shape every day, I was getting my looks back, and my spirits were rising, and this was all in all a happy time for me.

All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us.

Junot Diaz

Edison, New Jersey

The first time we try to deliver the Gold Crown the lights are on in the house but no one lets us in. I bang on the front door and Wayne hits the back and I can hear our double drum shaking the windows like bass. Right then I have this feeling that someone is inside, laughing at us.

This guy better have a good excuse, Wayne says, lumbering around the newly planted rose hips. This is bullshit.

You’re telling me, I say but Wayne’s the one who takes this job too seriously; he pounds some more on the door, his face jiggling. A couple of times he raps carefully on the windows, tries squinting through the curtains. I take a more philosophical approach: I walk over to the ditch that has been cut next to the road and sit down. A drainage pipe half-filled with water. I smoke and watch a mama duck and her three ducklings scavenge the grassy bank and then float downstream like they’re on the same string. Beautiful, I say but Wayne doesn’t hear. He’s banging on the door with the staple gun.

At nine Wayne picks me up at the showroom and by then I have our route planned out. The order forms tell me everything I need to know about the customers we’ll be dealing with that day. If someone is just getting a 52” card table delivered then you know they aren’t going to be too much hassle but they also aren’t going to tip. Those are your Spotswood, Sayreville and Perth Amboy deliveries. The pool tables though go north to the rich suburbs, to Livingston, Ridgewood, Bedminster. And lots go out to Long Island.
You should see our customers. Doctors, diplomats, surgeons, presidents of universities, people who dress in slacks and silk tops, who sport thin watches you could trade in for a car, who wear comfortable leather shoes. Most of them prepare for us by laying down a path of yesterday’s *Washington Post* from the front door to the game room. I make them pick it all up. I say: Carajo, what if we slip? Do you know what two hundred pounds of slate could do to a floor? The threat of property damage puts the chop-chop in their step. The best customers bring us water and leave us alone until the bill has to be signed. Few have offered us more, though a dentist from Ghana once gave us a six-pack of Heineken while we worked.

Sometimes the customer has to jet to the store for cat food or for a newspaper while we’re in the middle of a job. I’m sure you’ll be all right, they say. They never sound too sure. Of course, I say. Just show us where the silver’s at. The customers ha-ha and we ha-ha and then they agonize over leaving, linger by the front door, trying to memorize everything they own, as if they don’t know where to find us, whom we work for.

Once they’re gone, I don’t have to worry about anyone bothering me. I put down the ratchet, crack my knuckles and explore, usually when Wayne is smoothing out the felt and I can’t help. I take cookies from the kitchen, razors from the bathroom cabinets. Some of these houses have twenty, thirty rooms. I often count and on the ride back figure out how much loot it would take to fill all that space up with cherrywood tables, Federal blue carpets and ottomans. I’ve been caught roaming around plenty of times but you’d be surprised how quickly someone believes you’re looking for the bathroom if you don’t jump when you’re discovered, if you just say, Howdy.

After the paperwork’s been signed, I have a decision to make. If the customer has been good and tipped well, we call it even and leave. If the customer has been an ass—maybe they yelled at us, maybe they let their kids throw golf balls at us—I ask for the bathroom. Wayne will pretend that he hasn’t seen this before; he’ll count the drill bits while the customer (or their maid) guides the vacuum over the floor. Excuse me, I say. I let them show me to the bathroom (usually I already know) and once the door is shut I cram bubble bath drops into my pockets and throw fist-sized wads of toilet paper into the toilet. I take a dump if I can and leave that for them.

Most of the time Wayne and I work well together. He’s the driver and the money man and I do the lifting and handle the assholes. Today we’re on our way to Lawrenceville and he wants to talk to me about Charlene, one of the showroom girls, the one with the blow-job lips. I haven’t wanted to talk about women in months, not since the girlfriend.

I really want to pile her, he tells me. Maybe on one of the Madisons.

Man, I say, cutting my eyes towards him. Don’t you have a wife or something?

He gets quiet. I’d still like to pile her, he says defensively.

And what will that do?

Why does it have to do anything?

Twice this year Wayne’s cheated on his wife and I’ve heard it all, the before and the after. The last time his wife nearly tossed his ass out to the dogs. Neither of the women seemed worth it to me. One of them was even younger than Charlene. Wayne can be a moody guy and tonight is one of those nights; he slouches in the driver’s seat and swerves through traffic, riding other people’s bumpers like I’ve told him not to do. I don’t need a collision or a four-hour silent treatment so I try to forget that I think his wife is good people and ask him if Charlene’s given him any signals.

