

F I C T I O N

SOUVENIRS

By Matthew Vollmer

Baby Hartness roamed the aisles of the Red Warrior Trading Post, searching for something—anything—to manhandle. He tried to snap a miniature tomahawk in half but its rubber shaft, bearing a leather tassel and a puffy orange feather, refused to break. He mashed in the face of a Pocahontas doll with his thumbs, but no matter how forcefully he squeezed, the concavity he'd created bubbled forward and the face assumed its cherubic shape. At the end of an aisle, Baby snatched a headdress from a metal rod, twisted its thick plastic packaging in an attempt to mangle.

No dice.

Baby—a blond-haired, fair-skinned, thirteen-year-old wearing swishy athletic pants, a wristband, a Tar Heels T-shirt, and a pair of Air Jordans—did not often resort to vandalism to express his discontent, but he'd just spent two hours touring the Living Indian Village of Echota with his eighth grade American History class and, as his mother had predicted, the experience had proved to be—and there really was no other word for it—demoralizing. Yes, there had been re-creations of Cherokee rituals performed by actual Cherokees, a number of whom could speak, with some fluency, the mother tongue; and yes, the little log cabins in which these people ostensibly lived, at least during their shifts as actors, had contained the sorts of possessions that a human eking out an 18th-century existence might own, like muskets and oil lamps and hand-hewn furniture and straw mattresses, but the main problem was that none of the re-creations had allowed Baby to forget that he was, in fact, watching a re-creation; in other words, he had not been, as the brochures had promised, “transported to another time and place.” Instead, Baby had been reminded, every

step of the way, that he was rooted firmly in a century whose inhabitants couldn't really be said to give much of a shit. Take, for instance, the fences. The tour guide—a pale, potbellied dude who'd shaved the sides of his head and pulled his hair into a severe ponytail—had led the tour group along winding paths bordered by log fences. Nobody appeared to be bothered by these fences. Nobody said, "Please ignore the fences" or "We need these fences to keep tourists on track!" or "Of course there would not have been any fenced paths in an actual native village, since the idea of building fences hadn't even occurred to these people, many of whom would've thought that fences, like roads, were an abomination." It was as if he, Baby, was supposed to pretend like he hadn't seen the fences, that he'd never read anything about the ways in which these Indians had constructed their villages and that those villages had definitely been fence-less. Then again, the Living Indian Village of Echota wasn't a village as much as it was a series of shingle-roofed, log-raftered stations where actors, wearing what appeared to be glorified hospital scrubs—i.e., baggy shirts and loose-fitting pants that might've been ordered from a place called Native American Casual Warehouse—ground corn meal or shaped pots made of clay or tapped river stones against flint to make arrowheads, while the ponytailed guide, in a voice that was both robotic and sing-songy, relayed bland information about the activities in which the actors were engaged, thus achieving the effect of a keeper narrating the behaviors of animals in a zoo. It might not've been so bad had the actors mustered a modicum of enthusiasm for their chores or radiated anything resembling personalities, but their performances had struck Baby as uninspired—the bead-stringers looked bored; the arrowhead makers looked stoned; and the fight between the Cherokee brave and the white settler, what with its wild arm-swings and exaggerated reactions, had proved unwatchable. Once Baby noticed that the guy working the pottery wheel hadn't bothered to remove his bifocals, the anachronisms began to snowball: one of the basket weavers wore tennis shoes, a bare-chested warrior had a Bugs Bunny tattoo on his forearm, a woman braiding fabric brandished fake acrylic nails, and the guy stirring coals at the bottom of a dugout

sported a silver Timex. If you were going to try to convince people that they had stepped back in time, Baby'd thought, the least you could do was remove your freaking watch.

He could hear his mom's voice in his head saying, *I told you so*, and she had.

