BABY'S BLUES

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

"As Wide as This World":

Native American Writers and Artists and the Bombing of Hiroshima

In her 1993 essay, "Thinking Woman's Children and the Bomb," literary critic Helen Jaskoski points to the common effect that both Native Americans and the bomb have had on our national consciousness. According to Jaskoski, "The continued presence of Indian people in the North American continent and the existence of the bomb…[b]oth require that the American people confront their fallacy of collective innocence and their obsession with freedom from guilt"(171). My novel, *Baby's Blues*, attempts to probe these very fallacies and obsessions by employing a rhetorical strategy in which the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki works as vehicle to discuss the mistreatment of Native Americans. By employing this rhetorical strategy, I am able to pose certain questions dramatically so that my reader must return to the possibility of innocence and/or guilt: How do these extreme acts of violence reveal a larger, unspoken political agenda? What role does worldview play? How might tribal people (and those other peoples who are subject to American acts of violence) overcome the fragmentation brought about by such treatment?

This rhetorical strategy is not uncommon in literary and artistic works of the late twentieth-century, particularly in those texts by Native American writers and artists. As many as a dozen Native writers and artists have taken the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as their subject (Caputi 1). Many of these writers and artists are known on a

national or even an international level. For example, arguably the most famous novel ever written by a Native American, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), employs such a strategy at the center of the novel. Much of Wendy Rose's poetry and T.C. Cannon's paintings do as well. These three writers and/or artists see the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a threat that reflects back on their own people. Carried out in the name of freedom and democracy, the bombing of Japan helped bring an end to the Second World War and, as the argument goes, helped save millions of young American soldiers, but the act also serves as a reminder of how far we are willing to go in order to enforce our will on other cultures, regardless of the purity of our motivations. This enforcement is something Native Americans tend to know something about.

Still, this strategy is not without its liabilities for Native and non-Native writers/artists alike. In order for the strategy to accomplish the intended effect, the reader or viewer must ignore the very different historical and cultural contexts present in the events. In short, the events are universalized in a way that denies them their reality. This means that the authors and/or artists sometimes sacrifice the truth. For example, many Native writers and artists employing this strategy paint the Japanese as one-dimensional victims. Thus, in texts by Leslie Silko, Wendy Rose, and T.C. Cannon, the Japanese are portrayed in a sympathetic light despite the fact that Japan, like the U.S., is well known as a colonial power that has committed atrocities of its own, such as the infamous Rape of Nanjing in which thousands of defenseless Chinese were raped and murdered by the Japanese military (Honda 3). This presents certain hazards for writers and artists using the bombing to talk about the mistreatment of Native Americans. If their portraits of the Japanese are overly simplistic, they risk losing their reader or viewer. Despite this

liability, the strategy continues to be used by both Native and non-Native writers and artists, such as Wendy Rose, T.C. Cannon, and Leslie Marmon Silko, and often to powerful effect.

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In "Trophy in Two Acts: On Hiroshima & Nagasaki," Hopi-Miwok poet Wendy Rose, uses the twin bombings to reveal a process whereby the Japanese, and Native Americans in turn, become objectified by acts of violence committed against them, a process connected directly to their differing worldviews. Helen Jaskoski argues that Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony*,—and we might add Rose's poems and Cannon's paintings—works to reveal the contrast between epistemologies, one

> that is essentially phenomalogical [*sic*] and one that [is] basically empirical. Native American thought…seeks understanding that is holistic and integrating, and its mode of discourse is prophecy and story. The Western—or European or Euroamerican—world view in contrast, tends toward atomism and the dis-integration of dissection and calculation; its mode of discourse is mathematical model and reductive analysis. (182)

As both a Native American and an anthropologist, Wendy Rose knows all too well the role science plays in western thought. Her poetry often suggests that in order to defeat the enemy, the western worldview attempts to break the opposing culture into parts, denying it of its power. Rose links this process to not only the Japanese but also to Native Americans.

"Trophy in Two Parts" weaves two, opposing voices together in order to create a larger tapestry of the American bombing of Japan. The first voice is that of an

Oppenheimer-like scientist waxing nostalgic to a "son" about his role in designing the bomb; the second appears to be that of a Japanese mother commenting on her son just before and after the explosion. Not only are the narrators themselves radically different, but the perspective from which they tell their stories and the voice in which they tell them are different as well. The first is an oral monologue and self-congratulatory; the second, on the other hand, is an interior monologue and is much less driven by self-interest and glory. There is little doubt where the poet's allegiance lies. The scientist mistakenly sees the bombing as an act of unification, the exact opposite of Rose's (and the Japanese narrator's) stance. This belief comes as a point of pride for the first narrator, proof of his success and justification for the American destiny as he imagines it. "Son," the scientist boasts, "I stepped/among brown skulls,/blackened bones, bones by the millions./I measured everything to judge our success./Technology is the way of the future" (16-17). The scientist goes on to say, "I am American pride,/the Yankee style that sneers/at jackboots and swastikas, that cheers for gratified boys/at play in the sky. We stopped Hitler, ended genocide./We will join the nations together" (18). Success to the scientist, after all, is measured in the number of "others" killed. Charred bones become his raw data. More importantly, the dead are said to have "brown skulls,/blackened bones," suggesting that the number of killed alone is not the only criteria for success; that the killed have "brown" skulls seems just as important if not more so than the final body count. Rose further complicates the issues of agency here. If the brown of the "brown skulls" signifies the "otherness" of the Japanese, does the "black" of the "blackened bones" represent something more than bones charred in the explosion? In other words, Rose dramatizes the process by which power is carried out against its "other." Simply

put, the act of bombing turns people into fragments, cities into ruins, and cultures into artifacts. This first part of the poem sets up the sympathetic portrayal of a Japanese character that follows. This arrangement allows Rose to comment on the mistreatment of the Japanese and, consequently, of Native Americans.

If the scientist's narration emphasizes division, the Japanese mother's section places importance on the cohesive nature of her relationship with her son, a cohesiveness broken by the bomb but recovered in the act of re-membering the boy and their time together:

> *If only once more I could see you*
> *start to school in the morning,*
> *flesh of my burning flesh, child*
> *forming in my soul. Newborn again,*
> *you would mouth my melting breast,*
> *make bird sounds in your sleep,*
> *dream in the crook of my arm.*
> *I must touch you again, flow into you*
> *And you back to me,....* (*Going to War* 18-19)

The mother's grief takes the form not of separation (though the threat is on the horizon) but of cohesion. Mother and child are represented as reciprocal beings, "flow[ing] into" one another and back again. It is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends; their boundaries bleed together. This relationship stands in contrast to the relationship the scientist has with his son, which Rose portrays as a hierarchical relationship—the son listens while his father lectures. Rose carefully constructs the mother's relationship as much less hierarchical that of the scientist's relationship. Using story as her mode of

discourse, the mother "speaks" back to process of objectification. This subverts the power dynamic employed against her and allows her to reclaim her own identity as well as her son's.

While there is no direct mention made of Native Americans or a Native American perspective on Japan or the bombing, "Trophy in Two Acts" echoes imagistically and thematically other poems written by Rose. As far as objectification is concerned, in both her nuclear and Native poems, western science serves as the bad guy in its attempt to impose outside order (based on division) on the "other." In "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song," for example, Rose responds to the way Native Americans are "tossed about,/cataloged, numbered with black ink/on newly-white foreheads" in museums dedicated to the memory of a dead culture (*Bone Dance* 54). Here too Rose points to a dangerous process at work whereby living cultures are turned into dead relics: "From this distant point,/beaded medicine bundles, even the bridles/of our shot-down horses./You who have priced us,/You who have removed us—at what cost?"(21). In both "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song" and "Trophy in Two Acts" Rose shows the Native American/Japanese cultures turned into artifacts and offered up for consumption by the dominant culture. The imagery approaches cannibalism.

Despite both poems' potential to turn Native Americans and the Japanese into victims (and reinforce their status as objects), Rose emphasizes survival and renewal. "Trophy in Two Acts" ends with a subtle but distinctive image of rebirth: "With morning/a light has come"(*Going to War* 19). The telling has facilitated this living again. The mother is able to reconnect with her son in this way. Such a rebirth is also present in "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song" in which "memory" animates the Native

"artifacts": "Our memory might be catching, you know./Picture the mortars, the arrowheads, the labrets/shaking off their labels like bears suddenly awake"(*Bone Dance* 21). In both poems, Native Americans and the Japanese defy victimization/ objectification and live on through story and memory. As critic Karen Tongson-McCall states, Wendy Rose's "positive contribution as both an anthropologist and a native poet is the reclamation of her ancestor's [and I might add her own] bones. Through digging she releases the bones from their encasement. Through writing she exhumes them from the confining pages of history"(21). To be trapped in the gaze of western science is to be turned to stone (object, artifact, ruin) and placed in a figurative (and sometimes literal) museum. Rose's focus on the bombing of Hiroshima allows her raise troubling questions about out country's use of force against both the Japanese and Native Americans.

One of the most famous Native American artists, T.C. Cannon, a Caddo-Kiowa and veteran of Vietnam, uses not only the bombings of Japan but also the heavy bombing of Southeast Asia carried out by American B-52s during the Vietnam War. Unlike Rose, however, Cannon positions himself as both a victim and an agent of the dominant power. In several of his paintings, sketches, and prints, T.C. Cannon juxtaposes images of what appear to be traditional Indians with imposing mushroom clouds, suggestive of the ones produced in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, rising up on the distant horizon. Many of these images with Cannon's mushroom cloud motif are directly or indirectly related to Vietnam, where Cannon served as a paratrooper in the 101st Infantry Division in the late 1960s. Apparently, Cannon was aware of the many ironies of an Indian serving in Southeast Asia. In a letter to friend Bob Harcourt, Cannon commented on the ironic relationship by prophesizing that "Someday I'll probably be assassinated by a Republic

Indian" (Frederick 49). According to another friend of Cannon's, Kirby Feathers, a Ponca Indian and a veteran of Vietnam, Cannon

> always had a great admiration for the Montagnards, which are the hill people of Vietnam. They're sort of like the Indians of Vietnam. They were there way before the Vietnamese. T.C. was always asking me about the Montagnards, because I trained them and worked with them a lot in the mountains. They had their own language that was different from Vietnamese--their own dialect. They danced and everything. T.C. always admired and felt sorry for them like I did. They were persecuted and discriminated against by the Vietnamese, although they were the true inhabitants of Vietnam. (Frederick 47-48)

In his letters home, Cannon writes of his many confusions over maintaining the proper alliances (Frederick 44). While it is true that Cannon volunteered for Vietnam, the violence and the paradox of his situation weighed heavily on his conscience and informed much of his later work, particularly "On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967," "As Snow Before a Summer Son" (Village with a Bomb)," and "Who Shot the Arrow...Who Killed the Sparrow...?". All three paintings use the imagery of the Hiroshima mushroom cloud well publicized in American newspapers to raise certain questions about American use of power against the Japanese, Vietnamese, and Native Americans.

In "On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967," Cannon presents two Indian soldiers in their U.S. Army uniforms (their unit patches identify them as members of the 101st Airborne) with a single can of beer in the forefront of the image. They both wear single feathers tied into their long hair (one of the soldier's hair is in braids, the other hanging loose). One of the soldiers literally has his arm over the other in a position of

companionship, and their two figures meld into one. It is hard to know how to read such an image. With the feathers pinned in their long hair and their stern faces, they seem to be relishing the warrior role that many Kiowa soldiers took with them to World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. According to Joan Frederick, Cannon's biographer, some people "saw T.C.'s enlistment as an innately Indian response to war. The Kiowa tribe boasted fierce and brave warriors, men who fought valiantly against the invasion of the whites"(39). If this was the basis of his initial impulse, it didn't seem to remain the reason for long.

"On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967" suggests the many paradoxes of an Indian fighting in and against the people of Vietnam. The title's juxtaposition of "beer" and "Vietnam" hints at the deep ironies at work in the piece. Furthermore, the fact that the two men are sharing a beer while a mushroom cloud blossoms in the distance seems to emphasize the image's irony. The idea that these two men can deny such imminent destruction going on right behind them speaks to the high price to be paid for turning away from such atrocities. If we take into account Cannon's interest in the Montagnards as well his awareness of the "Republic Indians" in the area, this image offers an extra layer to our reading of his other mushroom cloud paintings (primarily "Who Shot the Arrow...Who Killed the Sparrow...?" and "As Snow Before A Summer Sun [Village with Bomb]"). Clearly, these "warriors" are part of the American machinery of war. The two soldiers are contributing to the deaths of people who are, perhaps, more like them than not. The men ignore their own share of the responsibility for the destructive actions of their government, as suggested by the presence of the bomb. Lastly, the mushroom cloud sprouts up between the men, visually separating them from one another. This hints

at the bomb's divisiveness. What is now camaraderie will soon be isolation; long-term survival seems in doubt.

This idea of the bomb as the ultimate "divider" comes into play in one of Cannon's earliest mushroom cloud paintings, "As Snow Before a Summer Sun (Village with Bomb)." Completed in 1967 in the flat style and bright colors that became associated with most of Cannon's mature work, "As Snow Before a Summer Sun (Village with Bomb)" juxtaposes a mother holding a child in a papoose and an orange mushroom cloud with green circles in the immediate foreground. According to Joan Frederick, Cannon often drew from the great speeches of tribal leaders for inspiration in his work (149). The title of this particular painting is taken from Tecumseh, the Shawnee Chief:

> Where today is the Pequot? Where are the Narragansetts, the Mohawks, the Pokanoket, and many other once powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished before the avarice and oppression of the White Man, as snow before a summer sun. (Frederick 149)

All the human figures in Cannon's paintings risk just such a disappearance. America will chew them up and spit them out—mere fragments to be displayed in museums as testament to its own power and superiority over marginalized peoples. The one prominent difference among the three paintings is the degree to which the figures understand the situation.

Unlike "Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967" and "Who Shot the Sparrow," the mushroom cloud in "As Snow Before a Summer Sun (Village with Bomb)" is nearly on top of the people. The blast seems to have an immediate impact upon the two figures. The mother and child seem fully aware of what is happening, though they lack the ability

to do anything about it. They sit in abject supplication. We know this in two ways. First, the mother and child have pained looks on their faces, perhaps even frowns. The child's eyes are closed, which suggests that he or she is either passed out in pain or, perhaps, is already dead. Second, Cannon bleeds the two panel-like parts of the painting together with his use of the color green and echoes of shapes (circles and the gourd-like shape of the cloud). Small green circles dot the large mushroom cloud; these circles are echoed in shape and color of the leaf-like circles sprinkled evenly across the grass surrounding the mother and child. Loam green dots also appear on the mother's face, giving her skin a sickly tone. (The child is also shaded in a shade of brown mixed with green.) The mother's nose and forehead seem to reflect the shape of the blast itself. When all these factors are taken into account, "As Snow Before a Summer Sun" may be read as a potentially bleaker prophecy than the other two canvases. In this image, survival of any kind is in doubt. Like in Cannon's "Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967," the bomb's mushroom cloud in "As Snow Before a Summer Sun" formally comes between the two figures and figuratively suggests their inevitable separation.

In the last of the three paintings to be discussed, "Who Killed the Sparrow?...Who Shot the Arrow?...," T.C. Cannon raises the possibility of survival. In this image, the Indian figure faces down the bomb's cloud. The figures in the other two paintings faced the viewer, a choice on Cannon's part that seems to emphasize ignorance or possibly even denial. This mushroom cloud painting also returns to the irony of "On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967," an irony lacking in "As Snow Before a Summer Sun." With the exception of several splotches of black (working as shadows thrown by the blast), the painting appears in three panels: one red, one white, and one blue, a color trifecta that

makes it hard not to think of the colors of the American flag. In describing this painting to a friend, Cannon emphasized the fact that this was not a protest painting. The painting "pictures a Navajo girl-woman standing on a white plain with a green atomic bomb blowing up ten miles distant...but approaching...as another control device that will keep the Indian quiet for another decade or so"(Frederick 76). Despite Cannon's trademark cynicism, his emphasis in this painting seems to be on survival—even if it is just one decade at a time.

In *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko juxtaposes Native Americans and the Japanese much to the same effect as Wendy Rose and T.C. Cannon. The similarities amongst the texts are quite striking. Like Cannon's GIs in "On Drinking Beer in Vietnam in 1967," Silko's Tayo serves an institution that has oppressed native peoples for centuries. Both Cannon's soldiers and Tayo share varying degrees of awareness that they are tools of a larger power and share at least partial blame for the imperialistic practices carried out against its "others." Like Wendy Rose's "Trophy in Two Acts: Nagasaki & Hiroshima," Silko's *Ceremony* teases out the differences between the Japanese and American worldviews. Both Rose's poetry and Silko's novel show how the western worldview creates division and fragmentation. Silko, however, takes the strategy a step farther. Unlike Rose and Cannon, Silko uses the strategy to separate western people from the western worldview that shapes them. As a result, Silko uses the bomb not to comment on western versus eastern worldviews, nor Euroamericans versus the people of color, but in order to raise issues of good versus evil or, in Silko's terms, the "destroyers" versus the non-destroyers. This re-mapping of communities has radical implications for the politics of power.

In the novel, Tayo returns from the Second World War suffering from what appears to be post-traumatic stress syndrome. He spends most of his days trying unsuccessfully to sleep and gather back the energy he has lost. One memory in particular seems to haunt him. During the war, he is ordered to shoot several Japanese prisoners of war. Instead of carrying out the order, Tayo freezes in his tracks. He sees the face of his dead Uncle Josiah superimposed on the face of one of the Japanese soldiers: "Tayo stood there stiff with nausea while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah, and even after Rocky [Tayo's cousin] started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was *still* Josiah there"(8). In many ways, this moment of confusion characterizes Tayo's post-war illness. He suffers from a kind of "breakdown." He fails to recognize these simple distinctions around which the war is being fought. Tayo is unable to distinguish the Japanese from the (Native) Americans, nor the good guys from the bad. Louis Owens argues in "'The Very Essence' of Our Lives: Leslie Silko's Webs of Identity," that "Although Tayo's vision of Josiah is dismissed as 'battle fatigue,' as Tayo comes to understand the world according to Pueblo values, he will realize that in one crucial sense the executed man really was Josiah, that all men and women are one and all phenomena inextricably interrelated"(175). That Silko demonstrates the interrelatedness of all things by linking Native identity to Japanese identity is telling; this is not an arbitrary decision on the author's part. She chooses a people against whom the "ultimate signifier of violence" (Piper) is employed. In other words, by linking Native Americans with the Japanese, Silko (like Rose and Cannon) reveals a larger pattern of power at work. Instead of placing all the blame on Euroamericans, the novel blames the destroyers, a "mythical" group of spirits bent on

destroying the world. Not surprisingly, the destroyers employ a western worldview, favoring fragmentation and separation. The Euroamericans serve as mere pawns to the destroyers, a move that denies Euroamericans the possibility that they *ever* held any real power over indigenous peoples. In short, their power is an illusion. In a passage late in *Ceremony*, Ts'eh, a mythical character and Tayo's love interest, describes the destroyers in this way:

> 'They work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other.... Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. When they finish, you watch yourself from a distance and you can't even cry--not even for yourself.' (229)

According to Ts'eh's description, the destroyers thrive on division. They divide people from one another, individuals from their feelings, and people from the way they know themselves in memory. Their method is literal dissection. Also the heart (as opposed to the head) plays an important role in knowledge-formation. Their ultimate tool, of course, is the bomb, the "ultimate signifier of violence." The bomb dismembers everything in its path.

To accomplish such division, the destroyers perpetrate a lie that works equally well on both Indians and Euroamericans:

> If the white people never looked beyond the lie to see theirs was a nation built on stolen lands, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used by the witchery; they would never know that they were still being manipulated by those who knew how to stir the ingredients together: white

> thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. The destroyers only had to set it into motion, and sit back to count the casualties. (191)

"But it was more than a body count," the passage continues, echoing the body count in Rose's "Trophy in Two Acts," "the lies devoured the white hearts, and for more than two hundred years white people had worked to fill their emptiness; they tried to glut the hollowness with patriotic wars and with great technology and the wealth it brought. And always they had been fooling themselves, and they knew it"(191). While the lie works differently on different groups of people, the lie contributes to the veracity and the "naturalness" of the division amongst peoples. The lie is powerful enough to destroy the world (with the bomb in the hands of misguided Americans), and to defeat it will, in the words of Betonie, require "'power from everywhere. Even the power from the whites'"(150).

By denying Euroamericans authentic power, a complex spin is placed on the power dynamic represented in *Ceremony*. The ground shifts in a way that makes the reader watch his or her feet. The reconfiguration of communities sensitizes the reader to the way power is employed in (and out of) the novel. The reader is forced to rethink issues of right and wrong, sanity and insanity. Power is no longer seen as the possession of the people "in power." In this world, power can exist away from the people who employ it against "others." This is an obvious shift away from Rose who places power squarely in the hands of white America and from Cannon who places blame on the machinery of war. Taken in its purest sense, the ideology espoused by Silko's novel most neatly fits

Jaskoski's description of a Native worldview: a system of thought that "seeks understanding that is holistic and integrating"(182).

It is not until Tayo—with the help of the on-going ceremony—sees and honors the whole that he can fight the destroyers. Tayo's moment of confusion in which he sees Josiah's face on those of the Japanese soldiers is shown to be not insanity at all but clear-sightedness. The problem is that he lacks the knowledge necessary to interpret the vision. Late in the novel, Tayo re-imagines the boundaries of this world, grouping the Japanese along with the Pueblo people:

> From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (246)

Thus, Tayo's confusion over the Japanese prisoner/Uncle Josiah stands as a prophetic moment. He was seeing what he should have been seeing. As Silko tells us, "He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: No boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time"(246). The

inclusion of the Japanese in *Ceremony* is crucial if the novel is to achieve an all-inclusive perspective. The Japanese show Silko's reader how wide the circle is. More than any other Native work discussed, *Ceremony* depends upon the strategy to establish its argument. No longer can readers dismiss these standard problems—alcoholism, bitterness, etc.—as mere "Indian problems." Now they are part of a larger pattern.

Like the work of Wendy Rose, T.C. Cannon, and Leslie Marmon Silko, my novel, *Baby's Blues*, uses the bombing of Hiroshima as a foil against which to reveal the treatment of Native Americans, yet *Baby's Blues* goes about this task in a slightly different manner. The novel revolves around David Elkhart, part Little Elk Indian, and Baby Paquette, the half-Japanese daughter of a victim of the Hiroshima blast. David and Baby are introduced in the summer of 1969, the summer that begins with Hamburger Hill in May and ends with Woodstock in August. Both characters have inherited a world not unlike the world favored by Silko's destroyers. Both are threatened with the possibility of their own destruction. For both David and Baby, the atomic bomb serves as the "ultimate signifier of violence"(Piper), representing both figuratively (David) and literally (Baby) the power that the United States holds over its "others." The bomb, as we have seen in the work of Rose, Cannon, and Silko, divides everything it comes into contact with—identities, bodies, families, and communities. *Baby's Blues* explores these same issues of fragmentation, asking, "How is it possible for the parts to come together to create a whole?"

As the daughter of a survivor of Hiroshima, Baby seeks to reconnect with her mother who killed herself a few years after Baby was born. Baby's task is in many ways made more difficult by the wide gulf that separates her from her mother. She has no

memory of her mother. Her father, Old Man Paquette, is still alive, but he has cut himself off from the failures of his past. Unlike David, Baby has no one to facilitate a reconnection, though the remnants of her mother's role in Col. Paquette's Wild West Show (fliers, banners, etc.) provide her glimpse or two. Baby ultimately comes to depend upon her imagination and learns to connect with her mother through her dreams.

David comes to understand his own sense of alienation (from self, family, and tribal community) in terms of Baby's situation, a situation brought on by America's bombing of Hiroshima. She serves as a model for young David who is not yet aware of his own sense of alienation. He has grown comfortable with his father's protection. His father, placing his faith in Euroamerica (much like Rocky and Rocky's aunt in *Ceremony*), moved David, his brother Ben, and David's mother to a white suburb of Tulsa and keeps his son sheltered from his tribal community (and that of his extended family). In short, his father severs the family tree, believing this will help ensure David's success in the white world. He wants David to become a surgeon, a likely Euroamerican occupation from his perspective. David's father has also taken pains to change the direction of his own life by accepting a bid to encase the wooden Little Elk courthouse in white marble, a job that will allow him to make a great deal of money and move his family east to Providence, Rhode Island. Once there, he believes he will escape his Native American identity. A fluke places David in Little Elk, Oklahoma, for the summer, however, and this alters the course of action that David's father has planned for him. This move brings about a first meeting for David with his "Aunt" Irene and other community members from whom he has been cut off and begins a process by which David reconnects to the

tribe. Gradually David's identity becomes shaped by his interaction with Irene and her Red Elk stories (as well as his interaction with the traditional community and the land).

Of the two major characters, Baby's identity is the most contested. Unlike David, Baby has lived most of her life focused on the fragmentation that seems to define her, though she has fought it every step of the way. Like T.C. Cannon's GIs, Baby knows the risk of both facing down the powers that be and not facing them down. Both come at a high price. Part of the problem is that Baby has inherited both a western and a non-western worldview. Baby's grandfather, the famed Col. Paquette, typifies the Old West and its simultaneously romantic and imperial history, while her mother serves in many ways as its antithesis. Baby's mother, Yoshie, was injured in the Hiroshima blast. After receiving publicity about the damage done to her beautiful face, Yoshie is flown to the United States for a round of plastic surgeries, all of them paid for by a publicity-seeking Col. Paquette. In a desperate attempt to revive his Wild West Show, Col. Paquette's premier attraction is the marriage of his son to this survivor (and newly "recast" by American surgeons in order to render the violence more palatable) of America's most violent act. Her "deformity" becomes a show-stopper.

Like her mother, Baby is marked by the atomic blast (though second-hand through her mother's genes). Because of this inheritance, she has no arms or legs. Her body marks her as a "victim" of the U.S. attack on Japan, a physical reminder of the victory over "lesser peoples." In this sense, she is a product (or a byproduct) of American war efforts, just as her mother is. At least on the surface, Baby subverts such a static role. In part, her dynamic character—she is interested in high fashion and has a mouth like a sailor—is a response to the social expectations of a limbless woman, a role characterized

by the nickname her father gave her, Baby. She has "built" herself out of the rubble. The community, however, views her as a monster. She is a physical reminder of their "sins," their nightmare released into the streets of Little Elk, Oklahoma. Baby has found a certain amount of power in playing such a role.

David's father, on the other hand, sees her as a kind of excess of living brought about by Col. Paquette and his son. She is their punishment. Professor Stevens, an expert on Pompeii, sees Baby only as a relic, an artifact of the once-thriving community known as Hiroshima. She serves as an object of ruin that he might excavate without recrimination. And finally, though he loves her in his own limited way, Baby's own father sees her as his burden, as a responsibility he must constantly live up to. In all of these perspectives—the town's, David's father's, Professor Stevens', and Baby's father's—Baby is constructed as a one-dimensional object. This perspective denies her agency and volition. Only David and his Aunt Irene have a different take on Baby. Probably the strongest character in the novel, David's Aunt Irene has managed to maintain a consistent yet dynamic Native self. Because of this identity, she expects Baby to transcend the victimization in which Baby occasionally allows herself to wallow. Irene knows Baby is "abusing" her situation and doesn't mind telling her. Irene is, after all, the only one willing to tell her to stop being "Baby."

If Baby's body marks her identity as overdetermined, then David's marks him as underdetermined. If Baby's body (and character) is visibly marked by the bombing, David's body is marked by an absence of a Native identity. In short, David does not look Indian; in fact, he has inherited the fair skin of his mother's Scandinavian ancestry. His body does not tell the story Baby's body does. More importantly, his father has isolated

him from the Little Elk community. (This too may be seen as a form of violence, a dis-membering.) David's (re)entry into the Little Elk community helps drive this need to be marked. He needs to trace his identity through the "ruins." In some sense, he comes to envy Baby's marked body. In his logic, David believes that exploding the courthouse will allow him to reconfigure himself from scratch. His final act is an attempt to mark himself as different from his father, to mark himself as not "white." In this sense, his father is not helpful. He denies David's (and Ben's) claim to any sort of balanced identity as a Native American.

Hiroshima serves not only as an extreme reminder of American will and force, but also as a constant threat for all those who have served as its target in one form or another. This was, after all, President Truman's original intent: *See what we can do to you and, more importantly, what we are willing to do again*. The characters and/or figures of Wendy Rose, T.C. Cannon, and Leslie Marmon Silko also seem aware of this fact. The mushroom cloud is always looming on the horizon. By channeling her mother over and over again, Baby comes to feel this threat on a daily basis. It's the price she pays for connecting with her mother. David soon learns what Baby has known for most of her life: this threat of fragmentation may take many forms in ones life.

Not surprisingly, the novel ends in an act of violence committed by David. He blows up the newly marble-covered courthouse, the very structure his father has instilled with "whiteness." In the process, David kills his only brother. If *Baby's Blues* succeeds as a novel, this final act will be viewed as a complex one. As David has been initiated into this new, politically charged world, he has learned that

violence dis-members. Still, David can't help himself; from his perspective, he must sever the invisible cord that connects him to his father in order to maintain the identity he has begun to construct. This act is a failure, and he admits as much. David fails to believe in himself and his ability to stay committed to his community. He is afraid of failure. However, something larger is at work. David narrates the story three years after the summer of 1969. His telling is an act of attrition. In the act of telling the story, David re-members the various parts that his act of violence dis-members. Because of this, David resists becoming another "destroyer."

Finally, the danger in writing about tragedies such as Hiroshima or others suffered by Native Americans is to deny or trivialize any real pain and grief experienced by these people. The very real destruction of an entire Japanese city can become just another artistic metaphor for fear and hopelessness. My hope is that by placing the American "fallacy of collective innocence" and the "obsession with freedom from guilt" at center stage in the novel we might in some small way begin to own up to our national responsibility. In short, I want my reader to pause on such extreme destruction for a few minutes, confront some of the issues that have been packed away in the back of the American psyche. I want them to imagine the horror. Many Native Americans--Wendy Rose, T.C. Cannon, and Leslie Marmon Silko included--have no doubt grown accustomed to this "looking away." Cultural amnesia and rationalization constantly threaten to avert our national gaze. Americans, for the most part, remain in denial over Hiroshima and My Lai and Wounded Knee. The texts of Rose, Cannon, and Silko all attempt to reorient the American focus back on the issues that in many ways continue to haunt everyone on the North American

continent and beyond, but the task is too great for them to tackle on their own. As Betonie tells Tayo in *Ceremony*, this task is monumental and will require "power from everywhere"(150). I believe that I have learned to speak about the unspeakable through their poems, paintings, and novels, and in some small way I hope to champion this cause. It is unfortunate that too many readers will dismiss their work as biased and, thus, too easily escape back into the American safe house of denial and innocence. These are the readers I might reach. These are the readers for whom *Baby's Blues* might make a difference.

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BABY'S BLUES: A NOVEL

And what i want to know is
How do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death
--e.e. cummings

Don't fret
Warriors keep alive in the blood.
--Simon J. Ortiz

PROLOGUE

(May 1972)

My lawyer, who's an old college friend of Mom's, visits me at the home periodically, though I've told him not to bother. He's nice enough. He's tall and light-skinned and handsome, and he doesn't have to tell me that he and my mom are dating. That's why he keeps coming back. When he's here, he brings me a copy of the Daily Oklahoman. *He catches me up on the war and the escalating scandal against our pro-war president who happens to be Quaker. I don't bother to tell him that we get newspapers in the home, and at night, we all gather around the television the way that normal families do. Attendance required. Still, he's thoughtful to do these things. I'll give him that much. He carries the smell of the real world in his clothes and hair, which is also nice. If I didn't know the question that he had come here to ask me—the same one he asks me every time—I'd like him a whole lot better.*

Just as he's about to ask me the question, he slows down in gesture and speech, and for a moment becomes unsure of himself. You might say he becomes self-conscious. But then his legal training takes over. His hands fold magically in front of him, and he smiles. This is our ritual, and I find small comforts in it.

Before he can get the words out, I say, "No."

"David," he says, pleading with me. "Can you at least consider the deal?"

My lawyer, the friend of Mom's, has told my mother a story that makes her dream things she shouldn't be, and this too is what motivates his visits. The story fuels the flame of Mom's dream. If I put all the blame on Baby for what happened, they will let me go. At least this is what he tells me. The story they want goes like this: Baby seduced me and as a result brainwashed me into carrying out her will. In other words, I had no choice in the matter, no will of my own. Only she is to be blamed. As long as she's around, they'll feel threatened. This is, of course, an old story. Irene taught me as much.

Something I don't dare tell my lawyer is this: Part of me wants to give them their story. How much easier it would be—it was all her fault; I had absolutely nothing to do with it. Every time in the last three years that I have doubted her love for me or my worthiness to receive her love, I thought of giving them their story. I could find shelter in such a story. An open door that looks out into the blue, blue sky and the sun warms my skin. So pure, so pure. I choose not to tell them their story, though someday I might. The only one I'm willing to tell—the real story, as far as I'm concerned—has nothing to do with Baby, though our stories sometimes coil together in a way that makes them hard to tell apart. Nevertheless, this story starts and ends with my own needs. This is my story.

CHAPTER ONE

In the summer of 1969, I turned fourteen. For years, Dad had promised me that the summer I turned fourteen I could go to work for him. "Be patient," he had always said. I secretly believed he was using this as an excuse. Nevertheless, he remained steadfast in the decision. School let out in early May. At dinner that night, I reminded Dad of the promise he had made.

"Forget it," he said. "Not with *this* job."

"Joe," Mom said.

"It's not about the boy, Ellen. You know that. It's about getting the job done right and fast and moving on." He shook his head in disbelief. "This job, of all the jobs."

For years, Dad had two dreams. First, that his two sons would become a doctor and a lawyer. He didn't care which was which. Second, he dreamed of relocating his business out east, where there were promising opportunities and the schools had reputations for sending their students to Ivy League medical and law schools. In the fall of 1968, he received a huge government contract to remodel the courthouse located in his small hometown of Little Elk, Oklahoma, a town of about 3,000 located fifty or so miles from our home in Tulsa. This contract would provide us with the money we needed to relocate in Providence, Rhode Island. I had seen the Providence chamber of commerce materials spread across the coffee table. Bright, promising pictures of downtown, kids playing in the park, someone eating a messy pastry with both hands. All spring, Dad had been humming to himself, even telling a squeaky-clean joke now and then. One more

summer in Oklahoma, and that would be all. A line in the red Oklahoma dirt that he had drawn long ago would now be crossed.

"But you *promised* me," I reminded him at the dinner table.

Mom chimed in with her support. "You're always preaching about promises and how important it is for David to keep his," Mom said.

Dad rubbed his rough hands together, weighing the decision over in his mind. "You two are something," Dad said. He wanted to turn me down the same way he turned down his workers when they asked for an advance on their paycheck, but he couldn't, not his own son.

"Come on," I said. "Please."

"What about your studies?" he said.

"I'll study on breaks and at night."

"He's got almost ten years before he applies to medical school, Joe. He has plenty of time to study."

"You can't start too early," he said.

"I know, Dad."

A slight smile slipped from his boss' face. I could tell that he liked the idea that I *wanted* to work with him, something Ben had never seemed to want. According to Dad, when Ben reached eighteen, he would join the merchant marines and ship off for the farthest point of call from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Ben hadn't made it to eighteen. He had left home the previous year after a messy disagreement, though he had taken a job with Dad's crew for the summer.

"You can lend a hand where it's needed," Dad finally announced. "But," he said, "you have to stay clear of any real work. If you're underfoot, you'll just slow the project down. If you get in the way, you're gone. No questions asked." He pursed his lips and shook his head to himself, as if this were against his better judgment. "You understand the conditions?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

Mom and I exchanged grins.

*

On Monday morning, the first workday after Dad had made his announcement, he walked out of the house without me. He left me asleep on the cold tile in our entryway, my brand new, steel-toed work-boots weighing me down in my dreams. I had taken roost there in our entryway in the dark hours of the night after waking up worried that he would leave me despite his promise to the contrary. I curled up against the door, sure I was now located at the one place I knew he wouldn't be able to overlook me. Mom told me later that morning that he had stopped to cover me with a blanket, but she was just trying to make me feel better and maybe protect Dad a little. If I had thought about it, I would have realized that Dad had no idea where Mom kept the blankets. He might have walked around for hours, opening every cabinet door and hallway closet before he actually found the blankets. Nevertheless, Mom's story of the blanket nourished me through the long, agonizing day and into the early evening, all the while doing my best not to show my anger. I swallowed it back the way Dad had always done. "The minute they know you're angry," Dad liked to say, "they've got you where they want you."

Mom, too, was upset at Dad. She threw herself into a flurry of housework, the long list of tasks she had been putting off for months—vacuuming under the beds, polishing the silver, replacing the forty-nine light bulbs in our house with brand new ones, and washing the quilts by hand and hanging them out on the rusty old swing set to dry. At one point I found her in my older brother's old room, using the noise from the vacuum to cover up the sounds of her own crying. I was never sure what Mom needed from me, and I guess I was too scared to ask. If you opened one door, you might find a dozen more awaiting you. Sometimes it was easier to leave the first door closed.

"Your father," Mom said to me later that afternoon. She had been going over these words in her head for a while, and I could tell she was making sure to get them right. "I shouldn't be saying this, but your father is really a good man—his heart is in the right place—but sometimes he forgets what's important. He forgets he's got responsibilities to the people who love him." I thought she might start to cry. Instead, she sighed, letting all the pent-up energy go. She pulled me next to her body, hugging me with both arms, holding me as if I were the last remnant of Dad's goodness. She kissed the top of my head. "He really is a good man," she repeated.

I said, "I understand, Mom. I do."

He was going to school and working in a town about two hours from the state college I was attending at the time. It was heartbreaking for us to be so far from each other. We had talked of him moving to town, but his job paid so well that we both knew he couldn't afford to do that, no matter how great our love. My roommate told me what happens when boys were away from their girlfriends. I said, "No, not Joe. He's

different." I took her up to see him one Saturday to show her she was wrong. He was charming, of course. He took us out for a picnic at the lake. We wore our swimsuits so we could splash around in the water after we had eaten. For lunch, he had made little butter sandwiches and cut the crust off. It sounds silly now, I know. What more could a woman want in a husband?

Anyway, when we came back, my roommate showered in Joe's bathroom. She took off her necklace and placed it on top of the counter. We had to leave before dinner because he had to go to work. We said our usual goodbyes, and I cried just as I always did back then. Two hours was a long ways. The entire drive back home, I felt I was driving away from myself. My friend had been convinced, and we spent the evening talking about how great he was and where our lives together might lead us. She realized she had forgotten her necklace, and I told her I'd get it from Joe when he came down the following Saturday. I went to bed as happy as I had ever been.

In the morning, I found an envelope that had been slid under the door of our dorm room. I figured it was just another one of the many love letters that boys were constantly sticking under our door. The envelope had no writing on it, and it contained something bulky. I opened it and found my roommate's necklace. He hadn't left a note or anything.

*

At five I turned on my favorite TV show, *Bewitched*, but instead there was a news flash on Vietnam. I started to turn it off because any news about the war seemed to do strange things to mom. A boy she had dated in high school had been killed early in the war, and she equated every American death with her old boyfriend's death. Roger Mudd

broadcast the special. We were trying to take a hill in the highlands and the communists had decided to dig in. Mom just shook her head.

*

When Dad came home later that night, he didn't apologize for leaving me behind, nor did he notice anything different about the house. In the kitchen, he made up his usual after-work drink, a five-malt scotch poured over moon-shaped ice cubes. Dad stirred his drink, set the spoon on the edge of the sink. He turned to me and said, "Have a good day?"

I was sitting at the table, pretending to study a Latin textbook that our next-door neighbor had given me on loan. Dad wanted me to memorize twenty-five words a day. I wasn't sure how to answer his question. I couldn't say anything without revealing my utter frustration and disappointment. Instead, I chewed on the corner of my lip, which served as a reminder not to unleash my frustration in unproductive ways. I felt my anger welling up inside of me. My cheeks must have been hot to the touch. It was all I could do to keep from yelling, "Why, Dad? Why'd you leave me?"

Before Mom could even give Dad a welcome home kiss, he started right in complaining about the lack of good laborers for the job, which was the biggest contract he had landed in twenty years as a contractor. Mom kissed him anyway. Gave him a smack right on his moving lips. It was a form of power for her, though Dad never seemed to understand that. Mom had originally planned to make beef stroganoff—Dad's favorite—but after his stunt this morning, she changed the menu to manicotti, which was my favorite.

The kiss made me blush. I tried to look busy so they wouldn't notice that I had seen their kiss. They were beautiful together. It intimidated me, maybe even shamed me a little. When we were all in Kansas City on vacation in 1964, long before Vietnam was on the news every night, a newspaper photographer came up to us and asked to take our picture. We quickly assumed a pose in front of the downtown fountains, but the photographer shook his head. He only wanted Mom and Dad. Ben and I huddled off to the side, not sure what to do with ourselves. That was the way I always felt around them—I was the odd man out, disproving in some strange way the obvious truth of their beauty.

The two of them were a study in contrasts, but their starkly contrasting elements somehow complimented one another. Mom was from a long line of Texans, distantly related to one of the minor guys who died at the Alamo. She grew up with money and inherited her parents' fear of the sun. Dad, on the other hand, was dark skinned and had thick, dark hair. Mom liked to tease him about his Indian blood, a tease that made him clam up in a way that he never did. In private, Mom told me his father was a Little Elk Indian, but Dad didn't much get along with the people back home. Light and dark, Texan and Little Elk, they somehow became whole, became beautiful.

Mom said, "Well?"

"What?" Dad asked. He finished making his drink and turned to lean back against the counter. In an hour, he would take a hot shower and put on a nearly identical set of work clothes, a pair of khaki pants and blue denim work shirt minus the tie. This would be the outfit he wore to work the next day.

"Your son," Mom said to him. "You made him a promise."

He looked over at me and held me in view. He didn't like when Mom did my bidding for me. You could read it in his face. Of course, Mom felt it was her responsibility to make sure I got heard. She always said I was too quiet, that I needed to be more assertive and tell people what I wanted. I think she saw herself in me. She was quiet, too. Still, when I didn't speak up on my own behalf, she did the talking for me.

"The kid was snoring like a damn mule," Dad said. "What was I supposed to do? Carry him over my shoulder?" His sneer had been perfected on men he had no respect for, Indians and blacks who stopped going to school in the fifth grade and who practiced their penmanship when they attempted to forge their doctor's signature for missing work the day after payday. I didn't care about any of that. I wanted to show him that I could do the work of two of those men. I would never take a day off. I wanted to prove all this to him, if he would only let me.

"You promised."

"Tomorrow then," Dad said. He looked over at me. I was sitting at the kitchen table, my *Medical Latin for Students of Medicine* spread open in front of me. At Dad's request our next-door neighbor, Mr. Lewiski, who was a pharmacist, had been tutoring me once a week in his spare time. He assigned me homework problems from the book, though I didn't have the heart to show him the answers printed in the back of the book.

"That okay with you, sport?" Dad asked. "You game for tomorrow?"

I nodded. *Tomorrow.*

*

That night, Mom started pulling my clothes for the next day out of my closet. "I'll do that," I told her.

"Nonsense," she said. "I don't mind."

"Mom," I said. "I'll do it."

"Oh," she said. She put my blue denim shirt on my bed. "I'm sorry. You're getting big so quickly. I sometimes forget you're not going to be around forever."

*

The next day Dad woke me long before my alarm went off. Thunder rumbled in the distant sky. The smell from his after-shave mixed with that of his freshly brewed cup of coffee. "Get dressed," Dad said. "There's been a bad storm. A tornado hit the courthouse in Little Elk."

In my half-awake state, I remembered Dad waking me from a dream in which a dark and violent storm had struck. The storm had taken out the series of telephone poles on our block, and the end of a loose power line cackled and whipped around like the head of a snake, spewing flames. I couldn't get back to my house without passing by the snake. I was frozen in my tracks, not sure what to do.

