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# Cowboy Jamboree Magazine



**“My dog died.”**

*A Larry Brown inspired issue*

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## ESSAY

### Finding Larry Brown by Steven Lambert

*And somehow, wherever you are, it always seems to be enough.*

*-Larry Brown*

It's difficult to articulate just how much Larry Brown meant to me when I was a young man making my first attempts at writing. Anyone who's been there, I'm sure, understands. Those first few writers that you really get into—those writers who you, essentially, want to be—hold sway over you in such a deep and complicated way. Seeping into you, their writing is a drug to which you become hopelessly addicted. I miss those junky days.

I remember the day I discovered Larry Brown. 1996. I was at a bookstore in Gainesville, Florida, called Omni Books. On 34th Street, it was a place I went to often because of its proximity to the two restaurants I worked at, Leonardo's by the Slice and The Pizza Palace, for most of my three years in that strange and oscillating Neverland of Gainesville. I remember picking up *Facing the Music* first, then *Big Bad Love*. The covers, being Vintage Contemporaries releases, were not that interesting. But there was the Harry Crews blurb on the back of *Facing the Music*. (Barry Hannah was on there too, but I didn't know who he was yet, which was probably a good thing: he'd have thrown me then. I wouldn't have known what to do with his strange, modern tall tales. He'd have been too much, too soon.) I'd read Crews' *Feast of Snakes* and *The Knockout Artist* and an endorsement from him sealed the deal for me. I bought both books, took them home and had them both read inside of a week.

I'd say that Larry Brown taught me how to be a writer, but that's not exactly true. Brown taught me that it might be possible for *someone like me* to be a writer. Brown didn't seem like a natural candidate for a writing apprenticeship, and neither did I. I felt more kinship with Brown than I did someone like John Updike, who seemed born to wear a turtleneck and talk like creating literature was his birthright. Also, Brown and I were both late starters. I didn't get into reading until I was twenty, and I didn't dare to try writing myself until twenty-three. I didn't produce remotely promising work until I was in my late twenties. I quit writing for almost three years. From thirty-three to thirty-six, I wrote very little and thought I would never again earnestly seek publication. As I write this, I'm forty-three now and I have published a poetry collection with an independent press. I'll never quit again.

We try to be well-rounded individuals with multiple interests, but I'm not sure that's the way to go if

you want to be a writer. Harry Crews said that writers are "very jagged people." That is to say, the amount of focus and devotion it takes are such that one must give up on being any good at nearly everything else. Larry Brown knew that if he was going to become a writer he'd have to devote himself to it 100%, and he did just that.

Larry seemed to a lot of folks like the least likely person for the vocation. Barry Hannah claimed he used to hide from Brown when he came around, because he didn't have the heart to tell Larry how bad his writing was. I wasn't lucky enough to have a Barry Hannah to put upon when I was starting out, but I did burden other, less legendary writers. Like Larry, I am hard-headed.

But we are different in one very crucial way. Larry was a craftsman. Larry was good with his hands. He was the type of guy, I gather, who could build just about anything. I'm not like that at all. My approach to most forms of industry is, like Brown, hands-on, but I have to wreck something a multitude of times—I have to make mistakes, sometimes bad ones—to learn how to do something. New to learning the craft of writing, I was almost completely innocent of how to properly construct an English sentence, but I went to work haltingly and slowly. I plowed into the blank page. I'd take a look at what I had written. I knew it would be shit, but just producing something with a beginning middle and end was good work.

I've read Brown's story "Facing the Music" at least twenty-five times. As a beginning writer it seemed to me a perfect story, but it also seemed to me like something I could learn to do. It seemed like an achievable form. The story is written in short, plain sentences, and isn't lengthy. The plot of "Facing the Music" is simple: a man lies in bed contemplating his life with his wife, who has had a mastectomy. It's a very poignant little story, one that is an elegant example of late-eighties "dirty realism." *Pure* is the word that comes to mind. When I discovered Brown's work, I needed purity. I didn't know I had been looking for it.

I found myself staring at the covers of *Big Bad Love* and *Facing the Music* at the bookstore and I knew somehow. I knew they were for me. Bland Vintage Contemporaries covers and Harry Crews blurbs on the backs. I bought them on sight. I had just gotten off work. It must have been a pay day because if it wasn't, I probably wouldn't have had any money.

I'm essentially a lazy person. I started with *Facing the Music*, the shorter of the two books. I remember liking *Big Bad Love* less than *Facing the Music*, and I'll stick to that. The latter is a more inspired work. Its stories are sparer, tighter than in *Big Bad Love*, and with a greater emotional urgency. *Big Bad Love* is a slicker and perhaps more cynical book.

Larry Brown was a firefighter, like my father had been. Larry was born and raised in north Mississippi. My people had lived in southeast Mississippi for a hundred plus years, from about 1820 to 1930, before migrating to central Florida in search of work. These proximities

meant something to me. They still do. Finally, there was Carver. Brown loved Raymond Carver. I did, and still do, too. Had I not read Raymond Carver first and for so long, I might not have been so drawn to Brown's writing. Larry Brown seemed to me like a Southern Carver. But, hell. Both of them were *someone like me*.

## FICTION

### Quik-Mart by C.W. Accetta

It is five degrees below zero when Clarence steps out of the house that he shares with his sister and her two boys on a Wednesday morning in the middle of January. The door of his pickup truck is covered in a thin film of ice. Holding a battered travel mug of coffee and a bagged lunch in one hand, he yanks the door handle a few times before it opens with a screech. He jumps in, slamming the door quickly, as if there were heat in the cab he didn't want to let out. The engine turns over sluggishly, then catches. It's 9 a.m. and Clarence is late for work.

He drives down Route 5, toward Ovid, more glorified intersection than actual town. He travels a good 20 m.p.h. over the speed limit, not worried about being stopped because he knows all the local cops. The blown muffler barks out exhaust. He has tucked the coffee between his thighs to keep it warm. He reaches for the radio knob and thumbs it on. A staticky hiss fills the cab.

His sister's boys have been messing with the dials again. He keeps telling Linda to just buy them an Xbox already. He takes his eyes off the road for just a minute trying to find the country station and the right front tire of his truck bumps off the road onto the narrow shoulder.

"Goddam it all to hell!" His blue jeans absorb most of the spill, but Clarence still feels the burn of the coffee. He juggles the travel mug with the steering wheel and delicately pats around the crotch of his pants with his fingertips, trying to assess the damage, and goes even farther off the road. The truck fishtails on some ice before Clarence finally regains control. He hits the accelerator and drives on.

Fifteen miles later, Clarence pulls into the convenience store parking lot, rolling past the gas pumps and around the building to the employee parking. He slides into the space reserved for the employee of the month. Clarence has never been employee of the month. He studies the sign for a minute and can still make out the name "Sylvia Montero." Sylvia was fired two weeks ago, for helping herself to the cash register. Clarence takes a moment to ponder this, and lights up a cigarette. He pats his jeans again. Still wet. He takes a long drag, then shrugs, grabs his lunch from the passenger seat and slides out. He has to slam the door twice before it will shut.

He walks sideways between his truck and the car next to him. It's his manager's Camry.

"Very low mileage," Gupta said after he bought it. "An elderly gentleman drove it but not often—he said he didn't like Japanese cars. He sold it cheap. His loss, my gain." At this, Gupta smiled a big, shit-eating grin, then said—as if perhaps Clarence didn't understand him the first time—"My gain, his loss."

Clarence doesn't like having a boss. Certainly not

one who is 26, and fussy as an old lady about the rules. He walks slowly toward the front door, drawing deeply on his cigarette.

"Larry, my friend, you are late again," Gupta announces from behind the cash register as Clarence walks in blowing smoke out the side of his mouth and flicking his cigarette on the ground behind him. Gupta has an aversion to calling people by their given names. Roberta and Amanda, a mother-daughter team who work the 3 to 11 shift, are "Bertie" and "Mandy." Tomas, the guy who drives the bread truck, is "Tommy." Or more precisely, "Tommy my man." No amount of correcting can get Gupta to quit it.

"One more time, and I shall have to note it in your file. And, Larry? You are supposed to enter from the back door."

Clarence snorts, mostly to himself. He is never coming through the back.

Shirley is in the break room. "What the hell, you look like your dog just died," she says to Clarence, then, noticing the giant stain on his jeans, "Jesus, a little early for that, isn't it?"

"Morning," he says, turning quickly to his locker to hang up his coat. He pulls out an apron and ties it over his pants, his cold-numbered fingers fumbling with the strings.

Clarence and Shirley used to date in high school, back when he had hair and she was skinny. Now she's got four kids, and is working on her second husband. Clarence is in love with Shirley. He has loved her since the day they met in kindergarten. But she ditched him the summer they were 16, her head turned by a kid with a flashy Mustang and a promise of adventure that Clarence could never match. His name was Oswald, and he beat up anyone who dared use it. Ozzy married Shirley when she got pregnant, and by the time their daughter turned 5, they had two more girls and a shared dedication to crystal meth. But six years after that, Shirley had managed to free herself of both him and the drugs, and got her life in order. Ozzy had given her three children and destroyed her credit rating, but she came out of it with her trailer home and her dignity.

"I've got shit all to say to that dumb ass this morning," Shirley now says to Clarence as she lights up a cigarette. "You want one?" she asks, gesturing at him with her pack of Camels. He shakes his head, and pulls out a chair opposite her.

She means her second husband, Mitch, the father of her fourth child.

"Do you know he never came home last night?" she says, exhaling. "Yeah, he rolls up this morning, all *hey Babe*, and all *Yeah I was at the gym, and I left real early, didn't wanna wake you*, and I'm like *Do I look like an idiot?* and he's all *What? What are you talking about?*" She stops, and then says, "Hell, he doesn't even know where the gym is."

"Ass-hat," Clarence mutters, under his breath.

Shirley takes a long drag on her cigarette, then releases it slowly through her nose. She studies the burning

ash. It is longer than the cigarette. Clarence pushes the ashtray to her side of the table. She draws deeply again, holds the smoke, then breathes it out toward him. He's transported back to a fall day in high school, the two of them cutting English to smoke outside the gym. He sees her teenage lips pursed and blowing small lazy smoke rings into the damp air. Then, as now, it acted upon Clarence in an embarrassing way.

He watches her face. Her nostrils are flaring. The last time he saw her this furious was when she finally got clean and saw the damage she'd done. She stubs out her cigarette, grinding it into the ashtray.

"So he left. Went to his mother's. Said all that shit again about a circle of trust." She spits out a laugh. "Then he said he was going to come back and take Mitchell Jr. The fuck he will."

She sits back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest. She smiles, looks at Clarence.

"I guess you and me never shoulda broke up, right?"

He can't tell if she wants an answer or not.

"Yeah, you and me were perfect together," she says, exactly as if she's read his thoughts. She pulls out another cigarette and lights it, watching him. "Just perfect."

Clarence is quiet. He is listening. A sudden sharp pain flares up in his chest, causing him to gasp, and just as suddenly dies away. He feels like he can't draw a complete breath. The room feels hot. Under the table, he touches his crotch. It's still damp.

"Shirley, I—" he starts. He wants her to stop talking. He wants to tell her something.

"But you know what, Clarence? I would just fuck it all up. Like I always do," she says. She starts to cry. "You don't deserve the fucking mess I would make of your life."

Shirley's tears dry almost before she has finished crying them. She blows her nose loudly into the old gray bandanna that Clarence has dug up from deep in his pants pocket and handed to her without even knowing it.

"Here," she says, handing it back. She sniffs, and pushes her hair from her face, smoothing it with her palms. Standing, she hitches up the waistband of her jeans, and pulls her smock down over her belly.

"Shit. Sorry you had to see that, Clarence." She wipes her cheeks, shakes her head. "Gotta get to work. You coming?"

"What?" he says, as she pushes through the swinging door into the store. Dazed, he hauls himself up from the table, where Shirley's last cigarette sits smoldering. He calls after her, "Wait." But she can't hear him. She's gone.

## Twenty Dollars By Jeremy Perry

I wasn't drunk when I came through the front door, but I still had a good buzz. I guessed the time to be around three in the morning. I glanced at the clock on the wall and it read 4:30. The kitchen light shined into the living room, which told me Sara was up drinking coffee, as she always was at this time before heading to work. Normally, I would slip in, come out of my work boots and uniform and crawl into bed without disturbing my wife. There was no use trying to sneak in this time. I locked the door behind me and joined Sara in the kitchen.

She sat at her end of the kitchen table. A burning cigarette lay on the bald eagle ashtray that our son Tripp made in sixth grade art class ten years ago. She sipped from her cup, set it down. "Good morning," she said, as if she meant it.

"Morning," I said. I fetched a cup from the cabinet above the sink, poured it full, and joined her at the opposite end of the table. I tried not to...I didn't want...but I asked anyway.

"When did you start smoking again?" I pushed the words out with a concerned tone.

She picked up the cigarette from the tray, tapped off a loose ash, and said, "About a month ago I guess."

"A month ago?"

"Saw no reason to hide it anymore," she said. "No reason to hide anything anymore is there?"

I blew on my coffee. "Guess not." I sipped, swallowed, and then said, "What do you want to do? I mean about all this?"

Exhaling smoke, she sat the cigarette back into the ashtray. "I think I want a divorce, Kurt. I'm serious this time."

The topic of divorce had come up the week before and fizzled out. But this time she had a different look about her. A hardened, stale appearance with no life left behind those muddy eyes.

"Okay then," I said. "So where we go from here?"

"I'll go stay with my sister until it's final, the divorce, I mean."

"You don't have to do that," I said. "Just stay here. I'll leave."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll figure it out. You stay here."

"I have to get ready for work," she said.

She stood from the table and walked away leaving me there to drink my coffee and ponder my future.

We'd been married going on twenty-two years. We'd had our share of disagreements, as any married couple does, but we'd never separated or even mentioned the word 'divorce' until a week ago. It seemed the passage of time had butted in on our once happy home and made us forget why we were together in the first place—or maybe that was just happening to me.

I swallowed the last bit of my coffee, pushed up from the table, and headed toward the bathroom to piss. Steam floated from under the door when I turned the knob and walked in.

"Hello?" said Sara.

"Taking a piss," I said. "Be out in a second."

"Okay, but don't flush. I don't want my skin melting off."

"I won't." I raised the lid, pulled out my dick, and pissed beer and coffee. I finished, shook, zipped up, and before I realized it I'd flushed the toilet.

"Jesus Christ, Kurt! I told you not to flush the damn toilet!"

"Sorry, honey! Just habit, I guess." I slid the shower curtain over so she could see my sincerity. "I'm really sorry," I repeated. "I really am."

With back against the wall, Sara stood so the hot water shot past onto the tub floor. A heavy lather of soap covered her front, her large breasts, which still, after nurturing two children many years ago, were inviting and pleasing to the eyes. The suds trailed down her belly button and dripped off the thatch of hair between her legs.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

By now, the water was changing back to normal temperature. Sara tested it a couple times and then stepped back into the shower stream. "It's okay," she said. "I know you didn't."

"You didn't get burned did you?" I asked.

"No. As soon as you flushed I stepped out of the way." She spoke with her back turned. Her backside was as inviting as her front. Her ass was covered with cellulite, but still nicely shaped, not tiny but not large either. Sara was a good-looking woman and had been all her life.

I didn't ask if I could join her. I pulled off my boots and clothes and then stepped into the shower.

"What are you doing?" asked Sara. "I have to get ready for work. This isn't going to work, your sly tricks. I'm still divorcing you."

I stepped toward her, pressing against her backside. I wrapped my hands around and found her breasts, soapy and satisfying.

"No tricks," I said, hardly listening. Aroused, I found her down below and took her in the shower.

My eyes parted and I rolled to see the alarm clock on the nightstand read 2:00pm. Working second shift meant I had to be down at the metal shop by three. I'd worked second shift for about a year, and prior to that I'd worked dayshift for about ten years. I took the second shift job and gained a dollar and a half more on the hour. Before I took the job, Sara and I had discussed the matter. We agreed the extra money would help toward our youngest son's college tuition. Max was a second year student, and though he was eligible for grants, they weren't enough to pay all his expenses. Also, before I committed to the new shift, Sara and I vowed that being on opposite shifts wouldn't strain our marriage. And if it did become a problem we'd get through it as we always had by talking and finding a solution.

I got out of bed, dressed, drank a little coffee, and drove down to the workingman's asylum. I never scoffed at the work that came with being a metal fabricator. I always thought that a young man coming up in life should learn an

honest trade, one that requires a little blood, sweat, and tears, one that requires backbreaking work from time to time. And by the end of the shift, when the last nail is hammered, when the last weld is ran, when the last leaky faucet repaired, one can reflect, even rejoice, and feel proud from the day's accomplishments.

By the end of the shift I felt a strong thirst that only a cold beer could quench. It was the same strong thirst that had come around the same time every day this week, except this time I told myself that I wasn't going to the tavern. The plan was to clock out, jump into my truck, and drive home to save my marriage. I felt I'd made a decent first attempt this morning in the shower. Sara and I had reconnected.

With lunchbox in hand, I pulled my card, dropped it in the timeclock, and punched out. From behind, I heard someone yell out, "Kurt! Hey, Kurt!"

I knew the voice and turned around.

The voice belonged to Chet Tillis. He caught up to me and said, "You goin out?"

"Nah," I said. "Not tonight."

"Ah, hell. Come on." He slapped me on the back. "A few of the guys in the department are goin. You can go have a beer with us."

"Better not, Chet. Sara and me, we ain't doing too good lately. She's about ready to leave me. If I come home late again, that'll be the end of us for sure."

We walked out the door and down the concrete steps. We headed across the parking lot to our trucks. Chet said, "Just one beer won't hurt anything. You deserve it. Come drink one beer with us and then call it a night. You'll be home by midnight, one at the latest."

I thought about it. One cold beer wouldn't hurt. It would do me good to wash down some of this shop smoke and dust. I *did* deserve it. I'd worked hard all week. I would go have one beer and then drive home and crawl into bed with Sara and continue our makeup session from this morning.

"Okay, Chet. I'll go have one."

He gave another slap on the back. "Okay, pal. See ya down there."

"Yep," I said and climbed into my truck.

The tavern was called *Happy Mike's Place*. I walked in and spotted the guys gathered around a table. I knew them all, but I wasn't one to join them after work. I never hung out with them outside the shop, except for Chet a few times. He was all right. Most were younger than I was and some were much younger, closer to my boys' age, and enjoyed slamming shot after shot.

I passed familiar faces, nodded, said hi, and crossed the hardwood floor making my way to the bar. I ordered a Coors and then glanced around the place. Chet stepped from the hall that led down to the restrooms. He spotted me and walked over.

"We're all over there," he said and pointed.

"Okay. Let me get a beer then I'll be over."

"Sure thing."

Waiting on my beer, I saw a woman at the end of the bar looking my way. We made eye contact and she gave me a childish grin. She almost seemed embarrassed because I caught her checking me out. I smiled back, being polite. Maybe she wasn't checking me out, but it seemed that way. My beer came and as I was about to walk away, I glanced down the bar, to the woman who was still looking my way. I smiled not hiding my amusement of what I thought was happening. She gave me one of those inviting looks and then a slight nod to the empty stool beside her. I wanted to go over, but instead I turned and headed toward Chet and the other guys.

When I joined them they had a tray full of shots sitting on the table. Chet and the other three grabbed a glass and already they were loud and obnoxious.

"This one's yours," said Chet, placing a shot in front of me.

"Better not," I said. "Just beer for me. If I go home shit-faced Sara will divorce me for sure."

"Okay, pal," said Chet.

Glasses clinked in the middle of the table and down they went. That's when I said, "I'll be back. I think I saw someone I know."

Chet motioned to the waitress for another round. "Sure thing, pal."

The woman was still sitting at the end of the bar. When I approached, she grinned and said, "Sit down, if you like."

I nodded. "Sure. Thanks." I dropped on the stool and bellied up to the bar. "Not much of a crowd tonight."

"I kinda like it," she said. "The fewer the better."

I shrugged, took a swig from my beer, and then I said, "I come here all the time. I've never seen you here before."

She swallowed a mouthful of beer and said, "No, probably not. First time I've been here. Seems like an okay place."

"It's all right," I said. "It was a rough place at one time, but Mike bought it a couple years back and really cleaned up the joint."

"You just get off work, Kurt?" she asked, seeing my name on my uniform.

"Yeah, me and those guys over there. We work together." I hesitated. Then I asked, "You live around here? I know most everyone around here, but ain't never seen you before."

"No," she said. "Actually, I'm on my way to Louisville from Indy. Going to stay with my brother and his wife for a while until my divorce is final." She paused to drink and then said, "Sorry, I don't want to bore you with my bullshit problems."

"Hell, no worries," I said. Then I spoke some about my own problems. I told her how Sara and I were on the brink of divorcing ourselves. "I really shouldn't be here, but my buddy over there sitting at that table, the one with the hat on, he talked me into coming down here for a beer. I told him *just one beer* then I had to be on my way. The more I think about it the more I feel guilty for being here. Not with you. Just *here*, in general."



She finished her beer and motioned to the barkeep for another. "You seem like an okay guy. Maybe you better go, huh? I don't want you getting a divorce because of me."

"No. It's fine," I said. "I'll drink a beer or two and then head home. I got time."

"All right then."

She told me her name was Connie. She was attractive, but I wasn't drawn to her sexually. I chose to sit next to her because she appeared more my age and likely had more in common with me than my much younger, whiskey shooting co-workers. I told her my name, even though she knew it, and we shook hands.

"How long were you married?" I asked.

"Thirteen years. Thirteen long, drawn out years."

"That bad?"

"It wasn't all bad, actually. I got tired of trying and him not giving back. The first few years were good."

I finished my beer and didn't think twice about motioning to the barkeep for another. "That's usually the way it goes. Bliss and love and great sex and then it gradually turns to shit. Right?"

Connie grinned and nodded.

The barkeep grabbed my empty bottle and replaced it with a cold, full one. I drank three slugs down and then set the bottle on the bar. The beer tasted great, better than it had all week. Over at the table, the guys clanked another round of shots. I grinned at their youthful enthusiasm. I remembered that same mind-set when I was twenty-something. Now my idea of a good time was relaxing and sipping on a few cold ones. Throw in someone to shoot the shit with and the night couldn't get much better.

Connie asked, "So where's your wife now?"

"She's home, which is where I need to be after I finish this beer."

I drank again from my bottle. Someone fired up Nickelback on the jukebox, a Happy Mike's favorite, then David Allan Coe. No matter how many times played, the entire place sang together about how Momma 'got runned over by a damned ole train'.

Connie told me she had quit her advertising job in Indy, said she'd been with the company for eighteen years, and that she might have a similar job lined up in Louisville.

"It'll either work out or it won't," she said.

"That's the two ways of it," I added.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Connie stood, said she had to go to the little girl's room. I sat drinking my beer. The place started to fill. A couple women that I vaguely knew chose a seat at the bar. One was a teacher at the elementary school and the other's occupation I didn't know, sat a few stools down from Connie and I. They smiled and I returned the gesture.

I finished my beer and placed the empty on the bar. Before I knew it, the barkeep took my empty and replaced it with a full one. I grabbed it and drank. It was my natural reaction.

Not long after, Connie rejoined me and ordered another beer. She saw my new bottle and said, "Uh oh. You're way over your limit, mister. You're gonna be in big trouble." She was teasing, but the fact was, she was right. If I didn't stop drinking soon and get my ass home, my marriage would be over for sure. I picked up my beer and drank a little faster.

"This is my last one," I said.

"Don't be in a hurry. I was only playing."

I smiled. She got me thinking. Why was I in a hurry? Would racing home to Sara to profess my love, which would likely appear forced and desperate, going to save our marriage? I loved my wife and cared for her deeply. What I recognized at that moment was that maybe I needed to let go just as Sara was letting go. That's what she wanted. I knew that. And if I truly loved my wife and respected her feelings, then I needed to let go as well. Our kids were grown and doing great. As parents, Sara and I had done the best we could. I was proud of our boys, and I knew Sara was too. What more could a parent ask out of their children? One had completed college and had a fine career going, and the other was half-way through. It was time to let go.

The night carried on and Connie and I continued talking and drinking and getting to know each other. I sensed that maybe she was trying to push things a little further when she returned from the ladies' room. Before climbing up on her stool she scooted closer. Now, we sat drinking and talking, her thigh pressed against mine. The loud music nudged us closer so that we could hear each other speak, only a few inches apart now.

I noticed Connie wasn't drunk, or even appeared buzzed. I felt damn good at this point, and I know she was keeping up with me, beer for beer. Not to mention the ones she drank before I arrived.

I said, "For a woman you sure can handle your alcohol. You feeling all right? I got a hell of a buzz going myself?"

"I feel great, baby." She'd started calling me 'baby' sometime throughout the night. She smiled and patted her purse. "I have a little help from my friend. You want some?"

"No, thanks," I said.

"Are you okay to drive home?"

"I'm good," I said. "I've done this a few times."

The jukebox stopped and about that time the entire place shifted its focus. An onslaught of yells and 'fuck you's' erupted from across the room, from the table where Chet and the rest of the guys sat—except Chet wasn't sitting. He stood, waving his arms, flailing like a banked fish, cussing and pointing his long, boney finger in the face of Jorge, a Mexican that often came into the tavern. I'd drank with Jorge before, even bought him a beer a time or two. If someone asked me to sum up Jorge, I'd say he was an okay fella, the quiet type, really. But I also knew Chet, and when he'd had a few whiskeys in him, he was ready to throw fists at the drop of a hat.

"I better get over there," I said to Connie.

I parted the gathered crowd and stepped up beside Chet and Jorge. Wasn't long after, Happy Mike, the owner, was standing there too. He was a big son of a bitch, former body builder and power lifter. Even in his mid-fifties nobody fucked with Happy Mike.

"Listen up," said Happy Mike. "You two better kiss and make up real quick or I'll bar both your asses. You know I don't put up with this bullshit."

Jorge rattled off something that I didn't understand. Then he followed with, "You owe me twenty." He pointed to the palm of his hand. "Right here. Pay."

"I don't owe you a damn thing," said Chet, pointing his boney finger into Jorge's face. "He's tryin to cheat me, Mike. I'm not payin up to a damn cheater."

"You pay now," said Jorge, pointing to his palm.

Happy Mike said, "Jorge, you trying to cheat?"

