

# MANIACS

STORY BY JOSHUA FERRIS  
PAINTINGS BY LINDEN FREDERICK

Fifteen of America's leading fiction writers composed short stories to pair with Linden Frederick's new series of paintings, "Night Stories," on view at New York's Forum Gallery May 11 through June 30. The painting on the opposite page, *Police*, was the starting point for the story that follows.





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Budweiser  
Pepsi

PEPSI  
7-Eleven

Lite  
7-Eleven

EXPRESS DELIVERY  
FREE  
WEEK

ICE

POLICE





Save-A-Lot, 2016.  
Oil on linen. 36 x 36 in.

nostrils and ears until he was decked out like some kind of swamp king.

Inside we made toast and watched TV. We went back for more and he counted the egg cartons inside the fridge.

“How come you have so many?” he asked.

“Because that’s all my mom knows how to cook.”

She came home long enough to leave me in charge of my little brother. I fed him cereal and he went to bed. By then it was after sundown. With nothing else to do, we walked up to the highway. Mike kicked at a sleepy old pelican along the way, but it perked up and flew off. Sometimes when we got bored fishing we’d catch a grunt, say no bigger than four inches, reel it in and cast it across the canal to the other side. There was almost always a pelican there, watching. The grunt flopped around, and if the pelican waddled over, we’d start to chant: “Take. The. Bait! Take. The. Bait!” And for every stupid one that did it was like flying a kite.

We stood in the shadows near the mangroves, ginning up courage. The cars were coming around the bend at Mile Marker 21, heading unsuspecting in the direction of paradise.

“The Dow lost points today,” I told him.

“What?”

“The Dow Jones.”

“What’s that?”

“The stock market.”

“Oh,” he said. He was used to that sort of thing by then. “You ready?”

We listened with our entire bodies. The sound was faint at first, like the ocean in a conch shell, then suddenly the car went whooshing past. Michael put wind-up and follow-through into his throw. He had an outfielder’s grace

After that we doused t-shirts with lighter fluid and watched them burn in the woods. Half the island was wild—marsh and timberland—and the other half fancy compounds with powerboats cable-suspended above finished canals.

We came out of the woods as the mosquito dusters passed low over the island. Michael pinched one nostril shut and snorted the poisoned air, pretending to be somebody on *Miami Vice*. It was hilarious. He was without thought and would live forever. I was more

cautious, checked by the threat of consequences and the fear of bodily harm. I kept God close. What I prayed for more often than a boat on open water were pecs that looked like Mike’s.

We got back on our bikes and raced past houses and canals to the end of the street and the start of the ocean. It was a world full of other people’s vacations and there was nothing to do but pedal home. We stopped along the side of the road to catch geckos. Michael let them bite down on his

A



and the anger of a tosser of bombs. I held back. My egg barely made it to the highway.

“Missed,” he said. “Where’d yours land?”

“Over in the mangroves,” I lied.

I loved him. Not that I said it. I didn’t understand love of that kind enough to talk about it with anyone. He had biceps to go with his pecs and a mound of muscle at each shoulder. I didn’t want to kiss him. I wanted us to fuse.

Soon we were down to two eggs apiece. I was really trying by then. With aim like mine, though, it hardly mattered.

Then a red pickup went past going way too slow. We nailed it, both of us—SPLAT!— PLUNK! We were so happy we forgot that we’d done something wrong. We cheered for half a second before the brake lights flashed and that truck came to a screeching halt.

“Hey!” The driver stuck his head clean out the window and pointed right at us. “You little dickheads stay right where you are!”

With nowhere else to go but into the Gulf of Mexico, we ran hard for the one-lane thoroughfare called Spanish Main Trail. The driver ducked back inside his truck and threw it in reverse. We rounded the corner into complete darkness as his headlights swung around, casting our long shadows down the blacktop in front of us. Those shadows made an army of us. We ran like we never ran in school. I was jumping and whooping and laughing and looking back while flicking him the bird, delirious with fear. “Fuck you, motherfucker! FUCK YOU!! Ha ha ha!!!”