"If you want to go," Dad said, "you best speed it up."

I sat up in bed.

On the way out of my room, Dad said, "You can sleep on the way, if you want."

Dad put his big hand on my shoulder and directed me out of the house. "Christ," he said, the smell from the storm filling our lungs. I saw the streaks of lightning coming from the storm that had moved on northeast of Tulsa. The remnants of the storm were scattered about the neighborhood. The trees around the house had been nearly stripped of recently greened leaves. Trash from the nearby dump had lodged in the hedges and gathered in the corners of Mom's flowerbed.

"Goddamn this place," Dad said, flicking the leaves soaked from rain off the windshield of his truck. His anger seemed to animate him. "If I never live through another goddamn tornado for as long as I live, it wouldn't be too soon. Know how many tornadoes they had in Rhode Island last year?"

I tried to help by picking off the leaves that remained stuck to the windshield, tiny leaves that Dad ignored.

"None," Dad said. "Zero."

*

Storm damage in the Tulsa area was limited mostly to fallen trees and windows busted by gravel thrown by the wind. Dad didn't bother to slow the truck down for any of the damage we encountered. He rolled over the tops of tree branches and swerved around broken glass and police flares marking flooded areas to avoid. A lone Tulsa police officer waved us through an empty intersection on our way toward the highway heading for Little Elk. I kept quiet; there was a lot I had to learn, and I knew those lessons would come in forms that were not easily recognized.

I said, "Pretty bad, huh?"

He looked over at me--he was saving his comments for the only storm damage that mattered to him, the damage done to his project, the courthouse in Little Elk.

Before we left the Tulsa City limits, Dad pulled over at a twenty-four hour truck stop. He left the engine running. "You hungry?" he asked.

"Nope," I lied.

"Wait here."

I watched him through the glass front of the store. He shook the hand of the man behind the counter. They must have been talking about me because the man behind the counter tried to see out into the darkness of the parking lot. I tried to wave back, but he couldn't see me. He was very open with strangers. This characteristic of Dad's only aggravated Ben. "Why can't he be decent to us?" Ben asked. "He treats us like convicted criminals, but he can spend fifteen minutes cheering up some bum he just met on the street. That's not right. That's just not right."

In a few minutes, Dad came back to the truck, carrying two Styrofoam cups of hot coffee. The cup was warm to the touch, and I was careful to cradle it in both hands. I worked the lid off and put my lips to the edge. The steam rose up, warming my face. "Careful," Dad said. "It's hot." I forced myself to take a sip.

He backed the truck out of the parking space, steering with the same hand in which he held the cup of coffee. "We'd better head south. Johnson says the highway patrol has Route 111 blocked off, says Little Elk took a direct hit."

I nodded.

"It could be a hell of a long day," Dad said.

"I know," I said.

"We could go back right now. Wouldn't take but just a few minutes and you could be back asleep in your own bed. Mama would wake up and cook you a big breakfast. Sounds good, no?"

I was smart enough to recognize a test when I saw one. As emphatically as possible, I said, "*No, sir.*"

"All right then," he said.

I must have let loose a huge grin then, though I looked off to the side so Dad wouldn't see how excited I was. I decided right then and there that I loved the smell of coffee and the work gloves in the glove compartment and the smell of Dad's cologne. This was everything they hid from young boys. I felt lucky to be exposed to it; at the same time, I knew that one wrong move on my part would send me back to the world of women and home. The caffeine buzzed through my system, greatly enhancing everything I was feeling. It wasn't long before I had to pee, but I didn't dare mention it to Dad. I would have gone in my pants and prayed he didn't take notice before I would have told him to pull over for me.

I didn't know why I wanted to work with Dad so badly. Partly because it had been denied me for so long. Not being able to do this made me fixate on it, long for it in a way that made things like BB guns and ten-speed bikes seem trivial, like wishes wasted. Mostly, however, I just wanted to show him I could do the work. He was always complaining about the poor state of construction workers--lazy, slow, no pride in their work whatsoever, and drunk half the time. I wanted to prove my worth to him. I wanted to show him that we were cut from the same cloth.

*

We headed south. Dad drove with his one hand on the steering wheel, keeping one eye on the damage alongside the road. He let the land roll by without comment. The neutral expression was made available to me only by the dim light thrown by the truck's panel, a perspective that distorted Dad's gentle face, gave him a look of mystery. Some people communicate in words. You knew the type when you saw them. If we were visiting Mom's family in Houston, Mom's sisters were all talkers. They told stories and

gossiped about the people they knew. If the words stopped flowing, something was seriously wrong. They were happiest when more than one person was talking at a time, their voices like kite lines crossed in a stiff spring breeze. Dad was just the opposite. He communicated in silence. Not silence as in the absence of words, but silence as a real medium. Something you could tap with your knuckles.

"You okay?" Dad asked.

"Good to go," I said. I don't know what he was thinking--this was too boring for a fourteen-year-old kid, hanging out with his father like this.

Dad tuned the radio to a news story about Vietnam. I had seen his Korean War medals in his closet. He sometimes talked back to the stories on the radio, the way a fan listening to a football game might yell, "Run a screen-pass, run a screen-pass!" He never bothered to explain to me what he meant. I obviously wasn't his intended audience.

After a couple hours on the road, the sun started to peak out from under the storm clouds that had now moved on. We got a better view of the damage caused by the tornado. The tornado cleared a trail of its own through the uninhabited backlands. The oaks and blackjacks had been either uprooted or sucked clear of leaves and small branches. Patches of the Oklahoma red dirt were exposed where the funnel had stripped the grass away. "You bored?" Dad asked.

"No, sir," I said.

"Look in the glove box."

"What?"

"Go on," he said.

I popped open the compartment in front of me. Stacked neatly on top of Dad's work-gloves was a box of flashcards—a card for each and every bone in the human body.

He said, "Open it."

I pulled the cellophane free, lifted the lid, and took the first card off the top of the deck. "For pre-med students and aficionados of the human body," the card read. Each one had the name and diagram of a different bone in the human body--the scapula or the scaphoid. I sounded out the name of one of the bones.

"Think they might help?"

"Thanks," I said.

"Say a few more of them."

Despite the harsh names that seemed to string together a long series of consonants, I tried to pronounce each with a sense of authority. I tried on the role of medical graduate that Dad imagined for me. I nodded my head to punctuate the last syllable of each bone.

Dad smiled, pleased with the results. "Ten or twenty minutes a day, and shoot, by the end of the summer you'll have them down."

"I don't know, Dad."

"Takes some discipline is all, right? That's the difference between you and Ben. Ben had rather go out with his friends than crack open a book. That's why he's barely earning a decent day's wage right now, living like a damn hobo. You're better than that, David. Hell, you're smarter than that. You'll make the right choices."

Before Ben dropped out of school, he had been the smart one, and I had been the underachiever. Now we had switched roles. Dad had given Ben a lot of gifts like my stack of flash cards, gifts that would help prepare him for entrance exams. I remember

one in particular. A life-size poster of a human outline with the human muscle system illustrated, and when Ben left home, Dad pulled the poster off Ben's wall and pasted it onto mine. The man without any skin stared at me so hard that for a week I had trouble sleeping.

*

By the time we reached the outskirts of Little Elk, daylight had taken hold of the countryside. It glowed through the tops of the oaks and maples that lined the highway. The area was beautiful. A shallow valley full of hills that the road cut in and out of. I saw a sign that announced Little Elk was two miles away. The highway leading into Little Elk paralleled the Black Bear, both the creek and the road tracing the floor of the shallow valley. The path of damage caused by the storm cut in and out of the highway. With every curve and counter-curve, I felt the coffee sloshing around in my stomach, the near-nausea beginning to rise in my throat. A sign advertised the First Baptist Church of Little Elk. Several other placards bragged about the state football championships. The local funeral home advertised for new business. My stomach, sensing we were coming to an end of the ride, began to feel stable again, anchored.

"How come you never talk about Little Elk?"

"This a quiz?" Dad asked.

I gave Dad a few more seconds, and I said, "Really, Dad. Why not?"

"Christ," he said. "When you grow up some place, sometimes you spend all your time trying to get away from it, I guess. Nothing here for me after Mom died—at least not until now."

"You never even talk about it," I said.

"It's just another Okie town. Nothing special. That's it, that's all there is to say about it. You'll see for yourself."

Dad began to slow the truck down. "What?" I asked.

He nodded to the road ahead of us. A cluster of four roadside trees had pulled loose from the soil and fallen across the highway, blocking it off from any vehicles trying to get to Little Elk. Dad nearly tapped the first trunk of the tree with our bumper as he brought the truck to a stop. I thought maybe he was going to push it out of the road

He got out of the truck and looked the situation over. The trees were old and thick, rife with spring growth. They had to be at least as old as the state. Their interlocking root systems were exposed to the air, the loamy clay still clinging to them.

Dad hopped up onto the trunk of the first tree and tested it by bouncing up and down. "This sucker must pre-date statehood by fifty years," he said.

Back in the direction from which we had come, the line of destruction topped the hill; back toward Little Elk, the path veered off the road and went straight up a steep incline. A huge old house sat at the top of the hill in the middle of the damage path. There was something strange about it, something slightly different. They had been lucky. It looked like the roof had been damaged, but the rest of the house had been left standing. The funnel must have just skipped right over the top of it, taking a few shingles with it. I pointed up to the house. "I could walk up there and use the phone," I said, trying to make myself useful.

Dad looked back up the hill. "Paquette place," he said. The house was an odd mix of local and imported features. The body of the house seemed to be made of sandstone, the roof was a bright red tile from Milan, and the stained-glass windows were nicer than

the ones in our church back in Tulsa. From a distance, the place looked more like a museum than someone's home. Dad said, "I'd bet they don't even have a phone."

"I can give it a try," I said.

Dad unbuttoned the collar of his denim shirt, and pulled his tie free of his collar. "Let's see if we can roll them a little, get them off the road." From the glove box in the truck, he grabbed two sets of leather work-gloves. He tossed one set to me. "Mind your hands," he said. "Surgeons have to have full use of their fingers."

We took a place high on the trunk and found a secure hold. Dad said, "On the count of three." I waited for the count and lifted with all my might, my fourteen-year-old boy muscles not prepared for such a task. Dad's face turned red from exertion. He didn't want to give up without a good fight. I was afraid he might get mad at me for not pulling my own weight. I tugged until I thought my arms were about to separate from my shoulders.

"Okay," he finally said. He caught his breath and said, "I'll be damned if I'm going to let these damn trees beat me."

He walked around the trees and thought. "Back in the truck," he said.

He backed the truck up and then steered wide of the thick trunk, bringing the pickup to the far end of the branches, the tips of their leaves brushing against our front bumper, and he inched the truck forward. "We could just walk," I said.

"Hush for a minute, will you?"

The rain that had accompanied the storm had softened the ground, and as the tires left the cement and caught the red clay of the ditch, I could tell that the weight of the truck was too much for the soil to support. The tires quickly bogged down in the mud,

and feeling the chassis hit bottom and, fearing being stranded, Dad gunned the engine. His eyes widened, and he leaned forward into the steering wheel. Still, he managed to put one arm out to keep me from flying out of my seat. I grabbed hold of the armrest. The truck surged free of the mud and onto drier land and continued on. The truck's momentum returned us to the concrete. I looked back to see sloppy ruts in the mud along the side of the road. It was a trail, but I didn't think anyone else would be able to follow it. Though it seemed pretty near impossible, I wasn't surprised we had made it. I thought it was possible that Dad could do everything short of sprouting wings and taking flight, and even that was in question.

Dad looked over at me, the energy still in his eyes. "Don't tell Mom about that. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

*

"Jesus Christ," Dad said, when he caught his first glimpse of the damage done to the courthouse. "Goddamn," he said. I thought he might pound his fist on the steering wheel. If he saw our move to Providence slip a week or two further away, I saw only potential. I saw the perfect battlefield upon which I might prove my worth. There was a need for good, faithful workers, and I had arrived just in time.

Dad parked the truck and hurried over to his foreman, who had a pad of paper out and was noting the damage when we pulled up.

I opened the glove box and traded out the flashcards for the work gloves. I went right to work. Debris was scattered across the courthouse lawn--tarpaper from the tops of businesses across the street, whole sheets of plywood, and shattered parts from the

scaffolding. I stacked them up next to a statue of a man that had fallen off its base and landed facedown in the grass. The figure appeared to be some kind of cowboy in fancy dress. The plaque on the cement base read, "Col. Zebulon Paquette, Famed Military Scout, Wild West Show Promoter, and Founder of Little Elk, Oklahoma." Paquette, I thought. The house on the hill.

Though he had never said anything to me about the project, I had overheard him telling Mom the details of the construction. Dad was providing the labor to replace the wood structure of the courthouse with marble purchased with the help of a government project. The catch was that seventy-percent of the labor had to be Indian labor. "No Indians," Dad said, "no government money." They had been working at the project for about a month.

Dad was upset that his scaffolding that surrounded the building had collapsed. The metal connectors were twisted and thrown out of their configurations. Many of the planks had been snapped in two and scattered about the site, or had been blown off into the distance with the rest of the debris. The building itself seemed to have shed the slabs of blond marble Dad's men were applying to the walls. They had fallen from the wall and shattered on the ground.

Workers were starting to arrive in groups of two or three, many of them dark-skinned. Little Elk Indians. I watched them from a distance as I continued to pitch scraps into the pile. I never so much as stopped to catch my breath. I knew that there was a connection between my own father and these Indians. Still, Dad was lighter skinned than they were. I couldn't put my finger on it at the time, but they dressed differently. Their hair was often long, pulled back and sometimes kept under hardhats

that sat high on their heads. Their eyes were dark, tired. They joked with one another, but not with Dad or his foreman. In fact, they kept their distance from them, gathering over by the toppled trailer Dad used as an office. There were others mixed in with the Indians, a couple of white and black workers. All of them—Indian, black, or white—chewed thick wads of tobacco. A few on the crew seemed to notice me, but no one called over to me. Dad was too busy to approach, and I didn't feel comfortable going over to the trailer with the other workers.

Someone grabbed me by the ankle and tugged like he was going to pull me off. "Better be careful, Little Bro. You never know when someone might sneak up and get you." It was Ben. He smiled in a way that made me feel at home in this strange place and reached for my hand to help me down. He smelled differently, not badly, just differently. It took me a second, and then I realized that he no longer had the smell of bleach and Ivory soap that Mom used. He smelled musky, dank. "You see the twister?" he asked. "It was huge. Twice as big as the courthouse."

"Twister?" I asked.

"I thought it was going to have us for breakfast."

"We just got here," I said.

Ben turned around to locate Dad. "I thought he'd never make it to town. Should've known better, huh?" We both watched Dad. It had been almost a year since I had last seen Ben, and I was happy to see he looked well. The way Mom talked about him he was wasting away with little hope for survival. The sun had darkened him. He had lost any hint of chubbiness, the muscles in his arm rippled when he gestured toward the courthouse. Instead of eighteen, he looked twenty-something. Years now seemed to

separate the two of us. His fudge-brown hair had grown long, too. Unlike the Indian workers, he left his hair down.

"Well," Ben said. "How's life treating you? You spending a little time with us here in Little Elk?"

"I'm here to work," I said.

Ben smiled. "You are?" He put his arm over my shoulder and pulled me into him. "You better meet the guys, then."

*

Ben directed me through the thirty or so men who had now gathered by Dad's upside down trailer. I nodded at them as we weaved through the bulk of them. He stopped in front of a Little Elk man who was easily the oldest man in the crew. "This is my baby brother," he said to the old man.

"Hello," I said. I proffered my hand.

He responded with a loose handshake. "You weren't lying," the old man said to Ben. "Well, well, well. I'll be damned." He turned back to me and pumped my hand a few times. His grip was so slack that I thought my hand might fall free. His hair was long and thin, mostly gray so that it looked like he had strands of black running down it. He had anchor tattoos running up one arm and eagle tattoos running down the other. "I took your brother for one of them aliens from out of space they keep talking about in the news. You know, green blood and all, but you don't look like no alien. You said you was brothers, right?" The old man tapped a co-worker on the shoulder. "This boy look like one of them aliens to you?" The man just ignored him. He tapped the man again and repeated the question.

The other man glanced back at the three of us and said, "Mind your own business, old man."

"Fool," the old man said. "Maybe *he's* the damn alien."

Ben told me to call the old man Harry, which seemed a funny name to call an old Indian, but Ben told me it was taken from his Little Elk name.

A group of men gathered around Dad's uprooted trailer. They lined up on the edge of the roof and waited for others to do the same. "Come on," Ben said to me. We took a corner and waited on the foreman to count to three, our signal to heave the trailer over onto its side. I was wedged between Ben and Harry, our forearms touching as we braced for the heave. There was a certain energy in the air, anticipating the work to come, as if on the foreman's signal, we would all break out in song.

"Hold it," I heard Dad's voice call out. The men backed away from the trailer and waited on Dad's words. I followed their lead. Dad grabbed a hold of my arm and pulled me back from the rest of the workers. He gave Ben a little push. And barked at Ben. "You trying to get him hurt? You're supposed to look out for him. You're already messing up."

I could see in Ben's eyes he thought hard about pushing back. Ben just threw up his arms. "Same old shit," Ben said.

"Dad," I said.

"Come on," Dad said.

Ben pulled me close to him and whispered, "Don't take no lip off him. Don't do it, David. Listen to me." He looked me square in the eyes and pushed me away.

It was funny seeing them together again. Their falling out had happened over two years ago. I remembered the day Dad kicked Ben out of the house for good. Ben was late for dinner, even though Dad had scolded him earlier in the week for the same offense. What was worse, however, was the way he did it. He came running into the house full of energy. He kissed Mom on the cheek and took a seat. He still had his hair tapered up the sides and back like Dad's, which was also the way I wore mine. Military style. Dad ignored him, gritting his teeth the way Dad does. Ben, of course, couldn't leave it alone. "What's wrong, Dad? You have a bad day?" With all of Ben's over-the-top energy, Dad probably thought he had been out drinking and hanging out with the girls at the bowling alley. Dad was probably ready to pin him to the wall.

"Hey, Dad," Ben said. You could hear the edge to his voice. He knew exactly what he was doing. "They're wanting to hire a busboy down at Goldie's, and I thought maybe I could earn a little extra cash. Sounds like a good opportunity, no? What do you think?"

I knew something that Dad didn't know. Ben had already taken the job. He kept the uniform in a brown paper sack in his trunk. A more observant person would have noticed Ben's greasy skin, caught the smell of the deep fryer in Ben's hair. Dad only noticed his son was late for dinner. This was why he had been late. He looked at me and winked. He knew he was asking for it; that's the way Ben was—he couldn't stand it when Dad tried to dictate details of his life. "When somebody shoves me," Ben told me once after a school fight he'd had, "I shove back. You and everyone else can count on it." Ben wasn't able to see the irony that he had learned this from Dad. They were too much alike.

Dad told him no way about the job. The next day Ben didn't show up for dinner. Dad knew exactly what had happened—Ben had taken the job at Goldie's without his permission. The chair remained unoccupied, and the absence of Ben drew our attention. A few minutes into the meal, Dad pushed himself away from the table and tossed his linen napkin on the table. "Joe," Mom said, a caution. "I'll be right back." When the front door opened and then slammed shut, Mom corralled me and ran me out to her own car. "Come on," she said. "We've got to stop him."

Goldie's was just a few blocks away. We drove straight there without seeing the taillights to Dad's truck. His truck was illegally parked along side the front of the restaurant. I caught a glimpse of Dad as the door closed behind him. "There he is," I said. "Hurry." She pulled up behind Dad's truck, and we both hopped out of the car.

We found Dad holding Ben against the meat cooler in the back of the kitchen. Ben's co-workers were gathered around, too intimidated to say or do anything. Dad was red in the face. Ben was scared, too, but his face wasn't admitting to any fear. He had the look of numbness, as if he had expected this all along and had given up.

"Dad," I screamed.

Mom was crying fierce tears. In some place in her, she believed Dad might kill Ben. I could see it in her eyes. She tugged at Dad's arms and shoulders, but Dad deflected her efforts. He yelled to Ben, "Don't you ever defy me again. Ever." Dad gave him a little shove and let him go. Dad walked back to Mom, nodded at her as if to say, "Okay, I'm ready now."

Mom let me drive her car back to the house, and then Mom and Dad sat out in the truck in our driveway for the next three hours, working through what had just happened.

I wasn't sure what to do. It was already past my bedtime, but I was too keyed up to go to sleep. So I turned the TV on and watched a Dean Martin celebrity roast. Every once in a while, I would slip out the side door and listen to Mom scream at Dad. From what I got, she did all the talking, and Dad listened. I waited for Ben to come home that night, but of course he never did.

He came back to get his stuff the next afternoon before Dad came home from work. Mom was gone to get a gallon of milk. He came in with a Hefty bag and started loading up his personal belongings. If I had the time to think about it, I would have cried. My big brother was leaving home. I wasn't sure if I'd ever see him again. When the black bag was loaded down with clothes and miscellaneous belongings, Ben stuck out his hand to me. I shook it. He said, "You're looking at your own future here, Little Brother. This is the only way out."

I could tell it was hard for him. Mom didn't understand that. He loved Mom, and in his own way, he loved Dad, too. He was comfortable here. I could tell that he was worried, that he might be weak and come back. His face had gone slack, full of regret. Sad. In the coming weeks, Mom saw only Ben's threatened pride. She thought Ben would refuse to come back because he didn't want to give so much power to Dad. This was only a small part of the overall story. I saw the way Ben looked around the house for the last time, and I knew otherwise. He was more afraid of his own weaknesses than he was anything else in his life. Maybe Dad had taught him this, too.

Ben shook my hand one more time, and told me to go stay in my room for the next ten minutes. He said to stay there even if I heard strange noises. I didn't ask any

questions. I did as he asked. I sat in my room, thinking about what Ben had said, how this was my future too. I wondered about that.

It wasn't long before I heard the loud noises that Ben had warned me about. It was much worse because I knew I couldn't look, not yet. I listened the best I could, trying to figure out what Ben was up to. They sounded like bombs going off in the garage. Loud explosions that made the walls of the house vibrate. Twenty minutes later, I heard the glass pack on his engine sputter to life. I looked at Ben out of the window. From the look on his face, he seemed normal, unchanged by what he had done. In the garage, I found out what he had done: dumped the half-dozen hardware cabinets in which Dad kept all his nails, screws, and hinges. He knocked them over and then he pulled out the fifty or so drawers on each of the six cabinets and emptied them out everywhere across the garage. You couldn't take a step without stepping on a cement nail or a roofing nail. "You idiot," I said aloud. I got down on my hands and knees and started picking them up. Dad wouldn't be home for five more hours.

I stood next to Dad while the men flipped the trailer first on its side and then back onto its foundation. You could hear the desk and cabinets and chairs of Dad's office shift with each heave of the building. Dad just shook his head. He must have been calculating the delays caused by this storm. After they got it upright, Dad stepped up into the doorway, where he stood a few feet above his crew. "We've got a lot of work to do. It'll take us a day or two to recover, but I want us back on schedule in 72 hours. If you've got a problem with this, tell me, and I'll cut you a paycheck right now and you can look for work elsewhere." Dad looked the men over, calculating any possible dissension. As far

as I saw, there was none. Dad turned to the foremen and told him to get them going. "Limit breaks to ten minutes," he told the foreman.

"Sir," the man said.

"*Ten* minutes," Dad said. "The buzzards will soon be descending, and we want to show them some kind of progress."

I tried to work my way back to Ben, but Dad signaled me over his way. "You're with me."

I looked over at Ben and his crew. They would be doing the backbreaking work that needed to get done. "David," Dad said. "Pay attention."

"Yes, sir."

"Get over here," he said.

"Sorry."

"Christ," Dad said. "You picked a hell of a day to start."

*

Later that morning, a man in a white government car pulled into the parking lot. He was large, a man not entirely comfortable in a tight collar and a suit jacket. He ambled across the courtyard, careful to step over the obstacles strewn about by the tornado. He kept a close eye on the men as they reassembled the scaffolding. I was just coming back from taking a box full of broken glass to the dumpster in back of the courthouse. I watched him, regretting I had left the trailer door wide open. It didn't take much to realize he was one of the buzzards Dad had been referring to.

He pounded on the open door. "Joe," the man said to my father. He stepped inside and set his briefcase on the chair. "Looks to me like you got yourself a mess on your hands."

"Nothing we can't handle with some emergency funds."

"That's what I was just telling Mr. Wiggins back in O-K-C. There's nothing that Joe Elkhart can't handle. Mark my words. He'll have this under control in no time." If there hadn't been a filing cabinet and a desk with broken legs in his way, this man would have paced around the room as he spoke. You could tell he didn't like standing still. As it was, he put his energy into fidgeting with his hands. He never looked Dad once in the eye.

"Mr. Wiggins said to give you something to help with the recovery effort." The man flicked the locks on his briefcase and pulled out an oversized, blue check. "Buy whatever you need. If this isn't enough, give us a call, and we'll get you more." He tossed it down to the chair.

"Hello, son," he said to me.

I nodded.

I worked my way around the man, squeezed between the man and the filing cabinet and started picking up the files that had lodged between the wall and the cabinet. Now that the electricity was back on, I could see in the nooks and crannies. It would take another full day to get the trailer presentable. Outside the window, I could see Ben's crew hauling away the marble that had shattered across the cement sidewalk. The building had shed the marble in the storm like an excess layer of skin.

"If I was a real asshole, Joe, I'd line your workers up and check their BIA cards. I guarantee if I did that there's no way in hell we're gonna find seventy-percent Indians. No way, Joe"

"You want the building finished on time or do you want Indians," Dad said.

"Joe," he said. "You got no choice. No Indians, no money."

"I'll make some more calls," Dad said.

"Try Chief Harjo in Okmulgee. Those Creeks got a lot of skilled workers down there. Or, hell, give the Ponca a call." He snapped shut the locks on his briefcase.

"You know I can't do that. The Little Elks would rather walk away before working beside one of them."

"Whatever," he said. "I'll be back in two days. Work it out before then, okay?"

Dad nodded.

The man reached down, grabbed a hunk of files, and handed them over to me. "Here you go, son."

"Thank you."

"You on the payroll?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir."

"No," Dad said. "This is my son, David. He's just visiting for a few days."

"*Your* son? Well, hell, put him on the payroll, and you got yourself one more Indian. It don't matter if he's related."

Dad stood up. I saw something in his face that I had never seen before, a kind of muted anger. Dad pushed it back down with a grin. "He's not Indian," Dad said.

The man put his hand under my chin, lifted my face to the light. He looked me over feature-by-feature, the way a scientist examines bacteria cells. Eyes, hair, nose. I didn't know what to say to him. I wasn't sure if I needed to respond or not.

Dad gently pulled me back from the man, placed me next to his side. He rested his arm around my shoulder. "This one is different," he said. "One of these days, he's going to be a doctor. You watch and see."

"A doctor?" the man asked, surprised. "What kind of medicine you reckon you'll practice, son?"

I knew of only two kinds of medicine at the time--*animal* doctors and *people* doctors. "Human," I said.

Dad laughed along with the man. "He's not sure, but we've been thinking about urology or oncology."

"I want to be a surgeon," I added.

The man grunted approval. "A lot of money in that."

Outside the trailer, I could hear Ben calling over to the men on his crew, joking with them. Someone said something back to him, and I strained to hear what he said.

*

When I came through the door later that night, Mom wrapped her arms around me and gave me one of her hugs. I resisted the urge to push her away. I was tired and cranky.

Mom said, "Well? How'd it go?" She held a cheese grater in her hand. "I thought we'd celebrate your first day with cheese ravioli. What do you think?" She had skipped our usual French and Chinese nights for Italian, my favorite.

I just shook my head. I pulled the tail of my shirt out and let it fall over my jeans. I had done very little in the way of significant work. Still, my feet and legs ached from standing up for most of the day. If I worked for the rest of the summer, I would no longer have any arches in my feet to speak of.

"That's fine," I said.

I walked straight back to my bedroom. I caught a scent of Lemon Polish before I even stepped foot in the room. Ben and I had shared a joke in the last few years—Mom gave us money for a movie and sent us off for the afternoon so that she could sterilize our messy boy rooms. The closest equivalent I could think of is hospital rooms, the way the cleaning crew comes in after a patient has checked out to completely sterilize the room. New sheets, freshly buffed floors, etc. The room had been tidied up while I'd been gone, the bed made and my next day's set of work clothes displayed on the chest of drawers. I curled up on my bed, and let my mind go slack for the first time today, let it all fall away.

In the living room, I heard Mom ask Dad what was wrong. "What happened?"

"Tornado," Dad said.

"No," she said. "What's wrong with David?" Dad must not have responded because Mom said, "Well something must be the matter."

The door to the liquor cabinet banged shut. The ice tray snapped loose a row of cubes. They ricocheted around Dad's crystal tumbler. "Beats me," Dad said. "I thought we had a good day."

In a few seconds, I was caught off guard by five fingertips touching my shoulder. She rubbed my back until I turned over and looked at her. She was so patient. I wasn't crying, but I felt like it. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I might stay here with you tomorrow. I could help around the house, mow the lawn, run some errands."

"You could do that," she said. "I could always use the help."

"Good," I said.

"What do you want?"

"Show him what I can do. Show him I am as hard a worker as anyone else on his crew."

"Have you told him that?" she asked. "You've got to tell him or he won't know it."

She looked over at the door, smiled at me. "Just a second," she whispered. She stepped quietly over to the door and pulled the door shut without letting the lock mechanism click in place. She said, "Tell me about your brother. How's Ben doing?"

CHAPTER TWO

Dad woke me the next morning, and I jumped out of bed as quickly as I could. I dreaded the smell of his cologne mixed with the fresh cup of coffee. I must have groaned out my discontent. Dad said, "Just stay here then."

"No," I said. I did my best to button the denim shirt one button at a time.

I slept off-and-on all the way to Little Elk, though I was awake enough to catch the occasional radio broadcast on the 101st Airborne in Vietnam. The top of my head pushed against Dad's thigh, my feet left to hang off the front of the seat. I thought he might wake me to study the flashcards, but he never did. He listened intently to the radio broadcasts, turning up the radio when the station ran crackly interviews with the American field commanders. The Army was attempting to take a hill of some kind and had been pinned down over several days by enemy fire. Westmoreland had yet to make a public announcement, though one had been scheduled. Every update I heard ended with a casualty count, the numbers of American dead juxtaposed with those of the enemy. If the count was unfavorable, I felt the truck slowly speed up; if it was favorable, Dad nodded in agreement. The world was indeed just. A favorable count allowed me to continue sleeping undisturbed.

*

In the courthouse parking lot, we pulled between two old junk heaps, a classic Chevy on Dad's side and an Impala on mine, their radios blaring. From the Chevy, I recognized a Neil Sedaka song that I sometimes caught Mom humming. The Impala next to me was tuned to the same AM station to which our radio was tuned. The announcer's

voice seemed to echo back and forth between our vehicles. I looked down to see Ben's friend, Harry, reclined back in the driver's seat, his anchor tattoos exposed to my view. Ben's hand on a coffee was also visible. I imagined that Ben ignored Dad's arrival as much as possible. Harry saw me and winked. He blew me a kiss. He laughed and laughed, as if he had never seen anything funnier in his life.

Other cars pulled into the lot and jockeyed for good space. I figured out from the day before that the spaces closest to the exit were the most prized. It allowed those drivers to be the first off at the end of the workday.

As Dad and I were getting out of the pickup, I said, "I was wanting to ask you something." I recognized several faces of the men gathering by Dad's trailer. I resisted calling out to them. "Dad," I said, "I want to work with the others."

He stopped what he was doing. He seemed surprised by my request. "You're not skilled."

"Neither are they, Dad. Just give me the chance, and I'll show you. If it doesn't work out, I'll go back to cleaning your office."

"I don't know."

"Dad," I said.

He nodded. "Let me talk to Ben. Maybe he could use an extra hand on his crew."

The fact that Dad assigned me to Ben's crew said a lot about how little Dad trusted the rest of the workers. To risk putting me with Ben who might poison me against him must have seemed like a huge risk to Dad. I looked at the rag-tag group of men, and wondered why Dad felt the way he did. They seemed so harmless, so benign. Except on break, they reminded me of sleepwalkers in those old black and white movies. They

seemed to wander from task to task without concern for the obvious. At break, they were different. They came alive with energy and character. Maybe it was this version of the men that Dad feared the most. Still, I could tell that Dad had had a talk with Ben, about what he could and could not say. I could tell that Ben was doing his best to live up to their agreement. I wondered what was in it for Ben to do so.

After Dad spoke to the group about the day's tasks, Dad took Ben off to the side. Dad spoke under his breath, while the wind carried Ben's voice.

Dad walked over to me. "We'll talk about this tonight. This is not necessarily permanent, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Ben whistled me over. He walked with me over to the far side of the building where his crew was reassembling the scaffolding. He had his arm around me. "Dad told me to go easy on you," Ben said, "but I told him no way. I told him we'd work you so hard that you'd never want to come back."

"You didn't," I said.

Ben smiled.

*

The truth was that Ben sheltered me from the really hard stuff. His five-man crew was organized around a big Indian named Orange, who welded the scaffolding bent and damaged by the storm into a more workable form. Harry helped Orange, while three other guys assembled the scaffolding along the north wall. While I could do most of the tasks related to the courthouse renovation, I had never worked with scaffolding, so that made me the outside man. My job was to watch for government workers. If the crew got

caught working on damaged scaffolding materials, the site would be shut down and put under investigation. My job was to stand at the corner of the building and watch the parking lot for white governmental sedans. I was too far away to talk to Ben or to Orange or Harry. "You okay?" Ben called out every once in a while. I always responded with a little wave.

At break time, Orange sent me for a Mountain Dew and a box of chocolate raisins. He said welding always gave him a sweet tooth. Harry rubbed Orange's sizeable belly and said, "Orange works real regular like." The other guys gave me their orders, and I ended up walking down to the end of the block with a wad of fives and tens in one hand and a long list of snacks in the other-- Mountain Dews and Dr. Peppers, Fruit Pies and Hostess Cupcakes, a pack of Redman chewing tobacco and a copy of *Playboy* magazine. "Make sure it's the one with Twiggy on the cover," Harry said. "Don't let Johnson sell you last month's. I already got last months. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Whatever you do, don't take no peeks inside. You hear? You'll find out about that kind of stuff soon enough."

Inside the service station, five men in three-piece suits stood over the counter looking at a map. "Hi," one of the men said to me. He had on reflective sunglasses and had large white teeth. I nodded back at him. "We're looking for Washington Street. You wouldn't happen to know where that is, would you?"

"Sorry," I said.

When the storeowner came back inside from pumping someone's gas, the men asked him the same question. They explained that they were from Mo-Co Oil in Oklahoma City and we're looking for the Little Elk tribal building.

"Oil men," the storeowner said. "You drilling around here?"

The men looked at one another. One of them said, "We'd like to be. That all depends on how things work out."

*

I came back from the service station with two bags of groceries. Dad stopped me. "What are you doing?" I tried to explain it to him, but Dad shook his head the whole time. "They're taking advantage of you, son. Tell them to get their own damn fruit pies."

"I'm okay," I told Dad.

"You tell Ben to tell everyone to leave you the hell alone."

"I'm okay, Dad. Really."

I worked my hand back under the bag and walked off for the north side of the courthouse, feeling all things were possible.

We sat on the grass of the courthouse, our backs against the wooden sides. Orange let me have half his fruit pie, and the Indian with tattoos on his fingers tossed me a Dr. Pepper out of his six-pack. I turned down the chaw of tobacco, and accepted the offer of last month's *Playboy* from Harry, though he wanted it back eventually for his collection. He talked about his back issues of *Playboy* in the same way kids talked about their collection of baseball cards.

Harry flipped through the pages of this month's *Playboy*. "Look at them titties, will ya?" He flashed me the centerfold, her hair shining in a halo of light. "Your girlfriend have titties like that?"

I looked away and blushed. The fact that I blushed was more embarrassing than seeing a girl naked. I tried to change the topic. To Harry, I said, "I noticed your tattoos."

"Ah, my babies," he cooed.

Orange rolled his eyes.

"You were in the Navy?" I asked

"Navy *and* Army," Ben said for him.

"I tried to up with the Air Force, but they wouldn't take me 'cause they said I had flatfeet. I vowed revenge. I signed up for all the other services. Shit," Harry said, "Air Force just don't like Indians, is all." His dentures sat on the leg of his pants while he ate his chocolate cupcakes. Because of his teeth and his mouth stuffed full of chocolate cupcakes, his words came out distorted, deformed. Even though I couldn't translate all the words, I still nodded along with whatever Harry was saying.

Tommy shook his head. "Racist bastards."

"Harry was telling me that he'd sign up for Vietnam if he wasn't so old. Ain't that right, Harry?"

"Still got your grandfather's warrior blood racing through your veins, don't you Harry?"

"I can still handle my own," Harry said.

"That's the way, Harry," Tommy said. "That's what I'm talking about now."

A large, antique-looking car drove around the courthouse once, twice, and then pulled up close to the main entrance, the one with the Latin words over the arch. The car looked to be in disrepair, the kind of car that had at one time been very nice but now was held together with bailing wire and duct tape. The driver made a new parking space for himself, half on the cement of the parking lot and half on the grass. The trunk was open and bobbed up and down when the driver braked the car to a stop. It looked to be loosely tied with twine. "Oh, man," Orange said. "There they are."

Ben said, "Right on time, too."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"You don't want to know, Little Brother. Just look the other way, and you'll be fine."

"Yeah," Orange said. "She's a real ball-breaker, that one." He pointed over to the facedown statue of Col. Paquette. "Don't look her in the eye, or she'll turn you into stone just like she done with that poor bastard over there."

They all laughed.

The driver cut the engine, sat there for a minute as if he wasn't sure he wanted to get out, and then his door flew open. One leg came out, found a secure hold on the grass, and then the other followed. With both feet on the ground, the man hoisted himself to a standing position. He was an older man—the oldest I'd ever seen behind the wheel.

"That's Old Man Paquette," Ben said to me.

"Paquette?" I asked. "Same as the statue?"

"The statue's son," Ben said. "Paquette's father—he went by Colonel Paquette--had one of those Wild West Shows. Show people in New York and Boston what real

Indians and the buffalo looked like. Apparently, he made a lot of money, and built that big place on the hill. They say that when Col. Paquette came into town he used to toss out gold coins to the Little Elk kids, standing around staring at him. Just toss them out like he was feeding pigeons, and those kids jumped all over them, beating each other up over them."

Old Man Paquette kept his balance by running his hand across the body of the car, poised to catch himself if needed, and slowly worked his way to the trunk. His hair was white and thinning, as was his short beard. He wore faded khaki slacks with a sharp crease in each pant, and a shirt that was cut so loose that it seemed to balloon out on him, making him appear thinner than he already was. His skin appeared pale and raw.

Orange said, "He looks all feebled, right? Well, watch this."

Paquette slipped the twine loose from the trunk and then jammed the trunk open wide with a broom handle. He got a secure grip on the chair, and then jerked a large wooden chair out of the trunk and planted it on the ground. The frame was wooden with cane backing. The wheels seemed much too large for the size of the chair.

"That chair's gotta weigh forty or fifty pounds," Orange said, shaking his head.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A chair," Harry said.

"I bet that old man can arm-wrestle like a son-of-a-bitch," Orange said.

"I know it's a chair," I said. "What *kind* of chair?"

"Watch," Ben said. "You'll see."

Old Man Paquette carefully wheeled the chair around the car over to the passenger side of the car. The passenger's face was in the shade, blocked from where I sat on the

ground. I was curious. The oddness of the Old Man piqued my interest. His passenger was just the icing on top of the cake.

Old Man Paquette got into the car and attended to his passenger for what seemed like five minutes, and then, when I was about to give up, he pulled a girl from his car. He plucked her from the seat the way he had done the chair. Over his shoulder, her face came into view, and I thought she was absolutely the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. With her sunglasses, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a scarf around her neck, she looked like a Hollywood starlet, a dark-haired Grace Kelley maybe. Like her hair, her skin was dark, and—though I couldn't tell at the time because of her glasses--her eyes must have been a deep brown. She smiled at me.

Paquette brought her down carefully, letting her settle in comfortably before letting her go entirely. He patted her on the back of the head, and before anyone could call out to him, he wheeled her in the direction of the courthouse doors. The hem of her skirt dropped at her thighs, and her blouse was sleeveless, showing the nubs she had for arms. The girl didn't have any arms or legs. I didn't know what to say. I looked from Harry to Orange to Ben. None of them said anything. I wasn't sure how I felt. More than anything, I guess, I felt sorry for her--a pretty girl without limbs. Jesus, if she just had all the body parts, she could have been modeling in New York City. She must have known it, too. I wondered what it felt like to have known you might have been someone famous, someone that meant something in this world.

As Paquette wheeled her toward the entrance, her face rolled our way, though we couldn't tell for sure where she was looking. Her eyes remained hidden behind the dark glasses. Twenty feet separated us. Paquette himself ignored us. Her lips glowed with a

bright red lipstick. She carefully ran her tongue over her upper lip just once, and said, "Hi, Boys."

Orange was the only one who spoke. "Hi, Baby. How you doing, girl?"

"You boys working hard?"

"Sure are, Baby," Orange said. "That storm put us back a day or two."

"I bet it did."

Paquette stopped the chair in front of the courthouse entrance, a large wooden door, and spun Baby's chair around 180 degrees so that he might back her into the courthouse. I saw what he was doing. Mom had always taught me to be polite and give people a hand whenever possible. I hopped up to go help, not realizing this might be dangerous. In fact, I thought I might have heard Ben call out to me. When I glanced back his direction, he had a frown on his face, but I didn't let that stop me. If he had had a second longer, he would have grabbed me, held me back from dashing off to help. I wish he had.

I grabbed the door away from Paquette. He looked me in the eyes for the first time, as if to say, "Why?"

"Stop!" Baby said. I thought maybe she was talking to me, telling me to stop. The muscles in her face roiled. She said, "Don't you ever treat me that way again."

He backed her large wheels over the threshold of the courthouse entrance. She looked me in the face until Paquette, without slowing, spun the chair in the other direction and continued on down the long and dimly-lid hallway. A stream of air carried years of dust and mildew out the door. I stood there, inhaling it, wondering what had just happened.

In a few minutes, Paquette came out of the courthouse without Baby. He walked across the courtyard, crossed the street that separated the courthouse lawn from the row of businesses across the street, and disappeared into a hardware store on the corner that sold lumber as well as tools. I looked at Ben, but he didn't know anything. He just shrugged his shoulders.

*

After the break was over, Ben left for a crew-boss meeting with Dad in the trailer. I let Orange finish the weld on one of the scaffolding joints. He saw me watching him. He said, "What? Someone coming?" I could tell Orange had a touch of paranoia to him. Maybe his mother was always telling him his cowlick was standing up.

"Don't worry," I said.

From my watch corner, I could see not only the street where government sedans would pull up, but I also had a perfect view of Dad's trailer. I could see Ben inside along with the three other crew bosses, talking to Dad.

I said, "What happened to that girl?"

Orange slid the welding helmet off and set it down on the bench. He was sweating from the warmth of the day and the heat put off by the torch. He ran his sleeve across his forehead. "Baby?" he asked. He chuckled to himself. "Shit," he said. "I thought everyone knew that. She's kind a famous around these parts, I guess." I had already taken a strong liking to Orange. He seemed faithful, loyal. If I had a problem and Ben or Dad weren't available, I'd ask Orange for help.

Orange glanced over to the trailer. "I could use some water," he said. We walked over to the water cooler together. I kept my questions to myself. At the cooler, he filled

a cup and dumped it over his head. He shook his head like a St. Bernard, the water and sweat flying off the tips of his hair. Harry got one more cup of water. He drank this cup down in one shot. "Want some?" he asked.

I turned him down.

"Well," Orange said. "I went to school with Baby. We were in the same class together. What about Baby were you wanting to know?"

