

Cowboy Jamboree
Magazine

Issue 7.2—Spring 2022

NEW FOOLS ARE HERE TO TAKE YOUR PLACE



INSPIRED BY AND DEDICATED
TO BREECE D'JPANCAKE

New Fiction, CNF, and Flash

Special preview and excerpt of
Sheldon Lee Compton's
new memoir from Cowboy
Jamboree Press,
The Orchard Is Full of Sound,
about the author
and his pursuit of Breece

"He hears false power in the
preacher's voice, sees outsiders
pretending. Old fool, he thinks, new
fools are here to take your place."

HEREIN

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Breece D'J Pancake, 1952-1979

I Have Left My Ghost in Those Hollows

Kirsten Reneau

I am older now, older than Breece D’J Pancake was when he shot himself clean through the head on a Palm Sunday. That was the same day somewhere in the upper part of the state my father was holding a palm frond, its fingers long and green reaching out to touch his father, a pastor by trade and divine rights. At least, that’s how I imagine it. My dad couldn’t remember what he was doing on that Palm Sunday even if I asked him. But my father, who was not yet my father then but just a boy, really, a high schooler who would soon be leaving for college, where he would learn about the individual bones of the body, how they could bend and break, what muscles could tear and which organs could be replaced. It was the same college Breece had started to write and forty odd years later, I would learn too. The organ was the largest on the east coast, or at least that’s what the promotional material said. Its big, hollow pipes went from floor to ceiling of the chapel. The pamphlets never mentioned Breece, who had dropped out after one year, and moved away to Virginia. I live in New Orleans now, haunted by the mountains that are not here like a phantom limb. I tried to kill myself too, but I didn’t use a gun; I tried pills, but it didn’t work. Once, down here, a man shook a pill bottle at me and called it *West Virginia’s mating call*. I do not tell him of the black dress – velvet, older than me – that I wear to funerals. Breece’s book sits next to a card from my father asking me to come home. I dream I’m driving there but I never make it, and I always end up at distressed and broken down version of the college chapel that we all left behind – my father, Breece, and I – where my palm presses against those big, hollow organ pipes, cracked open like a skull after a gunshot wound.

Trendy Times

Jody Rae

Dipping in and out with a gentle j-stroke, her kayak glides next to chosen kinfolk. Back at the house, there’s a crackle in the wood stove. A spark flies high for every mile that she drove. Sharp wit lands like a needle on a record. Banjo solo, she’s a Country Western nerd. Walkin’ tall, move on outta her airspace. To meet her gaze, get in line on the staircase. If you can’t keep pace, memorize her fair face.

While Highlanders get a move on, stomp through autumn, the colors of fall form a fringe halo, just like her perfect dark curls learned to lay low.

A vintage pickup parked at the motel, bedspreads thin as the hide lampshades. She brought her pets but the manager won’t tell. They’ll hide out until the sunlight fades.

Flashing that Fleabag grin, it’s her mother’s smart grin. Her dad’s work shirts coulda fetched two point five Benjamin. Lessons lamented through her accordion, flannel never looked so good on no one.

Excerpt from *The Orchard Is Full of Sound*

Sheldon Lee Compton

I drove the first half of what would ultimately be a six-hour trip. During this drive, I forced Kenneth to be a springboard for ideas. First there was the business of introducing him to Breece to begin with.

“That’s a strange name,” he said.

“Well, it’s not as strange in certain areas of West Virginia,” I said. “You can look and find a ton of Pancakes in the phone book there.”

From there I moved on to all the proper highlights about Breece, covering a lot of ground far more quickly than I had imagined. Less than ten minutes, in fact. It struck me that there can be only so much to a life that lasted two and half decades. In the span of that short exchange, it became clear to me that Breece’s actual life wasn’t the real life left to us for discussion. His legacy, the one I needed to be talking with my brother about, was the twelve stories.

“He was from Milton?” Kenneth asked.

“Nevermind Milton,” I said. “But yes, he was from Milton. But never mind that right now. You need to read his story collection. That’s where you learn who Breece was. Where you learn who he still is to the people who care about his work.”

I noticed his gaze move toward the windshield, out beyond the two of us across some horizon or other, beyond yet another conversation about literature with his windbag brother.

“I’ve got the book right here on my phone. On my Kindle app on my phone,” I said. “They’re not the kind of stories I bet you’re thinking of. These go to some of the places we deal with, bub.”

“You want me to read? Now?”

He should have known the answer to that one.

I let him off the hook and asked that he read at least one story now. “I’ll be quiet and just drive. You read. Then we’ll talk.”

I had that feeling all writers would be familiar with, that kind of waiting that comes about when you’re anticipating what someone thinks about a story or book you wrote or recommended. And, also, this was the very definition of a crash course.

“What part you on?”

“Let’s see. He’s thinking about going on strike.”

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“Good. Okay.”

It went like this for the next twenty minutes or so. He handed the phone back to me when he finished.

“Man, you ain’t kidding,” he said. “That last part was awesome. Biting the liver, all that detail. And that part with the bobcat watching for him to leave. I don’t know. Somehow that kind of summed up the whole thing.”

It was clear that Kenneth now had at least a slightly better understanding of what Breece was about. I kept taking the two-lane through Virginia in sweeping curves and Kenneth kept reading.

In Charlottesville, I switched seats with Kenneth. Driving in any town with a population larger than a few thousand means various roads I can’t seem to navigate to save my life. Even with Google Maps I would get twisted around. I thought to simply cut through all that and switch right up front. When he suggested seeing Monticello, I had to decline. This wasn’t a trip for sightseeing. I needed to get a hotel and then get to Blue Ridge Lane.

Hotel secured and still mid-afternoon, I insisted on a quick nap. Six hours in a vehicle meant my two back surgeries were taking center stage with my pain level. I never dream, but while falling asleep in that strange otherness that comes with every hotel room in the world, I focused on Buddy crouched there in the hills chewing liver like a madman about to do mad things and I focused on the bobcat waiting, surviving. I was the bobcat: Breece was the bobcat. At some point I finally collapsed into sleep.

I knew from the satellite mapping—those crisp, overhead images of 2215 Blue Ridge Lane and the surrounding neighborhood—that I had entered a residential section unlike anything Kenneth or I had ever been around. Homes listed by realtors for millions of dollars. Homes with garages bigger than any house he and I had ever lived in. Homes with parking lots instead of parking spaces. And as was the case with 2215 Blue Ridge Lane, swimming pools and guest houses. Guest houses big enough to rent to students.

During my time as a small-town journalist, not to mention my time as a pizza delivery driver, I knocked on a lot of doors in a lot of different places. Dangerous places. But the idea of swaggering up to the front door of this home and knocking was giving me the nervous chills. I was still on Farmington Drive leading into what I had already started referring to as the Country Club Section. The homes

were, as Breece had said in his letters, in the middle of the golf course that was part of the Farmington Country Club. The very course he once did some work on for extra money. And then I turned right onto Blue Ridge Lane.

The moment was already surreal. More than a decade earlier I first pulled up Breece's Wikipedia page and read about his short life, his suicide along a stretch of road in Charlottesville. Now I was on that road, and the very first right turn led to what was once the Meade home. The view from the satellite pictures did not do the place justice. A wide roadway that ended in a rounded left curve into what I've already described as a parking lot, one large enough to park a dozen vehicles. Larger than every single privately owned car lot I'd seen back in Kentucky.

There were no cars around. No sign that anybody was home and, for the first time since leaving for Charlottesville, it occurred to me that any number of scenarios could exist that would have the home empty. Work, vacation, currently on the market, visiting family out of state. But that didn't really matter to me. I didn't need to see the inside of 2215 Blue Ridge Lane; I needed only to stand in at least the general area where Breece left the world.

"Don't look like there's anybody home," Kenneth said.

I had forgotten Kenneth was in the car. We both stepped out and shut our doors. "That's about the luck I expected," I said. "But you know, what I'm here for don't really require a full tour." As I said this, I pointed to a smaller path leading from the corner of the driveway nearest the main house. I knew from the maps that at the end of that path was a swimming pool and a guest house. The guest house.

"But we should knock at least, yeah?"

"We should knock, yes."

I bypassed the small path leading to the guest house and found the front door of the main house. Or at least a door. For all I knew a house this big had any number of doors.

I knocked, then Kenneth knocked, and then I knocked again. Kenneth went to knock again and I stopped him, motioned to the guest house. "No signs I can see. We can always plead dumb, drop a thicker accent on them."

Whoever had bought this home in 2017 for \$4 million dollars was most certainly not here. Though I didn't say it aloud, I was greatly relieved. Ever since calling Charlottesville several weeks before *New Fools Are Here To Take Your Place*

and trying to explain who Breece was, how he was significant to the great city, and having no luck, I wasn't eager to talk with yet another person who likely had no idea how important he was to a large part of the literary community. And, worse, in this case the significance was literally in their backyard.

The look from Kenneth said volumes. Like a war cry he was saying, we're low class, my brother, and low class never fails all that good roaming around upper class property. The trip to the front door and back to the car was all I was going to have. Sure, I could return later that day, before bedding down at the hotel for the drive back the next morning. But that wasn't going to happen. Once to the breech was enough. I knew Kenneth could feel the same thing I felt standing there in the middle of those luxury homes in the middle of that golf course in the land of Jefferson. He could feel that same tingling sensation across the skin, the old genetics letting us know we had wandered too far afield of our own land, our own people.

From where I stood the swimming pool was in view. I could see adjacent to that the guest house. Surely the space he rented. But left and right and in between there was no orchard. At once this melted something inside me.

"You know, I tried getting the police report." I turned to Kenneth and waved my arm toward the parking lot and started the short walk away from the core of Breece's legend. In the car, I settled back into the seat. "Yeah, I tried, but no luck. Called the city police. Their records stopped in 1997. Nothing else converted to the database before that. I tried the county. Worse luck there. Nothing before 1983. Even the division three post of the Virginia State Police said they had nothing that dated. It's a long way back to 1979."

Kenneth was quiet. I could feel the discomfort coming off him in those rings through time Breece so eloquently described. It was time to get back to our world. How often must Breece have felt the same way in this exact same place? How often must he have wished to be anywhere else but here? Then he left in his own way, and so did we.

The Orchard Is Full of Sound, a new memoir about one author's life and pursuit of closure for Breece D'J Pancake's tragic death by Sheldon Lee Compton is now available from Cowboy Jamboree Press.

Tomorrow is a Long Time

Daren Dean

Cody suggested that they go to Slocum's funeral. He felt bad about it. He had never seen anyone die in front of him before except his grandma and she had died in a hospital bed from a stroke. It wasn't anything so violent as falling to your death. Cody couldn't help but feel responsible. It was his fault after all. Maybe if he hadn't started to walk toward the back door at just the moment the bees had come streaming out of the chimney, he could have warned the old man or steadied his ladder for him. Terri told him not to blame himself. His wife was very practical like that although he pointed out that she hadn't witnessed it as he had. It was a terrible image that seemed to play through his mind on a loop. The man lying there on the ground in an unnatural position with his neck and legs at such impossible angles, but she was right. It was just an accident and these things did happen unexpectedly.

Not only did she *not* want to go to the funeral but she was a little miffed that they still had to contend with bees coming out from behind a crack between the wall and the fireplace. She called them "killer bees" though they were just your garden variety honey bees. On the floor behind the window treatments and the furniture were dozens of dead bee bodies. She worried that Michaela would get stung or put the bees in her mouth. She was at the crawling backward stage now and she didn't know any better. Cody was soon discovering that babies put everything in their mouths that they could get their hands on. You had to watch a baby every second.

All Cody could do was look at his pretty wife with the dark brown eyes and put his hand on her smooth, tanned face and suggest they go out to Wrightsville Beach for a picnic with the baby. They drove to the beach on the crooked highway. Terri was so beautiful he felt love and a sharp twinge of pain in his chest that he would somehow lose her or that they might be separated one day. He couldn't explain this fear nor had he mentioned to her, but ever since the baby had come along he had felt this with a strong sense of dread. At the beach, they watched Michaela sitting and playing with her colorful plastic blocks on the blanket under the red umbrella that really wasn't made to withstand the sudden gusts of wind coming down the coast. He leaned on his arm near the baby to make sure she didn't eat too much sand.

He watched Terri in her white bikini soaking up the sun on a bright orange beach towel about twenty yards away, close to that expanse of beach where children played and people walked or jogged just above the lip of sand where the waves crashed onto the beach. She wanted to be near the water, but she would come back and sit with them under the umbrella after she had a chance to soak up the sun. Her skin was so smooth and tan. It was like tan velvet, he thought. When she turned over on her stomach he looked down the gap between her breasts, her firm and very pleasing backside, and her sun-dappled hair. The extra baby weight made her look even better. He thought about all the things he wanted to do with her later if the baby would cooperate by napping early. Terri looked up at him with her chin resting on the back of her hands at one point. She touched the bridge of her sunglasses and pulled them down with a finger and winked at him. He didn't think it was an exaggeration to imagine she could have been a model or at least one of the vixens in a music video. She was a little too thin before. He couldn't help but smile back at her.

A squadron of pelicans cast shadows over the beach. Cody glanced up to see the strange antediluvian air force. If Terri had been a little closer he would have told her how they reminded him of pterodactyls due to the shape of their wings and the way they flew in formation. They hadn't been to the beach in a while but there were always interesting sights to see. Like the bearded camera man taking photographs of surfers dangerously near the pier. About the same time, a wild looking middle-aged man appeared to be skiing up the beach with skis, pumping his arms vigorously as he landed the points of his poles into the sand to keep his dubious momentum going forward. People back home would have laughed to watch the skiing man trying to do something so defiantly ridiculous, but they would have shaken their collective head, *That's Wilmington for you!* Even though it was Wrightsville Beach, not Wilmington at all. The residents of the little beach community had bumper stickers that read *Tourists Go Home!*

Two teenage boys were walking along the beach and elbowing each other as they checked Terri out. He felt himself get a little mad but then he knew he would have done the same thing had he come upon such a beautiful woman on the beach. He looked up in time to watch a seahawk dive like a stone after fish in the surf not too far out. It was one of those lazy summer days where the sun sucked all the energy out of your body. He took a swig from a water bottle he had filled with white wine. The baby was

laughing and smiling and it seemed like Cody could rest. He had the perfect child and the perfect wife.

A week later, Cody was sweeping up dead bee bodies with a broom into a blue plastic dustpan so that Terri wouldn't have to look at them and start complaining about how they had to move. He liked living in the little house but he wished he could talk her into moving into one of the little houses near Carolina Beach just a few streets from the waves of the Atlantic. He told her they would probably never get the chance to live so close to the beach ever again but she didn't want to be too far from the mall where she worked managing the Clinique makeup counter in Belk. He loved that she looked like an exquisite doctor or scientist devoted to the research of beauty in her requisite white lab coat.

A droning sound began to intrude on his thoughts until he realized it was coming from outside the house. It sounded like what he imagined a giant queen bee might sound like if she were on the hunt for a new home. He went outside and heard the sound of the plane dangerously low overhead. It was a military plane, a bomber he thought, flying so low it seemed to rumble just over the tops of the long leaf pines and ancient live oaks of the neighborhood. He swore he could almost make out the face of the pilot and a uniformed spotter hanging halfway out of the side door. He didn't know enough about the military to tell which branch this plane belonged to, but it triggered a memory from the year before when they had driven down to Florida and arrived at the Pensacola lighthouse just in time to see the Navy's Blue Angels maneuver dramatically around the lighthouse before landing. The only thing dramatic about this plane was how low it was flying. Everyone in New Hanover county was waiting for the other shoe to drop. What would they bomb next? Uncertainty was in the air and the fear was palpable even as North Carolinians tried to go about life as usual.

Cody and Terri had moved to Wilmington from Bladen County just over two years earlier. She had just told him she was pregnant and they had decided together it was high time to get out on their own. He had always worked for his granddad and daddy on the tobacco farm doing anything that needed doing. The Robeson name was well known around Bladenboro, up in Dublin, and over in Elizabethtown. He had taken over for his granddad's job picking up the Mexican laborers to work in the fields in the rusted Dodge when the old man's sight had become

so questionable that he couldn't drive anymore. It was easy enough to do, but his daddy wouldn't give him much responsibility or much money and he was almost thirty years old. Too old to be treated like some snot-nosed kid.

It was true enough they had free rent since they lived in the converted tobacco barn outside the big house his parents lived in. He had helped his daddy turn the old barn into a little, oddly shaped apartment but he and Terri had never been able to get enough money together to buy their own place. She constantly talked about getting their own little piece of heaven. She didn't care if it was a trailer in Green Meadows Trailer Court just so long as it was theirs and they didn't have to constantly feel grateful or do favors for everyone in his family as payment. Besides, they hadn't been married very long and neither of them had embraced their in-laws although truth be known, they really weren't that different.

He took a job as a bartender for a dive called the Whipping Post that had a view of the Cape Fear river and was well-trafficked by a mix of locals, college students, and tourists. The owner was an eccentric who let him run the place as he saw fit and really seemed to not care much about the bar, alcohol, or even the customers as such. Instead, his nostalgia knew no bounds. Phil King seemed to travel a circuit around the Southeast buying old boats, tractor signs, Harleys, anything with an old west motif, ancient radios, jukeboxes, and 1950s Rock-N-Roll memorabilia. He seemed especially fond of anything relative to Elvis or Hank Williams. He was seemingly on a quest to fill the bar with all the leftover junk nobody in the southeast wanted anymore.

Cody didn't mind working there but Terri was worried he was going to fall in love with a drunken college student or some random female tourist. He tried to assure her wasn't interested in anyone but her. He wasn't exaggerating when he told her she was the most beautiful woman he had ever known but being pregnant made her feel fat and ugly. She got angry at him when he touched her belly. It was as if he couldn't do anything to suit her anymore and her suspicion that he was about to leave her and their unborn baby.

As the days went by Terri seemed to become more involved with her job and increasingly unhappy with him. Cody found this confusing since nothing had changed about how he felt about her. Now they were on different schedules so they saw each other less. Their lives seemed to be all about working and

trading off taking care of the baby. She had just become the manager of the Clinique counter at Belk. She now made more money than he did, which made him feel like a failure but he decided not to tell her this since he didn't want her to feel bad. His daddy had told him the man was supposed to take care of his family and now it seemed like she was the one taking care of them. His daddy and Uncle Jesse took every opportunity to tell him he needed to keep his woman at home and in line but he didn't know how to tell them he didn't think like they did. He wanted the best for Terri and if that meant she did better at work, then so be it. He stayed silent on the issue in front of the men.

The busy time for both of them was now the weekend and they had to start paying an older woman down the street named Deloris to watch the baby while they were at work. It felt like lives on different schedules were beginning to take their toll. At just six weeks old, they had had to take the baby to daycare during the week so Terri could go back to work. They both felt really awful about handing their baby over to strangers but not working wasn't an option in Terri's mind. She was their little jewel and they just handed her off to a skinny lady with gray hair streaked with blonde highlights who called herself Ms. Joy. Out in the truck, Terri leaned across the seat and grabbed his shirt collar and cried with her face pressed against him. He could feel her hot tears dampening his chest. When she was finished she sat back in the seat and looked at him with a long face, smeared mascara blotched around those dark brown eyes. She thought more than she said. He smiled at her and she laughed in embarrassment although there was nothing to be embarrassed about as they put their heads together across the console.

"Should I go back in and get her?"

"Take me to work," She shook her head and dabbed her eyes with tissue. She flipped down the sunvisor because it had a mirror on the other side, took out her makeup bag, and went to work on "fixing" her face. It didn't need fixing he wanted to say, should have said, since he loved her for being so tender hearted.

Phil asked him to take on more responsibility at the bar. He had been promoted to head bartender and received a much-needed raise. It meant he had to come in earlier in the afternoon to run the bar, do the prep and scheduling. Some nights he felt good about his job and almost like a celebrity. People knew his name and one night he had even received a fifty-dollar tip from a businessman who had only had one drink.

