Cowboy Jamboree Magazine

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Country & Folk

The way I feel is that if you don't like folk music, stay away from my shows.

— Hank Williams

Good Grit Lit From

Susan R. Morritt
Garrett Stack
Melissa Flores Anderson
Kristin Keyes
Maud Lavin
Justin Carter
Jennifer Schneider
SR Schulz
M.E. Proctor
Dan Russell
Ashwini Gangal
Justin Lee
Josh Shepard
Lisa Thornton
Sheree Shatsky
Anthony Neil Smith
Rachel R. Baum
Coleman Bigelow
M.L. Owen
Mark Rogers
Brian Beatty

“If you walk across my camera I will flash the world your story.”

–Woody Guthrie

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Cannonball

Brian Beatty

"You can tune a banjo, but you can't tuna fish," Hurley chuckled into the microphone center stage. "Well, it takes a while."

The folks seated out in the curved rows of wooden benches moaned, like they did every year when he made that same joke between songs.

Bluegrass festival audiences were friendly, forgiving people that way.

Nobody minded that Hurley and his young band played the same dozen numbers every year. Probably because they were more puzzled why each year he was joined by a new crew of musicians. Or else why Hurley's bandmates were always half his age.

The truth was, Hurley and company were filler between the big name acts with tour buses, so nobody cared.

Hurley counted off a quick "Wabash Cannonball" no amount of tuning would've salvaged. Guitar, fiddle and mandolin came in playing different musical keys than Hurley was playing on his banjo. Different musical keys than each other, too.

The train song, always a favorite with folks, was an instant train wreck.

What pained Hurley more than their racket was the fact that the rest of the band kept playing even after he stopped.

Instead, they all modulated to mismatched minor keys, like a bunch of tone-deaf jazz snobs.

The bass player's random thumping made it all make musical sense somehow.

These young guys Hurley had found on Craigslist were too avant-garde for him. Sick as that made his gut, there was no stopping them now. The crowd was on its feet, happily clapping along. Elated dancers were assembling in the grass down in front of the stage.

The Pack

Mark Rogers

There's no reason under the Lord's bright sun to run your fingers through a dog's hair—especially in Mexico. It doesn't rain enough in Baja and dogs are seldom washed clean. Dogs roll around in the rotting corpses of animals, or in the lumps of human shit left behind by the homeless or the poor people with no plumbing in their homes.

The man sitting at the kitchen table, Francisco, has hair like a dog—like a Mexican dog. No one pets Francisco's hair. When he touches it himself—in those odd moments of exasperation or thoughtfulness—his hand comes away greasy and coated with dust.

***

When Francisco was 22 years old, he worked as a foreman in a *maquiladora* in Tecate, overseeing scores of workers assembling flatscreen TVs. It was a good job for several years until a reckless moment caused him to be electrocuted. There he was, shuddering on the concrete floor, as 400 volts of juice jolted through his body.

The physical damage was severe enough, but the emotional injury was far worse. It was as though a part of his psyche had been cauterized—the part that enabled him to abide the company of other humans. His withdrawal began in the hospital, turning away from family who visited, and presenting a stone face to the doctors and nurses attending him.

When Francisco was released and sent home, he got down on his knees in front of his wife. She suspected her husband was going to tell her they would battle their way back, that love would save them both. That he would find another job and not to worry.

Instead, Francisco spoke, with his eyes cast down at the floor. "Please. Leave me. Go live with your mother. Leave me alone. I feel like my head will burst if you stay."

"Why do I have to leave?"

"Please. I have nowhere to go. I don't want to die."

His wife fled, alarmed. She waited for a word from her husband, all the while living with her mother and younger sister. Months passed and no word came from Francisco. What did come was a suitor. Soon enough, Francisco's wife was living hours away in Mexicali, helping to manage her new man's thriving restaurant.

***

Francisco's one-story, one-bedroom *casa* is in a close-packed community of homes in the seaside town of Rosarito Beach. The house has a small backyard of hard-packed earth, surrounded by a cinderblock wall.

There was a small sum received from the *maquiladora*, a token disability payment. It enabled Francisco to spend long days stretched out on his sofa, the blinds drawn against the sun. He drank cool water, ate tortillas with salt, and listened to the sounds of children playing in the street, trucks downshifting, and of course—the almost constant barking of neighborhood dogs.

Francisco neglected to put money on his cellphone or to pay his internet bill and he was soon cut off from the world. This suited him. He made peace with his damaged brain. He listened to the radio, and read over and over the one book in the house, a Spanish translation of *Steve Jobs*, the biography written by Walter Isaacson. Reading this book became so familiar for Francisco, it was like someone was stroking his pelt.

***

A man can be alone for only so long. Eventually, someone will seek him out—not to be of assistance—but for their own benefit. This is what happened to Francisco and in a way it was fortunate. Francisco's payout from the *maquiladora* was almost gone, and he was losing weight—too much weight—subsisting on water and tortillas. Francisco's brother came up from Culiacan, a mainland city 1,500 miles south of Rosarito. His brother's name was Luis and he had a proposition for his younger sibling.

"I'm not here to help you," said Luis. "I'm here to help myself. I need a partner and it might as well be you."

"I can't help anybody," said Francisco.

Luis opened the plastic bag on the floor by his feet. It was filled with crushed ice and blue-and-silver cans of Tecate Light. He opened a can and handed it to his brother, then opened a second for himself.

Francisco stared at the can as though it had fallen from the sky. Then he took a tentative sip.

"I need someone close to the border," said Luis. "The big money is in the U.S."

"I don't want to deal drugs."

"No," said Luis. "Dogs. You'll be dealing dogs. And it will be legal. Almost a hundred percent legal."

"I don't think so."

"Snap out of it," said Luis, frowning. "Look at you. You're white like a *gusano*. You smell like old corn. I have a pistol in the car. Maybe you should eat a bullet."

This last outburst was what is called a conversation-stopper. For the next half hour, they drank in silence, until they were on the last of the Tecates.

"You wanna hear?" said Luis.

Francisco nodded. "Yes, I do."

***

The plan was simple.

Luis had been breeding French bulldogs for several years. Some of these dogs had legitimate bloodlines, while others—shall we say—were near misses. Legitimacy was not all that much a problem, because counterfeit papers were easy to arrange. French bulldogs could be sold for $3,000 in the States and in some cases much more—they were an extremely popular breed, boosted by celebrities like Lady Gaga, Martha Stewart, and The Rock, who posted photo after photo of their French bulldogs on social media. This constant bombardment of images on Instagram enhanced the breed's mystique. Cartel members, gang leaders—they all wanted a French bulldog.

"I'll give you the first female and pay to have her inseminated," said Luis. "You handle the pregnancy and birth. When the puppies are born, my contact in LA will find buyers. He'll pick up the puppies and

deliver them. One third of every sale goes to you. I'm selling all I can in Culiacan. I have to expand."

"What do I have to do?" asked Francisco.

***

The dog's name was Diamante. Diamond.

The poor beast's legs trembled inside the wire crate when Francisco picked her up at the main bus station in Tijuana.

It was cruel to make the dog travel in the baggage compartment under the bus, crammed in with cardboard boxes and cheap luggage. A 32-hour journey from Culiacan.

Francisco loaded the dog in its wire crate into the bed of his Ford pickup.

What does a dog know of time? Maybe Diamante had been afraid she'd spend the rest of her days down there—under the bus, breathing exhaust and getting rocked back and forth every time the driver tapped the brakes.

Francisco hesitated, then bent forward and slipped the wire lock of the crate. He gestured for the dog to come forward.

"Come here. Come here, Diamante."

Diamante was hesitant at first, then advanced, her nails scrabbling on the metal bed of the truck. French bulldogs have ugly faces. So ugly, they become beautiful. Diamante was like that, staring up at Francisco, with her bottom teeth sticking over her top lip; her nose wet, and her ears twitching.

Francisco scooped Diamante up and put her in the passenger seat of his pickup.

"Don't go moving around," said Francisco, giving her a pat on the head. "I don't want you under my foot, fucking with the brake."

***

It surprised Francisco to learn that a French bulldog's gestation period is a scant two months.

Before Diamante had even given birth, Francisco made the drive to the Tijuana bus station once again, this time to take possession of three additional female bulldogs. These were inseminated in short order, by his brother's contact, Santo, who would drive down across the border, from where he lived in Chula Vista.

Santo was Honduran. On first meeting Francisco, he divulged that ten years ago he had made the journey from Honduras across Mexico, aboard *La Bestia*, the freight train that cuts through Mexico north to south, carrying immigrants riding on top of its long line of railroad cars.

"I ate well aboard La Bestia," said Santo. "Better than I did in Honduras."

Santo gave Francisco tips on how to care for pregnant bulldogs. For example, the optimum temperature in the room (80°), what supplements they needed (glucosamine, fish oil, and probiotics), and the proper use of parasite medicine (medicate the whole litter). Also, unlike most dogs—French bulldogs will gobble down a treat of banana or cucumber—even broccoli.

Seeing the dogs eat broccoli would always make Francisco smile.

***

Late at night, when the dogs were finally quiet, Francisco would lie on his back on the sofa. Since the accident, he had chosen to sleep on the living room sofa instead of his bedroom. There were too many memories in that double bed. Memories of another lifetime that was gone for good.

He very seldom had dreams. Instead, he would daydream about what his life would be like when one puppy after another sold. He would see the profits piling up but his imagination went no further. He didn't envision things he would do with the money.

Maybe the electric shock in the *maquiladora* had burned that out of him, too. The capacity to spend and consume.

When Francisco did fall asleep, he would sometimes—deep into the night—make strange chuffing noises, and his legs would jerk back and forth.

***

Nothing is as simple as it seems.

Within months, all four bulldogs birthed litters—27 puppies altogether. They were charming, healthy, active—but flawed. Their ears failed to prick up, their heads were a shade too narrow, and their chests lacked the broad, bull quality of their breed.

Luis was sanguine about the setback. "This happens sometimes. Their DNA is missing something—who knows what it is? Maybe we'll get lucky and a few of them will have their ears pop up. If you can, sell them for twenty-five dollars each. If you can't sell them, give them away. Meanwhile, I'll send you another dog. We'll keep trying."

Santo came down and stood with Francisco in his backyard, watching the puppies chew on each other's mouths, playing and learning how to be a dog. The puppies ranged from black to white to mottled brown. All four mothers looked satisfied, especially Diamante.

"It's your problem now," said Santos. "I don't sell cheap dogs. I lose respect that way."

"My neighbors are complaining," said Francisco. "The noise and the smell."

"You've got a problem," said Santos, shaking his head. "Deal with it before it gets worse."

***

Francisco's problems grew worse but in an unexpected way.

One afternoon, he heard the clink, clink, clink of a peso coin on his metal gate.

A man wearing a white shirt and black slacks stood there with a coin in his hand. Behind him was his former wife, and a tall, broad man who Francisco had never seen.

The man in the white shirt and slacks waited for Francisco to open his gate. He then handed him a sheaf of papers. "My name is Raul Sanchez. Your wife has hired me to represent her in this matter. It would seem you've ignored previous communications. This house is no longer yours. It has been sold. I have a check for one half of the proceeds, your share of the sale."

"You knew about this," said his ex-wife. "It didn't have to be like this."

Francisco's mind wandered, wondering what it was that he'd neglected. A court date, certainly. A notice of judgment, it would seem.

The lawyer handed Francisco an envelope that hadn't been sealed. Francisco examined the check inside. A modest check. His share was certainly more than this. But he had handed over all of the weapons to his ex-wife. He felt a low hum of electricity course through his body.

"You have five days to vacate the premises," said the lawyer.

Done, all three walked away.

From the backyard came a cacophony of barks and growls—his dogs protecting their house.

***

The check was large enough to buy a small building lot six miles outside the city, back in the hills. The lot was 10 meters by 20. There was no water or sewage hookup, or electrical posts. All of that would come later when a sufficient amount of lots was developed.

The furnishings in the house were sold to his neighbors, who were pleased to see Francisco go. Him and his dogs.

Francisco slept in his truck the first two nights, while 31 dogs snuffed the dirt, ate weeds, and slept in heaps. A flatbed truck drove up on the third day, delivering a pre-built wooden shed. It was large enough to provide sleeping quarters and not much else. Francisco took to cooking outside on a propane stove and washing up from a 20-liter *garrafo*n of water.

Each morning, Francisco would stand in the middle of his lot, scooping dried dog food from a plastic garbage can. The puppies would crowd around, jostling his legs, waiting for Francisco—the pack leader—to dole out their daily meal.

He drove into Tijuana and picked up a fifth dog, sent by Luis from Culiacan. Santos handled the semination procedure but shook his head seeing Francisco's living conditions.

"This reminds me of Honduras," said Santos. "You need to get your head out of your ass."

***

Three months passed. Another litter was born and these puppies also had ears that flopped down instead of up. Diamante and the other three mothers became pregnant again—maybe even from one of their own puppies; it was impossible to tell.

Some puppies wandered off into the hills. A handful died, from scorpion bites or from intestinal blockages. This was caused by puppies swallowing stuff they should never have put in their mouths.

Two scruffy strays wandered into the lot and never left.

From among this constantly shifting amalgamation of dogs, there emerged a singular creature: white with a brown head. More muscular. More confident. Francisco gave him a name that he would later regret.

El Rey.

The King.

***

In the evenings, Francisco would watch the sun as it set over the Pacific, followed by the moon rising in the east.

There were several houses in the community. They were far enough away that all concerned maintained their privacy. Francisco did enjoy seeing the houses lit up for the night. That was enough for him.

El Rey took to leaving each sundown, to roam the hills. He had a pack that followed him. They hunted rabbits, rumbled with coyotes, and killed any other dogs that crossed their path. They developed a taste for fresh meat and only ate dry food when their hunt was unsuccessful.

More than once, Francisco would wake in the morning to find a dead dog or a dead puppy mauled and chewed. It was rare that there would be fights among the pack but if a dog fell to natural causes, they were meat to be consumed.

The next time Francisco drove into town, he brought back an iron 55-gallon drum and a 20-liter can of gasoline. The first of the dogs to die had been given a burial. Deaths were now more frequent and half-eaten corpses were tossed into the iron drum, soaked with gasoline, and burned.

More and more dogs were born more and more dogs died, until there were some mornings it seemed all Francisco did was tend to the drum.

More strays wandered in. They mated with the French bulldogs and created mutts that were ugly in the extreme, with short legs, awkward bodies, and unpleasant personalities prone to greed and fright.

Santos never came anymore.

Luis cut his losses and cut communication.

Some of the puppies had ears that pricked up, and wider heads, and broader chests. Passable French bulldogs. But Francisco had given up thinking of selling them. He had no idea where to begin.

***

It started simply enough. Each night, Francisco gathered a few puppies and let them sleep on the floor of his shed, snuggled against his body.

Perhaps the other dogs envied the special treatment given to a handful of puppies.

Francisco heard a rough scratching at the door. When he pushed it open, there was El Rey. The dog paused and then pushed past Francisco's legs and settled in a corner of the room.

That was the beginning. More dogs followed El Rey until the floor was covered with warm bodies.

Francisco stepped outside. There was only a sliver of moon but it was enough light to illuminate a mass of sleeping creatures overflowing the boundaries of his lot. Lumps of fur snuffling and growling.

He had a choice. He could sleep in his truck. He could shove dogs aside and claim a space for himself in the shed.

Francisco looked over his shoulder at the open door of the shed.

El Rey sat in the doorway on his hind legs. His brown head in shadow. The blue whites of his eyes reflecting what little light there was.

Francisco's chin fell to his chest. There was a third choice.

He zipped up the jacket he wore and tread carefully among the mass of bodies on the ground. He saw Diamante and cleared a space next to her.

He lay down in the dirt, protecting his cheek with the palm of his hand, breathing in the warmth.

Finding his place in the pack.

Good Time Charley and Homewrecker Holly

Justin Lee

I walked into Green's Tavern thirty minutes late. Nobody waited. People spilled out of booths and shambled around to some awful Luke Bryan song. It's been fifteen years since graduation day and I still feel like the odd man out.

I sat at the bar next to some redhead that kinda looked like Ruby. Her hair flowed the same, her body still didn't stop, but it wasn't until I saw her eyes that I knew for sure. Those blues washed all over you.

'Charley?'

'Ruby.'

'Oh my gosh, I didn't even think you were gonna come. We haven't heard from you in so long. Where you been? You still playing music?'

I didn't have the stones to say it. How does one just blurt out that they are the lone holdout of their class? I'm the only one that stayed behind and got a job at the tire plant like everyone else. The only one like everyone else.

'Nah, I gave that up. I'm a tire builder now.'

'Why? You were so good. Did you not try to go to Nashville? You know, Travis is doing so good up there. He opened up for Old Crow when they played at The Ryman in August. I wish y'all still hung out. I feel like he wouldn't have let you stay here.'

The truth is that I had called Travis a few years ago. I told him I was sorry and that I was clean now. At first I couldn't see it, but when he asked me to come jam with his new band I could tell he didn't want me there. When I was loading up my bass, I saw his song book. One of our old tunes, 'Homewrecker Holly' was highlighted. I wanted to ask if he was gonna try to record it. If I was gonna get credit for anything. I mean, the times I wasn't staring a thousand worlds away I did help him write a few lines.

It wasn't until I heard it on the radio that I realized that joining the band was never gonna happen.

'Me and Travis haven't talked in a while. I wouldn't even know what to say to him really.'

'You know he is here tonight, right? That black escalade? I saw him sneak in the backdoor.'

About that time, the stage lights came on and the bar owner came up to the mic.

'Folks, I'm not gonna mince my words here and say that I'm just happy to introduce Travis Howard to the stage. I'm gonna say I am goddamn proud to let Travis play a few tunes here and show us what Nashville has done to Elim County's golden boy.'

The place went nuts. Everyone was hooting and hollering and the sound of it all wrapped me up tight. It wasn't until Travis walked out that it really hit me. That sinking feeling. Quicksand in my guts and I felt like I was sinking deeper by the second.

I leaned up close to the bar. I ordered a beer and told the waitress to keep them coming. This was going to kill me. To see him up there being drooled over, and knowing I'll be down here watching. I'll be going back to the plant first thing in the morning, while he's on his way to some show somewhere living the life we were supposed to have.

He came out onto the stage holding that same Washburn he's played since middle school. It still has that Lucero sticker on the bridge from when we drove to their show in Memphis.

'Hey y'all, I'm gonna play a tune you may have heard before. I wrote it during my first year away from Elim. It's about a girl and a home and how she broke it all to hell. Here's Homewrecker Holly.'

I've heard about people being frozen in a spot. Like they couldn't move an inch no matter what they did. I always wondered what they thought about while they were stuck there. If there was a single image or word that just locked them up, or if it was the pressure of everything coming down on them. For me, in that moment, with every chord he played I saw all the gigs we played together. I saw those summer nights we got drunk and played along to Waylon. The last thing I saw was Holly and Travis in his truck bed naked under the stars.

It wasn't until after I felt my fist go against the side of his face that I realized what was going on. People's hands were all over me pulling and tugging. They were all screaming at me while they drug me outside. When they threw me out in the gravel, I could feel my face get torn up. I tasted copper and looked at the stars and laughed until I couldn't breathe.

Don't You Fret

(An Exchange Between Brothers)

Coleman Bigelow

Dear Ron,

You probably don't want to hear from me, but I need you to know you've been on my mind. Well, both you and Sheila. No matter our differences–this is a time for family–and I'm here for you. Pop would be rolling over in his grave if he thought I'd turn my back on my brother in his time of need. And you can bet Ma would be chasing me with her rolling pin if I ever even said an unkind word. *Shit, that thing used to leave us bruised for days, remember?* It sure hurt a hell-of-a lot more than Pop's whippings. But I guess it hurt the most because there was nothing worse than disappointing Ma.

Man, I can't believe how much I miss them. I bet you do too. Heck, I miss *you*, Ronnie. This stupid fight over the farm… Well, I'll just say it. I'm sorry for my part. I promise you, I never asked Pop to divide it up that way - and I had no idea about the oil on my side. But I think I've been pretty generous… plus, you know, if I can ever help, I'm always here.

I guess that's why I'm writing. I heard about Sheila's memory issues. It sounds like what Gram went through—and that's no fun. But there's new treatments now. So, listen, if y'all want to send her up to Tulsa, I can make that happen. I can help with doctors and nurses, or hunting down any experimental drugs. All you have to do is ask.

Anyway, I recognize you never thought I was much of a musician, but I wrote this song (enclosed) for you and I guess it does just about as a good a job expressing my thoughts on the Sheila subject… and us… as any letter. I'd play it for you but, since we're not speaking, I'm hoping you'll read it and know I care because… well; I guess I've already said it a bunch, but I really am here for you, brother. I really am.

