UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

Edmond, Oklahoma

Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

Ka'l Woman

and

Other Short Stories

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

Charles R. Johnson

Edmond, Oklahoma

2017

Ka'l Woman
and
Other Short Stories

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

November 10, 2017

By
Committee Chairperson

Committee Member

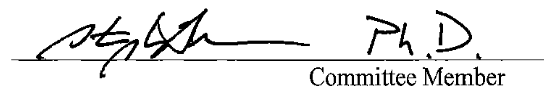
Committee Member

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ii

ABSTRACT OF THESIS . . . . .iii, iv

THESIS TITLE PAGE

KA'L WOMAN 1

NORWEGIAN WINTER (THE BUNKER) 17

CIRCUS CAMP 37

PAIN 55

THE BLUES LIFE 69

TOMMY HAMMER 89

WHISKEY AND SODA 102

NIGHT MOVES (WITH THANKS TO BOB SEGER) 114

SOUTH 40 130

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Garrison for his guidance throughout this journey toward my MFA. Dr. Garrison was fully supportive of what, at first, had to appear to be part of a mid-life crisis ("Steve, I need to feed my artistic side and want to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing . . ."), advising me to take it slow and easy, one class at a time. And when it appeared that, in the middle of work and family and other life stuff, I was actually going to do this and possibly complete the work to achieve my MFA, without hesitation, Dr. Garrison was fully supportive and enthusiastically helped me select the classes that fit my course of study and best fit me, and made it possible for me to reach my goal.

Thanks to Dr. Connie Squires for her consistent support and guidance as the instructor of my very first college class thirty-seven years after I received my bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, and for guiding me through my last short story classes and my thesis more than four years after that first day back in the classroom.

Thanks to Adam Davies, who guided me through the creative non-fiction phase of my studies and showed me a short film called *The Putter*, that taught me more about writing than any other single lesson.

Many thanks to my daughter, Liz, who inspired me to pursue my MFA by pursuing her MBA. We both started classes at the same time . . . she beat me to her degree by two years.

And finally, my deepest gratitude to my wife, Karen, who supported me throughout this work and laughed with me in a motel room in Bentonville, Arkansas until we both nearly cried while reading a story I wrote called The Perfect Child. It is not included in this collection of stories, and will likely never appear in print anywhere, because I want to protect my firstborn's reputation as, yes, the perfect child.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Charles R. Johnson

TITLE: Ka'l Woman and Other Short Stories

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Constance Squires, Ph.D.

PAGES: 146

This is a collection of short stories written by myself as part of my journey toward earning a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in the English Department at the University of Central Oklahoma. Some of these stories were written as part of the ongoing curriculum, specifically workshop courses, and have been edited for this thesis. Several others were written outside of class and compiled to complete the requirements of this thesis.

Throughout my studies in the MFA in Creative Writing program I was influenced by the works of many wonderful writers, especially in the areas of short story and creative non-fiction. Gay Talese and David Foster Wallace demonstrated to me that creative non-fiction can tell a story as well, or better, than almost any other form of story-telling, often through the use of literary journalism and humor. My favorite works from these authors are Frank Sinatra Has a Cold (Talese) and A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again (DFW). Short stories by Rick Bass (The Hermit's Story), Alice Munro (Save the Reaper) and John Cheever (The Enormous Radio and The Swimmer) provided guidance and influence on my writing in that genre. Bass' unique ability to tell stories about the unseen reality in a variety of settings, and his wonderful talent of creating amazing detail caused me, as the reader, to become absorbed into an oftentimes unfamiliar environment and to more easily understand the motivation of his characters. Much the same goes for Munro. I found her thorough and deep development of characters, especially women, to be very revealing and emotionally intense and often the specificity of her prose lulled me into a sense of comfort and then surprised me with some kind of new, disquieting, often dark, reality. Cheever always created a memorable time and place for his stories, which is something I try hard to do when I create my own fiction.

While I concentrated my studies on creative non-fiction and short story, I found myself drawn to short story as the genre for my thesis. As a former journalist, I enjoy reading non-fiction, but as a creative writer, I enjoy writing fiction. I believe the process of writing fiction, of escaping one's own reality and entering into an alternate reality and

creating something or someone that doesn't actually exist, is extremely challenging—and exhausting. Yet, when all is said and done, the end result—when I am surprised by and actually like what I've written—is more rewarding.

Yet, for me, it wasn't always that way. It took the patience and guidance of my teachers, especially Connie Squires and Adam Davies, to help me reach that place. For example, through them, I learned to find ways to make my fiction contain a bit more conflict, allowing for the creation of more flawed characters that seem more real to the reader. I also learned a great deal about developing story ideas, new ways of looking at things and developing characters by reading other authors, many of whom I have mentioned above. And I learned patience. To slowly and finely hone my stories, sentence by sentence, word by word, until I was satisfied with the result (or as satisfied as I could be before I had to turn them in!).

All of the stories in this collection are works of fiction. While some of the characters in these stories are based, in part, on people I have encountered throughout my life, names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of my imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. None of the events depicted in the stories actually occurred as written.

Ka'l Woman

And Other Short Stories

Ka'l Woman

Nestled in the Olympic National Park, ninety miles west of Seattle, as the crow flies over Elliott Bay and Bainbridge Island and the Hood Canal, across the entire range of the Olympic Mountains, where the Quinault, the Hoh and the Queets rivers run protected, lives the Hoh Rainforest. One hundred and seventy inches—just shy of fourteen feet—of rain drenches the temperate rainforest's loamy earth every year. Huge Sitka spruce and western hemlock live there, some ancient, some stretching upward three hundred feet, striving for every bit of the sun's energy they can consume. A twenty-five-foot rope could only just reach around the base of many of the old forest sentinels.

Douglas fir, western red cedar, big leaf maple, red alder, vine maple and black cottonwood grow densely around them. Mosses and lichens drape in massive clumps from branches; Oregon oxalis and ferns fan out on the ground like tight-knit strands in a carpet. Nearly every space in this place is taken up with a living plant. Some of them even live on others; these are the epiphytes. They never come in contact with the earth. Their seedlings germinate on fallen, decaying trees and send roots down through the dying trunks to the ground. After decades, maybe more, when the log rots away, rows of young trees are left standing on stilt-like roots.

The astonishing immensity of the trees and their innate tendency to feel most comfortable when growing close together, reaching out for each other, occasions the rainforest to be a dark place. Damp and dark; an ecosystem all its own. The air is heavy with the peaty bouquet of mud and decomposing flora. It is a realm that eventually

welcomes its inhabitants back to the earth so that new life may be conceived and nurtured. It is a place that has challenged the courage and persistence of human trespassers for thousands of years, and has even closed its arms around some, whose fate will forever remain unknown. Throughout the millennia, the rainforest has been a place of wonder and mystery and imaginative lore.

From the failing back door of the moss-laden log cabin on Lake Quinault, the soft narrow hiking trail meandered through tall grass in the unkempt yard and led Ben and Karin Harrison and their two children, eight-year-old Nils and six-year-old Lise, into the Hoh National Rainforest. The Hoh is one of just a handful of true rainforests in North America, most of which reside along the Pacific Coast from Kodiak Island in Alaska to Northern California. Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the Appalachian Mountains is home to the only other temperate rainforest in the United States.

On that Saturday, the Harrisons had left the cabin an hour ago, venturing out on their first foray into the rainforest.

"I don't like it here," Lise said. "It's scary."

Karin looked at Ben in an attempt to gauge his mood.

"Maybe we should head back, it is getting a little dark," Karin said.

The whole month of June had been cold and wet in the Puget Sound area, but on Thursday the sun broke through and the forecast looked good for the weekend. Ben and Karin decided to finally take their old friends—Terry and Mary Reid—up on their offer to let them use their cabin on Lake Quinault for a couple of days. It would be a good break for them all. It had been a tough spring; the family's eight-year-old yellow lab,

Bird, had been diagnosed with leukemia in mid-March and six weeks later had to be put down. It had been particularly tough on the kids. Plus, because of what turned out to be a false lead on the notorious Green River Killer, Ben had been bogged down at the TV station, working days as well as his normal night anchoring duty trying to substantiate the story. He hadn't even been able to be home when Karin had to call the neighbor girl to come over to stay with the kids while she took Bird to the vet to say goodbye for the last time. On her own, Karin stayed strong as she explained to the kids what had happened and comforted them when they cried themselves to sleep. When Ben got home after the late news, the kids were asleep and Karin was finally able to let go. She cried most of the night. So did Ben.

"Let's just work our way around that pond before we head back," Ben said.

Slightly ahead and to the left was a small, quiet pond that, despite getting little or no sunshine to its surface, even on a bright, sunny day, was nearly covered with red algae and enormous India green lily pads sprouting tiny bright yellow blooms. Ben stopped at the edge of the water.

"I think this is the very spot where the Ka'l woman originated," Ben said.

"What did you say, Dad?" Nils said.

"Yes, what did you say?" Karin said, looking at Ben with more than a bit of skepticism.

Ben's eyes slowly scanned from left to right, peering over the pond toward the darkness of the forest, as if it possessed secrets that only it could tell.

“Yep, I’m pretty sure this is it,” Ben said, glancing at Karin with a, “just go with me on this” look. “I read about it at work. I wanted to find out about the area before we came, so I did some reading about the forest.”

Karin knew Ben was about to add to the lore of the rainforest.

“You read about the forest?” Lise asked, sidling up to Ben, taking his hand in hers. “Where did you read about the forest?”

Normally, Lise wasn’t timid, but an hour in the oppressive greyness of the Hoh was beginning to erode her adventurous spirit.

“I read it in an old book, it was the story of a spirit, honey,” Ben said. “A spirit that, to this day, haunts this forest. The spirit of the Ka’l woman.”

The whish of a warm gentle breeze filtered through the tops of the trees, rustling the leaves, and suddenly the screeching call of a Stellars jay pierced the silence.

“What did it say, Dad? What did the story say?”

Back in the beginning, long before the way things are now, long before houses and streets and toys, and long before almost everything we know, deep in the rainforest there were birds and frogs and a little pond. It was at that pond that the forces of nature gathered to talk about what they needed to protect the forest, to make it a sacred place, to ensure that it would be able to exist long into the future. They believed the forest would need to be protected from what they knew would become a threat to its very existence. Somehow the forces of nature, the wind and rain and sun, knew that soon people would want to come to the forest and that some of them would want to do things they shouldn’t. They knew that some of those people would want to cut down the trees and to scrape

away the ferns and the beautiful forest flowers and to put houses and buildings and streets where the forest is.

So, the forces of nature talked about creating a fierce wind that would keep the people out. A wind so ferocious and cold that anyone who wanted to go into the forest would be forced to turn back and to leave the forest alone. But they knew that such a wind would sweep all the birds and frogs and other animals away, too. That it would freeze the water and ravage the trees so that the forest itself would not be able to live. It would turn into a cold, barren place where nothing could survive. The forces of nature agreed that this would not be the way to protect the forest.

They talked about creating a rain so heavy that anyone who wanted to come into the forest would be turned away and obliged to leave the forest alone. But then, the forces of nature realized that such a rain would cause a huge flood and destroy the homes of all the creatures that lived there. That it would wash away the earth necessary to nourish and support the trees and plants. They realized the forest would turn into a flat, barren place unfit for all living things. So, the forces of nature agreed that a flood would be a bad thing.

They asked, what else could we do that would protect the forest? How about causing the sun to shine so intensely that it would raise the temperature in the forest to a level so high that it would be intolerable for people to be there? They would become so hot and parched that they would be compelled to leave or die from thirst. Of course, it didn’t take the forces of nature long to realize that such extreme heat would be bad not only for people who would want to hurt the forest, but for all living things. It would cause the trees to lose their leaves, the plants to wilt and the ponds to dry up. Then all

living things in the forest would dry out and die from thirst. Soon, there would be nothing left but a vast desert where nothing could survive. The forces of nature knew they could never let that happen.

After much thought and consideration and examination of every possibility they could think of, they decided that the best way to protect the forest from people was with other people. They had to create a people of their own. They had to create a people that loved the rainforest more than they did. They needed to create someone that would make the rainforest their home and care for it and nurture it, someone that would protect it and keep it for as long as they lived, at almost any cost. They created the Ka'l woman.

"And I think this is the very spot where those forces of nature did it," Ben said.

"How do you know? I mean, how do you know it's right here?" Nils asked. "It could be just about anywhere, right?"

Karin raised an eyebrow at Ben and glanced at her watch.

"Well, son, the story tells of a round pond at the center of the rainforest, called Woman's Pond, one just like this. And it tells of how the Ka'l woman came from the pond . . ."

The forces of nature were seers; they looked into the future and saw that there would likely be two kinds of people . . . good and evil. They were, of course, concerned about the evil people and the damage they might do to the rainforest. So, they knew they had to create good people to defend the forest against people who would do harm. The problem was they didn't know which people would be good and which would be evil.

They didn't know whether some people could be both. So, they worried. They worried that they would create the wrong kind of people and that they could cause more harm to the forest than good. But eventually, they decided that they couldn't just sit idly by and watch the ruin of the forest and that they had to do something. In the end, the forces of nature reasoned that if they were to combine all of the most precious ingredients of the forest to create people, then it made sense that those people would be good.

With pure love and extraordinarily deliberate and patient care, the forces of nature searched every bit of the forest, the top of every tree, the bottom of every pond, underneath every plant and leaf on the ground, every branch, root, every bit of moss, lichen, bark and sap. They spoke with every bird. The ducks, the dunlins, the herons, the killdeer and the kingfisher. The cormorants, the sparrows, the woodpeckers, even the great bald eagle. They heard from every turtle, frog and salamander. They even talked with the snails and toads, and listened to the bees and flies and mosquitoes. Elk and deer, raccoon and bobcat, the cougar and the black bear had their say. They were searching for all the goodness they could gather together to create good people.

After a hundred years, when the forces of nature decided they finally had everything they needed, every bit of goodness they could find, they gathered at a beautiful round pond in the center of the forest. The pond was covered in a brilliant red blanket of algae and huge, deep green lily pads with tiny, intense yellow flowers growing from them. Together, they molded all the goodness they had into the form of a woman and very carefully, very gently carried her to the edge of the pond. They knew that once they put her into the pond, after another hundred years, she would rise up out of the water in the form of a human being, beautiful and good, to become the mother of all Ka'l

people. They knew that all of her goodness would spread throughout her descendants who would then become the protectors of the rainforest.

But, because they were so focused on the task at hand, they lost sight of their other responsibilities, and unexpectedly, before they could place their woman into the water, the sun disappeared, the wind whirled around and around and cold sheets of rain began to fall. Momentarily startled by the change, the forces of nature lost their grip and let their creation fall to the ground. But, just as quickly as the change had come, the light suddenly peeked through the trees, the air became still and the rain stopped falling. Confused, the forces of nature looked around and realized what they had done. They looked down and saw their woman lying on a bed of nettles near the edge of the pond. Gently, they gathered around her, lifted and raised her up high so that they could see if any damage had been done. They examined her very carefully, looking for any change. It had taken a hundred years to gather all the goodness and they knew that they were running out of time before other people might come to the forest. They couldn't start over again; it would take too long.

Just as if the whole forest depended on it, they scrutinized every tiny bit of the woman. Head to toe, side to side, top to bottom, they looked for any change. The process took many days, maybe even weeks, upsetting the rhythm of the forces of nature and delaying their intentions. Yet, despite this interruption, they were unable to detect any damage to their creation. Not one. So, they resumed their task of gently placing her in the pond, hoping that over the next hundred years all the love and care they put into their creation would nurture the good woman they knew they needed to protect the forest for all time. And so they did.

But what they didn't know is when they dropped her on the nettles, the tiniest, almost microscopic poisonous spine had, in fact, somehow become affixed in the woman. There was no way they could have known because that miniscule needle had been embedded under the surface of all that goodness and couldn't be seen. So, the forces of nature ever so gently lay the woman on the surface of the pond and lovingly watched as she slowly descended to the bottom with the greatest of hopes and expectations that in a hundred years, she would rise, and with a most unique inner potential, would protect the forest and all its creatures forever. They could not know that the needle and the delay would have profound effects.

Time passed. Many people, and many more, were born. The world became more and more crowded and people pushed boundaries. A hundred years went by. Then came the day that the woman in the pond rose to the surface to take her first breath, to feel her first heartbeat, to gain a spiritual essence and purpose—to protect the rainforest. She was thankful to the forces of nature for giving her life and vowed to dedicate herself to fulfilling the reason for her creation. So, she immediately began to learn everything about the rainforest. She made it her life's purpose to become familiar with every one of the millions of species of plants, animals, insects and microorganisms, most of which were undiscovered by people, in this jewel of the earth. She wandered about exploring every inch of the rainforest to learn about each snake, turtle and chameleon. She made friends with every bird, every mammal and every insect. Every tree, plant and fungus became as familiar to her as if they were a part of her. She knew every riverbank, leaf, swamp and seedling intimately. She loved them all, and they loved her in return. The

forces of nature saw this and knew that what they had created those many decades ago was good.

While the woman was, indeed, good, she was also fantastically free spirited and carefree. She spent all of her days lightheartedly frolicking without a single thought of anything other than living her life laughing and loving her friends. From the moment she awoke in the morning to the moment she laid her head upon the soft forest floor to sleep at night, she danced and joyously flitted about the forest like a beautiful fairy without a care in the world.

More years went by and the woman became as much a part of the rainforest as any other being. Then one day, as she was strolling happily through the forest, she discovered an ancient Sitka spruce tree—one she had known her whole life—lying dead on the ground. Immediately she knew there was something terribly wrong. Her friend had been healthy just a week before, and when she looked for an answer to why it had fallen, she realized it had been cut down. She was heartbroken and began to cry. Through her tears, she saw a trail leading from the fallen tree to the forest's edge, strewn with the bodies of many more trees, many more of her lifelong friends. The reason for her life and the pathway she had been following for her ultimate happiness came into focus in that moment. She had been created to protect the rainforest. But, she realized, despite the careful preparation by the forces of nature, and all the goodness they had created, she had failed. So now, she must do something, anything, everything she could to protect the forest. But what?

“Yeah, Dad, what?” Lise asked. “I mean, if she’s not a real woman, how could she do anything?”

“Well, honey, it’s important to understand that her spirit is what helped protect the rainforest. It’s all of the good things the forces of nature put into their creation that worked together to guide peoples’ conscience when it came to how they treated the forest.

But remember, the forces of nature didn’t realize that there was that one tiny nettle that got caught in their creation when they accidentally dropped her. And it was that little nettle that was the cause of what happened next.”

Even though she knew she had a purpose, a nature-given responsibility to protect the rainforest, through the steady stream of her tears the woman could not clearly see the direction she must follow. Frustrated, she became angry at what had happened. Angry that someone, some human, had come, uninvited, into the forest and without regard to the sanctity of its inhabitants, its eco-culture, had wantonly destroyed the lives of her once-proud, steadfast forest friends. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. In the course of her rising emotion, she simply could not allow herself to think clearly, and her anger only became more powerful. All of the good that the forces of nature had gathered over a hundred years and put into their creation seemed to evaporate. The woman turned and ran, as fast as the wind, back into the deepest, darkest reaches of the forest. And there, she reached into the deepest, darkest reaches of her mind and began to formulate a plan.

It wasn't good. The woman began to play tricks on people visiting the forest. At first, she would frighten them a little by hiding in the trees and making low moaning noises, even when children were there. She would alter the direction of a footpath and cause people to get lost. Then she convinced some of her forest family to participate in her abysmal antics. She knew that the black bears and the cougars were too shy and kind hearted and wouldn't want to hurt anyone or even scare anyone visiting the forest. But, she found it easier to convince the sly bobcat to let out an occasional scream or the banana slugs to drop out of trees onto the trespassers.

In the meantime, the forces of nature, believing their creation was protecting the forest, had been lulled into a sense of complacency. They believed that the woman was all they needed to ensure that bad things would not happen to their most beloved forest. But one day, they couldn't help but hear about one thing that happened in the forest that will live in the memory of all forest dwellers forever. And they knew it had to be their own creation that was the cause of the trouble. It was the day the woman finally convinced a young black bear to do her bidding.

"What? What happened?" Nils asked.

"Patience, my son," Ben said. "Patience."

That day, there were three men in the forest, men who knew the ways of the wilderness. They were prepared in every way to survive on their own and protect themselves against any threat to their wellbeing. Because of the gentle nature of the forest and all of its family, the men were not afraid. Yet, they were wary of the possible

presence of other men—strangers—in the forest, and they knew that could lead to trouble. So, when the men encountered a familiar black bear on a path in the forest, one who was blind in one eye and known to be very gentle, it came as a great surprise to them when the bear rose up to full height on his hind legs and generated a mighty, deafening roar and snarled brazenly at them. The men were stunned. They had never experienced any of the forest's creatures to be malicious or unkind. In fact, the men thought of the bear with great respect and honor. So, when this bear treated them in such an unexpected, brash manner, they didn't know what to do.

What happened next could not be explained. The bear charged at the men and with his powerful paw, swiped at one of them and knocked him roughly to the ground. When the injured man lay still on the earth, his head bleeding, the bear and the other two men stood transfixed, staring at each other in horror. Never before had such a thing happened. No one knew what to do. But then, afraid and thinking the bear might attack him, one of the men raised his bow and fired an arrow into the good eye of the bear. Blinded, the bear turned and dashed aimlessly, but far into the deep, dark part of the forest, where he came upon the woman.

"Why did you send me to do your bidding with those men?" he cried. "Now look what has happened, I will never again be able to look upon my beautiful forest, my family!"

The woman had reasoned that men had cut down the trees on the edge of the forest and she had tricked the bear into believing that men were bad. So, she had indeed sent him to terrorize them with the hope of scaring them away for good.

"What happened? Why did they shoot an arrow into your eye?" she asked.

"I only meant to frighten them, like you said. I meant only to pretend to lash out at them, like you said. But everything went all wrong. I got too close to one of them and knocked him to the ground," the bear answered. "Oh, look what you've done! It's not the fault of the men, it's your fault. You cannot be trusted!" Realizing now, what she had done, and feeling deeply ashamed, the woman fled even deeper into the forest and hid.

Word spread quickly throughout the forest. *The woman could not be trusted*. It was because of her that the bear was blinded and the men were afraid. Now, it was believed, the men would return to take their vengeance on all of the creatures in the forest. They would not stop, it was believed, until they had wreaked havoc upon them all. Yet, while the woman had only done what she thought was right to protect the forest, it was not the way the forces of nature had intended for things to turn out.

When they heard what had happened, the forces of nature arose from their complacency and gathered to talk about it. They realized that they had made a mistake all those years ago, that they had relinquished their own responsibility to the forest. So, they decided to once again go back to the forest, back to the top of every tree, the bottom of every pond, underneath every plant and leaf on the ground, every branch, root, every bit of moss, lichen, bark and sap. Again, they spoke with every bird: the ducks, the dunlins, the herons, the killdeer and the kingfisher. The cormorants, the sparrows, the woodpeckers, even the great bald eagle. They heard again from every turtle, frog and salamander. They even talked with the snails and toads, and listened to the bees and flies and mosquitoes. Elk and deer, raccoon and cougar, and even the guileful bobcat, had their say.

Finally, when all others had been considered, the forces of nature reached out to the black bear. Through tears flowing from unseeing eyes, he told the story of how he loved living in the forest. How when he was just a cub, he had carelessly run from his mother and fallen headlong into a thicket of brambles, and one of the spines had poked him in the eye. It became terribly infected and he lost the sight in that eye. But he told of how he was ever so grateful he still had his vision in the other eye so that he could behold the beauty of his family and his friends and his home in the rainforest. He then told of how from the very first time they met, just like all other creatures in the forest, he became fast friends with the woman. How they joyfully laughed and played whenever they were together.

Then he told of how the woman began to change, and how she became mischievous and how she had tricked the bobcat, and others, into helping her scare the men. He explained that through all that, he still loved her, as all the creatures did. And finally, with almost unbearable raw emotion, he told of the day the woman tricked him into helping her scare the three men who had come into the forest. She had appealed to his playful side, telling him how much fun it would be. But he had resisted. She had tried to play upon his sense of pride by telling him how brave he was. Still, he had not given in. Then, saying that no one would get hurt and that she was only trying to protect the forest, she told him he would no longer be her friend if he denied her. That, he said, he could not accept. So, he went along. And now, for as long as he lived, he would never again see his beloved family, friends or forest home. It was he, the black bear, who convinced the forces of nature that what the woman had done was not good.