A middle-aged woman in a black cocktail dress came out while he was on a smoke break in the alley and suddenly lunged at him, planting a drunken lip-lock on him and awkwardly groped him. He grabbed her hand and held her at arm's length. He was at heart just a simple man trying to do his job and hadn't bargained for the irrational things people did when they were under the influence. She was what his granddad could have called a handsome woman. It was easy to see she had once been very beautiful and not so long ago. If he had seen her ten years ago, she probably could have had any man she wanted. In fact, she probably still could now if she was sober. Before he could say anything she stumbled awkwardly on the bricks, one of her pointed heels had become lodged between the alley's bricks and when she tried to yank it out it snapped off at the heel.

She sneered drunkenly at him, "Do you realize how expensive these heels are? They cost more than you make in a night!" Before he could think of something to say back to her she spat out, "What are you . . . gay or something?" She tottered on one high heel and did a peg leg walk back into the bar to her husband who looked wealthy, important. He hoped they left before he had to go back in since Donnie couldn't run the place alone, not on a Saturday night.

Still, his promotion seemed like a good thing and they had dinner at the Pilot House restaurant to celebrate. Now they were both managers and they really needed the money more than ever to afford Michaela's daycare and her increasing doctor's visits. The baby had been getting sick recently and her little body heaved and retched so much they were both terrified that she might die. She was so tiny, a long and skinny baby. "Bowtie man" (what they called one of the rotating doctors at their pediatrician's office) typed furiously into his Blackberry and finally came up with rotavirus as the culprit but somehow this didn't seem right. The bees hadn't gone away either but he continued to try to clean them up so Terri wouldn't get too upset.

Terri said she wanted to go back to Bladen County because she missed her family. The Smiths were good people and he couldn't help feeling bad about taking their daughter away from them since he knew they all loved her so. He felt, no knew, he hadn't done right by them in more ways than one. Wilmington was just too big and fast for her, she said. Her beautiful dark eyes filled with tears and she wept at the kitchen table until Michaela pulled herself up on Cody's leg said her first word, not Mama or Dada, but *kitty*. Terri scooped the baby up in her arms. They both laughed at that, couldn't help

it, since they had each been trying to convince her to say mama or daddy when the other one wasn't around. Cody thought his wife would get over her homesickness eventually. It was just a passing phase and perfectly normal he told her. She didn't say anything and took the dinner dishes into the kitchen to clean up. They could go visiting on the weekend he said, but he couldn't bring himself to go back and face the judgmental eyes of his granddad that regarded working in a bar as a sinful occupation. His daddy just thought he was wasting his life. His elders both expected him to assume his position running the farm even though they both knew an operation like theirs was too small to make it anymore. They were a dying breed.

On Michaela's first birthday Terri made a homemade birthday cake. They lit a single candle and sang happy birthday to her and she seemed delighted when they helped her blow out the candle. The baby put both hands into the cake and pulled out fistfuls before cramming it into her mouth. He couldn't remember ever being happier except at the moment of her birth. Even on his wedding day he had been more terrified than happy due. In the moment, he had been struck by the idea he was doing this thing adults do, but the birth of the baby had been pure joy. Michaela did a face plant in the center of the cake and when she raised her head cake stuck to her cheeks and forehead, a big dollop of white icing on her nose, and a big smile behind the cake. Terri leaned her head on his shoulder and he didn't feel like an impostor as a husband or a dad in that moment.

It was a Saturday afternoon and he was feeling under the weather at home with the baby when he saw a figure in full camo gear run by his dining room window carrying an assault rifle. One eye checked to see that Michaela was bopping up and down in her playpen, while the other eye forced him to stumble toward the window to see what was going on. At first, he thought it had something to do with 9/11. Was al-Qaeda literally in his backyard? And why did President Bush want to send troops to Iraq instead of Afghanistan? The side road was blocked off by Wilmington police cars so he couldn't take the baby anywhere since the driveway was effectively blocked off. The figure in full camo and hood was leaning into the deep ditch like it was a World War I trench. He was aiming through the trees, past his neighbor's backyard, and aiming his rifle toward something or someone, but the only window on that side of the house was obscured by his neighbor's fence line.

The need to protect the baby welled up within him so much so that he felt tears stinging his eyes at the mere idea that something might happen to his precious daughter. He imagined himself packing a bag for the baby, putting it into her stroller, and maybe taking her to Salt Works just a couple of blocks away and have some pancakes for breakfast until the sting or whatever it was blew over. Whoever the police were after might also have guns. What if a stray bullet hit one of them even here in the house? He had heard of this happening many times over the years. It wasn't uncommon at all.

There was the squawking sound of a male voice through a bullhorn outside. The sound of the voice was distorted and it echoed so it was impossible to distinguish individual words. The voice made him angry. It had even sent the crows that liked to strut around in the medium across the street where it was said Wilmington had once had a trolley car system running back in the 1920s but if that was right the tracks were long gone. By the sounds outside, the police had someone cornered their quarry a couple of blocks north of the house. Cody knew there was an apartment complex in that area but it was also not far from College avenue, which was a very busy road lined with businesses and homes the further north you went.

The sniper in his ditch must have fired his weapon. He strode over to the window and by pushing the filmy white curtains aside and pressing his forehead against the window he could just make out the sniper who had jumped out of the ditch with his rifle and was now running across his backyard and out of sight. Cody went to the baby's room, plucked the baby out of her playpen though he knew she needed a change since she was beginning to whine at her discomfort, buckled her into her baby seat, shut the bedroom door, and sat down on the floor with her in the middle of their little house in the small dining room to wait for it to end. Terri had pumped some breast milk and he went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle for the baby to keep her pacified for the time being while he quickly changed her.

Suddenly, there was a barrage of gunfire outside. Instinctively he fell flat on the floor and positioned his body so that he was almost on top of the baby to protect her if a stray bullet happened to come in their direction. He imagined, though not because he wanted to, trying to explain to Terri that the baby had been shot by a stray bullet from the police or whoever it was they were after and he shook his head no to make the thought leave his mind. He feared imagining the event might make it happen or will it into existence.

“No!” he said out loud. “I don’t want that to happen.” Sometimes he imagined things like this and they seemed so real it was as if they had happened in that instant.

The barrage went silent. It was almost eerily quiet. It seemed to be indicative of the police had caught their man or men. He wondered if the local news would have anything to report about it later that evening. The cop cars had vanished from his street almost as if they had never been there. He picked up the house phone and called Terri to tell her what had happened. “Oh my god!” she shrieked. Her distress was like someone was stabbing him in the heart with an icepick. She was going to ask to take off early and come home. She wanted to be with the baby, with him.

It was more than twenty minutes he heard her little Dodge Colt crunching the pea gravel in the driveway. He met her at the door with the baby who squealed with delight as they locked in a three-way embrace in the kitchen. Even though the dishes needed to be done and the laundry was piling up, they were reunited in safety for the moment. Terri was weeping with a mixture of fear and relief.

Daddy-Mommy, Michaela said. This made them laugh. The baby squealed again and declared, *eat, eat, eat!* Cody felt closer to them than ever, but he feared it would never last. The good things in life were fleeting.

He was picking up the big pine cones from the long leaf pines out in the yard with a gloved hand and putting the pointy objects into a black trash bag that didn’t want to stay open. The pine cones were so large you had to pick them up or they would seriously damage or bend the mower’s blade over time. A fairly good-sized pile of pine straw had managed to accumulate by the road in the front yard and three people had already stopped by to ask if they could “take it off his hands” but that just meant they didn’t want to pay for it. He was going to use it around the house as edging. Terri had taken the baby back to Bladenboro to live with her mama. He had started drinking while he was working at the bar, and she didn’t like it. She had grown up, as they both had, in the Baptist church. Being a bartender was bad enough in her eyes, but drinking on the job had put him on the road to ruin. He had tried to point out it wasn’t as if she were a tea totaler herself or something, but the accusation felt hollow and argumentative on his part. She was convinced he didn’t care about her or the baby and said the demon of drink was at his elbow all weekend at the Whipping Post. It didn’t sound like her. It sounded

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like her mother speaking through her like in an article he had once read about a mesmerism and séances that were popular back in the early twentieth century, except his mother-in-law was relentlessly still alive and haunted him like a specter in the physical world. Terri’s teary red eyes and trembling lips angered him and made him want to kiss her at the same time.

Cody thought if he fixed the place up for her she would see he did care about her and the baby. After a few days without the two of them it was clear his life wasn’t worth a plug-nickel, which was something his granddad liked to say and now here he was, a modern person in a new century, saying things tobacco farmers said. Even the words proceeding out of his mouth called his blood and body home. His wife and family were all back in Bladen county trying to pull him back there, but he felt he had one foot back home and one foot firmly planted anywhere-but-there. Folks back home considered New Hanover county “the big city” where all the people with lacks morals dwelled. It was funny to hear them refer to it as the big city or his daddy simply called it Babylon. He loved the people back home, but he sometimes laughed at them even though they weren’t joining in. He didn’t want them to be backward and judgmental like they were. He considered himself open-minded and modern. He loved them, but he hated their small-mindedness toward people who were different or outsiders to their small world in southern North Carolina. It disturbed him that he had grown up with them, but was now out of step with his own.

What he needed to do was make the place into a garden for Terri and the baby. When he went by the electric coop to pay his rent he was telling the secretary, Deborah, about how Terri had left and his idea to plant a garden for her in the big backyard. Mr. Driscoll came out of his office and told him he thought a garden was a fine idea and gave him suggestions about what to grow. He favored corn, squash, and tomato plants.

Monday was his regular day off. His neighbor, Dan, across the street allowed him to use his tiller and the next thing he knew he was tilling an area in the backyard near the fence-line while the crows squawked at him from the trees. It felt good to be doing something outside and physical again instead of in a dark bar where the floorboards reeked with the odor of spilled beers and the warm humid nights seem to usher in the skunk scent of urine from the street. The sun warmed his skin and he felt that he was where he belonged for now but always in the back of his mind a feeling of disquiet. But today was going to be a good one.

The dogwood in his side yard was beginning to bloom with its impressive white flowers. He wished Terri were here to see it with him even though this time of year usually bothered her allergies. He took off his shirt and tucked part of it in his jeans and let most of it hang out to his side. He was beginning to work up a sweat, but he had picked up a large Gatorade and a pack of Marlboro Light 100's at Snuggers, a small convenience store, a couple of blocks away. Since he had started working at the bar he had taken to smoking and ever since Terri left him he didn't have to hide it. It reminded him that the last garden he had tilled was for his grandma. Just thinking about how she would sit in the shade of the big live oak by the old curing barn and watch him work like she was watching the best soap opera ever made him feel good, but then he couldn't help thinking she was gone now. Somehow that loss was now mixed up with the loss of his wife and daughter and he really didn't know what to do. He did not want to give in to Terri, but he also wanted them both back. He didn't want anyone to think he was so weak. His granddad always told him what he was beginning to suspect was a myth of what real men did. The garden was for them he told himself as he started pushing the tiller again. He might plant some watermelon for Michaela. He could see her eating watermelon on a warm southern night on the steps of the back porch spitting seeds and watermelon juice all over face and clothes. She was such a messy little eater.

A neighbor drove by and waved at him with a big smile on her face. He waved back. People loved to watch a person work, he thought.

The baby had turned their world upside down. At least, he was thinking this as he was cleaning up forgotten dirty glasses from the night before in the back bar. He squeezed out a white rag from a little plastic bucket with a mixture of a little too much bleach and warm water before he began to wipe down the bar. Now that Terri and the baby were gone all he had were memories now. As he remembered it, even his Granddad had stopped talking about the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse and the Last Days long enough to ride with Cody's Mom and Dad to New Hanover County Hospital and see their new baby. The old man looked at her and pronounced her beautiful and precious and the tender side of the tobacco farmer emerged like a cicada after thirteen years.

But then they had ruined it by telling him how he needed to bring Terri and the baby back to Bladen County to be with family. They all missed them, they

said. He felt their love, their collective influence, like a strait jacket. He just nodded. They were his elders and he didn't have the heart to tell them he wasn't coming back. At least, not right now. He was enjoying his independence. He was even saving up to buy a little place at Carolina Beach. Ever since his buddy Dave from back home had taken him four-wheeling and surf-fishing on the beach along the southern peninsula he had decided he would live there before he moved away. At least, that was his plan but he hadn't wanted to do it alone.

It hadn't dawned on him that she was angry with him. At least, not at the time. They were still newlyweds then. He did remember that. She wouldn't allow herself to say why she was peeved and retreated into silence that left him chastened, and he could feel her anger palpable and alive. They had been talking about how they needed a new car and he had driven up to Jacksonville's Air Force base to buy a used pickup with their savings, what little of it they had then, and without discussing it with her first.

That was the part that had hurt Terri's feelings and then made her so angry she could barely speak to him. It had "riled" her was what his granddad had said about it. It was an old blue and white Chevy C10. The kind of truck his dad had driven back when he was a kid. The nostalgia of settling in behind the wheel had put him in an arm bar and forced him to count out the bills out of the skinny white envelope the bank had given him when he had withdrawn the money from savings.

Now, she was angry again and it had finally dawned on him that this was another time (one of many) he had failed to take her feelings into consideration. He just couldn't understand her need for her own family when he was so done, at least for now, with feeling obligations toward his own. If they needed anything, he would bend over backwards for them in a pinch, but he was just tired of listening to their advice. He had to find his own way. Whatever he did today was what he would be doing tomorrow and farming was for a dying a breed in his book. The government wouldn't allow the small farmer to make it anymore. Besides all that, Terri needed help with the baby too. Not a man's help, not with a baby, he was sure she would say if she allowed herself to say anything at all. He had called her one lonely Monday night at her parent's house and he was still relieved to hear that she was calculating the baby's age in months. He wished there were a way to make

everything up to her without having to give in and move back to the farm. As a man, he didn't want to lose face in that way. He feared, too, that if he gave in she would lose respect for him even though she had got what she wanted. The heart of a woman was difficult to plumb to its depths. He knew a man could never hold his breath long enough to reach the emotional channels a woman owned.

All this time he was still sweeping up the little bee bodies in the dustbin. Not as many recently since the weather had begun to turn to fall. One night he woke from a disturbing dream of Michaela crawling around on the hardwood floor in the living room eating the little bee bodies like raisins. He couldn't believe they weren't stinging her mouth. As she ate, she began to transform. Her body grew darker. Little antennae sprouted on her forehead and began to grow. She started scuffling in circles around the floor faster and faster like an insect herself until she sprouted bee wings from the back of her little onesie and began buzzing and flying around the room, smashing into the lamps, knocking over the television in the corner, and bumping against the windows to be let out. Finally, she managed to bump into the screen door a couple of times and flew out of the house as he stood there in slack-jawed amazement. "Terri! Terri! Come quick! The baby just flew out of the house!" He ran after her, but she flew too fast for him. She was really buzzing loudly like a hive and heading south out of Wilmington. How would he explain to Terri that he had allowed Michaela to eat the bees off the floor and now she had buzzed away? When he awoke his dream anxiety turned back to reality. Terri and Michaela had both flown away.

Cody's sister Amber called from back home to tell him their brother Craig was killed by an IED in Baghdad. He was so surprised by the news he dropped the phone and had to bend down and pick it back up off the floor. He could hear her weeping over the phone as she tried to tell him about the men in uniform who had come to the door and how Daddy knew as soon as they pulled up in the driveway what they were going to say. Cody's mind was racing and he couldn't concentrate on what she was saying anymore. The words were spilling out and he wanted time, the words, to go back in reverse into her mouth. He could hang up the phone again. He wanted to go back to his old worries and not have this new, terrible thing hanging over his head like a black anvil.

Craig must have been about fifteen and now deeply tanned from working his summer job bucking bales

of hay with their cousins on their uncle's spread. His brother had grown suddenly muscular from lifting weights. A stubble of wiry beard was on his face. He had transformed into a man overnight in Cody's eyes. It was incredible to him because he had been his older brother, an older kid he worshipped, but now he had almost reached godlike status although he would never have said such an embarrassing thing out loud. There was no denying it. Craig was cool.

It was a Sunday morning about 5am when Craig touched his shoulder. "You want to come with me CC?" His brother stood over his bed and through sleepy eyes Cody could see that he held his Marlin by the stock.

"You going hunting?"

Craig's eyes cut away as if someone were watching him from the corner of the room. "You coming or not?"

"Okay," Cody said. "Where we going? What season is it?"

"No season you ever heard of. To the mountain. Let's go." His brother had a pack of cigarettes bulging from the shoulder of his shirt sleeve. He smoked Marlboro Light 100s. He loved his big brother because he was nice to him and he was tough.

He knew the exact spot he was talking about when he said that. It would take a little while to get there and it was on someone else's property. They would have to cross three barbed wire fences. Neither of them knew whose land it was. They could have asked their daddy, but he would have lectured them about private property. In one deft movement he flipped the sheet back and sat up on the bed. He put on his jeans, a t-shirt with the number 12 on it, and a pair of holey Converse.

"I'm wearing my holy shoes today," he said. Normally Craig would laugh at that, but he gave a curt nod.

They ate cold pulled pork on Wonder bread for breakfast. It was still good, but he would have liked it better warm but he could tell Craig was in a hurry to get out of the house.

The boys had stayed up all night with their daddy and Uncle Jesse at the pig pickin' the previous weekend after everyone else had gone to bed. The men took turns telling tall tales they swore were true about the Beast of Bladenboro; a folk creature equal parts mountain lion and vampire from all the

stories. Cody believed them all. Friends and family from all over the state would descend on the place the next day and they would all know the men had stayed up to slow cook the meat. Wonder of wonders, they had even allowed Craig to smoke in front of them and drink a beer since he was as big as a man now. The men only did things they normally said were wrong like letting kids smoke and drink when their wives weren't around.

"You're not old enough yet." Daddy said.

"When will I be old enough?" Cody asked.

"One day," Daddy said. "We'll both know it, but that time ain't now."

"The boy is too much of a pussy," Granddad said. "You and Maureen treat him like a baby on the tit."

Luckily it was dark and nobody could see Cody's face flush. Sometimes the men said things about him as if he weren't sitting right there in front of him. His eyes filled with his tears that his Granddad thought he wasn't tough enough. The men talked about being tough all the time. His daddy and Granddad had been known for their bad tempers and reputations as men not to mess with. His daddy's fist was like a hamhock it was so big. Uncle Jesse once told him he had women's hands just matter-of-factly. It all served to make him want to do something they would all know only a tough kid, a tough man, could do.

Later Granddad was asleep in his lawn chair and snoring quietly in front of the campfire. Cody pointed at him. Daddy put a finger up to his lips. They had all laughed quietly, trying mightily not to make a sound. It was funny, but Cody wasn't sure why but it was. Granddad was old and couldn't stay awake so late. Whoever could hack it and stay awake the longest had bragging rights the next day.

Uncle Jesse noticed him pouting about being called a pussy and when his daddy wasn't looking his uncle gave him an ink pen to look at in the fire light that showed a woman's clothes disappearing when you flipped it upside down and back again. "You will be an old man like me before you know it."

"How old are you, Uncle Jesse?"

"How old do you think?"

"I don't know," he said. "About forty?"

"Damn kid," Uncle Jesse said. "I'm twenty-nine. Where'd you get forty?"

"Well, I don't know. You're always saying how old you are. I figured you was really old."

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"Christ," Uncle Jesse shook his head. "I'm going to go get another bottle of Miller and I ain't letting you drink one with me until you're twenty-one."

"I don't like beer anyway," he stared at the tiny woman as her clothes magically appeared again. "It tastes like horse piss."

"Well," Uncle Jesse said. "If you're anything like the rest of us. And it looks like you are. You will like it well enough when you're older."

"Why does everyone always say that?" Cody asked. "You will understand when you're older."

"You know," he said. "You're right. By the time you're old enough to understand anything, the few things you do learn come too late to help you very much." He took the pen back and stuck in his shirt pocket like he might have to make a grocery list later. He would remember that night forever. It was the first time he stayed up all night with the men without falling asleep. He remembered watching the flames of their campfire. The flames reached up to the moon like savage prayers. The wood and ashes popping like magic into the starry night sky of midnight blue. But he never could summon up very many memories of the family get-together the next day.

The dawn was orange and splotched across the eastern sky like a Rorschach test. The big live oaks in the back allowed the color in through the veil of Spanish moss. Sergeant, their big German shepherd-yellow lab mix, met them at the backdoor and had to poke his big nose with the pink tip into their hands before he allowed them to get through the back door.

