

ALL THE FURTHER DOWN THAT'S LEFT TO GO: STORIES

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ALL THE FURTHER DOWN THAT'S LEFT TO GO: STORIES

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I. TOMORROW I MIGHT BE IN MINNESOTA

Last night, Trudy told me she wants another divorce. This morning, I'm still here. She's in the bathroom. I can hear her bare feet padding back and forth on the tile.

"Ray'll be up soon," she says. "We don't want to give him the wrong idea. I don't, anyway."

"And what idea would that be?"

She moves to the doorway. She's rubbing at the spot where her left ear lobe should be. Her high school sweetheart attacked her the first time she tried to break up with him, two years before she got rid of him for good. She puts her hand to the mutilation when she's either extremely happy or incredibly sad.

"Now's not the time for this," she says.

"I'll be up and out of your hair in a minute," I lie. I'll stay here as long as I can.

"Get dressed."

"Trudy, it's freezing in here."

She walks to the edge of the bed, grabs my clothes from the floor, throws them to the mattress.

"Change in bed." She's naked. Her breasts aren't as firm as they used to be. Pregnancy left them droopy, burdensome. Blue veins run through them like highway maps. They still get me going, though.

I'm not surprised Trudy couldn't kick me out last night. She's prone to loneliness, and it's worse at night. Many nights she's left Ray with her mother so she can drive to the Checkmate and drag me home. This is why we've made it eight years.

We got married young, after she graduated high school. We divorced two years later but I stayed anyway, save for a few stretches when I left town for a while. We married again a week before Ray was born. He's six now.

My clothes are on, but I can't get off the bed. Trudy's back in the bathroom. I lie back down, turn my back to the sound of the shower. In front of me is a photo from last Halloween. Around the edges of the frame are little brown smudges—sticky fingerprints, courtesy of my son. Ray the train conductor and Trudy the jellyfish. We used a goofy umbrella hat for the shell and plastic wrap and pink spray paint to make the tentacles. This was right after I came back from Texas, where I worked on an oil rig. That Halloween marked the first night since I'd been back that Trudy let me sleep in the big bed.

The toilet flushes and Trudy stamps out in her robe.

"Time to move," she says.

"Let me eat something first."

"Christ. Make it snappy." She offers me a hand. She leads the way to the living room with me tip-toeing behind her past Ray's room.

Rayville is on the coffee table. I started building it out of wood scraps salvaged from a construction site I worked. My father did the same for me when I was a kid. His buildings were fashioned from discarded beer cases. Rayville has expanded in the

months I've been gone. The library is finished and a jail and a baseball field have been added. Ray's toys are residents of Rayville. He's got characters for everyone he knows: me, his mom, his grandma and grandpa, the girl across the street. I can't remember who's who. He usually tells me the latest town gossip when I take him to the park on Fridays, but Trudy hasn't let me see him the past two weeks. As far as I can see, there's a showdown outside the jail involving three green army men, a cow dressed like Elvis, and Gumby. Everyone's lying down but the cow. I'll have to ask Ray about that.

“What do you want?” Trudy asks.

“Options?”

“Waffles or pancakes, but the pancakes go in the toaster, too.”

“How about eggs Benedict?” She used to make this for me a long time ago, before Ray and the first divorce.

“Not on the menu anymore.”

“Waffles, then.”

She grabs the waffles from the freezer and drops two into the toaster.

“My dad says his offer's still on the table,” she says. David offered to pay my way into a treatment center in Idaho. After he put the plug in the jug, he returned to school and got an accounting degree. He has a very successful firm, with three offices in Missoula, Kalispell, and Great Falls. “I told him you said no, but he wanted me to ask again.”

“I've been thinking about getting out of Helena,” I say, which is true. “Hell, tomorrow I might be in Minnesota.”

“What's in Minnesota?”

“I’ll tell you when I get back.” She doesn’t laugh. She pops the waffles up, squirts on syrup, turns around, and slides the plate in front of me. The half-toasted middles are cold as fish guts.

“You should take my father up on his offer.”

“I already have—I’ve been cured!”

Ray’s yawn makes us flinch and look toward the hallway. But he isn’t up yet. His ritual is to let off a good yawn, wiggle his legs, roll over, and try to get back to sleep. When I lived here, I had to tickle him out of bed.

“You’ve gotta leave,” Trudy whispers. She walks over, snatches my plate and throws it into the trash can. “I mean it.”

I get up and move towards the door with Trudy tailing me. When I get to the coffee table she touches my shoulder.

“Got any money?” she asks.

“No.” I have two hundred bucks from working at Safeway for a week. Since I haven’t seen her in a while, bringing it up now would only make things worse.

She walks to the front door and reaches into her purse, which is hanging from the coat rack I installed, and pulls out a twenty.

“Don’t spend this at the Checkmate. Buy yourself breakfast.” She brushes back my hair and looks at me for a second. Then she breaks away and leaves me standing there. I slip the bill in the entry of the Rayville Library, careful not to disturb the peace.

The morning is merciless. I decide to go to the library. They have computers, and I need to check my email and the bus schedule. Sometimes an old, withered gal

serves day-old doughnuts and coffee in the lobby. Cold wind slices through my sweatshirt and jeans. I forgot my jacket yesterday. I could grab it from my room at the Francis Grove Hotel. I'll have to pass it anyway. My room is exactly that: no bathroom, no kitchen. The community can is down the hall. One floor up is the shower. The Francis Grove is full of homeless people during the winter months. Churches have drives all year to foot the bill. David's footing me.

The sidewalk's plagued with gritty crusts of snow. On the few warmer days the snow mutates into a soupy mess. One day last week, I had to stay at the Francis Grove just to let me shoes dry out.

I pass David's house. A single flickering light from his porch is the only sign of life on the street. He lives three blocks away from Trudy and five from his ex-wife in a narrow, tall Victorian house.

My own father died trying to catch a train to California. My mother died on 9/11—not in the World Trade Center but in Warm Springs Mental Hospital. Trudy's mother divorced her father a month after Trudy was born and didn't talk to him until he got sober twenty-two years later and became rich.

