

# DREDGE

By Matt Bell

THE DROWNED GIRL DRIPS EVERYWHERE, soaking the cheap cloth of the Ford's back seat. Punter stares at her from the front of the car, first taking in her long blond hair, wrecked by the pond's amphibian sheen, then her lips, blue where the lipstick's been washed away, flaky red where it hasn't. He looks into her glassy green eyes, her pupils so dilated the irises are slivered halos, the right eye further polluted with burst blood vessels. She wears a lace-frilled gold tank top, a pair of acid wash jeans with grass stains on the knees and the ankles. A silver bracelet around her wrist throws off sparkles in the window-filtered moonlight, the same sparkle he saw through the lake's dark mirror, that made him drop his fishing pole and wade out, then dive in after her. Her feet are bare except for a silver ring on her left pinkie toe, suggesting the absence of sandals, flip-flops, something lost in a struggle. Suggesting too many things for Punter to process all at once.

Punter turns and faces forward. He lights a cigarette, then flicks it out the window after just two drags. Smoking with the drowned girl in the car reminds him of when he worked at the plastics factory, how he would sometimes taste melted plastic in every puff of smoke.

How a cigarette there hurt his lungs, left him gasping, his tongue coated with the taste of polyvinyl chloride, of adipates and phthalates. How that taste would leave his throat sore, would make his stomach ache all weekend.

The idea that some part of the dead girl might end up inside him—her wet smell or sloughing skin or dumb luck—he doesn't need a cigarette that bad.

Punter crawls halfway into the back seat and arranges the girl as comfortably as he can, while he still can. He's hunted enough deer and rabbits and squirrels to know she's going to stiffen soon. He arranges her arms and legs until she appears asleep, then brushes her hair out of her face before he climbs back into his own seat.

Looking in the rearview, Punter smiles at the drowned girl, waits for her to smile back. Feels his face flush when he remembers she's never going to.

He starts the engine. Drives her home.

Punter lives fifteen minutes from the pond but tonight it takes longer. He keeps the Ford five miles per hour under the speed limit, stops extra long at every stop sign. He thinks about calling the police, about how he should have already done so, instead of dragging the girl onto the shore and into his car.

The cops, they'll call this disturbing the scene of a crime. Obstructing justice. Tampering with evidence.

What the cops will say about what he's done, Punter already knows all about it.

At the house, he leaves the girl in the car while he goes inside and takes a shit, his stool as black and bloody as it has been for months. It burns when he wipes. He needs to see a doctor, but doesn't have insurance, hasn't since getting fired.

Afterward, he sits at the kitchen table and smokes a

cigarette. The phone is only a few feet away, hanging on the wall. Even though the service was disconnected a month ago, he's pretty sure he could still call 911, if he wanted to.

He doesn't want to.

In the garage, he lifts the lid of the chest freezer that sits against the far wall. He stares at the open space above the paper-wrapped bundles of venison, tries to guess if there's enough room, then stacks piles of burger and steak and sausage on the floor until he's sure. He goes out to the car and opens the back door. He lifts the girl, grunting as he gathers her into his arms like a child. He's not as strong as he used to be, and she's heavier than she looks, with all the water filling her lungs and stomach and intestinal tract. Even through her tank top he can see the way it bloats her belly like she's pregnant. He's careful as he lays her in the freezer, as he brushes the hair out of her eyes again, as he holds her eyelids closed until he's sure they'll stay that way.

The freezer will give him time to figure out what he wants. What he needs. What he and she are capable of together.

Punter wakes in the middle of the night and puts his boots on in a panic. In the freezer, the girl's covered in a thin layer of frost, and he realizes he shouldn't have put her away wet. He considers taking her out, thawing her, toweling her off, but doesn't. It's too risky. One thing Punter knows about himself is that he is not always good at saying when.

He closes the freezer lid, goes back to the house, back to bed but not to sleep. Even wide awake, he can see the

curve of her neck, the interrupting line of her collarbones intersecting the thin straps of her tank top. He reaches under his pajama bottoms, past the elastic of his underwear, then squeezes himself until the pain takes the erection away.

On the news the next morning, there's a story about the drowned girl. The anchorman calls her missing but then says the words *her name was*. Punter winces. It's only a slip, but he knows how hurtful the past tense can be.

