Rob was standing in line at the Nice N’ Easy gas station on the corner of fifth and Brinkerhoff. At the front of the line, there was an older black lady haggling the cashier over lottery tickets. She had a lot of bills in one hand and with the other, she was pointing to the “right” super Powerball ticket in the see-through plastic casing. It was morning rush hour and the line behind her was growing longer. There were six people ahead of Rob, most of them were guys dressed in Carhartt or Dickies. They had stopped at the gas station for coffee on their way to work at one of the mills in Utica, New York. Everyone was hemming and hawing over the lady at the front of the line, everyone but Rob.

“Leary, that you?” a voice said behind him.

It was Don Rudnitski, the union steward from Allied Aero Corp. He was a short with a white push broom mustache under his bulbous nose and safety glasses. Rob turned around and Don took stock of his haggard clothes and rough beard. The concern in Don’s face made Rob avert his eyes toward the door.

“Jeez, bud. I thought that was you, but I uh, guess it’s been a while. What are you on your way to work?”

“No. I’m just getting something to eat.”

“Not exactly the breakfast of champions,” Don said pointing at the Honey Buns and El Cheapo burrito in Rob’s hands. “Where you working now? I heard you interviewed over at Utica Chem a while back. You get in?”
“No, I didn’t, Don.”

Don studied the holes in Rob’s jeans and the dinginess of his hoody. His face grew even more dower.

“You ever think of trying to come back to Allied? I can talk to Bruce. It’s been a while, he might be open to talking about you.”

“No, Don,” Rob said with a heavy sigh.

“Okay, okay. You know that VA clinic has a program to get guys into work or whatever they need, right? John Coluccio’s brother heads the outreach thing over there. Ya, know if you need it, I could call him.”

Rob looked over his shoulder at the lady at the front of the line slowly counting out pennies on the counter.

“I saw your dad the other day,” Don said.

Rob turned back to Don and said, “Look man I gotta go, take it easy Don.” He left the line, set his items on a booth table near the ATM and walked out the door. He walked through a row of trucks and started toward the sidewalk. He Don yell something behind him and he looked back. Don was waddling through the parking lot trying to keep up, but Rob had already rounded the corner and slid into a narrow alley. It was a brick canyon filled with piles of black trash bags, dumpsters, and a few guys sleeping on cardboard mats. He was heading toward the 1500 block of a neighborhood called Cornhill. As Rob made his way between the buildings, he could hear the sound of Cornhill pouring out the windows he passed. Pit bulls snarled and snapped, a Hmong family argued in a kitchen full of clattering pots and pans, Kids squealed watching Bob
the Builder, trap music rattled the dumpsters he passed, and a woman moaned beautiful words he
didn’t learn in Spanish class. He emerged from the buildings and jaywalked into the street. A car
horn blared at him and a Jamaican man hung out the window of an old Buick Le Sabre and
called him a “bumbaclot”. He made his way through the neighborhood and heard the hustle and
bustle of the trap house up the street, loud repetitive bass lines and people partying on the front
porch. He steered clear of that end of the street, went west a block, then north to the 1300 block
where his house sat.

Cornhill used to be an Irish neighborhood, it was like his family’s ancestral home. In the
late seventies, the refugee centers popped up and the neighborhood filled with people from every
clime, creed, and crater the world over. First it was the Vietnamese and Hmong. Then the
Zimbabweans, Sudanese, and Ethiopians. After that, the Bosnians, the Serbs, the Syrians, the
Guatemalans, The El Salvadorians, and so and so forth. Whenever a new genocide popped up or
a famine took hold, a new set of faces and stories would appear here in Cornhill. Rob often
thought about how terribly disappointing Utica must have been to them. He sometimes wondered
how long it would be before the Afghans and Iraqis started pouring in. He figured it was only a
matter of time before he would meet someone he knew there. It was always tense here, people
were so territorial about each block. Rob was one of only a handful white people in the
neighborhood and he had to plan his movements through the blocks based on how people looked
at him. Most times, people would see his haggard clothes and beard out of the corner of their eyes
and avoid looking at him. Sometimes teenagers would follow him on the sidewalk and talk about
him until he could get some distance between them and disappear into the bricks. There was an
old Irish lady on the 1200 block that would stop him and offer him sandwiches from her porch.
That is of course, if he was willing to sit and listen to her little rants about the neighborhood. He
figured she was just happy to see an Irish kid every once in a while. She never asked where he lived.

