

JUNKIE, INDIANA

A novel

Steven Key Meyers

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First Edition

*Another, gratefully, for my father,
Harold Burton Meyers*

*I know you didn't mean it
When you slit my throat,
You were just out with the fellows
trying to have some fun.*

—Mose Allison,
I Know You Didn't Mean It

1.

Born on a sidewalk, I was right at home. Her father kneeled on the cement next to me, Cordelia across from us. Fewkes liked to be there Mondays, the babykillers' busy day, though it was a sacrifice, since Monday's a good day for scrapping, too—people drag junk out to the alleys over the weekend. Fewkes worked Sundays instead, trawled behind houses all day long, counting on God to know he meant no disrespect to His Sabbath. Anyway, Father Loomis called us stalwart witnesses. They always took me with them.

Eight or ten of us were there one cool day early in April. Whenever a car nudged to the curb everybody sank to their knees, Fewkes groaning. Everybody but me: I sat in my wheelchair, poster boy for *happy-to-be-alive-with-all-his-problems*, poster boy for *better-that-his-mother-had-him*, poster boy for *a blessing*.

Most of those who braved the court-mandated corridor through us were blushing young women accompanied by older ones. Fewkes drilled them as

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they passed, holding out his hands in appeal, stubbled cheeks sunken against his jaw, reddish mustache overhanging the black Groucho. Since the court order, we don't shout about the pain inflicted on the unborn, but offer mute testimony instead, as symbolized by the electrical tape over our mouths (except mine—need all the breath I can get).

The tape made Hitlers out of Fewkes and the rest, but on Cordelia seemed just a stray daub. Angelic in her quilted jacket, arms bent at the elbows, hands cupped, eyes shut, alabaster face tilted back, curly hair vividly red, she looked younger than her sixteen. The women tended to veer towards her, but she had a way of opening her eyes in dismay and steeping her hands pleadingly that hurried them through the blacked-out doors. When they came out again, everybody dropped once more to their knees, hands over eyes, heads bent in grief.

Fewkes shook his head at me as two women fled indoors from Cord's appeal, and I knew he was thinking, *If they can walk past my baby to kill theirs, they're just devils.* She was all he had; his wife was dead, his son in prison. One day Father Loomis showed us an *Annunciation* and thumped Mary with his finger. "Cordelia's spittin' image," he said. "A motherly child: That's *Cord.*"

Her heart encompassed both babies unborn and a certain blond boy. She could ignore the city's restless energies, the cars and buses, the fire trucks booming past, even the slaughterhouse pigs screaming from down the street, to give secret voice to her heart: "*Jordan, Jordan, Jordan, I love you.*" Even as her knees

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ached, she was ecstatic in contemplating her beloved's image: "*I love you, Jordan!*" Only Louisville's municipal roadkill truck passing amidst a stench of shoveled-up dogs, cats, squirrels, raccoons and possums could threaten her concentration.

At 4 o'clock, a guard locked the doors and Fewkes scooped her to her feet.

"Time to go, babe."

She blinked as though coming out of a trance. "OK, Daddy."

"Help me with Paul."

After pushing me to the Ranger and fireman-lifting me to the seat and folding my chair behind, Fewkes pumped up his bad tire, smoking while the compressor chugged. Then we loaded up at White Castle.

Even sucking our Cokes, Cord was moody the whole way home. The truck wasn't up to the Interstate, so we took the cross-country route, striking across the Ohio and north through open country, past fields groomed by gigantic combs. Shady Acres Trailer Park, overlooking the chutes and rapids of the Whitewash River Gorge in Chuterville, Indiana, is an hour north.

On the way up into the hills we passed upright brick manses standing back from the road, ranch houses carving cornfields into suburban quarter-acres and clapboard farmhouses rising amidst barns and silos, and looped two or three stone courthouses.

2.