"Don't let the screen door slam shut," Craig hissed. He handed Cody his nice Case knife, it was red like a man's blood, with a serious expression that told him to hang onto it and don't lose it! Cody slid the knife into the front pocket of his jeans.

Cody took his daddy's old Marlin out of the gun case. If he noticed it missing, and he probably wouldn't, he would likely get his ass handed to him. Craig gave him a look that asked, are you sure about that? Cody gave him a big grin.

"Your funeral, bro," Craig whispered.

Cody put on a hunting vest like Craig wore to hold a box of ammo in the zipper pocket.

After they passed the woodpile, Craig broke into a jog even though he was wearing heavy work boots. His hair was long and down to his shoulders. He was

running cross country at school as a Sophomore and had made varsity when he was a Freshman. Cody thought he might run cross country when he was in high school too. He would be a freshman when Cody was a senior. It would be cool to be on the same team with him. The sound Cody was most aware of was the rhythmic sound of the ammo in his pocket with each stride.

They passed through the hayfield running the old dog trots as they passed the haystacks. They came to a rust-colored cattle gate and climbed over it instead of unwinding the chain and opening it up. It was more fun this way although it made Granddad mad. The Herefords looked at them like they were crazy as they jogged across the field. Cody pretended they were Seneca. He was reading the second book in a series called "The White Indian" by Donald Clayton Porter and it was about the Seneca and how they ran like marathon runners whenever they were on the warpath with other Iroquois tribes. The only Indians around he had ever heard about were the Lumbee Indians.

Cody was beginning to feel a stitch in his side, but he pushed himself. He didn't want to lose sight of Craig even though he knew exactly where he was going. Craig was pulling ahead now. He ran like a coyote into the brush. Man, Cody whispered to himself. His brother had disappeared into a knotted copse of pine. He smiled to himself because he took an oblique angle that he thought might get him to their spot first. The Marlin was getting heavy so he switched it to the other hand as he leapt up on an oak that had been felled by Mother Nature. It looked like it was taking a nap and landed in such a way that it was like a bridge over the fence it covered. The tree limbs had spiked into the ground and kept it from crushing the barbed wire fence. Nobody but him and his brother had been back through there in ages. He balanced himself with the Marlin like he was doing a tightrope act for the squirrels as he used the trunk of the oak as a footbridge. When he jumped down he began to run hard now, dodging the young saplings, cedars, and hickory. It was his mission to beat Craig to their spot.

When he arrived at the spot, chest heaving and out of breath, Craig was already leaning against a great rocky outcropping of the creek bank. Craig looked at him over his shoulder and motioned to him to be quiet as he approached. His Browning already leaned against a tree. His brother's attention was on something down in the creek below. When Cody approached close enough to peer over the ridge Craig pointed to a wood ibis, just over three foot tall, strutted around in the water with a dignified air about it. Cody put the Marlin to his shoulder, sighted

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the ibis, and just as he squeezed the trigger Craig grabbed the barrel and pushed it way from the bird as the rifle barked. The startled bird took a few clumsy, halting steps like a drunk stepping in post holes before it threw himself into the tar heel sky. The single gunshot echoed across the pocosin.

"What did you do that for?" Cody hollered.

Craig cocked his head to look at his brother, "What the hell's wrong with you! You don't go just shooting anything that moves because you've got a gun. Give me that." He yanked the Marlin away from Cody. His brother's face red, hands trembling with a rage he could not account for. Their daddy blamed teenaged hormones raging. He leaned the Marlin against the same tree as his Browning where they sat like witnesses for the prosecution.

"I'm sorry," Cody said. He was shocked and confused. Isn't shooting what they had come to do? "I didn't know . . . it's not my fault."

"It's not your fault?" Craig said. "What are you even talking about?"

Cody shrugged, "I don't know."

Now in his mind that single shot continued to echo grievously down through the years of his life.

It was a Sunday when they heard the news. He was sandwiched in between his Granddad and Craig in the GMC heading into town. The old man liked to listen to the radio, especially the farm report, with the volume blasting. When the announcer told the story of the Sheriff's department investigation into a mysterious shooting of a Bladenboro first grader who had been mysteriously murdered in her home. Cody didn't think too much of it at first since he rarely paid any attention to the news but when they revealed that it was the Smith family's little girl, Angela, he felt something like a dagger in the pit of his stomach. All the kids on Cody's school bus called her Angel. She was a cute little girl, hard to forget, that the older girls petted and fawned over her ash-blond hair and blue eyes. She was almost the photo-negative of her darker complected older sister.

Just at that moment, his granddad bumped his knee with the knob of the gear shift as he downshifted for a steep hill. It felt like an accusation, so he looked quickly at the old man who calmly kept his eyes on the road and gave Cody's leg a little reassuring tap. A dreamy smile played on the old man's lips as if he hadn't been listening to the blaring radio. The windshield was muddy with dirt from the field. The old man ran the windshield and pumped washer

fluid to clean it at the same time. Craig dug his ribs hard and shot Cody his mean eyes. It was an expression he had learned from their daddy. Cody could see he would look just like their daddy when he grew up, he could see every judgmental bone in his face. It was an expression that held an accusation of wrongdoing and maybe even punishment.

What? He mouthed soundlessly to Craig.

That little girl . . . he mouthed back slowly and glanced at their granddad. Craig had his elbow positioned up on the lip of the passenger door where the window began. He had his thumb pressed to his cheek and his finger pushed hard against his temple.

Cody shook his head. He wasn't following his brother's meaning at first.

You! Craig held his hand out and made a shooting hand gesture and motioned with his head for emphasis.

Cody felt his heart leap in his chest. Could it be? That little girl was dead because of what had happened on "the mountain" when he tried to shoot the ibis? He couldn't believe it; he didn't want to believe it. He pictured Angel getting on the bus with her sister Terri, leading her by the hand, down the aisle to sit next to her in one of the dark green bus seats. He could see her repositioning herself in the seat because of her impossibly large backpack and her pink-little-pure lunchbox. The low rumbling of the bus as it labored down the gravel road and vibrated his entire body. He noted her cute angel face and honey-blond hair as she turned to say *hi* to another little girl her age sitting across the aisle. And it could have been a moment later, or several days later, Terri sat sideways in the bus seat next to Angel and struck him with a sudden smile. A moody girl, bright and dark, wearing black hand-me-down clothes but possessed of an undeniable, striking beauty.

He wanted to scream or cry, but he forced all the emotion down as he sat in the truck. What had he done? How could something so freakish happen? He couldn't have shot someone in that house from such a distance if he had tried. It couldn't be done. Even Craig couldn't have made such a shot even after his military training; a marksman on the shooting range. It was unthinkable. And yet it had happened. He knew it but he also knew he would never, could never, tell anyone. It would have to be a secret he kept until his grave as much as the good angel on his shoulder wanted him to confess. It remained just

another tragic mystery in Bladen County over the years.

When he was a sophomore in high school he started dating Terri Smith almost as an act of absolution though he wouldn't have put it that way at the time. He hoped he could somehow be forgiven without ever admitting his guilt, but what he had done, and failed to admit, ate him up from the inside. The guilt convinced him he wasn't completely lost. He convinced himself that he loved her, and then he did, but their relationship had a taint to it that only he knew the depths of it though she sensed it. If he was sometimes distant; she, for her part, chalked it up the fact that he was a Robeson and that's how the Robeson men were. They were known for their moodiness and sometimes violent outbursts.

Once he began dating her, Craig stopped talking to him almost completely. Cody knew Craig was afraid he would tell what had happened all those years ago. When they were together his brother wouldn't even acknowledge their existence. Cody felt like he had lost a brother just as much as Terri had lost a sister. It wasn't long after that his brother enlisted in the Army and was sent overseas. He had sent Craig several letters and they had all been returned unopened. His daddy gave him updates about Craig like he was a boy he had once gone to school with. He knew there was a rift between the brothers, but he had never asked about it because he felt it was a personal matter between them to resolve or not. And how his brother was dead and there was no time left for reconciliation.

The bees had been dormant through an especially cold winter. It had even snowed. It was a rare event in Wilmington. Cody had seen his neighbors outside taking pictures of each other in the snow. The public schools, colleges, and churches had all canceled due to the slick, dangerous conditions.

This meant everyone went to the grocery stores and the Independence mall to shop out of sheer boredom. Cody had the day off from the Whipping Post and was preparing for the return of Terri and Michaela. The Baptist preacher at the church she went to convinced her that a woman's place was by her husband's side no matter what or so she said. He didn't care either way he just wanted his family back. He needed them both. Still, he made sure there were no remnant bee bodies hiding in the corners as evidence.

He spotted the car before it had even turned off his street. He was smoking on the screened-in porch, but he nervously stubbed it out and tossed the

smoldering butt into the Maxwell House coffee can he kept in the corner for just that purpose. The day was bright and sunny with bright cotton cumulus clouds on a cerulean backdrop. The sun highlighted Michaela's strawberry-blonde hair as she stood holding her mother's hand in the gravel driveway. The iridescent white blossoms of the flowering dogwood in the yard seemed to preside over the moment.

"Daddy!" Michaela squealed. "Daddy! Daddy!" Her little arms flew up over her head and her face beamed with excitement. She was wearing a satin, pearl white, church dress with white leggings and glossy black shoes.

He felt his heart might burst with tenderness and love. She was so tiny and it seemed odd to see a person so little walking around in the world and yet his love for her was outsized. It made him want to protect her from all the bad in the world. With his eyes brimming with tears, he closed the space between them and lifted her in the air and spun her in circles. The sun glinted so that one instant he could see her little pixie face and the next it was obscured in shadow and then revealed again as they continued to whirl in the grass and pine straw in the yard. He could feel her heart pounding against the palm of his hand as they spun.

After they stopped spinning, Terri came to them and Cody buried his nose in the bouquet of her hair and he felt whole that he had his family back. If they could just make it until tomorrow as a family he felt everything would be all right. He held his toddler against him on one hip and his wife next to him on the other. The tears fell in rivulets down his face. Terri ducked her head and stared into his eyes, but he didn't want her to see his pain. He was theirs and they were complete as long as he never spoke of that long ago day.

Pickles

Brian Beatty

Local men – a few of them actual military veterans according to the patches on their farmer hats – hunched over the length of the bar as if interrogating their go-cup beers.

The women – wives, girlfriends, possibly a sister or daughter among them – occupied tables and booths behind the backs of the men, chatting to each other in annoyed, ignored cackles that competed with the blaring country music juke box to be the loudest thing in this VFW.

Around town folks joked VFW really stood for "very flirtatious women."

They didn't sound all that flirty to Hurley. But what did he know? He was only there – seated at a table in the corner, by himself, a glass of iced tea, not beer, for him – for his favorite Friday night dinner: a deep-fried pork tenderloin sandwich pounded as big around as the paper plate on which it was served.

He always saved the sweet homemade pickle slices atop the giant tenderloin for dessert.

Ducks

Brian Beatty

Hurley thought it would be cute. He could see himself rolling along in the Fourth of July parade in his old Chevy pick-up, tossing out miniature rubber ducks to kids instead of candy – the tiny ducks, either yellow or blue, quacking when pinched – because he'd won a pallet of these entertaining toys at an auction of dead inventory from a closed convenience store, but had been unable to sell them at flea markets.

What Hurley hadn't anticipated were confused parental shrieks of "Duck!" sending children running for their terrified lives.

The ensuing chaos halted the parade.

Even the marching band performing Sousa behind Hurley's truck scattered all directions.

One That Almost Got Away

Brian Beatty

One tackle box was full of costume jewelry. Another's lift trays contained only toy cars.

"What were you looking for?" Hurley asked the clearly disappointed customer.

"I don't know," the old guy grumbled, "*maybe some angling gear*. You must think you're pretty funny." He gave Hurley's sandals and tie-dye a sneering glance.

Hurley just smiled. "I store fake bait, flies and other fishing stuff in that oak file cabinet over there. Because it locks."

The Road Up Ahead

Travis Cravey & Levi Faulk

2009 Ford F-150, County Road 16 South, 7:15pm

Glass shatters. A terrible wrenching sound of metal. Everything goes upside down for a moment before going right side up again. My ears ring and I'm sure that I've hit my head on the roof of the cabin. Everything is black and I don't really know where I am or why. After a second, I notice that there's a hole in the windshield and Dan isn't there in the driver's seat anymore. His beer is on the dashboard, leaking just like Dan is leaking. Dan, sprawled out on the hood of the pickup, not moving. I call his name but my ears are still ringing and I cannot even hear myself. Panic. I scream.

1998 Buick Skylark, County Road 16 North, 7:14pm

I gotta figure out what to do. Kyle is a piece of shit, but Johnny has friends. He's gotta understand I didn't have no choice, right? And I don't give a good goddamn about kicking dirt on Kyle, but that dog. I ran that damn dog over. Johnny might not take that well. A man can get pretty fucking silly about some old mutt. He can get pretty goddamn silly over lots of things, of course, but his woman and his dog? Jesus Christ. I gotta get up to Canfield's Grocery, so I can call Johnny. Sooner the better. I can see this truck up ahead, coming right down the middle of the road. He swings back over to his side, though, so I figure he was just drifting. I put the hammer down now because I have to get to a phone and then that sonofabitch of a truck is coming right at me.

2009 Ford F-150, County Road 16 South, 7:05pm

Dan's beer is balanced between his thighs as he drives the pickup down the dirt lane. Thick clouds of dust rage behind us. It hasn't rained in quite some time. I like the sunny weather, I can lay outside and work on my tan. Dan is in a foul mood and it fills the cabin like the stench of a rotten egg. I fidget with the frayed ends of my cutoffs. When he is in a bad mood, it usually means a bad day for me too. My legs were held together tightly as if making myself small would protect me. Dwight Yoakam is on the radio so I tapped my foot and look out the window as if he wasn't even there. I stare at the neat rows of pine trees as we pass by and dream of other places.

1998 Buick Skylark, County Road 16 North, 7:08pm

I cannot for the goddamn life of me understand how shit got so bad so quick. Johnny had told me he had a 20 gauge pump to sell, so I drove by after work. He and his cousin Kyle were sitting on the porch. Johnny came out and showed me the shotgun, said he was asking seventy-five for it. "Fuck you," I laughed, "that thing is hotter than hell." Johnny smiled and said something about finding it by the side of the road. We both laughed and I told him I'd give him forty. The whole while his meth-mouthed cousin was eyeing me. Only so much I can take so I finally asked if he had a problem and like goddamn lightning he is off the porch with an axe coming at me. I swear to god I barely had time to get back in my Buick before he knocked out the passenger window. I tore out of there, throwing dirt all over Kyle and running over Johnny's dog. I'm still shaking.

2009 Ford F-150, County Road 16 South, 7:13pm

A deer runs into the road and Dan jerks the truck to the side, barely missing it. The sudden swerving of the truck makes his beer slosh into his lap, making it look as if he's peed himself. I stifle a giggle, knowing that it would only make things go from bad to worse. I open up the glove box, hunting for napkins but find none. He punches the steering wheel and curses. He lights up a cigarette, curses again when the lighter was dead. I see headlights coming towards us on the narrow dirt road. Dan is still looking down at the dead lighter and muttering to himself. I holler but he looks up just a little too late.

1998 Buick Skylark, County Road 16 North, 7:16pm

His headlight was all of a sudden a foot from my face. My engine is revving fast but I can't take my foot off the throttle. Maybe I don't want to? Maybe it's time to go hard and fast for good? Me and that dead dog, just tearing up the asphalt. The truck's horn is blaring and some man is laying on the hood but I can't see his face. I can feel something cracking in my insides and I cough blood and teeth all over the dash. I smell transmission fluid and gas and I want to throw up. I can't hear anything but I see a woman in the truck, screaming I guess. I feel like I smile at her, I hear "everything is alright," in my head and wonder if I said it. She must be pretty, under all that blood, and I wonder if she wants to come with me and Johnny's dead dog, just to see what the road up ahead looks like?

Extra Dumplings

Justin Eells

Chills ran through me as Aimee opened the door. She looked heavier and more alive than the last time I'd seen her, six years before, when we were all still drinking together. Some blond strands were matted to her forehead, and she had on a pink apron dotted with black cat faces. She put her arms around me, our bodies pressed together, and another kind of chill went through me.

"So sad about William," she said, taking my jacket. A smell of melted butter and disinfectant washed over me as I breathed in their home. "Jake'll be out in a minute. You can leave your shoes on or take them off, your choice."

I left them on. I noticed some gray dots in the faded maroon carpet as I followed her up the stairs. Specks of light appeared in my periphery. A faint ticking sounded from somewhere, maybe in my head, maybe nearby. I'd decided to play it sober for the weekend, for Jake and Aimee's sake. It'd been twenty-four hours since my last drink, in my bedroom at home in Ann Arbor, so I couldn't make any assumptions as to what sensations were real or not. The sound was intermittent, but it continued to repeat, so I knew it must be Jake and his clippers: Tick. Tick.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Aimee said, standing in the kitchen doorway. "We got pop, I can make coffee, there's Gatorade out in the garage."

The ticking stopped. "No there isn't!" Jake's voice blared from down the hall. "There's no Gatorade, I drank it all! I told you already." Tick. Tick.

"Your friend's out here waiting on you," Aimee called back.

"Brendon, my man, come on in here," Jake said. Aimee shrugged. She had her feet apart like she was ready to fight, and her face was glowing red.

"Soda sounds great," I said, thinking a Coke might tide me over, sort of.

"What kind you like? We got—"

"Honey, would you quit stalling him for fuck's sake!" Jake said, and she drew in a sharp breath and curled up her fist.

"He's a bag of dicks," she muttered. "Better go talk to him before he breaks a nail. First door on the right."

It had been six years since I moved to Michigan for treatment, and I hadn't seen either of them since. The treatment didn't catch, but I found decent work as an office grunt in Ann Arbor and ended up marrying Dee, a woman I'd met in treatment. The marriage didn't catch either, no surprise there, but I watched my old friends' progress on Facebook: first they were dating, then six months later, Jake sent me a message saying they'd been doing AA meetings together, him and the woman we both used to have this lighthearted thing for, back when she was our bartender and we'd sit beside each other on the stools competing for her attention. Now, six years later, they were engaged and I was back in town for our old friend's memorial service, feeling guilty I hadn't visited earlier.

In the bedroom, Jake was sitting on a bright orange ottoman that matched his hair. He looked like a piece of string cheese in dull boxers and a white undershirt with gray underarms, one heel propped on the edge of a metal cookie canister with a reindeer pictured on it. He was rubbing his big toenail with a file.

"Brendan, my man!" he said. "What happened to you? You look so fucking young! Come here and give an old man a hug."

I snickered. Jake was eight months younger than me. He set down the file and opened his arms, and I tried to steady the tremor in my hands as I bent down and put my arms around his shoulders. My knees buckled as he pulled me in, and I caught myself on the windowsill, almost touching an old soda can with wadded gum resting in the top, and pushed myself upright.

"I'm just about done here," he said. "You like Mac and cheese, right? You're going to love this shit Aimee's making. It's macaroni, but not those bullshit little elbow ones. She uses the big shells, and it's mixed with cream of celery, queso sauce—and not that Velveeta shit, either; she gets the good shit that comes in a can. And there's shredded mozzarella mixed in! And the best part? There's pieces of sausage in there too!"

Six years, and he was babbling about dinner. I realized then that the Jake I'd known six years before was the Jake I was talking to now: Jake was a mixer that tastes the same with or without booze. He reached over to grab a little clear bottle off the dresser.

"You polish them now?" I said.

“Aw! Shit!” Aimee’s voice came in sharp from the kitchen, and then the sound of something crashing, on the stove, it sounded like.

“Glaze!” Jake said. “It’s called glaze, just a thin layer to protect my hard work.”

I looked around the room, at the blanket twisted up with a sheet at the end of the bed, the dresser covered in unfolded clothing, the salt-and-peppering of dust on the carpet. My pulse echoed in my ears as Jake, in a sort of trance, meticulously brushed glaze onto his toenails.

“OK,” Aimee said, startling me. She was standing in the doorway, her face flushed and sweaty, a damp towel draped over one arm, a soda can in each hand. “I got Moon Mist and Dr. Faygo here. I think we might have some Twist in there too.”

“No we don’t,” Jake said. “You finished the Twist, remember?”