The girl is younger than Punter had guessed, a high school senior at the all-girls school across town. Her car was found yesterday, parked behind a nearby gas station, somewhere Punter occasionally fills up his car, buys cigarettes and candy bars.

The anchorman says the police are currently investigating, but haven't released any leads to the public.

The anchorman looks straight into the camera and says it's too early to presume the worst, that the girl could still show up at any time.

Punter shuts off the television, stubs out his cigarette. He takes a shower, shaves, combs his black hair straight back. Dresses himself in the same outfit he wears every day, a white t-shirt and blue jeans and black motorcycle boots.

On the way to his car, he stops by the garage and opens the freezer lid. Her body is obscured behind ice like frosted glass. He puts a finger to her lips, but all he feels is cold.

The gas station is on a wooded stretch of gravel road between Punter's house and the outskirts of town. Although Punter has been here before, he's never seen it

so crowded. While he waits in line he realizes these people are here for the same reason he is, to be near the site of the tragedy, to see the last place this girl was seen.

The checkout line crawls while the clerk runs his mouth, ruining his future testimony by telling his story over and over, transforming his eyewitness account into another harmless story.

The clerk says, I was the only one working that night. Of course I remember her.

In juvie, the therapists had called this narrative therapy, or else constructing a preferred reality.

The clerk says, Long blond hair, tight-ass jeans, all that tan skin—I'm not saying she brought in on herself, but you can be sure she knew people would be looking.

The clerk, he has black glasses and halitosis and fingernails chewed to keratin pulp. Teeth stained with cigarettes or chewing tobacco or coffee. Or all of the above. He reminds Punter of himself, and he wonders if the clerk feels the same, if there is a mutual recognition between them.

When it's Punter's turn, the clerk says, I didn't see who took her, but I wish I had.

Punter looks away, reads the clerk's name tag. OSWALD.

The clerk says, If I knew who took that girl, I'd kill him myself.

Punter shivers as he slides his bills across the counter, as he takes his carton of cigarettes and his candy bar. He doesn't stop shivering until he gets out of the air-conditioned store and back inside his sun-struck car.

The therapists had told Punter that what he'd done was a mistake, that there was nothing wrong with him. They made him repeat their words back to them, to absolve himself of the guilt they were so sure he was feeling.

The therapists had said, You were just kids. You didn't know what you were doing.

Punter said the words they wanted, but doing so changed nothing. He'd never felt the guilt they told him he should. Even now, he has only the remembered accusations of cops and judges to convince him that what he did was wrong.

Punter cooks two venison steaks in a frying pan with salt and butter. He sits down to eat, cuts big mouthfuls, then chews and chews, the meat tough from overcooking. He eats past the point of satiation on into discomfort, until his stomach presses against the tight skin of his abdomen. He never knows how much food to cook. He always clears his plate.

When he's done eating, he smokes and thinks about the girl in the freezer. How, when walking her out of the pond, she had threatened to slip out of his arms and back into the water. How he'd held on, carrying her up and out into the starlight. He hadn't saved her—couldn't have—but he had preserved her, kept her safe from the wet decay, from the mouths of fish and worse.

He knows the freezer is better than the refrigerator, that the dry cold of meat and ice is better than the slow rot of lettuce and leftovers and ancient, crust-rimmed condiments. Knows that even after death, there is a safety in the preservation of a body, that there is a second kind of life to be had.

Punter hasn't been to the bar near the factory since he got fired, but tonight he needs a drink. By eight, he's already been out to the garage four times, unable to keep from opening the freezer lid. If he doesn't stop, the constant

thawing and refreezing will destroy her, skin first.

It's mid-shift at the factory, so the bar is empty except for the bartender and two guys sitting together at the rail, watching the ball game on the television mounted above the liquor shelves. Punter takes a stool at the opposite end, orders a beer and lights a cigarette. He looks at the two men, tries to decide if they're men he knows from the plant. He's bad with names, bad at recognizing most people. One of the men catches him looking and gives him a glare that Punter immediately looks away from. He knows that he stares too long at people, that it makes them uncomfortable, but he can't help himself. He moves his eyes to his hands to his glass to the game, which he also can't make any sense of. Sports move too fast, are full of rules and behaviors he finds incomprehensible.

