
Hustle

by Jason Skipper

I can see my breath in this Texas morning where the sunlight's layered in orange, purple, and green like watercolors brushed across the pale blue sky. The ground is still wet outside my father's from last night's rainfall. I slide a large plastic cooler across the backyard, gripping one of the thick handles, pulling with my knees bent. Shrimp jostle around inside the cooler; the day is early and the ice is still solid. The time is eight or so on Sunday morning. I wasn't supposed to work today. But my father's sick as ever, his nerves shot to hell. He called me away from my friend's house after sunrise. I suspect he didn't sleep last night, that he sat up waiting until he figured the time was right.

I smell grease in the steam that comes from the back door of the house. From frying eggs, bacon, and the hamburger patty that my father, Wrendon, is cooking for me to eat for lunch today. I can picture the food, smell it, but not taste it and my stomach grumbles. I am tired and hungry, and before I know it the cooler catches along a corner of the porch; I pull too hard too quickly to get it moving again and the whole thing topples. The lid opens. Fifty pounds of shrimp and ice roll out on the ground. The small pink bodies are now speckled with dirt and grass. I step back and put my hands on my hips and say, Shit. Wren is suddenly there in the doorway. He wears faded Wranglers, a three-button collar shirt, a cap that's too big for his head. His shoulder is pressed against the screen door to hold it open. He holds a large iron skillet from which steam rises. A year ago he would have freaked out from me doing this, would have run into the yard and started pointing at the mess. But not today. Today he says Uh-oh and smiles in a playful way. Then he turns and goes back in, letting the screen door close behind him.

After the shrimp have been picked up, set into a different cooler, hosed down, drained, and set back clean in with the old shrimp, I grab the two sides of the cooler, bend over, then lift it to my chest. I place it in the van beside the other two coolers. Only when the pain jabs my spine like an icepick do I remember to lift with my legs and not my back. I jump in the van and check underneath the cabinets to see if we have the two extra things we sell: shellers and crab boil. We do. I clean my hands on the knees of my jeans, cross the porch, and hop over the steps. I wipe my feet, then open the door. Wren's standing at the stove. He points with a fork to a plate of eggs, bacon, and grits on the countertop. That's yours, he says. Sit down and eat. I run my hands underneath the kitchen faucet, pick up the plate,

and cross the floor. I sit down at the kitchen table and start shoveling food in my mouth, barely tasting anything aside from butter because the smell of disinfectant is still thick on my fingers. Through the screen door I can see the white van in the backyard, its doors still wide open, the three coolers side-by-side. Right now it smells of pine cleaner and soap. Later it will reek of warm shrimp and stale water.

I'm wishing I could have stayed gone this morning and that I could have slept in. I'm wishing I didn't have to do this any more. But I have to take my father into account. There are his elbows, his arms, his bony hips, and I think of the forty pounds he's dropped this year because of treatments. The only thing paying his bills is this business, and the only thing shutting us down would be the Health Department; if they checked in on us, there's no way we'd meet their standards. The last time they shut us down was three years ago, and we busted ass installing things like cabinets and sinks and running water. We laid linoleum on the floor and had to buy all new coolers. Because of his health, there's not a snowball's chance in hell we could pull off that sort of overhaul right now. We can hardly handle things like leaks in coolers and cracks in the scales. It's clean as a whistle, though. We make sure of that at the start of each weekend before we even consider heading out.

After a few bites my stomach starts to settle, and I notice the sun has risen further over the truck, past the backyard where there's the shed and the garden. I think to myself that maybe I'll sell out early, come home quick, and make an easy day of this. I'll probably only make twenty-five or thirty bucks, though. I swallow the food and take another bite. My fingers are still pink and burning from the cold ice, but I'm used to this and try not to take much notice.

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Two years have passed since Wrendon and my mother, Emily, split up. I've been living with him and Loren since July. I moved in twelve hours after I packed my duffel bag in the middle of the night, grabbed my Gibson SG copy, and left my mother and her husband's house at one in the morning. My jaws no longer ached from my teeth grinding. I never looked back once my feet started moving. I walked thirteen miles through grassy back-road ditches beneath an audience of stars to get here.