“No, I didn’t. I left two in there, so unless you finished them...”

“You know I don’t drink that pee water.”

“Dr. Faygo sounds good,” I said. She handed me the can and bit her lip.

“I have bad news,” she said.

“What kind of bad news?” Jake said, heel-stepping to the dresser, where he picked up a pair of shorts.

“The casserole took a little spill.”

“What? The whole thing?” Jake said, plunking back down on the ottoman.

“Nope, just the tip,” she said. “We can get take-out. Brendon, you cool with Chinese?”

“Chinese again?” Jake said.

“I’m cool with whatever,” I said.

“Well, you boys can go down to Shandong.”

Jake sighed, but then his face brightened. “Oh,” he said, “they got these dumplings, they’re deep-fried and they’re fat as shit! Not like those bullshit little potstickers they got at Panda Express.”

“You got to call it in, sweets. I got a mess to clean up.” Aimee lifted the towel off her arm, and there was a bright red stripe down her forearm. After a moment, I looked back and saw Jake on the ottoman putting all his attention into getting his feet through his bunched-up shorts without touching his nails. Aimee smiled at me and turned to leave. “I’ll have

shrimp lo mein,” she called back from the hallway. “A big one.”

Jake slumped against the windowsill. “Can you hand me my phone there, my man? On the bed there.”

My knuckles brushed against the ratty sheet, and I felt queasy. I handed him the phone, and he dialed.

“What are you eating, my man?”

My stomach turned. “Fried rice,” I said. “Chicken fried rice.”

He squinted at me. “OK,” he said into the phone. “We’ll have two orders of pork dumplings, fried, a large chicken fried rice, and a small shrimp lo mein.”

“Large,” I said. “She said a big one.” He ignored me, finished the call, and stood up.

“All right, my man, I ordered you some dumplings because friends don’t let friends subsist on fried rice. We got to go for a little drive. But first I got to find my sandals.”

“I can drive,” I said. “I can just bring it back.” I thought I might stop into a neighborhood bar for a quickie.

“I will not let you drive, my man, I won’t let you go alone, and I won’t let you treat. You are my guest, and I am treating.”

“I appreciate that. She said she wanted a large lo mein. Should I call them back while you find your shoes?”

“Can I tell you what happens? She gets the big lo mein. I get the dumplings. I finish my dumplings, and she eats half her lo mein because she’s got to save room for ice cream, and then next day, who gets leftovers? Not your old buddy Jake, that’s who. I’ll just be a minute.”

I left him in the bedroom, and as I went down the hall, my body felt like collapsing. And I realized something: my old friend was a dick, probably always had been. Jake had ended up with Aimee, which was fine; he had gotten sober with her, which was great; but now he was treating her like an adversary with something as mundane as takeout. I went and stood in the living room, took a few deep breaths.

“Brendon, you doing good?” Aimee said from the kitchen. I went and stood in the doorway.

“Yeah,” I said, holding up my Faygo can. She had an ice pack on her arm. I lifted the soda to my mouth.

"I mean, you holding up? Are things OK with you?"

I let out a little chuckle, and some soda escaped into the wrong pipe, leaving a little burn. "Yeah, I suppose," I said. "Divorce is over and done, thank god. Now I'm just...taking it a day at a time, as they say, ha ha. You guys still...doing the thing?"

"I'm still in it. Jake's too good for AA. Never got past Step Four. 'Fearless and searching' was a little too much for him, I guess."

I knew, from my short time in treatment, that Step Four was where you took inventory of yourself and reflected on all the wrongs you'd done to others, and there was something amusing about Jake attempting something so serious.

"But he's doing OK?" I said.

She laughed. "He's a taint. But he's a dry taint."

"You're talking about me when I'm in the other room?" Jake said, appearing in the doorway. "Aimee thinks I need some whoopity-woo to keep me sober, but I've been doing it my way for a few years now, and guess what?" He swirled the air and took a deep bow. "Still sober."

"Not sober," Aimee said. "You're dry."

Jake chuckled. "In Aimee's world, you're not really sober unless you're working the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," he said in a robotic drone.

"What I was telling Brendan," Aimee said, turning to me, "is we don't mind what you do here. If there's anything you need, Jake can take you to get it. Our sobriety's taken care of." She gave Jake a wry little smile.

"Let's go, my man. Our dumplings are getting cold." He kissed Aimee's cheek and didn't seem to notice the ice pack on her arm. "Later, dumpling."

When we were on the road, he told me to open the glove box. Inside was a beige canvas pouch with a zipper. In the pouch was a small glass pipe and a ziplock with a little nugget of weed. He told me to load up the bowl and didn't seem to notice the way I was looking at him. It was like he was cheating on Aimee; he'd just insisted he was sober when she said he was dry. I could feel my pulse quickening in my temples, and I clenched my teeth. I was his guest, so I did as he said and flaked a little splinter off the dry bud and put it in the bowl of the pipe.

We took a detour down a country road off Hight Point, and I sparked it. He let out a deep breath as I passed him the pipe, and we passed it back and forth as we drove away from town.

New Fools Are Here To Take Your Place

"You know," he said, "I smoked with Nutto like forty-eight hours before he died. It's fucking wild, isn't it? One of us is dead. And it's only going to get worse from here."

"It's sad, yeah," I said. The truth is, I didn't know William, or "Nutto," all that well, and had mostly come out to see Aimee and Jake.

"I wonder how fast we'll drop," Jake said. "I wonder if any more of us will die in the next ten years." He glanced over at me, and I felt accused.

"I don't have any plans to die," I said.

"Good, my man. Me neither. We got to stick together, you and me. That was Nutto's problem: he had all of us, but he was trapped in his bubble. Like, the last time I saw him, he'd been off the diesel for two days, and I just wanted to give him something to help dull the pain, you know? He was looking real rough that day, and I saw it. I thought, this man is done for. But I told him he looked good, and I think he liked hearing it, even if he didn't buy it."

We finished the bowl, and then he turned back toward town. My hand felt steadier, and I felt a little floaty.

"Sometimes you got to take a break," Jake said, bobbing his head up and down. "Sometimes, when things are going rough, it's good to step back, start over. Aimee's got her way, I've got mine. What's important is we both know when it's time, and we've got our own ways of doing it. And we trust each other."

He handed me the pipe, and I put it back in the pouch.

"You shouldn't keep this in the glove box," I said.

He smirked, pulling into a liquor store parking lot. "My fate is in God's hands," he said. "Want to run in?"

Of course I did. "Um," I said, "do you want anything?"

"I don't partake," he said, pressing a piece of gum out of a blister pack. "But don't let that stop you. Gum?"

"I don't partake. You're sure this is fine?"

"Of course, my man!"

I went in, bought a fifth of Canadian Club. When I was back in the car, Jake sped to Shandong. He handed me two twenties and said, "You run in. I don't like to get out of the car in my sandals."

Inside, there was a buffet set-up behind the glass window. I upgraded to a large lo mein, added a third order of dumplings, left the change in the tip jar. When we got back to the house, Aimee was sitting on the back porch in a flannel shirt. Jake opened the door.

“You meditating, honey?”

“I was,” she said, rolling her shoulders, “until you interrupted me.” She got up and leaned into him, and I watched them lock eyes in a way that made them look alone together, like I was watching them on a screen. Then she said, “What did he say?”

“Oh,” he said, scrunching his eyes shut like he'd forgotten something. Then they both looked at me.

“Brendon,” Aimee said, “Jake would like you to be his best man at our wedding. It would mean a lot to both of us.”

“Me?” I said.

“Of course, my man! It used to be the three of us, back when we were all young and bad.”

“Of course,” I said.

Inside, I poured a half inch of whiskey into a juice glass, mixed it with some Dr. Faygo, and they got glasses for their sodas so we could toast. When Aimee raised her glass, her unbuttoned flannel sleeve ran down her wrist, and her skin was bright red. She gave me a weepy little smile, gave it just to me, and my heart trembled.

“They gave us extra dumplings,” Jake said.

“Now you'll have leftovers,” I said.

He looked in the bag, pulled out the large lo mein, and smiled like it was the most beautiful thing, this extra food. Then he furrowed his brow. “What'll you have?”

“Fried rice,” I said. He opened his mouth to say something, but I said, “I won't be that hungry tomorrow.”

Aimee laughed for some reason, then so did Jake, so I did too, and I smiled until it hurt.

Not Another Dangerous Clown

Eli Evans

The next we know of Sholem Mogilevich, a.k.a. “Sacha the Macedonian,” a.k.a. “The Brainy Ashkenazi,” he is working as a part-time clown in rural Nebraska, USA, providing entertainment at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs (of which there are understandably few), grade school graduations, children's birthday parties, and so forth. He lives on the outskirts of a two-stoplight town in a modest apartment with a hot plate and toaster oven in place of a kitchen, and is best known by his neighbors, most of whom are migrants seasonally employed at one or more of the region's numerous hog farms, for keeping to himself, with the exception of those evenings when, having yet again run out of salsa, he makes his way down the hallway knocking on doors until he encounters someone willing to lend him a jar.

By all indications, the arrangement is a satisfactory one for Mogilevich, at least for the time being, and it may well have continued that way indefinitely had he not been recognized at a certain late summer birthday party by one Adalynn Peck, daughter of Jerry Peck of Peck Feed Service & Supply, who by pure chance happened to have been studying savage killers of the post-Soviet era as a school project. The moment Adalynn, pointing an accusatory finger in Mogilevich's direction, spoke his name aloud (we know not which of the three), the theretofore cheerful clown, as though transformed, drew various guns – hidden in the waistband of his balloon pants, underneath his pointy hat, and tucked into his flamboyant neck ruffle – and began firing with the marksmanship for which he was so feared. Fortunately, being that he had come to the party in his capacity as a clown, all the guns in question were squirt guns filled with water; unfortunately, being that he was nevertheless still a gangster, criminal, murderer-for-hire, and international fugitive, the water had been laced with highly concentrated quicklime, as a result of which all of the humans in attendance as well as one apparently stray pig were quickly disintegrated.

Special agents dispatched by Interpol managed to track Mogilevich's oversized footprints for several days across vast, grassy plains, but somewhere near the village of Little Big Canyon, a sparsely populated Mennonite outpost seventy-three miles from the Kansas state line, the trail went dry.

Downtown Diner

Mitchell Toews

Sunday with Evan

It had been a rye-and-coke Saturday night. What was originally billed as an exam study session ended up as a poker game followed by a tossing sleep on the couch in Dwight, Steen, and Nate's mousey apartment.

I wake up in an unkind fog. My friends, their pockets rippling with my folding money, leave a smiley-face note on the refrigerator: Evan, lock the door. See you in class Monday.

I guzzle orange juice from the jug, leaving only a bit of backwash. Before going, I wet a fingertip and draw a liquid frowney-face on the countertop with Minute Maid ink.

There's a diner just a block down Osborne and bleary-eyed, I go in to buy a pack of smokes. Volleyball practice tonight. I should really quit smoking, while I still can, as Mom always warns me.

The dingy bouquet that early morning is especially uninviting: cigarette butts, stale coffee, and the petroleum reek of oily water that seeps brown from the bristled mat at the door. A horizontal strata of smoke floats in the still air. My quarters clink in a steady stream as I slot in the handful required by the vending machine. When I reach down to pull the handle for my choice of cigarettes, I discover that I have fed the coins—the last of my money—into an adjacent jukebox. The cigarette machine stands beside me at disinterested attention.

"I can't get no..." the jukebox wails, as if to mock me. "No, no, no!"

The counterman is the only other occupant of the joint. He's a doleful biker-type who watches with impassive detachment from behind the counter. He racks his shoulders and shakes his head. Blood-mapped eyes are like a basset hound's, but deep set with something more to them, sadness or longing. Or weed. He folds his arms on his chest and I look, even though I don't want to. Big arms, his t-shirt stretched tight. The bunched biceps impress me in spite of my feigned indifference. He's graying and shopworn, but still looks like the kind of guy who could pick up one end of a piano and then set it down and play a little Debussy. I should hit the weight room, I'm thinking, as I imagine my pretty girlfriend, Nina, and the way other guys look at her and then at me.

New Fools Are Here To Take Your Place

He approaches and blows a thick stream of smoke from his freshly lit Export 'A' cigarette. Virginia tobacco. Filter tipped.

I lick my lips, eying the package. He looks away then back again with those Rembrandt eyes.

"You sure like music," he says, a phlegmy baritone, hung with sarcasm.

"Yeah, sure do. Actually, I wanted smokes. Wrong machine..."

"I featured that. Can't help you, kid." He smirks, then chuckles. Those red-rimmed eyes suggest that his Saturday night may have been as abrasive as mine. Maybe more. I enter a push-button song selection. "Thunk... Thunk." Yes, L7. That'll be perfect, I think to myself as I thumb the Select-O-Matic keyboard, again and again.

Duped by a vending machine! It's like that time I spilled the collection plate at church, quarters rolling in all directions on the hardwood floor, then spinning to a noisy halt. All eyes on the dumb kid.

Ignoring me as I stand there swallowing bile and plunking white plastic buttons, the counterman laughs—his face gradually turning as red as mine. After a minute he grabs the juke box to steady himself and coughs out the last of his fit, bent over, tears coursing.

Exiting beneath the jingle-jangle of the door bell, I toss an awkward line over my shoulder as I go, wishing immediately I hadn't, "My loss will be your gain..."

Outside, I round the corner and peer in through the glass. There he is, drying wet eyes with the edge of his apron. My fourteen quarters—mine no more—rest safe and warm in the jukebox like beaver kits in a mud lodge. I pause at the window, straining to hear L7 before I begin the trudge home, my boot heels squelching on the snow-packed sidewalk.

It's not long before I think about the biker dude back in the lonely diner, the jukebox in refrain. Exhaling hard, white vapour wreaths my head. I consider this and that, what ifs and how else, and allow myself, despite it all, a brief frozen smile. At least I didn't take it lying down. I should have stuck around, but, I have to get home.

Monday with Gunter

It's a busy Monday morning in the diner and I have to hustle to keep up. My cough is worse than most days—like there's barbed wire in there. My throat is

hot to the touch. Gotta quit smoking, but somehow, I never do.

I hum the song. How could I not after hearing it twenty times yesterday? Guess I coulda flipped the breaker... but it got busy right after that kid left.

Customers today come in to stoke for the workday ahead, ordering platters of eggs, hash browns, bacon and griddle cakes. My God, the scrambled eggs I serve are made with a powdered mix, plus water, and the gummy black residue scraped from the griddle. Disgusting! That's not an egg, man, that's an abomination.

Powdered eggs—ugh. I remember working construction, pouring concrete for the Werner Hatchery down in Grunthal. A long pipe fed the big drum in the corner, collecting blood spotted yolks, deformities, rotted chicks with eyes like black sequins. All day long, plop-plop-plop.

“For powdered eggs,” the owner said, pleased with himself. He tapped the barrel with a red knuckle. “I get a hundred bucks for one of these drums!” The rotten stench bore its way into my nasal cavity until it was all I could smell for days after. I can smell it still.

“What do you recommend?” a college age blonde-haired woman, a girl really, asks me. Her question brings me out of my long-ago thoughts. She closes her menu below dark eyelashes. She and her friend have been in before. More than once.

“Sunny-side up,” I say. “I baste ‘em a little so they aren't so...” I pause not knowing another way to say amniotic and she jumps in before I can finish.

“No, just scramble them, please. That's not as gross as those runny yolks.”

“Same for me,” her friend says.

Plop-plop-plop, I think, then tuck the pencil back behind my ear and smile. “Hokay then.” I push a strand of grey-black hair away from my face and check in the mirror. While I'm looking, I see the young blonde checking out my ass. Hello... I take pride—still got a decent build. Reminds me of my stepdad before he started getting old. I'm older than him now, older than he ever got. I could always outdo him in the weight room, though.

“You some kind of biker, or what?” the dark-haired one asks. They giggle then both look quickly at me, eyes flicking down to my forearms, back up to my broken nose.

Take a picture, it lasts longer. I wear a Harley-Davidson shirt under my apron to perpetuate the myth, so the question doesn't surprise me. In fact, it's what I'm aiming for.

“Nah, not even close,” I say. “But that's what all you country girls think, just because of the artwork on my arms and what not.”

“What were you?” the blonde one asks.

“Rock star, back in the good ol' days.”

“Really? No way. Come on... what?”

“You won't believe me.”

“Sure we will,” Blondie says, twisting back and forth from the hips on her counter stool.

“I was a University prof. Best job there is—end of story. Good money, surrounded by bright people, interesting women,” I pause and smile, forcing my dimples into deep creases. “Plus, shit, I only worked about four months a year, just a few hours a day,” I tell them. I can see the light register on their guileless faces, Wow! A prof...

“My profs don't have it easy—they seem to work like mad!” the blonde says, her lighter in hand, searching in the dark of her purse. I pull my smokes out of my apron front and offer her one.

“Thanks. Oh, but these are strong! You weren't really, were you? A professor? You're not the type! And also, we're not from the country.” She jumps from topic to topic, a bit nervous.

I leave to fill their order, to dribble chicken embryo gruel onto the spitting-hot griddle. Scrambling is the kindest thing that could happen to that catarrhic sludge. I fill coffee cups along the way, rearing the round glass pot up high and back down, making a showy thin stream, Manneken Pis style, as I like to call it. Anything for twenty-five cents; that being the largest tip I ever got. I'd close the place down if I ever got a buck.

“Me? A university professor? That'd be the day,” I call back to the girls with a laugh as I round the corner into the kitchen. Then I duck down and wink at the blonde through the pass-through window and watch as she takes a tiny puff and puts the smoke in the ashtray, pushing it back as if it might bite.

Damn rights I was a professor. Right up until someone like you said yes to my improper advances. The first time and the tenth time and often enough so that it became a habit. Another guilty addiction of mine. Then one of them confessed and accused and

then more of them and that ended that, tenure or not.

* * *

I sip from a Gulf Oil travel mug as I arrange the grill. My drink is charged with vodka throughout the day, topped off with splashes of OJ, as needed. For colour.

The frying surface is divided into six positions, three over three—like my daughter’s school volleyball team on the court. Hash browns heaped golden, top left. Bacon in the middle, ham and sausages top right. Onions bottom left, pancakes poured bottom center and the sixth spot—the serving position—is for frying eggs. Enamel pot lids, oil, chopped chives in a bowl, powdered sugar for French toast and a picture of my daughter—Becky—are on a shelf. A face full of eyes, I think, staring at the old photo as the eggs cook. After a minute, I slide the breakfast orders onto waiting plates and think about when Becky left town.

Read somewhere that when we face conflict in a stressful situation we go on auto-pilot... revert to the coping mechanisms we learned as a child. Somewhere around nine years old, the article claimed. Wonder if that’s true? Wonder how bad the stress has to be? If it can be the kind of stress that builds up over time until, like a stack of bricks, it eventually topples?

“So where, not in the country, you two from?” I say, settling onto my perch atop a stack of Pepsi crates on my side of the counter. They tuck into their eggs like a couple of lumberjacks. Damn. Look at them go. Is there any physical state more perfect than youth?

“Transcona, and North End,” the blonde girl replies around a cheekful of hash browns, indicating herself and her partner. “I’m Nina...” she paused to chew while pointing with her fork at her friend.

“And Pinta?” I offer, filling the silence.

She blushes, swallows and makes a “ha-ha” face and then retracts her fork. “Her name’s Adele, Mr. Professor in a Harley t-shirt.”

“Gunter,” I say, spreading my hand on my chest and giving those fucking dimples of mine a good hard tweak.

I smoke and sip my vodka. The breakfast crowd is waning fast and I hear the girls argue quietly about going to class or skipping. Adele, aka Pinta, slaps money on the counter and leaves, hoisting her heavy purse over her shoulder. She’s not pleased.

Rare. College girls never tip. North Enders never tip. Today is a double negative and that makes a positive. I’m not unhappy to see her go. Three’s a crowd.

Nina wads a gum wrapper in her hand and pushes it into her jacket pocket. She taps her coffee mug with a pointed fingernail, making the thick glass chime. I pour her refill and spin a creamer cup on the counter like a top. She pushes her empty plate towards me and bops her head to the jukebox.

“My boyfriend was in here,” she says with a flip of her hair. Fingers linger, feeling the soft strands like you would a fine fabric.