And so, leaving the poor black bear weeping alone, the forces of nature returned to the pond where they had created the Ka'l woman. It did not take long for them to realize and agree that they must now do something to prevent any further deception, fear and sadness. They had to find the woman and return her to the pond . . . forever. And they did.

The sun was beginning to drop below the mountain horizon, the wind was stirring the tops of the trees, and an ephemeral rumble of thunder—almost imperceptible, yet distinct—could be heard in the far distance, hinting at a coming storm.

"So, there you have it," Ben said. "They put her back into the pond, and that's where she remains to this day."

"You mean she's down there right now?" Lise asked.

"That's what they say," Ben said. "But from time to time, it is said, her spirit rises out of the pond and secretly whisks through the trees so she can see all of her beloved friends. Some say she haunts the forest."

Just then a gust of wind swept over the calm surface of the pond, causing ripples over the water and the hair on the back of Ben's neck to rise as he looked at Karin with surprise and apprehension in his eyes. She burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed until Lise and Nils joined in, and then they laughed some more.

Finally, catching her breath and wiping tears from her eyes, Karin said, "Okay, big guy, time to stop believing your own baloney, and time for us to head back to the cabin. Come on, kids, all three of you."

Norwegian Winter (The Bunker)

An indifferent mid-morning rain shrouded in opaque grey fog transformed the steep, seldom-used dirt path into a greasy, treacherous hazard, challenging Johan Lothbrok's every cautious step toward the crown of the rocky bluff overlooking the tiny settlement of Gudvangen. To his right—to the east—standing in stark relief, dwelt a dense stand of thick birch trees, their peeling white bark interrupted by black horizontal lenticels. And on the ground between the trees grew a luxurious layer of brilliant green new summer moss shielding the black soil of the Norwegian wood. The intense smell was of the earth; heavy, peaty, petrichor. To his left, despite its best efforts, the early June weather could not obscure one of the most beautiful sights in the world: the Naeroyfjord.

In his eagerness to get to the summit Johan nearly missed it but the Nazi bunker, or at least the ruins of it, was there, just ahead on the water side—to the west—nearly hidden by seven decades of the unrestrained, twisted growth of wild grass and brambles. The remains of the crumbling rock and concrete structure, resembling little more than an earthen berm, suffered from the effects of all those years of harsh Norwegian winters. If Johan hadn't been told by the local owner of Nordic Ventures Kayak Rentals where to look, he would never have found it.

The bunker, barely large enough for four men, had been built on the edge of the bluff overlooking the western tip of the Naeroyfjord and Gudvangen during the German occupation of Norway throughout World War II. The Nazis had feared an invasion by

Russian submarines silently stealing their way under the Barents Sea and navigating the maze of Norway's fjords, through the Sognefjord and into the Naeroyfjord. They also wanted to keep Allied ships from getting to Sweden's iron ore. So, they created Festung Norwegen, or Fortress Norway, an extensive defense and fortification system of 221 batteries throughout coastal Norway, including the one above Gudvangen.

It's almost impossible to imagine the horror of war in the beauty of this space, Johan thought. A UNESCO World Heritage site with breathtaking vistas saturating the senses at every turn. He wondered how his grandfather—the quiet, reserved man Johan called Farfar Einar when he was a boy—must have felt when he shot a man in this magnificent place.

Einar Lothbrok came from the west coast Norwegian village of Skudeneshavn on the southern tip of the island of Karmoy. The family was poor, and like his father, and his father before him—like every male child in Skudeneshavn before the war—Einar went to work on the fishing boats before his thirteenth birthday. Atlantic cod. It was what sustained the economy of Norway for hundreds of years. Seafaring traders, controlled largely by the Hanseatic League—established to protect economic interests and diplomatic privileges along western European trade routes, and the first Germanic visitors to Norway—plied the North and Baltic Seas, their ships weighted down with Norwegian Atlantic cod. The oily fish kept the lamps of England, France and what was to become Germany, burning for centuries, and fed generations of Europeans. Back then, everyone on Karmoy Island believed they were descendants of Norway's terrible

heathens, the Vikings, and Viking lore dictated that the name Lothbrok be revered. Einar believed he was a direct descendant of the legendary Viking king Ragnar Lothbrok.

Before he emigrated to America in 1949, Einar had never ventured away from Norwegian soil. Born in 1921, in the same home where his father was born in Skudeneshavn, he missed the Great War. Even his father, Bjorn, who had been handed down long-held prejudices against the Germans by his fiercely independent Norwegian ancestors, did not fight in World War One due to his country's Neutral Ally status. And again, when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939 and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin declared war on Germany, Norway's doctrine of neutrality remained intact. But, because of Hitler's desire to control the shipping lanes of the North and Baltic Seas, Germany bullied the peaceful, unprepared Norway and attacked in April, 1940. Norway resisted for sixty-two days. 860 Norwegian soldiers were killed in the invasion and some 400 civilians were lost, mostly in bombing raids. The Nazis occupied Norway for the rest of the war.

As Johan stood, catching his breath and taking in the reality of the bunker, a small white dog leapt onto a squat rock wall surrounding the ruin. The scruffy-faced pooch, probably some kind of terrier, sat, then quietly stared at him, observing, waiting for any kind of movement. Johan remained still.

"Whoa, boy, you scared the daylights out of me," he said to the dog, who steadfastly held his ground.

“Hello?” The quiet inquiry came from behind the bunker; a fragile, woman’s voice.

“Oh, hello,” Johan called out. “I didn’t realize there was anyone here.”

“Hans,” the voice said, calling the dog. “Come.”

An old woman, dressed in a drab green hooded rain poncho, black waterproof pants, sturdy hiking boots and grasping blue metal trekking poles, one in each hand, appeared from the other side of the bunker. Surprised, Johan thought she’s probably about his grandmother’s age. Ninety-one. How did she get up here?

Einar Lothbrok had joined the fight early. Not as much out of a sense of duty as out of a desire to escape the harsh working conditions a crewmember faces in Norwegian winters while fishing for cod north of the Arctic Circle, he had enlisted in the army at seventeen. Less than two years later, the German Luftwaffe dropped a curtain of bombs on Elverum and Nybergsund in an effort to kill the Norwegian King, Haakon VII, after he personally refused to accept German terms of surrender. As part of the Norwegian 4th Division, responsible for the defense of Western Norway, Einar was mobilized to the town of Voss in Hordaland. The six thousand man-strong division managed to ward off the initial German push along the Bergen Line railway line connecting Western and Eastern Norway. But, within days, Luftwaffe bombs severely damaged Voss and the town fell into Nazi hands. The 4th Division was evacuated and ordered to disband. And even though the advancing German forces knew the whereabouts of the Norwegian troops, they agreed to let them go.

“I’m sorry. Hans won’t bite you, he just can’t hear very well, and he doesn’t really bark much,” the woman said in excellent English with only a trace of an accent. “A poor excuse for a watch dog.”

“Oh, he’s fine. No harm done. I’m Johan. Most people just call me John.”

With a thin, courteous smile, she looked away and called the dog again. This time Hans appeared to have heard her and retreated from his sentry post halfway between Johan and the woman. Still, not wanting to relinquish his guard duties, Hans sat nervously on the tops of her hiking boots.

Glancing at Hans from under the hood of her poncho, she said, “I don’t know why I talk to him, he can’t hear me anyway.”

Johan sensed that the woman didn’t want to engage in conversation, yet he felt compelled to try anyway.

“I’m visiting from Minnesota,” he said. “St. Paul. I came to connect with relatives still living here in Norway.”

Johan had flown the eleven hours from the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport to Stavanger four days ago and had connected with relatives in Skudeneshaven. His father’s second cousin, Dag Tjerge and his wife Heidi, still lived there. All of his Norwegian family gathered and everyone commented on how much Johan and Dag looked alike and stood the two of them side-by-side for endless picture taking. Even though they were separated by a generation, Johan being thirty-two and Dag sixty years-

old, Johan had to admit there was some resemblance beyond the blond hair and blue eyes. Johan had planned the biking, hiking, kayaking Norway adventure with his brother Nils, who lived in Phoenix, a sort of final brotherly celebration of bachelorhood before Nils' upcoming nuptials in September. But two weeks before the trip, Nils had broken his shoulder when he crashed his bicycle while training for a triathlon, and had to cancel. After months of planning and maneuvering to get the time off from his job as the state capitol reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Johan decided to make the trip on his own.

"This place is amazing, isn't it?" he said. "I mean, it's like time forgot what went on here during the war.

Most of his fellow soldiers were happy to pack up and go back home to their wives and families, but Einar Lothbrok was not ready to give up the fight. He was upset when the 4th Division was ordered to disband, thinking the Norwegian army had gone soft, and not afraid to say so. Calling upon their sense of patriotism, and to some extent, their disdain for the Germans, and possibly on their inner Viking, Einar gathered a small band of brothers, fled into the mountains of south central Norway and helped to form the Norwegian resistance.

At first, Einar and his group were involved as spotters, aiding the British and French in the destruction of German warships as they cruised the fjords and the Atlantic coast. But soon, he formed what was to become known as Company Linge, a covert operations unit that specialized in coastal insertions and sabotage. Led by Einar,

Company Linge conducted repeated campaigns throughout the coastal areas helping to destroy German vessels and supplies.

“My grandfather once told me a story about this place,” Johan said to the old woman.

“He was a member of the Norwegian underground during World War Two, and he didn’t talk much about the war. But before he died he did tell me about a terrible night in Bergen, and another here in Gudvangen. About this bunker. That’s why I’m here. To see it for myself. I’ve been to Bergen, and I’m guessing it has changed a lot since the war. I know it has. But this place? Not so much. Not at all.”

The old woman looked at him for the first time, studied his face for a moment, then slowly lowered her head, as if she were suddenly very weary. She turned, then leaned on her trekking poles to make her way to the side of the bunker, where she eased herself down onto a moss-covered rock on the wall surrounding the bunker and sat with a heavy sigh. The rain had stopped now and the woman pulled the hood from her head revealing abundant, long silver hair and alarmingly clear, yet painfully sad, eyes, the color of the blue water five hundred feet below.

In a quiet, steady voice she said, “Johan, my name is Ilse. And this is my first visit here, too. We have much to talk about.”

“We have much to talk about?”

“Yes, there are some things I need to know. It is why I’m here. So, tell me, Johan, what was it that was so terrible that happened to your grandfather in Bergen?”

Maybe it was the way she looked at him with those sad eyes, maybe it was the searching tone in her voice, maybe it was just the time and place, he didn’t know. But, somehow Johan felt compelled to share the story.

By September, 1944, Einar had participated in countless missions of sabotage, mostly setting explosive charges and destroying caches of Nazi supplies. And, in the process, he had learned what it meant to take another man’s life.

It happened in the darkest part of the night just before dawn during a steady, heavy rain on the waterfront in the port City of Bergen near a dock loosely guarded by a young German soldier; a man about Einar’s age. Across the bay from the procession of colorful Hanseatic-era wooden frame buildings, the guard was posted in a one-man shack at the entrance to the dock from the shore. His orders were to march back and forth on the dock, and if anyone were to approach with what he perceived to be a threatening manner, to shoot on sight. Without questions.

At the end of the dock was a small supply depot that had taken a shipment of artillery ammunition destined to be transported by rail to Finnmark at the extreme northeastern end of Norway, bordering Russia. Collaborating with Bjorn Langoker, a member of the of the local resistance group, Einar silently approached by water in a small rowboat bearing explosives, intending to destroy not only the shipment of ammunition but the dock along with it. Very little went right that night. Any light from the stars was

obscured by the heavy cloud cover and rain, so in the extreme darkness Einar and Bjorn had approached the wrong pier, only to realize their mistake when a drunken Nazi soldier spotted them as he stood unsteadily at the edge of the dock and peed into the bay. The men quickly slid the rowboat under the dock, out of sight from anyone above. The drunk began to shout, but in his excitement he lost his balance and fell the fifteen feet from the dock into the bay, just a few feet from Einar's boat. Disoriented and weighted down by his woolen coat, knee-high leather boots and Wehrmacht uniform, the soldier had difficulty keeping his head above the fifty-degree water, and when after what seemed like minutes under the surface he finally came up, choking and gasping desperately for air. Without hesitation, Einar and Bjorn maneuvered the rowboat next to the man and it was Einar that reached his hand over the gunwale. The soldier, coughing up saltwater, saw him and somehow was able to grasp the extended hand. Einar, doubled over the side of the rowboat, legs still inside and upper body over the water, held firmly to the soldier's grip with one hand and with the other firmly grasped the collar of his overcoat and forced the man's head under the surface. Like a Viking protecting his homeland from a foreign invader, Einar ruthlessly held the drunken, struggling man underwater until the soldier's grip weakened, then finally fell away from his hand. Einar continued to hold him underwater, for what seemed like an eternity, until he was certain the man was dead, then finally let the limp body sink into the bay. If the dead man were to surface and be found, it would just be another unfortunate drunk who couldn't hold his liquor and who didn't know better than to pee off the end of a pier.

Thick grey clouds hung over the peaks of the low mountains, whose sheer, granite walls plunged majestically into the deep waters of the Naeroyfjord. Late morning, the rain had returned. Johan was seated on the rock wall a few feet from Ilse and Hans, who remained at his master's feet.

"My grandfather told me that it was the most difficult thing he had ever done, but that he believed he had to, to avoid being discovered and likely executed himself," Johan told Ilse. "They abandoned their original mission of blowing up the ammunition depot, fearing the commotion may have attracted attention and knowing they'd already used up any luck they had for one night. He said they were lucky to escape with their lives."

"And you said your grandfather, Einar is it? You said your grandfather told you about this place, too?"

"Yes, just Bergen and this bunker," Johan said. "Like I said, he didn't really talk about the war very much, at least not to me. I can only remember him telling me those two stories, and then, of course, about the day the Germans surrendered in the spring of 1945 and Norway was free again."

"And what story did he tell about this place?"

"Well, it was a much different story than the one from Bergen," Johan said.

"And how so?"

What is it that arouses this old woman's curiosity? Johan thought. Why is she so interested in his grandfather's story?

"Ilse, why are you here?"

"I'm sorry," she said, her face expressing shame and embarrassment. She leaned heavily on her trekking poles, readying to pull herself to her feet. "I'm sorry. I have no right to meddle."

"No, no, please," Johan said. "Please, sit down. I was being rude. Please sit down. I don't mind telling you."

Einar Lothbrok remained active as a leader within the Company Linge until they became part of the better organized resistance group known as Milorg, with cells throughout central Norway. In February of 1945, a small cell of underground operatives, a group that included Einar, was working out of an isolated hunting cabin near Voss when they drew up plans to make the thirty-mile trek through the mountains to Gudvangen. The mission was designed to send two men to destroy the Nazi bunker on the bluff above the village. Early in the occupation, the small railroad between the towns had been demolished by the Nazis and the one-lane dirt road was impassable in the winter, forcing Einar, along with one other man, Tor Driflot, to make the trip on foot and cross country skis. They carried an adequate amount of dynamite to collapse the bunker, along with British Lee-Enfield No. 1 rifles and enough ammunition to sustain an attempt at escape if they were confronted by German soldiers. They had to depend on the courage and generosity of their fellow Norwegians for food and other provisions to sustain them along the way.

Two-and-a-half days after leaving Voss, Einar and Tor made contact with a local collaborator of the resistance—an old man, painfully thin, dressed in little more than

loose rags—at a weather-worn white clapboard house next to the tiny Stave church in the center of Gudvangen. The old man revealed to them that four Nazi soldiers had taken over a farmhouse at the base of the bluff just below the bunker, forcing the farmer, his wife and two young daughters out of their home, making it necessary for them to depend on the kindness of townspeople for shelter. The guards, he said, rotated duty at the bunker, two men at a time, taking twelve hour shifts, coming on and off at 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.

With the sun setting around four in the afternoon at that time of year, Einar decided to make his move during the change of guard at 8 p.m. The plan was simple: Establish a position some fifty meters from the bunker in the birch forest, approaching from off the trail, ambush the four German soldiers, shooting the first two just as they reached the bunker. When the other two came out to see what the commotion was about, shoot them. If they didn't come out, then they would use the dynamite to destroy the bunker and everything—and everyone—in it. With the bunker destroyed, they would make their way to the farmhouse the Germans had occupied where the old man would have skis and a small supply of food waiting. Then they would strap on the skis and make their getaway that night. Simple.

Two hours after the sun had set on Gudvangen the temperature had dropped to four degrees below zero Celsius. For the uninitiated, the cloudless, subfreezing mountain air made it difficult to breathe. For men like Einar and Tor, sub-zero temperatures were of little consequence. Armed with their explosives, rifles and the knowledge given them by their contact, they made their move. Guided by the light from a half moon, they walked in silence through the back streets of the dark village, circled around to the east

side of the base of the bluff and began to make their way upward through the forest toward the bunker, careful not to leave footprints anywhere near the trail.

Twice they stopped, dropped to one knee and leveled their rifles, ready to do battle. Once when they thought they heard the sound of voices coming from somewhere near the trail. After holding steady for several minutes in the silence, they moved on. The second time came when a small, white dog suddenly appeared in front of them, surprising them. For some reason, the dog did not bark. It simply looked at them inquiringly, then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone. Thirty minutes after they left the house in Gudvangen, only slightly winded from the ascent, Einar and Tor reached a spot some fifty meters from the bunker.

Separated by twenty meters, the two men established an ambush position in a stand of thin, leafless birch trees. They could see a lamplight flickering through eight-by-twenty-four-inch gun slits, or embrasures, on the sides of the enclosed, rectangular bunker. Silently, they dug themselves into the snow, watching and waiting in the moonlight.

“They must have been just out there somewhere,” Johan said, nodding his head slightly, gesturing toward the forest on the other side of the muddy path just a few feet in front of them. “My grandfather said they just laid on their stomachs in the snow, waiting for the German soldiers to come up the path.”

Apparently immersed in deep thought, Ilse simply stared into the forest where Johan had gestured. After a long moment she averted her gaze and looked down at the ground where Hans lay at her feet.

"It must have been terrible for him, your grandfather."

"Yes," he said choosing his words carefully now. "War brings a terrible responsibility to every soldier."

Ilse looked up at Johan, seeing in his eyes what she thought might be an awareness and a reticence to talk more about the horrible things that had happened in this magnificent place.

"You can tell me, Johan," she said.

"Are you sure?" he replied.

"Yes, Johan," she said wearily. "Yes, please tell me what happened."

An hour after taking his position in the woods and still on his belly, Einar checked his watch. Ten past eight. No soldiers. No changing of the guard. Tor elevated his head slightly looking to Einar for direction. Hand held up, gloved palm out, Einar silently signaled to his comrade to continue to wait. Just then, he heard the heavy wooden door at the top of the bunker squeak slowly open. Coming up from inside they saw the distinctive coal scuttle Stahlhelm helmet appear atop the head of a Wehrmacht soldier. He peered around for a moment, eyes adjusting to the darkness, then pulled himself out of the enclosure. Fully dressed in a standard Wehrmacht issue wool winter coat to

protect against the cold and with a Mauser Karabiner 98K rifle slung over his shoulder, he slipped down the wall, making his way to the Naeroyfjord side to peer down the path toward the village, apparently looking for the soldiers scheduled to relieve him and his partner ten minutes ago. A second man's head and shoulders emerged from the door of the bunker. He shouted something in German to the first man, who seemed to shrug and shake his head. The second soldier disappeared back into the bunker and closed the door after him. There was silence for a moment, then Einar heard what seemed to be the faint sound of men singing from somewhere below. Coming up the path, the change of guard was arriving, twelve minutes late.

Again, Einar raised his hand, signaling for Tor to wait. Within moments, two Wehrmacht soldiers came slogging up the snow-packed path, arms over each other's shoulders, singing, "Ja, ja, ja, ja. Weist ja wie gut ich dir bin!" An old German drinking song.

The first soldier began to shout at the men as they staggered toward the bunker, wildly waving his arms in the air, apparently chastising them for their tardiness or drunkenness, or both. Laughing and singing, they seemed to ignore him until they were standing, unsteadily, just a few feet from the soldier, apparently noticing him for the first time. Obviously angry, the man continued to shout at the pair as the door atop the bunker opened again, and the fourth man's helmeted head appeared from inside.

"Fire!" Einar shouted.

His first shot was aimed at the head of the man just emerging from the bunker. Just a second later, his second shot found its mark and the man who had been shouting

and gesticulating only moments before fell dead on the path between him and the two drunken soldiers. Stunned by shock and surprise, the drunk Germans turned to look in the Norwegians' direction. Einar and Tor, highly trained in the use of the Lee-Enfield rifles, easily picked the Wehrmacht soldiers off; one shot each.

Again, Einar held up a hand, indicating to Tor to hold for the moment, waiting for any sound, any sign of life. Einar peered toward the bunker and saw immediately that the entire structure was dark, light no longer shone through the gun slits on its sides. Had the last soldier extinguished the lamp before he opened the door? Not likely, Einar thought. He's possibly still alive, and probably snuffed out the lamp after he dropped back into the bunker so that Einar and Tor couldn't see him inside, or see whether a rifle was poked out of one of the embrasures.

Einar signaled for Tor to stay low and both men began to crawl quickly toward the bunker. They'd covered a few meters when the first shot was fired. The sound of a bullet buzzed over Einar's head, his life spared by only a few inches. Almost immediately, another shot was fired from the bunker, and Einar heard the sickening sound of a fifty-seven millimeter slug slam into Tor's head. Without thought, Einar stood and ran hard to his left through the snow, away from the Mauser positioned in the slit on the east side of the bunker, then he turned to his right and sprinted directly at the structure. The firing had stopped, the soldier inside not knowing where Einar was. This allowed him just enough time to make it the last few meters to the squat stone wall surrounding the bunker. He leapt the enclosure and slammed his body hard against the south wall, hugging the rock so that the soldier inside couldn't get a good angle on him if he were to try to shoot him through the opening on the south side. Just then, the barrel of

the Mauser came out of the gun slit as if it were searching for Einar. He saw it and grabbed the gun with both of his gloved hands and pulled. The gun discharged harmlessly into the birch woods as Einar tugged it away from the grasp of the soldier inside the bunker and tossed it over the rock wall. Einar scrambled up the outside of the bunker just far enough to allow him to ready his rifle to shoot—point blank—anyone or anything that came through the heavy wooden door at the top. No one did.

Several minutes passed as Einar struggled to calm down and catch his breath in the bitter cold winter air and waited for what was to come next. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, he was dumbfounded to hear what he thought was the sound of a high-pitched single YIP! of what had to be a small dog, coming from inside the bunker. Then, just as suddenly and startling as the bark of a dog, the bunker door swung open and slammed against the outside wall. Einar quickly leveled his rifle sights just above the opening. That's when the third surprise of the moment happened: A white rag fastened to the handle end of a Louisville Slugger baseball bat rose slowly into view.

"The German soldier had been injured by my grandfather's first shot," Johan said. "A fairly minor wound, but one he would probably never recover from."

Still seated just couple of meters from Johan on the rock wall, Ilse had been listening intently, a somber expression in her eyes.

"No, he never would," she said softly. "Back then there was no way to replace an ear that had been shot off."

Startled, Johan turned to stare at Ilse.

“What did you say?” Johan said excitedly. “How did you know my grandfather shot that man’s ear off?”

Sensing the change in Johan’s demeanor, Hans jumped up and yipped a single, high-pitched small dog bark.

“It’s OK, Hansie,” Ilse said, using the endearing moniker and reaching down to pet him to help calm the dog, and he lay back down in the grass at her feet. “The soldier had a little dog in that bunker, too. A little dog just like my Hans.”

“How do you know this?” Johan asked quietly. “Ilse, how do you know these things?”

