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# Thirteen Unlikely Stories

by

JOSEPH GRAY

A Dissertation.  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Letters  
and the Department English  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctorate of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

*Thirteen Unlikely Stories* is a collection of fiction composed and revised at the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the instruction and advice of Steven Barthelme. Additionally, I am grateful for my peers in workshop. Specifically, I would like to thank Andrew Gretes, Mike Goodwin, Nick Rupert, and Matt Nagel. I am also thankful for the instruction and advice of both Anne Sanow and Justin Taylor. Finally, Dr. Craig Carey, Dr. Angela Ball, and Dr. Alexandra Valint were all a great help.

## DEDICATION

I owe much to my parents and family. Thank you, Mom and Dad. Your continued support has always meant a lot and enabled me to be my own pathfinder. Additionally, I am forever indebted to my wife, who is not only a great reader but a patient editor. Her help and support has been a lifesaver. Thank you, Rebecca.

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## INTRODUCTION

Simply put, I approached the dissertation as an opportunity to revisit and revise stories while also thinking through my process. I've been at this writing business a while now and it seemed an appropriate time to take stock of things.

Before I came to the University of Southern Mississippi I spent three years in the M.F.A. at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I felt at a significant disadvantage when I matriculated at McNeese State because everyone else in the M.F.A. had studied either English as an undergraduate or creative writing. I hadn't studied either and most all the writers they mentioned I had not heard of: Barry Hannah, Harry Crews, Larry Brown, Mark Richard, Richard Ford, Ron Rash, Denis Johnson. Of course I name these writers out of all those that were mentioned because I went on to read them and they influenced my work early on (and, as a result, have continued to do so). They all strike a kind of eloquence while writing about their respective characters, many of whom are the forgotten or the ill-thought-of. Somehow their depictions are generous while remaining honest. It is a trait I have long admired and have tried hard at imitating.

This company of writers have often been categorized as belonging to "grit lit" or "Southern lit" to denote their similarities of both style and themes, and my own work produced both before and while at Southern Miss could be classified as the same since the need exists now for its categorization. When pressed, I would say my stories are often backgrounded against a rural setting and feature characters who are intimately familiar with poverty. As a result, my stories often explore questions related to exposure or vulnerability, both physically and psychologically. If my stories are topically interested in what it is that I find interesting, then it is by proxy and not by any conscious intention

during their composition. Admittedly, though, knowing and being able to recognize how my intellectual interests intersect with my creative endeavors has only helped me become both a more thoughtful reader and writer.

These thirteen stories all began then as a germ in the form of either a sentence, an image, or situation—each an “initiating subject” as Richard Hugo writes in *The Triggering Town*. What about each of these subjects arrested my imagination I cannot say except they all piqued my curiosity by demanding to be questioned: What would a person do if their dying husband decided to build a Viking longboat for his funeral (“Shield Boss”); What purpose would a person give to a wax figure bought second-hand (“Her Personal Savior”); What if Jim Croce’s ghost haunted the college campus where he died (“Jim Croce’s Ghost”); Why is the neighbor kid so strange and how can his strangeness both bother me and induce sympathy at the same time (“Prey”); Why would a person shoot and kill all of somebody’s horses (“The Holdouts”)?

These questions germinated in this writer’s imagination until eventually taking root on the page. There they grew into what might have been identified as stories had it not been for all the weeds that grew in alongside them. The weeds are all the bad that the writer thought was good at the time of writing. Mixing bad in with good is easy even for this practiced writer because it is not like what is bad is unequivocally bad. It is simply that once I started to cultivate my shabby story I found that there existed elements that were either unwanted or too wild for the plot I staked out. These weeds were bad then only because they were in competition with the germ I intended to become the focus of the story. For example, “After the Tourists Have Gone” underwent a lot of changes. The story was once double in length and had a couple of titles before I settled on what it is

titled now. The story had been called “Swimming with Manatees” and later “Afloat.” Not until this most recent revision did a title occur to me that communicated what the story was about, not until the story itself had been made the focus.

In the original version of “After the Tourists Have Gone” the unnamed narrator had invited his friend over the night before for a Christmas dinner. The narrator’s wife was an alcoholic who was on and off the wagon and had recently fallen off again. In this story, Cecil is concerned for the narrator. Throughout the story, the narrator reflects on his relationship with his wife and what is to become of them while taking tourists out with Cecil to view manatees. This version of the story ended with the narrator realizing that things between him and his wife will always be the same. I grew less interested in that version of the story and more interested in the story that was about the narrator, Cecil, and their business as I began to edit. Eventually I revised towards the story it is now. The story’s focus became Cecil having *something* in his life—in this particular case, his pet boa—that brought him unexplained joy and purpose. The narrator was still searching for his. That their business was failing (I doubled down on this element in revising) only added pressure to the narrator’s situation. In this version, by the story’s conclusion, the narrator is no longer realizing the static and empty nature of his life by imagining a scenario involving his wife. Instead, he is faced with acknowledging the truth about himself after the hope that he had for a change has been wrecked in the wake of violence.

I wrote “After the Tourists Have Gone” in my third year at Southern Miss and with its inclusion in this dissertation I reflected on how this story and the others herein needed both their respective room (and time) to grow. For myself I realized my process

consisted of three stages. I realized first these stories grew from being the germ of a sentence, an image, or situation into a question. I say they grew into a question, but most often I was unsure of what exactly I was asking any given story to be until well after it was written and it is more accurate to say they grew into a curiosity that I began to prod over time. For example, with “After the Tourists Have Gone” the initial question was “Who are these people that run these manatee tours, *really?*” The room required for the stories to grow at this their earliest stage was this writer’s uncertainty, the difference between writing *towards* an answer or *for* an answer. One is a means to an end, the other an end in itself. The latter requires patience, and at this stage the stories needed not to be restrained by any predetermined objective. If I had had in mind already who I thought these characters were, then very easily my depiction could have become patronizing. Such a portrayal would have lacked the eloquence of the writers I admire who write about similar characters from a place of genuine curiosity and generosity.

Once actual writing began, the stories (and their writer) needed to be free from all restraints that were placed on previous stories: subject, style, scope and so on. Even though I had been influenced by Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, Mark Richard, and others, I had to try to write from a place that was outside of their shadow. This second stage of growth allowed for possibilities, the stories given the necessary room to grow into what they could become instead of what the writer thought they should be. Ernest Hemingway has often been quoted as having said as much with “Write drunk, edit sober.” Whether Hemingway ever offered such advice or rather the advice has been mistakenly attributed to him is of less interest to me than my loose interpretation. I have been guilty more than

once of getting word drunk. Intoxicated by syntax, wobbly on word choice. Three sheets in, really.

What I have found that I like about writing is being uninhibited and not caring to second guess, the self seemingly ceasing to exist for a while, and experiencing the literary equivalent of *le petite mort*. And why should the writer not have his own experience similar to that of the reader, what Roland Barthes articulated as *jouissance* (*The Pleasure of the Text*)? Is it any wonder that this second stage of first putting words to page is so addictive? As a writer I am always trying to attain again that small death that comes with letting go of the second person that divides me, that is, abandoning the conscious and critical mind for the unconscious artist. Dorothea Brande elaborates on this practice in *Becoming a Writer* when she talks about thinking of yourself as two persons: the conscious craftsman and critic and the unconscious artist. In fact I have long had difficulties reconciling these two persons because of my preference to create and not shape my stories, and thereby leaving many of my stories with weeds, much like how “After the Tourists Have Gone” was before many subsequent edits and revisions.

The collected stories were only in their final stage(s) of growth—revision—after I began to cull them of the aforementioned weeds: those elements in competition with each story’s focus. In “After the Tourists Have Gone” the story was in the weeds when the narrative was trying to include exposition that reduced the narrator’s problems to an easy diagnosis: martial problems. It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that growth results from such a culling but I will insist. If every writer is a thief, the good ones must also be homicidal. “Murder your darlings” is for the squeamish, aim for wholesale slaughter. “After the Tourists Have Gone” was reduced by half, cut from twelve pages to six, and is

a much improved story because of it. “The Last Panther” also lost half its length to revision, found a new title, and like “After the Tourists Have Gone” saw the role of the protagonist’s wife play a much smaller role than she did in its most original version. However, the wife’s character is retained and only changed in “The Last Panther.”

In the most original version of “The Last Panther,” Teddy had returned to his childhood home to care for his dying uncle while he and his wife were going through a separation. Teddy was hopeful for reconciliation, but his wife was not. Teddy’s frustration grew then out of being removed from his wife in order to care for his uncle. In revising, I found that the story’s focus was Teddy’s relationship with his home and family, not his relationship his wife. As such, the relationship with his wife was minimized as an aspect of the story, the two were fine and only separated by distance while Teddy was home caring for his uncle. The change brought to focus Teddy’s conflict. In this story, Teddy must come to terms with the past in order to live in the present by reconciling how who he is is informed by where he is from. Teddy had to let go in order to move on. In writing it is the same as life, things must die so that others might live. A recent revelation, a result of this dissertation.

If you become too word drunk you can easily fall in love with bad elements. You begin treasuring what Professor Barthelme called “bad poetry,” thinking necessary what can be done away with, and your stories are held hostage by precious writing. This is why Brande identifies “The Advantages of Duplicity” in her book, that the unconscious artist must eventually yield to the conscious critic and craftsman. Of the two persons that make up the writer, the latter literally sees anew in revision to get at the less common definition of the word (*OED*). Without the conscious critic and craftman’s perspective, these stories

could not be cultivated to grow to their fullest potential but would remain crowded and choked by competing parts, that which is in service of the writer versus what is in service of the story. The edits and revisions I did on “Cousins” serve as a good example of this.

In its original most form, “Cousins” was, like many of the stories collected in the dissertation, much longer. A whole subplot about an absent father and brother were shed in revision. Additionally, the writing itself was cleaned up on a sentence level. As a writer I had to learn discretion. For example, consider the following exchange that happens between Jeremy and Muncie early on in the story. The revised version collected in this dissertation reads like this: “I thumbed to the centerfold. Tarzan had taken her into the jungle. Her black hair tussled and a perfect mess. Abrasions painted on her arms and legs. Strategic daubs of mud. Mouth making an O. ‘This is real pervert stuff,’ I said.” For comparison, the original most version read this way:

“I thumbed to the centerfold. A woman looked out from the extended page. She looked like she’d been taken into the jungle by Tarzan. Her hair, jet black, was tussled and a mess and they’d painted her with abrasions—light scratches—and with daubs of mud. Her mouth made an O like she was as shocked as we were at finding her legs spread. ‘Mom would fillet me if she caught me with these. This is some real pervert stuff,’ I said. On the following page, the same woman struck different poses while being penetrated by an oiled up and burly looking fellow. The implication was that he was the guy that must’ve carried her off. He was enormous.”

I wrote “Cousins” my first year at Southern Miss, and the original version, as this selection illustrates, indulged my most adolescent tendencies. Much of this I learned to

strike because I have simply become a better (i.e., more mature) reader. A lot of the vulgar in my early work was overstated in this way because my writing lacked not only intellectual maturity but also confidence. I had not yet learned that the vulgar has more uses when it is put more subtly. Making such distinction like these, though—discerning the difference between what is in service of the writer versus what is in service of the story—has been the hardest of lessons and why I am hesitant to ever call this stage—revision—a final or last stage of growth.

All these stories seem to have forever been in some stage of growth. When they were freshly new, just written, and being read over by the writer for the first time I imagine these stories as if they were in their first spring. In this case I may or may not have thought I was in high cotton, having struck on something special. But by and by summer comes and goes, and after that fall, and soon the story finds itself in winter. By this time I would have put the story aside for a while, coming back to it every now and then, each time having second thoughts by cutting this or adding that. I imagine detritus builds around the story from all these edits. But once sentences like those shown above began to be pared from a story, a story begins to get closer to being in focus. I won't call these revisions but the story *is* being shaped as it grows off of what has been shed. Certainly that has been the case for most all the herein collected stories. Many have seen many springs, cropping up after a dormant winter, looking like the writer expected while also being slightly different. Eventually these stories were cultivated this way until all that was not needed was culled away and that which was in service of the story put in focus.

When I talk about what is in service of the story I specifically mean getting to good writing. For John Gardner that means sticking to set of primary subjects for fiction which are “emotion, values, and beliefs” (*The Art of Fiction*). This statement was more eloquently made by Faulkner nearly a quarter of a century before Gardner in his Nobel Banquet speech, when he said good writing was “the human heart in conflict with itself.” Conflict such as this I tried at getting at with “Good People.” A story I wrote my first year at Southern Miss, it too has lost a lot to revision. A thousand words, around four pages, are gone from this version.

In “Good People,” the two main characters are old friends from college who plan a meeting in New Orleans in order to begin an extramarital affair. However, both are conflicted when faced with the reality of attaining what they have only fantasized about until now. In dramatizing their dilemma I told the story from the perspective of Daniel. We are told it is Daniel in the beginning that is pursuing Mae, but once the story begins the situation has immediately changed because it is Mae who initiates their final meeting. In the first draft of this story and in subsequent edits Mae’s complicity in the proposed affair had been more the result of coercion than her acting as a co-conspirator. I made the change to make their relationship more dynamic while also complicating Mae’s character. This way, both principal characters were actively engaged in the subjects that Gardner identifies as the primary subjects of fiction: emotion, values, and beliefs.

For Gardner, writing successfully about these human dilemmas depends on the writer’s ability to persuade the reader into believing they are no longer reading. “[G]reat fiction,” Gardner says in *The Art of Fiction*, “engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real, we

respond to fictional problems as though they were real: We sympathize, think, and judge.” In order to achieve this, the writing must be of service to the story, the story of service to the reader’s experience. I aimed then as a writer to get out of the reader’s way.

In my efforts not to disrupt the reader, I revised with the goal of crafting stories you could lose yourself in just as I lost myself in writing them. I eliminated all that I could identify as indulgences included only for the writer’s vanity and tried to leave only that which was right and necessary for the story’s telling. In the process, I agonized over more than a few words. I like to think myself as concerned as Mark Twain was with choosing the *almost right word* instead of the *right word*—a matter of no small concern, only a difference as great as that between the lightning bug and lightning (*Writing Huckleberry Finn*). I tried, too, in each at writing the truest sentence I know, to get as close to the thing as possible and to show it as I saw it by getting at the story’s focus. Writing as I did for answers to questions that arose out of curiosity, I labored in each story to have characters confronted by a moment where they must act so that their character crystallized around their decision.

I did not always think as directly as I do now about the intersection of character and their actions as the impetus for what moves not only a story but its reader. Workshop with Professor Barthelme often left me perplexed and more than a little frustrated at not understanding how to address the question I knew he would eventually ask, “But why should I care?” A stark assessment of a story’s success that I often failed and struggle not to fail at now. A change for me came with the opportunity to teach fiction at the University of Southern Mississippi. For the class I assigned Rust Hills’ short book on the subject, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*. I had never read Hills’

book before and my choice was predicated on its being both short and inexpensive. I figured students were more likely to both purchase and read the book if both these things were true. Hills' small book proved invaluable.

From Hills' first page, my conscious critic/craftsman and my unconscious artist were told to work tandem. He writes, "I believe only two things can be said about the nature of the short story ... First, a short story tells of something that happened to someone. Second the successful contemporary short story will demonstrate a more harmonious relationship of all its aspects than will any other literary form, excepting perhaps lyric poetry" (*Writing in General*). Hills had articulated a strategy for answering the much dreaded question of "But why should I care?" Up until this point, I had been working around Hills' two things, the two coalescing in my work only by happy accident. I am not sure I was entirely certain what stories were about until I read this book and had to explain as much to my stories. I related to students many revelatory statements of Hills': "Nothing can happen again;" "[T]he action in fiction is final determining action;" "[W]hatever happens to the character as a result of the action of the story alters or 'moves' him in such a way, again however slightly it may be, that he would never experience or do the same thing in exactly the same way." In my depiction of these characters in action, my hope then is that readers will also be moved by these characters' defining actions. If I have succeeded only by a little, I count myself lucky.

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## SHIELD BOSS

Three months their dishwasher had needed fixing. Normally Jeanette would've been on Paul about it but there was no interrupting his boat building. She'd take care of it later. She held a plate under running water, Paul's hack and hammering heard over the faucet. He wanted to paint the hull next, his shaky drawings on the kitchen table behind her, loose leafs of paper weighed down with Crayola pencils. Nothing at all Viking about him, but he hadn't always been this way.

Three months ago the longboat hadn't existed, save for some two-by-fours and plywood heaped in a pile killing her Bermudagrass. She had watched Paul raise that pile of yellow pine into a rack of crudely shaped ribs. He showed a natural talent for carpentry, though he'd never held a hammer. Paul the shipwright and her a valkyrie. Svelte, blond. But she wasn't. She was tired. The knot that had started at the base of her spine had climbed higher, aggravated by her pirouetting between dishes soaked in filthied water and rinsing them.

Jeanette tore the damp dishtowel from the sink and wrung the rag out, twisting, and pulling its ends toward opposite walls. She wanted strength enough to tear the cloth in two. Adrenaline stung her fingers. She stood, the towel dripping, emptied of all but her anger while staring out the window. The day before the Bensons's dogwoods were in bloom. Their petals, mostly soft white, were edged in purple pastels. Easter eggs, waiting to be discovered, having opened overnight. Twenty-three blooms. The number of years her and Paul had been married, the same color white as her wedding dress. Suddenly she hated the Bensons. Their stupid trees, growing rightly, unnaturally.

Behind her Paul walked in without closing the door. Jeanette knew he had neglected to without looking. His habits had worsened, or else she had lost her patience. She walked past Paul and pushed the door to close. The door flung forward and shut without sound or satisfaction. Paul didn't notice or acted like he didn't. He took without compensating. With his greediness for dying, everything was his. Not only the rest of his life but what remained of hers with him. Jeanette had grown to hate dying Paul.

