

# Freedom's Just Another Word

by Vic Sizemore

Nadine's in a world of trouble now. You might think what she did was stupid—and it was—but you can't say what you'd do in her place. She can't say herself what came over her; she panicked is all, had to get free of him. The one who came up on the porch wearing his Smokey Bear hat, and read her her rights, he's already gone back out to prowling around looking for other people to arrest, she saw him leave. Now there's only a big man about to bust out of his green uniform; he's behind the counter, trying to finish his overnight shift, ignoring Nadine, acting like she isn't even over here cuffed to this hard metal chair that is itself bolted to the shiny tile floor, waiting for what comes next. It's bright in here, too bright, and the tiles reflect the light back up. Like being beside water in the bright sun.

Nadine knows it's over, she's done for. That cop with the bushy eyebrows and the Starbucks cup is dead and that can't be changed. CPS has her kids, and she'll probably never get them back. She has this flash vision of some fat foster mom with a hairy mole on her lip bringing them to visit her behind bars. It breaks her heart and she starts crying.

She leans her head back against the painted cinderblock wall and takes a deep breath. The radio behind the desk chatters—all those different voices of John Law, across the city, talking to himself on the radio. The big policeman takes a hit off a bottle of flavored vitamin water, twists the purple cap back on, wipes his mouth. He's just popped some popcorn, or somebody has—the aroma fills the room. Nadine's tummy gurgles low. She's so exhausted she's dizzy, but she can't fall asleep. She's thirsty, her tongue sticks pasty to the roof of her mouth. She wants to ask the cop for water, but she doesn't. She keeps her eyes closed, hears and doesn't hear the sounds of the cop station around her.

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The cause of her trouble has always been money, or the lack of it. She used to console herself when she saw those women scooted all straight-backed up to the steering wheels of their SUVs—looked like something

Maddie might draw, colorful elephants cruising through the Kroger lot with craning turtle necks holding up the pretty little heads of soccer moms—that money isn't real life; it's a fantasy, a false buffer against the patient and changeless reality that is pain and suffering and the inevitable: death. Money is an invisibility cloak that people throw over reality, but that doesn't make it go away; it's still right there, walking beside you, staring at the side of your face while you aren't looking back.

Getting your arm crushed between a car door and a tree before having it mashed off your shoulder will quick yank that veil away, sure. But so will the slow gnawing of cancer. Money can't get you free; money can only put up a screen to make you think you're free. Lots of things can tear that screen down. And the thing is, someday something *will*.

Some consolation that is to Nadine right now. Basically, at thirty three—same age as Jesus and Alexander the Great—her life is over.

This particular trouble started for Nadine over a year ago, in June, when she decided to splurge and go see her sister down in Buford, just this side of Atlanta. Her policy for a long time—at least since Rory's dad went to prison for cooking meth—was that staying home is what keeps you out of trouble. They needed to get away; she needed a break. Now, looking back, she thinks if she'd just lived by that rule—stay home—none of this would have happened.

On that Saturday morning, she and her oldest, Bennie, loaded Maddie and baby Rory into their car seats and hit the WV Turnpike, headed for Georgia to spend a week there and call it a vacation, as they didn't have money for anything else. The van wasn't in the best of shape even then, and her pulse could never quite settle as she willed it mile after mile to behave, to keep running, to just get them to her sister's. She'd been aware of the dark blue car for a couple of miles before it finally forced its way between her and the car that had been tailgating her and hit the flashing lights. It took her another couple of miles to get across the heavy traffic and into the narrow emergency lane.

She put down her window and waited. Cars whizzed by, trucks roared up and clipped the air beside the van with such force it felt like they could suck her right back out into traffic. Bennie fished around in the glove box and found her registration and an old GMAC insurance card, long expired—she'd told them to go fuck themselves after they raised her premium from \$67.00 a month to \$89.00, not because she'd gotten a ticket or had a wreck but because her credit was bad, and they had the balls to write her a letter and tell her as much. She told them on the phone that they were worthless

money-sucking parasites, and they'd never get another cent out of her. And they didn't.

