FATHER ABRAHAM

By

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DISARTICULATION

These child welfare people, they know how to interrogate. They escort me and Chelley up to the fourth floor, split us apart outside the elevator, take Chelley up the long white corridor to the hospital's Family Support Center. Me they stash in some pediatrician's office that stinks like glazing putty—I'm guessing where they put the fathers. They leave me alone with a piece of paper that sketches out State of Tennessee physical abuse definitions. I read it slowly and think about Icky. Her little hand uncovered on the ER table. How I kissed that hand, then her forehead, then both her cheeks, before I went to work this morning.

Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-102:

Misdemeanor. Abuse exists when a person under age 18 is suffering from, has sustained, or may be in immediate danger of sustaining a wound, injury, disability, or physical or mental condition …

I skim the paper to the definition of a felony—*the knowing use of force on a child that is likely to cause great bodily harm*—and the officials move in and shut the door. I look at their nametags. Chuck, a nursing administrator here at Le Bonheur; Ray, a social worker from the DCS; Debra, a forensic interviewer from the Memphis Child Advocacy Center. But it's hard to see them with names, even faces. A big round button hangs off the lapel of CAC's blouse: a teddy bear with two crossed Band-Aids on its forehead, the words STOP CHILD ABUSE NOW! semi-circling the bottom in red.

"Okay, let's get started, shall we?" says DCS.

"Yes, please. My little girl's downstairs," I say.

Nursing Admin offers a nod, a polite smile to let me know that someone wearing a tie in a hospital can still attempt the occasional empathy. The other two look down at the pediatrician's oaktop desk.

A muffled voice—DCS, I think—finally says, "Occupation, Mr. Galvin? Name of your current employer?"

"Lineman, Memphis Light," I say, annoyed by the inclusion of the word *current*, and all three scribble on their yellow pads, in thick, serious-looking notebooks that have the Tennessee flag emblazoned on the blue covers. I sip on the caffeine-free Diet Coke someone slipped into my hand downstairs. I put the can down before the hand starts shaking.

"Salary?"

"About forty-two-K. A little more after bonuses."

DCS ponders something in his notebook. Scribbles. Then CAC takes over—the child welfare version of Good Cop, Bad Cop, I guess.

"Length of marriage?"

"About five years," I tell her. Chelley would probably throw in *January makes six* if she were sitting here beside me. She's always adding on to what I say. "We're headed to the Smokies—" I'll tell a friend. "To do some hiking," Chelley will finish.

"Thank you, Mr. Galvin. All right, hmm, let's see …" CAC plays with her pen, taps it on the desktop, and I can tell she's pretending to look for the next question, the next approach, to set me further on the edge. Like Peter Falk fumbling for the half-smoked stogy in his raincoat to throw the suspect off his guard. "Let's talk about the accident now," she says after a moment, with perfect Good Cop timing. "What happened to Isabel, Mr. Galvin? What happened to Icky exactly?"

I look around the doctor's walls, up to a poster of a baby girl in a diaper backdropped in blue sky and sitting on a cloud. The cloud's got tints of pink and orange in it. And the baby's laughing, hands flipped up in delight.

"Take your time," mutters Nursing Admin. "We know this is difficult."

So I breathe and take my time and lead them back through Icky's worst moment. Chelley reaching in the fridge for the coconut cream pie. Icky standing behind the open door, right hand slid in just above the bottom hinge. The door snapping her wrist when Chelley slams it home. Icky screaming like a victim of Hiroshima. Chelley dropping the cream pie on the floor. I didn't hear that scream, thank God; I was at work when all this happened. Chelley waited thirty minutes to call me, said she wanted to see if the swelling would go down with a bag of ice. The doctor in the ER said the X-ray showed a "grim scenario." Severe misalignment. Compartment syndrome. Disarticulation. A catalog of problems duplicated in dismal red ink on the DCS rap sheet.

"She wasn't supposed to be in the kitchen," I say. "She was supposed to be napping on the living room floor. That could happen to anybody, couldn't it? She just didn't see her."

CAC gives a look I can't begin to read. Then the pens click off and the officials rise. "Please keep in mind this is all protocol," DCS says. "We have to have this paperwork on file, you see, in case of further investigations."

"I understand," I say, and CAC flicks a business card at me. "We'll be in touch," she says, and then the officials, along with the wood putty stink of the office, spill out into the corridor. A passing nurse in purple and white scrubs stops to peek at the action, scoots back up the hall when she spots Nursing Admin. Then the officials move up the corridor and into the Family Support Center, to interrogate my dazed, medicated wife.

*

"At home, you'll be giving Isabel mild doses of Gabapentin," a doctor explains, as they prep Icky for the surgery. It's part of the hospital's plan to ease parents into the idea of amputation: give the clinical terms first, soften the blow with bits of science. "That's a drug we

use to help alleviate pain after an operation, but it should also help with any phantom limb pain she might experience in a few days."

Chelley's face looks yellow under the fluorescent lights. "What happens if this Gaba, Gaba-whatever doesn't work?" she asks. "How bad will the pain get?"

"The drug will help," the doctor assures.

She nods and swipes at a few tears, and I can tell she's been chewing on her nails. Probably gnawed at them during the interrogation. I can see her now, working up and down the tips, spitting out the unpolished fragments. The officials probably scribbled *Neurotic* all over the notebooks.

"Given time," the doctor adds, "you can have Isabel fitted for a small, temporary prosthesis, and larger ones as she grows. But you'll need to help each other maintain the dressing. Your entire family, not just Isabel, will be adjusting to this new handicap. This is a team effort now, folks. Do you both understand?"

"We understand," I say.

A nurse leads us back into the waiting room—and that's when Chelley throws her arms out and practically clotheslines me to get to the exit. "I need some air," she moans when I ask her where she's going. She doesn't make it three feet past the pneumatic doors before she stops and props an elbow against one of the rain and nicotine-stained columns. A moment later the entire waiting room is staring at me. Moms, dads, aunts—they all stare like I'm shirking some kind of spousal responsibility. I find a seat, pick up a magazine, and turn away from their damning eyes. I know I should be out there, standing beside her and patting her back, droning *It's OK, hon, none of this is your fault, everything's going to be A-OK*, but I can't do that. The worst I've ever done is drop Icky on the bed after a diaper change when she was five months. And that was a ride at Disney compared to the fridge door.

*

Icky's recovery room on the seventh floor has been painted a cheery, sunshine yellow and a light, daydream blue—colors that alternate in pancakes of vibrancy and youth, but the opposite effect seems to take hold as soon as we get there. Chelley sits on the striped sofa by the window and stares out at downtown Memphis, her feet tucked up on the cushions beneath her butt. Her face is ash-white and her hair is pasted to the sides of her head by sweat and dashes of water. I've taken the chair at the end of Icky's bed, my hand curled around the foot rail, my head and shoulders too tired to keep upright. I feel slack, like a puppet with a cut string. As the evening passes I find myself trying to doze, but every so often Icky rolls and twitches under the hospital's blanket, and I wonder if the bandage at the end of her right arm is irritating the fresh stub.

I look down at my index finger, at the white scar above the knuckle. My small reminder of childhood pain—nothing compared to what Icky must be going through. I was nine, and nearly had the finger lopped off in the spokes of my bike, a Schwinn Predator my father had brought home from Montgomery Ward. This happened in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, on a cul-de-sac street rowdy with boys my age, boys who rode huge, rugged BMX bikes and did wheelies and ramped over cars and appeared to eat danger for breakfast. I remember my mother's face when my dad rolled the Predator into the kitchen—my gift was just as much a surprise to her, apparently. My mother was a health nut who collected *First Aid for the Family* encyclopedias, and when she saw the bike parked on our black and white linoleum, she saw death and dismemberment in thousands of different forms. She insisted we find some instructional video for me to watch before taking the bike out—an idea my father thought was ridiculous. *A dozen boys younger than him ride their bikes every day on this street, and do you see them losing arms and heads, Barb?* That was the argument, and it satisfied my mother for most of the afternoon—until I came back clutching my hand and shrieking horrified lungfuls, blood gushing out of a canyon-sized gash I'd given my finger on the spokes. I don't remember how the accident happened (something to do with showing my buddies how fast you could spin a wheel), but I do recall my mother's reaction, and

the look she cast at my poor father as we drove to the ER for stitches. Only much later, as that look replayed itself out in my mind, would I come to realize what it meant: *I'm not going to see you the same way again*. The look meant, *You've inflicted pain on me, and that's something I will never forget.*

*

The hospital gives Icky a few days for recovery and then signs her out, upon strict promise that we bring Isabel back for examinations and checkups on her antibiotics. On the drive back to Germantown, I watch our daughter in the rearview mirror. Her face looks run-down, watery from too much hospital room. But in the confines of her Eddie Bauer car seat, she still looks like any other eighteen-month-old, gazing from window to window and tree to tree and making the occasional bee-bop sound. At this stage, we'd normally be reviewing her feeding and sleeping schedules, watching her weight and height, getting her immunized and gearing up for potty-training, all the things regular parents would be doing to prime their kid for the second year of life. Chelley and me—we'll be changing amputation bandages along with Icky's diaper.

On Halback Street Chelley says, "I've been doing some thinking. I think we ought to look into suing."

"Suing who?" I say.

"The refrigerator company."

"What the hell for?"

She'd been surfing the hospital's Wi-Fi and stumbled across this website on pinch point injuries and realized our fridge doesn't have the proper safety labels. "I think someone ought to be held accountable," she says. "Can we at least find a lawyer?"

"A fridge door," I point out, "should be the *first* place you'd expect a pinch point. Do you really need a label for that?"

"Well, there certainly isn't any *warning*, Gabe."

"Out of the question," I say.

"Why?"

One thing about Chelley: she has this habit for wanting to hang on to bad memories. Five years ago I found that fascinating, that she would squirrel away trophies of disasters and let the pressure of time bear down and crush them one by one. But as our marriage unfolded, the habit started losing its appeal, its relevance, trophy by trophy. Going through old boxes, for example, I'd find copies of city traffic warnings, or pictures of old flings who cheated on her with best friends. Once I stumbled across a three-by-five photo—complete with *frame*—of a seventeen-year-old Chelley at one hundred and ninety-five pounds, sitting alone at the Treadwell High School prom. Her mother Patricia took the picture. Her mother who, by the way, keeps a pair of polished, bronzed baby shoes on the fireplace mantel because she thinks Chelley might forget her perfect childhood. For reasons I don't and probably never will understand, my wife believes that the past holds the key to unlocking her survival. She has bought and swallowed that old saying that you have to know the past to understand the present.

"Because we need to move on," I answer. "And because I don't want our life sitting on some cheap lawyer's desk. End of story, OK?"

She says nothing else the rest of the way home, but the subject is far from closed. Once Chelley's found something, she keeps returning to it, circling it. Like her mother, she can't put a thing down and walk away. She'll keep the pain tucked until it pulls her in and suffocates her.

*

We decide to buy Icky a round of new toys—a Stanley Snail Rocker, a Corn Popper Push Along, a Rock 'N Bounce Pony—to ease her transition back to normality. The first five or six days the playing goes horribly, an experience in pain and futility. With her dominant hand gone, Icky tries to favor the left and drives herself crazy, drops to the floor and pitches periodic fits that rival anything your typical problem child could muster. Most of the time she keeps the stub tucked high and close against her chest, like it's a rag doll she's refusing to let go, and every so

often—I never know if it's on purpose or not—she'll steer the Push Along right out of control, bang it against the wall, and unleash a brand new conniption.

Changing the bandage is also a nightmare—just like the doctor had warned. And Chelley doesn't help the process at all, finds some way to be absent when the dirty work starts. "Take care of it today," she tells me. "If I don't get the laundry in the dryer the clothes will go sour." But I insist we do the job together, or else Icky will never let her touch the damn thing. And I'm right; the first couple of times after I put a new dressing on, Icky won't let her anywhere near the stump, screams "No!" and "Daddy!" until I have to bump Chelley aside and tell her, "See? Thanks a lot."

After each bandaging session, Icky tries to peel off the dressing, starting with the tape. She sits on the floor, oblivious of her new toys, and picks at the edges of the tape like she's working on a difficult Leap Frog bingo game. Chelley says, "No, baby, you can't do that," and I say, "Stop it, Icky, or you're gonna get a spanking!" Chelley glares at me when I say that, but I tell her if we're not stern right out of the gate we'll wake up one morning and find Icky's stump completely torn open. "Tough love," I tell Chelley, to which she replies, "There's no such thing, Gabe."

One morning I bundle Icky in her coat and stick galoshes on her feet. I don't wake Chelley up to tell her where we're going. I pack the stroller and put Icky in the car seat and start driving toward Riverdale Road. Along the way we listen to Kidz Bop. Icky's half-asleep, her stub cradled beneath her chin, her left hand curled around her sippy cup, but when the CD plays "Let's Get it Started" she bobs her head and grins and starts making her bee-bop noises. We get to the leash-free dog area off East Churchill Downs and I parallel-park under a small elm. The day is sunny and the dogs and their masters are out exploring Forgey Park. I put Icky in the stroller and we amble across the park and watch the dogs romp across the dead grass. Forgey Park's my favorite place in Germantown—the place I go to relax, to forget about things.

I stop the stroller at the water fountains and lean to get a sip when my phone buzzes. “Uh oh,” I tell Icky, “we’re found,” but it’s not Chelley’s number. It’s Debra, the CAC interviewer who Good-Copped me and Chelley on the day of the accident. Checking up on Isabel’s progress and wanting me to know they are “still reviewing the situation.”

“Your office is open on Saturday?” I say.

“We’re always open, Mr. Galvin. Children don’t stop being abused on the weekends.”

“No one’s being abused. We had an accident and now we’re moving on.”

“I’m not denying that,” the woman says.

She adds that someone from Child Protective Services would be calling soon to do another follow-up, and then, hopefully, “we can file all this away and forget it ever happened.”

“Yes,” I say. “Hopefully.”

*

A week later Memphis Light starts calling the house, eager for me to get back to work. I pick up the seven-to-four shift and try to recover the swing of things, scaling telephone poles and cussing around with the crew. But I can’t stop thinking about Icky and Chelley. On a wire patch I’ll grab the wrong pliers, have to search around the bucket for a tool I forgot. It occurs to me during a random shuffle of thoughts that Chelley can’t handle problems straight on—she has to deal with them in the abstract, at various angles. Like a pair of eyes too stubborn to pull the image out of a 3D stereogram.

One day I’m working in Midtown, Chelley calls and says her mother has decided to drive over from West Memphis, that she’s going to be staying awhile to help take care of Icky.

“I can’t do this by myself,” she says. “I can’t even get her in the car without her battling me. I’m going crazy, Gabe.”

I tell her she doesn’t know crazy until that woman’s in the house running our lives. Besides, where was Patricia when Icky was in the hospital?

“Be nice. Please. She’s had a lot on her plate.”

"Well, so have we," I say.

I get home at five and Patricia's Escalade is parked in the drive. Inside Icky's yelling up a thunderstorm, and at first I want to dash in, see if the stump has broken open and Chelley and good old Mom are letting her bleed all over the floor, but then I realize she's only laughing her head off, probably at her favorite VeggieTales. I step inside and see, first, that I was right about the VeggieTales, and second, that something about the kitchen has changed. They've replaced the fridge with a new side-by-side, stainless steel Amana Deluxe. The old one—the one that snapped Icky's wrist—is off in the laundry room, sideways between the washer and the dryer.

"Chelley," I call. "Why is the fridge in the laundry room?"

She steps out of our bedroom, followed by Patricia. The older woman's got forty or so pounds on Chelley, and one of those pear-shaped figures my work buddies call the Weeble-Wobble. But their round faces and stubby noses are almost identical, and I can see how Chelley will look just like her when she replaces the usual low-cal diet with Nutty Bars. They've been bawling over pictures spread across the bed, I see, and sandwich fixings—mayo, mustard, empty packages of ham and turkey—have been left all over the kitchen counter.

"Trish, good to see you," I say. "Chelley, what happened to our fridge?"

"We thought it'd be a good idea—" she looks at her mother and sniffles "—to get that awful thing out of our kitchen. Don't worry, though, it's not staying inside. We'll take it out to the shed as soon as we get the serial number. And a few pictures."

"Of what?"

"We agreed you ought to sue the manufacturer," says Patricia. "You'll need pictures to give your lawyer as soon as you can find one. They help establish the negligence. Do you know any lawyers around here, Gabriel?"

"Sue the manufacturer." I feel my face redden. "Glad you decided this without me."

"I wanted to call you earlier," Chelley says.

"We're not suing the goddamn manufacturer."

"Gabriel!" Patricia says. "Isabel is in the living room!"

That night they team up in the kitchen like a Paula Deen special. Spicy wings and homemade spinach artichoke dip—and they spare no expense. They clang pots and pans and chuckle like clown chefs. I sit in the living room and watch Icky tinker with the Push Along, try to keep my eyes less on the kitchen and more on the bandage, one of Chelley's first attempts. The TV's blaring Nickelodeon, and every once in a while Icky stops behind the Push Along to grab a good part of SpongeBob. "Meow!" she bellows, every time the screen flashes to Gary the Snail. Her color still hasn't returned, but she doesn't seem to care as much about the bandage, and when she picks around the stub it's only to rub at a phantom baby knuckle, or scratch at a phantom tickle where the top of the hand used to be. I can't help wondering how schoolmates will see her when she gets older. Will she be the kid with the cute nickname? The kid whose mommy made her a leftie? Or will she be the kid who laughs, the kid who finds the beauty and ignores the regret?

*

A quick note about regret. All husbands have a big one they never share, one they dare not talk about at the dinner table. Mine is that I told Chelley I loved her a month after we started dating. One month. It was outside the Malco Theatre in the Wolfchase Galleria, October of 2003. She was crying about the ending to *Mystic River*, the movie we'd just watched, and it was our fourth date. I wouldn't learn where she was born, or what her middle name was, or the fact that she had lost more than sixty pounds in college, until the fifth or sixth.

"I understand why Sean Penn did it," she said, as we walked back to my truck, "but I just can't take those unfair endings. I feel so empty afterwards, you know?" To make her feel better I sang the lyrics to that old Glen Campbell song, "Wichita Lineman," one of my dad's favorite tunes and a popular ditty among the Memphis Light guys. Every lineman I know has borrowed it

from time to time to improve his odds. And nine times out of ten old Glen Campbell never lets him down.

"*I hear you singing in the wire,*" I sang, "*I can hear you through the whine. And the Wichita Lineman, is still on the line.*" I put my arm around her shoulders. "How's that?" I said. "Still empty? Still—"

She didn't give me time to finish. She stopped me and we smooched in the parking lot. Some teenage girl nearby crooned, "Aww, so *sweeet,*" and when Chelley pulled back and smiled I knew things were going way too quickly, and that I was encroaching on territory I did not yet want to enter. But the words flushed out—"*I love you*"—like the burst of air after you've held your breath too long, and once they were out I couldn't stop saying them, and neither could she. Inside the truck—"*I love you*"—and back at my apartment—"*I love you*"—and soon we were lost in the noise, the rushing wind, of the mantra that I had started. And that was all she wrote. My one big regret.

*

The next evening, soaked down to my socks after a long rain, I get home and find Chelley and her mother flipping through copies of *Child* magazine at the kitchen counter. Patricia's holding a book called *Living with Your Child's Handicap*, and Icky's down on the living room floor, napping on her monogrammed blanket and sucking a right thumb that's not there. The TV's on the Cartoon Network but clicked to mute, and Icky's face is covered in some kind of thick brown goo.

"What's going on?" I say. "Why is Icky still in pajamas?"

"We decided to be lazy," Patricia says. "With all that rain, we thought it'd be a good day to make brownies."

I look at Chelley. She gives me a noncommittal smile. "Well, could you at least clean the brownie *off*?" I say, and point to the goo all over Icky's face.

After a shower I put my feet up in the living room and watch Icky suck the imaginary thumb. Watch the lips pucker and the tongue probe around the ghost of that tiny digit, and my skin grows as cold as the Tennessee rain. The doctor had said things like this would be possible, that Icky might do strange things in her sleep, think subconsciously that her limb is still intact and that she's satisfying the old oral impulse. So would we still need to break her from the habit then? My mother's remedy was a few drops of Louisiana hot sauce around the nail. I got a taste of that stuff in the middle of the night and she never had to worry about the problem again. Chelley, she's given Icky the hard way out. No Louisiana hot sauce for her.

Later, as I'm falling asleep in my recliner, I hear Patricia mutter something about a special needs daycare and I snap awake. "Not now, Mom," Chelley says. But her mother flips to a page in the book and starts reading a section about schools that specialize in handicapped toddlers.

"You want her to be happy, don't you? And normal?" Patricia says.

"Here," Chelley says, "eat the last brownie, Mom."

"I'm just saying she's not going to be able to cope. These schools have therapists and psychologists. And playrooms where they can watch her. Don't you want Isabel to be around kids with the same problem?"

I stand and walk into the kitchen. Chelley's eyes drop to a magazine as though I'm coming over to smack her. "Gabriel?" says Patricia. "What do you think about a special needs school for Isabel? Don't you think that's an idea worth considering?"

I move around them, silently, to the new fridge. I open the freezer door, find the Klondike bar I've been saving, and let the slamming door behind me be the answer to her question.

*

The first of December I get a call from Child Protective Services. The woman on the line explains that after a close review of the circumstances and a detailed analysis of the interviews,

the professionals at the CPS office have closed the case as an Unintentional Injury. No further action will be taken or reported, and they are very happy that things could be resolved.

"Godspeed Isabel's recovery," the woman tells me. "Have a pleasant day, Mr. Galvin."

I thank her, disconnect my lineman's phone, and feel relief slide over my body.

Finally. Some closure.

Then I get home and find a silver Lexus hardtop sitting in the drive, behind Patricia's Escalade. Through the glass of the door, I see a man standing in the living room and staring at the pictures of Icky on top of the TV. He looks about my age, a little younger maybe, and he's wearing dark blue trousers and a white button-up shirt with the sleeves turned up to the elbows. He picks up one of the pictures and studies it for a moment until I open the door and walk in.

"Oh, hi," the man says, and sets the picture down quickly. He glides across the room, around the sofa, to shake my hand. "You must be Gabriel," he says. "Or is it just Gabe?"

"Gabriel," I say, and accept the hand slackly. His palm is soft and moist, like he's been holding a baby wipe—and I make damn certain I'm the first to pull away. And then it occurs to me: I've seen the man's face in the yellow pages and once on Fox 13. A "late-night lawyer" I call them when their ads come on after midnight. Accompanied usually by a horrible fifth-grade jingle and a lightning bolt that spells out the address or phone number at the bottom of the screen.

"Chelley," I yell. "Get the hell out here!"

Chelley and her mother come running out of the bedroom, Icky propped on Patricia's large left hip like some kind of fashion bag. They've just finished changing her diaper—I can see the old diaper rolled into a ball and lying on the bedspread.

"You're home early," Chelley says.

"Gabriel," says Patricia, "this is Ronald Baxter. Attorney at Dillon and Baxter. He's going to help us out with the lawsuit."

"Please, just Ron," the man says, and tries to offer the moist palm again. The hand falls and slips into a trouser pocket when I turn away to face Chelley.

"We're not suing anybody," I say. "Period. End of story."

The lawyer looks like a squirrel caught in the crosshairs. "Mr. Gavin, I assure you, your family has an airtight case here. If you would just look at some papers I've compiled—"

"It's Galvin, and I'd like you to leave," I tell the man. Patricia makes a small gasping noise like a busted air hose.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Chelley says.

"With *me*?"

"You're being rude," Chelley says.

"Yes, I agree," Patricia puts in.

"Your mother talked you into this crap," I tell Chelley, not caring if Patricia or Ron the Late-Night Lawyer are standing there or not. Somewhere in the floodwater of my rage I feel a cutting shame at what I'm saying and about to say, but I can't stop the words, can't rise back to the surface for a breath. I think of my mother yelling at my father on the way to the Murfreesboro hospital, as I held my gushing finger in the backseat. But I can't get my breath. Can't stop where this is going. "You knew I didn't want this," I say, "but you just had to have your way, didn't you. Always your fucking way, right Chelley?"

"Gabriel, not in front of Isabel!" Patricia scolds. She slides Icky off her hip and down to the floor. Icky scampers around her legs and giggles. Two nights ago she stopped the imaginary thumb-sucking. And her color has come back in full. Pinks and reds flush her busy face like touches of paint. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"This from a woman whose plate was too full to visit her own granddaughter," I say.

"Mr. Gavin," the lawyer mutters, "if you would just look at a few documents—"

"You're being ridiculous," Chelley cries. "We need to do something about this. It's important, Gabe. Don't you understand?"

"It's only important because you maimed our daughter for life," I say.

Icky runs off into the bedroom. Not because we're yelling, but because she's spotted the Playmobil Circus and wants to toss around the elephants. Soon she's laughing at them, and rolling on the carpet with the animal trainer, the ringmaster, the little band fellows that play circus tunes when you set them on the platform. She pushes a plastic doggie with her stump. I yell at Chelley until my throat hurts, and Chelley and her mother yell back. But all I can hear is Icky's laughter, rising above the circus music, rising above everything. Laughter as though nothing in the world will ever silence it.

ZERO GRAVITY

Three weeks before Buddy Norenberg got his head knocked off, we watched the rocket break into a thousand pieces and fall into the ocean. We were sitting in Mrs. Carsten's third-grade classroom, and none of us knew what we were looking at. Even when the corkscrews of vapor and smoke scrambled up the topaz sky, and the chunks of black garbage shotgunned out across the Atlantic, death and disaster were the farthest things from our minds. No one felt the gut-punch understanding that Mrs. Carsten did; no one made the visceral connection back to our humanity, our American spirit.

Most of us cared little about science, virtually nothing about NASA. Even less about gathering around Mrs. Carsten's aging TV cart at ten on a Tuesday morning to watch half an hour of ogling spectators and fifteen seconds of actual liftoff. Weekend adventures were still bright on our minds—memories of sleepovers, Nintendo tournaments, the funny beer commercials of Super Bowl XX. The news networks had already provided our science anyway, with the incessant clips of Voyager 2's orbits around Uranus. We joked on Monday how Voyager 2 would explore YOUR-anus, until *Uranus* lost all meaning as a planet. Then we capered on, found something new for our third-grade wits to dissect, and gleefully forgot about all things NASA.

We made Mrs. Carsten's life hell, that first twenty minutes around the TV. We belched perfect letters of the alphabet (Jimmy De Bry could get to "L," Henry McIntosh all the way to "Q"), we hurled paper airplanes at the back of Cindy Beemer's head, we flung sharpened pencils at the ceiling tiles to make them stick. Buddy Norenberg was the only one who acted, as Mrs. Carsten called it, "well-behaved and well-brought-up." He sat alone at the back of the class and

doodled Martian saucers on the inside jacket of his Gobot Trapper Keeper. He had been overheard that morning chatting with Mrs. Carsten about things scientific in nature: zero gravity, spacewalks, the distance between the moon and the Kennedy Space Center. We whispered the name *suck-ass*, the name one of our dads, Mr. Mansaray, had used during a Saturday night PTA meeting in the cafeteria. None of us knew what *suck-ass* meant.

Buddy was the bastard son of our bus driver, Mr. Norenberg, the Semicolon. Mr. Norenberg hunched over the steering wheel like a giant comma, his large head the hanging period, and Buddy looked exactly like him. We called him Semicolon Junior. They came from a family of drunks and Democrats. Mr. Norenberg didn't have a wife; it was rumored Buddy didn't even come from a mother, but a prostitute. He wore bolo ties and plain white Velcro sneakers, like his father. Stories had it they shopped for their clothes at the Walgreens and the local Sunoco. No one could prove that the Izod pull-overs that Buddy wore on Fridays were authentic.

That morning Mrs. Carsten passed around astronaut cupcakes and shuttle-shaped cookies she had baked the night before. She had exhausted herself on them—the cupcakes were crafted to be space helmets with black frosting for visors, a quarter-moon shape of yellow frosting for a sun glare—but we tore into them with no respect for the artistic. We were unruly and wanted pandemonium. She warned us about causing too much ruckus, about disturbing the other classrooms down the halls. We barely heard the admonitions. Henry McIntosh smeared black frosting on his lips and called himself Bill Cosby. We followed suit and called ourselves *The Gang*.

"I'll not have a reactionary attitude," Mrs. Carsten said. "This is an important day for everyone." Her warnings always included the words *reactionary attitude*. She kept a tally of *reactionary attitude* reprimands and gave demerits on orange slips of paper, and because of this we didn't like her very much. She paced the floor in ancient Sperry Top-Siders and wore brown shirts and matching culottes that made her look like a five-foot potato sack. She hovered over our desks when we least expected, quoted strange poetry from impossibly-named writers like Chris

Wallace-Crabbe and Gjertrud Schnackenberg. She told us we would have a quiz the next morning on the space shuttle's flight history, a quiz that would survey all the way back to 1983. We'd better listen to every detail, she said, and be prepared to take thorough notes. We retaliated with references to Concord High, where the students got to wear party hats and blow streamers in the auditorium. Were *they* listening to every detail? Were *they* taking thorough notes?

"Yes, but that's where Miss McAuliffe *teaches*," Mrs. Carsten explained. "You are students of Peterson Academy, and you *will* take notes."

At the back of the classroom, Buddy Norenberg filled his Trapper Keeper with shuttles and numbers and billowing rocket smoke. Mrs. Carsten hovered over his desk like a satellite. We expected a warning, a *reactionary attitude* demerit scratched off in a fury.

She said, "Do you see this, children? Buddy's drawing the liftoff!" and raised the Trapper Keeper for the classroom to see. Irvin Mansaray whispered his father's word—*suck-ass!*—and Buddy Norenberg blanched like a sheet of paper. He dropped the hanging period of his head and stayed that way until the announcement of the launch.

We counted down with the Concord school kids: T-MINUS-FIVE! T-MINUS-FOUR! T-MINUS THREE! T-MINUS-TWO! We hollered at the blastoff and lobbed our paper airplanes at the ceiling. Teddy Schulman's plane stuck in a vent, hung for a moment, spiraled back down to the floor without a sound. The shuttle on the TV did the same. We hooted as the plumes divided, ascended, divided again, as the rocket pieces burned across the Florida stratosphere. *Cooool*, mumbled Jimmy De Bry.

Mrs. Carsten put a hand on her face, collapsed into a student desk behind her. We registered the emotion as shock and awe, the glory after the finish, the epic finale, a teacher in space! Then she began to sob. We looked at the TV, back at Mrs. Carsten. She was not smiling, she was sobbing. Like our mothers after watching *The Color Purple*.

"Children—" Her voice drained clean of authority. "—Something terrible has happened."

We searched around the room. On the TV, a newscaster from CNN said in tragic monotone, "*There appears to be a problem.*" We looked around the room for the source, the big secret.

We heard later the astronauts were killed. Dead. Seventy-three seconds, our parents kept saying. They didn't have a chance. Probably survived the initial blast, poor bastards. Hope they went quick. Seventy-three seconds, dear God. Not a lot of time. They're better off, met their Maker. And by the end of the week we were telling the jokes that were circulating in the high school next door: What does NASA stand for? Need Another Seven Astronauts! Did you know NASA's got a new space drink? Ocean Spray. Their second choice 'cause they couldn't get *7-UP!* Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.

Mrs. Carsten got wind of the jokes. She made the class watch the footage again. The rocket blasting apart, the epic tumble across the sky, the smoke spirals reaching like giant arms toward Heaven. She stood by the door, barring our access to the bathroom, the outside world. She would not budge the entire day. ABC stock footage rolled over and over again: a recording of the NASA close-out crew handing McAuliffe the big red apple. The eighteen Concord school kids, frozen on the bleachers, faces stunned, their big white GO CHRISTA banner sagging in the wind. Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office addressing the schoolchildren of America, telling us all it was hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happened. The explosion, the spirals, the black chunks on the surface of the ocean. Over and over and over again we watched.

"Apparently you all think this is funny," Mrs. Carsten said. "Apparently you all think this is a joke."

We recognized the jokes were cruel. But we also understood it was the cruelty we enjoyed, the cruelty that sustained us.

