

## The Jaguars of Southtown

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Forty days passed without landing a sale. For a while, I felt sorry for myself, and then self-pity shifted gears and boiled into a rage that curdled everything I touched. The BP spill down in the Gulf had put a damper on auto sales. The economy in general was in shambles, but this town hadn't prospered much since the Red Mountain cut. Meanwhile, we're dumping good, hard-earned USD into foreign countries and our Harvard-educated Kenyan president was doing all of jackshit about it. Instead of buying new cars, people just drive them longer. Used to I could sell forty cars in a month. You don't need a Harvard degree to do that.

When DOT took a slice out of Red Mountain, most of downtown Birmingham reverted to a giant used-car lot, a smooth asphalted prairie where trash and news blew before the winds. I managed a downtown lot on 20th Street. My office was in a portable trailer stacked on cinder blocks. Long strands of razor wire outlined the perimeter of the lot like a concentration camp. The warehouse next door had probably been abandoned since I got my driver's license. Sale banners flapped and whipped in the hot winds and the flat air in that metal can was tight as my collar. We parked cars on the sidewalk. On Saturdays, when the urban prairieland was empty and dead, looking more and more like a southern Detroit, instead of getting hung up on by irate voices, I played lonely games of golf, as blue and red klaxons dopplered by.

I positioned my belly putter, searching for that sweet spot on the face-balanced clubhead, a custom job where I had detached the putter's iron head and refitted it with a leaping Jaguar hood ornament. Every putter's different, and you have to learn what they want inside like finding a woman's g-spot. With this special Jaguar putter I tapped the ball down a thin green strip of AstroTurf toward a plastic cup. Even though the trailer yawed toward the street, the putt was straight and simple. Then my lot attendant barged into the trailer without knocking and swiped the ball with the edge of the door and it skittered off under my desk.

—Goddamnit, Larry. I was about to sink that son of a bitch.

—Hey Rick.

—This better be important. You see I'm busy.

I brandished the club in the air, twisting it in my hands, admiring my craftsmanship. Kathy always said I was good with my hands.

—Guy out here wants to trade in his car.

—What kind of car?

—One a them banged-up Toyotas.

I looked around the trailer office for the golf ball.

—Let me guess, it's one of the recall models with no brakes.

—You'd be guessing right.

—Tell him to write a check to Birmingham Tow Company, or give us fifty dollars to tow that piece of shit off the lot. This is a used-car dealership, not a junkyard, goddamnit. We don't want people's scrap metal.

I ducked under my desk. Larry's boots were muddied up and dogshit-  
ted from where he'd been traipsing through the alleyway. I was about to yell  
at him for wasting my time and the good, untaxed money I paid him under the  
table every week, when he slammed the wafer-thin door on his way out. The  
trailer floor shook beneath my feet and yet the swiped golf ball did not roll out  
of its hiding place.

I leaned on the window, dead moths windrowed on the sill, and watched  
Larry hustle the rice burner off the lot. The Cityville Lofts across the street were  
almost complete and then the lofties would move in with their two and a half  
kids and the value of surrounding real estate would appreciate and before long  
the dealership rent would go up and Larry and I would be valeting the cars we'd  
just sold for Monopoly money.

The best were the adrenalin junkies who'd come grandstanding into  
my Madison Avenue trailer, their dicks hanging out and wanting the fastest  
production car in the lot. I'd sell them something that would explode when they  
banged into a telephone pole or drove through somebody's kitchen wall because  
they didn't know the gas from the brake. Ever since I got into a fisticuff with  
some rube who wanted to haggle over a below-market sticker price, I'd been  
angling to exit the business. Move somewhere nobody knew me, start fresh,  
maybe Miami, some place with a lot of golf green and no barbed wire, I don't  
know. I once threatened to floss a customer's yellowed teeth with that barbed  
wire and was sent home, because the owner said I was not the type to cross  
the street to avoid a fight. Right now I just wanted my goddamned golf ball  
back. I was about to place another ball through the office window overlooking  
20th Street, and watch it bounce through traffic, maybe put out a windshield,  
when the owner of the Jaguar dealership off University waltzed into my trailer

condo.

—Nice office, Rick. I love what you've done with the place.

