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## On Our Way Out: And Other Stories

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ON OUR WAY OUT AND OTHER STORIES

by

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a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

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**THE GRADUATE COLLEGE**

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

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## Abstract

On Our Way Out and other stories is a collection of short fiction banded together with themes of the darkened strange, the missing and the moving, and a sense of place. The characters in these stories try to claw their way to newfound identities, whether it's through a financial transaction, saving a life, or putting a body in the ground. An action with a result is what's needed in these characters' lives. Though, often, the results are not intended. Despite the oddity inherent in these stories and characters, there is something familiar about their plight as ordinary people, something in them that helps us understand ourselves better, be it disturbing or pleasant.

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## *On Our Way Out*

Charlene sat with George on the front porch. Their two golden retrievers slept at their feet, furry stomachs rising and falling together. The mid-October felt brisk, an unexpected cold front moving in off the lake. A dense layer of fog crept up the hill and covered them in an ashy haze.

The surrounding fog reminded Charlene of the evening smoke that poured out from the Mung's twin burn barrels next door. Charlene never asked her neighbors what they burned, but the rusted drums always smoldered with an unpleasant, heavy odor. Some nights she sat in her rocker and watched the flames flip around one another, angrily fighting for pieces of black sky.

When George couldn't sleep, he left Charlene in bed, and worked down in the basement. Charlene pretty much knew what to expect from a man after being married to him twenty years. His work area, like most other men's, was a sacred place.

Later that night, Charlene woke to use the bathroom. The space next to her was cooled, like he'd been gone for hours. Charlene heard the dogs barking outside. She figured George let them out before going down to the basement. From the hallway window, she saw the dogs grazing in the yellow haze of the motion light. She opened the sliding glass door and playfully whispered with them. Then she returned to bed alone.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Charlene felt the empty space beside her. She fed the dogs and made breakfast for her and her husband like every other morning for the past twenty years. Nothing changed. When breakfast was on the table, steaming, she called downstairs for George. She got no answer.

She put their plates in the oven and checked herself in the mirror. Then she

cautiously stepped down into the basement. The lone light bulb with a wiry pull string illuminated the laundry room. George's work room was all the way in the back. Charlene called out again. There were no lights on underneath his door and she softly put her ear up to it, her fingers working at the hem of her robe.

“George?” she asked. Her voice turned to a whisper.

The first thing she saw was George's workbench littered with sharp utensils crusted with globs of white and red. Charlene bit down on her hand to muffle a scream. She whirled around and saw shelf after shelf stocked with lifeless animals who stared back at her with marbled eyes. The dirty pink of a bloated tongue drooped from a deer's black mouth. A raccoon had tiny cotton balls stuffed into its eye sockets. Pelts were stretched out across pieces of board. The animals were arranged according to size. From a shiny black rat to a doe with blood crusted around its nose. Three geese were perched above the window. Thin pieces of steel ran up the backs of their necks to keep them from collapsing.

Suddenly, an odor wafted from below the workbench and forced her back into the laundry room. She got ill in the sink. Charlene breathed deeply and sipped the tepid grey water from the faucet. She wiped her mouth with an old towel and steadied herself. The door to George's workshop stood open and she didn't have the heart or stomach to go back and shut it. Instead, she crawled upstairs and collapsed onto the sofa. She cried herself into a blank dream.

Charlene woke to an explosion in the oven. Smoldering shards of ceramic were caked in bits of egg and jelly. She turned the oven off and left the mess for later. She thought about George and where he might be. No note, no call. She let the dogs out. As she watched them in the yard, it dawned on her that maybe George was doing those things for other people. On a commission. The thought comforted her momentarily. Maybe he

wanted to keep it as a secret because he knew how strange it would look. But the image of the rat returned to her. She didn't want to believe George methodically killed all those animals. All for himself. She had never even seen a gun in the house.

She dressed and decided to drive up 426 to the reservoir with the dogs. Charlene and George regularly brought them there to swim as it was recommended by the vet in town. She veered onto Townline Road, a non-serviced stretch of dirt and gravel, potholes the size of kitty pools. Her tires growled over the rock. The dogs immediately recognized the road and started whining. Charlene opened the window and let the biting cold surround her. Abandoned cars sat gutted in the fields that ran on either side of her.

She saw a few couples walking around the reservoir when she pulled into the lot. Pine trees fanned out around her and hid the road. The dogs' whimpering worsened until she let them bound out of the backseat. They took towards the water and leaped into the murky dark. Charlene stood by her car and took in the sounds of running water and all the birds that hid in the pines. She saw a few geese on the water and a chill ran up her body. Her mouth went dry. She threw a few sticks for the dogs to swim and fetch. Then she dried them off with dirty beach towels. She drove back to home in the dark.

Charlene skipped dinner. She got the sheriff on the phone and told him George had been missing for at least twenty-four hours. As she spoke, she realized the calmness in her voice. The Sheriff told her to try and get some sleep—that George would surely be back soon. Charlene

The following day, the sheriff put a search team together, and they spread out along Rt. 426, fanning into the woods just like in the movies. Old hound dogs strained furiously against their leashes, nosing invisible leads. The Lake Erie scuba club took to the ponds and reservoirs within two miles of Charlene's house.



The townspeople responded with support for Charlene. Luke and Robin Quiggle brought Charlene a quiche. Pastor King brought blueberry muffins. Dottie Bell and her little yapping dog, neither of whom Charlene cared for, brought Neapolitan ice cream. Others brought casseroles, potatoes, ham, and meatloaf. Charlene had to plug in the empty fridge down in the stone cellar.

Parking made a mess of things. Cars littered both sides of 426 for half a mile, shrinking the road to one lane. Charlene knew her neighbors would be irritated about the ruts on the outskirts of their lawn. She also noticed the smoke from their burn barrels smelled even more pungent than usual.

Charlene's yard was waterlogged, thick and heavy with rotten maple leaves. From the house, she watched Chet Wagner's breath billow white clouds as he fought his way into the brush behind the backyard, his wife, Lois, at his side. From the property line, the woods ran a mile deep to the grape vineyards that were harvested every fall.

Charlene stayed at the house, always within reach of her phone. Her house became headquarters to the volunteers and she had fresh coffee ready at the top of every hour. Searchers would often stop in to warm themselves by the fireplace in the living room. Charlene consistently fed the strong flames, which they ate their way through the logs that George had cut in the driveway and stacked in the garage. It was one of the things he used to do when they argued. George would take the dogs with him outside and they'd sit and watch him quart wood. He'd swing his axe until completely out of breath.

The dogs grew exhausted from all the commotion and they soon slumped down on the worn rug just in front of the black stone hearth. Above them, on the mantle, was Charlene's Niagara Falls decorative plate. On it was a painting of the Peace Bridge and little steam boats running underneath, their large cargos steeped upon their backs. George and

Charlene had gone to Niagara Falls for their 10th anniversary. It had been Charlene's idea.

Charlene loved looking out her window to watch the vineyards and farms rolling out for long stretches until they blurred with the sky. Charlene also had to pay attention to the road. She had to have exact dimes and nickels ready for George to pay the tolls.

George grew angry with her when she fumbled the coins in her purse. The whole way to Niagara Falls they had worked with small change.

Just past Westfield, it turned cloudy. They took the interstate most of the way, which didn't allow Charlene to stop and browse the roadside fruit stands that lined Rt5. She brought up the craft stores that she knew would be open near the Hamburg exit. George muttered something about unnecessary stops. Charlene knew he was anxious about driving, so she opted out of the argument. For the majority of their drive, George listened to talk radio. It began to rain.

As they drove, Charlene spied vineyard posts standing bare and useless amidst abandoned crops, and she saw large barns rise up out of the overgrowth, as if they had broken loose from the ground. She imagined them full of cold animals clumped together, trying to keep warm. Beyond the wiper blades streaking across the windshield, she watched the dark clouds huddle like bruises in the sky.

As the Hamburg exit went by, Charlene asked George if he remembered the concert they attended at the fair. He snorted at how long ago it'd been and mumbled something about a small Jew with a harmonica. Charlene remembered George standing behind her with a cigar firmly in his mouth as she swayed to an acoustic guitar.

Eventually they found themselves ground to a halt on the Peace Bridge. Charlene could feel George growing tense with each passing moment. Charlene looked at a family traveling in the next car over. A woman was talking in the rearview to her two children in

the backseat. The little boy and girl smiled at each other and smothered their laughter into the backs of the front seats. Charlene smiled at them.

George became irritated with the driver ahead of him and began honking. Short blurts and then long belches of horn, like he'd fallen asleep on the wheel. The mother looked over to see what the commotion was, and Charlene tightened her grin.

George was less than cordial with the border patrol. She never understood why he was so rough with people. When asked what reason they had for entering Canada, George replied, "You're looking at her." Only the men spoke. Charlene sat quietly and noticed the other husbands and fathers chat and laugh with the officers. They weren't held up long and rejoined the slowly trickling herd of vehicles.

Charlene found the sound of the falls overwhelming. A great enveloping mist rose up from where the waters joined together. She'd never seen anything like it and snapped several photographs. George let her take a few of him leaning against the railing with the mist closing in around him.

Charlene asked a small Asian woman to hold the camera and take their picture. George rolled his eyes, but Charlene sidled up to him and hooked an arm through his. The Asian woman simply stood looking at the camera, confused as to which button to push. George gestured wildly and spoke in a tone that made Charlene color with embarrassment. Eventually, Charlene broke her pose and pointed to the red button at the top.

Charlene used some of the leftover change from tolls to feed the coin-operated binoculars. George puffed on a cigar while Charlene took aim around the falls. She tried to scan the rocky green of Goat Island, but the mist and cigar smoke obscured her view. She could just make out the little blue people in their ponchos aboard the Maid of the Mist.

She turned and asked George if they could ride. “Maybe on our way out.”

Nearby, she found placards with incredible stories on them. They were all about the legendary daredevils of Niagara Falls. She learned that over the years, several men and women had attempted the mind-boggling stunt of going over the Falls in all sorts of contraptions. The first to do it and survive was Annie Taylor, a single school teacher from Bay City, Michigan.

On October 24, 1901, her 63rd birthday, the barrel was put over the side of a rowboat, and Taylor climbed in, clutching her lucky heart-shaped pillow. She was set adrift near the American shore, south of Goat Island. The current carried the barrel toward and over the Canadian Horseshoe Falls. When rescuers finally reached her barrel shortly after the plunge, Taylor was discovered alive and relatively uninjured, save for a small gash on her head. The trip itself took less than twenty minutes, but it was some time before the barrel was actually opened. Taylor had to bob around in the water for quite a while, waiting. Alone in her barrel.

\* \* \*

The sheriff called and startled Charlene from her sleep. She lifted the phone to her ear, her voice thin and raspy. The sheriff used few words. He told her that she was not to leave, that he'd be over in a few minutes. Charlene wondered if they'd found something. If there were answers. She waited at her dining room table in a red bathrobe, looking out at the backyard. The dogs whined at the door to be let out. Charlene didn't recognize any of the people sauntering around her yard like sleepwalkers. Eventually she rose to open the door and release the retrievers, who weaved excitedly in and out of the bundled up bodies, and then, together, made a bee-line for the neighbors' yard, where acrid, yellow flames danced over the lips of the burn barrels.

Charlene watched the dogs paw the soft, muddy ground around the barrels and wanted to yell out, but didn't. She just stood there with a kind of softened expression on her face, clenching her robe shut, alone in her waiting.

*Arriving on time: Flagstaff, Arizona*

Carson pulls into his son's apartment complex around ten in the evening. The two of them decide to hit the town. There's karaoke in the first bar but Carson isn't that kind of guy, isn't the kind of father who would feel comfortable singing a song with his son. The main street is crowded and smokers spill out and gather on the sidewalks. Carson and his son make their way to an old hotel in the historic district where Humphrey Bogart used to stay. Carson enjoys this fact and thinks about Bogart's Westerns. Figures he stayed there while shooting *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or maybe *The Petrified Forest*.

The bar is cast in swanky shadows from red light bulbs. Black and white pictures of movie stars cover the walls. They each take a stool and Carson's son orders a Bourbon, asks the bartender for an ashtray. Carson orders Scotch. Billie Holliday's voice rises quietly from a jukebox manufactured to look old-fashioned.

After twenty years, Carson's wife is leaving him. He has driven five hundred miles to tell his son. Carson also orders a coke on the side in hopes of waking up a little. He hasn't smoked in years but asks his son for one of his cigarettes. The two men sit without talking until their drinks arrive.

I like this place.

Thought you would.

Did you want to go back to the other place? Were your friends there?

No. Maybe a few. It's okay, though.

You sure? I don't mind.

This is fine, Dad. Let's stay for at least this one.

You're the boss.

The son finishes his drink and orders another. Carson holds up his empty glass for

the bartender to see. They drink and glance around the bar. Carson taps his foot to a B.B. King song.

You know this one? Classic.

No. Don't think so.

It's uh...you know who it is...legendary.

Don't know it.

This was big back then.

Two women walk in and take up stools at the bar. They begin to chat and order dry martinis. Carson looks them over.

Classy.

What?

Those women over there. Classy.

I guess.

You got a lot of girls like that here?

I don't know.

What do you mean? You don't look at girls?

Yes. I do.

Why don't you buy one of them a drink?

No thanks.

Come on. It'll be fun. Just for the hell of it. What do you say?

Pass.

Where's your adventure?

Don't know.

Maybe I'll have to then. Watch and learn.

## *Dead Sharks*

### AWAY

And so, in Berlin, the dead shark reared its head. Our relationship, something that was at once bold and constant, now stopped motion. Woody Allen once argued with Diane Keaton about the importance of a couple keeping their separate apartments, the idea of escape from each other, referring to it as a “free floating life raft.” Well, when abroad with a loved one, and we most certainly did love one another-that wasn’t the thing, the thing was- well, anyway, the life raft abroad is a tiny one, a self-created space that needs recharged after extended use. I suppose we were recharging.