*

Every afternoon, Mr. Norenberg made Buddy sit at the front of the bus, behind the driver's seat, and count buckeyes collected in a five-gallon bucket. The Semicolon gathered the

buckeyes throughout the day and put the bucket on the front seat, always with instructions for Semicolon Junior to weed out the smallest ones and toss them in a paper sack. So as the father drove, Buddy sat there and counted buckeyes, and dropped the small ones, one by one, into a brown grocery sack between his feet. While the rest of the boys gossiped about our favorite action shows (Ben Linderman said John "Hannibal" Smith was the toughest man on TV, and Henry McIntosh claimed Sonny Crockett was the toughest, had busted more bad guys than Hannibal and B.A. Baracus *combined*) you could hear the dull *clunk!* of a buckeye hitting the bottom of the sack, or the hollow clacking of buckeyes in Mr. Norenberg's five-gallon bucket. We never knew what the buckeyes were for. Maybe a homemade buckeye whiskey brew. Then again, some thought they were Semicolon Junior's punishment for being alive, for being the bastard kid of a prostitute and a Democrat. When you're a bastard, you have to count buckeyes.

Mr. Norenberg was a meticulous driver. But everyone knew he had terrible eyesight and would probably, one day, run the bus off into a quarry. For starters, his eyes looked disproportionately small to his large red face, like the tiny, beady eyes of a lobster, and to make matters worse the glasses he wore seemed to have a perpetual fog over them, as though no amount of cleaning could ever take away the smears. Because of this, the Semicolon overcompensated on the roads. The first Monday of February, he was so careful taking everyone to school that he stalled the bus on top of a train track. The track was slick from a late Sunday freeze, and the Semicolon drove too slowly over the hump and the back tires caught a layer of ice and stuck. We sat and spun for twenty minutes before a tow truck came and pulled us onto the road.

While the tow truck operator and Mr. Norenberg chatted, Buddy sat in the front seat and scribbled spaceships on the Gobot Trapper Keeper. We contemplated taking the Trapper Keeper, and ripping out the pages. We challenged Justin Fetterly: Do it, man, go walk up to the suck-ass and take the Trapper. But Justin wouldn't budge. What about you, Henry? Teddy? But no one could summon the courage (our older brothers called it *The Balls*) to walk up the aisle. Buddy's

head was larger than his dad's, and he had a large thick body to go with it. On field trips he was often mistaken for an older boy, a fifth- or a sixth-grader, and there was the time he frogged Irvin Mansaray and put a charcoal-sized lump on his shoulder when Irvin tried to pin him down at the monkey bars. So we never assumed we could be the proper bullies. He was B.A. Baracus and we were the fools.

At school Mrs. Carsten handed back our space shuttle quizzes. She had kept good on the threat, despite the tragedy at Kennedy Space Center, to make us take the quiz the day after the launch, on Wednesday. The quiz had contained questions that a genius couldn't answer. Who was the first American woman in space? What was the date of the shuttle's first launch? Name all seven members of the shuttle's final crew.

"The results are less than stellar," Mrs. Carsten said. "I'm very disappointed. I have a mind to make this a full test."

We groaned at the word, and Mrs. Carsten bristled.

"Miss McAuliffe would be appalled," she said.

Over the week her stare had become more serious, more malevolent. Her Sperry Top-Siders creaked against the floor like they had turned to wood.

She said, "If this were *her* classroom, what would you have to say for yourselves?"

The girls in the class made A's. And Semicolon Junior, of course. After the quiz, our hatred for Buddy knew very few bounds. But we still couldn't find the valor, The Balls, to torment him. So we left him alone, to sit in the back of the class and doodle on his Trapper Keeper. But in our minds we bullied him, every day, into oblivion.

*

The following Monday was President's Day, and there was a hushed, collective fear of coming back to school. The concern was that Mrs. Carsten would give another quiz, this time on the presidents. She had not assigned a weekend reading, but we knew something was wrong—something off in the air, like a bad memory not quite formed—and we had slept uncomfortably

the night before. That morning we waited for Mr. Norenberg's bus to creep up our streets like the ferry boat in the Greek stories, the one that would take you down, down to Hades. And when the bus pulled up at 7 A.M., each of us thought, *I'm doomed, there's no escape*.

We climbed aboard and saw the substitute driver, Mr. Rosenblum, the Gummy Bear. We called him the Gummy Bear because he was overweight and his face looked spongy and purple, like gelatin. Mr. Rosenblum drove the bus when the Semicolon was sick or out of town. Today the five-gallon bucket was gone, and there was no paper sack for the runt buckeyes. We stood in the door and interrogated the Gummy Bear for details.

Why are *you* driving the bus, Mr. Rosenblum?

Is Mr. Norenberg sick?

Is Buddy coming to class today?

"Go find your seat," the Gummy Bear said. "I ain't answering no questions."

Walking the halls at school, we felt like foolish outsiders, like spies turned decoy. Teachers in the classrooms were shaking and sobbing, like Mrs. Carsten had on NASA Day. The early-bird kids, the kids whose parents worked at the school, were already sitting at their desks, heads sunk deep into their arms. We felt like some kind of joke was on us, that we were ghosts wandering down our own corridors.

We filtered in and took our seats. Mrs. Carsten sat at the teacher's desk and didn't look up. At first we thought she was reading, attending to a lesson note, but she was only looking at the desktop, the empty surface of glass and wood. We sat in silence, afraid to ask the question heavy on our thoughts.

She read our minds anyway. "There will be no quiz today," she said, and looked up briefly. In that moment we saw a pair of tear-swollen eyes, a familiar look of shock, a Halloween face of ruined eye-shadow and mascara. "In fact, there will be no lesson and no homework. We're going to have a discussion. About something very important."

We dared not celebrate, even though those words—*no lesson, no homework*—was like badly needed water in the desert. We didn't budge. We were slaves to the moment, prisoners to the atmosphere.

"Class, something terrible has happened," she said.

We felt the most disturbing kind of déjà vu. We were the subjects of a strange circular experiment. We looked around for the release, the punchline. Had another shuttle just exploded? Was there another round of CNN footage? Crying school children, sobbing parents in Florida? Were we being punished all over again?

"Our friend and classmate, Buddy Norenberg, died in a car accident on Sunday," Mrs. Carsten said.

A brief silence. Ben Linderman raised his hand.

May I go to the bathroom?

"You most certainly may not," Mrs. Carsten said. "We are all going to sit here and we're going to talk about Buddy, about how this makes us feel. So no one is allowed to leave."

We looked at each other, searched for that something we were supposed to do. In church, during those periodic moments of salvation, the moments when people would make their public professions of faith and turn to God and forsake their sins at the altar of plush carpet, our parents sometimes looked at each other, searched each other's eyes for some kind of truth, like they were searching for the explanation, the big secret that would save their souls like the people up front who were braving the stares. What is this great mystery? our parents' eyes would say to each other. What is going on that we don't know here?

I *have* to go to the bathroom, Ben Linderman said.

"Dear Lord, Ben. If you must," Mrs. Carsten said.

Ben Linderman slipped out, his cheeks a mottled red. Mrs. Carsten stood and walked the room, her ancient shoes creaking on the tile. We had seen her walk like this a million times, a billion, but never like *this*, a teacher without a lesson. She went to the classroom's window,

pulled back the yellow checkered curtain, and gazed at the foggy winter morning. She waited for someone to speak, but no one dared to breathe. We were still looking at each other's faces, for the big mystery about Buddy. What was one supposed to feel here? A heaviness had fallen onto the room, as though a giant vacuum had taken everything out. Was this the feeling she wanted? She turned and walked back to the front of the class. At the chalkboard, she picked up a piece of chalk.

"I know this is hard to understand," Mrs. Carsten said. "But sometimes people die. Has anyone lost a family member? Would anyone like to share? It's important we discuss these things. We can't bottle such emotions up, children."

She waited chalk in hand, as though ready to write the name of the first student to speak. A moment later she turned away and faced the chalkboard in full. Her brown culottes were folded along the butt—a bad case of static cling—and someone tittered. She ignored the noise, pulled at the skirt, and began writing the letters, B-U-D-D-Y. By the time she was finished, she had spelled Semicolon Junior's name across the entire board in large white blocks:

BUDDY NORENBERG.

The silence forced us to study his name. We took in the letters, and felt something hostile in them, something cold and solid and difficult to grasp. Hours later, we packed into the bus and Mr. Rosenblum took us home. We were silent during the long drive across the neighborhoods. We looked out the windows, blew our breath onto the frozen panes, thumbed our initials into the fog. We kept seeing his name—BUDDY NORENBERG—invisibly etched into the glass. At our dinner tables we learned that Mr. Norenberg had driven his car headfirst into a semi-truck on Highway 67. He survived and was in critical condition, but the grill of the truck had knocked Buddy's head right off. Decapitated, our parents called it. We had never heard the word before and envisioned Ichabod Crane, what Buddy might look like with a jack-o'-lantern for a head. And that night our brothers whispered other things, new information, in the dark of our bedrooms:

They found his head on the side of the road. They put the head in a big plastic Ziploc bag. What's worse? The head was sitting in a bunch of smashed buckeyes.

We didn't sleep for a week.

Something felt different at school. We felt Buddy's absence, kept expecting to see him counting his buckeyes on the bus ride home, or scribbling his spaceships on the cover of his Trapper Keeper. The change was unsettling. We were quiet during lessons, and stopped throwing paper airplanes at Cindy Beemer.

Mrs. Carsten took note of our changed attitude. She gave fewer homework assignments, fewer *reactionary attitude* demerits. She started wearing colors other than brown—a white Frankie Says Relax T-shirt, a pair of white Keds. We listened to music after the in-class writing assignments, and watched Up With People videos on the old TV. Little by little, the air came back into the room.

A few days later, we were telling the jokes that were circulating in the high school.

What is Buddy Norenberg's new nickname?

Comma Junior.

Why was Mr. Norenberg's buckeye tally off by one?

Buddy's head was too big for the bucket.

All the while, Mrs. Carsten's words burned like liquid oxygen in our minds.

I know this is hard to understand. But sometimes people die.

THE BEGGARS

“The cempedak-fruit tree is across the fence
Please take a stick and poke it down for me
I'm just a new guy trying to learn
So if I'm wrong then please tell me.”

—Malay pantun

On a good day in the Plaka, Tuah and his monkey Jumaat ate spinach pie in the park behind Vyzantino Tavern. No one on the streets could see them sitting there, under the shade of the orange trees behind the building, and the summer evenings wouldn’t seem so hot and so purposeless. Once, when Jumaat was fast and business was good, Tuah paid an American tourist seven Euros to bring them a plate of kalamari and two rolls of white bread. It didn’t matter that Tuah could not feel the food scissored between fingers, or clutched between palms; the taste of red wine and sautéed onions was proof enough that the world was not necessarily empty of all delight.

On a bad day in the Plaka, the travelers kicked Jumaat in the stomach as he walked around, and police found Tuah’s hideaway alley and kicked *him* in the stomach, even though his only crime was sitting there shirtless on his Afghan blanket. Sometimes the police called him names—“Armless Swine” and “Dirty Cripple” were among their favorites—and confiscated the restaurant boxes where Jumaat would stash their belongings. After such invasions, it might take Jumaat a month to recover their shortfalls and restock a new box. Days like those, Tuah was lucky if Jumaat brought back a raw potato peeling or half-rotten eggplant. But Jumaat was never

one to give up and run away, despite a bad turn and misfortune here and there. He always returned with something to eat, perhaps even a little more, and for that Tuah supposed their luck wasn't too terrible after all. Someone else in the world—someone without legs, perhaps, or eyes—was doing somewhat worse than he and Jumaat.

*

Their trip to Athens had been going fine all week—until a monkey with a red collar stole Charlotte's purse and one hundred Euros. Paul had warned her not to leave the purse dangling from her shoulder like every other American girl overseas, but she'd been too excited about catching some museum—the Museum of Greek Music Instruments, or something like that—before the place closed for the day. If he'd been anyone but her brother, he might have broken through a bit of Charlotte's pigheadedness, and perhaps knocked some common sense into those chunks of brick inside her head. But she had just turned fourteen in May and had little patience for lessons on common sense, especially from a sibling who was almost twenty-eight and had long surpassed her in responsibility.

They were standing at a hectic corner of Adrianou Street, gazing around at the crowds and the junk merchandise piled around the yellow stucco shops and open-window flea markets. Paul had wanted to venture out into other neighborhoods—Agora to the west, perhaps, or the cemetery at Kerameikos, anything other than the same old tchotchke shops and fish-reeking ouzarias—but Charlotte had insisted they "adventure" in the Plaka a little while longer. "We can look at old rocks anytime," she'd said, as they had stepped out of their hotel at seven that morning. "But there's still so much to do in the *Center*, Paulie."

The museum was on Diogenous Street, according to Charlotte's bible, the Lonely Planet travel guide Paul had picked up for her at the duty-free shop in the Zurich airport. She was consulting the book and waving off the heat when Paul noticed the brown, ring-tailed monkey tottering up the sidewalk, probing people's back pockets and yanking at their hands. "Check that out," he said, pointing. "You don't see *that* in Jersey."

"What?" She glanced up from the guide.

"That monkey. It's totally pickpocketing."

The monkey disappeared in the jumble of pedestrians. A moment later Paul noticed a flicker of brown and white around their feet. Charlotte's purse came slipping off her shoulder, and Paul wheeled in time to see the monkey dash off toward Apollonos Street, the purse dragging behind one skinny, hairy arm and sparkles of July sun catching on the animal's thin red collar.

Charlotte grabbed at the purse strap, looked around in bewilderment, and shrieked.

"Christ, your passport!" Paul said, and then remembered his own money, the hundred Euros, stashed in the side pocket of the purse. He had taken the money out of his wallet and put it there two evenings before, after paying for dinner at Thespidos. A little spending money for Charlotte while he was stuck in his business meetings. He regretted later giving her so much—fifty Euros would have been more than enough for souvenirs—but one of the meetings had carried over and he'd completely forgotten to take back a little.

"Stay right where you are," he said, and started running. As he sprinted, pushing and weaving through the hundreds of people on Adrianou, the absurdity of what he was doing—chasing a monkey, a real monkey, through the streets of Athens—forced a squeal of laughter out of him, and Paul stopped a moment to catch his breath. Charlotte shouted for him at the corner. He looked at her, and considered for a second forgetting the whole thing and going back. She looked so small on the sidewalk, so frail in her sunflower blouse and Easter-white capris, anyone could take advantage of her, could walk right away with her and Paul would never know. Had she even grown since their mother's death last summer? Then the hunt recaptured his attention and he turned away from her and started back, hoping to catch a glimpse of the brown fur or another telltale glint of sun on the red collar. But the monkey was gone—swallowed up in the crowds pouring out of Mitropolis Square, stalking up and down the streets like zombies after swarming the churches and Grand Mitropolis Cathedral.

When he returned to the corner, Charlotte was still there, thank God, but she had lost all composure. Another tourist, an older man in golf shorts and a pink Officer Polo shirt, had stopped and was standing by her, a hand on her shoulder as though offering consolation. Charlotte was trying to wave him away as Paul walked up.

"Her purse," he said to the man, breathless, "it just got snatched."

"By a monkey!" Charlotte cried.

Paul expected an incredulous smirk, but the man, another American, only nodded. "Yep, I've heard of that happening. Little bastards see something shiny and they go right for it. Went to India once and the damn homeless people use them to swipe bracelets and wallets."

"I didn't know Greece *had* monkeys," Paul said.

The man pulled off his Panama hat and rubbed sweat off his glossy tan pate. "Saw one the other day in the National Garden. Had one of those little red fezzes strapped to its head, like in the movies. Belonged to a gypsy who had it running around in circles, and boy howdy was they racking up the change."

Paul looked at Charlotte, noticed that the man's story was not helping her composure. "So what the hell do we do? She lost her passport."

"I'd call the Tourist Police," the man said. He said it so quickly, Paul figured he or someone in his pack had experienced something similar, perhaps recently. "May not help much, but they can call the embassy and ask them to issue a temp. That's the only thing I know to tell you."

"Thanks, we'll try that," Paul said. The man in the Polo shirt scribbled the number for the police on the back of a restaurant receipt. "Don't wait too long to call," he said, and handed Paul the paper. "You might come back in a little while, same spot. Bastard might be here again. Worth a try, I reckon."

"Might be," Paul said. "Let's hope."

The man bade them good luck and disappeared back into the crowd.

"So what are we going to do?" Charlotte cried. She had grabbed Paul's shirt sleeve and was tugging at the hem, as she used to do whenever they'd go shopping with their mother at the grocery store in Hiltonia. While their mother inspected name brands and filled the basket, Charlotte would cling to Paul's hands and beg for KitKats or Reese's Pieces, and Paul would generally yield just to make her stop tugging. Their mother never paid much attention to these outbursts, and sadly that was half the problem. Charlotte, he had always suspected, was keenly aware of that apathy and knew how and when to exploit it. At their mother's graveside service last July, Charlotte stood beside him in the small black Bonnie Jean dress he'd bought her at Macy's and kept one hand fastened around his wrist as though Paul were a balloon she feared would go floating off. When he tried to pull his hand away, her grip grew tighter, and he thought of those old excursions to the grocery store and wondered what his life would now be like in Charlotte's shadow. Would he ever have freedom again? Freedom to go to the office, or on a date, or to a bar with his buddies, without constantly worrying about this new liability?

He looked up and down the streets. "We could stand here and bake in the heat," he said, "or we can take the fellow's advice and come back later, see if the little shit makes its way back into the Center. Although I don't imagine it'll be back today. We'll try first thing in the morning, how's that."

"But it took my passport!"

"Yes, and didn't I warn you, Char? Didn't I say it on the plane? And at the airport? And back at the hotel? *Don't put your purse on your shoulder*. But do you listen?" His tone was more "I told you so" than he intended—she was just a young girl, after all, and everything he did know about girls was that they despised "I told you so" with every fiber—but Charlotte barely heard him anyway. "I'll call the number that fellow gave us, and then we'll come back tomorrow morning," he said. "The thing was wearing a collar. My guess is, whoever's holding the leash must be getting awfully wealthy off idiots like us."

*

Some days, while Jumaat was working in the markets, Tuah sat on his blanket and daydreamed about the stories his mother told him when he was a boy in Kuala Lumpur. The best story of all was the one about his namesake, Hang Tuah, the Malay Muslim warrior who fought his best friend, Hang Jebat, for crimes against the Sultan. The battle, according to the legends, lasted for a week and ended with Hang Tuah stabbing his friend with the Taming Sari. Sometimes, when Tuah was all alone, he pretended that the Taming Sari was grasped in a strong hero's hand, and that he was wielding the all-powerful keris against scoundrels from all corners of the world. Sometimes he *was* Hang Tuah, even when his nubs ached and his belly rumbled and his head and heart told him he was nothing but a crippled beggar on the streets of Athens.

There were other times when the story of Hang Tuah was not enough to satisfy, so Tuah sat and remembered the long boat ride from Kuala Lumpar to the Port of Athens at Piraeus. He had a good memory of that journey because his mother had taught him songs and poems as they drifted across the Indian Ocean, and the songs and poems had served as markers along the channels the big trade boat would enter. He was nine years old, and his mother had worn curls of beautiful chestnut hair, and one song, "Rasa Sayang," was a particular favorite, full of sun and salt-sweet air as she sang it to him in the late ocean mornings: "*Rasa Sayang Eh … Rasa Sayang Sayang Eh … Hei Lihat Nona … Jauh Rasa Sayang Sayang Eh*."

The merchants on deck heard the singing and came down and teased his mother about the song's origins. "That song's Indonesian," the midshipman, a fat man named Syed, argued one day. "My grandmother lives in the Maluku and sang that song to my cousins when they were toddlers. You have no right to sing that."

"The song is for everybody," his mother informed Syed. "And it comes from Malay. We sing it during the joget lambak. I have every right to sing that."

Tuah was quick to join her in defending the song's heritage, believing that by guarding "Rasa Sayang" he was also protecting his mother's honor. But the midshipman only laughed when Tuah opened his mouth to argue back. "He should have been born without a tongue, too,"

the man told his mother, standing too close and gripping her shoulder with two hands. When she did not argue back, perhaps fearing that the merchants would do something, Tuah did not blame her for keeping her silence.

There were other songs, of course, but none as simple and beautiful as "Rasa Sayang." And then there were the poems, the Malay pantuns that his mother spoke slowly and methodically as the boat bobbed along the Equator and across the crystal Maldives. They sat on their bunk side by side, their backs against the moist wooden walls, and recited the pantuns together, loud enough to hear each other's tones and accentuations but low enough to avoid the midshipman's harassments: *"Buah cempedak di luar pagar … Ambil galah tolong jolokkan … Saya budak baru belajar … Kalau salah tolong tunjukkan."*

After the lessons were over, Tuah listened to stories about his father, who had been traveling the world as a Kadet Kanan in the Royal Malaysian Navy since 1975, the year Tuah was born. The stories were full of adventure, danger, and Tuah's mother sat up straight and stopped picking at the mats in his hair whenever she would tell them. He knew, in that way, that she was serious about the stories and that she believed they would all reunite at the Port of Athens where his father had sent her the last postcard some year and a half before.

Perhaps Tuah's memory of the boat ride was good because of the stories, then, and not the songs or the poems. Because the one thing Tuah recalled most clearly when they arrived in Athens in the fall was not the pantuns or "Rasa Sayang" but the image of a man who carried ropes in huge arms across the decks of a battleship, or arms that held onto a mast as a storm tossed his ship up and down on the Arabian Sea.

*

The next morning Paul paid for two breakfasts in the lobby of the Pan Hotel. Afterward, Charlotte followed him back into the Center, the PSP-3000 he'd bought her a few weeks ago in tow. They weren't a block up the street before she started protesting about the heat—grievances that she made sure Paul could not ignore. Sometime between their landing into Athens

International and this morning's exodus onto Syntagma Square, Charlotte's voice had taken on the quality of a shrill bird, like the budgie their mother used to keep as a sofa table centerpiece, the little green parakeet that would cling to the door of its cage and shriek for attention all afternoon and evening. Paul didn't know if he'd be able to take another hour of this. Their mother, had she put up with this for fourteen years? Maybe the nagging was the cause of her aneurism—death by Charlotte. At least the PSP was keeping her hands occupied.

"You don't have to come," he said, pushing down the irritation as they made their way up Mitropoleos. "You can go back to the hotel and swim in the pool if you like. It's got a deep end. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I want my purse and my passport," Charlotte said. She sounded oddly grown-up now, like an irate woman making demands to her divorce attorney. Paul considered that he really didn't know this girl at all—she was a strange person to him in almost every aspect, and he was obviously strange to her. "I'm going to walk around this place all day until I find that monkey!"

"Fine, but you can't complain about the heat. I can't do anything about that."

"I can complain if I want to," she said.

Even at such an early hour, the streets were deluged with tourists, people strolling back and forth from Syntagma Square to the stony paths and sidewalks that led up to the Acropolis gates, rushing to beat the nine o'clock sunburns and the bottlenecks at the ticket kiosks. Paul would have been among them if it weren't for Charlotte. His company had scheduled all the important meetings for earlier in the week, leaving little to do but play tourist and see the ancient sites, or "old rocks," as Charlotte called them. Now, with her passport probably halfway to China and his hundred Euros almost certainly burned up on cheap ouzo, Paul was stuck playing Sherlock Holmes in the sweltering summer morning, as Charlotte dogged every step and bragged about finding and killing "that little craphead monkey" who took her purse.

They started back on Adrianou, as the fellow the day before had recommended. Paul had heard somewhere that the city of Athens had spent some $1.5 billion for state-of-the-art

antiterrorism security for the 2004 Olympics, but there seemed to be a bona fide street cop nowhere in sight today, and on the phone the Tourist Police the evening before had not been so especially user-friendly. When he did see a cop, and resolved to flag the officer down for help, the man appeared to sense he was being required and promptly ducked into the side door of a shady-looking flea market.

They had no choice but to stand and think for a while. He surveyed the sidewalks as Charlotte played *Harry Potter* on the PSP, and every now and then a cop would come into view, then disappear like Harry Potter himself back into the crowd. The stench of roasting lamb at a nearby gyro stand soon drove them north to Pandrosu Street, and he and Charlotte wandered the fringes of Mitropolis Square like typical Americans without a travel guide. Paul had read in a magazine on the plane that the crime rate in Greece was one of the lowest in the European Union (perhaps because of all those new antiterrorism measures), but gazing around at the multitude of fat, impulsive tourists, each one hauling a souvenir bag or a fanny pouch or lugging a thousand-dollar Nikon by a tiny strap around the wrist, he believed just the opposite could be true, that the beggars of Athens had it better in the long run than the people who came here to walk over their homes and feast in their front yards.

The first hour of the search burned to ash in the Square, and Paul and Charlotte sat cooling under the patio awning of a tavern called The Muses. A young, pretty fiddler in a long, colorful skirt stopped at their table and offered to sing a Greek ballad for five Euros. He declined the song but paid the money to keep the table. At ten, the café chairs began filling up and the waiters grew busy serving lamb fricassee. Paul waited for Charlotte to say something about the food, about getting hungry. Her appetite seemed to be never-ending, and more than half his souvenir money had gone to filling her bottomless stomach. He should have made a rule about the food—maybe that they could splurge only once a day—but Paul had taken pity since he never kept much food back in the apartment, a crisis she had brought to Paul's attention more than once. "You never have cereal," she commented one day, two months after their mother had died

and Charlotte moved in. “Mom used to keep three boxes of three different kinds. And you *never* have cinnamon raisin bagels. There is absolutely *nothing* to eat in this place.”

The waiters were getting antsy for the table. Paul picked up the menu to order a mezedes, maybe a shot of ouzo for the road, but then Charlotte started yanking on the hem of his shirt. “Paulie, the monkey!” she bellowed, and jabbed a finger at the passing crowd of feet on the sidewalk. “It’s that little craphead monkey! It’s back!” He glanced up to see and sure enough, a brown, willow-thin monkey stepped around a shopfront full of antiques and lurched up the sidewalk on Plutonos. The monkey was wearing a red collar. “I’ll be *Christ*,” he said, and sprang to his feet. He threw a couple of fifty-cent pieces on the table and dashed away from the patio. Charlotte tried to follow but Paul threw a palm in the air and waved her back. “Don’t you move a goddamn muscle!” he barked.

The monkey moved quickly, weaving in and out of people’s legs and vanishing periodically in the heaps of market junk, but the movement seemed to go in fits and starts, as though the sun and the blistering wind were steadily zapping the animal’s will. Paul watched for glints of sunlight on the red collar and for one moment pretended he was some kind of hunter. Then he felt ridiculous and childish and the fantasy evaporated. Eventually the monkey veered into the intersection of Ermou and Kapnikarea and disappeared around the south side of a Greek Orthodox church, a tiny structure of ugly brown stones and orange Byzantine domes that for some reason had drawn a small crowd. Paul stopped on the north side, aware that the group of tourists (and a cop? was that also a cop?) had started to watch him. He moved around to the south end and toward a closed alley between two connected, run-down apartment buildings. The monkey had gone down there, he was certain.

At the mouth of the alley he paused, took a large breath, and peeked around the corner. The animal—was he was seeing this correctly?—had taken perch on the lap of a shirtless, brown-skinned hobo who sat cross-legged on a filthy Afghan blanket. There was something severely wrong with the man. He was missing both his arms. Nubs extended a few inches from his

shoulders, thrusting outward like chicken wings, and black wires of hair covered the areas that would have been his armpits. The monkey's tail had curled around the left nub, the tip of the tail resting like a question mark beneath the man's thinly bearded chin. A large cardboard box sat beside them, off against the wall. The box said CRETA FARMS in English on the side.

Paul felt something in his gut loosen—that feeling that often muddles revulsion and commiseration. And as soon as the man spotted Paul, he sprang to his feet so suddenly that Paul couldn't help reeling at the sheer fluidity of the movement. Like a deer reacting to the snap of a twig. And the moment the man sprang, the monkey was just as quick to leap away and run off down the alley and duck behind a pair of trash cans.

Paul eased around the corner, waded into the dingy, sun-threaded shadows of the alley. "Listen," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you, I just want to talk. Your pet took my sister's purse. I'm here to get it back, that's all. No trouble, okay?"

The man skimmed Paul head to toe. He seemed poised for another quick movement. But there was nowhere to run; beyond the trash cans the alley was a dead end.

"I didn't take any purse," the man shouted. His English was much clearer than Paul expected, not as broken as half the people in this city. "You are trying to harass me. Now leave my alley before I call the cops!"

"You also stole a hundred Euros," Paul said. "I want that back too."

The man shuffled backward. His feet slipped on a couple of wet cobblestones, and Paul thought he would surely lose his balance and tumble onto his head, but he recovered in the same second with the same preternatural dexterity. "You're trying to steal from an innocent person," the man bellowed. "I am not a thief, you are the thief, motherfucker! You come into my alley and demand money!"

"Your monkey stole our things. You've got him trained. He's wearing a collar."

"Do I look like a monkey trainer?" Then, almost as an afterthought, the man added: "*Pukimak Kau.*"

Paul scrolled through his mental Greek dictionary. “What language is that? What does that mean, Pokemon Cow?”

“You Americans you know everything, you should know what that means already!”

“I’m going to get a cop,” Paul said, and surprised himself with his nonchalance. In Jersey this would not be happening. In Jersey the assailant would have already pulled a gun. He was lucky the man had no arms. “Tell me your name first.”

“Hang Tuah!” the man snapped.

“Hang Tuah? What does that mean? Is that your name?”

“I will slash your fucking throat is what that means!”

Paul held out his hands, palms upward—the international sign for *Trust me*. Maybe the man would reason with a kinder gesture. Wasn’t that what you did with mad dogs? You held up your hands and didn’t break eye contact? Or was it just the opposite? “All I want to do is talk. We can work this out like gentlemen, can’t we?”

“You are not a gentleman,” the man spat. “You try to steal from the innocent!”

“How about you give me the purse, and everything that was inside it, and I won’t find a cop and tell him about this alley.”

“How about I shit on your head and you eat it for breakfast?”

A troubling thought occurred to Paul. What if the man worked with an accomplice, a wing man who hid nearby and waited to attack? What if this was an operation, some kind of clever theft ring using the crippled to invoke pity? What would happen to Charlotte if he were maimed or killed? She had no money, no passport, no means to get back. She would be lost here in Athens, without anyone to claim her. Would she even have a home without Paul?

He lowered his hands and backed away, eyes darting up to the apartment windows that looked down upon the alley. Anyone could be standing there, anyone. “I’m going to find a cop,” he told the man. “If you won’t give me back the purse and the passport, I’ll make the police give them back.”

But just before he turned to walk, the armless man's indignant war stance dissolved, and something like panic electrified his face. He shuffled toward Paul with quick, desperate steps. "Please," the man said. "Don't let them take Jumaat. I will give you one hundred Euros!"

At the end of the alley the monkey peeked at them from behind the trash cans. There was a good possibility that Charlotte's purse was inside one of those, buried among a hundred other purses. Paul considered just searching the cans himself and leaving the man to this—whatever you could call this kind of existence, here in this dank alley. But he still couldn't shake the creeping impression that someone was standing above them, poised at one of the muted, staring apartment windows, a dark foreign face between two black drapes. And now he could see Charlotte's face as well, the same one he had seen at their mother's funeral, the angry, offended face of someone who has been left alone. But a different face had tilted up to look at him in the early graveside light, had it not? A face that was all child, grappling and struggling over the new, unsettling information that Change was upon her and very real.

He turned and walked away quickly.

The beggar shouted after him, "Please! I will give you a hundred Euros! Please!"

But Charlotte's face was haunting him, and he knew that if he didn't get back to her soon, he would perhaps never get back to her at all. He would drift away like the balloon, and no one would ever be there again for her to stand beside, and touch the hem of a shirt, and hold onto for dear life.

*

After the boat ride they roamed the streets of Piraeus, searching for Tuah's father. No one knew Malaysian, of course, but Tuah's mother always found ways to communicate, some means to get them into someone's house to sleep. She fed Tuah discarded *sardeles* wrapped in pita bread and bags of bitter olives that vendors handed her on the sidewalks. She promised he would always dine this well, if not better. "My Tuah deserves the best," she'd say. "This food will grow strong arms one day," she'd say.