The old expired insurance card was better than nothing at all. She handed it out with her license and registration to John Law, who didn't look much older than her Bennie. He had a blond crew cut and sunglasses. His nose was pink and splotchy where it had burned and peeled. His lips were tight around a big dip of snuff, and he hid his eyes behind those mirrored glasses. Trying for all he was worth to look intimidating.

She said to him, "Officer, you plucked me right out of the flow of traffic. I was staying with traffic to be safe." Which was true. Nadine was not a speeder. It made her a nervous wreck, this traffic. She'd gotten herself into a kind of convoy of cars approaching Charlotte; the car in front of her and behind her hadn't changed for ten miles or more. Everyone was going her speed. And he pulled her over because she had West Virginia plates, plain and simple. They both knew it.

The officer hunched and looked at Bennie. He said, "Who's traveling with you?" God, she had to get a fresh cop, acting like she and her babies really might have been running meth.

She shook her head. "My family." She said, "You know good and well everybody was going the same speed I was."

When the cop peered in at Bennie, he raised his hand a few inches from his *Eastbay* catalogue to make a little wave. In this close space his hands reminded her of a puppy's paws, how they're too big and he'd have to grow into them. Bennie was fourteen and already six even. His feet were size eleven. He was going to be a big man like his daddy.

"Keep your hands on your lap, son," the officer said.

Bennie's eyelids drooped. He let his hand drop like a beanbag back onto his knee and sat motionless, staring straight out the front. Poor people get the same sinking gut that criminals do when they see John Law coming, Nadine figured.

"We're going to my sister's in Atlanta," she said. Hot exhaust blew into the van. Her children were being poisoned where they sat. The officer peered in back at Maddie and baby Rory. They were strapped into their car seats, making owl eyes at him.

"I was staying with traffic," she said. "You plucked me out because of my tags." Traffic was back up to speed right now, pounding relentlessly behind him, his blue sleeve flapping in its wind.

"Who," he asked, "do you have in the car with you?"

"Are you on crack?"

"Answer me."

"My family," she said. "*My children.*" She wanted to be home, back in the little house she rented on the hollow off of Davis Creek. How she missed Davis Creek right then. It was their sanctuary, their little smelly place of safety. She wished they'd never ventured this far away from it. She wished they could all just be there together. They could have spent this money on a good dinner and some movies from Hollywood Video, and still had some left over to help with bills.

He stared at Bennie again for a long instant. Bennie had his head shaved, which made him look like a basketball player most of the time, because he was a basketball player, but right now, looking at him as John Law might be, she could see how he could look like he'd just busted out of juvie. Like trouble.

"Stay here," the cop said, and he disappeared with her license and registration. And the bad insurance card.

Nadine turned slowly to Bennie and said, "When the Law has you pulled, you don't ever make a sudden move."

Bennie was outraged. He said, "I didn't do nothing."

"You didn't do *anything*," she corrected.

He growled in frustration and banged his head against the headrest. A truck plowed through the air just feet from her open window, rocked the van. Diesel wind blasted in. She put the window up to wait.

Rory shit his diaper in one noisy blast. Maddie started laughing at the sound. Bennie imitated the wet burst with his lips, which made Rory join into the laughter, cackling his little baby laugh. Maddie tried to imitate the sound of Rory's shit. Bennie did it again, and the two in back laughed so hard they started gasping.

John Law was back in his car writing. His blue and red lights flashed away in her rearview mirror. The smell of Rory's shitty diaper filled the van. That baby wasn't anything like Maddie had been; he could play with his diaper drooping full of shit and never give it a second thought, squish his ass down in it to ride his scooter.

"My god," Bennie said. "Rory, you are funky."

Maddie and Rory laughed until John Law appeared back at the window. When Nadine put it down for him, they went silent and stared at him again. Trucks blasted hot exhaust into the van. John Law gave Nadine the copy of her citation, and started telling her what her payment options were—just like any other transaction.

The paper was shiny and slick on the printed side. The fine was \$150.00.