We raced past my house on Snapper Lane, past dense swampland aching with bug noise, past one and then another new construction, and at the mailbox shaped like a manatee we jumped the neighbor’s fence and hid behind a speedboat under a house on stilts. All the houses on Cudjoe were built that way, as a precaution against hurricanes.

I hunkered down, hocking a lugie hard as a rock. My lungs burned. I was giddy trying not to laugh. Mike on port side of the speedboat saw the truck creep into view and alerted me with a *psst*. I took up a fistful of gravel. The brake lights flashed red across the palm fronds fallen in the front yard.

“What’s going on down there?” someone above us called out. My neighbor, the Cuban witchdoctor. She was peering over the balcony. I put my finger to my nose and Mike nodded. “Who’s down there?” she demanded.

We heard the door of the truck fall shut. Even then it felt like a game that any one of us could have put an end to at any time.

*Green Acres*, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.

“Listen up, idiots!” he said. His voice was like a preacher’s, but pissed. “Show yourselves and I will go easy. Make me find you, and I will slice you in fucking two!”

Wasn’t that funny! But Mike looked alarmed. He started yanking off his shoes.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Getting in the water!”

“What for?”

“Because that fucker is *mad!*”

We heard the crunch of gravel underfoot. Mike abandoned his shoes, ran to the canal and raced down the ladder. I followed right behind and slipped into the water just as the beam of a flashlight started bouncing around.

It was then I wanted to go home. I

We ran like we never ran in school. I was jumping and whooping and laughing and looking back while flicking him the bird, delirious with fear.









really didn't care to participate any longer. I needed to be back with my little brother. He was only three. What if he woke up and I wasn't there? Who would soothe him with a bowl of Kix and an episode of *He-Man: Masters of the Universe*?

I was sure Michael had drowned. Then, quiet as can be, he resurfaced. He'd made it halfway down that canal in a single breath!

The maniac stood on the canal's edge beaming his flashlight this way and that. He had something in his other hand that I couldn't make out until he pivoted, and the barrel of a shotgun caught the moonlight.

I ducked my head under and swam straight down until I touched the slimy seaweed on the bottom, then over to the other side, praying to God the whole time. I came up among a bundle of bobbing crabtraps and a beat-up outboarder with a yellow glow. My neighbor called down to that sulking maniac.

"Who is that? Who's down there?"

"I'm looking for the kids who egged me!"

"You're trespassing!" she said.

"Leave or I'm calling the cops!"

"Fuck you, lady! I'm not leaving until I have their hides!"

He came back to the canal to pace and shine his light some more. So well hidden was I among the crabtraps, I started feeling brave again. Yeah, sure, I'd made promises to God while underwater and He'd answered all my prayers, and who was I to press my luck—especially in the ocean, where creatures of the deep served Him as instruments of vengeance, at least in Sunday School—but I couldn't believe He'd care much for a man who'd go after kids with a gun. I remembered that I'd stuffed that fistful of gravel down my pocket. I tossed some of it into the mangroves. They landed like shot and plunked into the water with a delicious gulp. Oh, boy, did that drive him nuts! I swiveled in the other direction and really put everything into my next throw. It hit some metal

canister next door to the witchdoctor's with a *ping-ping-ping*, and the maniac raced off in that direction. He was going back and forth like a mad dog at a fence. I could have screamed with laughter but I stifled it masterfully. I might have bought myself an hour of shivering in that cold cold water, but those last few taunts made me the winner hands down.

When finally he gave up and I heard his truck restart, I took it for a trick and stayed right where I was. Then slowly, still afraid, hand over hand I crept out to sea.

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We'd been there a year. The palm trees were still strange to behold. My mom said into the phone that I was having a hard time adjusting. I found it boring, that's all. My stepdad couldn't believe that. He was into fishing and camping and swimming and all the rest of that Boy Scout crap. Every time he came home from work and found me on the sofa reading my *Barron's* and watching a taped episode of *St. Elsewhere*, he just shook his head. As far as he was concerned I was a failed boy the way a fork is a failed spoon. Just imagine the man I'd make.

