

"Candy called." Lauren's all dressed and everything. "She's got some really good heroin in. She's gonna cut us a deal, er, uh, something."

"Baby, I ain't got any money left really."

"I have a little," she says, all but pulling me out of bed. "We'll get clean right after this—I promise."

"Okay," I say. "Yeah, I know this cool old hotel off Grant. We can hole up there till we're done with the heroin."

"Then we'll come back here and my parents'll help us."

"I love you," I say.

"Yeah, I love you, too."

And so fast, fast we're outta there. It makes sense to me. We'll just go on one more run—blow it all out till the end. I know it's gonna be all right now. We shoot most of the crystal in her car down the block from her house. She hasn't used much in a couple days, so she gets real high. I drive.

— TWEAK (B) —

The San Remo Hotel is, like, fifty bucks a night—but nice. Dark wood paneling, strange potted ferns and things, thick carpeting. The place feels like a ship—warped, uneven, sinking.

We hook up a bunch of tar heroin from Candy and pack some stuff up to take to our small room. There are two twin beds. I look out the window at the clear sky—streaked white and blue. The sun is still warm, though falling—shattering the leaves, littering the ground with bright yellow and shadows. I watch the branches sway, sway—weeds growing up through cracks in the parched concrete—vines twisting up the brick walls across the street—green turning red and brown. It is all so, uh, lovely—but then I pull the shades down and turn to Lauren.

"This is it," I say. "You ready?"

"Yeah, baby—let's do it."

I cook up the heroin so it is thick, syrupy black and add whatever's left of the meth. Lauren actually hits real easy, but I gotta

dig for fucking ever. I swear all the veins in my arm are straight collapsed. I finally find one in the back of my hand.

The bed is soaking and stinking—but as night turns to day, turns to night, turns to day, we don't leave. The cleaning staff knocks but we tell them to go away. Maybe they're talking about us, maybe they're not.

I smoke cigarettes out the window and throw up several times. The only food we eat is candy from a vending machine down the hall. We drink water from the tap. Four days go by. Lauren's phone rings and rings, but we never answer until all the heroin is gone and most all the money, too.

"Dad," she slurs into the mouthpiece. "Dad, I'm ready. I'm ready to get help."

He tells her to come home.

"What about Nic?"

He wants me to wait till the morning for the meeting with her therapist, but Lauren insists he let me stay the night.

He relents.

We get our stuff and leave quickly. I have to throw up a bunch more on the way to Lauren's car. The world's just going around and around and I'm blacking out. Clouds filled with gray, gray rain make ready to drop their heavy load on the streets below. It's so cold that my teeth chatter and my stomach is tight, tight, tight.

Lauren has to drive. We're both crying some now, as we get closer. I put my hand on her thigh.

Pulling up to the house, her dad comes running out to the car. He's short and sort of round—with a tiny head and a dyed brown comb-over. He cries some as he hugs Lauren to him. He shakes my hand awkwardly and I try not to throw up all over him.

"Dad, please," says Lauren. "We need to go sleep."

"Okay, sweetie, Jules will be here soon with some medicine for you."

Lauren has to support most of my weight as we walk. I'm actually sicker than she is. Those dogs bark at me all over the place and the smell of them makes me cringe. I'm blacking out. I

lie in Lauren's white bed and try to just focus on my breath going in and out—the way my lungs expand and contract like they do. I'm hyperventilating some and I try to calm myself, but it doesn't really work. Lauren holds me, but the feel of her skin on me is suddenly repulsive.

"Please—please—I just need to lie here." That's all I can say. I maybe pass out for a moment, waking up only to take some pill Jules is shoving in my face.

"Thank you," I say, but I throw up whatever it is he gives me. I roll out of the bed onto the floor and vomit into a blue plastic trash can.

I sleep like that on the carpet.

DAY 26

Waking up, the sickness has passed some. My clothes are soaked through with sweat. I pull on one of Lauren's sweatshirts and stagger up the stairs into the living room. It's raining outside and I can feel the damp underneath my skin. Lauren, Jules, Lauren's dad, and some woman are sitting around the living-room table. Lauren is so pale and sunken in. They offer me coffee and I take it. I add lots of sugar. I also eat a piece of toast, but I feel them all staring at me with each bite I take. It seems like the noise of me chewing is, like, the loudest thing ever.