"No, no, no!" said Jorge. "I hit eight ball in...fair and square. He pay me twenty."

Happy Mike turned to Chet. "Well?"

Chet said, "He made a bad hit. He skimmed my ball before he hit the eight ball in. I tried to tell 'em, but he won't believe me. That game was double or nothing. He lost. Now we're even. I ain't payin a cheater."

Happy Mike had heard enough. Normally, he wouldn't have listened to either party plead his case, but both had been coming into his establishment for a while now and both were reasonably good men, but he'd reached his limit.

"I'm not listening to anymore," said Happy Mike. "You two need to cool off. Come up to the bar and have a cold beer, on the house."

A cold beer in exchange for twenty dollars didn't sit well with Jorge. He rambled once more in Spanish, flinging his hands, yelling, and inching toward Chet. Happy Mike stopped Jorge with one of his thick, beefy hands to the chest.

"You best go ahead and leave, Jorge," said Happy Mike. "Go home and sleep it off."

"Twenty dollars!" said Jorge. "Pay me!"

Jorge wasn't taking no for an answer, but Chet was already heading toward the bar to claim his beer.

"Go on, get outta here," said Happy Mike.

Finally, Jorge relaxed. He backed away, weaved through the crowd, and exited out the front door. The atmosphere went back to normal. I returned to my stool at the bar beside Connie and Chet joined us, drinking his free beer.

"Those crazy Mexicans," said Chet. "They're always tryin to cheat and lie their way through our society."

I asked Chet if he was *sure* Jorge made a 'bad hit'. He said yes, he was sure, and I spoke nothing more of the matter.

Chet began talking to the schoolteacher and I resumed my conversation with Connie. I lost count of the beers I'd drank, but was aware I passed my limit of *one* long ago. I was feeling damn good and wanted the night to continue. Connie had gone back to pressing her thigh against mine. She leaned in, giggled in my ear after she revealed she hadn't had sex in six months. I grinned and nodded. She then slid her hand across

my leg and down my inner thigh, only a couple inches from my goods. A tinge of regret hit me—but only for a second. I accepted. I didn't resist. She massaged and continued giggling in my ear. She was hot, ready. She found my crouch, leaned in, and kissed my neck. I glanced over to Chet. He and the teacher were becoming well acquainted also.

"Let's get out of here," said Connie.

I said okay and started to stand when behind us I heard someone yelling. Charging in was Jorge. He yelled, cursed half in Spanish, half in English. Visibly pissed, Chet came off his stool—but he didn't have a chance. Jorge pulled a pistol from his backside and fired a round into Chet's head and one into his chest. I pulled Connie to the floor out of the way. A couple fellas rushed Jorge, subdued his pistol, and slammed him to the floor. Chet had dropped beside us. A tiny, red fountain spurted from his forehead. He was only twenty-one.

I arrived home about five in the morning, after Chet's body was hauled away, after the questioning by the police and the other local authorities. The lights were on through the window and I expected Sara to be sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. I turned the corner and she wasn't there. I walked to the bathroom to piss. In the bedroom I flipped on the light and saw a freshly made bed. I peaked in the closet and saw that all Sara's clothes were gone. I pulled the dresser drawers only to find them empty too.

Then it hit me. I knew what had happened. It was just as well.

Sitting on the side of the bed, I peeled off my boots, socks, and the rest of my clothes. I walked to the light switch in my underwear, flipped it, and stumbled back to bed.

I wasn't sure if this was the end. Maybe Sara would eventually return. Maybe she just needed a break. I didn't know. I shut my eyes but couldn't sleep. I thought of Chet and how his life was over. Life was crazy and I often didn't understand it. Maybe tomorrow would be different. Maybe tomorrow would have all the answers.

## I Regret to Inform You by Lee Anderson

I-40 unspooled before us, an endless black ribbon, tracing tan swells of New Mexico earth. I drove with Bucky as my passenger, both of us squeezed into a rust-orange Corolla with missing hubcaps.

"How long you known Twigs?" I asked. I had to repeat myself. Wind chattered angrily through the open windows.

"Soon as we both learned to walk," Bucky said, named for a pair of jutting front teeth. His black ponytail flamed around his head. He wore a white T-shirt spotted with what resembled shit and blood, though I could only assume it wasn't. Bucky wasn't that crazy. I didn't think.

I'd met his tribe brother and our boss "Twigs" about a year ago, when I first moved to Albuquerque. I managed Catering at the downtown Hyatt. Twigs started out as just another teenage native kid who owned little hope of a better job than working for me as a food runner. His status improved tremendously once he began selling ice.

Not long ago, I got fired for punching the hotel's front desk manager because he stole my girlfriend. Now I needed money. Twigs agreed to let me work for him, but there was an admission fee: Drive Bucky out to the desert and shoot him. In the head. Bucky had knocked up Twig's cousin, then slapped her around. He also owed Twigs money, which was likely the larger reason.

I'd never killed anyone before, but seemed inevitable that I would one day. A childhood of beatings, four divorces, and a gambling addiction had left me with plenty of murder in my heart. I also had a daughter I worshipped whose mother had turned her against me. I just couldn't wait to kill someone. Besides, Bucky was a scumbag, and everyone knew it. He *enjoyed* beating women.

"You both grew up together on the reservation?" I asked. "*Jicarilla*, right?"

"*Hopi*."

"Twigs ever tell you anything about me?"

"Nothing bad."

"I appreciate your lying."

"*Lying*?" Bucky looked at me. I kept my sight on the road, but still felt those eyes, those arrow-point eyebrows shooting to his hairline. "Ain't a single word of bullshit ever pass *these* lips, Pale Face."

It was what *all* of Twig's friends called me. "*Pale Face*." Tongue-in-cheek.

"Ever been to New York?" I asked Bucky. "Twigs tell you what we're picking up there?"

Bucky said nothing. A stillness. Something was off. I looked to see that Bucky held a pistol on me, snub-nose model. My nerves sung from the sudden terror, but I managed to drive straight somehow, hold a steady speed.

"Stop the car," he said.

"Or what? You'll shoot me while I'm driving? What's going on?"

"I'll shoot you while you're driving. Pull over."

As I did, an eighteen-wheeler appeared out of nowhere, over top of us, gassing its horn. Plastic and glass exploded from my door, opened my forehead. The world was a deafening dial tone. My left eyebrow sponged blood.

"Next bullet will divide your brains, brother," Bucky said to me, his voice from the other end of a long hallway.

I lifted the hem of my T-shirt to my head, came away with deep-red bloodstains. "Dammit, dude."

"Give me your gun."

"Don't have one."

"Pale Face, I regret to inform you, but I'll kill you. Easily. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Search me. I am unarmed."

"Get out of the car, *anunaki*. Slowly."

I opened my door, stood out, hands up. He stood out on his side, keeping the pistol on me.

"You're going to kill me? You sure?" I asked him.

"Away from the road. This side. Walk."

I lifted my shirt over my head until the collar caught my temples, making like a pharaoh hat. I pulled my arms free from the sleeves and started walking.

"Not down the road," he hissed. "The desert!"

I turned, then maneuvered us wobbily through organ pipe cacti and desert sage. Fine sand flooded my shoes. The landscape darkened from the coming dusk, shadows swelling beneath distant cliffs. I spotted movement on the nearest shelf.

"Wolf," I said and pointed at the animal, as if this might create a sudden bond between Bucky and I. Save my damned life.

"Coyote, dumbass. Quit turning around!"

He tripped on uneven earth, only for an instant—but it was all I needed. There were two steps. There was a solid second when he could've pulled the trigger, striking me straight in the chest, but he'd hesitated, still off-balance. I slapped the gun from his hand, fell to one knee, then snatched my own gun from its ankle holster. I held my weapon on him, squeezing the handle with both hands, cop-style.

"Get on your knees," I told him. "This is the absolute end, motherfucker."

Bucky went to his knees. He raised a pair of trembling hands and stared at the ground. "Please, don't do this." His voice pinched higher, so he sounded like a little girl. Reminded me of the time my daughter had spoken those very same words while I stood over her sobbing mother. *Please, don't do this.*

"Lie on your stomach," I commanded Bucky.

He obeyed. He coughed. Soft orange earth dusted his lips. "Please, brother," he wheezed. "Don't do this."

"Ain't your brother."

I aimed the gun at his head. I leveled my arm.  
Bucky struggled to his feet and ran. Just went for it, shedding earth the whole way. He seemed to lose his breath after only a few steps but kept chugging, kept pumping those legs. His T-shirt rode up his torso, ponytail whipping his back.

I touched my head at the place where it stung. I touched the blood. I looked over my shoulder at the coyote on the cliff, and he was still there, watching us, his sagemess lording over the land like it must've done a hundred years ago.

I aimed again at Bucky and pulled the trigger. I pulled it over and over until I'd emptied the chamber and missed every shot. The bullets dented the dark earth around him with tiny fireworks.

## Out in the Woods

Scott Ray

Harley was bad on meth for a long time. The first time he ran out of money he asked for a pay advance from the small grocery store where he was employed as a produce stocker in Belmont, Mississippi. When he ran out of money again he didn't have that job anymore so he stole two shotguns and a Luger from his grandfather who lay slowly dying from throat and lung cancer in a cabin he'd built before he got sick. His grandfather never found out he stole the weapons and left the cabin and what money didn't go to the hospital to Harley, who by then was in jail awaiting trial for attempted robbery from when he ran out of money the third time. He'd pawned the shotguns, but the Luger he'd kept for the robbery. It disappeared or was stolen from the evidence, and Harley got cut loose after only a few weeks.

He bought a used F-150 with his grandfather's money and holed up in the cabin out in the woods for a few months to clean up. The cabin had cable but no Internet. He ate a lot of bacon and grilled a lot of burgers and drank a little beer but mostly he drank cranberry juice because it made his veins feel cleaner. He'd sit out in a rocking chair his grandfather had made from one of the many tall lonely pine trees that surrounded the cabin. He kept the gate to the long wooded drive chained closed and no one much knew he was out there.

When he started feeling human again he tried out woodworking with the tools his grandfather left behind, and when what he produced began to look worth buying he opened a little storefront in downtown Iuka. The weekend Pickwick water-skiers and pontooners appreciated his work, and his furniture still sits in many a weekend home around the lake out there.

One hot green day in June he drove back from Iuka after unpacking a truckload of pine and maple Windsor chairs. The day was humid and warm and the air in his truck had recently given out so he didn't take the time to shut the gate behind him. When some boys from the bad old days walking down county road 92 to town saw the gate was open they walked down the drive to pay him a visit.

Harley sat on the porch smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. The boys looked rough. Rougher even than Harley ever looked. Rougher even than when he held up that gas station eight months before. Jake Reeves had been short and squat before he started using but now his clothes hung off him like a tattered flag. Cal Bumgarden had always been gaunt, but now he had sores all around his mouth and couldn't keep his hands in one place. At their request Harley rolled each a cigarette, all the while wondering how he'd get rid of them.

"Looks like you're doing fine," Cal said.

"Yeah. You look good, Harley," Jake said. He took a drag and giggled.

"It's been a kind of a long day," Harley said.

“Haven’t seen you around much,” Cal said.

“Guess I’ve been laying low,” Harley said.

It was quiet out there except for the occasional gag or wheeze or cough from Cal or Jake. The trees kept the house shady all afternoon and it felt almost overcast though the sky beyond the tops of the pines was clear and bright.

“Never used to see you drinking Busch Light,” Cal said.

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Thought you were better than that.”

“Nah, I’m not,” Harley said.

Jake slapped a mosquito on his neck and a little blood trickled toward the collar of his ragged t-shirt.

“Kind of boring out here, ain’t it?” Cal said.

“I like it alright,” Harley said.

“C’mon,” Cal said, “let’s have a good old time like we used to.”

“Yeah, c’mon, Harley,” Jake said. “Come out with your boys.”

“I’m not doing that stuff anymore,” Harley said.

“Don’t have the spirit for it.”

“I know what can help with spirit,” Cal said.

“I thank you. But no thanks,” Harley said.

“I’m really not feeling any friendship from you, Harley” Cal said.

“What do you boys want?” Harley said.

Cal dropped his cigarette.

“We need to get to Memphis. See a man about a business opportunity.”

“I’ll take you to Belmont, but I’m not driving to Memphis,” Harley said.

“That’ll work,” Cal said.

Harley rolled himself another cigarette without offering another one to Cal and Jake. When it dangled from his mouth he walked to the truck where Cal sat shotgun and Jake squeezed into the small backseat of the cab, moving aside a ball-peen hammer and chisel still frosted with sawdust. Halfway to Belmont, about five miles out, Jake struck Harley with the ball end of the ball-peen hammer. The truck almost careened off the road, but Cal grabbed the wheel until the vehicle slowed down.

“What the fuck?” Cal said.

“I guess we can go to Memphis now,” Jake said. He pulled the hammer head out of Harley’s skull.

“I didn’t like the way he was talking to us.”

Cal got out of cab, ran around the front of the truck, and pushed Harley to the side. They drove another mile to a gravel road that turned to dirt and then stopped in a grove of trees. Harley wasn’t yet dead when they left him sitting up at the foot of a tall lonely pine tree. After they took his rolling tobacco they got back in the truck and drove back to highway 25 to the I-22 intercept towards Memphis.

## CJ AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT: BENJAMIN DREVLOW

### The Drevlow Show: On Grit Lit and Larry Brown and the Writing Life with Benjamin Drevlow By Adam Van Winkle

I first met Benjamin Drevlow at a wedding. A writer friend of mine leaned over and pointed to the guy with the Harry Crews mohawk and a Heineken in each hand and tells me, "That guy's a good writer." "I could see that," I joke, but I trust this writer friend so I ask, "Who is he?"

Turns out, as I met him later that night, Drevlow was just taking over as Editor-in-Chief at one of my favorite all time litmags, *Bull Men's Fiction*. I came to *Bull* because it has featured the likes of some of my favorite authors (see Bonnie Jo Campbell and Donald Ray Pollock). I stuck with *Bull* because it's an overall badass rag, every online and print edition worth reading. Color me impressed.

So I read his fiction. And it's fucking great. Seriously. Fucking. Great. *Bend with the Knees (and Other Love Advice from My Father)* from New Rivers Press (2008) won the 2006 Many Voices Project and is one of my all time favorite story collections. As the title implies, the stories chronicle an upbringing (like "Rusty, The Jesus Years" herein) where family and love are gauntlets that toughen (sometimes by mangling). You'll see he writes romance the same way if you read "My Baby Loves Me So Hard" over at one of my other favorite litmags, Split Lip Magazine.

One thing that occurred to me as I read is this dude with the Harry Crews cut must be a Larry Brown fan. So I asked him about that. And some other stuff about his writing and editing and all that.

*AV: First things first: this issue was inspired by the opening line of Larry Brown's "Big Bad Love" because, well, we love Larry Brown. What's your experience with Brown? How much does he matter to you as a writer?*

*BD: How's this: for our honeymoon, my wife and I went to Oxford to see his papers and to hang out in all the spots he used to write about. He was the first writer that I found out of grad school that I was like, I didn't know you can do this? I spent a good five years trying to write like Brown before if I realized I couldn't do it. "Rusty, the Jesus Years" is the closest I ever came. It was definitely inspired by "Big Bad Love" and the guy riding around in his truck waiting to bury his dog.*

*AV: "Rusty, The Jesus Years," is an odd, like really specific chain of painful events. Any truth to that fiction?*

*BD: Yeah, most everything I write is maybe 85% true. Basically everything in that story happened but not all that night, the night I got a flat in the middle of a bridge and pissed off the side. I tried to write that scene for at least three years before one day I got an email from my mom, which was basically verbatim from the story. I was like, Christ, that's a depressingly accurate email. Then I was like, what if I just throw all this shit at the wall, see what sticks.*

*AV: Speaking of truth working its way into fiction, "Life Story" seems to be just this: a writer trying to resolve writing the painful truth. There you write "I'd meant it to be both figurative and crude and a cruel joke on the narrator's entire pitiful existence, which is to say my own entire pitiful existence." Is this your approach to fiction writing? Or at least, an approach?*

*BD: A lot of the stories I write, yeah, for better or worse is me making myself the butt of the joke, or at least the villain of the story. It's all therapy for me. I take a lot of pride in how hard I work at writing, but I wouldn't say that I'm a writer, per se. I'm a storyteller. I'm a confessor. I'm a guy at a bar who needs professional therapy. I don't feel like I'm writing worth anything if I'm not opening a vein and letting it bleed. A lot of the time, I'm asking myself, What's the worst thing that could happen to me? What's the worst thing I could do in this situation—past, present, or future?*

*AV: I like to ask authors I dig this question for mostly selfish reasons but our readers who write will want to know too: what's your process? By that I mean, how do you make sure you get words on paper in story form? Is this easy or hard for you?*

*BD: My process is a little bit of everything. For years I was a binge writer. I would procrastinate and procrastinate, then write for twenty-four hours. I'd stick with a story and obsess about a story for a week straight. I still do this from time to time, especially during the semester when I'm teaching. I'll go a week or two without writing, then write straight for two or three days when I get a break. That's hard on me mentally, though. The ups and downs. For the summers, I've gotten pretty good*

*at sitting my ass in the chair for four or five hours a day. I've never struggled putting words down. I struggle with going somewhere. I often joke that I can sneeze out 10,000 words without thinking about it. Out of this, I currently have a 700-page novel (which was once a 1200-page novel) that I wrote in two summers, that may never be published because nobody wants to read a book that big. I'm no David Foster Wallace and this ain't exactly Infinite Jest. What happens? A fuckup janitor named Rusty pisses and moans about wanting to kill himself for 300,000 words.*

*AV: Speaking of process, you have to balance all this awesome fiction writing with managing Bull Men's Fiction. One rag editor to another, I know that can be a struggle. But beyond the struggle, how do you think working as Bull's editor makes you a better writer?*

*BD: It definitely motivates me to raise my game. We get so many great pieces from great authors that I end up having to reject. I'm constantly like, How have I ever gotten published? I end up thinking of my own stories as an editor and asking, What would make someone want to publish this for others to read? I've also started to become better at snuffing out my own posturing. Sometimes I think we want to get published so much and thinking that we have to stand out, what often happens is that we write from this dishonest voice that we think will make us sound more clever or more badass than we already are. What's an honest story? What's an honest voice? I think a lot about that now.*

*AV: Otherwise, how has been taking the reins of Bull been for you? That's long been one of my favorites with Donald Ray Pollock and Bonnie Jo Campbell and Sheldon Lee Compton and too many other awesome authors to note...*

*BD: It's been really great on so many levels I never really expected. I never really planned to do a magazine. I completely appreciate the great things that litmags do for writers and readers, even more so now that I'm on the other side. I just wasn't sure that I had anything to bring to the table, or more more importantly, I wasn't sure that anybody out there wanted to read what I would bring to the table. It was only through finding writers I appreciated online and then being able to talk to them about my favorite writers and find out their favorite writers that I started to feel like maybe this was something for me. In Bull, more than anything, I've found all these connections with a community looking for writing that doesn't always get published other places. Usually writing with some teeth to it, writing with some ugly truths laid bare without an easy moral at the end. And in so many ways, I've found this communal safe space to dig into all the ugliness and pain that often goes with navigating masculinity--for men and for women.*

*AV: As an editor of a magazine with an awesome reputation among writers looking to submit, who are the authors and what are the books that shaped and continue to shape your literary tastes?*

*BD: I never really read as a kid, and I didn't really discover writing until I was drinking way too much and suicidal and an all-around fun person to be around. It's so clichéd to say this, but Thom Jones and Tim O'Brien, those guys saved my life. I didn't know people like their people existed. I didn't know you could write about that, or like that. After that, Sherman Alexie and Amy Hempel basically taught me how to write a short story. Like I said, Larry Brown got me through my late twenties. I read every book he had, every interview I could find. When I think about the writing work ethic, I always think about old Larry. Of late, I've been consuming everything I can of Scott McClanahan, Bud Smith, and Troy James Weaver. These folks from outside the MFA world kill me. It's like I didn't know you were allowed to write those stories. But all these folks, I think of them like my crazy uncles and zany aunts, my fuckup cousins always telling the messed up stories.*

*AV: Obligatory trivia: What do you watch on TV? What music do you dig?*

*BD: I'm terrible for TV habits. There are so many options with Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc. It stresses me out how many good shows there are to choose from every night after work. And then all the shows now seem to have connected plots where you can't just watch one, which don't get me wrong, is cool, but addictive. Half the time I just settle for a good old Law & Order with Lennie Brisco that I've seen fifty times.*

*John Moreland writes these killer bluesy country songs. He just came out with Big Bad Luv. I'm not sure if he even knows about Larry Brown, but it's pretty great just the same. There's this Americana band American Aquarium that kicks much ass, a little bit country, a little bit rock and roll. Their album Burn. Flicker. Die. hasn't left my car's CD player for close to six years.*

*AV: Watcha working on now?*

BD: *The big ugly beast I was talking about earlier is called Mama's Boy ("Rusty, the Jesus Years" is actually the first chapter). It's done and I've gone through and cut it down a couple times to get closer to something more manageable. It's basically about a suicidal fuckup who decides to write a book about why he's so fucked up for his mom, but it doesn't go so well, because he is, after all, a fuckup.*

*I've also just finished up a collection of connected stories called Ina-Baby (which I kind of stole from Sheena Baby, one of LB's characters). It's the story of a dysfunctional relationship from start to finish, but told in reverse order. You asked me earlier about "Life Story" and how I tend to write stories to figure out my own pathetic existence. Both these books are essentially me asking myself, What'd be the worst shit that I could do? What'd be the worst shit that could happen? I'm still not sure this is a healthy coping mechanism, but it's what I do. Thankfully, I'm blessed with a very understanding wife and family who put up with me writing the way I do.*

AV: *Writing labels can be both limiting and misleading. Same time, it's useful to think in general terms of style and parallels. What do you think of the label "grit lit"? Do you think of yourself as this or any "type" of writer consciously?*

BD: *I know the actual writers of "grit lit" were often conflicted about the term, or for some it didn't even exist when they were writing. I love it. I have this visceral image that I can feel in the back of my teeth every time I say it--this little bit of grit that I can't chew or swallow. To me that so epitomizes what I love about LB's writing, but also William Gay, Harry Crews, Donald Ray Pollock, Daniel Woodrell, Dorothy Allison, Bonnie Jo Campbell, and a hundred others. It's definitely my favorite genre to read. Gritty, to me, also describes the ethos of writers like Brown, Gay, and Pollock who didn't travel the typical MFA route, the ones who painted houses and worked at the paper mill, the fire station for years before they got anywhere with their writing.*

*As for me, I don't know. I've definitely been heavily influenced by those folks, Larry Brown most of all. I definitely try to mine my roots growing up farming and working as a fry cook and summer hand. If I could, I'd always write about the lives of working class people with minimum-wage jobs and manual labor jobs. Those are my favorite people--the humor, the work ethic, the complexities of their often skewed morality, etc. But honestly, I haven't lived that life for a long time, and I tend to write to cope with the life I'm currently living. I'll never probably write a book about professors; I would kind of hate myself. I'm not sure I truly fit in with any genre because I steal a little bit from all the different authors I dig, and these days I'm trying harder to be okay with that. I'm trying my best just to write the best stories I can write, wherever they fall in terms of audience and genre. An honest story about shit that bothers me without any posturing.*



Benjamin Drevlow was the winner of the 2006 Many Voices Project and the author of a collection of short stories, *Bend With the Knees and Other Love Advice From My Father* (New Rivers Press, 2008). His fiction has also appeared in *The Blue Earth Review* and *Passages North*. He is editor-in-chief at *BULL: Men's Fiction*, teaches writing at Georgia Southern University, and lives both in Georgia and online at [www.thedrevlow-olsonshow.com](http://www.thedrevlow-olsonshow.com)



## Rusty, the Jesus Years

By Benjamin Drevlow

The dog'd died. Not Rusty's dog. But still. He'd had a dog once. This big Rottweiler named Stormin' Norman. The poor guy dying of smoke inhalation way back when Rusty'd accidentally burned his family house down.

Self-immolation, that's what they call it when you tried to kill yourself by lighting your skin on fire. Rusty hearing that on some cop show one time. Usually took a lot of gas and a shitload of self-hate.

Most likely the dog'd been trapped inside and passed out from smoke inhalation before his fur'd eventually caught on fire and at some point the big guy'd burned up with everything else.

Rusty never having been told the official cause of death, sometimes he'd like to imagine Stormin' Norman, big beautiful boy that he was, snorting and snarling as he'd gone down in a blaze of glory.

Or other times Rusty'd like to imagine Norman simply passing out from smoke inhalation and never waking up for the ugliness of his big finale. Up in a puff of smoke, that's what Rusty'd like to imagine sometimes.

Tonight's program? All Rusty could imagine, flaming furballs and wheezing whimpers.

*Why, Rusty, why?* The dog whining in Rusty's head. *Why, why, why...?*

Rusty's ma, she'd called and left like eight messages before she'd left for church that morning. One right after another with everything she'd forgotten about the last time. These'd went on for like an hour and a half. The first one, her wanting to wish Rusty an early happy birthday, ask Rusty if he'd gone to church wherever it was he might be going to church.

It'd been Dickie's dog this time, she'd said in the second one. Run over by the bus. Dickie, Rusty's middle brother. Rusty looking for any reason to throw himself a little pity party. Rusty figuring his brother's dog dying being good enough reason as any. He'd started off the morning with beer. But then he'd only had a couple of those left, so he'd gotten into the whiskey.

Must've been quite a traumatizing experience, Rusty thinking. Them kids on the school bus. Listening to that one last yelp cut short and then the crunch of the bones, that thump-thump of tires and fur and fresh meat. Rusty'd sat there at the breakfast nook all morning and drank and drank and listened to that message from his ma go on and on and when it'd been over he'd played it again on speaker phone.

Mixing whiskey with Coke, whiskey with Kool-Aid, whiskey with Gatorade, whiskey with water, whiskey with whiskey, and eventually whiskey straight up and right out of the bottle. Tipped way back like they did in movies when a guy really wanted to drown his sorrows.

Imagining what those kids in the first couple bench seats'd felt when that bus'd thump-thunked over Dickie's dog the morning before. Every time Rusty'd play those messages, he'd have to take a bigger drink before playing them again.

*Happy birthday dear Rusty...*, he'd kept singing to myself between drinks. *Happy birthday... to me...*

The big three-three. Same as old Jesus.

