

The Song of the  
**MIDNIGHT RIDER**

*a novel by*  
Lex E. Santí

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A Key Therapy Publications

*For the crew, who fought for me.  
For my Mom, who raised me right.  
For my Pops, who knows me.  
For Dave, my Gus.  
Most of all, for Shona and Gordie, who knew.*

We are the Shantis  
We don't have to run any more.



A love letter to  
found family and  
the American road,  
The Song of the  
Midnight Rider is  
fast, violent, and  
full of heart.

— **Kelli Jo Ford**, *author of Crooked Hallelujah*  
(*Finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Story Prize.*)



## ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE SONG OF THE MIDNIGHT RIDER

*“Lex Enrico Santi’s first novel is a wild ride—gathering momentum page by page. I won’t soon forget Jordan Samson and his headlong journey toward, and then away from, his fate.”*

— **Richard Bausch**, *author of Peace and Before, During, After*  
(*Winner of the PEN/Malamud and Rea Awards.*)



*Lex Santi has a poet’s heart, his work is a wonder.*

— **Cara Hoffman**, *author of Running, Be Safe I Love You, and So Much Pretty*  
(*Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Salon, and The Paris Review.*)\*



*“A love letter to found family and the American road, *The Song of the Midnight Rider* is fast, violent, and full of heart.”*

— **Kelli Jo Ford**, *author of Crooked Hallelujah*  
(*Finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Story Prize.*)



*“*The Song of the Midnight Rider* explores the fractured zeitgeist of America through the eyes of a young man who has seen an embattled country under bright lights and in dark shadows. Jordan Samson is unforgettable—coming of age in a surreal landscape of greed, hustle, and fever dreams. Combining the muscular pleasures of a thriller with sharp literary meditations on redemption, Lex Santi’s novel keeps grace just one chance away.”*

— **Michael Nye**, *author of Until We Have Faces*



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# FOREWORD TO THE SONG OF THE MIDNIGHT RIDER

BY COLLIN THORNHILL, MFA

Nearly 20 years ago, I had the honor of introducing Lex Santí at a reading at George Mason University for what was then just a story: “The Song of the Midnight Rider.” I was excited by this invitation because Lex had already been one of my favorite writers in our program. You see, Lex was originally a *poet*, not a fiction writer. He looked the part, too: his clothes crisp, yet warm; his hair well-groomed without seeming fussed over. He had a kind of casual elegance. And of course: black-rimmed glasses. Most poetry readings are a dull affair, but this was different. It felt like we were at a race, cars revving in anticipation. The crowd was buzzing from the moment he began, racing through his lines, veering through metaphors. It felt dangerous to the degree that a reading could actually make one feel nervous. To be clear, this was not an exercise in provoking the audience with inflammatory speech. He wasn’t trying to be edgy. Rather, he made us feel off balance, like a passenger uncertain about the driver accelerating into traffic, proceeding with a little too much confidence. Lex made all of us buckle up as he hugged the edge of each line, then floored it through enjambments. The final stretch was a headlong rush into stream-of-consciousness, language breaking loose from its restraints. Reaching the last stanza was like driving perfectly into a parking spot at 60 mph: reckless in theory, yet flawless in execution. And that was Lex, flouting the rules in a way the rest of us could never get away with.

When he left the podium, I remember wondering, “How the hell did he do that?”

With that in mind, it shouldn't surprise anyone that Lex drives the way he writes: aggressive, even a little flashy, but always in control. I say that because I have only ever seen him drive a manual transmission. Makes sense. After all, there was nothing *automatic* about the way he moved through his writing, shifting gears at his own pace.

So when I first read “Song of the Midnight Rider,” I felt myself a passenger back in the car, watching with awe as the author let the prose dip toward the end of a paragraph before throttling into the next one. But if the rhythm and pace push you frenetically through each page, it's the characters and story that make you want to slow down, afraid you might miss something crucial. That's because the author cares deeply about people.

The style was kinetic and relentless, but the substance of what he wrote was anchored in careful listening: to the way people speak, stumble, hope, and hurt.

20 years later, the story is now a novel, and the voice has aged with the wisdom you'd expect. *The Song of the Midnight Rider* drops you into the world of Jordan Samson, a drug runner trying to get out of the game. We've heard that story before. “One last job,” goes the tag line. But this isn't just a book about running drugs; it's about a man who's been moving so long he's forgotten how to stop. Yet as thrilling as the car chases are, what you're really experiencing is a character grappling with a past he can't outrun. It's the painful irony that the choices we make to liberate ourselves are also the very things that imprison us. Can Samson and Julia escape? The answer lies in the open road.

This is a novel burning with creativity. Let me give you some perspective: upon graduating, I began teaching college writing, and

I've yet to leave that profession. At a time when students are taking shortcuts with their writing, it is a relief to know that there are writers in the world like Lex Santí, whose creativity and novelty seems limitless. The characters in these pages will surprise you the way Lex surprised us that night many years ago – not through cheap tricks or sudden swerves, but through the kind of authentic human complexity that makes you lean forward, wondering what those characters will do next. You might find yourself wondering, “how the hell did he do that?” when you reach the final page. The answer, I think, is the same now as it was then: Lex never forgot that the best writing feels a little dangerous, even when it comes from a place of deep care.

What a gift is, after all these years, to be able to introduce him, not just as a writer I once admired, but as a novelist who has made good on all that promise. So as you read, remember that you're not just holding a novel – you're holding two decades of evolution, of a poet who learned to let his lines breathe across pages instead of stanzas. Lex hasn't lost that edge that made us grip our seats all those years ago. If anything, he's learned to sustain it.

— COLLIN THORNHILL



# PROLOGUE

## *To the Legend and the Road*

I'd like to begin with a story—one I've heard so many times and in so many versions that I can no longer trace its origin. This was pre-internet, back when legends traveled by word of mouth, passed between friends, across bar counters, through gas station rest stops and CB radio waves. You couldn't look it up. You could only listen.

It went something like this:

A sleepy sheriff sits in his cruiser on the side of a dark, empty highway. It's the middle of the night. His radar detector jolts him awake, clocking a vehicle at over 100 miles an hour. He looks up—nothing. No headlights. No taillights. Just empty road. This happens again the next night. And the night after that.

His colleagues begin to mock him. But he's convinced something—or someone—is out there. So one night, he sets a trap: a full roadblock. He positions himself in the middle of it, daring the phantom driver to appear.

And then it happens.

A car—black as the night, windows tinted, nearly silent—tears down the road. The driver is wearing night-vision goggles. The car doesn't slow. It doesn't veer. It hits the blockade and explodes. The sheriff is killed. Another officer is killed. In the smoking wreckage: a trunk full of cocaine.

Was it a Lamborghini? A modded-out Mustang? A ghost?

Years later, I found the story on Snopes—catalogued as a classic urban legend. False, they say. But back then, it felt true. Or at least true enough to haunt me. I wasn't alone—others had heard the tale

too, just set in different states. Texas. Tennessee. The Great Plains. The open road. Always an open road. Always a car you couldn't see coming, couldn't track, couldn't stop.

That image—the all-black car, the tinted windows, the driver in night-vision goggles streaking through the night like some modern myth—latched onto me. It wasn't the drugs or the crime that drew me in. It was the speed. The idea of a vehicle moving that fast, that precisely, undetected. A sleight-of-hand on wheels. A disappearing act. Was it possible to outrun the world? To vanish between the borders of one country and the next, hiding in plain sight?

As a young man obsessed with driving, I thought about this every time I got behind the wheel. Especially during the five years I shuttled between Washington, D.C. and Central New York—sixty, maybe a hundred round trips. The highway became a kind of practice. Not just in driving, but in reading people. Feeling them. Syncing with strangers. You find your rhythm on the road, and then you find your pack. Three or four cars, moving together at high speed, unspoken agreement beneath the tires:

They can't catch us all.

