

Brandon Boudreaux

THE NINJA BRIGADE OF JEFFERSON STREET

Author's Note: I visited my hometown in Louisiana for the holidays. While hanging out at one of my old haunts, the McKinley St. Pub, my friend and the proprietor, Remi, told me about the journalist C. Arthur Davis, who had come down from Cleveland in early 2006 to write a book about local crime. Remi led me to a storeroom where I found a box containing the following materials. Davis was a widower, Remi said, and wouldn't hesitate to talk to anyone at length about it at the bar. I asked where he was, only to be met with a shrug from Remi. "He was kind of losing it towards the end. Haven't seen him for months."

VII. Prologue – The Travel Journal of Carson Davis

Arrived in Louisiana early this morning after twenty or so hours of driving; should have left my coat at home. Reached Lafayette a little before noon with no traffic problems. Got a hotel by the interstate. A cheap dig, but it'll do. Didn't have much to unpack, just notebooks, laptop, etc. Everyone in the hotel bears the marks of hasty relocation – large families in small rooms, people hanging around the hotel all day without going anywhere, unshaven faces and mismatched clothes indicating they are not simple tourists. Find myself trying to speak with some of them, but all have the same story they don't want told. A young man approached me in the lobby. "My brother. What's your story?" I'm not a refugee, I said. Neither was he, he let me know. Told him about my work. He seemed disappointed, and when he called me a tourist, it sounded like profanity. Drove around the city and easily found the landmarks: McKinley St. Pub, Jefferson St., the Parish Courthouse. With a population of a quarter-million, this town isn't Metropolis. Thought I'd have trouble finding all the neighborhoods, but when downtown is three blocks, there's not much to have to

get to know. Snapped a few photographs of Jefferson Street and the benches decorated with fleur-de-lis decor. Turned a one-eighty and walked a block, then photographed an open field. Don't look for anything like a Chinatown here. Or an Irish part of town, or an Italian part. Joe said that he wanted to see something in a couple of weeks. Started taking notes on what I did today, but decided to leave myself out. Standard journalism has been done, objectivity preventing any real investigation. It won't work here anymore. Told Joe to expect something like a novel, third-person scenes and all. Besides, crime novels sell. Will start at the Pub tonight. Apparently these guys were regulars there. Maybe a bartender might remember something. Have no idea how to put this together, but am excited for the opportunity. Will leave for the Pub as soon as I finish this

* * *

The Daily Advertiser, September 16, 2005: Citizens are concerned that criminal activity is on the rise in the Hub City. Lafayette Parish Chief of Police Tom Richard went on the record saying, "The police force is on alert for any rise in crime. We don't think there will be any significant problems, but our main concern is the safety of our citizens." When asked if the influx of people to the area will affect crime rates, Richard responded with confidence. "Not if we do our jobs."

I. Wingman, Anytime

So like, this guy comes up to me at the Pub last night asking about the Ninja Brigade. Remi carded him and said he's from Ohio so I asked him how he knows about the Ninjas. Says he read it in a newspaper but I don't know how they got our papers way up there. I say I was working that night JP got jumped and that's probably what started it Ohio Man looked real excited so I started telling him how it went down. "Here," he says, and hands me a notebook. "Just write it down."

He told me to describe everyone first so here that is;

Ike (me) – The second coolest motherfucker you will ever meet! I work here.

JP – Everyone’s best friend. He moved to Boston to use his music degree. Tall, lanky guy. Used to play bass for Whiskey Avenger, who played here every Thursday night for like years.

Drew Romero – Singer/guitarist. Had his own business selling decals to convenience stores and people. Always dressed nice – polo shirts and all. No beard. If you met him, he’ll try to give you a business card.

Jack Gautreaux – Used to live in Texas for school. Dropped out then worked at the library in town. Really smart guy. Knows why days are longer in the summer and shit like that. Has a really long beard that looked pretty cool when Sal braided it.

Poirier – What can I say? Big fat drummer. Long pony tail. Chops. You’d like him.

Sal – Makes the best bacon cheese ham onion jalapeno mushroom omelet with ketchup you’ll ever have. The only girl in the Pub who never dresses like a skank. Graduated college. Cute. Also, was Poirier’s girl.