I wanted to tell him to fuck off but I was afraid he'd punch me in the mouth. He was always going around telling stories about how his father had punched him in the mouth at crucial moments in his development, and those blows had made all the difference. They'd turned him into a man. I found that hard to believe. It seemed commonsense that a real man, or a smart one, anyway, would know to stay quiet if it meant avoiding a punch, especially one to the mouth. But it was no democracy in our house and so you could bet I was wrong about that, too.

Lose the attitude, mister.

We can all do without the attitude.

You change your attitude THIS INSTANT!

I worried on the way home that Mike was dead and that my baby brother was floating facedown in a



canal—and that I would be ambushed after every step. But I made it back unmolested and found Mike sitting on the stairs. He'd even retrieved his shoes.

We'd never been happier to see each other.

"How did you escape?"

"I thought we were dead!"

"Did you know that maniac had a gun?"

Upstairs in our shitbox no one was home yet, and Brian remained sound asleep. I couldn't believe my luck.

I secretly swore never to do anything stupid again. I was done with close calls. And when at last my mom walked in with Dickie Barstow, my stepdad, I gave her a big hug.

"What have you done?" she asked.

"Can't I just hug you?"

"Not likely," she said. "What are you all wet for?"

"We jumped in the canal."

"In your shoes?"

I looked down. "We were hot."

"You were supposed to be watching your brother," she said.

"We just did it to cool off."

ABOVE:  
*Downstairs*, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.

OPPOSITE:  
*50 Percent*, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.





*Dish, 2016.*  
Oil on linen, 36 x 36 in.

Nothing on his walls  
except water stains  
and taped-up pictures  
of naked girls  
torn out of  
magazines.  
There was no one  
there to tell him not to  
look at naked girls.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Barstow,”  
Michael said.

She let the matter drop. As a child-abuse investigator who saw the worst of troubled families, she had no time for children of good fortune, myself included. Michael was a different matter. “You boys want some eggs?” she asked, looking at him, not me.

My stepfather said hello to Mike and then went to their bedroom and closed the door. I might have won his affection had I managed, during a hurricane, to erect a tent with a tourniquet on one arm, but all he needed from Mike was a simple hello.

She scrambled some eggs, salted

them and handed them over still steaming. Michael and I received our plates and realized what was on them. Eggs! We started laughing, the sweeter because no one else knew why.

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That night we stayed up talking, me on the top bunk, him on the bottom. Then we got quiet. I was thinking about everything and suddenly God was there with me. He was unhappy about most of it. But I could change. I promised I would. No more egging cars, no more catching pelicans. What troubled the two of us the most was how I could leave my little brother alone.

“Mike?”  
“Huh?”  
“You sleeping?”  
“No.”  
“Can I ask you something?”  
“What?”  
“Are we best friends?”  
“Sure.”  
“What about Shane?”  
“What about him?”  
“Are you better friends with him or with me?”  
“I don’t know,” he said. “You, probably.”  
“So I’m your best friend?”  
“Probably,” he said.  
“You’re mine, too, probably,” I said.  
“Has Shane ever been over to your house?”  
“No.” There was a pause. “Shane? No way.”  
“Can I come over sometime?”  
“How come?”  
“I’d like to check out your bedroom.”  
He didn’t answer. I thought maybe he’d fallen asleep.  
“I’ve never seen it,” I said. “What kind of posters do you have on your walls?”

Still no answer. I hung my head off the bunk to see if he was sleeping. He was just lying there, eyes open, saying nothing.

The next morning they left early for work and took my little brother with them. Michael and I woke up and baked cookies. We had to substitute honey for sugar and cook them in the oven three at a time, on the pan she used for scrambling eggs. We’d never been a family with much use for baking sheets. But they came out just fine. I had twelve and Michael fourteen. We ran fans to get the odor out. She didn’t let me have cookies because she thought sugar made me crazy.