Wren and Loren's place is average sized for Burleson, Texas: a single-wide on an acre of land with a couple modular sections set on either side. Oak and pine trees are planted throughout the yard. Behind the shed out back is a garden with tomato plants, some squash, some cucumber, and three marijuana plants that almost reach my waist, planted dead center of the tomatoes. Wren's joked about it a couple times, but I won't touch the stuff. The

smell's almost as bad as that of boiled shrimp. I won't tell him I think dope is for white trash because I know it eases the cramps and headaches that come with chemo.

Loren's all right. She's like my mother in looks, somewhat heavysset with dyed blonde hair and brown eyes. She laughs louder than my mother, which isn't a quality trait. She doesn't fawn. I can tell she feels imposed upon with me here, but Wren is sick and sometimes a handful. I make his life easier by being around--that's what she says. Throughout the week, I help her keep the house straightened up and lend a hand to my father in the yard when he needs it. Every other weekend I switch off selling shrimp by the roadside with Wren unless he's not up to it. Then I take over so he can do his thing, canceling whatever I've got going on.

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Today I will remember, in part, for my clumsiness. After dealing with this customer for something like ten minutes, trying to wheel and deal and get him the hell out of here, I manage to extend his stay a little longer by spilling shrimp from the hanging scales with my elbow. I've done this three times in my life, and, in those instances, I'd been forewarned by the sound of the shrimp sliding along the metal. This time the cold water gets to me first. It, the shaved ice, and limp bodies pour down my back until finally slapping to the coolertops and floor of the van. Some scatter across the counter and rest in the metal sinks. The water adheres my shirt to my back, and some of the shrimp cling to me with their whiskers.

The jerk who's been standing on the ground in front of the coolers, wearing these mirror glasses and grinning with these huge teeth, throws up his hands and says, Ahh, shit man. I ain't paying for them things. He waves a pointing finger at what's scattered about. Cars zip by on the highway behind him. The sky is clear except for sparse, cottony clouds. The sunlight's so bright it reflects off everything, even the black pavement of the street and the gravel beside it. Across the road from the van is an open field of high grass, sunflowers, and bluebonnets.

I shake my head and say, I know, my friend. I wouldn't do that to you.

You couldn't, he says.

I give him one of my looks, but keep my trap shut. Always let the customer have the last word, especially after you've just made a jackass of yourself. Turning back to the cooler before he can say more, I dig my hands into the icy brown water again. You have to go straight in with fingers loose, reaching deep for the cooler bottom, then clasp them together like a tractor's claw pulling what you need together. If you press too hard the serrated prongs on their heads will jab like splinters into your fingers. I've been doing this three years now--since I turned twelve--and know instinctively

how five pounds feels. Better to end up with more than necessary at first, it's easier to dump some back than stick your hands in again. Sometimes it's best to convince yourself that only the bones in your fingers exist--no muscles, no nerves, no feeling at all.

The guy stands on his tiptoes and looks up at the scale, making sure I'm not screwing him over.

I tell him that I tossed in a few extra.

It's just those heads, he says, and all that ice.

I tip the scale slightly to give him a better view. I ask him, How much ice do you see in there?

He flashes me those choppers again, saying we're all right.

Once weighed, I empty the shrimp into a small, white garbage bag. I spin it, then wrap the bag inside itself, twirl it again, and snap a brown sack open behind me. I slip the bag in, roll the sack end-over-end, and put a tab of white masking tape over the edge. I wipe my right hand across the thigh of my jeans and pull a Sharpie from my pocket. I press my forearm along the bundle. Moisture presses at the creases. I spell out "Saxton's Fresh Seafood" in thick curvy letters that end in pointed wisps. To me, this is clockwork, but Dad calls it flair. Says it helps to bring back the business.