By place Springs meant a steel desk and a sheetless mattress from my marriage, the one thing I got out of the divorce, aside from lawyer fees. I'd been sleeping on it in the trailer mortgage-free since the sheriff served me an eviction notice a year back. The divorce was made final a month ago; the summer months are the longest. The heartbreak, what there was, slowly drifted away until a man just let himself go. My trailer office was starting to look like a college dorm. An empty beer can rolled across the curling linoleum and stopped at Springs' feet.

—What the hell is it with people can't knock, I said to Mister Springs who was scanning the trailer like an interior decorator looking to queer up the place. Springs' lot was about a 5-iron distance from my trailer park, no farther than I could drive a ball down the fairway on a calm day. He looked at the club I brandished, and I followed his eyes down the length of the putter where it stopped at the leaping Jaguar mounted at the end of the club.

—That's a nice club you got there.

—Thanks. I made it myself.

—Where'd you get the hood ornament?

—Stole it off your lot, where else?

—I knew there was something missing. I can sense it. That's why I come here.

—You need a used but not abused jalopy, Mister Springs? I got just the deal for you.

—See that pen on the desk.

I looked at the desk.

—Yeah, I see it.

—Sell me that pen for at least twice what you paid for it.

—Pardon?

—The pen. Sell it to me.

—It's my pen.

—Sell me the goddamn pen.

—All right, all right.

The cinch to moving cars off the lot, to selling inventory at a criminal markup, was to assume that the customer was no brighter than the light bulb in your refrigerator. Through the artful manipulation of tone and demeanor, just the right edge and quantity of condescension, but not so much that you offend them, you present yourself as a professor of cars. You know the car's specs better than you know your own family, and if you don't have a family then you

make one up, because car-buying people trust a family man. A man's handshake can seal a deal, or break it, whether firm or flaccid. Follow me, you tell them, and you do not look back to see if they are following you. Most customers will follow you into the showroom like sheep to the slaughter. There's a lot of high-fiving, fist-bumping, tie-pulling, arm-wrestling, soft-soaping and frat-boy stunts. You do handstands or cartwheels if you have to, whatever antic it takes to make them think they're the brightest bulb in the meatlocker and take their checkbooks out.

I picked up the pen, hefted it in my palm and screwed the cap off.

—You know, my wife uses this pen when she writes love letters to me. She says the ink dries as soon as it hits the paper, so she never smears it when she writes words like *love* and *fuck me*.

I no longer had a wife, but your buyer doesn't need to know that. I could have rattled on about overhead, bottom line, the rising cost of ink, but that's the kind of business talk that will bore the good thrifty folks who buy used cars. I knew that Springs was the type of dealership owner to shoot from the hip, and any talk about economics would have put him off.

—And if the ink dries soon as it hits the paper, it'll be dry on your customers' checks when they sign it, before they can think twice about how much they're paying you for the best purchase of their lives. It won't bleed, won't run, writes with the grace and speed of a thing alive.

He snatched the pen from my hand, hefted it in his like a weapon.

—See Rick, that's what I'm talking about. That pitch right there is poetry. Sales ain't nothing but rhetoric. You could convince a man he's got a soul and that he needs to pay the retail price for it, plus tax. Or that a man ain't got a soul, and he needs to buy one, Springs lectured, still cockblocking the doorway, looking me always square in the eye. —I seen what you done selling rattletraps and jalopies before the market got shitdeep in bubbles and riskiness. But that ain't your fault. This morning I had to can my salesman because he couldn't sell pussy to a thirty-year-old virgin.

—What is it you want, Mister Springs? A round of golf? You want your hood ornament back?

—I want the shirt off their backs, their shoes, their credit cards, their wallets, their wives, whatever will make them put down a deposit on one of these cats, you got me? You got too much sales talent to be wasting it in this fucking trailer park. Now, get your ass out of this dump and hustle some real cars for me.

He still had the pen in his hand as he opened the trailer door and descended the wooden steps I'd skill-sawed from 2x10's.

—Oh, and keep your damn pen, he said and angled around, underhanding it to me. —Your wife may need it.  
The pen sailed by, end over end, and I grabbed only air, the pen lost among golf balls under my desk.