He slows the truck down. Signals like you wouldn’t believe, he says.

On the days we have no deliveries the boss has us working at the showroom, selling cards and poker chips and Mankala boards. Wayne spends his time skeezing on the salesgirls and dusting shelves. He’s a big goofy guy—I don’t understand why the girls dig his shit. The boss keeps me in the front of the store, away from the pool tables. He knows I’ll talk to the customers, tell them not to buy the cheap models. I’ll say shit like, Stay away from those Bristols. Wait until you can get something real. Only when he needs my Spanish will he let me help on a sale. Since I’m no good at cleaning or selling slot machines I slouch be-
hind the front register and steal. I don't ring anything up and pocket what comes in. I don't tell Wayne. He's too busy running his fingers through his beard, keeping the waves on his nappy head in order. A hundred-pound haul's not unusual for me and back in the day, when the girlfriend used to pick me up, I'd buy her anything she wanted, dresses, silver rings, lingerie. Sometimes I blew it all on her. She didn't like the stealing but hell, we weren't made out of loot and I liked going into a place and saying, Jeva, pick out anything, it's yours. This was the closest I've come to feeling rich.

Nowadays I take the bus home and the cash stays with me. I sit next to this three-hundred-pound rock-and-roll chick who washes dishes at the Friendly's. She tells me about the roaches she kills with her water nozzle. Boils the wings right off them. On Thursday I buy myself lottery tickets—ten Quick Picks and a couple of Pick-Fours. I don't bother with the little stuff.

The second time we bring the Gold Crown the heavy curtain next to the door swings up like a Spanish fan. A woman stares at me and Wayne's too busy knocking to see. Muñeca, I say. She's black and unsmiling and then the curtain drops between us, a whisper on the glass. She had on a T-shirt that said NO PROBLEM and didn't look like she owned the place. She looked more like the help and couldn't have been older than twenty and from the thickness of her face I pictured the rest of her skinny. We stared at each other for a second at the most, not enough for me to notice the shape of her ears or if her lips were chapped. I've fallen in love on less.

Later in the truck, on the way back to the showroom Wayne mutters, This guy is dead. I mean it.

The girlfriend calls sometimes but not often. She has found herself a new boyfriend, some zángano who works at a record store. Dan is his name and the way she says it, so painfully gringo, makes the corners of my eyes close. The clothes that I'm sure this guy tears from her when they both get home from work—the chokers, the rayon skirts from the Warehouse, the lingerie—I bought with stolen money and I'm glad that none of it was earned straining my back against hundreds of pounds of raw rock. I'm glad for that.

The last time I saw her in person was in Hoboken; she was with Dan and hadn't yet told me about him and hurried across the street in her high clogs to avoid me and my boys, all of whom could sense me turning, turning into the motherfucker who'll put a fist through anything. She flung one hand in the air but didn't stop. Before that, before the zángano, I went to her house and her parents asked me how business was, as if I balanced the books or something. Business is outstanding, I said.

That's really wonderful to hear, the father said.

You betcha.

He asks me to help him mow his lawn and while we're dribbling clear gas into the tank he offers me a job. Utilities, he says, is nothing to be ashamed of.

Later the parents go to the den to watch the Giants lose and she takes me into her bathroom. She puts on her makeup because we're going to a movie. As friends. If I had your eyelashes, I'd be famous, she tells me. The Giants start losing real bad. I still love you, she says and I'm embarrassed for the two of us, the way I'm embarrassed at those afternoon talk shows where broken couples and unhappy families let their hearts hang out.

We're friends, I say and Yes, she says, yes we are.

There's not much space so I have to put my heels on the edge of the bathtub. The cross I've given her dangles down on its silver chain so I put the cross in my mouth to keep it from poking me in the eye. By the time we finish my legs are bloodless, broomsticks inside my rolled-down baggies and while her breathing gets smaller and smaller against my neck, she says, I do, I still do.

Each payday I take out the old calculator and figure how long it would take me to buy a pool table honestly. A top of the line, three-piece slate affair doesn't come cheap. You have to buy sticks and balls and chalk and a score keeper and triangles and French tips if you're a fancy
shooter. Two and a half years if I give up buying underwear and eat only pasta but even this figure's bogus. Money has never stuck to me; it trails away like piles of dry leaves.