Erin – This little blonde chick that started hanging around the pub. She was weird at first, but she’s cool now. She turned into everybody’s little sister.

Mr. Remi Roberts – Owner of the Pub. He’s got all our backs. You’ll never see him without either his Pub shirt or his Whiskey Avenger shirt.

What happened was it was JP’s last week in town and now that he left, Lafayette won’t see another bass player like that for a while. It was a Thursday so Whiskey Avenger was playing but JP had the night off. Remi gave him free beers just the same.

Also a bunch of us knew that Poirier’s couches were waiting down the road for anyone who couldn’t drive home. Whoever wanted to crash there had to toss their car keys in a pitcher behind the bar, and Remi kept an eye on them and gave us a freebee once in a while. There were a bunch of keys in there man. JP was leaving, we all wanted to live it up you know?

Anyway what I’m getting at is at two-thirty Whiskey Avenger ended the show with fifteen minutes of “You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling.” JP always had a soft spot for that dumb song and nobody knows why. He jumped on stage and grabbed a spare guitar for the last ten minutes. When they quit playing nobody could see straight. We were too drunk to even pack up their stuff. After stashing just one speaker in the cab of Poirier’s truck, we said we’d finish breaking down the stuff the next morning when Remi opened the place

back up. Most of the crowd had split, hugging the hell out of JP and telling him to buy coats and hope his plans fall through so he has to move back down here – you know, the usual goodbye shit. At about three, there were only a few of us around. Jack and Poirier were shooting dice at the end of the bar. Sal was making them play for quarters instead of dollars. Drew said his throat hurt from singing all night, and split with his guitar saying he'd see JP the next day at Poirier's bar-be-que.

JP had been walking around, then stopped. "Where's Erin?"

We all kind of looked around the bar but she wasn't anywhere. I'd only met the little blonde that night. She's young, that was probably her first night really drinking. JP went looking for her, and I followed him out the back of the Pub. Our little friend was on the pavement leaning on Poirier's front tire. She was hammered and too young to take it. JP says some stuff, but the girl is way way out of it. He was all, "If you need to puke, just go, man. We won't watch. Seriously, you'll feel better." She didn't hear. Or if she did, she didn't move. I was kind of chuckling at the tire marks on her arms and JP looked at me and said he'll see if he can get her to Poirier's house. "I'll set her up on a couch, make sure she's okay then be right back." It sounded pretty smart to me. He tried to help her up, but she was already on her feet, and sort of walking. Just mentioning a place to crash was enough to get her up. JP was a step behind her going to Poirier's. I lit a joe and leaned against the back door of the Pub watching them make their way down the road. As they were stumbling and goofing off, this old old Caddy pulls up next to them and this fucking bastard with towel around his face (a friggin' towel!) and dreadlocks poking out of his cap (just my opinion – white guys shouldn't have dreadlocks) jumps out the passenger door and pulls a gun and points it in JP's face.

And this is why I think JP is the coolest motherfucker on the planet – he just starts cracking up at the guy.

He's frigging laughing his ass off while the guy's trying to be all serious. I couldn't move. Don't tell anyone, but I was scared as shit. The towel guy was into the getting-it-over-quick thing, so he takes a step and cracks JP on the side of his head with the gun. Now, JP ain't a big guy, plus that night he was blitzed, so he just goes right down. His glasses go flying into the air and land a few feet away. Erin freezes. Before the mugger gets any ideas, I yell at him and throw him my wallet. He kind of points his gun at me, but goes for my wallet on the street, then gets back into that shitty Caddy and they drive the fuck off.

Me, I'm calling Remi from my cell as I go over to JP and wait for everybody to come out the pub. I'm trying to talk to Erin standing on the sidewalk and still won't move, and my podna's out cold, glasses in pieces on the ground. This is fucked up. Right outside the Pub this shit has to happen. I could see if we were downtown or something but fuck, we're on McKinley St. Who the fuck gets mugged on McKinley? Everyone comes outside, and it takes about ten minutes, but JP comes around. We're all staggering back to the bar, JP is still laughing a little and asking, "Why are all of you guys so serious all of a sudden?"

