

HOMECOMING

Belle Boggs

When Marcus's mother and her boyfriend and just about everybody they knew were put in jail for possession and conspiracy to distribute cocaine, Marcus went to live with his aunt for a while. Marcus was sixteen, a hurdler and sprinter on the track team at Boys and Girls, a solid B student. A good boy, everyone said. Even as a baby, his mama liked to say, he wasn't any trouble. He cried so little that she would forget all about him.

His aunt Tiff was twenty-two and good-hearted, but no one could say that she was good. Ever since Marcus could remember, Tiff was always deciding between boyfriends, and the May when Marcus moved into her apartment was no exception. He came by gypsy cab on a Friday, humping his three duffel bags of clothes up the four narrow flights, Tiff chatting all the while about this one versus that one. It was an eighty-degree day, ten degrees warmer on the stairwell. Tiff walked backward on the stairs, hands free, as Marcus hauled the last bag off the landing. Marcus had left a bunch more stuff at the apartment. What would happen to it? What about his mama's stuff, and the furniture? Nobody had told him anything.

You know, Tiff said, I bet I can get you into a club.

Inside the stale-aired apartment, Marcus looked around for somewhere to sit, but the couch was piled with clothes and balled-up sheets. There were old Styrofoam take-out containers stacked on the coffee table, roaches scurrying in daylight. The windows were grimy and yellow, the screens all busted out. Marcus kept a clean room at home, did the dishes every night. Inside his duffels, every shirt and pair of pants was rolled up in a special way to prevent wrinkles. Eyeing Tiff's couch, he stacked his luggage neatly and made a seat for himself.

Papo took Mama to a lot of clubs, he said. Look how that turned out.

Tiff perched next to him and draped one long, lotion-scented arm across his shoulders. Don't worry, she said. You and me are gonna have a good time, and Briana will be home before you know it. You ever get high?

At Tiff's place, it was hard for Marcus to study or keep to his runner's schedule, and he failed two of his final exams. When they were finally put out after a big fight between Tiff and her boyfriend and another girl, it was arranged for Marcus to go down south on a Greyhound, to Virginia, where he would live with his father's mother.

"Be good," his mama said over the jail phone, the seriousness in her voice a formality more than a real warning. "Be sweet to your granny and stay out of trouble."

What trouble was there to be had in a little town—not even a town—in Virginia? In his mind he saw cows and fields, weedy ditches, long dirt driveways to nowhere.

But he promised her. The way he figured it, he was an expert at staying out of trouble.

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It was early September when Marcus arrived. School was already in session, but the air still had that sticky, sweet feeling Marcus remembered from summers a long time ago when he was a little boy. Granny lived in a white house crouched at the very back of a long dirt road. The trees that hid it were bigger now, but it had the same cinder-block steps, the same creaky porch boards. There was one bedroom, where his granny slept, and a sun porch with a foldout couch for Marcus.

Marcus spent the first few days getting reacquainted with Granny, a small, stooped woman with curly gray hair and dry, gray-brown skin. Like Marcus and his dad, she didn't talk except when she needed to. She told him the rules: No going out except on Friday or Saturday, eleven thirty curfew. No girls to the house unless she was there. He could have a job if he wanted but only on weekends and one or two afternoons a week. Keep his room clean, do homework first thing. Church on Sundays.

"Same rules I gave your father," Granny said. "Maybe they'll work this time."

Marcus's father had been in jail since Marcus was eight. He'd come out twice, both times cut short by his probation officer. You can't fight it, he'd told Marcus on those brief and painful visits.

"I blame the city for what happened to Jerome," she said quietly, after a minute. Marcus knew by "city" she was talking about his mother, Briana. She was like the city: loud and flashy and trash-talking, pretty when she took the trouble. Granny seemed to be seeing Briana before her eyes, but then she blinked heavily and looked at Marcus. "It'll be good for you here," she said.

At first it was relaxing, like a vacation. He liked the order of Granny's house, always having clean towels in the bathroom, dinner served to him at a regular time, nobody just popping by for no good reason. He cleaned up every night after supper and Granny said, "Thank you, son." He especially liked looking through old pictures she kept in two shoeboxes. They were of Jerome and Granny and a bunch of relatives he'd never met, and in no particular order. There were pictures from a cousin's wedding and from a family reunion at a park in Washington, D.C. Marcus sat on the scratchy plaid couch and shuffled through the box, looking for a picture of himself. He'd find a baby and ask, "Is that me?" and Granny would look at it and say "No, that's so-and-so." The closest he ever got to himself were the pictures of his dad when he was Marcus's age—same eyes, same chin.

But it didn't take long for Marcus to get around to missing Brooklyn. On weeknights his granny would be in bed by eight, and since the television in the living room got such poor reception Marcus would go to his room. The windows in Granny's house had no curtains or blinds, so when it was dark he got a creepy feeling, like he was being watched. There were no yellow streetlights, no sirens or car stereos, nobody calling out to anybody else outside. Just unfamiliar sounds rising and filling up the air until it sounded like they were invading the room itself. Frogs? Crickets? He couldn't tell. He'd make up his bed and lie down in it and put on his headphones and close his eyes and think about home.

The funny thing was, what he remembered was not the daily quality of his life, ordinary things like his screeching, one-stop subway ride to school, or the shiny white walls of his small room in the Brevoort Houses, or the weedy courtyard where homeless dudes sat all day with their dicks in their hands. He didn't think about the loud, profane hoochies at Boys and Girls, or how on Saturday mornings there would be glass and needles and vials and condoms all over the track. He didn't remember getting patted down by security guards at school. Instead he pictured the old mansions on Stuyvesant Avenue, with their wavy glass windows and their dark, redbrick exteriors. He remembered the prettiest girls on the track team, with their elegant

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long leg muscles. He remembered the nicest, youngest teachers, the time the coach said he had a real shot at the state championships. He remembered his one and only field trip to the Museum of Modern Art, all the crazy shit inside, and when the subway would careen out of darkness onto the Manhattan Bridge and you could see everything—the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the Chrysler Building, everything.

None of the kids he met at King William High School had ever been to New York City, so Marcus could have told them the Empire State Building was made out of Moon Pies and 50 Cent was his uncle and they would have believed him. These were kids, black and white, who hung out at *gas stations* for fun. They looked at his clothes, the spotless Enyce and Fubu and Rocawear and Nike that Papo bought him, and heard the word Brooklyn, and figured he was the reason he was down here. They figured he had done something, and the rumors started up within a week: that he was a dealer, that he saw a drug murder, that he robbed a jewelry store, that he was part Puerto Rican.

“Rumors, man,” was all Marcus would say, shaking his head and smiling, when people asked.

Marcus was in the tenth grade. He signed up for harder classes than he would have bothered with at Boys and Girls: Chemistry, English, Algebra II, Technology I, and World History. He figured with not much to distract him, he might as well see what he could do. The track team practiced only twice a week; he signed up for that. He looked in the paper for a weekend job, something to keep him out of Granny’s way on Saturdays and out of church on Sundays. He wanted a cell phone—Granny didn’t have long-distance service—so he could call his friend Khalil and tell him how boring everything was. He wanted a car, because you needed one here to have a girlfriend.

That was how he found Skinny. The ad in the paper said: “Odd jobs for local mechanic. \$8/hour. Plus you fix it, you can drive it home.”

That sounded good to Marcus.

Skinny lived on the Mattaponi Indian Reservation, just down the road from Granny but close to the river and even more remote from the two-lane main road that was all Marcus knew of the county. Secretly nervous about the reservation—he pictured teepees and feather headdresses, stony silences—Marcus had her drop him off even though she said it was walking distance. Quickly he discovered that the reservation was no different from anywhere else he’d seen in King William: trees, fields, squat little houses and trailers. All you saw when you pulled up to Skinny’s place was a row of cars—old, busted-up foreign cars on blocks: Volkswagens and Saabs and Mercedes and MGs. You could tell they had all been exceptional cars at one time, the kind of cars rich people drove, and Marcus went about picking one out—a dark-blue diesel Mercedes with primer-gray fenders—before he’d even found the house. As he got closer, he noticed that none of the cars was fixed up, not even on its way to being fixed up.

Well, he thought. At least the man knows when to ask for help.