I ask him if he needs a sheller for the shrimp. I hold one up; it's red and hard plastic with one end pointed and the other large for gripping. It's supposed to look like a shrimp. I show him how they work by deadheading a jumbo and putting the pointed end in the center of its tail. Gripping the shrimp, I run the little tool through its body, along the single vein that runs through its center. When the pointed end pokes out, I grip the shrimp tighter and twist the larger end of the sheller. It pries the shrimp apart down the middle, removes its legs and tail and skin. I dangle what remains for him to see. Only seven bucks, I tell him. And it'll last a lifetime.

Don't need one, he says. But can you cut me a deal on that crab boil? That's what I'm doing with them.

I have to push my smile back. Sure, I tell him. \$4.00?

He counts the extra from his wallet and hands me twenty-five dollars. He starts walking away. Have fun cleaning that shit up, he says, laughing.

Sure thing, asshole. I laugh with him, but I can feel my ears turning red. No big deal; I'd like to see him after he cooks them. Shrimp that size taste like a tire if you boil them. I turn around and write the sale in the spiral notebook: 3 lbs for \$20.00. It's the sale we have on the 21-25's. Otherwise, they are \$7.50 a pound. The 48-50's go for \$4.99 or 5 lbs for \$20.00. The 8-12's are \$8.99. I open the register and slide the twenty beneath the cash drawer. The ones go into the slot with the others. The fifties and hundreds stay in my hip pocket. I toss the sheller up to the dashboard. The guy waves

good-bye as he drives onto the highway.

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Around his buddies at the bar, my dad calls me Hustles. It's a pretty stupid name, but I know what it means, that I always take care of business and can hold my own when it comes to talking and pushing these shrimp. Say they're five days old and we've had to bleach them because they look bad. I won't hesitate to look you right in the eye and say, We drove these up this morning. Straight off the boats down in Galveston.

Or else, Sure you can butterfly these popcorn shrimp. Fry 'em on up. They'll taste better than any Jumbo. But I've also got these Tiger shrimp that I've been hiding for someone special.

I'll say, Listen up. I'm damn near giving these away to you. But only now. This second. You can take it or you can leave it.

Eight out of ten times you'll reach for your wallet. Unless you're some cheapskate who stopped just to bother me.

It's important we sell out before Sunday evening, otherwise we have to throw out what's left. On weekends, we set up outside a flea market in Grand Prairie. My dad sometimes works by a car lot on Fridays, and on Thursdays, we send someone south to get the shrimp. We do business with a guy down there whose dogs live off fish guts and squid that fish sorters toss on the docks. The man dealt with my grandpa when he ran the truck, but now deals with Wrendon since my grandfather, Buddy, passed away.

Buddy was the one to start me out with this. In those days we'd clear a thousand bucks per weekend. That's when shrimp cost half what we pay now. And believe me, Buddy could shoot the shit. Most of my hustle I took from him. He used to sit there while women of all ages brought him fruit pies, cakes, fried chicken, whatever. He would tell me to hold down the fort and tell the lady thanks for my dinner. Then he'd split for an hour or so. That gave me practice. Back then it was cool. I was just this little kid trying to talk big.

The best thing these days is closing that last sale on Sunday. Sometimes, when I'm really busy, time flies and the day's done before I know it. Often, the cars line up five and six deep. That's when I've really got to get in gear. I don't even have to talk too much at those times; one guy's opinion is as good as the next. Money's not bad, I get fifty cents per pound even on the small ones. In a weekend, I can clear eighty dollars, more dough than any other fifteen year-old that I know. Still, most of my friends are getting jobs sacking groceries or working at some place in the mall. I keep pressuring Wren to maybe hire outside help, especially for weekends like this when I've got plans. He wants to know why I'd work for someone else when out here I can be my own boss.

Wren says his nerves are bad. I know he's spending most of his time at the bar. He tells me as soon as the chemo lets up, as soon as the cancer goes into remission, we can start talking about me getting another job. Right now, he tells me, money's just too tight.