According to Orange, Baby's mother was Japanese, and before she—her name was Yoshie--had come to America, she had been living in Hiroshima when the Americans dropped the bomb. She had not been killed, but she had suffered severe burns to both her face and her hands. The flash had melted away her hair, left her face scarred with keloid scars. Yoshie received a lot of press because she had learned to speak some English at the hospital she worked at during the war. She became a kind of spokesperson for the group of women. Col. Paquette caught wind of their situation and offered to pay for one woman's trip to American and subsequent surgery. This ended up being Yoshie.

Orange was less clear when it came to how Yoshie and Old Man Paquette became involved. They got married in the east in a big ceremony, and when the couple came back to Little Elk to live, they moved back into the Paquette mansion to live with Col. Paquette. Yoshie didn't do so well back in Little Elk. There was a lot of speculation about what the problem was—she had a falling out with Col. Paquette, or she simply didn't like her life in America, or later when she got pregnant that she wanted to take Baby home to Japan. Then Baby was born, a baby without limbs. Out of disgrace, it was said, Yoshie took a knife to her own belly. That left Old Man Paquette to care for Baby.

He had always taken care of her, nurtured her in the way Yoshie would have done if she hadn't killed herself. He had made promises, and he was fulfilling them.

Orange just shook his head. He couldn't make sense of Baby's origins; they were just too much for him. There wasn't a satisfactory answer for him. She was just Baby, and the thought of Baby seemed to bring a cloud overhead. "She's supposed to die, you know?"

I said that I didn't. "Die?"

"Since the day she was born," Orange said, "the doctors have been saying that she wouldn't live but another year or, if she was lucky, two years at most. They said all that radiation fucked her system up, and one of these days, it'll just give out on her. Paquette built her a marble mausoleum on the family property and sat back and waited for her to die. Hell, the mausoleum's still there, but we're the same age, and she's proving all them doctors wrong. She'll probably outlive this here courthouse."

*

On my way back from getting Orange another box of chocolate-covered raisins at the service station, I saw Paquette crossing back over to the courthouse side of the street. He didn't even bother to look at the truck fast approaching. He kept his head down and moved forward. In Tulsa, he would have been run over. He crossed the courthouse lawn. I figured he was going back to get Baby, but to my surprise, he went over to Dad's trailer and knocked hard enough for me to hear the pounding from a distance. He seemed like a grumpy old man to me, so I figured he was going to complain about the something—the noise we were making or the fact that we were taking up all the parking spaces in the courthouse lawn. I was sure Dad would offer to take care of it, and the old man would be

off to complain about something else. I was glad that Dad had to deal with him and not me. I was especially glad not to have to see Baby again. I figured she was even more dangerous than he.

By the time I made it back to Orange with his candy, Dad had released his crew bosses. The other three men were older than Ben. They were white, and had the look of long-time construction workers. Somehow, Ben looked like he was just playing around, as if he would soon be moving on to something else. He didn't seem to take any of this too seriously.

Ben walked across the courthouse lawn, shaking his head. When he got close enough for me to hear, Ben said, "I think Dad's selling you off. Old Man Paquette's wanting someone to fix his damn roof, and you're the only one Dad can spare."

"Ben," I pleaded.

"I'll talk to him," Ben said.

A few minutes later, Dad stuck his head out the door of his trailer and whistled for me. I looked to Ben. "Go ahead," Ben said. "I'll go with you."

Dad met us half way. "Go on back," Dad told Ben. "This doesn't have anything to do with you."

"He wants to stay here," Ben said. I was embarrassed that Ben was speaking for me. I should have told him in my own words.

"I've got something better for him," Dad said.

"Let him decide that," Ben said.

"Get back to your crew."

"No."

"Goddamnit, Ben. I'll fire you just as fast as the next man, if I need to. Don't test my limits."

"What would Mom say to that?"

Dad's face changed. Ben had pushed some button that Ben knew about it. Dad grabbed Ben by the shirt, and pushed him back a few feet. "Get on back, Ben. Use your head for once."

I stood back, wanting to help Ben, but Dad was too strong.

*

Old Man Paquette waited for us in the trailer. He sat in the chair beside Dad's desk with his hands over his knees. It was hard to know if he had heard any of the exchange between Dad and Ben or not. If he did, he didn't let on to it.

As Dad explained their agreement to me, Old Man Paquette looked straight ahead. His jaw was on the verge of being clinched. His rigid posture suggested a kind of rage boiling just beneath the surface. One wrong word to him, and he would have burst like a popped balloon. Dad seemed overjoyed, as if he had just gotten his IRS return. Their deal was simple enough, and from Dad's perspective a strong one. If I fixed the roof of the Paquette place, Old Man Paquette would arrange for me to have Latin lessons with a professor from the university. I would stay with them for the week or two required. That way I could work early and stay late. They would feed me, care for me.

I realized then that I wouldn't be able to tell Dad that I wanted to stay. There are other ways to prove yourself. I didn't have much experience working on roofs, but I knew the basics. I would prove Dad right—I could handle the job because I was Joe Elkhart's son. That's all there was to it.

Dad said, "Shake Mr. Paquette's hand, son. Tell him you're grateful for this opportunity."

I stuck my hand out, and Old Man Paquette took it.

Paquette looked over at Dad. "Not much of a grip there. You sure he can handle the job, Joe?"

"He's *my* son, Mr. Paquette. Consider yourself lucky."

I wanted to make Paquette realize he was wrong, so I gripped harder, harder. Paquette only smiled. His eyes told me that I would have to squeeze much harder than I was if I wanted to impress him. I pulled my hand back and waited.

*

The rest of the day I felt like a condemned man awaiting my execution. It all seemed pointless. I kept a close eye on my wristwatch. Harry said, "You taking medicine?"

"No," I said, and I didn't even feel the need to explain. I looked to Ben, and I could tell he understood.

*

Riding out of town in Dad's pickup, we passed the Paquette place on the hill. I looked back and took it in—the house that somehow separated itself from the woods that surround it. That bright red roof that must have seemed like a target for that tornado. I couldn't imagine what it would be like living with Baby or Old Man Paquette. They both seemed so different to what I was used to. It was as if they spoke a foreign language, a language that I couldn't begin to speak much less translate. I felt a sense of loneliness

wash over me. The tears welled up inside me. I dreaded the next day. I already missed my father, though he sat next to me, tapping his hand to the beat of the nightly newscast.

Dad must have sensed my sudden shift in mood. He said, "You'll be fine, David. You'll get in there, do your job, and you'll be back again with us. Plus, those Latin lessons! Those will put you ahead of schedule."

I nodded. "They seem strange."

"Paquette and his daughter?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Look over there," he said. "See that bird up there in the sky over there?"

"A chicken hawk," I said.

"Yes, a chicken hawk," he said. "As long as that old bird flaps his wings, he'll stay afloat. The higher he keeps himself the more likely he is to see his prey."

I admired the chicken hawk's smooth flight. His course seemed to match the contour of the land below him, rising with the hillsides, lowering with the crevices of the valley. I waited for him to flap his wings.

"Paquette was foolish," Dad said. "He married someone he had no business marrying. He was a Paquette and he thought that gave him the right to expect things from the world. That's not the way it works. Paquette, hell, he just stopped flapping his wings. His problem is that he doesn't know there will be hell to pay. Mark my words. It'll come soon enough for him, and he'll be sorry then. With someone like that, you just got to let them crash. " He looked at me to see if I understood.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and tried to think it over.

Dad said, "We've got an hour drive ahead of us. Why don't you see if those flashcards are still in the glove box."

*

Mom helped me pack my bags that night. She pulled shirts from my drawer and held them up for me to agree or disagree. In the other room, we could hear Dad talking on the phone to some tribal leader. The tone of his voice suggested frustrated anger, the kind of state that was very rare for Dad. He was doing most of the talking.

If Mom was angry with Dad for making the deal, she didn't show it, though she had been unusually quiet through dinner and into the evening. "David," she said. "You don't have to do this."

"I know," I said. The poster of a man with his muscular system exposed looked out at me. He seemed to be watching me. "I want to."

She quizzed me with her expression.

"I *do*--really."

She placed the shirt in the old banged-up Samsonite suitcase that had been hers when she went off to college. The silk lining smelled of perfume and the powder Mom still patted on her face after putting on her makeup. "When you come back next weekend," Mom said, "we'll do something together. Go see a movie or have lunch at the mall. How does that sound?"

"Great, Mom."

She said, "Terrific. That will be a lot of fun."

When the packing was finished and she had given me her standard lecture on showering regularly and keeping a fresh pair of underclothes on my body, she paused in

the doorway and watched me as I loaded my *Latin Lessons for Medical Students* and the copy of Gray's *Anatomy* that Dad bought me at a garage sale last year. Her features were so delicate, soft blue eyes, small nose and thin lips. She reminded me of one of those china dolls that my grandmother in Houston collected in a glass case. I wondered if these features had attracted my father.

"You're so big," Mom said, "just like your brother. I remember when you were little, and you used to always sit in my lap. It got so aggravating because I couldn't do anything without you hanging onto me. I tried to hand you off to your father, and you would just cry and cry, and reach out for me with your tiny hands and arms. I can still hear the sound of your wail in my ear. Used to drive us absolutely crazy."

Some part of me realized that the reason she didn't want me to go was because I would be *leaving* her behind. She would be left alone, a big empty house to take care of. This thought made my insides well up with a kind of anchorless grief. What was I doing to her? Ben had abandoned her, and now, in some small way, I too was leaving.

"I'll be back, Mom," I said. "I promise."

She smiled and said, "I know, I know."

CHAPTER THREE

Dad let his pickup coast past the Paquette driveway and come to a stop on the shoulder of the road. From where we stopped, I could see the Paquette mansion up the gravel drive on the hilltop. The two-story house looked large and slightly intimidating--more like an old museum than a home where real people slept, used the bathroom, and talked about their day over roast beef or spaghetti.

He surprised me with a pat on the head. "This is a great opportunity," he said. He smiled at me for so long that I grew embarrassed. My backpack—heavy with books twice the size of our family bible—was sitting in my lap, nearly cutting off the circulation to my legs. I couldn't find the right word to break his spell.

I always had the feeling of missing Dad—even when I was with him. It was as if I could never know him completely. Maybe because he was only partially with me when were together. It's a strange feeling when you're sitting right beside a person and yet you're missing them, wishing they were here. I can't really describe it, but that's what I felt with Dad. I could reach out and pat him on the shoulder, but that wasn't enough. I guess I was already thinking about the day he would be gone for good, and I'd no longer have the opportunity to pat him on the back. I don't know. Sometimes he seemed like one of those TV ghosts that you could stick your hand right through them and not touch anything but air.

Dad tussled my hair and said, "Open your backpack."

"Dad," I moaned, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. I was worried that he had somehow found out about Mom giving me a ten-dollar bill the night before. She put it in

an envelope with a short note and handed it over to me. "In case you need a little something," she said. "Don't tell your dad." Dad had scolded her on more than one occasion for slipping me cash. I began pulling out what I had packed the night before from the main compartment—a pad of paper, a stack of 3x5 cards, color pencils for drawing diagrams, and my set of bone flashcards.

Dad said, "Keep going."

I searched his voice for clues--did Mom tell him about the money? Did he overhear her talking? At the bottom of the pack were my copies of *Latin Lessons for Students of Medicine* and Gray's *Anatomy*. One at a time, I held them up high for him to see. He seemed satisfied then. "Pack it back up," he said. "Those books are your bibles for the next few weeks. Memorize every line, chapter, and verse. You hear me?"

Dad got out of the truck, secured Mom's old suitcase from the pickup bed, and worked his way around to my side. I didn't want to get out, but I knew I had to. I had stayed up half the night trying to think of good reasons why I should go back to work at the courthouse today. I had a litany of wishes: I wished Paquette had never been born; I wished I had come to work for Dad a week later; I wished the tornado had veered around Little Elk instead of landing smack-dab on the Paquettes' roof. That was just bad luck. In the end, all my wishes were all useless, wasted energy.

"Button," Dad said, fingering his own loose collar.

I buttoned my collar.

"Your mama has worked hard to protect you from the hard facts of this world. You may not think so, but it's true," Dad said. He pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. "I always argued that you needed to be exposed to that kind of thing, so you'd know if

someone was trying to take advantage of you. Well, your mama won that disagreement. What I'm trying to say is this: lies and deceptions can take many different forms, but a lie dressed up as the truth is still just a damn old lie."

Dad looked back at the Paquette house. The morning sun took a prominent position in the sky, shining directly down on top of the Paquette mansion. Dad said, "Inside, it may get hard to tell the two apart." He held the twenty-dollar bill up and tore it carefully in two. I got one of the halves and he pocketed the other one. "Every lie you tell me about, I'll give you twenty dollars. This half is a down payment on the first one. When you bring it to me, you'll get the other half. Understand?"

Before he put his truck in first gear, I already missed him. I felt him slipping away from me. A sense of emptiness blindsided me. I let my backpack slide down to the cement, and I thought, "Hell. What now?"

*

The house was a kind of island away from the mainland of Little Elk. As I was making my way up the long, winding drive, with my backpack around my shoulder and the suitcase in hand, I had the feeling that I was being watched. Two large windows from the second-story overlooked the drive, though I didn't see anyone standing in either. The house reminded me of a fort in the way it was perched up on a hill, overlooking the town of Little Elk below. I imagined Old Man Paquette watching me, testing me in his own way, maybe seeing if Dad had been lying about me as a worker. This seemed to be the type of man Paquette was--always testing people. When they passed one test, he invented another, something much more difficult than the first. I began to feel a little of the same energy I felt on the first day Dad had taken me to the courthouse, the sense that

I had something to prove. I had a challenge to meet. This thought made me walk with my shoulders held back and my head held high, being careful not to let on that the combination of the suitcase and the incline had winded me.

I sat my gear down on the front porch and took a second to catch my breath and focus in on the task at hand. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but I thought I could smell fried eggs being cooked, biscuits baking, and sausage gravy on the stove. The cup of coffee I had had on the way out of Tulsa hardly filled me up. When I was ready, I pounded on the front door with my fist. "Mr. Paquette," I called out for emphasis. I stepped back from the door and waited. The porch was covered with a long overhang, which created a good deal of shade. A breeze blew past me, cooling the sweat I had worked up. My arms ached a bit from the weight of the suitcase. I gave them another second to answer, and I began to think they weren't home, though the biscuits and gravy suggested otherwise. I checked my watch to make sure I had the right time. Surely, Paquette wasn't going to pick me up at the courthouse.

Across the drive, the beat-up Paquette car sat parked in what looked like an old barn that had seen better days. A third building in even worse shape was next to the barn. It looked like a bunkhouse of one kind or another, a long building that might have housed field hands or maybe visitors passing through. Time had taken a toll on the structure. The roof had collapsed, and even from where I stood, I could see the light streaming in through the holes in the building that used to be windows and doorways. Beyond the two buildings was a large, open field full of blue stem grass. The far border of the property appeared to be marked by a thick wood line.

After my third knock, someone yelled out, "Irene! Door!" I thought I recognized Baby's voice. A high-pitched bark echoed Baby's words.

I stepped up to the door, anticipating someone opening the door. I wasn't exactly sure who Irene was, but I figured she must be some kind of hired help. As far as I knew, it was just Paquette and Baby living alone in the mansion. I waited, yet the door didn't budge. I began to feel self-conscious and foolish standing there, as if I were the object of some kind of strange joke. In a half-baked plan to upset the joke, I followed the edge of the house around to the other side and tried to see inside the house. The glass in the windows was thick, like the bottom of Coca-Cola bottles. I could make out a light or two inside, some distorted shapes of furniture and such. As a last resort, I tried tapping on a side window. Still, no one came to my rescue. "Baby," I called out. "Mr. Paquette! Irene!" I made my way around to the front porch and took a seat on the suitcase. I imagined them just on the other side of the door, huddled together, laughing at me. I thought of walking the mile to the courthouse, but how would I have explained it to Dad. He would have seen it as a violation.

The door suddenly opened. Paquette stuck his head out. "Goddamn, boy," he said. His white hair was mussed and he had to squint into the shaded light from the morning sun in order to make eye contact with me. I must have woken him up. "What the hell is wrong with you? Get in here."

I grabbed my two bags and stepped inside. A small white fluff ball of a dog escaped through the open door, and I turned to ask Paquette if I should go retrieve her back inside. It might as well have been nighttime inside the home. "It's pretty obvious that your Mama and Daddy never bothered to teach you proper manners."

"Sir," I said. His comments dwarfed my plans to prove him wrong. I wanted to shrink up in a tiny ball and roll off into a corner, where no one would think to look for me. I stood there planted in the middle of the floor and watched him buzz around the large room. He seemed to be making up his mind as he walked out his frustration.

The dog scratched at the door, so I stepped over and let her back inside. She alone seemed happy, stopped at my feet and smelled my shoes.

Paquette walked over to the base of the stairs and then abruptly executed an about face. He stormed right past me, nearly tripping over the dog. "Out of the way, Hiro," he said. I wasn't sure if he was talking to the dog or me. Paquette finally stopped at an interior door that led to another room in the house. He paused in front of the door. I realized he was listening. He was wearing a khaki shirt and pants. The elbows and knees had nearly been worn threadbare. "Irene!" he called out.

I realized then that the fried eggs, the biscuits and sausage gravy I had been imagining were real. They were on the other side of the door along with their cook, Irene.

I thought Paquette might open the door, but he didn't. He didn't seem too sure what he might find on the other side. "You're reading your damn books again, aren't you? Didn't you hear the damn door!"

The woman behind the door yelled back with equal force: "Does that *smell* like a book to you?"

"I pay you to answer the door," Paquette said back.

"It's unlocked," she said.

Paquette looked at me. "It's unlocked?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Good God," Paquette said. "I've gone and hired me a little *retarded* boy to fix my roof. A damn retard." He headed for the stairs, and I followed behind him cautiously, not quite sure what he expected of me. "Wait here," he said. "Sit right here on this step until I come back."

The dog sat down on the first step and panted. I took a seat next to the dog. I wondered what I had gotten myself into, and told myself that I needed a good way to get out of it. "Here, girl. Here." She smelled my hand and scooted up next to me. She had dark eyes. Her white hair on her head flipped over at its edges and bounced a little when she took steps. "You're not crazy, are you? No," I said. She licked my face. Her fur was full of cockleburs, clumps of hair clustered around the small seeds. In other places on her body, she had bald spots that revealed her pink skin. Someone had cut some of those burs out.

"David," I heard a tiny voice call out. It sounded like Baby's voice, but something about its tone was different than the other day. I stood up and glanced across the room. The room was long, divided in sections by the old fashioned furniture that occupied it. Large paintings of the same man and woman lined the walnut paneling. It smelled of dust and old age. The voice called out again. It was calm, almost reserved. I walked to the far end of the room, where there were three divans arranged in a U-shape around an old Victrola. On the wall over the fireplace mantle was a plain black umbrella mounted on a strip of faded red velvet. Someone was sitting at one of the divans, facing the opposite direction.

"Hello?" I called out. The dog followed along at my feet. Its bangs bouncing with every step. When I stopped, she stopped and looked up at me.

"Over here," the voice called out.

I could see the top of Baby's head, hair the same color as my brother Ben's. I said, "Are you okay, Ma'am?"

"I'm not doing so well," she called out. "I am in need of some assistance, if you don't mind."

Orange had told me about how Baby was supposed to die, and I wondered if she might be having some sort of related spell. I wondered if she was in some kind of pain. I worked my way over to the area, not wanting to rush into a circumstance I wasn't prepared to deal with. "Ma'am?" I said. Her body was positioned in a way that made the couch keep her torso from slipping out. A throw-blanket covered her lower portions.

She didn't look long for the world. Her head looked too heavy to hold up. Her hair fell down into her eyes. She had to cut her eyes in order to see me. Her dark skin made her appear either sick or under the influence of some kind of a drug. She licked her lips, as if her throat were too dry to swallow. As far as I could tell, I was sure she was going to die right then and there. I looked back to the staircase, wondering how long the old man was going to be, and whether or not I should chase after him before it was too late. I wondered about Irene in the kitchen.

"*My magazine*," she said, sounding a bit like a wounded soldier in a black-and-white war film. She nodded toward the ground.

The *Cosmopolitan* sat half-open on the floor, its pages spilling out underneath it. I reached down and grabbed it off the floor, the exact place where her feet would have

been. I caught a trace of her perfume, the same scent from the day before. Her dress was different than the one she had worn the day before but it was the same kind of fancy pattern that the movie stars wore. These things made me feel hollow, empty inside, though I couldn't pinpoint the exact cause of the pity the perfume and the dress caused me. I felt sorry for her.

I held the magazine out to her, and immediately I realized my mistake--she had no hands with which to grab it from me. I felt the blood rushing into my face. Large blotches the size of Texas erupted across my cheeks. "I'm sorry," I said. I tossed the magazine down beside her. "I'm really sorry."

"You're awfully cute," she said, which only made me blush more. A cute fool. Her dark eyes glistened beneath her bangs. "I'm having a little trouble with this magazine and it's terribly frustrating," she said. "Would you mind terribly turning the pages for me? That would really help me out--that is, if you've got the time."

Once again, I looked back to the staircase. The dog panted at my feet, unconcerned with the goings on. If Old Man Paquette was coming back, I wasn't sure when he might reappear. The laws of physics seemed to stretch and bend in this household. I could be sure of nothing.

"Sure," I said.

"Sit down."

" I took a seat next to her. The springs in the divan had obviously lost their tension. It was like sitting on a sack of potatoes. I tried to adjust.

She said, "Just hold the pages up so that I can see them, and when I'm ready to go on, I'll let you know. Any questions?"

"No, Ma'am." I opened the magazine to the first page.

She said, "Call me 'Baby.'"

"Yes, Baby."

"I like the way you say my name. Say it again."

"Baby," I said.

"Again."

"Baby." She was toying with me, but I wasn't sure what to do. She wasn't causing any harm. If she was going to die, I could at least play along.

She took a long look at the page and hummed out her indecision. "I don't know," she said. "I like that dress, but I'm not sure it would look good on me." She looked it over some more. "What do you think? You think I would look good in that dress? Now be honest with me."

I felt a lump building in my throat. My eyes jumped around, looking for a way to escape the embarrassment of the moment.

I can honestly say that never before and never again would I be so grateful to hear the annoying clump, clump, clump of Paquette's boots descending the steps. "Baby!" Paquette belted out half way down the stairs. His booming voice was meant for open fields and the tops of mountains. "Stop bothering our little retarded boy, Baby. He's here to fix the roof--not some play toy for your own amusement."

I watched her transform in front of my face. Any hint of Baby's decline dissolved away. She held her head up, kept a smile on her face. Her eyes glistened. "Never, ever underestimate me, David Elkhart."

I set the magazine in her lap. I said, "Ha, ha."

"You're a funny one, David Elkhart," she said. She gave me a wink, which brought a smile to my face. She was toying with me, and I kind of enjoyed it. "I'm looking forward to your extended stay."

"I'll only be here two weeks."

"You haven't seen the roof yet."

Paquette called for me from upstairs.

"I'll be right there," I called back.

Baby said, "Careful with the old man. He's trying to kill himself, you know, and my theory is that he's hoping to take someone with him."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I can take care of myself."

"We'll see about that," Baby said. She popped the magazine up against her chest and, with the stub from her arm, started furiously turning page after page after page. It was like magic, only it wasn't. "Thanks for all your help," she said.

*

Paquette was squirming through the access hole in the ceiling. His feet had lost contact with the ladder, and I rushed up the stepladder to grab hold of his legs in a way that helped guide him upward.

"Let go," he said. He got himself secured, and he looked back down the hole. "I had it," he said.

"Sorry," I said.

He glared at me. His eyes told me that he didn't really want me there. Someone had told him to hire me on. If it were up to him, he would be the one fixing the roof without me.

As soon as I stuck my head into the attic, I began to sneeze. I didn't have my handkerchief with me, and I didn't want to go back downstairs for fear of losing Paquette's tour. I pulled my shirttail from my pants and used the tip to wipe my nose clean. I sneezed again and called out an apology to Paquette. The large tear in the roof must have been around the corner of the attic. I could see the light flowing in there, but I couldn't see the opening itself. I would have liked to say that--except for the light from around the corner--Paquette disappeared in the perfectly dark attic, but the roof was so full of pinholes that I could easily make out where he was. There must have been hundreds of them dotting the roof. He was moving toward the center of the room, where a single light bulb hung down from a cord.

He snapped the pull-cord, and the light flashed on. "There," he said. The attic echoed the dimensions of the room downstairs--long and narrow. The difference was that the attic was crammed full of old boxes and materials. "Look at this," he said.

"Yes, sir."

I worked my way in the narrow isle between stacks of things. Most of the stacks were covered with a green tarp-like material the military used for their large tents. I held my nose to keep from sneezing, though I felt the pressure building in my nasal passages. Paquette pulled back one of the tarps to reveal a large stack of red tiles, the same as the ones on the roof. He picked one up and handed it to me. It was heavy. "Both hands," he said. "They're from Milan. That's in Italy. When my father bought them and had them shipped over, they cost more than that Victrola downstairs--each one." There must have been a hundred extra tiles stacked there. It was a wonder that the ceiling had supported the weight for so long. "And here," Paquette said. A second tarp was removed, revealing

2x4s and 1x5s and other spare lumber pieces. "Use this for the roof." He covered the tiles and the spare boards with the tarps. The dust flew with the flap of the tarp. Particles of dust rained down.

I looked around the attic. "There's a lot of stuff stored up here." I looked at Paquette, but he seemed to ignore me. "How long has it been up here?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," he said.

"No, sir."

He took me around the corner where the hole was. It wasn't as large as I thought it might be, two-feet by two-feet. About the size of a large TV set. He watched my face as I examined the frame. I peeled away part of the roof—the layer of plywood and tarpaper. It was rotten, and I had to assume most of the roof was the same. The tree coming through the roof just speeded up the process some. Either way, as rotten as the roof was, it was coming down. Sooner or later.

"Well?" he asked. "Can you fix it?"

"Let me see the outside."

*

The insides of the roof had given me a pretty good sense of what to expect from the outside, but I wanted to figure out my strategy with Paquette. If I told him I couldn't do it, he would send me packing. I would be back at the courthouse with Dad, but he would be disappointed in me. To be honest, I wasn't sure I could fix the hole anyway. Despite Dad's faith in my capabilities as a carpenter, I was not a roofer, nor had I had any experience with roofing. I had done a lot of small jobs with Dad, half-day tasks.

Framing a window, patching drywall, mixing and pouring cement for a short stretch of a sidewalk. Those kinds of things.

The roof was accessible only through a window in the attic. Paquette was going to take me outside, but I told him not to. I said I could do it alone. He shot me the same look he had at the courthouse, when I held the door open for Baby. I didn't want him stepping on a rotten roof. At least, I knew where I could and could not step.

Paquette said, "It's my goddamn house. Mind your own business."

"Yes, sir," I said.

The top of the roof provided an amazing view of the Little Elk valley. I could make out the Black Bear Creek through the treetops, its waters still muddied from the storm the other night. The creek ran alongside the highway that brought visitors to town. I followed the highway into town with my eye, and there—plopped down in the center of Little Elk—was the top of the courthouse. A sudden longing came over me. I looked for Ben and his crew, but I couldn't spot them. They were probably hiding down around the corner, out of Dad's vision.

"Over here," Paquette said. He was careful to gain a foothold before putting his weight down, but still the old man moved too swiftly. He moved straight across the roof. I was worried about him falling the two stories. He must have weighed no more than a hundred and twenty or thirty pounds. A sudden breeze could have knocked him off his feet and sent him plunging off the side of the roof. A man of that age, the fall would have surely crushed every bone in his body. To Paquette's credit, he stopped a good ten feet from the hole.

"Tell me," he said. "I need to know because if you can't, we'll find someone who can."

I took his words personally. *If I need to find someone who is smarter and stronger than you, I will. If I need to find someone whose dad is not a liar when it comes to his own son's abilities, I will.* I crouched down close to the roof. The red clay tile absorbed the morning son and was already warm to the touch. It left light streaks of orange across my fingertips. When I put my hand to my face, I thought I could smell the salt from the tile's long ocean trip. I said, "I can do it."

"Good," he said. "I'll call Professor Stevens and arrange your first lesson. Work first, lesson second."

Paquette took five steps across the roof and just disappeared. I hadn't even been looking at him when it happened. My mind had started working out the details of the job—the order, the tools, the know-how. They were all running through my head. He didn't scream or even yell. I heard the roof give way, and down he went. The sound of the roof giving out was followed immediately by a *crack* sound, like a baseball hitting the catcher's mitt, which must have been Paquette hitting the attic floor.

I immediately stretched out against the roof, evening my weight as much as possible. "Sir?" I called out. "Mr. Paquette?" Dust and mold mushroomed out of the second hole in the roof, and I began to sneeze. They started and didn't stop. My face must have looked a mess.

Slowly I worked my way toward the window, avoiding the new hole and attempting to stay on supported areas of the roof. I listened for sounds coming from Paquette, a

groan or mumbled words, but no sounds rose from the attic floor, so I assumed the worst. I couldn't help what Baby would say. She would start with, "I told you so."

When I finally got to Paquette, he was still as the night. He had landed on one of the tarped stacks flat on his back. His face and beard and clothing were covered with dust. His eyes were closed. In a strange way, he looked at peace with himself. "Mr. Paquette?" I said. I shook him by his sleeve. "Are you okay? Mr. Paquette?"

"Stop your damn yapping," he said. "Get Irene."

I hurried across the attic floor and rushed down the stepladder. The dog was waiting at the bottom for me there, doing the little back-and-forth dance that dogs do when they're being impatient. "Irene!" I called out from the top of the stairs and rushed down to the bottom.

Baby said, "What happened? Is he dead?"

"It's Mr. Paquette," I said.

"Is he dead?" Baby repeated.

"No," I yelled. "I need Irene."

"She's in the kitchen," Baby said.

I pushed open the door that Paquette had carefully avoided, not quite sure what I might find. There in the kitchen, sitting at a table full of eggs and bacon, biscuits and gravy, fried mush and cheese grits, was the woman everyone referred to as Irene. She was dark-skinned, a Little Elk Indian. She had long, dark hair and a little scar over her upper lip. She must have been in her early fifties. She had a book in her hand, a picture of a space capsule and some Trojan warriors standing around it.

She put the book down in her lap. "What?" she said, nonplussed.

"He's fallen," I said.

*

Irene laughed when she saw him. "Can you move on your own?" she asked Paquette.

"No."

She waited for him to sit up anyway. "What happened?"

Paquette grunted. "The boy," he said. "I think he pushed me. I couldn't hold myself up, and I just fell through the roof. It was the boy, though. He meant to do me in. Tell her, Elkhart"

"The boy, huh?"

"He pushed me."

"Mr. Paquette," I said, beginning to plead with him. I was deathly afraid Irene would believe him, and I would get in a lot of trouble. Why would she believe me over the man who signs her paycheck?

"I seriously doubt that, Old Man," Irene said. "I can tell by looking at him he's got more sense in him than ten of you put together."

Paquette looked at me and grunted. He kept to himself then.

We got him out of the attic and down the stepladder without any major problems. Paquette was light, his body compliant, though every time we accidentally touched at his arm he moaned in pain. Every time he let loose a moan, the dog whimpered sympathetically. "Let's take him into his bedroom."

"Is he okay?" Baby called up.

"Usual," Irene said.

"I want to see him!"

"In a minute, Baby," she said. "In a minute."

Paquette's room reminded me of a hospital room. Everything non-essential had been removed. All that was left was a bed and a bedside table with a lamp. A pair of reading glasses sat on an old bible. The room was painted in a strange shade of green, loamy and soft. A large window overlooked the road down below where Dad had dropped me off.

We got him on the bed. The dog jumped up at the foot of the bed and watched. Irene started to unbutton Paquette's shirt. His eyes were open, but he didn't look at either of us. She worked his pants off his waist. Paquette had grown sullen. He seemed to be pouting. Paquette wasn't wearing any underwear, and the insides of his hips were white as the belly of a fish.

"I'll wait outside," I said.

"You've never seen a man's body before?" Irene said. "I need your help getting him in his nightclothes."

"Yes, ma'am." I wanted to look away, but Irene would have surely chided me for it. The truth was that I had never seen a grown man's body, though I didn't dare tell Irene that. Paquette's pubic hair had gone white, and his penis was shriveled up into a small ball. He had large testicles, each of them the size of pomegranates.

Irene told me to get a pair of his pajamas from the closet.

Paquette suddenly broke his silence. "Put me in my uniform," Paquette said. I was so unprepared for his voice that it had startled me.

"Go on," Irene told me.

"Irene," he whined. He sounded so much like a whining child that I suddenly felt the absurdity of the situation. I felt a little sorry for the old man.

"When the doctor calls on you, he'll want to see you in your pajamas—not in your tired old war costumes."

"Uniforms," Paquette corrected, "and I don't need a doctor. I am perfectly fine."

"You are?" she said. "Shake my hand."

Paquette was sly. He tried shaking her hand with his left hand. She laughed. "You broke your arm, you old fool."

It was a walk-in closet with an identical pull-cord as the one in the attic. The closet was full of khaki shirts and pants hanging on the rod. I assumed that these were the uniforms Paquette referred to. There must have been fifteen of them. As far as I could tell, they were all identical. All of them well-worn so much that the material had taken on the quality of expensive velvet, the kind of material you wanted to put up to your cheek.

I said, "I see the uniforms, but I don't see any pajamas."

"Second drawer," she said.

I came back out with the pajamas. Irene laced each leg-hole with one of Paquette's feet. She scooted them up his legs as far as they would go, and then we hoisted his midsection up, and Irene pulled the pajamas up to his waist. She then worked the sleeve over his bad arm. She looked over at me watching intently, not sure how I should lend a hand, but knowing she would expect me to.

Baby screamed up to us, demanding she find out about Paquette. Irene looked over at me. "Will you please go tell Baby her fool father is fine. He just hurt his arm a little."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I started to leave, which was a relief for me. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Irene called to me before I got down the staircase, and I walked reluctantly back into the room. Irene said, "You don't know who I am, do you?"

I looked at her. She was Indian, and I didn't know any Indian women. Outside of the guys on Ben's crew, I didn't know any male Indians. Other than Dad, of course, but he didn't count. I said, "No, ma'am. I don't."

"Did your father ever talk about his sister?"

I looked at her confused. I didn't know what she meant. "He doesn't have a sister."

Irene laughed. "Even when we were growing up, your father always was a real asshole."

*

After the doctor had gone and Paquette was made as comfortable as he could be, Irene took me downstairs and fed me the biggest breakfast I had ever had. I ate everything she put in front of me--eggs-over-easy, buttermilk biscuits sopped with sausage gravy. I tried the fried mush and liked it, too. A glass of whole milk to wash it all down with. I was eating as if I had never eaten before.

Irene looked up from her science fiction book. "If you eat all this, I got some pork chops already thawed for tonight," Irene said.

"I'm almost full," I said.

"*Almost*? Your mama forget to feed you?"

I shrugged. "Usually I eat cereal for breakfast."

She set the book down on the table and cleared my dishes from the table. I looked at the book's cover. "This any good?"

"Good enough," she said. "You like to read?"

I nodded yes. "I'm not a fan of science fiction. I mostly just read mostly realistic books."

She took the book out of my hand. "This *is* realistic," she said. I wondered how a book about time travel could be realistic.

As she scrubbed the dishes, I watched her--and she could tell--for signs that she was related to my father. She was darker skinned than Dad. Her language was different. Dad would call it "ignorant language," by which he meant uneducated. She had the look of having lived a long and hard life. I had serious doubts about her claim. I guessed that this might be one of the lies that Dad had told me about.

*

Instead of watching TV like I would do at my house—as far as I could tell, there was no TV—I listened to Harry Caray's broadcast of the St. Louis Cardinals' game. This made me feel a little better about being in such a strange place with such strange people. Bob Gibson was going for his 7th win of the season. I had become a fan of Curt Flood the previous year, when he had helped the Cardinals win the pennant. I had always wanted to see him play, and Dad had promised me that he would take me one of these days.

Baby didn't say a word to me for the first four innings. She put her head down and listened. In all honesty, I preferred it that way. If she did say something to me it would have been to humiliate me some more.

At the end fourth, Gibson struck out Willie Stargle with a fastball that struck inside, brushing him off the plate. "I wonder what that's like," Baby said.

I didn't say anything, hoping she was just talking to herself. I hoped she hadn't bothered to notice I was in the room.

"Don't you?" she asked. She made eye contact with me.

I looked away. "What?" I asked.

"To be able to make people fear you like that," Baby said. "Bob Gibson is something else, don't you think?" I knew about Bob Gibson. He was mean. He sneered at the opposing batters. One TV broadcast I had seen, Gibson had shoved Tim McCarver, his own catcher, back to home plate. Dad had always said he went against the spirit of the game.

I had no idea what she was talking about. "It's just baseball," I said.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she said.

We listened to the commercials—mostly for Anheuser Busch—and then Harry Caray's voice came back on. "Go get 'em, Harry." The Cardinals' power hitters were up to bat, and I leaned up on my elbows to better hear the broadcast. The first batter got a single up the middle and took second base. The next batter blooped it to short right, allowing the runner on second to get to third. Houston's manager came out to change pitchers.

"What did you mean about people fearing you?"

"Power," she said. "What's it like to be able to throw a fastball one-hundred miles an hour at a man who calls you nigger or boy or monkey? What's it like to have the power to make them fear you, to worry over your motivations?"

I said, "I don't know."

"You wouldn't," she said. "It's *just* baseball to you."

I slumped down in my seat and tried to pretend that Baby wasn't in the room, that I was in my own house, listening to the broadcast by myself. If she spoke again, I was determined not to respond.

*

That night Irene dropped a stack of linens on the only comfortable couch in the living room. "Can you make this up?" She laughed to herself and started turning the couch into a bed before I could answer her. "You're a lot like your daddy," she said. I waited for her to go on, but she didn't. After she finished, she plopped the pillow down on the couch. "Night," she said.

"Night," I said back.

*

Paquette was in his room upstairs, recovering from the fall. I could hear him snoring. Baby had been moody all day, and she had taken her bath and gone to bed early. Now, with Irene retired for the night, I was the only one left awake. The room was chilled. I could feel it on my nose and the tips of my ears. I was surrounded by strange objects, such as umbrellas hanging on the walls. A bronze mortar shell as an ashtray. The covers were nice and warm, but it was so dark that I could have been in outer space. No one here seemed to be remotely interested in me. They were all so strange.

I pulled the blanket over my head and cried. I thought of Mom and how she would sometimes wake me up before she would go to bed. She'd sit down on the edge of my bed and kiss me on the forehead. I could smell her perfume. She would say, "I'm sorry,

sweetie. I just wanted to tell you how much I love you." Sometimes it felt like a hallucination. She would run her hand through my hair and speak to me in soft tones about how much I meant to her. I would drift in and out of sleep. When she left, she kissed me again, told me she loved me again, and shut my door closed behind her

Irene parked my suitcase and backpack next to the couch, which was okay with me. I'd rather not unpack them, if I had the choice. I found the switch to the lamp on the end table, and worked the *Gray's Anatomy* from my pack. The last thing I had been memorizing was the muscles of the abdomen, page 630.

CHAPTER FOUR

I heard the stairs squeaking under someone's footsteps. I sat up. I could see Paquette coming down the stairs, his white beard seemed to glow in the moonlight pouring in the windows. The white dog was also visible as she bounced down the steps at Paquette's side. I figured he must have been hungry after not eating all day. He was probably just going to the kitchen for a snack. I didn't know if he remembered where I was sleeping. I didn't want him to come upon me without him knowing I was there, so I called out to him in a whisper. "Mr. Paquette."

He didn't answer. I stood up. "Mr. Paquette?" He walked within a few feet of me, I could have reached out and touched him, but he passed by without acknowledging me in any way. Paquette's eye sockets were filled with dark shadows. His arm was wrapped in splint and supported with a cloth. I thought maybe he was mad at me for my role in the fall, and he was merely ignoring me. Maybe I should have told Irene I was at fault.

At the front of the house, he opened the door and walked out, leaving the door wide open. The dog walked out with him. I thought that was strange. He seemed like the kind of man who insisted on doors being closed. I put on my tennis shoes and followed after him. They were close enough that I had time to catch up with them before they entered the wood line at the edge of the Paquette property. Paquette and the dog disappeared in the cluster of blackjack and scrub oak. The moonlight had trouble penetrating the heavy vegetation, so I closed the gap between us to twenty feet. I wasn't sure Paquette wanted me following him, so I kept as quiet as possible. They followed the path cut by the storm. The tornado had mowed down a long path about fifty feet wide. Most everything

in the path had been uprooted or stripped of branches and leaves. I walked just out of the path for fear of being seen. I was also careful to avoid patches of ground with deadwood that I might crunch and attract Paquette's attention. I kept an eye on Paquette's white head and the occasional flash of white that the dog's fur offered me. In the distance, I could hear the sound of the thunder rolling across the plains, the gentle rumbles. I realized then that clouds kept the stars from shining through. I felt the dark sky press down on me.

The chase soon got the blood flowing through my body, and I began to feel better about my situation, though I wondered what the old man was up to. He moved with surefootedness. He knew where he was going, and I wanted to know, too. Something told me to stay with him. My mind freely speculated about possible answers. I had heard about the stills in the area, illegal liquor being made, but Paquette didn't really seem like the type. Maybe he was meeting someone, a secret rendezvous, but that too sounded unlike Paquette. Besides, why would he leave the door open? And, why would he take his dog with him?

Up ahead, I took in the smell of dead fish and muck. I could hear the slow movement of its water. I closed in on Paquette so that I wouldn't lose him here. I stepped on a stick, and the dog looked back at me, watched me for a second. I thought, *Please don't give me away. Please.* I couldn't imagine what Paquette would do to me if he found out I had been following him. He seemed so dark and bitter that he was capable of most anything. I didn't want to find out what that *anything* might be. She went bouncing back to Paquette, though she took suspicious glances back in my direction now and then. At the bank of the creek, Paquette stopped, and I was sure that this was the end

of his secret journey. The creek was about thirty feet across, and from the look of muddy water fairly deep, though it was hard to judge by sight alone.

He did the last thing I would have expect him to do—he stepped into the creek, slipped a little, but caught himself. The dog barked at him from the dry bank and paced up and down. He took another step, and I thought for sure that the old man was trying to drown himself, and I was beginning to sacrifice my position behind a plump evergreen tree for a clear route to the creek so that I might pull him from the water if I needed to. His third step caused him to lose his footing entirely, and he fell headlong into the creek water. The dog turned and ran back to me for help, but by then Paquette was standing himself back up. I bent back down behind my evergreen and watched. His pajamas had been turned brown from the creek water. If I spent more time watching monster movies, I would have thought him to be some kind of serpent rising from the watery depths.

A thick cottonwood growing near the creek had been felled by the tornado, and Paquette used it as a stool. The dog worked her way on top. She licked at her master's watery skin. "Stop it," Paquette yelled at her. He started to laugh, and then his laughter turned to tears. He sobbed in a way that I had never seen grown men cry before. I had seen men strike out in anger, but I had never seen anyone collapse into a fit of sobbing before. His cries were sung out loud, the insides given form on the outside. He cried unabashedly, as if he knew he were in the middle of nowhere and could just let it all come to the surface.

The dog barked at him.

Paquette said, "Shut up," and swatted her off the log. She landed on her haunches, and immediately jumped back on the log next to Paquette. "Here," he said, his voice

having grown soft. *Here*, he cooed. He could have been a young girl loving on her toy doll. He pulled her in with his good arm and stroked her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to think. I was embarrassed to be seeing this, and I began to wish I had never followed him. I didn't want to be a witness to this. This was a terrible mistake, though I was awed by it as well. I grew transfixed, not quite sure what it meant but knowing all the while that it meant a great deal.

Large drops of rain started to fall all around us. They made a noise when they hit the ground, like a piece of bamboo being struck. *Thuh, thuh.* Those that hit the creek sounded more severe. A single crash of thunder boomed over our heads.