“Your grandfather spared my husband’s life, Johan,” she said. “In the horror of war, where men took life, where they had to take life, without regard to families and those back home, and sometimes not really understanding why, your grandfather spared my husband’s life so that he could go home. So that he could come home, back to Bamberg, back to me. He let him go, Johan. Your grandfather simply let my husband go.”

Johan stared at her for a long moment.

“I know your husband’s name,” he said, finally. “It’s Karl Heinzelmann. Farfar Einar told me his name is Karl Heinzelmann.”

“Yes, that was his name, Karl Heinzelmann,” she said. “We had been married just four months before he was sent to Norway, before he was sent here. But he came

home, and we spent the next fifty-three years together. We had three children, two girls and a boy. We had a good life together until he died fourteen years ago. Cancer. We had a good life together, thanks to your grandfather."

Emotion began to surge in Johan's chest, and tears began to well up in his eyes.

"He told me that your husband, that Karl, was a brave man. He told me that he came out of the bunker holding that bat, that Louisville Slugger, and held it out in front of him as if it was some kind of peace offering."

"Yes, he was a good, brave man," Ilse said. "He was a very kind man. And he loved American baseball. The St. Louis Cardinals. Dizzy Dean and Leo Durocher. I remember it like it was yesterday. That bat was his pride and joy. His father gave it to him. He had it shipped over from the U.S. long before the war, when he was just a boy. How he got to keep it throughout his time in the Wehrmacht, I don't know."

Johan stared at Ilse in wonderment.

"My grandfather was a big baseball fan," he said. "He loved the Cardinals. Dizzy Dean was his baseball hero. Even though he came to Minnesota when he emigrated in '49, he never wavered from his loyalty to the Cardinals."

Ilse leaned forward onto her hiking poles and Hans jumped to his feet from his resting place on the ground next to her. Seeing her struggle to pull herself onto her feet, Johan stood to help her. She was glad for the hand up. Standing somewhat unsteadily after sitting for so long, Ilse's gaze followed the path down the hill toward Gudvangen.

“He just walked away,” she said. “Karl just walked away and made his way home. With that bat. I still have it. I’ll give it to my son someday soon, he’s sixty-two now, but I’m just not ready yet.”

She turned and looked up at Johan, the sadness in her eyes gone.

“This is a beautiful place, isn’t it?” she said, smiling. “To me, it’s the most beautiful place in the world.”

Circus Camp

Sticky sticktites and spiky sandburs created a kind of wicked world of Velcro from hell. The things were embedded in the densely overgrown field that began first with dry, tall grass then worked itself into chest-high brush strangled with the spiny stuff, impossible to pass without the despicable prickles hooking their barbarous barbs into every exposed bit of clothing. The triangular sticktites weren't so bad, really, it just seemed to take forever to scrape them off, one or two at a time. But just try pick a sandbur off a pair of blue jeans with bare hands; expect to suffer twice, maybe three times—or more—when it spikes your thumb or forefinger, then again when you try to remove it from that finger with your other hand. Finally, when you figure out how to flick it off using the only non-stick surface on your hand—your fingernail—the pain from the prick remains, as if the tiny thorn had injected a toxic venom under the surface of your skin. This was the Harrison brothers' unwelcome, but not entirely unexpected, reality as they devoted a sweltering late September afternoon in 1975 to a journey dedicated to the discovery of what they were beginning to think of as the mythical abandoned circus camp just outside the city limits of the only world they'd ever known, Okeene, Oklahoma.

They'd heard tales about it for as long as they could remember. Their whole life. Occasionally their father reminisced about the days when he was a kid and his father—the brothers' grandfather—would weave stories about the deep, dark nights when he was a boy and he would lie in bed at night in the tiny attic in the weatherworn whitewashed clapboard house, still next to the house their father built, where the boys had spent

countless nights in that same attic bedroom while visiting their grandfather, and he would sometimes hear the lamentations of lonely lions and elephants, and other beasts, carried on the southwest breeze through the open window. He said that at times, during the day, the good folks of Okeene might see the animals caged in colorfully painted circus wagons on their way through town, being towed behind an old Chevrolet pickup truck or Ford Model A sedan, and everyone in town would be excited to see the exotic eccentricity of all the circus had to offer. And when he reminisced, their father would paint such detailed word pictures of clowns and exotic animals and mysterious people that the boys' imaginations carried them off—at least for a while—to that that strange and mysterious time and place.

"Your grandfather told me about the time that old Jose Borredo thought he fell in love with the daring young raven-haired trapeze artist after seeing her perform her act in the community show they'd do for the town every year," their father had said. "Her name was Sophia Gandini, the daughter of the owner of the circus. Jose brought some Mexican food from his family's restaurant out to the circus camp to try and convince her go on a date with him. Problem was that the four hundred pound bear they had chained to a stake near the trailer where she stayed liked Mexican food, too. Old Jose damn near got his arm ripped off when that fat old bear swiped at that basket of tamales. He never went back to the camp, and from then on, he had to learn how to wrap masa and pork in a cornhusk with just one hand." Then their father laughed and said, "That was a long time ago, but you can still see signs of the camp where they would spend the off-season training and honing their skills for when they went out on the road to perform. There's still ruts from where wagon wheels dug through the red mud and maybe even some old

tent stakes out there. And if you look hard enough, you might see where the three rings were set up, where the ground was beaten down by all the activity. Just west of town beyond the tall grass."

The lure of the stories was irresistible to the boys. They had visions of clowns—Tom's favorite—and high wire walkers—Petey's fixation—and fire eaters and dancing horses so vivid that sometimes, while they lay in their bunkbeds, they would talk long into the night about the circus as if they'd actually seen it themselves. But, of course, they hadn't. So, they figured the next best thing would be to go and see the ancient camp for themselves. It took a long time and a lot of convincing, begging, really, before their mother and father finally reckoned them old enough, and responsible enough, to venture away from the home, from the family backyard, on their own—Tom was eight, Petey was six.

That meant Petey got the jump on Tom by a full two years, and it meant that Tom had to keep an eye on Petey to make sure he was OK; their father said so. But if that meant he got to see the old circus camp, Tom didn't mind. The brothers spent most of their weekend days together anyway. So, they concocted a plan and on the next Saturday afternoon, just after a lunch of peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches, Guy's potato chips and cherry Kool-Aid, they decided it was as good a time as any to stuff an old Boy Scout backpack with some supplies, including a length of old rope, a matchbox containing a few wooden match sticks and a Boy Scout compass, a light jacket each (their mother insisted, "just in case"), an Army surplus canteen for water and a couple of apples, and set out to discover what all the generational ruminating was about.

The tall grass field was just west of town, past the Soo Truck Stop, over Spruce Street, and beyond a thick stand of craggy old jack oaks on the other side of the county road that runs north and south where cousin Russell told the boys he went on Friday nights to race for pink slips against his high school buddies in his old '61 Chevy. Funny thing, though, they never did see Russell—or any one of his buddies for that matter—driving anything but the same old junkers they'd always had. Apparently, no one ever won or lost a pink slip.

It was really more than just a field. It started out on the other side of the jack oaks as what looked like a remnant of the tall grass prairie, an ecosystem that once blanketed the entire North American Midwest from Canada to northern Mexico. Two hundred years ago, bison, elk, deer and rabbits roamed freely throughout the prairie, living in harmony with the relative handful of native people inhabiting the land. Now, most of the tall grass was gone, plowed under by the multitudes of new Americans. It had been a hot, dry summer—drought plagued Oklahoma more often than not—and the parched blades of grass were brittle and brown and crunched under every step. Only a few yards in, the long tangled shoots feathered into tall brush and thick brambles; so tall and thick the boys were able to catch only glimpses of the horizon in any direction.

"Son of a bitch! This stuff hurts!" Petey said.

"Petey, don't y'all talk like that. Daddy would whup your ass," Tom, always the big brother, said.

"Don't say ass, and these damn sandburs hurt!"

Okeene is rattlesnake country—in reality all of Oklahoma is rattlesnake country, but Okeene is a town known for its annual Rattlesnake Festival—and even those venomous vipers wouldn't go into the bristle-plagued prairie quagmire that had apparently spent the past several decades swelling and spreading to discourage curiosity seekers like the boys from journeying into the past. They'd have done well to carry a real machete—which, in their young minds, would have been the coolest thing—obviously not to swing at snakes, but to hack their way through the brush. But, a three-foot length of one-by-two pilfered by Tom from their father's pile of project lumber in a corner of the garage was the best they could do to beat a path to wherever they were going.

Fifteen minutes and only about a hundred yards in and Petey was starting to wonder whether they were covering ground they'd already seen.

"How much farther?"

"How should I know?" Tom said. "Just follow me."

Petey thought he must have had a thousand sandburs covering his jeans and t-shirt. Even his dirty white PF Flyers looked like a couple of peculiar landlocked blowfish.

"Just stop for a minute. PLEASE. These stickers are killing me," Petey said.

"OK, you big baby, but just for a minute."

The tall grass and brush were now almost over their heads, making it nearly impossible for the boys to navigate with any certainty.

“Maybe we should come back later,” Petey said. “Let’s turn back and try again tomorrow.”

“We’re not turning back,” Tom said with a certain uncertainty in his voice. “We’re already half way to where we’re going.”

But Tom didn’t really know how far they’d gone or how much farther they had to go, and when he looked back, there was scant sign of the trail they’d blazed thus far. The growth was as thick and thorny as it had been when they passed through it a moment ago. It was practically impossible to tell where they’d come from.

“How do you know how far we have to go?” Petey said. “We’ve never been here before.”

“Hang on,” Tom said, and shrugged the green canvas Boy Scout pack off his shoulders and onto the ground. He unbuckled the single leather strap from the top flap, pulled it back, reached in and pulled out an apple and handed it to Petey.

“Here, eat this while I check our bearings,” he said, and took the matchbox from the pack and removed the compass.

“Do you know how to use that thing?” Petey asked.

“Of course I do. Mr. Pauley taught me in Cub Scouts,” Tom said, watching as the needle on the compass fixed on a north-northwest heading.

“It’s that way.”

“How do you know?” Petey asked.

"Well, I just know," Tom said. "It's right there on the compass. Come on, we're never going to get anywhere unless we keep going."

Hacking through the brush the best he could with the makeshift machete, and starting to feel like he was on a mission of the blind leading the blind, Tom was beginning to wonder himself whether they should turn back. He was wearing an old straw cowboy hat their grandfather had given him for Christmas three years ago. Back then, it was too big for him, but was just about right now. Petey hadn't bothered, or just plain forgot, to put his favorite Oklahoma Sooners cap on before they left home that morning and the heat from the midday sun was bearing down on the top of his buzz-cut towhead. And not thinking they would be gone for more than an hour or two, neither of them had thought to fill their old, dented canteen with water before they left. That, and the stifling closeness of the brush was causing Petey to heat up way too fast.

"I don't feel good," Petey said. "I'm getting dizzy."

Tom had to admit to himself that he wasn't feeling all that great, either. It was hot, dry and dusty, and he was hot, dry and thirsty. And what had been only a minor annoyance just a half hour ago when they started their journey, the pull of the underbrush was wearing on him. Petey pulled on the tail of Tom's t-shirt.

"Are we lost?" Petey asked.

"Nah, we're good," Tom said, trying to reassure his little brother.

Tom eyed the end of the one-by-two as he raised it to hack down more brush when about a hundred feet away he spotted some relief on the horizon.

"Look, Petey, there's trees over there," Tom said. "It's just a little ways more."

"I can't see," Petey said.

For a six-year-old, the world is a big place. The only time a child that age feels like the world fits him is when he's sitting at a kid-sized desk in his first grade class, or when he's playing on the schoolyard playground. This was no classroom or playground. For Petey, this field of thick Oklahoma brush was more like a big scary jungle with long, thorny tendrils intent on trapping and imprisoning him and never letting him go. He was on the verge of crying.

"I'm out!" Tom shouted from a few feet ahead. "Come on Petey, I'm out!"

Trying to run now, sensing the relief he'd feel to be free of his prickly shackles, Petey nearly tumbled over Tom as he broke through the brush into an open, low grass meadow.

"Yes! Yes! We're out!" Petey shouted, jumping around like a little circus monkey.

Petey stopped, then, to scrape off as many of the sandburs, goatheads, sticktites and cocklebururs as he could without transferring them from his clothes to his fingers and the palms of his hands, which would translate into assured agony.

"Tom, that's about as much . . ."

"Well, I'll be goddamned," Tom interrupted.

"Don't tell me not to swear. You'll get a whuppin' too if . . ."

Looking up and seeing the expression of bewilderment on Tom's face, Petey followed his brother's gaze across the grassy meadow.

"Jiminy Christmas," Petey said. "What is it?"

"Can't you just see it, Petey?" Tom said, excited now.

"See what?"

"Over there, Petey. Look hard, as hard as you can, and you'll see it. Just imagine it, the circus is right over there."

Petey looked hard, as hard as he could, and he started to imagine, just like Tom said. He looked hard and put his imagination to work, and then, he saw it.

Twenty yards away, just across the meadow, between two forty-foot hackberry trees, sat a bright red and blue barred circus wagon with a flat tire hitched to a sleek green '36 Ford Deluxe Sedan with a crumpled right front fender. Across the top panel of the wagon spelled out in bold, fancy yellow script were the words "Gandini's Circus. Est. 1933." Several wooden cases of bottled Coca-Cola were stacked one on top of the other on the ground in front of the wagon and there, lounging casually on the stack of pop, was a barefoot boy who looked to be about their age dressed in worn denim overalls, a faded red t-shirt and a dusty, worn brown derby that covered long, black hair that grew well over his ears.

Startled, Tom said, "Holy cow, where did he come from?"

Then even more startling than the scene under the hackberries, they heard the unmistakable bugling of an elephant somewhere in the distance. And now, the whinny of a horse, people shouting, the marching beat of a drum. Coming from somewhere clear of the boy and the pop cases and the wagon, there were the complicated sounds of what could only be a circus.

"Hey, there!" the boy on the wooden crates called out. "Hey, there, over here!" He waved one arm in the air, beckoning the boys to come over.

"Oh my gosh," Petey said. "Oh my gosh, Tom, what is it?"

"Calm down, Petey," Tom said. "I don't know, it's just a boy."

"Just a boy? Just . . . just . . ." Petey stammered.

Climbing down from the Coke crates, the boy stood next to the circus wagon and shouted at them, waving them over.

"Hey! Who are you guys?"

Petey grabbed Tom by the shirt sleeve and tried to pull him back toward the brambles. "Don't answer. Let's get out of here, let's go back!" he said.

"Let go," Tom said, as he pulled away from Petey's grasp and stepped toward the boy. "Hey!" Tom shouted at the boy then turned to Petey and said quietly, "Come on, let's go see what's going on."

“You can go see what’s going on, I’m going home,” Petey said as he turned back toward where they’d come from. But, all he saw was a wall of tall grass, no sign of the path they’d created to get through the tangle of growth.

“Listen, Petey. You know what dad said, I’m supposed to keep an eye on you. That means I’m in charge. We’re not going home.” Tom turned and shouted, “Hey!” And he began walking toward the boy.

Scared and reluctant, Petey realized he didn’t have much of a choice. “Wait up,” he said, working to catch up to his older brother.

They hadn’t paid much attention to time, and it was beginning to work against them. The autumn sun was easing itself down toward the western horizon, approaching the tops of the Gypsum Hills of Blaine county. Time had done what time always does: Slipped away without regard to anything, before anyone really notices. Scratched and grimy with sweat-soaked dust, weary and wary, Tom and Petey approached the boy by the circus wagon. He took two steps toward them.

“Hey, there,” the boy said.

Now they could see he was older than either of the Harrisons. Ten, maybe eleven. To their relief, he greeted them with a smile and held out a hand.

“I’m Roger. Roger Tremblay.”

“Tom,” Tom said, tentatively taking the boy’s hand. “And my brother Petey. We live here, well in town, really.”

“Well, Tom and Petey, it looks to me like you took the long way around just to come to see the circus. You could have waited for the community show. Before we settle in for the winter we do one free show every year for the town, you know. Right there in town square.”

The boys were confused. Neither of them had ever been to a circus, much less one in Okeene. The closest thing their sleepy town had ever had to a circus, at least in the boys’ lifetime, was the little traveling carnival that set up shop in the vacant lot behind the Korner Hardware store downtown during the Rattlesnake Festival every May. There was always a Ferris wheel and the thrill rides like the Hurricane and the Zipper, but until last year their folks would only allow them to ride the children’s rides like the Tea Cups and the Dragon Wagon. This year they got to go into the Pirates Den and ride the Tilt-A-Whirl, but no matter how much they begged and whined, they weren’t allowed to enter the Tomb of Doom. Maybe next year, their dad had said. But in Okeene, there had never been a circus with sensational live animals like lions or with clowns or people swinging high above on a trapeze or perched precariously on a wire stretched overhead. And town square? They had no idea what Roger was talking about.

“The circus?” Tom said.

“Yeah, of course, nitwit, the circus,” Roger said in a way that made it sound like he didn’t really mean Tom was a nitwit.

“You mean there’s a real live circus here?” Petey said.

"Well, yeah, what did you think it was? We just finished our home run and are setting up for winter." Roger began to think these guys really might be a little slow on the draw. "Come on, let me show you."

Roger grabbed three of the six-ounce bottles of Coke from a crate and extended the hand holding two of them to the boys and kept one for himself. "I have a bottle opener on my jackknife," he said, and reached into the right side pocket of his overalls and pulled out a military-style jackknife like the one the boys' grandfather used to carry.

"Look," Roger said, "it has a fork and a spoon and a corkscrew, even a scissors. My dad got it in the army and gave it to me when he came back from the war last year. The big one, dubbya dubbya two."

The boys had heard a few stories about "dubbya dubbya two" from their grandfather. He told them about how he'd served in the Pacific as a petty officer aboard a heavy cruiser–the Louisville—and fired at the Japanese in the Mariana Islands for eleven days in a row, helping to save the world from the "yellow peril," whatever that meant. But they knew that had been a long time ago, 1944, long before their father had even been born.

"What do you mean last year?" Tom said.

Roger just looked at him blankly with nearly black eyes and said, "Come on, follow me."

It was wonderful. A real live circus—no dog and pony show. Elephants, lions, tigers, chimpanzees, beautiful black horses, llamas, snakes, even trained coyotes. There

was a huge black bear in a cage on the ground next to a tractor used to pull heavy wagons. Three elephants were tethered with long chains to heavy wooden stakes driven deep into the ground. The big cats, chimps, bears and coyotes were in cages on wheels. There was a row of what looked to be temporary wooden shelters serving as living quarters for the trainers and their families, barns with circus rings for sheltering and training, wide open fields for grazing for the horses and llamas, and space to store trailers, trucks, buses and even a snake house.   A cook house, a trailer Roger called the Red Wagon that served as an office, huge piles of canvas with long wooden beams that looked like telephone poles alongside—the big top. Roger led the boys through sights and sounds they'd only dreamed of and introduced them to people like they'd never seen. Little people, very big people, exotic looking women—probably show girls. Dark men with beards, wiry men with tools—probably roustabouts. And a striking, tall man dressed in a red coat with tails over smart black pants, and a top hat.

"Who are these gillys?" the red-coated man said.

"Tom and Petey,' Roger said. "They're here from town."

"Well, well, Tom and Petey here from town," the man said. "What brings you here from town, boys? Looking for work?"

They laughed at the notion of boys their age working at the circus, or anywhere else for that matter, thinking the man was joking.

"No sir," Tom said. "We didn't know you were here. We heard that there used to be a circus that spent the winter here, but that was a long time ago. Back when our grandpa was a boy. So, we wanted to see if there was anything left behind."

"Well, I don't know of any other circus that set up winter camp here besides mine," the man said. "We've been coming here for the last thirteen or fourteen years, ever since I started Gandini's."

"Are you Mr. Gandini?" Petey asked.

"In the flesh," Mr. Gandini said.

"Is your daughter here? Sophia?" Petey asked.

"Why, yes she is. You must have seen her on the trapeze when we did our community show last year."

"Well, no sir. We've never seen the circus. But our dad told us the story of when our grandpa was a boy and Mr. Borredo brought tamales to Sophia and he was attacked by a bear."

Now it was Mr. Gandini's turn to laugh.

"Attacked by a bear! And this happened when your grandpa was a boy? Impossible. That was our third year here. 1936. Ten years ago. I remember it well. Your Mr. Borredo was nothing but a fool. Teasing that old bear with those tamales. It's a wonder he wasn't killed."

The sun was slipping fast behind the Gypsum Hills, night was coming on quickly and the wild smell of the animals and the stench of ammonia from their decaying waste settled around them in a kind of fog as the daytime wind and the bustling activity of the circus people quietened.

“Are there clowns in your circus?” Tom asked.

“And tightrope walkers?” Petey chimed in.

“Absolutely,” Mr. Gandini smiled broadly. “We have the best of both of any circus in the country. Roger here can take you to clown alley and up on the rigging with the aerialists tomorrow.”

“Can we come back tomorrow?” Petey asked Tom.

“Oh, you boys are welcome to stay here tonight,” Mr. Gandini said. “In fact, you can stay here as long as you like. It’s probably too late to head back to town now and even if you did, you might get lost in this fog.”

It was dark now, very dark, with a thick fog filling every crevice of the camp. It was unusual for Okeene to have an autumn fog, but Mr. Gandini was right, the boys weren’t going to find their way back, not now. And they could stay and see the clowns and the tightrope walkers. They could even go up on the high wire, Mr. Gandini said so.

“Tom! Petey! Boys, where are you!” Their father could be heard shouting into the stillness of the balmy Oklahoma night, his concerned calls coming from the east side of the hackberry trees, toward town. There was another voice, too, a man’s voice hollering in the distance, from the opposite direction, obviously looking for the Harrison brothers.

Ben Harrison emerged from the dense darkness of the tall grass and bramble field twenty yards from where the hackberry trees stood up like Roman columns. A hunter’s

moon shared the sun's reflection over that part of Oklahoma, illuminating the short grass meadow in a soft, even light. Under one of the trees Ben could see a single figure, very small, a boy, with his back turned to Ben, sitting on an old, worn wooden crate, hunched over, poking a small, smoky orange campfire with the burnt end of a three-foot length of one-by two. Maintaining an intense focus on the boy, Ben caught a glimpse in his peripheral vision of a small, indistinguishable bundle on the ground just a few yards to the right.

"Sheriff, over here!" Ben shouted.

The sitting boy did not indicate that he'd heard Ben's shouts. He did not turn around, he did not move, except for his tentative stirring of the fire. Ben covered the sixty-feet from the field to the hackberries in just a few long strides, stopping short of the hunched form. For a moment, he stared at the back of the figure, seeing that he was wearing a jacket, one that somehow looked familiar, and a tattered straw hat on his head, bowed low toward the fire. A few yards off to the left was the rusted out shell of an old Ford, a sedan, and a pile of dirty wood scraps with the faded Coca-Cola logo still visible on some of them. Ben could hear the boy speaking, softly; listening intently he heard the sorrowful sound of sadness.

"I'm sorry," the boy whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry I didn't see you when you took a Brody. I'm so sorry. I should have been there to protect you from falling."

The other man's shout came from somewhere beyond the hackberries.

"There's nothing over here, Ben," the voice said, and the man emerged from the darkness on the other side of the campfire, into the sphere of its light; the sheriff.

Stopping abruptly, he took in the scene before him, staring for a moment at the boy on the crate, then at Ben and then back at the lone figure. And then he focused on something else.

“Good lord,” he whispered, and a pained look settled over his face as he realized that the still bundle on the ground a few feet ahead of him was little Petey Harrison, lying still, between the two hackberry trees, his head twisted at an improbable angle. Looking up then, the sheriff understood. He understood that the rope that had spanned the length between the two trees, the rope the boys had brought along for Petey to play tightrope walker, that had been tied ten feet above the ground, that had served as Petey’s high wire, had given way under his weight. What had been a single length of rope was now two, each length hanging limp from one of the hackberries.