He avoided the basketball courts where all the young kids we're either dealing or shooting hoops. He cut up around the back end of a laundromat and got some confused looks from the Chinese workers as he passed by them into the shadows of the alleyway. He wasn’t heading to the renovation sight just yet, he had to pick up his tools from his stash. He walked deeper into the heart of Cornhill, past worse and worse houses, that held fewer and fewer people. They were all early 19th century tinderboxes with graffiti and boards over the windows. After 9/11 and the recession, the work dried up. The houses were all that was left of a working class that ran places InterCore, Remington, Banks Transmissions, and a laundry list of other places beat with the rust belt. Rob turned off a sidewalk and up into a potholed driveway that led behind a collapsed house to a garage. The side door into the garage had a heavy-duty lock on it. Rob produced a key, unlocked the lock from the latch, and pushed it open. It was pitch black inside the garage. He pulled a red lensed headlamp from his backpack, put it on his head, and flicked it on. He pointed the light toward a concrete stairwell leading down into a basement and started making his way toward it. Before he reached the stairwell, he paused and kneeled down.

He pointed his red light down onto the first three steps and saw that the thick layer of dust he had spread out was still undisturbed. He grabbed the metal railing, stepped over the first three steps, and went down into the cellar. He reached the bottom of the stairs and rounded the corner into a hallway under the house. He pointed his headlamp down the hallway toward a section where the house had completely collapsed in, and then back toward a closed door on his right. He walked up to the door and pulled out a key. He unlocked another padlock and mashed his shoulder into the door. The door opened to a room filled with his life’s savings. There were
many rows of neatly piled copper piping on one side. On the other, there were stacks of old mother boards and computer cases next to buckets filled with their little removed minutia. The top of one of the buckets was brimming with strips of little gold material that Rob had meticulously picked over from electronics pilfered from curbside trash piles. There was a wooden workbench covered in mismatched tools Rob had lifted from unlocked vans and from under the noses of lazy Lowe’s workers. There was a bicycle laying the concrete floor next to an oil can and pile of rags. But most importantly of all, there was a small Coleman tent in the corner. He unzipped its flap, crawled onto a twin mattress, covered himself, and closed his eyes.

He awoke hours later, it was dark and quiet in that room at least. He wondered if this house would last, he wondered if Don would still be waiting down at the gas station for him, he wondered if someone had gotten to the pipes in another building he had found. He would have to get out at dark and make his way across Cornhill to check. It was a sweet spot for sure. It was some kind of tenant building project that had been abandoned or stalled. They were trying to gentrify Cornhill, but the old place had resisted them with a little help from the recession. Rob had seen the plumber vans there for weeks a while back. He didn’t really know how much good stuff would be left in there, but he knew he had to get in and find out. He crawled out of the tent and went over to the workbench. He unzipped a large duffle bag and began packing it full of tools. A pair of bolt cutters, a framing hammer, a two-foot-long pipe cutter, gloves, monkey wrench, a hacksaw, blow torch, and a crowbar. He zipped the bag up and threw its long strap over his shoulders. The tools clanked together inside the bag loudly. Rob paused for a second and zipped it open. He walked toward a pile of old t shirts in a box, grabbed a few, stuffed them in the duffle bag and zipped it up. He gave the bag a shake and the sound of the tools was
muffled. He grabbed the bike and headed out to the hallway. He locked the door and went up the steps. He padded down the layer of dust on the steps when he reached the top and left the garage.