We were at the Berlin train station, the last leg of our trip. A place of excitement and expectation, a place not only visually stunning for its flourishing contemporary architecture, but at once bustling with arrivals and departures, to and from all over Europe. We watched people board the trains with large grins on their faces, she and I both wondering where each one of them were going, and would they take us with them. Had we company, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. What happened to our excitement? We had used it all up, and now drank from the tainted well of expectation.

She and I were in the bowels of the station, sitting together at one of the several departure platforms, and waiting for our train back to Amsterdam. Once and a while one of us would get up and wander off to a bathroom, whether we had to go or not, who knows. “Need anything?” I’d ask. “I’m OK, thanks,” she’d reply. Then I disappeared into a crowd of people. I moved with the current of eager travelers. Loads of tour groups and frantic parents with white-knuckle grips on their children’s aching, little hands. I looked back to see if she watched me from our spot on the dusty platform floor, but I couldn’t see her.



## HOME

I lost all or most of the pictures from the trip when I lent my camera to her friend and it went lost. The memory card inside. And even with 21st century technology, I couldn't recover what had been lost. She, being the photographer of the two of us, took wonderful and vibrant photos--both of us and the many landscapes we traveled. Still, what of my story through photos? Surely, we our accounts varied, our eyes not always focused on the same object, our minds on the same idea. Her friend replaced my camera along with a new memory card.

## AWAY

On the Berlin platform, we shared what we had left of our initially packed rations. Apples, cheese, and Red Label scotch, all purchased in Amsterdam at the beginning of the trip. Passing the bits of apple back and forth killed me inside. We still had those sweet seconds of offering, of touching gesture, "here you go," she'd say. "Thank you," I'd reply. "Want some more of this?" We had a bottle of wine nestled with some dirty clothes in one of our hiker packs with the straps that go around your waist. We opened it.

This I know for sure: we sat, half-drunk in the darkened departure section of the train station, and watched a locomotive slowly come to life and exit. When it left, there remained a type of husk, just an empty sleeve of stone and concrete, the warmth and smell lingered, signaling that something had been there at one time, but had since moved on. Maybe it left a sort of memory, a remembering for anyone who cared to take part in this experience of sitting and watching trains leave the station. Surely, someone wrote a poem about it. Pound?

I wrote my thoughts down in a moleskin and showed them to her later on the train.

She seemed to like it, or at least she smiled a bit and touched my shoulder. That wasn't so bad, I thought. Sometimes, I show her writings and she cringes and turns away as if I have crudely offended her. Sometimes my writing will open up old wounds. Sometimes...I know nothing for sure.

“Going to hit the bathroom,” she said. “Get you anything?” “I’m good, thanks, dear,” I replied. I watched her go and felt ache, like she herself climbed aboard one of those departing trains, leaving me to sit on the ground alone, and took off for new amazing experiences with someone else. Someone better. How did we let this happen? I thought. My fault. Her fault. I drank wine.

A few platforms away, I watched a station worker cleaning the large cycloptic window of a sleeping train. By the way he worked, I realized how caked that window must have been with dirt and pollen and the insides of insects and everything the wind could throw against it. Every stroke of the washer’s blade erased where the train had been, while it moved, its motion. He prepared the train for its next trip and made sure it could make new memories for all that cared to join in the remembering. Where would she and I fit into all of this? I thought. Would we want to remember any of this. Did we have a choice?

Would I remember drinking absinthe and skyping red-faced with her parents at the Fortuna Luna in the Czech Republic? Being somewhat worried that I would start hallucinating there in the hotel lobby into the face of her father? We couldn't get into Prague because of the train strikes that seemed to follow us around Central Europe. The workers shut down transportation randomly, it seemed to us, and forced a new kind of tourist experience. We dined in the same tavern two nights in a row. We started recognizing people in parks and grocery stores.

Would we remember ducking into a small theater while it rained and watching two

films, Von Trier's *Melancholia* and I don't remember the second one. It was about a town near Prague that had been completely wiped out by the Germans during the invasion. I forget the name of the movie and the town, but remember the incident now that I say it. Both films left me somewhat unsettled. We drank wine and hot chocolate through both. Beautiful theater.

What about making love on the train, one soft blue curtain drawn for privacy, the window open and air rushing by our faces, eyes closed together. And what about dancing in a Munich club with locals who walked us around town. The pictures we took of blue water. Lying separately on hostel bunk beds. Lying together in hostel bunk beds. Stepping in dog shit while trying to admire the canals in Amsterdam. And how she laughed. And how I held her.

One night in Berlin we went to a church in the square. Flyers for live orchestral music had drawn us in to the quiet hum of the wooden pews. Soon, we realized two things. One: that the presentation was an actual service, and two: it was going to be in German. We sat for two hours and were treated occasionally with musical interruptions to the foreign service. Neither one of us were very religious, so I can't say that even having understood the sermon, it would have done us much.

## HOME

Months after the trip, I feel a blackness inside that needs scraped out. A rotting stasis. I need absolution. And where we are today gives me very little despite our words, our warmth. Despite our sleeping together with frequent rhythm. Bore holes in me and see the oily reflection of your smile. See what has happened to this man. Climb inside and know.

I never wrote her any poetry until much later in the relationship. It strikes me now

that writing poetry for someone while traveling would be very romantic. Maybe it would have helped her remember. Instead, she caught me sending postcards to old friends, some of them old girlfriends. I meant no harm by it, just trying to be thoughtful, but maybe to the wrong person. We were in a tiny town outside of the Neuschwanstein Castle, waiting for the tourist bus to take us up to the castle. While we waited, I noticed a mailbox and decided to rattle off a few quick cards. The castle was the one thing on the trip she researched and planned.

I've written poems for her since we've been back, can't say she particularly liked any of them. A guy she's seeing now builds her things. Apparently, he's a skilled carpenter. I think she likes that kind of thing. A man who can build things with his hands, a pretty tall cliché. But, alas, probably true. I build differently, I told her once. She said I had soft hands.

Almost a year after being back from our trip, I sang Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" to her during a bar's karaoke night. I wanted to sing songs specifically from David Lynch films because we enjoy them darkly, together. So I started with *Blue Velvet*. The scene is not romantic by any means, really. Isabella Rossellini is visiting her kidnapped son while Dennis Hopper listens to a strange man named "Frank" in white make up sing Orbison. There is a strange softness to the scene that's quite lovely. And the words are beautiful to sing as a lover.

I'm no Elvis, never proclaimed to be. But I nailed "Love Me Tender". Nicolas Cage sang it to Laura Dern as the credits rolled at the end of *Wild at Heart*. And what gets me about this now is how perfect it seems. While he sang to her, she remembered everything she loved about him: his crazy ways, his passion, his love for her. That they belong together. While I sang to my ex, our eyes locked through the lazy smoke in the bar.

We had that dramatic fashion. And as I swayed and subtly gyrated on stage, just enough to not look completely foolish, I wondered what she thought about us and our future. What could she remember about me? What did she allow herself?

The song is a new beginning. It makes me curious to think about whether she and I will get one. Our new beginning created from memory. But all our memory is not positively illuminated like the red ruby slippers in the film. We have darkness in our past. A trip out of town, too much to drink. Me confessing months later. And now, another man for her.

### AWAY

I bought her gloves at an open air market in Berlin. She picked out sheik burgundy leather hobo gloves. I bought a similar pair for my sister. We spent the rest of that day walking around the city, stopped in to check out a few galleries. Observed the canals and people partying to Ska music on one of the boats passing beneath us. That night, I felt the sting of a leather hobo glove across my cheek. We were just down from the hostel at a local bar. We didn't always care for the clubs or popular tourist spots. This place was real local.

We talked about our families often, being that they came from very different backgrounds. Mine were PhDs and hers worked in a rock quarry and school office. No disrespect to any of the professions but there had been moments of tension. One came when her parents visited and we all went out to dinner. I had some drinks and began taking offense to her father's proclamations on tenured professors and how it bred laziness. I spoke my piece and then went noticeably silent.

Now, I don't remember exactly what was said that led up to our conversation that resulted in me getting slapped in the local bar in Berlin. I remember the tipping point, though. I said: "Stop pitying yourself." That did it. More than enough, probably. She took

it as I pitied her for her roots, which I surely do not. I can't remember why I said it, but I know I meant it.

She reached out and cracked me a solid across the cheek and stormed out in cinematic fashion. The local guys at the bar just swiveled on their seats, took me in, and swiveled back to their drinks. The bartender kept an eye on me as if I were trouble. I paid for the drinks and went after her. We met back in our room at the hostel, both breathing heavily and feeling sick. There were two sets of bunk beds, ours and the set belonging to the Indian gentlemen who slept. Then I remembered the power converter we left back at the bar to charge her phone. I went back.

For an hour or so, she laid on the top, myself on the bottom. Then we joined bunks and made little motions of what we wanted to watch on the computer. We settled on *The Graduate*. The men next to us began to snore and she and I took turns making loud disturbances in hopes of stirring them. We were partners again in something. Someone annoyed us more than each other at the moment and we had to work together to succeed. Nothing worked though, and the great rolls of thunder continued to shake our little room.

"I'll go and see if we can move to another room," I said. She nodded. I could tell that she felt grateful for this gesture. We packed up our things in the dark, stuffed clothes into bags, packed up wires and gathered loose change. Our new room also had two sets of bunk beds and we each took the bottom bunk on opposite sides of the room. I think we watched each other for a while, a soft light coming in the window from somewhere off the street. We didn't speak. Then the light went out. We shared the dark in silence.

The next morning, we decided to leave. It didn't matter if either of us wanted to stay, our rail passes were joined, and we were wed in our travels. The original plan had been for her to come back home with me to my family's house, and stay for the rest of the

summer. Neither one of us saw it an option any longer. Instead, we would ride the trains and planes back to America, frowning for thousands of miles out our respective windows.

## HOME

Plane: Amsterdam to Philly. Bus: Philly to Buffalo. Parents: Buffalo to Home.

Both of us.

## AWAY

A friend we were staying with in a small town in the Czech Republic had some Czech friends who were in a Tom Petty cover band. We all went over to Pavel's house for a pig roast. He played Tom in the band. His house sat amidst a huge cornfield, and we sat at what reminded me of a picnic site at any American rest stop. The slab of concrete, picnic table and benches. Only this had been covered and screened in, the open flame of the grill just off to the side.

We ate and drank into the soft glow of morning. We left with cherry leaves in our hair that we picked roadside before climbing into the cab. Downtown to another bar. In the morning, I slipped and fell in the shower, naked, bleeding on the bathroom floor. The gash running the length of a pinky finger on the back of my head. And as we waited for our train to Berlin, you made sure I was alright. You had no other choice. I had pain and you tried.

## HOME

Fourth of July you laughed throughout the entire fireworks presentation. I never heard anything like it. Childish in a way, but pure joy. I never heard that from you before. It's something I will remember. The older adults in the crowd turned to look at you, but you didn't care. They figured you were stoned or drunk or whatever, but you just loved seeing colorful explosions in the sky, loved the weight in noise they made. Their power.

Our relationship was based on explosion. Almost always. Those around us held their breath until we passed out of a room and sucked the air out of another. Colorful and loud. That, I think, you will remember. Take with you. Swimming late at night, pulling your feet and body softly through the water, the smile on your face. You kept my red handkerchief even though we don't speak. Why? I asked you, I kind of want that back. Then you shouldn't have given it to me, you replied. Fair is fair. A small object like that is easily capable of recreating some memory. Simulating a moment of caring. It can remind of who we once gave ourselves to.

#### AWAY

The Berlin station is cold. We have many miles ahead of us, I think. What is she going to tell her parents? She never told them anything real or intimate about her life. They didn't know she went to Belize with a man in his fifties. That bothered me on many levels. She had four versions of herself. Sometimes I wondered who else I could be. Who else would know?

As the train begins to pick up momentum, I think of where it has been in the last few days. How it's always on the track, moving forward or in reverse. Smoking. Wheezing. Carrying so many bodies who never think about the body of a train. Who don't care to remember or find out what it is. What of regret in all of this? We never saw a reason for it. We never had the time.



*Arriving on Time: Black Hills, South Dakota*

The smoke was visible for miles before we saw the fires.

“Can you believe how clean those stalls were?” She asked me.

“Best rest stop ever,” I replied.

“What is that out there?” She asked. “See all that black?”

“I do,” I said.

\* \* \*

We spotted the first brushfire on Rt. 16, fifty miles from Crazy Horse Monument. It was a plain stretch of highway that ran east-west through the Black Hills. I hung out the window and took pictures of the angry flames eating up all the brush, turning out dark clouds that muddied the sky. The roadside burned for miles. She looked worried in the driver’s seat.

We thought seeing Crazy Horse would give Mount Rushmore a more interesting context. We didn’t know much about either monument, really. Just knew that one was a famous Native American and the other was dead presidents. She hated being quizzed. I asked her if she knew the rock and roll significance of Crazy Horse.

My parents took my sister and me to the Crazy Horse Monument when we were much younger. I don’t remember going. They said that my sister and I just wanted to sit in the car and wait. Eventually, she and I caved and we got out to see what all the fuss was about. We were at the age when history seemed boring and irrelevant. What we saw was just a huge mass of yellowish stone. It had enough shape to it that we knew it would someday be something. But at that time, it was devoid of character, absent of heart, with no eyes to blink back at us.