“Wait! You old enough to date?” I’m feeling the guilty rhythm; how things begin.

She laughs. “Of course, Professor Gunter... I’ve reached the age of consent,” she says with a sly college-girl smile, one she has practiced in the mirror. The words hint and her eyes betray more, roving again. She could have said the next thing, the shameless, tingling thing. “Want me to prove it?” or something like that; some other coquetry. She didn’t though, but I was sure she hadn’t finished with me yet.

She changes the subject. “Yeah, so it’s funny, eh? Maybe you remember? He—my boyfriend—he came in here to buy smokes yesterday and put his quarters in the wrong machine and so he shoved, like, twenty-some songs worth of coins in the jukebox...” She laughs again, her voice so clear, like one I knew long ago—soprano notes lilting, just so.

That was her boyfriend? I think, drawing myself up and sticking out my chest. That pup...

“Sounds like he needs a babysitter.”

Nina hoods her eyelids for a second, then tilts her chin up to stare right at me. “I’m older than him,” she says, as if stating evidence in a trial. She casts her eyes—heavy with mascara—down again. “His name’s Evan. He’s always pulling stunts like that, eh... he’s such a kid.”

The last customer slides off his stool and gives me a nod as he leaves. I shove his dirty dishes into the bin. Nina sits, her eyes on me. I’m pretty sure about where things are going.

I pick up her plate and wipe the countertop with a hard circular motion, whipping the rag over the edge with a final scoop. “Your boyfriend, he played some old song twenty times. Then he left, making a wisecrack on his way out.” I smile at her and she returns it, looking me smack in the face, no blinking,

no turning away. Then out of nowhere, I say it...
“Hey, Nina,” hating myself just like I always do,
“seeing as you’re not in a rush—”

“Yeah?” she says, sitting up straight, like a slack sail
picking up a fresh gust. Her back arches and her
head turns. A little too quickly.

Oh, I know you and I know me and I know this, the
voice in my head like a dull ache.

“Think I’ll close the place early today, Nina. Want a
vodka?” That’s what I could say and from past
experience I knew I had a reasonable chance of
success. I was sure she was waiting for something
like that and it’s why she had hung around. But the
thing is, I knew what it was really all about for her.
Knew that I was the Oliver Mellors to her Lady
Chatterley, dredging up a book I used to teach to
first years. Now I was like Mellors, but older. Rough
hands, forbidden, from a class beneath her station. I
represented a place she challenged herself to go, a
path to womanhood, in a way? A test and a thrill
and a self-dare. The chance to make a bad choice
and see how it feels.

And me? I was accustomed to making bad choices.
Plus, if I’m honest, I wanted my macho revenge on
that whelp boyfriend of hers and his jukebox stunt.
Who says shitty choices can’t be pleasurable?

A bus lumbers by on Osborne, brakes squalling. The
wheels send a wash of brown slush from the gutter
onto the trampled snowy sidewalk. I see a young guy
looking at me from inside the bus. I see my reflection
in the bus window, an aging man in a grease-stained
apron beside a lovely young woman. She’s about the
same age as my daughter, the one I’ve not seen in
six birthdays and whom I might not even recognize
anymore.

It’s right then I’m sick of the whole damn thing. Me
stalking a young girl and letting her think she was
stalking me. Plotting revenge on a teenage boy I
don’t even know. Besides, it was really funny, what
happened to the kid and how he managed it. Sweet
as hell. Him with his big brave kid’s voice, standing
there in the doorway like Don Quixote. Ha! I liked
him a lot in that second; liked how he went from
foolish to wise and skipped all the stuff in-between.
And right now, remembering the scene, I like him all
over again.

“You know what?” I say to her and go to the sign in
the window, flip it to Closed. I pull the door open.
“You may as well go, I’m gonna give this place a good
scrub-down. It needs it.” She looks confused, then
opens her wallet. “Forget it, I say. On the house—I
enjoyed our chat.”

She walks towards the open door quickly, without
looking at me. I swing it partly closed before she gets
there. “Oh, and one more thing. Don’t order
scrambled eggs in a diner like this. They’re
reconstituted, eh? Not good for you. Made of the
most awful things.”

She leaves without a word. I watch her go as I lock
up.

“My loss will be your gain...”

Cherry's Dog

Craig Rodgers

The mountain is burning down. Tufts of orange hell bloom in the sky. Clouds of ash lit from below by this elemental wrath.

Sometimes they run the sirens. Always they run the lights. Cops, fire, others. Up the mountain. Down. At night their sudden passing brings a moment's break to the otherwise constant dark in the shadow of that doom. Each house along the road sits in that darkness, this one, the next, the next. All but Cherry's, every window lit even as she's been gone for some days now. A generator chugs and hums.

The caretaker stands on his balcony, listening to the generator and the fire and the night. The railing is dusted with soot. His boots leave prints on the deck. He sips coffee and waits for a morning still far off. He looks out at that spreading horror. He sips. When the old dog comes out three doors over he turns, he watches.

Hind legs drag, this ancient thing. It stands in the throw of light from an open garage at its back, turning its head left and right and left again. The caretaker sips his coffee. After some minutes pass by the old dog makes its slow way back the way it came.

In time the sun comes again. The mountain goes on burning.

* * *

The old dog barks just once. The caretaker comes out to see. That withered castaway squats at the driveway's edge, face turning about at the unmoving world beyond.

It does not stir at the caretaker's approach. It tenses and it waits and when he comes near it breathes him in. Its old body loosens.

"Come on."

He moves up the dirt drive into the open garage. Bins are left gaping where items were taken in the panicked retreat. A bare bulb shines. He touches the inner door's knob and gives it a shake but the bolt holds it closed.

A tube runs from a contraption on a shelf. Metal box attached to plastic silo. Where tube meets floor sits a pedal and a bowl. The caretaker presses the pedal with a foot and something in the box whirs and coughs and quiets again. He lifts a rubber lid at the silo's top but there is nothing inside. Cabinets and drawers are pulled open to show each empty until one is not and in this is canned food that he dumps in the bowl.

The caretaker takes a battered lawn chair from the garage and unfolds it. He drags it and sits in the driveway in the spill of garage light. The noise of the dog's eating is sloppy and lewd.

* * *

Comes a muffled bark, and another, and another. The caretaker rolls over and he lets bare feet touch the floor. He breathes in and he pushes fists into his eyes. The line of the maelstrom's coming is there up the mountain but everywhere else the night is ink black.

He stands and sucks in air. Old pains groan. He takes four steps and he is out on the balcony, he is standing in the night.

The bark is still there, softened by walls. The place where the garage light before fell is now dipped in the same darkness as the rest of the world. He breathes in again and tastes ash. He turns back to the bedroom.

Shoes are pulled on untied and he is moving downstairs, feet thumping through rooms; carpet, tile, the bare wood of the veranda. Up gravel driveway, gravel road. He stops at the end of Cherry's driveway. The maw of the garage is there, it is open and waiting, a darker hole in the cloth of an ill defined likeness. He walks on up the drive.

Hands brush and search for where the light switch should be but he misses it, he fumbles about, touching wall. He speaks in vague curses to no one. He feels the shock of impact to the side of his skull but to his mind this violence comes in quiet. He falls. Someone is speaking and there is a shuffling of feet and another voice speaks but the words are far away. The concrete is cool in the night heat.

The voices are gone. The caretaker rises. He breathes in the void. In some other world a dog is barking. The caretaker makes his way to the back wall and the door there. It opens with ease now and he pushes his way into the house proper. Cool air

escapes in a sigh. His hands touch new walls until he finds a switch and then he is in light and he is in a foyer and the barking is closer. He rounds a corner and passes a hall and he says hello and the dog goes on barking. He opens a door and the dog is there. It turns milk eyes his way and stares unseeing but he puts out a hand and the dog sniffs the air, it licks its own nose and it licks the caretaker's fingers. When he turns back the way he came the dog follows, past the hall, through the foyer. It follows to the spot just beyond the garage where it stops and sits on its sunken haunches and turns its head about, sniffing at the air as the caretaker makes his way back home.

He pulls open a kitchen drawer and then another and he takes from the gathered forgotten baubles there a flashlight which he clicks on and off and on again. He crosses the room to a hall and then a bathroom and looking into the mirror he turns his face one way and then the other. There is no blood but the ache there is dull and deep. He touches the side of his face and lets out a moaned word. He touches it again.

In the hall he pulls open another door and behind this is a closet with shelves of old blankets and miscellany sorted and stacked. He opens a box and then another and here he finds a case of light bulbs of which he takes one. He holds it in his hand, he stands. A moment passes by. He pulls open another box and stares down at what is there. This box he leaves open and as he leaves the closet he does not shut the door.

The dog has not moved. It sniffs at the air as the caretaker moves past and stays sitting on its ruined haunches. The glow of the fire is a silhouette of ruin in the distance but its glow illuminates nothing and only when the caretaker removes the old bulb and twists in the new does light return to this place.

* * *

There below the snake of burning sky is the pale blue floor of morning's soon coming. The caretaker puts mug to lips and drinks. He sets the mug down on the railing next to a revolver belonging to some other man in some other life.

From among the trees there comes a shadow. It moves into the clearing and toward the house, a shape felt more than seen. As this form nears the house it grows features, detail; a long coat, a hat. It stops and leans and turns a valve and under a tap's

spill of water it splays hands and rubs them together and then lets the faucet wash over long fingers to pool below. The caretaker slides the gun into his pocket.

He is holding his mug at his chest as he steps onto the veranda. The stranger is there holding a cigarette that he puts to his mouth and breathes in and when he speaks a cloud of soft gray spreads around his form.

"Do you have any more of that coffee?"

The caretaker watches the stranger. He says yes, he says he does have more coffee. He tells the man it's been sitting awhile but you're welcome to a cup. The stranger follows him in.

The kitchen is lit but palely by an electric lamp encircled by its cast of light and, just beyond, shadows made deeper by its being there. The caretaker takes up a pot set on a campground hot plate and pours a mug full of oily drink. No steam rises. The stranger takes the mug and sips and then drinks deep. He touches a coatsleeve to his mouth and presses it there and he takes a pull from the cigarette and he says to the caretaker thank you. There is a moment of nothing as seconds go by. Then.

"Well. You from up the mountain?"

"Oh I'm just visiting."

"Bad time for that."

The stranger nods. He sets his mug on the stove and puts his cigarette in his mouth and goes about the work of unbuttoning his long coat. Thick smoke stink wafts as he pulls those sheets of wool from his form, exposing the finery underneath, a suit cut and tailored in a darkest blue with checks of color impossible to discern, bedecked in this pattern of the dandies of old. He folds the coat over with delicate care and lays it across the back of a chair, which he drags and turns and lowers himself onto, crossing one leg over the other and taking the hat from his head to balance it atop that knee, uncovering hair parted with a severeness to one side. These tasks done, he takes up the mug in one hand and the cigarette in the other and looks to the caretaker, who has observed this ritual in silence.

"Just you?"

"What?"

The stranger gestures at the room surrounding and the world beyond.

"Everyone's been evacuated," says the caretaker.

“Not everyone.”

The caretaker says nothing. The stranger points with the cigarette hand.

“You’re still here.”

“I have to watch this place.”

And

“They might come back.”

The stranger studies the caretaker. In the poor fall of lamplight his sockets are deep wells.

“If the fires come, do you have a choice to stay or leave?”

“What does that mean?”

Seconds sit in silence.

“What will you do when the fire gets here?”

“It’s still miles off.”

“That is an answer but not to what you’ve been asked.”

“I’ll have to see when the time comes.”

The stranger smokes and he stares. He drops the nub of cigarette in the cup.

“What if I say to you that the time has come?”

“I don’t have an answer for that.”

“That is an answer for that.”

“Well. There’s a dog. The houses. I have to keep an eye on everything.”

“So it’s a vigil.”

“Sure. If you wanna call it that.”

“I am calling it that.”

The caretaker says nothing.

“You can come with me, but you have to make the choice.”

“Come with you?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know you.”

The stranger lifts the hat from his knee and uncrosses and recrosses legs, placing the hat again at the cross. His breathing is loud in the quiet. There is no other sound. Then.

“You will be leaving something behind either way. This is your chance to make a choice.”

“Leaving behind what?”

“What everyone does. A note, a picture, something. Something for someone to find after.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Something left. There’s a cup, there’s a pan, there’s a floor, there’s a frame. Clay tablets baked in burning cities of antiquity. What are you leaving?”

“I’m not leaving anything.”

“That’s honest. Do you want to come with me?”

“Where? Where will I go with you?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does. If you want me to go with you it does.”

“I am certain it does not.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything.”

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to sit.”

“What?”

“The mountain is on fire. I wanted to sit.”

The caretaker sits saying nothing. The stranger reaches into a pocket and brings out a deep blue cigarette pack. He shakes one loose and lights it with a lighter pulled from somewhere. Gray blooms with each breath. He sits. There is quiet. In the distance a snaking fire moves along. The stranger smokes his cigarette.

“Are you not going to say anything?” says the caretaker.

“I’m waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

The stranger inhales smoke. He breathes pale clouds into the room.

Then.

“All right, then. You’ve had your sit. You need to go.”

The stranger smiles. Three words seep out.

“There you go.”

He takes one last pull from the cigarette and drops the nub in the cup with the other. He takes up his hat and pushes back his chair. He stands unmoving and the caretaker stands too and a moment passes as if something is coming or has only just gone.

Then the stranger is setting his hat on his head and holding his coat and he is moving through the room and out and the caretaker is following and speaking in half formed thoughts of regret or fear and then the stranger is off the veranda and up the drive as the caretaker watches what remains of the night swallows the stranger away.

Seconds go by. Then the caretaker too is stepping off the veranda and over the crunch of gravel and then the dirt of road and he is turning in at Cherry's drive, he is pulling the gun from the pocket where it has waited.

The dog sits under the lighted bulb. It hears the approach of steps or it smells the man they belong to. It tries to stand but its legs tremble and fail. It turns blind eyes to the world around. The room is silent save for the hum of the mountain. The fire crawls. The man turns out the light.

Full

Colin Gee

There were two little kids sitting, just crouched by the side of the road. Lindsey drew the car right past them and rolled it to a stop.

He said, No thank you darling, I would like to give YOU the surprise of your life, and then he would take out his Bible and begin to preach as he does, with his tongue just a little bit out of his mouth, hand in his britches front pocket.

But the expression on the kids' faces was cruel and unflinching and all his Bible talk did nothing for them. Lindsey rolled a cigarette and hung it from her sneering face.

He said, And they shall smolder in sulfur, and it was a generation yet in those fields, the seraphim yipping in ecstatic union.

Holding a flaring match to her tobacco, she rolled the key deli deliberately in the ignition, let the engine turn over and catch, and slowly, slowly rolled off across the crunching gravel.

A paradigm of the animals.

Let the Slick End Slide, Let the Rough End Drag

Dan Townsend

I was happy for seven months. It started one day cutting trees on Brewer's farm. I did a good job and Brewer told some others in town. In two weeks, I had enough work to take on Percy for a partner. He had an F-150. Looking back, I needed the truck more than Percy.

A month passed and people we didn't know and people Brewer didn't know called asking me to cut trees. At this point I acquired proper tree cutting supplies.

Not long after that, we started calling it a business, and maybe our happiness would've stretched if we had gotten around to the paperwork. I don't know.

Instead, we advertised with oops paint on the back window of the F-150. We brushed the words on, stacked two by two with our phone number underneath.

It said: Cut Trees. Real Cheap. Local Boys.

We planned to call our company, Local Boys, LLC.

Oops paint is the stuff they mix up at the hardware store that comes out wrong. Or sometimes the customer will change their mind. Percy told me about it. They sell it for nothing. Sometimes they'll give it away if the color is especially bad.

By month three, my girlfriend was officially Crystal Beard. I spent all three years of my high school catching glimpses of Crystal's cameltoe in the hallway, the lunchroom, wherever I could. Now on mornings when I woke up smelling the shampoo in Crystal's hair beside me, I'd hop in Percy's truck already singing along with The Steve Miller Band Greatest Hits 1974-78 which was stuck in the tape deck and the only thing we listened to.

On Fridays after work me and Crystal, Percy and his girl Amber or Brittany or Starr, would hang all night at my place drinking bottles of beer and snorting drugs Percy bought off a guy he met at Buffalo Wild Wings. We'd stay up talking shit, listening to my daddy's old country records, coming to our senses very momentarily whenever the needle went skipping.

Those nights we'd make plans for Local Boys, LLC. I wanted to offer landscaping services, cut grass, prune crepe myrtles. Percy had marketing

strategies. His cousin made a website once. He might help us. We drew logos in Sharpie on the insides of Papa John's boxes. And when we ran out of ideas like always, we'd chuck empties at the critters moving in the trees behind my place, chasing them off like the ghosts of bad things trying to happen to us.

All I ever knew of my daddy was his taste in women and country music from a very, very specific time in his life.

One night, I said, "Nothing can beat a man who sets his mind to a goal."

Percy said, "Let the slick end slide and let the rough end drag."

I didn't have a clue what he meant when he said that, but he said it all the time. He said it for good news and said it when things went left. Each time he said it, it meant something different, and each time he said it, it seemed like the only thing worth saying.

Word spread about us. By springtime we had more work than we could handle. Percy bought new tires for the F-150. We were booked two weeks out and going nonstop from dawn till dark.

This was month five into month six, the best month of my life.

I had a threesome with Amber and Crystal when Amber found out Percy had been with Starr and Brittany the whole time he had been with her, and she wanted to get back at him. For my birthday Crystal got me professional business cards with my name in red raised letters beneath one of the best of the pizza box logos. When Steve Miller sang about speaking about the pompitus of love, I was sure I knew what he meant, so I bought a ring for Crystal at a store in the mall.

The night I proposed we ate chocolate ice cream on the kitchen floor while the dogs watched.

Then in the middle of month six, Percy fell from a branch, his fall broken by his eyebrows. His back snapped in two places. But he can walk. He cries a lot without knowing why and sometimes he starts fights with strangers in parking lots. Don't ask him to remember anything.

After the accident, Percy let me take the F-150 for work. He told me I had to keep going. I had to let the slick end slide. I had to let the rough end drag. I took pills bought at Buffalo Wild Wings that I was told would help. But I couldn't keep up. On a rainy morning, I spent half an hour trying to pry Steve Miller out of the tape deck with a screwdriver. When

Crystal said we were going to have a baby, each hair on my body was yanked by tiny invisible fists. I heard the voice of my daddy who I never met warn me how time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin' into the future.

I know the limb Percy fell from was nine feet three inches high, which is not that high compared to some of the trees we cut. I know it's nine-foot-three because sometime after I lost count of the unhappy months, sometime after Crystal went to stay at the Lovelady Center and the social worker took Brayden, I went to that jobsite in the middle of the night, addicted and sad. I strapped on my spikes and shimmied up the tree that doomed us. I stretched my tape measure to the topsoil. Nine-foot-three, that's not very high, but high enough to see things.

The ops paint on the F-150 glowed in the moonlight, matching the eyes of critters in the brush. In the house, a light was on behind a steamed window. But mostly what I saw were trees. Lobloilies and hackberries with branches reaching, every leaf and pinecone following the orders of desperation vibrating in the roots.

If I could, I'd cut them all. I'd take them down one by one until I came around to another with the magic of the first at Brewer's place. If I had to, I'd cut until none were left.

Paper Dolls

C.W. Blackwell

The roar of hail on the pump canopy startles her, reminds her of an earthquake or a jet plane taking off. She watches the gutters turn white on Ocean Street, late-night cars slowing with wipers at full tilt, ice building on the windshield cowls. Hailstones blanket the gas station parking lot, but it all melts quickly. There's a neon ATM sign in the minimart window and it paints a red-orange sheen on her evening gown. Her makeup leaves black streaks along the curve of her jaw.

When the hail passes, an old man appears at the end of the lot. He's pushing a shopping cart filled with garbage bags and old cookware. The castors skirl and rattle over the uneven blacktop. When he spots the girl sitting under the minimart window, he gives a long, ponderous stare and rubs the back of his neck.

"I thought you was dead for a minute," he says.

She stands and straightens her dress.

"Not dead," she says. "Just waiting."

"I guess that could be said for us all," he jokes.

She tries to smile. "I guess."