Had to be a message somewhere in all these messages.

Rusty burning the family house down all those years back. Sending old Stormin' Norman up in a puff of smoke. An accident, obviously.

He'd only been a kid after all. Actually, he'd been fourteen years old. *Supposedly old enough to know better.* Rusty having heard that from the old man more than a few times in his life.

Rusty staying up late to look at girly pics beside his bed, keeping warm with a couple space heaters he'd stolen from out in the barn—a couple a space heaters he'd forgotten to turn off before he'd gone to school the next morning.

But still, if you wanted to get technical about it, then *technically*, Rusty'd murdered Stormin' Norman. Manslaughter at the least. If this'd been *Law and Order*. If Stormin' Norman'd been a man. If Rusty'd been a man. Ever.

Reckless endangerment, man one. A bunch of other legal mumbo-jumbo the DAs always pulling out of their asses on TV. Get miserable fuckups like Rusty tossed in the clink and the key thrown away. A threat to himself, a threat to the rest of society.

The wheels'd literally started to come off for Rusty that night. Like for real for real. Goddamn front passenger'd upped and rolled right out from under the Bronco. Passed Rusty by on the side of the bridge as he'd come to up near the centerspan.

This being later that night, of course. Much later. The wee hours. After all the little piggies'd gone *wee... wee... wee...* and run all the way home.

Bit of a rude awakening, your wheel fallin' off right in the middle of a nice little blacked out ride across town. All those sparks. The grinding of steel and concrete, the front axle down for the count as Rusty'd tried to navigate his Bronco to the side of the bridge.

No driving shoulder up there to speak of. Maybe a foot between the front bumper and the guardrail. Just enough room for a guy stumble, stub his toe, and end up ass over tea kettle if he didn't watch out. Easy way out for a guy like Rusty. Even if he hadn't already been looking in the first place.

Never did see how far the damn wheel like to've rolled off to. Never went looking much neither. The whole dipsy-do'd been enough to make Rusty want to go back to drinking, back to blacked out, back to cruising up and down tall bridges out on auto-pilot.

Moral to the story? Don't drink and drive boys and girls, sure, but if you do it'd best if you'd drink enough to stay blacked out til you could get back wherever it was that you'd been headed. Home or jail or the warm bed of some lovely lady with a low self-esteem and a high need to please.

Weren't for the damn wheel coming off, Rusty could've gone and chalked all this up as some messed up dream where everything'd been a metaphor for everything wrong with him. His own front wheel rolling past him and then rolling way down into the shadows and out of sight on the far side of the bridge being the biggest of these metaphors.

The way Rusty'd known he hadn't been dreaming all this: how bad he still had to piss. Whereas usually if he'd had to piss this bad while he'd been dreaming, he'd end up dreaming that he'd been doing it hard with that lovely lady with the low self-esteem. Doing it so good that he'd let it all go and give her the whole thing no rubber or nothing. Then end up waking himself up as he'd pissed his own bed.

Rusty's fucked up version of wet dreams, nightly emissions. Pissed sheets.

Rusty being awake now, and cold and shaking with piss tremors, and not having pissed himself yet. That'd been the first major clue that this all'd been really happening. Another clue being that the Bronco's spare'd been pretty much rusted solid onto the back, no budging it. No way Rusty had the tools or know-how to fix any of the things that'd gone wrong for him of late.

Later he'd straddled the guardrail and finished off the whiskey. Went ahead tossed the empty over the side of the bridge. Listened for a while til he'd given up on hearing it splash. A hundred some feet down. Probably too far to hear a bottle hit the water, not far enough to kill himself diving in after it.

Not exactly comfortable up there. Concrete edges cutting into the inside of his shaking thighs. Couldn't bring himself to swing the other leg up and over the edge to piss off the side. Not quite yet, anyway.

Short as that guardrail was, he couldn't sit back in the saddle. At least not the way he'd've liked. Way he used sit back in the saddle of that springy Lone Ranger horse back as a kid. *Hi-ho Silver, away!* he'd shout. Then ride that springy horsey off into the sunset.

Sounded less cool all those years later, Rusty yelling it out at the top of his lungs to no one in particular. He'd been about to shout it again, louder this time, but'd stopped when he'd decided he'd end up pissing or puking myself if he did.

The horse'd died, too. It'd been Rusty's ma's third message that morning. Died the day before. Same as Dickie's dog. Not run over. Not even in a related accident. Like fifty miles away back home on the folks' farm.

The horse having died of old age. Ray's horse. Ray, Rusty'd big brother, himself having been dead for twenty-five years.

The way the old lady'd put it on her message that morning: *Oh yah, the horse died yesterday, too*, she'd said with a long sigh. *But he was pretty old, you know. Your age. Probably his time, I guess.*

Rusty pretty sure that she'd meant that the horse'd been thirty-three years old—like him—not that they'd shared the same birthday. Which would've been too much. Even for her.

But still: *On the same goddamn day as the dog, Ma?* What Rusty'd been thinking to himself.

And *Can you even hear yourself, Ma?*

Anyway, Ray's horse dying. Not great, but it'd been a real oldassed horse. And it hadn't been as if Ray'd ever ridden it. Nobody had. This real stubborn quarterhorse that'd kick or bite or buck you off anytime it'd get the chance.

*Of course, you remember that the horse'd been Ray's.* The old lady's every message circling back to dead Ray at some point.

*So that's sad*, she'd said. And: *I think the horse's hitting your dad the hardest. You know your dad, he wasn't much for dogs and cats.*

*Which reminds me*, she'd said, *I don't think I ever told you about the cat.*

Which'd been about the last goddamn straw. Why? Because Rusty'd hated that damn cat. This old barn cat. Mean little bastard. But the cat'd been best friends with Norman back before the house'd burned down. And Rusty'd never forgiven the cat, the damn thing abandoning his best friend in his moment of need. The way cats would. Those goddamn loveless little bastards.

*But Jesus Christ, Ma!* Rusty thinking to himself. *The goddamn cat, too?*

The dead cat kind of reminding Rusty of dead Ray, too, in a messed up way. Like six degrees of deranged tragedy that'd all led back to Rusty. The cat being best friends with Norman who'd been best friends with Rusty because his parents'd bought him for Christmas the year Ray'd blown his brains out two days before his eighteenth birthday.

*I guess I'd grown quite attached to the old thing,* Rusty's ma'd said on her message. *But at least he died the way he'd've wanted.*

*And how exactly was that, Ma?* Rusty thinking.

*Hunting,* she'd said. *We think a coyote might've gotten him. Which makes it a little better, I guess.*

Rusty'd never have to pick up his phone again to hear his ma's voice going on and on about all the death he'd wreaked upon my family.

One by one all the animals'd kept dying that morning. One by one Rusty's ma'd traced them all back to dead Ray and then to Rusty. In between that, she'd kept saying that she'd been calling to wish Rusty a happy birthday.

*Okay, well,* she'd said that about twenty times on eight different messages. Then: *I just wanted to wish you happy birthday, Rust.*

Then: *The big thirty-three!*

And: *I can't believe my baby boy's so old now.*

And: *Where's the time gone?*

And some more stuff about how she'd wished Rusty'd give her a call back to tell her what he'd wanted for a present this year. For the last part of it you could hear her choking up and sniffling back tears.

*If you could just call me back or maybe write me a letter, Rust? To let me know how things are going for you and tell me that I shouldn't worry so much about you so I don't have to bug you like this all the time.*

*Well, happy birthday anyway,* she'd said again, and of course Rusty'd gone ahead and kept right on playing every last one of them messages over and over and over. Listening and drinking, drinking and listening.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Back when they'd been kids, Ray'd sneak up from behind and tackle Rusty to the ground. Sit on his chest with his knees pinning his elbows to his sides. Put one grimy hand over his nose and face and then another over his chin so he could pry Rusty's mouth open like he was about to give him mouth to mouth.

You don't look so healthy, there, Crusty, Ray'd say, holding his mouth open. Looks like you could use a little green in your diet.

He'd hack and hawk and snort and suck up all the snot and phlegm he could muster. Then pucker up big and let that loogie ooze from the edges of his pursed lips and down into the back of Rusty's throat.

Big swallow, now, Ray'd say, and start bouncing up and down on Rusty's chest. Then he'd start dropping hammer fists on my crotch. Thump, thump, thump went Rusty tiny little fragile nuts until he'd eventually cough and gag and swallow hard, then gag and cough some more.

*Thatta boy,* Ray'd say then. *Make sure you get it all down, Crusty. Grow up big and strong like me.*

*Grow up big and strong, you told me, asshole! As if none of all this was ever gonna stunt me? Least of all my privates and all the abuse you'd rained down upon them?*

*Is that what you want to hear, Ray? That you made me grow up big and strong just like you?*

There'd been plenty of times where Rusty'd tried to blame Ray for all of this. Times he'd wondered if having such an a abused and stunted wiener'd been the root of all his short-comings in love and life. As in literally, but also figuratively.

But then he'd think back to the day Ray'd tried to fly. How he'd been coming back from town to pick up a replacement box of Twinkies for Rusty's lunch. Ray having eaten the last one despite the fact that Rusty having clearly written my name on it in big blocky magic-marker letters: **RUSTY.**

Must've been trying to fly, Dickie'd whispered in Rusty's ear from upstairs where they'd eavesdropped.

Must've been going at least seventy, eighty to fly like that, Dickie'd said. The way his helmet'd been shredded to paper thin, the way the frame of that crotchrocket'd gotten wrapped around that deer carcass like that.

A miracle the kid made it through that alive. What the cop'd said.

He hadn't ticketed Ray or even brought him to the station for questioning. He'd shook his head and then looked at the folks one last time. Just make sure the kid learns his safety lesson, he'd told them. Freak accident, he'd said.

A miracle, the old lady'd said. First to Pops and then to Ray. A real miracle, she'd kept saying.

The old man, according to him what'd saved Ray's life—sheer stupidity. All that snow and ice covering the road. How he never should've been out on those roads with his crotchrocket in the first place.

Stupid was what it was, Ray, just plain stupid, Pops'd told Ray over and over that night. You know what you've put your mother through tonight?

Nobody'd asked Rusty why he'd had to have those damn Twinkies so bad. Nobody'd asked Rusty why he'd pitched such a colossal fit over Ray having eaten the last one.

What were you even thinking, Ray? the old man'd kept asking.

He must've been thinking, *Everything is ruined, and for what? My worthless little brother and his goddamn Twinkies.*

But I had my name on them, Ma, Rusty'd kept whining earlier that night. As in before Ray'd learned to fly.

It was my Twinkie, Ma.

He knew it, too, Rusty'd told her over and over. He knew it and he done it on purpose. And now I won't have nothing for snack time.

And again: What'll I have to eat for snack time, Ma? When all the other kids're having their snacks, Ma? What'll I have? What, Ma? What?

Here's your frickin' Twinkies, little piggy! What Ray'd told Rusty later that night after all'd been said and done. When he'd snuck into his room. When he'd whipped that flattened, bloodied box of Twinkies in Rusty's stupid sleeping face.

Hope they taste good when you shove 'em down your fat little piggy snout, you pudgy little shit.

But back to Rusty up on top of the guardrail, pants now around his ankles, and pissing a steady stream for a good minute and a half before the phone'd rang. And all the way down in his pants pocket.

Obviously he could've ignored it. Reasonable people would've ignored it. Let it go to message. It wasn't worth the risk, they'd tell themselves. Balancing so precariously as he'd been.

But then again reasonable people wouldn't've been up there pissin off the side of a bridge in the middle of the night.

And who the hell'd be calling at this time of night anyway?

Which'd pretty much been the problem with ignoring it: Like maybe it'd be some lonely girl in distress somewhere. Her self-esteem in the crapper and in serious need of some heavy ego stroking.

Unlikely, sure. But then that's the magical thinking of guys like Rusty. No matter how big of a loser you are and how small of a stunted wiener you had, you'd always be ready for the right woman to take them in and mend your wounded souls.

There'd been more cars by then, nobody stopping or slowing down. But more than a few honking and shouting things Rusty couldn't make out. The phone vibrating once again against his ankle.

His bare ass bouncing around out behind him. A full moon tonight. The wind whistling between his legs and his little acorn top dangling out there in the cold.

Eventually he'd gotten a hold of his phone. His ma on the other end. He certainly hadn't picked up. Probably calling to say she'd been worried sick. Worried that he'd never called her back to thank her for her eight birthday messages. The oral obituary of dead animals.

*Why it couldn't've been some chick all liquored up and the stench of horniness burning a hole in her panties?*

Rusty knowing all too well the answer to that, the way he'd known the answer to all his problems. Rusty literally teetering on the precipice of it with his poor little wiener pointing the way.

It's not like Rusty hadn't any experience with drowning. For example that time the old man'd taken the family to San Antonio to see the Alamo, but then got sick of the kids complaining about how boring that was. So they'd ended up a couple hours south on beaches of Corpus Christie.

What the hell you doing, Crusty? Ray'd shouted from behind him.

What's it look like, Rusty shouting back. I'm practicing my crane kicks.

You're doing what?

*I said...*, Rusty's voice full of little kid pride and irritation, I'm practicing my crane—

Pudgy as shit from eating all those Twinkies and sitting on his butt watching TV and playing G. I. Joes, like a human flotation device with no real muscle to anchor him to the sandbar. Maybe eighty, ninety pounds soaking wet. Point is, it didn't take much for the big one to knock Rusty on my ass. Even less for the undertow to suck him right under.

What Rusty'd remembered: Floating around there deep under the surface, only a few spots of light peeking through. All those shadows down there, the bubbles rippling up so slowly away from him. How everything'd been so loud and muffled at the same time.

How he could hear everything right inside his own ears but it all being suffocated at the same time. The muffled trickle of bubbles going up to the surface, the muffled splashing sound his flailing arms and legs made as he'd tried to swim up, couldn't swim up, couldn't do anything to help himself.

How he could only float downward slowly and flail away helplessly.

And then suddenly: Ray's face! As if Rusty'd been seeing it for the first time. The way the string of snot and bubbles'd leaked out of his flared nose. The way the sharp edges his face'd blended into the bent sunlight showing through above it. The way his smirk'd looked even then, his lips pursed, his cheeks puffed out.

*What the hell you doing, Crusty?* Rusty'd sometimes imagine Ray shouting under all that water.

How hard Ray'd grabbed on Rusty's bicep. Ray's fingertips digging through the flesh and down to the bone almost, how hard he'd pulled Rusty, with one arm the whole way back to the beach.

*Quit your crying, Crusty!* Rusty liked to imagine Ray saying when he'd drop me back on the sand.

*Jesus Christ, asswipe, just calm down. Breathe.*

*Breathe goddamn it or I'll teach you to breathe.*

But then Rusty didn't actually remember any of that. Rusty remembering only Ray diving down to rescue him, to yank him back up to the surface, and drag him back to the beach. Rusty remembering only Ray saving his life and all the messed up ways he'd repay him for that over the next few years.

It'd been a bit of a maneuver. Rusty balancing up there, the phone ringing and ringing down by his ankles, trying to pull his pants back up, while not letting go of the phone, the bridge cable. Hard to reach down and reach up at the same time and without leaning too far one way or the other. Not stepping off into all that gravity and open air.

Ma calling again and again. Three rings, then four rings, then five. Decisions, decisions. Pull up his pants, talk to his worried mother, or drop the phone and jump off after it. It wouldn't've even been a jump at this point. Only a step, a lean, a letting go.

Rusty could hear another car coming up the bridge from behind him. *Oh Christ, Rusty thinking. What if she'd put a tracker on my phone and now she's hear to save me?*

The car, the truck, the cop, Rusty's mother worried sick. Whatever it'd been parked and started honking. Rusty wanting desperately to wave them off, tell them he was fine. Nothing to see here. Just a guy pissing off the side of a bridge with his pants down. But he'd been barely holding himself upright as it was.

Rusty could feel the emptiness under his toes as he'd stumbled out over the edge of the guardrail, the bridge cable seeming to get farther and farther away.

He couldn't hear anybody getting out of their car. Couldn't hear if it'd been his ma's car or what kind of car it was. Could only imagine the reasons she'd be sitting there honking her horn and doing nothing. Her headlights shining a big old spotlight on her baby-boy's pimply pale ass.

Her birthday boy!

*I did it, Ma, I killed him, Ma. Me, my stupid Twinkies.* That's what Rusty'd kept saying that night a month after Ray'd taught himself to fly. The early hours of the night, the night Ray'd gone and killed himself over a wrecked motorcycle he'd poured his college savings into buying.

*I should've been the one,* Rusty'd told her. It's my fault, Ma, he'd whined. Mine. *Not Ray. Me, Ma! Me!*

Rusty's ma, she'd simply kept crying and hugging him. *Sh... Rusty,* she'd kept saying as she'd held his head next to hers, her tears spilling onto his other tears.

*No, she'd kept saying, sh..., just sh... That's not true, Rusty, it's simply not true.*

A heavy door opening and slamming shut. A woman's voice, though definitely not Rusty's ma. You tryin' to get somebody killed up here?

The headlights blinding Rusty's eyes and Rusty still holding on for dear life, he couldn't see who it'd been let alone if she'd been hot. Which hadn't helped with thinking of things to say. Neither had Rusty's phone ringing again with his ma on the other end.

Honey, you got a funny way of thankin' for me comin to save your little bare ass.

Rusty could hear heavy boots clump-clumping toward him.

This all some big joke, eh boy? Goin and putting a scare into everybody who's gotta pass over this here bridge on their way home for the night?

*S-sorry*, Rusty'd finally said. He hadn't made eye contact yet. For all he knew, she could be some cop coming to arrest him for drinking and driving. Endangering others. Pissing in public. There being any number of reasons.

It ain't what you think, lady, Rusty saying. Rusty himself not really knowing what he'd been doing out there that night atop the bridge.

Well, then, she'd said, maybe five feet away now. You thinkin you can read my mind now? Boy, you go right ahead and tell me what it is you think I'm thinkin.

Rusty making the mistake of looking down to gather his thoughts. About a million flood lights lining the bottom of the bridge. That dull buzz of all that halogen fraying his nerves a bit. His bare knees shaking even more out there atop the guardrail.

It's... it's my birthday, he'd stuttered out.

I can see that.

Rusty nearly jumping at how close she'd come to him, how loud and low and raspy her voice'd been. This woman now standing a foot away looking over the edge as if she'd been trying to see what Rusty'd been seeing.

See what? Rusty'd said. It being even harder to talk now that he'd seen all of her nudging up next to him. Like a circus bear stuffed into the sexiest Carhart overalls he'd ever laid eyes on. These tits like the headlights on a fifty-seven Chevy barely restrained by the button up mechanic's uniform underneath. *SHEILA* in big red curvy letters across a white patch.

Well, honey, Sheila saying, I can see you already halfway into your birthday suit. Her big-toothed smile shining brightly even against the headlights of the tow truck behind her.

I'm Rusty, Rusty saying. And for some reason he'd decided of all things to try and shake her hand.

Which then the phone ringing one last time. This being the moment Rusty'd decided to let go.

When he'd come to he could feel the shards of loose concrete digging into every crevice old and new on his butt and thighs. Could feel the pulsing-pounding of the bloody back of his head where it'd hit whatever it'd hit on the way down.

Rusty was not paralyzed and drowning at the bottom of the lake, this much he could tell. He could hear the soft tisk-tisk-tisk of Sheila clicking her tongue as she'd worked him over. Could hear her heart pounding through that burly chest as she grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him toward her truck.

Oh dear Jesus, she'd been whispering. Oh dear dear Jesus, you sad sad son of a bitch.

Rusty imagining how beautiful those headlights of hers must've looked right then as they'd cradled his head. Still he'd kept his eyes shut. Trying to prolong the dream if it'd really been a dream.

After all, what evidence did Rusty have that any of this could've been a reality? Last time Rusty'd checked, people who fall off the side of a bridge with their pants down don't end up being carried back across said bridge in the strong soft arms of a buxom mama bear who drives a tow truck.

Least of all stunted-dick fuckups like him.

Those warm and meaty hands of hers as they'd hoisted him up onto the heated pleather of her bench seat. Those hands so strong and tender at the same time as they'd pulled up his pissed-on boxers and jeans. The tender violence with which they'd redone his belt and slammed the cab door without even whacking his dangling feet in the process.

It hadn't taken her long to load his three-wheeled Bronco up on her tail end. At some point she'd gotten behind the wheel and cradled his throbbing head on her lap as she'd ground the stick into first. At some point, everything blurry and cockeyed and spinning and Rusty doing his best not to vomit or pass back out, he'd asked, Mama, are we home yet?

Sheila shushing him, stroking the back of his head. She'd whispered, Oh no, birthday boy. That nasty knock on your head like that. Ain't no way I'm letting you go home and sleep alone on my watch, Mister.

Mama? Rusty asking one last time before he'd blacked out again.

Yes, baby.

Is it still my birthday?

No baby, she'd said still stroking his head. No, I reckon it ain't gonna be your birthday for a whole nother year.

That's okay, Mama, Rusty'd said. And then he'd started to say something else, but she'd put her finger to her lips and shushed him.

Baby, don't you worry about nothing else. Big Sheila's takin care of you and she's gonna make sure everything turns out all hunky dory, you hear?

And Rusty had heard, but he hadn't said anything back. Instead he'd closed his eyes and gone to sleep with his head rising and falling on her warm meaty thigh as she'd shifted gears and then hit the gas.

## FICTION

### Winter's Refugee By Carol Dunbar

Vera Hutton in mukluk boots and padded mittens trundles along the snow-covered path through the woods to rental cabin number three. She carries a laundry basket filled with fresh linens in front of her stomach filled with eight months' worth of growing child. Strapped around her furry hat a headlamp glows white and a man's coat hangs from her small frame, too big for her but large enough to close around her belly. Outside her spray of light, swales of snow curve under the jack pines that stand quiet and still, a silence interrupted only by the occasional knock of sap popping through the woods. Everything stunned by the cold, she thinks, and by the time Vera gets to the front door her stomach is as hard as a countertop.

Ned had told her to call up the guest who booked the cabin for tomorrow and cancel—they were their only booking for the weekend—but she wouldn't cancel. It was her excuse, the argument that they couldn't turn down money when they were expecting child number three, but then the weather had turned and temperatures dropped and Ned argued that it would cost more to heat the place than what they could make from one weekend. Maybe that was true, but he wasn't willing to give up his weekend with his buddies in the ice house on Leech Lake. All she wanted was time alone in her house, one weekend without the boys before having this baby, one night to sit in a bubble bath and collect her thoughts.

They would be at her mother's by now, Ned and the boys, and Vera wonders how her mother will manage without her help, how she will get the table set and the food laid out and the dishes washed and put away with her bad knees, the boys zooming underfoot. Vera feels guilty about this. She pins the laundry basket to the door of the rental, slips off a glove, jiggles the knob, and checks for ice around the door frame. It's locked, and they never lock the rentals. With her teeth she pulls off her other glove and digs through her pockets for the keys. She doesn't notice the other tracks leading up to the porch, or the foot-holes shot through the snow that come down the hill from the woods, not from the path, the tracks too big for a deer and ending at cabin number three. She fits key after key into the lock, the air stinging, flexing her hands into fists, bumping and thumping at the door with the glove dangling from her teeth as another practice contraction pours instant cement all through the giant mound of her belly.

Her mother worried about her being up here all by herself, their nearest neighbor two miles away, the nearest town fifty. Usually it was Ned who performed the maintenance duties, who drove around in the truck to all the units, checking that the pipes hadn't froze, relighting the pilot

lights on refrigerators and stoves. He also greeted the guests and talked to them as if they were old friends. It's true that many of them had been coming here for years, but Vera preferred to stay in the background, hauling out the dirty sheets, making the beds. She kept a lending library and grew herbs that she dried and made into teabags, baked muffins and pastries from scratch. Vera said she could do it all, which meant she had to do everything, and they'd had an argument about that, too. "What the hell's gotten into you?" Ned wanted to know, and she did, too. Normally, Vera went quietly about her work so that she could enjoy a good book at the end of the day. She rarely complained, hardly spoke out, and didn't like to stir up trouble. Boys will be boys, she thought, why try to change them? But now she is having a girl. Vera always wanted a girl, but instead of excitement and joy, all she feels is misery. Every day since they found out, a dread rising like a flood inside of her as the child grows and the months march by with the impending due date that to her feels like nothing short of doom.

Vera pops open the door and with her laundry basket tumbles inside. She clicks on the lamp, sheds her ridiculous coat, drops her gloves, and tugs off her boots. The cabin is small, only one bedroom and a half bath with a shower stall. With her stocking feet she scoots the laundry basket across the floor. She hangs fresh towels and turns on the tap in the bathroom so that it drips just a little, cleans the toothpaste specks from the counter and mirror. In the living room she plugs in the vacuum, slides her thumb along the on-switch, and lets out a wild and girlie scream.

The leg hanging off the end of the bed jerks back out of sight, the vacuum cleaner roars to life, and a lamp crashes from the dark of the bedroom.

Vera throws her hands up as a deep voice thunders from the bedroom above the vacuum's roar. And she is out the door. Without her coat or gloves she is running in her socks through the woods down a path lit only by the gleam of snow. In the clearing of the parking lot she throws herself into Ned's pick-up and locks the door. Her body trembles so bad she fumbles the keys on the dashboard and the grated press of the pedal cold through her socks but she turns over the engine, buckles her seatbelt, cranks the wheel, and without waiting for anything to warm-up, belts whining, tires popping on the packed snow, Vera Hutton charges into the night.

###

She drives with both hands clamped to the wheel. She thinks of her daughter and of her future in this world. In her mind the man in their cabin could be anywhere by now. He could have broken into their house—it wasn't far from the rentals—or, there could be many men, all of them predators. She can't go home; it doesn't feel safe. She clenches the wheel and thinks about the girl she saw earlier that week, the girl who had seemed to Vera to be a premonition of who her



daughter might become, because in many ways she was a reflection of who Vera had been, and maybe still was, and this bothers her so very much she drives right past the last gas station in Port Wing. The gas stations close at eight, and by the time she realizes she passed the last one, the clock on her dashboard reads 7:53, too late to turn back. She has also passed the house of every neighbor she knows. She doesn't want to see anybody anyway. How must she look? Her hands feel like glass about to shatter and her teeth click and rattle in her head.

