

*Stop Six, Ft. Worth*

When the police found the bodies packed into the trunk of a car parked in the Shack's driveway, Stanton and me were on the porch, smoking up the cigarettes he ripped off from his job at the Tom Thumb. Mom didn't let us smoke, not where she could see, but she was off doing her bus route and wouldn't be home for hours. Because the high school was only a five-minute walk, she didn't bus me, though she'd threatened to start. Stanton didn't even go to school. He dropped out last spring, a third-year freshman. I was only on my first go around but already fixing to flunk unless I pulled my shit together fast. That I was home smoking stolen Marlboros on a weekday morning suggested to me that things weren't pulling together and wouldn't be anytime soon.

We'd never seen the car before. The stooped woman from the next house over met two cops in the driveway, pointing at the trunk and clamping her nose. Summers always hung long into the school year and the sun had had several hours to work at the trunk. From the porch, we raised our noses and sniffed at the air, a faint gritty musk like spoiled meat. The cops slim-jimmed the door and popped the trunk. We craned our necks. Stanton exhaled sideways so smoke wouldn't block his view. The girls had been stuffed inside, tangled and twisted together, made to fit like mismatched puzzle pieces. They looked young, younger than me even, but it was hard to tell through the blood dried brown against their black skin. Hard to tell where one girl ended and the next began, or if there weren't three or four in there instead of two.

Stepping out into the yard, Stanton ground out his smoke in Mom's periwinkle bed and flicked the butt into the street before lighting up another, his fourth that hour. He joined the growing crowd two cops held at bay with nothing but stern warnings and the badges pinned to their shirts, sidearms holstered but visible.

Men shook their heads at the sight of the trunk, a few even turning away. Women cried. Children ran off silent, their eyes bugged, then crept back for another peek. Stanton waved me over, his face an unsettling mix of disgust and excitement. I shook my head no,

satisfied with my view from the porch. More squad cars pulled up, red and blue lights strobing out of time. Threatened with arrest, the crowd dispersed to porches and yards. Police tape went up. The cops photographed the bodies and the car, marked the position of the tires with yellow paint and powdered for prints. The media showed. Giant cameras mounted tripods with military speed. Boom stands unfolded and extended like miniature cranes. It was like something out of *Law & Order*. Detectives and reporters questioned everyone, us too. Mildly frightened, I gave quick one-word answers. Stanton took his time, apparently thrilled to be involved in the scene.

The family of the victims showed up to identify the bodies. I hadn't recognized the girls in the trunk, not with blood matting their curly hair slick, but we knew them. They were identical twins that lived with their dad and older sister, both of whom showed up in tears.

"That's fucked up," Stanton said, checking my face for a similar recognition. "Can't believe it."

I didn't think it that unlikely. They lived, had lived, in a dope house right off the 35W frontage road, a few blocks south of Berry, where Stanton scored. I'd gone with him once, but the whole thing scared me so bad I hadn't gone back in the month since. I waited in the car while he circled around the back of the house, the engine of his old, boxy-looking Cavalier rattling beneath me. Scrunching low in his seat, Stanton worked a cap open with his fingers and snorted the powder from both ends right there in the driveway. He about vomited on the stick shift. Though curious, I was glad he didn't offer me any.

The police separated Ciara, the twins' sister, from her dad. She was Stanton's age, but the cops talked to her in soothing baby voices, as if she were too young to understand. She rolled her teary eyes and plopped down on the curb, letting her face fall into her hands. They wouldn't let her dad near the trunk. He grew agitated, his chest rising and falling with tight breaths, faster and faster with each probing question. Eventually, they cuffed and frisked him, cameras swirling everywhere. They riffled through his pockets and checked under the blue rag pulled tight against his shaved head before escorting him to a squad car, Ciara to a different one.

When Mom got home and saw the police tape and the trunk open, us there gawking, she ordered us inside, saying this wasn't

the sort of thing we ought to be watching. She didn't ask why we weren't in class, why we reeked of tobacco, though it must've crossed her mind. She stared at the Shack from the doorframe, us peeking around her thin profile.