Sometimes, when they became bored with the walking, they sat with the refugee musicians in back-alley hashish dens and listened to the never-ending rebetiko music rise into the evenings. Tuah entertained his mother by reciting the pantuns over the violi solos, and she entertained the musicians by mimicking the *Ronggeng* dance to the big Greek drums. The musicians laughed, and she sat across the room and smiled happily at the klarino players, and Tuah thought, as they all sang together, *We will be all right if we don't find him tomorrow. We will be all right.*

Then, one day in Kallithea, he lost his mother in the masses. Moving up the crowded sidewalk with her hand on his neck, feeling her guide him along with a gentle push on the nape, and then suddenly a wrong turn and the hand gave one last push and she was gone. Tuah stopped and stared into the people, and waited for her to reappear, rematerialize like the ghost in one of those old rebetiko songs. Time on the sidewalk stopped. Tuah could hear every vein at work inside his body. He could hear his heart beat. He could hear his spirit whisper. Then time started back up and the crowds, the multitudes of hands and arms, gathered around him like a storm and he ran until he could smell the sea again and his sandals were biting calluses into his heels.

He waited there, among the boats on the water. Waited for his mother to return.

*

The cop at the church listened—Paul wasn't sure how attentively—as he explained the predicament. The same details he'd given the Tourist Police the evening before, only now he could give them a description of the monkey's owner. The cop asked Paul to wait and walked away a few feet and spoke rapid-fire Greek into his handset. He presumed the officer was summoning backup.

As he waited, Paul sat on the low whitewashed barrier that separated the church from the cobblestone street. An Asian couple with two toddlers on child leashes stopped a few feet away and smiled cheerfully at him, as though he were part of the scenery. They aimed a large, expensive-looking camera at him and snapped a picture. Paul offered a feeble wave. As they

moved away, one of the children, a little girl in a raspberry pettiskirt, yanked at her leash and waved slowly back, her eyes large and mysterious and somehow melancholy, and Paul's panic intensified. He stood and walked over to the cop.

"My sister is waiting in a tavern," he explained. "I need to get back, is this going to take long?"

The cop smiled and nodded—the international sign for *I don't understand*.

"The Muses. Tavern. My sister. She's *fourteen*." But it was then another officer—this one wearing a brown uniform instead of a blue one—approached the church from the eastern side. The officer was holding a long metal stick with a black loop at the end. The cop in blue smiled again and patted Paul on the shoulder. "You, wait," he said, and then the two officers went off together around the south side of the church.

Paul sat again on the stone barrier and looked at the sky. Was the day growing darker? Purple clouds looked to be amassing in the southwest, over Piraeus and the Saronic Gulf. Was there a storm on the way? He had read somewhere that just last month, a lightning bolt had struck the Parthenon during a morning thunderstorm, but no damage had been reported. An empty, 2,500-year-old temple, spared by God and Mother Nature. But there were things, from time to time, that God decided *not* to spare. A mother in New Jersey, for example. And a young girl with no one else but a brother who has already moved on. Why did God spare one thing and strike another? That was just the way of things, Paul guessed. The random tossing of the old, proverbial die.

A series of muffled noises rose from the alleyway behind the church. Paul stood. The officers were shouting, and the monkey—was it the monkey?—was shrieking. Some kind of fight was ensuing, a scuffle with the armless man. Paul paced a short length of the barrier, and thought about going back there. But this was not his concern, the armless man was not his concern. A short time later the cop in blue re-emerged around the church. He was sweating and breathing heavily. There was no sign of the other officer, the one with the long silver stick.

"The purse?" Paul said. "Did you find it?"

The cop was panting, his mouth gaped in a smile. "No purse," he replied.

"But there was a passport," Paul said, almost in a gasp. "Did you look in the trash cans?"

"No purse," the cop said again, and turned to walk away.

"Sir, wait!" Paul felt himself go numb with dread. He noticed he was being eyeballed again by more tourists—a trio of female college students standing nearby and fanning their faces with brochures. "We leave in two days. She can't go anywhere without her passport. What the hell do we do?"

But he knew already, thanks to the robot at the Tourist Police hotline. They would have to acquire some kind of incident report, and something like that could take up to three days, if not longer. And then there was the new application, and the proof of Charlotte's identity and her U.S. citizenship, and a million other hoops to navigate before the robots even rubber-stamped the first set of goddamn documents. He and Charlotte could be waiting here another week and still come no closer to being issued a temp.

The officer pretended not to understand. He nodded as before, and then turned to make his unheroic exit. Paul stopped him again with a hand on the shoulder. "What about the man?" he asked. "Did you arrest him? And the monkey? What about the monkey?"

The cop looked at Paul's hand, and the smile broadened. His face looked vicious, like the pictures Paul had seen of Hades in the Greek mythology books.

"No more stealing," the officer reported happily. "No more monkey." And then he marched off, with a hurried force that suggested he would not be restrained again.

A moment passed, and Paul realized what he had to do. It was the only thing left to try. He made his way back around the church, and to the mouth of the alley. As he stood at the corner and waited to go in, a light breeze collected in the archway of an adjacent building and made a surging, almost rippling sound, like the fall wind on the Delaware River back home. The college students were no longer in sight, and for all Paul knew, they had moved off to another locale. The

neighborhood was paranormally quiet now. And when at last he rounded the corner, the beggar's alley seemed fathoms long to the back wall of its brick dead end.

The armless man was sitting on his blanket, only this time curled into himself as though trying ineffectually to hold onto something. The pair of trash cans was still there, but the monkey was nowhere in sight. As Paul stepped into the alley, the man's head shot up, wary but curious, then dropped like a heavy rock. The glance was only a second, but it was long enough for Paul to perceive and identify the look on the beggar's face, the unraveled emotion of absolute defeat. It would be the glimpse that Paul would envision after closing his eyes on the plane, and lying in bed back in his own apartment. It would be the glimpse he would never tell Charlotte about, not even those years later when they would sit in restaurants and dimly reminisce about their clumsy American adventure together in Athens.

Paul edged himself down the opposite wall, determined not to look at the armless man again. The dim apartment windows above no longer concerned him; he felt ashamed now for ever thinking they were sinister. When he got to the trash cans, he lifted the first lid and peered inside. Nothing but scraps of newspaper and black banana peels. He opened the next and expected there, surely, to find the heaps of stolen merchandise, the purses and shopping bags and disposable cameras and watches. But the trash can was empty, like the first. Paul felt a scream simmer up into his throat.

He skirted back down the alley—this time with momentum. He noticed as he went that the cardboard box, the one that had been sitting beside the beggar a little while before, was no longer there. Then the armless man coughed—a small, gurgling, broken noise, like a smoker in the early stages of emphysema—and Paul stepped up his pace. All he wanted was to get away from the man and back to the tavern, back to Charlotte to make sure she was O.K. He never should have left her alone. They belonged to each other now. If he lost her, he would fail in this one thing his mother had left him to do—this one thing that would, almost certainly, define who he would become.

The beggar said nothing as he departed the alley. But Paul could sense the man's heavy, defeated eyes upon his back.

*

On the very best days in the Plaka, Tuah and his monkey Jumaat feasted on spinach pie in the park behind Vyzantino Tavern. They sat in the open to enjoy the breeze, and the people threw money by the gallons as Jumaat danced a light jig to the Greek music on the sidewalks. And Tuah sang the old songs his mother had taught him long, long ago, on a boat that drifted like a dream, like his father's mighty battleship, across the Indian Ocean:

"The cempedak-fruit tree is across the fence … Please take a stick and poke it down for me … I'm just a new guy trying to learn … So if I'm wrong then please tell me."

STRAIGHT RAZOR

Dad taught me how to do this when I was fourteen years old. I'm forty-nine now and I've never shaved a different way. When I came back home a couple years ago, that was the first thing he begged of me after all that time away: give him a close shave with the old straight razor. For the longest time I let him go without. But the son must always come back to the father, no matter what the sins were that kept them apart. So I started shaving him again.

Other folks may do this different, but this is what Dad told me to do:

First, hone the razor with a double-grain water stone. Do this in the bathroom while Dad's taking his afternoon nap. Close the door and turn on the fan because the sharpening sound will get him nervous and you'll catch five kinds of hell keeping him still. Before the honing run the stone under warm water and let each side soak for five minutes. Then whet the blade using an X pattern—the four thousand grain first, then turn the stone over and use the eight thousand. Twenty times each side. Like so.

I've been shaving this old man so long, I can tell by looking when the razor's dead sharp, but the best way to tell while you're learning is by doing what the barbers call the Hair Test. Pull a hair out of a comb or a brush and see if the blade cuts through on the first swipe down. If she slices you're ready for the next step, the lathering. Dad loves this part so he'll fight trying to take the brush for himself. Put a hand on his forehead and tell him to sing "The Race is On" by George Jones. Calms him down every time, and you'll get a good laugh hearing him sing "here comes pride up the backstretch." It's always a good idea to have him sing. This old man's got a lot of sin to atone for, and singing is the sure-fire way to settle his brain.

Not that he deserves atonement.

*

Damn glad you took this job, by the way. Doc Sommers highly recommended you, said you're the best home-care nurse this side of Bossier, and a man like me's only got so much nurse in him before he starts going bat-shit-crazy. Dad's living out his last season, so the most you'll probably have to be around is two, maybe three months, max. He'll probably call you a dirty name every now and then—he calls everybody a bad name who takes care of him—so don't take anything he says personal. And don't be surprised if he mutters while you work. He likes to mutter things, and most of the time they don't make a damn lick of sense. But sometimes they do.

Take last month. Dad starts complaining about the old snake bite that took nearly half his left foot back in 1975. No mention of the diabetes that took his entire goddamn leg in 2003. Just the bite this old cottonmouth gave him on his big toe back when I was a kid. The cottonmouth we blew to smithereens in the field behind our house in Claiborne Parish.

We're just about to strop the blade when he says it. I've got the leather in my hands, and the soap's on the nightstand, and we're just about ready to start. That's when he grabs my arm and nearly yanks me down to my knees. Best to remember that: he's surprisingly strong.

"Griffin, go get the Doc," he says to me. "That poison is still inside my leg."

"What poison?" I say.

"That cottonmouth," he shouts. "That poison is still inside me."

So I put down the strop and I put my hand on his forehead and I tell him, "You ain't got any poison in you. That happened a long time ago."

"Go fetch Doc Tillman," he yells. "Hurry up, I think I'm dying!"

Well, no book can tell you what to say to something like that. So I say to him, "Doc Tillman ain't here, Dad, you got a new doctor now, remember Doc Sommers?" Then I show him the badger hair brush and the shave soap, and I say to him, "All ready for the lather? That's your

favorite part, remember?" But what does that old bastard do? He reaches up and slaps the brush right out of my hands. Then he says something that stops my heart in my goddamn chest.

"Where the hell is Irene? Where the hell is your sister?" he says to me.

Maybe you saw the picture of Irene, the school picture of the little girl in the dark glasses, in the curio cabinet when you walked through the living room. Spring of 1987, Irene stuffed herself with a bottle of prescription Doxepin. She was only nineteen. Been living by herself over in Shreveport, cooped up in a lousy, roach-infested apartment with two starved parakeets hanging in the windowsill. We buried her outside a Baptist church in Union Parish—we being my mama and me. Dad didn't make it. Mama wouldn't let him go. Told everybody at the service the diabetes was acting up, that he couldn't get out of bed to get dressed. All the years after, Mama wouldn't let Dad speak Irene's name. Wouldn't even let him bring her up. Not even when he tried to cry about her death.

So imagine my surprise when he flings Irene's name at me after twenty-three goddamn years! One of the coordinators at St. Francis put it this way once: "Expect anything. Arnie might see a ghost and try to convince you it's real. You shouldn't feel the need to play along." Good advice, but what's the procedure for a dead sister you ain't talked about for more than two decades?

So I say to him, "Irene's gone, Dad. It's just the two of us now, remember?"

To which he says, "This poison is killing me, Griffin. Tell Irene to get her butt in here so I can talk to her. Don't you understand what I got to do? I got to tell her I'm sorry. Don't you understand I could *die*?"

*

Here's a few things to do when Dad starts getting restless. Turn on the Bose radio and let him listen to KGOD, his favorite gospel station out of Shreveport. He likes Dolly Parton, the Carter family, Ferlin Husky, some of the classic Porter Wagoner. Then take his hand and make little circles on the top with one finger. He likes the music and the touch and his nerves will

eventually settle on down. If that don't work try opening the window. He likes the occasional whiff of the wild persimmon trees that sit outside in the back yard. One of his favorite memories involves a persimmon-peanut griddlecake my grandmama used to bake and serve with butter and syrup when he was just a young boy. Not sure if the memory's true, but he sure likes the smell of those trees when the wind's breezing and the night's about to fall. Just know you can't eat the persimmons from the old back yard trees, not even in the ripe months. Your mouth goes puckery and you think you've just swallowed some kind of dangerous fungi. But the *tang* of those trees, the illusion of some kind of sweetness in the air, is nigh on rapture for Dad about the hour of dusk.

Don't let his chatter get distracting when it's time to lather up. That's Step Two, and remember, that's his favorite part. Take a brick of shaving soap and melt it down in the microwave, lowest heat setting, quick bursts of ten, fifteen seconds. Stop and stir. A good glycerin soap will melt down fine but never use a tallow soap like Tabac or Williams. You do, food'll come out tasting just like burnt sienna. Pour the soap into a good, sturdy cup or a plastic bowl. Use the coffee cup on the nightstand, the one that says "Fishermen Don't Die They Just Smell That Way." That's Dad's favorite mug.

Run the badger hair brush under hot water until it's soaked, then make hard fast little circles in the bottom of the cup. Now take the sponge and wet down the old man's face. He likes to pull up the bedsheet and dry himself off, so tell him to sing old George Jones to keep him distracted. Next, move the brush in slow circles, like so and like so, across the face and the neck. Dad might tell you some kind of story about growing up in Alabama. Don't listen to any of that; Arnie Puckett grew up in south Arkansas. He'll also tell you the straight razor once belonged to Tommy Gagliano, the New York gangster. Don't believe that either. Dad watches a lot of TV.

*

Which brings me to an interesting coincidence: Dad bought this razor off the ten-dollar rack at Safferstone's Pawn Shop in West Monroe, same day he and Mama took me to the dentist

for my first set of braces. Same week he got the snake bite too, if that ain't the strangest irony. Maybe that's what brought the bite to his mind, remembering the day we bought the razor. You never can tell with old age. The nightly news gets cross-wired with *Days of Our Lives*, or the family reunion gets jumbled up with the latest rerun of *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Damndest thing, the associations a brain like that will try to conjure up.

The day of the bite, we were tromping through a field of mostly bull thistle behind our house in Claiborne Parish. It was the fourth day of ring-turtle dove season. I was a beanpole of a kid, and burning up in too much flannel, and my new braces felt like broken toothpicks. Dad was wearing his patched-up blue jeans, a camouflage T-shirt, and his favorite pair of grass-mowing sneakers. Yes ma'am, they was quite the pair, those fellows—two socks in the same drawer, as my granddaddy used to say. Hard to imagine Dad this old and feebled-up now, and that beanpole of a kid a few months shy of fifty. Hard to imagine change, period, ain't it?

Mama, she loved these hunting seasons, not because of all the dead game we'd come lugging back home, but because they kept Dad away from the house during long portions of the day. That morning before the hunt, the two of them yelled and hollered at each other in the master bedroom behind the closed door. They yelled and screamed about Irene, about things I wouldn't understand for a good long while. "You know exactly!" Mama shouted, like some kind of wild woman tearing out her hair. "Tell the truth, damn you, tell the truth!" You could hear every word she was saying right through the door. She used words like *sick* and *liar* and *son of a bitch.* Words that meant little, if anything, because Dad seemed opposite of all of them. Such is a boy's grand stupidity, I guess. But that beanpole of a kid didn't know two cents better. A boy will try so hard to be like his father, emulate him down to the goddamn marrow. What's that old saying? "He followed in his father's footsteps, but his gait was somewhat erratic"?

The fighting never seemed to bother Dad. He always took the Pontius Pilate approach and washed his hands of just about everything. But something about the fight that particular morning got to him. He didn't speak or breathe a word during our long, slow hunting march

across the field, didn't even seem to look up at the sky. Plus, he had handed off the .12-gauge double-barrel so he wouldn't have to haul it himself—something he rarely did. Every now and then a bird would go flying up out of the bull nettle and Dad's hand would go up fisted in the air, like some kind of sergeant giving the order to hold the position. Half a dozen ring-turtle doves got to freedom that way. After almost thirty minutes of holding and going, holding and going, the question finally flew: "Are we gonna do any shooting today, Dad?" A normal hunt, that man couldn't keep a shell loaded, he was so quick to blow the animals away.

"We'll head to the back field and give 'em hell there," he said. "Let's keep on walking for now and get some distance from the house."

When the snake nipped at his shoe, one fang stuck Dad's left big toe just above the nail; the other fang sank into his sneaker but didn't break the skin. Dad didn't make a sound. He just stopped, glanced down, held his hand out for the .12-gauge shotgun and made pulp out of the cottonmouth's upper body. The boom warbled across the field and struck a back corner of Kisatchie National Forest and zoomed right back. "That oughta do it," he said, and handed back the gun. Then we took a break in the bull thistle, drank water from our canteens, and looked at the big toe in the morning light.

Ten minutes later Dad went down on one knee.

Imagine how hard, bearing that man soldier-style, one arm over the neck, all the way to the steps of the back porch. Mama was already standing there, hands propped on her hips, like she had seen this kind of disaster coming. Irene stood in the doorway just behind her, left hand fished deep into a bag of Toll House cookies. She was seven that year, almost eight. She had a piece of orange cloth tied around her head in some attempt to look like Rhoda Morgenstern. But those thick, horn-rimmed glasses she wore—the pair she'd tried to throw in the garbage at least twice—defeated the effort entirely.

"What happened to Dad?" says Irene. "Did you step on a nail, Dad?"

Dad says, “I guess we better get in the car,” and a few minutes later that cheerful little family was headed south to the emergency room at Homer Memorial Hospital. Mama drove and Dad sat in the passenger seat with his bare foot propped on the dashboard. In the back, Irene kept squirming and fumbling and wrestling to climb the passenger seat and get a look at the bloated toe.

Dad says, “What, *this* nasty old thing?” and you could tell he was in ferocious pain, but he was trying not to show it—one thing he does to this day. “Come on up here then, sugar plum,” he says. But Mama slapped her back down with a palm to her forehead. Told her to sit back and buckle up or *gone* would be the next *Land of the Lost* on NBC. *Land of the Lost* was Irene’s favorite program. Any time she did anything wrong, Mama threatened to ban the next episode. Dad, he never punished Irene like that. He always called her *my little darlin’* or *my little sugar plum* and gave in to just about whatever she wanted.

Down in the hospital room the doctor wheeled around Dad’s big toe in a squeaky metal chair. He poked and prodded, and Dad squealed like a man with a bullet in his foot. Arnie was damn lucky the cottonmouth didn’t go straight for the ankle, Doc Tillman told us.

He says, “My friend, something must be watching over you. A minute longer with that poison in your foot and we’d be sending you down to the morgue.”

But two days later, after a long round of antivenom, Dad’s foot swelled up like a butternut squash and he lost the big toe and two of its neighbors to amputation. So at least those parts of him were not so lucky.

Mama, she took care of everything after the surgery. She talked to his bosses at the gas refinery, told them to expect a long absence, at least five or six weeks. She stocked the house with medical supplies, set up the master bedroom like an outpatient clinic, reset the bed with crossbrace rails, put a rolling walker by the nightstand, made Dad keep his foot propped up on a foam bed wedge—you name it. Then she took a month off from teaching at Junction City Middle School and gave me and Irene a stern warning.

She tells us, “Your Dad’s in a lot of pain. That means I don’t want either of you pestering him unless I specifically ask for help.”

She was like a woman who needed to keep control of something. To build walls and hedges to avoid our little world from tumbling into some kind of black hole.

Irene, she didn’t listen to a word Mama said, always found some kind of way to lurk around the room. Not that Mama would often let her stay home, but Irene knew how to pitch the right kind of fit to get her freedom. She’d wait for Mama to go to town, and then she’d sneak in and play games around Dad’s bed. Dad’s word for their games was *Charades*. One day he told her to put a Patsy Cline record on the Zenith turntable and he watched while Irene moved around the room in her underwear. They didn’t know Irene had left the door cracked open, that anybody and his uncle could look in and see what was going on. And when Mama came home and walked in on them, Lord, you’d think the heavens had just fallen. She spanked the backs of Irene’s legs so hard with a fly swatter that her skin looked like a scalded sunburn. Then she threatened to spank mine even harder, despite the protests that I’d gotten too old to spank.

Mama says to me, “She don’t need to be playing like that. We’ve got enough to deal with keeping your Dad’s foot clean. Keep her away, Griffin, do you hear me?”

Mama played nurse well as she could, but eventually the foot grew worse and Dad became a dedicated grump. Suppers were dirt-cold, cups of coffee were too hot. His biggest complaint was there was too much sunlight coming through the bedroom curtains, so Mama shuffled him back to Irene’s room, the only room in the house that didn’t have windows. She told Dad, that afternoon he moved, “You stay in here and you think about stuff. Think about everything you’re doing, Arnold. You lie in here and you *think*.” And then she moved Irene up to the master bedroom like a dirty refugee. And Irene hated every single minute.

“I want my stuff,” she yelled at Mama. “Ain’t fair I can’t have my stuff and Griffin can have his!”

And Mama said, “Irene, if you don’t hush you’ll get another spanking. You’re not going back to your room and that is that.”

Dad took most of his suppers in the living room with the family. He sat in a secondhand Permobil wheelchair, and ate his supper on a brown plastic lap tray. The family never spoke; there was always something to watch on TV, *The Six Million Dollar Man* on ABC, *Three for the Road* on CBS. Sometimes he’d try to break the silence during commercials with a Polack joke. “How do you stop a Polack army on horseback? You turn off the carousel.” Most of the time the jokes got giggles and guffaws like they were supposed to, but Mama never cracked the slightest smile. “For Christ’s sake, lighten up,” Dad told her one night. “This is family time, Maggie, so pull the goddamn panties out of your ass.”

Days went by and I’d press my ear to Irene’s door and listen while Dad got scolded for not taking his meds. Doc Tillman had sent him home with a doggy bag of antibiotics, but the way Mama chastised him suggested maybe he was ignoring his meds on purpose. Soon she was leaving him alone and letting him do whatever the hell he wanted. One day after school, a curious little urge crept in to sneak into Irene’s room and get a look at Dad’s two leftover toes. The door eased open, and there was Dad sitting up on Irene’s mattress and staring at nothing in the dark.

He hollered my name when he saw the crack in the door. Then he said, “Tell your sister to come in here and pull down these Sesame Street posters. It looks like the goddamn Flying Circus in here!”

Then he lobbed one of Irene’s teddy bears at the door and moaned like he was dying.

That was around the time Mama told me to start learning the different medications and how to wrap the foot and how to shave Dad with the straight razor—the only kind of shaving he’d ever do again, he had decided. She wanted me to learn those things so I could watch the room and so when the time came I could take care of him myself without having to rely on somebody else.

She says one day, “Don’t let anything get by.” This while she’s going through the meds bottle by bottle in the bathroom. She says, “Tell me about anything strange that might happen. Anything, Griffin, you understand?”

I tell her, “Yes, I do,” but it was only to stop her from asking the question.

*

Practice on yourself before you start on Dad. Stand at the bathroom mirror and teach your fingers how to stretch the cheeks and pull above the neck. Dad made me do the same thing for nigh on two weeks. Wouldn’t let me touch him, wouldn’t let me get *near* him with the razor. So while I worked on myself, he coached me on the other things, how to sharpen, how to make the little X’s on the water stone, how to draw the tight circles of lather across the face. After a couple more weeks he said I was better than a Polack with a pocket knife and perfect vision, so then he taught me how to strop.

Run the razor under a hot water tap for five minutes to soften the blade. Hook the strap up to something fixed—a rail from the side of the bed is what I use—and pull the leather as tight as you can. Then drag the edge of the blade with the spine facing due south, like so. Do this twenty times, just like the water stone. Moisten the tip of the thumb and touch the blade to test her for smoothness. Takes practice, but that edge will be as smooth as a hound’s ear every time.

You know, not once did that razor cut him, during Dad’s afternoon sessions. Weeks passed like that, Dad holding the mirror, me holding the razor, and nothing ever happened that would constitute “strange.” Except for one late evening a couple of months after the amputation. Mama and Irene were in town shopping and I had just finished my science homework and cracked open Irene’s door, and the room was dim and had this familiar salty kind of smell and Conway Twitty was playing on the Zenith and Dad was staring up at the ceiling and clutching Irene’s teddy bear in his left arm. The other arm was snaked down over the dome of his hairy stomach and the right hand was moving and wiping at something under Irene’s Mickey Mouse bedspread. The room was hot and Dad’s stomach looked shiny. What did that stupid beanpole of

a kid do? I stood there like a damn statue, is what, and couldn't tear my eyes away from Irene's teddy bear. Its sandy, scruffy body twisting under Dad's armpit, and those sad, chocolate eyes gawking like it was begging and crying for help.

When Dad's eyes rolled back down from the ceiling, when he finally noticed me standing there and ogling the teddy bear, he loosed this ecclesiastical litany of curses I have never heard a man make since. He ended the tirade with something like "Fuckin' spy!" and the teddy bear came hurtling straight at the crack in the door. The bear smacked against the wall and the door slammed right away shut. Irene's room was a no-man's land for two and a half weeks after. I never looked in that direction.

And Mama noticed. She stopped at my bedroom one day, a yellow towel slung across her shoulder like an Indian pelt. Off in the kitchen, Irene splashed in the sink water and banged dishes around in the open cabinets.

Mama says to me, "So what's been going on with your daddy?"

And I say, "Nothing. Nothing at all."

The towel came off her shoulder and she wrung it in her hands. "I want you to know you can tell me anything," she says. "Anything at all."

And I say, "Okay. Fine."

The towel moved around and around, like she wanted to choke something. There might be another surgery, she says to me. The foot's getting worse. He's gonna be down a long, long time, she says. "I can't be around every minute. That's why I need you to watch the house very carefully."

She says, "You're the man of the house now, Griffin. Your sister depends on you. You have to take care of her when I'm not here. Your mama has to work to keep the bills up."

But the truth was, Irene was impossible to be around anymore. You'd tell her no to something and she'd reach and squeeze a massive hunk out of your side and then fall down and pitch a screaming, yelling fit on the floor. She acted different when Mama was around.

I tell her one day, “She won’t stop climbing. She climbs all over you like a monkey and she won’t stop when you tell her to get down.”

Mama says, “Did you ask her why she’s climbing?”

I said, “No, but she’s almost eight, I shouldn’t have to.”

Then one Saturday around Thanksgiving, Irene stole some of Mama’s facial masque cream and ran around the house with a green face and pretended to be a Sleestak. Mama was at the school changing posters and holiday decorations in her classroom. Irene begged me to be Rick Marshall and chase her around the front yard. I told her no, *Land of the Lost* was dumb and she needed to grow up. She kicked and screamed for half a damn hour and then stormed back into Dad’s room—well, *her* room. She slammed the door so hard a hallway picture tumbled off the wall. So I let her stay in the room with Dad, as punishment. I was too upset to put up with her. She was in the room a long time, the door closed, the lights off, and you couldn’t hear a damn thing. No talking, no record playing on the Zenith, no dancing around like Ricochet Rabbit. Nothing at all, I tell you.

And then an hour passed, and you can’t imagine that kind of quiet. It’s a particular kind of quiet that floats down the hallways of houses when it shouldn’t. I cracked the door a couple of inches to get a look. She was curled up on the bed, nestled against Dad’s right leg and sucking on her thumb. Dad was half-propped on the mattress, two of Irene’s pillows wedged under his back, and he was fast asleep with his head tilted slightly off, like a dog. The Mickey Mouse bedspread covered one of Irene’s legs and both of Dad’s. The leg not covered was bare. A pair of Irene’s blue jeans were lying at the foot of the bedpost, the legs pulled inside-out. I couldn’t tell if they were the ones she’d been wearing, but I think they might have been.

One of the door hinges popped and Irene woke up. She didn’t say anything, she just squeezed herself out of the bed and wandered past in her red underwear. She kept going until she reached Mama’s bedroom. When Mama came home, Irene was curled up on the bed, asleep in a pair of pajamas. Mama never found out she’d gone into her own room. She never found out

because I never told. I was too stubborn. Maybe if I had, maybe if I hadn't been so stubborn—Mama could've done something. You know. To keep her safe.

I was such a kid. Such a stupid goddamn kid.

*

But let's save the rest for another day. I've rambled away far too long. We've still got Step Four to talk about. That's the trickiest part of all, because that's the part, as Dad used to say, where the skin meets the steel.

Before you start, make sure you got a styptic pencil within arm's reach. A gash or two is guaranteed, and the alum stops the bleeding and keeps the cut from scarring the face. Also keep an extra pair of towels on the nightstand, a little bit moist. A couple of years back I gashed Dad a good one and the old man bled like a vein and one big towel couldn't sop up all the blood. He don't remember that happened, but I remember all too well. I remember such an unsteady hand that day.

Keep your wrist flexible, and hold the razor like so. Very important not to tip the blade—you might flay his face like a catfish. Rest your pinkie on the tang and place the first three fingers on the back. And whatever you do, don't forget to breathe.

Sometime during the shave Dad will start singing "I Surrender All." He might even weep a little. He thinks the good Lord will hear him through the open window and come fluttering in like a dove on the sweet smell of the wild persimmons. Let the old man sing as much as he wants.

Let me demonstrate. Took me several times to get the hang. Hold still, Dad, and let me show this good nurse how to swipe the cheeks.

Push the head back and to the opposite direction, like so. Now, swipe along the bristles.

Hold still, you son of a bitch. Hold still now.

Sometimes, dear God, I swear. Sometimes you'll want to cut this neck wide open.

Whatever you do, don't forget to breathe.

FATHER ABRAHAM

Last spring, a few weeks shy of my thirty-fourth birthday, I spent two days and one night handcuffed to the back of my cousin Garrett's pickup truck in the swampy bottomlands of North Corney Lake Camp Access. The Claiborne Parish newspapers dubbed the situation a standoff, and me a hostage, along with Garrett's two kids—Zachary, the nine-year-old, and Sawnie, the five-year-old—but as badly as the press wanted to report, I was never ransom or collateral for anything. My presence in the woods implied a clear-cut need for companionship, familiarity, the need for a family member to recognize Garrett was in the worst kind of pain. His kids were a different matter. A different kind of collateral, I guess you could say.

He roped them to a bald cypress tree with a pair of Home Depot rubber tie-downs. A heavy rain had pummeled Corney Lake earlier that week, so the kids sat in thick, leafy pillows of earthworm-infested mud and bawled for bottles of SunnyD and beef ravioli MREs, the only nourishing items Garrett had thought to bring. I sat in the fiberglass bed of Garrett's dusty, mud-coated Silverado, a pair of Thompson handcuffs pinning my arms to the pickup's roll bar while Garrett roamed the Kisatchie National Forest with his Remington 30-06. He never told me the reason for these periodic walk-abouts, what he was up to or what he might be planning. But every now and then a gunshot would peel open the sky and birds would flutter over my head and I started to think he might be practicing his long-range sniper techniques, the ones he had learned at Fort Benning in the days before Afghanistan.

The first day, Garrett warned me in a calm, cousinly voice that he would come back and shoot all three of us in the chest if we didn't sit quiet, so I spent the first several hours trying to

keep the kids from sobbing and yelling for their mother, my cousin-in-law Pauline, who was still serving time at David Wade Correctional. The first hour, I told them stories of how Garrett and I played cowboys and Indians in the rambling Catawba meadows behind their great-grandmother's house in Union Parish.

"Your daddy played the cowboy and he always tied me up," I told them. "But you guys don't worry, he'd always let me go in time for supper." When the kids stopped listening I resorted to singing—hanging one leg over the side of the truck and swinging my foot up and down to the tune of "Give Me Oil in My Lamp," the only song I could remember from my old Vacation Bible School days. By the time I got to the third verse—"Give me peace in my heart, keep me resting"—Zachary had settled down to a whimper and Sawnie had grown silent altogether, as though she had lost her vocal cords. Runners of snot had dried along her top lip, and I thought at first her silence meant shock, but her face had also taken on a stoic quality that I had never seen on a five-year-old. Every now and then Sawnie's eyes would probe the woods for signs of movement, and her chest would hitch and hiccup as though stubbornly trying to lock down a sob.