Paul's tool-belt, slung around his waist, fell lopsided. Weighed down by his hammer, he pulled at the strap with his left hand and lifted the belt higher over his hip. His frame emaciated, he had cinched his jeans tight by punching one hole after another in his belt. He had punched four already and at four there had existed the possibility that Paul might waste away entirely, disappear into nothing, but that had been wishful thinking. He would die this way, in front of her, painfully. "What are you after?" she said.

"Water," he said, sitting. He put his elbows on the table and leaned into cupped palms. Paul's face had once been fat cheeks above a soft jaw, a jocular roundness. Jeanette had prepared herself for Paul's inevitable hair loss but not the rest. His eyes had retreated beneath his brow, his lips dried. Paul whetted his gums with his tongue, smacking, sucking saliva. She hardly recognized him.

Jeanette took a glass from the cabinet. "Why don't you take a break."

Paul rubbed his eyes. His palms were no longer firm but slackened and soft. Jeanette sat the water down, the glass clacking against the table. Paul peeled his face from his hands, gripped the glass, and drank.

She wanted to slap him hard. Knock the glass from his hands. She wanted for him to fall on the floor and stare at her surprised and shout for help. Paul's hands shook as he guided the glass back to the table. Water sloshed over the rim, spilling. Jeanette grabbed Paul's wrist. He looked at her, smiling, maybe ready to give up. "Here," she said, taking the glass, "Let me."

"There's not much left to the boat," he said, ignoring her. "Painting, but that won't take long. Not with rollers and the Benson kid, Tom, helping. Practically begged me. I said I'd pay him but I'll be dead, so. Don't forget when he asks?"

"Pay him," she said. "For painting."

"I don't know how much. Whatever. I'd be surprised if he'll remember. All he wants is near the boat. All the neighbor kids gawk. Really, painting, it's small potatoes. What I need is to finish my shield. I have to have a metal plate for the center. That's all. A shield boss and I'm done."

"A shield boss," she said.

"The center, the strongest and most important part."

"Which you need," she said.

"For the final sojourn, gone to Valhalla. Vikings weren't buried without shields, hon. You know this."

"Paul—"

The doorbell rang, interrupting. Bright, hollow. Jingle-jangly. Paul scooted his chair back.

"Just stop," Jeanette said. Paul eyed her, she felt his stare between her shoulder blades. She didn't bother with the peep hole but answered the living room door.

“Roland,” she said, not surprised. Roland lived across the street, the Benson patriarch. The dogwoods. He had a pretty wife and behaved kids. Employed at Wells Fargo. He was dressed in a paisley green tie and white button-up. His pants had a sheen, possibly wrinkle-free. Polyester-cotton blend. He was president of the Home Owner’s Association.

Roland scratched behind a small ear. He stood tip-toed, heels arched, peering over Jeanette’s shoulder through tortoise shell glasses. His arms, dumb against his sides, were punctuated by balled fists with the thumbs tucked inside. “Hi,” he said.

“You here to cite me again, Roland?” Paul said from the table. He stood, hoisted his tool-belt over his hip, and limped forward. His right foot trailed behind his left, his hammer’s handle striking his leg, rising and falling with each stride. The limp was new.

“Roland,” Jeanette said. “You promised.”

Roland looked from Paul to Jeanette. “It’s not me, believe me. It’s the rules. Take our mailboxes, we’ve got Gibraltar Elite.” He counted on his fingers, tapping his wedding band with his thumb, grasping for another specific, his face tight. He threw his hands in the air. “I could care less about them—”

“So why don’t you make off,” Paul said from behind Jeanette. He rested his hand on her shoulder.

He removed his glasses and stared down at the lenses. “Gee,” he said, holding the pair even with his navel. “Why not?”

“Can’t you see me and my wife were in the middle of conversing? I’m dying, Roland. What if we were having a moment?”

Jeanette grabbed Paul's hand and draped his arm across her neck. He weighed little and she led him like they were dancing.

Roland put his glasses back on. "I didn't mean to interrupt," he said, sliding the frames up the bridge of his nose. "Believe me."

"Honest it's hard to believe anything you say anymore," Jeanette said. "You promised us you'd handle this."

"Look, Roland," Paul said. "I've got four, five days max. You can't give me that?"

"You two are making this harder than it needs to be," Roland said. "People are complaining. HOA bylaws clearly forbid lawn décor taller than eight feet."

"It's a longboat, Roland. How many times do we have to go over this? Not a lawn decoration."

"Whatever, I don't think those are legal either," Roland said. "Besides, bylaws forbid storing recreational vehicles in plain view. You'll have to garage your boat, Paul."

"Give us a couple days?" Jeanette asked. "Please? Paul's almost finished."

Roland leaned forward. "Debra down the street is breathing down my neck. Charlie too. The whole street. You should hear what they're saying."

"Roland," Paul said. He sounded out of breath. "A couple days and the boat will be gone, I promise."

"I'll do what I can," Roland said.

"We appreciate it," Paul said, taking Roland's hand. "Don't we, hon?"

"Yes," Jeanette said. She uncrossed her arms and shook Roland's freed hand. "Thanks."

“It’s all right,” he said, letting go. He looked at his watch. “I’ve got a couple lady soccer players to pick up. Practice should be wrapping up. Thanks for understanding.” He turned and waved without looking back.

“I’ve never liked him,” Paul said after Jeanette had closed the door. He was back at the kitchen table, hoisting his belt higher. “He’s always been in our business.”

“He’s always meant well,” Jeanette said. She parted the blinds. Roland was backing his Suburban out. The car’s side view mirror brushed the lowest of the dogwood’s branches, knocking petals loose. They hung in the air as if pinned, suspended, before twirling like dropped carousels. Jeanette felt a phantom touch on her cheek, thinking about how Roland had kissed her drunk at the block party seven years ago. Nothing had come of it, so why did she think of it now? She jerked from the blinds, Paul shouting at her.

“I’m going back out,” he said.

“Sure,” she said. Paul didn’t hear, already out the back door and walking around the side yard. She looked again out the blinds. The longboat was beautiful and because Paul had made the boat she despised both the boat and him. He never bothered telling her his plan. She woke one day and found Paul on the lawn, bent over a sawhorse, a circular saw squealing. Day and night, never once asking her for help. She had tried but Paul found her no use. What he couldn’t do himself he asked a neighbor kid for. She paid, his checkbook. She watched as he bent and dipped a roller in paint. The Benson kid, Tom, was at his elbow. They laughed, long poles in hand, applying paint to the boat’s hull. “Children,” she said, letting the blinds snap shut.

\*

Paul kept at the boat most the day and left Jeanette alone. She sat a while in the living room going over invoices for cherry wood and tiger cut oak. There was no way they could afford any of this. She used that as the excuse she needed to go outside.

Dried brown grass clippings edged the concrete patio and Jeanette grabbed the broom beside the door and attacked the grass with wide, slashing strokes. The patio, not large, exhausted her. Jeanette flung the broom to the concrete and collapsed. The brick house cooled her back. She kicked her legs out and sent the broom skittering into the backyard. Beside her sat a turned over plastic bucket meant for building sandcastles. She tilted back the bucket and reached in.

“You said you quit.” Roland straddled the neighbor’s privacy fence, a leg hanging over.

Jeanette stood and brushed grass clippings from the seat of her pants. “A stab in the dark but, you never was popular, were you?” She walked barefoot across the grass. Her cigarette dangled from her lips, thin blue smoke veiling her face. Jeanette reached and grabbed Roland’s calf.

“Don’t,” Roland said, too late. Jeanette pulled. He toppled, spilling nearly on top of her, but the fence snagged his pants, tearing a cuff. Roland hung upside down and cried high-pitched and throaty like a baby bird. “Get me down, hurry,” he said. “All the blood’s gone to my head, I’ll puke.”

“Hold still.” Jeanette ducked under Roland’s shoulders and tried lifting. “You’re too heavy,” she said.

Roland craned his head, tucking his chin into his chest. His glasses were askew, his voice strained. “I can’t hang here long.”

“I can see that,” she said.

“Well, do something.”

“Take your pants off.”

“What? No,” Roland said.

Jeanette righted Roland’s glasses. “Don’t be a child,” she said. “You’re hanging by your pants.” She undid Roland’s belt and pulled it loose. “You’ll slide free now.” He refused, shaking his head, holding tight to his waistband. “Let go,” Jeanette said.

“I’m not comfortable.”

“Prude.” She tossed his belt aside and stooped, grabbing the broom by its end.

“What are you doing?” Roland said. “Don’t.”

She poked Roland’s stomach with the broom handle. “Let. Go.”

“This is going to hurt,” Roland said, scrunching his face at Jeanette’s attacks. He fell out of his pants and onto the grass, shielding his head with his hands. His pale legs, contrasted with his starched shirt, were stark white. The loosed shirttails, terribly wrinkled, draped his crotch and buttocks.

Jeanette stood with her hands on her hips, having dropped the broom.

“Attractive.”

“Funny,” Roland said. He stooped and turned to look at his exposed thigh. A purple abrasion blossoming, he worked the bruise with the ham of his hand.

“Here,” Jeanette said, grabbing him by the elbow. “Let’s get you inside. I’ve got some hydrogen-peroxide.”

“You think that wise?”

“Would you rather I lick my thumb?”

“Don’t be stupid. What about Paul?”

She dismissed him with a wave. “Paul stopped caring months ago.”

Jeanette led Roland into the kitchen and sat him at the table. “Stay.” The cotton balls and hydrogen-peroxide she kept in the bathroom. She left him for the medicine cabinet, removing both. Shutting the cabinet she saw herself in the mirror. She shut her eyes. No electric whine came from outside, no knocking of lumber, no staccato hammering. This is what life would sound like. A sudden rush took her, invisible pinpricks beneath her cheeks.

“Are you all right?” Roland asked. His thigh purpling, he stood in the bathroom doorway.

She forced a laugh seeing him half naked. “I’m fine,” she said.

“You don’t look fine,” he said, taking the peroxide from her. He set the bottle on the sink. “We’ve been neighbors, what? Ten years?”

“Oh, Roland,” she said and sat on the toilet seat. “What do years matter?”

The bathroom was cramped. Roland scooted around Jeanette’s knees and sat opposite her on the edge of the tub. “Listen,” he said, taking her hands in his. “I’ve been married seventeen years, have three great kids, and, most days, wouldn’t trade a single thing for another, but seeing you and Paul, it’s godawful and I’m jealous. I’m hardly ever made to feel anything.”

“You’re an even bigger idiot than I imagined.”

“I’m morbid, Jeanie. I’ve sat up at night imagining Nora dying, the kids. I love them but *nada*. Not a tear drop.”

“What? You’re here to eat my grief?”

“Worse,” Roland said, shaking his head. “If I had my way and, if I were being honest, I wouldn’t change anything that’s happened to you. You’re the closest to sad I’ve ever been.”

“You’re sick,” Jeanette said, pulling her hands away.

“I know something’s wrong with me,” Roland said. “I don’t want to feel this way.”

“You don’t feel anything, Roland,” Jeanette said. “You said so yourself. You’re a leech.”

“You’re right,” he said, making to stand.

“Stop,” Jeanette said, daubing a cotton ball with peroxide. “Let me see that thigh.”

Jeanette leaned forward and swabbed Roland’s leg. He flinched. “Ow,” he said and pressed his hand to his mouth. “I bit my lip.”

“You’re falling apart.” Jeanette threw the ball in the sink. “Hold still,” she said, framing his cuts with her thumbs and forefingers. She bent her head, lips nearly brushing his skin, and blew on the blood welled welts, oxygenated and red. “Better?” she asked, sitting upright.

Roland gingerly touched where he had been scraped raw. He winced. “I’m sorry,” he said, looking up.

“Am I really that pathetic?”

“Jeanie,” he said, “everybody knows its you that’s suffering. Nobody cares about Paul, not really. He’s doing what he wants, but once he’s gone you’ll have that eyesore on your lawn. What are you going to do then?”

“I think you should leave,” Jeanette said.

“Jeanie.”

She stood and handed Roland the hydrogen-peroxide. “Here.”

\*

Jeanette found herself in the garage for no other reason than she couldn't stand the house. The mausoleum of her and Paul's marriage, the air ripe with aging cardboard and retired mice. The floor and walls had accumulated seasons of dust, a thin film undisturbed except where tracks of Paul's tennis shoes made a path to the garage doors. Amazing how they never deviated but slightly from a pattern that appeared obvious, as if Paul's steps were preordained. Boxes hemmed her in from all sides and threatened falling. She stepped towards a slat of light from the window dividing the garage in half. Jeanette stuck her hand in and dust motes moved around her fingers like atoms. Nothing was solid. What was there that wasn't already forgotten? Paul had already taken from the boxes what he wanted. She bent over a box he'd left opened.

Her wedding dress didn't fit until she tore seams from the hips and made a cut between the shoulders. Yellowed rather than white, the dress had aged like a pressed flower. She lifted the garage door over her head enough to go under. The late evening smelled of chamomile, tiki torches burning on the lawn. Tom Benson stood with what looked like the last to be placed around her husband's boat. Black smoke rose off the torches, the flames orange and constant. Tom was not much taller. He used both hands for force, bent double, stabbing the torch in the grass.

“That’s a nice dress,” he said. His face and hands were flecked with dabs of black paint. His tee shirt and jeans too. He was not unlike Roland, his father, compact with a low center of gravity. He held the lighter out. “Do you want to light the last one?”

“You do it,” she said and walked past, her hemline and train dragging dew and cut grass.

The longboat stretched oblong across the lawn, tall enough from bow to stern she couldn’t see over. She reached and touched the railing. Overhead was the mast without a sail and, to either side, the ends ran away from her—narrowing, rising, becoming the face of serpents. The hull, pitch black, swallowed the tiki light but for the gossamer reflection of wet paint. She pulled away and her palm and arm were stained, her dress nearest the boat smeared black. Jeanette grabbed hold the rope ladder hanging from the boat’s railing and climbed.

“Careful, you’ll break something,” Paul said when she swung herself over the side. He lay with his arms across his chest, his head flush against the mast pole, staring at the dusky sky.

Jeanette had stepped on a trophy. She picked up the pedestal for a bumblebee, *1<sup>st</sup> Grade Spelling Bee – Third Place*. Heaped on the deck all around her was the sum of her husband. Most he’d chosen to collect—a jar of baby’s teeth, a Cub’s Scout bandanna, Vancouver Winter Olympics *Wheaties*—she’d forgotten. Paul patted the deck next to him. “Sit next to me.”

Jeanette sat the trophy down beside a plush rabbit. “What is it?” she said, sitting, tucking her dress in.

“Do you remember the time we saw a sea turtle? We were kayaking in the Gulf.”

“I don’t,” she said.

“You wouldn’t,” Paul said. “We never saw a sea turtle, we only thought we did. Do you remember?”

Jeanette shook her head.

Paul sat and held his hand to Jeanette’s cheek. “These past few months I’ve tried to believe in what our imaginations wanted.” He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “But I’ve been pretending a lot longer than that,” he said into her brow.

“Paul, I don’t think I can do this.”

He grabbed her hand. “When I die you burn this boat with me in it.” He started coughing. “I don’t want to be some stone slab with sad flowers.”

“Paul,” she said. He was still coughing and she shook him by the shoulders.

“Paul.”

He nodded. “I’m okay,” he said. “Tired is all.” Paul sank back and crossed his arms again over his chest. “You’re wearing your wedding dress,” he said. “You look nice.”

She watched his shallow breaths. Already asleep or pretending to be. “Paul,” she said. “Why couldn’t you be cremated?” He didn’t answer and Jeanette stood and looked across the street. The Bensons’ lights were on. She swung her leg over the railing and clung to the rope ladder, feet before hands, making her way down. She touched the damp grass, the tiki torches casting long shadows across her path.

Jeanette wasn’t long in finding what she wanted from the garage. She stepped out from under the door, stood erect, and held the chainsaw aloft. The chain along the teeth bore the grit she had long wanted to express. She carried the saw down her drive, crossed

the street, and climbed the slight incline of the Bensons' yard. The dogwoods grew one after another, symmetrical and orderly. She couldn't stand them and sat the chainsaw on the ground. Her foot on top, she yanked the starter hard. The tool growled back and fired. Jeanette brought the teeth to the tree. Her strength held the saw, biting.

Dogwood blossoms fell casual from the branches above, loosed from Jeanette's rending. She stood where a blossom had caught her without a plan for letting go while down the street a lawnmower was going before dusk and children raced their bikes, shouting, trying to get home before the street lights flickered on. The Bensons' curtains drew back and the orange light from inside shone out the window's square frame. A woman's profile stared out as the dogwood began to fall.

## WRECKAGE

Sam came from Billy's funeral holding her sandals by their straps. Her and Billy had been going together.

She stood in the carport hugging herself, and the way the evening light was dying made her look better than I remembered. For a second I loved her again but Sam hadn't come for forgiveness. She wanted to hurt and be hurt in kind. I wiped my hands clean and threw the oil rag on the workbench. "You walk?" I said.

Her bangs were matted and red clay caked her feet. It was nearly four miles from her parents. We were her nearest neighbor. I could've reached out and held her. "More like ran," Sam said.

I dug at grease in my cuticles. "What you want?"

She brushed up against me. A sashay of hips. Almost nothing but I could imagine her body. I grabbed her hand, not gently. "They put him in the ground then? You cry?"

She dug her nails into my hand. "Why do you say such awful things? You know I did."

"Didn't know you could," I said. I let go and started back to work.

Sam slipped her hands around my waist. She was on her tiptoes and resting her chin on my shoulder. Her stomach pressed against my back. I counted each carburetor part I'd separated out. I had set the parts out methodically to remember how everything went together.

