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Guns to Keep

A THESIS

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Guns To Keep

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS University
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ABSTRACT:

Rooted in the Central Oklahoma landscape, the three plays and seven stories in *Guns to Keep* explore parental betrayal, life without faith, and a loss of personal authenticity. The all-male rural voices often find themselves at odds with unforgiving environments. From an unrelenting cold wind to an unrelenting cold mother, the landscapes of *Guns to Keep* rarely leave much room for hope, let alone redemption.

The conflicts of *Guns to Keep* range from an escalating argument over a light switch left on in "Cowards" to a sun that refuses to rise in *Prelude to Morning*. If the characters of these stories and plays share a commonality, it is that they all search for something to believe in, some theory or myth about their lives. Though these characters want little more than to count on the familiar, like the rising of the sun or mothers who love them, they find little to grasp hold of outside themselves.

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Introduction

Form Gulping after Formlessness

I took swimming lessons late in life. My mother had claimed that I already knew how to swim. I just didn't know that I knew. As was so often the case, she was right. Being the oldest in the pool was akin to the feeling of your last year trick-or-treating in a small town. You're fine until that last door is opened by a classmate. That's when you know. It's time to go home and hand out candy. I set out to float best, learn fastest, and get the hell out of that pool before anyone noticed what an advantage age and experience had given me.

Writing has taken much the same course. Prior to 2008, my writing would most aptly be characterized as uneventful. I never wrote a play that worked, a poem that moved, or a short story with more than three paragraphs. I was good with words in short bursts. My forte was heartfelt greeting cards, forceful letters to editors, and rants to low-level government officials per

my mother's request. Friends and family called me a writer. But having friends and family call me a writer is like my aunt Mary Lou tell me how handsome I am. She says it because she loves me, which doesn't necessarily make it so.

Muddying the water further, I have often struggled with the haunting belief that I don't have imagination enough for this line of work. I've never been the kind of writer who can create at will. I want very much to sit at my writing table, see the black striped tie draped over the back of my couch, and have imagination enough to write about it, yet I rarely do. I want to have imagination enough to communicate using images that did not exist before I thought of them. I want to sit around a conference table with my peers and scribble out freewrites like writers do. That isn't how I operate. I can't just make things up. I must engage my memory.

However, I've come to understand that memory can take me only so far. It can take me right to the end of some pretty awful first drafts. After that, something must fill the void between what I remember and what communicates. In that realization, I've learned I do have imagination enough for this line of work. Since 2008, I have begun to swim. I have completed six plays, nine stories, and thirty-two poems, much of which remain uneventful, but not all. I am improving. Much of my time at UCO I've spent not figuring out *if* I'm a writer, rather what *kind* of writer. When studying fiction, I feel like a fiction writer. When on my own, I'm a playwright.

As critical as I am of my own writing, I'm more so concerning my own psychology. Knowing which kind of writer I am is less important to me than understanding the why behind it. I want to know why I gravitate toward fiction when I write of my mother, and why I have yet to let her into my plays. Perhaps it's as simple as I love theatre too much to let her near it. But then, maybe I sometimes write plays rather than stories because I want a break from

remembering. The poet Stephen Dobyns' said in his book of essays on poetry, *Best Words, Best Order,* that we write to be free of things (52). Admittedly, I have noticed that when I write well enough about things I want to scream about, I have experienced an un-tethering of pain. It's often like leaving hurtful pieces of myself in dark ditches I never have to walk past again. The un-tethering is a coincidence I'm happy to endure, but I've never felt that's why I'm writing. I want conversations that answer questions I've never been able to answer on my own. Even this, I write not to explain, but to understand. In this conversation, I have learned one immutable truth about me as a writer. Short stories result from my desire to control the parameters of my life, while plays result from my desire to escape those parameters. Simpler put, short stories give me a place to control my past, while plays release me from it.

To me, writing a short story is like filling in the blanks. I begin with a memory, people I know, one or two specific things they'll do or say, some notion of where they'll wind up, then I call it a first draft and put the story away. I can't be imaginative until I've had time to distance myself from the story. When I return to the piece, the rest of the process I've often compared to an algebraic equation. I test variables until something works.

The first draft of "The Snow Goose" recorded the truth about a hunting trip I took as a boy. I'd found a coat in my grandmother's shed. There was nothing mythically applicable to our family about it, and nobody cared if I took it. I'd had it months before "the day the animals committed suicide," as my father called it. He'd been rather proud of my hunt as I recall, and my mother had thought it funny that I'd killed a tame goose. I'd had no intentions of changing any of those aspects because I'd thought the story was interesting enough as it was. During revisions I found that nothing fit an equation where I hoped that whatever squared plus whatever squared should equal something changed. It was just another day of my life. So I tested variables until I

found something that spoke to my emotional honesty rather than my memory. Like most of my stories about my mother, "The Snow Goose" now ends in betrayal and a loss of innocence.

Writing plays is an entirely different process. I can't help but think of Sam Shepard's play, *True West*, where the two estranged brothers, Austin and Lee, reconnect at their mother's home in California while she vacations in Alaska. Austin, a Hollywood screenwriter, is the younger and more responsible of the two brothers. He's using the house as a quiet place to write. Lee, a small time criminal, shows up uninvited from the desert after years of drifting. Shepard said of the play:

> I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with. (Shewey 141)

Considering this double nature, I know that the responsible, uptight Austin is the short story writer in me. The drunk thief Lee is the playwright. Where I must be in control when I write short stories, making each moment behave a certain way, steering each scene, I have an outlaw mentality concerning plays. I call my approach my filtering system. I start with one idea, one response or rebellion to an idea, and then I throw the chaotic debris of my life onto a screen and shake it to see what falls through. I thrust two characters together and just let them talk.

My play, *Prelude to Morning*, began as a minor response to Marsha Norman's play, *'night Mother*. In the description of the setting, Norman tells us the time of her play is the present and that the clocks in the kitchen and living room of the set must be visible to the audience and be running. Norman wants the audience to feel the countdown of time as much as

possible. Her description made me wonder how two characters might behave if instead of counting down to doom, they were caught in an infinite loop of time. So I began a play in which the sun has set and refuses to rise.

I had no idea what would happen in *Prelude* or how it would end. Two-thirds of the way through the first draft, I had begun thinking I was writing a twenty-first century update to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* by agreeing that yes, life is absurd and pointless, but the time in between life and death matters. The sun might not ever rise, but we don't have to keep returning to the same place waiting in vain for it. I felt my characters were trying to tell me we don't have to wait, that we can move forward in the dark. By the end of the play, my characters Joe and Two yanked that hope away from me. What I'm left with strikes me as something much more pessimistic than Beckett. I have two guys waiting not for some unknowable presence, some unknown Godot to help ease their waiting, but for something more sinister. They wait for what they ought to be able to count on every day in life like everyone else in the world: the familiar, the mere rising of the sun. Without meaning to in any way, my loose meanderings with Joe and Two represent the most honest sense of my worldview than anything to date. Short stories seldom surprise me like that. I might astonish myself when I find variables that are better than what I was looking for in order to complete my equations, but I rarely release control enough to allow for thematic surprise.

Sometimes I think I'd be a better short story writer if I'd learn to apply the same wildness I apply to plays. As evidence of this I look to "Black Night Ranch," which I consider one of the more successful of my stories. It is certainly my favorite. Unique in this collection, "Black Night Ranch" concludes with redemption. Further, I'd argue it contains the most authentic voice

of all my stories and the most memorable character, James Carl Henry. Managing and Fiction Editor for *Eclectica Magazine,* Tom Dooley, had this to say.

> "Black Night Ranch" is in some ways evocative of Annie Proulx's work, less stylistically than in terms of its death-tinged western subject matter. With vivid, Proulx-weird characters and subtle, crisscrossing coming-of-age plot threads, this story has some quiet, grown-up heft.

My work has often been compared to Annie Proulx's, which I'm flattered by, but when I read more than one of her stories at a time, I get the feeling that she doesn't really come from the places she writes about, which she doesn't. What often begins with impressive word play, winds up a showy use of language that distances me from her narratives. For example, the first line of her famous story, "The Half-Skinned Steer":

> In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns. (21)

Ten years ago, when I first read that line, I was astounded by how much work Proulx accomplished. Now when I read it, I feel the writer's presence. I feel her trying to impress me with what sounds like a messy attempt at voice and poetry. Add to this Proulx's continual barrage of oddball character naming like, Tick Corn (22), Diamond Felts (43), and Leecil Bewd (47), and I wind up insulted as a reader. I get to thinking, where are all the normal people with normal problems? Can't she trust me to be interested in her characters without that? As a result, her stories lose a sense of authenticity that I hope mine don't. My hope is for something simpler,

less stylized, less pretentious, something as open as the country I come from. I believe "Black Night Ranch" accomplishes this better than any of my other stories.

I credit my success with "Black Night" to the fact that at the time of its writing I'd been working exclusively with plays, both in reading and writing. I approached the story like a play. I began with two characters and let them talk. I had no notion of where they'd wind up or what they'd do. I made one rule. That it would not be about my family. To ensure this, I killed them off and let the story exist outside my memory, more importantly, outside my core traumas.

At this point in my writing career, I feel no allegiance to memory. I know that telling the truth doesn't mean telling what happened. Between Doug Goetsch's poetry classes and the most influential book on writing I've read to date, Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, I know very well that honesty and emotional honesty are two different beasts. Despite knowing this, most of my stories are plagued by my unwillingness to create. I *can* create, but you won't find much imagination in my first, second, or even third drafts. I'm never ruthless enough for that. I spend far too much time trying to make the words speak to what I remember and not to the real truth, the emotional truth.

In tackling my obsessive nature concerning memories of family, I often take my cues from poets. Tony Hoagland, in his essay "Obsession," says:

> A real diehard, indestructible, irresolvable obsession in a [writer] is nothing less than a blessing. The [writer] with an obsession never has to search for subject matter…A [writer] without a true obsession, a foundational fracture, a mythic wound, may have too much time to think. The [writer] without a compelling, half-conscious story of the world may not have a heat source catalytic enough to channel into the work of a lifetime. The danger of obsession, of course, is the potential for redundancy, stagnation, narrowness of

> aperture, confinement, paralysis, arrested development. Neurotic recitation can be boring. (81)

I certainly have an irresolvable obsession: my mother. She threatens to take over every narrative I start. For instance, in my story "Guns to Keep," I wanted so much to include everything from the shooting of my father until his death eleven years later that I hamstrung the potential of the story. Early versions were too big, too sprawling. I needed time away and distance. I needed a tough reader to find the guts of it, because I hadn't been able to. And I needed to approach it as a playwright, to see my memory as the fiction it truly is.

The poet Stephen Dunn said in his book, *Walking Light,* "When we start talking about [great events] we are already changing them" (117). Before reading that I think I operated on the assumption that a good writer can tell the truth (what happened) and still write well. I hadn't considered that it's impossible even to tell what happened. And though he didn't say this exactly as I've interpreted it, I know it to be correct. Telling what happened relies on memory, which is historically fallible. If that weren't bad enough, telling what happened relies on perspective, which changes as I change. In this way, I believe the only truth of any memory, or thought, or image, or anything, is how I feel about it in that moment. That's all I have to be true to, or more accurately, that's all I *can* be true to.

Wallace Stevens said in his "Adagia," "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (163). As far as I'm concerned, he may as well be saying, believe in your own imagination, because that's all there is. For Stevens, and for me, there is no magical (for if it were possible, it would be magical) arrangement of symbols that will make sense of this world. What further aligns me with Stevens is that in so much of his work he

provides the reader with paradoxes whose primary issues always come back to the rift, or void may be more accurate, between imagination and reality. Consider the following line from his poem "The Auroras of Autumn": "This is form gulping after formlessness" (355). Form (that we attempt to create via imagination) gulping after formlessness (reality, whatever that means). With this one line Stevens sums up not only my problems with writing, but living. To go about the monumental task of navigating my way through writing a story or play, while doubting the form has been at times downright oppressive. It has felt exactly like "form gulping after formlessness."

I once believed that, given enough talent and craft, any theme or narrative could be pressed into any form. I've worked hard to prove it. For example, the play *Defiance, Ohio* began as a story. Turning the narrative into a ten-minute play was an eye-opening exercise. In truth, I hadn't believed that the inciting story would be better served as a play. I had simply wanted to attend the regional Kennedy Center of American College Theatre Festival as a playwright. I had already submitted my play, *Prelude to Morning*, but wanting to increase my chances of receiving an invitation, I chose one of my most dialogue-heavy stories, with what I considered having the greatest appeal to theatre people, and turned it into a play.

What had begun as an attempt to attend a festival turned out to be a case of forcing the form. *Defiance* does not function well as a ten-minute play. Though I simplified the narrative a great deal, I still wound up with something that couldn't unravel itself in ten-minutes. Marie's change happens so fast as to lose verisimilitude, and William is as useless as wet paint. Worst of all, the audience doesn't have time to acclimate to this screwed up family in time to be able to stomach the idea of a girl having sex with a dog. It was too much, too fast. I got away with it at the festival because I was fortunate enough to have a theatre filled with theatre people. In the

play's current form, I could never produce it in an Oklahoma community theatre and expect positive responses.

My approach to *Defiance* condemned it as a play. I had goals in mind. I had a plan, and I had a template. There's nothing inherently wrong with adapting a play from a short story, but I defied my nature. Rather than use my filtering system, I was arrogant, lazy, and disrespectful to the art itself.

I think a worthy project might be to convert *Prelude* into a short story, maintaining all its wildness and absurdity, to put an end to the push and pull of control and release, and instead combine the two parts of me in one writer. I'm certainly interested enough in learning more about the two halves of me to do that. And rather than consider the play a template, I'd allow the story to go where it wanted. But then, I've already done that. Joe and Two went where they wanted.

Though I think there's merit in the impulse to be wilder with my stories, for now I'll trust my method. At the end of the day, plays are me in a loud, screaming rebellion, rejecting the real. Stories are my quiet, scared moments, understating but never far from betrayal, and infinitely tied to memory. So far I've learned to overcome many of my deficiencies in the revision process. I know very well that for me, revision of stories means releasing them from memory. Revision of plays means reigning in wild discursion. In other words, I revise my stories like a playwright, and my plays like a fiction writer.

In writing this introduction to my work, I set out to show how I am at heart a playwright who sometimes writes stories. Much like *Prelude* strayed from my intent, so did this essay. I am both fiction writer and playwright. I am equal parts control and release. I don't know which I'm best at, anymore than I know which I'll be best at ten years from now. What I do know is

that for the moment, I need them both. There can be no inhale without the eventual exhale, and believe me, I'll keep breathing a while yet.

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Along with the Chair

A Ten-Minute Play

Characters: DELILAH, 30s, strong but weary.

MOTHER, 80s, Delilah's mother, unkempt, mean streak, wears two very different nightgowns, one on top of the other.

JONATHAN, 17, friend of Delilah's son. He wears a suit.

Setting: A kitchen (can be represented by a small table and coffee pot) and two bedrooms, one for Mother, and one for Delilah. Mother's bedroom needs one chair and perhaps a low table to represent a bed. Delilah's room needs no more than a single chair.

Time: Now.

AT RISE: MOTHER sits in her chair staring at the only light in her room, the TV glow. JONATHAN makes coffee. MOTHER ambles into the kitchen.

MOTHER

Am I going to get coffee this morning?

JONATHAN

I'll fix you a cup.

MOTHER

(startled)

I thought you were Delilah. Honey, I haven't had coffee in a long time. Would you mind making enough for me? Do you take sugar in yours?

JONATHAN

No, I don't.

MOTHER

Me too. That's how I've always drank it. Lots of sugar.

(DELILAH, in bed clothes, enters.)

DELILAH

He said he doesn't drink it with sugar, Mother. And you drink a pot every morning.

MOTHER

What's his name again?

DELILAH

Jonathan. Daniel's friend. You met him last night.

MOTHER

Daniel my grandson Daniel?

DELILAH

Yes.

MOTHER

I thought Daniel was taller.

DELILAH

This is his friend, Mother. Christ. Daniel's at work. Jonathan's staying until his parents get back. Remember?

MOTHER

Of course I remember. I've known him since he was a little boy, not even this high. I forgot your name but I remember you. You were always my favorite. Such a good little boy.

DELILAH

You met him last night.

MOTHER

I know that. You're a sweet boy. You're going to stay a while I hope.

JONATHAN

Until my parents get back from Florida.

MOTHER

Ah, the Sunshine State, right? Why you wearing a suit?

JONATHAN

I'm trying to find a summer job. Delilah said I should—

MOTHER

Sweet boy. You got the prettiest bright green eyes I ever seen. Just like mine.

DELILAH

His eyes are blue and so are yours. Did you know you're wearing two nightgowns? Take one of those off before the new nurse gets here.

MOTHER

Son, if I were younger I'd swoop you right up. I'd follow you around like little puppy dog. He's a good looking boy ain't he Delly? Good looking. I'd take you out on the town. I'm a dancing bitch. Why I used to tear up the floor at the bars in Lehigh when I was a girl.

JONATHAN

I heard Lehigh was a good place to get killed.

MOTHER

It is! I met one of my husbands down at Lehigh. Which one was it? Richard? I've had a lot of damn husbands. How many is it Delly? Five?

DELILAH

Ten.

MOTHER

Let's see, there was Bob Henry, and Hylo Ganopis, and Freddy Fender...

DELILAH

Why do you always say that about Freddy Fender? You weren't married to Freddy Fender.

MOTHER

I knew all of them back then.

DELILAH

And she messed with Elvis too, just ask her.

MOTHER

I did go with Elvis. And Freddy Fender. All of them. I was a pretty good slut in those days. I had a lot of money, too. But money talks and bullshit walks, and I've sent a lot of it walking. That's the only use for a man. Money. They used to throw it at me. They still would if I could get out of this damn house for five seconds. I'm a prisoner here. I can still work. I can make my own money. I don't need to be a prisoner.

DELILAH

If you want out so bad, Clear Springs Rest Home is two blocks away.

MOTHER

I have a house. Why can't I just go home?

DELILAH

We sold your house.

MOTHER

Why did you do that?

DELILAH
You know we did. You signed all the papers. Don't start it this early in the morning.

MOTHER
I need my house.

DELILAH
Don't let her fool you. She's showing out because she has to meet a new nurse today.

MOTHER
I need my house, Delly.

DELILAH
She's trying to make it look like we all sold her house out from under her. You think I wanted to spend a week fighting over all your stuff? Who's going to get the dishes? Who's going to get the furniture? Who's going to get Mother? What did I get? I got you. Why do you have to pull this when strangers are here?

MOTHER
Daniel ain't a stranger.

DELILAH
Jonathan. This is Jonathan.

MOTHER
I know that. Don't make me look stupid in front of company.

(MOTHER crosses to her dark room and sits in front of the TV glow.)

JONATHAN
She really know Freddy Fender and Elvis?

DELILAH
I don't know. She might have. She knew a bunch of people back then. I have a picture of her in a coconut shell bikini with The Killer hugging her on one side and his bass player hugging her on the other. She was gorgeous. (beat) Jerry Lee Lewis? Great Balls of Fire? The Killer?

JONATHAN

Oh yeah. Really?

DELILAH

She talks about Bob Henry the most, though.

JONATHAN

He famous too?

DELILAH

He was nobody, but she loved him. Bob was her first husband. Killed in Oregon over another woman. I'm going to take a shower. When this brews, take her a cup.

(DELILAH exits. JONATHAN leans in MOTHER'S room.)

JONATHAN

How much sugar you want in your coffee?

MOTHER

I'm going to get coffee today?

JONATHAN

I made enough for all of us. About a teaspoon?

MOTHER

Just put however much you put in yours.

(JONATHAN starts to correct, changes his mind, pours two cups of coffee, guesses on the sugar for MOTHER, and then takes it to her.)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

(without taking a sip)

That's perfect.

(JONATHAN moves to leave.)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

My grandmother was a fortune teller. You got any fortune tellers in your family?

JONATHAN

None that I know of.

MOTHER

God, she had a bunch of money. It was in her mattress. She told me and Lois that she wasn't going to live much longer and for us to go on and get it all, so we did.

JONATHAN

(sits)

Who's Lois?

MOTHER

My sister. She blew her part of granny's money on a man. A bunch of money. I still had some, until they sold my house. I guess they stole it all when I wasn't looking because I don't have a penny to my name now. I'm broker than whodunit. They won't let me out of here. Do you know why?

JONATHAN

No, ma'am, I don't.

MOTHER

Me either, but I wish I did. Do you like whiskey?

JONATHAN

Sometimes.

MOTHER

I'd sure like to get drunk. You got any whiskey on you?

JONATHAN

Not a drop.

MOTHER

Damn. You won't tell Delilah I was asking for booze will you?

JONATHAN

It's our secret.

MOTHER

She'd kill us if she knew we were talking about getting drunk. You ain't even old enough, huh? Ain't you a devil. Where is she? Did she leave?

JONATHAN

She’s taking a shower.

MOTHER

I need to use the bathroom.

JONATHAN

I think she’s already in the tub. I hear the water running.

(MOTHER crosses to bathroom.)

MOTHER

Open this door.

DELILAH (O.S.)

I’ll be out in a minute.

MOTHER

I got to go.

DELILAH (O.S.)

Mother, I’m in the shower. I’ll be out in a minute.

(MOTHER returns to her room.)

MOTHER

She won’t let me in. I can’t do anything around here. Not even go to the toilet. You ever been a prisoner?

JONATHAN

No, ma’am, I guess not.

MOTHER

Well I don’t recommend it. When you’re a prisoner you ain’t got any of your own money, or food, or nothing. If I get hungry, I have to ask for something to eat. At my house, if I was hungry, I just went to the cabinet and got whatever I wanted. I never had to ask anybody for anything. And I could get drunk whenever I wanted to. I ain’t been drunk in...I can’t even remember the last time. That’s no way to live. Me and Bob used to get drunk all the time. Do you remember Bob?

(DELILAH, toweling her hair, enters.)

DELILAH
Bob Henry was dead twenty years before I was born. Jonathan is just a boy. Nobody remembers Bob but you, Mother.

MOTHER
Bob was my first husband. He liked the women. I knew it'd kill him so I just let it go. The only thing that'd stop him was a bullet. It did, too.

DELILAH
Go to the bathroom. I'm finished in there.

MOTHER
It's about time.

(MOTHER exits.)

JONATHAN
I like her stories.

DELILAH
She's lived a big life. Too big for her to remember it all.

(MOTHER enters combing her hair.)

DELILAH (CONT'D)
That's your toothbrush. You brush your teeth with the toothbrush. It's not for your hair.

MOTHER
Well, I have to have something.

DELILAH
Use the hairbrush. That's what it's for.

(MOTHER exits.)

DELILAH (CONT'D)
She wears me down. My eyes just want to close all the time.

JONATHAN

She’s looks tired, herself.

DELILAH

You’re getting lured in. Half of what she does is on purpose. She’s in rare form this morning because of the nurse. She hates having a nurse but I can’t do it by myself. She’s gearing up. I swear if she runs this one off, I give. I can’t deal with her anymore.

JONATHAN

Man, she seems so sweet.

DELILAH

Enough about this. I’m getting pissed.

JONATHAN

How does she run them off? The nurses.

DELILAH

By being the mean bitch she’s always been.

JONATHAN

Doesn’t seem like there’s a mean bone in her body.

DELILAH

That’s because you don’t really know her. She’s sucking up to you so it’ll make me look like I’m abusing her. Better finish your coffee and hit the pavement. Employers frown on applicants showing up in the afternoon. Best get to it.

(JONATHAN crosses to the kitchen, DELILAH to her bedroom, and MOTHER, suspiciously alert, enters and sits in her chair. She rises to sit on the bed, then sits again in her chair, staring blankly at the TV glow. DELILAH dresses, then exits to the bathroom.)

DELILAH (CONT’D)(O.S.)

Mother, God.

(DELILAH enters in coiled detonation and walks past JONATHAN, who peers into the bathroom, then retreats back into the kitchen.)

DELILAH (CONT'D)
(with exacting burn)
Still think she has no meanness?

JONATHAN
Surely she didn't mean to—

DELILAH
She went everywhere but the toilet. It's on the tub, the floor, the wall. How did it get on the wall, Mother? You have it all over you. You sat on the bed? My God. Your new chair? Mother? Get up. Two days you've had this chair. Get up.

MOTHER
(stares peacefully at the TV glow)
I had to go.

DELILAH
You were in the bathroom. You made it that far. How is it that you couldn't turn around and sit down but you managed to smear it all over my house?

MOTHER
Everything you are is because of me. That makes it my house. And I had to go. You don't know what it's like to be sad and alone.

DELILAH
Just because I'm married doesn't mean I'm not alone.

MOTHER
People's lives ain't very pretty, are they Delly?

DELILAH
Don't call me that. Hearing you call me Delly is like being stabbed and kissed at the same time. This chair will have to be thrown out. I just bought it. I bought it for you.

MOTHER
You just showed up with it. You didn't even ask me if I liked it.

