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**SHEER FORCE OF WILL**

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SHEER FORCE OF WILL

By

Teague Whalen

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2008

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ABSTRACT  
SHEER FORCE OF WILL

By  
Teague Whalen

This collection of short stories draws heavily from the form of realism. The stories vary in point-of-view, reliable and unreliable narrators, and place. Small towns and the rural outdoors have been emphasized, with a focus on blue-collar characters, their relationship with themselves and others, their dreams and hopes, and their fortitude in how they keep on keeping on through sheer force of will.

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## INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous times throughout my years of writing that I've asked myself why writing stories is important, how writing fiction is going to make the world a better place. Of course, literature is a safe place for readers to come and learn about the consequences and rewards of making characters face moral decisions, and the best kind of literature engages the reader's own moral imagination. But to make this possible for my readers, I the writer must first face my own moral choices, and fiction allows me the freedom to explore arenas I normally wouldn't off the page. I struggled with wanting my stories to be social critiques, as that is often a role an artist finds himself in, peering in from the fringes and painting the view from outside. However, I have learned that focusing on a social critique is not the best way to approach a story. Characters can end up thinly drawn as sketches, which are often stereotypical or even typical. However, when a story is first and foremost character-driven and the characters particularized as sympathetic individuals, only then may the social problems organically arise without being forced.

In moving toward more realistic and particularized narratives, I studied a varied array of authors, all of them "realists." In the sixth edition of Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft, Janet Burroway defines realism as "the attempt to render an authentic picture of life, in such a way that the reader identifies with one or more characters," and states further that realism's goal is "to reveal in recognizable detail the drama of ordinary life" (413). For this I turned, for

example, to one of today's most highly regarded and living short-story writers, Alice Munro, and like her, tried to focus on pivotal moments in my characters' lives and to use setting to reflect their moods at these crucial junctures. I also experimented with one of the key elements of successful narratives: point-of-view, trying to imitate Raymond Carver's minimalism and Lorrie Moore's use of second-person. In the vein of Cormac McCarthy, I experimented with not using quotation marks for dialogue and using fewer commas, thereby trying to build sentences whose integrity relied on the clarity of the language instead. And as all the above authors tended to do, I focused on working class characters whose desperate dreams and hope seem too thin and taut to sustain the distance.

Alice Munro has been likened to Chekov: a master of realism and subtlety. She chooses ordinary characters, mostly women protagonists, and isolates a time in a character's life when a decision will forever alter her life. In her short story, "Runaway," Munro depicts the characters, setting, and scenario so realistically that I can vividly picture and believe such a situation. For example, the opening paragraph:

Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they called a hill. It's her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson—Sylvia—home from her holiday in Greece. From the barn door—but far enough inside that she could not readily be seen—she watched the road Mrs. Jamieson would have to drive by on, her place being half a mile farther along the road than Clark and Carla's. (3)

No stretches of imagination like magical realism here, but just a woman hiding behind a barn door, observing her neighbor returning from vacation—something we can trust and know is possible.

Additionally, Munro doesn't just let her setting lie around like a pretty accessory. She expertly uses setting and symbolism to reflect a character's mood and changes of heart. For example, the following passage from "Runaway" illustrates how Munro is using the goat, Flora, to indirectly show the readers Carla's relationship with her husband, Clark:

Flora had been a half-grown kid when Clark brought her home from a farm where he had gone to bargain for some horse tackle [. . .] He had heard about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it. They had meant to breed her someday but there had never been any signs of her coming into heat.

At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she was suddenly much wiser, less skittish—she seemed capable, instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor. Carla's behavior with the horses was tender and strict and rather maternal, but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority. (9)

Instead of telling the reader or showing a scene directly involving the honeymoon behavior of Carla, Munro uses the above scene to accomplish three things at once: 1) establishes the literal relationship between the goat and Carla and Clark, 2) gives a sense of the farm setting, and 3) transforms the goat's relationship with its owners into a metaphor that symbolizes the back story and current state of Carla's and Clark's relationship. "Flora" (similar in sound and spelling to Carla), is a "kid," and her "resemblance to a guileless girl in love" directly correlate with Carla's earlier puppy love with Clark. Yet Flora attaches herself to Carla as she gets older, being "suddenly wiser, less skittish," showing how Carla has matured in her relationship to Clark. At the same time, Carla is

beginning to question Clark's love, as well as establishing that Clark still has the upper hand: "Flora allowing her no sense of superiority."

Through this setting technique, Munro emphasizes the goat as a key symbol that when tracked throughout the story provides many interpretive clues as to how we should read the culminating scene and the change in Carla's and Clark's relationship. Carla suspects Clark has chased the goat off for good or killed it:

She had only to raise her eyes, she had only to look in one direction, to know where she might go. An evening walk, once her chores for the day were finished. To the edge of the woods, and the bare trees where the buzzards had held their party.

And then the little dirty bones in the grass. The skull with perhaps some shreds of bloodied skin clinging to it. A skull that she could hold like a teacup in one hand. Knowledge in one hand.

Or perhaps not. Nothing there.

Other things could have happened. He could have chased Flora away. Or tied her in the back of the truck and driven some distance and set her loose. Taken her back to the place they got her from. Not to have her around, reminding them.

She might be free.

The days passed and Carla didn't go near that place. She held out against the temptation. (47)

Again, Munro is showing through her use of the goat, Flora, that Carla's innocence, her freedom, is lost never to be regained. Clark has put his foot down and Carla has accepted her place beside her man. Like Munro—an adept master of these rhetorical tools—I have tried to describe my settings in both literal and metaphorical ways that don't just lay around looking pretty, but in ways that reflect the characters' emotional and mental states.

In terms of point-of-view, authors Raymond Carver, Lorrie Moore, Ron Carlson, and the theorist David Jauss have been very influential. The first place I

was directed while working on my thesis was Raymond Carver. And from his clean and concise prose, I learned to limit my use of exposition and internal monologue and to make use of objective point-of-view. This forced me to focus on characters' behavior, action, and gestures to allude to their emotions and thoughts. In this subtle way, I was directed to imagine a camcorder atop the protagonist's head and to paint the narrative from that view point. Carver expertly shows this in his story, "A Small, Good Thing":

She pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wheel for a minute. She listened to the ticking sounds the engine made as it began to cool. Then she got out of the car. She could hear the dog barking inside the house. (291)

Not once has Carver told the reader how she is feeling, but he has concisely shown how utterly exhausted she is through leaning her head against the wheel and listening to the engine cool. I've tried to adapt this minimalist style, using the setting in conjunction with the character's actions to convey the emotions and thoughts hidden underneath.

In his article, "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance & Point of View in Fiction Writing," David Jauss states that point of view is where the language is coming from. He writes, "perhaps the most important purpose of point of view is to manipulate the degree of distance between the characters and the reader in order to achieve the emotional, intellectual, and moral responses the author desires"(¶8). And one way that I experimented with this was by writing from the perspective of an unreliable, first-person narrator.

Ron Carlson's "Bigfoot Stole My Wife" is a good example of this style. Much like how memory and conscience works in a personal essay, Carlson's narrator dips in and out of the present-tense narration by inserting brief flashback scenes. This allows him to easily move anywhere in time for as long or short as he wishes, and also allows him to reflect, analyze, and interpret. For example:

As I think about it, no one believes anything anymore. Give me one example of someone *believing* one thing. I dare you. After that we get into this credibility thing. No one believes me. I myself can't believe all the suspicion and cynicism there is in today's world. Even at the races, some character next to me will poke over at my tip sheet and ask me if I believe that stuff. If I believe? What is there to believe? The horse's name? What he did the last time out? And I look back at this guy, too cheap to go two bucks on the program, and I say: it's history. It is historical fact here. Believe. Huh. Here's a fact: I believe everything. (301)

Somehow, stories like these sometimes become more directly persuasive, like an essay: the difference being that sometimes the narrator, like the one in the above example, cannot be relied on because perhaps he is trying to convince himself.

Two of my stories were experiments in this vein: "Double Crossed" and "Trolls And Ferry Tales." What becomes important in this approach is the telling of the stories, through the narrator as main character, using his/her voice and consciousness. Chronological plots are usually traded in for more idea-driven narrative sequences, like what we often do in conversation: "That reminds me of a time when . . ." In this way, scenes are created through dialogue, through summary, and through a character recounting an event or through the narrator remembering. These scenes can be brief or extended and can shift at a moment's notice, just like thoughts. This type of lyrical essay-like narrative allows the narrator (and author) to make connections randomly and sporadically,

thereby hopefully seeming more conversational and authentically real, or in other words, to ring true.

My story, "Double Crossed," attempts to use a first-person unreliable narrator. Lonely at the bar, she is a woman in her forties who silently blames her friend, at the other end of the bar, for gossiping about her and not being the friend she needs at that time. The narrator is silently having a one-way conversation with this woman, trying to defend herself. The reader is only privy to the narrator's gossipy thoughts, having to solely rely on the narrator's perspective, until her friend comes over in the end to sincerely ask her how she's doing, proving the narrator might not have been all that trustworthy to begin with.

My story, "Trolls And Ferry Tales," written in first-person point of view, again, attempts to keep the reader guessing whether or not the narrator is to be believed, much like non-fiction satire. For example, Ian Frazier's "Dating Your Mom," begins by building the reader's trust and then his satirical persona stretches the truth into fictionalized scenarios. But he first leads with a simple, plausible detail that the reader has most likely experienced before: "Say your mom is driving you downtown in the car to buy you a new pair of slacks"(168). But then he begins the seduction once the reader has agreed to go along: "First, find a nice station on the car radio, one that she likes. Get into the pleasant lull of freeway driving—tires humming along the pavement, air-conditioner on max"(168). This is not too outlandish; the reader can see one's self doing this. "Then turn to look at her across the front seat and say something like, 'You know, you've really kept your shape, Mom, and don't think I haven't noticed'"(168). Now



Frazier is stretching the veil of plausibility he has weaved, but at the same time the reader is probably secretly eager to see how far he will stretch things.

Though “Trolls And Ferry Tales” is not a satire, the vision that the narrator has while staring out at the Straits of Mackinac is so outlandish that he needs to wait until the end of the experience to share it. And in order to convince his readers of the plausibility of it, he needs to start with scenes that are believable and then slowly over time begin to stretch the truth so that the reader will be prepared for this vision in the end. In Carlson’s “Bigfoot Stole My Wife,” the narrator faces the idea of reliability head on: “The problem is credibility” (300). The narrator goes on to undermine the readers’ first assumption: “A lot of people look at me and say, sure Rick, Bigfoot stole your wife. It makes me sad to see it, the look of disbelief in each person’s eye” (300). The narrator tries to gain the readers’ sympathy, enough to keep their attention and to make the unlikely seem even a bit plausible—maybe Bigfoot just does exist.

In “Trolls And Ferry Tales,” the first couple of sentences are designed to discredit the narrator’s perspective:

You know, I’ve seen some weird things in my life. Been on guided meditations to past lives and future selves. Have seen the air crawling with paisley rainbows, time stand still, and friends look like wax dolls. But staring out at the Straits of Mackinac, I’ve never seen the likes of this. Never would have thought it possible.

Though the narrator may be telling the truth, one may not want to trust his judgment, because even the narrator acknowledges he himself may not trust his judgment. In this way, the narrator is able to keep the reader guessing at what is and is not true, all managed through point of view, reeling the reader in.

Lorrie Moore is also a major influence, especially in my experiments in second-person point-of-view. One of the aspects that I found second-person can offer is the possibility of an androgynous narrator, one who could be read as a male or female voice. This was an important point-of-view for my story, "Never-Never Land," which is about the narrator falling in love with a married woman, but the ambiguity of the narrator allows the story to slide into the topic of homosexuality if a reader is willing to go there. Second-person can also be combined with first-person point-of-view in order to designate a very specific character who is being addressed, separate from the reader. Many times readers experience second-person point-of-view placing them directly into the shoes of the narrator. Though that is always a possible interpretation, I am more interested in how second-person can be a device to show how the narrator is telling him/herself what to do or think.

Moore's book of short stories, Self-Help, is mostly stories written in the second-person imperative, mocking how-to, pop-psychology instruction books for laymen. She often clips the second-person pronoun subject and begins with the verb, therefore instructing her character what to do and think. She illustrates this in her story, "How to Become a Writer":

In your high school English class look at Mr. Killian's face. Decide faces are important. Write a villanelle about pores. Struggle. Write a sonnet. Count the syllables: nine, ten, eleven, thirteen. Decide to experiment with fiction. Here you don't have to count syllables.  
(119)

Though a handful of my stories were written in second-person or combinations of second- and first-person point-of-view, Moore's style particularly influenced my "Femme Incomprise," and to a lesser extent, "Peat Mountain."

In terms of prose style, Cormac McCarthy has largely inspired my decision to not use quotation marks for dialogue and to use less commas. His sentences and dialogue are so clean that one doesn't even notice what's missing at first glance. Randomly opening to a page in his novel, All The Pretty Horses, I find that in the three narrative paragraphs and nine lines of dialogue, there is only one comma and no quotation marks, yet I never get confused as to what is spoken and what's narration. McCarthy goes so far as to even eliminate apostrophes in many of his contractions, like "dont," "cant," and "wont." This following passage will illustrate all three techniques:

Where the hell did they come from? said Rawlins.  
I dont know.  
Word gets around when the circus comes to town, dont it?  
They passed nodding through the crowd and entered the  
trap and fastened the gate.  
You picked one out? said John Grady.  
Yeah. For pure crazy I nominate that bucketheaded son of a  
bitch standin right yonder. (105)

Noah Lukeman, in his book on punctuation, A Dash of Style, shows alternative ways of using dialogue without quotation marks, whether that's using signifying dashes or nothing at all. But after showing artful examples from William Carlos Williams and mentioning Cormac McCarthy, Lukeman goes so far as to write about authors who choose not to use quotation marks: "Presumably this is done for the sake of being different, but to my mind this is just stylistic, and it makes it unnecessarily hard on the reader. Why boycott quotation marks?"(152).

I do have to agree that in my struggles to learn such a stylistic change in my prose, I have confused readers at times, but this was part of the process for me. Choosing not to use quotation marks profoundly affected my prose in that I couldn't just stick dialogue in the midst of the narrative and have it be clear that what is written is being spoken aloud. And though I like the fact that eliminating quotation marks begins to blur the boundaries between narrative and dialogue, speech and thought, not using them has forced me to look at how to fashion my narrative *and* dialogue in a way that encourages me to write in clearer and more natural ways.

In his article, "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance & Point of View in Fiction Writing," Jauss argues against the usually agreed-upon rule of point-of-view consistency in a story. These shifts between point-of-view can be clues as to the difference between narration and exposition, internal monologue, and dialogue. I much prefer these subtler ways of signaling dialogue, as it pushes me to be a better writer and craftsman. In helping to transition the reader from exposition to dialogue, it usually starts with shifting the point-of-view through pronoun shifts as well as shifts in verb tense. If a limited omniscient point of view is written in past tense, then the spoken dialogue will often shift to first-person present tense. For example, from All The Pretty Horses:

Where the hell did they come from? said Rawlins.  
I dont know. (105)  
Word gets around when the circus comes to town, dont it?  
They passed nodding through the crowd and entered the  
trap and fastened the gate.

The “said Rawlins” and “They passed nodding through” both indicate a third-person, limited omniscient point-of-view written in the past tense. However, “I dont know,” clearly indicates that this is spoken dialogue because of the shift to the first-person pronoun, “I” and the present-tense verb, “dont.” If carefully done, this approach can be effective.

One of the rhetorical choices I began to make is reducing the amount of dialogue tags anytime I can and using a brief character gesture, usually limited to one action per line of dialogue, to set up who is about to speak. In choosing to eliminate quotation marks in dialogue, I wrestled with whether or not to capitalize the first word of the spoken sentence, which follows the dialogue tag. For example, from my story, “Daphne Falls”: “She looks forward again and says, though both dad and Derek think he is, but I let them think what they want.” When I first began eliminating quotation marks, I would still capitalize the first word of the spoken sentence following the comma after the dialogue tag. In the above example, I would have capitalized the “T” in “though” and the narrative sentence would have looked like this: “She looks forward again and says, Though both dad and Derek think he is, but I let them think what they want.” Though this is an acceptable approach and yet another way to signify dialogue, I learned to prioritize the narrative sentence over the dialogue and understood that the dialogue tag followed by a comma would suffice. However, I notice in much of McCarthy’s work, he rarely if ever uses a tag to precede a line of dialogue. If he uses a dialogue tag, it will most always follow the dialogue: “You picked one out? said John Grady.” And I mean to do this more myself, therefore eliminating

the capitalization problem all together. And of course, most of the time, trying to drop the dialogue tags is even better.

Though I still have a long way to go in terms learning from the likes of Munro, Carver, Moore, and McCarthy, they have increased my ability to not only be a critical reader, but more importantly, to be a better craftsman. And being a better craftsman allows me to write closer to truth, closer to love. Love is what brought me here to this writing program, is what I hope has been put down in these following pages, as my characters have taught me about the different ways one tries to love, and not to suffer in this world.

## KID GLOVES

It was the summer between seventh and eighth grade for Farley Macon. He and Alphonse Gutenberg coasted into the vacant lot on their BMXs, ready for Alphonse's big fight. There was a fair turnout of kids and a strong smell of lilac in the air. The oak trees towered down the dusty boulevard and in the backyards by the lake. Farley and Alphonse jumped off their bikes, tossing them to the ground by the long grass hemming in the makeshift boxing ring, a stripped pontoon boat's doublewide deck.

Farley walked Al over to the trees. He produced a wrinkled cigarette from his cut-offs and lit it, coughing after the first hit. He handed it to Al and watched him lift the cigarette between his pudgy fingers up to his smiling lips while sticking his pinky out as if he were drinking tea. He inhaled and then his eyes widened and his suntanned cheeks puffed up as he held his breath.

You're supposed to let the smoke out dumb ass. Farley punched Al softly in the gut. Al doubled over in a fit of coughing smoke and laughter.

Being older and bigger, Farley always initiated these new rites as a way to downplay the fact that he was different, or at least looked like he was, with his prominent Asian features that he inherited from his Korean mother—the flat black hair, squinty eyes, and olive skin.

Farley frowned. It's supposed to make you meaner. Make you throw down like pistons and hammers. Not laugh.

He took the cigarette from Al and stubbed it in the dirt with his toe.

Al tried to sober up. Pistons and hammers, he repeated in wonderment. I like the sound of that.

They returned to the ring and Farley followed Al around, massaging his shoulders and pumping him up with winning ideas as Al paced back and forth biting his nails. Ricky Kimball, the high-school mastermind behind all of this, brought out two pairs of boxing gloves, duct tape, and a clipboard that he was hustling around to sign kids up on. Farley declined, saying he was strictly coaching that day. Kimball called him a pussy and said he'd deal with him later.

Kimball jumped up on the pontoon, put his pinkies into either side of his mouth, and let out a shrill whistle that caught everyone's attention. He laid down the rules. No kicking. No biting. No punches below the belt. And no crying. There'd be five rounds. And he'd referee and decide who the winner was. First up was a girl fight: Delila Workman vs. Darcie Perdita.

Darcie Perdita was big breasted with dark patches of hair under her arms and brunette hair straight down her back. She had a quiet voice, but she was mean when she needed to be, having grown up with brothers. Last summer, Darcie had gotten into a scrap with Jocelyn Bronwyn, who was now Farley's girlfriend, over some stupid rumor that Jocelyn was putting out for the neighborhood boys. Farley, Al, and a bunch of other kids were all hanging on the other side of the street from Jocelyn's house, waiting to see what would happen after Jocelyn was done doing the dinner dishes. Darcie was pacing back and forth, slamming her fist into her hand, muttering to herself, and every once in awhile a friend would come up and massage her shoulders and give her a pep



talk. Farley was sitting on his BMX when he heard the screen door bang shut and there was Jocelyn making a beeline for Darcie. No trash talk, no concern for who was there. She just walked up to Darcie and started swinging.

Then they were going at it. Pulling hair, scratching at each other's face, and swirling around like a dust devil. Farley had never seen a nastier cat fight. Even though Jocelyn had gotten the better of Darcie, he had to give it to Darcie for showing up and not leaving in tears. But Jocelyn was the one he went up to afterwards and asked to swim, afterwards asking her if she'd *go* with him. And a year later, she was still his girl.

And here was Darcie back again for more, but this time gloved up on a pontoon boat and it didn't take but one round for her to knock Delila the hell off the raft. Next up was Al vs. Gage Workman, Delila's younger brother, so Darcie came over, untying the long, leather laces on her boxing gloves with her teeth and offering them to Al. Al tugged them on and Farley tied them up for him, but they were still a little loose. Darcie got the duct tape from Kimball and taped the wrist-part of the gloves to his forearms.

On Al's way up, Farley patted his butt. Go get 'im Champ!

What Farley knew about the Workmans was that they had moved up from Kentucky so their dad could work in the car factories and that they lived in the most destitute home in the neighborhood. It looked like a haunted house with the gables crook'd every which way, a creaky door slightly open, and it was always dark inside. Parked in their dirt drive, their old Lincoln looked like it belonged in a

junkyard, and the kids—there were four of them, three sisters and a boy—were always dirty.

Farley had fought Gage once before. It had been a stupid fight to begin with. Dressed in street clothes, Farley had been down at Jocelyn's dock and couldn't swim that afternoon because of a family outing. Gage ran the length of the dock in his bathing suit, and as he passed Farley, grinned and pushed him in just before he dove in himself.

What had made Farley mad was not just that his wallet and family pictures were soaked, but that it had happened right in front of Jocelyn, her older sister, and Gage's two older sisters. Farley was so pissed that he jumped out of the lake and hollered for Gage to join him next door, where Farley hopped the fence and waited. Gage complied reluctantly, coming over the fence with a hangdog look. But Jocelyn's older sister and Gage's were yelling at Farley to stop, that he had no business fighting him over this. And they wouldn't stop hollering. Farley didn't care; they didn't come over the fence to stop him, so he finished what he started. It only took a few punches until Gage was too pathetic to want to hit anymore.

But that was last summer, and though Farley thought this fight would go to Al, he also knew what Gage had going for him. He'd had lots of practice being the neighborhood punching bag. He could also cuss a raccoon out of tree, and when Kimball blew the whistle, Gage came out swinging and spitting out every swear word he ever heard his dad utter. Al just stood there, not knowing what to do.

Farley's crash-course training for Al had been Rocky-Balboa style, tying his chubby right arm to his side to work him as a southpaw. Farley went so far as to have Jocelyn bring out her Yorkshire Terrier for Al to chase like Rocky when he caught the chicken and showed he was grease-lightning fast, but Jocelyn's dog just ran at Al and bit him in the ankle. Al tried kicking the dog, but Jocelyn scooped her up and left in a pout. Farley knew he'd have to make it up to her somehow, especially since she couldn't be at the fights because she was required to do dishes after dinner.

When she returned without the dog, Farley apologized and led her and Al to the woodpile at the far end of Farley's aluminum-sided house. There, sandwiched between the wood and some spare sheets of shingles, he pulled out a *Hustler* magazine.

Joss, you sure you want to see this?

She crossed her arms over her breasts. It ain't like there's nothing I haven't seen in there. Hell, I taught you how to neck. You didn't even know about wet dreams until you met me.

Fine, fine. Farley waved for her to stop busting him in front of Al. You can stay if you want.

Al's eyes widened. When he saw the busty nipples poking through a wet American-flag bikini on the cover, he wriggled his fingers up by his mouth. Come on, *man*, show me what's inside!

Farley began slowly turning the pages of naked women before him. Jocelyn hung back kicking at the dirt, throwing an occasional glance at the glossy pages from afar.

But no matter what, Farley said, shutting the slick, *always* fight back.

Yeah, yeah, Al nodded. Always fight back.

Jocelyn had been standing off to the side and now looked at the two of them with mixed amusement and disgust. To get Farley's attention, she ran her hand through her shoulder-length brunette hair, feathering the sides, making sure that her T-shirt stretched taut over her developing breasts.

Farley pretended not to look. Al, you win the fight tonight, and I'll give you this girly mag.

Really?

Really. Farley shut the magazine and moved to Jocelyn's side and ran his hand along her butt. 'Cause I got me a real girl.

Jocelyn blushed and slapped his hand away. Just because I like to wrestle don't mean I'm one of those whores. Her eyes bored through him. 'Cause I'm not.

Yeah, okay. I didn't mean nothing by it. Farley stashed the magazine back underneath the shingles, Al staring at the spot like a deer caught in the headlights.

Move! Farley yelled, slapping his hand on the raft's deck.

That broke Al out of his trance and he began loping around the bed of the large pontoon, throwing out left jabs to keep Gage at bay. But not before Gage landed some punches into the side of Al's head and one into his stomach. At the end of the first round, Al was breathing hard and sweating. Farley jumped up to the ring with some water. Al drank some and spit it out into the grass below like he'd seen Sugar Ray Leonard and Tommy Hearns do in the big fights on TV.

Come on, man, Farley said, looking him in the eye. This kid's nothing.

What do you want me to do?

Farley thought for a moment. Just think of fighting the ugliest and meanest guy you know, like a cross between Fred Flintstone and Mr. T.

Brock Mallory who used to be in the back of the bus.

Perfect. Farley clapped his hands. I hate that hairy asshole too. Now, pretend Gage is Brock Mallory and if you don't stop him, he's going to rape your sister.

What?

Okay, how 'bout your mom?

Al shook his head in wonderment, and Kimball blew the whistle to indicate the beginning of the next round.

Just do it, Farley said.

Okay.

Farley hopped back down to stand beside Darcie. She nudged her shoulder into Farley's and smiled at him.

What was that for?

Nothin'. Still smiling, she turned back toward the fight.

Al and Gage went the full five rounds, mostly landing glancing blows off of each other's arms and hair, but they did manage to come away with bloody noses. At the end of round five, Kimball hesitated for a second and then raised Al's hand to his delight while Gage slammed his gloves to the floor. Al jumped up and down on top of the pontoon with his arms raised and then hopped off to where Farley and Darcie were standing.

Farley! Can you believe it? I won! Al waved his gloves around.

You sure did, Champ. Let's get those gloves off of you.

Al stretched out his arms offering the backside of the gloves to him.

Palms up, dummy.

Oh, and Al turned the gloves over, and Farley began unwrapping the duct tape, then unlacing the gloves.

You guys want to cool off with a swim? Darcie said.

Yeah! Al nodded his head excitedly.

Um . . . Farley thought for a moment. Okay. But are you all right with Jocelyn's dock?

Mmm hmm. Darcie nodded. You?

Farley shrugged his shoulders.

The three of them walked over to Jocelyn's and through the narrow walkway between the screened-in porch and fence and down to the lake where they strolled out to the end of the dock. The boys took their shirts off and dove in, popping their heads back up and treading water to see what Darcie was going to

do. She unbuttoned her jean cutoffs and unzipped them. Farley let out a whistle and she dropped the shorts to the dock, revealing sky-blue bikini bottoms.

Yeah! Al shouted.

Darcie smiled and crossed her arms and, gripping the hem of her T-shirt, tugged it off over her head in one fluid motion, revealing the bikini top cupping her large boobs. Farley whistled again and she dove in holding her nose. When she swam by him, she tugged on his shorts. Farley swam back to the dock and pulled himself up into a sitting position. Darcie swam back too. When she stood on the dock, the water fell from her glistening body like drops of sunshine. She leaned her head back and pulled her hair out of her face.

Up close and staring at Farley, her crotch pressed against the too-tight bikini panties, with dark curls poking out the sides. As she took a few steps up the dock, he watched her butt, and as she ran by to dive into the water again, he spanked her. Then her body splashed into the lake.

Al liked that idea, so he pulled himself up onto the dock too and waited for Darcie to launch herself into flight again, and when she did, she received a two-handed spanking.

The boys dove back into the water and Farley swam up behind Darcie and snapped her bikini strap. All three treaded water and Al watched as Farley reached around her and felt her boobs. He let go because he was sinking, so she swam over to Al, who quickly copped a feel too. When Darcie swam back to Farley, she turned her back and pressed into him. He reached down into the front of her bikini panties, his fingers tangling in what felt like seaweed. With the other

hand he snapped the strap to her bikini top and it came undone, popping off of her.

Come on, man, Al said. When's it gonna be my turn?

Darcie laughed and then disappeared underwater. She re-emerged with her bikini top back on. She pulled herself out onto the dock and tugged on her shorts and shirt over her bikini, the clothes wetting around her boobs and butt.

I've got to get home, she said. See you around, Farley.

The boys watched her sashay down the dock as they climbed out and put on their shirts. They sat on the lawn looking out at the lake, waiting for Jocelyn. Farley noticed the forget-me-nots growing along the shore and picked a small bouquet, remembering Jocelyn's earlier request.