IV. The First Vengeance

(Transcription of an audio recording that can be found in the archives of The McKinley St. Pub, which catalogues many of the musical acts that perform there. The jewel case lists the artists as *Whiskey Avenger (After JP left)*. It is little more than a drunken rant from a regular, with unsteady drums and pseudo-jazzy bass lines in the background. – C. A. D.)

The power of the Holy Ghost brought to town! Standing, we're free as gods of old, ruling with Thunder! We Three, your silent warriors, kept to the dark of our fair city, in wait for the pestilence to show its cowardly self and demonstrate just what justice awaits.

Our hunting ground – Downtown. Jefferson St., the vein, protected that night. Our most noble decoy, drummer Poirier, walked the lonely hazard-path dressed in most feminine of fabrics. Trap primed – mark set.

The Demons zero in and spring free the vigilante shadows of the night! Your impromptu basser, charging car and extracting Sword of Justice – edge thrust to face of Maniac Driver. No one moves when ninja has drawn blade to face.

I scream the Battle Cry... YOU NO MUG!... and Nun Chucks of Retribution go a'swinging at the poor soul exiting the Vehicle of Larceny, set only on our decoy, blind to his own prey. From doubt to faith by chucks and blade – we avenge. No crime will be committed this night, no sir. Assailants, bruised and confused, by the collars were grabbed, writhing to the tune of my vengeance. Our Swordsman kindly opened the rear door of the car as I threw the fucker in!

The Thieves speed off into the night with marks of their transgressions to teach others what it means to fuck with the Brigade; surely they spread the word that any future attempts on the security of our citizens will be met with the Resistance!

III. Articulate Persuasion

(Note to self: Think about order, but place this part early on in the novel. Probably right after the song about the Ninja's first attack. – C. A. D.)

Andrew bought the first pitcher, and therefore was obligated to open the debate as he poured the drinks. "We're standing up to those fuckers."

Jack took the pitcher and filled his plastic cup. "Yeah. Sure," he said, and passed the pitcher to Poirier. The three sat at the bar of the mostly deserted Pub. JP had left for Boston earlier that afternoon, and Andrew invited the remaining band to commiserate.

"I'm serious," he said. "This is our town. We went to high school here. We barely made it through college here. Man, we popped our cherries here."

Jack took a drink. "I know where you're going with this. And you're full of shit." He tugged at his beard, which was reaching a manageable length.

"Man, go play. What's the big deal?"

"Well, it's illegal. Impractical. It's full of holes. And it's fucking dangerous."

"Not as much as you think. Look, man, we'll be prepared. We can plan. Every detail. The suits, the weapons, no stone unturned. We, my friend, are many."

"We, my friend," Poirier said, "are out of our minds. But hey, me, I'm up for whatever." He simultaneously scratched at his protruding midsection and tugged at his dark sideburns.

"Dude," Andrew turned to Jack, "If we get prepared, we'll get the drop on 'em. We owe it to JP. We won't get another bass player like that."

Jack frowned at his drink.

Remi walked over to the trio, having run out of customers to tend to. “Why are you guys so glum? You’re killing business.”

It was Poirier who spoke up. “No offense, pal, but I don’t think you should know.”

“Right,” Andrew said. “We love ya bro, but you can’t know about this.”

“Fine, assholes. You’re paying full price.” Remi took a few steps to the stereo controls behind the bar and turned up the volume, and then walked over to the other side of the bar to converse with Ike.

Jack stared at a sticker behind the bar, posted on the paneling below the Ol’ Dog sticker that separated the register from the whisky selection. It depicted a stop sign; beneath were the words BED WETTING. He lit a cigarette and tapped his fingers to the music.

“Anyway,” Andrew said. “I already ordered the suits from on-line. They should be in next week.”

“I still think you’re crazy.”

“Dude, look. This is one of those times in a man’s life that he has a choice. Ten years from now, say, you’ll look back here.” Andrew stared blankly into the mirrors behind the bar, insinuating great wisdom in his words. “If you don’t do anything, you’ll wish you did.”

Jack grunted. “That’s not my style.”