"The station don't open till five." He looks skyward as if he can somehow tell the hour in the gray night clouds. "You got a few hours yet."

"I know someone who works here." She gestures with her phone and steps into the open. "I just need to charge up so I can call somebody for a ride."

"There's an outlet behind the donut shop." He points his chin toward the building next door, yellow booths in the dark windows. She can see empty donut cases and coffee pots waiting to be filled. A 'HELP WANTED' sign hangs on the glass door. "They block the outlet with the dumpster, but it don't take much to get to it."

He digs through the cart and opens one of the garbage bags. Inside is a neatly folded wool blanket. She begins to weep, so he sets it on the ground and backs away slowly. He doesn't know if she's crying because of something he did, or just crying.

"It's clean," he says, reassuringly. "Just used it once or twice."

* * *

She shoulders the dumpster until it drifts away from the building. Her handbag is a menagerie of small items, and it takes a while to find the charging cable. When the phone powers up and the cell service connects, she finds no texts or voicemails. No DMs.

She hammers out a message.

Why didn't you come back for me?

The words lay in the text field with the cursor blinking, but she doesn't send it. She doesn't want him to know she had nowhere else to go—that his place was already a last resort. But that's not all. She doesn't want him to know she's cut too many classes to graduate, and while everyone else was taking the SATs, she was taking an open palm from her gin-soaked mother.

She swipes through the posts about the winter ball.

The corsages and boutonnieres, the motel room keg parties.

All she wants is to be like them.

The wool blanket cocoons her shoulders, smells vaguely of dust and campfire smoke. She scrolls until her phone gets hot. The heat feels good in her hands. She cinches tight beneath a warm exhaust duct and cradles the phone to her chest.

* * *

She wakes to a pair of crows grousing atop the dumpster. They tilt their soot-black heads and search for food scraps. The sky is a dim gray, sea fog heavy in the crowns of the redwood trees. She can smell the bay, it's musky brine. There's an old Ford Econoline in the corner of the lot and she tilts the van's side mirrors and cleans her face with towelettes from her handbag. She pulls her hair into a ponytail and puts the mirror back how she found it.

A five-gallon bucket filled with concrete and cigarette butts sits in front of the donut shop, propping open the front door. Inside, there's a line about six or seven customers deep. Some stand with their arms folded, while others paw their phones with inside-out stares like they're somewhere else. When she reaches the register, an older woman with short, curly hair looks at her expectantly. She wears a grease-stained apron and a name tag that says GINNY.

"Just a cup of coffee," says the girl. "And a key to the restroom."

"The restroom's for employees only," says Ginny. She flicks her eyes at the line of customers, now trailing out the door. "Two dollars for the coffee."

"I was hoping to fill out an application. I saw the sign on the door."

The woman looks her up and down.

"How old?"

"I'm eighteen."

"Drugs?"

"No ma'am."

"Why you all dressed up?"

"This old thing?" says the girl.

The young man standing behind her groans.

"Come around back," she says, nodding toward the counter partition. "Wash your hands. There's an apron hanging by the sink. Bag and box the orders and I'll ring them up."

The girl washes her hands and slips the apron over her head. There's a name tag pinned into the fabric that says CYNDI. She likes how the "Y" and the "I" are switched around, like it's some kind of inside joke. She takes orders, bags and boxes them. Everyone wants donut holes, and they run out quickly. She brews enough fresh coffee to fill three large carafes.

At noon, Ginny gives her three twenties and tells her to come back tomorrow at five o'clock. The girl wanders out behind the building with a chocolate donut and a cup of coffee and plugs her phone into the outlet behind the dumpster. She thumbs through all of her apps and imagines her classmates writing their college essays, maybe worrying about leaving home for the first time. Instead, all the posts seem frivolous, like they have all the time in the world—like the universe will come to them, wait for them.

Ginny comes around the corner with an unlit cigarette in her hand. She stops when she sees the girl, raises the smoke to her lips, lights it. She leans against the building and lets the smoke out through her nose.

"What you up to, sweetheart?" says Ginny.

"Just waiting," says the girl.

"Waiting, huh?"

The girl tries not to cry.

"I got a friend that runs a shelter on Chestnut," says Ginny, puffing on her cigarette. "Bet I can get you a bed for a few days, maybe longer. Want a ride?"

The girl watches a metro bus turn onto Ocean Street, big tires hissing on the wet blacktop, silhouettes fixed in the windows like paper dolls. There's a man kicking a plastic laundry basket down the sidewalk, filled with junk. Barren maple trees up and down the block. It could hail again, cold as it is.

She clicks her phone to black, follows Ginny to the car.

"It's not far?" she asks.

"No, not far at all."

Dustbin

Clem Flowers

I saw that they sunk a bunch of New York subway cars to try to make a new coral reef &

my first thought was

a prayer

for the kids who threw their

graffiti up on the walls

that somehow

the salt water will

preserve the Krylon jewels &

future divers & submarines might see

the unspoiled beauty right

next to the biggest damn batch

of algae in all recorded history

I put away the paper after all the guys started giving me shit as they came back to the abandoned half of the factory the company called a "rest area"

we all just named it "The Hole"

talk turned quick to football & basketball & pussy & how the weather was turning & how I was just ready for the apocalypse to come along before the harvest starts so I don't have to worry about hay fever again

they laughed

talking out both sides of my mouth

just trying to

make everybody happy

wishing I was out

in the marble blossom ether

that used to hold all the promise in our dead nights

before the oil went rotten & the wages stayed
stagnant & the union had a whole wave of new blood

I peer out the window as the Harold & Colby argue
about whether Virginia should have gone for the
field goal when they played A&M last Saturday

Green green bliss, back-lit by the city haze, looks
like holy ground from the choke of the machine
fumes clotting the old, battered cement blocks of the
factory

I ran to the city last year

I ran from the green hills

then I realized these juniper bluffs was in my
marrow

endless walls of emerald now surround my days

the ghosts of all the dogs in my bones that still roam
those crocodile dunes are pushed back when Lindy
asks to bum a cigarette

I hand him one, and light up one for myself

I turn back to the window as a low ballad of some
broken hearted best out in the guts of our nowhere

blue dogs still howl when the skyline turns to flame

Parked Car

Tim Frank

The silver Prius was in flawless condition, waxed
and buffed - only marred by the clumps of mud
caked to its tires. It appeared in Shannon and
William's parking space the day Shannon discovered
she was pregnant. Although they didn't have a car of
their own to fill the space, it was their spot and they
wanted it back.

At the beginning of spring, when William left a note
on the car - the sun creating radiant prisms of light
among the parked cars - Shannon decided to keep
her pregnancy a secret from her husband.

William attached the note with masking tape and it
read, "Please remove this vehicle immediately. This
spot is very valuable and you do not want to provoke
me."

In early May, an unexpected heatwave settled on
the city like a veil, scorching the wide stretches of
grass circling the carpark. Children played hide and
seek behind the cars, squealing with uninhibited joy.
William watched from his first-floor window and
then flicked a burning cigarette onto the dried-out
turf below. He yelled at the kids, "Stay away from
that fucking car!"

One of the children, of around ten years old wearing
a green and black hooped T-shirt, gave William the
finger and spat on the Prius' windshield. Indignant,
William vacated his spot by the window and made
his way downstairs.

Minutes later, Shannon went to the window to check
on the car for the third time that day. In the car
park, Shannon saw her husband corner the
boisterous kid. The child couldn't stop laughing, but
was quickly silenced when William seized him by the
throat and forced his writhing body against the hood
of the car.

Shannon swallowed hard and took several short
intakes of breath. She stepped back from the
window-ledge and screwed up her eyes until she saw
blurred impressions.

Next thing she knew William had stormed through
the front door and bustled into the kitchen. He
opened the fridge and scanned the contents.

"William," Shannon said.

"Not right now, Shannon," William said, barely
holding in his rage.

“William.”

“Jesus, what is it?”

“I’m pregnant.”

* * *

That evening William didn’t speak a word to his wife, instead he took a pillow from the king size bed and placed it on the curb beside the car. The area was overgrown with weeds and littered with empty tobacco pouches. He sat by the Prius all through the night, watching, waiting. He hardly blinked. Around 1am he stretched his legs and walked a couple of laps around the car park. When he returned he was convinced the car had moved.

“What’s happening!?” William roared. “Who did this!?”

Lights in nearby flats flickered on and neighbours peered out of their net curtains in a sleepy haze.

Everyone stared, no one answered.

“Fuck you all!” William yelled, and returned to his flat, grumbling to himself, full of paranoid thoughts.

“We need to talk,” Shannon said, standing on the threshold of the bathroom as William splashed cold water on his face.

“Another time, Shannon. I need to get my head straight.”

“We need help, William, you must see that.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I just want things to be like they were before. We used to be a team. And you used to be so kind before...”

“Before what? Before. What?”

William’s face twisted into a furious expression and he took two deliberate steps towards his wife. He grabbed her by both arms, forced her into the bedroom and flung her on the mattress, her head cracking against the headboard.

William muttered, “I’m going out.”

Shannon ran her fingers through her hair, checking for blood. “Ow,” she sobbed, “ow.”

Shannon wept so hard her heart almost burst out of her chest, and then when she finally composed herself, she felt febrile and unclean.

She couldn’t explain why, but she felt the need to inspect the Prius one more time, so she trotted down

the dank staircase to the carpark. The car was still there, still immaculate, seemingly frozen in time. William was nowhere to be seen.

She told herself something would happen tonight. It had to. So, she took a seat and waited hour upon hour, but to no avail. There wasn’t even a rustling in the trees.

Despite perching on an uneven paving stone, Shannon eventually fell into a dreamless sleep. When she surfaced from her heavy slumber, she felt sudden stabbing pains peppering her stomach. She groaned and lay flat on her back, afraid to touch her inflamed midriff. Then clotted blood gurgled down her inner thigh, splattering onto her shoes and merging with fragments of broken glass on the tarmac.

She didn’t call for help, didn’t want it from William or even a friendly stranger. Then something amazed her. The car was gone. There was only tyre marks and blood staining the empty parking spot.

She couldn’t believe it had finally disappeared. It was almost shocking. She wondered who was driving it now – what they looked like, if they were rich or poor. Then she tried to imagine where they could be travelling to - maybe down highways towards rocky coastlines or along boulevards slicked with rain. Maybe it was just parked somewhere else nearby. She gasped at the thought.

She tried to guess where William could be too. Was he with another woman or just drinking himself into a stupor again? She really had no idea. The truth was, right now, she didn’t care. Then her mind became lost in waves of confusion and she yearned for the comforting presence of the car that had plagued her all summer.

Exterminating Angel

Mark Bickley

They're hard to see. But you can smell 'em. Yeah, they're here alright. This is their most favorite room in the entire hotel.

Smell that? It's like rotting raspberries wrapped in a stanky sheet. You can smell it, right? It's the odor of indecency. Thought I got 'em all last week. Or most. And no one comes better than me, Crispin Colvin, exterminator extraordinaire! Damn straight! Know what my motto is? "My extermination clears a path to your liberation." Your liberation, from fear and suffering and infection.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking why does that fool spray all that deadly chemical and not wear a mask? A mask? I don't need no friggin' mask. I ain't got nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Purity protects me. Purity of essence!

You doubt me? You think I've sniffed too many fumes and delude myself that spirit is superior to body? My body of work speaks for itself. And I'm here to protect all of you from the evil that goes by many names--- chintzes, mahogany flats, red coats, wall louse, crimson ramblers. Yes, I'm talkin' bed bugs. Those little demons are masters of deception. Anywhere you can slide a credit card a bed bug could fit. They can flatten themselves down to fit in any crack or crevice. Feeling itchy my friends?

I'm like a freakin' suicide bomber, willing to die for a cause or a reason in any season in order to flush away all of their bloodsucking trauma and filth. Filth, you say? Don't all the magazines and newspaper stories make a point of telling us that bed bugs aren't attracted to dirty, unclean, grimy places? It's true. They don't even inject any dangerous diseases in the warm succulent flesh they feast on. Your flesh. That's not their brand of torment. The filth I'm talking about is PERVERSION! A filthy perversion of body and soul! Your body and soul!

Do I hear snickering? Go ahead, laugh. Laugh and show your ignorance. There's a national epidemic of bed bugs in these United States of America and not because of physical filth. It's because of moral filth. Within the fabric of American life are the crevices where these gluttons skulk and hide, waiting for the opportunity to siphon your blood to fuel the most despicable acts of sexual depravity this side of a Tiger's wood!

New Fools Are Here To Take Your Place

You ever hear the label scientists put on bed bug mating rituals? They call it

TRAUMATIC COPULATION! That's right. And do you know why they call it traumatic? It's because the male ignores the female's genitalia. Rejects her pathway to creation. He refuses to gently place his sperm into a female opening. Oh no. If they did that it would mean the males would have to court the females and show them respect by trying to please or appease them. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but not in the wicked world of bed buggery!

A male bed bug's sex organ is a weapon greater than my own. It's a long sharp spear with a hypodermic hook attached at the end. The male pounces on the female, holds her firmly while she struggles, and then rapes her by stabbing his razor sharp hook over and over into her back, her stomach, any exposed area on her body. He stabs and squirts these huge doses of sperm directly into her mutilated flesh. If she's lucky enough that this mating wound doesn't develop a serious infection and kill her, then his seed swims to her ovaries. Every time he gores her flesh it leaves a scar.

I ask you, can a society that treats its females like this be less deserving of extinction? I am a warrior for righteousness.

Brace yourself, my friends. There are even more shocking perversions male bed bugs commit against all that is decent and true in nature. They indulge in bestiality. You heard right. Bestiality. Twenty percent of their sexual encounters are with foreign animals. The little hopheads will bang anything that even looks like a bed bug. These perverts have sex up to 200 times a day and they don't give a damn who it's with. These gangsta bugs spend their whole lives just stabbing and shooting, stabbing and shooting. They stab anything that moves with their pointed pricks and shoot a disgusting amount of splooge into whomever or whatever they gash and slash. If a male bed bug were human in size, he'd be shooting seven gallons of man milk with each ejaculation! It ain't human and it ain't decent. Killing them is a sacred privilege.

Domination! Abomination! Proliferation! Irritation! Aggravation! Defecation! Fornication! And Homo-gen-iz-ation of an entire generation of male miscreants!

Yes! Yes! Yes! These bloodsucking fiends engage in homosexuality more than any other depraved sexual activity. Fifty percent of their illicit intercourse are the rape of other males who have just sucked--your--blood. And when the sperm of the rapist enters the male, the jism searches for

ovaries. When none are found it mixes with the raped male's man gravy and is passed on in his next encounter with a female. Sick. Sick. Sick.

You wanna scratch? You feel them chewing on your tender skin? Where's the itch? The itch is in their lust for your blood. They cannot indulge their dirtbag dicks without feeding on your juicy red plasma. They must feed on and steal your lifeblood energy in order to satisfy their corrupt desires. It's the warmth of your bodies and the sweetness of your breath that draws them to your vibrant flesh.

I smell them!

I listen to them!

I fill my weapon with venom and wait... wait... wait... wait....

Snake Mountain Hotshots

John Yohe

Albuquerque airport. Four hotshot crews in eight buggies driving up to the Alaska Airlines departures area, getting out in unwashed nomex and dirty boots, with matching crew shirts and caps—unshaven guys chewing tobacco, and even the few women, like Cat, looking kind of scary amazon-like, though he thought of her more like a superhero from the comic books of his youth, Phoenix or Black Widow. Inside, they were Conspicuous Entities. In the airport bookstore, a man asked Danny and Cat, —Are you guys part of a SWAT team?

Danny smiled and said, —We're wildland firefighters.

The man nodded wisely. —Ah. Like those guys that jump out of planes?

Cat said, —Those are smokejumpers. We're hotshots.

Hotshots are elite twenty-person crews that travel all over the American west for the summer. Danny's crew, the Snake Mountain Hotshots, had left their station in Stony Creek, California over a month ago for a big fire north of Taos, where he and Cat had first kissed in fire camp one night. They had been hitting small fires, and doing lots of project work like trail maintenance and building fence, on the Santa Fe National Forest ever since, with one R&R after three weeks, where Danny and Cat had finally hooked up one night in her hotel room.

But Alaska was on fire! Many of the guys on the crew nervous-giddy. To Danny, and Cat, a fellow rookie, flying was no big deal, they'd both been to Europe, but some, like Otter and Injun Joe and Mountain Du, a Mung guy smaller than CK but maybe one of the older people on the crew, with a wife and kids, had never flown before, or at least not in a plane. Though the giddiness was also about Alaska. Some lower-48 firefighters never get there. Cat's squad boss, Ace, his eyes had been lit up ever since he found out, saying to Danny, —Singer, you'll love it the most. They'll just send us out by ourselves, no overhead, nobody telling us what to do.

—So we won't have to tuck in our shirts in Fire Camp?

—Don't get smart now. But yeah, you can run around naked for all I care.

When they finally got all eighty hotshots on board, before take-off, the pilot announced who they were,

and the whole plane gave them a round of applause. But after they were in the air, the flight attendants passed out plastic cups for the tobacco chewers to spit in, and sprayed aerosol scents for all the farting.

They landed in Anchorage late, school buses waiting, one to each crew, which took them to an Alaska Fire Service district office building for a special briefing, where they waited until one in the morning, when finally the FMO for the area came in. He was friendly, making a point about how grateful everyone was that they were there, but they were dead tired and not caring much, most having long ago given up on the idea that the federal government was grateful for anything anybody does.

Alaska had been having a bad season, with a big fire near Anchorage, threatening homes, so the AFS freaked out and 'ordered the world.' The crews perked up when he got to actual Alaska firefighting and black spruce and dog-hair moss growing on them. In firefighting, they talk about one hour, ten hour, and thousand hour fuels, the time for a piece of fuel to dry up and be burnable. The FMO called this moss twenty minute fuel, meaning twenty minutes after it rained the moss could burn. Cat, sitting next to Danny, shook her head. —Crazy man!

His briefing took about thirty minutes, and they went out to their buses to wait. And wait. They ended up sleeping there the rest of the night, some people on the floor, others lying on the red bags piled up in back. At seven in the morning they get their orders to go, not to the Anchorage fire, but to a different one down on the Kenai Peninsula. Paul, Danny's foreman, and an ex-smokejumper, grinned. —Goddamn, jumpers go years up here without getting to go to the Kenai Peninsula! We hit the jackpot!

Heading south along a coast highway, Danny was exhausted and wanted to sleep, but the view was just too incredible to sleep through: blue-ish gray ocean, low clouds coming over lush green islands to rocky shoreline. Snowy mountains rising from the water's edge, and clear wide rivers. He would not have been surprised to see a pod of frolicking orcas.

The fire burning on a native Reservation with houses nearby, which was why they were there, but most of the land, like most of the state, was forest, clear-cut in places, sometimes with huge slash piles. The buses just dropped Snake Mountain and the other three crews off next to a dirt road with a bunch of supplies, out in the middle of nowhere. In a light rain.

They set up their tents. The sawyers walked out into the woods to cut firewood and get huge white-man bonfires going, everyone opening MREs and brewing coffee over flames while rain misted on their heads. Since they wouldn't start work until the next day, Danny asked Ace if he could go off in the woods and explore a little. Ace, seeming happy just to be there, smoking one of his cigars, gave him a thumbs up. — Hey man, why not? It's Alaska, there are no rules.

And there weren't. They were on their own. No overhead. No camp. According to legend, Alaska smokejumpers, the most elite of all, even had cases of beer flown out to them, though nobody really dared hope that would happen to bunch of lowly hotshots.

Grey sky. Thick forest, unlike the pines of New Mexico or northern California. More like northern Michigan actually, where Danny was from. No tall trees, none higher than maybe twenty feet. Not impossible to explore, but too overgrown for a casual stroll. Ground wet, puddles everywhere. Mosquitoes not bad actually, hardly any, which Danny learned from Paul was a miracle: —If we'd gone north into the central part of the (huge) state, we would have been in danger of getting carried away by them!

Even with the rain clouds, the sky never got dark all night. The next 'day' (according to their watches) they finally got to work. Starting at the heel of the fire, bulldozers gouged huge muddy swaths along the edge and the hotshots come through with driptorches, burning out any green patches. The ground wet, muddy, permafrost only a foot below but, amazingly, the trees still burned. Because wind caused the flames to really spread, pushing through the dog-hair moss, the fire was relatively long and skinny, and the active part was still far ahead.