DELILAH
Ungrateful. I hate this.

MOTHER

I hate you, too. I hate this house. I want to go home, and I want you to leave me alone.

(Doorbell rings. DELILAH straightens, leaves MOTHER'S room, then goes to her room and sits in her chair. Doorbell rings again.)

JONATHAN

Delilah? Someone is at the front door. Want me to get it? Delilah?

(DELILAH curls into a fetal ball. MOTHER watches TV. JONATHAN moves to the back door to exit. As he opens the door, light illuminates the house in a sweeping, circular arc that spreads first across DELILAH, then MOTHER, then diminishes as he exits.)

END

The Snow Goose

Christmas, 1977, a big snow fell in Non, Oklahoma. John William Caulder tore the paper from his last gift and pulled from a Red Wing boot box a worn brown duck jacket.

"You're ten," his mother said. "It's time you got real hunting clothes."

The old garment looked like the Carhartt chore coat his father wore. It had the same gray wool blanket lining, the same brown corduroy collar, the same frayed cotton strings hanging unraveled from the sleeve cuffs. But this coat wasn't stained by the grease and paint of fixing up broken down cars like his father's. This coat bore the stains of old hunts. Bits of hair and feathers still clung in the deep recesses of its pockets.

John's father, who had been in their shop working on a car, walked in. "Ten's too young in my opinion, but there it is. That was my daddy's. Don't go snagging it on fences."

"Granny Caulder hoped to live long enough to see you wear it," John's mother said.

"And if she was here you'd have to listen to her yammer on about every rip, why the buttons don't match, and where all the blood stains came from."

"She scrubbed it," John's mother said, "but blood sticks."

Though his grandfather had been a small man, the jacket still swallowed John. His mother reached into the space between him and the coat around to his back like she was hugging him. She unfastened metal hooks on the inside of the coat, releasing an extra two-foot flap of brown duck material. John had never seen anything like it. Fastened, it was an interior game pocket. Unfastened, it made the coat look more like a horse riding duster.

"That's the biggest game pouch you'll ever run across," John's father said. "And your granddaddy carried more squirrels in it than you're ever likely to see."

"He might put some rabbits in it, though, by god. This boy's got plenty of killer in him."

John said nothing, but to emphasize what his mother had said he retrieved his .410 shotgun from his bedroom. Rabbits had paid for that gun. Last winter, his rich uncle Elvis, who gave up hunting for drinking, had paid him five dollars apiece for rabbits. John rat-holed sixty dollars of Uncle Elvis's money and asked his mother to let him buy the break-open .410. He'd eyed it every time they stopped by the Montgomery Ward to make a payment on their washer and dryer.

John leaned the .410 against the couch. He was a hunter in a long line of hunters. He earned his own keep, just like his dad's dad, who had been such a great shot that he killed squirrels by shooting their noses. He was a man who didn't spoil meat nor brains. John had never eaten a squirrel brain. It was something he might like to try once he learned to shoot as well as his grandfather had.

As if reading his son's mind, John's father said, "I prefer squirrel," then went back to work in the shop.

John re-folded the hanging flap of his coat and fastened it with its metal hooks. He filled the breast pockets with ammo he'd received from Santa Claus and grabbed a bag of bacon leftover from yesterday's breakfast. He liked to chew the salty meat and stuff it in his jaw like tobacco.

"Wish me luck."

"Luck," his mother said. "Watch the weather. Cattle are bunched."

John marched toward the shop where his father worked. Donning his new gear, he felt like the Great White Hunter saying his last goodbyes before leaving out for an expedition. The boy stuffed bacon in his jaw and pushed his Doberman off him, who was leaping at his side. He opened the door to the shop to find his father covered in white dust and using the loud air file to sand the door of some rich lady's white Mercedes. John yelled at him three times before getting his attention.

"Going to hit those irrigation."

His father, barely looking up, let up on the air file. "Don't get too far," he said. "Got ice coming. It's too cold for hunting anyway."

The young hunter stomped out thinking that his father didn't know what he was talking about. What did he know about rabbits? John was the rabbit killer. It didn't get too cold. His father didn't even hunt for real. All he ever did was drive the roads, killing animals ten feet away from the window of his truck. The one time they had left the pickup to enter the woods, the hunt had ended as soon as it started. They'd walked up a creek and sat under a hickory. In the quiet, John had got to wondering a series of what ifs. He whispered one of them to his father.

"Daddy, do you think if there was nothing to stop bullets that you could fire your .22 in any direction, and eventually it'd circle the earth enough times to hit a squirrel right in the head?"

"What?"

"Do you think—"

"I heard you. Goddamn. Who thinks like that?"

"I just wondered—

"I don't know and neither does anybody else. Get in the truck."

John hadn't hunted in the woods with his father since that day. He closed the shop door and walked out to the barbed wire behind the house, spread dry grass on the snow for his gun to lie on then climbed the fence. As he straddled the top wire, he spotted a jackrabbit hunkered down. Just like that he knew it wouldn't be too cold. He eased over, drew his shotgun from its grass bed, took aim and remembered what his father said about jacks.

"Don't be killing no jackrabbits. There ain't enough left. Besides they mate for life. Rude to go killing one's mate."

He'd said that a million times, but beaded down on that one, John resolved to tell his father that he'd mistaken it for a cottontail. If questioned, he'd say that all he saw was the top of its head. They'd accidentally killed them a few times like that when road hunting. John thought about the good chili jacks made, locked his alibi away, and squeezed off his shot. Retrieving his game, he jumped another hare who trotted off five yards and stopped to watch him stuff her mate in his jacket. Taking mercy, he shot her, too.

The boy quick-timed it across the pasture toward the irrigation pipes. The level nature of the snow made him forget the rough plowed field lying under it. He stumbled in the furrows and

fell into a covey of quail. Birds rose all around him, flapping against his body. One nicked his ear. Two flew inside the opening to his coat's big pocket, which spooked him into a backwards fall that crushed the birds. Doby grabbed a bird on the climb and dropped it dead at the boy's feet. Lying in the snow, he watched the gray mass rise above him then drift down into a small patch of persimmon growing in a drainage ditch. He dragged himself to his knees and reached behind him into his coat.

"I can't believe that just happened."

John found the birds, pulled off their heads, and handfed the treats to Doby. They had become fine hunters together. He smiled remembering how they used to crawl under the barbed wire fence that separated their lawn from timber, slipping just far enough on the other side for him to feel like he was in the woods on his own. He'd yell, "Go get me a rabbit." Doby would shoot through the underbrush like a long, black bullet to deliver him a fresh killed rabbit. He'd rub her head, tell her what a good girl she was, then tie a shoestring around the rabbit's back legs and hang the dead cottontail from a branch. He pumped BBs into it until it felt like his kill. They'd present the yield to John's mother, who'd rub his head, tell him what a good little hunter he was, then tell him to give the rabbit to Doby, who spent the rest of the day pitching it into the air and rolling in it.

John untucked his green flannel shirttail from his pants and wiped the melted snow from his gun. He stuffed the shirt back, then resumed a beeline for the pipes. The clear noon sun went gray behind the ice coming in from the south. In the diffused light, a breeze kicked up, turning the air stiff, giving it edges. The cold silenced everything. The cows in the far east pasture stopped mooing. No field lark chirped. Even the quail's bobwhite whistles died out. He buttoned his coat, cradled his .410 in the nook of his arm and poked his hands in his pockets.

John had high hopes for the irrigation pipes. Cold as it was getting, surely they'd be filled to the gills with rabbits. He'd discovered their hiding place when he turned eight and got an air rifle for his birthday. He and Doby had been patrolling the pasture for slow-moving meadowlark fattening out on fallen wheat. Doby struck scent and followed the smell across the pasture to the irrigation pipes stacked up on the fence row. Looking through the end of one of the thirty-foot long aluminum tubes, John saw the silhouette of a young rabbit. He assumed prone and sent a pellet down the pipe. When he found he couldn't shake the dead rabbit out, he bent a hook in the end of a length of baling wire and fished it out.

He had been lucky on that first one. Sometimes he had to fire three shots to get the rabbits to stop kicking, a fourth to loosen their legs wedged stiff against the metal sides. After he developed the pattern of returning home with a half-dozen rabbits each time, John's mother had stopped being proud of her little hunter and had forbidden him to shoot down the pipes. She said it wasn't sportsmanlike.

That's when he had begged his mother to let him buy the .410. Since rabbits hold tight until you force them out, John would push the sharp point of the baling wire inside the tube until it poked fur. Frantic toenail scratching inching away from him meant in seconds he'd see a rabbit pop out the end. Missing his first two, he learned rabbits won't run directly away. They dash out a few yards then circle back the direction they came, often leaping back inside the same aluminum pipe under his feet. He trained himself to hold off on the trigger until they turned broadside. That move soon became so easy that he hit them in the head even if they were running in full stride. At suppers of rabbit, his mother often bragged how he hadn't let a single lead pellet damage meat. His father pretended to hurt his teeth biting into the beads.

In the new quiet, John thought his feet crunching through the hard crust of snow sounded like bridle leather twisted tight. His boots left clean indentations, pressing through the wide, white scab into the soft snow beneath. To soften his approach, he stepped on patches of green wheat poking up through the white. He discovered nine rabbits in the irrigation pipes. More than he'd ever found at one time. He trotted away with eight rabbits. He left one in the name of sportsmanship.

With a game pocket pushing twenty pounds, John swung with each step. At fences he removed the jacket to drop it over first. Otherwise, the coat caught on barbs. He crossed the fence where the pipes were stacked, then circled a quarter-mile around the persimmons to get to the quail. To his surprise, he crept up within fifteen yards where they sat under the persimmons waiting for him. He backed up five yards to widen his shot pattern, picked out the tightest clump of birds, then shot them on the ground. He killed five with one shot. The rest rose as slowly as snow falls, giving John time to load and fire twice more, dropping birds with each shot. When the feathers settled, he picked up eight birds. He pulled off their heads and fed the morsels one by one to Doby, letting her take as much time as she wanted to lick the blood from his fingers.

He felt he'd finally risen as the kind of hunter his mother had wanted and the kind his father couldn't deny. He wanted to head back to the house right then and show his parents what he was made of, and he would have, if not for the sound filtering across the wheat fields. A pristine, lone goose honk echoed through the cold. He'd never killed a goose. He hoped it honked from one of the small cattle ponds dotting the property, as he'd failed time and again to sneak up on ducks and geese on the big pond in the valley.

John inspected the waters in the sound's direction. He found each cattle pond iced over and empty. He arrived at the last timbered fence row and let the heavy jacket slide from the

troughs it dug in his shoulders. He knew he'd never be able to sneak up on anything lugging all that weight. Straightaway, he missed the warmth of the animals across his back. He removed the green war belt his father had given him and tied Doby to the fence.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, but I can't have you spooking the goose."

John bent down a limb and draped his jacket over it, letting it lift his coat up and away from scavengers and Doby. He seized his .410, a handful of shells, and then set out for the deep creek bed that emptied into the big pond.

Two hundred yards from the pond, John climbed on all fours out of the creek bed and hid behind a pile of flat sandstone, the last place to exit unseen. Busted countless times peering over rocks, through brush, and from behind gopher mounds, John grew nervous. He wanted that goose. He needed it. He sat with his back against the rock, looking out over all the land he'd crossed to get there. Smoke from the wood burning stove in his father's shop sifted up from behind a rise in the pasture a mile away. Worrying over rust, he laid the shotgun across his lap and cleared away the snow. The single honks fell to him in long, raspy notes, not at all like they sounded when he first heard them. John thought he had discovered the saddest goose in the world. He laid his head back against the rock and imagined the goose talked to him in a secret language that they two alone spoke.

The ice arrived in a drizzle. John convulsed in a violent shiver. A thin layer of frost was already forming on his shotgun. His hair would soon be frozen in thick brown curls. He was cold to the core. He wiped his sleeve across his gun's receiver, propped it against the rock and wormed his way onto his knees. He forced himself to shiver hard against the stiffness setting in his joints. Peering over the rock, he saw nothing but a big icy pond. A honk rose up. John dropped to his belly. It was close. He eased up over the stones to see a bright white goose

waddling across the ice. A snow goose. That meant rare, like the snow leopards he'd learned about in school. And this one was huge. Astounded by the pure luck of his find, he wished he had his grandfather's coat with him.

He had no choice but to cut through the grass slow and steady, crawling when the goose looked away. That required him to hold his .410 in one hand and press it into the wet snow with every push forward. He hated to do it, but he saw no other way of getting close. To his amazement, the goose closed the gap between them faster than his crawling. John had the overwhelming sense that the goose knew he hid in the grass, that it wanted to die. So sure of his realization, he stood. The goose paused, pecked at the ice, and waited. John took a step closer. The goose took a step closer. At twenty yards away, John wondered if he had the grit to kill this animal.

Giving up the ruse of stealth, the boy treaded to the edge of the frozen pond and waited for the goose, who stopped at gun's length. John backed away. The goose followed. He advanced on the bird.

"Get on, now. Get gone."

The goose stopped and cocked its head.

"Go on, I said."

The goose didn't move.

"I'm freezing. I want to go home. Get. I don't want to shoot you, but I will if you don't leave." John raised the barrel of his gun and aimed at the head of the bird. "I've got a gun pointed right at your head."

The goose bobbed its head like it wanted to move forward.

"I've got a gun, I said. You want to die?"

The goose took half a step forward. John watched it lift its webbed foot, *Don't, he thought,* and place it gingerly on the ice in his direction. "Oh, God," he said, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The ice that burst up fell like wheat kernels tossed in the air. The blast echoed back and forth through the valley, losing thunder with each pass. John opened his eyes, lowered his shotgun, and saw that the tiny lead shot had carried pieces of the bird's blood-pinked down into rough ice divots. Water bubbled up through them, soaking the dead bird. Killing a goose wasn't like rabbits or quail. It didn't tremble in dying quivers, or squawk in fear, or try to drag itself away. It died without incident.

The bluing snow told John the sun had fallen on the horizon. He stepped onto the ice, picked his bird up by its feet, and slung it over his shoulder. Its broken neck bobbed against his back. Wet feathers soaked through to his skin, and his hands stung bright red like caught in nettles. Each barbed wire fence he came to felt insurmountable. John cried a little when he saw the last tight wires. He couldn't lift the bird over again. He kicked it under with his feet, made his way over, and slung his goose.

Doby bounced against her tether. John placed his stiff, aching fingers against her hot belly. When warm enough, he pulled his coat from the tree and inspected his game. All were cold, some were frozen. He stuffed the goose inside with the rest then kneeled to slide on the coat. The heavy bird rested too far to one side. John couldn't get his balance. He shifted the goose to the center of the pocket. The weight had him nailed to the ground. A seam ripped when he tried to stand.

"Stupid goose." He peeled off the coat and snatched loose the bird. Pressing his hands into the snow, he lifted himself up, and kicked at the air. "You no good dirty—you tore my coat."

Doby jerked against the belt.

"I didn't mean you, Girl." John untied her and brushed away the ice clinging to her back. "You didn't do nothing."

The boy looped the belt around the bird's neck behind where he'd broken it and pulled on his coat. Stepping hard toward his house, he dragged the goose. Doby followed a timid distance behind him.

At the irrigation pipes, he killed the rabbit he had earlier spared. He fell to his knees in front of it, opened the sharpest blade of his Old Timer pocket knife and sliced open the rabbit, expelling hot steam. Like easing into a scalding bath, he slid his cold fingers inside. It hurt too much. He pulled them out and let the wind dry the blood into an itchy residue that hurt more than the heat of the rabbit. He scrubbed his hands with snow until the itch turned to raw stings, then slipped his fingers, slower this time, back into the thin space between ribs and entrails. When the shock of the heat subsided, he hitched the loose end of the belt to a rear belt loop, then headed home with his load wearing the rabbit like mittens.

John wanted his father to know how he had suffered to get these animals, to see that he's a real hunter, braving the elements to do real hunting. Not even his father had brought in such bounty before. Bursting through the door of the shop, he stopped in front of the wood burning stove, waited for his father to see the rabbit on his hands, and then dropped it and the coat to the floor, splaying both to show off new blood stains. He left the goose outside the shop door intending to save it for last, to drag it in like lost treasure.

"Damn. What you got in there? A deer?"

A deer. The one animal he hadn't thought of. He wished he hadn't made such an entrance. He should have walked in like any other day, as if empty handed. Nothing in his coat or outside the door would impress his father like a deer.

"No. No deer."

John wiped his hands on his pants, then hauled his kills from the coat. Two jacks, eleven quail, and nine cottontail rabbits.

"What'd they do, commit suicide?"

John said nothing.

"Why'd you kill those jacks?"

"First was buried in snow. Thought it was a cottontail. Jumped the second and felt sorry for her."

"That's best."

John brought in his goose.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Back pond."

His father picked the bird up by its damaged wings. "Too old to pluck. Too old to skin too, I imagine."

"I'll get him skinned."

"Jesus, boy, this bird's wings are clipped. This is somebody's pet."

"No, it ain't."

"You killed a tame bird."

"Whose? Nobody lives anywhere around here but us."

"Buster Martin moved his trailer in up the hill. Probably his bird."

John took the bird from his father. “I killed it. I’m eating it.”

“If your mama will cook it. Throw it over the fence before she sees it. She’ll have you carting it up to Buster’s to apologize.”

“I doubt she’d make me apologize to a man who cuts a bird’s wings off.”

“But she’ll cook a pet provided you shoot off its head?”

John looked the goose over. His father was right. Someone had clipped its wings. It was tame. How he’d convinced himself it was a snow goose was beyond him. How foolish. He’d seen farm geese before. For the first time that day he realized all the animals had come easy. None had been a challenge.

“Do you think it trusted me not to shoot?”

“Don’t start that. Animals don’t know nothing but survival. It ain’t our fault they ain’t as smart as us. Get rid of that bird, clean the rest, and go in the house.”

John dropped the goose over the back fence into a deep snow bank. His mother would never know, and he could go on like nothing ever happened. Even without the bird to top off the hunt she’d still be proud. He skinned his rabbits and quail, laid his torn coat on the ground and bundled the naked animals in it. He cradled them in his arms to deliver to his mother.

Cowards

As Tommy readied himself for senior prom, his mother followed him through the house shutting off lights in the rooms he exited. For ten minutes the lights of their home flicked like lightning flashes.

"How much do think our electric bill is?" Tommy's mother asked. He wished just once she'd say what she was thinking instead of asking silly questions like that.

"I know Mom. I'm hurrying." Tommy maneuvered his black cummerbund just right.

"I guess if you didn't wait until the last minute to do everything you wouldn't always be in such a hurry," Tommy's mother said.

"I know."

"I don't think you do."

"Yeah, I get it. Shut the lights off."

"You miss the point every time. I'm talking about you waiting until the last minute to do everything."

Tommy knew the staccato his mother's voice assumed when she was near the edge. He let a sigh slip as he situated his bow tie.

"Don't get an attitude with me, you little bastard. You don't pay the bills around here," she said.

Tommy knew his mother didn't mean that in any other way than she meant anything else. She just talked that way. Yesterday, when she asked him to taste her spaghetti sauce, Tommy had replied that it was perfect. His mother had said, "You little bastard, you always think it's perfect." But sometimes he didn't feel like being called a bastard or a son-of-a-bitch, even if his mother didn't know another way to talk.

Seventeen years of knowing better, yet the words slid out of Tommy like red-hot slag. "Why don't I give you twenty bucks and you leave me alone about it?"

All his life Tommy had felt like he walked the rim of a deep, steep drain. One slip, one look away would send him tumbling down the hole. Tommy heard the slap more than he felt it. He knew with perfect clarity that he had just fallen into something that he wouldn't be able to climb out of.

"It's you or me. I don't care which," she said.

"You or me what?"

"Leaving. Tonight. Now."

"It doesn't have to be this way," Tommy said, wishing he'd said something better. He wanted his father to wake.

"You just made sure it had to be this way."

"I didn't mean it," he said. He did mean it. He meant it exactly as he'd said it. He would have gladly handed her twenty dollars if she would have left him alone.

She turned down the hallway toward her bedroom. Tommy touched her shoulder. "I'll go." If experience proved anything, he knew his father wouldn't forgive him if he let his mother leave. The man had followed her across the state a half-dozen times. The last time was only six months earlier. She'd run off to her mother's. Said she was tired of being a slave, cooking, cleaning, wiping runny noses while Tommy's father was off drinking with his brothers. Tommy had asked his father how long he was going to keep trying to get her to come home.

"As long as it takes," his father said.

"Well," Tommy said, "I guess if you can manage to keep her a few days at a time you'll always have her."

"If that's what it takes."

Tommy's mother shook his hand off of her shoulder. "Fine. Pack."

He opened the closet door in his bedroom and found the tattered Vietnam duffle bag his father had given him. Tommy inventoried everything he'd bought with his own money, laying it all out on his bed. He knew there was no point trying to leave with more. He'd started buying his own clothes that school year, so there were only a couple pairs of jeans and four shirts. He grabbed them then turned his attention to his guns. His father had bought all but one.

When Tommy had turned fifteen he took all the money he'd earned hauling hay the summer before and bought a Belgian-made Browning .22 rifle. It was identical to the one his father owned. His father told him he could have it when he died. Tommy didn't want to wait.

He laid the rifle on the bed, then sorted through his 8-tracks and records until he gathered all he'd bought. In packing them he realized he might break them.

"I'll be back for these," Tommy said.

"Better hurry. Pawn shop opens on Monday."

Tommy poked his rifle in the bag.

"I shouldn't let you take that," she said.

"I bought it."

"Says who?"

Tommy went on like she hadn't said anything. Searching through his dirty clothes in the corner of his room, he found his Pink Floyd concert t-shirt. It always reminded him of 1982 when he was twelve and his mother had found a box of dusty 8-tracks in their barn. She said the tapes were stoner music his older cousin, Steve, had given away after he stopped smoking dope. Still, she wouldn't allow the tapes to be thrown away. Tommy loved that about her. Although his mother didn't like the band, when she heard in 1983 that Pink Floyd were touring, she made sure her son had a ticket.

"Don't think you're leaving in the Fury either," Tommy's mother said.

"I bought it."

"Whose name is it in?" She crossed her arms, stoic.

"Mom."

"Take that car and I'll report it stolen."

"Keep the goddamn car," he said.

She was baiting him. Tommy punished her by finishing his packing in silence. When the bag could take no more he slung it over his shoulder then went into his parents' room where his

father slept. Tommy hoped his father would stand up for him. Maybe this time, he thought. He had once before. A year earlier Tommy's mother had thought she had discovered her son running from a fight.

Tommy's high school and his sister's elementary school were only a few blocks from one another. One day in September, Tommy got out early because of a pep assembly. To save his mother the trip of picking his sister up first, then driving over to get him, he ran from his school to his sister's. When he arrived he was met by three Indian boys a year younger than he. His mother saw them picking on Tommy from across the playground. When she drove up, Tommy was glad to see her, because the boys, even though they were younger, were bigger. Tommy got in the car.

"What was that all about?" his mother asked.

"Just picking on me a little," Tommy said.

"We'll see about that," she said, circling the block.

"Where you going?" Tommy asked.

"I won't raise a coward who runs from fights."

"I didn't run from them."

"I saw you," she said.

"You saw me running, but not from a fight. There's three of them."

"Then there won't be any shame when you lose," she said.

There *was* shame when he lost. To Tommy's mother, he ran. She saw him. He would always be a coward to her. A coward who let younger kids beat him in front of his own mother. Every time Tommy heard her say the word, he felt like a steel drum filling with the word coward. Right before she left home the last time, he'd had a big fight with her.

Sitting at the kitchen table they'd been discussing whether or not Tommy should join the military.

"They got the G.I. Bill now and you wouldn't have to worry about insurance or a place to live," Tommy's mother said.

"War might break out, though. They talk about it on the news. I could get killed."

"I wouldn't worry about that. It's pretty hard to shoot somebody if it takes his mama to make him get out of the car."

"You've been screwing that story up for months. I never ran away. I didn't want to fight. But I never ran."

"You'd have been happy enough to let me drive on home, though, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not talking about what I would have been happy to do," Tommy said. "I'm talking about you calling me a coward for something that never happened."

"I guess I'm a liar."

Tommy's mother took the one-by-four board she kept on top of the refrigerator and pointed toward the dining room table. Fine, Tommy thought. He put his hands on the table. Each time the board struck his behind, he said out loud, "I did not. I did not. I did not." The fourth time he said it, Tommy caught a glimpse of his father coming through the back door just as the board struck the back of his head. He fell into the kitchen curtains, dragging them down with him so that the scene his father walked into looked as bad as it could. For the first time, Tommy saw his father take up for him. He yanked the board from his wife's hand, pinned her to green linoleum, and swung the pine plank against the floor beside her head. "How do you like it," he kept saying. Tommy had mistakenly thought that his standing up to his mother had

changed things, that his father had seen who she really was. Nothing changed. Everything went back to how it was before.