Your loyal brother,

Clint

Song for Sheila

If you hold steady, and squeeze her tight,
She'll stay your girl, dancing in the light.
I know pieces of her may slip away,
But all the best parts are here to stay.

Don't you fret, don't you sweat,
It ain't over, she ain't gone yet.
Sure, you got fears, and some regrets
But don't you quit, don't give up,
She's still there to fill your cup.

That smile, that laugh, that endless glow,
Your memories will linger like a picture show.
Her mind may fade, but she feels you,
All you have to do is let her know.
All you have to do is see things through.

Don't you fret, don't you sweat,
It ain't over, she ain't gone yet.
Sure, you got fears, and some regrets
But don't you quit, don't give up,
She's still there to fill your cup.

When everything goes upside down.
When all you get is a vacant frown.
Just harken back and hold her tight,
Always remember to follow the light.

Don't you fret, don't you sweat,
It ain't over, she ain't gone yet.
Sure, you got fears, and some regrets
But don't you quit, don't give up,
She's still there to fill your cup.

Dear Clint,

Thanks for your note and for your song,
but I'm sorry to say you've still got it wrong.
This ain't about land, it's about deceit.
And the reason why we can't never meet.

You had Pop's ear, and you fed him lies.
So, you won't earn my trust no matter how you try.
Sheila might not remember, but I know you cut us out.
No sappy lyrics can change what it's really about.

It's you vs. me—even Sheila saw that.
But don't you worry, we'll get by while you get fat.
And we won't take your charity or your pity.
One little letter doesn't make you less shitty.

I'm glad Ma can't see you now.
She'd whip your hide, then drop down and cry.
The thought of a brother pretending to care…
Well, that's easy when you take more than your share.

No. I'm done with this and I'm done with you.
There ain't more to say. Just know we're through.
Don't write again and don't check in.
We've got real friends who know stealing's a sin.

Your onetime brother,
Ray

Deadman

M.L. Owen

Linc gave the wire stretcher one more click. The barbed wire twanged the twenty yards across the draw to the far corner post. It quivered three feet above the top of the posts in the midde. There'd be enough give to pull it down. When his father came to pick him up at noon this section of the fence would be done, done right, and he'd be the one who did it.

He wrapped the loose end of the wire around the railroad-tie corner post, cut off the exess, wrapped the wire tight around itself with the fencing pliers, and hammered three staples over it, one to each side of, one in back, as insurance. Then he released the stretcher. Again the wire twanged. This was going to be good and tight.

He walked down to the middle of the draw and reached high to grab the wire and pull it toward a post. He pulled gently, with a loose grip. If it was going to pop he didn't want it taking his hand with it. The crescent straightened out into two lines, each running from a corner to his post. With his free hand he pulled a staple from his tool-belt pocket and passed it to the hand holding the wire in position. The free hand searched the belt for the fencing pliers. It found nothng. He looked around him on the ground. No pliers. He sighed and let the tension ease the wire, and his arm, back up.

He walked back up along the fence, searching the ground. When he got back to the corner, he looked in ever-widening circles around the corner post. He rechecked the tool belt and his jeans' pockets. He threw his gloves on the ground and looked at his watch. Eleven-oh-five. Shit. He slammed his fist against the tie and jumped as the pliers fell to the ground. He looked around and laughed sheepishly.

The staple bent as he drove it in with the hammer head on the pliers, so he put a second one in beside it. Then he walked to the next post and reached for the wire hovering just above it. The wire was quivering. He looked back along the fence line and saw the post he had left moments before slowly rise. It cleared the ground with a jump and hung in the air, bouncing.

Linc avoided his father's eyes as he explained the situation. His father heard him out and then chuckled slightly. "You need a deadman for a hard stretch," he said. "Would have told you, but I didn't think you'd be stretching wire yet. You loosen the stretcher, then cut that wire off the post and splice it back together. Then dig two holes beside each other, and I'll get one."

"Get one what?"

"A deadman."

He was just finishing the second hole when his father came back and threw a rusty harrow disk down and pulled his own fencing pliers out. "Run eight or ten feet of wire through the bolt holes, then bury the disc with the wire out."

Linc picked up the disk. "Deadman?"

"Deadman."

As Linc finished tamping the deadman hole his father tossed his own fencing pliers on the ground by the hole and picked up the post.

"Better put those someplace you can find them," Linc said. "They get lost easy."

"That they do, son. The key to finding them, is to leave 'em where you'll look. You take my word for it, you loose your pliers, first thing you're going to do is check the ground along the fence line."

"If you say so."

Once the post was reset and the disk with its umbilical-wire was buried, they pulled the spliced wire aside and strung a new one between the corners, a foot off the ground. That wire, when tightened, was just above the top of the reset post. They pulled it down to the right height and wrapped the wire from the disk around it.

"Next wire we'll do just the same, only higher," his father said. "Then restretch the one you ran and do it. The deadman holds the fence in place through the low spots."

***

Linc's son squirmed beside him. "You want to go outside for a while, Will, you can," Linc said. "You can

take the tie off but don't get those polished new shoes dirty."

Will was gone before Linc's wife could register a protest with anything but her eyes. Linc smiled at her. "He sat through the funeral, Sal. That's good enough for a twelve-year old. It's no disrespect for Dad that he's restless." Sally nodded and smiled back, then scooted over into Will's place beside Linc.

Linc looked out the window and watched Will kick a stone and then bend to check his shoe.

He remembered the shine on his own new shoes, not the ones he wore now, which were polished but didn't shine and definitely weren't new, but the ones he'd had at about Will's age. He was supposed to get an award. What was it? FFA? 4H?

He'd been horsing around and kicked a hunk out of the toe of one of the shoes. He couldn't remember what he'd kicked or why. He remembered sticking the piece of leather back on with white glue. It was ugly, but his parents hadn't said a thing.

The award had to do with that model pasture he'd set up in the hilly section of the south eighty. He was so proud of putting the fence in himself, mostly himself. His father helped.

Sally wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"What is it, honey?"

"Huh? Oh, I thought I'd get Will and run by the old place to show him something on the south eighty."

"Now? Can't it wait"

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking, or I was thinking too much."

"We'll get through it, Linc. Just hang on to me."

"Yeah, you and the deadman."

"You mean your father?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, my father."

I see your ghost

Rachel R. Baum

Since living in both Texas and Montana, I have been appalled and fascinated by this country's pervasive gun culture. I write poems about guns to try and make some sense where there is none.

For you to return would be lethal
I see your ghost everywhere,
in dreams, the inevitable fear,
as damaging as you.

I can't turn on the television,
take a walk, or hear the phone ring,
without you wading into my ocean,
and pulling me under.

The lights are on in all of the rooms
I borrow my neighbor's dog
and my neighbor's rifle
I'm ready to leave, instead
I stand here, barefoot.

Yankee Dimes

Dan Russell

Daddy asked me to help haul off the trash, but I didn't want to. It was cold and sleeting.

"Daddy, it is cold out. Can't you do it yourself?" I said.

"Come on, Sadie. I'll give you a Yankee dime if you go with me," he said.

He always told me that. Once I figured out a Yankee dime was just a kiss or punch in the arm, I told him he'd have to get me something real. There was no way I was getting out in the cold for nothing, so I told him I would go, but I wanted a milkshake from Sonic.

"All right, Sadie cakes, you got it," he said.

I pulled on my coat and beanie and slipped on my boots. Daddy was already outside warming up the truck. I heard the sleet pinging on the cabin's metal roof when I walked outside. The exhaust from Daddy's truck was blowing clouds into the chilly night air. I opened the door and slid into the front seat. The vinyl was so cold I could feel it through my jeans.

"Turn the heat up, Daddy, damn."

"I did. Give it a minute."

I blew into my hands and rubbed them together.

When Daddy could see through the hole the defroster made, we pulled out.

The sleet was steady, and the roads were already slick. Daddy drove on past the landfill and out toward Johnson's Hollow. The county charged to dump at the landfill, and Daddy said he wasn't paying anybody for the privilege of throwing away his trash. So we always dumped ours in a big hole Daddy dug out at Granny Mae's house. She had been dead for ten years, and the old house was in pretty awful shape. Daddy always said he would doze it, but he hadn't yet.

Daddy worked as a meat processor. Whatever anyone needed butchering, he could do it. He had a little building in town where he worked. Folks brought him all sorts of things to cut up. Whatever they didn't want, he brought home for us. Sometimes, some leftovers needed to be hauled off, so he put them in big Hefty bags, and we'd drive 'em out to Granny Mae's and dump 'em.

Daddy turned on Buzzard Roost Road and then right toward Granny's. The sleet was getting harder. I could see it bouncing off the truck hood like little BBs.

Daddy got out to open the gate when we got to Granny's. I watched him in the headlights. He was a big man–broad-shouldered and tall. Momma used to tell him he looked like Steve McQueen, but I didn't see it. He swung the gate open and jumped back into the truck.

"Goddamn, it's cold out there, Sadie," he said.

"Sleeting pretty good now," I said.

"We need to hurry. We don't want to get stuck out here and spend the night in the truck."

"I ain't sleeping in this truck, Daddy."

"Well, get your ass out and help me, and you won't have to."

I got out and I popped the latch on the tailgate. Daddy reached in and pulled on one of the Hefty bags. He slid it toward us. I grabbed ahold and helped him toss it into the pit.

When he pulled the second one, it came open, and I grabbed the edges to tie it in a knot. Daddy snatched it from me.

"What the hell?" I said.

"I got it, Sadie. Get in the truck."

"Yes, *sir*," I said, making sure Daddy heard the sarcasm.

He stared a hole in me. I rolled my eyes and got in.

I watched him in the mirror toss the bag into the pit. He stood there for a while with his hands in his pockets.

I rolled down the window.

"Get your ass in the truck. I'm fucking freezing," I said.

"Watch your mouth," he said.

He closed the tailgate and got inside.

"You're getting a little sassy," he said.

"Just get us to town before we freeze. You owe me a milkshake, and I aim to make you get it."

"Yes, *ma'am*," he said.

***

The Sonic was busy. Daddy pulled into a spot. He rolled down the window and pressed the red button.

"You wanting chocolate?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. And an order of tater tots," I said.

"You're pushing your luck, ain't you?"

"Nah, I reckon I deserve it."

He gave a little laugh, and when the voice came over the speaker, he ordered the shake and tots.

Daddy lit a cigarette, and I watched the smoke drift in the wind like a phantom.

Across from us, I saw Tom Paul Jessup's pickup.

"When the food comes, you think I could ride home with Tom Paul?" I asked.

"You sweet on him?"

"Might be."

"You steady?"

"Not yet."

"You wanna be?"

"Can I go or not?"

"Awful bad out."

"I reckon we might cut donuts in the church parking lot."

"The law will get after you."

"Well, if they do, I guess you can come get me."

Daddy laughed.

"All right. Be careful."

When the food came, I grabbed the sack and ran over to Tom Paul's truck.

I knocked on the window, and he let me in.

"What are you doing out running around?" he said.

"Oh, me and Daddy drove out to Granny's to dump some trash. I told him he owed me a shake and some tots for doing it. I seen you and run over. You gonna harass me or kiss me?"

He leaned over, and we kissed.

"Bad out. What are you wanting to do?"

"Well, I thought maybe we might find someplace quiet and keep warm."

Tom Paul grinned.

"Keep warm, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You got a place we can go? Momma and Daddy are entertaining the new preacher tonight. I ain't taking you home and trying to get your panties off with them in the other room."

"I got a place. You get us out there, and we'll see about the panties."

Tom Paul grinned.

"Hurry and eat then," he said.

***

We drove past my house and saw Daddy's truck in the drive and all the lights off. I told Tom Paul how to get to Granny's. The sleet had slacked off, and Tom Paul's truck wasn't having any trouble on the road.

When he pulled up to the gate, I jumped out and swung it open. When he drove through, I closed it and jumped back inside. I told him to pull behind Granny's house and park.

When he did, he slid across, and we started fooling around. It had been a while since we'd been alone together. I sat against the passenger door and let his hands go where they pleased. I wanted Tom Paul, but for some reason, I couldn't get what happened earlier off my mind. All I could think about was how Daddy snatched that trash bag away and told me to get in the truck. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it didn't seem right.

Tom Paul was undoing the button of my jeans and trying to get his hands down my panties. I pushed him away.

"What the hell, Sadie? I thought we come out here to fool around."

"We did, but something ain't right?"

"You ain't on the rag, are you?"

"No. I just have a weird feeling about something."

"What? It ain't me, is it? Look, I put on deodorant—"

"No. From earlier. Me and Daddy come out here to dump that trash and… I don't know, something about it wasn't right."

"Like what?"

"Well, he acted funny. I was pulling a sack out and it come open. He snatched it from me and told me to get in the truck."

"That ain't weird. It's fucking cold out, Sadie. He probably wanted to get it over with."

Tom Paul slid back across to his side and stared out the windshield for a while. Then he said, "I got an old flashlight back behind the seat. If it'll burn, you wanna get out and have a look?"

I thought about it for a bit and said I might.

He rifled around behind the seat before pulling out the old light. He hit the end of it twice with his palm and it came on.

"Come on, then. Let's see whatever it is you aim to find. I come out here for some pussy, and now I guess I'm gonna end up digging through some nasty ass trash."

"You keep mouthing me and there ain't gonna be no pussy, period."

Tom Paul huffed and got out. I buttoned my shirt and jeans and opened the door.

He was ahead of me. I could see the light bouncing on the ground as he walked. I hurried up and caught him by the arm and walked with him toward the pit.

"Where'd y'all throw it in at?"

"Over there by that stump."

Tom Paul shined the light into the pit. I could see the two sacks.

"I reckon I'll crawl down there and open 'em up," I said.

"That's all you. I ain't climbing down in no trash pit. It smells like shit up here. Down yonder'll be worse. If you wanna go down there, I'll help you, but I ain't about to."

"You're fucking something, ain't you? If I didn't know better, I'd think you was a girl."

"But you know I ain't."

"I do, but if you don't help me, don't expect to feel like a man anytime soon."

Tom Paul rolled his eyes and climbed down into the pit. He held his arms up, and I jumped down. The frozen grass crackled under our feet. A layer of sleet had settled on the bags, and they sparkled in the flashlight's beam.

"Which one you wanna open first?"

"I ain't sure."

"Well, eenie meenie that shit or something. It's fucking freezing."

"You are a puss, ain't you?"

"I don't know why I mess with you."

"How about I do one, and you do the other? That work?" I said.

"Alright," Tom Paul said, and started untying one of the bags.

I squatted down beside him.

He pulled it open. The bag was full of fish heads, deer parts, and duck carcasses Daddy had breasted out. It was worse than anything I'd ever smelled. Both of us retched.

"Fuck me, Sadie. That's godawful. I ain't opening another one."

"You ain't got to. Give me that flashlight."

Tom Paul handed me the light and walked off.

I knelt down by the other bag and worked at the knot Daddy put in it.

I could hear Tom Paul puking behind me.

I got my middle finger in the knot and worked it loose. When the bag came open, I scrambled back and put my hands over my mouth.

Tom Paul had finished puking and I could hear him walking back toward me.

"Don't you come over here," I said.

"That bad?"

"Worse than you can imagine."

"Well, I ain't coming. That last one was as bad as anything I've ever smelled. It's damn cold, Sadie. If it ain't nothing, tie it back up, and let's go home."

I grabbed the corners of the bag and tried not to look back inside while I fumbled around, trying to tie it closed. I was shaking and my fingers didn't want to work. When I finished, I stood up. Tom Paul had walked closer.

"I told you to stay over there," I said.

"What's in that bag?"

"Something awful. If you couldn't take the other, you can't handle that one."

"Maybe now I wanna look."

"You don't."

"I might."

"I might wanna fuck a little. You mess with that bag anymore and that ain't happening. Now climb up and pull me out of here."

I gave him the flashlight, and Tom Paul clambered up the face of the pit. When he got to the top, he shined the flashlight over toward the bag. When the light hit it I could see that when I made the knot, some hair got stuck in it, and you could see it hanging out.

I wasn't sure if Tom Paul could see it from up there, but I could.

"Hey," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Shine that light over here at me?"

"I'm looking at something."

"Well, look at these instead."

Tom Paul shined the light back at me, and I pulled my shirt and bra up so he could see my tits.

"Now, will you pull me up out of this shit hole?"

"All right," he said. He knelt down and grabbed me by both arms, and pulled me up.

"Can we go now?" I said.

"I reckon."

"You got someplace we can go? I owe you a piece."

"Yeah, I reckon I can find a spot."

We climbed back in the truck, and Tom Paul drove us back to the gate. I got out, closed it, and slid back inside.

Tom Paul pulled out on the road and drove us back toward town.

The sleet had stopped now, and the night was clear. I watched the yellow dotted lines on the highway dart underneath us.

"My Aunt Janie has an old wooden henhouse with a heater in it behind her house. They're out of town. That work?" Tom Paul said.

"Yeah. That'll be good," I said.

"You all right?"

"I'm all right."

"You ain't acting all right."

"I'm all right, damn it. Just drive."

I wasn't all right, though. I wasn't sure what would happen, when, or how. But I was sure that once I told Daddy what I did, he would have to go back out there to clean up my mess.

Any Minute Now

Lisa Thornton

I have to move because my building is made of bricks and we're due for an earthquake, he says, lighting a cigarette off the burning end of his last one. The setting sun hovers above the pine trees next to the park. His knee bounces under the picnic table. Every eight minutes he looks at the sky.

He exhales smoke through his nose and says his case worker has missed his last two appointments. He's pissed about it. His voice is an octave higher than you'd expect. He's always changed the subject fast like that.

We used to drink beer at that bar with the plastic ashtrays back when he was on some people having soiled souls and some people having pure souls and he could see the difference. Something about a light in their chests. Then they passed that no smoking indoors rule.

I watch an ant try to crawl out of a gouge in the table. He's always loved living things, any kind. He used to collect baby snakes, back before his mother died and he had to get his own place. Slippery things he'd find in the fields. When we were little and he stood barely one head taller than me, my mother would take me over there and he'd run up to me out by the shed where the guinea hens lived, taking a break from tossing them off the roof to try to get them to fly and open his hands to show me a coiled up black shoestring in his palm, two eyes and pink tongue flicking.

He has a picture of his mother in his wallet, and I see it sometimes when he's paying for burgers or cigarettes. Her hair cut in one of those 1970s shags. The same haircut my mother had. They shared everything seems like, the hair, the face, the egg they sprouted in. Some blip in their genes that ended them both so early.

I say no earthquakes have hit New England lately. We're due, he says. He suspects the Saudi prince is using a weather station up on Mount Washington as a landing pad. There's a senator he's sure is in on it. I try to help the ant with a stick but accidentally rip off one of its legs.

A bald eagle floats above us, probably on its way to Hanover or Lebanon. My car would make it that far, maybe even farther, but I don't know if I can leave him. I'm not saying he needs me. But I'm the one they call to pick him up. I'm the one who explains him. He'd probably go with me if I asked. But how would he get his social security? He'd never see that case worker again. And maybe I would like to know what I am without him. Or just disappear completely for a while.

He stares into the distance the way he used to when we hung out nights at the gravel pit before they put up the fences, chucking rocks into the void. I tell him there's a new item on the burger place menu, a chicken salad, to take his mind off it more than anything, whatever it is it's stuck on. He nods but I don't think he hears me. Not really.

He looks at his watch and then at the sky. He stands up and shoves his smokes and lighter in his coat pocket. His fingers are cracked and puffy. There are no snakes today, no black whirls in his palm.

Sunlight takes eight minutes to reach the earth. That's why he looks. Every eight minutes. Like clockwork. He checks to make sure it's still coming. Coming to find us here, in the woods. To make sure it hasn't burned out up there and we just don't know about it yet.

He leans over and blows on the gouge in the table like an enormous wind from the north and the ant goes flying, three legs tumbling over and over in the air like it weighs nothing, like it might catch an updraft and escape over the tops of the pine trees, along the state line, above Boston's sharp tips, across the harbor and out to sea where the fishermen won't see it, the whales won't see it, the seagulls and egrets and those long necked birds that dive into the water and come back up twenty feet away with a fish in their mouths, black feathers slick as an oil spill, won't even know it's there.

Slow Burn by Godavari G.

A contemporary love story that swept me up from the West Coast of India and tossed me on the West Coast of America.

Ashwini Gangal

I swiped right by mistake. And now we're married.

That's the best opening line for our love story, a story I've decided to write about, now that the dust is finally settling on the whirlwind that swept us up a year ago and has now flung us on different continents. As I write this, an hour shy of midnight in Mumbai, my husband has just had breakfast in San Francisco. This is the story of how we met.