Most people don't realize how amazing pool tables are. Yes, tables have bolts and staples on the rails but these suckers hold together mostly by gravity and the precision of their construction. If you treat a good table right it will outlast you. Believe me. Cathedrals are built like that. There are Incan roads in the Andes that even today you couldn't work a knife between two of the cobblestones. The sewers that the Romans built in Bath, England, were so good that they weren't replaced until the 1950s. That's the sort of thing I can admire.

These days I can build a table with my eyes closed and depending on how rushed we are I might build the table alone, let Wayne watch until I need help putting on the slate. It's better when the customers stay out of our faces, how they react when we're done, they run fingers on the lacquered rails and suck in their breath, the felt so tight over the slate you couldn't pluck it if you tried. Beautiful, is what they say and we always nod, tuck on our fingers, nod again, a bit wistfully.

The boss nearly kicked our asses over the Gold Crown. The customer, an asshole named Pruitt, called up crazy, said we were delinquent. That's how the boss put it. Delinquent. So we knew that's what the customer called us because the boss doesn't use words like that. Look boss, I said, we knocked like crazy. I mean, we knocked like federal marshals. Like Paul Bunyan. The boss wasn't having it. You fuckos, he said. You butthogs. He tore into us for a good two minutes and then dismissed us. For most of that night I didn't think I had a job so I hit the bars, fantasizing that I would bump into this cabrón out with that black woman while me and my boys were cranked but the next morning Wayne came by with that Gold Crown again. Both of us had hangovers. One more time, he said. An extra delivery, no overtime. We hammered on the door for ten minutes but no one answered. I jimmed with the windows and the back door and I could have sworn I heard her behind the patio door. I knocked hard and heard footsteps.

We called the boss and told him what was what and the boss called the house but no one answered. Okay, the boss said. Get those card tables done. That night as we lined up the next day's paperwork we got a call from Pruitt and he didn't use the word delinquent. He wanted us to come late at night but we were booked. Two-month waiting list, the boss reminded him. I looked over at Wayne and wondered how much money this guy was pouring into the boss's ear. Pruitt said he was contrite and determined and asked us to come again. His maid was sure to let us in.

What the hell kind of name is Pruitt anyway? Wayne asks me when we swing onto the Parkway.

Pato name, I say. Anglo or some other bog people.
Probably a fucking banker. What's the first name?
Just an initial, C. Clarence Pruitt sounds about right.
Yeah, Clarence, Wayne yucks.

Pruitt. Most of our customers have names like this, court case names: Wooley, Maynard, Gass, Binder, but the people from my town, our names, you see on convicts or couples together on boxing cards.

This time we take our time. We go to the Rio Diner. We blow an hour and all the dough we have in our pockets. Wayne is talking about Charlene and I'm leaning my head against a thick pane of glass.

Pruitt's neighborhood has recently gone up and only his court is complete. Gravel roams off this way and that, shaky. You can see inside the other houses, their newly formed guts, nailheads bright and sharp on the fresh timber. Wrinkled blue tarps protect wiring and fresh plaster. The driveways are mud and on each lawn stand huge stacks of sod. We park in front of Pruitt's house and bang on the door. I give Wayne a hard look when I see no car in the garage.

Yes? I hear a voice inside say.
We're the delivery guys, I yell.
A bolt slides, a lock turns, the door opens. She stands in our way, wearing black shorts and a gloss of red on her lips and I'm sweating. Come in, yes? She stands back from the door, holding it open. Sounds like Spanish, Wayne says.
No shit, I say, switching over. Do you remember me?
No, she says.
I look over at Wayne. Can you believe this?
I can believe anything, kid.
You heard us, didn’t you? The other day, that was you.
She shrugs and opens the door wider.
You better tell her to prop that with a chair. Wayne heads back to unlock the truck.
You hold that door, I say.