The next morning Jordan stirred awake in the drizzly gloom when Adam's phone alarm barked its command *Niggaz Rize Up*. He freed an arm from beneath his cousin's weight, groped for the phone, silenced it and, scrubbing his shorts to untangle his crotch, got up to pee.

When he returned Adam was sitting up smoking, brooding. Each having been thrown out by his mother, they were staying at my Mom's trailer—their aunt Jasmine Stocker's—at Shady Acres, collapsing every night as late as they could manage on her faux leather pullout. I was already in the kitchen eating cereal.

Adam's stocky and not very tall, his body hairy, but at 23 (Jordan's 19) his angular head balding, merely tufted with dark hair. Makes up for it with a billy-goat beard. Five years ago, Chuterville's young men's fashion was to gauge the ears, spread the lobes with colored disks, and Adam followed it. Fashion moving on, no one wears disks now, save for apologetic clear or flesh-colored ones meant to go

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unnoticed. Adam scorns those, as well as the surgical repairs others are resorting to; his earlobes dangle, empty loops.

“Time?” Jordan suggested, pulling on yesterday’s clothes. “Adam?”

“All right, all right.”

Adam peed, found clothes on the floor, slapped on rectangular glasses. He had the use of babymama #3’s old purple Honda on condition he pick her up without fail at her parents’ for her shift at Walgreens; take her there and later bring her home.

As we trailed outdoors—they fireman-carried me to the backseat, not bothering with my chair—Cordelia was watching from across the way through screens spun on the outside with spider webs that made the scene look weepy. Morose as Adam was, Jordan snuffled with the laughter of a good-humored youth. Got me in, and capered to the other side in soiled white jeans, something rolling at the crotch, and a beater that showed off biceps like handgrips. *Jordan, Cord was sighing, making the spider webs shimmer, I love you, I love you.*

Adam said, “God, do I want to get high.”

Jordan snuffled a laugh and, to the rockslide sound of tires on gravel, off we went to get the babymama to Walgreens.

3.

Not a great idea to be born on a sidewalk, but it wasn't mine. This was 25 years ago. What happened was my mother, Jasmine Stocker, 17 years old, nine months pregnant, and *desperate* to get high, waddled down the sidewalk to see what might turn up. Which was an old guy working on his backyard fence.

"Hey, mister," said Jasmine Stocker. "This might sound funny, but I don't know where I am. Where *am* I?"

Big as a balloon as she was, naturally she expected to be taken indoors, solicitously sat down, given a glass of water, and she'd see what developed when she took out her knife. Maybe cry "*Rape!*" to his wife in hopes of reaching an immediate settlement.

But this guy was an asshole. Looked her over, lips compressed, went back to his pickets as he told her, "You're in Chuterville, Indiana."

"Chuterville, *Indiana*? Where the hell's *that*?"

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“Missy, left at the corner and second right? Police station’s not a quarter mile away. They’ll help you out.”

“I don’t feel so good, mister. Don’t need the police station, I need —”

“You want, I can call them for you.”

There’s a reason why Indiana’s official state motto is *Get off my lawn!* (Just kidding.) But his rudeness, the shock of it, started me coming. Jasmine Stocker sank to the concrete and found she was bleeding, raised a bloody hand to that old man.

Know what that jerk did? Went indoors and called 911. Didn’t care that I was stuck in the birth canal gasping for air where there wasn’t any.

That’s why I can’t walk, can’t talk and have cravings every moment of the day—came into this world addicted to heroin, mine the honor of being the first child born an addict in Chuterville County. Rise above it, though. I’m smart and a bookworm, and thanks to SSI the household breadwinner, too.

Though I can use my arms and hands somewhat, it’s easier for me to let the computer voice read. Right now I’m on Richardson’s *Clarissa Harlowe or the History of a Young Lady*. The way the computer flattens those rounded 18th-century periods takes some getting used to:

There are people who love not your brother, because of his natural imperiousness and fierce and uncontrollable temper. They say, that Mr. Lovelace could not avoid drawing

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his sword: and that either your brother's unskillfulness or passion left him from the very first pass entirely in his power.

