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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Exercises in Writing Fiction

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

Jacob A. Comer

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair  
Professor Claire Vaye Watkins  
Christine Schutt

2023



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Abstract of the Thesis

Exercises in Writing Fiction

by

Jacob A. Comer

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair

This selection of four short stories is broadly representative of my development as a writer during my time as an M.F.A. candidate at the University of California, Irvine, between the fall of 2021 and the summer of 2023.

## Conversations with an Invasive

There's really nothing, you know, to complain about, being an invasive species. In a way, everything is easy. No natural predators, for example. That's a big one. And all the stuff we like to eat, all the plants—none of the local animals like that stuff as much as we do. So there's plenty of it. It's basically all for us.

We didn't ask to be here. You probably know the story, about the rich guy—apparently he was quite a bad guy, made all that money in a nasty way; I don't know the details—who bought a bunch of hippos and brought them here. And they got loose. And since, you know, things are so easy for us here, those hippos made a lot of other hippos. And so on. And here I am.

We loll around in the water, in the mud, all day. We go out to graze at night. Just like hippos have always done, from what I understand. We're normal hippos, except that, like I said, things are easier for us. Our relatives, the ones who live in Africa: They have to worry about all kinds of stuff. Crocodiles, lions, poachers. We don't.

There is, however, one thing that, as of just recently, we do have to worry about. The problem is that, even though there were just a handful of us to begin with, we've had so many baby hippos that now there are a lot of us. Like, a *lot* a lot. A couple hundred. And the people who live here think there are too many of us. And they want to send some of us to Africa. Or—and I think this would be even worse—to zoos.

I don't want to go to a zoo. I don't care how much they feed you there.

But I guess that in a way, it would be fair to send us to Africa. To deal with the crocodiles and the lions and the poachers and the hippos who really know what they're doing, being hippos. That's the way most hippos live. The natural order of things, one might say. So if someone were

to pack us up and ship us over there, to live out the rest of our days as God or nature or whatever intended, could I really complain?

On the other hand—let's be honest here: If they sent me to Africa, I'd have no idea what the heck I'd be doing. I've never seen a crocodile. I've heard those fuckers get big. And if one of them was going to try to bite me? I mean, obviously I'd do my best. But it's not like I've had any practice.

And, like—for better or for worse—no matter how it happened in the first place, this is my home. I grew up here. I don't know any place else. It's not like I wouldn't be interested in seeing another part of the world. And I know that, in a very real way, I don't belong here. But to be shoved into a crate and shipped off, without asking for it, to someplace I've never seen, to live out the rest of my days—I have to admit, that doesn't seem totally right to me, either.

—

I will say this: One thing about being an invasive species that really isn't that great, despite how easy we have it, is not speaking the language.

Again, I don't mean to complain, really. It doesn't seem right. But not speaking the language: It kind of sucks.

We have our own language, obviously. The language that our ancestors—that first handful—brought over from Africa. And my understanding is that, in Africa, it works great. Not only can all the hippos talk to each other, but they can talk pretty well with all the other African animals, too. It's a regional thing, not a hippo thing, is what I'm saying.

Over here in South America, though, they talk something different. And it's, like, pretty hard to understand. It's not impossible. There are some commonalities. Some of the hippos have even learned it, can speak it fluently. But because we're so isolated—we're the only hippos



around, obviously, the only African animals, and everyone knows we're kind of different—it doesn't happen that often. Hippos learning the South America language, I mean. Or the native animals learning the African one.

It was never a problem for me until I started seeing this native animal. We went out for a while. It didn't work out.

I probably should have known from the beginning—that it wouldn't work. But, like: I liked her. Still, I should have known. Because—you'll laugh at this—it's not just that she was native, that I didn't speak her language. She was a deer.

Yeah. A hippo and a deer. Look, it happens: an animal of one species having a crush on another. It does happen. Pretty frequently, actually. But I have to admit, I don't think I've ever heard of an instance where it's actually worked, like, in the long run.

What can I say? She was cute. I'd see her at night, when I'd go out to graze. I'd just started doing that on my own, grazing, at night, without my parents. I'd wander off. And sometimes I'd see her, grazing too. She'd be with her family. I saw her, and I was, like: Woah. She had these great big eyes. And her ears—like, way more delicate than a hippo's ears, even the prettiest hippos I've seen. And long legs. Real graceful. I guess I don't have to tell you that hippos—hippos don't have legs like that.

So I was like: Woah. And at night, I'd look for her. Try to cross paths. And I'd see her occasionally. But I didn't know what to say, especially because she was with her family, and—of course—because I didn't speak the language. But then, after a while, she started kind of hanging back, getting a little separation from her family, and I was, like: Okay, maybe she wants to talk to me. So I went up and said hello. Which, luckily—it doesn't really matter what language you say hello in.

And it went fine for a while. You're hopeful, in those situations. You have to be. I mean, I was scared. I wasn't blind to the difficulties. But I was really into her. For a while, I even thought I was in love. Maybe I was.

Once, for a week, I even stayed with her family. They had crossed to the other side of the river, the side opposite where they usually are, to get the fresh grass that grows over there in summer. It's farther away than where they usually hung around, so Carmen—that was her name, Carmen—and I wouldn't have been able to see each other each night, the way we had been doing. And she asked me if I wanted to spend the week with them.

And by the way, when I say asked, I mean: She didn't ask me in my language, or even, totally, in hers. Since neither of us knew how to talk to the other, we each just picked up a bunch of words in the other's language where we could, and we communicated in this weird scramble. And there was a lot of gesticulating going on. I mean, with head movements, and with the ears.

Anyway, I went. I stayed with them. And they were pretty patient with me, I guess. They didn't laugh or get upset when I ate so much more than they did. They didn't make me feel like I was getting in the way, even though I was, like, three times everyone else's size.

They did laugh at me one time. We were walking, through this forested area, and there was a fallen tree across the path, and they all just jumped over that tree like it was nothing. And then it was my turn. And, like, you know: Hippos don't jump. We just don't. We're not cut out for that. Still, I tried. Carmen was on the other side, watching me, waiting for me. So I gave it a shot. And I fell. And I probably looked ridiculous. And they laughed.

She didn't laugh. But her family did. And then they tried to make up for it, I guess, by being, like: Is he okay? But, you know, that was even worse. I felt humiliated.

And then I did something I shouldn't have done. I stood back up, and I opened my big hippo mouth and slammed it shut on that fallen tree. Snapped it in half. And then I walked through. And it quieted everyone down, that's true. But it was kind of a giveaway that I was upset.

