LONG STORY, NO MAP

Jerry Gabriel

The day before Choi fell from the roof of the house at 283 Constable, a Thursday in early December, Carl asked Choi how he'd come to America. They were walking along Midland toward Prince's Subs.

Airplane, Choi said. Long ride.

I meant why, Carl said, though he wouldn't have guessed that Choi had flown. He assumed that this had happened long ago, when international travel was all done by boat.

Choi smiled. America land of opportunity.

Right, Carl said.

I want to live in Columbus, Choi tried again. He was always smiling.

A block later he said, My wife want to come to America. She read magazines. She not like communist. She—he paused to line up the word right in his head—bourgeoisie.

Bourgeoisie, Carl said. He didn't know the word, but its French sound got the gist across more or less. You like the commies, did you?

It seemed safe, all these years removed. Truth was, Carl didn't know much about any of it. Until Choi had mentioned communism, Carl had forgotten it was even involved.

My family poor, Mr. Professional Roofer. Communist feed us.

Carl was quiet.

It was the most Choi had talked about himself in the five days they'd been reroofing the ancient Victorian where Carl subletted a room.

After Japanese go, more war, Choi continued.

Carl didn't ask what the Japanese had to do with it.

So you were still there for the war, were you?

Not just one war, Mr. Professional Roofer.

Carl looked over. My old man went to Korea, he said.

Ah, Choi said. Special Forces.

My dad? Hell no.

Marine probably, Choi said. Semper Fi motherfucker.

Carl had to laugh. Nah.

Choi lit a cigarette, shrugged. Look, he said, pointing out a flat, grassy area where two kids were throwing a football. The area appeared to be a park, but upon closer inspection, Carl could see it was really just an empty lot abutting a small cemetery.

This is grave, Choi said.

What? Where? Carl said.

Here, he said, pointing with his chin.

The kids were junior-high age and Carl wondered

absently why they weren't in school. Maybe it was some kind of holiday.

Where those kids are playing? he asked.

Six hundred seven people, Choi said.

You're kidding, Carl said. Six hundred and seven bodies are buried below where those two kids are playing?

Choi nodded. Spanish Flu, 1918. Bad year in Columbus. Same in Pyongyang.

Carl looked at the field and then back to Choi. How do you know how many people are there?

We dig. Long time.

Why?

Why we dig?

Yeah. Why you dig.

Choi looked at Carl, obviously catching the jab at his English.

Science, he said.

Science. The word was starting to take on some dimension in his mind, something quite distant from the inanity of General Biology with Mr. Hemsley senior year, dissecting a cat with Sarah Lot.

You? Carl said, unable to hide his incredulity. You were a scientist.

Is, Mr. Roofer. Not dead yet. Retire, but still scientist.

Carl had to laugh at his mistake. Yeah, okay. You *are* a scientist. What kind of scientist are you, Joe? This girl I know studies mosquitoes. You study mosquitoes, too? Ones that live in old graves?

Epidemiologist. Choi was careful with the word, pronouncing each syllable slowly.

And what does one of them do? You looking for a cure to the flu or something?

He smiled. No cure for flu, Choi said. How spread.

Somebody paid you to do that?

American government. Ohio State University, Choi said. Branch of government, no? Word "State" right in name.

The story just kept getting better.

They turned onto Rolston and then into the shop. The girl at the counter was already familiar with them because they'd been in every day this week.

Outside the double glass doors, a few cars drifted past.

Government pay enough to buy beautiful house, too, Choi added while the girl made their sandwiches. He pointed back out the doors behind them, in the general direction of the house some blocks distant, which he owned. I become capitalist.

Carl had to admit to himself he'd never met anyone like Joe Choi. He looked like a Korean hick, but he was full of surprises. He also looked like he should be in an old folks' home, but he was climbing ladders, putting down shingles at least as well as Carl was.

Man, Carl said.

They were quiet for a while.

So how does the flu spread? Carl asked on their way back.

Snot, Choi said.

No kidding, Carl said. Snot. You had to dig up six hundred and seven people to figure that out.

We dig thousand and thousand bodies all over world.

I been thinking about this all wrong, Carl said. I'm starting to think I need to go to college after all.

You? Choi said and shook his head.

What? Carl said.

Probably not college material.

The fuck does that mean?

Choi shrugged. Backpack not look right. You know?

This hit a nerve, because Carl did carry a pack—mostly to fit in around campus—and he felt self-conscious about it.

Whatever, he said. I could go to college.

Yes, Choi said. Boy with one ear in house go. Why not Mr. Professional Roofer?

There was a boy missing an ear in the house. Carl was pretty sure he was majoring in engineering.

Funny, Carl said.

Choi smiled. College easy, he said. Keg party, naked girls.

I'm not sure where and when you went to college, Carl said. But if you want to graduate, I don't think it's quite like that.

Hard part later, Choi said.

What's later?

Next part.

Carl looked at him. Medical school or something? he said. What?

No, Choi said. No. He thought for a minute—or pretended to. I remember, he said. Life.

In the months before Choi fell, Carl had already been thinking about leaving town. Maybe to Chile or one of these former Soviet Bloc countries where you could be a prince with a couple hundred dollars in your bank account. Who knew. He'd been scanning the "Items for Sale" in the *Dispatch*, checking out what kind of cut-rate plane tickets people were getting rid of. So far, there'd been a one-way ticket to Reykjavik—that turned out to be in Iceland; no thanks—as well as tickets to Dallas and Amarillo. Why were there so many excess tickets to Texas? And how did someplace called Amarillo even have an airport?

He'd been in Columbus for going on six months, but the place was seriously wearing thin, the gunshots out his window at night and the ubiquitous circling police helicopters, the sitting around in traffic you had to do to go anywhere. But mostly it was the fact that, since losing his job at Penney's, he couldn't find another one. There didn't seem to be any decent jobs anywhere. He'd spent a day crushing hard plastic beams into tiny little pieces with a sledge—for what purpose was anyone's guess—and another holding up a sign at the corner of Bethel and Sawmill for Little Caesar's Pizza, 39 degrees outside. Those were not good days. He'd stopped going to the temp agency that got him those gigs. It was a bit of a recession, the lady

there had told him by way of an apology. Normally, she said, these jobs would go to other types of clients. Here her eyes swept the room in both directions, like those lurking behind a painting. She meant Mexicans, Carl knew.

A mini-recession was what they'd called it on the news, whatever that meant. Carl didn't know or care if it was a recession or a Great Goddamn Depression. As far as he could tell, it was just a plain old shite market. That's what they would've called it in England—what they probably were calling it in England—where Carl had lived with a family when he was sixteen. He hadn't really retained many memories about the place itself, not Stonehenge or the Cliffs of Dover or Buckingham Palace—all of which the family had dutifully dragged him to. The town where he'd spent the summer was called Chester, not far from Liverpool—and it was not so different from his own crappy hometown in Ohio: Washburn. The only saving grace was the way everyone talked. That was worth the trip all by itself. Shagging meant having sex. Mental meant crazy. A blowjob was to get gobbled. It was hilarious. When he got back to Washburn, Carl tried to bring some of the language with him, but nobody got it. They thought he was being pretentious, which was fucking infuriating.