No matter how much Mom complained about the place, which was a lot—she once wrote the city about it, to no response—she never mentioned the other vacant, rundown houses in the cul-de-sac two blocks down, or the abandoned carwash on Rosedale where street hustlers trafficked chippers to the dope houses, or the line of cars in Ciara's driveway. Just that one lot across the street, that's where the problem was, so far as she was concerned.

Everyone called the house the Shack because it was roofed at a gentle angle with corrugated steel sheets nailed in over worn-out shingling. Half the windows were boarded over from where kids smashed them in to play or fuck or get high inside. The lot had sat vacant the whole summer, ever since the vice squad knocked the door in and walked out a single-file line of men and women, holding each one by the shoulder the way a parent might lead a crying child out of a movie theater, as if the cuffs were just for looks. We watched that from the porch too, except Mom was there then, shaking her head in a horrified, but somehow sympathetic, way. She whispered to Stanton that this was what became of thugs, which I guess she thought he was. A woman getting frisked caught Mom staring and spat at us from across the street, but our porch was well out of range. She told us to get our cracker asses back inside. Mom refused with silence.

But today, stepping in off the porch, she voluntarily shut the door on the crowd, the sirens, the bodies.

I hurried after Stanton to the room we shared. We sat by our single window, the blinds cracked, till the police came with a flatbed truck and towed the mess away, and the Shack's gravel driveway sat quiet and empty like nothing had happened there at all.

My brother sold black people drugs to white people. He bought bags full of ten-dollar gel caps—an assorted salt-and-pepper mix of dope and coke—and punted them off in the suburbs for three, four times that. The demand wasn't much, but with that kind of markup, he only had to work one or two days a week at the Tom Thumb, just to keep Mom off his case. She'd threatened to kick his ass to the curb

more than once. I wouldn't have blamed her, though I didn't want him moving out, leaving me there alone.

The same day the twins turned up dead, Stanton asked if I wanted to come with him on a run to Bedford, where we grew up. I sometimes rode shotgun to get out of the house and weave through the maze of cookie-cutter brick houses I'd always thought boring growing up but now saw as bastions of lush carpet and comfortingly off-white walls. The houses in Stop Six—named after the ghost railway that ran all the way to Dallas back before people had cars—were all clapboard or rotted wood that might have once looked quaint, before the decades of disrepair.

"I don't know," I said, staring at the TV from the couch. Pictures of the girls dominated the local news. They didn't show them the way we'd seen them, all bloodied and mashed together, just class photos, their smiling faces set against a marbled green backdrop. "I'm not really in the mood to go out."

"Tell me what kind of mood it is that keeps you inside on your ass all day?" He kicked at the TV stand lazily, jostling the reception. "Turn it off. That shit will mess with your head."

The TV cut to a shaky home video of the police holding back the crowd till forensics arrived. Stanton was front and center, a cop shouting *back it up* in his face.

He kneeled in front of the screen. "Did you see that? I was on TV." He touched the screen where his image had been. "Did you see?"

I nodded so he'd shut up and leave on delivery. The amateur video circled the car, capturing different angles, though the station kept the bodies blurred out. I was relieved that our house, with me on the patio, stayed always just off-screen. I wanted nothing to do with it.

Outside the living room double windows, a candlelight vigil shined in front of the Shack. Grossly off-key hymns came muffled through the window. They'd been at it since sundown, long after the camera crews packed it up. Mom and Ron held two of those flames. I'd watched them cut a single candle in two and affix the halves to a pair of Coke cans with the tops cut off.

"Watching this shit ain't doing anyone any good," Stanton said, pointing at the TV. "Might as well go out and get fucked up, get your mind off it."

I don't want to make out like my brother was some all-corrupting force. He was just worried about me. I hadn't made any friends since moving there, preferring to hole up in our room and read over going to school or loitering on the corner all day.

The front door squeaked open and Mom and Ron stepped inside. They tossed their extinguished Coke-can candles in the trash. Ron was Mom's boyfriend. She moved us out of our pay-by-the-week hotel and in here after only a month of dating. He worked as a rent-a-cop for the Baylor on Rosedale, a job he referred to as cleaning the pavement. "Don't look to me to guard nothing," he used to say, "I'm just the janitor. Clean and clear, that's all I do." He worked the night shift and slept days straight through, so we liked him okay. Mom didn't seem to mind him being gone all the time. Maybe she preferred it. It was weird seeing her kiss a black guy, but he treated us better than our real dad, who was off fucking some trailer-trash whore in Lubbock, ever had. Besides, living in a neighborhood where you yourself are the minority, you get over that kind of thing real fast.