Why am I writing this? This kind of self-indulgence doesn't come naturally to me – or to Xantanu. I tried telling myself it's because an aunt of mine asked me to document the details and share it on a family chat group, or because it'll help me exercise my writing muscle, or because it's good to write things down for posterity, if nothing else. But actually, it's simply because it's a very romantic story, one that proves, for the millionth time, that love is an enterprise worth undertaking.

So here goes. This is my version of the chain of events. I am sure if he were to write down his version – which he won't – it will be a very different account.

I actually did swipe right on Xantanu's profile on Bumble by accident. He was visiting his family in Matunga and landed up in my geographical radius – that's how the app works. I didn't want to date guys settled overseas, least of all in the United States, and I probably didn't notice the part in his write-up that said 'California'. But by the time I came clean about this mistake and excused myself from his life, as it were, it was too late. We'd already begun a conversation that had moved to WhatsApp and I was busy playing cupid to him and my best friend Sukaina, who, at the time, was interested in going abroad.

As it happened, Xantanu and I didn't meet on that trip, and he flew back to SF. He met Sukaina twice, though. Goaded by his mom, he even met an 'arranged marriage match' on this trip (I'm rolling my eyes here).

Anyway, Xantanu and Sukaina made friends and even kept in touch for a few weeks after he left, but the tricky thing was – Xantanu kept in touch with me too. He called, texted, even video called regularly. They were all benign conversations about this and that, with a hint of flirting… actually no, he didn't flirt with me. It was his salutations, really. "Hey pretty girl", "What's up pretty girl", that sort of thing. But it was quite obvious he liked me. I liked him too, but didn't for a moment forget the fact that he has an "American pincode", as he likes to say. I wasn't able to separate the guy from his country, and all the NRI trappings therein. Funnily, for weeks after he landed there, Sukaina, Xantanu and I spoke on three-way conference calls now and then.

Now, the reason we didn't meet while he was in Mumbai, is part of history – it was the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic – the deadly delta wave, no less – and because I live with my mom (and because I'm a scaredy-cat in general) I was taking all the social distancing rules very seriously. This was before they made the vaccines. Besides, what kind of cupid would I be if I met him after introducing him to my friend? The wave swept India and exposed all the warts in my socio-political reality. At an unconscious level, I changed my mind about migration and a couple of drunk calls from Xantanu helped cement our 'relationship'.

So, our cross-country conversations went on steadily for months. We spoke about work and family and friends and ambitions, the past, the future… and fell in love. To the extent possible over video calls, anyway. In the real world, however, I was speaking to local Bumble bees and 'matrimony guys' tossed at me by well-meaning family members. Meanwhile, Xantanu was also going on dates in San Francisco. Nothing worked out for either of us.

Finally, with the international flight ban behind me and two doses of Covishield in my body, about nine months after we first encountered each other in the digital universe, I took a mini-sabbatical from work and flew all the way to the US to meet him. People go to the Starbucks down the road for their first date; I went halfway across the globe for mine, in the middle

of a global contagion. It was the worst time for international travel.

The first time we met was at San Francisco Airport. We wore face masks. I was sweaty and tired and full of travel grime, wore no makeup and sported dark circles. But I did make sure I brushed my teeth before I stepped out of the airport – what if he came running towards me, roses in hand, grabbed me and kissed me?

None of that. I suppose the odds of that kind of spontaneity become slim when you ask the guy to pre-order hair conditioner, bananas and *bhendi* for you. I crashed at his place, yes. On the couch, no.

It was comfortable and familiar and I felt like we'd known each other for decades. One of my clearest memories of the first few minutes at his apartment is of me sitting on the bedroom floor, unpacking just enough for a quick shower; I remember taking my underclothes from the bag and flinging them across the room, onto the bed, while he watched the spectacle like it was a regular, everyday occurrence.

Today, at get-togethers and house parties when we tell acquaintances and strangers the story of how we went straight into a live-in relationship the very day we met, we do a double take ourselves. But it felt so right and easy. Nonetheless, it was an overwhelming month. I met his flatmate, his friends, his city, the DIY culture of America. I also met my own insecurities. Moreover, the prospect of living as an immigrant in the US is unattractive to me. But I allowed my adoration for Xantanu to guide me… and by the time I flew back, I'd already asked him to marry me.

In keeping with the dramatic nature of the whole affair, I wrote my proposal with red lipstick on his bathroom mirror. By the time I boarded my flight back home, I was wearing a heart shaped ring and had two cancelled appointments at two different marriage bureaus in California to my credit. Yes, we almost did the deed. But it was too much too soon to actually go through with it. The first appointment stood cancelled due to numerology (his family said the date was inauspicious) and we, mostly I, got drunk the night before the second appointment. It was on the morning of my flight back home anyway, so we were planning to drive from SF to Sacramento, get married and go straight to the airport. In hindsight, that might have been a touch too dramatic, even for us.

On my homebound flight, as I flew over the North Pole, I saw the shimmering green aurora borealis polar lights from my window. I am a hardened atheist, but it really did feel as though the heavens were dancing for me and my newfound love.

Once I came back to Mumbai, the real schbang began. Given my imminent migration, the clock started ticking on a bunch of legal and work-related things. My mother got covid, then post-covid neuropathy. Xantanu's father underwent surgeries for a long-standing diabetic foot issue. My world was spinning very fast suddenly.

We decided to get married in the US to avoid a large gathering in Mumbai in the middle of another wave, so we booked yet another date at the marriage bureau in SF. It was a no-show, because, after a lot of discussion and deliberation, we got married in Mumbai after all. While we fed each other bananas on stage in front of an audience (one of the many ridiculous rituals in a regressive Hindu wedding) some officiator in America probably thought a sorry brown couple had broken up after all.

The whole process leading up to 'the day' was chaotic – somehow, with us, it has always been like that. My brother, who lives in Hong Kong, had to jump through a hundred hoops of his own to join our celebration – that's a whole different story with its own insane twists and turns. With Xantanu and Godavari, nothing is easy. On our wedding night, for instance, he was applying eau de cologne on my forehead because I was burning up with fever. Covid, of course. Instead of going to the gorgeous beaches of Maldives for our honeymoon, I took him to Devgaon, a quiet village in Maharashtra, to isolate in a huge stone cottage in the middle of a jungle, where bugs feasted on his NRI blood. That's us.

Even our stunning pre-wedding photos belie the madness that went into creating those perfect frames; we were posing in a swimming pool at Thane at the crack of dawn and then on a boat in the Arabian Sea at dusk, on the same day. More than once, we – us and our photographer – almost fell into the sea. There was

a moment on those dangerously choppy waters when I held onto nothing but Xantanu's body; it was a fleeting second, but it was enough. I gave him his wedding band that evening on the boat.

There are many more examples to illustrate the insanity that always surrounds us. We actually printed two sets of official wedding cards with two different dates! The reason is solid, I swear. No, not numerology. It's got everything to do with the BMC and my US visa. Speaking of which, as I write this story, I'm waiting for my visa agent to get me a slot so that I can meet my husband at San Francisco Airport once again. It could take months, I am told.

Hopefully, this time, he'll run towards me, roses in hand, grab me and kiss me.

Erasure Poem for the Country Juke Joint from the Honky Tonk Man's "Vote of Confidence"

Josh Shepard

"The Honky Tonk Man is not getting the response he deserves."

-The Honky Tonk Man to Jesse "the Body" Ventura,
November 15, 1986

Honky Tonk feel good.
I've done shook a lot,
I kissed a lot.

Honky Tonk is
the music, the body,
screaming, shouting, & dancing
shaking, rattling & rolling

I need—
I need Honky Tonk.
I need it real bad.

Erasure Poem for the Lonesome from "Double J" Jeff Jarrett's "With My Baby Tonight"

Josh Shepard

"What were your excuses? Remember the gold tooth?"
-Jeff Jarrett to Vince McMahon, October 20, 1997

my working hands know hell
my arms, true like light

o, this world,
hold me in night

alone in the world
we never knew love

my mind, my worry,
I swear, I can't

be alone
(I can't)
(I can't)
(I can't)
(I can't)
(I can't)
(I can't)

Bag Limit

M.E. Proctor

We swore we would not get caught in a family remediation situation again. After what happened with Cindy, we all agreed that we had to put the old ways, our parents' ways, behind us for good. And maybe avoid spending too much time together, as our interactions tended to veer toward combustible. That turned out to be wishful thinking. On my part anyway. My siblings kept apart from each other but they all came to me. Because it was just too convenient. I ran the farm. I had space and equipment and they were dedicated hunters, in and out of season. Morris dropped his deer carcasses in my freezer without caring what was already in there. Lenny never cleaned up after himself in the barn, leaving piles of offal that attracted all the stray dogs and scavengers in a two-mile radius. I protested, repeatedly and to no avail. There was very little I could do to teach my brothers manners. Cindy was better behaved, and cleaner, but she crashed at the farm in need of affection and a drink after each spat with whatever moron she happened to bang, and she didn't give a damn if I had company.

Martha was different. She was twenty-two and quiet as a mouse. She just graduated from college with a degree in computer science. The first one in the family to make it that far. I assumed she was smart. Hell, she had to be, right? But smarts don't keep you out of trouble. The sort of trouble that sticks to our family like skunk funk.

We are the Bevill family. I'm Ryan. Morris, Cindy and Lenny are ahead of me. Little Martha is last, our parents' afterthought. Our precious Martha. The one that could redeem us all. Not that we aimed very high in the redemption sweepstakes. Seeing Martha happy, with a job that paid more than minimum wage, living in a town far away from our dark woods and cow manure, married with a couple of kids running around, was all we desired.

It was not to be.

Bevill. Devil.

Martha was slumped at my kitchen table, racked by sobs that were as painful to watch as the cuts and bruises marring her pretty face. She was a mess and I only saw the exposed parts of her. I could guess what horrors were under her raincoat. Judging from the way she held herself, the bastard had been at her with a baseball bat or a length of pipe.

I held my phone out. "I'm calling an ambulance."

She howled. "Ryan … no."

I hadn't managed to get a lot out of her since she tumbled through the screen door.

A party at a friend's house, drinking, a taxi back to her apartment, and two guys that waited for her in the hallway. One of them was an ex-boyfriend. He had the handheld tool. The other had heavy fists.

Jealousy, I thought. Yet another jerk who didn't take rejection well.

I was wrong. This was all coming back to the family.

Instead of calling 911, I called my brothers and sister and told them to come to the farm for an emergency meeting. I said it was about Martha. There were no recriminations.

Cindy arrived first, which was fortunate. She took Martha to the bedroom to assess the damage. My first aid kit was extensive. When you live on a farm, and work with machinery designed to slice, cut and plow, miles away from the nearest urgent care facility, you better be prepared.

By the time Morris and Lenny showed up, Cindy had cleaned up Martha the best she could, tucked her in my bed, and administered a hefty dose of painkillers. She had also dug out the full story.

"It's ugly," Cindy said.

I'd seen and heard enough to know that much. The total picture still sent a chill down my spine. Morris reacted with predictable rage. Lenny, less demonstrative, pulled out the 9mm he never was without. I put a hand on the gun.

"Let's think," I said.

"What's there to think about?" Morris growled. "They beat her up and had their way with her. There are no two ways to go about this."

"Right," Lenny said. "They don't know who they messed with."

Wrong. They knew. "You heard Cindy," I said. "They told Martha they were teaching her a lesson. Because she's a Bevill."

"That prick Davis was *cleansing his name*, his words," Cindy said. "Because he slept with Martha and that was a shame to be washed in blood. A dirty Bevill tramp, he called her. Made him impure." She sniggered. "Fucking asshole."

"Bullshit," Morris said. "Who's that Davis dude? Did we cross him somehow?"

"Not that I know," Lenny said. "Mind you, we cross people each time we take a breath." He winked at Cindy. "Right, sis?"

She let out a brief chuckle. The Bevills cut a wide swath through the county. There was no way to tell how many respectable citizens our mere presence offended. It went back generations. Bevill devil. It made for interesting business challenges in running the farm. The county contributed zero to my bottom line. I could have sold the property, and moved, but with our toxic reputation came an unhealthy dollop of prickly pride and two stiff middle fingers eager to poke as many eyes as possible.

"I don't know Ron Davis or his sidekick," I said. "He might just be a musclebound jerk. Martha drops him. He feels insulted. Then he finds out she's one of the notorious Bevills and he decides to play vigilante."

"Hurting our lamb," Morris said. "Big mistake."

They all concurred. "What if it's a set-up?" I said.

Cindy was the first to see my point. "Ryan's right. Touch one of us, and we rush in to get revenge. And walk into a trap, potentially. Who wants us out of the picture?"

"Half the world," Lenny said. "Damn it. What do we do? Can't let it slide."

"Not my intention," I said. "Let's find out about this Davis fellow. Discreet surveillance."

"Martha said she met him in college. He was working on a post-graduate," Cindy said. "I'll go. I'm less obvious than you guys."

We talked late into the night. We hadn't gone into the field together since Cindy's misadventure with the meth cookers. That had been a low risk operation. Meth labs blew up all the time. Dealing with Davis and his buddy was more complex, in a college town instead of the woods. And these guys must be expecting us. I could feel the buzz of adrenalin. My siblings' eyes sparkled with dark lightning.

Our parents told us that we were made for this. Hunting was in our blood.

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Cindy was the best tracker among us. She adapted to the urban terrain without a hitch, and swapped her camo overalls for a collection of wigs, glasses, and stylish outfits. Morris went to observe and failed to recognize her.

"Out of a deer blind," Cindy said, "you might as well be blindfolded. And who's idea was it to send you to town anyway?" She punched him in the chest. "Davis and Rucker could have spotted you, dimwit."

"I sent Morris," I said. "As back-up. I don't want to have to nurse both my sisters. What did you find out about that Rucker fellow?"

We were at the farm, in the kitchen. Martha was asleep. She was getting better but tired easily, and she didn't need to hear what we were planning to do. Cindy reported daily to me over the phone but after two weeks she felt she had gathered enough intelligence to move to the active phase.

"Rucker is former military," Cindy said. "He's a buddy of Davis's older brother. The three of them hang together without apparently hanging together. When Davis is alone, the two others are nearby pretending they're not with him. When Davis is with Rucker, the brother is in a corner somewhere, keeping an eye on them."

"Coverage," Morris said. "It confirms what you suspected, Ryan. They expect us to come after them."

"Guns?" I said.

"Rucker is packing," Cindy said. "The brother might be armed too, but I can't be sure. He wears baggy clothes, and he's big. Twice as wide as you, Morris."

That was big. Morris hovered around 260 pounds. Still light on his feet, and fast. I'd learned the painful way that heavy guys were not always clumsy.

"They can't keep that up forever," Lenny said. "They'll have to lower their guard eventually."

"We can't keep at it forever either," Cindy said. "I gotta go back to work."

She had a regular job. I was my own boss but the farm needed attention. Morris and Lenny were freelancers—involved in a variety of criminal enterprises—but they too had gigs and contracts that they couldn't drop without consequences.

"Either we do it now or we forget about these guys and go about our business as if nothing happened," I said.

"And then what?" Morris said. "One day they assault Cindy in a grocery parking lot? Or they firebomb the farm? If these guys intended to hurt the family when they attacked Martha, they're not going to sit on it, mark my word."

I knew he was right. "Let's find an opening. No system is perfect."

"They're always together," Lenny said, a dreamy expression on his thin hawkish face. If Cindy was our tracker, Lenny was our expert in prey behavior, animal or human, town or country, it made very little difference. "I hate hunters that use feeders to lure deer, but with Davis, I don't have the same scruples. He's a wild hog. No redeeming value." He popped a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and lit it at the gas stove. "Not even good eating."

Cindy made a gurgling sound that turned into a chuckle. "Gross."

"What's in the feeder to entice the game?" Morris said. "Not Cindy. One lame sister is enough for me."

"I'll be bait," Lenny said.

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The feeder analogy was inaccurate. The feeder is stationary. The deer come to it. Lenny's plan was similar to lure coursing, with Davis & Co. in the role of the dogs chasing Lenny-the-rabbit across a field of play carefully designed. Like the athletic pooches

running the course, the men were not supposed to catch the prey.

Lenny was perfect for the bait job. He had the country bumpkin act down to an art. Faded denim ensemble, scuffed shitkickers, long sandy hair not too clean, and a three-day stubble that tried to be on trend and failed. All that on a lanky frame that spoke of a hard life and bad habits. I was impressed. In disguise, he was a lifetime away from the cleaned-up Lenny who never left a bar without a pretty thing wrapped around his neck.

"What if they shoot Lenny on sight?" Morris said.

"And get charged with murder?" I said. "They'll want to take care of him in a quiet, discreet place, no witnesses, and use him to draw us in. They must think Martha didn't tell us who attacked her. Explains why we didn't make a move."

Everything was in place, including an iron-clad alibi in the event we came under suspicion. Martha had broken up with Ron Davis seven weeks ago and she shouldn't be in the crosshairs of investigators. In theory. But she was a Bevill. If cops started looking, her name would surface and the family would be scrutinized. It was as certain as sunrise. Our grandparents knew it, our parents too, and the lesson was well-learned. Cover your tracks. Especially as we were seldom innocent. The last time was when Cindy was snookered by the meth dealers. We erased them. Five of them. One for each of us. We bagged our limit on that one. It happened a bit over a year ago. At the time, we all believed it was our last hunt.

***

The plan unfolded as expected. Lenny-the-rabbit led the dogs to a cabin by a lake. Davis, his brother, and his buddy, Rucker, never knew what hit them. They were cleanly expedited. The lake was deep. Properly weighed, they would not surface. A drought might expose them some day.

Three brothers, three hits. The bag limit again.

"You don't think we're overdoing it with the RV and the camping at the state park?" Morris said.

The girls were waiting for us, playing recorded conversations and music, building the pretense that we were all together at the campsite, cooking barbecue.

"I'm not getting the needle because of these fuckers, Morris," I said. "So, we overdo the safety, like Mom and Pop did, and the grans. The Bevill family won't go under on my watch."

Lenny was gathering the guns and breaking them up. "Nothing wrong with a righteous kill. I wouldn't mind fish for dinner tomorrow, for a change. I got my fill of red meat for a while."

"Deer's lean," Morris said.

"So's wild hog but I don't like it," Lenny said.

I left them to their culinary conversation. The moon was bright as a newly minted quarter.

Clean beginnings might be out of reach for us. We were tied to this land by blood, weighed down as effectively as the bodies in the depth of the lake. I wanted to believe there was still hope for Martha. She had been hurt but she could recover. I would get her out of here, drive her down to Houston, where nobody would give a shit her last name was Bevill.

Rockfish

SR Schulz

Paul pulled off the side of the highway so Jessie could stop at the Jetty Market. Jessie came out with a 24-pack of beer. They cracked the cans open as they turned down a side road towards the empty headlands near the mouth of the bay. The sky turned a pale pink, with tears of orange and white following the setting sun. They parked the truck and grabbed the beer and sleeping bags. Paul mentioned grabbing their rods.

We could cast out into the sea and pull something up out of the dark.

Jessie shook his head. I don't need anything out of there at night, he said.

Paul went back to the truck and grabbed his rod. It's not about need, man. I just like pulling something out from the other side and showing him our end.

You ever catch a shark?

How am I going to catch a shark? They bite right through the line.

Steel line.

They walked along the path lined with overgrown, waist high grass.

I'd want a steel anchor to keep me on the shore. I don't know what size sharks are out there. I don't know if I want it to stay on the hook, Paul said.

The path ended on a small patch of ferns and flat rocks. The crash of the waves was deafening. They threw their sleeping bags and mats in a pile and walked over to the edge. About fifty feet below, the waves crashed into the rock. Paul stared out at the horizon and tried to imagine how far the waves had come, how long they'd travelled. He tried to imagine their birth. Their beginning. But he knew it was infinite. Like trying to imagine the origin of wind. It just was.

It made Paul feel small which he liked. Sometimes, in the swath of people in the city, he imagined he was a giant, even if he wasn't or never would be. He pretended he was, so as not to be squashed down like so many others. But out here, with the vastness of the ocean stretched before him, he was an atom, a blade of grass.

Paul lit up a cigarette and shared it with Jessie while they watched the sun set. Jessie didn't smoke but liked to share Paul's when they were together. It helped settle Jessie's guilt. Jessie's Mom had emphysema and walked around with a torpedo shaped oxygen tank. Paul remembered when they were kids, how pretty Jessie's Mom used to be before the cigarettes cut lines in her skin and the alcohol yellowed her eyes. Watching Jessie's Mom deteriorate didn't stop Paul from drinking and smoking though. He figured it had to be more complicated than just smoke and booze. It was in people's blood. A weakness or a deficiency that made them susceptible to its evils. Paul knew there was more than he could see or understand. A magic or strangeness to the world that wasn't meant to be calculated. It the vast scales of humanity, someone was setting their own rules not meant to be discovered so easy. All Paul knew was that he'd taken punches that would've killed someone lesser. Some people just couldn't be knocked down.

