

## 100% Cotton

The night is cold. The buildings are tall. The sky, except where it's starlit, is black. Black like black checker pieces or what's left of wood after the fire.

Also, I should mention that there's a large gun pointed at my face.

And because there's a large gun pointed at my face, things speed up the way they do in nature films, how a seed sprouts, turns to stalk, and takes leaves in ten seconds.

Things here are speeding up just that way. Stars pinwheel beyond the buildings. The moon rises, sets, rises again. And then things slow way, way down.

"If you don't want to be caught dead in that shirt," he says, "you'd best take it off."

The guy with the gun's not fucking around. I don't know anything about guns, but this is a big one. It looks like the kind that holds a lot of bullets, the kind that leaves your corpse unrecognizable when the cops come, which is okay because there's no one to miss me, no one left on this spinning planet to faint when the coroner lifts the sheet from my bullet-riddled face.

The gun's pointed at me because the guy asked for my wallet and I said no.

"No," I said, and he said, "How'd you like to die?" and I said, "Well, I wouldn't want to be caught dead in this shirt."

Which isn't exactly true. If I hadn't wanted to be caught dead in this shirt, I wouldn't have worn it. It seemed fitting for the occasion. The shirt's black with a skull-and-crossbones emblem on the pocket, what you see printed on bottles, the kind with caps to keep out babies and old people.

Maybe the skull and crossbones wasn't an inspired choice, but fuck you. Pick out your own death-shirt.

The guy with the gun didn't like my tone. He said, "I don't like your tone."

He didn't get my smugness, that it was on purpose, so I said it again, the thing about not wanting to be caught dead in this shirt, which is when he told me to take it off. Which pretty much brings you up to speed.

I pull the shirt over my head. I kneel and fold the shirt on the sidewalk, a rectangle, department-store-perfect. Work five years at the Gap, and you get really good at folding clothes.

"You've never been held up," the gunman says.

I could tell him the truth, that it's my third time this week, that for months I've watched the local news in order to pinpoint the Atlanta intersection most likely to get me offed. That I picked *this* street in *this* neighborhood and wander it nightly. That I've been roughed up, cursed, and mugged. I've lost two wallets, a watch, my phone, but not one guy would pull the trigger, because it turns out what they want, really, isn't blood—it's money.

Noncompliance, I decided, was my best option.

Last night, I sang, did a little dance. "My milk shake brings all the boys to the yard!" I belted it, gyrated my hips, but that only freaked the guy out. He didn't even stick around for the cash.

This guy, though. This guy looks like he wouldn't mind firing a round through your forehead if only you found the right words to provoke him.

"Wallet," he says. "Now."

I'm on my knees, the shirt the only thing between me and his feet. We're in the dark where he grabbed me, but there's enough moonlight to light up the skull, which isn't the same material as the rest of the shirt, but something firmer, rubbery, like a kid's iron-on jersey decal.

I point at the shirt. "One hundred percent cotton," I sign. English is my first language. My second's American Sign Language.

The guy looks around. He's getting antsy.

This is how my father died.

My father was born deaf and he taught me his language, though it wasn't his language, not for years. In this country's history, there was a time when sign language wasn't allowed, when the deaf were taught to speak in tongues, to mouth sounds they couldn't hear leave their lips, as though all of America was afraid of hands, of what the deaf might do with a language all their own.

My father found happiness with a deaf woman who taught him to speak with his body. She stuck around just long enough to give him a son. He never remarried. He died last year when a man asked for his wallet. Dad kept walking, and the man shot him.

"Couldn't your father read lips?" people ask, as though the answer to this question determines whose fault it is he's dead.

A wind kicks up. Shirtless, my skin prickles. The sidewalk hurts my knees.

"Count of five," the guy says. "Five."

At the Gap, I read tags until I came to know a material at the touch of a sleeve. Even cotton-polyester blends I can guess, give or take ten percent on the ratio.

My T-shirt between us looks lonely, and I wonder if my father fell like that, whether he folded or crumpled like a dropped shirt.

"Machine wash warm, with like colors," I sign.

"Four," the guy says.

I don't know whether my father misunderstood his killer, whether he saw the gun, whether he walked on knowing what came next.

"Gentle cycle," I sign.

"Keep it up," the guy says. His thumb jumps. Something clicks at his end of the gun. He steps toward me, and he's almost on the shirt. His boots are black lace-ups.

It won't be long now.

"Three."

You want to know why I want to die, but what answer could I give good enough for you, you who want to *live*?



Putting a thing like that into words, it's like trying to explain what stands between people, what keeps us from communicating—I mean really *communicating*—with each other.

We move through the days with our hands at our sides, and I believe that whatever holds us back, whatever keeps people at bay, maybe it's the same thing that left my mother tethered at the neck by an orange extension cord to our attic's rafters.

Maybe it's what sings in my ear to follow her.

She wasn't afraid to do to herself what I'm asking someone to do for me.

"Tumble dry low," I sign.

If I fall forward, my head will catch the shirt like a pillow. I'm ready.

"Two."

We talk in our sleep, and so do the deaf. Nights I snuck into my father's room, his hands worked over his chest, signing. It was the language of dreams, incomprehensible, but it was gorgeous. His hands rose and fell like birds with his breathing.

"One."

Except sometimes, sometimes, meaning crept in. A transmission. My father, who spent his life missing my mom, that sign: index fingers beckoning, then hands pulling air in the direction of the heart.

I close my eyes, and it's there, the gun muzzle, ice between my eyes.

I want to cry out. I hold my breath.

I wait.

I wait.

You want to know what my father was saying, and I'll tell you. It's what I shout once the gunman's given up, returned his weapon to his jacket pocket. It's what I call after his heels slapping the sidewalk.

It's my voice to the gunman and my father's hands to my mother in the night, calling: "Come back. Come back. Come back."