She didn't have that much for their entire vacation after gas.

Nadine said, "Couldn't you just give me a warning?" She said, "I was staying with the flow of traffic."

He said, "Drive the speed limit and stay safe."

His job out here was nothing more than to rob travelers with strange tags, bring in the cash. A low-paid bandit for the state. She said, "I was trying to stay safe, Goddamn it."

"Have a good afternoon," he said, and he flew from the window.

Bennie said, "Rory's got to be changed."

She had two diapers a day for him, and no money for more. Last night she'd flipped through Bennie's *Eastbay* catalogue. He had circled four pairs of basketball shoes. The Nike Hyperdunk 2010s were \$124.99, and the Reebok Zig-Slashes were \$99.99. These shoes looked to Nadine more like black moon boots than basketball shoes. He also had circled some St. Patrick's green Adidas AdiPure with black stripes that were only \$89.99. The ones he'd made repeated circles around for her to see were black and red Nike Air Max Wavy, and they had been marked down from \$79.99 to \$59.99.

She knew the cheapest shoes weren't his first choice; he was trying in his way. The high school coach had approached him about playing on the high school's JV team and he was only in eighth grade. He deserved some good shoes. It broke her heart, seeing those cheap shoes circled over and over like that.

She said, "Let me get us out of all this traffic first. Then I'll change him." By which she meant, let's get all the way to Buford and get all the use we can out of that dirty diaper.

After that she tried to stay at the speed limit of fifty five through Charlotte, but traffic ripped and weaved around her until only a few miles after she'd been pulled over, she was back up to almost eighty, trying to keep someone from ramming her right up the ass.

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A month after the vacation at her sister's, Nadine's hours got cut because Harcourt & Pritt couldn't fill all their beds. She put in a request to work overnights so she could make some of it up with a shift differential, but no one was giving up any shifts. She called and cancelled the cable. She was getting mail from Charlotte lawyers—"Speeding in Mecklenburg County? We can help"—not to reduce the fine, but simply to keep the points off her license for a reasonable fee, which she was sure would be way more than the \$150.00 of the ticket and the court costs, and she couldn't even pay that. Damn them all; what a fucking scam.



One day in August, another letter came in the mail informing her that the PTO had voted to have all the children wear uniforms and that she could purchase acceptable ones at Wal-Mart or Target or Burlington. “I’m not wearing a damn uniform,” Bennie whined. “Why they making us wear uniforms, like we’re jailbirds or something?”

Maddie was on the floor with her arts and crafts case spread all out, drawing pictures. Rory was scribbling with Maddie’s colored pencils. Maddie said, “I want a uniform.” Rory agreed in his garbled baby talk that he did too.

“They want everybody to look the same. So rich kids don’t look any different than poor kids.”

Bennie said, “So poor kids don’t look like gangsters.” He said, “Rich kids won’t get their uniforms at Wal-Mart.”

Rory stood up and bent over for another pencil. Nadine caught a whiff of him. He needed a diaper change.

Her last paycheck was \$920.39. Her rent was \$760.00, which left \$160.39 for the month. She got some groceries: rice and dry beans; chicken legs and thighs were on sale so she bought them all to stuff her freezer full; two cases of Ramen noodles, a big box of Quaker oats, and three gallons of milk—Bennie could drink a gallon in two days by himself if she didn’t hawk over him. After that she had \$60.15 to buy gas for the month. She couldn’t buy any uniforms anywhere.

“Maybe I could home school,” she said to herself.

Maddie said, “I want to be home schooled.”

Rory babbled his agreement.

Bennie said, “No way.” He said, “I don’t want those broke ass old pants they have at Burlington. We’re going to Target for mine. Or Old Navy.”

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In October Nadine got a letter from the State of North Carolina Department of Transportation:

*Effective 12:01 a.m., 11/01/2010, your North Carolina driving privilege is scheduled for an indefinite suspension in accordance with general statute 20-24-1 for failure to appear... During this suspension, you are prohibited from driving a motor vehicle in the State of North Carolina.*

She laughed out loud. Fine, she thought. Fuck you. I won’t *drive in the State of North Carolina*. She crumpled the letter and threw it away.

