

COWBOY JAMBOREE MAGAZINE



ASQUINT

Asquint – (def.) with the eye directed to one side, obliquely, or squinting as if with distorted vision or as if to peer or glance furtively or slyly

“When a man speaks the truth in the spirit of truth,
his eye is as clear as the heavens. When he has base ends,
and speaks falsely, the eye is muddy,
and sometimes *asquint*.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays

Cover art: *Gone (mixed media collage)* by C. R. Resetarits

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Rootless Shells

Hank Morgan

Bungalows, lifted and shelved, were driven out of the neighborhood. One came with the unexpected amenity of a boy in a fridge. On their platinum jubilee, the homes had their pier and beam foundations knocked down. Their bodies soon raised onto waiting flatbed trucks. Several blocks worth departed, either late at night or early in the morning to various unknown locations outside the city. Entire tracts of affordable housing were relocated with their wallpaper height markers, cracked countertops, and other oddities scabbed over. Yellow paint flaked off the boy's house. It matched his speckled honey blond curls. Unfortunately, nobody knew how to exorcise toddlers. At first, he remained at the end of the driveway in the unattached garage in the unlatched container. The rectangle frame, gabled roof, and evenly spaced windows from his childhood were unaltered.

For generations, bungalows were the most affordable and widespread homes in the city. They had raised farmhands, latchkey kids, indigo children, and left a few offspring behind. Visitors toured the American Craftsmen as the most senior and widespread homes across the city. Tutor Revivals and Victorian mansions disparaged the bungalow ubiquity, and applauded their relocation. Large families purchased bungalows from various vendors on the side of the highway, and dragged them into town. Unlucky properties were abandoned to undergraduate house parties. Some were remodeled. Insides torn apart revealed shiplap, hardwood floors, and vaulted ceilings. Appliances were traded out, except for the boy in the fridge. It's placement and brand added authenticity to the display. Latched from the outside, it was well protected from the thieving night creatures, like raccoons and possums. They planned to recycle and reclaim it. The rest were demolished, and replaced with boxy townhouses each two to four lots larger than the previous resident. The city finally sanitized.

Ensnared in the fridge, the boy never saw a change in his eggshell colored tomb. He could smell when renters neglected to clean cat pee in their shag carpet, and listen to crickets before the creek was swallowed in asphalt. His plot had grown uncomfortably close with their neighbors' after the tree lined borders were sheared. Decades ago, ranch homes encroached on spaces previously reserved for chicken coops or cow grazing. His family moved after the oil fields' endless pumping failed to find promise. His parents became chicken farmers. The three children could hear the axes and grunts of men cutting trunks for worker housing far south of them. Hens clucked. His sisters naughtily chased them around the yard, fearful a parent might peek out the window, and scream. Startled birds could not produce eggs. Their precautions were not always successful as a couple rotten eggs would be added each batch to the compost pile.

Their home did not mind the smell. It had been built for them, and enjoyed the company rifling around. It was a breezy, well shaded spot, overlooking the creek. The daughters were circling again, and kicking mud onto their dresses. The chickens circled during the day, and huddled together at night. It watched the young boy, pants around his ankles, piss a yellow stream into the creek, or pick up a fat juicy toad who splashed urine on the boy's white shirt. An impossibly large stain that he would never hide from Mama. His sister spied the shirt, and sang her taunts as he circled behind her. She thought of hiding from him in the fridge first. After reviving, she told the story. When he tried to squeeze in behind her, the latch fell down, and they were both trapped. It wasn't until the youngest sister, crying about having to play with herself that the parents realized both children were missing. They scoured the yard until arriving in the garage.

Buttons

Meagan Lucas

Tillie didn't want to go play outside. She didn't want sunshine on her face, or to make mudpies. Meemaw wouldn't let her ride her bike down the dirt road to town, and Tillie couldn't imagine using the heavy yellow phone in the kitchen to call someone from school to come over and play, not with Meemaw's collection all over the house. She wanted to stay in, and read the new book she got at the library, and wait until Meemaw fell asleep in her chair, and then sneak some cookies from the jar real quiet. But Meemaw said Tillie was making too much racket for her to hear her stories, and besides young girls need fresh air to grow strong, she said. She also said Tillie should be seen and not heard, should keep her knees together, and that she should always wear a smile (even if she didn't feel it on the inside). Meemaw had a lot of opinions about how to raise young ladies, most of them had to do with Tillie not growing up to be like her mama, like somehow it was her mama's fault what became of her.

Tillie patted Buttons, who didn't move from his place on the couch, and rolled her eyes, but then remembered the new shoes Meemaw had bought her for the first day of school next week, and ran to the back door. "Wear your rubbers," Meemaw called. "Don't go getting those new ones all muddy and ruint."

Tillie sighed, and frowned, and looked at her old beat-up, three sizes too large, boots. The only good part about going to a new school, and a new grade, was the new things. Mama didn't ever have a lot of money for new stuff, and Meemaw neither. Tillie was used to getting her clothes second hand, her cereal in a bag, and making do. But the first day of school meant new shoes, and new pink rubber erasers, and pencils that no one had chewed on yet, and it was a tiny high point in an otherwise shitty summer. But, there was nothing to do in Meemaw's yard except go down to the creek. No swing. No neighbors. No sidewalk

for hopscotch like at her old house. The stupid old boots would get stuck, but if she got mud on the new shoes, or stained them, she would get the switch. She'd just have to be careful in the boots. She petted Buttons, who didn't move from his basket by the shoes. The screen door smacked closed behind her. She stood on the back step with her hands in the pockets of her shorts and wondered how long she'd need to be out here before Meemaw would fall asleep and she could go back inside and read her book in peace.

The afternoon sun made the skin on her arms and neck tingle. She walked toward the shade down by the creek. She picked up a stick along the way and decapitated some black-eyed susans. She squatted in the shallows and watched the clear water bubble by, she floated her stick and wondered how long it would take it to get to the next county. Maybe next time she'd bring a note in a sandwich bag, tie it to the stick and see if she could get a pen pal in Tennessee, or even Georgia. She picked some pretty stones and put them in her pocket. The water was ice cold, it was always freezing, coming down from the mountains. Meemaw told her about how they used to keep their milk cold by putting it in the creek, back when she was a girl. Tillie imagined walking out to the creek in her jammies with a bowl of cereal and laughed. She picked some daisies and pulled the petals out, throwing them into the air and running beneath. Pretending the petals were snow. Pretending they were rice at the end of a wedding, and she was the beautiful bride. Pretending they were the soft caresses on her cheek where her mother's long hair tickled Tillie's skin as she kissed her forehead. She wondered if her mother still had long hair, or had any hair at all. Meemaw said not to think about that kind of stuff, but it was hard not to.

A branch snapped on the far side of the creek and she looked up to see eyes on her. Her cheeks went hot. He had seen her acting like a baby with the petals.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," she said. He walked closer to the creek. He was a lot bigger than her: red faced, and sweaty from the heat.

She tried to lift her foot to run back to the house but the boot was stuck. She didn't want him to see her struggle, to know that she was trapped.

"I've never seen you here before," she said.

"I've seen you," he said. "And an old lady with a little black dog," he picked up a stick and walked to the edge of the water.

Goosebumps raised on her arms. She shifted her weight, rolled her ankle to free the boot. She didn't like that there was only six feet of air, and some thigh deep water between them. He was peeling the bark from the end of a stick. It looked sharp. He whipped it through the air like one of those long bendy swords. It made it a swishing sound.

"What grade are you in?" she said. "I'm starting third next week."

"I'm starting fourth," he said.

"You're big for fourth."

"We move a lot," he said and sliced the air with the stick. He kept moving closer. Standing in the water up to his knees.

"You're going to hit me with that stick and I'mma be pissed."

"So move. No one is making you stand there."

Her boots wouldn't budge. She slipped her feet out of them and stepped back into the dirt, and then scrambled up the bank in her socks. He looked at the boots trapped in the muck and smiled. He crossed the river and slashed at her boots with the stick, a loud whack echoed as the wood met the rubber with all his preteen power behind it.

"You should let me hit you with this."

"You're crazy!" she said stepping backwards to run but tripping over a root and landing with an 'oof' on her bum. Her heart hammered. The air parted and re-parted above her in a whomp-whomp sound like a helicopter slowing as he beat it. She scrambled to get her feet beneath her and then ran behind a tree. He stood, five feet away, a foot

taller and twice as heavy, slicing the branch through the air, but his eyes never left her face.

"You ever been switched? Spanked? I bet it feels like that. I'll do it across your butt so no one will see."

"I'll scream."

"You're no fun. No wonder you got no friends."

"I got plenty."

"I've been watching. I've seen everything."

Her face heated and her belly clenched as she wondered if he could see in the windows. "You weirdo. Who has no friends? Who has time to spy on girls with his busy social calendar Mr. Popular?"

"I'm new. I haven't met anyone but you. But when I do meet people, I'm going to tell them what a baby you are. And maybe some of the other stuff I saw... "

"You're a jerk," she said, looking over her shoulder gauging the distance to the house and wondering if she could make it without feeling the sting of the stick slice across her shoulder blades or calves. She didn't hear him, he was fast and quiet, and she was on the ground again with the air pushed out of her chest and the boy sitting on her belly, before she could even scream.

"What if I just poke you," he said, pressing the sharp end of the stick into the soft flesh of her upper arm until it felt like her skin might just split. She didn't have the air to cry out, and she was glad. She didn't want to give him the pleasure.

He moved the stick to press into her belly just below her ribs. She only grunted. He moved then to the baby fat on her inner thigh and pushed hard. It burned and brought tears to her eyes. She felt the skin tearing. She imagined him drilling a hole through her leg, and pinning her to the dirt with the stick, before moving to her arms to do the same. Like one of those butterflies at the museum, trapped and spread wide open to for everyone to see, to touch. Prone and defenseless. "Okay," she whispered, choked.

"Okay!?" he was so shocked he tipped over. Finally, with his weight off of her belly, she could breathe

"I'll let you poke me."

"Wherever I want!" he was panting with excitement

"Wherever you want, if..."

"If what? What!"

"If I get to poke you first."

He thought about it. She could see the gears of his brain moving. He looked down at his body and then at the stick, and then at her face, his eyes narrowed. "Deal," he said and stood holding the stick out to her.

Tillie stood slowly, brushed the grass from her shorts, wiped her hands on her shirt. A bruise was blooming on her leg and it hurt to let her thighs touch. She took the stick from him. It was warm where he'd been gripping it. She thought about running, but then about how fast and quiet he was. She thought about breaking the stick in half, but then he'd have even more sharp ends to torture her. She ground her teeth together, and thought about where she wouldn't want him to poke her. There was a long list, but she needed to pick the right one. The one that would stop all of this. She's been watching his eyes, and she knew what he planned to do to her.

Then she knew what to do.

"Come on," he said, smiling, impatient to hurt her.

She struck fast.

He screamed like an animal and bent over double.

She knew she should be running back to the house, slamming and locking the door, but the noise coming out of his face froze her, she'd heard it before, through her open window in the hot

night, it was the scream of a baby bunny being eaten by a cat.

"Shit!" he screamed. "You aren't allowed to go for the eye."

"You didn't say that."

"Everyone knows that."

She shrugged. "I didn't. Lemme see."

The eye was swollen shut. Blotchy, red and white skin with some purple starting at the corner. But she didn't see any blood and thought that was probably good. She'd moved so fast that she hadn't felt the stick enter his eyeball, it was all just soft and then hard, but when she'd pulled it out there had been resistance. She bit her lip. "You might want to get your mama to take you to the doctor."

"She's gonna whip me. We ain't got no money for that." He was crying now. Somehow that sound was worse than the bunny noise. "My daddy's gonna kill me."

Tillie chewed her lip, sighed. "Come with me, I can fix it."

"You can?"

"Yeah."

"Your daddy like a doctor or something?"

"You think I'd be living here if my daddy was a doctor? Shit."

"Your mama a nurse?"

Tillie had him by the upper arm and was pulling him back to Meemaw's house. "Just shut up. My meemaw is sleeping, you gotta be super quiet, and here, close your eyes, I'll lead you. It'll be easier on your hurt eye if they are both closed. Keep them closed."

She led him to the bathroom and sat him down on the toilet seat. She ran cold water over a washcloth, rung it out and held it to his face. "Hold this," she said, grabbing his hand. "Don't move. I need to go get a couple of things." She tip-toed

past Buttons, to the junk drawer in the kitchen for the sewing kit, and supplies, and checked to see if Meemaw was still in her chair. Seeing her with her head tipped back, mouth open, and Buttons in her lap, Tillie snuck back to the bathroom and closed the door quietly behind her.

“Cookies?” he said, looking at the tin.

“What’s wrong with you? When does this ever mean cookies?”

He shrugged. “I’m hungry.”

“Move your hand, lemme see.”

She had to use her fingers to push the flesh of his eyelid back to see the ball. He sucked air through his teeth. There was a dark gash to the left of his pupil and all of the white had turned bright red. It reminded her of when the birds pecked at Meemaw’s tomatoes in the garden. Her stomach turned over and bile rose in her throat. She took a deep breath.

“It’s just a scratch. I can fix it. Happens to Meemaw’s dogs all the time.”

“What? I’m not a dog!”

“Pugs. She loves them. Totally obsessed. They have these giant eyeballs, they get scratched all the time, so you put some ointment on it, and sew it shut for a day or two, and then it’s fixed. You just gotta let the eye rest. If you keep moving it, it doesn’t heal and they go blind.”

“Blind!” he started to breathe quick and shallow, his shoulders jerking up and down. “I don’t believe you.”

“You can just go home.”

“No...”

“She has, had, like ten of ‘em. I know it’s weird. But it’s true.”

He nodded.

She squeezed a line of ointment from the metal tube onto her finger, and rubbed it in his eye.

“Ah! Jesus Christ!”

“Shhhhhhhhhhh,” she said right in his face, her spittle dusting his cheek.

“It hurts!”

“Sorry. I’m going to need you to hold still for this next part though. I don’t want to jab you in the eye with a needle.”

“Can’t I just hold it closed?”

“No. It won’t heal. That’s what the vet said to my meemaw.”

“But that’s a dog.”

Tillie rolled her eyes. “You’re not going to forget, for even a second for the next 2 days? You wanna be blind?”

He sighed. “No, you’re right.”

“You gotta be quiet, too. We can’t wake Meemaw or she’s going to march us over to your mama, and you’re gonna get switched.”

He whimpered as she slid the needle into his lower lid, between his eye lashes and then the upper, and pulled it tight. Just like darning a sock, or putting a patch on her jeans. And again. And again. The skin came together in a seam, the black of the thread stark against his pale lashes. “Okay,” she said, “just one more thing.” And she reached into the sewing kit and pulled out a round black button.

“What the heck?” he said, peeking through his good eye. “You’re not sewing a button on me like a doll. That’s probably just like a dog thing, to make the dog look more normal or something. We don’t have to do it.”

“It’s important. Something to do with the pressure on the stitches. You don’t want to rip these stitches, I ain’t that good at sewing. Besides, I got these sunglasses for you to wear. Start thinking about how you’re going to hide this from your mama until we can take the stitches out.”

He moaned a little as she attached the button, and then stood back to look at her handy work. The button was a little off center, and horrifying. It made her think of an old doll she’d found in a

puddle at the grocery store once. “Perfect,” she said. “Just like Buttons.” She dusted off her hands and put them on her hips.

He sighed.

“Okay, now we just gotta get you outta here before Meemaw wakes up.”

He whimpered a little.

She was so distracted by the relief she felt for having him almost out of the house that she forgot to tell him to close his good eye. When they got to the back porch, he was green.

“Which one of those dogs was Buttons?” He said, gesturing to the ten taxidermy pugs that filled Meemaw’s house.

“They all are. That’s the best part about pets. You never really lose them, when they die you can know what happened to them, you’re not worried about where they are, or what they look like. They look cute forever.”

“Was it their eyes, that killed ‘em?” He said, pointing to his eye.

“Some of them,” she said with a shrug.

“You’re a crazy bitch.”

“I thought you’d said you’d been watching me? I don’t hide it.”

He ran. She smiled until she went back inside and found Meemaw’s eyes on her, Buttons still in her lap. “You can’t treat boys like dogs, Tillie.”

Tillie thought about the look on his face, the wild pleasure in his eyes as he pinned her down and pressed that stick into her thigh; the same look Daddy had the day he took her mother.

“Why not?” she said.

The Brothers

Kevin C Stewart

The brothers heard about a suicide in a car up on the party flat. Gunshot. They knew the body’d be long gone by the time they arrived, but they hoped to at least see the car. After hopping on their Huffys, they networked their way through the blocks of town in the foggy mist. Knobby tires sizzled on damp pavement. The brothers’ unbuttoned, padded flannel shirttails flew back, buttoned flannel shirts beneath, untucked from their unbelted army khakis, the elder brother’s white and gray camouflage, the younger’s a solid, faded green.

The surrounding peaks stood invisible above them, above the firs, cedars and hemlocks rising into the fog and disappearing. Mist now dusting their clothes, the brothers hit the service road that paralleled the interstate and, against the grain, they cranked the gradually steepening grade as fast as they could. Occasional exiting vehicles slung spray but not quite high and far enough to wet them further. The brothers hugged the guardrail at the approach of each car, truck, bus or whatever slowed into town. By the dozens, vehicles whooshed down the highway fifteen to twenty feet above, headed into the city nearly twenty-five miles west, where the interstate terminated. The brothers lived in the last—or first, depending on how you looked at it—suburb, nestled between the Sound and the front range, where the Cicely River flowed in and created, as their dad used to joke, the Pacific Ocean. He used to say, before they moved, the same thing about the Pearl River and the Gulf.

A few miles farther, the access road crossed Minnifield Creek, the interstate bridges towering over them, the understructure populated with strutting pigeons and empty swallow nests, splatted to the girders as random as the spitballs on the George Washington portraits in their classrooms. Indecipherable gang graffiti was the only real color other than the red-black, green-

yellow, blue-black and gold-brown of the brothers' flannel. Beyond the bridges, the access road merged away from the interstate only to resume mirroring it for the rest of its length.

The brothers knew, though, that an unmaintained lane veered north just after the bridge, dropped into the tidal basin fifty or sixty feet down. They coasted the descent, easing the handbrakes off and on, testing the surface for consistency, muddiness and traction. The lane bottomed out and softened, channeled by ruts, full of caramel-colored water that a sudden drizzle pocked. The brothers squinted at the sky but pedaled the lane, mud popping the undersides of their rear fenders like an automatic. Through the trunks of the trees below the cottony ceiling, they could barely see the Sound stretching out, cobalt as the brothers' eyes, but lacking reflections of the surrounding peaks capped pale as the brothers' skins.

One last, long, southern turn into a clearing, and the lane ended in the flat. Here, once summer arrived, high-school kids' parties would begin, but the area before the brothers now was empty of bodies and bloody cars. The brothers leaned on their stiff, left legs, arms crossed over their handlebars, the brothers' flannel crystalized with mist. Sheriff-line tape, yellow as a flash, hung tied from a hazel limb just starting to bud. The rest of the twenty feet or so of tape lay across the wet, leaf-matted ground, into which tire tracks were pressed. A tow truck and the car's, they knew. Farther south and higher up, the interstate stood, vaguely in view again. As quickly as it'd begun, the drizzle stopped.

They shrugged, lowered their bikes to the ground and stepped to where the tape was ribboned around the thumb-thick branch. The elder brother, two inches shorter and a year older than his twelve-year-old sibling, did the honor. He reversed the loose end back through the knot, not wishing to waste even an inch of the tape. They'd ridden over five miles and wanted something to show for it.

A distant crack preceded a brief rumble, barely audible, barely detectable. They looked at the

interstate, almost obscured by fifty yards of fog and forest. They stared at each other. A wreck. The trip might not be a waste after all.

They hurried to their bikes, the elder brother braceleting the ribbon around his left hand. He pulled the roll free at his bike, worked it around the right handlebar, over the hand brake, where the tape uncoiled a little, the loose end hanging like a squirrel's tail.

The mast on the forest floor lay too soft and soaked for pedaling, so they pushed their bikes southeasterly, trotting, weaving through more hazel and through the salal, salmonberry, devil's club and Oregon grape. A knoll separated them from the highway, but they knew of an old construction road that circled it. When the interstate was being built, the workers used this bottom to store equipment and materials, such as rebar, gravel, beams: things two adolescent brothers would have used as a playground. Now it was just trees and scraggly understory.

That knoll, though, served as a good observation point. There were no sirens yet. The brothers wanted to beat the rescue trucks and police cars. Not as good as seeing the actual wreck, but close enough.

The construction road cut into the slope of the knoll, whiskered with only red cedars and Douglas firs, younger than the woods in the bottom, planted upon completion of the interstate. Spiraling around the knoll on the impassible-to-vehicles road, the brothers pushed their bikes over gullies, around saplings, through patches of scrub and over rotted, fallen logs. The interstate grew louder as the brothers curved toward it, their hearts grunge-metal kick-drumming from the trip, the climb, the anticipation.

The road leveled and the cedars and firs gave out to brown, knee-high grass, the interstate not yet visible. The brothers lowered their bikes to the ground again and jogged to the highest arc of the knoll. They took in about a half-mile stretch, six lanes separated only by a double guardrail, about five feet of median on each side of the barrier, ten

feet of berm on each side of the highway. This section had been cut through a ridge, a stair-stepped, bare rockface rising over fifty feet high. More traffic descended than ascended.

Though they'd been that far only by their parents' car, the brothers knew that, beyond the cut, the highway curved out of sight and, a couple of miles later, spanned the Cicely River for the first time east and last time west, the two crisscrossing for fifteen miles up the grade toward Cicely Pass. The bridges were old and low, only a few feet above the water. Sometimes they flooded.

The brothers scanned all the highway they could see. No wreck. But they'd heard it. Maybe it was farther up? Nothing seemed to ebb the flow of traffic in either direction. To rest, they sat a bench-sized rock that they'd sat on many times, watching the east-bound traffic, wondering where it was going, maybe to the Gulf.

They waited for the sirens and talked about all the sirens they'd heard over the years, including when the bridge flooded, the highway shut down. Theirs was not a quiet town in winter. The wrecks. All the wrecks, the ice, the black ice and sleet. They didn't talk about the siren that came to their house, lights strobing their windows.

The vehicles continually drove in and out of sight, traffic still heavier coming west. It was Sunday, opening day for the baseball team in the city, plus all the usual city things that lured people downtown. The brothers had been there only a few times, once to a baseball game, against the Astros, which excited their father but bored them. The baseball games always played on the TV, lighting up their father in his recliner. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether he was asleep or not. He grew angrier at the games when he had to start dealing in the casino. They were allowed to visit him at the shipyards at the Gulf. But not at the casino. The damned casino.

A westbound Subaru threw more spray than the other cars had been throwing. The brothers looked closer, charcoal-colored water spread down the grade as if poured gently from a house-sized,

tilted paint bucket. A few east-bounders cut through it like boats on the Sound. The brothers leaned forward. The water appeared to be only an inch or so deep. A cluster of west-bounders rounded the bend, plumes spraying over each other. An eighteen-wheeler rocked a little, appeared to brush the RV to its left. Both righted themselves, the RV slowing. Two sedans pulled ahead. A bread truck climbing in the opposite direction pulled over, an SUV splashing past. The bread truck driver climbed out and hurried to the first step in the rock face, about three feet above the pavement.

Gurgling filled the air, a sound like river rapids following. The tractor-trailer and RV disappeared below them. At the curve, water built up against the rock face, maybe a foot up the first step. A Mini Cooper floated into the ditch. Two cars tried to race ahead but were slowed by the initial aquatic surge. They sprayed water high. The next surge floated them and turned them cockeyed into each other and swept the cars toward the brothers. One car, a Toyota, caught traction and slammed into the center guardrail and spun upstream helplessly afloat. The Ford drifted out of sight below, and the Toyota followed.

A Humvee measured its way around the curve as smaller vehicles bunched against the Mini Cooper, at first gently, as if being parked by valets, and then with increasing violence, though their impacts were drowned out by the hammering sloshing water, which white-capped and eddied around the center guardrail posts and grew higher and more rapid against the lower rockface step. A Honda swept past the moving Humvee, and the brothers realized how fast the swooshing flood was moving. No vehicles headed eastbound, either stopping to wait out the flood or turning around to try to beat it to the Minnifield Creek bridge.

The pavement sloped from the eastbound to the westbound lanes, where the water ran deeper and swifter, peeling cars from the pile, spinning them slowly, clunkily and depositing them in the ditch, where they sank in three-quarters deep. People climbed out of windows and flung open doors, clambering for the rock shelf, the water tearing at

them, at their vehicles. A kid the brother's age didn't make it. His arms flailed.

The brothers looked at each other. They slid down the knoll, too steep to run, to try to cut off the kid. When they reached the shelf, the kid, a boy they could tell now, was twenty-five or thirty yards upstream, moving fast. The elder brother grabbed the limb of a fir, planted his foot and extended his hand down as far as he could, a couple of feet above the roiling, deafening current. Rising from it, the frigid temperature ached in his knuckles. The kid, almost to him, was bounced off the rock face, pulled under. The brother couldn't make him out in the gray murk. Fifty yards down, the kid rose ass first to the surface. The younger brother helped the elder back to the shelf, hands gripping each other's wrists.

A Dodge Ram rode close to the center, its high chassis still above the flow. Horns penetrated the raucous sluicing and channeling of the flood. Headlights and taillights cartwheeled. A flotsam and jetsam of vehicles clotted the water where it hit the rock face. The maelstrom pulled them away one at a time and wedged each in the ditch. The brothers ran toward them, needing to help. People huddled together in clusters up and down the shelf. Others washed past at speeds beyond rescue. Only briefly did the brothers hear the screams. They saw the looks, though, mouths and eyes all desperate, exaggerated O's.

Two tractor trailers followed the Dodge Ram's plan and crept along the guardrail, water kicking their trailers downhill slightly. Any higher, and those trucks would jackknife. A Hyundai, on its side, water rushing in the driver's side window, was the first car they reached. Either the occupants had gotten out or drowned. A late-model VW Beetle bumped it from behind and began sinking. The sunroof slid open and a woman climbed out, dress and jacket matted to her. She clawed halfway out of the hole. The younger brother held a signpost with his left hand, his elder brother's left wrist with his right, his own wrist clutched by his brother's hand. The elder brother found footing down the step, reached for the woman. She stretched for him. An Escalade slammed into the

Beetle, knocking her back inside but titling the Beetle toward the brother. The woman shot from the hole, but below the brothers. Her dress rode up around her torso. She floated face up, arms waving, escaping their reach. Metal screeching, the Escalade rotated off the Beetle, spun tail-end first into the rock face between the brothers and the woman. The Escalade sank to the front doors, its nose protruding above the current, like pictures of the Titanic the brothers had seen. Another sunroof escape attempt, by two men, mimicked the woman's, and they flailed in her wake.

The brothers' attempts were useless here. The rock face was too high, but the highway rose closer and closer to it, as it reached the curve. The elder brother pulled the younger back onto the shelf. They ran toward the curve, where they could maybe help. The screams emerged the flood's roar. As the brothers grew closer, they heard the sobbing, saw the shuddering, the people on cellphones, the blood, a man in boxers, arm missing below the elbow, bleeding through his beige pants, which someone had used as a tourniquet. He sat shocked, pale as gulls.

The sound was thunderous, the mist from the flood more frigid than the air. Up the interstate, sirens faintly cut through. Another car—they grew indistinguishable now—wedged into the pile, the water lifting its back end. The main channel narrowed, the current deeper and faster, building up against the shoal of vehicles, metal gouging metal. The water jostled them, pulling them screaming free and sending them spinning downstream. How many more cars could there be between here and the river bridges?