Paquette got up from the log before I could escape back to a better hiding place. He walked straight for me. I tensed, prepared myself to run if it came to that. Even if I bolted for the deep woods, Paquette would still know it was me. I crouched lower, felt the wet tips of the blue grass stem absorb into the seat of my pajamas. He took careful steps, yet the sneer had returned to his face. In a matter of seconds, he had somehow transformed himself back into the spiteful man who hated everything. He walked right past the evergreen I was hiding behind and went on. I thought it best to just stay frozen in my crouch rather than attempt to move around the evergreen in order to keep myself camouflaged. By this point, my legs were throbbing, and I needed to stretch them out before they cramped. I closed my eyes and counted his steps. They were moving away from me, further and further. Then they stopped.

I heard Paquette call out for Hiro. I opened my eyes, and there was Hiro in front of me, looking at me. Waiting for me, I might say. She maybe thought I would take the walk with them. "Go on, Hiro," I said. "Go on, girl."

Paquette called out again. I heard his footsteps coming my way. I whispered, "Please, girl. Just go on!"

Paquette's form appeared at a distance. I could make out his beard and eyes. I was sure he could see me; I froze in place as if he couldn't.

He was quiet for a few seconds, then said, "Come on, Hiro. Let's go home." A whistle caught her attention. She turned and headed back for Paquette. I fell back on the ground and, finally, let the air in my lungs go.

I gave Paquette and the dog what seemed like a lifetime to get back to the house. I wasn't positive I could make it back to the house without a guide, though I knew better than to try to tail him. I didn't move from my spot. The rain began to fall in earnest, drenching me. Without having Paquette to share the woods with, I suddenly felt the darkness invade. The crickets began to chirp, and I realized the slow-moving creek had a sound of its own. I could smell its clay, the ooze that I could almost feel between my toes. I took the short walk over to the edge of the creek and looked at Paquette's footprints--three of them were sunk deep into the mud, one half in the mud and half in the water, and the others were completely under water. The other set came up the bank about twenty-feet downstream. They looked identical to the other set, no way to tell the difference between coming and going. Despite Paquette's steps, the creek looked calm, steadily flowing downstream. I stepped back from the bank and thought about what

Paquette had done. If someone came upon the footprints, he might believe that the creek had swallowed someone whole or, perhaps, spit someone out.

*

I waited just outside the door to the house, listening inside for sounds of Paquette. Instead, my stomach grumbled over and over again. I hoped Irene made another one of her breakfasts in the morning. I didn't have a wristwatch, so I didn't know how long I had before the breakfast. The sun didn't seem close to appearing on the horizon, so I figured I had another hour or two. The night had taken a toll on me, and I just wanted to let my eyelids close, let my brain go numb for a while. I waited another ten minutes and entered the house.

I stepped inside and listened again for any sounds of Paquette. I was as wet as Paquette after he fell into the creek. The water dropped off my clothes and fell to the hardwood floors. It was cool enough in the house that I felt chilled by the air. I looked upstairs and saw that his door had been shut. I needed some time to think through what I had seen, and I wasn't sure how to go about this process. I knew it would take me a while to get back to sleep. My stomach growled again, so I went into the kitchen to see if Irene had any leftovers in the refrigerator. I hoped for a chicken leg or a fried pork chop. In the kitchen, leaning back against the counter, was Paquette. He wasn't surprised when I walked in. He had repaired the sling for his arm. In the hand of the injured arm, he held a glass of crackers crushed in milk. He scooped it out with a long teaspoon.

"You get lost?" he asked. He looked exhausted. If he stood there much longer, I thought he might fall over, collapse. "What you saw back there in the woods," he said. "I don't want Baby to know anything about it. You understand? If you tell her, she

won't let it alone. She'll keep after me until it kills us both. I need your word on this." He swiveled his body so that he could set the glass down on the counter without moving his arm.

"I promise," I said.

He glared at me in a way that told me I was no longer playing a boy's game. Things had gotten serious. "Night," he said. He nodded, as if it sealed the deal.

*

"Look at you," I said. Irene didn't tell me where she was going, and I had to confess that I was curious. I had never seen her take a step outside of the Paquette house. I wondered if she would just disintegrate if she did so. What would get her out of the house? She wore a blue denim skirt and a bright blouse for a top. Her hair was pulled back in ponytail. Her dress shoes were dusty from the time they had spent in the closet. I thought it was funny how she had dressed up but still didn't wear makeup.

She stood beside me for a second before she said anything. The perfume from the soap could still be smelled. "I could use a ride," she said. She looked a little uneasy.

In the car, Irene told me each turn to take seconds before I was expected to make a turn the steering wheel, and I happily obliged. We arrived at the high school gymnasium. The parking lot was almost full of cars. An old Little Elk man inched across the concrete parking lot with a walker. His wife clutched a large purse at her side. They both looked dressed for the Sunday service.

I sat there with my hands on the steering wheel, waiting for Irene to tell me what to do—if I should wait on her or when I might come back to get her.

"You have a minute?" Irene asked. She didn't wait for my answer. "Come on," she said.

The Indian man and his wife had stopped to rest for a minute at the entrance. We caught up with them. There was shade there, and a breeze blowing between the school buildings to keep them cool. They greeted Irene warmly, and the woman took Irene's hand in her own and patted it. They talked about the old days for a minute. I figured Irene would just ignore the fact that I was standing there with her the way she usually ignored me back at the Paquette mansion, and I figured that wouldn't be all bad. There were advantages to being invisible. "This is Agnes' grandson," Irene finally said. She never bothered saying my name.

The old Indian woman looked me over. I thought she might say something about my white skin. "He's too skinny," she said. "You don't feed him good."

"He eats like a bird," Irene said, partly in her own defense.

"Even birds gotta eat," the old woman said. "Birds gotta eat."

"Yes," Irene said.

Inside, there were more Indians. The room was full of them. I recognized a few of the men from Dad's crew, though I didn't see Orange or Tony or any of those guys from Ben's crew. They were mostly older, Dad's and Irene's generations. Some of them were lighter skinned than others. Some wore western clothes, others suits and dresses. The younger ones talked and carried on like my mother's sisters at a family reunion. The young girls flirted in groups with groups of boys.

A white man standing in the aisle handed us both a piece of paper. I thought maybe we were going to some kind of Indian church service. At our church in Tulsa, they

handed out the order of service on sheets of paper. Mom looked up the song numbers and marked each page with threads from a tassel. He wore a navy suit that was too hot for Little Elk in the summer time. He had a pin-on nametag that simply read, "Roger." "If you get a minute," Roger said, "look it over. I think you'll find it beneficial."

I tried to hand the sheet back to Roger. "That's okay," I said to the man. "I'm with her."

Irene nudged me. "Go ahead," she said, "you might need it."

"Over here," Irene said, guiding us through the aisle of folding chairs. She found us two seats toward the back of the gymnasium. Irene nodded at some women she knew. A few of the lighter-skinned people looked at me like they were wondering why I was there. I wish I had had some kind of ticket to show them, a hall pass. I sat down next to a woman who gave me an evil eye. She shook her head at me, as if to say, "What are you doing here?" She didn't look all that Indian to me either.

I was embarrassed. I didn't really want to be in the room anyway. I didn't belong here, for one thing. I didn't even know what the meeting was about. To the woman sitting next to me, I said the only thing I could think of: "I'm Agnes' grandson."

The room was hot, and many of the women used the sheets of paper as fans to cool themselves. As soon as we got seated, an Indian man stepped up on a chair. "We're gonna get started," he said. "Find a seat, everybody. Find you a seat."

"He's our tribal chairman," Irene whispered to me. I tried to detect from her tone if she liked him or not. I wasn't sure. It was a mere statement of fact.

"These folks have something important they want to say to you," the man continued. "This is important to us Little Elk. We've got to make some decisions about some things. Listen real good."

I looked at the sheet Roger had handed me. "A Proposal to the Little Elk Nation on Oil Exploration."

We listened to the men. They talked for a little about how much money the tribe could expect to make. All they had to do was grant them mineral rights for the next twenty years. They had slides with graphs and pie charts. And toward the end of the presentation, they turned off the lights—which made some of the young girls squeal with laughter—they showed some slides: pictures of open fields with the new drilling equipment doing its drilling right next to some kids playing games.

The lights came back on. I looked to Irene, and she shook her head slowly. Whether the gesture was for me or the proposal, I wasn't sure.

*

"Why'd you take me?" I asked Irene on the ride back.

"You heard the chairman," she said. "We got decisions to make. How 'bout you? Did you make up your own mind?"

I thought the whole thing was crazy. I passed by the well near the creek, but that was done years ago, not by this company. They promised to keep things clean, profitable for all. The oil company was going to give the tribe ten million dollars for their oil rights. Why wouldn't they agree to their proposal? What's more, no one at the meeting had offered any reason why they shouldn't go ahead with the deal. They could build a tribal

hospital, or give away scholarships for Little Elk students. They could help those Indians who lived down at the dump.

"They're thinking it over," Irene said. "You can't make these decisions too quick, or you might regret your choice."

I didn't want to seem like a fool to Irene. I said, "I'm still thinking it over."

"Me, too," she said. "Me, too."

*

It rained for four straight days. The next morning Irene woke me up to say that water was dripping from Baby's ceiling onto her bed and floor. She stood over the couch looking down on me. She held her long hair off to the side so that it didn't fall straight into my face. This was a different view of Irene, and the mixture of sleep and the new angle on Irene's face made me not recognize her at first. I wasn't entirely positive that I knew where I was. "What?" I asked.

"Leaks," Irene said. "Upstairs."

I hopped up off the couch as quickly as possible and ran up the stairs to see how much damage there was. This was, after all, what responsible roofers did, how they acted. I had been there for less than twenty-four hours but already I felt responsible for anything related to the roof. On my way up the stairs, I found my sock suddenly soaked with water. I looked straight up to the ceiling. Overhead, I saw a puddle of water building there. In the center of the circle, a thin stream of water poured down in long droplets. It would get cut off and then, when enough water had built back up, another long stretch would fall again.

Irene was standing there in the living room, stripping the couch of my sheets and blanket. I saw her looking at the mud on my pajama legs.

I said, "Irene?"

"What you going to do?" she asked.

*

Before I made my way up into the attic, I knew I was in trouble. I thought the rain made that public to anyone who wanted to know whether or not I was competent enough to handle the job. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, and it was just a matter of time before someone called me out for my incompetence.

Water was pouring down and roof and flooding into the two man-sized holes in the roof, I held my hand up to the flow of water coming in through Paquette's hole, letting the hand cut through the steady stream. I realized then that the first thing I should have done was to cover the holes. The rain clouds kept the attic dark, and I wasn't about to try the light for fear of electrocution. I felt helpless watching the water pour into the house. It pooled up on the attic floor, but I knew it wouldn't stay there for long. It seeped through to the ceiling in a matter of minutes. I stopped myself. What would Dad do? How would he solve this problem? The strategy worked. My brain clicked into gear.

I pulled two of the large military tarps off the boxes stored in the attic. The boxes were already green with mold, and I knew that meant another kind of trouble. I folded the tarps small enough that I could carry them out the window and onto the roof. The rain was cold, and in a matter of minutes I was shivering. If Mom knew, she would have had a fit. I was careful to stay low to the roof and keep close to the rafters that kept the roof supported. The wind whipped the rain around, and it was hard to see with the water

dripping down my face and into my eyes. I got over to the first hole and worked the tarp over, one corner at a time. I worked the highest corner of the tarp over the spire of the roof so that the water wouldn't slide under the tarp. I did the same with the second hole. After I got the tarps on, I went back in the attic and brought back a half-dozen spare tiles to weigh down the edges of the tarp until I could figure out what to do next.

In the attic, I sat down on one of the boxes and let myself fall into a state of despair. Water was slowly dropping down and landing at my feet. It fell like the second-hand of a watch, click...click...click. Then just behind me I heard the same thing—click, click, click. And then more drops to my side. They were everywhere, everywhere. This task was much larger than I thought. I put my head in my hands. The roof was rotten through and through, and I had been lucky not to fall through and kill myself.

Paquette called to me from below.

I worked my way downstairs slowly. There were a half-dozen buckets haphazardly placed down the hallway and on the steps. Paquette handed me one of the tin buckets. He told me to put this under the drip in Baby's room. It was similar to Paquette's room—other than the bed, everything essential had been moved out. The bed was a hospital bed that could be raised or lowered. A single mirror hung on the wall in the place that the window might have been. A small bookshelf was full of books with titles related to Hiroshima, *Citizens of Hiroshima Nagasaki Speak Back* and *Zero Hour: What Really Happened to Hiroshima*. I opened one of the books and flipped through. In the margins, notes had been written in crude asterisks, exclamation points, and a few words printed out to the side. They had to belong to Baby, but I wasn't sure how Baby could hold a pencil

in order to make such markings. Over one picture of the ruins of the Hiroshima Community Hospital, Baby had simply written: *MOM*.

I heard boots clomping in my direction.

As quickly as possible, I slipped the book back in the bookcase with the others. If he saw me with Baby's books out, there was no telling what he might do. I pretended to be examining the ceiling.

"Well," Paquette said. He turned the corner and put his good hand on his hip. He had changed into one of his khaki uniforms I had seen in his closet. He no longer had mud streaked across his face and hands. "I'm hoping you have a plan," he said.

There was only one way to solve the problem: re-roof the house from the ceiling up, and I didn't have the skill to do that on my own. I couldn't tell Paquette that, though. He wouldn't have believed me anyway. He would accuse me of lying to him. He would just go out and get someone else to do it, and I would look like a fool. I'd look like a fourteen-year-old kid who didn't know the first thing about roofing. Dad would be the first person Paquette would tell.

I said, "I'll need some supplies."

*

The plan was formed. First, I would drive Baby to the library in the courthouse building. Paquette normally did this once every morning, but with his injury to his arm, Irene wouldn't let him behind the wheel. Second, I could take the car over to the hardware store across the street from the courthouse. Paquette had an account there, and I could charge whatever supplies I needed. I would load up the materials, bring them back to the Paquette mansion, and then go back for Baby at the library. We were set.

Irene helped Baby move from the chair to the car. Her seat had been especially designed by Paquette years ago. It was the base and back of a rocking chair with the legs cut off. The seat sat flush with the car seat. A two-by-four sat on the lip of the seat bottom to keep Baby from slipping down into the floorboard. A thick belt was pulled tight across her mid-section, keeping Baby strapped in the seat. As Irene fastened the belt around her, I looked to Baby's eyes to tell me if she felt any humiliation. It seemed like something someone might do to an animal. I wondered. She said, "What's wrong? We going to sit here all day or what?"

I started the car and let the engine warm up. My feet barely reached the clutch. I wiped my sweaty palms off on my jeans. I had never driven with someone other than Dad in the car. Dad wasn't much of an audience. He let me correct myself when I made mistakes. Baby, on the other hand, was sure to point out everything I did wrong. Not only that, but she would tell other people about my mistakes. I felt her eyes on the gearshift knob as I worked it into first. The car lurched and then died. "Let the clutch out quicker," she said.

"Thanks for the tip," I said.

I got the car turned around and pointed down the gravel drive. I was having trouble pushing the clutch all the way; my legs weren't quite long enough. I thought maybe Baby realized this. I scooted up to the edge of the seat, as if I were just getting comfortable. I assumed a casual pose. I realized my arms had small nicks and scrapes from walking through the woods. Small branches tugged at my skin, though I had barely noticed it at the time. I was worried that it was an obvious clue for anyone who knew

enough to guess what they were from. Still, Irene hadn't said anything to me. Neither had Baby. At least not yet.

I hadn't been able to get Paquette's sleepwalking out of my head. I wondered what Baby knew, what she didn't know. "Baby," I said. "What did you mean the other day, when you said that Paquette was trying to kill himself?"

"Hmmm," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," I said. If she did know about her father sleepwalking into the woods, I didn't want her thinking I knew about it. I wasn't convinced it would kill Baby the way Paquette seemed to believe, but I didn't want to be the one to give it away.

"Well," she said. "My theory is that he is tired of living—he wants to just give it all up, but for some reason he refuses to stick a .12 gauge in his mouth and blow his brains out. That's what I'd do if I were him—only I'd have to find someone to pull the trigger. Maybe you'd pull the trigger for me, no?"

I looked at her, attempting to gauge her seriousness. "I don't know, Baby."

She laughed aloud. "I'm kidding. Jesus, David! What kind of person you think I am?"

*

Despite the rainfall, work continued as usual at the courthouse. I pulled up into the parking lot in the same way I had witnessed Old Man Paquette do it. I had never driven a car this large, and every move I made felt exaggerated. I was especially careful to steer wide of the cars anywhere near my own. I killed the engine. "Here we are," I said. I was nervous about getting Baby out of the car. I was ready for her to unload on me. Dad must have been in his trailer. The door was closed, though I could see the light from the

parking lot. I stood under the umbrella Irene had given me, not because I wanted to avoid the rain but because I thought Irene would think I was foolish not to avoid the rain. The wheelchair that I pulled from the trunk was as heavy as I thought it would be. I opened it, and wheeled it around to her side. "You ready?" I asked.

When I reached in to unbuckle her, she wouldn't look at me. She wouldn't look at me. I got the belt off without much trouble, and I wasn't working myself closer so that I might hoist her out of the car and into the wheelchair. I slipped my arm around her side and she said, "No."

I pulled my hand back. "What?"

"I want to do it."

"Baby," I said.

I stepped back, the open umbrella providing me protection from the rain. The men on the crew wore identical, orange raincoats with hoods pulled up over their heads. They buzzed around over the scaffolding they had put in place since I had been at the Paquettes'. In the distance, I recognized Ben and Harry. Orange was standing there, too. I waved over to them, and Orange acknowledged me with a wave of his own. Ben and Harry stood back and watched. I wondered if she had noticed them before she had decided to get out of the car on her own.

She worked the stubs of her legs over the two-by-four and turned herself around so that she might slide down to the floorboard. She didn't have anyway of controlling her descent. She tried to do it by inching down the side of the seat a little at a time, but instead she sort of dropped to the floorboard. I grabbed for her. She said, "Don't." I didn't want her to hurt herself, and I was embarrassed for her, everyone watching her

attempt to get into the wheelchair. I kept my distance. If I didn't, she would have let me have it. That's for sure.

Down on the floorboard, Baby said, "Push the chair along side the door. I'll just scoot over."

I did what she asked. Baby worked her way over to the edge. There must have been a six-inch gap separating the car from the wheelchair. I wasn't sure how she could get across. She hoisted herself over, reaching for the seat of the chair with the stub of the one leg until it touched. She tested it to see if it would support her weight. "Hold the chair still, would you?" Her voice was testy. If she leaned the wrong direction, she would end up falling through the gap and onto the ground.

"Baby," I said.

"Just hold it still."

Again, there was no way to steady herself. I could see her preparing herself in her eyes. They zeroed in on the chair. She bounced forward twice and then lunged at the seat. She ended up right on her target. The chair tried to tilt, but I held it in place. "Good job," I said, surprised.

She worked herself down into the seat. "I know," she said. She seemed pretty smug about the accomplishment. "Let's go."

I wheeled her around the car and up to the library entrance. Ben and Harry had disappeared. Orange held the door open for us. The rain was falling on his head, but he didn't seem to notice. "Hey, Baby. How you doing?"

"Fine, Orange," she said. "Look what I found--a new servant to keep me entertained. What do you think?"

A *servant*, I thought. I ignored her. I was quickly learning this was the best way to bother her. Nothing bothered her more.

Orange said, "I think he'll do a real good job for you, Baby."

"Hope you're right, Orange. Hope you're right"

I wheeled her inside the darkness of the courthouse. The insides smelled at least a hundred years old. The library was on the first floor, a collection financed by Baby's own grandfather. The chair barely fit through the narrow opening. "Good job," she said.

"Thanks," I said. There was no one in the library, just an old woman who put down a book when she saw us. Out of habit, I lowered my voice. "Not bad for a servant."

Baby looked back over her should and smiled at me. "Don't be overly sensitive," she said. "It's true, though. You would do anything I asked you to, wouldn't you? I've got you under my complete control. You're putty in my hands."

I said, "Baby, you don't have hands."

"If I did," she said without missing a beat, "you'd be putty in them. Admit it."

*

Outside of the courthouse, I ran into Dad. He was out of breath when I saw him. "Hey," he said. He patted me on the shoulder. "How's Mr. Paquette treating you?"

I let myself tell him about the leaks in the roof, but I didn't describe them in much detail. I didn't dare mention Irene.

"You'll get it under control in no time," he said. "I have complete faith in you."

"I know."

He said, "Well, I better get back. I'm supposed to give someone a call in about five minutes."

"Okay," I said.

"Tell me something," he said. "When's your first tutoring session?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"If you don't hear anything in another day or two, give me a call, and I'll have a talk with Mr. Paquette. This is why you're there, right? Hit the books, okay? I'll tell your mama I saw you."

I watched him turn and then was swiftly across the courthouse lawn. He saw that I was still watching him. He waved to me. I returned the wave.

*

At Owens' Hardware across the street from the courthouse, I found most of the materials that I needed to temporarily fix the leaks in the roof. I pulled two large rolls of plastic off the shelves, a box of shingle nails, and a half-dozen rolls of duct tape. "Charge it," I said.

The kid working the counter wrote down the serial number of each item on a carbon-copy receipt. "You working across the street?" the kid asked me. He was about my same age. Next to him on the counter sat his bottle of Coke crammed full of shelled peanuts. He wore his shirttail out.

"Not really," I said. "I'd like to be, though."

"Someone told me I had to be Indian to work there," he said. "Shit, I don't want the job if I gotta be Indian to get it. I'll just keep this one."

I nodded.

"What's the account?" the kid asked.

I told him the name, and he frowned. "That's a problem," he said. "Hold on for a minute." The kid ran upstairs and brought his father back down to the counter.

The owner just shook his head at me. "That Paquette account is null and void. He doesn't tend to pay his bills, so I had to cut him off." The skin around the storeowner's lips was stained brown from a constant use of chewing tobacco. "Sorry, but I can't help you."

I thought there must be some mistake. Old Man Paquette had the huge house full of antiques and a sizeable chunk of expensive land that overlooked the town. How could his account have been cut off? I said, "It's Mr. Paquette." I said, "He owns the house up on the hill."

"I know who he is," the merchant said. He leaned into me a little, preparing himself to do battle over the account if it was going to come to that. "If he has a problem with my billing policies, he can come talk to me himself."

"Yes, sir," I said. I turned and walked out of the store, leaving the rolls of plastic and the other materials on the store counter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Paquette didn't come out of his room all afternoon. I spent the rest of the day up in the attic, listening to the drops of rain thumping away at the tarps, not quite sure what to do with myself. I certainly couldn't confront Paquette with the information about his account. As private as Paquette was, he would be threatened by what I knew. I might as well have taken a peek in the man's wallet. I didn't want to take any more chances when it came to Old Man Paquette. He was a loose cannon.

The mold and the damp rain that leaked in made my nose start to run. I had to hold my nose half the time I was up there to keep from sneezing all the time. I tried to nestle into the corner of the attic, a place I might be able to hide and maybe even take a nap, but I couldn't get comfortable. I finally figured out that I could sit on the small mountains of materials stored there. I took a seat on one, and it crumbled underneath me. That was the last thing I wanted to do: to ruin something important of Paquette's, one more thing he could blame me for. I pulled the box out to see if I could fix the sides and get it positioned in a way that no one would notice what I had done. The boxes were in terrible shape. Mold that followed the moisture was already turning the boxes into dust. Sooner or later the mountains of materials stored in the attic would be ruined if they remained there much longer.

The top of the box hadn't been taped or secured in any fashion, so I opened it. I didn't see any harm. Inside the box were dozens of flyers for "Col. Paquette's Wild West Show, the Only Show of Its Kind Still in Existence." They were all eaten up with mold, or chewed up by moths. I recognized Colonel Paquette from the portraits downstairs. He

had long white hair and beard, not dissimilar to Paquette's hair and beard. In this picture, the colonel wore a buckskin coat and chaps. His head tilted upward, as if were looking for something in the clouds. The flyer advertised others in the show: acrobats from Bulgaria, performing Elephants, and Red Elk, who—according to the flyer--had been the leader of the Little Elk Ghost Dance. I recognized him from the statue in the courtyard. Down in the corner of the flyer was Yoshie, the Beautiful Maiden from Hiroshima, Japan. I had never seen a picture of Baby's mother before. I wondered if Baby knew these flyers existed.

I looked at the black-and-white drawing a little closer. I wouldn't have guessed that Baby and her mother looked so much alike. Yoshie struck a look of defiance common to Baby, yet their eyes shared a look of softness, which made me question the posture. From the look of the flyer, Col. Paquette had meant to show off Yoshie's beauty. Her hair was up. Her face was long, the lips full. She looked like a strong, beautiful woman. On the other hand, he had been careful to have the artist doctor the scarring on her neck and arms. It was funny that when I thought of Baby's mother I thought of her in Japan, not the woman who came to the United States. I wondered what Baby thought of. There were thousands of the flyers stacked up in the box. I wondered if all the boxes contained the same thing.

I found Irene downstairs, reading her science fiction book aloud to Baby. I didn't want to interrupt, so I took a seat on the bottom step and listened. The scene was about a time machine that took two people back to Paris during the French Revolution. They landed outside the Bastille. I thought it all pretty silly, though I'd never tell Irene that.

She seemed to take science fiction way too seriously for my tastes. Dad would have called it a complete waste of time. She could have been reading something educational.

At the break, I asked Irene about the materials in the attic. I explained the situation and asked her recommendation. "I'm afraid they'll all be ruined, if we don't do something with them."

Irene explained that when the show closed down in 1950 they packed everything up they could salvage and stored it in the bunkhouse next to the garage and the rest went into the attic. No one had been through the belongings in the attic. There must be a hundred boxes from that day in 1950. "I was here," Irene explained.

My question had piqued Baby's interest. "What kind of materials?" she asked.

"You might be interested," I said. I described the flyer.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"It's not for me to say," Irene responded. "Go ask Paquette."

I had feared that answer. I thought maybe it would be easier to just push them off to the side and let the elements do with them what they would.

"That flyer," Baby said. "Can you bring me one?"

I looked at her. I could tell from the look on her face that she was interested. For the first time since I had arrived, I felt as if I had something she wanted. "Sure," I said. "I'll get you one right after I talk to Paquette."

*

Upstairs, I knocked on Paquette's door before opening it an inch or two. Hiro, the dog, had been sitting next to the space between the floor and the bottom of the door. I wondered if she could smell Paquette from out there. When I knocked, she sat up and

whimpered. I opened it carefully, and Hiro took advantage of it by bouncing into the room and jumping up on Paquette's bed.

"What!" Paquette yelled. He was stretched out in bed with his table lamp off. Irene had the window open, and a warm breeze kept the hem of the lace curtains flapping with each gust.

"I had a question, sir."

"Ask Irene."

"I did, sir. She told me to ask you." I waited, and when he didn't respond I went on with the question.

Paquette said, "Let them rot, for all I care." He wouldn't look me in the eye, and he didn't reach out for Hiro. I thought he might. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." I didn't move. I wasn't sure how to broach the topic again. I didn't want to let them rot.

He said, "What!"

"About those materials, sir," I said.

"I don't care what you do with them--call the Salvation Army and have them pick them up, for all I care. Just get out of my room so that I can get some rest."

I backed out. "You want Hiro to stay with you?"

"No!" he snapped.

"Come on, girl. Let's go, Hiro." I patted my leg, calling for her. She reluctantly hopped down off the bed, slowly worked her way across the room, and came across the threshold, plopping herself down on the floor. "I'm sorry," I whispered to her. I reached

down and gave her a pet. "Blame me, if you want," I said. I felt a large tuft of fur that had tangled around a burr.

*

I carried the box with the flyers downstairs and plopped it down in the corner. I had pulled a butler's chair away in order to make room for a few boxes. I pulled out a flyer for Baby. Her face revealed a cautious curiosity, and I'll admit that I walked a little bit slower than normal so that she would have to wait one more second or two before she got to see the picture of her mother and father. I relished the extra seconds. "Here," I said.

"Hold it still," she said.

I waved it back in forth in front of her face like the watch of a hypnotist.

"David," she said. She smiled at me. "If I have to, I will kick your ass. You may think I can't, but I will, and you'll suffer the consequences."

I tossed it down into her lap.

"Oh, God" she said. She examined the details of the wedding picture, the lines and words. "Look at her," Baby said. "Look what they've done."

I looked at the picture, but I wasn't sure what she was responding to. Irene came over to take a look. "They're trying to make money, Baby. What else you think they're going to do?"

"Look at that," Baby said.

*

I carried ten boxes down and stopped to take a break. Most of the boxes contained odds and ends that didn't seem particularly worth keeping other than for being old. In one box, I pulled an umbrella out and opened it. "I can't believe it," Irene said. She held

out her hand, and I handed the umbrella over to her. She opened it and closed it back. Dust flew everywhere. There were tiny, uneven holes in the fabric, the kind you could stick your finger through. "You've heard of the Queen of England?" Irene said. "We were doing the show at Earl's Court, and the rain started coming down. Rain never stopped Col. Paquette. Never. He liked the challenge, you know. That's how he was. Crazy.

"Anyway, the Queen is sitting in the dry grandstand with all her servants around her, watching Col. Paquette's clothes getting soaked. She has one of her butlers run this umbrella down to the colonel. He didn't know what to do. He had never used an umbrella, didn't believe in them. He couldn't toss the queen's umbrella off to the side. He had offended enough royalty to know better. He did the entire show holding the umbrella in one hand."

"You sound like you miss him," I said.

"The colonel got a lot of things wrong, but he wasn't all bad. He knew who he was, you have to give him that much."

"My grandfather," Baby said, "the last of the real-life cowboys."

"In the twenties and thirties, when I was still young, Hollywood started making all those features in California, those Westerns. You ever heard of Tom Mix? He was with us for a few years. A lot of them were. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. They all spent time with the colonel's show. Half of them had never been on a horse before they joined him. They were city boys, like you. Col. Paquette taught them how to be cowboys. He knew talent when he saw it, that's for sure. He could spot talent a mile away."

I found an old projector in one of the boxes and managed to get it running. The projector came to life, throwing a bright square of light against the couch. "We don't have a screen," I said.

Irene pointed to the far wall and said, "What do you call that?"

"Schools these days," Baby said, joining in. I didn't like when they teamed up against me. For fun or not, I felt out-manned.

"Hey," I said. "I've been going to school for nine years now, and never once have I made anything but an A."

Irene laughed. "That's what worries me."

I played around with the reel of film, and even when the reel wouldn't snap into place, I didn't dare mention it to Irene. She would have rolled her eyes at me. I finally got the thing snapped on, and we were ready. "Lights," I said. Irene flicked the switch. The image was disappointing. Instead of the sharp black and white images we saw on TV, the picture was grainy and faded. The people were almost too far away to make out their costumes. They were walking backwards, the film in reverse.

"This is the Deadwood skit," Irene said. "Jack and Bobby were part of the outlaws that took all that gold."

"You mean in real life?"

"Yes," Irene said. "In real life. Jack and Bobby robbed the real Deadwood."

"Why weren't they in jail?" I asked.

"How long you want them to stay in jail? They didn't hurt anyone. They just robbed them."

Instead of robbing the stagecoach they were taking the bags of gold back. They were putting the jewelry back on the passengers. I wanted to stop the film and try to re-spool it so that it ran the correct way, but Irene wouldn't let me. "It's better this way," she said. "Red Elk's coming up," she said. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"What year is this?" Baby asked, interested.

"Your Mama's not in it, Baby," Irene said. "This was long before the colonel grew desperate. This film was made just before people lost interest in cowboys and Indians—before the features that put Paquette out of business."

In a few minutes, the camera focused on an old Indian with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He was dressed the same way he was in the photograph, a single feather hanging from his hair. He made some kind of speech, his mouth moved without the sound in a rhythm all his own. "Red Elk," Irene said, admiring him. "He was a good speaker. Not like we are today."

"He's the guy at the courthouse," I said.

Irene looked at me. "Yes," she said.

Suddenly Red Elk was surrounded by a cloud of smoke, smoke from guns having been fired. Indians got up off the ground with hatchets in their hands, bows and arrows at the ready, while many of the men dressed as U.S. Cavalry also got up and did battle of their own. Their weapons left wisps of smoke in the sky. And then none of them were fighting. Red Elk stood in the same place and talked some more. The people were sitting around a fire, eating food and talking amongst themselves. "The massacre," Irene said, but it wasn't so much a massacre as a rebirth. They all seemed happy now.

"There," Irene said. "That's your Daddy."

"Where?" I asked.

She got up and pointed at the wall, but her hand blocked his face from the wall. There he was, Dad as a little boy looking just like an Indian. He came to life after a soldier had shot him point-black with a rifle. "That's Luther, your uncle, right next to him."

"My uncle?" I said.

"You never heard about Luther?" Irene asked. "Your father doesn't talk much about growing up, does he?"

"Not much," I said, trying to cover for Dad in Irene's eyes. The truth was Dad didn't talk about his past at all. All his stories were about the future: where we were going and what we were going to do once we got there. If he dipped into the well of his past at all, the stories he told isolated a single strand, the time he won the state track meet or the time he met the governor of Oklahoma. They didn't reveal much, if any at all, of his past. I had heard him mention Providence, Rhode Island many more times than Little Elk, Oklahoma.

The film broke, and the white square of light was back. "I remember after a show, we used to eat and eat, all of us—your father, Luther, and Red Elk. Col. Paquette didn't believe in hunger, not for his employees. We would roast a pig, or use some of the meat he had butchered before we had left Little Elk. We would sit around and talk and tell stories. Luther liked to tell stories most of all."

"Does he live in town?"

"Died," Irene said. "We were all distraught over his death. He was like Red Elk. Luther was special. He had already had a vision. I think your father was a little jealous."

Baby asked how he died.

"He was doing a stunt that he had seen one of the other Indians had done. He fell off the horse and broke his neck. Some said that he had been drinking, but I don't know. You know how those rumors go."

*

It was hard for me to consider myself an Indian, no matter what Irene had said. Later that night, I drew out these connections in the back of Gray's *Anatomy*, a kind of family tree. Ben and I were in the center, and then came Dad and Irene, and then came Dad's grandma, who had died before I knew her, and then was her father, Red Elk. I could accept those lines that joined us all together. I had drawn the line myself, after all; I just didn't know what the line meant. Was it supposed to change the way I behaved? The things I believed? The reasons I did what I did? Sometimes, I would sit there and try to think like an Indian, but the idea had me stumped.

I was smart enough to know that Indians were not like the Indians I had seen in the movies and on TV. I had yet to.... Still, I wasn't like any Indian I had seen or knew. How could I have been Indian?

I went to Irene in the kitchen and told her that I wasn't Indian. It didn't matter what she said. She said, "Okay by me."

I said, "That's it? You're not going to tell me otherwise."

"No," she said.

Baby sat in the living room. "Irene told me I'm not Indian."

"Irene!" Baby called. "Is David Indian?"

"He says he's not one," Irene said through the doorway.

"*You* said I wasn't," I yelled back.

"No," Irene said. "It was you who said it. I didn't say anything one way or the other."

"Well then?" Baby asked.

"It's true whether or not he believes it," Irene said.

"See?" Baby said. "You *are* Indian."

*

The next day I made up an excuse to go ask Dad about what Irene had said. He hit the roof when I told him. *It's true whether or not he believes it.* He came at me, and I thought he might hit me. Instead, he grabbed me by the collar and forced me over to the window. "See that man there?" Dad said. "The guy who looks like he's fifty-something in the ratty shirt and dirty blue jeans?

"Yea," I said.

"Watch him for a minute."

I pushed my face to the glass and watched him go to his car. He didn't seem to notice that he was being watched. He looked back toward the work-site, saw that no one was looking at him. He took a long drink out of a thermos. He wiped his mouth off on his sleeve, put the thermos back in his car, and headed back to his crew. I turned back to Dad. "So? What about him?" I asked.

"You know how old that guy really is? He's in his mid-thirties. There's a path he's worn in the grass that goes from the courthouse to his car because all he does all day is drink vodka from that thermos. He'll die before he's fifty of liver failure. That guy is an Indian," he said. "You are no Indian. Indians sit around and wait to die. Indians don't

go to medical school. Don't be stupid or I'll put you out of Paquette's and send you home. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

*

For the next three days, I moved the boxes full of old Wild West Show memorabilia out of the attic. We searched through them downstairs before repacking them and, when the rain broke for an hour or two, running them out to a dry part of the garage. Searching through the boxes slowed the process down, but the tarps on the roof seemed to repel the water well enough for the time being, and kept me from having to face the fact that I didn't know as much about roofing as I thought I did. Baby searched for anything having to do with her mother. And I wanted to know more about Dad or my Uncle Luther. For the most part, we packed up a box without finding anything we were looking for. Still, each box seemed to have potential. There might be the key to the mystery we were trying to solve, though neither of us quite knew what that might be.

I did my best to put my arms underneath in order to support the rotting cardboard. Most of the boxes made it down out of the attic and onto the floor in the living room without bursting. A few of the boxes did not make it down the steps, however. A side would fall out of the box, the bottom might follow, and soon the box's contents had gone sprawling every which way.

Each time that happened, Baby called up to me, "David, so help me God, if you broke anything in that box, I'll break your head in two." Each box that came down brought her a newfound sense of hope. I wasn't sure she knew what she was looking for,

but nonetheless she put her face down into the box, while I pulled the items out for her to examine.

Old Man Paquette came downstairs early the second day. "Get all this goddamn crap out of here," he said. We had half the memorabilia from one box spilled out over the divan Baby was sitting on. He scooped up as much as he could hold and threw the arm-load back into the box. "I don't want to see this," he said. "I don't want to have to look at it." He got the box repacked and tried to carry it with his bad arm but couldn't. He resorted to dragging it across the room. "That's all you all are doing. I hear you. Don't think I don't. You're down here laughing at me, and I won't have it."

"Stop it," Baby said. "You're making a fool of yourself."

He stopped and stood up straight. "I know what you all are doing," he said.

"I'm looking for Mama," Baby said.

Paquette didn't know what to do with himself. He let go of the box. "Suit yourself," he said, "but I can hear you upstairs. I know what you're talking about."

*

Late the second day, I pulled out a banner as large as the room, and Baby's face lit up. The banner's background was a light green. Irene said, "I thought we might find that sooner or later." One corner at a time, I pulled the banner as far as it would go until it was flat and we could make out figures on the front. "These used to hang behind the field during the shows," Irene said. "They worked as advertisements for the audience and kept the crew and actors out of sight." It was an advertisement for the wedding of Paquette and Yoshie. Paquette was dressed like a military hero, a fancy blue uniform, ribbons on his chest, and hat sitting low on his head. A sword was fastened to his side.

Yoshie, on the other hand, was dressed in what looked to be a traditional kimono. The wounds on her face had been emphasized as they had been on the flyer with brown and black paint.

Baby was speechless.

"You okay, Baby?" I asked.

Irene just shook her head. "He just couldn't give up," Irene said. "He was so desperate back then. He thought Yoshie was his best shot at reviving the show. They had come to see Red Elk, after all, so he thought they'd come to see Yoshie. When Old Man Paquette told the colonel that he was marrying Yoshie, well, that became part of the act. Everything was game back then. Col. Paquette thought Yoshie could bring back the glory of his past."

*

Irene told us about the wedding. Their wedding became the marquee event in the show. People no longer wanted to see a girl on horseback shooting a clay pigeon at fifty feet or witness a reenactment of The Battle of Little Bighorn. World War II had been too real for them. They wanted to see what damage an atom bomb could do to a human being. Yoshie was perfect. Before the bomb dropped, she had been young and beautiful. She seemed like a typical Japanese girl, someone who just so happened to get in the way. She had experienced the bombing first-hand. She was marked by the experience. A victim and a survivor. That Col. Paquette's son—the blood relative of a man who practically single-handedly tamed the west himself—was the one marrying this girl was the cherry on top of the sundae. Who wouldn't want to buy a ticket?

The wedding ceremony was scheduled for each of the major cities—Providence and Newport, Albany and Buffalo, Hartford and Hackensack. In every city and for every show, they would renew their vows in front of their audience.

*

At first, I thought Baby relished the process of going through the boxes, looking for things related to her mother, but there wasn't much—just posters and the kimono and carton of wooden nickels they must have handed out as advertisements when the show's train first rolled into town. Baby wore down after three days of looking through the boxes. I didn't know if it was because we didn't find the thing she was looking for, or because we had. It was hard to say. Over the three days, Baby talked less and less. It was as if a dark cloud had swallowed her, and she had put distance between herself and the rest of us.

Although the boxes contained very little relating to Baby's mother, they did contain about everything else you could think of—old saddles, models of fairgrounds in Connecticut, U.S. Cavalry uniforms, medallions minted especially for the show. There were old contracts, and dried-up cowboy boots, a stuffed rattlesnake broken in two, and maps of everywhere they had toured—Luxembourg, Italy, Egypt and the Orient. Irene pretended not to be too interested. She read her science fiction books off in the corner, though when we found something interesting, Irene was the first to look it over. She didn't offer much information up on her own, but every time she was asked a question it was obvious that she knew plenty.

"How do you know all this, Irene?" I was amazed. She was like a living, breathing history book.

She said, "I was there."

Finally, toward the end of the third day, I had to be the one to prod Baby with questions. "Are you through? You want me to close it up?"

Around 6:00, I suggested we call it a day. Without Baby's energy driving me, I had begun to tire as well. The boxes had begun to feel like junk rather than potential evidence for some issue Baby had worked up in her mind. We had maybe one more day of boxes to come down. I had been happy with this task, because I could do it reasonably well. When I had to go back to the roof, I had to face the fact that I was lost, that I would have to face the possibility of defeat.

Baby didn't seem to object to quitting for the day. She didn't say anything at all. I plopped myself down on the divan next to Baby. Irene was in the kitchen fixing black bean soup and ham. As usual, Baby seemed preoccupied with her inner thoughts. I had never known another human being who thought so much. Her head seemed to race with ideas, yet I only got to hear a few of them. I wondered what I was missing.

"You think she was beautiful?" Baby asked me.

I knew who she was talking about, but I feigned confusion.

"Yoshie," she said. "My mother. Do you think she is beautiful? I mean, not in a Sophia Loren or Jacqueline Onasis way, but in her own way. Is she pretty?"

"Sure," I said, and I did think she was beautiful. It was hard for me to talk about women or bodies at all without turning flush all over, my mother's white skin breaking out in large hives, revealing my naïveté. "Of course," I added, only making my initial response less convincing.

Baby shook her head no, as if she were answering her own question. "I wonder if Dad thought so." Baby felt like she was sliding further and further away. I wanted to say something to bring her back. Maybe that was why I was there, to keep her anchored. She had stopped challenging me. I missed her challenges. If I could figure out how, I would nudge her a little, but she was a hard one to figure out. She wore a kind of veil over herself. You had to watch carefully to see glimpses of her.

Baby said, "You must be tired." She seemed full of melancholy.

"Pooped," I said. I tried to wring out my bicep. The previous night a deep ache in the muscle had kept me awake until early in the morning.

"Let's see your muscle. Hold your arm up for me to see." A slight grin slipped across her face.

"Baby," I said, blushing again.

"Now be a good sport," she said. She was having fun with me again. "Go on and show me." I picked up the most recent box we had been working through and carried it over to the corner. I could hear a little of the old Baby coming back. Still, she was embarrassing me. "If I had a hundred dollars," Baby told me, "I'd put it on you to win one of those strong man competitions. Think that'd be a good bet?"

I opened the door to check the rain. After three days of solid downpour, the rain had started to subside. The clouds were a shade lighter, and the rain was only scattered. If I ran the box across the courtyard, it would barely catch any water. I positioned one of the boxes so that I might get the best grip. "Tell Irene I'll be ready for dinner by 6:30."

"*David*," Baby called me back.

"What?" I closed the door and wandered back into the living room.

"Think you could lift *me*?" She watched me through the corner of her eyes. Her forehead scrunched up with the challenge.

"I better take those boxes on into the barn."