Skinny’s house was not a regular house, with a yard and a driveway and a front door, and it took Marcus a minute to recognize it as a house at all. Behind the jumble of cars and engine blocks were three small structures, like shacks but newer, holding on tight to the edge of his narrow yard. Beyond the houses was a tree line, and beyond the trees was the river. Skinny, who was not skinny at all, came out of one of the shacks with a beer in his hand and two dogs and another guy with sunglasses and a beard. He did not seem surprised to

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see Marcus—they'd set up the appointment over the phone—and didn't look twice at Marcus's baggy jeans or clean white T-shirt.

"Can't get a permit to lay a foundation," he explained, waving his hand in the direction of the shacks. With effort Skinny propped a boot on the bumper of a trashed Saab, his great gut spilling over his belt, and Marcus stood with his hands in his jeans pockets and answered no to all of Skinny's questions about experience. He didn't ask where Marcus was from, or what grade he was in, or where he went to school.

The sunglass man stood drinking a beer and laughing, and Skinny spoke to him instead of Marcus.

"Well, Bruce, he was the only one to answer the damn ad. What do you want this job for, anyway?"

Marcus said he wanted to buy a cell phone.

"Good a reason as any, I suppose. When can you work?"

"After school, I guess, on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays. I can work any time on the weekends." Skinny thought for a minute. "What time does school let out? Hell, never mind, better make it weekends starting at nine o'clock for now."

"He's too drunk by three o'clock to work," Bruce explained.

The first time Marcus ran sprints at track practice, the coach called him over. Her name was Mrs. Stephens, wife of Jay Stephens, the football coach. She yelled for the other runners, mostly girls and skinny guys, none of them even very fast, to do a mile of laps. "Wait here, honey," she told Marcus, and then she got on her cell phone. Before long Jay Stephens was chewing on an unlit cigar and leaning on the back of his giant pickup, pulled close to the track.

"Go ahead," Mrs. Stephens said. "Run a forty for us."

When Marcus ran, there was nothing in his head. All he thought about was his body, the way it felt pushing the ground away from him. When he was a kid he ran so fast he sometimes tripped over his own legs. It had been the speed he liked best, everything a blur. He'd run down Atlantic Avenue, under the LIRR, just until the first thrilling burst of speed left him and then he'd stop, leaning over and panting hard. Now he liked the control, the way he knew just where his foot would go down to push against the track, the way the force and effort of running traveled up the muscles of his legs and into his abdomen and shoulders and arms, ending in his hands. His fingers curled loosely around this ball of energy, and when he was done he shook them out, releasing it. He trotted back and lifted his chin at the coach, hardly out of breath.

"You ever play football?" Jay Stephens asked.

Marcus shook his head.

"Well, you're gonna play football for us," he said. He nodded at the track. "S'alright, but it ain't football, not here anyway. You'll see. Practice is every day at four"—he pointed with his cigar toward the football field—"over there."

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He didn't give Marcus a chance to say yes or no, just hopped back in his truck and drove off, a cell phone to his ear.

Marcus started to stretch for the next round of heats. "I like to run," he told Mrs. Stephens when she asked him, nervously, what he was doing. "The road I live on is too rough."

The coach paid for everything—the uniform and pads and cleats and helmet, all brand new and in the school colors, black and gold, with a C on the helmet for Cavaliers. Granny made a fuss over them when Marcus showed them off, but asked if he might want to think about quitting his job or taking an easier course load. You don't have to do everything all at once, she said.

"I'll be okay," Marcus said. He didn't say so, but it was good to have something to take his mind off his mama, whose letters were growing more and more bitter. She'd never been in jail before, and she was used to being taken care of in style. Briana had a closet full of Rocawear herself, which she bet, in letters, her sister had taken and ruined. *And to top it off Papo forgot about me*, she wrote. *I got nothin in my comisary*. Marcus had put off his cell phone plans; he figured he could send some money up to Briana and just talk on a phone card for now.

It took him a few practices to decipher the rules of football; or, more like it took a few practices for Coach Stephens to realize that Marcus had never even played a real football game before. He sat Marcus down in the locker room and explained it, drew diagrams on a yellow legal pad. They were full of circles and Xs and arrows, and Marcus nodded like he understood. "You'll get it," Coach said. "Just do what we tell you to and you'll be okay."

The first time he was tackled, in practice, was like nothing Marcus had ever experienced. His breath knocked from him, it was like he was flying, like every bit of feeling in his body was concentrated into the place where he had been hit. This is what I've been running from? Marcus thought, standing up. This was nothing. It was better than nothing. It felt *good*. He wanted to be hit again and again and again.

"Wait till they hit you for real, in a game," the coach warned. "These kids are a little scared of you."

"Yeah?" Marcus said. That part felt good too.

"Football!" Skinny cried when he told him about it one Saturday. "I didn't take you for the jock type. You any good?"

"I run fast," Marcus said. They were doing what they always did when Marcus came to work: shooting the shit. Normally they talked about fixing up Skinny's place, or which car to work on next, or the NBA. They had the hood of a green MG open to reveal its destroyed engine, a door propped open to Skinny's house, country music blaring. They were fixing it up for Skinny's son; it was going to be a belated graduation present. Marcus's job was to fetch tools and beers and cigarettes for Skinny, run errands to the Food Lion and the 7-Eleven when Skinny was too loaded. Marcus would point out that he didn't have a license and only barely knew how to drive, but Skinny always waved him off. Can't take something you don't have away from you, he'd say. *He* was one ticket away, he told Marcus, from losing his license for good.

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“I was on the track team at Boys and Girls,” Marcus offered.

“Boys and Girls? What’s that, some kinda private school shit?”

Marcus laughed. “Naw,” he said. “It’s a big public high school in Bed-Stuy. It’s got like, five thousand kids. It has a good track team,” he added.

“Bed-Stuy, huh?” Skinny leaned under the hood. “That where Biggie Smalls is from?”

“That’s the place,” Marcus said. That was the thing about Skinny: He knew more than you’d give him credit for just looking at him. “Track up there is like football down here.”

“So, what’re you doing down here then? Come to play football?”

And so for the first time Marcus told him the whole story, about his mama and Papo and the police raid. Everybody in his family who could be responsible for him had another five years before they could even think about parole. By then, Marcus said, he’d be all grown up. When he said it, it was like the first time he realized that it was true. He’d be a man the next time he saw his dad outside of jail, maybe even his mama.

Skinny shook his head. “That’s rough, man. Goddamn police.”

Skinny had had his own brushes with the law over the years. He’d been a junkie, and he’d been to jail a few times for that, plus DWI charges every now and again. Now he was clean except for the painkillers he abused for his hepatitis, and all the beer and sometimes weed. He had an ex-wife and two kids he never saw.

“They shouldn’t have got messed up with all that,” Marcus said. It felt strange, saying it. He’d never passed judgment out loud on his family before. “I mean, we had this two-bedroom apartment, we had plenty to eat. They had more without the drugs than my granny has living down here.”

It wasn’t true, but it was something he told himself. Before the drugs Marcus and Briana lived for a year in a shelter, commuting all the way to Bed-Stuy from the Bronx so Marcus could stay in his school. It took the whole year of riding trains and being late every day to get them off the waiting list and into Brevoort.

“People do all kinds of things,” Skinny said. “You can’t know why.”

Wheels weren’t the only way, after all, to get a girlfriend in King William County. Football was just as good. Being the newest player on the varsity squad was even better than that, and Marcus soon found that he had the pick of the best-looking girls at school. He chose Charlene, a short freshman with thick legs and a pretty, round face. She waited for him at the end of practice, and they walked home together. She lived less than a mile from his house, and there were dense woods in between where they could sneak off and have sex. Charlene was so sweet, she wouldn’t even let him dirty his Enyce jacket by spreading it on the ground under them.

“Use mine instead,” she would say, offering her dingy down coat.

Marcus wrote mostly about her in letters to Khalil:

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Man, it doesn't take much down here to live large. You remember me, skinny dude who ran track? Well guess what. I've got a fine girl (look at her picture) and a job fixing old Porsches and I'm already like some kind of football star and we haven't even had a real game yet. And the girl, let me tell you. We done it in the woods, in her little bedroom with her teddy bears on the bed, even in a car and I don't have a car yet! She's even smart, not some hoochie, she takes Algebra I and helps me with my Algebra II. Did I mention that she is 14 and never even had none before me?

For real, you should move down here. All the girls are like Charlene.

This last part was not true—there were plenty of dogs—but it sounded good.

The first game he played was in early October, an away game. Marcus was hit brutally at the end of most of his carries. After the game was over, he thought he'd never walk normally again, and he felt that way for days.