The brothers passed several more huddles of weeping shivering people of all ages, all colors. Shivering dogs trotted around sniffing the ground and howling. On the interstate, an Asian woman worked hand-by-hand, creeping along the center rail. She screamed for help, thundering water drowning her voice, and she waved her hand. The current seized her, swept her from the rail, down the incline, into the Escalade and under it.

The brothers turned, trotted toward the curve, which lay less than a soccer field's length away. They wanted only to help. Their father always said, Family first, neighbors second. He'd driven them around the casino parking lot, pointing out the IBB stickers on the back windows of pickup trucks and SUVs. His sticker never got him on there. Now, all were furloughed. All in that damned casino. Now their mother worked there, too, serving drinks among the day-shift slots, the asynchronous beeps, the spiderwebs of lights, the occasional sound of tokens spilling into the victory trays.

Up the highway, a boom echoed down the lanes. The stretch above the curve eased into view. The shelf was only a foot and a half above the sluicing water, cars bunched together two and three deep into the submerged lane. It sounded like a regular whitewater river washing around, over and under boulders. A second boom. The brothers paused and gazed at the three-quarter-mile straight stretch sloping toward them. They looked at each other, the elder mouthing, "The bridges." They gazed up the highway again. It passed across a flat, the water spreading out and shallowing before forcing its way into the cut. The fog clung tight, leaving just enough headroom to see. The flow eddied vehicles of all makes and models, dozens scattered across the scene. The SUV that headed east earlier had pulled off onto the right berm, the driver still inside.

The water slowed. At first, the brothers couldn't believe it, but the water was emptying from the flat. The rushing gurgles quieted. The brothers glanced at each other. Sirens to the east grew louder, though the brothers understood that the noises were no closer. The bridges. Were they gone?

As it had arrived, the torrent calmed and sucked its way through all the wreckage, through the cut, trailed by a thin layer of water, and disappeared like a snake. In the ditches lay a few twisted bodies. A man, two girls around the brothers' age, a toddler. Several dogs. The mourning of the living now hung heavy in the fog.

At the fringe of the wreckage, a bawling man's cries for help penetrated the mournful din. The brothers pinpointed it in a Subaru Impreza as gray as the rushing water itself had been. The brothers hurried to the car as fast as they could in the shoe-sucking silt. The driver's side was pressed into a 60s-model Chevelle. A classic, their dad would have said.

The brothers swung open the passenger's door. A thin black man was buckled into his seat, shaking, crying. He wore a black tie, a white long-sleeve shirt, soaked to his undershirt and chest. His black pants were waterlogged. The elder brother leaned in and unbuckled the seat belt, which slid back into the retractor. The man mumbled about not feeling anything. To allow the younger brother room, the elder lay the passenger seat back as far as it would go and climbed into the rear seat. He wrested the man toward the younger, hands under the man's arms, turning him backs-of-the-shoulders first. The younger brother found a hold under the armpits and dragged the man, not much bigger than they, from the chassis.

Together they pulled him across the muck, up to the rock step and reclined him there. On their knees, they hovered over him, wondering about CPR, like on TV. The man moaned and mumbled about not being able to feel anything, his eyes squinted tight as a freezer seal. People gathered around asking what was wrong. Was he okay?

The brothers didn't have an answer. They didn't know what to do. The elder brother sobbed as if the air had been punched out of him, shocking the younger. He'd never heard this from his brother, who, ever since the flashing lights lit up their windows that night, strode around quiet, calm and mechanical, just as he was when trying to fish people from the flood.

The elder brother bolted to his feet, another sob. He pushed his way through the people. Sirens approached from the west. The water must have poured into Minnifield Creek, and on into the Sound. The younger brother rose and stepped over the shuddering, frail body and followed his brother, who was sprinting down the shelf,

zigzagging around people, who lay, sat and meandered like in the zombie show the brothers watched. The younger brother broke into a jog, not trying to catch the elder, just to keep him in sight.

When the younger brother climbed the knoll, he found the elder sitting on the rock where they watched it all begin. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands hanging down like limp bird's wings. Head lolled forward. The sobs that earlier swelled his chest had now escaped the chokehold of his throat. He looked up at his brother, eyes clear as rain, and said that they were helpless. They were helpless in this world. He had been eight years old. He had been the only one to hear the shot, muffled through a throw pillow. In the driveway, in the domelight of his father's 1993 Blazer, the elder brother saw what he saw. He ran inside screaming. Since, he'd just wanted to be like his brother: aloof, without knowledge, innocent.

A lady cop stayed with the brothers while their mother was taken to the hospital with their father. The lady cop asked them about school, what they did for fun. As he listened to the tow-truck hitching up the Blazer and dragging it away, the younger brother just wanted to see. The lady cop wouldn't let him.

The brothers worked their bikes down the knoll to the interstate, which was now crowded with the vehicles of cops, firemen, rescue workers, and paramedics. Random ruined cars and pickups dotted the highway from the cut to the Minnifield Creek bridges. Several bodies lay under blankets. The brothers had seen them before they were corpses.

When the brothers reached the bridge, they stopped and watched rescue workers down in the flat, covering a few more bodies on the bare, sloppy mud. On its way to the Sound, the water scoured the forest floor clean. Minnifield Creek below them ran clear and normal, as if nothing had happened. Overhead, the fog held true, as though trying to conceal everything. More sirens climbed the grade.

The elder brother pulled the sheriff-line tape from his handlebar and gripped the loose end. The tape unrolled. He let it flicker in the breeze briefly before releasing it. It spiraled gently as a yellow smoke devil and lay down on the water, the current pulling it under foot-by-foot. Before biking away, they watched the tape coil around itself with the grace of an aurora. It flowed under the access road bridge and disappeared toward a Sound chunked with river ice from far upstream.

Another Red Wheelbarrow

Kevin Grauke

Mac Gentry hoisted Mabel's carcass into a red wheelbarrow and pushed it down the street to Dean Pettibone's house. Upon answering the door and seeing his big black Lab dead in a wheelbarrow, Dean burst into tears, despite being a retired Marine. "Oh my God, what happened?"

Mac could've made up some story about how he'd just found her like this, all bloody and bludgeoned, but he did the honorable thing instead and told him the truth. "I beat her to death with a shovel."

Dean looked at him in disbelief. "You did what?"

"She was digging in one of my horseshoe pits, and I couldn't shoo her away, so I had to take after her with a shovel."

Dean stared at Mabel. Her tongue was hanging out of her mouth like a strip of raw bacon. "Did you try to shoo away?"

"I just said that I did."

"And she wouldn't shoo?"

"She would not. Then she snapped at me. I hit her with just a warning tap on the noggin, but that only pissed her off because she really came after me then. I had to start swinging harder at that point. She had me fearing for my life."

Dean crouched next to the wheelbarrow and rubbed Mabel's soft ears for a long while. When he finally stopped, he said, "Fair enough. If she had you fearing for your life."

"She did."

"It's a good thing she had puppies recently."

"I guess so."

"But don't think I'm gonna entirely forgive you for this, because I won't."

"I know how much you loved her."

"Why didn't you just call me? I could've come and gotten her."

"I don't have a phone no more. Who the hell needs to get ahold of me that bad? Nobody at all, that's who."

Dean lifted Mabel from the wheelbarrow. She looked like a giant furry baby in his arms. "What've you got buried in that horseshoe pit, anyhow?"

"That's none of your business and you know it," Mac said as he started pushing his empty wheelbarrow back home.

"I suppose you're right about that," Dean said.

He laid Mabel gently on the ground, sat down next to her, cradled her battered black head in his lap, and talked to her for a bit before he got up to dig a grave for her on the side of his house that got the morning sun's first and purest rays of light.

Earmarked for Later

Jessica Evans

Later. That's what we're on the lookout for. Nate tells us anything can happen later and we believe him. It's night in May. We're at a party near the university and we're working. We sell powders and herbs carefully tucked into the liners of our bras, our socks, our pockets. Two of us sit on the front porch of the row house and create a cover charge for access to the party. We make a hundred before some douche probably named Brad or Brett or Brandon comes and shuts it down.

Nate decides the party is too lame, so it's time to leave. Nate wears fronts in his mouth made from platinum, bought with dope money, shined with pride. He paid extra to the shop on Vine to have his name spelled out in sapphires and sometimes like tonight, the light catches the gemstones and his eyes in just the right way and he looks like a king. Sometimes I have trouble looking at him straight because he's so striking. Also because he's the one who tells us what to do, and sometimes it better not to push that limit. I'm a friend and a lover, but I'm a worker first. Later, Nate will look at me in Duck Creek and his eyes will glisten like an ocean I've never seen and he'll ask me to take a charge for him. And since his magic is the strongest magic of all, I say yes without realizing how the cuffs around my wrist and the stamp on my record will change my possibilities. Years later, when my scars from the night have finally faded, and we're attending the annual memorial of the friend who got shot, we'll relieve who did the shooting and who got charged. Nate will laugh. He'll tell jokes about bailing me out but he won't say thanks.

Later is One of Our Tags**

Jessica Evans

Nate's blue Dodge caravan used to be his mom's before she started taking too many pills to drive. It's missing the steering column, but we use a flathead screwdriver to start it. Nate keeps saying he's going to fix it later. We all buckle up because Nate won't leave until we do. We light a joint, slide in a bootleg Three Six album. Nate drives us down Straight Street, turns left onto Calhoun and takes us back across the city.

Duck Creek isn't a creek. It's the place to explode televisions and learn how to fuck. The city uses it to funnel water from the treatment facility on Route 50 out into the river. We come here to light fireworks, to take mushrooms, to tag. It's where we come when the topside world is too busy, too bright, too loud. Here, sounds echo. They reverberate against the concrete walls, reminding us that later is eventually going to come back to us. Later is one of our tags. We spray paint words with double meanings, huff fumes and pretend we're doing it for the art. None of us are artists. We just like to get high. Nate's tag is Mach One because he wants to be faster than the speed of sound. He parks in the shadows along Ridge Avenue, where the road curves a little to the left before a steep incline. This city is like that, soft and slow before steep slopes. Debbie's sister lives two houses up with an abusive husband who leaves her eyes black and her bones broken. Debbie pretends not to know where we are, and we pretend like she isn't pretending. This is the circle we know, the give and take of being here and being there all at once. It's called dissonance but none of us know that yet. We're too busy looking for ways to take in more air without drowning.

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Managing Secrets

Jessica Evans

Nate doesn't have any weed so he doesn't have any work, but we have sex and it feels good to be next to his familiar scented skin. After, he tells me about rehab and his new diagnosis.

"They called it paranoid schizophrenia, but I know that's not it," he says as he replaces his pinky ring and pulls on his byzantine link chain.

I nod because I don't know what to say. It probably is something, even if that diagnosis isn't right. Both his sisters have fields of pills they take every day, challenges with communication, with deadlines, with living. We don't talk about it the same way we don't talk about my mama being in jail.

Nate asks me what it's like living in Clifton and I tell him about Homa. Of course, he knows Samir, which shouldn't surprise me, but it does. When I'm far from Nate my world is off orbit but when I'm close to him I only want to get away. His pager goes off and he makes a big show of it, like I don't know where he gets his money. Sometimes he forgets about our history and likes to act brand new. We have been together for three years and he's slept with five of my friends on the side. I pretend like it doesn't bother me because I don't have anyone else.

When he's drinking cognac, Nate throws history at me as if he were a Redwood holding all the rings of all the secrets he promised he'd never tell. Nate shows me the pager screen – it's Debbie's number, Debbie who promised she'd stop sleeping with him, stop buying weed for him, would stop trying to lay claim. Nate's eyes glisten. This is a secret he knows how to manage.

Peer Boy

Steve Comstock

It was a heavy, humid summer night and the Mississippi stars were burning all over the place. I was laid out on my bed listening to mama crying in the living room while watching Johnny Carson.

Daddy had stormed out after some fight or other with mama, cursing her soul to hell and Tennessee. He'd been sorting through his old Army stuff, which he always liked to do when he was drinking. He liked to pull the shiny little pins out and wipe them til they sparkled. He had old uniforms in there and boots that he didn't walk nowhere in anymore. He had pictures of Vietnamese women and little Vietnamese babies that he'd shuffle solemnly like they were one hundred dollar bills. Then he liked to get mad about wasted food in the garbage can or windows that didn't shine bright enough.

Sometimes I'd go over to Jimmy's house after school. We had only known each other for half a year. His daddy was a mechanic and one time he showed me what an alternator was. His daddy called him son and only drank beer when he was watching the race on Sunday, and even then he only drank until he got tired and fell asleep on the couch with his arms crossed.

Daddy didn't come back. This time, mama swore she'd had enough.

I woke up the next morning and she was standing in the kitchen with her yellow dress on with the flowers on the collar; that ol' leaving dress that never left nowhere. We were halfway through packing when she found the little champagne glasses that had their names etched on them from their wedding in the top of the closet. She laid down with them on the bed and went to crying in that way I'd always seen before.

That's what set me off. The only thing crueller than the meanness from daddy's heart was the hope mama gave me everytime she said we were

gonna leave. But every time she'd go forgiving him again, leaving my hopes piled up on the trailer floor.

I called mama weak and pathetic. I told her she never left because she didn't have nothing to give the world except to be somebody's rag-doll. I said a lot of other, more despicable things before I stormed off.

I knew about an abandoned shotgun house deep in the woods. I kept cigarettes and stolen comic books there under a floorboard, not because I was ashamed but because when you don't have nothing it feels like something to hide a treasure somewhere. I didn't have anything to miss at home because I didn't have anything at all except mama. Soon enough I did start missing her. I thought about how she'd call me mushroom because I didn't like to cut my hair and it would curl up and poof out like an atomic bomb cloud.

I sat in that house for most of the afternoon. I smoked a cigarette and looked at the Fantastic Four comic mama had given me last year for my 14th birthday. Mr. Fantastic was always my favorite superhero. I lit another smoke even though the last one was burning my throat and read on about Mr. Fantastic whooping up on Dr. Doom.

The mosquitos started eating me up when I set out at dusk to grab my things from home. Even if mama won't leaving, I sure was. The woods were still wet from some rain we had the night before. It smelled of fresh soil and the crickets were playing their legs into the night.

I was just on the edge of the woods when I heard a blast cut through the air. It was coming from home. I felt every name I ever called her come washing back over my tongue. When I got there, the screen door was half broke off and slamming in the wind. It was so loud.

Home didn't look like home nomore. There was blood drops racing each other to the floor. Mama was laid back over the couch, sprawled like she fell asleep all funny. She still had flowers on her collar, but I couldn't make out her face anymore. I

smelled copper and my mouth was bitter and dry. I smelled burnt starch and saw the iron melting through one of daddy's shirts that mama had been ironing. I felt more awake than I've ever been in my life.

I looked and the shotgun he'd used was left on the counter. I grabbed it and laid it gently in the passenger's seat of mama's car. I tore out for Shorty's; daddy's favorite hangout. He said he always liked it because the corners were dark and the jukebox only costed three dimes, but it won't nothing but a rinky-dink brick joint on the edge of town.

I didn't have to look very hard, daddy was right outside the front door begging to be let back in. I flung mama's car into neutral. I stepped out of the half-parked car, levelled the shotgun at my daddy and squeezed the trigger. I didn't have a thing to say to him, just a job to do. I stood there and watched him crumpling into the dirt. He was wheezing.

Jimmy's dad had been watching the whole thing from inside Shorty's and he came out and put his hand on my shoulder, pulled the shotgun out of my hand and tested its weight. I was shaking like a little wet dog. He said, "Poor boy, we all knew what he was like." Then he held open the heavy old bar door and told me "Why don't you come in and sit down, at least til your knees stop knocking."

We went inside and I felt my daddy out there bleeding out and dying. I liked the feeling of him being gone.

There was a Braves game buzzing through a little TV mounted high up in the corner. Jimmy's dad and a big fella named Al just kept feeding me cold beers and telling me about who was gonna bunt and who was gonna steal second. My eyes were heavy and I curled up with my face on my elbow and started thinking about Mr. Fantastic and Dr. Doom and somebody cracking homeruns while people cheered.

Fifty-Five

Charles Pearson

“You’d die,” Wallace said.

“No you wouldn’t,” Saul said.

“You’re godamn right you *would*,” Wallace mumbled. “Bust your head open, break your ribs and proly screw up who knows what all inside.”

Silence. A straight road into town. No hills. All the signs looked the same, and only locals know the landmarks: A burnt up Allis-Chambers in a playa lake, half buried in mud, about five miles out.

Wallace looked to the passenger seat. Saul leaned against the door, eyes asquint with ganja and determination, watching unchanging darkness.

About an hour before, they’d been in Wallace’s garage smoking a pipe and listening to Merle Haggard. Two songs into *Ramblin’ Fever* they couldn’t hear the swerving noises from overplayed vinyl. They swerved, too.

Just after side one of *Swinging Doors*, they ran out of beer.

Wallace was less drunk. They took his car.

Saul’d been drunk since noon and Wallace was beginning to wonder why he didn’t just take him home.

The car smelled like pot when Wallace bought it. Saul thrashed around the glove box looking for a tape. The smell got worse after he bought it. It never stopped running and rode like a boat.

Saul found *Your Place or Mine* by Gary Stewart and slipped it into the tape dock. *Leah, I wanna see ya one more time (bew bewbew bewbew bewba bew) goddamn you woman how can you hold my miiiiiii-* It reminded him of a hooker. The other song that brought her to mind was “Let It Roll” by Guy Clark. That was for different reasons. He preferred to this.

Wallace focused on not crashing. The road looked snakey. In flux. He thought he might’ve gone the wrong way. He looked for the tractor.

He saw Saul reach under the console.

“Hey, hey, slow down,” Saul said. He was rolling down the window.

Bam! Bam!

The car screeched to a stop. Saul’s head hit the windshield. He leaned back against the seat. He touched his head, brought his fingers back and stared.

“What the hell’d you do that for?”

Wallace looked at the gun. In Saul’s lap, still smoking.

“I was shooting that fucking *sign*,” Saul said.

“You could’ve told me,” Wallace said.

“You were fucking driving.”

Saul pulled a knife.

He cut a sleeve off his shirt and pressed it against his head. A trail of blood ended at a red tear below his right eye. The gun sat in his lap. With his free hand he reached into his vest pocket, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He pulled one out between his lips. He didn’t offer to Wallace. Wallace didn’t smoke. He took out his lighter. The small flame reflected in the wrinkles and craters in his skin.

Weed didn’t affect him anymore. It just made him tired. He’d smoked heavy for the last twenty or so years. Started just after his wife left him. It’d helped for a while, then he couldn’t feel it. Beer did it for him. He had some touchy information on his employer and started drinking at lunch most days. He used to play with hookers (which started the whole trouble). It drained him, so he stuck to pot and beer. Now the pot left him feeling the same way. He just smoked it cause it was there. Wallace wondered when it’d be that he couldn’t get drunk anymore.

Saul exhaled a line of smoke that expanded into a funnel, then disappeared.

"I heard somewhere that if you jump out of a car going fifty-five miles per hour—it'd kill you," he said.

"I believe it," Wallace said.

"I doubt it," Saul said. "Not unless you hit a sign or land short of the ditch."

Wallace shook his head. The speedometer sat on fifty. Saul flicked the cigarette butt out the window. Dried blood stuck the shirt sleeve to his head. He reached into his pocket for another smoke.

"I'll bet you a case, that if I jump out at fifty-five, it won't kill me." The words came out slowly, covered in smoke. "Deal?"

Wallace shook his head: No.

Saul stared out the window.

The car stopped about halfway over the dam.

Saul kicked the door open and started shooting. Chunks blew out of the road and gravel peppered the car's hood.

The first shot clipped its rattle. The snake coiled up—ready to strike. The next three missed completely. Wallace watched him scramble back to the car, reach into the console. Saul clicked bullets into place, cursed in mumbles.

Walking towards the snake he let off two shots, one after the other. The snake went sprawling and Saul went after it.

A car drove by, honked. Headlights revealed a man with his left foot of the head of a snake, spiraling in desperation, gun hanging down with right arm, left hand up flipping the bird.

The barrel looked through his foot at the snake's head. Saul struggled to hold it steady. Pulled the trigger. Bam.

The passenger door opened and a headless snake flew in from the dark, dripping blood in a crooked line across the leather interior.

"What'd you do with the head?" Wallace asked.

"In the lake."

Dark liquid escaped a through hole in Saul's boot. A thin stream leading to a spreading stain in the floor mat. Two of his middle toes were gone. Wallace held back vomit.

"I think I'll run for office," Saul said. He looked pleased.

Wallace nodded and made a noise in his throat. Watched yellow rectangles slide under the car.

The speedometer needle leaned right. A slow lean. Saul watched the bar ditch:

"Move over. You're taking the whole damn road."

Wallace didn't argue. He wondered how Saul would react to the emergency room. He'd probably be too woozy to know the difference, but when he was screwed up there were certain things he noticed. Bizarre things. Not bizarre things, normal things—bizarre details. And there was no pattern. Once he was too drunk to stand, his cigarette count came up one short, and he wanted to know who in the *hell* had smoked from his pack without asking. Another time, he announced his back right tire was three pounds flat. He hadn't been able to speak for the last half hour. They were taking him home. They stopped the car, checked and sure as hell—

Saul forced open the door and jumped.

Down on the Farm

Jeremy Perry

Sheriff Randall King wheeled his cruiser onto the dirt lane that ran the length of the Mullins' old home place. Over the years the lane had been eroded by weather and rutted by farming equipment. He veered around the patrol car of Neal Bass and nodded to the rookie deputy who stood by with rifle at the ready. The sheriff had instructed Neal to stand down. He would take care of the matter on his own.

Randall drew from his non-filtered Pall Mall and blew thick double streams from his nose. He slowed the cruiser to a crawl and dipped into a hole and eased back out. A call came over the radio about a domestic dispute and an outstanding warrant on someone living on the other side of the county. Those calls were a dime a dozen. He turned down the volume.

At the end of the dirt lane he saw the Winnebago. Most people would consider the camper dilapidated and ready for the scrap yard, but Randall knew it was the only home Lyle Mullins had left. The sheriff had known Lyle and his family all of his life. He'd gone to school with Lyle's boy, Curtis, who'd died of cancer a few years back. Lyle and Randall's daddy had served in Vietnam together. By luck or grace of God or some other force, both came home alive. Their families had history, and some might say they even had a strong kinship.

To his right, Randall glanced across a field to the old Mullins' farmhouse. The white paint had been neglected for some years. A lopsided shutter hung on by a single screw. He spied a few missing shingles that the bank had yet to replace. No doubt the roof leaked. A *For Sale* sign was planted in the front yard. The entire sight saddened his heart.

Front brakes bird-squeaked then silenced as the cruiser came to a stop. Randall believed Lyle wouldn't cause any trouble, as he'd done earlier

with Deputy Bass, but by instinct and experience, he unclasped his holster. He knew what kind of man Lyle Mullins was, one who had worked hard all his life, one who wanted nothing more than to live an honest and simple life. He also knew Lyle preferred to be left the hell alone.

Randall stepped out and eased the door closed. He hit the cig a last time then dropped it and crushed it into the dirt with the toe of his cowboy boot. He studied the camper. The rig had been sitting in the same spot for as long as he could remember. When times were different the camper served as a fishing retreat for Lyle and his friends, and once in a while was a place to hole-up when Lyle wanted to get away from his wife's hen pecking. Randall tried to recall how long Joyce had been gone. Ten years? Twelve? Time slipped away, he knew that for sure.

He stepped away from the cruiser and heard, "You best stop right there, 'less you want a chest-full from my shotgun."

Randall raised his hands, showing his peaceful intent. "Damn it, Lyle, it's me, Randall King. I've come to talk."

A pause came, then Lyle said, "Sheriff, is that you out there?"

"Yes, sir. It's me."

"You alone?"

"My deputy's down the lane, but it's just me standing out here." Randall's eyes swept over the campsite, but failed to spot the old man.

"Alright then. Come on in. Slow and easy."

Randall dropped his arms to their natural position and moved toward the camper. The rig was settled next to the Muscatatuck River in a grove of hickory and beech trees. The morning breeze shifted and Randall whiffed the sweet smell of campfire smoke. When he reached the riverbank, he saw the old man.

Lyle sat on a felled tree that was dark and scarred by the hands of Mother Nature. He was hunched over with elbows resting on knees covered with

faded denim jeans. Between two gnarled, leather hands was a tin cup with steam rising from the top. Beside him rested a pump shotgun with ribbed forestock and gold trigger. A Remington 870 Wingmaster, best as Randall could tell.

“Morning,” said Randall stopping a few feet from the fire.

The old man placed his whiskered mouth to his cup and sipped. He didn’t speak but gave a respectful nod instead.

“My deputy says you took a pot-shot at him,” Randall said outright.

“Is that so?” said Lyle in a rasped tone.

“It’s one thing to be squatting on state land, but to go shooting at one of my deputies, that’s a whole other ballgame.”

The old man drank from his cup, not a bit riled by the sheriff’s words. He straightened his back, glanced at his shotgun, then nodded at the small fire. “You best have a cup of coffee first, sheriff. Then we’ll talk.”

A tin coffee pot sat on a chunk of river rock next to the fire. An extra cup waited out of the flame’s heat. Randall had already drank his morning coffee, but thought it best to accept Lyle’s advice. He wanted to keep the peace. He knew wheeling in here trying to use force on the old man would be the worst approach. Keeping a side-eye on Lyle and his shotgun, Randall grabbed the cup and filled up.

On a spit, just above the flames, was a skinned, headless critter. Randall knew a skinned squirrel when he saw one. The season was out and Lyle could be fined for poaching, but Randall didn’t give a damn about some tree rat. He was here to deescalate and put a stop to this on-going bullshit.

“This has to end, Lyle. I can’t keep holding off my deputies from coming out here. You have to move on out.”

“This is my land. I don’t have to do a damn thing,” said Lyle. He sat his cup on the log next to the shotgun. He stood. When he did, Randall’s hand

moved toward his side arm, but broke away when Lyle leaned over to turn the spit.

“Awful jumpy, sheriff. Go ahead and sit down, relax a spell.” Lyle motioned to a stump on the other side of the fire.

A turtle perched on a log scurried off and dove into the muddy water when Randall dropped onto the stump. With his back to the river, he sipped from his cup. The coffee was hot and strong. Lyle lifted the spit and Randall saw a holstered revolver under his flannel jacket. Lyle twisted off one of the hind legs and offered it to the sheriff.

Randall shook his head. “No, thanks. Already had breakfast this morning.”

Lyle deposited the charred animal across the stones that encircled the fire. He returned to his spot on the log and with yellowed teeth, ripped tiny squirrel muscle and chewed. He swallowed and sipped from his cup. “So, your deputy thinks I shot at him, huh?” Bits of meat projected from his mouth. “Did I hear you say that right?”

Randall swallowed coffee, then said, “My deputy claims you shot at him, yeah, that’s right.”

Lyle shook his head. “Did no such thing.”

“He said he heard a gunshot. Said you shot right over his head.”

Lyle sucked at his teeth. “Let me tell you something, sheriff. One thing I can’t stand is being called a liar.” His old raspy voice climbed. “Now, you haven’t outright and said it yet, but you’re getting mighty close. What your deputy likely heard was the shot that killed my breakfast. He’s either real brave or real dumb to make a bold claim like that on another man.”

Randall looked at the squirrel on the rocks. Could be that Lyle was telling the truth. The sheriff knew he came from a time when a man’s word was his honor, but he also knew Lyle would do whatever he needed to do to keep his land.

“No one’s calling you a liar,” said Randall. “Neal said he stepped out of his car and heard a shot, but if you say you didn’t shoot at him, then you

didn't. You ignoring the judge's order has everyone a little on edge, that's all."