Garrett was a good father. He never did anything special, like coach the T-ball league or take them trawling around Corney Lake. But he had that way of telling the world, I'm a good man, and I like my kids just fine. He did volunteer, every year at Halloween, to drive the hayride truck for his church, Bethel Baptist, and every year his kids rode in the cab instead of on the flat-bed trailer. While the other kids howled and tossed hay into the road, Zachary and Sawnie nestled close to Garrett and listened to Reba McEntire and Hank Williams, Jr. After Pauline went to prison they stayed close to Garrett like that—he never let them stray. He was a good father, and till the standoff at Corney no one thought a damn thing about him. And afterward, they didn't blame him, they blamed the Taliban.

*

Garrett helped me out the year my wife, Debbie, left me for the Entergy technician from Mississippi. This was 2001, the winter of the big ice storms, the ones that blacked out South

Arkansas and six parishes of North Louisiana, and some guy named Teddy came over from Yalobusha County to help restore power and ended up stealing Debbie right out from under me. She packed a suitcase in the middle of a work day and rode back with him to Water Valley, called me a week later to apologize for never giving me a child. I couldn't speak to her, so Garrett called her back and said never to bother crawling home, because cousins took care of each other and I had nothing to worry about, I could do better than a cheating pigface whore anyway.

The spring and summer that followed, Garrett dragged me out of the house on the weekends and took me fishing for big-mouth bass at Corney Lake Bottom, a quarter mile north of the dense, forgotten bayou the newspapers would eventually call "the standoff territory." This was a year before sniper school in Georgia, and Garrett had a different outlook on things. He talked a lot about the future, how he wanted to start a small engine-repair business in Summerfield and get his black belt in Taekwondo and take his brand-new baby boy to a Saints game at the SuperDome when Zachary got his football teeth. After Afghanistan, he talked about God, and Pauline's tempers, and blood drying on white rocks, and the world's gravitational pull upon his soul.

One day a few months after my separation, Garrett's Silverado rolled up into the drive, the horn bleating a rapid-fire version of "Shave and a Haircut." Behind the Chevy, his green aluminum Classic boat rattled along on its matching homemade trailer. I stepped onto the porch and Garrett held a strip of beef jerky out the window, his way of saying howdy and signaling our impromptu fishing trips.

"Rods are in the back and the tackles are full," Garrett said. This was before his Afghan tour, so Garrett didn't have the tattoo on his inner left forearm yet, the tattoo of the heart—a realistic heart with veins and ventricles—entwined in a strand of barbed wire that wrapped around his flesh.

"I can't, I have to work," I said.

"You own the place, Russ. And those busted TV's ain't going nowhere," he said.

"It's a Wednesday," I said. "The fish don't even bite on Wednesday."

"Get your ass in the truck. I got three packs of J.D. Watermelon Spike in the cooler."

"I'll get my cap," I said.

The Bottom access to Corney Lake is an old, snakeskin path of pale white pebbles and fallen tree branches that look like black nets cast on the ground. Garrett drove the path like a madman, and along the way we talked about women and cussed about Debbie's lack of a soul. When the woods dropped away and Corney Lake materialized, the water shimmering like tarnished metal in the morning sun, I felt the cinderblocks of my past few months of isolation collapse on my shoulders and I told Garrett I'd do anything for him, I'd be there for whatever and whenever he needed, as payment for being there for me.

"Someday I'll take you up on that," he said.

"Goddamn Debbie."

"Goddamn Mississippi," Garrett said.

We sat on the water for hours, soaking up too much sun and not even trying to fish, just snacking on strips of beef jerky, drinking our Watermelon Spikes, and bobbing on the lake water among the lazy flecks of yellow foam. Occasionally Garrett fired up the trolling motor and a gentle hum disrupted the silence and the boat glided forward and zipped off to nowhere, ripples of water fanning like a dream behind the motor's blades. Between the snacks and the J.D.s, we talked about kids, the strange, adult-like ways that Zachary would look up at the ceiling from his bassinet, and Garrett confessed he had talked to Pauline about wanting another, and how sometimes he could already see the face of that unborn child somewhere in the dark behind his closed eyes. This was three years before Sawnie.

"I swear it's a little girl," Garrett said. He was drunk as I was, but he spoke as though he were sober. "Sometimes you can see those things, if you concentrate hard." Shortly thereafter I broke down and cried. Told Garrett I felt like I was flushing everything, my entire life, down the tubes. I was sleeping too much, and letting the empty days get the better of me. A hell of a thing,

being a father, I said, my blurry thoughts one continuous epiphany, or something. Hell of a thing, a kid keeping you so busy you forget about the rest of the world, and want to. Garrett sipped on his Watermelon Spike and nodded. Hell of a thing, he said. You bet. These thoughts would come again eight years later in the back of Garrett's pickup, as the Remington 30-06 crackled and echoed across the piney hills. And with every gun blast, with every whimper from the bald cypress tree, I envisioned the slow ripples on the lake that day, but in the sky as though Garrett's bullets were tearing straight through the cloudless blue.

*

Those first few hours, I don't know how many times I sang "Give Me Oil in My Lamp" before Garrett came back. Maybe seven or eight, maybe a dozen. At least until Zachary started to sing along, and by then he wasn't singing because I'd lured him into it, he was singing because the metal S hooks linking the rubber cords were biting into his elbows and he needed some kind of distraction. Sawnie, she never sang. On the other side of the tree, she kept her watchful study of the woods, her chest rising and falling to the cadence of the May wind. Whenever a shot rang out, her dirt-smeared face moved like a nervous hunter's, and her big hazel eyes bulged. I tried talking to her between verses, but the only reply came from Zachary, who didn't like the interruptions.

"Do the second verse," he'd say. "Uncle Russ, the second."

"Your dad should be back soon," I'd say. "We'll do it one more time, how's that?"

Late that evening Garrett returned from his walk-about and put the 30-06 on the seat of the pickup, his bearded face a shiny red from all the hiking. Zachary sobbed and pushed against the rubber ties and Garrett told him, in a soft voice, to be a man, be a little man, okay? Then he looked at me and nodded, like he did that day in the boat. I couldn't recognize the look in his eyes, couldn't get a glimpse of one human thing I remembered about him, and the need for that recognition scared me more than the rubber cords and the handcuffs and the 30-06.

“Thank you for being here,” he told me, at the rear of the pickup. His hands were grimy, as though he’d been running them across ground, and the knuckles of both hands were bloody. “Our test has come, Russ, so thank you for being here.”

I asked him what his plan for the night was. The kids needed to stretch and pee and they needed shelter, I said. They couldn’t stay corded to a tree all night, could they? “Those hooks are probably killing them by now,” I said. “Plus, I don’t know how long we can last on MREs.”

“God provides that kind of thing,” was Garrett’s answer. He said nothing about the hooks.

He spent the next hour building a makeshift headquarters, a one-person backpacking tent between the truck and the kids and five or six Coleman lanterns placed in a wide ring around the camp. When dusk approached, he lit the lanterns and sat in the cab of the truck and listened to a staticky talk show on some radio station out of Monroe. I strained in the cuffs to keep my eyes on him, see if he was holding the Remington, but he was only taking drags off a cigarette and twiddling with the radio. I asked him through the open back window if I could have a smoke. He said no, better not. Then he stepped out and flicked the butt into the woods and grabbed the 30-06, and from beneath the cypress Sawnie started to wail, a low, down-in-the-pit, honest wailing that steeped my body in dread.

“Bubblegum, don’t,” Garrett said, in that small muted voice he had used with Zachary. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“She’s been good,” I told Garrett. “Hasn’t made a peep the whole day.”

“She’s stubborn like her mama, that’s why.”

“She’s better than her,” I said.

Garrett slid the strap of the Remington over his neck and hung the rifle behind his back. The movement was natural for him. And something turned over in his eyes when he did it. The look of a person who’s gone civilian to soldier with the simple change of a hat.

"I'll be back at dawn," he said. As he turned and started walking, the scope on the rifle reflected a coin of sunlight onto a tree, and I felt a glacial kind of unreality settle into my bones.

"What about the tent?" I called. "We should let the kids have it."

"Everyone is fine," Garrett said.

"Everyone is not fine."

He paused. I couldn't see him, and his sudden invisibility spooked me. "I shouldn't have mentioned Pauline," he said after a time, and then the dusk and the soundless woods swallowed him up.

*

He met Pauline at a blackjack table at the Dixie Land Casino in Minden. They dated for three months then showed up at my repair shop in Junction City and announced she was pregnant and they were getting hitched. No wedding, just a J.P. ceremony with a couple witnesses. Would I swing down to Homer and be a witness for them?

Of course, I told them. Even though I knew Pauline was no better than a snake.

After Garrett joined the Army and shipped off to Fort Benning, she tried to hang out at my house. She brought Zachary and sat at my kitchen table and went on about 9/11's effects on Louisiana casinos while Zachary crawled like a bear cub across my linoleum. He looked exactly like Garrett—you had to marvel how much. He had Garrett's big cheekbones and Garrett's dense hickory-brown hair and that aggressive-looking chin that I'd once told Garrett could give Dolph Lundgren's a run for his money. Garrett liked to hide that chin with a long, bushy beard. I imagined Zachary would eventually do the same.

"It's a crying shame what Debbie did to you," Pauline said, puffing on one of her cheap cigarettes. "If I had a man like you, I'd never go messing around."

I pointed out Garrett's loyalty and Pauline blustered smoke across the room.

"He didn't have to join no *Army*. You know well as I do, Garrett don't have a patriotic bone in his *body*. He just wanted time away from his *family*."

My face burned. I said, “If I was married to you, I’d think war was a vacation too,” and for the next two years I caught only glimpses of Pauline, mostly at the grocery store. Whenever we saw each other, we turned away and walked different directions. A shame, because I enjoyed seeing Zachary. One day I sneaked a wave at him, and received a wave back. He was sitting in the grocery cart, his thick lumberjack legs dangling from the plastic seat as Pauline pushed him up and down the aisles. When he saw me, he gave me a jaw-busting smile and we exchanged our wave behind Pauline’s back. His chin had grown into this big awkward thing, this big kind of contraption of a thing, and I thought his grin made him look a little like Popeye. I wanted to put a corn-cob pipe into his mouth to complete the effect.

The day Garrett came back, Pauline broke our long silence and called to let me know his flight would be arriving late that night in Monroe. This was Pauline’s way of explaining I should be the one to pick him up, so I did. He looked haggard in the poorly lit terminal and didn’t see me for several minutes, even though I was waving and calling his name. I had envisioned my cousin’s return as the hero’s homecoming, with family crowding all around and confetti flying in the air, but when we hugged, alone and with no confetti, his side of the embrace was half-hearted, like a deflated balloon. We stood in front of each other without speaking, and a few minutes later, as we shuffled across the parking lot, Garrett’s duffel bag slung over my shoulder, I commented on the forearm tattoo.

“Christ I bet that stung,” I said. “Some nice art, though.”

“It’s my reminder,” Garrett said, smoothing the hair over the tattoo with his hand.

“Of what?”

His boots seemed to make no sound on the pavement. He was like a ghost. “Certain things,” he said.

The drive back to Summerfield, we listened to Three Dog Night and Garrett stared at the highway, his eyes daring not to flinch at the passing headlights. I wondered what he had seen over there and so I asked.

“Russ, I’m trying to get things right,” he said. “I have a lot to process—” he hammered his temples with two fingers “—up here.”

“Fair enough,” I said, and we drove on in the dark.

*

I didn’t hear from Garrett for a month. Then one Tuesday afternoon the Silverado pulled up in front of the TV shop and Garrett walked in and asked me to take a ride to Homer, to the Sheriff’s Office.

“What for?” I said.

He looked embarrassed. “Pauline’s locked up. And she’s pregnant. I want you to ride with me to bail her out. I sold the boat so I’ve got some bail money.”

I said, “She’s what?”

He scrubbed a hand over his beard. “Sorry, I should’ve told you.”

I asked what she did to merit jail-time. Not that it surprised me.

He said, “She’s been assaulting me and the boy. This is her third time. I should’ve told you that too, I guess.”

“We’re family,” I said. “You come to me first.”

I rode with him in silence, a drive curiously similar to Garrett’s first night back. Somewhere along Highway 9 we passed an eighteen-wheeler that hugged the centerline and Garrett went off on the driver, called him a fuckbag and shitheap, and his hands gripped and choked the steering wheel. As the hands crushed the leather, the tattoo on his forearm seemed to beat like a living heart and I asked him what in hell was going on. He said he couldn’t sort anything out, that his life was careening out of control. Pauline’s tempers were getting worse, and he was waking up at night with mind-splitting headaches.

“I keep dreaming about that face,” he said. “Over and over again. I need to get that face out of my head, Russ.”

I thought he was talking about the unborn child, the one he spoke about the day we got drunk in the boat. “Do you mean the kid?” I said.

“Yes, that fucking kid,” he said.

The return trip with Pauline, Garrett turned on Three Dog Night and none of us said a word. I sat in the fold-down seat in the extended cab and Pauline sat in the middle, next to Garrett in the front seat like some new girlfriend with a cheerleader crush. She smelled like a jail—sour and calloused. He put his arm around her and drove with his left hand. When they dropped me off at the shop, I stopped at the driver’s-side window and put a hand on Garrett’s arm. I expected him to flinch, but he was cold-still.

“Let’s get back to the lake soon,” I said. But I could see Pauline’s face, pinched and judgmental, a face that suggested he would not be fishing anytime in the near future.

“Let’s do,” he said, but then Pauline goaded him to drive away. I didn’t see Garrett again until seven months later, three days after Sawnie was born. He called to let me know the birth went well and they were back home, trying to recuperate and get the baby settled. I went to their house—Uncle Davey’s old house—and Garrett didn’t look himself at all. His face had lost its linebacker thickness and the beard had spread all the way down his neck and he wore a brown T-shirt with moth holes riddled into the chest. We sat in the kitchen and drank watered-down coffee while Pauline breast-fed Sawnie in the back. Zachary sat in the floor under the table, rolled and crashed his Tonka trucks around my feet and made collision noises, and that was the first time I noticed Garrett wouldn’t look down at him. He wouldn’t watch his own son play.

“Are you getting any sleep?” I said. “You look like shit.”

“Don’t cuss,” Garrett said.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. A little, I guess. Maybe three, four hours.”

“That’s not enough,” I said. “You’re wearing down, man. You’ve lost weight.”

Garrett stared at his coffee. Zachary bumped a bulldozer into my shoe and made another crashing sound. Imaginary victims went tumbling, and Zachary shrieked. I reached down and fluffed his hair. He rammed the dozer back into my heel and cackled.

I watched Garrett avoid watching Zachary. This was February, and the morning was a dull gray with frost on the ground and a crusty rime along the edges of Uncle Davey's windows. I've always thought of that house as Uncle Davey's—I can't help it. Even when Garrett and Pauline lived there, the house didn't feel like their home, or any kind of home. The house didn't respond to their so-called harmony. A house knows when something is broken inside it. That's why I spend most of my days in the TV shop.

I said, "Is Pauline gonna bring out the baby? I sure would like to see her."

He looked up at the hallway. "Pauline! The baby!" he shouted.

I suspected she wouldn't come out and she didn't. I could hear them in one of the bedrooms, Sawnie whimpering, Pauline cooing and rattling some kind of toy to make her stop. From the sound, she was growing more and more frustrated.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll see her tomorrow."

"We never should've had her," Garrett said.

The comment shocked a bare silence between us. And when I looked at him, Garrett's eyes darted off to the nearest window. He didn't like me looking at him.

"You're just tired," I said. "When you're rested, things will get easier."

Under the table, Zachary rammed the bulldozer violently into Garrett's boot.

"Stop bumping Daddy's foot," Garrett said. He slid his boot away, out of the boy's reach. This was before he started keeping the kids close, keeping them nestled right next to him whenever he'd take them out.

"I don't think God intended me to have kids," he said. "Sometimes I think He ought to just have them back."

"These kids are a gift," I said.

The words came out angry. But he shrugged, as though he didn't understand.

"Just get some rest. You're wearing down." It was all I knew to add.

We took long, slow sips of coffee. After I finished, Garrett got up and refilled my cup. I looked under the table at Zachary. He was pushing the bulldozer along a dirty brown seam of linoleum, his brow furrowed and lips making a *bloom-bloom-bloom* sound, a low gear struggling to climb a hill. I said, "That's a tough job, huh," and Zachary glanced up and nodded, and the anger at Garrett's comment intensified. Then I heard Pauline shout in the back room, *Christ, be still, will you,* and I thought about walking back there and confronting her. But then Garrett set the mug beside my hand and took his seat, and after a time he tapped on the table to get my attention.

"Russ," he said, "do you remember that story about Abraham and Isaac?"

I said, "From the Bible?"

"Yeah, Abraham. The father of many nations."

"Okay," I said.

"I've been thinking about that story lately. I can't seem to get it out of my head. The one about Abraham sacrificing Isaac up on Mount Moriah."

"But he didn't sacrifice him. He chickened out, right?"

"No, he didn't chicken out." A shade of his own anger now. "An angel stayed his hand."

"Oh," I said. "That's good. What about it?"

"Sometimes, God will ask you to do crazy things."

"Okay. And your point?"

"That is the point."

"I thought the point was Abraham's faith."

"You wouldn't need faith if God didn't ask you to do crazy things."

Something officially uncomfortable whittled into my gut. "Christ, man, I don't know why you talk this way."

Garrett pushed his coffee cup around the table.

"I don't know either," he said.

I asked him, "What happened over there? You ever gonna tell me?"

He ignored the question. "Zachary, stop bumping Daddy's goddamn foot," he said. "I'm not gonna say it again."

*

Pauline went back to jail the following fall, and Garrett started looking better. He sheared the Wolfman beard off his neck and a few pounds of the weight came back on and he started bringing the kids around the shop to watch me work on the TVs. One Sunday evening he brought a sack of hot barbecue and we ate pulled pork sandwiches on paper saucers and watched football on a customer's flat-screen TV while Zachary pretended to shoot things with an unplugged soldering gun. As Garrett watched him, I fed Sawnie daubs of barbecue sauce off the tip of a spork and contemplated what I would be like as a father. Would I be like good old Uncle Russ or someone completely different? Would I have the proper patience? Would I be capable of sternness? Would I be The Great Protector and keep them from harm? After Debbie I had envisioned a stark reality of being alone and staying that way until I died, but something about Garrett's kids skewed and distorted that reality until another kind of life started coming into view. A life, I started to think, that wasn't all that far away. All I had to do was try again. I was so enamored, I told Garrett I was back in the market and wanted to find a woman.

"About damn time," Garrett said. "Soon as Pauline gets out, we'll go to the Dixie."

But Pauline never got out. She assaulted a sheriff's deputy a week before her release, and a judge sent her up to David Wade for six years without time spent. Her hearing made the Homer newspaper, and the reporter quoted the public defender as saying Pauline was the actual victim and that she had "suffered more abuse in her marriage than her husband ever did," and Garrett took the news as God's test, God's last-ditch effort to get him and his family in church. So he started taking the kids to Bethel Baptist, every Sunday. The first couple of weeks he asked me to

go along, and every time I declined. Said I didn't have the proper clothes, and that I didn't think God was trying to test me, per se.

"He's always trying to test," Garrett said.

I told him, "I guess that's why He sent Teddy, huh?"

*

Then came the morning last spring when Garrett rolled up to the shop with Zachary and Sawnie in the front seat beside him. I hadn't seen or heard from him in months. From my chair behind the counter, I could see that Garrett had let his beard grow Wolfman again, obscuring those impossibly defined edges of his chin, and that he had packed a pile of camping supplies in the back of the Silverado. I didn't see the rifle till later, when we were getting out of the truck at Corney Lake Camp Access.

Garrett stepped into the shop and I could tell something was wrong, even though his beard was splitting, or trying to split, into a smile. He was wearing camouflage head to toe, and his face looked drained, the poster board for sleepless nights. I wiped my hands and stepped around to meet him. He slung one arm around me and we half-embraced in the middle of the shop, walled in by my stacks of broken, irreparable TVs. He smelled like Irish Springs soap, with a hint of something gamy on his breath, old peppered bacon or a stick of beef jerky. I didn't know what to say, so a long silence lingered. But the silence felt natural, too, as though it was supposed to be there. I let it go until Garrett released me and took a step back. After a time he said, "I'd like you to take a ride with me, Russ. Out to Corney Lake for a while."

"Wish I could, I'm swamped," I said.

"These busted TVs can sit one more day."

"I'm already two weeks under," I said.

"I gave up the J.D., but there's a pack of SunnyD in the cooler."

He didn't look well. His shoulders were hunched, and the eyes weren't right.

"I'll get my cap," I said.

When I got in the truck, the kids looked droggy. They were dressed in school clothes, but I didn't see books, backpacks, or lunch boxes. I asked Zachary why they weren't in school. Garrett said, "That's not important." He patted Sawnie's leg. "They get to play hooky today." And Sawnie frowned.

On the way to Corney Lake we listened to Reba McEntire. I asked Sawnie to sing a line of "Fancy" for me, but she said she didn't feel like singing. "Are you not feeling good, Miss Sawnie?" I asked, and she said, like a person twenty years older, "No, I don't at all."

The ditches along Highway 9 were swollen from the storm a few days earlier, so I expected the Corney Lake access roads would be impossible to navigate. Rangers were known to close the lake after severe rains, but only under situations like flash flooding. I asked Garrett if Summerfield or surrounding areas had flooded and he mumbled no, everything checked out, we should be okay. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I sat with my hands in my lap and let Zachary's head rest on my arm. Sawnie sat beside Garrett, her legs as still as blocks of wood, the laces of her tennis shoes perfectly tied in double bows. These were the things I noticed, that I *always* noticed.

When we reached the Bottom access road, Garrett drove the muddy path carefully, as Uncle Davey had taught him to do after heavy rains. The morning felt out of kilter. The sun was shining and the lake was glittering, but the trees seemed closer to the truck, as though the woods had shrunk into themselves, and it occurred to me that I hadn't been down here since the last time Garrett had brought me. I kept expecting with every bump in the path to hear the Classic boat bang up and down on the trailer, and when the bang didn't come my head reeled a bit like I had just dozed and caught myself in the act. In my fog I heard Zachary say, "Where are we going, Daddy?" and Garrett's reply, "We're going on a hunt. We're gonna hunt some birds, little man."

A few yards past North Corney Lake Camp, Garrett wheeled us off the beaten path and we went thumping off into the woods. We mowed down bushes, skinny saplings, and the kids'

legs bounced on the seat. I held onto Zachary's knees. "Garrett," I said, "I don't think the Chevy can handle this."

"We'll be fine," Garrett said. "I know where I'm going."

We stopped in a small clearing surrounded by cypress and tupelo gums and Garrett killed the engine. I opened the door and Zachary bounded over my lap, ready to play. Sawnie stayed in the seat, confused. "Crawl on out, Bubblegum," Garrett said. Timidly she slid over his legs and eased down off the seat. Afterward she stood by the door and didn't move, as though ready to leap back in at the first insinuation.

Garrett and I sat in the truck. We looked at each other.

I said, "So what are we doing. Not bird hunting, I know that."

Garrett said, "Shut the door, Russ."

We shut the truck doors, leaving Sawnie to stand by herself, like a petrified tree. A few feet ahead, Zachary was poking around the base of a thorn bush. I watched him closely, but he knew better than to touch it. He looked more interested in something underneath, a worm or a displaced crawdaddy.

Garrett gazed out at his children and seemed to forget I was there. His finger had found a bald spot on the steering wheel and he started picking at it, trying to scuff it up. Finally he said, "Russ, you ever hear of a guy named Simo Häyhä?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," I said.

He picked at the steering wheel. "He was a Finnish sniper. My class in Fort Benning studied his every move. Back in the Winter War between Finland and Russia, the Soviet troops, they called this guy 'Belaya Smert.' That means 'White Death.' They were terrified of him. By the end of the war, he'd sniped more than five hundred Russians, and almost two hundred more unconfirmed. Ask me what this guy used."

"What did he use?"

"A Model 28, Mosin-Nagant, Russian-made. This tiny Finnish guy, he kills five hundred-plus soldiers using their own damn rifle. The kicker is, the Mosin-Nagant didn't even have a scope. He was shooting through plain old iron sights. And this guy Simo is the deadliest sniper in combat history. Ain't that something?"

He paused. Picked at the wheel. I said nothing.

"Simo, he kicked the bucket April 2002. That's the same time I went to Fort Benning, man. Same goddamn month, same year. Ain't that the weirdest thing you ever heard?"

"Weird," I said. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"You gotta wonder if old Simo killed any kids, you know? Out of five hundred, maybe seven hundred people, you know he had to have popped one kid. Wouldn't you think?"

"I suppose," I said, not letting my eyes veer off Zachary. I was worried about the thorn bush, worried Zachary would try to reach in and grab one. My heart was beating like I was in a panic.

"When you pop a kid," Garrett said, "he goes down different. It ain't like a grown man."

"Why is that?" I heard myself say.

"There's not enough to him. The M24 at short range, you split him apart. Maybe seven, eight hundred meters, there'd be a little something left. But a hundred meters, man, there ain't a lot left, you know? He's just too small."

I asked him, "Why would you want to shoot a kid, Garrett?"

His eyes moved from Sawnie to Zachary, back and forth between his children. He said, "In the mountains they put bombs on the little ones, tell 'em to bee-line straight to the foreigners. It's a test, Russ. It's all a test. They want to see what we do, what we choose. You understand?"

I didn't respond. After a long silence Garrett opened the door and stepped outside. He stretched a little, and Zachary ran over to show him the thing he'd found under the bush. Garrett put a hand on his head and said, "That's great, little man. You keep playing," then he opened the back door and reached into the extended cab and pulled out a camouflage rifle case, the one he

used for toting his 30-06 during the deer seasons. I sat with my cap in my hands, and I glanced at Sawnie, and wondered what she was thinking as she stood at the front of the truck. The sunlight came down perfectly on her face, and for one moment I could register a kind of sadness, or maybe acquiescence, in her blank expression. Then I heard the *shick-shack* of a cartridge loading into the rifle, and Zachary laughed at something in the woods, and I looked back at Garrett, and the rifle was pointing inside the truck, at my head.

Garrett said, "Russ, I am sorry about this." His voice was murky, as though under water. "I just don't know what I'm doing anymore."

"Come on," I said. "A gun?"

"I need you to be here for this."

"I am here. And you need to put that gun down."

"I can't do this by myself anymore."

"I'm here, Garrett."

The firing finger settled on the trigger. I could see the outline of his face behind the barrel, but he didn't look like himself.

"Whatever you need," I said, and stepped out of the truck.

*

He was gone most of the second day. He came back once, in the late afternoon, and took an hour-long rest in the tent. His snoring lured Zachary and Sawnie into their own nap, and for a good thirty minutes they slept without fidgeting. I didn't sleep at all. The flesh under the handcuffs blazed, and my arms felt like they were in the process of falling off.

When Garrett stepped out he still looked exhausted, and I saw that his clothes had been torn in several places from his walk-abouts. Zachary woke and told Garrett he needed to pee. Garrett unfastened the S hooks and let Zachary stand a minute, then pee behind a small hackberry tree. Sawnie didn't budge while the binds were off. I was worried about her. She looked like a child who had come down with the flu, her face chalky and drained, and the leather strap had

scored a fierce line into her right arm. When Garrett walked over and asked if I wanted something, a SunnyD or MRE packet, I told him we needed to take the kids home and clean them up, and Sawnie could probably use a trip to the hospital.

"The kids are fine," Garrett said. "I've decided I'm going to turn you loose."

"No," I said promptly. "I think I should stay."

"You don't have to be here anymore. You didn't want to be here in the first place."

"I did. You asked me and I came. Let me stay with them. It's okay if I stay."

Garrett looked off into the woods. "I need to apologize to them, for all this mess. I have really fucked this up into a mess. I have really fucked this up."

My heart pounded. "Pauline fucked this up. She's the one in jail. I don't want to leave them alone out here."

But shortly before six, Garrett uncuffed me from the roll bar and told me I was free to go. My muscles were in agony, so he helped me down from the truck and handed back my cell phone and shop keys. He asked me to start walking. I refused, so Garrett raised the rifle to my chest.

"Move," he said.

"I'm not gonna go."

"Russ, I don't need you here. I need to be alone with my kids."

"I'm sorry things happened," I said, "but don't make me leave."

He raised the Remington to my head. Then he started counting down from twenty.

I waited till he got to nine, then something turned me around and I started walking. Garrett kept counting, spurring me to pick up my pace. I walked faster, my breath a dead weight in my chest. As I moved, I looked back several times, to make sure the kids were still there, still O.K. I suddenly couldn't see Garrett anywhere, but I knew he was there, watching me through his scope. It was the first time I felt real terror of him. He was not my cousin anymore. He was the invisible man in the woods. Belaya Smert. The White Death.

I walked and walked. The kids' faces kept flashing in front of me: Sawnie's grownup indignation, Zachary's jaw-busting grin beneath the kitchen table. I wanted to be holding them, to be running away with them. A bottomless shame burrowed into me for abandoning them. *You can never be a father now*, something reproached, and I knew it was true.

After I reached the Bottom access road, I checked my phone for a signal and put a call in to the Claiborne Parish Sheriff's Office. Then I sat on the side of the path and waited. I couldn't think. Couldn't make a single goddamn thought work straight. The kids' faces haunted me. I told myself, I'll see them in a few minutes. Nothing will have changed. Everything will be the same.

Twenty minutes later two deputies in green uniforms met me on the road and told me to tell them everything I could. I explained Garrett's problems in detail. They asked me to sit in the car, so I waited in the back seat, the door open to catch the light watery breeze. One of the deputies radioed the State Police headquarters in Bossier Parish. He repeated several words I had used in my description, including *sniper*. Another half hour passed, and then the muddy roads around North Camp Access were surrounded by deputies and Troop G State Police sharpshooters. A young newspaper reporter in a black skirt showed up with a photographer, an older man with a fishing hat on. They found me sitting on the side of the road. The reporter asked my name, and whether I'd been held for ransom. I told her no, not at all, and she scribbled something, disappointed. The photographer kept telling me to stop looking up, I didn't need to look at the camera, stop looking at the camera, fella. The photo he ended up taking was not the one that made the front page. The photo that took that honor was a picture of a big state trooper shambling out of the woods around 7 P.M., two terrified children scooped in each arm and clinging frantically to his neck.

Moments before the finale, a single shot rang out like a cannon in the forest. Unlike the sporadic discharges of the walk-abouts, this shot sounded nearby, as though it had come from Garrett's camp, and when I heard it my throat strangled on something large and I put my face in my hands and I lay back in the wet ditch, trying to process. I heard movement through the woods,

the distant echo of a loon on the lake water, the click of the old photographer's camera. Someone shouted *There! Go get them! Go get them!* then a frantic sloshing of boots in the heavy mud. Below it all, I could hear Garrett's voice—*It's a test, Russ, it's all a test*—and I could see Zachary's face as I sang "Give Me Oil in My Lamp, Keep Me Burning." I can still see that face—both of their faces, as they emerge from Garrett's woods—when I close my eyes and try to sleep.

They are the faces that stay with you in the dark, on the nights you pray for them to disappear.

BRUISERS

"It's a long time from seed to grain."

—Bob Childers

The Asshole's fields are burning.

I can see him now, the old man, loping out across the farm, five-gallon buckets of water in each hand jostling and spilling all over the charring wheat. Thinks he can stop a brush fire that's already burned three thousand acres of Oklahoma with a couple of buckets. Old fool. Wouldn't realize if his own legs were on fire.

I have a lot to say about that old man, The Asshole. Before I start, though, I want you to get a good last look at him. I know you can't make out his face from here, but you can see his long, arched back pushed forward by momentum, the lean and hefty figure of him, the shadow he casts on the smoking black farmland. See how he stumbles, how he dips left on each step and scoops right to recover, like a man digging and straightening then digging some more.