Andrew smirked. “You’re telling me you wouldn’t go back and follow Stephanie to Cali if you could?”

“That’s low, man.”

Poirier poured another round from a fresh pitcher, and drank a while in silence. He attempted to end the awkwardness. “Another storm’s coming,” he said, nodding to the television screen displaying the weather forecast.

“That’s exactly why I’m making this proposal.”

“You know, I have no idea how to use nun chucks,” offered Poirier.

“Okay,” Andrew said, slamming an open palm on the sticky bar. “You just volunteered to be the bait. No one’s gonna see this storm coming.”

* * *

Jack drove home that night, careful to stay five miles-per-hour below the speed limit. The local radio was on auto-pilot at that hour, and generally played the less popular bands in line with his preference. When an older song that had been lost in the obscurity of newer trends began to play, Stephanie came to mind. It

was something Drew said. The song took him back to Stephanie. He had driven her to the airport the day she left, the flowers remaining beneath his car seat – he decided not to give them to her at the last minute. It was something Drew said that night. He reached a decision.

V. Equal and Opposite

Jack and Andrew crouched behind a parked car, adjusting their costumes. After months of setting ambushes, the ritual had taken on more significance with each outing. Pointing to the red Japanese character on Andrew's head band, Jack asked, "What does that mean, anyway?"

"It's supposed to mean 'Sword.' But it probably means something like White People Will Buy Anything Asian."

Jack chuckled, running his fingers together to tighten his gloves. He looked into the deserted street for any signs of movement. The weather had turned overcast. A street lamp blinked in the distance, and the parked cars that lined the street oscillated in and out of visibility.

"It's goddamn freezing out here," Jack said, handing Andrew his pouch of throwing stars. "We'll see if anything goes down tonight, then we'll take off for a month or two if nothing happens."

"For true? Well, we haven't seen anybody in weeks."

"I guess that means it's working. These punks are learning," Jack said, extending an arm across his torso, an exercise Poirier had taught him in little league.

"See? And you thought it was a bad idea."

"It is a bad idea. But, we--" His voice was cut off by a high pitched whistle coming from the street.

"It's Poirier," Andrew said. "He's in position."

"Jesus, he looks like a fruit in that shirt. Why'd he go with pink this time? The yellow one in the wash?"

"That's my shirt."

Jack pulled the hood over his head and stood up. "Your shirt is fruity."

"Very funny, jerk. Pick a bush to hide in and shut up."

The three waited in ambush for two hours. At four a.m., Poirier casually walked to a deserted park bench and sat down. He spoke to the crouched figure behind it.

“No one’s around, let’s get the hell out of here. I got work tomorrow.”

The crouching shadow mumbled in acquiescence, and told Poirier he should just walk home. As he stood up to head home, a BMW with running lights pulled next to him. A pale arm holding a pistol emerged from inside. The gun was pointed directly at Poirier’s large midsection.

“Christ, man. Here’s my money.” He quickly fumbled with the objects in his pockets, and dropped the empty wallet.

As planned, Jack and Andrew approached the rear of the car from their respective hiding points on either side of the street. Jack unsheathed his katana and headed for the driver. Andrew, approaching from the passenger side, could see unusual alarm in Poirier’s face and quickened his step, running to the car with less theatrical movement and more with genuine protection. Jack noticed the absence of flamboyant movements, and before he could make anything of it, an unseen shooter opened fire in the darkness of the street behind them.

Andrew looked behind him and saw flashes of muzzle flare and heard the occasional bullet ricochet off the pavement. He ran to the sidewalk for cover.

Jack had an easier time making his way back to the curb; he ran in a crouch as quickly as he could, sandwiched between the sounds of gunshots. He reached the bench on the sidewalk, out of view for the car at least, and held his breath. His grip on the katana tightened, and the sword wavered in his grip. After a few seconds, the gunshots became less and less frequent until they stopped completely. He looked over the back of the bench. The car had sped off and the street was silent. He waited, afraid that any noise or motion would set off another bout of violence.

“Guys?” he called out after the silence became unbearable. “Hey!”