The road unfolds in segments under the twin cones of her headlights. She drives west along Highway 13 with the dark plate of Lake Superior on her left. By the time the car has warmed up, the houselights of the occasional residence appear sporadic through the stripped and bare trees, nothing but miles of darkness between. She can't go to these houses, it wouldn't be safe. For the next forty minutes the only communication she has with the outside world is the on and off clicking of her high beams at the occasional approach of an oncoming car.

The town of Superior appears in a glittering sprawl. She is unfamiliar with the area, all of the houses run-down and the shops closed or out of business. Vera pulls into the parking lot of a shopping mall and turns off her engine. She has finally stopped shaking, but she has to pee. Salt-dusted cars dot an otherwise empty lot, and the warning of train crossing chimes in the distance.

The girl she saw earlier that week had been waiting at a corner bus stop. An oncoming school bus had turned on its flashers and put out its Stop arm and Vera obeyed, waited behind her windshield while the kids boarded. That's when she saw her: hair stick straight and mouse brown, standing in a posture that suggested she ought not take up too much space. The girl's jacket was unzipped, and she wore it over a mini-skirt with knee socks, in the middle of winter, the knobs of her knees burnished from the cold. In her arms she carried a mountain of books. From the look of her pack, she carried even more books on her back, enough to stock a shelf, while the boys who stood around her carried nothing heavier than pop bottles swung casually from otherwise empty hands. Maybe they wore backpacks, but theirs couldn't have weighed very much. They stepped lightly up onto the bus. The girl with her books boarded last and the doors folded her in, the lights extinguished, and the bus pulled away.

Vera enters the shopping mall, pads along in her socks past the trickling fountain and into the long narrow corridor at the back of which are the restrooms. After using the facilities she washes her hands, and it feels as though her inner body has been made liquid by fear. She watches the water running from the faucet in a kind of trance, shock maybe. The water when it rushes still holds the shape of the spigot even though it's no longer in the pipes. She feels like that water: no longer bound by what protects it. She might go anywhere, spray out, break apart. This was her night, her

time alone to herself. All she'd wanted to do was to be alone but now that was ruined, and this is what bothers her most, bothers her more than the thought of that man in her cabin. What was he doing in there anyway? Robbing them? Taking another nap? In the mirror above the sink her face appears twitchy and damp, her skin puffy and moist, the color of French vanilla. I look like a rodent, she thinks, tracing with her fingers the scratches from branches, the welts rising in whiskered lines.

Vera pads alone through the mall in her socks. She keeps her head down, avoids eye contact and thinks how she ought to call someone, the police, probably. There aren't a lot of people, teenagers mostly, and they all expect everyone to carry their own phones.

Before becoming the owner of Hutton Lakeside Cottages, Vera worked for a non-profit, and the hardest part of her job—what made her so nauseous she could hardly eat—was calling up the donors and asking for their help. She would arrive to work a full hour early, sit in her office, and psych herself up. She listened to motivational speakers and audiobooks in her car. Vera thinks about those tapes now, tries to remember how to tap into her strength as an introvert. She isn't prepared for the police officers and the attention her accusation of a break in will bring, the questions they will ask and how she will respond. Why did she drive so far? Why didn't she go to a neighbor's? Technically, the man didn't break in because the door to the rental had been unlocked. She was the one to surprise him, she realizes now, replaying the sound of his voice in her mind - a manly yodel, she thinks. And it's embarrassing how she'd run away after seeing only his leg. She has no description to give them other than the leg: big, hairy, white. He was definitely a large man. Also, she might add that his sock had a hole in it, the big toe sticking out pale and bulbous like a fungus.

At a coffee kiosk at the end of the mall Vera orders a cup of hot water.

"Do you want a tea bag to go with it?" the girl behind the counter asks.

"No thank you," Vera says. "I forgot my purse."

The girl makes the hot water, her thick brown ponytail following her every move like a bouncy pet. She seems capable and confident, just the way you would want your own daughter to be, Vera thinks, and not at all like the girl who got on the bus.

"Chamomile is my favorite." The girl sets a packet of tea out next to the to-go cup of water. "Nice and soothing in the evening. Your baby might like it."

"Oh," Vera looks at the teabag. "I don't have any money for that."

"I know," the girl says. "It's on me."

Now that the girl has given her complimentary tea, it seems rude to ask if she can use her phone. Vera sits on a bench by the fountain lets the chamomile calm her nerves.

She reasons that the man in her cabin probably isn't a burglar because he'd been lying down, and they don't keep anything of value in the rental cabins anyway. She yawns and wishes she hadn't driven so far, worries about having enough gas to make it home. She can't call Ned; he'd either be angry at having to miss his ice fishing weekend, or he'd come charging up here with the boys in their pajamas, armed with his shotgun.

Only then does Vera remember that Ned keeps a shotgun in the back of the maintenance truck. It's sitting there right now, under a tarp, and it's been sitting there this whole time. Vera imagines driving the truck all the way back to the rentals, taking out the shotgun, and marching up to the door of cabin number three. "Open up!" she'd shout, "Or I'll blast the damn door down!" But she would never do that. She doesn't even know how to fire a shotgun, and that's not her way. Ned could do that, in fact, that's probably exactly what he'd do. But that isn't how she wants to handle this, as a woman. She doesn't want to become a victim, and so she will have to face this man in her cabin, one way or another. But what way? Vera puts a hand on her belly and realizes that this is what has been bothering her all these weeks, all these months. More is being asked of her now. This daughter growing inside her is the one doing the asking, by the simple fact of her existence she needs to know from her mother, *what can you teach me about being a woman?*

Vera walks to the other end of the mall and back again. When she was seventeen, Vera worked at a shopping mall selling soft-serve yogurt. She made cones or served dishes with one scoop or two scoops of a topping: Reese's peanut butter cups, Oreos, strawberries in syrup. The boys from the sports shop next door always came over during their shift to distract themselves, and they would tease her and call her *Aloe Vera*.

"How's it going Aloe Vera?"

"Give us a smile, Aloe Vera."

And they weren't all that good looking, but they sure thought they were swift with their *aloe-vera* and how they flirted with all the girls behind the counter, and then they left with their yogurt shakes for free. Vera always thought she should have spoken up or told someone, but she never did.

What made those boys so above having to pay? And what made the girls think they owed it to them? Now that she is a mother, Vera can see how a boy like that, used to being given things for free, might grow up with a false impression of the world. It must be a surprise for them, she thinks, when they realize that life is hard and that things don't always come so easy. She is thinking this about the man in her cabin tonight. She imagines how it might have happened: an adult male escapes from the city after a bad day, going someplace, he doesn't know where, just driving. Lots of people come to their cabins to escape. Some to get away from work, others from the noise of the city. This man, the one who had locked her cabin door, he was trying to keep the world out, to keep his wife from dying of cancer, his son from becoming a drug

addict. He had problems much bigger than Vera could ever imagine, and so maybe he just walked into their cabin tonight because the door was unlocked. Maybe he thought it was free, like the yogurt.

The vitamin store across the way pulls down its metal gate and in the distance she hears the purr of a vacuum cleaner. The mall closes at nine, past her bedtime. The drive here hadn't seemed long, in fact it had gone by rather fast, but now that she thinks about having to go all the way back, she worries about falling asleep.

"You want something?" the boy asks. He wears a long white apron and holds a broom. Vera has stopped in front of a pretzel shop. She didn't stop, her body did. It stares at the braided hearts inside a heated swivel-stand while she shakes her head no. The boy goes back to sweeping. Vera pats her stomach, licks her lips. The boy glances at her, and maybe he thinks she is a pregnant homeless person. For whatever reason, he sets down his broom and empties out all of the pretzels into a white paper sack.

"Here you go," he says. "It's on the house."

"Oh, no. I can't take that."

"Why not?" The boy says. "We're just going to throw them out." He shrugs, leaves the bag up on the counter.

Inside her car with the heater on, eating free food, Vera reads the sign across the street for Fast Money U\$A. They can do loans on paychecks and car titles. The title for the truck is sitting right there in the glove compartment. Ned had stashed it there the day it arrived in the mail. He rarely walked all the way out to their mailbox on foot when it was easier to just drive. In fact, Ned rarely made anything harder than it had to be at all.

The food revives her, makes her feel magnanimous and strong. In her neck of the woods generally speaking, people took care of each other and tried to do the right thing. Maybe she is being gullible or maybe she is still in shock, but something about this break-in isn't quite adding up. There's nothing valuable in the rental cabins, she'd furnished them all from second-hand shops and garage sales. The most important thing is that she takes care of herself and the baby, and what she really wants is a hot bath and a bed with no one jumping on it at five a.m. These were the things she had promised herself, and if she doesn't give them to herself, then how else will she get them? Why not let that man, or boy, or whoever he is, stay at her cabin tonight? This isn't how Ned would handle this, in fact she'd probably think she'd gone loony. But it's what she wants, her way. If she gives this stranger an opportunity to figure things out, whatever it might be, then she will no longer be his victim. In the morning she can go to the police; in the morning, she hopes, the man will be gone.

Vera licks the salt from her fingers and brushes the crumbs from her stomach, climbs out of the truck and hustles across the parking lot. The air turns white and swirls

through little cinder block building as she comes through the door. Her stomach hardens and she approaches the counter in her socks.

"How does this work?" She slides the car title across and blows air into her hands. "I've never done this before."

The young man takes out a piece of paper and gets a pen, his eyes the color of Park Place on a Monopoly board.

"Is the title free and clear?"

"Yes, we paid it off last year."

"Interest will be calculated at thirty percent per one hundred per thirty days," he says, copying down her license plate number. "How much do you want?"

Vera puts a hand on her belly. "May I have two-hundred?"

He writes that down. "We just need to do an inspection of the vehicle."

"And then you keep the title?"

"We keep the title and become the lien holder."

She looks at the title sitting there on the counter, the raised letters, the state seal. The truck is registered in both their names. She starts to sway.

"Why don't I just get the vehicle inspection done and you can think about it," he says, coming out from behind the counter.

"Can I stay in here?"

"Should be fine."

Vera sits on a bench. She is shivering uncontrollably again, her feet hurt, her back aches, and then she sees the sign: *All U need is clear title & ID*. She has no I.D. If he comes back in here and asks for identification, what is she going to do?

Vera leans against the wall and tips her head to the ceiling. In the crack between two light panels, someone has stuck the white flag of a Hershey's Kiss. She imagines herself waving the flag, *I surrender! I give up!* She is done for the day. Her body grew a baby, practiced contractions, and fled from a perpetrator. It can do no more. If sleeping in a bed isn't an option, then she'll curl up right here, on this bench.

"Looks good," he says, returning.

"It does?"

"Yep. We just need to verify employment and I.D. and you're all set. Pay check, bank statements. Either of those is fine. Something with your name and address."

Vera presses the heels of her hands to her eyes. Sleep has already shut her down, like the gates closing the mall stores.

A kick hits her squarely in the ribs. Then another kick. Little gallops, buried deep. Secret notes, passing.

"I'm a business owner," Vera says. "That's our name and address painted right there on the side of the truck."

The boy looks at her.

"Lighten up," she tells him. "You'll get your money back. I'm not going to let you take my truck. I'm Vera Hutton, owner of Hutton Cottages. You can look me up in

the phone book or right there on your phone. My picture and everything are on the website."

Slowly Vera stands, the large mound of her belly rising. Another Braxton Hicks practice contraction tightens and squeezes and Vera is nowhere near going into labor, but she huffs and puffs with dramatic persuasion because she knows that the young man behind the counter knows nothing at all about how women go into labor.

He hardly glances at his phone before counting out her money.

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The police officers in Superior are far nicer than she'd imagined. They take her report seriously and listen to everything she has to say. They don't judge her for not coming to them earlier, and even though the incident happened outside of their jurisdiction, they escort her all the way to the county line. There, she is greeted by the deputy sheriff and his partner from Bayfield County, and in a convoy the Bayfield police escort her back home.

Vera leads them down the path that winds through the jack pines. She wears boots now, and a coat she bought second-hand with the car title money. The air is quiet, no animal sounds, everything recovering from last night's cold. The cabin comes into view and the officers move in front of her while Vera stays behind.

The deputy steps up onto the porch, knocks on the door, and calls out, "Bayfield police, open up."

The door pops opens wide.

"Boy am I glad to see you folks," the man says.

"Nolan Parks here. I have no idea where the hell I am. Been trying to contact my buddies all night but the service up here is touchy." He smiles and pumps their hands.

He is tall, six-four perhaps, with a barrel chest and a moony face patterned with facial hair. From the path among the trees Vera watches as things change, the loosening of muscles and the smiles, how both officers are laughing and shaking their heads in disbelief, the younger one shuffling his feet like a kid about to sit on Santa.

The deputy calls out to her, "This the perp broke into your cabin last night?"

Vera doesn't know what to say. He's in her cabin, right? So he must be *the perp*. But before she can reply, they laugh again and file inside. The deputy calls out to her, "Come on in, honey, he ain't going to hurt you." Then the door closes.

Alone out in front of her cabin Vera hugs herself, steps up onto the porch. She opens her own door like she's crashing a party, the men standing in the small room, visiting with one another. Vera shuts the door, and before she can think what to do, the man called Nolan Parks comes over to shake her hand.

"Ma'am," he says, "Nolan Parks here, nice to meet you."

She is shaking hands with the perp, and his hand is warm and soft like an overripe banana left in the sun.

"Well don't this beat all," says the deputy.

Nolan Parks struts back across the room, "Nice place you have here. I didn't know what to think last night after you walked in on me, but I had nowhere else to go. My buddies and me were out on the trails yesterday, snowmobiling, and my Ski-do went ski-dat, if you know what I mean. I got left behind, walked for hours in that cold until I stumbled on this place. Meanwhile, I don't think anybody noticed that I was gone." All the men in the room have a good laugh.

Vera asks, "Are you all friends?"

They erupt into laughter again.

"Sure thing, Ma'am," says Nolan Parks. "Me and the law, we go way back."

Hilarity swells the room, threatening to tip her over. Vera reaches out for the wall. She wants to sit down, but Nolan Parks has thrown his things over all the chairs. He has also made coffee and left all the cupboard doors open.

The young officer standing next to her widens his eyes and whispers, "Nolan Parks."

"That doesn't mean anything to me," she says, hiccupping.

"You don't know who he is?"

"Why should I?"

"He's like, bigger than Garth Brooks ever was. They play his songs on the radio all the time, like twenty times a day."

They sing his songs and talk about how many Grammy's he's won, his upcoming concerts and events. Nolan Parks uses the deputy's phone to make his calls and then he signs a few autographs. Even in long johns he has the air of the charmed: snow white teeth, twinkling eyes, and a tanned vigor that radiates from his skin in a nebula glow.

Vera studies the great country singer, and he is nothing at all like the soul-searching young lad she'd imagined last night. Nothing about this is like she thought. She looks around at the mess, the broken lamp, the dirty dishes and soiled sheets, all the things she has to do before for her real guests arrive at three, and her hiccups crescendo.

They make their way out to the main parking area where the men will arrive to rescue Nolan Parks. It's sunny now, the sky pressed crisp and blue. The great country singer carries his chest high with an easy gait, no guilt, no regrets. They hear the trundle of tires pulling up on snow and three shiny black SUVs barrel into view.

A half-dozen men in dark jeans and shades step out in their cowboy boots and shake hands with the officers. They are cordial to Vera, they say hello and nice to meet you, and then it's over. There is the slapping of car doors and the starting of engines. The officers disappear and start their own cars, and she realizes that the end has come, the ordeal is over, and nobody is going to do anything more about it.

"Wait just a minute," Vera runs into in the middle of the parking lot, full belly in view. She shouts and waves her hands, "Stop this! Stop, stop, stop!" The men hit their brakes and stop their cars; alarmed faces peer through windshields. The deputy scrambles out of his vehicle and approaches her like she's a feral creature, liable to do anything.

"Ma'am," he says. "Did you want to press charges?"

Vera catches her breath and tries to speak, but nothing comes out. The heat pounds into her face and they all stare at her, these polished men, all of them looking right at her.

"No," she says, and the hiccups have been scared out of her. "I don't want to get anybody in trouble. I just want to be reimbursed. I know he was lost, and I'm glad he found a place to stay. But I didn't know who he was last night." She puts a hand on her belly, packed solid as the snow. "I have a baby to think about. I left my home, stayed in a hotel. I drove a hundred and four miles and I didn't have my coat or my purse with me. I took a loan out on my car."

The men stand around her subdued and now that they are, she wishes they would go back to being the other way, bouncy and blithe. Out of the corner of her eye she sees movement, hears whispering. A door slams. Someone comes over to her.

"Ma'am, I truly am sorry." Nolan Parks, wearing a big black cowboy hat that someone must have brought for him. "We'll take care of it, we'll take care of it right now. Stu?" He turns around, and one of his men is handing him a cake of money. Nolan strips off several bills, shaking his head, "I didn't even think," he says. "If you can forgive me, I truly am sorry."

Vera holds out her hand.

He asks, "Is four hundred enough for your fine accommodations?"

"And I had to stay at a hotel."

He peels off more money.

"And," she says, "there was that broken lamp."

"Shoot," he says, "Just take it all. For the baby."

"That's too much," she says. "But thank you."

"No, thank *you*." Nolan tips his hat, turns, and raises a fist into the air. The engines fire up again, the deputy gives a nod, and they all follow Nolan Parks down the long white tongue of her driveway.

After the quiet resettles, Vera looks down at the money in her hand. She smiles and folds the bills into the pocket of her oversized coat. Then with one hand resting lightly on her belly, Vera Hutton walks along the path back to her cabin among the jack pines.

## The Sportscaster

By A.F. Knott

When Cooster limped through Millie's front door, Jessup Harnig was already saddled on the stool by the cash register, coffee cup touching his lower lip, so still he looked like one of those sculptures you could mistake for a real person.

Jessup's pack of Viceroy's lay beside the saucer, a stars and stripes lighter on top of that. It'd been over ten years since a person could smoke in there but every time Harnig took his seat, he set about arranging the pack and lighter with the care of a priest setting out communion wafers; called it his "set up." Harnig's face looked like one of his Viceroy's sucked down to the filter and stubbed out in an ashtray: Lopsided and tarnished with a corkscrew mouth, golf ball nose, and two prunes for eyes.

Since Harnig knew Cooster as well as anybody and had been in Millie's the day it happened, Buddy Thomas, the Sentinel's editor, ended up interviewing him for the story. The reporter quit, naturally, after his hand was chopped off. "I heard Cooster before I set eyes on him," Harnig started off by saying. "One foot was size of a cinder block and sounded like one too. Used his ax as a walking stick. You could have heard a sparrow fart when he made his entrance; after that, nothing but clumping until he took his seat. Sucked all the air out of the place. Cooster smelled like he used pepper spray for deodorant.

We'd ridden in the same semi for good part of fifteen years and even I couldn't recognize him: One eye gone, half an ear and three fingers. Sat down three stools away and I'm thinking, here's a man who'd been living up in the mountains and probably got mauled by some grizzly or a cougar. As it turns out, we'll never know and I blame that goddamn reporter of yours for that. The other thing was, someone must have called the Sheriff as soon as he came in because the two Deputy's cars were already in the parking lot by the time all that shit started.

You used to see people come into Millie's with their axes, believe it or not; saws as well, twenty, thirty years ago. She'd open at four-thirty and everybody was either a trucker, logger, or Sheriff's department. Coffee was better back then too. She bought the machine from Italy that steams milk, and kids sit in there looking at computers all day now. I guarantee not a single one ever picked up a shovel. Five years back, Millie Junior made her mother install the wiring so they wouldn't lose any more business to the Starbucks. Millie works half the week now. Told me she can't stand the smell of bullshit and figured it was her daughter's turn to deal with it all. I'll kindly ask you not to print that.

But let me tell you how I knew it was Cooster. After he sat, he placed both hands on the counter like he'd taken a seat at a black jack table. Stares straight ahead and says *arguably*, then says *comparatively*. When he turned and

glared at me with that one beady eye of his, I nearly shit. I nod and he nods back. Didn't have the same voice though. Sounded as if someone had taken a spoke shave to his vocal cords then went at them with coarse grade sand paper. The arguably-comparatively thing had been our joke for about ten years. Don't ask me what it meant. It was part of his sportscasting thing. We'd have our coffee and be smoking out in the parking lot then he'd say the two words and start the truck. So I figure that was Cooster's way of tipping his hat to me that morning.

Sure as hell, as soon as he gets himself settled, the comments start up from these two smart ass goat ropers right behind us. Cooster doesn't turn around. He just listens. They didn't like his smell, I guess, and at one point started lowing like cattle. In hind sight, that was it right there; their fate was sealed. This bunny hugger coed wearing about five hundred dollars' worth of clothing on her back thinks what they're doing is funny and at the same time starts calling Cooster a filthy pig. To be honest, I've never seen or heard anything like that in there all my years I've been coming. I'm not saying these people got what they deserved but times have changed. You can print that. And none of it would have happened if Millie had been in. She's always strict with her customers as far as disrespecting goes. And you can't get a better meal anywhere. Cooster and I worked as powder monkeys for Ashland Timber and went all over the state blowing shit up. He was wound as tight as a squirrel's ass but had a good sense of how the world worked. He'd turn it with a gust of wind though. Had a bugaboo when it came to lack of respect, just like Millie but he was meaner than Millie.

With some people, you don't see them for fifteen years and can just about take up where you left off. I'm thinking Cooster came in there looking for a familiar face. The waitress was too young to know anything about him and from her expression, Cooster might as well been a bucket of fertilizer sitting there. Getting new clothes was Cooster's way of making an effort even though the pine pitch he'd slathered over every inch of skin cancelled that out, I'd say, a tad. Cooster took off up the Rattlesnake fifteen years before, suitcase in one hand, ax in the other and the next time anyone saw him was standing in front of Army Navy on East Main that morning. Frank wasn't going to open his door because Cooster looked like he just climbed out of a wood chipper. Frank said he'd stitched bear skin to raccoon to fox and had moss, twigs, and leaves imbedded in all the sap he'd smeared on. Frank still got the coat he left in the changing room and I hear they're auctioning it to pay for the people's medical bills.

Frank recognized him from the little tattoo on his wrist. They'd gone into the Marines together and both had USMC put on over in Billings. Cooster handed Frank a wad of moldy tens when he walked in, money he must have been holding since he left. Frank handed it back and told him to pick out any clothes he needed. That's why he came into Millie's that morning wearing the brand new Big Yank shirt,

pants, canvas jacket, thermal socks, and the one boot. He tied the other one to his belt as it wouldn't fit over the deformed foot.

Frank's mistake was calling you at the Sentinel, I'm sorry to say. He should have let Cooster be. He told me he felt like shit about it afterward. At the time, he meant well and figured Cooster needed a hand and knew you paid for interviews. It wasn't your fault either, Buddy. You never met Cooster, and as you told me, started calling people right away because you figured he might head into the hills after eating and you'd miss an opportunity. And that would have been a good story, I'd have to agree with that. The problem was, the one person you found that morning was the wrong person. Everybody in Zootown except for you knew Jimmy Parks, journalism degree and all, was a tweaker. When your boy showed up at Millie/s bouncing off the wall, he acted indignant that he had to get out of bed that day to interview some vagrant.

All of us thought Cooster had died that first winter but since no body was recovered, there was always that question. Some search and rescue effort had been made, I recall, but it didn't last more than a week. The Sheriff at the time came out and said they had a strong suspicion Cooster had been eaten by animals. Rangers up there were usually good at finding people. They looked for smoke, buzzards, clothing, all those signs, but in Cooster's case, he hadn't left even a fingernail behind. He must have holed way back up in there and I'm thinking crossed into Flathead land.

Cooster gets his coffee, a plate of buckwheat hotcakes, and probably was working on his second mouthful when the tweaker sits down on the side of his missing eye. Your boy with the diploma didn't say hello, my name is Jimmy Parks, I'm from the Sentinel, anything like that. He puts the recorder against his plate of hot cakes, presses play and asks, 'So how does it feel being back?' He's scratching himself the whole time, looking around like he really couldn't care less how Cooster felt.

Cooster stops chewing and says, *Jack Morris pitched ten scoreless innings, no runs, no earned runs*, then turns his head and stares straight at Jimmy Parks just when the dumb ass is rolling his eyes at the waitress. He's showing off, Cooster could see that, so he leans forward, looks past Jimmy right at me. I take my coffee, my set up and move over to a window seat. I've been coming into Millie's for over thirty years and that was the first time I've sat anywhere else. My spot is beside the cash register. Everyone knows that. If I come in and see the stool isn't available, it's no biggie; I'll go over to the Greek diner or the donut place.

Anyway, I sit at that rickety table next to the rest room door, practically a front row seat. There's a story behind that table, by the way. I'll tell it to you because it has something to do with all this shit. Some woman come in few years back, one of those back-east types that put up six-foot fences around their ranch. She said, 'I'd like to speak with the manager.' Millie comes out from behind the counter; the woman tells her the table is rocking too much and that Millie needs to

shim it or she'll take her business elsewhere. Millie goes in the restroom, comes out with an empty toilet paper roll, folds it and sticks it under the leg. Millie says good as new, then tells the lady: 'Breakfast is on me but then how's about you never sticking your stink cunt through my door again.' That's when the whole cardboard thing started. Millie or her daughter now will pull it out from under the table every night before closing so it's rocking again the next morning. If anyone complains, they go through the whole routine including the stink cunt part but it's more just for fun now. They keep the cardboard piece behind the donut case so everybody knows where to fetch it.

Cooster did his sports reporting while we set charges. Part of high line rigging back then was blowing the tops off spar trees. He'd sportscast while drilling holes for the dynamite. It helped steady him. He also did it when his back was up. We'd be at the Pussy Cat, or what used to be the Pussy Cat, out on Commercial, and some suck egg would mouth off. Cooster wouldn't do anything, just sit there and sportscast. Then he'd reach a point and stop talking. He'd usually pick up a pool ball and if the dumb ass didn't end up with a skull fracture, they'd be lucky. I mentioned mean before but it was more what I might call thorough.

What people didn't understand was Cooster knew exactly who lost four games or which team went undefeated any given year. And what he said was accurate. People just assumed it was gibberish because they weren't listening. The tweaker wouldn't leave Cooster alone that morning was one problem; that as well as the two boys sitting behind him and the loud mouth coed. I honestly think Cooster had been trying to keep his cool but at some point your reporter decides it was a waste of his time and out of the blue asks Cooster a question in a different tone of voice. Cooster put his knife and fork down and looked at him again, this time just like he was examining some rare form of bug under a magnifying glass.