The whole thing was his dad's idea and he'd set it up with an old friend of his, a guy he'd known from when he was stationed in England forty-some years ago. Carl had heard the boring stories many times, the nostalgia in his dad's voice as he talked about England and, mostly, about

the beer. The air force was over there keeping an eye on the commies, according to his dad, never a particularly reliable storyteller, though it more or less checked out when Carl asked his tenth grade history teacher.

But then everything went to hell when his dad's bomber group was transferred out of good old fish-and-chips-with-a-stout England and sent to stinking, corrupt, VD-infested Japan, in case they were needed there, which it turned out they weren't, because the old World War II bombers were too slow to deal with the Russian-made MiGs the Chinese were flying for the North Koreans. Carl's dad had never really gotten past his hatred of Koreans for ruining the good time he was having up to Oxfordshire.

Carl's dad hadn't had many good ideas in Carl's recollection, but it had been through his dad's connections that he'd gotten the sweet job at JC Penney's mothership distribution center, driving a van around with boxes of underwear and tricycles and whatnot to suburban malls. Obviously the idea was to get Carl on his feet after graduation and, more importantly, out of the house. Which was fine with Carl.

During the nearly four months at Penney's, he'd had his own place, a one-bedroom apartment in a brand new low-slung building just outside the city's outer belt, on the east side, not five minutes from work. The day he signed the lease—fronting over $1,200 in first and last and security deposit, most of it high school graduation money—that was a great day. He was grateful, in those months, not to

have to deal with his parents, particularly his dad, who had a lot of answers about the world for someone who hadn't done particularly well. When you got down to it, his parents still lived in the same cramped house they did when Carl was born.

All the way out there at Carl's bachelor pad, there'd been no circling helicopters—at that point, he hadn't even known that there could be such a thing. The nightlife wasn't much, but he had a car—a Chevette with all the pickup of a garden tractor, but still, it went. Also the job had been super easy, a no-brainer you could do high, which he sometimes did. Lots of guys did their jobs high. Even the forklift operators, who got piss-tested on a regular basis, mostly did their jobs high. They apparently had a number of systems in place to deal with the drug tests, though Carl wasn't around long enough to figure out what those systems were. But he did aspire to one day get one of those forklift operator jobs for himself, because they made a metric ton of money.

But when the market turned really shite—who knew where these things originated and how the results of that finally reached someone like Carl—he'd gotten called into the small office near Dock 16, really just a closet with a large window on one of the walls that looked out onto the loading area. He'd only been in there one other time, the day he got the job.

His foreman, Tom Barrett, said nothing, just made dispirited faces, contortions of his cheeks and lips, until

Carl had said, So what, I'm fired then? Barrett made a noise, a clicking with his tongue, in order to confirm. Low guy on the fucking totem pole? Carl said. Barrett nodded. Do I get a few weeks to look for something? Barrett held up his thumb and index finger, the way they do in Europe, which Carl thought odd. From beginning to end, Barrett never actually uttered a word. It was like being let go by a mime.

He rode things out for a month, mostly relying on his Sega Saturn for companionship, but his bank account, never that robust, dwindled, and he'd had to give the place up. He lost his security deposit in the process because he was breaking his lease, and so he'd gotten into a screaming argument with the cigarette-smoking blue hair who managed the place, Edna something. Or Ida.

You can yell until the cows come home, she'd said. It's not going to get you your deposit back, she said. I'm sorry, hon. Reality is harsh. Believe me, I know.

He seethed. She went back to her accounting calculator, entering figures, a cigarette smoldering in a full and obviously ancient Baltimore Colts ashtray; even Carl, who did not watch professional football—with all its bullshit merchandise and prima donnas—knew that the Colts did not play in Baltimore anymore and hadn't for many years.

Goddamnit, he said and slammed the glass doors of the complex behind him, thankful afterward that the doors hadn't broken.

Next, there were two days of living back in his old

basement bedroom at his parents' in Washburn. That was another bad couple days, the culmination of which was his dad hitting him in the jaw late in the afternoon of the second day, both of them a little drunk. The whole story was complicated; Carl had probably started it, and he was pretty sure he'd landed a punch of his own to his dad's throat, but he didn't stick around to assess the damage. Afterward, he stood on the front stoop with his bag—he'd never really unpacked, unsure of how things would play out there. Looking out across the old neighborhood, he could practically see into the dim light of his future, which he could feel was already, just months out of high school, veering toward catastrophe or some other less-than-desirable fate. He saw, or perhaps merely felt, that he'd misjudged things, starting some time back. But it was as if he'd already gained some critical momentum and there was little he could do to alter it.

He spent the next night with Frank Stellar, a high school friend he hadn't talked to since May. Frank was in his first quarter at Ohio State, what Frank and his friends called the OSU. While Carl talked through his next move, they smoked some weed Carl had bought from a shady long-haul Penney's driver.

I could fucking do anything, he told Frank. I could go to Israel and work on a kibbutz. Or join the army.

What's a kibbutz? Frank wanted to know.

I don't know. It's like a commune. But it's supposed to be a pretty sweet time. Huge hook-up scenario. Some guy

I met out at Penney's had done it and told me that it was just too many girls.

I wouldn't do that, Frank said. People are blowing shit up over there all the time. And I especially wouldn't join the army, man. That's a real bad decision.

Carl shrugged. I'm just thinking, he said. I could do it. It'd get me out of here. Will Sennet joined and he's stationed in Germany, smoking himself some cheap PX cigarettes, probably hooking up with German girls like that kid in *European Vacation*. You remember that girl?

Who can forget that girl? Frank said. But you know that was a movie, right?

Whatever.

I'd go air force if I had to go military, Frank offered.

My fucking dad always says that, but it's bullshit. The air force is just as much bullshit as the army. Why walk when you can fly? That's stupid.

Your call, Frank said. I don't fucking care.

Man, Carl said. I wish I had my old job back. I wish we didn't live in such a crappy country where everything was going to hell all the time.

Dude, Frank said.

What?

Nothing. I gotta go to bed.

Go to bed, Carl said.

You know you can only stay here a night or two, Frank said. My RA's kind of a dick.

Yeah, okay. Thanks, man. I'll be out of your hair.

Carl drank the rest of the beer by himself—there were just two left from the twelve he'd bought with his fake ID at a sketchy convenience store east of the university—and looked out from the eleventh floor of the high rise dorm toward campus, and beyond that, the city of Columbus glowing dimly out there in the ether. Close by was the stadium, placid at this hour, some flood lights running along the upper deck casting an early dawn's worth of light on the field.

When he left Frank's dorm three days later, he didn't go far, sleeping on the couches of guys he knew less well, all of them from Washburn, mostly sophomores and juniors. They were all business majors, because that was apparently easy and didn't require a foreign language or anything too taxing, except for some accounting that they all had flunked a few times. There were a couple packs of these guys, loosely affiliated, in a series of sprawling apartment buildings on Wilcox. He passed most of that time without ever encountering anyone not from Washburn, except at bars. They were an island, these guys. Among them, Carl noticed there was a lot of talk about the girls they called the Unapproachable, the Mustang- and Fiero-driving girls who lived in the large sorority mansions down along 15th. Carl was annoyed with the whole scene and was looking for a way off their couches from the very first night.