Daphne hadn't forked over the cash for admission, which meant that Baby'd been forced to raid his own personal reserves, and was now twenty-five bucks poorer. Daphne had said she hadn't meant to be a bitch about it; she'd simply wanted to teach Baby what it meant to stand up for what you believed in. And Daphne—a woman who could trace her lineage all the way back to Junaluska, that great chief who'd marched at bayonet point to Oklahoma, only to return to North Carolina years later on foot, because he was homesick for the mountains—did not believe in the Indian Village. That is, she believed it existed, even though she'd only seen advertisements, but she couldn't in good conscience support an industry that took representations of native culture and transformed them into a spectacle for the amusement of white people. Because let's face it, white people would stand there and stare at the natives in their ritual garb and think, "How quaint!" and "How innovative!" Or, more likely, "This sucks" or "I'm bored." Then, having exorcised themselves of whatever guilt they might or might not feel when considering the plight of the American Indian, they'd exit the exhibits, stop off at a teepee to get their picture taken with a man wearing a headdress and a feathered shield, buy a dream-catcher, and call it a day.



"Check this shit out," a voice said.

The voice belonged to Gregory Limpkin—a redheaded, man-teated, overgrown mouth-breather who was repeating, for the second time, Mr. Hawkes' American History class. He held a knife in his fist, raised it above his head, flashed a set of yellowed, gritted teeth, and slammed it into his arm. The plastic blade retracted into a hollow, spring-loaded handle, thus granting the illusion that Limpkin had stabbed himself.

“Mm,” Baby said.

Limpkin chuckled. His uncurled lip revealed a fanglike eye-tooth. He tugged the bottom of his T-shirt, where the image of a rabid-looking Rottweiler clawed a hole through the middle of a tattered Confederate flag. Limpkin had worn this same shirt three days straight; its sleeves were crusted with dried gunk. Limpkin did not smoke—he preferred, when using a tobacco product, to insert a velvety teabag-like pouch of wintergreen Skoal between cheek and gum—but he smelled like he’d been wallowing in an ashtray. Baby imagined Limpkin’s whole house—or, more likely, trailer, since he rode Bus 45 that came off Happy Top and therefore passed by Adam’s Mark Mobile Home Park—reeked of dead Winstons, and that, like the story his mother had told about a DSS worker who’d come into the office to gossip about a family so bad off they used their tub as a container to hold potatoes and that one of their kittens was bald because their youngest had been teething, the Limpkin home was likely a shithole of epic proportions.

Limpkin grabbed a handful of Baby’s shirt. Baby karate-chopped Limpkin’s arm, spun on one heel and headed down the next aisle. Misty Ruckhauser, a mousy girl rocking a pair of lace-up moccasin boots, observed the blizzard she’d inflicted on a group of teepees inside a snow globe. Chris Simpson, a retainer-wearing kid who grinned constantly and often drooled on himself, pretended to toke a peace pipe, while Candi Simmons, whose hoodie-sleeves had swallowed her hands, played with a magnetic jewelry display. None of them batted an eye. They were, Baby figured, too interested in deciding which gaudy mementos they’d claim as their own. Never mind that three-quarters of this supposed “memorabilia”—the teepees, for instance—never existed east of the Mississippi, and therefore had no business, really, on a Cherokee reservation.

Baby felt a jab in his right shoulder.

“Just severed your brachial artery,” Limpkin said. “Five minutes till maximum drainage.”

“Don’t do that again,” Baby replied. Limpkin stabbed Baby again.

“I said stop,” Baby said.

“That’s what she said,” Limpkin said. He stabbed Baby again.

Baby swatted at Limpkin, missed. “That’s what who said?”

“Your mom,” Limpkin said.

Baby frowned. “My mom?”

“Yeah.”

“My mom said stop?”

“Yeah.”

“When’d she say that?”

Limpkin shrugged. “When your dad was doing her.”

“I don’t have a dad.”

“I know,” Limpkin said. He stabbed himself in the gut, ran the handle hog—carving style up to his neck. “You’re a rapebaby.”