Lay off those cigarettes, I tell him. Steer clear of those beer joints. Someday, he says. But don't order me around.

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Everything happens in three's, Buddy'd say. When my grandfather died of emphysema, Wren stayed distant from everyone for a while. He started knocking back the hard stuff. Then came Loren. When my mother found out, she changed the locks on the doors of our house. Usually, my father's the one laying out guilt trips, but somehow she managed to pull a real fast one. Just after that, the doctors found his throat cancer. Talk about timing. No one could have predicted it.

Months passed and the radiation treatment didn't work. It burned Wren's saliva glands so that he can barely swallow; he has to spray down his mouth with saline before eating. Now they're trying chemo and hopefully it'll work. But it's taken away his hair, made him skinnier than ever. If this doesn't fix it, there's the last ditch operation to remove his larynx. My father's proud of his voice. He says it's how he makes his living. I've seen people who've had this surgery done, and they speak through their noses. Their mouths are shaped like O's. Their chins look collapsed.

Wren's said to me while gesturing at his throat: Just imagine. Your voice. One day here. The next day gone.

During the radiation, I still lived with my mother, but since then I've moved in with Wren. He and my step-father have different ways of dealing with me, particularly when my mouth gets out of hand. I don't know. Maybe if I'd been raised by him, I wouldn't really notice, but I wasn't and things turned all fucked-up in the year I stayed there. I don't blame her because she never raised a hand to me. But she never really came between me and one either. I won't go on about it. Everyone's got options. I'm not an idiot. I picked mine. The morning that I showed up on Wren's doorstep, we sat outside and drank coffee and watched the sun rise. He said, Your mother just called. I told her you were here. And safe.

Next time she calls, I said, taking a sip of coffee, tell her I'm not going back.

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Around 4 p.m. she pulls up, a convertible LeBaron. Black. Needs washing. She's got black hair feathered across her head. She's wearing a red blouse, black jacket, black skirt, black pumps. Probably just getting back from church. She comes up to the van, barely making it across the gravel in

those shoes. I smile. I start to give her the spiel. She tips her glasses down her nose, looks up at me and, between smacks of gum, asks, Where do you go when you need to use the restroom?

Excuse me?

That's what I thought, she says. She pushes her glasses back up her face and taps one of the coolers. Stick tight, she says.

It's the Health Department.

I look around the van to see if there's anything I need to adjust or fix up. Some of the shrimp that fell earlier are dried out on the floor. The weighing scale's face is cracked. The page where I mark down sales is hard from placing my wet hand against it. The running water's broke. Coolers are in bad shape. There's nothing I can do about any of this right now. I leap to the glove box and dig for our permits, then sit on the roughest looking cooler.

She returns and tells me to open the rear doors. She walks around, I open them, and she steps into the van with a clipboard and checklist. I feel torn between wanting to welcome her and wanting to shove her out. She wants to see permits, and I show her what I've got. She examines them and says, You've got one here for Texas, but not Grand Prairie. Where's your permit for this area?

I tell her Texas means Texas, all inclusive. This line has worked before. Just play the quick-to-shrug, ignorant kid.

She shakes her head and says, Yeah, right.

I almost smile with her.

She starts at the front of the van where I normally sit. First, she looks at my laid out homework, my Geometry. For a second, I think she's going to tell me which ones are wrong. She notes the grease-stained paper bag which held my lunch. She goes through the van, moving things with the tip of her pen. First the trash bags, then Ziplocs and brown paper sacks. She measures the scales and makes note of the face. She sticks thermometers in the coolers and turns some of the shrimp in her palm. She yanks up their heads and peels at their skins. She asks me about the lines running up their middles. I tell her it's a vein, not what she thinks it is, and besides, people can buy one of the tools if it irks them.

She says, Oh, and throws the shrimp back in the cooler with the others.

Some of these look as though they've been dropped on the ground, she says. And, either way, those things are at least three days old.

No, they're not, I tell her. In a really weak voice that may as well have said, I guess so, maybe.