Although I never formally agreed to take the Jaguar job, I drove my shitkicker Nissan 720 pickup truck the next morning and rattlebanged into a space in the employee lot and cut off the engine. To my right, overlooking the street, was a silver sculpture of a leaping Jaguar, modeled exactly like the hood ornament only big as a real puss and chromed so bright in the sun it burned your retinas to even glance at it. I had never sold new cars before, but I figured I'd give it the old college try, and if that didn't pan out there was always the army, Miami, prison, other planets. I stayed strapped to my seat and listened to the faucet of oil dripping from the cylinder heads into the oil pan, the metronomic plinking of the engine, and I remembered the Jaguar lot had been built on top of a black cemetery. Mister Springs swaggered out of his office, ducking under a Jaguar banner, and hustled across the lot toward me and my truck. I cranked the window down, positioning my arm on the door like a long-distance truck driver.

—Look, if you're going to sell cars for me, you're not going to show up to work in that oil burner.

He handed over the keys to a new Jaguar XF, one of those luxury sports saloons that was worth more than I would ever have. A 5.0-litre supercharged V8 petrol engine under the hood.

—Product knowledge is essential, Springs said, tapping his forehead.  
—You got to know these cars inside and out, just like you would your wife if you had one. He was eyeing my bare ring finger.

—Good morning to you too, Mister Springs.

—And another thing. You got to stop snubbing out cigarettes on plates. I saw those plates in your trailer office. Well, this ain't your trailer, got it, Rick?

—Got it, Mister Springs. I got it.

Mister Springs disappeared into the heat vapors floating over the rolling blacktop, and I thought, as I handled the truck door open, it ain't so bad to be buried under a black field of Jaguars.

I spent my first day washing down the cats in the lot, waiting on a buyer Springs had set me up with to keep an appointment. I was getting sunburned from the reflection off the cars and seeing floating white spots, so I pulled aviators out

of my shirt pocket and slipped them over my face and buffed every XF until my arms were sore and Springs went home for the day. When he was gone, I walked the lot, checked all the doors to make sure they were locked and pulled the razor-wire gate behind me when I left.

I did not knock at my old trailer office door. Larry was throwing darts at a board he had chalked on the wall.

—I'm gone less than a week, and the whole place falls to shit.

—Rick, you back for more?

—I see you moved up in the world of used cars, Larry. Who's watching the lot?

—Ain't nobody watching the lot. You want your old job back? I can throw darts against the side of the trailer from the lot.

—Larry, this is a very classy office, don't trash it. I want to trade in my Nissan.

—Think we got enough of those, Rick.

Larry disagreeably cleared some phlegm from the back of his throat.

—You got any idea how many Mexicans you can fit into the back of this here thing? Look, I already feel like I'm donating an organ by giving her away. Do you know how it feels to give up an organ, Larry? The heart, say? Your liver? All that bile stored up for years just gone like that.

—All right, we'll take it.

Larry had always been a pushover. The place would be crowded with unsellable cars by the end of the month. Buy low, sell high should be the state motto.

I fumbled through my pants for the keys and then sent them sailing through the air and Larry caught them against his chest like a basket of eggs. I wrote myself a check from the used-car dealership and pocketed it and headed for the door.

—Hey, Larry.

—Hey what, Rick, as he aimed a green dart at the trailer wall.

—You know what the Jaguar motto is?

—Meow?

—Grace, Space, Pace.

—Grace, Larry said. —That's real funny. Good luck, Rick.

Across the street from Springs' showroom was a long low concrete wall that marked the territory of the Southtown housing project, thrown up long before Hope VI. The city had commissioned a local artist to paint over all the graffiti

tags: *The Jaguars* in looping bubble script and the words *Birmingham City Jail* slanted cryptically down the concrete wall in plain view for any potential car buyer to read. Over half the scene was executed before Springs recruited me for his dealership. The mural would be done and signed by the muralist's handprint by the end of the day.

The muralist crouched against his work, moving between buckets of bright paint with many brushes. What must it be like to create a thing like that, and the thing for a time is you, and then you are finished, and it goes on in the world without you. The car is the closest thing we will ever create to something that is alive. Without knowing either from what it comes, or toward what end it tends. I think now the mural, though still there, is old and gray, sunfaded and dead as the used cars I once retailed.

I was the only salesman on that lot no bigger than a slave ship. Jaguars sell themselves. You're not going to sell a Jag to anyone who doesn't already dream about one. The crossless Negro dead beneath the black tires of white-collar luxury were silent, and I prospered in the cool of the showroom, behind a sun-sparkled field of glass, sipping weak drip coffee, the white noise of Jaguar commercials buzzing in the background, and watched the artist erase the work of Southtown's gangs, the urban poetry of dogs marking their territory.