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You scared?" She said it in such a way that made me feel odd about not trying to lift her. It wasn't so much the challenge itself; it was more the fear behind the challenge. She was the one afraid. Her words seemed to be reaching through the darkness for something to grab hold of.

I approached the couch with my arms out, as if I were about to dance with her. She pushed herself up toward the edge of the couch so that I could get a better grip. The material of her dress was slick, smooth. Baby's warmth and sweat came through the material. I worked my hands under her stubs and was surprised to feel the rim of her backbone, the place where I could gain leverage. The awkwardness I felt toward Baby's body came rushing back to me. I was suddenly embarrassed over the possibility that I might say the wrong thing, that I might offend her in some way that I had thought of before or that I might drop her. She would break in a hundred pieces on the floor, and I'd never manage to gather them all back up.

"Go on," Baby said, trying to comfort me. "Put your arms around me and lift." Her face no longer held a smile. She looked as if she were preparing herself for heartache. "You won't hurt me," she said. "I promise."

I did as she asked. I hoisted her into the air. She laughed with a kind of joy that I had never heard from her. Her chin came to my forehead. I looked right into her neck. I felt the warmth of her breasts against my collarbone.

I had done my best to keep the feeling at bay. Then, with the warmth of Baby's skin playing on my own, I began to feel my desire rising in a way that I knew would be impossible to ignore. I felt my body respond to her.

"Walk around the room," Baby said. "I want to feel you walking."

"I'm sorry," I said. I plopped her back down on the couch. I was sure she had felt my penis against her thigh. I was sure she was just pretending not to notice. I turned and ran up the stairs, took the stepladder straight up into the attic. But even there, I felt surrounded by the pressure of the boxes that were left, and how they reminded me of Baby in a way that made me uncomfortable. Although the clouds dropped light showers, I climbed out of the window and took a seat on the apex of the roof, the one place that would support my one-hundred and twenty pounds. The air was cool there, and I could breath. No one watching me, checking on me. No right or wrong.

In the distance, I could see the top of the courthouse. The scaffolding came up to the top of the courthouse now. I focused in on the courthouse. A few of the workers were sitting there on top of the courthouse. How I longed to catch sight of Dad, just for a second, a glimpse that might have told me I was okay. I was sure he was locked in his office down on the ground, making phone calls or drawing up plans. I could see him at work in my mind. At work. Hard at work.

*

I got up early. I made myself some coffee in Irene's kitchen, using her method with the boiling water and coffee beans. The smell was wonderful, and I kept my face over the pot, taking it all in. I sat down with a cup of coffee and read the book I had checked out of the library. The chapter I was reading mostly chronicled his battles with the Ponca and Sioux.

According to the author, Red Elk had led his people away from the forts, though they had resisted. I tried to imagine myself in his position. He was, after all, my great-grandfather, and I tried to imagine any sort of connection I might have to his life. I examined his picture in the book, a portrait taken by Charles Eastman, and thought of the ad for the Wild West Show.

Irene walked in on me. She sniffed at the air around me, mocking me. "Didn't use enough beans," she quipped.

"I did it just the way you taught me."

She sniffed at the air a second time. "I don't think so," she said. She poured herself a cup and came over to sit down beside me. I was never sure why she wanted to sit down next to me. She never wanted to say anything in particular. Sometimes it seemed like she wanted to be left alone. "*Red Elk: Leader of the Little Elk*," she read aloud, examining the cover of my book. "I've read that one," Irene said. "They know some of the stories."

"Some?"

She nodded her head. "*Some*." She gripped the coffee mug with both hands, took a long sip. "Old Man Paquette says you don't have much time left before you're going back to Tulsa. I guess you all will move out to the east coast then."

"I guess," I said.

She said, "You better read faster then."

*

At dinner, the phone rang and gave me a fright. I had been here for nearly a week and didn't realize the house had a working phone. I had forgotten about it. Irene

disappeared into the kitchen. In a few minutes, Irene came back into the room. "That was the professor from the college. He's coming over next Tuesday."

"What time?" I asked.

"He didn't say."

"And you didn't think to ask?"

"He'll be over on Tuesday," Irene said. "Where else do you have to go?"

*

Hiro woke me late that night by licking my wrist over and over again. "What's wrong, girl?" I asked. She whimpered impatiently. Over the last few nights, she had taken to sleeping at the foot of my couch, and sometimes she woke me in the middle of the night to let her out. I worked my way to my feet, feeling exhausted from the work I had been doing. She ran ahead of me and let lose with a sharp bark at the door. I was surprised to see the door standing wide open. A quick spurt of breeze brushed back my bangs.

I ran as quickly as I could, taking the most direct route to the creek that I could find. Still, the tips of branches caught my skin, and the wait-a-minute vines grabbed at my tennis shoes. Hiro ran in front of me, turning back to check on my progress every fifty feet or so. I caught a scent of the creek before it came in sight. Creek water smelled the same as the cottonmouths that warmed themselves at night on slabs of rock that had spent the day absorbing the sun. I was careful to watch my step. "Mr. Paquette?" I called out, not sure what was going on or how I might be needed.

We were too far up creek, so I jogged back down the bank, looking all the while for sight of Paquette's khaki uniform or his white hair or beard. I didn't want to think about

what might have happened. Every night, he was drawn to this creek, and I was afraid he had finally done himself in. "Why didn't you stay with him, Hiro? Huh? Why'd you come get me?"

A quarter of a mile up from where he had ended up on the first night I had followed him, I saw fresh footprints in the mud. They went straight from the bank to the water, no indecision there. I scanned the creek from where the footprints had ended. With the rain we had had over the last four days, the creek was peaking. The water ran swiftly, its flotsam and jetsam drifting along at a breakneck pace. Hiro ran down to the prints to sniff them. "Where is he, girl?" I asked.

My tennis shoes disappeared in the mud. I was sure I would lose them. Hiro took off back down the creek, and I followed along, splashing in the water as I went. Soon, I saw what Hiro had: Paquette facedown in the creek. I felt an agony come over me. He had managed to escape the house without my noticing. I felt guilty that I had been thinking about Baby. This had happened on my watch. How would I explain this to Baby? He had done what she said he would, and I hadn't been able to do anything to stop it.

His body looked caught on a tree that had fallen from the bank. I waded waist-deep in the water, careful not to let the flow of the river catch me and carry me downstream. In order to make progress through the water, I lifted my knees as high as possible. The water splashed up around my waist. When I had worked myself within arm's length, I grabbed him with one hand by the back of his shirt and tugged at him. He was already soaked with creek water, so I had to secure him with both hands in order to keep him from floating away. I had never felt true deadweight before.

We hit the embankment, and I tried to turn him over, see if he might still be breathing, when his mouth opened, and he cried out like a wild coyote. I jumped back. "You're not dead," I said. It felt like he had caught me doing something I shouldn't have been doing. "Are you okay, sir? Sit up so you can get some air."

He nodded, cried a little to himself. And then, something came over him. I didn't recognize it until it was too late. He lunged at me with all his might, knocking me down to the muddy creek bank. I didn't have time to respond. I tried to keep my head above water. My heels dug into the loose mud. He grabbed me by the hair to steady my head and punched me in the face. I took the blows the best I could, letting them slide off my cheeks. Each time his fist made contact, my face bloomed with numbness. I got my hands up before he could hit me again. I tried to jump up but he was over me in a way that didn't give me any leverage. He pushed my shoulders back down. He plunged my head into the dark water, and I choked on creek water and its thick dirt, and it came up out of nose and dribbled across my lips and chin. He brought me up and tossed me away from him. I stumbled back into the creek water and fell back against my butt. The warm pee slid between my legs and floated away.

*

I waited a long time outside the Paquette house. I wasn't for sure I would ever step foot back inside. I was scared and cold and hurting. In my hand, I carried an axe handle I had found in the garage. When I saw Paquette again, I would smash his head in. No questions asked. Hiro met me at the door. She smelled at the slime drying on my tennis shoes. I walked slowly through the house, knowing I was leaving two streaks of mud as I shuffled my feet across the room. The stairs squeaked in a familiar way. This was what

rage felt like. It was transforming. I gripped the axe handle tighter. At the top of the stairs, Paquette's door was closed. I put my ear to the door and listened. He was snoring. How could he sleep? I stood there, not sure what to do.

Another noise broke my fixation on Paquette's breathing. I followed the trail of sound down the hallway and stopped at Baby's open door. Paquette kept the door jammed open with an old railroad spike. Inside was Baby asleep in her hospital bed. The bed was raised waist-high so that Irene could deal with Baby more efficiently. Baby slept facing the wall opposite the door. I slipped quietly and cautiously into the room. A single cotton sheet covered her body, flowing over her breasts and down her hips. Her body moved slightly as if she were in the middle of a dream. Something I had never asked her came to mind: in her dreams did she walk on two good feet and clap her hands together as if she were celebrating everything she felt. I put my face close to hers. Her lips were caught in a pout. Her body's slight movement turned into an outright shake, the closest thing to a seizure I had ever seen. Her face revealed fear, a look of terror.

"Baby," I said, wanting to rescue her from the dream. I was afraid for her. I shook her side, the place where I had found leverage enough to lift her.

Baby never opened her eyes. She spoke from the place where her dream had taken her. She said, "It's my mother."

"Please," I said. "I need to tell you something."

"Go away," she said.

"Baby," I said. I felt so desperate. My desperation embarrassed me.

"No, David," she said. "Not now."

In the shaking her body had done, Baby's hair had fallen across her face. I took my finger and pulled it back. I stared at her sleeping form for a long while until my thoughts began to scare me. I ran my hand across the dim shadow between Baby's skin and the sheet. I felt the heat coming from her body. "I'm so scared, Baby," I said. "I'm scared."

"Good question," Irene said. "Better have the flapjacks."

Over breakfast Irene didn't say anything about my bruised face. My busted lip bled every time I opened my mouth to eat. She served up my food and sat back down at her seat, her book in her hand. "Where's Baby?" I asked.

"Asleep."

"Paquette?"

"Asleep."

I nodded. I worked my jaw back and forth, trying to loosen up the tightness in the joint. The process of eating was almost unbearable, though my stomach growled loudly enough that someone in the next room might hear. I looked at Irene. I said, "Don't you want to know what happened?"

"No," she said.

"You're not in the least bit curious?"

"Should I be?"

"Yes," I said. "If I were you, I'd be curious. If you're my aunt, you should want to know what happened to me."

She looked at me blankly.

"Never mind," I said. I pushed myself dramatically away from the table and threw my linen napkin on the table next to my plate. "You people are so strange. I don't even know why I came here—you're all cursed."

"David," Irene said.

I stopped in the doorway. "What?" I asked.

"You finished eating? If you're done, I'll clear away the dishes."

"Yes," I said. "I am finished!"

*

I stuffed my copy of *Gray's Anatomy* and my flashcards back into my backpack. I shouldered the backpack, grabbed my suitcase by the handle, and walked out the door. I specifically did not say goodbye to Irene. There was no reason why I should put up with her. If she was my aunt, I certainly didn't understand her behavior toward me. She was like no aunt I knew. Dad was right about Irene and the Paquettes. We could have shared a laugh over them. Yes, he would have understood. I slammed the door behind me, my own personal signature on the whole mess.

The walk to Main Street took only ten minutes, though I had to keep changing the grip on the suitcase in order to carry it for that long. The rain had finally subsided, and the sun had come out in full force. I must have looked like some kind of runaway. I thought the county sheriff might stop me to ask me where I was going, but not a single car passed me by. When I reached Main Street, I set the suitcase down on the sidewalk. Across the street was the courthouse buzzing with workers from Dad's crew. I caught sight of Dad's blue denim shirt. He was walking from the far end of the courthouse to his trailer. It was all I could do to keep from yelling out to him. If I had run, I could have caught him in time. Even from this distance, I could tell he was preoccupied. He would never notice me. He disappeared into his trailer. I took a seat on my suitcase.

I was jealous of the workers. Like bees in a beehive, they all had their roles, their routines. They knew exactly what they had to do and who they were because of it. Their daily tasks added up to something much grander than their individual roles suggested. They were able to lose themselves in their work. My work, on the other hand, was

messy. I wasn't allowed to forget who I was or what I was doing. If I failed, there would be only one person to blame. Dad would be the first one to know about it. Your son is a failure, Mr. Elkhart. A *failure*.

I tried to talk myself into crossing the street. I could imagine stepping into Dad's trailer and plopping my suitcase down. The wounds on my face would surely horrify him. I could imagine Dad shaking his head at the story I told him. I would probably have to restrain him from going after Paquette. The dream running through my imagination helped pacify me. I caught my breath and was able to relax. I had to reevaluate things.

Somewhere inside of me I knew that Dad would be disappointed with me. He would look at this as the start of something larger, some kind of pattern of failure for me. He would start watching for the signs. It didn't take me long to come to a conclusion: I couldn't cross the street. This was not an option. I hoisted the backpack up off the ground and swung it as hard as I could against the brick wall. I wanted explosions, but all that happened was it went thud and fell to the ground. No fireworks, no drama. I picked the suitcase up and headed back to the Paquettes'.

*

Baby was downstairs on the couch. She didn't say anything. I wondered if she had talked to Irene. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

I pushed the suitcase back into the corner behind the end table and set my backpack on top of it. I plopped myself down on the couch. I wouldn't admit it, but I was mad at Baby for turning me away the previous night. It wasn't fair, but she had pushed me away when I needed her help. I said, "Nothing. Why? What would you do?"

"Get a protective helmet," she said.

"That's not funny," I said. She busted out in laughter.

In the kitchen, Irene continued to read her book. My plate was still sitting there, the cold pancakes gone colder. Sometimes I thought time stood still in this house. I had been gone maybe an hour-and-a-half, and Irene hadn't move an inch. "Anything to eat?" I asked.

She nodded at my plate.

"Christ," I said. I stopped myself. I sounded just like my dad. I didn't like the way the word felt coming out of my bruised mouth. The refrigerator was stocked full of leftovers. I pulled out a ham from the two nights ago and made myself a sandwich with too much mustard, the way Irene made my sandwiches. I ate my meal in silence, watching Irene read her book. She flipped pages without taking her eyes off the print. I kept thinking that if she really were my aunt she would want to know about the bruises. She would demand to know. I had two dill pickles for dessert. I craved them but the juice stung my busted lip. The sting felt good.

Irene set her book face down on the table. She secured a towel and washcloth from the drawer. As she ran the hot water in the kitchen sink, she looked over my wounds and shook her head. "Why'd you let him do that to you?"

"You know about it?"

"A boy your age," she said. She put the towel around my shoulders and then squeezed the hot water out of the washcloth. The soap lathered up as she ran it back and forth across the washcloth. "You've spent too much time in school. That's your

problem. They've made you dumb. If that fool wants to go and kill himself, you let him. Don't get in his way."

I nodded.

"Sit down," she said.

I thought it would hurt, the rough cloth over my bruised face. The heat loosened the muscles up, and the soap washed away the layer of creek water I had been feeling and smelling for most of the morning. I remembered baths long ago when Mom would scrub the dirt out of scrapes, and all I could do was grit my teeth. She would clean me up because it had to be done even if my crying made her feel hopeless. This was somehow different. "You hit him back?" she asked.

"I tried."

"You should have hit him back," Irene said, chiding me.

She finished, and I said, "Thanks."

"One more thing," Irene said. "When your daddy picks up you up tonight, you tell him his *sister* says hi. Will you do that for me?"

*

I spent the rest of the afternoon working on the roof. I put my watch down on the palette close to the worst of the two holes and checked the time every fifteen minutes. Dad would be here at 7:00, and I sure didn't want to miss him. I didn't want to run away, but I wanted to get away. The distinction between the two was important. I tried to let my work take my mind off Paquette. It didn't matter what I did as far as Paquette was concerned, not really. He was a bitter old man, and I just happened to get in his way. He

was used to people being in his way, and I paid the price. I wouldn't do it again. That was for sure.

After I cleared out all the boxes, I had placed the buckets around the worst spots. Those buckets were now full of rainwater, dark with dirt and particles from the roof. I took each one out the window, and dumped it. I watched the water run down the tile in a wave and splash off the edge. I did this twenty-two times. I turned the twenty-second bucket over and took a seat. Once again I had to face the possibility of defeat. I had no supplies, no real knowledge about how to go about this thing. I sat on top of the roof and watched the courthouse for a good hour. My body hurt when I moved it, so I sat perfectly still. How I wished I could steal Ben away from the courthouse for fifteen minutes. He would know what to do. He would know how to fix the roof.

About dinnertime, I came down the ladder, hoping to get Irene to cook me something before I left. My worst fear came true: I came face-to-face with Paquette. He was standing in his doorway. He refused to look at me, though he must have known what he had done to my face. Regardless, I was sure to stare him down. I waited for him to make the first move.

"Your daddy is coming for you tonight?" he asked. He didn't wait for an answer. "You're going home for the weekend." I didn't move. I just watched him. "Well," he said. "You should just stay home. Don't come back. Just stay there."

"No," I said.

He looked at me for the first time. "No?" he asked, puzzled.

"No, sir. I'm going to finish your roof before I leave." I couldn't believe I was saying this, but I felt it to be true. I knew I had to do it.

He nodded, looked away. "Then *you*'re the fool, boy."

"I'll finish," I said.

"Suit yourself," he said, "but it's your doing now, not mine." He turned to go back in his room. "A damned fool," he said to himself.

*

"Irene's a liar," Dad said.

We were driving back to Tulsa that night. Dad listened to the radio news about the war. I had my hamburger spread out on the paper wrapper in my lap. I took bites out the good side of my mouth and sipped my cold Pepsi from a straw. "She showed me a picture of you two together when you were younger."

"Step-sister," Dad said. "She's my step-sister."

"What about Uncle Luther?"

"Hell," Dad said. "She's got a big fucking mouth, doesn't she? You don't need to know everything. Some of it's my business. I should decide what gets talked about and what doesn't." Dad turned the news about Vietnam off. "What else she tell you?" he asked. "I want you to tell me everything she said. Don't leave anything out."

*

Dad never did pick me up at the Paquettes'. I waited for Dad for an hour-and-a-half along side the road down from the Paquette mansion until I finally figured out that Dad had forgotten. I just walked back down to the courthouse to remind him that today was the day I was supposed to go home. He acted like he had remembered, but I could tell he didn't. He said he was just running a little behind. He said, "I'll be out in a minute."

Outside the trailer, I heard voices coming from the parking lot on the other side of the courthouse. The voices bounced off the backside of the courthouse, causing them to build in strength. Still, even in the middle of all the other voices, I recognized Ben's. I walked around back, and stood there, watching Ben on the back of Harry's pickup, swinging his legs back and forth and drinking a silver can of beer. Harry was telling some joke, and Orange kept trying to back out of the group. "I gotta get home, boys. I gotta daughter at home." But they kept pulling him back with another joke.

Harry finally saw me. He nudged Ben. "Little Brother," Ben said. "How goes it?"

When I got close enough for Ben to see the bruises on my face, he said, "Jesus Christ, David. What in the hell?"

"Looks like you could use a beer," Harry said. He pulled a can of beer from the cooler they had rigged in the back of the truck. Water dripped down his hand and fell onto the concrete in front of me.

"He doesn't drink," Ben said.

Despite Ben's statement, Harry held the beer up in the air, offering it up to me.

I shook my head no.

"Suit yourself, Little Brother," Harry said. He pulled the pop-top off and took a drink of it himself.

Harry said, "It wasn't Baby, was it? She give you a solid left, followed by one of her lights-out right-hooks?" The guys laughed, and I turned red in the face. He kept it up for a little while, egging me on. Air escaped under his dentures as he spoke. The long strands of his hair were clumped at the tips.

"No," Tony said. "I heard she's real sweet with the boys--the younger the better. Ain't that right, Ben?"

"Shut up," Ben said. I looked to Ben, but he didn't give anything away. The door to Dad's trailer slammed shut. The sound echoed off the courthouse. "You headed home with Dad for the weekend?" Ben asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Give Mom my best, okay? Tell her I'll see her soon."

*

As an apology for forgetting to pick me up at Paquette's, Dad stopped at Tastee Freeze on the way out of town and bought me the largest cheeseburger they had. He ignored my face. I was beginning to think we were playing a game—who could go the longest without mentioning my bruises. When he finally asked me about my face, I told him I had fallen through the roof. An accident, but I was all right. "You sure?" he asked. He was worried about my hands and fingers. He had read somewhere that surgeons had to have full range. He went so far as to have me hold up my hands and move my fingers this way and that. "Okay," he said and then he laughed. "Better make up something for your mother—something not as dangerous as falling through a roof. How 'bout you ran into a door? That way she won't worry."

I looked at him.

"It's not a lie," he said. "It's protection. You know how your mama is. She's sensitive. Your mama needs us to look out for her, too. She's on the temperamental side."

I nodded. "I ran into a door."

"Your mama has enough to worry about as it is."

*

Mom was so happy to see me that she practically knocked me down. "I was starting to get worried."

"My fault," Dad said.

Mom didn't notice my face at first. She wrapped me in her arms and tugged. She smelled of a high-caliber perfume. Her hair smelled of fresh hairspray. When she went to kiss me, she got a good look at my wounds. She held me at arm's length. "What happened? Are you alright?" She pulled me in and hugged me again. I felt her hand tapping the center of my back and then rubbing the pain away.

I looked at Dad. "I did a stupid thing," I said. "I wasn't paying attention, and I walked right into a door."

"Poor, baby," she said. "It looks something awful. Let me get you an icepack. Did you put Neosporin on the cuts?"

I followed her into the kitchen, while Dad went back to the back to change. She pulled me aside and put her fingers up to her lips, the signal for be quiet. She whispered to me, "Did you see Ben? How is he?" The truth was that I wasn't sure how he was doing, but I thought she needed to hear that he was doing well. "He's fine," I said. "He wanted to know how you were."

"He did?" she asked. Her eyes lit up. "Well."

The table was set. The house was as clean as I had ever seen it. The furniture dusted, the paneling oiled, the carpets steam-cleaned. It looked like someone had turned our house into a museum—everything perfectly in its place, cleaned daily. All it lacked

were the ropes keeping people from testing out the bedsprings or attempting to write with the quill pen. Before she made the cold compress for my face, she fixed me a cup of ice water. I took a sip and had to spit the water out. It tasted of some heavy-duty soap detergent.

"House looks great, Mom. You've been working hard."

"Thanks," she said. "You know how it is—with everyone out of the house, there's not much to do. So, I clean."

She said, "Look in the oven."

I walked over to take a peak. There was a large sack from Tastee Freeze warming in the oven. "Hamburgers," I said.

"I don't know if you've eaten or not," she said, "but this is a kind of coming home party so I thought I should get you something you like." She pulled out a sheet cake covered with chocolate icing. On the top, she had written in white icing, "Welcome home, David."

She kissed me on top of the head and said, "It's good to have you back. We certainly missed you."

*

Mom had Saturday planned. Though I would have preferred to stay around the house, she wanted us to get out and do a few things together--run an errand or two and talk.

I had gone to bed thinking about Baby, Mr. Paquette, and Irene, but in the mall I forgot them all. Things were too new there, too shiny, and they piped music out of the speakers in every store. As far as I was concerned, they might as well have been dead.

That is, except for Baby. She never quite left my mind. I had a question teasing my brain, and only Baby could answer the question. It seemed strange being with Mom, who had no idea of Baby's existence. I thought about telling her about Baby, but I realized that she wouldn't understand. She would only be repulsed by my description of Baby. She would get that look in her eyes, and I would know it was too late. I decided just to keep my mouth shut.

In the big department store in the mall, Mom bought me a new pair of slacks and a yellow button-down shirt. She found a bow tie to go with the outfit. The salesclerk looked at my face and then at Mom. I was pretty sure she thought I was being abused and the shopping was some perverse way of making up for the physical violence. Mom must have sensed the same thing. "He ran into a door," she said.

"Oh," the clerk said, sarcastically. "That explains everything."

While I tried on the clothes, Mom was careful not to dote on me for too long. She tugged at the shirt a little until it fell right on my shoulders and hugged me with her smile. "So big," she said. "When you were a baby, you were tiny, fragile—like one of those porcelain dolls I used to play with at Grandma's. One wrong move and I thought I'd break you."

Across from the department store, the Army had set up a recruiting table. A dozen teenage kids stood around it, talking to the two recruiters who attracted the kids with their small gifts they handed out. The recruiters did their best to look energetic and convincing. Apparently, it had worked. Several dozen kids proudly wore the U.S. Army buttons that the recruiters had pinned on them. I had seen them in the department store.

From the distance, I recognized one of the kids from my homeroom class. He kept his lime-colored skateboard under his arm.

"Ready for some lunch?" Mom asked.

"Hold on," I said to Mom. Normally, I liked my friends to see Mom. They thought she was beautiful, and there was something nice about your friends thinking your mom is beautiful. It gives you some leverage, as if they might have underestimated your potential. On this occasion, I nodded my head, telling her I'd be right back. I didn't want her mentioning I was working for the summer. Jerry would think that was not cool.

I ran over to say high to Jerry. "Hey," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Jesus H. Christ," he said. "What happened to your face?"

"I got into it with some asshole," I said.

"Man," Jerry said. "He must have been one tough son of a bitch. I mean, look at you."

"Yeah," I said. "What about you? I thought you were supposed to go to some kind of summer camp or something."

"No way," he said. "I'm joining the fuckin' Green Berets," he said. He was a tall gangly kid, large ears and a haircut that couldn't decide what it was going for. "They're running a two-for-one special. You wouldn't want to join up, would you?"

"No, really," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Skipping out on summer school," he said. "If I didn't sign up for summer English, my Dad said I'd have to work at the car wash, and I'm sure as hell not working at the car wash again this summer. And I'm sure as hell not going back into Mr. Cheatwood's

class. No way. He's one of those sadomasochists. I heard that his own wife won't let him touch her unless he's wearing these thick rubber gloves."

The recruiter interrupted Jerry by clearing his throat. We both turned and looked at him. His hair was shaved on the sides over his ears. He had an eastern accent, New York City. "You want a button, kid? If you don't want it, you can give it to one of your buddies."

"Sure he wants a button." Jerry took the button from the recruiter and pinned it to my shirt. "There," he said, "you're practically John fucking Wayne."

*

Before our waiter had time to bring out our ice teas, Mom kept glancing at the button on my shirt. She looked away, but the button seemed to draw her attention. She read the menu aloud. When she looked up to see if I had made up my mind, the button once again drew her focus. I said, "What's wrong?"

"Do you have to wear that thing?"

"This?" I asked. "I'll take it off." I unclipped it and set it down on the table next to the salt-and-pepper shakers. She put her hands back in her lap, and she smiled at me. "Now," she said. "Tell me what all you've been doing with yourself."

*

That night, I overheard Mom and Dad yelling for a minute, and then they stopped. "Hush," Mom said. "He's going to hear us. You want him to hear us?" I opened the door and tried to hear the discussion that followed. Mom was upset. She seemed to be crying. Dad said, "He'll be fine. Don't worry about him." I took a seat in the hallway and listened. They must have assumed I was asleep. They always assumed I was asleep.

"What are we going to do?" Mom said.

"This might be the best thing that could happen to him," Dad said. "Get him out of Little Elk and give him a sense of direction. The boy needs a sense of direction."

"Joe," Mom said. "How can you say that? He could be killed in Vietnam."

"I fought in Korea," Dad said.

"This is *our* son."

I figured out that they were talking about Ben. He must have gotten drafted. That's what I figured from the way Mom was talking. Mom finally said, "Talk to someone. You know all those people in Little Elk. See what you can do, please? For me?"

"I'll see what I can do," Dad said.

"Joe," she said. "I never thought this would happen to him. I don't know why, but I just didn't. He's not meant to go there."

I wasn't sure what happened next. There was complete silence. I thought maybe Dad had walked out of the room, but if he had gone out to the garage, I would have heard the garage door slam. If he had gone out to the back porch, the sliding glass door would have banged shut. I waited on a sound for closure in the same way one anticipates the final beat of a song. If the beat never comes, its absence hangs there as a kind of presence. I thought about sneaking down the hallway for a look. Then I heard her sobs. She cried in a way that she had always feared, though she always seemed on the edge of such a cry. It was everything Mom could do to keep her composure.

"There, there," Dad said. I imagined Dad holding her, stroking her hair. Maybe he put his cheek up to hers. Maybe he soothed her with a voice too low for me to make out. "He's going to die," she said.

"No," he said.

"Yes," she said, the tears still flowing.

"Just relax," he said. "This will resolve itself. Trust me. It will resolve itself."

*

In the morning, everything seemed back normal. I looked for signs of their discussion, but I couldn't find anything. No evidence of their discussion the night before. It was as if it had never happened. Mom hugged me before I climbed in Dad's truck and said her goodbyes. She patted me on the head and walked back to the porch, where she watched us drive off in the dark. In the truck, I waited until we stopped for our morning coffee and Dad came back carrying two Styrofoam cups of coffee.

"I heard you and Mom talking about Ben."

"You were spying on us?" Dad said. "I ought to stop right here and make you walk back to the house. You mind your own business, you understand?"

We drove for maybe ten minutes without either one of us speaking. I waited for an opportune time to raise the issue again. I wanted to know about Ben. I sipped slowly at my coffee, put my face to the lip of the cup and felt the steam on my face. At the Paquettes', I had grown used to drinking three or four cups of coffee a day. I had begun to like the taste.

Dad looked over at me. "You making love to that coffee or drinking it?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Never mind," Dad said. "You're a strange one."

I finally said, "You were talking about Ben with Mom. What happened?"

"I guess it won't hurt if you know." He took a sip of coffee. "Your mama opened a draft notice for Ben. He's been drafted. Your mama is just upset."

"When's he have to leave?"

"I don't know," Dad said. "We'll have to see."

*

Dad avoided the Paquette driveway, the same as he had last time. I thought maybe now that he might be more comfortable with it. He let the truck coast down the shoulder a little before coasting to a stop and stepping on the emergency brake. It was just barely daybreak. The sky was pink and blue. A chill was in the air. Around back of the truck, Dad grabbed my suitcase and my loaded-down backpack from the bed of the truck. "Here you go," he said. He didn't give me time to take the handle. He just set it down at my feet. I wanted to ask him about Ben, but Dad was fidgety and wanted to get going. I wanted to ask him if he really was going to talk to someone about Ben.

"I gotta go," Dad said. I realized he was looking at something in the distance. I glanced back, and I saw Irene standing at the mailbox. She had a shawl wrapped around her. She watched the two of us. My guess was she had been standing there all along. "She's just trying to get to me," Dad said.

I laughed. "That's Irene," I said.

"Irene and Luther were a lot alike," Dad said.

"Really?"

"If your Latin lesson doesn't meet your standards," Dad said, "call me or drop by the courthouse, and we'll straighten out the misunderstanding." Dad took one more look in Irene's direction just to let her know he wasn't intimidated.

*

When Baby saw me, she smiled. We felt the same thing: a kind of joy at being back in each other's company. She said, "Long time no see."

I said, "Have you grown?"

"Still forty-two inches, top to bottom."

As much as I wanted to be with Baby, I sat up in the attic for most of the morning, not sure what to do with myself but knowing I needed to fix the roof. I finally came down about lunchtime. I looked in the kitchen for Irene. Baby sat in the living room with her eyes closed. "What's going on?" I asked Baby. "No lunch today?"

Irene suddenly appeared. She wore the same blue denim skirt and blouse that I had seen her in a few weeks ago the day we attended the Mo-Co presentation. She had added a bright scarf around her neck. Still she wore no makeup. It was funny because mom never went out of the house without makeup. She'd shriek if you didn't give her the time she needed to get her makeup on.

"You going somewhere?" Baby asked her.

"Yep," she said.

She looked over to me. "You mind taking me?" she asked.

*

I pulled upside the entrance to the school gym. The old couple I had met the last time were both sitting there. I wanted to tell Irene why I couldn't go inside, but I wasn't sure how to convey this without hurting her feelings. Regardless of my own identity, their decision didn't have anything to do with me. I was an outsider. I didn't belong in there with the Little Elk. "Irene," I said.

"Be back later," she said, giving me a break.

"Sure," I said.

I came back about three hours later. Irene sat on the bench near the entrance to the gym, her back as stiff as a plank. She walked over without letting on that she knew I was here. "Well?" I asked. "What'd they decide?"

"Not yet," she said.

"What did they say?"

"Different things, some good and some bad."

"Irene," I said. "You're going to drive me crazy." Out of frustration, I growled at her.

She laughed. "You want to know more?"

"Not really," I said.

"Turn right," she said. To get back to the Paquette mansion, we had to take a left. I paused at the stop sign. "Go on," she said. "Right is that way."

We drove down a section-line road, mostly gravel. The sun had nearly dropped below the tree line in the distance. In the rearview mirror, I saw only dust swirling about. We took a few more turns, and it wasn't long before I started to lose my sense of being grounded. If I didn't have the sun to check my direction, I might have really begun to feel displaced. Every once in a while, I would check with Irene. "Keep going," she said every time. I wasn't sure I could find my way back or not, even though we were only a few miles out of Little Elk.

"Stop up here," Irene finally said.

I didn't see any crossroads or even landmarks that would warrant stopping, but I did as Irene asked, pulling off to the edge of the road. "Up ahead," she said. There were two strips of dirt worn into the grass that ran off into the wood line. Without Irene pointing the path out

to me, I probably would have never noticed it. I knew to take the path before Irene told me to. The car was not designed for such a rocky road, but I took it slowly, and we crept along until we entered a clearing. "Let's park here," Irene said.

I followed Irene over to the line of trees. On the other side of the trees was a creek. "Big Elk?" I asked.

"That's right," she said. "Look over there."

An old well had been abandoned, and in a circle that surrounded the well, all the vegetation had been killed off. The soil had become discolored, a mix of rust-colored puddles within and a thin mucus of white. I realized that whatever was killing off all the plants and keeping the wildlife at bay was leaking into the creek. "That company that wants to give us all that money, they did this. This is their well."

*

For my Latin lesson that night, I put on the new outfit Mom had gotten me over the weekend, khaki pants, yellow button-down shirt, and a bowtie. The hot shower I had taken meant that I had to keep wiping the fog off the mirror. One part of me knew I was dressing up for my Latin lessons, but the other part of me had a different reason. I wanted to impress Baby, though I wasn't sure yet why. She was funny, interesting. I wanted her to take one look at me and think that I was something special, someone she had mistakenly overlooked. The thought made me nervous. I had never really thought much about my own looks before. My looks always seemed to be what they were—adequate and functional. No one made fun of me on the playground like they had some of my friends. The girls never seemed to whisper about me, but that had never bothered me. I didn't whisper about them, either.

I figured that if I wanted to I could look like those guys in Baby's magazines. I took special care to get the part in my hair just right. I buttoned every button. I had been smart enough to sneak an unopened bottle of cologne out of Dad's cabinet back in Tulsa. He had a dozen of them, and I was sure he wouldn't miss one. Mom bought him a bottle of cologne every year, but as far as I was aware, he never once broke the seal on the package, not to mention the fact that he never wore anything stronger on his body than Ivory soap or maybe a light aftershave. Baby paid attention to scent. She commented on it constantly, so I thought I'd take the risk. I had seen Dad put on aftershave. He created a small puddle in his hand and splashed it across his cheeks. I figured the cologne worked the same way.

Downstairs Irene was reading to Baby from her novel. I walked between them to get my Latin textbook out of my backpack. Baby gave me a wolf-whistle. "You going on shore leave, sailor?" she asked.

I wasn't sure what she meant. I said, "My Latin professor's coming tonight."

"Oh," Baby said. She laughed.

Irene had a big grin on her face. "I hope you're not planning on going outside," Irene said.

"Why not?"

"Mosquitoes would go and eat you alive, you smelling that way and all."

They were making fun of me. My face suddenly felt flush. My intent had been revealed. "Mom thought I should dress up," I said.

"I think you look nice," Baby said. "You look like Rock Hudson in a bowtie."

"Thanks," I said. The week before that she had told me about her secret crush on Rock Hudson. She had just seen him in *Ice Station Zebra*. I smiled with my secret information. I grabbed my Latin textbook and made my getaway as quickly as I could before she could transform the compliment into something else.

In the kitchen, I tried to review my basic Latin vocabulary, but I couldn't concentrate. I tried to think of some excuse that I might use to go back in the living room. Maybe I forgot something in my backpack, but it all seemed silly, and I had begun to feel vulnerable, so I decided just to sit in the kitchen until my professor came. If I had the chance, I would try to impress Baby with the Latin I knew. I had tried to memorize one of Cicero's orations, and I thought if the time were right, I would try it out.

*

When Professor Stevens finally arrived, he was an hour late. Irene was about to take Baby upstairs for bed when he knocked on the door. I looked at Irene and Baby. "Go ahead," Baby said. I opened the door, and there stood Professor Stevens, looking like one of the models in Baby's magazines. I thought Latin professors were supposed to be old and cranky.

"Hi," he said. "You must be David."

"I am," I said.

"Good," he said. "I found it without a police escort. Excellent."

I wasn't sure he would step inside without an invitation, so I waved my hand for him to enter. He stopped and wiped his feet. He had a large satchel hanging around his neck by a strap. "Great place," he said. "Your parents?"

"Long story," I said.

"I get it," he said. "Say no more."

I took him into the living room to meet Baby and Irene. He followed along without making a sound. "Hi," he said. He nodded his head at both of them. He blushed a little and looked away. Baby looked at Irene and smiled. She thought he was handsome. I saw him in the way she must have: a handsome professional man in a tweed jacket. Behind his turtle-shell rimmed glasses, he had eyes the color of the Aegean Sea. All of this and humility to boot.

The professor looked about the house as if he were touring a museum. In front of the portraits of Col. Paquette and his wife, he stopped and stared. "Nice," he said, as if talking to himself. He ran his hand over the carved staircase banisters. When he realized I was watching him, he said, "Not many homes like this around here." His voice marked him as an easterner, New York or possibly Boston.

"No, sir," I said.

"The home was built by my grandfather at the turn of the century," Baby said. "You may have heard of him, Col. Paquette. He ran a Wild West Show for years and years."

"Paquette," the professor said. He smiled at Baby. "The name does sound familiar."

I had assumed that Paquette knew the professor in his dealings with the state university only thirty miles from Little Elk, but he corrected me. The president of the school owed Paquette a favor. Paquette had never met the Latin professor, nor had even heard of the man. All he knew was that Professor Stevens came highly recommended by the president. According to Paquette, the president and Professor Stevens had made their

own arrangements, though an all-expenses research trip to Pompeii—the professor's own focus of study—had been mentioned. The professor had been scheduled for ten sessions. If any problems arose, Paquette was supposed to call the president at his personal number.

When he worked his way over to the fireplace mantle, he finally noticed Baby's condition. "Baby, was it?"

"That's right," Baby said.

"Well," he said. There was no mistaking the look on his face. He looked Baby over the same way he had looked at the portrait and the banister. The crevices in the stubs of her arms, the absence of thighs under the blanket. No shoes. He nodded at her a second time. "Baby," he said, testing the contour of the syllables in his mouth and on the tip of his tongue. "I like that name."

*

In the kitchen, the professor grew more professorial. He pulled a long, mimeographed test from his satchel and pushed it to my end of the table. "I want to test your aptitude so we'll know where to start," he said.

"I don't know much," I said, preparing to apologize for my lack of formal learning in Latin. I wished I had worked further into my Latin workbook.

He pulled three number two pencils from his satchel and set them on the table in a parallel arrangement. "Don't let the questions intimidate you, although you should do your best. Your score on the exam will determine our goals for these sessions. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Good luck," he said.

I turned the coversheet back, and looked over the paragraph I was expected to translate and then use it to answer the questions that followed. The passage was the third paragraph of Cicero's oration. If he had asked me to translate the piece aloud, I could have done so. I skipped to the first question and got right to work.

*

As I worked through the exam, Professor Stevens read from a batch of letters written in Latin. I could see that an antiquated hand had penned them. The author's words brought him pleasure. Sounds escaped from his mouth. They themselves were mildly distracting, but what bothered me more than anything was that I didn't think he knew he was making these sounds. They seemed private somehow, bodily moans and hums. He seemed to be enjoying the letters in a way that made me uncomfortable being in the same room with him.

"Would you like some water?" I asked.

"No thanks," he said. He looked at his watch. "Thirty-five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

I finished in fifteen. "That's awfully quick," he said. I looked over my answers one more time and pushed them over to his side of the table.

"You're good," he finally said. He packed my exam back into his satchel. "One week from today, we'll discuss your translation of two letters from Pliny the Younger, a witness to Pompeii. You'll find the letters in this book." He handed me a copy of the book he had taken from his satchel. The professor's picture was featured on the back. "Any questions?"

I shook my head.

"Tell me something," the professor said. He scooted up to the edge of his seat and leaned in so that the space we shared was more intimate. "Baby," he said. "Her physical condition? What happened? Not many like her around."

*

That night, my first night back in the Paquette mansion, I kept myself awake until I heard Paquette's boots on the steps. I watched him in a way I never had before, with a certain amount of distance that the attack had given me. The white of his hair and beard seemed to draw the room's moonlight. His uniforms that had become his pajamas also absorbed the light. He was a kind of ghostly figure. In a way, I had come to hate the old man after the attack. I felt sorry for him yet utterly despised him. While I was home, I had rehearsed my first night back in my mind. I had given up the idea of revenging the beating I had taken, though I had been surprised by how swiftly and sometimes cruelly I could generate revenge scenarios. The stories Dad listened to about the fighting in Vietnam seemed to supply the raw material I needed for these scenarios. In my own way, I transformed the back-hills of Little Elk into the jungles of Southeast Asia. In this way, I imagined ambush tactics and punji sticks and claymore mines. Finally, I had decided Old Man Paquette wasn't worth the effort.

I met Paquette on the ground floor and walked with him step for step, keeping my distance so if for some reason he lunged for me he would miss. Hiro jogged along beside us. My jaw hurt from the strength at which I ground my teeth. As he got closer to the door, I jogged ahead and opened the door wide. "There," I said out loud. "Go kill yourself." And as if he had heard the move I had scripted for him, he walked through the

open door and out onto the grounds. Hiro waited for me to follow. "Go on, girl," I said. "You can go, but I'm staying." She turned and sped off to catch up with Paquette. I just shook my head at her misguided loyalty.

The next thing I did surprised even me. As part of my revenge fantasies, I had thought about locking all the ground-level doors to the house. He would have no way of getting back in unless he kept a house key stashed somewhere. He would have to sleep outside, and maybe that way Irene would find out. If Irene knew, she would take some sort of action. Instead of locking all the doors and being done with it, I just left the door open and went back to my couch to sleep, but I couldn't fall asleep. It felt like I had abandoned Paquette. I felt a hollow feeling, the same kind of feeling I had my first night in the house—as if I were all alone. No one to talk to. No one to confide in. I waited until he came back. He shut the door behind him, and I watched him climb the stairs, much slower than he had taken them when he had gone down. He was a figure of sadness, someone doomed by his fate. I wondered how much he fought the process, the way he was transformed as if he were some kind of film beast, the werewolf or Dracula. If he resisted the transformation, could he control it? Or, did he merely give in to it? Let it carry him along as if he were riding the current of the stream? I suppose he was waiting to find out how it would all end. I guess, in a way, I was also doing that.

After an hour or two without being able to go to sleep, I decided to find something to do. I worked my way upstairs, being careful to slowly put weight on each stair. The sound of Paquette's boots on the steps served as my own alarm, and I didn't want others tipped off by my own steps.

I crept past Paquette's closed bedroom door and then further down the hallway. Before I caught a glimpse of Baby in her bed, I could hear her radio crackling. She had told me that she liked to listen to broadcasts of the St. Louis Cardinals, especially when Bob Gibson was pitching. I stepped carefully across her floor. I was just beginning to recognize those places on the floor that creaked and the various sounds that might come from stepping in the wrong place. I navigated the floor, avoiding the spots that might give me away. Baby slept on her side. I looked into her face, but she was not dreaming of her mother on this night. She seemed at peace with herself. I brought my hand up to the blanket covering her side, thought about waking her to tell her something. What would I say? It felt as if I had something important to say to her. The funny thing was that I didn't know what it was. I had gone around for days, trying to call it up as if I had lost it among my other thoughts.