Ron went to his room to get uniformed. Mom sat across from me on the couch. On-screen, the police chief said the car traced back to a Dallas man who'd reported it stolen the week before and wasn't a person of interest in the case. They didn't have a single lead. He begged anyone with information to please step forward, but the resignation in his voice, already bordering on disinterest, indicated he didn't think anyone would.

"Well, if you want to come, we'd better get a move on," Stanton said, jingling his keys.

Mom sat up straight. "Where you think you're headed?"

"Out for a while."

"Y'all haven't even cleaned up." She pointed at the plastic trays we'd left on the coffee table, the remnants of microwaved dinners crusted to them.

"When I get back." He looked at me one last time, shrugged, and headed out the door.

Through the window, we watched his Cavalier's break lights go red, headlights flip on. He pulled out of the cul-de-sac, leaving only the candles flickering in the night. They'd dwindled from almost a hundred to about a dozen. The hymns had stopped altogether.

Mom sighed when the girls flashed on-screen again. She used to bus them to and from school and always complained about how

they would pick on other kids. Today, she hadn't mentioned them, as if not speaking was a matter of respect, silence the highest honor. When Ron suggested stopping by the vigil, she'd crafted the candles dutifully but silently.

"Would you please turn that shit off?" she said. This was not a question. She had her hand up, out, and open, waiting on me to fetch her the remote. It took me a minute to find it wedged between the cushions. She put on a crime drama and sank deep into the couch. I took Stanton's tray from the coffee table and carried it, along with mine, to the sink.

The twins soon became as inconspicuously absent from the news as they were from the neighborhood. The occasional quick mention sandwiched between traffic updates and the weather. No more footage or headlines, just their pictures shrunk to fit the corner of the screen, and soon not even that. Things carried on. The only people still on the corners the day of the murders were crackheads and shrivel-faced whores. That didn't last. Stanton and all the other kids resumed hanging out by the crooked stop sign at the mouth of our cul-de-sac, which was really just a street that dead-ended in permanent barricades. I took to staying inside even more than before.

One morning a week or two after the murders, I woke up entirely too late for school and decided to spend the day on the porch stuffing an aluminum can full of cigarette butts. Mom was inside napping, already back from her morning route. I'd given up on hiding my smoking and ditching from her. After about three smokes, Ciara came walking up our street with a handful of red dianthus that looked like they'd been ripped out of the ground, or someone's flowerbed. Every day for over a week now she'd come and topped off a pile of wilted flowers left during the vigil. She would bow her head, lace her fingers, and stand quiet for a minute. Then she'd walk off, rubbing at her eyes. She always came alone; her dad, after all, had a dope house to run. I'd started keeping an eye out the bedroom window, waiting for her. Twice she had looked over, as if spotting me, and twice I'd ducked beneath the sill, holding my breath as if she could hear from across the street.

Today, she tossed the ripped-up dianthus carelessly into the driveway because rain from the night before had washed the flower pile into the street and down the storm drain. She didn't stop or bow

her head, just huffed, shrugged, and turned away. She spotted me and came over, stopping in the middle of our yard. "Your brother around?"

"He's inside. Want me to run and get him?"

She had on denim cutoffs and a worn T-shirt, not the look of someone come to pay respects, but probably it was the nicest thing she owned. "He ain't been past in a few days. Thought he could run me back, if he'll be headed there anyway. I'll hook him up."

Going inside for Stanton, I caught Mom trying to look casual by the window. She dusted the sill with her palm. Mom knew Ciara, had mentioned how each morning she used to see her waiting with the twins at the bus stop, holding each one by the hand as if someone might snatch them away. Mom said good morning awkwardly and walked away from the window without questioning me. She didn't know what to say anymore than I did.

Stanton did, of course, want to go score. I offered to ride along, hoping to spy on Ciara. That something so terrible could happen to her one day and then the next the world expected her to go on, I couldn't imagine it. A home life at a dope house seemed foreign and incomprehensible before; it now seemed impossible.