Trudy hasn't been sympathetic about my background since her father died out. When we first met, all we talked about was how shitty our childhoods were, how no one ever changed, how at least we had each other and we would stay the same. No surprises for us. It was easier for Trudy to tell herself she didn't believe in change. The truth is she can't help but believe someone when they tell her they'll change. Take her ear-butcherer boyfriend, for instance. Take me.

Trudy always focuses on my bad streaks. It's true that this last go-around was rough—the one that ended with me living the past three weeks at Francis Gove on David's dime. I got beat up by two scrawny teenagers. I spent our grocery money at the Checkmate. I huffed gasoline. I wept in front of David. There've been other times when Trudy and I parted ways and I've been just fine, maybe even better.

After our first divorce, I went back to Billings. I got a job at the *Gazette* and rented a studio apartment a block from work. I drank smoothies for lunch and spent long hours riding my bike along the Rimrocks. I drank, but not in bars and not as much as usual. I wrote sappy letters to Trudy once a week. I won an award for a story about a Native-American artist getting a Guggenheim fellowship. I came home one day and Trudy was on my doorstep. I didn't even put in my two-week notice or pack up my shit; I hopped in her Taurus without thinking. And things were fine for a while, like always.

I'm the only one downtown. Newspapers protected in plastic wrappers lay ignored on doorsteps. I breathe desperately on my hands and wiggle my fingers like a crazy person. It's no use. My knuckles are purple and I'm still four blocks from the library. Anyway, it's only about seven o'clock and the library won't open until nine.

The Francis Grove. Its gray stone blocks, with wrought-iron gates around the windows, belong in some gothic city in some county I've never visited. A few windows are lit. If I'm going to Minnesota, I'll need my stuff.

The hall smells of sweat and stale smoke. A few doors down from mine I'm hit with the stink of an ass that needs wiping. I stumble into my room toward the far wall to

flip the switch. Goddamn dust and mildew. The comforter my mother gave us at our first wedding lies twisted on the bare mattress in the center of the room. A few empty cans and a half-eaten sandwich on the TV tray by the bed. On the other side of the room, a pile of clothes, a backpack, an outdated *Guinness Book of World Records*, two rolls of toilet paper. I transfer the clothes into the backpack without looking. Ray's up by now, probably already pretended to brush his teeth. He's eaten his breakfast. He's had his fifteen minutes of television before Trudy carries him off to school. She's kissing him good-bye just before he wrestles out of her arms and runs like hell for the playground. She's rubbing that phantom lobe, probably sad that Ray has no idea I'm leaving, that I spent the night, or that when I woke up this morning in the big bed it was as if nothing between us had changed.

Two other men are standing outside the Checkmate. They don't say hello. One digs in his pocket and pulls out cigarettes, lights one, and begins inspecting the cherry. The other walks over to a telephone pole and begins running his finger along the jagged staples forever stuck in the wood. The clock on the courthouse across the street reads five minutes past ten. The bartender must be late.

On the computer at the library, I found out there's a Greyhound going to Minneapolis leaving today at four-thirty. It cost one-hundred-fifty-five. All I have to do is wait.

The Checkmate door shakes for a moment, then swings open. It's the bartender, Derek, with the septum ring and finger nails as long as paper clips.

"Hey, man," he says.

“About time,” says the guy by the telephone pole.

“Yeah, yeah.” Derek waves us in. We enter single-file, like kindergarteners coming in from recess.

I’m down twenty bucks already. The men I came in with have left; a few others have drifted in, had a drink or two, then said their farewells. Frank’s sitting next to me, though we haven’t said a word to each other. When he walked in, he nodded and so did I. That’s enough for now.

I’ve known Frank a long time. For years he’s been riding his bike with a blue macaw on his shoulder. It’s a nasty thing, always looking to bite someone. Frank has a chunk of his eyebrow missing from a row the two of them had. The fucker scratched the left lens of my glasses once. In winter, though, Frank’s pal stays home. Frank’s always worse in the cold season as a result—stays out longer, drinks more, gets in fights.

If I make it to Minnesota, I’ll only have twenty-five bucks left. I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’ll figure it out. Maybe get a job in a kitchen somewhere and send my resume to the local papers. Be a journalist again. Or try something new—banker, lab assistant, public relations.

The door shutters open and Marty sways in. Blondish-white hair, parted to the side, aviator glasses. Today it’s a red tweed blazer and a black mini-skirt and ruby heels. His legs gleam like polished hubcaps in the brackish fluorescent light. The Checkmate is the only place Marty can go in town without getting shit. If anyone else walked in here wearing a skirt and heels, that’d be another story. Marty’s been this way so long no one

thinks twice about it. In fact, if he walked in dressed like a regular Joe he might get his ass kicked. We don't like surprises at the Checkmate. I see Marty more than Ray.

"Whadda ya know?" says Marty, smoothing out his skirt before he slides into the stool next to Frank.

"The usual. I'm going to Minnesota."

He says to Frank: "I can't believe they still let you in here."

"Fuck off."

"So, where in Minnesota?"

"Minneapolis."

"I've got a cousin there," Frank says. "He owes me three hundred bucks."

"Why Minnesota?" Marty asks.

"Gonna pitch for the Twins."

"His old lady kicked him out again," Marty says to Frank. He signals Derek by taking a swig from a make-believe glass.

"How's Ray?" Frank asks, glancing casually toward the fuzzy television at the end of the bar.

"Fine." I despise the guys who talk about their children. You should hear them, talking as if their kids are sitting on the next bar stool. He's doing great in football. She's struggling in algebra but shows interest in social studies. I'm furious at myself for telling Frank I have a son.

"You got a job lined up over there?" Marty asks.

"Got an interview with the *Star Tribune*." No need to put in much effort. Frank nods.

“That’s a hell of a paper.” Then he turns to the television.

The phone rings. I look at the clock. In eleven minutes, it will be one.

“How long’re you staying?” I ask Marty.

The phone rings again.

“I didn’t think about it.”

“Yeah?” Derek demands.

“Can you give me a ride to the bus station in a few hours?”

“Make it quick,” Derek says, thrusting a handset my way. “I hate it when you take your personal calls here.” I don’t know what the fuck he’s talking about. No one calls me here.

“Hello?”

“I told you not to go there.”

“Can I help you?” I’m trying to sound indignant, but I’m happy as hell.

“Ray fell off the gym roof at lunch.”

“Anything broken?”