We’ve had our share of delivery trouble. Trucks break down. Customers move and leave us with an empty house. Handguns get pointed. Slate gets dropped, a rail goes missing. The felt is the wrong color, the Dufferins get left in the warehouse. Back in the day the girlfriend and I made a game of this. A prediction game. In the mornings I rolled onto my pillow and said, What’s today going to be like?
Let me check. She put her fingers up to her widow’s peak and that motion would shift her breasts, her hair. We never slept under any covers, not in spring, fall or summer and our bodies were dark and thin the whole year.
I see an asshole customer, she murmured. Unbearable traffic. Wayne’s going to work slow. And then you’ll come home to me.
Will I get rich?
You’ll come home to me. That’s the best I can do. And then we’d kiss hungrily because this was how we loved each other.
The game was part of our mornings, the way our showers and our sex and breakfasts were. We stopped playing only when it started to go wrong for us, when I’d wake up and listen to the traffic outside without waking her, when everything was a fight.

She stays in the kitchen while we work. I can hear her humming. Wayne’s shaking his right hand frantically like he’s scalded his fingertips. Yes, she’s a hottie. She has her back to me, her hands stirring around in a full sink, when I walk in.

I try to sound conciliatory. You’re from the city?
A nod.
Where about?
Washington Heights.
Dominicana. Quisqueyana. She nods. What street?
I don’t know the address. I have it written down. My mother and my brothers live there.
I’m Dominican, I say.
You don’t look it.
I get a glass of water. We’re both staring out at the muddy lawn.
I didn’t answer the door because I wanted to piss him off.
Piss who off?
I want to get out of here, she says.
Out of here?
I’ll pay you for a ride.
I don’t think so, I say.
Aren’t you from Nueva York?
No.
Then why did you ask the address?
Why? I have family near there.
Would it be that big of a problem?
I say in English that she should have her boss bring her but she stares blank at me. I switch over.

He’s a pendejo, she says, suddenly angry. I put down the glass, move next to wash it. She’s exactly my height and smells of liquid detergent and has tiny beautiful moles on her neck, an archipelago leading down into her clothes.

Here, she says; putting out her hand but I finish and go back to the den.
Do you know what she wants us to do? I say to Wayne.

Her room is upstairs, a bed, a closet, a dresser, yellow wallpaper. Spanish Cosmo and El Diario thrown on the floor. Four hangers worth of clothes in the closet and only the top drawer of the dresser is full. I put my hand on the bed and the cotton sheets are cool.
Pruitt has pictures of himself in his room. He's tan and probably has been to more countries than I know capitals for. Photos of him on vacations, on beaches, standing beside a wide-mouth Pacific salmon he has hooked. The size of his dome would make a phrenologist proud. The bed is made and his wardrobe spills out onto chairs and a line of dress shoes follows the far wall. A bachelor. I find an open box of Trojans in his dresser beneath a stack of boxer shorts. I put one of the condoms in my pocket and stick the rest under his bed.

I find her in her room. He likes clothes, she says.

A habit of money, I say but I can't translate it right; I end up agreeing with her. Are you going to need to pack?

She holds up her purse. I have everything I need. He can keep the rest of it.

You should take some of your things.

I don't care about that vaina. I just want to go.

Don't be stupid, I say. I open her dresser and pull out the jeans on top. A handful of soft bright panties comes out as well, starts to roll down the front of my jeans. There are more in the drawer. I try to catch the ones that fall but as soon as I touch their fabric I let everything go.

Leave it. She stands. Go on, she says and begins to put them back in the dresser, her square back to me, the movement of her hands smooth and easy.

Look, I say.

Don't worry. She doesn't look up.

I go downstairs. Wayne is sinking the bolts into the slate with the Makita. You can't do it, he says.

Why not?

Kid. We have to finish this.

I'll be back before you know it. A quick trip, in, out.

Kid. He stands up slowly; he's nearly twice as old as me.

I go to the window and look out. New ginkgos stand in fresh rows beside the driveway. A thousand years ago when I was still in college I learned something about them. Living fossils. Unchanged since their inception millions of years ago. You've tagged Charlene, haven't you?

Sure, he answers easily. I take the truck keys out of the toolbox.

I'll be right back, I promise him.

My mother still has pictures of the girlfriend in her apartment. The girlfriend's the sort of person who never looks bad. There's a picture of us at the bar where I taught her to play pool. She's leaning on the Schmelke I stole for her, nearly a grand worth of cue and frowning at the shot I left her, a shot she'd go on to miss.