On our way out the door, Mom told us to be careful. I promised we would. Stanton just shrugged her off. He could be a real asshole sometimes. We piled into the Cavalier, me in the back, and I thought I saw Mom back at the window, but it maybe could've been the cat.

Stanton dialed in some crap rock on the radio. "I saw them collar your dad. How long they keep y'all for?" Curiosity bled through his sympathetic tone.

"They wasted a couple hours with a bunch of bullshit questions." She fiddled with the tuner, found a rap station. "Too busy making out like it was our fault to do their fucking job."

"They think your dad did it?" Stanton said.

"Nah, but they're trying to hit him with child endangerment or some shit like that. Like he came asking for this or something."

"Police might try and take you away," Stanton said. "Because of the dope and all."

"P-lease," she said, emphasizing the first syllable with a pop, "I'm seventeen. Can't be taking me nowhere I ain't want to go."

"I'm sorry for your loss," I blurted out. I'd heard that in some made-for-TV movie.

Stanton shot me a shut-the-fuck-up look over his shoulder.

Ciara caught my eye in the rearview. "What's your name, kid?"

I stammered, cleared my throat, and tried again. "Jeremy." My hands felt oversized, my face uneven.

She turned around, her hand on Stanton's headrest, and looked me over. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Fourteen," I said, though my birthday wasn't for another month.

"Would've guessed younger," she said, in the tone of someone who'd solved a mystery. "I seen you, you know." She took out a pack of cigarettes from Stanton's console. "Seen you in your window."

I fumbled for a response, came up with nothing.

Passing me the pack, Stanton came to my defense, sort of. "Jeremy's an observer. He's all smart and shit." It surprised me to hear my brother say that. I was, after all, flunking out of a high school with some of the lowest SAT scores in the state. "He's always reading the paper."

"Reading ain't good for nothing," Ciara said. "Paper makes half that shit up."

When the TV aired footage of Ciara in the back of a cop car, the whole thing felt oddly distant, though I'd witnessed it in person only hours before. The news provided no caption, no explanatory voiceover. They'd blurred her face out.

Ciara ashed out the window, half of it blowing back in my face. "So you're playing detective, is that it? You think it's our fault too? Think my daddy done it?"

"I never said anything was anyone's fault," I said, wishing I'd stayed home.

"Quit fucking staring then." She crossed her arms and got quiet. What had the police said to her during questioning to make her so defensive? She'd been through a lot and probably deserved more leeway than she'd been allowed. She had every right to be volatile.

To change the subject, Stanton started complaining about being low on gas and the price at the pump. He trailed off awkwardly.

Ciara's dad was grilling in their front yard. A fat guy with braids threaded through the back of his ball cap sat in a sunbathing recliner, a sawed-off shotgun in his lap. This was about noontime on a

weekday. They didn't usually sit out in their yard openly armed, but it didn't strike me as that peculiar.

Without being asked, Ciara took a folded-over wad of bills from her pocket and passed Stanton a twenty like it was nothing at all. "For gas," she said, jumping out of the car. "What you need? I'll have them throw you a kicker or two for the ride."

"Ten boys, two girls," Stanton said, meaning ten caps of heroin, two of coke.

She went over to her dad by the grill. He put his arm around her shoulder, tousled her hair. When Stanton started over, Ciara's dad waved him around back, as usual. He handed Ciara a basting dropper and went in the front door. I waited in the Cavalier, the windows down, watching Ciara baste ribs as if this were any other house. The man with the shotgun handed her a beer. She kicked the bottle up as a cop rolled by. Though a more common sight since the murders, they'd already started dwindling. The fat man shifted slightly in the recliner to conceal the shotgun. He and Ciara, beer in hand, watched the car roll by slow. The police rarely patrolled the back roads, except to park down-street from known dope houses and bust junkies as they left. I always wondered how come they never just hit the houses themselves, why it took six months, a year, or more for that.

Ciara took another long drink then turned to face the Cavalier. My eyes wouldn't drop fast enough. She mock-stared, her mouth hung wide, and waved in exaggerated sarcastic motions. "Jesus shit, nigger," she said to the shotgun man, "think I got a new beau."