"You need to gain some weight, some muscle," the coach said. "Take some supplements, drink some energy shakes." He wrote out some suggestions on a notecard, even offered to drive Marcus into Mechanicsville to the GNC.

Instead Marcus went with Skinny in his truck, and Skinny even gave Marcus an advance on his paycheck so he could buy the supplements in bulk. Marcus hardly ever made trips outside of King William, and it felt good to be going fifty, sixty miles an hour on a divided highway. "Broadus's Flats," Skinny said, pointing to the wide harvested fields that stretched before them. They said little more than that until they got to the store, where Skinny made a big show of talking to the salesclerks, comparing nutritional information, and joking about Marcus's training. "Our big hope for the championships," Skinny said. "You're looking at the next T.O. right here."

They spent an hour inside the store, and it didn't occur to Marcus until later, on the way home, that Skinny had done all of that talking and label-reading to show off, that he was proud of him. His own son was older than Marcus, in college, but he didn't come around much. At home Skinny had a framed picture of him at high school graduation. He was wearing a long shiny robe and smiling. Marcus tried to remember the last time someone took his picture at home, and he couldn't.

Marcus was ten the last time his dad had been paroled. He was in the fifth grade, and his dad had picked him up early from school. Marcus didn't know that he was coming—the teacher came and got him at lunch, and he'd copied his homework without thought of doing it and packed his backpack and walked into the early afternoon with his dad. It was April and chilly.

They had gone to Coney Island on the F train. Marcus remembered that his dad couldn't keep still on the train. He kept pacing back and forth, reading and rereading the map, tracing his finger along the routes of the A, C, and F trains. When they got to Coney Island, there was a stiff cold breeze off the ocean. They sat with their backs to the wind and ate four Nathan's hot dogs each.

"Man," his dad said, shaking his head. "I missed this."

At the time Marcus didn't think about how rarely, if ever, they'd come to Coney Island. Maybe his dad came out by himself. Or maybe he had come a lot as a child. Probably he just missed the idea of Coney Island. The fact that he *could* come, the same way Marcus would later miss the Museum of Modern Art.

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“You sure must be glad to be home,” Marcus said. The hot dogs made him feel warm, excited. He started asking questions all at once about when Jerome would be coming by to see his mama, and when he would be moving back in.

Jerome held his hand up, palm facing Marcus. “Son,” he said. “Marcus. You know it ain’t like that.”

And he explained he’d probably be back in jail pretty soon, for one damn thing or another. After that they rode the Cyclone, Marcus trying to understand the whole time why it was that his dad would be going back, why parole worked like that. It was hard to think with all that up and down, the Cyclone’s short fierce run, the way it felt like it was trying to shake him off on every turn. There was no line, so Jerome gave the operator a ten and they rode it again and again, for as long as the money lasted and a little longer.

Marcus waited for his granny to go to sleep before fixing his Pro Performance mocha-flavored protein drink. She said good night and kissed his cheek, and he heard her door shut softly, her dresser open and close. After a half hour, when he heard her snoring, he poured milk into a tall, wide-mouthed Mason jar and stirred in two scoops of grayish powder. He stood at the counter and drank it slowly, steadily, looking past the uncurtained windows into the blank, black night. The taste was chalky and sweet, and he closed his eyes and imagined that new cells—stronger ones—were gathering up in his arms, his stomach, his back, and his legs.

Over the sound of his own swallowing, he heard a low rustling. He looked more closely through the window, past his own reflection at the oak branches closest to the house. There on the lowest branches were the black shapes of the biggest birds he had ever seen. He thought they might be owls, but they were silent and pointy-headed, black-feathered. He didn’t think owls looked like that.

Baby Boy,

I am writing you from jail, hoping things are going better for you than they are for me. My hearing came and went. It got postponed. I dont know why but I think its something to do with Papo’s case. Damn state lawyer hasnt been here once.

I been thinking alot—all I have time to do—and I been thinking about how when you were a baby me and your daddy liked to take you to Prospect Park to the zoo. I had a nice stroller for you, a big blue one I got almost new. We would wheel you around to look at the polar bears swimming in their pool. The sides of the pool was glass so we could sit your stroller in front of it and you could watch them diving under water, rolling around like it was a show. You loved them bears with their dirty white fur.

You know your daddy and me we loved you and we still do and we want to make things up to you. Its not right having two parents in jail but thats the way it is for now I guess. You know that I picked Papo for you dont you? I picked him so I would have somebody to take care of you, to buy you what you needed and help you get where you needed to go in life. He was so smart and strong and he took care of us. I never loved him. I guess I made the wrong choice but I made it for you.

I want you to be good, but anything you can do for me, for us, would be good too. I think if I can get a real lawyer I can beat this and we can move. I think we should move to Philly.

*Love,
Mama*

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By the end of the month, Marcus had put on five pounds and saved two hundred dollars, but it wasn't enough. The Cavaliers had lost an away game and a home game, and Marcus was benched for much of the time for worries about his knee, which he'd twisted at a game they won in Mathews County. "We got you for two more years, might as well save you for then, when you're bigger," Coach Stephens said, but sitting sidelined and costumed, Marcus felt as useless as a cheerleader, and he knew it was because he hadn't put on enough muscle. He could see, too, that Stephens was disappointed, chewing on his unlit cigar and frowning at the field. Marcus felt bad every time he looked at his shiny new helmet, his expensive pads and cleats. Then there were the letters from his mama pleading for money, protection, a lawyer. Marcus knew you couldn't get a lawyer for two hundred dollars. Charlene wasn't speaking to him, even though he'd spent forty dollars on a trip to the mall with her and Skinny. They were shopping for a birthday present for Skinny's daughter, and he hadn't counted on buying Charlene a present too. He still wanted the cell phone, and the new girl he'd been seeing wanted him to have a cell phone too, plus a hundred other things he didn't have.

Tasha Davis was a cheerleader, varsity, seventeen, twin to Wally Davis, the team's quarterback and captain. Their mama owned a popular restaurant on Route 30 and they lived in a brick split-level house with a neat green lawn and a lawn jockey painted white. School days, if Wally could be persuaded, Tasha would pick Marcus up in her mama's old Camry. Tasha always drove and teased Marcus, calling him "BK all day" and "city boy."

Those two are wild, Granny told Marcus. I remember them from when they was little.

Nah, Marcus said.

Used to drive their mama to distraction in that restaurant of hers. A nice woman, but she spoils 'em.

People change, don't they?

No, they don't.

After losing a home game at the end of October, none of his teammates felt like partying. Tasha was waiting for Marcus in her car.

"Where's Wally?" Marcus said. Normally they shared the car.

"He's mad," Tasha said. "He went home."

Tasha showed Marcus her bottle of Boone's, and they drove on a dark, snaking road Marcus had never been down. Benched again, Marcus was hardly even tired, and what little about the game he remembered disappeared when he saw where Tasha wanted to put the car: in a little gravel spot behind an old burned-down church. After a few sips of wine poured into a Dixie cup, Tasha let Marcus hold her against him in the front seat of the Camry, and he didn't give a thought to Charlene. Maybe it was because Tasha was so different: tall, light-skinned, put-together. Haughty, his granny said. But in the car she was sweet, telling Marcus how she liked him because he wasn't ignorant. Because he'd seen stuff outside of this damn county. She said she hoped she would get in early admission to Grambling State so she wouldn't have to be separated from Wally.

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“You don’t look like twins,” Marcus told her. It was a good excuse, he figured, for looking at her and touching her. “I thought you was cousins at first.”

“We do too!” Tasha said. “We’ve got the same lips, same color and shape of eyes. Same hair if he let his grow.”

“He’s so big,” Marcus said. He pinched Tasha’s tiny waist. “You tiny, girl.”

Tasha squirmed and laughed, pushing his hand away. “That ain’t *natural*, you know.”

“What?” Marcus tried to kiss her neck.

“Wally being big,” she said, pulling away and widening her eyes in surprise. “You can’t say you don’t know, BK.”

“Don’t know what?”

Tasha leaned in close to Marcus’s ear. “He *dopes*.” She whispered it breathily, then laughed a hard laugh and took a drink. “He puts a needle in his ass. Sometimes I do it for him.”

Marcus didn’t say anything for a while. He didn’t want Tasha to think he was stupid. Then he said, “I thought he was big.”

“You could get a scholarship like him, you know,” Tasha said. “With your sad story and your speed, you could get all kinds of college money. You just gotta get play time. What you do to bulk up?” Tasha said. Marcus was quiet, then admitted that he lifted every day and drank the powder drinks he’d bought from GNC.