The boys walked up to Jocelyn's screen-porch door and Farley rang the doorbell. Her older sister came out on the porch and stood behind the screen on the storm door. She smiled. Well if it isn't lover boy and his favorite flower, she said.

Is Jocelyn here? Farley said, trying to not look her straight in the eye. She was so beautiful and in-your-face, she was hard to look at.

Of course dummy. She's just finishing the dishes now. Here, let me take those for her. She opened the door and he handed over the flowers. I'll go tell lover girl you're here.

She turned and disappeared into the house.

I hate it when she does that, Farley said. Jocelyn just loves to send her sister out here to humiliate me.



Girls. Al shook his head.

Yeah, girls.

When Jocelyn finally came out, she gave Farley a quick peck on the lips and said thanks. The three walked up the dirt shoulder along the main road to the corner store on the hill. Along the way, they filled Jocelyn in on the fights. In the store they each bought a pop and a candy bar, and as they came out, from around the corner walked Darcie Perdita and Brock Mallory.

Brock Mallory looked hairier, bigger, and meaner than Farley remembered when he was antagonized by him in the back of the bus. Smoking a cigarette, Brock wore an Ozzy Osborne T-shirt and black jean cutoffs. Downy whiskers stuck out on his pimpled face and he was all shoulders and jaw. Farley noticed Darcie had a swollen eye with a fresh cut underneath it and was flushed, like she'd been crying. She wouldn't look at him. He tried to look away but couldn't.

Then Brock took one step toward Farley and swung, hitting him in the eye. What are you looking at you fuck?

Farley blinked away the flash and searing pain and took a step back. Hey man, what the hell?

Al and Jocelyn just stood there, frozen, holding their pop and candy bars. Darcie didn't look at anyone.

It seemed to Farley as if the posters hanging on the concrete walls in his basement, where he lifted weights with Al and Jocelyn earlier that day, had just come alive for the first time: Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando*, Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, a busty blonde in a bikini curling hand weights. They were no

longer pumping him up into the tall, filled-out, high-school kid he was wanted to be. Instead he just stood there outside the corner store, feeling as if his shirt was off and he'd been showing off his ripped pecs and biceps to his friends, when Al had to ask Farley if he'd been in many fights and Jocelyn caught Farley looking at her tits and decided to bust him by saying only Gage.

Brock stepped into Farley's personal space again. Why don't you run home to your mommy before you cry.

Brock hauled off and hit Farley in the same eye again. Farley stumbled back, throwing up his arms in defense too late.

Darcie shook her head. Come on, Brock. Let it go. She grabbed his jean jacket and started for the store.

Brock shrugged her hand off, then spit on the pavement next to Farley. Yeah, okay. I don't want to be around no losers anyways.

Darcie held the glass door open for Brock as he went inside. Then she turned her sore eye on Farley and just stared at him as if she were waiting for an answer. When none came, she looked at Jocelyn. Did you get a whiff of your boyfriend's fingers yet?

Darcie put her hand down the front of her pants as if she were scratching herself and when her hand reappeared, she held up two fingers side-by-side. Or do you want to smell mine?

With that, she let the door shut behind her.

Farley watched Jocelyn as she stared at the closed door, her teeth set and her eyes trying to hold back the tears. She turned to Farley and looked him in the eye. What the hell's that all about?

Right there in her blue eyes, he saw himself deflated and sinking fast.

He looked down at the hot expanse of blacktop surrounding his tennis shoes and the splat of Brock's saliva.

Farley? she said more earnestly. The top of her cheeks were wet now.

He cursed his brain to come up with something to say, but when he couldn't, she pushed him and started beating his chest with her pop in one hand the candy bar in the other, and he just let her until she stopped.

Darcie of all people too, she snuffled, stepping back and wiping her nose with the side of her hand. I guess you got your whore after all.

She ran across the road and down the shoulder a little ways and then began walking back home. Then for a brief moment, she turned around and walked backwards and shouted, Kimball was right. You *are* a pussy.

Covering the eye that had been hit, Farley didn't know what else to do but to begin walking too, but with no intent to catch up. Al followed right behind him, and after some silence, jogged up to his side.

You okay, man?

Farley didn't acknowledge him.

Why didn't you deck him, Farley?

Farley kept holding his eye and, with the other, watching Jocelyn walk further away.

You said it was the most important thing to do, to fight back. Right?

Then Farley had had enough. He felt like a funhouse mirror, stretched too far, widening where he shouldn't be, and caved in and exposed. He pushed Al hard with both hands and watched him fly backwards and land in the gravelly shoulder. He could see him wanting to cry and he wanted to take pleasure in that, but it just made his stomach hurt. But he couldn't stop himself from saying what he said next.

The only reason you won today, Al, was because Kimball doesn't like Gage.

Farley turned, tears welling up in his eyes, and walked away, oblivious to Al's pleas as he scrambled to get up and follow. All Farley heard was the repeated Doppler effect of the cars whizzing by, his eye burning as if he'd been swimming in chlorine. With his good eye, he spotted forget-me-nots beside a roadside pond, little dots of sun in pedals of blue sky. Without hesitation, he stomped on them until the bank was submerged under muddy water and walked on. It would be some time before the surface cleared again, before the real thing cared to sprout, bloom, and offer up.

## DAPHNE FALLS

The sun bathes the canyon's cliffs jutting into sky where a waterfall trickles down and occasional gusts swirl through from the upper valleys, carrying remnants of the last tufts of shaded snow. Sol dips his paddle into the water and lets the slow current pull the canoe away from where the train dropped them, the deepening gurgle of rapids dancing into view. He stares at Lauren's tangled ponytail draped down the back of her nylon jacket, her paddle resting across the gunnels. Underneath his sun hat, Sol tucks his dark curls behind his ears. Hey, he says. I got a joke for you. How do you spell Canada?

Lauren turns her ear toward him and waits.

C, eh? N, eh? D, eh?

Lauren shakes her head. Who told you that? The guy at the last gas station?

No. Your dad.

Figures. She tests the water with her paddle and sighs. Dad's not too happy that I'm doing this.

Sol takes another stroke, letting the paddle linger in the water behind him, steering the bow straight. What about Derek?

She looks at Sol. Why would you think that? Derek's *not* my boyfriend. She looks forward again and says, though both dad and Derek think he is, but I let them think what they want. At least church is entertaining and the occasional Friday night is paid for. But, she looks up at the cliffs, he gets no play.

I hope you assured him that I'd keep you warm. He blows her a kiss.

She glares at him. Funny.

She turns her back to him and faces the oncoming rapids, getting louder as they approach. Sol bites his lip and watches the water drip from her paddle. He draws up to the cliff-side bank just in time, before the lip of the pond slides out in a wide roiling tongue, ending in turbulent whitewater spitting out in all directions from the glacial boulders beneath. Agreeing that these were class IV rapids—too big to run—they step into the shallow rocky water, holding the canoe steady. His breath catches as his wetsuit, from his calves down, absorbs the ice water, sending shivers up his spine. He uncoils the rope tied to the stern and walks a few feet behind the canoe, lining it through the edge of the rapids. Like his job in the stern, he keeps the canoe straight and upright as it finds its own slippery course over the shallow pools. Similarly, Lauren walks beside the bow, reading the river and aiming for the best line, guiding the nose around protruding boulders.

Wow! Lauren shouts over the roar. This is some high water!

Sol nods his head.

At the end of the section, they step back into the canoe and peel-out into mid stream. The swift water propels them forward and they busy themselves with their tasks—paddles dipping, drawing left and right, low bracing through high standing waves. Ahead, the rapids sound like a freight train as thousands of tons a second slam up against the base of the canyon wall and swirl around boulders the size of wrecking balls strewn haphazardly across the silty water.

Lauren looks back at Sol, her brows furrowed. Maybe we should line this next one too.

Sol frowns. There's really nowhere to do that, and . . .

And? She narrows her eyes.

And if we line this one, we might line the rest, having lost our confidence, and we can't afford to do that. Let's just back-paddle and pick our way carefully through.

Oh. Kay. She whips back around, scanning the turbulent surface, humming to herself.

They drop into the first shoot, splashing up some water. Their back-paddling doesn't slow their descent and they're sucked toward a starboard boulder. Both drawing on their port side with all their strength, they kiss the edge of the monster rock, leaving a green mark. After some more close calls, Lauren stabs her paddle in, steering the bow quickly toward shore as Sol swings the stern around to follow so that they eddy-out facing upriver in a calm swirl of back water, looking at what they just ran.

Holy shit! Lauren breathes hard.

Bailing out the water from beneath his seat, Sol tries to choke down his heartbeat.

Lauren says, maybe this isn't such a good idea.

Well, I think that was the worst of it. And . . . He sucks some blood from where he banged his thumb.

Lauren clenches and unclenches her fists and says through her teeth,  
And?

Well, he smiles through his thumb, we made it.

She frowns.

Don't worry, he says, his voice too cheery. From here down to the Little Peneus will just be a fun float. Maybe some big standing waves, but most everything else will be submerged. Besides . . . He leans over and washes his thumb in the cold water. She gives him a look, waiting. He finishes, we're committed now.

What would usually take three hours to their first camp, they run in two. They eddy-out where the Little Peneus falls to join the main branch. They step out of the canoe wet and stiff from kneeling. Lauren sets up her tent while Sol forages for firewood. Soon, he has a small fire going and Lauren returns from securing the food-pack line over a high branch away from camp so as to discourage any curious bears. The sun having disappeared behind the canyon walls, the temperature begins to drop quickly. Lauren digs out her fleece and nylon ground chair.

She sits down and stares at the fire. Think they're proud of us?

Sol hums around the cook-stove, boiling pasta. I don't know, he says. Maybe. My dad gave me a bear hug and said, all right kid, you're growing some balls. Then he said if I wanted to use his truck I'd have to rotate the tires.



I thought for sure my dad was going to start quoting the bible and ask to pray together. But surprisingly he hugged me and said he didn't want to let me go, but that he could see it was time.

Sol turns the stove heat down. Eighteen has its advantages now doesn't it? But you got to give it to them. After running this river for twelve years now, the last five with us, they're letting us out from under their wings.

Standing up, he carries the pot of pasta over to the river, squats, and pours out the water. He laughs. Come to think of it, the only thing my dad was worried about was if I was bringing rubbers or not.

Lauren hugs her knees, her face aghast. *What?*

He stands. Yeah, and I said—

She holds her palm up and out from her, turning her head away like a crossing guard motioning for him to stop. Too much information, she says.

She zips her fleece up to her chin and the two of them eat and watch the late evening darken into a silver-lined purple over the canyon ridges. The staid rock cliffs begin to fade down the river one by one like giant cairns marking the watery road to Lake Superior. After packing up the food, Sol puts on his headlamp and walks into the woods where he hangs the pack equidistant from the tree trunk, the branch, and the ground, then ties it off. About to walk back, he checks his pants' pockets and then his shirt's and feels two small lumps. Digging them out, he finds a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and a Hershey's Kiss. He unwraps the Peanut Butter Cup and puts the bite-size candy in his mouth, savoring it all the way back to camp.

He tosses the wrapper into the fire, then bends down toward Lauren. How about a Kiss? He holds out the Hershey's.

Lauren hesitates.

You better eat it, he says. Or the bears might get you before I do.

You're relentless. She shakes her head and takes it from him, unwrapping the chocolate and popping it in her mouth. She stretches with a big yawn. I'm getting tired.

Bring your bag out here. We'll talk each other to sleep like we used to do on the river while our dads played cribbage.

She squints at him.

Come on, it'll be fun. He yanks his bag out of a pack, finds his pad.

She sighs and goes to the tent to bring her stuff back. She places her pillow near his and lets her hair down, stretching out on her stomach inside her bag, propping herself up on her forearms.

Sol sits down on his sleeping bag and unlaces his boots.

Oh, I almost forgot, she says and reaches beside her to place something over the crown of his head.

Sol feels soft pointed firs and smells pine.

It's a wreath, she says like a kid. I made it while you were hanging the food.

Sol runs his hands around it. Thanks, I guess.

She picks up a stick and draws in the dirt. On the river with our dads, I was always so frightened that we might go over Daphne Falls. But the night

before, when dad would sing to us around the campfire, his voice would always comfort me. That and the smell of pine.

She smiles to herself. I always know I'm in a good place when I smell pine. Lauren fluffs her pillow, then darts a look at him. So don't miss the portage around the falls tomorrow, okay?

Okay. Sol adjusts a log in the fire.

She stares at him deadpan. Promise.

Yeah, yeah. I promise. He crumbles a leaf and tosses it into the fire. It crackles and hisses, sparking into the night sky.

She sighs through her nose, smoothing out the wrinkles in her sleeping bag. The pastor in him won't think of anything else but sending me to divinity school—*but*—I'm only going to Duke because I'll be closer to Asheville where I can learn to be a summer guide on the New and Gauley rivers. Like our dads used to do.

Sol turns onto his side, holding his head up with his hand. Do you know that when they were newbies on the river together, my dad got yours stoned for the first time?

Lauren's eyes widen.

Hard to believe isn't it? I guess your dad couldn't stop gazing at the stars and contemplating god. *And*, whenever they weren't paddling, they drank. Around campfires, in bars, in cars.

*Really?* Lauren scrunches her face, then points at him with half a smile. You're fucking with me.

Sol laughs. Did you know my dad also met my mom on the New River?

Lauren shakes her head.

Yeah. He was already engaged to another woman, but after a cool evening of stars hunched over the canyon around a riverside fire, wine and song—he ended up crawling into her tent. A month later he got a call from her saying that she was pregnant.

Woa. Lauren raises her eyebrows.

Yeah. He unzips and zips his sleeping-bag, then looks her in the eye. And here I am.

She lifts her head up toward the starlit sky and Sol follows suit. They stare at it for awhile, until a meteor bursts and fades away.

Make a wish, Sol.

He settles into his bag, clasping his hands behind his head. I wish—

You can't say it out loud, silly, Lauren says. It won't come true.

*Anyway.* I wish I could build a log cabin nestled down in this valley. Then I'd build my own birch-bark canoe and live like a voyageur, paddling down to Lake Superior and along the coast, bartering fish and hides for who knows what. Just to do it, I guess.

Mmm. Lauren closes her eyes and whispers, sounds nice.

I'd still write letters to you, and every spring I'd ask you to come up to run the Peneus River, like our fathers do, like we're doing now. And you'd take the train in and there I'd be, paddle in hand at the drop-off site, all grins because of the sight of you. Then one spring, the conversation and dreams would be so

good that we couldn't bear to stop, so you would just stay. And after a couple of years, we might find we'd want some others to talk with, and . . . He glances at her out of the side of his eyes.

And? she yawns.

And we'd have children.

Come off it.

He looks into her green eyes, leaning close, and her blonde locks tickle his nose. Wood smoke mixes with her clean shampoo smell. So I'm a hopeless romantic, he whispers, but one who's so helplessly in love with you.

You're so full of shit, she whispers back.

Maybe. He brushes a lock out her eyes. But what if I'm not?

Then his lips touch hers—supple, moist, a hint of chocolate. His tongue finds hers. Lauren places a hand on his chest, slightly falls into him for a moment, kissing back. The fire hisses quietly.

Her eyes widen as if she's seen a bear. She pulls away. Oh my God, she whispers, covering her mouth, looking away from him.

Sol flops back onto his bag and puts his hand over his forehead. Jesus Christ, Lauren. It was only a kiss.

She scrambles out of her bag, grabbing her headlamp, and rushes over to the dry bags beneath the canoe and starts pulling clothes out of one, throwing them down on the ground.

Lord, do you have to be so dramatic? Sol stands up. What the hell are you doing?

What did you last have to eat?

Sol throws his hands up in the air. Same dinner you had. What? My breath that bad?

She stops. Covers her eyes. Sol. Listen to me. I tasted peanut butter. I'm allergic to nuts. Remember?

She strikes the top of the upturned canoe bottom and begins to cry, sinking down to the ground. I can't find my EpiPen damn it! I *hate* having to rely on that thing.

Sol just stands there and blinks.

Sobbing, she shakes her head. I always keep it in my purse. And I can see right where I left it now, on the floor of your dad's truck. She laughs weakly, wiping tears from her eyes. I can't believe this is happening.

I just *kissed* you, Lauren. You didn't actually *eat* any nuts.

Lauren shakes her head and cries. If I can taste it, then I know I'm in for it.

Sol moves over to her, kneels down, and cradles her face between his hands. Lauren, are you sure?

She covers her face and cries, nodding her head yes.

Sol looks at the canoe, then at the dark river rushing by. Shit. He steps into his pants and boots and tugs on his fleece.

What am I going to do? Lauren says in a high voice, unfolding and folding a shirt. We can't run the fucking river at night? We'd surely go over the falls!

He puts his face in his hands. What'd I just do?

Sol!

Okay. He snaps out of it. We're hiking out. He pours water on the fire and kicks dirt into the pit. He clicks on his headlamp.

She sniffles, what about all my stuff?

Sol stuffs her sleeping bag. Lauren, put your boots on.

She does so while Sol grabs a bottle of water and rain gear, stuffing them in a day pack with the sleeping bag. He slings the pack over his shoulders.

Ready?

She nods.

He takes her hand briefly. Maybe I should carry you.

She withdraws her hand and shakes her head. I'm walking out of here.

Suit yourself. Sol starts hiking the steep, faint fisherman's path along the Little Peneus.

Twenty minutes later, they reach the railroad tracks and turn south, hiking right between the rails.

I'm scared, Lauren says.

He looks back and sees her massaging her throat. We probably should pick up the pace.

It's getting hard to breathe. She shivers.

Sol stops dead in his tracks and dumps his pack to the ground. He yanks the sleeping bag out and unzips the bottom and top. Hold your arms up, he says and kneels before her, tugging the nylon sheath over her, down to her boots until her face appears. Their eyes meet. He pets her head a couple times and his

eyes begin to water. I'm so sorry, Lauren. He puts his pack on his front side and, squatting down, says, piggyback.

She climbs on, wrapping her hands around his neck and he holds her legs. Her calves and feet flop back and forth with his heavy cadence as the railroad ties crawl by beneath his fluorescent beam.

Sol? she says dreamily, her head lying against his.

He chokes back the tears. I never. . .

She whispers, I know.

The rocks crunch beneath his feet. He tries to remember the songs her dad had sung, any snippet of chorus he can muster, but nothing comes. He closes his eyes, imagining himself back at the fire with Lauren and their dads; No Expectations, an old Stones tune, comes flooding back to him and he begins singing softly.

Sol trudges on, singing verse after verse, repeating the song over and over. For how long, he doesn't know. Miles back, Lauren called out to her father once. Before that, he'd kept telling her to keep singing along, keep alert. She whispered hoarsely that she was, in her mind. She's been silent since. Nothing but endless darkness surrounds him. Wincing, he slumps forward to keep her from falling off his numb body. His breath freezes on his whiskers around his lips. Flashes cross his eyes.

Eventually, the edges of the darkness turn a silver-lined purple on the horizon and a beam surges forward from far down the tracks, rumbling toward him. He stays standing between the two rails until he hears the train's emergency



brake screech, and at the last blinding minute, he stumbles over a rail. Lauren and her sleeping bag slide off his back as they both fall into a ditch. Sol's shoulders and arms rebound with a weightless feeling. A warm wind rushes through his ears as the engine rolls by, sounding like heavy boulders moving against each other beneath a river.

He crawls over to her. Lauren?

She barely whispers, yes?

He wants to tell her that she's in a good place, but instead, says, make a wish. He leans down to her and she whispers in his ear. They both smile and clasp fingers for a moment.

People begin talking, shouting. Flashlights run alongside the train. A man helps Sol to his feet, throws an arm around him. Several men reach down to hoist up the cocoon of Lauren's limp body and carry her toward the train. Sol tells the man helping him that he can stand now and to just give him a minute. The man walks away and Sol bends over, clutching his knees. He gets sick, then stands. He can't keep from shaking. He sits on the ground for a minute, his face in his hands, crying. He feels the wreath on his head. Uncovering his face, he lifts his head, inhaling the pine deeply. He just thinks of her, as the tips of dawn's cliffs perch in a shock of blue he's never seen before.

## PEAT MOUNTAIN

*Escape may be checked by  
water and land, but the air  
and sky are free . . .*

—*Daedalus*

You're in love. And driving into this country feels like you are flying. Hurst sits at the helm of his pickup truck as if he owns this land, owns you. And it makes you tingle. Highway 17 dips in and out of moose-laden cedar deltas, curves around frozen bay after bay, and climbs over two-thousand-foot vistas left behind by the last ice age. You feel young among these Laurentian Mountains. Once the size of the Rockies, they migrated southwest from Quebec as well as northeast into the arctic. Their rounded peaks bristle with snow-covered white and red pines and firs, reminding you of the broad-backed shoulders of hibernating bears keeping watch over the shores of Gitchigumi. But you don't let the picturesque landscape fool you. People have died here: mauled by bear, canoed over falls, swallowed into the icy depths of Lake Superior. Mistakes are not easily forgiven seeing that the nearest hospital is in Sault Sainte Marie, an hour-and-a-half away by car, and often, getting to the nearest road can be days.

Hurst pulls off into a plowed parking lot beside a long frozen lake. You step into snowshoes, throw on day packs, and break trail for a mile until you come to a trail-juncture sign: a large plank with a blue groove depicting the loop to the top of Peat Mountain and back. Wearing a blue windbreaker, Hurst stands tall and lanky, like the dense pines. He fidgets with his pack straps.

Did you bring matches or a sleeping bag? he says.

Hurst doesn't believe in luck, or at least the kind that just finds you; he believes in creating your own luck through skill and preparation. You brush the snow off your shoulders and ask him if he did.

No. Forgot 'em in the truck.

Your father's a retired French-Canadian logger and your mother's Cree. You're from the far north, and whenever you venture outdoors, you dress up in your most colorful outfits: ornate mukluks and a vibrant, multi-colored fleece and hat. It's like going to church for you. Tell him you think you brought your hatchet.

It's cold and damp with a stiff breeze, probably in the teens. Cold enough where, even though you're plowing through a foot of fresh powder, you keep your jacket zipped up to your chin. But this cold means nothing to you. You grew up where the nights and days regularly get down to minus forty below in the winter, where it doesn't matter if it's Celsius or Fahrenheit because that's where the two met. Minus forty is minus forty, plain and simple, just damn cold. But this country can get down to that kind of temperature at night too.

You look at your snowshoe and kick at the snow. Ask if you should go back to the truck for matches and a sleeping bag.

Nah. Hurst waves it off. We'll be all right.

You shrug your shoulders and smile. He was just testing you.

Hurst takes the right fork and breaks trail most of the time, trying to push the pace. It warms you up and spills off some of your anxiety due to having started so late in the afternoon in an unfamiliar part of the bush in such extreme conditions. The usual blue blazes on the trees are faint and hard to find, but

someone had come through earlier in the winter or late fall and tied orange ribbon to the lower tree branches, marking the trail, so you follow these, hoping whoever it was had also been following the same trail you think you're on. You swing your arms to warm up your hands, and as you stomp on, create a mantra prayer that you keep chanting in your head: *Spirits of the woods and Native elders of the past, please grant us safe passage and the wisdom to make it home.*

The first part of the loop leads you out of the narrow creek valley and through a cloaked, slightly raised forest plateau that circumnavigates Peat Mountain from the north and west and looks across the valley at the mountain's high cliffs. The two of you get into a meditative rhythm and before you know it, two hours have passed and you've arrived at the lip of a frozen inland lake. You take a break and any sweat begins to cool off to a slight chill. You pull out extra layers and tug them on and eat slices of apple and cheese. Hurst talks about how he wishes he'd brought his ice-fishing gear to catch some lake trout or walleye, then he stomps off with the toilet paper. You bring out your camera and take pictures, framing possible drawings. You wonder where the trail goes from here.

When Hurst returns, he is sure he remembers the trail leading from the lake up the backside of Peat Mountain; he remembers losing the trail here last time but eventually coming across it. And off he goes, shouldering his pack and charging up a wooded slope. You follow and strain to find the comforting sight of

orange ribbons and nearly imagine the faintest blue blaze of a trail marker on distant bark, but to no avail.

You shrug off a chill and try to take comfort in Hurst's eagle-view of the woods. Last Memorial Day weekend the two of you meant to canoe one of the many rivers, but ended up needing to put chains on his truck to bust through the old snow covering the two track up to the train depot, only to find out the river was at flood stage and the train wasn't running because a few bridges had washed out. Hurst couldn't believe it and was anxious to see the river, so you hiked down a trail until you got to the muddy roiling mass. Whole trees were floating down and the rest of the riverside trail was submerged. You ended up bushwhacking a few miles up the ridge and beyond, following Hurst's lead. You began to feel a little panicky, wondering if you'd just end up wandering around the vast wilderness into the dark. But you wanted to show him you could be strong, so you kept silent. Then like some Aboriginal, Hurst squatted down and drew in the dirt with a stick.

Okay, he thought out loud. Here's the river. Here's the truck. And here's the train tracks. The tracks eventually cut east at some point and we might be paralleling them. So we should head northeast just in case.

You began to veer in that direction and soon enough you came out of the woods to hit the tracks just as they turned east, away from the ridge. And lucky enough, one of those rail pick-up trucks happened by and let you jump in the back to ride the rest of the way back to the train depot.

You've learned to trust him, so you trudge up the slope too, following his Bigfoot tracks. Soon you're breaking a sweat, and just as he had said, come across the trail once again. You follow it the rest of the way up to the bald top where a splendid view of the Laurentians stretches in all directions and the wide blue swath of Lake Superior opens in the distance to the south. Hurst looks like he's standing on the winner's podium, the world his stage with you at his feet. Only here, in the teeth of the wild, does he ever look content to you. His smile is relaxed, eyes lifted from the maze so that he can stop searching for the path of least resistance. You outstretch your arm and snap a couple of Kodak moments together on the summit.

Though the day is overcast, the light begins to fade. Hurst leads you off the north face, back into the pines, and you slide down to the second ridge pretty quickly. But here, you can't figure out which way the trail goes. You know that if you set off through the more open forest to your left, the north, you will eventually hit your snowshoe trail coming in. Or better yet, you could follow the string of your snowshoe path in reverse all the way back to Hurst's truck. Turning around makes the most sense due to the failing light and the distance you have left to cover yet. But Hurst is off stomping around looking for the trail to your right.

Typical Hurst. Always in need of some adventure. Trails are too easy for him. Getting lost is more of a challenge. Finding his way back out is even better. Being that he's older and knows what he's talking about, you follow his tracks in complete confidence that he knows where he's going. He has a legendary past: an accomplished white-water paddler, a trail builder, a competitive cross-country

ski racer, a self-reliant backcountry man who'd ski up and down frozen rivers for a week in the bush. If he's into something, he learns it inside and out, and you can't shut him up about it. He knows engines, bikes, canoes, tools, machines, skis, maps. He likes problems. They're just big puzzles to solve, and he peers at something from all angles, either moving his body around without any regard for dirt or mud if it is something big like blown automatic hubs, or rotating the thing in his hand or between his fingers, staring at it with his eagle eyes, his jaw hanging slack. He gets right into it too, asking questions out loud, as if testing the knowledge of others present.

You like to think of him as the reincarnation of Towab, a legendary Ojibwa hunter and guide in the area in the late-eighteen hundreds. Legend has it that when Towab received word that his wife was in labor in the Sault, he traveled all night, covering the hundred plus miles by dawn, no worse for the wear, to be there for the birth of his child. People didn't know how he did it; some thought he shape-shifted into a wolf or an eagle. So whenever you catch Hurst sleeping, you imagine he's flying above the forests, scouting the ridges and lakes, the trails and rivers, taking in more of the land under his skin, because it seems he has some uncanny control of his unconscious. He once told you that when he used to compete in the giant slalom, he'd run the course a hundred times in his dream the night before a race to insure his win. And last spring when you first drove up to Hurst's camp with him, you were driving the dark Highway 17 and he was snoring away in the passenger seat. You woke him up to ask where you turned off and, barely opening his eyes, he just said, a ways yet, and went back to

sleep. So you just kept driving, wondering if you'd end up in Wawa before he woke up. Then on the descent of the very hill you were to turn off, he woke up and said, turn here.

He waves you over to a cliff he's peering down and says, I think I remember the trail going this way. Yeah, I'm pretty sure.

Still quite high, you see the inland lake off to the north where Hurst's truck is parked at the northern end. So as long as you keep moving in that direction, you're fine with it. You clomp over to the ridge where Hurst's standing and he slides down on his butt into a small forested plateau. You do the same, laughing as you try to help each other up out of the deep snow. You begin bushwhacking through the dense cedars, holding branches back for each other and stepping over downed trees, sometimes falling through holes up to your thighs. Hurst slides down into an even narrower plateau and stomps off through the pines.