"We were just discussing treatment options for the both of you," says Jules, in this voice that sounds like it should be from a guided meditation tape—soothing and serene. "Please, sit down."

"Thanks."

I'm introduced to Kathy, Lauren's stepmom. She is definitely less than thrilled to meet me. She has a creased, overtanned face with blond highlights and a lot of makeup. Her lips are thin, lined, and painted bright red. She mostly says nothing.

Jules explains that he wants to get Lauren and me into our own place—a furnished monthly hotel off Van Ness. He knows the owner and he will certainly keep an eye on us. As well, we will be randomly drug-tested throughout the week. We will have to go to seven twelve-step meetings a week and meet with Jules twice a week—separately. Both Lauren and I will have to get jobs and Lauren is no longer allowed to work for her mother. Her parents will pay for food and rent.

I just nod my head. It sounds perfect, you know? I'll be taken care of. I won't have to worry about money and whatever.

"What if we test dirty?" asks Lauren.

Jules looks at Lauren's father.

"Then all deals are off," Jules says. "You'll either have to go back into a residential treatment program, or you're on your own."

"I don't know," says Lauren. She starts talking about why what they're saying isn't fair and now I'm trying to talk her into taking it. Her dad and Jules seem grateful that I'm so enthusiastic. We are all trying to convince her now.

And so it's decided. They're gonna take care of us while we get back on our feet. We all shake hands and then Lauren's dad asks if he can talk to me privately. He puts a hand on my shoulder and leads me into this study area. There are books all over the shelves and a white stuffed tiger-head rug on the floor.

"Nic," he says, "I appreciate everything you're trying to do. I know you care about Lauren very much and that means a lot to me. But I have to ask you one favor—I need you to stay away for a few nights. Just till we get your place set up. I want to have Lauren here, alone. We have to talk over some things and I'd just feel safer that way."

"Yeah, I understand."

"You do? Excellent. Thank you."

He shakes my hand again firmly and I try to meet his eyes. They are distant blue, like Lauren's.

When we tell her I'm leaving, she kinda throws a tantrum. I'm just trying to keep on her dad's good side, you know? I mean,

what a fucking opportunity, right? I wanna do whatever he says at this point. Plus, the sickness is coming back and I figure I should at least say good-bye to Gack and maybe Candy, too—maybe get high one more time—just one more time. I've still got a little money anyway.

So I call Gack and we agree to meet back at Church and Market. The rain's stopped, so I'm able to walk to the bus stop without much trouble and ride down there. I sit toward the back, looking at some graffiti drawn on the seat in front of mine. As we sway and stutter down Geary, I think about the possibility of me staying clean in this city. It feels impossible again. Not that I don't want to—but it's just so easy to get on a bus, call Gack—justify it to myself. I guess it's that way in every city—I just know this one so intimately. The thought scares me some.

Gack shows up with a bag of a few clean needles and he goes off with twenty dollars of mine while I wait for Candy. I'm leaning my back against this video store and watching all the street kids trying out whatever hustle they got on those who pass. Some of 'em are just straight-up begging—ain't got no hustle at all. I've got that cold sweating again from the heroin withdrawal and I ache, ache, ache all over.

Candy pulls up some minutes later and I get in the passenger door. Her skin's broken out and her mascara is starting to run down, but she's still fucking striking as hell.

"You only getting half a gram today?"

"Yeah," I say. "This is it. I'm getting clean."

She sighs, lighting a Parliament Menthol cigarette.

"You goin' away then?"

"No, I'm stayin' around."

"All right, then, don't throw away my number."

"No, we're done."

"We'll see." She hands over the wax paper ball and tells me she's gotta get going.

"You ever think about stopping?" I ask.

She puts on a pair of big sunglasses before turning toward

me. "Honey, we've all tried. I'll see you around. You're a good kid." 123
I leave.

Gack's reaction is basically the same as Candy's. We hike up to Dolores Park and shoot the speed (and heroin for me) in someone's doorway. Everything is all cleared out in my head suddenly. I feel a surge of power and find myself thinking, thinking, thinking back to what Candy said.

"Yeah," says Gack, walking down to the still wet playground. "I went to some twelve-step meetings and shit. I didn't really get it. They say the average life expectancy of tweakers like us is around three years. I've been going for at least twice that and I'm doin' all right. I wouldn't worry about it."