The saving grace of it all was going out to bars, which were crawling with girls. A couple weeks into his couch rotation, he met Iris at a sit-down-and-have-a-European-

beer kind of place just down the street from one of the complexes the Washburn boys lived in. She was a scientist, of all things—or training to be one. The two of them spent quite a bit of time drinking at a few different bars, sometimes even dancing to Al Greene and Hank, Sr. The dancing was a new one for Carl, but he took to it just fine.

Carl quickly—too quickly, it turned out—began sleeping at Iris's place every night, assuming that this was his new address. But then Iris—she studied mosquitoes of some sort; he honestly hadn't known people did things like that, though once he thought about it, it made sense—called him on it. She told him that she'd made this mistake before and that he shouldn't see what was going on between them as anything more than what was going on between them, which stung Carl a bit. But then what did he have to complain about? He was shagging this twenty-four-year-old girl who was actually from another state and who took off to places like Borneo—wherever that was—on a regular basis. She had all kinds of mementos on her walls of these travels. New Zealand. Easter Island. She was not beautiful, not in the way Kelli Hallis was; he'd spent a great deal of his senior year obsessing over Hallis's blonde bob and long, lithe legs. But still there was something about Iris, the bangs hanging in her eyes, which were dark brown and huge, and the gray skirts and woolen sweaters she wore. Most of all it was her feistiness, though. It wasn't mere confidence but a kind of certitude. It was refreshing, emboldening even.

A bit chastened, but still happy to be in the game, he checked his bank balance and figured he had enough for a cheap room for a few months, during which time he could hopefully find some work. The place he found was tiny—barely big enough for the single bed that was somehow stuffed into it. Good luck getting that thing out of there when the day came. It wouldn't be his problem, in any case.

The room was in a massive house about nine blocks south of the Washburn boys. He hoped he'd never see any of those guys again, ever. There was a load of students in the new place, so many that there was no real way to count. Probably twenty or more. The building sagged at the junctions of its various built-on sections. In the whole house, he appeared to be the only one not going to college—this fact of his life was drawn in stark relief this close to campus, something never far from his mind now—though one of the guys was doing some kind of automotive diagnostic degree at DeVry, whose brochures Carl remembered looking at during the college fair senior year. He would never have gone to the fair, but it was just after football practice, and he was walking home with Frank, whose attorney father had made it clear that Frank was definitely going to college. So Carl had followed Frank around for a while that night and listened as he talked to some seriously bitchy girls from Miami University and representatives—nearly all of them good-looking girls, come to think of it—from a whole bunch of other lamer

schools. Bowling Green. Wright State.

From where Carl stood that night in Washburn senior year, college seemed like a nightmare, like more high school that was both harder and cost money. Now that he was here, though—at least living here, if not actually attending college—it didn't seem like such a big deal. Certainly a sizable chunk of the inhabitants of his building didn't have much on him in the intelligence department. One of the kids—an English major—had flooded a bathroom with a backed-up toilet because he didn't know that there was a valve at the base to turn off the water. Carl had come in, tip-toed through the water, and turned the knob.

Oh, Jesus, the kid had said. I didn't know about that.

Carl wanted to say, You've shat in a toilet your whole life and never bothered once to look down and see that there was a little knob on every bloody one of them. And you never wondered what that knob could be for?

Instead he shrugged.

Carl started seeing Joe Choi, the kooky old Asian dude, around the place almost immediately. He was probably seventy and was short and wore high-water pants and running shoes long past their expiration date. Carl hadn't figured him for the landlord, but he also hadn't known what to figure him for, because he sure as fuck didn't belong there.

Carl's dad's prejudice against Koreans had apparently rubbed off on him some, because the first few times he'd seen Choi, he'd almost yelled at him to quit lurking

around. He almost said, Just because there's a lot of people living here, you're not going to get away with mixing in and stealing food. To be fair, this perception was aided by Choi's scruffiness, by the holes in his sweatshirts and the tape on his glasses. But for Carl's dad, all Asians were boat people, and this idea was pretty strong in Carl's mind, too, even if he didn't like to agree with his dad. There's something to the power of environment, Iris liked to say, which he figured meant that there was no escaping his dad's vision of the world, that some part of it was in him, no matter what he thought of his dad. Carl had to admit, when he looked at the facts, that there seemed to be something to it: a decade of complaining about his dad's smoking habit and look who had picked up the stinking habit—when, that is, he could afford a pack.

Ensconced in this mammoth house on Constable Street, Carl got a new job plan. He was trying to get a union card down at the United Steel Workers, because he had a cousin who worked on these high-rises going up downtown, and he made serious money. This cousin, who drove to Columbus from Washburn every day—just over an hour—already had his own place out in the country—a trailer house, but still—as well as about three motocross bikes and a pretty nice '79 Chevelle, and he was just two years older than Carl. He'd vouched for Carl with the union folks, and so Carl was trying to break into this line of work. Eventually, he'd have to go to welding school, but the thing was to get in first, according to the cousin.

Problem was, the scene at the union hall was dismal. The place was worse than a locker room at halftime after the coach has gone outside—incessant bitching. These guys did just three things: they sat around and played cards, they smoked, and they complained. There was no work, they said. You could apply for a card, hang around if you wanted. Bide your time. Who knew what would come? Probably nothing in this market. Probably we'd all be on government assistance for the rest of our lives. Could be another government cheese scenario, one of them said. This got some uneasy laughs. But someday, another said, you might get a call. For instance, these folks came in from Atlanta a few weeks back looking for some good workers, and off to Atlanta a slew of guys went to work on a new tower. The story sounded like the myth of hobos. Carl had no intention of going to Atlanta and he struggled to see how this story was supposed to be encouraging.

In three days he was back on the porch at the old house on Constable. Screw that, he said. I don't have time to sit around a union hall all day. He sat on the porch instead and smoked and drank coffee until his body couldn't take it anymore. He continued to plot his next move.

Gradually Carl was learning the faces of the house's inhabitants, if not their names. The Asian guy remained a bit of a mystery, though. And, what was more, this guy seemed to have noticed Carl hanging around; Carl caught the guy eyeing him in the long hallway off the kitchen one morning, which made him uncomfortable, so he'd kept

moving. There were so many people milling around the house it was hard to imagine anyone knew who they all were, least of all an Asian; he assumed that Asians couldn't tell white people apart any better than white people could tell Asians apart. Carl was subletting the room, so he hadn't even met anyone when he took the room except for the girl who was leaving. Her name was Bridget and he was pretty sure she was a lesbian. Her hair was really short, anyway, and she wore men's jeans. He'd seen a fair amount of that around campus these weeks and months and was growing used to it.

Out there on the porch, he kept circling around to the army.

When he'd told Iris about this option at a bar one night, she spat out her rum and Coke on the floor.

Hijo, she said. You can't be serious.

Why wouldn't I be?

They'll love you in there, she said.

Har, he said. Don't be a dick.

She laughed. Be serious, she said. You've been watching too much TV. The army is an unmitigated nightmare.

I don't watch any TV, he said. It was more of a complaint than a statement of truth.

No me importa, she said. It's your life.

He ignored the Spanish, which she used a lot, especially around her biology friends; they all spoke it, though he was pretty sure none of them had been raised with it.

What is it that you think I should do, Professor?

I don't know, Carl. I'm not your guidance counselor.

No you're not, he said. What are you again?

Nothing, she said. Just some girl.

Just some girl, he agreed, nodding.

They went home then and had drunken sex, during which she would start to moan, and then shush Carl, as if he were the one moaning.