You're definitely not on the trail anymore.

You slide down too and then he asks how you're doing. Hold back your frustration, your doubt, and tell him you're just being careful. At the next cliff, you stare down hundreds of feet of cliff. Now tucked into the northeast shadow of the mountain, the temperature drops fast, creeping in through zippers, cuffs, and collars, numbing the extremities, seeking to freeze out your very heart. But it's your mind you're worried about, as you try to stave off the panic coming on.

You had both been in this situation one time before, last year in the bush outside of your hometown off of Highway 11, halfway between Lake Superior and



James Bay. There were no roads north of there and the only way into the Native settlements to the north, like Moosonee, is via train or float plane. And even further up the coast into Hudson Bay was the Polar Bear Provincial Park: the real bush, wild and inhabited by predators and prey, where the land is flat, the trees small, and the rivers fast, cold, and wide.

This was when you and Hurst were first dating, so you decided to snowmobile into your parents' camp along the Ground Hog River for dinner. Your parents came and there Hurst met your brother, who said he'd just snowshoed in a trail earlier that afternoon if you'd like to get out into the bush. Hurst asked him how long it had taken him, and he said maybe forty-five minutes. So the two of you set off with your dark-curved mutt. About thirty minutes into your snowshoe, you came to a pristine lake where your brother's snowshoe tracks cut across. Hurst started looking at the length of the tracks and noticed you both had taken two for every one of your brother's. Apparently, he had run the whole loop and had "forgot" to mention that fact. After an hour, you still weren't back to camp and the dog was tired and the ice collecting on her paws was cutting her pads. And it was getting dark.

You took turns carrying the dog. And during one break, the light failing fast and knowing for certain that it was going to be at least forty below that night, Hurst asked, bring any matches, a hatchet?

Nope. All you could do was continue to hike out, praying that around every bend, there'd be the smell of wood smoke and the yellow light of the cabin spilling out over the snow.

But here at Peat Mountain, no warm cabin with food and a concerned family waits for you, no bouncing drone of a snowmobile headlight searches for you. Nobody knows you're here. Just you and the cold decisions you can make. And the wall of dark descends, making every step a bump in the night, a blind spin of the compass.

Hurst stares down the hundreds of feet of cliff, his jaw slack. He takes off his hat, his hair bristling as if charged, pointing every which way. He turns to you, his needling eyes buttons of darkness overtaking a fading blue, and asks in a cracking voice, what should we do?

Catch your breath. The horizon seems to dip as if you're reeling backwards for a moment. What should *we* do? Hurst's asking *you*? He's never once looked to you for answers. Hurst is asking *you*? Your heart slams against your chest. Something in the tone of his voice tells you he's not testing you this time. The one man you'd always put your faith in for direction and safety is looking to you to give him answers. And here you are facing the dead-end of his decisions and of your lack of speaking up earlier about what way you thought you should have gone. You are lost and everything seems to close in, buried beneath a downed, black sail.

Your heart still racing, your thoughts spiral down. You begin thinking about the last time you saw your loved ones, the words you left them with. You begin thinking about a slow, cold death heightened by fear and darkness. Everything begins to seem wrong—like you're stuck in an inescapable labyrinth and there's no escaping from the Minotaur's horns—fear itself, each turn taking you closer to

him or him to you, entangling you further within the entrenchment of the maze.

Focus on your breath. Calm down. Think rationally.

Tell him he should climb this ridge to his left and see if he can see the lake where his truck is parked and take a bearing and head for it.

Yeah, Hurst says. Good idea.

He clambers up the steep ridge, grabbing tree branches for purchase.

Follow him. Atop the ridge, you barely make out the lake to the north in the fuzzy darkness. Below, there's still a great expanse of dense forest to bushwhack through, more than the light will hold out for, and you'll lose your lookout advantage as soon as you continue to dip down. Look at the apartment-sized plateau you just climbed out of. Imagine the two of you huddled together naked in a snow cave, backs against the mountain, shivering and teeth clattering, trying to keep each other from falling into hypothermic sleep. You shudder. Push the image out of your mind.

Say that you think he should head northwest because the snowshoe trail is in that direction. That if he continues east, you'll just end up paralleling the original right fork you took. That if he continues north, you may just parallel the trail in. Northwest should guarantee that he should hit either one of those and then you can follow your tracks out easily enough with your headlamp.

Sounds good, Hurst says. And you hear that?

Nod your head. The lone transport barreling down Highway 17.

We can always head for that, Hurst says.

Put your headlamp on and begin moving northwest and not fifty feet in that

direction do you find your old snowshoe tracks, coming out right at the fork. The night has just raised the black sail to carry you home. *We are safe. We're going to make it.* Take a moment to thank the forest spirits and past elders for their guidance and wisdom.

In silence, the two of you trudge back on your packed path through the dark, occasionally speaking about how famished you are and looking forward to a burger and a beer. Once back at the parking lot, you climb into Hurst's truck, and you doze on and off to the hum of the diesel. Then you hear Hurst marvel to himself, *Hurst got lost today*, like he couldn't figure it out. *Hurst got lost today*, he repeats. His moose-lamps light up the snowplowed shoulders in a dazzling brilliance as his words echo in your head like frost-cracked rocks melted from the face of the mountain, fallen, slowly tumbling down to the sea.

## NEVER-NEVER LAND

Perspiring in the Indian-summer heat, you both straddle your mountain bikes and rest after the long climb to the island's overlook: the great lake stretches out of sight to the east along the mainland's eroded sandstone cliffs, forested with pines and flaming hardwoods at their peak, and the westering sunset colors the picture in a rosy hue. She tells you she's upset with her husband right now. Doesn't want to have to demand that he replace the wood-burning stove with a gas fireplace because of her allergies; her husband knows this is important to her and should just do it. But he hasn't yet; he enjoys cutting and stacking the wood and stoking the fire. Sometimes she thinks he just married her for her body.

I don't want to be a trophy wife, she says, even though she's drawn to her friend who is. Not because she grew up with her, but because the two of them ended up in the same different town and her friend's the hot, doctor's wife whom everyone wants to be around. The perfect mother, career woman, and athlete. And though the woman taught her how to mountain bike, this "friend" also likes to not call her back or to leave rude messages that make her feel guilty for not having a job, messages that say the only reason why she's faster is because she has more time to bike.

I'm an angry girl, she says. You know this, have seen her play guitar like Ani DiFranco, but you think she sings like a sweet Bonnie Raitt. She tells you that she kicked her dishwasher today, even when she knew it would hurt, that she

regrets not finishing her masters. Thinks she still should. Second guesses herself because her thesis advisor said she was accepted in to the program because she was cute. People never seem to live up to her expectations, like her mother, she says. I was suspicious as soon as she kept bailing me out of the drunken trouble I got into during my twenties. Knew when my dad told me she hadn't touched him in months.

You say she's angry because she's afraid to stand up for herself, afraid to take the power back from those she's given it to.

She seems like she might cry, but then tells you she's a good little dreamer. Having moved back home for a few years, she'd dreamt her mother, who was unable to bear hiding behind the lies anymore, sat their family down at the dinner table and straight-up acknowledged a drinking problem and an affair with a much younger woman, another teacher at school. Then her mother asked everyone to leave the room.

But I crossed my arms and stayed, your friend says, staring down the rocky path. I wanted to help her. She looked like she was dying, but she just got meaner.

You don't tell her that you dreamt you were walking past her on a ferry when you both stopped at the last second—each with one foot ahead, the other hesitating as you came face to face. And you kissed: a soft, moist lip over lip. When you parted, you could see her thinking about it, then shaking her head, no, like this was a bad idea and you both knew it.

The uncanny thing, she says, was that the following day, my mom actually came out.

She tells you that no one in her family had ever been that direct before. It gave her hope and relief that it was finally on the table, that they could work through it like a normal family would. But when her mother left and her older sister was still in denial, she found herself flying across the room like someone possessed, shaking her sister to wake up. Then as she drove out to their cottage to find her mother, she began thinking about her own relationship with this other woman, about the many hikes they had taken together, how she'd become a friend, someone to confide in, to look up to. Then it dawned on me, she says. She was just practicing to be my other mom.

Wow, you say. You have a lot to be angry about.

You're a good listener. This may be why she trusts you. Or maybe it's because you're familiar, like a favorite song playing out of context, when it becomes brand new again, like the Indigo Girls covering Bob Dylan, and a part of you leaps ahead, trying to figure it out, while the other hesitates, hoping to keep the moment alive. Maybe it's because you just moved up from her old hometown where you'd been living for the past five years while she lived here. It's as if the two of you had shared something important through a lag in time. Then there's now, wanting your life to feel this good, pretending she's your significant other and soon you'll be driving home to a log cabin in the woods, where you'll chop and haul wood but won't burn any. You like to think she needs you, that she's looking for a way out. You want to take advantage of this, to come out and tell

her that you're attracted to her, but you end up compromising and doing what you think's best for her, telling her what you need to hear yourself: You're perfect just the way you are.

The distant, returning ferry hums softly underneath it all. The air turns crisper and the boreal sky wraps around you both as you gaze into the afterglow and lean slightly into each other. Everything feels as it should: a oneness. You don't think about when it will end, but are aware that it's going. It's so surreal, she says as you watch the sun's last rays catch the high clouds—torn like a blue jacket's polyester lining turned inside-out—the undersides uncannily configured in forked tongues, appearing like old flames stopped in time.



## TROLLS AND FERRY TALES

You know, I've seen some weird things in my life. Been on guided meditations to past lives and future selves. Have seen the air crawling with paisley rainbows, time stand still, and friends look like wax dolls. But ten miles ago, down the coast of Lake Michigan, I stared out at the Straits of Mackinac and had never seen the likes of what I saw. Never would have thought it possible. It was kind of like lightning in January, snow in June, or a total eclipse. Events that you may only witness once in your life. I'm talking about the kind of thing that you'll never forget, that'll make you do a double take. Stuff you don't know if you should trust, but there it is right in front of your eyes.

But before I tell you about the two towers of the Mackinac Bridge looming over my car as I hit the onramp like it's a runway to heaven, I've got to start with what you could always count on seeing here at the Straits of Mackinac for the last fifty years, swear on if your life depended on it. Any local would know, and especially someone like me, who teaches geography at a community college in the Upper Peninsula. Michigan's a damn unique place and beautiful as all get out—hardwoods and pines for fall colors and hunting big and small game, hilly vistas, rivers for trout fishing, and this far north—lots of snow. Lived here all my life. And if you do live here, you better like water, because we got it on all three sides of not one, but *two* peninsulas, an upper one and a lower, filled with golden beaches of sand for summer sailing fun. I'm talking the Great Lakes, water you can't see the other side of for the curvature of the earth. Except when you're up

at the Straits of Mackinac. Here it's only five miles across where Lake Michigan rounds the tip of the Lower Peninsula's mitten-shaped hand and sloshes into Lake Huron and the Upper Peninsula's tail end of its shark profile.

Fifty years ago, some businessmen decided folks were tired of waiting five hours for the ferry to return and schlep them and their cars across the Straits between Mackinaw City in the Lower Peninsula and St. Ignace in the Upper Peninsula. So they built the **WORLD'S LARGEST SUSPENSION BRIDGE** to span the distance and then people bitched about the eyesore. While off to the east still sits the quaint isle of Mackinac Island, which can only be reached by boat or plane, with its paved streets of pedestrians, bicycles, and steaming horseshit lining up in front of all the fudge stores. Trolls we call all them tourists who live down below the bridge in the Lower Peninsula.

So that's the scene, or at least part of what I expected to see ten miles down the coast of Lake Michigan, looking out at the Straits. But then there's the things you can't see coming, like the men in business suits building a bridge to the U.P., hoping to pump tourism into the most sparsely populated place in the country. It's like someone selling an acre parcel of Mars on the Internet. I even met a man who, site unseen, bought that acre.

Can you believe that shit?

If that ain't a sign of something going haywire down in Washington or with the damn high-speed search engines, I don't know what is. And I tell you what, I'm always looking for signs, you know, for meaning in what I see. So this morning at the tip of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, after a long night with my

buddy Jack Daniels, I was wondering what this vision before me was trying to tell me. But before I go there, I got to back up a little. A friend of mine owns a comic-book store in Traverse City, and he once told me that something like a million people a weekend drive through on their way up to Mackinac Island. Tourists. And he laughs at them every time they ask where the bridge is over to the island. And he just shakes his head and tells them their compass is about a hundred miles off of true north.

It's funny the concepts people get in their heads when you confuse them with upper and lower peninsulas and then, right between the two, you stick an island and a bridge, with a city at one end, all using the same name. You'd think the trolls would have gotten the word out by now: horse-drawn carriages and bicycles on the island, ferries across the water, cars on the bridge to the U.P.

But sometimes things shift on a level that we're not aware of, until we can't make sense out of it. There are other forces at work out there, you know. Like spirit guides, angels, fairies and shit. But it's the sneaky little bastards right under our noses that can do the most damage. Like the map makers. Talk about turning the world upside down. I don't even know who allowed these lunatics the permits to do such a thing. The DNR? The DEQ? The DMV? I mean, hell, I was trying to teach geography to college freshmen and there's this new-fangled map in the textbook that flip-flops South and North America so that Antarctica is on top of the world and South America's on top of North. (But I had to hand it to them, they didn't cut Eurasia in half this time. They probably got sick of being bitched out in fourteen different languages for doing that last time. I mean you

better not fuck with Russia, man. Breaking up a home where some former KBG agent has to be careful transporting through the void on either side of the margins in order to maneuver from his living room to his kitchen just so he can reach his Vodka, *that's* some serious business. And don't *even* get me started on the Big and Little Diomed Islands smack dab in the Bering Strait. With just one mile between those rocks, the map makers made one island finish the week on Saturday, while the other one—under the same high-noon sun mind you—starts the week on Sunday! What kind of schizophrenic, catastrophic decision was that?)

So I asked my students. Do you know the ramifications of North America being on the bottom folks?! They had no clue and seemed like they could care less. So I told them. We no longer lived in the Upper Peninsula; as of that very moment, we had just been transported to the Lower Peninsula. We couldn't drive downstate anymore.

But some kids really struggled with this idea, like this football player who tried to figure out up and down all over again, saying outer space was still up and the ground was still down, right? Yeah, I said. But our fourth down is still up to China.

Anyways, depending on how you look at it, for the past few years, I guess I've been living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, trying to slap together a handful of part-time jobs just to survive. But on the weekends, I hope to be the next blockbusting documentary filmmaker so I can work people's imagination and help them see and believe in new ways. And that's how I got to staring out at the

Straits this morning. I'd just driven down to the Lower Peninsula for the filming of the pilot, *Camp Chef*, a reality show me and four friends wrote, based on our monthly camp forays. We're starring in it too. It's pretty low budget; you know, a sort of *Blair Witch* meets *Seinfeld*. We pretty much just eat, drink, and talk about nothing around the campfire. We've got our own line of *Camp Chef* cookware, *Camp Chef* recipes, *Camp Chef* aprons, and we hope that, one day after we're successful, we'll have camp chicks.

Mr. Camp Chef himself, a burly bear of a guy and former white-water raft guide, cooks us up some breakfast in the Pentagon, a giant screen tent where he serves us Eggs Benedict and steaming coffee to-go and coal-baked cinnamon rolls. Then we're off mountain biking with helmet cams and lattes, jawing about the next episode of *Camp Chef* on the fly. We even went so far as to write our final episode when we'd be gray-haired and fat, stuck in one massive RV where in our dotage we'd be smelling each other's farts and struggling to find the goddamn bridge over to Mackinac Island.

But really, we're all just waiting to freeze-frame the one of us who'll end up doing a flying-W, ass-over-teacups, handlebar stunt just before the inevitable face plant in a berry-spattered pile of—then we'd cut to the scantily clad Budweiser Girls while our viewers anxiously await our safe return back to camp, where we'll embellish our survival stories around the comforts of the picnic table, whiskey, and beer.

But last night I got really hammered on Jack, couldn't play my guitar or stand up too well and all the boys were laughing at me, mercilessly recording the

whole ordeal until I ended up sleeping it off under the stars. And this morning, after we'd said our goodbyes, I drove down the road to get a glimpse of Lake Michigan, you know, maybe see the bridge, catch a few Z's, get my head right again. And I just got to say before I share this next bit, that I've been misunderstood a lot in my life. Though I admit there are times that I love to bullshit as much as the next guy; it's damn right scary how easy it is sometimes, how people want so badly to believe, that is. But what I don't get is when I'm really trying to tell the truth, I mean *really* pouring my heart out and meaning something important—no one believes a word.

But that's the risk we all take, right? I mean, what's really important is what I think I saw and what it meant to *me*. Sometimes I think that the world's just some giant holodeck careening through space on the Enterprise, everyone just figments of my imagination. That I'm god having tricked himself into believing he's human and trying to decipher all the prefab codes along the climb back up that spiritual ladder, just so that he can have some fun finding himself again.

So that was what I was trying to do, looking out at the Straits of Mackinac, trying to determine what rung I was on, when I had to actually get out of my car to make sure I was seeing things right. There stood, ten miles away, like monster tuning forks, the two towers of the Mackinac Bridge spanning across where Lake Michigan joins Lake Huron. And from my vantage point, Mackinac Island was directly under the bridge. But what was strange was that the shoreline cliffs were stretched to *twice* their height, as if the water had drained sixty feet over night or the island had grown. And way out there, the waves were up, moving east like

giant inch worms. But the craziest part, and I swear, even if I was struck blind this very minute I could still see it for the next fifty years, was that the Mackinac Bridge, all five miles of steel tonnage, spanned—not over to St. Ignace like it had since it was built fifty years ago, but moved east—over to the northwest side of Mackinac Island! It must have happened like some rotating train trestle, switching over in the fog with the tourists' blind faith. Perhaps the fairies were on strike; I don't know. But one thing was for sure, there was no mistaking it. Where St. Ignace should have been, the U.P. abruptly ended into a gap tooth of sea, like it had sunk.

I just stood there, my head pounding, my whole world turned upside down, wondering if the map makers had just made a mistake. Overused the big eraser, you know, shifted a longitudinal line too close to another or something. Or all that Tennessee whiskey that had drowned the very memory cell that remembered where St. Ignace was supposed to be in the world.

Running on fumes, I hopped in my car and punched it, cutting inland for the most direct route to the bridge, and ten miles later, here I am, white-knuckled and pumped, crossing the Mackinac Bridge. I can't wait for the first glimpse of the Grand Hotel's pearly gates. Fort Mackinac had dropped sharply off to my left. And like blinders on a horse, I try not looking to the right or left, want so badly to believe. I can feel the green suspension cables clipping by like marionette strings as the first tower looms toward me, a rite of passage. I turn on the radio, and wouldn't you know, another sign. They're playing Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water"!

Passing under the second golden tower on my descent, I won't even lift my eyes from the grated middle lane, for fear of throwing the timing off. You know, like catching Santa Claus grabbing your mom's ass or something—just kind of ruins the fun when you see behind the curtain. Anyway, I'm convinced, and like Superman playing Christopher Reeves in *Somewhere In Time*—where he drives to Mackinaw Island and teleports back in time to meet the love of his life—nothing is going to stop me from making this historic drive. I just *have* to make this once-in-a-lifetime event. This could launch my geography career! Could be the most popular episode that would put *Camp Chef* on the map! Just think of it: the pristine off ramps downtown Mackinac Island, clean swept streets, and bars full of Budweiser Girls and endless taps. And there we'd be, me and my *Camp Chef* cronies, back in our mid-twenties and living out of a Sportsmobile, full of smiles and realized dreams, camping out for an eternity while we drank, farted, and poked fun at all the trolls down below the clouds, gorging themselves on fudge and facades.

But then out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the tiniest fleck. And like a migraine so subtly creeping up behind one eye, I try to ignore and rationalize it away. Try with all my might, but the periphery inevitably becomes center stage, when you can't not look, can't deny what's about to come on. And soon I find myself gazing off to the starboard side, and what do I see but a white rooster tail off in the distance. Then like Superman in *Somewhere In Time*, finding the 1970s' penny in his 1880s' vest pocket, my reality comes crashing down. It's a



fucking Shepler's ferry shuttling folks over to the island. And guess what?  
Straight ahead—the St. Ignace toll booth.

Man, I got to tell you. It's like waiting all of Saint Patrick's Day to eat your mother's corn beef and cabbage, with her extra special spicy mustard sauce heated up, only to watch her accidentally drop the pot and the corn beef goes along mopping up the floor. That's how it fucking felt. Like I'd been jumping too long on a trampoline and when I got down to walk again, I couldn't stand how flat the world was.

I pay my three bucks and curse the trolls for getting my hopes up.

So what does it all mean? I guess I really don't know. I could feed you some bullshit line about hope and dreams and stuff. But I won't. I'll tell it to you straight. I might have missed it this time, but I'll be back, because it's sort of like chasing rainbows, you know. You could be standing at one end and never know it, until you've moved on and looked over your shoulder. Then you see that it's raining and shining, that it's Monday and Sunday, all at the same time.

## DRIVING UP TO DENVER

Broken clouds send shadows across the wheat fields, pushing a late harvest as a rust-pocked flatbed crunches into the gravel lot of the Onstead Bar. Two men step down from the truck and push through the screen door, leaving the day's work to settle in the fields with the sun. Inside, shadows slink in the corners, a thin haze of smoke crawls around the stools, and the jukebox waits quietly. On a race weekend, the pit crews from the Michigan International Speedway pack in at night looking for some local color, ready to jaw about the day's big crash. But this is an off week, and only a handful of regulars sit inside the dimly-lit hall as the two men pull back stools at the bar.

His left arm in a sling, the nephew drives his words home, chopping at the bar with his good hand to accent his words. We'll leave tonight. Drive straight through. That'll put us in Denver by sunset tomorrow.

Crossing his arms, his uncle leans on the bar and fakes a laugh. I'm too old to pull that shit anymore. I can't just run off on Sue and the kids like that. I don't have a big enough dog house for *all* my stuff.

His nephew leans toward him. You can't back down now Clint, not after what you just told me. Family's *family* man. You owe me. Hell, you owe it to Friend.

What'll it be boys? A stout woman says behind the bar.

Clint fakes a smile and pushes his square glasses further up his nose with a leathery finger. How 'bout a Bud for Sully here and a Jack and Coke for me,

Vera honey.

Vera digs down into the cooler and plops an ice-dripping bottle down in front of Sully. Well if it isn't Friend's ghost. This one's on me hon.

Sully tips his baseball cap toward her, then knocks back a swig from the longneck and wipes the suds from his sandy goatee with his good arm. He looks at Clint. I'm not taking no for an answer.

Clint sighs and looks down the bar. You don't know how many times I've had this very same conversation with Friend, in this very bar. I'm starting to regret ever telling you.

Vera reaches for a short glass and fills it with ice. Clint, where were you Thursday night? You missed Patrick's bachelor party.

Did they have you all greased up and dancing on the tables? Clint fondles his chest and lolls his head back. The men at the bar look at each other and laugh trying to envision the old, overweight broad in raw form.

Vera presses her lips together in a thin half-smile, a practiced deflection, and Clint's words roll off of her as she sets his drink in front of him. They probably wouldn't have let you in anyway, she says, scouring him with her eyes, then lowering her gaze to wipe down the section of bar immediately between them, polishing the hardwood surface laden with years of stiff-lipped, off-color remarks.

Not let me in? That'll be the day, Clint boasts as she strides down to a man holding up the corner of the bar. Clint leans toward Sully. See that guy she's serving now? That's Gerald, her husband.

Sully notes the tired eyes, beer gut, and gray, smoked-stained mustache and hair. Gerald, who'd been laughing with the rest of them, raises his mug of beer.

Clint points over to a scuffed upright piano along the wall. That man can play the piano like nobody I've seen. Usually on a Saturday night, he'll just have the place rocking. Maybe we'll get him to roll the keys on a few tunes before we leave.

The piano reminds Sully of how he feels most Sunday mornings. All played out. Like this morning when he stopped by his uncle's to ride out to the farm with him. Clint was still in the shower so Sue invited him into the kitchen. Wearing just a long T-shirt, her blonde hair fell straight over her shoulders, her long legs were tan and toned from waterskiing.

She poured them coffee. That farm's been good for him, she said. Kept him settled. He used to get my panties in a bunch, walking in the door half-drunk, telling me he was off to Denver on a bar run with your dad. Wouldn't be back for a few days. And I'd cuss him out, following him room to room as he packed. Told him he shouldn't be leaving his pregnant wife to chase after a two-year-old. I threatened that if he got in that car with Friend, to not bother coming back home.

She sipped from her mug, frowned, and poured some sugar in it. You don't know how many times I've regretted saying that the last time he went. If it wasn't for your daddy, I wouldn't have stuck it out this long.

Then she pinned her eyes on Sully's. But if Clint got a wild hair to cut out of town now, I can't say what I'd do. I know you two are going to want to have a

drink or two later, and that's fine. I miss Friend too, so have one on me, but just don't keep Clint out too late. We've got a date. Okay?

Yes ma'am, he said.

In the half-light of the bar, Clint mixes his drink with his index finger as the ice clinks up against the sides of the glass. He could see Friend's youthful face in Sully's, eyes restless and searching. Staring through the bottles of whiskey lit up in the mirror, Clint sees the dark lines of his own father's face staring back tired and tough. Those bottles never seem to run dry no matter where he goes. All it's really got him was a lung full of smoke and a bad heart. He's been here too many times, wondering when this perpetual binge was ever going to stop haunting him. He wasn't counting on driving up to Denver with Sully in order for some closure.

Clint stands and limps behind the bar then disappears below. Bottles clank around and he stands back up with a dusty dark wine bottle in one hand and shot glasses in the other.

What's in the bottle? Sully squints.

Schnapps.

I like schnapps.

Not only is it schnapps, but it's Blue Maui Schnapps. Clint shakes the bottle and grins.

Sully Brightens to the idea. I've never had Blue Maui Schnapps before.

Clint lines up the shots at the edge of the bar and pours the clear amber liquid.

Doesn't look blue, Sully says.

To Friend. Clint raises his shot glass.

To Dad, Sully toasts and they down the shots.

Scrunching up his face, Sully coughs. What the hell is that stuff?

Coming back 'round the bar, Clint laughs and pats him on the back. That's the only real whiskey there is son. You're drinking the stuff the settlers drank.

Rye whiskey. Clint sits back down at the bar and yells out, Gerald, can you play us a few tunes?

Reluctant to leave his comfortable perch, Gerald hesitates. Well, he sighs. All right. He steps down from his bar stool, hobbling over to the scratched-up piano bench. He sets his frothy mug of beer on top of the piano and plops down and his fingers spread out across the keys and roll up and down a blues scale warming up. Then his foot is tapping and both his hands are jumping boogie-woogie. Clint motions to a young waitress in jeans and a tight shirt just starting her shift and, when she comes over, whispers in her ear. Then the two are gliding across the open floor between the tables, twirling and dipping in a flash of smiles and laughter. Sully raises his drink, hoots, and downs big slurps. The piano begins to shake and Gerald's beer sloshes over the brim as his hands criss-cross, blurring black and white into blue notes flying off the higher keys as he pounds a walking bass down below. Then in one final fit, forearms to elbows, Gerald hammers a big finish from the top of the keys to the bottom. The few men in the bar clap and offer an occasional holler and whistle. Gerald then starts into a rolling blues ballad, swaying left then right with the rhythm of his hands

caressing the keys.

Clint pats the waitress's behind as she tucks a stray chair under a table that they had knocked out of their way. He limps back to the bar out of breath.

That boy sure can play.

Sully nods. That Tracy sure can dance too.

Gulping down his drink, Clint smacks his lips. Yeah, she's a keeper.

Tracy brings another round for Clint and Sully. She points at Sully's slung arm. So I heard you had another crash.

Yeah. Sully nods, turning the beer bottle in his good hand. Skidded my Sea Doo into the Beach Bar's docks last Saturday night thinking they'd all been taken out for the season already.

No shit.

The first dock tore up my hull and sent me flying. I landed on another dock where I bounced twice and cracked four ribs.

Sully goes on to tell Tracy about the time he laid his Harley down doing 80.

Clint sips his drink and interrupts. You'd think rolling your Chevy 454 would have taught you good, but being banned from driving in Michigan for two years didn't either.

About to tip the longneck to his lips, Sully looks sideways at Clint. Well, must be something in the water 'cause your colorful background ain't none too pretty either. So whether I'm driving or not, we're still making for that western border tonight.

Sully guzzles the rest and slams the bottle on the bar. That's what Friend would do.