The three sawyers were the ones who got to burn. The rest of the crew stood in mud and watched the flames, "holding" the line. Danny was about thirty feet from Cat when Ace came along, calling them both over, grinning. He took out a lighter, walked up to a spruce, and put the small flame under some dogwood moss hanging down. Instantly, flames shot up into the branches, up the whole tree, engulfing it in fifty foot flames and smoke. Then, just as quickly, the flames died, with no spread to other trees at all. After that, many of the crew went around taking pictures of each other lighting off trees.

End of the day, boots caked with mud, nomex pants soaked, everyone clustered around fires holding up socks to dry, eating MREs and drinking coffee. Sky still the same light-grey. Danny was tired, and when

he checked his watch, was surprised that it was already eleven o'clock. Even in his tent, trying to sleep, his body still couldn't believe it was night.

The next 'morning' they kept burning. The air warmer and less humid, meaning going from seventy percent to sixty maybe, but enough for fire behavior to increase: The sections they lit ignited faster, burned hotter. Fortunately no wind.

They moved off the Reservation and onto Forest Service land and lost the dozers. The head of the fire had moved way beyond them, they were just working up the sides trying to stop the spread, clearing out the canopy trees along the edges, since nothing on the ground really burned. Which was a hell of a lot easier for the diggers: Paul thankfully had fought fires in Alaska before and knew digging any kind of line was a waste of time. Snake Mountain leap-frogged with Feather River, one of their sister crews from northern California, and their supe had them digging down to the permafrost. They looked miserable.

Late afternoon of the third day, Snake Mountain's section of line was, or had been, still burning, but a wind change sent a burning finger north out away from the main fire. Bob, the slightly overweight Snake Mountain supe, with a thick moustache, called back for the saw teams and a couple extra swampers. Cat and Danny volunteered, running up to a wall of burning spruce. The moss still lit up quick, though once the trees are on the ground they didn't burn as quickly. CK and Lucky Charms, their saw almost as big as them, went first, as usual, getting burning trees on the ground while Schmitt and Roo and their swampers came behind and cut them up.

Ace sent Cat and Danny to help Schmitt and Buckner, the two Chico frat boys. Buckner pulled the cut sections out of the way, they carried them into the black. Danny was surprised to be next to flames and heat again, right in their faces—so hot he actually had to turn away, his whole body covered in sweat.

Paul came back and told Schmitt to take down a tree CK had left. Cat and Danny backed off and stood by Paul, watching. Schmitt's pie-cut in front was fine, but something went wrong on the back-cut, too low and off to one side, causing the tree to fall backwards, right at them.

They ran. Danny looked back. The tree crashed behind Cat and Paul, branches flying over their heads.

When they stopped, Paul's face raged beet red. Danny thought he was going to rip into Schmitt, but CK and Roo called on the radio saying they'd just pinched off the rest of the finger. Paul told Cat and Danny to go back to the rest of the crew to mop up.

That night Bob gathered them around one of the fires for a little lecture: —I guess we had a little incident today, which I'm sure everyone involved learned from. Ace, you shouldn't have had Cat and Danny up there with all those sawyers running around. And Cat, you should have been paying attention to that tree. Always keep your eyes on the tree that's being cut. With God's will, it won't happen again, will it?

Nobody said anything, but afterwards, at one of the campfires, Schmitt and Buckner were laughing, either oblivious that they could be heard, or not caring, or wanting to be, talking about Cat. —What the fuck was she doing up there anyways?

Danny was sitting at another fire with her, and she was seething. —What the hell, man?! Nobody said anything about Schmitt's shitty cut.

Danny nodded. —Yeah. Or about me. I was right there too. Or Paul. He was right next to you.

—I know. And I was watching the fucking tree. I was fucking watching it coming back at me, man. I don't know why the fuck he thinks I wasn't.

Ace was sitting on a log across from them. He lit a cigar, puffing on it to get it started, and smiled, quoting the running crew joke to all rookies: —So you want to be a hotshot....

Cat glared into the flames. —Being a hotshot shouldn't mean working with fucking idiots!

He laughed and got up and walked away.

She shook her head. —I just don't get him sometimes. He could fucking stand up for me. Or us. All of us.

Danny set his boots near the fire to dry. —Full-timers won't go past that wall. They don't want to be trouble-makers because they have to work with each other in the winter too.

—Well, I guess there's not much of a future for me with the government.

—No, me either. Focus on Spain this winter.

She nodded. —I am. Quisieras venir conmigo?

He paused, looking around to see if anyone was listening. —Me encantaría. En serio?

She nodded again. —Sí. I'd love to hang out with you there. You could learn flamenco guitar and have all the chicas dancing for you.

—Wouldn't you be jealous?

She laughed. —Maybe. I wish you had your guitar here right now. I knew when I heard you playing out on the barracks porch that we were going to be good friends.

The next day, they returned to the finger area to mop. Teddie, the guy on Danny's squad who could do pushups forever, got smart and suggested using the permafrost, so they dug a pit and scooped frozen mud onto burning logs, putting them out instantly. He and Cat and Danny were having a good time talking, so of course Yoli, Danny's squad boss, and the only other woman on the crew, yelled over to him. —Singerrr! Do you have a lot of smoke over there?

—Yeah Yoli, we're keeping busy.

—Well, how many people do you need?

—Three is fine.

—Well, why don't you get Otter and Tony to help you and send Cat and Ted over here? I've got some smokes here too.

The three of them looked at each other. Danny waved. —See you guys.

Cat waved and smiled. —Bye Singer.

Teddie looked down at the ground as he walked away. —At least you don't have to work with Yoli.

Otter, their token Mormon, and Tony, the third-year rookie, came over. Tony smiling, of course.

Friendliest guy, but: —Hey Singer, how do you like Alaska? My grandfather always said he wanted to go to Alaska and go fishing. Do you like fish? Some vegetarians eat fish you know, which doesn't really make them vegetarians if you ask me, though cows are smarter than fish, right? Maybe I'll go fishing if we get R&R up here. They must have some big salmon. Do you eat salmon? I like it with lemon juice. Did I tell you about the time I ate a whole can of chew? I puked my guys out. Thing is, it was red. Kinda like salmon.

—Tony, please, quiet time!

All the hotshot crews eventually created a mobile fire camp, of sorts, a place to gather at night. No camp personnel, no Forest Circus, just a place to make fires and get food. While they worked up the fire line, their red bags were flown along by helitack. At the end of the day they hiked into a 'clearing', which turned out to be a shallow pond with grass growing out of it. Ace had arrived early to help organize Snake Mountain's red bags, and he was shaking his head when the crew arrived. —Man, you should've seen it. The helicopter dropped off the sling load with the bags right in the middle and, I swear, they started to sink. I hope everybody has their stuff in plastic bags inside!

The trees grew too thick to camp in, so they set up tents in the clear area on the edge of the pond, really just a bunch of grass clumps growing close together, thick enough to be above the water, but uneven and lumpy. And of course that night the rain poured. Firefighters aren't used to being around rain, so a lot of people got soaked in the night, some worse than others. Otter and CK were up early the next morning drying their sleeping bags over a fire. Otter's bag is soaked. —I thought I pissed my pants!

When he saw Danny, CK laughed. —Singer, mi amigo, how are you so dry? I woke up with my whole ass in a puddle!

—I leaned the hard way camping back in Michigan. Always put your space blanket on the floor on the inside of the tent. Putting it under the tent ends up catching the rain and making a big puddle at the lowest point—the camper.

CK nodded. —You know Singer, you're smarter than you look!

—Thanks CK.

At the morning briefing, Bob informed them that the fire had run into a lake miles from camp and gone out. All they could really do was 'cold trail' the edge, making sure the fire couldn't take off in another direction with a wind change. But as soon as Snow Mountain got back to the finger area, the rain poured again and Bob sent them into the woods to take cover. Danny found a good thick tree and took out his space blanket, making a flimsy tent for himself, basically dry, but with not a lot of moving room. Rain pattering down. Cat laughing with some of the other guys somewhere else. He tried to take a nap, resting his head on his knees, but it was just too cold, water leaking in and dripping on his neck.

When the rain let up a bit, they all headed back into the burn—not to mop up but to make warming fires. Teddie and Lopez and Danny got a lean-to going, and a nice roaring almost-bonfire, using logs they had put out the day before. Rain came on and off the whole day and they just sat there. Lopez, the bear-like EMT on Danny's squad, couldn't stop laughing and scratching his new black beard. —This whole trip insane!

Teddie kept whittling on a branch with his Leatherman. —Yeah, it's not about fire-fighting anymore. It's about survival.

—At least fucking Yoli isn't around to tell us to get to work. Fuck that fucking bitch annoys the shit out of me. I can't believe she has a fucking boyfriend on Feather River. Did you really see Otter go back to her room in Albuquerque?

Teddie smiled and Danny tilted his head. —Wait a minute, I missed this. Did he?

Lopez nodded. —Dude, a bunch of us were drinking, you must have been reading a fucking book somewhere or something, or jerking off. We got Otter the Mormon hammered and Yoli walked back with him to the hotel and Teddie fucking saw them go back to her room.

—Where was Cat?

—I don't fucking know. Hooking up with Ace or something. Teddie was the one that fucking saw them.

Danny looked down at the ground. —Oh.

They hadn't realized how loud they were being until Otter came over from one of the other fires, keeping his voice real low. —You guys, please don't talk about that, ok?

Danny looked up, feeling bad, seeing the embarrassed look on his face. —Sorry Otter.

Lopez wouldn't let up though. —Come on Otter, did you or didn't you?

Otter looked around, whispering. —We didn't do nothing. Just made out a little.

Lopez laughed. —Not even a blowjob? Come on Otter, you got to try harder than that! Somebody's got to nail that bitch.

Teddie nodded. —Yeah man, Ace made a bet with Lucky Charms that he'd fuck Yoli by the end of the season. Maybe you could get in on it.

Danny put up a hand. —You guys, basta. Leave him alone.

Lopez flipped him off, though smiling. —What, did he turn you into a fucking Mormon or something?

The rain stopped, sort of, and the people in charge, whoever and wherever they were, decided to move camp again, to someplace more permanent. They hiked back to the pond to get their things, but as they were breaking down their tents, more rain sprinkled down.

They hurried. Feather River had built a landing pad of logs tied together out in the middle of the shallow water. Snake Mountain brought their bags down to the edge, waiting, hoping the helicopter wouldn't be grounded. But it came and, with no rules in Alaska, they loaded it themselves, simply by how many people and bags could fit in. If the helicopter couldn't lift, the pilot told someone to get out.

The first load lifted off as the rain got harder, but they keep flying. Danny didn't realize helicopters could fly in the rain. When his turn came get in, from where he was sitting facing forward, he couldn't see anything out of the windshield.

The new site wasn't a pond at least, but a large clearing in the spruce. When the last load of folks arrived, the rain just poured down. Most the crew were running around, screaming like children. Only CK grabbed his saw, walked into the woods, and starts cutting rounds. Lucky Charms and Otter carried them over to the campsite, and Cat and Danny chopped them into firewood with their pulaskis. Everyone else was building lean-tos and setting up tents, grabbing all the best spots. Using their first pieces of wood, Bob got a small fire going, which he stood by the whole time, watching.

Sopping and annoyed, Danny looked at Cat, —Fuck this, there's enough wood!

He grabbed his red bag, but setting up a tent just seemed insane, it would be soaked before he could get it up. He asked Teddie and Lopez if he could get in with them in their lean-to, but Teddie shook his head. —Sorry Singer, no room.

—Yeah, and you didn't help build it!

—Lopez, I was busy chopping fucking firewood for you, asshole.

—Hey, that's your problem.

—Great, thanks guys.

Cat, as soaked as he, looking miserable, and maybe crying, had the same problem. —Man, that's the last time I fucking help these fucking assholes!

Danny looked at her. —I wish I could just be in a tent with you.

Her expression softened, and she whispered, —I know. But we can't.

She finally got in a lean-to with CK and Lucky Charms. Danny set his tent up anyways, leaving his wet clothes outside in a pile, wiping himself and the inside walls off with a spare t-shirt.

After the rain eased up to a light sprinkle, the crew crept out and spent the rest of the night trying to keep warming fires going, stringing tarps between trees and drying their clothes next to the flames, steaming t-shirts everywhere. When he wasn't paying attention, Danny burned a hole in one of his.

And that's how it went for the next few days. The camp became semi-permanent, every morning they got up whenever, and waited around to be helicoptered up the line, which meant more waiting for it to arrive and/or transport other crews. Each day they left three people behind as 'camp bitches' to have dinner ready. The AFS finally sent in huge food boxes, which had everything: meat, potatoes, fruit, bread, cheese, rice. Buckner immediately tried to grab all the candy bars, everybody touching everything, which caused Paul to freak out and make a rule that only the three bitches could be in the kitchen, a separate little area they had fenced in with logs. Snake Mountain's camp became even more elaborate as they learned from some Alaskan village crews: similar to native American Type II crews in the lower forty-eight. They knew all the tricks, like putting branches under the tent or lean-to, for padding and to keep bodies up off the wet ground. They even constructed little huts out of smaller trees, where they sat around smoking pot at the end of the day (and sometimes the beginning). Their crews were made up of only sixteen people, fifteen men and always one woman, the cook. One of them came over to our area and, after he saw Cat and Yoli, remarked, very seriously, —I didn't know hotshots brought their own cooks too.

Neither Cat nor Yoli was very amused.

When Ace stayed in camp with his two camp bitches, Otter and Roo, they sat around all day playing cards. Yoli picked Danny as her bitch, along with Mountain Du, and she kept them working nonstop, peeling and cutting potatoes, maintaining the fires, and cutting more wood. Which was ok, and even fun, just because Danny liked to cook, but it wasn't a break,

and they ended up working harder than the people who went out to mop-up. On that day though, Mountain Du showed everybody up, even the village crews, by designing The Outhouse.

Overhead, whoever they were, wherever they were, didn't want firefighters wandering out randomly shitting in the woods because of bears, because shit attracts bears? So Bob asked Mountain Du to come up with something for sanitation. Danny helped, but it was all Du's idea. He found an old hollow stump and Danny cut it off even with a chainsaw, making a ledge to sit on. Mountain Du also had him cut out a flat slab, which became the lid. Together, they cut and taped thin saplings as a frame, and arranged leafy branches on the walls and ceiling for privacy, and to help keep the rain off. Everyone was very impressed when they got back.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew flew out to the lake where the fire burned itself out and did nothing. Bob fished all day. The fire had been out days ago, but overhead seemed more than happy to keep them going or, it was speculated, maybe they'd been forgotten about? Which was how the crews felt, but they were getting eighteen-hour days, hella overtime, so—another firefighter joke—ch-ching!

Finally, and kind of suddenly, on the morning of the eleventh day, all four hotshot crews were demobbed. They packed their stuff. By the time they were all waiting at the helispot, the village crews staying behind were already scavenging the food boxes and wood. Mountain Du told them about The Outhouse, disappointed that it didn't get more use.

Another bus ride, back to Anchorage, with the same view. Cat sat in the seat in front of Danny and they both watched the mountains. Most of the crew dozing. At one point Cat turned and whispered, —I like your beard, man.

Danny rubbed it. —It's kind of patchy.

She laughed. —It's scruffy, man.

Each hotshot crew was treated immediately to dinner at various restaurants in town by the AFS, as kind of a publicity opportunity. Snake Mountain went a fancy seafood restaurant. Dirty and unshaven, smelling like smoke and worse, they sat next to horrified-looking people in suits and nice dresses, whispering to each other. But when Danny was in line at the salad bar, a couple came over, thanking him for saving their city.

He didn't know what to say, because they hadn't. —Um, thanks. We're happy to be here.

After the couple walked away Cat came over and nudged him in the ribs, smiling. —My hero.

They spent the night at an old empty army barracks on the military base outside of town, with drill sergeants and troops yelling in the distance. Each hotshot crew got one building, and all the women from the crews stayed in another. As he was carrying his red bag into the building, Danny looked back and saw Ace lean in to Cat and whisper something. And her whisper something back. She saw Danny watching, and looked scared. They stared at each other, then Danny went inside, his stomach feeling like it had been stabbed by a harpoon.

But: hot showers. Never had a shower felt so good. Danny was one of the first in, and the last out. After shampooing twice, and conditioning, he left what looked like some species of small furry animal in the drain.

Conclave

John Denver-Drain

The woman was on her knees in the wet dirt and snow, and it soaked her and teased out the first twinges of arthritis. Behind, the woods were leafless, a trick of bareness, because they hid with their numbers the same range they'd hidden with their green coats months before.

Out front, the estuary was in frightening contrast: wide, open. When the shingle shore halted there was nothing but white, strained through with gray and brown pebbles, until the shivering view reached the opposite bank where the forest sprung up again, wiry against the white sky.

She swallowed, took two breaths, swallowed again. Her pupils were tiny dots that swung left and right like gnats flying into a mirror. They fixed on things only for a second, snapping without comprehension onto a twig, a log, or a slab of slate. The snow began to fall again, peppering the branches and drifting on her eyebrows and cranium, the turned collar of her dress, piling against her legs. She remained in position and didn't move anything except her eyes.

The footsteps came, swift, crunching on gravel and snow, and he turned his head as if straining to twist the trunk of a tree. There were maybe six sets of them, and the sound of their movement came through the trees and thudded in her chest. She peered between the wooden pillars, trying to discern shadows and wind from form and direction.

"You can't cross the ice", the voice said, breaking from the trees, heralding that kingmask of a face, heavy and thick with muscle and entirely free from emotion. For a second, the Oxhead was half in and half out of the limbs, and then the winter sun hit him full-on. The leer he wore rode up his cheeks into a V.

She stood. She'd been running the park for a day now. She could feel the oppressive weight of his presence, knew it instinctively, had known it when it lunged with piston footsteps through the snowy grass. She'd seen it shatter the wooden gazebo to matchsticks. He was a real man, the Oxhead- that's what Father said- a real husband- though Father had no money. Money was good wherever it came from. The chase was all the Oxhead asked.

She turned and looked at the Oxhead and then looked away and then began to run, again, feeling the ache in her thin-stretched muscle as she ran. The Oxhead again began to lollop after, his brogue howl filling the air- "You can't cross the ice!" Her

feet left the stones, smacked against the frozen water, skidded, she slipped, grasped, drug herself along, and all the while knew he was...just...behind her.

Then there was a sudden crack, the sound from when she broke her Mother's mirror as a girl; she peered behind her to see the Oxhead flail for a second between slices of ice, the water reaching up and drenching him. His roar was like a lion. He had followed her onto the ice. She laughed, even through the stitch, let herself laugh, as the pursuer sank into the water.

The Ticks Will Eat You Whole

Anthony Neil Smith

He counted eight, no, nine, no, *ten* fucking deer ticks on his khakis long after this death march through the woods stopped being a good idea. Never was a good idea for Gavin, but for his wife, Tilly, and his mother-in-law, it was a necessary death march.

A literal death march.

Tilly tromped about twenty steps ahead of him on the grown over path, following faint tire ruts, carrying her dad's ashes in a wooden box.

When his wife told him they were going to spread some of her dad's ashes, Gavin thought it would be something, like, dignified. Churchy, even though her parents had stopped going to their Catholic church decades ago. Tilly had never shown any interest.

But still, *dignified*.

Gavin wore khakis he hadn't worn since losing his job during the pandemic. Blue denim dress shirt. Some slip-on tan leather loafers he'd bought for his own grandma's funeral nine years ago. Should've known something was wrong when Tilly put on some cargo shorts, her mud-caked Keens, and one of his flannel shirts over a t-shirt she'd bought in Greece ten-years before. It said *Greece* in script, but written across a drawing of the Roman colosseum.

This was their sixth stop of the day. *Sixth*.

- 1) Father-in-law's parents' graves
- 2) his cousin's grave
- 3) a spot in the woods he just liked for some reason
- 4) another spot in a different set of woods that required climbing over a barbed-wire fence
- 5) behind his parent's barn
- 6) and now, even more itchy, buggy, stinky woods.