He locked the door, left the back yard through a path made in some briar patches, and rode off toward the bike trail in Black River Park. There were never cops there. The only thing he had ever seen on the bike path was new sets of discarded clothes and the occasional drug deal at the entrances. After ten minutes of riding, the path let out at the 1100 block near the renovation site. The row of houses the renovation site sat on was even more quiet than the stretch his stash house was on. Many of the lots were condemned after the early 2000’s meth scene had turned them into toxic cesspools the city still refused to deal with ten years later. He rolled his bike into the tree line across from the house. Rob thought the house he was about to rob was in pretty good shape for Utica. It had new paint, new windows, and mason blocks scattered around from the extensive foundation work. He picked up the duffel bag and sprinted across the street and down towards the basement entrance of the house. He pulled the gloves from the bag and put them on. He pulled the crowbar out and mashed it into the doorframe. He held onto the bar and leaned back. The door burst open and wood splinters tinkered across the fresh concrete floor. He stepped inside and closed the door. He put on his head lamp, turned it on, and its red light washed over the room. The ceiling was lined with brand new pristine piping and it was covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. No one had been here in a while Rob thought. He began walking around and doing the mental math on where he needed to start. Then his shin wacked into something and there was rattling roar all over the floor. Rob froze dead still when he saw the rows and rows of virgin copper rolling all over the ground.

“Oh my god, yes,” he said watching the pile come to a rest on the basement floor. The sections of pipe were 10 ft long, Rob produced the pipe cutter and started cutting them into
sections short enough to fit inside his duffel bag. After 30 minutes of twisting and pulling the pipe cutter round and round several lengths of pipe, he could barely zip the duffel bag shut. He threw the bag over his shoulder and almost went over with the weight of the load on his back. It reminded him of being dropped off in the battle of Marjah with a giant ILBE pack full of ammo, food, and water. Except this time instead of walking, he had the bike. He trudged out the door toward the bicycle and got on it. It took him twice as long and three times the effort to get back to the stash house, but it didn't matter. He decided he was going to unload this place if it killed him. So back and forth he went all night, cutting, packing, biking, and unloading his haul.

Eventually, the sun begin to appear and so did the cars on the road. Rob was riding along the sidewalk when an old white guy in a grey Mercury gave him a funny look that made Rob feel uneasy. Rob got the bike and load into the stash house basement and sat down on the duffel bag. He didn't even bother heading back to his sleep house for the night. He headed out with some change to a gas station and bought as many burritos as he possibly could. It took him several minutes to count out all the change on the counter, but eventually he left with three El Cheapo burritos and a head full of ideas about how to attack the night ahead. He sat in the stash house and he could barely sleep as ideas passed through his mind about what would happen once he finally saved enough copper to sell. There were nice apartments that he had once looked at while working at Allied Aero Corp, he wondered if he would have enough for first and last rent. He wondered if he could own his own scrapping business, he was getting pretty good at it he figured.

When the next night rolled around, he unloaded the duffel bag of everything except the pipe cutter. He wasn't going to need anything else for what was left on the ground. He took off rolling on his bike. As he left the neighborhood of the stash house, he heard a volley of shots ring
out a block or two over. He didn’t hear any police sirens. He rode along the bicycle path, it was empty except for a new pair of blue socks at the halfway point. When he reached the end, he threw the bike into the tree line and made a dash towards the basement door of the renno-house. He got inside and began cutting the pipe again. He had it down to a science now and was moving mechanically through a pile he laid out the night before. He was almost done loading the bag when he heard footsteps shuffling through the grass outside. He gently set his bag down, picked up the pipe cutter, and quickly headed for a dark corner of the basement behind a water heater.

He watched as the door creaked open and a dark figure stood in the doorway. A small flashlight clicked on and searched around the ceiling of the basement. It followed along the lengths of pipes for a moment.

“Okay, okay,” a man’s voice said. The figure stepped into the basement and closed the door behind them. A bag tools made a loud clang as the man set it down on a pile of pipe Rob had cut. The light pointed down at the pile and stopped on the duffel bag. Rob tightened his grip on the pipe cutter handles. The light began pointing around the room slowly searching the corners.

“If you’re still in here man, we can split this,” the man said. “I ain’t trying to get in no fight over this shit. It ain’t worth that much to me.”

Rob didn’t move. The man walked around the basement searching the corners. Rob could hear his slow breath and his footsteps getting closer to the water heater he was hiding behind. The flashlight pointed at the water heater and Rob wondered if the man could see his silhouette. The man neared the water heater and stopped. Rob jumped out lifting the pipe cutters above his head. He lunged forward toward the flashlight.
“We can split! We can split it!” the man said. He fell to the ground, dropped the flashlight, and put his hands up to block the blow, but Rob didn’t swing. Rob turned on his head lamp and the red light washed over the body of the man. It was Killian McCormick, a guy he had worked in the forge shop with at Allied Aero Corps. He was in his late twenties, tall, with shaggy brown hair, and a face full of freckles. The last time Rob had seen him was when Bruce was marching him out the front gate of Allied, security guards holding him by both arms. Bruce had found Killian slumped over in a toilet stall with enough Percocet in a system to kill a horse. It had not been the first time. Now, Killian opened his eyes and posted up on his hands. He looked up at Rob.