Clint grits his teeth and inhales sharply. That's what Friend *used* to do.

Tracy leans her elbows on the bar, massaging her neck beneath her straight dark hair, her low-cut top showing cleavage. I hear your father was quite the hell raiser, Sully.

Sully sips from his beer and wipes his lips. Yeah. Friend was a wild man. Tracy, you'da liked 'im. He always wanted to be a flat-tracker. When I was younger, he got himself a racer and practiced for months. Leaning over the curves, barely scraping his knees. Then the big event came and my mom and I went out to see him at the Silver Dome. Dad pulled up to the starting line with everyone else.

Sully imitates a mad Friend hunched over his bike. Wheeeaaa! Wheaa! Then they took off and there's Dad still at the line. Then he gunned it and pulled a tremendous wheelie and fell right on his back. Oh, we loved it and laughed so hard. Dad's big moment and we'd never let him forget it. From then on, we called him Flat-Backer.

Sully drains his beer and Tracey gives him another as he shifts into the next story.

Dad used to love to tell this one. Cousin Jake came up from West Virginia and one night Dad and Clint grabbed up Jake and his car to drive to Detroit to bar hop. But on their way home they got pulled over on Michigan Avenue just outside of Dearborn. The cop asked Jake if he knew he could get a ticket for



having a burned-out taillight. But knowing the cop was young and green, Dad leaned over from the passenger seat and told him you only need one taillight in West Virginia. And the cop walked away shaking his head.

Tracy laughs and Clint presses his palms deep into his eyes as the memories and the man come flooding back to him like the easy drinks in a bar close to home. Clint eyes Tracy and says, Sully's a lot like his father in some ways, but he's got a ways to go. Friend was older than me and always doing the cool stuff I wasn't allowed to do yet. Smoking, driving, dating. But he'd still let me hang out with him sometimes, being that I was his younger brother. Sometimes he'd let me drive his car with him the half-a-mile to the corner store and back. I thought that was a gas.

Clint laughs to himself, soaking up Tracy's brown eyes. Friend had a way with women too, but he fell in love too easily. He was always helping some girl out and he'd saved more than a couple relationships. Like when Sue would be flipping her lid over something I did, soon Friend would be by to pick her up and take her for a spin. He'd roll a joint, get her stoned, and put on some Moody Blues. Then he'd listen to her hysterics and all the time he'd be nodding his head and saying she's right. Then in an hour or two, he'd bring her back to our house all calmed down.

Clint's eyes rest on Tracy again and she smiles. One night, he says, Friend and I were sitting here when Sue called up with the news. Her older sister Peggy had just gone into labor. Peggy had always been a late-night port for Friend whenever we found ourselves in Denver, but it'd been several months

since he'd last seen her. So the news of being a father again came as a surprise. Well, he bought a round for the whole bar all proud and happy, but as soon as the initial cheers and backslaps faded, I could see the wheels turning in his mind, shifting between Eastern Standard and Mountain.

Sully slaps the bar and shrinks into his shoulders like a coiled snake. Can you believe that shit, Trace? Clint just lays it on me today that I have a half-sister I never knew about, and now he's dragging his feet about doing something about it.

Clint grimaces, sorry he has said anything at all. Hell, he'd buried this business two decades ago and now Peggy sends a picture of her with her newly acquainted daughter, Nadine, who she'd given up for adoption at birth and who'd finally decided to track down her real mom. Now he can no longer drown the fact that Nadine has as much chance of being his. Friend knew that too and that was why, without a word, he was willing to claim her as his own.

Sue showed the picture to Clint and said she could be one of ours. Sue had never let on that she knew, and if she did know, that was the closest she came to saying something. But like him, she seemed to be for just putting it in the dirt with Friend, as long as Clint wasn't going to risk going down that road again.

Clint picks up the story again. Friend had a car that would just go too. A '69 Shelby. Wouldn't have mattered how fast we drove though, Nadine was born just before midnight, an hour after it happened. We were just hauling down Jefferson when a truck without any taillights backed out of a driveway.

He reaches his arm out and moved his hand in a swerving motion. And I

know Friend. He could have taken it to either side. Clint drops his hand back on the table, apparently finished with the story.

Then he picks up his glass. But he chose his side, he says. Saved my life that night as he slid under the backside of the flatbed, twenty-one-years ago today.

Clint washes down the rest of his Jack and Coke and finishes. He wasn't just a hell raiser. He was a class act.

Clint tugs a crisp fifty out of his wallet and slips Tracy the note. He winks. And if I wasn't twice your age, sweet pea, and didn't know any better, I'd say we could be in Denver by nightfall tomorrow.

He stands up with a scuff of his barstool.

Sully sits still, peeling the label off his beer bottle. *You* were the friend riding with him?

Clint nods and slaps his right leg. Where do you think I got this limp?

Holy shit, Clint. How come you just telling me all this now about my sis and you being the one in the accident?

Clint drops a heavy hand onto Sully's shoulder. He wants to tell him. Just so Sully won't drive half-way across the country hell bent on a lie. Wants to tell him he knew it the last night he'd been with Peggy. That he'd fucked up and wasn't careful. That the burden is his alone.

But he still owes Friend a favor.

Clint sighs, the pins in his knee aching with the telltale sing of rain. I'm telling you, he says, because, she can probably use a brother right now. And

you're old enough to do something about it now.

Tracy wipes down the bar. One for the road boys?

The screen door bangs shut behind them as they swagger into the cool evening air smelling like rain. The distant clouds stack up on the horizon like mountain mammals throwing down the sun, where down the road, an open face peers into mirror, brushing her windy hair. Just waiting on her man. The flatbed crunches out of the parking lot and rain begins to pelt the windshield. The blown bluegrass sprays sideways from the head-lit rush of the night-stained dually barreling down Jefferson, leaving behind the corralled graveyard next door, where the turning oak leaves hover above, rustling like whispers of a buried confession haunting the dark ride home.

## AMERICAN SPIRIT

The evening of July 4<sup>th</sup> had been hot and humid and you could hear the cicadas frenzied scratching still, the fields of corn across the street gathered like a silent auction. I sat on the concrete porch steps, smoking an American Spirit and watching the smoke curl up into the sky as if it were a faraway jet plane, one I wished I was on. The front yard was littered like a mine field, with all of Little Bill's belongings that I'd just tossed out—drawers of clothes, golf clubs he never used, CDs, and more. And I just waited for his drunk ass to show up, feeling the cold steel of a double barrel shotgun warming across my knees.

I had the holiday off from waiting tables and earlier that day, had been waiting for Little Bill to come home from the Ford garage in town. He had the day off too but he went in to do some work on his own truck, getting ready for a mud-bogging fireworks party on someone's back forty.

Dressed in jeans and a low-cut blouse, I had rummaged through my top dresser drawer full of silk and cotton panties and bras until I found what I needed: a little pick-me-up line of coke that I laid out right there on top of the dresser and sniffed away. When I raised my head to wipe away the powder puffs, all I could do was stare at myself staring back in my grandma's silver-lined oval mirror. My jaw-line still sharp and cheekbones high, but my mussed hair seemed to be yellowing at the shoulders and darker at the roots. Webs of tiny wrinkles spidered out from the corners of my brown eyes, sunken and weighed down in heavy bags.

Today was the day I'd saved up enough dollar tips from pouring coffee at the Big Boys to buy me a Harley, which was now promptly parked out on my front lawn in plain view. Been saving for five years, for something big for myself. Just didn't have a clue for what until I randomly walked into a Harley dealer. At first, I didn't know what I was thinking. Knew I liked the freedom of riding my granddaddy's horses when I was younger, so I thought riding a motorcycle might give me the same rush, plus be something that I could call my own. So that's how I found myself pushing through those showcase doors into the hardboiled smell of leather, gas, and rubber.

But what thrilled me to no end was that Little Bill still didn't know about it. I felt like a giddy teenager again, sneaking out my bedroom window for the first time to meet up with a girlfriend and find some booze and some boys. Felt reckless, like I'd done something I couldn't take back. And I wouldn't have wanted to anyway, even if I had to. I lit an American Spirit and sat at the kitchen table, watching the light leak out the windows joining the tree-line fields, the Irish Hills dipping down toward the Raisin River as the room got darker.

I used to sit here with my Granddaddy Saturday evenings in the summertime, when I was nine or ten and this was his kitchen, at the same oak table and watch him smoke and drink. He was a big man with the largest hands I'd ever seen, and his face looked like a faded topo map with salt and pepper hair on top. We'd listen to Howard Cosell broadcasting the Tigers' game on the radio while Grandma washed dishes, served us rhubarb pie and vanilla ice cream, and knitted.

What do you think, kid? he said one night, squinting through the smoke.

Will they make it to the World Series this year?

I shrugged my shoulders. If Sparky lets Morris pitch.

He nodded his head. Yeah, he's got some heat. But do you know what wins a World Series?

He took a drink from his glass.

I drank from my milk and looked up to him. Gibson hitting home runs?

Dragging from his cigarette, he almost smiled. Then he leaned into the light over the table as if to draw me in closer.

Have you ever wanted anything so bad you thought you couldn't live without it?

I thought about it for a second, looking up toward the light. Maybe a horse.

Maybe? he said in disbelief and cocked an eyebrow. That doesn't sound so sure.

He kept staring at me, tapping his leathery finger on the table. You know what it was that I wanted so bad?

Huh?

Your grandmother. And I didn't let up until she was mine. Then I found when I got her, I got the whole world—this house, those horses out back.

He sat back in his chair. Even you.

I folded my arms. What's this got to do with the Tigers winning the World Series?

He smiled. They got to want it, kid. They got to want it like their life depends on it.

He took a drink from his glass and set it back down on the worn table. Find something you want, Desireé, and don't let nobody stand in your way.

He nodded at me and I took that to mean we were listening to the game again.

It all seemed like grownup talk at the time and I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Now it seemed clear that this Harley was that one thing I'd wanted so bad. And I wasn't going to let Little Bill stand in my way, not in my own granddaddy's kitchen, rest his soul.

Later than usual, I had heard the gravel-crunch of tires rolling up the drive on the side of the house. Probably'd been at the bar for awhile.

Little Bill pulled back the screen door, the coil croaking like some frog, and it banged shut behind him. He stood there, a shadow not five-feet tall.

What the fuck you sitting here in the dark for?

I could hear him groping around for the light switch and then it was on, the world outside gone black. The harsh light glared off his bald crown, cuffs rolled back, bristly curls on his forearms. A six-pack of Bud under one arm, he began to whirl about the kitchen like a dust devil. Beer in the fridge, taking one out, tossing the bottle cap into the garbage, unbuttoning his work shirt down to his tank-top, sifting through the mail.

Somebody here? he said.

No.



Whose bike's out front?

Mine, I said and took a long drag from my cigarette, then blew smoke up into the light.

His mouth hung open.

Jesus fucking Christ, Desirée! You got to be shitting me.

I ain't kidding you. I cracked a smile, looking down at the ashtray and flicking.

You think this is funny? What makes you think we can afford a god-damn Harley?

Billy—

Don't fucking call me Billy.

Last time I checked, there weren't no ring on my finger, *Billy*. No, you'd rather buy a thirty-thousand dollar truck that's only going to make you a grand or two plowing fluff than invest in your girlfriend. Then you tell me in my house, what I can't afford? I don't think so.

I snubbed my cigarette out and shook my head. In one swift move, he was by my side and had a hold of my wrist so tight that I couldn't feel my fingers. I could hear him grinding his teeth, smell the beer on his breath and the whiskey underneath, but I just kept staring at the last bit of smoke coiling up from the ashtray.

Bill, I spoke sternly but softly and slowly. You don't want to do this. You're drunk. Let go of my arm and we'll talk about it in the morning.

Look at me.

I focused real hard on that smoke wisping away.

I said look at me.

He grabbed my chin with his other hand and whipped my face up and around to look at him. You think I'm some kind of idiot who you can keep things from?

You're hurting me.

He pushed my face away and threw my hand down onto the table. He walked back around to the other side and patted his empty shirt pocket for cigarettes. God *damn* it, he said.

He swiped mine from the table, shook one out and lit it, sucking in. Well, you just bought your fucking ring.

I massaged my wrist with my other hand and scooted the chair back to stand and reach for my helmet.

Fuck you Bill.

Where the fuck you think you're going?

The fuck away from you.

He leaned over and grabbed my arm like a vice grip again. I said where are you going?

Our eyes locked, and I just stood there, stretching away from him, my arm hanging stiff between us.

You know I'll find you, so you better just tell me now.

Let go of my arm. You're hurting me again.

Where?

I. Don't. Know, I said and ripped my arm away from him.

I banged out the screen door and kick-started my Harley and let the trembling roar massage the dull pain in my arm, and in my heart, and took to the open road.

It wasn't always like this. No matter how much he would drink the night before or how awful we might have fought, the mornings with Little Bill would always make up for it. Like a little kid, he'd yawn real loud, stretching one hairy arm across me, trying to wake me up. Then he'd roll over so that he was lying on top of me, just staring at me. If I still didn't open my eyes, he'd stand up and start jumping up and down on the bed until I threw a pillow at him or kicked at his feet, trying to knock him down. Then he'd drop on top of me and start tickling me until I thought I'd pee or cry from laughing so hard, covering my face with a pillow, biting into it. And if I rolled over, pretending I went back to sleep, he'd start singing Patsy Cline's "Crazy" and touching me until my nipples were hard, and then we'd make sweet, carefree love.

But I was running out of sweetness. And it was easy to rationalize that he was just a mean drunk, that that wasn't the real Bill. But he drank every night. When I first met him, I had taken my Escort up to the Ford Garage for a tune up, and he'd been as charming as a munchkin, showing me the waiting room and pouring me a cup of coffee, telling me he'd get right to it. When the car was ready, he came into the waiting room doing this little song and dance for me on the spot, a sort of River Dance meets polka, and he made up lyrics about having "checked under my hood" and "liking what he saw," and stuff. I liked a man who

could make me laugh, so I said yes when he asked me out to Aggie's all-you-can-eat Friday-night fish fry. And that was that.

A year later he moved in to my place and we signed up for a pool league, and for awhile there it was fun. I'd never really played much pool, but Little Bill was dead on. And he didn't seem to care if we won or lost and was happy playing his favorite tunes on the jukebox, helping me with my shots, and drinking me in. Then one night, after we lost *again*, a man on the other team made a comment about how even though I couldn't play for shit, he could watch me stretching out for the corner pocket all night long.

Little Bill didn't even hesitate, swinging the butt end of his cue stick straight across the guy's face, laying him out flat.

The whole bar was stunned there for a moment, trying to take it in.

Little Bill racked up the billiards. Who's got next game? he spat out.

Nobody said a thing. I wasn't even sure how I felt about what happened.

Hell, I'd grown up with comments like that all my life.

But the bartender, Ronnie, a big teddy-bear of a man, quietly walked over to stand before Little Bill and said he would have done the same thing, and he hated to do what he had to right now, but Little Bill knew the rules. He had to leave.

Now, these two men had known each other all their lives, fished and hunted together, and Ronnie knew what I was yet to come learn. Little Bill didn't like to be backed into a corner, didn't like to stand down. No matter who it was. So when the cue stick clattered to the floor and Little Bill stepped back for a

swing, Ronnie stepped forward and crushed him in a bear hug, Little Bill's feet dangling in the air kicking Ronnie in the shins, and Ronnie just quietly carried him out the door, tossing him like a sack of corn into the bed of Little Bill's truck.

I didn't know what I had really seen. Still high on the lines of coke we'd done out in Little Bill's truck, part of me was dizzy with the fact that Little Bill had stood up for me. But part of me didn't want to see that there was a deeper mean streak that blinded him from those he supposedly cared about. But maybe that's because I was used to this sort of man. My Pappy could be a mean-spirited son-of-a-bitch too, though the reverse of Little Bill. Pappy was a happy drunk with a mean hangover. Straight out of the bush, he was a wiry French-Canadian trapper who was part Chippewa. And I'd cover my ears those mornings he'd curse my Ma, telling her what a whore she'd been the night before, shouting at her until she came into my room crying, locking the door behind her and we'd lay on the bed together, me stroking her hair and telling her I loved her.

But it wasn't always like that. The best times I remembered were when Pappy would gently shake me awake in the middle of the night, the whiskey on his breath washing over me. They're out, he'd whisper. Quick, catch 'em while you can.

And I'd rub my eyes open and swing my legs over the edge of the bed and he'd already have my winter boots on the floor for me to step into and he'd wrap a wool blanket around me. Then he'd lead me out onto the back porch and there'd they be. In the north, wisps of soft light like colored curls of smoke running up the sky. When we got tired of standing, we'd huddle together on the

porch swing and he'd tell me about how another warrior must have passed on and the Chippewas were dancing the war dances they'd known on Earth. Then we'd make hot coco and pancakes, being silly in the kitchen, trying not to laugh too loud and wake up Ma who had to work in the morning. But after those rough morning scenarios started coming harder and faster, he wound up hitting Ma once and that was it. We moved into live with my Granddaddy.

After that first pool incident with Little Bill, he got real serious about our pool playing, making me wear shirts with a high neckline and being really critical of my technique. I guess you could say the honeymoon was over. And now it had gotten to this, him being a dick more regularly than not. It was like an addiction. I kept snorting away hoping for that beautiful feeling of control again, that sweetness of the old mornings in bed with Little Bill, those late nights with my Pappy. But that was the trick, I kept coming back for more, hoping it would be different the next time, but ended up crashing more and hating myself for it.

I throttled up to 80, rolling across the stone-speckled pavement, the corn fields knee high and the evening not quite dark yet, but drivers started flicking on headlights. The hot air felt good blowing in my face, being that nothing stood between me and the sky. It was like my own little personal roller coaster.

I was stretched out trying to make the corner pocket at Aggie's when Little Bill showed up. Ronnie was right. What the hell was I doing there if I didn't want to be found. I guess I was just looking for the next best place to home where Little Bill wasn't.

Little Bill swaggered in beneath the Bud Light NASCAR posters, glazed eyed with that sort of half-smile you learn not to trust right away, the kind that spells trouble. He ignored me and sat down at the bar and lit a cigarette.

Seen any biker bitches flashing their titties? he asked Ronnie.

Ronnie came to stand in front of him, both arms holding down the bar. What can I get you, Bill?

No leather-chapped pussy? Little Bill sounded disappointed, then he slapped Ronnie in the arm. Just fucking with you, man. I'll have a shot and a beer.

Ronnie poured him a shot of Rye and a draft of Bud.

Little Bill pointed at the young guys I was playing pool with. Which one of you pecker heads wants to play a game of nine-ball for fifty bucks?

He tossed back his shot and slammed it on the bar. He fished out a fifty from his wallet, grabbed his beer, and came over to slap the note on the side of the table.

He still hadn't made eye contact with me yet. Well, who's it going to be? he said.

Well, we ain't done playing with the missus yet, said the man with a sleeveless button-down shirt, goatee, and baseball cap.

What missus? Little Bill said. *Oh*, you mean this whore?

And then he quickly turned toward me and yanked my blouse open revealing my lacey C-cups.

Little Bill stepped back and laughed, slapping his thigh and spilling his beer. There you go boys. It's what you've been hoping to see all night, isn't it?

Ronnie was coming 'round the bar and I was hoping to keep the situation from going further south. So I grabbed Little Bill's wrist and started tugging him toward the door, saying let's go home to talk about this. But that caused him to drop his beer and soapy glass shattered on the floor.

I let go for a moment and looked at the mess. Then my head snapped sideways with a searing flash on my cheek.

Little Bill had slapped me. Never before had he ever laid a hand on me.

Ronnie was almost on top of Little Bill, but before he reached him, I up and kicked the pointed-tip of my cowboy boot straight into Little Bill's balls, watching him crumple to the floor in a moaning fetus position at Ronnie's feet.

That's it you fuck! I spat on him. You'll find your shit out on the lawn and if it ain't picked up tonight, it's going out with the trash in the morning.

I gathered my purse from the floor, my cheek hot and eye watering. And don't think about doing anything stupid. If you think that hurt, you've got another thing coming.

I roared out of the parking lot on my Harley, leather jacket and blouse flapping in the wind, my headlights staring anyone down who cared to look.

When I got home, I parked the bike in the gravel drive and stormed into the house. I threw my purse onto the kitchen counter and headed for the closet where I found my Granddaddy's shotgun. I swung open the barrel and took down



a box of shells, which spilled out on the floor in my hastiness. I grabbed up two shells of buckshot and plugged them in to the barrel, snapping it back in place. I thumbed the safety off and propped the gun by the front door, then proceeded to throw all his shit out onto the front lawn.

Then there I was again, staring at myself in my grandmother's silver-lined mirror, about to sniff another line, when I looked up for just a moment. I don't know if it was my Granddaddy or what that might have tapped me on my shoulder, but someone was trying to look out for me. Because I didn't like what I saw staring back at me—a broken-down woman trying to jam love up her nose, just so that she could stand being with herself.

Then I started crying, holding on to the top of the dresser like I was trying to keep it from falling on me. I crumpled down to the floor and laid my head on the foot of the bed and just held myself there as my body heaved. I'd never felt so alone. Felt like the nine-year-old buried within was trying to take care of her mother again.

I don't know how long I wept there like that, but eventually I felt better, like a cloud lifted off my shoulders. I stood and replaced my torn blouse with a tank top, blew my nose, and swiped my American Spirits from the kitchen table to sit out on the front porch steps with the shotgun, waiting for Little Bill.

It wasn't long before he came barreling down the road, fishtailing into my driveway and kicking up stones. Then he pulled up short, half-way on the grass, and jumped out of his rig before it even stopped rocking.

What the fuck? he slurred, stumbling around the yard, trying to keep his balance. He kicked the bag of golf clubs, then decided to reach down and grab a driver and began walking toward me.

I flicked my cigarette at him, stood up on the top step and shouldered the butt end of the shotgun, aiming down at Little Bill's bald crown.

That's far enough, I said.

He stopped, jaw agape.

Pick up your shit. I ain't playing anymore.

Then he let out a high laugh. You're not fucking going to shoot me.

He took a step forward and I fired one off over his head, pelting his front fender.

He ducked and after the percussive explosion faded into just a ringing in the ears, he patted down his chest and belly and felt the top of his head.

My fucking truck, he whispered, looking at the buckshot rivets.

I ain't planning on wasting this next one, I said.

He took a step back and surveyed his shit in the yard. Babe, he said, dropping the driver to the ground, opening his palms toward me. I just got a feeling you're going to need me. I got a kilo in the truck with your name on it.

I lowered the barrel to rest my arm. Go pedal that shit somewheres else. I'm way past being snowed by you anymore.

Hon' let's sleep on it, okay? Let's not do anything rash. You know the mornings are always the best. I'll make it up to you. I promise.

I shook my head. You're not hearing me, Bill. I'm done listening to your bullshit.

I pointed the barrel around the yard. So, I said. Pick. Your. Shit. Up. And go.

God *damn* it! he said and started scooping up the spilled golf clubs from the yard and throwing them in the back of his truck, then going back to cart over the drawers of clothes.

Then he was in his truck, revving the engine high. He looked up my drive and then I saw it too late, that glint in his eye. He slammed the truck into reverse, tearing up the dirt drive toward the house.

Billy! I screamed, as he backed into my brand-new Harley, knocking it over and then running right over it in crunches of metal

Hooting, he shifted into drive and crunched over it again on his way out. I brought the shotgun up to my shoulder. Aimed. And squeezed the trigger. His rear windshield exploded into thousands of shards of glass, his tires squealing as he hit the pavement sideways and accelerated down the road.

I sat down on the porch, the concrete cooling my skin through my jeans. I rested the shotgun across my knees, and held my head in my hands, shaking. I hadn't thought anywheres beyond that night. Sure, it seemed like he was actually going to leave, but what would keep him from coming back tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that? Maybe it would get easier, but I didn't want to be sleeping with a gun by my side worried every night.

I fished out my cell phone from my jeans' pocket and dialed 911. When I lifted my head for a deep breath, there in the sky were cherry blossom fireworks exploding in the dark over Brooklyn. Then out in a flash, the smoke left behind drifted toward the horizon like the feather headdress of a warrior I was just beginning to know.

## UNDER A BLANKET OF BLUE

Dawn lit up the windowed sky in pale blue above snow-covered pines as she padded down the hardwood stairs in her wool socks and flannel PJs. Chrisantha Pembroke brushed her rusty bangs out of her eyes. The kids still asleep, Sylvester sat wrapped in a blanket at the kitchen table, typing away on his laptop beside an open bottle of bourbon. Chrisantha rubbed her arms and looked out the window. The thermometer outside read twenty below. Sylvester would say it wasn't too cold to run the dogs, but she'd say it was too cold for the children. She crouched down to the wood stove and raked the coals clear from the ash. Sticking in some cedar kindling, she watched it smoke, then catch flame, and added a couple small pine logs.

In the kitchen she filled the aluminum coffee pot and set it atop the stove. The flame went out beneath the coffee pot. She tried lighting it again, but nothing.

That was the last of the coffee, she said.

He kept typing. Uh huh.

And looks like the pig's empty.

Use the wood stove, hon'.

She sighed and did so, then sat down at the table. She always liked looking at his face, sharp jaw line and nose cut fine and square like this house he'd built. His beard was dark and full, with strains of silver. But she had no easy smile for him this morning, no glimmer in her Lake Superior blues; they were

overcast like cold steel. She pulled her feet from the cold floor to sit cross-legged on the chair and traced the thorny roses on the side of her empty mug.

Pancakes are all we have left, she said.

He stared at the screen, reading what he just wrote. Just make a run into town, babe. Have Dave put it on our tab.

She shook her head. Dave's been carrying us for two months now. I can't face that kind man anymore and he can't face me. Enough's enough.

Sylvester sat back in his chair, arms crossed, and looked through his glasses at her for the first time that morning. Can't you see I'm trying my damnedest to write, to pay our bills? I hardly sleep anymore.

Oh, I can see alright. She grabbed and recapped the bourbon, putting it away in a high cupboard.

He lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Shit, he said.

She sat back down. We'll have to sell the dogs—

We're not selling the dogs. He crossed his arms again.

Then the snowmobile.

He just stared at here.

Or we sell our house and look for teaching jobs, she said.

His mouth hung open, then he blinked. I could build again.

We can't wait until summer.

He sighed and put his head in his hands. I can't believe you're saying this.

He looked back at his laptop screen. I just need to finish this story.

Chirsantha stood up and ran a hand through her hair. Can't you fucking hear what I'm saying, Sylvester? We're broke. B. R. O. K. E.

She moved to the sliding glass wall and looked out, eyes watering.

I love those damn dogs too you know. She sniffled. Just don't test me on this one, Sylvester. I feel like I'm cornered and I don't know what I'm liable to do.

She went to the cupboard and brought the pancake mix down. She heard him drink down the rest of the bourbon in his glass, then move to the front door, stepping into his boots and tossing on his long coat with fur-lined hood. She turned to watch him step outside, shutting the door behind him, the leftover cold, far from spring, curling around her feet.

Sylvester crunched through the bright snow, the dogs wagging their tails and barking at him. He could swear they were laughing at him. He hefted the bag of food from the shed and poured scoops of dry kibbles into their bowls, stepping around the shit in the snow.

When he and Chirsantha first got the dogs, they dreamed of smooth sledding to and from town in the winter time. At first, she didn't understand how they were going to feed them all. It had already been a series of big steps. After grad school, instead of having a large wedding, they asked their parents for a down payment to purchase land. That June they moved to the Grand Marias area and built their own log home out in the bush, the idea being he'd join a carpentry crew and write in the winters and she'd substitute teach in town hoping for an English position to open up at the K-12.

Over the course of the summer, Sylvester had put the word out that he was looking for sled dogs, so they could make the six-mile, unplowed trip into town and back in the winter. Every other week or so, another husky would turn up. But feeding the dogs did not turn out to be the problem; keeping them from fighting did. Each dog had a distinct personality and all had wild streaks. They ended up with a small team of four that needed to be trained how to work together, but first the dogs had to figure out who was going to take the lead.

Sylvester knelt down on one knee in front of his most faithful lead dog, Jasper, a snow-white fur ball. He'd fought hard that first winter to have her in the house, but Chrisantha would have nothing of it, saying if she let one in, soon they'd all be.

He scratched behind her jaw on either side as she panted in his face. How you doing ol' girl? You up for a run?

He harnessed up the yapping team to the tied-off sled they strained to pull.

Dad! You going to town? Tristan's disheveled hair leaned out the door, one boot on and coat in hand.

Maybe later, Sylvester mumbled. He stepped on the sled runners, untying the anchor, and the team lurched forward. Soon, it was just the quiet hush of panting dogs sledding him through the whispering maples, firs, and birches along the sunlit escarpment. Lake Superior stretched out to the dipping horizon.