They were nice, though. They even—and this really surprised me—they were okay with Carmen and me sleeping in the same place, in the same little nest in the grass. Not, like, totally separated from the herd, but in our own little area. I wouldn't have thought they'd be okay with that. But they were. So at night we could kind of snuggle.

But, you know—and maybe it was just me—I got the sense that even though they were *okay* with my being there, they weren't *crazy* about it. Like: I felt like I was being tolerated. And tolerance is good. But it wasn't, like: Hey, we love this guy.

And at the end of that week, I had a weird feeling. First of all, I was really tired, because Carmen and I had been staying up late every night, talking as best we could, trying to communicate. So I was sleepy. But also, even though, after all that time together, I felt even more strongly about her than before, I had a sense of something being off. It was like I was aware of something, something between me and her, that was—I'm not sure how to say it—unfinished. So for a few days after that week with her family, I was wandering around in this fatigued, contemplative haze.

I don't know if that's when it was starting to dawn on me that Carmen and I, eventually, would have to break up. I didn't want to think that, to see it. I didn't want to break up. I felt like: If this is what we want to do, there's got to be a way.

And maybe that's true. Maybe if you want something badly enough, with someone else, you find a way, no matter what. But it wasn't the case with Carmen and me. A few months later,

I started to feel like she wasn't all that into me anymore. She seemed, like, *tired*. Tired of trying to communicate—to communicate with *me*. Like, she'd try to say something to me, in our mix of languages, and it was like she didn't have the energy. Like she was giving up.

I held on for a while. I tried to be patient, to give her space, to pick up more of her language, whatever. But after a few more weeks, to be honest, I was feeling tired, too.

So, yeah. Since then, I've dated only hippos. I mean, maybe, in theory, if I were to meet someone else, someone who isn't one of us, and feel like we were really a good match, I'd give the whole native-and-invasive-romance thing another try.

But, to be honest, I think I can understand why you never really see those relationships working out. I'm not saying I agree with it, but I get why we hippos tend to keep to ourselves.

—

It could be worse. I've heard that, in some parts of the world, if there are too many of your species, the humans just come along and shoot you.

And maybe—I've been giving this some thought, the past few days—maybe it wouldn't actually be so bad. Moving to Africa, I mean. Like, okay, I'm still not saying it's *fair*, getting shot by some creep with a tranquilizer dart and waking up under a tarp in the belly of some jet 35,000 feet above the Atlantic, halfway to getting parachute-dropped into the heart of the Serengeti, and really having to pee. That's something you should have the right to opt out of.

But, I mean, the *result*, is what I'm saying. Maybe it would be better that way. That's where the other hippos are, after all. And the other animals that speak our language. Our social horizons would be expanded. Or, maybe I should say, it would make it a lot easier for those social horizons to expand.

I'll say it: It would probably make it easier to make friends, and to find a partner, you know. Someone to love. As much procreation as we've been doing over here, the dating pool is limited. Plus, it's not lost on me that we're all—even if it's a few generations back—related.

And here's another thought I had recently: What if the humans, the people who want to send us to Africa, are, somehow, *right*?

Like: Their reason for sending us away is that we're screwing up the environment. I never really took that seriously. I mean, yeah, we eat a lot. But it's not like South America is running out of plants.

But maybe there's more to it than I'm seeing. Like, to me, it doesn't look like we're doing any harm: We do our thing, the native animals do theirs, everyone has enough of what they need—I think—and so it goes. But maybe the humans know something I don't. Maybe we're disturbing the native animals in a way I don't understand. Like, in a way that goes beyond just having enough food and water. Maybe, in a more subtle way, we're screwing up the natural order of things. Not by, like, starving anyone, or driving them out of their homes, but just, like—making them uncomfortable.

Maybe that's the real reason for wanting to send us away. Maybe that's what the humans mean when they say we're messing up the environment. Not that we're totally destroying it, or even damaging it. Just that we're changing it in a way they don't like.

Which—and this is what I'm saying—would kind of make sense. We don't completely belong. We're not native. Just by being here, we make things a little different. And I can understand if the native animals, and the humans—they don't like it.

In theory, if they shipped us back to Africa, we wouldn't have that same problem. I mean, it would take us a while to get acquainted, learn how to fit in. And maybe we never would,

totally. We'd be a little different from the hippos that have always been there. But it wouldn't be the way it is here. We'd stand out, but we wouldn't be, you know, *invasive*.

We wouldn't be getting in the way. I guess that's one way to sum up what I've been thinking, the past few days: Maybe, all my life, I've been making a lot of others—the humans, the native animals—kind of uncomfortable, just by being here. Being in the way. And if they shipped me to Africa, even if I don't really like it there, at least I wouldn't have to worry about that.

—

So, yeah, I've been doing a lot of thinking. But it's funny, it's like: When it's time to actually make a decision, when it's time to *act*, all the stuff you've been thinking about, it all sinks way to the bottom of your mind. It goes out of sight. And you just *do* something. And often, what you do, it surprises you, right?

That's what happened two days ago. It turns out that those rumors, about the humans flattening us to the next hemisphere, are totally true. I mean, very few of us were surprised: They were crazy enough to bring us here in the first place.

It started upstream from where my family and I hang out. I didn't hear anything, actually. They came in the morning, while we were napping, and next thing I know, a bunch of hippos are splashing downriver, running along the banks, calling to us, waking us up. And they told us, like: It's happening. The humans are taking us away.

And we were, like: Oh.

And then Ronnie, a cousin of mine, who saw it happen, explained. He said: It was weird, because they didn't seem determined to get everyone. They tranquilized a bunch of us, and they

started packing those ones up, and it didn't seem to bother them that the rest of us escaped. They got ten of us total. They seemed satisfied with that.

The next day—yesterday—we heard that the same thing had happened. They came in the morning—the humans—picked up ten more of us, and left.

So there are two possible explanations. One is that they're just taking their time, coming after us ten by ten, because even with those crazy machines they've got, moving just ten of us, knocked out, is a serious job.

Another is that they don't care about getting all of us. That they're taking some of us, to keep our numbers down, and the rest of us, they'll let stay.

I don't know. Time will tell. But here's something else, something that shocked me, a little, when I first heard it. A bunch of hippos, a bunch of the ones that are gone: They went *willingly*. I mean, they didn't walk into the trucks. But they didn't run, either. They saw the humans, and the dart guns, and they were just, like: Tranquilize me, mister.

Apparently most of those ones—the ones who went willingly—were old-timers. Like, some of them were super old, old enough to actually have been from Africa in the first place, or children of the original immigrants. So maybe some of them actually *missed* the place. Maybe they'd been waiting for this. Maybe they're ready to die on their native soil, or in their native mud hole, or whatever.