The longer she stays the dirtier things seem. The floor is layered with a sticky brown film, and whiskers of dead shrimp bang from the scales. The thirty-gallon coolers sit faded burnt-orange and most of their drain plugs

are corked with plastic baggies. The makeshift brown cabinets of plywood and screws are splintered and warped beneath the strain of the sinks. There is no running hot water to clean my hands.

She asks how often I mop the floors. Where do I keep the drained dirty water? Again, where do I go when I need to use the restroom?

I want to hustle her, but my head's too cluttered. I wonder what would happen if she shut us down, if it would get me out of this and help my father to start helping himself out more. I can't think and say the right words without stammering. I respond to each question with a half-hearted lie. Part of me is wondering how Wren and I will make the bills, while the other part is thinking of all the weekends I've spent doing this.

I tell her, Sure, on a normal day my dad would be here. But you see he's got chemotherapy in the morning. I'm out alone today. The pump on the sinks broke an hour ago. I've used towelettes to clean my hands since then. I change the ice regularly--two or three times this morning. I drain the old water into large plastic jugs that we give to a neighbor with a squash and tomato garden. You could call and ask her yourself, if I had the number. I close up shop when I need to take restroom breaks. I walk to the 7-11 up the street.

All the while, I feel an urge to yank the whiskers from the scales or else scrub the floors right there in front of her.

She closes the cabinet doors beneath the sink. For the first time since entering the van, she shuts up. She settles down on one of the coolertops beside me. A warm feeling threads through my stomach, in my chest, up my neck.

Shut the doors, she says. She holds out her hand. In her palm are two small pellets, the sort I've seen only in Wren's shed or behind the fridge, but never in the van.

You've got rodent problems, she says. This van is a mess and you don't have the permits to set up in this county. I'm shutting you down. You won't sell here again. Not after the city sees my reports.

I look at her hand thinking I'm going to get sick. I feel a rush to do a million things or say all the right words right now, no more messing around.

Go ahead and start packing up, she says. I need to make some phone calls. She takes a cell phone from her purse and goes outside. She paces in front of the van as I pack up my signs. At one point, a brand new Mustang rolls up. Inside, there is a man with a boy of about ten, maybe a little older. They are sitting side-by-side wearing matching shirts and sunglasses. The gold wire frames make the kid's face look tiny. When the man reaches over his son to roll down his window, the lady walks over to the car and leans over.

This truck has been condemned, she says. Health code violations. There's a store down the street if you are interested in seafood.

The son looks up at me, squinting his nose so the glasses won't slip. The man waves to the woman and she waves back. I feel like I'm watching all of this from far away; it's got everything and nothing to do with me right now. Before she goes she says, I don't expect to see your truck here again, okay? The next time you park here, I'll confiscate the goods and have your truck towed. Show your father all those papers that I gave to you. Each of those citations is worth a ticket. He needs to call tomorrow morning to find out how much he owes.

I go ahead and tell her: Look, my father should have noticed that stuff yesterday morning. I'd never have let that slip.

She says, Take care of yourself, Chris.

This is the first time all day that anyone's said my name. She must have seen it when she was looking at my homework.

She hands me a card. I read the name. Rebekah Clark.

I close the doors of the van. I sit down on the cabinet, rest my feet on the coolers. There's only the sound of cars passing by. The only light is that filtering through the windows. Not much of it reaches the floor. The linoleum is yellow with diamonds of beige and dark brown. I remember picking that out with Wren just a year ago. Beneath it lies a sheet of three-ply pine that he and I measured and cut and fit into the van. Beneath that is white corrugated metal. The van started out as "business expansion," something my father purchased when he actually owned a seafood store years ago. Right here on this floor is where I've followed both him and my grandfather around, trying to learn how to talk as well as they could. Here's where they've told me a million times to speak up, to pick my words wisely, to not give the customer a second to even think; to tell them what they want to hear, confirm what belief they have. If they think you believe with them, they will trust you. Right here's where I let the moment get the better part of me.