He laughed, said, "Shit, ain't no joke."

I slunk low into my seat, wishing Stanton would hurry back.

Ciara finished her beer and checked on the grill. Her dad emerged from the house as Stanton skulked back around the side, his fist balled up. They wouldn't bag anything here, he once told me, so swallowing was fast and easy if you got pulled over.

"Better sit on that here," the shotgun man hollered. "Police just made a block. Roll out now and they'll up and hit you on the corner."

Stanton looked ready to blow off the warning, but thought better of it. Leaning into the Cavalier, he dumped the dope into a recess in the driver-side elbow rest, scraping half-melted gel caps from his sweaty palm. "Promise it won't be long," he told me. "Better safe than sorry."

Ciara's dad basted the ribs one last time and shut off the heat. He offered us some, so long as we were there. Words tumbled out of his mouth slow and beer-soaked. The shotgun man passed out paper plates and fetched chairs from inside the house. We ate in the yard without napkins. Using my sleeve to keep barbeque glaze off my face, I felt like a kid. Ciara and the shotgun stayed in my peripheral, but I did my best not to stare directly at either.

A beat-to-shit pickup pulled up behind the Cavalier. The driver, a hollow-eyed white woman, around thirty, maybe less, eyed the barbeque and the shotgun, then killed her engine.

"Police were just here," Ciara's dad said, shooing her away. "Make a block."

The woman looked irritated but pulled off without complaint. She circled four corners and was back in less than a minute. Ciara's dad muttered something incoherent about fucking junkies, something else about fucking white girls, and told her to come back in twenty.

"She rolls by again that quick and I'm gonna blast her tires," shotgun man said, riding a slow nod. "Shit, I ain't even kidding." He ran his hand over the short barrel.

Ciara scowled at him. Having only finished half her plate, she dumped the rest in a trash can by the side of the house. She bummed another smoke off Stanton and went and sat alone on the porch, her forehead wrinkled as if straining under a migraine or deep thought.

"You don't think the police will come back by?" I asked, worried of getting caught here. "I mean, don't y'all worry about them?"

Ciara's dad laughed. "Police ain't gonna do shit. They hit us here, we open up on Berry. They hit us on Berry, we open back up here." This didn't exactly ease my own fears. He handed me the bottle of Jack. I turned it down, not wanting to drink after him, though Stanton took a shot. He continued, "Police are dumb as dirt. Y'all seen them up in my shit the other night like I'm some monster gonna kill my own babies?" His hard eyes watered. He took the bottle back, kicked it up. "Bet y'all ain't even seen no police across the street from your momma's. Am I right?"

A couple of plainclothes came poking around the Shack for a day or two after the murders. They re-combed the lot for evidence, but every last piece of trash had already been bagged and carted away.

The Shack was the cleanest place in all of Stop Six. Before leaving, they shook their heads at the shabby houses surrounding the Shack, as if the big mystery weren't the murders but that no one had bulldozed the whole damn neighborhood in the first place.

"Yeah, they've been by," I said, not letting on that it'd been almost a week.

Stanton nodded.

"At least they're working it," her dad said. His breathing was heavy and phlegm-ridden. It turned like a rusted crank in his chest. "Not that I need no police to handle my business for me. Someone will get it for this like it ain't been had before, y'all see."

He got up and pretended to fiddle with the grill, wiping at his eyes. Spotting his daughter alone on the porch, he brought her another beer. The idea of my mom bringing me a beer was laughable, but you couldn't look at them together on the porch and deny love or family. I understood now why he never visited the Shack with her. Probably he couldn't bear to see it. Probably he was torn to pieces feeling guilty for what had happened. A dope house isn't the best place to raise kids, but neither is Stop Six in general. And if you are going to raise a family in a dope house, how do you do it without shotguns, without gangbangers and junkies hanging around?

Ciara caught me staring at them and whispered something to her dad.

He eyed us suspiciously. Through cupped hands, he hollered, "Get on and roll out. We ain't running no restaurant up in here."