The artist's overpainting evolved as the day pushed on—I don't know how long I stood there, entranced behind glass—into a tropical mural painted lengthwise across the concrete wall that separated the housing project from the boulevard down to the interstate overpass. From his painstaking brushwork emerged banana leaves and floral motifs, pink blooms of exotically extinct species, a different kind of graffiti.

When the mural was almost done, the jungle leaves looked layered thick enough to get lost in. At last, he brushed over the Jaguars' tag. I wanted to talk with him, but knew I had nothing to say. I recalled some drunk's bar joke, told around the time of my separation from Kathy, about why the car salesman crossed the road, but couldn't remember the punch line. Remembering how a thing begins is easy, but how a thing ends I never could count on. Just as, after making a sell, you know who drives the car off the lot, but where it goes is a blindspot, because the mirror is all rearview.

I knew that the muralist couldn't see me obscured behind the angry white glare flashing across the showroom glass. But he must have sixth-sensed the sentiment of an invisible omniscience, for he turned around, brush in hand, squinting into the glassy second sun behind which I was the outside I was in.

The muralist had dark eyes that drooped with drink and which the light avoided. The brushes disappeared in his big hands, became an appendage

from which the jungle spontaneously burst forth. The artist stood just higher than his mural, about the height of a smallish truck. A hard face sensitively set, a blacker version of myself. I have never been what you might call an introspective man, and I see myself only as a shade of others.

I jaywalked University Boulevard and took the sidewalk jagged by magnolia roots and turned down an alley by a blue metal dumpster, holding my nose, and came out upon an empty, childless playground, swings dangling by rusted chains swaying in the wind. I was searching for the muralist, but he was gone, leaving only his handiwork behind. A plastic sheet flapped over a window. I thought of what I would leave behind when my work was done. Mattresses like the one back in my trailer piled waist-high on the curb, shredded tires and meatless chicken bones whitening in the sun.

I took my jacket off and draped it over my forearm and sidestepped around an overturned, broken-wheeled grocery cart in someone's front yard. A plateless car jacked up on cinder blocks like my old trailer office. Old men sat on dented metal folding chairs and leaned at a formica table. I thought they might be playing cards, reading the paper, but they didn't appear to be doing anything at all except leaning against the table like a taxidermist's work. A man younger than myself was grilling red meat on an open pit and I watched him moribundly chew on a cheeseburger like a zombie as his eyes followed me across the lawn. The whole place skunked up with oniony halitosis. I unbuttoned my collar and loosened the constricting tie knotted about my neck as I stepped over water pooled in the gutters where an unrepaired main had ruptured, my head aching with the pounding purr of new and used cars on the Red Mountain expressway nearby. I find myself in places I do not belong.

But anyplace you can make a sale is the right one at that moment. I've always stood by that. I met my ex-wife when I sold her a used car I knew would fall apart soon as she drove it off the lot. I was counting the cash down payment when she phoned the office, saying the engine failed ten blocks south. I gave her a lift. After we married, she said there was something wrong in the way I looked at people. I looked at them and tried to calculate how much money was in their wallets based on such W-2 form categories as age, sex, race, creed, marital status, hourly wage and salaried income, etc. No one was an equal. I called her a bitch. You have to see people this way if you want to make it in this racket. Because they see you worse. Kathy called me a bigot. Anyplace you make a sale is the right one at that moment, but the sale might be the wrong one.

I was a colonial in the habitat of a people who probably had relatives buried across the street, beneath the hot blacktop where Springs sold Jaguars to trust-fund golfers with popped collars and the alcoholic bachelor doctors,

the workaholic lawyers and shrewd, sartorial investment bankers. That's when I saw the stockpile of red gas cans, trophies of the Jaguar gang's graveyard pilaging of the lot, siphoning hoses coiled up on the ground. What the future shall pave or build over my dry bones I am happy not to know.

I blundered down another alley and out of the Southtown projects and stalked across the boulevard. I spotted a woman browsing the cars on the sloped lot over the Negro cemetery. The back of her blonde head glinted in the sunglare like the windshields of the cars. She was eyeing a Jaguar XJ, one of our flagship models. She looked dressed for a funeral. I came up from behind her and she startled, but before she had time to say anything I introduced myself and she said her name was Ellen. —What can I do to get you in one of these cats? as if asking her out on a date, something social I had not done in a long time.