The lonely figure seated on the wooden crate turned to face Ben, and with a slender, smooth almost feminine hand, reached up to slowly remove the straw hat from his head. The face looked old, much older than what the young hand would have implied. Ben Harrison looked into intolerably sad eyes. Eyes that he had seen ten thousand times before, but never before this heartbreaking. Eyes he’d seen full of life, of excitement, of promise, of laughter, of love. The exact shape and blue-grey color of his mother’s, they were eyes that had brought with them a world of joy when they first came into the Harrison home eight years ago.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I know you told me to keep an eye on Petey, but I didn’t. I didn’t do as you said and he fell. Fell from the high wire. I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry.”

Pain

Tucked away in a corner around another corner on the second floor of the university administration building, seated comfortably in my considerable executive chair at my dark walnut-stained desk, hearing but not listening to the conversation going on between the receptionist and someone I don't know in the waiting area just outside my door, I'm not thinking about work. Instead I'm thinking: On the one hand, some things happen so quickly that the time they take to occur, at least the perception of time in one's mind, can't be measured, or even comprehended. On the other hand, some things happen so slowly that time seems to stand still as the mind comprehends everything in the moment. Where does that garbage come from? Who just sits here and thinks like that?

Looking now through the large window behind my desk, past the three flags flying from the staff outside my office—the American flag at the top, the Oklahoma State flag next and the university's blue and yellow logo on the flag at the bottom—I'm distracted, as usual, by something else that just popped into my mind, something that, on the one hand, might seem completely random: Cicadas. Yet, on the other hand, it may not that random because I've never heard the cicadas screech this loud before. Never.

It's not just the usual intense high-pitched buzz, it's almost deafening, like the shrill scream of a jet engine passing low overhead. I even heard them over the sound of my old red Craftsman riding lawn mower last night. Is it the heat? Maybe the heavy rains back in May—it was a record for the month— caused a spike in the number of the dog day tree crickets. Maybe it's just the peak of the seven-year underground cycle that the

peculiar insects allegedly endure in their larval stage before they actually excavate a tunnel and emerge aboveground in their final nymphal phase.

The cicadas were an unwelcome surprise when a new job forced me to move my family from the Pacific Northwest to Oklahoma City. The noise is bad enough, but when my kids—Nils and Lise—first discovered dried out, empty, cicada exoskeletons left behind by those weird nymphs as they molted into adults attached to the gate on the rough, wooden fence in our backyard, it pretty much grossed them out. The kids were still in junior high school back then. My wife, Karin, and I had worried that they would never talk to us again after wrenching them away from their Tacoma friends and forcing them to adapt to a strange new life in hot, dusty, landlocked Oklahoma. That was eighteen years ago. 1998. The kids are grown now, happy in their lives, and it's just the two of us living in the same home with the same rough, wooden fence.

As usual, my right knee hurts like hell. It's time for my daily walk to help keep the thing loose. So, just as I have twice a day, every day, to relieve the ache and stiffness in the six-decade-old joint that resulted from an attempt at becoming a long-distance runner back in the day, I'm making my way out of my office, through the waiting area into the hallway and down the double flight of stairs, headed outside, to shuffle slowly over the hot sidewalk in a sluggish circle around the interior of the campus where I work in the PR department. I do this on my own, reasoning that my pain is irrelevant to anyone else, except maybe Karin, who has to listen to my occasional peculiar moaning while I attempt to sleep at night. She didn't know what to make of it at first, thinking I might be having nightmares, or crying, which freaked her out. It's not that I'm crying, really, I just emit gut-deep involuntary utterances in response to the pain. I'm not even

aware that I'm doing it. I've tried the pills and the shots and the arthroscopic surgery, but in the end, none of it has succeeded and I've decided that walking it off works best. At least until I can't take the aching anymore and then I might have to consider having the damn thing replaced.

Outside, the mid-morning Oklahoma August heat is already oppressive, stifling, relentlessly rising off the sidewalk in waves, much like the days when I was a kid working summers on a road construction crew back home in Minnesota, where I spent the first twenty-eight years of my life. There were only four months to get it all done between the snowmelt and the first freeze up there, and the cheap teen labor had only three of those months between high school or college classes to do the work that none of the regular laborers wanted to do. So, those were long, hot days, and humid, not unlike most summer days in Oklahoma. However, one noticeable difference is there were no cicadas in Minnesota.

But now, as I walk away from the door of the administration building on the first leg of my self-imposed therapy, I'm thinking about time again, the perception of it in my mind and how it seems to slip away so quickly, yet stand still at times. And all I can hear is screeching cicadas. I look up into the trees to see if I can spot any of the annoying things, but as usual, I can't.

It's the strangest damn thing: Out of the blue, I'm not looking at the trees anymore. I'm looking at my feet and they're not on the sidewalk, they're out in front of me, no shoes, just stocking feet, my legs above me, now behind me. I feel like my brain is suddenly in overdrive. I can't figure this out. I think I'm actually whirling in the air

above the sidewalk . . . way above the sidewalk. I can see a truck blowing by a few feet below me. What's happening? It's a small red pickup and I think it's moving fast, but in distorted time, in slow motion. Have I been hit by that truck? It has to be going fast. What is it doing on the sidewalk, on campus? I think I've been hit by that truck. And it's really a long way off the road. Not like someone just veered over the curb as if they were texting and driving, or something equally ridiculous. I have been hit by that truck. From behind. Is anyone else seeing this? There will be some pretty serious deliberations about needing to protect the campus community from this kind of thing. The goddamn thing hit me. Somebody is actually driving—or at least the truck is moving—at high speed, on the sidewalk on the campus. Outrageous. Of course, just about anything seems like high speed on a sidewalk. The university even recently came up with new rules limiting the speed of the unnecessary fleet of golf carts that swarmed around the easily walkable campus.

It's a good thing it's summer, otherwise there would be students, lots of them, walking, standing, laughing, crowding the walkway just below me. The pint-sized speech and hearing impaired children—only three and four years old—that attend classes in the building just a few feet away from here would be playing just inside the white wooden picket fence next to the sidewalk if school were in session. And who's to say the truck would have taken the course it's on right now? It could just as easily have plowed through the kiddos playing on the grass, leaving their families to suffer real pain.

Now I can see through the windshield of the truck and can tell that the driver isn't really driving, is he? The guy is clearly slumped over the wheel, his hands in his lap. Why is he going so damn fast? Cars and trucks traveling the roads around the university

usually keep pretty close to the twenty-five mile-per-hour speed limit. If they don't, either the campus cops or the city police will intervene by suddenly materializing on a motorcycle or in a black and white SUV from one of several of their favorite hiding spots around the perimeter of the campus, blasting a short whoop of the siren and flashing red and blue lights in the offender's rearview mirror. There is one road connecting the university with I-35 and downtown—Second Street—that allows forty miles per hour along the southern border of the campus, but that is nowhere near here. The guy must have had a heart attack, or a seizure, or something. He could have fallen asleep. He doesn't appear to be conscious but I can't really tell, and I certainly can't see if he is hurt; if he is in pain. The guy looks sort of old, and bald. He looks like the character, Mike, in the TV show *Breaking Bad*.

Someone is going to have to do something about this. The higher ups at the university will meet in a special executive session to get the report from the campus police chief about what happened. They will hear from witnesses who saw the whole thing, like the round-faced guy I see over by the administration building. I can see him looking my way, and there is no doubt that the guy sees that the truck is where it's not supposed to be and that it's traveling at a speed that makes no sense at all. The guy looks like Phillip. It is Phillip, and he is seeing everything. It's pretty weird for me to see Phillip from this perspective, up in the air. It is funny, really, for me to see the expression on his face. I'm not sure if the pained look is simple surprise or shock.

I've learned a lot from Phillip, who taught me to be more open minded about the LGBTQ community. Phillip has worked in my office for the past six years, starting as a student worker, going on to get his undergraduate degree, and then staying on to work

reception and whatever else anyone needed him to do, and deciding to get his master's degree in Education while he is still around. That was two years ago, and he still works in the office, now helping coordinate social media efforts for the university. Phillip is the first man I've ever known that married another man. The two of them went to San Francisco for the ceremony just a few months before Oklahoma was finally forced, in October 2014, to get in compliance with the rest of the country when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a case that had resolved a lawsuit challenging the state's ban on same sex marriage. That ruling, in effect, found the ban unconstitutional. The whole department celebrated with Phillip and his husband. I wonder why he's not back in the office? Maybe he's out for a walk, too.

It is strange to see the campus so quiet. From my new perspective, the view looks different. Not that it is so much better, it just looks different from twelve feet rather than from six feet above ground. It looks different when it's this quiet. So much has changed since I first arrived at the university fifteen years ago, leaving my job managing the news department at Oklahoma City's CBS television affiliate to come here. I'd moved from Tacoma to OKC, but after only a few months on the job I realized that the situation was unsustainable. The executive news director there suffered the pain of being bi-polar and half the time couldn't understand why everyone hated her; the other half she was everyone's best friend. No one could figure out how to work for her, so it was a relief when she was kicked even further upstairs. That had happened because of the stellar work she had done back in May of 1995, when the Murrah Building was bombed by America's deadliest domestic terrorist, causing a lifetime of almost unendurable pain to families in Oklahoma City.

So, after she was promoted, the station wanted to hire me as their executive news director, but I knew she wouldn't leave me alone to do my job. There would always be the feeling that it was her department. The TV news world is turning into the infotainment world anyway, and old dogs like me find it difficult to work within those constraints. Long gone is the day when most reporters got into the business because they wanted to help effect change, not entertain. Public interest, convenience and necessity, providing information to help people make important decisions; all that stuff is outdated. When the executive news director said she wanted me to make decisions on where to do news stories based on where the Neilson ratings meters were located throughout the metro, I decided I needed to figure out something else to do.

The university job just popped up. Karin had seen an ad in the local newspaper and told me I should apply. News Bureau Director. At the time I'd asked her who gets a job by answering an ad in the paper? But, she was right. I made a phone call, a meeting was set and the job was offered. The guy who would be my boss was interesting, to say the least. Eccentric. He was an attorney, owned a PR firm, was past his third divorce and had been recently ordained as an Episcopal priest at the age of sixty-one. Yet, despite the fact the job would provide much of what I wanted—including freedom and flexibility—the financial part was the problem, so I declined the offer. A few months later, I got a call back saying that the person they hired didn't work out, and did I want to reconsider? It took a leap of faith, but I did. It was Karin that convinced me that it would be the best thing for the family, for me.

It wasn't long before my new boss and his eccentricities convinced me that I had made the right decision. At least that's how I felt on most days. As for the rest? I

couldn't believe I was working for the guy. I loved and hated him at the same time. I loved the fact that he loved me. He always had my back and supported whatever crazy ideas I might have about pulling the marketing and communication efforts of the university into the twenty-first century. But, I hated the way he treated everyone else in the office with little or no respect. I think his insecurities from failed relationships and a certain self-loathing over food addiction and obesity led him to mistreat others in order to make himself feel better. I loved that he was a big fan of twentieth century German literature, but was appalled at his fascination with modern day porn. Soon I found out that once he trusted someone he liked to share bits of Thomas Mann or Hermann Hesse, or the latest blow job videos he found on the internet. Works by Hesse and Mann are scattered throughout my bookshelf, and the trash bin on my MacBook Pro is full of, well, trash.

I miss the guy now. He was killed in an airplane accident in 2007. He'd been the pilot of a rented plane that had a bad fuel pump. The engine sputtered just after takeoff and the right wing clipped a power line a quarter mile from the end of the runway. The plane nosed into the ground, and my old boss, my old boss's girlfriend and her three teenaged kids, two girls and a boy, were killed instantly. It is a bad way to get a promotion, but that's what happened.

Karin. Where is she now? She's probably still at the hospital. She went in early for surgery this morning, but that doesn't mean she'll be able to get out early. The patients don't stop needing help at quitting time. The doors never close at the hospital, and when the hospital is open, nurses like Karin run the place. They never used to close the TV station, either. Seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. That is one of the

things we shared for the first twenty-five years of our marriage. It's a little thing, but it has made a difference. All those little things add up to understanding each other and caring for each other enough to stick around for thirty-nine years together.

What's she going to do? This probably is not going to end well, and I am pained to think she'll be left alone. The kids will be around for a while to help, but eventually they'll go back to their own lives; they'll have to. She will have to make some decisions. She may decide to go back to Minnesota. Her ninety-year-old mother is there. Ninety and still kicking, big time. Karin has a lot of friends in Minnesota, but she has a lot of friends in Oklahoma, too. The thing is, it's Oklahoma.

I never thought we'd be here this long. We figured we'd be five and done. Get the kids through high school, find something else and get the hell out. To the rest of the country—except maybe Kansas—the politics are ridiculous. And, there's the in-your-face religious deal. Early on we learned that unless you grew up in Oklahoma, you probably would never get used to people asking where you go to church. And it makes a difference to them. If you don't go to their church, or some iteration of it, then maybe you weren't thinking quite right. If you don't go to church at all . . . well, then . . .

What would life have been like if Karin and I hadn't stuck it out? What if I'd pursued my momentary infatuation with Sherrie Bonnema back in college? I hadn't because my good friend Ray was dating Sherrie and my loyalty to him prevented me from getting in their way. Sherrie had been giving me all the right signals, but Ray and I had been buddies since we were little kids. Ray's dad, who was a lot older than all the other dads, treated him like a real person, and not just another kid. Ray had obviously

been treated that way his whole life, and our friendship grew because of it. Real people. Real good people. So, I didn't, couldn't, mess with Ray's girlfriend. Of course, one day Sherrie went her own way and even Ray eventually lost track of her. I wonder where she is now? What does she look like? She was really beautiful back then. Long, thick dark hair and the slightest hint, a fine wisp, really, of that dark hair over her upper lip, large dark almond shaped eyes, slender and sensual, like a young Frida Kahlo. It's hard to imagine what a woman like that, at that age, looks like when she gets older. I like to think she's still beautiful, still sensual, growing old gracefully.

Karin is beautiful, sensual and growing old gracefully. The thought of her loving someone else, another man, is distressing—we've been inseparable since we absorbed into each other when we were just kids, except for a short time exactly twenty-two years and four months ago. That's when she asked me—no she told me—to leave her, the kids, our home and everything we had built together, and get the hell out. It was because of a one-night fuck up. It happened when I was in Los Angeles for a broadcast convention. A late night party, a beautiful, young blonde news anchor from Phoenix, too much booze and the stupidest mistake I've ever made. I couldn't compromise my loyalty to my old buddy Ray and mess with Sherrie Bonnema, but apparently, I couldn't find it within myself to stay devoted to my wife and my family. What an asshole.

No marriage is perfect, right? Just like everyone else, we've had our troubles. But until the LA trip, there hadn't been anything like that. I didn't know what to do. We'd always talked things through, kept the lines of communication open. So, the Saturday after I returned from the convention, I told Karin about the blonde. I had to. She threw me out. And then, after the most painful six weeks of my life, the most beautiful, most

compassionate and loving person I have ever known, somehow found it in her heart to forgive me. She took me back. The shame and guilt have always been with me, but we've never spoken of it since. My whole being wants her to be happy and I know a big part of her is to share her love, herself, and that eases the pain a bit.

If she has any of her mother's genes Karin has a lot of life ahead of her, a lot more to offer. She'll never be done, not until the bitter end. She's much stronger than me. Petite, compact, and strong; physically, mentally and spiritually. Nursing is her profession now, but when she reaches the end of that rope, she'll do something else. She'll have to because that's who she is.

The kids will be fine. They're old kids, adults. But, I don't have any grandchildren yet. Damn. That little fact alone pains me. There's this little hole in my heart thinking that—like my own father who died from cancer when he was just forty-four—I will never know my grandchildren. When I think about my father, it's with a feeling of sadness. For myself, yes, for not really having the chance to get to know him, but mostly for my dad who never really had the chance to get to know his own five children. His career as an attorney kept him away from home most of the time. He never even got to see any of his children graduate from high school, or college, or start a career, or get married, or have their own children. None of that. But, unlike my own father, at least I got to know my own son's wife, my daughter-in-law. Lovely, loving, and intelligent. My son needs someone like her to challenge him. They met while they were in law school and they're doing just fine up in Kansas City. I worry a bit about my daughter, though. She is here in Oklahoma City, just finishing up her MBA, and her plan is to get out to the west coast, probably San Francisco. She knows a couple of people out

there, but to make that move on her own is pretty uncompromising. She'll lose her support system.

Silence. When did the cicadas stop their shrieking? Not a sound, now, except for tires whooshing across cement. BAM! The truck just slammed into a tree. A thick, champion bald cypress. That tree has probably been here for a hundred years, planted somewhere around the time when the university was founded. It isn't like those little jack oaks that are so common throughout Oklahoma. It easily stood its ground against the assault. But, the truck didn't do as well, crunched up pretty badly on the driver's side. And the sound of it . . . I've never heard anything like it and probably won't ever again. It pains me to realize the things I especially love to hear; the comforting sound of Karin's voice just before sleep takes hold at night, the fluttering of a jib on a perfect Puget Sound sailing day, the gentle trickle when a well-stroked kayak paddle lifts out of the water on a calm day, the cry of a Mississippi kite from high above warning perceived intruders away from its nest, all will be lost to me.

My olfactory nerves are in high gear. Motor oil. Sweet evergreen. Burnt rubber.

Have I made a difference? I remember my college roommate Danny telling me a long time ago, when we were just getting started in the adult world, that his main goal in life was to provide value, to somehow make a difference. Danny went on to medical school and learned how to be a damn good orthopedic surgeon and how to make a real difference in his patients' lives. I often think that if Danny hadn't also learned how to drink a fifth of vodka every night and hadn't ended up driving off the end of a T-road into

a massive Dutch elm in Minneapolis and killing himself at age thirty-seven, he might have been able to help me with my knee. Corny stuff, but have I made a difference?

What do we know about what we know the moment before we die? Do we get our questions answered? Usually, when someone is seriously hurt in an accident—or is hit from behind by a truck—and survives, they say they don't remember a thing. They remember leaving work, getting in the car and then, BAM! The next thing they know is they wake up in the hospital and don't remember anything in between the BAM! and waking up in pain. That seems like the best we can do. Nobody remembers anything, so nobody knows what we know. Maybe that's because they survived. Maybe it's our built-in way of helping us to avoid the really bad stuff. But, what about those who died? What did they know?

What's next? Is there a next? Life is difficult. You've got to work at it. Life gets better. Minnesota. Seattle. Oklahoma. Sailing. Skiing. Kayaking. Lucky. Born into privilege. Right time. Advantage. Cancer sucks. Parenting counts. Character counts. Love counts.

Looking up now I see Phillip again, his face inches from mine looking down at me. Concerned. Saying something. I can't hear him. Other people are there, standing over me, looking down at Phillip, then at me, saying something. I can't hear them. I hear only the cicadas.

Forgiveness. Count your blessings. Music. Maker's. Moonlight on the lake. Rome. Tuscany. Positano. Bergen. Naeroyfjord. Vikings. Oslo. Chuck Blue. Danny. Nils. Lise.

Karin. Karin. Karin.

The Blues Life

Locks on the doors to the late-night haunts had long been secured and the nocturnal street creatures were fully engaged with their weird and wonderful nightly waltz through run-down city boulevards. Beneath a creaky, crooked awning crowned with weather-beaten shake shingles, Ben Harrison sat alone in the still darkness on an aged wooden bench polished smooth by the rough-hewn undersides of thousands of pairs of denim jeans, and carved from end to end with the initials of dozens of anonymous somebodies. Leaning against the outside wall of the old Biting Sow Blues Club—or better known by those in the blues life as the Sow—Ben thought about the first time he came here, about the old man, and about the shabbiness of the blues life.

The grimy, weather-worn exterior of the Sow had been painted over dozens of times. The Texas Longhorn burnt orange that was the last color the most recent absentee owner decided to plaster on the place—possibly in an attempt to make it look like the color of the original brick, or even more likely just to piss off the Sooner Nation loyalists in Oklahoma City—was certainly among the worst. It simply didn't weather well. A putrid puddle of puke produced after a long high school night of orange vodka followed up by a few shots of Jaeger came to mind. By the look of faded red lettering over a dirty white background, a crooked wooden "For Lease" sign that had been hammered onto the wooden railing attached to the steps leading to the double front doors had apparently been there much longer than anticipated. There was still a nauseating reek of sour beer and cigarettes that surrounded the place. . . or was it his imagination?

Before it was the Sow, the squalid structure had spent years as a seafood shack, a biker bar, a Chinese dry cleaner, a Hookah lounge and for untold months, maybe even years, sitting empty. There'd even been an attempt at using the fifteen hundred square foot, flat tarpaper-roofed, single story three-window brick box as a daycare center. It didn't fly. Never got off the ground. Thank God.

The much-less-than-adequate parking lot adjacent to the place exemplified the progress that had been made in the asphalt world over the past thirty years, meaning it represented everything that was wrong with the way things used to be. A wholly horseshit job of paving pockmarked with ankle-breaking holes and strewn with chunks of crumbing junk; piles of what had come out of those craters. Through the past year-and-a-half of vacancy and neglect, Ben thought, the whole place had become a bona fide dump. On the other hand, if he were being honest, he'd have to say that anyone who had been there during the Biting Sow heydays would have to admit that inside the double wooden windowless doors it had never been any better.

Sometimes old wooden floors add character to a place. Not the Sow. The best thing that could be said about the floors in the joint is all the mud and dirt and beer and whiskey and piss and puke, and God knows what other bodily fluids, that had been dragged in or splattered across them over the years kept them in a permanent state of moist, rendering them virtually fireproof. At least once a night, a leg of one of the mismatched wooden or metal chairs would get stuck between floorboards and some overserved inebriate would slip off to the side and end up on the floor, his pants or shirt forever stained by whatever stickiness they came in contact with. Or a table leg would punch through a gap, which strangely enough, didn't seem to bother anyone very much.

Evidently, a pitcher of beer or a shot of whiskey could just as easily be snatched up from an angle as it could from a level surface.

There's no doubt that a place like that looks far better at night. Brightly colored neon beer signs on the walls, a few low wattage incandescent bulbs hanging from woven fabric-coated wires from the ceiling, along with a second-hand disco ball spinning in an alarmingly gradual orbit allowing each reflected beam of dull white light to circumnavigate the entire room in painstakingly slow motion, can do a lot to level things out. Even then, if you look closely, if you make the mistake of actually trying to see where you are, you will be very disappointed. And worse yet, if you look during the light of day, if you actually try to process what it is you're looking at, you will see the unvarnished truth and then learn an important life lesson: Never look too closely. It was the perfect place for a blues bar.

Ben met the old man at a party that he threw for himself to celebrate his seventy-sixth birthday. Ben was there because his girlfriend at the time, a petite blonde nurse named Bonnie, had helped the old man and his third wife, a twenty-three-year-old woman named Misty, have a baby at the fertility clinic where she worked, and Bonnie had invited him along for the festivities. When Ben found out the old man's vasectomy was seventeen years older than his wife, he had to meet him. When the old man found out Ben had a Fender bass guitar, they started to talk.

"See this?" the old man said. "See what it says?" He was wearing a black rubber wristband with white lettering. On it was written, *WWMWD?*

"Yes, I see it," Ben said.

"So, then you know what it stands for," the old man said.

"I don't," Ben said. "I've seen the 'What Would Jesus Do' bracelets, but not one like that."

"Sure you do," the old man said. "Go ahead, tell me."

"OK," Ben said. "It means, What Would My Wife Do?"

"Jeeesus!" the old man coughed. "My wife? Hell no. Muddy Waters, not my wife! What Would Muddy Waters Do?"

The party was in the old man's upstairs apartment, which occupied the entire top floor of a four-story brick building the old man owned just a block away from his blues club. Low blue light radiating from every fixture in the place reflected off of all light-colored surfaces in the mostly open space, but disappeared into blackness on anything darker than white or pale grey. The whole place, everything and everyone in it, was black and blue.

"You ever been to the Sow?" the old man asked.

"I don't really go out to the bars," Ben said. "Not anymore."

"No?"

"Nope. Let's just say there was a time when I did, and it wasn't really good for me. Cost me my marriage."

"Well, I'm working on number three," the old man said. "I just had to find a woman who wasn't threatened by the Biting Sow."