Tasha wrapped her long fingers around his bicep, squeezed. “I’ll tell him to come talk to you.”

The drugs came in a plain manila envelope on a chilly, cloudy day. Wally’s dealer, a white kid with mirrored sunglasses, met Marcus in a hardware store parking lot in Ashland and took his two hundred dollars in a handshake. Inside the envelope were a clear glass bottle, three syringes, some antiseptic swabs, and a narrow bottle of pills. Marcus drove home in Skinny’s truck, checking his rearview mirror the whole way. He dropped off the truck, threw the keys into the floorboard, and walked off the reservation with the envelope under his arm like a school assignment.

At home, he stashed the drugs in his dresser, then under his mattress. He told Granny he wasn’t hungry but made a shake in front of her and took it back to his room. He leaned back in his bed and drank slowly, watching the darkening windows for those big black birds. It was chilly, air seeping in from every crack. He pulled on an Ecko sweatshirt and shook a woolen blanket over his legs.

After a while Granny knocked and pushed the door open. She had a pile of blankets in her arms.

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“Sure,” Marcus said.

“Time to cover up these windows soon,” she said.

Marcus asked what she meant.

“With plastic,” she said. “I put plastic sheeting up in the winter to keep the cold out and the warm in.

What’s that you’re drinking?” she said.

“It’s a shake the coach said to drink,” Marcus said. He could feel the milk drying in a mustache. “For nutrition.”

“I thought only old people drank those drinks,” she said, looking around for laundry to collect. “You’ll do it for me then? You’ll get the plastic and staple it up?”

Marcus said sure. He asked her about the birds he’d seen—what were they? Owls?

“Buzzards,” Granny said, shaking her head. “Not owls, buzzards. We’ve got a buzzard problem in this county, but they won’t hurt you if you don’t bother them.” She looked around at Marcus’s careful pile of schoolbooks, the CDs stacked on his dresser. “You do keep a neat room,” she added skeptically, as if that were proof he wouldn’t go messing with buzzards.

Marcus stood to close the door behind her.

The raid happened on a Saturday, early, while everyone but Marcus was asleep. Marcus was running at Boys and Girls. When he thought of that morning now, he remembered things in separate fields of sensation: the way the sun looked coming up over the Albany Houses, the sound of the LIRR rushing by, his feet slapping the track. He had on new shoes that Briana had bought for him, black and red Nikes, and he remembered their stiffness on his feet. There was a rock in one of his shoes, a tiny pebble near his left heel, and he remembered its pressure, and stopping to remove it. No one was at the track; it wasn’t even seven o’clock. No one was on the street, and the only cars he remembered were livery cabs and yellow cabs on their way down Atlantic Avenue, back to wherever it was that cab drivers lived.

He had run for about an hour. His lungs burned a little, and he had a fine beading of sweat all over his body. His hamstrings tightened as he walked slowly home, drinking water. He thought he’d stretch when he got home, maybe take a nap or do some homework: a five-page personal essay on any topic.

The cops were parked outside, sirens off, when he came inside. It wasn’t unusual to see cops outside his building, but he had a nervous feeling as he walked up the stairs, and a dread thud in his chest when he saw his own apartment door open to the hall. Then he heard Briana crying and saw Papo in his shorts and no shirt, hands cuffed behind his back. The coffee table had been tipped over, a basket of laundry that Marcus had done the night before was upended, underwear strewn from one side of the small living room to the other. Sit on the couch, a black cop said to Marcus. He sat. There were no cushions on the couch, so it was uncomfortably low and hard, and he was close to the floor, where almost everything they owned had been

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tossed. Marcus could see past the living room to the kitchen, where the fridge and freezer doors stood open, their contents spilled onto the floor. All the drawers had been dumped. In the hallway, mounds of clothes and shoes were piled outside of both rooms.

The mistake, Marcus learned later, had been Briana's. That was why she was crying. She had a package she was supposed to stash at her cousin's. She'd been drunk the night before, too lazy to go out and get it done before Papo came by. It had been raining; she put it in the freezer.

Papo had a tattoo on his neck from when he lived in Los Angeles, and a lady cop was asking him about it in an angry, teasing way. His head was thrown back, and he kept saying in a low voice, *Shut up, Bri, don't say nothin', and I want my lawyer.* When she saw Marcus she wailed louder.

And Papo, louder: *Come on, Bri. Keep it tight.*

It took almost the whole day for them to release Marcus into his aunt's custody. They must have asked him a thousand questions. The only one he knew how to answer was, where was he? Running, he said. Running the track at Boys and Girls. Even that question, the only one with a simple and truthful answer, they asked over and over again.

The waiting, that's what Marcus remembered when he thought about that day. Waiting on a wooden chair in a cold, yellow room. When he turned over his own contraband in his hands, when he swabbed the place he'd chosen, when he drew the medicine into the needle.

He thought about waiting, not knowing what was happening. He thought about the last time he saw his mama, her messy hair falling out the elastic, no makeup, a crust of sleep in her eyes. Through the prison shirt he could tell she wasn't wearing a bra.

Be good, she said, then pressed her fingertips into her eyelids and groaned. It's me that's bad. You always been so good.

At practice he did high knees, butt kicks, crazy legs. He power-skipped across the field faster than anyone, did power slides, quick feet, carioca. He jumped, hitting his knees against his chest so hard it hurt. If the coach said to do five reps, he did eight. After practice he ran cross-country in the scruffy little patch of woods behind the school. "Don't overdo it," Coach Stephens said. "We don't want some hunter shooting your ugly ass."

He was like a TV coach—they were all ugly, stupid, sorry sons of bitches at practice. He drilled them on scenarios and plays, and if they didn't say their answers loud enough, if they didn't shout them like Marines, he mocked them, got in their faces. But before games he slapped their backs and told them they were the best, and they all bowed their heads to say the Lord's Prayer.

In the school's sweat-humid gym he bench-pressed 160 pounds, curled twenty- and thirty-pound weights, did incline sit-ups and leg curls and lat pull-downs. Sometimes at work Skinny would catch him doing squats and shake his big, bearded head. Then he would threaten to make Marcus drink a six-pack of beer, ruin all that work, but instead he fed him hamburgers, lean steaks, soups cooked from scratch. He kept a mug in his

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freezer and a gallon of milk in the fridge for whenever Marcus came by.

He gained a few more pounds, then leveled off. “You need to buy the whole package,” Wally told him one day on the drive home from practice. “The, the...testosterone pills, the T-400, it works together with the other.” Wally seemed to always be forgetting what he was about to say. He would snap his finger in the air or thump his head until it came to him, or say “you know” and “the thing.” Marcus once asked Tasha if he’d always been like that and she said, what, you think it’s the drugs? Wally’s just got a lot on his mind.

“How much is that?” Marcus asked.

“One-fifty.”

Marcus shook his head. He’d just sent some money to Briana; he’d bought some groceries for his granny and finally paid his textbook fees. You didn’t have to pay textbook fees at Boys and Girls, just like you didn’t have to say “free lunch” at the cashier in the cafeteria. There wasn’t a cashier. Lunch was just free. “I don’t have it.”

“I could loan you—”

“No,” Marcus said.

“If you had some, you know, connections, there’s hardly any competition around here.”

It took Marcus a moment to understand what he was saying. They turned onto Marcus’s road and Wally stopped the car. By now the road was deeply rutted, and Wally wouldn’t drive his mama’s Camry down it. Marcus made ready to get out. The tops of the pine trees swayed in the wind. Marcus zipped his jacket. “No, I don’t know nobody.”

“You sure?” Wally asked. “‘Cause I know you came down here pretty quick. You just have to get the stuff, that’s all. Anything. Some weed, some coke. You could sell crack. Crack for crackers.”

“I’m sure, man,” Marcus said. He got out and leaned in to thank Wally for the ride.

“My sister, she’s hard to please for long,” Wally said. “‘Specially if you’re broke.”

Homecoming was late this year; Tasha was on the committee that picked the song and the theme. She told Marcus he’d need a patriotic vest and tie for his suit. The theme was “Red, White and Blue”; the song was “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” by Toby Keith. Tasha had fought hard for “Air Force Ones” by Nelly. She told the other cheerleaders, most of them white, that it was patriotic, too, but they didn’t buy it. She gave in, picked a red dress, strapless, with shimmery white insets in the skirt. She thought Marcus would be pleased by this theme; it was in memory of 9/11. The year before, she said, the memory had been too fresh, so it was time they did something. That year the song was “Country Grammar” by Nelly.