Jessie made a fire and they placed their cans of Dinty Moore Beef Stew near the flames. Paul put a chunk of beef on his hook and cast it out into inky pacific below.

You didn't say but I figured you wanted to come out here because of your grandpa, Jessie said. He pushed around the burning logs with a crooked stick.

It reminds me of him, Paul said. Him and Dad took us here when we were kids, remember?

He was always real kind to me.

Paul thought he felt the line pull and gripped the rod with both hands. They went silent. The fire crackled and the waves swung below. Nothing. Paul loosened his grip.

No, I actually had some shit happen at work and I needed to get out of the city. Grandpa Ray had been dying for a while so as much as it hurt that he died this week, it was a slow burn.

Work sucks in general, Jessie said. He took a bite out of his Dinty Moore can and chewed with his mouth open trying to cool down the stew.

I'm surprised you got out so easy.

Quit.

I should?

No, I did.

Paul turned around. Really?

Fuck them.

Paul laughed. Sure, but what are you going to do for money?

I don't know. Figure some shit out. Maybe I'll just live out here.

I gotta pick up Grandpa Ray's ashes on Monday, Paul said. He never said for sure where he wanted them spread.

Jessie noticed the pile of empties next to him and decided to open another. This is a nice place to rest.

Paul ran his hand through his hair. I feel like you don't really rest where you're put, you know?

Jesse nodded. All those poor bastards out there at the bottom of the sea? Still there? Don't think so.

Paul reeled in and checked the beef. It was gone. He tried a potato on the hook this time and cast it out further into the ocean.

Do you ever feel like time is all messed up? Paul asked.

What do you mean? Jessie said.

Like things are moving way too fast and then slow as shit.

All the time man. Time is relative. Or some shit like that. It's always changing.

Paul woke up in the morning covered in dew and half inside his sleeping bag. The fire was out but the black charcoal logs still smoked. His rod hung out over the cliff edge, nestled between two rocks. The line dropped straight down into the sea. Paul stretched and tried to discern what time it was, but the dark revealed little. It could've been five AM, it could've been midafternoon. He smelled seaweed and salt, fresh air and fish. Jessie was still asleep, a wool cap pulled over half his face. Paul grabbed the rod and began to reel in. It reeled easy until he met a faint resistance. Maybe a stick or some seaweed. He kept reeling, waiting for whatever it was to break the surface. He pulled it up and dropped it in a pile of gravel. It writhed blindly like an earthworm searching for its way back down to the dark. It was a gray rockfish with huge yellow eyes and a spiny top fin. It gave up fighting quickly and lay on the rock. Paul watched it jutting out its lower lip and gasping for air. He felt a tear come down his face. He pulled the hook from its mouth and threw it back to the sea.

Jessie's boat was at a nearby marina. They got in the truck and drove ten minutes to get there. It was early, just past seven, and the only people awake on the coast were fishermen keen on catching salmon running up the rivers back home to spawn and die. The sun broke through as they untied from the dock. Hints of blue appeared through the gray sky. The wind tunneled past the bar and lashed tears from Paul's eyes as they set out. The smell of gasoline and dead fish flooded the boat. Paul cranked the outboard while Jessie wired red snapper carcasses to the floor of the crab rings. Their rods were rigged with herring bait, the best for catching the larger and better tasting Chinook salmon. They planned to throw a few rings out for crabs and retrieve them later.

Paul yelled over the roar of the waves and the idling of the engine and Jessie heaved the iron ring, chocked-full of fish heads, over the gunwale and it sank into the obsidian-green. The yellow rope trailed it down into the void. They dropped two more rings, drove back up river where the water was calm, and waited for the Dungeness crabs to arrive with the incoming tide. The sun torched the late spring sky, and by ten the clouds dissipated back into the atmosphere, allowing tendrils of marigold to blossom around the boat. Paul and Jessie trolled slowly in the slack tide, their lines dragging the spinning herring behind them, drinking cans of Ranier, and smelling the mix of forest, river and sea.

So, how's Chrissy? Jessie asked.

She's great man. We are really solid, Paul said.

When are you going to get a ring?

When I grow up.

When's that?

Not soon.

Jessie nodded and sipped his beer.

Why do you always ask me about that? You think I won't come out here if we get married?

Jessie shrugged. I just thought that was what people did. Get married after a while.

People do all sorts of dumb shit.

They reeled in, checked their bait and then lowered their line back into the green-black water. Paul looked over at a nearby boat.

They got one, Paul said.

Goddamn, Jessie said.

They watched the man fight with the fish, pulling his rod back with his arms, legs and back. It was strong enough to pull the boat in a half circle.

He's gonna lose it. What a dumbass, Jessie said.

He's got it. He's got it, Paul said.

He heard something tapping the aluminum hull and looked down to see his pole thrashing up and down.

Fuck, I got one on, Paul said.

Jessie reeled in while trying to navigate away from the other boat so the two fish didn't end up crossing lines. Paul kept reeling. It was an exhilarating feeling to have something fight for its life at the other end of the line. He felt it trashing and pulling, giving every ounce of his energy to survive. It was the feeling Paul was chasing. Everything went blank and all that mattered was the fight. It was essentially the exact opposite feeling the rockfish gave him.

The water swirled where the line dipped below the surface.

Get the net! Paul yelled.

Jessie scrambled to get it ready. Paul pulled as hard as he could, careful not to snap the rod or the line. The line disappeared into the water no more than five feet from the boat but they saw nothing.

Pull up a bit. He's gonna run and snap off on the prop, Jessie said.

Paul lifted the rod into the air and from the green shadows he saw a flash of silver. It was large. Both wide and long. Then the flash disappeared, and the reel buzzed as the line was pulled out.

He's running, Paul said, and then there was nothing. The rod became straight and the line went slack. Paul and Jessie stared off into the deep hoping it was a trick or an undercurrent, but as Paul reeled in, they realized it wasn't. Paul's hook was still attached but somehow had been stripped clean of the herring baitfish. The salmon had dislodged the hook and was gone.

Paul sat down and cussed to himself. A flood of memories came back, both fish he'd caught and fish he'd lost. All the advice he'd gotten. All the experience he'd accumulated. It had led up to this moment, just like all the moments before, and he'd lost the fish. He felt like he'd been beaten in a fight he wasn't meant to lose. Jessie tried to comfort him but he wasn't ready for it. He stared at the empty bow and pictured Grandpa Ray. He'd lost a Chinook before with Grandpa Ray, and he'd never scolded him or gotten angry. He just looked at Paul like he was a child, even when he was, it still never felt right. He looked at Paul with disappointment, but more than that, his eyes told of a defeat that felt permanent. Grandpa Ray never had to say anything, but it was times like that when Paul knew, he'd never be the fisherman he was. And maybe that was the most disappointing part for Grandpa Ray. He knew about Paul's struggles with school and reading. He knew that there was only one arena where Paul might match up to pass him, and that was fishing. As Paul re-baited his hook, he felt Grandpa Ray's disappointment settle in his chest.

They called it quits after they got too drunk to pay attention to their lines and decided to go pull the crab traps. The tide was starting to run out again too, so if they wanted any crabs, now was the time.

Paul drove the boat within inches of the orange buoy and Jessie reached down to grab it. He carefully pulled the slack out of the rope and when the rope tightened, he attacked it, pulling ferociously, salt water whipping into the boat with strands of seaweed.

Seems heavy, Paul said.

The ring appeared from the depths like something seen through thick stained glass.

Got it. Got it, Paul said as he helped Jessie bring it into the boat. A few crabs escaped off the sides and

flittered away like swimming spiders. Jessie sat down hard on the bench, breathing heavy from the pull. Between them lay the ring, filled to the brim with crabs. Their wet, hard shells scraped against each other as they crawled. Paul grabbed the largest and threw it into a white bucket filled with water. It skittered along the plastic sides as it sank to the bottom. Jessie sent more than half the haul airborne as he quickly eliminated the smaller ones. The crabs near the bottom were still feasting on the remains of the fish heads, their claws tearing at the eyeballs and fighting others away.

Paul stared at the four large crabs perched atop one another in the bucket of water. He'd heard that crabs could drown themselves in small buckets after they use up all the oxygen. What a strange way to die, Paul thought, drowning where they were meant to survive. They motored over to the next ring and this time Jessie drove and Paul pulled. Again, it was full of Dungeness, and they ended up with another five to keep. Paul threw a straggler crab out from the bottom of the boat and watched a glossy seal poke its head out before diving down to fetch it.

They went back to the marina where the deckhand had a large vat of boiling water. He charged them a couple of dollars to cook the crabs and after twenty minutes their burgundy shells turned crimson in the heat. Paul and Jessie cleaned them at the sink while looking out on the bay. Their warm insides slid down the silver sinks and down onto the rocks below. Paul cracked a leg while he worked, tasting the white, warm meat mixed with salt water. The sun was making its way down from its peak. Paul was in a state of drunken happiness. They sat on a driftwood log near the water and ate more crabs and drank more beer. Paul tried not to think about work, or Grandpa Ray's funeral, or the rockfish. Somehow, they all were related but he didn't want to try and connect the dots right now. He was here to slow down before he had to speed back up again, and that was what he was going to do.

You ever think about how the river is always flowing into the ocean, but it never fills up? Paul asked.

Jessie shook his head. The clouds must absorb just enough and bring it back as rain.

I don't think so. There's certain things that can't be had. You know? Thirsts that can't be quenched, itches that can't be scratched.

The ocean is infinite, Paul thought but didn't say. Jessie didn't appear to be listening. He was eating and drinking beer, focused on separating the crab meat from its shell.

The glaciers are melting at just the right speed, Paul said, thinking of the summer glaciers on the nearby mountains. They are melting just fast enough to fill the rivers and by the time they're almost spent, the snows come again.

How to Court a Proper New Year's Resolution / A Reminder for Me and Anyone Else New to the Gym(boree)

Jen Schneider

Start easy. But make sure to start. Be easy. On
yourself. It's by far the most important part. Secure
the gym ID. It's probably (still) in your pocket. Smile.
Not at the camera. Focus on your reflection. Inhale
the feel-good energy. Count. One. Two. Three. Be.

Next, stretch. Do not kvetch. Even though you'll
want to. For better or for mesh. Legs, times
two. Arms, too. Wide – of possibility. Four sets
of ten. With water breaks (pre-planned). Palms
dusted, also trusted. No more unexpected deliveries.

Hydration is an important part of the persistence
equation. Second only to dominance. Artificial
sweeteners (and greeters) can be (at times)
as effective as pure cane sugars. Also, divine. Take
seats (freshly wiped), claim open benches (freshly
dried), and ask questions (free weights, free of
charge, fresh language prized). Low impact is more
than no impact. Neither tickets nor
subservient acquiescence is needed.

Seize, then stifle mayhem, monitor acumen.
Channel paired socks (mismatches fine) and regular
upticks in stacked rings (for which the regulars pine).
Ticker tape and horizontal replay reels are as
common as athletic wear (Gildan and Lululemon).
Embrace (never race) stocked weights. Return stares.

Continue. Rotate limbs in directions grounded
in both whimsy and warmth. Let compass dials
spin. Permit ellipticals to spiral. Head North.
Twist abdomen muscles. East. Avoid studs.
Then West. Secure hard stops. Country tunes
are just as reliable as The Tops. Allow the Top
100 to tango easily with Fifties classics. Count.

On resistance. Bands and buds. Don't crouch. Place
headphones on (or in) ears. Keep moving. Remember
–
objects in motion generally maintain motion. Avoid
unbalanced
forces. Inertia is neither idyllic nor iconic. It's
movement (in any
direction) that counts. Compass dials know. Count on
it. Stand.

Up to time. For choice. Via stationary bikes or
treadmills.
Dumbbells or barbells. Perhaps both. Perhaps all. The
freeway
denied. Choose (machines, music, meanderings) – not
wisely,
but perfectly. Even if subjectively weird. Objectivity is
as much
a structure as a system. Balance is as much an illusion
as an
intention. States of existence stir (and sweat) of wires
not crossed but curated. For you. For me. (T)Read.

Scales of justice. Tea parties. Kettle balls.
Proclamations on patience. Archie on cells.
Dial-up also allowed. Revelations be told. Reveal (or
consume)
truths via the phone. Laugh out loud at Garfield.
Peruse
Dilbert. Doonesbury, too. Solve the crossword – NY
Times.
SF Chronicle. Washington Post. Challenges denied.
Come at Me.

Come at Us. Popular Mechanics and People collect
dust. Flip news feeds. Scroll thru the mockingbird.
Crush pages.
Carve pounds. Chill to oldies and Hollywood
wannabes. Tune up
on the latest Indie albums. Check out. Raise the
volume on
chin-up bars, medicine balls, and James Dean.

Count by twos. Next, by threes. Out loud. Why?
Because
you can. It's free. Don't doubt it. Dr. Pepper is to Birch
Beer as Pepsi is to Coke. All machines fully stocked.

Different weights for different folks. Drink – heartily.

Weave fibers of muscle and music. Include harmonies. Accent Ahems. Also, Amens. Blessings over bread. Desires
ready to be fed. Lycra are legumes fit just right, no matter
how tight. Neon pink is as proper as toes with no polish.
Barbells are never overdone. Beats are never outdone.

It's Planet Fitness -- after and before dark. No windows.
All weights. No waits. Turn right. Spin left. Balance,
then push boundaries. Pulse barbells. Recall labor.
Times four. Realize this is nothing and nothing More.
A place where balance is delivered in abundance. Wait.

Forget the roads – whether the Pacific Coast Highway or Route 101. The mat is less stressful than the I-95 corridor.
Go where The Streets Have No Names. Stream Born
to Run. Tread lightly. Guard valuables. Graze
stationary bicycles. Eye spy on lifeguards asleep
at an empty pool. Contemplate wading. Opt for weighting.

The deadlift bar is often hopping. Wait. Cards aren't needed.
No IDs. Only ideas of who we want to be. Plug buds in ears.
Neither yeast nor Beauty and the Beast. Choose tunes without care. Recklessly. No one will hear.
Red means stop. Green means go. The fox lurks
on overhead screens. Go ahead, scream. Don't worry
about what you wear. Don't wear anything at all. Bring
a change of clothes to shower. Don't change. No need for flowery deodorants. No one cares.

Stand. Stand in front of the mirror. Stare. Hard.
Flex. Harder. Smile at whoever returns. Repeat.

Spray handles with COVID-inspired potions. Before and after all uses.

And use cases. Spin weights. Spurn advances. Planet Fitness never
said men are from Mars (or mats) and women are from Venus.
The planets all look and loom the same from second-floor balconies.

String lanyards around collars. Regulate rings on all mats.
No worries if you can't lie flat. They can't push as you did.
Four births. No Gatorade. Avoid eye contact
with the channels on TV. Channel your own energy.
Lavender and lace. Joy. Chanel No 5. Overpriced. At Planet
Fitness, both scents and sensibilities are on sale. Free to fly.
Fly high. Dove both bar and bird.

It's not a race. Don't leave a trace. Leave a trace.
Bench trainers. Train benches. Mark time (not stretch marks),
with grace. Don't hit the showers. Quench thirsts. Resist bands.
Avoid battles. Wear the same clothes. With
or without underwear. No one cares. It's okay

not to change. To row
with and against tides.
It's an all-in-one planet.
Ours to roam. Not claim.
And fit, to size. To be.

Copperhead Road

Justin Carter

No one in southeast Texas did the "Copperhead Road" line dance better than my uncle Jimmy, but then he lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. Even after that, he'd go out on the dance floor at the Coyote during the song and jump around the best he could, but it was never really the same. I'm not sure Jimmy really knew who he was any more, since he'd made his whole reputation on that one song. People would come from miles around to watch him, every Saturday night, week after week, month after month, year after year.

Jimmy didn't have any kids of his own anymore—his only daughter drowned out in the Gulf during a red tide—so he decided that since he couldn't be the best now, he'd teach me how to do it so I could carry on the family legacy. One Thursday evening I went over to his place after work and he had the garage all cleared out.

"I wanna see what you got," Jimmy said when I stepped out of my truck. "Right now." And, I mean, I'd danced the "Copperhead Road" plenty of times, but almost always it was after I'd downed a few at the bar, so trying to do it completely sober was a new adventure. I got the stomps right, but the kicks were off, and my turns were—in Jimmy's words—"some malarkey-ass hell." But he wouldn't let me stop dancing. He'd yell out commands—make the part where you bring the calf in sharper, show the emotion of the song in your face. By the time he said I was "good enough, whatever," I never wanted to hear Steve Earle's voice again.

But I had to. Saturday night. Coyote Ballroom. The way the "Copperhead Road" dancing works down there is that when the song begins, the best dancer—it was Jimmy for forever, but now it's Shelley Morris, who Jimmy used to date back in the 70s—heads out alone to the floor, and they've got an extended mix of the song that starts with two minutes of just the music. The featured person gets that time alone to just show off to everyone, and then when the words start and Steve Earle goes "well my name's," the rest of the bar rushes out on the floor and joins in. Shelley's not as crisp as uncle Jimmy used to be, but she's got the rhythm down.

When we got to the Coyote that night, Jimmy—who refused to use a wheelchair and always alternated between a walker and crutches—went over to where Shelley was at and whispered something in her ear. She whispered something back and then they both turned to look at me. Jimmy came back over.

"You got the feature tonight," he said. "She owed me a favor."

"I what?" I said. "I ain't ready for that."

"I wasn't either, the first time. But you gotta get out there and do it, otherwise you'll never do it." I reached down for my beer. "And don't you have more than one of those before you go on. You do the drinkin' after the job's done."

It was 8:30, and usually they didn't play "Copperhead Road" until 10, so that meant I had an hour and a half to just stew about it, to go over all the moves in my head. Yeah, I'd done the dance plenty, but always in that part of the night where it didn't matter *how* you were doing it. When missing a step or two was expected. And I was serious about helping Jimmy and keeping this tradition alive, but when we'd been training I thought it was just step one. That this was like baseball or something and I'd still need to put some time in in the minors, waiting for Shelley to be sick one weekend or something. But, nope. There I was. Two days after my session with Jimmy, I was about to go out in front of the whole Coyote. I paced around. I took the smallest sips I'd ever taken from a beer bottle. And I just kept going over all the moves in my head until Jimmy came over.

"After this song, it's all you."

I took a deep breath, downed the rest of my beer, and waited to hear the bagpipes that signaled the beginning of the song. When they finally came, I bounded out of my chair and out onto the Coyote dance floor. All the eyes in the room were on me. I kicked my foot out, and when I glanced back over at Jimmy, he was doing something he never did: he was smiling.

Super 8

Melissa Flores Anderson

Beck heard the door jingle from the back room and he placed a tattered paperback down on the wooden table that had one wobbly leg. It was late, after 10 p.m., and he didn't have any more reservations on the books. He pulled a worn baseball hat down over his unkempt dark hair and shuffled out to the front desk to find a 20-something couple standing at the counter. Their smooth skin glowed in golden shades at the edges of their tank tops and shorts, and the woman had no tan lines at her ankle, a sign that she wore flip-flops more than sneakers.

Outside the door, the rice flies buzzed under the neon Super 8 sign in a dense cloud that made the air opaque. He couldn't see what car the couple had pulled up in, but he knew their type. If the camera pointed at the front lot had still worked, he was sure he'd have found a Ford Escape or a Jeep in a bright shade of green or blue.

They were just the kind of faux hippies who accidentally found their way to Upper Lake. The kind of people who happened across an old website that touted boating, fishing and hiking around Clear Lake and thought they could beat the crowds that gathered around Lake Tahoe this time of year at a different, more remote locale. Like they were the cleverest.

The sparkling blue lagoon had been the boon of the town before the algae blooms started every summer and closed off large portions of the lake to swimming. And then the quagga mussels invaded and eliminated most water vessels. The vacation homes on the lower lake stood abandoned on the waterfront and the economy turned from tourism to black-market endeavors.

Clear Lake's claim to fame had once been the largest fresh water lake in California with a hundred miles of shoreline; now they were the county with the highest rate of fatal opioid overdoses. It wasn't a place people came for vacation on purpose.

"Hey, man, we don't have a reservation but can we get a room for three nights?" the man asked, his sunglasses pushed up into his blond hair though the sun had set hours ago. "Parking lot looks pretty empty."

"Not many checking in on a Sunday night," Beck said, turning toward the desktop computer and away from the couple.

