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PROPERTY

The man with the beard had leaves in his hair. Charlie tried to smile, and gestured to his lips, asking for a cigarette. The man just looked at Charlie and shook his head. The sky was spitting rain but the man was wearing sunglasses, and he had his headphones turned up as loud as they could go. Classic Rock. Maybe *Deep Purple* or something like that. Most of them sounded the same. Charlie's father used to listen to *Deep Purple* when Charlie was little, and he had given Charlie the album—the colors on the cover faded and a white lined imprint of the record pressing through from the inside—when Charlie turned thirteen. Charlie's father had acted like it was the greatest thing you could ever give anybody, and Charlie had pretended that it was. The record skipped though, and the music didn't make a lot of sense. Charlie had traded it along with an old Nintendo set for a bong a couple years later.

Now he watched his father moving slowly across the hospital grounds, picking through the ashtrays for half-smoked cigarette butts, and lifting the trash barrel lids to see if there were cans inside. His father wore a backpack, and carried a filthy white plastic bag, and Charlie could tell by the way the plastic was stretching that the bag wouldn't last much longer.

Charlie and the man with the beard were in the gazebo a few hundred yards from the hospital. There was another guy in there with them. A thin, black guy who looked pretty old. His eyes were yellow and looked like they were going to pop out of his head, and he was waving his cigarette around, talking to himself and not making any sense. Charlie asked him for a cigarette, too, but he had just said a very clear "no," and then mumbled something about Superman and candy corn, looking at the sky as he did. He told Charlie he was in love with him, and Charlie had told him he loved him, too, but the guy still wouldn't give him a cigarette.

The old guy was bald, but now he was wearing a thick, knit black hat pulled down on his forehead. Charlie knew he was bald because he used to see him a lot when he was in the hospital. Charlie was bald, too, but that was because he shaved his head—it made it easier to look clean, and to keep out the leaves. But today he was wearing a knit blue *Patriots* hat they had given him at the shelter. The gazebo was new, but someone had already spray-painted some graffiti on the ceiling—*Lisa sucks big cocks*. There were four or five gazebos here now, spread about the grounds. There hadn't been any when Charlie had been hospitalized, but he heard the state had thrown them up when some kind of inspection was coming. Gazebos made things look good. Happy and clean. Only happy things happened in gazebos.

The man with the headphones flicked his cigarette, and Charlie watched it roll across the floor. His father was still stuffing his pockets with the half-smoked butts, and Charlie knew that when they got back to the shelter he would break them all open and roll them into new cigarettes, and Charlie would roll over on his cot, pretending that he was asleep, so he wouldn't have to watch. His father would smoke a few, sell a few for a dime each. Charlie's father had been awake for three days without any sleep. That happened sometimes. He stopped now and looked up at the sky, his bag weighing heavy on the ground. If they weren't here on the hospital grounds, Charlie would maybe be helping him with the cans, but he couldn't do it here. The people from his old ward would be coming over on smoke break soon, people he knew, and he didn't want them to see him coming back around here picking up cans. Not with his father.

Charlie remembered his father coming to the hospital with his mother for Charlie's discharge meetings. Shirt and tie, his hair combed back neat from his forehead, and his body smelling of after-shave. Leaning over in his chair, long legs and enormous hands clasped between them, demanding that the hospital have an adequate discharge plan in place before Charlie stepped out the door. That had been about eight months ago. Up until six months ago, his father had been working as a counselor at another hospital up in Norwood, and about seven years before he had been some kind of administrator at a hospital in Brockton. Six figures, my friend, Charlie remembered him saying to him, you haven't peaked at life until you're making at least six figures. Six figures hadn't been enough though, and his father had walked off that job. Charlie had been fourteen then. He remembered his father staying up for days on end, then, too, pacing the house and tearing pictures out of magazines and stuffing hundreds of them into his briefcase before heading out for interviews that his mother said had never been arranged.

"You hear the sirens?" the old guy suddenly asked Charlie. Charlie didn't. The old guy—Charlie was pretty sure his name was Richard—turned his head and whispered something to the ceiling. Then he pointed with the cigarette, his fingers long and bony and yellow from nicotine. "That's the Mod Squad," Richard said, "They run the whole place, the whole town. Probably means another earthquake. The earth will open up and eat all the little animals. That's what they tell me." The man kept looking at Charlie, speaking, but his words suddenly went silent. Charlie figured he was hearing voices, talking back to them. Charlie sometimes heard voices, too, but only when he was high. He hadn't been high for a few weeks though—if you got high at the shelter, they kicked you out. It wouldn't be good to get kicked out this time of year; it was November. And besides, it had been raining pretty heavily for the past two weeks. The rain wasn't stopping, and the river kept rising; you heard about it all over the news.