Marcus thought it was funny how serious everyone here got about 9/11. There were FDNY and NYPD T-shirts and caps for sale at the gas stations, plus “These Colors Don’t Run” and “Never Forget” bumper

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stickers. He didn't tell Tasha how nobody he knew at home thought much about it; at Boys and Girls, they'd talked and laughed as usual during the moments of silence, and never paused to say the pledge or sing any anthems.

Marcus didn't have a suit, but he didn't tell Tasha about that either. He needed one anyway, he figured, for his mother's trial, but he needed so many other things too: the cell phone, free weights for his room at Granny's, plastic sheeting for the windows, more money to send to Briana. The Mercedes wasn't done yet—she still ran rough, and her body was a patchwork of primer spots. Skinny said hell, drive his kid's MG—it was almost completely restored, Skinny's best work in years. The MG wasn't exactly what Marcus had pictured himself driving up to pick up Tasha, but the paint job was so shiny he could see his reflection in it. He squinted at himself in his long T-shirt and coat, pictured a sharp gray suit in its place. Marcus would be seventeen in March; he was almost a man.

He and Wally got the Ecstasy in D.C. from a club-owner friend of Wally's dealer. Wally picked Marcus as partner, he said, as a marketing maneuver, that and loyalty to his sister. They would tell the kids in King William that it was from New York, let Marcus do most of the selling. Waiting outside Passions II in his mother's Camry, just off a busy avenue in the northeast part of the city, Wally tapped his fingers against his knees and wobbled his legs, nearly shaking with nervousness. Marcus knew it was also his experience in cities that made him partner. The neighborhoods they'd driven through to get there didn't look much like the worst neighborhoods Marcus had been to in Brooklyn, with their towering brown-colored projects and elevated railroads and truck depots ringed with high, razor wire fences. Everything was low and crouching, ground-oriented instead of sky-oriented. The buildings were two-story frame houses that leaned into one another or crumbled into empty lots. Next to their car, a seagull picked at a McDonald's bag.

"Man, what is it about seagulls and the ghetto?" Marcus said. "Those must be some lost-ass birds."

Wally didn't say anything, so Marcus went on: "Maybe they're looking for some bootleg DVDs."

When Wally didn't laugh Marcus knew he must be really nervous. He had a lot at stake: the scholarship, for one, plus his mama'd probably kill him if she found out he even drove the car to D.C. She thought he and Marcus were going to Richmond to shop for the homecoming dance. Marcus thought about what he had at stake. Not much, he guessed—a job running errands for an ex-junkie. His granny would sure be mad, but his mama and daddy couldn't say much, could they? He envied Wally, with his big muscles and his nice house and all he had to lose.

When the metal door opened and a man in dreads waved them inside, Marcus nodded at Wally to reassure him. They didn't say anything as they got out. Wally had to close his car door twice to make it stick. The nightclub was cavernous and empty. On a landing a DJ was setting up his equipment. The perimeter of the room was set with dirty couches. There were smeared, hand-printed mirrors along one wall. Marcus and Wally sat at the bar and waited for Wally's dealer's friend. Wally's dealer had said to put the money in a FedEx envelope. Wally took the envelope from his backpack and set it on the bar, then changed his mind and put it back.

Marcus was expecting someone who looked like Papo, or the men who used to sit in their trucks on Nostrand Avenue with a thick chain and a ring on almost every finger. Instead they were approached by a muscular

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man of about forty wearing a lavender dress shirt. He smiled broadly at them. "You must be Marcus and Wally. I'm Tony." He sat down next to Wally and asked the man in dreadlocks to bring them three Cokes. Marcus saw Wally's hands shake as he handed him the envelope.

Tony looked in the envelope for a long moment. He nodded to the dreadlocked man.

"I hear you boys are football players," he said, standing. His voice was friendly and calm.

"Yeah," Wally said, straightening up like he was a recruiter.

"I played," he said thoughtfully. "But that was a long time ago. I had a coach that would bust your ass. They still doin' that?"

"Sure," Wally said.

"I hated that motherfucker."

Tony bounced his fist lightly on the bar, like he'd cleared something up. "Well, thanks for stopping by, boys. You're always welcome here. Don't forget your radio."

On the bar a few feet down from them had appeared a small black nylon bag; it might have held a CD player. Wally picked it up as they went out.

Fifty-fifty, that was how they would split it.

Everybody had a part to play. Wally had to secure the connection, pass the word around school. He started by giving a couple of pills to Percy Wills, a big redneck everybody knew smoked weed after practice, and L.T. Betts, a stoner kid who hung around the field waiting for his girlfriend to be done with color guard. "Be more at homecoming," Wally said. "But not for everybody and not from me. I got these from Marcus Conway. He says he got some more, but only for those that can keep their mouths shut. Forty a pill, have yourself a good ol' time like they do in New York."

Marcus had to look sharp, keep his clothes clean, run the ball. He had to buy new clothes for the dance, get an all-blue corsage for Tasha, wash the MG on loan from Skinny. Granny didn't want him driving it at first; she frowned into its paint job, saying no young man needed such a shiny car, but she gave in after he told her he could keep it until Sunday, to drive her to church.

The game was on Friday, the dance was Saturday. Before the game and without Granny's knowing, Skinny cooked dinner for Marcus, Tasha, Wally, and Wally's girlfriend, Shay: barbecue, coleslaw, and potato salad and sweet tea for the girls, homemade energy bars and milk for the players. Granny had made it clear that after the borrowed car and the dates, Marcus was to *stay home some*, to drive her to Tappahannock for shopping and to her Ladies' Circle but other than that to *stay home* and do his homework. But even she wasn't hard enough to spoil homecoming week. She'd seen his father through it, after all, twenty-some years before.

Jerome had been a football player, too, though he didn't get to play as much as Marcus. But as the season advanced, as Marcus ran yard after yard, Jerome just got better and better. The way Granny told it, racism

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was the only thing that kept Jerome Conway from the pros. He'd been a wide receiver—and fast, Granny said. “Like lightning,” she'd say, shaking her head as if at a driver going too fast down her road. Marcus hadn't grown up hearing any of these stories; he knew his dad played, but it was never anything he made a big deal over.

Skinny, he was another story. He'd been at King William about ten years before Jerome, and he claimed he never played a single sport, not in any organized way. Marcus thought he must have regretted it; how else to explain the homemade granola bars, the time it must have taken to clear his table and four mismatched chairs of paper and tools and parts catalogues? The barbecue sauce he'd made for their dinner was a home-made, secret recipe. Marcus didn't think he'd ever had homemade barbecue sauce. It smelled delicious.

“Aw, man, just a taste,” Wally said as his sister laughed and licked her fingers in front of him. It was almost time for them to go. Skinny was brown-bagging the plentiful leftovers for after the game. “After you've kicked King and Queen's ass good,” he said. “Not before.”

Marcus hadn't said much at dinner, but he wasn't sweating the game. King and Queen would be an easy defeat—both their good players were hurt, and they'd beaten them bad in September. With all of them crowded into Skinny's kitchen and Skinny bustling around them like someone's mom in dark glasses and low-slung Wranglers, Marcus felt anxious and embarrassed, the way he'd felt when his track coach came over to his apartment at the Brevoort Houses and Briana had just gotten up from a nap. Did he have to smoke in this tiny-ass house? Marcus coughed dramatically and his hand back and forth in front of his face. The room suddenly felt too small, crazy-small, and he thought how Tasha and Wally must see it. A run-down shack with a fat Indian drinking himself to death. A coffin. Marcus craned his neck to read the time on the stove's clock.

“Better go soon,” Marcus said.

But Wally wasn't listening. “This'd be a chill place for an after-party tomorrow night,” he said. He stood and walked to the room's only window, onto the field across from Skinny's. It was true; the field across the road was empty and open, inviting. “Shit,” he said. “What's that?”

Skinny had been drinking—a lot, even for him. He was slurring his words, and he stumbled as he moved to stand next to Wally. “Goddamn it,” he said, grabbing a broom and rushing outside. The little house shook as he opened the front door and stomped onto the front steps, waving his broom.

“What the hell?” Tasha asked.

“Buzzards,” Skinny announced. He seemed soberer, more awake. “Can't keep 'em off my property.”

“They hunting something?” Wally asked.

“Buzzards are scavengers,” Skinny said. “They like dead meat. Rotting meat.”