But that wasn't all of them. Some of the ones who went—who *wanted* to go—were young. Maybe they wanted the adventure. Maybe they felt, really strongly, how I sometimes feel, that they didn't belong here. Didn't belong, or weren't wanted.

Well, we can't ask them now. They are drugged up and gone.

But let's talk about me. What I'm saying is this: When Ronnie came down, all breathless, and he was standing on the bank to tell us what had just popped off, and his ears were twitching all over the place, he was so juiced up, and all of us, listening, were up to our nostrils in the shallow water, still waking up, blinking the water out of our eyes—I heard what he said, and I didn't even think about what I was going to do. I had a mental image of those guys with the dart guns, and the trucks waiting, and the sad old hippos just standing there, waiting their turn to get knocked out and boxed up, and I was like: Fuck that.

I ran. I ran and I swam, as fast as I could, downriver. To get away from those people.

The thoughts I'd had about how maybe it would be easier to make friends, or find someone, in Africa: gone. I kept going all day, with my family, running, swimming, until we got to this place where a smaller river met up with the bigger one, and we moved up that smaller river until we found a good place to hide—this place, the one we're in now—all covered with trees and with deep pools, so we can duck under if we need to. And I guess we'll stay until this all blows over. Or at least until we know what's going on.

Or maybe we'll keep moving. Live life on the run. Until they forget about us, or they hunt us down and drag us away. No matter how this all ends up, I've realized: I don't want to go.

Don't want to. Maybe I'll always feel a little guilty, a little bad, about messing with the system for everyone else, about getting in the way. But, first of all, I'm not trying to do any harm. I'm just here.

Second: I am my own creature, after all. My own hippo, my own self. And it's for that reason, I guess, that I've got something inside me that *wants* things. That wants and feels. Whatever you call that thing—maybe you can just call it *me*—it popped its head up, there where



we were napping, when Ronnie came to tell us the other day. And it spoke up. And it was, like: No.

I don't even know why. I feel like that inner hippo, that inner me, has reasons that I—like, with my mind—don't totally understand. Maybe it feels like my future is here. Far-fetched though it sounds, maybe it senses, like, my fate. Or maybe it just doesn't like being told what to do—doesn't like being forced.

Not sure. But regardless, even though I don't want to make other creatures' lives harder, or less pleasant, I feel like, you know, I have to answer to that thing. To that hippo, that *me*. Because if I don't—if I push it away—if I favor some general group, some everyone-else, over my own self, then, like: Am I really living my life? Or am I living a life that's not totally mine, a life that's more like an extension of everyone else's—whoever that everyone-else might be?

I don't know. Maybe I never will—never get answers to those questions, I mean. For now, I'm going with this. Answering to my self—my own self.

We'll see how it goes. If I change my mind, I bet the guys with the dart guns will be more than happy take me up on it.

In the meantime, I'll try not to eat too much. And to pick up some more of the language. You know—the native one.

## A Blockage

For Krissy there was a pervasive feeling of vapidness, emptiness inside and out, and she felt tired, though she had just spent ten hours in bed. She ate a good breakfast, morning oats and blueberries, from force of habit, without wanting to. The plan was to meet Louis at a café on Balboa Island at ten o'clock, and Louis would be late, yet unaccountably, automatically, she was in the car at nine-thirty, to get there on time, even a few minutes early. When had her attitude toward life shifted to one of apathy at best, and at worst, disdain?

Oh, the move away from home, from Riverside—even that, it was a halfway move, enough to get her out of the house but not far enough that she couldn't be home in time for dinner. A master's degree, in fashion design. Fashion design. Was she serious? And Louis. Louis, who didn't want her, really, who was seeing other women, was open about it. She turned left, toward the water, down a big hill and up another. At the top, at the intersection with Coast Highway, the sky over the ocean was bright as if scoured with hot water—too bright—harsh and empty. She squeezed the wheel. Her nails, short and painted, were perfect.

Maybe it was Louis. Her problem, her knowledge that he was sleeping with other women. That she was not enough, was not sufficiently wanted. That she had brought him a birthday cake, found another car in the driveway, and that still she waited for him. Maybe she lived too close to home. Maybe too far. Maybe it was her knowledge that fashion, being her dream, was only that—a dream—and that she held to it with desperate hope and the comprehension that though it was necessary, it would never be sufficient to save her.

She crossed the highway and descended, toward the water, the bridge, and the island. The dilute morning sun gasped over her forearm, and it comforted her, momentarily, the way the fine hairs caught and hummed with the light, with an energy of another life.

Humiliating, looking for parking. An inanity ratcheted unto the impossible. Finally, four blocks from Marine, in front of a white house with enormous roses of lemon and cream crowding over the fence and, over the door, an American flag hanging, swaying like a person turning in their sleep.

She smelled the concrete sidewalk and the sun but not the ocean. At the café—it was nine fifty-one—she realized she was not going to drink coffee, which always made her anxious. She chose instead, though she was not hungry, a plastic cup of fruit: grapes, cubes of melon and pineapple, with a plastic fork. She sat down at a counter, facing the window, on a high stool. The fruit pieces shone like ice.

Louis was not going to save her. She could not be saved. Could not save herself. Not least because there was nothing wrong. She was lonely, she was uncertain. She was not hungry, sick, or dying. How could she save herself, when her unhappinesses were only in her head?

The fruit cut the edges of her gums with cold. She tried to swallow quickly. She started to choke.

She tried to swallow, once, twice. No, she really was choking.

She could not believe it. She stood, tottering, the stool legs honking abruptly against the floor. Her hands were on her neck. Around her, staring, were faces she had not noticed before.

It really was happening. She saw spots, pinpoints, of the primary colors. Someone seized her from behind, around the waist. She had time to think: Not Louis. Then, as if she had been hurled backward against a wall, the air shot from her, air that she did not know she contained, all the way down to where it contacted her soul. And on this breath of her life, as it flew from her, there went a soggy, orange hunk of melon, which penetrated the short void before her and vanished as, released, she fell to her knees.

Her hair, downhanging, swayed. She reached forward, leaning, to press her hands flat against the wooden floor. Cool but with an inner, reticent heat, like a strange animal. She breathed. The spots grew larger, then faded. Breath passed the place where, a moment ago and for the first time, there had been a stop.

Someone was pulling her up, by the armpits, the upper arms. Then another pair of hands, steadying her. There: Louis. She did not try to help them. She closed her eyes, blocking from her vision only the wood, her hands, her hair. She smelled them. He can do as he wishes. I am as good as reborn.