The Biting Sow. The old man said it was the first thing that came to mind when he needed a name for his club. He claimed to be a simple, unsophisticated country boy, born and raised on a pig farm outside of Okeene, Oklahoma. He said that modest rural upbringing was the key to his success, that he used his down-to-earth way of talking, his unpretentious, seemingly naïve persona whenever he negotiated with anyone for anything. He'd talk slowly and deliberately with a sense of modesty and self-deprecation to lure his prey into a state of self-perceived superiority, then he'd gently set the hook, reel them slowly in and before anyone knew what had happened, he'd get his way. He said that's how he got to own six buildings in downtown OKC, including the Biting Sow. But, those negotiations had been between him and other businessmen. Never businesswomen.

The old man had an old-fashioned sense of the roles of men and women in the world, and for whatever reasons, fully trusted only men. Maybe that's why he was on his third marriage. He said he learned early on, back on the farm, that you don't go near a sow with piglets because she'll bite you sure as the day is long and be pretty damned aggressive about it. He said the name, the Biting Sow, came to him when his second wife left him just after he bought the club.

"The bite from that hurt pretty bad," the old man confided. "Not because I miss her, you understand, but because I miss the money she takes from me every month!"

The old man hadn't signed a prenuptial agreement before they were married. And if anyone were to ask him, it was her fault, not his own.

The old man was the kind of guy who cared about names. Called himself Medico Blue. Medico because he made his money convincing upwardly striving moms that prospects for their underwhelming offspring would be so much better if they'd get that crooked smile straightened out through the construction of a maze of stainless steel wires and brackets in their mouths. And being an orthodontist, he knew exactly where they could go to get the best deal on braces: His shabby little office in a low-rent strip mall in the Oklahoma City suburb of Midwest City. Just drop in any time, he'd say, and Marge at the front desk would get the paperwork done and put your kid on the schedule. And, don't worry, we can make the payments affordable. Trust me, I'm a doctor. Blue because somewhere in the midst of a mid-life crisis—he was fifty-two at the time—he learned how to play the harmonica, and the only songs he learned were *Oh Susanna* and just about any blues song. It turns out that's because the riffs on the harp were the same for most blues tunes, and he'd been blowing those same old grooves going on twenty-four years. Besides, he thought that when you put Blue on the end of Medico it sounded really cool.

He was a little guy, the old man. Five seven, maybe. Always wore the same shabby black suit with a white shirt and a skinny black tie. And a black pork pie hat on top of his head of thinning, close cropped white hair. Fashioned himself to be some kind of Blues Brother; the constant black knockoff Ray Ban Wayfarers clinched it. He'd owned the club at the end of California Street next to the railroad tracks in the shabby part of the old Bricktown section of downtown OKC for ten years. He spent some of his orthodontics money so that the band he'd formed a few years before had a place to play. Nobody else in town would hire Medico Blue and the Healers, so he raised his middle

finger at them, bought his own joint and immediately became the leader of the house band.

The old man persisted, telling Ben that he should come down on a Monday night, jam night, when anybody could sign up for a turn to play with whoever else was up on the Biting Sow's wobbly stage.

"You been playing?" the old man asked.

"Not really. Not since I was a kid," Ben said.

"You have a bass? A Fender?" the old man said.

"Well, yeah, but . . . "

"Bring the sumbitch to the Sow, and we play!"

And, so he did. Well, sort of. It took Ben a full three weeks of letting his balls grow big enough to even show up at the place. He drove down after ten, paid three bucks to park in the pitted lot adjacent to the building and slinked into the smoky Sow under the cover of darkness and rain and the driving rhythm of "Sweet Home Chicago," hoping no one would notice when he slouched into an uncomfortable wooden chair at a double top near the back. But, then again, it was always dark in the Sow, at least when there were people inside, of which there were maybe a dozen and a half that night. And, for the most part, those were night people, nocturnal animals, they could see best in the dark. There was no hiding from the old man.

“I see we have a new jammer in the house!” Ben flinched and squeezed his eyes closed at the old man’s shrill amplified voice. “Come on up here, Benjamin, my man. Let’s play some blues!”

Why would Ben have expected anything else? He showed up, just like the old man had told him to do, on a jam night, when people in the crowd got up to play, and so he was expected to get up and jam. Right?

“No, no, I can’t,” Ben, embarrassed at having been singled out, half shouted. “I didn’t bring my bass.”

He had brought his bass, but somehow he’d reasoned that maybe he could do this whole thing in increments. He thought that if he left his bass in the car, then he wouldn’t have to play, but it was there if, for some reason, he did. The old man didn’t give a shit.

“Get up here, we have a bass for you. Give him yours,” the old man said to the guy that had been up there playing a crappy, old black wide-necked bass that looked like it had been cobbled together using parts from at least three instruments, maybe four. A Frankenstein. The guy looked peevish, maybe even a little ticked off, about the whole thing. Looked like he didn’t want to give up his bass to someone he’d never even seen before, but he did as he was told by the old man and shrugged out of the shoulder strap and perched the bass in a vertical guitar stand before slinking off stage.

Still, Ben didn’t move.

“Come on up here, Benny Boy,” the old man said into the microphone, then abruptly turned his attention to his guitar player and directed him to start the next song.

No one was on the bass. The old man knew Ben would have to do his bidding, or never get the chance to play on the Sow's stage again. Twelve bars of Robert Johnson's "Come On in My Kitchen" went by before Ben slung the bass over his shoulder, turned up the volume and commenced to make a fool out of himself.

That's how Ben's venture into the blues life began. The old man even made him play a solo that night. "Give it a ride, Benny Boy!" the old man had shouted during the second stop in Howlin' Wolf's "Killin' Floor." He didn't really know what that meant, but when everyone else stopped playing and stared at him expectantly, he awkwardly plucked his way through an excruciating assortment of poorly picked notes while the old man laughed. At him, not with him. "That's how we do it!" the old man cackled when he thought Ben had had enough, had been broken down to the most basic level of humiliation, had lost all self-respect, and then the band picked up where they'd left off.

"The only way you're going to get better is to play with other people," the old man had said after it was all over that night. "See you back here next Monday." And Ben went back, week after week, and the old man patiently helped him work on his mojo.

Mojo. He learned all kinds of blues talk, and all kinds of other things that he'd never known before. Ben Harrison had already lived a lot of life, had worked as a television news reporter in Seattle for fifteen years before moving to Oklahoma City to take over as manager of the CBS television news operation there. Years of checking the crime docket at the police station, the court records, reading the Associated Press newswire, running after police cars when he heard a report of something out of the ordinary on the scanner, all of these things had worked together to give Ben somewhat of

a jaded outlook on the human condition. He had often said that he would never get used to the horrible things people were willing to do to each other. He'd said the first crime report he read when he started his career in TV news at age twenty-four in Duluth, Minnesota, a report filed by some guy who walked into his sixty-eight-year-old neighbor's apartment to borrow a screwdriver to fix a broken lamp only to find the old guy with his nine-month-old granddaughter in his lap, holding the back of her head so that the baby was forced to suck on his semi-hard dick, was the worst thing he'd ever heard of.

But over the next seventeen years, as his career progressed from Duluth to Seattle to Oklahoma City, and from reporting to anchoring and ultimately management, he would show up to work every day only to discover someone had done something just as bad, or even worse; maybe chain their kid in a closet for a few weeks because he didn't clean up after himself, or burn a child with a cigarette because she didn't smile when she was supposed to, or kidnap and murder a child after sexually assaulting her—or him—because the guy that did it was a sick fuck. All the worst stuff involved kids.

None of that changed when Ben moved from Seattle to take the OKC job. It was just a matter of degree. People were the same no matter where they lived, there were just a lot more of them in Seattle than there were in OKC, and people will do things only people would do wherever they are. That kind of thing can take a toll. Back in Seattle, the suffering got to him, so he tried drowning it out with booze. And when that didn't work he attempted to escape using other substances; mostly smoke, some pills. It's what wrecked his marriage, nearly wrecked his career, and ultimately forced him to clean up his act and move halfway across the country to get a new start.

Still, there was plenty of misery in Oklahoma City, and along with the misery, comes the blues, and the old man introduced him to plenty of people who had the blues.

"Benny Boy, don't you think it's about time you started playing a bit more? Come on over here, I want you to meet Harry Hazard," he said one night at the Sow, a couple of months after Ben started attending the Monday night blues jams. "He's looking for a bass player." He introduced them, then walked away.

It was the guy that gave up his jury-rigged bass that first night Ben had jammed with the old man. Up close Ben could see that Hazard was probably approaching fifty, his short-cropped beard neatly shaved to form an outline along his jawline and a connecting pencil-thin mustache was obviously dyed black. He wore the obligatory camp shirt, untucked and adorned with martini glasses, over baggy blue jeans. And, even though he hadn't liked it when Ben took over for him that night, he didn't seem to hold a grudge.

"I've heard you play at the jams," Hazard said. "You looking for a regular gig?"

"Aren't you a bass player?" Ben said.

"Only when Medico needs one," Hazard said. "I play guitar in my own band."

"Well, I haven't been looking," Ben said. "I'm just starting to figure out what it's all about. I'm probably not good enough to play in an actual band."

"Come back on Wednesday, my band is playing here that night," Hazard said. "Sit in for a set. See what you think."

When Ben went back that Wednesday he found Harry Hazard leaning on one side of a tall, free-standing countertop toward the back of the joint that gave people who

didn't want to sit at a table a place to stand, a place to set their beer and an ashtray for their cigarette. Hazard was drinking a Bud Light and smoking a Marlboro. Ben went around to the other side of the counter to face him and saw that his eyes were a little rheumy.

"I can't promise anything, but I'd like to sit in with you for a set," Ben said.

"Third set," Hazard said, somewhat thickly. "Starts about midnight."

A bleached blonde with a hairdo stuck in the eighties walked up behind Hazard—a woman Ben had never seen before—wrapped her arms around him from behind then reached down and grabbed his junk with both hands. Her shiny red face with dark, thin penciled-in eyebrows peeked over his right shoulder wearing an iniquitous smile. She was rough.

Throwing his arms in the air, rolling his eyes back in his head and swiveling his hips as the woman held on, Hazard gleefully shouted, "Rhonda! Ha, ha, ha! Help me, Rhonda!" It was then that Ben realized he'd never seen Hazard smile before. He was missing a front tooth; bottom left.

Ben became a member of the Hazard Project, laying down the backbeat to Hazard's rhythm guitar and vocals, Stormin' Norman's sufficient lead guitar, and the sad drummer Leapin' Lanny's blues shuffles before paltry crowds at various blues joints in OKC. Sweetwater's. Danny's Blues Saloon. Even a gig or two at Beverly's Blue Fox, where the fifty-something Beverly herself provided adult entertainment by stripping and wagging her generous cellulite-pocked ass at the crowd and propping a beer bottle between her palpably fake tits to bumping recorded dance music when the band went on

break. Beverly evidently got a kick out of her own performances, laughing raucously the whole time and working the mostly disinterested crowd by simulating an orgasm at the climactic end of the third song—usually Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love"—just before the Hazard Project returned to the stage to perform more of Hazard's original blues. They even played an occasional Wednesday or Thursday at the Sow.

On one of those nights, Ben was lugging his Hartke bass amp with a custom fifteen-inch Electrovoice speaker onto the Sow's derelict stage for a nine o'clock gig. The structure was so shabby it wasn't clear what kept the thing together. Ben thought it might be the section of chain link fence across the front of it. Or maybe it was just there to protect the band from people like Rhonda.

"Have you seen the old man tonight?" Ben asked Hazard as he watched him weave a guitar cable between his black pearl Danelectro and a worn white leather strap; a trick guitar players use to keep the chord from getting in their way while they play.

"You haven't heard," Hazard said matter-of-factly.

Ben had been with the band for the better part of a year now, playing most weekend nights and an occasional weeknight or two, this just happened to be a Thursday. He considered the thirty bucks or so that he was paid for each gig to be insultingly pitiful. No one was making a living as a blues musician in Oklahoma City. It was merely what he and the rest of the band called walking money. His day job at the TV station was how he paid the mortgage.

"Haven't heard what?" Ben was consistently perplexed at how little real communication he had with Hazard, or anyone else in the band for that matter.

"Sick," Hazard said without making eye contact with Ben.

"What do you mean sick? You mean like real sick, or just sick sick," Ben said.

"Something about a leaky heart valve," Hazard said. "He got lightheaded and damn near collapsed at his dental office a couple days ago. He's in the hospital."

The old man had turned seventy-seven a month before and hadn't changed a thing about his lifestyle. The dental office during the day and the Biting Sow at night, with his own band playing every Friday and Saturday night, with him front and center cupping his harmonica in his left hand and a short, yet apparently bottomless glass of Jack Daniel's on the rocks, in the right.

The last time Ben had seen him was the Saturday before, when the Hazard Project had what was becoming a rare weekend off. Not because they wanted the time, but because the joint they were scheduled to play had had a fire that nearly destroyed the place; an electrical circuit overload. The old man's band was on a break when Ben arrived late at the Sow and the guitar player was running around asking if anyone had seen Medico. It was time to get back on stage, he said, and finish the last set for the night. Another five minutes passed, and no one could find him.

Then, from the back of the bar, coming from behind the closed door of the only storage room in the place, even above the reverberation of a George Thorogood CD playing through the sound system, the unmistakable high pitched rhythmic moaning, slow staccato screams really, of a woman—which could be interpreted only as an expression of sexual ecstasy—was heard coming from the storeroom. When the door was opened—by God knows who—there was the old man, back to the door, still wearing

his black coat, white shirt and skinny black tie, pork pie hat and black sunglasses with his pants around his ankles, wrinkly bare white ass pumping away between the widespread legs of his young, and obviously needy, wife who was lying on her back, completely nude, on top of several stacked cases of Coors Light, howling like there was a full moon.

"Just about there!" the old man grunted at the open door behind him, apparently without interruption to his rhythm. "Give me a minute and I'll be right out!"

Whoever opened the door mercifully slammed it shut, and the whole place waited, quietly, for the noise behind the door to subside. The only sound in the room was George Thorogood growling *Bad to the Bone* through speakers suspended from the ceiling. And true to the old man's word, about a minute later, following an exceptionally enthusiastic and markedly mixed chorus from behind the door, all was quiet. After another minute, the door opened and the old man strode through, fully dressed, without the least hint of expression on his face that would betray anything out of the usual and hollered, "Let's play!"

At closing time that Saturday, as the bar was being shut down and the late-night people were shuffling out and the cash from the aluminum tip bucket that was perched on the edge of the stage every night was being divided up between the band members and the bar staff, the old man pulled Ben by the sleeve and sat him at a table in the back. Just the two of them.

"Benny Boy, I want you to come and play with me," he said. "Come up to the prime time here at the Sow. You're ready."

Ben was caught off guard.

“Well, I appreciate that, but I don’t know,” Ben said. “What about your guy, what about Corey?”

“Corey is Corey,” the old man said. “He’s not helping the band. You know him. He’s drunk half the time and messing around with the other stuff the other half. I need someone smart, someone steady. Someone who isn’t going to get into that shit.

“Now don’t get me wrong, we like to have some fun, drink a little, fuck a little, you know. But when it comes right down to it, I know the kind of man you are and that’s the kind of man I want in my band.”

“What about Hazard?” Ben said.

“Oh, well, don’t worry about him,” the old man said. “He’s a simple man who needs to be told what to do from time to time. And listen, Benny, it’s time for you to get away from him. You’ve done all you can with Harry Hazard. By now I’m sure you know he likes his funny stuff, too. It’s been getting worse. I know you don’t need that. It could hurt you.”

Ben did know. It was the first gig they’d played at Sweetwater’s in south Oklahoma City near the Diamond Ballroom off of I-240 about three months back. The place was shabbier, much worse than the Sow by a long shot. A tiny, completely windowless cinderblock shack with a concrete slab for a floor, six tiny round tables with four chairs at each one and two pool tables—with beer-stained green felt that had survived long past its life expectancy—placed directly in front of the band’s staging area, which was really no more than a corner of the room blocked off with just enough room for Lanny’s drum set and not much more. The bar was on one side, and everything else

was entirely jammed into the rest of the space. It was a smoke-filled, low-point beer joint where people went after their shift at the nearby Budweiser bottling facility to drink as much of their own product as they needed to get a buzz before they had to go home to whatever sadness was waiting for them there.

In his short time with the band, Ben had come to realize that in general, people who populated the late night bar scene, that found their escape, their solace in booze, that came together to find other people like them who seek succor in their shared misery, operated on a level just a tiny step above the seamy underside of society he had come to know in his day job. For the most part how they acted and what they were willing to do was not necessarily criminal, it was just basically inappropriate. For the most part.

During their second break, around midnight, Ben had gone to the back of the place looking to get rid of some of the two bottles of Bud Light he'd downed the hour before. There was a gathering of angry-looking women outside the ladies' room door, but as usual, no one waiting outside the men's room. Without hesitation, Ben twisted the door handle and walked in. Inside were two women, jeans and panties around their ankles. One was about fifty years old with long, jet-black hair, a red poncho wrapped around her shoulders and was seated on the toilet. The other, around thirty, bleached blonde hair, a low-cut blouse exposing plenty of cleavage and a crooked grin on her flushed face was actually sitting with her bare ass in the sink. Both were apparently taking a leak.

"Come on in, honey," the sink sitter said. "We couldn't wait for that bitch in the ladies' room so we're just borrowing yours for a minute."

Stunned, but not really surprised, and without a word, Ben backed out and pulled the door shut. He could hear the women laughing inside. Hilarious. He knew he had to find another place to wait in order to avoid facing the trespassers when they came out, so when he spotted a grey metal-encased side door beneath a red exit sign he went through it. Just outside and off to Ben's right, there was Hazard in the dark, gathered closely together with three or four other rather average looking characters that Ben had never seen before, obviously exchanging something for something else. Just as suddenly as he'd gone through the door, they all turned their attention to Ben, looking like deer caught in the headlights, or maybe more like kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar. Hazard recovered first, scowled and shook his head at Ben then nodded toward the door. The message was clear: Get the hell out of here, now. Go back inside.

There was no doubt in Ben's mind about what was happening in that moment. He'd seen it plenty of times before, back in Seattle. Hazard was making a drug deal, probably cocaine. It didn't catch Ben completely off guard, he'd witnessed enough of Hazard's erratic behavior to realize that the regular swings from high to low then back up and down again probably involved some kind of help.

The old man was right, it was time to get away from Hazard.

"I've got to take some time to think about it," Ben said to the old man. "Can you give me a couple of days?"

"OK. Just don't take too long," he said. "I need someone next week. And listen, Benny Boy, no matter what you decide about playing with me, you need to get out of the Hazard Project. There's trouble there."

That Thursday night, Ben was going to tell the old man that he'd come to a decision about playing in his band. He was going to tell him thanks, but no thanks. He didn't get the chance. Before they'd finished their second set, in the middle of Hazard's *Hard Drivin' Man*, the woman from behind the bar, Gloria, obviously distraught, came out waving her arms in the air and shouting at them, demanding that they stop the music. That had never happened before, so they knew that the level-headed Gloria, the woman who'd run the place night after night, year after year, since the old man bought it, was serious. With tears streaming and stifled sobs she told them Misty had just called; the old man was gone, he died an hour ago leaving behind a twenty-four-year-old wife and a six-month-old baby.

Sitting on that worn wooden bench, leaning up against the grimy wall of the old Biting Sow, and looking back at that year he laid down the bottom for The Hazard Project, Ben remembered wondering how the old man, or anyone for that matter, could get stuck in the blues. The same beat, the same one-four-five twelve-bar chord progressions, the same depressing lyrics. He thought back to that Thursday night when he was going to tell the old man that not only was he going to turn down his offer, but that he was going to quit playing altogether, that he was going to drop out of the blues life. He couldn't take the same old thing anymore. But then, the old man died, and that's when Ben figured it out. Ultimately, no one ever leaves the blues behind. Life is the blues. And the longer your life goes on, the more the blues seeps into your bones. It's just that simple.

“What do you need, Benny Boy?”

Startled, Ben was jolted back to the present and looked up into the whiskey and smoke-worn, half-smiling face of a man wearing a black dyed, close cropped beard and missing his lower left front tooth. He hadn’t heard him approach.

“Holy shit, you scared the crap out of me,” Ben said.

“Sorry man,” Hazard said. “You looked like you were off somewhere else.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ben said. “Thinking about the old days. And this place. The blues life. In some ways it seems like it was so long ago, but in other ways it’s like it was just yesterday.”

“A lot changes in three years,” Hazard said.

“True that,” Ben said. “A lot of changes. But at the same time, some things haven’t changed at all.”

Alert now, aware of his surroundings, Ben heard a siren off in the distance. He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke, then realized Hazard had a butt burning. Slowly, and carefully, Ben surveyed the darkness, making sure they were alone.

“So, what’d you bring?” he said.

“Anything you need, Benny Boy. Anything you need.”

Tommy Hammer

Tommy Hammer. Even his name was appealing to us isolated, small town, pale Middle-America Scandinavian know-nothings. Hammer. Not Nelson, Peterson or Olson. Tommy *Hammer*. He was mystifying. We didn't know where he came from, when he came, or why he was in our town. He was older, but nobody knew by how much. For sure he was older than all of us high school juniors. He was slender and of medium height, maybe a bit more, unintimidating in that way. And he was good looking, really good looking, with thick black hair, olive skin, dark eyes, straight, brilliant white teeth and a smile that charmed, like a real-life, young Cary Grant. All of that was different—and a bit intimidating—in our fair-skinned, blue-eyed homogenous town. Tommy Hammer was older and good looking and *different*. Every Nelson, Peterson and Olson blonde took notice. I didn't like him.

He just showed up one day working at Snow Jeans, the hip shop where we hung out after school browsing through the latest snow ski gear and fashions in winter (Hart Javelin skis were all the rage, but Head 320s were untouchably cool) and lake necessities in the summer (including our first exposure to wildly colorful bold floral-print Hawaiian "baggies") hoping we would be perceived as cool just by being part of the crowd. We all had our after-school jobs, working at the local hardware, or jewelry or dime store. But working at Snow Jeans automatically made Tommy Hammer cool.

And he had this voice. It was more than just pleasant; it was . . . authentic. And along with it came this charisma. At first, none of us could resist it. He was mesmerizing. No one could tell stories like Tommy Hammer. He was articulate, funny

and clever, like Jack Parr or Steve Allen. And he used words that none of us had ever used. Words like groovy, boss and bitchin. Bitchin. We'd never heard that one before, at least not used to describe something that was actually good. Tommy Hammer told stories about things we had never heard of before, places we had never visited or people that existed only in . . . well, his stories.

"Sure, I make my own beer," Tommy was saying to a gathering of captivated, naïve innocents.

It was a Monday night, cold—very cold and getting colder—and dreadfully dark. In December in Minnesota, the sun sets at around four-thirty, meaning it had slipped below the horizon nearly five hours ago. Six of us were seated on loose, squeaky metal-framed chairs with well-worn, padded green vinyl seats, crowded around one of the four square, gray-speckled Formica-topped tables with chrome edging—surrounded by six elevated, four-person booths, three on each side—inside the Puritan Café. Sandwiched between Hedlund Drug and Hogan's Clothiers on Litchfield Avenue, Puritan's walls were smoke-stained beige and the incandescent lighting suffered. The retail stores in our town stayed open late on Monday nights in December, and with Christmas just a few days away, we all had to work and we all liked to gather afterwards to BS and complain. There was Craig, Dan, Karin, Brenda and me, Ben Harrison; and Tommy Hammer, who basically crashed our little klatch, uninvited. The only other customers in Puritan that night were Raynold Tolefson and Harlan Rohner, sitting across from each other at the back booth against the wall on the right side, still wearing short, heavy winter jackets over long white smocks, on break from their jobs on the nighttime cleanup crew at the

Farmer's Produce turkey processing plant on the edge of town. We were listening to "Hey Jude" because Tommy had put a dime in the jukebox and told us we just *had* to hear this bitchin new song.

"It's not really that hard, but you totally have to know what you're doing," Tommy said. Laughing now, exhibiting that captivating smile, he said, "If you don't, you can end up getting pretty sick."

"Sick? What do you mean, sick?" Craig asked.