“Leary? Holy shit, is that you?”

“Yeah.”

Killian got up on his feet and brushed himself off. He picked up his flashlight and looked Rob over with it.

“I see I got another Allied all-star out here on the night shift.”

Rob laughed and put his hand out to shake Killian’s. Killian shook it.

“I almost caved your fucking head in, man.”

“Jesus Christ, I know you fucking jarhead.”

Rob smiled. He hadn’t seen anyone he had known, other than Don, in a long while. Killy and Rob had always gotten along. They were both infantry guys, Killy was in the 173rd airborne and had been one of the only veterans at Allied that Rob could stand. Even when he was popping
Xanny’s on night shift, Rob had still watched out for him and made sure he was at least semi-conscious when Bruce came around.

“What’s it been? Two years since I seen ya?” Killy asked.

“Something like that.”

“Where you staying now?”

Rob looked at the floor and didn’t answer. The pause filled the room.

“Oh,” Killy laughed. “Me too. I was in that shelter up on 14th for a while, but the staff kept shaking me down for beans and the other guys kept stealing my clothes. I’ve been sleeping in the camper shell on the bed of my truck for a couple months now. Every once in a while, those outreach people would come find me in a parking lot and try to hassle me into coming back. I think they get some kind of kick back from the state for pumping their numbers up. Jesus Christ, their worse than fucking recruiters.”

“I saw Don the other day.”

“Oh man, how’d that go?”

“I dropped my shit in Nice N’ Easy and ran.”

“That’s probably what I would have done too. So anyway, we gonna split this shit or what?”

Rob looked uneasy for a second as he looked over the haul laying on the ground. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to tell Killy about the rest he had already taken, or if he even wanted to split what was left.
“Look, Rob. This is a shitload of work, man. Look at this. How the hell are you gonna get this to wherever you’re going? What are you gonna hump it on your back all the way there?

“I have a bike I’ve been using.”

Killy snort laughed. “Fuck that! What are you training for an iron man race? Look at you, bubbly. You’re holocaust skinny and you’re running around on a bicycle with all this scrap? Come one, man. I at least got the transportation problem solved. You got a nonferrous permit for scrapping this shit?”

“No.”

“Dude, you can’t even turn this shit in at scrap yard. I got my permit still, all we gotta do is go around to the demo projects in town. They’ll let me pick through the dump piles, we can just mix this shit in with that stuff.”

Killian thought about it for a minute and said, “I got most of what was on the floor here plus a couple tons more in a safe spot.”

“Yeah? Well, it might take us a couple weeks to get through that. Like I said we gotta mix it in with the legit stuff. I don’t want to end up with Oneida county Sheriff rolling me up at the scrap yard.”

“Yeah, no thanks.”

“Listen I’m parked up around the way, we can go ahead and start running this stuff to my truck. Then take it to wherever you’re working on it.”

They started picking up all the loose copper piping they could carry and put it in the bed of Killy’s truck. Rob hadn’t ridden in a truck in a long time, when he slid into the passenger seat
it felt like he didn't belong. Rob turned around and looked in the backseat and saw all of Kelly's worldly possessions. A pillow, a trash bag full of blanket, some rolls of jeans, socks, T shirts, a folded tarp, a backpack, three jugs of water, and some cans of vegetable beef soup. Killy climbed in and the drove off toward the stash house. They arrived at the collapsed house, Killy cut the truck’s lights, they pulled into the driveway, and parked behind the house. Rob didn’t like the idea of the truck being this close to the stash house, but he figured two guys running that much pipe across the derelict neighborhood might be seen. They quietly unloaded load after load of the pipes into the garage.

“What’d you hide this stuff in an Indiana Jones temple or something?” Killy said looking down the dark stairwell.

“It gets better,” Rob said as they reached the cellar. He pointed his headlamp at the caved in section of the house and they both laughed a little. Rob unlocked the door to the cellar room, and they walked in. They set down their loads and Killy inspected the piles of copper.