## Towed

It was the third quarter, they were down by two, and Wilkins's best attackman—the shifty, little kind, who probably weighed, Alex thought, no more than a buck and a quarter—took the ball behind the goal and charged up toward the right. Joey closed him off, and the kid rolled to his left, popped out in front of the goal, and raised his stick to shoot. But Alex, doing his job, came flying across the crease and leveled the little bastard before he could pull the trigger.

The hit was sublime. Like crashing through a window, like shattering an egg. The kid lifted into the air and hung there horizontally, as if in a dentist's chair, for an instant before hitting the ground as dead weight. The snaps of his helmet tore loose, and he lay there like he'd fallen out of a time machine and didn't know what year it was. The crowd howled, and even Vasquez, the goalie, who basically never said a word, stood over the kid lying at his feet like a sacrifice and screamed through his mouthguard: "BOOM!"

Joey scooped up the ball and cleared it out. The little attackman took a while getting up. And Alex, standing before him, watching him rise slowly to his knees, then to his feet, had a reaction unlike any he'd had before. He had a feeling of great cold, then uncomfortable warmth. Then, in the center of his chest, he had a sensation of something spinning, a spinning that sent a profound disturbance throughout his body, a feeling that something was going to go terribly wrong. Never, on the lacrosse field, had he seen anyone look as defeated as the little attackman did. He was reminded, to his horror, of an expression he used to see on his father's face, an expression he used to make in the years after the death of Alex's mother.

For the rest of the game, Alex played shakily. He was slow to track the ball, and everyone else seemed to be a step quicker. Luckily, the other defensemen and Vasquez picked up the slack, and they ended up winning by two goals.

In the game's final moments, it started to rain. The drops fell as a dreamish mist that coated helmets, gloves, and the weightless metal of the lacrosse sticks like condensation. In the hazy air, the team's victorious celebrations were blurred and muffled, as if enshrouded in smoke. Coming off the field, Alex removed his helmet and raised it, limply, toward Nixie, in the stands. She had, as usual, spread glitter on her face for the game, tied blue and gold ribbons in her hair, and painted Alex's number on her cheeks. She was beaming.

He drove home. The mist, falling on him, had mingled with his sweat, gathering his hair into hooks and whorls. He felt his pulse in his ears. At a stoplight, he checked his phone.

Tristan: "Congratulations"

Tristan: "That kid you hit just got sent back to pre-algebra"

Nixie: "I am so proud of you, my dear one. You were amazing. And now the playoffs!"

Nixie: "I love you, my Alex. Tell me when you are home so we can say good night. Kiss kiss kiss"

He set his phone in the cup holder and took a long, slow breath.

The image of the little attackman, lying on his back, would not leave Alex's head. The little bastard, he thought. He remembered him rising to his feet, hanging his head, but more slowly, more brokenly than the way it had happened in reality.

He got home. He went to the kitchen, stood in front of the fridge, and poured himself a glass of whole milk. He drank it, then drank another one. He poured himself a third, took a bowl of hard-boiled eggs out of the fridge, and sat down at the kitchen table. He began to crack and eat them. He drank the milk.

The eggshells in the bowl looked like a little disaster. A mess.

"Fuck," he muttered.

He went up to his room. He lay on the floor. The evening had become purple, almost black. The mist was falling. On his bedside table there was a heart rate monitor, the kind you clip to your finger, and he rose and checked his pulse. Sixty-two beats per minute. Sixty-three. Sixty-four. Sixty-three. Normal.

“Fuck,” he said.

Again he lay down. The carpeted floor seemed to press upward, to lift him without moving him at all. The spinning in his chest would not stop. He had a longing for something he could not identify. Then he thought of Nixie. He wanted to hold her against him, to press his face to hers.

He would call her. He loved her. But the spinning: it paralyzed him, as if he were frozen with fear.

“Alex!”

He jumped up. “Fuck!”

His father was standing in the doorway.

“Woah, geez, you’re on edge?”

“Jesus.”

“Sorry, bud. I heard you won!”

“Yeah, we won.”

“Unstoppable. Unstoppable this year. Good job!”

Alex’s room had become almost completely dark.

“Well, anyway, are you hungry?” his father said.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I got us some chickens.”

“Hm.”

They went downstairs to the kitchen. On the counter there lay two rotisserie chickens in plastic trays. Alex put his on the table, at the place where he had eaten his eggs, and began pulling it apart with his hands. His father sat across from him, at the spot he used for both eating and working, clearing a space among the papers before him. He ran a towing company, Atlas Towing, the official slogan of which was “You blow it, we tow it.” The unofficial slogan was “Fuck you, you’re gettin’ towed.”

“Everybody gets towed sometimes, big guy,” his father said, tearing off a leg. “But today you did the towin’.”

“I did indeed do some towing today,” Alex said. “Then I fell apart.”

“I got a great call today,” his father continued. “Got a call from a gentleman in Mercersburg. Said a bunch of Mexicans left a trailer in front of his garage.”

“Not necessarily Mexicans, Dad.”

“Just tellin’ you what he said to me. He says: Bunch of Mexicans left a trailer right in front of my garage. Lock on the hitch. Can’t get in my garage. Can you tow that? I said—” Alex’s father began to smile. “I said, ‘Sir, I understand your situation, and I appreciate your call. Now, let me ask you something: Are you familiar with our company slogan?’ ‘Not sure I am,’ he says.”

Alex’s father was getting excited.

“I say: ‘Well, sir, the specifics are unimportant, so I’ll cut to the gist. Forgive me my parochial diction, sir, but I’ll take the liberty of making myself clear: We can tow any-goddamn-thing. It doesn’t even have to have wheels. Shit, it don’t even have to be a *vehicle*. One time we towed a couple hundred pounds of road tailings a bunch of rednecks left piled up beside the curb.



The point, sir, the kernel of my argument, is neither God nor man nor dark of night will stay us from our purpose. So I tell you what we'll do: we'll bring along the flat-bed, pull that fucker up on there, lock and all, and we'll drag it away to where the bad trailers go faster than you can say: 'Where the fuck is my trailer?'"

Alex's father was wide eyed and beaming crazily. "Who!" he concluded, waving the chicken leg.

Alex worked his fingers between the keelbone and the breast meat and pulled the flesh away. "So you towed that."

"Towed it good."

Alex's father's cell phone rang. With his free hand he answered. "Yellow."

He listened. Slowly, the crazed smile returned to his face. "Aw," he said.

With his teeth, Alex tore off a bite of chicken. The flesh made a tiny ripping sound as it separated.