Lyle tossed squirrel bones into the fire. He wiped his hands on his pant legs. "I moved out of the goddamn house. What more do you want?"

"You have to move off this land, Lyle. I'm sorry. That's just the way it is."

"You know how long I lived in that house, sheriff? On this land? I lived in that house longer than you've been alive. Made many memories over there. Worked my fingers to the bone to provide for my family. Joyce too. She was a good woman."

"I know she was, Lyle. I was fond of Miss Joyce too."

"I have her ashes in a metal tin in the camper. When she passed-on a part of me went with her. I still owe those goddamn doctors. I had to refinance to pay her medical bills. I couldn't keep up with paying the taxes. Now the goddamn bank has taken my home and trying to kick me off my land." Lyle stared into the fire, searching for his next words. A fly landed on his sleeve. Randall sensed Lyle had more to say and waited until he was ready. "It's a damn shame a man's country turns on him the way it does. He goes off to war, fights for what he believes in, to protect America. Then comes home to a place where he's no longer accepted. Then starts a family of his own and works his entire life only for his country to turn its back on him again. It's a damn shame. But you likely don't care about any of that."

The old man's words resonated deeply within Randall. He'd heard a similar sentiment spoken by his own father. The way these vets, especially wartime veterans, were unfairly treated by the government...it wasn't right. Randall did care, but he still had a job to do.

Quick on the draw, Lyle pulled his gun and aimed in Randall's direction. "Don't move, sheriff. Stay right where you are."

Randall cursed under his breath for being so careless, for putting his guard down. "Don't do this, Lyle."

"Sit still, damn it." Lyle drifted his barrel just right of Randall's left leg and fired. The head of a snake exploded into little pink chunks along the riverbank. "Damned water moccasins are thick as thieves out here. Leave a nasty bite if you let 'em." Lyle slid the gun back into the holster.

Randall's heart thumped in his chest. Then he heard, "Sheriff! Sheriff! You okay? Copy?"

Randall hit the button on his radio. His breathing heavy. "Yeah, Neal. Everything's fine. Snake came up on us. Everything's fine."

"You want me to come down there?"

Randall looked at Lyle. The old man squinted, gave a hard, disgruntled scowl. "No. Just stay put until I say otherwise. Over." He drained his cup, set it beside him. He pulled a pack of smokes from his shirt pocket. He tapped one out, poked it into his mouth, and lit up. He thought of the oath he'd taken years ago, the one to protect and serve. He'd faltered on that oath many times over the years, with his drinking and poor decisions, but he'd always tried to do what was right.

"We're gonna end this today," said Randall. "This has to end right now."

"Come on, sheriff, you know me better than that. Besides, where am I gonna go? I don't have any family around. This is my land and my land's where I'll be staying."

Randall flicked his cig into the fire and stood. "I've heard enough. Let's get in the car."

The old man shucked his pistol. This time, the sheriff was ready and did the same. Both men, hard-faced staring through slotted eyelids, aimed their gun at the other. One man trying to protect what he felt was rightfully his and the other man trying to uphold law and order.

"Don't do this, Lyle. Put it down and we'll walk out peaceably. We'll figure this out."

Lyle shook his head. "Can't do that, sheriff. I'm gonna show you something and then you'll know why I'm not leaving this farm." Lyle eased his left hand inside his jacket. His eyes and pistol stayed

fixed on the sheriff. When his hand returned, a gunshot cracked the air, echoing through the woods, scattering birds from treetops. The old man's eyes fluttered. His body slumped and dropped like a sack of feed, pistol falling beside him. Fifty yards up the riverbank, Neal Bass was lowering his rifle.

Randall's chest heaved in and out. Mouth open, he wanted to yell, he wanted to cuss, but couldn't find the words. This wasn't the first time he'd seen a man's brains sprayed over the ground, but this was someone he'd admired, someone he saw in the same light as he saw his own father. He'd always worried that one day it would come to this. Randall stood over the body knowing the old man was the last of his kind. He knew there would never be another Lyle Mullins.

Beside Lyle's body was an envelope. Randall squatted, opened it, and after a quick read, realized he was looking at a permit, one for a burial plot right here on the Mullins' Farm. It was legal and binding.

In the envelope was another piece of paper that had been ripped from the corner of a brown paper sack. Randall flipped it over and on the back he read the words: *Scatter her ashes over my grave.*

Right then, Randall knew the old man had been right all along. Lyle Mullins, proud husband, father, and army veteran, would be staying on his land after all.

Get to Work

Miranda Ramírez

It's after 10:00 PM when I decide to leave Arlo's place. We have class tomorrow, and we both need time to sleep this off. Every hour he kept saying he wanted to wait a bit longer, just for the clouds to clear up. But I knew that was bull shit. Even tossed as I am, I can easily spot Canis Minor in his eternal leap after Lepus when I look up. This night was crystal clear. Arlo hadn't even brought out his telescope. It stayed zipped in the big black canvas bag by his feet at the edge of the unlit firepit all night.

"It's late," I said.

"Night Manny," said Arlo without looking my way.

I said my goodbye, leaving him alone by that pit. It's like he's not even really sitting there, or I wasn't, I can't be sure. Standing up too quickly lets me know I should have stopped at my third beer. I keep my eyes on the sky as I walk back toward the house. Until the looking up gives me vertigo, and I slip a little on the dirt path.

"Whoa, glad I didn't drive." I laugh because I don't own a car.

Reaching the yard, I push off the tailgate of Arlo's dad's, Mr. Stuckey's, Chevy. He had parked it near the barn, like always. Though I'm grateful it's here now, it makes me sad to think he still hasn't come home to move it. I worry for Arlo. I know what it's like, not knowing if or when your old man will be back. I know how it feels like years, but it's only been weeks.

I take a leak behind the truck before I turn to go—I breathe in the night air. The path still smells of fresh-cut cedar from the fence they'd built last month. As I come to the front side of Arlo's house, I listen to the whine of the cicadas. They're early this year; it's only March. I look up at the stars one last time. Thankful that Mr. Stuckey had made this large clearing for his home. Arlo told me once when we were kids that it was for horses. His Mom

had always wanted them to have horses. She and my Mom used to be really close. They'd danced together in the Rodeo shows; all decked out in these frills and roses. That was before they had husbands and kids.

The trees will be too thick in the driveway for me to see the stars, so I'm soaking it in. I hope Arlo isn't going to have another freak-out like he did when his Mom split on them. I try to help him. I've been coming by all the time, real low stakes, to show him he isn't alone. My parents left too, not the same way, but still, I get it.

The crunch of stones beneath my soles startles me into looking down. I'm already at the gravel drive. My black Adidas blur into sight, and my head spins even more than when I was stargazing. But, instead of falling, I right myself into this sort of arrhythmic gait, ride through the spin. I am careful to avoid the small swamps that have sprung up in the four-foot ditches that run along both sides of the drive. It's early spring here in Banderas, and they're full of rainwater and mosquito larva. The trees are looming, creating a dark tunnel for me to tread through, but I am not scared. I can see the streetlight at the end, and I've walked this way a thousand times. Even so, I hate walking it alone.

I stop short and brace my shoulder against the giant oak tree that marks the end of the Stuckey driveway. I catch my breath and search for something to make me feel grounded. The crushed limestone cuts a stark line against the road's older, darker, and oil-stained gravel. If I squint, the tiny bits of rock blend into gray, losing definition. For a moment, I lean into the solid feel of the bark on my back. Then I push myself off the tree and step out into the road. Shady Glen doesn't have sidewalks. This last street isn't even paved. It doesn't matter; in half a mile, I'll be in my bed at Tita's.

There's no one on the road, all the houses I walk by are dark. No people are shouting or playing music, but the Glen is far from silent. At this hour, all sound belongs to the wild. Besides the cicadas, there are cats, frogs, dogs, bats, sometimes even

owls. All kinds of natural noise fill the night air. I can't even hear the highway over the din.

I'm still drunk, but I feel better out here, away from my friend and his gloomy demeanor. It's peaceful, walking along this split in the woods, below a river of stars. The clarity of the sky reminds me that our town sits on the edge of the grasslands and the desert. Shady Glen might even be the last woods this side of town. Its streets are lined by trees older than my parents, but ten miles west, the chaparral fades, and the wastes of rock and sand dominate. I wonder if Dad ever gets to see the stars. I think he only gets to go outside during the day. Who knows if he has a window in there? I wonder if he remembers me, it's been so long. I never write him anymore. He never calls, not even collect. Mom would say he didn't want us to see him like that. In his orange jumpsuit, behind bars, looking like a crook. Guess she didn't realize that meant that I never got to see him at all.

Arlo's house is in the back of the neighborhood, where the lots are bigger. Woods surround his place. Standing in their pasture, it can seem like you're in some big forest. But here on my end of Shady Glen Drive, the houses sit on half-acre lots and have four-foot chain-link fences. I can see my house from here. Jesse's car is in the driveway. The lights are on in the kitchen when I walk up to the backdoor. It's unlocked, as always.

"Bout time?" says Jesse.

My ancient Abuelita gets up from her seat and hobbles over to me. She sighs and puts her hand to my cheek. Then she turns and kisses Jesse, pats him on the shoulder, and leaves us for bed.

"Buenas Noches, Tita." I hear Tony call from the living room.

It sounds like he's watching the Spurs game. My eldest brother, Jesse stands, grabs himself a Negra Modelo. He pops the top with a lighter and flicks the cap into the garbage bin by the door. He takes a sip, and we all wait for the sound of Tita closing her bedroom door.

When it does, Jesse smacks me across the back of my head. "Where you been?"

"Hey, man, get off me." I shove him a bit, but not seriously.

"You drunk?" he asks me, taking another sip.

Half his beer is already gone.

"He smells drunk," says Tony walking into the kitchen.

"What are you...Mom?" I stammered.

"He's drunk," Tony said, getting himself a beer.

I sit down at the table. Tony had left the TV on—he did this on purpose so that *we* wouldn't bother Tita. I know I am about to get it. Jesse drained his bottle, and Tony handed him another.

"It ain't Friday," he said, wiping his mouth.

"Really, I can't tell," I said.

Tony leaned on the counter, his elbows hooked into the sink.

"What the fuck Manny?" Jesse questioned, "Ain't you got school in the morning?"

I don't say anything. Jesse knows I have school. He also knows I'm drunk. He ought to; he's the one who taught me how. So I drum my fingers on the tabletop and try to act sober.

"You down at the Stuckey's again?" Jesse asked, knowing my answer before he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

Tony turned, snorted something thick and heavy into the sink. I heard it plop. The sound made my stomach wrench. It stayed in my throat as I watched him take another pull on his beer. I'm glad he quit smoking; maybe that sound would go away too.

"Alright then, school don't matter to you no more. Let's put you to work." Jesse said.

"What?" I got a distinct feeling that I was being set up.

"Yeah, yeah. You're a big man now, getting drunk with the homies. That shit costs money, right? Besides, your family is in need; I'm a man short." He said.

"You mean join a crew? Like—like, Tony?" I asked.

"Yeah, like Tony, little shit. Like me, like Tio, and your cousins." He said.

I look at my big brothers, first to Tony, hoping he'd help, but that middle child had his lips sealed. So, finally, I looked back at Jesse.

"I can't do that; you know I can't. I-I have class." I said.

"Jess, he's got a point; you know how Mom felt," Tony said.

I smiled, and Jesse glared at him. He'd hit it on the head—the perfect out. Before Mom left, she told me, "I don't want anything distracting you from your studies, mijo. Nada ok? Escúchame." We'd been sitting right in this same kitchen when she said it. They all knew I was the smart one. Better than smart, I was *gifted*. Mom didn't know what to do with that, but she did everything she could to protect me from the future my brothers were living—a life of hard labor and little reward.

"Mom's pretty busy these days—ain't she Ton?" Jesse snapped at him.

That one stung. Even though a year has passed since Mom took Tony's baby with her to San Antonio, it's still real raw. Jesse knew it. He used it to keep Tony in line. In response, Tony said nothing and grabbed another beer from the fridge.

"Mom said nothing's more important than school," I said.

It was a weak attempt. Jesse kept the roof over our heads. I could never really tell him no. I tried to stifle a belch. Jesse looked me over, from head to toe. It made me feel sober and nauseous at the same time. I slid my feet, my sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. Jesse leaned back in his chair.

"Naw—of course, I wouldn't want to distract you from school. But hey, you got that early dismissal, right?" he almost whispered this last bit in my ear.

I'd had Tita sign the papers so Jesse wouldn't know, but she must have told Mom. Mom would assume everyone knew, and if I'd complained, "Mijo, we don't keep secrets in this family." No one bothered to tell her we hadn't lived as a family in years. Even before Mom left for San Antonio. It was weird enough when Dad went to jail, but then she gave Jesse our house in town. Moving me out here to the Glen to be with Tita, well, that had pretty much been it. No more church, no family dinners, none of those big block parties we used to have at the house in Little Mexico. Everything that defined family for me was back in that old neighborhood.

"Come on, man, I have club after class?" I tried to reason with my eldest brother.

I hadn't been going, but it was worth a shot.

"Club, huh? That that STEM shit?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, not meeting his face.

Jesse had never done anything like that. He'd tell you that after-school clubs were for kids who didn't have to work. Dad and Tio had him on the crew when he was like 10, mowing lawns, raking leaves, being their water boy or their translator. I never had to do any of that. Not just because I hate manual labor, I couldn't do it. My asthma is so bad I'm useless in the heat, besides I barely speak Spanish. Tita and I get by with our broken communication, but I ain't even going to try outside the house. She tries to teach me, but if I'm being honest, I'm just not interested. I know enough to get by.

"Don't lie to me, Manny," Jesse, said each word real slow, never blinking.

Tony shook his big-eared head. He's as powerless as me.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked.

My brothers looked at each other. Then Jesse clasped his hands, leaning his face down into the

knot of fingers he'd just made. He looked tired. He always did.

"I can't have you going over there no more." He said to me.

"What, why not?" I was surprised; he'd always liked Arlo.

"Whole lot of trouble out there." Tony chimed in.

I furrowed my brow so heavily he could have sunk in it.

"Hey, look," Jesse said, his palms in the air, "some people just don't want help."

"Some people don't need to ask." I stared into his face, daring him to push me.

Tony laughed into his fist at our played-out showdown routine. Neither one of us could look away. I know my brother. All of us, we are all like different suits cuts from the same cloth. If he told me I was on a crew, I was on one. It could be on his terms or mine.

"Alright, but only part-time," I mumbled.

He clapped me on the shoulder, quickly drained his bottle, and stood up. Tony tossed their empties in the bin, a six-pack gone in less than twenty minutes. Jesse grabbed the keys from the hook near the backdoor. He slaps my hand and pulls me to my feet for a hug.

"Welcome to the crew, Lil' Dude." He says as he walks out the door.

Tony shakes his head at us. Jesse steps of the porch—the starlight is reflected in his eyes when he turns back to look at me.

"Hey, Arlo can come here if he wants company," he watches my nod.

"I know," I say to him.

Jesse smiles.

"Good. Night Manny."

I watch them walk to the car; then, I lock the backdoor. I can't tell you why; it just felt right.

Just Another Day

Miranda Ramírez

It's 4:30 AM, and both of us are up—Mom and me. She's commuting over an hour these days, down into the city. Since they closed the plant, she works in a big corporate office in San Antonio. She got a promotion when most people got laid off. She says I should be thankful; she's putting food on the table, cable on the TV. Most mornings, I spend half my time waiting to use the bathroom. She just smiles at my impatience.

"Kacie, honey, it takes time to look this good. It's early in the morning."

"I know Mama," I tell her with a nod.

I don't remind her that she could sleep longer if she were home earlier, and I don't say anything about the overnight bag she has sitting by the garage door. I'll have the house to myself again this weekend. Checking the clock, I intentionally, audibly sigh.

"Alright, alright. I'm out of your way," she says.

I plop my makeup bag on the counter and sit on the toilet. I lean over in my seat and turn on the water for my shower. Feeling the temperature with my fingers, I wince; it's ice cold.

"Mom, the pilots out again!"

No answer. I stick my head out into the hallway. Stevie Nicks and Mom's Conair hairdryer is blasting from her bedroom.

Our water heater is an old piece of shit. It sits smack in the middle of our hallway wall, nestled among the wood paneling and warn family photos. It's an original, classic of 70s style housing that littered the front section of Shady Glen, our neighborhood. I turn the little brushed-brass knob opening the knee to ceiling panel that contains the water heater. I use the grill lighter with practiced skill, left here for this very purpose, to relight the thing. When it lights, the heat from the flame reminds me that my throat feels like sandpaper,

and I start to cough. I'm nineteen, but I sound like I'm sixty-five. I should quit smoking. I want coffee; that should help. I've got time to kill while the water warms up. I pour a cup into an oversized mug. Extra sugar, extra cream. A cloud of perfume proceeds the arrival of Mom to the kitchen.

"You want a little coffee with that?"

"Ha-ha," I say, slurping at the edge of the cup.

It's too hot to gulp like I want to. Mom pours herself a cup into her travel thermos.

"Grabbed these for you at the CVS," she hands me my birth control.

I don't remind her that I've asked her to let me do these things. I take the pills and head back to the bathroom. Praying the shower is ready. I pop open the box and slide out the little yellow dial. Popping out my pill, I swallow it with my hot sugary concoction. It's a good thing she picked them up—I'd forgotten. But it's not like I need them—she's the only one getting laid in this house. Mom would say, better to have them, just in case. I know why they're important to her—it's why they're important to me too. I don't want another—neither of us would use the word, accident.

I work at the Valero outside Shady Glen. A five-minute walk to another twelve-hour shift. Good thing too because I don't have a car. By the time I was in the tub, Mom was shouting her goodbye through the door.

"I'm sorry, I can't wait and drop you off, honey."

She could wait; she makes her own hours.

"No worries, Mom. Have a good day!" is what I say, but I'm thinking, *what the fuck ever.*

I shouldn't complain, it's just a short walk, but I still do. I'm not a morning person, to begin with, and this day already feels long. I grab my purse, my smokes, my keys and head for the garage door. We never go out the front. The sun is just rising, and there's a wetness to the grassy lots. It's more than morning dew; it's as if a big fat cloud just

settled itself down on the road, like walking through a wet blanket. I'm glad I braided my hair, even if it does extenuate my roots. By the time I walk up to the station's glass doors, my sneakers and the bottom of my khakis are soaked. Pete let me in, his giant ring of keys clanging against the glass.

"Mornin," he said with a smile.

I like Pete. Most people think he's a creep, but I know better. He might take a little too close of a look at your uniform every now and again—if you know what I mean, but overall, he was harmless, sweet even. For one thing, Pete has never made me work the night shift, not once. He's old school like that. Pete thinks *it isn't safe for a lady to work the overnight*. I didn't need to tell him it was risky day or night—he knew. But keeping me on days was what he could do, so he did it, and I'm grateful.

"Mornin' Pete."

I smile back and take the keys he's left in the door out and hand them to him.

"I'll watch the floor. You get the coffee going," He says.

See? Nice guy. He knows I like to wake up slow. It's 5:05 AM, and the morning rush won't start for another twenty minutes. I pull out my bright teal vest and set my purse under the front counter. I stretch my arms wide and back as I slip it on, the fabric of my white cotton t-shirt pulling tight across my chest. As if on cue, I catch Pete sneaking his morning peek. I'll be honest; I knew what I was doing. I did it for him. My small thanks for his patience. He seats himself with a groan on the stool behind the counter. I know it's so he can easily watch me walk toward the coffee station. I don't mind, not really. I find that it's easier to appease older men like Pete. Forgive them their vices, and they'll have your back. I head toward the three-gallon automatic brewers opposite the soda fountains and catty-corner to Pete's seat at the front counter. Perfect view.

"Turn on the radio, Pete."

"You got it. Rock or Country?"

"Put it on the Skynyrd station on the XM, would ya?"

"Mmmhmmmm."

Tuesday's Gone starts playing. I can't hear that one without thinking of *Happy Gilmore*. My dad loved that movie. I wonder if he watches it with his new family. I wonder how he is with his new daughters. *Did they have special, daddy-daughter movie time, too?* I never watch movies anymore. I hate the movies.

By the time I've got the coffee brewing, Regular, Decaf Regular, and Cinnamon Pecan, Pete is drooping, and the pumps out front are starting to see some action. He'll just be in my way.

"I got it, Pete. Go get some sleep." I pat him on the shoulder as he passes me the stool.

"Your throne, Highness."

"Good night, Pete."

I say this to him every morning—the same routine every day. Nothing changes around here, not for the better, at least.

By 7:00 AM, I've seen most of my regulars. Marla Smith has rolled through with her twin toddlers. Alejandro and his house painting crew just gassed up for the long drive to the suburbs of San Antonio. Bev Jenkins spent twenty minutes at my counter talking about the guy she met at the grocery store last night as other commuters came and went. She never paused in her retelling, ignoring the other customers in her enthusiasm.

We'd gone to school together, she and I, but we weren't close—we never were. I let her talk anyway—like she always wants to when she comes through the store. Bev is sweet in a bruised sort of way. I get that. She'd had always been a bigger gal, and the fellas had never paid her much attention. I never felt sorry for her or anything, not even back in the day—I know there's plenty of guys out there into bigger ladies. But Banderas is

small, and most of the guys—well, guys our age are shallow cruel assholes, and the girls were even worse. But no, I never felt sorry for her, at least not until her parents sent her to fat camp our junior year. Kind of messed up—since we all knew she didn't want to go, and she wasn't even that big. But parents do weird shit that they think is helping when it's hurting—hurting more than anything anyone else could have done. Who am I to judge? She came back skinny, well skinnier, and she kept it off. Didn't stop the girls from picking on her, but it sure did seem to shift the way the guys around here saw her. Without the fat, she was all T & A with a tiny waist, just how they like 'em round here.

When Bev started to repeat herself, I left the counter to check the coffee machines. She followed me, ignoring my attempts to imply that I was busy with work. As I begin brewing a fresh batch of regular and restocking the flavored creamers, the chime for the door goes off, and I turn to see Manny and Jesse Sanchez walking in. Habitually, I do a double-take, looking for Toni. He's not with them. I look out at the pumps. There he is, filling up the work truck at the one diesel pump. He looks older, darker. It makes me sad to think I played a part in that.

"Mornin' Kacie, Bev," said Manny, on his way past me to the energy drinks.

"Good morning," I said back.

Jesse doesn't say anything to me; he just tips up his hat and gives this forced little smile. Guess he's still on the *you're-ruining-my-brother's-life* kick. I don't know why I care. Everyone thinks Jesse's this saint, but he's not. I know him now—now that we are technically family.

Bev's mouth has stopped running for the first time in what felt like a century as she watches all this. She doesn't know; nobody knows that I, quiet Kacie Diaz from Shady Glen, had secretly had a baby with Antonio Martin Sanchez. Nobody knew that Savannah Maria Sanchez, now four years old, was my baby. I guess my fat-camp lasted a bit

longer than Bev's, a whole year in fact and every weekend since.

That year, my pregnancy, and the few weeks after Savannah's birth, I lived with Mama Sanchez. That sweet woman moved cities just to raise our baby. That's why Jesse was actually pissed—the boy just misses his Mama. I can't say that I blame him; she is a saint. I know she'd been their rock—ever since their dad went to prison. I remember sitting in that little house off of 6th, the one that Jesse still lives in, holding Toni's hand and breaking the news.

"Mom, I gotta—we gotta tell you something," Toni faltered, and I squeezed his hand.

She looked worried and sat down on the coffee table right in front of us. I had this unbearable urge to pee, so much so that it was distracting me. It was supposed to be too early in my pregnancy for that to be a thing. I tried to push the sensation away. Toni kept hopping his knees up and down.

"Mijo, what is it?" she said so calmly; it was as if she already knew.

"I'm pregnant!" I practically shouted it at her.

Without hesitation, she leaned forward and grabbed my hand.

"That's wonderful, Corazoncita—welcome to our family." But, of course, she had known.

She hugged us both, and we all cried. We'd had to go to Mama Sanchez; my mother hadn't been so understanding, she'd given me two options: abortion or get out. Toni and I had decided to keep the baby—but we were babies ourselves—not even really a couple until it happened.

Manny started to head for the counter, so I moved to meet him. I glare at Bev when I notice she's still watching us. She finally takes the hint.

"Well, I'll catch up with you later, Kace," She leaves.

Jesse joins Manny at the counter.

"How's my niece?" Jesse says tersely.

“How does Toni say she is?” I respond equally terse.

“Easy, you two, it’s still too early,” says Manny, and he’s right.

“She’s fine; she just started Pre-K. Didn’t you get the picture?” I ask.

I knew why Toni didn’t come—Jesse, and probably Manny too. Toni had proposed again last weekend. It was the third time he’d brought it up—and the third time I’d said no. It pisses me off that Jesse thinks he gets some authority in this situation.

“Oh yeah, she looked so cute in that little yellow dress with her glasses and shit,” said Manny. I know he was trying to cut the tension.

“Your Mom made it,” I said.

“Of course, she did,” said Jesse.

Mama Sanchez was a dressmaker, a very talented dressmaker. She made the most beautiful little gowns, christenings, weddings, you-name-it, and she’d made a dress for it. She’d worked at the same little alterations shop in Banderas for 20 years before Savannah came along. Now she just took special orders out of her new home in San Antonio. She did ok, but both Kacie and Toni had gotten full-time jobs to help foot the bills on the little house she shared with their baby girl. This conversation was pissing me off. How dare he give me this attitude. Toni at least got to finish high school. I had to drop out and get my GED. I know Jesse blames me for all this. He’d totally have been on my Mom’s team if he’d had a chance.

I ring up the two coffees, breakfast sweets, and Manny’s oversized Redbull. Jesse pays, and I hand him the change.

“It was good to see ya, Kace,” says Manny. Jesse just grabs his coffee and leaves.

“Likewise.” I wave a little as they leave.

I check the time on the register, it’s only 7:30 AM, and I’m exhausted. I’m thankful the stores empty now; I know that I’ve hit the 7:30-11:30 AM lull just like any other day. I turn on the little TV behind

the register. There’s a rerun of *Steel Magnolias* on TBS; I leave the volume on mute and plop onto the stool, elbows on the counter, chin in my hands. I’m angry and tired and more than a little sad. The last thing I want to do is sit here alone and think about Toni. But here I am—thinking of him and trying not to cry.

It’s not that I don’t love him or that he’s a bad guy or anything; I’m just not in love with him. Toni wants to get married because *it’s the right thing to do*; he said so himself. I don’t want to be his obligation, and I don’t want to tell that story to my daughter. Maybe, I just don’t believe in love—not like I used to. I know we could make it work; I could probably grow to love him. We tried being a couple during the pregnancy and a little bit afterward, but Toni was out when I wouldn’t marry him. Hurt, I imagine, by my indecision.

Last weekend we drove down to the city together, as we’ve done every weekend for the last four years. It had been a nice two days. Toni and I helped around the house, some easy yard work, minor repairs, little chores—whatever we could to help out Mama Sanchez. We spent time playing with Savannah and discussing the school she’d be attending. I cried when Savannah tried on that little yellow dress. She was already so big. Our days together feel so short. I miss that time when I’m stuck here alone in the store. I have a family, a real family, or the shot at one during those brief hours. I don’t know why I won’t take it.

On Sundays, Mama Sanchez always makes our shared favorite, enchiladas, for dinner. We laugh and smile, kiss our baby girl and make pretend. I cling to those moments, but the minute I’m on the road headed back here—back to Banderas and The Glen, it all begins to crumble. Toni couldn’t have had worse timing. I was moody and moping about not being there for Savannah’s first day of school.