And now, standing in his father's dark bedroom, hoping that in this moment he would stand up for him again, Tommy had his doubts. When his father rolled toward him, his countenance gave him away. He was pretending to be asleep. Tommy knew then nothing he could say to his father would change anything.

With bitterness he allowed his father the lie. "I'm leaving," he said.

"Leaving and going where?" his father asked.

"I don't know. Me and Mom got into it."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know."

"Well, okay then. Be careful," his father said.

Tommy told his father goodbye. His father rolled over. Unwilling to move, Tommy stood staring at the man's back. He didn't care if it helped or hurt. He wanted his presence felt. His feet planted, jaw set, Tommy imagined opening a hole in his father. He wanted to see inside. He wanted to see what the heart of a man who professes love for his son looked like. Tommy stood firm until his father shifted under his stare. Only then did he turn to leave.

Tommy slung his pack, walked past his mother, and tried to make the last thing he said to her strong. He refused to give her the satisfaction of breaking him. He knew she was going for that.

"It never had to be this way," he said.

"You already said that."

"Fuck you," he said, and walked out the door.

She closed the door behind him. She'd won again. The "fuck you" confirmed it. They both knew it.

Tommy walked through the gate of his parents' chain link fence heading down their quarter-mile long gravel driveway. He knew his father didn't want him to go. He would never want that. Despite his weakness, the man always let his children know they were loved.

The summer Tommy was eight and Claire was five, their parents dropped them off at their grandmother's to stay a few days.

Claire met her father at the door. "You left us a whole month. That's almost forever. Tommy won't talk to me anymore."

"It's just eleven days," Tommy corrected.

Ten minutes into the silent drive home, Tommy's father pulled over beside a great, empty hayfield.

"Me and your mama's both sorry we left you so long," he said. "I did some things I ought not to have, but that don't matter because things are straightened out now. We love you. You know that."

Tommy lowered his eyes away from his father and stared at a cigarette butt on the floorboard.

"Tommy, don't do that. Look at me, now. I know your mama wouldn't ever say it out loud, but she loves you just like I do."

Tommy forced a smile, letting him off the hook.

But now, when it most counted, thinking of the look on his father's face as he told him goodbye infuriated Tommy. It was six miles to town. His father was letting him walk into the dark.

When Tommy reached the dirt road in front of their house, he didn't know which way to go. If he travelled a mile east he could use a neighbors' phone. He was too embarrassed to walk up on old man Sutter's front porch wearing a tuxedo. West toward town was the best move, he thought. He got no more than three-quarters of a mile when the weight of the bag became too heavy to carry. He tossed it down in the middle of the road and sat on it. He knew he couldn't lug it all the way to town. He glanced around for a place to stash it so he could come back for it the next day. The south side of the road was open pasture. The north side, though, had good thick timber with briars.

Tommy heard something in the pasture on the south side of the road. He thought it might be a couple of deer blowing. The sounds were coming toward him. He strained his eyes to find definition but he was looking too far into the darkness. Two scrawny dogs leapt the barbed wire fence, landing in the road in front of him. Tommy stood. His father's voice spun through his head, "Never let a dog know you're scared." His legs shook, aching to bolt. The dogs stood sideways in staggered formation, six feet in front of him, heads turned toward him. If they'd stayed one more instant, fear would have forced him into an ill-advised sprint in the opposite direction. The dogs, startled themselves, bounded into the timber on the opposite side of the road, disappearing into the briars.

No way was he walking to town in the dark. Looking back toward his house, he thought he might crawl under one of the cars for protection. He grabbed his bag and made quick time in that direction. When he came to the intersection of the driveway and the road, he noticed the big cedar tree growing in the corner of the pasture where the fences met. It was the only tree in that section of land. He had watched it grow since he was little. Many times at Christmas the suggestion came up that they cut down that tree. Tommy always resisted. Not because he

wanted to save the tree, but because their family's hunt for the perfect tree was the best part of Christmas. His mother had let him and his sister look as long as they wanted without ever complaining, even if it took all day. Besides, cutting that one would have been lazy, like killing deer grazing in your own backyard. Without thinking, he tossed his bag over the barbed wired fence and hopped over. He lifted the heavy boughs of the tree, slithered beneath them, pulling his bag in front of him. He lay shivering beneath the cedar thinking of the absurdity of sleeping outside in a tuxedo.

At dawn, Tommy woke to the sound of cattle sniffing at him. He parted the cedar branches to see if his parents were home. The lights were on. He took off his jacket, cummerbund and bow tie and laid them across his bag, which he left hidden when he sneaked out from under the tree. He crossed the fence and jogged down the road toward town. At the mile section he heard a car coming. It was his mother. Though he felt refreshed, Tommy didn't feel like fighting.

His mother pulled up beside him. "Where you headed?"

"Town."

"Get cold?"

"No. I slept under the big cedar."

"I know."

Tommy was surprised his mother had watched him long enough to know that. "You see the dogs?" he asked.

"You want to get in and talk about this some more?"

"Is there anything else to say?" Tommy couldn't believe he just said that. Going home was the answer. Going home would end his confusion. His mouth had ceased to obey his instinct.

"I guess that's up to you," she said.

"Dad say anything?"

"He's not up yet."

Tommy stared at the ground not knowing what to say next.

"You getting in or not?" his mother asked. "I ain't begging. I just thought I'd give you one more chance."

It would always be this way. One more chance to do what? He knew his mother probably loved him. He also knew she'd never say it, not without the same addendum the words always had. "I love you only because I have to, not because I want to." He couldn't go home. The hard part was over. May as well stick with it. She might have cared enough to watch him in the dark, but not enough to bring him a blanket, or to try to fix things then.

"No, I reckon not, Mom. I don't think you and me will ever learn to get along. Do you?"

"That's fine with me. You want a ride to town then?"

"No."

She said nothing as she rolled up her window and turned her car around. Feeling like a bad son, Tommy watched her drive away.

Guns to Keep

Dad's esophagus had held on as long as it could. Eleven Januaries after Mom shot off his leg, he lay reclined in his blue LA-Z-Boy puffed up like a toad from too much whiskey and lethargy. Old Charter bourbon and buttered cornbread pressed into his chest cavity.

They took him to a hospital in Oklahoma City. I lived three and a half hours away in Poteau where I managed a clothing store. I visited the man as often as I could, but retail stores don't run themselves. My girlfriend kept at me about the Christian way of doing things, which as I understood it meant forget everything I ever learned as a boy, let my business fall into ruin, and spend my days preaching doctrine I didn't believe in to a man who'd failed me every chance he had at it. She and I had to call it quits.

It got to where somebody had to stay with the old man round the clock to keep an eye on

the nurses. He'd developed bed sores, which sounded like an innocuous thing to me, but Sis said they looked bad. The three of us took turns staying. At night, I'd often wait until his meds kicked in, then slip out to see an old girlfriend who had moved to the City. I'd time it so I'd be gone when they changed his bandages. Most times when I crept back into his room he'd be asleep. Once in a while he'd be awake and scared. He'd ask me where I'd been. I'd say that I'd gone out for coffee or food or the bathroom. One night about two in the morning I returned to find him in full body restraints.

"I can't move," he said. "My arms won't work."

"Why are you tied up?" I asked.

"You weren't here to protect me. They want to poison me. They put something red in one of these tubes."

"Probably just drawing blood, Dad."

I thought I'd smoothed it over. The next morning when Mom showed up she dove into a rage about the restraints.

"What the fuck is this?"

Before I could answer, Dad pointed a finger at me and said, "He left last night. When I woke up I was like this."

"Why did you leave?" Mom asked.

"I went for coffee."

"He didn't go for coffee," Dad said. "He leaves like that all the time. He leaves me here, and I can't fight them people off. They tie me up and stab me."

"Hallucinations, Mom."

"Hallucinations or not, you ain't got any goddamn business leaving him here by himself," she said. "And he shouldn't be hallucinating anyhow. Did you let them put him on morphine again?"

"Not that I know of."

"Why don't you know for sure? You're useless."

Dad looked at me like, "See there? That's what you get." Sis made the nurses untie him. Mom was right though. I *was* useless. I helped the nurses turn or calm him, that kind of deal. But I didn't like bothering them for things that might have been nothing. I didn't want them thinking of me as a troublemaker like my mother or overbearing and loud like my sister. I wanted to be the nice one. The sane one.

Dad went home in March. The hospital set up a spare room in his house with a special bed for his sores. Nurses visited some. For the times in between, they trained Mom on how to change the bandages on Dad's rear and how to pour the liquid food into the one-foot tube hanging out of his belly. He could eat solid food by that time, but his lack of appetite kept him from eating enough.

Mom started crushing fiber pills into liquid Imodium and pouring it through the tube. One weekend when Sis and I were both there, the tube had swelled shut. Mom handed me a thick length of Weed Eater monofilament line.

"Clear that tube before he starves," she said.

"I'm not sticking that in there," I told her.

"Neither one of us are," Sis said. "What if we push too far and poke a hole in his stomach?"

"It don't take a genius," Mom said.

"Then you do it," I said.

"Get out. I'll find somebody else."

Sis felt sorry for her. She said Mom seemed desperate and scared and had only been trying to keep Dad's sores from getting any more infected than they already were. I kept closer to Poteau and my own life.

In August, Dad was back in the hospital. A team of white coats entered his ICU room, told the four of us he had Stage 4 lung cancer and said he may as well go on home and die.

"Everybody's got to die, Mama. I'd rather do it at the house," Dad said.

We transitioned him by moving him first to his hometown hospital, then when he felt up to it, we would take him home. Dad had all kinds of visitors. He hadn't seen so much of his family in years. Once when I visited, I walked into a room full of people. His sister and all three of his brothers were among them. They were making fun of Dad's brother Joe.

Joe's wife, who rarely spoke, said "He's still got the box from the first VCR we bought in 1979."

"That ain't nothing," Joe said. "I've still got the first box of rubbers I ever bought, because I sure ain't needed them."

Dad pointed at me. "I still got the box he came in."

Mom waited until late at night to come around, and then she'd leave way early in the morning before anyone showed up. She kept trying to force the hospital to release him. A few days before she got her way, she pulled me into the hallway.

"Once he's moved it's your job to keep everybody away," she said.

"He's got a right to see his family."

"We're his family and all they do is upset him."

"He's looked happier than I've seen him in years," I said.

"You don't even know him. And you ain't around when he tells me the truth. He tells me to make them leave so he can sleep. Your Uncle Ira is here when he wakes up and here when he falls asleep."

"I won't do it."

"I've never known a bigger coward than you. You ought to be ashamed of what you've become."

"I'm plenty ashamed of who I've become, but I won't run his family off."

"I don't want you anywhere near him. I don't want to see you around my house or this hospital ever again."

"Let's see how that works out for you," I said. I walked back in Dad's room and told him I had to get back to work.

Sis called that afternoon. She sounded like she was nine years old again, crying in hiccupping heaves.

"Why does she do this?" Sis asked.

"What happened?"

"Why is she like this?"

"I don't know. What happened?"

"What makes her so mean?"

"Sister, goddamn it, what happened?"

"When I went in Dad's room, Mom started packing her stuff up to go. When I asked why, she said, 'Well I guess I'm ignoring you like you're ignoring me.' Right there in front of Daddy. Why would she do that in front of him?"

"I don't know."

"I kissed Daddy and told him I was getting upset and had to go. Mom followed me out, poking me in the back, cussing me. Everybody was watching."

I told her to go to Uncle Ira's and wait for me there. It was the childlike "What makes her so mean?" that got to me. I knew it was wrong, and I knew it made me like her, but I wanted my hands around my mother's throat more than I've ever wanted anything. I wanted to know how strong my hands were, to feel the soft, thin skin of her neck go rigid under the pressure. The whole way there my hands twisted the steering wheel like a windpipe.

I took Sis back to the hospital so we could walk in together. So Mom could see us together. I didn't care anything about seeing Dad. I wanted Mom to know we wouldn't be run off like sick dogs. We spoke with Dad long enough to make our point, then left. Mom followed us into the hallway.

"We're getting a will and you two ain't getting nothing," she said.

Sis, her color returning, closed in on Mom and spoke in a low growl, "Listen here you fucking bitch, I don't want a goddamn thing from you or Daddy. What I want is a piece of your ass, and I'll have it if you follow me outside again. I'll have it right now."

Mom turned and held her hand behind her back, flipping us the bird like some kid who had just figured out how. A few days after that we learned Dad was scheduled to go home on the following Friday. We woke early and arrived at the hospital at seven a.m. that morning. Mom stood at Dad's bed. Sis grabbed her into a tight hug. Mom tried squirming out of it.

"I don't want to touch you," Mom said. "I don't want you touching me."

"No, Mom. I'm sorry. It was all my fault." Sis held her like iron. Dad moaned and clutched underneath his right arm. Sis ran into the hall and screamed for help.

A nurse showed up, a sweet girl I'd known all my life, and did what she could to soothe him but said he was maxed out on pain meds. She stroked his face and patted his chest. The pains hit him in waves. His body bent upward like it was caught in the grip of a great bird. He clutched at his right arm pit, contorted, and let out a yell that sounded like it came from some beast and not a man at all. I thought we were watching him die. If I'd been a religious man, I would have prayed for God to kill him.

His doctor arrived and told us he was having a panic attack. I didn't believe him. I'd had panic attacks that didn't look anything like that, but after the Atavan made its way into his system, he calmed down like the doctor said he would. Mom surprised us by letting us help gather his things and move him home.

Every time Dad cleared his throat, or moaned, or shifted, or snored, every little noise he made I thought would be his last. I hated seeing his hands twitch, the blood on his nose from the tubes wearing through skin, the arthritic knots on his elbows, seeing the life in those damaged parts, knowing it would soon drain and leave the rest as something we'd throw out. Sometimes when alone with him, if he slept heavy I'd rest my hand on his chest as it rose and fell, close my eyes and imagine him sleeping off a three-day drunk. I'd pretend it was nothing more.

His second week home, Mom and I had coffee at the breakfast table. Sis had gone to town to pick up our Aunt Rae, who didn't drive, so she could sit with her brother. Mom stewed at the thought of family coming out.

"I guess you know after your daddy's gone that you and me are through, right?"

I did know that. I planned on never seeing her again after the funeral. Personally, I hoped she would do us all a favor and grieve herself into a noose.

"No, I didn't Mom. But if that's what you want, then I guess it's what we should do."

“I just can’t see spending any more time with somebody who’s more of a hindrance than a help.”

“Yes, I always had the impression you didn’t like me very much.”

“No, I really don’t. You should know your daddy’s trying to think of a way to take me with him. I don't have anything to live for anyway after he's gone so it sounds good to me.”

It was all I could to do to keep from telling her if she wanted to go with him it didn’t take a genius to figure out how. A few days after that Sis and I sat talking in the living room outside Dad’s door. She told me how scared he’d been earlier in the day, how he didn't want to go, and how he’d kept asking where he’d go when he died. Honking a horn, he interrupted our talk. Mom had bought the horn so he could get her attention when she worked in the far parts of the house. It was one of those old kinds they used to mount on bicycles. Mom made him stop honking, then came into the living room.

“What do ya’ll think about me getting in bed with him?” she asked.

I was surprised she bothered asking.

“You should take every advantage of every moment, Mom,” Sis said. Mom nodded and went back to his room.

“Would you like for me to sleep with you tonight?” she asked him.

“Honk honk.”

We like to fell out. Every time she spoke to him he honked that horn. We peeked through the door. Mom grappled with him, but he held the horn out beside the bed so she couldn’t reach it. Just when she’d get close he’d switch hands.

“Honk.”

“Give me that horn.”

"Honk."

"This ain't why I bought it."

"Honk honk honk."

Dad had eaten well that day, better than I'd seen him eat since going into the hospital. And he'd been funny, his old self. I was sure it meant he'd die soon. That happens all the time. People who are dying have a good day, then the next thing you know, they're gone. Outsmarting him, Mom snatched the horn away, then eased into bed with him. Even as much as I despised her, I liked seeing them cuddled together. They were cute.

The next Sunday was September 7th. Dove season had opened. I went with Dad's three brothers and their sons for a morning hunt. I shot my yearly limit in just two hours, making it the best day of dove hunting I ever had. Nobody got more birds than me. I went to Dad's, excited to tell him. He never was much of a shot on dove. He stopped me cold.

"I gave my life to God today," he said. "What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know, Dad. You feel better?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Then I think it's good."

He handed me a red Gideon's Bible.

"Cousin Ernie gave me this. He says it's the New Testament. I don't know what that means. Is it anything like the Bible?"

"It's part of the Bible. The last part."

"I want to read it, but the words are too little. Should I read the Bible or the New Testament?"

I explained again about the Bible and told him I'd buy him one in large print. That afternoon I brought him an NIV version from Wal-Mart. I thought he could make better sense of the language than with the King James.

"That's a big book," he said. "I never paid attention to that. I ain't got a lot of time left. Where should I start?"

I thought about it, then said, "I think, if it were me, I'd turn to the Book of Matthew where it talks about Jesus."

"How come?"

I lied. "A man once told me that the Bible is a confusing book for normal men like you and me, but if you ignore everything but Jesus a man can't go wrong. That sounded about right to me."

He handed me the book. I turned to the second chapter of Matthew after the lineage of Christ. I pointed to it and showed him where to read.

"I still can't read it. Read a little for me." I read for him and spent a big part of the night telling him Bible stories.

"How do you know all this stuff?" he asked.

"I've read it."

"You've read that whole thing?"

"A bunch of times."

"I didn't think you believed in God."

I didn't. I read the book right after I'd seen *The Exorcist* for the first time. I was eleven. Fearing demon possession, I read it for protection and fell asleep every night for six months with it resting on my pillow, my head lying on pages that felt powerful. I read it again after I got

saved at church camp when I was thirteen. I hadn't felt a need to be saved, but my grandmother was visiting that day. I wanted to make her happy. I figured since I was saved I ought to read it again. Reading it that time un-saved me.

"Well, there's no way to know everything, Dad."

Mom poked her head in the door. "I'm going to town for your Ensure," she said.

After we heard the back door close and lock, Dad asked, "If you could pick one of my guns to keep, which would it be?"

I looked down at his right stump and tried to remember him with two legs. I thought I recalled him walking past wild, yellow tulips that used to grow along the hog pens when I was a kid. Every year the rich dirt shot the stems up too fast to support their fat blossoms. Like those drooping heads, I couldn't make him stand straight. The memory barely more than a blur, he slumped and fell back into his wheelchair.

"Which would you like me to have?"

"Hell Son, I'd like you to have them all, but I can't swing that from here. I worked it out with your mama for you to take one."

It crossed my mind to tell him I wanted the twelve-gauge of Mom's. The old Browning wasn't worth much. Someone had cut the stock off short to fit a kid, and then they'd cut the barrel off and installed an aftermarket choke, alterations that strip antique guns of their value. It fit Mom well but kicked the hell out of people bigger than her. I used to hunt with it before I outgrew it. I wanted it so she'd never point it again, so I could tear it to bits, so I could mail it to her in pieces.

"I guess it would have to be that old straight grip Marlin .30-30. I always liked that we couldn't find it in the books."

"Go get it then," he said. "Hurry, before she gets home from town. Put it in your car and lock it up. I already worked it out, but I don't want there to be any question of it."

I did like he said. I fell asleep on the couch just outside his door that night. Sis couldn't be there. Her youngest boy was sick. I woke at two-thirty a.m. to give Dad his OxyContin, then went back to the couch. I heard Mom go into his room just after that. I didn't think much of it. She'd kept weird hours ever since Dad had gone into the hospital nine months earlier. At five a.m., she went in his room again to give him his heart pills. When she found him not breathing, she ran into the living room, kneeled beside me and shook me.

"He ain't breathing. He ain't breathing. Go look. Make him breathe," she said. When I sat up she ran back to his room. I didn't hurry. I collected myself, took a long deep breath, then walked into his room to find his eyes jaundiced and his mouth open and still. He died in his sleep, I think. People always say that, but I think he really did. I think when Mom woke just after me, she forgot she'd asked me to give him his meds at two-thirty. That's what I want to believe. Months of taking care of him had exhausted her. I believe she thought she had overslept, then went in and accidently gave him a second dose of OxyContin.

"He's gone, Mama." I sat in the chair beside his bed and stared at his hands. Mom crawled in bed beside him, crying and cursing him. In the months and years leading up to that morning, I'd felt little more than hatred for her. Though I didn't want my father dead, I had looked forward to having no more obligations to come home. Then I'd never again have her finger in my face and imagine breaking it off, or stare at her cold neck and restrain my thumbs from pressing into her windpipe. Seeing her cry over my father, I believed something in her had loved, if not my sister and me, him at least. There must be something redeemable in that.

Three Drunk Indians

Caleb and Dean's conversation wound up where it always wound up when Caleb drank. Indians. On the second story balcony of Dean's university apartment, they lay kicked back in beanbags drinking Jim Beam and apple juice. Caleb had been told his whole life he was part Indian. He studied the history, dug through roll books, and picked Dean's brain for Indian secrets, but he'd failed what he considered the Oklahoma white rite of passage. Proof.

Caleb was just about to make a point about how much better government apple juice tasted than Welch's, and how much he sure wished he had some, when his eyes locked on a figure across the dark courtyard. An Indian stepped clear of the stairwell shadows and stumbled to the charcoal grill behind the volleyball pit. He bent down like he was sniffing it, then, in what appeared a moment of fright, checked his surroundings. Planted under the bright light of an

amber security lamp, the Indian stood swaying on top of the Sooner Schooner mosaic imbedded at the dead center of the courtyard.

"Oh man, look," Caleb said. "We're like that guy in Wild Kingdom."

The Indian studied the sidewalks like a confused deer entering an unknown cornfield.

"Who?" Dean asked.

"The guy, man. That old guy who went around looking at animals. 'And here comes an Indian now.' That guy."

"Who?" Dean asked.

"Marlin something." Caleb grabbed the bars in front of him, pulled himself upright and leaned out over the top rail. "Hey, Cousin," he said with his best Indian inflection.

Dean snatched Caleb's shirttail and yanked him back into his seat.

"It's fine, man," Caleb said. "He's an Indian."

"Stay put before he sees you."

"Dude, seriously, he's an *In*dian. He's like the perfect Indian. He's even wearing a Vietnam-style field jacket, man."

The Indian shielded his eyes from the streetlamp. Caleb spun around and dropped his knees into his beanbag.

"Dude, listen. Oh, man. Listen. You be Creek, and I'll be—"

"I *am* Creek."

"You look as white as me. This guy is a *real* Indian. I'll be—"

"Be Cherokee. See what he says."

Caleb had already been schooled on Indians' opinion of white people who claimed Indian blood. He'd once worked with a big Seminole who had asked him if he had any Indian. Caleb had told him how his mother maintained her great-grandmother was a full-blood Cherokee.

"All you white people," the Seminole had said. "Smack dab in the middle of Creek and Seminole country, and all of you Cherokee. How's that happen? Cherokee must get around, huh?"

"I got a square face," Caleb said. "I'll be Choctaw. That sounds too normal to be a lie."

"What Choctaws you know with square faces?"

"Plenty. Simpy Sample, for one. And that fella who lost his foot last year."

"Louis? Louis Harjo's Creek."

"I'll be Kickapoo! Think I'd pass for Apache?"

"I don't want a stranger in my apartment."

"No, listen. We're Indians, too. We're like family. Why would he want to rob us?"

"I never said—"

Caleb called down to the Indian. "Hey Cuz."

Dean rushed inside. Caleb followed him in, watching him hide random objects. "You're acting like a crazy person," Caleb said.

Dean pulled out the corner of the futon, then stood on the cushion. With one motion he raked off his Sooner memorabilia hanging on the wall and let it fall: Switzer-signed caps, conference title photos, even the 1950 National Championship ring he found on eBay and spent a whole summer's wages in purchasing.

"Watch your ring, dude. Is there a heater vent back there?"

Dean hopped down from the futon and shoved the end table lamp behind it with the rest and pushed it back as far as it would go.

"Why the lamp?" Caleb asked.

"Blunt instrument."

"That guy's meek as a mouse. I guarantee it." Caleb raised the window blinds. "From up here he looks like your uncle Jimmy."

"Exactly. Jimmy's a piece of shit drunk."

"Maybe if you'd killed all the people in the war like he had you'd be a drunk, too."

"Just another excuse," Dean said. "He's in jail right now for breaking into the courthouse Tuesday night."

"I love Jimmy. He's got balls."

"Balls? He spends so much time in county jail he thought it was his house. He turned over two vending machines and busted in the D.A.'s office before they got him to quit hollering about killing Geneva for locking him out again."

"Well this guy's not Jimmy, and we don't have a vending machine in sight."

Dean stuffed a stack of CDs in the refrigerator, then stopped to listen. "Shit, he found the right stairwell. He's knocking on the neighbor's door. Go get your damn Indian before they call the cops on him."

Caleb gave the Indian his beanbag. Dean leaned against the balcony's door jamb. He looked to Caleb as if he were preparing his escape.

"That's Dean. I'm Caleb."