“A what?” Baby, registering the phrase’s absurdity, broke into a grin. “Rapebaby,” Limpkin said. He plunged the blade into his fist.

“You’re sick,” Baby said.

Limpkin raised one corner of his mouth, as if to say, “My work is done here.”



What Baby didn’t want to admit? Rapebaby stung. Not that he wasn’t used to people making fun of his name. It’d been happening his entire life. He’d been called “Babycakes” and “Big Baby” and “Little Baby” and “Stupid Baby” and “Dumb Baby” and “Ugly Baby” and “Dead Baby” and “Baby Bunting.” His teammates on the Valleytown Mites Wildcat Basketball Team had said things like “Aw yeah, Baby” and “Hit me, Baby, one more time” and “Nobody puts Baby in a corner!” At one time this name calling had upset him but his mother had told him so many times now that people made fun of what they didn’t understand and that there was power in mystery and that she’d named him Baby for precisely this reason, though the real reason was that during the nine months he’d been inside her she’d addressed him as “baby” and when he’d come out she’d continued to do so, since calling him by any other name felt false.

But rapebaby? Rapebaby went to the heart of the matter, opened a new line of inquiry. Baby couldn’t defend rapebaby. He could *say* he wasn’t a rapebaby but he had nothing to back it up with. He

didn't have a dad, never had, knew absolutely nothing about the man who'd impregnated his mother. Whenever the subject came up, his mom said things like, "All it takes is two people to make a family" or "Sometimes two people come together and make a baby and then they all stay together, and sometimes two people make a baby and go their separate ways, one with the baby and one without, which, as you know, is totally okay" and by the tone of her voice and the speed with which she delivered these little retorts Baby knew that she hadn't wanted to talk about it and so trying to get her to say more would've been pointless, and whenever he summoned the balls to ask, "So, who's my dad, anyway?" his mom had answered, "Nobody you know," meaning, he guessed, that Baby could subtract from all possible fathers any male with whom he was acquainted. Once Baby had asked point-blank if Daphne knew his father's name and she'd said, "Of course I do," and Baby had said, "Can you tell me?" and she'd said, "I made a promise to myself before you were born that I would keep that name to myself until you were sixteen, so you just have to trust me, I have my reasons, I'm not crazy, I'm your mother, a person who loves you unconditionally forever and will never stop no matter what you do or how bad or good you are, and so please try to be satisfied with the fact that I promise you that when May 31st comes in the year 2012, and you ask me about this again, I will give you the name." This had shut Baby up, and he hadn't asked any follow-up questions, like, "Why sixteen?" because once again his mother had steamrolled this monologue out at a breakneck pace, meaning that she'd wanted to get it over with ASAP and that if he wanted to keep her happy he'd keep his trap shut.

"Did you hear?" Limpkin said. He grabbed a handful of Brandon Shankley's T-shirt. Brandon bit into his lip and acted like he was going to backhand Limpkin, which made Limpkin flinch and let go.

"Hear what?" Brandon said.

"About Hartness," Limpkin replied.

"What about him?"

"He's a rapebaby."

"I don't even know what that means."

“It means his dad raped his mom.”

Brandon drew back. “Your dad raped your *face*.”

Limpkin’s mouth went screwy. “Whatever,” he said.

The fact that Brandon had told Limpkin that Limpkin’s dad had raped Limpkin’s face had not bothered Limpkin because it hadn’t been true. Limpkin’s dad had not raped Limpkin’s face, and Limpkin knew it. But Baby had no way of knowing whether or not Baby’s father had raped his mother. And he figured that Limpkin knew he didn’t.

“Oh man,” Limpkin said. “Check it out!”

Limpkin pointed through the glass of the front counter at a velvet clamshell box.

Inside, upon a bed of cotton, sat a black oblong of obsidian.

“Day-umn,” Limpkin said. “That right there’s the real thang.” He jabbed a finger against the glass.