“Jeez, this is quite the haul for a dude on a bicycle. How long you been at it?”

“Four months or so.”

“Not bad. We’re gonna have to beat all this shit up too. It’s too fresh right now, they’re gonna start asking questions at the recycling center and neither of us can afford to get turned away.” Killy walked over to the buckets full of computer parts and started sorting through the pieces. Trying to get the gold out of this stuff?

“Yeah, eventually I figured I could process most of this and see what comes out of it.”
“You got a couple barrels of hydrochloric acid or nitric acid lying around?” Killy had worked in the acid treatment part of the Allied facility originally. That was until he nodded off the first time and Don had him moved into the forge shop so the old guys could keep an eye on him.

“No,” Rob said.

“It’s a bit of a hassle for two homeless guys to acquire that stuff, man. Why don’t we just scrap this down at the yard? It’s a decent price if you got a lot of it like this.”

“When do you wanna make a run?”

“Well, I’ll check my busy schedule, but I’ll hazard a guess and say that tomorrow is as good a day as any.”

“Where are you gonna stay tonight?”

“In the bed of my truck like usual. I’ll probably park in the parking lot at Rite Aid for tonight. What about you?”

“Here, I guess.”

“What? In this death trap? Who knows how much mold you’re breathing in in here. Come on, man I got extra blankets n’ shit. We can crash in there and sleep head to foot. Just like in the Ghan.” They locked up the basement door and headed up the stairs. Rob showed Killy the way he laid out the dust all over the steps to see if anyone had come in and Killy called him “Tommy Taliban”. They both snickered as they left the garage, got in the truck, and took off. Rob watched out the window as the neighborhoods passed by. They rolled by roving mobs of teenagers on sidewalks, they shouted at the truck as they passed. A guy spray painted
nonsensical symbols on a boarded-up storefront that used to belong to a Polish deli that Rob’s
dad bought really good kielbasa from. Hanowics, it was called. He saw UCPD pulling a shirtless
guy out of a house on 12th street and his old lady was screaming at cop holding her back. The
heat from the vents felt great on Rob’s hands, he hadn’t felt heat like that in a long time. Being
warm was usually dependent on how many layers of blankets he could cover himself with before
air became a problem. In Afghanistan he had to do just about the same thing with tarps and a
sleeping bag. They slept in dry wadi beds, open opium fields, and waterlogged fighting holes in
the middle of the rocky desert. They had always joked that they were “professionally homeless”.

They arrived at Rite Aid. Killy backed the maroon Silverado up against a tree line and
climbed into the bed. There was plenty of room for both of them. They layered up with the
comforters Killy produced from a construction trash bag. They settled in and there was a moment
of silence as they laid wake.

“Yo, Robby.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s your plan after we get some money from all this.”

“I need a place, I guess. I thought about the shelters, but it sounds like they’re as bad as I
thought they were.”

“They are. What about the Obleston? We could get a room there. They don’t give a shit
where the money comes from. Everyone knows that.”

“That place is scary, man.”

“Yeah, and it’s probably the only place that will take us.”
The Obleston was an enormous seven story brick complex built by some famous guy in the early 1900’s. It used to be where all the rich people lived, but after the depression it turned into a flop house. Then when the state booted all the mental patients from Utica’s massive psychiatric ward in the 80’s, many of the mental patients ended up in the Obleston. The cops ignored calls that came from inside the place, so just about anything went there. It was a zoo, but Rob knew that it was probably their only shot at getting indoors before winter.

“You’re probably right, man,” Rob said.

“I don’t like it either, bud. I just can’t think of anywhere else that will let us in with no credit.”

There was a long silent moment between them.

“Hey, Rob.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s something you miss from old life?”

Rob thought about for a moment and said, “Hoffman hotdogs.”

“Oh, man. Those are the best. I would kill for one right now. With some slaw and Nathan’s mustard? Forget about it.” He paused for a second and said, “Rob?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re gonna get out of this, man.”

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They spent the early morning hours driving to demolition sites and picking through the scrap piles. The copper was sparse, but it didn’t matter. They only needed enough to mix in with the good stuff they had pilfered. They drove back to the stash house and spent a couple hours beating up and bending the copper pipes. When they had enough to fill the truck bed, they drove off to Milton’s Metal Recycling. The pulled up to a line of trucks with trailers. A guy wearing a flannel shirt and carrying a clipboard walked up to their truck. Killy rolled down his window.