"Aw," his father repeated. "Well, Butch," he said, barely containing himself, "you just get on over there and do what you do best. We have a purpose on this earth, Butch." He was speaking into the phone but looking Alex in the eye. "Life's not meaningless, Butch. We have a purpose, a calling. Some things are inexorable. Means they can't be escaped. I've been towed myself, Butch. You know that, don't you?" He listened, never breaking his gaze with Alex. "That's right. We have the fear of God in us, the fear of the inevitable. Forces beyond our control, beyond what we can understand. You're a messenger of that, Butch. Be the messenger. But before you go, do something else for me, Butch. My son here, Alex—you know him; we're sharing a couple of chickens—remind him, if you will, of our slogan. I'll put you on speaker."

He set the phone on the table. "Ready?" he said.

Butch's voice was as one would expect. "Ready," he growled.

"One, two, three ... "

Then the two voices together, bellowing. The phone quivered on the table, and Alex's father leaned forward, his face over the dead chicken, grinning with macabre joy: "FUCK YOU, YOU'RE GETTIN' TOWED!"

The following afternoon, after practice, Alex was on the track, running seven-and-a-half-minute miles. Tristan, leaving the gym—twenty-five minutes on the elliptical was his daily routine—leaned his forearms on the chain-link fence to watch.

Alex came barreling up the home stretch. "How many have you done?" Tristan shouted.

Alex raised three fingers.

"Jesus. Dude. After practice? Stop it. Stop!"

Alex slowed, breathing hard, and came to a stop. He knit his fingers and placed his hands behind his head. He stood in the track, his chest lifting and falling, his t-shirt patterned with sweat. He wandered toward the fence.

Tristan stared at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Something's wrong with me."

"All day you've been acting like a maniac."

"Have I?"

"Yes. I would know."

Alex leaned on the fence, facing past Tristan. He was breathing hard, and he noticed now that he was sore all over: his legs, his core, his shoulders and arms. "Yesterday," he said, "I hit that kid."

“You did. He’ll never play the trumpet again.”

“I hit him hard.”

“You play defense, Alex,” Tristan said, as if speaking to a distracted child. “Collapsing people’s lungs is part of the fun.”

“Since then ... ” Alex was having difficulty tracking his thoughts. He wondered what his heart rate was. “Since then I have this feeling that everything is going to go wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. No specifics.”

“My mom’s got pills for that.” Tristan’s mother was a psychiatrist. “Shit,” Tristan continued, laughing, “*I’ve* got pills for that.”

“Fuck,” Alex said, without knowing why. Then: “Let’s eat something.”

They went to the locker room. They showered and changed, then headed down the avenue toward Tracie’s, an old grocery store three blocks away. As they walked, they passed big, impassive-looking houses with broad lawns and elaborate gardens. Peonies were voluptuous on their stems. The evening was thickening from blue into purple. They entered Tracie’s, jostling the bell. The other patrons were a smattering of pale, shuffling old people and middle-aged parents drifting along the aisles with detached, almost hypnotic intent. At the deli counter, Alex got a Reuben the size of a small textbook, and Tristan ordered a BLT. They went back outside and sat across from each other at a picnic table on the sidewalk. Mist was rising from the ground.

“You’re anxious,” Tristan said, unwrapping the butcher paper from his half-sandwich.

“I’m not an anxious person.”

“You’re afraid of something you don’t need to be afraid of.”

“There’s nothing to *be* afraid of.”

“Exactly.”

Alex was two bites, a substantial proportion, into his sandwich. “Unless there *is* something to be afraid of.”

“You hear yourself, right?”

“It is possible,” Alex said, slowly and through a mouthful of sandwich, “for everything to go wrong.”

“Life’s not risk free. That’s not the point, though.”

“What’s the point?”

“It’s that if you focus on all that could go wrong, even if it’s improbable, you’re torturing yourself and getting distracted from actually living.”

“Your mom tells you this stuff?”

“Yes, actually.”

Alex was starting on the second half of his sandwich. “It’s okay, by the way,” Tristan said, “to actually taste your food.”

“I’m not focused on what could go wrong,” Alex said, ignoring him. “I have no idea what could go wrong. It’s just a feeling. Like everything could fall apart.”

“Well, it could. But maybe don’t worry about that until you actually have a reason to. Speaking of which.”

From his backpack, resting on the bench beside him, Tristan took a pill box with seven compartments, each labeled with the initial of a day of the week. He also took out a small, circular object, like a compass. On the pill box, he opened the compartment labeled F and, with his fingertips, picked out a white pill. Then he opened the circular object, which had a hinged lid like a compact mirror, and set the pill carefully inside.

“What’s that?” Alex said.

“What?”

“Your makeup thing.”

“It’s a pill splitter, jackass.” Gently, Tristan closed the lid. There was a tiny popping sound as the pill broke into two.

“Can’t you just use your hands? Or a knife, or something?”

Tristan opened the little device. He put one half of the broken pill back into the pill box, in the Sa compartment, and the other into his mouth. He took a long drink from his water bottle, swallowing the half-pill. “This is more precise.”

“Isn’t that kind of obsessive?”

Tristan, screwing the cap back onto his water bottle, looked at Alex like he had never heard anything so stupid. “Alex,” he said. “What the fuck do you think these pills are *for*?”

Over the weekend, Alex descended deeper and deeper into a state of anxiety. Inexplicably, he found himself waking around six, unable to get back to sleep. In the morning twilight, he would run, his legs still sore from all the running the day before. He would shower, get into the car, and drive aimlessly, red eyed, around town. Various thoughts—of the playoffs, of exams, of college applications the following year, of Nixie—popped into his head. The burning, spinning thing in his chest was constantly in motion: now slow, as if idling; now fast, whirling at such a speed that, holding his hand before his face, he could watch his fingers shake.

Monday arrived. He showed up to school exhausted. In class, he experienced a kind of mental tunnel vision, unaware of what the teacher was saying, his mind flashing from one troubling thought to the next: of playing poorly; of handling both homework and the playoffs; of

feeling, for some reason, avoidant toward Nixie. In pre-calculus, after lunch, he clipped the heart rate monitor to his finger. He watched the little green light that matched his pulse as if he were awaiting a divination. Seventy-three. Seventy-five. Seventy-six. Considering he was at rest, seventy-six was high.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

In practice, he played like a frightened animal. He was slow, his reflexes jerky and delayed. The problem was that he had no sense of the field, of the movement of the game in general: he could focus on one thing, one man at a time, and one only, and even at this he was not quite up to speed. On one drill, an instant too late in following the progress of play, he got caught in front of the goal as someone was shooting. The dense little ball slammed into the side of his facemask, turning his head as if he'd been punched. He stumbled, dizzy, and let out a short, pained, furious cry that made his teammates hesitate before playing on.