If you press play, Buddy, I've cued the tape to exactly the place when Cooster had been staring at Jimmy Parks and began to sportscast:

*Are they getting into panic mode? I don't think its panic. They moved the ball real good. I think what you have to do offensively is defeat the other team's defense. I agree. There are wide receivers and there are wide receivers. You cross a wide receiver with an inside tackle and what do you get? What do you get? That's a good point. I know it's a good point. This kind of thing is happening all over the sport now. Living on the last year of his contract. You can't turn the ball over if you're a so-so team. I think he'll do well - they'll be growing pains. I'll say it so you won't have to. I like the move Jack Fox is making. It hasn't been unacceptable, it's been terrible. You see the game he played against the Giants?*

"I'm going to press pause here because I need to explain something. Word had gotten around Millie's who the one-eyed man at the counter was and people, especially the older ones, started whispering and pointing. This was big news to

them. Press Edgeston had made a delivery at Army Navy right after Cooster left the store. He came in to pick up his usual egg salad sandwich, told Mabel and Harry Belmont on the other side of the cash register; the Belmonts told the Sandersons and so forth, right down the line. By then, everybody was tuned in and heard the tweaker's question: *From what I was told, you had lost your insurance and your son died as a result. Is that right? Seems like you could have done something about that.*

When Ashland bellied up, Cooster and I lost our benefits. Their son had a serious liver disease since birth but was alright as long as he had the medicine sent up from Denver. One little bitty vial of liquid was a week's worth for him, and cost more than we made in a year. There'd been some kind of mix up and Phillip, that was the boy's name, didn't get it for a whole two weeks until their State insurance kicked in. He ended up dying at home through some fluke. A week later, Cooster's wife shot herself right in their kitchen with his thirty-odd six and Cooster never went back into the house after that. Brought his suitcase and ax to the funeral then walked up into the mountains.

Everybody was listening to Cooster's sportscasting at that point as if he was a preacher in church. That is except for the three behind him and the tweaker. I'm going to press play again.

*At the end of the day, I'm with you on that one. And I'm not pooh-pooing you, I'm just . . . No doubt the perfect game is better. That is a fair question. Can we make a case? I don't want this is lesser or this is greater, or this fits into a niche. It's flayed open on the grill and we eat it and as soon as we taste it, we know it's good. It's an animal and it's not kind as we understand kindness.*

"After Cooster stopped talking, he moved faster than I'd expect he would, especially with the ankle flailing around like a ball and chain. The whole thing was over before it began and the worst of it, at least for me, was seeing him shot. I know why the Deputy did what he did. He couldn't be faulted. But I wish they could have tranquilized him, to be honest, like they do with bears.

The reporter had been punching a button on his tape recorder and took his eye off Cooster for all of a second; that's when Cooster brought his ax out from between his legs and cuts clear through the tweaker's wrist. He did it so fast and clean that the tweaker sat there for what I'd describe as a Montana moment looking at his hand laying on the counter finger still on the play button. Then he holds up his bleeding stump and I'd say sounded like a cow giving birth.

The ax was imbedded in the counter top so Cooster had to jerk on it. When he did that, one of the tweaker's tendons flew off and stuck against the waitress's face, just like Laurel and Hardy. She stood there looking cross eyed at this white strip draping over one eye and starts dancing around, clawing at her hair as if it was on fire. The two assholes behind Cooster start laughing and as soon as they did, Cooster swivels, I guess you'd say, and catches both arms in mid-air.

They dropped onto the table at the same time, both cut, I'm telling you right now, at the same spot right below their elbows, one right arm and one left; exactly what he'd do to branches when we'd be high lining.

Cooster used his pancake fork to scrape the rest of the meat away from his ax blade. The coed stands there shrieking, calling him a dirty sociopath. This time Cooster swings his ax one handed, like a tennis racket, and cuts her left foot off. It was as if Cooster knew who the assholes were because they were the only ones that got chopped. And you don't have to print that. That's just my opinion.

The first Deputy came through the door with his revolver drawn and shot Cooster three times. I'd say Cooster was dead as a doornail before he even hit the ground because one of the bullets passed straight through his heart. The Deputy did ask him to put down his ax and naturally Cooster didn't. The waitress was still behind the counter and people were yelling *shoot him shoot him* so that's when he shot him. The city scheduled to put Cooster in a pauper's grave as nobody came forward to claim him. *Mountain Man Massacre* they were calling it on KTMM which is a load of shit. I paid for his cremation and bought him a little tombstone which set me back about eight hundred. Had Arguably and Comparatively chiseled on and nothing else. It's satisfying to look at and I'm fairly certain Cooster would have thought so too. The groundskeeper is my nephew and had Cooster put next to his wife and boy. Someone is bound to find out of course and I'm sure they'll all be in an uproar about Cooster being in their private cemetery but the reality was not one of those assholes ended up dying that day, just him. It turns out he came down fifteen years to the day his son died. Maybe he shouldn't have brought the ax with him. Then again, maybe that was the right thing. You can decide and print whatever you want.

## Little Alice, Are You Sleeping? by Chila Woychik

*We wish down death, soft and kind, and pay the high cost of  
living by being born.*

The sign below the gently flapping flag says, "Parker's Grove  
graveyard, EST. 1842." One online site says the place is  
haunted, for the face carved into a special tombstone weeps  
each night.

The first stones inside the gate are all but worn away, sunk  
deep in the cooling October ground, their inscriptions  
weather-beaten and bald.

*Nancy, wife of [unreadable] died Feb. 22, 1861, aged 39 yrs.  
7 ms.*

Cattle cry in a nearby pasture, a keening of restless ghosts  
from hard-won pioneer days. The crumbling headstones  
speak the loudest.

*Cynthia F. wife of M. Pratt & dau. of L.W. & D. Pangborn  
died Oct. 31, 1860 Age 25 ys 1mo. 21 ds. "I sleep in Jesus,  
blessed sleep, From which none ever wake again."*

It was exactly 157 years ago today, presumably near enough  
to this old burial ground that someone chose to make it  
Cynthia's final home. Was it a cold gray Halloween like this  
one? What brought her low: typhoid, influenza,  
tuberculosis? Or maybe a skirmish with disgruntled settlers  
or a First American tribe.

Three stones, gray, buckled, and fallen.

*Calista E. dau. of T.C. & E.A. Black died March 14, 1889  
aged 20 ys. 7 mo. 12 ds.*

I've picked the oldest ones first, the forgotten. Bones  
underneath my feet, buried at 23 ys. old. [name unreadable]

*Margaret wife of C. Cowel died Apr. 22, 1858. [no age given]*

One tall four-sided pillar has been etched on two sides, two  
brothers, James and Thomas, sons of Simeon and Sarah  
Maxson. James died first, Aug. 10, 1863. Aged 17 ys. 5 mo.  
[?] ds. Four years later, his brother followed. Oct. 24, 1867.

Aged 17 ys. 7 mo. 0 ds. The heartache of a mother and  
father, the fear of other children living past 17.

*3-year old Alice, 1869*

*Infant dau. of J. L. & Ruth Youel, 15 ds. Old.*

A flat stone, unreadable, ground level, and a mystery below.

Then in one family: Martha, 47. Sadie A. 10 mo. Gertie, 4  
ys. 1 mo. 25 ds. J.B. 32. All one sad, dying, young family.

Wm. Russell. Co. K. 141 ILL. INF. No date. [141st  
Regiment Infantry - Organized at Elgin, Ill., and mustered in  
for 100 days June 16, 1864. Moved to Columbus, Ky., and  
Garrison duty in that District until October. Mustered out  
October 10, 1864. Regiment lost by disease during service  
21. - Civil War archive]

Another one on Oct. 31, but the year is 1880. Margaret, 42.

*G Edward Fisher Iowa CPL Co G 36 Regt Infantry Spanish  
American War 1871-1957.*

*Pyous Johnson died April 11, 1894. Aged 3 ys. 11 ms. 7 ds.*

*The Deda Baby*

*Frank H. 23 ys. 7 mo. 23 ds.*

Another young Alice, this one sleeps far away near the  
treeline sloping down to a hollow. The tombstone lays flat  
against the earth, a tiny baby carved in the now-white and  
worn stone. The only readable portion says:

*Little Alice*

Was your hair soft and wispy, long and curly, blonde and  
fine? Were your eyes the glint of sky, a sparrow's wing, the  
grass in spring?

Halloween may be the perfect day to visit a cemetery. Sky a  
hazy gray, leaves in shades of ochre and fall. No one drives  
these rural roads, no one cares if I park on the shoulder in a  
chilling breeze and situate my mind to the sadness of passing  
days and lives long erased from memory.

*Little Alice, are you sleeping? Did your mama cry  
and cry? What's it like up there in heaven? Make a  
space, a pretty place, for me.*



## Pilgrim By Yasser El-Sayed

The man had boarded the bus when Tamer was asleep, and slid into the empty seat behind him.

“Son,” he called out at a rest stop in Joplin, Missouri, tapping Tamer on the shoulder. Tap-tap-tap. “Son. Would you mind grabbin’ me a Coke.”

Tamer didn’t respond – the drawl slurred the words into gibberish – but only glanced over his shoulder, smiled, shrugged, and pretended to fall back asleep. But if the man was anything he was persistent, and when the tapping started up again, Tamer turned to face him.

The man waved a five-dollar bill in Tamer’s face. “Buy yourself a Coke too,” he was saying, “G’head. G’head. On me.”

“Coke?” Tamer had said finally.

“Yeah. You know. Coca Cola. Buy yourself one too.”

Tamer took the fiver and pushed himself out of his seat.

“I like extra ice on mine,” said the man. “Please.”

Nine p.m. Where the bus had turned off the freeway and a taken a sharp turn down a frontage road to the rest stop, Tamer could no longer see the highway. He could still hear it though, the whooshing sounds of cars in the distance, so much blacktop cutting through more space than he could have ever conceived of. Something like the road between Alexandria and Cairo, a thin ribbon of light, a stretch of desert on both sides. But this was vaster, more immense, and he felt vulnerable outside of the bus, afraid of being left behind. The sky was pitch black, in the distance a dim silhouette of trees. Trees everywhere, like a charcoal mural barely touched by the yellow halo of street lights in the parking lot, or the light from the rest stop itself - both falling short of illumination.

Tamer couldn’t help it, looked back, saw that two other passengers had descended too, and were walking behind him to the rest stop. This made him feel better. Once inside, Tamer headed straight to the canteen. The place smelled of grease and bacon. Bacon. That was a new smell to him. A rich and appealing aroma, one he had first encountered walking around Boston where he had spent his first few days in the United States staying at his Uncle Lutfi’s house.

“What kin I do ya for hon?” said a lady in a pale green uniform dress. Betsy, according to her nametag. She was a big woman in her 40s or 50s with a bulge around the middle where her apron was tied. She didn’t look up from whatever it was she was busy with, and Tamer wasn’t sure he had quite understood her. When he didn’t answer she looked up at him impatiently and said, “What can I getcha

hon?” She had a pock-marked face, deep creases when she squinted at him. Her hair, scraggly, silver-grey, was tied in the back in a long pony tail, almost like a little girl’s, incongruous on her.

“A Coca Cola,” Tamer said carefully. “With ice.”

Betsy pondered Tamer a moment, cocked her head to one side. “Sure thing hon,” she said finally and dug into the ice machine with a metal scoop. “We got lots of ice.”

#

Uncle Lutfi’s house outside of Boston was a small, compact affair. “Cape Cod” style, he had said to Tamer as they approached it in the blue Volvo, slipping down a tree lined street that ended in a cul de sac, at the center of which stood a triangular shaped home, white with gray shingles, a small front yard, and a freshly mowed lawn bisected by a cobblestone path leading to the front door. Tamer had no idea what “Cape Cod” style referred to, but he nodded his head approvingly.

“The backyard is big. Huge,” said his uncle by way of explanation or apology, Tamer couldn’t tell which. “We are right up against a nature reserve. In fact you can walk right from the backyard into the woods. Beautiful. Nothing like it in all of Egypt, I swear.”

Tamer nodded his approval. “It’s very nice, Uncle,” he said. “Congratulations. I’m really happy for you.”

His uncle laughed. “America,” he said.

Uncle Lutfi was his father’s best friend from their days at the l’Ecole Saint Marc in Alexandria. Lutfi and Khaled, Tamer’s father, had established a camaraderie as two of the few Moslem students enrolled in that French Catholic school. And their relationship had lasted through the many decades that followed. Even after Lutfi migrated to the United States, Khaled and he stayed in touch. And when Tamer was accepted to the graduate program in petroleum engineering at the University of Oklahoma, Lutfi insisted that he spend a few weeks in Boston.

Lutfi met him at Logan airport, greeted him with the exuberance befitting a long absent son, and peppered him with questions about the old country, the family, the unrest, how average folks were faring, and what in God’s name was going on with security. He was squat with a paunch, thinning black hair combed over a bald crown. He spoke English with a decidedly forced American accent, reminding Tamer of other family and friends who would return from studies in Great Britain, with a similar tortured adaptation. But other than a comment to Tamer about the Boston summer’s leaving him “sweating like a pig” and a “stay cool, man” to the African American parking lot attendant wilting in his cubicle, Lutfi for the most part stuck to Arabic.

As they moved along Interstate 90, Tamer took in the sudden maze of metal and concrete, as Lutfi pointed out famous landmarks with short declarative bursts, “That’s called the Charles River. See that—that’s Fenway Park. You

know baseball right. Baseball? We're passing Cambridge here. You know MIT, right? You've heard of that place before? Very famous!" Then off the highway, up Trapelo Road. Streets tidy and clean. Trees and manicured lawns. Working streetlights. Stop signs where cars actually stopped. An America he had seen in the movies, and thus in imagination.

"Pamela's made you an Egyptian home-cooked meal!" Lutfi declared. He raised a cloister of fingers to his lips and made a kissing sound. "Moulokhiya, mahshi, bamia!"

Pamela was from White River Junction, Vermont. Lutfi had met her in graduate school at Boston University. "Where'd she learn all that?" Tamer asked.

Lutfi looked at him with mock surprise, "She is married to an Egyptian!" he declared thumping his chest, setting off a brief coughing fit.

#

Pamela greeted them at the door, early fifties, bulky, dressed in a loose-fitting blue gown that looked too heavy for the heat, a pale green hijab. She had hazel eyes recessed above plump alabaster cheeks.

Her appearance surprised Tamer, as it was somehow incongruent with the freewheeling spirit his father had always ascribed to Lutfi. That his American wife would be dressed in traditional Moslem garb greeting him into their "Cape Cod" style American home seemed a novelty of sorts.

"Al salamalaykum, Ostaz Tamer," she greeted him in Egyptian accented Arabic, as forced as Lutfi's American English.

Tamer reached out to shake her hand, but she only smiled at him and kept her hands folded in front of her.

There was movement behind her, and Pamela stepped aside.

"This is Nadia," she said.

"My daughter," added Lutfi.

Nadia gave Tamer a perfunctory wave of her hand. "Hey," she said.

She was around 20 or so, Tamer guessed, dark brown hair streaked red and green. She was dressed in a bright yellow halter top that showed off her midriff, frayed blue jeans. She scratched the inside of one calf with a maroon sneakered foot.

Tamer again extended his hand, and this time he was met with a flaccid handshake. Nadia's wrists jangled with steel bracelets, metal half-moons dangled from her earlobes. A black crystalline nose stud protruded prominently from her left nares, and around it the skin looked raw and inflamed. Tamer had never encountered a creature quite like this before.

"Nadia is heading to college in a few months," said Lutfi. "She took a couple of years off after high school, but now is all settled in and ready to put her nose to the grind." He spoke in English, an anxious smile flitting across his face as he looked back and forth between Nadia and Pamela.

"You should show Tamer his room, Lutfi," said Pamela.

"*Tabaan*. Of course. How foolish of me," cried Lutfi with some relief. "Tamer, this way."

"Tamer, there is a prayer rug in the bureau opposite the bed," said Pamela. "Second drawer."

Tamer nodded. "Thank you Auntie," he said, although he had not prayed regularly in years.

#

At the dinner table Tamer asked Nadia what she planned to study.

"Sex Therapy," she said and looked up briefly at him from her plate of koshari and mahshi.

"Nadia!" cried Pamela.

Lutfi dropped his utensils with a clatter, threw up his hands, and feigned a chuckle. "I had a chance of working in Saudi Arabia many years ago. Remember that, Pamela. I should have!" He said wagging his finger at his daughter, still chuckling, then mumbling something beneath his breath. He seemed to talk to himself for a minute or two.

"Nadia will be studying graphic design," said Pamela softly with a forced smile. "At one of our local community colleges."

"Either that or off to *el Saudia!*" Barked Lutfi, rising into Arabic. He winked at Tamer, wagged his finger again at Nadia and for some reason at his wife.

Tamer knew from his father's stories that Lutfi had never been a religious man. Neither had his father for that matter. They had smoked hashish, stocked up on Johnnie Walker all the way through high school at Saint Marc and then at university in Alexandria. When he was 15 Tamer's mother, Zainab, had run off with a visiting American professor of Middle Eastern studies she had met at a seminar in Alexandria. Khaled had no inkling of anything, had never met the man. One day his mother was gone, presumably to a place called Saint Louis, Missouri where the professor was from, and neither Tamer nor Khaled ever saw or heard from her again. The night before her secret departure Zainab had crawled into bed beside Tamer and drawn him to her. He had instinctively pulled away, alarmed at this sudden intimacy, but she had held firm.

"One moment. Just one moment," his mother whispered to him.

And so he had lain still, feeling her breasts rise and fall against his back, counting the minutes silently. Before she climbed back out of his bed, she pressed a photograph of herself—a color passport photo—into his sleepy palm.

She left a note on the kitchen table. *My soul yearns to be free*, it read. The next morning Khaled stormed through their apartment like a wild, wounded beast, howling at the top of his lungs. *Her soul! Her fucking soul! I mean at least come up with something better than that!* He then taped the note to the wall above the toilet so he could look at it while urinating, bearing down hard against a soggy prostrate such that the stream hit the toilet bowl like muffled

explosions. This went on for a couple of months until one day Tamer saw the note was gone.

He wasn't sure what made him think of this particular time just now, sitting at the dinner table with Lutfi and his family. Pamela, in her billowing hijab, didn't look like someone who was about to run off with anyone any time soon, and neither did Lutfi, who appeared to Tamer to be in a state of advanced bafflement as he surveyed his wife and daughter sitting on opposite sides of the table, forks and knives momentarily suspended above their plates, as if about to do battle.

#

Tamer slept in the study. There was a sofa bed already made up for him, a dark oak desk, a few papers stacked neatly to one side, a banker's lamp with a green shade on the other, a swivel chair with the permanent indentation of someone's rear end on the seat. Along one wall were family portraits - Nadia as a child, Pamela and Lutfi together holding Nadia at the front of an apartment complex, some grainy pictures of Pamela and Lutfi by the pyramids, camels in the background. Tamer surveyed these quickly. He was exhausted from his trip and wanted to disappear under the covers.

There was a knock and the door opened slowly. "*Kulutaman?*" asked Lutfi. "Everything good?"

"*Taman,*" replied Tamer. "*Shokranya Ammi.* Thank you."

"*Nawar Boston.* You have filled Boston with light," said Lutfi with a big smile.

That night Tamer dreamt of Alexandria, its Cornice snaking along the sea, the smell of the ocean in the early morning from the balcony of the apartment he shared with his father, the waft of coffee and cooking from the food stalls that lined the dirt side road below, the percolating, vaporous heat of mid-morning, the shouts of the hardware seller on his donkey cart, hawking his wares. The relentless noise. Compared to this -the quiet streets, each home a fortress, the backyard falling away to wilderness and solitude - Tamer desperately missed Alexandria. Ached for its warm comfort amidst the chaos. Why had he ever left? He panicked, his pulse pounding in his forehead. Perhaps the image of Lutfi alone and strange had brought this on. There was an emptiness, a void he pushed back against frantically, sensing that hollow absence in his host - his strange wife and stranger daughter, the house on the edge of darkness.

His father had not wanted him to leave, having lost a wife and fearful of losing his only child. But Tamer had secretly dreamed of leaving. Imagined his mother elsewhere. Across the waters. Wanted to follow her, but then not. Choosing a path that skirted her trajectory. On the map Norman, Oklahoma was to the left of this Saint Louis, a touch south, a glide down a road called I-44 that became something called the Will Rogers Turnpike, and past places called Fort Leonard Wood, Springfield, Joplin, Miami, Owasso, Tulsa, Edmond, Broken Arrow, Claremore. He

imagined her in this place, this Saint Louis. If she was there at all. Imagined a solitary street, tree-lined, something out of a movie or an image off the internet. A clean street, a windswept sidewalk, and her standing in the doorway of a red brick home, the soft light from the living room illuminating the doorway, casting shadows on the hallway walls. She would be waving to others, her other children, calling them indoors, to safety.

#

The next morning Lutfi pounded on Tamer's door again, "Rise and shine," Lutfi said, a phrase Tamer did not understand.

"Still in pajamas! Still!" he barked when Tamer opened the door. "No. No. That won't do at all. We are not on sleepy Egypt time! This is America!"

"One moment, Uncle," replied Tamer. "I'm so sorry!"

"Rise and shine!" barked Lutfi again.

Tamer shaved, showered, splashed on the Three 5's Egyptian cologne he always purchased from Zakaria's corner store just down the road from the apartment on Port Said Street. He changed into the designer jeans he had bought from the San Stefano Grand Plaza mall in Alexandria, and the new, sky blue button down shirt from the Carrefour Mall on the outskirts of the city.

"Better," said Lutfi, eyeing him in the parlor. "We have a big day. You need to see Boston before you leave. Your father would never forgive me otherwise."

"That is not necessary uncle," said Tamer. "I am more than happy to spend the next few days here. With you and Auntie."

Auntie was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh please!" Exclaimed Lutfi. "Do you realize where you are going? They hang people there with your name." He paused seeing the expression on Tamer's face. "I'm exaggerating. A little. Besides, at least I can show you some local American history. And by the way, do you have any more bottles of the Three 5's cologne—I have missed that fragrance so much!"

#

Uncle Lutfi was full of excited energy on their drive. "Pamela is not feeling well today, but Nadia will meet us at Harvard Square—she wanted to have her own car handy. We will have breakfast there, then walk around, then go to Faneuil Hall and walk around there, and then have lunch, then we will see where else!"

"Thank you Uncle," said Tamer. "I am sorry Auntie is ill. My very best for her recovery."

"Nothing serious my boy. Nothing serious at all. But it is so good to see you my son! How I miss your dear father. Your dear, dear father!" Lutfi declared as they turned off Trapelo Road onto Mill Street.

#

Nadia met them at the Algiers Coffee House for Arabic coffee and a croissant. Lutfi and Tamer watched her

walk across Brattle Street towards them. She was dressed in a short summer frock, brown with yellow flower patterns, legs pale in the morning light, feet bare in sandals with leather straps that crisscrossed her shins. He averted his eyes fearing Lutfi would notice his scrutiny. The morning air was warm, a misty haze across the square, a flock of pigeons on the sidewalk outside.

Nadia slid into a seat beside Tamer, across from her father.

“Morning Gentlemen,” she said. “So Tamer—anything like this back home?”

“Don’t be silly Nadia,” Lutfi exclaimed.

Nadia shrugged. “Never been there,” she said.

“Plenty of coffee shops,” said Tamer with a chuckle. “But this,” he waved his arms in the direction of the street.

“No. This all feels very different. Newer. Fresher. Cleaner.”

“Well Boston is about as old as we get,” said Lutfi.

“Three thousand years contrasted to a few hundred.”

“My dad says you’re taking the bus to Oklahoma,” remarked Nadia. “Kinda weird don’t you think? There are airports in Oklahoma.”

“It’s a chance to see the country, Nadia” said Lutfi reproachfully.

“Yes,” said Tamer. “It’s an idea I had back in Alexandria. It was an opportunity. Before studies began.”

“You’ll see the country alright,” said Nadia. “Good luck with that.”

“I don’t see the problem, Nadia,” retorted Lutfi.

“No problem—just a 20 something year old Arab guy on a bus through the American heartland, living it up with the rednecks. No problem at all.”

“Red Necks?” repeated Tamer uncertainly.

“That’s not accurate or nice, Nadia,” said Lutfi reproachfully as he turned to Tamer. “It’s a beautiful country and very nice and kind people everywhere.”

Nadia shrugged, reached over and tore off a wedge of Tamer’s croissant and plopped it into her mouth. “Can I at least get some coffee,” she said, mouth full.

#

After breakfast they strolled around Harvard Square, past the bookstores, the bars, the restaurants and movie theaters. There were many people out, but to Tamer the place felt half deserted. Nothing compared to the teeming sidewalks and alleyways he had so recently left. Gone were the incessant honking of car horns, the furious mix of man and beast claiming the fractured asphalt and crumbling sidewalks. Here everything seemed to have its place. A sense of order and structure he found both pleasing and strangely numbing.

Lutfi was eager to show him Harvard University. “The most famous university in America. Most famous!”

They walked into Harvard Yard and Nadia threw herself down on the nearest bench outside an ornate red brick building that overlooked a stretch of green lawn.

“The most famous university bench,” she said mimicking her father. “That way is the most famous university law school,” she said pointing north. “And a little further is a most famous university museum.”

Tamer chuckled. He looked over at Nadia conspiratorially.

“Nadia, you are being ridiculous,” said Lutfi.

“The guy’s going to no less than ‘Harvard of the Plains’ for God’s sake,” she retorted.

A young couple strode past them. The girl was dressed in white shorts and a yellow halter-top. The boy wore tan slacks and a blue button down. They both carried knapsacks with Harvard scrolled across the back. The girl smiled and waved at them as they walked past.

“How sweet,” said Nadia. She smiled brightly and waved back. “Bunker Hill Community College,” she called to them, pointing at herself.

The girl looked confused for a moment then she and her partner hurried off.

Tamer burst out laughing.

Lutfi stood abruptly from the bench. “We should go,” he said.

Their next stop was the Paul Revere House, its ashen exterior giving it a uniquely morbid appearance. Lutfi had told him the story of Revere, his horseback ride to Lexington to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock.

