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# The Republic of Catatonia: a Novel

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*THE REPUBLIC OF CATATONIA: A NOVEL*

By

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BA, Eugene Lang the New School for Liberal Arts, New York, New York, 2010

Thesis

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*The Republic of Catatonia: a Novel*

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My thesis, a novel titled *The Republic of Catatonia*, is a story of a broken family, and the one man trying to keep their legacy alive. An adrift academic named Miles Cata moves back to Northeastern Montana from New York City, when he learns about the death of his father. When he arrives, it turns out his father isn't dead, and Miles soon learns of his father's plan for building an autonomous micro-nation on the property of their Montana ranch. The novel is set in the '90s against the backdrop of the Bakken oil boom, and much of the second half deals with an oil company trying to run a pipeline through their property. Miles is then forced to take drastic measures in the fight to to preserve the country in his own backyard. Part sweeping family drama, part bizarro anti-western—think Cormac McCarthy meets the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*.

Part I

## Chapter 1

A year earlier, Miles got the call from his mother: “your father’s dead,” she’d said. The phone dropped from his hand, and cracked into pieces as it hit the floor. He packed up his New York apartment—he’d been squatting for months anyway—put everything he couldn’t fit in his bags on the curb, and spent all he had left on a one way ticket from Newark to Great Falls.

On the plane, Miles rested his head on the window and watched the landscape pass below: the flat empty expanse of the plains. He ordered a whiskey and Coke, and then another, until the stewardess told him he wouldn’t be able to order any more.

At the Great Falls airport, Jax was nowhere to be found. Miles went to a payphone and tried his number, but there was no answer. Then he tried his mother. Nothing. He lugged his suitcase back over to baggage claim and sat for a while trying to figure out a plan to get from Great Falls all the way out to Scab with less than twenty dollars to his name. He tried calling them again. He went to an information desk and was told that the next closest bus—to Havre—would not be leaving until the next afternoon. Miles went outside. He sat on the loading curb for a while, and watched the newly arrived travelers. The air was sharp and cold, and he could see his breath in front of him. His hands shook, but he wasn’t sure if it was because of the cold. “Screw this,” he said, and hoisted up his suitcase and started walking. He walked the length of the airport grounds, and started along the lip of the highway, every so often sticking out a thumb

to try and catch the interest of a passing car. The sun was setting; it was getting darker and colder, and the shadows were stretching wide and fast against the horizon.

A mile or so out he was sweating, and there was a terrible pain in his side. He doubled over and sat on his suitcase in the grass off the road, watching the eighteen wheelers scream down the highway. The temperature had dropped in the hour he'd been walking—it must have been in the low 30s—and he opened the suitcase and layered a flannel on top of the one he was already wearing, before zipping up his jacket once more. The moon slipped out from behind a dense wedge of a cloud, as big and quick as an ocean liner; it illuminated the highway and the fields beyond in soft, silver light—everything so flat and still, with the occasional knobby hillock catching and producing a shadow that tumbled across the empty expanse with the top-heavy roll of a bowling pin, before reaching the darkness.

A pair of headlights appeared on the horizon, and seemed to float along for a while, until growing in Miles' direction. The car slowed. He stood from his suitcase and waved them down before it rolled to a stop. A man leaned across the passenger seat and cranked the window open. "You'll get yourself killed standing out here," he said, pushing open the door, which caught for a moment and then ripped forward in the wind with a metallic screech.

"Maybe I want to die," Miles said, as he got in.

"Nobody wants to die," the man said. "That's no laughing matter." Miles apologized, and then told him where he was headed. "Scab? Of course, I know it. I'm headed that way myself. I don't live too far from there. I'll take you all the way."

The man gave the gas a kick, and the car lurched ahead. It was a sputtering rickety thing, with two long, spidering cracks across the windshield. Miles was amazed it could still run at all,

let alone get up to the speed limit. It smelled of oil, and would freeze and then lurch forward every half mile or so, as if a car in a laggy Nintendo game.

He looked over at the man driving. He was older, maybe fifty or sixty, with a squarish jaw and a threadbare Calgary Flames snapback and a pair of aviator glasses that sat on the lower third of his nose. Every so often he dipped his hand into a bag of candy resting in his cupholder. “Lefebvre,” he said, extending his hand. Miles shook it, large and callused; his tight grip sent a jolt from his own hand, up along his arm and shoulders, pinching Miles’ brain.

“*Lef*—what?”

“No, that’s my name.” Then Lefebvre veered into the right lane, grazing the rumble strips, sending a quick shock through the car. “Gotta take a leak,” he said, and pulled off at the next exit. They stopped at a truck stop along the highway. Lefebvre went inside, and Miles got out of the car and walked as far away from the gas pumps as he could so he could smoke a cigarette. The wind tore across the empty fields; a flag above snapped and cracked against its pole. He felt like he was on the moon. There wasn’t a single building or person as far as he could see, and the stars were sharp and clear and pulsed with light. He flicked his lighter several times, but wasn’t able to get it started. His hands were freezing and he cupped them in front of his mouth to warm them, and continued until his hands dripped with condensation. Then he turned and saw Lefebvre approaching. He’d bought a few new bags of candy, and was palming a tin of dipping tobacco. He noticed Miles’ lighter and then opened the tin and handed him a pinch of the tobacco. “Works better out here,” he said. Miles took it and placed it against his lip, feeling the sharp minty burn—it tasted like what he imagined the wall of a men’s room to taste, he thought

—and made him immediately queasy. Lefebvre watched and laughed and told him if he got sick in his car he was leaving his ass on the side of the road. Miles wasn't sure if he was joking.

They drove the next hour in silence, mostly. On the radio, two men were discussing the verdict of the OJ Simpson trial, which had been announced earlier in the week. It was hard for Miles to follow, as every ten seconds or so the radio would cut out sharply into a blast of hissing static, their voices crinkly and hollow and stretched. Fed up, Lefebvre popped in a cassette tape. Nirvana's *In Utero*. They listened to Kurt Cobain's tortured howls and buzzsaw guitars, and Dave Grohl's titanic drumming as they careened down the highway into the dark. There hadn't been another car or truck for miles. It felt good. He didn't want to see anybody anymore. That was the problem with New York: so many people. So much noise, and stimulation. Miles didn't recognize any of it at all—none of the highway towns, none of the names on the signs, though it filled him with a sensation like *deja-vu*. Like he'd been there, and yet had not been there at the same time. Like he was sleepwalking, and also like he was not.

They arrived in Scab at one in the morning. The streets were empty and sparsely lit, soft beams of orange-yellow light lighting the street from the poles above. They passed a Taco Johns and a gas station/casino with a few trucks still parked out front, taking a right off Main Street, leaving town, venturing back into the dark.

Miles had a map out. He knew roughly where his parents' property was—about four miles east of town, up the slight hill—but after a while driving around, he could sense Lefebvre's patience beginning to leave. How was it possible he couldn't find it? They wound around a gravel road at the edge of town, through the hills, each hill smoothed and frosty and glistening



with silver-dark light like the wet belly of a whale. Lefebvre pulled off the side of the road and put a flashlight over the map. Miles said aloud the address, but the map did not show any roads connecting to it. He was exhausted and lightheaded and delirious—he hadn't had a full night's sleep for as long as he could remember, and each time he looked at the map his eyes would relax and all the lines seemed to double and blur.

“This isn't some trick,” Lefebvre said. “I don't like my kindness advantaged.”

“No,” Miles said. “I swear, it's right around here. I don't know why I can't find it.”

After one more pass, Lefebvre turned the car around. He drove back toward the faint dome of light over Scab in the distance, rolling through stop signs and street lights.

“It's almost two,” Lefebvre said. Then, as if on cue, a terrible metallic gurgle began from under the hood of the car, followed by the sound like that of a coin tossed into a blender. The car bucked a little underneath them, and Lefebvre gripped the wheel, guiding it steadily to the edge of the unpaved road, where the front wheels tipped suddenly down into a roadside irrigation ditch and the back of the car lifted upward at a 45 degree angle.

“You all right?” asked Lefebvre. Miles said he was, but his hands were shaking so hard he thought they were going to snap right off of his wrists.

Lefebvre kicked open the side door; it stuck against the road and he had to kick it a few more times to get it open wide enough for him to squeeze through. He reached back in and gripped Miles' hand, and helped him slide through the car and out the door.

Outside, Lefebvre assessed the damage. “Godammit!” he said, throwing his hat on the ground, kicking at the dirt like an angry ballplayer. He then picked it up and placed it back on his

head, causing a layering of dirt to fall across his neck and shoulders. He left the car behind and started towards Scab. Miles worked his suitcase out of the back of the car and went after him.

“I’m sorry,” he shouted ahead.

Lefebvre turned. “No, the car will be fine,” he said. “We’re going to miss last call.”

They arrived at the Hangdog Saloon a few minutes before close—the house lights were on and the floor was being mopped. In the back of the bar, there was a karaoke machine playing, but nobody singing. Corny, muzak versions of popular songs shuffled along—Michael Jackson, INXS, U2. There wasn’t anyone else there except for an older man in a cowboy hat who was sleeping perfectly upright in a booth. “I think it’s too late,” Miles said.

Lefebvre ignored him and moved ahead to the bar. Before he’d sat down, the bartender had poured him a whiskey. “Another for my friend here,” Lefebvre said.

The bartender did as he was told, and then stepped back and looked over Miles. “Oh man,” he said. “That Maverick Cata’s boy?” Miles looked at the man. “Shit, I haven’t seen you around in ages. Last I heard you were out East. New York, I think?”

“You must be thinking of someone else,” Miles said, finally.

The bartender laughed. “Come on, it’s you.”

“No it’s not,” Miles said.

“Well,” the bartender said, running a wet towel across the bar. “If it isn’t you, it’s the spitting image. You know I ran into Mav not too long ago, at the Conoco.”

“I don’t know who you’re—”

“—he and El finally move down to Florida?”

“No.”

“I know they been talking about it for some time, now.”

“It’s not happening,” Miles said.

“Why not?”

Lefebvre turned and looked at Miles. Miles downed his drink, and signaled for another.

The bartender poured another whiskey and passed it across to him. He took it, and walked across the bar to sit in a booth alone. Soon, Lefebvre carried his drink over and sat across from him.

“He’s dead,” Miles said.

“I didn’t know,” Lefebvre said.

“Why would you?”

“You’re right,” Lefebvre said. “Why would I?”

Miles sat there for a while nursing his drink, watching the simple, hypnotic charm of the karaoke backing videos: the way the lyrics filled themselves in by changing color as the song continued forward in time; the dreamy, slow-motion backdrops of beautiful Slavic women riding along beach boardwalks on rollerblades, or posing on a sand dune, or riding horses and pointing toward an unseen object off-camera as if they’d just witnessed something so remarkable that they were still compelled to point it out, even though they were the only ones around.

Miles stumbled along the street with his hands in his pockets, past the old faded storefronts, the edges of the sky turning soft pink and orange. He returned to the road leading out from town, up a slight hill, and down another. He walked along a split rail fence at the side of the

road, checking each mailbox as he came to it, each around a half mile apart from one another, looking for any familiar signs. He watched a mule deer buck vault across the tight knots of bunchgrass in the distance, its front and legs both connecting with the earth at the same time, springing itself forward in motion, before slowing to a prancing trot, and disappearing over the slight crest of a hill. Then he saw it. A long, dark stretched out rectangle in the distance, in the center of an unkempt seven acre property connected to the road by a straight gravel path.

The ranch.

He hopped the fence at end of the property, and started on foot towards the house. A mist hung over the earth; the frosted grass crunched under his shoes, and *fuzzy-butt* gnats (as he'd called them as a child) lofted about. The field was coming alive in the early morning: field crickets, the shriek and cheep of birds, the horses (two left, he noted), the blast of a distant train.

He approached the house. There were no lights on inside. He went around back to where his room had been. He peered in the window. The room was untouched—almost exactly as he'd left it—though it appeared they'd been using it for storage. It was filled with boxes, and blanket-covered furniture. His bookshelf remained in tact, as he remembered it. His posters on the wall above his bed: *Star Wars*, Daisy Duke, Steve Martin with an arrow through his head.

Then he did as he'd done for years: pressed his palms against the window glass and pushed upward to open it, but it didn't budge. The window was stuck (or someone had finally fixed it). He tried again—nothing. Then he went around the side of the house, to the garage. The side door with the busted handle turned creakily, and he went inside and found the house key, still in its magnetic container along the dusty metal storage rack, in front of his mother's old F-250. He palmed the key and went into the house. He slipped off his shoes and held them as he

slid along the wooden flooring, his muscle memory kicking in—all the creaky, noise-making spots to avoid—and reached his bedroom, which was stuffy and suffocating with dust. The room spun, glowing a little, as Miles undressed and went into his closet for an old t-shirt. The shirt he found smelled of mothballs and a kind of mildewy, rank smell of sweat that had been gaining strength over the past decade and a half, but Miles didn't care. He put the shirt on anyway and fell on the bed. He was asleep before his head was even on the pillow.

When he woke, it wasn't any lighter. The room was still the same hazy dark as when he'd come in. He'd slept an hour, maybe less. His mouth was cottony, his lips dry.

He snuck out of the room, down the hallway, and into the kitchen. He found a glass in the cupboard and filled it with water from the sink. He drank it down in several large gulps, and then was filling another when he saw a flicker of movement in the window. He turned and caught the sight of something moving through the adjacent living room, a figure, a person. He set the glass down. Then he moved over to the half-opened bifold doors, peering through the opening into the dark living room. The window shades were down, and the room was almost black, but he could see the figure moving in the center of the room. "Hello?" he called in a thin whisper. When there was no answer, he tried again. Then he slipped uneasily into the room, his back to the wall. He could hear breathing and the movement of feet. In the reflection of the dark TV, he could see the outline of the standing figure. Then the figure turned, and looked in his direction. His face caught a dusty beam of sunlight coming from the kitchen, and it illuminated in warm silver light.

"It's you," the figure said, moving towards him and opening his arms.

"Dad," Miles said. "I thought you were dead."

## Chapter 2

His father sat at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee steaming beside him as he packed his pipe with tobacco. The black plastic stem was covered in bite mark indentations. He struck a match, held it above the chamber, and then shook it out over the table. The smoke curled off it for a moment, dissipating across the musty light of the kitchen. “Would have thought dying would get me to quit,” he said, after a long pull. The rich smell of the tobacco filled the kitchen, something between vanilla and burning leaves.