After the initial confusion over what Carl's mailing address was, they did work out an arrangement, and he spent a few nights a week at Iris's place. She, too, lived in an old converted house which she shared with eight or nine other girls. She had her own bathroom, though, right off her bedroom, and she had walls and walls of books. Carl had never been a reader, but faced with the prospect of sitting around the sprawling house on Constable thinking about employment on one hand, or reading some of these books on the other, it was an easy choice.

He discovered that if he kept a sandwich in the pack he carried—you had to carry a pack unless you wanted to be immediately recognized as a dirtbag, because everyone carried a pack anywhere near campus, even kids who looked like Italian thugs from Youngstown—he could stay in Iris's room after she left for the lab, where she spent a good twelve hours a day. He wouldn't need to come out of there all day if he didn't want to, but he had to be subtle about it. No smelly cheeses or she would've been on to

him. Peanut butter was okay, but he had to double-bag it. Whenever they were going out, he would make himself a lunch for the next day.

In the morning, she usually got up early to get to the lab by eight, and he would just lie there, face down in his pillow as she showered.

You know how to let yourself out, she would say as she was leaving. I'll talk to you later.

Hmmm, he'd say. And then, Have a good day.

Then he'd sleep another hour or two. When he finally got up, he'd shower and set up shop in an old cracked leather Barcalounger she kept near a small bay window, and open up a book. First, he went through *David Copperfield*. Then *Wuthering Heights*. Then *Crime and Punishment*, which he liked best of the three. Now he was working on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which he thought strange and downright confusing. In particular, he wanted to know exactly what happened between Tess and Alex that night in the fog. Anyway, he found that he really liked imagining the far away world in these books, even if most of them were set in boring old England.

He had to keep quiet in there, though, tip-toeing around. Her housemates, mostly graduate students, came and went to classes. They were mostly gone, in truth. It took him some time, but he eventually learned their schedules from their footfalls. And he knew that between three and four, there was no one in the house, and that's when he would slip out the back door, into the greasy

alley—there was a line of fast-food restaurants opposite her place—and through the cramped parking lot, which was patrolled ruthlessly by the rednecks at Lucky Brothers Towing, which incidentally made it impossible for him to ever drive to her house.

It was a fifteen minute walk from there to Constable, and he did it happily most days, refreshed from his day of reading. But it wasn't every night that he stayed with Iris. Many nights she worked late and didn't have time to hang out. Those nights, he lay in his small room. He might read or jerk off, but it wasn't great, either way. He might go out for a drink by himself, or go sit in one of the coffee shops around and watch people. On occasion, he wandered the halls of the old house he shared with strangers, but they all seemed fixed in whatever lives they were living. He rarely got past a simple hello with any of them.

One early morning after a night like this, he was back on the porch—a pot of coffee resting on the banister in front of him, *Tess* in his hand, the employment ads on the floor (nothing doing there)—and the Asian guy approached him.

Live here? he wanted to know.

Yeah, Carl said, practically incredulous that the guy was talking to him.

The man nodded.

You? Carl asked.

He laughed. I own.

You own this place?

I own. This. He said the word like it was the first time he truly had understood its meaning. He waved his arm toward the door. Carl nodded. That made some kind of sense, at least why he'd seen him lurking around. It didn't account for the man's ratty clothes, but Carl was willing to admit all manner of weirdness in the world at this point.

You scientist? the man said. Archaeologist maybe?

Archaeologist? Me? Hell no. I don't do nothing.

Nothing? he said. Do something. Sell drugs. Study literature. He pointed to the book in Carl's hand, obviously a classic by its jacket design.

Look, old man. I'm not a student. And I'm not a criminal. I pay my rent. I'm looking for work, but I pay my rent.

The man was quiet for a while, looked out onto the empty block of Constable. The buzz of a busier street carried to them from a few blocks away.

Carl was waiting for the man to move on; he didn't care for small talk with old Asian landlords.

You know way to put roof in? Choi asked finally.

Carl looked at him. Do I know how to roof?

Yes. To roof. I just ask you this.

Carl had done some roofing, in fact, with his uncle a few summers back.

Yeah, he said, easing up a little. I know about roofing.

Okay, Choi said. See? We solve job problem. Solve problem for Joe also. You think so?

You offering me a job?

Yes. I hire to help me put in roof.

You've already got a roof.

This roof, Choi started.

Leaks?

Very old.

Yeah. I guess I did notice that.

Observant, Choi said. Maybe scientist after all. He smiled.

Carl watched Choi as he pulled a pack of Salems out of his breast pocket. Carl lit a cigarette of his own and the two of them smoked in silence. Afterwards, Carl took his coffee cup and pot into the kitchen and threw them into the sink, which was already piled with dishes—nobody reliably did their dishes, which he knew was a problem in the house from the many notes about it on the fridge door—and he went outside to help the old man fish some tools out of his minivan, which was parked across the street. The van had all but the driver's seat removed and was filled with tools and parts and about nine packs of cement shingles from Wykoff Lumber. There was also a wholesale-size box of Salems. The two of them dragged a ladder to the side of the house and Choi gave Carl a tool belt and a nail apron.

You have a nail gun? Carl wanted to know.

Gun?

Yeah. An air compressor. It makes this job a lot easier.

Easier? Choi said. Need work, right?

Carl saw where this was going.

We fix roof North Korea style, Choi said.

Carl knew nothing about North Korea, but he got the

gist just the same.

Alright then, he said.

They worked through the rest of the morning setting some hooks at the apex of the roof through which they ran ropes to tie around their waists. Finally, they started putting down some shingles, working side by side. Just before noon, Choi carefully made his way to the ladder and disappeared down the side of the house. They had done three rows, which didn't feel like much, but, in addition to the prep, it had taken them some time to figure out how to fit the sheets on.

Choi hadn't said anything about where he was going and Carl had assumed he was using one of the downstairs bathrooms—there were three or four of them on the first floor of the place, one dirtier than the last—but then he was gone for a very long time. After a while, Carl stopped working and leaned back under the cloudless, cool day and lit a cigarette. This, he thought, is the dumbest goddamn habit in the world. It was probably the hundredth cigarette of his life, all of them since he'd left home. It was only out of boredom and a need for something to do standing around the dock at Penney's that he'd ever had his first. This, he thought, will be my last cigarette. As he smoked it, he heard Choi down on the ground.

Mr. Professional Roofer, Choi said.

Name is Carl, Carl said, peering over the edge of the roof.

Choi nodded but didn't say anything. He held up a bag

for Carl to see. He had brought back sandwiches for them both from Prince's Subs; Carl recognized the orange and green bag. When Carl made it down, Choi pulled his own sandwich out and handed the bag to Carl. There were large containers of Coke on the ground. The Everything, read a sticker that held the paper around the sandwich.

Take from pay stub, Choi said.

Yeah. Okay. Thanks.

Coke okay? Everyone like Coke.

Coke's great, Carl said. Thanks.

They sat on the decrepit chairs on the front porch and started to eat. We didn't talk about pay, actually, Carl said. How much are you paying me anyway?

Fair price, Choi said.

What's that mean?

Five dollars.

An hour?

Five dollar hour, yes.

This isn't 1970. Should be more like eight or nine.

Eight dollar per hour for roofer?

Yeah, eight. At least.

Ball-breaker, Mr. Professional Roofer.