"What's that from," Sam said.

"A riding lawn-mower," I said.

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“Let’s go for a ride,” she said.

“Dad’s sleeping off a swing shift. He gets up and sees the Plymouth gone it’s an inch off my ass.”

“You’ve done it before.”

“And caught hell,” I said. “He’s memorized the odometer.”

Sam’s hands slipped away. She had won. I wiped my hands clean again. “You’ll have to help me roll her out.”

The Plymouth Roadrunner waited under a paint-stained drop cloth. I pulled the cloth free and the last of the sun played across the paint.

\*

We yelled over the sound of the wind spilling in through Sam’s window. Her hair floated.

“It was a nice service,” she said. “His parents invited me over tomorrow.”

I shifted into a higher gear and felt I was an integral part. You could’ve welded me on.

Sam lifted her dress, exposing her thighs. We had done this many times. She pushed my hand away, pulling her dress back down.

Ahead the gray interstate shone in the headlights. Billy had lost control and wrapped his Mustang around a power line pole two miles farther. I pushed the needle, 120. “Billy was a stupid son of a bitch,” I said.

Sam rolled her window up. “He was going to Rice, in Houston,” she said.

“I know where Rice is.” We were where Billy had run headlong off the road. The power line pole materializing in the headlights.

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I jerked the wheel right and kicked the tires out from behind. The Plymouth skidded sideways. I corrected as the car slowed and we took into the grass burnt and dead from a long summer. Sam squealed high throttle.

She had been with him, likely drunk with her head in his lap. Coaxed him into driving too fast. He was a dumb son of a bitch to try and be like me.

UNMANNED

Stuck on Warner Robins' A.F.B., I pilot an unmanned drone. Mission Photographic Surveillance. America's backyard swimming pools spied from inside a trailer parked between pecan trees. South Georgia is sweltering.

\*

Over our rental house in Sarasota my wife's SUV is gone.

\*

Sarge keeps breathing on my scalp. He's scored kills on combatants and non-combatants alike. They're all potential terrorists. I told him I've got kids. He groans when I advocate for better lumbar support.

\*

Over Salt Lake City I imagine my wife learning Jesus descended unto Tenochtitlan while shedding her knickers. Belonging to a door-to-door-man, black tie and Oxford shirt, draping a black stocking over a Mormon headboard, a guilty hand undoes his nametag. She confesses her dissatisfaction. Married too early, children too soon, never loved her husband, etc.

\*

There's four of us: Helen, Heidi, Hector, and me. At three months Hector can't speak. He only stares bug-eyed while sucking on my wife.

\*

—Sarge: I manage a Sears in Spartanburg but won't let that become a distraction.

—Myself: I'm full-time at Home Depot. They're threatening to cut my hours.

—Sarge: You have any marijuana on you?

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—Myself: I have a wife and two children.

—Sarge: I'm sorry.

\*

We've got to keep the tribe together.

At 1900 hours I can call again her mother's in Jacksonville.

—She doesn't want to talk to you. Stop calling.

Out of quarters, the friendly Mormon behind me says I'm holding up the line.

GOOD PEOPLE

Mae agreed to meet in New Orleans. I arrived at Tujague's to find her already seated. She wore a modest but flattering dress. A large red handbag rested at her feet. She stood and I was surprised by her improved bust size.

"Go ahead and stare," she said. "Charlie paid for them but they're mine."

"They're nice. They fit your frame."

"You're lying. They're entirely too much."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Hush. I like them that way."

We ordered Tujague's house wine.

Alone Mae explained that Charlie had paid for her breast enlargement over a series of installments. Each one he had massaged every night for a week until his hands had cramped. This was required after the procedure.

Besides this it was like sixteen years hadn't passed since we lived in the dorm. Her marriage hadn't happened. I hadn't already gone through a string of disappointing relationships, many I admit now were perfectly adequate. We were still two drunk kids sharing a bed after a night out dancing.

Mae had resisted my repeated suggestions that we meet over a weekend while also managing to respond kindly to each prod. When she made the suggestion I booked the Sheraton on Canal. Mae smiled over her glass. "What are you thinking about?"

It had begun to rain outside the restaurant and tourists ran for the awnings lining Decatur. Not a stone's throw away the Mississippi took the rain in without consequence. Before I could answer our waitress lit the candle between us. A boyhood friend who had

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been an altar boy told me once you can't look directly into a candle's flame without losing yourself. Across the table I saw Mae in bed with sheets below her navel and Charlie beside her. He spoke to her in a hushed tone I couldn't make a word of while he massaged her breasts. "We should've brought an umbrella," I said.

"When were you ever put off by the elements, Daniel?"

"I'm not sure I ever was but I've gotten used to other people's protests."

Mae leaned forward. "Let's see your hands."

I put my hands forward and she turned them over in hers. Her thumbs ran along the inside of my palms. "The whole way here I kept telling myself, 'Turn around.'"

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I'd already left."

I almost believed her. She let go my hands and took her glass by its stem, swirling the wine. "Charlie always makes a show of wine. We went to Napa once and now he thinks he knows everything. When we have friends over he embarrasses himself. He raises it to his face like this," she said, making an exaggerated effort with her glass. "He gets in close to get the scent before allowing himself a taste."

"Sounds like foreplay."

"It's for the benefit of other people. I'm just a set piece. I don't understand how it happened. The other day I was in the kitchen slicing an onion. I had tears in my eyes when I looked up and saw him. He'd gotten home earlier than usual. He asked me, 'What's wrong?' And you know what I said? I said, 'Nothing.' That's how I felt towards him."

"It's natural for people to get settled, Mae."

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“Settled maybe, but apathy? The kitchen might as well have been empty.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“What’s to say? You’re not sorry. I wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t the case.

That’s what you’ve wanted, right? For me to be here?”

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t.”

“Well, I’m here. What do you intend to do now?”

I asked for the check.

\*

Decatur was deserted. What tourists were left walked the streets on the double. They kept their heads low and their hands in their waistcoats. None of the mule drivers in their carriages outside Jackson Square called to them. Even the folk artists had retreated from around the square’s iron railings. Only two men who looked homeless remained making conversation with a policeman about his motorcycle.

I thought Mae and I were looking at the same things, saw them the same, and felt the same about them. The idea left as soon as the hostess asked if we’d like a taxi. We politely declined and I shrugged my coat from my shoulders. I lifted it above us both and shielded us from the rain as we passed the carriages.

“Have you ever taken one,” she said.

“No, have you?”

“Once in Charleston.”

“Oh,” I said.”

“I’ll stop talking about him.”

“I don’t want you to feel that you can’t. I just thought that this weekend would go different.”

“How? I’m not your mistress. The twentieth century killed its mistresses. This isn’t romantic.”

“I thought this was something you wanted?”

“I never said it wasn’t. Why haven’t you kissed me?”

Holding my coat above us, I stopped. Mae was wrestling with her handbag. A small white dog was inside.

“He has to go,” she said. She set the dog down and we watched him nose the cobblestones. The dog began to urinate.

“You brought a dog?”

“He’s an Alaskan Klee Kai. Like a miniature husky.”

“Why?”

“I told Charlie I was going to a dog show. My excuse to get out of town.”

“So you brought a dog.”

“I didn’t want to raise suspicion.” She scooped the animal up and the dog went back in her handbag.

“I thought Charlie was offshore?”

“He is. You’re missing the point. I couldn’t board the dog. People would talk. I’m married.”

I met Charlie at Mae’s wedding. A small affair. The ceremony was staged in the backyard of Mae’s soon-to-be in-laws. It was August in Louisiana and miserably hot. Like a good guest I tolerated the ceremony only because drinks were promised at the

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reception. The whole time I had the distinct impression a horse sat on my chest, the humidity made it that hard to breathe. Making matters worse it was lovebug season, a fact that kept being mentioned. I couldn't help from thinking about how lovebugs exhausted themselves by dying intertwined, the last little bit of their lives spent by coitus. More marriages might end happier.

I imagined Mae and Charlie knotted together in the Quarter imitating lovebugs. There was none of Mae to see for Charlie. He was everything I wasn't. I sold retirees condos on the Gulf, where I took them to casino buffets. "Let's go back to the hotel," I said.

\*

I stood at the window and looked through a reflection of myself caused by the hotel room's soft light. The rain had brought on an early night. Below red brake lights, lampposts, and storefront signs lit the street. I looked for anything else to gain my attention outside the room. The red handbag snored in the corner. A clock radio sounded through the neighboring wall.

"Look at me," Mae said. She was seated at the foot of the bed.

"I imagined this as something else entirely," I said. "Now that you're here—"

"Would you stop talking and just come here."

I crossed the room and stood over her. Looking at me, she slipped a shoulder from her dress. "Mae."

"They were my idea," she said and slid her other shoulder free. Her dress draped to rest below her collarbone. "Not Charlie's. He insisted I didn't need them. When he massaged my breasts afterward, it was never sexual. I thought he'd want nothing more

than to have me then. It was like an opportunity to be with another woman. But he'd sit in bed massaging me while talking like we'd always talked. I felt so silly, like I'd made a mistake. I asked him one night if they felt the same now that they were fake. He said he thought they were beautiful. But that's not what I was asking. Do you want to see them?"

"I would love to."

She slid her dress down to her waist. "Well?"

"They did a good job," I said.

"They're not too much?"

"You'd never hear me say that."

She leaned back and kicked off her heels. I was unsure of whether or not her performance was for my benefit or hers. "I've imagined myself in this place," she said. "A hotel room like this, though I was always the other woman. But I'm not that, am I? I'm the one that's stepped out."

"I didn't invite you here to make you feel bad about yourself. That's not what I wanted."

The handbag was dreaming. Mae reached for my hand. "Touch them." She held my hand to her breast. "What does it feel like? Can you tell a difference?"

"It feels how I imagined." I sat on the bed beside her. "Are we good people?"

She pulled her dress up. "I don't think we're bad people."

I placed my hand in hers. "I'll go." I made to stand but she held on.

"I don't think either one of us should. This bed is too big." She lay back on the pillow with her thighs showing. "Turn the light off, won't you?"

## THE LAST PANTHER

That evening my uncle shot the last of his dogs I sat at the kitchen table. Outside a train whistled and then, another. The trains blew at each other as they passed on tracks that ran parallel through the valley, each going in opposite directions. My hand tightened around the receiver and drove my wedding band into the fat of my finger. I listened as the trains faded and then died altogether.

Too old and infirm to chop wood or hike into the valley to collect coal that'd kicked loose and fallen from train cars, my uncle had begun to burn the house, piece by piece, in the potbelly stove. Cabinet doors, drawers, baseboards. A crowbar and short-handled ax rested in the corner. Only a single chair left. Before my uncle would've sat in one and my aunt would've sat in another. My twin cousins Emery and Gil would've been there too. If only forgetting was as easy as setting a thing on fire.

Margaret answered. I could hear traffic on her side. "Teddy?"

I cleared my throat. "You'll never believe what Uncle Carlisle made up this time." Margaret inhaled. "Thinks he hears a panther at night. A cougar. Same difference. Do you know what a panther sounds like, Marge? Like a child screaming. Nobody's seen a panther around here in over a hundred years. No use telling *him* that. How about," I said, "when I get back we'll get Thai. You like Thai. We can go to that little place on Eisenhower—"

"Teddy," she said. "Are you okay?"

I'd never taken Margaret home to visit. I'd never been back since leaving.

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“Marge,” I said. The line was dead. I hung up and looked around. Unopened envelopes scattered on the table told me bills had gone unpaid. Second and final notices. The man who raised me lay dying in his room. I stood and my chair’s legs scraped linoleum.

When I first saw him again Uncle Carlisle looked flat and pale as a scrap of paper and sounded like someone breathing into a paper bag. I couldn’t stand the sight of him.

“Uncle Carlisle?”

His bedroom was empty but for a bed and a dresser. The dresser’s mirror looked back at the bed and showed sheets messed on a stained mattress. Gone was the gun that hung above the dresser’s mirror. A beautiful Browning made over-under, the barrels stacked one over the other. The stock shone red. The metal the appearance of silver. My uncle’s prized possession. Most expensive he owned. I’d wanted the gun once.

I wasn’t surprised my uncle had taken the gun or by the shotgun blast that followed. On its heels came another. The shots hung on the air and blended together until the sound of the first dropped away and left the last echoing. I guessed my uncle was on the front porch. Pitched but dying yelps rose from that direction. I imagined him breaking open the barrel from the stock, exposing the breech, smoke rising from spent shells, the sulfuric smell of fired powder.

I ran to see. Uncle Carlisle was in his pajamas, facing the front yard. The Browning in one hand, he searched his hip pocket for more shells with the other. Spent casings lay at his feet. I crossed the porch and tore his gun away. He didn’t protest. His arms fell useless. “The hawk got them,” he said. “Hurt them bad. I had to.” He stared at the yard and two dogs. A red cur gyp and brindled male.

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“It’s all right,” I said, harsher than I intended. I led him to a chair.

“All my chickens,” he said, confused. “Dead.” His mind was gone and he was bothered. Where did he go when he slipped from the present? I sat beside him and saw that neither dog had run from my uncle. Past the dogs the sun was setting. The trees’ silhouettes, Gil and Emery’s. I’d been seeing the twins everywhere since getting back and had to tell myself they were dead.

\*

The night I was fourteen my cousins stood near enough one another that you could tell Emery was a shy taller. Gil noticed and moved away. Only sixteen, he looked like a man.

The dogs were tied to the porch and pulled at their leads, panting. Their faces narrow, ears drawn back. The sun gone below the trees.

Aunt Ettie opened the front door and inside looked yellow and warm. “Teddy,” she said.

She handed me a couple butter sandwiches wrapped in a paper napkins. “Be careful,” she said.

Uncle Carlisle spoke to Gil and Emery. He held the Browning under his arm. “Don’t stray too far or stay out too late. Getting lost is easy.” He let that sink in. “You watch out for Teddy. He’s younger than you both and eager to be older. Don’t make him do anything the two of you would.” He motioned me over. “You carry the Browning.” The twins watched as Uncle Carlisle passed the gun over. “Don’t let anything happen to it,” he said.

Emery began untying the dogs from the porch post.

“Hurry up, won’t you,” Gil said.

“You could help.”

Gil rubbed at his nose with his sleeve. “You got it fine.”

Emery mumbled low under his breath. A beautifully bad litany.

The dogs loosed, they pulled at the end of their leads with splayed legs and stomachs low. We made for the trees and I didn’t look back. I was trying to catch up, already getting left behind.

Where the clearing met the trees Emery let the dogs off their leads. Freed, they nosed the ground, moving left then right. Buck stopped and hiked his leg. He was still pissing when Katie struck a trail. A sharp cry, short and clipped. Butch took off after her, not even finished. They crashed over dead leaves and through winter brush. Emery hollered after them. Gil answered Emery with a yip. Their shouting embarrassed me. The two slapped each other’s backs, laughing. “Come on, Teddy. They’re hot.”

We followed to a rock face that overlooked a dry creek bed and stopped to let the dogs trail the coon until it was treed. You could tell the dogs were still working because they only gave a bark every now and again. There was no reason to chase until their voices became heated.

The twins gathered twigs and leaves and built a nest out of them on top of the dry creek bed. “Stand over here and block the wind. Hurry,” Emery said to me. Gil, standing opposite, already was. Emery bent over blew into embers he started with a lighter.

I set the Browning aside carefully on stones and held my palms over the small fire. The rock face behind us began to be painted burnt ocher.

“You hear that panther last night?” Gil said.

Emery squatted on his haunches, rubbed his hands together. “Sure did.”

Gil nudged me. “Did you, Teddy?”

“There’s no panthers. Stop playing tricks.”

Gil laughed. “Nobody’s playing. Sure enough there’s a panther. Emery and me walked up on some scat the other day while squirrel hunting.”

Emery nodded. “We did.”

“I’d keep that Browning handy,” Gil said.

“You’re playing,” I said. “They’ve all been killed.”

“Suit yourself,” Gil said.

“Listen,” Emery said. At night in the woods when you stop and listen you hear nothing at first because you hear everything at once but after a minute you begin picking out differences between wind rustling leaves on the ground from those left clinging to trees.

“I don’t hear any—“

Gil yelled as high pitched as he could muster.

“That’s too funny,” Emery said. “You should’ve seen your face. White as a sheet.”

Gil jostled me. “Don’t be sore.”

“Seriously though,” Emery said. “We spotted that scat.”

“Heard him last night,” Gil said.

“Could be a she,” Emery said.

I pulled the Browning close. “I don’t believe you.”

The dogs barked then. “That’s hot,” Emery said. “Not far. Come on.”

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Gil stood and kicked dirt and rocks on the fire. The light on the rock face dying, Gil stomped the last embers. “Let’s go.”

They got ahead quickly. The dogs giving chase were already past the double set of railroad tracks. An oncoming train’s light bore down on them as they crossed. Light washed over the twins. They stopped and cursed the train filing past. An easy rhythm of cars swaying and the clack of metal moving over top metal. I’d nearly caught up when the last car had passed. Gil and Emery both stepped out behind it. They’re there and they’re not. Both overtaken by a train coming the opposite direction. The train moved on, light shining ahead of the engine.

\*

It was Margaret who said I should finally go home when Uncle Carlisle called. On the porch Uncle Carlisle’s hands draped over the Browning. His dead eyes stared ahead at trees. I stepped off the porch.

I lifted the cur gyp first. Slung her over my shoulders and carried her inside the house. I placed her on the kitchen table. On the table the phone sat beside her. I grabbed the cord and yanked. Not satisfied, I threw the phone against the wall. The bell inside rang.

I felt light after the brindle male and found paint thinner under the sink. I doused the walls and floor. Last I carried Uncle Carlisle inside. He weighed hardly anything as I propped him in the last kitchen chair. “Uncle,” I said. I half expected him to answer. “Goodbye.”