The half-crazed sculptor Ziolkowski and family had finished Crazy Horse’s head

when my sister and I went back years later. The outline of his horse was there beneath him this time like a heaving warrior chest, like he had gathered his breath for centuries. How much wind, she and I wondered aloud, would it take to put out all the fires up and down Rt. 16, or maybe all over the state, or the forests and mountains, the oil fields and power plants? We imagined Crazy Horse closing his boulder eyes and exhaling from his dynamited mouth, flushing air and rainwater through rock, flooding basins, extinguishing all the flames in the country, and all that flame that trailed through the hills and led us right to him.

## *Burying the Local*

Oxbow cemetery was tucked away in the rolling hills of Harborcreek, Pennsylvania, out deep behind the shady willows and pine trees off Damsite Road. I lived just up from there on 426, a twisting stretch of unmarked black pavement that Jake Henry and I snuck down after dark, silently passing a flask of Old Crow we'd boosted from my parents. The moon reflected off the dead midnight asphalt. When our sneakers scraped against the loose dirt and gravel of Damsite, we let the warm drunkenness fly off our tongues, our slurred adolescent obscenities flapping wet into the darkness for no one but us to hear.

I drove down that dirt road and helped Stacey Wilson get relaxed in the back of my Cherokee despite her obvious discomfort from the surrounding headstones. There would also be afterschool fights up in Oxbow. Once detention let out, a string of cars could be seen going through town, making their way up the hill. I had seen a few and fought once.

Jake and I fought the Haines brothers; we went at it using pieces of a broken window from the cemetery caretaker's shed. Julie, the caretaker, was in her mid-thirties. I had always wondered about her character, why she did that kind of work. She wasn't married or anything, as far as I knew. Lived alone. Part of the reason I fought there was to give her the opportunity to see how tough I was. The fight with the brothers ended with our arms streaked with blood. We were all satisfied with ourselves and went home to revel in the brutish carnage. She came out once or twice and we all scattered into our cars. I secretly wanted to stay back. To let her dress my wounds. To see the inside of her little house.

My understanding of the cemetery gradually changed. I no longer saw it as a place to get laid or kick up dust with the other guys. I wanted a different experience altogether, one that leave my friends behind me smoldering like our half-smoked Swisher Sweet

cigars. Seeing the dead names scrawled on the stones made me want to become immortalized in town. I wanted my parents and teachers to marvel at who I had become. I didn't want to be shrouded in mystery or anything, just to carry a different weight.

So, when the opportunity presented itself, I helped Jake and his dad bury a man at Oxbow.

Jake's dad held the township supervisor position and the two of them lived on the other side of the cemetery. Mr. Henry took a proactive role in the town. He volunteered for security at the Cherry Festival and always showed his prize-winning 69' Mustang at the annual Rib Cook-Off down in Gravel Pit Park. He had stature. Mr. Henry was well known and respected by everyone I knew. I figured it was mostly due to the fact that he was paid to bury the town's dead. He was the man families saw delivering their loved ones to their final place in the earth. That has weight.

I could even hear respect in the way people in town talked about him. I saw their regard for him as he casually strolled behind his grocery cart, methodically navigating the aisles of Sanders Market. I'd seen one of the check-out guys, a grown man, slightly stutter when counting back Mr. Henry's change. My mother believes that she sees colors around someone when she meets them for the first time, that she can tell what kind of person they are from these colors. Auras, she calls them. She said Mr. Henry had a purplish-black aura to him, like a deep bruise on the mend.

Mr. Henry regularly visited the cemetery, his truck consistently parked next to an elm tree just inside the front gate. Sometimes his truck was there well after dark. He also liked to stop by Freeport Restaurant for a beer. The early evening air was cool coming off the water, a perfect place to watch the day peacefully end. Jake and I used to work in the kitchen. A lot of my friends were cooks and servers. It was a high school rite of passage, a

classic town staple, and an easy job to do with a thumping hangover. We often commiserated collectively, turned the radio down to a low murmur, and shuffled around the kitchen.

Some of the kids were older and we'd get to party with them after work, even just in the parking lot behind the dumpsters. All I did for my five an hour was smoke cigarettes, wash a few dishes, and sit on an empty upside down pickle bucket trying to catch a glimpse of Randa Berry's cleavage as she beer battered scrod. I would angrily masturbate in the bathroom to her during my breaks.

This one time, the kitchen closed and I stuck around after my shift to party a bit with the other workers. Randa wasn't going, so I was headed home. When I noticed Mr. Henry's truck in the parking lot, I went back inside and ordered a coke at the bar from Nancy, the owner's wife. She could usually be found tending bar with one needle-thin cigarette spinning smoke from its ashtray and another between her tan, bony fingers. I pretended to watch the ball game on TV but secretly kept an eye on Mr. Henry sitting alone at a table. He hadn't seen me come in.

The lamp lights were on low and cast shadows across the men's faces sitting down. I could still make out the dirt stains on Mr. Henry's jeans. His hands resting on the table looked callused, like chipped stone. I thought to buy him a beer when Ron, my boss, walked in and snorted about the score of the ballgame. He was notorious for giving the girls raises in an effort to keep them around, especially in the summer, when they wore little tank tops and shorts in the kitchen. A real pig, if you ask me.

I smoked a cigarette and looked at my hands. I held them up to the light and observed them carefully. They were weak-looking, and I felt ashamed. Attached to my soft, pink palms were hairless fingers wrinkly and pruned from dishwashing. My pointer and

middle fingers did have a soft orange glow to the tips from tobacco, which I rather liked. But all in all, they looked like my mother's after she cleaned up from dinner. I lit another cigarette and gazed down my arms, patiently studying the thinly raised scars that looked like skinny white worms zigzagging across my forearms. This made me feel a little better.

I felt a large hand land on my shoulder and squeeze.

"Ready for Oxbow this weekend?" Mr. Henry asked.

"I am."

He nodded and left.

\* \* \*

Early the next evening, I entered through the open gates of Oxbow Cemetery. I came with purpose. The crisp air gave me gooseflesh. I heard crows cawing from unseen positions in the trees above. I stood in the middle of small dirt road that ran through the cemetery. I watched Julie walk over from her house.

"Are you with Mr. Henry," she asked. Her blue jeans were faded and she wore her hair back in a bouncy ponytail. She took a step closer to me and I jammed my hands in my pockets. She looked unbelievably clean for this job.

"Yeah. I'm supposed to meet them."

"I know you, don't I?"

"I don't think so."

"Yeah. I think we may have met right over there." She pointed to a scattering of headstones about twenty yards off. Her fingernails were unpainted and the little beds beneath them looked a perfect pink. "It was a while ago, maybe last summer?"

"Not ringing a bell."

"No? Really? That's weird because I could swear it was you. There was this bad

looking kid with cut up arms and a ripped t-shirt. Bad. He looked like he may have delivered a whooping to some other kids. That wasn't you?"

"What do you mean 'bad looking'?"

"I don't know. Like Dean in Rebel."

"Dean?"

"Nevermind."

A car slowly rolled into the cemetery. Inside were four old ladies with matching gray perms under green rain bonnets. The woman in the front passenger seat had flowers and an empty milk jug.

"Know them?"

"Don't think so. Must not be regulars."

"Sounds like you're running a bar or something. I think those ladies hit last call years ago."

Julie laughed and I felt my face turn red.

"That's right, move it or lose it. And some local folks have been known to nip at a bottle while grieving here. Sometimes people just drink in here. Believe that?" Her eyes narrowed slightly. I imagine Julie on her knees picking up shards of glass. Her fingers in the dirt. It's her job. Her responsibility. She had no choice. I remember the filthy, chemical-stinking handkerchiefs and metal pop cans burnt black with small pen-sized holes, shiny metal nitrous cartridges like steel sausages, little plastic straws. Dirty clothing. Our blood.

"I think you've spent a lot of time here."

I really looked at her then. Noticed her green eyes and the little freckles beneath them. Her tanned skin showed long work hours in the sun. I tried to imagine holding her

to me, what she might feel like. The smell of sun and sweat and dirt. How she'd rinse it all off before climbing into bed. I tried in that moment to understand exactly how she saw me. What did she mean by calling me Dean? She probably thought of me as just a kid, like Jake.

"Maybe you'd like to help me out sometime?" she asked. "Nothing too strenuous. Just some maintenance stuff and general clean up. Do a good job and I might even let you in on some of the secrets of the trade."

Secrets of the trade. Exactly what I needed. Maybe I could finally quit working for Stetson. I'd miss Randa, but Julie had something I wanted in an altogether different way. She had a dark mystery to her. She had womanish features. She was in control. Established.

"Alright. Sure. What do I do, just show up? Call you or...?"

"Come back Monday."

"Monday," I repeated. "Great."

Mr. Henry's truck rumbled up the road and into Oxbow. I saw Jake playing with his phone and felt embarrassed for him.

"Howdy, Julie," Mr. Henry said.

"Hey, Sam."

I noticed a kind of unease between them. Something in the way they spoke each other's names. She touched his shoulder and I felt my stomach twist.

"Where we looking?" he asked

"Right over here, Sam."

Mr. Henry walked alongside Julie to the plot. I had always heard that you don't step on the ground directly above where someone's buried body. My parents told me it meant



disrespect to the rested. But I saw Mr. Henry completely unconcerned with where he stepped, little care for what he had underneath his boots.

“Get the sound bar, Jake,” he called back over his shoulder.

Jake dug in the truck’s toolbox and pulled out a long leaf blower-looking machine. He flicked it on and we started to thread our way through the Oxbow cemetery, the bar sweeping back and forth inches above the ground. As we passed gravesites, the beeps came faster. I imagined the steel handles of coffins. I wondered if people liked to be buried in their jewelry.

At first, I walked around where I assumed the bodies would be. Then I felt stupid and decided to let it go. Bad luck be damned, I thought. I can handle it. I read some of the names on the gravestones out loud.

“Wilcox. Meabon. Post.”

Jake gave me a weird look and switched off the sound bar to see if I would keep reading aloud.

Some of the names I couldn’t even read because of the turquoise moss that climbed up from the ground. It made the stones look funky with decay. I wondered why Julie didn’t clean the faces of the stones. Maybe that’s what I’ll be doing, I suddenly thought.

We approached Mr. Henry and Julie, who stood over a flat strip of untouched green. Not a leaf on it and lightly shaded by a nearby pine tree. Mr. Henry sounded annoyed when he had to tell Jake to turn the sound bar on again. I saw my window.

“Can I?”

Jake frowned and looked at his dad. Mr. Henry nodded. I took the bar from Jake and switched it on. I walked back and forth across the square plot in straight lines.

“How’s this?” I asked.

“Fine,” replied Mr. Henry. “That’s good. Okay.” He turned to Julie. “Funeral’s at noon, we’ll be here at ten.”

“Sounds good, Sam. See you, boys.” Julie smiled and turned back towards the house.

I watched her leave, her small hips and tight jeans. I pictured her lying down on a couch, flipping television channels. Something ordinary that took her out of this place. I noticed Mr. Henry watching me and coughed into my fist. It began to rain.

Mr. Henry drove Jake and me over to my house. I watched little trails of rain melt into one another as they patterned on the window of the truck. I could see the tree line that gave way to the foggy outline of Ontario on the other side of the lake. Black clouds huddled together like large animals. Mr. Henry dropped us off without saying a word. He didn’t talk much. I liked that. He only said what was necessary and kept the rest simple. Jake headed straight into my house, and I turned to watch Mr. Henry ease down the driveway. A dog barked at me from across the road.

Jake sat at the dining room table with a glass of orange juice and talked with my mom. My friends teased me about how attractive they thought she was. Her hair was always brushed and it fell gracefully down past her shoulders. I could smell her cinnamon candles mixing with the spice of the chili on the stove.

“Hey, Scotty.”

I nodded and poured myself some juice and drank it down. I moved deliberately around the kitchen, fully aware of her watching me. I quickly turned and rifled through the kitchen junk drawer.

“What on earth are you looking for?”

“Masking tape,” I muttered.

“Oh? For what?”

“My hands. I need it for my hands. For work.”

“Ok, well dinner is ready.”

“What about dad?”

“He’s working late at the office. We’ll leave him a plate.”

“Figures.”

“Don’t start.”

After dinner, I took Jake home. While he waited in the car, I grabbed a shovel from the garage and put it in my trunk. He didn’t notice, or didn’t bother to ask. Neither one of us spoke on the way home. I watched the cemetery drift by me in the dark.

“See you at nine, sharp,” I said.

“Right,” said Jake. “Don’t worry if you’re a few minutes late. I hate getting up that early.”

“You got it,” I said.

But I didn’t listen. I noticed Mr. Henry’s truck wasn’t in the driveway. A motion light clicked on and Mr. Henry’s Mustang was illuminated there in the night.

I should have turned right out of the drive to get back home, but instead I went left, and swung down through Paper Mill Hollow. At night, you could hear Sixteen Mile Creek bubble and run alongside the road all the way into Lake Erie. Every so often, the creek would flood and we’d swim in it. Once a little girl playing in her backyard fell in and almost drowned. They found her two miles down from her house, barely conscious and clinging to an entanglement of branches. I never thought about children being buried up at Oxbow. I made my way past the silent and sparkling boat marina, and parked in Freeport’s gravel

lot.

I parked close to the first dumpster and walked over to Mr. Henry's truck. I kept an eye on the back door of the restaurant. I cupped my hands to the window and saw a scattering of tools, travel mugs, and empty cigarette packs. I remembered the large toolbox and I circled the truck once before I hoisted myself up into the bed of the truck. I breathed heavily.

I rummaged through the toolbox like my life depended on what I found inside. Every few seconds, I stopped and held an object up to the light for closer examination. I found a Playboy and quickly flipped through it, studied the centerfold for a moment. They weren't as attractive to me as Julie was. It surprised me.