4.

All my life, Aunt Bunny (Adam's mother), Aunt Kitty (Jordan's) and their sister Jasmine Stocker—*Mom*—have beguiled and terrorized the men of Chuterville in pursuits that keep life interesting, their husbands on the ball and themselves high, though they also, even as time and drugs erode their personal charms, go to prison in regular rotation. Their great-great-great-grandmother, daughter of honored Early Settlers, was the first white child born in the county, so it's fitting the sisters were themselves pioneers of opiate addiction.

At the moment, Bunny was finishing a sentence at Rockville Prison for kiting checks, but the State of Florida had given notice of its intent to extradite her to serve the four years for muling drugs it sentenced her to *in absentia*. Our relatives talked gaudily of chain gangs.

Meanwhile, Kitty at long last was having some luck. She felt she deserved it. Released a few months earlier and determined to stay out, she refused to

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move back to Shady Acres, though Jasmine Stocker offered her room (generous, since Kitty was responsible for Dad's bankruptcy, hence indirectly Mom's and his divorce, having borrowed his new Silverado one day and, pulled over for speeding, crammed her crack pipe down the window groove; the resulting search, overseen by a growling K-9 unit, effectively and punitively totaled the truck), and her own husband, long-suffering Jordan Sr., a groundskeeper at the country club, would have taken her back into the doublewide. Instead, she rented a falling-down house — "needs TLC," the ad read — in the neighborhood across the gorge and got a job at Happy Arbors coaching the old folks through their bowel movements.

For a while she seemed to be making it, but her wages, even supplemented by the pills she purloined from her charges, were not enough — not enough to keep her high — so she supplemented her income by reverting to an old pursuit: She posted her crotch shot on Craigslist, a .jpeg ten years old and juicier than in life — "MILF ISO FWB NSA \$\$\$" — and thereafter scandalized her neighbors with a daily parade of men drawn to the image of her shaven pudendum with its vermilion crack. "Hi," they'd go, jumping down from a Ram or throwing a leg over a Harley, "I'm Chuterville Shawn!"

She lived alone — pointedly refused to house her son, though it was she who set Jordan on his present path. Four years ago he was living with her and his Dad, a sweet high school sophomore surprising everybody with theatrical talent — cast as George Gibbs

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in the school production of *Our Town*—when Kitty, already having difficulty feeding her habit, had the brilliant idea of addicting him, too, to the painkillers and uppers and downers that, in intricate turnabout, kept her going (though in true maternal fashion she refused to introduce him to her true love, heroin; Adam did that). Jordan played his first, and last, performance high, giggling through Grover’s Corners, then dropped out of school and kept himself and his mom fucked up by becoming a thief, a hustler, whatever he needed to be, whatever it took.

Fortunately, Jordan was a natural. He turned his emergent stage skills to lucrative account in stores with his fingers’ golden touch and in men’s vehicles and beds, besides bringing the face of an angel to the trades of burglar and strong-arm robber. At first he easily supplied both himself and his mom. However, their wants widening, as naturally they will, he started hocking everything she possessed, and his parents had to throw him out. Then a liver infection landed Kitty in Squire Hospital, where they found her injecting heroin into her IV line; hence her return to Rockville.

Now, living by herself, it was lucky and irresistible to have a project pop up in her own back yard, or just across the alleyway from it. The neighborhood, built a century ago for the piano factory workers—the factory ruins picturesquely line the riverside—remains a working-class one, though actual workers are few and far between. The well-kept house behind hers belonged to a very old man whom Kitty saw only when his garage door rose and he backed his

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admittedly not-very-new Lexus into the alley, sometimes with an ill-looking old woman beside him.