That's ligament damage, back of the kneecap, 2002. I gave it to him when I was seventeen, a month away from graduation. The Asshole deserved it, everything he got. But that's for later, when I tell you about Leo Jalbert and how we got into trouble over in Colorado and Kansas. For now, I just want you to watch the old man and observe how he moves, how he covers ground. A man's walk—even more, the way he runs when danger's approaching—and which direction he'll take when it's upon him—can tell you a lot about his heart and soul.

Part One: Leo

Cimarron — An awned, white-glumed semidwarf Hard Red Winter Wheat. Shorter than Chisholm and heads about one day later. Cimarron has good resistance to leaf rust, powdery mildew and Hessian fly. It is susceptible to greenbugs and soil-borne mosaic virus. High yielding. Good baking qualities. Early maturity.

The first time I called my old man The Asshole, I got a busted lip that wouldn't heal for a month. I was ten years old, and my mother was a year and a half in her grave in Ponca City. That was the age I started to realize that a son in his right mind would never willingly wish to be like his father.

This was 1995, and no one in my life at that point shared my way of thinking. "Dad" was another word for "God" for my friends at Goshen Middle School, and farming was the Throne of Grace on which He sat. Every boy I knew wanted to be a farmer, just like his stoic, sunburned dad who battled the earth and conquered the wind. In 4H my friends would talk about their fathers and farms like both were topics for state senators or the president, and at summer camps while our dads were back home harvesting the wheat, alfalfa and soybean fields, my friends would brag about the work like they, themselves, were there in body to lend blood and sweat to the process.

I never took part in those discussions, those toy-farm fantasies, though I did my share of work and offered my share of blood. Truth was, talking about my father was impossible because I couldn't find the proper descriptions, the right language, to make the lies sound sensible and not too self-aware. Whenever my friends asked how the farm was going I'd use the same excuse my mother used when some church or bingo acquaintance started asking farm-related questions she didn't want to answer: "I think it's bad luck to talk about family business, don't you?" Sometimes

the excuse worked; sometimes it didn't.

Everyone in Payne County calls my father Big Darrell. You can think of him that way if you want. He took the name from my granddad, Big Darrell Senior, a tall, stooped Abraham Lincoln of a man who chewed tobacco and smelled like wintergreen and bragged about knowing Richard Halliburton. When Granddad died in 1990, The Asshole inherited 1,530 acres of fields scattered across the western part of the county. That year the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station released a hard red winter variety called Cimarron Wheat, so The Asshole planted two hundred acres of the Cimarron on the north side of the farm. Three years later he added Oklon Rye on the south side, hearing tales of its extraordinary winter forage production. By 1997 he was adding the 2174 mix and a few other varieties, all with strange Native American titles or numbers I couldn't pronounce or remember, much less understand their differences.

As the years went by, The Asshole made more and more work for himself—more than he could handle with his full-time trio of Puerto Rican plowboys. So every late spring, usually around the first of June, he gets a fellow named Tommy to bring out a small, young crew to help prep and scour the fields for the summer harvest. Tommy is chairman of the distribution affiliate of the Ag-college at OK University and hires students at the end of the spring term to rogue the wheat and vacuum the combines. They help harvest twenty-something fields across the state and distribute the wheat in August and September, in those giant polyethylene grain bags that hold eight thousand bushels. It's a long, hot operation, especially for kids who don't see that kind of work coming. These are the kids who tramp across Oklahoma hotland fifteen hours a day getting ant-bit and sun-scorched, while their boss spends the majority of the mornings and afternoons indoors with the lazy, has-been farmers sipping ice tea and eating farm-wife breakfast. I feel bad for the young crews, but at the same time I don't. They've got the college to fall back on, the option to walk away from the field if something better swings along.

The day I met Leo Jalbert, The Asshole had me working on our busted Massey-Ferguson tractor, trying to unstick a throttle while he tinkered with the hydraulics on our '96

Mack, one of the two diesel trucks we use to haul the wheat loads. I was revving the engine, toying around with the sticks, when a heat shimmer rolled up the dirt road to the farm. I didn't know it was Tommy's crew until I stopped the tractor and squinted into the dust. Even at my age my eyes play tricks sometimes. The crimped heat above the soil makes everything—dogs, men, tractors, diesels—become just another part of the flickering landscape, and I find myself extra careful on the days my eyes do that. My fear is I'll run somebody over with a piece of equipment, not knowing they're right dead in front of me. The Asshole's got this saying: God won't let a farmer go blind or deaf, 'cause the Good Lord won't rob a hard-working man of his tools. But The Asshole doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. God may not strike a farmer deaf or blind, but eighteen-hour days in Oklahoma summers have a way of doing what the Good Lord may not want to.

I sat on the tractor, rubbing grit out of my eyes, as the truck-shape spat gravel and dust down our private road. When the shape materialized as Tommy's F-350 and passed the silos, I hopped off the tractor to greet them at the shop. Usually there's at least one cute freshman among the crew and one time, when I was sixteen, one of the helpers, a blond named Lisa Macklin, gave me a blowjob behind the chicken coops on the other side of the house. Every year after, I hoped for a Lisa Macklin revisitation or at least a comparable situation of a hot country girl with a taste for a sweaty farm boy, but I never got it.

The truck rolled to the shop grinding and spitting like something was wrong with the turbo. Tommy killed the engine and I tossed a wave at them. The truck was chock-full of college students—two in the front with Tommy and four in the backseat. One of the guys in the back looked older than the rest, in his late twenties or early thirties, and wore a green John Deere cap that pushed curly brown wings of hair out the sides and around his ears. He stared out the window at nothing, and that was the first time Leo's glassy, spooky eyes haunted my attention. One of those eyes—the left one—looked as though a boxer had gone to round three on it. I didn't feel much sympathy, then. My first shiner was a month after the busted lip and I didn't know why I

was getting into trouble.

Tommy stalked around the pickup and said, “Say, Jeremy, how’s it going,” as I held out my hand for a shake. “What’s Big Darrell up to these days?”

“Big crew this year,” I said, ignoring the question, and found myself looking at the fellow with the shiner again. “That guy looks a little older than a freshman, don’t he?”

“A drop-out,” Tommy said. “He’s a walk-on, picked him up at the 7-11 yesterday morning asking for a job. Worked for the city until a couple of weeks ago, he said. Had him in parks and recreation cleaning up playgrounds and picking up trash at the softball complex. They let him go at the end of May, he said, so he needed some work. Hope Big Darrell don’t mind.”

Tommy looked back at the truck and the fellow’s eyes darted off. I think he knew we were talking about him. I swiveled a bit, moved my own eyes out to the fields, but Tommy kept looking.

“Best we better get started,” he said. “Lots of acre to cover today.”

He motioned at the truck for the kids to get out. The troop spilled into the morning heat and formed a loose circle around us, straining immediately for the shade of the shop—four tanned, muscled guys in OKU hats and shirts, a cute, round-faced tomboy with blue overalls and a brown Stetson cap, and the lonely 7-11 walk-on gazing out across the fields.

Tommy introduced them starting with the tomboy, whose name was Cindy. I sized her up as a potential Lisa Macklin, but she didn’t once look at me, seemed to be interested in one of the muscled guys. After calling out the others, Tommy said Leo Jalbert’s name and Cindy shuffled a boot in the dirt and the four boys exchanged a face.

“This here is Jeremy, Big Darrell’s son. He’ll be your boss for the day,” Tommy said, though I’d made no plans to do such a thing. “I expect you to do what he says.” He finished by explaining he had to get back to Goshen to pick up a combine belt at the P&K and wouldn’t be gone any later than ten. Then he had them unload the back of the pickup—a case of bottled Dr. Peppers, a five-gallon water cooler, and a box of powdered lemonade—then left them standing in

the shop to take my orders while The Asshole ignored us. Leo was the only one who didn't look at me. His eyes had gone out to the fields, taking in the wheat and the treelines off in the distance. One of the boys—Michael, I think, they all looked alike except for Leo—spat a loogie in the dirt near Leo's foot. I couldn't tell if it was hateful or just bad aim.

"All right, listen up," I said, raising my voice like The Asshole, "we got lots of ground to cover and the heat's rising quick," and I handed out the roguing bags—burlap potato sacks split open at one end, with a rope zigzagged into the mouth so you could sling it over your neck and across your waist. Tommy hadn't shown the crew what to do, so I took them to the edge of the first field—the sixty-acre Guymon field—and explained how to rogue: walk the wheat thirty feet apart and pull the tall stalks and off-types, anything that doesn't match up to the Guymon. Leo stared at the wheat, not taking his eyes off it, trying maybe to puzzle out what I meant by off types and tall stalks.

I let Cindy, who said she had rogued for Tommy the summer before, demonstrate the process on a couple of rows as the guys watched. As their eyes tracked her, I studied Leo, not able to stop staring at his purple left eye. I felt nervous about him. I began to think, watching him gaze at the field, that I knew a world about him just by his face and clothes. Tommy had been wrong: the guy hadn't been to college, had not stepped foot on a campus. Not that he looked dumb, but a fellow has an aspect when he's educated, like he knows how to use his eyeballs. Take me off the farm, away from my small engines, and I'd look the same, lost as a plucked goose, because I'm educated to the dirt and sweat. Leo didn't have the aspect of a student, the appearance of the well-informed or well-adjusted, or about to be. He looked like a guy who can't catch what you're about to toss—even though he was tall and somewhat thick and had a decent reach on him. Oh, and the clothes. Another reason for the uneducated look, maybe, because in his clothes he looked like the most depressing SOB to walk God's earth. A blue, body-hugging polo shirt, boot-cut, high-water blue jeans that looked fifteen years old, the John Deere cap with all those brown wings beneath, and a red bandanna covering his neck so he wouldn't catch a burn.

The outfit, in other words, of an outsider, no matter where he was from.

The lessons over, I sent Tommy's crew out to start—the morning was getting on and the heat would be at full mast in another two hours. Plus I still had that throttle to unstick on the Massey and I wanted to finish before The Asshole called me out on it. My hunch was, because Leo Jalbert seemed so far off the grid, he would be a nice surprise and out-rogue the others five sacks to one, barring Cindy maybe. But that wasn't the case. Around nine, she came walking back to the shop, an empty sack tossed over her shoulder, and started tattletaling. "That guy Leo's just been walking around. It's getting all of us pretty mad. We've already emptied three sacks."

I stopped tinkering on the tractor and looked out the shop door. Four shapes moved slowly around a wedge of terrain, going in circles like vultures. I walked to the door, edged my hat down, and squinted. A fifth shape stood in the middle. I looked at Cindy. "What the hell are they doing out there, fighting?"

The girl shrugged. "Not when I was out there they wasn't."

I quietly cussed Tommy, looked around for The Asshole, and made my way out into the field. Cindy followed close behind, her short legs having a hard time in the tall sticky wheat. When I got to the boys, the four of them had Leo Jalbert on his knees, and one of the guys—the one who spat a loogie at Leo's foot—was nursing a small cut on his top lip. It wasn't all that bad, but the guy's expression made him look like he was enduring the fires of hell. The wheat where they'd been squabbling had been trampled all the way down, many of the stalks snapped in two and touching the ground. I took my hat off.

"Somebody gonna tell me why my wheat is stomped?" I said. "We're three weeks out to harvest and this patch is ruined. So somebody start talking or all of you are gonna pay for it."

"This guy took a swing at me for no reason," said the kid with the cut lip. He was the shortest one of the bunch, I realized, and looked like your average blond party boy. My buddies in high school would have called him an Abercrombie Zombie. "Just whacked me right in the mouth for no reason."

I wanted to say “Nobody takes a swing for nothing,” but I knew it would come out a bald-faced lie, so I looked at Leo Jalbert. On his knees, head lowered to the ground, he looked like he was praying. But I could tell he was livid and didn’t want to be seen pouting. Also, he’d lost his cap in the scuffle and his hair was a tangle of greasy curls, as though he hadn’t put a comb through it in weeks. He didn’t like us seeing him this way, that much was obvious by the way he was trying to shrink into the shadows we were casting. That was when I decided: I would never like Leo Jalbert.

“Dude, get up,” I said, and Leo looked up at me, his bruised eye swollen worse than before. Michael, whatever the Abercrombie Zombie’s name was, had popped him there again, from the look. “You’re going back to the shop with me, to wait for Tommy or my dad. The rest of you keep roguing; you’ve still got a lot of acres to cover.”

I picked up the John Deere cap and handed it back to Leo. He slammed it onto his head and brushed dirt off his ass and knees. The rest of the crew watched, their roguing bags hanging off their sides like saddle pouches. I yelled and they went back to work. As we walked, Leo made sure to stay behind me. I looked back once, however, and saw he was having trouble, like Cindy, getting through the dry clingy wheat, though he shouldn’t have with his tall, lanky legs.

“Pick up your feet,” I said, “and try to keep inside a row.” Back at the shop, I told him to keep to himself while I worked on the Massey. Tommy would be back by ten and would want to handle the situation himself, I told him.

“And Lord knows you don’t want my dad to get involved.”

He was so quiet I’d forgotten he was in the shop. Until a short while later, I heard a shuffle toward the tractor and a tinking sound of metal. Under the hood, fidgeting with a loose cable, I watched him circle with a monkey wrench.

“Need some help?”

The wobble in his voice didn’t match the baritone I’d heard in my head. Some folks see a black eye and think deep voice, must be a fighter, hard and threatening, a man’s man. Leo Jalbert

had a light, bashful voice, like honey that won't quite drip out of the jar.

"This is more a one-person job," I said.

Moving in closer, he said, "What sort of tractor is this?"

"Massey-Ferguson. Older than God."

"What's the problem with it?"

"Throttle freezing up."

"Oh. Okay."

He tapped the wrench against a piece of metal.

"Sorry about the wheat," he said. "You want me to pay for it, I guess I can."

"No need. That little bit won't hurt."

"I'm gonna get canned," Leo said. He didn't miss a beat between the first subject and the next. Probably because this was what he'd wanted to say from the beginning. "I really can't afford that. I've got places to go."

"You shouldn't have got into a fight then."

The wrench tinked on a back tire plate. "I know." Another pause and he moved in closer, right beside me at the hood. I smelled cheap cologne masking B.O. "So if I get canned, could I come out and work on your farm, for your dad?"

I straightened and wiped my hands on a shop rag. His head darted left. Trying, I reckon, to keep the black eye out of view. He was constantly shifting, Leo Jalbert, his nerves in a continual state of duck and dodge. "Probably not," I said. "The Asshole's got a couple of workers already."

"The Asshole?"

"Never mind."

He circled the tractor again. "I could still help," he said after a moment.

"By getting into fist fights?"

"I didn't start that."

I tossed the rag onto the tractor seat. “He said you whacked him for no reason. You don’t just hit a guy for no reason. He’s already gotta be an asshole.”

“I could do a lot. I just need a job. Something steady. At least for a while.”

“Three guys come in for planting and harvest,” I said. “And Dad has me take care of everything in the middle.”

“All I’m asking is that you think about it.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

Sometime after eleven Tommy’s F350 crunched back up the gravel and moseyed past the silos. I had made Leo leave the shop, after he asked me three or four more times if he could come out and work, and I couldn’t take the damn persistence. I sent him out to clean an auger The Asshole never used. When I gave him the air hose, he looked at the thing like he’d never seen one in his life.

Tommy walked up holding a Route 44 Sonic cup. He asked about Leo right away. I explained what happened.

“I find *that* hard to believe,” Tommy said.

“That’s what I was told. And he’s scared you’re gonna fire him.”

“Well, yeah. I suppose so.”

Leo spent the rest of the afternoon at the shop. He took lunch alone, sitting under the shade of an oak with a bottled water in one hand and a tiny can of smoked Vienna sausage in the other. Shortly after three, once the crew had finished roguing, they packed up and Leo helped out only when the other guys were distracted. The Asshole never stopped working on the Mack, never once made contact with them or Tommy. Later he marked them in the logbook to come back in a few days to rogue the ninety acres of Custer, and I didn’t expect to see Leo Jalbert when they did. And I was right: he didn’t come back with them. But I did see Leo again, a week later, with a suitcase in his hand.

*

He walked up to the farm on Tuesday, June 9, a week before The Asshole was scheduled to start the harvest on the Jagger. That same day, an article in the *Telegraph* had blamed the late harvest dates on a fall drought and a late April freeze and The Asshole had pitched a fit that the media was over-sensationalizing. June 9 was also the day The Asshole got a call from his sister, my aunt Martha, who lives in Keenseburg, Colorado. Her husband, my uncle Wilson, had just died of a massive heart attack and there was some news concerning his properties and assets: he'd left most of his farming equipment, the stuff he'd been using for twenty, thirty years on his sorghum fields a little west of Fort Morgan, to The Asshole.

"I don't know how you want to make arrangements to pick these things up," Aunt Martha told my father, "but everything's here, waiting for you to come get them, whenever you're ready."

She added that one of the largest things Uncle Wilson had left was a 1978 Allis-Chalmers Gleaner L2 combine worth about $10,500 in the after-market. We could use it as a trade-in for a new one if we wanted; the L2 belonged to us now and we could do with it whatever we liked. We could strip the old thing down and turn it into a Ferris wheel as far as she was concerned.

"No, I need another combine for the harvest," my father said. "That's fantastic, Martha, I'll make all the arrangements. May not be able to get there myself, but I'll make arrangements somehow."

That afternoon Leo Jalbert showed up at the front door holding a blue suitcase and a half-empty bottle of Diet Dr. Pepper. He looked like he'd been walking for thirty days. He was dressed in a pair of ripped khakis and a faded black Guns 'N Roses T-shirt, and just like the week before in the backseat of Tommy's F350, he had that spooky, confounded look about him. The shiner was mostly gone. A faint patch of red remained near the corner of his eye like a spot of woman's blush.

I met him at the door and Leo thrust out his hand. I shook it quickly. The shake was like touching a young girl's, no grip to speak of and soft flimsy skin that had never experienced a

burn, a hard tan, or a callous. Virgin fingers, farmers call those.

I asked what in hell the suitcase was for.

"I want to talk to Big Darrell about that job," he said. "The one we talked about that day in the shop."

"What job? Ain't no job."

"All the same, I'd like to ask," he said.

I wanted to warn him that The Asshole might not be in the best of moods, that a close relative had just kicked the bucket and we were neck-deep in farming equipment, but I figured if Leo Jalbert got the heavy end of Big Darrell he might decide to leave us be. So I let him in and called The Asshole. My father stepped out of the kitchen holding a stack of papers and gnawing on a stick of old Christmas peppermint. Leo introduced himself and shook The Asshole's hand. I could tell The Asshole was turned off by the guy's touch like I had been.

"I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to meet last week," Leo said, his eyes barely meeting my father's and the toe of one marked-up sneaker making small, unconscious furrows in the carpet. "But Tommy over at Ag Seed says you're a good man to work for."

The Asshole looked down at the suitcase, back up at Leo's eye. He rolled the peppermint stick from one side of his mouth to the other, like a poker player with a toothpick. "You get that shiner last week when you trampled my wheat?" he said.

Leo Jalbert turned deep-fried red. "No, no sir. This happened … earlier."

"I take it you didn't win the fight then."

"No, no sir." He tried to return a smile, and I could tell he was 100 percent mortified. Such was the very best of The Asshole's many talents.

"Now, about that job, sir—"

"Where you from, around here?"

Leo Jalbert glanced down, eyes darting, avoiding. "Cushing. Thereabouts. Around Cushing."

"What are you doing wanting a job in Goshen?"

"I can't find anything. I want to work out in the country. Away from everything."

"Well—"The peppermint swished again, east to west "—I can relate to that, I guess. You got any skills?"

"I can help in the harvesting, and I can run any small engine you put in my hands."

I knew the guy was lying—I remembered all those questions, the way he'd acted around the Massey-Ferguson in the shop—but I didn't say anything. He was obviously playing some kind of angle so I let him play.

"And, I may not look it but I can take the heat," Leo said.

The Asshole considered.

By the end of my father's impromptu interview, Leo Jalbert had weaseled his way into a full-time job on the farm, payment of ten dollars an hour under the table and the promise he could stay aboard when planting time came around in October. And when Leo threw in that he had no place to stay, The Asshole tossed in one of the spare bedrooms—one of three rented to the Puerto Ricans—on the condition Leo pay him a hundred bucks of room and board out of the first check. Leo said no problem, said he could pay three months up front if he needed, and The Asshole shook his flimsy hand again. And that was how Leo Jalbert came to work on the Cooke wheat farm.

*

As for the other matter, the issue of dead Uncle Wilson's 1978 Gleaner L2, The Asshole had pretty much ruled out going to Colorado himself. He would send me, he told me that following Wednesday, because he didn't have a lot for me to do until the harvesting of the Guymon and the Jagger. He and a couple of the summer helpers would start on the Cimarron while I was gone, and hopefully the other fields would be ready for Uncle Wilson's Gleaner when I got back.

"And you can take that Leo Jalbert with you," The Asshole said.

"No way. You can forget that," I said.

"I've been watching him pitter. He can't do a good eighth of the shit he says he can handle. I'd fire him but I need the other guys to help out with the Cimarron. And I can't be sending you all the way to Colorado by yourself. I'll fire him when y'all get back."

"Dammit, I'm twenty-four years old!"

The Asshole chuckled. "And act like twelve most of the time. You ain't going by yourself and that's that."

There was no use arguing. He was convinced I couldn't handle the drive, the loading, and the return trip all by myself—I needed a wing man and that was that. About the loading he was probably right—many times you do need a second pair of hands to help get the bigger stuff on the trailers—but the loading, the driving, all that was beside the point. He wanted somebody to keep an eye on me, make sure I was walking the straight and narrow, and getting his toys back in one, smooth-rolling piece.

The following Saturday, two days before Leo Jalbert and I were scheduled to roll out, The Asshole rounded the two of us up in the kitchen to sit us down and go over some "ground rules." He looked amused by the sight of us sitting on opposite sides of the table, as though he were staring at two dim-witted, red-handed crop thieves who can't find a good backup story. When he started his speech, he was smiling.

"You fellas oughta know—Jeremy, at least you oughta—what kind of situation our wheat harvesting has been seeing lately. Piss poor and looking worse," The Asshole said. "Damn late April freeze near about killed us this year. That's why it's real important we get as many combines working out there as possible. I can't have a three-week lag on one field and a four-week lag on another. It just don't work that way. So I'm counting on you two to get that Gleaner up here in one piece, so we can get that machine out in the fields and cutting that wheat. Is that clear?"

Leo said, "Absolutely. Perfectly clear."

And I said, “Yes. Are we almost done?”

We weren’t. The Asshole carried on—as though Leo Jalbert would understand, or care—about the state of central Oklahoma’s average wheat yields and what would happen to the farm if the yields suffered another 500 million drop. But while Leo pretended to be amazed by the information, I knew what The Asshole was trying to do: sound smart in front of the new guy. Most of the info he was spouting had come directly from the Oklahoma Farm Report. My father was known to take notes during the broadcast, and then paraphrase the bits when somebody pulled him into a conversation he couldn’t handle.

That evening, as I was tinkering on the Massey out in the shop, Leo tiptoed in and picked up a wrench out of the toolbox. I heard a *tink* on the back tire plate. I stopped what I was doing, tossed my shop rag into the seat.

“You want something, Leo?”

“Not really. I just want you to know …”

“What?”

“I just want you to know I’m looking forward to the trip.”

I looked at him for a second—to see if he was trying to kid, get a rise out of me—and the poor bastard looked completely sincere. I leaned back over the tractor. “I’m glad one of us is.”

Leo fiddled around the shop another fifteen or twenty minutes. Waited to see if I would stop and have an actual conversation. Walked away when he realized I would not.

Part Two: Road Trip

Guymon — A Hard White Winter wheat variety released by OK University in 2005. A small-seeded variety with exceptional test weight and milling quality. Straw strength is better than that of Intrada, which can translate to improved top-end yield potential in higher-yielding environments. Has a very good tolerance to soil borne mosaic and spindle streak mosaic viruses, good tolerance to leaf rust, and below-average tolerance to stripe rust.

We set out for Keenesburg, Colorado, the morning of Monday, June 15. The Asshole said he wanted us back in Goshen the next evening, as early as we could get back, so we could start prepping the Gleaner for the cutting. He'd ask Tommy to furnish a header from the college for now, until someone could make a second trip to Keenesburg to pick up the Gleaner's header and the John Deere 9420, another of Uncle Wilson's earthly parting gifts we wouldn't be able to get this round.

"Keep your cell phone on," The Asshole said, as I threw my overnight bag into the cab and Leo tossed in his blue suitcase. "I want a progress report every step of the way, understand?"

"I know," I said. "You already told me."

"I mean it, Jeremy. Every step."

"I *know*," I said. "Jesus *Christ*."

"Don't blaspheme. You got the permit, your CDL?"

I tapped my back pocket.

"All right, you fellas get on the road then. It's nine hours driving in a car. With a trailer you can add another hour, maybe two."

"I know," I said.

"Stick to the route. I don't need no $600 ticket 'cause you decided to hotdog."

I cranked the Peterbilt. As the diesel roared Leo Jalbert shifted in the passenger seat, as though he were trying to find a safe place in case the truck decided to explode. The Asshole shut the driver's-side door, rapped on the aluminum panel with his knuckles, and limped back a step to let the truck roll. Leo watched my hand as I took us into first gear. And then something happened. Through the dusty windshield The Asshole and I locked eyeballs for a moment—a simple accident. It was impossible to know what he was thinking—his face was a deadpan mask of bright red sunburn and two-day stubble—but I realized at that moment it was possible to hate someone so completely you could make one miscalculation and mistake it for something else. And then we were moving, a blood-red Peterbilt diesel and a thirty-five-foot trailer kicking up dust and obliterating gravel, and the white powder rose behind us like a cloud. "Take care of Big Red!" was the last thing I heard The Asshole yell before he disappeared in the dust. I gave a loud, long honk to let him know I was happy leaving.

The drive out of Goshen, up Highway 51, onto Interstate 35 and toward the Kansas state line was the longest, most excruciating drive I've ever been on, somehow worse than those terrible Grand Canyon silences that would pass between me and The Asshole whenever he'd take us around the county to inspect fields. It was worse, I think, because Leo wanted to break that silence, say something that could start us gabbing and turn us buddy-buddy, but he could tell, I also think, that I wanted nothing to do with that, nothing to do with *him*. So he sat and gawked out the window, and occasionally I'd see him glance down at my hand when I'd take Big Red into another gear. He wanted that power. Wanted to feel Big Red vibrate under his hand. He'd never owned that kind of power. And having that *over* Leo made the shudder of the Peterbilt all the better.

So we rolled on to Kansas, and Big Red hummed over the blacktop. We didn't talk, didn't turn on the radio, did nothing but sit and feel the humming, watch the yellow lines of the highway zip under us like lasers, watch other farmers' fields come and go, appear and disappear, significant slices of Midwestern America completely insignificant to our quest. An hour and a

half into the drive Leo asked if we could turn on some music. I flicked on the radio and one of The Asshole's CDs blurted on: a Red Dirt band called The Great Divide, out of Goshen. An album called *Afterglow: The Will Rogers Sessions*. Song named "Wild Horses." A pretty good piece of work, one I had listened to a million times.

Leo Jalbert looked at the radio and gave a distasteful frown.

"What are we listening to?" he said.

"Are you serious? You've never heard of The Great Divide?"

"I can't say I have, sorry."

"And you're from Cushing?"

Leo hesitated. "I just don't like country. I'm into rock 'n roll. I can't help it. I like what I like."

"Can't say you look the type for that."

"And what type do I look like?" he snapped.

"Forget it. Never mind." And I turned up the song, let the wild horses run. We were so opposite, so north and south in our ways of thinking, I considered a moment that The Asshole had known all along what he was doing and paired me off with this clown just to make me squirm. I wouldn't have put it past my father to pull Leo Jalbert aside and test his knowledge of Red Dirt with the hopes that Leo would thorn-in-the-side my ass all the way to Colorado and back. I could picture the interrogation:

Do you know who The Great Divide is?

No sir.

DJ Eric Wayne?

No sir.

Ever hear of pain so awful you gotta grab an acoustic guitar and sing about ragweed and cactus?

No, no sir.

You'll do fine, just fine.

In central Oklahoma a fellow worth any kind of salt must be able to do two things: know how to work a piece of land and know how to talk smart about Red Dirt music. Growing up I was king of the latter, mostly *because* of my father. My best memory of The Asshole is walking into the oil and gasoline darkness of his shop one evening and hearing Bob Childers piping a slow, meandering, acoustic tune called "Can't Help Wonderin'" on the overhead speakers. My father had rigged these giant speakers to hang from each cobwebbed corner of the shop so he could listen to Red Dirt while banging on his engines. I'm not sure if it's the dank fuel odor of the shop, or the sight of my dad in welding gear patching up busted tractor parts that my mind associates with Bob Childers first, but this is the memory I would always use in conversations with my friends. My father looking up from a cracked oil pump gear shaft, lifting up his gunmetal gray welder's mask, face underneath smeary with blue grime but somehow holding an ancient spark of tenderness when he sees me. Bob Childers going into the final verse: *Some things are all right and some things are all wrong … so it seems it's always been … I can safely say that a change will come … but I can't help wondering when*. My father hums along, waits for me to join in though I don't know the melody. The welding torch and its pygmy flame dance in the air like a director's wand. He thumps the bill of my cap with a knuckle, folds the gray mask back down, and bends back over the smoking steel. *Can't help wondering when*, my father sings, and I can barely hear the bass of his voice over the hiss-pop of the welding. The shop takes on the smell of acetylene, black licorice. And I kick around the farm happy as a June bug the rest of the day.

Sunday nights after supper, The Asshole and my mother—he called her Patsy, though her name was Patricia—they used to dance to Red Dirt music in the short hallway between the living room and the kitchen. Back when The Asshole could hold his temper and my mother could say and do the right things to make him happy. After she died, the music stopped. The house fell silent and the speakers in the shop collected gunk and rotted in the rafters where they hung. Our music became a TV muttering to itself in the master bedroom and The Asshole flipping through

Goshen *Telegraph* pages while listening to The Oklahoma Farm Report with Ron Hays on the Bose. The sound of the man's radio voice always made me sleepy though I'd just woken up. The Asshole saw me yawning one day as I sat at the kitchen table, spooned in Count Chocula cereal, and listened to Hays mutter about prices per bushel and lags in the wheat harvest in the Panhandle around Guymon.

"What's the matter, you bored?" The Asshole mumbled. When he spoke in the mornings, most of the time he wouldn't look up from his coffee or newspaper. This time he was looking dead at me, the top of the paper folded over to unveil a slightly amused, but still very mean, quarter-moon smile. His bottom lip was brown and slimy, like a fat earthworm, stained from the tobacco habit he'd pilfered from Big Darrell Senior. But my father smelled like dirt and sweat, not wintergreen.

"No sir," I said.

"I guess you ain't never gonna learn this stuff. But it wouldn't hurt to start paying attention to *some* things. Ain't nothing boring about the Oklahoma Farm Report. It's the most important thing a farmer can listen to, don't you understand?"

"Yes sir," I said.

Except I never learned the stuff he said he wanted me to learn. When planting time came, The Asshole told me to stay out of the fields and let the farmhands do the work and when harvest arrived, he'd tell me to stay clear of the combines and close to the shop, he didn't want me getting in the way and losing an arm. This went on till I was well into high school, when the rest of my friends had already conquered the little stuff, the seeding processes and the grain yields and the moisture testing and the mechanics of keeping the combines greased and rolling. And while my friends were finishing college and getting job offers, long official letters from large to giant corporations hunting young, capable Farmers of America to carry the sacred torch, I was stuck in The Asshole's graveyard-quiet shop, twiddling with John Deere parts while my father and two or three full-time workers from the OKU Ag program harvested the wheat and brought home the

bacon. I felt like my only skills, the only ones left for me to cultivate, were driving tractors, cleaning out grain bins, backing up gooseneck trailers, and fixing small engines. So, after high school, I took a job in Goshen at the Greenfield Auto & Truck shop replacing carburetors and overhauling shot brakes. The job paid nine dollars an hour. I couldn't afford my own place—not if I wanted to read my books by electric light and heat my food on a gas stove. So that's how The Asshole did it. That's how he kept me around under his calloused, oil-caked thumb.