During commercials, the station plugs its own late-night newscast, including the latest about the missing girl. Punter stares at the picture of her on the television screen, his tongue growing thick and dry for the five seconds the image is displayed. One of the other men drains the last gulp of his beer and shakes his head, says, I hope they find the fucker that killed her and cut his balls off.

So you think she's dead then?

Of course she's dead. You don't go missing like that and not end up dead.

The men motion for another round as the baseball game comes back from the break. Punter realizes he's been holding his breath, lets it go in a loud, hacking gasp. The bartender and two men turn to look, so he holds a hand up, trying to signal he doesn't need any help, then puts it down when he realizes they're not offering. He pays his tab and gets up to leave.

He hasn't thought much about how the girl got into the pond, or who put her there. He too assumed murder,

but the who or why or when is not something he's previously considered.

In juvie, the counselors told him nothing he did or didn't do would have kept his mother alive, which Punter understood fine. Of course he hadn't killed his mother. That wasn't why he was there. It was what he'd done afterward that had locked him away, put him behind bars until he was eighteen.

This time, he will do better. He won't sit around for months while the police slowly solve the case, while they decide that what he's done is just as bad. This time, Punter will find the murderer himself, and he will make him pay.

He remembers: Missing her. Not knowing where she was, not understanding, just wishing she'd come back. Not believing his father, who told him that she'd left them, that she was gone forever.

He remembers looking for her all day while his father worked, wandering the road, the fields, the rooms of their small house.

He remembers descending into the basement one step at a time. Finding the light switch, waiting for the fluorescent tubes to warm up. Stepping off the wood steps, his bare feet aching at the cold of the concrete floor.

He remembers nothing out of the ordinary, everything in its place.

He remembers the olive green refrigerator and the hum of the lights being the only two sounds in the world.

He remembers walking across the concrete and opening the refrigerator door.

More than anything else, he remembers opening his mouth to scream and not being able to. He remembers

that scream being trapped in his chest like a fist, never to emerge.

When the eleven o' clock news comes on, Punter waits for the story about the girl. He's ready with his small, spiral-bound notebook and his golf pencil stolen from the keno caddy at the bar. He writes down the sparse information. The reporter recounts what Punter already knows—her name, the school, the abandoned car—then plays a clip of the local sheriff, who leans into the reporter's microphone and says, We're still investigating, but so far there's no proof for any of these theories. It's rare when someone gets out of their car and disappears on their own, but it does happen.

The sheriff pauses, listening to an inaudible question, then says, Whatever happened to her, it didn't happen in the car. There's no sign of a struggle, no sign of sexual assault or worse.

Punter crosses his legs, then uncrosses them. He presses the pencil down onto the paper and writes all of this down.

The next clip is of the girl's father and mother, standing behind a podium at a press conference. They are both dressed in black, both stern and sad in dress clothes. The father speaks, saying, If anyone out there knows what happened—if you know where our daughter is—please come forward. We need to know where she is.

Punter writes down the word *father*, writes down the words *mother* and *daughter*. He looks at his useless telephone. He could tell these strangers what they wanted, but what good would it do them? His own father had known exactly where his mother was, and it hadn't done either of them any good.

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According to the shows on television, the first part of an investigation is always observation, is always the gathering of clues. Punter opens the closet where he keeps his hunting gear and takes his binoculars out of their case. He hangs them around his neck and closes the closet door, then reopens it and takes his hunting knife off the top shelf. He doesn't need it, not yet, but he knows television detectives always carry a handgun to protect themselves. He only owns a rifle and a shotgun, both too long for this kind of work. The knife will have to be enough.

In the car, he puts the knife in the glove box and the binoculars on the seat. He takes the notebook out of his back pocket and reads the list of locations he's written down: the school, her parents' house, the pond and the gas station.

He reads the time when the clerk said he saw her and then writes down another, the time he found her in the pond. The two times are separated by barely a day, so she couldn't have been in the pond for too long.

Whatever happened to her, it happened fast.

He thinks that whoever did this, they must be a local to know about the pond. Punter has never actually seen anyone else there, only the occasional tire tracks, the left-behind beer bottles and cigarette butts from teenage parties. The condoms discarded further off in the bushes, where Punter goes to piss.