Compassionate Kitty took charge on trash day of pulling his Rosie Rollers thirty feet down his driveway and later pulling them back empty — just a neighborly gesture, amply rewarded by exchanging friendly waves with the man. Every dusting of snow had her noisily dragging a shovel down that drive. When one mild day her neighbor happened to be pottering about his yard, she showed herself in hers, tugging at her maple's dead limb, and he tottered over to thank her. She responded vivaciously, yakked away at him for half an hour. He loved it. Thereafter they found frequent occasion for more such flirtation, and he made himself useful taking her shopping (she'd driven drunk one too many times to keep her license). He took to parting from her, when safely back in his garage, with an all-hands hug and a kiss on the lips.

The sisters' tried-and-true motto is *There's no fool like an old fool*. Aunt Bunny blazed the trail, taking lonely elderly men for all she could get and generally laying them in their graves, more or less of natural causes. "He died happy, I think," she would say pensively of her latest mark.

She set the gold standard when she cozied up to a millionaire widower far gone in dementia and in the last year of his life drained his assets hand over fist. She held court at his kitchen table, piled high with drugs and crowded with visitors, while the old man, outnumbered in his own home, querulously bustled about upstairs.

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That season of plenty made an addict out of her son. Adam would drop by after school — this was soon after his father threw him out — park Jordan and me in a corner and try a little bit of everything so copiously on offer, the Xanax, Oxycodone, Opana and Vicodin, Ecstasy, crystal meth (a favorite of the sisters' biker friends), weed, hash, crack (the sisters' guilty pleasure), cocaine, and finally the one that is a way of life, heroin; liberated at long last from the city, heroin powders the Corn Belt. Washed down with whatever was going; Adam found he liked beer, bourbon, vodka, gin, tequila, rum and wine — Scotch, not so much. Bunny meanwhile had pizzas delivered three at a time, and Adam thought, *This is living*.

The episode left little but trackmarks and a souvenir photograph from Las Vegas, which Aunt Bunny and a boyfriend visited with the old man and his credit cards in tow. She hired prostitutes to babysit him while she and her friend lost his money at the tables (later telling everyone they won big), and the photo showed him in a Scrooge McDuck T-shirt and boxer shorts printed with greenbacks (and puffed out by Depends underneath), his arms around two beaming, top-heavy young women. Under his shrewd eyes a smile cobwebbed with drool proclaimed pure joy. As Bunny asked, Did anyone really think he'd be happier in an Alzheimer's unit somewhere?

Alas, his money slipped like water through her fingers, and when he expired — they found him one night perhaps two days dead on his bedroom floor in the brick Tudor in Chuterville's best neighborhood —

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all Bunny had to show for it was a longish term in prison.

Kitty's elderly neighbor was not so out of it, not by a long shot, and getting anything out of him was ridiculously effortful—in fact, impossible. He was a retired farmer in a region where it's farmers who have money. Kitty reminded herself of Ruth in the Old Testament, crawling over Boaz's harvested field looking for overlooked grains of barley. Hugs and thanks she collected tons of, but otherwise had no luck at all, aside from soda cans she found in rooting through his recyclables. Once he asked her into his kitchen for a cup of coffee, and introduced his ailing wife; Kitty was not again invited indoors.

One April morning, after watching them drive off, she walked into their house. The door was unlocked, typical of Chuterville. She gave herself half an hour.

They certainly had a lot of nice things, things she longed to wheel down to the pawn shop, but she intended taking no risks. In a desk drawer in the study she came across a box of checks. She took the bottom packet of twenty-five, and also ripped out some flimsies traced with his signature. Last, she found a statement for a brokerage account worth half a million dollars! Trembling, she got out of there.

Like her sisters, Aunt Kitty was an old hand at forging checks. She wouldn't be greedy, but would go slow, make them out in small amounts to people she trusted; slow and steady would do it.

5.