Limpkin’s tongue ran like a slug around the rim of his mouth. The kid was, Baby thought, like some kind of animal—a dog, maybe, or something that could easily lose its train of thought. It was as though the appearance of something new—namely the arrowhead, an anomaly there on a glass shelf, surrounded by the more sophisticated weaponry of butterfly knives and airsoft pistols—had obliterated the rapebaby incident.

“How much you think that costs,” Limpkin said, swatting Baby in the chest.

Before Baby could say he didn’t give a shit—the cashier piped up. “That one’s ninety-three.” The cashier was a large Indian woman with feathered brown hair and a pink shirt, upon which the words “I’d Rather Be in Margaritaville” had been printed. With a plastic spoon, she scooped a hunk of yogurt from a tub.

“Shit,” Limpkin said. “I got at least ninety-three cents.” He shoved one of his chubby mitts into a jean-pocket.

“Not cents, sweetheart,” the cashier said. “*Dollars*.”

“Dollars?!”

The cashier slipped the spoon upside-down style from her mouth and slowly nodded.

“Damn,” Limpkin said. “Seems like a lot.”

Baby rolled his eyes. Limpkin obviously knew jack about arrowheads. Granted, Baby was no expert, but he'd gone on hunts with his Pawpaw, had walked the overgrown logging roads that lead into National Forest behind the old man's house, had been whipped by the limbs of saplings if he'd followed too close behind, had crawled through rhododendron thickets and leapt over hog-wallahs and creeks, had climbed up and down ridges until finally reaching a boulder, jutting like a giant shoulder-bone smothered with moss and crispy fungi that called to Baby's mind the phrase "dinosaur skin." There, under that rock, they'd begun their search. They'd carried shovels and carted a sifter—four boards nailed together in a square with a wire mesh bottom—into which they'd tossed the dirt they dug, each taking a turn: Baby dumping a shovelful inside and shaking then Pawpaw dumping a shovelful and shaking, each watching the pyramid of dirt reduce itself until only rocks and dirt-clods remained. They'd done this for one hour and found nothing but then around the 75-minute mark Pawpaw began to find stuff: pottery shards, a couple broken arrowheads, a musket ball. But Baby? Baby'd found zilch, had returned to Pawpaw's house empty-handed, refused to take the plastic baggy of artifacts Pawpaw had rationed out for him. He'd wanted to find his own.

"That's about the purtiest one I ever seen," Limpkin said, pulling at his pecker through his jeans.

The sight of Limpkin grabbing himself gave Baby an idea. He knew, even then, that it was an idea he should've walked away from. Because Baby hadn't been raised to be mean. He hadn't been reared in any way shape or form that would have condoned revenge.



"Come on, y'all," someone said. It was Kevin Doogle, a barrel-chested kid in a Panthers jersey. Baby and Limpkin were holding up the line. Which was fine with Baby. Baby wanted everyone to see what was about to happen.

"Chill," Baby said.

He un-Velcro-ed the flap of his back pocket and slipped out his wallet, a leather case that had been given to him by his Pawpaw. The wallet was over a hundred years old and had been embossed with the name H. W. Hartness. H. W. Hartness had been Baby's great-granddad—a man who'd once slit the throat of a wild boar with a jackknife, then held on to the handle as the stuck pig bucked its way to oblivion. That wallet had been in the back pocket of the man's pants then, and it was in Baby's now. In this wallet, Baby kept an identification card bearing his photograph, address, and home telephone number; a newspaper photograph of his mother shooting a basketball; a library membership card, and—in a secretish compartment—a hundred dollar bill. His emergency hundred.

“Could I see that one there?” he said.

The cashier rolled off her stool. Air whistled through her nose. She slid open the cabinet door. “No,” Baby said. “Not the LiPo charger. The arrowhead.”