A shadow stood up across the street. “I called the ambulance,” it called. Jack cautiously ran across the street, disrobing as he went. When he reached Andrew, he used his shirt to wrap the bullet wound in his friend’s right shoulder. “Where’s our boy?”

In the middle of the street, in a growing pool of blood, Poirier lay motionless.

VI. Counterpoint

The Teche News, October 17, 2005: Gerald Baptiste of St. Martinville was released from Lafayette General Hospital today at noon. Baptiste was hospitalized after a robbery in downtown Lafayette last Friday night. He was admitted with bruises from blows to the head from a blunt object. According to Baptiste, his assailants attacked without warning. Most startling was the fact that they appeared to be wearing ninja costumes.

When asked, Chief of Police Tom Richard responded, “We’re looking into exactly what Mr. Baptiste was doing earlier that night.”

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(Transcript of the Lafayette Parish Police interview with James Gautreaux, December 9, 2005)

Q. Like ninjas? Has this been going on for a while?

A. A couple of months.

Q. A couple of months?

A. Well, it’s not like this is every day. This was only about the fourth time.

Q. So you were the ones responsible for what happened to-- [papers rustling] --Gerald Baptiste?

A. I’m not sure. We weren’t in the habit of taking roll.

Q. How did you boys start all of this? What kicked it off?

A. One of our friends, Jean Paul, got held up at gun point one night. The mugger knocked him out with a gun.

Q. So you go after them yourselves?

A. The decision wasn’t reached so quickly, but essentially, yes, that’s how it happened.

Q. You didn’t think we could handle it?

A. Are you kidding? I don’t recall JP’s assailant ever being caught.

Q. That’s no reason to take the law into your own hands.

A. The dead can do nothing easy.

Q. You come up with that yourself?

A. Ben Franklin.

Q. If you say so. Where is Jean Paul now?

A. Boston.

Q. That's a pretty good distance away. What's he doing up there?

A. Working as a sound engineer. The week before he left, it happened.

Q. Does he know anything about this?

A. No.

Q. Says here you lived in Houston for a time.

A. Graduate school. UT. History, before you ask.

Q. Why did you move back here?

A. I dropped out.

Q. Why?

A. Personal reasons.

Q. [Laughter] That usually means a woman.

A. ...

Q. You know, your friend might not pull through.

A. I'm aware of that.

VIII. Connect/Disconnect. From the Journal of Carson Davis

I met JP in person after living in a hotel for months. He was in town visiting family for the Fourth. We had exchanged a few letters, but equivocal responses didn't sit right with me. The more I learned, the less sense the actions of his friends made. I figured I could get something more out of him if we spoke face to face.

Honestly, I was stuck with the book. A single mugging doesn't warrant dressing up like clowns and hitting back. There had to be something they knew that I didn't, and that would make everything click. The more I thought about it, though, the more I feared the justification simply wasn't there or, worse, it was

something mundane, another insignificant action that wasn't quite enough to make a sane person become a vigilante, costumed or not.

At the Pub, I was watching the Astros get embarrassed. Remi asked how the book was going, and I shrugged my shoulders and told him that a shot of Bourbon said that Biggio would strike out.

After I paid for Remi's shot, he walked over to the other end of the bar. I was staring at this sticker on the wall between the register and the liquor selection. It was a crude illustration of an old dog: mangy fur, thin as a rail, hunched over like it just got the shit kicked out of it, tail tucked awkwardly between its legs. Beneath it: it's been a good year.

That's when Jean Paul came in and sat down at the bar, two stools away from me. "Astros are having a shit year," he said to the screen.

"Aren't we all?" I said.

"Jesus, man. I just meant baseball." He lit a cigarette and Remi brought him a Budweiser. A spiky tattoo poked out his shirt sleeves. The television reflected off his glasses, so it was hard to tell if he was looking at me or behind me to the rest of the bar.

"Dude," Remi said to me, waving a thumb. "This is JP."

JP's eyes widened. "Carson?"

I raised my bottle in a salute.

"I thought I'd run into you here."

"How's Boston?" I asked.

"Busy. Pretty bid adjustment."

I wasn't sure where I stood with him. I didn't know if I should press the situation right off or ease into it somehow.