It's a small heartbreak when one of them breaks off—SUV or sports car, rental van or Ford pickup—taking an exit to destinations unknown. But for a while, we were moving as one. Anonymous kin. Highway family.

And that's always resonated with me—found family. I've been deeply lucky in this life to have a close, loving family. But I've also found brothers and sisters out in the world, people I'm not blood related to but whose presence in my life is as vital and as bonded as blood. That same energy runs through this novel. My friend Kelli Jo Ford described this as “a book about found friendship,” and she's right. I didn't set out to write that book, but somewhere along the road, it became exactly that.

Eventually, I realized I wasn't going to become the driver in that urban legend. But I could *write* him. I could write the car, the myth, the movement. I could imagine what it would feel like to exist at that velocity, in that in-between space where law, legend, and longing collide.

And in writing it, I began to understand something else: these urban legends—these hallucinations we once passed around in gas stations and truck stops—aren't so different from the digital hallucinations of our AI age. Both are attempts to make meaning from fragments. To believe in patterns where there may be none. To create stories when facts fall short.

Maybe it was always about the story.

So this is mine.

I hope you enjoy *The Song of the Midnight Rider*. It gave me a way to step into the illusion. To honor the myth. To drive into the heart of an American story—one paved with blacktop, lit by high beams, and pulsing with the question:

What if it was true?

— LEX E SANTÍ 9/12/2025

## Midnight Rider

*Well, I've got to run to keep from hiding,  
And I'm bound to keep on riding.  
And I've got one more silver dollar,  
But I'm not gonna let them catch me, no,  
Not gonna let 'em catch the midnight rider.*

*And I don't own the clothes I'm wearing,  
And the road goes on forever,  
And I've got one more silver dollar,  
But I'm not gonna let them catch me, no  
Not gonna let 'em catch the midnight rider.*

*And I've gone by the point of caring,  
Some old bed I'll soon be sharing,  
And I've got one more silver dollar,*

*But I'm not gonna let 'em catch me, no  
Not gonna let them catch the midnight rider.*

— THE ALLMAN BROTHERS

## WELCOME

You're driving late at night on the highway and in the pitch black of northern upstate New York, the Arizona desert, the Florida Everglades, or deep into the woods of Washington state, and it is late at night. You're tired. All you've had is black coffee and the sound of Muddy Waters or the Rolling Stones or a bad recording of Creedence (you catch my drift) on the stereo. You drive alone on the highway with only the other lights of cars around you to guide your way North, South, East, or West. And we've all been there. We've all had these long drives before we flew on American or Southwest or the Pacific Northwest, and so on; let's say we all did this drive at some point in our lives. Now, the question is—what did you do when someone pulled up next to you? It's not so much like they wanted to pass you or anything. They just pulled up alongside you, and the two of you were on the highway. Are you the type that speeds up? Or do you slow down and let them pass? Or are you the third type that exists in this great country of ours: this gorgeous expanse of tarmac and asphalt and concrete slabs that have tied together this great nation. I need to know this: are you the third type that matches your fellow driver on the American road when you find another midnight rider? Do you drive with a stranger doing 80 on the parkway? Doing 90 on back roads. Breaking 110 on the Pacific Coast Highway with only one thought in your mind as you pick up other drivers, you have a team of drivers gathering in the darkness. All of you think the same thing: *they can't catch us all.*

We find one another in darkness, and they can't catch us all.

Some of you I know will understand where I'm coming from right from the start—and for the rest of you, I believe you'll figure it out as we continue because part of being American is knowing how to drive. I like to think that this part of being American is one of the damn finest parts that there is, infinitely higher on the list than strip malls and the latest fitness pride. The American road is the American dream. I've always believed that since I was a little kid learning to drive in Tennessee. This is where I come in because I am the road, ladies and gents. I'm the damn finest drug runner in the entire United States. Well, I *was* the finest drug runner, you could say. At another point, I was the damn finest NAPA-under-18-stock-car-driver, and at another point, I was a kid who dreamed of going into outer space.

So, you're out on this great American road. In the middle of the night, a car pulls up next to you in California, Pennsylvania, or Virginia, maybe Arkansas. They're all dark and tinted windows of this car. Windows are rolled up. Look over, what do you see? Do you know the car's driver? You should see yourself well because it doesn't matter who it is or what they're driving. All that matters is that you're with someone else out on the American road and need one another. So you drive together and pick up other drivers along the way. A team of strangers along the highway, crisscrossing this great nation to get home. To get to work. To get to another life. If you've done this with your fellow Americans on this great American road, congratulations, you're a midnight rider. Just like that, I bet you didn't know that, did you?

So where do I come in all this? I am not the one that pulls up next to you. No siree. A drug runner can't run with civilians like that.

I am the one who is coming up behind both of you fast. I have no lights on. You can barely see me. I am driving the meanest-looking black Mustang on the road, which is being led by a Dodge Charger

and followed by a Chevy Camaro. We approach from behind without lights on; if you look closely enough, we're wearing night visions. You can't look close enough because you're not paying attention; happy with your newfound status as a Midnight Rider, we are moving past you with a trunk full of coke, trying to beat the sunrise. We were one of the first teams to drive like that, the original Midnight Riders. We came up with that name and gave it to all of you. Come discover the cure for cancer; we just taught the world how to drive.

This is my story, how I got into it, how I grew up, and my last night running. This is the song of the Midnight Rider.



# 1

## ABOUT THE LAST NIGHT

This story begins three times in three places. It started in Nashville on a couch shot up with tranquilizers, and we'll get to that. My story began that day when the shuttle exploded in the sky, along with my dream of being an astronaut, down in Cape Canaveral in 1986. But this story also begins in the southeast corner of Washington, DC, in a car hangar with harmful halogen lights, a black Charger, a Mustang, and a Camaro winking at you in 2005.

This is how I'm going to get this story across to you. We got one part of the story that starts that day when Drago found me, one part when I was 12 years old leaving Florida, and another part about the last run I did for Drago. It's the middle of all those that'll get us to the end. I'm not trying to be coy; I know there's too much of another bad Fast and the Fight Club Me Furious movie stuff in this last run, and it's not all that simple. I wanted to know how Vin Diesel grew up, wouldn't you?

This part of the story began on May 23rd, 2005, on the run from Washington, DC, to Florida. We were leaving on the new moon at

twenty-three hundred hours and had to make Cape Canaveral by the break of dawn.

We are dressed in our black zip-up suits, helmets, and shoes. Like all the other nights, we stood in front of our cars waiting for the final clearance. The hangar buzzes with final checkovers in the Hungarians' sharp, pointed thrust of vowels. This has been our system about once a month for the last number of years.

Before standing in front of our cars, we stood in separate opaque glassed rooms in our underwear after removing our civilian clothes. They ran scanners and metal detectors over our bodies—each to each—where they checked us for wiretaps, extra drugs, or weapons. Wands were waved, and the slightest beep would cause more men to enter the room and inspect away. To say they ran a tight ship would be putting it lightly.

Before that, we were driving to the garage, leaving our cars, chirping them out, and taking the elevator down two floors to a steel, nondescript door surrounded by concrete. There is our underground lair with its two-floor ramp that exited to Mother Earth, to the road, and to our personal racetrack that covers over 500 miles of backgrounds and highways from the great capitol of the United States in run-down part of North East DC, all the way to southern Florida.

The three teams check out our cars for about three hours.

We called the first team, the mechanics. These were nameless men who walked around with charts and sensor readings, jotted down notes, and argued with one another in Hungarian. They checked tires and engine gauges.

The next team was the security; they paced inside and outside the building with small arms and harmful cigarettes. They all totted Uzis or were strapped with Berettas. Some didn't sport a gun, but they were big, thing giants who stood behind. None of those guys spoke a lick of English and seemed to stare into our souls for any sign of

weakness or suspicion. They had all killed before; some of them, it was told to me that they had killed often. Some were mercenaries in Kosovo, and others earned a fair share of coin in Iraq until Drago found them.