Everybody looked at the barbecue. “No, not that,” Skinny said. “Something must have died down there, on the riverbank.” Marcus didn't admit that his house had buzzards too.

“So,” Wally said. “Cops come around here, like at night?”

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Marcus interrupted. “We can’t—”

“No, it’s all right,” Skinny said. “I don’t think I remember them coming by lately. It’s pretty far from the Fas Mart, pretty far off Route 30. I suppose if you wanted to come here and drink some beer there wouldn’t be any harm in it. I can’t be responsible, but I can try to keep an eye on things.”

Marcus was shaking his head even as Tasha and Shay and Wally were grinning and planning and thanking Skinny. In his excitement, Skinny spilled a full can of Budweiser across the cluttered little dinette.

But then Marcus started thinking about Tasha in her cheering uniform, Tasha after the game, and about borrowing the MG. And finally about the game, about running, and suddenly he forgot to be worried.

Marcus had been nervous and absentminded at the pregame warm-ups, and the coach yelled at him to get it together. Sorry, sorry, he’d mumbled too low for the coach to hear.

Maybe you don’t want to win? The coach asked. Maybe you just wanna *hang out* for the month of December, huh? Do some Christmas shopping?

The game started badly, with the Chargers quickly shutting down the Cavs’ offense and getting the ball back in under a minute. They looked bigger on the field than Marcus remembered. They were a team of mainly black guys, while the Cavs were about half and half. They had a reputation for playing dirty, but Marcus had chalked that up to racism from the coaches. Now, looking at them across the line of scrimmage, he wondered. It seemed like they were all looking at him, marking him. He squatted down, touched his finger to the dry, chilly grass. They were at their own thirty-yard line, and Marcus could see Stephens standing with his arms crossed.

The Chargers blitzed on first down. Wally overthrew a pass to Martin James, who had always been short on speed. On second down, they managed to advance only two yards.

On the sideline, Stephens shook his head in disgust. He signaled for Wally to hand off to Marcus.

The ball was light in Marcus’s hands, slippery almost. One of the Chargers’ linebackers was already around the Cavs’ line. Marcus ran straight at the sideline, straight at Stephens, the linebacker on his tail. Then he pulled up, spun, and felt the linebacker drop off behind. He ran, expecting the hit from the safety, knowing he’d make first down. The hit was low, and he came down heavily on his chest.

When he stood up, he saw that everybody in the stands was on their feet, glad for some good news. Nobody had come out for track meets at Boys and Girls, only a few parents and relatives for some of the older, star runners, the ones with college scholarships and plans. Briana had never gone to one, and nobody had said much about college, but Marcus always thought that would happen later, in eleventh or twelfth grade. He looked for Tasha, saw her pompoms in the air. He swore he could see Skinny’s big gut shaking with his clapping.

The Cavs drove down the field, and Wally’s touchdown pass connected. The Chargers responded with a

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touchdown of their own, but missed the extra point. At halftime the score was 7-6. Stephens wasn't happy. Are we going to lose our own damn homecoming game to a bunch of boys who can barely count to fourth down? he said.

Wally's passes had been straight and true—a girl could catch them, Marcus thought—but he hung his head with the rest of them. Then they prayed and Wally asked if he could say something.

“Assuming the good Lord sees right to let us win,” he said, standing up in the middle of them. His shoulders were massive in their pads. “Assuming that the Lord is with us, I just want to be there to do His will. I want to do right by y'all, to put the ball in the air and get it down the field.

“We're gonna have the ball back when we go out there, and I want you to slam 'em. I want you to come down hard on 'em, I want to see 'em spittin' out mud.”

He went on for a while longer.

Marcus was silent. He'd been slapped on the back by a few players and told he was doing right by the coach. He could hear the band playing “We Will Rock You” on the field.

It was colder after halftime, the sky blacker behind the floodlights. They charged forward on the kickoff. A white kid named Jim Shelton caught it at his belly and managed to get it to the Cavs' forty-yard line.

They set up to run the ball and Marcus felt all eyes on him as the other team hunkered down. Marcus carried the ball across the fifty-yard line, into the Chargers' territory. No one had laid a hand on him. He felt like he could outrun anybody on the field.

The Chargers blitzed, and the Cavs ran a draw. As several Chargers rushed from the outside, Marcus took the handoff from Wally and ran straight up the middle, juking a linebacker and winding up in the end zone. He watched the fans on the Cavs' side of the stadium come out of their seats. He saw the cheerleaders' feet leave the ground.

On his next carry the linebackers ran his face mask into the turf. The Chargers had failed to get anything on their last possession and they were gunning for him. It took a long time for someone to take his weight off Marcus's helmet. Cleats sank into his leg.

He retched once. Then he stood up, looked at Wally, and hollered. Wally hollered back. The pain was superficial, a condition of his strength. The strong were going to get knocked down; they were going to have people coming at them from all sides. They had to be ready, they had to be looking for the hit. That was what Briana should have known when she put the cocaine behind the frozen pizzas. That was what Papo should have known when he trusted Briana—what Marcus did know, now that he'd shaken her. That's what Jerome should have known when he came out only to go back in weak and tired after a couple of weeks of drinking and looking people up, for robbing the same bodega he always robbed.

Marcus saw that now. The bruising he felt was just on top. Underneath, where it mattered, he was muscle and heart.

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The Cavaliers won the game by two touchdowns. Marcus had carried the ball eleven times. Tasha jumped into his arms when the game was over, and Skinny and Granny were standing together at the fence, smiling at him.

Marcus slept late on Saturday, read twenty history pages without committing a word to memory, and finally showered at around four. He soaped his body tenderly, massaging all the sore parts until the hot water ran out. He still had to pick up Tasha's corsage and put gas in the car. He had to organize his thoughts, play back every moment in the game before it disappeared. First he remembered them in order of importance, starting with his touchdown after halftime; then he remembered them in chronological order. When he'd done that three or four times he turned his thoughts to the dance. There was money to be made.

He'd thought that they could keep the pills in the car to keep from dealing inside, but Wally said no, that wouldn't work. You could only come into the dance once; when you left, you left for good. Marcus wasn't eager to deal the drugs out in the open like that, but Wally said not to worry. They kept the gym lights dim. There'd be so many people that no one would even notice. Plus, didn't kids at Marcus's school start dealing when they were, like, eleven? Didn't they deal in the bathrooms?

Marcus told him the story of a third grader he'd known way back when who sold dime bags in summer school. He remembered the runner he knew in fifth grade who wore a diamond in each ear and attacked the principal at lunch, the ninth graders who dealt in gym class. Wally listened with a bemused and unsurprised look on his face. Marcus didn't mention that he knew all these stories because the kids had gotten caught.

Tasha would be putting up the decorations. She would be wearing that tight velvet tracksuit of hers and standing on a chair, her hair done already, calling out orders to the other girls. It made Marcus smile to think about her. He wondered if she was thinking about tonight too—if she'd be ready to go all the way. He wondered if she felt nervous about that, or about the drugs. Probably not, Marcus thought. Things came easy to Tasha. She'd already talked on and on about being crowned homecoming king and queen. The way she figured it, her toughest competition would be Wally, and Wally's Shay was too shy to be queen. Tasha was the most beautiful senior girl who was also smart and classy, and Marcus didn't really look like a sophomore, not anymore. Just have yourself a good time, Marcus told Tasha. Don't be thinking about that.

No, she said, looking at him. Not like a sophomore at all.

Doing his errands, though, Marcus thought she might be right. He was congratulated by three different people at the florist's, and asked when championships were when he gassed up the MG. How many more games would they have to win to make the championships? He was asked that question a half-dozen times; everybody knew the answer. Two more games.

Granny fed him a sandwich and took his picture alone and with the car; Tasha's mom took about fifty pictures on the stairs, in front of the house, on the lawn, beside the car. Marcus wanted to drive Tasha and Wally to Granny's house so they could take more pictures over there, but Tasha said no, there was no time, their reservations at Outback Steakhouse were at seven and they were already late. She'd love to see you, though, Marcus said, looking at Tasha. She was gorgeous—tall, slim and curvy both, her hair done up high and glossy, sparkly eye makeup. He thought he'd never seen such a beautiful girl before, and he worried about never getting a copy of the photo to send back home. We can't be late, Tasha said, hurrying him to the car.

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We'll see her after.

Your mama can get double prints?

Tasha laughed. What? You think we're never gonna look this good again?

Music was pouring out of the gym. Marcus said he didn't know country music could get so loud. Don't worry, Tasha said. I rigged it so they play one song for them, one song for us.