*

Sometime later, at a Love's Travel Stop a few miles south of Wichita, Leo got the idea to buy a straw cowboy hat for six dollars off a souvenir rack. Said he wanted something for his head, something that would make more sense if we were going to listen to "that god-awful boogie-woogie stuff." I realized he was trying to be funny, melt the Goliath iceberg between us, but I was stubborn to the whole attempt. Told him he looked like a fucking retard and shouldn't have wasted his six bucks.

"Fuck you, I *like* my hat," Leo said. The F-bomb sounded awkward on him, as awkward as that straw hat stuffed on top of his brown curly hair, but it was obvious he enjoyed the way the word felt and tasted. It was also obvious Leo Jalbert had led a seriously sheltered life. He acted like he was on his first road trip, his first official grown-up adventure. You have to appreciate that kind of freedom; you can't, and shouldn't, take that away. Straw hat be damned, Leo Jalbert could cut loose any old way he wanted and I wouldn't interfere. I didn't have to like him, or like being stuck on a ten-hour road trip with him, but I did have to respect a fellow's need to call for the untamed, the uncultivated, the rugged and raw.

In spite of my best efforts, though, the iceberg began to thaw, and Leo and I began to open up. Not a lot, just a few mindless thoughts here and there, and a few choice words thrown at The Asshole for good measure. Leo said he couldn't figure out how I'd survived on the farm under Big Darrell's Gestapo rule for going on twenty-five years. What was my secret?

"I throw it right back in his face," I said. "He says what he wants, but I give him the shit

right back. And he *knows* not to mess with me physically anymore."

"Physically?" Leo rose in his seat.

"Yeah. Fucker used to hit me when I was a kid. Started after my mother died. He couldn't hack raising a kid and running a farm, so instead of teaching me how to help him, he kept me beat down."

Leo looked away, a little south of the window, contemplated the chalk-gray horizon. Then he looked back and said, "How did he hurt you? If you don't mind me asking."

"Nothing fancy, just his hands. Slap across the face, usually, and sometimes he'd clip me with a knuckle and bust a lip. One time he thought he broke my nose and went completely ape-shit, but I was only faking. Still hurt though."

"How did he get away with all that? Didn't your teachers see?"

I leveled a face at Leo that suggested he was more sheltered than even he could understand. "Dude, when you're a farmer's kid in Goshen, Oklahoma, don't no teachers ask you shit about scrapes and bruises. A kid's pretty much *expected* to fight. And hell, if a teacher found out The Asshole was beating on me, chances are they would've patted him on the back, called him an honest daddy, and gave him a trophy."

"Surely that ain't true," Leo said. "Surely somebody would've stopped it."

"Don't be naïve. Life's ugly then you die. That's the Goshen motto."

A couple hours past Wichita, we decided to hit another truck stop, me for a Coke and a Slim Jim, Leo for a bottled water and a can of Armour Viennas. I looked at a map while we stretched. We were just outside Salina and the exit onto I-70, the long snake of highway that would take us into Colorado. Once we were back in the truck and heading west again, the first signs for Hays and Colby emerged, along with signs that promised we would "See The Largest Prairie Dog In The World—10 Miles To Exit!" I got a call from The Asshole on my cell around 1:00 and hit the ignore button. We also started noticing signs on each side of the interstate, and one inside a Kansas cornfield, pleading with travelers to "Stop At The World's Largest XXX

Adult Shop!" These latter signs seemed to unsettle Leo. Every time we passed one he would fidget and cough a little and turn away from the window, do everything in his power to avoid making eye contact. I asked what was wrong, didn't he like porn? He said he didn't like the idea that messages like that were advertised so openly, for every Dick and Jane and their poor children to see.

"Dude, they don't have naked women on them," I said.

"My mother would *die* if she saw these."

"Well, thank God your mother ain't here."

"Yeah, thank God," Leo said.

"We should go. Find the World's Largest Triple X Adult Shop. Be interesting to see in Kansas, don't you think?"

"No," Leo said.

"Dude, what are you, gay?"

"No I'm not *gay*."

"A virgin then?"

"Fuck you, Jeremy."

I laughed. "Ease up, man, I'm only kidding. Why couldn't we just dip over, see what they got, buy a dirty magazine and hit the road?"

"Because I don't want to, that's why. And besides, Big Darrell said stick to the route, no hotdogging."

The first idea to strike me was that Leo was afraid of sex. But something a little deeper than sex was going on, I was just too dim to understand. After putting another mile under us, I said, "Listen, okay, here's what I want us to do, and hear me out. The next strip club we come to, we're gonna pull in and we're gonna see us some strippers. And then—"

"No, Jeremy."

"—*and then*, you're gonna hit all over the hottest stripper in the house, and we're gonna

get you laid. Or at least flirted on. I think it'd take that large chip right off your shoulder."

Leo took the straw hat off and put it on his lap. He didn't look at me.

"That sound all right to you?" I said.

"Fuck you, Jeremy."

I looked at him closely, studied his face. The way you might study a Rubik's Cube or watch the lips of a mumbling ventriloquist. I said: "What is your story, man?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what is your story? Why are you so wound up?"

"I don't have a story."

"Everybody's got a story. *I've* got a story."

Leo said nothing.

"How did you get that shiner? The one you were sporting that first day with Tommy's crew?"

Leo looked away sharply, the same way his face had darted off the first day I met him. His hands tightened around the brim of the hat. The straw creaked.

"That's none of your business," he said.

I let the moment sit, let the silence fizzle back in. Then I said, "You never worked for parks and recreation, I bet. Never even went to college. You were lying about that, I bet. I can smell a lie ten miles away."

The straw hat hit the floorboard. The look on Leo's face suggested he wanted to brawl right there in the truck. He would lose, of course, and he knew he would lose, but it didn't change the fact he wanted to.

"Drop it," he said. "I'm warning you."

And that was the end of our camaraderie until we hit Keenesburg a few hours later. The longest, most depressing drive of my life. My foot had grown heavy, and Big Red zoomed across the countryside much too fast for The Asshole's standards. At one point I hit a large pothole and

the trailer pitched sideways and thrust me off to the left, and I had to recover before Big Red hit the median. And once I thought a tailing state trooper was on the verge of pulling me over as I sped us through Colby, and visions of arguing with The Asshole on the cell phone tugged at my spirit. Instead, the smoky passed on the right and got some poor sucker in a black Jaguar. When the Colorado state line approached, I fought the urge to stop at the big Visitor's Center and take a leak and snatch a few handfuls of the free tourist stuff. I needed to get to Aunt Martha's and let myself off Leo Jalbert's hook. I felt restless, needful of some kind of monster emotional release. The air was heavy wherever Leo went. You needed oxygen to last him, to outlive the suffocating cloud that surrounded him.

The Asshole's Department of Public Safety permit made us turn off I-70 at Limon and head north to Brush, a farming and ranching town another couple hours east of Keenesburg. At Brush we took I-76 and saw more farms, more ranches, tiny houses that sat between enormous silos like shrubs among Sequoias. Leo continued to give me the cold shoulder, and by that time I didn't care and welcomed the peace and quiet. Aunt Martha would have a lot to tell me anyway, and would be excited to talk, probably over her famous cups of green tea. I was her favorite nephew, she always told me at reunions, funerals. She didn't see why Darrell had to be so *hard* on me, she always said. And when I sent The Asshole to the Goshen E.R. back in '02, she didn't blame me for the mutiny. Said her brother probably deserved what he got for being such a big damn bully. I liked Aunt Martha. A lot.

We pulled into Keenesburg shortly after eight. When I slid Big Red onto a shoulder to check my map, I checked my cell phone as well. Five missed calls from The Asshole. One voicemail that simply stated, "You answer this *phone*." I put the phone back in my pocket and searched for Aunt Martha's road on the map. Leo sat quietly, his right arm propped on the door against the window. Occasionally he'd glance over to see what I was up to, see what I was looking at on the map. I felt he kept wanting to ask questions, get back into a conversation, but stubbornness prevailed on both sides. I didn't look at him, didn't register the guy was breathing.

Uncle Wilson's farm sat on the fringe of a dirt road I didn't think Big Red would fit down. As much as I didn't want to, I had to break the silence and ask Leo if he'd hang his head out the window and make sure I was keeping the truck out of the ditch. Keenesburg had gotten a good rain a few days back, and getting a Peterbilt rig jammed in mud in the dark down a strange dirt road did not sound like my idea of a vacation.

We finally pulled into Aunt Martha's drive, a long, fat gravel turnaround designed for big trucks and lined with seasonal flowers and ill-fated crepe myrtles. A short fenceline of brown lombardy poplars separated the north side of the house from a large, run-down Jimmy Goad outbuilding. The house itself was smaller than I imagined from the stories and looked antique, two pairs of blue shutters barely hanging off two ancient storm windows. Tales had been told that Uncle Wilson had tried his hand at siding once, and had only gotten halfway around his house before calling the job quits. The stories were right. The house had a two-tone look from the yellow siding on the north side, red brick and lack of yellow siding on the south.

Big Red groaned and shuddered to a stop, and Aunt Martha stepped onto the front porch in a purple house robe. She waved. I said to Leo, "Don't be all weird in front of my aunt, okay? She just lost her husband and she don't need your crazy shit weirding the place out. All right?"

Leo shook his head—a gesture of disgust, it seemed to me. But he didn't break his silence.

She fed us peas and cornbread and talked to us about Uncle Wilson around the supper table. Leo was a good sport, easy and pleasant to talk to (he didn't, however, talk to *me*), and Aunt Martha seemed to enjoy Leo's company. She told us Uncle Wilson had been feeling run-down for weeks before the heart attack, had constantly been complaining about heart burn and chest pains after meals, and they both knew something bad was approaching, they just didn't know how to stop it. He'd already been to doctors, had already gone through stent surgeries a couple years back. What could they have done? She broke only once, and that was when she told us about the funeral, how the military came out and gave a 21-gun salute at the graveside service

in Roggen to honor Uncle Wilson's tour in the Korean War.

"Your mama had a nice funeral too," Aunt Martha said. "Everyone and their grandmamma came to that one. I'm not sure how much you remember."

"Not very much," I said, raking my fork through leftover peas. Leo's hands were folded over each other in front of his plate, which he had cleaned like a hungry dog. He was looking down at a speck on the flower tablecloth. Musing about his own mother, maybe.

"She was such a strong woman," Aunt Martha said. "Made your daddy very happy."

"I don't remember much," I said, but I could tell she was seeing straight through my lies.

"My, how Patricia *hated* your daddy's long hours. If he could've done anything else in the world, she would've had him doing it. But farming's in the blood, I'm afraid. It may be in your blood too, Jeremy, but your mama, she didn't want you anywhere near that life."

I continued to rake peas.

"She used to tell me how you liked to read. Do you still like books?"

"When I get the time," I said. "Not much time these days."

Leo was getting itchy, the way someone does when he knows he's fifth-wheeling. He scooted his chair back to take his plate to the sink but Aunt Martha stopped him with a friendly tap on the table. "Don't you dare," she said, and Leo eased back into position. "Sorry," he said.

"Well," she continued, "if you still like books, take what you want of Wilson's. He's got some Elmore Leonard in the living room, and I believe there's a few Clive Cusslers and John Grishams if you like those kind."

"Aunt Martha, I don't want to take Wilson's stuff. That's *your* stuff," I said.

"Your mama wanted you to read, I've got books I'll never get to. Take them all."

Then she told us we could take the Chevy S-10 pickup sitting outside into Denver if we wanted. "'Cause Lord knows I wouldn't want to be cooped up on a farm with some old granny lady," she joked.

I glanced at Leo. He looked confused on how to react. "We can't do that," I said, but I

couldn't hide my excitement. "We can't just take your truck."

"It's Wilson's truck. I haven't drove that truck in ten years and don't plan to. I hate that thing, I want to sell it for parts. Take it and have fun. It's not even 10:00." Then she added: "I won't tell Darrell if he calls again. I'll tell him you're in bed resting up for the drive home."

And then she excused herself, gave me and Leo a hug (Leo seemed to like the contact, squeezing extra hard when it was his turn), and disappeared down the long hall—a hall that reminded me so much of our own, the one my mother used to dance the two-step down.

She hadn't fully closed her bedroom door before I turned to Leo and half-whispered, "Look, man, I know we got different opinions on things, but Denver's not that far and we got a set of wheels if we want. I ain't never been to a city."

"What are you talking about," Leo said. "You've got OKC right next door."

"Never been. Compliments of The Asshole. Come on, man, it's Denver."

"That's not a good idea," Leo said. "Your old man would be pissed."

"Fuck the old man, that's a great idea. And we don't have to go to a tiddy bar. I'm sorry I pushed you about that, I really am. Just a couple of bars, a look at the Rockies, then we'll come straight back, I swear."

Leo looked down at his shoes. The one thing he did a lot without knowing.

Ten minutes later, after brief groomings at the bathroom mirror, we started out, careful not to let the screen door slam and wake Aunt Martha. The S-10 looked like a lump of shadow at the edge of the driveway. Waist-high crops of foxtail and Canadian thistle surrounded the truck, with a single footpath cut straight to the driver's door. Leo had to fight the weeds to get his side open. We stepped in, sat—and jumped right back out. The truck reeked of something rotten. I looked around the cab, nothing but trash on the seat, then glanced in the back, in the bed that Uncle Wilson had haphazardly lined with wooden planks. Sure enough, a pile of fish carcasses, a big steaming mass of rot covered in flies, lay up against the gate. Good old Uncle Wilson had gone fishing one day, put the catch in the back of the truck, and up and died before disposing of

the bodies. We crawled back in, holding our noses. Rolled the windows down to get some fresh air. Decided that was a terrible idea and rolled them back up.

"Maybe we should throw them out," Leo said, his nose pinched off.

"I'm not gonna touch those things. Will you?"

"Hell no."

"Let's just go then. The wind will blow the stink the other direction."

As I pulled us out of the weeds and back onto Aunt Martha's drive, the cell phone went off again in my pocket. I tugged it out and looked at the number. The Asshole, calling for the tenth time. I pushed ignore and threw the phone onto the seat.

"Maybe you should pick that up," Leo said.

"He's only gonna bitch. I'm sick to death of him not trusting me."

The drive back into Keenesburg, I tried to spot the Rockies to the west and couldn't distinguish the faint blur in the distance from the regular dark of the horizon. You could easily see the lights of Denver, glowing an eerie light topaz against the blur. Although it was already past nine on a Monday night, I felt an anticipation I'd never felt before, a sharp exhilaration that I was doing something new, even if that something meant nothing more than a Bud Light in a dive bar in the worst part of Denver. Something new.

Back on I-76, as the lights of the city loomed closer and closer, the silence in the cab started to tamper with my new excitement, and I felt my nerves setting on spikes like before. I didn't want to ruin the night by saying something wrong, but I considered one more attempt at some kind of conversation. I went over possible subjects, and decided to settle on one that sounded reasonable and safe.

"So Leo, back in Kansas," I said, "you mentioned something about your mom. What does she do? Where does she live?"

"A nursing home in Drumright," he said.

"Oh. I thought you said you're from Cushing."

"Yeah. And the nursing home's in Drumright."

" Sorry. I didn't know that was a touchy subject."

"It's not. She got too old to take care of herself. If she weren't in that home, I'd probably be in California by now."

"Trying to run away from something." Another stupid thing to say, another gamble, but I felt he would take the push this time without flying off.

"You could call it that."

"Aren't we all, though?" I said. "Trying to run away?"

"I suppose we are." He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "Some faster than others."

Soon after, the city opened up and my eyes fixed on downtown Denver and couldn't pull away. It was true what I had told Leo: I'd never been to a city. Back when I was five or six, I remember seeing a large green Tulsa sign as we headed down the Cimarron Turnpike to visit my mother's sister in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And I'm certain we drove through Tulsa. But I have no memory of the city itself, no memory of seeing a skyline, a sprawling network of concrete and glass, beyond the image of that sign we passed on the Cimarron. I suppose I had fallen asleep before I could see it.

Uncle Wilson had a Rand McNally Denver map shoved between the dash and the windshield. I asked Leo to open the map and read streets while I kept my eyes peeled for a bar we could call on. I longed for The Asshole's GPS, the one he kept in the Mack. "Tell me how to get downtown," I said. "I want to go down there."

Leo navigated us onto the I-70 exchange and we drove another fifteen minutes. I kept my eyes on the horizon, eager for a glimpse of the famous Rockies, but I still couldn't see the first mountain. The lights of the city were too intense and obscured everything around me. I grew antsy at the highway under us, at Uncle Wilson's stinking pickup, at listening to Leo's directions, and soon the prospect, the magnitude, of what I was doing struck home and I chickened out. Downtown Denver seemed much too large. I saw the lights of a dive up on the left, a multi-

colored neon sign that said Cloud 9, and I took the exit. Leo glanced up from the map. “What are we doing?”

“Impulse,” I said. “This place looks good as any.”

The sign gave away what kind of establishment Cloud 9 was. A puffy white neon cloud, the big number 9 outlined in purple … and the figure of a nude woman resting her breasts on a blue neon pole. Leo immediately began to squirm. “Jeremy, you promised!” he said.

I found us a parking spot near the front door—it wasn’t difficult with only five or six other vehicles plunked around the lot. “I’m sorry, it was a quick decision. I had no idea this was a strip club, I swear. I just saw a bar sign and went for it.”

I put the truck in park and killed the engine. Leo didn’t look angry as much as he did panicked. His face had gone fish-belly white and he seemed to be having trouble breathing. I waited a moment, watched him to make sure he wasn’t about to have his own heart attack, and then stepped out onto the gravel. I stood at the open door and looked in at him.

“Just get out of the truck, Leo. This is not what you’re making it out to be. We’re just gonna go in and have a couple beers. You don’t have to look at the women. I’ll tell ‘em you’re not feeling good, how’s that? They won’t come around if I tell ‘em you’re sick. Those women, they got radar for two things: guys with no cash and guys who are sick. I’ll tell ‘em you got the Swine Flu, how’s that?”

Truth is, I’ve only been to one strip club in my life, the one on Bower Road back in Goshen, and it’s so awful I don’t go very often. The “Hep B & C Club,” I like to call it. But I still know enough about the strippers, the way they sidle up to you and place one hand on the lower thigh and one on the back of your neck, try to make you feel like the only guy on the planet, cudgel and harass you with offers of the Best Lap Dance of the Universe, all for a measly twenty-dollar bill—I know enough about those women to form my opinion of the whole lot. You get what you pay for. You give twenty dollars, you get a twenty-dollar boner. I stick with the Lisa Macklins of the world, the girls who take care of that boner behind a chicken coop in the middle

of a hot summer day.

Leo came around, but it took five good minutes, and by the time he was stepping out and shaking off his mysterious fright, I'd almost changed my mind. "Seriously, man, you don't have to look at the women," I said. "You don't even have to talk to 'em."

"Let's just get it over with," Leo said.

Cloud 9 was about the size of a Motel 6 lobby, but the place boomed with a sound system louder than a Metallica stage. A middle-aged woman in a glittery, vacuum-tight blouse greeted us at a small window beyond the front door and checked our IDs. She smiled especially big at Leo, who acted like his feet had suddenly turned to roots. "He gonna be all right?" she asked as Leo crept into the main bar entrance. "He looks a little green around the gills."

"He's got the Swine Flu," I said, and the woman frowned.

We made our way across the bar, Leo searching for a place to sit that was farthest from the empty stage. A topless brunette approached us with a round plastic tray. Her boobs were small, and had a weird suntan ruddiness under the black lights, but I immediately got hard. "Hiya fellas, I'm Amy, how you guys doing tonight?" she said, and Leo stepped aside to let me do the talking. Dwight Yoakam was booming over the speakers. "Fast As You." Leo wouldn't be able to hear a word of what I was about to say.

"Great," I said, leaning into the waitress's ear. I got a whiff of cinnamon and my dick pulsated. "Well, sorta great, Amy. My friend's not doing very well. He just lost his Uncle Wilson to a heart attack. His favorite uncle, too. Took him fishing all the time. I was kinda hoping I could cheer him up, you know? Take his mind away from the pain?"

The waitress looked at Leo (who was investigating his shoes again, or trying to), and beamed. "I think I got just the girl for that. What's his name, sugar?"

"Leo," I said. "But I call him 'Jailbird.' He just got out of jail. Hasn't been with a woman in five years. And now this with his uncle. Really sad."

"No shit?" the brunette said.

"No shit, Amy," I said.

She turned to walk away and I touched her shoulder. "By the way, you think you can play some rock 'n roll? For Jailbird?"

"I'll tell the D.J.," Amy said.

We settled at a table a million miles away from Perv Row. A couple of guys in fratboy costumes sat nearby, soaking down bottles of Coors, and a tableful of middle-age, executive biker-wannabes sat in a circle next to the stage, pounding shots and shouting at each other like real goons. Other than that Cloud 9 was empty except for Amy and two or three other female staffers. I wondered if a stripper would even take the stage tonight. Maybe it was a Monday night thing.

We waited for someone to take our drink order. Leo looked like he was warming to the place, but the iceberg was still present and still a very long way from melted. "This ain't so bad," I said after a minute. "You sit here and look around and talk to the ladies if you want, ignore the ladies if you don't—that's all you gotta do. They can always tell what you want."

"If it were any busier, I wouldn't like it," Leo said.

As soon as he barked the words, out walked this piping hot redhead—maybe the hottest redhead I've ever seen, the *Hustler* kind of redhead. She targeted our table, came strolling over, and nestled herself without invitation between me and Leo. Her breasts were perfectly sized, and my erection grew exponentially. Leo flinched, more startled at her lack of invitation, I think, than the sight of her nakedness. But he still couldn't take his eyes off her. Something jarred loose, the dam gumming up his brain suddenly cracking.

"Hey, good-lookin'," the redhead said to Leo. She didn't glance at me, and I felt an instantaneous jab of jealousy and resentment. But I knew what this was for, knew this was Leo's moment, so I told myself to relax, let Leo have the fun, I could always hit on Amy.

"Hello," said Leo, so bashful it barely came through. The music was still set to country, Little Texas playing "God Bless Texas." Maybe Amy had forgotten my request.

"So it's been awhile, huh?" The redhead sidled in. "Been awhile since you seen a pair of these?" And she grabbed her boobs and bounced them up and down in her hands, left, right, left, right, and Leo didn't know what to do. But he couldn't tear his eyes away either. And neither could I for that matter.

"Name's Amanda. And you're Jailbird, right?"

"Jailbird?" said Leo.

Amanda's left hand vanished under the table, and Leo's eyes grew as large as manhole covers. I felt the jealousy again, forced it back down. Little Texas stopped playing, and AC/DC started up with "Shook Me All Night Long." I looked across the bar and shot Amy a thumbs-up. She returned the gesture and flicked me a small wink. Her breasts were looking sweeter and sweeter by the second.

"I think," said Amanda, "I know exactly what you need, Jailbird." And without another word she stood and grabbed Leo's hand and pulled him away from the table. He stumbled the first few steps and followed like a nervous gosling. She led him toward the private, curtained room on the other side of the stage. Before they disappeared Leo looked back at me, utterly clueless, a scared Boy Scout lost in the woods. I see that face over and over again when I think of Leo Jalbert. The face in the window of Tommy's truck, the face in the strip club, the face on the side of the road as he walks off to God knows where. I nodded my confidence to him. He nodded back slowly. Up. Down. A single uncertain motion.

My eyes fell back to the table—and I suddenly felt pathetic. I realized I hadn't ordered a beer, and the lack of a bottle in my hands made me feel all the lonelier. I walked over to the bar and asked Amy for a longneck Bud Light, extra neck. She didn't get the joke. A tall guy, one of the douchebag fratboys, stood beside me waiting for his own drink. I tried not to notice he was staring at me. "Yo, Farmer John. You make it out of the woods?" he said.

I slid over to the next stool. He stank like an athlete after a long game. "Dude, leave me alone," I said.

The fratboy turned around to face his friends, pointed at me with an oversized Neanderthal thumb. “Check out Farmer John,” he called, but when Amy handed over his drink he went back to his table and forgot about me and the whole ordeal. I tried talking to Amy awhile, but she wasn’t interested, had shut down the flirting and put on a bikini top to man the counter. I sank back over to the table and swallowed the beer, far too quickly to enjoy it.

A few minutes later the private room curtain shot open and Leo came stumbling out. Amanda the stripper nowhere behind him, and the lost Boy Scout face unchanged. He sat back down and glanced around, eyes skimming everything and nothing. He looked mortified.

“What happened?” I said. “She give you a lap dance?”

“I couldn’t …” Leo said.

“Couldn’t what?”

“Do anything,” Leo said.

I thought about poking fun, saying something smartass like “Dude if you couldn’t blow your load with Amanda you’re pretty much a lost cause,” but I figured it would only set us right back and we’d spend the rest of the drive home in that God-awful uncomfortable silence.

“Well, that happens,” I said.

Leo groped for my empty bottle, spent the next minute or two picking and tearing at the soggy label. I kept waiting for Amanda to peel back the curtain and come gliding out for a quick dance, but she never did and I started thinking she might be just as embarrassed as Leo.

And then the tall fratboy who had called me Farmer John walked over with his friend and the next thing I knew I was throwing punches and getting knuckles across my left ear and right cheek. The world started ringing and thundering and Leo jumped up and leapt into the fight. Have I mentioned before that Leo is kind of a big guy? At least six foot three and very little body fat. Long arms, muscled-looking legs. Towered over the fratboys, in fact, but the fratboys took no time to hand Leo’s ass to him. The guy just didn’t know how to fight, kept leaping into uppercuts and throwing punches so wild that he’d hit the wall behind him and bust a knuckle wide open.

Before we knew it a small army of bouncers—seemingly out of nowhere, I think it was the table of executive biker wannabes—was grabbing us by our shirts and tossing all four of us out into the parking lot. “Jesus Christ, a Monday night?” one of the bouncers yelled. Leo slid and fell onto the gravel, made a *hmmpph* sound when his own knee rammed into his midsection. One of the fratboys hit the side of his own truck, a mint black 2008 Dodge Ram Crew Cab 4X4. He put a small, crown-sized dent in the driver’s-side panel. On my knees, smearing blood off my lips, I laughed at him. From all appearances they were doing just as badly as we were, if not worse. A few of my blows had connected, but apparently those blows had caused more damage than I thought. One of the guys was feeling around his mouth, shrieking that he was missing a molar, oh no, oh Jesus, where the fuck was his *molar*? But they’d soon be on their feet wanting Round Two, most likely, and while I probably could have handled a few more punches, I didn’t think Leo had any more to take. I pulled him to his feet and we limped as quickly as we could back to the S-10. The fratboy who’d called me names saw our imminent escape and tried to recover. But the one who’d lost his molar was still in a panic, searching for the lost tooth. We threw ourselves into the Chevy and I peeled out in reverse, spitting pea gravel all over the opposite bank of grass.

“Motherfuckers,” the fratboy with all his teeth yelled. He picked up a handful of pea gravel and lobbed it at the pickup. They peppered the metal, tink-tink-tinks like the world’s smallest Gatling gun. I put the truck in gear—then stopped. Leo gave me a violent look of alarm. “What are you doing?” he shrieked. I slapped the Chevy back into neutral and stepped back outside. Walked over quickly and whacked the fratboy across the jaw. Splinters of pain flew up my right wrist and the fratboy went down, collapsed like a rucksack of potatoes. I laughed again. Turned back to the truck and grabbed a gooey handful of Uncle Wilson’s fish carcasses and galloped back over to the Crew Cab. The guy minus the molar lunged for my legs and missed. I opened a back door and tossed the rotten fish onto the backseat. Then I ran my slimy hand over the carpet of the driver’s seat to clean my fingers. The owner of the truck, still on the ground from the right cross I’d given him, realized what I was doing and screamed like a banshee. I sprinted

back to the S-10, hands slimy and reeking but I didn't give three shits. Leo started cackling. His face looked like one giant bruise and every last knuckle looked broken apart, but he started cackling. I looked at his face and started cackling too. As we sped out of Cloud 9's parking lot, dust and gravel shooting everywhere, we guffawed until our sides were splitting, until I could no longer keep the Chevy under control and had to pull over and finish cackling on the side of I-70.

When we managed to calm ourselves, we sat for a moment in a silence no longer uncomfortable, and I turned with my bleeding face to Leo and said, "Well, you know, I think I've seen all of Denver I want for one evening," and the cackling started right back up. It didn't stop all the way back to Aunt Martha's, and if I had only looked over my shoulder, just one quick glimpse at the western horizon, I probably would have seen the Rockies outlined in the distance, if only for a brief moment through a small crack in the clouds and the lights of the city. But by then I no longer really needed to see them.

*

We slept in Aunt Martha's living room, me on the loveseat, feet hanging over the arm, and Leo on the couch. The house was cool and still and subtle with the smell of Aunt Martha's green tea. We had patched our war wounds in the bathroom, trying not to groan too loudly when we cleaned our busted skin with cotton balls dipped in rubbing alcohol. And now, lying in the quiet of Aunt Martha's house, we were so exhausted we couldn't move. My ears were still ringing from the clock to the side of my head, and my right hand stung from that last good hook, and Leo said his balls were still hurting from the unfinished punishment Amanda the redhead had given him in the lap dance room. I was astounded, but pleased, that he was now comfortable enough to say that much.

Sometime in the night, just before I passed out, Leo sat up and said, "You asleep yet, Jeremy?"

"Thereabouts," I said.

"I want to ask you something."

"No, I will not give you a happy ending," I said.

He didn't laugh.

"On the road you told me your dad knows not to mess with you anymore. Physically."

"And?"

"So how did you do it? How did you stop it?"

I pictured the moment in my head, play by play. I can't say it's my golden memory, but I can't do anything to make it go away, as hard as I try sometimes. But there are times, too, that I don't *want* the memory to go away, that I'd rather focus on that moment than anything else. Because it seems to make me stronger. Or weaker. I can't figure out which of the two I want to feel the most.

"I took a shovel to The Asshole's leg," I said. "Sliced the ligament right behind the kneecap. Put him in the hospital for three weeks."

Leo straightened. Fell silent. Then he lay back down, threw the blanket back over his legs, and said "Jesus" under his breath. Then we went to sleep.

*

Late April, 2002. I'm seventeen and graduation is on the horizon. The Asshole's been complaining we need to build a new fence around the ninety-acre Jagger. The old barb and t-post fence is fine—no one ever walks onto the fields, and no animal has ever harmed a crop. But The Asshole wants a new fence. He goes to the ledger, looks at the budget, determines we have the money for the new material. No t-posts this time; The Asshole wants cedar. Sturdier that way. Like a man's fence ought to be.

You'll be digging the holes for the posts, he informs me. One every six feet down, no less than two, three feet deep. Gonna be a lengthy operation, so get ready for long evenings after school. And he goes into town to buy the material. Brings back a new pair of posthole diggers, five bundles of galvanized razor coil, and a mountain of cedar. Informs me the work will begin immediately, so get your ass out here, Jeremy, you want to be a farmer, now's your chance to

work like one.

First day he watches every move, instructs me on the ways of digging post holes. He takes the diggers, demonstrates what to do. Like this, he says. Shove down hard. Can't be a pussy on the diggers. Hard, Jeremy. *Harder*.

Second day, The Asshole lets me work and tends to another field. I get the idea—a brilliant idea—to work a little off the grid, take each hole a micro-section off the line. He comes to inspect and doesn't notice a thing. Third day I dig like a maniac: an inch to the left, three inches to the right, another four inches back to the left. The Asshole will bitch all the way to Sunday, but the look on his face when he drives the posts and sees my Chinese checkerboard will be well worth the price. Anything to get a rise from The Asshole.

Fourth day, a surprise inspection. Digging my zigzag holes in the earth. I hear The Asshole shriek. He stumbles over, breathless. You fucked this up on purpose! You did this on purpose! He raises one hand, like a judge about to swear in a witness. I cringe. You always have to make things hard. I steel myself for the blow, but the backhand lingers. Wish your mama was around to see you. Perfect little angel! The backhand shrinks into a fist.