"But I just feel like I'm not even getting that high anymore—and I'm outta money, you know?"

"There's always money. We'll figure it out."

"Maybe you're right."

"Trust me," he says. "You only get to live this life once. I'd rather be blissed out for a short time than fucking bored and miserable till I'm like ninety or something."

"Yeah, I've thought about that too."

We're quiet awhile after that—or at least, I am. Gack is kinda rambling like he does, but I'm not paying attention. I try to remember—was I happy before all this? The fucking tweak won't let me think. It tries to tell me I wasn't. Maybe that's the truth.

"This is life," says Gack, shaking me. "This is living. Every day is an adventure."

"I don't know," I say after a moment. "Every day is the same thing. Gack, I love you for everything you've done for me—but I don't think I can go on like this. Maybe you could get help too."

"No thanks," he says, smiling. "But, yeah, I love you too. And we'll see each other soon. It'll do you good to clean up for a while—especially get off that fucking junk. That's some nasty-ass shit."

"Word."

"Word."

We walk together down Valencia, talking shit—just keeping it light, you know?

We walk all the way to the TL and it's dark and starting to rain again some. I say good-bye to Gack, then call Lauren. She begs me to sneak into the house and spend the night. I figure since it's raining, that's the best option I got. Her dad'll either understand, or he won't. I don't care. I shoot the rest of the dope and it's all I can do to get on the bus again. My hands shake so bad that I can't get the dollar into the little machine. I have to hand it to the bus driver and get him to do it. He looks bored, or annoyed, or both.

Lauren doesn't even bother trying to hide the fact that I'm there. She lets me in through the front door, dragging my loaded ass down the stairs. When she sees how fucking high I am she tries to get me to give her whatever's left of the drugs—but I don't have any. She pretends to be less pissed off than she is. My world fades out into an opiated fantasy.

DAY 27

I have been throwing up all night.

Sleeping and then jerking awake, dry-heaving into that plastic trash can. I lie on the floor, on the bare carpet. Lauren keeps trying to get me to come up in bed with her, but moving makes my stomach turn, so I lie still. Plus there is the smell of her and the smell of that house, those dogs, cigarettes, Gatorade, and leftover Chinese food. The stench is overpowering. I retch over and over. Everything is heightened, but sickeningly so. At one point Jules is there, standing over me and giving me a tablet of methadone. I throw that up too.

Lauren is whining, crying for me to hold her, and I just want her to shut up.

"You don't care about me," she says. "You don't love me." My skin itches and the top of my head itches and I scratch until I'm bloody. "Lauren, man, I'm sick."

I am so tired—this painful, aching tired. I just want to sleep and be left alone—or maybe just to die there. I can't take it. I drift in and out of hallucinations. At one point I think I'm walking around with Gack, or that he is there at the house. I can't tell what is real and what isn't. My spine digs into the floor, but I can't move, I just can't.

I have to get out of there—I have to. Please, I mean, please, I'm ready to do anything.

After sleeping some more, I wake up and it is night. Lauren has gone somewhere. I pull myself up on the tattered couch, pushing aside all the clothes and things that are scattered everywhere. The room is all dark and I'm sweating. My breathing is strained. For some reason my shirt is off, my ribs sticking through the skin—tracks up and down both arms. From where I'd missed the vein while shooting up, my arms are swollen and aching. I'm broken out all over and thin, so goddamn thin.

I close my eyes, tears streaming down suddenly. I don't know what to do. I think back on all the stories I've heard at twelve-step meetings. I think back to what my sponsor said. Broken down, defeated, they'd all asked for help from a power that they called God. And so that's what I do—I pray. I pray from somewhere deep inside me. I pray out loud to a God that I don't even believe in. The words just start coming out.

Spencer used to talk to me about God. He talked a lot about God, but I always dismissed it. I was a militant atheist. I thought the belief in God was totally backward, delusional, and ignorant. Spencer would talk to me about prayer and meditation, but I basically avoided ever experimenting with it. I just couldn't believe, there was no way. But Spencer sure did talk about it a lot.

Tonight I pray. Maybe it isn't the first time, but it is the first time I pray with sincerity. I am desperate. And so I cry and ask God for help.