At the stovetop, Miles cooked some eggs for the both of them. He’d kept them on the skillet for so long, they’d turned rubbery. He doused them with cheese and hot sauce to make up for it, and then dropped a plate in front of his father and sat across from him.

“What’s it like?” he asked, after a moment.

“Like a campfire in your gut. Come on now, you’ve smoked a pipe before.”

“No,” said Miles. “Dying.”

“Oh,” said Gabriel, “*that*. Like nothing really. A deep sleep.”

“No light at the end of the tunnel?”

“No tunnel. No nothing. But listen. In case your mother asks, the story is an angel walked into the room and took my hand, and then decided it wasn’t time.”

“Mom’s a Christian now?”

“She’s always been a Christian,” he said. “But now she’s a *Christian*. So be kind. I know you New Yorker’s did away with God a long time ago.”

“That club on 57th? No, it’s still there.”

Gabriel snorted. Smoke shot out of his nose like a dragon. “It’s good to have you home,” he said. “But these eggs aren’t worth a shit.”

It was Miles who laughed this time; a yellow hunk of half-chewed egg fired out of his mouth and onto the table. “Since when did Mom go all in on the T-Place anyway?”

Gabriel gestured at the window. In the distance, Miles could see his mother riding a horse along the property line. “Why don’t you ask her yourself,” he said.

Miles walked out into the field beyond their house. The shadows were tightening and the sun had lofted into the lower third of the sky, burning away the remaining morning dew and mist. His mother was a hundred yards away, trotting along on her horse, over the rolling hills; she sat tall and relaxed and perfectly straight, her crushable Stetson bouncing against her back, the reins bunched in one hand with her other hand resting on her thigh. In all his life it was the only time he’d ever seen her truly happy and at peace—up on that horse in the early morning, galloping along. She pulled on the reins and brought the horse into a canter, easing along the high brush toward the east property line, her long hair absorbing the golden-red sun.

Gabriel shuffled out onto the patio, still in his robe. He moved with frail, uneasy steps. His father had built the patio, along with the house, when they’d moved the family out to Montana from Ohio in the spring of 1974, to be closer to his mother’s ailing parents. Miles was eleven. He and Jax hadn’t wanted to move. They’d moved around so many times in those years—Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania—their father had been a prominent land developer—that the idea of moving to somewhere like northeastern Montana felt, to Miles, like the equivalent of being banished to the moon.

Miles hung back and took his father's arm and helped him into a green plastic Adirondack. In the light, he could see the illness in his father's face: pale and ashen, skin pulled so tight it was as if his bones were nearly poking through his skin; and with each movement, the strained inner-workings of his body produced a hollow, ambient crackle—almost imperceptible—the sound of applause heard on televised golf.

His mother must have seen them; she reversed the horse suddenly and started back to the house at a gallop, before slowing the horse, leaping off, and leading it toward them at a tense, brisk pace. “He's not supposed to be outside,” she said. “You need to be resting! I thought you were in bed!”

“Well hello to you too, mother,” Miles said.

She tied the horse to the patio railing, and leaped up the steps. She was sweaty and muscular, with a green plaid snap shirt tucked snugly into her rhinestone pocketed jeans.

“No, no, no,” she said, waving her hands like she was scaring away some kind of pest. “Back inside, now!” Gabriel sat sheepishly staring up at her. “And is that smoke I smell? You reek like a cigar store Indian. Do you have a death wish? Do you want to die again?”

Miles caught a knowing shrug from his father, and watched him sigh, before his mother pulled him back into the house by the collar of his bathrobe. Miles followed them inside, through the dark house, and found his father in bed. His mother sat at the bedside, with his hand gripped tightly in hers. “I won't lose you again,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye before snapping out of it the moment she noticed Miles was in the room. She stood and hugged him, and kissed him on the forehead. Her lips were dry, and tough like rubber. “It's a miracle isn't it?” she said. “It's an absolute miracle. The Lord has truly blessed this family. I watched him die. I watched his



heart stop. I went into the kitchen to call you, and when I came back in he was sitting upright like nothing had happened. The nurse said she'd never seen anything like it. He had no heartbeat for almost five minutes. If it'd been any longer, his brain would've started to—" She stopped, and cried. Miles put his arm around her, and rubbed his hand along her back.

"Shut down," his father said.

"Please don't say it," his mother said. "If I hear that phrase one more time."

"An angel took him by the hand," Miles said. "And then decided it wasn't his time."

"Yes! That's it!" his mother said, looking to the ceiling, clutching the silver cross around her neck. "There's no such thing as coincidence, Miles. There's only God's will."

His father winked at Miles. Miles shared a knowing smile with him and watched him close his eyes, ease painfully back against the pillow. Soon, he was snoring. His mother lead Miles out of the room, with a hand on his back. She shut the bedroom door and spoke to him in a whisper: "Listen, I don't want your father to know this, but there's a real chance he might have—" She seized up, as if trying to contain a hiccup. "I can't say it out loud."

"It's OK."

"He might have something wrong with his brain. His heart stopped for long enough that there may be some damage. The nurse said it's probably acute, but it's likely."

"Shouldn't he be in the hospital?"

"Yes," she said. "That damn insurance company—don't even get me started." She balled one hand and ground it against the other. "We've got a woman who comes by each day, Marlene—you'll meet her. We're having to pay for her out of pocket. I'm not going to lie to you, Miles. Money's tight. Jax is paying for a lot of it. Thank god one of you had some financial success."

“Gee thanks, Mom.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. You know we’re proud of whatever it is that you do. The uh, the thing with the signs. The study of street signs, or—”

“I have a masters in semiotics from New York University.”

“And we’re so proud, honey, we are.”

“It isn’t right to keep this from him.”

“No. I’ve made my decision.”

“He *has* to know.”

“What do you know? You left. You’ve been gone for a decade. And now you think you know what’s best for him? You don’t know anything. You haven’t *been* here.”

Miles knocked on the door of the bedroom. “Mom has something she needs to tell you.”

“Stop! Enough!”

“You awake Dad?” He opened the door and saw his father asleep on his back, his hands resting across his stomach.

Then a door slammed from somewhere across the house. Jax’s voice cut through the silence of the house. “Hello?” he called. “Anyone home?” His solid body boomed through the house as he moved, causing the floorboards to creak and groan and the dishware in the kitchen to rattle in the cupboards. He’d been a star defensive end for the Cats, and a serious NFL draft prospect (Miles remembered the scouts that began calling while he was still in high school; how he’d pretended not to know anything about his brother’s football prowess, or even the game at all —*football: that’s the one with the pads and tights right? The vague homoerotic undertones?*) before a knee injury late in his Junior year season, ended any hope.

Jax appeared at the end of the hall. “No way,” he said, and charged at Miles. As he reached him he nearly picked him up off the floor in a tight hug. He’d thinned out since Miles had last seen him, but he was as strong as ever, knocking the wind out of him as their chests collided. He removed his ball cap, swept his hair back underneath it, and then placed it back on his head. Beneath, he wore a pair of polarized sunglasses that concealed his eyes, left Miles with two distorted images of his face staring back at him. “Only took dad dying and coming back to life to get this guy to finally visit.”

“Jesus,” Miles said.

“Exactly,” their mother said.

“No, could we be a little more discrete? Dad’s in the next room.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” Jax said. “You’re concerned about Dad now?”

“That’s not fair,” Miles said.

“I’m fucking with you.”

“Jax,” Eleanor said. “Language. You’ve been out with those roughnecks too long.”

“Sorry,” Jax said. “How’s he doing today?”

“He needs rest. I found him out on the patio this morning. In a bathrobe.”

“What? He’s not supposed to leave his bed.”

“I know, I told him.”

“Did you do this?” he asked, turning and looking down at Miles. At six feet four inches, his head nearly scraped the wooden beams running along the hallway ceiling.

“I didn’t *do* anything. He made his own decisions.”

“He shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“Loud and clear.”

“Will you two stop,” Eleanor said. “Any stress between you two can be taken on by your father. And he doesn’t need it.”

“Fine,” Jax said. He opened the bedroom door, checked on their sleeping father, and then closed it once more. “Who wants breakfast?”

“I already ate,” Miles said.

“Well you’re going to eat again,” Eleanor said.

While Jax and Eleanor were in the kitchen, Miles went off to his bedroom at the other end of the house. He showered and changed, and when he was finished he snuck back down the hall, slipping into his father’s room. The room had a musty, sickly smell to it like an old locker room, and the mid-morning light as it connected with the window created several swelling fans of color across the floor and wall—yellow, red, orange—roving and shifting like light on the bottom of a pool. His father’s eyes were open; he stared at the ceiling fan, which chopped fluidly through the stagnant air above.

“Listen, there’s something you should know,” Miles said, as he sat on the edge of the bed. His father sat up a little, wincing in pain as he did.

“I know, I know. The brain damage. Big whoop.”

“How do you know?”

“I heard you two knuckleheads talking in the hall. I also heard her and Jax having it out a day ago. This family’s got a lot of positive attributes, but subtlety sure isn’t one of them.”

“Are you OK?”

“Do I have a choice? It is what it is. New normal. At least I’m still here.”

“Mom didn’t want you to know.”

“Of course not. Why would she?”

“So you’re OK with that?”

“The lengths she’d go to keep it from me—it’s why I love her.”

“You two have such a healthy thing going.”

“Be good to your mother. She may be hard as nails at times, but she cares. She may never show it, but she’s happy to have you back. It’s been hard on her, with you being away.” His father sat up and took a sip of water from the glass on his bedside table. When he was finished he set it down. With his other hand, he pointed at the window. “I want to show you something.”

“Easy, Dad. Don’t overdo it.”

“Look,” he said.

Miles did as instructed. There was nothing—treeless grassland that stretched on and on across their fourteen acre property. “I don’t see anything.”

“That’s because it isn’t there yet.”

“Is this some kind of riddle?”

“No.”

“Then what am I looking at?”

“The Republic of Catatonia,” his father said.

### Chapter 3

Over the next weeks, a cold settled in across the plains. Each night Miles would try to sleep as the winds would whistle and crack against the house, and each morning he'd awake under a mound of blankets and clothes to a window tessellated by frost. Two snows came and went. A bleak gray overtook the sky. The darkness of night lengthened; sunrise taking longer and longer each morning, causing Miles to sleep and sleep until he was sleeping in sometimes until nine or ten in the morning—until he could hear his parents moving about throughout the house, the sound of his father's cane sticking into the wooden floor. *Crack crack crack.*

Miles was sitting in the kitchen with his mother one afternoon when they heard it, distant and soft. *Crack crack crack.* Quick, rhythmic—somewhere in the house. His mother set down her newspaper, and listened. “Gabe?” she asked. There was no answer. “Gabe, is that you?”

They got up and tiptoed around the house, searching for the source of the sound. They went through each room of the house, then the garage. “It's coming from outside.” They went out the side door and walked around the house. They pounding stopped. A large dark cloud pushed in from the north, and the wind whistled. Then it started again.

*Crack crack crack.*

They walked around, moving closer to its direction each time they heard it. *Crack crack crack.* Half an acre out, they saw a pair of tire marks in the grass and followed them up a hill, down along a gradual leveling out into flatland. A hundred yards out they saw Gabriel, on the other side of the hill. Eleanor gasped and ran in his direction. Miles followed, stopping to cough and grab his sides after each twenty yard dash. His father was seated on the ground with a hammer, nailing two beams of wood together. The wind picked up and little pearly white pellets

of graupel were bouncing off the earth. His father's pickup was parked nearby, its open bed strapped with a mound of lumber. His mother shouted. She caught up to him and wrestled the hammer out of his hand. "What are you doing?" she said. "It's twenty degrees out here!"

Miles leaned against the truck, a burning sensation around his lungs. His father turned to face his mother. He had a look like a young child who'd written with marker all over the wall. "I'm going to found a country," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to found my very own country. I'm going to be its king."

His mother was sobbing and shaking in the cold. She wasn't wearing socks or shoes, Miles noticed. "You're not well, Gabe. Oh God, there's something really wrong."

"I'm fine," he said, and picked up the hammer and went back to nailing boards together. It was encouraging to see his returned strength in action. He whipped the hammer down on each nailhead with expert precision. It made a quick rat-a-tat-tat like a machine gun. The grey-black clouds swirled above. When he was finished, he stood up. It wasn't much more than a few boards nailed together, but he seemed proud of what he'd accomplished. Eleanor took his hand and pulled him back to the truck. The three of them got in and drove back up to the house. There, his mother got his father into a bath. She closed the bathroom door and sat against the wall just outside of it. Miles sat with her "I'm very alarmed," she said. "He's going to the doctor first thing tomorrow morning. This isn't OK. What was he saying? He wants to build a country? This is the talk of a sick mind."

"Catatonia," Miles said.

"Is that what it's—?" She pointed to her head, her brain.

“No,” he said. “That’s his country. The Republic of Catatonia.”

“Oh don’t even—” A sound came out of his mother’s mouth that Miles had never heard, like a dog’s squeaky toy under a boot. “Don’t even tell me you *knew*. Miles, I could scream right now. You don’t keep a secret like that. This is a matter of life and death.”

“Why not let him do what he wants to do?”

“This isn’t New York, Miles. There are rules here.”

“What’s so wrong with it?”

“It’s nonsense. No, no, no. I’m not going to enable his delusion. This ends now.”

Miles did not respond. When he finally did come up with something to say his mother had already walked the full length of the hall, turned the corner toward the garage, and was gone.

The light hit Miles like a bolt to the skull. He gasped awake. The comforter flew off the bed and landed in a heap on the floor. Jax stood over him. “Come on,” he said. Miles rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and looked over at the clock. 4:15 AM.

“Leave me alone,” he said. “It’s the middle of the night.”

Jax’s wide hand latched onto Miles’ ankle. He pulled hard and sent Miles sliding all the way down the bed, and onto the floor where he landed with a thud. “Fuck you!” he said, as he lunged upward and swung an awkward fist at Jax’s chest. Not even close. Miles lost his balance and fell into the bedside table, knocking over the lamp; it hit the carpet in one piece, landed with a thud. Jax laughed and before Miles could regain his balance he’d secured his palm at the back of Miles’ neck, subduing him like a caught snake. Miles said, OK, OK, fine, and then pulled on some jeans and a jacket, squeezed some toothpaste onto his finger to run along his teeth, and



then met Jax outside. He was idling in the driveway, his large white truck rumbling, steaming, lurking in the dark and cold, a deer skull secured to the grated front with zip ties, like it were about to provide transport for him straight to the gates of hell.