I don't know what I expected to find, the key to something more important than myself. Answers of some kind. Some fact about Mr. Henry I didn't know before. The reason I followed him around town. Something to confirm my belief in what I was going to do in the morning would change me. But instead, I felt an awful emptiness. The same feeling I eventually got with the other kids up at Oxbow. I felt my eyes burn like I'd been punched in the nose. I ran my shirtsleeve across my face and slammed the toolbox shut.

I got back in my car and decided to wait for a few minutes. The back door to the restaurant opened and Julie emerged with Mr. Henry close behind. They walked over to his truck and he opened the door for her. She climbed inside. I could see her ponytail through the back window. My stomach tightened as I watched her flip down the visor mirror and check her makeup. She wouldn't have to wear makeup for me, I thought. I felt my eyes water again.

The truck lights kicked on and they swung around onto the road. I started my car and kept a safe distance back. They turned off into the cemetery at Julie's place, and I

continued on home. I thought about sneaking down in the morning to see if his truck would still be there.

I parked and remembered the shovel in the trunk. I took it out and circled the house to see if my parents heard me come in. Light from my dad's office poured out his window and spilled onto a small patch of lawn. I stood just beyond the light in the shadows and put the shovel into the ground. I put one foot on the purchase and leaned on it. I watched my dad stare into his computer screen, a look I had seen quite often. Sometimes, it was the look I talked to, the look I walked away from. I seemed to have forgotten all about Julie and Mr. Henry in that moment. My father. I had never heard anyone really talk about my father.

He looked up from his screen and seemed to peer directly at me. I took my foot off the shovel and readied myself to hide. Then I tried to think of something to say to him if he found me in the yard. Practicing for the morning seemed like a good one. But he went back to his computer. After a few minutes, he closed up shop and turned the office light off, plunging me into darkness.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I sat on Mr. Henry's porch, moving a rocking chair back and forth. It was the morning Mr. Henry apprenticed me to the art of burying the dead. The porch faced a deep valley on the other side of the road with a curtain of trees obstructing my view from the town beyond. I looked out on the driveway and saw the backhoe that Mr. Henry would operate. Its awkward scoop for digging, monstrous and dirtied yellow, looked like a huge metal claw with spaces between like fingers. Jake would be on the tractor, a trailer full of tools hitched on the back. And then, because there wouldn't be a seat for me, I'd be in my car, bringing up the rear of the mechanical procession to Oxbow.

Mr. Henry was out first. He nodded to me, and I stood quickly at attention.

“I got here at nine.”

“That’s good,” Scott.

Jake appeared with his coat half on and stumbling towards the car. I braved the weather without coat or hat. Then Mr. Henry was on the backhoe firing it up, letting the engine run before he put it in gear and crept toward the road.

It was the three of us on the road. I wanted someone to drive by and see me, but wondered if they’d think I was just stuck behind two large and slow vehicles. I wanted the buzz around town to start early on this one. It was 9:30. We’d be at the cemetery right on time.

I felt myself tense up when the Oxbow came into sight. I began to sweat. Once inside the cemetery, I pulled off to the side behind Jake and Mr. Henry, who grabbed tools.

“I have a shovel,” I said.

“Don’t need it. Here’s an axe and the pitchfork. We’re going to line these,” Mr. Henry said, holding up two large pieces of particle board. “Length wise, on both sides of the grave. Got to get the sod up.”

He held both pieces over his head, and we carried the tools to the marked plot. Mr. Henry sat in the backhoe, its diesel engine exhaled black smog from its vertical steel lung. Julie appeared in her front yard and started to walk over. I didn’t bother to watch her this time. I kept an eye on Mr. Henry. He kept his head down with the work.

Jake and I put the particle board down and began to cut the outline of the grave with the axe. I stood back and watched Jake hack his way around the edges. When he was done, there were four neat sections perfectly measured.

“Pitchfork,” Jake said. We were both quiet and focused. I hadn’t seen him work like this before. A huge brawl could’ve been taking place up on the hill and we wouldn’t have cared. “We gotta roll it,” he said. I raised one section of sod and disconnected all the shaggy roots with the pitchfork. Jake rolled the sections into what looked like a green and brown sleeping bag. We knocked the first section with our fists to shake loose the excess dirt so it would be lighter when we carried it off. We rolled the other three pieces and carried them behind a tree so they couldn’t be seen from the burial site.

Jake stalked off to bring the tractor and trailer around. I heard the backhoe’s gears grind and shift as Mr. Henry nodded for me to get out of the way. Jake stood behind him and then circled the gravesite. The great yellow claw bit down into the ground and came up with a fistful of soil and rock and dumped it into the trailer. I could’ve watched it dig for days. There was something in the simplicity of power. The way it fulfilled its purpose without thinking. A perfect machine.

Eventually, the mechanical digging ended. I felt electric inside. It was time for someone to hop down into the hole, continue another foot or so, and smooth out the bottom. Before I knew it, I was shoveling the rocky soil. My back burned. I could faintly hear the little streams of soil falling off the trailer and back into the hole. I grew aware of my heavy breathing and hoped Mr. Henry and Julie were watching me. I only stopped once to observe the view from my new job. I couldn’t see over the top of the grave, but I could look up and saw the ashy sky, a whole six feet further away than anyone else. I stood alone in the hole. Rare, and on dangerous ground.

The digging finished, I bridged the corner of my freshly dug grave with the shovel. To get out of the hole, I anchored all my weight against the shovel, and swung my legs over to the other side. When I got out, I only saw Mr. Henry and Jake.

“Decent time,” said Mr. Henry. “Good work with the hole. Jake show you how to even the edges?”

“Just figured it out, I guess.”

“Good,” Mr. Henry said.

I didn’t smile when he complimented me like I thought I would. I kept a straight face and got ready for the next move. We packed up our gear and parked our vehicles out of sight about a half mile down Damsite Road. I could smell Eaton Reservoir drifting heavily in the cross breeze.

“Go kill some time, boys. You got an hour.”

Jake and I decided to hang out at the reservoir. I turned to Mr. Henry.

“What are you going to do?”

He seemed surprised that I asked. “Go see if Julie needs any help. Or maybe I’ll just plant myself under this tree.”

“Fair enough,” said Jake.

We walked around the reservoir’s shallow edges, looking for animals. In summer, frogs chirped and leapt into the water, one by one, like dominoes. Now there were mostly tadpoles squirming in the shady water. I saw a few large ones that looked like they’d change right before me.

“Look at this,” said Jake, a few yards ahead of me. “Come look.” He was standing over a small pile of fur, berries, and little white sticks. It was dark in complexion and shaped like a pinecone.

“Owl scat,” I said.

“Right” said Jake. “What are those white things? Worms?”

“Mouse bones, I think.”



“Yeah? They look like worms.”

“Think so. They’re not moving.”

We looked around the reservoir as if there were answers to be found in the surrounding trees. A few fishermen were out on the water, a middle-aged couple walked their dog without a leash. I watched the way the dog walked and looked back to the furry bones.

“What do you think of Julie?” Jake asked.

“What?”

“What do you think of Julie?”

“The caretaker? She seems cool. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

We sent some stones skipping across the reservoir’s rippling surface. My rocks almost always went further than Jake’s.

“I saw your dad with her the other night.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Jake said. “He keeps that to himself and I don’t ask.”

“Just sayin,” I said. “I saw them together. Are they dating?”

“I just told you, we don’t talk about that stuff. Leave it.”

“You know I’m working for her on Monday.”

“Good for you.”

Our arms got tired and we needed to get back to the cemetery. We caught the tail end of the procession snaking onto 426 as we made our way up to our vehicles. I suddenly realized I hadn’t eaten when my stomach gave off a hollow pain. I dismissed it and drove up to the gravesite. I wasn’t sure what I should’ve expected to see. Members of my family had passed before I was old enough to remember the experiences of a funeral. I had to

assume I went and played in the lobby with cousins and ran around outside while the adults held each other and cried.

I saw a silver casket at the bottom of the hole. The hole I dug. The claw, the shovel, and me. My body in the hole.

Jake backed up the trailer filled with dirt until Mr. Henry held up his hands. The trailer slowly raised and pounds of dirt came sliding down onto the casket with a sound like heavy rain drumming on buckets. The casket quickly disappeared under the dirt and rock, buried. Mr. Henry told me to smooth out the dirt. I went back over my job several times; making sure it was even for the sod. It had to fit back on top just like a lid. Jake and I carried over the four sections and laid them down, one by one. I didn't see Julie around.

Mr. Henry brought over the tamper, a thick metal pole with a square face for stomping surfaces flat. It must've weighed plenty, because I saw the pressure and strain in Mr. Henry's face every time he would lift it and bring it pounding down. I wanted to give it a try.

"Go get the flowers, Scott," said Mr. Henry. He raised the tamper and brought it down again.

I looked over at him and then at Jake. "Go get the flowers, Jake."

"Go to hell, man."

"Both of you go," Mr. Henry hissed in between lifts.

We came back with the flowers and Mr. Henry put them on top of the grave. The way he arranged them made the grave look like we'd never been there. Like I was never down there. We headed over to meet Julie by the vehicles. As we walked away, I kept looking back amazement at how quickly it all seemed to go by. Thousands of times a year, people are buried. And I got one of them.

Julie thanked the three of us and I gave her a serious look. Told her I'd see her Monday.

I shook Mr. Henry's hand quickly and firmly, said goodbye to Jake. Getting into my car, I could hear the soil shake loose from my pants and lightly patter onto the floor mats. I had it all over my clothes. Dirt, stuck with sweat, clung and browned my skin. It was in my ears and shoes. I decided not to go home just yet. Despite being exhausted from the day's work, muscles aching, I followed my gut and went down the hill, into town.

My car idled at the center light on Main St. At two in the afternoon the sidewalks were surprisingly full. I recognized some girls from my class talking excitedly on the outskirts of Gibson Park to my left. One of them called out to me. "Have something on your face, Scott."

"I know," I called back. "I was just..." The car honked behind me and the girls laughed. The light had changed. I decided to circle the block, but the girls scattered off. I drove down Paper Mill Hollow, passed Freeport Restaurant, and parked in front of the brick walls that bordered the small park and playground at the beach. The walls were waist high and covered with the first and last names of donors, most of them from town. I recognized a few families, and knew my parents were on there somewhere. Some people donate anonymously.

I looked out at the lake and thought about washing myself off in the cold water. White caps curled and disappeared into waves. Seagulls drifted and angled around the shore with the wind. I looked at my hands and saw the dirt had turned underneath my nails black. I drove back to the restaurant. The kitchen lights were off and it felt like a warm cave. I could barely read the schedule. Stetson had cut my hours to only two days the following week. I felt my car keys in my pocket and pictured what his little trashy car would

like with a nice lightning bolt scratched into the passenger door.

\* \* \*

Back at the house, I noticed the sky turning cold and getting ready for rain. My parents sat at the dining room table having lunch, and they turned together to stare at me, their son, covered in soil from head to toe.

“You mind changing outside?” asked my mom. “Your father and I just did the floors.”

“Guess I’m a bit dirty, huh?”

“Yes,” said my mother.

“That’s what work will get you,” I replied.

“So,” said my father, “how’d the big dig go?”

“Great,” I said. “Just fine.”

“Good to hear,” said my father. “Mr. Henry does good work around here. He’s a good customer, too.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Customer of yours?”

“Well, I’ve been doing his taxes for years, Scott.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s cool.”

“How do you feel, Scotty?” my mother asked.

“It was hard work, but that’s alright. I landed myself a job at Oxbow. Gonna work outside under the clouds. Get out of the kitchen. It’s gonna be eating up lots more of my time.”

“Sounds serious,” said my mom.

“It is,” I said, looking at them both. “It’s permanent.”

On the Friday night, before I started working for Julie in Oxbow, I rode my bike down to her place for what I started calling “check-ins”. I began to feel protective. Jake didn’t know, but I did. It wasn’t that I thought Mr. Henry was going to hurt her, but I wanted to keep some tabs on them. I was to be the new eyes and ears of the cemetery.

Julie sat alone at her kitchen table, something left over, foil removed and crumpled off to the side. Through the window, I heard the news off her television. A woman reported the weather. I still hadn’t been in her house, yet I felt excitement by familiarizing myself with the positioning of her plants and furniture. No pets. I started to know Julie.

Her phone rang and she turned down the television to answer. I watched her smile. I leaned in closer to the window, my face pressed up against the pane. She laughed. I cringed. Who else could it be at this hour? Maybe she had a brother. Who else would disregard someone’s dinner hour like that?

I watched Julie hop onto the couch and disappear. Then I circled the house. The drawn curtains in the living room forced me to keep moving to the next room. The bedroom, I thought. I knew it was, even though no lights were on. I cupped my face to the window and saw a laundry basket full of clothes. Whites. It occurred to me that if I knocked on the door, she would get off the phone. But then what would I say? I could’ve asked about work, but I would’ve looked foolish.

I’d show her Monday. She and I were going to be something special. A team. I thought about walking through the cemetery one last time as a casual bystander. But as I looked over Oxbow, I felt oddly aware of my smallness in the dark cemetery. Some of the gravestones seemed to glow against the moonlight. Bats excitedly looped around one another, I could hear their wings beating just above my head. They disappeared into the elm trees and then flashed out in front of the lone street light for insects. A soft wind blew

through the trees. Leaves encircled my feet. And that night of all other nights, I decided I couldn't walk through.

## *Gator Eggs*

Dale and Jackson ran and kept pace carrying six stolen eggs apiece. There must have been over fifty in the nest, but they didn't stick around to count. Each egg was light and would have busted open if they were dropped. The night air was sticky. And the fear of being caught by the Louisiana Gaming Commission or the eggs' mother turned the wind into hot breath on their backs.

Dale and Jackson each thought about Tall, a farmer in Pinegrove, as they darted through the brush. Tall hired them for the job and would pay thousands for the even dozen. The albino eggs were borderline extinct and used to raise gators for expensive export leather. Because of this, the boys had to venture into unfriendly territory.