Most women do not buy cars alone, and those who do usually think you're a predator or a felon before you even open your trap, so you start out with one foot in the hole and the idea is that you turn on just the right quantity of charm to get your ass out of it.

—I'd like to test-drive the new XJ, she said.

—This thing's got claws. The exterior design makes a formal and radical break from the previous models. The designer, Ian Callum, started over, went back to the drawing board, so to speak.

—I used to have an XJ-S.

—Did you buy it from us?

—My ex-husband did, yes.

—What happened to it?

—He dumped it in East Lake before we signed the divorce papers. It was an older model. Do you think it's a good idea to let cars idle or turn them off?

—Depends upon how old it is. The carburetor cars, I would say let them run. The fuel injectors weren't designed with fuel economy in mind. They burn off more gas when you start them back up.

—That's what I told my ex-husband.

—Is it still at the bottom of the lake?

—The police divers said to leave it there.

I'd heard enough about this Ellen's conjugal problems. I'm not a marriage counselor, so I angled to get her in one of the jags and go for a joyride.

—Let me fetch the keys to this one, I said, and left her with the pack of cars before she could say no. Never let them say no, especially a woman with a

checkbook and legs like a runner.

The keys were in Mister Springs' office. I did not waste time knocking, but barged in and lifted a key off the rack and gave him the thumbs up.

Inhaling the manufactured smell of new leather, I inserted the key into the starter, but the engine spluttered and wouldn't roll over. I looked at the gas gauge, wondering if the float switch was busted. I got out and tried another model, and that too was out of gas.

—One more try.

—Look, it's all right. I can come back another time, she said apologetically.

—No, it's not all right. I jumped into the third jag and jammed the key into the ignition. The engine bucked up and I gassed the pedal, thinking back to the red fuel cans I'd seen in Southtown.

—Wait right here, I grumbled and dove through the showroom and bolted into Mister Springs' office.

—Can you people knock? Springs bellowed at me in the middle of a sales call, not even bothering to cover the receiver.

I bowed out of the office and closed the door behind me and waited a few seconds, then gave the dealer's door a smugly polite knock.

—Come in, his voice muffled behind the door.

He'd hung up the phone. For the first time I noticed a cheap reproduction of a painting exhibited on the eastern wall of his otherwise Spartan office. The reproduction made me think of the Southtown artist's tropical mural across the boulevard with its botanical landscape. The painting behind Mister Springs featured yellow-skinned women who dwelled in a blue and rambling Tahitian landscape.

—That's better, Rick. Now, what's the problem?

—I just lost a fucking sale because some dipshit can't fuel a car. Every car in the lot is out of gas.

—Yes, that's a problem, now isn't it? But whose problem is it, Rick?

I was not meant to answer this question.

—It's your job to sell the cars, so fix the problem.

—What's that painting, Mister Springs?

He stretched back over the chair and looked behind him at the painting on the paneled wall.

—Oh, that ugly thing? Springs said, reclining back in his squeaking throne like he was sunning in a deckchair. —My wife liked it.

—What's it called?

—It's called go sell some fuckin' cars, Rick.

—I can't do that until I know what the name of that painting is.

—I write your paycheck, Rick. You do what I say, or you go back to pushing used cars.

—The painting.

—*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

What's it to you?

—Too many questions.

—It's the name of the painting, dumbass.

—I guess the painting is the answer to the question.

—Get a company fuel card, take those cats to the BP next door and fill them up.

—Got it, got it.

I still had my hand on the doorknob when the dealer called me back into his office.

—Oh and Rick.

—Mister Springs.

—My wife said the painter vowed to commit suicide when it was finished. A damn silly and pathetic notion if you ask me.

—Have you seen the mural going up across the street?

—No, what is it? Springs was half-listening, already returning to a spreadsheet of calls to make. I saw my future columned and formulized into the thousands of rectangles on a spreadsheet.

—A jungle.

—Suppose a jungle's better for business than all that goddamned graffiti, don't you?

—Maybe he'll off himself when he's finished.

—Maybe.