"You want to shoot my dad's gun?" I asked him.

"Your dad has a gun?"

"Well, not my real dad," I said. "My stepdad. My real dad's a stockbroker in Chicago, Illinois."

"You've told me that a thousand times," he said.

We went into the bedroom Dickie shared with my mom and looked everywhere for his gun but he must of taken it to work. We did find my mom's diaphragm.

"Know what this is?" I asked him.

"It's a dildo," he said.

"It's called a diaphragm," I said.

"It's so she doesn't get pregnant again."

"That is a dildo," he said.

"This is what a woman uses when she doesn't want to get pregnant. She told me. She puts it up her thing and it catches all the sperm."

"This is how a woman jerks off, dipshit. It's called a dildo. It goes up her snatch, like a cock."

"It's a diaphragm," I said.

We put everything back exactly the way it was. Then we rode bikes to the water and threw rocks at seagulls.

On the way back we stopped at Shane's house and raced up the stairs. No one answered. We had shoplifted before but that was the first time we broke into someone's home. It was easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy. They'd left a sliding-glass door unlocked.

"Come on!" he said.

"I don't know," I said. "What if we get caught?"

"We won't."

We mostly just walked around. All the rooms were quiet. In the dining room we took seats at the table and pretended to cut into a couple of steak dinners.

"How was your day, sweetheart?"

"Oh, thank you for asking, darling. And yours?"

"Oh, enchanté," I said.

Shane's mom had a lot of jewelry. Necklaces and rings, stuff like that. We said it was treasure worth millions. We ran our fingers through it and held it up to the light. We didn't take any of it,

though. We took only nylons, half a pack of cigarettes, all the pocket change we could find, a package of Oreos, and a canister of just-add-water lemonade. We also took the cat. Mike had the idea to take two pillows but we had to ditch them at the last minute because they were too hard to conceal.

We walked everything into the woods. I had half a fort there put together with stolen plywood. The cat tried to slip through the openings until we tied him up with a little leash of twine.

"How come you don't just nail the walls together?" he asked.

"I don't have nails," I said.

*Vacant, 2016.*  
Oil on linen.  
36 x 36 in.

He put his hands down one of the nylons and turned it over, trying to convince himself that he was seeing a real woman's leg.

That afternoon we set up a lemonade stand on the side of Spanish Main. We weren't having much luck until a brand-new truck pulled up and powered down the windows. It was Shane and his family.

"You boys up to no good?" his dad asked.

Shane said hi to Mike from the backseat and Mike said hi back.

"Give us all a cup of that cold brew!" his dad shouted.

So we sold some of their lemonade





back to them for fifty cents a cup. His dad handed over a fiver and told us to keep it. We added it to their loose change. Shane was lucky. His parents were so rich they could run the air conditioner even when they weren't home.

I kept asking. "Can I come over?" "Can I see your room?" "Can I spend the night?" It took a while. I just wanted to notch something I knew Shane had never done.

He lived in a trailer park on Stock Island. I'd been there once before with my mom. She had to pay an emergency visit to a family in some kind of trouble and had dragged Brian and me along. She paid me fifty cents an hour to keep him entertained in the car. She parked in the shade of a seagrape tree and disappeared inside as we rolled down the windows and settled in for the long haul, me with my copy of *Money*, Brian with his *He-Man* action figures. The hot air wafting in smelled of sawdust

and trash. A hippie cruised to a stop near the car, straddled his ten-speed while he popped open a beer, and wobbily kicked off again. It was all squalor, and ruin, and last night's rain; I dreamed of Chicago and its Options Exchange. I was reading about P/E yields when a man burst through the door of the trailer my mom had entered, fell down in the dirt lane and had a massive, mouth-foaming seizure.

I expected a lot of rigmarole as we pulled up to Mike's. But "I'll get you in the morning" was all she said. And: "Be ready by ten. Don't make me wait."

"Can I have a dollar?"

"I don't have a dollar," she said.