A Louisville Slugger dangled from Jackson's belt. The wooden handle of a rusty misfiring pistol jutted out from Dale's ripped jean pocket. The Louisiana sun lent the land its last bit of light as the moon rose to take its shift, watching over the wooded marsh. A red-tailed hawk clung to a tree branch while, below, calloused and cast in dry mud, the boys' feet made a thin trail through the grass. Shadows sprung from the looming cattails and the thick bodies of rotting tree stumps.

The boys exploded out of the towering grass. Yellow halos from their flashlights bobbed unsteadily on the long stretch of rock and gravel that led them home. Dust rose and trailed them in the dark.

\* \* \*

Ellendale was a dust cloud of a town, most of its population tucked away on the back roads that ran through swampy thickets and under the canopy of sagging willow trees. The downtown train station was just as small as the surrounding businesses and shops. The station served as the main escape out of Ellendale, and each year a few eager locals shot out

of town to other parts of the country. The same family ran both the grocery and general store for twenty years. The nearest doctor was forty miles south in Pine Grove.

\* \* \*

The family trailer sat on an overgrown pasture with grazing dairy cows. A surrounding row of elms stood like totems in front of the deep woods. Bullfrogs bellowed out back in the pond, which started from a stagnant pool of rainwater years ago. The pond and pasture grew even when nothing else would.

Jackson and Dale's father had purchased the spread as a young man; a few years later, he married. The newlyweds had a few cows and a chicken coop. Every other week, they sold eggs and milk in town or traded to distant neighbors. The day his wife gave birth to twin boys, Curtis was fifty miles down the road trading his calves for a better plow.

Soon after becoming a father, he lost interest in farming and traded the land for a used Oldsmobile and some cash. He skipped town before his twin boys could walk across the living room floor. When Jackson and Dale were older, they began to really question their father's story. Their mother told them that her husband, Curtis Wills, died in a knife fight next to railroad tracks somewhere out West.

\* \* \*

Jackson and Dale stumbled into their back yard, nearly knocking the wooden gate off its hinges. They waded through the knee-high grass, over to the shed that stood next to an empty dog house. The doors were full of holes and rotting from rain. Dale got the metal toolbox down from a shelf and Jackson laid his eggs inside. Dale examined his eggs thoughtfully before he set them down. He liked the speckled spots of brown and red. They reminded him of Sarah's chicken pox scars.

Their mother appeared at the kitchen window of the trailer. The ceiling fan behind



her teetered like a warped record. “Wash up,” she said. “Dinner.”

Jackson gripped the handle of the spigot and started to crank. Dale wearily stood waiting for the slide whistle noise that signaled the water rising up the pipes, dirty brown at first. Dale ran his fingers through his hair, maroon streaks of dirt smeared across his face. He was the handsomer of the two boys, and their mother said so. Dale had soft features and thin blonde hair that matched the two day scruff on his chin. Jackson dried off and lumbered up the brick-stacked steps to the back door. A thicker frame than Dale, he had laborer’s shoulders and a slanted smile that made most folks uncomfortable.

The three of them sat down to a scantily set table. When their mother started to say Grace, Jackson quietly got down on his knees next to her and gently loosened the cap of a plastic bag strapped to her pale leg. The elastic bands left a ring around her calf like a snake had squeezed the life out of it. The tube was put in years ago, when her bladder gave out. It had taken Jackson some time to convince her to bite the bullet and make the trip to the doctor. She still hated the tube being inside her and usually forgot to empty the bag.

The cloudy urine filled a plastic bowl and the pungent smell made Jackson turn his head to the living room. He saw the family sofa and his tattered recliner. A small television sat atop a dusty square table in the corner next to the window. A few pictures hung on the wall. One showed their mother as a little girl playing the piano, a profile shot with the faint trace of her smile. The picture of their father was next to it, leaning over and practically swallowed by the hood of his first car.

“...and bless this food which we are about to receive. And bless my old pup, Luther. Keep him safe, Lord. Keep him safe like you know how... wherever he is...Amen.”

When their mother prayed, she was gone. You might as well not have been in the room. To her, you weren’t. She’d ramble under her breath for a few minutes, then came a

summary that short-listed all the wrongs in her life. In those moments, she disconnected from everything. Jackson and Dale didn't always listen. They didn't always want to know.

After they ate, their mother washed the dishes while Jackson sat at the table with a beer and talked up his plan. Dale went outside to wait for Sarah.

"I don't like you boys stealing, Jackson. I don't. It's sinful business."

"Pioneers did it. Why can't we?"

"Pioneers. Pioneers? That was different." She turned around to face him. "You know that. What we got here just isn't right."

"How, Mother? We got needs like them. Don't we? Dale and I gonna go out and get ourselves a big job? With big money? We gonna go out and buy ourself a car? Dale's about as useless as dirt without seed." He pointed his finger out at the window, "just like all this land."

"Sarah is probably right outside with your brother. You want her to hear you?"

"Shit," said Jackson. He took a long pull on his beer and looked around the kitchen. He watched his mother work to get the plates clean. He thought about helping her when he heard voices outside. "That's a hell of a trip for that girl to take for the likes of him? Not much in that pretty head of hers, I guess."

"Oh, really? She's brighter than the two of you put together, and you know it. Just listen to yourself and these eggs."

"These eggs," said Jackson, making a fist, "are no bigger than this. And they're a special kind. I gotta deal with this reptile farmer down a few miles who will give us a whole bundle for the dozen Dale and me got today. Talking hundreds here. Big money. These eggs we got are really special, you see? They're white albino, or something. I'm almost certain they are."

In his mother's face, Jackson could read she would need more convincing. "Well, I'm gonna see the farmer the day after next to seal the deal. Like it or not. This is gonna happen whether you like it or not. Get it? I mean we're doing this for you!"

"I certainly never asked for anything like this."

"Momma, listen. Once this first deal goes through, Dale and I prove we're good partners. Then we got a business. You see? We could get a house. You and me and Dale. Hell, even that girl of his. We could get outta here. We could be okay." With a beer in his hand, he gestured to the trailer's faded walls. "What have we got here? Nothing, that's what."

"Where's this farmer?" his mother asked.

"Pine Grove."

"Suppose you're not walking, are you? You got a ride?"

"Tall's sending a car. That's the farmer's name. Tall. He's sending a car for me and Dale in two days. A fine car, I'm told. Big and black."

"I don't like it, Jackson. I really don't."

"Mother."

"Suppose that big gator comes sniffing around here before you leave. Huh? Did you get a look at her? Bet she's mighty angry. You know one of em' ate my Rex!"

"We don't know that for sure, Mom, you know that. That dog of yours ran off a bunch of times. Probably found something worth keeping. Or maybe he tangled with a big fat snake or the like. Hell, I don't know. You don't know if he's dead. You don't know what's what in this family. Maybe he's with daddy somewhere. Anyway, you still keep that dog's bowl in case he comes back, don't ya? I know you still have hope."

"I gave that up years ago, Jackson. Hope doesn't float around here."

Dale and Sarah sat silently until the voices inside died down. Their faces were dimly lit by the light from the kitchen window. A band of crickets sounded off in the warm evening.

“How’re the brothers and sisters?”

“They’re alright, I suppose,” Sarah answered. “My folks went out last night and left me to watch them. You know what those younger ones do to me.”

“What’d Bobby do this time?” he asked with a grin.

“The usual. He put a small frog in Caroline’s cereal when she wasn’t looking. And that sister of mine can scream. Before I could grab Bobby, he ran outside and rolled back and forth in the cow pasture so I wouldn’t wanna touch him. I still gave him a crack, though.”

“Good for you. You know what I would’ve done? I would’ve done the same thing to Bobby. I would’ve put a big snake in that boy’s bed.”

“That’s dangerous , Dale.”

“Nothing poisonous. No harm. That’s brotherly justice. I bet it would’ve worked. Can’t tell you how Jackson and I used to go at it. And I’ve handled kids before.” He folded his arms in satisfaction, feeling good, thinking he had proved his theory.

“You’ve handled snakes and frogs, Dale.”

“Sometimes the difference is hard to notice, if you ask me.”

“Dale!”

“Just think of your dirty brothers and Jackson. They’re just a bunch of sweaty shirts and muddy boots.”

“You gotta point there,” Sarah said. They laughed and it was quiet except for the crickets. Jackson’s voice came from somewhere inside the trailer. Sarah shifted on the

bench and coughed.

“How’s your mother?” she asked. Dale didn’t answer. He gazed up at the kitchen window. “Dale?”

“Shit, I’m sorry. Doing alright, I guess.”

“You shouldn’t listen to Jackson. He’s just being a brother. He doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah, well. He don’t mean much to me.” Dale scratched his shoulder and swatted a mosquito. He rested his forearms on his knees and, with his head down, swept a hand over the tops of the spindly weeds and picked a few strands. “You don’t like taking care of those kids much, do you?” he asked.

“Not really, no. But they’re my family, aren’t they?”

“What if you had your own? Maybe one that you started.” He twisted the weeds between his fingers.

“I’d like that more, but...”

“Then let’s do it. Let’s try at least.” He took Sarah’s hand and tied a weed around her pinky finger. Sarah smiled and laughed.

“With this weed, I thee wed.”

There were no more voices from the kitchen, but the light still shone in the window. Dale helped Sarah stand, and he took her over to the shed. The door shut behind them, and they were swallowed by darkness. Dale held her waist and leaned in. He landed a kiss somewhere next to her nose.

“You about kissed my right eye, Dale,” she whispered.

“Sorry.”

They moved around awkwardly. Something slid against wood and fell to the floor.

Dale dug a lighter out of his pocket and flicked it. Long shadows of rakes and shovels ran up the walls, where slanted shelves were lined with cardboard boxes full of small, rusted metal tools. An old bag of dog food that had been nibbled into rested in the corner.

“It was just a shovel,” said Dale. He picked it up with one hand and showed her.

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “There’s something I wanna give you. And then something I wanna ask you.”

“Really?” she smiled. Her hands found his shoulders and she squeezed a little.

“It’s in here,” he said, and tapped the metal toolbox that held the eggs. “One of these belongs to you and me.” The lighter had gotten too hot for his thumb. “Goddamnit!” He threw the lighter to the floor. They listened as it bounced and rattled around the shed. They both crouched down and ran their palms over the dust and dirt on the floor. Their fingernails scratched and scraped against the wood as they searched together in the dark.

\* \* \*

Jackson woke to the sound of an airplane sputtering somewhere south of the trailer. Probably a crop duster rising high, circling around, and dropping fertilizer. He thought he’d be a pretty good pilot if ever given the chance. He thought about looking into getting a license.

Jackson found Dale and his mother in the kitchen, talking over toast and eggs. He noticed a small stack of money on the counter. After he poured some coffee, he sat down at his seat and let the sun warm his chest through the glass window. His mother’s bag lay empty on the floor beside her.

“What’s the money for?” Jackson asked, and nodded at the counter.

“Dale’s gonna run into town with Sarah for some groceries.”

“Oh, yeah? On what?”

“Bikes,” said Dale.

“Well, good luck, brother,” snorted Jackson.

Mother stood and carried the pan from the stove over to Jackson and scraped out some eggs. “Have some breakfast.”

Dale rose from the table, kissed his mother’s cheek, and scooped up the money. “Guess I’ll see you all later this evening.”

“I don’t like you going out like this, we got a big meeting tomorrow. When you coming back?”

“Supper,” said Dale. “I’ll be back by supper.”

“Better be, boy,” said Jackson, shoveling egg into his mouth.

The refrigerator hummed softly. The clock in the living room ticked off rhythmically. Jackson downed the rest of the coffee.

“Got some chores to do. See you at supper, huh?”

“I’ll leave the light on.”

\* \* \*

Dale’s fingers twitched while he waited for the clerk to hand back his change and tickets. Sarah looked around the station, studying the people waiting on the platforms.

“Look at them,” she said. “They’re all getting ready to blow out of here.”

“Amen to that. Tomorrow it’s me and you.”

“I feel bad your mother had to lie to Jackson like that. But it was a nice gesture.”

“And that there is what it is, Sarah. She made a gesture of faith and we’re going to make it happen.”

“I hope so, Dale.”

He held the tickets in his hand, studied them.

“Now what?” she asked.

“I think we ought to walk around a bit, don’t you? Explore the station. I don’t wanna get mixed up tomorrow and miss our train.”

“It’s Platform A, Dale. Right there.” She pointed to a platform where a man and woman stood with their young daughter.

“So it is. Let’s go sit on that bench and see how it feels.”

“Don’t you want to walk around town and see some familiar things before we go?”

“It feels like it went up ten degrees out there. Sure,” he said. “If that’s what you want.”

\* \* \*

Jackson sat by the pond with the eggs and the instructions Tall wrote down for him during their one and only meeting. Tall’s farm had wire fencing surrounding the property at every angle. He lived in a two story ranch house with a golden knocker on the front door that Jackson noticed on his way in. The house had been gutted to be one huge room with animal skulls looking down from the walls. There was a girl in ripped jean shorts and a bikini top playing the piano softly in the corner of the room. A man wearing a cowboy hat sat next to her, smoking a cigar, his thumb rubbing her leg.

People were drinking at the saloon style bar up against the far wall. A large chandelier threw prisms of light from the sky windows in the ceiling. Jackson watched them dance around the room, and then he settled back on the girl playing the piano. She noticed him and smiled. He nodded. The man in the cowboy hat stared him down.

Tall slapped him on the shoulder and walked him over to the saloon with the other guests. Jackson felt odd and tried to concentrate on Tall’s mouth, which was mostly hidden



by a thick beard. He was going bald and wore reading glasses, black overalls, his arms covered in tattoos. Must've been in his fifties, Jackson figured. An arrowhead necklace dangled on a piece of leather around Tall's neck. His boots were white leather.