Craig worked with Tommy at Snow Jeans, which just added to the cred Craig needed to qualify for cool. He had never had a real challenge getting girls, or for just about anything else, including the hip job at Snow Jeans. Tall, lean, and a star basketball player, Craig was used to winning. He had sandy blond hair, a strong jaw and striking blue eyes. That had made high school very copacetic for him. But ever since Tommy's arrival, Craig sensed a change in the atmosphere. We all felt the shift, a slight tilt in our comfortable, insulated little world. Craig chose to stay close to Tommy in order to gauge the perceived opposition, so he had done what he could to befriend him. He also made sure Tommy didn't get off too easy, challenging him whenever he deemed necessary.

"Well, just what I said. Not just blitzed, but righteously sick," Tommy answered, not the least put off by the interruption. "Just last summer it happened to me."

"What happened to you?" Brenda asked.

Not unlike a few other girls in our small town, Brenda—who was marginally attractive, tall and top-heavy, with dishwater blond hair and grey eyes obscured by the reflection off her black cat-eye eyeglasses—couldn't seem to keep her hands off of Tommy Hammer. Literally. Just sitting there looking at and listening to Tommy tell

tales, she had to caress his arm from time to time, or she might allow a finger to linger on the thigh of his Ivey Leaguers for a few moments; right in front of the rest of us. She couldn't help it. He didn't seem to mind. Apparently, he was used to it. Word around town was that many girls had ridden in the birth control seat of Tommy's raked '57 Port Holer. He took full advantage of the suicide knob on his steering wheel, which allowed him to steer with his left hand and wrap his right arm around stacked chicks like Brenda, copping a feel while they were cruising.

"Well, I brewed a batch of beer at home and decided to invite some people over to help me drink it," Tommy began. "Craig, you might remember Deano talking about this."

Deano was Dean Vegdahl, well known in town as the thirty-something owner of Snow Jeans. He was cool.

"Deano came out—you know my pad at the lake, right?" Tommy said. "Well, Deano came out along with a couple other guys to help me drink my home brewski. It was a small batch, just a couple of gallons, but plenty for all of us, if you get my drift."

We got his drift, but none of us had ever heard the story or had ever been to Tommy's pad. He lived alone in a small rental house on the west side of Green Lake about ten miles north of town. That was prime real estate and we figured that either Deano was paying Tommy much more than he was paying Craig, or Tommy had bread from somewhere else. It was probably the latter. But, from where, nobody knew.

"We were just hanging loose in lawn chairs on the deck—can't you just feel those summer days?" Tommy said.

I swear we all could.

“We were grooving to some tunes, drinking beer, talking,” Tommy continued. “One of the guys, your cousin Curt, Danny, brought over a few snacks from his old man’s grocery store, chips and that kind of thing.”

Dan Hermanson was my best friend. We met in kindergarten and had gone through all our life changes together. He was Paul McCartney and I was John Lennon. We worked together tagging and stocking merchandise at Coast-to-Coast Hardware after school on weeknights and all day on Saturdays. He needed the job. His old man had died when Dan was twelve, and his mom worked as an operator for Northwestern Bell, so there wasn’t much money. Dan had four little brothers, all under fifteen. They shoveled sidewalks and mowed lawns to help out. The Hermansons lived a few blocks from me, so I gave Dan a ride to school in my ’50 Chevy, then to work and home again, every day. I never asked for anything in return because I knew he didn’t have it.

“Curt knew I like those salted-in-the-shell peanuts, so he brought a bag over just for me. I was jazzed. I must have eaten a pound of those things, cracking them open and tossing the shells over the rail. Don’t you just love salted-in-the-shell peanuts?” Tommy said. “Anyway, I wasn’t sure why, but the home brew didn’t taste particularly primo. It was sort of bland, almost thick. Not my best effort. Still, peanuts and beer go together, so the more I ate, the more I drank. Plus, it had what it takes and by the time we finished it off, we were all pretty loaded. I’m just glad no one got busted by your uncle on their way home, Karin.”

Karin Haakonsson had one of the notable Norwegian names in town—easy to say, but impossible to spell just by hearing it. Long ago, some families from the old country had changed the spelling to Hawkinson so they wouldn’t have to explain it every time

someone asked, but Karin's father, Tor, stubbornly clung to the exemplar. Tor owned Haakonsson's Jewelry and Gift Store, where he and his wife, Lillian, sold diamond engagement rings, dinnerware sets and Scandinavian knick-knacks. Karin worked in the store after school and on most Saturdays. Karin's uncle, Siggard Haakonsson, was a deputy sheriff in our county. He was well known as a hard ass that wouldn't cut anyone any slack, especially when it came to drinking and driving. Karin looked every bit her heritage: blond, blue-eyed and beautiful. And try as he might—and we all knew he did—Tommy Hammer couldn't get to her. But then, neither could the rest of us.

Believe me, I tried. At seventeen, I hadn't had much luck with girls. My two older brothers had been the cool guys in our high school, always dating the prettiest girls. With both of them in college now I was supposed to carry the family torch, but it didn't quite fit in my hand. Apparently, I didn't get the cool gene and pretty much stumbled around any conversation with girls—especially Karin. She wasn't my first crush—that was my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Haines—but Karin was my high school crush and I was lost in my desire for her. Yet, while she was nice to me, that was about as far as it went. So, I was delighted that the suave, good-looking, smooth-talking Tommy Hammer was mired in my league as far as Karin was concerned. Somehow, it made me feel a little better about my future prospects.

"So, everyone finally left," Tommy said. "I basically passed out on the couch in the front room off the deck, still in my t-shirt and cutoffs, and I started to have this horrific nightmare."

Tommy paused, looking slowly around the table, apparently assessing his audience and our level of interest. Seeing that we were all agog with anticipation, anxiously hanging on the design of a dreadful dream, he picked up where he left off.

"It was awful. I dreamt that my body was all bloated, like someone who drowned and had been underwater for a few days. But the bloat in my dream wasn't from days underwater, it was from worms, maggots, millions of them squirming. They were those fat, yellowish-white greasy kind, crawling through the inside of my entire body. It was like I didn't have any muscles or bones or internal organs, just maggots struggling, causing the surface of my skin to crawl, to sort of . . . undulate."

"Good lord, Tommy," I said. "That is gross. I think I'm going to hurl."

"You have no idea, Bennie Boy," Tommy said, bugging me because he called me Benny Boy. "Every bit of me was rippling, from my eyeballs to my asshole. I was trying to scream but my mouth and throat were clogged with fat, slimy maggots pouring out in masses, flowing onto my chest as I lay there on my back on the couch."

"All right," Craig said. "That's about all I can take. Jesus, I don't think I can finish my malt."

"Well," Tommy said, "apparently that was about all I could take, too. I came slowly out of the dream, my head was in a fog, and of course, the first thing I realized was that there weren't any maggots. But, here's the thing; like I said, I was lying on my back and when I looked down at my belly it was huge. I mean my gut looked like I was pregnant."

"What the heck?" Dan said.

“Seriously, my stomach was enormous and round, like I had swallowed a basketball,” Tommy said. “And it hurt like hell, like it was on fire from the inside. And it was gurgling, moving and churning, and I was freaked out thinking it could be full of maggots after all.”

“Jesus!” Craig said.

“I could barely get up,” Tommy said. “I felt as sick as I’ve ever felt in my life. I could hardly see; everything was hazy and spinning around and around. And I was alone. Even if I would have been able to call out, there was no one there to help me. I was finally able to stand up and stagger across the room toward the front door. I damn near crashed through the screen, but found my way out onto the deck and to the railing. I just stood there in the dark, not knowing what to do. Then, hoping to do something—anything—to change the situation, to get myself back, on impulse, I grabbed the railing, opened my mouth wide and clenched my stomach muscles and pushed, hoping to get rid of the maggots, or whatever was in my gut. “

“Good lord!” I said.

“This is where it gets funky,” Tommy said.

“Gets funky!” Brenda said with a hand over her mouth as if she were trying to keep from puking.

“Yeah, really pretty strange,” Tommy said. “I opened my mouth and pushed, expecting to spew, but nothing came out. Well, not nothing, exactly. Some kind of gas came out. Air. Kind of like a balloon slowly deflating.”

The metal legs of Tommy’s chair squeaked on the dirty yellow linoleum floor as he pushed it back and stood up. With a lunatic look in his eyes he pantomimed clutching

a deck rail and bent slightly at his waist and said, “It made this weird sound, kind of like this.”

Then he opened his mouth wide and exhaled a sort of whispering sound, like the sound of a thousand voices cheering in unison from a mile away.

“Hhaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh.”

He stopped and said, “It lasted for at least ten seconds, then, BAM! Peanuts and beer blew out over the railing, in a straight line damn near to the beach.”

“Oh god.” Craig said.

“I don’t know exactly how long I was out there trying to get rid of every last bit of the crap in my gut, but it was a long time,” Tommy said. “Ultimately, I stood there puking and dry-heaving for the better part of what had to be an hour.”

“So, what happened?” Brenda wasn’t touching Tommy any longer.

“Well, I’m not sure,” Tommy said. “But, I think the beer wasn’t ready to drink. I think the yeast—you know you have to use a live yeast culture to brew beer properly—I think the yeast was still active. You’re supposed to give it enough time to neutralize so it won’t do what it did to me. So, when I ate all those peanuts, they combined with the yeast to create some kind of byproduct that resulted in that gas in my gut. And when there wasn’t any more room in there, something had to happen to get it out. If it hadn’t, I think my gut could have exploded.”

I glanced around the table to see what kind of reaction Tommy was getting to his story. Hands covering either eyes or mouths, everyone had a look of pure horror or disgust on their faces, possibly even a certain measure of fear. Everyone except Karin. To look at Karin was to imagine that she had just been listening to a lecture on the theory

of relativity. Those beautiful blues eyes were bored. Then she said flatly, "That's bullshit."

Everyone, surprised—shocked, even—turned to stare incredulously at Karin, with looks of: "Did you really say that to THE Tommy Hammer? Cool, good looking, older than the rest of us, Tommy Hammer?"

"Bullshit?" Tommy said.

"Bullshit," Karin said again.

"What are you saying?" Tommy said.

"I'm saying you took an old story, one I read about in a journal in Mr. Eikmeyer's chemistry class last fall, and made it your own," Karin said. "We even discussed it in class. Sure, yeast can cause all kinds of problems in your stomach, and can even turn sugars and starches you eat into ethanol, which in and of itself can make you drunk. There was some guy in Texas who would just get hammered—no pun intended—out of the blue.   His wife thought he was drinking alone all the time. She even dragged him down to the police department to have him take a breathalyzer test. He was so messed up one day she took him to the hospital where he tested for a blood alcohol level of nearly point-four-oh. He almost died. It turns out the guy liked to brew his own beer. He didn't drink a lot, but he likely drank some with live yeast in it. And he just happened to have eaten some peanuts while he drank his beer that day. This didn't happen to you, Tommy, a version of it happened to some guy in Texas. Nice try, though. Very creative."

His smile now discernably absent, Tommy stared hard at Karin. For just the slightest moment, his usual strong confidence seemed to escape him. His jaw muscles

tensed up and for only the briefest instant, his eyes flickered with what could only be comprehended as anger. We all held our breath. Defiantly, Karin just stared back.

"Wow, Karin. I'm hurt," Tommy finally said with a counterfeit smile, his composure recaptured.

"I doubt that, Tommy," Karin said, her steady gaze leveled at him. "I'm pretty sure you've tried that story before, and I'm pretty sure it worked on other wide-eyed kids. Here's the deal. I don't know who you are or where you came from, but whatever your game is, it won't work on me. You've tried, but seriously, it just won't work. So, Tommy, why don't you just grow up and go play with somebody your own age."

Gape mouthed, we all stared in astonishment. Then, in a show of what could only be interpreted as contempt, Karin tilted her chin up slightly, pushed her chair back and got up from the table. Preparing to head into the sub-freezing outdoors, she wrapped a long, red knit wool scarf around her neck, pulled a matching knit wool stocking cap over her head—long blond locks cascading from beneath it—grabbed the navy blue, heavy wool pea coat from the back of her chair, put it on, slowly buttoned up the front, turned and walked toward the front door of the Puritan.

"Whoa," Tommy said loud enough for everyone in the restaurant, including Raynold and Harlan—and Karin—to hear. "What a cunt."

Well, even isolated, white Middle-America Scandinavian know-nothings have their limits. Horrified by what we had just heard (yes, we had heard the c-word before), a word that we seldom, if ever, used ourselves, especially when it comes to one of our own, we all bundled up and left the Puritan that night without another utterance. Headed silently toward the parking lot behind Coast-to-Coast, Dan and I watched Tommy cross

Litchfield Avenue, alone, and get into his T-Bird parked just down the street. He started the car and without hesitation gunned the engine, driving east, rear tires spinning on the packed snow and ice and white steam pouring out of the dual exhaust pipes of the cold 312-cubic inch V-8, nearly obscuring the car. It couldn't have been two minutes later—as we sat in the front seat of the '50 Chevy while it warmed up for the ride home—when Dan commented on a county sheriff's cruiser passing by. We could see Sigurd Haakonsson inside as he drove past in his chocolate brown Kandiyohi County Sheriff's Department squad car, headed east on Litchfield Avenue. Two car lengths behind him, Raynold Tolefson and Harlan Rohner followed in Harlan's light blue '64 Ford F-150 pickup.

For most high school kids in our town, life was relatively uncomplicated. We were still learning about the real world, making our way a little at a time. When things happened without a good explanation, it was easy to accept them at face value and move on to the next thing; much easier than for grownups. So, when Tommy Hammer didn't show up for work at Snow Jeans the next day and no one—not even Dean Vegdahl—knew where he was, we were curious. And then when Tommy didn't show up the day after that, or any other day, it became apparent that he had vanished as quickly and mysteriously as he had appeared in our town.

Craig, Dan, Brenda, Karin and I gathered at the Puritan after work on the following Monday night to share our theories about what might have happened: He slipped off the road into a ditch (no way, someone would have found him by now); he drove out on the lake and broke through the ice (no way, someone would have seen the

tracks and the hole); he embezzled money from Deano and took off (no way, Deano would have said something about that). But, Christmas was coming up, we had to work, we had to plan a holiday break ski trip to Thunder Bay, Ontario, and after a few days, we just sort of let it go. No one really liked Tommy Hammer very well anyway.

Whiskey and Soda

The routine of waking to the feel and smell of a gentle morning breeze straining through the screen of my open bedroom window and the pacifying sound of the quiet lapping of waves on the shore was heavenly. I'd lay there awhile with my eyes open, staring from the top bunk at the rough cedar plank ceiling in the tiny upstairs room I shared with my brother in our two-story cottage, just feeling the magic of the lake. It was Wednesday, but I didn't have to be anywhere or do anything until later, pretty much no matter what day it was. It was, after all, summer at the lake and I took advantage of the lazy calm as much as I could. It didn't take a genius to know that this wouldn't last forever. But for now, it was the summer of 1970 and just like every summer since 1954, my family arrived at the lake from town, twelve miles away, the day after school got out and stayed until school started up again in the fall.

While I lay there staring at the ceiling my mind would be off somewhere, fantasizing about a girl, or a car or some other sixteen-year-old boy thing. Reality reared its loathsome head only after a signal from the real world, usually in the form of something like the buzz of a neighbor's Lawn Boy or the drone of a boat motor out on the lake, or our family basset hound, George, instinctively barking at a chipmunk taunting him from just a few feet up a tree in the yard. It was only then that my teenaged sleep-blinded eyes actually started to see for the day, and I would reluctantly slip out of my bunk and into my daily uniform of swimming trunks and t-shirt. And most days, before too long, the t-shirt would be off and I'd be in the lake, swimming or skiing with my best lake friend, Scotty Moore.

Scotty lived at the lake year-round, which is why he was my best lake friend. There were town friends and lake friends and, for the most part, they didn't cross over. For me, it was town friends in winter and lake friends in the summer. And the best of them was Scotty.

During those summers, Scotty and I went through a lot of firsts together. Our first cigarette: An Old Gold. We snuck one out of one of the numerous open packs that his mom left lying around their house. We were five-years-old and went down into the filthy, spider-webbed crawl space under Scotty's house where we could see dust floating through the spears of light reaching through narrow gaps between wooden boards that enclosed the space. It's lucky we didn't burn the place down. It's miraculous we didn't get caught by our moms, who were upstairs visiting over summer cocktails in tall glasses with wedges of lime perched on the rims. Our first beer: Schmidt Big Mouths. We had gotten one of the local losers to buy us a twelve pack for the cost of the beer plus five bucks. We were fifteen, camping in the woods across the lake road from Scotty's and after finishing five beers each we both puked our guts out, ultimately ending up looking like a couple of inert drooling babies lying in the grass outside our mildewed canvas Army Surplus tent. Our first lay: Well, we were working on that, planning and scheming, but to our constant frustration, not getting anywhere. And, so, it was anybody's guess what the next first would be. Whatever it was, it would be with Scotty, and I was looking forward to it.

Most mornings, my mom would be downstairs in the kitchen or outside picking weeds in her flower garden by the clothesline near the back door. The outrageously beautiful white and pink peonies standing sentinel between the sidewalk and garden, the

snapdragons, lilies of the valley and fragrant lilac bushes with blooms like miniature purple Christmas trees were her favorites. When she was immersed in her flowers I would leave her alone. I wasn't sure, but I always felt she was thinking about my dad and how much she missed him. Her flowers were her therapy, I guess. Or at least they were a momentary diversion from the bullshit she had been dealt by being left alone a year ago with two boys when she was just forty-years-old. Cancer is a bitch.

Barefoot, I would make my way downstairs to the kitchen counter for a breakfast of juice and cereal. Sometimes, when my mom had the energy, the kitchen would already be filled with the divine smell of bacon frying. At least that's how it smelled to me. Fried pig is how my older brother, Tom, described it. Most days, like that Wednesday, Tom would already be gone from the bottom bunk, over at Salisbury Beach on the other side of the lake teaching swimming lessons to little kids from throughout the county. In those days, there weren't any swimming pools around, except at the golf club in town, so everyone took swimming lessons at the lake.

Somewhere around eleven, I would be thinking about making my way down the lake road to Community Park, where I had a part-time summer job lifeguarding every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the small county park beach. Even though my brother and I shared a car—a 1950 Chevy with a straight six engine and Power-Glide automatic transmission—he needed it most days to get to work on the other side of the lake, so I rode my red Schwinn Continental the mile to the park. I really didn't need to be there until about noon, but I liked the time alone to set up my lifeguard stand, pull the ancient red and white wooden rescue rowboat to the water and prepare my perch—which looked like an oversized baby's highchair—for the afternoon. I would get myself fully greased

up with olive oil and plaster a white patch of zinc oxide on my nose so it wouldn't burn and peel.

Farm families kept Community Park alive in the summer, but during the week, the farmers were out in the fields, enlisting the help of their kids to walk the soybeans for weeds or to detassel the corn, so the beach at Community Park was quiet, and I was almost always off the guard stand by five. That Wednesday was no different, so I was home by five fifteen.

That night I was up late, in the Lazy Boy recliner in the living room, weirded out because I was reading *The Godfather,* the nightmarish part where the guy wakes up with buckets of blood and a horse head in his bed. It was about eleven when my brother yelled at me from our room at the top of stairs to answer the phone. We had only one phone in the house back then, a beige Slimline on the wall in the kitchen next to the living room and—being freaked out—I hadn't even heard it ring.

"Hello?"

"Ben, I need your help. Now. I am not shitting you." Scotty's usual laid-back demeanor had gone missing. I sensed what sounded almost like panic in his voice.

"What? What's going on?"

"It's the dogs. They're down at Freeman's killing pigs."

When Scotty talked about his dogs I automatically thought about Molly. We had grown up with her. Two summers ago, the nine-year-old black and white springer spaniel had been killed when she was hit by a car while on her daily morning walk down and across the lake road to old man Freeman's farm to get her usual handout of whatever scraps he and Mrs. Freeman might have left over from dinner the night before. She

would get her head scratched and her belly rubbed, too, if she stayed in the Freeman's yard long enough. Then she would head the quarter mile back home to Scotty's, crossing back over the road to get there.

Whoever ran her down didn't stop. There weren't any skid marks or other evidence in the road that she'd been hit. It was only when Molly was gone at least an hour longer than usual that Scotty and his mom became concerned. They went out looking for her, first walking down the lake road to Freeman's farm and back, then getting in the car and slowly driving farther and farther down the road in both directions, back and forth, whistling and calling her name.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that day when Scotty's neighbor to the west, Dr. Guy, came to their door with a long look on his face. He had found Molly in some long grass in the ditch just to the west side of his driveway. He had wrapped her in an old blanket and put her in the trunk of his car before he drove up to Scotty's to break the bad news.

Nobody knew for sure who hit Molly, but another year-round lake dweller, Helen Allred, who lived about a half mile west of Scotty's, later told his mom she had seen an old, beat up, rust cancer ridden, light blue car—she didn't know what kind or year it was—tearing down the road past her place "like the dickens." She said there was only one person in the car, a young man with long hair wearing sunglasses, gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead. But, she said, he was going so fast she couldn't see for sure who it was.

Well, she knew who it was. We all knew. As soon as we heard the description of the car and the long hair and sunglasses, we all knew it was Clyde Larsen. The way we

figured it, Clyde was headed back to his mom's trailer in New London after a night of drinking and prowling around the lake doing who knows what. We figured he ran Molly down for shits and giggles, and probably did giggle about it when he passed by Scotty's. There was no way we could prove it, but we knew he did it.

Clyde had a reputation around the lake, which grew from an incident that made even the next-worst hooligan in town look like a pussycat. As the story went, a couple of years back, when he was drunk, Clyde got into a fight with a guy over a wiener dog. Apparently, the guy's dog had gotten off his leash at the trailer park where Larsen's mother lived and had taken a messy dump on Clyde's mom's walkway. Unfortunately, for the guy and his dog, Clyde just happened to be visiting and knocking back beers at the kitchen table with good old mom at the time.

It was said that Clyde looked out the kitchen window of the singlewide and saw the dog just finishing its business as its owner walked up with a leash. Well, with a few beers under his belt, Clyde apparently went berserk. He ran outside, grabbed the leash from the surprised dog owner and wrapped it around the guy's neck. Then, it is said, Clyde pulled that poor fool's head down to the ground with the leash, rubbed the guy's face in his own dog's poop, and proceeded to beat the shit out him. That's bad. But what got Clyde Larsen the baddest of the badasses reputation is the part of the story where after he had beaten its owner senseless, he calmly called the frightened dog over, patted it on the head, then stomped it to death with his black steel-toed engineer boots. We all knew it was Clyde that ran over Molly.

A week after Dr. Guy found Molly, Scotty's dad brought home two of the coolest dogs I had ever seen. They were almost identical, rust and white, fuzzy-haired, bouncing

eight-week-old St. Bernard puppies. When he brought them home, they each had a little red leather collar with a miniature brown plastic keg attached, made to look like those pint-sized wooden whiskey kegs you see around the necks of St. Bernard rescue dogs in the movies. He had named them Whiskey and Soda.

St. Bernard puppies don't stay little for very long. By the end of that summer, Whiskey, the male, and Soda, the female, had grown to at least three times the size they were when Scotty's dad brought them home that day. And when I came back to the lake the summer of '69, when they were just about to turn one-year-old, those dogs were huge. By the time the summer of '70 rolled around, they were full-fledged monsters, especially Whiskey. He must have weighed two hundred pounds, and Soda was only a few pounds behind him. Just looking at them was enough to scare the crap out of anybody that wandered onto Scotty's parents' property. But, the shit would really start to flow if those mammoth canines decided they wanted to bark at the intruder. The power and depth of that bark was so intense that you could almost feel it vibrate in your chest if you were nearby. That'll get your attention. Funny thing, though, those two dogs were the sweetest, kindest, most gentle monsters you would ever care to meet. That's why when Scotty said the dogs were down at Freeman's killing pigs, it didn't register.

"What dogs? Killing pigs? What are you talking about?" I was a little tired and a lot confused, and still a little freaked out by Mario Puzo.