Tristan turned from the door to look at his mom. *Where's he going?*



She flipped pancakes. I don't know.

He shut the door, then dropped his coat and kicked off his boot.

Did you guys have a fight? He sat down at the table.

We just talked.

About what?

Dinner.

Freya lay down on her stomach by the woodstove, flipping through large glossy pages. She stopped on one, brushed her red curls out of her freckled face and peered closer.

Mom, look at this.

Chrisantha came over and looked. There she was, smiling in her perky letter sweater, pleated skirt, and tennies, her curly red hair down to her butt nearly. Freya almost to a tee.

You were a cheerleader, Freya said. How come you never told me?

Chrisantha returned to the kitchen to set out plates, forks and knives. I don't know, hon'. I guess I just never thought to.

Can I be a cheerleader? Freya sighed. Oh I can't. I forgot. I'm home-schooled in the middle of nowhere.

Freya, I'm not in the mood. Chrisantha filled a plate full of pancakes and shoved it onto the table with some maple syrup. Breakfast's ready.

Who're you going to cheer for, the dog team? Tristan said.

Freya stuck her tongue out at him and got up off the floor to come to the table.

When she sat down, she and Tristan looked at the plate of pancakes and then rolled their eyes at each other.

Chrisantha stared out the sliding glass door. I don't want to hear it. Now eat up until you're good and full.

The kids stabbed flapjacks onto their plates and began to eat as the coffee percolated. Chrisantha moved to the woodstove, put in some large pieces of maple, and poured herself some coffee.

Are we poor, Mom? Freya looked up from her plate.

Tristan peered over the top of a book he was reading.

Chrisantha sat on a high stool at the counter and stared out the sliding glass door. Why do you think that, hon'?

All we've been eating lately is pancakes. That can't be healthy.

*Not* eating is unhealthy, dear.

Tristan pretended to resume reading. Then why have you and dad been such zombies?

Chrisantha watched the chickadees and nuthatches on the bird feeder. Have we been?

*Mom*, Freya said. You're not even listening to us right now. As soon as Dad gets home, I'm calling a family meeting.

Chrisantha sighed.

With her fork, Freya just swirled a bite of pancake around in the syrup, trying to mop up the mess.

Chrisantha twirled a strand of her hair, over and over. For weeks now it seemed she and Sylvester hardly touched each other. One or the other would just make excuses to go to bed earlier or later, and whoever came to bed second would usually find a covered back dumbly facing them. Mornings started with a curt, mornin' and continued with polite, necessary dialogue like, coffee's ready, or warmed up today, or colder than a witch's teet. This was never where she thought she would end up. And she didn't know how to start shoveling out.

Sylvester returned sometime in the afternoon. Though Chrisantha could see the bags under his eyes, his face looked more relaxed. Getting outside was always a good start for either one of them when trying to sort out their mind. Sometimes she just forgot to do it.

Sylvester had only kicked his boots off and was pouring himself a cup of coffee, when Freya announced a family meeting.

I'm exhausted, hon', he said, dropping his hand onto Freya's shoulder. Can we do this later tonight? It feels like I haven't slept in a week. I need to lie down.

Freya pouted. *Dad, this is important.*

Chrisantha moved to stand by his side. We know it is, hon'. Just because you're ready, doesn't mean all of us are yet. We'll definitely get to it.

Chrisantha looked Sylvester in the eye. Your dad and I need to talk first.

Sylvester half frowned, half smiled, but nodded his head.

Freya lowered her eyebrows. Okay. But *tonight* for sure.

Tonight, Chrisantha said.

Sylvester left his coffee mug on the counter and rubbed his eyes, then made his way upstairs. Chrisantha followed. They both climbed into bed, under the comforter, with their clothes on. They stared at the ceiling, not touching one another. The sunlight lay across them, reminding her of when she was a kid and would lay in the carpeted squares of sunlight on the floor, shining in from the southern windows in the winter.

I thought we were living the way we wanted to, Sylvester said. We've seen leaner times.

I know. It's just that I don't know if this is what's best for our kids.

What do you mean? Tristan can be a little gruff, but he loves working with the dogs. We're raising them up just fine. They're smart and politically aware and self-reliant.

She rolled toward him to lie on her side. I'm not talking about what *we* think. I'm wondering what kind of life *they* want.

He blinked at the ceiling. Is this about the cheerleading thing? 'Cause it'll pass.

It's bigger than that, Sylvester. You know what she said to me at breakfast this morning? She asked me if we were poor. Because all we ate were pancakes these last couple of weeks.

Chrisantha started crying, trying to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Sylvester was quiet.

And I don't like who we've become, Chrisantha said. I worry. You work and drink all night and then during the day, if you're not sleeping, you're like the walking dead.

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. Okay, okay. Don't get upset.

*Don't get upset?* I need you present in your family's life.

He grimaced, nodded his head once, then rolled away from her onto his stomach. I just need some sleep, he spoke into his pillow.

She sighed and flopped onto her back, wiping the tears out of her eyes. In a minute, his breathing slowed. She got up and blew her nose, then walked downstairs.

The sky above the pines was darkening when Sylvester came down from his nap, his hair was all disheveled and he barely seemed awake. Chrisantha had scrounged up a couple of potatoes and made some potato pancakes with sour cream. They were just finishing eating, when he sat down.

I saved you one, Chrisantha said.

He shook his head. Tristan can have it.

The cat jumped up onto Freya's lap and she began petting her. Tristan crossed his arms and stared beneath the table.

Chrisantha sighed and traced the roses on her coffee cup. Things have probably seemed pretty tense around here this last week.

Freya looked up from petting the cat. Are you getting a divorce?

Chrisantha moved her head back as if avoiding a swing. Heavens no, honey.

Good. Freya nodded her head matter-of-factly. Are you pregnant?

Chrisantha looked at her daughter in disbelief. What?

Sylvester moved over to Chrisantha to stand behind her. Your mother and I are still very much in love; we've just got some big decisions to make as a family.

Like what? Tristan creased his eyebrows, his jaw slack.

Chrisantha explained how she thought they might want to try life out in the city, to be able to play sports, go to the movies, have classes with people their age.

Freya brightened up and she scooted her chair back and stood up, dumping the cat to the floor. She flung herself at Chrisantha, giving her a big hug.

Chrisantha wrapped one arm around her. Wo. This doesn't mean that it's a done deal. We're just discussing possibilities.

Tristan looked up to his father. You'd leave?

Sylvester sat down, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. I'd do anything that was best for the family. Right now, your mother and I are having a difficult time making ends meet. But what's most important is you telling us *your* feelings.

What about the dogs?

Well, Sylvester clenched his lips, I don't know. I don't have all the answers yet. Your mom and I are just trying to get a pulse before we jump too far ahead.

I'm staying. Tristan re-crossed his arms.

Freya sat back down and, clasping her hands, stretched her arms on the table and looked at Tristan. Dave will watch the team.

Chrisantha touched Freya's leg. We don't know that, Freya.

Freya pouted.

Tristan kicked at the table. Is all this because Freya wants to be a *cheerleader*?

No, Chrisantha said. It's bigger than that.

Is it because Freya thinks we're poor?

Chrisantha softened her eyes. We're rich in many ways—friends, experiences, each other. But yeah, we might have to move so that your dad and I can get jobs. So that you don't have to eat pancakes for two weeks straight.

When I went to college, Tristan, Sylvester said, I had to live in the city, and I didn't like it for the first couple years. But it eventually grew on me. That didn't mean that I stopped wanting to be in the woods; it just really helped me to appreciate it more.

Tristan stood up, clenching the chair. You guys are ganging up on me, trying to talk me into something I don't want. I told you, I'm *staying!*

He left the table, stepped into his boots, and threw his coat on.

*Tristan*, Chrisantha said.

He slammed the door behind him and Chrisantha stood up.

Sylvester put a hand on her shoulder. Let him go.

Her mouth hung open as she looked him in the eye. Not when it's twenty-below. You go out there and make sure he doesn't do anything rash.

He won't.

What if he does?

Then we'll deal with it. He just needs to blow off some steam.

Sylvester got up from the table and moved to the stove and put the coffee back on. I'll check on him in a few minutes.

Chrisantha hung her head in her hands. Well, this certainly went well.

We're still going, right? Freya said.

They both gave her the look.

Okay, okay. She put up her hand, then left for her room.

Chrisantha had heard the dogs barking as soon as Tristan stepped outside, but fifteen minutes later, it was quiet, so she urged Sylvester to go out and check on Tristan. When Sylvester stepped outside, the first thing he noticed was the stillness and silence. Then it clicked—the dog team was missing.

Fuck, Sylvester said, shaking his head at the ground. He walked down their drive a few strides, and sure enough, there was the kicked up snow and sliding indentation of the runners. Sylvester looked up at the stars, then trudged back to the cabin, shutting the door behind him to deliver the news.

Chrisantha tossed the towel in the sink and stared out the window. I *knew* it.

Sylvester watched her back. Don't worry. He won't stray far. He loves the dogs too much, knows he shouldn't be running them long in this weather.



She turned to face him, arms crossed and her eyes lasers. You're going after him, right?

He nodded his head. Just wanted to let you know. Sylvester stomped back across the floor and grabbed his pack of survival gear by the door.

He paused at the door. We might have to camp out tonight.

Chrisantha held her face in her hands, then looked up at the ceiling for a moment. She began smoothing out the table cloth.

He started to say something but Chirsantha said to just please go. So he threw his pack on and stepped outside, scrolling down his ski mask and tugging on his beaver mittens. Underneath the lean-to, he pulled the choke out on the old Arctic Cat and stepped on the foot rail and began yanking back the roped handle with two hands. The engine turned over each time, until it caught and roared to life as Sylvester gunned the throttle a few times and then knocked the choke back. The headlight flooded the distinct tracks ahead that faded down the drive, so he knelt on the seat with his right knee and stood on the left rail so that he could see over the windshield and tore off into the white night, kicking up a dimming red cloud, whining off into the distance.

Chrisantha sat at the table, scratching an old price tag off an empty jelly jar. There'd be no sleep tonight. She put a couple more logs in the woodstove, checked on Freya, who was in bed reading. In the kitchen beside the sliding glass door, Chrisantha decided to set up her easel and canvas. She needed a

release, something to put her mind at ease. She pawed through her tubes of oil paints. What was she going to paint?

She lifted her head to think, and there over the canvas and out the sliding glass door was the one thing she couldn't have ever found if she'd been looking, her favorite scene—the backyard. There wasn't anything dramatic about its beauty, but just that it was what she woke up to every day. The pines were naturally arranged as if they were sneaking up close, where she always liked to look out to the furthest crook, half expecting to see a deer or a fox, or the rare moose or bear appearing suddenly out of the trees. And of course, there were her birdfeeders too. But these cold February nights, with the moon draped over the white pines, milking the snow, and the stars like distant flashlights receding in time—could seem so deeply private that she often felt minutely tucked away in one of God's paintings, just waiting to be discovered.

She put on Greg Brown's *Notebook Songs* and began humming to herself while she selected her colors. She wanted to capture the pine silhouettes and the warm light of the full moon hidden somewhere above her house, but most importantly she wanted to catch that vibrant clarity of the lively night sky. Onto her palette, she squeezed a dab of Raw Umber for the rich dark she wanted to dress the pine-tipped shadow of forest and also a dab of Olive Green for life. Then she selected Brilliant Yellow Light and Silver Point for the moon and snow, King's Pale Blue for the stars, and for the stark brilliance of the sky—Manganese Blue, Cobalt Blue, Cobalt Turquoise, Phthalo Blue, and Cerulean Blue.

She picked up her palette knife and began pushing the Raw Umber across the center of the 20" x 30" canvas. It seemed like it had been a month since she last painted, and she didn't know why it had been that long. She used to paint nearly every night. But she had forgotten how good it felt, not only the joy and meditation in creating art, but carving out time for herself, staying up through the night to live as if she were single again. Chrisantha paused briefly to open a bottle of cabernet and poured some into a clay mug her grandfather had made her.

She worked away into the night, always with an ear for the dogs or the snowmobile pulling in. But as the eastern sky began to lighten, the wine bottle empty, they still had not returned.

Chrisantha poured herself a mug of pine tea and leaned against the counter, chewing her fingernails. She didn't know whether or not Freya would go for a bowl of snow, cream, and sugar for breakfast. The kids used to love it when they were younger, but she doubted it anymore.

When Freya got up, she moped around the kitchen table for an hour or so, reading while Chrisantha continued to paint and the temperature steadily climbed toward above freezing.

They're back! Freya said, scooting out her chair. She rushed over to the door and stepped into her boots and then was out the door.

Chrisantha walked over to the storm door and into the rectangle of sun on the floor. She stepped into her boots too and out into the bright snow.

The early March sun felt above freezing for the first time. The eaves were dripping and the snow crunched down wetly. Sylvester and Tristan both had their mittens and hoods off and parkas open. Tristan unharnessed the team and chained them up to their dog houses while Sylvester unloaded gear from the sled.

Wait until you see what we've got! Tristan shouted.

What? Freya said.

Just wait, he said.

Neither he nor Sylvester could contain their smiles, when from down in the sled, Sylvester hoisted up a gigantic, glistening brook trout with speckles of grass quartz green and sandy brown down to a sun-pink belly.

Freya squealed and jumped up and down clapping her hands.

Chrisantha tried hard not to smile and shook her head. You devil.

Plucked it out of the East Branch first thing this morning! Sylvester said and kissed Chrisantha on his way to the house, Freya and Tristan trailing.

You guys want to learn how to filet this thing? he said.

Freya and Tristan nodded.

They filed into the house and Sylvester laid the trout out on the counter. First thing's first, he said. We need some music. Freya, how 'bout some Louis and Ella? And play it loud like my father did, okay?

Okay, Freya said and rushed off to the CD player.

Tristan, he said. Downstairs in my tackle box, you'll find a leather-holstered filet knife. Can you bring it up?

Sure, Dad. Tristan disappeared downstairs.

And you. Sylvester leaned against the counter and crooked his finger at Chrisantha.

Chrisantha sauntered into the kitchen, staring him in the eyes. She placed her mug on the counter and hopped onto him, wrapping her legs around his as he held her butt, and she gave him a big sloppy kiss.

She rested her head against his shoulder and they gazed at her painting; her single-file snowshoe tracks stretched into the last etch of their meadow and disappeared beneath the outstretched arms of the white pines under a moonlit sky. She brushed the wetness away from the corner of her eyes.

His eyes widened and mouth hung open. Honey, that's . . .

He put his hand through his hair. That's what makes this place home.

She smiled. I don't want to leave, she said.

I know, he said. I know.

Then the Satchmo's trumpet rang out clear and true.

Freya came back into the kitchen. You guys are weird, she said.

Chrisantha leaned her smiling side of her face against his, looking at Freya. No, she said. *That's* what happy looks like. And don't you forget it.

Freya smiled back. Don't *you*, she said.

Tristan reappeared at the top of the steps and Sylvester let Chrisantha down. One arm still holding Sylvester, she held out her other to Freya and Tristan and they gathered in close for a group hug. The March sun thrust into the tree-

lined sky and Ella's voice sang out as warm as a blade of grass on a new spring day.

## DRAGGING FOR SKIRT

I used to pump gas down on the docks for Harbor Springs' marina all summer long, kissing butt for all the swanky well-to-dos. Mostly directed traffic and took heat (giving some back when I could). All yes sir, no sir, talking about the weather and their million-dollar yachts and done with a smile for a hefty tip, a golden tan, and a little T 'n' A. After work I usually stayed within striking distance down at the Pier. It's real nice: back patio overlooking the marina and sunset, some local Joe playing Jimmy-Buffet tunes, and a lukewarm breeze blowing in your ear like a Key-West lover. And that was where most of the boats were from: Florida. They're like a flock of geese summering up here in Lake Michigan. One of my dreams was to be hired as a deckhand on one of those floating shrines and visit Jamaica, Cuba, Belize, living the never-ending summer in style. But I knew I probably couldn't stand the bastards that long, so kept hoping that come late September I'd be counting my bills off the coast of the sunshine state, catching marlin, and not answering to nobody.

You know a lot of my friends think these high rollers are snobs; some of them are but you get a few drinks in anybody and they usually loosen up. Mostly they're just people who can afford to have a lot of fun most of the time. And I was always on the lookout for the right gig or at least a real good-looking flirt who was married money. But I still had to be careful and that usually meant doing my homework because there are some types you don't want to touch with a thirty-foot pole. Not that they're not hot enough, but there's just one rule and that's

getting out alive. That's it. That's all that it comes down to, whether you think you can get away with a little play, even if the hubby finds out. I mean hell, I don't mind a black eye or a bloody nose or anything, but I do like to keep my parts in order and kicking the next day.

Usually while docking or gassing up one of the fresh arrivals, I'd work in a few jabs before I even saw if there was any pussy on board. If anything, it kept the boredom at bay. I'd give the guy shit for not knowing his left testicle from his starboard bow, even when most of these country gentlemen knew how to coast up on a blustery day like a windless whisper so that there wasn't so much as a nick on their babies' polished bottoms and I was left looking like the chump with the limp lasso in his hand. But that's the perfect time to needle them, when they know they've shown off their flying colors, and I let them know that I could give a shit. You get right to the meat of a man and find out if he's got any backbone.

Then there's this trio of locals in their sheet-metal row boat with a ten-horse outboard who every now and then pull up stinking of fish and whiskey. They don't even care that they're like a bruised eye in church. And they're usually laughing at me. Hey mister, can you spare us a liter of gas? Sir, do you have any escargot to go? Hey, can you kiss my ass while you're wiping?

I've done considerably well tuning them out as if they were just a bubbler in a fish tank of minnows. But one day, I got tired of being their sport and unzipped and pissed all over them. That piped them down for awhile.

See, they all try to pass off being a man's man, but it's real easy to pick out the ones who can really back it up. The guys who puff up like blowfish are all



show and no go; the ones who are cool and still like an alligator could really care less, as it should be, and never give me no thought. And those mothers are the ones that I seldom mess with.

But you don't find many gals who've got the balls to dock their own rig right along side all these male pissing contests. But Deirdre Sheridan, she made docking look like she was doing it just to prove that a jock strap ain't got nothing over a bra and panties. You should of seen how clean she slipped into port, parallel parking her charter boat between two ships I would of passed on for fear of ruining their reflection. But she came in hot like she was some five-star brass and thrust the engines in reverse, swinging her stern in, then backed off to neutral, standing still like she'd been waiting all day for me to help her get off.

But she wasn't waiting for nobody. She threw out her lines and tied herself off, used to her own dock. Then she strode down the planks, dark hair tussled up beneath a baseball cap, nipples poking through a tank top, and she wore black canvas pants with big pockets on the side and rubber clogs. Sort of militant looking and carried herself in such a way that suggested she'd pulled through a scrap or two. And she didn't pay me no heed.

At this point it was getting toward the end of August and I was itching to land a few more catches and was sort of being reckless because I'd just gone through a severe dry spell. The last lay I landed, Melissa, or maybe it was Clarissa—I can't recall. The point being that there are often rules with these cat and mouse games I play. And I broke one: Never say I love you. But I could clearly see that was what this woman needed and so I gave her what she

wanted. You know, went the whole nine yards, selling her on how I'd steal her away to my lakeside bungalow and we'd just be farmers and raise horses, or some shit. What's the harm in that? Her husband wasn't pulling his weight. And I got to lean her over the third-story balcony on his yacht, giving her the business end of things while he flew his Leer jet to New York. *That's* what she needed.

But here I was again this particular night, dragging for skirt up at the bar where I did my best to fit in with my Hawaii five-o' look. And being that Deirdre was fresh into port, I had my eye on her down at the other side of the bar. So I ordered a Jack and Coke and whatever Deirdre wanted, who I didn't know by name yet. Turned out she liked Guinness and drank the pint down well enough as I waited for that polite two-fingered gesture to step up to the plate.

It never came. Not even a glance. So I had to assert myself more. I walked over to her extending my hand. The name's Tiburon, Tiburon Pelagios, but you can call me Tibby for short.

I could tell she wasn't your usual first lady pretty to a fault, glittery, well practiced, and in shape. Though Deirdre was cut. But there was something immediate and striking about her in an offhand way. Her hazel eyes gave off a sort of half-light charge as if she'd forgotten which way was up. This lent her an almost star-struck desperateness, but not from anything around her. She seemed to be wrestling with a deep imbedded hook and her eyes shifted with stiff impatience, an almost steel resolve to do whatever it takes to figure it out. Whatever it was, she was strung taut and seemed ready to jump.

Well she didn't shake my hand or offer her name.

You strike me as a woman who likes a good wager, I said.

She just stared at me with those sink-or-swim eyes.

Your choice of dart game, I said. Loser's got to run against Chief.

Chief was a German Shepherd that used to be a cop dog used to sniff out narcotics, but she didn't seem to care. When Chief retired, one of the cooks got him and kept him in his VW bus where the cook lived for the summer in the marina parking lot. Once in awhile someone would get drunk enough to take Chief on in a foot race around the city block. Once the slider on the bus opened, the race was on. Always an exciting event. The runner had a fifty-percent chance of making it because Chief was blind and because of that, any bystander was at risk too. So to help Chief out, we'd make the runner wear a T-shirt that reeked of pot. And man, let me tell you, I'd seen some heels and behinds torn up. And the one time I was foolish enough to go up against Chief, I learned real quick to ditch the shirt around the first bend.

So you could say I had a backup plan if I lost the dart game.

Plus buys me pint, she said in an Irish accent.

Mugs away, I said, even though I knew I was in trouble.

She told me we were playing cricket, so we diddled for the middle. She hit a double bull and I didn't bother with my chance and gave her the just honors to shoot first. Seemed like she was just going along out of sheer boredom. But she knew what she was doing. Her first three throws were all triple twenties, closing them out plus giving her a hundred and twenty points. I didn't know what miracle was going to save my ass on this one, but something of the sort did.

While I was sweating over my next move, a few locals showed up drunk and pissed off. It didn't take these rednecks more than one sip from their PBRs to recognize that I was the asshole that never waited on them down at the docks when they whined up in their piece of shit outboard to get some gas. So one at a time they took turns purposefully walking between us and the dartboard, but only while Deirdre was shooting.

But Deirdre took care of it. She stood chest to chest with the biggest guy and asked him if he'd like to take this outside. He laughed, looking down at her and then over to his homies like he couldn't believe he'd just heard her right. She clipped his shoulder hard and to the side as she passed through him on her way to the exit sign. They looked to me for some hopeful retribution. Darts in hand, I just turned my palms up and shrugged. They finally shut their jaws and followed her out the door, leaving me behind.

I was in a quandary. I couldn't figure out if she was testing me or really didn't need me. I decided to give it a few minutes and see what developed, maybe have another drink. Well not long after she'd stepped out, I saw one of the guys run through the bar and out the back. A minute later I saw the same guy running back through, exiting out into the parking lot again, but this time he had a bat.

For me, the guy who was benched on the sidelines, things seemed to be exponentially escalating way out of control and I knew it was time to act. I grabbed an empty beer bottle off the bar and broke the bottom of it against the door jamb on my way out. I was prepared to see Deirdre lying unconscious on

the asphalt, battered and bruised. But when I pushed through that solid oak door, I couldn't believe it. Deirdre had the bat and had beaten all three of those punks to the ground. They weren't getting up anymore and she was still swinging.

I didn't think about what I did next; it was just instinct and reflexes kicking in. I stepped up to her in mid-swing and caught the stinging blow with my right-handed grip, stopping the bloody bat like an exclamation point immediately in front of my face. That broke her trance.

She turned to look at me, her eyes wild. Then slowly there seemed to be some recognition and she let go her grip. I couldn't tell if she had killed any of them or not and now a crowd was beginning to gather. I had to think fast. I mean not about what she had to do. Hell she needed to get the fuck out of Dodge. But I knew there was no coming back if I decided to help her. But man, for the first time in a long while, since those midnight skydiving flights into the Pacific off some equator coast, I felt juiced, as if my veins were pumping battery acid and my mind was on fire and I hadn't even seen this woman naked yet. I realized I was going to do anything to keep feeling like this.

The bar's patrons dribbled out to see what was up and drank in the scene. Dierdre's chest rose and fell with deeper breaths now. Looking her straight in the eye, I told her I knew some well-hidden gunk holes up along the North Channel where we could drop anchor, let things cool off and blow over and then we could begin to work our way south. I could tell that she really wasn't interested in what I had to say. She just kept staring right through me and I don't know what made her finally decide to let me tag along, but something seemed to click behind her

shadowy eyes, like some final door opened with its sole purpose to shut from the other side. She then nodded in agreement more to herself than to me, as if she was half listening.

The sun had been well down and just the afterglow was left. I knew we had to get moving being that cops in small, high-dollar resort towns have nothing to do but overreact to any sort of situation they come across. The trick would be keeping anyone from thinking we were leaving, or at least leaving on a boat. We needed a diversion. Then I saw the VW bus parked closest to the bar. I asked her to follow my lead and we walked toward my Datsun. When we passed the VW bus, I yanked the sliding door open.

Run! I yelled as the high-strung German Shepard leapt out of the van and hit the pavement nails clicking. One woman screamed and then people scattered trying to put anything between them and Chief.

When we reached my car, I told her to drive the shore-line a few blocks to the police station and then back into the furthest low-lit space, that they'll never think to look there until we're long gone. Then I'd pick her up with her boat on the furthest dock. This was when she balked.

Yer not feckin taking me boot while you turn me in!

I got in the car too and had one block to convince her. Talk about pressure. Someone you think you could fall in love with, yet she doesn't know you from the next creep. Now I've conned more dangerous people in less time for larger stakes, yet I had to give up as much as I thought I was going to be able to gain. And that thing couldn't come from my pockets somewhere or the

confines of my car. I had to give her the naked truth. So I kicked off my sandals and tugged my shirt over my head.

What the feck? she said. I loved it when she said feck. What the feck're ya doin'?

I said I was going to have to swim back to the boat because the Pier would be run over with police by now and if she wanted, she could either stop the car and jump in with me or drive back and risk getting caught trying to race me to her boot. Or trust me.

She laughed. Well ya can keep yer pants on. Yer pecker tisn't worth more than me boot.

When she stepped aboard her boat after stashing the car, she nudged the throttle forward a touch and idled us out of port and into the bay. Her face seemed to soften in the pale glow of the instrument lights but I could tell by her knuckles on the wheel that she was still wound tight from what had happened. Then she lost it.

Those feckin' cocksuckers! She slammed her fist into the sidewall. God *damn* it! I try so hard to leave that part of me life behind and I let those feckin' worthless buggers get under me skin. And fer what? Her eyes lashed out at me. To keep runnin' all me life? She pointed ahead of us into the dark water and skyline. It's no good. Me past is rearin' its feckin' ugly head in me nightmares too and 'tis always the same. I'm running fer me life through the jungle at night, after I've slipped in and slit some bugger's throat and the whole compound's hunting me down and I'm jess lookin' fer a place to hide and then find meself in some

hole-in-the-ground box and it's humid hot and claustrophobic, and I'm breathing hard tryin' not to, me heart pounding out me ears, the darkness so bloody *black*. It's like the whole feekin' universe is swallowing me down infinitely empty and uncaring and I can't tell where me mind ends and eternity begins.

She mashed her fist into the side of the cab again, but with less heart that time. It's feekin' hell and I wake up thinkin' of me da' and how 'twas the same feelin' under his covers with his bloody pecker in me mouth.

Deidre thrust the dual acceleration levers forward so that the boat leapt out of the water and leveled off in a gentle bounce of the bow through the waves. She stared straight ahead and veered north out of the bay.

I sat down in the co-pilot's chair. You know, I said, I've had those same nightmares, been in those foxholes too.

Deirdre snapped to attention like I was the one who'd been chasing her all her life. Don't worry, I said. I'm not yer feekin' da'. She smiled tentatively. But the crazy thing, I continued, was that sometimes I found bliss right on the heels of some fucked-up military op. I'd be swimming off some coast along the equator, the woods behind me alight with shouts and live rounds. And I'd keep going until it was just a din, just praying that I wouldn't hear the boats coming. There'd come a point so far out that I'd just float standing still, waiting for the pick up and the stars would be out. The temperature of my body was exactly the same as the water and air and I couldn't tell what was melting into what. All I could see was my head mirrored in the calm surface of the ocean, surrounded by pinpoints of light above. I felt like I was God in the center of the fucking universe, bobbing



through the Milky Way. I almost didn't want to see that time-warp bulge coupled with the sound of that nuclear hum from the unknown depths behind the stars just before the submarine broke the surface.