And what do you mean by them and us? Wally teased. She rolled her eyes.

Red, white, and blue streamers brushed Marcus's face as they entered the gym through the double doorways. Tasha took his hand and showed him the balloons, the banners, the tablecloths, the punch. Taped over the exit doors was a giant painting of the Twin Towers at night. Someone had painted hundreds of square yellow windows in each of the towers. They looked like giant tenements. Underneath, in cursive, were the words *Never Forget*.

"See?" she said, leading him to the wall of collapsed bleachers. "All the girls painted a poster with the different player numbers." She pointed out the neatest, most elegant poster—number 22, done in sparkling gold paint. "I painted yours."

Marcus nodded. Everybody was looking at them. He scoped out an empty table in the corner and took his seat. His knees bounced a little; he hid them under the table and told himself to be cool.

Wally walked off to get them some punch and say a few words to some people. He'd told Marcus to expect about ten customers. If each bought two hits, that was eight hundred dollars—four for Marcus, four for Wally. That wasn't so bad, but it just paid for dinner and Marcus's suit and Tasha's corsage and gas, with only a little left over. If they did better, well, that would be good. He had forty pills.

From where he sat, Marcus could see his history teacher and the home ec teacher, the principal and his wife. The youth minister was there, plus the cheerleading coach and her husband. Seven chaperones, as far as he could tell. They were all busy talking, lingering by the punch bowl. Marcus had heard rumors about spiking the punch bowl; apparently, this was something that had happened in the past.

Marcus could see Charlene standing with another boy, a junior he recognized from track practice. He was also in Marcus's technology class; he was stupid and lazy, couldn't decipher an electrical circuit to save his life. What was Charlene doing with that guy? Trayvon, that was his name. She wore a lacy, strapless white dress that was too long for her. It trailed the floor when she walked. Her hair was sprayed up into a fan on the back of her head and Marcus could see tiny, sparkling rhinestones stuck to its surface, catching the light. She cut her eyes at Marcus.

"What you looking at, baby?" Tasha stood before him, smiling broadly. She held out a cup of red punch.

Marcus shook his head and focused on the plastic cup in his hand. The ice cubes were white and blue; where they melted the punch was starting to turn an oily-looking purple.

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Tasha leaned in close to him. "Don't be nervous," she whispered. "We'll relax later."

Marcus put his hands on either side of her tiny waist and drew her nearer. "Will we?"

"We will."

His first customer was L.T. It was strange to see him dressed up in a suit. The tweed jacket and pants didn't match, and his hair had been slicked back with gel. He wore a narrow-collared white shirt and a skinny black tie. He sat down next to Marcus. "That shit was awesome," he said.

Marcus nodded, leaned forward, and looked around. The adults were all the way on the other side of the room, probably talking about church or Costco or whatever it was they talked about. They were near the bathrooms, though. It would be better, Marcus figured, to hand over the pills right here.

"Seriously," L.T. said. His eyes were on his girlfriend, who was dancing in a circle of other girls. She was a plump girl in a short red dress. "Britney and I never did it like that before. I mean, she was wild, man."

Marcus held up his hand. "I don't need to know all that. How much you want?"

L.T. shook his hand, passing him eighty dollars. "That was an awesome game last night."

Marcus set two pills down on the table, under a napkin. "Thanks," he said.

"You know Brandon and Shaun an' them?"

Marcus nodded, though he didn't. Wally came over, fresh from the dance floor. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and sat down, turned to L.T. "You got friends who want some?"

L.T. nodded.

"Send just one over. Tell them to be cool, act like they're coming to talk to Marcus about football. Shake his hand, pat his back, shit like that."

He looked at the clock; it was nine-thirty. "He's done at ten-thirty."

For the next hour, Marcus was congratulated by every stoner, redneck, dooper, and druggie-preppie at King William High. He danced only once with Tasha, a slow dance. Her back felt warm and strong under his hands; he could feel her breasts as she leaned against his chest. She lay her head on his shoulder and whispered the dirtiest things he'd ever heard from a girl into his ears. Then he walked back to his chair and waited for ten thirty to come.

Some people he told to take just one; others he dealt to silently, accepting their praise stone-faced and serious. Wally kept coming by, even though he'd said he wanted to stay out of the dealing part. He told a few people to meet them out at the reservation by Skinny's. He said they'd play better music; there'd be beer there too. Between customers, Marcus said he didn't think that was such a good idea, but Wally told him not to be so uptight; it'd be fine.

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The first person to lose her cool was Wally's girlfriend. Giggling, she spilled punch on Wally's lapel and tried to lick it off. She spilled some more into her own cleavage and tried to sit on his lap, then Marcus's. When that didn't work she settled for Tasha's lap. She leaned her head back into Tasha's neck and moaned a little.

"You are so fucking stupid, Wally," Tasha said.

Shay looked plastered. The strapless bodice of her dress was askew. Her hair had fallen out of its careful arrangement. Her lipstick was worn away from kissing on Wally so that only the dark liner remained. Normally she was cute.

"Borderline retarded," Tasha said, bouncing her knee. Shay squealed. "Get her out of here."

"I can't," Wally said, nodding toward the exit doors. The principal was dancing with his wife to "Unforgettable." "We can all go when they get up on stage to do the awards," Wally said. "We'll slip out."

"*Fuck* that, Wally," Tasha said. "I spent two hundred dollars on my dress, not to mention my hair and nails. I am *not* leaving early."

"Here," Wally said, shaking out a napkin and throwing it over his sister's head. "You're the goddamn queen already."

Tasha snatched the napkin off her head. "Don't make Marcus beat the shit out of you."

Wally started to laugh, his broad shoulders convulsing under fine charcoal pinstriping. The song ended and the principal and his wife bowed while the students clapped. Wally was still laughing when the next song started and everybody ran onto the floor.

"Oh Lord," Tasha said. "Look."

Two of the cheerleaders, Megan Trice and Stacey Adams, were grinding each other to the opening, censored-for-radio bars of "Back That Ass Up." It had been a cheerleading favorite, though no one would let the cheerleaders perform the routine they choreographed. Near the stage, a freshman was wiggling out of her dress.

"Hey," Shay said, sitting up and frowning. "Why'd you think you and Marcus will be king and queen? Wally played good last night too."

"You better hope they don't pick you, you dumb slut," Tasha muttered.

"*Tash,*" Wally said.

"You better hope they don't pick you, too," Tasha said. "If I was you I'd be over at the ballot box right now, voting for my non-fucked-up sister."

Before the night was over, two couples were thrown out—one for making out in the hallway to the bathroom, the other for trying to have sex under an uncollapsed portion of the bleachers. The home ec teacher found

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both of them and marched them outside, but seemed to suspect nothing. Marcus didn't know either couple well enough to be sure they wouldn't snitch, but they hadn't looked embarrassed as they walked out.

"Don't worry," Wally said. "You think they'll care about missing the rest of this boring-ass dance? They're about to wear each other out."

In a little while, Marcus was the king and Tasha was the queen. The crowns were plastic, and the comb that held his in place bit uncomfortably into Marcus's carefully groomed head. Wally had sneaked off with Shay; they were probably in the back of the Camry by now. From the stage Marcus could see the yellow and black disposable camera he'd brought along sitting unused on the table.

Newly crowned, Tasha wouldn't hear of going off by herself with Marcus. And she couldn't just leave her brother, could she? She didn't want him to drive anyway; she'd take Shay in the Camry, and Wally could ride with Marcus. Wally had just taken a hit, and he wanted to go to the reservation with everybody else. Come on, Tasha said, let's have some fun.

Marcus was relieved that the night had gone off without more problems. He and Wally each had more than six hundred dollars. He could send some of that to Briana, use the rest to buy his next round of steroids. When the season was over he'd spend time lifting and running, and by next year he'd get scouted. In the car as they made their way onto the little gravel road, Wally was talking about what was next.

"I mean, this could be a regular weekend thing," he said, "if we get some more stuff. We could get some pills, some coke, maybe some heroin."

Marcus thought about Skinny, what he'd said about being a junkie. "I don't want to deal heroin," he said quietly.

"Okay," Wally said. "We got to give the people what they want, though. Am I right?"

Both hands steady on the wheel, Marcus repeated himself.

The reservation had no streetlights. They parked alongside a field and stumbled out of the MG. Two football fields away they could see Skinny's little shacks, one light shining through the fencing. Marcus looked up; the sky was creamy with stars, more stars than he'd ever seen in his life. He thought about how he didn't know any of their names. He couldn't even find the Big Dipper.