“What’s the matter?” Marty asks. Everyone’s looking at me. I might’ve just yelled.

“Don’t know. Dad’s taking us to the hospital now.” It sounds like she’s put her hand over the phone. A muffled conversation trickles through the receiver. “Ray wants to talk to you.”

“Dad?” At least his voice sounds the same.

“Sting Ray, how you doin’, man?”

“My heart hurts.”

“That’s not your heart, bud. It must be your ribs.” This is a good sign; they’re probably not broken.

“Will you come see me? Mom says you can.”

“I will, bud. I’ll be there in a flash. I love you.”

“Hey,” Trudy says. “We’re leaving now.”

“I told Ray I’d come.”

“You going to?”

“Fuck you.”

“Well, what’s wrong?” Frank asks. They’re around me like a football huddle.

“Ray’s hurt.” The Bartender bites his lip and a woman I’ve never seen before pats my shoulder.

“Can I get a lift to the hospital?” I ask Marty.

“Sure.”

“Can you drop me off, too?” Frank asks.

“Nope,” I say.

“Oh! Don’t do this to me. I have to check on Lemon. He gets weird if I stay gone too long.” Lemon is the fucking parrot.

“What does he do?” Marty asks, handing Derek a twenty.

“It depends. Sometimes he’ll bite the hell outta his tongue. Once, after I spent the night in jail, I came home and he’d plucked a bald spot on his chest.”

“Forty-five,” Derek says to me.

“Jesus,” I say. “A break’d be nice once and a while.”

“I gave you one,” he says. I could throw my glass at the wall and run out the door. A younger me would’ve. I unfold my wallet, fork over a big chunk of my Minnesota money. Marty and Frank are already back on their stools.

“Let’s go!” The clock claims it’s only been five minutes since Trudy called, but I don’t believe it.

Marty’s truck is a Dodge Ram, an old one. Trudy and I had one before David went straight. We drove it to Billings to see Bad Religion once, but never saw the show. We ate acid and sat on the Redrocks for hours. “Oh shit! The concert!” Trudy said finally, then laughed so hard she farted.

“Lower your window,” Frank says. When I do, he reaches past me to ash his cigarette. The long, gray cinder flies out and comes back into my face.

“Fuck!” I elbow Frank in the ribs.

“What?” he says. We are exactly two blocks from the Checkmate. The Continental Divide has grown a thousand feet since we left.

“Hurry up, for chrissakes.”

Marty takes his right hand off the wheel and flips me off. He slows down even more as we approach Ray’s school. A line of heavily-stickered mini vans loiter next to the curb with their hazard lights on. School doesn’t let out for two hours and already they’re here, waiting. Four minutes pass before I see the playground shrinking in the side mirror.

This memory keeps flying through my head. It must've been a few years ago, when Ray was four. He was just learning the monkey bars, and I was standing right under him. Every time his hands slipped—and they slipped a ton—I'd catch him, pull him to the ground and tickle him until he screamed, "Stop! Stop!"

"Where do I park?" Marty asks as we pull into the parking lot. Helena General is puny. It looks more like a nursing home than a hospital, save for the red sign declaring EMERGENCY.

"Just drop me in front."

He ignores me, follows the signs for visitor parking. I see David as we pass the emergency entrance. He's holding his cell phone to his ear with one hand, the other in his jacket pocket. I can smell the booze on me, on all three of us. My gut has that hot slosh it always gets when I'm drunk around David. I've spent too many nights sitting in my living room with David after Trudy's called him over. "Come to a meeting with me," he'd say. "Why? My dad went to a hundred of 'em," I'd reply. But it never sunk in—he'd smile, shake his head. I'd like to sneak around to a side entrance, but that wouldn't do any good.

We park and I get out. Frank and Marty do, too.

"Don't come in." I walk faster.

David gets off his phone and starts walking toward me with his hand stretched out for a shake.

"Where is he?" I ask.

“He’s getting an x-ray.” David pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one.

“Minnesota, huh?”

“I’m not going anymore.”

David’s looking past me. I turn and see my two chauffeurs. Frank, rubbing his bare arms. Marty, digging a tissue out of his purse. I didn’t notice until now that Frank’s just wearing a loose-collared, short-sleeved shirt.

“Who are they?” David asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, and walk past him into the warmth of the building.

Trudy’s sitting in the waiting room. Her knee’s bouncing like crazy.

“How is he?” I touch her shoulder; she reaches up and grabs my hand.

“Fine. The x-ray’s a formality. Doctor says his ribs’re just bruised.”

Even though the news is good, the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

“Shit, how’d he get on the roof?”

Trudy turns to me, then looks past me to the nurses’ station. “You smell so damn familiar.”

“Did you talk to the school?”

“The janitor left a ladder up.”

“Is your dad coming back?”

“Nope, he’s waiting for a friend to give him a lift.”

“That janitor ought to be canned.”

“I figured you’d be in North Dakota by now.”

The automatic doors behind me sigh open and before I turn around someone is hugging me.

“Dad!” Ray squeezes my legs hard as hell.

“Careful, bud.” I lift him up as carefully as I can and plant a big one on his cheek.

“Squeeze any harder and you’ll have to get another x-ray.”

“They put this heavy thing on my legs and then I had to lie still and they put me in this thing and I was scared but I’m okay!”

“You’re the bravest kid in the world,” I say.

We’re driving back to the Frances Grove, just me and Trudy. We dropped a recovered Ray off at Grandma’s house where he’ll eat tons of ice cream and watch whatever he wants on television. Trudy hasn’t said anything about David’s offer or my trip to Minnesota. She’s singing along to Joplin’s “Me and Bobby McGee.”

She pulls up to the front door of the Frances Grove, turns off the engine, and gets out.

“You ever been there?” Trudy asks, pointing to a new restaurant across the street.

“I haven’t.”

“Heard pretty good things about it.”

We’re at the front door. The day’s grayness is getting darker, and wind is coming through downtown like a tidal wave. Trudy shivers and leans into me.

“So what’re you gonna do?” she asks.

“Probably win a Pulitzer, play rhythm guitar for U2, swim to the moon.” She takes a playful swipe at me. “How ’bout you guys?”

“I’m free for a while. Mom’s gonna coax Ray into piano lessons, I’m sure.”

“She should let him rest.”