Sweat through, worn slap out, itchy, his shoes wet and squishy, ticks climbing his body like Orcs scaling the walls in *Lord of the Rings*. Tilly and her mom had swung back and forth all day between pissed off at each other to weepy and hugging.

Tilly was short, with short brown hair, easy to mistake for a junior high boy, which it seemed like she wanted. She wore less make-up as every year passed, thirteen years of marriage. She loved being out in the woods, and had worked in a State Park

before they met. He called her “Nature Girl” and hated to admit he was kind of turned on by her not shaving anything anymore – armpits, legs, cooch.

Bad day for sex fantasies. Part of him wanted to push her up against a tree and rip her shorts down. The rest of him felt like the ticks would eat him whole, the bushes were all poison and the bare tree branches might put his eye out.

Further up ahead of Tilly, making quick work of the trail like a deer or a bear, was his mother-in-law. Gavin called her Pauline, her real name, but everyone else in the family called her “Nookie” for whatever the fuck reason, at least one they never told Gavin.

Not even Tilly, short for Matilda, could explain it, but Gavin knowing “Nookie” sixteen years now explained a lot of why anyone would saddle their kid with a name like “Matilda.” because she’d been saddled with a name like “Nookie.”

Pauline was seventy-one, but not little old lady seventy-one. More like Patti Smith seventy-one. Thin as a rail. She wore her usual dirty jeans and hiking sandals, one of her husband’s XXL mechanic’s shirt with the sleeves cut off so you could see her black bra and translucent skin. Gavin was pretty sure she still snorted cocaine, ate some pot brownies from time to time. She usually walked with a cane for her bad hip, but out here she was feeling no pain, pointing out spots to spread more ashes.

“Here, he liked to hunt here because he could see three ways down these paths, see?”

“Chuck loved these plum trees. Leave some by the plum trees.”

“We were going to build our first house here, before Chuck got that job in Fargo. Shame no one ever did. I had hoped someone would. It’d be such a nice home.”

For hermits, Gavin thought.

Like she knew what he was thinking, Tilly gave him *the eye*. She did as her mother said, sifted some of her dad from the plastic bag in the box. None of them thought to bring a measuring cup.

The grass and leaves under his loafers were wet this far out, and he didn’t know why. No rain, no water nearby. Just a sudden everything being wet. Smelled like piss, too. Like deer shit and deer piss and cat piss, probably the meth lab they passed – *had* to be a goddamn meth lab. Gavin could’ve sworn

he’d seen a face peek out of the rusted out Airstream welded to a U-Haul.

Bout, what, eight, nine minutes ago?

They’d passed his father-in-law’s auto graveyard. This was his parents’ land, passed down to him when they both passed away. He’d grown up in these woods, and any time he got a new car or truck, he would drive the old one out here to the graveyard, park it among the trees.

Gavin asked Chuck one time, “You ever going to do anything with them?”

The old man looked at Gavin like he was an idiot.

Looked at Gavin like he was an idiot most of the time, though.

Pauline had spotted the Airstream and U-Haul and said, “What is that? What is going on there? I don’t remember those, no, I don’t at all.”

Gavin shushed her.

When they’d pulled into the drive at the old house earlier, there was a car there – brown Malibu. No license plate. A bumper sticker saying, “Tread on Me. I’ve Got Fangs.”

Tilly said, “I didn’t think anyone was staying here.”

“Some of your cousins, now and then, if they need a place. No big deal.” Pauline climbed out of the car and walked to the front door. Knocked hard and loud. Knocked harder and louder. Stood around, then peeked into the front window. Gavin hung back near the car, the door like a shield for him if the shooting started. He searched the second floor windows for signs of life, or afterlife, *shiver*.

No one answered, so Pauline said, “Alright, let’s do it.”

Tilly asked, “Do you want to drive?”

But she was already headed for the field, the rutted path leading to the treeline, shouting behind her, “It’s not all that far.”

Lying bitch.

Don’t take it wrong. Pauline had never been anything but lovely to Gavin. Made him non-pot brownies every time he visited. Kept real Coca-Cola in the fridge just in case, since she nor Chuck drank it. Made Tilly jealous. Where were *her* brownies? Where were *her* fizzy drinks?

But then Chuck died – Covid made worse by COPD – and they moved her to their suburb outside of Minneapolis, four hours away from the woods. They helped her buy a new house, but she hated it. *Hated* it. The town, the house, *hate hate hate*.

She bought a German Shepherd with diarrhea. He shat all over the house. Tilly was the one who had to go clean up. Calls all hours of the day, asking for help with one thing or another, or offering to pick something up at the store, or worried the dog might die.

Also, she bitched about how her dead husband had been spoiled by his mother, then by herself, but it was still somehow his fault for letting it happen. Just a selfish, spoiled, son-of-a-bitch who quit his cushy corporate lodge job to work on semi-trucks instead. He didn't mind getting dirty, but god forbid you leave one of his *thousands* of tools out of place. His pork chops had to be seasoned just right. Exactly right. If not he wouldn't eat it, and would instead grab a box of Milk Duds or a couple Cherry Bings for "dinner."

When Tilly hung up after a call with her mom anymore, her cheeks were bright red. "She never even asks how I'm doing. Just goes right into it."

Gavin whipped his head around. Swore he heard twigs snapping and echoing behind him. He caught up with Tilly. "Where the *fuck* –"

"Not now. You should've stayed at the car."

"We should've driven."

"Enough. This is already hard enough as is."

"I told you I'd be here for you."

"Then be nice."

Pauline shouted back to them, "Right around this corner. Right here."

Tilly said, "Buck up," and then went to catch up with her mom.

Gavin stayed put. He was done. Another glance down at his pants – six, seven, eight more ticks. The ones he could *see*. He swore they were crawling under his pants, up the skin of his legs, heading for his balls, his ass crack, and he wouldn't find them until they'd bloated three times their size on his blood, trading it for a lifetime of lyme.

Another twig snap.

He didn't flinch, didn't whip his head around this time. The monster stalking him – *Bear? Wolf? Deer?* – wanted him to know it was there.

Gavin slipped his hands into his khaki pockets. He shambled in a little circle, looking up at the trees. Oaks or maples or birch, he couldn't tell trees apart. Pine, he knew. Pine was easy. And sticky. He brought his chin down, his eyes down, and standing a few yards away, there was this guy.

This guy.

Younger than Gavin by a decade. Untied Nikes, baggy jeans, a band of boxer-briefs, and a white-stained-yellow t-shirt, tight. A white kid with shaggy hair, almost like one of the Ramones, but Gavin bet this kid wouldn't know who that was. Trucker hat with *I like it dirty* on the front.

Gavin nodded. "Hey."

Dude nodded back. "Alright?"

"Yeah, just fine."

"What's going on here?"

Gavin's first impulse was to say *None of your goddamned business*, but we're talking a *really* short impulse. "Oh, just. Spreading some ashes." He pointed up the trail. "My wife, my mother-in-law. My father-in-law died from Covid. Did you know him? Chuck Oakley?"

Why not just give him your social security number, too, Gav?

"That's pretty gross."

"You think?"

"Spreading dead guys out here? Not telling people."

"He grew up here, back at the house." Another point. "In these woods. Used to be his land."

A new cough a little too close for comfort. Gavin flicked his eyes. The other one had been standing there all along, just behind a tree off to the right. Closer than Dirty Hat. Camo pants and scuffed-to-hell workboots. A puffy vest over a tight bare chest. No eyebrows. Too many piercings – lip, nose, both ears, eyebrow, chin. Mr. Clean dome. He held his right hand straight down, out of sight behind his leg.

Gavin thought, *If you don't think it, it's not there*.

Like telling someone "Don't think about an elephant."

The first thing you do, right?

So yeah, Mr. Clean had a gun.

“Used to be?”

Gavin blinked. “Maybe still is. They sold the land next door, though.”

“Maybe.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. Tilly and her mom were almost out of sight. Out of hearing range, for sure. The one time he wished Chuck was still alive, still here, because he was a gun nut. He always carried a Glock, even to Fleet Farm or Home Depot. He had a heavy-as-fuck gun safe they couldn't take along to Pauline's new house, so they had to take all the guns one by one, carry them in the trunk, and hide them in a closet until she'd bought a new safe for them all.

“He left you a .45,” Pauline told him. “He'd had it for thirty years.”

Gavin had told her to keep it in the safe. He wasn't ready to risk having that in his home. Why did she need to keep them all? They were worth a lot of money. They were just going to rust in the safe.

Yeah, the one time he wished Chuck was there, paranoid as shit, bulge on his hip, even if it would make Gavin feel like a little man, he was instead scattered on the leaves of a plum tree.

Gavin said, “That's it.”

Dirty Hat crossed his arms. “That's it, then?”

“Pretty sure. I just follow along. Do as I'm told.”

Mr. Clean cleared his throat. “Thought I heard the old lady say something about an Airstream?”

His voice was a gargle, causing Gavin to raise his hands waist high like every gangster in every black and white film when the cops catch up to them. Every muscle in Mr. Clean's neck pulsed, word by word. Could've drank some Drano when he was a kid.

“Sure, back with the old cars? Back there? You guys see it?”

“The old cars?”

“Chuck's old cars? Pauline said she hadn't seen the Airstream before. I told her it might have been some cousins or something left it there.”

Go ahead and give them Pauline's PIN numbers, too, why don't you?

“Some cousins.” Dirty Hat winked at Mr. Clean. “I hear you.”

New Fools Are Here To Take Your Place

Gavin thumbed over his shoulder. “I've got to catch up with them. One last spread and we're done.”

“What's the last one?”

“I don't know. Another hunting spot? So many.”

He lifted his hand, sort of, kind of, a little wave. Jesus. Sent a burning embarrassment through him. The meth cooks had the gun. They were the “cool kids.” Gavin was the nerd who did their homework.

He turned his back on DH and Mr. C to show them he was tough – turning his back on a *meth cooker with a gun*, the thought muscled its way in front of some others. *He's not a high school football star, idiot.*

Too late. He started down the trail, peeked over his shoulder, and caught the tail end of their convo. Not the words, but the nods and “Hm”s and “Yeah, yeah.” They started down the trail after Gavin. Not fast or anything. Moseying. DH's hands in his pockets, and Mr. Clean bopping the pistol off his hip. Dirty Hat whistled to a tune Gavin didn't know.

The urge in his gut was *run, fucker, run*. But *run, fucker, run* might get him shot. Playing it cool might still get him shot, but maybe he could distract the goons so Tilly and her mom could get away or hide.

Hard to imagine dying for someone. He thought he could, when it came down to it, but it was goddamned hard to imagine. It would have to be a frantic moment, Gavin fighting for the gun, shouting at Tilly and Pauline to vamoose, when the gun goes bang – right in his midsection – and he goes down slowly, his light fading, off to the big sleep.

But that's only in movies.

The reality, more likely: Gavin on his knees, begging them to leave him alive. Every muscle flinching and cramping because he could see it coming. Any second now.

Gavin's mouth was bone dry.

He said, “Going my way?”

Dirty Hat caught up with him. “We only thought it right to pay our respects.”

Mr. Clean, on his other side. “Mad respect. That's hardcore, coming out here like this.”

“Important to her. To them.”

“Yeah, almost forgot.” Dirty Hat flung an arm around Gavin's shoulder, the crook on the back of his neck, and hugged him closer. “Tell me about your wife, Gavin. Tell me all the details.”

"Details?" Slow on the pick-up.

"Like, blonde, brunette, red? Tall? Short?"

"Short, pretty short."

"What's that like?"

"What's what like?"

"Riding a short girl," Mr. Clean said. "Can you hold her up steady? Bounce her on your dick?" Already starting to laugh before getting it out. DH too.

"Dude said she was short, not a *child*, man. C'mon, how much does she weigh?"

Gavin tried to twist out of DH's hug, but the guy yanked him back. Jesus, the smell. Ammonia, skunk, awful breath, and some sort of fruity cologne.

"Listen, guys, this is kind of private."

"It's guy talk, is all. Ain't nothing to it." Another laugh. A giggle? Can you call a meth-cooker a giggler?

"I mean the ashes. The spreading. I don't think my mother-in-law wants anyone else -"

"See, that's too bad." Mr. Clean shook his head, scratched his armpit with the front site of his pistol. "You know us, right? You know that camper back there is ours. But we don't know you. I mean, all of you."

"We're going to make our introductions, explain a couple of things, then I swear, you'll be rid of us forever."

"And ever."

The idea of dying, *really dying*, had never crossed Gavin's mind quite this way. Murdered. Watching Tilly murdered, or her watching him. "Fuck."

"Now you're catching on."

"We've got people waiting on us. Our, yeah, our kids. My wife's friends."

Grasping at straws, because for the life of him, Gavin couldn't think of anyone waiting on them right then. Most of the people in their lives might not miss them for a few days or more, mostly work friends or Tilly's cousins. Nobody else waiting by the phone.

Sad, man. Sad.

"Everybody's got someone waiting." Mr. Clean looked oily. Maybe it was just a sheen of sweat, but it looked oily. He had had deer ticks crawling all over his abs, his chest. A few had latched on and were

already inflating with blood. It made Gavin gag. He tried not to. It was a reflex. The ticks, the slick skin, the smell of these guys, the gun.

"Look, I'm not going to tell anyone." He got out in front of these guys and turned to them. Hands out again. Surrender palms. "You've got nothing to worry about. I don't care what you're doing."

Dirty Hat sighed. He took off his hat and wiped his arm across his forehead. "That's all well and good, but if we let you go, let your family go, without at least a warning, and them son-a-bitches, you know, Sheriffs, they'll show up a few days after and we're caught with our cocks in our hands, you get it?"

"Please, please, I'm serious." His hands doing most of the work. "My wife, her mom, they don't even know you're here. I won't tell them. It'll just be me who knows, and I've got nothing to say to anybody."

Mr. Clean grinned. "Aw, you'll tell them. It's too good a story not to tell them."

"I swear."

"We already heard the old bitch about the trailer. Do you think she'd going to let it go?"

Dirty Hat put his hat back on, snugged it, and stepped up to Gavin. He grabbed both shoulders, gave him a twist, turning him towards the trail again.

"Keep walking."

"Wait, wait."

Dirty Hat's momentum, plus his hand on the middle of Gavin's back, kept them going. If Gavin would try to slow down, he'd trip. "I'll tell her I checked it out, it's why I'm so far back. Tell her it's empty, rusted through the bottom. I'll tell her to leave it with the rest of the cars."

Quiet for a minute, except their feet squishing leaves into the mud.

Gavin, said, "I've got to pee."

They laughed. "You'll pee soon enough."

"Why you got to do this? What are you getting out of it?"

Mr. Clean shrugged. "Get to fuck your wife's ass. She won't like it. I will."

"That's...no, man, that's...please."

How do they do it? The heroes. The cops. The firemen. Even Chuck with his Glock ready at all

times, the good guy with a gun. How do they stay tough in the face of this bullshit?

“What? What’s that? You say that’s what?”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what? Fuck your wife’s ass? Or my buddy over here going to choke your mother-in-law with his big white snake?”

“Jesus, stop it. Don’t do any of that. Jesus. This is...fuck. Please, please.”

Mr. Clean stopped dead in his tracks and turned to Gavin, chest to chest. “Where’s the fun in that? Can you tell me? Before you turned up, we were going to cook up a batch and make *bank*, alright? But now we get to fuck some pussy and spill some blood and still make bank. I’d say that’s a pretty good day above the ground.”

Every day is a good day above the ground, is what Chuck would’ve told them.

“Hold up.” Mr. Clean brought the gun barrel up, brushed it underneath Gavin’s chin. Made out like he was examining Gavin’s neck. Then, “You got a little something, right...”

He slid the gun down Gavin’s throat to the side of his neck, then flicked the skin with the front sights. “It was a tick. Got it.”

Gavin took a heaving breath and felt his chest burn.

Dirty Hat went *hmpf*. “Those things’ll eat you whole if you’re not careful. Give you Lyme’s Disease.”

“Please.”

Gavin got down on one knee. Mr. Clean tried to stop him, drag him to his feet. But Gavin leaned out of the way, plopped his other knee into the mud. It was an awkward spread, Gavin wobbling back and forth. Hands still up and out.

“Please.”

Mr. Clean looked over to Dirty Hat. “Mother fuck. I’m tired of him.”

“Let’s keep the noise down.”

Gavin couldn’t see Dirty Hat, but heard the sound of the hunting knife being pulled from its sheath. Steps coming up behind him. Gavin humped his shoulders and rolled his head on his neck.

“God, no, please, no.”

Dirty Hat grabbed his hair and yanked his head back as Gavin squeezed a scream and let go of his bladder and then –

“Gavin!” A woman’s voice. Tilly’s voice.

Two fast and loud *pop pops* out in the brush.

The meth cookers hopped up like popcorn. Dirty Hat let go of Gavin and said, “Shit, shit shit!” His arms pulled in protecting his chest.

Mr. Clean let out a yelp and turned and starting firing wildly into the trees. Gavin’s ears felt like they might bleed. He covered them with his hands and flinched with each shot.

Two more shots, further out.

Gavin was nearly deaf by then. He watched Dirty Hat crumple to the ground on his back. He watched Mr. Clean finish his magazine and try to run like there were wolves on his heels, but he stumbled, fell onto his face, then tried to crawl away.

Pauline and Tilly appeared from the trees. *Angels. Beautiful angels.* Pauline held a pistol in her hand. The boxy black frame he’d seen Chuck carry many times before. While Tilly ran for Gavin and dropped at his side – “Are you okay? Are you okay? Did they hurt you? Can you hear me.” – Pauline calmly stepped over to Mr. Clean, still trying to crawl. He flipped onto his side and pawed the air between them with one hand.

“Hey, bitch, you’re nothing bitch. Cheap shots, bitch.”

Then she raised the Glock.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait.” Mr. Clean was running out of breath. “Wait...oh, I feel bad, I feel real bad. Help me, please.”

“No.”

Pop.

Like so. That was it. Tilly took Gavin’s cheeks in her hands and told him to focus, to know that it was going to be okay. But he was too busy watching Pauline, now working her way over to Dirty Hat. She stood over him, a foot on each side of his body, and watched for a long moment. She didn’t bother pointing her gun at him. He was done for.

Gavin opened his mouth wide a few times, trying to clear the rest of the fuzz from his ears. “I’m alright. Baby, I love you. I’m alright, I’m okay, I’m alright.”

She gripped his hands and he hers and then Pauline was standing over them, shoving her husband’s

pistol into her waistband at her back. She turned her head slowly, looking out into the murk. On patrol. What if there were others?

Pauline finally looked at Gavin and reached down a hand to help him up. He took it. "How are you feeling?"

He cleared his throat. Then again. Croaked out, "Good. Good. Yeah. Good."

He couldn't ask her *What are we going to do? When will we call the cops? Are we in trouble?*

Not *we*. Her. Was Pauline in trouble?

She grabbed him at the back of his neck. Kneaded. Looked in his eyes. "Do me a favor?"

He nodded.

"Don't tell anyone about this. Not ever. Not *EV-UR*. Do you understand?"

This was not the sweet old woman who baked him brownies. Not anymore.

"You got that. Tilly? Goes for you too."

She nodded. "I'll go get Dad." Back into the woods again.

Pauline looked around. Two dead. But no one out here noticed the gunfire. Not a single one. She turned back to Gavin. "Go get the car. Bring it back here."

"Walk all the way back?"

"You don't have much choice, do you?"

"What about Tilly?"

Pauline crossed her arms. "I need her help here. She knows what to do."

So many other questions, but Gavin didn't have the rights words, or the right order, and it sure as hell wasn't the right time.

He jangled the car keys in his wet khakis, reminding him they were soaked in his piss. His loafers were ruined. His pride snipped in two. But he started walking. Didn't look back, didn't look down, not even when he passed Mr. Clean's body, the face staring right at him.

By the time he'd gotten past Chuck's other favorite hunting spot, his car graveyard, and the meth cooks' Airstream, there was only one question left he was desperate to know the answer to: *What did she mean, Tilly knows what to do?*

"Well, when everybody's going this way, it's time to turn around and go that way, you know? ... I don't care if they end up shitting gold nuggets, somebody's got to dig in the damn ground. Somebody's got to."

Breece D'J Pancake

Contributors

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Cowboy Jamboree Editors

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