“Well, we could be there.” He’d said.

“You know I’ve got work,” I said.

“You don’t have to, you know—you don’t have to work ever again.” He smirked.

“What?” I said absentmindedly, already thinking about the week ahead.

“Let’s get married, Kace; we could move in with Ma, never see this place again.”

“Toni, don’t start.”

“Why not? I know you miss her; I know you want to be there for her, and we can.”

I sigh audibly and cross my arms.

“Will you please....”

“Stop, Toni. How many times do I have to say no?” I snapped.

Then I reached down and grabbed my smokes, a signal to him that I was done with this conversation. Thinking about that moment, I look at the clock on the register—it’s already 8:15 AM. Time for my first smoke break. I take my phone and grab a fresh Bic off the lighter rack.

I sit down on the curb just outside the dingy glass doors, as I always do, and light one up. The woody burn fills my lungs, harsh and comforting at the same time. I feel the stiffness in my neck and jaw release a bit. *Thank you, nicotine.* Toni hates it when I smoke, says I use it as an escape. He’s not wrong. The first smoke I ever had was the night we hooked up. Annie gave it to me. I think she’d swiped them from her dad. She is taking a lot more these days—more than smokes, I mean. She’s not keeping it in the family anymore either.

It’s why we aren’t talking. I still can’t believe Annie sabotaged my job at the clubhouse. I mean, what the fuck? What kind of friend does that? I’m glad I never told her about Savannah.

Shit just hasn’t been the same since she started hooking up with that rich kid from Four Rivers. Our friendship hasn’t been the same since I refused to tell her anything about my year in San Antonio. I love Annie, but she cannot keep her mouth shut. I don’t need the whole town in my business. I don’t need any more people telling me how I should be living my life, certainly not Annie *fucking* Stuckey.

Still, I’d like to text her, even now, to tell her everything just like I used to. I go back to the stool. *Days of Our Lives* should be starting soon.

I sit on that hard wooden thing until my ass goes numb, then I mop the already clean floors. Finally, the door chime goes off, and Abuelita walks in the door. Not my granny, Granny Sanchez—she insists that all of us kids that palled around The Glen call her that.

“Buenos días, hija.”

“Hola, Abuelita. ¿Cómo estás hoy?”

“Oh, estoy haciendo bien, hija.”

She hobbles over to the counter, the soles of her yellow plastic sandals squeaking to the spot she preferred to lean—just left of my register.

“Pan, leche, café, ¿algo más?” I say, looking down into her tiny weathered face.

She might be 4’9 at the tallest; she is tiny. But, I can see traces of Mama Sanchez in her eyes. Funny, I hate when people tell me I have my mother’s eyes.

“Hola, cariño. Dame un abrazo ...” I begin gathering her things.

I know her preferences without asking. As I walk up the middle aisle toward the sugar, “...y azúcar, hija.”

I grab a bag with my spare hand and return to the counter where Abuelita is still leaning. Before ringing her up, I pour her a cup of the Texas Pecan blend with two scoops of sugar and the french vanilla creamer. I don’t bother telling her it’s on the house—she knows already.

“Gracias.”

I catch her looking over my shoulder at the *Black and Milds* on the rack. I finish sacking the groceries and grab her one—what harm can one do? She smiles sweetly at me then opens her wallet. Always cash, crisp twenties, straight from Jesse’s bank account—he must have dropped it off this morning when he picked up Manny.

“No debería comprar esas cosas.”

I know she felt guilty spending Jesse’s money on the habit he hated.

“Te tengo en este. Será nuestro pequeño secreto,” I say, smiling back at her.

We should forgive the elderly their vices.

“Eres una buena chica, hija. ¿Cuándo te casarás con mi nieto?”

She always snuck that one into our conversations somehow. So I was thankful that just then, a flustered stranger came through the glass doors. He looks curiously at our casual demeanor and the already bagged goods warming on the glass-topped counter.

Clearing his throat, he says, “Pump wouldn’t read my card. Can you ring me up for \$30?”

“Sure thing. Pump number?”

“Seven. Thanks.” He says, grabbing his card.

Abuelita just stands there waiting while I ring up the stranger. Finally, he leaves his receipt for me to trash. She rolls her eyes.

“Agringado.”

She knows I am half white, but she never treats me that way, not like some other family members. I laugh, and she smiles. That smile reminds me of Savannah.

“Mira.”

While she digs in her little purse for her glasses, I pull out my phone. I show her the photo of Savannah in the yellow dress.

“¡Ah, mi bebé, se ve tan bonita! Como tú cuando eras una niña.”

My father had been friends with Antonio’s father before he went to jail, of course. This woman had probably seen photos of me at this age. I know she watched over me for my Mom after Dad split. Not that I needed a babysitter at that age—I was nearly sixteen. But she watched over all of us kids. I can’t honestly remember meeting her—she just

always was, like a part of the landscape of Shady Glen. She fed us, let us play in her garage when it rained and scolded us for fighting. She’s the reason I even speak Spanish. Dad never spoke it around me, and Mom never bothered to learn.

“Gracias, hija, gracias por mostrarme eso.”

“Cuando consigamos las fotos, traeré una por tu casa.”

“¡Ah! Me gustaría mucho.”

I walked around the corner and kissed her on the cheek before she gathered her things to leave. I watch her tiny form climb back into her boat of a Lincoln sedan. My phone vibrates in my vest pocket. It’s Annie.

“PARTY TONIGHT?”

It’s my first text from her in weeks. A big part of me is saying “yes!” and the other part is wondering why she’s texting me at all.

“WHERE?”

“MARCO’S”

So, it’s a coke party. I hear Abuelita in my head, “Tipico, no?” Marco, another member of my *family*—he was Toni’s drug-dealing cousin, on his dad’s side. Abuelita had another name for him, “Travieso.”

“I DON’T PLAN ON LEAVING THE GLEN TONIGHT. SAVING GAS.”

I lie; I don’t even have the car this weekend.

She texts back, “LAME.”

She doesn’t offer to come to get me, even though she lives down the block. I think about the last time I let Annie push me into a party I didn’t want to be at—her brother’s fifteenth. Man, did I have a crush on him—sure, he was younger, but just a year. Arlo was cute, thoughtful, kind of funny in his own way, if a little too shy for his good. Annie knew I liked Arlo. It didn’t stop her from setting me up with Toni. Funny, she doesn’t even know what all her pushing caused. I doubt that she’d really care—she always talked mad shit about the

girls who got pregnant in high school. One thing she made perfectly clear that night though, she didn't think I was good enough for her baby brother. Every time I tried to speak to Arlo that night, she'd walk over with Toni shoving us together while grabbing Arlo by the elbow—leading him away. I was so bored and lonely I started talking to Toni. We both had too much drink; everyone had—someone had brought a keg. I wonder if Abuelita would still love me if she knew I let Toni take my virginity in her Lincoln. I decide it's best not to text Annie back; I lock the screen and put the phone back in my pocket.

The middle of the day is the longest part of any shift. It gets so dead around here. In fact, from the time Abuealita left, I didn't get another in-store customer until 2:15 PM. A couple of high schoolers, girls I vaguely recognize as underclassmen—well, they were underclassmen when I was still at Banderas High; they're probably juniors now.

"Playing hooky?" I ask, trying to be friendly.

The prettier of the two girls scoffed, "No. early dismissal."

Rolling my eyes, I rang up their Dr. Pepper and hot Cheetos. *Early dismissal*, my grades were never good enough for that; Manny's were, though, hell Manny graduated a year early. Shame that Jesse put him on the job so quickly afterward. I was proud of Toni for standing up during that fight—the only time I'd seen him argue with his big brother. Because of Toni, Manny only worked half-days. The door chime rings.

"Speak of the devil!" I laugh as Manny and Arlo stroll in, sweaty from their walk.

"Huh?" says Arlo.

"Hey, Kace." Manny waves walking towards the beer case.

I watch him grab two forties of Ole E. Arlo is searching for Takis.

"They're on the other aisle now."

"Why?"

"Paul said he wanted all the Mexican stuff together."

"Ok."

I reposition myself on the stool, blocking the camera. Manny tosses Toni's old driver's license on the counter.

"Toni, know you have this?"

"Maybe," Manny smirks as he says it.

"Whatever." I can't help but giggle; they do look alike.

"What time are you off?" Manny asks.

"You know I'm off at four," I reply.

By then, Arlo has wandered up with two more forties and like six bags of Takis.

"You all set there?"

He shrugs—still the shy guy.

"Come drink with us."

"What, no."

"Yeah, come on."

"No, but I'm about to take a smoke break; want to chill with me?"

We go out front and sit on the curb. Manny cracks the first forty.

"Seriously?"

"What? Paul won't be here for another hour."

I go to take out my pack, forgetting I'd finished them on my last break.

"Man, I'm out."

"I got you." Says Arlo, handing his pack of reds to me.

"Phew! Cowboy killers, huh?"

He just smiles and lights me up. Habitually, I pull out my phone and set it in my lap.

“Who’s that?” Arlo asks.

I look down at the image of Savannah on my lock screen. I catch Manny looking too.

“My niece.”

Manny looks away before I can meet his eyes.

“Wow, she looks just like you, cute!”

“Really, thanks.”

I take a long drag, hoping it’ll burn away my guilt and confusion. I exhale a big cloud of blue smoke. No change. Just another day.

The Last Scrabble Game at Beaver Swamp

Ken Post

Reid and Leah recline, backs against a downed log, waiting their turn while the helicopter zips around like a hummingbird, picking up the other Forest Service crews. They’ve spent the previous five months laying out a timber sale in this remote Alaskan valley.

The radio crackles with a conversation across the valley.

“Rachel, this is Jacob on Channel Three.”

“This is Rachel, switch to Channel Eleven.”

“Okay. I’ve got a Scrabble word for you.

“What’s the word?” Rachel asks.”

“Febrile.”

“Feb-what?”

“Febrile. F as in foxtrot, E as in echo, B as bravo, R as in Romeo, I as in India, L as in Lima, and E as in echo,” spells Jacob. “It’s a killer word with three vowels and nothing special for consonants. If you play all seven tiles, though, it’s a fifty-point bonus.”

“Where the hell did you find a word like that?”

“I read the dictionary looking for seven-letter words not too far out in difficulty.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Rachel adds.

“Hey guys,” Reid chimes in. “Let’s save the radio batteries for meaningful conversation such as pickup locations or emergencies. I’ve got some words for both of you, but I’ll save them for later.” They won’t take him to heart. He chuckles at some of the crazy shit his crew does. This isn’t the first time Scrabble words were discussed over the radio with the latest topic covering words with ‘Z’ and ‘X’. Until last week, he had no idea a zax was a tool for trimming slate shingles. He looks at

Leah, shakes his head and mutters, “Jesus” before shoving the radio back into his sodden pack.

Jacob is back on the radio. “Don’t worry, Reid, I’ve got some good words for you too.”

Leah flashes him two raised eyebrows with the unstated message: You started this. Not much we can do about it now.

Even with Scrabble occupying his crew, life is so much simpler at Beaver Swamp than it had been for Reid back home. He graduated college with a forestry degree, Boilermaker Class of 1978. Not long afterwards, his parents divorced and sold the Indiana split-level home he’d grown up in, moving to different parts of the country. No warning, no idea it was coming, as if the warranty on their marriage expired. He had no siblings to share his dismay or to learn if there were signs he missed. A bloodless wound, festering. The anger turned into questions. The questions turned to emptiness, and the emptiness turned to flight.

There were long rides with people who had no business being on the road in the vehicles they were driving. “I’m living from gas station to gas station,” confided Carl, the driver of an ancient, battered green Ford pickup. “If this thing dies, I’m setting off on foot.” Two hours later they both had their thumbs out, the family Scrabble box wrapped in plastic and strapped to Reid’s pack.

Or the drivers had no business being on the road in their condition.

The dented Dodge pulled over, leaving a plume of dust behind it. Rope held the hood down. A man in faded denim and untucked flannel shirt rolled the window down. “Hop in, I can take you as far as Watson Lake.” He handed Reid a beer through the window although it was only 9:00 a.m.

Reid saw five empties on the floor and the rest of the case was in the back seat. “How about I give you a break and I’ll drive?”

The man opened the driver’s door, tumbled out onto the gravel, and staggered to the rear door.

He opened the door and stretched out on the back seat, right on top of the beer, and fell asleep before Reid hit forty miles per hour.

A raven caws as it passes in the shadow of peaks rising steeply from the valley floor, and over dense stands of hemlock and spruce. The call fades and Leah and Reid step from a cluster of trees into an open area, listening for a different kind of bird. From the other end of the valley, the *whop, whop, whop* of helicopter rotors are faint but growing stronger by the minute.

“I hear it,” says Leah. She puts her hand above her eyes to block the sun as it slants through the parting clouds. As she steps across a rivulet in the opening, one shoulder strap on her bib rain pants slides off her shoulder. The checked wool Pendleton shirt she wears has two elbow patches on it, recent additions sewn on by lantern light. Reid places bright orange flagging on the ends of a scraggily tree limb to help the pilot find them and show the wind direction.

The chopper searches as it turns to make another pass. “Uphill and to your left,” Leah directs via radio, and Reid stands up. He is stripped down to a logger’s shirt, waving his yellow raincoat like a deserted island survivor trying to attract a passing freighter. The helicopter angles at them and they crouch low, away from the landing zone. Dead grass, spruce needles, and twigs zip by them from the rotor blast, and they cover their eyes with their hands for protection. The Plexiglas-domed chopper resembles a large dragonfly. In a minute it lands and they hunch over into the wind with the turbine screaming.

A Forest Service helicopter foreman jumps from his seat next to the pilot as they reach the ship, and hands them two green, Nomex fire-resistant coveralls and helmets to wear. Blades cleave the air a few feet over their heads. They cram arms and legs into the flight suits, the foreman stows their bear protection rifle under the back seat. “Is that everything!?” the foreman screams. Reid gives him the thumbs-up.

In the back seat, chest harnesses snap, helmet cables click into intercom jacks, backpacks lay heavy on their laps. From his front seat, the foreman looks them over and says into his mic to the pilot, “We’re good.” With an explosion of energy, the chopper rises and slaloms downhill over the trees, like some high decibel sleigh.

Over the intercom, Bill, the pilot, says, “Next stop, Beaver Swamp.”

On Leah’s side are tall summits with a white snowline; winter is not far off. Reid’s view from the “downhill” side of the helicopter reveals a five-mile long valley, filled with ponds and beaver marshes sitting in a bowl, before the mountains surge upwards on the other side. The sun turns the beaver ponds into mirrors. Two tundra swans send concentric circles rippling outward in one pond. Reid taps Leah on the thigh, their eyes catch for a moment. Her dark brown hair is hidden by the helmet she is wearing, which accentuates her round cheeks and dark brown eyes surrounded by a cue-ball whiteness, making her irises stand out.

Their season is over and it’s one of the last helicopter flights they’ll take together before camp closes in the next few days. The pangs of not sharing more time with Leah, catch Reid in the gut. Together, they’ve beaten through brush, gasped up hills, laughed at embarrassing gaffes—when Leah fell face-first in the mud or Reid inhaled a cloud of no-see-ums. They fended off mosquitoes, swatting them off each other’s back, and huddled against chilling rain. She is more than a work partner and he doesn’t want to lose her. He hopes she feels the same way. The hard part is finding the courage to speak. It’s an all or nothing choice; if he spills his feelings and she’s not interested—it’s over. Everything they have now will be spoiled.

Back in August, Leah and Reid had slumped side by side next to a lunch fire warming their feet under the awning of a large spruce. Damp wool socks hung drying from branches next to the coals.

“I love this place,” Leah said. A rain drop from her Helly Hanson jacket hood plopped on her nose.

“What do you mean?” Reid cracked a branch over his knee, and placed it in the fire.

“It’s so quiet and peaceful. You can almost hear yourself think. I’ve never felt this way anywhere else.”

Reid was blessed to work with Leah. She was unflappable in the face of cold, wet, mud, hunger, and fatigue. Gracefully skipping across creeks, balancing on a rock while water hissed by. Or scampering along a downed tree like a marten.

Reid worked with others on his crew periodically but the best days were the ones with Leah. He was in charge of a collection of poorly dressed, foul-smelling seasonal employees traipsing around the woods marking potential roads and trees to be cut. There was this unspoken barrier with Leah, like a fine mesh they could see through but kept them from physically getting closer to each other. More than that though—he respected her; she had an equanimity that carried over to everyone she was around as if she had telepathically slipped them a valium. They tiptoed up to that invisible line many times but never crossed it.

Leah pulled out a gallon Ziploc bag and grabbed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“What’s for lunch?” Reid asked.

“PBJ, it’s a bit mashed, though.”

“I’ve got turkey—it’s also taken a beating in my pack. Why don’t we mix and match.”

“Deal.” Leah handed him half a sandwich with jelly oozing out of it.

They munched quietly, toes resting on a small log near the edge of fire. The heat worked its way into their limbs.

“I’ve seen your toes so many times I’ve got names for them,” Leah said, “so you’re going to have to name mine.”

“You do? Like what?” Reid asked.

“You tell me first.”

Reid was puzzled but took a stab at it. “That left big toe is Zelda.”

“Zelda?! Where did you come up with that?”

“It just came to me.”

They burst out laughing and never named the rest of her toes.

Reid points to the swans and she nods. From their vantage point in the helicopter, there is no road, no town, not one house or light visible. Just south is a long fiord with cliffs rising thousands of feet straight out of the water. Icebergs from the glacier at the head of the fiord floated for thirty miles, and lay grounded in the shallow bay.

The helicopter veers left. An opening in a furrow of trees appears, and the only habitation in the entire lowland comes into sight—Beaver Swamp. There is nothing impressive about the five wall tents on plywood platforms; three are for sleeping, one is for gear storage, and the cook tent, across the clearing. Maximum population during the peak of summer: twelve people.

The helicopter glides over the trees and settles on the ground. Bill cuts the power and the rotors come to a stop. “We’ll that’s it for today.” He is a trim ex-Vietnam War vet with an odd sense of formality and tidiness. He takes great pride in being clean-shaven, and having a sharp crease in his flight suit every day in a place where personal appearance is never a priority. Every evening he closes out the day, like a news anchorman, with the same comment.

They trudge sixty yards to camp through boot-sucking mud and wet grass. As they approach the tents, Jacob steps out. He and his partner, Randy, were picked up before Reid and Leah. Jacob has already showered. His dark hair is matted from the water and his slight build, thin, angular face and scruffy beard make him, along with his metal-framed glasses, look like a grad student at an ivy-covered college.

Reid sits against the edge of the tent platform, relieved to be done. It is that point in the day between fatigue and the sense of accomplishment from stumbling around the woods, finding obscure points on an aerial photo like they’re on a topographic treasure hunt. The mental toll of getting everyone back each day in one piece frays him. Slips down steep hillsides, branches whipping eyeballs, chainsaws slashing through chaps. He pulls off his boot and a wet sock comes with it, when Jacob sidles up to him and hands him a cup of hot cocoa with little marshmallows bobbing in it.

“How’d it go today?”

“Not bad. A shower will definitely help.” Reid tosses the boot and it skitters across the floor.

“So what are you doing once camp shuts down?” Jacob asks.

“I have office work to do for a month before I get laid off for the season. I’m thinking about holing up in a nice ski town in the Rockies for the winter. Maybe Telluride. I’ve got a few buddies down there that will let me sleep on their couch.” Reid knows there will be a lot of competition for that couch too, since at least a few other friends have turned their mental compasses to Telluride for the off-season. “Mexico sounds good too. I’m hearing about some places on the Pacific side.” The beach, heat from the sand seeping into him, and a cold beer by his side, is a notion rapidly gaining appeal. Even better, would be Leah on a towel next to him.

“Hey, maybe I’ll come with you. I know some Spanish.”

“You told me you were going to visit your parents and then go back to school for the spring semester.” Jacob had shared many tales of his family vacations, holidays together—chestnuts roasting over an open fire type of stuff—and how close he is to his sister, Janey. “I’m sure your mom, dad and Janey would love to see you and I’ll bet they want you to finish college.”

“You’re probably right,” Jacob says. “So many expectations. Where’s the spontaneity, the serendipity in life? You’re going to be slicing through deep powder while I’m stuck in a formaldehyde-filled lab with preserved animals in it. All those beady eyes staring, crying out for Latin name identification.” Jacob, rolls his eyes and grimaces. Changing the subject, Jacob brightens. “Ready for the game tonight?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Reid says. “I’m in third place behind Rachel and Randy.” Reid thought back to the day he walked into the cook tent with his family’s Scrabble game. An evening diversion for his crew.

It had been a distraction for his parents during their failing marriage. One of Reid’s few memories of his parents doing anything fun together was their weekly Scrabble game. His father hunched over his rack of tiles, Scotch in hand. His mom pulled the rack onto her lap and laid back on the sofa, wine glass on the coffee table. As much as they were a mismatch in life, they matched up well on the score sheet.

One evening in July he had brought it into the kitchen tent after dinner. “Anyone wanna play Scrabble?” There were only three people in the tent at the time: Rachel, Randy and Jacob.

Jacob was whittling a stick. “Not tonight, Reid.”

Randy set down the cards from his fifth game of Solitaire. “I’ll give it a shot. It’s been a long time though.” Randy was normally Jacob’s field partner and the camp curmudgeon. Jacob and Randy argued over who took a wrong turn up a creek, forgot to bring enough flagging, or didn’t pack a big enough lunch, but then the squall blew over, much like the weather they faced together each day.

“Count me in.” Rachel swept a pile of magazines, books, candles, empty pop cans, aerial photos, and a bowl of chainsaw parts with her forearm from her side of the plywood table. Randy dragged his chair toward Rachel’s end.

“So how do you do this again?” Randy asked.

“We each select seven tiles,” Reid said.

Little did anyone know this was the beginning of one the longest running board games in the history of Alaskan field camps.

Reid tilts his head in the direction of the shower, just beyond the cook tent. “Anyone in the shower?”

Jacob mumblety-pegs his knife into a log. It bounces off, and he bends to pick it up. “I think it’s open but you’ll have to hurry.”

There is no roof to the stall and the water comes from a black plastic pipe running two hundred yards uphill to a creek. The pipe is plumbed into a propane hot water heater next to the stall for showers—hot and cold running water in the middle of nowhere.

Reid strips, stands on the wooden pallet outside the shower, kicks off his flip flops and turns the water on. The hot water cascades off his scalp and he hangs his head while rivulets run down his body. His thoughts turn to Leah as the water funnels down his groin and a hollowness grows inside him. He shuts his eyes and leans his head on the shower stall, the only thing propping him up now, as the heat and steam separate him from his surroundings.

“Hey! Whoever’s in the shower, make sure to save some hot water for me.” Leah’s calling out from a few feet away snaps Reid out of his trance faster than if the cold water had suddenly started flowing.

“Be right out,” Reid says, not realizing he was hogging the hot water.

“Is that you in there, Reid?”

“Yup.”

“All I can say is...,” Leah pauses for effect and Reid can practically see her in the tattered flamingo-pink cotton bathrobe she wears to the shower. A lone trace of femininity, “you’re lucky it’s me who found you camping out in there and not the Lezs.

They would have dragged your sorry ass right out.”

It had been late April when Reid had been sitting in his office behind a scarred metal desk staring at a faded piece of paper with typewritten names on a list. It was a list of people he hired from the official government personnel register. He had no way to tell how any crew would work out; would they gel or make life hellish for him? He absently picked up a pair of scissors and cut each name out of the list: Jill, Jacob, Randy, Rachel, and Leah. The little pieces of paper slid around under his finger and he matched up prospective pairs of names for work partners, switched them, and moved them again trying to imagine a winning combination.

Jill and Rachel are the camp lesbians who share one of the wall tents and unabashedly call themselves “The Lezs.” Reid was blessed to have Jill and Rachel on the crew and nobody really gave any thought about their sexual persuasion. They always showed up for work on time, knew where they were going in the field the next day, and took care of their gear. Guys—they beat the shit out of their equipment. Chainsaws came back with pull cords hanging out like dog tongues, chains busted, or the bars inexplicably bent. The Lez’s chanted, “Estrogen Rules!” whenever a guy broke something by trying to overpower it.

Rachel sets up her rack and mixes the upside-down tiles inside the box cover while Randy clears the rest of the table. Reid knows Leah is in her tent and usually makes an appearance during the Scrabble game. He waits in anticipation, like a hunter trying not to breathe too hard. He feigns calmness but inside tautness grips him. It’s a new feeling, a blend of helplessness and intoxication.

“Pick a tile,” Rachel says. Whoever picks the letter closest to ‘A’ gets to pick their seven tiles first and go first.

Randy selects a ‘C.’ “Top that.” Reid knows Randy is thrilled because he needs every point he can get and whoever goes first gets double points.

Rachel reshuffles the tiles with their blank faces staring at her and draws a ‘P.’”

Reid grabs an ‘S.’” Aside from trailing in points and thinking about Leah, his focus is on camp closing tomorrow after a long season that started in mid-May. Reid was part of the three-person crew dropped off to build the camp named Beaver Swamp. Now, in late October, daylight is much shorter and the crews are lucky to get six hours of work in the woods, particularly in the dusky gloom of the coastal rainforest. The alder trees are bare while the ferns that spread so mightily in early summer now lie in brown bundles. On clear mornings, the frost settles thickly on the grass, and the creeks and beaver ponds are rimmed with ice.

Several days will be needed to break camp and haul all of the materials by helicopter down to the bay, where a landing craft and De Havilland Beaver float plane will rendezvous with them. The skeletons of the tent platforms are all that will be left—they will make it through winter and be needed next year so the timber sale can continue to be laid out.

Once camp break-up starts there will be no time for Scrabble so tonight is the final game. The board has been unfolded seventeen times and nobody has won a game yet; they decided at the end of the first game that they would keep a running score and Rachel leads with 2,721 points to Randy’s 2,670 points, and Reid’s 2,540.

“I’ll grab my tiles now,” Randy says with a satisfied smile. He stares at the backs of seven tiles as if each one held the key to the winning word. He randomly plucks his tiles and set them in his rack. Inwardly, he grumbles; five out of seven letters are low-point vowels.

Rachel is less deliberate and picks her tiles. Almost all of them are consonants. She mixes them

around in her rack to see what potential word combinations are available

Randy places three tiles at the center of the board: gun. “four points times two on a double word score.” He will have to do better or it will be a long night.

Jacob says, “With big words like that you’re ready to write the next great American novel.”

“You saw what I had to use.” Randy picks three new tiles and sighs, “That’s much better.”

Randy is not known for the biggest words, but possesses an innate ability to use low-scoring tiles in tight spaces to generate points where not much opportunity exists. The more congested the board gets, the better he is. Rachel goes for high-scoring, big words so it is the home run slugger against the singles hitter with the high batting average. Reid’s strategy is somewhere in between.

Rachel shifts some tiles around on her rack and places four on the board attached to ‘gun.’
“Flagon. F-L-A-G-O-N. That’s nine points.”

“What the hell’s that?” Randy asks.

“It’s an old word for a container that holds liquor or some kind of alcohol,” Rachel says.

Jacob shakes his head, “Impressive.”

A few minutes pass and Randy arranges tiles, trying to make sense of them.

Rachel is reading a magazine waiting for Randy.
“Ready?”

“Yup.” Randy plops four tiles and attaches them to the ‘N’ on “flagon.”

“Hymen. That’s thirteen points.” Randy smiles knowing it’s a good word and that it’s slightly naughty—nothing like getting points and tweaking Rachel at the same time.

Jacob says, “I thought this is a family game.”

“Jacob,” Reid joins the fray, “this camp is full of perverts and if you just learned that, then I don’t

know where you’ve been all season. It’s the only thing that keeps us sane out here.”