“Oh,” the cashier said. She retrieved the box, handed it over. Baby studied it. A little string at the base of the rock was connected to a tag that read: “Transitional Paleo Triangular Wheeler Arrowhead. Found in Eastern Tennessee.”

“Ninety-three?” Baby said.

“That's right,” the cashier said.

“Dang,” Limpkin said.

“Actually,” the cashier said, “He cut it down from 150.” Limpkin whistled.

Baby eyeballed the number. Ninety-three bucks. Plus seven percent sales tax equaled what? Ninety-nine? It would take over a month of after-school work at Dr. Barber's office to earn 99 dollars. Two weeks of filing patient folders and emptying trash bags and running instruments through the autoclave.

“Hey!” somebody said behind them. “Y'all ain't the only ones buyin' stuff!”

Baby unsnapped the wallet. He dug out the hundred, unfolded the bill and laid it on the counter, smoothed it with his palm, flicked a corner so that it twirled toward the cashier.

“I'll take it,” he said.

The cashier's expression didn't change. Her drowsy lids lowered and lifted. She tapped some buttons on the register. "98.70," she said.

Baby nodded toward the bill. The cashier picked it up, studied it, gave Baby a once-over. She uncapped a highlighter, ran its neon yellow tip across the bill's surface, and slid it under the cash drawer.



Limpkin mumbled "dang" and shook his head, but he didn't ask to see the arrowhead, didn't beg to hold it. Baby predicted it'd only be a matter of time. He tossed the bag and the clamshell box into a trashcan outside the Trading Post, slid a hand into his pocket and felt for the arrowhead. He wondered if arrowheads, like gold or silver or other precious metals, increased or decreased in value over time, and if in a few months or years he could resell it to somebody and make a profit. The thing was, he had no way of knowing whether or not the arrowhead was authentic, had nothing he could show—save the hand-written paper scrap on which a description had been written—that would prove that the thing had for sure been made during the Paleolithic era. Surely, there existed somewhere an expert, a man or woman who, having studied thousands of arrowheads, could tell you whether or not an arrowhead had been made 2,000 years ago or two weeks ago. But that person was not Baby. Baby'd merely taken the counter girl's word for it. And even if it was real, even if it'd been used to slay some animal whose kind had since been wiped out of these mountains, it was still just a rock.



On the bus, Limpkin went back to his DS and his Mountain Dew bottle, which continued to fill with chew spit as he zeroed in on virtual zombies, blasting open their chests with a Gatlin gun. The boy's insult-parade had expired and he was now kicking back, taking it easy, indulging in a little vicarious murder. The bleats and beeps of the game made themselves known only when the wild chatter and laughter of the other kids on the bus died down, which it rarely did.

Baby leaned his head against the cool window glass and watched the reservation scroll past: a souvenir store, a store selling leather and belts and boots, a Kentucky Fried Chicken, a Quonset hut, a Holiday Inn, a campground half full of old camper trailers, a motel whose unlit and mildew-streaked sign featured a scowling brave brandishing a tomahawk. Baby shut his eyes, thinking he might try to escape by sleeping, but he couldn't help hearing snatches of conversation coming from the seat in front of him, where Brandon Slagel was telling Jeremy Hyde about how Brandon's daddy had been hunting a lost coon dog up near Fire's Creek and had heard what he swore was a panther. Jeremy said, "they ain't no way" and Brandon said, "swear to God" and Jeremy said, "they ain't no way" and Brandon said, "swear to God" again and then that his dad had heard it and it'd sounded like a woman screaming, that at first he'd thought there was a woman out in the woods and something terrible was happening to her. "Maybe it was," Jeremy said. "Maybe it was a woman. And maybe something bad was happening. That kinda shit happens all the time."