The van was hemorrhaging oil now. People stopped at lights to tell her

that her motor was smoking, like she couldn’t see it right there in front of her face. But it kept running. A good van. She felt a genuine gratitude and affection for the poor old thing. It was her freedom, that van, what kept her mobile, and, sure, she was thankful for that. The kids weren’t getting sick. They were as strong and resilient as mutt dogs, like poor kids usually are. That much was a blessing too.

Her hours stayed cut. She fell further behind on the bills. She got one cash advance, and then couldn’t pay it back. Gas went up to \$3.22 a gallon, and she could barely keep fuel in the van, much less buy the one quart of oil it was bleeding into a black patch of dirt in front of their house each week. She mixed water into the milk to make it go farther. Bennie said, “This tastes like piss.” She said, “No, it tastes like water.” But he kept drinking it. The landlord dropped by some plastic that she and Bennie stapled over the windows, and she was thankful he did it while she was at work so that the matter of rent didn’t have to come up. She blocked off the back room by nailing a blanket over the door so they wouldn’t have to heat it. They blocked off the upstairs with plastic. They lived in the living room and her bedroom, the four of them, and stayed close to the space heaters. It wasn’t so bad; it was cozy. They played games and sang, and watched the two channels of fuzzy TV they could still get. *Cops* was one of the shows they watched. Maddie and Rory called the show “Bad boys, bad boys,” and cheered when it came on.

They had some Ramen noodles and frozen chicken left from her last check, and they still had heat. She didn’t have any money, but she still had \$60.00 left on her overdraft protection at the bank. That would feed them until she got paid again at the beginning of November. North Carolina could go fuck itself, she wasn’t paying them a damn thing; she daydreamed about writing them a letter telling them as much. That would feel good.

She could have written them a letter that would have shamed them. She wasn’t stupid, and she’d done some writing, had even taken a creative writing class one semester during her two years over at State. She’d hated it. All those little kids with money sitting inside those comfortable walls talking about subtlety and insight, using words like *epiphany* and *aba*. They hadn’t liked her story about the guy who made babies he didn’t help care for and cooked meth in his grandmother’s basement, and saw his best friend get shot dead by John Law, and then went to prison while the Law had his grandmother’s house torn down and put a lien on her property to pay for it. “It’s too much,” they’d said to her. “It’s too sensational.” The teacher had said, “It’s like trying to carry an iron safe in a canoe.” “But it really happened,”

she'd said. "That's not the point," the teacher had told her. All the students who had written their little boyfriend/girlfriend/coming-of-age stories had looked at her like she was stupid. What the fuck did they know about her world outside those walls, where people didn't have the luxury of sitting

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around waiting for epiphanies to pop like soft little orgasms inside their heads—out in her world it was all wild and violent change. She'd dropped the class. One semester after that she'd run out of money for classes anyway. Who was she kidding. Writing a letter wouldn't do her any more good than writing a story. She had other, more immediate, things to worry about.

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Her October paycheck was \$772.00. That's what had to get them through November. Her choice was to pay the rent, or buy food and gas so she could keep getting to work. She could look under the van and see oil dripping steadily from two different places now, and when she drove, the smoke streamed white around the edges of her hood like a steady smoldering fire under green leaves. The other day she drove to the library in the rain to drop off movies. Walking across the parking lot, she noticed the oil path she'd left on the lot, a steady string of little rainbow explosions, *kaplow, plow, plow*, leading right to where her van was parked. When she came back out, the oil rainbow had swirled from under the van and all the way to the silver Nissan beside her. The tire treads were smooth, and metal shined through in spots, some places even splitting off in little wiry threads. The next day, driving the kids to the YMCA before school, her hands trembled. She knew it was only a matter of time and they'd be stranded. She gripped the wheel and pressed lightly on the gas, and willed the van along.