"God," I say. "Look, I don't believe in you or anything, but if you're there, I need your help. I can't do this anymore. I'll do anything. PLEASE."

Nothing happens. No flash of light, no burning bush, nothing.

What I do is, I call home.

My dad answers on the third ring. "Hello?"

That voice—my dad's sweet voice.

I cry so hard. "Dad . . . I . . ."

"Jesus, Nic. What are you doing calling here?"

"I need help."

"I can't help you, Nic, we're done."

"Dad, please."

"I'm sorry. Maybe Spencer will be willing to talk to you, but I can't. I'm through." He hangs up.

"God," I say aloud, folding in on myself, my body shaking from crying. "Please help me. What do I do?" My hand trembles all over the place, but I dial Spencer's cell phone. He picks up right away. "Spencer?"

"Nic," he says, actually laughing into the phone. "It's about goddamn time you called me. You had enough?"

"Yeah. Please, what do I do?"

"Come home, man, we're waiting for you."

"Back to L.A.?"

"Sure. Eric still hasn't rented out your room. Something told us you'd be back before long."

"I'm so sick."

He laughs. "Come home, you rotten little snot. I'm fat 'cause there's been no one to ride bikes with me."

"I don't think I can ride any bike, Spencer. I can barely stand up."

"What are you comin' off of, meth?"

"And heroin."

"Lovely. Come on, Nic, it's time to come home. You don't have to prove anything anymore. So what do you say?"

"My car's dead."

"Get on a plane."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, right now. I'll pick you up."

"No, you don't have to . . ."

"No shit. But what can I say? I missed you, man. I might've even been a little worried. Now, let's go. You've had all the good times you're gonna have out there. It just gets worse from here."

"Worse?"

"Yeah, man, you've peaked." He laughs again.

"Spencer," I say between sobs. "I'm gonna go to the airport right now."

"Damn right you are."

"And Spencer . . ."

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Yeah, yeah, just get going."

"Okay."

"Call me when you know what flight you're comin' in on."

"Yeah." I put the phone down and then cry some more. I call a taxi.

I try to stand up, but all the blood rushes to my head and I fall back down again. I decide crawling is the way to go. I find my shirt stuffed under the bed. I put it on and it smells so strong that I gag, but nothing comes out. Somehow I manage to get my suitcase and things together. There are a bunch of clothes and CDs and things still in my burned-out car, but I don't really care anymore. I just want to go home.

One of my shoes is gone, a black Jack Purcell sneaker. Between walking outta there with one shoe and no shoes, I figure maybe if I wear some dark-colored socks, no one will notice. So I pull my bag over my shoulder, grab my backpack, and hobble my way up the stairs. I have three hundred dollars cash in my wallet. That is all that is left. If I need more, well, I don't know what to do then. Throughout all this I'm praying. It is like the voice in my

head, the running monologue; it has switched over to thoughts of prayer. Please help me—be with me. I just keep repeating it over and over—up the stairs.

Walking out into the living room, I see Lauren. She is just coming back down to her room and she sees me with all my bags and everything. She drops to the floor, curling fetal-like, and now she is crying.

"You're leaving me, aren't you?"

"I'm . . . yeah. I'm going back to L.A. I can't . . . I can't do this anymore."

"But you promised you'd stay with me."

"Did I?"

"Yes, goddamn it, you did."

"Lauren, please. You and I both know that we'll never stay sober if we stay here together."

"Fuck you. You think you're so much better than me. I wish I'd never met you. You've ruined my life."

"I . . . I'm sorry."

"Don't go." She springs up off the floor and tries to kiss me and I think I'll be sick if I touch her, so I pull away.

"I have to," I say, and I walk outta there, leaving her screaming and crying behind me.

The outside air is so cold, the wind blowing straight off the water. I tuck my arms into my T-shirt and shiver. But still, it is cleansing, that air. The night is clear and I look up at the starless sky and feel the sweat seeping out under my skin. The taxi finally gets there and I get in, collapsing on the clean-smelling nylon seats.

"The Oakland Airport," I say.

The man asks how I'm feeling and I admit that I've been better. Mostly I can't think at all. I just pray, like I said, over and over. I watch the poison city sweep by as we drive out to the Bay Bridge. The lights blur out. I maybe sleep or something, 'cause the guy has to yell, "Hey, kid" a few times when we get there.