He thinks about the girl, about how he knows she would never consent to him touching her if she were still alive. About how she would never let him say the words he's said, the words he still wants to say. He wonders what he will do when he finds her killer. His investigation, it could be either an act of vengeance or thanksgiving, but it is still too early to know which.

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Punter has been to the girl's school once before, when the unemployment office sent him to interview for a janitorial position there. He hadn't been offered the job, couldn't have passed the background check if he had. His juvenile record was sealed, but there was enough there to warn people, and schools never took any chances.

He circles the parking lot twice, then parks down the sidewalk from the front entrance, where he'll be able to watch people coming in and out of the school. He resists the urge to use the binoculars, knows he must control himself in public, must keep from acting on every thought he has. This is why he hasn't talked in months. Why he keeps to himself in his house, hunting and fishing, living off the too-small government disability checks the unemployment counselors helped him apply for.

These counselors, they hadn't wanted him to see what they wrote down for his disability, but he had. Seeing those words written in the counselor's neat script didn't make him angry, just relieved to know. He wasn't bad anymore. He was a person with a disorder, with a trauma. No one had ever believed him about this, especially not the therapist in juvie, who had urged Punter to open up, who had gotten angry when he couldn't. They didn't believe him when he said he'd already told them everything he had inside him.

Punter knows they were right to disbelieve him, that he did have feelings he didn't want to let out.

When Punter pictures the place where other people keep their feelings, all he sees is his own trapped scream, imagined as a devouring ball of sound, hungry and hot in his guts.

A bell rings from inside the building. Soon the doors

open, spilling girls out onto the sidewalk and into the parking lot. Punter watches parents getting out of other cars, going to greet their children. One of these girls might be a friend of the drowned girl, and if he could talk to her then he might be able to find out who the drowned girl was. Might be able to make a list of other people he needed to question so that he could solve her murder.

The volume and the increasing number of distinct voices, all of it overwhelms Punter. He stares, watching the girls go by in their uniforms. All of them are identically clothed and so he focuses instead on their faces, on their hair, on the differences between blondes and brunettes and redheads. He watches the girls smiling and rolling their eyes and exchanging embarrassed looks as their mothers step forward to receive them.

He watches the breeze blow all that hair around all those made-up faces. He presses himself against the closed door of his Ford, holds himself still.

He closes his eyes and tries to picture the drowned girl here, wearing her own uniform, but she is separate now, distinct from these girls and the life they once shared. Punter's glad. These girls terrify him in a way the drowned girl does not.

A short burst of siren startles Punter, and he twists around in his seat to see a police cruiser idling its engine behind him, its driver side window rolled down. The cop inside is around Punter's age, his hair starting to gray at the temples but the rest of him young and healthy-looking. The cop yells something, hanging his left arm out the window, drumming his fingers against the side of the cruiser, but Punter can't hear him through the closed windows, not with all the other voices surrounding him.

Punter opens his mouth, then closes it without saying anything. He shakes his head, then locks his driver's side door, suddenly afraid that the cop means to drag him

from the car, to put hands on him as other officers did when he was a kid. He looks up from the lock to see the cop outside of his cruiser, walking toward Punter's own car.

The cop raps on Punter's window, waits for him to roll down the window. He stares at Punter, who tries to look away, inadvertently letting his eyes fall on another group of teenage girls.

The cop says, You need to move your car. This is a fire lane.

Punter tries to nod, finds himself shaking his head instead. He whispers that he'll leave, that he's leaving. The cop says, I can't hear you. What did you say?

Punter turns the key, sighs when the engine turns over. He says, I'm going. He says it as loud as he can, his vocal cords choked and rusty.

There are too many girls walking in front of him for Punter to pull forward, and so he has to wait as the cop gets back in his own car. Eventually the cop puts the cruiser in reverse, lets him pass. Punter drives slowly out of the parking lot and onto the city streets, keeping the car slow, keeping it straight between the lines.

Afraid that the cop might follow him, Punter sticks to the main roads, other well-populated areas, but he gets lost anyway. These aren't places he goes. A half hour passes, and then another. Punter's throat is raw from smoking. His eyes ache from staring into the rearview mirror, and his hands tremble so long he fears they might never stop.