Miles got in. “Morning sunshine,” said Jax, chewing on a granola bar. Metallica’s *Master of Puppets* thrashed ahead on the car stereo system. He turned the truck around and gunned it up the gravel driveway, toward the road.

They drove for what seemed like hours. Miles had his head against the cold window, with his fingers in his ears to *protest* Jax’s heavy metal tapes. Jax didn’t appear to notice. He drove forward into the night, the sky lightening at the edges. In the distance, Miles could see several domes of red-gold light, like martian colonies. Jax hit a sharp right and left the road. He ran the truck along an adjacent S-shaped loop up and down the hills, past the yards of lazily nodding pumpjacks, past the clusters of flat-roofed office trailers (their windows and doors created an illusory, visual trick against the sky: large, looming skulls), before angling the truck along a final curve and shooting it down the cool, dark hillside, under a sickly grayish band running above the horizon and the stars and a moon that’s light seemed to drip off it like candle wax.

“It might not look like much,” said Jax, “but there’s going to be a boom from here to Minot to all the way up to Regina in the next ten years. It’s going to be a modern gold rush. Bigger than the gold rush. We’re talking billions and billions to be made.”

“You can’t just make billions off the earth without repercussions.”

“You better cool it with that Al Gore shit.”

“I’m just saying, there’s always cause and effect.”

“If God didn’t want us to have it, he wouldn’t have put it in the ground.”

“What if there is no God?”

“Not a morning person, I take it. Look, I’m all for sustainability, or whatever the lefties say these days. I think that’s a genuinely nice idea. But it’s right here in our backyard. Gold. Actual gold. A winning lottery ticket. And you’d be willing to deny yourself the fruits of that God-given fortune to take a chance on some loons from Washington? Who, by the way, have their own agendas and interests to manage, and honestly couldn’t give two shits about this part of the country until they think we might vote for them.”

“You sound like you’re trying to justify it to yourself, not me.”

“Oh no,” he said. “I know right where I stand.”

“Emphasis on *right*.”

“Besides, I’m sick of the cold. If this global heating—”

“—warming.”

“Whatever. If it’s true as they say, I honestly wouldn’t mind it. Warmer winters up here?

Who could say no to that?”

“But what about the places that are already warm?”

“Why is that my problem? If they don’t like it, they can move here.”

“The world doesn’t revolve around Northeastern Montana. Sorry to say.”

“Not yet it doesn’t,” said Jax.

Jax eased off the gravel road, and pull into a makeshift parking area where a few dozen cars and trucks were lined in loose rows along the tire-worn grass. They got out of the truck and walked along in the dark, up to a trailer parked at the top of a small vista, looking down over rows of pumpjacks and drilling rigs. The trailer was long and narrow, with wood paneled walls,

lockers, and sporadically placed baskets of single use hair and hygienic products: colognes, pomades, balms, jars of black combs bobbing in blue liquid, like miniature sawfish. “Let’s fit you a brain bucket.” He grabbed a helmet from a loose stack in the corner, tightened it, and then slapped him in the head. Miles responded with a surprised *oof*. “How’s that feel?”

“Like you slapped me in the head.”

“No,” he said, “I mean, does it need to be adjusted?”

“I don’t know.”

“Things out there can kill you. This isn’t a joke.” Jax wrestled Miles against the wall, clicking the straps in place. It gave his brain a squeeze. “You know anything about oil?”

“I once taught a course on the symbolic nature of oil in avant-garde Iraqi cinema.”

“Oh,” Jax said, “well that’s just not going to be of any use at all.”

Miles followed him out of the locker, and back into the sharp cold air of the morning. They could see their breath in front of them. The sky had lightened into an orange-pink glow, with several gauzy clouds drifting above them, collecting with the dense steam of the drill site. Huge towers of wind blasted across the plains, twisting the dark, burnt-fuel infused steam up into the sky, where it dissipated. They worked their way around, up and down the platforms—the drilling rigs, mud pumps, derricks, the stacks of piping. “We’re building an entire highway system from here to Canada,” Jax shouted over the industrial clangor—the clanks and whirs and hisses and booms, and an incessant dumdumdumdumdum that sounded like a death metal drummer working a double bass drum pedal. “We got some of the guys who worked the TAPS on it. Five stations, at least. We got another team out location scouting.” They climbed a ladder off one of the platforms, and then Jax led Miles into a third trailer which was less tidy than the

ones before, with a starchy wood-chippy smell that was like a hamster's cage. There was a fax machine in the corner, a wall of metal filing cabinets, a desk and phone, and a burbling coffee pot that smelled burnt. Jax told Miles to sit tight, and tossed a dog-eared safety manual down on the desk and told him to read it front to back, and that he would be back in an hour or so.

"They're gonna test you," he said. "Legally they have to before we can do anything else. So actually read it. And help yourself to some coffee, we got a few different kinds."

"Oh? Do you have anything single origin? Preferably a Yirgacheffe?"

"We got Folgers, or Chock full o' Nuts. Take your pick."

He left and Miles sat there for a while, glancing only briefly at the packet. He paced around the small space, sipping on his coffee. He drank cup after cup, but the coffee did not wake him up; and only made his tongue bitter, his bladder full. He tried again to glance through the manual, but his eyes wouldn't focus. Soon he had to pee. Jax had not returned. An hour passed. Then another fifteen minutes. And Miles walked out of the trailer to find a bathroom. He moved across the grounds. There was nobody around, and he was so mixed up he couldn't find his way back to the lockers. The oil rigs creaked and clattered above him like carnival rides.

Miles saw a man moving around on a catwalk about twenty feet up, in loose bulky clothing dragging two long straps behind him like he'd just arrived by parachute. He searched the area for a ladder, located it, and climbed up. The cold, vibrating metal of the steps shocked his hands and it was difficult to hold on. Halfway up, his fingers were numb and he was losing his grasp. He started back down, when he heard a shout above him. The man was yelling and waving his arms. "Bathroom!" Miles shouted, and his frozen hand slipped from a wet rung of the ladder. The man sprang forward, leaving his station behind. He hurried across the catwalk and

down the ladder, offering his hand. Miles was lifted upward, spilling out onto the cold catwalk. Before Miles could say anything else, there was a loud bang. A tall metal beam swung from the top of a derrick, clanging against the side of the rig, causing the whole structure to shake. Miles held on to the railing. The man on the catwalk was thrown about five yards away; a metal latch at the end of his strap caught on the catwalk, leaving him dangling and swinging over the pit in the center, feet from the pounding drill bit. An emergency alarm sounded. Men from all over the site appeared below, pointed upward. A team of three men took to the ladder with a rope and tossed it down to the swinging man. He took it, tightened it around his waist, and then tied it off in a knot. The three men on the catwalk pulled him upward. Soon he was over the railing, on his back. One man straddled the man on his back, and pointed a finger an inch in front of his nose, running it back and forth across his eyes. Satisfied, he stood up and the men helped the man up once more, slapping him across the shoulders and back. The men below cheered. Once they'd helped him up, two strong hands gripped Miles by the undersides of his arms. They dragged him up and then forced him back down the ladder, down to the ground where Jax was waiting.

“What the fuck?” Jax said.

Miles' jeans filled with warm and rank liquid, that went cold in the wind. Jax grabbed Miles by the arm and pulled him across the site, back to the truck. He didn't say anything. Not for the hour it took to drive back to Scab, not as they pulled into the driveway of their parents house, and not as Miles leapt out of the car and hurried back into the house, went down the hall, tossed his soiled pants in the laundry room, and collapsed in his bed, sweating and hot.

Miles woke in the late afternoon. He heard the sound again. *Crack. Crack. Crack.* Like a marble rolling around inside his head. He dressed and went outside. It had warmed since the morning, and the sun was beaming. He followed the sounds out onto the property, down the slight hill. His father was back at it. Several piles of wood and stray lumber lay around him. He squatted, nailing two long beams together. Miles' shadow stretched out across his father's field of view, and his father looked up and held his hand above his eyes to shield the sun. He waved him over. Miles watched as he finished the beam. He pointed with his hammer to a box of tools and several blueprints that had been drawn out and laminated and were nailed into the ground. "Don't just stand there," he said. Miles went over to the tools, and picked out a hammer.

He got to work.

#### Chapter 4

"To the left!" Gabriel shouted into a bullhorn.

Twenty yards out, in the center of what was soon to be Catatonia's governmental district, Miles sat in the cockpit of the mobile crane, working the controls. Above him, dangled the roof of the capital building. It was gold, pyramidal, with the shine of a tooth cap each time the sun broke through the dark low hanging clouds. Bits of snow drifted lazily through the air, swinging and pulling in the sharp winds like little schools of fish. There was still so much to do.

Miles inched the roof forward and down. He angled the boom in slight jerky movements. Every time he did, the roof would compensate for each new movement by swinging side to side, before slowing to a still above the frame once more.

The Republic of Catatonia was about two-thirds complete. Its border was clearly demarcated (.0053 km<sup>2</sup>) by stakes in the earth, and its capital city of Catatonia, was under construction in its northeast quadrant; its skyline newly visible against the gray November skies.

Miles eased the roof down further, as one of four laborers Gabriel had hired leapt out from behind the capital building, and waved his arms in front of the crane. Miles stopped. The man pointed to Gabriel. Miles waved and turned on the crane once more, angling the roof just slightly before lowering it. It came down inch by inch. A gust of wind swept through town, snapping the tarps and causing the unfinished building frames to wobble. In the cockpit's mirror Miles saw one of the blue tarps detach in the wind, and sail out across the field beyond. The roof that dangled above him swayed violently from side to side. He tried to accommodate each swing as it happened with a slight readjustment of the boom, but once he did the wind would be coming from a new, different direction. Once he had it closing in atop the building's trusses, the laborers scrambled up on their ladders and reeled it in. They secured it, nailed it into place. When they came down, Gabriel was applauding from the platform. Miles pumped his fists, drove the crane

down the avenue, and parked it on the outskirts of the city. He hopped out and ran back through town, along Catatonia's main stretch, the wide, three block long King Gabriel Blvd, past the post office, the bank, the Catatonia Bar, the jail, the barber shop, the gas station, the Catatonia Diner, and the Church of Catatonianism, with its wrought iron © jutting up from the steeped rooftop; designed to create the possibility, at certain hours of the morning, of throwing a large ©-shaped shadow in the center of Catatonia Park, on the west side of the city, a 7x7 grassy knoll with a small paisley tear drop shaped pool along its northwest fence.

The sun broke through the clouds, lighting the yard with the antiseptic brightness of an anti-depressant commercial. Miles bounded ahead. The wind whipped around him. As he ran a hot, prickly excitement crackled in his belly, like a pot of water just before boil, and a sense of accomplishment he hadn't felt in years. As he approached his father's tower however, he saw that something had changed. The appreciation had left his face, replaced by a panicked mouth open gape. He pointed. Miles turned and caught the image of the newly secured roof dangling half off in the wind like a tipped hat. There was a loud rip across the construction site. Miles charged back towards the building as it tore from the structure, and crashed to the ground with an enormous crunch. Dust kicked up over the city, down the avenues; it gathered above the wreckage before disappearing into the darkened clouds above. When he looked back, his father was down from the platform. One of the laborers had already helped him into his wheel chair, and he was being pushed away from the site, back up the hill toward the house in the distance. Miles went after him. When he caught up with him, his father's face was ashen. "That's it for today," he said.

"There's time. We can still—"



“It was a mistake to try and do this now.”

“It’s a roof, Dad. We’ll get it fixed.”

Gabriel wheeled back into the house. Miles followed. Down the hallway, to his bedroom, where he grabbed at his wheels, went inside, and closed the door. It locked from inside.

Miles walked down the hall to his bedroom. Inside, he saw his mother seated on the bed. Jax was standing nearby. “This an intervention?” Miles said. He unlaced his shoes and slipped into the bed around his mother, lay down, and placed his head on the pillow.

“You know what needs to happen,” Eleanor said.

“You’re killing him,” Jax said.

“I’m not doing anything to him,” Miles said. “This is what *he* wants. Respect that.”

“He needs to be in bed, resting,” Jax said.

“Each day you continue to prop up this delusion of his,” Eleanor said. “He’s not well, Miles. He doesn’t have the mental capacity to make decisions right now.”

“I’ll be straight with you,” Jax said. “We can’t afford it.”

“*There* it is,” Miles said.

“Do you know what this is costing? Money was tight before all this nonsense, and now we’re in the red. Our debt is compounding, Miles. Do you know what that means?”

“You think I’m an idiot.”

“He’s been on a fixed income since he retired,” Jax said.

“You’re so rich, why don’t you help Dad out?”

“I *am* helping him out. You ungrateful piece of—”

“Jax!”

“Sorry. But how do you think we’ve been able to cover the majority of Dad’s medical expenses? The insurance companies are fighting us for every penny.”

“I don’t know. President Clinton? Healthcare should be free anyway. It’s a human right.”

“Nothing’s free,” Jax said.

“We’re going to have to sell the ranch,” Eleanor said. “I don’t see any other way.”

“But what about Catatonia?”

“What about what?”

“Dad’s country.”

“Are you that thick? It’s over. If you don’t end it right now, I’m bringing a bull dozer over here and will demolish it myself. That is if the winter doesn’t do it for me. You realize you have about a week left before we’re under a foot of snow? If not sooner.”

“Why we should deny him of it?”

“You think you’re helping him, but you’re actually hurting him. He’s going to be die, Miles. If we don’t end this now, he is going to die. You don’t want him to die, do you?”

“No.”

Eleanor and Jax left the room. Miles lay there on his bed for a while and watched the declining sun and the clouds create vague fans of gray and white and black across the dusty surface of the floor, the dust swirling after Jax’s slam of the door. It was still early in the day. Miles felt weighted down and scrambled in the stomach. Nervous, prickly balls of energy zipped up and down along his veins. He didn’t know what to do. He stood and looked at himself in the mirror. He couldn’t have been more than a hundred a forty pounds, long skeletal limbs and

awkward cords of hair just starting to gray along his chin and upper lip, each of which were almost wet with the kind of dense yellow grease found only on the surface of a pizza.