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I took the Browning from the porch and tucked it under my arm. The house caught fire easy. Consumed by flames like it were made of polyurethane. I watched until the rafters burned.

## COUSINS

The summer before graduating high school when Muncie came to stay with us, I lay on the floor thinking Vanessa Baker was my last best hope.

“Jeremy,” Mom shouted. “Aunt Karen is here. Why don’t you show Muncie where he can put his stuff.”

My door always open. Mom wanted to know I’d hear when she called. Didn’t matter our trailer was super small with walls paper thin. I didn’t answer but stared at a man in the plaster with a nose as enormous as an eggplant.

“Hi Jeremy,” Muncie said. He stood in the doorframe with a gym bag. He didn’t look retarded. Blond with a powerful frame and a beautiful face, he was smart enough he listened more than he spoke.

“Hey yourself.”

“Want me to go?”

I stood. “They’ll only send you back. Let me see what you got.” I rifled through his bag, pushing aside undershirts and blue jeans. “What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s mine.”

“I know it’s yours, dummy. Does Karen know?”

I thumbed to the centerfold. Tarzan had taken her into the jungle. Her black hair tussled and a perfect mess. Abrasions painted on her arms and legs. Strategic daubs of mud. Mouth making an O. “This is real pervert stuff,” I said.

“It’s my outlet.” Muncie used the word *outlet* as if he were testing the word’s meaning. “Mom says I’m that age.”

“For what? Sex?” I threw the magazine back at him. “I don’t want to think about you with your pecker out. You ought not to have one. Trust me.”

\*

Mom and Karen had brought lawn chairs into the kitchen. An opened Sauza tequila bottle between them. A two-liter of pineapple Faygo out for mixer. Aunt Karen scooted a path for me to reach the refrigerator.

“What’s your plans tonight?” Mom asked.

I held a Dr. Thunder over the sink as fizz ran over. “I need the car.”

Mom topped her coffee mug off with a pull more of Sauza. “Why?”

“Maybe he has a date,” Karen said.

I leaned against the counter with my soda. Muncie was on the periphery staring from the living room. “Can I?”

“That true,” Mom said. “You got a date?”

“It matter?”

“I’d like to know.”

“Susan,” Karen said. She reached across the table and squeezed Mom’s hand.

“He’s embarrassed.”

“There’s a double-feature at the drive-in,” I said.

“Remember when we used to go to the drive-in,” Karen said.

“Who’s going,” Mom said.

“I’m taking Vanessa,” I said.

“Baker?”

“Yeah. Can I have the car or not?”

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Mom jumped from her lawn chair and slapped me hard.

I pressed the cold soda can to my cheek. “Shit.”

Mom stood shaking. “You think it’s easy with your father gone?”

“Susan,” Karen said.

Muncie was suddenly between us. “Don’t.”

Mom retreated back to her lawn chair. She looked into her mug. “Take Muncie with you.”

“Fine.” I grabbed the keys from the counter.

\*

Town was small, smaller than most. It was impossible to get lost. If you made a wrong turn all you had to do was turn around. A train barreled through once a day and twice at night. Vanessa lived closer to the tracks than anybody and the train rattled her walls.

When the train came you came, the whole house shaking, that’s how guys put it at school. I glanced in the rearview and Muncie was staring ahead. “What are you looking at?”

“Yards.”

We got to Vanessa’s and wind chimes from the porch awning. Cheap and tacky. A lime green frog with expressive eyes, a ladybug with yellow wire antennae, others made of imitation stained glass. Splashes of turquoise, fuchsia, and garnet. The chimes broken carousels unable to complete a full rotation. Each loud because of Sunday’s quiet. I laid on the horn.

“Where’s your dad?” Muncie asked.

“He ran off.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“They was fighting,” Muncie said.

I looked in the rear view again at Muncie. “That’s because your dad is a piece of shit.”

“Mom broke a chair on Dad.”

“They’ll work it out,” I said and honked the horn again.

“Do you remember your dad,” Muncie said.

“Sure,” I said, remembering a photo I’d found in Mom’s dresser and kept. “He looked like Yul Brynner but with hair.”

Muncie parted his mouth to speak but Vanessa’s screen door opened. “Sit back,” I said. “I don’t want you being the first she sees of us.”

I stuck my head out the car window. “New shorts,” I said.

Vanessa looked at her exposed thighs. “They’re old. I cut them off for summer. They’ll keep getting shorter too in the wash. By the time school starts they’ll be nothing but a loincloth.”

I leaned across the front seat, opening the door for her. “They look nice.”

“Such the gentleman,” she said, sliding in.

“Sunflowers,” Muncie said from the backseat. He pointed at her halter top.

Vanessa brushed hair back from her face. She didn’t have a bra on. I didn’t care. It was her skin, tan as it was. I could see most all of it.

“They’re my favorite,” Vanessa said. “He’s your cousin, right?”

“Muncie,” I said, starting the car.

“Hi there,” Vanessa said.

“Me and Jeremy were in class together,” Muncie said.

“She doesn’t want to hear that,” I said.

“You two,” Vanessa said.

“I had a speech impediment.”

“Oh,” she said. She tucked her legs under her. “Can we get candy and popcorn? I can’t stand being at the movies without candy and popcorn.”

“How much money you got, Muncie? How much Karen give you?”

“Money for a ticket.”

Vanessa turned so she could see into the backseat at Muncie while still looking at me.

“Do you want to share some Raisinets? I love Raisinets.” She touched my arm. “You’ll tell if any get stuck in my teeth though. I don’t want to look like a goob.”

“I’ll tell,” Muncie said.

“I got an idea,” I said and pulled over. “Why don’t you climb in the trunk, Muncie?”

“What?” Vanessa said. “Don’t, Muncie. It must be a hundred out. He’ll bake.”

“I can go,” Muncie said. “You want me to go, Jeremy?”

“Yeah, buddy,” I said. “Just ‘til we get there.”

“You can’t be serious,” Vanessa said. “You’re going to kill him for a couple lousy bucks?”

“He’ll be fine. He goes in the trunk and we let him out after. The extra money gets us snacks. Everybody wins.”

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“He doesn’t know any better,” Vanessa said. “I don’t want to be a part of it.”

“But he wants to,” I said.

“I can get in the trunk,” he said. He was staring at Vanessa’s breasts. Most of both were on display.

“Go on then,” I said.

Vanessa crossed her arms. If she had a way of getting out of town she could be somebody with the way she looked. I felt sorry for her.

“Can he run out of air?” she asked. “Did you think of that?”

“Doesn’t make any difference to him,” I said, starting the car again.

“You’re horrible.”

\*

The drive-in was on the edge of town.

“Double feature tonight,” Clement said. Still a senior, he’d soon be twenty.

Everybody thought they’d finally pass him the coming year. He had on a cotton tee. The shirt collar had started to fray. A soft pack of cigarettes were in the breast pocket. A lit cigarette hung loose in his lips. He leaned against the car door and poked his head in.

“*The Wolf Man* and *Frankenstein*.” The drive-in was always playing old movies. “Two?” Clement asked.

Vanessa didn’t answer. She hadn’t spoken for five miles but had winced at each bump and pothole. I told myself the movies would make it right. Once we were parked and the actors’ voices were over the speakers. Big screen shining its electric light at us. We’d be part of the make believe.

The drive-in showed dirty movies some nights. Some friends and me would climb into a broken backhoe rusting in the salvage yard next door and watch women's muted faces exaggerate. It was frightening. I wanted to ask what she thought about that.

"Just two," I said.

"Park where you want," Clements said. He pushed his ballcap back. He was balding.

"Gnats congregate around the bathrooms though. Might be the smell. They can get pretty bad."

Vanessa leaned across me. "Thanks, Clement."

I had the notion they knew each other well. "Yeah," I said. "Thanks."

Clement tipped his hat bill. "No problem." He wanted to keep talking but a pick-up behind us had started honking. A look back and the cab was filled with kids. Clement took a drag from his cigarette and stared down the driver. "You all go on," he said. "I've got to check this cowboy's horses."

We left Clement behind to find the only spots left were those nearest the bathrooms. A square block building once painted white. He'd been right about the gnats. "We've got to keep the windows up," I said.

"Can't we crack them some? It's hot enough already without the windows shut. Muncie must be dying."

"He's fine," I said. "You'll see." I shut the door behind me and walked around with the keys. I rapped on the trunk hood. "Knock, knock." Muncie didn't answer and while I fooled with the lock Vanessa came around.

"He dead?"

“He ain’t dead,” I said, but the trunk wouldn’t open. “Stop fooling, Muncie.”

Vanessa put her ear to the car. “It sounds like he’s moaning.”

I pulled at the trunk but it felt like it was pulling against me. I turned to Vanessa.

“Can you help? It’s stuck.”

Vanessa still leaned over the car with her ear pressed to the trunk. She cupped her hands to the car and spoke at the trunk. “Hold tight, Muncie.”

“Come on,” I said. She was beside me then and we lifted together.

Vanessa jumped back. “Oh, God,” she said and laughed. “Who would’ve thought.”

My ears were ringing. “Cover yourself,” I said.

He kept saying *sorry*. “I got excited,” he said.

“You can’t do that,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Vanessa said. “He’s got the general idea.”

I turned on her. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What? It’s funny.”

I helped Muncie out of the trunk and led him to the bathrooms. I shoved the door open and checked that we were alone. We were and I kicked a stall door. The door slammed against the partition.

“I’m sorry,” Muncie said again. He had the face of a stray afraid of getting beat.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“How did you not mean to,” I said. “Are you so stupid you don’t ever know what you’re doing?” I stood over the sink, turned on the faucet, and splashed my face. Muncie was in the mirror.

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“I like Vanessa,” he said.

I handed Muncie paper towels. “Clean yourself up,” I said. “It’s okay.”

Static-laced howls filtered through the block wall. Our movie had started.

## THE BUTCHER BIRD

Dawn was over the trees when Jules stepped on the porch. He brought his coffee to his lips, the warmth rising over his face. The heat of it ran down his throat and stomach while outside was cold. He had spent his life here, seeing the land through the seasons. Now that time looked to be ending with Sheriff Walter's patrol car coming up the gravel road.

Walt was near sixty and four months from retirement. He stepped from his car and hitched his belt higher. "Jules," he said. "If it wouldn't make a liar out of me, I'd say it's going to snow."

"Might do it, but you didn't come out here to talk about the weather."

"You know I didn't. Sad business having to be out here. I reckon you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"I hate having to be out here," Walt said again, looking around. The farm looked as it always had, sad and overworked. "You know that, right, son?"

Walt's breath hung in the air the way a man's soul might hang around after he dies. He shoved his hands in his lined coat. "Molly ran off the road last night," he said. "A deputy spotted her car in a ditch over by the old mill sometime early morning.

"No sight of a body."

"Nothing around the car?" Jules asked.

"Nothing," Walt said and shifted his weight on his feet he couldn't feel and wondered whether the cause was the weather or his diabetes.

"We was thinking of making a search party," he said, "now that it's getting light. I hate to think she's laid up and we can't get to her. I figure she might've been thrown into

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the brush, somewhere the flashlights can't spot her."

"That or she could've crawled off," Jules said. "I've known animals to do that after they've been hurt real bad."

"God—don't say that. I know you and Molly ended badly but hell, that's rough to think."

"Just saying, Walt. It happens."

"Well, I thought I'd ask you," Walt said, "if you'd want to help look or not. I thought it'd be important to you."

"No," said Jules, "you're right to. I appreciate that."

After Walt had gone, Jules stood in the kitchen and thought it was true—he and Molly had ended badly. He filled his coffee and looked out the window at the woods behind the house. The trees stood bare and secretive, storing some unseen knowledge from the living world. He set his coffee on the countertop and sat at the table to pull his duck boots on.

He laced the boots, drawing the laces through the eyelets, pulling them tight over his calves. She was probably the only woman he had loved if he were honest. Though he still didn't understand what that was, only he knew it was gone. It was in the way the bed was larger, how the towels were never as soft, that the television was never on, and there was never any singing in the house. There was only the coffee mug from Orlando, what she had wanted from the amusement park. He stood and took his coat from the couch.

\*

Walt looked up from the ditch and briar bush he was bent over to see Jules' pickup. The body of it was painted with primer, and the engine sounded as an angry animal, idling,

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and he made out Jules' silhouette behind the wheel. The younger man stepped down and slammed the heavy door closed, the sound a crisp crack as loud as a gunshot in the morning silence. Jules walked past the parked patrol cars and Walt's deputies, not saying a word or looking twice at Molly's car turned over in the ditch but shoved his hands in his pockets. His face was half-hidden below a skullcap.

"Any luck?" Jules asked as he eased down the ditch.

"None yet," Walt answered.

The two listened to the deputies searching, their weight moving over grass hardened by frost. A pair of starlings skirted overhead—their wings spread—and Walt tracked them against the gray sky.

"Makes you wish for a shotgun," Jules said beside him. "They're always getting into my deer feeder. Between them and the coyotes it's a wonder anything keeps around here."

"They are a nuisance," Walt said and turned away, looking at the briars. It felt like he had been looking at thorn bushes all morning. All he wanted was to be back home with his wife, where she might've made him hot chocolate, though he wasn't allowed it, and most likely it'd be sugar-free and awful. But that was hours away and *that* felt like a lifetime, and he wondered how a lifetime can slip away from a person; how his own life had been good enough without too many bad parts; how he never told Martha the bad parts, the way some of it came back to him at unwanted times like while they were together in bed. He shook his head and looked for the starlings. He hoped to God they found a place to rest.

\*

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They were still searching when the car pulled in beside Jules' pickup and the door swung open. The man that stepped out left the engine running, the exhaust billowing. He was near in age to Walt but the years had been kinder. He was thinner, tall, and broad at the shoulders.

“What's that drunk doing here, Walt?” he asked, moving towards them.

Walt didn't have to see Jules to know the younger man's stance had widened and his pulse was rising. He knew these men as he knew himself and the town he had sheriffed for thirty years.

“Wait there, Frank,” Walt said, raising his hand for him to stop.

“Your badge doesn't give you license to tell me what to do,” Frank said. “Not when it's my baby girl you're looking for and *you*, you've brought this bastard with you.”

Jules stood tight lipped, his face a mask.

“You got no right being here,” Frank said to him.

Walt stepped between them and put a hand on Frank's chest. “You need to watch yourself.”

Frank stood, visibly shaking. “Why didn't you call me?”

“I would've called as soon as we knew something, Frank. Molly might've just walked off somewhere. We don't know yet.”

Frank pulled away. “Don't kid me, Walt. We've known each other a long time. Have you found her or not?”

“We're still looking.”

Frank turned on Jules. “I reckon this makes you happy.”

“No, sir,” Jules answered.

Frank shook his head and clenched his hands and unclenched them. Sidestepping Walt, he pivoted, raised his fist, and swung.

Jules threw his left arm up. Frank's punch grazed his forearm and deflected into his chest.

"That's enough," Walt said, stepping between them.

He pointed at his deputies. "Frank, why don't you help them boys look?"

Frank nodded. "All right."

Walt took Jules' elbow and turned him away from Molly's father. They went a couple paces before he was sure Frank couldn't hear. "I didn't want him out here until we knew something certain. It's hard on the fathers."

He looked at Jules. "You got anything to say about last night, son?"

Jules blanched at the question. He made to say he hadn't been drinking but stopped. Drinking was how he lost her and he had never owned up to the pain he had cost them both. Not until she was packed. She had kissed him on the cheek then, already gone. There was nothing he could've said that would've made her stay, and he had said nothing, always thinking they'd get another try, so that losing her had stuck him through his AA meetings. In truth, losing her had saved his life.

"I went out for baling wire, if that's what you're asking," Jules answered.

Walt considered this as they moved farther down the ditch that was slowly turning into a ravine, grabbing a branch to steady himself. The path narrowed to a deer trail.

"When was the last time y'all had spoken?"

"It's been months probably," Jules lied, knowing the day and time he'd spoken to Molly last.

Walt stopped to rest and catch his breath. “So you know Molly has been drinking at the VFW lately?”

“I’d heard talk.”

“Talk–hell–all this town does is talk,” Walt said, taking chew from his pocket. “In fact, talk is all it’s got left.”

Walt held the pouch of Redman out for Jules but the younger man shook his head.

“Look,” Walt said, taking a pinch. He stuck it under his bottom lip, making a knot between his chin and mouth. “I didn’t want to say nothing in front of Frank, but I got word Molly was at the VFW last night. Drinking with that Billy Thompkins kid. Supposedly, they got into it. That was a bit after midnight.”

Jules blew into his hands.

Walt looked him over and tucked the chew in his back pocket. “I just hope we find her soon,” he said and spat. The tobacco juice landed in the dead grass and steam rose off it. “All anybody wants is for things like this to be over.”

“Yeah,” Jules said and shouldered past him. “I think it best we keep looking.”

\*

Frank waited for Walt and Jules as they ascended the ridge, the two struggling up the ditch and away from the creek bed and ravine’s bottom. The creek had run once and fed the old mill in years past, but the old mill stood silent now but for its corrugated tin that shifted and banged in the wind.

Walt nodded to Jules and watched him walk past his two deputies and Frank. Jules stopped at his pickup and struggled with the door, yanking the handle again and again. “Dammit,” he said.

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“Problems?” Walt called after him.

“The door’s jammed is all,” Jules said. Everyone was watching him now.

“You try unlocking it?” Walt asked.

Jules thrust his hand in his jacket pocket and went at the lock angrily. Walt waited until Jules was shut inside his truck, the engine turned over and idling warm, before he turned to answer the question he knew was coming.

“Tell me why you asked that boy out,” Frank said. “You know how Catharine and I feel.”