The Indian sat and said nothing. Caleb positioned his bag so that his face would be just outside the glow of the courtyard lights. From the shadow he could stare at the Indian without appearing to. He lowered himself into the bag as if he were sneaking up on a deer, careful not to spook, lest the Indian flee. He wanted to know the Indian's tribe but knew it was too early to ask.

"What tribe are you?" Caleb asked. He mentally kicked himself.

The Indian lolled his head toward Caleb. "Got a light?"

"We don't smoke," Caleb said. He wished they did.

The Indian poked a white cigarette in his mouth and leaned his head backwards so that he looked at an upside-down Dean. His black hair hung over the bulge of the beanbag and swept the concrete floor of the balcony.

"Got a light, Cuz?"

Dean disappeared into the apartment without a word. Caleb was jealous that the Indian had recognized Dean's Indian-ness. He studied the stranger's face. He'd ushered him out to the balcony so fast that he hadn't taken notice of how young the man was. He couldn't have been any older than he and Dean. Probably another college student like them, and worse, his jacket wasn't Vietnam-era at all. It was one of those black, white and gray urban camouflage things.

"We got whiskey. If you want some," Caleb said.

Dean returned with a book of matches and a pint bottle of Jim Beam that Caleb hadn't seen. They'd been mixing drinks from a quart. The Indian took the whiskey and matches from Dean.

"*Mvdo*," the Indian said.

"*Enka*," Dean said, resuming his position against the door jamb.

Caleb understood the exchange, as he'd been studying the Mvskoke language with Dean. The Indian had said "Thanks," and Dean had said, "Okay." His excitement waned. Another Creek.

"Thought you was Creek," the Indian said.

"Some," Dean said. "You?"

"Kiowa."

The word Kiowa flowed over Caleb like a cold river. He'd never met a Kiowa. Now he had a drunk one lying in a beanbag beside him. His mind swam in Kiowa. He was just about to scream out "Apache" when Dean saved him.

Dean pointed with his lips at Caleb. "Kickapoo. Sore subject though."

Caleb took Dean's cue, let his eyes fall into a sad droop, and sighed, as if exhaling all his secrets into a heavy fog. He looked away from the Indian, sucked at the inside of his cheek, and said, "You going to drink that whiskey?"

The Indian smiled, twisted off the lid and handed Caleb the first drink. Caleb pulled heavily from the bottle and handed it back to the Indian, who took a short taste, then passed it to Dean. Dean turned the bottle up. Caleb could tell he was pretending to drink.

"How you know Creek?" Dean asked.

"Stepfather tells jokes in his sleep. I got tired of wondering what was so funny. Took some classes."

"So what was so funny?" Dean asked.

"Nothing. Got to piss," the Indian said.

Dean pointed in the direction of the bathroom and waited to hear the door close.

"There. You got to be Indian. Now how we getting rid of him?"

"He just got here," Caleb said.

"Hence my question."

"Come on, man, can't we be Indian a little while?"

"I *am* Indian you son-of-a-bitch."

"I know, man, you're doing great. That thing with the lips. How much pizza we got left?"

"It's in the microwave. And if you don't leave it there we won't have anything to eat when the Kiowa's gone."

Caleb was appalled that Dean had hidden food. It was awfully un-Indian.

"Where's that big bottle of whiskey then? This one won't last."

"Goddamn Iwannabe Tribe is what you should have said."

"Can't you enjoy this a little?"

"Did you see the tattoos on his hands? F.B.I. on the left. A.I.M. on the right. He's a damn militant."

"F.B.I.?"

"Fucking Big Indian."

"He *is* a pretty big fucking Indian. I'll give him that. I don't see how acknowledging that fact makes him dangerous. If I had a panther on my arm, does that mean I'm secretly keeping a giant cat in my basement?"

"What? No. That doesn't even—"

The sound of the bathroom door cut Dean short. The Indian returned to the balcony and plopped down on the beanbag. Dean shoved the whiskey into Caleb's hand, then sat on the bare concrete near the door.

Caleb held the bottle in his lap and prepared the speech he felt he'd been born to deliver. When his two companions assumed the proper Indian-quiet, he spoke with solemnity.

"It's the worst when it's from your own damn people." He paused for effect. "Like it's my fault my father wanted a white woman. And his father and his father, too." Caleb stood, moved by his own words. He rocked himself against the railing. A fire built in him. An Indian fire with animal skin drum beats thumping through it. He took a long drink from the bottle, then waved it like it had the answers he looked for. "Like it's my fault I'm moon white. Well the moon's got other colors, too." He bent his head down close to the Indian. "See this Indian hair?"

"I see it, brother," the Indian said.

Caleb placed the bottle on the Indian's chest. He held it there, believing all that he'd said. He stood straight and collected himself, proud to be an oppressed Kickapoo Indian.

"I know a few Kickapoo," the Indian said. "Met them at the Jacobson House. Some poet was reading."

"Ah. Where the Kiowa Five's art hang," Caleb said.

"Six. There was a woman. White people always fuck up the history," the Indian said.

Caleb knew there had been a woman. It said so right there at the Jacobson House. And while he knew white people had often skewed Indian history, it didn't seem to him to apply in this case.

"Just like at the Washita," Caleb said. "White people call it a battle—"

"Indians call it a massacre," the Indian said.

"I had a vision at the Washita," Caleb said without thinking. He really had had a vision. At least, he thought he had. At the site of the Washita Massacre outside Cheyenne, Oklahoma, a

turkey disappeared right in front of his face, and though a disappearing turkey had no relevance that he was aware of, talking about it felt wrong. He'd never even told Dean about it. "Went there after I read *Little Big Man*."

"*Laksv*," Dean said.

Caleb didn't know that word, but it had a disparaging tone. The Kiowa seemed to understand fine. Though Caleb was uncomfortable talking about the Washita, he saw that he had the Indian's attention, plus he wanted to shut Dean up.

"Up there that river's small," Caleb said. "Dirty, too. Thought it might be clear, but it's just another dirty Oklahoma river. Could have jumped across it if I had a running start. Dipped my hands in it anyway, just in case."

"In case it had power," the Indian said.

That was it exactly. He'd rubbed the river water on his face, then removed from his pocket the pamphlet that told about the people who'd lived and died there.

"Big Medicine. Thinks he's Dustin Hoffman," Dean said.

"Maybe he is," the Indian said.

Caleb stared Dean down. Dean lowered his head.

"Sat there and looked where they say Black Kettle's tipi had been," Caleb said. "Imagined his American flag flying above his dead wife."

"Fucking Custer," the Indian said.

"I sat there thinking something would come to me. That I'd feel something. See something. But all the skinny young army boys shooting Cheyenne ponies and tipis burning up and all that red snow I saw was just me thinking. Before making the drive up, I felt I'd been sent there. Like I had to go. But I sat there a long time and nothing happened. Halfway across the

river bottom, I turned back to give one last look. That's when a turkey flew past me. It landed in some mowed down sunflower stubble then disappeared. I looked all over. I didn't see nothing. Didn't hear nothing. No tracks. Nothing. I thought if that was a vision it was a damn bad one because I didn't understand a bit of it. I still don't."

"You will," the Indian said. "Might be twenty years, but you will."

Caleb felt awful about saying it was a bad vision. He felt awful about mentioning it all. It seemed somehow disrespectful, although the famous Sioux, Black Elk, had spoken of his visions to such an extent that books were still being written about him. But he was a shaman. He was supposed to know what was right and what was not. Caleb wished he'd never brought it up. He thought the Kiowa had no basis for his optimism. He felt low.

Caleb wished he were anywhere but sitting drunk in a beanbag in Norman, Oklahoma. Waking in his car in Medicine Park, maybe, wiping steam off the rearview, rolling down the windows and driving to Parallel Forest where dead pines stand in dark straight rows, starved by their own shade. He'd rather be there, in a place where no matter where you stand, the dead radiate out at six feet intervals like upright graves. He'd sit on cold red granite and watch the sun burn fog off Mount Scott, elk bugling through the timber. The talk of his vision made Caleb wish for rain. He sank deep in his seat imagining a great rainstorm flooding a wide, clear Washita river, vast prairies giving way to the weight.

"Listen, me and Dean here got work in the morning," Caleb lied.

"Yeah, Cuz. It's bright and early for us," Dean said.

"It's early now," the Indian said. He looked back and forth at Caleb and Dean waiting for a response. "Your couch comfortable?"

"Caleb bitches it hurts his back," Dean said. "Where you sleeping, tonight? Need us to call somebody for you?"

Caleb was ashamed. He felt his Kickapoo blood leaking out. He gave Dean a look that meant it was okay with him if the Indian stayed. He didn't mind sleeping on the floor to make room. Dean took the bottle from the Indian and pretended again to drink.

"Needed one more before calling it a night," he said.

The Indian grabbed the railing and pulled himself to his feet. "Got any food to send with your cousin?"

He shouldn't have had to ask, Caleb thought.

"Yeah blood, we got something," Dean said. "Never let a cousin leave without feeding him, ennit?"

Caleb followed Dean and the Indian into the kitchen. He motioned to the microwave. Dean ignored him and opened a cabinet door. He dug around a minute, then pulled out a half-empty package of cookies.

"You like Nutter Butters?" Dean asked.

"Who don't?"

Caleb grabbed two big handfuls of cookies and stuffed them in the Indian's baggy pant pockets before he had a chance to do it himself.

"That enough?" Dean asked.

"Whatever you can spare," the Indian said.

Caleb stuffed the Indian's pockets until nothing would fit. "Fill your hands, too," he said.

"*Mvdo,*" the Indian said.

Dean opened the door for the Indian, who turned before leaving and pointed at Caleb. “You’re a good Indian.”

Dean locked the door behind him and pulled the pizza from the microwave. “Thought he’d never leave.”

Caleb lay down on the couch feeling more white than he ever had. He thought about the disappearing Washita turkey, rivers he never saw flood, and just wished it would rain.

Prelude to Morning

A One-Act Play

Characters:	TWO is a 32 year old, white, country boy with a taste for excess. He wears a heavy, ragged, stained cowboy hat and has two six-shooters hanging in their holsters around his hips. JOE is 33, also white and practical to a fault. He's taller and bigger than Two. GEORGE is a Creek/Seminole Indian in his 60s. He wears a white T-shirt tucked into jeans.
Setting:	A clearing in the woods along the South Canadian River somewhere near Calvin, Oklahoma. We have a small canvas tent, a campfire, a guitar, and an old rifle. A large rock borders the stage.
Time:	Late Fall. Perpetually night. Now.

Scene 1

AT RISE: TWO sits beside the fire drinking from a tin cup.

TWO

Joe. Joe.

(JOE enters with a load of sticks and drops them beside the fire.)

JOE

What?

(JOE exits.)

TWO

What time is it? Wait, what time is it? Is it six yet? Bastard.

JOE (from O.S.)

Shut up.

(TWO pulls a flask and refills his cup. He listens, then shoots blindly into the woods. JOE enters.)

JOE

What are you shooting at?

TWO

(pause, nonchalant, holsters his pistol.)

Well I told you to get over here. What time is it?

JOE

It's late. Did you mean to shoot?

TWO

Yeah.

JOE

You could have killed me.

TWO

Sit down. Let's drink.

JOE

Where's your dog?

TWO

She was just here a minute ago. I hate being drunk. (calls dog) Jewel. Jewelly Girl.

JOE

It's too stormy to have camped this close to the river. Think this will burn all night?

TWO

You set the whole woods down here. I think it'll burn from now on.

JOE

I'm going to go get a few more big pieces.

TWO

Damn it, drink with me.

JOE

It could be a long night.

TWO

They're all long.

(JOE exits. The fire crackles, crickets chirp. A rhythm begins. Just as the sound reaches an apex, TWO stands and fires his pistols into the woods. JOE charges back.)

JOE

Damn you. You're going to kill somebody.

TWO

(puts his pistols back.)

Ain't nobody out there but you.

JOE

Well, by all means, reload then.

(TWO reloads.)

JOE (CONT'D)

Put those away.

TWO

No, I don't think I will. There might be a bear.

JOE

There's not a bear two hundred miles from here that's not in a zoo.

TWO

Don't care. I thought we were getting a full moon.

JOE

It's full.

TWO

Where? Behind those clouds the weatherman said wouldn't be there?

JOE

Yes. Though, I've never seen it so dark.

TWO

I have. What was that?

JOE

You're going to waste every bullet you have.

TWO

No, I won't. I brought plenty just in case.

JOE

In case what?

TWO

Bears.

JOE

You'll have plenty then. It's getting colder.

TWO

It’s always cold to me.

JOE

Whisky ought to help.

TWO

It’s always too cold. I hope it’s warmer tomorrow. If it’s warmer I’ll make the breakfast. I don’t imagine I’ll be in the mood otherwise. Oklahoma’s a dismal state. Snow in May and burn up in January. We never get perfect weather around here. I ought to be able to walk around naked and be comfortable, in all my grace and beauty.

JOE

I hope it never gets to be perfect then.

TWO

Why don’t you go ahead and wish for rain while you’re at it?

JOE

Be fine with me.

TWO

(pulls a pistol, takes aim at the sky.)

You’re strange. You’ve always been strange. I wish morning would hurry. What time is it? Seems like we’ve been sitting here forever.

JOE

Seems like we just got here to me.

TWO

See? Strange. I wish morning would hurry. It’s too dark out here. Even with the stars. Can’t see the stars from my house. Too many lights. Funny ain’t it? Can’t see the lights in the sky for the lights on the ground.

JOE

You can see them out here, though.

TWO

Yeah, but I feel like I’m being watched.

JOE

You are. By me, you drunk son-of-a-bitch. If you hadn't started boozing so early we'd have made it already.

TWO

Made it where?

JOE

To the mouth of the Little River. The same place we've been humping these rucksacks for two damn days. If I'd been by myself I'd have made it yesterday.

TWO

Well go on by yourself then.

JOE

I'd come back to find you headfirst in quicksand drunk as you are.

TWO

If I fell in quicksand you wouldn't find me at all. Maybe you ought to go on. I'll find that quicksand right now and save you the trouble of looking for me.

JOE

I just think if a man starts out for a place he ought go on and get there. You ain't got the drive god gave a turkey.

TWO

Like you know the mind of a turkey. Like you know anything at all. You said all we had to do was jump on those abandoned railroad tracks and follow them until we got there.

JOE

How was I supposed to know they'd be so grown up?

TWO

Because you know everything. Ain't that right?

JOE

This ain't getting us anywhere. I thought for sure those tracks would lead us straight on. Rain's got the river up so high I doubt we're going to be able to follow it either the way the timber's all flooded.

TWO

Let’s go home.

JOE

You’ve got one hell of a lot of quit in you.

TWO

I ain’t in shape. You keep pushing like you have been and this is going to be The South Canadian River Death March.

JOE

No, now if we just stay steady and—

TWO

Have a drink and shut up about the Little River. This is the South Canadian we’re on and we’re going to be on it again tomorrow.

JOE

Look at those moths. They keep flying into the fire even though it’s killing them.

TWO

Because they have wings.

JOE

I know that.

TWO

They got no brains, Joe. They fly into the fire because they have wings. It’s like how we gaze at stars except they can fly to whatever they want. I’d take off right now if I could, and I’d burn up just like that one did right there.

JOE

I wouldn’t.

TWO

Yes you would.

JOE

It’s like you said, moths got no brains. They don’t know any better.

TWO

Lucky moths. No worries for them.

JOE

Not too lucky.

TWO

If we'd been born with wings and a brain, we'd all be ruined. We'd either kill ourselves out of curiosity, or we'd have to castrate ourselves from the burden. End of humanity or be chained to the land, safe and flightless. The lucky moths I say.

JOE

Moths fly in the fire all the time and they haven't been wiped out.

TWO

I just wasted a perfectly good metaphor on you, and now I'm confused.

JOE

It was a flawed metaphor.

TWO

They're all flawed.

JOE

You're just drunk and mad.

TWO

(yanks both pistols.)

Yup. What's that racket?

JOE

I don't hear anything.

TWO

Listen then. It might be Jewel. We need to go see.

JOE

Probably the river. You go.

TWO

You've been gathering kindling for the last hour. Now you're scared to go in the woods?

JOE

Number one, we're in the woods. And number two, screw you. You shot at me the last time I was out there. Run around chasing shadows if you want. I'm going to bed.

(TWO grabs JOE'S shirt and tries to lift him.)

TWO

No by-god you ain't. You're by-god coming with me, and I don't give a good by-god how tired you are.

(They scuffle. TWO enjoys this and dashes O.S. JOE exits behind him. Groans that sound more like growls are followed by a final thud, like a body hitting the ground. JOE enters, sits by the fire. TWO enters limping and bleeding. His shirt is torn away on one side, and he's missing one boot. He checks his wounds, sourly.)

TWO (CONT'D)

That got to knuckles and skulls pretty quick.

JOE

No wonder nobody likes you.

TWO

Where'd that bear come from?

JOE

Nobody.

TWO

Out of nowhere. Reckon he was watching us the whole time? I'm sleeping with my pistols. You hurt? Damn. I hope I get a good scar out of this.

JOE

I'd even bet your dog hates you.

TWO

Now that's not true. My dog loves me. Here girl. Here girl. Come on Jewelly Girl.

JOE

She won’t come. Been gone too long. She ran off.

TWO

She didn’t run off. She’s just hunting.

JOE

Maybe she’s chasing bears.

TWO

Oh god. That damn bear might have got her.

JOE

You’re drunker than I thought.

TWO

You were out there you twit. Look at me. You blind? We’re going to have to camp in the trees for sure now.

JOE

You’re tore all to hell because you don’t have sense enough to know when to leave me alone. And bears climb trees.

TWO

I know. I didn’t want to admit the truth.

JOE

No shame in it.

TWO

I didn’t think anyone would believe me.

JOE

There’s no one here but you and me and we were both there.

TWO

But you’re a skeptic.

JOE

What does being a skeptic have to do with it?

TWO

I'm surprised you admit it. You never believed in black panthers. I'm lucky to be alive. How did you get away so fast? And why did she run away right there at the end?

JOE

Panther?

TWO

You weren't drunk. I guess that's how you got away. She was chewing holy crap out of me, and you...you sneaked away. Coward. I didn't mean to shoot at you, you know.

JOE

It was a she-panther was it?

TWO

I believe so. That's not the first black panther I've seen.

JOE

Yes.

TWO

I remember the first time I saw one.

JOE

I know the story.

TWO

She was laid out as pretty as you please on the pond dam down in Wilson's draw behind Dad's house.

JOE

I know where Wilson's draw is. We've been neighbors near thirty years.

TWO

Her tail was as long as her body.

JOE

I know the story.

TWO

Black as night.

JOE

I know.

TWO

Just lying there.

JOE

I know!

TWO

All stretched out.

JOE

Goddammit.

TWO

If you know so much about it then why are you arguing with me? You act like all those people who don't believe in black panthers. (mocking) There's no such thing. I'm a game warden, and I know what I'm talking about. There's no such thing. There's no such thing.

JOE

I mean I know the story.

TWO

Did you or did you not see the cat?

JOE

I did not.

TWO

Skeptic. Just like I said.

JOE

I am not a skeptic. And even if there were a black panther out there somewhere, I was too busy tossing you around to know it.

TWO

Aha, so you admit there could have been one.

JOE

No.

TWO

God it’s dark. What time is it?

JOE

I don’t know.

TWO

Look at your watch.

JOE

You have a watch. Look at your own.

TWO

Are you trying to start something?

JOE

Stop talking to me.

TWO

Because if you are.

JOE

Shut up.

TWO

Why are you always so mean to me? I didn’t do anything. I was just asking.

JOE

My watch broke.

TWO

Did I do it or that bear?

JOE

Jesus H. Christ. I’m going to bed.

(JOE retires to the tent. TWO seems lost. He limps around, dragging his sock foot through the leaf litter, creating as much noise as he can appear to accidentally make. He picks up random objects and throws them into the woods. With each unsuccessful attempt to draw JOE out of the tent TWO'S *accidents* get louder. He retrieves JOE'S guitar and strums the strings.)

TWO

It's good your mama made you learn how to play guitar.

(He strums harder.)

Don't know how lucky you are.

(Harder.)

Can't believe you didn't want to bring it.

(TWO brutally pounds the strings.)

JOE

Two. You see I'm trying to sleep.

TWO

Come sit with me. I'll warm you some whisky. Is it long until morning? Seems like we've been here forever. Come play a song. Play that one you always play. The sad one. I like the sad one.

JOE

(acquiescent)

Moonlight Sonata or the prelude of Chopin's?

TWO

Which is the sad one?

JOE

Both are sad.

TWO

There's no moon. Do the prelude.

(JOE crawls out of the tent and sits by the fire. TWO hands him the guitar. JOE plays. TWO lies back, relaxes, aims a

pistol at the sky, and continues to drink. When the tune ends, TWO holsters his gun and wipes a tear.)

TWO (CONT'D)
I wish I had wings. I'd fly to morning. (a beat) I don't think the sun will ever rise.

JOE
It'll rise.

TWO
No.

JOE
Two, it will rise. Of course it'll rise.

TWO
No. I've been thinking about it. And I think it will definitely not rise.

JOE
How much whisky do you have left?

TWO
Bunch.

JOE
Why'd you bring so much?

TWO
So I wouldn't run out, dummy.

JOE
The sun will rise.

TWO
How do you know?

JOE
Because it rises every damn day.

TWO
That doesn't mean anything.

JOE

It means everything you drunk. The sun will rise like it has risen every day of your life. Lord you get stupid when you drink.

TWO

I know. I hope I don't wet the bed tonight.

JOE

There is no bed. Playing with fire and wetting the bed is just superstition.

TWO

Good, because even if there's not a bed, I don't want to be pissing myself.

(The western sky begins to glow.)

JOE

Look. There it comes. I told you.

(TWO dances and whistles for his dog.)

TWO

We waited it out? Be damned. Here Jewelly Girl. Come Girl. Time to go hunting.

JOE

Wait. That's west. The sun doesn't rise in the west.

TWO

West? That's west?

JOE

It is.

TWO

Then it's setting? Is that what you're telling me? We missed it?

JOE

I don't see how, but there it is.

(The light that rose diminishes.)

TWO

How? How did this happen? How did we miss a whole day of sunshine?

JOE

I don't know.

TWO

You don't know?

JOE

No.

TWO

Damn it all to hell. I can't wait anymore. I can't do it.

JOE

Calm down. Let me think. I'll get my compass. Two, it's west. I don't know how, but it is.

TWO

What now? Wait? No. Let's try and make it out of here in the dark. Okay? Let's do that. Forget hunting. Forget our vacation. I don't need a vacation anyway. Let's just go. Let's find Jewel and then let's go.

JOE

If the moon would pop out we might make it. But those bluffs. All that quicksand. And you're drunk as hell.

TWO

We can make it. I hate this river. Why did we come here? You know I hate this river.

JOE

I know.

TWO

I just hate it. The sand is always swirling out from under you. Makes you feel like you're walking through a tub of snakes. You have to run through it to keep from sinking.

JOE

You shouldn't let it bother you so much.

TWO

You shouldn't run your mouth so much. You trying to start something?

JOE

Most of that loose sand goes down only so far.

TWO

Most.

JOE

We should try and get some sleep.

TWO

How can you sleep? We're stuck out here in the dark groping around like a couple of idiots. It's cold enough to freeze the fire. There's a she-panther on the loose that you don't seem to mind if it kills me. And the days are slipping by us like we're blind. Stop being so calm. We missed the sun. You think that happens every day?

JOE

If we slept through the night, it wouldn't seem so long.

TWO

Well I'm not sleeping. We'd go to sleep and miss it all over again. I don't feel well.

JOE

Right now or in general?

TWO

Yeah.

JOE

Yes to which?

TWO

I'm hungry. God my stomach hurts.

(JOE opens a soup can and places it on a rock near the fire.)

JOE

Let's eat a bite.

TWO

Want some of this whisky?

JOE

I've had enough. We need to do something to kill time.

TWO

Like what, drink? You know what? I don't care if the sun comes up at all. Hell with it.

JOE

You're taking it all too personally.

TWO

So.

(The woods darken, quiet lightning rolls overhead as everything is silenced. Thunder cracks.)

TWO (CONT'D)

I hate this place. Why do I let you talk me into this every time? Every time. Every damn time. I hope the sun never comes up so you can feel what I feel. All that dark mess that I feel. Just darkness all the time.

JOE

You're going to have to calm down. Let's eat this soup before we get soaked.

TWO

Why are you taller and stronger? Look at you. Like a damn mountain. I'm afraid. Why ain't you afraid? (a beat) This ain't soup.

JOE

I thought it was.

TWO

Chili. It didn't get warm, but chili is a good sign.

(The storm builds. They finish their last bites then prepare the camp, moving gear, guitar, and themselves inside the

tent. Their campfire is extinguished. Lightning increases in volume and violence as TWO peers out of the tent, emerges, and trips on the untied strings of his remaining boot. He sits, struggles to remove it, and leaves it on the ground. He exits crying out for his dog. Pitch black.)