I couldn't wake Baby and I couldn't go back to sleep downstairs. Her mirror hung on her wall where a window might have been. I could barely make out my dark image in the reflection. I decided to stretch out on Baby's floor. Baby was hidden on top of the mattress. The mechanical undersides of her bed were all that I could make out. The floor was cold on my arms and face, and I had to curl up in a ball to get warm and settled. When I got comfortable, I listened to the rhythms of my own breathing, the in and out of the air moving through my lungs. And then, I could feel the air moving through my body. I laughed to myself. Just before I dropped off, I realized I could hear the flow of Baby's breath as well. I listened to the rhythm of her breathing like an old song on the radio. I listened until I started to sing along, and our breathing matched in every way, and we were both seeing the same song together in unison. I slept.

*

In the morning, Irene woke me with a kick to my butt. "What?" I said. The lack of sleep was starting to take a toll on me.

"You better get yourself up," she said. Irene carried a stack of Baby's laundry in her arms. She disappeared in Baby's closet. "If Old Man Paquette found out you spent the night in Baby's room, he might put you under the wheels of his automobile and run them back and forth across your fourteen-year-old body."

"She was asleep," I said. "I just wanted to talk."

"Don't matter what you were wanting to do," Irene said. "If Paquette knew you were in here, he'd have a fit."

"Let him," I said.

Irene stuck her head back into the room. "What was that?"

"I mean it," I said. I hopped up to my feet. Baby's bed had been made up for the day. "Where is she?"

"Bath," Irene said.

I had never been on the second floor in the morning when Irene bathed Baby. I was usually on the roof by then, starting my day. I had always been careful to avoid the area. "No," I said. "I just wanted to ask her something about Mr. Paquette."

"About his night walks?"

Baby called for Irene from the bathroom. "Come on, Irene," she said. "I'm shriveling up like a prune. You'll have to take me outside and spread me out under the sun just to get me back into my former shape."

"Let him go," Irene said to me. "You've got to learn—some people don't want to be saved. Paquette's one of those people."

*

The bathroom door stood wide open and the day's dress hung on the lip of the doorframe. On the other end of the hallway, Paquette's door remained shut. Instead of trying to get past the bathroom, I slipped back inside Baby's room and waited for them to finish up in there. I could hear the water drop off Baby and splash back into the tub as Irene lifted her. "Ouch," Baby cried.

"Stop it," Irene said.

"You pinch me every time," Baby said. "I've never once pinched you, have I? You could at least return the favor."

"Lean forward," Irene said.

"Use the blow dryer today."

"I got things to do," she said.

I stood back in Baby's room, waiting for a time when I might try to get back downstairs or possibly slip up into the attic.

"David," Irene called out to me.

I rolled my eyes. In a house this big, it was sometimes hard to be left alone. Sometimes I just wanted to disappear.

"What's he doing?" Baby asked Irene.

"Um," she said. "Being fourteen."

"I can hear you," I said.

"Come here," Baby said.

I stepped back into the hallway. The dress was gone, so I figured I had given them enough time to get Baby dressed. "David," she called. I thought for sure I was in trouble. She would never let me hear the end of it. The dress hung on the light over the sink. To my surprise, Baby wasn't dressed, though the towel was wrapped around her torso. She was propped on the closed seat of the toilet so that Irene could attend to her. Irene combed out her long, wet hair. She looked at me as the brush tugged her head back. Her partial legs managed to keep her balanced. The towel covered her breasts but exposed her shoulders and the stubs of her arms. I had never seen the stubs before, and I tried not to stare. They looked like oddly shaped joints wrapped with skin. They were darker than her face. Strips of flesh had been grafted in places, leaving a few light-toned patches here and there.

"You came into my room last night?" she asked.

Irene stopped running the comb through her hair and looked at me. They both looked at me. "Yes," I said.

"I want to know why."

I couldn't tell her that I had been lonely. She would have laughed and laughed. I could see her saying, "So what? Who isn't?" I just shook my head. "I don't know," I said. I walked off before she could call me back. I heard them laugh a little. Paquette's door opened, and he looked at me through the crack. "Morning," I said.

"You going to do some work today or just gab with the ladies?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said.

*

At one point, I had thrown up my hands over the roof. Impossible. I was on top of the house, looking out over the valley. In the time I had spent at the Paquettes' place, I had come to enjoy the perch with all the fresh air and the feeling of space. On clear days, I could occasionally catch a glimpse of Ben and the rest of his crew. I felt a little less isolated then. I could both see and remain hidden at the same time. The only trouble was that I knew my time was limited. Eventually Paquette would want to verify my progress on the roof. He was a man who would demand accountability. That's when I finally gave up. I was ready to march down and tell Paquette it couldn't be done, at least not by me. The funny thing was that as soon as I had let it go, an idea came into my head. I could reinforce the rotten beams with other boards. If I fastened them correctly, the old support system could rot entirely away and the new structure would support the roof without fail. The only down side was that I would need a stack of lumber that Paquette couldn't afford. Sometimes I wondered how he could afford Irene and all the food she cooked up. According to Mr. Owens, Paquette was broke. Where did it come from?

I took Paquette's car down to the courthouse. I figured that if there was one person from whom I might get the supplies it was my father. He was on the phone, but seemed happy to see me. He waved me inside the trailer. It had been five long days since I had last seen him, but seeing him in front of me made me miss him even more. His blue denim shirt and tie, his khaki pants and dress shoes. His dark skin. I sat back, closed my eyes, and listened to his voice fill the room. I missed the protective umbrella of his confidence.

"David," he said as he hung up the phone. He looked down at a tissue-wrapped gift. "Your mother and I were just talking about you this morning."

I nodded at the package. "That for me?" I asked. I recognized it immediately as my mother's. She took neighbors plates of cookies when someone died or a young couple had a baby. The package had one of her trademark homemade bows.

"Go ahead and have one," Dad said.

I broke through the tissue. Peanut butter cookies. I could tell they had been sitting on Dad's desk for a few days. I bit into the cookie, and it shattered in my mouth. Dad knew what I was thinking. He said, "I've been meaning to get them out to you, but we've been trying to meet the fed's deadlines. You know how it is."

"Sure," I said. I set the plate back down on the desk.

"Tell me," he said. "You about finished with the Paquette roof?"

I gave him a version of the story that walked the line between the difficulty of the task and the less than helpful assistance of Paquette. It was a version through which I thought I could keep doing what I was doing. I told him I needed to get some supplies, but Paquette couldn't afford any.

Dad stood up. "Let me give him a call," Dad said. "You shouldn't have to work under those conditions. It's his responsibility to supply the required materials."

"No, Dad," I said.

"Well how else are you going to get them?"

"You have stacks and stacks of lumber. Forty or fifty of those boards would probably take care of it."

He thought about it some and shook his head. "I'd like to oblige you, David. If all of that belonged to me, I'd let you back a truck up to it and load away, but it's not mine. It's just not right. I'm sorry."

*

Ben tilted his head to one side, causing his hair to flop down into his face. "You an idiot? Why'd you ask Dad for it?" he asked me. He scooped it back up and flung it behind his shoulder. "I could have told you his answer before he gave it to you."

"You didn't know for sure," I insisted.

"Good God almighty," Ben said. His crew was on break, and I was starting to realize that they pretty much stayed on break until Dad came around to take a look. That's when they hopped up and got their work done. "Harry," Ben called over to him. He looked over at Harry, who was sitting on one of the scaffolding boards. "Can you believe this guy?" Harry had his false teeth sitting on his jeans, and he was eating a wrapped sandwich from the service station. Orange had a box of chocolate he tilted up to eat from now and then. "Dad is hung up on that kind of stuff. He never cut a corner in his life. How naïve are you?"

Orange stuck up for me. "He likes his daddy, Ben. There ain't no crime in that, is there?"

"Shut up, Orange. You don't know anything about him. He's my father. Dad or no dad, that man is a fucking tyrant."

Ben told me to come back after dark that night. We could load up lumber from four of the stacks of lumber and Dad would never notice. "Can you keep this a secret?" Ben asked me. "If you can't, it'll cost me my job."

*

That night we threaded four-dozen boards through the back windows of Paquette's car. "Just don't drive like a wild man," Ben said, "and you'll be fine." Harry was there

helping him, though he mostly stood off to the side while the two of us took the ends of five or six boards and carried them over. "If the law stops you, you're on your own. You can say that you whittled them from trees or something."

Harry said, "Come on, man. We gotta get going."

I shook Ben's hand and told him thanks. Ben climbed into his truck and rolled down the window. "We're going back to Harry's to watch some TV," Ben said to me. "You want to come with us?"

I pointed at Paquette's car with the boards sticking out both sides. They weighed enough that the back of the car slumped. "Better get those back to Paquette's."

"Keep it to yourself," he said.

He nodded at me and started his car. The glass-pack gave the engine a high-powered rumble. "What about the letter?" I asked.

"Dad showed you that?"

"Maybe," I said.

Ben looked over at Harry. "I'm thinking about signing up anyway. That's what the Little Elk did, you know? They were warriors. Ask Irene. She'll tell you."

"You know Irene?" I asked.

"When I left home, I went and lived with her at the Paquettes'. She told me what I needed to know. Same thing she's telling you now. About our great-grandfather, Red Elk."

I stopped and looked at Ben. "We're related to Red Elk?"

"Irene hasn't mentioned that?" Ben shook his head. "She will," he said, "she will."

*

I barely got any work done the day the professor had scheduled for his second visit. I tried to study the text he had assigned, but it was difficult and my mind was elsewhere. I had started to find that when I was away from Dad that my interest in Latin and medicine seemed to dwindle. I had to force myself to be interested, and the better I got to know Baby, the more difficult studying had become. All week I had struggled through Pliny the Younger's two letters. My lack of preparation would show. I was doomed.

"Hi," the professor said.

I said, "Good evening, Professor Stevens."

He stepped inside. He carried his satchel at a distance from his body. His outfit was different from the one he wore last week, but it was made up of all the same parts—the tweed jacket, a bowtie, and pleated-slacks. I thought maybe he'd had a haircut and had his shoes shined since the previous lesson. He looked about nervously until he saw what he'd been looking for. "Baby," he said. His voice carried across the room and found its mark. "I didn't see you over there."

"How was your drive, Professor?" she asked.

"Very nice," he said. "It's pretty country."

I started for the kitchen door, expecting him to follow along. "I hope you don't mind," the professor said, "but I found a little something I thought you might appreciate." He stepped closer to Baby's divan and smiled at her. He sat the satchel on the seat next to Baby and unsnapped the clasp. "If I may say so, you look quite *beautiful* tonight."

Baby and I locked eyes, and like two young children sharing a secret, we smiled at one another.

"How sweet of you to say so," Baby said, egging him on. I could see that she had taken on the role he expected of her. "You're so nice. I've never met anyone like you."

"Nor I you," he said. He pulled a small gift box from the bottom of the bag. "If you please," he said. He opened the box and pulled out a silver chain. A small pendant of some kind hung down off the chain. "I bought a dozen of them on my last trip to Pompeii. That's my area of research, you know."

"How lovely," she said.

He held the necklace over to her. "You mind?"

"Please," she said. She leaned her head forward, and the professor slipped the necklace around her neck. She looked over at me. "What do you think, David?"

"It's terrific," I said.

*

Professor Stevens corrected the errors in my translation of Pliny the Younger. At one point, he pulled my exam out and reviewed my responses. He hummed to himself. I held my breath, waiting for him to question my abilities, but he never did. "David," he said, flustered at my translation. "Pliny is in the process of witnessing what may be the end of the world. The earth is shaking, ash is falling out of the sky. Yet you've translated his letter as if he is writing about buying candy at the five and dime. He is days—maybe hours--away from his death. Can you not see that?"

"No, sir."

"Well," he said. He shook his head. "Imagine the scene. The sun no longer shines, boiling-hot lava threatens women and children cornered in the nooks and crevices of

Mount Vesuvius. They are choking from ash that first makes them delirious and then suffocates them. You are there with them. What do you do? What *do* you do?"

"I don't know," I said.

The professor shook his head. "Let's take a short break, shall we?"

In the living room, I took a seat on the couch. The professor stood over the two of us. "David," Baby said. "Go get us something to drink."

"You," I said.

"David," she said, her tone threatening.

"All right," I said.

Before I was even out of the room, the professor had taken my seat on the divan. On my through the doorway, I heard the front end of his question about her family being in Oklahoma. I didn't want to go back in there with the two of them sitting side by side, so I waited for the professor to return to our lessons. He came back thirty minutes later, a big smile covering his face. "She's really nice," he said. "Does she ever go out on...," he paused not sure how to put it. "Dates?" he added.

*

I didn't find out until after he left that the professor had officially asked Baby out for a date. Baby tested me with the information. I said, "That's great."

She said, "I'm too good for him, of course."

"Of course," I said.

"I would make an excellent wife of a professor of Classics, would I not?"

I was tired from the long day. The roof had been challenging me, and once again I was feeling fatigued from the long trip into the woods the previous night. If I came back

from Tulsa feeling fresh and ready to finish the task at hand, I had now lost the boost of energy, lost the distance I had felt. I wanted to throw my Latin book in the trash and get as far away from Baby as possible. The way she had toyed with the foolish professor turned my stomach, and made me wonder if she did the same thing to me without my noticing it. I hated myself for being jealous. I thought it was a boy's emotion, something my Dad would just shake his head over.

"Baby's been through too much, you know?" Irene told me later. "She doesn't know what she wants, so she takes everything that catches her eye. She's like a raccoon that way. She sees something shiny, she's gotta have it. It doesn't matter if she has a need for it or not. She's gotta have it is all. Maybe you're the same way, huh? Maybe you think she looks a little shiny?"

I looked away in embarrassment.

"Her mama wasn't like her at all," Irene said. "Not at all." She made the couch up the same every time, a bottom sheet, a top sheet, and three blankets. It was like she thought it was winter or something. Why would I need three blankets in June? I had a routine of folding two of the blankets down to my feet. Irene saw me do it every time, yet every time she added the three blankets.

"What was Yoshie like?" I asked. I had been curious since I pulled the flyer out of the box upstairs.

"Ah," Irene said. "She was too good for this world. I had to look out for her. In Buffalo, some bum asked her for a dollar. Yoshie, poor Yoshie! She pulled all the money out of her purse and handed it over to him, thirty or forty dollars. That was a lot

of money back then. It used to make Old Man Paquette so mad, but he loved her for it. You could tell. He loved her for it. Yes."

*

One night, I asked Baby about her mother. "Why did she agree to marry Paquette?" I guess I was trying to imagine what that must have been like for her, being over here in a foreign country and asked to marry someone here. What in the world would they have had in common?

"Love," Baby said. She was quite sure of her response.

The idea of someone loving Paquette was an impossibility for me, nor could I have imagined Paquette being capable of love. "What about Paquette?" I asked. "Why'd he want to marry Yoshie?"

"Loyalty," Baby said.

"What made him need to be loyal to her?"

"You don't understand," Baby said. "It didn't have anything to do with her. It was loyalty to grandpa. He would have done anything to please him. That's the kind of son he was. If Grandpa had told him to swim the Pacific, Dad would have done it."

"I'm nervous," she said. "You may find this hard to believe," she said, "but I don't get to go out on many dates with eligible men. What if he asks me for a dance?"

"He'll think you're great," I said. "Really."

"I don' t know," she said. She broke eye contact. I could tell that she really liked him, and that made me crazy. I swallowed my pride. "He seems nice," I offered.

"You think so?"

"Sensitive," I said. "Sensitive in a good way."

"Yes," she said. "I think you're right."

When someone knocked on the front door fifteen minutes before the professor was scheduled to arrive, I thought it must have been a door-to-door salesman. I answered the door, and there stood Professor Stevens absent his satchel. He transferred his hands from his pockets to his waist and back again. "David," he called me for the first time. "No need to worry," he said. "I've left Pliny the Younger in my car."

"Good," I said.

"Yes," Professor Stevens said. "He's sitting out there with Cicero, discussing the future of the Roman Empire."

I said, "That's funny, Professor Stevens."

"Well," he said.

I guided him toward Baby. How I wanted to hate him! His blue eyes, his tweed jackets. His cloistered ways. I did hate that Baby valued him so much that she would wear extra makeup for him. I hated that she could stammer and mispronounce words that she teased others for botching. I couldn't imagine what that was like—to impact a woman so much that she couldn't think of anything else. There was a place in me that

knew Baby could feel the same way about me. I realized now that I wanted her to. She was more than just shiny. There was more to it.

"Sam," she said.

He bent over her in order to kiss her. I just caught it: Baby swooned as he leaned into her. He kissed her on the cheek. The professor shyly took a few steps back and crossed his arms around himself. "Hello, Baby. How are you tonight?"

"I'm fine," she said. Even the rouge didn't hide the red flowing across her face. "I am just fine."

I heard the squeak of Paquette's door as it opened. "Is that Stevens?" Paquette called down.

"Yes, Daddy," Irene said.

"It's me, sir."

Paquette took the stairs slowly, sizing Baby's date up as he walked. This was the first time in nearly two weeks that I had seen Paquette dressed in anything other than his old uniforms. He wore a country shirt with an old-fashioned string tie. His hair had been slicked back with gel or water. It gave him a look of meanness. I had a secret wish that he would the send professor away. He finally lived up to the way I thought of him.

Paquette shook his hand in a way that fathers were supposed to do, a firm handshake. "Where are you taking her?"

"Daddy," Baby said.

"You're my daughter. I think I have a right to know."

"When we get back," Baby said, "I'll tell you."

Paquette insisted on carrying Baby out of the house and across the drive to the car, though he could have put her in the wheelchair after he had carried her over the raised doorjamb. "Can I help?" the professor asked.

"No," Paquette said.

"If I can help, let me know."

The professor's car was a VW Beetle, yellow and a convertible. Paquette took one look at it and said, "Better take my car. It's equipped with a special seat for Baby." He carried her a little farther, looked over at the professor and said, "You can drive a stick, can't you?"

*

From all appearances, the professor's car must have already been a decade old if not more. The professor followed behind Paquette, apologizing profusely for the car's age and the high level of discomfort. Paquette nudged around the professor in order to get to the passenger side. "Here, here," the professor said, wanting to do his part in getting Baby in the car. He opened the door as wide as it would go and got out of Paquette's way. It had taken a few minutes to get to the car and coordinate the effort, and in the meantime, Paquette had been holding Baby in his arms for longer than he normally had to.

"Just set me down, Daddy," she said. Baby's eyes darted about, and I felt the fear rising in her. She was afraid he would drop her and ruin the evening.

Paquette placed her on the seat. "No lap belt?" he said to the professor, who just shrugged. Paquette glanced back at me. "How we going to keep her from falling?"

"Stop it, Daddy," she said. "I'll be fine. Just leave me alone."

Paquette wasn't sure what to do. He stood back with his hands on his hips. The situation perplexed him.

"Daddy," Baby pleaded.

"I'm a careful driver," the professor said. "My car insurance premiums are at the lowest rate possible."

Just when I thought the situation was over and Baby had started to regain her composure, Paquette said, "What about the chair? How are you going to get around town without a chair to sit in?"

"God," Baby said.

Paquette motioned to his car. "Grab the chair," he told me, "and we'll see if we can fit it in the backseat."

The chair wouldn't fit. We tried it a dozen different ways. The chair was old and awkward and heavy.

"I can carry her," the professor said.

"She's too heavy to carry for long," Paquette said.

"Just let us go," Baby said. She started crying in a quiet way, the self-pitying way that sometimes comes with being overwhelmed by circumstances. I recognized the emotion from my interactions with Dad.

It was decided that I would drive them where they wanted to go, but I was told not to interfere in any way. Baby lectured me for so long that I couldn't look the professor in the face anymore. We all loaded up in Paquette's car and headed for the college town thirty miles from Little Elk.

*

When we arrived in Stillwater, the professor tapped me on the shoulder and told me to take a right at the next light. "We have some time before the performance begins. I thought maybe we could go by my place for a drink." They were both in the backseat, and I openly listened from the driver's seat.

"That would be nice," Baby said.

I was already tired of them. On the drive on the way over, he had asked her the details of her mother's experience with the bomb. While she didn't mention the dreams, she did tell him everything, and with every detail she told him, I felt betrayed. The drops added up to be a pool of disloyalty, as Baby had told him our own secrets.

We pulled down a street of junky rental houses. Their front yards were overgrown with grass full of trash and rusting junk. If I had to pick his house from all the others, I would have never guessed it. His small wooden house was one in a row of similar structures. I would have thought he would live in something different, something unique. I was a little disappointed.

"The next one on the left," the professor said. "The one with the bicycle on the porch."

I pulled in and parked. The lights in the house had been left on. I could hear music coming from the house. "Someone home?" I asked before going to get the chair out of the trunk.

"Just Helen," the professor said.

"Helen?" Baby asked.

"My Persian."

"Oh," Baby said.

When I got the trunk open, the professor said, "Don't bother."

"She should have the chair," I said.

"David," Baby warned.

I watched as he put his arms around her and pulled her from the car. She giggled a little, and as I watched the two of them next to each other, I felt my heart sink. I could recall her scent from the last time I had been close to her. "David," the professor said, "would you mind getting the door for us?"

I held it open and stepped back.

"It's like we're newlyweds, and I'm carrying you through the threshold for the first time. Remarkable, isn't it?"

I took a seat on the front porch. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. The professor's and Baby's voices filtered through the sound of the jazz trumpet. I listened to them through the screen without bothering to look—red or white wine, Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the black-and-white pictures of Edward Weston on his walls, the professor's own snapshots of Pompeii and Mt. Vesuvius. Baby's voice was so accommodating, so pliable that I had to get away from the screen door. I just couldn't take it anymore.

The front fender of Paquette's car made the perfect seat. From a distance I heard the rumblings of a party. The smell of hamburgers cooking on an open flame had been blowing down the block since I had first arrived. It was already dark, yet far down the street four of them continued to pass the football around in the street. When a car's headlights washed over them, they would step off to the side and let the car pass. I

couldn't hear their voices or make out their faces or tell the difference between the boys and girls. They might as well have been a hundred miles away.

A half-hour later, the professor carried Baby back out the door. I could smell the wine on their breath. Baby didn't even notice me standing there. I said, "It's like you all are getting a divorce."

"Excuse me," the professor said.

"The threshold," I said. "You're coming back out now." He didn't get it. "You're undoing your marriage."

*

I dropped them off at the performing arts center on campus and told them I'd be back in two hours. "Don't meet us here," the professor said. He gave me directions to the duck pond on the other side of campus. "We're going to take a little walk," the professor said. "And instead of two hours make it three."

He had given me the keys to his place, so I went back to his house and let myself in. The house had no overhead lighting, only lamps with stained-glass shades. This gave the room a strange, filtered effect. The house was mostly just dark. The black-and-white photographs on the walls were lighted from underneath. I found Helen the Persian in the kitchen, drinking from her water bowl. She smelled Hiro on my pant leg, and followed me around the house with her investigation. I personally thought she looked sickly. I thought about throwing her out the front door, letting her have a taste of the real world for a change.

Their half-finished bottle of wine sat out on the counter. I had never had wine before, though Dad let me take an occasional sip of his scotch now and then. I didn't like

the taste, but because he offered it, I thought it important to try. I figured there would eventually come a day when something happened and I liked it. The cups in the cupboards were all blown glass. I pulled one out and filled it to the top with wine. In the living room, I turned on the radio and tuned the dial to a broadcast of a Cardinals' game. Bob Gibson was going for his seventh win of the season against the Pittsburgh Pirates. The wine tasted terribly bitter to me. I forced myself to take a few gulps. My plan was to finish the bottle. I would be too drunk to pick them up at the duck pond.

The photo-album of the professor's snapshots of Pompeii and Mt. Vesuvius had been left open. There were pictures of the half-excavated ruins--partially destroyed murals and columns broken into a dozen or more parts. I stopped at the pictures of the people, three pages worth. The professor had told me about the process of pouring plaster into the cavities of the Pompeii dead. Once you broke away the layers of ash and dirt that surrounded the bodies, they ended up with mannequins. Their death masks were recorded in the cast. I got chills looking at all the faces, their arms and legs all akimbo. If you tapped them with a hammer, they would shatter into a thousand pieces.

I sat back in the couch and balanced the glass of wine on my midsection. Gibson had struck out the side in the sixth, and the Cards were starting to make a run in the seventh. Leave it to Al Weis to drive in the go-ahead run. When I listened to the games on the radio, it seemed as if they never lost. Each one of the photographs on the wall was of some kind of shape. They looked like the kind of decoration a professor would have on his wall. Not really pretty so much as strange. I stared at them, at the form, and I suddenly realized that they were pictures of women's bodies. The models were folded up in odd poses, their faces hidden. They weren't like Henry's pornographic pictures. They

didn't show the breasts or anything. There would be a knee and a torso, a head tucked down in a way that made it seem something other than a human head. I looked at them and the longer and harder I stared the more I realized that there was a connection between the casts of bodies at Pompeii and the photographs of women on the professor's walls. I sat up, and in the process, my glass of wine fell over, spilling all over my shirt and the couch. "Jesus Christ," I said, sounding just like Dad. I could feel the thick liquid across my belly.

*

Baby and the Professor were not waiting for me where he had told me they would be. I waited for ten minutes and then got out of Paquette's car. The wind had picked up. The smell of a storm whistled through the wind, sending trash whirling around in circles around me. They would be somewhere close.

I walked down the sidewalk, passing college students walking home or coming from home. I felt intimidated by them with their nice clothes and the way the boys were so often paired with girls. They looked at me as if I were some sort of freak, the person who got past the admissions board, this strange guy with a big wine stain across the front of his shirt like a birthmark. I cut across the grass and walked down to the pond. Couples were sitting on the benches. I tried not to look at them or think about what they were doing. I just walked along the water's edge, keeping one eye open for Baby and the professor. At the end of my first loop, I saw a couple sitting in an unlit area almost entirely surrounded by shrubbery. I caught sight of a swatch of the professor's jacket. He was sitting with Baby on a retaining wall under a cluster of oaks. There was no light

there, and when I came up on them, I realized they were kissing. Stevens had his arm around Baby, holding her steady and keeping her close to him.

"Baby," I said.

The professor slid away from her as if her father had caught them and for a brief second I thought he was going to let her fall. She had lost her own balance. At the last second, he grabbed her. They smiled at each other over the near-mistake. He said, "David," he said, "I didn't see you standing there."

*

On the drive back, they sat in the back seat, leaning against one another on the side of the car directly behind my driver's seat. Side by side, they fitted themselves together. "Can you find something decent on the radio?" Baby asked. I glanced back in the rearview mirror and gave her what I hoped she recognized as a scowl. I had been listening to the end of the Cardinal's game with the Senators, though Gibson had blown his comeback after I had left the professor's house. I thought there was always the possibility that Baby would get interested in the game.

I tuned the dial to a rock channel, playing the rock music that a lot of my friends listened to. I figured Baby would want that, but she said, "The professor doesn't listen to rock and roll."

"No," he said. "That's fine. Leave it."

They pretended to be innocently riding there, but half way back to Little Elk, their conversation turned to whispers and then disappeared altogether. I glanced back in my rearview mirror and knew that something was going on that they'd rather not have me know about. His arm was no longer wrapped around Baby's shoulder. I sped the car up

and zipped through the dark, Oklahoma night, but they didn't notice that we were zooming past other cars and not vice versa. I wasn't sure what the source of my anger was, whether Baby had violated our intimacy or if it was more that the professor had already been further with Baby than I had in the month I had been getting to know her. Maybe it was that he was slowly separating Baby and me. I let the car glide down the highway without restraint. When we took a corner too fast, I hit my brakes and Baby said, "You okay, David?"

"Fine," I said. After the turn, I got the car back up to the speed I had been going.

At the Paquette mansion, Baby dismissed me. She said that she would be in in a few minutes. "Okay," I said. There wasn't an excuse that I could think of. I stood there for a second, trying desperately to think of one, but they all failed me. Baby said, "I'll be in in just a little while."

"I'll wait up," I said.

She looked over at the professor. They both looked back at me. "It may be a while," Baby said.

I said, "That's alright. I don't mind."

*

Irene was sitting under the only light on in the house, reading one of her science fiction books. She looked up at me. She had been reading for so long her eyes had crossed. "Irene," I said, "you need glasses."

"Ha," she said. "You're one to speak."

"I see 20/20."

"If you say so," Irene said.

I went into the kitchen and tried to catch a glimpse of the professor and Baby in the car. The drive didn't have any lights, and the clouds from the front blocked off the moonlight. The door pushed open. Irene came in and took a seat at the table. "I've been thinking about Red Elk," she said.

"*Irene*," I said. I moved Irene's stepping stool over to the wall to see if I could get a better angle on the car. Still, I couldn't see anything. I was getting frustrated at all this. If I could just see Baby, I knew I would be okay. Just a glimpse of her.

"You know how it was with Red Elk. He was a great warrior."

"Damn," I said.

"Red Elk knew something that the rest of the Little Elk didn't. They refused to listen to him."

I took a seat on the stool in frustration. "What was that?" I asked.

Irene said, "What was what?"

"Red Elk," I said. "What did he know that the Little Elk didn't?"

"Ah," Irene said. She smiled.

After the white soldiers had killed many of our people, Red Elk was brought up on trial in Chicago and convicted of treason against the people of the United States. As punishment, the judge gave Red Elk a choice. The choice was this: Red Elk and his people could be removed from Nebraska to the Indian Territories where they would be given land for farms or he could leave his people behind to join Paquette's Wild West Show for four years. After four years, he could do what he wanted. It would be up to him. He would have two days to make up his mind and then he would come back and tell the judge his decision. In two days, Red Elk appeared before the judge a second time, his

mind made up. Col. Paquette was there with him, standing at his side. The important judge thought he was smart. He believed that the great warrior Red Elk would be too full of pride to go with Paquette. He had seen what they did to Crazy Horse and to Red Cloud. Like these great men, he would be paraded around in front of white people who would stare at him and ask him what it was like to scalp innocent women and children and spit on him. They would want their pictures taken with him and ask him what it felt like to be as good as dead. Too much pride, ha!

And the people, too! They didn't want to give up their leader and a warrior like Red Elk. What would they be without him? Nothing, they thought. The day before Red Elk was to report back to the court, a group of important men in the tribe came to him and told him they would take him west to the mountains where the white soldiers couldn't find them. They could live the life they wanted there, and when they no longer remembered Red Elk, they could come back to their home in Nebraska. He knew that would have been the government's excuse for killing the rest of his people that remained after the bloody battle. Red Elk sent the men away without explanation.

In the courtroom, Red Elk told the judge he had reached a decision. He spoke in his native Little Elk and Col. Paquette translated for him. He looked the judge in the eye the way he knew that the white people talked to each other. He said, "I will go with the good colonel." Many of the women sat in the back of the courtroom and openly wept. They were making too much noise and the judge had these women removed from the courtroom.

The judge said that he would honor Red Elk's decision, but first he wanted to know why Red Elk had made such a choice, knowing how he would be treated. "Why?" the judge asked.

Irene took my hand gently. She gripped my thumb in her fist and squeezed. "If you were to cut your thumb off your body, you would still be you. He thought he could take attention away from the tribe, but the tribe could never be severed from the land." She let my hand go. The finger tingled in numbness. The blood rushed back through all of my hand.

"Is all that true?" I asked.

"Well," Irene said. "What do you think?"

"But the Little Elk are in Oklahoma now."

"I said that Red Elk knew more than his people," she said. "I didn't say he knew everything. Red Elk joined Col. Paquette's show, and they forced the tribe down here anyway."

I got back up to look out the window again. They had been out there for close to an hour-and-a half, and I was beginning to worry about Baby. "I'm going to bed," Irene said. "Can you help Baby when she comes in?"

"Sure," I said.

Irene grabbed me by the thumb and shook my hand slowly. "Don't do anything stupid, David."

*

The waiting got to be too much. I snuck out the back door and crept around the house to where I could see the car. When that didn't do me much good, I walked all the

way to the wood line, followed the trees to the back of the bunkhouse, and crept up behind the car. The windows were down, and I could hear the faint murmurs of Baby's voice. She was humming a tune of her own making. Her words started to take shape. She was directing him, guiding him around her body.

I took a seat at the back of the car, and I began to cry. The evening had been too much for me. I quietly wept for my failures that I had yet to understand but knew that the lessons would come to me soon enough.

"Stop," she suddenly said. "Now kiss me some more." He kissed her, and they giggled. I thought maybe I should go back inside. I could just fall asleep by the door, and they could wake me when they were ready. That way I would still be able to help Baby into bed.

"Don't do that," Baby said. I sat up on my knees and listened more intently. "I'm serious," she said.

I stood up. From the back window, I could see the professor hovering over Baby's shoulder. He was running his tongue over the stubs of her arms. He said, "Come on."

"Get away," she said.

She fell over in the seat, and he must have kept up because she started yelling. I jerked the door open, and as soon as I did, the professor sat up. His pants were off his waist. Baby's dress was above over the stubs of her legs. I realized that her underwear was draped over the headrest of the backseat. I had never seen those parts of woman before. "You little creep," he said. He rushed out of the car and pushed me down to the ground.

Baby said, "Stop it, you creep. Get the hell out of here."

The professor pulled his pants back up. "You little bitch. You're nothing but a monster, a grotesque mockery of the human body."

I did what I had to do. I ran the fifteen feet to the professor and tackled him. His head nearly missing Paquette's bumper. I got him onto his back as he struggled and saw the fear in his eyes, and I hated him for showing the fear to me, so I pounded him with my fist. Once, twice, three times. My blows felt mild from my perspective. I had never hit someone in the face before. They seemed to catch his face each time, freezing for just a second on the edge of his cheekbone or jaw where my knuckle caught him. It felt good, a delayed satisfaction. Still, I knew I had to stop. I hopped up off him. The professor just stayed there on the ground, lost in the aftermath of my blows and whimpering from the shock. His blue eyes had welled up with tears. His lip was swollen and busted.

"Get up," I said. I proffered my hand to lift him.

He swatted it away. "Leave me alone."

I pulled Baby out of the car and carried her inside. Over my shoulder, she yelled at him all the way to the front door: "You're a lousy fucking lover. You know that? You fuck like a rabbit! You should be ashamed of yourself. A fucking rabbit!"

*

I carried her carefully up the stairs. Her body felt light and warm next to mine. I thought she leaned into me as I carried her. "Careful," she said. "I'm the only limbless girl in the entire world who has to diet in order to keep her figure."

"Hush," I said.

Her makeup had been smeared. The rouge was displaced. The mascara smeared from her tears. She looked a mess, but her eyes were bright and I thought she was stunning.

"He's a fool. Isn't he?" she asked.

"An idiot," I said.

"An overeducated buffoon."

"An overeducated asshole."

"Right," Baby said.

We had forgotten about Paquette, and as we talked, we suddenly heard the sound of Hiro's nails scraping the floor as she pranced inside Paquette's room. We looked at one another. Baby said, "Shhhh."

The door opened and Paquette stuck his head to see what all the noise was about. He looked at Baby first, then me. She was starting to get heavy so I had to bounce her a little to get my hold back. Paquette's door slammed shut.

"Oh, hell," Baby said.

"What?"

"Never mind."

In the bathroom, I helped get her ready for bed. I said, "You need to take a bath or anything?" I had to look at the sink to get the question out.

"You are mighty cute, David Elkhart."

I took a washcloth, soaked it in lukewarm water, and then soaped it up with the bar of Ivory sitting on the kitchen sink. Just as carefully as I had rubbed in the rouge, I washed her face free of makeup. The warmth of the washcloth must have felt comforting

on her skin. I had trouble with some of the mascara. "Rub harder," Baby said. "I won't break off in pieces." I did as she asked. Finally, I got her nightgown from her bedroom closet and brought it into the bathroom. She had me unbutton the dress from the back and then slip the nightgown over neck. "Now turn around," she said.

*

In her bedroom, I sat her down on the edge of her bed. "I owe you for tonight," Baby said. She seemed on unstable ground with the compliment. She just shook her head. "I owe you."

"You don't," I said.

She worked herself down onto the mattress, favoring her left side. I pulled the sheet up over her. "Good night," I said. I took a step back.

"'Night, David."

I turned to leave her room and let her sleep, but she called me back. "Stay here tonight," she said. "There on the ground."

I rolled up my wine-stained shirt and stuck it under my head. Baby had an extra blanket on the bed, so I folded it in half like a taco and slipped inside. I was exhausted. There was so much that I wanted to tell Baby that I felt overwhelmed by the possibilities. I wanted to ask her about the things in her life, questions that never before had I thought to ask. Still, I had to be patient. I had to wait for the right time. Tomorrow was Friday, the day Dad would pick me up and take me back to Tulsa for the weekend. The idea pleased me. My time with Baby was fascinating and unpredictable, but I still wanted to go home to see Mom and sleep in my own bed. I had the best of both worlds, and I wasn't ready to give one up in favor of the other.

I was starting to drift off when I heard Baby's quiet sobs. I thought she might have been dreaming, so I got up and ran my arm down her side, to jostle her from her dream.

"Oh, David," she cried. "Why can't I just be normal? Tell me that? What normal man would want a monster like me?" I didn't know what to say. "Hold me, David. I just need to be held tonight. Can you do that?"

I crawled up in bed and wrapped my arms around her. One arm under her neck and the other just under the stub of her arm. I wedged it there, held her tightly. I held her in a way that let her know that I wouldn't let go. "There," she said. She stopped crying. Her breath caught back up with her. "That makes me feel better." She was asleep before I settled on something. I held her until my own arms fell asleep and they tingled from the lack of circulation.

In the middle of the night, Baby's body started to shake, a slight tremor running the length of her body. I squeezed her close to me, and my body absorbed her body's vibrations. "Baby," I whispered.

"It's Mom," she whispered back.

I could feel the heat rising off her body and within a few seconds, her nightgown became soaked with sweat. I put my cheek up to her back and closed my eyes:

Yoshie walks slowly down the long hallway. A window that overlooks the doctors' parking lot at the hospital. In the distance is her home, Hiroshima. Every time she passes the large picture window, she looks out to see if Dr. Suzuki's car has arrived. She looks at her watch. He is late. Yoshie wears the uniform of a Japanese nurse, though she hasn't had the formal training that would qualify her to wear the uniform. To her, the uniform feels like a costume, a prop from her junior high production of The Three

Sisters. *She is only fifteen and is there only because the other nurses have been called up to field hospitals to support the war effort.*

An elderly woman comes out of one of the many rooms in the wing and stops her by grabbing her arm. She tells Yoshie that her husband is having difficulty breathing. Yoshie tells her that she will get help, to go back inside the room and wait for the doctor. The woman bows, thanking her. Instead of going right to the doctor's station, Yoshie stops to look out the window one more time. She can't resist. There he is. One of the few men in Hiroshima who can afford a vehicle during the war. He has told her that he will soon be shipped up to the front with many of his older colleagues. Their men deserve the best medical care. She agrees with him, of course. Her parents don't know about the doctor, and the doctor's wife and three kids don't know about her. If this information were to become known, they would all be disgraced. There would be nothing left.

Standing in the window, Yoshie waves to her young lover, the doctor. She is careful not to let anyone see her do so. The wave is small, almost not even a wave at all but more of a flutter of her fingers, a thought more than a greeting. He is too far away to see her. She rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet. She is almost too excited to contain the adrenaline running through her body. She is in love. She is in love. Yoshie almost believes that her father would accept their relationship if he could only feel this feeling for a short second. Perhaps the wife, too.

One second she is standing there at the window and the next she is not. Her desire takes form in a flash that temporarily blinds her and swallows her in heat and glass and the smell of skin and hair singed to the bone. For a second, she thinks this is exactly what her desire is. This is her inside made manifest for everyone to see. The cries begin

to echo down the hallway, and she remembers the old man. She tries to pick herself up off the ground, but she cannot stand. The cries are her own, as well as the cries of ghosts stacked around her.

"I haven't," I said.

"Ah," she said. "It must be beginner's luck."

Her body began to push back against my body. "Scoot over," she said. She pushed at me until I was centered on top of her. I cushioned her from the full weight of my body by pushing myself up with one hand. I didn't want to hurt her, and I wanted to see her. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't break."

She pushed her crotch into mine. I leaned into her, and I felt the feeling inside me build until I felt like my body was on fire, like I was swimming in liquid flame, and then I felt the flow of the wave. I must have gasped. I put my cheek against hers. "I can't believe it," I said. It was too late.

She laughed. "What's wrong?" she said, pretending she didn't know.

I nodded down to my pants, and we both looked down at the blossoming spill on my pants. "I think I made a mess."

She looked me in the eyes. "You're so young," she said. "So *sweet*. You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"Baby," I pleaded. I kissed her again, trying to kiss her in the way a sweet boy would never kiss. She kept her eyes open wide. She laughed at my effort. "Don't try so hard," she said.

"I'm not," I said.

"David," she said. "I want you to see what I really look like. I want you to look closely, and tell me if you still want to do this." Baby rolled onto her side, and I unbuttoned the back of her dress. Her skin was the color of copper pennies. I unhooked the bra strap, letting it fall aside. I curled up around her and kissed her back. I ran my

hand over her side and felt the softness of her breast. The skin of her back felt cool to my lips. I sat up and pulled the dress back off her shoulder. The stub of her arm was exposed. She didn't move while I took a long look. I wanted her to know I was looking. This, too, was a test. The skin was partially discolored where they had tried two unsuccessful operations. Cartilage had been cut away, the bone left exposed. "The root of my bone aches," she said.

"It's hurting now?" I asked.

"It hurts all the time," she said.

I cupped the rough part of her joint with my hand. I rubbed, letting my fingers feel for the soft parts, kneeding between tough areas with my thumb. The skin stretched at my touch. I rubbed through to the bone. Baby smiled.

She rolled over on her other side, and I pulled the dress away from her shoulder. I pulled the dress away from her front. Her other stub was slightly different. I took a closer look. I wondered if anyone had ever noticed the difference. I rubbed the bone and skin and ligaments by touch alone, while I kissed her again. I broke away for a breath. "Why does this one feel different?" I asked. I rubbed harder to let her know what I was talking about.

"It's not," she said.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"No."

I dug my hand under her other shoulder, checking for the difference. An extra bone along the ridge of the end, no larger than the width of a pencil. "My last surgery," Baby

said. "They tried to graft on something that might allow me to grab hold of things. That opposable thumb seemed awfully important to them."

I looked her in the face. "What? What'd they use?"

"A hand from a guy who had died," she said. "It was an experiment. They left part of his wrist embedded in me." She grew shy, looking away from me. I knew she hated her body, and I felt sad knowing that. "Does that disgust you?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"I'll understand if you want to leave."

I rolled the dress down to her hips. She shifted her weight, and I pulled the dress free of her body. I rubbed the stubs of her legs in the same way I had rubbed her arms. "Go on," she said with a smile, her eyes open wide.

*

I kissed her on the lips when I woke up. I wanted to make love again, but I didn't want to risk Baby turning me down. Even that would be a blow to me so early in our relationship. "Let me be," she said, groggily. I showered. My own body felt different to me, as if my own body had been transformed by Baby's.

After a few hours of work in the attic, I went downstairs and told Irene I was going into town for an hour or two. She looked at me, expecting me to divulge my purpose. I had a habit of giving away too much, of tossing the dog a bone if he wanted it or not. She had grown used to my habit. I said, "None of your business."

"I'd rather not know," she said.

In town, I went to the drugstore a few businesses down from Owens' Hardware. They had a soda stand in the front and a part-time pharmacist who worked the counter in

the back. They also had five and dime items—an aisle of toys and dolls, cards and stationary, pop and picnic items. I had the ten-dollar bill that Mom had given me, and I figured this was a good time to use the money. If I had more, I would have spent it as well. In the way of jewelry, the store carried a line of inexpensive watches, rings, and necklaces. I looked them over, trying to figure out what Baby might like best. She had such good taste that I was worried she would laugh at cheap drugstore jewelry. The models in her fashion magazines wore bracelets of pure silver, gold necklaces, and diamonds bought by millionaire businessmen. I looked for something just right. I handled each item on the shelf. One at a time, I rejected each one. The woman working the counter asked if she could help me. "No," I said. "I'm not sure what I need."