But the fist doesn't fly. The Asshole decides to shove me down instead. I land on my ass by the shovel, almost *on* the shovel. He points at the posthole diggers. Gonna show you how to use them *proper*, he says, and I get the sudden animal notion, some kind of biting animal instinct, that The Asshole's going to pick them up and kill me with them. This is the day, right now—a goddamn posthole digger right through the stomach. So I grab the shovel and close my eyes. I swing once. Expect to hear the bang of the shovel's flat surface smack against The Asshole's knee. Maybe if I drop him once—a really good drop out in his own field, his own turf …. And when I open my eyes and see The Asshole's down, holding the back of his leg, I feel the rise of the animal, a claw across the open soul, and I shout, scream, and spit at the Oklahoma sky. Then I see the blood on the ground, the blood in the black turned-over dirt, the blood all over his hands. The Asshole buckles. Crumples to the ground like a shotgunned moose.

Why in Christ— he says. Why in Christ's name would you do that? I was only gonna …

I stumble back, stare at the small mouth I've made in The Asshole's leg. The animal's heaving. I've done something I can't take back. I know this and the animal's gasping, wheezing, breathing new life.

Jeremy, I think you hurt me.

But I can only stand and gawk at the blood, the red oil, leaking out of his leg.

Call an ambulance!

I push on one foot to start walking. My legs refuse to work.

Christ, Jeremy, before I bleed to death!

But I have no strength to hurry.

*

The next morning Aunt Martha cooked us heaping platefuls of eggs and ham, and we shoved the food down like death-row inmates. Because we couldn't figure out a feasible excuse to account for the gashes and bruises, I decided to fess up to Aunt Martha that we'd gotten into a bar fight. I left out that the bar was a strip club.

"Reminds me so much of Darrell when he was your age," Aunt Martha said. "He couldn't go anywhere without somebody wanting to shove him around. That man just drew the bullies."

After breakfast I took a long hot shower to prime for the drive back to Goshen. When I stepped out to dry I heard a loud bee-buzzing outside the bathroom window, pulled back the dusty curtain, and saw Leo hunkered over one of Uncle Wilson's Toro weed-eaters and going to town on the scraps and patches of silver burr and Canadian thistle around the house. He spotted my face in the window and gave me a hearty wave, almost weed-whacking his bared ankle in the process. I drew the curtain and felt guilty for not thinking of doing that myself. I got dressed and found Aunt Martha sitting outside on the front porch, fanning the side of her neck with the torn cover of a Keenesburg telephone book. She was wearing the same purple house robe she'd been

wearing the day before, and probably the day before that. I sat down beside her and we watched Leo weed-eat the front yard and the turnaround drive, thwacked grass blades and weed juice pasted like alien hair all over the legs of his blue jeans. He glanced up once and saw he had an audience and tried to straighten, took out half a crepe myrtle and one of Aunt Martha's flowers when he did. Aunt Martha sniggered quietly.

"He sure is a peculiar young man," she said.

"That he is," I said.

"How long have you known him?"

"A few weeks. Not long."

"Well, don't go getting him into trouble. He don't have the strength you and your daddy got. I'm not sure how many bruises he can handle."

"I won't get him into trouble," I said.

Aunt Martha resumed her fanning. Sweat had beaded along the creases of her neck. "Good to hear," she said, and patted me on the leg. "You're a good boy, Jeremy. Aren't you?"

"Yes, Aunt Martha. I'm a good boy."

As the hour neared to gather up our things, Leo suggested I put a call in to The Asshole. He called him that—The Asshole—and my feelings for Leo Jalbert warmed a little more. I argued with him it wasn't necessary, that all The Asshole would do was gripe that I hadn't returned his calls, or threaten my life to get the combine back by nightfall. But Leo said he wouldn't get in the truck if I didn't call. So I dialed The Asshole's number and my father's gruff voicemail jabbed at my ear: "*This is Darrell Cooke. I'm probably in the fields. Leave me a message*."

"This is Jeremy," I said. "It's nine o'clock, and we're still at Aunt Martha's. Loading up now. Be home when we get there." And I hung up and turned to Leo. "You happy now?" I said.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Dude, you have no idea," I said.

The equipment barn was half a mile past Aunt Martha's house. We tossed my bag and

Leo's blue suitcase into Big Red's cab and Aunt Martha handed us sack lunches for the road, little brown paper sacks rolled down to the middle that reminded me of third grade and my mother slicing apples for my midday snack.

"There's ham and cheese sandwiches in there, and a few containers of egg salad," she said. "Are you sure you don't need me to come down there?"

"No, Aunt Martha, we got it," I said. "You go back in and enjoy your day." We went to hug her goodbye. When it came Leo's turn, Aunt Martha looked at his battered face and put her hand on his cheek. They stood on the porch and shared a moment of quiet. I didn't interfere, though I felt a small pang of envy. She must have recognized something in Leo, something she'd taken from the deep of his eyes. That loneliness he put forth, maybe, but I didn't think it was all loneliness she was picking up. I wondered if she'd sensed his lack of a mother, the fact that his mother lay cooped up in a Drumright nursing home while he searched the world over for something to do and feel.

Big Red's diesel rumbled to life, and we waved at Aunt Martha. Turning the Peterbilt back toward the road, I swung us left and we drove the half mile to Uncle Wilson's barns, three open, side-by-side structures that looked nicer than the house with their complete siding and shiny aluminum roofs. The first barn contained the smaller implements, a three-axle dollie, a 2500 Yanmar tractor, and the John Deere 9420 we were supposed to come back for at some later date. A couple of combine headers—including the Gleaner header we were also supposed to retrieve—sat in the second barn. In the third barn sat Uncle Wilson's L2 combine, toothless without the header but still somehow just as intimidating.

"Okay, here's what we gotta do," I said. "Listen up, 'cause this part can be a real pain in the ass."

I explained the process of loading the combine on the trailer: make sure the tires match up perfect to the ramps, drive the combine on slow, buckle the axles down to the steel with the chains and boomers we brought along. Afterward, fasten the yellow Wide Load sign to the back

of the trailer and do a double- and triple-check of the blinkers and brake lights. Bada-bing-bada-boom, we're good to go.

"Technically, we're supposed to have a lead truck," I added, "but The Asshole likes to cut serious corners. Gonna get him into trouble one day, mark my damn word."

I backed Big Red and the trailer to the barn and crawled into the Gleaner. Leo looked nervous around the equipment, the boomers loose in his busted hands like they were tools from some ancient culture. I told him to relax, this wouldn't take long, and I fired up the combine. She came to life immediately—a great relief, given the state of Uncle Wilson's house and yard and pickup truck. But apparently he was a man who took care of his farming equipment, kept them fueled and greased and hungry for the fields. I caught a whiff of old sorghum whopping around in the augers, and suddenly it came to me just how much I loved the farmer's life and what I'd give to be a larger part of it. I thought about my friends in Goshen who had gone on to work for the great American companies in Nebraska, Missouri, or found niches right there in the home state with the universities, the Oklahoma Wheat Commission, and I longed to be a cog in that machine, that big American farm machine that rolls ever onward and supplies the country with life and promise. But the most I would ever have of that experience, the most I would ever see of a combine in true action, was this moment right here, preparing to load a dead man's Gleaner into my father's trailer.

I took the Gleaner up the ramps—five minutes of exhilaration, five minutes of glory—then killed the engine. Leo started on the boomers, but as I expected, I had to show him how to use the ratchets and put the right pressure on the chains. After a moment he stepped back and let me take over. The work went much quicker that way, even with my battle wounds. But he wasn't embarrassed. I think he knew you couldn't blame a man for his lack of knowledge, especially if he tries.

The loading and tying done, we climbed into Big Red and sat cooling in the AC. Leo grabbed his straw cowboy hat and shoved it back onto his head. He was in good spirits. I hated to

kill his mood by what I was about to say.

The radio was playing a Keith Urban tune, the one about making memories and following rainbows. I shut the radio off and put my hands on the steering wheel. Leo took off his hat, put it back in the floorboard where he'd left it, and looked at me. The bruises on his face reminded me of the first day I saw him.

"I don't know about you," I said, "but I don't want to go home."

He didn't look surprised. "Me neither," he said.

"The way I see it, we can do one of two things. Either do what that dumb permit says and follow our tracks back home, stop in somewhere along the way and grab a motel. Or we can go another way entirely. Do something else."

"Scenic route," Leo said. Not so much following my track of thought as he was offering the suggestion.

I nodded. "Scenic route."

"We'll be in a hell of a lot of trouble if we get stopped, you know that."

"Hell of a lot," I said.

"Well, I am Jailbird Jalbert."

"One more day then?" I said. "One more day with Farmer John?"

We looked out the windows, judged the mood, sniffed the direction of the wind.

"Fuck it," Leo said. "Let's go see some Rockies."

Part Three: Bruisers

Jagger — A Hard Red Winter wheat named Oklahoma's Top Wheat Variety, 2008. Early in maturity, offers good grazing potential, and due to its resistance to tan spot and Septoria leaf blotch, works very well in minimum or no-till and continuous wheat cropping systems. Has lost resistance to leaf rust and is susceptible to spring freeze injury. Yield potential of Jagger is still considered very good.

Back down Highway 76, back down to Denver. At last we got to see our Rockies, looming like smoke along the borders of the city. We took them in like desert nomads. On I-70 we stopped at a Pilot Travel Center and bought snacks: a Coke and a Slim Jim for me, a bottled water and a Vienna sausage for Leo. I saw a disposable Kodak camera stashed in his plastic bag when he got back. I decided not to pick on him for it.

We grabbed Highway 25 South to Colorado Springs. Our plan was to stop along the way, see a couple of interesting mountain peaks, a couple of interesting rocks, and keep trucking all the way down to Pueblo. At noon The Asshole called the cell phone, right on schedule. I let the voicemail pick up, right on schedule.

We laughed about the night before, our adventure at Cloud 9. Me cold-cocking that sonofabitch fratboy and throwing that handful of putrid fish into his truck. Leo hitting the gravel with his face and ramming his own knee into his guts. Both of us tougher than two wet cords of unstretched manila hemp. The memory of the fight stirred him up and got him roused to the prospect of doing it all over again, this time with the intention of doing a better job and dishing out more punishment. And when I suggested just that—that we find another bar along the way and pick a fight with a couple of assholes who deserved it—Leo didn't say no to the possibility. His nods to my ideas were quick and self-convincing, and the more we talked about fighting and

what it takes to win one, the more his eyes began to spark and smolder with a fiery adrenaline that I knew he wasn't used to feeling.

And then I asked how Amanda's lips had felt around his pecker and Leo Jalbert clammed up like an idiot savant who's just been slapped.

"So what now? We can't talk about this?" I said.

"Why in hell would I want to talk about that?"

"Maybe 'cause she was hot? Maybe 'cause guys talk about that kind of stuff?"

His face burned scarlet, and just like that the Goliath iceberg—the one I thought we'd chipped away for good back in Denver—was back and frosty as ever.

"Leo, for the love of Christ," I said, "I don't think I can take any more of these uncomfortable silences."

"I'm just not good with women," he said. "I never have been."

"So how many have you—" I thought about not finishing "—been with?"

Leo's head tilted down.

"We're not in high school," I said. "I'm not gonna poke fun."

He gave a thorough examination of the floorboard. "Just one," he said. Quietly, as though trying to tuck the word under his breath, distort it to make me think he'd said something else.

"Okay, that's cool. No big deal."

I couldn't understand why he'd find that idea so shameful. I knew a lot of guys who only had one experience—usually the one that turned out to be their wife—and those guys weren't nearly as messed up as Leo. Whatever it was, I decided I should probably stop pressing for now. So I turned my attention back to the road, and back to gazing at the Rockies along the west.

Every now and then, because of some strange paranoia that I might lose her, my eyes skated over to the side mirrors of the truck and inspected the Gleaner riding high behind us. From the point of view of Big Red's mirrors, the combine looked like a leviathan chasing us down the highway, getting ready to pounce and maw. Long black windshield, fangless mouth, metal grain

shoot thrust inward like a wing. A shiver dripped down my body. I put my eyes back on the highway; a half-second later, looked at the combine again. Still there, still chasing.

We rode for thirty minutes in the uncomfortable silence. We shot past a place called Castle Rock, a cheery little yuppie town surrounded by bottle-green hills, and soon we were seeing signs for Colorado Springs. The last one said ELEVATION 6,035. The sign reminded me of something a buddy had once told me. Said his parents had lived in Colorado more than twenty years and everyone they knew claimed your elevation dictated your social status. The higher the elevation, the higher your positioning on the social ladder. I told Leo about my friend's theory and he said we'd have to keep up with that, see if it was true. He said he would make a journal through every town, mark the elevations and see how "trendy" the people looked in each. I told him Goshen had to be the bottom of the barrel. No, the sludge *around* the bottom.

The exits for Colorado Springs emerged. We discussed whether to stop, explore the roads we could get Big Red down, or keep on trucking south to Pueblo. We decided to keep on trucking. Aunt Martha had told us Colorado Springs was only good if you liked candy shops and pizzerias, and Manitou Springs was good if you wanted to play bumper cars with RVs from Seattle and North Dakota.

So we cruised for another hour and the Rockies seemed to fade and reemerge, like immense thunderclouds amassing and dispersing in a hard wind. A giant building stood high in the middle of nowhere between Pueblo and Colorado Springs: the Pikes Peak International Raceway. We fantasized about betting on the right car and becoming instant millionaires. Then Leo said he had to piss and we took the exit for the Rocky Mountain Travel Center. The truck idling, I grabbed Leo's disposable Kodak and took a picture of the big green Sinclair dinosaur standing out by the road. When I snapped the picture my right hand sparked with pain: my little souvenir from clobbering the fratboy asshole.

As we rolled into Pueblo, Leo found a piece of paper and pen in Big Red's glove box and made a quick note of the city's elevation: 4,724. Then we started slamming the residents, called

them retards because they were two thousand feet below the cool people at Colorado Springs. We looked forward to slamming the lower, smaller towns, and seeing how creative we could get decreasing their residents' social reputations.

Shortly after two, The Asshole called again. And again I let the voicemail answer. Leo shot a concerned look at the phone and said he thought I should probably listen to the messages, what if Big Darrell had decided to send cops? I told him Big Darrell wasn't that smart to think about cops, and besides, as far as he knew, we were still heading home on I-70, right?

"I guess, but he is your dad," Leo said.

"That's one word for the bastard," I said.

Once we had turned onto Highway 50, and once Pueblo and the Rocky Mountains were behind us instead of around us, the notion sunk in to both of us that we really didn't have a plan. All we knew was that we were cruising without immediate destination with a few hundred tons of borrowed steel on our backs. And by that point, Leo had also started to get the creeps at the sight of the Gleaner roving silently behind us. We agreed not to look anymore, just ignore the mirrors and pretend nothing was there.

The Asshole had a 2005 Road Atlas tucked under Big Red's seat. We tugged it out and Leo ran his finger across every town on 50 between La Junta and Wichita. When he found the black dot that said **Dodge City** beside it, he practically yelled the town's name.

"That's where we stay tonight. I've always wanted to see Dodge City."

I tasted the name. Echoes of Boot Hill, Wyatt Earp, hard whiskey. Sounded like an excellent place—no, *the* place—to get into the ultimate bar brawl, show Leo Jalbert once and for all how to swing those long guns he'd be wasting.

"Hell yeah, we'll crash there tonight," I said. "Find us a nice saloon, get us into a nice fight with some assholes."

We needed rules, though, we decided. Rules for this impending brawl.

"Kinda like the Brad Pitt movie?" Leo asked.

Yes, I said. Just like the Brad Pitt movie.

First, the victims had to be assholes. Nobody cool, and nobody trying to mind his own business. Second, the assholes had to call us nasty names. If no nasty names flew, we couldn't fight them. Fighting was a matter of defending pride, honor, the family moniker. Last (and this was the given, I told Leo) we had to make damn certain we won. "The point of a struggle is to prevail in the struggle," I said. "Dwight D. Eisenhower."

Leo made up other rules—the assholes had to be jocks, the assholes had to be humiliated in front of their women—and we debated the merits of both. At last he agreed that finding assholes to fit all the criteria, from my list and his, would probably be difficult. The first three rules would do fine, we agreed.

And then we hit La Junta and Leo got excited about the journal, about recording the town's elevation (4,066). I was cool with that, but I was also starting to feel like I'd created a damn monster. Leo was impressionable. If I told him to eat a pile of dung and chase it with a gallon of scamper juice he would've done both with a wink and a smile.

"I don't know, Jeremy," he said as we rolled through, "this one's got a Wal-Mart, and a Hampton Inn. Looks pretty snazzy."

"Yep," I said, "better wait for the next."

Most of the urban sprawls on 50 were minuscule rail towns situated on the Arkansas River. Many of them boasted historic forts, military museums, markers that stood beside the town limit signs that advertised "Historical Part of the Santa Fe Trail!" Every town we passed, there were homemade billboards that announced, "Thanks Gov. Ritter For Higher Motor Vehicle Fees" or "Gov. Ritter Welcomes You To Taxorado." Leo commented he could probably make a decent governor because politics ran in his family.

"I'm some kind of relative of Charles Haskell," he bragged, not realizing I had no inkling who Charles Haskell was. Some kind of great uncle, he said. Did I have any famous descendents, anyone to speak of?

I told him family stories had it I was descended from Lieutenant W.W. Cooke, who fought beside Custer and got his mammoth sidewhiskers scalped by the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

"He was thirty years old," I said. "Died in a fuckin' field. Kinda poetic, isn't it?"

"That's not going to happen to you," Leo said.

"You're damn right. I'll burn everything down before I get the chance."

Leo stared at me. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not gonna let that bastard keep me fenced in. Just so I can keel over with a heart attack like Uncle Wilson and my mama."

"That's how she died? Heart attack?"

"Fuckin' A," I said. "They were fighting one day and bam, Mama falls on her face on the living room floor. The Asshole blamed himself a long time, then decided to switch on over to me."

"Christ, I'm sorry," said Leo. "That sucks."

"Burn it all down, man. Burn it all down."

Near Lamar we came upon a sea of cattle packed into the biggest livestock yard I had ever seen. A literal mile of cattle standing head to tail, and dear God, the air stank. A feral smell that reminded me of a grain bin that's gone hell-sour with mold. So bad we covered our noses and tried to hold our breaths for more than half a mile. When we reached Lamar, Leo said he felt like he needed to puke. "Seriously, man, I think I'm gonna," he said. So we pulled into a truck plaza (another Sinclair dinosaur stood outside, silently roaring at the highway traffic), and as he did his business in the bathroom I tinkered around the arcade in the back of the plaza's greasy spoon. I looked around for Mrs. Pac-Man. She was one of my favorite games when I was a kid. No Mrs. Pac-Man here, but another memory—this one a good one—sparked as I looked around at the ringing, binging video games. Sometimes on our way to neighboring towns and farms, The Asshole stopped at truck plazas just like this and let me quarter up at arcade games while he

played the scratch lotto tickets at the front counter. One time, during a game of Haunted Circus pinball, I watched this huge Freightliner rig—a truck that made Big Red look like a ladybug—come thundering into the parking lot, and a man who looked like he'd consumed a thousand cheeseburgers came crashing into the plaza. I figured he would stop at the coolers and the candy bars but he proceeded instead directly into the arcade. I stopped playing, my quarters wasted, to watch the man. Shifting his vast gut and loosening his Big Texas belt buckle, he plopped himself in front of Night Driver, behind the black wheel and into the black bucket seat designed to make you feel like you're in a sports car. Then he pumped the quarters and smashed into every car he saw. When the game was over, the man pumped more quarters and started all over, bam bam bam, cars flying left and right, every fucking car that came within a foot got smashed. He sucked so bad, I abandoned the Haunted Circus and stood beside him to give him pointers on how to win.

"Win?" the man said. "Hell, kid, I don't want to *win*. I want to kill as many cars I can. You drive a truck you'll understand."

I laughed at the memory as I walked around the Lamar Truck Plaza waiting for Leo. Around 5 P.M. my cell phone buzzed. This time, after The Asshole left his message, I decided I best hear the rant and get it over with. Something about the combine, most likely. Make sure you're stopping to check the boomers. Did you fasten down the grain shoot? I called the voicemail, deleted the first couple of "Why the hell aren't you calling me back" messages. I got to the last two—this latest message and the one he'd left in Pueblo—and plugged my finger in my ear so I could hear better. Glanced around for Leo. Walked the plaza for better reception, and played each message over, to make sure I'd heard every last word right.

Message No. 1: *"Jeremy, stop screening these calls and answer the phone. Some cop from Enid came by the farm today. Says he needs to talk to Leo. Call me back!"*

Message No. 2: *"Boy, I swear, you're gonna get your ever-lovin' ass whipped if you don't answer this goddamn phone. That cop from Enid came back, says he needs to talk to Leo Jalbert. Call me back and explain what the hell is going on."*

During the second playing of the last message, Leo came walking out of the bathroom. His face was pale and he looked like he'd been splashing in toilet water. I folded the phone and stuffed it back into my pocket. Leo frowned. "Who was that, Big Darrell?"

"Feel better?" I said.

He shook his head. "I'm never gonna eat beef again. Was that Big Darrell?"

"Yeah, same shit. Worried about the combine."

"Figures," he said. "You ready to head out?"

"Yeah, I think I am," I said.

We rolled into the next town thirty minutes later, and Leo insisted we play the Elevation Game, insisted that lovely Granada was perhaps the most backwards town in Colorado, with its lowly elevation of 3,484 feet. I said I wasn't interested in playing anymore. Leo asked if something was wrong, was I mad at something? No, I said, the game didn't hold my interest anymore.

I was thinking back to something Leo had said earlier, back in Pueblo after The Asshole had left his first message. "What if Big Darrell decides to send cops?" My father hadn't sent the Law, but a cop—an Enid cop to be exact—was apparently coming around anyway. With a scope and sights apparently fixed on my new friend. Did Leo know the authorities were chasing him? *Were* they chasing him? Or was this all a big misunderstanding?

My brain turned over crazy possibilities. Maybe Leo had killed somebody. A woman. That might explain his issues, why his eyes darted and head ducked when the opposite sex came around. Why he couldn't blow his load when Amanda the stripper was knobbing him at Cloud 9. Leo Jalbert was a fucking Ted Bundy.

I looked across the cab, to size him up in the role. He was messing around with his cowboy hat, cocking it forwards and back, forwards and back, curving down the straw brim. A killer? He couldn't figure out which direction to wear his hat.

Christ. Leo the killer. Never in a million. But, didn't they say the same thing about

Bundy? Never in a million?

It occurred to me I should take Leo back, before The Asshole got smart and gave the authorities our designated DPS travel route. And that started sounding like the best thing, the more and more I let myself think. Bid farewell to the crazy Dodge City plans and blaze on without stopping, despite what Leo had to say. But what if he decided I should be his next victim, his next asshole? Tell himself, Hey now, Jeremy isn't playing the damn Elevation Game anymore so I think I'll take his head and shove it on a pool cue?

I decided to keep on trucking, stay with the plan—for now. We were almost to Kansas. But I wondered what I'd do—or *should* do—when The Asshole called again.

About that time weird things started to happen. The closer we got to the Kansas line, the less connected I felt to the landscape. More than once we'd pass through a town and Leo would start reading off the quirky signs—billboards for the End of Times, or banners for the Holly Days Bluegrass Festival—and I'd barely hear him speak. I couldn't concentrate on the road. My eyes got fatigued, started conjuring those strange shapes like I see sometimes in the dusty heat. I told a buddy about those shapes once. He said he thought the mirages were by-products of getting knocked around so much. Makes sense, I guess. I'd taken plenty of knocks at Cloud 9.

A little after six, at the Hamilton County line, we crossed back over into Kansas. Here the telephone poles leaned precariously away from the road, like they were scared and shrinking away from the passing vehicles on Highway 50. And the mood inside Big Red—whatever the current mood happened to be—changed again. We grew as quiet as a couple of psychos, and everything I saw took on sharp apocalyptic edges, like a black tornado sky. The land seemed ominous, threatening, packed and layered with hidden, menacing implications. Like the rubbled buildings in downtown Syracuse or the jammed cattle yards outside Lakin. Full of death, all death. When two lone horses grazed in a sprawling field, while behind them a thousand head of cattle waited behind fences at a livestock yard, I saw the horses as the ones in danger. I felt like a child again—and not in the Lassie-Timmy kind of way. Growing up I'd get strange ideas like

these so frequently I wouldn't be able to sleep for the nightmares. My mother blamed the nightmares on the farm equipment, the big machines that boomed like God's voice and left tracks of chewed, guzzled earth behind their mammoth black tires.

And then we reentered the Central Time Zone in Kearny County and the feeling of dread multiplied all over my skin. I looked back into the Peterbilt's mirror. The combine was coming faster than the trailer it was chained to. I was certain of it.

"I don't like this," I told Leo.

"What?" said Leo.

"None of it," I said. "I don't like anything."

Town after Kansas town passed under Big Red's wheels: Deerfield, Holcomb, Garden City, Charleston, Ingalls, Cimarron. We crushed them like gravel and kept rolling east. The wind picked up and blew us lane to lane; a cloud bigger than the Rockies formed overhead. I looked out across the plains and saw a rainbow flying out of the very storm we were driving into. The image was so unsettling, I didn't know how to make it symbolic. Fifteen after 8:00 Leo pointed at the Atlas and said, "Dodge City coming up. Dodge City, straight ahead." And then The Asshole called again. I let the voicemail pick up. Knew I wouldn't have the guts to listen to it anytime soon.

The rain started falling as we pulled into town. I looked at the city limit sign and read the elevation: 2,504. Shithole status compared to the good folks of Denver and Colorado Springs. The good folks like Amanda the stripper and the asshole fratboy no doubt still searching for his molar in the parking lot gravel. A heavy wind surged against Big Red's left side, against the metal flesh of the Gleaner, and I told Leo it was probably best if we find a motel, I didn't want to get caught in a Kansas tornado in a tied-down diesel truck.

We found a Super 8 and veered into the empty lot. Leo said he had a hundred bucks and could pay for the double room, but I volunteered to pay for my own. We checked in separately, Leo paying in cash, me with The Asshole's Visa card. He asked me in the lobby if we should

meet back up at a certain time to find the bar. I hesitated, didn't know what to say. By then I was starting to think about something, the nasty idea of letting him find his room then hopping into Big Red and chugging home alone. Calling the cops when I got on the road, telling them the madman fugitive lady killer was holed up at the Dodge City Super 8 like Cherokee Bill.

9:00, I told him. Meet me in the lobby at 9:00.

When I got to my room I tossed my overnight bag on the bed, took my wet shirt off and hung it on one of the motel hangers. Then I washed my face in the bathroom sink and listened to The Asshole's newest message.

Message No. 3: *"Jeremy, I don't know what you're thinking, but this has got to be the dumbest shit you have ever pulled. Cop comes around, needs to find your butt buddy Leo, and you decide to screen the calls, ignore every goddamn thing going on. I hope you know how much trouble you're in. When you get home I will personally—"*

I pushed a button and my father's voice snapped apart.

So nothing had changed on The Asshole's end. Some cop from Enid had come around earlier, had snooped around the farm asking questions about Leo, and that was that. No new developments, nothing crazy to add to the F.U.B.A.R. Just The Asshole's rage, The Asshole's righteous indignation. Nope, nothing new.

After a quick shower I walked back to the lobby and Leo was waiting. He hadn't taken a shower from the look, but he had changed out of his red Nirvana T-shirt and into a short-sleeve pop-button. He looked like a farmer in that shirt, like somebody I would've hung out with in Goshen.

"You cleaned up," he said.

"I was starting to feel grimy," I said.

"I figured we'll be getting messy anyway. With all that blood on us." He grinned like an outlaw. "You ready to go kick some assholes' asses?"

I rubbed at the knuckles of my right hand. "I don't know, this hand's really hurting."

Disappointment trickled down Leo's face. "Are you kidding? This was the *plan*. You're gonna back out now?"

Nothing is ever simple. Leo needed this. Whatever was going on, this was what Leo needed. To feel like a man, like a bruiser. Should I give that to him? Or give *in* to him?

I said: "No, I'm not backing out. I'm just saying, you may have to do all the punching tonight."

"Good," Leo said. "I'm ready."

I had noticed a bar—the Dodge City Saloon—a couple blocks down as we were driving up to the motel. I told him we shouldn't bother with the rig and walk the distance. It'd make our escape much easier if we didn't have to back out a trailer, a combine, and a semi. Leo agreed.

Everything in that damn town has a Wild West name—Wyatt Earp Liquor, the Boot Hill Museum, the Wild Horses Hair Salon—and a Wild West look to go with it all—cedar-post fencing, horseshoe window shutters, rope-and-saddle porch ornaments. Everything except the Dodge City Saloon. The place looks like your average bar, neon Bud hangers in the windows, a single red nightclub door in the front. When Leo and I walked up, I think Leo was expecting the Spirit of the Frontier, he looked disenchanted at the average brick walls, the lack of swinging butterfly doors, and the hippie Native American bouncer asking for IDs.

"What's the hold-up?" asked the hippie, when Leo gave him a disappointed smirk.

"Nothing," said Leo. "The sign advertises a *saloon*, is all."

"Oh, I'm sorry—" The hippie stood from his straightback chair. He towered over us like a Windigo. "*Howdy now, pards, y'all come on in!* That better? Or should I go out back and put feathers on for the powwow?"

"Just go inside," I told Leo, and practically pushed him through the door.

The place was a lot bigger and had a hell of a lot more life than Cloud 9. At least half the tables were full, and the waitresses weren't bad— although they were wearing clothes and had no poles to play on. But Leo wasn't bothering with the waitresses; he was looking for the assholes,

the guy or guys who could take their swings and make him feel like the man he wanted and needed to be. Toward the back of the bar, on the long wall between the bathrooms and the rear exit, I found us a table. After we sat I motioned at the waitress. She nodded, held a finger up to indicate one more minute, and then snaked over. I watched her as she moved. She had short, wavy blond hair, and wore ass-hugging Daisy Dukes that made my mouth go watery. Leo ignored her.

"Gentlemen, I'm Paula," the waitress said. The sound system wasn't nearly as loud as Cloud 9 and The Black Crows had just come on. "She Talks To Angels." Good damn song, good enough to sing to. "What can I get you fellas?"

I ordered a couple Bud Lights and handed her a twenty, told her to keep the change. This trick works for me at the Tumbleweed in Goshen sometimes: give the waitress one big bill, tell her the rest is all tip. And what do you know, before she walked away, Paula gave me the look—the look that every man (well, *nearly* every man) knows and appreciates more than gold. Either the tip had enticed her, or she liked a man with bruises. I thanked my lucky stars we were staying at the Super 8, not somewhere across town, and that I had a separate room I could take her to.

The cell phone rang twice as we sat waiting for the beers. But I'd placed the ringer on vibrate back in the motel and Leo never noticed. He'd gotten fidgety, had worked himself into a proper lather at the idea of fighting. I told him to calm down, he looked like a fucking squirrel about to cross a busy interstate. But his eyes wouldn't stop roving over the tables, the guys crowing at their friends and sucking down their suds. At that moment he certainly looked *capable* of murder, the way he studied the room for assholes that fit our criteria. But the most rational part of my brain still wanted to laugh at that, tell me Leo Jalbert had his issues—issues larger than I would ever understand—but not the *murdering* kind. The man was scared, was all. Fear was one of the issues. Maybe the only. He was scared manhood was passing him by, and that he was in danger of becoming somebody the world could overlook.

I thought about asking a few more questions about his mother—sometimes guys like this

have mama problems at the core—but Paula came back with the Bud Lights. And the look she'd given me had grown ravenous. "Here you go, sugar," she crooned, and handed over my beer first. After she served Leo I pushed my bottle aside and leaned into Paula's ear. No smell of cinnamon like Amy but the scent was still delectable. I asked her what time she got off and she said any old time she wanted, it was Tuesday and the place had plenty staffers. I told Leo I'd be back and walked with Paula to the front.

I took one more look at Leo sitting alone at the table before I stepped out front with Paula. He seemed oblivious I was leaving. I thought about going back, but Paula was beckoning me out into the parking lot. Said she wanted me to see her car, her brand new Chevy Cobalt with the turbo charge. I allowed myself to go.