The van shudders in the wake of a passing semi's moan. I still need to call my father and tell him what's happened.

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Wren looks nervous when he arrives. He steps out of Loren's Nova and tells her it's all right, she can head on home. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and steers me toward the van. Get inside, he says.

I climb into the passenger's seat. He doesn't start the engine. Instead, he grips the steering wheel and glares ahead. I'm not mad at you, he says. You should know that. But you've got to tell me, for the business's sake, exactly what that woman asked you.

I can't remember everything, I tell him. She looked at the coolers and looked at the shrimp. Then she said she found mice stuff underneath the sink. That's when she said to shut the doors. I hand him the copy of the checklist.

Mice stuff? He turns to me. What do you mean?

That wasn't the only thing, I say, pointing to the list.

Wren pulls it away from me. What did she find in here?

Droppings, I say. Something about rodent problems.

Rat turds? he says. Speak up now dammit. This woman told you she found rat turds in the van?

I don't respond just yet. It's that word that makes me feel every bit of grime and stench that covers the van. I want to yell at him every time he says it, but I think that if I talk I'm going to start bawling. I don't want that. Not now, not here.

Still, he keeps on. What did she ask you? What did you tell her? Answer me when I talk to you.

Finally, staring down at the floorboard, I say, Stop it. There was nothing I could do. Not without you here. You should have seen that stuff on the floor yesterday morning.

He shakes his head. Five years, he says. Down the motherfucking tubes. That's just not smart thinking.

In silence we drive the fifteen minutes to the beer-joint called Greener Acres where Wren's been all day. I sit by myself at a booth in the back beside the two pool tables. Layers of cigarette smoke sway inches above the carpet. Women playing cards argue with men at the bar over the volume of their yelling. My father is amongst these men watching the Cowboys on a television set in a corner above the bar beside the liquor bottles and large mirror. This cocktail waitress sometimes strolls over to give me an order to fill in the van.

At one point, I come back to a plate of plain Lays and barbecued brisket. I chew the sandwich slowly, taking large gulps. A bleach-blonde woman I've never seen before is shooting pool with this obnoxious guy. She thinks it's funny to wink a caked-blue eye at me.

At one point she says to me: You're gonna be so handsome some day.

Her boyfriend looks at me and smiles. Spots of dip dot his gum line. He says, Why that's old Fishhead's boy.

My father looks over, then back at the television.

I notice the bread from the sandwich is wet with some of the shrimp water. I throw it down on the plate and spit my food into a napkin. I walk across the dance floor and enter the men's restroom. It smells like old urine, but luckily no one is inside. I run hot water into the sink until steam rises. I

clean my hands and avoid my reflection. I think to myself, Now this fucking sucks. I lift the receiver from the payphone by the condom machine and start shoving buttons.

In the background, I can hear my step-dad. You hang up that phone, he says. Tell him to call back from his dad's at a decent hour.

My mother whispers it's late and now the dogs are awake. Her voice is soft and hurried. She's probably cupping the receiver. Her eyes, I would bet, are as scattered as her voice, looking at him next to her, the ceiling, then the phone. She asks me to hang on. I hear the screen door slam. The dogs' barking grows distant. She picks up a separate phone, probably in the living room. I grow nervous that he might be listening in their bedroom.

I really want her nothing-but-complaints tone of voice when I ask how work is going, but she whispers, Just fine. Real quick. How are you?

Real quick. I want to tell her how my back aches from lifting heavy coolers all day. About this stupid woman in the bar who keeps staring at me. I ruined the business today. Down the motherfucking tubes. I don't think I meant to. Either way, it's gone now because I didn't talk fast enough, soon enough. I fucked up. Everything. I have no idea how we're gonna make the bills. Dad won't take me home. He's saying we've got to sell the rest of these shrimp.

Fine, I say. Had a run-in with the health department today. That's all.

Yeah, but knowing Wren, she says, he'll have you back out in that van by next weekend.

I say, I don't think so. Not this time.