“Molly was that man’s wife once,” Walt said. “You can begrudge my decision but don’t question the reason.”

“She was too young,” Frank said and dropped to a crouch. Sitting on his haunches, he looked like he might fall down. He looked older somehow.

Walt knelt and waved his deputies off. “Go on,” he said, knowing the early evening of winter was coming. Soon the sun would give out. Already the day was colder than it had started and it would get colder still.

They were good boys, his deputies, thought Walt, though too eager to know what they’d eventually end up learning. He would warn them again about life’s seriousness but knew they never listened. Instead, he would scold them for not letting the patrol car warm in the cold weather.

“I thought Molly was done with him but—he drove her to this,” Frank said.

Walt put his hand on Frank’s knee. “Jules had his problems, but you can’t blame Molly’s accident on him. Tell me, did you smell any liquor on his breath this evening?”

“None,” Frank said. He sounded as if he had been crying.

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“You should get back to Catharine,” Walt said, giving Frank’s knee a squeeze.

“There’s nothing more you can do here. You’ve done all a man can.”

“You and Martha,” Frank said, looking at him, “you never had kids.”

Walt looked at Frank, never had he seen his face this way. There was nothing there to hide the man behind it.

“Come on,” he said, helping Frank stand. They passed Molly’s sedan turned over in the ditch. Its windshield was scattered around it as if someone had thrown confetti.

Walt felt Frank’s strength go and wanted no more of this day then, or any other days like it. He had seen the sun go down on too many griefs.

Walt opened Frank’s car door and helped him inside. “Go home to Catharine,” he said. “Sit with her.”

“Yes,” Frank said, “you’re right. I need to.”

Walt waited, knowing Frank might or might not go home, but whenever that car door closed, as soon as the man inside was alone with no one else to watch him, there would be screaming, and *that*, thought Walt, must be as near to the gnashing of teeth that there was.

“I’ll call when I know something for certain,” Walt said and took his hand off the car’s door.

“Do that,” Frank said.

Watching him drive off made Walt suddenly tired. The weight of his body felt like a chore and he let himself sink into his car seat, turning the engine over, listening to the heater blow and to that idle ticking that heat breathes back into dead cold. He pulled his gloves free and held his hands over the vents.

Experience told him the girl was dead. If she'd wandered off after the accident he'd have known by now. No, she'd been flung into the brush or else, she'd crawled off as Jules suggested. She was somewhere they couldn't find her cause they hadn't looked there yet. He tried to think where that was and looked up at the sky. It was an expanse of white, and the first snow fell on his car's hood. It was not a gentle and romantic snow like on the Christmas cards Martha sent every holiday. No, it was violent and with purpose.

He should get going, he thought and flicked the headlights on. Snow danced ahead, bright as poured glass in the beams, swirling, seeming without direction but always moving earthward. Through this, he saw it. A small bird lit on the barbwire fence. Ugly and brown as winter, he never would've noticed the bird if it hadn't been for its standing out against the snow. He leaned closer over the steering wheel, seeing the bird perched amongst its larder. It had speared a starling on the wire and was bent over its prey, tearing at its flesh, its head twisting as if on a swivel. It lifted its bill—swallowing. A butcher bird, he thought. Mostly they went unnoticed. Usually it was only their dead prey that hinted at their presence, what they kept for themselves. Walt's gut sank. He thought of Jules again, angrily pulling at his car door. He thought of him standing bare-chested on his porch that morning. He thought he knew where he would find Molly.

\*

Jules had been careful no one followed but stopped to look back over his shoulder and listen. He had left the house without a flashlight and started across the yard and past the cattle gate, walking until the fields gave way to trees and the snow started. The snow had started slow at first but was falling faster now that he was deeper in the woods and alongside the creek bed. A low wall edged the creek's bank and was made from rocks

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taken from its bottom by early settlers. The logging road he followed ran alongside it.

When he was younger the woods at night had frightened him because the rock wall made him feel like the people that built it were not so far gone in the dark. Jules adjusted his rifle's strap and—satisfied he was alone—started again as if guided by instinct and without need for a flashlight.

He remembered he had begged with Molly but she wouldn't listen, and so, he hadn't lied to Walt. He had been out for baling wire that night, driving, not able to sleep, the house too big, too quiet, and he had wanted something like a bottle but the house was empty. He kept it empty after Molly. He remembered concentrating on the road, shifting, feeling the engine in the clutch, turning the bend, a slow curve, seeing the lights ahead staring out of the ditch. He had shifted down, slowing, pulling the truck over. He thought he could still hear hot metal cooling beneath the tires turned skyward, the car flipped over. The glass had looked like stars scattered across blacktop and glittered in the headlights. He slid down the ditch then, his heart pounding. Molly was inside the car and he had lifted her free, taking her stained hand in his, before carrying her to his pickup truck. He had been on his way to confront her and Billy Thompkins at the VFW.

\*

Jules' house looked empty with the lights off and no smoke rising from the chimney but his truck was parked in the drive. Walt brushed snow from the rusted hood, pressing his palm to its surface. Cold, he thought. The engine hadn't ran in a while and he didn't like it. That meant Jules had been home a while. Walt's hand went for his revolver, a Colt Python .357 magnum. In his thirty years, he had yet to shoot it in action except as a warning. He unbuckled the holster and slid the gun free. Its weight was always more than

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he wanted. Satisfied he could clear the gun if needed, he set it back and clicked his Maglite on. Shining the house, he stepped closer, his boots breaking the snow's hardened surface.

The flashlight reflected off the windows. No Jules, thought Walt, scanning the porch to around the house's corner. The beam shot across the yard and towards the barbed-wire fence and trees. Walt picked his feet up, high stepping, moving around the house, away from his car and Jules' truck. He shined the woodpile, the tarp blown free, exposing logs, some of which had been split and piled. He bent over the axe and chopping block and checked the blade's edge. It was well used and clean but had only split logs.

You old fool, he thought. What was he doing here? Molly had run off the road. Only he hadn't found her and *that* bothered him. In his thirty years there was always a body, and he moved along the house, skirting its edge, and came around where the toolshed was. Could Jules really be to blame, he wondered. The door swung open and Walt jumped and grabbed his gun, lifting it to the Maglite. *Nothing*. Only an old blade saw on the inside wall and a post-hole digger. Where had Jules wandered off to on a night like this?

He tried reasoning it out but the cold was getting to him. He looked at the trees lining the horizon. The snow was collecting on them as it was on him and everything else. He turned, moving away from the field and towards his car. The wind was a butcher's knife tonight and hacking at his age. It made him think, what more could he do until morning? And Martha, she was waiting. Too many nights had he left her waiting. He stopped at his car and his gloved fingers tightened around the handle.

\*

“Molly,” Jules said and set his rifle down.

A leg was slid out from a hollow part in the tree, an opening in its base wide enough to crawl inside. Naked and white, the leg looked luminescent. It was bent at an awkward angle above the ankle. Jules laid his hands on the skin and delicately bent the leg back the way it should have been. After that, he stroked her face, tracing a finger across her cheek. He wished she would answer. He had been trying to tell her but she wouldn't listen and he wondered at telling her again but his thoughts were broken by the sound of them.

It was a pack, singular voices at first but joined by others and growing to a wail until the coyotes harmonized in pitch and unison. The sound crawled up Jules' spine and he pulled the rifle closer, clearing the bolt and checking the chamber for snow, listening, noting the cries' distance, sometimes closer, sometimes farther; it was hard to know, the pack's cry was manipulated by the wind. He sidled closer to the tree.

\*

The rifle's report had sounded lonely and shrinking and after, the coyotes' voices had started anew. Walt hurried in its direction, moving beneath branches that sounded as wooden ships racking one another under their weight of snow. It recalled to him men that had landed centuries before, men not unlike him, having gone into these woods to meet violence, and his chest was tight, his lungs burning, but he was not cold—no, he was moving too fast to be cold, his nerves too lit. His hand shook, and he gripped the gun's inlaid pearl handle tighter, and *that* was cold. He was getting closer, the coyotes' shrill

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barks distinct, wild, and heated. Dammit, Jules, he thought. He had not heard another rifle's report.

He stopped, his breath heavy. "Easy," he said.

Jules had stepped from the trees, his rifle on him. "I thought you were a coyote."

They both seemed to consider this.

"Why did you follow me out here?"

Walt didn't answer at first but thought that the snow reminded him of his youth, waking to its stillness waiting to be made over—the possibilities; he thought of Martha's Christmas cards and that she was waiting at home; he thought of the fire going; he thought about the first bad accident he'd seen as sheriff, that it had been snowing like this, that the family's minivan had skidded in front of a semi. His brain worked slowly, inundated with pain.

"Where is she, Jules?"

Jules looked away. "You look tired."

"What have you done?"

Jules stared into the trees from where he had come.

"Is she over there?"

"Don't," Jules said and raised his rifle.

"I'm not, but Jules—" Walt stopped, looking around. The coyotes were there. He saw their eyes between the pines, like little blazoned coals, burning above the snow that canvassed the ground they paced. He turned back to Jules. "I need to know she's okay."

"You look tired," Jules said again, absentmindedly, like he had forgotten having said it.

“You’ve got to help me then,” Walt said. He stepped closer to Jules. “Show me where she is.”

\*

The tree stood in a bottom, alone, and had long been dead. Molly was inside a hollow part in the tree’s base. What the coyotes had been after, Walt decided and was glad that Jules had fired his rifle a second time to scare them off.

“We used to come here,” Jules said, “when we were married. We’d picnic, lie about. Nobody to bother us. After we, well, after...”

Jules didn’t finish but leaned the rifle against the tree.

“You found her then,” Walt asked, “like this?”

“No,” Jules said. “I brought her back to the house first and cleaned her up. Ran her a warm bath. I never threw out the perfume she kept.” He knelt beside the tree. “I promised myself I’d take care of her.”

Walt looked around. The tree had grown out of a small depression that tapered down to a V shaped bottom that was overshadowed by the ridge above. A man could pass by from above and never notice the tree in the holler below.

Jules drew his body closer to that of Molly’s and ran his fingers through the dead woman’s hair. “She’s my wife,” he said.

“You’ll die in this cold,” Walt said.

When Jules didn’t answer, Walt turned and saw their tracks already being filled over. It’d be four months until a good thaw and by then he’d be retired. Yes, it would be a long winter—a season where things often went missing. Walt bent and took Jules’ rifle and cradled it under his arm. Jules didn’t protest. Walt stared up over the ridge and thought of

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Martha, her patience, and the years they had shared and lost together. Walt started up the ridge alone.

JIM CROCE'S GHOST

Jim started visiting three days after my wife packed out.

The first time I mistook him for a hippie faculty member, but Jim's plane went down in '73 after colliding with a pecan tree. He was on his way to Texas after giving a concert here at the college. Poor fellow clad all in denim for eternity. We don't speak about it.

Jim wants to go and see Isabella in the gymnasium. "You fool with Isabella," I say. "I'm tired of women for a while." I lean against my broom and look out past the knoll at the black stream that's Cane River. It's neither day nor night. The college in its brick and mortar looms gothic. Everything looks blue and long thin shadows menace the grounds. The college in its brick and mortar looms gothic.

Jim's spectral brow is writ with what we living call troubles. He's been stuck haunting this college for half a century with no chance of ever reuniting with his boy. "She's pregnant," I say about my wife. "I won't ever know if we were having a girl or a boy,"

\*

Everyone knows they condemned the college gymnasium because Isabella moved in. She's older than Jim. She left France for Natchitoches in the 1800s and died from heartache not long after. The man she loved lost a duel over another woman.

I make it a habit not to frequent her haunt. In fact, outside of work I stay off campus. Nobody wants to see me. I'm the invisible hand that pushes a trash bin from one building to another.

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A heavy chain bars the gymnasium doors. Jim can pass through but points at my janitor's keys. My hands shake. I expect bats and cobwebs but inside's nothing but a dusty basketball court. Jim glides across. Isabella hangs by the pool. I follow.

Over the years her grief has pooled. Olympic-sized, she floats suspended above her tears like an aberrant Christmas ornament. My own reflection shows I'm alone, only ghosts.

PREY

Something about the boy bothered Ira.

“What’s the matter with you?” Ira asked over the pencil gritted between his teeth. He leafed through the black composition book in his lap, the pages filled with marks and notations. A pair of binoculars were at his elbow on the coffee table beside a slim book titled *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Birds*. Ira lifted the binoculars and looked at a sycamore that grew out of the gully behind his deck and trailer, thirty or more feet from where he sat in his wheelchair. The tree’s hand shaped leaves that shone green and translucent. Ira imagined he could smell the sycamore’s leaves being warmed along with the leaves of those trees growing closest to the deck.

Ira set the binoculars down and took the pencil from his mouth. He scribbled a dark circle and then another. His therapist had told him cultivating hobbies could be beneficial. He jotted notes, his writing chickenscratch: American yellow warblers, mating pair, sunny, 10 A.M. The birds looked yellow enough with black and white markings like racing stripes running across their wings and backs. He consulted his field guide. They could easily be Yellow-rumped warblers. He turned to the boy. “Well?” he asked.

There wasn’t a pool for miles but the boy was shirtless and barefoot like always and wearing mud-splattered green and blue swim shorts. His bangs fell in a straight line too high across a dominating brow, fattening his face, making his deep set eyes look dull and his nose prominent and ugly. The nose’s bridge had healed crookedly after being broken.

“Nothing I know of,” the boy said. He possessed a deliberateness that Ira thought unnatural for an eleven year old. His skin was brown as tanned leather and taut over

sinew and muscle. Ira couldn't recall ever having such musculature. "Is there something wrong with me, Mr. Ira?"

Ira frowned. He was twenty-nine for chrissake. He hated when the boy called him "Mr. Ira". He reminded himself that the boy was being polite. Hell, he hadn't even bothered asking the boy his name and the kid had been pestering him for six weeks. The boy started coming around when school got out for summer. Ira guessed he lived in that crowded trailer park off the highway. Wasn't too far, seemed likely.

Ira shut the composition book, drummed his fingertips on its cover. "You're creepy," Ira said.

"So," the boy said. He grabbed the binoculars. The binoculars looked heavy supported by the boy's wiry arms. In a year or less the binoculars would be too heavy for Ira, his arms would've atrophied. Ira's fingers would become incapable of grasping the binoculars. The boy adjusted the lenses and scouted the trees' highest branches.

"It bothers people," Ira said.

"So," the boy said from behind the binoculars.

"So, you should try at being less creepy. Don't you want people to like you?"

"I got friends," the boy said. He passed the binoculars. "There," he said, pointing.

Ira pressed the binoculars to his face. "What? Where?"

The boy moved behind Ira's wheelchair and pointed over his shoulder at a dead pin oak alone in a clearing at the top of the gully's other side. The tree had been hit by lightning years ago and had caught fire before rain doused the flames. The dead tree had lost most of its bark and limbs to become a massive, faceless totem. After any nasty storm Ira was always surprised that the snag wasn't at the gully's bottom.

“See?” the boy asked.

“The snag?” Ira asked.

“No,” the boy said, dismissive. His impatience made Ira feel stupid.

Ira pulled the binoculars away. “Where?” he asked. He gestured towards where the boy pointed. “What am I looking for?”

The boy took the binoculars and aimed at the snag. “There,” he said. He held the binoculars steady. “Look.”

“Wow,” Ira said. He took hold of the binoculars. “Good eye, kid.”

“What’s that it’s got in its mouth?”

Ira adjusted the binoculars. “Dinner most likely. What dinner is, that’s harder to say.”

“Looks like another bird.”

“Maybe,” Ira said. “Hand me that field guide.” He traded the binoculars for the guide and flipped towards the back. He ran his finger down the page, mouthing the words without reading out loud, and settled on “Red-tailed Hawk”. The slim, narrow page was a treasure trove of information complete with illustrations and a colored map of North America. *Buteo jamaicensis*. A large hawk, common, reddish-brown tail, hunts from a perch, diet—small animals, protected by the Migratory Bird Act of 1918.

“That’s new,” the boy said. “Is that it?”

“Far as I can tell,” Ira said. He opened the composition book in his lap, turned the page, and began making another graphite circle.

“You think it’ll kill a lot of other birds?”

“No,” Ira said, writing. “Only ones it needs to.”

“Why can’t it just eat the birdseed we put out?”

“The birdseed *I* put out,” Ira corrected. “A hawk isn’t that kind of bird. It’s a bird of prey.” He picked the field guide up again and pointed to the page. “A hawk doesn’t only hunt other birds but kills and eats all kinds of animals smaller than itself.”

“Why’s it got to be like that?” the boy asked. “Why can’t it be like other birds?”

“They can’t all be the same,” Ira said. He took the binoculars and looked across the gully at the hawk on top of the snag. The bird had begun to eat. “That’s just the way hawks are.”

“Is it going to live in that dead tree?”

“Could be, yeah. That hawk might take up residence.”

“I don’t like it,” the boy said.

“You don’t have to,” Ira said. He put the binoculars down. The boy upset, Ira nodded at the sliding glass door. “Why don’t you go inside the trailer and grab us both a cold Pepsi?”

“No,” the boy said. He was looking across the gully at the snag. “I’m going to go.”

“Go where?” Ira asked. “It’s not even noon. You’re going to miss those two breeding pairs of Eastern towhees.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“At least help me refill the feeder before you go. You know I have a hard time getting it down and back up again.” Ira rolled backwards and pivoted. He wheeled himself to the bucket of bird feed that was flush against the trailer, leaned over, and pried

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the lid off. Soon he might not be able to do this. He'd have to get one of those motorized wheelchairs.

"Go on," he said. "Fetch the feeder down." Ira scooped seed from the bucket with a large plastic cup before turning. The deck was empty but for himself, the coffee table, the guide, and binoculars. The boy had left as stealthily as he had arrived. Ira dropped the cup back in the bucket.