The last teams we called were demolition experts. They were the ones that set the Automatic Explosive Devices that sat close to our steering columns. Five men, who'd all seen time for blowing explosive devices across the world, known for bombing campaigns in European and Middle Eastern countries, found a home with Drago. The IEDs were key to Drago's operation, and where other runners failed, Drago cornered the market. He knew that if you move that much product, you must ensure you can remotely blow the cars if someone decides to drive off into the darkness.

The last team, the boys who inspected everything, were Drago and his inner circle.

The three of us left that night were Me, code name Samson, TTBoy, and OU812. We stood by our three machines and waited—waiting for the call.

Drago lumbered over with Atilla, their bald spots glinting from the overhead lamps. Sombi was something of the mad scientist of the group, though part of the inner circle was the true nerd of the bunch. He was constantly jabbering about new technology or advances to our night vision goggles. Sombi was following behind them and trying to get them to listen. They kept telling him in English to shut the hell up. When the English failed, then came the Hungarian.

“Nem igaz, csak egy bodyguard, boz meg!” I'd picked up enough Hungarian listening to these guys for 3 years to know that he said, *It's not true, one bodyguard, fuck it all*. That little Hungarian meant very little to me then, but I would understand what happened in just over 24 hours.

“I don't want to hear about it. Container is the same.”

“Nem, csak egy—” his voice trailed off, replaced by a loud smack.

Drago turned around with a closed fist and said, “Shut up. Get back to your gadgets.”

I put my gloves on and turned to TTBoy, and he lifted an eyebrow my way. TT had slicked-back hair, stood about five foot four, and had a tattoo on both wrists. The two tattoos were solid black ink bands a quarter inch wide. When I asked him what they were about, he simply replied, “They’re so my hands don’t fall asleep on the steering wheel.”

Drago came over, let me take another peek at his three gold teeth, and blew smoke out his nostrils. He kicked the tires of my Mustang and gritted his teeth before he spoke. In a series of jerky motions, he talked to me.

“Yes, Samson, wonderful—car in shape, no?” I wanted to tell him I hoped he wouldn’t replace those gold teeth with a grill. But I didn’t say things like that because I couldn’t say things like that.

“She’s a beaut’ you crazy Hungarian,” I pointed my fingers like a little gun and clicked my teeth while I winked at them. “Let’s ensure there are no problems this time, okay, Samson? Not like what happened with police in Pennsylvania,” he was referring to a cop who drove straight into a field after she shined her lights on the road and saw us drive past her. I’d seen the cop a mile off and decided to hit the gas and roll by instead of doubling back. Big mistake, the chick cop went cowboy and ended up giving chase for two miles till we lost her. The incident made the press in the local Pennsylvania papers, “Cop Sees Ghost Cars!” We were shut down for a month. Business boz meg, business. Needless to say, Drago wouldn’t let it go.

“No worries, boss. Won’t happen again,” I said, smirking at them, and patted him on the shoulder.

They like that. Drago and Atilla laughed, went to OU812 and her Charger, and looked her over. As they walked away, Csaba

approached me; he was a large guy with a crooked jaw. “So you all set, Samson?” He said to me. It struck me as unusual for him to approach me. I thought about my flyover with the feds a few weeks ago and Clarke’s tips for me on this run. “Keep your eyes open; things are happening,” he said. That’s when I knew that last night would be different. I mean, Csaba always wanted to be everyone’s friend, but a little heads-up like that spooked me for about a good three seconds until I got a look at OU812’s curves in her black body suit. I couldn’t help it, she looked good, what can I say.

Her code was OU812, but I knew her as Julia; she pushed her long, curly black hair back. Her lips were full, and she’d dabbed red lipstick before we arrived. She was nervous underneath. That night, at least, it seemed that way. She had good reason, I’ll fill you in later, but we were both on the verge.

She leaned against her black Charger and crossed her legs, one over the other. I think there’s nothing sexier than a woman who crosses her legs like that; it’s the damndest way for a woman to collect a man’s attention. They kicked her tires as well. They loved kicking tires. She tossed her head back and laughed at their jokes. “Good job,” I said to myself. Her dark olive skin was perfect, and if anyone could pull off wearing a zip-up suit and look damn good, it was her. Drago grabbed her chin gently and said, “So beautiful, so very beautiful. When you come to my hot tub for champagne night?” he said loud enough for everyone to hear.

“As soon as you let me finish paying this debt off and get me a sitter, I promise we’ll celebrate, Hungo,” she said with a bit of sass. Drago laughed and did a little dirty talk in Hungarian and walked away.

I smiled and turned towards TT, who was waiting for their check-in.

I didn’t care too much about TT and the way he drove. He thought he was some sort of rockstar, but he was more like some

wise kid that just got his license, a Troy, maybe a Neil. He took risks. He acted erratic, arrogant, and hated pulling up the rear—what could I say? I don't lead, and I don't pull up the rear. The middle of a group of runners controls the pace. He was stuck in one place and one place only. He drove the new Camaro, slightly older than our rides but just as powerful. It was the sportiest looking of the cars. He chitchatted and laughed with the two of them. He always made me feel like I had to pump my gas. I exhaled deeply and coughed, "doosh bag," into my hand.

Drago turned to me and said, "Excuse you."

"Sorry, boss," I said and waved. As he turned around, I made sure to give TT the finger. He crossed his arms and seemed to lose his train of thought while he talked to them.

I looked back at Sombi, who was bugged out in the corner and watching us. There was tension in the air. Something didn't feel right, but I wiped the idea from my mind and thought about what was next. I would've wanted a cigarette, that is, if I smoked, and what I really wanted was a nice glass of Jack. I walked over to the back of the car where they'd been stacking the bags of ecstasy in the trunk. It looked like the usual load of drugs to head down: bricks of cocaine and bags of pills.

We strapped up, and they turned off the lights in the hangar. The soft glow of the LED running lights poked out of the concrete. Black ink took over, and my eyes slowly adjusted. I put on my goggles, and the entire car was silent. The only lights were my video cameras, the red light of the intercom that would flash, and the voice would come out. I turned on my mix, and *Sweet Melissa* shot into my earpiece. I hit the switch on my night vision goggles, and everything was red again. It hung over one eye, and the night disappeared.

The smell of fake vanilla air freshener.

I hate that smell.

The feeling of melting into a piece of machinery again.

I love that feeling.

I started the car and the instinct of driving without lights returned to me.

A shadow again.

Red light—*ready?*

The goggles kicked on, and everything glowed again; the way out of the hangar was marked by those same LEDs, now hazy bright lights on the side of the road.

It's a go.

"Remember Samson," He called over the mic, "Business boz meg, Business," he said

"I got it, igan--persa, boz meg," I chimed in, which means "yes, of course, fuck everything else!" I aimed to please my employer when I had to.

"Enough with the boz meg thing?" OU812 said, laughing.

*And we're off*, at least that's what I'm saying to myself as the hangar doors open two stories up, the pools of green haze seeping in, and I see Drago and the rest of the crew in the rearview, and it's six and half hours to the hangar in Key West, twelve hours of medicated sleep till it's dark again. Then we're off again and will return to DC if we get that far.

I start the engine, and OU812 starts her engine. TTBoy starts his engine, and our cars, baffled in silence, slowly climb out, like tigers now slowly waking after hibernation. We climb out the basement ramp, and then we creep off. We drive, let go of the engines, and press down on the gas. We're off.

That's how that began. Is it simple enough? Just another night of driving through the night till the dawn. Just another night with night vision goggles strapped to my head while we took our route

through the back roads. This is the night that everything went wrong and fell apart before my eyes.