In the locker room, what he wanted to do was sit on one of the long, pine benches with his head in his hands and stay there for a long time. But it was crowded, and noisy, and everyone else was in good spirits. He changed and went to his car. He got into the driver's seat and stared through the windshield. He had an impulse to cry but could not. He drove home slowly.

He was certain that something was going to go terribly wrong. He just didn't know what. In his room, he lay on the floor. Was it the playoffs? Typically, he took important games in stride, but now, the thought of the next one, three days from now, made him quiver. Was that the problem? Or was it the summer, the fact that he hadn't yet made plans? He sensed the summer would be torment, that he was going to languish, that the hot, slow months would be a waste. Through these thoughts, among others, his mind cycled at sickening speed.

He got a text. He pulled his phone from his pocket. It was Nixie.

Nixie. For the past several days, he had hardly spoken to her. He opened the message.

“My dear one, are you okay?”

At the sight of this, and of Nixie’s name and picture at the top of the screen, the spinning in Alex’s chest intensified into agony. It became unbearable. Needing to do something, anything, to escape it, he sat up, holding the phone before him, and then, finding that sitting up brought him no relief, he immediately lay back down. Though he was still, he seemed to be shaking, as if electrified, and his stomach roiled.

Nixie. She was the problem. But how? She was nothing but good to him. Why, now, did the thought of her fill him with distress? Compulsively, he wrote back: “I’m sorry, darling one. I’m just at home”

Immediately, she replied: “Is everything okay?”

Alex: “Yes”

Alex: “Just distracted with lacrosse and homework”

Nixie: “Oh”

Nixie: “Can I see you?”

Alex felt as though he had been plunged into exceedingly cold water.

Alex: “Not tonight, baby. My dad wants my help with something”

As if in response, Alex’s father called up from the kitchen. He sounded preoccupied, glum. “Alex?”

“Yes?”

Apparently his father had not heard him. “Alex!”

“Yeah!”

“You want some shepherd’s pie?”

“Ah. Sure.”

Alex stood. He took his heart rate monitor from his backpack. Ninety-two. Ninety-one. Ninety-two.

“*Fuck.*”

He went to the kitchen. Entering it, he was suddenly aware that it had grown dark. “Dad?” he said. He switched on the light and stopped in the doorway, startled.

His father was sitting at the table, staring at the papers spread before him. At his elbow was a tray of shepherd’s pie, frozen and reheated. “Dad?” Alex said.

“Yeah,” he said, without looking up.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Here. Eat.”

Alex looked at him. He moved to the cupboard, pulled down two plates, and took two forks and a big spoon from the drawer. He scooped himself some shepherd’s pie, left a plate and fork in front of his father, and sat down in his usual place. He did not feel hungry. His father did not move.

“Dad,” Alex said. “What’s going on?”

Alex’s father was so still, he did not seem to be breathing. “A few nights ago,” he said, staring at a spot on the table, “some kids torched a school bus. In someone’s yard. Came in the middle of the night and lit the fucker on fire. Guy came out—thing was broken down already; he didn’t drive it, it was just sitting there—and the whole thing was on fire. Flames higher than the house. Took hours to burn down. So now, of course, it’s all seized up and falling apart. No tires. Just a big, dead weight.”

His face was very grave. “Not sure how we’re going to tow that.”



Alex discovered that most of his shepherd's pie was gone.

"What do you think you'll do?" he said.

His father shook his head slowly. "That I don't know," he said. "This one's got me stuck."

The quarterfinals, Thursday, was an away game, at Saint Joseph's. Alex had been getting a few hours of sleep each night. Awake, his mind jumped from one worry to the next with self-destructive speed, like an engine tearing itself apart. Now, minutes before the game, in an unfamiliar locker room, the spinning in his chest again reached a torturous point, and Alex went to the toilets, knelt before one, and threw up. He threw up everything, eggs and salad and bits of chicken in a viscous, acidic mess. His body, not done, tried to give up more. He heaved, wracked, spitting his guts' dregs into the streaky bowl. He stood up with toilet water splashed on his face. He went to the sink.

"Dude," Joey said, from one of the urinals. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Just stoked?"

Alex washed his hands and rubbed water on his face. His eyes burned. His stomach was in revolt, and his pulse hammered in his neck. "Yeah," he said. "Exactly."

The game passed in a blur. To Alex's surprise, he played badly, but not terribly. It was, in fact, as if he were not playing at all: his body moved, reacted, desperately, as if constantly responding in terror. Alex himself was just along for the ride.

Someone took a shot. It hit Vasquez in the shoulder and rebounded into the dangerous zone in front of the goal. Chaos descended, a melee of players hurling themselves at one another,

fighting for the ball. By accident, lowering his shoulder, Alex threw his weight into someone's face. The kid's head snapped back, and he stumbled. When he had recovered himself, he wound up and swung his stick, as if it were a baseball bat, hard against Alex's stomach. Enraged, frightened, Alex grabbed the kid's jersey with a gloved hand and threw him to the ground.

The whistle blew. The kid Alex had floored was getting to his feet, and on an impulse, Alex stepped forward to shove him back down. Joey caught him, grabbed him with both hands by the helmet, and began to walk him slowly backwards, repeating, in an urgent whisper: "Be cool. Be cool. Be cool."

They won by three. A great deal of noise was coming from the stands. Alex had hardly noticed there were spectators. He returned to the locker room in a daze. He changed without showering and walked, as if in a bad dream, to his car.

Nixie was waiting for him, leaning against the rear panel of his old Grand Cherokee with her arms crossed. She straightened as he approached. She was dressed as if she had just come from school: no ribbons in her hair, no glitter or numbers on her face.

Alex stopped a few steps before her. "Hi."

"Can you tell me what's going on, please?"

He pressed the heels of his palms to his temples. "I don't know. Something's wrong with me."

"*What, baby? What is wrong?*" She approached and stood close to him, looking up into his face. Her expression was both concerned and angry: a motherish look. "Why don't you just *talk* to me? You've been avoiding me. You haven't been telling me anything. It's not fair. It's not nice."

"I don't know what to tell you. Everything scares me these days."

“Like *what?*”

“Lacrosse. Everything. You.”

“I scare you? What did I do?”

“Nothing. I don’t know.” He shook his head, gripping his hair. “I’m freaking out. Freaking out all the time. It has something to do with Mom.”

“Alex,” Nixie said, gently. “What does this have to do with your mom?”

As she spoke, she raised one hand and placed it softly on the center of Alex’s chest. This was something Alex could not bear: she was touching the spinning thing, the part of him that was most raw. He took her wrist and, slowly, moved her arm back down to her side. Nixie frowned.