"Whiskey and Soda. Mrs. Freeman just called and said if I don't come and get the dogs the old man is going to have to shoot them. They're killing his pigs, Ben!"

"That can't be right, Scotty. Are they gone? I mean are you sure they're not in the house or in the yard somewhere?"

"I can't find them. I don't know where they are."

"But you don't think they're down at Freeman's, right?"

"Shit, Ben, I don't know. She says they're killing his pigs. I need help, I've got to get down there and find out what's going on."

"Okay. I'm coming. Wait for me, though. Don't go down there by yourself. Are your folks home?"

"No, they're both at the restaurant. There's no one else here."

"Okay, stay there. I'll be right over."

Scotty was waiting under the yard light in his driveway when I got there less than five minutes later. I had barely brought the '50 Chevy to a stop when Scotty jumped in the passenger side and slammed the door.

"Let's go, hurry! He's going to shoot 'em, Ben!"

That old bomb wasn't fast, but it was reliable, and within sixty seconds, we were in the Freeman's gravel driveway in front of the small white farmhouse, which sat about two hundred feet off the lake road. Old man Freeman owned twenty acres, with the house and a couple of outbuildings and a small barn occupying about two of those acres. Right in the front yard, between the house and the road, his wife kept about a quarter acre planted with sweet corn in the summer, which she would sell for fifty cents a dozen. Anyone lucky enough to be passing by when the hand-painted cardboard "Sweet Corn" sign was posted on the Freeman's mailbox at the road, could just turn into the driveway and pull up to an old wooden picnic table on the edge of the corn patch and grab a dozen freshly-picked ears out of the two bushels that Mrs. Freeman had filled that morning, and

leave fifty cents in the coffee can next to the corn. Mrs. Freeman was hardly ever there; she ran the business by the honor system.

A single lighted bulb in a cheap, clear glass fixture hanging on the side of the house by the Freeman's front door, with the inevitable cloud of mosquitos swarming around it, threw a dim light interrupted by energetic mosquito shadows a few feet out onto the front yard. Through my open car window we could see Mrs. Freeman standing, backlit, behind the screen door.

"Back in the barn!" she shouted as she anxiously clutched at the collar of her nightclothes.

Without a word, Scotty and I got out of the car and took only a single step toward the small barn around the back of the house where we knew old man Freeman kept his pigs, and stopped dead in our tracks. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and an involuntary shudder of real fear momentarily shook my whole being at the high-pitched squeal of terror coming from the direction of the barn. It was so loud and so disturbing that, just for a moment, I—we—couldn't move. With an expression on his face that matched the way I felt, Scotty looked like he was going to cry. For a moment, we had no idea what we were hearing, we just knew that whatever it was, it was horrible.

"What the hell is that?" Scotty was the first to find his voice.

"Damned if I know," I said, my voice shaking along with the rest of me. "It sounds like someone screaming bloody murder."

"Like a pig screaming bloody murder."

"Let's go," I said without conviction.

Together, forcing ourselves to walk, we headed toward the barn out back. Once we got around the corner of the house, we lost the light and were plunged into thick blackness, all the while that hideous pig scream stabbing at our eardrums. I thought, "Can anyone else hear this? Won't someone hear this and call the sheriff?" Now we could hear vicious, low growling sounds mixed in with the agonized screams. There was no mistake about where the growling was coming from. Even though we couldn't see, Scotty broke into a run and I followed.

"Mr. Freeman!" Scotty shouted in the dark, full panic now in his voice. "Mr. Freeman, it's Scott Moore, I'm here to get my dogs!"

That horrifying pig scream persisted, but the growling stopped. Now we could see the piercing beam of a flashlight slash from right to left through the darkness, landing on us and illuminating a path to the fenced-in pigpen outside the barn. Mercifully, the screaming stopped.

"Scott, call your dogs. Now. You've got to call them right now." Old man Freeman's voice, with the familiar Norwegian accent was calm, but firm. He didn't shout, he didn't have to, the urgency in what he said was unmistakable. Scotty complied immediately.

"Whiskey! Soda! Come!"

Now we were nearly to the gate of the pen, where old man Freeman stood inside. We could see he was armed with a shotgun, held at his side in his right hand. He turned the flashlight in his left hand away from us to point it at the spectacle about ten feet in front of him. I had never seen anything like it before.

Whiskey and Soda stood, side-by-side, wagging their tails, looking at us with their customary St. Barnard smiles, panting with their long, pink bubblegum tongues hanging out of their mouths. They looked completely normal except their ordinarily white muzzles and the white fur covering their chests was crimson red, soaked in blood. Lots of blood. And just at the bloody forepaws of the dogs lay one of old man Freeman's pigs on the ground, quiet now but still struggling for breath, obviously striving to live. A big, ruinous gash had been ripped from its throat, and it looked like most of its snout had been torn from its head. The bone of its left rear leg was exposed where a large part of the muscle had been ripped away.

"Call them again, Scott, and take them home."

Sometime later, Mrs. Freeman told Scotty's mom that not twenty minutes before we got to the nightmarish scene, old man Freeman had known immediately that there was something terribly wrong when he heard his pigs squealing. He had been in bed, but no one was going to sleep through that terrifying sound. He threw on his bib overalls and manure crusted boots, grabbed his flashlight and shotgun and went outside to the barn. Whiskey was at the pig's throat and Soda had it by the left rear leg. They were working together to team kill it. Old man Freeman actually fired a shot in the air to scare the dogs off the pig. That's when Mrs. Freeman came out to find out what was going on. He sent her back in the house to call Scotty. Knowing that it was too late for the pig, old man Freeman did his best to keep the dogs away from the rest of the drift by bravely standing inside the pen between them and the dogs. He figured he would be able to shoot at least one of the dogs if they challenged him, and maybe both.

Scotty and I got Whiskey and Soda home and cleaned up that night. Well, actually Scotty did. He walked them the quarter mile home, probably the same route Molly used to take, while I—trying to bring some calm back to my brain—drove slowly behind them, the lights from the '50 Chevy illuminating the peculiar panorama. It was Scotty that hosed them off outside as best he could while I just stood and watched, weakly holding a camping lantern that we found in the garage to light the surreal scene. Those dogs acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. They were just as happy-go-lucky and gentle and friendly as ever. And there was Scotty, scrubbing pig blood off their muzzles as they wagged their tails.

The story goes that once a dog gets the taste of fresh blood, it's never forgotten. It's the nature of the beast. Dogs have been domesticated for only about twelve thousand years, and that first family pet was a wolf. Even today's miniature poodles have wolf DNA somewhere in their genetic makeup. So, you can take the dog out of the wolf pack, but you can't take the wolf out of the dog, not even a happy-go-lucky, smiling, alpine rescuing St. Bernard.

Lusting after blood, Whiskey and Soda went back to the Freeman's four nights later. Mr. Freeman didn't even hesitate. As soon as those dogs went over the fence into the pigpen, but before they had a chance to kill another pig, the old man stood outside the fence with his twelve-gauge shotgun and made sure that what happened on that Wednesday night, four nights ago, would be a first—and last—for all of us.

Night Moves

(With thanks to Bob Seger)

After months of patient waiting, there it was. The comforting sound of fresh water waves being gently pushed onto the beach by a quiet night breeze, each one making its presence known by collapsing in a whisper onto the sand, three beats after the one before, in a constant, persistent rhythm. Sifting into my room through the screened-in window, wrapping me in the comfort of a lifetime of familiarity, the night air carried the unmistakable presence of the lake to my senses, washing over me as I lay on the top bunk in the tiny, two-story cottage room I shared with my older brother, Tom. It was warm by Minnesota Memorial Day standards, but as I lay awake, staring at nothing, listening to the rhythmic breathing from the bunk below, I smiled and thought, "This is going to be a good summer."

It was the summer of 1970 and I was sixteen. Just like every summer since 1954, my family arrived at the lake the day after school got out. School was in town twelve miles away, but as far as I was concerned, it might as well be twelve hundred or twelve thousand miles away because for the next three months, until school started up again, I was at the lake to stay. And this summer, I thought, was going to be one to remember because this was the summer that I, Benjamin Harrison, and my best lake friend Scotty Moore, were going to get laid. After all, we had started the planning process a year ago.

Just a mile down the narrow, winding asphalt road on the north side, Scotty lived at the lake year-round. Ever since we were little kids, we were allowed to ride our bikes back and forth between his family's year-round home and our cottage, or we could go by

water in the boat. But this was going to be a big year. This year we could both drive a car.

Summers had always been a time of relative freedom for Scotty and me, the way that kids enjoyed their freedom back then. No school, no jobs, minimal supervision from parents, spending our days swimming, waterskiing, and generally goofing around until the sun decided to ease itself down into a cushion of brilliant red-orange over the black treetops on the western horizon of the lake, reflecting across the surface of the water in a way that can't be replicated.

But this year felt a little different. We had a real sense of being on our own, of being a little more grown up. We were sixteen, after all. We could make decisions on our own. My dad had died the year before after a long battle with cancer, and Scotty's dad was gone a lot, working at the restaurant he owned in town. My mother was going nuts still trying to figure out what to do on her own without my dad, and Scotty's mom was already nuts and didn't seem to care what her kids did. She spent her days sipping something on ice out of a tall frosted glass, smoking Old Golds and staring at the RCA. Both of us had older brothers—mine eighteen months older, Scotty's three years older—but they didn't give a shit about us. We both had sisters, each two years younger than us, but we didn't give a shit about them. We were stuck with each other, and were happy about it.

The lake was one of 238 in Kandiyohi County, which was almost in the dead center of the Land of 10,000 Lakes. But it was by far the best, the purest the cleanest, the deepest, with the best girls on the best sand beaches, and everyone knew it. The lake was surrounded by homes, mostly summer homes, and by Memorial Day the ice had melted,

the docks were out and the boats were in. Thirteen miles around, almost a perfect circle, it was five miles across. To get from one side to the other, it took twelve minutes in my dad's old green and white fourteen foot Larsen with an Evinrude sixty horsepower motor pushing it, and about eight minutes in Scotty's very cool seventeen foot Glastron with a glittering red metal flake paint job and a Mercury 95. That's where we figured we'd have the most luck getting laid: In Scotty's cool boat.

It was in that boat that Scotty showed up at the cottage the next morning, still skinny in his baggie Hawaiian print swimsuit, but looking a little taller, a little older and his blonde hair a little longer than last year. He did not forget our plans.

"We'll need some cherry sloe gin," Scotty said. "Girls like cherry sloe gin."

So, we decided we would get Willy Slocum, a lake guy Scotty knew through another lake guy, who would be willing to take five bucks from a couple of underage punks to buy a bottle of McGuiness Cherry Sloe Gin. We would tuck it away behind an orange life preserver in the corner of the pump house at the cottage, ready for use at a moment's notice.

"We'll need protection," I said. "But, there's no way we can get it in Spicer."

Spicer. A tiny town of 762 hardy souls on the southwest side of the lake that sleeps in winter and comes alive in June for three months, with warmth-starved sun-seekers crawling through the narrow streets and swarming Salisbury Beach, boosting the population to nearly three thousand, only to vanish like so many loons migrating south at the end of August, allowing the town to ease back into hibernation on Labor Day. Because Scotty lived there year-round, everybody knew him. Because I hung out with

Scotty all summer, everybody knew me, too. So, I volunteered to drive the ’50 Chevy that my brother reluctantly shared with me into town to buy protection at Thrifty Drug. Two three-packs of Trojan-Enze, lubricated with the reservoir tip.

We got our gin and we got our protection. We were very optimistic.

Perhaps a bit too optimistic. As the summer wore on it seemed the only thing Scotty and I needed protection from was our own dumb ideas. It’s not like we were the only guys who ever had a boat on a lake, or like any of the girls we knew hadn’t ever been asked out by a couple of goofs with less than noble intentions. We tried, clumsily, a time or two, going to Spicer in the Glastron, looking for girls at the arcade, where kids, young and restless and bored, liked to congregate and listen to Eric Burden sing “Spill the Wine” while working on their night moves. We just didn’t know how it worked or what to do. We didn’t have a clue.

So, as the summer of 1970 began to wind down I didn’t see my chance coming. But it did, without warning, and in a completely unexpected way.

It was closing in on nine o’clock on a typical late August night in Minnesota. The daytime temperature had been near eighty, but now the night air was just beginning to get that slight, damp chill that foreshadowed the inevitable change with autumn closing in. There were only a few days before Labor Day and Scotty and I were in his dad’s yellow fortress-like Oldsmobile Toronado at the Spicer Drive-In with another lake buddy, Christy. His real name was David Christopherson, but everyone called him Christy. Christy wanted to tag along because he too, was hoping to lose those awkward teenage blues. Scotty was still hopeful, but with so little time left before summer ended, I had

almost given up on the idea that I was going to go back to town among the experienced. Still, I just didn't have much to lose so I was game, too.

Just about a half-mile south of Spicer, it was a typical outdoor drive-in with rows of parking for around seventy-five cars. There were the cheap, tinny-sounding metal speakers wired to evenly spaced metal posts—which mostly worked some of the time—that staked out the spaces where cars were to park. There was a little cinderblock shack—painted dark brown to avoid being distracting during the movie—in the middle of the third row that housed the projection room and a concession stand where the usual theater-going fare was sold. The grounds were graveled, so when a car drove through, its tires would make a loud crunching sound, which became a constant irritation if, in fact, anyone was actually trying to hear what was happening on-screen. We got a pretty good spot just in front and to the left of the concession stand.

All of the movies heralded on the classic '50s style, Googie architecture marquee out in front of the drive-in were at least a few months—sometimes even years—old, and had long been gone from the regular theater in town. That summer *Easy Rider*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Midnight Cowboy* featured prominently. But this night was a big one for sixteen-year-old boys: A return engagement of *Barbarella*. Everybody wanted to see Jane Fonda's tits, if only for a few seconds. Even the girls seemed to want to know what all the hoopla was about. Fonda hadn't been on her infamous trip to Hanoi yet, that wouldn't happen for another two years, so she was still a sex symbol, not yet a controversial political figure.

The sun was now below the horizon and dropping fast, so the serious business of finding out who was at the drive-in, what car they were in, who they were with and what

their plans were for watching the movie got underway. Cars and pickups were still crunching their way in. Scotty, Christy and I decided a little reconnoitering of the situation was in order, so we embarked on a slow-walking survey through the rows of parked vehicles.

The familiar but weirdly bitter smell of pyrethrum wafted through the air as moviegoers lit Coghlan's mosquito-repelling incense coils inside their cars to keep the bloodthirsty miniature vampires out. The air tasted like dust. There was the sound of car doors opening and closing as nocturnal teenaged prowlers—like us—ventured out to follow where their hormones led them.

Christy took the lead and wound his way toward an old dark blue four-door Dodge Dart with rust cancer under the door panels parked off to the right side of the second to the last row. We knew the car, so I wasn't sure why he was taking us there. We knew the skanky lake girl Verna Chappell would be behind the wheel with her equally skanky lake girlfriend Paula Donner sitting next to her in the front seat. They would be drinking Old Milwaukee and smoking Marlboros, and using the foulest language they could come up with in normal conversation, no matter what the subject. And there they were. But as we got closer, I was surprised, maybe even a little shocked, to see a dark-haired, dark-eyed total fox in the back seat: Christy's older sister, Cyndi.

Two years older than her brother, Cyndi Christopherson was mostly thought, among her brother's friends, to be the ideal woman. A. She was older. B. She was gorgeous. C. She had big tits. However, of course, she had a boyfriend. Frank Fischer. Everyone called him Fish. He was a college man, big, tough, good looking, everything

one might expect from a guy who dated a girl like Cyndi Christopherson. The windows to the car were rolled down and giggling could be heard from inside.

"What's going on Cyndi?" It was evident that Christy did not like the fact that his sister was hanging out with Verna Chappell and Paula Donner. "Where's Fish?"

"Fuck him," came the unexpected answer from the back seat.

Fuck him? That's all it took for us to realize why Cyndi was in the back seat of that car with those girls: She had been into the bottle more than just a little bit. Christy opened the back door and gently removed a half-empty pint bottle of McGuiness Cherry Sloe Gin from Cyndi's loose grip.

"See? I told you," Scotty whispered to me out of the side of his mouth, eyeing that bottle of sloe gin.

"Fuck him and the horse he rode in on," Cyndi said.

More giggling from the front seat.

"Tell me what happened. Are you okay?" Christy said with some bravado.

Christy was no match for Fish, but he would do what he would have to do if there was something that had to be done. Cyndi was his sister, after all.

"I'm fine," Cyndi said, with a bit of a whine in her voice now. "It's just that prick completely forgot that he was supposed to take me out to dinner tonight to celebrate our anniversary."

Now Scotty, still transfixed by the bottle of sloe gin, looked at me for confirmation.

"I know, right?" I said under my breath.

"Your anniversary?" Christy had to be relieved that nothing serious was going on.

“It’s our nine-month anniversary and he was supposed to take me out to dinner.” There was more aggravation in her voice now. “Instead he decides to go up to the tavern in Regal to drink with his college buddies. He said he made his plans long before I mentioned our anniversary.”

“So, when did you mention your anniversary?” It seemed like Christy knew where this might be going.

“Well, yesterday. But he should have known without me telling him.”

“Fuckin’ A,” it was Verna trying to get her two cents in.

Christy, annoyed now, shot a scorching glance at Verna then turned his attention back to his sister.

“Come on Cyndi, you can come with us,” he said.

Come with us? For Scotty and me, this could be very good news. Just to be hanging with Cyndi Christopherson could bring one’s desirability status up a notch. If someone as cool as Cyndi were to actually want to be around guys like us, it’s only logical that people who saw us would think we’re cool, too. Especially other girls. On the other hand, there was the problem of Christy himself. Yes, it would be good to be seen with Cyndi, but not while her little brother is hanging around.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Cyndi said. “And give me back my sloe gin.”

She grabbed for the open bottle still in Christy’s hand, causing a little to splash out on her lap. But she got hold of it and took a messy swig.

“Go on David, leave me alone.” Cyndi always called Christy by his real name, which pretty much bugged him.

“Okay, if that’s what you want. Come on guys, let’s quit wasting time.” Sister or not, that was as far as Christy was willing to go.

The previews were over now and the “3-Minutes to Showtime” countdown was on the screen: A black and white animated film clip of a clock ticking down from three minutes to zero, surrounded by animated images of cups of Coca-Cola, hotdogs, popcorn and candy dancing on the screen.

“Hey Christy!” It was another lake guy I had only met a time or two, Roger Dokken. He had apparently seen us talking to the girls in the Dart and approached Christy, ignoring Scotty and me.

“Christy, Cathy Carlson is asking about you,” Dokken said with a shit-eating grin smeared across his face.

Christy and the petite blonde with big boobs had been seen working each other over in the back seat of Janie Swezey’s car during last Friday’s showing of *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes.* It had been a topic of conversation for the past week.

“Where is she?” Christy asked.

“She’s in Swezey’s car, right over there,” Dokken said, pointing at the familiar light blue Fairlane four cars over. “I’m just going to take a leak before the show starts, and I’ll meet you there.”

Dokken had apparently already beaten everyone else to the punch with Janie Swezey.

“See you poor bastards later,” Christy said to us. “You don’t need to wait for me. I’ll catch a ride home with Janie.”

He and Dokken were gone, just like that.

Raging hormones or not, Scotty and I had no intention of hanging out with the two skanky lake girls—we had to maintain some semblance of dignity—and even with Fish in Regal, if we wanted to live, there wasn't the slightest chance that we would approach Cyndi Christopherson, so we made our way back to the Toronado to regroup. We both sat in the front, Scotty in the driver's seat, me leaning on the door in the shotgun position. The countdown on the screen showed one minute to showtime. People were hurrying past our car now, headed to the concession stand to spend their money during the previews of coming attractions.

Suddenly, I almost fell out of the car when someone jerked open the passenger side door.

"Slide over, will you Ben?"

When I turned to see who it was, it took a moment for my mind to register that it was Cyndi, Christy's older, major babe of a sister. I nearly shit my pants. I could feel my jaw drop and just hang there in surprise. Not a word came out of my mouth. Cyndi was already pushing my ass over with hers and slipping onto the seat next to me. Then she pulled the door firmly shut, locked it and turned to look directly at me—still gape mouthed and bug eyed—just inches from my face. There we were, the three of us in the front seat of Scotty's dad's car. I had no idea what Scotty was thinking, but I was firmly in a state of confusion. And then this sex goddess, this perfect female, this idyllic woman said something that I will never forget for the rest of my life, something for which I will forever be thankful that Scotty was there to witness.

"Do you want to fuck?"

Almost immediately, I heard the driver's side door open and shut. My witness was gone. I have no idea how much time passed between when Christy's sister actually asked me if I wanted to fuck and when I was actually able to utter anything that sounded like a word. But in that time, my brain must have gone into shock. It was telling me that the thing that I had never even dared to think about for fear that I would go crazy, just became reality. It was going over every possible scenario of what could happen next. I could say yes and Fish would cut my dick off. I could say yes and I would have to move to Mexico that night. I could say yes and the whole damn town would know what happened, then Fish would cut my dick off and then I'd have to move to Mexico.

Christy's sister was still looking plumb at me, beautiful dark eyes, unwavering, with a sort of steadfast determination behind them. In the dim, flickering light coming through the windshield her lips looked dark red and slightly swollen. I could smell Cherry Sloe Gin on her warm breath. She had me, of course. There wasn't anything I could do but give in to her. Whatever she wanted from me, she could have. On the other hand, I did not want to spend the rest of my life dickless. But, Oh God, it might be worth it. She turned her body toward me and leaned in until she was nearly on top of me.

Now I could feel her generous, really great looking tits actually touching, then pressing down on my chest. I couldn't believe it. What happened next challenged every logical, sensible notion that my brain had ever comprehended. She actually slid her right hand up the inside of my right thigh until she could get no higher, and through my jeans she slowly began rubbing the dick Fish was going to cut off.

"Cyndi . . ." I'm not sure how I actually said something out loud. It was the best I could do for the moment.

She quickly shut me up with those Cherry Sloe Gin lips, open and on top of mine. My senses were on very high alert and, strangely, my mind told me I could taste cough syrup. My head was pushed back against the luxurious tan leather car seat and when her long, raven black hair brushed across my neck it created a startling awareness that only those heightened senses could explain. Her tongue was much more experienced than mine and the sensation of it, along with some fairly deft hand action, caused my soon-to-be gone dick to quickly rise up in anticipation of its first, and very likely last, journey into the unknown.

Jesus, I thought, I can't believe this. I was completely under her control. I had absolutely no self-determination. Christy's centerfold model of an older sister was doing things to me that I had only heard or read about, but never thought really happened to guys like me.

Lips still locked on mine, she rolled her hips to bring her right leg around and her knee between my legs. She was actually straddling my right leg and began moving those hips, slowly, back and forth. The Trojan in the billfold in my back pocket was unreachable for the moment. She let go of my lips and lifted her head up and tilted it back with her eyes tightly closed. She inhaled deeply through her open mouth and arched her back slightly, still moving her hips and rubbing my ill-fated dick. But now, she was working on my belt, trying to get it unbuckled.

"Cyndi . . ." I tried again.

"Shhh. You'll be all right." She said it quietly, nearly a whisper, as if to herself.

My belt was unbuckled, the button on my Lee jeans was open and my zipper was coming down. I was about to enter into a place where presumably only one man had gone before. Fish.

"Cyndi," I said it with more conviction this time.

Her eyes opened now and she looked directly down at me. She seemed to be a bit surprised, as if she was seeing me for the first time. She stopped moving her hips and my zipper was only about halfway down.

"Look, Cyndi." I couldn't believe that I was talking in the middle of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Every bit of my being was screaming for action. "I know I'll be all right. I want to do this more than you will ever know. But, what about Fish? He'll kill me. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Her hand settled on my dick again, she paused for a moment, and then looked down at me and smiled.

"You know Ben, I think I would like to." There was mischief in those beautiful dark eyes now, and her smile broadened. "Yeah, I think I would really enjoy it. I think we would both really enjoy it, and maybe we will someday."