## 2

### EXPLOSIONS IN THE SKY

I'm eleven, and my first dream is to be blown out of the sky. The rest has been that same way. It was in the middle of October, near the Cape, 1986. We'd started packing when we got the notices, and a few cardboard boxes littered every room. Mom would ditch the boxes later and just side with the shopping bags. For the moment, the house was scattered with the boxes before the frantic move the following week in two different cars, the trunks packed, making a tear for the northland.

That morning, it was cold, and I felt something for the first time in my young Floridian life, something I'd feel again later living in DC and the years in Tennessee—there was a chill in the air. It came from the window, slightly cracked above my bed. I got up on my knees and felt the cold air on my chest through the wire mesh screen. I stood, wobbling slightly, and reached up. With a little effort, the window came down and closed with a thud louder than I wanted. I hoped it didn't wake her.

I looked across the yard and saw Esperanza playing with a white and black ribbon. She tossed the ribbon, and an arc ran from the blue

sky to the green palm tree. Then, she connected the two before they fell. She spun around, whipped her long brown hair, and smacked her tan and white boxer, Taz, in the snout. She was wearing jean shorts and gel bands that were popular at the time. Her thirteen-year-old frame was developing, but she was still a girl, and I was still a boy. She was trying out for the middle school cheerleading squad and figured the ribbon was her way in. I had a crush on her; I can't lie about it. I laid back down and shut my eyes as tight as possible, hoping the slight thud of the window wouldn't wake my Mom. As I drifted back to sleep, I heard glasses clink, a lighter flicked, and then a gasp followed by a cough in the hallway. Then, the footsteps. I knew she was coming. It was only a matter of time. I tried to keep my eyes shut, but they flapped. I thought about facing away from the door, but that scared me too damn much. If you'd never woken up to a belt to your back, you wouldn't know what I was talking about. Instead, I faced the open door, my eyes shut.

The poster on the door was of the astronauts who had landed on the moon, the sort with the moon in the background and Neil Armstrong and the crew standing in attention. I can't remember if it was the *Right Stuff* movie poster or something else. The sketched-out details of these superheroes, to me, were what kept me up at night. My arms were folded over my chest like a mummy, and I pulled the blanket to my neck. I prayed she wouldn't come in. The footsteps were followed by a toilet flushing. Then, steps to the kitchen, a sudden turnaround, and heavier and hollow clunks on top of the carpet in the hallway. Finally, the door rattled, and the sweep brushed the green carpet. She was in.

I tried hard to keep my peepers shut. Holding them tight only started a little blink. I froze my body, stiff as a board. Like a freeze frame flicking through our family album, she turned, looking one way. Amazing that twelve years later, I'd be wishing I could run off

somewhere, and there I was, pretending to be fucking asleep in front of my mother on the day my first dream died.

Let me paint you a little picture of Ma at the tender age of 30. Her hair was unkempt, all over the place, and a stringy reddish-brown mess. She had the thin figure of someone who was indeed into abusing her body on a full-time basis. Clothes, stylish ex-hippy meets trailer trash. That's Mrs. Samson, Geraldine, the one and only.

She stood over the bed. I could hear the cherry burning the paper and the smoke blowing over my bed. She went from one hip to the other. She gulped a swig and then dropped her smoke. I heard the familiar sound of her shoe pushing into the carpet. No, it wasn't the first time she'd done that. I was just happy it was on the piece of shit rug and not on my piece of shit clothes. Geraldine was probably wearing a white blouse with bright orange polka dots the size of closed fists and blue jeans ripped at the knees. She could've been wearing a jean suit jumper. She could've been wearing a giant white dress and a red tasseled get-up blouse that opened in the middle. Let's say she was wearing polka-dots and blue jeans, for the story's sake.

She bumped the bed with her knee and jostled the bed. I knew this was it—if she didn't walk away, the gig would be up. She wanted me up but could also walk away and decide to do something else. Then came the jangling bracelets. She loved them. She used them to announce her presence when she didn't want to speak. The sound of them rattling against one another, like an inmate pushing the tin can over the gray steel bars she needed to be noticed. She was coming closer, pushing down next to my head. I tried to keep holding. Still, I winced; I just hoped she wouldn't hit me. Hoped she wouldn't bruise me again. She had a rasp back then, which would later turn into a hack, which would later turn into emphysema, which would later turn into terminal lung cancer.

“Joor-dan wakey wakey! Jooordaaan. Let’s see the rocket launch; you wanna go see the rocket launch?” She pushed the bed up and down, its springs submitting to her muscles. “Wake up. Sleepyhead!” Not opening my eyes, she grabbed my shoulders and pushed me into the bed.

“Mom,” I said quickly. “Is that you?” I pretended to be serious. I was a shit actor, I admit it. I wiped the crud out of my eyes and sat up. I was wearing a camo T-shirt, you can wear that, and a pair of boxers. My hair, back then before it was long like the story of Samson goes, was a set of spikey, whacked-out punk crap with cheap pink crusty gel that went in two different directions. I was a real dirtball kid back then with pegged jeans and an attitude. “Huh, what shuttle launch?”

“Over at the Cape, they’re launching a shuttle into space. Don’t you read the papers? Gosh, what kind of kid are you?” she said, laughing hard, and then she started coughing. She stood at the foot of my bed, sipped beer from a yellow can of Schlitz, and then started going through my drawers. She cackled a bit and then started rifling things into the air. “Dammit, where are all your clean clothes?”

“Over there,” I said, pointing to the plastic basket containing the clothes folded the night before.

“How often do I have to tell you that when you do your laundry, you must put your things away? Now look at this; I will have to find something here.”

She turned the yellow basket over on its side, and an orgy of clothes spilled on the green miniature-golf-like carpet. She placed her beer on the corner of the dresser and threw the jeans I’d folded onto my bed. Next came a bunch of random Miami Dolphins and an LA Dodger shirt. At one point, she seemed to pick out a bright yellow striped long-sleeved shirt. Still, she then changed her mind, reasoning out loud, “Fuck that, it makes you look like a big bird,”

and the yellow shirt wound up flying in another direction while she chirped after it. She whipped a light-colored T-shirt around next, which struck the beer. The can spritzed across the room and fell to the floor and my clothes. I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“Shit, what the fuck are these clothes doing everywhere,” her voice strained, and her face began to turn red.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said, with a touch of sing-songiness. She picked up her beer, setting it close to the edge.

“It’s fine, just don’t do it again,” she said, wiping her hands on my Dan Marino jersey and then drowning the remaining beer, “Ahh, whatever, wear whatever you fucking want,” and then burped on her way out.

I watched her disappear down the hall, sat on the edge of my bed, and then looked down at the pile of clothes she’d tossed everywhere and the blot of beer damp across three shirts and a pair of jeans.

“Huh, you say something?” she asked.

“No, ma,” I said, shaking my head.

“Listen, we’ll take ‘em,” she said, pointing to some of the clothes on the ground, with a stick of deodorant in one hand, a cigarette in her mouth, “Up and at ‘em and all that. Get dressed. Shuttle launch is in an hour, and we gotta drive, gotta go, gotta go.” Her raggedy hair was flying in different directions. “We’ll show him, we’ll show him once we get out of here, we will,” she threw the deodorant as hard as she could towards her room. It smashed against the wall, and the color left her face as she turned around. “We’ll show him,” she said again, looking around the room. She started outside and retook a drag of her cigarette, “I love you, Jordan,” she said to me, looking confused and lost. “I’m sorry your dad had to go and leave us.”

I hugged her, “I love you too, Mom,” and squeezed as hard as possible. We stood like that for just a moment, and then her mood lifted, and she started to do one of those little hippy dances.

“Woo hoo, we’re gonna get to see the shuttle launch. Astronaut boy is going to watch them go to the moon!” She started moving her arms in waves and then popped another, splattering some drops of beer all over my neck again.