The picture of us at Boca Raton is the largest—shiny, framed, nearly a foot tall. We're in our bathing suits and the legs of some stranger frame the right. She has her butt in the sand, knees folded up in front of her because she knew I was sending the picture home to my mom; she didn't want my mother to see her bikini, didn't want my mother to think her a whore. I'm crouching next to her, smiling, one hand on her thin shoulder, one of her moles showing between my thumb and pointer.

My mother won't look at the pictures or talk about her when I'm around but my sister says she still cries over the break-up. Around me my mother's polite, sits quietly on the couch while I tell her about what I'm reading and how work has been. Do you have anyone? she asks me sometimes.

Yes, I say.

She talks to my sister on the side, says, In my dreams they're still together.

We reach the Washington Bridge without saying a word. She's emptied his cupboards and refrigerator; the bags are at her feet. She's eating corn chips but I'm too nervous to join in.

Is this the best way? she asks. The bridge doesn't seem to impress her.

It's the shortest way.

She folds the bag shut. That's what he said when I arrived last year, I wanted to see the countryside. There was too much rain to see anything anyway.

I want to ask her if she loves her boss, but I ask instead, How do you like the States?
She swings her head across at the billboards. I’m not surprised by any of it, she says.

Traffic on the bridge is bad and she has to give me an oily fiver for the toll. Are you from the capital? I ask.

No.

I was born there. In Villa Juana. Moved here when I was a little boy. She nods, staring out at the traffic. As we cross over the bridge I drop my hand into her lap. I leave it there, palm up, fingers slightly curled. Sometimes you just have to try, even if you know it won’t work. She turns her head away slowly, facing out beyond the bridge cables, out to Manhattan and the Hudson.

Everything in Washington Heights is Dominican. You can’t go a block without passing a Quisqueya Bakery or a Quisqueya Supermercado or a Hotel Quisqueya. If I were to park the truck and get out nobody would take me for a deliveryman; I could be like the guy who’s on the street corner selling Dominican flags. I could be on my way home to my girl. Everybody’s on the streets and the merengue’s falling out of windows like TVs. When we reach her block I ask a kid with the sag for the building and he points out the stoop with his pinkie. She steps out of the truck and straightens the front of her sweatshirt before following the line that the kid’s finger has cut across the street. Cuidate, I say.

Wayne works on the boss and a week later I’m back, on probation, painting the warehouse. Wayne brings me meatball sandwiches from out on the road, skinny things with a seam of cheese gumming the bread.

Was it worth it? he asks me.

He’s watching me close. I tell him it wasn’t.

Did you at least get some?

Hell yeah, I say.

Are you sure?

Why would I lie about something like that? Homegirl was an animal. I still have the teeth marks.

Damn, he says.

I punch him in the arm. And how’s it going with you and Charlene? I don’t know, man. He shakes his head and in that motion I see him out on his lawn with all his things. I just don’t know about this one.

We’re back on the road a week later. Buckinghams, Imperials, Gold Crowns and dozens of card tables. I keep a copy of Pruitt’s paperwork and when the curiosity finally gets to me I call. The first time I get the machine; we’re delivering at a house in Long Island with a view of the Sound that would break you. Wayne and I smoke a joint on the beach and I pick a dead horseshoe crab up by the tail and leave it in the customer’s garage. The next two times I’m in the Bedminster area and Pruitt picks up and says, Yes? But on the fourth time she answers and the sink is running on her side of the phone and she shuts it off when I don’t say anything.

Was she there? Wayne asks in the truck.

Of course she was.

He runs a thumb over the front of his teeth. Pretty predictable. She’s probably in love with the guy. You know how it is.

I sure do.

Don’t get angry.

I’m tired, that’s all.

Tired’s the best way to be, he says. It really is.

He hands me the map and my fingers trace our deliveries, stitching city to city. Looks like we’ve gotten everything, I say.

Finally, He yawns. What’s first tomorrow?

We won’t really know until the morning, when I’ve gotten the paperwork in order but I take guesses anyway. One of our games. It passes the time, gives us something to look forward to. I close my eyes and put my hand on the map. So many towns, so many cities to choose from. Some places are sure bets but more than once I’ve gone with the long shot and been right.

You can’t imagine how many times I’ve been right.

Usually the name will come to me fast, the way the numbered balls pop out during the lottery drawings, but this time nothing comes: no magic, no nothing. It could be anywhere. I open my eyes and see that Wayne is still waiting. Edison, I say, pressing my thumb down. Edison, New Jersey.