That is sixty dollars gone.

I walk, or more accurately, stagger into the United terminal

of the Oakland Airport. The patterned carpet makes me sick and dizzy and I hope so bad I won't have to throw up again. The fluorescent bulbs shine violently overhead, the flickering nearly unbearable.

I stagger over to the ticket counter and I'm still not wearing any shoes.

"Welcome to United, can I help you?"

The woman is wrinkled, with dyed purple hair, too much lipstick, and a smile that quickly disappears when she sees me step closer.

"I need to go to L.A.," I say.

"Okay, uh, sir. Let's see." Her fingernails click, click on her little keyboard.

"There's a flight at nine fifteen that has a few seats available. Would you like that?"

"Sure."

"Round trip?"

"No."

It costs me two hundred dollars.

She prints out my ticket and then tells me to take my bags over to the security checkpoint. It is only after I hand my suitcase over to one of the two uniformed baggage handlers that I begin to panic. I hadn't thought to check for Baggies, or needles, or dope, or whatever other paraphernalia might be left in there. The woman puts latex gloves on both hands and begins rooting around in my bag. Her hair is braided back in tight rows against her scalp and she looks at me with open disdain. She searches and searches and I say nothing, still praying maybe.

And then she is done.

"Thank you, sir, have a nice day."

"Yeah."

She puts my suitcase on that conveyor belt thing and I watch it disappear. When I get to the metal detectors, the passengers are all taking off their belts and shoes, putting them through to be x-rayed. At least I am saved that trouble.

I go and call Spencer and he agrees to come get me around ten. I buy a piece of sweet potato pie from Your Black Muslim Bakery, but can't really get it down. Mostly I just try not to be noticed by anyone. The wait is long.

On the plane I sleep, thank God, and when I wake up there is drool all over my shirt. That's how I greet Spencer. Actually, as soon as I see him, I start crying and can't look at him.

"Come on, asshole," he says, but sweetly. He puts his arm around me and even carries my bag. He's grown a goatee since the last time I saw him, but otherwise looks just the same. He wears a black leather jacket over a black pullover sweater. We get into his BMW and drive off through the Los Angeles night. It is warm. L.A. is always so goddamn warm.

We don't talk much. He drives me home and tells me to sleep and asks if I want any food.

I shake my head. "Can I see you tomorrow?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "Maybe we can go to a meeting at noon."

"A meeting?"

"Yeah, brother."

"Fuck."

"There's no other way."

"Yeah," I say. "I know." And so I go upstairs into my old apartment, using my same old key. And there it is, exactly as I left it.

PART TWO

DAY 32

I detox on the floor of the apartment. Spencer doesn't think I need to go to the hospital. According to him, well, I should rely on my Higher Power to get me through this. I am so weak and shaking—throwing up—not able to sleep. I try renting some movies, but I can't focus on the screen. All I can do is shiver in bed, staring at the ceiling and struggling not to pull my skin off.

These are the worst withdrawals I've ever had. I'm alone. I have no medication, nothing to ease the suffering. The only things I have are the twelve steps and Spencer.

I know I have to stay close to him.

I have to do whatever he says.

That's the only chance I have.

If Spencer tells me God can get me through my detox, then I will trust him. I feel so desperate right now. I am ashamed and terrified of everything I've just gone through. Spencer is the one person I can trust. I've tried doing it without him, without the twelve steps—it has never worked.

It's still very hard for me to believe in God, but I'm just too beaten up to fight it anymore. That's always been my problem with the twelve-step program. There's all this God talk, or Higher Power talk. I could never get past the third step, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood him." It just seemed like some religious cult or something. But I just can't afford to question it anymore. I have to go to meetings. I have to work the steps with Spencer. I've been told in all the different rehabs I've gone to that the only way to stay sober is to be an active member of a twelve-step program. I have to believe that is true.

While I'm still detoxing I actually go with Spencer to a couple of twelve-step meetings, but I can't really focus enough yet to hear anything. It is like someone came in with a vacuum cleaner and sucked out my brain—removing any trace of joy or excitement, leaving me with nothing but this overpowering hopelessness. The world turns bleak, dull, and oppressive. I have grown so weak and pale. I look in the mirror at my sunken-in eyes and coarse skin—scaly, gray, almost reptilian. My legs are bruised and sinewy. I lie staring at the ceiling. I lie there like that until around two in the afternoon when my phone rings and I see Spencer's number come up.