The drop-off was at Kyle Gilbert's house. Kyle and I used to be friends back when we lived on this same road, Teasley Lane, which looked just like Booker Lane before it and Sweetgum Drive at the next turn-off. I now longed for that kind of bland uniformity, a return to safety and assuredness, though you do start to build a callus to wherever you live. Ron and Mom had been mugged three times in their driveway on the way to and from the car, twice by the same men, neither of whom seemed to recognize Mom the second time they put a nine to her head to hurry the process along. Mom made Ron report the first mugging, called in the second one herself. The third time, she cancelled her bankcard by phone and put dinner on.

We sat at an outdoor wrought-iron table with Kyle and his older sister Chelsea. A trellis of stiff metal leaves and branches bridged

the gap between us. Pale blue lights shined from both ends of her swimming pool, the surface undulating in the night breeze, casting the backyard and the brick house in an eerie incandescence easier felt than seen.

Chelsea twisted a lock of blond hair around her thin finger and smiled at me. "I haven't seen you since you moved." Her voice was too sweet, condescendingly sweet, like my age rendered me innocent by default. She was older than us by several years, which once made her seem like she was from a different world, not quite an adult, but close. But this illusion had faded away. Track marks pocked her arms, not up and down them like I'd seen on the corner whores, but the beginnings, enough to be lines and not dots. Enough to be clear on where things were headed. "You used to be in Kyle's grade, right?" she said, as if I were no longer in school, which wasn't that far off the mark, but she didn't know that.

"I was," I said, guiltily. "I might get held back this year."

"I flunked out of TCC. Fuck 'em, right?" She kept twisting at her hair, a nervous tick. Sweat beaded her brow. Conversation was just a nicety, an unnecessary one really as Stanton would be ready to go as soon as we saw cash. "Where do y'all go to school now?" she asked.

"Dunbar," Stanton said, garnering no recognition. "It's on the Southside," he added, in a smooth cool-guy voice.

Chelsea nodded like that was something to take in. The only thing people like Chelsea Gilbert knew about Southside was that it was where you scored. Forget about all the burnt-out corner niggers—as white kids called them, as Stanton used to—shouting apocalyptic scripture at signposts. Forget about the ironclad windows, the whores, the food stamps. Forget about the dope houses, the people living in them, the people dying in them. Southside was just where you scored at, a quick task if all went well. Get in, get out.

"You get high?" Kyle asked me, tapping the underside of his forearm with two fingers.

I exchanged an awkward glance with Stanton. He had guilt in his eyes for bringing me here to see Kyle like this, only the slightest hint of guilt, but it was there. He turned away, and when he looked back his face was blank.

"Not really," I said.

"Oh, well, that's cool," Kyle said slowly, like maybe he didn't believe me. When we were little we used to play two-touch football and G.I. Joes in the park up the street. And now I was here with my brother, selling him heroin. Or at least I was here while my brother sold him heroin.

Stanton pulled out four caps and held them out on his palm. "We got to roll."

Chelsea traced an iron branch with her finger. Kyle snorted, wiped his nose on his sleeve. His eyes were watery and his pupils skittered a little bit, one a little slower than the other. "We're a little short."

"How short?" Stanton asked.

"Only twenty," Chelsea said, again spooling her hair. "But I'm good for it, you know. I'm always good for it." The way she said it, with slight hesitation, a sideways glance, there was no mistaking what she meant.

Stanton hesitated. I got up and walked over to the pool, took a seat Indian-style on the diving board. I knew everyone was staring at me, which just made my face burn red.

"Twenty is fine," Stanton finally told Chelsea. There was another pause and I knew he was motioning at me. "Y'all can get it to me next time."

On the way home, we hit traffic on the north side. Stanton pulled off the highway to bypass the backup, but even the frontage road was bumper to bumper. We crept past an endless strip of twenty-four-hour taco joints and Catholic churches. Fort Worth was very much segregated. Mexicans on the north side, blacks on the south, whites sandwiched in between, scurrying across Sundance Square with their lattes and briefcases and concert tickets. We weren't those kinds of white people though, not anymore. A year in Stop Six and I'd given up on school and Stanton had taken to slinging dope, changes that seemed about as natural as sitting in your lawn with a sawed-off shotgun, absurd but practical. Expected.