“I’m just trying to help,” she said. “I don’t know why you’re pushing me away.”

“I’m not pushing you away.”

“You actually are. I understand something’s wrong, but I want to be here for it. I want to help.”

“I know,” he said, “but I can’t. I don’t know what’s wrong. I don’t know what to say about it.”

He stepped around her. “I didn’t play well. I have to go.”

“Alex,” she said, turning. “What is *wrong* with you? Why are you treating me like this?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. I’ll see you tomorrow. At school.”

“No, you won’t.”

He had opened the driver’s door. With one foot in the car, he turned back. “What?”

“I’m not going to be around you at school tomorrow. This isn’t right. I’m trying to help. When you actually decide you’re going to let me care about you, and not treat me like part of the problem, you can let me know.”

Alex, momentarily sobered, watched her walk away. He remained as he was, half in the car and half out of it, until she had disappeared. He had an impulse to curse, but he did not quite have it in him.

At home, pulling into the driveway, Alex noticed his father sitting on the front steps, hunched over his knees, drinking a beer. Though the sun had not set, there was a thick layer of cloud in the sky, and it was unusually dark. Over the house, a one-story ranch style, the leaves on the oaks and tulip poplars were lifelessly still. Alex, leaving his lacrosse gear in the car, approached the front door. "What are you doing, Dad?" he said, gently.

His father wiggled the can in his hand. From the sound of it, it was almost empty. "Just thinkin'," he said. "Thinkin' maybe there are some things in this world that can't be towed."

"What you need to recognize," Tristan said, "is that you've got issues."

"I know. Everyone's got issues."

"No, really. Like actual issues. Like: you're a little more fucked up than you give yourself credit for."

They were leaning again on the fence beside the track, facing opposite directions. Alex had just run a few miles, and his breathing was beginning to slow. "I'm not saying," Tristan continued, "that they're big, terrible issues. It's not that. It's just that they're there, and you won't be doing yourself any good by pretending they're not."

"What are we even talking about here?"

"You're anxious as shit. You're freaking out about something. You flipped out at Nixie. You're thinking about your mom."

"That's not much of a diagnosis."

“I’m not a fucking doctor. What I would suggest would be, first, to acknowledge how miserable you feel. You’re stuck with it now, and there’s not much point trying to escape it.”

Alex, staring down at the steel bar atop the fence, nodded.

“Then try to figure out what’s actually bothering you. It’s probably not what it seems. It’s not lacrosse, for instance. Yes, you’ve been playing like shit, but that’s just because you’re a disaster right now. Usually you don’t suck. Or flip out in the middle of a game and start throwing people to the ground. There’s nothing to actually worry about there. So what are you actually scared of?”

The following night, Friday, Alex drove to Nixie’s. He felt drained and dispirited, as though he were getting over an illness. He parked by the curb, crossed the lawn, and rang the doorbell. Nixie opened the door. She raised an eyebrow. “You can come in,” she said. “I’m making cookies.”

Alex stepped inside and removed his shoes. Nixie disappeared into the kitchen. He followed her. In the center of the kitchen was a marble countertop, on which Nixie had placed the bowl of dough and a baking sheet. Alex surveyed the scene as if it were all strange to him. “Can I help?”

“This part has to be done right. No offense.”

He sat on one of the stools beside the countertop. Nixie resumed forming balls of dough and placing them on the baking sheet. The dough was sticking to her hands, and she had to manipulate the little mounds carefully to free the tips of her fingers. Alex wished he had his heart rate monitor.

Nixie raised her eyes from the baking sheet to look at him. “Give it a try,” she said.

Alex pressed his lips together. “I’m terrified of losing you.”

She lifted her gaze again, pausing her work on a dough ball. “Alex,” she said. “What are you talking about?”

Sitting down was suddenly making Alex very anxious. He stood, leaning slightly against the countertop. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Lose me?”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know. But it terrifies me.”

“Baby. Lose me how? Like, what, I’m going to be kidnapped?”

“I know. It doesn’t make sense.”

She gave him a long look. Then she returned her attention to the cookie dough. When she had filled the baking sheet, she held her sticky hands before her, unsure what to do with them, her fingers spread. “You said it had to do with your mom,” she said.

“I think so, yeah.”

Nixie looked at her hands. She seemed to consider licking them clean before she changed her mind and rinsed them in the sink. She dried her hands, then lifted the baking sheet, swung open the oven door, and slid the cookies in. She closed the oven and straightened.

“I’ve been worried about everything recently,” Alex said. “Anything I can worry about, I’ve been worrying about. It’s like my worrying has been flying around, looking for different places to land. But what I’m actually worried about—or, really, afraid of—is being separated, somehow, from you. I feel like: I lost my mom, and I’m afraid of losing you, too.”

Nixie watched him carefully, as if he had just told her a riddle and thought there might be, in his expression, some clue about its solution. The oven ticked. She came around the countertop and sat on the stool beside Alex's. She leaned forward, laying both hands on his thigh. "Does it make any difference," she said, "that you have no reason to think you're going to lose me?"

"But how do I *know*?"

Bizarrely, the words came to Alex's head: *Don't get towed. Don't get towed.*

"Well," Nixie said, cautiously, "I guess that's true. We don't really *know* anything for sure."

Alex's phone rang. He ignored it. It began to ring again. He took it from his pocket. His father was calling.

"Hang on, baby. I'm sorry." He stood, kissed the top of Nixie's head, and answered, wandering back out of the kitchen to the front door. "Hello?"

"Hey, big guy." Alex's father sounded pensive. "How are you?"

"Good, Dad. What's up?"

"You busy this weekend?"

This was not a question Alex could remember his father having asked before. "Not really. Why?"

"Well, you know. About that school bus. Butch and I figured we'd rent a couple of torches. Cut the thing up. Can't tow it like it is. Want to get it into some, you know, smaller pieces." He sniffed.

"That's a good idea, Dad."

"You want to help?"

“Help cut up the bus?”

“Yeah. Could be fun.”

There was a pane of glass in Nixie’s front door. Alex looked through it at the Grand Cherokee parked at the curb. The late afternoon light was watery. “I never used a torch before.”

“Well, that’ll be the fun part. We’ll wear gloves, or something.”

“That does, actually, sound kind of fun.”

“Aw, good. Well. Tomorrow morning. We’ll go together. I’ll pick up something to eat. Fried chicken, maybe.”

“Sounds good, Dad.”

“Aw. It’s a date.”

They hung up. For a few moments, Alex remained before the door, looking at his car, standing loyally at the curb. The house was very quiet.