That's right. Carl laughed.

Roof expert, however. Eight dollar for professional normal?

It's sort of a steal.

New fair price, Choi said and smiled.

The next day, Iris told Carl that she was leaving for a research trip to Baja California on Saturday. He was upset, in part because she would be gone, but also because she hadn't bothered to tell him about the trip, though she'd obviously known for months.

Her research group—which Carl knew included a boy named Sydney who was clearly angling for Iris; he'd seen all of the signs during a night out at a bar with Iris's friends from the lab, the ribbing and touching of the elbow, the nervousness—was going to fly to New Orleans on the way and take a cab into the French Quarter during their layover so they could drink coffee at someplace called Café Du Monde before buzzing back to the airport and hopping the second leg of their flight. Hearing the anticipated details made him furious, even without the kid Sydney in the picture. Truth was, things had been a little tense between them for a couple weeks.

What is it that you do that you can just leave for a month? he wanted to know. Aren't you in school?

Come on, Hijo, she said. I told you. I'm a biologist. An ecologist. Scientists have to go work in the field sometimes, if they're the kind of scientist I am.

He knew all of that. Stop calling me Hijo, he told her.

Don't get mad. I told you we were just having a good time. I thought we agreed on this.

Sydney's going along to California?

It's Mexico, Carl. Baja California is in Mexico. It means Lower California.

I had to take Spanish in high school, Iris. I know what "baja" means.

What does Sydney have to do with anything?

He's obviously in love with you.

No, she said, slowly. You think so? She genuinely seemed not to have considered this option or else was a better liar than he'd thought she was capable of.

Carl shook his head.

He's got a goddamn girl's name, he said. He did not want to talk about Sydney; he wanted to punch something.

I know, she said. Isn't that funny?

When will you be back?

She sighed. We're not understanding each other, Carl.

Oh Christ, he thought, and then said, I get it. You want to break up.

We were never really going out, Carl. We were sleeping together. It's not the same thing. Don't make me out to be an evil witch here. We've had an agreement. For instance, I never hassled you about using my room as your reading lounge.

He knew he should've seen this coming, but he hadn't. He knew there were a lot of things about being in the world he should've already learned, from TV or books or from listening to the warnings of adults. And this one was common sense, really. He wouldn't make a mistake like this again, he thought.

But as things with Iris appeared to be ending, this was the moment he most wanted it to be real. His sense of isolation

took on dimension and heft inside him. He thought of his parents in their dinky house down in Washburn and felt some misguided nostalgia for his adolescence, or, anyway, for an earlier time, before the world started hacking away at him with its persistent indifference.

Hey, she said.

What?

I'm sorry, Carl. I guess I thought of this differently.

He needed to get out of there.

It doesn't matter, he said. He knew he sounded petulant.

You're a good looking boy, she said. And a sweetheart. And pretty good in the hay. Shit, Carl. You're a catch. But you should be messing around with nineteen-year-old girls. I'm like a spinster already.

I'm gonna go, he told her.

Okay, she said. But don't be mad.

I'm not mad, Iris. Good luck in California, he said.

She smiled. Thanks, Hijo.

A FEW DAYS LATER, clouds moved in during mid-morning. At eight AM, when the sun had been bright, Carl and Choi had stripped off an entire pitch, which now sat exposed. They were working quickly, hoping they could beat the weather, but then Carl felt a few sprinkles.

We need to cover this, he said. If it pours, this could be a catastrophe for the top floor.

Choi nodded. Catastrophe, he repeated slowly.

They went to the basement, a place Carl had been just once to do a load of laundry. The washer and dryer were in the corner of the basement closest to the stairs. Beyond that, an expansive series of rooms set off in all directions like catacombs, all of them filled with junk. There was more furniture stacked in the basement than in all the rooms of the three floors above. Not only furniture, but lamps and cat carriers; there were maybe eight bikes, shoe racks, damaged kitchen cabinets, spice racks, and boxes and boxes of trashy books, what his mom called bodice rippers.

You just let everyone leave all their shit down here when they move out?

No let, Choi said. Just do.

See, a tarp is the one thing we won't find, because it doesn't take up any space. This is stuff people didn't want to move. How long have you owned this place?

Choi was digging under some boxes. Nineteen seventy-one.

That's a long fucking time, Carl said.

They kept poking into piles, searching. They didn't find any tarps, though. What they did find was a roll of plastic that you might use as a drop cloth, probably too thin for the job, but it was all they had, so they took it upstairs.

Some of the residents were milling around the kitchen.

What's all the racket on the roof? one of them wanted to know.

We fix, Choi said.

They looked at Carl oddly, apparently unsure who

he was, even though he'd been living there for nearly a month now.

Back outside, rain was coming down steadily.

Be careful on the way up, Carl told Choi.

Choi nodded, looked into the sky.

Carl followed him up the ladder, and once there, the two of them coaxed the plastic into position. Choi cut it into three strips with a razor knife from his tool belt and they did the best they could to cover the exposed part of the roof. It wasn't quite enough plastic, so about two feet above the eave was going to get wet, but short of driving back out to Wykoff's and getting real tarps—something Choi did not seem inclined to spend the time or money on—this would have to do.

Afterward, they sat on the porch, drinking coffee. Choi smoked cigarette after cigarette.

Am I getting paid for this? Carl asked. He wasn't serious; he just wanted to hear what funny thing Choi would say.

Choi smiled. Sure. I also now pay when sleep.

Carl chuckled.

The rain was slacking off by lunch time, and they walked down to Prince's together. On the way back, they ate their subs as they walked. They'd been quiet since the cemetery, since Choi's story about the Spanish Flu, but then Carl started, Your wife. He didn't know why he was asking Choi about his wife.

Choi, though, was silent.

The one who wanted to come to America, Carl went on.

Bourgeoisie, Choi said.

Yeah. What . . . he started. He regretted treading down this path, but here he was.

Dead, Choi said.

Oh, Carl said. I'm sorry.

Choi probably shrugged, but said nothing, took a bite of his sandwich.

When they got back to the house, as if in response to the recent conversation, a woman stood on the porch.

Cookie, Choi said under his breath as they approached the steps. And then, as if to clarify, No-bake cookie.

The woman holding a plate, Carl surmised, was, for lack of a better descriptor, Choi's girlfriend.

She introduced herself to Carl as Kathy, was maybe ten years younger than Choi, tall, blonde, dressed in business clothes. She was on her lunch break from an office on campus, where papers got shuffled and someone with the title of provost called the shots.

You're brave to climb a ladder with this one, she said to Carl.

It's not dangerous if you're careful, Carl said.

You've not done things with Joe before then. He's accident prone.

Choi smiled. Safety Job One, he said.

I made you some cookies, she said to Choi. You share them with your partner, though. She put them on the banister.

Choi nodded.

I'm going to use the ladies', Kathy said, and she went inside, which struck Carl as brave for a woman in such nice clothes.

When she disappeared, Choi eyed the cookies and then looked at Carl.

No-bake cookie killing me, he said.

Don't eat them, man, Carl said.

She bring every week. I don't like.

Carl shrugged, taking one of the cookies and tossing the whole thing in his mouth.

What mean "no-bake"? Choi wanted to know.

Look, Carl said. Relax. For another dollar an hour, I'll eat them for you.

Choi smiled broadly. New fair price, he said.