"I used to play here, you know," he said after the first sip of his next beer. "Whiskey Avenger. We mostly made it up as we went along." He grinned to himself, looking around the pub.

"I heard that, yeah. Heard you're quite the bassist."

"No. I just look good doing it." He smirked and looked at the stage. There was an old billiard table that these kids renovated to play something called beer pong. "You might've dug it."

I didn't think so, but I didn't tell him. "Have you spoken with any of them lately?" I asked.

The grin disappeared. He turned back to the screen and started drumming on the sticky bar with his fingertips. He opened his mouth to answer, and then stopped himself. He took a long drag of his cigarette in capitulation. “Dude, what the hell do you know? You weren’t around when it happened. What’ve you got to do with anything?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Probably nothing.” I looked around the bar and knew that I was out of place. Christ, I was the only guy in that place who knew what a Windsor knot was. As friendly as these guys had been (I didn’t expect anyone to talk to me, let alone conduct interviews; that kid bartender even wrote out what happened to JP; Remi let me transcribe the recording of Andrew ranting, etc.), I was an outsider. Some things you don’t talk to outsiders about.

“I saw Sal today,” Jean Paul said as I was about to leave.

“Sal?”

“Poirier’s girl.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s in pieces. She wouldn’t stop smiling. She wouldn’t stop moving for anything, either. First it was to get drinks. Then adjusting the thermostat. Then she stood next to her entertainment center messing with the dragons.”

“Dragons?”

“These little porcelain things. She’s got a shit load of them around.”

“She’s been collecting for a while?”

“I never saw any of them before. It’s weird. Her place was sort of in a mess. Dirty dishes, floor needed sweeping, shit like that. But the dragons didn’t have a speck of dust on them.”

JP scratched his facial stubble. Remi had brought him another beer and quickly disappeared in the back of the bar. I had considered abandoning the project. There was a stack of interviews and stories in my hotel room, arranged into a few chapters that I numbered in chronological order with titles and everything, and I didn’t care anymore. It didn’t seem complete. Something had to be missing, so I had been pumping these guys for more information. The situation was just too simple. Maybe I was too close. Maybe it was something else.

“Yeah,” I said. “Weird.”

* * *

(Letter from JP to Carson, dated May 2006)

Mr. Davis,

I'd suppose the worst part about that night is I don't remember it. I've reconstructed what happened from listening to everyone else talk about it, but I can't honestly tell you anything. What I do remember is being on stage with Drew and Poirier, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in the parking lot with Jack holding a bag of ice to my face and lighting a cigarette someone had given me.

You asked me if I learned anything from the experience. The closest thing to an answer is a story. The night after the Pub incident, Erin bought me diner/breakfast at IHOP. She didn't say it, but I think she felt responsible for what happened. It was late, about four a.m., and we were the only ones in the place. At some point, she had gone to the can and I was sitting by myself at the table, sipping my coffee. I hadn't finished my eggs because it hurt too much to chew, so I tried to avoid remembering it by gazing out the window. But the night had turned the glass into a mirror, and I saw the bruises. For most of the day, I would do my best to forget what was clear to anyone who saw my face. I learned quickly to avoid my reflection in restrooms and car mirrors, but there in the restaurant, it snuck on me and I couldn't avoid it.

I could have died last night, I thought. I could have died and I wouldn't have even remembered it. Dying in an alcoholic blackout. Sometimes, I think that I did die. Like that story (you probably know it) we read in high school where the guy gets hanged in the Civil War, but he thinks he escapes and lives on for years and years, but it turns out he did die and he just imagined it all while he was in the noose. It's like that.

Like I said, I try not to think about it too much. That night at IHOP, staring at my reflection in the window, I was thinking about what it would mean to remember your own death. When Erin came back, we paid the bill and left.

I don't really think about the guys who did it. They had their reasons and it probably didn't have anything to do with me personally. I don't know their story and I don't care. These things happen. Maybe you can find one of them who'll fess up and let you interview them. But to answer your question – No, I don't hate them. I would have to care first.

As for Jack and them, what can I say? They took it more seriously than I let myself do.