"Hey . . ."

"What's up, brother?" His voice is irritatingly joyful.

"Dude, I'm dying."

"Uh-huh. You know, it's a beautiful day out."

"Is it?" All the shades are drawn on the windows and my apartment is bare and dark.

"Yeah, it is. So, you wanna go on a bike ride?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, man, I'm way outta shape, we gotta start riding again."

"I can barely move."

He laughs. "Come on, man, we'll go slow."

"Look, I don't know, uh . . ."

"Nic, I'm already on my way."

"What?"

"That's right. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Uh . . . okay."

"See you downstairs."

I hang up, pulling myself out of bed and feeling all dizzy, or like I'm gonna faint or something. I curse and go over to my dresser. The bottom drawer is filled with old bike clothes. I'd left them here, sure I would never need them again. Those nights I'd slept in my car outside the Presidio, I'd watched the groups of cyclists climbing up the forest road. It was hard to believe that I had once been like that, pulling away on a sprint, spending five or six hours at a

time on the bike. I looked at those riders and I told myself that I was better off sitting in the car, loaded outta my mind. But the thing was I had experienced some of the good life that the twelve steps had to offer. I remembered riding my bike with Spencer through the Marina as the sun rose over the Hollywood hills. I remembered him telling me how much he loved his life, and in those moments, I felt the same way. I just hadn't been willing to fight through the difficult moments with the faith that it would get better—that maybe, one day, I could have what Spencer had—a beautiful life.

That seems a long way off, but what is there left to do but try?

I take off my clothes and I smell terrible. I put on some bike shorts and a jersey. I feel naked and exposed—embarrassed by my white, strung-out body. All the definition has been eaten away from my muscles and I try to avoid the mirror that is leaning against the wall. My Raleigh is there in the corner, a fifteen-hundred-dollar road bike that I'd saved up for and bought with my own money. It was the first thing ever that I had really done that with.

I put some air in the tires, sweating and out of breath from the exertion. This is definitely not a good idea. But I put on some socks and my cycling shoes and fill up a plastic water bottle. Spencer calls from outside and I go down to meet him. He's driven his wife's Blazer over, but he's already all dressed in his cycling gear.

"Lookin' good," he says.

"Yeah, yeah."

The sun is out and the sky is still and blue and perfect.

"It's so warm out here."

"Yep," he says.

I click into my pedals and spin my legs a few times, cruising up the block. Everything aches and is tight and I feel sick. I figure I'll just tell him I can't do it, but then he is pedaling up next to me and smiling, so I hang on a little longer. It is very foreign—steering, the feel of sitting on the bike, turning my legs, standing out of the saddle. It is foreign, but at the same time not.

"God," I say quietly. "Please, if you're there, could you help

me. Please. I know you allowed me to come back to L.A. and get sober. Now help me to ride this bike." We pedal faster and then the wind is cooling my sweating body and Spencer says, "How does it feel?"

And I start to cry. I close my eyes and the tears run down and I sit up tall and let the handlebars go and just drift like that, down California Street, toward the calm, pulsing ocean.

"I forgot about this," I say.

"No you didn't; otherwise you wouldn't be back."

"Is it too late? Will I ever be where I was?"

"You'll be far beyond that."

"But—"

"Look. Let's make a list."

"What?"

"A list."

We turn left along the Santa Monica cliffs, the palm trees stretching up, bent forward from the onshore winds. The street is cracked and I stand to avoid the impact of a manhole cover. I am breathing pretty hard.

"Just think about it for now," says Spencer. "But I have a guarantee for you. We're gonna make a list of all the things you want out of life, okay? Not anything too dramatic, but just the stuff you think you need in order to be happy. Put it on paper—write it down. In one year from today, one year, if you follow this program to the best of your ability, you will have everything you wanted and more. Your life will be inexplicably transformed. Just think of it as an experiment. Give it a year and see what happens."

"But," I say, "I had a year."

"Give it a year where you actually commit to this thing—where you, like they say, grab hold of spiritual principles with all the fervor with which a drowning man seizes a life preserver. You've got nothing else, man."