“Okay, I’m ready with my next word: balls.”

Rachel acts as if she is going to place the tiles and then says, “Don’t worry, I’m just kidding. I wouldn’t waste a precious ‘S’ on balls.”

Leah enters the tent and it is like pumped-in oxygen. Reid inhales and breathes in again, and he can feel his face flush. She scans the board and her eyes stop at hymen. “Looks like we’re getting an anatomy lesson tonight.

“Is it hot in here or is it just me,” Reid says.

“Look,” Randy defends, “it’s a legal word and it’s all I had in my rack. Let’s just get on with the game.”

Leah hunches over and puts her face close to Rachel’s in that girl-friendly way that knows no interpersonal space. “Are these boys picking on you?”

“They are and they’re making me cry,” whines Rachel in her best little girl voice.

Leah scowls at Jacob, Randy, and Reid. “Who’s in charge here? It must be you.”

She squints at Reid.

Reid slowly uncrosses his legs and stands up. Randy and Rachel quickly cover their racks so Reid can’t see their tiles. He approaches Leah and in his best John Wayne imitation says, “Ma’am, I am the law in these parts. If you or this other fair maiden needs protection, you can count on my services.” He doffs an imaginary cowboy hat. “In the meantime, why don’t you head over to the kitchen and make some brownies for us hard-workin’ Scrabble players.” He steers her by her shoulders to the propane range at the other side of the tent.

“Oh sheriff, I’m gonna swoon.” Leah holds her forearm to her head. “I’ll do anything you say.”

Reid’s winks at Leah. “Anything?”

Leah bats her eyelids. “Sheriff, just what kind of services are you offering?”

“Leah, go bake the damn brownies already,” Randy breaks in. “We’ve got a game to play here.”

Leah salutes and starts rummaging in the kitchen for the ingredients.

The game goes on for an hour and grows quieter as the tiles click, and the players survey the board looking to crowd a few tiles in and squeeze a few points out. Jill ambles in, feels the force of the concentration, grabs a brownie and silently gives Rachel a high five before departing. Jacob and Leah drift off to their tents. Reid has turned his rack over and conceded, and is absent-mindedly eating a brownie. He goes outside for a minute when he hears Rachel exclaim, “Kiss my ass!” Randy lets out a low groan like an accordion deflating and he knows the game is over. He hears Rachel shuffling in the tent and through the tent wall he sees the silhouette of her dancing a spastic jig.

“Girl, you just wait ‘til next year. I’ll be ready for the rematch.”

“Well,” Rachel crows. “Then I hope you’ll be ready for Kiss My Ass, Part II!”

Reid pauses and smiles, drinking in his crew’s camaraderie. He continues gingerly across the muddy grass to his tent when he hears a voice quietly say, “Hey.” He hadn’t noticed Leah standing in the dark in front of her tent that she shares with an assortment of hand tools, scrap wood, and spare sleeping bags. He walks over, the ground squishing with every step.

“Looks like we have a winner,” Leah says.

“I thought you went to bed.”

“Nope. Just thinking.” Leah’s arms are crossed over her chest to ward off the chill.

“About?”

Leah doesn’t answer right away. “I was thinking about staying on and helping close up camp.”

“I thought you were going to take off with Jacob and the Lez’s while Randy and I put this place to

bed for the winter.” Reid stands directly in front of Leah with his arms crossed and their chilled breath merge, leaving a fog hanging over them.

“Changed my mind. I can do that, right?”

“I don’t see why not. I’ll check with Randy in the morning but I don’t think he’ll mind since he’s been anxious to get back to town anyway.”

Leah reaches out and touches him on his bicep and he can feel the warmth of her hand through his shirt. She leaves it there for a few seconds, looks at him with those carbon-dark eyes, leans forward and kisses Reid on the lips, before slipping her arms around him. The strawberry scent of her shampoo wafts over them, and a small earring brushes his cheek while the press of her breasts reveals a heart beating harder than his own. They cling to each other wordlessly, oblivious to the cold, the camp, the stars.

Leah pulls away slowly although Reid could have stayed in that position until the sun thawed him. “Thanks, Reid.” She opens up her tent flap and starts to go inside when she pauses, “By the way, I already talked to Randy and he’s fine with our new arrangement.” She doesn’t wait for an answer and goes inside.

Reid jolts awake—the glowing dials on his clock show 3:11 a.m. He’s not aware what stirred him, and lies in bed, startled by his lucidness. He slowly unzips his sleeping bag and pulls on a sweatshirt and sweatpants, quiet not to wake Jacob out of his low-rpm snore. Randy lays noiseless, his chest gently rising and falling, while Bill’s only sign of life are tomorrow’s clothes set out neatly on his footlocker.

He parts the front door flaps. Must be twenty-five degrees. A few scattered clouds pass by the moon and Reid sees the glint from the dome of the helicopter and the grass, silvered by the heavy frost, in the illuminated camp. The silence is as clear and palpable as his breath suspended in the air.

The clouds converge and a shadow lingers over camp. Reid imagines Scrabble tiles and words drift through his mind. They shift and change, then all new tiles appear. The game goes on, and always will. They're all players choosing their own tiles and laying them down as best they can.

Never the Type

Glenn Deutsch

Mike pocketed the state sales tax he collected at his Long Island auto repair shop for a good year before getting caught. A compliance agent promised Mike she'd padlock his business if he ever defaulted on an installment payment. Mike said he'd make the cheese by flipping used cars.

All of which I knew because Mom and that agent were colleagues. And I was a lovesick sophomore suddenly in need of wheels.

I'd been moping around my parents that August about returning to college without Erin Grener. We'd been exclusive since first sizing each other up at a dorm party in January. Now I would be heading back to Wisconsin while Erin was set to begin her junior year as a visiting student in Manhattan. Enter Dad, an educator and heart attack survivor, with a plan to cure his son's heartache. He withdrew me from UW-Madison and registered me at a community college close to home. Erin and I would soon be able to cohabit weekends in the bedroom I'd once built for myself in my parents' basement.

One muggy supper hour while Dad was still at work, Mike arrived in a pickup truck, a full-size, midnight-blue Ford. Mom and I met him at the bottom of the driveway. He was around twenty-five and wore gray coveralls. He smiled handsomely when he saw us.

Mom and I were both surprised to hear he was selling his own truck. It was just a few years old. He'd left it running, and I got up into the driver's seat. Through the open window, Mom asked: "Do you want it?" What eighteen-year-old wouldn't?

She cut Mike two checks, one for his Ford F-250 and one for a tune-up, brake job, and set of new tires. "You'll be on the highway at all hours," she told me. "It has to be reliable."

Mike delivered the truck in the driveway on the Friday morning of Labor Day weekend. While crossing the blacktop I palmed the hood to feel the heat rising from the motor, and then walked around to his side and watched him turn the ignition off and hop down from the seat. He dropped door and ignition keys into my palm—his, on a darkly patinaed leather keychain stamped with the Ford logo, and a set of dupes on a cable keyring.

“You’re some lucky kid, Geoff, having her for a mother,” he said, as much for his benefit as mine, since she was standing right there. His girlfriend was waiting at the curb in a Camaro, red with black racing stripes painted along the trunk and hood, the engine idling. “Give her regular oil changes,” Mike said out the passenger window, and off they drove.

Friday evenings I would finish my shift stocking shoes at a store in the mall near my parents’ and then baby the truck for forty-five minutes on the Long Island Expressway, generally keeping to the right lane. It rode pleurably high, its supersized trailer hitch and large hitch ball warned off tailgaters, and five cab marker lights rose off the front of the roof like crocodilian eyes and glowed amber like the sodium vapor street lights I’d attune myself to at around ten-thirty rumbling out of the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

Something else would come over me up in Mike’s truck as I approached the final hurdle before I could see Erin again: the city blocks containing Madison Square Garden and the main entrance to Penn Station. I’d get a few stray taxicabs in my sights, Caprices, Galaxies, Checkers, and lay on the bass horn to scatter those cabbies angling to stand three deep. Then I’d wag my way down the comparatively deserted remaining stretch of Seventh Avenue that led to the Fashion Institute of Technology and Erin’s dorm.

Erin and I both worked Saturday mornings, so we’d turn right around to range the L.I.E.

eastbound. A textiles and fashion design major from Tucson, Erin rode shotgun in hand-tailored lumberjack shirts, Levi’s and Timberlands. Behind the wheel, I’d mostly reflect on my good fortune. We would sleep together again. And even work together, sort of—Erin clerked at a boutique at the same mall.

Which is where the truck went missing from the parking lot the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Erin denied leaving her door unlocked. Anyway, insurance paid, and at a dealership my parents scored a leftover new poo-brown Duster, which I drove that spring semester.

Erin and I returned to Madison, rented a balconied studio apartment off campus. I threw myself into school, gave too little to the relationship. When she graduated in December, Erin moved back home.

Several weeks later, I was standing at the sliding door to the balcony, phone against my ear. I traced with the tip of a finger in the frost lining the inside of the glass the structures spread out before me. Nearest was the downtown campus of Madison Area Technical College. Rising above a courtyard was an ornate three-story arch, salvaged from the entrance of a high school that once stood on the site. I traced that last.

“Don’t ever lose ...” and she named a few things.

“I’ll never forget you riding in that truck with me,” I said. “It occurs to me, you know, Mike probably stole it back.”

“You were never the type anyway to have a truck like that,” said Erin.

Here Comes the Night

Mark Westmoreland

*When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No, I won't be afraid
Oh, I won't be afraid
Just as long as you stand
Stand by me*

-Ben E. King, "Stand By Me"

Ronnie twisted the stereo's volume knob all the way to the left and turned the music down. Her daddy's favorite song played and if it made it to the words she'd start crying. Tears already filled her eyes and she turned her back to the man tied to the chair so he couldn't see.

She'd met him at Due South. A hillbilly bar tucked away in the mountains of north Georgia. She found him drinking alone and didn't even have to charm her way onto the stool next to him. He gave her a single once over and pulled it away from the bar for her to sit. She'd worn her nicest fitting jeans and borrowed a shirt from her sister that cut low into her cleavage. The whole time she sat with him he never once took his eyes away from her tits. Maybe if he'd looked her in the eyes he'd have recognized who she was.

They drank in near silence the whole time they were at the bar. He sipped on some watered down domestic that was on special and she asked for something strong and brown. She'd need it for courage and to keep her on the stool next to him. He'd startled her when he asked her what her plans were for the evening. She stuttered when she told him she was free.

That was when he slipped his hand onto her thigh. His touch made her skin clammy and she could feel herself get sick in the back of her throat. He

squeezed her leg too hard and his tongue flicked at the corners of his crusty mouth. Ronnie smiled and did her best not to act disgusted when he said he happened to be free as well. He bought them both a shot and asked her if she wanted to get out of here. The liquor burned all the way down to her chest.

"What's a matter, baby, you don't like *Stand By Me*? That song's a classic."

She'd made him strip down to his underwear and he flexed his abs when he spoke. He wanted to make sure she was impressed and flexed his biceps along with them.

Ronnie didn't want to talk about that song and walked to the other side of the living room. She was glad he was tied to the chair and couldn't touch her when she passed by. The way his eyes wandered all around her was enough. She pulled open a drawer on the small TV stand she'd bought from Big Lots. He tried to lean forward and see what it was she got.

"Hey, you ever done anything like this before?" His voice was greasy and he dug his nails into the arms of the chair.

Ronnie didn't answer right away. When she did she spoke with some consideration. "I've never done *anything* quite like this."

She didn't mean to sound like she was flirting but that's the way he took it. He smiled like a fresh meal had been set before him. "That's okay. I'm gone take good care of you."

The way he tried to sound sexy made Ronnie laugh. Not in a way that would embarrass him or make him mad but in a way that made him think she was into it. He bit his bottom lip and growled in the back of his throat. She turned away from the TV stand with a hand behind her back.

He flexed for her as she walked near. “What you got there, baby?”

Ronnie walked around him real slow and enjoyed teasing him. This wasn't part of her plan but the liquor made her loosen up and she just went with it. “It's a surprise.”

He turned his head to watch her as she walked behind him. The corner of his mouth curled into an Elvis-like-snarl. “What kinda surprise?”

Ronnie said, “A good one.”

She took her hand from behind her back when she was behind him and he couldn't see what she had. He tried twisting around in the chair but she told him to sit still. Ronnie waited for him to obey and when he did she said, “Let's play a game.”

That grabbed his curiosity, “What kinda game?”

Ronnie said, “The kind where I ask you a question and you tell me what I wanna know.”

“What if I lie?”

“There'll be consequences.”

“I like the sound of this, baby. What kinda consequences?”

“Painful ones.”

The man grit his teeth, “I like a little pain.”

Ronnie took her stun gun and gave him a taste of the pain she'd been saving for him. She pressed it to his arm, gave him a pop, and his whole body jerked. He screamed. “What the fuck? What're you doing back there?”

Ronnie didn't answer. She waited a second and picked out a new spot on his body. Once he'd recovered from the shock she stuck the stun gun into his back and gave him another. This one just a second longer. His whole body tensed up and his muscles flexed but he wasn't showing off. He spit and growled and said, “Listen, bitch, I ain't into this kinky shit. You can untie me right-fucking-now.”

“Not until we're finished with our game,” Ronnie said, “and only if you answer all my questions.”

“Fuck your questions. I'm not playing any fucking games with you.”

He jerked the ropes and tried tearing loose but Ronnie's deddy taught her to tie a knot that couldn't be broken. She watched him struggle and waited for him to settle down. It took longer than she thought because of the way his fear energized him. While he fought against her knots she walked over to the kitchen table and grabbed one of the chairs. She came back and took a seat in front of him. Ronnie crossed one leg over the other and relaxed.

She said, “You're never gone get out of them ropes.”

He didn't want to believe that and pulled against them until they cut into his skin. The veins in his neck bulged and his face turned red. He rocked the chair as he tried to get loose. She worried he'd tip over but he calmed down. Either it occurred to him he wouldn't get free or he needed to try a new tactic. He laughed like he was finally in on the joke but it sounded fake to Ronnie.

He spoke and added a little sugar to his tone. “You know what, baby. I shouldn't've cussed at you like that. We should've laid down some ground rules before I let you tie me up. That's my fault. I'm not really into the whole Taser thing. If you don't mind using something else I'd appreciate it.”

Ronnie didn't waste any time letting him know she wasn't fucking around. She leaned forward, reached for his thigh, and gave him a jolt. He spasmed all over and would've kicked her if she hadn't tied his leg to the chair. He started cussing again but before he could get started good she interrupted him.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Listen, goddammit, I'm gone beat the shit outta you when I get outta this chair. Understand me? I don't even believe in hitting women but I'm gone hurt you and ain't even gone feel bad for it.”

“You’re not getting outta that chair if you don’t shut your mouth.” She was lying but it must have been believable because he shut his mouth. He eyeballed her and it was the first time all night he looked at her without lust. He really did want to hurt her and if he got loose from that chair she knew he would. Ronnie asked, “Are you ready to answer my questions?”

“Is that the first one?” He said being a smartass.

Ronnie popped the gun just to scare him and it worked.

“Ask your fucking questions,” he said, “let’s get this shit over with.”

Now that it was time for her to ask her questions Ronnie didn’t know if she could. She’d come too far to even consider changing her mind but she was scared to know the truth. Her daddy always told her it did no good living scared. All it did was cause you to miss out on the fun.

She thought about what to ask first and wished she’d written her questions down. Her mind was all a jumble and it made it hard to sort through what was important. The man started getting impatient and badgered her about asking her goddamn questions. It made it even harder to think and she blurted one out to make him stop.

“What did you get for killing my daddy?”

He reacted like he’d been smacked in the face and he finally realized they weren’t here to play sex games. The way he looked at her changed. He wasn’t trying to intimidate her anymore, he was trying to figure out who she was. “Who the fuck’re you?”

“That’s not part of the rules. You can’t answer a question with a question.”

Before he could reply, she popped him in the ribs and repeated her question. He couldn’t answer her with the way his body jerked around but Ronnie didn’t mind waiting. She wanted to put him through as much pain as he put her daddy through.

When he could speak again he asked, “Do you know who I fucking am?”

That brought a smile to Ronnie’s face and he realized what he’d done. His whole body tensed as he waited for her to reach over and shock him again, but she wasn’t going to. He’d misunderstood her. She wasn’t smiling because he’d broken a rule she’d just laid out. She smiled because she wanted him to know she knew who he was.

“You’re Bobby Ray Black.” She said. “A deputy sheriff in Blackwood County for ten years, and here in Confederate County before that. They say you’ll run for sheriff in Blackwood once Lou Stanley retires and that you’re probably gone win. But it wouldn’t be good for nobody if that happened. You’d just bring the trash up the ladder with you.”

Bobby breathed in hard and deep after she finished. His chest expanded until it puffed all the way out and when he exhaled it looked like it caved in. His eyes set hard on Ronnie and he said, “Tell me who the fuck you are, girl. I ain’t never killed nobody’s daddy and don’t appreciate being accused of it.”

She mocked his tone, “You don’t remember? A lot must’ve happened in six month for you to forget you killed a man. Do I need to remind you?”

Before he could answer she told the story of how her daddy was found.

“It was smart of you to bury him out where you did. Ain’t nobody been out to Dirty Creek after all that drought we’ve had. I bet the last thing you expected was for us to get all that rain throughout the summer. The worms would’ve ate daddy up if he hadn’t’ve been washed outta that shallow grave. It scared the hell outta that couple when they found his body out near their campsite. They told me that themselves.”

Ronnie knew from the way Bobby’s eyes flickered he was about to lie to her. He did his best not to look at her straight on but she wouldn’t let him break her gaze.

“Listen, sweetie,” his tone wasn’t mean but she didn’t like the way he called her that, “you got me mistaken for someone else. I don’t even know who your deddy is.”

“Bobby, what did I say would happen if you lied to me?”

“Don’t you use that fucking gun on me. Don’t you do it.” Bobby’s voice climbed in pitch with every word. He tried moving away from her but she left the chair and walked around him.

Once she stood behind him she put a hand on his shoulder and it scared him so bad he screamed. Ronnie leaned down next to his ear, “The man I got this stun gun from was really helpful. He thought I was in some kinda trouble and wanted to make sure I knew how to use it. Told me if I really wanted to hurt someone I needed to shock ‘em where the most nerve endings are. Most people go for the arms, the ribs, and the thighs like I already done. Those’re all good spots. But they ain’t as sensitive as your nose or under your chin or even around your dick. And if you lie to me one more time, Bobby, I’m gone hit you in each and every one of them spots.”

Just to show him she was serious Ronnie grabbed a handful of his hair, jerked his head back, and shoved the stunner right underneath his chin. He jerked all around and did his best to get away from her and she hadn’t even pushed the trigger. She spoke right into his face. “Now tell me what you got for killing my deddy?”

“Not a goddamn thing.” Bobby said back. “I was in no position to ask for anything. It was a favor to some people I wanted to get in good with.”

Ronnie let Bobby’s hair go and stepped away from him shocked. He knew she didn’t expect that answer and scoffed at her. “Did you really think your deddy was actually worth something, girl?” He wasn’t nothing but a piece of shit dealing opioids to the hillbillies around here. Once I heard he got into Country Mud I was happy to kill him. I’d’ve done it even if I didn’t need the favor.”

Ronnie didn’t want to hear her deddy talked about that way and let Bobby know it. “You don’t know a thing about my deddy. He wasn’t selling drugs just because it was something he wanted to do. Our family needed that money. I needed that money.”

Bobby shook his head like every word she said was more ridiculous than the last. “It’s always some kinda bullshit with you people. But the simple truth of the matter is that your deddy was doing more harm by selling that shit than I did by taking him outta this world.”

“You don’t even know why my deddy was selling that stuff.”

“Does it fucking matter?”

“My deddy was a good man.”

Bobby laughed at Ronnie over his shoulder. It was loud and insulting and reminded her of the bullies in high school. The kids that made fun of her for not having nice shoes or brand name clothes. Tears blurred her vision and it made her angry that she let him make her this emotional. This was never meant to be a debate about her deddy’s character but she’d let him bait her. They were sidetracked now and she needed to get them back on course.

“How’d my deddy get too big for his britches?”

Bobby let his head roll backwards and sighed hard. “Do you really even wanna know the answer to these questions? You’re better off believing your deddy was some kinda saint. Go on thinking he was out to do good for his fellow man. Because you ain’t gone like what you learn if you keep digging like this.”

Ronnie pressed the stun gun into the side of Bobby’s neck and said, “Answer the question.”

His jaw clenched when he felt the prongs bite into his skin. “Your deddy thought that because he’d started making a little bit of money he could call his own shots. But that ain’t how it works when you’re in bed with someone that’s got a bigger dick than you. They get to decide what position

they wanna fuck you in and how deep you gotta take it and your deddy didn't like that."

"Deddy wanted to get out."

"No the fuck he didn't." Bobby said. "He wanted to try and go out on his own. Started talking to some boys in Atlanta he thought could help him but that was a bad idea. Word got back to the people he was working for and they gave me a call."

"You're talking 'bout the Bohannons. That's who deddy worked for."

Bobby shrugged and went silent. Ronnie watched him go rigid? all over and knew he was more afraid right now than he'd been all night. Her deddy'd always made passing comments about the Bohannons being a ruthless clan but never said anything more. He didn't like her knowing more than she needed to and she wondered if her deddy hadn't been scared enough."

Ronnie walked back to her seat and pulled it close to Bobby. She sat down and waited for him to look at her. There was some foreboding in his gaze now, "The Bohannons ain't like some of these backwood gangs around here that commit crime for fun. It's their livelihood. They've been into it longer than either of us have been alive. They pass that shit down like it's a family heirloom or something. They're deep and organized and have their hands in all sorts of pots around the state. There's no taking 'em down and there damn sure ain't no double crossing 'em. If you think I'm fixing to tell you shit you're wrong. Use that gun on me however you want but I ain't talking. The Bohannons could hurt me in ways that you never could. That ain't no exaggeration either. They'd wipe me and all my history off the face of this earth."

Ronnie let Bobby keep talking. "What's this plan you got inside your head? You're gone retaliate against each and every person that was involved in your deddy's death until you reach the Bohannons? Listen, the Bohannons'll know you're coming long before you get to 'em. Once they find out they'll be the ones coming after you. You

won't stand a goddamn chance. You understand that? They'll eat you alive, girl. You and your sister. Whether you realize it or not you brought her into this too. They'll make it worse on her and make you watch. Just so you know they're the ones with all the power."

Ronnie didn't bring Bobby here to lecture her about the consequences of her decisions. She knew how dangerous this was and her sister had already tried to talk her out of it. Ronnie let her know there was no changing her mind and made her sister go into hiding. Their deddy was the only thing keeping Ronnie alive and since he'd been taken from her there was nothing else to tie her to this world. Ronnie was going to die whether it was by the hand of the Bohannons or because there was an expiration date on her life. She just wanted to make sure she took a few people with her while she was still here.

Her silence made Bobby think he'd started changing her mind. He took a frank tone with her and said, "It's time to untie me, Ronnie. We both know this's gone far enough. Ain't no reason for you to get any deeper in this than you already have. The Bohannons don't know nothing yet and ain't going to. You ain't gotta worry 'bout me saying shit. They'd slit my throat if they knew I was here."

Ronnie asked one last question. One she knew Bobby wouldn't have an answer for but wanted to see the look on his face as he tried contemplating it. One her deddy must have struggled with in the moments before Bobby put that bullet in the back of his head. One she'd been dealing with for close to three years now. She still didn't have an answer to it. That's how she knew Bobby wouldn't but she asked him anyway.

"Are you ready to die now?"

His eyes went wide and he tried pulling away when she grabbed him by the back of the neck. They wrestled around and he begged for his life as she pulled his nose onto the prongs of the stun gun, mashed the trigger, and didn't let go.

Ronnie's deddy smiled at her. She could tell he was holding back tears but he wasn't going to cry in front of the doctor. She didn't have that kind of strength. She cried the whole time the doctor talked to them and told them what was wrong with her body. Her deddy held her hand and squeezed it the whole time the doctor spoke. She didn't tell him that it hurt because she needed to feel something besides fear in that moment. She watched him out of the corner of her eye and he looked at the doctor with a stark expression. He didn't want to believe a word he heard. Two years. Maybe a little longer. They found the cancer early and if they attacked it aggressively she might go into remission. There were no guarantees with something like this.

When the doctor shut the door behind him Ronnie's deddy scooped her into his arms and they cried together. He let his sorrow out in great uncontrollable waves and they swept her away. She remembered the last time her deddy cried this way, she was a little girl. They were sitting next to her mama's still body at the funeral home. It looked like her mama was just sleeping but every time someone walked up to say they were sorry her deddy cried just like this. Ronnie imagined that being her in a couple of years. Her sister and her deddy sitting next to her and everybody they knew coming by to express their condolences. The weight of her deddy's grief would break him and that's the thought she really couldn't handle.

Her deddy finally got control of himself enough to tell her it would be all right. It didn't sound like he believed that and he went on to say he'd get her the best treatment. They'd go to that treatment center the doctor told them was in Newnan and have a specialist look at her but she knew they didn't have the money for that. Her deddy told her not to worry. He'd figure everything out. Somehow he would. He'd get the money and they'd get rid of this cancer. Except he couldn't say cancer. He tripped over the word, stuttered around it, and got frustrated.

He hid it by burying his face in her hair. His beard matted against her scalp. She wrapped her arms around him and tried feeling safe but couldn't. Her mind wouldn't let her. It was too loud and told her she was going to die. Ronnie dug her fingers into her deddy's shirt and he started singing his favorite song. The song he always sang to her when she was scared. The song he sang to her when she was little and it was bedtime. The song he sang to her when she said she didn't want a little sister. The song she sang to him when he found out mama died. It made her mind go quiet for just a few minutes. Long enough for her to listen to all the words.

Bobby regained consciousness slowly. His face was a mess. Blood drizzled over his mouth and down his chin and his nose looked like a fried cherry. Ronnie thought about cleaning him up but she liked him looking this way. She'd taken a few close up pictures of his face in case they'd come in handy later. As he became more aware of his surroundings he took in great gulps of air through his mouth and Ronnie wondered how much it hurt for him to breathe. She hoped every breath felt like someone stabbed a knife through his nostrils.

Bobby looked around the room and found her standing by the stereo. She'd played *Stand By Me* on repeat the whole time he'd been unconscious. It'd kept her motivated while she got the room ready and helped her focus on why she was doing this. She turned the volume down so they didn't have to talk over the music and walked over to him. Bobby looked down when the tarp crinkled under her boot heels then he saw the gun she carried and tried speaking.

His voice cracked and it sounded like he choked on something stuck in the back of his throat. He worked his mouth until he was able to form words and breathe at the same time. "You ain't gotta do this. It wouldn't even be worth it to you. Think about how I could help you."

"I don't need your help."

Bobby nodded his head like she hadn't thought this through. "Sure you do. Think of everything I could do. I could lead you to the right people and kill 'em if you need me to. I done it before. Killing ain't nothing for me."

"Just like my deddy wasn't nothing, huh?"

Bobby stuttered and stopped and couldn't work his mouth like he needed to. He tried using his hands to speak but forgot they were tied to the chair. "That ain't how I meant it. It ain't easy killing somebody if you ain't never done it. Do you even know if you'll be able to pull the trigger when you get the chance?"

Ronnie honestly didn't know if she'd be able to, but they were about to find out. She'd taken out some insurance just in case she needed the help. "If I can't do it my partner will."

"Partner?" Bobby spit the word out.

"I've got a partner, Bobby," Ronnie said, "how do you think I knew to find you at that bar, or to use that stunner like I did? For a cop you ain't looking at all the angles here. You should've done figured this out."