I moved over to Deirdre standing at the helm, her twin diesels humming at full RPMs under the Big Dipper and the freshwater wind poured over us, whipping through our hair. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her neck.

That's what it feels like being here with you, I said. And I'm not just saying that. It really does.

And for the first time in a long time I felt good, like yanking fish guts and cleaning them in the spray. It was one of those surreal times when you get a sense of stepping outside of yourself as if you were watching yourself in a movie and you didn't want it to end.

Deirdre kept her bead on the dark horizon and I massaged her shoulders and kissed her neck until she turned and pressed her lips, full and open, into mine. She cut the engine and led me up onto the bow deck where she pushed me down hard to the floor and fell on top of me, kissing me even harder. Sitting up for a moment, she crossed her arms to the hem of her tank top and pulled it over her head, shaking her hair loose. And there were those beautiful tits, dipped right into my face as she stretched my arms out to either side. Then I felt rope around a wrist.

Wo. I started to sit up, but she slammed me back down.

Did I forget to tell you that I like it rough? Is that a problem?

Hell, I thought. I'd done some kinky things in my past, but being tied up? And though I thought I was desperate and wanting to get laid, I was hoping for more than that now. Hoping to wake up next to this woman for many mornings to come.

The boat drifted in the slight breeze, small waves slapping up against the hull. She growled at me and clawed my chest and sunk her tits back into my face while she tied up both of my wrists with the starboard and port lines, tight enough so that they burned when I strained against them. Then she kissed me down to my feet, yanked my shorts off, and tied my ankles together with the bow line. Her smiling face reappeared above mine as I stood at full attention, when she cocked back her elbow and let fly her fist hammering down, bursting my view into a million stars.

That one was for Clarissa, she purred, no trace of her Irish accent. And this one's for Clarissa's husband. Deirdre slammed her fist into my other eye and I was back in the Pacific, melting into the Milky Way.

I woke up to something wet and sticky leaking over me, my head a train wreck, and I couldn't move my arms or legs. I tried opening my eyes, but just two slits appeared. The sun was bright and low on the horizon and I noticed I was tied naked to the deck of a boat. The three assholes I never waited on at the Pier, stood barefoot on the dock in cutoffs and T-shirts, pissing on me.

Good morning El Captain, one laughed. Rough night I see.

Batter up, another said and they laughed. Not a cut or bruise on any of them.

They zipped up and the third guy took a photo with his camera. Man, she can swing, huh?

You think things are rough now, the first one said. Just wait until brunch is over and everyone tours the docks. They'll think you pissed yourself.

They laughed again. See you around, limpy. Thanks for the gas. And they walked to the end of the dock and whined away in their piece of shit outboard.

Like I said, I didn't mind a black eye or two, as long as I could keep my parts in order and kicking the next day. And I got lucky this time. Real lucky. And it was high time I headed south and started trolling for the real thing. 'Cause I think I'd like to see her again.

## RUNNING HOT

1

Charlie got out of prison back in 2006. And of all nights, showed up on Devil's Night. I flipped the porch light on and nearly had me a holler. There he was smoking on the front steps, no hurry to come in after eight years. Why anybody'd come back after that, I dont know. I guess he didnt have nowheres else to go.

Hey, Mary, he said and looked up at me, pinching off a stray tobacco leaf from the tip of his tongue.

Hey, I said and stared through the porch screen door at him.

Charlie wiped his palms on his jeans. I dont want to trouble you none, Mary.

You been doing that a long time now.

He shook his head. Yeah, he sighed and ran his fingers through his wavy hair, I reckon.

Who's at the door, Ma? my boy said.

I didnt turn away and said, Your Pa.

Pa?

Yup. I splayed my arms akimbo. Better come meet him. Then we'll make up the pull-out.

Charlie stood and his boots stepped heavy as he walked up the final steps to come to stand tall on the porch. Jacob came to the door and stood beside me

tall as my shoulder and I squeezed him half a hug and ran my hand over his head. I looked at Charlie and said, Jacob, this is Charlie, your daddy. Charlie, this is Jacob.

I looked down at Jacob and he seemed to be looking somewhere between the screen and Charlie's boots. I opened the screen door and patted Jacob's butt. Go on; he won't bite.

He took a couple steps out the door I let shut behind him. I knew Charlie'd pick it up from there.

Hey, Champ. Charlie gave him a slight punch in the shoulder and said, You done growed up. You're looking real strong.

Jacob looked up at him for the first time and grinned.

Charlie said, I bet you could whip a mountain lion with one hand tied behind your back, huh?

Jacob kept grinning and nodded his head, looking down at his feet. He said, Well, maybe a *coyote*.

Hell yeah. Maybe a *coyote*, Charlie leaned back and laughed. Then he dragged on his cigarette. He turned his head to the side and blew out a thin line of smoke and said, Maybe me and you could hunt us some deer here together pretty soon. What do you think about that?

Yeah? Jacob lifted his eyes and smiled real wide. Mama wouldnt let me go last year and I got plum tired of hearing about the McCafferty boys' twelve point on opening day when I was the one who showed 'em where to find him.

Well, Charlie said and ruffled Jacob's hair, we'll get ourselves a twelve-point this year. And before those boys can say shoot.

That's alright. You can say shit. Ma does it around me all the time.

Okay, I said and was out the door, hustling Jacob back in. It's time for your bath.

Over his shoulder, Jacob said, But Ma, I went swimming in the creek today.

Bath, I pointed. Your daddy and I got some talking to do.

When I heard the water running, I forgot that I hadn't invited Charlie in yet. For heavens sake, I said, clearing bills off the table, come on in.

I opened the screen door and saw that he'd sat back down on the steps and was smoking another cigarette.

It's real nice out here, he said.

He must have been talking about the Indian Summer we were having, but I said, Nonsense. Get your butt in here.

He took a last puff and flicked the butt into our dirt drive, then reached for the screen door and helped himself in.

We don't got no beer, I said as he sat down at the kitchen table.

That's alright.

How 'bout some coffee?

That'd be real fine.

He sat there shuffling a deck of cards I'd left out.

I started the coffee pot and wiped down the counter tops and stove. Then I stopped and leaned my backside against the oven, crossing my arms and glaring at him.

Don't go making any promises you can't keep.

He laid out a line of solitaire and said, I haven't said a thing.

I tossed the dish rag into the sink and said, Not to me yet, but to Jacob you did. Just remember I know what broken dreams are. He doesn't.

He stayed quiet.

So if you're going to pretend to be a dad, pretend to be a good one. Give him hope. Just . . . I put my head in my hand, then slapped my thigh, staring at him. Do something right for once, I said and looked at the ceiling wiping tears out of my eyes. We've been getting on just fine without you.

He scooped the chair back, stood up and came over to me. I covered my face with both my hands and I let him hug me for a moment, kissing the top of my head. Then I pushed him away and went to my room and shut the door.

In the morning, I found the two of them eating cereal together. I poured myself a cup of coffee and said, That better not be coffee you're drinking, Jacob.

No ma'am, he said and got up to dump his mug.

Charlie half stood and said, It was all my idea, Mary. Don't blame him.

He grabbed Jacob's half-empty mug, put his finger up to his smiling lips, trying not to laugh.

I sipped from my coffee and said, I can see what you guys are up to. And I don't like it.

Charlie stepped out from in front of the chair and extended his open palm toward her. Mary, the boy's twelve. We were drinking coffee before ten and you know it.

I cradled the mug in my hands and said, Yeah. So? *We* did a lot of things earlier than we should have and I hate to break it to you, but it all didnt turn out like roses, I said and slapped my thigh and let my hand lay there. My head cocked, I squinted at him and said, You know what I mean, Charlie?

He sat back down and picked up his mug and made like he was half-cheering staring at the wall between us. Real low like, he said, She's right kid. Sorry to get your hopes up. I should have *known* better.

He downed the remaining black coffee.

I bit my lip and tasted blood. I pointed my finger at him and said, Now dont you go turning this around on me! *You're*, a *guest* in this house. And if you want any of my saving graces, then you better act like it!

I swallowed then mumbled as a side note, Leaving me alone to raise a kid and make money on my own. *Shit*. I don't want to hear nothing from you.

I stared over my coffee cup at him until he got up and made for the door.

He said, On that note, guess I'll go pay a visit to the good-city's police chief this morning.

And with that, he left. I just stood there staring at Jacob on the other side of the table staring at me. Didnt know what to say.



Police Chief Liam Sloane sat at his desk by the large window sipping coffee and tapping the end of his pencil against the calendar mat on his desk, a big swath of lead circling that day: Monday, October 30, Charlie's name written on it. And today was the 31<sup>st</sup>. Outside, heavy clouds began gathering over Pearlton, Michigan. The clock read ten-twenty. His forearms pushed down on the arms of the chair and the chair creaked as he stood. He pulled up his trousers and tucked in his shirt around his overhanging belly and then strapped on his holstered .357. He downed the rest of his coffee and put on his Stetson.

Outside, he inspected a ding on the hood of his Grand Marquis cruiser.

A voice behind him said, Glad to say that wasnt me who done it.

Liam turned around and there he was in the flesh. Charlie, he said and studied him for a few moments. Standing there in his jean jacket, he looked like he'd been sleeping out in the weather for a long time, but his smile was relaxed, as if he'd had one good night with a roof over his head. Liam adjusted his hat and said, I was just . . .

Coming for me? Charlie cocked his thumbs at his waist and pointed his index fingers at Liam. Leaning against the parking meter, he looked at it and said, Your time's up, you know?

Liam opened the driver-side door and said, Lets go for a ride.

Youre not going to leave me for dead are you?

Liam ducked his head and sat heavily into the driver's seat.

Front seat or back? Charlie said.

Shut up and get in the damn car, Charlie.

Liam shut his door. Charlie came around and let himself in.

Liam backed out and quickly made a left out of town driving one-handed.

Soon cornfields filled up their windows on either side.

Where we going? Charlie said

Seen Mary?

Charlie pulled out a cigarette and put it between his lips. He said, Can I smoke?

Liam sighed, then nodded his head once.

Charlie lit his cigarette and cracked the window some. He said, Kind of special sitting up front like this. Feel like a kid again.

From his shirt pocket, Liam took out a snuff can and pinched a wad into his cheek. He said, You still are to me.

Charlie leaned back and ran a hand through his hair, blew out some smoke. I dont know, Liam. I really dont. It's all new to me. Like a pear clinging to the tree knowing it caint escape the bruise when it drops to the ground. You know what I mean?

Liam pointed down at Charlie's feet and said, Charlie, you dropped from the tree a long time ago. Hand me that spit bottle would you.

Charlie leaned down for the clear plastic bottle with its Gatorade sticker and handed it to him, the tarry liquid inside sloshing off the sides real slow.

I guess it'd just be wishful thinking hoping you'd be clearing out of town?

Liam opened the cap to the bottle, spit, and recapped. Your family's here, whether they'd have you or not. Might could find some work through an old connection or some sort. But . . . Liam lightly hammered the steering wheel, then said, The same trouble's here too.

Charlie looked out his window and said, Damn chief, you got me all figured out.

Liam sighed. I hope you come back for different reasons than you left is all I'm saying.

The farm houses and barns set back floated by. Crows pecked at the field edges of the dried corn husks and stalks. A cattle farm wafted through the window.

Charlie lifted his nose and breathed deeply. Ah, he said, the smell of cow shit. That's one thing I sure missed on the inside. We going to see my Uncle?

Liam creased his eyebrows at Charlie and said, If I hear the two of you been in cahoots together again, I'll be on you like a fly on shit. You understand me, boy?

Charlie just returned his stare.

Not seeing him—that's what would be good for *you*. Not seeing Mary would probably be good for *her*. That is if you got an ounce of warmth left in your blood.

Charlie shook his head, dragged on his cigarette until the cherry glowed hot. Then he let out the smoke while he spoke. Damn boss, you's laying down the law. Who else you got on that list? Probably none too many left to pick from.

The wind whistled through the top of the window and Charlie added, She seeing anyone?

Liam spit in his bottle again and said, Now see, that's the type of question I'm warning against.

I'll find out sooner or later.

Liam turned into a wide parking lot outside a plant and said, There's only one thing you should be focusing on right now. Work. It'll keep the idle time at bay, son.

Fuck, Liam, the rendering plant?

Liam nodded toward the plant. I hear you're free to go each day at shift's end.

A regular comic, Charley said, opening his door. He dropped his butt to the ground and stepped on it as he got out of the car.

Oh, and another thing, Liam said and leaned toward the passenger door.

Charley ducked his head down.

No guns, Charlie. Not even a fucking cap pistol or bee-bee gun. Or else I'm hauling you back in.

Shit. You're busting my balls here, Liam. I told Jacob I'd take him hunting.

Liam struck his eyes at him hard. Am. I. Clear?

Loud as a fucking siren. Charlie slammed the door.

Liam watched Charlie walk away and said to himself, You're fucking welcome.

3

Clyde Hibble rolled up in his Porsche at eight o'clock just as Charlie's afternoon shift let out. He rolled down the window as Charlie approached and said, Heard you was back in town. Welcome home.

Charlie stood there, smoking and studying his uncle. Same slicked-back hair, suit and tie, gold watch. Charlie crossed his arms and took a wide stance, settling into where he was standing.

Clyde said, Cat got your tongue or have you seen enough dead pussy for a day?

Charlie smoked and said, What do you expect, Clyde—open arms, a slap on the ol' back, and a God damn I missed ya?

Clyde grimaced.

Charlie leaned closer, threw a hand in the air. Nobody asked me if I wanted to *take one for the team*. You could've at least hired me the same fucking lawyer.

Charlie leaned his forearms on the car window sill. Clyde leaned his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. The he looked at Charlie and turned a palm up.

How fucking good would that have seemed, Charlie? They would have convicted us both on the spot. And I'm not—

You're not fucking innocent—

I'm not the one who fucking shot somebody.

Charlie looked toward the plant. Clyde put his hands on the steering wheel, looking out the front windshield and said, I didnt want to have to say it. And I'm not here to argue. I gather you probably dont have many friends right now. I'm just here to say Sheila's got dinner on the table and the loft's open in the barn.

Charlie looked down at the pavement and said under his breath, Fuck.

We're family, man. And family sticks together. No matter what.

Charlie stood and flicked his cigarette into the parking lot and got in. He crossed his arms and stared out the front window. He said, This doesnt mean I forgive your sorry ass.

Fine, Clyde said and shifted into first, letting the clutch out and accelerating out of the parking lot. The tall oaks lined the road at the edge of the fields like a covered bridge, its bronze roof ready to fall in the next big wind.

4

I wanted to call up Mary on the phone and invite her and Jacob to dinner too, but Clyde wasnt too sure Charlie would be a definite. But I busied myself with making enough stuffed pasta shells for an extra, pouring myself a glass of Chardonnay and listening to the Stones' You Cant Always Get What You Want. I fussed with my hair a little more. Then there they were pulling up the drive, seemingly at least

amiable. I took two beers out of the fridge and popped the tops, and right on time, heard the front door open.

I swung into the living room with my biggest smile and said, Hey, boys. How bout a cold one?

I handed one to Clyde and then one to Charlie who was behind him. I kissed him on the cheek and said, Welcome home, Charlie. We've missed you.

He tipped his bottle at me. Thanks, Sheila, he said and then took a long pull.

Smells good, babe, Clyde said and kissed me while patting my behind.

I smiled through my kiss, It's ready when you are.

He smiled back and said, That's what I like. My baby's full service.

Well come on in and sit yourselves down.

Hon, Clyde said, I think we'll cruise the barn first. You know, show him the new wheels for sale.

I frowned at him, splayed my arms akimbo, and thought better of what to say next.

Charlie said, Why dont you walk with us.

Yeah, Clyde said. Show him what we've done with the loft.

I smiled at Charlie and returned to the kitchen for my Chardonnay and out the door we went.

As we walked, Clyde gestured toward his putting green, talking about golf, and I watched Charlie from the side of my eyes. He'd nod his head and stare off somewheres else as if trying to figure out which way to run. And I wanted to kick

him in his shin and tear off in front of him just to get him going. But like all moths to the flame, we were drawn to Clyde because he was cool, could sell you a teat off a dead rat and you'd suck on it like it was gum that never lost its flavor. But Charlie, I could see he knew the bitter aftertaste of his own saliva and he was probably wondering how much more he could stomach. Every now and then he'd look over to me and wink and I'd wink back. I wanted to ask him, for the love of God, why'd you come back? But when it's the only place you know, for better or for worse, I guess that's something.

Charlie turned to me and said, I guess that's it.

He kind of stunned me for a moment until I realized he was responding to something Clyde said. But then again, I knew God worked in mysterious ways. I just hoped it wasn't my turn for comeuppance. But we both knew too well whose turn it really was.

Clyde got behind the end of the barn's wall door and leaned his shoulder into it, shoving it open. The western light spilled in on the new concrete floor. I never knew why Clyde cared to park his grimy tractors with his precious shiny cars. Cracks of light showed through the far side barn planks as if a theme for one of Clyde's ideas to make his own car calendar. It would read October and Clyde would have a model dressed in only an open flannel shirt.

Clyde walked us around each car and rattled off the specs and how he got it.

This one here—

A '69 Shelby, Charlie interrupted. I know my cars.



I know you do, son, Clyde clucked then said, What I was going to say is that it's probably the most legit out of the bunch. Won it in a poker game.

I said, He's a real Robinson Caruso.

Robin Hood, Hon. I steal from the rich and give to the less rich.

Clyde walked us to the back where a low car was under a cloth cover. He yanked it off in one motion and there in the orange light of the setting sun was a stunning stock car. It was pumpkin orange with two sky-blue racing stripes right down the middle and a black number 27 on the doors, hood, and trunk.

Wow, Charlie said, walking up to it and running his hand along the hood.

Clyde popped the hood and there was the shiniest chrome throated monster I've ever seen. He said, Five hundred cubic inches. One thousand three hundred fifty horsepower. A hundred fifty thousand dollars just in this engine.

Holy shit, Clyde, Charlie said, throwing his eyes wide open with his hand on his head.

How'd you like me to sponsor you in this?

Charlie's jaw dropped, but then he quickly closed it and said, What's the hitch, Clyde?

Clyde hung his head then looked at me and said, He didnt fall off no turnip truck, did he?

Then everyone was quite for a few moments. I gulped the rest of my Chardonnay and crossed me arms, the evening chill beginning to settle in.

Clyde pulled a strand of hay from a bale and began chewing on it. He said, I know there's things we all shouldnt do, but we do it anyway. Kind of

becomes who we are, you know? Honest work isn't anything without being honest with yourself. And I've been honest with myself from the get go. What I do is wrong in many people's eyes, but I was born to do this. I love it. And I'm damn good at it.

Clyde paused then put his hand on Charlie's shoulder and said, And you were born to drive and you know it.

I shuffled my feet and said, Boys it's getting dark in here and dinner's past ready.

Charlie said, So what're you saying?

I've got one more job for you and if you do it—he points at the car—she's yours.

Charlie lifted his eyebrows and looked at him sideways and said, That's a big bill. Might be too much at stake here.

Clyde stuck out his bottom lip and shook his head and said, No. Let's just say the job's a sentimental pay off for me and the car's to make up for the last eight years.

Charlie said, Well then, I guess the only question is who's riding shotgun.

We walked back out and Clyde shoved the barn door closed and locked it. Walking back, he said, Charlie, I don't mean to put this pressure on you already, but like all important jobs, this one has a quick deadline. But I don't want your answer today. I'll give you to the end of the week to *really* think about it.

Why aren't you doing it yourself if it's so important? Charlie said.

Clyde quickly looked at me and coughed. He said, We'll talk about it later.

He stared ahead and picked up the pace, leaving me behind with Charlie as we walked toward the house. I walked with my head down and said, I'm sorry Charlie. I was hoping for something better for you.

He put his arm around me and hugged me as we walked. He said, Dont worry, Sheila, everything's just words right now.

And even though he was right for the moment, he wasnt being honest with me. But I smiled up at him anyways and he laughed and we walked hand in hand up to the porch.

Over dinner we talked about family, dead and missed relatives like Charlie's parents and the good times of the past. Then Clyde made a toast to the future. Then I saw him slip a hundred dollar bill under the table to Charlie as he said, You best remember who your friends are.

Charlie folded the bill into his jean-jacket pocket and didnt say a word. I collected the dirty plates and stuck them in the dishwasher, then walked Charlie and Clyde to the door. Charlie looked back as they walked down the drive to the Porsche. He winked at me again and I tried to smile, but it was harder this time. I wished I had my glasses. They both seemed to going out of focus.

5

Sheila called and warned me Charlie was on his way over. He got back just in time to walk the neighborhood with me as Jacob trick-or-treated. It was real nice. Me and him walking shoulder to shoulder and catching pieces of conversation between Jacob running back and forth between door walks in his Ricky-Bobby

racecar outfit. Charlie asked me if I was seeing anyone and I said no, but not to be mistook; there'd been other guys for sure. And he said that was fair. Then he asked me how come I only wrote letters and never came to see him. I told him it would of broken my heart even more if I had to see him inside that dreadful place, but more importantly, I never wanted Jacob to see him there. Charlie said he could understand, but just the sight of me and the sound of my voice every once in awhile might have made prison the more bearable.

I took his hand in mine and said, You can look at me all you want now.

He raised our held hands to his lips and kissed the back of mine.

We made mad love that night and the next day, Wednesday, I had off and so I kept Jacob home from school so we could spend the day being a family. So Charlie cooked us peanut-butter French toast. Then he stacked hay bales in the backyard and rigged up a practice target for Jacob and the two of them shot arrows until their fingers were raw. I sat in the chaise longue, draped in the blanket I was knitting, the day sunny but windy. It made my heart lift just to watch my son love being around his father, each giving the other pointers and encouragement, talking about the big bucks they were going to fell.

That night in bed again, curled up into each other, I said, If this is how it's going to be, then I need you to promise me you wont work for your uncle again.

You talked to Sheila didnt you?

I dont care who's talked to who. I'm just saying right now, between the two of us.

He ran his finger down my nose and said, You know you and Jacob are more important to me than his bullshit.

No, I dont know that. I'm saying you got to prove it.

Honey, I'm just trying to stay out and stay alive.

'Cause if you're going to suck me back in Charlie, I'll never forgive you if you wind up in jail again or worse yet dead. And I'm saying this as much or more for Jacob's sake. It's not all about you anymore.

Charlie flopped onto his back and rested his forearm on his forehead. Fuck, Mary. I'm just trying to get used to living again. I'm too afraid of thinking about tomorrow.

Well, welcome to living again. It's called thinking about tomorrow. I dont care what else we ever fight about again—that'll at least mean you're around—but this is the big one we got to face.

He turned his back on me and said, So far, being back's felt more like a halfway house than home. Everyone's got me one foot in the slammer again.

I sat up on an elbow. No, Charlie. Prison's one thing. Earning back respect's another. Eight years is a big hole to fill, but people will let you back in if you want them to. Just got to keep showing up, that's all.

I laid back and stared at the ceiling. Then I said, I'm working the morning shift at Kay's Diner tomorrow. Can you get Jacob off to school?

Yeah. Then he said, Does Jacob have a hunting gun?

Yeah, what for? I said and looked at the ceiling some more. He didn't answer so I tried to shut my eyes and go to sleep. I didn't know where we stood. But at least we were talking. Talking about tomorrow.

6

Thursday morning, Police Chief Liam Sloane decided he'd have himself a ride about with Eddie Balencort the conservation officer. Liam climbed up into the forest green Chevy pick-up.

Shit they make these things tall, Liam said. *And* you got four-wheel drive and bush grills.

Beats sitting behind desks and making phone calls.

No need for desks now with cell phones. But they still find ways of putting me behind one.

Eddie put the truck in gear and they rolled north of town. He said, So Charlie's back in town, eh?

Yeah, and I know that shit is not going to pass up hunting. Bow season or not, we catch him with a gun—he's finished.

You really think he'd chance it?

I dont know. But it's my job to find out.

Well, I know Raisin River east of ten is the country Charlie liked to hunt. So that ought about narrow it down.

This'll be your collar, Eddie. My satisfaction'll come from seeing him locked up again.

You saying you want to stay in the truck?

Smartass.

Liam pointed at the next town's bakery and said to stop for some coffee. Eddie did. When they'd purchased their coffee and doughnut selections, the two walked out with boxes in one hand and coffee in the other. Then they stood there with their mouths open, watching as Jacob pulled up on a four wheeler with Charlie on the seat behind him and they were pulling a trailer with a twelve-point buck in it.

Charlie stood off the four wheeler and whooped, Look at this one, boys. Me and Jacob tried waiting for you, but alas, the early bird gets the worm.

The Chief and C.O. walked over, peeling their eyes over the whole rig.

I know what you're thinking, Charlie said. I done shot this buck in bow season, but you wont find me breaking the rules like that. No, sir. Jacob, turn around so that they can see your hunting license.

Jacob did so, grinning.

Hell yeah, Charlie said. This is the boy's first deer, gentlemen.

Well I'll be, the game warden said, peering closer at the Jacob's license and then the bow in the trailer with the deer. He said, Congratulations, son.

Now hold on here a minute, the Chief said. Why aint the boy in school, Charlie? He dont look sick to me.

You trying to ruin our fun today, Chief? Charlie said. Charlie stepped up to the Chief and said with an edge in his voice, All you see here is a convict and I wont have it in front of my son.

The warden came over and said, Back off, Charlie.

Charlie took a step back and said, There's no law that says a parent cant keep his kid from going to school for a day. I called in.

Come on, Liam. Let's go. There's nothing here for us.

Liam pointed his coffee at Charlie and said, We aint through yet.

Liam and Eddie turned and walked toward the truck.

Charlie yelled, What you see here standing before you is a father and a husband, someone who's doing day after day's honest work.

The men climbed up into the truck and Liam took out a powdered doughnut and took a bite. He looked over at Charlie and Jacob one more time as they pulled out of the drive and found them laughing. Then he saw the powder on his fingers and he looked at Eddie.

Eddie pointed to his own lips and said, You got a little . . .

Liam wiped his mouth with a napkin and laughed too. Maybe Charlie was finally straightened out. There were a lot of straight roads in this township. But they all ended in curves and stop signs eventually.

7

Come Friday morning, I kept fidgeting with my hair, too excited that Clyde had rented an hour of track time down at the speedway to give Charlie a taste of his stock car. There was no one who could drive a car like Charlie. Mary knew that. Clyde knew that, and so did I. When he was a kid, he won all the soapbox car races and then again with the go-carts. But because he didnt have any money for



his own car was how he came to work for my Clyde. Clyde always had fast cars and needed them driven somewhere, so he took his nephew on and taught him all he knew about cars. And here they were again, a woman and a car between them as Clyde and Charlie rolled the car out of Clyde's enclosed trailer and into the pit.

Clyde said, This is it Charlie, the day you've been waiting for. Could be the start of a new household name—Charlie Sampson. Boy I like the sound of that.

You're laying it on a little too thick, dont you think? Charlie said.

Mary coming? I said. You know how she just loved to watch you drive.

I wish she would, Sheila, Charlie said. But we had a fight about it last night. I might be needing your loft accommodations yet.

You're always welcome, Charlie, I said and touched my hot cheek.

He tugged on his racing gloves and said, Clyde, why cant I just race for you? Why's there got to be this car deal in the way?

What he's not telling you yet, I said before Clyde could take it another way, is that he's got a teenaged daughter that lives in Ohio and she's been writing that her mom's—I stared hard at Clyde until he looked away—hooked on crystal meth and the daughter doesnt want to live there anymore.

Clyde, is this true? Charlie said.

Clyde said, We're eating up track time guys.

Hold on, Charlie said. What's this got to do with me?

If you don't tell him, I said, I will.

For Christ sakes, Clyde said, then leveled his eyes at Charlie. I need you to kidnap her and bring her back here to my home.

Kidnap her? I cant fucking do that. Hell I dont even think I'm supposed to leave the state.

Listen. What I'm really asking you to do isnt all that illegal. Private Investigators are hired to do this all the time. Once you clear back over the Michigan state line, you're home free. Ohio cant touch you.

You're fucking crazy man, Charlie said and tugged on his helmet.

Dont you even think about doing it, Charlie, Mary said, walking up.

Mary? I said and gave her a quick little hug. I didnt think you'd show.

Charlie took his helmet back off and said, What are you doing here?

To make sure this scumbag doesnt ruin our lives again, she spit out at Clyde.

Clyde ignored her and said, Charlie, your baby cousin has her whole life in front of her. I cant bear to know she's stuck in the drug world.

Fuck. You, Mary said, her arms crossed and hair tangled. *We've* got our whole lives in front of us too. Just because some late night port gone awry over a decade ago threatens your fatherly concern. I'm just plum sorry. Life sucks sometimes doesnt it?