Truth be told, they never got many visitors these days. He survived on vouchers from county programs to house the homeless, recovering drug addicts and the mentally ill. People who had worn out their welcome in the homes of family or friends. Though he knew the feeling of being disoriented and displaced, he didn't offer shelter out of any sense of kindness. The programs paid twice his nightly rate per room to put up with any collateral damage—cigarette smoke in the rooms, vomit in the parking lot, the occasional hole in the wall.

He asked for ID and ran the man's credit card. Mr. Drew Arcadian had a San Francisco address and a mid-90s birthdate that put him at 10 years younger than Beck.

Beck glanced at the woman, aware that he looked older than his 36 years, and wondered if she shared the same last name as the man. The woman smiled at him politely as he handed over the reservation paperwork for a signature, with a key on a plastic key chain.

"You're in room 134, toward the end of the lot," Beck said. "The ice machine is broken so sorry in advance."

The woman frowned and reached her golden arm across the counter, her fingers almost touching Beck's pale forearm, before she curled them back toward herself.

"Actually, can we get an upstairs room? If it's not too much trouble. If there is one available."

Beck grunted and turned toward the computer to void the paperwork.

"Sorry, I didn't ask before. I'm a light sleeper And these old hotels can get a little noisy if someone is walking overhead," she said as she tilted her head in an apologetic nod. Her lips curled into a half smile.

Beck chuckled at her use of the word hotel. They all knew this was a two-star motel at best.

"Take the stairs just outside the office and you'll be the third door down," he said.

The couple exited into the swarm of rice flies.

Beck thought the woman didn't belong here, probably had been dragged on some half-cocked adventure by the boyfriend. He assumed boyfriend; she didn't have a ring when she'd almost touched his arm. A girl like that belonged on a beach in Hawaii with mai tais, her green eyes shining in the sunlight and her brown skin cutting through the waves.

Two types of people inhabited the world—beach people and lake people.

Beach people had money and freedom. They drank champagne on sunset cruises and stayed in houses high up on clifftops. Lake people took day trips and rented boats they couldn't afford to own, drank beer and store-brand soda, and covered their skin in DEET to deter mosquitos.

When he was young, he thought he could transform from one to the other. Scouts watched him pitch every weekend his junior year and offered scholarships that could change his life. Beck dreamt of colleges along the coast. Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, San Diego. He didn't want to go pro. He just needed tuition, and room and board, covered long enough to get a degree.

The lake had stolen that promise from him.

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The last time he'd been out on the water, at 16, he'd dressed like the man he'd just checked in at the front desk with a tank top and board shorts emblazoned with palm trees. His black hair had been shaggy across his forehead and his eyes deep blue like the water below them on that clear day. He hated going out on the water with his father, but his mom pressured him and his brother to do it anyway.

"Who knows how long your dad will be back this time?" she said.

Their father had been gone for two years on that last drug offense. Half the kids in the county had one parent or the other in jail, but his mom had never been in trouble and held a steady job as a home health aide in Ukiah. The only thing unstable about her was the way she kept letting his dad back in.

That morning his father begged a boat off his brother, Beck's uncle.

"Just let me borrow it for the day," he said. "I never get to see my boys."

They went out at 8 a.m., with fishing poles and a tackle box. Beck helped his 6-year-old brother Jay tighten a lifejacket around his skinny body. Jay huddled close to Beck, unsure of what to think of this mystery man who'd shown up a few days before.

They left from the boat launch near Clearlake Oaks and headed toward Rattlesnake Island.

"We can go all the way up toward Nice, Jay," their father said as he tousled the younger boy's hair. His dad never pronounced their town like the French city it was named for, like "niece." "Might be able to see the house."

Jay shrunk back from their dad's touch against Beck's stomach.

Their dad flinched as though Jay's shyness were an insult and anger flashed in his narrow eyes. He pulled a beer from the cooler. The day he arrived at the prefab house on Meadowlark Lane, Beck's mother said one world as his old man stood at the side of the driveway.

"Sober?"

Beck's dad had given that bright, white smile he managed to maintain even in the worst of situations. "Of course, I am, baby."

And Beck's mother stepped aside and let him into the living room, where he had slept the last three days. Beck should have known his dad didn't count beer as a substance that could be abused.

His dad steered them around other fishing boats and jet skis with one hand on the wheel and the other clutching a beer. His father navigated the water with ease, the only place in the world he seemed surefooted.

"You should join the Navy, boys," he said. "Like I did. See the world. See real boats."

Jay warmed up when their father helped him bait his hook and drop a line in the water. He pulled out a

cola for each of the boys, something their mom didn't let them have at home.

"Thanks, daddy," the boy said.

"Most people are either beach people or lake people," his dad said after a few more beers. "I got to be both. Have you ever heard of the Dead Sea? You can float there without treading water. Nothin' lives in that lake."

He kept talking about all the places he'd visited in the Navy, not once mentioning his most recent stop had been the state prison in Solano.

As the sun climbed up toward the center of the sky, his dad had finished off a six-pack.

"Do you want to get in the water, Jay?" their dad said. "We could go for a swim."

Jay shook his head.

"He doesn't know how to swim," Beck said.

"Come on, kid," their father said. "You can't live on a lake and not swim."

Jay's lip pouted out and Beck could see the quick flash of tears in his eyes.

"You don't have to swim if you don't want to," Beck said, holding on to Jay's hand.

"No goddamn kid of mine is going to be afraid of the water," his father said, and stood up.

The boat rocked from side to side and Beck felt his feet slipping beneath him. He let go of Jay's hand as he fell sideways into the water. His eyes stung from the unexpected impact and he sunk deep down toward the bottom of the lake bed. This wasn't the Dead Sea where everything floated. Beck drifted down toward the darkness. If he kept dropping to the bottom, he'd be 27 feet down.

But then he kicked his legs up and pulled his body toward the sunlight. He was almost to the surface when he felt the wave coming toward him. He couldn't move fast enough to get away. Lakes didn't have waves unless there was a boat creating a wake as it cut through.

He didn't even see the propellor—but Beck felt the sharp steel cut through his deltoid and his lats before he was pushed under the water. He bobbed up, unable to use his right arm, and a piercing sound cut through the air. He clutched his right arm against his body as the pain started to spread outward from his shoulder. The green-tinted water turned a murky yellow color around him, like the fancy dijon mustard his mom sometimes bought. He realized it was his red blood spilling out into the water and turning an unexpected hue in the shady spot, and the piercing sound was Jay screaming.

The colors in the water drifted away from his body as he kicked himself toward the boat, but his body grew heavier. He closed his eyes and let the lake pull him back down.

Later, Beck's mother said his dad had jumped in and saved his life, then used the first aid kit to slow the bleeding. He'd sped to the clinic closest to the waterfront and a man helped carry Beck to the medical facility while a woman took Jay by the hand and trailed behind them.

Beck woke up at a hospital in San Francisco, his right arm bandaged and splintered to his side.

"You are lucky to be alive," his mother said. "Thank God, you're still alive."

When they got home, his dad's things were gone from the living room. The muscle damage and the scars on his arm kept him off the field and his chance at a baseball scholarship disappeared. Beck filled up the time he didn't need to train with working evening shifts at his uncle's motel, and after graduation he spent his days working there, too.

By the time his uncle passed, Beck had been manning the front desk and checking in guests for 15 years. His father never came back and Jay had moved up to Eureka where he grew pot for dispensaries. His mother still had the house on Meadowlark, and she said he was always welcome, but he knew she grew impatient with his sullen moods. The last time he'd been over and complaining about being stuck running the motel all the time, she had little sympathy.

"You still could have gone to college, you know," she said a few weeks before. "You didn't have to stay here. You could still go."

She didn't understand that he hadn't just lost his pitching arm that day 20 years ago. He'd lost his ability to see beyond the borders of the lake.

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After the couple left, Beck locked the front door of the office and left a note for people to text if anything came up before 5 a.m.

He trudged up the stairs with his good hand on the railing to the room he slept in. It was second from the left, next to the couple who had just checked in. He didn't like renting the room next to his because he could hear everything that happened, the tweakers pacing when they got too high, children crying all night, or families arguing.

That night as he brushed his teeth, Beck heard the tap turn on in the bathroom next to his. The shower muffled the sound of the San Francisco couple, but he thought he could make out their words.

"Babe, there is a huge hole in the wall of the shower," the man said. "Do you think it's there on purpose so that creepy motel guy can spy?"

"Drew, stop," she said. "I'm not surprised this place needs repairs. If you hadn't waited 'til the last minute, we could have had a nice rental up in Mendocino."

"I bet that guy videotapes all the people who stay here," the man said, his loud laughter echoing through the wall. "I bet he has a fetish for watching people wash their crotches after they fuck."

"Stop. Why do you always have to be so crass?" the woman said. "He seemed nice and normal. Not strung out like all the people we saw at the gas station."

Beck heard an edge of irritation in her voice and appreciated that she was taking his side.

"Come on, babe, it'll be fun anyway. Even if we just stay here all day. Come join me and we'll really give that perv a show."

Beck left the bathroom and turned on the TV to drown out more noise. He fell asleep to the flickering light.

In the morning, when he was clean shaven in a fresh pair of clothes, the woman came into the office alone and Beck put down his book.

"Hi, Beck," she said.

"Hi," he said, startled to hear his name out of her lovely mouth, and then he remembered his nametag. "How can I help you?"

"So my boyfriend planned this trip—planned might not be the right word—around a bunch of water stuff. But it looks like there are warnings not to go in the lake right now," she said.

"Yeah, algae blooms are high this week since a heatwave last week."

"So I was wondering if there are other things we could do around here that don't involve the water or being out in 110-degree air."

She smiled at him and Beck realized it had been a long time since a young, sober woman smiled at him. She had a silver necklace hung around her neck with her name. *Alison*. He thought about where he would take a girl on a date, where he would take her on a date.

"Tallman Hotel on Main Street serves a nice lunch and drinks on an outdoor patio," he said. "Then there are some wineries nearby if you like that sort of thing."

She pulled out her phone and started typing in notes.

"There are a couple Indian casinos nearby, but to be honest, those places are a bit depressing and very smoky since they don't follow state laws," he said.

She looked up at him expectantly and leaned her elbows onto the counter, that sweet smile still on her pink lips. He thought about what it would be like to kiss those lips and then turned red and looked away. He kept talking to keep her from leaving.

"Ukiah is a bit of a drive, but they have a downtown area with restaurants that have live music sometimes."

Now he felt like a member of the visitor's bureau.

"They have spas there, too," he said. "Probably a nicer hotel. Or you could just drive for a couple hours and you'll hit the ocean."

"You know, my boyfriend hates the sand and the waves," she said. "He always wants to go to lakes. Thanks for all this advice. I'm never letting Drew plan a trip again. Honestly, sometimes I don't know why I stay with him."

She put her phone in her pocket and stepped toward the door. Then she turned abruptly and looked back at him.

"Are you from around here?" she said. "You seem to know a lot about this place."

"Yep. I'm a local. Never left."

She walked halfway back to the counter.

"Did you ever want to?" Beck saw her glance at the arm he held akimbo from his side. She didn't look away from him to hide that she had seen his broken body.

"No," he said, unsure if she was asking the question of him or herself.

"Anyway, I've taken up enough of your time. See you around."

Alison walked away and Beck watched as the backs of her tan calves flexed, a shiny chain encircling her left ankle.

He sat down in the back room, but kept losing his spot in the book he was reading. His eyes glazed over, and he'd find himself back in the same paragraph over and over again. He tried watching YouTube videos on his phone, but the beautiful girl's words kept echoing through his head. Of course, he'd wanted to leave. Who would want to stay?

When the housekeeper finished cleaning up the rooms at 1 p.m., he asked if she could stay and cover the desk for a few hours.

"I have something I need to do," he said. "I'll pay you cash for the hours you're covering for me."

Beck got into his old Toyota, one of the small pickup trucks no one made anymore, and drove north on Highway 20. He followed the curve around the lake onto the main highway. He turned onto a rural artery that headed west through the jagged hills and leaned into the door of his truck with every sharp curve he took too fast. He had to get to his destination with an urgency he hadn't felt in years. Soon the hills flattened out into long miles of cattle grazing land.

Two hours later, Beck maneuvered off the Pacific Coast Highway into a parking lot next to the dunes at Manchester State Park. He leaned against a wooden bannister that abutted the parking lot on his good arm. At the edge of the pavement, he untied his shoes, peeled back his socks, and rolled up the cuffs of his faded jeans. Beck walked through the fine grains, each stride exfoliating the rough patches on the bottom of his feet. He stepped over driftwood weathered by wind and ocean waves, by being in constant motion, the way he had been hardened by staying in place.

Beck took a deep breath of the salt water and decaying seaweed that mixed together in the air and stepped his toes into the sea. He took another step as though that endless body of water could heal the damage another had caused. He walked until the waves reached for the edges of his rolled-up cuffs, the icy Northern California water numbing his legs and the wind massaging his stiff upper body. He looked out in the distance, a limitless horizon before him.

Blood Test

Garrett Stack

He's been on the clock since five a.m. for forty-four years and today he finally called in sick. Instead of keeping up his iron man streak down at the Tool and Die, he sits in the parking lot of the Quik Clinic for two hours watching the staff slowly filter in. He leaves the engine on but the radio off. He doesn't take much truck with doctors or their chemical-smelling chop shops, but here he is, head tight as a drum brake, looking for release.

He turns off the pick-up and goes to stand patiently before the doors, hands tucked into the pockets of the old denim jacket covered in rally patches. From the dark sidewalk he watches the staff move around the lobby. He remembers seeing the nurses fresh off the second shift at the little liquor store by the hospital. He thinks about the nurse who lingered in the Schnapps aisle, deliberating over flavor, her neck bent and her white-uniformed arms swept out towards the fragile bottles like a beautiful seagull.

Eventually, a young woman comes to unlock the doors and is startled to see him. Through the door, she gestures to either side of her face. He shakes his head, and she leaves him standing there. She returns with a surgical mask, a twin to her own, which he dons reluctantly. He's admitted and handed paperwork and shown to a chair. Then he's shown to the same chair in a smaller room. A different nurse enters and asks a few questions, then weighs him and takes his temperature. She says he's a little warm. He watches her eyes over the mask but she's all business and bustle and then he's alone again.

Later, the doctor knocks twice before blowing in and he wonders what's the point of knocking at all. He begins unbuttoning his shirt but is told that won't be necessary. The doctor asks the same questions the nurse already asked and then looks in his ears for no reason at all before declaring he's going to need to run some tests. The doctor retreats after four minutes with general well wishes and no backward look.

When the nurse returns with swabs and pipettes and intent, she still refuses to meet his eyes but engages in small talk while she prepares the equipment. She asks about his jacket, its patches, and he admits he sewed them on one at a time. He tells her how it looked silly with only two rally patches and then later how it looked silly with twenty-two, like two types of raggedy minstrel. When the nurse asks if he's going to add more, he tells her no. The silence stretches back out like winter.

When she finally reaches for his hand, he gives it willingly. When she asks which finger he'd prefer, he lets her choose. She pricks a speck of crimson and draws the blood down with smooth strokes to fill the greedy channel, her gloved fingers massaging his with gentle pressure. She stops only when he begins to cry.

She asks if it hurts and he thinks about trying to explain how no one has touched his hand in three and one half years and about how he thinks it might be possible that this young woman is the daughter of that long ago nurse in the schnapps aisle or maybe she's even his own daughter that he'll never know and also he wants to explain how time is the only thing you're given in the world and somehow incredibly also the easiest thing to take away and does she know all that yet or is it still coming down the tracks toward her like a night train?

When she asks again if he's all right, he clears his throat, nods. She informs him that the results will take about fifteen minutes and he should make himself comfortable. He's feeling embarrassed and a little wild so he just keeps nodding. As he waits, he wonders what happened to the magazines they used to keep in these places and decides germs, probably.

The nurse enters a third time and tells him everything came up negative except the blood test which will take a day, recommends aspirin, fluids, rest, asks if he needs anything else. He considers a joke—*New hips!*—but can't muster the gumption. What he'd really like is to see what her smile looks like, but he'd probably have just as much luck asking for a time machine. He shakes his head and is handed paperwork. He's grateful she doesn't offer to escort him back to the lobby.

In the parking lot he rests his hand on the ignition feeling the cold metal against his hot fingertips. He ought to go get that aspirin to knock the fever down some but he can't make himself leave. He turns it one click to get the radio going then watches the traffic flow tidally in and out of the Quik Clinic wondering which car might be hers. Before he realizes, it's about lunchtime and he starts paying more attention. Maybe she'd take a break, eat in her car or run down to the Blimpy, but she doesn't come out. He feels stuck, the fever like mud in his limbs. He starts to shiver.

He must have dozed off because all of a sudden the light is failing. His truck is one of a few left in the lot, and the people exiting are all wearing scrubs. He tries to rouse himself, but he's just so tired. He rests his head on his hands on the steering wheel and idly wonders what happened to the radio. Just when he's sure he missed her, the lobby lights turn off and a final nurse exits, locking the door behind her. She turns to stretch her back then takes off her mask. He hears the cry of a single gull, alone and so very far from the sea. She doesn't smile, but he does.

Silences, HGTV

Maud Lavin

K and A lived on their boat in the San Francisco Bay. They were on a tight budget and they were photogenic, so they entered an HGTV contest. If they won, the show would do their whole wedding—food, props, bucolic stage set, video it, and pay for it. It would cost them nothing. I knew K and A because at that time I was the third wife of K's father, we'll call him Brock, and K was my older stepson (his half-brother D being my younger stepson).

K and A won the contest! The wedding would be outdoors in the Bay Area in someone's scenic backyard.

Brock and I were impressed how, once again, K and A had proved so resourceful. Have I mentioned that they'd already sailed across the Pacific and back in their boat? We were betting they'd be resourceful at marriage too.

Before the wedding, things got complicated at our end in Chicago. There was a flurry of phone calls from K's biological mother, who went by her chosen name Luscious. She was Brock's first wife. We heard that C, Brock's second wife and D's mother, would come, and D would come with her. Brock's dad, a retired minister, got in on the plans. My mother decided she would fly out from Ohio. A's estranged father was not invited, but A's mother would be there from Minneapolis and A's many sisters. K and A's California friends.

Brock's father said he would bring the family Bible so that K and A could sign it on their wedding day, along with Brock and his first wife, Luscious. I said I should sign it, too, as I was, after all, Brock's wife and K's stepmother, and had been for almost 10 years at that point. Brock said no because I wasn't K's mother. What. Was there some kind of creepy harem hierarchy that I wasn't part of and those who had birthed sons were? Brock and I argued about this. (We spared K and A this argument.) For me, it kept getting

worse. Why couldn't I sign Brock's family Bible? Even more damaging; I was the only non-Christian person in this whole set up.

I went to the wedding anyway, I wanted to honor K and A. Once I was there, K and A said they wanted to talk with me. Brock had told them I hadn't come because I had issues with Luscious. A said to me firmly that she didn't want issues at her wedding. I agreed and said that I didn't have issues with Luscious. What I didn't say was that I had issues with Brock. I figured K and A didn't need to hear about that on their wedding weekend. Or ever.

Here's what happened at the wedding:

Luscious was overly friendly. I was minimally friendly and kept my distance. Luscious was separated from her current husband, we'll call him Alaska because he lived in Alaska on his homestead. Alaska was there, natch, he was K's stepdad, loved him, and had helped raise him. There was a rumor, presented to me as fact, that Alaska had brought a gun on the trip, that he'd managed to sneak it on to the airplane. I wondered how he'd done that. I wondered if he'd brought the gun to the wedding. Alaska's eyes were too bright. He was friendly to me, maybe hoping for an ally at the wedding. I stayed away as much as I could, though. I don't like guns and I didn't know what to think of Alaska.

Brock and I had declared a détente. I had stayed with him at the hotel the night before the wedding. I didn't sleep well. I was tired at the wedding. My mom was running around, all petite and high energy, talking with everyone. She didn't like what I was wearing. I wished she wasn't there although I understood she'd come to try to be supportive.

I was in the wedding party, Brock and I walked down the aisle together. No one gave K or A away. They walked themselves down the aisle. Did I mention that K had been an emancipated minor since he was 16? He had a lot to emancipate from. Luscious and Alaska were in the wedding party, but not together. C, Brock's second wife and mother of D, was not in the wedding ceremony. She resented this and told D who told me. D said to me what were you doing there? I felt hurt, I could see that many people seemed to be forgetting that I was Brock's wife. Not for the first time I wished that C would stop confiding in her son stuff about her divorce from Brock. I didn't say that to D. I just said I'm your dad's wife, so that's why.