\*

Annette was half-in the trailer and half-out. She let the screen door slam behind her. Her arms were laden with grocery bags. "You look upset, honey," she said. "What's wrong? Something happen?"

Ira sat at the kitchen table with his laptop. "Did you know it's the red tailed hawk's cry you hear in movies and not an eagle's?"

Annette crossed the living room in a couple strides and set the groceries on the kitchen counter. She opened the cabinets and started putting canned goods away. "Gosh," she said. "Is that all? Here I was thinking it was something serious."

"You get my magazine?"

"Your *National Geographic* is in that bag," she said.

Ira shut his laptop and wheeled himself to the counter. "You didn't forget."

"When have I forgot?"

Ira pulled the bag off the counter and onto his lap.

Annette worked on the other bag. "These are expired." She held a can of pineapples. A bigger woman, slightly above middle age, years of smoking had ruined her face. "I thought I checked all the labels at the store." She tossed the can in the trash. Ira

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wasn't paying attention. "I figured you'd be tired of magazines after working at that printing factory all those years. Remind me why they're so important?"

Ira ran his hand over the glossy ink embossed cover. "I like the feel of the pages. I can almost feel the pictures."

"Some ladies at church scrapbook. Maybe you could join them."

"That's different," Ira said while tearing out a page. "This is real photography."

"Don't tell that to the ladies meeting in my church's basement. They'd string you up."

"Are you done yet, Annette?"

"I was only trying to help. Whatever's bothering you today is all over your face."

Ira flipped to the *National Geographic's* last page and, finished, threw the whole magazine in the trash minus the page he kept. "I don't think the state pays you to play therapist." He wheeled his chair back to the table and opened his laptop. "In fact, I know they don't because they pay my therapist to play therapist. They pay you to cook and clean, Annette. Lucky for you I tell them you're half-decent at both."

Annette stopped with the groceries. "Why'd you stop your physical therapy?"

Ira didn't look up. "It's degenerative. I didn't see the point."

Annette began putting the cans away again, much louder than before. "I wish you'd go to church with me sometime," she said.

Ira didn't answer.

"What's this about a hawk?" she asked.

"We saw one today across the gully perched on that old snag."

"You and that boy? Was he here again?"

“He was,” Ira said. “He was the one that first spotted the hawk. The damned thing had another bird in its mouth and was eating it. I tried explaining nature to him but it was no use. The boy got upset at that.”

“Who can blame him,” Annette said. “Death is ugly.” She put away the last can and shut the cabinet. “You know, I’ve been helping out for over a year and—”

Ira interrupted, “The toilet needs cleaning.” He shut his laptop, not waiting for an answer, and went out onto the deck.

\*

The digital clock read 7:47 A.M. “Just a minute,” Ira shouted. He lay in bed, back propped against pillows. Whoever it was was pounding on the door. “I said I’m coming.” His voice sounded hoarse from lack of use. He hadn’t spoken out loud since Annette left in a huff the evening before. Maybe the knocking sounded louder than it was. Sometimes the quiet became a sound in itself. Whenever it became that quiet Ira didn’t know if what he heard was real or imagined. He had been laying in bed for hours, listening, trying to figure that out. It seemed he slept less and less. Why hadn’t he let Annette comfort him?

“Hold on,” Ira shouted from bed. He pulled the sheet aside. His legs looked pallid and lifeless like drumsticks boiled too long, the meat having shrunk to the bone. He raised himself with his hands, scooting from the center of the mattress to the edge, maneuvering so he could slide into his wheelchair. Seated, he arranged his legs so they weren’t resting at odd angles. He did all this faster than usual, which was still slow, and he worried he might fall and have to try and mount his chair from the floor.

Ira wheeled himself into the living room. Whoever was at the door must’ve heard because they began to pound on the door more. Ira wanted to open the door in a way that

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said he wasn't messing around, but if he flung the door wide he would have to roll backwards quickly or else the door would slam into his wheelchair and send him careening.

He struggled with the lock, his hand shaking. He wanted badly to open the door with force. "Hello," he said to the man standing on the ramp that led to his yard. "Can I help you?"

The man had been muscular once. Now he had bulk and a gut. He drove a Mercedes which was parked in Ira's drive and wore a blazer, tie, and loafers. He thought he was somebody and possibly was, but Ira didn't care. Being a cripple should've bought Ira a modicum of consideration since he no longer could ask for respect. He would settle for consideration if that was all that was left. The man had left his car door open, ready to go with his keys in hand. Ira doubted he'd get an apology. "You seen my boy?" the man said. "His name's Mark. Eleven years old."

"I don't know anybody goes by Mark," Ira said.

"Well, he's told me he rides his bike out this way and I was wondering if anybody has seen him."

"He missing?"

"Nothing like that," the man said. "I'm looking for him is all. He kinda ran off. You know how kids are when they get upset."

"No," Ira said. "I don't know how kids are."

"Consider yourself lucky." The man wasn't looking at Ira. He was looking inside his trailer.

"What upset him?" Ira asked.

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“You know,” the man said, “Kid stuff.”

Ira backed away from the door so he had room to close it. “I’m sorry but I haven’t seen him,” he said. “I hope you find him though.”

“Yeah,” the man said. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Ira said and shut the door. He waited a minute until he thought the man gone and moved closer to the window and peeked between the blind. The man stood beside his car looking over Ira’s yard for what must’ve been a third or fourth time. He looked to where Ira was at the window, but he couldn’t see him—could he? “Go,” Ira said, though not so loudly that the man could hear. He watched as the man got in his car, not turning away, until the car had turned off his gravel drive onto the paved road.

Ira went to the kitchen and turned the water on. He let it run until it was hot and then filled a coffee mug. He dumped a tablespoon of instant coffee in the mug and another and stirred. Most the grounds mixed with the water though a few remained floating. It didn’t matter. The coffee tasted like burnt bread. He would’ve preferred to percolate his coffee but that was involved and a hassle. Sometimes Annette would bring him a thermos of good made coffee. He should stop giving her such a hard time. Ira cradled the mug between his thighs and went to the sliding glass doors that led to the deck.

Through the glass he saw a tufted titmouse, with its namesake crown like a mohawk, waiting on the railing for its turn at the feeder. It wasn’t alone. A few chickadees waited too. Red house finches crowded the feeder. When the finches had first started showing up Ira had been delighted because they were new and different. There

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had been so many of them and they had kept coming. He soon learned the finches were aggressive and kept the other birds away. Now Ira had grown to hate them. He slid the glass door open and watched as the lot of them took flight. Their wings sounded like flags being snapped in a high wind. He went out on the deck.

“Is he gone?” the boy asked, his voice from below.

Between the slats at his feet Ira saw nothing. “Are you under my deck?” he asked, already knowing.

The boy’s head appeared through a gap in the deck’s skirting. He dragged his torso and legs out after. Freed, he reached behind him and pulled a rifle from under the deck. The gun was nearly as long as the boy. A bolt action .22, the walnut stock a deep stained finish, the blued barrel nearly coal black. Ira made to speak but the boy reached behind him again and pulled the hawk out. He held the large bird up by the legs. The hawk could’ve just as easily been a chicken. “I killed it,” he said.

Ira drank from his coffee. The boy looked neither happy nor sad about what he’d done. “I see that,” he said.

The boy climbed the deck’s steps, holding the hawk in one hand and the rifle in another. Naked above the waist and barefoot, he limped slightly. His chest and arms were covered with scratches.

Ira admired the boy. There was no discernible way across the gully without briars and vines. He had found his way, where he must’ve sat with the rifle and waited.

The boy put the hawk in Ira’s lap. “I want you to have it,” he said.

Ira was surprised by how little the hawk weighed. “I don’t want it,” he said and knocked the hawk off his lap. The dead bird landed at his feet. The two of them stared at the corpse.

“I don’t want it either,” the boy said.

The bird was beautiful. “I won’t tell anybody you killed it,” Ira said and dumped coffee from his mug over the deck’s railing. “I’m going to go inside and get some that’s hot. You want some?”

“Yeah,” the boy said.

“All right,” Ira said. “Wait here.”

Ira wheeled inside and slid the door shut. Behind him the boy stood looking across the gully. The hawk was at the boy’s feet and the rifle was laid across the coffee table. Ira moved away from the door and took his phone from his shirt pocket and hit speed dial.

“Hello?” It was Annette.

“I need you to come over,” Ira said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Not me,” Ira said, “it’s the boy. His dad came looking for him earlier. I think he needs a ride home.”

“You know I work another job, Ira.”

“I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t important.”

Annette sighed. “All right,” she said. “I can take my lunch early. I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

“Thank you,” Ira said. He hung up and tucked the phone back in his pocket. He turned and went back out to the deck.

“Where’s the coffee?” the boy asked.

“Right,” Ira said. He looked at the hawk again and then, the rifle. “Bring both of those inside and help me make some,” he said.

The boy followed after Ira. He leaned the gun against the wall in the corner and set the hawk on the table.

“Get yourself a mug,” Ira said. “Run some water. Is it hot?”

The boy tested the water with his hand. “Yes.”

“All right, fill my mug and yours and then put two tablespoons of coffee in both and stir each real good. You got that?”

The boy didn’t answer but did as Ira asked. Ira went to the gun in the corner and checked that the safety was on. It was. He set the gun back and went to the table. “Take a chair,” he said.

The boy set the mugs on the table before sitting beside Ira. Ira took his coffee and blew on it. The boy did the same.

“Were you hiding from your dad?” Ira asked.

“I don’t know,” the boy said.

“You don’t know or won’t say?” Ira asked.

The boy took another sip of coffee. Ira could tell he didn’t like it.

“You hiding because you took his gun out?”

“He’d be mad if he knew,” the boy said.

“He knows,” Ira said. “A person doesn’t take care of something the way your dad does that gun and not know it’s gone missing.”

The boy perked up, a car in the drive.

“I got a friend coming over,” Ira said, backing away from the table.

Ira went to the door and the boy followed. Ira opened it, expecting Annette. It was the man and his Mercedes. The boy’s dad stepped from the car, headed towards the trailer. “Was you lying to me?” he asked.

“Hold on,” Ira said in the doorway. “Calm down.”

The man backed Ira into the living room and made for the boy. “You been here this whole time, Mark?”

The boy backpedaled and fell on the carpet. The man grabbed his arm, jerking him to his feet.

“Hey now,” Ira said. His chair was caught. “Don’t be so rough with him.”

The man ignored Ira, yanking the boy closer, “Get the rifle and take it to the car.” He pushed the boy towards the gun.

The boy caught himself before running into the table. The dead hawk stared at him.

“Hurry up,” the man said.

The boy took the gun from the corner, turned, and marched past. Ira wanted to catch the boy’s eye but he wouldn’t look up.

“I asked you if my boy was here,” the man said, standing over Ira. “I don’t ever want to find him here again.” He leaned in. “You look like a goddamn creep.”

“How’d that boy break his nose?” Ira asked, surprising himself.

“He plays football, you twit.”

Ira grabbed the man’s blazer. “I don’t believe you.” The man jerked his arm free and raised it like he might bring it down again. “I’ll call the law,” Ira said.

“Call them,” the man said. He stood upright and relaxed his posture. “How you think this looks? My boy over here without me knowing. I found him in your house.”

Ira looked away. “Just go,” he said.

Past the man, the boy stared at Ira from the passenger’s seat. Ira wished he could’ve been with him when he shot the hawk, he would’ve liked to have been there for that.

HER PERSONAL SAVIOR

I was twelve the summer my parents prepared Susan McGregor's body for burial.

"We're not keeping it," Mom said. She stood at the kitchen counter keeping vigil over the toaster. Mrs. McGregor's Maltese had piddled on the floor.

Dad stared at me from across the table. The kitchen fell quiet. He cleared his throat, "After *that* what was I supposed've done, Val?"

The toaster popped and Mom pinched the waffles with her thumb and forefinger. "We're a mortuary, Charlie. Not an animal shelter."

\*

After breakfast I took Mrs. McGregor's Maltese for a walk. "What's your problem?" I asked. "Are you sad?" Her dog's face was round and dumb and I felt suddenly stupid. I tucked her dog under my arm and not knowing where to go I walked to Mrs. McGregor's.

Through the fence a dandelion or two had been missed. I had shirked Mrs. McGregor, not going tightly around the trees when I last mowed her lawn. Her Maltese started whining again.

I looked and it was Mr. Henry who had half his right arm missing. The stub was soft looking except for a raised scar. The lost arm had made him into a celebrity. "Roy," he said.

I was startled he knew my name. The Maltese growled from deep in her throat. "I don't think she likes you," I said.

"We've never been good friends." He held his arm out. "It's the missing end that spooks her."

"She's not too smart," I said.

“We’ve had our run-ins, me and that dog.” He pointed at the house, at the rose window. The bottommost pane was missing a piece. “Know anything about that?”

I’d passed by countless times and never noticed the window until Mr. Henry pointed. The window was beautifully broken. “I don’t know anything about that window.”

“I guess you don’t happen to know what happened to it then. Figures.” He gestured towards the driveway and his truck, a small Datsun. “Help me move a few things?”

“I’ve got the dog,” I said.

“You can put her in the truck. Won’t take long. She’ll be fine.”

Against my better judgment I followed him. “Sit her inside there,” he said. The truck windows were rolled down. I hesitated setting her Maltese on the seat.

Mr. Henry waited at the tailgate. “You going to kiss that dog? Hurry up now.”

I set her Maltese down and walked around. Mr. Henry had removed the tarpaulin so the whole of Marlon Brando was exposed. I recognized the wax figure from movies my parents liked.

“Where’d you get Marlon Brando?”

“At auction,” Mr. Henry said. “Now grab his legs and we’ll carry him to the front porch.”

\*

Mr. Henry propped Brando against the porch railing where I was afraid he might topple onto the begonias. “What are you going to do with him?”

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“Crucify him.” Mr. Henry went down the porch steps. His heavy breaths trailed after him as he walked around the side of the house and back towards his truck.

Alone with Brando I covered the lower half of his right arm with my hands and stood there a while.

Mr. Henry surprised me. “You’re a strange kid. You know that?”

I looked and he had unrolled a sheath of leather on the porch. There were knives inside. “I sharpened them this morning,” he said and jabbed a knife deep into Brando’s side.

“She was a lonely woman,” I said.

“Yes,” Mr. Henry said. “Very lonely.”

Mr. Henry turned away from Brando. “Your dog is barking.”

AFTER THE TOURISTS HAVE GONE

Cecil looks up at me from a five-gallon bucket he's been staring inside of. He's already gotten the snorkels, goggles, and wet suits laid across the dock. The dimpled, goose-fleshed suits we bought used smell ripe.

My business partner Cecil's fifty-five but you'd guess forty. He keeps a bench inside his mostly empty apartment and racks the barbell before breakfast. Despite this he's got a bit of an under chin that bunches and gathers below his neck. "Let me show you something," Cecil says.

We lean over the bucket. "I caught it myself," he says.

"Did you?" Despite knowing Cecil, I'm interested. "Where?"

"Was on the deck of the boat. Slowed by the cold." Cecil bends and reaches for a coat hanger he's undone and stretched long. Where he got a coat hanger from I don't know but he's left the hook on the end. Cecil pokes at the frog's ass-end, chasing him around the bucket's bottom. He does this for a while longer than I'd expect. "Fast little devil," Cecil says. "Not too smart."

"He's a frog, Cecil," I say.

"I reckon you're right," Cecil says. He changes the coat hanger up on the frog. No longer bumping the frog's behind, he pushes the hook against the head. The frog won't budge and the wire slides under the animal's chin, where the thin parchment skin hangs.

"You ought to put some water in, let him swim some." Cecil ignores me.

"Let's fetch Bump," he says.

Cecil's boa is in the back of his pickup. There are strange occasions when Cecil takes the boa places. Like once Cecil told me he drove into Tampa where he waited

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outside a movie multiplex. He stood in the parking lot with the boa draped over his broad shoulders and beckoned strangers made half blind from emerging from a matinée to come closer. “Run your hands a snake’s length,” he’d said. Whenever he brings this up, and other times like it, I know he’s disappointed I don’t understand.

I’m glad then the first tourists show. We don’t have to fetch Bump and frog is spared for now. They park. A sedan. This Sunday it’s the only vehicle but Cecil’s in the gravel lot outside of *Reggie’s Marina & Bait*. We still call it *Reggie’s* even with Reggie dead. Reggie’s widow Maureen rents us a slip for the Carolina Skiff we somehow managed to make a down payment on.

Three weeks in and we keep hoping business will pick up fast. We haven’t cleared enough in our first month to make the coming boat payment. We’ve barely made enough for gas with Maureen’s cut. She keeps hush that we’re operating without a license. She says Reggie would’ve liked us running wild this way, how it was in Florida before the goddamn Yankees. She also likes our money.

Cecil checks his watch. Almost 6 A.M. The earliest tour is usually our biggest, when the best sightings are—mothers and calves together. The manatees haven’t spooked yet and we can get close. Tourists get all their pictures before swimming alongside the manatees. Touch them even. All this is, strictly speaking, illegal. Our part of the river doesn’t allow tours, and no matter where you are manatees are hands-off. Me and Cecil though, we haven’t once not delivered a hands-on experience. “Weak turnout,” Cecil says.

They’re not a bad looking family but not remarkable either. Mom and Dad are worn-in. Dressed to match. Comfortable. Dad’s height is exaggerated by how Mom

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stands. Mom's a sloucher. Their son a squat version of both. Nine or ten and big-headed with no neck. I walk to greet them.

"Are we it?" Dad asks.

"Looks like," I say.

"Good," Dad says. "I hate crowds."

"You're in luck," I say. "A private tour."

Cecil hates the business of small talk. He leaves chit-chat to me and makes a show of untying the boat and firing up the Evinrude. What tourists don't know is the outboard motor has an electric start and is easy.