After dropping off the babymama, Adam and Jordan scored the blueberry muffin that was all their funds would extend to, though Jordan also slipped a Snickers into his pocket. We split both—Jordan happy to cede the largest thirds to Adam, with whom he was in love—and returned to Shady Acres. The drizzle meanwhile had strengthened to a steady pounding that filled the trailer with racket. Jasmine Stocker still slept; I could hear her snoring over the rain as my cousins got under the blanket on the pullout and went back to sleep. I read *Clarissa*:

Hitherto, I seem to be delivered over to my brother, who pretends as great a love to me as ever. He affects to rally me, and not to believe it possible, that one so dutiful and discreet as his sister Clary can resolve to disoblige all her friends.

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Shady Acres lies off the Interstate, whose arterial hum can be heard at all hours, though no one's aware of it save when a semi crosses into opposing lanes or rolls over a minivan. This tract was never farmed. Trees meet overhead in a dense canopy, rock shelves emerge above the riverbanks and big round rocks lie scattered on the surface. Potholes honeycomb the half-mile lane—always wet, often foggy—that loops through it. Thirty or thirty-five old mobile homes sit jammed into greenery, placed well apart and settled at comfortable angles. They look like moldy pastel shoeboxes.

Around noon Jasmine Stocker woke up her nephews with her gravel foghorn, coming out of her room saying, "Jordan? *Hon?* Your mom's calling."

"What's she want?"

Poor Mom. Before answering she took a drag on her Marlboro, breathed out the smoke, finished with a chaser from the oxygen tank slung from her neck. The eldest sister, she looks it. Her toothless jaw juts like a saucer held to her chin, the shapeless sacks she wears emphasizing the ruin of the rest of her. She's 42.

"Don't know," she gasped. "S'got something for you."

Jordan took the phone. "Hello?"

"Honey, I've got— How you doin'?"

"Fine, Ma, 'ra you?"

"Look, two hundred dollars, do me a favor."

"Mmm?"

"Gentleman friend's making a gift, two checks, five hundred apiece, made out to you."

"Yeah?"

“Cash ‘em, you can keep two hundred.”

“Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Adam’s sleeping. Catch you later.”

It wasn’t no. When Adam finally opened a protesting eye, Jordan laid it out for him.

“Sounds OK, don’t it?” said Adam, eyes darting in shallow angles within his frames.

“I doubt the guy signed —”

“Don’t matter, bank cashes ‘em. If somebody forged ‘em, that’s not *you*. All you do’s sign your name in front of them. Have the right to do that, don’t you?”

“I guess.”

Adam crammed his anxiety about where his next high was coming from into, “So let’s go sign your name, dumbass!”

They loaded me up, drove to Kitty’s, fireman-carried me to her wobbly kitchen table.

“Here you go, honey, Hoosier National. Should be no problem.”

Jordan held the checks up to the light and asked for an exemplar of the old man’s signature. Kitty had done a good job. “Why two?” he asked.

“Don’t know, cleaner that way.” The real answer was that she supposed, incorrectly, it would keep her forgeries at the misdemeanor level should things go south.

“OK,” he said.

“Keep two hundred for yourself, mind, and bring me the rest.”

“Two-fifty,” said Jordan. “I’ll bring you your money, don’t worry about it.”

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“You know I worry. That’s all a mother does, honey, is worry. OK, two-fifty.” Her smile showed gaps in her teeth.

Hoosier National’s across town, on the strip. On the way we passed its old marble temple downtown, now an empty thrift store, and Adam handed Jordan reds and blues from his wallet stash. Jordan requires something to help purpose to form inside him, stifle his innate warmth. A local martyr shouldered his twelve-foot wooden cross in front of us with a dirty look, rolling it on the little rubber wheels Jesus never thought of. Adam swung into the bank’s parking lot and lighted a cigarette while Jordan got out in a young man’s armor—his hoodie—unfolded my chair and pushed me inside. Happy to help; nothing’s more innocent than a guy in a wheelchair, right?

It was an hour before closing time. He took out the checks, endorsed them and, suppressing any curiosity about his surroundings, especially careful not to stare into a ceiling camera, took them to the counter. Glassy-eyed and blank-faced, he moved like an automaton. When asked, he produced his I.D., it was inspected and notes taken, consultations made, a shrug delivered, and one thousand bucks counted across. In addition, a smile—a bank’s reflexive tribute to cash—was thrown in for free. There was an urgent bounce to his step as we returned to the Honda.