On the other side of the hollow wall that his bed rested against—the bedroom had obviously been part of a much larger room until someone had divided it up with sheetrock into two or three separate rooms—a boy and girl were having sex. In addition to the repetitious banging against the wall, he could hear their moans.

Godamnit, he thought.

It was anyone's guess which two people were over there, but it didn't matter, because whoever it was, it made Carl think of Iris and Sydney sharing a tent down there on the beach in Lower California. He could only imagine what nights were like on these scientific trips. He'd met

Iris's advisor one afternoon at the lab, Professor Harris, a light-hearted guy, probably no more than forty or forty-five. Obviously anything went with that guy. He had no difficulty imagining the place at dusk, the moon pulling the water out to sea, and all of these educated kids running out onto the shelf left behind by the retreating water, the sandy goo, oyster shells and sea anemones and kelp. And later, they would probably sit around drinking Corona, and eventually, in the small hours, pair off. No doubt Professor Harris would hook up with one of the many attractive girls from the lab. Whatever professional relationships there were in Columbus probably disintegrated the moment they hit Mexican soil. It made sense. Carl was beginning to see that everything was about sex—not just for boys, but for girls, too. You were kidding yourself if you thought differently. And he was beginning to see—to really see—the way the world will push you out, will take what you want most, and push you out.

Ah, fuck it, he thought. He went downstairs and used the one phone in the house and called Iris. One of the nameless girls who lived with her answered. She told Carl she hadn't seen Iris all day.

Is this Carl? the girl asked.

Yeah, he said, surprised that any of them would've come to know his name.

She might still be at the lab. You have the number there?

No, he said.

Hold on, she said.

A minute later she was back with the number.

Haven't seen you around, the girl said. He was trying to imagine which of the girls he was talking to. She said her name was Jen, but that didn't help.

He didn't really know what to say to this. He certainly didn't feel like getting into it with her about the breakup.

We're sort of on hiatus, he heard himself say.

Oh, she said. Sorry. I didn't know that. I don't see Iris much.

He thanked her for the number.

At the lab, a male voice answered.

Iris, the voice said. Let me see.

He held the phone to his chest, Carl was sure, and said something. He could hear the muffled sound through the boy's body. Four syllables. Probably: Is Iris here?

There was some shuffling, the phone's receiver picking up the jostling as loud sweeps of air. And then, a few seconds later, Iris was there, and he knew—or was pretty sure—it had been Sydney. His head burned.

Hey, he said, trying to regain some composure. It's Carl.

Carl, she said, not unfriendly, but not altogether friendly either. What's up?

He nodded to himself. Listen. I know you're busy. I know you're leaving Saturday. But I wanted. I'd like to buy you lunch.

Oh, she said. Um.

Platonically, he said. Why did he say that? He corrected himself. I mean, as friends.

She laughed, though he didn't know at which thing, lunch or the word Platonically.

That may not be a great idea.

I want to start a new phase, a friend phase.

A friend phase, she said. He knew that everyone in the lab—Sydney, at the very least—was listening to their conversation and he was probably enjoying this business.

It's harmless, he said. It's lunch.

Okay, she said. As friends. What time?

Noon, he told her. The Blue Danube.

He lay awake for a long time imagining the meeting, trying to figure out what kinds of things they would talk about. A friend phase? What a dumbass.

Later, someone banged on his door.

You Carl?

Yeah.

Phone, they said.

Downstairs, he picked up the receiver for the second time tonight. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he assumed that it would be Iris, calling back to bail on the lunch. She was the only one who really even knew he lived here. Not even his parents knew where he was exactly. But when he picked up the receiver it was not Iris's voice that he heard, but Frank Stellar's.

Dude, Frank said.

Carl hadn't seen Frank in nearly two months, since the

morning he'd left the tower Frank lived in with his surly Cleveland suitemates.

Frank? he said.

You're like in the Witness Protection Program or something.

Something like that.

It's the night before the Michigan game.

Yeah? What's that? They're like a team that our team plays?

Stop fucking around, dude. Me and these douchebags are gonna hit some parties. You wanna come?

The game's on Saturday, Carl said. Even I know that.

You knew what I meant. We can swing by and pick you up.

Carl was inclined to say no. It hadn't been a great day. It hadn't been a great week, really. Frank and his drunk friends were hardly likely to cheer him.

Yeah, okay, he told him. He gave him the address.

Frank, he said.

Yeah?

How did you find me here?

That's a funny story. Frank told him one of the boys up on Wilcox—he meant the Washburn boys—knew which house Carl was in because he used to bang a girl that lived there. He still had the phone number in his little black book.

Wow, Carl said, but thought, I've got to get out of this town.

He waited awhile on the porch for Frank, but then got antsy and took off with no particular plan. He walked to a pizza place along High Street and ate two bready slices at a small table back by the bathroom. Afterwards, he crossed High and entered a university building, a library as it turned out. The place was crawling with the girls the Washburn boys called The Unapproachable. He chastised himself for even remembering the word. But if you were looking for a model-quality college girl tonight, this was the place. He walked from room to room, checking out the ancient building. In each new room, there were tables, sometimes dozens, filled with kids studying, or trying to. Not just girls, but their male counterparts, too, most everybody in t-shirts promoting—more like bragging about—fundraisers their sorority or fraternity had put on for leukemia or arts in the schools. Carl was aware that he was conspicuous here. He had dropped the backpack because of Choi's comment and he still wore the clothes he'd worked in all day. He had no fraternity t-shirt, and he hadn't had a haircut in a couple months. He felt eyes on him as he passed through the study rooms.

On the third floor, he found a room devoid of tables. There were a few soft velvet chairs, and he sat in one of those for a bit. Close by was a globe, which he spun around once, finding first the United States and then the tiny state of Ohio. He spun it some more, and thought to look for Korea, whose geography he had no idea about beyond the

fact that it was somewhere in Asia. He was surprised at its strange location, the oddly shaped peninsula hanging off the bottom of China, across the sea from Japan. That made sense, given his dad's experience there. It was of course divided in two, North and South.

How strange, he thought, to have lived in a place that you couldn't go back to.

Outside again, he wandered further into campus. Other than those first few days sleeping on the plastic-cushioned couch in the anteroom of Frank Stellar's suite, he'd spent very little time on campus. In the distance, he could hear the pep band getting raucous, leading a snaking crowd of cheering, Busch-drinking students around. He'd read about this in the student newspaper, how the band would go from dorm to dorm collecting members and it would all culminate in the coach and a few players speaking at the stadium later.

He walked north toward Iris's lab, the only other campus building he'd been in. He didn't know if he would go in or not or what he would say if he did. Right now he was just walking. He wasn't really dressed for the cold. In truth, he needed a warmer coat and knew that he would soon either have to go to the Burlington Coat Factory to get one—which would eat up some of the money from the roofing job—or else he would have to go back to Washburn to collect some winter clothes from his parents', which raised the specter of his father.

At the Biological Sciences Building, he circled the place

once. He found a bench and sat for a while and patted his pants for cigarettes—it seemed the kind of place he should smoke—but remembered he'd given them up. He watched a few people come and go from the building, the band's music distant now. He sat for a bit in the chilly evening and finally got up to wander among the shrubs, trying to see if he could get a peek of Iris's lab. The first few windows he looked into were empty basement-level classrooms, dark, lit only by ambient hallway light. The third was a lab, but it was empty.