Miles snatched the keys off the hook in the kitchen, and went outside to his father's black Suburban parked in the yard just off the driveway. The Suburban was old and decorated with gravel chippings all up the front and side. He pressed his foot on the gas and it shot out from beneath him. He tore down the driveway, then onto the road, swerving to avoid the potholes that had accumulated during the yearly beatings of ice and snow, until he saw the Hangdog coming into focus down the street. He pulled off, and sat in the parking lot for a while, debating whether or not to go in. His mind was spiraling. He shut down the car and went inside. The familiarity of the bar in mid-day—of any bar—gave him at once the sense of comfort and calm he'd never been able to fully verbalize. There were a few barflies sitting around. Garth Brooks was on the jukebox singing about how a dream was like a river, or something. Miles hadn't ever seen the appeal. Sanitized, and over produced—more Fogelberg than Waylon or Willie.

But here he didn't hate it. In this place, anything could sound OK.

Miles sat down, and a woman came over and asked him what he was drinking. She had wet hair and a pot-belly under her tight t-shirt. He told her and she returned with the bottle. He drank it and calm came over him. The Cats were playing the Vandals on the small TV hanging over the bar, fuzzing and tracking, hanging from a metallic arm drilled into the wood paneling. It was Sunday. The song changed. More Garth. He took a drink. It tumbled down into his empty stomach. He drank the whole thing then, in three long gulps, and signaled for another.

Miles woke the next morning with a pain in his head. He was clothed, shoes and all, lying on top of his comforter, his skin covered in a film of sleep grease and sweat. He stumbled up and went into the kitchen where he drank two full glasses of water and the last half of a flat two-liter of Coca-Cola. He went into the bathroom and peed a dark yellow, brownish color, which filled the bathroom with an ammoniacal funk. He brushed his teeth and went out to the yard. His father was seated by the worksite, in his wheelchair. Nobody else was there. "Where is everybody?"

"Nobody showed," his father said. "I've been waiting around for hours."

"Well, if it's not happening today..." Miles said, and started toward the house. His head was throbbing in the cold and smooth silver light, and all he wanted was to be back in his bed with the curtains drawn, lying within the warm dark shell of his comforter.

"Nonsense," his father said. He stood unsteadily up out of his chair, and leaned on one of his wooden crutches. "We've got so much left to do." He directed Miles to begin reconstructing the broken roof of the capital building; it had snapped in half upon its impact with the ground and needed two new panels. Miles moved slowly, his lungs burning in the cold air. So much so that each breath seemed to create a red-orange sensation behind his eyes, that lingered superimposed against his vision like he'd taken a too-long peak at the sun.

"You hear me?" his father asked. Miles said yes, but didn't move. He awaited his next direction. "I said, you're going to need to get the cordless drill and drill a new sheet onto the roof." Miles nodded. "Let's get going," he said. "We're losing daylight."

Miles shuffled across the worksite with his thumb pressed in his forehead. His mouth was dry and cottony and waves of sickness came over him. With his father directing from his chair nearby, Miles worked slowly, nailing boards together. Each swing of the hammer was like a stab

into the temple with a knife. Within an hour, he'd patched up the roof as best he could and was seated next to it on the ground, panting and sweating.

His father wheeled over. "What's wrong?" he said. "Do you not want to be here?"

"I talked to Mom and Jax. They said they're pulling the plug on this whole thing if I don't stop. Jax says he's going to get a bulldozer and destroy it all."

His father grunted. "Son, you smell like a barstool. You been drinking?"

"No," Miles said.

"I can smell it."

"I swear."

"It runs in the family, you know."

"What does?"

"Just be careful," he said, and then his father made a pained face and pushed himself up out of his wheelchair. He reached out his hand and took it and moved unsteadily across the grounds toward the crane. He sat inside, working the controls. "I need you to stand back. I'm going to get this thing on here if it kills me." Miles stepped back and watched his father on the machine. He lifted the boom, and soon had the roof angled in place over the structure's foundation. The wind had died down considerably from the day before, nothing more than a gentle batting against Miles' face. After several attempts—lowering, raising, lowering; in slight, tedious movements—his father dropped the roof into place. Miles leapt up onto a ladder and secured it to the trusses with a nail gun. He ran along the roof, moving the ladder every few feet. When it was secure, he undid the hook, freed up the hook-block, and signaled a thumbs up in the

air for his father. The boom lifted, and then he set the crane in park. His father got out of the cockpit. Miles joined him. “Closer every day,” Miles said.

They spent the next week at work. Miles and Gabriel. Out there each day. Gabriel in his wheelchair, directing from within a cocoon of blankets and coats. Miles doing his best to work through it, even though he had little idea what he was doing. The ground hardened, and snow fell daily; it collected on the tall grass and in loose, wet mounds that melted off by afternoon. Every so often, as they’d work, he’d see his mother or Jax watching from up on the hill.

Over the course of the week, the laborers returned. From there each day was more or less the same. Morning’s they’d wake early, pre-light, the laborers in sleeping bags on the living room floor, in a tight row like sardines. Each morning Miles would make use of the kitchen, fill two large steel vats with eggs and toast and bacon and cubed honeydew melon. Each meal was family-style. They’d sit at the dining room table and eat and talk and plan out the remains of the day. The food was never good, but it sustained them. The eggs often tasted rubbery, and the produce was mushy and bitten with frost. Once a week—though sooner, if needed—the crew would take Gabriel’s Suburban back into Scab, to load up on that week’s supply of whatever was needed. This was Miles’ favorite: sure and free as they barreled across the plains, the windows open, the cold air eating at their faces, their hair whipping and snapping in the wind. They had an answer to the secret nobody else had, would ever have. The only true way to exist was to opt-out, to give up on everything, and do what they did, live on the outside, create their own reality.

Initial construction was completed on Thanksgiving morning. Miles, Gabriel and the laborers drove into Scab and loaded up the Suburban for a celebratory feast. They bought a large

turkey, potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and enough beer and wine. Then they bought a wide ceremonial style banner to be cut the next morning, marking Catatonia's completion. The crew was in good spirits; they cracked open 'road pops' in the car on the drive home, and sang along to each song as it came on the radio: Vince Gill, George Strait, Sammy Kershaw, Clint Black. At one point, Miles looked over at his father. He sat quietly in the passenger seat with his forehead resting on the window, looking out across the endless flat lands, the rolling hills. Miles placed his hand on his father's shoulder. His father looked over and took his hand and squeezed. "It's good to have you back," he said, and then let go of his hand, and returned his gaze out the window.

At home, Miles helped load the food and drinks in through the garage. As he opened the door, Eleanor and Jax were standing in the kitchen. They didn't say anything as he walked in, unloaded the groceries, and went back outside to help with the rest.

Miles cleaned, basted, and stuffed the turkey, and then got it in the oven before the afternoon was over. The sunlight was fading. The shadows of the ranch retreated across the lawn. He'd forgotten how far north they were up in Scab, how the days grew so narrow—each a momentary light in the darkness.

Eleanor walked into the kitchen as Miles mashing peeled potatoes lumpily in a bowl with a fork. She stood behind him without saying anything. "You're making me nervous," he said. From the adjacent room, a frustrated roar. The Vikings were playing the Lions. Last time he'd checked they were up 28-24 at the half, Carter catching the go-ahead TD from Moon, but he knew by the sound of his brother's voice—"you fucking kidding me?"—and delighted in the ill that had assumedly befallen his brother's beloved Vikings.

“Jax!” Eleanor said. “Language! Not in this house!” Then she tossed the fork into the sink and went to a cabinet nearby, retrieved a potato masher, and handed it to him. He held it like an ogre in a Nintendo fantasy RPG, until his mother groaned and took the bowl into her own hands. She mashed the potatoes quickly, the bowl tucked under her arm like a baby.

“You know it’s all to sell beer, right?” Miles said. “The NFL. When your heart rate’s up, you’re more likely to spend. So why do you think every two seconds it’s an ad for beer beer beer.”

“You going to stand there, or are you going to help help help?”

“All I’m saying is that there’s a lot more going on than who wins and loses. We all lose, is what I’m saying. And the game is rigged.”

“You must be a lot of fun at your Upper West Side cocktail parties.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead above 14th Street. And I’d really only go to 14th for Nell’s.”

“You started dating again? That’s nice to hear.”

“It’s a club, Mom.”

Miles took the bowl and struggled to press the masher into the potatoes. Eleanor took it back. “I can do it myself.”

“All that schooling and he can’t even mash a damn darn potato.”

“*He* is standing right here.”

“And either it’s smoke season, or you’ve got a burnt bird on your hands.”

Miles darted back over to the turkey in the oven. A gray plume of smoke flew out as he opened it. Over basted. The liquid poured down onto the base of the oven, burning off—a smoky, brittle mess. They were going to be lucky to salvage anything from it.



“Why don’t you join your friends in the other room. Let me take over from here.”

Miles walked into the next room, where Jax, his father, and the laborers were all seated.

Jax was lying in the Lay-Z-Boy in the corner of the room.

Miles checked the score: 38-43. Lions.

“Fucking Moon!” Jax said, vicing his forehead.

“Language!” yelled Eleanor from the other room.

“We have a drive going, and he throws it right to Vanhorse for the pick. He’s just too old.

The Vikes need a fresh arm.”

“Welp, you win some, you lose some.”

“You couldn’t give a shit—”

“—language!”

“Sorry,” Jax said. “A *darn* about this game. You’re bad luck. No wonder they lost.”

“Yeah, *I’m sure* I had a lot to do with it. Besides, I think they should do away with the emphasis on score. Just let the players have some fun out there.”

“What’s the point in that?”

“Does away with competition.”

“Competition *is the point*. Sounds communist to me. Worse, it sounds like soccer.”

“I don’t know, it’d be an interesting social experiment.”

“You’re a weird dude, Miles.”

They sat around for a while half-watching the Cowboys and the Chiefs, the smells of burnt turkey and butter and cranberry and celery (from the stuffing) layering across the living room. Miles and Jax together drank through a six-pack of Budweiser, and after a few hours or so,

Miles was seated on the floor. The room had taken on a seasick tilt, but he felt warm and good and excited, the TV doubling a little in his vision, the players at the line of scrimmage extending out like an accordion each time he let his eyes relax, before blinking and resetting them—like there was a slight superimposition of the image on the screen. Every so often Gabriel, seated nearby, would shoot him a look of discouragement. When Miles cracked open his fifth beer, Gabriel reached down and put his palm over the mouth of it. “Last one, OK?” he said.

“It’s fine, Dad,” Miles said. “I’m fine.”

“I think you should slow down.”

“Jax is on his fifth?”

“Jax weighs twice what you weigh. And he’s not slurring.”

Eleanor came in wearing her apron: dinner was almost ready. Miles and the rest got up and helped her set the table. Everyone was fairly drunk at this point—except Eleanor and Gabriel (although Miles had tried to sneak him a sixer of 3/2, so he wouldn’t feel left out). They made up the table sloppily and then sat around and said thanks.

“I’d like to thank God,” said Eleanor. “All my children, my family, finally together.”

Then Jax: “I’d like to thank Mom for this wonderful meal.”

“That Miles helped with,” Miles said.

“That Miles helped with,” Jax said. “I’d also like to thank Coach Dennis Green for a hard fought game against a tough Lions defense. If only we’d have been at the Dome.”

Then Miles, slurring: “Yeah, yeah. Family. Me? I’d like to thank the Detroit Lions for laying the smack down on a vastly underwhelming Vikings—”

“—you son of a bitch!” Jax said, grabbing Miles by the throat. Miles took a swing at Jax’s chest; his fist hit it with a muted thud, eliciting only a laugh from Jax.

Eleanor shrieked: “Boys! Stop!”

“That’s enough!” Gabriel said from the end of the table. Gabriel stood unsteadily. He held on to the table for support. “We’re here tonight to celebrate Thanksgiving, of course, but also the completion of The Republic of Catatonia.” Jax shot Eleanor a look. She mirrored it back at him.

“And I am so thankful that we’re all here right now. That I’m—” His eyes had gone watery.

Miles took his hand. “We need to come together,” he said. “Together *as a family*.”

Food was passed around. They ate until they couldn’t eat anymore, and then one by one they drifted away from the table, arranged for rides home, until it was just Jax and Miles seated next to each other. “I’m sorry,” Jax said. “I know I’ve been a jerk to you.”

“You have,” said Miles. “You owe me an apology.”

“I literally just did.”

“That was your apology?”

“I’m trying, Miles. I want what’s best for Dad, for this family. For you, too.”

“Then quit being such an obstructionist asshat.”

“But I don’t understand what’s going on. This country, Catatonia.”

“It’s a *micro-nation*.”

“I’m trying to understand it, but it seems like mental illness to me.”

“There’s like hundreds of them around the world.”

“But what’s the point? There has to be a *reason*.”

“Why does there have to be a reason? Why can’t Dad just do it if he wants?”

“Because if there’s no reason, this is chaos.”

Miles finished his beer and stumbled away from the table. He found the bathroom at the end of the hall, puked into the toilet, brushed his teeth haphazardly, and drank a large glass of water from the sink before working his way back to his bedroom, propping himself up as best he could by steadying himself on the walls. He fell into bed with his shoes, clothes still on. He put on his headphones, and pressed play on his Discman—Nas’ “N.Y. State of Mind.” The room spun around him. His mouth curled into a smile, his brain numb and alive and the room zeroing, his vision dropping away, like he was sinking further and further into a pit of sand, sinking faster, faster, spinning, spinning, spinning, watching disappear above him the last pinprick of light.

In the morning, Miles clutched his throbbing head. He sat on the edge of the bed and held it in his hands. He ran his fingers along his forehead, crackling his sinuses. When he removed his hands the sound was still there. A crackle into a rumble. He drank one of the several glasses of water he had on his bedside table, and popped a few Advil into his mouth; their tinny coating melted away against his throat. When the rumble grew louder, he went to the window. He’d nailed an unzipped He-Man sleeping bag across it to block out any chance of light getting in, and in trying to pull it far enough back to see, he heard a tear and the bag came falling down into a pile on the floor. Through the window, a cloud swirled up from Catatonia. There was a thundering crack and Miles ran out into the hall, to his father’s room. The bed was empty.

His father wasn’t there.