She says, Look. Are you sure this is what you want? I mean, I know things weren't easy here with Davis and all, but we've been talking and he's agreed to ease up. You have to understand. He's just not used to having kids around. You just have to try and be patient with each other.

The bedroom phone picks up. Davis starts in. He says, This business of collect calls at ten o'clock is bullshit.

I miss you, Hon', she says. Next time, try to call from your dad's. Okay?

Sure, I say.

Davis hangs up his line.

She says goodnight and hangs up hers.

I replace the receiver and turn around to see Wren leaning against the bathroom door. He asks, Who are you calling at this time of night?

I shrug and say, Nobody. Just time and temperature.

He takes me by the elbow and walks me through the bar. I feel a whirl of caked eyelids, football calls, and smoke around me. We head out the door, into the cool night air, through the parking lot, behind the van. He places both of his hands on my shoulders and kneels in front of me.

I've raised you to be the type of person, he says, that can talk straight with folks. The type of person who handles his own problems. Now, you're your own boss. I can't make you do anything, including help out with this business and my treatments. But you will hear me out on this. You came to me, remember?

I know.

You know. So you just give the word. If you want to go back to your mother and Davis, I'll drive you myself. I'll take you there now. But you tell me right now. Decide, once and for all.

I search the dark pavement at my feet for some answer, hug myself tighter, close my eyes and shiver. I'm just tired, I tell him.

You think I don't know what you're going through these days? I went through the same thing with your grandpa not long ago. But you and I have got to stick together, Christopher.

I look him over again. There's a look to his eyes. It doesn't matter what I've got to tell him. He's all set with what he's going to say. This is his hustle, the way he wants to work. My initial response is to take his hands off me, tell him to lay off with this guilt-trip shit. Maybe then he'll get a feel for the steady frustration that I keep tucked away. But there's the cold in the air, him standing there, waiting. With his cheeks darkened in, his eyes squinted, his throat strained. His narrowed chest inside of his shirt. His ankles ill-fit at the bend in his white tennis shoes. His forearms that fit too easily in my grip, and I wonder for a moment what this must be like for him.

Because he is my father, because there is the cancer, because we're doing the best that we can for ourselves, because I want him out, I tell Wren that I'm sorry. I say it so deeply, I believe it myself. Otherwise, he won't believe me.

I tell him I should have called from the lady's cell phone, told the woman to stay. Maybe we can get the van fixed up just right, then we'll be back out running in a couple of weeks. I tell him this sort of thing won't happen again. When I speak I look him right in his blue eyes, just as he and my grandpa reminded me time and again to do. I speak from my chest and not from my mouth. Before I finish, before letting him say anything else, I tell him: This is nothing but a bump along the road. Just like everything else, we're going to get through this. We're going to be better for it. I believe almost all of it. Even if it's not what I want.

Wren grits his teeth and looks hard in my eyes. He grips my shoulders.

I look at my watch. Look, it's already 9 o'clock, I tell him. I've still got to drain out those coolers and hose the van down. I've got homework to finish.

He stands and smoothes his jeans. He eyes the door of the bar, then me.

Let me go ahead and settle up in there, he says.

I nod and walk the opposite way around the van from him. I climb in the passenger's side and sit down. The air is warm. I crack the window to let the night air in. The sound of traffic on the highway behind me comes with it. I sit there waiting, knowing he's taking his time. I reach for the spiral notebook on top of the dash so I can tally the day's sales, but I get distracted by the sheller I tossed there earlier. I take it in my right hand and stare at it for a moment. I close my left hand into a fist, as if a shrimp's in there. I close it tight and I place the pointed end of the sheller to the right side, against the very small hole in the center of my hand. I push the pointed end in and attempt to keep my grip. It stays until I turn the handle, at which point the edges pull at the folds in my skin until it hurts too much to keep my fist tightened. My hand opens up, I stare down at the little lines, at the small red creases from where I gripped the sheller, and the red spots from where the tool had pulled against my hand.