He peeked in on two more empty rooms and then, slipping past some holly shrubs growing close to the building, he was showered in bright light, not of a lab, but of a class in session. The professor stood closest to the window, her back to him, and the class sat in individual seats facing him. They were all shaken out of their bored trance by his movement and raised their heads as if one being. He stood before them for a very long moment, startled. He scanned the faces of the students, who looked very young to him, though none of them could've possibly been younger than he was; he wouldn't even be nineteen until April.

Recognizing that something was happening behind her, the teacher spun around to see what was going on.

It was Iris. She led a discussion session of an introductory biology course every Thursday evening. He had forgotten that, or, if he was going to be honest with himself, had never paid much attention when she told him about what

she did; he really only remembered all of this because he knew that she wasn't available to go out until after nine-thirty on Thursdays.

He looked at Iris for an instant, and saw that she saw him, felt the heat of her on him—was it anger? Something else? He couldn't say.

He did not stick around to see what would happen next. He turned and fought his way through two bushes and back to the sidewalk, where he almost collided with a pair of girls walking along the path. They looked at him like he was a creeper, which, to be fair, he seemed to be, coming out of the bushes like a hedgehog. He brushed himself off and walked to Midwestern Donut, a place he knew only foreign students ever went—he had heard the Washburn boys call it Third World Donut—to sit among the immigrants in anonymity. Drinking a tepid coffee among papers from Jerusalem and Bogotá, he felt more at ease than he had in some time.

He was looking down at a paper in Spanish, trying to piece together the headline from the two years of the language he took in high school, when someone smacked the window nearest him from the outside. When he looked up, he saw the smirk of Frank Stellar and a slew of other kids, most of whom he'd met during his stay in the tower. Frank, already drunk, held up his middle finger. Carl got up and reluctantly went outside to join them on their way to wherever it was they were off to.

The day Choi fell, Carl woke with a start from a deep, drunken sleep. The house was already buzzing with activity. He was going to see Iris today was his first thought. His second was, I'm still wearing my shoes.

He got up and took the longest piss of his life and then went downstairs and ate some generic Rice Crispies and then went out on the porch with some coffee. He felt ill and wasn't sure the cereal was going to stay down. The trail of parties from the night before was foggy in his mind, almost irretrievable, at least at this hour. There had been some cheering about Saturday's game, but mostly there had been reggae music and sweaty kids dancing, many of them wearing expensive jackets. For a while, he'd considered stealing one of these, but he wasn't ready yet to go down that path.

Choi showed up at the usual hour. The students in the house were dispersing toward campus for Friday classes, those that had them. Carl spoke to none of them as they descended the porch stairs and none of them even pretended that he was sitting out there in the cold.

Even a few blocks from High, the pregame electricity was in the air. Everything seemed louder. Out on the porch, he could see a few obviously well-tended houses in the area that were inhabited by non-students—businessmen, probably, who graduated but never wanted to leave the college life. They had neat Arts and Crafts houses and they flew their Ohio State flags every weekend in the fall. From where he sat, he could see four such flags already

this morning.

A front had arrived, bringing Ontario air into central Ohio and Carl wore two hoodies against it, one inside the other; it was really all the warm clothes he had. He owned no gloves, so he kept his hands inside his sleeves. Choi came better dressed, in a tan pair of Carhartt coveralls. He also wore Carhartt gloves and a Carhartt ski cap.

Dr. Choi, Carl mustered. Are you getting endorsements from Carhartt?

Yes, Choi said, catching on. Carhartt call. Decide good to use skinny Korean smoke too much. Very good for business.

Carl laughed, sipped his coffee. As absurd as it was, he felt closer to Choi than to his own father.

They made their way down the north slope of the roof through the morning's cold, which emboldened them somehow, and they worked rhythmically as the sun began to cut the cold some. From up there, they could see over the neighborhood better. Whenever Choi stopped for a smoke break, Carl would lean back and relieve the burden on his lower back. They'd gotten better each day and now worked at a quick clip and were closing in on finishing the roof of the behemoth structure, probably in the next day or two.

At eleven, they finished the pitch, each of them on a ladder for the last row. Down on the ground, Choi smoked and they discussed whether they should get set up for the east side of the house now or later. Carl was keenly aware

that after the east side, he was out of a job again.

Early lunch, Choi seemed to decide. Okay?

Sure, Carl said. I've got to go meet someone anyway.

Oh, Choi said. Mosquito girl probably.

Probably, Carl said.

They both looked to the sky then as if for signs of the afternoon's weather. The city had clouded over and it seemed like it would be this way until May, such was the apparent density of the gray above the city.

No rain, I think, Choi said.

Yeah, maybe snow.

Maybe snow, Choi agreed.

Carl went inside and took a shower—his first in some days. He thought about cutting his hair, but knew that that would be a bad idea; he'd done that once back in August, and the guys at Penney's had given him endless shit about it, calling him Ringo. He found a sweater in the bottom of his bag that was more or less clean and he picked the least wrinkled of his three pairs of pants and then he drove his Chevette up High to the restaurant just north of campus.

Inside, the Blue Danube was violent with lunchtime noise, plates being tossed into sinks, waitresses yelling to the cooks, children sitting on high chairs wailing. There was a soundtrack of crackly alternative radio barely audible beneath the din. Iris was sitting in a booth along a bank of windows.

Hey, he said. He sat across from her. Thanks for coming out, he said.

You're not going to get all emotional on me, right? she said.

No, he said. I promise not to get emotional.

She squinted at him. I've got a string of old boyfriends around this city, she said. Enough to fill a dumpster with.

That's a weird thing to put them in, he said.

Yeah. But it's where they go in my mind.

Because you're done with them.

You know, because it doesn't work, this thing we're talking about, or this thing going on in your mind. People say it works. It works on TV. And it seems super mature. But it's the opposite of that. In the real world, people can't watch other people move on in their lives. It's why people are always killing their exes.

Carl watched her. A waiter came and took their order—smugly, Carl thought, in his neat and tight apron, the wine corker hanging out of one of the front pockets.

I called you up because I didn't want to be a baby about this. I don't know. Was that dumb?

She looked out the window, took a sip of her iced tea. Listen, Carl, she said—this struck him, because she almost never used his name—it's going to seem cruel to you, but I'm going to go now. You'll see later—hopefully sooner rather than really later—that it was the right thing to do.

He watched her speak, filled with humiliation. He had never dealt well with being spoken sharply to, with being dressed down, with, generally, being instructed—particularly about the way things were in the real world.

I like you, but I can't have you lurking in the bushes outside the windows of my classroom, she said.

I'm sorry about that.

That's what I'm talking about. But even calling my lab.

I'm sorry, he said again.

It doesn't matter, she said. It was weird, though. You see that, right? Peering in the window of my class was weird.

I know it was weird. I wasn't doing what you thought I was doing. I was trying to find your lab was all.

Then what?

I wanted to talk to you.

You were going to see me today.

I know. But it felt more pressing than that.

You want to know what I think?

Probably not, he said.

Okay. She reached down and grabbed her purse.

Fucking hell, he said. What?

She stood up.

Oh, it doesn't matter. She put ten bucks on the table.

Great, Carl said, pretty much to himself, and stood up too. Goodbye, I guess, he said.