Tamer had only a very rudimentary grasp of American colonial history, but he listened attentively to Lutfi’s fragmented historical narrative with exaggerated interest.

“He fell off his horse twice,” said Nadia.

“He did not fall off his horse, Nadia,” snapped Lutfi.

Nadia shrugged. “Sam Adams is now a beer and John Hancock sells life insurance,” she retorted.

“They’ve done a nice job preserving the house,” said Tamer.

“It’s not the pyramids, my boy. Not the pyramids by a long shot,” mused Lutfi.

“But what’s a few thousand years,” said Nadia.

“It’s good the care they’ve taken though. The attention to even this. In Egypt so much history left to fall apart. Disappear.”

Lutfi was determined to show Tamer as much of Boston in one day as possible. The Bunker Hill Monument, Old North Church, and the site of the Boston Massacre on State Street in front of the Old State House.

Tamer stared down at the circle of cobblestone that marked the site. “How many people were killed?” he asked.

Lutfi seemed uncertain, “Hundreds I believe,” he said. “The British killed hundreds.”

“Actually five,” said Nadia holding up an open hand. She was reading from a pamphlet she had picked up from outside the State House.

“A massacre is a massacre is a massacre,” said Lutfi.

Late afternoon, the sky a translucent blue, a sliver of cool in the air, and Lutfi said, "I should call Pamela and see what our dinner plans are."

"I'm taking Tamer to dinner tonight," interjected Nadia. "You and mom enjoy yourselves."

#

Nadia chose a Mexican restaurant on Rows Wharf with a view of Boston Harbor. "Cheap. Food's decent. And most critical—if we get tired of talking to each other we can stare at the water," she said.

She negotiated with the hostess for a small corner table by the window instead of the suggested booth. Tamer followed behind Nadia and settled into his seat facing her. Outside was an outdoor seating area, empty and in semi-darkness, the patio umbrellas closed. Just beyond that a glimpse of the water's edge at the far end of the wharf.

"You drink?" Nadia asked Tamer after the waitress dropped off their menus—double-sided laminated sheets, slightly sticky.

Tamer shrugged. His father favored scotch bought at the duty free shops at Alexandria airport. Khaled drank occasionally, more so in the first year or two after Tamer's mother left him.

"Two Coronas," Nadia said to the waitress on her return. "Also, guac, salsa and chips," she looked over at Tamer, "You like guacamole, right?"

Tamer hesitated, "yes," he said.

"Can I see your ID Miss," the waitress asked Nadia. She was a middle-aged lady with a mess of black hair tied up in a loose bun. She patted down the front of her brown waitress uniform as she waited for Nadia to dig into her purse for her driver's license.

Nadia handed her the card. The woman peered at it for a moment then at Nadia, then handed it back to her.

"What's that?" asked Tamer after the waitress had left.

"Fake ID," said Nadia, scratching the skin around her nose stud. "I'm a few months under 21." She paused, then added by way of explanation. "You have to be 21 around here just to order a goddamn beer."

Tamer nodded. "And the other thing. This *gwak*?"

"Guacamole?" Nadia started to laugh. "Avocado. It's a fruit. You will like it."

He did. Also the salsa and chips, and then the chimichanga she ordered for him.

"Your mother," said Tamer. "She is quite religious. I was a little surprised."

Nadia rolled her eyes. "She's a daughter of a Lutheran minister for crying out loud," she said. "Go figure. She marries a Moslem Arab. Pisses off her mom and dad, although the guy she's marrying is as secular as you can get. Then 9-11 and everything that has happened since. Then it's like something to prove for both of them. Well at least for her. Dad just goes along out of guilt."

Nadia played with her taco salad. "Your mom," she said looking up at Tamer. "I heard that years ago she ran off with some American professor."

"Who told you that?" asked Tamer.

"Dad. He didn't know much more than that," she shrugged. "Is it true?"

Tamer nodded. "Yes," he said. "It's true. I was 10 when she left."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Not exactly. No. I haven't spoken to her since."

"Not exactly?" Nadia said, one eyebrow raised.

"Maybe. A place called Saint Louis. I heard he was from this Saint Louis."

Nadia seemed to ponder that for a while. She tugged at a loose strand of red-streaked hair, curled it around a ring heavy finger, then unfurled it, over and over. "Hmm. You may pass right through there on your way to Hick Central."

"What's that?" asked Tamer.

"Never mind. I was just thinking of the possible bus route."

Tamer said nothing. He wasn't sure how much he wanted to open up to Nadia about how he had already mapped out the whole trip, memorized the names, the sequence of all the intervening towns between Saint Louis and Norman.

"Would you want to see her? Would you even recognize her?" Nadia said breaking into his thoughts. Her tone seemed suddenly a little harder, with an edge to it.

"I don't know. I think I would recognize her. But I don't know if I would want to see her." He kept quiet about the fact that he had carried a copy of his mother's passport photo with him for years. Studied it from every angle, in every variation of light.

Nadia nodded. She rested her elbows on the table, her chin balanced on clasped hands. "Do you think you will like it here Tamer? Are you happy you came?"

"I think so," Tamer replied. "I really think so." He paused. "Except last night I panicked a little. It was so quiet. The neighborhood. Silent. And then the woods out back. It was silly and it passed before I knew it."

#

That evening there was a gentle knock on his bedroom door, and then the door opened slowly to Nadia, her figure caught in the streaming light from the hallway outside.

Tamer regarded her silently from his sofa bed. She was wearing checkered flannel pajama pants and a red t-shirt with the logo Bunker Hill Community College in bold black letters on the front.

"Hi," she said. "From what you described today I figured you wouldn't mind the company." Before he could answer she closed the door behind herself, and the room fell into shadows

Tamer leaned towards the nightstand to switch on the bedside lamp, but Nadia stopped him. “No. It’s OK,” she said. “Better that it’s dark.”

“Nadia. I’m sorry. I think you misunderstood me.” Tamer started to get up, but Nadia put a hand on his shoulder and gently, effortlessly held him down.

“I don’t think so, Tamer,” she said. “I don’t think I misunderstood anything.”

She crept in next to him. She pressed her face up against his. And Tamer felt the imprint of her nose stud against his cheek. Her hair a waft of fragrant shampoo, her breath harsher, stale.

“I know you want this,” she whispered in his ear. “Twenty three and probably never been with a woman.”

Tamer held himself still in bed.

“I’m right aren’t I?” she taunted with a tender laugh. “I know I’m right. Everyone back there just too young and too horny.”

Tamer was not following completely, but didn’t have much time to ponder the question as her bracelet laden hand slipped down his abdomen, then her fingers crept under his waistband, and he was in her small, tight fist. He felt himself throbbing against her palm as she moved her wrist. He pushed his head back on the pillow, fleeting, anxious thoughts about where he was, what he was doing, all that metal she was wearing so close to his flesh. He could hear the clinking of her bracelets, faster, more urgent, the pressure on him alternating deep and light. And then his head snapped forward again off the pillow, pressed itself into the hollow of Nadia’s neck, and he heard himself groan long and loud and hard.

Nadia touched her lips to his cheek. She wiped her hand on her pajama pant leg.

“Now you’ve woken everyone up,” she quipped. She stood up and walked to the door. “You’re welcome,” she said as she stepped out.

In the dark, alone, spent, Tamer could hear voices in the hallway outside. Muffled at first and then raised, shouting. He jumped out of bed and pressed his ear against the door. He could discern Nadia’s voice angry, mocking. Pamela’s lower, persistent, questioning, finally calling out to her husband, and this followed by the slamming of a door further down the hall. Then the house was silent.

Tamer stayed by the door for what seemed an eternity, expecting it to burst open at any minute. His heart beating wildly, aching in his chest. He felt nauseated with dread and guilt. Finally he fell back on the sofa bed and tried to slow the anguished thoughts racing through his mind. He would leave tomorrow. Yes. That would be best. There would be no argument from Uncle Lutfi and certainly not from Aunt Pamela. He had shamed their home and their family, but they would all leave everything unspoken between them, and he would get on the bus and head west. He pulled the covers over his head and forced his eyes closed.

#

Tamer slept little, woke before the break of dawn, hauled his suitcase to the front foyer and then sat down at the kitchen table. The house was still. He had no plan other than to sit where he was until someone awoke and ask them to call him a cab to the bus station. He had enough cash, would figure out how to modify his ticket, and pay any penalty if there was one. Maybe not. Maybe it wasn’t like an airline ticket. Maybe he could just change the departure date without any hassles. He didn’t care really, he knew he was just fixating on problems he could solve to keep other thoughts at bay.

Uncle Lutfi stumbled into the kitchen a few moments later. He appeared off guard seeing Tamer there. He was still in his pajamas, striped white and black like a prison outfit, his half head of hair jutting off to one side, the bald spot gleaming in the kitchen light.

“I heard something,” he said. He looked away from Tamer, walked over to the sink peering aimlessly into it, his back to Tamer.

“I will leave Uncle,” said Tamer.

“Yes. That would be best,” he said stiffly. “Pamela is . . .”

“It’s OK, Uncle. I will leave.”

Lutfi slammed his palm onto the granite counter with a loud clap and Tamer jumped.

“Bloody Hell!” Lutfi exclaimed with a decidedly British inflection that seemed just as awkward as his earlier American enunciations. He turned to face Tamer, and Tamer could see the old man was close to tears.

“Just call me a taxi, Uncle,” said Tamer.

“I’ll take you to the damn bus station,” declared Nadia, walking in on them. She was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her hair—brown, red and green—pulled back off her forehead. “Let’s get out of here.”

Tamer stood up. He thought of embracing his uncle, but instead followed Nadia out the front door. He looked back at his uncle’s “Cape Cod” style house one last time as Nadia pulled her red Ford Fiesta out of the driveway, thought he saw a faint movement of a curtain at a front window, a glimpse of Pamela’s moon face peering out for just a second, then disappearing.

#

It was a seamless trip into Boston on an early Sunday morning, and Nadia parked the car on Atlantic Avenue outside the bus terminal. She got out of the car with him as he unloaded his two suitcases from the trunk, and then followed him to the station.

“Vaya con dios,” said Nadia with a playful smile. She was standing at the entrance to the bus station. Her back to the cityscape of high rises, the air metallic and cold. The breaking light a bruised shade of blue.

“What does that mean?” said Tamer.

Nadia shrugged. She seemed diminutive in the anemic light, her streaked hair and piercings like a mad rebellion against the juggernaut of steel and glass behind her.

“Something I’m sure my parents, my mother, would say if they spoke Spanish. I like the way it sounds though. A farewell of sorts even with the god reference. But then you’re bound to see a lot more of that where you’re heading.”

Tamer nodded, uncertain. “I’m sorry Nadia,” he started to say, but she had strode up to him, raised her hand as if to slap him, then grasped the back of his neck and pulled his face forward into hers. Her tongue slid into his mouth. It settled there for a moment against his palate like something serpentine and cold and languid before withdrawing.

“When you get to Saint Louis, just keep going.” She shrugged and added, “just my two cents.”

Then she was gone.

#

Back on the bus in Joplin, Tamer handed the man his Coke and his change.

“Thank you son,” he said. “Much appreciated. Name’s Galvin,” he said. Then he cocked his head, “Yours?”

Tamer waved, smiled and slid back into his seat, trying to hide his irritation.

Tamer hoped Galvin, whoever he was, wouldn’t bother him the remainder of the trip. He would have a few hours rest-stop in Tulsa before catching a connection to Norman. He wondered if the man was getting off in Tulsa too. In the yellow light of the bus interior, Tamer had estimated he was in his 40’s, a stained white baseball cap with the words Conoco scrawled in blue letters across the front, sitting atop a weathered, leathery face, the tan fading abruptly at a bizarrely protuberant Adam’s apple.

#

Tamer lay his head back and rested his eyes. The bouts of anxiety he had experienced at Uncle Lutfi’s house were most acute as the light faded, the bus pummeling down blackened highways, the scattered headlights of passing cars like a constellation in vertiginous space. Across the rolling hills of Ohio and Indiana, slicing through the flat lands of southern Illinois known as Little Egypt, he watched as the approaching night suppressed, then finally concealed a landscape vast and unrelenting. Moving west he saw the density of the world appear to change; the space between cities, towns, hamlets grow and expand like something unmoored entirely from place and man.

He read the billboards along the highway, advertising food and drink, clothes and automobiles. And then at a certain point in the tumbling geography, as if rising out of the very interstitium of the terrain, touting God and Christ. Jesus Saves, read one. It Is Not Too Late, read another. Repent and Be Saved. Christ Is The Answer. Jesus Is Lord. Hell Is Real.

Their randomness, their jumbled and erratic spectacle, made Tamer think of the call to prayer in Alexandria. How five times daily, anyone could be a muezzin. Once a solitary calling of the faithful from a central mosque, now a deafening cacophony from loudspeakers on

the roofs of apartment blocks. A bellowing of voices into the over-heated air, competing it would seem, for salvation. Or dominion.

He disembarked at the bus station in Saint Louis. He had imagined he would pass through this place as he had so many others with little more than a glimpse of the city. An undifferentiated spread of concrete and metal, of bridges and highways. A momentary congestion swallowed up inevitably by the interposed space.

*I will wave out the window. I will wave in passing to her. I will know if she is here. I will feel her next to me. And that will be good enough.*

In the station, he thought of calling Nadia, thought of dialing his uncle’s home phone on the off chance she would pickup. *I am here* he would tell her. *I will pass through as you suggested.* But instead he altered his plans and opted for a longer layover. He liked the station—the Saint Louis Gateway Transportation Center. The convergence of so much motion—trains and buses and light rail; the stream of people all in one place. The comfort of sounds and light and activity. He wanted to sit in a static place and take it in. And despite himself he began to imagine Zainab here, his mother. Maybe on her way to somewhere else, or waiting to greet her American professor husband back home from a trip. She was average height, long brown hair that he remembered she would pile up in a bun when she was in the kitchen in her robe in the morning, but which she otherwise wore down. Always perfectly manicured. Olive skin. A café au lait birthmark along her left temple, which she tried to conceal with her hair. Her nose a touch too broad and prominent for the high cheekbones, for the delicate cut of jaw and lips, but also strangely complimenting how he remembered her—forward, impetuous, quick to anger.

He imagined he caught a glimpse of her, a solitary figure emerging from the crowd, illuminated momentarily in a ray of sunlight that slanted down from the high windows of the station, as if to beckon him in some baffled, prophetic moment. And he hurried after the figure as it stepped through the automatic glass doors and outside the station. He stood blinking in the bright sun, peering up at the overpass above 15<sup>th</sup> street, the woman now turning the corner, glancing nervously back at him, and he looking away from her, feeling his foolishness revealed.

Back in the station, waiting for his connection, he watched cable news on a large screen in the seating lounge. The volume was off, but he could read the closed captioning, recognized the scenes from half way across the world, the streaming of refugees in another Arab war zone, commentators discussing ISIS, terror, more refugees amongst the ruins of a city, a man kneeling in a barren stretch of desert in an orange jumpsuit, the final score of a baseball game trotting below.

When his bus finally arrived, Tamer was the first in line.

#

It was just past six in the morning when the bus pulled into the Tulsa terminal, a compact blue-and-white structure that looked as if it could have once been a service station. Tamer climbed off, and waited in line for his suitcase to be hauled out of the luggage compartment. He looked up into the bus and noticed that only Galvin was still in his seat. Galvin saw him, flashed him a crooked smile and a thumbs up. Tamer nodded his head in brief acknowledgement. He identified his suitcase, then strode into the station. He had three more hours before the last leg of his trip to Norman.

As he climbed up the ramp into the station, he looked back and saw that the bus driver was supporting Galvin down the steep steps of the bus onto the concrete platform. The bus driver stayed one step below Galvin, reaching up and holding him steady with a hand just under Galvin's left armpit. On the last step he moved his arm around Galvin's waste in a half embrace as if to partially hoist him onto terra firma.

For a moment Galvin stood unsteadily on the platform, then he shook hands with the driver and ambled with an awkward, swerving gait, one hip thrusting out then the other, towards the small crowd of travelers milling around the luggage compartment. He looked briefly up at the ramp and noticed Tamer watching him. He stopped abruptly, swaying on his feet a moment and waved. Tamer waved back, then turned and passed through a haze of bugs swarming outside the glass door of the station. He found a seat by the front window looking at the flickering, blue neon light of a bail bonds store with the signage *Your Ass in a Sling? Give us a Ring*, and beyond that low-flung buildings along a still darkened avenue.

It was not long before he saw Galvin make his way towards him, each step heaving one side of his body forward then the other. He had a green duffle bag over one shoulder, and dropped it down heavily at the foot of the plastic table where Tamer sat.

"Finally here!" He exclaimed loudly. "Mind if I join ya?"

"No," said Tamer politely, although he would have preferred to sit alone. The station was now largely deserted, no one even behind the ticket counter, and there was plenty of open seating in the small hall.

Galvin nodded and threw himself down in a chair opposite Tamer. The chair tilted back precariously with Galvin's sudden weight, and for a brief second Tamer thought the chair with its occupant would tumble over. But then it righted itself, and Galvin squirmed his hips around and settled in. He pulled his cap off, ran a hand over his matted brown hair, replaced the cap, and smiled up at Tamer.

"So where you headin' to son?" Galvin asked.

And Tamer had no choice but to respond.

"Norman," he said.

Galvin nodded absently. He had clear blue eyes, the bluest Tamer could ever recall seeing, and in striking contrast to his tan face. "What's in Norman?"

"University," replied Tamer. "I'm studying there."

"Well go figure!" Barked Galvin. "I'm heading to a university too. But right here. Right here in Tulsa. Whatcha studying son?"

"Petroleum engineering," said Tamer.

Galvin nodded, scratched the back of his neck. "Where you from, anyways? You got an accent on you I can't figure?"

"I'm from Egypt," replied Tamer. "I'm here for school. Graduate school."

"Egypt!" Exclaimed Galvin. "Hell. I've never met anyone from Egypt! How about that!"

Tamer laughed and reached over to shake Galvin's enthusiastically extended hand.

"So how does this work?" said Galvin earnestly, "one day you just suddenly said, 'hell lemme shuffle on over and hang with the Sooners?'"

"It was an opportunity," answered Tamer, not quite sure what Galvin was referring to.

"Yeah. I guess. You have no kin 'round here?" inquired Galvin, and when Tamer looked at him perplexed added, "Family?"

Tamer paused. "No," he replied finally.

"Well, I guess I'm just passing through too. Finally made a decision to be saved." Galvin said, then stopped and regarded Tamer. "You a Christian, right?"

Tamer thought of Uncle Lutfi and Nadia and a ripple of unease passed through him. He shook his head. "No," he said.

"So what are ya, if you don't mind me askin'?" said Galvin probingly.

"Moslem," replied Tamer.

Galvin shook his head in wonder, "Well I'll be damned. Never met one of those either! Must be a sign. Must be a sign from the Lord. Knew somehow we was meant to connect the moment I seen you! Not that I mean to convert you. Nothing like that. Just the pleasure of knowin' you is all. This meetin'."

Tamer said nothing. He straightened out in his chair. Turned his eyes away from Galvin and to the street outside, the light now breaking through.

"Well, you can tell I'm a cripple," said Galvin.

"Haven't always been, mind you. And I damn well won't be forever either."

Tamer looked back at him inquisitively, tried not to let doubt creep into his expression.

"Like I said, I'm here to be saved. To be healed. There's a reverend 'round here. Has a school too. The Lord *speaks* through him. He can heal any illness, any malady, any *contagion* of the body or spirit. All it takes is to *believe*. To *believe* in the Lord and in His *word*. He who believes shall be *healed* my friend." His voice lost a certain official



precision as he continued: "I seen it with mine own eyes. Mine own eyes! On the TV."

Tamer nodded silently, decided to say nothing, glanced quickly at the clock on the wall.

"Wasn't always like this," repeated Galvin. "Got crushed a couple of years back. Fell off my tractor. Rolled right over me. Everything smashed—pelvis, legs, bladder, other unspeakable things. They flew me out of Velva, so many operations I can't even begin to tell ya. Put me back together as best they could, God bless them. Left me like this though. Half a man." Galvin looked down, patted his legs—first the left then the right. "I wasn't good for a long time. Wasn't good in the head. Know what I mean, son. Lost everything."

"I'm really sorry to hear this, Galvin," said Tamer. And he indeed was sorry for this broken man across from him.

"Thank you son," said Galvin with an appreciative smile. "Lost my way for a while. Lost the Lord. But the Lord did not lose me. No sir. And now I am back. Back in his arms. I *feel* His love closer and nearer to me than ever before. And now I come with an *open* heart and an *open* mind and I am *ready*. I am *ready* to have the laying on of hands and to be *healed* body and soul. To be finally *healed*."

"So that's where you are going?" asked Tamer. "You just go to this place and they do this healing."

"That's right. I'm calling them here in a little. Make an appointment."

"An appointment?" Tamer said.

"Exactamundo!" With that Galvin pushed himself up from his chair and stood a moment, got his balance. "Better go freshen up!"

When he emerged from the station restroom twenty peaceful minutes later, he was clean-shaven, his dusty brown hair wetted and combed back over his thinning crown and streaked flat across his temples. He had changed out of his checkered plaid shirt into denim the same faded blue of his Wranglers. He'd wiped his scuffed boots clean on top, a muddy wet residue still clinging to the sole edges. He threw Tamer a big smile, dropped his duffle bag on their table, and made his way unsteadily to the line of payphones on the near wall of the station.

He dropped a coin in the slot and consulting a scrap of paper that he pulled out of his shirt pocket, punched in the numbers. He cradled the receiver in the crook of his neck, and glanced back at Tamer with a thumbs up.

"It's ringing," he called.

Tamer nodded back at him, "Good. That's good."

"Yes Ma'am!" Galvin hollered suddenly into the receiver. Then he turned his back to Tamer and hunched over a little and Tamer could only catch fragments of what he was saying.

"OK. OK. . . Sure. . . I'll hold. . . Sure. . . Office still closed. . . Well then. . . OK. . . That would be great. . . God bless."

Galvin turned back to Tamer and put his hand over the receiver. "Office is still closed but she's connecting me to another number," he said to Tamer. "Very nice lady and mighty, mighty helpful. A real sweetheart."

Then he was back hunched over the phone barking, "Yes. Yes. Thank you. First prayer service. I have the address. I sure do. Didn't haul my sorry ass all the way from Velva, North Dakota without an address. Haha. OK. I'm sorry ma'am. Didn't mean to offend. God bless you ma'am. God bless."

Galvin hung up the phone and shuffled back to his seat at the table. "Well, that's it I guess. Need to be there by 8 am. Local bus stop just up the road will take me right there, she said." He stopped and looked around the empty hall.

Galvin tried to sound cheerful, but Tamer could sense something had happened during the call.

"You alright Galvin?" Tamer asked.

Galvin nodded absently to himself. "Yup. All set."

Then as if changing his mind, "maybe I'll just go relieve myself before heading out. Can never predict these days. Watch my stuff will you." And before Tamer could answer he was hauling himself towards the restroom.

Tamer leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He must have fallen asleep but when he came to, Galvin's duffle bag was still on the table, but no Galvin. When after ten more minutes he still didn't show, Tamer got up and stuck his head in the restroom. The fluorescent lights cast a jaundiced pallor on the splotched white tiled floor, on the grimy sheen of vanilla colored walls.

"Galvin," he called, and then saw him sprawled on the floor, his back to the wall on the far end of the row of sinks, his legs in their crooked posture in front of him.

"You alright Galvin? Did you fall?"

"Nah, son," murmured Galvin. He shook his head. "Not that kind of fall," he muttered.

Tamer hurried to his side and squatted down beside him. He eyed the row of urinals on the opposite wall, the floor below them stained with puddles of urine in various stages of yellowed congealment.

Galvin looked up at him, his clear blue eyes a little brighter still, swimming under a thin film of tears. He rested his head back against the wall.

"Sometimes," he said shaking his head. "Sometimes no matter how darn hard you try, how close you think you are, you just can't get it right."

When Tamer said nothing, he went on. "You wanna know what I did?"

Tamer tilted his head sideways, ambiguously.

"Well of course ya don't," he said with a quick laugh. "But I'll tell you anyway. I walked in on her with that other man. I had no right. I had no right." He paused, regarded Tamer for a moment. "She had left me already, and moved in with him across town. I waited across the street in my truck for hours. I saw my daughter come home from somewhere laughin' with a friend, and then they parted ways,

and someone opened the front door and she went in. Disappeared just like that. And I waiting there as the sun set and the evening comin' on, and all the lights goin' out in the house. And then I waited some more until everything was real quiet. Until all you could hear were beetles chirping and that kinda thing, and the only thing you could see was the dark front of the few houses there on that dusty ol' street. Then I got out of my car and stumbled along in my useless way, and as quietly as I could, tryin' not to trip, make it to the back of the house. And then I just let myself in. And there I was with them again. We was all together again. I wanted to say I'm here. It's me. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Galvin stopped, inhaled in a wheezy rattle. Exhaled, a long, suffocated groan.

"I could hear 'em even before I saw 'em. Could hear it from down the hall. And I just followed the sound. Not carin' now how much noise I made, just heavin' and thrustin' myself down that hall until I was there outside their door, then inside the room, my eyes now all adjustin' to the dark, and their bodies all steely and blue in the moonlight comin' through the window. My hand found the light switch, and she screamed when she saw me. This horrible scream. She lookin' over his shoulders at me. Her eyes full of somethin'. Not hate. Not that. Just terror. And somethin' else. Worse than that. Disgust. Like I was some mad, misbegotten beast from hell. The Devil's own. And then he jumped off her."

Galvin massaged his spindly thighs with his hands. He lowered his head, shook it back and forth. "And that's what I remember most of all," Galvin said with a groan. "The way he leaped off her when she screamed. The way his body moved. And her hands still clutchin' those beefy shoulders. The sheet falling away—and his legs. The way they were. Thick. Muscular. The way the muscles rippled, powerful-like under the skin."

He was sobbing now. Grunting bursts. Beating his wasted legs with his fists in slow, steady blows, his large Adam's apple bobbing wildly around the loose skin of his neck.

"Have to believe in somethin'. In somethin'," Galvin moaned. "Can't spend my days crawlin' like this after what's lost and gone." He looked up at Tamer with his watery eyes. "You can't know 'til you been there son."

"Come on Galvin," Tamer said finally, and half lifted him up to his feet.

