

Bloodlines

“The police are on their way,” John said to Mara, hanging up the phone.

He flushed with shame, imagining the officers arriving and setting foot smack dab in the middle of his shitty parenting. John felt claustrophobic in this motel room, with its ancient yellowed lamp shades and decades of cigarette smoke coating the wallpaper. If only the symphony of struggle coming from the air-conditioner in the corner could overpower the voice in his head telling him how all of this was his fault, he could forgive it for failing to cover the penetrating smell of mold settled into the heavy carpet from decades of the Florida heat. He’d seen countless prostitutes and addicts arrested or chalk-lined in rooms just like this one in serial dramas, on a black-box television just like this one mounted to the wall, a blind sentinel reporting to a lazy commander with no real capacity for response, military or otherwise. Stepping into the room felt like the poverty-line made manifest, a cliff edge he had allowed his family to fall from while he watched.

He joined Mara as she sulked, sitting at the bistro table on the patio adjoining their room. She had picked up a stone from the bed of river rock and was rolling it between her palms, its grey-brown coolness a transitory relief from the heat. She rubbed it along her temples, drops of sweat forming a growing stain across its oblong roundness.

As he sat he noticed the table was aslant, a defect in its manufacture. He sucked his teeth and resisted a reflexive urge to upright it and examine its legs.

“I can’t stop thinking about what the kids might be going though out there,” he said, fishing for comfort and hooking nothing.

Mara’s continued silence irritated him. He watched as she clawed several more stones from the bed, lining them up by size, in duck fashion, on the table. He launched from his chair to pace, wanting to be in motion, and noting the table wobbling at the force of his lift-off and the sound of the hollow clunks from the unsettled stones.

“I won’t be able to live with myself if something bad happens to them.”

A Cerulean Warbler announced itself on a nearby fig tree branch.

“Hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst,” Mara said, finally. “I don’t know why you think they were kidnapped. I think they took off on their own. My guess is they left right after

you did this morning for the interview. The way those kids eat our cupboards bare at home, I bet they were hungry, impossible as that should be. I know I am. Damned jackals. They're so fast, I only get the fucking scraps."

Mara watched John absorb the blame. "Hell, I'm jealous. Maybe they're better off. They definitely will be better off if those tight-assed good old boy union carpenters don't let you in on that job."

Mara plucked another stone from the landscape and tossed it in the direction of the bird, a clear miss but a clear enough intention. A haughty flutter of flapping wings was the bird's only response as it made off to spend its day without Mara's interference so it could offer its song to a more accommodating audience.

John paused to watch the bird disappear. "I don't care about the job right now."

"You not caring about a job is what created this situation!"

John sighed, the gravity of his heavy heart pulling him to sit down again.

"I know they're not your kids. Yes, Hunter eats a lot, and there's sometimes not enough to go around. And I know Gwen drives you crazy, but they need us."

"They need an endless supply of food, is what they need," Mara said, chucking the stones across the lawn and into the hedges. "They took the last of the bread with them and left nothing for us! Selfish brats until the end!"

John's gaze followed the trajectory of the displaced stones and remained with them where they landed for a long time.

"Hunter will look after his sister, I know he will. And Gwen stays calm in a crisis."

He bent over in his chair to inspect the table's legs. Mara kicked the table and took her own turn at pacing, her version a furious staccato variation on John's metronomic but legato nervousness. Undeterred in his need for distraction, John turned the table upside-down to determine which leg needed shaving to restore its balance.

Mara froze suddenly, transfixed by the images skirting across the silent screen of the television, visible through the window pane. Without another word she silently rushed into the hotel room, grabbed her purse, and fled through the door.

The screech of tires and gravel that followed was what roused John from his ministrations. Right there on the screen were his very own living children, on the television news, being led from a police cruiser and surrounded by reporters jamming a bouquet of microphones into their beautiful, bloodied faces.