Baby lost track of the conversation at this point, not because he couldn't hear them anymore but because the phrase "kinda shit happens all the time" reminded him that he'd successfully spent about twelve minutes without thinking of the words "rape baby," though this realization had allowed this same phrase to make a comeback. And this time, it was like a bad song that'd gotten stuck on repeat, here to stay. Only unlike a song, it wasn't stuck because it was catchy. It was stuck because Baby wanted it to go away. It was like the bad thoughts he sometimes forced himself to dream up, thoughts he tricked himself into thinking simply because he shouldn't be thinking them, thoughts that were the product of Baby saying to himself, *what's the absolute worst thing you can think of, the worst thing you can imagine doing or having done to you*, and then he'd think of it and because whatever he came up with was so terrible and because he wanted not to think about it, it became the only thing he could think about. And the things he thought sometimes—they were pretty bad. Things that, if he were to repeat them, would probably make most people sick. Things that would

make phrases like “rapebaby” seem downright wholesome. Things that would, believe it or not, make the image of his mother getting boned against her will look like somebody’s quaint version of something terrible.

Not that imagining his mother getting boned against her will was something he wanted to entertain. And, really, when he tried to imagine that, which he did, he kept seeing his mom put up an enormous fight. Surely, if she’d ever been in that situation, she would’ve fought. She was, by nature, a fighter. A competitor. She was strong. She could do thirty pushups in one minute. He’d seen her win games of mercy—the contest where you entwine your fingers with someone else’s and then try to twist them backwards until your opponent begs you to stop—against men who were twice her size. When it was her turn to carry groceries into the house—she and Baby took turns with just about everything, from washing dishes to doing laundry to vacuuming to making breakfast and supper—she always slid her arms through the handles of each and every plastic bag and carried the whole bunch, no matter how many, in one trip. Whoever’d held her down—supposing she’d actually been held down and not drugged—would’ve had to’ve been superhumanly strong. And fast. Because that was another thing: his mom was fast. At thirty-one years of age she still had moves. She and Baby must’ve played a thousand games of basketball during Baby’s lifetime, and Baby—despite his skills—had never beaten her—not once. Not in one-on-one, not in Twenty-One, not in Around the World, not Horse, not Pig. She didn’t believe in letting anybody win, especially not her son; if Baby was gonna beat her, he’d have to do it fair and square—no gimmes, no freebies, no do-overs or second chances. Still, he had to admit that his mom wasn’t invincible. She could’ve been drugged, tricked, or simply overpowered. Maybe she’d been ambushed, didn’t have time to think about what was happening, was so shocked that the perpetrator was doing whatever it was he’d done that she hadn’t put up a fight at all, or that maybe she’d begun to put up a fight and then after realizing that she didn’t have a chance and that what was going to happen was going to happen no matter how much effort she exerted, maybe she’d given up. Maybe

she'd just lain there letting the a-hole do his business, thinking *this isn't happening* or *I can't believe this is happening* or *this is something that happens to other people and not to me* or *this must be a dream* or *I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to forget this*.

So, maybe he *could* imagine it. But that didn't mean he wanted to. Didn't like having imagined it. Didn't like it in his head, didn't enjoy having been put, by Limpkin, in the position of picturing some faceless dude taking his mother by force. Especially when that dude was—or could've been—his own father. Well, not father. "Father" was not a word you'd use to describe a man who'd done something that brutal. Calling a man like that "father" didn't seem fair to regular fathers: men who'd stuck around, even if they turned out to be—like Limpkin's daddy, who was obese and smoked and cussed his family members in public—not all that great. There needed to be a name other than father for the kind of man who impregnated a woman by force and then ran away. But as far as Baby knew, there wasn't.

So far, this father-who-could-not-be-called-father was nameless and faceless.