"Manatees in no time," I say.

We get them in their gear—wet suits, swim fins, snorkels, and goggles—and after that it's difficult getting them on the boat. The husband has the hardest time because he's tall. I extend my hand, holding onto the gunwale with the other. "Easy," I say. Most men won't grab your hand. They'll try and get in without help. This guy doesn't hesitate.

Mom and son are already seated with life-jackets pushed up against their chins by the time Dad's onboard. Both stare over the bow towards down the river. "We ready?" Cecil asks, already taking us out.

I go into the spiel. How the springs below are a limestone aquifer. A unique aquifer that runs for miles. A geological gift giving us clean water. Between two hundred and three hundred million gallons a day pumping free. Water warmer than you'd expect, even in winter. Surprisingly, manatees don't have a lot of body fat and warmth is what they're after. That's why they migrate every winter, swimming upriver towards the spring's mouth. That's the only way they can survive. Here and a few other places like it

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are the only places they can live. If anything changes, they're done. This place a safe haven for animals and humans alike. A place for a drink and rest. Been that way since the dinosaurs. They've even found mastodon fossils from before the river was a river and was only a watering hole. Millions of years ago.

The boy is looking at the cypress trees in the river. At their knobbed knees, their deep creased bark. Spanish moss hangs from their branches. If you look down the water is clear as can be. Silt settled like sand on the river's bottom. Try to reach bottom, depth not looking like much. A blue heron flying in the water, large wings extended, legs tucked under its belly. A reflection.

"Can I drive?" the boy asks, not answering me. "I'd like to see the mastodon. Are we going to see the mastodon?"

"Maybe," I say, lying. No way Cecil or me would take us that far up river, too much a risk.

"I'd like that," he says.

No one talks after that, not until we get to *the spot*. Where Cecil and me have spotted a mother and calf regularly.

Cecil cuts the engine. The manatees are together, their backs breaking the surface like smoothed stones floating. Sailors who first crossed the Atlantic mistook them for mermaids, beautiful women, and that sounds impossible until you see silhouettes wavering beneath the river's surface, gliding as if everything was so easy. We've moved into the bow, the parents and kid gawking.

"James," Mom says. "The camera."

“I’ll get it,” I say, excusing Dad, and move towards the back of the boat. When they get done snapping pictures Cecil demonstrates how to go overboard.

“You have to spit inside them,” he says about the goggles for a second time. He sits on the gunwales, flippered feet splayed on the deck. “Like this,” he says falling backwards. The flat of his back strikes water and then he’s under. The family hesitates, watching for him to surface.

I reassure them. “This may be your last chance,” I say. “They’ll be extinct before long.” Cecil resurfaces, blowing water free from his snorkel. “Water’s good,” he says.

Mom and Dad go in then and I admire them. They’re made different. They look happy.

“I don’t want to get in,” the boy says at my elbow.

From the water Dad says, “Nothing to be scared of.”

Mom nods. “It’s wonderful,” she says. “Come on, honey.”

I’ve been in the business long enough to know the boy isn’t buying. “He’ll be fine on the boat,” I say. “Why don’t you go with Cecil and take a closer look? Go ahead. Touch one.”

“Are you sure?” Mom asks.

“He’ll be fine,” Dad says. “If he doesn’t want to get in, he doesn’t want to get in.”

Her husband starting ahead, Mom goes after an obligatory glance back.

Normally I’d sit with the boy, try and convince him to get in, but I move into the bow to watch the couple swimming. I’m not paying attention then when the Evinrude fires up.

The boat lurches forward and I'm thrown. I fall against the steering column between bow and stern. The boat barrels towards the parents, Cecil, and manatees. I yell hoping that Cecil has already started to get clear and Mom and Dad haven't frozen.

The boy's sprawled on the boat's deck, thrown backwards from the wheel. A couple breaths and we'll be onto the bank, the whole underside sheared from the skiff. I stand to reach the engine. The Evinrude bucks upwards. Propellers go *whack-whack-whack*. We've hit them.

I'm disoriented by what feels like forever and Cecil is screaming, "What were you thinking?" The boat between climbing the bank and backing off. Cecil in the boat tearing his goggles off. He throws them at his flippered feet. "You little shit."

I grab him. "Cecil," I say.

"They're crying," he says.

*God god god god god god*

It sounds unworldly with Mom and Dad back on board, Mom pressing child to gut. Trying to push him back inside I think.

The noise they make. No one speaks.

Cecil gets us back, somehow. We don't ask the family to pay. We don't help them with their gear. We sit and watch as they struggle at peeling each other off.

After the tourists have gone, it's a long while before either of us leaves the boat. Cecil goes first. "I haven't fed Bump in over a month," he says, taking the bucket with frog inside.

The animal inside skitters and I haven't the heart for what comes after.

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## LAST TRANSMISSION

Up here in the space we want answers. We suspect a casual accident. Whatever casual means.

\*

Below us blue silk gauze floats, its lights out. Seven and a half billion gone. Numbers abstract us.

\*

Only three left. Jokingly, the trinity. Who's Jesus?

\*

Stars twinkle, die. There is no order. Everything just *is*. Houston won't answer.

\*

Feel stationary, waiting. Remind crew, Earth's Speed - 1000 mph (1600 km/hr)/Our speed – 17,150 mph (27600.25 km/hr). *We are* moving. But where are we going?

\*

Rest of crew dead. Blunt force trauma. Casualties, 2. Pity.

\*

The need now for freeze-dried ice cream baffles.

## THE HOLDOUTS

Someone had shot the Gilchrists' horses. Six lay dead in the pasture with the sun rising, the coming morning a white glare behind a black horizon of pines. The chestnut gelding had died on its haunches sitting like a child. A colt, fawn-colored and doe-like, ran out its last breath mid-stride, collapsing. All dead but for the Appaloosa. The mare was half sable and leopard spotted. She had run the pasture's length and tried clearing the fence where the pasture met the road but hung draped over the wire, hindquarters caught and tangled. Her coat changed from black to chalk past her ribs, except what was white was now red like dried clay.

Benton stepped from the truck and crossed the ditch. Warm in a coat and jeans, his layers made him stouter than he was. He pulled his toboggan lower, tugging its edges over his ears, while behind him Dorene scooted across the bench seat. She shut the driver's door against the cold and stared ahead. Where the distant trees touched sky stratus clouds stacked gray and frozen. Above the clouds, a ghost of the moon.

Dorene counted twelve crows perched on electric lines that ran parallel with the road. Nothing about the murder of them would change come full light. They'd be just as black and ugly. She slammed her palm on the horn. The crows didn't even look back at her. "I'll kill them," she said, pushing off the wheel and throwing herself against the seat.

The wail of the horn faded over Benton's head. He raised his glove to his face and bit the fingers. The cold stung but he pulled his hand free and tucked the glove in his hip pocket while the horse blew hot air out her nostrils. Her breath rose like steam off morning coffee. Benton stepped closer. "Easy," he said, holding his hand out.

The mare tossed her head. Their best horse, Benton loved her as well as he loved anything. He crouched level with her head slung low near the ground. Froth at her mouth's corners was thick like meringue and slaver ran off her jaw like a dog's. He stroked the flat of her neck and her coarse hair felt damp with sweat. "Little Girl," he said, turning her head.

Her eyes, black and dull, stared back—intelligence lingering. Benton unzipped his coat at the neck and reached inside. He felt the trapped warmth of his body around the handle of the revolver. The gun was heavier in his hand than it had been in his coat. He pressed the barrel flush against the mare's head. The horse couldn't see him, he was directly ahead of her and outside her field of vision. Benton cocked the hammer, rolling the cylinder over, locking the chamber.

"Go on," Dorene said, walking up behind. Her heavy boots crunched dew-frozen grass. She had tucked her jeans into the boots and thrown a Sherpa-lined denim coat over an old Woolrich flannel. She stopped short and frowned, braced against a northerly wind coming off the pasture. Her auburn hair had fallen loose from under her hunter's cap, and her bangs lashed her brow and cheeks. She called over the wind, "She's suffering because of you."

Dorene's truth cut Benton. "I know," he said. The mare turned her head against the revolver and stared at him. Benton pressed the barrel again against the bony ridge of the mare's forehead. He counted from ten, lost count, and took a deep breath. The cold air hurt his lungs. "I can't," he said, standing.

"You were never going to," Dorene said, grabbing the revolver. "Doing it wrong anyway." She planted her feet shoulder width apart, standing three feet from where the

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mare was caught in the fence, and raised the revolver until the sight fell on the mare's head. She cradled the sight at the barrel's end to rest in the sight above the hammer, inhaled, and fired. The mare's head jerked at the gun's blast and her neck went slack. The whole of her body relaxed and no longer strained the wire but rested easy as if hung like an ornament. The report rang still in the air, a note stretched thin, crows taking flight after. Dorene reached under the flap that covered her ear and rubbed. "Here," she said, thrusting the gun at Benton. "Next time don't stand so damn close. You press the barrel to the head like that and the gun's liable to explode. Don't you know anything?"

"No," Benton said, shaking his head, refusing the gun. "I won't—you carry it." He walked around Dorene. The grass bore her tracks and his, the jeweled grass having broken underfoot. No evidence of anyone having passed that way before them, their tracks leading to the truck. Exhaust billowed and hung around the old GMC like the truck ran on a cloud of its own making, but if Dorene hadn't left the engine running the truck could've left them stranded. The truck worked when it wanted and the cold weather tested its resolve. Another winter was unlikely. Benton got in, purposely not looking back at Dorene or past her at the mare—Little Girl, he'd no longer bring himself to call her again by name—Benton slammed the door.

Dorene climbed in. "There's no sense in being a sissy," she said, closing the door. She and Benton sat, puffed birds layered in wool and polyester. She set the revolver on the dash and leaned back. Their clothes ruffled in the cab's quiet like fluffed down, their silence punctuated by the slightest movement. Benton exhaled like he might speak and Dorene pulled free her hunter's cap. Her auburn hair sat flattened and messed on top of

her head. She bent forward, tossing her head like a dog's, shaking tangles loose, raking her hair straight with her fingers.

Benton grabbed Dorene's arm and jerked her upright. "Are you serious?" he said, into her face. "That's what you're going to call me?"

Dorene pushed him off and raised her fist. "Don't touch me then," she said.

"I don't get you is all," Benton said, turning away. He gripped the wheel, making a fist of his own, his knuckles forming a bony ridge and reddening. "I thought I did but—" he stopped, cutting himself off. "You're unbelievable. I thought this would be easier."

"And here I thought you knew," she said, not looking at Benton but at fields dormant and frozen. "Nothing's easy."

\*

Benton turned off the asphalt State route onto the rutted washboard road that led to the Gilchrist farm. The truck dipped and thudded over a pothole, creaking along on a worn suspension. Dorene held the dash, anticipating the next dip, lifting herself off her seat before the truck hit. Neither had spoken since leaving the pasture and now the revolver slid lengthwise across the dash. Benton reached over the wheel and slammed his hand down. "Is this loaded?" He knew the answer, passing the gun to Dorene. "Put it away," he said.

Dorene stuck the gun in her waistband behind the belt she wore. The nickel buckle depicted a cowboy on a wild horse about to be thrown, or the cowboy had won, the horse standing near vertical, kicking, the cowboy holding strong, one arm brazenly thrown backwards for balance. The buckle belonged to Alvarez and Benton hadn't said anything. Was he jealous? Dorene and Alvarez had grown close since Benton had

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returned home with Alvarez. Three weeks now and she knew her brother less than the stranger he brought with him. “There’s Nee-Hi,” Dorene said, pointing. “Come to greet us.”

Open pastures on either side of the truck appeared deceptively flat but ridges slid into barely noticeable depressions, and the dog appeared from nowhere, barking, cresting a hilltop unnoticed from the road’s vantage. He ran angry, seemingly without touching ground, bounding across pasture gone brown and fallow. “Jesus,” Benton said, turning.

“Isn’t he mean-looking,” Dorene said, half standing in the cab. She shoved open the passenger door with the heel of her hand and leaned out. At seeing Dorene hold the door wide, the dog, black like grease, lowered its big square head and pressed faster, leaping the ditch between the road and pasture, his forepaws landing hard and, jarred by the broken road, he stumbled, the road seemingly rising to strike his chest. His fluid motion broken, he didn’t notice but quickly regained himself and ran even with the truck. Dorene scooted back from the gap, making room on the bench seat, and whistled. The dog made one stride, two, and sprung forward. His first half landed on the seat but the second half hung loose and began to drag the rest out. Dorene grabbed the scruff of the dog’s neck and pulled, the dog kicking, climbing in.

Dorene laughed easy in the bench seat at Benton’s elbow. The dog sat proper, on its haunches, taking Dorene’s place next to the passenger door. Dorene leaned over and reached across the dog. His mouth open and panting, he watched wide-eyed while she yanked the door closed. When she crossed back over he tossed his head into Dorene’s neck and laughing face. She half-heartedly played at pushing him off, the dog’s cold nose and warm breath nestling her neck. “Down,” she said, without conviction, mussing the

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fluff around the dog's pointed ears, smiling, the dog licking her with the exposed muscular organ that was his tongue, red and spotted black, smelling faintly of putrid earthiness.

"That dog's a mess," Benton said. "Smells like he's rolled in shit."

"He probably has," Dorene said, petting down the broad space between his ears.

Benton shook his head and cracked his window, cranking the knob on the door panel beside him. The morning was no warmer than before, chill air riding in over the glass, whistling as Dorene had but in a tone much lower and rustling. Benton played with the crank, easing the window up slightly and back down again, trying at getting it right, but he couldn't settle on a spot. Where had the dog been when the horses were shot, the ugly brute.

The dog had been with Dorene, at the foot of her bed, looking hurt because his place beside her was occupied by Alvarez. The dog still smelled him on her, though they had parted well before dawn when Alvarez had left to tend the cows in the barn. He had watched him dress and forget his belt draped over the bedpost, waiting till he was gone before jumping on the mattress beside Dorene. Shots woke them both and the dog had stood in bed barking in Dorene's ear. Not long after, Benton had run inside, revolver in hand, the bad smell of fear on him. The dog looked over Dorene at Benton and barked. Quick, clipped. Deafening.

"Shut him up," Benton said, easing the truck to stop and shifting to park.

"That's all he has to say," Dorene said. "Ain't that right?" She shook the dog's loose jowls, exposing his bright teeth. He raised up and licked her face.

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Benton swung the door out and jumped down, his boots crunching gravel. He slammed the door and walked around the truck's hood, rapping the rusted steel with his knuckles still exposed from before at the pasture when he had held the gun to the mare's head. He hadn't bothered putting that glove back on. There was an awareness altogether lacking when insulated and protected, bare and exposed life bit at him and he felt like biting back. Coming home wasn't like he had expected.

He walked up the drive which ended with the loose scattering of gravel spread wide and thin. The beginning of grass marked the lawn, the lawn where grass was allowed to grow and that was all. There because the land had been cleared once for a house and, trees cut back and brush gone, what grew could become a prairie if left alone. Benton often dreamt the grass grew wild and high with tall stalks topped with spikelets shaped like stars and all together they bent whispering with a wind always turned against where house was supposed to be but wasn't and in its place stood Benton alone. He never told anybody, half-forgetting mostly, but when the grasses grew high in summer remembering was a tinge he couldn't name or describe. A phantom memory he shook off now in winter, standing there.

Alvarez sat on the porch step with his ankles crossed and a sharpened stick in hand. He was digging at the heel of his boot, scraping clods of dirt loose like chiseled shavings, knocking caked clay and shit onto the wood planks at his feet. "That bad," he said at Benton, looking up at his face, while digging still at his heel. He was a small man, tanned, and thin looking even when he'd heaped clothes on under bib overalls. He had on a stained red sweatshirt and, beneath that, long-johns showing under his collar. His

gloves and hat he'd left somewhere, his hands pale and his nose and cheeks flushed red. He tossed the stick aside. "What you need me to do?"

"Nothing yet," Benton said, climbing the stairs.

Alvarez moved aside, letting Benton pass, waiting for Dorene. He hadn't said goodbye when he last left her. She wouldn't expect that he should, but his staying the night was the first time she'd asked in the three weeks since they'd started together. From the start he'd wanted to stay with her in bed instead of leaving, but each time he never managed asking and returned to the small apartment in the barn. Afraid was the word. He wasn't used to sleeping alone after ten years of prison, and the quiet of night bothered him. She also bothered him, made him a child each time, because he was scared of women after such a long time and always shy and embarrassed afterwards. Lying beside her he'd talk about childhood to keep from leaving, her listening about his *tía abuela*. An old woman who, used to squatting in fields, pissed with the door open. He and his cousins would ask her throughout the day, did she want to take some water, they could bring her water if she were thirsty—a Coke from the gas station if she wanted. All so that they might spy on her. Alvarez didn't understand anything then and thought he understood less now.

"Hi, Alvarez," Dorene said, passing him on the stairs. She reached down and frogged his shoulder hard, laughing, the dog climbing the steps after her. Alvarez made to stand and follow but the dog turned half-way up the steps and, hackles raised, growled. Dorene didn't notice at first but kept going, stopping only after she realized the dog was no longer following close behind. She spun around, her boots clomping on the wood

porch. “Hey,” she yelled at the dog. She struck her padded thigh with a balled fist. “Nee-Hi.”

The dog’s demeanor changed from that of a feral animal to domesticated canine, hair no longer bristled and straight up along its back, snout no longer snarled with teeth flashing; instead, the dog’s ears perked up and its jowls hung loose, its spotted tongue visible, teeth exposed as if he were smiling at a shared joke. He pranced to Dorene, wagging his tail, and nudged her hand with his broad head wanting her touch.