She gasped a bit, looking down at her shirt. “Oh, gosh, look at what I did. I gotta change. Now you get it together, junior, gotta move. Change now; get your pants on. Oh, and let’s go ask your girlfriend if she wants to go.”

“But Ma, we have to go to school.”

“What do I always tell you?” I got ready for her favorite saying and mouthed the words, “School is for suckers, and suckers never get ahead,” she said “Don’t worry, we’ll use the old family emergency or something, yeah, that’ll do it. I got to fucking change. Shit, look at this,” she said

My mother had taken me out of school twenty-two times that year, and that day was number 23. It was that simple.

“Hey, remember it’s cold out there,” her voice echoed from down the hall, “make sure you get your windbreaker.”

In my eleven-year-old glory, my wet hair patted down, and my soiled Space Camp t-shirt with a Rorschach of dried beer, I crossed the street to Esperanza’s. The best-looking thing in our yard was one yellow patch of grass where a garbage can had been on its head until last week. Next on the totem scale was my broken bicycle, a kicked-in TV, and a leather couch that had been gutted with a steak knife. The TV and the couch sat on the curb while the bicycle hung on a bush by the window. The slithering lizards, whose tails we would tear off, danced in front of me as I looked both ways and crossed the street.

Esperanza’s house smelled like burnt toast and strawberry jelly, and music played from inside. It was that Latino stuff, what I would later learn was called *Rancheros*, that sometimes had a quick beat. Their house made me feel warm and comforted.

I saw her Mom, Lupita, a big-hipped, dark-skinned woman holding a wooden spoon, laughing with her mustachioed-father at their table. I knocked on the screen door, and they called after her, “Esperanza! Venga!” I waited down on the steps. She was my first crush and my only friend in Florida.

She walked towards me silently, smiling like she was holding onto something she didn’t want to tell me about. She put her black and white ribbon down and opened the screen door. Esperanza had long brown hair and a pockmark on her cheek. It’s been years 10 years since I last saw her, but I’ve held onto what I remember.

I stammered, stuttered, and fingered the matchbox space shuttle in my pocket. I pushed my fingers over the nose of the shuttle and gathered up my courage. “My mom, I mean Geraldine, would like to go on another adventure—I mean,” I blushed, and she took my hand.

“Yes, let’s go,” she said I thought about giving Esperanza my space shuttle for good luck, but I didn’t want her to feel I was just a kid.

Esperanza knew all about Mom’s adventures already. She had come with us on a stake out of Steve McQueen’s hotel and was escorted off the property by security. Then there was the capture of a baby alligator, which failed after she tried to use licorice instead of chicken on a string; Esperanza knew what she was in for.

With our backpacks strapped on, we crossed the great divide between Esperanza’s life and mine. We walked past the gutted couch, the garbage, and the busted TV and stood next to my bicycle that hung from the bush underneath Mom’s bedroom window.

“Let’s wait out here,” I told her, embarrassed to take her inside. We stood, holding hands, and she told me about her homework. I let go of her hand and spun the one good wheel that was hanging from the branch.

“It’s great that your Mom will take us to see the shuttle. I’ve always wanted to, but my Mom wouldn’t let me go,” Esperanza smiled and offered me a piece of chewing gum.

I shook my head, “Yeah, it’s okay, I guess.”

We shivered a little while we heard my Mom knocking things around. At one point, the radio went on, then another minute, it went off, only to go back on again, the station changing until she had a song she seemed to like. We stood by the car and kicked the front tire.

“Look, a plane. Neat. I want to visit my family in New York. Where do you want to go?” she asked me.

I swung my arms around in circles; this was a habit I had in starting a new conversation, “I don’t want to go anywhere on a plane like that; I want to go into outer space. And when I do, I’m not coming back.” Then I stopped, kicked a pebble, and heard the sound of a sprinkler in the distance.

She stared at the blacktop and kicked the tire again. She was silent for a good while and stared at her shoes.

“Not even for a visit?”

And if I’d ever felt the aw-shucks in that young life of mine, it was right then as our bus drove by. The yellow swath of municipal transportation was rolling past when the jolt of the spring door moaned loudly. My Mom jumped down two steps, her keys clattering on the cement driveway at my feet.

“Ohh, goodie, there she is, there’s your girlfriend Jordan, goodie!” She said, taking a slim bottle and shoving it down in her purse. “Sweetie, will you pick up my keys? Mommy has to throw her bag in the car.” She jumped back up and down the stairs, bowing slightly to Esperanza. That was her Sinatra dance from *Guys and Dolls*. I handed her the keys when she returned from the last two front steps

for the third time. Esperanza clapped. I bowed, and my Mom wiped her mouth with the back of her pink striped shirt.

“Alright, you two ready for a road trip?” We both stared at my mother, who had a dull look on her face, although she’d been loud enough to wake a few neighbors.

“Yup, we’re ready, Mom,” I said, while Esperanza nodded.

“Well, let’s go then,” she said, opening the side door. I climbed into the white hunk of junk, and Esperanza didn’t move until she was picked up in the air and gasped. “There we go, Esperanza. By the way, kiddo, here’s breakfast,” Mom tossed an orange at me, bouncing on the seat and into the car’s dirt-covered floor. I picked it up and wiped the gravel off. “You, me, and your girlfriend will see things go into outer space!” Esperanza laughed when my mom said girlfriend. I couldn’t tell whether Esperanza liked my Mom or she just knew how to handle her.

A plume of black smoke kicked out from the Nova, and the exhaust backfired as we pulled out when Esperanza’s mother called out to her.

“Esperanza, adonde vas?”

Esperanza rolled down the window and answered, “A la escuela, con Geradeen,”

“Con esté? Esperanza cuantos tiempos tengo que decirte, una Nova, NO VA!” she said and broke out laughing.

“Si, mi mama, adios!” The ‘74 Chevy Nova kicked back up from its deep slumber with a cough and a sputter and then jerked backward into the road. Plumes of black smoke rose behind us to signal our grand exit.

“What did your mom say?” My mother asked.

“Oh, just to wish us the best of luck with our adventure,” she replied.

We went off in that fine bit of American machinery, the Nova, it was a muscle car thrown into Americana and from the back seat, I sat on our knees and watched her parents wave. It was like another classic cinematic getaway scene. I gripped the muted orange seat stuffing that crisped into a powder in my fingers and waved back to them like it was our last goodbye.

My Mom was singing Dylan, taking sips of beer in a brown bag. “Singee with me, come on, kids! *Early one morning, the sun was shining, and I was lying in bed wondering if she nanananana... and I was standing on the side of the Rooooaddd nananananana. Headed up of the eaasst Coaaast nananana Tangled up in blue.*” The sing-along was in full effect as they say, for those moments it was all right. I smiled at my mom when she looked at me in the back seat, and I was solid on backup.

Cold steel surrounded us. White paint chips and rust came off the long beat-up hood and flew in the air toward the ocean. The engine radiated warmth through my cotton pants, Ma’s jeans, and Esperanza’s plaid school skirt, keeping us all warm. This was the youth of my life. We would leave Florida soon enough, and I never saw Orlando again until I was running drugs into a warehouse a few miles from where we were going that day.

We drove for an hour with the windows down, the heat on high, and our hands underneath our thighs, shivering in that unusual chilly Florida air. Mom held her hand outside the window and was ready for anything, with a buzz at the wheel, her eyes shifting from the radio to the road. The day broke open in front of us, full of change and possibility, and Mom’s jabber played nicely with this thought.

Ma slugged another beer and said, “You know we’re gonna have to get you in science classes during the summer, don’t you?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” I said, with a spark of interest and assurance that it probably would never happen.

“That is if you want to be an astronaut. Yup, that’s what we need to do to get you someplace where they got better science and all.” I nodded, thinking she was being earnest, cocked and all.