At home, Punter finds the girl's parents in the phonebook, writes down their address. He knows he has to be more careful, that if he isn't then someone will come looking for him too. He lies down on the couch to

wait for dark, falls asleep with the television tuned to daytime dramas and court shows. He dreams about finding the murderer, about hauling him into the police station in chains. He sees himself avenging the girl with a smoking pistol, emptying round after round into this faceless person, unknown but certainly out there, surely as marked by his crime as Punter was.

When he wakes up, the television is still on, broadcasting game shows full of questions Punter isn't prepared to answer. He gets up and goes into the bathroom, the pain in his guts doubling him over on the toilet. When he's finished, he takes a long, gulping drink from the faucet, then goes out into the living room to gather his notebook, his binoculars, his knife.

In the garage, he tries to lift the girl's tank top to get to the skin hidden underneath, but the fabric is frozen to her flesh. He can't tell if the sound of his efforts is the ripping of ice or of skin. He tries touching her through her clothes, but she's too far gone, distant with cold. He shuts the freezer door and leaves her again in the dark, but not before he explains what he's doing for her. Not before he promises to find the person who hurt her, to hurt this person himself.

Her parents' house is outside of town, at the end of a long tree-lined driveway. Punter drives past, then leaves his car parked down the road and walks back with the binoculars around his neck. Moving through the shadows of the trees, he finds a spot a hundred yards from the house, then scans the lighted windows for movement until he finds the three figures sitting in the living room. He recognizes her parents from the television, sees that the third person is a boy around the same age as the drowned girl. Punter watches him the closest, tries to

decide if this is the girl's boyfriend. The boy is all movement, his hands gesturing with every word he speaks. He could be laughing or crying or screaming and from this distance Punter wouldn't be able to tell the difference. He watches as the parents embrace the boy, then hurries back through the woods as soon as he sees the headlights come on in front of the house.

He makes it to his own car just as the boy's convertible pulls out onto the road. Punter starts the engine and follows the convertible through town, past the gas station and the downtown shopping, then into another neighborhood where the houses are smaller. He's never been here before, but he knows the plastics plant is close, that many of his old coworkers live nearby. He watches the boy park in front of a dirty white house, watches through the binoculars as the boy climbs the steps to the porch, as he rings the doorbell. The boy does not go in, but Punter's view is still obscured by the open door. Whatever happens only takes a few minutes, and then the boy is back in his car. He sits on the side of the road for a long time, smoking. Punter smokes too. He imagines getting out of the car and going up to the boy, imagines questioning him about the night of the murder. He knows he should, knows being a detective means taking risks, but he can't do it. When the boy leaves, Punter lets him go, then drives past the white house with his foot off the gas pedal, idling at a crawl. He doesn't see anything he understands, but this is not exactly new.

Back at the pond, the only evidence he gathers is that he was there himself. His tire tracks are the only ones backing up to the pond, his footprints the only marks along the shore. Whoever else was there before him has been given an alibi by Punter's own clumsiness. He

knows how this will look, so he finds a long branch with its leaves intact and uses it to rake out the sand, erasing the worst of his tracks. When he's done, he stares out over the dark water, trying to remember how it felt to hold her in his arms, to feel her body soft and pliable before surrendering her to the freezer.

He wonders if it was a mistake to take her from beneath the water. Maybe he should have done the opposite, should have stayed under the waves with her until his own lungs filled with the same watery weight, until he was trapped beside her. Their bodies would not have lasted. The fish would have dismantled their shells, and then Punter could have shown her the good person he's always believed himself to be, trapped underneath all this sticky rot.

For dinner he cooks two more steaks. All the venison the girl displaced is going bad in his aged refrigerator, and already the steaks are browned and bruised. To be safe, he fries them hard as leather. He has to chew the venison until his jaws ache and his teeth feel loose, but he finishes every bite, not leaving behind even the slightest scrap of fat.

Watching the late night news, Punter can tell that without any new evidence the story is losing steam. The girl gets only a minute of coverage, the reporter reiterating facts Punter's known for days. He stares at her picture again, at how her smile once made her whole face seem alive.