And a man without a name and without a face could be anybody, could be anywhere. It meant that Baby could sometimes play, in his head, a little game he'd invented, though less than he used to since he had less free time on his hands but the gist of it went something like this: you looked at a man you didn't know and you asked yourself, *What if that was your dad? Could you love him?* And the weird thing was that nine times out of ten Baby could instantly transform the guy from horrific to sympathetic by employing this simple hypothetical, and no matter how the man combed his hair or whether he had any at all or whether he looked like he hadn't bathed in days or had skin diseases or suffered from morbid obesity, the answer was not "I could love him" or "I would love him" it was "*I do love him*" and sometimes this imaginative exercise would actually get Baby all choked up, Baby thinking about the slings and arrows that this possible dad might've suffered over the course of whatever fucked up life he'd chosen, or who knows, maybe he hadn't chosen it, maybe Baby's mother had never bothered to tell the man

that he'd become a father, instead choosing to keep Baby's existence a secret, because she knew she didn't love the father and therefore hadn't wanted to subject Baby to a lifetime of constant arguing or resentment, plus his mom was sort of a control freak, and she could be sneaky about it, too, point in case being Baby's basketball career, not that Baby hadn't wanted to play basketball, not that he hadn't wanted to follow in his Mom's footsteps, which was basically impossible since she held every Wildcat record and who knows how many state and possibly national records, but she had this way of keeping Baby interested, a sort of reverse psychology deal where Baby would complain or mutter something negative about shooting his daily 100 free throws or wishing he didn't have to practice three-pointers or layups or passes and she'd say, whenever you want to quit, quit. But of course he wouldn't quit. Not when he'd dedicated the majority of his life to not-quitting, to practicing, not when he'd spent so much time with a basketball that actually holding or dribbling or shooting one automatically made him feel better, like suddenly all that mattered in the world was a world-shaped thing he could totally control—a world-shaped thing nobody could steal away.



"Lemme see that thing," Limpkin said. Baby was holding the arrowhead between a thumb and forefinger, turning it over, watching the light ride the indentations where its maker had hacked it into shape.

"No," Baby said.

"Come on."

"No way."

"I'll trade you," Limpkin said. He mashed a series of buttons. His avatar on the little screen reached into the chest of a zombie and yanked out its heart.

"Yeah right," Baby said. "I coulda bought a hundred of those stupid knives if I'd wanted them."

"Not that," Limpkin said. "This." He wagged the DS.

Baby snorted. "Yeah right."

"Seriously."

"You're stupid."

"Come on, man. What are you even gonna do with it? Make a fuckin' necklace?"

"I suppose you've got better plans."

"Maybe I do."

"Like what?"

Limpkin shrugged. "Give it to my dad. Get him to make me an arrow. Bonafide. River cane for the shaft. Wild turkey feathers for the fletching."

Baby pushed out his bottom lip, legitimately impressed that Limpkin even knew what fletching was. "Okay," he said. "Then what?"

"Whattaya mean then what? I'll fuckin' shoot something. Ain't that what it's made for?"

"Like hundreds of years ago."

"Whatever. I bet that shit's still sharp. Come on. Lemme test it out."

"On what?"

"My arm."

"Yeah right."

"Seriously. Go ahead."

"Go ahead and what?"

"Poke me."

"Don't be an idiot."

"I'm not. I ain't scared. Just fucking see if it'll pierce skin."

"No way," Baby said. Limpkin lunged for the arrowhead. Baby jerked it out of reach, squeezed it in his fist.

"Pussy," Limpkin mumbled.

"I'm not a pussy."

"Prove it then."

Limpkin put his hand on Baby's leg. "Get your hand off my leg."

"You know you like it," Limpkin said. He was grinning. He began to massage Baby's thigh. Baby threateningly raised his fist, showing Limpkin the tip of the arrowhead. Limpkin responded by wagging his tongue and squeezing harder, as though the simple idea of getting stabbed was something he might like.

"I'm gonna count to three," Baby said. "And if your hand's still there, there's gonna be blood."