Scene 2

AT RISE: Still night. The storm is over. Their camp is in shambles. JOE tries to light the fire, a difficult task. TWO, who is missing.

JOE

Two. Two.

(JOE re-secures the tent, hauls off limbs, checks his backpack, and examines his rifle.)

Damn it. Two?

(TWO enters wearing a different shirt.)

TWO

(emotionless)

How long we known each other?

JOE

All our lives.

TWO

How long is that? How long is that?

JOE

You injured?

TWO

You don't know the answer?

JOE

Yes I know the answer. You forget how old you are?

TWO

I want to hear you say it.

JOE

Okay, you're thirty-two, I'm thirty-three, so we've known each other for thirty-two years.

TWO

Thirty-two years. How long have we been drinking scotch?

JOE

Ever since you decided you were a Scot and refused good American bourbon.

TWO

How long ago was that?

JOE

I don’t know. Ten years I guess.

TWO

How long have we been friends?

JOE

Thirty-two frigging years. Where did you go last night?

TWO

Last night? When was last night?

JOE

Where’d you get that shirt?

TWO

Has last night occurred? Is it last night now?

JOE

Stop that.

TWO

Jewel ran off.

JOE

I told you.

TWO

Yeah, but you were right. About her running off.

JOE

Talk right.

TWO

I didn’t do anything.

JOE

You're not making sense.

TWO

And a sun going down without ever having come up does?

JOE

Still on that?

TWO

I've been thinking.

JOE

Where'd you go last night?

TWO

Last night? When was last night?

JOE

Stop. Stop. Stop it.

TWO

Calm down.

JOE

Don't talk to me. Don't you talk to me.

(JOE exits.)

TWO

Watch out for the bear.

JOE (O.S.)

Panther.

TWO

You see her?

JOE (O.S.)

No. No. No.

TWO

Then why did you say it?

(JOE enters, meeting TWO face to face. He shoves the whisky flask into TWO's hands.)

JOE

Leave me alone. I liked you better drunk.

(JOE exits.)

TWO

I wondered where that was. Watch out for the panther.

JOE (O.S.)

Jesus H. Christ.

(TWO returns to the fire, retrieves a big whisky bottle, and refills his flask. He walks around with the guitar, placing his fingers on the strings. The sounds are low and broken but not unpleasant. He puts the guitar away and runs by the fire doing airplane fly-bys.)

TWO

Vroom vroom. I'm a moth. I'm going to burn up now. Whoa no I'm not. I have a brain. Whoa no I don't. Vroom vroom.

(TWO collapses by the fire.)

Vroom? Buzz? What does a moth sound like? I wish I hadn't laid down here. I got to pee.

(TWO gets up, pisses, and returns to the fire.)

I guess Joe's abandoned me. There's no gravity all of a sudden. It feels like everything's been dipped in wax.

(TWO crumples to the ground, then shoots into the air. JOE enters.)

JOE

There better be something dead.

TWO

Something *is* dead. Somewhere.

JOE

Did you kill something?

TWO

Maybe. Depends on where the bullets fell.

JOE

So you were just shooting to be shooting.

TWO

I knew you weren't far. I was calling you back.

JOE

Who said I wanted called back?

TWO

Who said I cared what you wanted? I got my own mind. I can do my own thinking. If you came back just to fight, go on back out there and sulk. I'm just kidding. Stay and drink with me. Let's talk. I wanted to talk before but you took off. What do you want to do?

JOE

Sleep.

TWO

How long have you been gone? Seems like forever.

JOE

Ten minutes.

TWO

Nuh uh.

JOE

If you know then why'd you ask?

TWO

How long?

JOE

Ten minutes.

TWO

Nuh uh. Well? How long? It's no ten minutes, I can tell you that. I learned to play guitar while you were gone. That's how I know. No one can learn guitar in ten minutes. It must have been a couple of days.

JOE

No one can learn guitar in a couple of days either.

TWO

I did.

JOE

I was gone ten minutes!

TWO

Fine. I learned to play in ten minutes then.

JOE

Right.

TWO

I'll show you.

(TWO stumbles to the guitar, kicks it over, then drags it to the fire where he proceeds to bang more than strum.)

I don't know what happened. I sounded good earlier.

JOE

You're sober enough to hear it now.

TWO

I'm telling you I was good. Forget it. That's not even what I wanted to talk to you about. I want you to know that if I die out here, I want to be buried out here.

JOE

It'd be a lot of trouble since we don't have a shovel.

TWO

Then it'd be a lot of trouble.

JOE
You don’t mind putting folks out.

TWO
Not my best friend.

JOE
You don’t even like it here. You hate it.

TWO
Irrelevant.

JOE
It’d be relevant to me.

TWO
You ain’t me.

JOE
I bury you on the South Canadian River, and I’ll wind up the rest of my days in jail.

TWO
Always got to think of yourself.

JOE
Fine, I’ll bury you out here.

TWO
What would you put on my headstone?

JOE
Headstone.

TWO
Yeah.

JOE
Where would I get a headstone?

TWO

A rock or big piece of bark or something would do, like in the old days. Like in Lonesome Dove when Call took Gus back to Texas. What would you put on it?

JOE

You mean carve something on it?

TWO

Of course.

JOE

Nothing I imagine.

TWO

That's the worst thing you've ever said to me. That's the worst thing you could have said.

JOE

I can think of worse things.

TWO

What's worse than nothing?

JOE

"Here lies Two. He had a small penis."

TWO

Good point. Why didn't we bring a shovel? Seems like something we'd need.

JOE

We did. You lost it in the river.

TWO

I did?

JOE

Next time we go on one of these trips, you pick where we're going. Maybe if you pick, you won't think you have to get drunk beforehand. I should have never let you start on the bottle so early.

TWO

It ain’t up to you when I start.

JOE

It was stupid crossing the river like you were, are. You stumbled.

TWO

I got caught on a log jam.

JOE

That’s where you lost the shovel.

TWO

Don’t remember.

JOE

Well, we brought a shovel.

TWO

Oh, hey, here’s something we can do to kill time. Tell me again about when you saw your first decapitated person. You were eighteen. Tell that story. Tell it.

JOE

Pointless.

TWO

Death’s all around us. Trees are dying. Moths are dying. Can’t escape it. Tell the story.

JOE

Doesn’t mean I want to talk about it.

TWO

I bet there’s more headless people running around than you’d think. Well, not running around. Lying around.

JOE

Stop that ignorant talk.

TWO

I never saw any headless people. I don’t think I’d much enjoy it.

JOE

Don’t mind hearing about it though, do you?

TWO

Hearing about it ain’t the same as seeing it.

JOE

You’d look if you had the chance. Everybody looks. People might cover their kids’ eyes with their hands, but they look even if they pretend they don’t.

TWO

It was your first night with the Air Force fire department in Guam. You’d barely introduced yourself when you got the call. Your first call even. A big night of firsts. You knew the lady. You bought groceries in town earlier that day. She was the cashier. Go on now. Great Northern beans, ham hock, cornmeal, taters. You were going to show the little Filipino stripper with the Cindy Crawford mole how Okies eat.

JOE

Chamorro.

TWO

The coffee liqueur?

JOE

She was Chamorro, from Guam, not Filipino. I didn’t meet the Filipino you’re talking about for another two years.

TWO

She flirted with you. Wanted to know what time supper was.

JOE

She didn’t flirt. She joked.

TWO

She had a half-moon scar on her right cheekbone.

JOE

Left.

TWO

She caught you staring at it.

JOE

I embarrassed her.

TWO

You told her she had pretty eyes.

JOE

I *wanted* to tell her she had pretty eyes. I joked supper would be at eight if I didn't burn the beans. Told her "good day" and found her on the highway that night. Red '92 Celica wadded up like a crushed Coors can. Couldn't get two sensible words out of the diesel tank driver that hit her.

TWO

Tank driver? You said she hit a concrete highway divider.

JOE

The semi pushed her into it.

TWO

You never said anything about any truck.

JOE

You'd think that once you've seen somebody without her head that nothing could surprise you. That's not so. You never get used to seeing living things torn up. I've seen bodies without heads, heads without ears, and parts I couldn't identify at all. Just pieces of meat. That cashier wasn't much more than that. Remember that colt we had to pull out of your bay mare when we were kids, how it came out in pieces? That truck driver ran down the highway screaming, fell on all fours crying and puking. Screaming's all I heard. Even over the saws we were using. Captain said for me to shut him up. Walking toward him I kept yelling for him to stand up, gather himself. He wouldn't. Between him, the saws, and the girl in the car, I lost my patience. I was going to jerk him up and kick the

JOE (CONT'D)

shit out of him if he didn't shut up. I was going to beat him unconscious if I had to. I yanked him up with one hand and was about to bust his teeth out. Out of the corner of my eye I saw what he was crying about. I knew what it was, but I just stared at that man like I was waiting for him to tell me it wasn't what it looked like. He was looking at me the

same way. I told him what he wanted to hear, because I wanted to hear it too. I said, "That ain't no goddamn car seat." I shook him hard, pointed my finger in his face and said, "And that ain't no goddamn baby inside it." I thought I was a man. Big time Air Force fire fighter. Kicking ass. Dating a stripper. Real cool. They tell me I almost choked that driver to death, that I screamed louder than him. Said I kept hollering how the cashier deserved what she got for buckling the kid into the seat but not the seat into the car.

TWO

Yeah that's worse than the colt. You never told that part. Whose fault was the crash? That driver's?

JOE

Always got to be somebody's fault. It don't make any difference whose fault it was.

TWO

I don't want to stay by this river, Joe. You can't do shit about the river. It'll rise or fall whether we're here or there or wherever. And it'll keep flowing that way, and on and on until there ain't nothing left of it.

JOE

You're not going to die out here. You know that.

TWO

Doesn't matter. Here. There. Wherever. I'm tired of waiting. The sun will either come up or it won't, but I'm not going to sit here and wait in the dark.

JOE

Can't do it.

TWO

Can.

JOE

It's dark. Muddy. There's another storm coming.

TWO

There will never be a time when a storm won't be coming. We can't wait them all out.

JOE

We can wait this one out. You're going to want to locate your dog anyway.

TWO

I think Jewel might be dead. I saw her for a minute when I went out looking for her. She didn't look good.

JOE

You found her?

TWO

No. I saw her. That's it. I saw her and held her for a minute, and then she was gone.

JOE

Did she run away from you?

TWO

I don't know.

JOE

Why do you always have to answer my questions like that?

TWO

Like what?

JOE

You saw her. You saw Jewel. You held Jewel. And now she's gone, and when I ask if she ran away you don't know.

TWO

It ain't like I meant to be asleep when she left.

JOE

Asleep? Stop dancing. And what happened to 'I'm not sleeping. We'd go to sleep and...'

TWO

When I went looking for her, it was storming.

JOE

Yes. It stormed last night. I know it was storming.

TWO

Last night?

JOE

Stop.

TWO

Whenever it was, I found a shack. Practically ran into it. Raining so heavy I could hardly tell what it was. I was lost. Sobering up. Pretty scared. Finding that shack made me hopeful. When I pushed open the door I ran into a tree.

JOE

I don't believe that for a minute.

TWO

(shows the bump on his head.)

It grew up from the floor and right through the roof. Knocked me clean out, but I fell inside instead of outside. If I had fallen out in that weather, I imagine I would have drowned. When I woke up Jewel was licking my face.

JOE

So you did find her.

TWO

I was groggy and didn't know if it was really her. When I finally came to and got my bearings, I saw it was Jewel. I was catching glimpses of her in the lightning. She was cut up. Beat up. Pitiful. One of her eyes was hanging out.

JOE

You didn't just leave her.

TWO

I didn't intend to leave her. Or maybe she didn't intend to leave me. Either way, I'm here and she's not. That place, the cabin, even though a tree grew through the roof there really wasn't much rain getting in. It was kind of comfortable. In the lightning flashes I felt my way around trying to find a soft spot to lie down. My head ached from my run-in with the

TWO (CONT'D)

tree. There was a bed a couple of steps away with blankets piled up on it, so I picked Jewel up to lay her on it when I saw the blankets move. It was a—

JOE

Panther.

TWO

God no it wasn't a panther. What would a panther be doing in bed? It was a man. He sat up, I spun around with Jewel and ran right back into the tree.

JOE

Knocked out again.

TWO

Knocked out again.

JOE

Jewel hurt?

TWO

I don't know. Probably. When I woke she was gone. The man too. I wandered around outside in the rain for a while looking for Jewel, but I was scared of the dark.

JOE

Because of the man?

TWO

Yeah, that, and bears. I didn't have my pistols. Don't know why I left without them. Anyway, I went back in the shack.

JOE

Hit the tree again?

TWO

Ha, ha. I sat on the floor with my back wedged against the door and my feet against the tree until the rain stopped.

JOE

Good thinking. Unless someone else was inside.

TWO

Damn. I'm glad I didn't think of that.

JOE

You never have been one to think things out.

TWO

After the rain stopped, the moon popped out real bright. I could see around inside pretty well. It wasn't such a bad place. Except I noticed this cracked mirror hanging above the kitchen sink. I looked in it hard. Too hard. I looked so hard that I thought it was me in there. I switched places for a moment and my own eyes, these eyes, stared back at me. They penetrated me. I felt violated, like I had seen something I shouldn't have. Like my head, my skull was coming apart, only not really the head, but the pieces. Like my cells, my atoms, my parts split. It felt like they were dying off and leaving me with a fake. I was afraid I'd be caught in the mirror. Trapped, forever staring out at nothing.

JOE

You're making this up.

TWO

I don't know. The man in the bed should have made me leave.

JOE

Why?

TWO

Not my cabin.

JOE

Doesn't mean it was his.

TWO

You're right. I don't think things through. When I saw him in that bed I should have pointed and yelled, "Get out of my bed trespasser!"

(Thunder breaks up his mood.)

This is the last time I let you drag me down here.

JOE

At least you're not hysterical.

TWO

No, but I am getting kind of sick again.

JOE

You're just hungry.

(TWO vomits.)

TWO
I didn’t know there were noodles in that chili.

JOE
There wasn’t.

TWO
Come look at this.

JOE
(looks)
That can’t be good.

(The storm moves in stronger this time. They have a difficult time securing the camp. Their efforts are useless. They give up and head for their tent.)

Scene 3

AT RISE: Still night. The storm is over. Their camp is in surprisingly good shape. TWO and JOE emerge from the tent.

JOE

I feel good.

TWO

Why? It's still dark.

JOE

I slept.

TWO

I didn't. And the tent leaked.

JOE

I'm starting breakfast. Then we'll find your pup. The fire's still lit.

TWO

We ought to at least wait until morning to enjoy breakfast. I can't find so much as a dry shirt to wipe off with.

JOE

Sit by the fire.

TWO

Where's my whisky?

JOE

Last I saw it you put it in your coat pocket.

TWO

Where is it?

JOE

In your coat pocket.

TWO

Where's my coat?

JOE

It's your coat.

TWO

Is it in the tent?

JOE

Forget the whisky. You don't need any frigging whisky.

TWO

I think I left it at that little cabin. Damn. I'm going to have to go back for it.

JOE

I wouldn't.

TWO

I have to. I need to go that way anyway. Jewel might have gone back looking for me.

JOE

It's not cold enough for whisky or a coat. I'd leave it.

TWO

Then why are you shivering?

JOE

I'm warming up. Leave the coat.

TWO

Can't.

JOE

I'll buy you a new one when we get home.

TWO

No.

JOE

I'm not going with you.

TWO

Didn't ask you to.

JOE

Good. ‘Cause I ain’t.

TWO

You mean if I asked you to you wouldn’t go with me?

JOE

That’s right.

TWO

Jewel is still out there somewhere, you know that?

JOE

You’re not going for your dog. You’re going for whisky.

TWO

I’m going for Jewel and the coat, not the whisky.

JOE

What’s so important about that coat?

TWO

It’s my lucky coat, and I won’t leave it. It’s special. My uncle Clay made it when he was in the nuthouse. That makes it a family heirloom. I want to be buried in it.

JOE

Uncle Clay? Henry Clay Tollett? The one who robbed the Calvin bank and put them out of business? He stole every penny they had right?

TWO

He wasn’t my uncle. Where did you hear he was my uncle?

JOE

Your mom.

TWO

My daddy knew a man said he was Tollett’s cousin. Uncle.

JOE

Your mom knew a lot about him.

TWO

I don't care if she knew what color his piss was, he wasn't my goddamn uncle. How is it that everybody in Oklahoma has an outlaw relative?

JOE

My granddaddy gave cornbread to Belle Starr right before she died. They found it in one of her pockets.

TWO

See that's what I'm saying.

JOE

He claims it for the truth.

TWO

I'm not saying it ain't true. But how come nobody has Jim Thorpe kin or Will Rogers?

JOE

More outlaws here I guess.

TWO

No. Everybody wants to be an outlaw. Makes people feel wild to be kin to famous dead criminals. That's the truth.

JOE

Your own grandma said she had a date with Pretty Boy Floyd in Morris, Oklahoma. Never was a greater saint than her.

TWO

Forget it. My uncle, Uncle Clay, Clay *Shaw*, who has no famous relations that I'm aware of, he made the coat. But one time my daddy got drunk and told me Uncle Clay didn't sew it together, not with needle and thread. Not like that. Daddy said he willed it into the shape of a coat. Said he thought of a coat, and it appeared. Uncle Clay wanted to be buried in it. Hospital wouldn't let him. Said it represented all that had gone wrong in his

TWO (CONT'D)

life and was just a reminder of his isolation. They took it away from him the minute it appeared and gave it to my granny. She thought it was some kind of witch coat and tried to burn it with the trash after Uncle Clay died. Daddy stole it and hid it and waited for her to die instead. He said, "Ain't nobody burning this witch coat while I'm alive." He

wanted to be buried in it like Clay but died before he told anybody where it was. Then Jewel, sweet Jewelly Girl, twenty-three years after the fact, found the coat at Daddy's old home place when she wasn't more than two months old. She dug it up, dragged it to the front porch, and slept on it for nearly a week before I realized what it was. And when she was old enough to hunt, I wore the coat. With it I carried the birds she found. I carried the ducks she retrieved. I am attached to the coat just like I am attached to Jewel, and if you don't understand I don't really care. (a beat) I want to be buried in the coat.

JOE

All right. We'll go get the coat. Sounds like a load of shit to me, but we'll go get it.

TWO

I'll go. I was knocked out twice. Whoever's out there had plenty of chances to do me ill and didn't. Finish breakfast. I'll be back before the bacon gets crisp. Listen for Jewel.

JOE

Be careful. Get your pistols. Take plenty of ammo.

TWO

Two cylinders full ought to be enough. If there's more than twelve bad guys it won't matter if I have twelve bullets or a hundred and twelve.

JOE

That coat your uncle made, was he planning on getting out of the nuthouse soon?

TWO

Nope. He was just a crazy old man, Joe. Don't wander off. I want somebody around if Jewel comes back.

JOE

I like my bacon chewy. Be back by then.

(TWO walks to the edge of the wood line where he notices something on the ground.)

TWO

Turtle shell. There's a long line of them. They go around the whole camp.

JOE

They weren't there before. Somebody must've put them there last night.

TWO

Last night? When was last night?

JOE

Shut up. While we slept.

TWO

While you slept.

JOE

While I slept. If you were awake, you should've heard something.

TWO

I think it's a good idea to leave these shells alone.

(TWO exits.)

JOE

Don't forget the whisky. (a beat, to himself) I don't care about the whisky.

(JOE tends to breakfast while keeping a watchful eye. He burns the bacon and scrapes it from the skillet. Uncomfortably alone, he plays the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. It doesn't suit him, so he plays something upbeat. That doesn't do it either. He hears a low growl, gets his rifle and crouches under branches. In a series of lightning flashes, we find him cowering somewhere new. With the last rise of the lights JOE has fallen asleep against a tree. TWO is squatted at the fire salvaging a piece of bacon. JOE wakes and fires off a shot. Both are startled.)

TWO

How long you been asleep?

JOE

How long have you been here?

TWO

Ten minutes.

JOE

Impossible. I said be back before the bacon got crisp. Find your coat?

TWO

Yeah.

JOE

You've been gone a long time.

TWO

I found Jewel. I buried her next to the river in that little bend where we saw the sand falling in. Right up from where we crossed.

JOE

Dead?

TWO

Wouldn't have buried her unless she was.

JOE

Where did you find her?

TWO

In a tree a few hundred yards from here. The tree I was telling you about. The one growing through the roof. I guess the panther dragged her up there. All that was left was a bloody spine and some of her pretty black hair.

JOE

Enough. What happened to your dog?

TWO

Something pulled her into the tree.

JOE

It could've been a black calf or a raccoon you found.

TWO

It was Jewel.

JOE

I don’t believe it.

(TWO tosses a dog collar at JOE.)

TWO

I didn’t want to bury her in restraints. I should have never had her in them in the first place. I just thought it looked nice against her black hair. I unbuckled her collar, wrapped her up in my good coat, dug a hole, and pushed the sand in on her.

JOE

I don’t believe you.

TWO

I’ll tell you what, walk straight that way until you get to a hump at the edge of the river, get on your knees and start digging. If in about ten minutes things don’t start seeming a little more real to you, then keep on living the illusion, because I’ll tell you something else, I like your way better, and if thinking she’s alive will make her alive, then you come back and teach me how you did it, because I damn sure don’t want her dead.

JOE

She was a good dog.

TWO

Yeah.

JOE

Remember the time you shot those two dove? She caught both before they hit the ground.

TWO

Don’t do that. Talking about her doesn’t change anything, and it doesn’t make me feel any better. We know what kind of dog she was.

(GEORGE enters.)

GEORGE

Ya’ll ain’t going to need these turtle shells no more, but you ought to go on and get out. Storming all week. Going to get drowned when the river comes up. Are you stupid? (a beat.) I know you can talk. That’s all you done since you been here. Talk talk talk. Go on, speak up. Are you stupid? Oh yeah? That’s interesting. What’s my name you say? I’d

complain that you haven't even offered me any bacon except I've seen how you cook bacon. I've always liked bacon. Know anything about mules? Looks like you would at least thank me for the turtles.

JOE

Why did you put them there?

GEORGE

Protect you from the storm. Big one.

JOE

You believe in that?

GEORGE

I don't know. Can't hurt though ennit? My father used to put them all around the house when weather got bad. Must have worked. Here I am.

JOE

We're not rude.

GEORGE

Guess not. Just slow?

TWO

We're not stupid either.

GEORGE

Ah good. That's good to know, yeah. So, know anything about mules?

JOE

Why?

GEORGE

There's a white man this side of the river who can't keep his mule in the fence.

JOE

So.

GEORGE

If you catch the mule you can ride him.

JOE

So.

GEORGE

I'm just saying, you know, better than walking.

TWO

Why did you call him 'a white man?'

GEORGE

That's what he is.

TWO

But why did you say it that way?

GEORGE

What way?

TWO

White.

GEORGE

(to JOE.)

What's wrong with your friend? Is he, you know, crazy?

JOE

Hung-over mostly.

GEORGE

So, anyway, this mule, he can really jump. The old man down there hung a big long chain from the mule's halter. That didn't do no good so he put a cinder block on the end of the chain. The mule still jumps the fence. The fence was this high. So he added more barbed wire to the top, right at the top of the tee posts. You know what the mule did?

JOE

He jumped it.

GEORGE

He jumped it. This high. So he says, “I’m gonna get that damn mule,” and he made the chain hang twice as long from his nose and twice as heavy and put three cinder blocks on it. What do you think happened?

JOE

He still jumped.

GEORGE

No. That stumped the mule. He moped for a long time, dragged that heap around with him all over the pen. He dragged it alongside the fence until there was a groove all along the edge. The old man was very happy with himself that he outsmarted and overpowered the mule. But the mule, dragging all that around with him, he built up his muscles, right here in the neck. One night he jumped the fence. The old man couldn’t believe it. He put the mule back in the pen and stayed up all night long to see how he did it. Almost a week later the mule jumped the fence. The old man was so impressed that he just watched him. In the night the mule jumped back inside and then out five more times, then after daybreak you know what the mule did? He jumped back inside and stayed inside the rest of the day. Turns out he wasn’t trying to escape. He just likes to jump. We can catch him outside the fence because even though he can jump, he can’t move too fast with all that hanging from his nose. Ya’ll should go get him and ride him out of here.

TWO

We’re not ready to leave. Why do you want us to leave?

GEORGE

(To JOE.)

I don’t like talking to him very much. You know, ya’ll shouldn’t crap so close to camp. Really stinks. I bet he did it. You stink. I felt bad about the black dog’s eye. I tried to save it but I found her too late. And then she died anyway. I like where you buried her. She’ll be part of the river by morning. I think that’s good. Ya’ll want to go catch that mule? You can put the Mohican Sneak on him and maybe you won’t have to chase him.

TWO

We’re not Mohican.

GEORGE

What are you then?

TWO

Cherokee.

GEORGE

All you white people. All the same. Right here, smack dab in the middle of Creek and Seminole country and all of you got Cherokee blood. How's that happen, huh? You know, I got white blood in me. I just can't prove it. Ha.