He knows he doesn't have much time. He crawls toward the television on his hands and knees, puts his hand on her image as it fades away. He turns around, sits with his back against the television screen. Behind him there is satellite footage of a tornado or a hurricane or a

flood. Of destruction seen from afar.

Punter wakes up choking in the dark, his throat closed off with something, phlegm or pus or he doesn't know what. He grabs a handkerchief off of his bed stand and spits over and over until he clears away the worst of it. He gets up to flip the light switch, but the light doesn't turn on. He tries it again, and then once more. He realizes how quiet the house is, how without the steady clacking of his wall clock the only sound in his bedroom is his own thudding heart. He leaves the bedroom, walks into the kitchen. The oven's digital clock stares at him like an empty black eye, while the refrigerator waits silent and still.

He runs out of the house in his underwear, his big bare feet slapping at the cold driveway. Inside the garage, the freezer is silent too. He lifts the lid, letting out a blast of frozen air, then slams it shut again after realizing he's wasted several degrees of chill to confirm something he already knows.

He knew this day was coming—the power company has given him ample written notice—but still he curses in frustration. He goes back inside and dresses hurriedly, then scavenges his house for loose change, for crumpled dollar bills left in discarded jeans. At the grocery down the road, he buys what little ice he can afford, his cash reserves exhausted until his next disability check. It's not enough, but it's all he can do.

Back in the garage, he works fast, cracking the blocks of ice on the cement floor and dumping them over the girl's body. He manages to cover her completely, suppressing the pang of regret he feels once he's unable to see her face through the ice. For a second, he considers crawling inside the freezer himself, sweeping away the ice

between them. Letting his body heat hers, letting her thaw into his arms.

What he wonders is, Would it be better to have one day with her than a forever separated by ice?

He goes back into the house and sits down at the kitchen table. Lights a cigarette, then digs through the envelopes on the table until he finds the unopened bill from the power company. He opens it, reads the impossible number, shoves the bill back into the envelope. He tries to calculate how long the ice will buy him, but he never could do math or figures, can't begin to start to solve a problem like this.

He remembers: The basement refrigerator had always smelled bad, like leaking coolant and stale air. It wasn't used much, had been kept out of his father's refusal to throw anything away more than out of any sense of utility. By the time Punter found his mother there, she was already bloated around the belly and the cheeks, her skin slick with something that glistened like petroleum jelly.

Unsure what he should do, he'd slammed the refrigerator door and ran back upstairs to hide in his bedroom. By the time his father came home, Punter was terrified his father would know he'd seen, that he'd kill him too. That what would start as a beating would end as a murder.

Only his father never said anything, never gave any sign the mother was dead. He stuck to his story, telling Punter over and over how his mother had run away and left them behind, until Punter's voice was too muted to ask.

Punter tried to forget, to believe his father's story, but he couldn't.

Punter tried to tell someone else, some adult, but he couldn't do that either. Not when he knew what would happen to his father. Not when he knew they would take her from him.

During the day, while his father worked, he went down to the basement and opened the refrigerator door.

At first, he only looked at her, at the open eyes and mouth, at the way her body had been jammed into the too-small space. At the way her throat was slit the same way his dad had once demonstrated on a deer that had fallen but not expired.

The first time he touched her, he was sure she was trying to speak to him, but it was only gas leaking out of her mouth, squeaking free of her lungs. Punter had rushed to pull her out of the refrigerator, convinced for a moment she was somehow alive, but when he wrapped his arms around her, all that gas rolled out of her mouth and nose and ears, sounding like a wet fart but smelling so much worse.

He hadn't meant to vomit on her, but he couldn't help himself.

Afterward, he took her upstairs and bathed her to get the puke off. He'd never seen another person naked, and so he tried not to look at his mother's veiny breasts, at the wet thatch of her pubic hair floating in the bath water.

Scrubbing her with a washcloth and a bar of soap, he averted his eyes the best he could.

Rinsing the shampoo out of her hair, he whispered he was sorry.

It was hard to dress her, but eventually he managed, and then it was time to put her back in the refrigerator before his father came home.

Closing the door, he whispered goodbye. I love you. I'll see you tomorrow.

The old clothes, covered with blood and vomit, he

took them out into the cornfield behind the house and buried them. Then came the waiting, all through the evening while his father occupied the living room, all through the night while he was supposed to be sleeping.