She kept talking, pointing to something in the road, and jabbing her cigarette towards an imaginary bully. We couldn’t hear her often, but we knew she was angry. Ranting. And that spot in the road she was jabbing her cig at was whoever was keeping me from those classes, and she was singeing their flesh with the cherry. Her voice rose to the steady stream of disgust. When she said it, the more she went on, the more I wanted to hate that little imaginary devil in the road and tell it off. Sometimes, when I drive now, all there is in front of us is the hate that we have to run over and watch tumble in our rearview like a piece of garbage thrown onto the highway. But it’s never there. Can’t ever get there. I almost jumped up on the back seat, slapped the cushion beside her, and said, “YEAH!” but I let her go. She did things that way; that was how she was, and I was used to listening to it. Her interest would be gone a few moments later after another pull.

Esperanza fell asleep in the front while the wind whipped her hair into the back seat. I rolled down the window, stuck my hand out, and ran my hand through the air rushing past us. Esperanza’s beautiful chocolate hair wrapped around my fingertips as I held my hands open to receive. The sound of the wind whipping the seat belt shuttered in my ears. I reached into my pocket and took out my space shuttle. Its tiny wings pushed through Esperanza’s hair. I traced my fingers across the circular blue and red NASA emblem on the left side of my spaceship. It was simple and small, so perfect and elegant. Her hair tickled my wrist as my shuttle took us to the launching pad.

I was small for my age, and I could barely imagine what it was like sitting in the back of a car. It’s been a long time since I’ve done

that. A long time ago, I could barely look out of a window and had to reach up with my hands onto the side of the car and look out and feel the rush of air. A long time since I trusted someone behind the wheel who wouldn't help me get dressed.

Enough of all that.

We drove for some forty minutes while my Mom mumbled, Esperanza slumbered, and I tried to lock the memory away to tell you about it now. I tore open my orange, ripping off the skin as the sticky pulp exploded over my fingers. I dropped the peels on the car floor and licked the juice off my fingertips. My tongue stung, and my stomach wanted more.

We kept making turns the closer we got to the Cape. Finally, we were nowhere. Off past the highway and after the residential homes. The road finally dead-ended, and we were placated by the tumble of sandy roads and swampland property. We pulled over before a posted sign and two large metal grates that kept us from going further. We were still way out of sight from the launch, but it didn't take much to be close enough. We got out and sat on the tired engine that knocked slightly. We were all glad for a break.

The sound of tired crickets and scuttling cicadas came from the brush. The sand dusted up the end of the road. In front of us stood the signposts and the chain link fence that marked the beginning of NASA.

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We stretched a little, and then Mom hopped on top of the car and held the can of beer up, her throat chugging it into her gullet. The rest of the six-pack, four unopened cans, sat next to the wipers, ready to slide down at any moment. I kept my hands behind my back and shrugged shoulders while Esperanza played with her curly black hair.

“The shuttle is going to launch that way,” Mom said, pointing towards an otherwise tree-filled spot in the distance. “Yup, it’s just right over that way.”

“How do you know, Mrs. Samson?”

“Aww sweetheart, you ain’t gotta call me Mrs. Samson; my friends call me Judy, is fine by me,” she said, tossing the beer to the pavement, the hollow sound of the aluminum clanging in our ears. I still called her Geraldine, mind you.

“Sorry, Judy.”

“She’s real polite, son, I’ll give you that even if she is some Mexican. Yup, real sweet,” Mom had ignored the fact that we didn’t know any Mexicans in Florida at the time and that Esperanza’s family, like so many others around us, were Cuban. To my Mom, there was little difference between the two. “So direction, you don’t know which way is east?” We shook our heads while the wind picked up and whistled in our ears. The wind moved the branches, and we hugged ourselves to keep warm. “Jordan, go get the blanket from the trunk; we’re all going to have a lesson right here; they’re all teaching you nothing in school, nothing,” she said as I hopped off.

I opened the trunk, and the squeaky hydraulics followed. I immediately felt the waft of a warmer place, the trapped heat wrapped around oil that hadn’t decided to go away, and the mustiness of the Mexican blanket Mom got in Tijuana on a Coke binge with some hippies from Albuquerque. I climbed up on the bumper and grabbed the blanket. I could easily fall in the trunk; that’s what I thought about then. Mom slammed down the trunk and cackled with Esperanza on the outside. When I saw the tire iron, I was ready to remove it from the trunk and pop it back down. It stuck out like a bone that was left behind by a dinosaur. Discovered and yet unbelievable to my eyes, it hid in the dark of the trunk. It was wedged in with the oil, goop, and tatters of towels next to it, stained

with a dark red sauce of blood caked over it. It sat trapped next to the spare and my father's brown mesh hat and uniform that said, "Arbys." Dad didn't go away on his own accord. We'll get to that later, though.

I closed the trunk to shut the thoughts out and saw her leaning against the windshield. The fat of her back pressed against the glass and pushed outwards, expanding. She was wedged steady, nodding at Esperanza. I heard Mom laugh as she finished a story.

With the blanket in my hands, I tried to shut the sight of the bloody rags out of my mind. From that angle, looking through both windshields and the dust and grime that had built up inside our Chevy Nova, she was just a woman taking a load off. Like that, I could trust her, watching her from behind. I had her in place, and the flesh of her shoulders was flattened against the glass.

Away from me.

When I walked back around, Ma had slugged another beer and said, "You don't need school, noooo school B-A-D!" she said, her voice cracking into laughter, "A teacher is going up with them right now. She's skipping school too. That's right... right noooooowwww. Christa McAuliffe – she can teach you how to fly."

I threw the blanket over Esperanza and motioned for her to hold onto the side of it after I climbed up to the top of the car. I didn't interrupt my Mom's talk on what she thought about Ronald Reagan. She went on about the "Gipper," as she called him, and I was happy being quiet and unnoticeable. I felt warm there for a minute, which was a relief to the cold day, with the engine's heat underneath us and the rough comfort of the itchy blanket that wrapped its arms around me. I traced the intersections of the dark brown, white, and red patterns on the blanket that connected into the corners of red, yellow, and blue triangles surrounded by green squares where the white fuzzies had sheered into the borders. I heard her rumblings

about “sticking it to those commies,” I felt some peace, waiting for the shuttle to go off into the sky. It was a clear, windy blue day, and I knew that a puffy white streak would soon fade into the rest of the stratosphere. I was breathing heavy but feeling relaxed. Time to watch a launch, and then the sky felt closer, and I was sliding down. Then I knew I was going to fall off the car. I felt a palm against my back and then, sliding further, a boot on my shoulder. Then a laugh, my Mom’s cackle. I felt myself propelled off the front of the hood. The well-worn lines of dead grass flashed in front of my eyes. I fell hard into the gravel. She laughed some more as I hit the ground with a large thud, the creak of the engine colluding behind me.

“Oops, sorry about that!” Everything was brown and black dots of dizziness. The feel of the sand and pebbles on my hands surprised me. I landed out of breath, a huff coming out of my mouth as I wanted to start coughing, sitting on my hands and knees. My face went red with shame; I was always ashamed growing up. Being embarrassed like that in front of Esperanza. I looked at the two of them and tried to calm my thoughts; *why is she still sitting on her lap?*

“Looookeee, someone fell down! Someone couldn’t fly!” Esperanza tried to move from my Mom’s arm across her waist, but she couldn’t. “No, that’s okay, he’s fine, he’s okay. Aren’t you Jordan?” Then she threw an aluminum can into the sand. “Come on, Esperanza, let’s do the bouncy bounce. Wanna do the bouncy bounce? Here we go.”

Never turn your back to her. I knew better than that. It made me feel good that Esperanza cared enough to try to get away. Sometimes, all that matters in my life is someone’s intentions; what someone *tried to do* made all the difference to me. If I had a dime for all the best intentions, I wouldn’t have been able to fill my pocket with enough change to catch a bus. Sometimes, you do it yourself; you’re lucky if someone tries to help you.

“So we got north, south, east and west.” Mom was pointing to the different swaths of the land to indicate different planes of existence.