After the wedding, the Bible was signed by K, A, Brock's dad, Brock, and Luscious. Not me. Not Alaska. It did not make me feel better that Alaska was also excluded from the signing because Alaska was a) separated from Luscious and b) scary.

I talked some to Alaska after the wedding, but didn't ask him about the gun rumor. I'm originally from Ohio and in Ohio when you ask someone if they brought a gun, then if they did, they showed you the gun. I didn't want to see any guns, especially at this wedding.

At the reception, Brock was hoping for sympathy from me, so he told me that someone at work told him they felt sorry for him going to a wedding with all three of his wives there. I already hated him some. Then I hated him a lot since he wasn't distinguishing between his former wives and his current wife, me. I learned too much at this wedding.

There was dancing. K and A were having a wonderful time. Good! C and Luscious were dancing together. I can't believe those two are dancing together, said Brock. It occurred to me he liked having women fight over him, or imagining that they were.

K and A were happy, and I think relieved afterward, although K told me if he had to do it again, he'd do it without HGTV. HGTV had asked for a lot of rehearsing and landed them with an overdone, pastel bower. The tower of wedding cupcakes was nice though.

I agreed, too many ribbons and flowers, but told him he and A looked beautiful and were, inside and out. I didn't say but I thought that K and A's marriage was beginning as Brock's and mine had started to end.

I Have No Daughter

Kristin Keyes

Tonight, my mother asked me to keep a secret from my father. It was not the first time. The first time was when I was getting married—nearly twenty-five years ago. She had lost a receipt, something from Macy's or Dillards, something for pantyhose or a dress.

She thought she had put the receipt in her wallet. We were in her car, a five speed, and I was rusty so I was trying to maneuver the clutch and the stick while she rustled through her purse and her pockets to find this receipt. "I can't find it. I can't find it," her voice was beginning to rise into a high pitch wail.

I navigate into a parking space and jerk the emergency brake. I don't trust myself in this car. I don't trust myself with her. She raised me to obey, but I also inherited her hair trigger temper. "Give me that," I snap with impatience as I take her bag. Now she is crying, her brown hair pressed to the window, bawling over a missing slip of paper while I fumble through her bag: wallet, lipstick, crumpled tissues.

I find the receipt tucked into the inner pocket. She must have dropped it absentmindedly when the clerk handed it back to her. I look out at the mall parking lot. I remind myself to not be like her. I find a gentle voice that she never taught me. "Look mom, it's right here. It's right here."

She wipes tears from her eyes and says, "Don't tell your father."

She started Prozac the week after my wedding. Months later she seemed happier, more at ease, not as anxious, and I wondered how different my own childhood would have been if she had been on pills earlier. How different *her* childhood would have been if my grandmother had been on pills for depression, anxiety, general malaise. They had both been raised dirt poor on cotton farms along the Texas Gulf Coast. Anti-depressants, therapy, just kindness and gentleness, were unknown, unspoken, in their families.

The second time she asked me not to tell was much later. I was a dozen years married, visiting with my husband and bouncing baby boy. I was on the same pills she was—generational you know. I woke to her playing the piano downstairs. She was playing from the hymnal. Shutting my eyes tight, I tried to remember the name of the song. My husband muttered next to me, "Jesus Christ our Help in Ages Past." The way he said it, though. He emphasized JESUS CHRIST. She can't get past the first few lines without a discordant bashing of the keys.

I creep downstairs to get coffee. Her hair is now snow white against her bright pink sweater.

"How are you this morning, mom?" I give her a kiss and the notes clang again.

"I'm supposed to play for church tomorrow." She says it with a furrowed brow and a frown.

"You are?"

"Yes. I play the third Sunday of the month."

I go to the fridge to check the church calendar—it has hung in the same spot on four different fridges since my childhood. She played last week. "Mom," I say gently, "you played last week."

She looks at me. The hymnal suddenly falls to the keys with a clang—she looks at me. "Don't tell your father."

I never tell my father, but I do ask him, "What's going on with mom?"

He shrugs and says, "She gets confused."

She thinks she might have diabetes, so she tests her blood sugar every morning. Privately, I ask my dad, "Does she have diabetes?"

He says, "No, but it helps her worries." Imagined diabetes or real dementia—I'm not sure which is worse.

Tonight, is different. She's older. I'm older. We've both aged, with the same white hair and hands that show we haven't been afraid of hard work.

"What's the pin number to my credit card?" she asks.

"Mom I don't know. I only know the one to your debit card—its 8963."

"Yes, that is what I told your father. He asked me and I blurted out—8963. But I think it might be 7475." Her voice is teary, anxious. "You don't know what it is like," she says, "You don't know what it is like. I'm losing my mind and I know I am. Just don't be mad at me," she continues, "Don't yell."

Don't be mad. Don't yell.

I used to think those words when I was little. I never had the courage to say them to her, to risk her temper. The temper she learned at my grandparent's farmhouse, an unpainted homestead framed from railroad ties and surrounded by white cotton fields. The temper I now must tamp down as I parent my own child.

I steady my voice. "Mom. You have a debit card and a credit card. Your debit card is First Tennessee and your credit card is First South. I can see where that can be confusing. It's going to be okay," I say. It's all lies. It isn't okay. I am fifteen hours away. All I can do is try to keep her dignity. I know dignity—how hard it is to find it and keep it.

"Where is Dad?" I ask.

"Don't call him." She starts to weep. "Please. Don't tell your father".

This time I don't agree. My silence used to be my consent, now she knows it is my refusal to obey. When I speak to him, my father says he already knows.

Later, I cry alone. I told him because I have a son.

When my son was born, a visiting neighbor told me, "You need to have a daughter. Daughters take care of you. A son is your son until he takes a wife. Your daughter is yours for the rest of your life."

I have no daughter to keep my secrets.

Turn Around

Susan R. Morritt

Early nineteen sixties. A darkened bedroom in a brick bungalow. Curtains drawn for a young child's nap, while an older sibling sits at the foot of the narrow bunk bed with a sagging-springs mattress, crooning a melody to her flaxen-haired baby sister. "Where are you going, my little one, little one, where are you going, my baby, my own?"

Fast forward to the year 2020, a passage of time witnessing the assassination of an American president, the television broadcast of the first man on the moon, the rise of the women's liberation movement, and the dawn of the computer.

The baby sister is all grown up now, and approaching sixty years old.

"Turn around, and you're two, turn around, and you're four, turn around, and you're a young girl going out of my door."

There is a ghostly presence here beside me, ruffling my hair, whispering, *remember.* Breathing life into a singular memory, long buried. The numbing icy anesthesia crawling across my scalp. Snaking down my limbs, the ridge of my spine. Tears well up in my eyes, blur the dashboard of my truck, the glow of the CD player. Weightlessness, levitation. "Turn around, turn around…"

Nanci Griffith: Other Voices/Other Rooms. The name of a second-hand CD I have just now purchased at a Salvation Army thrift store.

An apt title, to say the least. To be transported back in time, enticed down a gilded path of guitar notes plucked, a crystalline voice, plaintively asking me, "where have you gone?"

I sing along raggedly, with an infantile lump lodged in my throat. Dazed by this unexpected soul-assaultive recollection, this message from the past, from out of nowhere.

This is the immeasurable power of music, of a song, a lyric. The illumination of an unbreakable bond with a chance encounter.

"Where have you gone?" The question nails me with a gut-wrenching impact. *I* am still here, on this earth, and it is *she*, my sister, whom sang to me all those years ago--*she* is gone. She left this world unexpectedly, abruptly, when she crashed through the passenger side windshield of a compact car forty-four long years ago. Long years… or was it just yesterday?

As I listen once again, I feel myself adrift, tucked into my child's bed, swept along by the melody. Swept back in time to discover a part of myself that was ripped away.

Thank you, Nanci Griffith, for your simple, sweet rendition of a song that once lulled me to sleep. Thank you, Malvina Reynolds, Alan Greene, and Harry Belafonte, for creating such a timeless classic. And, thank *you*, my sister, Mona, for the all-too brief and precious time we had together.

The Jesus Tree

Sheree Shatsky

Lula sits by the road counting cars. Her mother sends her out whenever her slime ball boyfriend Sucky comes over. She forbids Lula to come back home until one hundred cars tick by or when she calls for her, meaning whenever Momma's good and damn ready. On this snake slice of a rural road, counting fifty cars could take a good three days, but fortune shines Lula bright as a procession of motorcycles pass her by. Apparently, her mother has forgotten about Bike Week in the next town over, in Llewellyn. In Lula's mental vehicular abacus, motorcycles count as cars. She scratches tally marks in the dirt as bike after bike stream by her. At one hundred, an old dude with long silver hair riding a vintage Indian roars past and waves, his hand missing a middle finger. Lula heads back to the house and bangs on the locked front door.

Sucky opens up. He lounges the door wearing a yellowed wife beater and ragged red and white striped boxer shorts he calls his candy stripers. He says the shorts remind him of the uniform the teen girl volunteers wore at the hospital back when he was banged up, the girls all fresh and starched with wide wannabe nurse eyes. "Get a rise just thinking about it," he'd wink and tell Lula's mother, "you know what I mean" and she'd make a fist and take aim below his belt. "Not funny," he said and covered himself with a happy face throw pillow. He'd been hospitalized for what Lula's mother called blue balls sustained from a swift kick between the legs, an act no one in attendance for karaoke at the Hi-Way Inn that evening would either claim responsibility or give up the perpetrator. The kick came from behind as Sucky leaned across the bar to swap spit with the wrong bar-back. Fat chance anything rose for Sucky in the hospital for weeks following. To this day, the color blue and any semblance of the shade makes him want to puke.

"Get out of my way, you piece of shit." Lula shoves past his skinny ass, but Sucky corrals her with his

good arm and pushes her back with his remaining hand. His fingers settle on her twelve year old chest a mite too long. "That's Mr. Piece of Shit to you, darlin'."

The nub of what was left of his left arm withers out the sleeveless tank sort like a shoulder sleeve, the shape resembling a mushroom cap without the stem. Mr. POS had gone and pinned himself under the hood of an unforgiving 1969 Plymouth Roadrunner with less than reliable hood springs. Lula fixates on the protuberance and conjures the burning bush of the Bible in her minds eye. She imagines its ridiculous red hot heat searing open the seam holding back the guts inside his sewn shut sleeve of an arm.

"Sucky, what's going on?" Lula's mother barely wrapped in a cheap kimono aflame with a phoenix firebird hurries out of the bedroom and slaps past Sucky's stump. "No way in hell," she says to her daughter, "did one hundred cars pass this house." She looks out toward the road and the bikes bound for Llewellyn. Lula crosses her arms underscoring the words on her tee shirt, a message she considers her viewpoint on life: *If I Agreed With You We Would Both Be Wrong.*

"Some bikes got more than two wheels, Eunice," Sucky offers, rubbing his nub in contemplation. "you know, like them ATVs. "

"Shut the hell up, Sucky, I said count cars girl! Automobiles! Not motorcycles or grocery buggies or goddamn skateboards, dammit do I need to draw you a picture? Get on out there and do what I told you to do! "

Lula grabs her jean jacket off the fancy gilded chair her mother positions by the front door as a first impression of elegance in an otherwise craphole of a house. No one sits in the fancy chair. No one, not even Eunice. "It's to look at, to remind me much I hate rich people," she says. Eunice stole the chair or as she preferred to say, *convinced* the high society woman she cleans house for into giving her. Through less than veiled insinuation, Eunice threatened to share witness of her employer's intimate relations with a 7-iron astride her dead husband's golf cart to everyone in the town who would care to listen. Currently, she was in the process of convincing the lady boss that her fine bone china would look best placed in Eunice's beat to hell kitchen hutch at home. "I've got Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell right where I want her," she'd say, "scared shitless her white gloved country club high society sorority sisters will drop her like a bird turd in a chilled martini should the word get out on her less than ladylike ways."

Lula bangs out the door and across the dump of a yard, littered with strewn trash and piles of old car parts. She pats her pockets for the pack of Marlboros she stole off Sucky when he dropped his drawers earlier to settle in on the couch in his candy stripers with a bottle of idiot juice. She kicks a path through scattered beer cans and trips over a stem of steel. A tire iron. After whacking the holy hell out of the decrepit playground set for a good ten minutes, she collapses into a swing and lights a smoke. Lula took up smoking late last year and knew she shouldn't, but it kept her calm, like snapping a rubber band on your wrist when faced with the urge of a bad habit or in her case, faced with bad people. She stubs out the cigarette and hikes into the woods to the Jesus tree. Other people could see Jesus she imagines, but they'd have to know where and when the sun shines between a particular pair of trees in a sort of daily solstice. Jesus called out to her that first day and she's known where to look ever since.

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If Lula didn't come from the circumstances everyone in town already knew, by looking at her appearance-wise, people with innocent eyes could never imagine her world such a godforsaken one. She kept herself clean. She brushed her hair. She smiled now and again. What folks didn't know is Lula washed her own clothes the old-fashioned way, in the bathtub with baking soda she also used to brush her teeth. She pilfered a little bit at a time to keep Eunice from catching on and kept the stash hidden in a sandwich bag. Lula learned early other people had ample supplies of toothpaste and laundry detergent and an operable washing machine. Busted washers lined her front porch. Lula kept the lids closed to keep feral cats out and away from the house. Momma was known for taking out her temper on anyone or anything trespassing her property, to include the

eastern diamondback rattler coiled inside the last working washer. As Eunice loaded towels, the viper struck just shy of her shoulder. She threw in a couple of red clay bricks and two cups of bleach with a few pellets of d-CON rat bait and turned the dial to heavy wash, killing successfully both the serpent and the washer, presently aligned fifth from the right of its brethren inoperables. Eunice wiped up the little left of the snake with what was left of the towels and threw the shreds in the yard; a reminder of what could happen to anyone or anything slithering or stepping close to her front porch without her invitation.

As with cars, Eunice had a counting scheme for laundry. Clothes were to be worn two weeks before the wash of a full load, no matter how sweaty, grimy or greasy. She never deterred from her time decree, even though she hadn't laid a hand on the family laundry for months. She bragged Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell did that job for her ever since the business with the golf cart. All Lula's mother had to do when she wanted something or something done was head out to the fancy oversized garage with a good shammy and polish the golf cart. The lady boss would be all over Eunice asking if there was anything she could do to help her housekeeper as far as making her life easier. She told Sucky once, if only Ms. Priss hadn't been wearing a Payne Stewart golf cap when Eunice caught her indulging in self-gratification, she might have let her boss off the hook, eventually. Women have needs, for godsakes, Eunice knew that; but diddling yourself wearing a hat from a dead golfer's sportswear line in your dead husband's Club car was subpar at best, even if Priscilla Bagwell was a bonafide golf widow.

Lula couldn't wait two weeks for clean clothes, once her body turned pre-teen on her. Drenching sweats, oily hair, hair growing in places like never before demanded a more frequent timetable. She'd wait until her mother was out of the house and wash wash wash quick quick quick and hurry to hang the clothes out to dry in the clearing she'd found running scared senseless, the day she discovered her not yet worn two weeks unlaundered panties striped with her first blood. Back then, when she was an eleven year old baby girl surely bleeding to death in the clearing, Lula found the Jesus Tree.

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Lula thought she'd finally gone crazy, hearing a voice in the woods. Cuckoo crazy like Brucie Robinson. People say he is more addled than nuts. He'd been out on the golf course as a boy looking for stray balls to sell back to golfers when a storm blew in, clearing the course for Brucie to sweet pick clean. Nobody in their right mind finds themselves on a golf course in a thunderstorm, a predictor perhaps Brucie may have been leaning toward crazy even back then. He'd bagged twenty Titleists when lightning found him and skewered him good. The pink Pro V1 ball tight in his hand melted his palm with its dimpled imprint, obliterating most of his lifeline. His mother held hope the tiny bit of line left near his wrist was sign enough he would recover.

Brucie spends afternoons sitting outside the convenience store waiting for the middle school to let out, for the kids to stop in and buy pixy stiks to pour inside a soda for the walk home. He wears a rumpled business suit and waves hello with his dimpled hand and eats cigarette butts stamped out on the parking lot. Brucie has his own technique. He licks his finger, pushes dead center of the butt and pops it inside his mouth for a good chew. Kids place bets on how many butts Brucie can eat in a minute. His record is sixty. Claude, the store owner doesn't mind Brucie one bit, considering how Brucie's kept the parking lot clean a good fifteen years. Once, somebody dared him to suck a snail out of its shell and later on, Brucie almost died from lungworm, a disease snails carry from eating parasites passed in rat shit. The next day, Brucie's oldest brother Bernard waited at the convenience store. He grabbed kids up by the collar and demanded to know which one of us little suckers forced his feeb of a brother to suck snails. Bernard is bad for business. Kids passed the store by and bought pixy stiks for their soda at the Magic Market a half mile down the street. Claude called the cops. He didn't want any part of Brucie's sucky brother Bernard any more than did the kid customers. "Sucky Bernard sucks shit-eating snails!" the tough kids yelled when the cops cuffed him to his belt and

loaded him in the back of the cruiser. The nickname stuck like a melted Titleist and as long as her mother wants her boy toy loser around, Lula is stuck with Sucky.

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Jesus didn't look much like the guy in her kid Bible. He looked like a man all right, but didn't wear a robe. Probably a good thing because from his place in the tree and where Lula stood, she could've seen straight up to his nether regions. He wore boots and jeans but the rest of him dimmed in and out as the sun moved behind him, making him look like he was a bottom without a top. It was hard to tell if his hair was long or maybe swept back in a man bun, but he definitely had a beard longer than his Bible beard. More like the guys from the show Sucky liked to watch with Eunice, Duck Dynasty. That first day in the clearing her blood trickling down her leg, Lula hadn't plan to stick around and find out much more. She'd grabbed a big stick and squeezed her eyes shut in a quick prayer. *If I die right here and now, please Jesus, let me see my daddy in heaven.*

"He's waiting, child. When your time comes. Not today. Not for a long long time."

Lula forgot all about being scared and got all about being mad. Even though the voice from the tree drifted down to her all spicy and woodsy fragrant like the colossal blooms of wild rhododendron. She knew all about snatched kids, but never thought she'd be one. But this guy, she'd make him work for it.

"You don't know my daddy. You're a flat out liar."

"Yes, well, I've been called worse." The man rustled forward a bit and reached inside the pocket of his flannel shirt. She could see him now, his complete appearance. His face though, seemed to shift before her eyes, a sweep of blurred faces.

Lula wildly hoped she tied her sneakers tight because she could outrun this guy. He was up the tree too high to jump and he'd break both legs trying. If he climbed down no matter how fast, she'd have a head start and with her own short cuts and hiding places, she could make it home if she ran now. Right now she should turn and run, but her feet wouldn't comply, wouldn't budge an inch, heavy inside her very means of escape, sneakers tied too tight to wriggle out and barefoot it out of here.

The man in the tree, he tossed something at her concrete feet.

A wallet.

Lula eased down and flipped it open. The man in the driver license picture. Him, she knew. She compared the man in her hand with the man up in the tree. He'd paused his shifting face to one familiar. Her father's face.

"Are you my daddy?"

"In a way, I guess. I did see a lot of me in your daddy, but Lula, I'm Jesus."

Her feet broke free and she ran like Brucie Robinson should've.

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Lula wanted to believe she'd seen some sort of serial killer changeling out in the clearing if it hadn't been for the wallet. Her daddy's wallet had never been found after he died four years ago. Lula would never forget on account of how Eunice had turned the house inside out looking for it. She'd even called Sucky over to help her look. Wads of cash always padded his wallet thick enough to throw his back out of alignment on occasion. "Tips from his job at the driving range," he'd say and give his wife a wink and a couple hundred dollars. Eunice finally gave up on the wallet and the cash and the credit cards her husband kept on his person because she charged more than a bull on a rampage. But now, because of a guy calling himself Jesus, Lula had the wallet. A worn imitation leather wallet swept clean except for the religious medal her father kept slipped inside. St. Sebastian, patron saint of golfers.

He had been a hot shot golfer back in high school. His insanely accurate chip shot earned him the obvious nickname Chip, though he preferred the family nickname Schoolie, short for Schoolfield. His parents - solidly wedged between the lower middle class and the working poor - saw golf as Schoolie's way up and out of their piss-poor life. Both worked at the country club, his father as a greenskeeper assistant and his mother as a housekeeper. Perks

included major medical, use of the swimming pool and the golf course, including the driving range and the practice greens. His dad used to joke his son had learned to putt before using a spoon, that's how early he'd had a club in the boy's hand. Every off day, he had Schoolie out on the green. In bad weather, they practiced on the cheap putting balls into paper cups placed strategically about the house. The front bathroom gave plenty leeway for chip shots into the tub, the most deadly chip shot his high school coach would ever witness in a kid without formal instruction.