Charlie jammed his helmet on, then sat up on the driver's side door and swung both legs into the car and slithered in.

That a boy, Clyde said, snapping the window mesh down. Get in the car.

Clyde, I'm warning you, Charlie said. Dont push me. I'm liable to put this car into the wall.

Clyde put his face right up next to the mesh and said, Put this car in the wall, you better not come crawling out of it. You hear? And if you don't take the Shelby down to get my daughter, I'll make sure you dont get another job from here to Detroit.

Charlie started his engine and revved it high, splitting my poor eardrums in half. Clyde slapped the roof and Charlie smoked the rear wheels tearing off onto the wide banked track, ripping through the gears until he was flying up high on the bank close to the wall. That car sounded like the devil's throat cleft open and I could feel it vibrate through my entire being. There was nowhere to go but around in circles just as fast as he could until the wheels looked like they were still. All eyes were on Charlie now.

## 8

That night at the rendering plant, Charlie drove the Bob Cat like an outlaw cowboy, a bandana over his mouth and nose as he scooped up bucketfuls from the heaping pile of horse and cow heads and hooves, road kill, and euthanized pets. Flies and maggots swarmed over the lifeless meat until it seemed the pile was a giant humming brain. He backed up and drove across the slick floor over to the stainless-steel pit where he dumped the carcasses into a grinding auger below, bones snapping and flesh tearing. All he could think of with each cement-

banging scoop, each auger belch, was the splintered bone and red meat of a man's hip torn into shot-gunned khakis.

Eight years in for the pull of a trigger and a hot car. Charlie rolled the dice knowing Clyde always got his cars from downtown Detroit, where they were hijacked. Clyde was their high-end out-of-town retailer. Charlie, his driver. Clyde'd drive him in and Charlie'd drive them out. The last time, in a yellow Thunderbird, Charlie stopped at a Mobil gas station in the suburbs at two a.m. It was a hot night, just cooling off into the upper seventies and Charlie had the top down and was wearing loose cotton pants and shirt and huaraches. Knew to play the part so it would look like he'd been to the casino.

A little black girl sat outside the gas station door, sucking on a sucker. Charlie unscrewed the gas cap and put the nozzle in and started pumping when a man pulled up in a dark sedan, parking by the pay phone. The man got out of his car and leaned against his hood to light a cigarette. A scraggly Nick Nolte in a cheap suit without a tie. He hit his cigarette and blew out smoke, looking at the little girl sitting on the ground.

The man says, Hey little girl, where's your *nigger* daddy?

The little girl just keeps sucking and looking at the man with her big brown eyes. The back of Charlie's neck tingles and he glances at the butt of his sawed-off twelve-gauge sticking out from under his seat.

The man says, Hey, your daddy teach you how to suck like that?

He reminds Charlie of his neighbor in Flint when Charlie was just a kid. The neighbor would sit in his lawn chair drinking cans of Schlitz and calling him a

pussy and a nigger lover anytime he was playing in the front yard with one of his black friends.

Charlie eyes the man leaning against his hood and spits at him, That's enough.

Oh, is that so? the man says, his cigarette pauses mid-air. He fixates his eyes on Charlie and says, Your daddy a nigger too?

Charlie steps up to the Thunderbird's open door and without taking his eyes off the man, leans one shoulder down and grabs up the double-barreled shotgun pistol. But the man has already pulled his .38 from his shoulder holster beneath his jacket, so Charlie freezes in a half crouch.

Well, well. What, have, we, here? The man cocks his head and smirks, his other hand opening his jacket to the steel flash of a badge. He says, Oh, you want to show her how to suck it. Is that it?

Charlie feels the cold steel slowly warm to his touch. That sensation has always excited him during the snap of dawn on opening day. But now, his knees and hands shake. Everything feels wrong, like a bad acid trip, like rolling a car—he doesn't know if he's going to come out alive. Clyde had talked him into bringing along the gun for protection, just in case someone tried to hijack the cars. A deterrent really. Charlie had never taken the thought all the way to its dead end. Had never imagined pulling the trigger on a person. And here he is being a dumbass for asking for it rather than keeping to himself like he should have. He's screwed. Only one choice seems available.

The man's eyes dart too Charlie's gas nozzle when it clinks off. Charlie shoots from beneath his driver's side door and tears a hole the size of a squash in the man's left hip. As the man falls back against the hood, Charlie jumps into the Thunderbird turns the key and punches it, the nozzle popping out of his tank as he jettisons the parking lot.

Charlie ends up doing some of his craziest driving stunts that night, trying to outrun the cop he shot. Charlie hadn't known he'd be able to do it. But he'd been desperate, cornered, and could feel the barred windows behind him already. But this feeling, this rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins, makes him so damn happy being on the run, that he knows he'll do it all over again if he could. But then he thinks of the little black girl having had to watch the nasty scene he'd orchestrated and suddenly feels sick. Always trying so hard to play it cool, yet he still seems to fuck it up somehow.

He pounds the steering wheel to focus his mind on the immediacy of the moment, his only thought to escape to the Ohio border. He knows he can out-drive the cop and he's doing just that, zigzagging between the late-night traffic on Michigan Avenue and power-skidding into right-hand turns at every red light. Then a gas truck pulls out of a station, forcing him into oncoming traffic. He cranks the steering wheel and skids into a sideways drift. Then the last thing he remembers is the Thunderbird rolling through the air and being thrown to the asphalt like a bug off a windshield.

He woke up in a hospital bed the next day surrounded by a couple of policeman, Mary, and Sheila and Clyde. He knew his life as he knew it was over then, and when he saw the tears streaming down Mary's face, his heart broke. He wished he was Superman so that he could fly into outer space and supersonically zip around the world a hundred thousand times in order to reverse time, so that he could start afresh again that day he'd met her stranding on the side of Highway 10, unsuccessfully trying to wrench free the lug nuts from a flat tire. He could see her tan legs curving up to her Daisy Dukes and a tank top. Her hair back in a blonde pony, and there was a grease smudge or two on her face where she'd wiped her bangs out of her eyes when she lifted her head from her squat position to see him pull up. A woman who wasn't afraid to get dirty. He wished he would have left the flat tire on the car on the side of the road and just given her a lift. And he would have gone left this time, heading out of town, maybe not stopping until Denver, running as far as he could from Clyde. But all that was left in that hospital bed, were those empty eyes of hers staring at him like eight years of slotted space between bars.

Now, here he was back outside, facing the same wheel of decisions turning at such high speed; his options looked still and unchanging again. Work for Clyde or not work at all. Dont work for Clyde and come home to Mary. Work for Clyde and dont come home to Mary. This time he felt closer to the drain, where all the oil and blood ran off the road and mixed with the muck and insects on a hot humid night, like every night at the rendering plant. Back and forth, carrying scoops of wasted life nobody cared to take the time to bury.

After work, Charlie caught a ride into town with one of his co-workers, and he bought a six pack of Bud. He popped one and started walking for Mary's in the evening chill, the headlights coming at him like some light at the end of a tunnel, then running over him. When he got to Mary's, he knocked on the door and waited, but no one answered. So he let himself in.

There was a note on the table. He read it and sighed. Grabbing another beer, he put the rest in the fridge and sat down for a moment, just staring off. After some time, his eyes dimmed to a focus of cold sparked steel and he stood up, got another beer, and took the stairs down into the basement, where he pulled on the string to a round ceiling light bulb, which cast a yellowish light that chased the shadows into the corners where the clay floor met the fieldstone. Just some boxes labeled winter boots and clothes and one of Christmas ornaments. A cot with a pillow and wool blanket on it. His dad's cot from the marines. His house that used to be his parents'.

Behind the furnace he found Jacob's hunting gun and his old tool box. He opened the box and rummaged around until he found the hack saw. Then Charlie sat down on the cot with a squeak of coils and placed the gun across his lap. Taking a sip of beer, he began sawing thirteen inches of barrel to the floor, the headstock vibrating beneath his left-handed grip, the saw blade turning blue from friction heat. He never liked the sound of nails on a chalkboard, and this came close.



The process filled him with that heady anticipation, like the day before a family reunion—getting things ready with a few cousins and an uncle or two, moving picnic tables, parking cars, buying and drinking beer by the lake, just waiting for everyone to arrive and the party to begin. That simmering summer heat beckoning for the wind to blow through the open windows at sixty miles an hour or more—running to redline.

He knew that was as far as he should go, just pretending, reminiscing how it used to feel. But what worried him was learning how to stop, just like drinking. The first beer always went down so easily, that he never learned when he was falling off that slippery edge with the ones to come.

## STELLA BY STARLIGHT

Kenan Brook finishes the last swig from his longneck and looks up through the pines at the night sky. The cold stars stare back unblinking and steadfast in the New Year. Like a thin veil, steam from the hiss of the hot-tub's bubbling water rises about his quarterback shoulders as window light from the Sexton's cottage spills onto the snow-covered deck outside the walk-out basement. He watches Conrad Sexton, his old high-school history teacher from downstate, reach his thick arm down into the snow for two more beers, handing one to him.

You've been a good friend, Kenan says. I miss living with you guys last year as I finished up my degree. Miss hanging out with Stella.

Conrad combs his beard with his hand. Well, just in these couple of days, you can probably see she's still the typical teenager. You know, on the phone, the Internet, stares in the mirror way too much.

Kenan nods, thinking of last night. Since the last eight months he's been gone, there definitely seems to be more to her than just those things now.

Hey, Conrad says. You really should think about sailing to the North Channel with us this summer. I know Stella would really appreciate it. She hates been held captive by her skinny-dipping parents.

That would be really nice. You know I've always wanted to. But . . . Kenan peers through the dense pines for a glimpse of the frozen lake.

But what? This'll be your first paid summer off. We'll just count on it.

Kenan glances up at the windows above, trying to smile.

So how *is* your first year of teaching going anyways? Conrad says.

Kenan runs his fingers through his curly dark hair covering his ears. I really like living up here, he says. The small towns, the snow. But *man*, what these girls are wearing in class. They're kids showing off their women bodies. I mean cleavage, mini skirts, puppy eyes. Enough to drive me crazy. I don't know where to look.

Conrad laughs. Here's what I do. If you're caught looking, just ever so slightly shift your gaze off to the side, like you're lost in thought.

Really?

Have you sported a hard on during lecture yet?

What?

It's bound to happen. Why do you think I stood behind that podium every day? Just wait until you find a Robin in your class.

Or a Stella, Kenan thinks. He has always wanted to get his hands on her, but has known that was just fantasy. Whenever he catches himself thinking about it he quickly does the math, counting how many years until she was twenty-one; then when that seems like too long, he counts how many to eighteen. When he finds himself dreaming of them together, he reminds himself of the ten years difference and that tends to bring him back to reality.

The low hum of the water jets drones on and Kenan gazes through the mist at Robin's slim profile behind the sliding glass door, ten years his senior. She moves in and out of view, prepping skis for tomorrow. Still in her ski tights, she shows off her tight ass and athletic legs as her blond hair straight down to

her butt sways back and forth, her nipples poking through a loose-fitting nylon top.

Earlier that evening, Kenan and Robin had gotten a chance to ski together on the Sexton's own groomed ski trails through the ten acres they owned on Walloon Lake. The sun was out and fresh snow weighed down the pines as he and Robin skated among the intermittent birches and beeches skirting the lake.

How's the love life? Robin said.

Slow. Been hitting on this waitress down at the brewery, but she's leaving for Alaska.

Well, don't rush things. I used to be just one of the guys, joining in on the locker room talk, flirting for fun. But marriage has changed me. Now it seems I don't have anyone to confide in. It's strange, but I feel like Conrad and I are just one person, like I'm androgynous or something. But it's for the better, I guess. I learned my lesson early on. Remember Grady, Conrad's cousin, the heart surgeon who lives out West? He used to visit Conrad every fall, bringing a pound of mushrooms, and the two of them would trip and go to the MSU football game. The first year we were married, Grady visited as usual, and after the game the three of us sat in the hot tub. Tapped out, Conrad went to bed early and Grady and I stayed in the tub. Giving each other back rubs, we eventually kissed.

That was as far as it went, but I knew I'd have to tell Conrad the next morning. And when I did, you'd never seen such a stormy face. He reigned in his anger until he cried. Grady was his closest friend, but Conrad had made up his

mind. We drove him to the airport that morning and it was the most awkward, quiet ride of my life. We haven't seen him to this day.

It's sad, she said. His family must wonder why. And I felt just awful. Conrad had already made many of his mistakes, been through a divorce. But hell, I was still young, just twenty.

Their skis shushed on snow, poles flicking beside them.

Everyone thinks we're the perfect happy family, Robin said. But we're not. It's hard to live up to. But we have our struggles too, you know.

Kenan felt honored that she'd opened up to him, taking their friendship to a deeper level. But he kept to himself about his own struggles with being attracted to her, and worse yet, to Stella. But he knew he'd never seen Robin as beautiful as those naked moments of sharing. And as they skied along talking about other things, he pretended that she was his wife, and how fucking good that felt while it lasted.

Kenan hears the sliding glass door open and shut and watches as a slim figure runs across the thin layer of snow in her bare feet. Stella, filling out to be a younger version of her mother—full lips, high cheek bones, and eager doe eyes. She quickly sheds her towel to reveal a one piece bathing suit and dips her slender legs in the hot water and slowly submerges up to her neck.

Hi Kenan, she says and he returns her greeting.

Stella's starting as a varsity pole-vaulter as a freshman this spring, says Conrad.

Is that so? Congratulations. Kenan nods his head and lifts his upper body out of the water to sit on a submerged bench to cool off and allow room for Stella.

But the spring training's kicking her ass, says Conrad.

Yeah, says Stella, I'm really sore.

Well, Kenan's just finished a massage class for fun. I bet he wouldn't mind loosening you up a bit.

Stella floats over to sit in the neck-deep water in front of him, her back turned to him, offering her bare shoulders. Kenan finds his powerful hands, which could each palm and dunk a basketball, kneading and caressing her developing deltoids, triceps and biceps, and forearms. He works his thumbs into Stella's lat muscles as she slides down into the water, backlit by a blue light below. Her eyes close, hair fans out, and her arms stretch out to either side like the weightless shadow of an angel floating through the heavens.

Last night bringing in the New Year, he knew where to draw the line. Robin and Conrad had retired "early," leaving the two of them to stay up and watch the clock tick. Kenan brought out his iPod and portable speakers and introduced her to the likes of Satchmo, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Ella Fitzgerald. Told her how the band was having a conversation, how the musicians were *saying* something.

Stella brought over two mugs of hot chocolate. Kind of like people kissing, right?

Right. He pinched his lower lip. Or dancing.

She asked him to teach her how to swing dance and so he twirled, dipped, and swung her around on the hardwood floor that dashed along the high-ceilinged wall of glass. The moonlit tops of snow-covered pines and the frozen lake looked in as the windows reflected back the young bodies in motion. The two of them laughed hand in hand until it was well past midnight when they collapsed on the couch.

What time is it? she asked.

He looked at his watch. One o'clock, he said. Happy New Year.

She looked in his eyes. Weren't we supposed to kiss or something, you know, at midnight?

At that moment he wanted to. But she's too young! his mind screamed. What does she know?! Her dad is your best friend!

He slowly moved his eyes so that he stared just over her shoulder at the smoldering fireplace. We danced instead, he said. And how 'bout that?

He stood and moved to his iPod to turn it up. They're playing your song.

She frowned. What song?

Stella by Starlight.

Jazz sucks, she said and got off the couch, arms crossed. Goodnight.

Hey, hold on a minute.

Kenan walked over and hugged her. Let's not spoil the night. You're one of my favorite people, you know.

He kissed the top of her head. You'll have plenty of kisses in the years to come. No need to worry about that. He let her go, his heart aching as she walked away. Sweet dreams, he said, wishing she were ten years older.

Conrad stands up in his Speedo, the water and steam rushing off his thick body. More beer? he asks.

Kenan nods and Conrad steps out of the tub and grabs his towel, tiptoeing to the house while he dries off. As he sits on the high bench, submerged up to his belly-button, the back of Stella's head floats just above his lap, where he can easily reach her shoulders. Kenan begins to massage Stella's arms, up into her shoulders and down toward her neckline as she floats to and away from him. His mind screams, NO! but his body screams, YES! How odd he doesn't feel embarrassed that he's sporting a hard on and the back of her neck is actually rubbing up against it. Does she know what the hell's going on? Is she turned on? He can't tell where the hot water turns to steam, where her supple curves begin and his fingertips leave off.

He can't control it. He's got to touch her breasts.

Touching.

Massaging.

No reaction.

When Kenan sees Conrad returning, he moves his hands back to Stella's shoulders. Conrad steps back into the tub with a handful of beers. Setting them



down beside the tub, he sits back down, and smiles down at Stella. Man, he says. Must be working; she's zoned out.

Kenan knows it has to stop, has gone too far already, and thank god, Robin pokes her head out the sliding-glass door.

You guys are going to turn into prunes, she calls out. Stella, come on in.

In slow motion, Stella stands up and wraps herself in a towel and leaves without a word. She seems to float across the deck, her silhouette edged in stars.

At the door, Robin takes her under her arm. What's the matter? Are you all right?

Before Robin slides the door shut, she looks out at them in the hot tub. What'd you guys do to her?

Nothing, Conrad laughs. Then Robin disappears down the hallway with Stella.

Conrad is talking again, but Kenan doesn't hear a word, the Milky Way stretching out between them. He lowers his gaze and hides behind one of his hands massaging his temples. The hot-tub motor, the pulsing jets, the rise and fall of Conrad's voice, all sound like some foreign music from another world where trees are steel bars and friends can't help.

He can't seem to shake it. It seems that Stella had frozen in the warm water when he touched her there, riveted like an icy-hot electric shock that wouldn't let go. He wondered if she had seen the stars too, the North Star directly above, as they tried to get their bearings. But all she could probably see was the receding blackness behind the stuck back of her eyelids. Then her mother's

voice called from across the long distance, sharp and cold as ice, as if she were in bed, caught touching herself. He let his hands drop into the jet stream and watched as she willed herself to move toward where her mother would take her under her wing and down the hallway to start the shower running hot. Wrapped in a towel like some high-fevered zombie, Stella floated over the edge like a wet dream, stepping through a million tiny pinpricks toward a sliding wall of glass, the river pushing down deep.

## DOUBLE CROSSED

You think I don't know what you're saying behind my back. But I can see it in the way you try not to watch me as we sit at either end of the bar. Turning to your neighbor and saying, can you believe she's forty, married, and dresses like a slut? I hear she's getting a divorce. Dating guys half her age. Students even.

I thought we were friends. End of August, between first-week faculty meetings at the college, a group of us drank too much at lunch and decided in honor of the new Fish philosophy designed to buck us up as a team of new and improved individuals, we should go out on my pontoon boat and skinny dip in Crooked Lake. I was the only one who didn't completely undress, just stayed tanning in my bra and thong. You didn't seem to mind then. You were the one who got your bare ass slapped by a married man as you dove in. Probably wondering if you betrayed his wife, your friend. I know he was.

Now it's the season for holiday cheer, even if it's fake. Later we'll have to say hello, just so you can pretend that you care. So things aren't awkward at the faculty Christmas party. You'll give me a hug with a nervous smile and laugh. Make some small talk in regards to teaching, then lie and say how good I look. I'll be obliged to play along. You'll expect me to smile back with a quick laugh and lay my hand on your arm, feigning sincerity. Like nothing's wrong. Why go through the motions I don't know. Maybe I should have another whiskey sour, find the guts to say what I really feel.

And, yeah, maybe I'm drinking a little too much, more than I used to anyways. I mean I always opened a bottle of red wine while I started dinner and would be through it by the end of dishes. But Jim would drink some too, you know. When he was around anyways. I never used to go out alone. Just got tired of staying home and lying to the kids about Jim's whereabouts, knowing Bobby had probably already heard that his dad's banging last year's homecoming queen.

And don't think I haven't seen the way your male students ogle your C-cups. You know they're one of your best assets. And do I fault you for flaunting it every now and then? So what if I'm wearing fishnet stockings and a leather mini skirt, my blouse cut low. It's the robin-egg blue eye-shadow and the heavy mascara that makes me look whorish. Or is it my second chin when I laugh, the crow feet in the corner of my eyes? My short hair. That's it.

It's probably because I'm doing what you wish you only could. Take Joey in your class. I know in your mind you've undressed him while singing wine karaoke in your living room all by yourself in front of a sad, romantic fire. Then left to stimulate yourself alone in bed. But not me. Got to rake my fingernails down his hard body and rip his belt out with my teeth. You can imagine the rest. An easy A.

And so what if that wasn't the most moral thing I could do in the world. You should talk about who *Jim's* fucking. Probably are. Christ what else could a man ask for? You may tell yourself that it's your civic duty to talk about me. Maybe then you won't be tempted to get sucked into my immoral ways, because

you'll remember that you care too much about what other people think. Couldn't stand to be talked about in such a shameful way. Maybe just talking about it helps you to feel like you're better, helps you to shove those primal feelings down deep, trying to figure out what's right, because you don't know yet. You don't want to know yet.

It's easy when you're young and single. Easy to judge. Because you haven't made your mistakes yet. You're still discovering them. You still think you've got all the men by the balls, that you're too good for them. Maybe you are. I know I should be. But what you don't know yet, and I forgive you this, is the pain of your dearest love leaving you. It's like the outward whoosh of breath after a soccer ball has been drilled into your guts and you fall down in a clutch wondering if you'll ever breathe again. And there's no one standing there to help you back up. To care if you've caught your breath or not.

That's where I am right now. Catching that first breath. Taking it all the way in for all that it's worth. Because I've been put last by my family, by myself. And when I realized this right in the middle of finishing the cabernet after dishes one night, I was staring out the sliding glass door into the January darkness, looking for the dog, but only seeing my pathetic self reflected back in the kitchen light, arms crossed with an empty bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

Then that made me cry. And then I was crying about crying until it didn't seem like it was going to end any time soon. I sat down at the kitchen table, head in hands. Crying because I couldn't talk coherently enough to tell my kids it was

going to be all right. Crying because my awful husband might feel like he had to fetch me off to my room. Thank god, he knew better. About that anyways.

But then I began laugh crying, wiping away my tears. I didn't fucking care anymore. It was absurd I put up with it that long. My family stood there perplexed, the TV chatting away in the other room, son and daughter at each shoulder petting my hair. Jim with his button-down shirt and khakis, hands on his hips, just stared at me as if I've just peed my pants in church. And all I could think of was that woman I read poetry by in my last grad class, how her poems were so haunting and I couldn't figure out why. Until then. She was writing about me. And that made me laugh and cry even more.

Don't think I haven't tried to save my marriage. When he came home smelling of her, I surely didn't kick him out and send him right back. No. He moved into the guest room and we got used to not talking about it. Just like his parents. But of course, I'm really not like that. I tried to talk about it. I tried until everyone was pissed off at me for wrecking our evenings at home and I just ended up crying more and the TV droned on.

Sure, maybe I can be a little flirtatious with the boys in my classes. And maybe I don't always feel like having sex with Jim. He used to take care of me in bed, always making sure to pleasure me twice before we made love. But it was all too predictable—how he'd start, right up to how he'd end. Maybe that's what I get for marrying a tax accountant. But then again, maybe I made him feel obligated to please me, rather than spicing up things myself and pleasing him before I got off. But unlike Jim, whose work stays at the office, mine comes

home. Hundreds of shitty essays on stupid topics, like why marijuana should be legalized or abortion should be illegalized. And he wonders why by the end of the night I've got a headache? Now it's because he's still fucking her.

And here I find myself at the bar showing off more than I'm comfortable with and trying to smile confidently in-between slurs and long blinks. Because I'm still seeing stars in my eyes, wondering how Rocky ever got through being punch drunk and how Yo Adrian could stand to watch. I used to think I was a genius. Graduated summa cum laude from Eastern Michigan University and published a chap book only to land a freshman composition job at the community college back in my home town. That's when I liked to be talked about. Back when it was all good. Well, at least okay.

But now I have to deal with it at Glen's Market, Family Video, and tonight the Noggin' Room. People just being politely not there. Thank god for tourists. I go out of my way to make eye contact and say hi to someone I know and on the off chance I caught her eye, she'd make a quick smiling nod my way. But that was it. None of our usual can't-shut-us-up banter. And the only person who did seem to care was the woman behind the counter at the post office, who took in sick horses at her ranch. And who *really* didn't care was anyone serving me behind a bar, and that was refreshing, for awhile. Then there are always the men. I can count on them to look. And look and look.

Sometimes I'd go home after last call, the house cold and dark, and pace from room to room, my legs quaking, heart pounding, my body numb, afraid I was going to die. Sometimes doubling over the toilet, but nothing came up. Even

tried sticking my finger down my throat. It was like all the bullshit I'd taken in over the years was clogged in my pores. I was allergic to myself, walled off a long way from my stomach being able to help. The anxiety would wash over me in waves and I'd concentrate on deep breaths, telling myself I was going to be okay, making deals with myself and god until I was so tired of caring, I'd pass out on the couch under a blanket. Dreaming the nightmare would be gone by tomorrow.

But you're still there at the end of the bar. I can almost see the syllables escaping your lips: she should see a shrink.

I have. But shrinks are only hired friends really, paid to listen. And how sad is that really when you realize that? Better get your money's worth I thought. 'Cause I didn't need just a friend; I needed some good loving. Shame on him for taking advantage of me, you might be thinking. Sure, you could say that, but at least he came to the table and didn't judge me for who I was at that moment. He embraced me. And that's a lot more than this town is doing. After fifteen years of *service* trying to teach freshman jerk-offs how to use a comma, target an audience, and write persuasively, this is what I get in return? People whispering behind newspapers?

Maybe I should do a full centerfold spread so everyone can have their good laugh all day and point in my direction, shaking their heads. Maybe we should all get it over with and stand naked down at the waterfront and let it all air out. Because at least I haven't been hiding. And people don't know what to do with that. You're afraid I'm gunning for your man next, or if he's not, then the one



you want. Just when you thought the field was narrowed down, all those housewives no one had to worry about.

But let me tell you how it is on the dead-end side of the gossip. It's not the community that has your best interest in mind. Gossip's a wicked tool trying to police you into caring what other's think is right for you, to help bring me down to your level so that you can feel better that you weren't the one who *did that*. I call that rubbing my nose in it. Not the kind of small-town politics I want to be a part of.

Oh, and here you come now, dressed in a suit, probably on your way out.

Hey you, you say, kissing me on the cheek, hugging me long, speaking through my hair. How are you doing? I'm worried. You haven't returned my calls.

You sit down, your warm hand holding mine, smiling kindly. Talk to me.

With my other hand, I wipe the corner of my eyes. I've been wrong before, I say.

Coffee? you say and help me put on my fur coat. Once out the door, you link your arm with mine as we walk down the snow-laced street, the old gas-light district lit up like pillared snow globes or full moons down to the bay.

Remember that day we skinny-dipped drunk at lunch? you say. I miss those times.

Me too.

Maybe we should jump in the bay.

*Now?*

You nod vigorously as I think about laughing, just the wet flakes falling and the sound of our dampened foot steps. And it's as if the night has paused, the city at your beckoning call, poised and ready to catch my breath.

## FEMME INCOMPRISE

So you're a writer. Or a grad assistant enrolled in a creative-writing program. And your biggest challenge, which everyone says is nearly impossible to do as a man, is to write from a woman's perspective. How hard can it be, you think? You've always been open to new experiences. Couldn't be any harder than wearing your girlfriend's pink legwarmers to sixth grade one day just to show boys could do it too. Or when in undergrad, you shaved your legs one season to race on the bicycle team. Thinking like a woman couldn't be any more difficult than squatting to pee. You'd have to do some training, that's all. Understand you still have a penis and that boobs don't grow over night and you're already used to that. You would just be a flat-chested woman who wouldn't wear any spandex. Luckily you already have hair down past your nipples. So you shaved your face before you went to bed last night and decided to wake up as a woman for today.

Call in sick to work and tell them you feel funny. Decide to take a bath, which you never do. You find yourself standing up and facing the open toilet bowl about to aim away when you laugh, catching yourself just in time and deciding to curse the man in your life who's carelessly left the seat up. You notice old urine splashed on the rim, pubic hair, and bacterial stains seeping down the bowl. How disgusting. How'd you ever live with this?

For the first time in what seems like months, clean the toilet and be excited as you sit your bare ass down on the clean seat and pee. You look

around and begin to notice how filthy the tub is, the sink is, the floor. Sigh. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. You're afraid to leave the bathroom now.