“It’s the piano, babe, not wrestling.”

A bottle breaks somewhere, and Trudy turns towards the sound. I’m wondering what I’ll do if she just walks away, gets in touch with a lawyer again, starts dating a city planner who rides his bicycle on the weekend and has one beer on Sundays while watching the Broncos with his pals. What will happen then?

II. A SUNDAY DINNER

The devil worshippers came in the middle of the night again, this time with two cartons of eggs. Winston heard thunk-thunking against the house in pairs, one barely after the other. The cats, Cleopatra and Victoria, started howling, challenging Winston to do something about it. But it was cold; his knuckles throbbed like a pulse. Maybe, he thought, this is another thing I'm imagining. A few nights ago he imagined that he could hear Claudette in the kitchen, cleaning out the condiments shelf in the refrigerator—something she used to do when she couldn't sleep. The thunking continued; so did the cats' caterwauling. "Quiet down, girls," he said and rolled over, pretending to fall back asleep. He thought about how strange it felt, even after more than a year, to sleep in a bed clearly meant for two. And he thought of his daughter, Francine, and how she was coming over to the new house for the first time since he moved to Darby from Helena, and that she would be bringing her girlfriend, Dana, and now the eggs were just another thing he'd have to clean up before they arrived.

In the morning, he came out to fetch the paper from the red tube on the mailbox post and saw that his house was polka-dotted with frozen yolks. Little bastards, he thought. This is the way the country's going. He'd read online about how three teenage boys in New Mexico held down a nine-year-old girl and stuffed a rattlesnake into her pants. In Southern California, a man got caught attempting to sell his eight-year-old

daughter to a seventy-four-year-old retired principal in New Hampshire. Winston couldn't avoid this stuff—it was in front of him as soon as he clicked the internet button, and after the headlines snagged him in he had to follow another, another, another. Since he'd sold Helena Avenue Filling Station, which he and Claudette had owned and operated for thirty years, and retired, the only thing he seemed to do was watch the world collapse from his side of the screen. The world's falling into the sea a mile a minute, he thought, and all you can do is hole up and wait for the slide.

The eggs didn't come off easy; he'd had to tear off large scabs of the house's paint just to get rid of the frozen globs. It would have to be repainted, and that would be goddamn expensive. While he balanced himself on the ladder precariously—the bottom legs stood uneven on the lumpy ground, and every time he adjusted himself the thing shuddered and threatened to topple over—a yellow Geo Metro slogged up the drive. He hadn't seen it before, but that wasn't necessarily unusual. Curious Californians looking for houses often stalked up and down this road, looking at the view and checking out the houses, wondering, Winston figured, if they had the stones to live here. When he bought his house, the realtor told him most of the firm's sales were to Californians, though they rarely lived in the Bitterroot Valley for long. The Geo Metro, though, didn't seem like a car a Californian would drive. It was a throwaway car. He'd bought one once for Francine, which was just one of the many things he'd bought for her that didn't last. The car turned around by the Milkes' driveway, then slid past him, pausing only briefly at Winston's house.

After he was done cleaning the mess, his knuckles were purple and throbbing from the cold again. He ran his hands under lukewarm water from the tap in the kitchen.

His fingertips stung; he'd cut them on the jagged shells as he peeled them away from the crusty snow. He wiped his hands off on the hand towel decorated with red felt apples—something Claudette had made when she was still alive—curled over the refrigerator door. He tried calling Francine, but an automated message told him that the cellular phone customer he called had either travelled outside the coverage area or was not taking calls at this time. “Goddamnit,” Winston said. A thirty-two-year-old woman ought to be able to keep her own phone on. He called again and got the same result, so he called the Ravalli County Sherriff’s Office.

“Bastards are at it again,” he said when he got through.

“Kids still givin’ you a hard time?” the deputy asked.

“That hardly says it. I’ll have to repaint come summer.”

“See anyone do it?”

“Eggs didn’t fly into my goddamn house on their own, Jerry.” Winston noticed a black smudge of grape jelly on the corner of the sink and picked it off with his thumbnail.

The deputy sighed, said something Winston couldn’t hear. “I’m just tryin’ to help. I’d love to write up the pricks who did this, but I need proof.”

“It’s the Tanner boys from down the street.” The boys were about two years apart (one around twelve and the other fourteen or so), Winston guessed, and were bad people already. Winston had seen the boys throwing stones at a cat, and when he’d told them to knock it off, they’d raised their middle fingers at him. They tackled a fat boy in front of Winston’s house and smeared his reddened face in the snow. Winston got out the BB gun he kept around to fend off deer and fired it twice into the dirt at their feet, hoping to scare the boys senseless. But it didn’t seem to bother them; they looked at him as if he’d

asked them something they hadn't quite heard, and then loped up the road toward their folks' place to tell their dad what happened, leaving the fat kid crumpled and weeping in the snow. When the deputy came by an hour later, he only cared about the fact that a grown man—an old man—had fired a BB gun at two minors. A few weeks ago, when he'd overheard someone at the IGA saying that a deer had been found hogtied, tongueless, and disemboweled, in the cemetery, that there was devil-worshipping involved, he knew it was those boys—a hunch, but a strong one.

“I know you think so,” the deputy said. He sneezed, then excused himself. “I talked to their father last time, and he said he's sure it wasn't them.”

Winston snorted. “I guess that settles it.”

“My guess is it's some older punks, high-school age. I can go talk to the Tanners again, but that's about it.”

Winston took a sip of coffee, then poured the rest of it into the sink so hard it splashed clear up to the window. “Goddamnit.”

“Listen.” The deputy's voice sounded strict and scolding now, as if Winston were the perpetrator. “I don't wanna stomp out any more of your fires.”

“Those little shits're as evil as the devil's ass,” Winston said, spitting into the sink for emphasis.

“You're not the law, Win, remember that,” the deputy said, then hung up.

Winston took the roast out of the refrigerator, where it'd been wallowing in wine and garlic for two days, rubbed it down with black peppercorns and kosher salt and butter. He'd hoped to fix something more sophisticated than roast beef—the same meal

he'd been fixing for special occasions since Francine was a kid—but he'd lost his wife's cookbooks in his move to Darby. Claudette would've known exactly what to fix for Francine, she always did. Winston tried to conjure up a memory of some past meal the three of them enjoyed together, but nothing came.