Tall said his driver would pick him and Dale up in front of the Ellendale train station at 9AM. Said they would all return to Pinegrove where Tall would be waiting to greet them with a little party. Some music and drinking. Jackson thought about dancing with the piano girl. He could do with that after the long day was over.

\* \* \*

Jackson kept supper lively. He talked up his brother and mother all the way to dessert. A rhubarb pie was set down on the table between beer bottles.

"You should come with me, Dale. Be good for you to see how a man conducts his business." He smiled at Dale, who offered nothing in return.

"I'll be busy," said Dale.

"Spending more time with that girl of yours? That right? You've gone and found one for life, haven't you, boy? Man-oh-man. Mother, aren't you gonna talk some sense into this son of yours?"

"Your brother does what he thinks is best, Jackson. She's a sweet girl. Leave it."

"Supposed to be a scorcher tomorrow," mumbled Dale.

"Hell," said Jackson. "I got some friends in the penitentiary who can tell you what marriage is all about, brother. I would think you might learn from others around you once and awhile."

"That's plenty out of you, Jackson." She poured coffee into three cups.

"He ought to know what's waiting for him on the other side of the mountain, mother. He's gonna have to provide for a family someday."

“Cut the damn pie, would ya,” said Dale.

Jackson winked at his brother.

\* \* \*

Dale set out before the sun rose.

Jackson found Dale’s room empty when he went to wake him. He ran out to the kitchen and found his mother huddled something cooking on the stove.

“Where’s that son of yours gone to?”

“He’s not going with you, Jackson. You leave him out of it.”

“He over at Sarah’s? Son of a bitch. I don’t have time to run over there and collect him!”

“That’s right. You don’t. You do this alone.”

“Swell,” said Jackson. He punched the wall in the kitchen. Pictures in the living room fell to the floor. The sound of broken glass made Jackson shut his eyes tight and breathe deeply.

“Sorry.”

Jackson went back to his room and fished the rusty pistol from its hiding spot under the mattress. He put on a new pair of snake skin boots he had bought in town after his meeting with Tall. He felt legitimate.

After giving his mother a kiss, Jackson walked out into the morning. The morning sky had an ashy pink smear across it that reminded Jackson of his mother’s skin. He grabbed the box of eggs and thought about all the things he could do with that money, but wouldn’t. On his walk into town, he thought about his option to take off on his own. Could start a family of his own. But he would never do that to his Mother, never run off like his Daddy and Dale did.

He was glad they were going to get out of the trailer and move to a real house. Start over. He wondered if his Dad would think the same way. Jackson knew his mother deserved better. Knew life owed her something. Him, too.

The driver arrived on time in a black town car. The windows were tinted and everyone around stared. Jackson couldn't help but feel a sense of pride that it was his ride to a better life. He grinned as he got in. Then he recognized him as the man at the piano. He thought of the girl and how she must've been trapped there against her will. Maybe he'd rescue her after the deal. He decided better to bury the thoughts for the moment.

"Where's the other one?" the driver asked.

"He's out," said Jackson. He held up and tapped the box of eggs with his finger. "But don't worry, we're all here."

Cigar smoke leaked out the side of the driver's mouth. He kept his eyes on the road, his cowboy hat pulled down tight. Jackson watched his hands on the wheel and felt ill. Fifteen miles into the ride, Jackson thought he heard a high-pitched peeping barely muffled by the truck's tires turning over the dirt road.

"This thing go any faster, buddy?" Jackson asked. His eyes were fixed on the box.

"Faster? This car goes one speed. Mine. Any idea how much this costs? Doubt it."

"I don't. I bet it's a lot."

The driver laughed. "You can say that again."

\* \* \*

Dale and Sarah got off their bikes by the marsh and watched the sunrise together. They sat on a log and ate the apples with cheese and bread they had packed for breakfast. Dale talked about their trip but stopped when he spotted a blue heron; its long thin legs were still as reeds in mud. A warm wind blew and they took it as a sign to get going. A

small cardboard box rode in the basket on the front of Sarah's bike. Dale wanted to borrow her dad's truck but instead, Sarah had bribed her little sister, Caroline, with a few bucks to use her red wagon so they could pull their luggage behind them.

\* \* \*

Only a few miles into the trip, the driver pulled the car to the side of the road in a cloud of dust.

"What is this?" asked Jackson. "Hold on a second."

The driver didn't say a word. He climbed out of the car and circled around the back. The trunk of the car went up and blocked Jackson's view. He ran a finger over the pistol tucked into his boot. Then the trunk closed driver's steps continued to crunch on the road. Jackson looked back to the road. There came a tapping on his window. Jackson turned to see a small sword the size of his forearm peering back at him.

Jackson turned his attention to the long stretch of road ahead of him. He peered through the sweltering vapors that rose from the ground, until the dirt brown of the road met the blue sky. Cornfields, as far as his eye could see, bordered his view. He'd always admired the goldenrods that crowned the tall green stalks. He sat in the comfortable car and watched them gently wave, felt the cool air conditioning wash over him. The sight of the green growth calmed him, took him back to a time when things were better, a time he couldn't pin down.

Jackson got out of the car with his pistol still holstered. The Driver took a step back. The metal toolbox stayed in the car.

"Tell you what," said Jackson. "You get me to Tall, and I'll be sure he hears what a great job you did."

"You just don't get it, Fella," said the Driver.

“Mister, I need this. My family”

The driver seemed to think it over. He tapped the blade rhythmically against the palm of his hand.

“I need this,” pleaded Jackson. “You understand? My mother and me. My brother needs this.” Jackson reached into the car and pulled out the box. He snapped open the lid and held it up for the driver. The driver shook his head and grimaced. Jackson counted eleven. Then he recounted.

\* \* \*

Dale and Sarah sat waiting with small, mismatched suitcases beside them. Platform A. Dale noticed Sarah biting her lip nervously so he put an arm around her and kissed her cheek. Thick lines of heat ran across the track like greeting phantoms. The little cardboard box rested between them. There was a cop sitting a few benches down and Dale caught himself staring at the holstered gun. He startled when an arrival train’s whistle blew.

“This one must be ours,” he said, nodding at the approaching train.

“You sure we should do this, Dale? Leave everyone behind and all?” She stood and sat back down, letting go of her suitcase. “And this egg, my God. I don’t know. Maybe we should just leave it.”

“We can’t go and do something crazy like that. It’s startup money for us. You remember the plan, right? We got nothing here. Our families will look after themselves. So, what are we going to do? We take this,” he said, pointing to the box, “and sell it. That’s what.” He glanced up at the officer again and lowered his voice. “Trust me.”

“I do, Dale.”

“Alright then.”

“You sure, Dale?”

“Sure as cotton makes a dress.”

\* \* \*

The Driver walked Jackson over to the side of the road, guiding him with the shiny tip of his sword. “In the ditch,” he ordered.

Jackson stared at the man and took a hard step down. His boots settled in the mud, suctioned.

“Nice boots. Go ahead, take em’ off.” The sun was bearing down on both men. As Jackson unearthed his right boot from the mud with a wet sucking sound, he drew the rusty pistol. It jammed.

“Is that right?” asked the Driver. He hopped down into the ditch with one fist clenched and the other wielding the Bowie. The driver caught Jackson in the face with a whirling fist and grabbed the gun. Jackson swung and connected with the driver’s nose. Blood tore across his face. The Driver grunted and kicked Jackson in the groin. Jackson dropped to a knee. Then he felt the sword sting his cheek. A warm stream of blood ran out of the half-moon shaped cut and pooled at the base of his neck. The quickly slipped in and out of his body, his thigh, stomach, and chest.

Jackson planted his hands in the mud and squinted up at the dark formations. He saw cornstalks towering overhead and silhouetted by the glowing sun. The husks drooped and looked strange then, as if they’d grown sickly and crooked from bad seed. He put a hand on his leg, felt the blood run over and through his fingers. The driver removed Jackson’s boots. Then he climbed out of the ditch.

“Have a nice day,” said the Driver. The car spewed rock and dirt as it peeled out down the road.

Jackson rolled over onto his back. He tried to wipe the mud from his eyes, ears and

nose. But he was still able to hear the shifting gears of the truck as it rumbled off down the road, taking with it his eggs and his money. The whole plan. When the sound of the car disappeared, Jackson's surroundings settled into the quiet. He tried to get up but fell back down, planting his hands in the mud. "Slowly," he whispered. "No point in hurrying."

When he moved, a raw sting bolted through bone and skin, fat beads of sweat ran down his face and his body cooled. He lay there for a few seconds. His chest doubled in size as he gathered all the air in his lungs, harnessed it, and yelled. He yelled at his blood that mixed with the brown ditch water. He yelled at the corn that bent and looked down on him. He yelled for his mother, who didn't know any better. For Dale. And for himself. He yelled for his father, who was probably somewhere loving another woman, maybe another family.

Now he was quiet and his heart pumped like it filled with sludge. He let out a painful grunt as he crawled his way up to the lip of the ditch and sat. His eyes twitched and blurred. The pink beds under his fingernails were stuffed with amber clay. His legs hung down the side of the ditch and his bare feet lay limp and cool in the reddish mud.

\* \* \*

The train from Ellendale to Baton Rouge slowly moved out from the station. Dale and Sarah gazed out their windows at the passing wetlands. Just then, Dale pictured Jackson shaking hands with Tall and collecting a briefcase full of cash. Then he saw Jackson walking through the gate at home with everything to show for his efforts. A proud smile spread across his face. He felt good for his brother. Happy that Jackson had gotten what he wanted, and that his mother would be taken care of. Dale hoped Jackson would forgive him. Sarah patted Dale's hand and they both looked out further on the landscape they were leaving behind. The train began to pick up speed. The box rested between them

on the seat.

“Well,” said Dale. “This’ll be a change, huh? Something different.” He wiped a red handkerchief across his face.

“Yeah,” said Sarah. “That sounds okay by me.”

“Hot in here,” said Dale.

The train rattled and gently shook their seats. In the box, underneath the blanket, the eggshell split. The train rolled on, clicking its way down the track, heading south.

\* \* \*

Jackson and Dale’s mother was at home in the living room. She sat in her chair and drank coffee. On television, there was a man and a woman holding each other. The picture was fading and covered with a thin curtain of static. She couldn’t understand what the couple was saying. They looked serious and sad, like someone had died. Or maybe one was leaving the other. She put her coffee down slowly and rubbed her hands together.

Her eyes drifted from the television to the wall where the family pictures were hanging. She remembered how her little fingers moved quickly over the keys on her parents’ piano. They had set it up near the living room window and when she’d play in the summer, a warm breeze encircled her from behind.

She remembered the strong winds that would make her house shift and creak at night. And how the hard gusts drove through her hair during her first car ride with her husband—him at the wheel—and how his large arm could reach around both of her shoulders and squeeze her tightly. His hands, large and shapeless like oven mitts, held her with ease. She remembered all this and looked out the window.

She drew her right hand up and laid it across her chest. Now, she prayed. She shut her eyes and prayed for Dale. For Sarah. She prayed for Jackson. Then she stopped and



just sat there. Her eyes were still closed, but she wasn't asking for anything anymore. She  
With her left hand, she reached down underneath her worn linen dress and took hold of  
the thin plastic tube. She needed emptied, but she knew Jackson would be home soon to  
do it. And then they'd eat supper.

## *Arriving on Time: Centennial, Wyoming*

There's stillness up here in Centennial. Buckhorn Restaurant. And it's not because the population is the size of a Sunday congregation. The two waitresses smoke out back behind the kitchen, and the customers are talkin' around me but I'm not tuned in. Where I am, this booth—this restaurant—right here near Medicine Bow National Forest, I consider real good country. People say settlers found gold here a hundred years ago, made a good go at a living and gave the town its celebrating name. I came here for my own kind of wealth, maybe a last shot for peace.

I pull a postcard from my back pocket and read Shelly's message over again. The blue ink is smeared in spots and I wouldn't be able to tell what some of the words said if I hadn't memorized it on the drive down here. Four hundred miles give or take from Billings, the small drafty apartment, right where her mother left me. I fold the card back up behind my wallet. Each year, Shelly picks a new place to meet down here in Wyoming: Jackson Hole, Cheyenne, Rock Springs. But Centennial carries some different weight.

I arrived in town yesterday and decided to camp up off Rt. 130, behind a wall of pines so I couldn't be made from the road. The quiet within the Snowies can make a man forget all about himself. The snowcapped ridges seem to rise into the clouds, and if you followed them you might reach some secret terrain. Trying to climb partway up in this altitude stole my breath, but it also somehow lightened me. I am content to climb down and lie beneath the pines, on a bed of needles, and listen to the creaking and ticking of the forest. The wind played through branches.

I dipped my hands in a stream and it swallowed them up; the water stung my bones. Then I lost feeling in my body, in everything. But at that moment, clarity shook me like a damp web ripple. These mountains help me look for things that I've lost.

Five years ago, a plane flew straight into the front cliff of the Snowies and everyone on board died, including a Mormon choir, including my wife. She was on her way back from a trip to her mother's in Reno, a result of our fight two weeks before. Why we fought isn't important here, really. That's over. She and I had agreed the time would help us figure out what the next move should be. Especially with Shelly and her being unaware of what her father had done. But her unknowing didn't last long.

I was clamoring over the rocks of the crash site for the first time yesterday. I waited for a great heaviness to overtake me, the kind of pain I want to feel at small funerals. If it's going to hurt, I want it to really be something. Not parsed out in sporadic memories. Though it's what I deserve, maybe. But I found myself to be more curious than anything while I was up there. I picked up little pieces of metal and plastic and examined them in the sunlight. I found what appeared to be a tiny, rusted-out piece of motor from the plane that just fit inside my coat pocket.