If Bobby was insulted at all he didn't act like it. He was too busy going through a list of people in his mind that would help her set him up.

Ronnie saved him the trouble of figuring it out. "Don't worry, Bobby, they'll be here shortly. They just needed to make a quick stop on their way here."

Bobby grit his teeth and with the way the blood ran around his mouth it created a wicked image. He started cussing under his breath and was about to call her names when someone knocked at the door.

He twisted around but the door was behind him. Ronnie stood from her chair and said, "They made it right on time."

She walked around Bobby, over to the door, and opened it. The old sheriff stood there and, in the

porchlight, looked like the Shadow of Death. He gave her a smile that narrowed his eyes and stretched his crows feet. Ronnie stepped forward and gave him a hug. It wasn't short nor intimate but expressed the bond they'd created. When she let him into the house he walked over to the chair in front of Bobby and sat.

The men shared a long gaze and never once broke eye contact. Bobby huffed until he was able to speak. "What the fuck, Lou?"

Lou Stanley crossed one leg over the other, took off his Stetson, and balanced it on his knee. He drummed his fingers on the brim while he looked Bobby over and said, "Boy, you look like hell."

"It's been a rough night." Bobby said, humorless.

Lou gave Bobby a flat smile but didn't speak. He kept drumming his fingers on the brim of his hat until it gave Ronnie chills. It got to Bobby too and he broke the spooky silence. "I hope to God you're here to talk some sense into this girl, Lou. She's got it in her mind she's gone bring the Bohannons down. Tell her she's outta her goddamn mind for me. I done tried but she ain't listening."

Lou looked over Bobby's shoulder at Ronnie. The old sheriff's eyes were soft and filled with hurt. She knew they shared an unspoken pain and that's why he'd agreed to help. He said to Bobby, "Done tried talking her out of it myself. She's a stubborn girl and don't wanna listen to nobody."

"So you got it in your head that she needs your help?" Bobby asked. "You're too damn old for this, Lou. You do know that, right? Hell, you can barely sit there without looking sleepy. It's past your bedtime, old man."

Lou breathed in long and slow and sat his cowboy hat off to the side. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and stared down at his boots. He spoke to them, "I am too damn old for this. That's been clear to me for some time. But I ain't walking away when somebody like you's waiting to take over."

“You’re gone die, Lou. You and this girl. She’ll lead you right to your goddamn grave and yall’re gone share it.”

“I’ve already got one foot in it, boy. Won’t hurt me none to get there a little early.”

“What is this then?” Bobby asked. “Your way of making things right before you ride off into the sunset? Because you’ve made Blackwood County what it is. You’re the one that let the Bohannons move in little by little. They run the county because you let ‘em take over. Helping this girl ain’t gone get rid of ‘em either. It’s just gone get the two of yall killed.”

“We know we’re gone die, son,” Lou said, “everybody dies.”

“Fuck off, Lou,” Bobby said, “you done watch one too many John Wayne movies.”

Lou sat back up. His posture straight and stiff and his face long and hard. When he replied to Bobby it was through gritted teeth and with gravel in the words. “I stopped by your place before coming here. Thought I’d make it look all ramshackle but there wasn’t much work for me to do. The place was a goddamn mess, Bobby. How you even living that way?”

Bobby ignored the question, “What the fuck were you doing in my house?”

“Making it look like a crime scene, son. Like you might have something somebody wanted. You know as well as I do you can’t just make a deputy sheriff disappear without raising some questions. Lucky for us you got plenty of secrets that’ll make those questions easy to answer.”

For the first time all night Bobby didn’t have a thing to say. He sat there staring at Lou. His jaw clenched and his mouth made a sharp line. He didn’t even notice when Ronnie stepped up beside him and aimed the gun at his temple. She held it there long enough for him to have his chance to react but he never did. She didn’t want to hear him beg and plead anyway. There’d already been enough of that.

It was time for them to move on.

Lou helped Ronnie cinch the tarp around Bobby’s body. She looked around the room to see what kind of mess there was to clean up and noticed the way the old sheriff looked at her. He wanted to make one more go at talking her out of going through with the rest of her plan. She sat back on her heels and waited for his argument to come.

Instead Lou said, “I’ve been knowing this boy since he was a teenager. He always wanted to be a cop. I never knew a time when he didn’t go trick-or-treating as one. He made a good one too. Could’ve done a lot of good as sheriff but something happened to him along the way. It’s like his blood went bad or something. I shouldn’t feel so good about him laying here like this but I do. I really do.”

Ronnie reached over and squeezed Lou’s arm but he didn’t look at her. His eyes never left Bobby’s corpse. He asked, “How’s it make you feel, girl?”

Ronnie took her hand away from Lou’s arm and let her eyes drop down to Bobby. She was glad he was dead and hoped she felt this way after she killed everyone else on her list. She looked at Lou and waited for him to look back up at her and said, “Bobby told me killing somebody wasn’t easy if you ain’t never done it before but he was wrong about that. Pulling that trigger was the easiest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

The Fixer

Bobby Mathews

When Hilly Taylor heard the shot, he flopped off the lawnmower, his graceless heavy body hitting the fresh-mowed grass as the engine died automatically when his weight left the seat. He struck the ground with his right shoulder, tucked his body something that might have passed for a ball, and heaved himself into a crouch. He peered over the engine of the lawnmower, eyes keen for the source of the gunfire. It was a position he'd used a lifetime ago in the desert, and the muscle memory had come back to him before his conscious mind had registered it.

His training was far behind him. The young soldier he'd been in Desert Storm had given way to this middle-aged man with the sloping gut and receding hairline. Still got the moves, though. Some of them, anyway. Hilly looked around. He was a little more than halfway through the big backyard where Lawrence Christian did most of his entertaining during the summer. The yard sloped downhill away from the sprawling house, toward a small creek. But the shot had come from the other direction, Hilly thought.

It had come from the house.

Shit.

Hilly blinked sweat from his eyes and waited. Around him, nothing but biting flies and mosquitoes stirred.

The house was red brick, three stories high, with French doors at the rear and an outdoor fireplace. The in-ground pool boasted a pair of Jacuzzis. The stainless steel outdoor kitchen glimmered under the covered patio. The glimpses Hilly had gotten of the inside showed stone floors and dark mahogany. It was a rich man's house, and that was fitting, because the honorable Judge Lawrence Christian had made his fortune the old-fashioned way: He inherited it. Christian lived alone on a five-acre spread outside of town.

Reclusive. No security to speak of. So what if someone had finally come to do for the judge? Hilly rose to his feet and slipped toward the French doors at the back of the big house.

He took his time looking everything over. No need to rush in there and get his own ass shot off. Life had made him a realist, and seeing action in multiple hot zones had taught him caution. But whatever had happened was one-and-done. Hilly duck-walked across the flagstone patio, trying to stay below the windows, under the sight line of a potential shooter.

The doors were unlocked, but most of the lights were off. The air-conditioning hit hard when Hilly opened the door. His tee-shirt, wet with sweat and heavy with humidity, clung to his chest and shoulders like a second layer of skin. Hilly went through a large sitting room, its native stone floors bedecked with comfortable-looking leather furniture. The ceilings were high and airy. The art on the walls looked like original work to Hilly's untutored eye. He moved silently in broken-in work boots, shivering a little as the chill air attacked his sweat-damp hair and clothes. Steve Earle's *Guitar Town* played with the volume low through speakers that were expertly hidden.

The kitchen was a pool of light, nearly blinding after the darkness in the rest of the house. That's where he found the judge. Lawrence Christian knelt beside the body of another man. A .44 magnum—the kind of revolver some people own in case the elephant hunts them back—lay gleaming on the floor beside the judge. The other man was dead. A cursory glance showed a single gunshot wound in the chest. From there, Hilly's training took over. He'd seen much worse. He stepped over to the gun and lifted it by the barrel. Emptied the cylinder, brass tinkling against the stone floor like soft music in the empty house, and the judge's head whipped around, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

Hilly didn't pay the old man any attention. He slipped the revolver into his waistband, careful not to touch the grips or the trigger, even though the gun was unloaded now. The dead man—he had to

be dead, you couldn't lose that much blood and live—was the first body he'd seen since he'd shipped home from Afghanistan. He expected to feel something—anger, shock, revulsion—but instead there was simply a quiet stillness. Not a feeling, but instead an absence.

The dead man was younger than the judge. Younger than Hilly, too. Not much more than a kid. He was slender, his blonde hair nearly platinum in the bright overhead lights. Blood slicked the floor beneath the body. The entry wound wasn't as big as Hilly would have thought, but the magnum left an enormous exit wound.

He put his hands under the judge's armpits and dragged him to his feet. Christian dropped back to his knees, tried to scramble back to the body. The sound of his weight dropping onto the hard floor made Hilly wince.

"Come on, Judge," he said. He lifted the man again, this time steering him toward a leather-backed barstool. The judge's eyes never left the body, but this time he stayed where Hilly put him.

Hilly found the liquor cabinet and unlocked it with a key hanging from a hook on the sideboard. He poured two generous shots of 18-year-old Macallan into leaded crystal lowball glasses and brought the drinks back to the counter where the judge leaned against his elbows.

"Here," Hilly said, and handed the judge a glass. They drank while the body cooled on the floor. "In a little while I'll call the cops, we'll get this sorted out."

The judge shook his head. "No cops."

"Got to, Judge. You know that. I shoulda called them already."

The judge shook his head and tossed back the rest of his drink, while Hilly took in a little more, too, letting the rich smoky flavor of the scotch roll on his tongue.

"Pour me another one of these, would you?" The judge pushed his lowball glass toward Hilly. Hilly

got up and poured another, and this time he brought the bottle back with him.

"I never shot anybody before," the judge said. He tossed off his second drink and reached for the bottle. "It's a shock to the system, let me tell you."

"Not as much as it was for him."

The judge chuckled, a heavy coughing sound like old machinery starting on a cold morning. It was the kind of sound that made Hilly want to clear his own throat. "No, I expect you're right about that. The son of a bitch."

Hilly drank again. There was something happening here, and he wasn't sure what it was. His cell phone was in his pocket, and all he needed to do was dial 911. That would be the end of it. He could hand over the gun, hand over the judge. Let the old man take his chances on the other side of the courtroom for once. It would work itself out.

Hilly didn't need to get involved in it at all. But here he was, drinking the judge's scotch and knowing—hoping, anyway—what was going to happen. The next time the judge's glass went empty, the old man reached for the Macallan himself. He filled his own glass and topped off Hilly's, too. His hands barely shook at all.

"I don't want any cops. You understand?"

Hilly nodded.

"Too many questions, too much ... hell, scrutiny, I guess is the word. I've always been a private person. Any hint of scandal like this and I'd have to resign from the bench."

So what? Hilly thought. And then, as if the judge had read his mind, he continued.

"I guess I could do that, but goddamn it, I'm a good judge. I like sitting on the bench. It's good work, and I do it well." The judge's voice was thicker with the honey-smoke flavor of the scotch, and he had a little trouble separating his words now.

"We can fix this," he said. A hard heartbeat later he said, "You can fix this."

There it was. Hilly could feel it was coming, and now the only thing to decide was whether he wanted to help Judge Lawrence Christian, or whether he wanted to get away from the whole damned thing.

Here he was, sitting in the judge's house neat as you please, sipping good scotch and thinking about what it would be like to be someone like Lawrence Christian, what it would be like to be someone that mattered. Hilly Taylor, who mowed lawns in the summer and cooked barbecue for fall tailgates, who sold moonshine and tended bar, who did odd carpentry jobs here and there, was someone the judge needed.

He might not need me for very long, but he needs me very badly right now.

"Judge, you're asking me for quite a lot."

"You think I don't know that? Boy, I know the law like your hand knows your dick. I'm asking you to help me. I'm not asking you to work for free."

Hilly ran his hands through his damp hair, aware of the dirt and grass clippings stuck in the creases of his sunburned neck. Redneck for life, redneck for sure, just a long step up from white trash. That was Hilly Taylor, and it didn't faze him at all. Hilly understood who and what he was. The part that bothered him was the judge, rich-as-hell Lawrence Christian thinking he was high and mighty enough to buy Hilly's silence and his help all at once. The part that bothered Hilly the most was that the man was right.

The judge named a figure. Hilly named another, and by the time he got the words out of his mouth, the judge was already shaking his head. *I am dickering with this asshole over how much disposing of a dead body is worth.* When the judge re-stated his original figure, Hilly reached for his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling 911," Hilly said. "Let them figure it out."

"Goddamn it."

Hilly shrugged. He held the phone in his hand, tapped the code to unlock the screen.

"All right," the judge said. Hilly tapped out 9-1-1, held his hand over the send button. "I said all right, Hilly."

Hilly hesitated. "I'll want that up front," he said.

The judge rolled his eyes. "Of course."

He motioned Hilly to follow him. They went upstairs to the judge's office, where the old man doddered around a cherrywood desk that seemed like it had an acre of writing space, swung a painting of Robert E. Lee decked out in his Confederate gray uniform away from the wall to reveal an old-fashioned combination safe. The judge spun the dial left, then right, and then left again. When it clicked open, Hilly told the old man to stop.

"Judge, is there a gun in that safe?"

Lawrence Christian hesitated, which was all the answer Hilly needed.

"Sir, you're probably going to be tempted to dip your hand in there and come out with that gun. Maybe you should just back away. I'll bring out the cash, and we'll count it together."

The judge backed away, and Hilly stepped forward, scooping cash out and dumping it on the huge antique desk. Almost as an afterthought, he lifted the gun—a little .380 automatic—and slipped it into his pocket. They counted the money, and when Hilly was satisfied, the judge zipped it up into a vinyl bank bag.

"Can we get down to business now?"

"What do you think we've been doing?" Hilly asked. He loosened his belt and tucked the bank bag into the waistband of his faded, ragged jeans. Then it was back to the kitchen, where the body was still just as dead as it had been ten minutes before.

"Stay here," Hilly said. He rose, knees cracking like muted fireworks, and searched for a laundry room. He found it and loaded up on jugs of

bleach, rubber gloves and hard-bristled scrubbers. The next trip took him through the rest of the first floor. There were three bathrooms downstairs—no telling how many on the upper floors—and Hilly grabbed armloads of fluffy white towels from each one.

Hilly ignored the opulence around him. Over the years he had developed a kind of tunnel vision in times of stress, and it served him well now. Their first step was to get the body out of the kitchen. The second step was to clean the place like it had never been cleaned before.

When Hilly returned to the kitchen, Lawrence Christian was nowhere to be seen. Hilly paused and looked around. When he was satisfied the judge was nowhere around, he pulled out his phone and snapped two pictures of the dead body—with just enough detail of the surrounding room that there was no doubt that the photo had been taken in Lawrence Christian's kitchen. He slipped the phone back into his pocket. Then Hilly knelt beside the body and worked at the buttons of its shirt. The judge returned while Hilly was leaning over the body. The old man had a rolled-up tarp slung over one shoulder. He nodded at Hilly.

“What are you doing?”

Hilly didn't answer. It was obvious that he was stripping the dead man. Hilly pulled the corpse's arm free of one sleeve and concentrated on the other.

“I said what are you doing?”

“You can *see* what I'm doing, Judge. What you want to know is why I'm doing it.”

Lawrence Christian was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he said finally, in a flat, emotionless voice, the voice of a man who's not used to being talked back to. “That's true. So tell me—why?”

“We're thinking about evidence,” Hilly said. “We can burn his clothes, but we can't really burn his body. I mean, we could get a fire hot enough to cook him, but I think I have a better idea.”

“Do I want to know?”

“That depends. How much deniability do you want to have?”

Eventually Hilly got the dead man undressed. While the judge wasn't looking, he took the man's wallet and stuffed it down into his own pocket. It might be useful. They took the corpse's clothes out to the outdoor fireplace on the patio, where Christian started a fire. The judge tossed the clothes onto the flames, but they were soaked in blood and didn't want to burn. Eventually the old man grabbed a can of lighter fluid from his outdoor kitchen and doused the clothes. After that, they went up pretty quickly.

Inside, they worked to get the body onto the tarp, and then they rolled him up like a burrito. Hilly strapped the makeshift shroud closed above the head and below the feet with layers and layers of duct tape, the ripping sound of the tape as it peeled off the roll echoing in the mostly empty house. Then Hilly left the judge with the corpse while he went outside to his truck. The bank bag full of money went into the center console, which Hilly locked. Then he drove his truck around to the rear of the house and unhitched his equipment trailer, leaving it mostly hidden in the judge's backyard. He tossed a couple of tools in the back and then re-joined the judge in the kitchen. They muscled the body outside and into the bed of the truck, and then they went back to clean.

It took more than an hour. They soaked the blood up with the thick, fluffy bath towels taken from the downstairs bathrooms, and then they used bleach to scrub the stone floor. Hilly stole the judge's toothbrush and used it to clean the grout between the stones, taking care to clean every surface where it looked like blood had touched.

The whole time they each kept an eye out for where the bullet might have gone. The exit wound had been huge, but Hilly couldn't figure the trajectory of the round that had killed the man. In the end, it was the one thing they couldn't control. Either the judge would eventually find it, or he wouldn't.

Once the floor and walls had been cleaned, Hilly went back to the truck. The judge didn't follow. That was fine with Hilly. He had other things to think about. Who the hell was the dead man in the back of his truck, and why had the judge killed him? The money in the bank bag weighed on him as well. That was enough money to see him through all of the next year—the next two or three, if he was careful.

The drive was easy, despite all the things going on in his mind, and as always, Hilly smelled the place before he saw it. Ostermeyer's farm was a huge and rambling place. The man ran several hundred head of cattle, raised a few horses and chickens, and had a huge herd of pigs.

The pigs—hogs, really—were huge monsters that outweighed Hilly by several hundred pounds each. The pen where they rutted, rested, and rolled in the mud was a couple of rises away from the house, in order to cut down on the smell. Hilly doubted it worked. Already the rancid smell of pigs was in his nostrils. He shook his head and tried to remember that the pigs were what he needed right now. They were always hungry. That was a good thing, Hilly thought as he pulled the body out of the truck bed and began to saw away at the tarp with a long-bladed folding knife. The body finally slipped free, and Hilly reached back into the truck bed for the axe he'd tossed in earlier.

Everything up until then had been easy. Next came the hardest part. The pigs would eat everything, as long as it was chopped small enough. Hilly raised the axe and tried not to look away as he brought it down again and again.

The hogs squealed, snuffling and prancing back and forth in their pen, waiting.

Litter

Emmi Conner

John knocked on the door of his new neighbor's home, hoping that 8:15 a.m. wasn't too early for his first visit. After three firm knocks, he got his answer. Henry Richards opened the door.

"What do you want?" Henry asked.

John hoped for a more welcoming start to their conversation, but he had pastored long enough that shock didn't surge through his body like a stray bolt of lightning.

"Morning, Henry," he said. "I'm John. My wife and I just moved into the parsonage beside Pine Springs Baptist. You probably saw my truck loaded down in the driveway."

John held out his hand.

Henry looked at it and walked away from the door, letting it hang open, and called for John to come inside.

John took one last long look at the parsonage before forcing himself through the doorway.

The house smelled entirely of one thing: cat litter. It wafted up from the floors and down from the ceiling, though John didn't notice a single cat. Didn't even hear a meow, in fact. And in a way, that made some sense. The house didn't smell like cats; it smelled like litter.

"You can sit at the table," Henry said. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black is fine," John said. He craned his head around to the left, searching the kitchen-connected hallway for even a kitten.

"Which one?" Henry asked, and for a moment, John believed he'd been asked to pick from a whole litter of kittens, cardboard-box style like the ones that sat on the curb of the local Winn-Dixie.

When he turned back toward Henry, though, he found his new neighbor pointing to a row of mugs

hanging on rusted nails hammered into the wall beside the sink. Maybe five or six of them, each a different size or color.

“That red one will do just fine,” John said, because it hung closest to Henry. “So, how long have you lived here?”

“Since I was a boy,” Henry said. “I inherited this place when my parents died about fifteen years ago. My wife used to live here with me, but she’s since taken up with an encyclopedia salesman. Better for both of us, if you ask me.”

John hadn’t asked, but the little snippets of life that people handed him were often his favorite parts of the job. He considered himself a kind of collector of those scraps of information, usually given in the form of memories, wishes, dreams, or ghosts and always given without asking.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Or perhaps, if you feel you’re better off, I’m delighted to hear it. My wife and I have been tied up all week trying out the restaurants in town. We’re looking for a good diner spot, you know? The ones that small towns somehow keep secret.”

“There ain’t much,” Henry said. “The word *secret* just isn’t in most people’s dictionaries.”

John knew nothing to say to that. This early in the morning, though, silence felt more comfortable than it normally did between strangers.

When the coffee was ready, Henry plopped John’s red mug on the table and sat down opposite him. A layer of frothy cream covered John’s drink, even though he didn’t think Henry had poured anything extra into the mug. And he *knew* he’d asked for black.

The froth became a foreign enemy in John’s mind. It was a small, gray cloud, swept in over his head on a day when the man on Channel 6 promised only sunshine.

John sipped his coffee—still boiling hot, just the way he liked it—and knew immediately what created the pretend-cream: a thick layer of dust, probably enough of it to mirror a hairball.

I bet that mug’s been up there for years, John thought. God knows what’s swimming around in my stomach now.

Even with the strange lack of evidence, he guessed the mixture in his coffee must include at least *a little* cat hair. The first sip made a considerable dent in the coffee, but the dust-froth only resettled atop what was left.

“Good, yeah?” Henry said. He swallowed a big gulp. “If there’s one thing I do right, it’s coffee.”

“Of course,” John said, forcing down another small sip. “You know, I think I’ll take a little sugar in mine. If you’ll show me where it’s at, I’ll get it myself.”

He hated anything in his coffee—dust, most of all, he’d learned—but John figured he could spoon out the dust when he mixed in a little sugar. Even if he only removed half of it, the sugar might make the rest tolerable. Hopefully.

“I’m afraid I don’t keep sugar in the house anymore,” Henry said, bankrupting John’s plans. “My wife thought it’d make us both fat if we kept it close by, so I got used to not buying it. I guess old habits die hard.”

“I guess they do,” John said.

If not sugar, what else has worked so hard to create the pouch of pudge resting just above your belt? John thought. Cat hair dust?

He considered asking for cream or milk, but a first impression meant everything in his business. Instead, he sent up a silent prayer that nothing hiding among the dust would slither back up through him before he got back to the parsonage. John usually drank three to four cups of coffee a day but none as memorable as this.

Henry finished what was left in his mug and got up from the table.

“Should I top you off?” he asked, refilling his own mug.

Absolutely not, John thought.

"I think I'm okay, but thank you," he said. "In fact, I've been trying to cut down lately. My wife says I probably shouldn't drink as much of this stuff anymore, you know?"

"Oh, if there's anything I know," Henry said, "it's a wife that says 'you shouldn't.'"

"So, Henry," John said, hoping some excuse to go home would appear in front of him. After a bout of silence and no obvious reason to leave, John almost accepted defeat. He said the first thing that came to mind. "How many cats do you have?"

Henry stopped pouring coffee and faced the table.

"Cats?" he said. "None, I guess. I've never had a cat in my life. My wife was allergic."

With that, John took another slow sip from his red mug and ditched his hope for a quick escape.

No cats, he thought. No cats in this house. Plenty of dust-froth, though.

Resigned to defeat, John lifted the mug to his lips and swallowed every last drop, including the cloudy layer of god-knows-what.

"One more cup?" Henry asked.

John looked in the direction of the parsonage before raising his mug to Henry.

"Of course, Henry," he said. "I'd love another cup."

The Waltz

Sean Jacques

I shouldn't have to tell you how hard it is to knock over a bank. But imagine how hard it might be knocking over a bank in the hicktown you grew up at.

Well, that's me. Right now. Twenty-past-nine on a chilly Saturday morning in November, striding down a cracked sidewalk, sporting a blaze orange hunting coat, a matching orange ski mask scrunched on my head like a sock toboggan, puffy camo pants, muddy brown work boots, black leather gloves, dark aviator shades, and a Colt .45 tucked away inside my waistband.

It's a crazy notion, I know, but I wouldn't be in this clusterfuck if it wasn't for my rotten daddy. The son of a bitch did the world a favor by dying, and as soon as I'd heard the good news, I skipped out of the rathole basement where I was living in Chicago and came running back here to my birthplace to pick up any effects that he'd never bothered to share with me or my mama when she was alive. But instead of any inheritance, the bank politely told me that he'd spent the past decade second-and-third mortgaging all his worth in whiskey and a wasted life. There's nothing left. Except the ten acres and the broken-down house that I grew up in that they are taking as collateral. I still don't know why I'm surprised, the worthless piece of shit is no better dead than he was alive.

Reaching the corner of Central and Franklin, I nod my chin down as a dented-up 4x4 Ford dually comes along pulling an empty gooseneck, and after it passes on by me, I spit and ramble my way across the street toward the Town & County Bank. A few empty cars and trucks are parked in the lot and no one is loitering about. Like I was hoping for, most of the locals, and probably even a couple of the town deputies, maybe even the sheriff, are out in the woods this morning, freezing their nuts off, as it's the opening day of deer hunting season. I must've run across at least a couple hundred orange-costumed killers this week, and heard all I

could stand of their boasts about bagging a big buck. I swear to God, people around here are more juiced over gunning down a deer than they are watching fireworks in July.

I keep my steady pace into the parking lot and keep heading straight toward the double-glass doors, and when I get there, I read the fancy-stenciled words to remind myself that this is not a dream and that the bank is indeed open:

*Open Monday- Friday 8:00 AM – 4:00 PM
Saturday 9:00 AM – Noon*

Yes, it is. So I brace myself, lift the shades from my eyes, tug the orange ski mask over my mug, whip out the .45, and yank open the double-glass doors to step into the spotlight.

I scan the lobby. Five customers. Three women. Two men. All older than fifty. Three women tellers behind the counter, working sleepy and oblivious, and one of them is Tammy Dixon, who was a good friend of my mama. I should mention that my mama worked in this same bank as a teller too, before she died of cancer when I was twelve, and I used to come and visit her here sometimes after school to grab a free lollipop.

I hurry over to the largest man and smash him on his nose with the butt of my Colt, and as I wanted him to do, he immediately takes to howling, throwing his hands over his face, as blood milks from his nostrils and shoe-laces down to the checkered marble floor.

“No one fucking move!”

As everybody cranes their heads toward me, I wag my Colt at their faces, and from behind the two holes in my ski mask, I roll my sight at a chunky secretary sitting at her desk.

“Get the manager out here! Tell him to bring his keys!”

But she stays stuck in her seat, her eyeballs bulging like they’re going to pop.

“Now fat girl! Move your fat ass!”

Now getting the picture I’m painting, she shakily stands from her swivel chair and moves like a stunned sow toward the manager’s office. The big bloody-nosed man keeps bawling, so I kick him in his rear to move him closer to other customers, still waving my Colt like a band conductor’s baton. “You, you, you, you. . . cram together! Come on, cram in!”

Though clumsy, they manage to huddle together with their knees wobbling and their eyes wetting with fright, so I turn my aim toward Tammy and the two tellers standing stone still behind the window counter. “How many others are back there?”

“P-P-Please don’t h-hurt nobody,” one teller moans.

“How many?!”

“J-J-Just Kathy,” the other teller stutters. “Sh-she’s workin’ the drive-up window.”