I returned to the lot with a gas can. Ellen leaned against the razor fence, watching the muralist put the last brushstroke on an outsized leaf, her fingers curled through the chain-links. I wanted to sneak up behind her and bury my mouth in the nape of her neck. It had been a long time. She pulled her license from her purse for me to photocopy, but I waved her off. After I refueled the XJ, it started up without bucking at me, and I knew then what was the problem. I got out and Ellen got behind the wheel, with the engine running quietly. When she didn't pull out of the lot, I realized she was waiting on me. I buckled myself into the passenger seat and she pulled out of the lot and onto University. The muralist was gone by now, though his paints were still on the sidewalk waiting

for his return.

She gassed it through a yellow light and took a hard left on 23rd, her black clothes radiating warmth, and I switched on the A/C. I waved at the old-timers as we toured by Southtown. I saw the man who had been grilling hamburgers walk out of a payday loan place across the street. The city had stripped the road surface without bothering to repave and the Jaguar jounced all over the road, swerving around potholes and sewer heads.

—Usually it rides real smooth, I apologized to her. —On a regular surface, that is.

Ellen was silently spurring a round right turn on Magnolia by Brother Bryan Park. I recognized a few of the gutter drunks I'd hired to sweep the used lot or wash down a car. When they were finished, boozy breath in my face, they'd always tried to cadge more cash off me than what I told them their time was worth. Ellen flashed through Five Points and around the fountain where there were as many bums as pigeons, and we triangulated our way down 11th Court back to University. I had no idea where she was going. As she shifted gears I thought of her car sitting at the bottom of East Lake.

—How many women do you ride with like this?

—I stopped counting, I answered, looking out the window as buildings blurred by.

—Do you ever stop for drinks?

—Sometimes.

—Do you intend to sell me this car or not?

—The original XJ was the last to have creative input from Sir Williams Lyons.

—You know a lot about Jaguar.

—I like to think that Jaguar now is a better car than it was back then, those experimental designs, each series better than the one before it. Takes a long time to squeeze out the quirks, simplify systems, increase shift quality, a real work in progress is what you're driving right now. You know why it's called the XJ, don't you?

—Why is it called the XJ, tell me.

—XJ for experimental Jaguar.

—I just like the hood ornament.

—I've got a dozen back at my place if you want to head that way.

Her shapely knees jutted out below the hem of her skirt, the muscle of her finely toned calves rippled under her tight, tawny skin as she pedaled the clutch like a piano and we crested the hill on 21st Street and coasted over the railroad viaduct and into downtown. At the bottom of the hill she turned into

a parking deck and we spiraled up the ramp to the top deck with a view of the skyline. She keyed the ignition off and we sat together but separate in the car, me thinking about all the important moments in movies that happen behind the wheel of a car. Church bells at St. Paul's tolled the evening hour.

She would buy this Jaguar outright in cash, I knew as she leaped the gearshift between us like mounting a horse, legs splayed in a straddle and black skirt hiked up to her waist as I palmed her ass and hefted her body electric on top of me, bumping her head against the ceiling of the car, and I did not turn my mouth away from hers as she leaned my seat back and plunged into me, and I thought of what Mister Springs had said about the shirt off their backs.

After work, Springs and I went for a few rounds at the Highland Golf Course to celebrate the sale of my first cat. The first sale I'd made in over forty days, used or new. We downed Bloody Marys at the clubhouse, a drink for each hole. Nine holes, nine drinks. The sweltry day was cut with wind, thin pines bent and swayed under the invisible weight of the heat and the nostalgic smell of freshly mowed golf grass tickled my nose. I thought again of the lush, tropical painting on Springs' office wall. The yellowish skin of naked native women, the blue landscape, those three unanswerable questions, or was it four? But then I recalled that the title inscription in the upper left corner of the reprint had no question marks. They were not questions at all, just the date 1897, before even Jaguar.

By the seventh or eighth hole I was pretty cocked and drove the ball wild and high into a low sand bunker where I had to stab at the sand to drive it out. Springs leaned against his club, soused on Blood Marys, and laughed at my luck. I holed a few more balls and on the sixth or seventh sent the ball sailing parabolically skyward and then waterbound into a clear, blue hazard by Highland Avenue. The wind had picked up and it was blowing our balls all over the green, and we were losing light as the sun lowered behind the pines.