I got out of the car and she backed up. "Behave yourself," she advised through the window before she drove off. She had families to see in Key West.

Mike answered the door and led me inside. I'd seen houses like his before, in pictures my mom kept inside her case files, but I'd never known a friend to live in one. Everything old and dingy. The floors warped and dirty. Walls peeling and stained. Food sitting open on the counters. Trash piled in the corners. Garbage bags everywhere. In fact it was not until many years later, walking the streets of New York City, that I would again see such a tidy stack of garbage bags as I found in the back room at Michael's, where furniture was limited to a weight bench and the far wall, enclosed by a blue tarp, let in nettles and daylight.

In the kitchen a rickety table had been pushed against the wall and a man was sitting there smoking a cigarette. He was old and shirtless, with pink nipples on his saggy boobs, and a wet towel around his neck like a boxer. His belly was as big as a pregnant lady's but his legs were as skinny as mine. Mike walked right past him and had to come back for me. "What are you doing?" he said. "Come on."

He led me down the hallway to his bedroom. "Your dad looks like someone who could have been in a war," I said.

"That's not my dad," he said. "That's

my grandpa."

"Doesn't he talk?"

"To himself sometimes. Mostly he's deaf"

"Where's your dad?"

"Tampa Bay."

"And your mom?"

"She lives on a houseboat."

It was like that there—weird. No one saying hi when you walked in the door. Just a creepy old deaf grandpa at the kitchen table with his boobs on display, watching a cigarette burn straight up into his eyes and sipping from a can of beer.

His bedroom, a plain white box, ended with a window covered in cardboard. He sprawled out on his sleeping bag and took up a football. "Wanna play catch?" he asked, trying to act normal. But there was no bed. No pillows, no furniture. Nothing on his walls except water stains and taped-up pictures of naked girls torn out of magazines. There was no one there to tell him not to look at naked girls.

If she'd seen that place, she'd have yanked Mike out of there in a heartbeat. But me, I was a spoiled brat who made everyone's life a misery, so she'd dropped me off with fare-thee-well and left me there to die.

"I have to go," I said.

"Go where?"

"Home."

"But you just got here."

I knew it was a mistake. He wasn't stupid.

"Go if you want," he said. "I don't care."

"Just kidding," I said. "I don't have to."

"No. Go. Leave. Be gone."

"No, I told you. I was just kidding."

He stood. "Fuck you," he said. He got in my face and pointed a finger at my eye. "Fuck. You."

He fake head-butted me and I flinched. "What'd I do?" I said weakly.

He left the room.

There was God, the one I prayed to, and then there was a god like Michael. He was the boy my stepdad wanted, and the boy I wanted more of in me. I hadn't been prepared to feel

OPPOSITE:  
*Rear Window*, 2016.  
Oil on linen, 36 x 36 in.

BELOW:  
*Mansard*, 2016.  
Oil on linen, 36 x 36 in.











*Night Off*, 2016.  
Oil on linen, 36 x 36 in.

toward him pity and disgust.

Never before—at savings banks, in car-lot lobbies, during the duller Sunday-morning sermons—had I wanted to be gone from a place so badly. But I couldn't leave, not now, so I dawdled in his bedroom thinking up excuses. I remembered God and made Him a promise. Everything would change if He gave me the strength to stay. There would be no more backtalk, no more attitude, no more breaking into houses, if only He kept watch over me and got me safely back home.

Mike reappeared in the doorway,

straightening out his shirt in back.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"And go where?"

"I'm hungry, aren't you?"

Nothing was said to us by the old guy as we left. It was a campgrounds atmosphere on the dirt path we took on our walk up to the convenience store. Figures moved furtively in the shadows, their cherries firing between the trees like lightning bugs. Mike and I kicked a beer can back and forth across the wood chips as I tried to find some way to tell him that I was done stealing forever.