Then the manager ambles out of his office, his face white as a bedsheet, his hands held high, one of them dangling his keys, and I recognize him as Scotty Burns, the grown-up version of the Goodie-Two-Shoes kid that I once gave a black eye to in grade school because he snitched me out for playing kiss tag with the girls. The sight of him is a surprise to me, as I was expecting to see old Mr. Woolway, the man who’s run this bank ever since I can remember, the man who ran it when my mama worked here, and the same man who informed me two days ago that my rotten daddy’s worth had evaporated in drink. I can only gather that Scotty Burns has done good for himself since our school days and has been put in charge on Saturdays.

“Get over here!” I react, pointing the Colt at him and the chunky secretary. “Both of you, come on, hurry it up!” Smartly, they obey me like dumb mules, stumbling forward and inserting themselves into the gathered crowd of customers.

“Okay, Mr. Manager, listen real careful. You go over there and lock them doors, real quick, and if

you try to pull any funny shit, I'll blow a hole right through you. You get me?"

"Y-yes," he whimpers, bobbing his bald head.

"And if you're thinking I might miss, you might also think about how you'll be stamped as the coward banker who ran away from these poor folks for the rest of your life."

And just like that, Burns goes scurrying away to do what he's been told.

Okay, then. So far, this plan is working out just like I imagined it would. I might have forgotten to mention that this is my first bank job. It's not like I'm a hardcore criminal, not really, though I do possess a certain expertise in stealing cars. Or at least, I did.

The short of it is, I jetted out of this little town about a decade ago, on account of my rotten daddy's daily beatings, and I wound up in the mean streets of Chicago and fell in with some old-school crooks with a racket in chop shops. Fast and easy money, you wouldn't believe how many gullible shitheads still leave their keys in the ignition, it doesn't take a whole lot of know-how to steal cars. The main prizes are your older model Hondas and Toyotas (yeah, I know, not exactly glamorous, but those suckers are easy to chop and sell parts, and you can find them parked on any block in the metro and surrounding suburbs). Every so often, we did lift a high-dollar 'Vette or Porsche, but those jobs are dicey, and it's on account of a dicey job that now has me desperate enough to hit this bank in the shithole town I grew up at.

You see, about three months ago, me and my partner, let's call him "Dipshit," were ripping-off a Maserati outside of a downtown nightclub, and the Maserati's owner spotted us just as we cracked open the car door, and here he came sprinting to stop us from our intentions. We pack heat for such occasions, like the old-school crooks taught us, as a pistol pointed at someone's face will warn off even the most hot-headed assholes, but mind you, we never chamber a round because we're not looking to shoot anybody. But this time, Dipshit somehow

forgot to follow our rule and accidentally fired a .45 round into the asshole's eyeball, and I swear to Christ, I never seen anything so godawful as watching the back of that dude's brain splatter like salsa and chips across the hood of his Maserati.

Anyway, let's just say that one goddamn bullet also changed the trajectory of my profession. After hearing about Dipshit's monumental fuck-up, the old-school crooks dropped us from their ranks, but worse than that, I've been scared shitless that the cops are going to sniff me out as the killer, even though I didn't pull the trigger, hell, I wasn't even holding the gun. So when I got the good word that my rotten daddy had croaked, I figured to score some inheritance and start a new life somewhere else, maybe California, but like I've already said, when I rolled into town this week, I found out my daddy, even dead, is still a lowdown rotten son of a bitch, so my only choice left was to walk in here and demand what is due to me.

As I watch Burns click the lock on the double-glass doors, I yank out a wadded-up grain sack that I'd slipped inside my hunting coat pocket, and I toss it toward the teller windows at Tammy. "Take that sack and get whoever's back there at that drive-up window," I tell her, "and fill it up with cash from the safe."

"I, I, I don't want no trouble," she coughs out.

I notice her neck muscles are clamping around her throatbox, and I do feel bad for her, but I've gone too far now, and she's the only one I can truly trust to follow my directions. "The only trouble is if you don't do what I say, grandma, now get the fuck back there and do it!"

I figure that is all the prodding the old gal will need, but instead of following my advice, her eyes roll back into her head and she grabs at her chest and tumbles to the floor, and before I can even gather what is going on with her, the drive-up window teller, a hideous young blonde gal, steps out from the door that leads to the back room.

"What's all this racket---?"

“Don’t move!!” I roar, leveling the Colt her way, then I try to nudge Tammy out of her sudden stupor. “Get up grandma! Get up!”

“She’s got a heart condition,” one of the other tellers speaks out.

Heart condition? Holy shit, Tammy is choking to death like a trout out of the creek, and I sure as hell didn’t expect something like this.

“Window girl. Step over there to grandma and pick up that grain sack!”

The window girl shuffles over to Tammy, leans down to pick up the grain sack, and when she raises back up, tears are rolling down her flushed cheeks.

“Good girl.”

My attention turns back to Goodie-Two-Shoes Burns, still standing in a fright at the double-glass doors. “Mr. Manger, get your ass back over here!”

“Y-yes, sir.” He stumbles toward me again, his eyes wide, not a single blink.

I point my pistol at his forehead. “Give me those keys and get back there and help her fill that sack up with large bills, and if you do anything stupid like trip an alarm or put a dye pack in that sack, you are going to be the first to fucking die, you get me?”

“Y-yes, sir.” He hands me the keys, real careful-like, then he rambles away from me like I’m the plague, and runs smack dab into the batwing door that gains entrance to the vault room.

He turns back at me, trembling. “I, I can’t get in. I- It’s locked.”

“Well, figure it the fuck out then!”

Good Christ, Burns is as pathetic as he was in school. I shoot my eyes back at the drive-up window teller again, knowing I can trust her to do something right, or at least do it better than he can. “Window girl, let your boss through the damn door!”

Like a dutiful dog, she hurries along to open the batwing gate, but nothing is moving fast enough for me, so I coach her along, “Hurry up, hurry up!” then throw out the darker threat, “I’ll kill anybody I have to!”

So I’m not really going to kill anybody, as I said before, I’m not the killing type. But I do have to stick to the plan, which says that you have to make a person piss their pants for them to obey you, bank robbery or otherwise. That’s why I busted the big bastard on the nose right from the start, get the sight of blood on everybody’s mind, and then I have to keep hounding that *I will kill them*. It’s all for show. And if you’re curious, warning Burns about the dye-pack is also part of my plan, thanks to my mama, who used to tell me all about it when I was kid, and yes, as a matter of fact, I have intentionally dressed up in this orange get-up because I know that I look just like about a couple thousand or so deer hunters within a two-mile radius today. And I will also let you in on that the next phase of the plan is not entirely of my own design, I’d heard about it from the old-school crooks in Chicago one time when they were tossing back whiskey together in one of their home bars. It’s called, *The Waltz*. It starts with me glaring harder at every one, with my Colt stretched from my fist, and me saying, “Alright, everybody find a dance partner.”

I am quick to see that this is not a great beginning, because the two men and three women customers and the chunky secretary are only shifting looks of bewilderment at one another. I guess I need to repeat myself with a little more gusto.

“I said find a dance partner, goddamnit!”

Now with the higher notch of fear rushing through their veins, the nose-bleeding bastard turns to the old blue-haired woman, and the cross-eyed man shuffles his feet over to the elderly lady with a wart on her cheek. But still, the skinny third woman and the chunky secretary aren’t moving, I bet they’re thinking that I’m going to shoot them since they didn’t find a man.

“Partner the fuck up,” I direct them, “this ain’t the time to get shy, ladies,” then I gesture the Colt at the two tellers behind the counter. “You too, honey dolls!”

And just like that, the two pairs of women partners are ready to cut a rug.

“Alright, now I want all of you to kiss each other on the mouth and grab each other’s asses like you’ve been waiting to make sweet love together your whole lives.”

But again, the dance partners hesitate from following my demands, it must seem like a disgusting joke to them, and I don’t blame them for it, not really, they are probably waiting for me to shoot a plastic flower out of my pistol.

“I said grab an ass! What the fuck are your waiting for?!”

“I’m a married woman,” the wart cheek woman argues back to me.

“And you’ll be a dead bitch if you don’t mind me!”

The lobby now starts to take on the appearance of a dancehall in hell, as shaky hands seize clenched butts, and each chosen pair puckers up and places their lips together. The two chubby tellers smack like genuine lovers, as does the chunky secretary and the skinny woman customer. The married wart cheek woman closes her eyes to smooch a stranger, probably for the first time since her wedding night, while the blue-haired woman’s mouth becomes smeared with the blood of the nose-bleeder.

“Good work, everybody, now keep holding on to your partner’s ass like it’s your own,” I warn them, “cause if your partner tries to run, then you’re both going to die.”

I’m relieved to see that *The Waltz* seems calming the situation, easing the panic amongst my co-stars, except for Tammy of course, who looks as if she’s going into cardiac arrest on the floor. Poor woman. I sure didn’t wish this on her. But all we can do now is wait for Burns to hurry on out with my money, and I promise I will be on my way.

Then my ears catch a knock coming from the double-glass doors, and I whirl around to see a goateed-man squinting through from the outside.

“Ye open?” he hollers.

A tingle of alarm shoots down my spine, I know the prying bastard probably isn’t going to just shoo on his own, so I warn the waltzing customers, “Don’t none of you fucking move!”

I hoof it to the entrance, use Burns’s keys to flip the lock, and swing open one of the glass doors hard enough to thump the prying bastard’s face and send him reeling backwards.

I step out and grab him by his collar. “Shut the fuck up or I’ll blow your goddamn head off!” Then I poke the Colt under his goateed chin and jostle him inside.

“Wha-What’s goin’ on?” he cries as I shove him to the floor.

“Stay down and don’t move!”

I relock the double-glass doors then hoist the new arrival up from the floor and marshal him across the lobby, just as Burns and the drive-up window teller return from the vault.

“You get it all?” I ask them.

But they both can only gawk with open mouths at the profane sight in the lobby.

“Hey! You get the money?! Bring it over here!”

Burns jerks back to his wits and quick-trots to me, pulling along the stuffed sack.

Window girl, get on over here where I can see you.”

She hurries along too, her eyes still wet from fright, and she halts beside the kissing blue-haired woman and nose-bleeding man.

I glare at Burns. “Open it.”

With buckling knees, he bends down and pulls back the top of the grain sack, and as the flap widens, I see a heap of wrapped bills bearing famous faces.

“You didn't put a dye-pack in there like I told you not to, did you?”

His eyes go to bulging, unblinking, giving himself away. I elevate the Colt at the drive-up window teller. “Did he put something in there? Did he?!”

“Here, here,” Burns speaks up, reaching into the sack. He pulls out a funny-looking wrapped bundle of 50s, which I'm guessing houses a dye-pack.

“You mother fucker!”

Set loose with a blind rage over another asshole in my life not following through with the plan, I chamber a bullet into the Colt and jab the barrel next to his temple, my finger tickling the trigger, daring me to waste him, daring me to ignore my own rules, but then my better sense takes over, reminding me that I'm not a killer, so instead I raise the Colt over his skull and bring it down like a sledgehammer, which sends the women into screaming.

Burn slumps over, his eyes rolling in their sockets, while the goateed-man breaks for the double-glass doors, so I raise the Colt and pull the trigger, blasting him in his ass cheek and dropping him to the floor. Now with my eardrums ringing, I scoop up the grain sack and torpedo toward the entrance, I unlock the bolt with the keys, then rush out into the cold air, and I'm running so damn blind that I don't see a Buick pulling into the lot, and it clips me in the hip, but I roll over the hood and recover on my feet, then I go sprinting on to Central Avenue, and I keep running, and running, and running, not knowing where am I running to, but I do know that I just waltzed into the goddamn bank in the hicktown I grew up at, and I'm getting away with a grain sack full of cash bouncing on my back.

The Yellow Corvette

Jim Woessner

Walter got out of his car, stretched his lanky frame, and looked up at a cloudless desert sky. Even with sunglasses, he had to squint. Waves of heat radiated from the black asphalt of the parking lot. He felt it through his sticking shirt and the rubber soles of his running shoes. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He then folded the handkerchief into a neat square, tucked it back in a pocket, and walked into the convenience store.

Walter had left Pasadena at seven in an attempt to cross the desert before it became unbearably hot. When he reached the western edge of the Mojave, it was already over a hundred and climbing. It wasn't yet ten o'clock. The drive had been monotonous with the continuous drone of engine, the strain of a barely functioning air-conditioning system, and the rhythmic beat of tires on pavement. He kept the driver's side window cracked for ventilation, although it was nearly as hot inside as it was outside. And he was getting thirsty. When he reached Baker, a small town halfway between Barstow and the Nevada border, he pulled off the freeway.

Inside the store, Walter took off his sunglasses and stood for a moment to let his eyes adjust. He said “morning” to the short, muscular man behind the counter, but the man didn't notice or couldn't be bothered to look up from a newspaper spread across the counter top. Walter thought the man looked too young to work in a convenience store. Maybe 17 or 18. He smiled and reminded himself that he was the absolute worst judge of a person's age. He looked across the store to locate the chillers and spotted them arranged along the back wall. Walter headed down an aisle containing an assortment of nuts, chips, candy, various flavors of beef and turkey jerky, maps, and gadgets for cars and trucks. In the chillers he looked at the brands and flavors. He normally wouldn't touch

artificially-flavored soft drinks, but in today's heat he would make an exception.

Walter opened the chiller door, closed his eyes, and let the refrigerated air wash over him. A moment later his meditation ended with shouting coming from the front of the store. He turned to see what was going on, but shelves blocked his view. The voices sounded Spanish. He didn't understand what was being said, but he knew it was intense. As he grabbed a can of Coke, he heard a sharp crack of sound, as if a large book had dropped on the floor. The shouting stopped. Walter walked across the back of the store. When he reached the last aisle, he turned and saw the backlit shape of someone leaning over the counter from the customer's side. Just then the figure straightened up and appeared to face Walter. He couldn't see the man clearly because of sunlight streaming through the front windows, so he instinctively put up a hand to shield his eyes. As he did, there was a flash of light.

Walter felt a sharp blow on his chest and fell backwards. Disoriented, he reached out with his arms, dropped the can of soda, and knocked over a magazine rack before hitting the floor. Lying on his back, his first thought was embarrassment for making a mess of the magazines. He looked over and noticed the cover of one of them. It showed a yellow Corvette, the latest version of the car he once owned in college, twenty-some years ago. He had loved that car like no other, his ragtop chick magnet. He smiled at the memories: When he drove to the fraternity house and saw the envy on the members' faces. When he asked a beautiful young woman if she wanted a ride, and she said yes. When Brenda sat next to him with her dog Bruno squeezed in behind. When the three of them – he, Brenda, and the dog – were married. When he sold the car to make a down payment on a tract house in Altadena. When a year later Brenda left him. The yellow Corvette represented the pinnacle of his life. When he sold it, everything changed.

Walter regretted letting it go. He didn't have many regrets, but that was one of the biggest. Not trying harder to keep Brenda was another. The

last he'd heard, she was living in Dallas, married to a dentist, and expecting a child. That had been several years back. He'd thought about writing to her, but never seemed to get around to it. She probably had several kids by now. Kids. Not having any of his own was another regret. But then maybe it was for the best.

Walter rolled to his side and closed his eyes against the dull pain of his head having hit the linoleum and the pressure building in his chest. When he opened them into the sunlight from the store front, a broad shouldered man stood above him. The man didn't speak. His features were indistinguishable in the glare. Walter wanted to ask him why he was lying on the floor, but the words wouldn't form in his mouth. The man turned without speaking and walked away. Walter looked to the side and saw the magazine cover with the photograph of the yellow Corvette. He felt something hot and wet on his chest. Breathing was becoming difficult. He couldn't feel his legs. Nothing made sense. He saw his can of Coke lying out of reach under one of the shelves. It looked as if it was perspiring with tiny droplets of cool condensation. Walter felt strangely cool himself. It was almost a relief from the blistering heat.

Rolling on the Bottom

Wilson Koewing

State Detective French Calhoun spit big then kicked dirt that was happy to get moving. The Louisiana sun cooked so hot it made asphalt brand new soft. French tugged on his Oxford. It sucked back. He'd ditched the sport coat by nine. The lead was dried up like the old gator claw French wore around his neck.

Only the trail was cold.

French stood under an I-10 overpass by the long bridge over Whiskey Bay. The last place Kinsley Ashton's phone pinged. The case was closed, still French kept returning. After 48 hours the family had a wake. Higher-ups thought French could best serve the department by going out to pasture with severance. French wanted to leave the higher-ups some crow to eat as the door swung.

French remembered picking up the phone with a gloved hand. A pink case, covered in dew, a sliver of battery left. A text notification read: *Wanna double with John and Brandy? John's getting his dad's car. I can buy the tickets if you can buy...* Then trailed off. French couldn't see it without a passcode. Fog had crept off the swamp and hung until the sun sizzled it away. French thought he saw gator eyes under the slime on the water's surface.

French felt wobbly and walked over to the underpass in search of shade.

He believed the culprit to be a man named Randall Short, but he was the only one. The lone witness saw a black truck racing away from the scene. Randall Short had a black truck.

"Shit, a lot of people have black trucks, French," the deputy director said. "This is Louisiana."

French sat across from him scribbling in a notepad.

"Maybe do some actual police work before you start sticking your nose in people's business," the

deputy director continued. "Remember what that is?"

French made some violent scratches, flipped the page and continued.

"What is it, a hunch?" the deputy director asked. "Look, I agree, he's a slimy little bastard. Scares people, but he's been living here all his life. Never caused trouble."

French kept scribbling.

"God dammit, French," the deputy director said. "Go see him if it's that important to you."

French stopped scribbling and held up the notebook. Written on the page in big letters: *Thank you, sweetheart.*

Randall Short wore his name. He was a pitiful little fuck; a monster since birth that even hell didn't want. He survived the respirator and lost vision in his right eye to childhood cancer. St. Jude couldn't handle him. They found fosters to take him. Backwater Louisiana coon-asses with liver spots and a combination of basic meth-cooking-know-how, ambition and stupidity.

Things ended explosively for them.

French drove out to Randall Short's ramshackle house on stilts by Whiskey Bay. He stepped out of his cruiser and stared over the water at a sunset that was eerie pretty. The carcass of a dead dog rotted on the bank.

Randall Short pushed through a screen door as French climbed the porch steps.

"Why wouldn't you do something about that dog?" French asked.

"Ain't mine."

"Smell doesn't bother you?"

"Just cause the winds blowin' in," Randall smiled, showing filthy teeth.

"Where's Kinsley Ashton's body?"

Randall lit a cigarette and chewed on the filter.

“You think I did somethin’ to that little girl on the news?”

Randall glanced at French and held his gaze before staring out over the water.

“Know what happens when something sinks to the bottom of Whiskey Bay?”

French moved his hand closer to his waist.

“It gets covered up,” Randall continued. “See, there’s a layer of loose sediment at the bottom. Tide comes in and out real slow, barely notice, but it’s strong on the bottom. Over time, things get covered up and buried. Impossible to know how many things been covered up under there. How deep that soft sand goes.”

French stood and left.

“Got a daughter don’t ya, French?”

French stopped halfway down the stairs.

The stink from the dead dog floated by.

“What did you say?” French said, not bothering to turn around.

The sun resembled a giant bobber being yanked into the bay by something big in the endless dark underneath, stealing the light from the world.

“Shit, it’s a little town, French,” Randall said. “I know about ya. She’d probably be about the same age as that missing girl, wouldn’t she?”

French continued down the stairs.

“Don’t see her much though, do ya?” Randall said. “Wouldn’t even be able to protect her if somebody came for her. How you expect to solve this case, boy?”

French wanted to pull out his pistol and walk up the stairs, grab Randall Short and cram the barrel down his throat until he confessed. But he knew better than to think he wouldn’t pull the trigger and walk right into the swamp dragging Randall Short’s body with him until it covered them both.

Instead, French headed for the dog carcass.

“Fuck you doing?” Randall said.

French reached the dog and gagged. He scooped up the carcass and ran toward the water, but it fell apart. The torso and head stayed in his arms. He tossed them as far as he could. They landed with a slap. He tossed the rest in the bay, piece by piece.

Randall Short kicked at his deck railing, took a swig from a Shiner and spit it out in the bay breeze. French waded in and splashed himself, trying to remove the smell and get the flies off. Then he stomped back to his cruiser and sped away.

French labored up to the interstate and climbed in his unmarked. Through the front windshield the long bridge that led to New Orleans rolled out swampy on both sides. The black trees poking out of the muck reminded French of every bad night he’d like back. Suffocating under the water’s surface were the memories, growing murkier by the day.

The city skyline rose demonic in the distance.

He’d lost Jules for trips there. Ironic it’s where she chose to settle alone.

French hit the A/C and it blasted hot, but after a minute, blew fresh cold.

In the rear view, cars kept coming.

A photo of Anne, their only, spun below the mirror. Her junior year would soon end. She’d returned French’s last birthday gift with a note attached: *Seeing you would have been a better gift.*

French popped the glove box and a bottle of Jack tumbled out.

He tossed one back then another. After a third, he punched the gas and merged onto the interstate. He hit eighty, then ninety, weaving in and out of traffic. All he could think about was sliding into the filthy bowl that is the French Quarter, letting his

head get tight, and seeing if he could crawl up the sides.

Jules was French's only real flame. She had her prom, her first love, and her first broken heart before she met French driving his El Camino down a side street in Scott. Jules and her best friend, Sally, were riding their bikes in the middle of the street. French honked and they waved him by. French slowed to their speed. Jules was wary.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Old enough to know how to treat a lady."

Jules blushed. They kept rolling. French kept pace.

"Lemme call ya sometime." French said.

"Got some paper?"

French didn't.

"Hey, stop for a second, would ya?"

French got out.

"Tell me the number."

"How you gon' remember it?" Jules looked at Sally and giggled.

"Just tell me."

Jules scrunched her mouth trying to figure French out. French leaned against his El Camino. Jules said the number and he keyed it into the paint.

They got married on a Monday because Jules didn't think weekends were serious. When he pulled the veil up, French could have called it a life. Keeping her was the challenge and somewhere deep inside, he always knew he wasn't up for it. But every day he could have was worth the pain coming. He knew that, too. He kept her for a good spell.

They didn't go far for the honeymoon. The casino in New Orleans. French won \$600 on Blackjack. Jules had three margaritas one night. French chased her as she danced and spun through the casino care-free. When he finally caught her, she

fell into his arms. He gave her a hundred, told her to pick a color on Roulette and she won. Six months later, French gave her the picket fence. He was just Scott police then.

French's cruiser floated towards New Orleans. Forks of lightning stabbed through grey clouds behind the skyline. Heat waves rose from the asphalt. Dulling the city's façade in a dim haze.

French took the Carrolton exit and headed toward Mid-City. He drove by Lusher. School was about to let out. He settled a block away and angled the side-mirror to see the entrance.

Anne stepped out alone. She favored Jules. Thank Christ. She wore a floral sundress. Her hair was in a long ponytail and she had on what looked like combat boots. French wasn't sure what to make of that. She glanced in French's direction. He could have sworn she saw him. Then she bounced down the stairs and hopped into a shiny Black Dodge Challenger. French didn't have to wonder if a boy was driving.

He followed them through traffic. They cut a right on Orleans and headed for Bayou St. John. French cruised by and parked. The boy ran inside. He wore all black. Tattoos crawled up his arms. He came out with a brown bag.

French scooted past as they parked by the bayou. Anne and the boy crossed a bridge and settled under an oak. The boy spread out a blanket. He leaned in for a kiss, but Anne turned away. A group of friends approached. French liked that she turned away.

They sat in a semi-circle and passed the bottle around.

French curled around the bayou and hooked a right on Esplanade. In a mile he'd be in the quarter. He waited at the red light on Rampart and saw the sign for Buffa's. A haunt, one of many.

Outside Jules's shotgun in the Marigny he took two whiskey swigs before getting out. He stood on the

sidewalk in front of the house. Gardenias wrapped around two pillars on the porch. French imagined Jules sitting out there every morning having coffee, reading and smelling those Gardenias.

He knocked, but no answer. He opened the gate and walked around the house.

He stepped into the backyard and marveled at what Jules had done, a little garden oasis in the middle of a concrete jungle. The wood fence in the back was covered in honeysuckle. A patio table sat in a patch of perfectly mowed grass. Jules knelt, digging in a flowerbed. She turned, sensing French's presence and slid off her work gloves. She wore cut-off jeans and a tank top, hair wild and frizzy. French melted again.

"What are you doing here, French?"

"Just wanted to get a look at you."

"What do you think?"

"I like the honeysuckles."

Jules plucked a blossom and slid it behind her ear.

"You here drinking?"

French pulled out the whiskey bottle from his back pocket.

"Saw Anne," French said. "Watched her leave school and drive off with a boy."

"He's too old for her, but who am I to judge?" Jules said.

"She looked happy."

"You want some coffee?"

"No, I know the rules," French said, "I'd need to add a little Jack."

"Why'd you come here, French?"

"I told you," French said. "Wanted a get a look at you."

French turned and walked back down the stone path, through the gate and back to his cruiser. He climbed inside and drove away.

French parked on Chartres and strolled to The Chart Room. Darkness settled during his walk. Gas lanterns lit the streets. The bottle of Jack was history. The CBD skyline jutted modern in the distance. It felt like a different world.

French slid onto a barstool and ordered a Sazerac. The bar was populated by eccentric locals and tourists. French liked that he could be anonymous, drink alone and not answer questions. A drunk woman, probably late forties, stepped to the bar and touched French's arm. She wore a cowboy hat and a leather vest.

"You look so serious," she said.

French motioned to the bartender to put her drink on his tab.

"What's your name?"

"French."

She took her drink and moved closer.

"Mom!" a girl in her mid-twenties tapped her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Just meeting a new friend."

French spun away on his barstool. The daughter cast a worried glance in his direction.

"Mom, we have to go."

"Can our new friend join?"

French spun farther. The lady spun him back around.

"I don't care," the daughter shrugged.

"Do you care?" the woman asked French.

"I don't care about anything," French responded.

"Perfect."

A frat guy moved up behind the daughter and wrapped his arm around her waist. French sensed they'd just met. The bartender placed a drink on the counter in front of her and French watched him drop a pill in it. A trail of bubbles rose as the

pill dissolved. When the girl reached for the drink, he grabbed her and kissed her neck. By the time she picked up the drink it looked normal.

The woman led French out by the hand. The girl kept glancing back with a worried look as she held the frat guy's hand. They were headed to Bourbon. French carried a fresh Sazerac. The sides of the quarter felt steep. Rolling on the bottom felt like the task at hand. He'd worry about climbing out later. He had his eye on the frat guy. He'd been one step behind as long as he could remember, but he had the jump this time.

Like Wonders; Much Reduced

Evan James Sheldon

No one is around when I step out of the woods and onto the highway. I didn't know when I would step out exactly, but I did expect to see someone or something when it finally happened. Shouldn't someone be there to give an old man a hand when he leaves the woods?

The road is leading up to the right and down to the left winding around the mountains. In spots the metal guardrail braces the curves, protecting foolish people who are not paying attention, protecting them from themselves. One guardrail is badly mangled, twisted into something resembling a wolf. Chips of red paint spot the creature. My face is wet and when I touch it, my hand comes away bloody...

I'm in a bar with a whiskey in front of me listening to a man talk about the weather and roads and how people who aren't from around here don't know how to drive in the snow. He strikes me as well-meaning if narrow minded. I ask him if he's seen any red wolves about. He pulls me outside.

I'm sure I've stumbled upon some code word which unveiled a kind of truth he is aware of but I've only begun to understand. Or perhaps in my lack of care, speaking of things meant to be kept secret, he has mistaken me for someone I'm not. Either way I go along quietly. He has a kind face even if he keeps running his tongue along the backside of his lower teeth when looks at me.