He returned to the kitchen. Nixie was nowhere in sight. Then, on the far side of the counter, she appeared, having been crouching in front of the oven, checking on the cookies.

“Looking perfectly uniform,” she said, “if I do say so myself.”

She came back around the counter. She sat again on her stool. She faced Alex, smiling pleasantly, as if she were waiting for him to say something. “What?” she said. She tilted her head. “What, you’re surprised I’m still here?”



## A Bet

“There you are!” Carmelo called. He was coming along the sidewalk toward the betting shop. The men standing outside the shop and sitting at the plastic tables on the sidewalk turned and smiled. They were drinking coffee or beer and smoking cigarettes. “Massimo! You owe me ten euro,” he said.

“What?” Massimo was leaning against the shop’s front. He started to stand up straight but hesitated. “I owe *you* ten euro?”

“Of course! Juventus won.” Carmelo started to greet the men in the group, one by one. He embraced a man near the edge of the group. “*Ciao, Vincenzo,*” he said. He made kissing sounds by Vincenzo’s cheeks.

“Yes, but by only one goal,” Massimo said.

“That’s not important. We didn’t say anything about the number of goals,” Carmelo said. “*Ciao, Francesco.*” He was making his way through the men.

Massimo did not know what to do. He stood, as he often did, with his neck hunched and his shoulders tensed together, as if he were trying to make himself look smaller. He was a big, quiet man. He was different from most of the men who frequented the betting shop. The other men were always clapping each other on the back, saying things to the women who walked by, and tossing their cigarette butts into the street, where the little embers would shatter on the smooth, black stones that pave the old streets in Catania.

Massimo left his cigarette butts in the ashtrays, and he did not say anything to the women who passed by. He was patient and timid. For work he drove a truck, and he spent long periods driving alone. Sometimes, when he was making a delivery, the person accepting it would notice a memorable expression on Massimo’s face. His eyes would be soft and sad, and his lips would

be pressed together in a flat line. It made him look as if something had been done to hurt him, but that he was neither angry nor surprised about it. The few people who noticed this expression were touched by it. They would speak gently to Massimo, and for some time after he left, they would treat people with special kindness, while the impression of Massimo's face hovered behind their thoughts.

When he was at the betting shop, Massimo felt good. He was not there to gamble. He was happy to have his group of friends. He liked their loud and insouciant energy. He also liked that they counted him part of the group even though he was quiet.

But now he was nervous. Carmelo was getting closer. Massimo said, "I thought they had to win by two goals."

"No, no, no," Carmelo said. "Who cares about the number of goals?"

Carmelo was new to the group. He was a cousin of Pietro's who had moved to Catania from Palermo. The other men liked him. The day before, he had offered Massimo the Juventus bet separately from the formal bets they had all placed in the shop. Massimo had thought he was being friendly.

Now Carmelo came to embrace him. "*Ciao, Massimo,*" Carmelo said. He was smiling. His eyes were hard and bright.

"*Ciao, Carmelo,*" Massimo said. They made the kissing sounds. Massimo tried to say something funny and lighthearted, but all he could think of was: "We should have written it down!"

Andrea, an older man sitting nearby, said, "It's good to write these things down."

“Ah, there’s no need to write it down,” Carmelo said. He started to turn away. “You’re the one who doesn’t remember!” he said. As he did, he used one hand to shove Massimo lightly in the center of his chest.

Massimo felt a flash of anger and hurt. He shoved Carmelo back. He was bigger and stronger than Carmelo, and his shove caught Carmelo’s shoulder and knocked him off balance. Carmelo staggered sideways into Andrea’s chair. Andrea put out his hands to hold him up. The chair grunted against the sidewalk.

Some of the men said, “Whoa, whoa.”

Carmelo regained himself. His eyes were wider and brighter now. “What’s this? Over ten euro?” he said. He came and shoved Massimo with both hands.

“Whoa, whoa,” the other men said. There was the sound of chairs being pushed back as the men stood up.

Carmelo’s shove had barely moved Massimo. But Massimo’s back was against the wall of the shop, and he could not get away. He wanted to say something to calm Carmelo down, but he could not think of anything. Carmelo was about to shove him again.

Massimo stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the smaller man. He smelled old cigarette smoke and something artificial and sweet in Carmelo’s hair.

Carmelo grunted and struggled against Massimo’s size. He wrapped his arms tightly around him. Suddenly he twisted as if he were trying to pitch Massimo to the ground.

“Whoa!” the other men exclaimed.

Massimo was full of frustration and anger. But he was also hurt and confused. “*Aspetta, aspetta,*” he whispered into Carmelo’s ear. Wait, wait.

“Hey!” The voice of Claudio, the shop’s proprietor, came down on the men. He was standing in the doorway. “What the hell are you all doing?”

Carmelo tried again to throw Massimo.

“Whoa, whoa!” the other men said.

“Hey!” Claudio said. “Hey!”

“No,” Massimo whispered urgently. “*Aspetta.*” But Carmelo continued to strain against him.

Massimo wanted it all to be over. It was not fair. He released Carmelo and shoved him away hard. Carmelo stumbled backward, tripped over something, and hit his head on a table as he fell.

The men converged on Carmelo. He rolled onto his side. The table had hit him above his eyebrow, and blood was coming down his face. Massimo watched the other men help him onto a chair.

“I’m sorry,” Massimo said toward the men. Nobody seemed to hear him.

Vincenzo brought Carmelo a handful of napkins from another table.

“I’m sorry,” Massimo said again.

Andrea came out of the group and approached Massimo. He stood in front of him with his eyes lowered. “Maybe you should go home,” he said.

Claudio was still standing above them in the doorway. “Go home, Massimo,” he said. He sounded tired.

“It wasn’t my intention,” Massimo said.

“I know,” Andrea said.

“Go home,” Claudio said.

Massimo left. Some people had stopped on the sidewalk across the street to see what was going on. They watched Massimo walk away.

Massimo was confused about what had happened. It should not have happened that way. He was ashamed and afraid. It was spring, late in the afternoon, and warm, but the shame and fear felt like cold air. They seemed to be concentrated on Massimo's face and hands. He kept thinking about how it had happened.

His route home took him through a little piazza. There was a tall, white church on one side and a kiosk in the middle for coffee and newspapers. The piazza was empty. A loose group of swallows was flying in the motionless air above it. They slid and swept among each other through the silence. Usually, when he saw swallows, Massimo had strong feelings about them. He loved the smooth, sharp ease of their flying. And it made him sad to think that they were migrating, going away somewhere. But now he did not notice them at all. He was worrying about how the men at the betting shop were the only group of friends he had.