We went up and down the aisles—

friends again, just like that. The store clerk, in a blue vest and back brace, stopped restocking the coolers and returned to the counter, where he watched us with a gunslinger's quiet. A hippie entered, one of Stock Island's million sun-leathered loners, this one in cut-off Levi's and a hat woven of palm leaves, to redeem a winning scratch-off card. His payout was more of the same and he went at them with a penny just to the left of the cash register. The clerk in the vest resumed his eagle eye. By then I had two Slim Jims down my shorts.

I didn't really like beef jerky, or use deodorant, or need any more fish hooks, but it wasn't about that or even the money, since we still had all that loose change we'd taken from Shane's house.

Mike was in back near the coolers. After a while I wondered what he was doing, and I wasn't the only one.

"What are you doing back there, boy?" the clerk called out.

I looked over at him. He was staring Mike down and Mike was staring back.

"You been here a while. You gonna buy something or what?"

I felt it was time to leave. I walked down the aisle and over to the end cap where Mike stood rooted to the spot. He and that clerk were still squaring off. "What are you doing?" I asked him.

"What do you want here?" he asked me.

"What?"

"Take whatever it is you want."

"What are you doing? You look suspicious, man."

"I mean anything," he said. "Take beer if you want."

"What are you talking about, Mike?"

He hiked up his shirt in back. Any time a shoplifter does that, you're



meant to look at all he's stolen. But Mike was showing me something else entirely.

"Where'd you get that?" I whispered softly.

He broke off from the clerk at last and looked at me. "Anything your little heart desires," he said.

"Don't be crazy, Mike."

"What are you boys whispering about back there?" I knew some things in that instant that I hadn't known before. His little muscles didn't matter. He'd never get rich. He'd hurt people. He'd spend time in jail. He'd never go back to being a boy. And that was what I loved him for—all that was grown-up and all that was bad. And I knew that that love had a limit.

I walked down the far aisle in the direction of the front door. I nearly hit it running and bounced back hard. It was dead-bolted.

"In a hurry?" the clerk asked me.

The hippie handed his keys back to him across the counter and chuckled. He shifted his weight and bent down to another scratch-off card. "Just let them boys go, Frank," he said.

"Okay, you other one. Come on up here, now. Game's over."

Game's over, time's up. You should have thought about that beforehand, young man. But do you ever stop to think? You don't know how good you have it. You don't deserve any of this. What you deserve is a punch in the mouth.

"My stepdad's a cop," I said.

The clerk peered over casually. "Congratulations."

He reached for the phone as Michael came forward. The hippie didn't look up until the clerk said, "Oh no, son." At that, he glanced at Mike, righted himself and took two steps back into a bin of miniature pies.

"Put the phone down," Mike said.

"You have the cameras, son," the clerk said.

"Put the phone down!"

The clerk did as he was told. At Mike's instruction he came around and unlocked the door while Mike

kept distance between them. He stepped aside and Mike looked at me. "Go," he said, gesturing with the gun. He meant out the door, into freedom. But I didn't belong out there. I belonged in here, with the clerk and the hippie. Why else did I have my hands up? "Go!" he shouted. Without thinking I removed everything I had put down my shorts and placed it on the counter in the name of God. Then I ran out the door and into the night.

I felt sick to my soul. Just sick and done for and ready to confess. I joined Michael at the window for the fiftieth time. He was sitting on the weight bench peeling back the blue

*Ice, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.*

tarp, awaiting the arrival of a SWAT team. "Do you see 'em?" I asked. He shook his head. The wait was agony. I went back to the bathroom with the need to vomit, so sorrowful and full of regret. The stool was missing a toilet seat, and the shower head was a green garden hose that lay coiled inside the bathtub. I was homesick and wanted to cry.

And they had *me* pegged for the bad kid. *He* was the bad kid! You only had to look around. What did he have to lose?