After he put the roast in the oven and chopped the asparagus free of its white feet, Winston put his hands under running water again. His knuckles still hurt, partly from his work in the cold, but there was something else—a sort of electric pulsing that had recently started up when more snow was on the way. Claudette's Aunt Marvel claimed she could tell a storm was coming in her neck. "When it feels like a handful of bees stinging at once, that means rain," she said. "If it feels like God's got a hand wrapped around my throat, I go to the store and stock up: blizzard's on its way." He thought her senile at first, but her predictions turned out to be more reliable than the weatherman's. Since the accident that took Claudette and turned Winston into a geezer overnight, he'd been able to read the weather through his knuckles just like Marvel. Rain, snow, you name it. Hell of a consolation prize, Winston thought. He watched through the kitchen window gray clouds over the Bitterroots drift towards him, closing in.

Winston called the phone company and paid his daughter's bill—something he told her he'd done for the last time a few months earlier—then called Francine again.

"Dad," Francine said. He could hear the crackly sound of wind slapping into the mouthpiece. The fact that her car window was down meant she was smoking again.

He said, “Can’t spare a lousy seventy bucks to keep the phone on?” He could hear the tinny sound of the radio in the background. “It’s frustratin’ as hell to wanna talk to you and get that wise-ass automated message tellin’ me I can’t.”

“I’m excited to see you.”

“On the road yet?” he asked.

“Almost.” She inhaled loudly, then let out a breath into the mouthpiece. “Had to run a few errands first.”

“Dinner’ll be ready by four,” he said. “Not still smokin’, are you?”

He waited for a response, but he could only hear a noisy commercial on the radio.

“Better get movin’ soon,” he said. “How’re your snow tires?”

“Fine, I guess.” He heard another voice, heard a sound like pine needles crunching under boots. Francine was pressing her phone against her chest, locking him out of whatever secret she was discussing with Dana.

“How’s the Great Dana?” Winston asked. He’d hoped the nickname would be a sort of friendly ribbing, a thing to call a close friend. But now, after he’d let it out of his mouth for the first time, he saw that it was cruel, adolescent, emphasized not the similarity to Great Dane but instead brought to mind Dana’s size. It was a name the Tanner boys might call that poor fatty. In order to call someone that name and get away with it you had to be close, and he and Dana were strangers. He waited for Francine to get angry, to call him a bigot, an asshole, a tyrant, all the names she threw at him in her earlier years.

She sighed, said: “I’ll call you when I get on the road, okay?”

“All right, kid,” he said, feeling embarrassed. “I’m excited as hell to see you,” he added, but Francine had already hit the red button.

Winston had moved to Darby after he found his house in Helena unbearable. Claudette had kept it clean enough for decades, but two months after she died the house had taken on a neglected look: dusty tumbleweeds of cat hair in the corners of the kitchen; grime around the tub; the carpet a minefield of dropped pen caps and Cheez-It crumbs. The house had become foreign to him, as if someone had switched it for a fake while he was in the can. He couldn’t find things anymore: can-opener, laundry detergent, screwdriver. Francine hadn’t been over since after the memorial service, and was barely willing to talk to Winston for a few minutes every couple of weeks. Most nights, Winston sat in the garage drinking Hamm’s until he felt drunk enough to go inside.

He couldn’t get ahead at the Helena Avenue Filling Station. He’d have to stop, wash his hands, wipe them off with degreaser, so many times just to ring up a customer for gas or cigarettes or a brick of Icehouse so many times that it might take him an hour for an oil change. Brake jobs took all day. Anything bigger—replacing gaskets, hoses, deep engine work—he’d have to send to Lars over on Eleventh Street, which he hated to do for several reasons. He should’ve hired someone, but everyone who applied had tattoos or blue hair or coughed a lot during the interview. Plus, his job felt exhausting. He had trouble breathing most days, other days he’d look up to see half the day gone, and all he could remember was unlocking the doors.

Claudette was good with customers; Winston was not. She had a kindness for unbearable people that he couldn't even pretend to replicate. She allowed lonely people—the type one often finds in public places, holding hostage whatever poor prick they can get their hands on—to loiter for hours. She'd nod along, clicking her tongue in the right places, as she took inventory or arranged a beer display. Without her, Winston found these people intolerable, and often sent them along their solitary path quickly.

One night, after he'd been informed that someone had complained about him violating the ADA Act (he knew exactly who: the miserable woman who claimed her pit bull was a service dog), after he'd drunk too much and couldn't fall asleep, he found himself digging through the boxes he'd stashed in the garage. He was looking for the manual to the computer, which kept screeching at him every time he turned it on. He found, in an old, yellowed copy of *The Flight of the Falcon*, a black-and-white photo of himself and Claudette. The photo, sun-spotted and curling at the edges, showed a young, shirtless Winston with hair past his ears and a mustache like Groucho. Claudette's hair was shorter than his, and was light blonde. She wore a long skirt and had her hand on his chest and her head thrown back, caught in mid-laugh. On the back of the photo, Claudette had written *Summer, Darby, Montana* in cursive with ink that had faded to the color of an oil splotch in a rain puddle. Had he seen this before? he wondered. Who took that photo? They stayed at a cabin Claudette's aunt owned for a summer in the Bitterroot Valley long before the state expanded 93 into a four-lane, long before Californians started migrating in. They stayed out there for two months, drinking wine and skinny-dipping and hiking the Bitterroots, often thwacking their own trail to the top, and reading to each other for hours. How long had they been married? Was this the year before Francine

was born? Winston couldn't recall, but he distinctly remembered thinking back then that this was something he wouldn't forget.

The next the day he called a realtor in Darby, and two months later he was retired, had sold his business and his customer list, and on his was way down there with a U-Haul trailer swaying behind him as he drove the three hours to his new home.

His phone rang as he was clearing out the beer cans and grease-spotted paper sacks from the living room.

"On the road?" Winston asked.

"Hello, faggot," a boy's voice said. He heard giggling in the background. "Did you have a boner when you killed your wife?"

"You little fucker," Winston said, squeezing the can in his hand. "I'm gonna rip your throat out."

"You'll die soon, and then there will be a party."