“Permit,” the guy said.

“Here,” Killy said.

“What’ya got?”

“Rebar, copper wire #1, and some copper pipe.”

“Pull up over there at lot two and start unloading on the scales.”

They pulled off toward the scale and an older man in a yellow hard hat stepped out of a small shack next to the scale. Killy pulled the truck up to the giant metal scale and they got out.

“Killian, how are we?” the man said.

“Good, man.”

“More copper today?”

“Yes, sir. What’s the rate for today?”

“$2.95 a pound.”

The guy peered into the bed of the truck and picked up some of the pilfered copper from the renno house. He looked it over closely.
“This is pretty clean for a demo site,” he said looking over his glasses at Killy.

“They’re tearing these buildings down earlier an earlier, man. I can barely keep up,”

Killy replied.

“Mmmhmm. I think we’ll be paying you at the number 2 insulated price at $1.95 a pound today,” he said to Killy without blinking. Killy rolled his eyes and let out a big sigh.

“That’s fine, John.”

“Perfect. Go ahead and unload and let’s get this weighed up,” John said as he stepped up into the shack.”

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“$834.67, holy dog shit. We did good, man,” Killy said as he smacked Rob in the chest with the wad full of bills. “We should head back to that renno house tonight and get what’s left of that load before someone else picks it off.”

“Don’t you wanna get a room at the Obleston first?”

“Nah, man. We’ll do that shit tomorrow. Oh, and by the way. That company that was doing the renno there? They have two other houses. One on Simmons and 3rd and another on Luciana Grove. They went belly up in 09 and the bank they financed through was in Cleveland or some shit. They ain’t coming out here any time soon, but we gotta go get that shit before anyone else does.”

They spent the rest of the night running between the renno house and the stash house. In the morning, they made another trip round the job sites then up to the recycling center for a load that paid out $1,126.42. They got McDonalds and stopped at Walmart to buy new clothes. They
changed in the men’s bathroom and threw their old clothes out in the trash can for the paper towels. They were wearing Carhart hoodies, Levi’s, and steel toe Timberlands. They walked out the doors to the parking lot toward the truck.

“I feel like a new, man,” Rob said. “I haven’t felt this way since I worked at Allied.”

“Me too, my man. Me too. Look we gotta get into that Luciana house tonight. I’m not sure if anyone’s been in there, but it’s in a little bit better of a neighborhood. I’m worried that if they’re going to go back any of those houses it’s gonna be that one first.”

“People still live over there, man. That’s not exactly low hanging fruit.”

“I know. We just gotta be fast.”

They laid up for the rest of the day inside the truck bed at Walmart. Rob didn’t sleep a whole lot. He thought about ways in an out of Luciana Grove that wouldn’t get them spotted or shot. The house was in the back end of a cul-de-sac buttled up against a tree line. They would have to go through the woods to get into it Rob figured. An hour or so later, Rob drifted off to sleep to the sound of a parking lot light buzzing over the truck.

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Rob felt his foot being shook.

“Wake up, Robby. Time for post.”

Rob shot up and Killy let out a laugh.

“Man, fuck you. Don’t do that shit to me.”

“I couldn’t help it. Come on it’s go time, let’s get over to that Luciana house.”
They climbed into the cab of the truck, turned it on, and took off eastward on the parkway towards Cornhill. They parked on a backroad that ran parallel to the train tracks behind Luciana Grove. They grabbed their tools and headed into the woods towards the house. They reached the tree line and saw that the neighborhood was silent. There was a light on in one of the houses near the entrance to the cul-de-sac. They waited for it to turn off, then they trudged through the swampy backyard, past stacks of framing wood, and up to the back of the house. The house was stripped of all siding except for the white Tyvek layer that had a couple sections flapping off in the wind. Killy walked up to the back door of the house and wedged a crowbar into the frame. They both pulled on it and the handle hardware pulled through the mushy wood of the door frame. Rob pushed the door open and turned his head lamp on. The cellar stairs were right there at the back door. They slowly worked their way down them.