Why crash victim family members left the plane pieces scattered on the rocks is something I struggle with. I suppose they want their pain to stay at the site, frozen forever in those bits of plastic and metal. Now it's a place where people can go to forget or remember. Put their hands in the water and see.

I get a refill on my coffee. It's mid-afternoon. Outside, things are calm, and the clouds are so low they seem to blanket the mountains and fences with their shadows. The few remaining leaves on a nearby birch tremble in the chilled wind. Someone's meal is up, the bell by the heat lamp dings.

Rhubarb pie is written in yellow chalk on the board just inside the front door. I order a piece and thank the waitress. When she turns to go, I pull the post card back out. The front features a huge rainbow trout being towed behind a large flat bed. It reads: You

Caught the Biggest One! Shelly probably got it at one of those little gas station stores between Laramie and Cheyenne. Knew I'd get a kick out of that, I suppose. The three of us must have seen a dozen of those places alongside the highway, the ones that sell cheap Navajo jewelry and belt buckles to people from the East.

The people we used to be had a decent living out here for a while.

If Shelly shows, I'll tell her about her mother. I'll do my best to remind her how happy we all were together. I'll recreate some memory. And that her and I don't have to work like this. Even though I know it's not the truth. Even though she won't ever come back to family.

Maybe she'll walk through the door I've been watching for hours and sit across from me in this booth. And we'll just look out the window together. The same window. All the clouds nearly touching down on little Laramie thousands of feet below. Then she'll scoot over to my side of the table and take my hand and I'll show her the piece of the motor I recovered from the rocks. Or maybe she won't, maybe she'll just send me another post card, another place, another time.

## *Flood*

*This story didn't start out about my brother, Nick. It was supposed to be about the girl.*

\* \* \*

Our town had been dumped on for days, and a steady downpour crippled our Saturday afternoon. There were three of us at the trailer: Aaron, Jeff, and myself. Three young guys lazing around on a trailer deck in camping chairs drinking dark beer thick as sludge. Jeff's older brother, Craig, let us use his place while he worked for the town's EMT unit.

An old Van Morrison tune crackled from our rundown boom box. We talked about all the girls in our class and whether or not Prom would be worth the money. We debated between over Scorsese or Coppola. Aaron could've been the tiebreaker, but he went with Lucas. Jeff and I both punched him hard on the shoulder. We also decided the NBA could never be cool again like it was in the early 90s. We smoked cigarettes and held them between our fingers in styles that made us feel hip.

We noticed our next door neighbor, X-Surfer, outside flipping steaks up in the air like a backwoods Hibachi chef. He and his girlfriend, Donna, were under this sprawling blue tarp because a tree shattered the roof of his deck in a storm back in March. Donna smoked and read in a lounge chair. We all had a thing for her. And I don't really know if it was the result of what looks good in a trailer park, or if she really is a knockout like we thought.

"That tarp's going up in flames any minute," Jeff said.

We watched them through the rain, and chuckled at X-Surfer's topless figure wielding a spatula and grill lid; dense white clouds leaked out from underneath the tarp like smoke signals that slowly broke apart in the rain.

Across the creek and up the hill loomed Oxbow Cemetery. We were good and bored, warmed up from the beer, and decided to play a game we made up called “Catching Kurtz”. This game was usually reserved for night, as it added an extra special ops feel. But we were bored, so we stripped down to our shorts, attached water bottles full of whiskey sours to our belts, and marched down the trailer deck stairs. Each one of us held an aluminum baseball bat. Jeff’s brother and his friends always shook their heads and told us not to call them if we died.

The three of us stood at the edge of the creek. I turned and saw that both X-Surfer and Donna were watching us with puzzled concern. I threw a stick into the water and it swiftly disappeared downstream.

“Moving fast,” I said.

With baseball bats held over our heads, we waded across Sixteen Mile Creek. The water level typically came up to our thighs, all of us being that relative height. The temperature we hadn’t really counted on. We were careful not to cry out in falsettos. That would bring a round of “Firing Squad” to the poor individual who squealed. We barked fake orders and quickly clamored up the hill. Our labored breathing prevented us from any unnecessary chatter or laughter.

Once inside the cemetery, we designated Jeff as Kurtz. While he found a mausoleum to hide behind, Aaron and I sprinted around the cemetery, gathering rocks.

We hid behind two towering grave markers. The rain picked up and the temperature dropped. I could see my breath. I hit my whiskey sour and wiped my face.

Then the moment of quiet. We listened to the rain pound through the trees like we had a jungle canopy above us. We were in the shit. And then Aaron and I stalked through the stones, trying to find our Captain.

“There!” cried Aaron.

I saw Jeff dart back behind a moss-covered tomb that looked ancient.

The rocks exploded off our bats with electric sparks and ricocheted invisibly off the sides of Jeff’s mausoleum. He fired back and then retreated behind another. A loud thunder clap sounded off in an echoing boom above us. Aaron and I let out a war cry.

I felt a rock bite into my skin and watched the blood tip out of a hole in my shoulder. The game wasn’t supposed to end until you were hit by a rock; then you were dead. If you were dead, you had to go stand by a family grave. Except for me.

All three of us had family buried in Oxbow. Both of Jeff’s grandparents, and Aaron’s grandfather and great aunt. I had Nick, my brother. He was eighteen. While my dad was tracking a buck, Nick turned his rifle backwards and dropped himself to the floor of the family tree stand. Our family had a camp between Erie and Williamsport, right near Penn State where Nick was scheduled to start in the spring. I was twelve, at home, eating pizza with my mom. We had ordered out for the fun of it.

My father never gave me much of anything. And, as one might suspect, it didn’t get better after Nick. My father’s voice and hand faltered when he tried to impart meaningful advice about school and my future. About what kind of man I could and should be. His eyes betrayed any warmth he wanted to feel towards me. I think he tried, but just couldn’t find any remaining strength. Nick took it with him.

His body was processed in Williamsport. Then driven three hours back to Erie. On the ride home, my mother explained to me that Nick was in the tree stand by himself and his gun went off. This was true enough, I suppose. When I asked where my father was, she said ‘tracking’. He had left my brother alone in the afternoon for an hour. At the funeral, people talked about warning signs and how “if they’d only paid more attention.”

What kind of warnings could Nick give?

\* \* \*

Sixteen Mile Creek ran between the trailer and the Oxbow. It snaked north along the town's outer edge and eventually emptied into Lake Erie, its waters eventually making it to Canada. A woman from town, our old swim coach, swam across Lake Erie to Ontario and got a park named after her down by Freeport Beach.

My brother and I took field trips into the creek with the school. We lagged behind the group to do our own thing. Together, we splashed through shallow parts of the creek, unearthed broken slabs of shale and hoped to catch the slick and writhing bodies of spotted salamanders before they escaped into their muddy beds.

Now the rain fed the creek, had it roiling along, uglified it. The creek changed into something unsettling and strange to me, like seeing your mother or father weakened with pain. Sixteen Mile's brown body foamed and furiously licked the top ridges of its bank. Its new voice roared up at us on the trailer deck, the boom box completely drowned out. We weren't able to hear X-Surfer laying on his horn to get our attention. Then he ran over to us.

The two trailers sat about ten yards apart, with a bare clothesline between them. Both trailers were on the park's outer back edge and provided some privacy from the other residents, something we certainly appreciated. X-Surfer moved in a year ago and we all considered him to be a pretty odd dude. He bought us beer and sometimes sold us smoke, though.

"I'll do you boys steaks if you want. If you got the meat, I got the heat."

We called him X-Surfer on account of his heap-on-wheels old turquoise Beretta. Its vanity plate read "X-SURFER." He looked the age my brother would've been, around 25,



and stood at 6'3 with a lanky frame and a protruding Adam's apple like a large stone got caught halfway down his throat. He wore a dark goatee and curly, shoulder-length hair that reminded us of Serpico. His pale torso and chest had occasional patches of black hair and I could see the thin white line of his underwear just above his jeans.

We were all kind of drunk and just watched him dripping on the deck. He shook out his hair and hit us with a thin veil of water. The rain softened because we heard Donna blast the Beretta's horn. X-Surfer whirled around and took off into the rain. We watched with amusement as he spoke with Donna and immediately circled back.

"We don't know exactly what's going on, guys. Donna just got a call from her sister. A little girl playing in her back yard got swept up in this," he said, pointing to the creek. "She said both fire companies and volunteers are out right now looking for her." X-Surfer paused and stood on the deck, water dripping from his curls. Then he sprinted off the deck, back to his grill.

Before any of us could really react to what X-Surfer had just said, Donna trotted over. She walked up the stairs and stood in front of us with her hands on her hips. I considered Donna pretty attractive, with broad-shoulders and dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore faded blue jeans, a button down plaid, and brown hiking boots. She wiped the rain from her face and sat on the thick wood railing.

"Hey boys. Pretty crazy, huh? Pretty damn awful."

We nodded. I remember wondering why she came over. She didn't speak to us regularly, but kept to her own. And I didn't know how to act. I could tell Aaron and Mark were a little uncomfortable as well. Donna had altered the feeling on the deck.

"I have a little sister but she's not as young as this one. I can imagine what the girl's family is going through. I bet they're all out there looking for her right now," she

continued, "I know I would be."

"Where'd she go in?" I asked, and immediately wondered if it was a dumb question.

"I think somewhere around Williams Road. It's possible she comes right by here."

We all looked out to the creek as if we'd spot her instantly, her small head bobbing in the water, arms flailing. The image bothered me. Mark offered Donna a beer and she declined, saying she should get back to the trailer in case her sister called again with more news. With a weak smile and a wave, she headed next door.

The three sat in silence. A heaviness had settled in our tough little circle. Maybe we didn't think it cool to care about a little girl we didn't even know. But gradually we talked about the girl whose name we didn't know yet, the girl who probably floated rapidly down Sixteen Mile. We wondered if she could still be alive.

"What if she knocks her head on a branch or something and goes unconscious?" Mark asked.

"Probably fighting hypothermia," Aaron added.

"I don't think it's cold enough for that," I said. "But either way, she needs to be found soon."

\* \* \*

A year or two before Nick died, my family took a trip to visit my grandmother in Cleveland. My parents argued about whether or not it was safe to travel because there had been a bizarre string of highway shootings. National papers covered the story and it excited our dismal little town, our identity being out there for the world to witness. My friends thought it'd be a great idea for a movie.

At school, we talked about the pictures in the paper. Minivans made porous like a

huge metal strainer. Busted windshields. They were crime scenes that rivaled Taxi Driver or The Godfather. Ten people had been killed. The victims in some of the shootings were children and pets. State Police couldn't shut down the stretch of highway, as it was the main route from Erie to Cleveland, but they did have a suspect in custody. When my mother heard that, she put her foot down and we packed the car.

The whole way there, I ducked down and tried to listen to my Walkman. Nick sat, with a book in his lap, and stared out the window.

My grandmother didn't recognize her grandsons, and we grew uncomfortable with her and the overall nursing home atmosphere. Everything smelled like mold and urine. Finally, my dad decided to get us out of there and took us to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to get our minds off things.

"For those about to rock, we salute you," he said, pulling open the doors to the museum.

"Good one, Dad," Nick said. He gave my arm a soft punch.

\* \* \*

Now, when we heard the news about the little girl, we used Mark's brother, Craig, as our insider to the action. If anyone in our little group knew anything, it'd be Craig. He volunteered for the Fuller Hose Fire Department and regularly regaled us with stories about minor rescue missions and major "close calls" with collapsing houses. We didn't care that embellished them, we devoured them.

He and his fellow firemen liked to drink and play cards at the station. Then they'd go out to the town bars, looking for their rivals, the Crescent Fire Company. I never understood why a town this small would need two companies, and apparently, neither did they. Once, I witnessed a brawl of drunken firemen in the park. It turned into a real mess

with both chiefs having to sort it all out with the local cops.

\* \* \*

The wind picked up and the rain drilled sideways off the trailer like wild bullets. Mark charged from the door and tripped on the deck. He would've skidded right off if Aaron hadn't grabbed him. He told us Craig searched with a team down near the Sewage Plant, a popular access point for fishermen, and only a fifteen minute car ride down the road from us.

We'd tried our luck fishing there before, throwing baited lines from slippery banks, joking about catching fish with mutated parts, like a pike with pinching claws or a sunfish with a dog tail. The older fly-fishermen from town would wade upstream, casting their phantom-like lines inches above the water's glassy surface. On their way back to the road, a few of them might watch us and give pointers or lecture on the fundamentals of "patience" and the "art of the cast." We had our own way of doing things, though, our own technique, whether we caught anything or not.

We talked about Craig and got excited at the thought of him being out there searching for the girl. We like the image of climbing over wet logs and removing brush from the shoreline, trying to find signs of the little life. Mark said that whoever found her would probably get their picture in the paper. I imagined myself cradling the girl, her drenched body limp in my arms, face barely peeking out from a warm blanket. And then we were all in the picture: the three of us grinning broadly like small town heroes do, each supporting a different section of the girl's body. We'd smile up at the town in black and white, like fishing buddies who had just reeled in a record-sized bass.

The beer had emboldened us. We forgot our limitations as young men, and decided that we were going to join the search and rescue effort. We liked this phrase,

“search and rescue,” it sounded official and serious. We found some of Craig’s old clothes and put on long pants to deal with the prickles we would no doubt be pushing through. We lit cigarettes. None of us could drive, so telephone calls were made. No luck. Some of the roads were closed due to sections of the creek running over. And with no other good option, we splashed next door.

While he gnawed on a piece of blackened meat, X-Surfer agreed to give us a lift on the condition that we waited for him to finish dinner. He stood and started to turn raw lumps of marinated chicken breasts over the flames.