“That dog is Lucifer’s,” Alvarez said, standing, brushing the seat of his overalls with his hands. “I don’t understand what he has against me. Me and him, we should get along. I’ve been to hell.”

“He smells you on me,” Dorene said, grinning, “and, being a prince, he doesn’t like sharing.”

Alvarez approached mindful that the dog’s demeanor had changed but not his attention, the brute watched him still with yellow eyes. “He’s gonna have to get used to me,” Alvarez said, holding his hand out for the dog to sniff.

“You two boys can work that out amongst yourselves,” Dorene said, opening the front door to the house. “I’m going inside before my tits freeze.”

\*

The narrow hall was boarded with wood paneling aged the black of walnut, no longer bright as maple, and Alvarez walked careful not to knock a framed picture off in the dark. He could hear a clock ticking and his own feet on the carpet, the house was that quiet. At the end of the hall the doorway leading to the kitchen was lit orange like a portal that he could’ve made himself believe led to another house. The dog walking ahead looked back

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over its shoulders at him, as if he thought so too, and for a moment Alvarez felt as if he'd never been understood by anyone so well.

The kitchen was immediately warm and Dorene, already at the table, sat shedding layers. She shrugged off her denim coat and threw it on the floor in a heap along with her hat and gloves. The dog nosed the pile and began pawing the clothes into a bed for itself. The three watched him, not speaking, while Benton stood by a percolator on the stove-top's burner. "Sit," Benton said, finally, nodding at the table and chairs. Alvarez had stood in the doorway not thinking, realizing now he was sweating in all his winter clothes and staring at the dog that lay curled on the floor with its nose tucked near its tail.

"Don't be a dummy," Dorene sat, pulling a chair back for him. "Come sit." She patted the seat.

Alvarez crossed the small kitchen and moved around the long table with five long strides. The walls pressed in on him, the room less warm now than it was suffocating. The cabinet, stove, and sink where Benton stood took up one whole side and behind Alvarez a hutch older than he took up more room than its opulence and China plates were worth. A door leading out was opposite the hall and to the right of a new Frigidaire he'd helped Benton wrestle in two days after they were paroled and Benton had said there was no reason Alvarez shouldn't come home with him to live.

He knew cattle and there had been plenty of need for him on a dairy farm. He was looking at Dorene, knowing he was in trouble, that he hadn't expected things to turn like this and had the feeling like he did before he was forced to stab his brother-in-law Santo, *ese cochino rabo verde*. He'd not known anything was wrong until he visited his sister's family for Christmas and he knew then immediately but he could not say how he knew *he*

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*knew*. When he caught Santo with his niece he had stopped it, pulling him off the girl. He couldn't remember any more than that, not even in court, where his own sister had testified against him. They had even made his niece, Nelly, lie and swear to things untrue. She'd been crying the whole time and he tried not to remember when he could. Worse sometimes he remembered but remembering was only her face. When they told him he hadn't killed him, only that he nearly did, having stabbed him nineteen times, he swore he'd not make that mistake again and would kill both his sister and him before taking his niece away if he ever worked out how—

“Alvarez,” Benton said, standing over him with percolator in hand. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Alvarez said.

Benton set a mug down in front of Alvarez. “Here.”

“Me too,” Dorene said, holding her mug out.

Benton moved around Alvarez to the head of the table. “Aren't you going to take any?” Alvarez asked.

“In a minute,” Benton said, pouring Dorene's coffee. He set the percolator down on the table and pulled a chair out. “Once it cools, it's too hot for me now.” He sat and watched Alvarez lift his mug, the black coffee roiling under his breath, Dorene stirring hers with a spoon without having added milk or sugar and, in the corner, the dog dreaming, whimpering, running in place. Benton gripped his mug.

“What now?” Dorene asked.

“I haven't made up my mind,” Benton said, grabbing the percolator and pulling it closer. “Something,” he added, pouring.

“They all dead?” Alvarez said.

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“One wasn’t,” Benton said, not looking up. He set the percolator down. “It is now.”

Alvarez slammed his fist against the table, disturbing his mug and Benton’s, coffee sloshing onto the table. “You know it was Ascott.”

“Calm down,” Dorene said.

“Calm down,” Alvarez said, parroting her. He laughed, showing his teeth, which he never did—his teeth being bad.

Benton reached across the table and laid his hand on Alvarez’s forearm. “Look at me,” he said, squeezing. “Let’s figure this out first before doing anything.”

“What’s to figure,” Dorene said. “You know it was Jim. If not Jim Ascott then his brother, Danny. Hell, could’ve been Rick Charles. Name someone. No one in the county likes us. Not since we screwed them.”

“I’m not having this conversation again,” Benton said.

“They killed your horses,” Alvarez said.

“They’ll kill the cows next,” Dorene said.

“Why?” Benton asked. “Aren’t the horses enough? Can’t they leave us alone?”

“The horses were nothing,” Dorene said, leaning in. “Jim probably thinks he was doing us a favor saving us from keeping the horses in hay through winter. They left the herd alone, that’s what keeps the lights on and Jim knows that. You know that. Alvarez knows that. They’re telling us to give or else they’ll break us.”

“Benton,” Alvarez said. “She’s right.”

Benton shook his head. “They’re not running a pipeline over us, no matter how much the oil company pays. They’re not.”

Dorene threw herself back from the table, slamming her hands down, waking the dog behind her who lifted its head in a start. She pointed at Benton. “What were those horses but a vanity? Jim and them didn’t kill them, you did. Just like you’re killing us and Jim and everyone else. Why hold out? We need that money and you know it. Let them run their pipeline, let them run four dozen. Their checks cash the same as anyone’s.”

Benton sat back and crossed his arms. “You think she’s right, Alvarez? You do, don’t you? You both think I’m wrong.” He looked down at his feet. “This farm’s all that’s left for me after Angola. Our parents, our grandparents—they’re buried here. We’ll be buried here too. No,” he said. “The whole county can turn against me but I’m not signing.”

“The courts will make you,” Dorene said.

“Let them try,” Benton said, knocking his chair to the floor by standing. “I’m no stranger to courtrooms.” It was his turn to laugh now.

“I’m with you,” Alvarez said, not looking across the table at Dorene but feeling her stare. His face was hot. “I’d rather starve than have another thing taken from me or a friend.”

“Jesus,” Dorene said. “None of us are starving. If you don’t sign they’ll take the farm, Benton. Don’t you see? We can’t pay the taxes or the note Dad took out against the house for the new milking equipment. You would know this if you hadn’t been down in the pen, if you’d been here when Dad was alive. I helped him with the accounts, we’re in the red. Same as Jim and everyone else. The company knows that, they know we haven’t a choice. So they’re running the pipe over us. Just take their money. If you don’t, the bank will after they’ve kicked us off. We hold out, we lose everything.”

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Dorene had convinced Benton or else he agreed to drive out to the Ascotts' for reasons all his own. The three rode in the truck together, Dorene squeezed between Alvarez and her brother. Nee-Hi she'd left at home though she was certain the dog was not far, he never was. Besides Benton was driving no faster than thirty-five. The truck's motor was missing, the cab shuddering with each fired piston, the three of them not having made it far—only to near the pasture's edge where the dead horse waited. The truck was giving up the ghost too, reluctant to have even started on this trip but Benton and Alvarez had managed somehow to coax it into living again for one final go, the day cold and temperature dropping even with the sun rising. The sky darker than what she'd been met with that morning, Dorene wanted the day over more than any other in recent memory. Her brother wouldn't talk to her, and his silence scared her.

Before the accident and his conviction Benton never stopped talking. He was even cheerful. The man beside Dorene wasn't her brother but someone else that bore a striking resemblance. The best thing about Benton's return was Alvarez. The nature of the two's relationship while they were in prison she didn't question, never asking to know more after Alvarez had been introduced as Benton's friend from Angola's prison rodeo. What they said about prison she didn't know to be true, and the two had been paroled together on good behavior. About Alvarez's crime, Dorene didn't ask. That too she didn't want to know. She trusted her brother—this man she hardly knew beside her who scared her—even though he scared her because he *was* her brother. He wouldn't knowingly put her in danger and that was why they went now to the Ascotts' with the papers she held. Her

only wish that the truck would get them there, where they'd show everyone they'd go along, signing off on the pipeline—the county's last holdouts.

The cab shuddered again and the truck lurched forward as if pulled. Ahead from under the hood, the engine gave a sound like rolling thunder. The thunder's roll gave way quickly, turning into a long sigh, and ended with hissing. The truck rolled to a stop, listing into the grass alongside the road. Benton punched the steering column square in its center, the wheel shook under his fist and there came with it the sound of bones broken by a hammer. He pulled back cursing under his breath, saying no real words, birthing new curses not yet heard—forming them with his tongue against his teeth—sounds that came from where he had no knowledge of except for its pain. He cradled his hand against his chest with his other hand. His head craned back, he stared at the cab's ceiling, blinking, and biting his lip.

“Here,” Dorene said, twisting to look. “Let me see.”

Benton pulled away and leaned against his door. “Stop,” he said, holding his hand from her by shielding it with a bent shoulder.

“Look.” Alvarez pointed to up the road ahead. Four men on horseback made the horizon. The riders not far, though far enough you couldn't be certain who they were unless you knew already. At that distance, a little less than two hundred yards, the riders had no faces and no distinction existed between the men and their horses—the sun directly behind them. The riders started forward at a walk, not hurried, but the middlemost edged out the rest and walked ahead.

“Ascott,” Dorene said at last.

Benton leaned against the door and reached down for the handle, wincing, still holding his bad hand with his good while he tried yanking the door handle back with his good hand's pinky and ring finger. "Best we go meet them," he said, throwing his shoulder against the door while he pulled the handle. The door swung open and Benton stumbled out off balance, staggering sideways while he held his broken hand. He caught himself finally and stopped himself from falling. "We can sign the papers here as good as anywhere," he said, looking over at the pasture beside them. They had stopped where the horse hung on the wire, her eyes and mouth open and tongue black already. The blood around the wound in her head had dried over, and what had run from the wound had dried, and being settled the violence was the worse to look at—the horse stiff and contorted into a position not natural, the body strung twisted, the face easily mistaken as caught in laughter.

The riders approached at a pace that spoke their disregard for those they advanced against. The middlemost horse, large, shining chestnut, its rider held back with effort, rearing on the reins, jerking the animal's head upright to arc back over its shoulders, the bit driven deeper into its mouth. The horse raised itself on its hindquarters against the pull of its master's hand, its approaching legs rising off gray asphalt and its hooves pawing at air as if they were hands desperate and searching to grab hold of anything. As the riders grew closer, their faces became visible, three Ascotts and Rick Charles with them. On the far left rode Danny, the youngest brother, and beside him the nephew, Jim's son, who they called 'Lil Jim. The boy, 'Lil Jim, was sixteen, and Jim rode between the boy from Rick Charles, who was riding on the far right. Jim spurred his horse into a trot—already ahead of the rest—riding his horse down on Benton, Dorene, and Alvarez.

“Move,” Benton said, shoving Dorene behind him while stepping out in front of her. Jim jerked his horse at the last minute, forcing him sideways and riding him the same while looking down on the three.

Jim laughed. “You should see your faces, the way they look, out here in the cold. You must be having truck problems,” he said and nodded towards their truck behind him. He twisted in the saddle, looking behind him, “Danny,” he said, “you drive a wrecker. Why don’t you be kind and pull these people’s truck home for them?” He turned back in the saddle, leaning on the pommel. “Looks like you’ve had horse trouble too,” he said, nodding again at the pasture and the wire where the horse was strung.

“You son-of-a—” Dorene pushed around Benton.

“Alvarez,” Benton said, cradling his hand to his chest. Alvarez had already started and grabbed Dorene’s arm, jerking her backwards.

The three men behind Jim hadn’t moved though their horses did, the mounts nervous at the sight and smell of one of their own dead. “Hurry up already, Jim,” Danny said. He was tall like Jim with thin, straw-colored hair and an angled face. All the Ascotts were fair and looked out at the world with sharp, blue eyes that turned the color of slate if they stared at you right. “My ass hurts in this saddle.”

“Go on then,” Jim said, casually annoyed. His voice picked up both a whine and edge. “Go back home with Rick and the boy. I’ll stay here with them, make sure they’re all right.”

“Dad, can’t I—” The boy, ‘Lil Jim, started but his father interrupted.

“I said go back.” The two grown men were already turning their horses before Jim had said it and now, the boy turned his and started after them while looking back over his

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shoulder with a hangdog expression, the sharp edges of his face, like his father's, grew longer and he looked for a moment like a spiteful old man. The boy turned around, kicking his heels into his horse, *hiyah*-ing, sending his mount after the two men already ahead of him. Jim turned back to Benton.

“I saw you once before. At Angola. I drove down a Sunday in October, took my boy, my wife—the whole family. Gone to see the prison rodeo. Of course I knew that's where they sent you, too good in my estimate that they should've sent you anywhere but one place, after you killed that boy, but who am I to judge. Judge not they say. I'm not here to judge, Benton. But I saw you ride, the barrel races, and you cut better than anybody I'd seen in my life. I thought what a goddamn pity you was in prison, that *you* could ride like that, and that you were alive to do it. You, who killed a man in that car wreck. Down and out in Louisiana, drunk as a skunk and behind the wheel. Imagine how I sat there beside my family, watching you then, knowing what I did. You know what I saw? They didn't think anything of it. Neither did anyone else in attendance, I looked. I'm a thinking man, Benton. I felt bad for you then, saw your whole life wasted on folks not any better than you—hell, probably worse—not being able to see how damn good you were, better than they were at anything they'd ever done. And you a murderer, what a waste of a human being.” Jim raised up in the saddle and looked over at the horse on the wire. “I killed your horses, Benton. I killed them for no other reason than you don't deserve them.”

Dorene screamed and twisted in Alvarez's grip. Desperate, she threw her elbow into his gut. Alvarez let go and bent double, gasping for breath, his wind gone.

“Dorene,” Benton said, too late. She was moving on Jim. His horse backed away from her, wide-eyed and startled, and Jim struggled keeping control.

“Whoa,” Jim said, jerking the reins and digging his heels in. “Easy—”

Nee-Hi’s bark cut over Jim’s voice, loud and angry, as if Dorene’s scream had summoned him from the pasture. The dog raced out from beneath the barbed wire, crossed the ditch, and made for the horse’s legs. The horse evaded Nee-Hi, crazed and unresponsive to Jim’s commands, swiveling, moving in circles, its metal-shod hooves clacking against asphalt. Jim kicked the horse harder with his spurs. The horse reared its head, neighing. Jim, holding tight to the reins with one hand, reached for his hip. The flash of metal came up with his hand and Jim’s thumb cocked the revolver’s hammer back.

“No,” Dorene screamed, grabbing the revolver she had stuck earlier in her jeans. Her own hand came up faster than Jim’s could aim, but Benton threw himself on her—grabbing with both his good hand and bad—yelling. The two wrestled with the revolver in their hands but it was Dorene’s finger that pulled the trigger. Once, twice, three shots. Jim rocked back in his saddle as if someone had thrown a rope around his shoulders and jerked him from behind without his knowing. His gun fell to the asphalt and lay as impotently as any object at rest. The reins he held onto even as he slipped sideways from the saddle, falling from the horse behind his gun. The horse kicked his sternum mid-air, as the animal, sensing it was free, spun and made to get away.

In all this the riders had stopped, gone a distance near as far away as they had been when Alvarez first spotted them. Dorene stood wrapped up with Benton but was no longer fighting him. Benton tore the gun from her and ran after Jim’s horse, grabbing its

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bridle. The men had turned their horses and were starting towards them. Benton raised the gun over the saddle and fired over the horse and over the heads of the men on their horses. The men ducked, lowering their bodies over top their horses. Alvarez yelled at him or at them and was waving for help, squatted over Jim with his hands pressed to the other man's chest. He was covered in blood and crying, muttering Spanish Benton vaguely knew but couldn't catch. Nee-Hi barked casual, again clipped but loud, dancing around Dorene and obviously nervous. The men would have guns of their own and Jim was dead, Benton didn't need to look. He stepped into the horse's stirrups and swung himself over the saddle, grabbing the reins and turning the animal with his hand towards the barbed-wire fence.

He could hear the horses running now—clear, distinct—and he sat in the saddle watching the locomotion of their bodies as they were driven by men that rode them. The hair on his hands stood on end and he whistled low, striking the horse's quarters with his heels. The horse moved beneath him and Benton urged him more, but the horse needed no encouragement. Benton aimed him for the fence, the horse breaking already into a gallop. They were close and the fence high, higher than he should jump, but Benton was not thinking of anything more than the impossible. He coiled himself on the horse and let the animal rise in the air.

They landed in the pasture on the wire's other side, racing. Firecrackers ignited behind them, popping. Benton felt the sting of the air on his face and hands, cutting through the layers he wore. The land beneath ceased its stillness but moved in its place like it was being tugged out from under him or away from him or both, Benton racing towards an edge racing away from him on both ends, ahead a distance he could run forever, the horse

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not touching ground now but for that imperceptible moment that went unfelt and unnoticed, the horse's body rushing in flight, a grace to which Benton held tight, a position in which he possessed control and possessed none.

The horse came up gassed and Benton slowed, drawing the animal to stop beside a creek running between knolls in the pasture. He dismounted, falling from the saddle, and staggered towards the water. His knees gave and he tumbled forward at the creek's edge, near enough he could hear the water running but far enough away he crawled on his stomach the final inches. He pulled his hand free of his last glove and plunged both under. In water his broken hand looked more swollen, mangled. From his other hand blood mixed with the water. They had shot him and he laughed, cupping water in his hands. He saw clearly through and felt dizzy and elated at seeing. He lifted the water and drank. He had never drank so, their shouts behind him. The sound of burnt cordite, the taste of firecrackers. He would never sign.