TWO

You antagonizing us?

JOE

What if he is? You've been drunk and foul ever since we got here.

TWO

Hey, Indian.

GEORGE

Yes White Man?

TWO

Don't call me that.

GEORGE

Don't call me Indian.

TWO

You ain't introduced yourself. Ain't we got another bottle?

JOE

No.

TWO

We got one somewhere.

JOE

I said there ain't no more.

GEORGE

I think your friend has gone crazy.

JOE

Just drunk.

GEORGE

Same thing.

(TWO finds his whisky.)

TWO

(drinks)

Hey Indian guy, I mean, what was your name again?

GEORGE

Ain't no again. Never told you.

TWO

Well you rude son-of-a-bitch.

GEORGE

Rude? You still ain't offered me no bacon. Burnt or not, I would have fed you.

TWO

What is your name?

GEORGE

You only want to know it because you think I'm keeping it from you.

TWO

What is it?

GEORGE

Ain't telling you.

TWO

Tell me your name.

JOE

If he doesn't want to tell you he doesn't have to.

TWO

I want to know it.

JOE

I can see that, but you're getting out of hand here, and if you...stop pushing.

(TWO scrambles around JOE and takes GEORGE to the ground. TWO finds GEORGE'S wallet.)

TWO

George Johnson, born March 7th, 1945. George Johnson? Got to be kidding. What kind of Indian name is that?

JOE

Leave him alone. He took care of your dog. Leave him alone.

(JOE snatches the wallet from TWO and returns it to GEORGE. TWO sulks.)

JOE(CONT'D)

You know this area pretty well? We've never been quite this far upriver.

GEORGE

Enough to know that this spot will be underwater soon.

JOE

We could ease north out of its way until it settled if it came to that.

GEORGE

Nope.

JOE

Why not?

GEORGE

Water. Water everywhere. You're in an oxbow. Almost an island. You camped too close. Now the river's got you surrounded. Better head east and cross while you can.

TWO

We shouldn't have come. All I've done is let a good dog get killed.

GEORGE

It's a crazy world, ennit?

(GEORGE exits.)

JOE

That’s the wrong way.

TWO

I don’t want to leave. It might not rain again.

JOE

He’s gone off the wrong way.

TWO

You were right. It’s too dark. Let’s wait until morning. I don’t want to walk in the dark.

JOE

I don’t want to swim in the dark, but that’s what we’ll be doing if we wait much longer. George, ain’t you coming?

TWO

I’m drunk. I don’t need to be crossing the river like this. Can’t we just wait a little while? What if I refuse? You won’t leave me here.

JOE

You want to die? Is that what we’re doing? Is that what this is?

TWO

Didn’t mean to make you mad.

JOE

After they find our bodies and get us identified people back home will be hollering, ‘but how can that be, we just saw them’ as if just seeing someone makes a difference in whether they live or die.

(The storm intensifies. A tree falls. TWO trips over it.)

TWO

Don’t leave me.

(JOE helps TWO to his feet and guides him eastwardly against the wind.)

JOE

George. Ain't you coming? What? Did he say something?

TWO

I don't know. He mumbles.

JOE

You better come with us. You went the wrong way. Hey.

TWO

Forget it Joe. He wasn't ever coming with us.

JOE

Damn. How does he move in this weather?

(TWO and JOE struggle to the edge of the timberline.)

TWO

Ain't you going to get your guitar?

JOE

Don't need it.

(JOE and TWO exit. The storm swells, its winds shifting back and forth, east and west. Debris litters in waves. TWO enters sprinting to grab the guitar. Lightning knocks him to the ground, throwing the guitar from his hand. JOE enters, rushing to his friend's side, and attempts to revive him. He slaps his face, checks his pulse, listens to his heart, and starts CPR.)

JOE

Can you hear me? Two.

(He slaps TWO)

Hear me?

(JOE drags TWO to the boulder and pulls him on top of it, situating him so he won't fall off. He starts to leave, thinks twice, kneels and speaks to his unconscious friend.)

JOE (CONT'D)

With all this rain I think the river's probably already too high. We'd drown each other for sure. I'm going to go find the mule. Hear me? I'm going to go get the mule and we'll try for the north bridge. Okay? Wake up. Okay. Don't roll off. Hear me? Stay on this rock.

(JOE feels TWO'S cheeks and forehead. After a lingering touch, he exits. Weak signs of life appear in TWO.)

TWO

Play that one song. The sad one. I like the sad one.

(A western glow exposes a catlike shadow on the face of the boulder. Lightning flashes and the shadow disappears. TWO is dragged violently into the dark. The storm continues.)

THE END

Shambhala

Marie and I turned off I-25 to Owl Canyon Road toward Shambhala and The Great Stupa into low hills that were still a ways off from the Rockies. Except for the mountain view, it was country that could have been Oklahoma. Red dirt and run-down farms with tractors left to rot. Ranch houses with rusted stove pipe flues bending out of windows. Skinny dogs chasing us down the road. The moment the pavement turned to dirt road, I was annoyed it looked so much like home.

"Mountain people," I said.

"I've always wanted to live in the mountains," Marie said.

It was the first thing she'd said in two hours. Our trip had started out so well, too. Colorado's laid back. Pot is more or less legal in Denver, and I saw a billboard there that said,

"Don't believe in God? You're not alone." They had a hotline you could call if you'd been harassed by Christians. You would never see that in Oklahoma. Politicians' and preachers' heads would blow apart if one of those signs popped up in OKC. I'd had a good vibe going until leaving Denver for Shambhala.

We'd left our hotel and walked down to a mom and pop bagel shop before heading out. When it came time to pay, Marie looked at me with my wallet out. She had this look of contempt running all through her.

"Oh, this is together?" she asked.

We'd only been roommates a year, but she'd been good to let me pay for things when we went places together. Now she's looking at me like I'm some beggar who followed her in the door. I handed the clerk the money, sat down and brooded about it.

"You're overreacting," she said. "I don't want to assume you'll always pay."

"I like to pay. You know I do."

"Well, I don't want to take advantage of you."

I didn't believe that was the issue for a second. She was broadcasting to the whole place, "Hey, in case anyone's wondering, I'm not with this guy." We'd drunk too much a few times and toyed with the idea of taking things further than a strictly roommate slash friend scenario, but it wasn't like either of us were confused about our relationship. I let it go. I had to. The idea of walking up that mountain excited me. I had let myself believe visiting Shambhala with Marie might turn out to be the most important moment of our lives. I wanted to come to some sort of awakening that I could point to and say, "This is where it happened. This is the place that changed me." I think it's possible some places are holier than others.

There's this three-thousand acre mesa complex in Avard, Oklahoma, that feels that way to me. Clear selenite rocks left behind from when the ocean receded now lie on top of the ground exposed to erosion. They're like little soft diamonds. Like treasure. What if Shambhala were such a place? I didn't want to start the walk pissed off. So I let the bagel thing go. Besides, Marie was the key to all this.

She has these vivid dreams, dreams that sometimes suck me into them. A week before leaving for Colorado, I woke disturbed by a dream where she was calling out to me. I stepped out of a dark wood and found her in a creek bottom north of Calvin, Oklahoma, where I grew up. She was lost and asked if I'd lead her. I took her along a path beside the creek until we came to a spot where we could cross. She was scared. All we had to do was crawl over a barbed wire fence then step across the creek. She wouldn't do it. She's the bravest person I know. Way braver than me. When I told her about it, she said in her dream the creek was a cruel river. She trusted me, but her feet wouldn't budge.

Three months ago, we were in Prague, Oklahoma, during their Kolache Festival. A man stood on the corner selling raffle tickets for a muzzleloader rifle. I looked at the man, looked at Marie, and knew I'd win the rifle. Just like that, I knew. I started to buy one ticket, then somehow realized it would take five to win. A month later the man called me with the good news.

All this started two years ago when my dad died. I'd gone to a bar to have a drink. Marie was singing the Byrds' song "Turn, Turn, Turn" to her friends at a nearby table. She caught me watching her. She sidled up to the bar, introduced herself and bought me a drink.

"You feel beaten down to me," she said.

"That's probably because my father's funeral is tomorrow."

She said, “I’m going with you.”

She didn’t even ask if I’d be alone that day, let alone whether or not I wanted her to go. Just, “I’m going with you.”

At the graveside service when everyone settled, Marie said, “He’s the right preacher for you.”

“I’m not religious,” I said.

She stood up, plucked a red carnation from the casket, and placed it in my hand. “I know.”

The preacher opened his Bible to Ecclesiastes and began reading lyrics to the song Marie had sung to her friends.

She took my hand. “Turn, Turn, Turn,” she whispered.

So when Marie said we should make a pilgrimage to a Buddhist temple, I didn’t say yes because I’m a Buddhist or anything like that. I said yes because one way or another, I believe in belief.

In the last few miles nearing the retreat, I was furious with Marie for making it so hard to enjoy the landscape with her. She took her pictures, grinning, ooh-ing and ah-ing, all the while ignoring me. Once the roads started narrowing, it hurt me to be silent.

“Look how these split-rail fences zigzag through the timber,” I said.

Marie rolled down the window for a better shot of the mountains.

“The snow’s different up here,” I said. “Mountains got their own climate don’t they.”

Marie rolled up the window and warmed her fingers in front of the vent.

"It covers everything," I said. "Not in a draping way. It's more like it's visiting, like us, the way it sits on top of mailboxes, rusty gates, and those cedars out there. Just waiting for something to happen."

Marie leaned her seat back and closed her eyes.

"These slopes dropping and converging at the road makes me feel pinched in," I said. Still nothing from her. I wanted to turn the radio up loud or bang the steering wheel or run my car off in a ditch if that's what it took. Anything to make her talk, to tell me why she felt the need to embarrass me that morning then shut me out the rest of the day.

Pulling into the Shambhala Mountain Center, I parked the car near a clump of small pines in an area that looked like it had been cleared for parking. We gathered our warm clothes out of the trunk and bundled up. I put on insulated brown duck overalls and a camouflaged down jacket. Marie wore a stylish burnt orange leather jacket and a gossamer, earth toned, long skirt.

"You're going to freeze," I said.

She was, at least, wearing warm looking snow boots.

In Denver we read on the internet how you're supposed to leave a gift when you visit the stupa. Some people leave coins or pictures of their kids. I wished I'd been better prepared. I wanted whatever I left to mean something. If I'd known ahead of time I'd have brought a piece of selenite. Standing outside the car pulling on my gloves I spotted the carnation Marie had given me lying on my dash. I'd thought a few times to throw it away or put it up somewhere. I imagined it would flake away a little at a time until there was nothing left. It had gone all straw colored. Just the bud, stem and short remnants of the petals were left. I figured what the hell. I zipped the flower up in my coat pocket and tried not to crush it.

Marie and I wandered the premises until we found an unlocked log building. I think it was the registration office for people who were going to do more than just walk up and look at the stupa. A sign said for us to take off our shoes before entering. A little woman with a Bronx accent greeted us inside.

"What brave souls," she said. "It's an icy hike this time of year."

She let us use the bathroom then told us what time they'd serve lunch.

"If you see people and they won't speak to you, don't take offense. They're not supposed to talk. If you need directions or anything, ask questions like, 'Where is the cafeteria?' They'll point you in the right direction."

Communication is communication, but whatever. They have their reasons, I guess. A sign said The Great Stupa was up the mountain a half a mile. I'd thought it would be further, harder to reach, a struggle. We weaved through their compound of buildings near the parking area. I couldn't believe how disorganized everything was. Garden hoses and orange extension cords lay tangled and frozen in the snow. Half-built platforms had gone gray from disuse and exposure. Cobbled-together, out-of-plumb shacks leaned against one another. A hand-scrawled advertisement for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was taped to the cafeteria door. That made me laugh out loud. I pointed it out to Marie.

"I'd like to see one of those stuck to a Baptist church back home," I said. "There'd be some missed tithes that day."

Marie stopped and stared at me as though I'd just said the most disgusting thing in the world.

"It was a joke for crissakes." That pissed me off more than anything else that had happened that day. I resented her. "Want to do it on your own? Fine," I said.

I walked ahead of her up the trail as fast as I could, trying not to look ridiculous. The icy ground was treacherous in places. Falling down with her looking at me would have been a nightmare. I panted my way up the trail far enough that I couldn't hear her crunching through the snow anymore.

Back at the compound of buildings we'd seen ragged blue nylon flags flapping. They marked the way to the trail that winds toward The Great Stupa. I figured once we arrived into more natural settings the flags would have disappeared. They didn't. They went all the way up the mountain. I got so tired of those flags flapping their Sanskrit and Himalayan silhouettes. I felt like I was at a carnival.

I know there are no corners in the woods, but there's this corner you turn by a thicket of young aspens, and up through the ponderosa pine rises a temple so white the snow around it looked dirty. Pictures can't prepare you for seeing this white thing rising in plastic out of the pines. I imagine it's cement. It looked like plastic. It reminded me of a Baptist steeple, only fatter, fancier. Off to the left was a faded green trailer house bowed in the middle. At first I thought, don't be judgmental. Appearances don't matter. Then I saw plastic chairs crumbling in a half stacked mess beside the stupa, a wind-separated blue tarp covering something on the other side of it, and a junk car in the timber. The wind whistled through its broken windows. I thought, Jesus Christ, how is this conducive to peaceful thought?

I paced the gravel path around the stupa. The fourteenth Dalai Lama had walked that same path. I didn't feel anything from it. Whatever energy the man had brought to the place had long since blown away. I sat on a cold metal bench and stared at the stupa. Marie passed, walked straight up the front steps, took off her shoes and entered. She looked calm. Didn't seem

to be an angry thought in her head. I almost hated her for it. One minute it's "I'm so pissed at you, won't you shut up," and the next it's "I'm having the spiritual journey of my life." .

I wanted to go in with her. I didn't want to carry that bad energy in with me. It felt rude to muddy up a holy place with negativity, even if it didn't feel holy to me. I don't know how all that works. It just felt that way. Through the tops of the trees, down into the valley below, a lone horse stood in the middle of a pasture. Damn thing looked near dead, snow on its back, head drooped. It made me nauseous. I couldn't stand to look at it. I stood, numb from the metal bench, determined to enter the temple.

Ascending the steps, I tried to clear my head so that I could make myself feel like I wasn't angry. I imagined lying on my back in the dead grass at the top of an Avard mesa. I took off my shoes and placed them in the wooden bins outside the doors of the stupa. Picturing the sun warming me through my clothes, I removed my coat and hung it on a peg. I imagined the wind was the same wind of Avard. Taking one last breath of the outside air, I opened the heavy wooden doors and exhaled into the warm, quiet, round room.

Marie was the only person there. She sat in a blue plastic chair along a wall. I'd thought she would have chosen one of the purple pillows on the floor. Her chin was on her chest and her eyes were closed. She looked asleep. I didn't know how to meditate. I think she must have been doing it right. She looked peaceful. Beautiful.

An incense had been lit. Lavender, I think. I chose a chair across from Marie and stared up at the enormous Buddha that dominated the room. It's funny to say it dominated the room when it was one of the last things I noticed when I walked in, but it was huge. Twenty feet high, I'd say, and gold painted. It was one of the real Buddhas, the ones people call Skinny Buddha,

not that fat laughing oaf you see on take-out Chinese. I have to say, though, it looked as plastic as everything else.

Sitting there looking up at the Buddha, I hoped no monks showed up to see how ignorant I was. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Not that I was bored. I just didn't know what to do. Marie's chair scuffed the floor. She got up and left. I felt relieved.

I walked around the room. A book lay open near the door for visitors to sign their names. Marie's name wasn't in it. I figured the monks might like to know people from Oklahoma had come up. I filled out the address section, then thought better of it and scratched it out. I was nervous some monk might knock on my door like Jehovah's Witnesses. It was a stupid thought. I felt bad about marking out my address, so above it I wrote, *Beautiful Quiet*. That was stupid, too.

I decided to try one of the purple pillows on the floor. They were hard as hell and a full foot thick. Kneeling didn't work. Sitting was plain awkward. I returned to my chair. Looking up again at the Buddha, despite myself I started praying. Not out loud. Just in my head. I prayed that I'd stop being angry. I prayed that I'd stop loving Marie so much. In two years she'd graduate college and move off somewhere without me. I prayed that I could let her go and not hurt so much about it. I stared into its eyes, twenty feet up, begging it to look at me. I mean, I knew it wouldn't. I just wanted to allow myself to believe that it would. I've stared at stars until they changed colors. That's what I wanted. An optical illusion just for me.

A thought went through my head. "Why is it so important I look at *you*?" I couldn't believe that there I sat, praying to a plastic Buddha, wanting it to give me something other gods never had, imagining it talking to me. I felt ridiculous. My very presence was a sacrilege to all the people in the world who believed it held power.

I left The Great Stupa, descended the steps and headed toward the shrine where people left their gifts. It looked like an oversized birdbath. I pulled the carnation out of my jacket pocket and tossed it in with all the other gifts people had left. Marie stepped from behind the green trailer house, taking pictures. She wanted to take a picture with me like we were some kind of happy couple. Like we hadn't been fighting all day. You should see the photos. I look like such a prick. I can't turn it off like she does.

Marie took a white candle out of her pocket and put it on the shrine beside my flower. I helped her block the wind so she could light the candle. It smelled like gardenias. My favorite. We sifted through what others had left. There were Obama buttons, cheap necklaces, rocks, photos of soldiers, kids' drawings, marbles, you name it. I liked the pewter Jesus the best.

We walked together down the mountain trail. Marie hooked her arm in mine, slowing my pace to match hers. I kept thinking about that damn flower, where it'd wind up. I did a mental check of all the personal items I had on me. Coins. Scarf. Watch. I wanted to leave something else, anything else. It all made me feel silly. I couldn't stop questioning why people come here in the first place. Do people really need all this gaudy show of devotion in order to find peace? Do we really need a twenty-foot Buddha? But there I was placing value on a stupid flower. A stupid flower that had been drying on my dash for a year. I wanted it back. I took off my glove and fingered the pieces it left in my pocket. Marie pulled me closer, our arms locked tight. I wanted to march straight back up that mountain and get my flower. I looked back at it. The candle had gone out. I made a move to separate from Marie, then stopped myself. I couldn't undo the one good thing that had happened all day.

When specks of snow started to spit, we hurried downhill, got in the car, and left Shambhala without saying a word. The snow began falling in clumps. I kicked the heat up,

rolled down my window, and poked my head out so I could see the road. The snow muted everything. Even with my window rolled down and my head hanging out, I couldn't hear my tires on the road. It was like drifting through an endless white.

"You know it's made of chocolate, right?" Marie asked. "The Buddha. It's chocolate, in case you didn't know."

I was puzzled. I thought she was making fun of me somehow.

"Have you ever seen a gaudier thing than that stupa?" she asked.

I hadn't. "I would have appreciated a circle of sandstone more," I said.

"Why did you leave the flower? I almost put it in my pocket when you weren't looking."

If we hadn't been caught in the hardest snow I'd ever seen, I would have turned around right then. I should have let my carnation disintegrate where it was, where I could see it, with time and erosion, its brittle pieces blowing out our rolled down windows. I should have left it on my dash. I think a man ought to get to be sentimental once in a while. He ought to get to hang on to things, even if every day he has to watch them slip away, little by little.

Defiance, Ohio

We almost missed the dead man we drove a thousand miles to find. Pacing up and down the rows of graves, Marie and I must have walked by the nine-year-old copper placard ten times before she noticed the name, William Levi Carson. In the rare moments when she spoke of her stepfather, Marie called him Levvy. Learning his name was William dazed me. That's my name.

When Marie first told me about Levvy, she thought he had likely overdosed. The more she talked about it the more she figured his heart gave out. He'd once collapsed in the hallway of their home with the telephone cord wrapped around his neck. Marie had run to the bathroom, broken a nitro pill in half and shoved it under his tongue. Ten-years-old. She saved him.

At the cemetery, standing over what was left of Levvy, I wondered if Marie pictured

what he looked like rotting in his hole. I did. I wound through the other stones until I found one with fresh dirt so that I'd know which way the bodies lay. I went back to William Levi Carson's grave, stepped off three feet to the spot at which I thought I stood over his groin, then imagined the sounds his hip bones would make with my boot heel stomping them.

I tried to understand how this place affected Marie. It's difficult when I have nothing to compare it to. I wanted to hold her, to protect her from all the bastard stepfathers of the world. It's a man thing, thinking I could fix it. A woman would have known better. I made it worse. I learned that the night before when we arrived in Defiance.

Wrung out from the nineteen-hour drive out of Oklahoma, we found one affordable room in Defiance. The room, despite our non-smoking preference, smelled like a wet ashtray. We didn't bother with showers. Six in the evening, we crashed. I woke at ten that night wide awake. I reached for Marie. She shuddered away and pressed a pillow wall between us. I started to let it piss me off, then I considered where we were, why we were there. The final destination of our trip was New York. Marie had been accepted in a private culinary school there. As for our stop in Ohio, she could talk all she liked about wanting to show me where she grew up. We detoured north to make certain a dead man really was dead.

Still, it hurt that my touch sent her crawling away. At our apartment in Oklahoma City we slept on a twin bed. We're not big people, though. There's room to sleep apart. We slept close. That meant a hell of lot to me. In the two years we'd lived together I'd learned her history with her stepfather, and she's gay.

Lying there in Ohio, I thought how the size of bed doesn't matter between couples who plan to stay together. But we weren't really a couple. We vacationed, partied, read poetry together. We shared money, music, coffee in the morning. And yes, sometimes we were lovers.

I kicked off the comforter, peeled back the drapes and looked out at Defiance. The city felt like a fist that wouldn't unclench. Road workers had torn up all the streets around the motel. Yellow caution lights blinked from every direction. Semis recoiled against the cobbled up concrete. I closed the stiff, ugly curtain, showered and ate Dramamine.

I stayed away from Marie. I didn't want to get close enough for her to pull away again. Her moving to New York without me was all the pulling away I could stand. I would have followed her in a minute. She said I'd taken care of her for two years. She wanted to take care of herself for a while. I'm wise enough to know that what I wanted didn't matter. In the middle of the night she backed up against me. I put my arm over her. She crawled away a second time.

There at the grave, I was faced with it again. I made eye contact once every thirty seconds to remain tethered to her. Thirty seconds might not seem long. It is when you're waiting for something to happen. I walked seemingly random semi-circles around her, passing close sometimes. Other times I left distance. Once when I passed, she grabbed me and held tight. Her thighs trembled against me.

"Thank you," she said, kissing my ear.

"I love you most," I said.

"He's dead."

"I know, babe."

"He's right there, lying right there under all that dirt."

"I know he is."

"Nobody loved him. Do you think no one loved him? He had a rich brother who could have bought him a stone," she said.

I can't explain it. She grieved. I'd thought she'd enjoy knowing the son-of-a-bitch rotted in a grave practically unmarked, unloved.

"Did you love him?" I asked.

"I hated him. I hated him for staying. Then I hated him for leaving."

Marie released me then turned her back on the grave. We'd no more climbed in the car when her mother Phyllis called. She wanted us to visit June, Phyllis's sister, who lived south of Defiance. Marie didn't want to see her. She wanted to see her grandfather's old place. That was it. She'd lived there from her seventh year to her ninth, her best years in Ohio, right before her father left and her mother met Levvy.

"I don't think we'll have time, Mom," Marie said into the phone. "We have to be in New York in two days. I know, but in case we have trouble. Like car trouble or something."

Marie whispered. "She knows I'm lying."

"Tell her the truth. Tell her you don't want to," I said.

"He's doing okay, Mom." Marie covered the phone. "She still wants you to move with me."

My phone rang. I stepped out of the car. Marie's sister Becca.

"I told my cousins all about you, Will. They can't wait to meet you."

"I'm not sure we're going by," I said.

"You have to. You're right there."

"We don't have to. If Marie doesn't want to—"

"You mean it's that she doesn't *want* to? Why doesn't she want to see her own family? She's missed the last nine reunions, even the ones we had in Oklahoma. It's not right. She should love her family."

"She should love who she wants, Becca."

"She should love her family." The phone clicked dead in my ear. Marie opened the door and looked at me over the top of the car.

"I screwed up, Marie."

"I like that you stick up for me. You don't have to lie just because I did."

"We going to see them?"

"No. Get in," she said.

The blanks around Defiance were colored in with corn. Corn everywhere. And ponds. Everyone in Northern Ohio, it seemed, had ponds. Beautiful, well-kept, squarish ponds, some with diving boards, slides, and white rocked bottoms. I'd never felt Oklahoma hurt for water until I saw that country. Marie slowed at a narrow blacktop crossroads and rolled to a stop in front of a lone, white mobile home.

"Mr. Strickland lives there."

The place looked deserted. No cars. No signs of life. Just a white trailer house stuck in an opening someone carved in the corn. Three old elms grew in the front. Each appeared as if someone had crashed a car into it, their bark mangled to deformity.

"He used to shoot his trees," Marie said, "to kill the demons. He bought us no-bake cookies from the gas station."