Outside, the air had changed. A strange thickness to it—cold, swirling clouds, winds that pressed against him. Nearing Catatonia, he saw it. First one, then two. Then a few more, darting on by like schools of fish. Snow. It reached his face, collected in his greasy hair. A mound had formed in the grass near his boots. He dropped to a knee and into it he reached an unsure hand. The snow was dry and warm and smeared against his hands like chalk, before thinning out in a gust of wind. Miles stepped back and followed the arching billow of it up into the sky. The mist of the morning had broken, and he could see its origins over the hill beyond. Catatonia.

As grew closer, he felt the heat. Swelling, unrelenting.

He ran up the hillside, reaching its peak, before witnessing Catatonia ablaze beneath him. Jax was seated on a massive bulldozer. He drove it away in the opposite direction as fast as it would go. The nation's roofs and sidings were charred black-gray; the plastic border fence was wilting and dripping like a candle, the plastic collecting in smooth, glossy pools at its base.

Miles stepped through a hole in the fence and entered the gray wonderland. Everything was white and gray around him. The grass, the piles of rubble where the buildings of Catatonia had once stood, which now crackled and hissed like firecrackers.

Jax leapt from the bulldozer and ran toward him. "Fuck," he said. "I only meant to knock it over. I don't know what happened! I didn't know you guys were running gas down here! The whole thing just went up in flames!"

"Where's Dad?" Miles said.

"He's back at the house. He's still sleeping."

"No, he's not. Where is he?"

Miles ran back through the collapsing buildings and the newly planted trees of Catatonia Park all haunted and white and pointy like fossilized capillaries against the sky, convinced he wasn't experiencing the things he was experiencing. He rounded the side of the capital building, or what was left it—the side had caved in around a huge, open gash in its center.

Then he saw them. Shoes. Sticking out from within the collapse. Miles slipped on the ash, fell onto the ground, his face and hands caked and white as a ghost. The heat still hovered off the ground, rolling and warping. He pulled at the shoes as hard as he could. He was able to loosen the shoes and the legs they were attached to from the obstruction—a collapsed wall, burned most of the way through. The body slid out. Miles vomited. "I'm so sorry," he said. He pulled the body close, held it against him not wanting to let go. It burned Miles, ate into his forearms and chest. He sat with his father on the ground, mummified in a wrap of charcoal black. His skin bubbled with fresh blisters, and there were holes singed through the fabric of his t-shirt. The pain started its way from his stomach, until fully received into the receptors of his brain.

## Part II

Miles followed the driveway out to the road. The bus was late, as usual—though, to be fair, he couldn't remember a time when it had ever arrived according to schedule. A sharp wind cut across the fields. The morning sky was a pink to lavender ombré. He leapt around the puddles in the muddy driveway. The grass was soggy and there were polyyps of grey-white snow all around, melting slowly, steadily, back into the earth.

The Scab City Authority of Transit (SCAT) wasn't much of a bus system at all. Two repurposed airport shuttles—the logos of their previous owners still visible under the thin, amateurishly painted portrait of a mule deer on its side—that did a single loop around town three times a day. At least it was free. Or, Miles assumed it was—the driver had never once mentioned anything about payment as long as Miles had been riding it.

The sun poked through the clouds momentarily. A sudden sharp pain pulsed in Miles' forehead and behind his eyes. His head throbbed. The typical nausea of the morning sloshed around inside his stomach, and he felt a familiar dead flatness in his brain. He reached the road, and splashed along its side for a mile or so, until he reached the bus stop. There was nobody there; there'd never been anyone there. In fact, in his months of riding the SCAT he'd only ever seen maybe three or four other riders. He was already late to work. They could fire him. The job paid nothing, meant nothing. He didn't care. He'd already been through several jobs through the winter, since his father had passed: gas station casino attendant, substitute teacher, even a brief time trying to sell reversible crowding systems to cattle ranchers in the area. He just needed to



save enough money to get back to New York, and then he'd never have to think about Scab again.

He sat against the split rail fence behind the bus stop, which was nothing more than a pole and a small sign that said only BUS, littered with several bullet holes. He rubbed his forehead, and pressed his temples massaging them one way and then the other. He closed his eyes and he must have fallen asleep because when he opened them the bus had already rumbled on by and was about a hundred yards ahead of him. They must not have seen him. He sat up, his jeans wet from the muddy grass. He ran after it, waving. "Wait!" he shouted. But the bus continued on down the road, until it disappeared up over a slight hill.

When he arrived at work, Miles was sweating and out of breath. He snuck in past his supervisor's office at the front of the structure—an old converted World War II era quonset hut. He wrote his clock in time on the sheet (gifting himself an extra half an hour) and then hurried along the wall, towards the back corner, where his supervisor would be less inclined to see him. The single room was lined with a half dozen tables, each with a dozen phones and shoddy plastic partitions between each seat. Thirty or forty employees Miles had never once spoken to, except the occasional nod in the hallway, or the bathroom. The voices, scripts were all the same; as he passed the tables, the same words, phrases, repeated and overlapped, created a trippy dissonance: rhythmic rounds that looped on end, reminding Miles of a Steve Reich style tape loop.

At his station there was a headset in a plastic Ziploc bag, along with a bag of disinfectant wipes and a chunky white dial-pad which had a note taped to it that said: WIPE DOWN EVERYTHING, STOP THE SPREAD OF GERMS. Miles sat in the chair and wiped everything down, as the note instructed. He opened the binder of names and phone numbers, and his script

filled with \_\_\_\_\_'s that he was supposed to fill in with specific information about the surveys they conducted. He went through the endless 406 numbers, picked one at random. He dialed. It rang twice. A woman answered.

“Hello! My name is Miles! I’m calling on behalf of Newstone Oil & Gas. Do you have a moment to hear about a life changing opportunity?”

“Hello?” the woman said. She sounded older, her voice like a creaky door.

“I said, my name is Miles!”

“Who? Is this Abe and Dori’s son?”

“No, ma’am. I’m calling on behalf of—”

The line went dead. He picked another number. Dialed. It rang once.

“Hello! My name is Miles! Do you have a moment to—”

Dead. He picked another. Dialed. It rang five times. When it went to their answering machine, he switched it over to the automated messaging system. He picked another. Dialed. It rang once. “Please take us off your list!” a man said, before the line went dead.

He picked up the phone. Dialed. It rang three times. “Hello! My name is Miles! I’m calling on behalf of Newstone Oil & Gas. Do you have a moment to hear about a life changing opportunity?—when the man on the other line failed to object, Miles continued—we’re conducting a survey to gauge community interest in a possible oil pipeline running through Scab. Let’s begin... on a scale of one being *least enthusiastic* and five being *most enthusiastic* how enthusiastic would you be?” The man answered. “Great, now on a scale of one being *least enthusiastic* and five being *most enthusiastic* how enthusiastic would you be in terms of voting for an initiative to allow Newstone Oil & Gas to run this pipeline through the town of Scab?”

“Will it bring jobs?” the man asked.

Miles blanked, looking down at his sheet of bullet points. His head was throbbing so bad, and the halogen light from the ceiling gave his eyeballs a strange squeezing sensation. “I’m sorry,” he said, after a moment. “Could you repeat that?”

“Will this pipeline bring jobs to Scab? I don’t want to see any big city types coming in and thinking they can do whatever they want without any of us seeing benefit.”

“I, uh—”

“Jobs,” the man said, his voice hardening. “And where exactly will this thing be running through anyway? Could make a whole lotta difference to my number of *enthusiasm*.”

Miles flipped through his cheat sheet, his eyes struggling to focus. Towards the back he found a map of Scab, with the proposed pipeline dotted through town.

“Will there be incentive programs? Tax abatements? Development restrictions?”

“One moment, sir, while I put you on hold.”

Miles removed his headset and closed the binder. He folded his arms, set his forehead down on them, and closed his eyes. The run spun around him. He got up. He darted off to the bathroom, and hid in the stall. He rubbed his forehead. He sat there for a while trying not to think of anything until he left the stall and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. His beard had grown into a patchy tangle, and there were roundish gray-purple streaks underneath both of his eyes. His face seemed to contain a new puffiness—swollen in the most unexpected places: under his chin, his cheekbones, in the space above his ears. A result, he was sure, of his exclusive fast food diet—the Dairy Queen on Main St, the gas station/Subway on Ruby St, or the Taco Johns on Expedition Dr—Scab’s only options. It made his stomach uneasy to look at himself, to push

through each day inside this face and body. To have to go about each day existing as this person. Who even was this person? He splashed some water on his face, and went back into work.

His supervisor, Grant, was waiting at his cubicle. Miles approached. He nodded at Grant and tried to return to his seat, but Grant was blocking him. "Talk to me, Miles," he said.

"I'm sorry," Miles said. "I was in the bathroom."

"No," Grant said. "What's going on? You were an hour late. You don't look well."

"I'm fine," Miles said.

Grant stood there, observing him. He was thin and completely hairless, except for a stamp of chin hair that countered his suburban dad vibe with a kind of dictatorial sting. "Talk to me," he said. "Are you ill? Do you need to go home?"

"No."

"What can I do to help?"

"You could pay me more."

"We can't pay you more. The best I can do is \$7.45 an hour."

"Come on."

"I'm sorry."

"I have a masters degree."

"Fine," he said. "I think we can do \$7.50. But if that's the case I'm going to need you to meet your targets. That's fifteen calls per hour."

"I know."

Grant angled his body to leave, and then leaned in. "And Miles," he said, quietly. "Don't forget to wipe down your headset." He walked away. Miles sat in his chair and placed the

headset over his throbbing head. Dialed. It rang once. “Hello! My name is—” he began, before removing the headset. He breathed on it and rubbed it all over his face and under his arms. He placed it on his seat and sat on it. Then he stood up, and walked out.

Miles walked around town aimlessly for a while, before stopping for a gas station bean burrito and a cherry FreeZee, and walking across the street to eat it in a small square concrete park near the center of town. He sat at a picnic table under the park’s lone tree, and watched a few day laborers kick a soccer ball around on the dusty concrete. Indigenous rap beats slugged out the back of a pickup parked nearby, the lowest frequencies farting out of the system as if from the cave of a flatulent dragon. Cheese grease seared the top of his mouth, but it felt good to put some food away. It helped his aching head, the anxiety that had felt since he’d woken up like a cinderblock was lying on his chest. An older woman approached his table. She was wrapped in a blanket. Her hair was dreaded and filled with dust and debris, and he could smell the alcohol waving off of her. She pinched two fingers to her lips, mimed eating, and then pointed to his food. Miles looked at her. He stood to leave, but then sat back down and ripped off half of his burrito. He put it on his plate and handed it to her. She ate it quickly. When she was done, she sat there with a look of relief on her dirty, creased face. Miles shared a look with her. “My father’s dead,” he said. She looked like she was thinking, and then reached a hand out across the table. Miles took it. Callused and cold. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but the only sound that came was a kind of gummy moan. She tried again. The sound was soft and Miles leaned in to try and hear her. “I’m sorry,” Miles said. “I don’t understand.” They held hands for a minute, before

she reached into her blanket. She retrieved a water bottle filled with a pale tan colored liquid. She unscrewed the cap, took a long pull, and offered it to Miles. He took it and poured a little in his FreeZee, and then handed it back to her. She stood and walked away. Miles sipped on the drink, feeling the comforting trickle down through him. The sunlight warmed his face. His headache subsided, and he felt a new reserve of energy flowing through him.

A large white van arrived. A man in a cowboy hat honked his horn and the day laborers piled into the back of it, before slamming the door. The van sped off.

On its side read: Newstone Oil & Gas.

Miles finished his drink, stood, and wandered away. He walked three blocks north to the Hangdog Saloon. Inside, he took a seat at the bar. The place smelled as it always did, cleaning products and a faint uric tang. There were a few barflies drifting about. There was no music playing. When the bartender saw him, he waved him away. “No, no,” he said. “I’m not dealing with you today.”

“What’d I do?”

The bartender pointed to a Guest Check taped to the mirror behind the bar. “You owe me twenty-five dollars. You square up, you can stay.” Miles retrieved his wallet from his back pocket. There were a few small bills, and two coins that turned out to be subway tokens. He had been sitting on them all winter, and hadn’t even noticed. He handed over the bills. The bartender took them, amended the check. “Now twelve.”

“I’m not really sure if I believe in the concept of money,” Miles said.

“OK,” the bartender said. “It’s still going to be twelve.”

Miles asked for a water. The bartender retrieved it and he sat there watching the TV. *Groundhog Day* was playing soundlessly. He watched Bill Murray kill himself over and over—first by driving off a cliff, then by taking a toaster into the bath, then by jumping in front of a truck, then finally by leaping off a building. He thought about his father. The scene coming back to him over and over—his body, the heat—on an endless loop, until the bartender came by and dropped a beer off in front of him. “Your lucky day,” he said. Miles thanked him, and the bartender pointed down to a man seated at the end of the bar. “Don’t thank me—thank him.”

Miles took the drink, and moved a few seats down. The man was large—he wore a Seahawks snapback and aviator shades and was dipping his hand into the dish of salted peanuts, licking the salt off each finger when he was finished. “I know you,” Miles said.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Scab’s prodigal son.” Lefebvre laughed. He popped a palm full of peanuts into his mouth and crunched them swiftly. Miles could see the new dusting of peanut salt all over his fingers, his fingernails each containing a half moon of black dirt. They sat and watched the movie, until the next commercial break. An ad for Pizza Hut came on. Scab didn’t have a Pizza Hut, but Miles had gotten used to seeing ads for places they didn’t have. In the ad, Donald Trump was eating a slice of pizza crust-first. He spoke to Ivana before stopping her hand as she reached for a piece. Lefebvre scoffed, shook his head. “They think that shit’s going to sell pizza?”

“They say he’s got political ambitions,” Miles said.

“That’s a joke. Nobody in their right mind would vote for him. How much more out of touch could he be to everyday folks?” Lefebvre took a drink. “You ever been there?”

“Pizza Hut? Sure.”

“No,” he said. “New York City.”

“I’ve been there.”

“I always wanted to go. To see the Statue of Liberty.”

“To pay your respects?”

“Hell no! I got a big ol’ middle finger ready.” Miles laughed at this, beer nearly coming out of his nose. “Where I come from, that statue means death for a lot of folks.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Oh I don’t know. Saskatchewan. Then I was in Pasco for a time. Picking apples, working hay. Then did some seasonal work in Alaska. Then Spokane. Now I’m here.”