She gave my dick a little squeeze, and with those words, commuted its death sentence and dashed my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have what I knew would have been unbelievable sex with one of the most beautiful, sexy, most desirable women I had ever known or seen in my sixteen years. She gently rolled off me and, still sitting close, buttoned my jeans and carefully zipped them back up. In my mind, I was weeping uncontrollably. I absolutely screwed, well maybe that's a bad choice of words, I absolutely, well maybe it's the best choice after all, I absolutely screwed myself out of a

dream. But with a weak smile, I buckled my belt, putting the final kibosh on the whole thing.

Cyndi stayed with me in the Toronado, just the two of us, sitting close and watching *Barbarella* all the way to the end. Every once in a while she would look at me and smile. Every once in a while I would look at her and nearly cry, especially when she smiled playfully during the Excessive Machine scene. Still, she really made me feel good. She made me feel like she actually meant the things she had said to me, those things about enjoying it, and all. And every time Jane Fonda's tits—each much, much larger than life—flashed across the big screen, I hooted along with just about every other guy at the drive-in that night. You could hear them all laughing and howling through open car windows and car horns honking. Cyndi just looked at me and laughed.

"They're not bad," she said with that mischievous smile. "But not that good, either."

Not that good, either? Jesus! Only God and Fish knew what I had missed out on.

When the show was over, I could sense Scotty outside, keeping a respectful distance in back of the Toronado until he received some kind of signal from me. I was glad Christy had already decided he would ride home with Janie Swezey. Even though I knew I would have to tell him a reasonable version of what happened, I didn't want to have to go through the third degree with him just then. Knowing that my moment with Christy's older major goddess of a sister was about to end, I just wanted to enjoy it for as long as it would last.

"What are you going to tell them?" Cyndi asked.

It was a fair question. She knew there was potential for some damage to be done, depending on what version of the story I chose to tell. She knew sixteen-year-old guys like to embellish stories of self-perceived sexual conquest just a bit to enhance their standing within the community of would be sexual conquerors.

"I guess I'll just tell them the truth, or most of it anyway. What are you going to tell Fish?" I was still a little worried about the future of little Dickie Harrison.

"Don't worry about Fish. I can take care of that."

"Thank God, I mean, thanks, Cyndi." Relief.

For the first time that night, there was a sort of awkward moment between the two of us, where neither of us knew quite what to say next or how we were going to let this end. Cyndi broke the silence.

"You're really a nice guy, Ben."

Shit. This was not exactly what I wanted to hear, fearful that the old axiom that nice guys finish last was about to be put to the test.

"You know, I meant what I said earlier, but . . ." Cyndi paused for just a moment. I think she did it to let me down easy. "But the way things are, Ben, I don't know if you and I will ever get together again."

Tested, tried and true. Dead last.

Then she surprised me again by leaning over and planting another, although a bit more gentle, open-mouthed kiss on me, the taste of Cherry Sloe Gin gone now. After a moment she pulled away, smiled that beautiful smile, turned away, opened the door, slid out of the seat and was gone.

Almost before the door had closed, the driver's side door jerked open and Scotty was in the Toronado demanding to know every detail.

As we drove the long way around the lake toward the cottage where Scotty would drop me off, I told him everything, the whole story, with only a few minor embellishments. After all, I didn't want my best lake buddy to think that I was that nice of a guy.

South 40

Minnesota is a dangerous place if you don't know how to swim. It is the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes, after all, and most grown-ups, especially parents, get it. They know that sooner or later, and usually sooner, their kids will be in the water at one of the dozens of lakes close to home and they had better know how to swim. So, most of them either teach their kids as best they can, or they send them off to swimming lessons to learn to keep their heads above water. But not all do, and for those who don't, there are people like Ben Harrison to help those parents keep their kids from ending up on the bottom of the lake.

Community Park Number Five on the north side of Green Lake in rural west central Minnesota was Ben's first life guarding gig. There are 238 lakes in the county, all of them formed by receding glaciers as the Ice Age ended, most of them small and full of weeds, but Green Lake is special. Spring-fed with sandy beaches, and big enough, nearly five miles across its circular shape, and deep enough, one hundred forty feet at its deepest spot, for every kind of recreation a lake has to offer. Fishing for walleyes is big, waterskiing on the calm side brings the slick powerboats out, but it is those natural sand beaches that attract the most people to the clear water of Green Lake on a beautiful summer day. The Saturday before Labor Day, summer of 1970, was one of those days, hot and humid: A perfect lake day.

When he woke around eight that morning, Ben could tell just by the way it felt that just about everybody in the county would quit whatever it was they were doing early that day, and head to the lake. He quietly slid out of the top bunk bed, slipped out of his boxer shorts and into his orange and yellow Hawaiian print swimming trunks, and went downstairs, all the while being careful not to wake his little brother still asleep in the lower bunk in the room they shared at their family's tiny two-story walkout lake cottage.

"Morning, Ma," Ben said.

Most mornings Ben's mother would be downstairs seated at the kitchen counter, barefoot, still in her light blue flower print summer nightgown, drinking coffee, smoking her first Phillip Morris of the day and working the newspaper crossword puzzle. Ben thought she looked sort of lost, probably trying to figure out why she'd been left alone with three kids eighteen months ago. That's when his dad died; just after her fortieth birthday. Cancer.

"Where were you last night?" she asked without looking up.

"Scotty's. Remember? I was home by eleven, but you were already asleep."

Ben had never been particularly close to his mother, but when his father had been sick, he'd told Ben to respect and care for her when he was gone. Sometimes it was hard.

"Always Scotty. I wish you wouldn't spend so much time with Scotty," she said. "I just don't know what you two do with all the time you spend together. And never any parents over there."

Ben and Scotty Moore had been friends their whole life. They grew up together because their mothers had once been close friends. In the summer, while their husbands were at work in town they would spend their days at the lake together, going back and

forth on the winding, hilly mile-and-a-half on the lake road between their cottages, sitting on the beach in their green and white braided plastic lawn chairs letting Ben and Scotty play in the water while they smoked and chatted and kept an eye on the boys as they swam and built sand castles and tried to skip round, flat stones. But then, it all stopped. A few years back, Ben's mother just quit spending time with Mrs. Moore. She wouldn't talk about it, not to Ben, anyway. Ben naively thought it might have something to do with his dad getting sick. It would be years before he knew the truth about Mr. Moore and his mother.

"Don't worry. We're fine. We were just watching TV," Ben said.

It was like she hadn't heard him. She seemed to ignore the answer, apparently concentrating on her crossword puzzle.

She's clueless, he thought. She has no idea what's going on with me. None.

"It's going to be busy today so I'm going to get to the beach a little early," Ben said without sitting down at the counter.

She looked up from her puzzle, a nearly imperceptible look of wariness in her eyes, and drew deeply on her cigarette.

"What about tonight?" she asked.

"Well, South 40 is playing the Saturday night dance in Spicer. So, I think we'll be going there, at least for a while."

"You and Scotty, I suppose."

"Yeah, I suppose."

Her eyes searched his face, like she was seeking some understanding, a tangible connection with her son.

“You know Ben, I wish you would actually talk to me. Tell me about your life, about something, about anything. Ever since your dad died, it’s like I don’t know you anymore.”

Ben just stared at his mother, a thin, insincere smile on his face. She never knew me before Dad died, he thought. She never took the time then, why would she now?

She stared back for a long moment, then her face hardened and she turned her attention back to her crossword puzzle and said, “No later than midnight.”

“OK,” was all he said, and without another word, Ben turned and started up the back stairs, two at a time. Halfway up he paused and turned as if to go back, but changed his mind and climbed quickly to the top.

“If George calls, tell him I’m at Community,” he shouted over his shoulder. “If he has to, he can call the store and Mickey will come and get me. I’ll get breakfast there.”

He had no idea whether she’d heard him; he didn’t wait for an answer. Even if one came, he was out the door and in his light green 1950 Chevrolet Deluxe before he could hear it.

George was George Miller, the water sheriff. He trained and supervised all lifeguards on Green Lake, in addition to his job of keeping the peace on one of Minnesota’s busiest lakes. George had been water sheriff at Green Lake for as long as Ben could remember. And even though George was probably only about forty-five years old, Ben thought of him as being an old guy. Maybe it was because he was a bit overweight, or maybe it was because he had spent so much time outside in the sun wearing only his official tan-with-brown-piping Kandiyohi County water sheriff swim trunks—complete with an official brown with yellow embroidered “County Sheriff”

patch on the left front leg—and the sun was starting to take its toll. Or maybe it was just that Ben was sixteen and anyone over thirty was an old guy.

At the entrance to every driveway to every residence on Green Lake was a red metal post with a small red sign with a "fire number" stenciled in white, reflective paint. That way if there was a problem, even at night, the fire department would know where to go.   Community Park Number Five was exactly one mile east of fire number 686, Ben's cottage, on the northeast corner of the lake. It was a classic Minnesota park on a lake, with fifty campsites located one on top of the other, a convenience store with a dock where boaters could buy gas and snacks, and a swimming beach complete with two docks and a raft, all within ten acres of property. People, mainly farmers and their families, would come to Community from throughout the county to camp in tents and foldout campers. George was already there, standing, waiting by the guard tower when Ben pulled his car into his designated spot in the parking lot near the beach.

"Ben." George was well known for being a nice guy, but he was not long on words.

"Hey, George, what's up?" Ben said as he searched his Minnesota Gophers key ring for the key to the storage shed that held the oars to the lifeboat, a life-saver buoy with a red cross painted on the side, a couple of orange life jackets and a Folger's coffee can to bail the lifeboat out after a rain.

"You know the McKabe family down from your place, don't you?" George asked.

George knew Ben knew the McKabe family fairly well. Craig McKabe was a year older than Ben and he came up to the lake from Indianapolis every summer with his

dad, Reece, his mom Delores and an older sister, Dot. Ben and Craig had been friends since they were just little kids. Not like Scotty and Ben but they would hang out every once in a while, go skiing or take turns bouncing around in Craig's tiny pumpkinseed hydroplane that was outfitted with a souped-up ten-horsepower Mercury outboard motor.

"Yeah, sure I know them. Why?"

Ben knew George didn't like Craig McKabe. George even grumbled from time to time about how Craig never worked a day in his life and just rammed around in his ski boat or his pumpkinseed all day, acting cool. George thought of Craig as some kind of spoiled punk. A hot shot.

"When was the last time you saw the McKabe boy?" George asked.

Ben thought a moment. "Craig? Well, I saw him at the drive-in a week ago last night. He was with a bunch of guys I know."

"Did you see him with anyone else, other than that bunch of guys you know?'

"Not really. But I think he hooked up with a couple of girls from New London that night. I think they gave him a ride home."

"Who were they? The girls, I mean." George was watching Ben closely, now.

"Well, I didn't really see them. But one of my buddies told me he was in a car with Verna Chappell and Paula Donner."

"Anybody else with them?"

"All I know is what I heard. I didn't really see anyone in a car with Craig."

George looked hard at Ben, bullshit detector fully engaged, then looked down at his bare feet in the sand, giving Ben an opening to say more.

Ben looked at George's feet, too. Even though George's skin was deeply tanned from the sun, the skin on his feet had big patches of pale-colored pigment across the tops of both of them. It was like he had done a sloppy job of rubbing sunscreen over his feet, protecting only the tops from the sun's damaging rays. Everybody knew about George's blotchy feet, but nobody knew why they were that way, and of course, nobody asked.

"George, is Craig in trouble?"

"Well, Ben, I don't know. What I do know is if I were you I would be careful about who I was hanging around with. You've got a good family, a good mother. Don't do anything stupid that would disappoint her or be embarrassing for your family."

"Look, George, I don't know what you're talking about. What did Craig do?"

"Just listen to what I told you," George said.

George turned and headed toward the dock, where his twenty-one foot, white with brown stripe Larsen cruiser, powered by a gray Evinrude 100 horse power motor, was tied, then looked back over his shoulder.

"Do you think you'll need some help here today?" he asked, as if he hadn't just had the previous conversation with Ben.

Ben, still going over the exchange in his head said, "Yeah, maybe. I think it's going to be pretty busy."

"Okay, I'll see if Midby is available. It might not be until sometime after noon."

Ben's wasn't the most coveted job on the lake, not by a long shot, but then, at sixteen, he was glad to have it. The best gig was guard duty at Salisbury Beach in Spicer, a tiny town on the southwest side of the lake that came alive in the summer time, and went back into hibernation in September. That's where all the kids from "town"—a

bigger small town of ten thousand people twelve miles from Green Lake—went to find each other, to see and to be seen. The girls would lay out on tie-dyed beach towels in their bikinis, covered with Coppertone or baby oil to deepen their tans. The boys would strut around with only their baggy swim trunks on and wearing cheap sunglasses to keep the girls from knowing exactly where they were looking. A spot on the guard stand at Salisbury Beach had to be earned. Ben had to put in time for at least another year before George would consider him for an opening there. Very few of those town kids ever went to Community Park Number Five, if any.

That day the farmers and small town folks were looking for the southwest breeze coming off the lake to keep them cool. The farmer dads were obvious, wearing old-style, short-legged bathing suits and showing that ever-present farmer's tan: their faces, necks and most of their arms reddened by the sun, but their backs, shoulders, chests, legs and upper arms almost translucently white where they had been protected by the t-shirt and jeans they wore while working in the fields. And the farmer moms, most of them not wanting to put a bathing suit on to expose their self-perceived inadequacies, invariably wore loose sundresses, large-brimmed hats and sandals.

Together, the farmer moms and dads sat in their lawn chairs near the picnic tables in the shade of one of Community's dozens of eighty-foot tall elm trees, just close enough to the sand beach to keep a watchful eye on their kids. They knew Ben was there to help keep their children safe, but these were Minnesotans; they had a real respect for the lake.

So far that summer, Ben had saved exactly two lives . . . sort of. He pulled one little kid—he was probably two years old—out of shallow water because he had lost his

balance due to the waves pushing him around, and went under. Another time he had to row the lifeboat out to help an exhausted teenager who had gone out too far trying to get to the raft. He was able to reach out to her with an oar, she grabbed onto it, and he pulled her into the boat. Not exactly the exciting hero-type of lifesaving, but that was alright with him.

Compared to the cryptic conversation Ben had had with George, the rest of the day at the beach was relatively uneventful, even boring. Around one o'clock, Midby came over to help, but there weren't as many people as Ben had anticipated and he sent his backup home around three. By five thirty there wasn't a soul in the water so he pulled the lifeboat up on shore, locked the oars and life buoy in the storage shed, flipped the LIFEGUARD OFF DUTY sign over on the guard stand, and left. It took him all of seven minutes to get back to the cottage, park the '50 Chevy and dial up Scotty's home number on the phone in the kitchen.

"What's going on, man?" Ben wanted to see if Scotty knew anything before he told him about his conversation with George.

"I'm just sitting here, bored out of my mind," Scotty said.

Scotty didn't really work, especially on Saturdays. He just did some yard work and other odd jobs at his dad's restaurant during the week for a little extra money.

"We need to get someone to buy us some beer," Scotty said this with little concern in his voice. It was not unusual for Ben and Scotty to wait until the last minute on any given night to find someone willing to break the law for a few bucks.

"We'll find someone at the dance," Ben said with confidence. "Hey, is McKabe going to be there tonight?"

"Probably, why?" Scotty apparently knew nothing.

Ben told him what he knew.

"Well, Ben, you probably know what's going on. I'm pretty sure I do," Scotty said.

"Yeah, I think I do, too. But who told George? I mean who was involved that would blab about it?"

Even though the 60s decade had come to an end, the experimental drug scene had just barely seeped into the small town culture of central Minnesota. Ben knew there were plenty of people smoking grass but it was still a relatively new phenomenon in that little corner of the world. So, when Craig McKabe came up from Indianapolis at the beginning of the summer and started telling everyone that he had been getting high for most of the past school year, there was real intrigue. He had even told them that his favorite high came from smoking hash oil. Nobody knew what hash oil was.

"I suppose just about anybody. I mean shit, he's been bragging about doing dope to just about anyone who will listen," Scotty said.

Word traveled fast around the lake. It was surprising, Scotty said, that if what McKabe was saying was the truth, that there hadn't already been some trouble. And, if it was in fact true, he was probably smoking his hash oil right there at the lake, as well as back home in Indianapolis.

"Well, what are we going to do when we see him?" Ben asked. "Do we tell him George is asking about him?"

"I guess so," Scotty said. "We can't just ignore it, can we?"

“Shit, I don’t know. I guess not,” Ben said. “When you think about it, I wonder if George wants McKabe to know he knows about the drugs. Why else would he be talking to me about it?”

“Good question. Why *would* he be talking to you about it?” Scotty said. “Sometimes I think he thinks you know more than you let on. Do you?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Ben asked.

“Never mind. Forget it,” Scotty said. “The band starts playing at eight.”

It was seven o’clock when Ben got to Scotty’s, and by that time Scotty had arranged to meet Steve Serbus in the gravel parking lot across from Indian Beach Resort on the south side of the lake to pick up a twelve-pack of Schmidt Big Mouth bottles. Serbus made five bucks off the deal. Beggars couldn’t be choosers.

It was getting close to eight and Ben wanted to get inside for the beginning of South 40’s first set. They finally found a parking spot two blocks from the roller rink, half on the sidewalk and half in the Orred’s Grocery parking lot. Parking on the sidewalk in Spicer was common and no one really cared as long as a driver could get in and out without scraping along the side of someone else’s car. Thinking they would come back after dark, the beer stayed safely stashed in the trunk of the ’50 Chevy as the boys started toward the dance. That’s when they heard the crunch of car tires pulling up in the street behind them.

“Hey, boys,” said George, leaning out the window of his sheriff’s cruiser, not five feet from where the ’50 Chevy straddled the sidewalk.

“Hey, George,” Ben and Scotty answered simultaneously.

“Going to the dance?”

"Yeah, South 40. They're really good, one of my favorite bands. They have a great horn section and can really play, can't they Ben? Have you ever heard them, George?" Scotty was bad at dealing with authority, especially when there was beer in the trunk. He seldom fooled anyone, and he wasn't fooling George now. But, George apparently had other things on his mind.

"You guys seen Craig McKabe tonight?" George asked.

"Craig McKabe?" Scotty started to put his foot in his mouth again, but Ben jumped in to avoid further embarrassment.

"No, we haven't really seen anyone yet, we just got here," Ben said.

"Okay, Ben. But, remember what I told you this morning. You boys have fun but stay out of trouble."

Their regular evening expeditions into Spicer started in junior high, when everyone went there on Friday nights to roller skate at the old skating rink in the Spicer Pavilion. Built in the 1920s, it was all wood, painted white with green trim and with an old sign out front above the double door entrance that looked like one of those signs you might see at a train station. In green block letters, it simply spelled out: SPICER. Every Friday night in the fall, winter and spring, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs blasting "Wooly Bully," or Tommy James and the Shondells singing "Crimson and Clover" could be heard from the loudspeakers hanging from the rafters in the middle of the huge room. Tonight, it was all about South 40.

"Jesus, McKabe's in trouble. We better try to find him before George does." Even though he seemed to be concerned about Craig McKabe, relief definitely showed on

Scotty's face that George hadn't caught them with a twelve-pack of Big Mouths before the night got started.

By the time they made it to the door of the Pavilion, paid their two dollars each, and got their hands stamped with an indistinguishable image consisting of glow-in-the-black light mystery ink, and passed under the SPICER sign, they heard the signature horn riff intro to "Vehicle" by the Ides of March.

The place was packed. Even though there were two or three dances featuring live bands every summer at the roller rink, Ben thought it was still a bit disorienting to see musicians up on the normally vacant stage at the end opposite the entrance, and to see all those people just standing in place on the floor rather than moving en masse, counter-clockwise, in an oval around the room.

I'm your vehicle baby, I'll take you anywhere you want to go . . .

South 40 did covers with brass as well as anyone, Ben thought as he fixed his eyes on the band and made his way through the crowd toward the stage. Scotty did his best to keep up.

"Jesus, what's your hurry?" Scotty shouted to be heard over the music.

"What? Oh, sorry. I love this song."

I'm your vehicle woman, by now I'm sure you know . . .

"Who's here?" Scotty was looking around the room, not really interested in the music.

Karl Bengston and Johnny Sjoberg were standing off to the left side about ten feet from the stage, with their thumbs in their jean pockets, bobbing their heads to the music, trying to look cool. Both Bengston and Sjoberg knew Craig McKabe fairly well. In fact,

a year ago both had been early pioneers when it came to experimenting with recreational drugs at ages fifteen and sixteen. Scotty led the way over and tapped Bengston on the shoulder.

"Have you seen McKabe?" Scotty asked.

"What?" The music had drowned out the question.

I love you, I need you, I want you, got to have you child. Great god in heaven you know I luh-uh-uh-uh ove you.

"Have you seen Craig McKabe?" The McKabe part of Scotty's question was punctuated by the fact that the song had ended abruptly with a final blast of brass the moment before he said it.

"What about him?" Sjoberg asked, quietly.

"Have you seen him tonight?"

"Why, what's going on?" Bengston was now paying attention.

"George is looking for him," Scotty said. "He stopped us as we were coming in and asked if we'd seen McKabe."

That got their full attention, just as the staccato guitar open to Chicago's "25-or-6-to-4" burst from the stack of Marshall speakers ten feet away.

"Where's George now?" Bengston had leaned in close to Scotty's ear so he could be heard, eyes darting from one side of the room to the other.

"No idea," Scotty shouted.

Bengston and Sjoberg dropped any pretense of trying to act cool and now looked like a couple of nervous cats. Without another word, they glanced at each other, turned

and made their way toward the door as quickly as they could without attracting too much attention to themselves.

Waiting for the break of day . . .

"What the hell was that all about?" Scotty wanted to know.

Searching for something to say . . .

"No idea. Well maybe . . . shit, I don't know." But Ben did know.

Something bright against the sky . . .

"I think we better just stay right here for now," Ben said.

The music was loud, but Ben could clearly hear George's warning in his head: "Ben, you need to be careful about who your friends are."

Giving up I closed my eyes . . .

"Whatever those guys are doing is done, there's nothing we can do to change that now," Ben said.

What happened to Bengston and Sjoberg that night pushed everything else that had happened that summer right off the radar. Both were arrested, separately, for conspiracy to sell a controlled substance: a felony charge. Bengston was at his parents' home on Eagle Lake when two county sheriff's deputies knocked on their door. They arrested him on the spot, cuffed him and put him in the back of their cruiser. He spent the night in the county jail before his dad could bail him out. Sjoberg lived at Eagle Lake, too, but he didn't go home when he left the Pavilion that night. He was arrested after Reece McKabe called George to tell him someone—Johnny Sjoberg—was outside his cottage on the north side of Green Lake, shouting, insisting that he be allowed in, demanding to see Reece's son, Craig.

Before South 40 finished their last set, Ben dropped Scotty off at his place and drove to the cottage, vowing to keep his promise to his mom to be home by midnight. He had plenty of time; it was only 11:45. He parked the '50 Chevy in the driveway, tiptoed into the cottage and knocked softly on his mother's bedroom door.

"Ma?" he whispered. "Are you awake?"

There was no answer.

He tried again. "Ma?"

When he didn't get an answer the second time, Ben went quietly back out the cottage door to his car, opened the trunk and grabbed the still full 12-pack of Schmidt beers. There was somewhere else he needed to go that night. He walked out to the lake road, turned right and headed east, past four mailboxes and turned into the gravel driveway at fire number 690. Then he walked into the darkness of the trees, where someone waited.

"Bengston and Sjoberg?" Ben said in a near whisper.

"Both busted," came a quiet voice from the darkness.

"So, it worked?"

"Yup, it worked."

"Shit. I can't believe it," Ben said.

"I can't either. When my mom found the brick of weed in my room last night I thought I was fucked. But she and my dad swallowed the whole story about Bengston and Sjoberg threatening to hurt me if I didn't stash the stuff for them. Hook, line and sinker. It was my mom who actually convinced George it was true, too. What a couple of dumbasses."

"And Bengston and Sjoberg financed the whole buy at sixty instead of forty dollars a lid?"

"Yup."

"Well done," Ben said. "What does that leave us with?"

"Well, no weed, but enough cash to buy some good hash oil for the two of us."

Ben smiled and handed Craig McKabe a Big Mouth.