Eunice worked part-time in housekeeping after dropping out of high school. She hoped to find a rich out of town husband, preferably someone else's husband. Schoolie though, she knew him from working with his mother. She never stopped yapping about her perfect golfer son, how he'd won so many championships for the high school and how he'd made the all star team for the state. Eunice felt in her bones Schoolie was bound for greatness, or at the very least for out of town. He was her way out, rather than some old man beer gut golfer.

Schoolie picked up his mother after work one afternoon and Eunice aimed her vacuum right at him. He'd tried to step by her and she slid the vacuum in his way. He'd make his way around the other side and she'd sweep that way. His shoelace got sucked up inside and she asked him out. She got him in the back seat of her rust bucket Impala and used her tongue on him in the twirly way she'd caught her momma doing with the propane man. Schoolie was hooked. His scholarship to the state university presented a problem for Eunice, all those rich sorority girls with wealthy daddies. She was bound to lose him once those Lilly Pulitzer-wearing future golf wife kid breeders got a hold of him, so she kept Schoolie hot and got pregnant.

"Access to the golf course under a full moon has a way of leading to less than thought through decisions," Schoolie tried to explain to his parents. His father sobbed like a child. His mother - a quiet unassuming woman as fragile as a baby finch - said Eunice wasn't much for dusting and vacuuming; really wasn't much good at anything she'd ever witnessed and pulled a driver from Schoolie's golf bag. She took a couple good swings at Eunice's abdomen in the nice living room. Eunice dodged and darted and taunted the distraught woman, slapping her belly and saying this kid was her golden ticket. Heartbroken, the two up and moved and never looked back. Somewhere golf-centric, Schoolie guessed, Arizona, maybe Florida. He got a job at the club as an entry-level assistant golf pro and Eunice, she'd found her beginnings in the art of ruining lives, a skill she mastered as skillfully as Schoolie and his chip shot.

Schoolfield "Chip" Purdue was found at the 18th hole with a single needle mark in his arm. He'd played the full course the day before with fellows with known bookie ties in Llewellyn. His score card was stuffed in his mouth. He'd finished ten strokes under par.

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Though she swore never to return, Lula went back to the clearing because of Brucie, something he'd said to her at the convenience store. She had hid her daddy's wallet with her baking soda and put the entire event out of her mind. Lula decided whoever killed her father had cleaned out the money and hid the wallet in the tree. She was crazy scared the day she happened upon the clearing, not one iota aware the blood spill between her legs meant at the young age of eleven, Lula had become a woman. The guy in the tree, she chalked up as some sort of hysterical hallucination, probably from the loss of so much blood from her puny self. A squirrel or the wind or God knows what had ousted the wallet from the tree for her to find. Weird enough, but weird things happen in this life so no reason the unexplainable shouldn't happen to her. Looking back, the worst part of the day was Eunice, her notice of blood on the back of her daughter's short shorts. She'd slapped Lula hard across the face and said "Welcome to the club, baby girl" and showed her how to rig a pad between her legs. "And stay away from Sucky," she'd said, "his brain swings between his legs like the rest of his kind, my best advice is stick to women." Lula made peace that wherever her daddy was, he wanted her to have the wallet and found a way to get it to

her. Like her daddy would say, *that's all she wrote, nothing more to say, nothing more to the story.* Until a few weeks later, when Eunice needed a six-pack.

She'd scrawled out a note on the back of an unpaid parking ticket. *I give my daughter permission to buy me beer and a pack of cigarettes.*

"Here. Give it to Claude, tell him to wave at me through the window, that's as good as me going inside and buying it myself. And tell him to put it on my tab or I'll take my trading down to the Magic Market. Go on now. Momma's thirsty."

No sense in arguing. Too hot to argue, plus Lula knew Claude wouldn't sell her beer or cigarettes anyway. Claude was convinced Eunice was a paid informant for the cops. He'd told Lula as much the last time Eunice sent her in with a note. He believed her momma was set on shutting him down for selling to underage minors, sending in her own daughter to lure him straight to jail.

He deadbolted the store door when he saw Lula coming.

"Come on, Claude!" Lula yelled. "Momma's gonna kill me, then you." She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered inside, her face flush against the hot plate glass door.

Claude mouthed "SORRY LULA". He punched 911 on his cell and flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED.

Eunice hollered out the car window. "What the hell is going on, Lula?"

"The door's locked, Momma! I can't get in!"

"I'm gonna kick your ass, then his!" Eunice climbed out the car and slammed the door closed on her skirt. "GODDAMN, GODDAMN, GODDAMN! Get your ass back here, Lula! We're going to the Magic Market!" She tugged her skirt hard and *rrriiiippp*, left half hanging in the door. "SONOFABITCH! LULA, LET'S GO!"

Lula flipped Claude the bird and turned to leave. A cigarette butt bounced off her leg.

"What the hell, Brucie?"

"Monkey man says keep the wallet," Brucie said and popped a butt in his mouth, then another. Black drool spilled the corner of his mouth and he wiped it away with the stinking sleeve of his filthy ash tray of a suit; yet, an overwhelming scent of wild rhododendron hit Lula unexpected, fresh and clean and heavenly.

"Brucie, what man?"

He stopped midchew, like someone light-switched his jaw off and unfolded his maimed melted golf ball hand toward Lula. "He saved me."

A police car pulled up behind Eunice her skirt half gone. "JESUS, LULA! NOW!"

The kids say if you helped Brucie pick up cigarette butts, he'd let you count how many dimples the golf ball seared into his scarred palm.

All Lula saw was her daddy's face.

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Some days she hangs out her wash in the clearing and he makes the sun shine her clothes hot and dry faster than a top of the line Sears dryer. Other times, he tells her about her day, because he knows all and can see all. Now and then, once in a while, the two sit in silence and Lula will head home in peace. Today though, the day Lula counts motorcycles instead of cars, is a Come to Jesus meeting.

Lula stabs at the dirt with the tire iron. "I don't know how much longer I can take my momma. I'd be better off hanging myself with the clothesline instead of hanging my clothes."

A sun beam haloes the metal rod and sweeps the length to uplift her downtrodden chin. "This is what you and I are going to do," says Jesus from his place in the tree.

***

Eunice pushed Lula off on Schoolie on Sundays, the day he gave lessons to ladies who claimed golf as their one and only Savior. "Take the kid along with you," she said, "at the very least she's good for big tips. Those dowagers you teach won't mind a bit." Back before Lula's daddy died and she had to go to work for Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell, Eunice always had somewhere to go, something to do, somewhere to spend Schoolie's money. For the little attention Eunice gave Lula, her daddy gave back in heaps.

Lula hopped on the golf cart and from the rear view seat watched the world in reverse sweep out behind her. “Is she okay back there?” a lady golfer would ask. Schoolie would always answer the same, “Oh yes ma’am, she’s fine. Lula is my best caddie.” And she was. Her father had no intention for his daughter to swing a club professionally like some sort of trained golf club sock monkey. To caddie is what Schoolie wanted for Lula, but first, she had to learn the game. He taught her everything he knew, including the magic behind his chip shot. The brains carry the bag, he told her. The brains offer solid advice. The brains know the club to suggest when a player asks if a 6-iron or an 8-iron works best on a 150-yard drive. She stood by the cart while her father gave instruction and listened in as he taught the lady how to best use her core, the abdominal springs housing the energy to power the club through the swing. The short ladies were naturals, all that power wrapped in their low center but the tall lithesome ladies, sometimes needed their coil wound a bit. Her daddy would place his hands along the long of their waist and have the tall and narrow swing an imaginary club in slow motion over and over. “That’s it, that’s the way, keep your head down, eyes glued on the ball and follow through like your life depends on it. Yes, that’s it, let’s try again.” These ladies always returned for a second lesson and midway toward the tenth, asked Lula to call them by their first name. One suggested to call her momma if she wanted. Barbara was her name, the long-legged blonde her daddy ran into at the club restaurant later the same day. Schoolie sat back with a martini and chicken wings and Lula with her burger and Shirley Temple with three cherries and there stood Barbara at their table. Barbara smelled like sweet magnolia and Schoolie said as much, inviting her to sit down if she had time. He stood as she squished herself into the booth beside Lula, his eyes wide and shiny like he looked too long at a full moon. “My momma’s allergic to perfume,” Lula said. “Well, I’m glad you’re not,” she said and pulled a small vial from her fancy purse and offered Lula a tiny drop on each wrist.

The fragrance set Eunice off hacking the second Lula walked through the door. “What have you gotten yourself into, girl?”

Schoolie lied and said he’d given Lula a quarter to purchase a spritz of cologne from the ladies locker room dispenser. Eunice sneezed and wheezed and tore into Schoolie until he shoved a hundred bucks in her hand to buy as much Kleenex as she needed. The tiny spiral notebook Lula kept in her backpack with the names and phone numbers of the lady golfers, like any good caddie, she gave to Schoolie when the course was clear. Lula liked Barbara best, not enough to call her momma because momma brought Eunice to mind, ruining any attempt to spit out the word. Her daddy, he and his moon-shiny eyes liked Barbara best too. She could tell because of the lie he told Eunice about why Lula smelled like the same perfume clinging to her father’s shirts Lula would find stuffed in the back of the golf cart on Sundays. Schoolie said Barbara lived close by in Llewellyn and took private golf lessons when Lula was in school. Barbara was always so glad to see Lula. She’d tell her how much she wished for a little girl of her own to keep her company; she got lonely with her husband busy running books, which Lula found funny because her daddy liked to read too. Barbara laughed long and loud like she did that first lunch when Lula ordered another Shirley Temple and asked Schoolie if Barbara was a dowager.

***

Karaoke at the Hi-Way Inn brought in the afternoon heathens who toasted God in the Highest with a shot of tequila instead of the Welch’s grape juice served up in church as the blood of Jesus. Eunice attended karaoke every Sunday. She fancied herself the likes of Tanya Tucker, the singer’s hit song “Delta Dawn” Eunice’s go to selection. She didn’t need the words projected on the screen, she knew the song by heart and used the time as practice to polish her performance. She commanded the stage wearing one of her two Tanya outfits, both heavy on fringe because Tanya was big into fringe. Patriotic Tanya wore white jeans topped with a white fringed tee shirt with the flag of the United States of America silkscreened across the front. Eunice choreographed a move where she could ripple her breasts in such a way the flag appeared to wave as if flying high from a flagpole. Sexy Tanya wore tight black leather pants and a silky barely there blouse with leather fringe

dangling from the sleeves with sequins hot-glued to each strand to catch the stage lights and dazzle the crowd. Eunice open and closed with "Amazing Grace" singing "Delta Dawn" in between the hymn. People were moved by her performance. Riveted. They hooted and hollered for an encore. Flicked their BICs. Dimmed the house lights and waved cell phones with the flashlights on bright. Some cried and made the sign of the cross, claiming their dead mommas loved Tanya and those two songs, especially "Amazing Grace". Once, a few tossed drinks over their own head to self-baptize, claiming Eunice's manifestation of the iconic Tanya Tucker overpowered them with the need to be one with Jesus. A guy claiming to be Jesus himself bought a round for the bar in celebration of the dousing. By the time Eunice went to thank him, he had gone and left a twenty dollar tip she promptly pocketed for herself.

People came from all over for karaoke Sunday at the Hi-Way for the music and the two dollar pitchers of beer. A few of the singers were professional paid performers represented by managers. Eunice longed to be a paid professional karaoke singer. She was sure she had the talent, but she also had clipped wings, clipped by Schoolie and Lula. She was a grounded songbird. Sundays were the best she could do for the time being, so she spent what her husband doled out along with the bit she stole out of his wallet to keep her in hot glue and sequins. After Schoolie got himself killed and she had Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell good and helpless, Eunice blackmailed her lady boss into funding her act and babysitting Lula on karaoke Sundays.

Eunice met Sucky at the Hi-Way. His song was "Stairway to Heaven" and she admired how he could tuck the mike inside the mushroom cap sleeve of his missing arm for the amount of time the song required. People placed bets on Sucky. Would this Sunday be the day he would get tired and switch-hit the mike into his one remaining hand? "He never will," some said; "but, you never know," said others and slapped the money down.

Many people had the tendency to use "Stairway to Heaven" as an excuse to step outside for a smoke break, the damn song ran so long, a well-known cultural fact even radio DJs played the Led Zeppelin tune whenever they needed to hit the crapper. Sucky though, he was well worth the time. People stuck around the entire eight minutes plus. Sucky was stepping up the stairway to karaoke fame, a real phenom. The Hi-Way promoted Sucky on the website as sort of a tax-deductible public service announcement of encouragement for the disabled to live their dreams; though the most disabled Sucky had ever truly seemed was following the kick from behind that landed him in the hospital with blue balls. "Watch this," he said to Eunice the first time she bought him a drink. "I'll show you disabled." He tucked a shot glass of whiskey under what was left of his shoulder and with a full lurch of his body backwards, the liquid flowed in a sparkling brown rainbow from the glass into his mouth, not a drop missed.

Eunice loved to tell this story when she arrived home as Blitzed Tanya and always, always the story ended badly, with how Schoolie had clipped her karaoke wings, dying on the job and leaving her a working widowed mother with no time to practice and no time to smooze with the slimy hillbilly managers because she had to pick her kid up from the rich Miss Priss. "I can go with you, Momma," Lula offered, "you could teach me to sing. I could be Tanya Two."

Tanya Tucker, along with Shania Twain and Tammy Wynette completed Eunice's version of the karaoke Holy Trinity. "Don't you ever say Tanya's name in vain again, girl! There's only one Tanya Tucker and that one is me!"

Sucky scratched his Robert Plant long hair wig and stepped in deep. "Is Tanya Tucker dead because if she ain't, Tanya would be the one and only, Eunice. Unless you know something I don't? Maybe she still uses Glen's last name? Tanya Tucker Campbell, but still, she'd be the original, at least as far as the legal, right? Not you."

Lula didn't stick around long enough to witness how the couch got turned upside down and the kitchen hutch pushed over shattering Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell's pilfered fine bone china tea cups into a million bits; but as she ran out the door, she had a

pretty good idea who kicked Sucky from behind that afternoon at the Hi-Way Inn.

***

There's something exceptional about lying down in the middle of the road, Lula thinks, like she's been granted super powers. She hears the birds in a way she never has before. The songsters, the warblers, the tricksters; the change in pitch and volume, the pure tones and resonance of their calls, the sweep, the dart, the glide of wings. The tree Schoolie never got around to cutting back, the black walnut tree overhanging the road and now her, takes Lula's breath away with the citrusy smell of its leaves. Beneath her under the warm tar road, she can feel its roots extend. She closes her eyes dreamy drowsy. The intoxicating scent of rhododendron lulls her sleepy and she nods off for a second. She's lying out by the golf club swimming pool drinking a Shirley Temple with Barbara and her daddy. The man in the tree said she would never have to count another car if she trusted him, if she did what he told her to do. "Lie out in the road and have faith. I am with you." Lula feels the tiniest vibration off the road. What a snake must feel when something heads its way, gets too close, gets it moving fast, never waiting around for a tremor or a rumble, or in her case, a vehicle. Lula spreads her arms out, her legs and feet flush together and waits.

The Harley brakes. It's a trike. Lula heard too many counting bikes earlier that morning not to recognize the difference, super powers or not.

"What the hell?" A boot hits the road heavy, then another. A man.

Tiny steps follow. A woman, from the other side, but further back, hesitant, as if she doesn't want to look. "Is she dead?"

Lula didn't think she was dead.

"I don't think so." The man checks her pulse. "She's fine as being alive, though why she's lying out in the road makes the definition of fine debatable."

"Should we call someone?" The woman sounds closer.

The man laughs. "I am someone."

Lula doesn't budge. She waits.

More tiny steps. "I know that shirt," the woman says of Lula's *If I Agreed With You We Would Both Be Wrong* tee. "I've washed that shirt! Many times! Lula??"

Open your eyes, darlin' she hears her daddy say and Lula does.

***

Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell hovers over her wearing a biker jacket. The sheriff kneels beside her, his badge pinned through the double 'ee' of his *Daytona Bike Week* shirt, his radio strapped on his belt.

He takes a second look. "Well, by God, it is Miss Lula, you are getting so big, a real young lady. C'mon now, sit up and stay with Miss Priscilla for a few minutes."

Lula met the sheriff when he came to the house to tell Eunice that Schoolie was dead. Harry had known Schoolie back in high school and felt the best way to honor his old friend was to check on his family now and then. Eunice didn't act like her momma when Harry stopped by. Lula watched fascinated as she offered Harry a seat in the fancy chair, the chair off limits to everyone else, then offer him a cup of coffee to help wash down a slice of cherry pie stolen from the refrigerator of Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell. He'd say no, but then okay sure and she put on her grieving working widowed mother face and ask about the investigation, ask if Schoolie's wallet had ever been tracked down? Harry, he'd shake his head sadly and tell her that wallet would likely never be seen again. After Harry left, Eunice told Lula to get this shit out of her sight and later on, the woman she knew as her mother would take a hammer to both and throw the shards out in the yard.

Harry looks up and down the road and calls for back-up. He turns on the emergency flashers of the Harley and ties police tape he carries in the trunk from the black walnut tree to the electrical pole across the street.

"Harry, we need to do something, this child is not safe."

"Well, Priscilla, Lula has a home and we need to get her back to it. I know her momma, she'll know best what to do."

"Good idea," Sucky says, approaching them from the dirt drive leading to the house. "Your momma's sitting on the porch waiting. She wants you to come in now."

"Can't." Lula looks past him at Eunice. She's wearing her new super-fringy Country Tanya denim jacket over her flaming phoenix firebird kimono. "Haven't counted a hundred cars yet, Momma!"

Eunice yells back, "Don't make me come off this porch. Ain't that right, Mrs. Bagwell?"

"Eunice, stay where you are," says Harry. "Sucky and me are going to walk the little lady home, give me a second. Priscilla, I'll be right back."

"I'm going …"

"Stay here, Priscilla, keep an eye on the bike for me. Please."

Two cruisers pull up, lights running. The sheriff gives them a wave toward the traffic backing up on both sides of the road, heading to and from Llewellyn. Lula grabs Harry's hand and together with Sucky, they walk toward the house.

***

A golf ball hits Harry in the thigh, another Sucky's mushroom cap sleeve of an arm. It will bruise and swell so painful, he will be forced to hold the mike in his hand for the first time ever at the Hi-Way next karaoke Sunday.

"Eunice! What did you go and do that for?"

Eunice stabs a tee in between the porch slats, then another two and sets up the balls Titleist label up. "Because it's so damn easy!" One two three, she drives the balls like Schoolie taught her back when she pretended to give a damn.

The first hits Sucky smack in the forehead, dropping him flat in the driveway. The second ricochets the black walnut tree off to Harry's right, giving him time to run for cover behind an old Studebaker rusting in the yard. He looks around for Lula and sees her run off into the brush.

Lula scrambles low to the ground, her chip shot daddy in her head. *Dig in, dig the club up under the ball, yes darlin' take the dirt along for the ride and chip away from the hole; never toward, a dirty ball will always boomerang back to where it wants to go.* She hurries toward the back door of the house.

The third drive hooks left and takes out a headlight on the Harley. "Well. Can't imagine who might be responsible for this," Priscilla says and starts up the trike.

A golf cart and a Harley trike have more in common than not. Steering is in the wheel and reverse electronic. Harry had told Priscilla as much when he rode over a couple weeks back interested in purchasing her dead husband's Club car he'd seen listed on Craigslist. He demonstrated the basics then and there on her driveway and said the hardest part was not to lean into the turn, but she shouldn't have any trouble having never previously ridden a bike. Priscilla liked the trunk especially for her purse after she popped on the extra helmet stored inside and asked Harry for a ride. The two were heading to Bike Week to price a trike for Priscilla when they stopped for what turned out to be Lula lying in the road. He hoped Priscilla wouldn't find anything she wanted to buy right away. He liked her riding with him.

Priscilla idles the Harley at the end of the drive and stares down her blackmailer housekeeper. Eunice takes a couple practice swings with her golf club and yells,"Trading up, boss? Golf cart doesn't do it for you anymore?" She sets a hot pink golf ball on the tee. "No worries, I've got pictures!"

Priscilla opens up the trike and screams, "FORE!" She heads straight at Eunice, her head is down, eyes on the ball, ready to drive Mrs. Priscilla Bagwell into the middle of next week. Something in the road, Priscilla sees something, a person not moving, not Lula, it's Sucky sprawled out unconscious. Priscilla pulls left, brakes hard and the trike throws her off.

"Now what, rich bitch?" Eunice shoulders the club and steps off the porch - one, two, three.

"MOMMA!"