We drive away from the bar until he pulls into a wide field where a single barn sits, dilapidated. Snow on the ground and all so quaint. It is dark inside the barn, hardly any light can get in through the slats and where it does it ghosts through in straight lines. I heard once that light was made up of particles or waves and while I watch this light, I'm sure whoever told me about it lied. The light around me looks more like a taut strings. It reminds me of the skylight in my son Ernest's apartment.

I tell this to my friend and again he mistakes my meaning. He holds me close and I can feel his heart beating through our shirts. It's a wild rhythm and syncopated if you listen closely.

After some time he begins to cry and lets me go and then he is gone. I search for him but all I can find in this particular barn are some mouse skulls. At least I think they are mouse skulls, they could belong to another rodent or miniscule animal...

I'm by a lake, though I don't remember leaving the barn. I think I stayed there among the hay and mouse bones for quite a long time, slowly watching the strings of light rise and descend. I once knew how to make a cat's cradle and I tried to mimic the motions I used to make with yarn, but with light.

The lake is massive or maybe it's small. I have no way of knowing if it extends beyond what I can see. Maybe it goes down and down and down? I have long ago learned my eyes only capture a piece of reality, this glittering surface.

An old woman fishes up the shore a ways with a stick and some string. As I draw close, I see she has a bag of marshmallows she's using as bait.

What kind of fish eat marshmallows? I ask.

The world is dark and full of wonder, she says. She might have been trying to say something else but she's eating her bait and it's hard to understand her.

I try to say it back to her to disguise my terror, but it's as if she's plucked those words from my brain. I force my lips around the words but nothing happens. Erased. Or stolen. What kind of person can reach inside another, take their thoughts, and speak them out into the world as their own?

I go to run, to escape this thief, but I trip and sprawl out on the rocky shore.

She says, *Do not run. I am the Red Wolf.*

Again her mouth is full of bait but I am certain of her words. They ricochet inside me until they stick below my collarbone and become my own, the opposite of what she did before. What she's

planted I'm sure will grow. I try to run again and this time I don't trip...

I am in town again but not a bar or restaurant or a home. Out behind a paint store, up against the brick, two people writhe against one another. I wait for them to finish, and when they are done I'm glad I waited. Their faces shine and a light above the Employees Only entrance casts them angelically.

You cold, friend? one of them asks.

I realize I am cold, from skin to marrow, frozen or nearly so. I wonder how long I've been cold like this. I nod unable to find the words. One of the two pulls me over so I'm sitting between them. It is snowing and I wonder if the question this one spoke caused the snow or if it has happened on its own. I don't believe in coincidence.

Let's see about some warmth then, one of them says.

A needle appears, filled already. The liquid inside it is gorgeous, shimmering in the light. Then it is in my arm and I am filled with it, humming just under my skin. I see everything from a long way off now and the light from the eyes of the two elongates like I am squinting through a wet window pane.

I wonder then what the three of us might look like to a passerby with all the light raining from our eyes. I bet it's spectacular. From that far distance inside myself I hear one of them say, *You gave him all of it? That'll kill him.* The other takes a long time to speak or maybe time is slowing down. *Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, didn't you see him? It was a mercy...*

I'm in a dark room on my back on a hard cot. There are many of us, rows of dark green cots filled with lumps covered in thin colorless blankets, some other people are making noises and I am too. A low moan escapes my throat. I once saw a mother monkey keening over the death of her baby, and I am making the same sound. I wonder if I'm grieving, and if so, for whom?

No one notices me or asks me to stop so I figure my behavior is either normal for this place or maybe normal for me in this place. There's a kind of reassurance in knowing you can moan and not receive a sideways glance.

A fluorescent light flickers at the far end of the room where people walk in and out carrying food on paper plates. I go over and my legs fight me. My neck is rigid, my back hurts below the bottom of my left shoulder blade. I touch the spot where the woman's words stuck. I can feel all through me how much time I've lost. It is not insignificant.

A large lady and a small man are in line for the food and I get in behind them. I realize that if their positions were swapped, from my viewpoint I wouldn't know the man exists. When I tell them this the man snaps his teeth at me. The woman says, *honey, don't none of us exist. Not in here.* She laughs and the three of us smile together in acknowledgment of our nonexistence.

Tortilla chips are piled on a plate, and a metal dish, the kind heated by a blue-goo candle from underneath, is full of neon orange nacho cheese steadily forming a skin. There's a wet, empty bowl next to the cheese, probably once filled with pickled jalapenos. I pour the remaining juice from the bowl over my nachos and a malaise settles over me. I ache for the burning pleasure of jalapenos. I would never willingly skip the jalapenos - if I were to make my own I would spare no expense - but here, this simple, if crucial addition is absent. Do these people, whoever runs this place, owe me nachos? Definitely not. But to provide nachos without jalapenos is just too much. Better to not offer the food at all. I eat the food anyway because what else am I supposed to do?

And this is how we become who they expect us to be, by mixing guilt and need and ire in exact proportion so we can never say no though our hearts beg for more. A voice near me tells me to be grateful but when I look there's no one there. I never knew my father but I like to imagine he'd whisper unhelpful and callous shit in my ear, a belittling ghost.

I learn the big woman is named Charley after Mountain Charley - a woman who dressed as a man during the Colorado Gold Rush. *My father wanted a boy, someone to change all the dirt of his life into gold,* she says, stealing a chip off the small man's plate. I ask her if she ever sees gold streaming from people like rivers and they both laugh and laugh. I laugh too though I'm not sure what we're laughing about. Maybe I asked it in a funny way.

The small man goes by Spark. *But don't ever call me Sparky or I will Silence-of-the-Lambs your face.* I nod remembering the sound of the clip of his teeth.

They tell me we're in Detox. Which is nice as it's a slight jump up from jail. There's more food here, better pills, more routes to come down slowly, but it costs more. *So if you had cash on you, you can kiss it goodbye.* Spark makes little smooching noises.

If it's not jail, can I leave? I ask, even though I know the answer. Sometimes it's better to let new friends feel like they can help you.

That's a bit more complicated, says Charley. She tells me I can leave once they deem me safe to myself, sober, etc.

I sleep, try to make a phone call but I don't remember any numbers. I check the door and it is locked. I settle in. I eat the food - always missing the one thing that could make it okay - I complete puzzles, I sleep again, I watch people secretly fuck on the green cots. I moan.

I talk to a man with a nametag. Dave.

How are you feeling? he asks.

Tell me what you remember before coming here? he asks.

Do you have anywhere to go? he asks.

Do you have a history of trauma? he asks.

Do you have any desire or intruding thoughts of inflicting harm upon yourself? I ask.

He doesn't like that I ask him the question he wanted to ask me, marks something on his blue, plastic clipboard. Maybe he just didn't want to realize that we might answer a question in the same way.

Charley gets out but they don't let Spark leave. It's a whole thing.

When everyone calms down, Spark tells me he really doesn't mind. He has rules about leaving these types of places anyway and he has a couple things he needs to do first.

He tells me: *The night before leaving, you must clean yourself up. The night before leaving you can't sleep on a green cot. You must steal a book, wade deep in the water of your own mind, pick a fight – blood must be shed – but it must be a secret fight so they don't keep you longer so sometimes it's a fight with yourself and the blood you shed is your own. You must never pray the night before. Don't need that kind of attention.*

I understand about rules and the little pathways we create to make our steps sure. I walk through the steps with him, our shared ritual now. I ask what happens if you don't complete each one. *Then you don't get out. They'll know. They always find out somehow and stop you. The rules are different for jail. Different for each type of place you want to leave but can't. But they're there if you can access them.* He taps his temple, hard.

I wonder about my own rules, where I might access the procedures for escape. Not this place, or not only this place, but I've begun to recognize that something is wrong, that something happened in the woods, or before the woods, and now I'm this way, my mind in a sort of darkness flitting toward the light.

When we get to the step about spilling blood, I tell Spark Charley never loved him. He looks at me so gratefully that I barely notice the gash he bites from the back of hand...

We're outside and it has stopped snowing. I ask him where he will go. *Charley*, he says, like she's a destination. *She's waiting for me.* I look around

only seeing the street, a broken down and abandoned van, some birds pecking at the concrete, low clouds masking a grey sky.

How will you find her?

I always find her. Or she finds me.

I nod. *Yes, some things are inescapable.*

You say that likes it's a bad thing. Not everything we keep returning to will ruin us. Not everything we circle around will forever be out of reach.

Where will you go? he asks.

I tell him about my son, Ernest. About how he lives around here somewhere, an apartment with arched ceilings and a skylight. About how you can lay on the couch and watch a square of light pass through the skylight and journey across the room as the day progresses, and you can feel anchored while the world spins. I tell him I might try and find Ernest...

I am in a part of town I don't recognize but I've always been able to figure out where to find certain things. Energy flows like golden rivers, to people and from people, choppy, smooth, deep, stagnant. I think most people can sense it, even if they can't vocalize it.

There's a park nearby, the adult kind with wide stretches of grass and awnings and rubber-dipped picnic tables, young trees held straight by green twine. Three women are sitting at a table near the public restroom, drinking Steel Reserve and eating cinnamon gummy bears. Two others are standing, handing out pamphlets. I walk up and everyone gets quiet. It's clear that the women eating the bears and the women with the pamphlets are not friends. It's too warm for snow now. I wonder when it's going to start to rain.

One woman hands me a pamphlet as well, all smiles. The paper is glossy, expensive, and filled with images of burning. I ask one of the sitting women if I can trade my pamphlet for a sip of their beer. The sitting women laugh and laugh, one so hard she snorts. The women passing out the pamphlets don't seem amused. I apologize and

explain, *I'm not trying to be rude, I'd just rather have the beer.*

Their necks flush and one shoves another pamphlet hard against my chest. *This is where your booze will lead you.* There's a map on the back that I hadn't noticed before, with little pictures of fun things and a descent into a bright, bright fire. I tell her it looks warm, and they stalk off. The sitting women spit beer they laugh so hard.

Come to find out, they had several more beers in a plastic bag beneath the table and they're willing to share. We joke and laugh until the beer is gone. It is raining but we're under an awning and no one seems to mind. They don't ask me how I ended up here and I don't offer, and I extend them the same curtesy. I do ask about my son, about Red Wolves, about light in all its multitude, but they only laugh harder.

Then they're gone and I'm alone with all the pamphlets which have become indistinct. All the maps show different paths now, different fires, but one pamphlet, one map doesn't end in fire but in serenity. I think I might follow it once I find Ernest. I stay there for a while, letting the rain fall, watching shapes scurry to and from different doors, so determined not to get wet, to get to the next place, and I feel unmeasured relief, a feeling I know will not last, but for the moment I don't need to be anywhere, I don't need to be anything, I can watch the drops fall and splatter and walk out among them and breathe it all in, and my burden of being drifts away for a time...

I find Ernest's apartment but he's not living there. A person who claims to have known him lets me in. Gregory has long hair, beautiful, and falling around his shoulders gently. I tell him I bet he doesn't wash it as much as people think, it's bad for the oils. He laughs. *You're right. It's so unnecessary.* His smile fades when I ask about Ernest. I look to the skylight but it's covered up with cardboard. I want to ask about it but Gregory is already loading a bowl.

We smoke and he relaxes a touch, sinks into the green couch where I used to watch the light move, but for me, the weed has the opposite effect. I ask Gregory about Ernest. I ask him about himself. How does he know Ernest? Does he know where Ernest is now?

He swears and stands up, begins to tug his hair, and I feel bad for pushing him. He's quiet for a long time, so long I wonder if he will speak again, or if I, like the old woman by the lake, have taken words from him and he no longer can access the language he would use.

But then he speaks, eyes on the floor: *I was the one who found him, you know. He was in the closet, feet so close to the carpet it was almost like he was just standing there. Like he could touch with his tippy toes. But he wasn't touching. He'd taken off his shoes, arranged his wallet and keys, everything was put away and organized. I think he wanted it to be easy. I think he didn't want it to be a hassle. Even the closet door was closed. You know he'd dyed his hair red earlier in the day? I couldn't tell at first, because there wasn't enough light. But...*

I ask if I can sleep on the couch. I know I shouldn't, it's green and I will be leaving in the morning, forgetting, escaping this place and there are rules to follow, but a part of me needs to be where he was.

Gregory nods and leaves. I lie down and do my best not to think about how Ernest closed the door, how he died in the dark, and I trace the slow path where the light should have been had the skylight not been boarded up. I think about stealing a book, about the water of my mind. I don't start a fight, enough blood has been shed. And everyone knows that prayer is in the seeking - unavoidable for some of us - our whole lives lost in pursuit. Spark would understand.

Gregory is back, eyes glassed and jaw loose, and I realize how he's been able to stay here after what what he saw. *It's so dark, it's just no good,* he says over and over. I agree but I can't stay...

I'm walking the highway, the woods are on either side, a lake off in the distance, a wide field

somewhere, a barn shot through with light. I'm searching for the Red Wolf and I am the Red Wolf. I know everything will become clear if only I can find the Red Wolf and he turns out to be me. I let my fingers drag along the metal guardrails as I walk, peering over the edge searching for movement from time to time. I hear the wind among pine needles whispering bad omens.

A pickup, red, as red as blood, mistakes me for a hitchhiker and pulls over. I get in and pass the driver my pamphlet, the one leading to serenity. *Can you take me here?* I ask. *Sure thing pal*, he says. I tell him I had a truck once, almost just like his, but I lost it somewhere. He smiles and everything snaps into focus.

Tyler Childers and I Drive Out of West Virginia

Kirsten Reneau

...and I tell him I have never been baptized in anyone's name but I roll through the fog water of the mountain and it feels like it could be the same thing. The droplets condense on my window shield and we wish on them like stars. I'm driving and he sits in the passenger seat, or at least, I think he does. I can only see him out of my peripherals, asquint and quick. When I turn to look, the seat is empty. I wonder if I'm going crazy. My body is tired; tired from working all day, tired from not being able to afford groceries, so fucking tired.

He reminds me of when we had bloodshot eyes and the long white lines, star trails on the coffee table that disappeared into the black holes of our bodies; when I walked inside the mountains during the witching hour; how once in a dream I shoot a deer and tied it up to skin it and the muscle fell off, how absolutely clean, how white the bones were. I ask him how he knows my dreams, but he doesn't answer.

He tells me *Keep your nose on the grindstone and out of the pills*. I tell him *I know, Tyler, I know, but I don't know if I can*. We drive until the cosmos reveal themselves, my hands outstretched as if perpetually ready to catch the skeleton of my body when it falls again.

In which I make note of all good wishes

John Meyers

I spent a lot of time trying to locate a copy of *Heartworn Highways* on DVD. I couldn't rent it, I couldn't buy it for less than \$100 on eBay, and I couldn't find it at my local library. I had pretty much given up when an email arrived advertising an AFI film festival in which *Heartworn Highways* was offered in a 2K restoration. I streamed it that night.

A lot has been written about this movie and its focus on the colorful characters who defined the Outlaw country music movement. For me the essence of this film is found in the vignettes of daily life so exquisitely represented on screen. The musicians are living the music even when they're not playing: Larry Jon Wilson introduces *Ohoopee River Bottomland* in a double-deep bass voice seasoned with the previous evening's excesses; Townes Van Zandt gives a tour of his trailer and his property in between gulps of whiskey and Coca Cola. The camera is on these guys but it feels like we just stumbled upon them while walking down the street. And there's something about the Coke can for those of us who were fortunate enough to peel back pull tabs in the seventies. The can is bright red, a really striking red. It's a Coke from the seventies, you mix it with bourbon, you're set. No such thing as orange vanilla Coke in 1976.

Every musical moment in this film is memorable, but Guy Clark playing *LA Freeway* at the beginning stunned me. I had not heard this song in awhile and as I listened and watched Guy play, I decided to learn it. Anyone who is an accomplished fingerstyle guitar player will learn how to play *LA Freeway* after a few focused sessions. I am not that guitar player. I'm an older guy who has been playing for years, but my fingerstyle skills are minimal. I tend to rush things

when I'm learning and that leads to trouble down the line. But when I watched Guy play *LA Freeway* at the opening of *Heartworn Highways* and the song got into me, the time I spent learning it almost seemed unmarked, undocumented. The pace of learning was slow, but every time I hit the opening notes, my heart jumped.

Eventually I was able to string together various sections of the song and play it slowly. Today when I see Guy Clark as he was in 1976 at the beginning of *Heartworn Highways*, hitting the end of *LA Freeway* and passing judgement on his playing with the words "little loose," I laugh because, to me, this version is perfect. I'm working on it every day. Anytime I want, I can sit down and pluck the opening notes and feel myself gliding back through time. The film of my life is a bit grainy, there is no 2k restoration, but I can see everything quite clearly. I like it this way: just me, my guitar, and a song. The only thing missing is a bright red can of Coke with a pull tab.

CJ Recommends

Hobo Radio by Brian Beatty (with Charlie Parr)

Reviewed by Adam Van Winkle

Charlie Parr's melodic and often hypnotic picking perfectly backs the words and voice of Brian Beatty on the fantastic spoken word album, *Hobo Radio*. Combined this album offers up what might best be described as superb folk.

To be honest, with Beatty's accent and tones and Parr's strings I would listen to this if it were a grocery list. But of course it is much, much more.

"Wherever You Go, There You Are" is an imagining of a prairie with barbed wire "tuned like the strings of a guitar." In "Samuel Beckett," a lightbulb hangs big as a noose swinging in the breeze (and the poem is perfectly Beckett as a janitor in a theatre pushes a "broom, broom, broom"). In "Plaid Flannel Shirt" empty space is made corporal when the speaker reveals he is "always discovering a new missing button to replace."

In other words, this is stellar poetry with images that will knock your teeth out.

The first rate string work from Parr seems to range from banjo to acoustic guitar to slide guitar to a haunting electric. It and Beatty's brilliant lines mean this album is a pairing in virtuosity.

If you're looking for the perfect place to listen to your download of *Hobo Radio*, I highly recommend doing it at the wheel of a fifty year old truck with a dim dash light glow driving into a warm night with the windows down.

I haven't heard anything like this in a long time, and doubt I will again soon. It's that damned good.

Check out the album at:

<https://brianbeatty.bandcamp.com/album/hobo-radio>

Working it Off in Labor County by

Larry D. Thacker (West Virginia University Press, 2021)

Reviewed by Adam Van Winkle

When Cowboy Jamboree published Larry Thacker's "The Hard Thing" in our special Harry Crews Tribute issue in 2017 I thought I'd love to see a collection from its author. Wishes come true and *Working it Off in Labor County* by Larry D. Thacker is now available from West Virginia University Press ("The Hard Thing" is included).

Labor County is an Appalachian community that is a mix of "isolation and paradise" as described in "Riding Shotgun with Dory." And, as the title of this 17-tale collection suggests, the characters in these pages are "working it off," but not in the traditional coal-mining way you might expect in an Appalachian collection.

In "Hot Ticket" a paid arsonist changes his ways after he is nearly engulfed in his own flames. With the help of winning lotto ticket, the story's protagonist Ed sees the light and begins his own tabernacle with hellfire and brimstone. "The Clown Brothers Eller" follows two brothers selling ice cream from their "wacked-out" van. "Day of the Dead Diner, Home of Juan D's Best BBQ" sees Juan D. working meat in a "fifty-five-gallon drum smoker" to set up shop in where many have tried and failed (and died) before—it was once Sam's Taco Heaven with a police raided Cinco de Mayo MMA fight, then Cool Doggy Dog's Doghouse which caught fire killing proprietor Emily while making her husband rich from insurance claims.

The title story indeed shows its protagonist, a history professor, "working it off" as he is forced into community service cleaning the very museum he robbed after the Labor County History Society confiscates his civil war memorabilia for exhibit.

In this highly recommended read you will, as the child narrator of "Riding Shotgun with Dory" does, feel like you are "slipping on another world."

Get this book, read it, treasure it for the collection of oddities, odd balls, and beautiful people it is.

This Fall from Cowboy Jamboree Press

Issue Contributors

August 2021

Amanda Bales, *Pekolah Stories*

Dan Crawley, *The Wind, It Swirls*

September 2021

Michael Chin, *My Grandfather's an Immigrant and So Is Yours*

William Soldan, *Undone Valley*

October 2021

Benjamin Drevlow, *A Good Ram is Hard to Find*

Daren Dean, *This Vale of Tears*

November 2021

Sheldon Lee Compton, *The Collected Stories*

Patrick Trotti, *The Persistence of Instability*

December 2021

Adam Van Winkle, *Ina-Baby* (play adapted from Benjamin Drevlow's novel *Ina-Baby*)

C. R. Rejetarits is a writer and collagist. Her art has appeared in dozens of little mags. <https://crrejetarits.com/collages/>

Hank Morgan is a writer from Austin, Texas, and has previously been published in Sigma Tau Delta's *The Rectangle*, *The Flash Fiction Press*, and *the Dead Mule School of Literature*. He is currently living in Seattle, and hibernating when not drinking coffee.

Meagan Lucas is the author of the award-winning novel, *Songbirds and Stray Dogs* (Main Street Rag Press, 2019). Meagan's short work has been published in journals like *The Santa Fe Writers' Project*, *Still: The Journal*, *MonkeyBicycle*, and others. She is Pushcart nominated, and won the 2017 Scythe Prize for Fiction. She lives in Western North Carolina where she teaches English and Creative Writing at Asheville Buncombe Technical Community College and is the editor of *Reckon Review*. You can connect with her on twitter @mgnlcs.

Kevin C Stewart's "The Brothers" is one of a dozen linked stories and shorts, *Tales from North Gates and Beyond*, set in or connected to Baton Rouge, Louisiana (where Kevin C Stewart lived and taught from 1999-2006), after Hurricane Katrina. Others (of these stories) have appeared in *The Southeast Review*, *Juked*, *Fiction Southeast*, *American Literary Review*, and *The Hamilton Stone Review*. A native West Virginian, Stewart now lives in Montana, serves as Associate Professor of English at Carroll College and holds an MFA from The University of Arkansas. His collection of stories and a novella, *The Way Things Always Happen Here*, was published in 2007 by WVU Press's literary imprint, Vandalia, and was a finalist that year for *ForeWord Magazine's* book of the year (short-story collections) and the Weatherford Award for the best Southern Appalachian book of fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. Stories from it appeared in, among others, *Shenandoah*, *The*

Antietam Review, *The Connecticut Review*, *Now and Then*, and *The Texas Review*, which awarded “Margot” its 1999 novella prize. Since then, his stories have appeared in the anthology *Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry from West Virginia* (Vandalia, 2017) and, forthcoming, in *Writers by the River: Reflections on 40+ Years of the Highland Summer Conference* (MacFarland, 2021). In addition, *The Common* and *Red River Review* have recently published his poetry.

Kevin Grauke is the author of *Shadows of Men* (Queen's Ferry Press), which won the Steven Turner Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Blue Mesa Review*, and *Cimarron Review*. He teaches at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

Jessica Evans writes from Arlington, VA. She is the EIC for *Twin Pies*, poetry editor for *Dress Blues*, prose editor for *Knight's Library*, and serves as a mentor for Veteran's Writing Project. Work is forthcoming in *LEON Literary Review*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter @jessica__evans

Steve Comstock was born and raised in South Alabama. He served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan and now works as a diesel mechanic in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His work has previously been published in *Hobart*, *Dinner Bell Magazine*, and *Parhelion Literary Magazine* among others.

Charles Pearson is from Spearman, Texas. He enjoys reading, music, and film noir.

Jeremy Perry is an American writer whose books and stories span many genres. His stories have appeared in literary magazines such as *Plumb Journal*, *Revolution John*, and *Hello America*. Jeremy Perry lives and writes in southern Indiana. For all book and story news visit <https://www.jeremyjperry.com/>.

Miranda Ramírez is an activist/artist residing in Houston, Texas. You may find her publications in *Ripples in Space*, *Glass Mountain*, *Shards*, *The Bayou Review*, *Coffin Bell*, and *Puro Chicana Writers of the 21st Century*. She is a founder and contributing editor for *Defunkt Magazine*, an international publication that seeks to uplift marginalized voices. Her visual works have exhibited at Williams Tower Gallery, Tea+Art Gallery, and Insomnia Gallery. She is currently drafting her first novel. Instagram: @ramirez.miranda.n , Twitter: tellme_to_smile

Originally from the suburbs of New Jersey, **Ken Post** worked for the Forest Service in Alaska for 40 years, including many seasons on a million-acre island with more brown (grizzly) bears than there are people. He writes short stories during the long, dark winters. His fiction has previously appeared in *Cirque*, *Red Fez* and *Poor Yorick*.

Glenn Deutsch's work has appeared in *Post Road*, *The Literary Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and *Fiction Southeast*, among others. He lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with his wife and son, two brother-and-sister rescue cats, and a guard dog from Kentucky who would hurl himself if he could at skateboarders and fire engines. Find Glenn on Twitter @GlennDeutsch and at glennddeutsch.com.

Mark Westmoreland is a Georgia native living in Oklahoma with his wife and two dogs. He's a part time writer, full time Dawg fan, and likes sipping good bourbon. He's the author of *A Violent Gospel*. Coming from Shotgun Honey Books later this year. You can find him hanging out on Twitter @ItsMarkYall.

Bobby Mathews is a writer and journalist based in Birmingham, Alabama. His checkered past includes stints as an investigator, PR flack, reporter, bartender, and other shady occupations that find their way into his short fiction. Mathews's novel, *Magic City Blues*, will be published in February 2022 from Close to the Bone.

Emmi Conner is a graduate of the University of North Carolina Wilmington with a BFA in creative writing. She writes fiction and research-based nonfiction. Emmi is from a small town in western North Carolina and now lives in Wilmington, where she works as a writer and librarian. Her work has been featured in *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *Atlantis: A Creative Magazine*.

Sean Jacques is a fifth-generation native of the Missouri Ozarks. His wayward career includes bartender, bank teller, stone sculptor, public relations director, creative executive for the Weinstein Company film studio, and screenwriter in various development hell ventures in the movie business. Currently, he teaches English Literature in Los Angeles while writing new tales, his most recent work can be found at *Across the Margin*, *Dead Fern Press*, and *34 Orchard*. You can find him on twitter @SeanJacques10.

Jim Woessner is a visual artist and writer living on the water in Sausalito, California. He has an MFA from Bennington College and has had poetry and prose published in numerous online and print magazines, including the *Blue Collar Review*, *California Quarterly*, and *Close to the Bone*. Additionally, two of his plays have been produced in community theatre.

Wilson Koewing is a writer from South Carolina. His work has recently appeared in *New World Writing*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *Trampset*, *JMWW* and *The Loch Raven Review*.

Evan James Sheldon's work has appeared recently in the *American Literary Review*, the *Cincinnati Review*, and the *Maine Review*, among other journals. He is a Senior Editor for F(r)iction and the Editorial Director for Brink Literacy Project. You can find him online at www.evanjamessheldon.com.

Kirsten Reneau is a writer from West Virginia, now living in New Orleans. Her work can also be seen in *Hobart*, *Trampset*, *The Threepenny Review*, and others. She's on Twitter: @ReneauGlow.

John Meyers' stories and poems have appeared in *Spartan*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Louisville Review*, *Threadcount Magazine*, *Lunch Ticket*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and many other places. John was a 2018 Best Small Fictions nominee and is online at hammeredinmetal.com

Adam Van Winkle is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Cowboy Jamboree Magazine* and CJ Press. He is the author of the novels *Abraham Anyhow* and *While They were in the Field*, the novella *Hardway Juice*, and playwright of *The Red Knife Plays* and *Two Eunices*. A Pushcart nominee, his short fiction has appeared in *BULL Fiction*, *Plumb Journal*, *the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *CHEAP POP*, *Steel Toe Review*, and several other publications. @gritvanwinkle

Constance Beitzel is a PhD candidate in English Literature at Southern Illinois University. She recently published an article analyzing motherhood in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*.