“What’s here?”

“My wife,” he said.

“Does your wife know you’re at a bar at two in the afternoon?”

“She’s passed.”

“Past what?”

“No,” he said. “She’s *passed*.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s OK,” he said.

Lefebvre finished his drink. He reached for his wallet, but when he pulled it out there was nothing inside.

“What now?” Miles asked.

“Time to go to the bank,” Lefebvre said.



Miles followed Lefebvre out onto the sidewalk. The sun was bright; it shot off of the leftover mounds of snow, blanching his slowly adjusting vision. Lefebvre walked with his shoulders hunched, his hands in his pockets. He started across the street, through the center of town—a square with a grassy center, where there was a mound of elk antlers. He lumbered down Ruby St., past the First Security—the only bank Miles was aware of in town—and headed to a side street just beyond the train tracks, that fed off into a small industrial park where there was an auto body shop, a concrete contractor, and a metal fabricator all seemingly part of the same warehouse-like structure. They rounded the barbed wire fence, and approached another building, just about thirty yards beyond it: a bland, corporate looking office in the shape of an “P” that said LifeBlood across the top of it, and every minute or so had a man or woman leaving with the same green bandage around the bend in their arm. As they reached the doors, Lefebvre turned. “What is this place?” Miles asked.

“Don’t let ‘em know you’ve been drinking,” he said. “They don’t like that.”

Inside, they approached the front desk. A woman was seated behind it. She recognized Lefebvre and waved. “Well hey, Lefebvre,” she said. “Back again?”

“Thought I’d get my friend here in on the action,” Lefebvre said.

The woman handed Miles a set of forms, and when Miles reached for it she pulled it back out of reach. “You boys ain’t been drinking have you?”

“No, ma’am,” Miles said.

“Not at all,” Lefebvre said.

“Cause it’s a wash for us if you’ve been drinking. Plus it’s a safety thing.”

“I promise,” Lefebvre said.

She handed them the forms uneasily, and then Lefebvre led Miles into the waiting room. There were a few people sitting around with magazines. The place was old, and decrepit. The linoleum floor was scuffed and ripped, and all the furniture creaked like it was about to fall apart the moment you sat on it. A single light flickered occasionally from the ceiling, which had a large brownish-yellow stain seeping out across the center that had a chunky C shape and reminded Miles of the supercontinent Pangea.

Miles filled out the paperwork as best as he could. When it asked for his emergency contact, he wrote “~~Jaekson Cata~~” (crossing it out immediately after writing it). He then wrote “~~Eleanor Cata~~” (before crossing it out as well). Then next to it he wrote, “911.” Soon a nurse called their names and led them down the hall to a room that looked and smelled like an old elementary school cafeteria, with rows of seats all along the wall. In them sat a handful of men and women, hooked up to their tubing, reading magazines, gazing out the large plate glass window at the north end of the building, that looked onto an empty field. The imagery gave Miles a squirmy discomfort; there was something dystopian about it, science fictional. The men were seated next to each other. The nurse came by and rubbed the inside of their elbows with a cold, antiseptic cotton ball. Miles laughed as it touched his skin. It was like being licked by a very cold cat. The nurse looked at him strangely, and Miles apologized. She resumed and he did his best to contain his laughter, his body tensing and releasing in the seat. “Stay still,” the nurse said, and Miles nodded. He looked at Lefebvre. A large grin hung on his face, and when the nurse moved over to him he too began to squirm and laugh when she rubbed the cotton ball on his arm. “OK, you two,” she said. “What’s going on?” They both erupted in laughter. Every head

in the room swiveled to face them. The nurse expelled a frustrated huff and then walked quickly out of the room. Miles and Lefebvre tried to contain their laughter but, like two actors breaking character in a stage show, the harder they tried to suppress it, the more difficult it became.

After a minute, the nurse returned with a security guard. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go. You need to leave.” Miles and Lefebvre exploded in laughter, bent over at the waist. Their faces were red and breathless. The security guard seized Miles’ arm and yanked him onto his feet. “They’re completely wasted,” he announced. “Come on. Out!”

The security guard led them out of the room, down the hall, and back to the front desk. Lefebvre asked the woman behind the desk if they could still be compensated. “I don’t think so,” she said. “You only get the money after you donate the plasma.”

“Anything for our time?”

The woman looked each way and retrieved a lockbox from under her desk. “Don’t tell nobody,” she said. “I could lose my job.” She handed them each a five dollar bill.

“We appreciate it,” Lefebvre said.

“It’s just that we took time out of our day to be here,” Miles said.

“Yeah, yeah,” the woman said. “You seem like you’re *real* busy today.”

They returned to the bar and drank until their money ran out. It was night when they finally left. The temperature had dropped thirty degrees since the afternoon, and there were new patches of ice where all the puddles had been earlier in the day. They walked out to Lefebvre’s car parked in the alley behind the saloon, got in, and drove back toward Miles’ parents house.

The car pulled and swerved, as Lefebvre did his best to keep it on the road—his eyes, heavy and

crossed. The shape of the house came up in the distance, framed within a band of gauzy white light sitting heavy on the horizon, still somehow not yet pushed all the way by night. Miles pointed a finger in its direction—“there!” The outburst snapped Lefebvre out from his drowsy stupor; he yanked the wheel sharply to the side, and left the road, thumping over a drainage ditch, and cracking through the split-rail fence alongside the road. He sailed into the icy field. Miles shouted. Lefebvre stomped on the break. The car fishtailed left and right, before spinning to a stop. Lefebvre kicked open the door, and stumbled out. He walked twenty-thirty yards ahead into the empty field and sat down. Miles approached. Lefebvre’s hands, body were shaking violently. “You OK?” Miles asked, sitting down next to him. He didn’t say anything, just kept shaking. The wind snapped against them.

“You know,” Lefebvre said, “it really took the life up and out of me for a while there. At first, you know, it’s like the whole world opens up. The worst possible thing to ever happen has happened and you convince yourself you have this new perspective on life and you appreciate everything so much more, and you kind of do for a while, but then it starts to go away and everything starts to go back to normal and you realize that nothing has or will change, you’ll still be you, you’ll still be making all the same mistakes you used to, except it’s worse now because you’re all alone, because that person isn’t there.”

“Your wife,” Miles said, after a moment.

“I miss her every day.”

“Come on,” Miles said. “I want to show you something.”

They continued into the field, toward his parents' property line. They walked slowly up the slight hill. The moon had slipped behind a dense tuft of cloud and the light was poor and they were careful to step around the ice and ankle-threatening prairie dog holes. When they reached the top of the hill, Miles gestured down to the ruins of Catatonia. They took the icy hillside, and slid halfway down. Then the two of them walked through the remains—the burned out frames of the buildings, the mounds of frozen ash. The temperature must have let up slightly; Miles could hear rain patting on the ground, and the cracked and blackened structures. They wandered through, neither saying a word. At some point, Lefebvre turned. "What is this place?" he asked. Miles told him. Then they continued on, down what was left of Gabriel Cata Blvd. They passed the capital building, and the Church of Catatonia. The top of its wrought iron © lay frozen on the ground, sticking up through a dense crumble of drywall. They listened to the crackle of debris continuing to settle, reconfigure, with each new blast of prairie wind. The smell of wet char clung to the inside of their noses, attaching itself to the fibers of their clothing.

"This is a haunted place."

"It's why I'm leaving," Miles said. "I want no part of this."

"No," Lefebvre said.

"There's nothing for me here."

"No," Lefebvre repeated. "You're wrong. There is."

Miles thought about it. "It's too far gone. I'd have to start all over again."

Lefebvre turned, and met his eyes: "you need to complete it."

Miles slipped in through the back sliding door, careful not to wake his mother. As he walked into the living room, his heart seized for a moment. Jax was lying on the couch in the glow of the TV, cradling a bottle of whiskey, a half dozen crushed beer cans on the table in front of him. “Hey Jax,” Miles said. Jax said nothing. His eyes were open, but he didn’t respond. Miles approached him cautiously, as if an animal of questionable domesticity, and then sat on the floor with his back against the couch. They watched the TV. David Letterman was talking to Phil Hartman about the Academy Awards, which had been broadcast the night before. Miles looked back at his brother, who’s eyes were still open, though they had a certain gloss about them, as if he were frozen in place. “Are you OK?” he asked, during the next commercial break. “Why are you here?” Jax didn’t respond. He blinked and unscrewed the cap off the whiskey bottle. He took a short pull and then set it on the floor. “Why aren’t you at home? Did Katie kick you out?”

Miles stood, and patted Jax on the shoulder. He walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, rooting around for leftovers. He settled on a half eaten box of Dairy Queen chicken tenders; they were cold, and rubbery, but Miles squirted some ranch dressing on a paper towel and ate them anyway. He popped the rest into the microwave and started the timer. Then Jax stumbled into the kitchen. He was crying. “You,” he said. He swayed side to side, knocking his shoulder into the doorframe. He stumbled forward and steadied himself on the kitchen table. Miles told him to be quiet, that he was going to wake their mother. But Jax didn’t seem to hear him. “This is all because of you.”

“What is?”

“Everywhere you go, you bring chaos.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You couldn’t have stayed in goddamn New York, with all the freaks and fairies.”

“Hey, that hurts. I’m like a two on the Kinsey Scale.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re drunk, Jax.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Fuck you.”

“You can barely stand.”

“Fuck you.”

“I don’t even know what to say to you like this.”

“Fuck you.”

“All right, I’m going to go to bed.”

“Dad would still be alive if it weren’t for you.”

“Why is this my fault?”

“You encouraged his delusion.”

“It was what he wanted.”

“No,” Jax said. “It wasn’t. You pushed him. It was what *you* wanted. None of this would have happened without you. He could have gotten the care he needed. You’re a poison.”

Jax lunged at his brother. He took an off-balance swing in his direction, his fist hitting the microwave window just above Miles' head. It exploded. The door came off its hinges, and there was a loud, vacant pop. Jax stumbled back, his knuckles bloodied. Miles shoved him into the wall. He smashed into the drywall, cracking it, leaving a body-shaped indentation. Jax threw himself onto Miles, and wrestled him to the floor. He pinned him with his knees on his arms, and Miles thrashed about beneath him. "We're selling the house and the property," Jax said. "You're not going to be able to mooch off Mom much longer." Their mother appeared in the doorway in a nightshirt. She had curlers in her hair, and her eyes were squinty and in a kind of Ambien daze. She yelled as she saw them on the floor. She grabbed Jax by the shoulders and tried to pull him off Miles. "Jax!" she shouted. "Stop! You're going to hurt him!" Jax stumbled back, cursing incoherently. He walked out of the kitchen. Miles heard a door slam at the end of the house, and the rumble of his truck in the driveway before it quickly returned to silence. Eleanor sat with Miles on the kitchen floor, her arms around him. "Are you OK?" she asked. Miles nodded, though he felt a strain surging through his neck and in his back.

"What the hell was that?" Miles asked.

"He's in terrible pain, your brother."

"No, he was saying you're going to sell the house."

"I can't live here any longer. Not with that *thing* in the yard."

"What thing?"

"That *country* of your father's. It makes me sick to even think about."

"But where are you going to go?"

"Florida," she said. "I'm going to retire."



“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been waiting for the right moment.”

“But where am I going to live?”

“At least you have a job. You’ve been saving, right?”

Miles thought about his checking account. He had maybe seventy-five dollars in total, and four maxed out credit cards ranging from \$2,500-\$4000 (on which he’d been paying only the minimums for years—each payment newly replaced by its interest).

“Yeah,” Miles said.

“Good,” Eleanor said. She helped him up, kissed him goodnight, and then walked back into the dark hallway toward her bedroom. When she was gone, Miles got on his hands and knees. The last chicken strip was somewhere on the floor.

In the morning, Miles shaved and went into his father’s closet to find a suit to wear. As he walked in, he stopped. It was like a time-capsule; the smell of his father somehow still lingering in the stale air—the sharp, earthiness of the tweed; the cedar deodorant. He pulled a few different suits off the rack, and laid them out on the floor. He settled for a pair of pleated khakis and a blue blazer, put them on, and walked to the kitchen where he his mother was sitting with a mug of tea steaming on the table in front of her. She was staring into space, the outline of Jax’s body still visible in the drywall behind her.

“Well don’t you look nice,” she said. “That your father’s?”

“I need to borrow your car,” he said.

“I thought you didn’t have a license.”

“I don’t.”

“So you’re asking me to break the law?”

“*You’re* not breaking the law—I am.”

“I don’t like this, Miles.”

“I just need it for an hour or two.”

“For what?”

“I need to drop off my resume.”

“I thought you had a job.”

“I’m exploring my options.”

“All right, then,” she said. She stood and removed her keys from the hook on the wall next to the phone. Miles reached for them, open palmed. She pulled them away. “Not until you get your license.”

“Come on, Mom.”

“No,” she said.

Then she tossed them on the table, and turned to the sink. She rinsed out her mug of tea, and began to wash the dishes in the sink. When she turned her back, Miles snatched the keys off the table and took off for the driveway. He got in the car and drove away.

He went straight to the Scab Job Center at 3rd and Main. There, he was seated across from a triangular shaped woman with a tight ponytail pulled against her starched purple suit, reading over the clipboard he’d spent the majority of the past hour filling out in the waiting area. She squinted, clearly trying to make sense of his erratic, evil child scrawl.

“You’ve worked a lot of different jobs over the years,” she said.

Before landing his adjunct spot at the university, and working at the oyster and drag bar, Miles had worked as a movie-theater ticket tearer, a dishwasher, dog walker, a nude art model at Parsons, one of those guys on MacDougal who bully tourists into comedy shows, a golf ball diver at a driving range in Queens, a bicycle messenger, and an anthropomorphic diamond who would walk back and forth on 47<sup>th</sup> street handing out promo cards. “I guess you could say I’ve attempted to diversify my work experience.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean *why*?”

“Why diversify? Why not try to find *one* job and stay with it?”

He didn’t have an answer. She returned her gaze to the clipboard. Miles eyed the bare walls, undecorated desk. The window behind her contained a view of a brick wall about three feet away from it. A radiator clanked from the corner, near the door. Her cheeks sagged from her face with the same weighted elasticity as a series of avant-garde paintings of clock faces that Otis had once seen at the MoMa. “*Hello?*” she said.

“Sorry,” Miles said. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

She set down the clipboard. “Are you an active drug user, Mr. Cata?”