Esperanza pushed her long hair back and shivered on the hood.

“How about we do the bouncy bounce? You’re cold, aren’t you?”

“I don’t think I want to, Judy; I’m a little old for the bouncy bounce,” she said, pushing on her arms in her best 7th-grade voice. Esperanza looked defeated, cold, the blanket cast off. “Come on now, I ain’t gonna bite; you like the bouncy bounce, right?” Esperanza looked at me, and I just gave her a little wink to let her know it was okay. She settled inside, and Ma wrapped the blanket tightly around them.

I dusted myself off winced at the hazy sun, and looked down the ocean line to where the launch would be. I wasn’t getting back on the hood of the car to fucking get thrown down again. No way. Memories like those made it clear to stop trying to win when you just can’t.

“You see, that’s the way that North is,” and she pointed behind us to the road we had just been on. I didn’t care much about that road, and I didn’t want to go back on it. Nowadays, when I travel north and south, they both feel the same, like I’ve been caught in it after driving for Drago for so long. “Then over there is the east, and that’s where the shuttle is going to go up, *up* and *up* into the sky.” With every up, she pushed Esperanza a little higher, giving her an after-effect of the bounce. I looked up at the two of them and put my elbows on the hood, catching a fraction of the heat I had before as a gust of wind whipped through my shirt.

“Then that way is south; that’s the way Mexico is, and your family is down further south but to the west.” I turned to see her reaction, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“Mom, she’s not Mexican, she’s Cuban.”

“Jordan, why are you interrupting? I said she was Cuban, didn’t I?”

“No, Mom, you said—

“I said stop interrupting, Jordan,” she said, raising an open hand. “You know I always wanted a daughter. Do you think your parents would let me adopt you? Maybe that way you two could be brother and sister?”

My chest heaved a little, and I felt like I was going to be sick.

“No, I wouldn’t like that, Mrs. Samson,” Esperanza said, pronouncing the words without a hint of an accent.

My Mom was silent for a minute, and I refused to look back and gauge her reaction. I knew that shortly, something would come flying at me, or there would be something else that I would have to apologize for.

“And that’s the West; that’s where everything new is. That’s where we start over and get away from everything over here.”

Bodies moving in one direction or the other. The sound of the sea wind whipping against the sand and a creaking engine. The feeling of dirt brushing against my palms. The smell of beer and the orange pulp are sticky on my hands. I wanted to go west to get away from her. That’s most of what I thought about for the entire time growing up, going west and finding a way.

“North, South, East, and West—those are the four directions we can go, and here’s how we remember them.”

I thought for a second, listening to the Beatles play *Hey Jude*, right before the countdown over the radio, that there was something else I wanted in my life. I want to always be in a car, to be on the open road, and to be able to write off the tragedies that make up the pattern. I didn’t need a parent, a job, or a school that would make everyone proud enough of me; I just needed to get away.

“Samson, look up here at your mother; this is important.” I turned to look at her, no longer facing the West and the world out

there, somewhere else I wouldn't get to. "Samson, look at me," she said when I was staring straight at her.

"I am," I said.

"Don't talk back to me," she said

"When you need to remember the direction, you say the following, Never Eat Soggy Waffles. Say it with me!"

"Never Eat Soggy Waffles," we repeated and looked across toward the east.

"Isn't that fun? Don't tell me I never taught you anything. Never Eat Soggy Waffles!"

I looked up at Esperanza, who smiled. We'd learned that in school already and didn't have it in our hearts to tell her what we thought about it.

The radio blared through the open doors, lazily hanging around like the answered prayers of hitchhikers.

"We interrupt this broadcast to provide you with our coverage of the Challenger launch on KFLA; thank you, folks, for joining us," there was a tick of two or three seconds before we heard another more patient, raspy voice, "the launch 30, 29, 28...everything is all clear 25, 24..."

"Come back here, sweetie, come back here, hahaha. Bouncy bounce Esperanza, bouncy bounce. He wants to be an astronaut, that's right, he does, he's going to leave us Esperanza! Hahaha."

That was the first and last time I felt shame about wanting to be something. I didn't mind giving up the dream of racing cars on the circuit. I was glad to get rid of that dream. This one, this one I still feel every day.

And I walked back—a closed beer on the hood, Esperanza doing the bouncy bounce, and I leaned my back against Ma's leg, the one she wasn't bouncing.

*“The first private citizen to enter outer space in 17... 16...”* We squinted, looking in the distance, and Ma stopped the bouncing and slid down the hood towards me. The shocks of the Nova relieved me, and she said to me, “I’m sorry, love,” really low. Then she moved her fingers over my neck and forcefully grabbed my brown mop of hair. I moved back on the hood, next to Ma, Esperanza on her leg. “And 9, 8, 7...” Mom popped a beer and said, “This is really something, kids, this is going to be,” and gulped, “something special.”

She wiped her mouth and let out something of a cross between a sigh of relief and pure joy.

She wiped some beer off her jeans and bounced Esperanza on her lap.

During those moments, we were all completely content. The seconds before it happened. For those 73 seconds, everything was perfect, all of us there, the three of us. I had all I needed while they raced into the sky, Esperanza’s hand in mine. My Ma is in love with us both. Everybody had a chance in those 73 seconds. We all had a chance.

“5...4...3...2...1”

And I thought about that teacher in the cockpit, strapped in with her big curly hair. I thought about being right next to her, strapped in, and her hand reached across, rubbing my hair gently, unlike Mom used to.

We watched a white trail shoot into the sky. I watched it climb higher, and nothing could stop the perpetual thrust of those gas engines burning it all off—taking you—moving you as fast as it could, propelling you into another atmosphere.

“Yes, Esperanza, he wants to go into outer space.” She took another sip of the beer can and then threw it into the sandy grass, and I twitched a little, wanting to believe, in the back of my mind,

that it was done. She knocked me down but didn't need to go any further.

Off it went seconds, bleeding into the other, and our breath was the only thing that came faster to the silent air that whisked around us.

And I said it. I said what I've always regretted since that day. Why the fuck did I need to say anything? Couldn't I just shut up about the whole thing and just keep it to myself that I wanted to go into space? Here it goes, though; watch and listen.

"That's going to be me. I'm going to be an astronaut," I shouted in the open air, watching the shuttle climb. "I'm leaving and never coming back."

Here's the funny thing about dreams, about wanting something, as soon as you say that you really want it, as soon as it's right there in front of you as an image you've fully realized, it becomes much easier to disappear. Somebody can kill it then, somebody who knows how to hurt you.

So, what happened? My mother put her boot against my back while I stared at Esperanza's smiling face. I did it to let my Mom know I would get away. That's why I said it, and there I was: a smiling kid with his back turned again at the wrong time. Goofy grin, looking his seventh-grade girlfriend in the eye with a boot on his back; it's pressed there, just lingering on me. Then the camera rolled again. Things moved too fast for me to consider, and I went, tumbling onto the ground while my Mom hopped out of the car, swaggering.

"Looks like someone fell down again!" Kicking sand everywhere, I struggled to get to my feet. Looking back on it now, hindsight being 20/20 reminds me of getting the bag beaten out of me. Still, I can't remember whether I wasn't thinking about the beating my Mom was about to give me or the shuttle explosion, to tell you the truth.

When I got to my feet, I started running. I didn't care where I was headed. I jumped the chain link fence and took off like mad, tripping over patches of grass cropped up everywhere, like the uneven balding on the stretch of every mid-level manager in the suburbs. I looked back and saw my Mom a ways back. She was drunk, swaggering like a zombie that wanted flesh, making her way after me. "You get back here!" she shouted.