“Two for two,” Killy said as he swung his flashlight over the stack of pristine copper pipes. They were held together with a thick metal ribbon band. Rob pulled out a pair of clippers and snipped the band. It shot off the stack with a warbling snap. The copper began spilling out, but Killian blocked it from hitting the ground by putting his steel toe boot underneath it just in time. They picked up a few of the lengths and hefted them over their shoulders. They guided them, slowly and carefully, up the stairs and through the open door. They went into the yard and sloshed through the muck toward the tree line. They crunched and snapped their way through some of the brush toward the truck. Killy kept getting the long pipes caught on branches and brambles as he went. He had to suppress the urge to mutter curses all the way to the truck. They went back and forth four more times between the house and truck. On the last trip, the backyard had become a bowl of soup. Killy had almost lost a boot when the muck tried to suck it off his foot. He lurched forward to free himself, he lost his balance, went flying forward onto his hands.
The copper pipes clanged down and went everywhere. A dog started barking two houses over and some lights turned on.

“Oh shit,” Killy said. He picked up the copper piping. He thrashed through the rest of the muddy yard. He was almost to the tree line when he heard a door bang open behind him.

“Who the hell is out there?” Stop!”

Killy and Rob started running and crashing through the woods. A shot cracked over their heads.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Rob yelled.

The pipes got caught on everything in the woods. Rob and Killy ripped and smashed the pipes through a mess of brambles and pierced through to the road. Another shot cracked behind them. They threw the copper in the bed of the truck and the pipes rattled around the inside like bowling pins exploding after a strike. They ran to the cab of the truck, ripped the doors open, and jumped in. Kill fumbled with the mess of keys on his lanyard.

“Come on!” Rob shouted.

“I’m trying!” Killy shouted back.

He drilled the Chevy key into the ignition, turned it over, and they blasted off down the access road into the night.

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They spent the next day sleeping in the Rite Aid parking lot. Rob hadn’t slept like that in years. When they woke up, they made their way down to the stash house and started filling up on some of the pipe they yielded from the night before. They took home $752.80 from the recycling
center and ate lunch at a nice Italian place called Ventura’s. Rob got Utica riggies and Killy got a ribeye. After dinner, they got back in the truck and there was silence for a moment.

“We gotta get a place, man,” Rob said. “I’m sick of being out here. I want to shower. I can’t even remember the last time I showered… It was probably at Allied.” Rob looked his muddy clothes over and let out a sigh.

“How’d you get canned there, man?” Killy asked.

“I got into an argument with Bruce…”

“And?”

“I took a pair of four foot steel tongs and smashed up a set of new glow bars they were installing in furnace seven.”

Killy laughed. “Holy shit, I don’t feel so bad about zonking out on the shitter anymore.”

They both laughed.

“Let’s head over to the Obleston and see if we can get in tonight,” Killy said.

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They pulled into the lot of the Obleston, and the building loomed over them like Dracula’s castle. It had tall spires on the corners and its once red bricks were now a matted black and brown. They got out of the truck and locked it. There were some people hanging around the entrance of the building. As Killy and Rob passed them a blonde girl with blood shot eyes said,

“Horse?”

“Maybe later,” Killy said as he laughed and rolled his eyes to Rob.
They entered the foyer. It had a huge grand staircase that spiraled up the entire seven floors. In another life, this had been a feat of architecture that Utica had never seen before. Now it was just a great hole that the moans, groans, and shouts that spilled down from the Obleston’s upper floors. They spotted a booth with a plexy glass window tucked away in the corner of the foyer. They walked over to it and saw that the booth was empty. Rob pressed a button next to the speaker box and it let out a buzzing noise. A black guy chewing gum and holding a folder leaned into the doorway at the back of the booth. He walked over to the speaker box and leaned in.

“What do you want?”

“A room please,” Rob said.

“You got cash?” he said with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah.”

“For the night or long term?”

“Long term,” Killy said.

“We go by the week here.”

“That’s fine,” Rob said.

“You got any warrants?”

“No,” Rob and Kill said together.

“We’ll see. ID’s please,” the man said.

The man pushed a handle on the counter toward them and a partitioned security drawer shot out of the wall. They put their Id’s in the drawer, and he pulled it back.
“Have a seat over there on that bench. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He came back several minutes later with a pair of keys and some forms. He slapped the forms into the drawer and pushed it toward them.