- JP

IX. It's Been a Good Year

i guess if someone reads this it probably means that i forgot my notebook at the pub. who knows where i am now (?) let Remi know that he can keep all my notes and stuff. i've given up, i think. there is nothing to do about it. murder is as old as the human condition. we've created religion to punish transgressors where man's justice has failed. either that or we dress up as ninjas, i guess. is there really anyone to blame? we all act in our own self interest, more or less. can understanding change any of that? we don't solve it – we cope with it. then we finish off our days collecting dragons. when i was writing today, i slipped up. i wrote my wife's name instead of sal's. it was the bit about the cookout after jp's mugging. when i looked back at the page, her name was there and i didn't remember writing it. how do we deal with a situation that we have no control over? sometimes, sticking your head in the sand makes as much sense. yet we call those that so make a stand heroes – even if they are foolish. i've spent a year here looking for an ending. it's not here. i drove one thousand one hundred sixty four miles to get to this place, and her ghost followed every one of them. only i can't bring myself to start gathering dragons for her. there's a web of no sense here. pick out a few strands to highlight and you can approach something called meaning. but what if you highlight, there is no meaning? but grow up, man. you're too old for that. right now, somewhere on the 196,937,400 square miles of the planet, there is a good thing that's so goddamn profound that it'll make you feel like an asshole to think, even for a second, that dragons are silly. i guess i have to look for mine now. heroes. our greatest ones are the ones who fail.

there was that one guy who is in the same boat. it's just that his woman left him. they call him the smart one, with the long damn beard. when i was interviewing him in the visitor's area, he spotted my wedding ring.

“you've been here for a while. you miss her?” he asked.

sure, kid. i miss her

II. Ramification

The day after JP was mugged, Poirier bar-be-que'd all afternoon; it was his goodbye to his friend. The present group, however, was much more intimate than planned. It was a sunny, hot day as Poirier stood over his pit in his backyard with a cigar hanging out of his mouth, can of beer in one hand and spatula in the other.

“Won’t get the Creole cooking in Massachusetts,” he called to JP over the small radio next to him on his back porch. He began murmuring to the song.

“Baby,” Sal said standing next to him, “you’re killing the song. Just cook.” She grabbed a link of sausage off the pit. JP and Erin were reclined on the porch swing, she holding ice wrapped in a towel to his left eye.

“I don’t...think it’ll swell up too much,” she said.

“Hooray.” He knew the ice was a useless gesture twelve hours after the incident but wanted her to feel as if she were helping.

“I can’t believe this. Of all people.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, you’ve got, what, three days left here? I can’t believe it.”

“Two days.”

“You know, I feel bad. It was sort of, kind of my fault.”

“It *was* your fault,” Poirier called out, and then Sal punched him in the arm.

“You, you stay out of this,” she told Poirier.

“It was your fault,” JP said.

“God, okay, okay. I’m *sorry*.” She held JP’s head in both hands and looked directly at him, an inch away from his face. “*I’m sorry*.” She let his head fall back on his shoulders. “Now, do you feel better?”

“Ow.”

The small radio filled in the silence of the next few minutes. Poirier placed the freshly cooked burgers on a plate and covered them with aluminum foil; Sal placed a few more on the grill, and put an unannounced arm around Poirier.

Andrew walked through the back door, six-pack in hand. “Get your booze here, ladies and gentlemen. What, are you two cuddling?” He nodded at the pair on the swing.

Poirier called out again through teeth gently clenched around the cigar. "JP got pistol-whipped last night."

"God," Sal said, "You can say it a little nicer."

"For true? Beer, man?" JP groaned and took the can. Andrew examined his bruised face. "Christ, they did a number on ya."

"They hit him with a gun," Erin said. "Really scary."

"A goddamn gun?" Andrew placed the remainder of the six-pack on the porch beside the pair. "This is fucked up. Hey, you remember that guy Squeaks?"

"Squeaks? The guitar guy?" Sal asked.

"Two weeks ago, he got mugged downtown. He was just walking back to his car. Got jumped by like, four guys."

Erin stroked JP's hair. "Looks like you're leaving just in time."

"That's it," Andrew said. "You guys know where we can get some nun chucks?"

THE END