Day after day, he took her out and wrestled her up the stairs. He sat her on the couch or at the kitchen table, and then he talked, his normal reticence somehow negated by her forever silence. He'd never talked to his mother this much while she was alive, but now he couldn't stop telling her everything he had ever felt, all his trapped words spilling out one after another.

Punter knows that even if they hadn't found her and taken her away, she wouldn't have lasted forever. He had started finding little pieces of her left behind, waiting wet and squishy on the wooden basement steps, the kitchen floor, in between the cracks of the couch.

He tried to clean up after her, but sometimes his father would find one too. Then Punter would have to watch as his father held some squishy flake up to the light, rolling it between his fingers as if he could not recognize what it was or where it came from before throwing it in the trash.

Day after day, Punter bathed his mother to get rid of the smell, which grew more pungent as her face began to droop, as the skin on her arms wrinkled and sagged. He searched her body for patches of mold to scrub them off, then held her hands in his, marveling at how, even weeks later, her fingernails continued to grow.

Punter sits on his front step, trying to make sense of the scribbles in his notebook. He doesn't have enough, isn't even close to solving the crime, but he knows he has to, if he wants to keep the police away. If they figure the crime out before he does, if they question the killer, then they'll

eventually end up at the pond, where Punter's attempts at covering his tracks are unlikely to be good enough.

Punter doesn't need to prove the killer guilty, at least not with a judge and a jury. All he has to do is find this person, then make sure he never tells anyone what he did with the body. After that, the girl can be his forever, for as long as he has enough ice.

Punter drives, circling the scenes of the crime: The gas station, the school, her parents' house, the pond. He drives the circuit over and over, and even with the air conditioning cranked he can't stop sweating, his face drenched and fevered, his stomach hard with meat. He's halfway between his house and the gas station when his gas gauge hits empty. He pulls over and sits for a moment, trying to decide, trying to wrap his slow thoughts around his investigation. He opens his notebook, flips through its barely filled pages. He has written down so few facts, so few suspects, and there is so little time left.

In his notebook, he crosses out *father, mother, boyfriend*. He has only one name left, one suspect he hasn't disqualified, one other person that Punter knows has seen the girl. He smokes, considers, tries to prove himself right or wrong, gets nowhere.

He opens the door and stands beside the car. Home is in one direction, the gas station the other. Reaching back inside, he leaves the notebook and the binoculars but takes the hunting knife and shoves it into his waistband, untucking his t-shirt to cover the weapon.

What Punter decides, he knows it's only a guess, but he also believes that when a detective has a hunch, it always turns out for the best.

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It's not a long walk, but Punter gets tired fast. He sits down to rest, then can't get back up. He curls into a ball off the weed-choked shoulder, sleeps fitfully as cars pass by, their tires throwing loose gravel over his body. When he wakes up, it's dark out. His body is covered with gray dust, and he can't remember where he is. He's never walked this road before, and in the dark it's as alien as a foreign land. He studies the meager footprints in the dust, tracking himself until he knows which way he needs to go.

There are two cars parked behind the gas station, where the drowned girl's car was before it was towed away. One is a small compact, the other a newer sports car. The sports car's windows are rolled down, its stereo blaring music Punter doesn't know or understand, the words too fast for him to hear. He takes a couple steps into the trees beside the road, slows his approach until his gasps for air grow quieter. Leaning against the station are two young men in t-shirts and blue jeans, nearly identical with their purposely mussed hair and scraggly stubble. With them are two girls—one redhead and one brunette—still wearing their school uniforms, looking even younger than Punter knows they are.

The brunette presses her hand against her man's chest, and the man's own hand clenches her hip. Punter can see how firmly he's holding her, how her skirt is bunched between his fingers, exposing several extra inches of thigh.

He thinks of his girl thawing at home, how soon he will have to decide how badly he wants to feel that, to feel her skin so close to his own.

He thinks of the boyfriend he saw through the binoculars. Wonders if *boyfriend* is really the word he needs.

The redhead, she takes something from the unoccupied man, puts it on her tongue. The man laughs, then motions to his friend, who releases his girl and picks a twelve pack of beer up off the cement. All four of them get into the sports car and drive off together in the direction of the pond, the town beyond. Punter stands still as they pass, knowing they won't see him, that he is already—has always been—a ghost to their world.