"I know. I know I don't."

"So what have you got to lose?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Nothing."

We make it down to the bike path and I look out at all the joggers and bladders and cyclists participating in their lives. Men and women walk dogs or hold each other's hands. A group of boys play hand drums in the coarse sand.

"So what do you want?"

"Uh . . . I don't know."

"Come on, come on."

"All right, well, I'd like to be healthy again. I'd like to be able to ride like I used to."

"How 'bout a car?"

"Yeah, I'd like a car again."

"And a career?"

"Sure, I'd like to be a self-supporting writer."

"What else?"

"A relationship. A meaningful relationship."

"All right."

"I'd like friends and, uh, to have my family forgive me."

"Write it down, man. I'm telling you, either you'll get exactly what you want, or you'll find that you've been given infinitely more."

"No way."

"Either you're gonna trust me or you're not, man, it's your choice."

"I trust you."

"Well then . . ."

We ride on in silence, around the Marina. I watch the boats rocking in the harbor and I pray—I just keep praying.

Spencer is in front of me most of the time, but I try my best to keep up. We circle back around. He talks to me about the last movie he produced. There are problems with the director and cast, but the editing is coming together. He asks if I'll come out with him to the sound guy's studio tomorrow. I agree. He talks about closing his corporate video company—moving his business back

home. He wants to me to help him pack the office up in a week or so. I agree to that, too. When we get back to my house, we change and he drives me to get some groceries.

"Thank you," I say.

"Hey, man, helping you is how I stay alive. Never forget that."

I hug him and go upstairs. I write a list of all the things we talked about. I put it on paper, thinking there's no way I can get these things—there's just no way.

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Spencer's lent me a bunch of money and now he wants me to help him move out of his office—which is annoying. Still, I can't tell him no. I've written up a resumé and started passing it out around local coffee shops and things, but no one is real responsive. I'm probably terrible at making the damn things. Sounding professional has never been my strong point. Plus the big chunks of missing time are hard to explain. Other than my road bike, I have this old beater that used to be my mom's. I ride that around, though I'm still weak as hell. It's hard to look anyone in the eye. I feel, well, like I'm completely transparent or something—like everyone can see exactly what's going on with me.

Spencer picks me up around one. It's almost May and it's hot outside. Just walking from my apartment to his car has my T-shirt sticking to my back. My long hair is all matted and everything.

We drive east to Thousand Oaks, where Spencer owns a little corporate video production company. He's shutting it down to concentrate exclusively on making his horror movies.

I ask a lot of questions about recovery and the twelve steps, trying my best to listen. We both agree I should call my dad and stepmom, just to let them know I'm safe and all. I'm nervous about calling them. I feel embarrassed, but also kind of angry

or something. I mean, what I do with my life should be up to me, right? I say as much to Spencer.

"So you think you should just be able to kill yourself and no one should care?" he asks. "You don't think your actions are gonna affect other people—the people who love you?"

"No, I mean, I know it's gonna affect them. I just . . ." I stare out at the canyon walls, dry earth broken out with thorned, crawling vines; startled brush, prickling cacti. The sea air gives way to hot, stifling desert wind as we climb over the Santa Monica Mountains, over Kanan-Dume Road toward the valley.

"You just wanna be able to do whatever you want, whenever you want. That's all it is." Spencer smiles. "If you're gonna kill yourself you might as well just jump into those bushes there and roll around till you get thousands of little cuts all over your body and you bleed to death. I'll tell you what, that's gonna be a lot more fun than what you've got to look forward to if you go back out there. And that way we all won't have to worry about when you're gonna break into our house, or steal our car, or run someone over."

I nod.

"No, I know . . ."

"What does that mean, you know? What do you know?"

"I know that going out again is not an option."

"It's not an option. You've had all the good times you're ever gonna have with meth, heroin, or any of that stuff. It just gets worse from here on out. But there is another way. I was no different, man. I was just like you. But today, man, I love my life. I love my life." He grins with his big block teeth and steers the car fast around the steep mountain curves.

I feel like maybe he means it.

"So how do I get that?" I ask. "How do I start to love my life?"

"By committing yourself to the program. By doin' what I did—going to meetings, working the steps, and by helping other alcoholics and drug addicts so we don't have to be thinking about ourselves all the time."