Jordan knew Adam well enough to insist on going back with his mom’s share before visiting Dopeman, but they had a nice night even so. An outstanding one, actually, for they splurged on speedballs—heroin and cocaine combined.

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A memorable night, save that next morning they couldn't remember much of it, and found it particularly painful to get up at the alarm's summons to take the babymama to work, and lacked money even for a muffin.

6.

Chuterville officially opened its new hospital on May Day; unofficially, it began operating weeks earlier while patients and departments were transferred from the old one. The new Squire Hospital is placed farther outside town, a hilltop sprawl of steel and glass. The portrait of the millionaire who endowed it in robber-baron days was carried with ceremony to the new palace's lobby, where his sclerotic gaze can bless the modern-day sick. A tent was raised in the parking lot, a 5K walk/run held, bottled water and yogurt given out, tours offered and a ribbon cut by the town's leading committeewomen. I had a wheelchair-division personal best.

Then Fewkes drove us over to the old place. We could still hear the high school band—the Marching Devils—as he pushed his truck down a woods lane and across a lawn already in need of mowing to reach it from behind. It was a rambling jumble of styles, the 1900 stone block dwarfed by 1920s brick wings, dwarfed in turn by the glassy pavilion added in 1960.

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It proved, as he hoped, deserted. Or almost so: A car stood near the entrance, presumably a security guard's. As Fewkes walked around the structure, pry bar in hand, trying doors, he could see someone sitting in the lobby, legs raised against greenery on the other side. I waited in the truck, ready to blow the horn if need be.

Finally he forced a door at the loading dock and was inside. Moving at first with caution, then more boldly, he tramped the corridors unable to believe his luck: The hospital was empty but intact—Ali Baba's cave. Long hallways led past ward after empty ward, five stories of them—*intact*. Turn the lights on and you could admit patients. "Holy shit," he repeated with glee. He strutted like a conquering king through a captured castle, or a Dark Ages peasant through a Roman temple after the priests decamped. The mother lode; it would take *years* to salvage everything of value. He didn't know where to begin.

The timing was right, for the enormous Continental Fixtures plant where his grandfather and father worked and whose ruins long supplemented his income—a complex built by that selfsame Squire which for nearly a century produced more bathtubs, lavatories, toilets and faucets than any place on earth—was at long last, like even the richest mine in time, about played out.

The memorable phenomenon of his youth, Fewkes told me, was shift change at the factory. Automotive mayhem: Cars poured out of the lots for minutes on end, the Christmas rotation of traffic lights over the exit lanes meaningless. But manufacturing moved to

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China twenty years ago—the brand name’s still global, but now *Made in China* is impressed into stainless steel or porcelain beneath an updated, stylized C and F.

Fewkes’ father, then not 50, lost his job. His foreman undertook to explain capital’s requirements to him—how it must be free to go where it finds the highest return, a dictate of Nature’s as ineluctable as the nesting instinct or water’s flowing downhill; how, in the bigger picture, closing down in the U.S.A. to open up in China was a *good* thing. Fewkes’ old man didn’t get it; but judging from the company’s buoyant stock price and dividends, the move overseas was prescient.

All Fewkes knew was that where once there were jobs for everybody in Chuterville, now there were none. His dad had owned his own home, two cars, a hunting cabin an hour away, and bruted the idea of college for Fewkes (who, in the event, quit high school to race dirt bikes). Everything but the house went away with the job; it took another ten years for it to go into foreclosure.