Yep, she said. He watched her weave through the crowded restaurant and out to her car. He sat there for some time, long after she had pulled her Tercel out of the lot. When the waiter appeared with the food some minutes later, he looked at her empty seat and then looked at Carl and made a sympathetic face.

Just put both of them here, he told the kid. And get lost.

The waiter raised his eyebrows, but then did what he was asked.

Sobered up by a morning in the cold, Carl's appetite had returned and he ate his burger and her Caesar salad both and then just sat there, the racket of the place washing over him. Well, he said under his breath. Goddamnit all to hell. Which was what his dad said when he couldn't find his keys or a stool's leg broke.

Outside, it had indeed started to flurry. He paid for the food, pulling change out of his pocket to cover the bill to the penny—you get no tip when you're a dick, he thought; another wisdom more or less his father's—and he drove back to Constable Street. After he parked, he circled the house, looking for Choi, and found him, on the east side, lying on the ground, his leg tangled in the bottom rung of the ladder. The neighborhood stood perfectly still, it seemed. Choi was wincing, the ladder a too large appendage. Carl wondered how long he'd been there.

Jesus, Joe, he said. Are you okay? What the hell happened?

Choi opened his eyes and then closed them again.

Unraveling Choi's leg from the ladder, Carl could see blood at about calf level.

Choi looked up again, stared at him, as if he were a distant city on the plain he was trying to bring into focus.

Carl tried to raise the cuff of Choi's Carhartts, but they were too tight.

Choi looked up at him. Cigarette?

Carl found the pack in Choi's breast pocket and tapped

one out for him, even put it in his mouth and lit it. Choi seemed relieved, and regained enough strength to lift his right hand up to his mouth in order to pull the cigarette from his lips between puffs. He also torqued himself around into a more comfortable spot.

Your back okay?

Back fine, Choi said. Leg is all.

I should probably call an ambulance.

No ambulance.

Nobody ever wants an ambulance, Carl said.

Use van, Choi said.

I've got to get a look at this, he told Choi. I'll be right back.

When Choi didn't respond, Carl said, You hear me?

Choi nodded, looking at the ground or his leg.

Inside the house, he couldn't find any scissors and started screaming for one of his housemates, but they all seemed to be gone. As incredible as that seemed, the place was empty.

He found a paring knife in the kitchen drawer; he knew for a fact it was dull because he'd tried to cut chicken with it once.

Outside Choi hadn't moved.

We're just going to have a quick look at this and then I'm going to take you to the hospital, he told him. It was the way the trainer from Carl's high school football team had talked to kids who'd been injured.

Quick look, Choi repeated, then winced as Carl moved

the leg gingerly.

Friend study mosquito. She not real?

She's real.

Girlfriend?

Not really.

Have girlfriend study mosquito or don't, Choi said.

Don't, Carl said, trying to puncture the coveralls with the dulled point of the knife.

Carl was thinking that he didn't have a girlfriend who studied mosquitoes or anything else to speak of. He didn't have any money. He didn't have a plan.

Listen up, Joe. I'm going to cut your pants. This is going to hurt.

Choi blew smoke through his nose.

Carl sawed with the paring knife, trying to hold the cloth taut without putting pressure on the spot he assumed was a compound break. Choi lay mostly impassive, quickly running through his cigarette. Playing sports growing up, Carl had witnessed three separate compound breaks. In each case, the kid screamed like he'd been bludgeoned by a mace. By comparison, Choi appeared to be on pain killers.

After a few minutes, he was able to rip the fabric and get at the wound. There was bone right there alright, through the skin like a spear.

Jesus, Carl said.

Jesus, Choi said dreamily. Jesus H. Christ.

How you doing?

Hwan Choi tough like nail.

Hwan Choi?

Choi smiled. American friend say, Hwan must change name. American think sneeze when say name. Hwan Choi. Just pick new name, he say. Okay, I say. Joe. Like GI Joe.

I wondered about that, Carl said.

Just above where the tibia jutted through the skin, there was a terrible scar, a place where the skin had healed improperly.

Noticing his gaze, Choi said, Bullet.

This is a bullet wound?

Maybe your dad, Choi said.

I doubt that. This looks like it was done by someone who knew what they were doing.

Know what doing, shoot here. He pointed to his chest.

Okay, Doc, Carl said. I guess I'm going to carry you to the van.

After he pulled the van into the yard, he returned to the house once more, to the basement, where he retrieved a couple slender boards that looked to have been pried from a skid. Upstairs, he picked through his dirty clothes until he found a thin T-shirt—Virginia is For Lovers, it said in front of a sunset—and ripped it into three long strips.

He didn't explain anything to Choi, he just held the wood strips to either side of the leg with one hand and wrapped the strips around and tied them off, not with much attention to the pain. He didn't look at Choi once during this operation.

When he was satisfied that the leg was marginally

stabilized for the trip—still without making eye contact—he said, one, two, three, and hefted Choi over his shoulder. He was a slight man, probably 140 pounds, and Carl was really able to carry him like he was a bag of sod. Choi complained, but it couldn't be helped. He didn't have to take him far, and then he slid him onto the floor of the van, and got in himself.

We're on our way, Carl said. They drove down Constable, then Midland.

Your old cemetery, he narrated, because Choi couldn't see out.

Nineteen eighteen, Choi said.

Yeah. The Mexican Flu.

Spanish, Choi said.

Same difference, right?

Choi laughed. When go to college, learn difference.

Carl laughed at that too.

At the emergency room, Choi leap-frogged over a kid with a sports sprain and somebody who had no obvious signs of trauma. A nurse led them into an exam room and took Choi's vitals. She put in a hep-lock and then ran something for the pain through that. There's just one in front of you, she said.

After she was gone, they were quiet for a long time and Carl thought Choi was asleep, but then he spoke.

Not hurt so bad, he said.

No? Carl looked over at Choi's leg.

Sting, Choi said. Burn.

Carl realized he was talking about the gunshot wound.

I've heard that, Carl said.

Saved life.

How was that? Carl asked.

Long story with no map. Short way to say: UN take over hospital.

Wow, Carl said.

Lucky, Choi said.

You a prisoner, then?

Until war end, yes. Not so bad. American good guys, right?

Then what?

After, he said. Apply to go to America.

What about your wife? I thought America was her idea.

Choi's gaze was on the middle distance. He said nothing.

You had to leave her behind? Carl said.

Choi shook his head, smiled. No wife.

You were never married?

Maybe like mosquito girl, Choi said. Maybe different. I don't know. Girlfriend with magazine of other place.

She stayed?

School teacher.

In North Korea? Carl said.

Pyongyang.

And you never talked to her again?

Did I talk to her? Choi said, more to himself than to Carl.

A doctor walked in then and started to read over the

details the nurse had written down.

Have charmed life, Mr. Roofer, Choi said.

It's Carl, Carl corrected.

Choi nodded, a hint of a smile. Carl, he said for the first time.

It ain't over yet, Carl told him.

No, Choi agreed. Not dead yet.

Jerry Gabriel's first book of short fiction, *Drowned Boy*, was published in January 2010 by Sarabande Books, and has been awarded the Towson Prize for Literature and named a "Discover Great New Writers" selection by Barnes and Noble. His stories have appeared in *Epoch*, *One Story*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Five Chapters*. He lives in southern Maryland and is a visiting assistant professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He's at work on a new book of short stories.