“No warrants. Fill these out for me.”

They sat on the bench and lied their way through most of the form. They were interrupted halfway through when a Latin couple came storming down the spiral stairs screaming in Spanish. They reached the lobby floor, the man ran to the main door and blocked it with his arms. He started pleading with her quietly. She laughed at him, said something that Rob nor Killy could hear, pushed his arm out of the way, and glided by him through the doors. The man shot Killy a murderous look as he ascended the stairs. Killy went right back to filling out the agreement. They finished the forms, the man took them, and he gave them the keys to basement apartment F19. They paid him $173.00 for the week and they took off down the dimly lit stairwell to the basement. The hallway was filled with the smell of menthol cigarettes and the sound of maxed out television volumes. The carpet was dingey, thin, grey, runner covered in stains. They found apartment F19. They opened the door to the two-bedroom apartment and a musky smell filled their nostrils. They stepped inside and shut the door. It was mostly furnished, with a small couch, refrigerator, oven, an old CRT TV, a stand-up lamp, and a coffee table that had an ash tray still full of butts. Each room had a twin bed with a nightstand in it.

“Home sweet home,” Killy said. I’m gonna head over to the gas station quick and get some essentials and shit.”

“I’m gonna shower,” Rob said.

“Enjoy, my man. You earned it.”
Killy left the apartment and Rob locked the door behind him. He stripped down and set his clothes next to the couch. He walked into the bathroom and saw the shower. It was an old claw foot tub with no curtain. He lowered himself into the tub and turned the water on. The pipes groaned and a piping hot drizzle soon gave way to a warm mesmerizing mist. Rob melted. He didn’t think a thought. The water ran over him and he listened to the sound of the last year and half trickling down the drain. He must have fallen asleep. He heard the sound of the apartments door open and shut.

“It’s just me,” Killy said.

Rob passed back out under the water’s stingy mist.

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A while later, he woke again. He stood up and turned off the shower. He was disoriented as he looked around for a towel and realized he didn’t own one. He drip dried in the tub for a minute and then stepped out into a pool of warm water that had collected around the tub. He stared into the mirror over the sink for a second and took in his new look. He needed to buy a razor, hopefully Killy picked one up he thought. He opened the door to the living room and said,

“Yo, man. I know this place ain’t the Ritz, but it’s got a pretty decent shower.” There was no reply. “Killy? Where you at?” He looked into Killy’s room and spotted Killy’s boot on the end of the unsheeted mattress. He walked over and grabbed a pair of new boxers from his backpack and put them on. He was still a little wet, but he didn’t care. “Hey, man. What are you asleep?” he said as he walked into Killy’s room. Killy was laying on his back, his eyes were wide open. He wasn’t moving. He was fully clothed, but his sleeves were rolled up. There was a belt tied around his bicep and a needle hanging out of the crook of his arm. Rob ran over and
pushed two fingers against Killy’s carotid artery. Nothing. Rob stood still staring at Killy’s pale freckled face for a long time.

He turned around and walked into the living room. He sat on the couch next to a grocery bag. He looked into the bag and saw two jars of peanut butter, a bag of Wonder bread, some Nathan’s mustard, and some Hoffman hotdogs. He shot up from the couch. He grabbed his clothes and started yanking them on. Pants, shirt, hoody, socks, boots, belt? No belt. Where the fuck is my belt Rob thought. And the color left his face as he realized that Killy was wearing his own belt around his waist. He walked into the room and stared at the belt around Killy’s bicep. He leaned against the doorway and watched him silently. He could hear the sound of Sponge Bob Square Pants playing in the next apartment over through the wall. He went over to Killy’s nightstand, he grabbed his keys and pulled all the cash from his wallet. He looked down at Killy. He reached over. He closed Killy’s eyes. He walked into the living room and pulled out his knife. He ripped the lamp cord out from the socket and cut it at the base of the lamp. He fed the wire through the loops of his pants and synched it tight under his belly button. He grabbed the grocery bag and walked to the front door. He stopped for a second and turned around. He said nothing.

He walked out into the hallway and left the door to the apartment open. He walked down the entire length of the hall and passed a black couple making out next to the emergency exit door. No alarm went off as he pushed it open and ran up the stairs to the street.