Punter coughs, not caring where the blood goes. He checks his watch, the numbers glowing digital green in the shadows of the trees. He's not out of time yet, but he can't think of any way to buy more. He decides.

Once the decision is made, it's nothing to walk into the empty gas station, to push past the waist-high swinging door to get behind the counter. It's nothing to grab the gas station clerk and press the knife through his uniform, into the small of his back. Nothing to ignore the way the clerk squeals as Punter pushes him out from behind the counter.

The clerk says, You don't have to do this.

He says, Anything you want, take it. I don't fucking care, man.

It's nothing to ignore him saying, Please don't hurt me.

It's nothing to ignore the words, to keep pushing the clerk toward the back of the gas station, to the hallway leading behind the coolers. Punter pushes the clerk down to his knees, feels his own feet slipping on the cool tile. He keeps one hand on the knife while the other grips the clerk's shoulder, his fingers digging into the hollows left

between muscle and bone.

The clerk says, Why are you doing this?

Punter lets go of the clerk's shoulder and smacks him across the face with the blunt edge of his hand. He chokes the words out. The girl. I'm here about the girl.

What girl?

Punter smacks him again, and the clerk swallows hard, blood or teeth.

Punter says, You know. You saw her. You told me.

Her? The clerk's lips split, begin to leak. He says, I never did anything to that girl. I swear.

Punter thinks of the clerk's bragging, about how excited he was to be the center of attention. He growls, grabs a fistful of greasy hair, then yanks hard, exposing the clerk's stubbled throat, turning his face sideways until one eye faces Punter's.

The clerk's glasses fall off, clatter to the tile.

The clerk says, Punter.

He says, I know you. Your name is Punter. You come in here all the time.

The clerk's visible eye is wide, terrified with hope, and for one second Punter sees his mother's eyes, sees the girl's, sees his hand closing both their eyelids for the last time.

OSWALD, Punter reads again, then shakes the name clear of his head.

The clerk says, I never hurt her, man. I was just the last person to see her alive.

Punter puts the knife to flesh. It's nothing. We're all the last person to see someone. He snaps his wrist inward, pushes through. That's nothing either. Or, if it is something, it's nothing worse than all the rest.

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And then dragging the body into the tiny freezer. And then shoving the body between stacks of hot dogs and soft pretzels. And then trying not to step in the cooling puddles of blood. And then picking up the knife and putting it back in its sheath, tucking it into his waistband again. And then the walk home with a bag of ice in each hand. And then realizing the ice doesn't matter, that it will never be enough. And then the walk turning into a run, his heart pounding and his lungs heaving. And then the feeling he might die. And then the not caring what happens next.

By the time Punter gets back to the garage, the ice is already melting, the girl's face jutting from between the cubes. Her eyelids are covered with frost, cheeks slick with thawing pond water. He reaches in and lifts, her face and breasts and thighs giving to his fingers but her back still frozen to the wrapped venison below. He pulls, trying to ignore the peeling sound her skin makes as it rips away from the paper.

Punter speaks, his voice barely audible. He doesn't have to speak loud for her to hear him. They're so close. Something falls off, but he doesn't look, doesn't need to dissect the girl into parts, into flesh and bone, into brains and blood. He kisses her forehead, her skin scaly like a fish, like a mermaid. He says it again: You're safe now.

He sits down with the girl in his arms and his back to the freezer. He rocks her, feels himself getting wet as she continues to thaw all over him. He shivers, then puts his mouth to hers, breathes deep from the icy blast still frozen in her lungs, lets the air cool the burning in his own throat, the horror of his guts. When he's ready, he picks her up, cradles her close, and carries her into the house. Takes her into the bedroom and lays her down.

He lies beside her, and then, in a loud, clear voice, he speaks. He tries not to cough, tries to ignore the scratchy catch at the back of his throat. He knows what will happen next, but he also knows all this will be over by the time they break down his door, by the time they come in with guns drawn and voices raised. He talks until his voice disappears, until his trapped scream becomes a whisper. He talks until he gets all of it out of him and into her, where none of you people will ever be able to find it.