#

A maintenance worker in a blue uniform was mopping the floor of the hall. For a moment he stopped and eyed Tamer and Galvin as they emerged from the restroom, then went back to his chore.

"Gotta go," Galvin said quietly.

"Yes," Tamer replied. He pointed to the wall clock. "It's nearly 8 am." He picked up the green duffle bag and helped secure the strap over Galvin's shoulder.

He walked with him to the station door. "Good luck to you Galvin," he said.

Galvin gave Tamer's arm a hard squeeze. "So long fellow pilgrim," he said, which made Tamer laugh out loud.

He watched as Galvin made his way down the ramp and then around the small building to the main road. Tamer had a thought to call after Galvin with Nadia's parting words, the ones mentioning god. But he couldn't remember them. Instead he watched in silence after the wobbly, retreating figure.

Eventually Tamer settled back into his plastic chair in the station, peered out at the scrawled letters on the bail bonds office, the gray light now flooding the deserted avenue. He turned and eyed the row of phones and thought again of calling Nadia. He would tell her about Saint Louis and about Galvin, and he would ask her to get on a bus or a plane and join him here. Nadia could remind him of that Spanish phrase she liked, and he would run out of the station and shout it to Galvin in farewell. But Tamer knew that by then Galvin would be nowhere in sight, and Nadia fading away even as he reached for her.

## REVIEWS

by Adam Van Winkle

### *Thrift Store Coats*

by Brooks Rexroat

(Orson's Publishing)



A table of contents with titles like “Blood Off Rusted Steel,” “Angel of Death,” “Destroying New Boston,” “Abigail Newton Goes to Church Alone Again,” and “Waiting out the Apocalypse” might hint at an end of the world narrative. In reality, *Thrift Store Coats*—Brooks Rexroat’s debut story collection from Orson’s Publishing out April 24th—is a set of stories set in the contemporary with post-apocalyptic sentiment.

Character and voices in *Thrift Store Coats* are as wide and varied as a Tom Waits’ album. Certainly Rexroat’s collection focuses pretty singularly on Rust Belt characters, but their age and occupation and experience are myriad. “Blood Off Rusted Steel”—perhaps the most perfect image of Rust Belt sentiment I’ve seen—tells a high schooler’s struggle to navigate basketball and girls in a small town when cops massacre his crazy uncle’s animal herd, “Angel of Death” of a priest answering last rite calls like a wrecker called to an accident in the middle of the night, “Thrift Store Coats” of a young and struggling couple hoping for the writer’s life in Rust Belt economics, “Five Meals in Paris” of an Ohio factory worker fulfilling a lifelong desire of going to Paris to

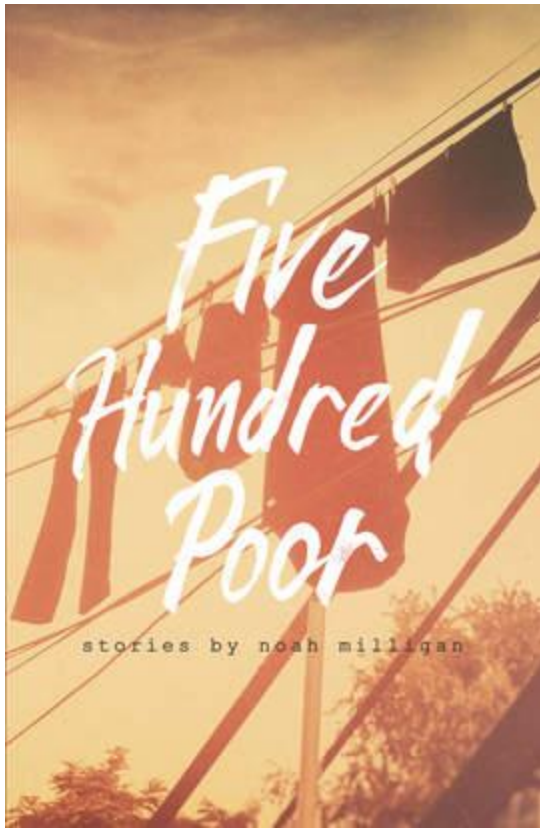
find himself out of his Midwestern place.

What binds the characters beyond their geographic origins are their tough luck existence and downtrodden outlook. To be sure the characters have dreams and desires. Wishes to fulfill. One gets the feeling in reading though that things are never quite really possible because place and economics and relationships limit.

“Waiting Out the Apocalypse” perhaps best captures this tension. The 2011 Mississippi River floods threatened to flood out Cairo, IL. While many mistake Cairo for a ghost town and curse its dilapidation—full disclosure I teach English literature at Cairo High School every day and have my own feelings about those categorizations—the decision was made to blow levee walls downriver and flood largely unoccupied Missouri farmland so the levees wouldn’t breach at Cairo. The flooding of poor Missouri farmers or poor Cairo residents looks like the two bowls of shit choice. Eat one or the other and you’ll have a bad taste in your mouth.

If the sentiment of a region, the undercutting mood of its mythopoeia, can be captured in prose, Brooks Rexroat does it. Whether you are a Rust Belter, Midwesterner or, like me, neither and simply appreciate how place shapes story and character authentically, *Thrift Store Coats* is your next read.

As for me, as with my favorite Tom Waits’ albums, I know I’ll be digging into this one again soon.



*Five Hundred Poor*  
by Noah Milligan  
(Central Avenue Publishing)

*In Five Hundred Poor* Noah Milligan doesn't have any problem, as Larry Brown said, putting "trouble on the first page." His stories get to it. In the opening paragraphs of the stories we find an illegitimate child, brain tissue from suicide by gunshot to the head, purple appendages, a deranged looking man with a chainsaw, biblical flooding, a school closing.

The stories don't stop at that though. They evolve into complex personal struggles for already struggling Okies. Don't just take my word for it. Check out CJ's Fall 2016 issue for the opening story's previous publication. "A Good Start" was one of our 2016 Pushcart Nominations and we're proud as hell to see it resurface in this absorbing collection.

Milligan pulls his title from Adam Smith: "For one very rich man there must be at least five hundred poor..." Problems for these characters are often born out of the struggle of the hardscrabbled and careworn. In "A Good Start" a methhead pawns her boy off on a one night stand of years gone by

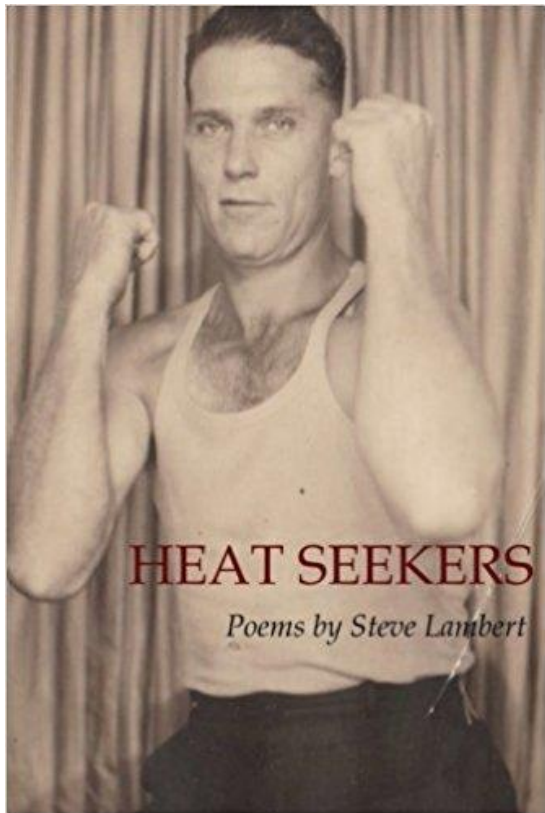
claiming the boy is his for "a few days" so she can go take care of "business" at the Indian Casino.

What starts as a struggle to resolve the idea of himself as a father becomes a larger realization of the cycle of the downtrodden, the one night stand, himself the son of a woman who'd "been turning tricks in the back of big rigs." By the end we're pretty sure the child is not his, or at least the rowdy waitress wouldn't know, as the one night stand hands the boy a twenty to send him off. The cycle will continue, tides of the social underbelly.

Maybe I identify so much with Milligan's story telling because I grew up between struggling divorced parents, Okies at that. I get the tension and shame of a single mother putting so much stock in a bought material object (a purse in the case of "The Deep Down Bone of Desire") because every bought item is weighed so heavily when a single mom is trying to provide for kids.

Perhaps that makes me a bias reader, but it means I can feel the authenticity of voice and character and place in this collection. If that matters to you dear reader, the way it matters to me, this is one to get and read and have and keep. This is Milligan's second work out with Central Avenue Publishing after his acclaimed novel, *An Elegant Theory*, a more than worthy followup, and, I'm sure, part of a line of more good stuff to come.

*Heat Seekers*  
By Steve Lambert  
(Cherry Grove Press)



My grandma Essie killed snakes every which way. I saw her chop heads off with shovels, hoes, and spades. I saw her shoot several. Once, a copperhead was curled up in the old metal fan in the chicken coop. She turned the fan on and watched it chop that copperhead to bits, me standing behind her. Some years the water moccasin infestations were so bad on the farm we all carried a pistol. Even me. Ten or so years old. There are lots of snakes where I come from.

Seeing a strong woman “shovel-stab the copperhead on our porch” in Steven Lambert’s “Us and Them” from his fantastic collection of verse, *Heat Seekers*, struck a chord with me. Took me back home. A lot of the verse does. With Ford Tempos, shroomin’ in the “cow pasture behind his trailer park,” Chevys, the Circle K, and “a town named after corn where there are no cornfields,” this collection slides neatly into our brand of grit lit at *CJ*. But the poems move beyond the imagery and make deep connections that show us why we love grit lit.

As much as style and imagery define grit lit, Lambert seems to hit on its universal themes, or truths. In the title poem, “Heat Seekers,” the narrator muses that “home, for most of us, is not a decision so much as a birthright, or used to be.” This line made me think of Harry Crews and Larry Brown and Barry Hannah and Donald Ray Pollock and all my favorites, and how home as a forced existence (and subsequently a rite of passage) matters to all their fiction, be it rural Mississippi, Bacon County, Georgia, or Knockemstiff, Ohio. It takes something to be from these places that define grit. It takes something to survive and live in these places. Lambert gets this, shows this, superbly in this collection.

The deep irony of Lambert’s collection, and much of grit lit, is that the rights won by place come through poverty and violence. In “The Living Ones” Lambert masterfully reveals this irony and tension. In the collection’s final piece and last lines he aptly describes those that populate the worlds of Brown and Pollock and others:

*We’re here, twitching with boredom.  
Docile as fixed dogs,  
we sleep with clenched jaws.  
We peasants love our forbearers’ wars like fine art...  
We go in awe of them and believe in them  
because that’s what you do  
with what you can’t imagine.  
Violence finds its way.*

It’s no wonder Steven Lambert is a Larry Brown fan (see the opening essay of this issue). His terse verse is filled with Brown-like characters and couples. This is no parody though. Take a single verse on its own, or read as a collection, and you’ll see what I mean. This is verse to be contended with. This is verse, as the cover photo suggests, that punches back. This is good, good writing.

## ESSAY

### Laddie By Julia Nunnally Duncan

I believe I was born predisposed to love collies. And, of course, being a child in the 1960s, I grew up watching *Lassie* on TV. In fact, with my blonde pigtails, I could have passed for Timmy's sister. I was a tomboy who loved playing outdoors, climbing trees, riding my bicycle, and seeking adventures in nearby pastures and woods. All I lacked was a dog to accompany me in my adventures.

But that problem was solved one day when I entered the backyard of my uncle Lloyd, our next door neighbor. I noticed Lloyd playing with a puppy near his back stoop, so I went to investigate.

The puppy was a sable and white fur ball—a little Lassie, though actually a male puppy that I would soon name *Laddie*. Lloyd saw my immediate affection—or should I say passion—for the puppy and told me to go ask my parents if I could keep him.

I was seven and would keep him for the next ten years.

Those were good years, and Laddie was my constant companion for many of them. Most of our family photographs and our 8 mm home movies featured Laddie.

Being a collie, he was a natural herder, and I was his sheep. If I strayed near the street, he gently, but firmly took my wrist in his mouth and redirected me. One of our home movies shows me sledding down our icy, snow-covered street, Laddie running alongside, my gloved wrist in his mouth. I was never far from his sight.

But being a collie, he was also sneaky.

My grandmother's house, where my family would visit on weekend afternoons, was a short drive from our neighborhood. To get to the road where she lived, we had to drive to the end of our street and then cross a two-lane highway. We shoed Laddie back as he trotted behind our Mercury. Yet he would slyly wait till we were safely out of sight and then run up the highway and cross over, somehow evading traffic. When we arrived at my grandmother's house, we found Laddie resting on the front porch. My grandmother proudly said he often came to visit her. Though she was a fragile lady who didn't keep a dog or any pet of her own, she enjoyed Laddie's gentle company.

Laddie was also a digger. Once when our neighbor Virgil planted a flowering shrub, Laddie decided we needed it. He promptly dug it up and set it in our yard. My embarrassed father replanted it where Virgil had originally placed it. Virgil either didn't realize what had happened or wasn't too concerned. The shrub was not disturbed after that.

Laddie proved to be a thief more than once. One day he showed up at our house with a very large doll—a child-sized one popular at the time, its frilly dress unscathed. We

had no idea what little girl he stole it from or where she lived. It probably came from my grandmother's neighborhood. Whether Laddie had brought the doll to me or just wanted it for himself, we didn't know. I think my father discarded the doll, not knowing who in the world to return it to.

In my experience through the years with the several collies I have owned, I have noted the breed's particular terror of thunderstorms.

During summer storms, at the first crash of thunder, Laddie often broke through our front screen door to get into the house. One night my mother and father were asleep in their bed, their window open to let in cool air. My father awoke to find Laddie curled up on the hardwood floor beside the bed. Apparently during a storm in the night, Laddie had jumped from the front porch through the window screen, to find shelter beside my father. He evidently knew my father slept just inside the window.

Surprisingly, I don't remember my father ever being angry at Laddie's destructive ways or threatening him. He often recalled the bedroom window incident, and in telling about it, he seemed pleased Laddie had sought him as a protector.

I think Laddie in general, though, was our protector. Insurance agents who came to our house to collect on policies feared him. I never knew of Laddie biting anyone, and all the neighbors—adults and kids—liked him, yet with his barking he could pose a fierce threat to strangers.

My mother and I sometimes turned to Laddie for solace. If we were unhappy about something, we could find him on the porch or in the yard, ready to offer his company. He would lift his paw to greet us, as if reaching out his hand in friendship. He was an understanding listener. If in some moment of mischief I scolded him, his brown eyes filled with tears, making me quickly repent my meanness. I hugged him to let him know I wasn't mad after all. He taught me compassion.

Like other collies, he understood the English language well. I could say, "Basement, boy," and he immediately headed to our cool dirt basement. It was one of his favorite places to rest.

And, not surprisingly, he chose it for his final resting place.

At seventeen, I had grown away from my era of playing with Laddie and had, in fact, married. In the early days of our marriage, my husband and I moved into his parents' home. It was here that I received an evening telephone call from my mother.

"Laddie died," she said when I answered. With emotion in her voice, she explained that my father had gone looking for Laddie and found him dead in the basement. As with all dogs I've ever known, he must have instinctively sensed what was about to happen and sought a safe, private place to die. My father quickly disposed of his body to spare my mother and me the grief of seeing him.

I told my mother, "I can't talk."

Her voice breaking too, she replied, "I can't talk either." And she hung up.

So that day I lost my friend and companion of a decade. I hope he didn't feel I had abandoned him in those teenage years when my interests turned to boys and dating

and finally to marriage. My lack of attention then must have confused and saddened him. I'm sad now to think of it and wish Laddie could somehow know that I love and miss him still, these forty-four years later.

## CJ AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT: SHELDON LEE COMPTON

### "To Be Perfectly Honest"-An Interview on Influence and Craft with Sheldon Lee Compton By Adam Van Winkle

*Donald Ray Pollock says of Sheldon Lee Compton that he is "a hillbilly Bukowski, one of the grittiest writers to come down the pike since Larry Brown." Fitting then that we feature a new story and interview with the fantastic story writer in our Winter-Spring Larry Brown inspired issue, "My dog died."*

Sheldon Lee Compton has been writing some of my favorite stories in the last few years. I don't know if kinship is the word, but his prose speaks to me. The voices are so real, so authentic. I said recently of Larry Brown to a friend that I can smell the men and truck cabs in Larry Brown stories because I rode around in trucks like those with men like that when I was young. They're real to me. When an addict swallows a pill in an SLC story, I can taste and feel that because I messed around with that when I was younger. It's real to me.

I've read SLC interviews before and seen him talk about Larry Brown so I know the comparison is apt. I wanted to ask the man himself a little more about Brown though, and about some other things I suspected he might be up on—from Elmore Leonard to Hank Williams to addiction. I hope y'all enjoy the interview as much as I enjoy Sheldon Lee Compton stories. Check out "Remodeling" herein, and then go read all the rest you can. We are witnessing the making of a classic American author the likes of Pollock and Brown and so many other of my favorite grit lit authors.

*AV: First things first: this issue was inspired by the opening line of Larry Brown's "Big Bad Love" because, well, we love Larry Brown. I've seen you answer a question about writer influence before where you said something to the effect that discovering Larry Brown showed you it was okay to right about your own home place. I think I get what you mean, but can you elaborate?*

*SLC: "Big Bad Love" is one of my favorite all time short stories. I think Brown was a fantastic short story writer and a good novelist. I would have loved to have seen more collections from him before he was gone. Reading his work at the beginning did give me a sense that it was okay to write about the people where I come from in a realistic way, that is without sentiment. There's so much about growing up poor or going hungry or looking for work and things like that that can become really saturated with a kind of preciousness if you're not careful as a writer from Eastern Kentucky. And though Brown was a southerner, he understood the same point. Or at least that's what his writing said to me. Also, he was just a real guy, as far as I can tell from listening to second-hand stories from writers I know who knew him. And the fact that a normal but hardworking guy like Larry Brown could write books, well that was also an inspiration. For me, that kind of knowledge effectively wrested the world of literature out of the hands of the people who wrote stories exclusively for The New Yorker or whatever and gave them to a young guy at the end of the world. That was a powerful thing for me, and I love Larry Brown to this day for that gift.*

*AV: Speaking of cool writers that died too soon, I've been a pretty big fan of the FX series Justified based on the Elmore Leonard's Raylan Givens fiction universe. I've seen you mention some of your favorite TV and films elsewhere and surprised you didn't mention the Harlan County-set series. Have you read Leonard's Harlan County depiction? Have you seen the show? How good (or terrible) a job did they do depicting rural Eastern Kentucky?*

*SLC: Elmore Leonard equals legendary storyteller, and not every writer is a great storyteller. I've never read any of the Raylan Givens books, but I have watched the television series made from them. I watched it in its entirety, too. I liked it a lot. But was it an accurate depiction of Eastern Kentucky? Well, I don't really think they were trying for that, to be honest, and I'm usually okay to take a work of art at whatever value it's presented. But, if pressed, I'd say the characters are enlarged*



for dramatic purposes. Some more than others. Raylan certainly, which makes sense within the genre Leonard wrote these books. One aspect that was brought off at just the right pitch was this idea of a single family handling a lot of the crime-related stuff in an Eastern Kentucky town. That is a real thing here. I could rattle off a fairly long list of last names that are exactly those kinds of families. The fact that I won't name them here, that says a lot right there.

AV: Writing labels can be both limiting and misleading. Same time, it's useful to think in general terms of style and parallels. What do you think of the label "grit lit"? Do you think of yourself as this or any "type" of writer consciously?

SLC: I'm going to be perfectly honest in saying that I've become more uncomfortable with labels in my older age. I've identified in the past as an Appalachian writer, then a southern writer, but then, when I realized the label forced this kind of blinders effect on my work, I started to care less and think about it less. I write short stories mostly. I think of myself as a short story writer. Sometimes I write about people in Eastern Kentucky, sometimes I write about ghost dinosaurs; there's days I write about dead coal mining fathers and others when I write stories that could be called fabulist historical fiction. I love all of it. I write westerns and even the occasional surrealist novel or set of poems with footnotes that have lines like "The last 11 emails in my inbox are from me to me, but I stay categorically Red Dragon." I can't imagine not taking risks and exploring different themes and kinds of stories and ways of telling stories. It's what makes all of this interesting for me. Grit lit is a good enough label. It's a type of literature that's been around for a long, long time, really, but I can appreciate folks wanting to place certain kinds of writing apart from others. I have no problem at all with it; I just don't really have much input on it.

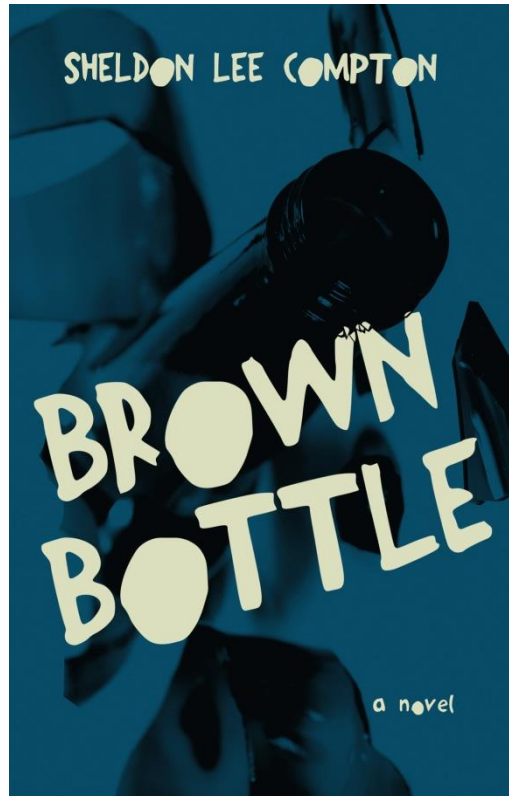
AV: Speaking of thinking of writing, what's your process? I mean, how do you make sure you get words on paper in story form? Is this easy or hard for you?

SLC: I've tried a lot of different processes. I first tried an output schedule with a target of five-hundred words a day. That didn't work very well. Then I moved to the time schedule, putting in about three hours a day writing. That didn't work very well, either. Finally I ditched thinking about process, too. Now I do what I've done with most of my stories or books, I generally sit down with my laptop in my recliner and start working on whatever story I have going that draws my interest at that time. I usually have about five stories going at once, and there's always something about one of them that is catching my eye. I dip in and start exploring around, trusting my instincts to lead me in the right direction. That sense of discovery is one of the biggest things for me as a writer. If I don't have things to discover for myself while writing a story then there's nothing there for me. Any time I've ever plotted a story out and then sat down to write it, I've never had a bit of luck with it. The story was already told. Doesn't matter if it was in outline form. The story has been told and is over. The most difficult time I had writing this way was the six years I worked on my novel *Brown Bottle*. I never plotted or planned a single thing in that book, and it was grueling. It's not an approach that works for me when writing a novel, especially a realist novel. I've come to believe if it takes you two-hundred and fifty pages to tell a story then you're probably not making enough choices. I can't think of any novel I've read that wouldn't have worked better as a ten-page short story, even books by Proust and Pynchon. In fact, you should read Pynchon's short story collection *Slow Learner* if you haven't already. He wrote some tight short stories, man.

AV: How'd you come up with a character like Wade "Brown Bottle" Taylor? It's clear he's displaced in the modern world. Several times the narrator seems to have to explain his lack of understanding of Gmail and caller ID and such. Like he never factored these into his existence. Do you know a Wade? Have a little Wade in you? I guess I'm asking, where's the truth behind that character's fiction?

SLC: Most of the time a character develops for me as this really organic part of the narrative. This happened with Wade Taylor. He first appeared in a short story of mine called "Purpose" in my short story collection *The Same Terrible Storm*. That story eventually became the first opening chapter of *Brown Bottle*. I knew I wanted to write more about the character because I felt him developing beyond the walls of the story. He's based in part on a former step-uncle of mine, a young guy

who sacrificed a lot of his free time to be a kind of father figure to me while his brother was off drinking and so on. The idea that he is awkward with technology is that part of myself I tend to put in my characters from time to time. So there's a strange kind of patchwork when considering the truth behind that character. The largest part of *Wade*, that is all the key decisions he made in the book, were these very natural moments within the narrative flow, a part of that discovery process. But, no matter the flow, things were going to go the way they were going to go for him from the second I started writing the book. That was one thing I did plan, I guess. I always knew the end of that book.



AV: There's a lot of violence, even sudden violence in *Brown Bottle*. I noticed though that the violence is delivered with almost a whimper and often in ways that subvert violent stereotypes. The narrator does not embellish the acts and is quick to inform the reader that movies don't get it right and no characters really get "blown away." I guess I'd suggest the narrator seems very uninterested in violence and wants to reign it in when possible. Was this intentional?

SLC: Ha! There's so much of what I do in my books and stories that is not intentional. I honestly just cast out into the dark, as Ondaatje so beautifully puts it when talking about his writing process. I cast out then eagerly and carefully reel in whatever my gut and stubbornness brings back. I've been asked before about violence in my work, and, of course, it's understandable. But the thing is, I live in a generally violent place. A lot of guns, a lot of fighting, a lot of crime, a ton of drugs. For instance, when Fay Mullins reflects on his first job as a hired gun, the one where he disposes of the body in the coal mine, every detail of that murder was bonafide truth. That murder took place where I live, back in the early 80s. I grew up hearing that story and a hundred more very much like it. Violence, in one form or another, is part of where I live, part of who I am, even, though I like to deny that sometimes. But to fully answer the question, I never considered how much violence or how little I put on the page. To an extent, I drew on military vets I actually know. These guys want to avoid violence once they get home, it seems to me. They've had plenty enough of it in their lives. I had that idea in mind to a certain degree, so maybe more thought went into it than I realize. But, in general, if I write a story set in Eastern Kentucky, it's going to present violence, because to leave it out would be unbelievable to the narrative. It's just a huge part of this area. It's the same reason if I have a large family dinner scene there's going to be soup beans and fried taters on the table. It might appear stereotypical, but that's just the way it is.