I left without buying anything.

*

The Cardinals played later that night. Baby had been quiet through most of the game. Bob Gibson was pitching, but Baby just wasn't interested. I looked up after they turned a double-play, and she hadn't even noticed. "Penny for your thoughts," I told her, a saying my Mom liked to use on Dad. Baby looked inside herself, frowned, and then said, "It's nothing." Irene glanced up from her book to look first at Baby, then at me. I wanted to pin her down to the couch and kiss her right then and there, but I kept myself in check. And that, too, added to my excitement.

My memories from the night before mingled with scenes my imagination was producing on its own. I had showered two times during the day, the second time Irene had stopped me outside the door: "That's all," she said, "I need the hot water for the dishes." I had blushed. There was something else on my mind. She had kept her eyes

open the entire time we had made love, and I didn't want to admit it, but that bothered me a little. It suggested a distance that I didn't want to admit to. I wondered if she had had too many experiences like the one she had with the professor. She was jaded and no longer could give all of herself over to someone. That seemed like a reasonable explanation. I blamed the professor.

Baby spoke up again a few minutes later. "Mom never had anyone to love her, not really," she said.

"Your father doesn't count?"

"What do you think?"

"They had you—Yoshie must have at least liked him."

"Anything's possible," Baby said. She was beginning to get angry with me. When Baby had made up her mind, there was no going against it. She had this way of looking just over my head when she was mad at me. Plus, the tips of her ears grew hot red. "He's been such a *great* father," she said. "I'm sure he must have been a *terrific* husband and lover. He's just a *wonderful* all around person, isn't he?"

I laughed at her. I recalled what Irene had once told me about Baby: "If anything really good happened to her, it might just about kill her."

"Don't pay any attention to me," Baby said. "You know what," Baby said, "you better just stay down here tonight. I need to get a good night's sleep."

*

As Irene was making up my bed, I asked Irene what was wrong with Baby. "I don't know," she said. "I thought you might be the one to answer that."

"I don't know," I said.

"The professor called and left a message," Irene said.

"What did he say?"

"He was sorry," Irene said. "He hoped to meet her for coffee this weekend, if she was available."

*

The next day I found myself driving over to the college town. I had been thinking a lot about the professor and what he had done to Baby. I resented him, detested his actions. I thought in some way Baby needed to be free of him, though I wasn't sure how she might accomplish this. I drove by the front of the professor's house. His VW bug was gone. I pulled down the block and waited. I wasn't entirely sure what I would do when I found him. All I knew was that I needed to see him again. I'd decide what action to take when I set eyes on him. After an hour, I got tired of waiting and drove around town, looking for him. The town was big enough that he could have been anywhere. I didn't have much luck, so I went back to his house.

There was always the chance that his car was parked somewhere else but that he was actually home. The outside door was unlocked. I knocked on the screen door. It bounced ajar with each knock. It wasn't latched. I called for him, but he didn't answer. From the door, I could see the coffee table and the photographs on the wall. I thought I could smell wine in the air. I looked around to see if anyone was watching and stepped inside. I had hated myself that night she had been here. I hated myself for not being able to tell her the way I felt, for knowing that the professor was all wrong for her. I felt paralyzed, useless.

I took a close look at the black-and-white photographs of the heads of cabbage, the bell pepper. They seemed to be making fun of Baby. It was something about the way they were lit as if they were bodies, yet they were made to look grotesque. I took one of the framed photographs off the wall and held it. Without taking the time to think about my action, I slammed the top of the frame down on the coffee table, shattering the glass and breaking the top of the frame off. I sailed the broken frame like a Frisbee across the room. I didn't feel the glass cut me, but I looked down at my hand and saw a dozen cuts across my fingers and palm. I ignored the injury for the time being. For the six other photographs, I took objects off the coffee table—an ashtray, a vase, a small globe—and doing my best Bob Gibson fastball, I threw them as hard as I could into the photographs. The glass flew everywhere. Before I left, I grabbed the professor's album of his trip to Pompeii.

*

I waited until late that night to show her. "What's that?" she asked when I pulled the album out of my backpack and put it next to her on her bed.

She flipped through the pages, no doubt reliving her night with the professor. She turned to the photographs of the body molds. A mother frozen mid-scream, her hand up in the air warding the heat and ash away from her child. The dog curled up in a little ball trying to protect itself. "No," Baby said. She smiled. "I can't believe it."

I kissed her, and she kissed me back. I crawled into bed with her. Smiling, she said, "I'm worried about you."

She noticed the cuts on my hand. "Let me see," she said.

I held the hand up to her face. She began to lick my palm. Her tongue ran between my fingers and then up and down each one. "My wounds," she said.

*

In the morning, Baby rolled out of my arms. She nudged me with the stub of her arm. "Listen."

I did as she asked, though I wasn't sure what she might have heard. Maybe Irene was calling for me? Maybe Paquette had fallen and hurt himself? I didn't know. "I don't hear anything," I said. "What is it?"

Baby nudged me a second time, harder than the first. "You're not *listening*," she said.

I tried again. Then I heard it: feet shuffling across the floorboards above us. Someone was in the attic, looking over the work I had yet to do. "Shit," I said. I hopped up out of bed. Paquette didn't know about all the thinking I had been doing, the plans starting to come together. "He's looking for a way to get rid of me."

"He wouldn't do that," she said.

"No?"

"No," Baby said.

"What's going to stop him?"

"Me," she said. "I won't let him."

"He's going to try," I said. I traced the sounds of each step across the floor and saw what he saw in my mind's eye. The steps moved toward the ladder. The short leg of the ladder wobbled against the floor, sending the signal that Paquette was coming down. Hiro barked at him from the floor.

"Hell," I said. I wanted to disappear. I couldn't face him. My pride wouldn't let me. I slipped into Baby's closet and pulled the door shut. I put one ear to the door.

I heard Baby's voice: "Go away, Dad."

I imagined Paquette stepping into Baby's room and looking around for any tell-tale signs of me. "Where is he?" Paquette asked.

"Go back to sleep."

"You know what the boy's done up there? Not a thing. Nothing. And here, I've been paying for his food, shelter, and his goddamn Latin lessons. He's been lying the entire time about fixing the roof. A goddamn liar." Paquette might as well have been lashing me with a whip. Each word made me cringe in embarrassment. All those feelings of insecurity came rushing back to me. Dad had been wrong to put his trust in me. I was a big failure, after all.

Paquette stormed out of Baby's room, stomped down the staircase, and slammed the front door shut behind him. I stepped out of the closet and faced Baby.

"You fuck-up," she said, teasing. The engine to Paquette's car roared to life. "Where does he think he's going?"

"I know where," I said.

The car spit gravel back at the garage. This sound was quickly followed by the steady drone of his car gaining speed going down the long stretch of road that led to the center of Little Elk. I could feel my insides tightening.

*

Paquette's car pulled back into the drive a short time later. I had gone for a cup of coffee and to hide behind Irene, who was washing the pots from breakfast. Irene knew

what I was up to, but she didn't go anywhere the way I thought she might. She threw me the towel, and I started drying.

"I was thinking about something," Irene said. "Between you and your daddy, which one of you is smarter? You or your daddy?"

"And what'd you decide?" I asked her.

"Ah," she said. "I haven't quite made up my mind, but I'm starting to figure it out."

"Funny," I said.

The door opened, and Paquette leaned inside, keeping the door braced open with palm of his hand. "Here, son."

I looked to Irene. She nodded at me to go with him. I folded the towel over once and then twice and placed it on the kitchen counter and inched my way around between him and the door. "David," Irene said. "When I make up my mind, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks a lot," I said.

Paquette poked me in the chest with his finger and gritted his teeth. I waited for him to tell me to get my bags and get out. "All high and mighty," he said. He got down in my face. I had never realized his eyes were so cold, so severe. They scared me in a way Paquette's fist never could.

I said, "Don't."

"You are fake," he said. He looked up to the second floor landing to see if anyone was watching. "You following me out there every night, like you're some kind of goddamn angel. It ends up you're not perfect any more than I am. But you know that better than I do, don't you?"

He gave me a hard shove, sending me stumbling back. I had just about had enough, but I stopped myself from going after him. I wish I had tried harder to fight back when he had attacked me. This kind of thinking was a lot easier than dealing with the real problems I was having. I wanted to pound away, but maybe this was the excuse he was looking for to send me away. I took to my feet.

"Your daddy wants to see you," Paquette said.

*

"I put my name on the line for you," Dad said. I sat in the chair opposite Dad's desk in his trailer office. He didn't yell at me, but he let it be known that I had crossed the line and that I was now walking on risky terrain. "If you needed help," Dad said, "why didn't you say anything? You never said one word to me. I just assumed you were getting the job done, and you were...what? What were you doing up there all that time?" I just sat there with my head down. I felt terrible. I had wanted to show him what I was capable of, and all I had done was disappoint him. If I had something to offer him up, I would have gladly done it then: a promise to make up for my mistake, a second chance. "What do you have to say for yourself?'

"I'm sorry," I said. Behind the sound of Dad's voice, I could hear the voices of Dad's workers, calling to one another, teasing each other. They bounced across the grounds of the courtyard, making Little Elk seem alive. If I listened closely enough, I would no doubt hear Ben's voice, one thread among the many. Harry's, Orange's, Tony's.

"I told Paquette that we would make good on our part of the deal, no matter what happened with you," Dad said. "I told him that I would have my men finish the Paquette

roof if that's what it came down to. You know what that means? Once again, we would fall behind. Each time we get behind, the more likely our move will have to be put off. It would be your fault."

I nodded. I was ready to accept most any fault he saddled me with. It was all true.

"If I were smart," he said, "I would just send you home, but I'm not smart. I want you to show Paquette that you can handle the job. Prove to him that I wasn't telling a lie when I said that you could fix his roof." Dad stopped to look out the window. From his window, I could see the marble creeping up the side of the courthouse. They had gone one story at a time. They were finishing up the top of first floor now. The second story would start on the far side—Ben's side—soon. "You'll stay at the Paquette's until you have that roof fixed. No visits home."

"Give me two weeks," I said.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Dad said.

*

When I got back, I felt terribly relieved. I was given a second chance, another opportunity to prove myself and to spend a little more time with Baby. I went right to Baby and told her what my Dad had said. She thought it was hilarious. "Your dad," she said, "does he think he's John Wayne?" *You've shamed the Elkhart name*, Baby mimicked.

"That's not how he said it," I said.

Don't let me down, Baby said.

"No," I said. Her words made me a little sick to my stomach. "He just wants me to be responsible. I told him I would fix the roof, and that's what I'm going to do."

"Your dad doesn't care about you or the roof. You're fooling yourself," Baby said. "He's just scared that you'll start talking back to him. You might start doing what *you* want to do, and stop doing what he thinks you should do. Then what's going to happen? Tell me that. That's the kind of stuff people say when they're afraid. He's afraid of you, David. That's all it is, fear."

*

I didn't want to talk about Dad anymore, but I had been thinking a lot about letting him down. It would have been a lot easier if I had just remained home for the summer. All the pain I would have saved myself, but it was too late for that now. "If I had become what Daddy wanted me to be," Baby said to me later that day, "then I would be a soft-boiled egg. Daddies are just like that"

"Not mine," I said.

Baby got quiet. Her hospital bed was so much higher than the floor. I could see her shoulder when she was on her side, but not her head. "If your daddy isn't like that," Baby said, "then *why* are you here?"

I went on to defend Dad. I accused her of applying the problems she had with her father to my situation. I said, "Who are you to give advice to me about fathers?"

*

I had trouble sleeping that night. I beat myself up over the details, feeling every bit the fourteen-year-old kid that I was, and hating myself all the more for feeling that way. I wanted to handle this the way a man would, but the only response I could possibly imagine my Dad having, if he were in this situation, would be this: he would refuse to care. He would shrug it off. That was the last thing I could do. What was worse, I could

hear Irene's voice saying over and over again, "Well? What'd you think would happen?" I imagined doing all sort of foolish things to myself—jumping off the roof and breaking my arms or legs, running Paquette's car into a tree so that my body would be shredded when it flew through the front windshield. In all the scenarios, I would be torn limb from limb. Only that thought made me feel a little better. I thought of taking Paquette's car and driving home, but home no longer seemed an option either. Home was not a possibility. I pulled the pillow over my head and cried in a way I hadn't done since my first few nights. I prayed that no one would hear me, especially not Baby. Damn her. The darkness poured over me, and I let myself wallow there in self-pity for the rest of the night.

The next day I didn't say a word to Baby. I was determined to punish her for treating me that way. I suppose there was a part of me that wanted her to beg me to say something to her. The time would come soon enough, I believed. About the time we took our afternoon trips to the public library, I walked out of the house, slamming the front door closed.

I took the Paquette car down to the courthouse. I thought I might say hello to Dad. I thought maybe I could ask him about Baby in a round about way. It was funny. Right after the storm, Dad's crew had taken a chainsaw to most of the limbs left attached to the trunk of the trees. The street was lined with them every fifteen feet or so. The trees formed a kind of wall. They sawed them off in a way that made the exposed parts look like wounds, a little like scabs. I guess I hadn't noticed that new branches were starting to bloom off the trunks. They had tight green buds at their tips. In another few months,

the trees would be nearly full again. The locals might not even remember the storm until the next one hit.

Ben was busy working on a slab of marble, so I went looking for Dad. He wasn't in his trailer. His foreman said to try down at the pool hall. I laughed when the foreman said, "Pool hall."

"What?" he said.

"I can't imagine Dad in a pool hall."

"Every Friday," the foreman said.

The pool hall was a converted from an old service station. The four tables were set up in the "garage" part of the service station, while the counter had become the place you could order food and drinks. I pulled open the door, and a bell announced my arrival. I walked on in and looked around. The place was very neat, if not a little dark. It was too early for customers. "David," Dad called out. He sat at a small table against the far wall of the garage. "What are you doing?'

"The foreman told me you were here."

"He did, huh?"

"It's not his fault," I said. "I forced it out of him."

An old Indian man brought out a plate with a large sandwich. "We're closed until 5:00," the man said to me.

"This is my son, Ted."

"No kidding?" Ted said. "This is the son you was telling me about?"

"That's right," Dad said. "He's the *smart* one, like his Mama."

"I'll be damned." Ted shook my hand. He was so old he had to squint just to see me. His hair was long like the traditional Little Elk, but it was gray and thin. "You're working for the crazy man on the hill, am I right?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I've known your Daddy a long time," Ted told me. "He was always something. There was that time him and Luther beat those two white boys in pool. You remember that, Joe?"

"He doesn't need to hear about the old days."

"Sure he does," Ted said.

"Tell you what," Dad said. "You got time to make him one of these sandwiches? Let him taste a little of the old days himself."

*

"Baby," I said. "I want to be with you. I hate that you're mad at me."

"Say you're sorry," she said.

I did, and she smiled at me. "Come here," she said.

*

The next two weeks went by like a dream. I spent every night with Baby in her bed. We made love and then talked about everything that came to our minds—Tim McCarver's inability to hit curve balls, the war in Vietnam and Laos, and our own mothers and fathers. It was all up for discussion, debate. In the day, I worked on the roof, knowing that in some sense when I finished putting the last tile in place that I would have to leave Baby. Our relationship as we had constructed it would then be over. Once I had been able to conceive how the repair would work in my mind, I didn't have any

trouble getting the project started. Then it was a matter of time, getting everything done that needed to be done. Board by board, nail by nail. I felt happy as I worked, letting my thoughts about Baby take my mind off the job. I started taking Baby up to the attic, so we could be together, and she could watch me work. We would take our breaks up on the roof, looking out over Little Elk.

Baby said, "Does it still bother you? Not being near your brother and father?"

I looked out over Little Elk. With the marble beginning to encase the old structure, it changed the way it occupied the landscape. The contrast between the treetops and the courthouse was strong. It seemed to demand my attention more than the old building. I thought that once they were finished there was no storm that could knock this marble-protected structure down. It would stand for a thousand years or more, like the Coliseum in Rome. In a way, I was proud of it. The sweat of my brother and father had gone into the building. They would live on in it. The distance between us had grown comfortable. I guess in some sense I had traded one distance for another.

"No," I told Baby. "I'd rather be here. They're doing what they need to be doing, and I'm doing what I need to be doing."

Irene watched over us, never interfering but always remaining close by. A distant vigil. I couldn't step out of Baby's room without running into her or finding her downstairs with one eye off the pages of her science fiction book. The expression on her face told me that she thought I was foolish, but she never said so herself. Paquette must have known what was going on. We simply didn't see him. He no longer took his meals with the rest of us. All day long, he sat in his room and rested. He would sometimes walk by Baby's open door but never look in. Still, he knew. At night, he continued his

sleepwalking trips to the creek. We heard him as he walked across the second-floor landing and then down the stairs. "Let him go," Baby always said, as if we had a real choice in the matter. Maybe she thought we did. I alone knew that we couldn't stop him, even if we wanted to.

My mother must have had her own routine. It wasn't hard to imagine her in the garden, working the ground with her small trowel, her gloves protecting her hands from a prick of a thorn or the fodder my father brought home at her request from Little Elk. When a rosebush tried to escape the narrow garden, Mom would be there with her garden clippers. This constant vigilance must have helped her through the day, though I imagined that without any of her men she must have been lonely. I felt sorry for her, in a way. I knew I couldn't tell her about my relationship with Baby and that knowledge placed a secret between us. I wasn't sure how I would get around the secret when I saw her the next time.

*

At one point, Paquette made a special trip into the attic. He had been in town and had some news for me. The climb was especially hard on him. He ignored a stool next to Baby and sat across the way from her, the top of an old tailor's box that I used to keep my tools in. "Daddy," Baby said. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

"Just got back from town," he said. "Got some news."

As he sat there catching his breath, he looked my repairs over. I was beaming with pride at my craftsmanship and wanted him both to ignore and admire my repair job. "Getting close," Paquette said.

"He's very good," Baby said.

Paquette ignored her. "How much longer?" he asked.

I moved some of the lumber over to the other end of the attic. I would need it later, but it also kept me from having to look at Paquette. I wasn't sure I was strong enough right then to square off with Baby's father. "Week or two," I said.

"Your brother," Paquette said. He shook his head. "Your daddy's going around telling everyone that your brother is going to join the green berets. Says he's going to be a small-weapons specialist. What do you think about that?"

"Is it true?" I asked. I knew that Paquette would latch on to anything that might make me upset or cause me some trouble. I kept my poker face on.

"How do I know?" Paquette said. "They're your goddamn family. You tell me." He stood up. From the way he stood, it was obvious his back was stiff. He had trouble walking. He seemed to be going downhill fast.

"Let David help you down," Baby suggested.

"Hell no," Paquette said. It had been so extreme that we all looked at one another. Where would he go from here?

"Daddy, please."

"I can do it."

"David," she said. "Give him a hand."

"He can do it," I said. No way was I going to help. He could dig his own grave as far as I was concerned.

Paquette began to lower himself down to the stepladder. "I'm no roofer," Paquette said, alternating between looking at Baby and me, "but I bet you can finish the roof by

the end of the week. What do you think, Baby? Think your friend will be able to pack his bags by the end of the week?"

"I don't know," she said.

"That's what I thought you'd say."

*

Mom showed up at the Paquette door one day. I was upstairs in the attic working on repairs when she arrived. I didn't hear her car drive up or the knock at the door. Irene had to come up to the attic to bring me down. The whole way down—down the ladder, the stairs, and across the floor—I couldn't help but think that someone had died. I thought maybe Dad had run his pickup off the road and into a tree or that Ben had fallen off the top of the courthouse and broken his neck. I knew that something bad had happened. Mom looked beautiful, dressed as if she were going to church.

Irene came down the stairs in front of me. Mom nodded at her. "Thank you, Irene."

"David!" she said. She tried to smile through the weight of the burden she wore on her face. She managed a full hug with a plate of cookies in one hand. Her hair was clipped back. "Honey," she said. "How are you? How have you been?"

"I'm fine," I said.

She raised the plate of cookies. "Chocolate chip," she said. "Keep them out of the sun or they'll melt." She looked over at Irene. "You look as pretty as ever. I don't think you've aged a day in all the years I've known you." I tried to process all this as quickly as possible. Mom knew Irene from a long time back, and she had kept that from me. I was starting to wonder what else it was that I didn't know.

"I was hoping you could do me a favor, David," Mom said.

*

I ran down to the courthouse as fast as I could. I didn't have to, but the urgency in Mom's instructions propelled me. Besides, I needed to run, to exorcise the anxiety in my body. Let the air pump in and out of my lungs, let my cooped up muscles in my legs have their own way for a few minutes. By the time I arrived, I was out of breath. I stopped at the corner of the Owens' Hardware Store, from where I could see the courthouse, but I was blocked from Dad's trailer. I wasn't supposed to let Dad know what I was doing, so I waited until he had settled himself in his mobile office. I ran across the street and found Ben's crew on the west side of the courthouse, only Ben wasn't with them. They were on the third-floor scaffolding working with the marble slabs.

"You hear the news?" Harry called down to me. He practically spat on me as he talked. "Ben's going to show them the way us warriors fight."

"Where is he?"

"Meeting," Orange said.

"With Dad?" I asked.

Orange shook his head. "He'll be done in a minute."

"That's all they do in those meetings," Harry said. "Eat donuts and drink hot tea, you know how those types are."

I waited for him around the corner, the place where I figured he would pass on his way back to his crew and where I thought I'd be safe from Dad. Instead of risk having Dad see me, I just took a seat there and waited. I plucked the courthouse grass and tossed

it up so that the wind might take it. In fifteen or twenty minutes, I heard Ben's voice and stood up to grab him and get him back up at the Paquette place. But then I heard Dad's unmistakable baritone. There was no place to hide, no place to go. I just stood there frozen in place, waiting for them to catch me. Ben turned the corner with Dad, the two of them practically arm-in-arm.

"David," Dad said.

I backed away from him. "I heard the news," I said.

"You coming?" Ben asked.

"He doesn't have to leave for another two weeks," Dad said, keeping one arm securely around him, "but I thought we might as well get together and celebrate after he signs the paperwork. A little ceremony, if you will. If the Paquette roof is coming along, I thought you might like to be there."

"Sure," I said. My mind was racing as quickly as possible trying to figure out a way to get Ben away from Dad. Dad took care of that on his own. He walked around the courthouse in order to invite all his courthouse crew. I looked to Ben. "Why did you do it?"

"Why not?" Ben asked. He flipped his hair over his shoulder.

I just shook my head. "Mom's at the Paquettes."

*

We cut straight across the courthouse lawn and then across the street to Owens' Hardware without even trying to hide ourselves. "What about Dad? What happens if he finds out that you're gone?" I asked. "Should we have made up an excuse?"

"Nah," he said. "He's too happy to notice I'm missing."

As we walked back up the house, Ben told me why he had enlisted. He wanted to feel what our great-grandfather had felt. He believed that until he had become a warrior himself the possibility of knowing Red Elk, of connecting with him, was almost nil. In short, for him this was the best way of knowing he was Indian. "If I can serve bravely, I'll know what Red Elk felt. I'll know what it means to be Indian."

*

I opened the door for Ben and ushered him inside. Mom was sitting there, waiting on us. "Hi, Ben," Mom said.

She held the tears back as well as she could. Her tears welled up in her eyes, showed in the way her face became red and her muscles contorted. "Don't do it," she said. "I'm begging you."

"Mom," Ben said. "Let's go in here." Ben guided her past Baby. Baby nodded at him, and he said, "Baby." They disappeared in the kitchen. I didn't know whether to go or not, so I stayed there with Baby. "You know Ben?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I know Ben."

That's all she had to say. I suddenly understood that the two of them had slept together the way we had. My heart sank. I sat there in the room with Baby, not sure what to say to her and not wanting to listen to the conversation Ben was having with Mom. I wanted to snap my fingers and disappear. For the first time, I thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad to finish the roof and get back to where I knew the rules of the game. Here, the rules seemed to change before I had learned them. At home, I could stay in my room and not feel overwhelmed.

When Ben and Mom came back out, Mom was crying. "I'm sorry," Ben said. "I've got to get back." She just held onto him and cried. She was no longer holding anything back. I felt like crying as well. Her overwhelming sadness flooded me with remorse for the distance I felt between us.

Outside the house, before Ben could break away, she pulled a thick bank envelope from her purse. "I have a friend in Vancouver," she said. "Take the money and stay with her for a few months. If you want, you can get a job up there."

"Mom," Ben said.

"Take the money," Mom said. "It's ten thousand dollars from my savings."

"I'm sorry," Ben said. He kissed Mom on the side of her forehead and trotted off down the street.

We watched him disappear down the road that led back to town. Her tears had dried up, but she had expelled every ounce of energy she possessed. She had trouble keeping her head up, her eyes open. "I hate your father," she said.

"Don't' say that, Mom," I said.

"I do," she said. "I *hate* your father."

She wanted me to go back to Tulsa with her, but I had to tell her no. I wanted to fix the roof. She said, "It's because of him, isn't it?" By him, I understood her to mean Dad. "No," I said. "I made a promise."

"Break it," she said.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

She kept her hands crossed around her. "No," she said. "I'm not."

*

Dad talked an old friend of his into letting them use the VFW Hall for Ben's get-together. I had seen the old VFW sign swinging in the wind, but I had never been inside. The room was one large rectangle over the top of the drugstore. When they weren't having VFW meetings, they were hosting high school dances and bingo games. I put on a fresh shirt and ran a wet comb through my hair. Baby had tried to talk me into taking her with me, but she knew it was only for men. "I could wear pants," she joked. She told me how these local parties went: they started off drinking pop mixed with rum from the flasks they kept hidden in their jackets, then they moved to homemade gin from their daddy's still, and finally, when the rum and gin was all gone, they drank the only thing left in the county, 3.2 beer that they bought at the service stations.

"I'm not drinking," I said.

"We'll see about that."

I arrived late. It seemed most of the town was there. Two groups occupied opposite ends of the floor. The white veterans that Dad knew from growing up here in Little Elk had established themselves in the folding chairs around the coffee and donut table. For the most part, they formed a proper group, their hands folded in their lap and their legs crossed, which hiked the hem of their pants and revealed their white, white ankles. The other group was made up of Indians, guys from the courthouse. These guys had worked from dawn to just before the party started, but instead of being tired, they looked ready to break out. More than a handful had something wrong with them—a sleeve rolled up at the end, a cane they used to get across the floor, an eye patch. The war maimed had come out of the woodwork.

"Hey, David!" Orange called over to me. He raised his party cup up in the air, nearly touching the cloud of smoke that hung over all of them. Ben and the rest of the guys were clustered around him.

I acknowledged Orange with a wave and began working my way through the clusters of men, white and Indian. They towered a foot or more over me and seemed surprised when I entered their field of vision. "Little man," one of them said as I passed through.

Ben shook my hand. I was mad at Ben, but I didn't want to ruin his party. I had decided that he treated mom the wrong way. "Thanks for coming," he said. He wore his collar buttoned to the top. His hair was pulled back with a rubber band.

"Here's our boy," Harry said. He grabbed me around the neck and pulled me next to him. He smelled of sweat and dirt and neglect. His cup of Coke and Rum was twice as big as Orange's. I struggled to get away from Harry's hold, but I didn't want to look like a bad sport. They frowned on guys who couldn't play along, who couldn't take a joke. I figured this was why Ben let them mess with me. He wanted to give me the room to show that I could handle their teasing. "Ben tells us you and Baby are getting along real good." He laughed hard at his own joke. He thrust his hips forward, mocking me.

"Goddamnit, Harry," Orange said.

"Oh, Baby! Ohhhh, Baby!" he screamed, putting his whole body into motion and sound. Other guys around him rolled their eyes at him and walked away. "What's it like fuckin' a broad that ain't got no arms or legs?"

I gathered my weapons, keeping my gaze even.

"Hell," Harry said. "We could just ask Ben. He could tell us. Couldn't you, Ben?"

I looked to Ben, but he just looked away, pretending not to know what Harry was talking about. He knew.

"She's been without it so long," Harry said, "I bet she just about fainted when you stuck your dick in her."

Orange pushed Harry back. His cup of rum spilled down the front of his shirt. "Hey," Harry said. "That was fine liquor." Orange pushed him again and worked himself closer until Harry had no choice but to back up. He separated him from the rest of us the way they handled cows being culled from the heard. Orange walked him over to the coffee and donut table across the room.

I took the space next to Ben. His hands were buried deep into his pockets making it seem as if he was folded into himself. "You want something to drink?" I asked.

"I'm not drinking," he said. He was looking across the room at something that I couldn't make out.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

Ben nodded in the direction of the coffee and donut table. He had had his eye on Dad the whole time. I turned to look for myself. There was Dad talking to a group of white men. He was telling them some story. He held his hands out wide as if he were describing the length of the fish he had caught.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Terrific," he said.

Not long after this, Dad stepped up onto the small stage at the end of the room. Behind him, the windows that would look out on the courthouse had been covered up with black construction paper, though the light from the streetlights outside shined through. A light and scattered applause sounded. "Alright," Dad said. He had a cup in his hands. "You all know why we're here. We're here because my first-born son, Ben, has decided to become a man. When he was growing up, I always knew that Ben was different than all the other boys. I just want him to know how proud I am of him. As of next week, Ben has joined the Special Forces. He's going to go fight the communists in Southeast Asia."

A few of the gung-ho types just back from Vietnam let lose with "Hooah!" They called for a speech from Ben, and Ben reluctantly made his way to the stage. He shook Dad's hand and worked up a convincing smile for all of them.

"Thank you," Ben said. "I am really looking forward to all my experiences, and I want to thank you for being here tonight." He nodded at them to tell them that that was all he would say.

Dad took the floor back. "One more thing," Dad said. "Have a good time and wish Ben luck."

*

After the party was over, I walked Ben back to his truck. He was stone-cold sober. As far as I knew, he hadn't taken a drink all night. I asked him what was wrong. Why wasn't he having a good time? "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

"Don't do it," I told him. "Don't join the Army."

"Easy for you to say."

"I mean it."

"Too late now," Ben said. "I go in tomorrow to sign the paperwork. It's a done deal."

"Shit, Ben."

"I am Red Elk's great-grandson," Ben said. "I have certain responsibilities to live up to."

"Ben," I said, "Did Irene ever tell you about the Little Elk massacre of 1891?"

*

"Red Elk had watched the government men shooting women and children who were doing nothing more than fleeing for their own lives. These people had done nothing to the soldiers. The men trained trained their rifles on the backs of these women and children and picked them off in the same way they had shot the buffalo and hunted down the elk by the hundreds. The gullies filled with their bodies, their shirts red with lost blood.

"He did what he could. Wild with anger and revenge, he rode his horse at the middle of one group of the soldiers. They took aim and fired at his heart, but the bullets didn't find him. He wore a special shirt that helped aid his effort. The soldiers scattered, yet he managed to ride down the one who seemed to have done the most harm. He took him to the ground and pounded his head with a stone. Red Elk felt only a little better then. There was more revenge to be had.

"The Little Elk who had not been murdered by the government men had escaped to the creek bank and followed the creek downstream. They met where the hunters sometimes forded the banks in the springtime. Once they had gathered, snow started to

fall, and the men and women and children were cold and tired. They had not eaten since earlier that morning. "Do not sit," Iron Ridge told them. He had fire in his eyes. "We must fight back. We must take revenge on these white soldiers for our fallen brothers and sisters." The people had always listened to Iron Ridge. He had not led them astray in the past. The people considered his plan.

While they were doing this, Red Elk stepped up on the creek bank. "No," he said. "That would be foolish. We would jeopardize those of us who live on. There will be a better time to fight, and we will all join together and take revenge then." The people listened to Red Elk. He had had a vision and had helped the people find the red road. He was wise, and they would listen to him. There would be better days to die."

*

That night, back in bed with Baby, I kept the stuff Harry had said about her to myself, but as soon as I did, I felt a distance open between us. I knew it was too late to change my choice about keeping Harry's comments to myself. The space was there. Instead of talking about my father, I asked Baby about her own mother. "Can we talk about something you don't want to talk about?" I asked.

"How can I answer that if I don't know what you're wanting to talk about?"

"Baby," I said, exasperated. "Irene told me some of the story, but I don't understand something. After all she had been through, why did she go and kill herself? I don't get it."

In August of 1951, Yoshie received word that her own father had passed away. She had not been terribly surprised. He had been old and had been confined to a bed for

most of the previous year. She traveled from Oklahoma to Hiroshima with her brand new baby. The Americans and the Japanese on the airplane stared hard at the baby, trying to resolve a question in their own minds. Yoshie didn't mind. She had gotten used to the stares because her own face, arms, and hands had been badly burned in the explosion of the atomic bomb. These same people—or people just like them—also stared at her. She figured that when the baby got older she would teach the baby not to pay any attention to these people.

When they landed in Hiroshima, they found no one waiting for them. Yoshie thought that maybe they hadn't received her telegraph. She had enough money to pay for a taxi to her mother's estate. As the taxi drove through the newly rebuilt streets of her hometown, Yoshie held the baby's face to the window and told her everything she knew about her hometown. The baby cooed, as if in deep appreciation. The driver sneered at them, but she didn't care. He was like all the others.

At her mother's estate, the taxi dropped them off without helping with their bags. The days were changing in Japan. She carried the baby and her belongings to the front door. She was so excited that she couldn't keep from rapping on the door the way she had learned to do in America. She carried on a conversation with her newborn about her mother and her sisters so that she too would be excited and know how important this visit was for both of them.

But when her mother answered the door, she looked at Yoshie in the same way the taxi driver and the people on the airplane looked at her. She looked down on Yoshie and refused to take a peek at her beautiful baby. Her eyes showed that the mother blamed Yoshie for everything—for her father's death, for the mother's own despair, for their

family's dishonor. She was not turned away, nor was she invited inside her mother's estate.

Inside her mother's home, her family and their visitors ignored them. A young niece who reminded Yoshie of herself at that age, asked to see her baby. Yoshie thought this was a good sign. Someone had taken an interest in her. She agreed, and when the niece pulled the baby from its basket, the niece screamed and dropped the baby on the ground. Yoshie scooped the baby up, comforted her, and then explained the best she could. The bombing, the radiation. Other than the baby's body, she was fine. Completely normal

Four days passed this way. They buried her father and her sisters helped her mother with the mourning process. Still, Yoshie felt unwanted. She became mad at her sisters and lashed out at them. "You treat me like a foreigner," she told them. The eldest sister spit on her. "You have brought misfortune on us all," the sister scolded her. "You must leave at once, never to come back."

Yoshie cried and cried at a hotel not far from her mother's estate. She held her baby close, taking the fresh smell of the baby inside her. The tears fell on the baby's cheeks and the baby cried as if in sympathy with her mother's own sadness. Yoshie thought of her husband back in America, but he was too far away to help her and he did not understand her people's ways. She was dead to them. She had died without her even knowing it.

When the baby went to sleep, she went into the bathroom with a small pair of sewing scissors and jabbed them into the veins in her wrist. Yoshie had never done anything like this before and she found that the blade of the scissors did not cut through

to her vein. She looked hard at the soft part of her wrist and forearm. They attempts only left large purple bruises across the soft pouch of skin. The color like the belly of a large fish. She finally succeeded. The blood flowed from her wrist. It soaked into Yoshie's blouse and her skirt. It flooded the floor and crept toward the room where her brand-new baby was still asleep.

"A woman showed up here in Little Elk a week after Dad had received the news about mother," Baby said. "The woman was Mom's eldest sister, the one who had sent her away. The sister handed me over to Dad, turned, and went back to Japan."

"Have you tried to contact them since?"

"Nope," Baby said.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day we slept in until a knock at the door downstairs finally woke us up. "You better get that," Baby said.

I slipped on my pants and ran downstairs. On my way, I noticed that Paquette's door was open wide, unusual for the morning. Hiro was also nowhere to be seen. I figured that Paquette must have gotten up early. Maybe he had gone into town to visit Frank Goodnight at the post office.

At the door was the sheriff. He had been at Ben's party the other night, though he looked different in his uniform. From this angle, through the open door, I could see that Paquette's car was parked just outside the garage. "Morning," the sheriff said. "You're Elkhart's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He nodded to himself. "We got a call about Mr. Paquette. Apparently, he was supposed to meet Mr. Goodnight this morning at the post office, and he never showed up. Have you seen Mr. Paquette at any point this morning?"

*

We walked from room to room looking for him. In Paquette's bedroom, the window was open, the draperies blowing with the slight breeze. No sign of Paquette anywhere in the house.

"Bed's not made," the sheriff said.

"Yes," I said, "but that's the way he keeps it. He sleeps on top of the covers."

"A strange man," the sheriff said.

The sheriff used the downstairs phone to make a few calls. In ten minutes, the sheriff's two deputies showed up in their cars. They were about Ben's age and seemed excited about the task in front of them, maybe even a little nervous. The sheriff assigned them sectors of Little Elk and suggested they rendezvous back at the Paquette place in thirty minutes.

"What happens if we find him?" one of them asked.

"Then bring him back," the sheriff said.

Irene carried Baby downstairs. "I wouldn't be worried," the sheriff told Irene and Baby.

I looked over at Baby. She knew that something had happened.

It wasn't long before a few people from town started dropping by to check on the search and to see if there was anything they could do. For the first time in the two months I had been there, Irene answered the door. She thanked them for their concerns and sent them on their way. From the looks of their faces, they had been surprised. Maybe they had been expecting finger foods. As a result of Irene's turning them out, a small group of people had started to gather next to the sheriff's car, telling rumors they had heard and making up details to fit the whole. I recognized a few of them, but most of them I had never seen before.

Around noon, the sheriff gathered Irene and Baby into the kitchen. He told Baby that he was going to open the search up state wide. "That way," the sheriff explained, "if he went out for a walk and got lost in the next county, their personnel will know that we're looking for him."

When he said the word "walk," I knew what had happened. I snuck out the front side of the house, away from the sheriff deputies and the well-wishers. I took off for the wood line, running as fast as my legs would carry me. I hoped it wasn't true, that he hadn't done what I thought he had done. There was always a chance that I might find him still alive. The run felt strange because I had never been across this terrain in the daylight. The blackjack and oak looked different somehow, more like trees than the ghosts of trees I saw in the moonlight. The vegetation that seemed to make the walk so tricky at night seemed much more sparse in the daylight, as if I had been incompetent for tripping so much in the dark. I ran until I was completely out of breath and my shirt and undershirt were soaked with sweat. That was about the time I happened upon the muddy flow of the creek. I didn't know where to go exactly other than to the creek. He could have been anywhere in a mile or two stretch. I could search the entire day without finding hide nor hair of him. Paquette's footprints along the banks led me downstream, though I wasn't sure how fresh they were. They could have been from anytime in the last few days. Following the tracks of those people that had come before you was tricky business. You could easily make a fool of yourself.

I jogged along the creek for an hour, looking for a sign of the old man. I hoped I didn't find anything. I couldn't imagine how I could tell Baby, if I did find Paquette's body. She had a certain kind of rage when it came to her father. She may have denied her feelings for him, but no one feels so strongly about someone without having some kind of fierce emotional attachment, knowingly or unknowingly. The creek had been serving as a dumping ground for quite a few people, stuff that was only half-working: the hoods of old cars, tables without legs, phones without their receivers. As far as I could

remember, we had never made it this far south. The town was just up the bank. The town bakery was just up the embankment, and I could still smell the bread they were baking for their runs out into the country.

A mile in, I saw a swatch of his beige shirt along the edge of the creek, and my stomach sank. I didn't even run over. I worked my way carefully down the embankment and slid partially down to the creek bank. Paquette was face down, floating but hung up on an exposed tree root. His compulsion had finally done him in, I thought. He had gone too far. I caught hold of his shirt and tugged. The body was heavier than I thought it would be soaked with water and only just beginning the process of decay. I edged closer to the water and gripped him with both hands. His body finally gave. I pulled him off the root and worked him onto the bank. When I flipped him, I realized that he had shot himself. Part of his skull was loose. His face almost looked as if it had melted, half because of the water and half because of the damage done by the bullet. He looked in agony, a witness to a horrific crime.

*

That night, when all the well wishers had gone, Baby asked me to go upstairs and gather up everything from Col. Paquette's Wild West Show. "Baby," I said, "why don't you wait until tomorrow. Then you can decide what you want to do."

"Irene," Baby said. "Will *you* go pull that stuff off my wall."

I said, "I'll do it, Baby. I just don't want you doing anything rash."

I rolled everything up in the larger banner—the fliers and posters and programs and pictures—and brought it downstairs. I presented the bundle to Baby.

"Burn it," she said. "Burn all of it."

It took me three or four tries to get the banner to catch on fire. I tried to make a joke of the way the banner seemed to shed the flame the way that some material shed water, but she wasn't in the mood. Finally, the flame caught. The banner's coarse material absorbed the flame and in a few seconds the bundle glowed like the insides of a Dutch oven. I turned to watch Baby's face as the last of the materials disintegrated into ash, though the flame lived on in a few bits and pieces. She looked neither happy, nor upset, only resigned. Tired was the best way to characterize her, as if she had been up for most of her life waiting for what she knew would eventually happen. The glowing embers reflected in her eyes.

"There," Baby said. "That does it."

When I told her about the gunshot to Paquette's head, Baby hadn't been surprised. "He got tired of waiting for me to die," she said, a phrase I could tell that she had been holding on to for too many years. She closed her eyes and swallowed down the truth. Although it had finally happened, there didn't seem to be any resolution for her, only a concern eating away at her that she didn't allow out into the open.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. I waited for more, but none followed. The sound of the wind outside made me uneasy. It was going to rain, and I realized Paquette's window was still open from the night before. I had grown used to hearing Baby's voice. I followed the rhythms of her voice the way that some people blindly read musical notes on sheet music. Its sudden absence disturbed me.

*

In the years that followed, our people barely survived. By this time, the buffalo were almost gone. Government soldiers watched over our every move. We were miserable and full of self-doubt. There was talk amongst us that we were better off having gone with the Pawnee and the Ponca to Indian Territory. A few families left for Indian Territory on the hope that it was not too late to take up the government on its offer. Red Elk stood fast. He knew that times were not good, but he also knew that this would soon change.

Word had begun to spread of Wovoka's Ghost Dance, the promise he had made that all Indian people would live and the world would once again be righted. They didn't believe Wovoka, but they feared his prophecy. They feared the Indians believing in their brothers and sisters coming back to haunt them. The Ghost Dance made the government nervous. They sent more soldiers to watch over the Little Elk and the other tribes living in the Plains. They lived this way for two years, and then Red Elk told his people to ready themselves. The Ghost Dance would soon begin.

The people cried. They missed their brothers and sisters. They missed the buffalo. When the Ghost Dance was carried out, they would no longer be looked at as an injured deer, waiting for a friend to put him out of his misery. There was much singing and dancing. The government caught wind of Red Elk's pronouncement and sent two battalions of soldiers to establish a camp nearby. They were well supplied with new rifles and ammunition.

*

On the morning of Paquette's funeral, Baby woke me up and told me she had had the most magnificent dream. She was bursting with energy as she told me, as if she

simply couldn't contain the energy of the dream. According to Baby, the dream started with her mother. Instead of the bombing throwing her back from the window at the hospital, it did the opposite, as if the bomb had been reversed. She picked herself up off the floor and reappeared at the window. Baby took her by the hand, and they walked outside. Everywhere people who had been blown down to the ground by the blast stood up and brushed themselves off. Their burns healed before their eyes. Their singed hair grew back. Baby and her mother walked on. Soon they had arrived at the part of the city where there was nothing left. As they walked, bodies began to form together where there had been nothing but a vague outline left by the flash. These people too took to their feet and carried on.

In the outskirts of the city, those who had suffered radiation sickness suddenly felt their stomachs settle and they began to crave fresh fruit. Baby and her mother found themselves at the house Yoshie had grown up in. They were shown inside, and everyone was there. Yoshie's father, her sisters, and Baby. Their nieces performed a little skit for their benefit, and everyone applauded.

"Was your dad there?" I asked.