"I'm gonna call the deputy," Winston said. He felt a pain in his palm; the tin of the can had split and was cutting him. "Then you'll be in trouble."

"You'll be dead before that."

Without wanting to, Winston spun around wildly, looking through the windows at the front door for signs of teenagers with swords or shotguns or pitchforks. Snow fell past his windows in blurry streaks. The yellow hatchback drove by cautiously. Had the Tanner boys, those little cocksuckers, hired someone to stamp him out like a garden spider? No, no, Winston assured himself. You're acting old again. No one's coming for you. Nothing will grab you from the dark when you least expect it.

“Next time I see you walking past my house I’ll throttle your neck ’til your face goes blue,” he said. He waited for the boy to reply, but the line went dead.

He went outside, stood in the middle of the driveway. They’re out here, he thought, watching. He saw deer over by the Milkes’ fence line, nosing through brittle weeds. Two magpies danced on the telephone wire across the lane with their beaks open. Gray trails of chimney smoke lazily expanded until they were part of the sky. No burning crosses, no pentagrams written with blood in the blue-tinted snow, no eminent threat that he could see or do anything to stop.

He turned to see the yellow hatchback returning from the end of the lane. He reached into his pocket, but didn’t find anything. Winston thought about the Metro he’d bought for Francine. He remembered that he made love to Claudette in the kitchen the night he bought it, and by the time Francine came home, Claudette and Winston were red-faced and giggling, unable to keep their hands off each other. Francine didn’t take care of the car, of course. He’d taught her how to change the oil, the tires, the sparkplugs. It ended up, like two other cars he’d gotten for her, in the junkyard not long after he’d bought it—a result of something she could’ve easily prevented.

The Geo slowed as it approached Winston. Though they were too young, he expected the Tanner boys to be in the front, the older one driving and the younger, meaner one pointing a pistol at him. The man in the driver’s seat looked tall; he was bent over toward the steering wheel. He stared at Winston as he passed. After the car had gotten just a hare past Winston’s driveway its brake lights flashed, then stayed on. Winston’s stomach felt hot and airy, like he might burp. Get on with it, Winston thought, do whatever it was you were sent here to do. He saw the driver crane his neck back

toward Winston, then reach for something in the passenger seat. Winston closed his eyes, wondering what it might felt like to get shot in the face. Maybe it wouldn't be that easy; maybe the man was sent here to drug Winston, then drag him off to some deserted barn filled with rotting hay and horse droppings as hard as river rocks, where the Tanner boys would offer him to their Dark Lord. When he opened his eyes, the car was gone.

Cleopatra and Victoria had followed him outside, and were pawing gingerly at the clumps of snow just off the porch steps. "Nothing for us to do here, ladies," he said, holding the front door open for them.

He thought about calling the deputy again, but decided against it. Instead, he flipped the roast over and then began preparing the guestroom—making the bed, clearing out the boxes marked *Claudette's Crap*, scrubbing the guest bathroom's toilet—even though his knuckles continued to ache, even though it would've been easier just to go lie on the couch until something happened.

This wasn't the first time they'd accused Winston of slaughtering his wife. Months ago, when he first became the devil worshippers' target, he got a call in the middle of the night. He'd thought it was Francine, or—even worse—about Francine. They hadn't spoken in weeks; every time he called it went straight to voicemail. He'd even called Lewis & Clark Retirement Center, where Francine worked as a RNA, but was told that she no longer worked there. When he'd finally answered, the same voice he heard today spoke.

"Hi, sir," the voice started, sounding polite, even warm. "You killed your wife and fed her to your church's congregation."

“I think you have the wrong number,” Winston said, because they were wrong, because they were crazy, because, at three-thirty in the morning, he wasn’t sure if they weren’t right, if he wasn’t the one who was crazy.

The boy laughed, and so did another. The two different forms of laughter—one high and screechy, the other a sort of breathy coughing—mixed to make an ugly sound, like broken horns played into the mouth of a windy tunnel. Winston’s hands started shaking. Cleopatra started rubbing her head against his shin, but he kicked her away.

“We won’t stop, Leonard.” The boy’s voice sounded more confident now, the trace of laughter gone, and Winston had a feeling that as the boy spoke he was pointing his finger at an imaginative chest, Winston’s chest. “We know you changed your name, that you moved here from Michigan, that you plan to do it again, as soon as you can find a whore dumb enough to marry you.”

Winston was up now, tripping through the dark, trying to find the light switch. “Listen to me,” Winston said. “My name isn’t Leonard, and I loved my wife dearly.” But his voice sounded unconvincing, maybe even insincere. “I’m callin’ the police.”

This pleased the boys; they erupted again into laughter so hard that Winston had to hold the phone away. When he brought it back to his ear, the line was dead, but he kept listening, hoping for some hint, some reason as to why this was happening.

Winston did feel responsible for her death. He didn’t kill her, he knew that. He’d been driving them to the gas station when a Jeep Grand Cherokee sailed through a stop sign, clobbering his side of the car, pinning his knuckles to the steering wheel. He wasn’t to blame, not for that part. But Winston hadn’t been paying attention; he’d been fuming

at Claudette for giving Francine more money. They'd decided (at least Winston thought they had) that Francine needed to bail herself out of trouble for now. But the night before, when he was balancing their checkbook, he noticed a four-hundred-dollar discrepancy. She denied it at first, then, as they were they were cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, she admitted that Francine had been short on rent, had needed some help just one last time.

He hadn't said a word the rest of that night, or the next morning. His last words to her, before her head slid through the passenger window and severed something important in her neck, were: "You're a goddamn idiot if you think that lazy dyke's gonna stop askin' you for money."

As he laid in the dark that first night the devil worshippers called, desperately grabbing at sleep, he heard himself say those words, saw the way Claudette's eyes grew wide when he called her an idiot, saw how her jaw tightened when he called their little girl a dyke. These things couldn't be fixed, no matter how hard he tried.

At four, as the day's shade went from ash gray to shale, the phone rang again. Winston paused from chopping romaine for the salad and looked at the phone. He listened to the whispering sound of oil searing the asparagus. He wished that he'd opted for caller ID. Claudette had refused to use it when she was alive; it took away the fun of answering the phone, she'd claimed, and so when he had a new line installed in Darby, he hadn't even thought to get it.