I've always hated golf, but it's a necessary evil if you want to sell anything more than ballpoint pens, like always having on hand the newest edition of the Kelley Blue Book, the bible of the business. I got so I could recite the Blue Book value of any model from memory, and many nights I fell asleep in bed, my wife's back to me, the curve of her bottom arching under satin sheets, the Blue Book still propped against my chest. The Blue Book was shelved now, and in that spreadsheet future I would spend my nights drinking alone in a bar studying specs and performance ratings on Jaguar engines. At least I was no longer playing golf on an AstroTurf mat in that trailer park.

—You ever considered owning a dealership, Rick?

Springs was priming me for something, and I wasn't about to fall for it. Yes, I had considered it, but I didn't want to be tied down to anything again the way you get tied to a car note, a mortgage, a woman, a life that you never wanted but come to find out is yours whether you like it or not, love it or leave it. I had an ex-wife with whom I led an unexamined existence for some time. Kathy said I had the arms of a man who raced wheelchairs for a living, that was her idea of a compliment, and she said I looked at everything and thought only how to sell it to someone else for more than it was worth, like that pen I told Springs she wrote dirty letters with. I would never sell the Jaguar golf club I made though, she didn't know me so deep as she thought in the end.

—You gonna clean out the back of the car before you turn it over to her?

I knew what he was getting at, but sometimes it was smarter to play dumb.

—You were gone a long time on that test drive, he said with a lewd wink.

I knelt by the hazard's edge, saw my own face rippled on the shallow abyss of the golf pond, and fished around where I thought I'd seen the ball splash into the hazard. I sensed another hand finger my hand, and I thought of Ellen leaning over me in the Jaguar, her eyes shut when I came inside her, the church bells quieted. The underwater hand pulled me down, and I sliced the water with my club, and then the blue face of the artist merged with the reflection of my face and he let my hand go.

Mister Springs' shadow darkened long over me. —Lost your balls? Springs' jowly face then overtook mine in the hazard, displacing it with his pumpkin grin. I didn't tell Mister Springs what I saw, I just stood there wondering whether the muralist drowned himself after finishing the jungle or whether the Jaguar gang hunted him out and killed him for erasing their tags.

That night I crashed on the backseat of Ellen's Jaguar in the graveyard lot. The interior was dark as oil, the jet and starless sky was blotted out by the lot's humming sulfur lights. I scanned the lot for trespassers and fuel encroachers. She was coming to pick it up in the morning, she said, and we'd go for another ride together on my lunch. I was looking forward to it. The bluish face of the drowned muralist lingered with me still, and they've got used-car lots and razor wire in Miami too, I thought. Black shadows flitted across the tinted windows of Ellen's catlike dream panthers prowling in the lot. I had slept many nights in my trailer office like a useless security guard, and I figured I would tell Springs why every car in his lot was out of gas at the Friday morning sales meeting. Jag-

Jaguar club slung over my shoulder, I would be there to explain everything. Ellen and I would screw in a parking lot again, the only place I felt anything, and then fall asleep in each other's arms on the backseat.

The jungle mural across the boulevard glowed green in the light of the BP Station. I heard the unmistakable guzzle of someone siphoning gas with a drill pump out of the Jag's tank. With one hand I clutched the door handle, the other tightening around the taped grip of the Jaguar club, and waited for the moment to spring.

I shot out of the back driver-side door and wielded the Jaguar club like a baseball bat and homerun swung at one of the siphoners and missed, the hood ornament sailing though the air and denting the fender of Ellen's car. Siphoners shadowboxed around me, panthering in the dark, warwhooping and leaping across the lot between cars. These Southtown hoods danced and berserked in the lot's freak light, I couldn't possibly take them all on, but I stood there waving the club as a kid dropped his gas can and broke into a dark run, fuel trickling out onto the blacktop, and he began to scale the chain-link palisade beyond the muralist's wall.

The remaining siphoners huddled close to the cars, thinking I'd never catch them. Had they come to prey on our gasoline, or as in a mental quartermoment I believed, to collect their dead who had been asphalted over by Mister Springs, his cars filling the lot like rows of dark headstones? No matter what their color, all his cars appeared wetly black, with an Ellen ensconced behind the tinted windows of each one. When I saw one of the Jaguar siphoners snap a silver ornament from the hood of an executive S-type, I decided to let the Southtown punks scatter back into their jungle—the wild we come from and the wild where we're going.