We made out like demons in the uncomfortable bucket seats. And before I knew it she was sliding her hand over my crotch and stroking the bulge. I thought of Lisa Macklin going down on me behind the chicken coops, as I sweated in the July heat and tried not to think about the stench of the farm animals. Then, as Paula was leaning further over the console to nibble my ear, I thought about Leo Jalbert, about the night before, as we lay in the silence of Aunt Martha's house and he'd asked how a person escapes abuse. That what was he was asking: how a person can escape. Not specifically how *I* had escaped, though he'd worded the question that way. He'd been crying out for help.

I squirmed away. Pulled her head up so she'd face me. Gently, so as not to hurt her.

"I'm sorry, Paula. I can't do this," I said.

She raised up in the seat, wiped her lips. "You were ready a second ago. You need to lean back? My seats lean back nice."

"I need to go back. My buddy in there, I need to take him back to our motel."

"Oh my God, you've got to be kidding," Paula said.

"No, I'm not." I opened the car door. "I'm sorry, I gotta go. I'm—really sorry."

I left Paula sitting in her turbo-charged Cobalt, and made my way back to the door. When

I got there, the hippie wasn't sitting on his chair. I opened the door and heard the noise of brawling and looked across the bar in time to see Leo Jalbert punching some guy in the face. A bouncer was trying to peel him off but Leo wasn't having it, kept pummeling the face and throwing his other elbow out to smack anyone who came near. I darted across the bar, crashed through half a dozen tables. My feet hit a puddle of spilled beer and I slid. The slide made me tumble into the fight, and Leo's elbow caught my left cheek. He didn't turn around.

"Leo!" I shouted, grabbing my cheek. "Stop!"

The bouncer heard my yell, wheeled on me, and jabbed out. Knuckles smashed into my jaw and my face exploded and I went down on one knee. Ringing filled the bar, my head. I felt something stab into my palms—a sliver of bottle, broken during the fight. When I looked up, two other guys were joining the bouncer, and I felt myself lifted and slammed back onto my feet. Leo whirled, saw me in the fight, and grinned. His teeth were bloody, smeared with hate. He swung at someone else, a new asshole who fit new criteria. "Leo," I tried to say, but a couple of fists rammed into my side, my stomach, and the air whooshed out. I went down again. Then a fist banged into Leo's temple. He lost his balance and went down like a shot stargazer horse.

We looked at each other, in that micro-second on the wet, sticky bar floor. But that moment seemed like a small eternity, too. My entire relationship, my entire experience with Leo Jalbert, seemed to be micro-eternities of glimpses, passing infinities given to us so we could understand each other and maybe learn something. But we hadn't learned a thing. We were the horses standing in the sprawling green pasture, the moment right there at our feet for the grazing, but we didn't know how to reach for the grass.

I stumbled back to my feet and caught Leo by the collar. His pop-button shirt had popped open in the fight, and the white T-shirt beneath was soaked around the neck in beer and blood. I mouthed, *We have to go!* and Leo somehow understood. We staggered toward the front door. The drunk regulars watched us, but they did nothing to interfere. They were the ones who wanted no harm, who wanted the peaceful night with their buddies, and we were the interfering assholes.

The brawl continued in the middle of the saloon, men grunting and punching and falling and shouting. The point of a struggle is to prevail in the struggle. We sneaked out the front under the cover of their battle.

Paula stood at the door, watching the scene with apparent disbelief. As I lurched across the threshold with Leo in tow, she echoed, “Oh my God, are you kidding?” and I gave her a bloodied smile. The ravenous look was ancient history. Apparently she had liked the tip and not the bruises. She ran back in to see the battle firsthand, and I said, “Bye, Paula, thanks for the beers,” and Leo cackled like a rooster. This time I didn’t join.

*

We cleaned our wounds—for the second time in forty-eight hours—at the tiny bathroom mirror of my room at the Super 8. No one had seen us walk off to the motel. A few moments after we got there we saw a flash of blue lights and a couple of cops descended on the Dodge City Saloon. Leo said, “I *hate* the fuckin’ cops!” as we crashed through the door and collapsed onto the full-size beds.

We dropped bloody towel after bloody towel on the bathroom floor. Housekeeping the next morning would no doubt think the worst. Leo had to prop himself at the mirror using both hands on the sink, and I had to lean against the bathroom door to keep standing. Our faces together in the mirror looked like a *Halloween* movie. Leo kept wanting to laugh, talk about the bar fight, but I kept telling him to stop, shut up, what the fuck was wrong with him?

“Wrong with me? We started this together.”

“We did not start that,” I shouted. “You started that when I was outside.”

Leo poked at a cut with the tip of a cloth.

“You started that back there and you didn’t follow any criteria, you found some guy you thought was an asshole and you picked a fight. Because you’re a bully and you have to feel a knuckle across the face to feel like a man.”

Leo spun, teeth bared. He’d cleaned the blood off, but the hate was still on him. “You are

the last person," he yelled, "to call anybody a bully."

"What the hell have I done to you?"

"Poor Jeremy." Leo slammed the cloth into the sink. "Daddy hit him a few times, so he feels like everybody else ought to pay for it."

"And what the hell do you think you're doing?" He tried to step out of the bathroom but I blocked the door with my arm. The cut where the sliver of bottle had gone into my palm screamed out.

"Get out of my way."

"Answer the question," I said.

"Jeremy, get out of my *way*." And he shoved down my arm. I followed him into the bedroom, tracked his every step. If he tried to open the door, I'd tackle him.

"Answer the question."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why the hell is a cop from Enid snooping around my father's farm?"

Picture this: a face that deflates of all emotion. Or no—maybe the word is hope. A face that deflates of all hope. One moment, anger that could rip apart a Super 8, the next moment a colossal expulsion of all these dreams and possibilities. Leo lost his legs. He collapsed onto the bed, so heavily the mattress bounced. Arms falling to his sides, he stopped breathing and gazed at the wall.

I sat on the opposite bed. "Tell me what's going on," I said. "I think you owe me that, man. I just took a beating for you."

He stared at the yellow wallpaper.

"Leo …"

He said: "The cop's name is Randy. He's a deputy from the Garfield County Sheriff's Department."

"Okay," I said. "And how do you know him? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"You might say that," Leo said. "He's my brother-in-law." Then he waited for my reaction, as though he'd confessed his deepest, darkest sin.

"Start talking," I said.

*

Everybody's got a story. I believe I told Leo that as we were driving to Colorado. When Leo told his story in the bedroom of the Dodge City Super 8, I realized my own was only a punchline, a game of Night Driver on the blip of an arcade screen. His was the cruel joke.

He got married when he was eighteen, a few months before graduating from Enid High School, he told me. This would have been 1999. His first and only high school fling, a girl named Jeanette, and God was she beautiful, the talk of the entire school, maybe the town. Would look at you, he said, and those emerald green eyes would haunt your soul. But throughout school, Jeanette had Daddy issues. Touchy-feely issues, and when Leo tried to pull them out of her, the emerald green would burn right through, and he'd always have to back away from the fire. He couldn't stay backed away for long. The wildness in Jeannette would always bring him back, and she would fuck them both right back into normal. But Daddy never went away. She wanted to get married, escape Daddy awhile, and Leo donned the helmet and the shining armor. He married Jeannette in February, around Valentine's Day, and the world turned great. Daddy gave her a trailer—the perfect, all-American double-wide on the outskirts of Breckinridge—and she fucked old Leo four months shy of graduation right straight out of the all-American diploma. Pretty Jeannette started missing her periods, and good old Leo dropped out of school and went to work at the Domino's delivering pizzas. A couple months later, she miscarried and started blaming the good knight for her health issues.

"The further we got into the marriage," Leo said, "the more Jeanette started to change. She was good at that. Wore different faces every day. At home she didn't wear one. I was completely terrified of her daddy, and her brother was a cop in the Enid Police Department, so what the hell was I gonna do?"

She started roughing Leo up the summer of 2001, when he was nineteen. It started with a small slap as they'd fight over bills. Sometimes he'd block the slap, sometimes one got through. More and more of the slaps starting getting through, and pretty soon lovely, green-eyed Jeannette graduated from slapping to throwing coffee mugs. One day when Leo came home from work, one of the mugs had coffee in it. He spent the evening in the ER, getting second-degree burns treated by a nurse who thought Jeannette was the victim.

Then there was the day he woke up from a nap and Jeannette was beating his chest and arms with the flat end of a Black & Decker clothes iron. To get her to stop Leo slugged her across the face. Her brother was at the house five minutes later, helping Jeannette finish the job. Then Randy slapped cuffs on Leo and hauled him into jail for domestic assault.

"I got to where I was a pro at hiding bruises," Leo said. "Jeannette was popular, so whenever we went out I made sure the world didn't see the kind of monster I was dealing with. 'I banged my head on the door.' That was a favorite. And after she'd scratch me, I'd tell people, 'Oh, I was trying to chase a wild cat out of the shed.' Can you believe that? A damn wild cat? But people believed it."

Then Randy got a job at the Sheriff's Department and things got worse. Since they lived out in the county, Randy would take every excuse in the book to come knocking at the trailer door, and more than once those brotherly visits turned violent, especially if Jeannette got involved. That's how in a span of two years Leo got three restraining orders put on him and fifteen threats on his life. Every time he'd try to walk, seek out some new, semi-normal life, there would come Randy Larson in his cruiser to scoop him back up and take him back to Jeannette.

"Christ, what did their daddy do?" I asked.

Leo didn't seem to hear. He was staring at the wallpaper again.

"I think everybody is abused," he said. "Everybody on the planet. In some way or another."

Sometimes you have to take something and turn it over in your brain, see what you can

make of it, if anything. I didn't know what to say to Leo's comment. I had no words, no ideas. If you want to know the truth, I thought he might be on to something.

"This past February," Leo said, still staring at the wall, "it dawned on me that me and Jeannette, we've been married for ten years. A decade, Jeremy."

"And you haven't had any kids?"

I braced for yes, they had three, four, half a dozen abused rugrats trying to outrun the blows of their mother's high-heeled Sunday shoes.

"No, I got snipped in 2004," Leo said. "But Jeannette doesn't know about that. I saved up for it, put money from a second job back into a jar, all in secret. Same place I put the money for Mom's healthcare over in Drumright."

"Jesus," I said. "A jar?"

"But a couple weeks ago, man, a couple of weeks ago I decided that was all she wrote. This time I was gonna get away. I waited till Jeannette was gone to town, I grabbed my suitcase, and I started hiking up the road. And I did it, man, I did it. Next thing I know I'm a dozen towns over and climbing into a pickup truck and driving out to your farm."

"But Randy found you again," I said.

Leo paused. "Yep. Looks like he found me again."

*

So we decided right there in the bedroom of that Super 8 motel, decided to get away from our fucked-up all-American lives once and for all. I can't tell you we figured out the moves, all the necessary actions and realignments it would take to get all that accomplished, but I can tell you we both meant what we were saying.

We knew we couldn't part ways in Dodge City, Leo going one way, me going the other. We knew a last fling in Goshen remained—getting that Gleaner combine back to The Asshole—and Leo refused to walk away and leave the burden to me. We knew we couldn't pull the Thelma and Louise, take Big Red over some ravine and grab each other's hands on the way down. Things

work that way in the movies but not in life. On the all-American farm, you grab the shovel and prepare to get calluses.

We decided to leave that night and try to have the combine back to the farm by early morning. If we left by one, and kept on 50 all the way to the 35 at Wichita, that would put us back in Goshen by five or six. The Asshole was on farming hours, of course, but I figured he would also be harvesting the Cimarron, the field twenty miles away from the house. And if he happened to be there when Big Red rolled up—well, too fucking bad for The Asshole.

So we loaded our bag and suitcase in Big Red and tossed the motel keys on the bed. And despite the bruises, I started to feel the old adrenaline again. And from the look so did Leo. Telling his story had done more to free him up than knocking out some asshole's teeth. His cowboy hat in hand, he put his arm on the window guard and looked like he did the night we drove back from Cloud 9, giddy out of our minds.

Back on the road, the sky was ghost-black with storm clouds. The winds were still trying to blow us half to Oz, but I could tell the clouds were moving west, away from Oklahoma. Outside Ford the highway switched over to 400 and the blacktop glistened like crankcase oil under the fresh rain. We passed a farm festooned in antique road signs. Rusty brigades of 1940s and '50s Americana in every shape, form and color standing along the fence line: Mobil, Standard Oil, Phillips 66, Pyro Anti-Freeze $1 Per Gallon. Leo asked me to stop and take a picture with the Kodak. As I propped my elbow out the window, preparing to snap the picture, my eyes looked in the mirror and caught a glimpse of the combine gleaming under a burst of Kansas lightning. I put my elbow back in the truck and we started back up the road.

Don't think I'm crazy, but every now and then I'd dare another peek at the Gleaner in the side view mirror. But dead Uncle Wilson's combine would not flash in the dark. All the way through Greensburg the lights along the town streets would not light her up, and rolling down the cloud-black highway I could not seem to catch another vision of her. Past the town of Cullison I began to think I'd lost her, had bumped her off the trailer somewhere between Brenham and

Haviland. I imagined us trucking on to Wichita and dead Uncle Wilson's Gleaner L2 trying to find us, roving down the highway in search of her chains and boomers. The goosebumps were enough to make my stomach flip.

I stopped Big Red in the middle of the road. Stopped so hard the tires slid on the wet pavement. We were somewhere near Pratt, about two hours west of Wichita.

"What are we doing?" Leo said. The bruises on his face made his surprise look like a beaten Wile E. Coyote who's just run out of desert.

"I'm sick of this shit." I opened the door, jumped down onto the slick blacktop.

"What?"

I took off walking toward the trailer. A second later Leo tried to catch up on the opposite side. At the end of the trailer we met each other and I started loosening the boomers by the light of the red trailer lamps. The mosquitoes went immediately for blood. Masses of them droned around my ears like Uncle Wilson's weedeater. Leo was trying his best to ignore them.

"What are we doing?" he asked again.

"I'm ready to raise some hell," I said. "I'm tired of being scared."

Leo didn't question; he started on the boomers on the other side. Five minutes later the Gleaner's chains were unfettered and we flung them off the road, the only sound the crackle of distant thunder and chains clattering together in the muddy ditches.

The ramps came down and I scrambled up. Opened the combine door and threw on every light the L2 had. Our small patch of forgotten Kansas highway brightened. Then I turned the key left in the ignition and dead Uncle Wilson's Gleaner bellowed, 158 horses that had pushed this old beast more than 3,000 hours through Colorado sorghum. In the quiet of the night it was a noise that would drive a wolf straight to suicide.

I took the combine down the ramps. "Climb on," I shouted. The cartoonish surprise hit Leo's face again—and then he was sprinting back toward the truck. I waited to see what he was doing, though I suspected. And I was right: he was getting his straw cowboy hat. He joined me in

the cab with the hat cocked half-moon and I steered the Gleaner right. A short dip over the ditch, a barbed-wire fence under the tires, and we were off. We racetracked some poor farmer's field, turned half an acre of wet rye into mush doing slow donuts.

"Hotdog this, you son of a bitch!" I yelled, and Leo cackled like a hyena.

As we drove I pictured a 24-foot header spinning out of control, devouring everything in its path. Dogs, houses, Tommy. The Asshole's shop. The dusty speakers in the rafters, eaten up by the reciprocating knife bar. Spitting out chunks of bad memories, throwing bits of The Asshole into durum wheat oblivion. I lost myself in the reaping, and I suppose Leo did too. We hotdogged for an hour, maybe more—it was hard to tell. Until the combine stuck deep in a rut and I flooded the engine trying to jostle her out. Mud coated everything, caked the combine from tire to auger.

We hopped down, stood in a field of tire-sized canyons, and inspected our work, our situation. Everywhere we could see, the farmer's rye was decimated. Back toward the road a fifteen-to-twenty-foot section of barbed wire lay twisted on the ground, and the wood posts that had gone under the Gleaner's elephant body looked like sawed, mangled legs. I thought of The Asshole's fence, the one I had botched the holes for when I was seventeen. That fence had never seen the light of day. Medical bills had taken all the money for any hired labor. That, and The Asshole never had the heart for a new fence after the hospital. Had certainly been too nervous to ask me to build it for him. If he had I probably would've said yes and built it perfect just to see his face.

I could have, too. I could have built that damn fence perfect.

I looked at my watch. A little past three. So dark outside the Gleaner's light, I felt the prairie breathing down my spine, the open grasslands and the fields of rye creeping up as though the world wanted to split like a mouth and swallow me. I might have welcomed that, but Leo was looking at me for the next plan, the next big solution. But there was no solution for what I had done. I had fucked this trip up, and I couldn't escape that.

"Here's the funny part," I told Leo. "This combine ain't going home with us. She's stuck

for the rest of the night. It'll take a dozer to get her out."

Leo already knew this. "Reimbursement for the farmer's rye, I guess."

"Yep," I said. "Should just about break him even."

We looked at each other and laughed.

Moments passed—I don't know how many. In the darkness of the ruined field, Leo said, "I can't go back to Jeannette. If I have to go back I'll kill myself."

"You don't have to. You walked away, you can stay walked away."

"I have to stay close to Drumright. Close to my mom."

"I know you do," I said. "I know."

We listened to a night sound, a Katydid somewhere off in the distant woods. I put a hand on one of the Gleaner's tires and leaned against the cooling mud. One time when I was six my mother and I made mud pies together in the back yard. We packed them in Thanksgiving pie tins, and afterward she topped them with Cool Whip and slid them in the fridge. Big Darrell came in from the fields and Mama told me to give him a slice. He took a big bite and we all laughed our asses off. All three of us. Laughing like tomorrow had already come.

"We should probably get the truck back," I said after a time.

"Yeah, probably," Leo said.

"I'll figure things out. I got us into this mess, I'll get us out."

"I've made a mess too, Jeremy. More ways than one."

The moment had come to tell him a few things. I thought he could take the news.

"No sense in keeping this from you now. My dad's planning on firing you when we get back. He told me before we left. Only reason he sent you was to babysit."

Leo tilted his face east, as though trying to sniff the weather in Oklahoma. But he didn't look surprised.

"One more thing. He's been leaving messages on my phone. A cop from Enid's been coming around the farm. Your brother-in-law has found you again, Leo."

The floodlight of the combine was still burning. In the faint glow that drifted down over the night-damp air, Leo's eyes looked like small brands that had cooled and begun to heal. There's an old saying in the Midwest: It ain't hard to tell when a fellow is ridden out. I could tell Leo Jalbert was close to seeing his last ride, if he hadn't already gotten there. He would kill himself if Randy took him back to her. He hadn't been lying. He would find a way to do it, and he would make it look like no accident. To teach them both a lesson.

His face drifted back to the east. "Let me ask you a question," he said. "Did you really mean what you said around Lamar, when you said you wanted to burn everything down?"

I gave the question honest thought.

"I just want to feel like I've done something that'll make a difference. Something that'll make a real mark on things," I said.

Leo nodded and we looked off at the invisible horizon. Another storm was close. You could smell the next layer of ozone falling over the field.

"I don't know, I don't think you'd do it," he said. "You're not that kind of fellow."

A mosquito landed on my neck. I slapped at it. "You're probably right. I don't have the guts."

"You know what I want to do?"

"What's that?"

Leo gestured at the road. "I want to take a long walk. See where I might turn up."

"Do it then."

"No, I'm serious," he said, smiling. "I want to do it now."

And pushing away from the Gleaner, Leo slogged across the field and made his way over the rutted ditch and up to the Peterbilt. I chased after him but by the time I'd plodded over the ruts he was already up in the cab and hauling out his blue suitcase. He stepped down, set the suitcase on the wet blacktop, and put his hand out for a shake. His eyes were dead serious.

"Been a good time," he said. "Don't wait around, Jeremy."

I refused to shake. But Leo's mind was made. Not a thing on God's earth was going to stop him from walking, especially me. So I took his hand and we shook, slowly. I could feel the cracked skin, the busted knuckles. The grip was firm. Had it always been firm? Had he been pretending?

When I let go, he started walking.

"Goddammit, Leo," I yelled, "it's dark as hell and there's another storm ahead. And the mosquitoes'll pick you clean!"

"Gonna be light soon," was all he said, and he didn't look back to say it.

I climbed up into Big Red's cab and turned on the engine. The headlights snapped on and flooded the road and there was Leo, walking up the shoulder toward Wichita. He'd taken the cowboy hat off, and his brown curly hair looked confused without it. The hat wasn't in his hands. I suppose he'd thrown it off somewhere, into the ditch maybe.

I gave a last look at dead Uncle Wilson's Gleaner, sunk in the Kansas rye, and then I started rolling and left the old combine to molder. When I caught up to Leo I rolled a little slower, gave him one last chance to climb back in. The door didn't open. I waited five minutes, rolled slower, slower. A quarter of a mile. I waited for the door to open, for Leo's suitcase to come flying back in.

I put my head out the window. "I'm leaving," I shouted. "And I'm not turning around. Last chance!"

The figure in the road walked on. With purpose.

I pushed on the gas and left him in the dark.

*

I drove the empty highway into Wichita with the radio set to KZLN, a country station out of Hutchinson that played too much Kenny Chesney. I kept the volume low so I could hear the hum of the tires and try to figure out a few things, namely what I was going to say when I got home without the Gleaner. I figured my father would forgive me for arriving without Leo—but

the Gleaner would be another story. I envisioned the pure fit he would throw, the sun-red face bulging and ballooning under his National Farmers Crop Insurance ball cap. The storm Leo and I had sensed in the east never struck, but I could feel those zipped-up clouds waiting to unleash, just like The Asshole's tantrum.

I made the decision at the U.S. 81 merge to call him, let him know I was three hours shy of home. I decided to make that call because a) being so late back into Goshen, I knew he would not be harvesting the Cimarron, but waiting back at the house anyway, and b) he would most likely have reported our DPS permit to the Highway Patrol just to light that extra fire. I decided not to say a word about the Gleaner, that his brother-in-law's $11,000 going-away present was now six and a half feet under central Kansas sludge. What's the perfect lie for something like that anyway?

He was already awake when I called, as I knew he would be. From the tight, throaty sound of his voice, I could tell he'd been chain-chugging his black Folgers coffee, probably as he listened to Randy Crouch on the Bose or the early-morning Ron Hays spiel on the Radio Oklahoma Network.

"Son, do you have any idea—any *inkling* of an idea—what you have been putting me through?" said my father when the lines connected.

"No, I probably don't," I said. "But I'm calling to let you know I'm in Wichita, and I'll be there in three. That's really all I have to say."

I braced myself for the worst. Instead, my father said, "Jeremy, I don't know what's going on, but I'm real concerned about this fellow Leo. I don't know if he's told you anything, but this cop from Enid is real antsy to get his hands on him. Won't say why."

I paused. "That's a bad situation. Please, Dad. Just leave Leo out of this, and let him walk. You don't have any clue how bad that situation is."

There was a long silence. My father's patented sigh of agitation. The sigh before the typhoon, I call it sometimes.

"My truck and that combine, sitting in the yard no later than eight o'clock." His voice was too calm—too patient. I felt eerily off kilter, knocked sideways by his composure. I felt like a child again, spoiled and knowing my pleas would do no good.

"I understand," I said, and my father hung up.

*

A few miles past Wichita, I pulled Big Red into the same Love's Travel Stop where Leo had bought his $6 cowboy hat. I sat in the parking lot among the other trucks, and mostly out of dumb nostalgia, searched around for the big Freightliner and the cheeseburger Texan who had run down every last car in Night Driver. All the trucks in the lot looked the same—except for Big Red. I felt like I was intruding on their sleep, their hallowed ground. I stepped out to get some five o'clock air, but the morning was muggy and the air felt like a popcorn bag. Through the big window of the Travel Stop I watched a man and woman argue over a couple of Powerball tickets. A toddler with a snotty face threw a tantrum behind them, pounded on the backs of his mother's legs like a small, tired ape. The clerk at the counter scowled at them, and the attendant behind the clerk frowned at him for standing and scowling. And I realized what Leo had said at the motel was true. This happens to everyone. Someone gets hurt, every time. Misery finds a way to keep going.

Summer, 1993, and I'm eight years old. The Asshole sits in the back bedroom, slumped at the edge of the queen-size bed. He's holding a black necktie, as though he's forgotten how to put it on. Aunt Martha's beside him, holding him up. I can hear my father's low voice, muffled against Aunt Martha's padded shoulder. *I think I killed her. I think I did this*. Then The Asshole spots my feet, my little shadow in the doorway. Shouts something about spying, little shit are you *spying*? Aunt Martha's small, motherly voice: *He doesn't know what's going on, Darrell. He's only confused.* I run back to the front. Back into the kitchen, surrounded by squash casseroles and tuna salads. Relatives I don't know mess up my hair and tussle my Sunday shirt, all in the spirit of making me feel better. The smell of my cousin Georgia's deviled eggs like a blight on my

stomach. And my own tie choking me, forcing me to claw at the Windsor knot.

Jeremy, some relative says, *you know what happened to your mama, don't you? She died and went to Heaven.*

Another: *Jeremy, always remember your mama loves you very, very much, and she's awfully sorry she had to leave you.*

We bury her in a cemetery an hour north of Goshen, five minutes outside the Ponca City limits. At the graveside service, under the green awning where they line up the relatives in stiff metal chairs, my father keeps his palms on his legs. They play a Red Dirt song on a small CD player: a slow, lingering ballad about walking with the Savior through a wheat field of gold.

Let's bow our heads, the preacher says.

I want so badly to snake a finger into my father's right hand, let him know I'm there beside him. But I can't bring myself to touch him, feel that rough, farm-calloused skin.

Our Father in Heaven, please welcome your tender, loving servant, Patricia Madeline Cooke, into your bosom on this day. Our Father in Heaven …

The only time I'll feel those hands will be two years later, when I pop off in the shop and call him The Asshole and get backhanded across my top lip.

*

The rain had not fallen on Goshen. At 8:35, as I pulled onto Highway 51 and rolled east back toward the farm, the Payne County grass looked as brittle as straw and the heat waves rippled across the broken white blacktop. I wondered if Leo had made it all the way to Wichita, or if he'd called off his long walk and thumbed himself a ride. And if so, to where?

Driving my father's Peterbilt rig and empty combine trailer up our private dirt road eclipsed all other long, uncomfortable silences. I could barely catch a breath, and the sun beat down through the windshield and burned holes right into my eyes. My father was waiting at the edge of the front yard. He stumbled on his bad leg and tripped over a lone root of barnyard grass when he saw me. My stomach felt like I'd been gobbling unthreshed wheat. I made the slight turn

in the drive, around the last of the old silos, and there was no hiding the fact now that the trailer was bare of its cargo.

But his reaction, and the lightning-storm tantrum my father would pitch as soon as I was off the truck and on the ground, was of no interest to me whatsoever.

Those things were of no interest because a sheriff's patrol car was sitting in the drive.

Two people sat inside the car. Both in the front seat.

Big Red eased to a grinding stop, and my father came shuffling to the door. I braced for the explosion, the typhoon. He would either scream black murder in my face, or he'd skip the drill-sergeant act and dry gulch me across the jaw, let God sort out my apology from the ground. When the door came open, I wasn't sure who opened it, me or him. Just like I wasn't sure if he was pulling me down or I was stepping of my own free will. Either way he was in my face and leaning in close before I could take another step. I forgot all about the patrol car. I shut my eyes, waited for the blow, the dislocation of my jaw.

My father's hand fell on my shoulder. Then the arm went around my neck.

"Jeremy," he said, almost in a whisper, "I don't know how bad we've messed things up, but things have gotten pretty damn bad for you to do something like this." His breath was a cloud of Folgers and peppermint stick and I leaned back to avoid it. His words sank in, but at some level I couldn't process or comprehend. I said the first thing that came to mind.

"I'm sorry about the combine. I fucked things up real bad. I'll do what I need to do. I'll go back and—"

"I know about the combine," my father said, releasing my neck. "Stuck in the mud outside Pratt, Kansas. Now where the hell is Leo Jalbert?"

I couldn't think. My brain was so tired. "How do you know about the combine? Did Leo talk to you? Did he call?"

"No, but the farmer whose rye field you shredded up did," my father said.

"How is that possible?"

"You don't think Wilson didn't keep a logbook? They found his phone number in the cab and called Martha—when they found my goddamn combine rutted up in their field. But that's not the issue right now. The issue is, where the hell is Leo Jalbert?"

I looked over Big Red's mirror and my father's shoulder at the patrol car. As if on cue, as if they'd known all along what we were saying, the driver's side door popped open and out stepped a uniformed officer, tall and thick and shady as sin, just like Leo had described Randy. Then the opposite door swung out and the passenger appeared. A woman, like I figured. The green-eyed devil herself. But something was wrong with her. My foggy eyes couldn't make out the details, but it looked like something was wrong with her right arm, and her face. She was wearing a white plaster brace that jutted the arm out like a chicken wing. And on the left side of her face, a bandage from the edge of her jaw to the top of her forehead.

The cop mumbled something, then strolled up the driveway toward Big Red. His gait was long and sure, like a football player who's just won the Heisman, and you could tell he was damn pleased to be wearing a sidearm and badge. When he reached the truck and stopped, I read the name on his brass tag: RANDALL P. LARSON.

I feel it would be crucial to give you every word of what Randy said to me, every slice of that reality and non-reality that occurred after he started talking. But I also feel, after spending all this time together, that you're probably getting a sense of those realities anyway, and that like me, you'd rather not dwell on the things that can't be changed.

Leo broke his wife's face and arm with a Black & Decker clothes iron.

Leo is a good person. He defended himself and walked away.

Leo stole $3,000 from his mother in Drumright.

Leo borrowed the money, and is looking for a better home for both of them.

I think we should leave him there, hanging in the balance but still getting to choose, don't you?

I will, however, tell you how things ended for me.

First I want you to imagine a brush fire.

They happen all the time in Oklahoma. Sometimes they start with a kid's cigarette, sometimes a bolt of lightning. Sometimes a combine will catch fire in the fields and the blaze will eat across two counties before it's stopped. Today—Friday, June 19—the fire begins with a careless match, thrown by some nameless person, a drifter without a purpose let's say, somewhere on Interstate 35 north of Mulhall.

It catches sometime around 2 P.M., as far as officials can tell, and cedar trees along I-35 go up first. Then the fire starts leaking onto farms, and takes out a double-wide. Smoke rises higher than a cell-phone tower. 2:15, officials close 35 North and shut off the exit at Mulhall.

Keep the weather in mind: this is the day that winds are gusting up to fifty, sixty miles an hour. The KFOR News Chopper goes up in the air, gives a play-by-play of the damage. Hay bales go up like paper. Farm equipment gets charred. The winds blow straight toward Goshen, and the fires leap toward dry, brittle wheat. The officials shut down Highway 51.

By 3:25, three thousand acres are black. Brush pumpers rush to a farm on Laughlin Road. The Asshole's farm lies fifteen minutes from a wheat field blazing there. A speck of cinder, a casual variation of wind gust, and The Asshole's fields will ignite.

But the wind is blowing in the opposite direction. The Asshole's farm looks safe.

In my truck on the side of a nearby county road, I listen to KFOR radio broadcasts and mark the direction of the blaze.

Reporter on the radio says: *"Brush pumpers are finally stopping the fire on Laughlin."*

3:35, the fire sniffs out a trail, and the wind turns direction. The Cooke properties start to go up, fast. 4 P.M., The Asshole's fields are burning.

I watch the old man run yelling out across the farm. Watch him stumble on the bad leg, dip left, scoop right to avoid tumbling, and slosh five-gallon buckets of water on the ground. A hand goes up to his face, rubs his eyes. Probably for the smoke. He shakes his head, yells again, throws an empty bucket at the fire.

I watch the flames take The Asshole's farm. A long, hard burn to nothing. Fast and sure.

This is what happens. Someone gets hurt every time. Misery finds a way to keep going.

I turn on my father's CD and listen to Bob Childers. "Jesus Was A Refugee." And watch the world and everything burn.

VITA

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Major Field: Creative Writing

Scope of Study:

FATHER ABRAHAM is a collection of original fiction comprised of five short stories and one novella-length work. As the title suggests, the stories delve deeply into themes of fatherhood, and often explore the darker side of "family." The stories within focus on such topics as abuse, incest, the effects of war, the adolescent's perspective on death, and familial sacrifice.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Toni Graham