That night the mail had three bills: car insurance of \$89.00 three times over, plus an unspecified reinstatement fee (her inspection sticker was four months past due, which she had to take care of before this, but she knew the van wouldn't pass without work, which she couldn't afford); a cut off notice from the phone company if she didn't get them their \$124.00 immediately;

and the electric bill for the last two months of \$170.93. Her heat was electric, she had to figure something out there. There was also a letter from the West Virginia DMV. She tore it open and read:

*Your privilege to operate motor vehicles in West Virginia will be suspended effective December 1, 2010, at 12:01 a.m., because North Carolina has filed with DMV the following non-compliance citation:*

*citation no: 3E43418*

*date of citation: June 23, 2010*

*court telephone no: (704) 686-0600*

*offense location: Charlotte*

*The reinstatement requirements listed in this order may change without prior notice. Any fees owed to the state in which the citation occurred should be paid to that state.*

They were all in cahoots, the fucking bastards. North Carolina had to have the \$150.00, plus a \$100.00 late fee, plus whatever court costs would be, and now West Virginia had to have \$85.00 from her, and she had to go to the DMV and prove that she was in the United States legally. Plus another \$50.00 to the North Carolina Department of Transportation, for whatever—pay some alcoholic to prop himself up in the middle of the road on a stop sign. The kids were all out front playing. Maddie rode her bike around the house, counting the laps to Nadine every time. She rode by, barely keeping her balance. The bike was too big. "One hundred and forty three," she said, which was a skip of about six laps. Rory sat on his yellow school bus scooter with handles on top and kicked it up and down the sidewalk. His little legs straightened behind him like a swimming duck's feet. Bennie was slam-dunking a volleyball on the low basketball rim down by the road. He looked up at her and shouted, "What's for dinner? I'm starving." Rory echoed, "I'm starving."

Inside, Nadine boiled the last three packets of beef Ramen noodles, only using two of the flavor packs because Bennie was starting to act like the taste made him gag. She had chicken thigh meat she'd boiled and frozen, which she thawed and chopped up and mixed into the noodles for some protein. She went to the front door and hollered that it was dinner time. Rory lunged sideward off his scooter and rolled in the grass. He pushed himself up and ran for the door. Bennie walked. Maddie was around back on her bike. It was dark outside now, but they were way out Davis Creek, with no one else around except this family of inbreds a ways down who shied off to themselves like a pack of raccoons. She and the kids were safe out here. She could gather them in and close the door; they had food; the heat was not cut

off; she had four diapers left for Rory: at least for this night, everything was okay.

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On December first she got her November pay, which was \$662.17. She made out a check for \$100.00 to AEP, put it in the envelope that came with the last cutoff notice which asked for the \$392.20 past due right now, and told her she had another \$173.43 on top of that for November. The \$100.00 would keep them from cutting her off. She'd worry about the \$465.63 when her next paycheck came. For December, they could block off her bedroom and all just stay in the living room and kitchen to keep it lower. She wrote out a check for \$400.00 to the landlord, which would bring what she owed him down to \$2,640.00, and keep him from throwing them out.

Maddie and Rory were watching *Dragon Tales* on PBS, the fuzzier of their two channels. The sound was good, but Nadine could barely make out the shapes of the dragons sometimes in all the crackling snow. The kids didn't seem to mind. Bennie was outside in the cold shooting hoops on the low rim. Nadine didn't have any stamps to put on the bills. When she deposited her check on the way home, she had kept out a five dollar bill so they could have a special evening. She and Bennie loaded up Maddie and Rory. Bennie's face glowed red from running in the cold, he wafted the smell of boy sweat and cold and grass into the van. With his face all chapped, his wet blue eyes look like an angel's. His nose ran. He snorted, wiped with his sleeve, snorted again.

They drove out the hollow, and out Davis Creek. They went into the South Charleston Kroger and found that Totino's pizzas were on sale for \$1.00 apiece. Bennie grabbed the supreme, and Maddie picked pepperoni. Nadine slid out a plain cheese for her and Rory to share. Bennie said, "We should get a movie tonight." The other two cheered. In the van Nadine fished around in the console and they all dug under the seats, and they found enough coins to add to her \$1.00 and change to get a non-new release at Hollywood Video. Even Nadine was excited. At least for tonight, things would be okay. They would eat pizza and watch a movie.