The shuttle was climbing away, and I was trying to escape in that 73 seconds, just trying to be free. Praying that they'd leave the atmosphere and take me with them. I was running out of one room and into another, like in our house, quicker though, the grass patches and roots shooting up the laundry and toys scattered. Doors slamming. She was screaming the high pitch of lemons squeezed down the throats of babies in pain. But outside now, and in the memory of my childhood, I can't see it all; I have to be honest with you, but with this heightened ability to reflect on the past and to know the world for what it was, there are certain things I'd rather shut out. So my chest heaved, and I wanted to wretch, and I felt myself stumbling. And there it is, in my head, the line I can't cross, looking up and watching it happen. Watching that shuttle break apart while the astronauts are dying in the open sky, barely out of one world, unable to make it to the next.

"You can't leave me, you just can't leave me, I'll take you there. I'll leave you there like I left him," and that title of a mother had been forgotten a long time ago. She never wanted a son; she just wanted me to act like her son. While a cigarette was hanging out of her lips, she'd crack her hand against my rear or smack my face with a closed fist lately. That's when she'd say, "You can't leave me, you can't." That's why I learned to run; that's why I learned to keep safe and out of sight.

I slowed down after I heard something from Esperanza and tried to look back at the car. The only place to go was into the swamp. I was backed into it, which was the last thing I wanted to do. Back to the swamp, where she'd said she'd leave me. I had a flash of a bloody arm being gnashed off by a gator when I tripped and fell flat on my face.

I looked up at the sky and saw the shuttle pushing higher. All I wanted was for it to get away. The contrail zig-zagged in the sky. One fuel jet shot off in one direction and the other to the left. It formed a gigantic Y. Off it was supposed to go into space—off into the wild blue yonder to disappear from everyone else's sight. Gone.

They couldn't get away. Where the shuttle should've been climbing into the sky was her face. Her limp, dishwater blonde hair and the stink of cheap beer on her breath flowed down over my face like jungle branches. I turned my face to the grit of sand; it dusted my cheek for a brief moment before she forced me up in the air and then slammed me back down.

"Thought you could run away, that's what you thought, huh, space boy! Thought you could run away from your Mom! We just want to have fun." I pushed myself up and made a jerk to run toward Esperanza, but she grabbed me by the back of my shirt. That's when the screaming started, and I turned around and felt Mom's palm across my face. I grabbed my cheek and cocked my fist. I paused, thinking that this would have to stop, that a mother couldn't beat me in front of my first girlfriend, but as soon I knew that she most certainly could, she let me go, and I fell to the ground. I felt the sand on my lips and flayed my arms in every direction. She grabbed my arms, and I prepared myself for another smack. I closed my eyes tight, biting my lip.

"Don't you ever," and then I expected it, the next smack across the face, but there was nothing. Just the pause. And if this was a

movie, they would pan up into the sky as my mother's hand was cocked, and I was ready to defend myself. The sky blue sky above us and the shuttle breaking into a million pieces. We can't see that, though, yet. We don't know what is happening next, and all I can see is my mother's face in a blab of fury like her last child was taken or she wanted to beat her only child.

"I'm telling you, Jordan, don't you ever," she repeated. My mother grabbed me by the shirt and picked me off the ground, and she drew back her hand. My body felt like it was levitating from the ground, and the control I would have otherwise had was gone. This was it, I thought, as I knew I'd just have to take it. I looked over her shoulder, and I saw Esperanza. She looked down at us, and this scrunched up expression on her face but then her eyes screamed something wildly different. My feeling of joy that she cared for me was replaced by confusion. That she might start screaming when I was getting slapped. Then she started saying something else, something I could barely make out. She was pointing up into the sky, making eye contact with me. She stood on top of the Nova and wailed.

"Shuttle... shuttle no there... shuttle fire...." And I looked back at Esperanza, her waif-like arm jutting to the sky like it could pierce what was left. "Shuttle ... shuttle... explode!" She screamed more as I looked up at the blue sky. My mother had backed off, and I landed on the ground with a thud. She stood over me, looking up towards the sky. I followed her eyes, looked up over me, and fell against the ground.

"Holy fuck," she said, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph." The smoke had enveloped the shuttle, and the thrusters painted a letter in the sky. An original question mark in the air.

With the wails of Esperanza helping ease the transition between anger and shock, there remained my mother, who seemed unable

to move. She stood up straighter, looking at the sky, and I pushed myself back on my elbows, digging into the dirt.

“That fucking thing. No. That’s not what’s supposed to happen.”

The two side engines zig-zagged out of control, dispensing gas into the air as tears of the Challenger trickled down in the sky towards the grave called Earth. The Florida sky, known for its sun rays that trickled down into the lonely tourists of cold American states. America was watching, in classrooms and at their homes-- every year we mark the day. That swamp land of possibilities, of Mickey and Goofy and the Road Runner who always seemed to get away, a cartoon was made of what should have been another brilliant moment in American history. Still, it was now written by the contrails of disaster.

The shuttle cracked in two, opening a fortune for all the school children to watch nationwide. I imagined my classmates sitting inside the gymnasium together, watching the curved TV screen propped up on a metal roller. The rabbit ears point in two directions with just the proper connection. Mrs. Bataligini or my reading teacher Roberta Wallet, sitting down, smiling one second at the rows of kids in small green plastic chairs, then the next minute, their faces white against the image of the news.

We stared briefly as the steady drip of sagging rocket fuel told us nothing would be left. “Mom, it’s over,” I said, not knowing why. From the ground, I felt the mix of sand and dirt on my palms, and I imagined the shuttle turning into fine sand blowing over America’s best beaches.

“Mom, it’s over,” I said again as I sat up. And it really was. I didn’t think about being an astronaut anymore, and maybe Mom thought she won that day; she could keep me from running away, and perhaps she was a bit right.

What I remember after that is what all of us alive remember. The jokes. The sarcasm. We were not apathetic from birth in America. You taught us to be so. You expected it because you fine adults, with wit and pomp and line of 1980's coke, took this American tragedy and turned it into a fucking joke that your children would laugh at.

"Obviously, a major malfunction," the NASA control center said over the radio.

"You can fucking say that again!" My Mom said, walking back to the car. "Fucking shuttle blows up in the air, and all you can say is, '*a major malfunction!*'" The radio announcer's voice took over from the NASA desk and began repeating, "It's a tragedy, it's a damn tragedy." I followed behind her, tears in my eyes, strolling.

My Mom started the car while Esperanza cried on the hood.

"No entiendo, what happened? What happened?" I reached for her hand. She'd started to hiccup as tears streaked her face. She jumped down, and the Mexican blanket fell like a used piece of meat in the sand. I took her hand and squeezed it as I looked up at the sky again. The twist of metal and dust in three directions.

"Let's move it, come on," my Mom said, laying on the horn twice. My mom slung her arm back and pushed the car door open. We walked to the back seat and sat together, bouncing on the seat while the tires spun, kicking up dirt. My Mom laid her arm across the seat and gunned it in reverse. Above the two of us, we could see the thousand-foot-long trail of a shuttle falling back toward Earth from the back of the car.

"Stop your crying, the both of you," she said

"Pero, I don't understand, what happened?" Esperanza said, looking at me.

I stared at her, feeling choked up as the tires squealed and the car lurched forward on the main road.

I wish I could've said something back then. I wish that I knew something, anything, to make that day feel better. I want to say on that day with Esperanza that sometimes it is best to let the dreams go. This is America, and the party doesn't last all night.

We rode off in the silence of Esperanza's tears. I reached into my pocket and took the shuttle out. I held onto it and held my head down in my open palms. The tears began to fall onto it, and my dream of escaping into the vastness of space faded away with every mile that car sped. My mother drove faster than I'd ever felt her drive before. I did not mind how she moved. I wanted her to drive faster, faster till I could not feel anything, and if we were to crash, then the death would be quick. I threw the toy shuttle out the window somewhere along the road home. I do not remember when.

I learned that day never to want something so desperate till it makes you cry when you lose it because those dreams that you had as a kid explode right before your eyes.