Huge floodlamps shaped like globes shined like beacons where the traffic ended on the highway. Rubberneckers caused even the frontage road to back up. At two miles an hour, we passed a flipped semi sitting on top of a Camaro, blood on both windshields.

"Jesus, that's fucked up. Would you look at that, Jeremy?"

I turned away. "I don't want to fucking look at it." My voice had come out a snarl.

"What's your problem?"

"Would you just shut up and drive?"

"Well, I'm sort of trying," he said, gesturing at the car in front of us with his hands.

"Just don't bring me on anymore of your runs, okay? Just don't ask me to come."

Stanton stared vacantly at the dash for a moment. "Is this about Kyle? You didn't know he's been doping? Sister got him into it."

"Yeah, well, you didn't exactly help things, did you?"

We passed the wrecked semi. Just ahead of it, another floodlamp illuminated a pickup torn in two against a concrete support beam supporting the 820 overpass. Paramedics were trying to cut a man out of the wreckage but they had to pry back the torn metal that had wrapped itself around him. He was all blood. It brought back images of the twins in the trunk.

"You think Kyle's a victim or something? I didn't do nothing to him. They're fucking junkies. All I did is fix him like he wanted."

"What about his sister?" I said. "You were gonna fix her too, right? If I wasn't there?"

"What if I was? I like pussy. You ever heard of it?" He put the radio back on and cranked it up till the speakers rattled and we couldn't have talked had we even wanted to.

We passed the wreck, neither of us rubbernecking by this point, and pulled back onto the highway, lighter on traffic than usual now that the wreck was behind us, holding everyone else up. When we came to the Texaco where people always stopped to shoot up on their way out of Fort Worth, Stanton pulled over. I bought a Coke with leftover pocket change while Stanton pumped gas with Ciara's money. He paid the cashier through a slit in a reinforced glass encasement.

By the time we got home, Mom had gone to bed and Ron to work. Stanton killed the engine and collected the caps still in the nook in the driver-side door. "I was just hooking them up. They were gonna score somewhere," he said. "Sorry I brought you," he added.

"It's whatever," I said. I went and sat on the porch, not even totally sure what exactly had made me so mad. Kyle does dope, so what? His sister whores herself. What's it to me?

I lingered on the porch after Stanton went in. The steady pulse of the neighborhood moved through the air. Our street, itself, was quiet

at night, but that just made the city seem louder. Cars pulling off the highway, honking and revving. The steady boom-uh-boom-uh from the sketchy reggae club on Rosedale, more of a feeling than a sound at this distance, but always discernable. White kids blasting commercial gangsta rap while cruising the backstreets for some corner nigger to hustle them dope. Some of those kids were daily visitors, but they had no idea. No idea what they were buying into at five dollars a rock, ten dollars a shot, not the faintest clue. They might pay with the rest of their lives and still have no sense of it all.

Across the street, the police tape was still up, but otherwise it looked like it had before the murders. People would soon forget what had happened there. They'd already consciously begun pushing it out of mind, just like Mom. The twins would fade into a ghost story, some article in a discarded newspaper. Before long, there'd be kids tearing the boards off the windows again, trampling out paths on forgotten sacred ground.

I crossed the street and kicked at the gravel in the Shack's driveway as if searching for something. Circling around back I found a busted A/C unit long since stripped for copper. I climbed on top of it and hoisted myself onto the roof. The aluminum sunk beneath my weight and popped loudly back into place with every foot raised. My bedroom light was still on across the street, bars of light between the drawn blinds, alternating dark light dark light. I turned in a slow circle, able to see the whole neighborhood from here, all the ramshackle houses blending together in every direction. I could see the Baylor where Ron worked, the chains of headlights moving down the freeways that quarantined Stop Six with their concrete barriers and chain-link fencing. I could see the gravel driveway below me, the neon bar lights burning on the other side of Rosedale, the Fort Worth skyline backdropping it all, a rich tapestry of lighting rising high into the night sky. It felt like questioning God, like blasphemy, standing up on that roof and looking out at that brilliant skyline of office buildings and condominiums and nightclubs and asking myself how a handful of miles could make such a difference. A view like that, a feeling so humbling it rides over your whole body in oppressive waves, it's enough to make you slump down, quiet and still.