Miles felt a jolt begin in his stomach and climb into his brain. “No,” he said. She continued to stare at him. “So when can I start to collect unemployment?”

“We’re not quite there, Mr. Cata. You do realize that you are by no means *guaranteed* assistance by the state of Montana as a result of your current situation. What we are doing is

helping you to file a *claim* which will be accepted or declined based on your determined eligibility.”

“So what’s next?”

“Next I’m going to need to contact your previous place of employment. As you have stated here, your—” She frowned, and turned the form around to show Miles. “From 1989-1992, all it says here is: *Capitalism Sucks*.”

“Oh,” Miles said. “Sorry. I was reading a lot of Foucault at the time.”

“You have stated here that you were working at TeleCom Corp in Scab, Montana. Was this a temporary employment situation?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You claim here you *left* this job—yet you appear to have nothing else lined up?”

“Yes, well, I’m in construction too.”

“Oh? Did you leave for a particular job in construction?”

“Sort of.”

“I’m going to need a little more cooperation here, Mr. Cata.”

“I was helping my father build an autonomous micro-nation in his backyard.”

“An anonymous—what?”

“*Autonomous*. Micro-nation.”

“I can’t squeeze a damn bit of sense out of that.”

“You know, like his own country.”

“Were you being paid for your services?”

“Room and board. And food.”

“Is your father—”

“Yes, he’s dead.”

“No, I mean—and I’m terribly sorry to hear that—was this *project* incorporated?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did you file a W2, or W9?”

“No.”

“Was there any sort of paperwork at all?”

“What will happen if I say no?”

“Well, it won’t strengthen your claim in terms of viable employment. What you’ve described—and again, I’m terribly sorry—but from a governmental standpoint this sounds more like you were assisting him with his *hobby*. Not that you were *employed*.”

“But there was an exchange of goods and services.”

“Yes, but within a private arrangement.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Your best bet, and this is by no means a guarantee, would be to focus our effort here on your job here in Scab at TeleCom.”

“Fine.”

“OK, then. We will need to speak with Mr. Grant Deskins to verify your statement here.”

“Why?”

“Because you may not be fully eligible for unemployment benefits if you quit this job without good reason, or were fired because of a violation of company policy.”

“Such as?”

“Were you fired or not, Mr. Cata?”

“No.”

“What was your reason for leaving?”

Sweat collected in Miles’ palms. The musique concrète of the radiator now seemed to have transposed itself onto his brain; he could feel his weakened synapses misfire, everything failing. Finally, he landed on some half-remembered phrase from a bubble on worker’s unions in a cultural studies textbook he’d been assigned to read in grad school. “How can one place the blame on the working classes,” he said, “when it’s the”—his throat croaked amphibiously—“when it’s the, um, system itself that is flawed?” Miles felt himself in motion, lifting from the chair. His chin dropped against his chest, his clenched fist began to rise toward the water-stained ceiling panels.

“Oh please don’t,” the woman said.

Miles finished the full extension of his arm, completing his desired fist of solidarity, and stood there. The woman scrunched her eyebrows, pinched the arch of her nose. Then she reached for a stamp. “That says rejected, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“We’ll be in touch,” she said.

Miles drove next to the Scab Public Library. He printed off a few copies of his resume, and then he drove to the center of town where he walked around dropping them off: the Scab Motor Inn, Albertsons, the Scab Bistro, an RV lot—within an hour, he’d visited nearly every business in town, it seemed. Next he went to the Goodwill, and unloaded a trash bag full of old clothing from his bedroom—old jeans and sweaters, band t-shirts: The Rolling Stones, Queen, Aerosmith 1978 US tour t-shirt, from the time his father had driven him and Jax all the way to

the Metrapark Arena in Billings to see them, and had spent the entirety of the show seated, with his thumbs in his ears, complaining about the noise. Miles pulled that shirt from the pile, and set it aside. He wasn't ready to part with it yet. They gave him \$22.75 for everything. And after some harsh words, he took it. Afterward, he went to a small used bookstore and unloaded his box of old paperbacks, spine-broken Westerns and horror novels from his youth that netted him another \$13. With the money he'd earned, he bought a plastic wrapped muffin at the gas station and a watery coffee in a styrofoam container and sat and ate it inside the gazebo in the center of the town square. He ate a few pinches of muffin and watched the townspeople going about their day. It was overcast. There was a large gray-black cloud, in the shape of a giant ribcage, idling above the center of town, looking like any moment it was going to begin dumping water right above him. He finished his muffin and hurried back toward the car. It started to rain. Miles ditched his coffee and placed his resumes in his jacket, and ran, leaping over newly formed puddles of rain and melted snow. The rain picked up; it beat against the roofs of town, and a screaming gust of wind blew it sideways, italicizing its trajectory. Miles darted into a hardware store on the corner, a few blocks from his car to get out of the rain. He shook out his clothes and wandered inside.

The hardware store was narrow and poorly lit, and Miles walked around aimlessly for a while, trying to allow his clothes time to dry. He looked at the walls of tools—the hammers, the wrenches, the drills, which, in the dark lighting, cast shadows across the wall like he was standing in a torture chamber for some intergalactic warlord. He continued on, before noticing a familiar smell—his mind went immediately to an image of his father's shoes sticking out of a collapsed building. He turned the corner and came across a loose mound of scrap pine boards on

some kind of clearance. Some had charring, fire damage. He inquired with a salesman as to why they were marked down. The man rocked back on the heels of his orthotic tennis shoes. They made a pressurized squeak. “Salvaged from a fire in the north hills,” he said. “Some of its got some cosmetic damage, but structurally it’s still solid wood. Most of which could be sanded out. Huge bargain. We’re practically giving it away. Could be great for some kind of restoration.”

“How much would thirty-five dollars get me?”

“Well heck, if you’re willing to transport it, I’d sell it all to you for thirty.”

The rain had stopped, at least momentarily. Miles ran down the block to his mother’s truck, and pulled it around, backing it in to the back of the hardware store. He and the salesman loaded up the truck bed, stacking it as high as he could, before securing it with a large blue tarp. He paid the man thirty dollars for the wood, and five for the tarp. Then Miles drove off in the direction of home, newly energized. He turned up the radio, catching it during the first half of Mike McCready’s lead guitar solo on Pearl Jam’s “Alive.” Only half a year ago, he would have dismissed the song entirely—bland, major label, mass-produced, radio-friendly. But in the fuzzy crunch of his mother’s truck’s sound system, the blistering, hooky solo filled him with joy. What did it matter that a lot of people liked it? Maybe there was something to a song that could connect on that level? He left town, returning to neighboring country roads, careful to swing around the potholes that had accumulated through the winter—it wasn’t yet warm enough for construction season. The glassy sun broke across the fields, reflecting off the snow and the mist still floating in places off the ground. The guitar solo picked up. The drums began their steady, martial stomp to the song’s triumphant crescendo when the song cut out, replaced with hissy static. He’d reached the edge of the town’s rock station’s reach. Miles realized that the thumping



he'd attributed to the drums was coming from the back of the truck. A siren was following him. A red-blue light spun in his rearview mirror. "Shit!" he yelled and eased the truck off the road, almost within sight of his parent's house about a mile up the road. He opened the glove compartment and fished around for his mother's registration, quickly trying to think of an excuse for why he was driving without a license. He couldn't think of anything. The police officer got out of the car, and approached the vehicle. Beyond him, Miles could see the wood scattered all over the road, back as far as he could see. The bungees securing it must have come loose; the tarp was nowhere to be seen. The officer stopped and picked up a beam and tossed it to the side of the road. He reached the window, and motioned for Miles to lower it. "License and registration," he said.

"Listen," Miles said. "I live just up the road there."

"License and registration," the officer said.

"Funny thing," Miles said.

Miles was surprised by how different the cell looked compared to what he'd imagined on the ride there. It was dark and damp, with heavily scuffed checkered flooring. A stone bench wrapped around the edges of the room. A single window, in the top right corner let in a pale thread of sunlight against the green cinderblock wall. Miles sat in the corner, under the window. A man wearing a denim vest and a white felt cowboy hat paced in front of him. He was talking nonstop to nobody in particular—a bag of loose, worn out bones and joints, rattling and clattering around the cell like a classroom skeleton rolling down a hallway. “They ssssscrewed me” the man slurred, over and over.

Miles kept his eyes on the ground. Tears built within them. Soon, Miles felt the man in the cowboy hat take interest in him—as if noticing him for the first time. The man walked over. He stood over Miles, his cowboy hat eclipsing the sunlight. “What?”

“They ssssssss—” the man said, his voice catching the “s” and getting stuck on it momentarily. “—crewed me, big time.”

“You said that already,” Miles said.

“I lived on that land for thirty-five yearsssssss,” he said. “And these oil guysssss come in with their lawyers and say I wass breaking the law, that my land was never zzzzzzzoned for residential purpossessesss. And I have no goddamn what they’re talking about. I bought that land back in 1962 from Ssssssamuel Gundy-Waller, a third generation homessssteader who’sssss family wasssssss on that land ssssssince the Civil War. My children were born on that land. My wife issss buried on that land. Whoever heard of a zone? And I tell them to go ssssscrew

themssselvesss. Thissss isss my land we're talking about here. I *own* thissss land. Then I get thissss letter in the mail a few weekss later. A bill. Sssssaying I owe thirty-five yearsss in zoning fees. Thirty-five yearssssss! You can't imagine the number printed on that thing. I'd never ssseeen a ssssssssum that large in my life. There wassss no way in hell I wassss gonna pay that off within my lifetime. And then thissss company, Newsssstone Oil, ssssayssss, *hey we're on your sssside here. Thissss issss tragic what'ssss happening and we want to help. How about we make you an offer to take the land and the zoning fees off your handssss. We'll abssssorb the feesss along with the property. And we'll put you up in houssssing until you get back on your feet.* And I know what they're doing—I'm not ssssssstupid. I can sssseeeee right through thissss sssscheme of theirsss. But I alssso don't sssseeee any other way to get around paying the damn feessss. Sssso I take their offer. The moment I ssssign the damn paper, they have the truckssss already parked in my driveway. They load up the truckssss within a few hourssss with all my belongingss. My entire life in thosssse truckssss! All the memoriessss of my wife and kidssssss! Pricelessssss sssstuff and they drive it off to ssssome sssstorage unit sssssomewhere in Willissssssston, North Dakota and then drive me in the opposssite direction to a trailer in a community of trailersss just outssside of town out by the train trackssss. And next thing I know I'm living in thiss trailer and neighborssss with all thessse otherss who got ssssssssscrewed too! All waiting for our checkssss to clear!"

The cell door opened. A guard leaned in. "Cata," he said. "You're free to go."

Eleanor was waiting for him in the hallway, and didn't say anything as she led him out to the truck, or as she drove the two of them home. Miles watched her face. She'd done her makeup, looked strong and dignified, though there were jaunty lines in her forehead and to the

side of her eyes and a look Miles hadn't ever seen except for a time years before when they'd driven all the way to Missoula, to watch Jax play in the Griz-Cats game. There'd been a snowstorm at the top of the Homestake Pass; and Eleanor had clung to the wheel as they slid around the chain-wheeled semis, the road a spotted gray tunnel, gliding all the way down into Butte, where she'd pulled off in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen, her hands and body shaking; and Miles had held her hand for what seemed like an hour, saying, "you did good, Mom, we're OK, you did good," until she stopped.

"Why have you made it your mission in life to disappoint me," she said.

"But God made me this way, right?"

They continued on down the road, every so often stopping to pick up the occasional wooden beam Miles and the officer had missed earlier. "I know what you're trying to do with that wood," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play coy with me, Miles. I'd take it as a threat if I had a shred of confidence you knew what you were doing."

"I know what I'm doing."

Eleanor laughed. "Right," she said.

"I audited a course once on medieval advances in engineering and technologies. Most of the principles should be the same. Only less catapults, I'd suppose."

"By all means," she said. "Go ahead. Continue your father's delusion. You can see how well it worked out for him."

"What would Jesus do?"

“As a carpenter, he’d at least know what the hell he was doing.”

When they pulled up to the house, Jax’s truck was parked in the driveway, along with several other several large pickup trucks in the driveway. He could see several figures a half mile or so onto the property, walking around with their surveying equipment, driving stakes into the earth, the reflective tape on the poles winking in the sun like the eye of a distant creature. He watched the group move about—their bodies a dark blemish against the muted, still-snow covered colors of the hills.

Miles ran out towards them. As he approached, their heads turned. Jax left the group and pushed forward to cut him off. “What do you think you’re doing?” Miles asked.

“We’re going to buy up Mom and Dad’s land. We’re going to be running a pipeline right through the property. This land is incredibly valuable. I told this to you already.”

“I didn’t know *you* were involved.”

“What difference does it make? Mom wants to get the hell out of here. It’s killing her to be here. Besides, wait till you see what we’re going to offer. Mom can retire. You can go back to New York, and do whatever it is that you do there. But you’ll be financially set.”

“But what about Catatonia?”

“What?”

“Dad’s country.”

“Jesus, Miles. Are you serious with that shit?” Jax fished out a lip of tobacco from his lip and pitched it out over the yard. “We’re selling it,” he said. “It’s already in motion.”

“Too bad you had to kill him to get what you wanted.”

Jax stood for a moment, his eyes locked on Miles. He didn't say anything. A clump of purple threawn swayed sharply in the wind by his feet like the hair of a Troll doll. Then he stepped forward, straight at Miles, there was a blur of motion and the next thing Miles felt was a vicious crack on the left side of his head, over his eye, his eye socket absorbing the hit and swelling instantly. His eardrum sang with a high pitched tone. His vision halved. Next he was on the cold ground, looking up at Jax. The gray sky swirled above him.

Inside, Miles looked for a steak to put on his eye. The skin had ballooned around his eye socket. He checked the kitchen freezer, and his mother walked in. She shrieked. "I am not an animal," Miles said, doing his best John Hurt impression. "I'm a human being!"

"What happened to your face?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Miles. Honey."

"I fell on the ice outside and hit my head."

"I'm going to take you to the doctor."