"Whatcha looking for?" Tasha asked. Her eyes were shining; she smiled and looked up at him. He hoped that she hadn't taken a hit.

"It's right there," Tasha said, pointing. She took his head in her hands and pointed him in the right direction. He could feel her long, red nails grazing the skin on his face. "The Big Dipper. Right?"

Shay fell back into the long dead grass of the field. Wally pretended to tackle her. Far away, then closer, they could hear the whoops and hollers of rednecks advancing across the field in their trucks. Marcus looked up at the stars, a whole bewildering sky full of them.

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Above Skinny's house, dark shapes were circling and swooping low, grazing the treetops. The field was filling up with people now, but nobody else seemed to notice the stars or the birds. After a while, Marcus forgot about them too.

By the time Marcus gets around to winterizing his granny's house, it is December, and it is the last good thing he does for her. He approaches the task methodically, measuring and cutting the heavy plastic sheeting and laying it flat on the frozen ground outside each window. He starts with Granny's bedroom window. He climbs a rickety wooden ladder leaned against the windowsill, hoists up the plastic, and rests his borrowed staple gun on the sill.

She is at church. Through the casement panes he can see her little iron bedstead, the smoothed sheets and quilts just so, the pillowcases taut and ironed. He can see her framed picture of Jesus on the wall, his face thin and sorrowful inside the cheap, ornate frame. There is her nightstand with its windup clock, her hooked rug, her white wooden dresser. Her closet door is open and he can see her rack of limp gray and navy blue dresses.

It took just days for Marcus to get caught. One of the football players' girlfriends went too far at the bonfire with another guy, and the football player snitched. Marcus was dragged into the principal's office during Algebra II the Wednesday after homecoming. By the end of the school day, when he should have been practicing, getting ready for the championships, he was at the police station in Aylette. All alone—no mention of Wally, who was in that very same Algebra II class. He hadn't even looked up.

The principal had gone on about fresh starts and taking people's goodwill for granted. He'd shaken his head over the championships. He said Marcus might never get another opportunity like that again, but it didn't sound like it meant much to him. Think about all those people you hurt, he said, as he handed over the expulsion hearing paperwork he'd already prepared. Think about all they were trying to do for you.

Marcus had looked at the thin stack of papers the principal handed across but did not take them. Wally. Where the fuck was *Wally*? Sitting in Algebra II, right where he was when Marcus left, hunched over his notebook like those *x*'s and *y*'s held some kind of secret. Marcus puffed out a long sigh and leaned back in his chair, slouching to one side to show that those papers didn't matter any more to him than they did to the principal. He lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes like he'd seen kids do at Boys and Girls, the kids who waited with their mothers or grandmothers in a line of chairs outside the office, the kids going out on long-term suspensions, expulsions. He didn't say a thing.

And the principal had cleared his throat and set the papers down, very gently, at the edge of his desk, so that an inch or so of paper hung off the edge and Marcus could snatch them up without touching anything. Marcus kept his eyes slitted until they burned, shifted back further in his seat. The chair scraped the tile floor and the principal flinched. You're not a bad kid, he tried, looking over Marcus's shoulder to the door. Marcus blinked twice and the burning stopped. He took the papers.

Think about all those people you hurt. Marcus didn't think he'd hurt anyone except Granny, and even she seemed unsurprised at how things turned out. What he'd done hadn't touched Wally or his scholarship, and Tasha would find another boyfriend easy, some college boy most likely. Marcus tried to call them after he was home again, but he just kept getting their mother's voice on the machine. He'd called and called until finally

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Tasha picked up. *Don't call here*, she said. *Please*. He hung up without saying a word to her.

Marcus thinks a lot about Skinny. Skinny was the one who bailed him out; he finished and sold the Mercedes himself to cover the cost. Skinny said he'd have sold the MG too if they needed. Naw, Marcus told him, that's your son's car. Skinny said the boy didn't want the car. He wanted something else, something newer. He had this look on his face that made Marcus hurt inside. Just keep it, Marcus said.

Marcus has a state-appointed attorney, a woman he met in person once, when she brought him the plea agreement. If he didn't take it he'd be looking at a felony sentencing in an adult court. Did Marcus know what a felony meant, the attorney asked in her brisk way. He did, he said. No military service, no voting. Those weren't things he'd counted on or looked forward to.

No, she corrected him. It meant time in prison. Years. And there were two of them. Sale of a Schedule I controlled substance. Five years. Within a school zone. One more year. She looked down at her yellow legal pad. Marcus could go to circuit court and risk six years in an adult jail or take sixteen months in a juvenile facility in Richmond, and on his eighteenth birthday, he would be free. The attorney said they have a high school at the juvenile hall. You can take the classes you need to graduate, or you can get released from compulsory attendance and just study for your GED.

Would Marcus's mother or father be there to read over the plea agreement? I brought it home and they read it, he said. They said go ahead and sign it.

She moved to sit next to him while he read over the statement of facts, an outline, hour by hour, of the night of the homecoming dance. He read it so slowly she asked him if he wanted her to read it aloud. Asked it delicately, like he couldn't read well. He said *no ma'am*, polite like he was taught to be, though he was thinking something else. He picked up the pen and she showed him where to sign.

Would there be a track to run on at the juvenile facility? She wasn't sure but told him she'd check. So far she hasn't checked.

He lifts up the plastic and fits it over the window. He staples the corners first, smoothing out the gaps and wrinkles. He holds the staple gun against the worn window frame and presses hard. It makes a loud, echoing *wa-pow*.

When he is done with Granny's bedroom window, he does the kitchen, the living room, and the bathroom. He trims the extra plastic with a razor so it doesn't look sloppy. He's saved his room, with all its windows, for last.

There is his foldout bed, his little desk with all his half-written letters on top: to Khalil, to Briana. To Jerome, who told him the truth a long time ago: no sense in fighting it. There are his schoolbooks in the corner. His Walkman on the dresser. His closet filled with clothes.

It's cold. Marcus blows on his bare hands, zips his jacket, and wonders who will look after his things. He fits the plastic neat and tight over the old windows. *Wa-pow, wa-pow*. If you don't pull the plastic tight across the window, cold air will get in.

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When he's done he presses his face up close to the plastic. You can't see anything except the vague dark shapes of furniture and doorways. He goes inside, where, he tells himself, it is already warmer. In his room he lies on the little couch and puts his headphones on but doesn't turn on the music. He looks up at the windows, which stretch around three sides of his room. From the inside he can see a little better, but there isn't much to see after all. If he'd stayed in Brooklyn he could be practicing for spring meets, running on a track that this time of year was almost empty. If he'd won some meets, who knows, maybe he could have thought about scholarships, college. Football had been a mistake from the start. He wasn't a good strategist, like Wally, anticipating plays, looking ahead. Nobody he knew was like that. They were runners like him. Sprinters looking back from the finish line.

Tonight Skinny is making dinner for Marcus while Granny visits a church friend. He has to sneak out to see anyone. He's going to be good for his last weeks with her; she is making sure of it. Good: It's a word she still hangs on to. It means nothing to Marcus now. It's a lie, something you tell little kids about but you know they'll figure out the truth later, like Santa Claus and college. Nobody's good, Marcus thinks, but some people are tolerable.

The wind pushes the plastic against the windows, releases it, and pushes it again like breathing. Down the road Skinny's been cooking for days in his tiny kitchen, making chestnut stuffing and cranberry sauce and sweet potato pie. He's calling this an early Christmas dinner, like Christmas can be moved from one date to another. He's frying a turkey in an oil drum and he's got pictures, two whole rolls he took at the homecoming game. A lot of the shots are blurry and dark, but he and Marcus are going to look at every one of them, they're going to take their time, and when Marcus goes home again he'll have his own set to keep.

Belle Boggs grew up in King William County, Virginia and has since lived in California, New York, and Washington, D.C. She has worked at many difficult jobs involving children, including inner-city schoolteacher and amusement-park bear. She earned an MFA in fiction from the University of California at Irvine, and her writing has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, the *Oxford American*, and *Best New American Voices*. "Homecoming" will appear in *Mattaponi Queen*, a collection of linked short stories that was selected by Percival Everett as the winner of the 2009 Bakeless Prize in Fiction. *Mattaponi Queen* will be published by Graywolf Press in June 2010. Belle lives outside of Chapel Hill, North Carolina with her husband, Richard Allen, and their cat, Loretta.