Eunice pivots toward Lula, standing behind her. "You little shit!"

"I know where my daddy's wallet is."

Eunice points the club at Lula. "Don't lie to me, girl."

"I'm not, I know where it is. It's in the house."

"In the house. You watched me trash this place more than once and never said a goddamn word?"

"I'll show you, momma," says Lula and steps back inside.

Eunice stands at the door and watches her daughter turn over the fancy gilded chair. A wallet and a sealed sandwich bag with something white inside is tucked up under the springs. Lula pulls Schoolie's wallet free. "Your dad," Eunice says,"was fucking worthless."

Back up, Lula. Now.

The world explodes, all pops and static and bright light. Eunice throws up her arms electrified. The bedazzled fringe of her denim jacket quivers the way Brucie must've when lightning struck him out on the golf course. The golf club points high toward heaven making Eunice look more like Vegas Elvis than Country Tanya. The flashes fizzle. Eunice drops to the floor and behind her, Lula sees Schoolie smiling. A blink later, it's Harry. He tells Lula that Eunice will be fine, a taser never hurts for too awfully long.

Lula opens the wallet and sees the picture of her daddy smiling at her, the St. Sebastian religious medal tucked safe behind his driver license. A scrap of paper torn from a spiral notebook flutters out from the fold. *Barbara.* Written on the back, a phone number. *I am always with you,* she hears and every season the wild rhododendron come into bloom, she will remember.

Cowpunk

Anthony Neil Smith

It was time to dump Layla when she walked into the trailer day drunk and stinking of another man, still raring to go.

Again.

She prowled Gordo's recliner while he plucked the opening riff to "Dark Night" on his unplugged guitar – a Blasters song he kept fucking up at practice. Layla's jeans were unbuttoned, her zipper half down. She thought she was hiding the baby bump? He knew her game, trying to pin it on him, but that baby was coming out black and everyone knew it. Probably Biz Warr's, a guy Gordo'd gone to high school with. Trying to be a rapper now.

"Come on." Pushing against him, her shirt riding up. A peek of her faded-pink cotton panties. Damn, the heat wafting off her. "Fuck me, baby."

"Layla, please."

She leaned down, peach wine and spearmint gum on her breath. "I am *giving* it away."

"Yeah, a two for one sale."

She laughed and laughed. "You're so funny."

Flubbed the riff again, distracted. He shouldn't have quit lessons. Never going to compete with the greats – Gary Moore, Johnny Winter, Eddie. His dick was getting stiff because it didn't matter how many men she fucked, Layla's dirty baby act got him horny against his will.

She pouted. "Makes me think you don't like girls anymore."

Eight months since they first hooked up. They'd known each other a lot longer, since she was twelve and started crushing hard on him at their church. Gordo's parents had made him go. No high school kids gave a shit about Jesus except when they got in trouble – caught drinking, caught smoking, caught fucking. *Jesus, I swear if you get me out of this…*

So, yeah, he'd flirted with this junior high girl five years younger than him but never did anything. Okay,

one kiss. One. Then her hips widened and her tits plumped. Her pimply face cleared up and broke the boys' hearts. The cute kid became the local slut.

Gordo lost touch with her after he graduated, stopped going to church, and told his stepdad, Shane, he didn't plan on taking over the sugar beet farm. Shane slapped him so hard he lost a few minutes.

"Your sister sure as shit won't take it."

"Sell it. Move to Florida. Live on the beach."

Thought he'd get slapped again. But Shane deflated.

"You've got two weeks to move out. I'll give you some money, but it's the last you'll ever get from me."

And it was.

His mother was one of those "the man is the head of the household" types, gone all super Christian after getting over meth. Once Gordo was gone, she'd clip coupons and send his younger sister Destiny over with a fat envelope of them, a few twenties tucked inside, with a note: *I'm praying for you*.

Gordo and Destiny had different dads, no idea who. Mom swore Gordo's was a high school sweetheart who died in "the war", but they guessed Destiny's was her drug dealer. The poison took its toll on Mom – thirty-one going on seventy. Lucky she got saved by Jesus and met Shane Oleson, beet farmer, at her charismatic church and married him seven months later. By then Mom's insides were all fucked up, Gordo and Destiny the only kids she was ever going to have. Shane could have resented them for it, having to settle for step kids instead of his own flesh and bone, but if he did, he kept it under wraps. Even if he wasn't the warmest guy and he ran a strict house, he made sure they got what they needed and then some.

Never laid a hand on any of them. Never raised his voice.

Until that slap.

Anyway.

Gordo moved into this shitty trailer with his band's bassist, Percy. Got a job at Hy-Vee stocking groceries. Found a third-hand Kawasaki motorcycle because his stepdad sold the truck he'd bought for him. A temporary situation, that was all. With the Twin Cities to the east and Fargo up north and Iowa City dead south, his band was going to make it playing bars, he just knew it.

Layla worked a register at the same Hy-Vee, still crushing hard but a senior now. Gordo took her for a ride on his bike. Then another. The third time, they fucked real nice in a corn field. Girl knew what she was doing. Knew more than him, anyway.

His first time. Barely lasted three minutes.

But she laughed and told him it felt good and played with his sticky cock with her feet to get him going again.

His second time. Much better.

Now look at her.

Twang twang *thud* – this fucking riff.

Don't like girls anymore. Hoping he'd get pissed, get a little rough with her.

Layla darted in, a surprise kiss on the side of his lips. Salty.

Gordo made a face. "He's all over you."

"So win me back. Are you going to let any old guy sleep with me? Take a bath with me, and then win me back."

Girl this young shouldn't be thinking that way. Her voice reminded Gordo of chipmunks.

Taking a bath with her meant another foot job before the main attraction, and he was already straining against his jeans.

Twang.

He glanced at her feet. Boot-cut jeans over flip-flops. Chipped hot pick toenails. Bet her soles were dirty. Why he liked it, he couldn't say, but his stomach dropped and his throat got thick.

Percy to the rescue, driving up in his loud-as-fuck Chevy Caprice – a color Gordo could only describe as "greenge." No muffler, and it needed new oil every week. Lost count of black patches killing the grass out front.

Percy stomped up the steps. Six-nine and two-seventy, every step was a stomp. He wasn't all fat. Just *big*. When he strapped the bass on, it sat way high and looked like a ukulele.

He opened the door, big grin on his slab-of-concrete face. "Dude."

"My man, what's up?"

He flicked his eyes towards Layla, then ignored her as usual. She didn't matter a hill of beans. No girls did. Didn't care about pussy yet. Didn't dress like he cared, short-sleeved checkered shirts over band tees, comic book tees. Hockey hair mullet, the front and sides too short. His grandma hated when it covered his ears.

Layla *despised* Percy. Called him a tree-sized cockblock.

"Got our first gig, man. First one. And it pays."

Layla pouted and whispered to Gordo, "I'll be in the bath if you want me."

She twirled and sashayed down the hall, slow so they'd look at her ass.

Gordo cleared his throat. Needed to pee now, but the trailer had only one bathroom. "How can we have a gig? We know two songs."

"Two and a half. We learn one more, that's all we'll need. It's not a full gig, it's a good start."

Percy sat on his aunt's hand-me-down couch, the legs broken off.

"They'll be other bands or something?"

"No, just us."

"How much?"

"Forty bucks and free beer, free pizza. So stoked."

"For three songs?"

Percy's grin was like, *You're gonna shit your pants*.

"I don't get it."

Percy lifted his hands, beholding the savior in the clouds. "Wrestle. Mania."

Aw fuck. "Percy…"

"Right?"

Not *WrestleMania*. Not Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant. Not Rowdy Roddy and Macho Man.

But "Wrestle Mania" – no italics, no trademark, a space between the words.

On Friday nights, this soybean farmer named Colin Korhoen – they all called him "Cornhole" – let some guys who wrestled and taped it in their own backyards take over his barn. Built a shitty ring, bought a bunch of folding chairs cheap, an old church sound system from a pawn shop, and some long tables they could break every week. He'd buy pop – most kids BYOBed – pizza and fried chicken, and let the wrestlers charge admission. He didn't want any money. He wanted to watch the guys in their underwear and costumes. He wanted to be in their "dressing room" in the loft while they got ready. He loved the sweat, the skin, the muscles.

He never touched any of them, what the wrestlers said, but he sure eyefucked them.

They were sure he was a catcher, no pitcher.

Gordo put his Peavey down, ugly ass guitar he bought for a steal from a garage sale, and leaned forward in the recliner. Counted off on his fingers. "We got Flirtin' with Disaster and White Lies. But I still ain't got Dark Night."

"But you're close."

"Not close enough."

"We've got four days. We can figure it out in four days." He dropped his voice. Chinned towards the bathroom. "You swear it ain't yours?"

"Fuck, I hope not."

"You need to kick her to the curb if it's not."

Gordo shook his head. "I know it."

Should've never started. But when it was that easy, fuck.

"We ought to learn a fourth, for an encore. What d'you think about Powderfinger? I'll call the guys." He rocked himself off the couch, went to the phone - wall-mounted in the kitchen with a twenty-five foot stretchy cord, tangled to shit right now.

Gordo picked up the guitar again. Didn't pluck it. He hated to admit it, but they needed a better guitarist. He was great with rhythm, barre chords, but solos? Long way to go. What he really wanted, but hadn't dared show the guys yet, was to write his own songs. Only problem, he couldn't sing them and play them at the same time. Threw him off. He had a good handful

in progress in a notebook, recorded a few on his boom box, like, partially. What he needed was a four-track recorder.

One of those, five hundred bucks. A lot more than his share of forty bucks.

Percy hung up the phone. "Everybody's in. Let's do this."

"Shit. Going to embarrass ourselves."

"Maybe, but it'll be loud. Cover our mistakes."

"One sec."

Gordo headed down the hall, knocked on the bathroom door. "We're going to practice."

Layla didn't answer. Little splashes, though.

"You hear me?"

"*What?*"

"I said I'm going."

"*What? Open the door*."

He reached for the doorknob. Stopped.

"*Gordo? I said come in*."

If he opened the door, Layla would be in the tub, bubbles everywhere, hair slicked wet. One leg up on the side. Come hither eyes.

"I said I'm going!"

Didn't wait for an answer. She'd figure it out when Percy cranked his engine.

They pulled up behind Loader's pick-up out front of Klaus' parents' house, the garage door opening because they'd heard Percy's car from blocks away. He pulled up off the curb, on the grass – not much grass anymore, worn away. Klaus' dad would ream him over it later, but never in front of his friends. Wasn't going to stop Percy parking there.

Gordo grabbed his guitar from the back. He kept his amp here in the garage, a Crate. Damned thing sounded cool in his bedroom, but like sludge in the garage. They'd listened to "Powderfinger" on the way over.

"Nobody at Wrestle Mania wants to hear a ten-minute Neil Young song."

"Then 'Cinnamon Girl.' Loud and short. And you get to show off."

"I can't play like that."

"Neil plays like shit."

"Shit, man, is harder than it sounds."

In the garage Klaus and Loader stood in front of the stereo, Klaus' high school graduation present from his folks. They were all jealous. JVC. Even had a CD player.

The sound out of the speakers – huge sweeping guitar. Growling. Sustain.

The singer, nasal as all get out, mumble-shouting, *Something something HAPPINESS…something THREE HOUR something something…WHISKY BOTTLE something JEEEEE-SUUUUUS.*

Klaus and Loader, hands in pockets, staring at the ground. Eyebrows knit.

"The fuck is that?"

"Uncle Tupelo." Klaus, still tripping over a German accent after ten years here, stopped the tape, rewound. "You've got to hear this. Friend of mine taped it down at a club in St. Louis."

Loader shook his head. "I don't know what else to say."

He was the singer. Dude was fucking phenomenal on the mike. That guy in the Cult, Ian whatshisname? Pretended to be an Indian? Loader was the real deal, real Dakota. A curtain of straight black hair, skin permanently tanned. Those *cheekbones*, motherfucker, sharp enough to cut through virginity.

All four guys so different. Each thinking they ran the band.

Except Klaus, because a drummer was hard to find. He could join ten bands if he wanted. And his parents didn't mind them practicing in their garage. His dad, big shot at a giant frozen food company's HQ in town, was brutal on him, but bought him the stereo, his drums, his expensive jeans he'd then rip with a hunting knife, burn with matches, and flick paint on.

The tape clicked to a stop and Klaus pushed play.

Crowd noise, crowd banter, then…

"Wait, is that pedal steel?"

"Listen, man."

The steel was gorgeous and slow, backed up by box guitar.

The singer started. Not a pretty voice. Not a high-pitched voice. Sound like one big nose.

But it worked.

Goddamn, it worked. Dude sounded like he'd worked the graveyard shift, gone home to sleep, then woke up two hours later to come play this song.

Gordo shook his head. "I can't play pedal steel."

The others shushed him.

Then the quiet song blasted off, what they'd heard when they walked up.

When it faded, Loader stabbed his finger at the tape deck. "*That. That.* This is the future. I'm telling you, we need to be doing *that*."

Percy stretched his hands behind his head. "Sound like crap? They're not tight."

"Didn't you just *hear* that? Shit. I swear, that's the future. Dirtier, more real."

"Real bad."

"Dude, you like *Neil Young*." Loader looked like he wanted to deck his bass player. But Percy was another one who could join any band he wanted. Guitarists and singers, a dime a baker's dozen. Bass players and drummers, not as flashy but they still got plenty of pussy.

If they wanted to. Klaus did.

Percy grinned. "Calm down, smoke your peace pipe."

If he wasn't so big, Loader would've murdered this piece of shit by now.

Gordo said, "Listen, I don't think we should do it. We don't know enough songs, and I can't get Dark Night. I try and try."

"Seriously? We've got to, man." Loader sounded like a leader. "Flirtin' with Disaster, White Lies, and Dark Night. We can do it. *You* can do it."

Klaus spun a drumstick and nodded along. "Ja."

Percy shrugged. "We should do a fourth." Then started *Duh du du DU du DU*, mouthriffing "Cinnamon Girl."

"We're not doing Neil Young."

Klaus started air drumming along to Percy. Fuck, the look in Loader's eyes...

Gordo looked up to see an old Toyota pick-up pull into the driveway, stop, leaving them a good twenty feet in-between. A black guy jumped out of the bed, long-ass gym shorts and a tank-top, bottle of Mountain Dew in his hand. The passenger, also black, in a puffy shirt, tapered dress pants, and loafers.

He didn't know those two, but the driver climbing out, sure enough: Biz Warr. Jeans and a Polo, clean Jordans. No malice on his face. Hard to read. Three of the band had gone to school with him for most of the last decade. Knew him as well as any white kid in rural Minnesota knew any of their Somali neighbors – barely at all.

What Gordo knew:

His real name was Warsame. The "Biz" stuff was for rapping.

His dad had come to the States in the seventies, and young Warr went from little English and lost to near-native English and upfront – basketball, honors, music.

And pussy. White pussy.

The rumor about his big cock was true, so said Layla, twisting the knife.

He regretted it now. Fuck, did Gordo ever regret it. Blame the hardcore porn mags he'd found stashed in Shane's barn when he was fifteen, the real taboo shit. Got his wiring short-circuited.

Then him and Layla fighting about her drinking, her cheating, and goddamn if her taunting him with the details, meant to wound him – which of course they did – also made him rock hard. And he did something about it.

After, Layla knew she had him wrapped around any part of her she wanted, and Gordo couldn't cut the string.

One more thing: Biz Warr was an amazing rapper.

Not that any of Gordo's friends would know. It was an unspoken truth – hip hop was in a war with rock for America's hearts and minds. You know what that meant.

Which was funny when you realized the kids who liked country – your Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson – liked rap just as much, even if their parents didn't know.

Percy's cheeks reddened. He was ready. A nod to Loader and Klaus.

Gordo said, "He's here for me. Let me talk to him."

"Got your back."

"Not going to happen. It's fine. Hold on."

He walked down the driveway to meet them, hands in his pockets. Not going to shake his hand if offered. But Warr did the same thing. His friends stood a few steps back, one on each side.

"Sup, Gordo?"

"Nothing new. You good?"

"I thought you and me…listen, you can't go around telling people it's my baby."

"Who said I did?"

"Come on, man. You know what I'm saying. If it ain't one of ours, it could be one of a lot of guys."

"Hey, watch it." Compelled to defend her, in spite of wishing Warr would propose to her or something, stop him worrying about it. Layla wasn't all that slutty. More than just the two of them, no doubt, but not at the same time. Except now. "You want to go there?"

"My bad." Hands out of pockets. Palms out. "She's sweet and all. But just, you know, we were just having some fun. Stop calling me out, bro. I hear you don't want her no more either. We don't have to fight about this shit."

"You really sure it's not yours?"

"Naw, man. My pullout game is strong. I'd bet you a hundred."

Gordo knew first hand his pullout game was not strong at all.

"So, we good, Gord?"

Gordo was going to say, *Sure, no problem.*

Was.

He saw the shadow on the ground, Percy blocking the sun, coming in hot.

"Hey, Warr, your baby momma is stinking up my house. Why don't you go pick her up?"

"The fuck you say to me?"

Now Warr's wingmen stepped closer. Loader and Klaus rushed up, too.

Shit. Gordo squeezed his eyes closed for a second.

The baller with the Dew inched forward, same height as Percy. Eye to eye. "Alright, alright. I see what this is. Think your buddy's Nazi daddy is going to protect you?"

"Uh-ight. Uh-ight. How about it? Pronounce your words clearly, uh-ite?"

"Like some faggot cracker thinks he's better'n me?"

Gordo found himself in back of the pack now, the band pushing ahead of him. Warr wasn't rushing forward either.

The one in his Sunday best told Loader, "I expected better from you. Fight for your boy here today, tomorrow he cuts you out. That's the whole history of this country, man."

"I know my history, *boy*. Don't need no –"

"Hey, hey!" Gordo pushed back through. Holding his arms out. Wished he had a whistle. "It's cool."

"No, let him say it! Let him say it! Say it, Tonto! What were you going to call me just then?"

"Please, don't."

"*Schvartz!*" Klaus kicking in from the back. "Doesn't count in German, does it? *Schvartz!*"

"I'll shove your schvartze up your ass, Adolf."

Then…

It got said.

One of them said it.

Gordo didn't know who. Probably Percy. Percy would. Percy liked to provoke. Percy didn't like being

called a faggot, so fair game, that's what Gordo thought he was thinking.

More shouting, more shoving, but Gordo couldn't get in-between them.

It took Biz Warr telling his boys to *chill*. He looked over his shoulder at Gordo while herding them back to the truck. Was it *Hey, thanks for trying*? Or was it *Dude, I thought we were cool*?

Whatever.

No punches thrown. Not in a white neighborhood in a white state. Not worth the storm that would bring. Shit no.

"Fuck them," Gordo said when the truck pulled out, screeched down the block. "Nothing but bullshit."

Truth was Gordo didn't hate Biz Warr, didn't want to fight him.

He only wished he could make himself stop taking the guy's sloppy seconds.

"Come on. Let's grind through Dark Night."

When they got back to the trailer past ten that night, having given up on "Dark Night" after two brutal hours, Layla was gone. Probably had a shift at work, then home to her folks. Lucky they were understanding. Nice people, as far as he remembered. Her daddy hadn't come looking for him yet, so that was good.

Once the band had dropped "Dark Night," they circled back around to "Keep Your Hands to Yourself," Georgia Satellites. Easy to play, and people liked it.

"Stupid ass song," Klaus had said. "Corny as shit full of corn."

Loader's voice wasn't a good match at all. Too forceful, too *not* Georgia.

But it was a third song. They had three fucking songs.

Layla had left him a present on his pillow. Her faded pink cotton panties.

Made him wonder if she really left to go to work, or if Biz Warr really came by and picked her up, wanting to shove Gordo's nose in it one more time. Not like it makes any difference now – the baby was *one* of theirs, so fucking her now wasn't going to make it any more or less either of theirs.

Percy's bass shook the walls. Lucky the closest neighbors were far enough way and, probably, stone deaf. Gordo told him on the way home that his shit was going to get them in serious trouble if he kept it up.

"Excuse me for telling off the guy screwing your girl."

"She's not…I don't…"

"Had to stand up for her, since you weren't gonna. You're my bro, bro."

Now he sat on his bed, leaned against the wall, and couldn't help himself. He lifted the panties to his nose. He knew that smell. As much as he wanted to throw them across the room and go have a beer, force himself to get "Dark Night" right, he didn't. He got up, locked the bedroom door, and pulled his jeans off. Licked his palm to get started.

The bass vibrations helped. He closed his eyes. He went back in time, earlier that day, Layla grinning, bubbles everywhere, leg up on the side of the tub.

Thought, *it had better be his, it had better be his, it had better be his*.

Contributors

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