He picked it up and listened for a moment without saying hello. He heard a faint crackling sound like wind, then his daughter's voice. "No, I told you, I've never been

here before. I don't even think he'd ever been here before he moved. He bought it over the Internet or something. I have no fuckin' idea why he moved to this place."

"Francine?" he said, his voice a little phlegmy and uncertain. "Hello?"

"Hey," she said. "We're in Darby, parked outside the IGA. How do we get to your house again? Mapquest led me to the high school gymnasium."

"You were supposed to call before you left."

"The roads are awful," she said. "We must've seen ten cars in the ditches along the way."

"I was startin' to think you weren't gonna make it."

"What?" she said, but it sounded quiet, like she pulled the phone away and was talking to Dana. "Yeah, okay," she said. "Can you just come meet us here?"

The roads were gray with slush, and the clouds hid the moon. He navigated past the clusters of mailboxes and groves of snow-bloated pines at the end of driveways, with caution, going too slowly, apparently; an SUV swung around him, laying on the horn. All the things he wanted to say to Francine didn't sound right. Sentences he had been massaging in his head for weeks now seemed scathing, snotty, whiny. He wanted to tell her that he missed her, that it was all too obvious that for her talking to Winston had become a chore not unlike scouring the bottom of a trashcan. But how could he say any of this? Even though he'd thought about the ways in which he could convey his feelings to her for weeks, he'd been limited by one terrible disadvantage: he was his only audience, his only critic.

The yellow hatchback was parked in front of the laundromat. He slowed and tried to look in, but the salt-smearred windshield camouflaged its driver. What was he doing? Winston wondered. His knuckles started aching again, and holding them up to the vent on the dashboard as it coughed out warm air didn't help. Should he stop, talk to the guy, spider-web the windshield with a tire iron? But before he could make a decision the yellow hatchback was just a brightly colored spot in his rearview mirror and he was turning into the IGA parking lot, where Francine and her girlfriend sat in a brown station wagon, waiting for him.

He parked next to them and waited for a moment, expecting Francine to slump out of the driver's seat and walk up to his door. Her car spat out long clouds of exhaust. She didn't seem to notice that he'd pulled up; she had her body pointed to the passenger seat, was telling a story: her arms went up and down, her head nodded and shook intermittently. It was only after he'd pressed the horn that she turned to him, smiled, then waved him out of his truck.

The air was thick and frigid, the sort of cold that can stick with you for days if you stay out in it for too long. He pulled his collar up and walked carefully across the frozen parking space to her car.

She rolled her window down. "Hiya, Dad." He bent toward her, attempting a through-the-window hug, but she settled for a strong forearm touch. She had gained some weight in her face. She bent her head down so that he could kiss the top of it.

"Hey, Francine," he said into the top of her head. "Hey, my girl."

Dana leaned forward to make eye contact with him. “Hello, Win!” she said. She had dark hair so thick it had the consistency of a broom’s straw. She had gained some weight, too.

“Hi there,” he said. “Your car’s spittin’ out a helluva lot of dirt. When’s the last time you changed the oil?”

Francine rolled her eyes, tucked her dusty blonde hair behind her ears, showing off the skeleton-head earrings dangling from her lobes.

“Isn’t it early for Halloween?” He touched the earring and watched as it wobbled back and forth. She turned to Dana and laughed, then turned back to her father.

“Lead the way,” she said.

When he opened the door for them the cats came shooting out. Thick smoke hung in the living room.

“My God,” Francine said, marching through the room, looking for the fire. Dana brushed past him, too. Winston followed them through the house.

“Goddamn devil worshippers,” he said, feeling his neck grow hot. “They’re tryin’ to kill me.”

When Winston got to the kitchen he saw Francine carrying his pan of asparagus, now filled with purple flames, toward the back door. “Open the door, babe,” she said to Dana. She had a towel Claudette made wrapped around her hand. Winston watched as she trudged through the backyard—snow up to her shins—and then, after she’d gotten about twenty feet away from the house, flung the pan as far as she could. He watched the

blackened asparagus flip limply through the air, watched the funnel of smoke rise from the pan, hidden now by the snow.

“I forgot to turn the heat off,” he said when Francine came back in, her eyes watering from the cold or smoke. He wasn’t sure if this was true—the Tanner boys could’ve easily snaked through one of the first-floor windows and turned it back on, but he could tell by the way Francine bit the side of her cheek and nodded curtly and said, “It’s okay,” that this was not the time to tell her about them.

“Listen, don’t look so worried,” he said, smiling. “I’m fine here.”

Dana clapped her hands, walked to the window above the sink. “Let’s get the windows open before we suffocate,” she said.

They went around the house, wrestling open the windows. Most of them had been closed for years; tufts of dried paint and dried bug husks fell from the frames when the glass finally got shoved upward.

In the newly cleared air, Winston saw that, though he’d tried to tidy up, his house was quite obviously the home of a lone person: the coffee table sat burdened by stacks of books, most of them on devil worshippers; wadded up tissues and napkins were clustered around the couch like bales of hay in a field; the TV tray that stood in the corner of the room was blemished by gravy stains and held several dirty forks.

“Sorry about all this,” he said, waving his hands around the room. “Guess I’ve gotten used to livin’ like I’m the only one left in the world.”

Francine smiled at him, fiddled with a ring on her middle finger. Dana put a hand on her shoulder, and Francine responded by rubbing her head against Dana’s knuckles.

Dana said, “You didn’t burn everything, didya?”

He shook his head solemnly.

“Well, let’s eat what’s left,” she said, leading Francine to the kitchen.

During dinner, Dana talked about the new shopping center being built up by the canyon, how it was forcing the wildlife to move closer into town. “Just the other day,” she said, “We saw a moose and its baby eating out of the dumpster behind our apartments.” She clucked her tongue, shook her head, took in another bite of salad. The roast turned out exactly the way Claudette always liked it—pink on the edges, redder toward the middle. Neither Dana nor Francine had touched their roast.

“I thought you were gonna move outta that dump?” Winston said, looking at Francine. “What’d I send you that four-hundred-dollar check for last month?”

Francine, who’d been quiet since putting out the fire, looked up from her plate, squinted at Winston. “Why are you being like this?”

He took a drink from his wine. “I’m just tryin’ to see where my money’s goin’, that’s all.”