Marie snapped pictures of Mr. Strickland's place then drove on to homes where she'd lived. Her family must have moved into a dozen run down shacks and trailer houses in the thirteen years they lived in Ohio. She said she couldn't recall being poor. Judging by what I saw, they were. At one of the nicer homes, a beige two-story frame house, she parked the car.

"Hannah Lynn," she said.

"*The* Hannah Lynn?" I asked.

"*The* Hannah Lynn."

Hannah had been Marie's first kiss when they were ten. They pretended all that summer to play hide and seek then hid in the attic and made out. Hannah's father had once commented that he didn't think they understood the rules of the game.

"She smelled like new lumber and gasoline. Her dad built their house. It was still unfinished when I left." Marie smiled, remembering. "Hannah huffed gas. Ever siphon it and get some in your mouth? That's how she tasted. Her dad bolted up the lawnmowers and put locking gas caps on his trucks. He threatened the people at the corner store that they better not sell her any, but she always had some."

Marie took us further into the corn where the roads grew too narrow for cars to pass safely. At a right angle bend in the blacktop, the pavement turned to dirt, and trees cocooned the road. The land on both sides had belonged to her grandfather, Opa Souther.

"Opa lost a daughter down there. Little Sammi. She was ten I think. The road used to go straight."

"It's a blind section, now," I said.

"People drove too fast. One day this boy came barreling through there in a Willys Army Jeep, hit a chug hole. Opa had been hunting morel mushrooms when he saw the Jeep bouncing through the timber. Sammi was ten feet away playing with a horned toad. Couldn't get to her in time. Killed the boy, too. Opa tried to make the county do something. Put signs up or build a gate. When they wouldn't he piled his junk on the road. Figured someone would clean it after he died."

Old stock trailers and gutted out tractors blocked the road. Tangles of barbed wire, too, and box springs. Trees and weeds had taken over, lacing it all together.

"He lived like this?" I asked.

"It looks just like I remember it."

Marie had told me about a concrete silo she called her castle and how it smelled of mint. The upper staves had crumbled in such a way as to leave rook-like teeth at the top. She steered past it without comment, rounded the corner and drove between a dark complex of homes. The houses were as run down as most everything else I'd seen that day, but by Marie's family standards, Opa had been rich. He'd owned land. Marie parked at the house where she had lived just before Levvy came along. Twisted off its blocks, the green trailer house rested unevenly on the ground.

"Wind must have blown it loose," I said.

Walking toward the trailer, Marie snapped at me.

"No. This way. The tar pit is over there."

"Where?"

"Where those tires and dishwashers are piled up. The tar eats everything. That's where I lost Grizzly."

"Grizzly?"

"My German Shepherd. He chased a mouse into the pit and got stuck. Opa hooked a chain around his belly and tried to unstick him with the backhoe. His hand slipped. Pulled Grizzly in half."

"Did anything good happen here? God."

Marie peeked in the windows of the house. "No one's lived here for a long time."

"Good. I hope nobody ever does again."

The thought of a nine-year-old Marie watching her dog ripped in half made me hate Ohio. She used to talk about an animal cemetery she kept at the base of a big oak. I almost made myself sick imagining her burying the halves of Grizzly.

"Opa loved me."

"What?"

"You asked if anything good happened here. Opa was good."

Her phone rang.

"Who is it now?" I asked.

"Might be the school. They're supposed to call about the loan."

It was her Aunt June.

"We were just heading out actually. Yes, Will is with me. Hang on. No, hang on. I'll ask. He's the one keeping us on track, time-wise."

Marie hung up on her.

"How dare they utter your name? 'Is Will with you?' Like they know you. Why can't Becca mind her own business? Now they know we're here."

"So?"

"If we don't see them it'll make Mom look bad."

"So what if she looks bad," I said. "Where was she when ya'll were kids? Nothing but a ghost. I know for a fact she knew what was going on. Your sister told me."

"Becca lies. Anyway Mom's been making excuses for me for years. How is she supposed to explain that I'm right here in Defiance and wouldn't stop?"

"She'd think of something. Let's make our appearance," I said.

The phone rang.

"I'm sorry, Aunt June. Hit the wrong button. We're pretty tight on time, but we'll stop a minute."

Marie closed the phone.

"I don't want to go right now," she said.

"Okay."

"I don't want to drive anymore."

"Okay."

"We're not eating with them."

"No, we're not."

I used the GPS to navigate our way out of the corn.

"They're going to think we're together," Marie said over lunch.

"Not if you tell them different."

"I don't know if I want to."

I knew she didn't mean she feared telling them she's gay. She's an out and proud lesbian who pretends to no one. It was something else.

"You don't want to give them that?" I asked.

"I don't want them to have anything of me."

"Surely they know. At the reunions your sister must have told them. She tells everything."

"They won't believe anything they don't want to until they have to," Marie said. "It's not like I could ever explain to them who I am anyway. Not in terms they'd understand. Not here. Not them."

We burned up three hours before pulling into June's driveway. There must have been twenty people there waiting to see Marie. Their place was nice. Pretty white house with a sculpted lawn, clear blue pond, and a giant deck that wrapped around a big pecan tree. Everyone had gathered around a table on the deck. At least half were fully drunk. The other half were half drunk. Given the nature of the rest of my experience in Ohio, I don't know why I expected anything different.

Marie's kin seemed happy to see her. They asked where we'd been, what we'd seen, what took us so long. We kept it vague. I told them what pretty country Ohio was. It wasn't a lie. The corn, despite its monotony, has its own beauty. The air pushes through it in hushes and sighs, hypnotic as dry wind-bent Oklahoma wheat fields. I didn't say that. They offered beer. I didn't want to drink with them. Even if I had, they drank Bud Light. I'd rather drink cold coffee than watery beer. Instead, I charmed them with deer hunting and guns. They didn't think I looked like a deer hunter. I feigned surprise then thickened my accent. Three different men brought me beer and opened the bottles before I could say no. Marie looked at the beer like enemies. I knew what she was thinking. Each bottle, unless I drank fast, amounted to twenty minutes apiece.

A motorcycle rumbled into the driveway somewhere during my second beer.

"There's your Uncle Cecil," June said.

The man rode a sweet Harley, and he looked the part if anyone ever did. He reminded me of Johnny Cash, but instead of having grown old he'd gone to seed. Long black hair hanging like loose, greasy ropes. Deep voice. Wind and sun ruts in his face. He shook my hand, hugged Marie, then sat opposite us. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat. It was dark before Cecil spoke straight at Marie.

"Where you been?" he asked.

"Oklahoma. You know that," Marie said.

"I mean where you been." Cecil's tone was blunt and accusatory. "I've been to Oklahoma three times in nine years. I ain't seen you."

Marie shifted like she was about to let this guy have it. She wasn't a girl who reacted benignly to such tones.

"I've been busy, Cecil."

"Too busy to drive to Tulsa and see your family? A thousand miles I drove. You can't travel an hour from Oklahoma City? Three times in nine years."

"I'm here now."

"Leave her alone," June said. "This girl didn't come by here to get chewed out."

"I saw your mom and your sister. Not you," Cecil said.

"Every time you guys have a reunion, I'm busy."

"I just want to know what's more important than family."

"None of your business," June said. "Now leave her alone."

June's son, Jimmy, in what appeared an attempt to defuse Cecil, said, "Hey, Marie, you used to run around with that Hannah Lynn didn't you?"

"Some," Marie said.

"Yeah, she banged a Rottweiler not a month after you left," Jimmy said.

"She what?" I asked.

That brought laughter from everyone except Marie, whose expression had gone from restrained anger to disgust.

"Look at his face," Jimmy said, meaning me.

"How do you know that, Jimmy?" Marie asked. "Did you see her? Did you watch?"

"Hell, yes, I watched. Whole bunch of us did. Even her brother was there."

"Her brother watched her fuck a dog?" I asked, then checked myself. I hadn't meant to curse in front of them.

I got big laughs again. They thought I was really funny.

"Man, you didn't know what you were getting into up here, did you?" Jimmy asked, laughing. "Ya'll ever think about tying the knot?"

Marie cut her eyes at me. I downed the beer and grabbed the third. In the course of the next few conversations, we learned that the old man, Mr. Strickland, who had bought no-bake cookies for the kids and shot his trees to kill the demons, shot himself on the roof of his house last year. We learned that they all hated Marie's grandfather because they felt he didn't help his wife remember when her Alzheimer's took away the memory of the daughter she lost. And we learned that when it came to remembering things, Marie's family didn't mind forgetting.

Marie's cousin, Angie, spoke up first about Levvy. "That man your mom married after your dad left, what was his name?"

"Levvy," Marie said.

"Levvy. Yeah. You must have been what, ten? How is Levvy?" Angie asked.

"Dead," Marie said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know," Angie said.

"Hadn't seen him in years," Marie said.

"Well, maybe that's good. He scared me."

"I knew he died," June said, slurring. "A pissed off dealer put windshield wiper fluid in his whiskey. What I don't know is what your mother saw in him. He didn't hit you girls, did

he? I told your mother a hundred times to look out for that man. I kept an eye out for you. I hope you know that."

"He was scary," Angie said again.

"Only thing I can figure," June said, spreading her hands to indicate a measurement, "was he must have been good in bed."

If I could have yanked the sky down on those people, I would have done it. I wanted a fight so big they'd never ask to see Marie again.

"June," Marie said, "that's inappropriate."

"Well, you got to wonder," June said.

"Yeah, Mom, how crude," Angie said giggling.

June turned her palms up in mock supplication. I finished my beer.

"Marie, we've stayed longer than we meant to," I said. "We need to go."

Jimmy said we could stay at his place for the night. Angie said we could stay at hers.

With a touch of threat June said, "This girl is antsy to get to New York. Let her leave."

"Yes, I am," Marie said.

We stepped toward the car. June waved and yelled out, "Now when you're rich and famous in New York don't forget your kin."

As bad as I wanted out of that state I dreaded the next motel, dreaded that my palm on Marie's shoulder might send her crawling again to the mattress edge. I dreaded spending our last night wondering if I would be Will in her bed or just some man she couldn't stand to touch. I think somewhere in the complexity of her relationship with Levvy lay the answer to why we became lovers in the first place. She hated him, yet somehow needed him. I know she loved me,

but I couldn't help wondering if on those nights that I loved so tenderly, carefully, if my hands ever grazed her skin like his.

"I'm driving," Marie said so only I could hear.

"Yeah, that six-point has me heavy-headed."

"No," she said, fastening her seat belt, "this time I want to be at the wheel when I leave this place."

Fog had risen when the sun had set. Marie drove like something fleeting waited on the other side of the gray. I gripped my thighs and stomped the floorboard on curves she took too fast. I lay my head back, closed my eyes, and tried not to think about crashing.

At the top of a short, steep hill she slammed on the brakes, throwing us hard against our shoulder straps.

"Deer?" I asked.

"No."

"What?"

"It wasn't a deer."

"What was it?"

"It was nothing," she said.

"We're a target here, Marie. A semi comes from behind, we'd never get out of its way in time."

"Nothing does," she said.

"Nothing does what?"

"Leave in time."

I gave her a slow, thoughtful nod as if I understood, as if a sense of calm had come over me, as if I weren’t imagining a dozen sets of headlights bearing down on us.

Defiance, Ohio

A Ten-Minute Play

Characters:	MARIE, early 20s, gay.
	WILLIAM, early 20s.
	JUNE, Marie's aunt.
	CECIL, June's husband.
	ANGIE, June and Cecil's daughter
Setting:	Defiance, Ohio. June's deck behind her house.
Time:	After Marie's father's funeral. Now.

AT RISE: WILLIAM and MARIE walk toward June's door.

WILLIAM

I guess I should have driven faster.

MARIE

I wouldn't have gone to his funeral if we'd gotten here two days ago.

WILLIAM

All the same. You going to tell them we stopped by the cemetery?

MARIE

No.

WILLIAM

You're jumpy as a cricket.

MARIE

Let's just say hello then leave.

WILLIAM

I've been confused this whole trip. Why drive all the way from Oklahoma just to miss your dad's funeral and then give a half-hearted hello to your aunt and uncle?

MARIE

I needed to make sure.

WILLIAM

Of what?

MARIE

That he was dead. Nine years I've been expecting to run into him around some corner or have him knocking on my door.

WILLIAM

I get that. From all you've said I assumed he was first-class jerk. But at the grave, you were crying. That was grieving, wasn't it?

MARIE

He was right there lying under all that dirt.

WILLIAM

I figured you'd like that he finally lay rotting in a grave. Did you love him?

MARIE

Nobody loved him.

WILLIAM

It seemed like you did.

MARIE

I hated him. I hated him for staying. Then I hated him for leaving.

WILLIAM

I know he hurt you. You've got those scars on your legs. Was it worse than that? Was it of a—

MARIE

Specifics don't matter. God, I hate being here. Why couldn't my sister keep her nose out of it? If she hadn't called Aunt June, the woman would have never even known we were in Ohio.

WILLIAM

We can turn back around right now.

MARIE

If we don't see them it'll make Mom look bad.

WILLIAM

So what?

MARIE

She's been making excuses for me for years. How is she supposed to explain that I'm right here in Defiance and wouldn't stop?

WILLIAM

Tell her it was my fault. I got sick or something.

MARIE

Don’t let these people in your head. We’re nothing like them. (beat) You know they’re going to think we’re together.

WILLIAM

Not if you tell them different.

MARIE

I don’t know that I want to.

WILLIAM

Why?

MARIE

I don’t want them having anything of me.

WILLIAM

Surely they know. At the reunions your sister must have told them you’re gay. She tells everything.

MARIE

They won’t believe anything that they don’t want to until they have to. It’s not like I could ever explain to them who I am anyway. Not in terms they’d understand.

(MARIE starts to knock, then pauses)

I know we need to get back to Oklahoma so you don’t miss any more classes, but when we leave here, do you mind if we try to find Hannah Lynn?

WILLIAM

Your first kiss?

MARIE

We played hide and seek then hid in the attic and made out. Her dad used to say he didn’t think we understood the rules of the game. She smelled like gasoline. Hannah huffed gas. Ever siphon it and get some in your mouth? That’s how she tasted. I’d like to see her.

WILLIAM

We have time.

MARIE

And Grandpa Opa’s place? It’s near here. I want to show you the silo that I called my castle and that crazy old road where he and Oma’s little baby daughter died.

(JUNE peeks from the side of the house.)

JUNE

Marie Elizabeth! Get yourself back here. Your uncle Cecil and Angie's on the deck in the back yard. We've got beer and a fire. Now come on you two. William, I presume?

MARIE

Here we go.

WILLIAM

You got a nice place, ma'am. I've never seen so many crystal blue ponds as what Ohio has.

(They seat themselves on the deck. Hugs all around.)

CECIL

We missed you at the funeral.

JUNE

Where ya'll been so long? Your sister said you all left Oklahoma two days ago.

MARIE

Had some car trouble in Missouri.

WILLIAM

Sure is pretty country, June. I figured I'd tire of all the corn, but it's got its own sort of magic, doesn't it? Reminds me of dry Oklahoma wheat fields the way the wind pushes through it.

JUNE

Ya'll want a Coors? We got the good stuff here. None of that 3.2 crap that passes for beer in Oklahoma.

MARIE

We can't stay long. The car trouble ran us behind. Better not.

JUNE

You can stay long enough for a beer.

WILLIAM

Got Sam Adams?

JUNE

We got us a fancy pants here don't we? This is a divided house. Budweiser or Coors, and you *will* be judged harshly according to which you choose.

WILLIAM

I'll pass.

JUNE

Coors it is. Cecil, get this man a beer.

(CECIL places three beers in front of WILLIAM and opens each one.)

CECIL

(harsh)

June said drink. I haven't seen this girl in years. You got time to sit a minute.

(to MARIE, accusatory)

Where you been?

MARIE

Oklahoma. You know that.

CECIL

I mean where you been. We've been to Oklahoma three times in nine years. We ain't seen you.

MARIE

I've been busy, Cecil.

CECIL

Too busy to see your family? A thousand miles we drove. Three times in nine years.

MARIE

I'm here, now.

JUNE

Leave her alone. This girl didn't come by here to get chewed out.

CECIL

We get to see your mom and your sister. Not you. And now here you are, late for your own daddy's funeral.

JUNE

Cecil.

MARIE

Every time you guys have a reunion, I'm busy. And as for the funeral—

CECIL

I just want to know what's more important than family.

JUNE

None of your business. Now leave her alone.

ANGIE

(diffusing CECIL)

Hey, Marie, you used to run around with that Hannah Lynn didn't you?

MARIE

Some.

ANGIE

Did you hear she screwed a Rottweiler a month after you left?

WILLIAM

She what?

(All except MARIE and WILLIAM laugh.)

ANGIE

Look at his face.

MARIE

How do you know that, Angie? Did you see her? Did you watch?

ANGIE

Whole bunch of us did. Even her brother was there.

WILLIAM

Her brother watched her fuck a dog?

(Big laughs again.)

JUNE

Man, you didn't know what you were getting into up here, did you? Ya'll ever think about tying the knot?

(WILLIAM drinks heavily.)

JUNE (CONT'D)

Your sister says you're headed to New York after graduation. Going to some art school.

MARIE

Yes.

JUNE

She also says this boy's not going with you.

MARIE

He still has a year left of school after me.

JUNE

He ought to be going with you.

WILLIAM

She wants to do it on her own.

MARIE

We talked about it, June. He might come out the year after.

JUNE

Your mother's worried about it. That's not right. (to WILLIAM) You move with her and save that woman some wrinkles. A pretty girl's got no business in New York by herself.

MARIE

It's a year away, June. Anything could happen in that time.

JUNE

Yeah, and you could get mugged and murdered if you're not careful.

MARIE

I could get mugged and murdered if I am careful.

ANGIE

Oh, hey, did you pass by Opa's land on your way out?

MARIE

Didn't get a chance to.

ANGIE

You should see it. It's junkier than ever. I figured he would have cleaned it up after Oma died.

JUNE

That old man didn't give a wit about Mama or that land.

MARIE

He loved Oma plenty from what I saw.

JUNE

If he loved her so much then why didn't he take care of her when she got the Alzheimer's?

MARIE

He was good to me.

JUNE

Then you're the only one. He got cheated out of the land just before he died, which was good enough for him.

MARIE

Why you say that? Maybe he didn't know how to take care of Oma.

CECIL

She says it because it's true. If he liked you then you were the only one. He let that old woman dry up and forget the baby daughter they lost.

MARIE

If I lost a daughter I'd want to forget. Maybe he did her favor by not reminding her, if that's how it happened.

CECIL

That's how it happened.

MARIE

Okay. I'm just saying maybe it was a blessing.

JUNE

Well, I hated him.

ANGIE

Marie, how old were you when your daddy ran off?

MARIE

Thirteen.

JUNE

Thought you were younger. Well, either way, we're real sorry for your loss.

CECIL

I wouldn't call it much of a loss.

JUNE

Cecil.

MARIE

Hadn't seen him in years.

ANGIE

Well, maybe that's good. He scared me.

JUNE

He ran around on your mother quite a bit. You were probably too young to have known about that.

WILLIAM

I guess it's a big secret how he died. Nobody seems to know.

MARIE

I told you he had heart trouble.

CECIL

A pissed off crank-head put windshield wiper fluid in his whiskey is what happened. Turns out drug dealers prefer getting paid for their product. What I don't know is what your mother saw in him.

JUNE

He didn't hit you girls, did he? I told your mother a hundred times to look out for that man. I kept an eye out for you, you know?

ANGIE

Man was he scary.

JUNE

Only thing I can figure (spreads her hands to indicate a measurement) was he must have been good in bed.

MARIE

June, that is inappropriate.

JUNE

Well, you got to wonder.

ANGIE

(giggly)

Yeah, Mom, how crude.

(JUNE turns her palms up in mock supplication. WILLIAM finishes his beer.)

WILLIAM

Marie, we've stayed longer than we meant to. Let's go.

ANGIE

Ya'll stay. I have an air mattress we can blow up.

JUNE

This girl's antsy to leave. Let her go.

MARIE

Yes, I am.

(MARIE and WILLIAM turn to leave without a word of goodbye.)

JUNE

Now when you're rich and famous in New York, don't forget your kin.

MARIE

I'm driving.

WILLIAM

Yeah, that six-point has me heavy-headed.

MARIE

No, this time I want to be at the wheel when I leave this place.

(Marie stops.)

WILLIAM

What is it?

MARIE

Nothing.

WILLIAM

Forget something back there?

MARIE

No.

WILLIAM

We're sort of a target standing here. One of them notices us and we'll never get to leave in time.

MARIE

Nothing does.

WILLIAM

Nothing does what?

MARIE

Leave in time.

END

Black Night Ranch

"Sheep are born to die," James Carl said, pointing his syringe at Billy. "They think that's their purpose. We want their wool. They want to die. The trick is to make the stupid son-of-a-bitches think you want them dead." He vaccinated with authority, tossing sheep aside like wool blankets when he finished with each one.

"They'll spite you that way and live. Don't baby them. Make them think you're stabbing them to death."

James Carl and Billy had hanging around their necks clear bags of sheep dope with long rubber hoses attached to needles big as framing nails. The sheep were packed tight into the twenty-foot pen, squirming and crawling over one another like maggots. Every time James Carl tossed one, the whole bunch erupted into isolated geysers of sheep. Billy kept losing his balance in the melee,

exasperating the beasts. It was the uncertainty of it. Falling. They couldn't stand it. An old ewe leapt at Billy's head, dragging the needle in his hand with her. The chisel end of the needle carved a deep line in Billy's cheek. The ewe's front hooves clawed his back as she made her way over.

"Fucking sheep."

"Don't baby them," James Carl said, tossing two animals at once. He was in a hurry. A group of Mexican shearers were due at his ranch by noon, and he wanted to be ready for them. Billy had been looking forward to the shearing ever since waking up. All through breakfast James Carl had talked about it. He said they could shear a sheep in less than two minutes, and if they brought the young one called Miguel with them, then Billy would really get to see fast.

"And quit that cussing. Your parents didn't let you, and I ain't either," James Carl said.

Billy climbed out of the pen.

"Where you going? I see three unmarked backs."

Though it was more of a bad scratch than a cut, Billy touched a finger to his cheek and tongued it from the inside. He didn't know much about sheep. Before Bird Creek Bridge gave way three months earlier, taking Billy's parents forever with it, his family had run a few cows, but never sheep. He'd gotten the job and moved in with his father's old friend, James Carl, mostly because the rancher was lonely, but the official reason was that Billy knew Spanish. Or rather, he was supposed to know Spanish. James Carl owned the only sheep ranch in Hughes County, Oklahoma, and every spring he hired Mexicans out of South Texas to shear his flock. Lonely as he'd been the ten years since his wife left, he frustrated himself into great depressions when he couldn't communicate with the only company he ever had. He'd said that very thing to Billy the day of the funeral. Billy's dad, who'd been proud of how well Billy did in school, had bragged about his son being so smart in one language that he took up another one. That had

impressed James Carl. But while Billy recognized words when he saw them on paper, and he did well in class, in truth he understood little spoken Spanish. Nonetheless, he was fresh out of high school and fresh out of parents, and James Carl took him in.

“Don't worry about the cut. Them's antibiotics,” James Carl said. He caught up with the last three sheep and had them stuck and marked before Billy could get back across the fence. “Just get the gate.”

James Carl was a big man. Notoriously big. He was so big that when people saw him for the first time, they'd say out loud, “Goddamn, that is a big man.” When he walked his steps were so far apart his gait looked like slow motion to Billy. His fists were as wide as Billy's head, and he could lift four sheep at once when their wool was thick. And since Dog, the only sheep dog on the Black Night Ranch, couldn't herd, protect, or do anything else that a sheep dog was supposed to do, that's how they often had to move them. By hand, five at a time. Billy's one to James Carl's four. It took a long time to move the animals like that, but usually, even if Dog was around, he’d spend more time scattering the sheep than anything else. Billy wasn't crazy about Dog. Sometimes when James Carl left the front door of the house open, Dog nosed his way into bed with Billy. Billy slept heavy and never noticed until he either woke up with the mutt or else itching from the dirty black hairs, cockleburs, or ticks the animal left behind. Even thinking of Dog made Billy itchy.

Billy opened the gate at the end of the pen furthest from James Carl. To the sheep the opening must have looked like an entrance to hell because the front lines facing the gate were impenetrable. They weren't going. James Carl kicked and pushed from his end, but the gray mass absorbed him like a pond takes a pebble. Finally, letting out a series of spooky high-

pitched yelps, the big man grabbed a lamb and threw him over the top of the horde. It was a half-eared lamb they called Sonny, who had only been on the ground a little over a month.

James Carl, who called every dog he ever owned Dog, named all his sheep. Few had simple names like Sonny did. Most were called things like That Bitch Ewe Who Almost Killed Me, The Lamb Who Got Tangled in the Fence That Time, or Billy's favorite, The Ram with One Nut. Sonny was named after James Carl's father, Sonny, who, a few years before he died, had gotten half an ear kicked off by an emu. Sonny landed beyond the open gate and ran. The rest of the sheep, looking at one another for reassurance and apparently not finding it, dug in after him, emptying the pen into the pasture where the rest waited to be sheared.