Baby didn't think for a second that he'd miss. Limpkin had exhibited his ridiculously slow reflexes earlier that morning, during a game of handslap, in which Baby had smacked the shit out of Limpkin's hands, turning his knuckle flesh red, faking him out and making him flinch then whacking him with two fingers on the freckled skin underside of his arms. Limpkin kept saying it wasn't fair, mostly because he wasn't fast enough and Baby never missed, but eventually Baby'd relented, missed on purpose just to give Limpkin a turn, and Limpkin, with the tip of his tongue emerging from his mouth, tried to fake Baby out a coupla times, but Baby didn't flinch, simply remained calm, his fingerpads touching Limpkin's, and sometimes coming into contact with his sweaty palms, which made his nostrils flare involuntarily, but Limpkin never once slapped the backs of Baby's hands, never so much as grazed them, the game ending only when Limpkin slammed his funny bone into the metal frame of the seatback in front of him. So when Baby held the arrowhead aloft, when he aimed for Limpkin's hand, he'd done so with the full confidence that he would strike meat, and possibly bone, and that sure, he'd probably get in trouble, as would Limpkin, because Limpkin had egged him on, but it'd be worth it, and so, after he got to three, and Limpkin's hand remained on his thigh, he slammed the tip of the arrowhead downward. Only he didn't strike Limpkin's hand-meat. He struck the flesh of his own leg, though, initially, that hadn't been what horrified him. His first thought was, *oh shit, I've torn a hole in my pants*—pants that his mother had purchased him for Christmas, his favorite pair, the ones he wore three days out of seven, if not four or five. It wasn't until he'd inspected the hole he'd made in the pants—using a thumb and forefinger to stretch it open—that he realized he'd injured himself, and when he saw the gash—exposing bloody, glistening fat—in his thigh, he freaked.

Limpkin, however, did not freak. Which was a good thing. Because somebody needed to take charge. Which was what Limpkin did.

"Dude," Limpkin said. "You don't have to scream. You just stabbed yourself. You ain't gonna die." And then, apparently not

giving two shits about exposing his flab and puckered nips—to say nothing of ruining what was apparently one of *his* favorite articles of clothing—he whipped off his T-shirt and tied it around Baby’s leg, muttering, “Seriously, dude, you gotta chill,” and “If you don’t stop moving I won’t be able to get it tight.” By this point, the heads of other kids had swiveled and Gene the bus driver had asked, over the intercom, what was the matter and Limpkin had flashed an A-OK sign. “I can’t believe it,” he’d whispered. “I can’t believe you actually did it, you’re a crazy motherfucker, you know that?” When Brandon Slagel asked what’d happened, Limpkin told him to mind his own business, don’t fucking crowd him, give him some room, because the man was wounded and he needed some air, dammit! Baby, delirious, on the verge of tears, tried to protest by telling Limpkin that his shirt was gonna be ruined, but Limpkin put a naked arm around him—an arm whose pit hair was caked with white, melty deodorant—and said, “You think I was gonna just sit there and let you bleed to death?” to which Baby said he guessed not. “Damn straight,” Limpkin said, then “Keep pressure on that,” nodding to the knot he’d made. Baby mashed the balled cloth, squished his eyes shut. Limpkin’s arm was hot. The flesh of it unpeeled and restuck to Baby’s neck every time the bus hit a frost heave. The boy was retelling a tale about the time he and his dad had been clearing brush and his dad had been holding a chainsaw and had whipped around and accidentally whacked Limpkin in the forehead and even though it hadn’t been running one of the teeth had bit a good-sized chunk of flesh, but Baby was only half-listening. The arrowhead was somewhere on the floor, out of reach. He had a gash in his leg. A hole in his pants. Twenty minutes to think of a lie. It was stupid, he thought, to think he could hide what had happened. He couldn’t reverse time. Couldn’t wash the blood from his hands. Plus, his mom was no fool. She’d want the whole story. The worst sin was a lie; falsehoods of all varieties she could not abide. That’s why when he told her, he’d have to be careful. Some words he’d have to omit. He could do it, he thought, if he planned it all out. But first he’d have to know where to begin.