They spent over an hour inside the Hollywood Video. Maddie was dead set on getting *Air Bud* which she'd seen from the library probably seven times already. Bennie refused to consider *Air Bud*. He tried to be mature about it, offering to watch *My Dog Skip* with her again if she had to have a dog movie. Eventually they all agreed on *Independence Day*, which neither of them seemed all that excited about, but at least they could both live with it.

The Hollywood Video was right beside a Starbucks. In line, they could

smell the coffee.

Bennie said, "Those cappuccinos smell good."

Nadine said, "They cost four dollars apiece." She saw through the window, John Law pull up beside her van and get out. He was a big man—fat—with dark hair and bushy eyebrows. He paused and looked at her inspection sticker. It was bad. She remembered that she didn't have a license anymore. Her heart started racing.

"Damn," Bennie said. "Four dollars."

Rory grabbed a fat pickle in a packet of brine from the candy stand. "Mommy," he said.

She watched the cop walk into the Starbucks. He turned at the door and looked at her van again.

Bennie was telling Rory to put the pickle back and Rory was whining. The woman in front of them got her videos handed around to her and went out the door. Nadine put the video on the counter.

"Is this all?" the register girl asked.

"Yes." Nadine watched the parking lot.

"Twelve dollars," the girl said.

"For one movie?"

"We aren't renting anymore."

Only then did Nadine notice all the signs. This Hollywood Video was going out of business. They were selling off their inventory. They couldn't rent a movie here.

"Come on," Nadine said, as she picked up Rory.

"What about a movie?" Bennie asked.

"I want a movie," Maddie said.

"Get to the van this minute," Nadine said. With Rory dangling from her arms, she burst through the door and ran across the parking lot. He did a singsong, "Woah, woah, woah," with her every jolting step. She put him in the side door and told him to get in his car seat. Bennie started to strap Maddie in, but Nadine said, "She can do it. Get in." He did. She saw the cop at the door, coming out with his big cup with the cardboard ring around it for holding hot shit. He looked right at her and she looked right back at him. She suddenly got an urgent need to pee. He gave her a nod and a friendly wave of his arm, indicating that he wanted her to wait for him just a second, no big deal. Her heart jumped and pounded. She started the van and ripped out of the parking space. As she veered out onto old 60 and gunned it for Montrose, she saw him hurrying to his car, holding out his coffee so as not to spill it.

She flew through South Charleston, running lights. The van motor started clicking and she could smell the oil burning. She got to Davis Creek before John Law's lights came blaring in behind her. She'd driven this road a couple times a day for several years now, and that was her advantage. She knew the curves, and she cranked into them tight as a NASCAR driver. If something was coming the other way, they'd just all be dead, but she couldn't stop now. She had to get them back to that little house, where they could be safe in the living room, and eat pizza, and watch TV. Curve after curve, she took, the van went swaying and listing like a boat in water, and she kept control. John Law's lights would disappear, then swing back in behind her on a straight stretch, come up fast and hard on her ass. His blue and reds flashed and his siren wailed. There'd be others on the way by now, but they had to come out this same road.

Bennie stared straight out the front window with his head back against the headrest like an astronaut, his eyes set and scared. The dollar pizzas slid across the floorboard in their slick plastic bags and fell into the van's door well. She didn't chance a look back at Maddie and Rory. No one said anything. Even Rory seemed to understand how important this situation was for their family. Nadine took a tight curve. The yellow curve sign said thirty was the maximum safe speed, but she took it as sixty, using all of the road and both gravelly berms, and kept control, and punched the gas as she entered another straight stretch. The engine clicked hard, but dug in. Two more curves and they'd be at their hollow road.

John Law's lights didn't appear behind her. In her rearview it was just dark now.