But Fewkes has mined that old factory ever since. Its mile-square sprawl contains huge lofts stretching along railway sidings; a foundry; a brass-finishing plant; its own dynamo; administration buildings; warehouses bedecked with fierce stone eagles; a water tower, and three towering smokestacks. For years, a good day’s work was as easy as driving past the bullet-sprayed FOR SALE billboard, albeit with ladders ever taller, and pulling conduit off the wall to get at the copper wiring within, or ripping out pipes, or prying up tracks, or smashing the old jigger

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machines and tunnel kilns to portable chunks, and trucking everything to the scrapyards. Even with the work it took to break things up or burn off insulation, plus the necessity of keeping an eye peeled for cops, it was easy money. There was always something to be hauled off to the scales where, not looking too closely, they paid cash. The scrap value of America's Industrial Age kept Fewkes going, him and his kids; the factory was the meal ticket for generations.

Now fire has collapsed several structures and the ground floors of others are flooded. But little of value remains, anyway, save for sawed-off copper pipes tauntingly embedded in concrete. The easy money's long gone. Some guys lately are prying individual bricks out of walls or pulling down rafters and selling them as barn timber. The collapse in commodities prices doesn't help; something else Fewkes can blame on China.

In the hospital, he located the room in Obstetrics where his wife died delivering their daughter. Fewkes refused to have a beef with God but, since he had to start somewhere, started there—spent hours opening walls and yanking wires, pulling fixtures off ceilings, tugging at pipes with all his might.

A project like this made him miss his son acutely, but Junior has another nineteen years to go in prison. A hulking youngster, rather sweet, though definitely not the brightest, he was expelled from Chuterville High for being thought a threat by those who, having failed to teach him to read or write, imagined a wish for retribution on his part. That his beefy arm was tattooed in the red, white and blue of the Confederate

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battle flag, and thus an incitement to his black classmates, didn't help. Junior was out and adrift by the age of sixteen.

The one thing school gave him was a girlfriend, fond of him less for his sake, as he imagined, than because his bulk scared people. A few years later, when her latest secret flame lost interest, she talked Junior into a home invasion, and gave him the gun.

It was a big mess. After his arrest, he felt he'd at least enacted some gallantry, and accepted a plea agreement calling for twenty years in prison without parole. Fewkes would have despaired, save that, not long after his transfer from Chuterville's showcase jail to Michigan City, Junior told him over the phone, "Dad, I got *myself* into this predicament." So he had hope for him still; but, oh, how he could have used his help in scrapping the old hospital!

He might bring Cordelia next time. She could do some good. Though for Fewkes scrapping's a never-ending treasure hunt, Cord hated the dirt, the smells, the rusty edges, dreaded coming across maggots or the bodies of dead pets. Even an armload of copper gave her no joy. But the bewilderments of high school—Fewkes insisted she was not *slow* so much as *late*—had caused her to drop out during the past winter, and Fewkes thought it time she did more than babysit at a few bucks a throw or lie around the trailer begging him to get her a cat. Cats suck the breath from babies, he informed her; wouldn't have one in the house. So she pouted.

Fewkes filled the Ranger's bed with steel and copper, and secured a tarp over it with bungee cords;

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both the scrapyards and Chuterville Recycling were closed until Monday, and he had no wish to advertise his find and have others jump his claim.

We high-fived each other and went home to Shady Acres.

7.

The police came to arrest Kitty early on a trash day. One cruiser blocked the alley, another parked out front. She knew the officers who knocked. After glancing at the warrant, she asked to use the bathroom, and hastily brushed her hair, swallowed some pills and stuffed others in a baggie up her vagina, cavity searches not being the Chuterville jail's strong point. It was a relief to find that somehow her billfold held the \$30 she would need to buy whites to go under the orange jail jumpsuit. The jumpsuit was free.

As they drove her off, she saw with complacency her elderly neighbor's Rosie Rollers standing in the alley beside hers. The old coot would have to pull them up the drive all by his lonesome.

At the jail they booked her and added a mugshot to her gallery of them. The *Chronicle* published it the next morning. Face drawn, she just looked sad, but at least her stringy hair was neat.