*A: I've been reading your short stories for a while. It seems like each one, at some point, feels shot through with such authenticity, I can't stand it (in a good way). I've written characters who use pills and that's based in some personal experience. I gotta say, the way Deb regrets her method in "The Same Terrible Storm," "wishing now she had chewed the pills" instead of dry-swallowing them, feels real as hell. Based in any experience?*

*SLC: Thanks so much for reading some of my stories. I truly, truly appreciate that. Yeah I've dealt with pain pill addiction, nerve pills, and for years and years alcoholism. I'm a recovering addict and alcoholic, full blown. I have two years sober from drinking and about a decade from the pills. I never snorted pills; I always took them regular. Dry-swallow, as Deb said. So some of that specificity comes from first-hand knowledge for sure. Other details come from living here and being around it all the time, being around addicts day in and day out. It might seem hard to imagine, but the majority of people here are addicts, not the other way around. And they come from all walks of life and ages, so pulling for details can happen no matter what kind of character you're writing. The key really is to write drugs and drinking as if it is as normal to that character as someone else drinking a cup of coffee, because that's the truth. Talk to a opiate addict from Eastern Kentucky for five minutes and you'll see what I'm saying. They are second- and third-generation pill heads and alcoholics. It's their norm, so when I write about it I keep that in mind. I don't make a big deal out of it when I'm writing a scene where someone's crushing pills or lying their way through a doctor's exam to get another script. I write it about the same way I'd describe them taking an afternoon walk.*

*AV: Little Walter. Hank Williams. Seems like maybe you and Cowboy Jamboree got the same musical tastes... Who are your favorite musicians? Do you play any music?*

*SLC: I'd bet we surely do. I love the purity of traditional music - blues, folk, gospel, Irish ballads, whatever it may be. And the contemporary artists and bands I like, they bring some of that along with them. Singers like Tom Waits, Shane MacGowan, Nick Cave. I listen to a lot of indie music and absolutely no popular top ten stuff. I couldn't tell you the name of a single song on the local radio station, unless they're running an evening 80s hits. Then I'm open to all of it. Bring on Culture Club! I mean with the 80s it's all good because it's all nostalgic. But, yeah, Hank Williams Sr., Townes Van Zandt, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, bands like The Pogues, Slim Cessna's Auto Club, Those Poor Bastards, modern musicians like Sturgill Simpson and William Elliott Whitmore. I could go on and on. I love music. In fact, my interest in music nearly predates my interest in writing. My dad was a really talented guitar player who aspired to be a studio musician. He started teaching me guitar when I was five years old, and I've played ever since. So that's nearly forty years experience on the instrument. I can play a tune or two, that's a fact.*

*AV: So less trivia, more big-picture: Why do you write? I read once where you said "reading is prayer." I totally get that. If reading is prayer, what is writing for you? Confession?*

*SLC: Yes, reading is prayer. Reading has become more important to me than writing in the past four or five years. I've kept a reading log during this time and tried to make an effort to read as far and wide as my tastes will allow. Some surprises along the way include my love for Tolstoy's work, especially the short stories. Other reading insights have been not so surprising, such as the fact that Proust makes me want to put my head through a wall. In that way, reading is also an act of discovery. Not to say that writing has become less important. I like how you posed the two, though. Writing as confession and reading as prayer. That's cool. But writing isn't confession for me. Lately I've come to realize it's just something I do. I write to tell stories, and that's important enough as is. When we were all gathered around some fire in the middle of the night with the unknown moving in the dark all around us, it was stories that kept us from going crazy.*

*AV: What's next from Sheldon Lee Compton? What larger project(s) are you at work on?*

SLC: *Well, I tell you what, I'm looking forward to this upcoming issue of Cowboy Jamboree, that's for sure. You guys are putting together some interesting work. Other than that, I'm putting together a collection of short stories set in Eastern Kentucky. It'll be the first stories of that kind I've written since the publication of my first book The Same Terrible Storm in 2012. And I'm always working on a few other projects, too. I have a collection of stories finished in second draft called Sway made up of all the other kinds of short stories I write, which range in topic from towns devoted to amputee worship to dragons that live in small ponds. There's also a novel I'm about a year into called Evergreen that's about an immortal serial killer and his three immortal siblings, one of whom played a large role in a previous book of mine called Alice and the Wendigo. So, yeah, I'm fairly busy most of the time. But it keeps things interesting, and, like I mentioned earlier, it keeps me from going crazy. I can only hope it does the same for others.*



Sheldon Lee Compton is from Eastern Kentucky. He is the author of four books – the short story collections *The Same Terrible Storm* (Foxhead Books, 2012) *Where Alligators Sleep* (Foxhead Books, 2014) the novel *Brown Bottle* (Bottom Dog Press, 2016) and *A True Story: A Novella* (Shivelight Books, 2017). His fiction and poetry has been published in more than 150 journals both online and in print including *Unbroken Journal*, *Gravel*, *Nailed Magazine*, *Wigleaf*, *Five:2:One Magazine*, *Vending Machine Press*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Atticus Review*, *New World Writing*, *Pank*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Dogzplot*, *Fair Folk*, *decomp*, *Gone Lawn*, *Spelk*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *Great Jones Street*, and elsewhere. His involvement with the indie lit community dates back to 2002, when he first started publishing *Cellar Door Magazine*, though he wouldn't see his own work published until some four years later. In 2012, he was a finalist for both the Gertrude Stein Fiction Award and the Still Fiction Award. *The Same Terrible Storm* was nominated for the Thomas and Lillie D. Chaffin Award for Excellence in Appalachian Writing, while his short stories have been nominated four times for the Pushcart Prize, as well as Best of the Net, storySouth's Million Writers Award, and cited in *Best Small Fictions 2015* and *Best Small Fictions 2016*, guest edited by Robert Olen Butler and Stuart Dybek, respectively. Other writing has appeared in the anthologies *Degrees of Elevation: Short Stories of Contemporary Appalachia* (Bottom Dog Press, 2010) *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia* (Ohio University Press, 2015) and Larry Fessenden's *Sudden Storm: A Wendigo Reader* (Fiddleblack, 2016). He lives in Pikeville, Kentucky with his partner, the photographer Heather McCoy, and their two children, Tyler Lee and Natalie Grace.

## Remodeling

By Sheldon Lee Compton

A weak rain fell and settled across Route 6 like a worn out bed sheet so that oil and grease left from the occasional car and several short-bed coal trucks rose back to the surface of the blacktop. The road would stay slick with the reborn oil until the rain picked up and washed it away. Until then, most of the vehicles slowed down, taking it easy through the horseshoe curve that hugged past Peaceful Murphy's truck garage.

Most drivers, the ones leaning into the steering wheels of their cars and mini-vans, slowed down to a crawl through the curve. They knew the old oil mixed with the first sprinkles of new rain was worse than black ice. So they drove like it was midnight in December. The short-beds blew past Murphy's loud and hard, spraying bits of coal the size of quarters from beneath loose tarps. Paid by the load, these drivers with call names like Spider, Grape Ape and Wild Bill didn't care if the road ahead was coated in napalm.

When a rogue chunk of coal bounced across Route 6 and skipped to land at the tip of Hank Clayton's boot, he picked it up and tossed it at a stray dog huddled near the edge of the garage.

"Hank! That anyway to treat a dog?"

It was his granddaddy, Burl, crossing Route 6 from his house atop the hill on Beauty Street, a short walk to the truck garage and adjacent building, which he owned.

Hank threw his hand up, formally, apologetically, and Burl waved him over to where he stood like a totem pole of flannel and khaki in front of the brick-broken building.

Checking the garage for Murphy or drivers and mechanics and finding it empty, Hank crossed the bramble thickets that separated Murphy's and his granddaddy's building by less than ten feet. When he made it over, Burl didn't move his gaze from the sagging top of the building.

"We'll need to start on the roof first," Burl said and then looked to Hank. He adjusted his suspenders. "Gonna remodel this building. It's about time, and I need your help. Particularly on the roof."

Hank shielded his eyes from the sun with the back of his hand and studied the roof. The building was two stories and even from the ground he could see boards peeking up from the edge like driftwood, split and blackened, soft as sponge.

"I'm working over here for Murphy now, granddaddy," Hank said, and motioned to the garage.

"What? With that bunch? That's just tinkerin. What's Peaceful got you doin?"

"Spraying down trucks and doing some repairs and so forth," Hank answered.

"Doin some repairs, you say?" Burl went to the side of the building and placed his hand there, like a nervous father checking to see if his newborn was still breathing. "I shoulda taught you weldin," he said after a time.

"Well, all the same, I don't mind to help, but it'll have to be on my days off," Hank said. "I'm just working three days a week right now."

"That gives us three other days to manage with, then," Burl said.

"Four," Hank corrected.

"Three. We don't work Sundays."

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Like always, the rumbling crunch and hitch of his neighbor's car grinding to start woke Hank at just after 7:00 a.m. Since renting the place more than a year ago, he had yet to use an alarm clock. Just went back to sleep on days off and got out of bed with the sound of the gutted car engine for days when there was work. Today there was work. Soggy boards to be pulled up and replaced and God only knew what else.

He went to the kitchen in the barely light of morning and poured a cup of coffee from half a pot left from yesterday. A microwave would be nice, he thought, gulping down the cold coffee quickly and cleaning out the cup at the sink. But then he should have just made a new pot, but granddaddy would be waiting at the building soon and he was a ten minute drive away.

Skipping a shower Hank dipped his head under the sink instead, wetting down the rat nests that had twirled into his hair during sleep. He toweled off with a dish rag and combed hurriedly with his fingers, thinking of the ladder, double extended to the roof, a dread settling into his stomach.

He'd never said a word of it aloud, but the building was pretty much a shit hole. At one time, there were a couple nice apartments upstairs and one downstairs, and a barber shop beside that. But that had been years and his

granddaddy had bought it after all that was gone. Whatever plans he had, they were put on the shelf a long time ago. That was until yesterday.

Burl was there before Hank pulled in and work started right away. It was just after 7:30 a.m. When a light drizzle started just as they had the ladder positioned alongside the building, Hank secretly began to wonder if he might get a little money for helping. Some pay could go a long way in covering the rent and utilities and other debts he thought about less specifically, the ones that nagged him especially hard. Then the drizzle lifted off, back into the clouds, which moved away in a slow bulk across the ridge and dissipated like a swarm of colorless wasps.

The building was a shipwreck raised to the surface just off Route 6 and left alone, no treasure to speak of, no fine discoveries. From the roof, Hank could see into to what was once the top floor bedrooms, spyglassed through holes that looked as if they might have been the result of boulders falling from the nearby heavens of John Attic Ridge. There were more than ten of these busted out sections, the roof an opened mouthful of wooden cavities. And the rot inside was that much worse.

Hank lowered himself steadily through one of the holes during a break, mindful of rusty nails and countless other objects left in dangerous shards from the constant, pushing weight of weather and wind. Below was a bleached out dresser and he tested it with first one foot then the other until he was positioned solidly. He did the same with the floor of the old apartment until he was standing in a kaleidoscope of light from the outside world distilled through thousands of hidden cracks in the filmed over windows and plaster-curved walls.

People had certainly lived here. Families. In an area that served as a kitchen there were four chairs that seemed blown about the room. Two tilted against a far wall and the others sat upright but on opposite sides of the room. There were dishes in a cancerous sink.

Everywhere the floors were trap-door weak. Hank gazed up at the hole through which he had left the unfiltered sunlight behind as he made his way down a hallway running the length of the apartment. Not more than five steps in, he moved with caution through a doorway leading to what was once a bedroom. Claustrophobic in size, it was a child's bedroom, he figured. A rectangle of cleaner hardwood suggested a place where a bed might have once been. In the corner he found odd toys, action figures, arms twisted and gnawed from where rats had rushed through and tested the items for food.

Hank stood for too long examining the toys. For a crazy moment he wished he might just stay in the room, sleep nights on the clean rectangle, the negative exposure his place of rest. At dawn he would arrange the toys in the room and sit quietly in the kitchen while the morning opened up the light show through the cracks in the walls.

"Hank! Let's get back at it!"

The sound of his granddaddy's voice ringing out from above, the shuffle of his boots overhead, muted but insistent, pulled him backwards from the bedroom. He went up through the broken section of roof and spent the next couple of hours forgetting the toys and kitchen chairs.

At lunch, they drove to the IGA for hot dogs with chili made from fresh hamburger and sloppyjoe sauce. By dinner, Hank thought his granddaddy looked tired and finished, and with about an hour of daylight left, he called it a day. The ladder was retracted and tied to the back of the Datsun truck.

Of the thirty or so squares needed to repair the roof, they had stripped about four and replaced just two rotted boards. The work with his granddaddy had been uncustomary in its slowness, easy-going and a surprise to Hank. With the extra time and a decent well of energy left, he decided to drive straight to Jimmy Cole's poker game on Thompson Fork Road.

\* \* \*

He had stowed away twenty dollars for the buy-in and took the bill out of his shirt pocket as soon as he walked in the door to Jimmy's tool shop, a rickety structure originally envisioned as a two-door garage which eventually became the poker room and general hideaway. He was greeted by familiars when he placed his twenty on the table in the center of the room.

"Sure Shot Clayton," Jimmy said as Hank pulled up a chair. Hank's dad had shot a man in the kneecap during a poker game once when the deed to somebody's house was folded into a large pot in a no-limit hand. Since all these men had known his dad, Hank had inherited the name Sure Shot right off, the first night he played in the game.

"Who's winning?" Hank said, counting chips out in four denominations of green, black, red and blue from a silver case on what would have been a fine, metal workbench. He had noticed Peaceful Murphy sitting in, but left it alone in his thoughts. This was poker. Not work.

"Thing's already started," Jimmy said.

“Okay if I take a hit on however many blinds and jump in?” Hank asked.

Jimmy looked at the others and they agreed by offering a silent disregard to the question. Murphy snorted lightly into the air.

The game usually went far into the morning with a tournament style Jimmy implemented after becoming a huge fan of the World Series of Poker on television a few months back. Before that it was straight money games and dealer’s choice. Now it was tournaments with timed blind increases and payouts to first and second place. And always no-limit hold ’em.

“This game’s the Cadillac of poker, boys,” Jimmy said, a cigarette hanging from his lip like some enormously long tooth busted loose but hanging on. He had just pulled in his third straight pot.

“Lucky tonight, Jim.”

Still stacking his chips even, Hank could tell it was Murphy’s voice offering Jimmy comment. Jimmy was one of Murphy’s drivers. The tone, sarcastic and accusatory, irked Hank, and he found himself wishing he would have went on home. This might not be work, but it was Murphy, and he couldn’t afford to toss away twenty dollars just for getting rattled at the table.

When Hank turned to the table with his chips balanced in both hands he saw Jimmy had already folded his buy-in with the rest, a wound tight roll of bills on a unvarnished table inches, always inches, from his elbow. He was in the game now whether he wanted to be or not.

“Drove by today and saw you and Burl on that old roof,” Murphy said as soon as Hank was in his seat.

Hank didn’t say much, just agreed, and the game went on in a ruffling of worn out cards and the clacking of clay chips. Jimmy was getting the best of it, but Hank had built a small stack, picking his spots and laying low.

When Murphy spoke to him again, it wasn’t about the game, no attempt to rattle him from his conservative, grind-it-out approach. But what Murphy said rattled him all the same.

“Tell Burl I’ll give him ten thousand for that buildin,” Murphy said in a bored voice, the voice he used when doing business. “As is. Not ten or twenty months from now after you all finish piddlin with it.”

It was Murphy’s deal and when Hank didn’t answer he stopped the rainbow movement of cards, placed the deck in his left hand and looked directly at Hank.

Hank had hoped to let the comment go, just idle talk he had no real stake in. Murphy’s continued stare told him that was not to be the case.

“It’s not mine to negotiate,” Hank said.

Murphy snorted again, resumed shuffling. “Who can talk to Burl about anything these days?”

Four hands later, Hank busted out and drove home thinking of how he should have checked kings on the river instead of pushing against a possible flush, thinking of how to mention ten thousand dollars to his granddaddy.

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Alzheimer’s. Or Old Timer’s, as the old timers called it. Early onset, in his granddaddy’s case, but getting worse. And fast.

On the roof the next morning, Hank worked and thought of what it must feel like to lose memories. He imagined it would be better in some ways. But with his granddaddy, it only seemed to be recent memories that were gone. He remembered everything about his distant past, his days welding to build tipples or fixing machinery on contract at this mine or that mine. It was the daily things that were slipping. Mentioning Murphy’s offer was a daily thing, and Hank wondered how it would be handled. He decided to mention Murphy’s proposal as they loaded into the Datsun, eating their hotdogs as they went.

“Why would I want to do that? No sale,” Burl said, and pointed to a drop of chili on the seat between Hank’s knees. “Looks like that hotdog run straight through you.”

Hank wiped away the chili with the back of his sleeve. “That’s a good amount of money for a building that’s in bad shape,” he said. “You’ll spend more fixing it than Murphy’s offering to give.”

“I welded the gas line all across this ridge, all the way into Fischer County,” was the only response. “I even stayed in Fischer County, a town called Viper, through the week for more than a month. Came home on the weekends.”

The moment had passed. Until they arrived back at the building, the present moment was for his granddaddy what Hank imagined must have been a light sandstorm across a memorized landscape, like a room stirred in dust. A kaleidoscope where objects once sacred were left behind to be fought over by vermin.

\*\*\*

The phone rang before he made it to the couch that evening. It was Angie. Her voice seemed distant and thick in the receiver. In the background, the muffled sound of drumming music told him she was somewhere with a live band. It was Saturday night and she was asking about child support.

"I'm behind. I know that," Hank said tiredly, reclining onto the couch and closing his eyes. "Tomorrow's Sunday. Murphy pays Monday. I'll send it to you then."

Behind closed eyelids Pearl played in the front yard, washed out images almost gone in his mind except her smile and the way she held onto the handlebars so tight her knuckles were white as clean chips of porcelain. Her smile was his happiness, her fear the knot in his stomach. Behind closed eyelids he held gently to the small of her back, the tiny muscles tightened there, moving across the bumpy terrain of the overgrown yard, all bravery and joy. And then her laughter, soaking the outside world in beauty and purpose. Life in fading images, a scrapbook in his mind sharp at the edges with the shrapnel of his slow-beating heart, images fading not from overexposure to light, but from a dark so deep it glowed in places like the transparent skin of creatures that would never see a morning unfold, never feel a breeze across a summer yard, the clenched embrace of another living thing more important than their own buried existence.

"You there, Hank?" Angie asked, the drumming beat louder as he figured she was making her way back to the entrance of the bar.

"I'm here," he said.

"Just send the money to Mom's address."

He opened his eyes in the dark. "When can I see Pearl again?"

"When you get some groceries," she said, and pushed a dial tone through his ear.

\* \* \*

Murphy didn't speak of his offer the next day at work. He was gone for most of the day. In and then out, but mostly out. Hank went about his business as usual, but noticed his granddaddy's building more than before. No longer was it something his eye passed over. It loomed against the valley's ridge line as jagged, still, as the bushy treetops in the backdrop. His granddaddy never wondered down from Beauty Street and so the building sat undisturbed and mute.

Hank let his thoughts wander during work about the building. He rekindled the image of the kitchen in his mind, remodeling it there with the Formica table top and only two chairs near the middle of the room just off from the sink, now a fine, shiny white with a silver-finished faucet and knobs. One for himself and one for Pearl. As metal clanked in first one tone then another, as air pressure released and the sharp barking of the metal and high hissing of the air mixed with other sounds emitting from the truck garage, Hank moved on to the bedroom.

Pink would burst loose here, onto the walls and then, a shade darker, along the crowning and trim. The clean rectangle was covered again with Pearl's canopied day bed and pictures and designs adorned the walls, flowers and butterflies, clowns and kittens. But most of all Hank placed toys throughout the room. Stuffed animals and porcelain tea sets, dolls of all sizes, a vanity with a tiny chair for pretend preening, stacks of story books and more stacks of coloring books, an entire corner of the room devoted to these books, complete with a dandelion-colored bookshelf. The room would always smell of freshly washed hair, the aroma of a bubble bath perpetually lingering, an unseen misting of newness.

Hank rubbed grease across the knees of his pants and nodded to Spider as the trucker crossed the garage on his way to the front office, a shuffle and stomp of girth, his buzz cut hair slicing through the air before him like thousands of tiny razors. He returned quickly, swinging the connecting office door just hard enough for the hinges to stretch and give simultaneous pops before relaxing back into place.

"Where's Murphy?"

"Not sure," Hank answered. He pushed a truck tire upright and started wobble walking it to a short-bed parked sideways at the entrance.

"Goddamnit," Spider muttered. "Owes me money. I've held off on payday like this enough. He'll have to ask somebody else next time. Just cause I ain't got kids don't mean I can always be the one he asks to hold off when things get tight. You tell him if you see him he owes me money."

When things get tight? The comment surprised Hank. He eased the wheel to a stop and propped it against his side and turned to Spider.

"Murphy has money problems?" Hank asked.

Spider laughed at this and rubbed the top of his head. "It's not exactly that kind of situation, even though I



guess it might've sounded that way. Just tell him. He'll know just what it is by exactly the way it sounds."

Laughing again, this time more to himself than out loud, Spider started to the back of the truck where he had wedge-parked his own.

"What kind of situation is it, then?" Hank called to Spider, but the trucker was already climbing into his cab, cutting off an oncoming suburban as he pulled onto Route 6 and slow-gear'd away.

Hank rolled the wheel, standing about four feet high between his clutched hands, and leaned it against the parked short-bed. The driver was a man by name of Caudill, but everybody, like everybody else in turn, used their call names instead. Caudill's call name was Torch. When Hank started on the wheel, Torch appeared from behind a stack of fuel barrels and called across the lot.

"Let Mackey do that, boy," Torch said. He was waving his hand. "Murphy ain't paying you no mechanic wages. Why in hell would you offer em up?" And then to some indistinct distance behind him he called out, "Mackey! Wheel's ready!"

Mackey, a thin man with a patchy beard who had worked for Murphy for more than twenty years, in turn appeared from a corner of the garage. Hank saw Mackey throw a half-smoked joint into a pile of discarded metal fixings, rub his eyes and quicken his pace until it was just him and Hank standing beside the truck.

"Murphy gone for the day?" It was the first words Mackey had spoken to him in the three weeks Hank had worked at the garage. Usually he just finished his work, motioned his hand for another part, which Hank was always expected to intuitively know, and then returned behind the garage. He smoked joints the entire shift and was the only garage employee who could get by with such a thing. The drivers, it seemed to Hank, did whatever the hell they wanted on the road. Better for tracking along that napalm and getting another load. "Murphy gone for the day?" Mackey asked again, this time louder, upset at having to repeat himself.

"I don't know," Hank replied. He didn't like Mackey's tone. "How am I supposed to know?"

Mackey stared at him hard for four or five uncomfortable seconds and then laughed hard and started on the wheel, motioning with his hand when this or that was needed and Hank complied without comment until Mackey finally settled back and, peering about the lot, took a joint from his shirt pocket and held it lovingly beneath the orange flame of an ageless Zippo lighter.

Hank settled beside him, sitting directly on the ground even though Mackey had made the changed and busted tire his own personal recliner.

"Why would Spider think Murphy is having money problems?" Hank finally asked. He waited patiently, watching Mackey take a long drag on the joint, hold it for so long when he exhaled there was nothing in the air but air.

"The hell you talkin bout?" Mackey said breathlessly.

"Spider said he was tired of waiting on his paycheck. Said Murphy shouldn't always stick him short when the money was tight," Hank said.

Mackey laughed hard again, raising his legs into the air and wiggling his filthy boots, the tongues flapping without the benefit of laces.

"What?"

"What, shit," Mackey said. "I forget you're green, what a month into the job? I guess I forget because of your Papaw and all. Burl could weld and do electric like nobody." He stopped and took another long drag and then said again, "Like. Nobody."

Just as he was expected to know instinctively what tool or part Mackey might need next, Hank felt that something was coming, a further explanation. He waited for the harmless old burnout to finish. But there was a long silence and Hank stared evenly at Mackey, watched him take a last draw from the joint and crush it carefully underfoot. The old mechanic looked first at Hank and then around the lot again. Still nobody around.

"This might be some information useful to you, now that I think of it," Mackey said after the long pause. "Old Spidey's woman, Charlene, she's a whore. You might get in a lick or two for the right price. I've had a shot or two when times were, you know, rough, like you got."

Hank stood up, dusting off the back of his pants, feeling metal shavings peel into the palms of his hands. The metal shavings might have slipped beneath his very skin and made him invisible. The thought of pulling good timing Mackey off his rubber recliner and knocking him around some passed through his mind, a fleeting fantasy, a daydream, the place he'd been most of the day anyway. Instead he lazily shook his head and started back to the face of the garage.

"Bullshit," he said, resting himself now in the dankness of the garage.

Mackey smiled and grabbed a variety of tools, turning back to the wheel for a beat or two and then turned back to Hank.

“Don’t believe me? Call her up then, greenhorn. Number’s in the book under Michael and Charlene Hall. That’s Spider’s real name. Michael.”

\* \* \*

Dusk settled across the house slowly and Hank watched it fall across the kitchen and then the couch and then the living room floor until he sat in near total darkness. He was satisfied to see the darkness overtake the room. The room, the dormant items within the room, brought pain like he’d never felt. A blue and pink trimmed toy playpen for dolls, Pearl’s dolls, in the corner, now obscured by the dying dusk, was an open nerve in the daylight. In the daylight he watched over and over again Pearl leaning carefully over the edge and placing her dolls in, tucking them so gently and then pulling them out again to feed and fuss over them, rock them in her skinny, motherly arms, smiling at her gentleness and care.

Ten thousand dollars would bring Pearl back.

Angie would take the money and let him have Pearl. She didn’t want her anyway, and her parents were tired and old and couldn’t care for a child. They’d be happy to see either of parents take her in. Angie would go for it. Ten thousand dollars would be the shining light of God across this dying room of dusk and pain. Ten thousand dollars would be his salvation.

Draped across the couch, Hank rubbed his forehead, hoping it wasn’t the pain and hurt making him think crazy. He looked again, squinting now through the full darkness to make out the toy playpen across the room. All of Pearl’s toys were still in their place since the last time she came, more than a month ago. A stuffed animal, a dog she had named Spotty, a toy purse and a pair of princess slippers, a purple plastic microphone left dead across the coffee table. He picked up the phone and, instead of turning on a light, flicked his lighter, brought a cigarette to life and then flipped open the phone book. He found Murphy’s number and dialed quickly. He focused on the open nerves, driving him forward in the dark.

## Contributors

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