After rounding up all but a few dozen stragglers hiding somewhere on the rancher's three-thousand acres, they were ready for the Mexicans. James Carl told Billy to start plowing the upper three-hundred and twenty acres, the 320 for short, and that he would call him when their company arrived.

Billy had barely climbed in the Big R Versatile tractor when he spotted six or seven wild dogs working the tree line to the north. They were a long way away, but he knew they were dogs. They don't hunch up all timid-like and prance the way coyotes do. Dogs are worse than coyotes. Braver. Smarter, too, which made them bad news for sheep. These looked especially menacing to Billy the way they slithered in and out of the timber like a snake. About a thousand yards east and upwind of the dogs were a group of thirteen sheep, five ewes and their lambs.

Billy picked up the CB handset and radioed back to James Carl, who was supposed to be preparing a barbecue pit by the shearing barn.

"Found the stragglers. We got dogs on them," Billy said, but he realized that from where the shearing barn was he was right in the line of fire. In a hurry he added, "The dogs are behind me." He made a hard right turn so the dogs would progress past him.

Five minutes after radioing and hearing no response from James Carl, Billy saw a ewe go down. She kicked her back legs high in the air before falling. Over the noise of the tractor, he hadn't heard the rifle report, but he'd often seen deer kick the same way. It meant the ewe was likely heart-shot. It also meant James Carl mistook his sheep for dogs. While Billy fumbled for the CB, he saw another ewe collapse, and he dropped the handset. A lamb then spun to the ground. The dogs were about two-hundred yards from the sheep when the lead dog broke and ran for them, the rest of the pack following. The sheep stood looking in the wrong direction until Billy honked his horn. As the sheep turned toward the tractor, they caught sight of the dogs and fled into the timber out of Billy's sight. When the dogs were nearly at the spot where the sheep disappeared, the sheep re-emerged and ran straight at the dogs. All but one.

A lamb separated from the group and ran flat out across the newly plowed field toward the tractor. When it got close enough, Billy saw one of its ears was half gone, which was strange because Sonny was supposed to be with the others they'd rounded up that morning. At first it looked like he was headed back to the pasture he'd escaped from and was going to cross in front of the tractor, but instead the lamb cut hard just short of the Versatile and took cover under it. Versatiles like the Big R were enormous and difficult to maneuver. The tires alone were taller than he was, and there were eight of those. As fast as Sonny was running, the tractor must have looked parked. Billy heard and felt nothing, but he knew he got the lamb because it never came out the other side. He shut the tractor off and climbed out, mindful of James Carl's position at the barn. With Sonny coming at him like he had, Billy had lost track of the other sheep.

Shots echoed off the timberline from the north. Billy couldn't see anything that James Carl might be shooting at by that time. He also couldn't find Sonny.

“Break down?” James Carl asked over the CB. Billy climbed back into the cab to answer him.

“Ran over Sonny.”

“Anything salvageable?”

“Can't find him.”

“Quit plowing and go gather up what woolies you can find.”

“How come you shot those sheep?” Billy asked.

“What sheep?”

“Those sheep up there I radioed about.” Billy waited long for a response.

“My goddamn eyes. Who'd I kill?”

“Not sure, but three.”

“Shit. All right. Just get the dead.”

Billy drove the Versatile a quarter-mile across the field and parked on the timberline where he last saw the dogs. He loaded the three sheep that James Carl had killed, pulling them on top of the plow. He found some old, rusty barbed wire rolled up and looped over a fence post and used it to tie them to the frame. He had expected to find one or two more dead, or at least some evidence that a couple had been killed by the dogs, but instead, he found seven strung out along a short path on Wewoka Creek, which was the east border of the property. He couldn't believe the waste. Two went unaccounted for. He assumed they had been killed and carried off, but the fact the dogs had killed seven and let them lay was odd. And then there was Sonny,

plowed under somewhere on the lower half of the 320. Billy drove the tractor and sheep to the shearing barn. James Carl looked over the dead.

"Ten? Damn. Just three were mine? I shot eight times."

"Just the three."

"The Ewe I Hate and One Eye ran with this group."

"I didn't find them," Billy said.

"Did a headcount. They ain't with the rest. Why'd Sonny split off from the others?" Billy didn't know. He also didn't know why James Carl would ask him. He knew Billy didn't know anything about sheep. "Sheep don't split up. Don't make sense. Why'd those dogs kill so many?" Billy didn't know that either. From the recent lack of ticks in his bed, and the fact that he hadn't seen Dog around, Billy thought he'd been missing a couple of days, but he wasn't willing to mention it without something concrete to say about it.

"Instinct never failed an animal so much as a damn sheep. Untie my three. I'll skin them and hang them in the smokehouse. Take the rest to the bone yard in the pecan orchard. How's your eyes? You see good?"

Billy told him his eyes were fine, but that he was only a fair shot with open sights.

"Can't be any worse than me. I reckon you better start carrying the rifle, at least until I get a scope for it."

Billy had only been working with James Carl the three months since his parents died, and already he was used to seeing sheep do things that made no sense. He was used to seeing them get killed. They ran into barbed wire fences, off cliffs, into slow moving dirt road traffic, and other such nonsense on a regular basis. Apparently he and his boss could add running under tractors and straight at dogs to the list of stupid things sheep do.

"Maybe Sonny was retarded," James Carl said with serious wonder. "Get back to plowing. I'm going go find the hole he slipped through. I'll yell at you when the Mexicans get here." It was his last word on the subject of Sonny.

Billy didn't say anything, but he didn't think Sonny was retarded. For one thing, the lamb had been the only one to find the hole in the fence, which Billy thought was smart. And had he not run under the Versatile, splitting off from the rest of the sheep would have proven a wise move. He considered it a huge oversight on the part of James Carl for him to think a lamb running from dogs pointed to low intelligence.

Sweating, Billy climbed back into the Versatile. It had been a dry year. A drought if you listened to farmers. Farmers couldn't be trusted when it came to weather, though. They'll tell you it's either too wet to get the wheat up or too dry for it to grow. Billy had never met a farmer yet who had a good year where weather was concerned. But it was dry that morning, that's for sure. The wind had blown all during the night before and dried the ground to a powder by daylight.

Dust puffed in through the cracks of the cab. Billy tied a bandana around his nose. Soon it was too soaked with snot to be of use. He took the bandana off and leaned over the gear shifts. Eyes squinting and nose dripping like hydraulic fluid, he thought about James Carl. He had never known a tougher man. For years he'd heard his father talk about *the* James Carl Henry who could lift Hemi blocks without a cherry picker and who stepped over gates instead of opening them.

When Billy was six, he and his father were fishing a roadside pond when he first saw James Carl. At that time the man wore a thick black beard. He was looking for Billy's father in

order to trade him a beefalo for a .223 Remington rifle. Billy saw him step out of his Chevy one-ton and walk toward them.

Billy said, “Daddy, there's a really big man coming.”

“What do you think that man wants?” Billy's father asked, casting his line.

“I don't know. He looks mad.”

“Think we ought to run or fight it out?”

“I think we ought to run.”

After that Billy found it fascinating to hear all the stories about the big man. James Carl once took on a band of Hell's Angels sixty miles away in Lehigh, Oklahoma, back when being a Hell's Angel had nothing to do with parades or charities. Back when all outlaw motorcycle gangs called themselves Hell's Angels. Outside the only bar in Lehigh, for fun he kicked one of their bikes to the ground. After a short chase down unfamiliar dirt roads, he wound up taking twenty-three stabs in a wheat field. Billy had heard his father tell the story many times.

Shortly after being hired on, and in a rare moment of courage, Billy had asked his boss about the stabbing. The courage to raise the question resulted from James Carl having burned the palms of both his hands when Billy had mistakenly tried to open the hood on the feed truck he was driving. What Billy had thought was steam rolling from under the hood, James Carl had realized was actually smoke. He had knocked the boy out of the way and burned himself instead. He had talked Billy through how to bandage his hands for him, and in the moment, though Billy had felt responsible for getting his boss burned, he'd also felt a kind of safety and trust in doctoring the man's burns. In feeling that sense of safety, Billy asked about Lehigh. James Carl said it was the prettiest stand of wheat he ever saw. He claimed it's what saved him. Said the wheat sang to him and kept him from bleeding out. Billy didn't much buy it, but he

wouldn't have been the one to disagree. Two of those stabs were to James Carl's neck, and not pocket knife stabs either. All his scars were at least an inch wide. Those bikers had used big knives.

Starting to doze into his daydream, the CB cracked. “Wake up, goddamn it.”

Billy hit the brakes and looked up. He had been veering off into a cut in the timber toward the creek. James Carl must have seen him and figured he had gone to sleep.

“I'm awake.”

“The Mexicans are here. Park the tractor and come on.”

James Carl did the introductions. “Billy, these are the Mexicans. Mexicans, this is Billy. Tell them how many head we got and ask them how long's it going to take. Not that I care. I just like to know. I'll go get some ice for the water cooler.” James Carl carried the water can to the house.

Billy wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve. Words passed back and forth through his head, but he was afraid to say them. He knew that once spoken, he'd be expected to make sense of the words that would come back at him. He pretended to spot something important on the ground, bent to pick up a rock, and stuffed it in his pocket. He wiped his nose again. A square-faced man stepped forward and handed Billy a red bandana. Billy took it but didn't know what to do with it. The man motioned to his face like wiping his nose and Billy got it. Even though Billy already had a bandana, he nodded a “thank you” to the man and blew his nose into it. It smelled of lemons. The Mexican pulled a blue bandana from his pocket to show him he had another and motioned for Billy to keep the one he'd handed him. Billy nodded again but said nothing.

A boy about fifteen, Billy guessed, stepped out from behind the others. The boy looked toward the sheep gathered out in the pasture.

“Looks like two-thousand. He thinks you speak Spanish, huh?” the boy said.

“I can read it.”

“Tell him we will do it in one day and one half.”

“Okay,” Billy said.

The boy leaned in close and whispered, “Drink whiskey?”

The sound of James Carl closing the house door straightened the boys. The rancher returned with a five-gallon orange water can filled and ready. He took Billy aside. “What'd Miguel say?”

“That was Miguel?”

“I've been gone ten minutes, and ya'll didn't so much as introduce yourself?”

“No.”

James Carl got loud. “Did you talk sheep at all or what? Pimples and jacking off?”

“He said it would take the rest of today and half of tomorrow.”

“Twenty-three hundred head? Seven Mexicans? You misheard.”

“No.”

James Carl thought about it. “I guess that boy's got faster.”

The Mexicans rigged up, tested their shears, and donned their chaps, but mostly they waited for sheep. James Carl and Billy ended their conversation and herded in the animals from the pasture through hog panel corrals they'd rigged up for that purpose. After getting ahead of the shearers by five-hundred head, James Carl sat in lawn chair in the shade of an elm growing beside the shearing barn. He opened an ice chest full of beer and watched.

The shed was set up with ten shearing stalls, which were just plywood cubicles with eight-foot tall burlap bags hanging in wooden racks in the corner of each one. Each stall was six feet wide and had a back and two sides. The front was open to the outside. Billy helped Miguel's little brother stuff the bags with shorn wool, and when each bag was full, James Carl left his beer and hoisted the little boy into the sacks so he could tamp the wool down. Billy noted the little boy was wide between the eyes, and though he wasn't clumsy, it appeared he never really looked at anything. Like he looked past everything. He was a pleasant boy, though, and stayed steady.

Billy's hands, already soft from handling the wool every day, turned yellowish-brown and grew foul from the stink of it. He wiped his hands on his pants but couldn't rid himself of its stickiness.

"Lanolin," James Carl said from the shade. "Wool's got lanolin in it. Give up, you ain't getting it off. Look at your boots." Billy's boots glistened in the rich grease. "They won't be leaking for a while."

"It's like ear wax," Billy said.

"Quit stuffing a minute. Watch that boy shear."

Billy had been working so hard to keep up that he hadn't been able to watch the shearing like he'd meant to. Miguel kicked a sheep loose two-to-one faster than the next fastest. James Carl timed him.

"Goddamn." He showed the stopwatch to Billy.

"It looked fast. Was it fast?"

"The record is about twenty seconds slower than his average. That one was twenty-seven seconds." James Carl timed again. "Twenty-nine seconds. Look how he hardly nicks them."

Miguel was beautiful. The sheep, quiet, docile in his hands, trusted the boy. Where the other men occasionally had to struggle to get the sheep positioned just right, Miguel molded them between his legs exactly the way he wanted the first time. He never repositioned until he was ready to turn them to his shears, and he never grabbed an animal that went rank in his hands, not even the moody rams.

At the day's end, two-thousand one-hundred and nine sheep were sheared. Nine-hundred and seventy-two were Miguel's alone. With less than two-hundred sheep to go, the Mexicans were antsy to finish, but James Carl refused to string lights in the shed. Instead, he built a great fire in the pit he'd dug earlier. A white man fire, he called it. He spit a gimp yearling and feasted them on mutton and beer. When everyone had their bellies full and their heads buzzing, he ordered Billy to get two cots from out of the shed behind the house.

“Me and you are going to sleep outside with them tonight,” he said.

Billy fetched the two cots and started setting them up beside the fire. The Mexicans looked uneasy about it. It was clear they didn't know if the cots were for them or for James Carl and Billy.

“Explain it to them, Billy. They look scared.”

“Explain what?”

“I don't want them thinking we don't trust them. Just tell them we feel like sleeping under the stars tonight. The fat one plays guitar. I might get my fiddle. Tell him I'm better than last year.” Billy waited for his boss to walk away liked he had before. The big man waited to see what was said.

“Well?” James Carl asked.

Billy looked for Miguel but didn't see him. "They're shy, and only Miguel will talk to me."

"They've been chattering all day. They ain't looked shy to me."

"But Miguel—"

"Billy," James Carl said, raising his voice, "if the next word out of your mouth ain't some Mexican gibberish I can't understand, then I don't want to hear another word."

"*Dormir?*" Billy said.

"Good, but look at them when you're talking. They're the Spanish speakers, now ain't they?"

Billy turned to the group of Mexicans, who had grown silent as James Carl's voice had risen. Miguel walked up. Billy searched the boy's face, then said, "*Dormir. Quere dormir.*"

Miguel nodded to him. "We will, too, then."

"I'm a dirty bastard," James Carl said, looking at Billy. "I had me a feeling about this." He walked off toward the house. "Put the cots up."

Watching his boss walk away, Billy thought he should say something. Anything. Explain himself somehow. He wanted to tell him how he would try to learn how to speak it and how he knows how to read it, but what came out was, "But my parents—"

James Carl turned back. "What? What about your parents?"

Billy couldn't finish his thought because he didn't have any idea what he had planned to say. It just came out. Embarrassed, he lowered his eyes and stared at the ground.

"I won't put up with a boy who'll run his parents down, particularly when they ain't here to defend themselves. Is that what you intended to do? Tell me it's their fault you lied to me?"

Billy said nothing.

"What then?"

"I don't know," Billy said.

"Well, I don't either. But I know what trust is. Do you?"

When Billy couldn't answer, James Carl walked away.

"You better sleep out here tonight," Miguel said.

"Yeah," Billy said, but he didn't move until his boss was fully out of sight. "Why did you speak English? You got me caught."

"Already caught. I just made it hurry," Miguel said. He spoke to his family in Spanish, which Billy couldn't understand, but when the square-faced one went to the back of their truck and retrieved a blanket for him, he figured out what had been said.

Billy wrapped the blanket around him and pulled a lawn chair close to the warm pit of embers. He sat wondering if he'd be fired, but more than anything, he was just sorry he'd disappointed the man. He'd disappointed people before. So far as he could tell, it was as much his purpose to disappoint as it was the sheep's apparent desire to die. The way James Carl looked at him when he realized he'd been lied to, Billy had seen before. He'd seen it when he let the bottom burn completely out of his mother's favorite bean pot that had been handed down three generations. He'd seen it in his father when he stumbled in one night drunk and bloody. And he'd seen it especially severe in his grandmother when he'd doubted God. But he'd never seen it like it was in James Carl. It felt as different to him as the difference between killing a mouse and a horse. The bigger they are, the more it hurts. There is something in the weight of it. The size. The space a thing takes up in the world. He fell asleep in the chair feeling he had scarred a big piece of the world. A really big piece.

Billy woke, scratching the back of his neck. Miguel's little brother, springing from behind him, giggled and tossed a tuft of wool in Billy's lap. From his cot Miguel shushed him, then pulled a bottle of whiskey from his sleeping bag and offered it to Billy. Billy shook his head "no," but looking at the people sleeping around him and back at the house to see if lights were on, he eased out of his creaking chair and signaled Miguel to follow him.

Billy led Miguel and Miguel's wide-eyed little brother a half mile to the Versatile at the lower edge of the 320. They crawled under the tractor, built a tiny pit fire, and sat in a circle around it.

"How do you shear so fast?" Billy asked.

"Faster I shear, faster I finish," Miguel said passing the whiskey. Miguel's brother reached for the bottle but was passed over. "No."

"He's quiet. What's his name?" Billy asked.

"He has no name."

"I got a name. It is Carlos," the boy said.

"It is not Carlos," Miguel said.

"It is Claudio."

"Stop lying. It is not Claudio either."

"It is Pedro."

"Why did you have to ask his name?"

"I know my name," the boy said, getting agitated. "My name is Jesus. It is Justo. It is Ramiro. It is—"

"*Si*. I am sorry. It is Justo," Miguel said.

"Ramiro."

"I know. Ramiro."

"It is Ramiro."

"I heard you," Miguel said.

"It is."

Billy interrupted, "I'm Billy."

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?" Billy asked.

"We both have names."

"Oh." Billy opened his mouth to ask how old the little boy was, but thought better of it. He guessed him to be about nine or ten. That was close enough.

The little boy stretched out on the ground and fell asleep. Miguel slumped against a tire, drunk. Billy drained the bottle, stood up too fast, and banged his head on the tractor.

"Fuck."

The little boy stirred but didn't wake. Miguel looked long at his brother. "The same voices," he said. "Day and night. Same voices all the time. I am tired listening to sheep. To shears. My hands shake all the time. It is like I am shearing when I am not shearing. I am tired listening to him talking nonsense all the time. It would be worth dying if I never had to hear sheep or shears or him or Mexicans and Americans trying to understand the other."

"Yeah," Billy said.

"You will not be fired, I think," Miguel said.

"Maybe."

"You can learn my language by next year when we come. I did not speak English last year. My brother did not. Tell him that."

"Why would he even need me to speak Spanish if you speak English? He doesn't need me."

"He will. I will not be back," Miguel said. "I am hungry."

"I am hungry, too," Miguel's brother said, waking to the suggestion.

"Too bad one of those stupid sheep hasn't walked by and dropped dead. I bet I could cook mutton better than James Carl," Billy said.

Miguel perked up. "Want to go kill one?" He pulled a cheap looking survival knife from his boot. "It is sharp. Feel," Miguel said handing Billy the knife. It was sharp. He handed it back. Miguel crawled out from under the tractor. His brother sat looking hopeful. "There are too many here. He would never miss one. I say we get one of the woolly ones still in the wood corrals. Easier." He crawled up on the Versatile to get a better look. "I think it is too far for him to hear." Miguel jumped down from the tractor and slid under it to put out the fire.

Billy didn't want to kill any sheep. He'd seen enough dead for one day, but he felt like doing something brave. He felt like taking up a greater space in the world, like James Carl. Billy helped fill in the pit, leaving no visible evidence there had been a fire. He remembered to bury the bottle.

Miguel led the way but hesitated at the timberline. "I get lost in trees," he said. Billy took over and led the boys straight through to the other side where it opened up into another field not yet plowed. Across the field lay the wooden corrals. Miguel out front, they sneaked the last quarter-mile. At the corrals, Miguel's brother put his hand through and let a lamb lick his fingers. He giggled.

"Stay on this side," Miguel said to his brother. Grinning at Billy, Miguel took the knife from his boot and bit down on it.

Climbing over the corral fence, Billy missed a step and fell into the sheep, frightening them. Bleating, the sheep scattered and ran in futile circles around the boys. Miguel took the knife out of his mouth to laugh at Billy lying in the dirt, put it back, and began the chase. Miguel lunged at one, missed, chased another, and missed again. Billy faired about the same, each boy running in drunken circles, laughing and falling, until Billy gave out and crossed the fence. He sat panting in the grass with Miguel's brother, who rocked patiently. Billy heard the gate jangle. Miguel approached carrying a tiny lamb. It looked dead, drooping in his arms. Miguel spit the knife onto the ground. The lamb raised its head, curled comfortably into his arms, and fell asleep.

“I can not do it,” Miguel said. “He jumped in my arms like I was to save him. They all ran. He jumped.”

Billy, feeling big, picked up the knife. “You can't baby sheep.” He tested the knife's edge, wiped it off on his pant leg, and raised the lamb's sleepy head, exposing its neck. He gripped the knife hard, felt for the best spot to cut, and looked up at Miguel. Miguel took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and turned away. Billy lowered the lamb's head. He could see there was more to it than Miguel not wanting to be the one holding the knife. He could see the boy didn't want it killed at all.

“Let's put him back,” Billy said, tossing the knife in the grass.

Miguel relaxed his shoulders and stared up at the sky, his hands slipping to loosely hold the lamb. Seeing the look on Miguel's face, Billy, too, felt a sense of relief. In his periphery, Billy saw Miguel's little brother pick up the knife, but he was too slow to prevent the boy from slitting the lamb's throat. Miguel dropped to the ground with the lamb and tried to stop the flow, but it was a good cut. The lamb was mostly dead.

"Why did you do that?" Miguel pleaded.

"Huh?"

"I said why did you do that? We were going to put it back. I have it all over me. What are we going to do with it? Shit. Shit." Miguel turned to Billy. "Do something."

The little boy put his hand on Miguel's shoulder. "We eat? I am hungry. We eat now?"

Miguel cried, leaning over the lamb.

"We could throw it in the creek," Billy said. Wewoka Creek was only a couple hundred yards away.

"Throw it in a creek? There is blood all over." Miguel stood and walked away from them into the dark. Billy, hearing Miguel's crying intensify, ducked his head and stared at the ground like he always did when he was nervous. He noticed blood had splashed his boot. It beaded up in red half-moons that with a shake rolled to the ground.

Miguel reappeared, calm. He pointed a finger at his brother. "His name is Cordaro." The boy started to correct, but Miguel leapt onto him, pinned him to the ground, and knocked the knife from his hand. "*Cállate el hocico!* I want to hear nothing from you. Hear? *Nada*." Miguel's brother looked vacant, as if focusing on some curious point far beyond his brother. Miguel crawled off of him and went to Billy. He started to cry again but stifled it. He picked the lamb up from the ground and held it like a dead baby. "Which way?"

Billy led him to the creek. It was full of spring rain. Miguel waded chest deep and released the lamb. Watching it float downstream, he washed away the blood, then washed his brother. Billy, sitting on the bank sobering up, caught movement downstream. In the moonlight, he saw Dog slip through the cattails on the opposite side of the creek. He was after the lamb. Billy stood.

"Get," Billy yelled. Dog looked up and saw him but appeared unconcerned.

"*Que?*" Miguel asked, pulling his brother close.

Dog stretched his neck out into the water, nipped at and missed the lamb. He hunkered his haunches. Billy knew he was going to leap. He ran down the bank toward Dog, throwing anything he could grab as he closed the gap between them. Dog was brave, but he wasn't stupid. He abandoned the creek and disappeared into the cattails. Billy slowed when he saw him leave. He waded in and pulled the lamb from the water. Dripping at the river's edge, he saw Miguel staring at him.

"A dog was going to get him," Billy said.

"It is dead."

"Yeah."

Billy heard the familiar diesel cams of the Versatile hammer to a start. Though it was a half mile away, it was clearly the big tractor. When lights washed the tops of the creek willows, he knew James Carl was coming. He saw that Miguel knew it, too.

"Put it back in the water," Miguel said.

Billy laid the lamb in soft grass and walked the incline up and out of the creek to get a better look. The tractor was almost to the corrals. They hadn't bothered to kick dirt over the blood. Miguel and his brother joined Billy.

"He will know," Miguel said. Billy nodded. "Tell him that dog did it. Tell him we chased but too late." In the headlights, Billy saw James Carl standing at the corrals. "Tell him it was the dog," Miguel said again. Billy descended the slope to where he'd laid the lamb. He gathered it in his arms and climbed the rise, stopping beside Miguel. "You will tell him it was the dog?" Miguel asked.

Billy stood looking into the lights now heading his direction. “Stay in the creek bottom. Walk up it until you get to a fence. It goes right across the creek. Follow the fence back to the barn.”

“You will say it was the dog?” Miguel asked.

Billy shook his head.

“It will be bad,” Miguel said.

Billy nodded that it would, and carried the lamb into the lights of the Versatile.