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For the rest of the day she sat in an interrogation room, and from the questions asked of her put together what happened: The old man in studying his bank statement noticed the out-of-sequence checks and guessed the payee to be related to his neighbor — same last name — and, with more acuteness than you have any right to expect in a 90-year-old, realized he'd been had. He called the police and told them to throw the book at 'em, and so Kitty found herself in a mirror-walled room being grilled by detectives.

Chuterville spent millions on its new jail, and placed it prominently next to the landmark courthouse. From the outside it's a well-proportioned structure of brick with stone facings and large expanses of glass. Indoors, one finds the windows to be fake. There is little natural light amidst overmuch steel.

There was no point in denying anything, so Kitty admitted everything, including Jordan's role. In fact, she played it up: Her son being addicted to heroin and pills, she said, his ferocious need for cash gave *him* the idea of conning her neighbor. It was *Jordan's* idea; *he* made her steal the checks — knew they were forged when he took them to the bank.

Accepting a cigarette from a detective, Kitty expressed the hope that making statements about her son would help her, but they explained that, being on parole, she would probably now have to complete her original sentence, and more. Anyway, that was up to the judge. Regardless, she declared, she was glad to be there because jail's a good place to get clean.

Her piety bored them as much as it did her. They placed her in a cell with a woman who spoke no English, and that night she huddled beneath a thin blanket on her bunk's thin pad, trying without success to sleep, although because of her timely provision of pills she did not immediately become dopesick.

The police came for her son before noon the next day. The cruisers rolled into Shady Acres and surrounded our trailer. Mom was off selling her May food stamps. As the cops came through the door and bore in on Jordan, Adam padded off to find a cigarette. Jordan pulled on jeans and a shirt, and by the time they finished reading him his rights was cool and distant, fastening his belt with a bounce on the balls of his feet. They cuffed him and put him in a car, a cop paternally pushing his head beneath the headliner.

He mustered his hardest look for his mugshot, but looked merely adorable, if upset and apprehensive. Unlike his mother, he lacked money for his whites so, after his prints were taken, pulled on a jumpsuit over bare skin and was put into an interrogation room.

The charges, they explained, were two counts of forgery, each a Class "C" felony.

"Forgery?" he protested. "You're saying *me* signing *my* name is *forgery*?"

They asked who put him up to it. This he refused to say. Of course, he knew his mother was languishing elsewhere in the jail, so was not entirely surprised when the detectives quoted Aunt Kitty on its being his idea in the first place. He bled through stab wounds of betrayal, but let *her* talk, his standards were higher. He denied everything.

Finally a TV and VCR were rolled into the room and the bank's surveillance tape played. Again and again Jordan watched a jerky stop-time loop that showed a hooded figure pushing a wheelchair with a twisted, gaping little thing in it up to a counter and exchanging checks for cash. Shaking his head, he declared that whoever it was, it certainly wasn't *him*, and could he please have a lawyer?

Some time later a plump, distracted man in a jacket that needed cleaning came in, sat down and took a case file and paper sack out of his briefcase.

"Jordan? Mitch Hurst, public defender." From the sack he brought out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, murmuring, "You don't mind?" Taking a bite, he chewed while he riffled through papers concerning the case. Finally he put them aside and asked, "This your first arrest?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, I've reviewed the charge sheet and interview transcripts," Hurst said. "Seen the bank video, too." He shook his head and looked at Jordan with something admiring in his regard. "Got you cold, my friend—'C' felony, two counts. Have to plead you. Go to trial, you'd get four-to-six *years*. First offense, should be able to plead to four, six *months*, or even no time at all, assuming you're willing to talk about your mother. Believe me, she's singing like a bird about *you*."

Jordan declared he would never speak against his mom, and repeated his existential protest that even if he *had* signed the checks, which he *hadn't*, signing his own name couldn't be *forgery*.

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They put him in a cell already occupied by a shaven-headed man bursting his jumpsuit, and he quailed in dismay until the guy introduced himself as a friend of his mother's.

If he still quailed, it was with incipient dopesickness.

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