Hike up your jammies, flush the toilet, and put the lid down. Push your sleeves up, run the water hot, and clean the tub with Comet. So much for pampering. But soon the tub is glistening and you're filling it up for a good, long soak. Decide to reach down into the bottom shelf of bath stuff your last girlfriend left behind. Squirt in Dr. Bronner's Hemp Peppermint Pure-Castile Soap. Add a titch of Bragg's organic, raw-unfiltered, apple cider vinegar. Some natural mineral Batherapy to sooth the aches and pains. And a couple drops of essential oils: lavender and Roman chamomile. Bring in the portable CD player and play Enya's *Watermark* and light a stick of Desert Piñon incense.

Shed your PJs and slide into heaven as the morning light shines in. Imagine you're Princess Guinevere in the Mists of Avalon as the steam rises around you. Wash your hair with Nature's Gate herbal shampoo and conditioner. Lean back, eyes closed. Don't think. Don't think about the hair. On your legs. Your armpits.

Not thinking.

Shit. Should you shave? Is that the type of woman you'd be? Or would you be more organic and let it grow?

You decide every once in awhile you'd like to shave for special occasions because you can, and today's special. But not your pits. You'd keep some sort of feminist reminder. You step out of the tub dripping water and soap everywhere and open the cabinet to retrieve your razor and shaving cream and retreat back

to your silken blanket. Lift your leg out of the soapy water like a bicycle upstroke. Point your toe at the wall like a ballet dancer. Lather up your leg and cut straight and smooth roadways of skin until the hilly contours are bare. Think about who you want to ask over for dinner tonight. When you're finished, your legs look like synchronized swimmers', edged and clean and ready to dive in.

Step out and wrap your hair up in a towel-turban and since you don't have a robe, wrap another towel around your body chest high. Look in the mirror. Brush and floss your teeth. Rub your ex-girlfriend's Burt's Beeswax & Banana Crème on your face and legs. Then let your hair down and brush it out. You braid it into Dorothy braids and pluck your eyebrows. Clip your finger and toenails. File them down and push back the cuticles. Thank god you don't like make-up.

In your room you look at your pathetic wardrobe and have to remind yourself that this little experiment is not so much about outward appearance as it is an inward journey. Everyone you know still sees you for who you really are. And that's just it. You're not trying to be someone else. You're still you. And it's not like you have to wear a skirt and high heels. You'd be more of a tomboy, so you wear cutoff jeans to show off your legs, a Sara McLachlan T-shirt from her *Solace* tour, and your neon-blue Keen sandals. They were women's shoes anyways, being that their sizes always fit you better.

Whip up a smoothie with almond milk, avocado, hemp protein powder, and frozen organic blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries, a dash of cinnamon, some honey and maple syrup. Call your closest girlfriend and ask her to lunch. Then call your closest boyfriend and ask him over for dinner. Clean the

rest of the house. Do twenty minutes of yoga in your living room. Call your mom just to say hi and ask her for her marinated steak recipe. Call your sister and ask how her marriage is going. What cute things your two-year-old nephew said or did lately. Giggle and tell her you just shaved your legs and asked Scott over for dinner. Before she can respond, lie and tell her you're receiving another call. Hang up and set out the steaks on the counter to thaw.

Walk to the Italian deli to meet your girlfriend. Feel the warm air caress your legs and stop to pet cats. Smile at everyone and say hi. Thank the mailman when you see him and pick a bouquet of wild flowers along the way.

When you arrive, your girlfriend is bent over in her baggy-white knickers, fussing with the child seat in the back of her car. Wow, you think, she's put on some weight. She pops up in her saggy black T-shirt, hefting her portable car seat with her one-month-old in it and pushing her thin, black- and rectangular-framed glasses back up her nose. You give her a close hug and present her with the flowers. Say, have you lost weight? You look great.

Flustered and with her hands full, she doesn't quite know what to do, so you take the car seat for her as she brushes her hair out of her glasses. Her cheeks red, she says thanks and takes the flowers. You bend in close to the boy's face and let him grab your pinky as she puts the bouquet in her car. You and the infant make baby noises together.

Sitting down inside, you realize you'd really like a burger and a beer, but you hold true to your course and you both eat antipasto salads and drink ice tea. You hold the baby and ask how life is as a single mom. If she's getting much

sleep, any help. And you listen to a new mother who's been cooped up for a month running on caffeine and living out of town at her mother's. You ask what you've always wondered. What's it like being a single mom? Is it fun to breast feed? Can you ever get enough cuddling? Share with her how much you'd like to have kids too, someone to share your life with. At the end of the meal, you say that if she ever needs a night out, you'd be happy to spell her sometime and babysit.

Wow, she says, taken aback. I'll, I'll think about it. Thanks. Her smooth leg accidentally bumps against yours. Sorry, she says.

Pick up the tab and when she protests, scrambling for her purse, lay a hand on hers and say it's your pleasure. You asked her out and don't have another mouth to feed. Walk her out to her car and after she snaps the car seat back in place, kiss her on the cheek.

She'll smile quizzically at you and then look at your feet. Them are some blue shoes, she'll say. Then her eyes will grow big. Did you shave your legs?

You smile back.

She'll laugh and shake her head. I *knew* it. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there *was* something different about you today. What gives?

Smile and ask her if she'd think you'd look good in spandex. But quickly tell her not to answer that and then scold her to be sure to call you when she's ready for a night out, that you're as serious as shaved legs.

On your way home, stop by the food co-op and buy fresh produce for a salad, a bottle of cabernet, and some dark chocolate for desert. At home, make

the marinating sauce and watch Dr. Phil. Wonder how the psychology major in you ever avoided such a show. Soak the steaks and sit down to watch Oprah. Fight the urge to pull the drapes. Thank god it's someone you like, Denzel Washington. If he can be on the show, you can watch it. Now the writer in you is about to lose it when they bring his old English teacher out whom he hasn't seen in over thirty years. Don't fight the urge to cry. This is part of the experiment. Women cry. Just let it out. You think of Mr. Sexton senior year. Wipe tears out of your eyes and wish you had a cat.

Go look at your pathetic wardrobe again. Pull your T-shirt inside-out over your head, kick your sandals off, and drop your shorts to the floor. You decide on jeans and a nice button-down shirt. When you tug your jeans on, you can't believe how close they feel to your legs. It's somewhat distracting and you feel a little embarrassed as if you were caught with your fly open. But you still need something to differentiate the evening's date from lunch's.

Drop your jeans to the floor and laugh. It's time to wear that sarong your sister sent you two years ago as a birthday gag. After a few attempts at wrapping it around you, look up how to do it on the Internet, finally securing it at the waste. It's how you learned to braid your hair too. Had to once explain this to your Japanese friend: she got to grow up with sisters that braided each other's hair; you just grew up with sisters.

Decide to paint your toenails. Just this once. Even though you don't have any nail polish. Run next door to the apartment upstairs and ask fifty-something



Sheila to borrow hers. Try real hard not to look at her double Ds and don't forget to comment on how dashing Denzel looked today.

She'll hand over a little orange bag and glance down at your sarong. Are you sniffing this stuff?

Laugh and say no, but you might think about it. Run back down the stairs before she ropes you into her parakeet's current drama.

Sit on your upright futon in the living room and paw through her assorted collection. Decide you like the fruity orange color of the bag and delight that she's actually whacky enough to have it in nail polish. Not exactly feminine, but surely not masculine and it'll go well with your blue sandals. You're loud anyways.

Bring a knee up to your chest, resting your heel on the edge of the mattress and paint away in precise, manicured strokes—big toe, middle toe, little toes. Then do your other foot, all the while thinking, Joni Mitchell, eat your heart out.

Waiting for the paint to dry, lean back and gaze at the stucco ceiling, wondering how the hell'd they ever do that. When you're tired of waiting, flail your legs and feet in the air like a cyclist falling backwards off a mountain. Be careful not to let your feet touch.

Undo your braids and let your hair down. Wash your hands and begin making the salad. Why so nervous? Put on more deodorant. Pour yourself a glass of wine. You turn the stereo on and play Buena Vista Social Club. Practice barefoot salsa and meringue to and from the kitchen while preparing dinner and setting the table. When you hear a knock at the door, turn down the music.

It's Scott. You never noticed how tall he is, how sharp his jaw line, his narrow nose. How he always seems to have that rough and ready five-o'clock-shadow look. Let him in and when he goes to shake your hand, hug him instead. His ropey arms awkwardly around you, his body will stiffen, but he'll eventually pat you on the back and try to hand you a six-pack. His collar-length hair is curly wet against your cheek and he smells of water and Tide. Glance at his toned legs adorned with thin wisps of blonde hair. Tell him you like his Chacos and, has he been working out?

Take the beer and put it in the fridge. Offer him some wine, but he'll ask for one of his beers instead. Put the steaks and potatoes in the broiler.

How come you're not barbecuing? he'll ask.

Tell him sorry, guess you didn't even think about it.

Huh? he'll say.

Move to the stereo speaking over your shoulder. Tell him you were practicing your Latin moves, but that was over now and you could change it. Unless he'd like to tango.

No, no, no, he'll say and take a drink from his beer, move his eyes around the room, just standing there not asking to do anything.

Decide to put on his favorite. Wilco's *Sky Blue Sky*.

Ah, that's better, he says from the kitchen where you find him checking on the steaks. You know, he says, they're coming to Duluth in September. You wanna go?

You don't know what to think. He's surprised you and now you have to think about the future, but today you're a woman. It would mean an over night trip, being five hours away, and you haven't even camped together yet, let alone driven that far in one car.

What's with the get up? he asks, just noticing your Celtic sarong. He squints his eyes toward your feet. Nail polish?

Is it hot in here or just me? you ask, fanning yourself as you walk by him to retrieve your glass of wine.

He smiles. What the fuck's going on? You got a date with a butch lesbian later? He laughs at his own joke.

You lean up against the counter, legs pressed together like a balance beam, and you cradle your wine glass, trying to hide behind it as you sip slowly. You smile nervously. That'd be you, you say.

He kicks his head back and laughs. That's a good one, he says and downs the rest of his beer, coming over to slide it on the counter. No, really.

You raise your eyebrows and say, just roll with it for now if you can.

He shrugs his shoulders. Yeah, okay. Then he smirks and says, sexy, as he opens the refrigerator and bends in for another beer. He stands tall and twists off the cap, tossing it across the room into the garbage. I do have to say though, seeing you like this kind of makes *me* feel butch. He shudders. So how're those steaks looking anyways?

You eye his ass and smile. Fine, you say. Just fine.

His mouth hangs open, trying to figure what to say. So you wink at him before he forms a syllable and pull out the sizzling steaks and hot potatoes. You bring along the wine bottle to the dining-room table and you both sit down. Scott shakes out the cloth napkin and sets it on his lap, moving right to the knife and fork to dig in.

Decide to trust your intuition and extend your palm toward him and say, let's give thanks.

He frowns. You getting religious on me now?

Say, just do it you pussy.

He'll smile and put his hand in yours. That's more like it.

You both laugh and he gives thanks while you imagine him in bed being whipped by a woman in leather chaps. Over dinner you ask him about his relationship with his mother, his sister. Who his ideal life partner is. Then you ask him whether he feels secure enough in his masculinity to wear salmon polos.

He'll peer under the table. Well I can tell you I ain't ever gonna paint my toenails or wear a sarong. Wait . . . don't tell me you fucking shaved your legs. What gives? Is this some sort of psychology experiment the university pays you for? What's my cut?

Excuse yourself and wish you had a girlfriend to go to the bathroom with. Sit down and pee. Should you call your sister? No. She wouldn't know what hit her. Your grandmother you once went to a titty bar with? Nah. It's hopeless. Wonder what the hell you're doing.

Flush the toilet. Smile into the mirror, and say, you're beautiful. You can do this.

You grab him another beer on your way and sit down. He's peeling the label off his last one. You were saying, he says.

You sit back and smile, drink from your wine. I'm, you slosh the wine around watching the syrupy waves sag back down.

What? Scott raises his eyebrows and opens his hand.

Nothing. Never mind.

He shakes his head and picks at what's left of his steak.

I'm just having fun. You nod your head once.

Whatever, he says and clears the plates while you sit and finish your wine. In the kitchen you hear the tap water running and the dishes clanking.

Say, don't worry about those. I'll do them later.

I don't mind, he says.

Walk into the kitchen and make a pot of decaf. Unwrap the chocolate. Feed him bite sized chunks while his hands are wet and soapy. He only takes one.

When he's finished, he says he needs to go home and let his dog out. Hug him and hand him the rest of his six-pack. Tell him he's one of your favorite people and that you'd be happy to watch his dog anytime he needs to go out of town.

He'll crease his eyebrows at the door. Thanks for dinner, he'll finally say. He'll open the screen, shutting it gently behind him, and descend down the steps.

Think about Wilco, he says and waves a hand up in the air once without looking back.

You flop down onto your futon, resting your hand on your forehead. Not sure what to feel. And the day's not even over yet. So you grab the bottle of wine decide to find out what's on the public television station and spend the rest of the evening transported back in time to when Carry Grant and Deborah Kerr starred in *An Affair To Remember*. How you wish life could be so grand.

After the movie, brush your teeth and your hair and decide to sleep in the buff, your legs silk worms beneath sheets. Though you're unsure of god, pray anyways, for the first time in a long time. Pray to your higher self, your future self, the whole of you. Be thankful for the renewing day you just had, for your beautiful and open friends, your beautiful self. Thankful for the food and home you could afford. Pray that you can give and accept more love, from yourself and others, that your life path becomes clearer. Pray for the safety, health, and wisdom of your family and friends and those in need. Pray that your life partner will arrive soon, so that she can take care of you, and you can take care of her. But until then, pray that you can continue to nurture yourself, to be okay just being alone, and being you.

## ROADHOUSE MONEY

Frank Madison stood on his front porch with one hand down his boxers, scratching himself and the other tipping a bottle of Budweiser to his lips. He glared back at the morning sun beating down on his weed-whipped lawn springing back to life. A few blocks away, the M-59 corridor rolled by the trailer park in Highland, Michigan, a thousand tires a minute, exhausting the air.

Babe! he yelled, bending backwards, craning his neck toward the dark interior behind him. Get up. We're going to Alaska.

He squinted at the Plymouth Sundancer in the dirt drive with its rear-passenger window duct-taped in plastic, crunched front bumper, flat rear tire with a missing hubcap. He walked back in and scanned the crowded room for his smokes and saw them on the end table beside the bed. The lump beneath the blanket wasn't showing any signs of life so he yanked back the covers and slapped the pantied rear of his girlfriend. Get your ass up, he said. We're going fishin'.

She pulled the sheet back around her. Leave me alone, she mumbled.

He swiped his Marlboroughs and his lighter off the end table and setting his beer on the windowsill shook a cigarette out of a crumpled package. He lit it and tossed the package back on the end table as he inhaled. He tugged on yesterday's jeans draped over a chair and blew smoke out his nose. Sitting down on the bed, he pulled socks on and pointed cowboy boots, then shuffled over to the open closet, singing "Country Road."

What are you singin' that for? A tangled mess of blonde spoke through the side of the pillow.

It's a country song, he said, reaching up and dragging down a suitcase to toss it on the bed.

It's a West Virginia song dummy.

He selected a navy-blue sweatshirt from the floor and pushed his hands through one at a time, then his head and wrestled the rest down to his waist. No, *John Denver*, he said. It's a Colorado song.

No matter. It's not a Alaska song.

Taking his Polaris snowmobile jacket off the hanger, he put it on along with a Red Wings cap and walked to the window, combing his goatee with his hand, and yanked the drapes back as the dust and cigarette ash spiraled through the rays crowding the room.

By the time I get that spare on, you better be up and ready, Janice.

Her hand pawed out of the covers, searching for something to throw.

He grabbed his beer and his keys and made for the car. Unlocking the trunk, he rifled between trash bags of empties until he found the jack, tire iron, and undersized spare. Squatting beside the tire, he grimaced as the smoke from his cigarette drifted into his eyes and he attempted to loosen the lug nuts while the tire still had some purchase, but no go. He stood his full 200 lbs. on the tire iron and began to bounce. Still nothing. He retrieved a quart of oil from beneath the driver's seat and poured some over the lug nuts. Standing on the tire iron again, he jumped up and down until the nut finally gave way in a screech.



After the last resisting lug nut, he discovered that the rim was frozen to the axel. He looked around and didn't see anything to bang the wheel lose except the spare tire so he picked that up and swung it against the flat.

The spare bounced back hard.

He tried a couple more times and finally, the rim broke free and wobbled off. He threw it in the trunk, tightened on the spare, and went back inside.

He stood by the bed with his hands on his hips. You think I'm joking? he said. I'll carry you to the car if I have to, Janey.

She turned over while sitting up on her elbows and her breasts popped out from beneath the sheet. You're such a dreamer. Where the hell you going without no money?

He moved to the dresser and opened a drawer. Whipping open the suitcase, he began tossing in handfuls of pantyhose, bras, underwear, socks. I've got forty bucks, he said. Plus probably another forty in empties out in the trunk. That'll get us two gas tanks worth down the road.

She flopped back into the pillow. Frank, that's my teeth whitening money that you promised me for those new Crest strips they've been advertising on TV.

Baby, they've got fishing boats that are out all summer long up in Alaska. Bald Eagles perched on all the streetlights. We can make some big cash. Five thousand a week I hear. Then you can have all the teeth-whitening fun you want.

Alaska ain't next door Frank. And two tanks of gas won't get us past Marquette.

We'll worry about that when we get there. Besides I have a plan. You probably won't like it at first, but you'll warm up to it. He lifted up a black, lace G-string and a garter belt. Ooh, this'll be perfect, he said, gyrating his hips. What do you say? Just like the old times.

He dropped the lingerie into the suitcase and stuffed it closed, then hefted it and started around the bed.

Oh no you don't, Frank. Uh unh. You're fuckin' crazy.

She started kicking, but he dropped the suitcase and tackled her, then half carried, half dragged her out the door.

Where's your sense of adventure, Janice? he said, gritting his teeth under the load, and then kicked the door shut.

Janice woke up with a start, the room dark except for a dim outline around the heavy curtains. She held her head and swung her legs over the side, sitting naked for a moment as the heater beneath the window clicked on in ticks. The rooms were always the same, smelling of Lysol on a good day, stale whiskey on a bad one. She used to like that life fifteen years ago, before she knew better. Now the shadow of the coffee pot seemed to stare dumbly back, withholding all its bitter secrets. The little bars of soap wrapped up in there nice packaging just didn't seem to be clean enough anymore. From the outside door to the opposite mirror, she ate, fuck, slept, and brushed her teeth all in one room, where there was nowhere else to go to get a break from herself. Except the road.

She groped her way over and yanked back the curtains to an overcast afternoon and a Motel 6 sign lording over the parking lot. Dirty snow banks still sat humped this far north, on the edges of the parking lot and the shoulders of the road out front, left over from the months of plowing things clear. A man walked along the side of the highway, turning around to walk backwards and stick out his thumb every time a car approached. On the other side of the highway, the gray expanse of Lake Superior faded into the horizon.

She stared out into the distance. Something about the deeper blue of the lake meeting the electric shock of the sky way off on the thin-lined horizon. It leveled out her gaze, stretched it to a calmer place, where she hoped dreams were caught atop those stacked-up clouds, turning that puffy mist into stony ladders of mountain sunshine. Where she could leave all the heaviness, anything broken that couldn't be fixed, and roll it down the mountainside. Even just half-way there would be nice.

She sat in the chair beside the window, hugging her knees to her chest, and shook out a Marlborough. She lit it and creased her brows at the wad of singles, fives, tens, and twenties that littered the tabletop. Frowning, she pushed the mess away and slid a bottle of Tequila toward her, finished the last swig, then threw it, hitting the still lump in bed.

A moan, some motion, then a cracked voice. I can't see.

That's 'cause both your eyes are swollen shut you shit.

She flicked her ashes onto the floor. Where's your sense of adventure now, Frank? Singing any country-western songs today?

She grabbed a fistful of money and threw it at the bed. Feel like dancing?

She took a drag on her cigarette, her words coming out in smoke. Get up  
you fuck. We're going to Alaska.

## SHEER FORCE OF WILL

Mountainous islands of Sitka spruce weigh down like icebergs flowing through the maze of low clouds clogging the Inland Passage. Taking a break from shoveling the wet snow off his deck, a rare respite from the year-long rain, Aaron Day exhales chalky puffs of breath. Tiny icicles have formed on his downy beard around his lips. He notices the tide is down and can hear the buzz of a float plane descending through the low ceiling. He resumes shoveling and finishes clearing a path to a one-hundred-pound pumpkin from the Matanuska Valley. He leans the shovel against the aluminum siding and rolls out a rusty chaise lounge. Surveying his job, he breathes in the fresh air and rubs a long, blond lock of his hair between his thumb and first two fingers, wishing he had a smoke.

He looks across the mile-wide narrows for any seals. Finding none, he can't shake the image from his head, truly dreading the day he finds Darcie lying in a pool of her own crimson wrist-slit blood or out cold with a vacant stare as empty as the lidless pill bottle beside her on the tile. But knowing her, if she could muster enough energy, she'd shoulder a backpack full of rocks, then trudge out into the hypothermic salt water at low tide on a new moon night in December, at least trying to complete the circle by crawling back into the womb.

Satisfied, he slides open the glass door and steps in to stand by the wood-burning stove and warm his hands in the half-light of the late October sun. A gray

cat rubs up against his boots, purring. He peers at the couch, where a pale and disheveled brunette sprawls under a down comforter.

I'm not handling that monster carving myself, you know, he says.

Her voice heavy and thick with sleep, she says, I fuckin' hate it when it gets dark this early.

Come on, it'll be fun. I've a great idea for some wicked eyes. He looks down the length of the windowed living room leading into the kitchen. Wrinkled clothes draped over chairs. Unwashed dishes in the sink. Litter box needs to be changed.

He walks into their bedroom and opens a drawer, taking out his 9mm Smith and Wesson, then comes over to sit down on the edge of the couch. He uses the barrel to push her books aside. *The Awakening*, *'Night Mother*, *Beneath the Wheel*. All Greek to him.

He removes the pistol's clip, taking the bullets out one by one. Shit, you haven't even gotten up yet and it's damn near dinner time. You want me to pour you a glass of wine and grill up some salmon?

I'm not hungry. She curls up into a ball on her side.

Are you Cinderella or one of her wicked step-sisters? He chuckles. Because by the look of it, someone didn't make it home last night.

She shivers and grips the comforter tighter around her neck. You don't know what it's like.

He disengages the headstock and pours some gun oil on a rag and begins to clean the firing chamber. The way I see it is that your rear quarter panel is all

smashed in for fear of looking where you've been. We just need to pull out the dent and raise your headlights.

Her voice, not quite whiny, fills with a dangerous push-pull balance of take-care-of-me and leave-me-alone self-pity. I read once how frightful the moon's shadow can be during a total eclipse, tearing across the hillsides at eighteen-hundred miles an hour, and when it hit you, it was as if god had dragged a manhole cover over the earth, everyone frozen in time, like it was the end of the world.

Her voice becomes more desperate. Even if someone was an arm's length away, you could feel light years apart.

Aaron puts the empty clip in the gun, sights out the window, and pulls the trigger, releasing just the click of the hammer. He sets the gun down on the coffee table and rubs her back while clicking on the sun lamp, bathing them both in hot golden light, like when it was late June and he had taken her out to the quarry to teach her how to shoot.

That spring, while grading essays, she'd seen someone peeking in the living-room windows a couple of times when he'd been out and he thought it was time she learned to protect herself. So after work one day they met outside the community college where he was a maintenance man and she a literature professor. Driving north out of town in his pick up, they smoked a joint. His large frame crowded the steering wheel and cab. Metallica blared through the tinny speakers and he accelerated around the curves, his 9mm strapped to his leg.

Slipping out of her clogs, she stretched her skirted legs, pale and smooth, toward the dashboard, where she placed her feet, displaying her newly painted toenails. She leaned back into the seat, her velvet hair flowing in the wind, and stuck her hand out the window, flying it through the air like she was a kid again. She looked over to him with a smile that was like the sunshine washing over the windshield and her brown eyes drank him in with years of trust.

So where we going to shoot? she yelled.

He turned down the music some. Well, there's the shooting range. But that place gets busy with rules and regulations. We're going out to the rock quarry where the outlaws go. No one will bother us there.

He winked at her.

A rock quarry? She squinted at him as if from the other side of a dream, trying to wake up, but not really wanting to. What the hell's going to keep the bullets from ricocheting back at us?

Staring off down the road, he methodically rubbed his index and middle finger with his thumb and said matter-of-factly, spirits unknown to us and sheer force of will.

She was taken aback a moment at his seriousness and then laughed, falling against his shoulder. That's why I love you A.D. I never know what you're going to say. She reached toward the volume to turn up the heavy metal again.

But now under the dusty din of the sun lamp, he wishes he could flash her back to the longest day of the year, that summer solstice at the rock quarry. She had taken to that Glock like she was Calamity Jane. Clip after clip she shot up



the bull's-eye targets tacked to a wooden stand he'd placed sixty feet out. Sometimes she'd shoot two-handed, focused and poised, measuring each blow as she sighted down the barrel. Other times, she'd shoot single-handedly from the hip, the pistol's kick recklessly jumping her hand around in ear-shattering explosions as she drained the whole clip round after round in a matter of seconds. What a picture. All six feet of her standing there in a business suit like some mafia hit woman, shells littered about and a smoking barrel, letting out a heartfelt whoop.

Forty dollars of ammo buried in the dirt and four months later, her eclipse story reminds him of a bad acid trip, when time stopped and the whole world felt wrong, and your mind was parked on the moon. He imagines her dressed in black inside a void where a soundproof see-through barrier separates her from him and she looks like she's screaming, yet he can't hear one iota of sound as she slowly begins to recede.

A chill racks his body, snapping him out of it. He stops rubbing her back, but keeps his hand on her, letting her soak up his warmth. The little things he tries to do don't seem enough anymore, like trying to anticipate when she was going to bed so he could slip between the cold sheets first to warm her side up. Or in the blue-black chill of dawn, he'd start a fire and the shower running so that when she joined him the water was steamin' hot. But lately, he's had to shower alone. But he still makes her coffee and starts her car so it's toasty and there's no excuse for her not to go to work that day.

He moves his hands up to massage her shoulders. I don't know what we're going to do because it's a long stretch to spring.

Crying now, Darcie wipes her eyes with the palm of her hand. I can't take this anymore. I'd rather kill myself than live through this again.

Maybe so. He picks up the clip and presses the bullets in one by one. But don't think that I'll attend your funeral if you kill yourself. I've got no respect for suicides.

Leave me alone, she hisses.

And you better take a long, hard look before you do, 'cause there ain't no take backs. So don't be blaming anyone for you being the middle child, or Becky for moving out and getting on with her life. Or me for jacking off to Internet porn, 'cause I haven't been laid in a month.

He just hears her sobbing. Lying back against the couch, he realizes he's just lost some ground. He's always been the one who was able to calmly take everyone's realities in stride; this used to be his specialty, like the time when she freaked out for no reason in a car full of people and wanted to stop and get out. He understood that's what she needed, even though they were late to the company dinner. So he pulled the car over and got out for a smoke as she paced up and down the shoulder until she had calmed down enough to get back on the road. Now it seems like she's telling him to pull over again, that this is where she needs to get out. As much as he doesn't like it, he can understand. Had to get out once himself, after he'd been dealing for the Hell's Angels too long. Alaska was the next best thing to the end of the world. Now he's glad to just be alive.

He jams the clip back into the 9mm and stuffs the pistol in his inside coat pocket. He stares out the window at the bloated pumpkin. You know what you need? he says. You need a little fresh air.

She covers her face.

You don't even have to move. He reaches down and gathers her comforted body into his arms.

A.D. put me down! she shrieks.

In a second hon. He shoulders open the sliding glass door and shuffles through sideways on to the deck. He sets her down on the chaise lounge, her face a mean frown of sooty eyebrows and tangled raven locks, and props her up to face the whale-sized pumpkin head-on.

Let's get this over with once and for all, he says, and in one sweeping motion from beneath his jacket, his hand flashes out the metallic 9mm Smith and Wesson. He ratchets back the headstock and lets it snap forward, filling the chamber with the first bullet. Almost dark now; he hands her the icy butt of the gun.

In shock, she looks up to him.

I love you, he says, his eyes watery.

She begins to cry, then raises the pistol and squeezes off an alarming burst. Jagged bits of bile-yellow shell blast onto the deck and pulpy seeds leak out of the dirty orange pumpkin hide, like a coagulating tear from a gaping eye socket. The acrid odor of discharged gunpowder hangs between them, the

thundering echoes kicking back through the low-slung clouds like forgotten  
stardust settling on the dark side of the moon.

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