"I think I lost him," she said into the van. No one said anything in response.

She turned on their road, and drove at a normal speed. The van engine clacked even louder. Smoke poured from under the hood. It would carry them the rest of the way to the house. After that, who knew. They were almost there. Her heart was filled with love for the old van. Such a good van, getting her free of John Law in his fast car. Fuck him.

She and Bennie ushered the little ones into the house. Bennie micro-waved the pizzas while she paced and peeked out the front door. The pizza smell filled their plastic- and blanket-shrouded living room.

John Law did not come.

As her breathing and heart rate calmed, she began to feel a small light inside, a little glow of happiness; there'd be hell to pay for running, but tonight they could have their pizza and be safe here together in this hot little

room. Eventually she sat on the couch beside Bennie, and ate a chunk of Rory's pizza.

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Now here she is in the jailhouse, handcuffed to a chair that is bolted to the floor. Last night, after they ate the pizza and tried to watch some fuzzy TV, she and Bennie put Maddie and Rory into their sleeping bags, and the two little ones colored until they fell asleep in the middle of scattered crayons and coloring books. Bennie went into the kitchen and sat at the table and flipped through his *Eastbay* catalogue. His legs bounced up and down on his toes, which he did that all the time anyway. At one point he said, "Guess I won't be playing JV ball."

A little after three in the morning—Bennie was still in the kitchen but he wasn't making any noise, the other two were asleep, and Nadine had dozed in and out sitting on the couch but was awake—John Law came with his bright lights, up the hollow road. Four State Troopers spread their cars in front of her house, shined their lights like it was a gangster hideout. One of them walked around her van looking at it. She didn't see the one with the bushy eyebrows. He was a South Charleston city cop, not a state cop.

Then John Law was at her door. A young man with a military crew cut and razor rash on his neck. He asked her name. He told her she was under arrest and read her rights. Bennie stood watching from the kitchen doorway and the other two didn't even wake up, not that Nadine saw. One of the cops got on his cell phone and said, "Are you on call?" Then he said, "I have three minors over here. How many have you had?" Then he said, "I'm sorry about that. We're running the mother in. You need to come get these minors."

Nadine tries to remember the charges now. It was all so strange and dreamlike, though it only happened a couple hours ago. Failure to something or other, some kind of endangerment, a couple other charges. Those other charges didn't stick in her head because he'd lead off with the biggie: manslaughter. She's charged with manslaughter. Driving her down here, the cop told her the car had rolled, clipped a tree. The man's arm had been smashed and torn from his torso and he was dead. The cop said to her, "He has a wife. One kid. Seven years old. That's a crying shame isn't it? Such a waste. And for what?"

The first thing Nadine felt when he said this to her was rage. She didn't ask the Law to come racing after her. He could have just given someone her license number and gone on drinking his goddamn \$4.00 coffee. All she wanted was one more night of peace and freedom with her kids.

Then she cried because a man was dead and it was her fault, and because

she had lost her kids probably for good this time.

Sitting here, she sees her future: prison time, kids gone. This is when the realization descends on her. Those kids will be taken care of. Maybe they'll all be kept together. Some kind soul will step up and offer to buy Bennie his basketball shoes.

It's not her responsibility anymore, making those hard choices to keep them fed and warm. This is her freedom. For the first time that she can remember, she's truly and utterly free. John Law had to die for it, she had to lose her kids—which is tearing her up inside, the image of that fat foster mom giving them their cereal in the morning instead of her—and that's a hard price to pay. Such a hard price.

Hard as the price is though, she's out from under. It is all out of her control now. All she has to do is sit back and let it happen. They'll bring her some breakfast. Her kids will be eating somewhere, eating real food. So this is what freedom feels like. God she feels so light, she's never felt this light before in her life; if she weren't chained to this chair she feels like she could float up and bounce along lightly against the drop-ceiling tiles.

Her body goes limp. The smell of buttered popcorn and the sound of John Law chattering to himself over the radio swirl all around her. She takes a deep breath, keeps her eyes closed, and smiles.