I didn't know what to say to God, but He certainly knew in my heart of hearts that I would change this time from the inside out if only He would

**He'd never get rich.  
He'd hurt people.  
He'd spend time in  
jail. He'd never  
go back to  
being a boy.  
And that was what I  
loved him for—all  
that was grown up  
and all that was bad.**







DAILY NEWS

AL'S DINER  
330 9670

Coca-Cola





accommodate one final request, which I above all other wretched souls on earth failed to deserve. I was on my knees in that awful bathroom among rust stains and rags for towels praying for leniency and the salvation of my soul until nine o'clock gave way to ten and ten o'clock to bedtime and still no one came to take us away.

I ended up in the kitchen. I wanted to be near an adult, even a deaf and nearly dead one like Mike's grandpa. He hadn't moved an inch since I first saw him. He might have been burning the same cigarette. The chair I sat on had only three legs.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked him.

He bent an ear in half with a finger and shook his head. I raised my voice.

"Do you believe in God?"

He looked away and sipped his beer. So much for protection and comfort.

Michael appeared in the doorway. He wasn't talking to me and I wasn't talking to him but he gestured and I followed. His room was even more terrible at night. A lamp on the floor cast shadows up the enormous walls. He took the gun out of a garbage bag and handed it to me.

"This is my stepdad's gun, isn't it?" I said. "You took this from my house."

He nodded. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I thought we were friends."

"I thought we were, too," he said.

"You were the one who wanted to go home."

He wasn't a bad kid. He knew right from wrong. If he wasn't sick to his soul like I was, he was sure sorry anyway, and casting around for excuses. I liked him again, sort of. Besides, I had to talk to someone.

"Why do you think they haven't come for us yet?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Do you think ...?"

But I didn't dare say it out loud. What if God was giving me a second chance? What if I was living a prayer come true?

"Tell me about the stock market," he said.

"What?"

"The stock market," he said.

"The down Joe, or whatever."

"What do you want to know?"

"How much money can you make?"

I began to explain long and short positions, calls and puts, turning the gun over in my hand as I spoke. I pointed it at him. "I should shoot you," I said, "you know that? I really should."

"I told you I was sorry," he said.

"I know," I said. "I forgive you."

"But man," he said, shaking his head, "you should have seen your face!"

"My face? What about that clerk's face?"

"What about that hippie's face?!"

We both laughed. But we knew we were pressing our luck so we stopped as soon as we could.

"Is it loaded?" I asked.

"No."

"Let's pretend I have to shoot an apple off your head."

He stood up and assumed the pose of a knife-thrower's assistant: hands against the wall and his head held steady.

"Okay," he said. "Do it."

"Are you sure it's not loaded?"

"Try it there first," he said, pointing.

I aimed it at the wall and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked and the bullet ripped through the air. Mike ducked and plugged his fingers in his ears. "What the—!"

"You said it wasn't loaded!" I cried. "You did it, not me!"

A few seconds later, we heard something from the other room—a bang and a fall, and someone said, "Ooh!" Then: "AHHH! AHHH! AHHH!"

Mike looked at me with his eyes gone big. "My grandpa," he said.

He ran out of the room.

I didn't move. I dropped the gun. There was a hole in the wall above the taped-up pictures.

Just as the future was starting to look up again, it collapsed all around me worse than ever before. I wandered slowly out of the room toward the old man's screams.

He was sitting on the kitchen floor



holding his foot. "STUBBED MY FUCKING TOE!" he shouted up at me.

"He didn't even hear it go off," Mike said. "Go to bed, grandpa!"

"HUH?"

Mike squatted down behind the old man and hooked him under his armpits. "I said it's time for bed!"

"Yeah, okay, okay," he said.

With a great heave-ho, followed by a dangerous stagger, Mike managed to get him to his feet.

"Told you he was deaf," he said to me as they passed down the hall.

I watched them go. Then I went back to Mike's room. The gun was still on the floor. I shook my head at it. I promised never to shoot another gun again, ever. "I solemnly swear," I said to God above with my right hand raised. I was forever done doing stupid things, for real this time. There was only one place for me and that was heaven. **MP**

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ABOVE:  
*Liquor*, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.

OPPOSITE:  
*Takeout*, 2016.  
Oil on linen,  
36 x 36 in.