"I'm fine," he said, and walked away. Next he went down into the basement. He remembered they'd kept a freezer down there. He found it, and rooted through years of frozen bricks of game leftover from Jax's hunting trips, each as hard and cold as a hockey puck. He freed one steak of venison from the ice and placed it on his face. A cooling sensation came over him, and the pain throbbing in his head neutralized for a moment. Miles walked through the basement. It was unfinished, more of a store room than anything—full of his father's miniatures:

his trains, his model houses and buildings. In the corner, spread across an old net-less ping pong table was a miniature version of Catatonia covered in a thick layer of dust. Miles recognized it immediately—the capital building, the bank, the diner, the church, the park. Snot globbed out of Miles' nose, and he could feel the sour pinch of saline on his lips. He staggered backward. He knocked into the wall where there was hung a kind of repurposed camouflage hip quiver with several rolled up posters inside. The quiver tipped off its hook on the wall. The posters slid out. They hit the cold, uncarpeted floor, unrolling themselves as if by magic. They opened across the floor. Blueprints. The exact specifications of Catatonia. Miles sat on the floor running his hand over them. It was all there, each building mapped out. Beneath the maps, he saw a set of photocopied documents. He picked them up and held them in front of a standing lamp nearby. His left eye throbbed, and each letter appeared to contain a blurry double directly beside it. He tried his best to read it. Finally, his vision corrected. It was a copy of the land deed, concerning the sale of the land in 1974—the year his father had moved the family all the way from Marietta, Ohio—from a Gerald M. Scab. Miles felt an excited twitch in his stomach to see the name. Gerald M. Scab. Scab. He went across the basement to his father's bookshelf. He could hear the pounding of shoes against the floor above him, voices. Jax and his team must have moved inside the house. He scanned the bookshelves. There were dozens of books on local Montana history. He pulled a few of the them down and began scanning the indexes at the back. A boot stomped above him, dislodging a scattering of dust from the beams and pipes along the ceiling. He needed to hurry. They were probably close to signing the paperwork as he sat there. He whipped through several more books—anything he could find on Montana, or Scab. At the end of one, *A Traveler's Companion to Scab, Montana*, he saw a stamp on the title page for the Scab Historical

Society located at 376 NE 3rd St. He put the book under his arm, grabbed his quickly thawing brick of venison, and hurried up the stairs.

Upstairs, Jax was standing around the dining room table with O'Brien and several other of the oil guys. Their mother was seated at the head of the table. Before her were a dozen or so sheets of papers. They were negotiating the terms of the sale. Miles stomped in. "Don't sign anything yet!" he said. The venison had mostly thawed, and was now nothing more than a damp hunk of meat that was steadily bleeding its inner juices out across Miles' arm and wrist. He lobbed the meat across the room; it hit the table with a dense splat. Its juices splattered all over the paperwork. His mother shouted. "What the fuck!" yelled Jax, and took off after him across the house. Miles booked it down the hall and took off running out the front door. He sprinted as fast as he could down the driveway, never once turning to see if Jax was following. He ran and ran. He reached the road and continued to run, all three and a half miles or so until he was seated in the center of town on a bench, sweating, freezing (he hadn't had time to grab a coat), with a sharp pain in his side that felt like he were trying to pass a softball through his kidney.

When he'd gathered his breath, he went to 3rd Street and found the Scab Historical Society—which looked to be nothing more than a private residence, with a small silver placard next to the doorbell. He rang it. An older man soon came to the door, dressed like a Scottish golfer with his herringbone flat cap, tweed sport coat, and vest with the diamond pattern of an elevator's gate. Under his cap was a mess of stringy white hair.

He opened the door. Miles was wheezing. "Are you OK?" asked the man.

"I...ran...all...the...way from my...parents house...four miles...northeast..."



“Four miles Northeast?” he asked. “You Pat Van West’s boy?” Miles shook his head.

“Well I’ll be,” he said. “You must be Miles Cata.”

“How did...?”

“Come inside,” he said. He opened the door and flashed a smile in Miles’ direction. I knew your father. He was an active member of our humble little circle of historians.”

The man introduced himself simply as L.T., and led Miles into the living room of the house. He made tea, returned, and sat with Miles as Miles presented his findings.

“I must say,” said L.T., when Miles was finished. “I never knew ol’ Gabe was in a Scab house. You know Gerald had many properties around town. His great-grandfather founded Scab in 1871, having come from Lawrence, Massachusetts.”

“Do you think I could register the house as a historic landmark?”

“I think it’s certainly possible.”

“Could we do it today?”

L.T. laughed. “These things take time.” He sipped his tea, and set the mug on the table.

“You’ll need a few months at least. And that’s with approval by city council.”

“When’s the next city council meeting?”

“I don’t know, I’d have to look at a calendar. Probably not for another month or so. It’s a sleepy town, as I’m sure you know. They’re pretty infrequent.”

“Do you know any of the council members?”

“Well, sure. I know everybody. But—”

“Can I see them today?”

“Today?”

“Yes. Right now, if possible.”

“I mean, I can set something up.”

“Can you call them right now?”

L.T. watched Miles’ edgy demeanor. Miles could feel his eyes assessing his shaky hands, the swollen lumpy skin hanging over his eye. “I don’t respond well to pressure.”

“Give me the number, and I’ll call them.”

“Are you OK, Miles? You look like you’ve had your head in a wasp nest.”

“I’m fine. What’s the number?”

“I’ll give you their office number,” he said. “But I don’t think you understand. These kind of things take time and effort. Trust me, I’ve done this many, many—”

“The number.”

“There’s no need to be pushy.”

“The number.”

“I’m at a loss here, Miles. I genuinely cared about your father. Because of that I will do anything I can to help your family. But something just doesn’t seem right here.”

“I’m sorry,” Miles said. He explained everything. Catatonia. The pipeline. Newstone. The sale of the property. When he was finished, L.T. sat back in his chair.

“Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?” he said. “Listen,” he said. “I’ll help you. I will do what I can to get the paperwork started, and I’ll go see councilwoman Pack first thing tomorrow. But if your mother is signing the paperwork as we speak, I don’t think there’s a whole lot we’re going to be able to do here.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t mean to sound defeatist, but I know Scab. I know the ins and outs of this town, and this county. You may not see it, but most folks here will be all for this pipeline.”

“Well, I need to change their minds.”

“You won’t.”

“But I can try.”

“Sure. But my advice to you? Let it go. Take the buyout, and go on with your lives.”

“But what about Gerald Scab? What about preserving his story?”

L.T. laughed. “Gerald M. Scab was a ruthless capitalist. He owned and inherited something like twenty properties from here to Glacier County. It’s noteworthy, sure, that your father owned one of the those homes. But I don’t think it’s going to be enough.”

“I thought you’d side with history on this one.”

“I do,” he said. “Always.”

“So help me stop this.”

“Newstone is a powerful corporation. And your brother’s right—there’s going to be a major, major oil play in this part of the country. And you know what? Quite frankly I don’t need this kind of liability and disruption in my life. You realize you’re David against Goliath here. I wish you well, but I hope you know what you’re up against.” Miles thanked L.T., stood, and left. Outside, he heard his name. He turned to see L.T. standing in the doorway of the house, looking his way. “Your dad could be a stubborn son of a bitch at times. A real pain in the ass.”

“You trying to start something old man?” Miles said.

“No,” L.T. said. “I mean, I see it in you, too. That fight. There’s no doubt you’re Gabriel Cata’s kid. I think he’d be proud of what you’re doing.”

The cold night air felt good on Miles' swollen eye as he walked home. When he arrived, his mother was sitting on the couch in front of the TV. *Seinfeld* was on. In the episode, George discovers a condom in his car after parking it in a car lot and suspects that the lot is running a prostitution ring. They sat silently, neither laughing, listening to the laugh track and the carbonated bass pops of the show's theme. At the commercial break Eleanor muted the TV, as she always did when the commercials came on—*I don't want to be sold anything*, she'd say (although, most of the time, she'd spend the entirety of the commercial then trying to guess what they were saying). "You ever see them shooting this show in New York?" she asked, after a moment.

"It's filmed in LA."

"No it's not, that's New York. It's set in New York."

"They shoot the exteriors in New York, but it's filmed in LA."

"That just doesn't make sense at all."

"I don't know Mom, that's just how they do it," Miles said.

They watched the commercials, until his mother turned to him. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine," he said. "I first thought it was shot in New York too."

"No," she said. "About Jax. About the house. The property."

"So you're moving to Florida then?"

"Yes," she said. "Fort Lauderdale. But not yet."

"What?"

"I didn't sign the papers."

“It didn’t feel like the right time. Plus you really did a number on those pages with that venison steak.” She laughed. “They were ringing ‘em out for a half an hour.”

“Good.”

“I told them to give me until the end of summer,” she said. “And I fully intend to sign then. But I needed—” She paused. “—a little more time, that’s all. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

“I miss Dad,” Miles said, resting his head on her shoulder.

“I do too,” she said.

Miles walked into the Hangdog and took a seat at the bar. A local heavy metal band was playing in the corner, in front of maybe a dozen people swaying about, holding drinks, looking less like a concert crowd and more like patrons strolling haphazardly around some sort of disappointing museum. The singer screamed unintelligibly over the sludgy drop-tuned rhythm guitar. Most of the regulars, seated at the bar, had their hands over their ears; every so often they looked with annoyed expressions at the bartender, as if the right glance had the power to shut the whole scene down.

Miles secured an elbow on the sticky bar, and wagged his finger. The bartender poured out a seltzer water and dropped it off in front of him. “That’s all for you tonight,” he said.

“I’m looking for Lefebvre,” he said.

“What?” the bartender shouted. On stage, the two guitarists pressed their backs together—their long hair spun in circular, washing-machine-like motions, as they fumbled through what should have been some kind of a harmonized double-finger tapping solo, but came out as a mess of sharp, slightly off-tune tangle of notes. Miles repeated his question. The bartender shrugged and walked away. Miles sat there sipping on his seltzer, half-watching the band on stage. The lead guitarist had his foot on the monitor amp on the front of the stage, and was currently dive-bombing a squeal of harmonics, pumping on his whammy bar like he were trying to inflate a large and unwieldy pool float. After a while, Miles finished his seltzer. The lead guitarist, at the end of the band’s somewhat ham-fisted rendition of Slayer’s “Reign in Blood,” had stabbed the neck of his guitar cleanly through the head of one of the double stack’s on stage (which must

have been backline, because the bartender had leapt from behind the bar and was on stage, scolding and shouting at the members of the band—who looked about high school age with the house lights up. In the confusion, Miles snuck behind the bar. He stuck his arm into the watery cooler and retrieved two bottles of lukewarm beer. As he rooted around the bar for a bottle opener, his eyes found a series of ID's taped up behind the bar. He searched the faces and, as if materialized from his subconscious, there was Lefebvre's face—pockmarked, dour, and baggy eyed. He pulled the ID off the wall, and placed it into his pocket. Then he slipped out the front, drinking his beer.

Miles walked across town, in the rough direction of the address on the ID. The sky was clear. He thought he could just make out the the snowy escarpments of the Bearpaws, seeming to list and heel lethargically against the night sky—thinned by distance, nearly translucent—giving way to the reflective flats of icy plains. Miles finished his beer, and tossed it behind his head; it came down with a pop on the street, and the glass scattered. He opened the next one and drank it quickly, the liquid pocket-warmed and foamy. And then he turned across the parking lot of the Albertson's, down two more blocks off Main, before locating the shot up sign for Bullhook Rd. The street wasn't plowed and Miles walked tentatively across a solid sheet of ice—several inches deep—adhered to the street, with the timid stride of a newborn calf. The neighborhood was full of trailers and homes on blocks. The yards were filled with discarded things—kids toys, car parts—frozen to the ground. From one yard, a muscular white pitbull lunged at the chainlink fence, throwing itself in Miles' direction. The dog snapped out a series of barks that ricocheted off the surrounding trailers, all narrowly situated, and echoed down the quiet block.

Miles came to the address on the ID. It was a faded, lime green trailer tilted at an angle (one of the supporting cinderblocks appeared to have collapsed, crumbled). Lefebvre's car was parked to the side of it. Above the door was a bleached painted elk skull secured by a thin wire wrapped around its antlers. Miles approached cautiously, trying to remain silent. He knocked on the door. No answer. He placed his hand on the handle and gave it a little twist. Unlocked. Then he pushed the door ever so slightly, pushing it into the dark musty mildewed stench of the trailer. As he applied more pressure, the door fell backward from the doorway, crashing into the center of the trailer. It punctured the flimsy plywood door of a kitchenette cabinet and sent several pots and pans to clatter down into a heap on the floor. Miles' heart beat fast in his chest. He stood in the newly opened doorway. He called out into the trailer, pushing the door aside. He squeezed in down the hallway, and toward what appeared to be a bedroom at the end of the hall. "Lefebvre?" he called again. Along the hallway were a line of beer bottles and half empty handles of vodka and whiskey that had seemingly all rolled across the trailer, due to its slight tilt, like he were in the hull of a slowly sinking ship.

Miles opened the bedroom door, and poked his head in. The bedroom was a disaster. The mattress itself was off its slatted frame, in an angled heap in the corner of the narrow room. The cheap metal blinds against the single window behind the bed were all bent and pointing in different directions like a beat up old rake. The room smelled like urine and beer. There was a tight cocoon of blankets in the space between the mattress and the wall. Miles called out Lefebvre's name once more. From within the blankets, there was a white explosive light and a deafening crack and suddenly a hole was opened up through the ceiling, the cold night air and moonlight feeding in through it. Miles leapt to the ground. His ears rang painfully. As if they'd



been boxed by two large hands. “Out!” shouted a voice from within the blankets. They were kicked away. Lefebvre was wrapped up in them, holding a shotgun in his arms—his eyes wild, and glossed over, like he was still asleep, or possessed by some kind of demon. He took a long swig from the nearest bottle, finished it off, and tossed it aside. “Come and get me!” he shouted, firing off another. The sound exploded around the room; it caused the thin walls of the trailer to shake, and punched a second hole in the ceiling.

“It’s me! It’s me!” Miles shouted from his spot on the floor, his arms up in the air. He then lunged at Lefebvre. He grabbed the shotgun from his hands, opened the window behind them, and threw it out into the yard. Lefebvre punched loosely into the air. He was drunk; the alcohol sweeping off of him in sour waves, a stagnant maple syrupy scent. Miles wrestled him against the floor, as if he were a hog. Finally, Lefebvre gave in, went limp. Miles eased off of him. The room was cold from the outside air spilling in through the holes in the ceiling. Lefebvre’s recognition of Miles slowly broke across his face.