I had left my smokes next door and ran back for them. Something made me stop between the trailers. Now, I am not the religious kind. I’ve never claimed a solid belief in anything, really. I live day to day. During my counseling after Nick’s death, the therapist talked about taking solace in knowing a loved one is safe in a different world. I knew that suicides weren’t supposed to go to heaven. So that seemed out. Answers were elsewhere. And a part of me felt bad for never really looking.

But there I stood, looking up, beyond the rain, into a bruised sky. I remember a strange feeling coming over me, one both pleasing and painful. I can only contribute it to the snap moments in mid-air after I jumped off the Ripley cliffs into the lake. People used to throw garbage off the cliffs, and one kid from our school landed on a shopping cart and busted his leg.

The uncertainty of what you could possibly land on, mixed with the pride of being seen jumping, made for an intoxicating kind of euphoria. The exhilaration of uncertainty. I wondered if this was the reason my brother looked out the window on the way to Cleveland. Why he wasn’t worried about the highway gunman.

\* \* \*

Fat rain drops stung my face, blurred my vision. But I still did not blink, even when a thin stream of lightning flashed yellow in the sky, before it cracked and split over the sound of the rain and the creek. Something in that moment assured me the girl would be found. That the forces, wherever they came from, would not let her be harmed like the others. This would be different, I thought. And I knew I couldn't tell anyone about it. I knew what they'd say.

We sat under X-Surfer's tarp in silence watching him man the grill. It occurred to me that we were going to get into a car with a man whose name we didn't know. I didn't know much about him at all, but this seemed natural, for some reason. This was what small town people did for each other, real names or not. Donna got up and paced under the tarp. She sucked down cigarettes and squashed them out with her boot. Mark called Craig again to make sure the girl hadn't been found. Donna needed help carrying out some beers so I went inside with her. I felt Mark and Aaron watching me curiously.

The kitchen's cleanliness surprised me. X-Surfer's slovenly appearance gave me the impression that his trailer would be in complete disarray. But it actually had some class to it. A few black and white cinema stills were on the walls, and exotic island postcards were magnetized to the refrigerator.

"Grab three, would you?" She pointed to the fridge and turned around to rummage through the lower cupboards. "Wait a minute." She poked her head up and looked me over. "You're twenty-one, aren't you?"

"Close enough. I got a year or two."

"Don't let this get around. Last thing we need is to be busted serving minors. You seem like you can handle your drink. Don't prove me wrong."

I smiled and gripped the bottles tightly. You drop these and you're done for, I thought. I noticed two figurines carved from a strange, dark brown wood. They had wild markings on them, maybe tribal.

"Those are kinda cool. What are they?" I asked.

She turned. "Those would be napkin holders from Hawaii."

"Pretty neat," I replied.

She dug a Bic out of her pocket and popped the caps off of our beers. The foam from her beer rolled out and down the bottle like a commercial. She swore and held it over the sink.

"Did you do this?" she asked. Her grimace gradually broke into the hint of a smile.

"No way," I said. "Not this guy. I wouldn't do that."

She dried her hands with a towel and we raised our beers.

"Here's to honest men and hard working women," she said.

I nodded.

We both took long gulps and sighed. Expecting the other one to say something, we both stayed quiet. She looked to me and I looked to the door. I got a little nervous and couldn't think of anything else.

"Bathroom?" I asked.

"Right through there." She pointed down a hallway that ran off from the living room.

"Thanks."

There were few lights on in the trailer and I felt my way along the hallway wall. There were posters of black men playing brass instruments. I saw names like Coltrane, Davis, and Bird. Two surfboards with wild jagged designs on them stood on either side of

the bedroom. The door stood open just enough for me to glimpse a couple of socks and shirts on the floor. The word CABANA was in bold above the bathroom door.

I stood on the register that ran along the floor and quickly glanced out the small bathroom window. The smell of chicken thickened in the air. I couldn't see the guys, and I barely made out the blue tip of the tarp from the back of the trailer. I stepped down and then back up again with a better grip. A few yards out I saw X-Surfer's open tool shed and mower. Next to the shed sat a large purple inner tube, half inflated and collecting rain.

Donna was gone when I returned to the kitchen. There were a few pictures of her and X-Surfer on the refrigerator: The two of them in snorkeling gear, smiling through crystal-blue water. The location could have been anywhere warm: Cancun, Virgin Islands, or California. I just knew I hadn't been there in my life. It didn't resemble the water of Lake Erie or the murky dark liquid we swam in under the Cole Rd trestle.

It angered me slightly. The alcohol was bringing me down.

The grill smoldered in a meaty aftermath. X-Surfer held a broom, and in a strange moment, poked a sagging section of tarp. Aaron's reflexes were too slow and he slid forward in an unsuccessful attempt to dodge the mini waterfall. Instead, he caught it right on his back. Donna bellowed out with drunken laughter. X-Surfer chuckled and apologized.

"Great," said Aaron.

"Come on," I said. "What difference does it make? We're all gonna be drenched once we get out there...if we ever do."

"Yeah, well, I don't really give a shit. I'm wet and pissed."

Mark took him next door to find some more clothes. Donna settled down to her chicken. X-Surfer cracked another beer and rolled his head over the back of his chair to



point it at me.

“You’re really ready for this thing, aren’t you? I mean, really ready.”

“What do you mean? To find the girl?”

“Yes, to find the girl—to rescue the girl. Finding and rescuing aren’t the same things, you understand? You can find someone and not rescue them.”

“I know,” I said. “I know something about that.” I felt my face burn with anger or something like it.

“And those two don’t seem to be in a hurry,” X-Surfer said. “But you, you’re greased and fired, buddy.”

“Sure,” I said between my teeth. “Shouldn’t we find her? Don’t we all want her rescued instead of just found...”

“Depends,” he said, “depends. This isn’t any movie we got here. You understand? Look at that creek, buddy. It’s moving angry. I’ve seen Sixteen get pretty nasty in my days.”

The creek had seemed to pick up its momentum. I carefully lifted the tarp to see a big tree trunk ride swiftly, carelessly, along with the rippling current. X-Surfer stood next to me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Bigger one than that took out my goddamn roof.”

“Tragedy,” I said.

“Look,” he said. “They already got half the town out there, man.” The smell of barbecue sauce and beer drifted across my face in the white clouds of his breath. “You think one more pair of eyes is gonna make a difference?”

“Can’t say,” I replied.

“So he wants to go. What’s it to you?” Donna piped in from behind.

“It’s cool, baby,” he put up a hand, “just a little tarp talk, you know? Wanna make

sure he knows what to expect. What he's getting into. Too many heroes out there wanna make names for themselves. I know what I'm saying. I was a young gun. This isn't the first flood in world history, you know?"

I let the tarp fall and sat back down. I felt dark inside. Felt like struggling, but not sure against what. Aaron and Mark came back over, the rain matted hair to their foreheads. They glanced at each other, surely sensing the mood had drastically altered. X-Surfer and I caught each other's eye for a moment. Mark finally cleared his throat and spoke.

"We still going?"

"I'm still in," I said confidently.

I could tell Aaron didn't care anymore. He shed his enthusiasm for the mission with his wet clothing. Donna went inside the trailer. Mark looked back and forth between Aaron and me, then out to the creek. I drank the last half of my beer in a few gulps. X-Surfer leaned back in his chair and started whistling, and then he sang.

"Well, it's sugar for sugar and salt for salt, if you go down in the flood, it's gonna be your own fault. Oh mama, ain't you gonna miss your best friend now?" He grinned wide.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A little tune," he said.

"I know it's a song, which one?"

"That's Bobby Dylan, man. Never heard it? I'll go get it. Hold on."

He let the door close behind him and disappeared inside. I put my arms between my legs and locked my hands together with my fingers. I looked at the guys. Aaron flexed his neck, swished beer around in his mouth. Mark eyed up the creek.

Then the music started playing. Donna came out first, tossed us all a beer; her head bounced with the opening drum and guitar. X-Surfer immediately followed with an unlit

cigarette in his mouth. The two of them started a little circle jig and we scooted our chairs back to make room.

I did recognize the song. I had heard it with my dad and brother at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. An entire wing had been dedicated to Dylan and we watched a documentary about him in one of the dark and intimate theaters. Nick and I each bought an album at the store on the way out. This thought slowly uncoiled itself and worked around inside me. Small moments of us walking around all the guitars and listening to the history of rock and roll through headphones together began to play inside me. That experience shared by the three of us turned out to be the last.

“I know this,” I shouted. Nobody heard me. I yelled again. “I know this song!”

A booming clap of thunder startled me. I laughed and worried that I may have tears on my face. I cracked open my beer. X-Surfer had his arms out, swinging like a propeller. I felt myself spring up and join the dancing just in time for the song to finish. X-Surfer must have put it on repeat. It started again.

I laughed, louder. The black inside me giving way to a softer light. And I felt again that notion of being watched out for. That a saving would be inevitable for the little girl. The three of us pranced around in what must have looked like some tribal rain dance. Only I could barely hear the rain. And even the sound of the roaring Sixteen Mile began to fade out and up with the twangy chords from the guitars. Donna took my hand and whirled me around with an in-place shuffle step. Aaron and Mark didn't move from their seats, but I thought I heard one of them yell something as X-Surfer, Donna, and I danced out from under the tarp, into the rain, making our way out towards the creek.

## *Arriving on Time: Galveston, Texas*

It's raining and my arthritis flares. My hands on the steering wheel ache. I'm driving Brandon and Cody to school today. Sandra is sick. I don't really believe her, though. A mother knows. She had a date last night. Sure, I said, I'm available. What else would I be doing tomorrow? My windshield wipers thump back and forth.

She's been seeing this man, Luke or Lee or Levi. Something like that. I met him the other day. He's nice enough, fairly good looking, but it's the way he walks that bothers me. He's got this sweeping gait, like he would need an entire hallway to himself. I can't for the life of me picture the two of them arm-in-arm going to the movies. He's nice enough.

Traffic has come to a stop. We're on a brief stretch of old highway, nothing around but mud and brush. The rain picks up and I turn the radio off. Tell the boys to please settle down. A car honks. I look in my rearview. I notice a man standing outside of his car. He must be a lunatic to stand in the rain like that.

And here is another. A woman beside me emerges from her station wagon and shields her eyes from the rain. It must be a wreck. I rub my hands gently together trying to calm them. Then Brandon and Cody notice all the people outside and they want to exit and see what's going on. I tell them to please stay put.

They are antsy, curious, like their father. He's up in Montana last I heard. Left about two years back. Supposedly a ranch hand, if you can believe it. I wouldn't guess it now. That man. Always into something new. Parenting went cold on him. Now Sandra and the boys have this Leroy or Lyle or Levon. I really just want what's best for the three of them. Of course I do. I'm the only one left around here to give them any help. Only one who really cares. Just look at me.

There's a low rumble. I can feel it travel up from feet to chest, my hands and the

wheel gently shake. The boys say they feel it too and get quiet. Then the three of us just sit and look at each other for a moment. The rain beating nervously against the car. I turn the radio back on for distraction. Political talk radio. Who can stand those voices? I switch it off.

I swear I feel tears welling from behind my glasses; they are broken and pinch the side of my nose. They need fixed. I think about my grandchildren in the backseat, my single daughter, and this new man. What the hell is she doing? She's so lost. Bless her for trying to find a suitable father for these two, or at least that's what I imagine she's doing with this new guy. My silly broken glasses. I start to cry. I try and cover my face so Brandon and Cody won't notice; hoping the sound of the rain will cover up my gasps. It feels good and warm to cry. But I must stop. For all of them.

I slowly unbuckle my seatbelt and tell the boys to stay put. I'm still frowning when I cover my hair with an old plastic rain bonnet. I can feel there's a small tear in it.

The rumbling is stronger. The woman from the station wagon sees me and points. She nods and says something. The rain is too much and I'm unable to hear her. Then I realize what is coming. I've seen them before. But usually, there aren't this many.

There must be fifteen or so. I can see them running full speed towards us. I get in the backseat with the boys and tell them to get on the floor. I cover them with their cheap backpacks, lumpy with school supplies I bought them. Spider Man and Super Man. I lock all the doors and try to wipe the fog off the windows. I take my glasses off, massage my hands slowly, and wait for the pack of javelinas to sweep through the alleys of our idling vehicles.

*Arriving on Time: Morgantown, West Virginia*

I-79. It's real hot outside. We're on our way to buy pop for Mom when we find this car just sitting by the side of the road. It doesn't look like much of a car anymore. It's all beat up like somebody tangled with it all night, like something wrong happened. I see glass and a t-shirt. I'm with my little brother. All the windows are rolled down.

## *Curriculum Vitae*

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### *Education*

North East High School 97-2001

Penn State Behrend (BFA in Creative Writing) 04'-08'

University of Nevada, Las Vegas (MFA in Creative Writing) 2012

### *Awards*

- *Edward Nichols Prose Award 06'*  
*(for "Something Worth Keeping")*
- *Kennedy Fiction Award 07'*  
*(Short story "Sixteen Mile Flood"-published in *Lake Effect*)*
- *Corey N Farrell Scholarship for Creative Writing 07'*
- *Summer Workshop Scholarship- Chautauqua Institute 07'*
- *PCEA Fiction Award 08'*  
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- *James "Jake" Cranage Award 07'*  
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### *Publications*

"Sixteen Mile Flood" appeared in *Lake Effect* (Volume 12, 08')

"On Our Way Out" appeared in *The Red Clay Review* (Issue 4, 11')

"Arriving on Time: Morgantown, West Virginia" appeared in *The Rusty Typer* (2011)

*Fellowships*

The Black Mountain Institute “John Cobain Fellowship” (2010-2011)

*Editor*

Co-fiction Editor of *Lake Effect Volume 12& 13*.

Co-fiction Editor of *Witness: Volume XXIV, 2011*.