"No," Baby said. "That's not all. After the skit, I began to sprout arms and legs. They grew like branches on trees."

*

People came from all around for Paquette's funeral. At one point, I grew sad for him because I figured no one would care. They were mostly the old cast and crew from Col. Paquette's Wild West Show.

As I was strolling Baby into the small chapel on the far side of the courthouse, I saw Dad sitting in his truck, his coat and tie on. He didn't wave or nod his head. I pushed her over the doorjamb and took her inside the room. Organ music was playing, the sappy kind that I knew Paquette would hate. The funeral director guided us up to the first row. Paquette's closed coffin was almost within arm's reach. Baby was holding up very well. I knew that somewhere inside her she was devastated. I knew that without her having to admit to it. Irene came in and took a seat on the far side of Baby. Some of the people who had come by the house in the last few days came up to the front to say a few words to Baby.

Every once in a while, I glanced back to see if Ben might show up. In deference to Paquette and his family name, Dad had closed down the operation for an hour so that his workers might attend the service. From the looks of the guests, most of Dad's workers had skipped out for an early lunch, though Orange was standing in the back with his wife and their baby daughter. He waved at me. In the door, I noticed Dad appear. He stopped just inside the door so that the people behind him had to either wait on him or push around his side. He scanned the crowd, zeroed in on me, and worked his way to a seat a few rows behind me. I whispered to Baby that I'd be right back.

"Dad," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I knew Paquette," he said.

I glanced back at him to see if he was trying to get my attention. He just stared at me.

*

When I got home that night, someone had placed a bundle of letters on top of Baby's bed. "Read them," Baby said. I unfolded them and read the first one aloud to Baby.

*

Dearest Yoshie:

I hope you and Baby are well. Please give your family my best wishes. Tell them I think of them often.

I have had some regrets since you left. Perhaps I should have come along with you and Baby to Hiroshima. My old friends come up to me on the street here in Little Elk and say, "So the girl *has gone back to Japan." I try to remind them that you will be back, but they do not seem to believe me. They say this as if they are telling me that they knew it would happen all along. As if it is all for the better because now I can get on with my life. Best not to be married to a woman who speaks only a word or two of English. Best not to have to raise a child without arms or legs.*

How do I tell them that I am half the man without you? I know what they see in you and Baby. You know, too. They see themselves reflected in you, and they cannot stand to look for very long. They confuse you with their own darkness. So they grit their teeth and look away. I know this because I was like them once. I have never told you this, but when my father first introduced me to you, I was sick to my stomach. If I was forced to be with you, I thought I might kill myself. I hated you because my father forced us together like two

animals to be bred for their offspring. I saw only the scarred tissue on your face and arms. That is not you, that is not you.

CHAPTER TEN

If I had taken the time to think it through, I would have guessed what Dad would do. The way he watched the two of us together at the funeral, his coolness. At nine on the night of the funeral, just after he sent his workers home, Dad knocked on the Paquette door. Three loud knocks, his fist on the wood.

I answered the door.

"Get your stuff," Dad said.

"But the roof."

He stepped inside, looked about the house. Baby was on the divan, Irene on the seat across from Baby. "Where is it? Where's your suitcase?"

"Dad," I pleaded.

Irene was the last person I thought might speak, but she did. She looked on, letting Dad make a fool of himself. "You're not doing this boy any favors," she said.

"What's that?" Dad asked. He stepped up close to her, but he still kept his distance, as if he was afraid that she might contaminate him. The funny thing was that now that they were side-by-side I could see how much they looked alike. "How could you allow this? A girl *twice* his own age?" he said. "This went on under your own eyes. The boy is fourteen. He can't even drive yet." For a second, I thought he might strike Irene.

"He can *drive* fine," Baby said.

Dad pointed his finger at Baby. "Shut up," he said.

"He's trying to kill your brother," Baby said to me. "Can't you see that? He's doing a pretty good job of it, too. He'll go after you next."

Dad told her to shut up again. He said, "bitch."

I said, "Leave her alone, Dad."

"Go out and get in the truck," Dad said.

"David," she said.

"I want to stay here," I said, though I didn't sound convinced of the idea myself. I wanted to believe in it. I needed to believe it. I had only seen Dad this mad one other time, the night Dad had attacked Ben at the restaurant.

"You're so messed up right now you don't know your brain from your butt," Dad said. "Now go get in the car."

I looked at Baby. What choice did I have? I wasn't yet seventeen the way Ben had been when he left home. I had never worked a real job in all my life. My only pay had been Dad's allowance. "I'm sorry," I said. I knew she wouldn't understand.

I didn't bother to get my suitcase or my book bag with *Latin for Students of Medicine* and my copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, both of which had remained closed since the professor's last visit. I did as he had said. I went out and got into the truck. I waited there with the window rolled down. Even though it was night, the temperature must have been close to a hundred. I felt the sweat trickle down my back.

He must have been in there for ten minutes or more. I don't know what they said to each other. They didn't raise their voices. The whole time I was thinking about how I would never see Baby again. I felt hopeless. I hit the dashboard with my fist and yelled. Then I kicked at it with my foot. I kicked it again and again. The only damage was my dirty footprints. I let loose a scream that I knew the entire town of Little Elk could hear.

I was sure my voice carried all the way to Tulsa. And then the need was gone. I sat back in my seat and watched the front door.

When Dad came out a few minutes later, he carried my backpack and suitcase. He tossed them in the back. I didn't want to hate him for what he had done. I tried to keep those other things in mind. I thought of him driving the necklace two hours and delivering it anonymously under her door. It was perfect, an act of genuine kindness. How I wanted to see Dad in terms of that story.

"Tomorrow," Dad said, "I need you at the courthouse. What do you think about that? That's what you wanted to do anyway." Behind the wheel, Dad took one look at the footprints running across the dashboard and said, "You feel better now?"

"No," I said.

*

We didn't talk all the way home. Not one word passed between us. Dad didn't listen to news about Vietnam or let on that the courthouse was wearing him down, though I thought I could see that the stress was beginning to get to him. I probably wasn't helping any, either. He seemed nervous, preoccupied. I just wanted to go into my room and shut the door, sleep for a week.

We finally pulled up into our driveway. Mama's car was missing from its usual place. He said, "She's been doing a lot for that group of hers, those MIA wives."

I nodded.

"She'll be glad to see you. She's always talking about how much she misses you, wishing you were back home and all."

"I know," I said.

"One other thing," he said. Dad locked the truck door. "I'm not going to say anything about the Paquette girl to your mama. I recommend you don't bring it up, either. She's got too much to worry about as it is."

*

Mom got back about an hour later, just after eleven. Her headlights washed over my bedroom window. Her car door slammed shut and then, a few second later, the front door opened. "Where is he?" I heard Mom ask Dad.

I don't know if Dad responded or not. She burst into my room. "Baby," she said. I sat up in bed, and she hugged me and kissed me on top of my head. I thought for sure she would ask me about Ben, but she didn't. She didn't even say anything about me sleeping in my clothes. "How are you? How is everything?"

"Fine," I said.

"My baby," she said. She hugged me again. She was full of energy, vitality. I hadn't seen her like this since before Ben left home. "Well, we can talk more later. I've got some cooking to do," she said. "I better get started before the night's gone."

In the middle of the night, I woke up to the smell of something cooking. It was two in the morning. I went into the living room and watched Mom in the light of the kitchen. She didn't seem to notice me standing there. She was manic, bouncing from the table to the cabinet, writing something down. A few seconds later, she would do the whole thing over again. There were three casserole dishes covered with tinfoil and three not yet cooked on the kitchen table. She was driven.

"Mom," I said. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing up?"

"I smelled the food," I said.

"We got another call this evening," she said. "We lost another one, and I don't know if I have time to do all this. They're so desperate."

"Lost another what, Mom?"

"A husband," she said. "A father, a son. According to Grace, this one flew Huey helicopters in the 1st Cav., whatever that means. Shot down behind enemy lines, and they weren't able to find a body. They don't know if he's MIA or KIA. Can you imagine? Wouldn't that be terrible? Not knowing if your loved one is living or dead?"

"Terrible," I said.

Mom opened the oven, peeled back the tinfoil and set the time for ten more minutes. "We don't get many from the Army," she said. "Mostly they're fighter pilots, F-15s and –16s. Occasionally we get B-52 pilots and the like. I can't really tell them apart, the planes. Their families are all the same. You go pay them a visit, and they all look the same. Sad. They knew it was going to happen. It was just a matter of time. All these pictures on the wall, the man with his airplane giving them a thumbs up. Sad. Their family just sits around waiting on the phone. Really quite sad, don't you think?"

*

When we passed the Paquette mansion the next day on our way to the courthouse, Dad watched me over his shoulder to see how I would respond. I gritted my teeth and stared straight ahead. I would give him no evidence to use against me.

The crew was sitting around waiting on him to arrive. They looked tired, run down. I looked for Ben but didn't see him. Orange was drinking a Coke. "Look at them," Dad

said. "A bunch of lazy Indians. They could be getting a jump on the day's work. If they had taken some initiative, we would probably be finished by now."

"How much longer?" I asked.

"Three weeks," Dad said.

"When's the governor scheduled to speak?"

"Two weeks," he said. "I need you to do something for me. If you see people not pulling their weight, you come and tell me. We don't want any deadweight."

*

I made my way through the workers toward Orange. The crew was smaller than it had been the week I had first spent with them. Cut in half, maybe. I didn't dare mention this to Dad. "Hey, Little Brother," Orange said. "How's it going?"

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

Orange nodded to across the street. A building down from Owens' Hardware had a new banner strung across the front:

NOW HIRING, $8 PER HOUR

MO-CO OIL

I knew exactly what the oil company was doing: pulling workers away from Dad, buying their votes. As soon as the tribe agreed to let them lease the oil rights for the next twenty years, they would fire them all.

"What about Ben?" I asked.

"No," Orange said. "He's out at Harry's place. He hasn't been to work in a week. It's bad, ya know?" Orange looked at me, his eyes wide. "Bad."

*

That afternoon, a flatbed twelve-wheeler pulled into the courthouse parking lot. Orange nudged me. "The lights," he said. "Your Dad said he was going to do it, but we didn't believe him. I guess we were wrong."

Dad went over to the driver of the truck and talked for a minute. Dad turned from the truck and shouted out the names of about a half-dozen of us. He called out Orange's name, but not mine. I walked over anyway. "You two," he said to us. "I got something else for you all."

We walked with Dad back to his trailer. Back at the truck, the workers were pulling the temporary lights off the truck. "What are the lights for, Dad?"

"We can go all night, if we need to."

That morning I had heard two guys talking to Orange. They said they'd like to knock Dad off. "You seen those garrotes the Green Berets use? Just put it around Elkhart's neck and pull. Kill him in seconds." Orange looked at me. When the two moved on, Orange said, "Don't pay any attention to them. They're tired. We're all just a little tired."

"I know, I know," I said.

In Dad's trailer, Dad sat us both down. "Go see if you can get Ben back here." The man from the government was coming around later that day, and if Dad's Indian-to-white ratio wasn't adjusted, the operation would be shut down. He gave us the key to his truck. "Get back as quickly as possible."

We started to head out, but Dad stopped me. "Go on, Orange," Dad said. "David will catch up with you in a minute." Orange nodded and went on.

"I need you to sign some papers." Dad handed me a few forms with the Little Elk Nation printed at the top.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Paperwork," he said. I looked them over, and Dad quickly grew impatient. "They don't mean anything. They're so that the government recognizes you as an Indian. That's all they are."

*

"I'm thinking about quitting," Orange told me in the truck on our way out to Harry's place. "It's not worth the bull shit."

"Quit," I said.

"But my little girl," Orange said. He shook his head. "I don't know. Eight dollars an hour isn't too shabby, if you know what I mean. I'll have to think it over."

There were five old junk heaps parked in front of Harry's place, but Ben's truck wasn't one of them. "Looks like we missed him," Orange said.

"Damn it," I said, knowing what Dad would say. "Let's see if someone knows where he's gone."

Orange waited in the truck while I went looking for Ben. The front door of the house was standing wide open. I saw someone in the kitchen with his head down on the table. The kitchen was an absolute mess—bottles of booze everywhere, dishes piled high in the sink and across the counter. Trash had been piled into the corner. The place smelled like dog piss. I realized the guy at the table was asleep. The living room didn't look any different than the kitchen. More people were passed out on the couches and on the floor. All of Harry's Army and Navy certificates were hung on the wall. Ben was

passed out next to Wendy, Harry's girlfriend. I patted his shoulder. "Ben," I whispered. "Wake up," I said.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Shit," he said. "I was just dreaming that you were Dad and you had a twelve-gauge shotgun in your hands." He scooted away from Wendy without waking her up. "You got any money?" he asked.

I gave him all the money I had.

"I'll pay you back," he said. "If you count combat pay, the Army pays you a decent wage."

"Where's your truck?" I asked.

"I sold it," Ben said. He pulled his hair over his shoulder. "I figured I didn't really need it anymore anyway. They don't let you drive to Vietnam."

Ben pulled some cigarettes and matches from a nearby denim purse, and I followed him out back to the porch. The back wasn't much better than inside. A car was on blocks, no tires. The hood was open. Next to the car was an old washing machine sitting there rusting. The only tree close to the house had died. The circle of dirt surrounded the house like a moat. "Late night," he said, laughing. I didn't bother telling him that it was already past lunch.

"Dad wants you back," I said. "He sent me here to get you."

"Yeah," he said. He shivered and wrapped his free hand around himself. He took a long hit off the cigarette and squinted out into the distance. "He doesn't really want me around, trust me. He'll be happier when I've shipped out, and he doesn't have to deal with all my crap."

I didn't know what to say. He was right. I realized that Ben had been trying to cut his ties when he dumped Dad's nails and screws in the garage. He was courting Dad's wrath, and I had messed it up for him by cleaning it all up. Maybe I was to blame for the mess Ben found himself. "You should think about going back," I said, but it sounded hollow. Even I didn't believe going back was a good idea.

"Why? What's that going to accomplish?"

"So you're going to give Dad what he wants and just disappear? Let him have his way without a fight?"

"Goddamn right," Ben said. "When I left home, I didn't go far enough. I should have gone to Idaho or Mexico, somewhere he couldn't find me. Now I'm going to Southeast Asia and get myself killed. Dad would like that—not having me around to bug him plus me being a war hero. Two birds with one stone. He'd be real proud of me then, wouldn't he? He could bronze me and put in front of the courthouse with the other suckers."

"Why didn't you tell me we had a guest," Harry said. The old man came out with a quart of beer in his hand. "If you're staying," Harry said to me, "you gotta drink. It's my house, and those are the rules. No exceptions." He didn't have his teeth in, and he smelled something awful, like rotten food or vomit.

Ben said, "Shut up, Harry. Go back inside."

He stepped in front of us, blocking off our view of the hill in the distance. "Drink," he said to me, shoving the bottle up to me.

Ben grabbed it out of his hand. He scrambled to his feet, took a few steps, and tossed the bottle into the woods. After I left, I was sure that Harry would be out in the

grass on his hands and knees searching for the drink or two that survived the throw. Ben said, "David doesn't drink."

"That's all you're getting from me," Harry said. "No more for you, Ben." He turned to me and said, "He thinks he's some kind of genius, but you know what? Your brother's just another dumb fuck. He doesn't know it yet, but he'll figure it out one of these days."

I put my arm around him and tugged at him, supporting him. "Come back with me," I said. "If you don't want to see Dad, we can make that trip to Idaho. I'll go with you, if you want me to."

Ben wouldn't look at me. "Too late for that."

"No it's not," I said.

"You should get out while you can," he said.

In Dad's truck on the way back to the courthouse, I told Orange that I couldn't believe they let Harry fight in a war.

Orange laughed. "You believed all that crap he tells? Hell, Harry didn't fight in no war."

"What about those certificates framed on his walls? The tattoos?"

"Those certificates you can buy mail order by the box. And those tattoos, hell, anyone who's ever worked in a tattoo parlor knows how to do an anchor."

"Does Ben know Harry's a fake?"

"If he doesn't, he's a fool. Harry spent Korea in a whorehouse down in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The only uniform he's ever been in is the jumpsuit that the inmates at the county jail have to wear."

*

When we got back to the house, the man from the government had all of Dad's crew lined up against the courthouse. They had their papers out. "Shakedown," Orange said.

Dad saw us park his truck. He ran over to us. "Where's Ben?"

"He wasn't there," I said.

"Come on, you two." He grabbed me by the shoulder and guided me to the back of the line. "Don't say anything. Let me do all the talking."

We waited in line without talking to one another. No one felt like joking. I watched as the man worked his way slowly to the end of the line. Each person handed him a card, and the man recorded something on a clipboard he carried. Occasionally, he asked the person a question. Usually, he just handed the card back and went on to the next person. By the time he made it to the end of the line, he had culled three men from the line and sent them over to the trailer. "Asshole," Orange said after each one. I didn't know if Orange was talking about the men who had been sent away, the government man, or Dad. Maybe they were all assholes in Orange's eyes. Dad argued after each one, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. The workers didn't even bother to stick around. One drove away in his truck. The other two walked across the street to the Mo-Co office.

"Card," the man asked Orange.

"Yeah," Orange said. "Here it is." He pulled his wallet out from his pocket and handed him the card that showed he was a member of the tribe. The man looked at it closely. "Is it a problem if my step-father is a Pygmy?" Orange asked, straight-faced, "'cause if it is, I can get him to write me a note saying he's not my real father."

Dad said, "Shut up, Orange," and I could tell that Orange didn't appreciate Dad's comment. I hoped he played if off because I needed Orange to be there. He was practically the only thing keeping me at the courthouse.

"That's the thing about Indians," the man said to Dad. "They don't know when to keep their mouths shut."

He stopped in front of me. "Card?"

Dad said, "This is *my* boy."

"So?" the man said. "Where's his card?"

"We just put in the paperwork today. He's Little Elk, like me."

The man looked me over. This time he didn't want to believe Dad. "I thought you said that he wasn't Indian."

"How can I be Indian and my own son not be?"

The man shook his head. Dad looked like a fool. "Next time I want to see the paperwork or he doesn't count. Got it?"

*

After the man from the government drove his car away, Dad met with his foreman for a half-hour and then called all of us together. He apologized to everyone. They had to let two men go. It was nothing personal. I noticed that the two men were white. I knew from hearing Dad talk that the acceptable ratio of whites to Indians had fallen below what the government required in the contract. Then he announced that anyone who wanted overtime pay could work an extra shift starting tomorrow night. "We'll work around the clock until we finish," Dad said. "Another thing, no more chit-chat. We have to pick up the pace. Put some pride into your work."

Orange nudged me. "How are we going to work around the clock if we're the only workers he's got? We'll fall over dead."

I shrugged. "Maybe he's found some other guys."

"You got any more brothers?" Orange asked. "Sons or uncles?"

"No," I said.

He watched the Mo-Co office out of the corner of his eye, as if he might make a break for it. "I didn't think so."

*

That night I went home with Dad. It would be my last night there. Mom was gone through most of the night, running errands to other parts of the city. I thought I heard her come in late that night. I could have sworn I smelled baked beans cooking on the stove. Dad disappeared into the house, and I did the same.

*

Before I left, I bought Orange a sandwich wrapped in plastic. He thanked me. "Don't do anything stupid," I told him.

"Your Dad don't pay me enough to be stupid—even with overtime, you know?"

"You're okay, Orange."

"Tell my wife that. She forgets."

I found Dad in his trailer. He was on the phone again. I nodded at him. "Ben said I could stay with him tonight," I whispered.

"No," Dad said. He looked tired. He didn't have the energy to put up much of a fight. "That's a bad idea."

"I'm staying with Ben," I said. He knew what I meant.

"Go on then," he said.

I started to walk off, but not in the direction of Ben's. I looked back at him. He looked all alone. "I'll be back," I said.

"I know," Dad said.

*

As I made the walk up the hill, I suddenly realized that Dad sent me to Paquette's not because of the tutoring but in order to get rid of me. In many ways, I was as much of a pain as Ben. I began to run up the hill as fast as I could. The lights from Paquette's were barely visible through the tree branches in the woods. Instead of taking the drive, I plunged into the dark woods and kept running. The dead branches and living vines tried to snag me, but they couldn't slow me down. I just lifted my legs higher, dodged around clumps of bushes. The air flowed through my lungs, and I felt good for the first time in two days. Suddenly, my chest took an invisible blow and knocked me back. I found myself on the ground, gasping for air. I felt a deep welt across my chest burn. I reached out in the dark, feeling for the invisible thing that had delivered the blow. I crawled forward a few feet before my wrist made contact with the line, a strand of barbed wire. It was part of an old fence Paquette had built to keep intruders away from his property. I tugged at the wire, testing the tension. I pushed at it some, and then I put all my weight on the wire until it snapped and fell away.

Back in the direction of the courthouse, a huge cloud of light filled the sky. Dad had finally turned on the work lights. I walked the rest of the way up the hill. At the top, near the house, I looked back down to the courthouse. Except for a thin shadow cutting diagonally across the building, the lights reflected off the marble, making the structure

vibrate in a white glow. One more volt and the structure looked as if it might burst into flames. I realized then that I hated the building, its new shell of marble. It stood there bathed in the lights like some kind of Hollywood debutante. I hated that my father needed the building more than he did Mom or Ben or even me. Maybe Ben was right. Maybe I should have gotten out while I still could.

The wind blew, and the lights on the courthouse shook with the wind. The shadowy streak across the front of the building remained constant. I remembered the problem the crew had with the statute of Red Elk and laughed. It was his shadow cast across the perfect whiteness of the building. He was to blame for the smudge.

*

It felt good to be back with Baby again after two nights away. She told me that her dreams weren't as good while I was away, though I didn't completely believe her. I kissed her. It was the first time I felt in control of my desire, not that Baby had taken advantage of me. No, it was more that I knew what I wanted. Baby laughed when she saw my chest: the barbed wire had left a horizontal cut across my chest. It was raw and seeped puss. "You've been cut in half," Baby said. "You're a divided man."

The next morning Baby woke me up with a kiss to my forehead. "I've been wanting to tell you something." She said, "The other night I had a dream, and I didn't tell you because I was scared."

I sat up a little. "You can tell me," I said.

"In the dream, the courthouse became a ball of flame and burned a hole through to the core of the earth. People walked away from the ash and rebuilt their lives with one another." She looked at me to get my response.

"Is that it?"

"That's enough, isn't it? What does it mean?"

*

Irene was up long before I was, cooking the breakfast she was famous for. "Irene," I said. I put my arm around her. It felt as if I hadn't seen her in weeks.

"Careful," she said. "Don't get me confused with your girlfriend."

"No, ma'am."

"Listen to you," Irene said. "Sit down and eat before the biscuits get cold."

She served me up not only biscuits and sausage gravy but also fried chicken and mush. She left off the chicken liver, a taste I had just learned to tolerate in my time there. When I finished, I pushed my plate away.

Irene pulled a small stone from the pocket of her apron and set it there on the table where my plate had been.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A stone."

"I can tell that."

"Red Elk gave that to me when I was a little girl."

"You knew Red Elk?"

"Yes," she said, "I do."

I put the stone in my palm. It barely weighed anything at all. Its edges were as smooth as skin. There were flecks of pink in the white.

"He picked it up in the old country and carried it with him here."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"Do? Nothing," she said. "It means he figured something out."

"What did he learn?"

"Even if I knew, I couldn't explain it to you. Hang on to it," Irene said. "You'll find one of your own one of these days."

I slipped Red Elk's stone into my pocket. My jeans pressed the stone into my thigh, and I felt good knowing it was there, reminding me of its existence. "Thanks," I said.

"Wash your plate off before that gravy gets hard."

"Yes, ma'am."

*

Before I could get out the front door, Irene called me back. "I could use a ride over to the tribal building."

"Sure," I said. I figured I had a few minutes before reporting back to Dad.

The Little Elk headquarters was nothing like I had imagined it. A one-story, prefab structure, the building could as easily have been located in a strip mall in Tulsa. The Little Elk Nation seal was posted on the front of the building next to a payphone. I pulled into the closest spot to the front door. "You want to look inside?" Irene asked.

An older Indian woman sat behind a table, her hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup of coffee. A large metal ballot box sat on the table with a stack of mimeographed ballots along side it. Her hair was permed in tight curls, and she wore earrings that dangled down to her cheeks. She nodded at Irene. "Dick said you'd be the first one here."

I watched Irene carefully fill out her ballot. She handed it to the woman. The woman folded Irene's ballot in half and dropped it into the box. Irene turned around to me. "You made up your mind yet?"

I looked up at the woman. "I don't have a card yet," I explained. "Dad just put in the paperwork."

The woman's head tilted, her long earring dangled out in space. "You're Agnes' boy, aren't ya?" She slid one of the ballots in my direction.

*

Irene pointed to a parking space close to the courthouse.

"That's alright," I said. "You don't have to walk. I'll drive you back. I've got time."

"That's not necessary," she said.

I went ahead and grabbed the parking space. Directly in front of us, Dad was talking to someone by his trailer. As far as I could tell, there were no emergencies to be dealt with. Everything was going as planned. "That's a long walk," I told Irene.

"Who said I'm gonna walk?"

I got out and shut the door back. I leaned in through the driver's window. "Why you been having me drive you all over Little Elk? Why didn't you just drive yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. She smiled and shook her head. "Let's just say I wanted the company." Irene put the car in gear. I wasn't sure how much longer Paquette's car would run, but I suppose Irene knew its days were numbered. She seemed to know most everything else important.

"Tell Baby I'll see her tonight," I said.

"I look like your messenger," Irene said.

"You're something," I said.

Irene nodded over at Dad's workers who were starting to gather for the day's work. "A lot of Indians there," Irene said.

"Not as many as there used to be."

"You think they know about the vote today?"

I looked back at the men. They were a rough group. Except for one or two, they weren't at the presentation the oil company gave. I couldn't imagine that they took much interest in tribal business. "I'm not sure," I said.

"That'd be a shame if they didn't remember," Irene said. "They're all young and they don't have good memories. They're like you. Sometimes they need to be reminded."

I knew what Irene was saying. She wanted me to do the reminding. "I don't know, Irene," I said. "It's not really my place."

She looked at me point-blank. "You don't think, huh? What is your place? You better figure that out pretty soon."

I looked back at the workers. "I'll see what I can do."

*

Dad didn't say anything when he finally saw me. There were only a dozen of us, waiting there for our morning orders. The other half had worked the extra shift the night before. Dad had told them to be back by eight, which would have meant less than four hours to sleep and wash up for the next full day of work. Orange pulled up in his van, his

wife behind the wheel. I walked over to say hello. I had a list in my hand, things that Dad wanted me to pick up at the hardware store. "Did you sleep any?"

"Sure," Orange said. "I'm still sleeping."

I nodded at Orange's wife and made a funny face at his little girl. "This morning she told me she wants a brand new Camaro for her second birthday. Isn't that right, Katie?"

"Orange," his wife said, "you're full of shit."

"Jet-black with a little spoiler. Maybe some of them hot flames running down the sides."

"You better get your ass to work," his wife said.

Orange slammed the door shut. I looked away just before they kissed. "See you," Orange said to her. He waved goodbye to his little girl. He patted the van as she drove off.

He saw Dad's list in my hand. "That for Santa?"

"Supplies at Owens'"

"Get me some nails," Orange said. "I'm low on all-purpose nails."

*

At Owens' Hardware, I gathered up the items on the list. I stuffed the basket he had given me, and I probably had enough items on the list for another two baskets full. Mr. Owens leaned against his counter and looked at the catalogues his suppliers had sent him. You could tell that he loved them. I said, "Is there any limit on the account?"

"No," he said. "Not on the Elkhart account. No, sir."

Just to be funny, I said, "You sell automobiles?"

He pulled a catalogue out from underneath and flipped back to the index. "Go-carts and scooters," he said, "but no automobiles."

"I could charge a scooter?"

"No limits."

*

I was gone maybe forty-five minutes, and when I came back to borrow Dad's truck to pick up the supplies with, I saw the lights on top of the sheriff's car spinning, drawing a crowd of bystanders. I ran across the street. I realized something was missing from the sky over the courthouse. The arm of the crane had toppled. I was sure that someone was dead.

I ran up to the men huddled around the fallen crane. "Who is it?" I screamed. "Who is it?" I shoved my way in, knowing I would find my own father dead on the grass. Then I heard Dad yelling, "Orange!" The crane had clipped Orange across his hip, tearing his leg out of the socket and turning his body around. They had gotten the crane off his leg by hoisting it on their own. Orange faced the sky, while his toe pointed into the ground. Someone had tied an impromptu tourniquet around his upper thigh, but the blood seemed to flow out of him without being slowed down.

I crouched down beside him. "What happened?" I asked.

"You're asking the wrong guy," Orange said. "I didn't see it."

Across from me was another man, a white man who was skilled at this kind of work, I recognized but didn't know him by name. I recognized the tourniquet as fabric from the man's shirt. "I couldn't stay awake," the man said. "I tried, but I couldn't."

I looked up at Dad.

Dad said, "Everybody back to work. Go on."

Orange kept his eyes closed. His face didn't show any signs of pain. The white of his bone broke through his flesh. My hip hurt just seeing his like that. I couldn't imagine how much pain that would be. Orange said, "I'm beginning to wonder about this project, ya know?"

It took the ambulance another ten minutes. It wasn't hard to see that all the leg would be lost. And then there was the possibility that Orange himself would not make it. I offered to ride with him to the hospital. In fact, I started to load up with him, but Dad grabbed me by the meat of the arm and pulled me back. "Not you," he said. He gave a shove to another man. "You go," he said. "Call me when you hear something." Dad shut the back door of the ambulance, and they sped off.

The men stood around stunned, not sure what to do with themselves. Dad said, "If you all want to get paid for today, you better get on back to work. Go on." They broke up and went back to their tasks. Just the two of us remained. "Stupid," Dad said. "Just plain old stupid."

"Why wouldn't you let me go with him, Dad? Why'd you stop me?"

"I need you," he said. "You're too valuable."

"The man you sent was white, wasn't he?"

"So what?"

"If they came by to check out cards today, he wouldn't have counted, would he? He could go with Orange because he wouldn't count. Me, I'm Indian now. I count, so I had to stay. Isn't that right?"

"That's not true," Dad said. "What's wrong with you? Go on with the others. Get back to work."

I had to do it. I turned away and left the courthouse grounds. I couldn't stay there anymore. Dad didn't even try to stop me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the drugstore, I found Bill Owens. He had an empty shake glass in front of him. "Hey, Bill," I said. I wasn't sure if he would remember me. His broom was leaning back against the soda counter. On the counter was an empty soda glass with a straw. The woman who worked the counter was outside smoking a cigarette. The courthouse was just across the street. "You know a lot about explosives, right? Dynamite and fuses and things?"

"Used to," he said. He tried to sip the rest of his shake through his straw. "In the war."

"I have a question for you. How much dynamite would it take to blow up a big building?"

"Depends on how big we're talking about."

I pointed out the window to the courthouse. "About like that," I said.

*

That night I drove to Stillwater and found the university library. The Department of Defense had several shelves full of books about explosives. I picked the three that dealt with demolition and made photocopies of them. I figured if I had any questions, I could ask Bill Owens. I slid the copies in my backpack so no one would get suspicious.

On my way out of the library, I saw Professor Stevens sitting at the table with a young girl in a wheelchair. I made a detour from the front door so that I might pass by the table. I felt my anger rising in me.

"Professor Stevens," I said.

He didn't recognize me at first. He was mentally running through past rosters of his students. But then the look of recognition crossed his face. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you," I said. I smiled at the girl sitting next to him. "You'll be glad to know Baby decided to drop the rape charges against you."

"Don't listen to him," the professor told the girl.

"You all have a good evening," I said.

On my way out the door, the student working security stopped me. "We have to look through your backpack." He would see the manuals on demolition for sure. "It'll just take a second," he said.

I tossed the backpack onto the counter. He unzipped the pack, opened it up, and pulled out some of my copies. He read the title. "You must be an engineering student," he said.

"That's right," I said.

"With a job like that, at least you'll be able to pay back your student loans."

*

I went looking for Ben. I drove out to Harry's place. Ben's truck was gone, but I thought I might check inside to make sure someone else hadn't taken it. The breeze carried the smell of urine with it. I shook it off. The front door stood open. "Anybody home?" I called out. The inside was dark. They didn't have any electricity, or if they did, it had been turned off a long time ago by the electric company. "Who's that!" someone yelled from somewhere in the back part of the house. I recognized the voice. It was Wendy, Harry's old girlfriend.

"It's me," I said.

"Who's me?" she called back.

I worked my way toward the voice, into the kitchen and then into the bedroom. I found her there in the bedroom. "David," I said. I didn't want her to draw a gun on me or anything. "Ben's brother."

"You scared me shitless," she said. She sat back and stopped doing whatever she was doing. She put her hand to her chest in a gesture of feigned concern. The drawers of his cabinets were all pulled out and had been rummaged through. She had apparently not found what she was looking for from Harry. He was passed out on the bed. "You seen your brother?"

"No," I said. "I'm looking for him myself."

"That bastard took my money," she said. "He said he'd come back, but he ain't. I just know it," she said. "I bet they're somewhere passing my bottle back and forth, the bastards."

"They'll be back," I said.

She sat up on her knees. "Come here," she said. I moved a little closer. She grabbed my wrist and tugged me down at her side. "You got anything to drink?" she asked. She smiled at me. I looked over at Harry, who didn't look like he would wake up anytime soon. He might have been the one to finish off her booze. She reached down and felt my jeans for my penis. She rubbed it from the outside of the jeans with her hand. "Well?" she asked. "You like that? If you go get us some liquor, I'll make you a happy boy."

I pulled back. "No thanks," I said.

"Come on," she said. "What's the harm? You a faggot? Or, is it you only go for crips?"

"If you see Ben," I said, "tell him I'm looking for him."

She went back to the drawers that were already flung open and starting tossing out dirty clothes that been wadded up and stuffed in there. "Goddamnit," she said. She took the whole drawer out and flung it against the wall. She ran over to the bed and pounced on top of Harry. She shook him hard, but it didn't seem to do any good. "Wake up," she said. "Where is it? Where's that bottle? You wake up and tell me before I kill you, damn it. Wake up, Harry."

*

I stopped by the hospital to see Orange. His wife was there. Someone was keeping their little girl while she was here. "I'm sorry, Orange," I told him.

"Me, too," he said. Pillows under shoulders and head kept him propped up high. He was positioned on top of the sheet. The stump was covered with bandages.

"Well he's alive," his wife said. "

"That's right," he said. "I get to see my little girl grow up."

"I feel like I'm to blame."

"You?" Orange shook his head. "A man from the state came by to ask me about the accident."

"You tell him the truth?"

"Your Dad won't have a job much longer."

I nodded. "He's made some mistakes. He should pay for them like everyone else."

"Funny thing," Orange said. "A woman came in here this morning, took one look at my leg, and starting crying. Big tears. So many tears they had to mop up the floor after she left. She pinned a little flag on me and said a prayer for our troops in Vietnam.

She got a photographer from the newspaper to take my picture. Can you believe it? It's supposed to be in tomorrow's paper. Me, a war hero. When people ask about the leg, I figure that's what I'll tell 'em. Why not?"

*

I heard the state was on its way to shut down Dad before they arrived with the sheriff in tow. Dad hadn't been home to Tulsa in a few days. He was living out of his trailer and cleaning himself up at Ted's pool hall. He wouldn't let anyone see his fear over what might happen. He would give up before he had to admit to being afraid. He must have known what would happen. Word had it that he had tried to get the dozen workers left after I walked away to stay on and finish the job—even if it meant doing it behind the state's back. He went so far as to take his tie off and work alongside them.

And the funny thing was that when I heard all this, I felt guilty that I hadn't been there to help him. I had come to Little Elk to prove myself to him, after all. The truth was that if he had invited me in just a little, shared his desire to finish the job, I would have begged to stay with him. I would have been the one cleaning off with wet paper towels at the pool hall. I would have gladly done it for him. This was the saddest truth of them all.

*

I was surprised to hear his knock on the front door of the Paquette place. I looked at Baby, and she knew who it was, too. She gave me that look of hers. "Don't worry," I said, though I felt the nausea beginning to build inside me. Would I be strong enough? I reached for the door knob, my hand shaking.

"You have a minute?" Dad asked. He thumbed the air, signaling me outside Paquette's.

"You better come in," I said.

He looked good, the same as if he had been taking showers and sleeping eight hours a night in his own bed. Despite everything Irene had taught me, I still envied him his dark skin, only a shade lighter than Red Elk's.

Dad couldn't bring himself to move past the entryway. He said, "They've suspended my license."

"I heard."

"This town," Dad said and shook his head. "I've never had much luck here. I guess Irene's told you as much." He tried to look into the living room to see who was there, who was listening to his words. "I've been thinking," Dad said, "if you still want to give me a hand, we could get a few things done on our own, forget those other guys. They're just deadweight anyway."

As I listened to him, I rubbed the stone between my fingers. The motion gave me strength, keeping me grounded.

"What do you say? Father and son. Interested?"

I looked at him. Just a few months ago, he was everything I wanted to be when I got older. I just wanted to show him that, offer him some proof that I could live up to his standards. Still, even as he invited me, I thought maybe I had got it all wrong. Maybe I was thinking too much of myself, and he had it right.

He stood there, as if he was not about to move until I agreed to come with him. "Come on," he said.

"I don't think so, Dad."

"David."

"Go home to Mom. She needs you."

"You're not thinking this through," he said. What are you going to do? Marry a girl with no arms or legs? Get a job at the hardware store? Have a bunch of cripple children?"

"Shut up," I said.

"If you just think it through, you'll understand what I'm saying. Think through your options. I'll be down at the courthouse. Come find me when you're ready to talk."

I shut the door and walked back into the living room. Baby looked after me, waiting for a response. "Well?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He doesn't understand."

"You still want to go through with the plan?"

"If I don't," I said, "he'll always be there, waiting for me."

*

We quietly listened to a Cardinals' game on the radio. Harry Caray's energy stood in contrast to our own lack of energy. I finally said, "What do you think about California?"

"I've always wanted to surf," Baby said.

"Seriously," I said. "We could get a small house by the ocean. That would be kind of fun, huh? I could get a job doing something, make enough to support us.

"Sounds nice," Baby said. She nodded to be encouraging, but I knew she had other ideas.

*

That night, I pulled out the checklist that Baby had helped me work up. If I grew nervous or unsure of myself, I could go back to the list and check off each item one by one and still succeed at my task. I recovered my backpack from Baby's closet where I had been storing it since the episode with Professor Stevens. I packed it with the C-4 that we had ordered from Owens' Hardware and charged to Dad's account. He wouldn't find out he had purchased the dynamite for a week or two. Baby had called this a "residual bomb," the kind that would be dropped for weeks after the courthouse was blown apart. I packed a roll of detonation cord and the individually-wrapped blasting caps, though if everything went well I'd only need one to do the entire job. Last but not least, I packed a 12-volt battery. I checked the caps to see if they were securely screwed onto the battery terminals.

Baby watched me as I packed the items into the backpack. "Careful," she said. "You don't want to kill the good guys." Her confidence kept me going. I knew I was doing the right thing.

I put the backpack on Baby's bed, making sure the contents didn't shift. If the blasting caps built up even the slightest charge from static electricity, they could ignite and in turn ignite the C-4 and send us all to kingdom come. "You ready?" I asked her. My hands were shaking, so I stuck them inside my pockets.

"If you are," she said.

I carried her up the stepladder to the attic. From the attic, I got her out the window and onto the roof. She would watch the explosion from there. That's where I would get her when I came back.

"Well," I said.

"Kiss me," she said.

I kissed her the way we had kissed the first night of our relationship, when I wasn't sure of anything. "I'm worried about you," she said.

"Don't," I said. "I'll get everything ready and then get out. No fancy stuff. No John Wayne."

Before leaving, I kissed her on top of her head. "My Baby," I said.

*

Driving down the hill to the courthouse, I felt like a man for the first time. The window was down, and I let the breeze blow through the car. At the streetlight across from the courthouse, I stopped the car and let the engine idle. The building was bathed in light, lit from below like some kind of German castle or American sacred site. Dad had his crew working late into the night to meet the upcoming deadline. Baby and I had watched Dad working alone from the roof of the Paquette place undetected for the last few days. He looked so determined. I had no real fear of being caught. I drove Paquette's car into the parking lot and over to his place, half on the cement and half on the grass. I killed the engine and looked around to see if anyone might have been watching. Part of me wanted to get caught. If I was to sever my relationship with my father, I knew I had to do something big. There had to be rubble.

The backpack was just as heavy as it had been with *Gray's Anatomy*, so I had to be careful to remember to treat the materials gently. Don't let the blasting caps work up any static electricity. I lifted the backpack out of the seat and carried it like a small body to the steps of the courthouse. The door was open, and I stepped inside. The smell of dust

and old age enshrouded me. Dust took form in the corners and on top of the picture frames. You could gather it in a bucket and still not have enough space to contain all of it. I walked past the photographs of Col. Paquette and his friends, the founding fathers of Little Elk. They all wore their fancy suits that they had brought with them from Illinois and Kansas and Tennessee. The suits didn't make much sense here in Indian Territory and then Oklahoma. It was too hot for them. Their elbows and knees wore out too soon. Only their wives' bonnets survived the summers intact, and that was only because they were stored in boxes and hidden away in the attic or closet. I didn't know it until then, but I hated Col. Paquette even more than I hated his son. I hated him and the others for the idea that they brought with them from wherever they had come. The building was like they were, foreign to this place. The marble too had been brought in from upstate New York.

I walked past the post office where Old Man Paquette had his long talks with Frank Goodnight. And then the library, where Baby had spent so much time with her books about home. Finally, the recruiter's office: the smallest room in the building, not counting the men's bathroom or the janitor's closet, room enough for only one of the two men assigned here. The odd man out had to spend his day on the road, visiting high schools and making visits to the homes of their potential recruits. This had been the one who had talked to Ben. He told him about the glory to be had in being a Green Beret. John Wayne himself was working up the financing to make a movie about the elite soldiers. Who knows? Ben might have a bit part, if the timing worked out right.

I sat the backpack down on the single desk in the office and pulled out a small block of C-4. This was the only office I targeted. The other blocks would be placed

according to key points in the structure of the building. I inserted a blasting cap and ran the det cord out the window. When I was finished placing the C-4, I would gather the cords outside and run them out to a point across the street. It didn't take me more than ten minutes to place the other blocks and rig them for detonation. I pulled out the battery and tossed the backpack down in the hallway. No need for a book bag anymore. When I let go, I regretted it, and I suddenly felt a flash of fear go through me. I shut my eyes and focused on what I was doing. I could gather up the materials and be out of the courthouse in two or three minutes. "My God," I thought. I picked up a chair sitting in the hallway and tossed it through the library window. The noise echoed through the courthouse hallway. If anyone was in the area, they would have likely heard that. I had committed myself.

Outside, I gathered the cord from the windows and ran them up the sidewalk that led to the street. I tried to look up the hill at the Paquette house, but the line of businesses was blocking the path of my vision. Somewhere in that direction Baby was watching as it all unfolded. It would have been nice to see her one more time before I connected the wires to the battery. I twisted the ends of the six wires together and took one more look at the courthouse. Dad's trailer was sitting over there innocently off to the side. If I had thought of it, I would have placed a block there as well. As I was looking at Dad's trailer, I saw something behind the trailer. Parked down the block a little ways from the courthouse was Ben's truck. I recognized Tony who was leaning against it, looking like he'd had a little too much to drink. "Shit," I thought. I figured Tony was far enough away that he wouldn't be hurt. That was my thinking.

I held my breath and did what I had to do. Carefully, I brought the ends of detonation cords to the battery. There was a quick spark. A split second before I saw the quick flame of the spark, I heard a voice call out: "Little Brother," it said, but it was too late to do anything about it. The charge of electricity traveled at the speed of light and must have already been half way to the courthouse by then. The words fragmented in my ears, falling away from me even as I put them back together in my mind. Ben. Ben's voice.

Remember this, I thought. *Remember this.*

VITA

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