She looked at her plate. “Dana doesn’t eat meat,” she said. “I’ve told you a hundred times.”

“That’s alright,” Dana said. “No big deal.”

“You never told me that,” Winston said, standing up. “I’ll fix you something else.” He walked over to Dana’s seat and picked up her plate. “I’ve got eggs, cheese, English muffins—you want a fried egg sandwich?”

“It’s okay, really,” Dana said. “I’ll get somethin’ in Missoula on the way back.”

“You’re not stayin’?” he said. “That’s crazy. The weather’ll swallow you up.”

“I’ve got to work at eight o’clock,” Francine said. She bent down and picked up Cleopatra and put the cat on her lap. “We should be gettin’ on soon.”

“Call ’em,” he said, putting the plate down. He flexed his hand a few times; his knuckles were at it again. “Say you got stuck.”

“It won’t be too treacherous,” Dana said. “The plows’ll keep the highways clear.”

“It’d be stupid to go back out there,” Winston said. “Just nuts. I fixed the guest bedroom up for you.”

Francine put the cat down and stood up. She walked to the hall closet and took out her coat, then Dana’s. “I’m sorry you went to all this trouble.”

Winston noticed that her shoulders slouched down, and her legs were bent slightly, a pose not unlike the one she gave her mother before school, when she was unsuccessful in convincing Claudette that she was too sick to go. Her hands looked chapped, as if she’d been gloveless and in the wind all day. The windows were still open; the house was freezing. He wanted to walk over to her, to put his arms around her, to apologize for all that had happened between them in her thirty-two years. He walked to the window next to the front door and closed it, making sure the drapes didn’t get stuck. He turned back to Francine. “Suit yourself,” he said.

She walked back towards him, and for a moment he thought that perhaps she would say what he couldn’t, would take him in her arms, walk him upstairs, and start the conversation he’d wanted to have with her since Claudette died. If she could start it, he was sure he’d be able to follow suit. She went to the table and took a cherry tomato from the salad bowl, popped it in her mouth, then finished off the half-inch of wine remaining in her glass.

“Sorry,” she said, but not in the way he wanted her to say it. Then her coat was on, and she was out the door.

Dana, who Winston had almost entirely forgotten about, stood up from the table. She walked over to the couch, where her jacket lay draped over one of the arms. She pulled a scarf from a pocket and twirled it around her neck. Then she looked at him. She put her hand out to shake his hand, and he accepted.

“Win,” she said. He looked at the mirror above the woodstove; Francine’s car’s headlights glowed in the glass like twin yellow discs. Dana’s grip tightened. “She needs you, but not in the way you think.”

Winston sat by the fire drinking from the wine bottle when headlights swept across the living room. Plates were still on the table, the butter still out. Cleopatra had knocked Winston’s fork to the floor and was licking it. He was thinking that old men are alone only when they’ve successfully severed themselves from every tentacle of life that meant something for years. He thought of how many husbands and wives die within a year of when their partners die, and how that might be okay. He heard tires crunch to a halt, heard the whiny sound of a fan belt that needed to be replaced. He looked over by the hall closet, where his BB gun sat propped against the wall. Before he could scoot toward it, he heard feet on the porch, then the sound of someone stamping the snow from their shoes. Only one set of feet. Maybe it was the older Tanner boy, he thought, coming to finish the job but not wanting the younger one to see it. Were devil worshippers capable of compassion? he wondered. Probably not, but he wasn’t sure, not anymore.

Three knocks. Cleopatra darted into the kitchen, but Victoria, who was sprawled out on the couch, just pinned her ears back, squinted vaguely.

“Well,” Winston said to her, “Might as well get it over with.”

He’d imagined a hooded figure in black, billowing robes. He imagined a scarred face, barely visible in all that darkness. The man who stood in front of him was wearing a Boise Broncos jacket. He had dark, thinning hair and a red beard that curled its way from cheeks to chin. He held a tan baseball cap in his hands and looked startled, maybe even devastated, when Winston flung open the door.

“Yeah?” Winston asked, keeping his hands behind his back, his head jutting out in front of his body—a nervous tic Claudette used to make fun of him for.

“Oh,” the man said. He smiled nervously, then looked at the number next to the porch light. “I’m sorry for the time. I meant to come earlier.”

“You did,” Winston said. “I saw you drive by here in the morning and then again in the afternoon.”

The man looked past Winston, trying to get a look at the living room. “Is Ma here?” he asked. “Blair Hodges?”

The stranger couldn’t have been more than twenty-five. The skin on his face contained few wrinkles, and his beard hair was soft-looking like frayed yarn. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Winston said, looking behind him, trying to figure out what the man was looking at. “No Ma here. Just me.”

The man didn’t seem to hear him; he kept fiddling with the adjustable band of his baseball cap. The hat’s brim was dark in the middle from the constant touch of dirty

fingers. He took a step toward Winston, and Winston brought his hands out from behind his back, just in case he had to do something with them.

“Hold on a minute,” Winston said.

“Excuse me,” the man said, stepping into the house. He looked over to the corner by the fireplace, currently occupied by six boxes on which Winston had Sharpied *C’s Books*. “Where’s the piano?” the man asked. “Where’d she go?”

“Blair Hodges,” Winston said. “She lived here before me.”

“When did she move?” the man asked.

“Don’t know. I bought it nine months ago.”

The man walked over to the fireplace, ran a finger idly over the corner of the mantle. “You know where she moved?”

“Nope.”

“She still alive?”

The man was still standing at the open door, the cold crashing into him over and over. Winston stepped inside and flexed his hand, though his knuckles didn’t hurt. “You hungry? I was supposed to have guests, but that fell through. Got all this goddamn food and no one to feed it to.”

The man’s name was Paul. He was twenty-four. He’d been in Boise for the past two years, working at an o-ring manufacturing plant. Before that he’d been an extra on a movie about the Civil War in Georgia; had worked at an antique mall in West Virginia; had canned herring somewhere in Alaska; had spent time in North Dakota doing nothing

but forgetting the days. He was happy in Boise, had found a girl, found God. And he was quite hungry; he ate several plates of roast beef, but refused wine.

Winston listened to all this without much thought—it had been a while since he'd had the pleasure of listening, taking things in, and not thinking about anything else but what the other person was saying. This is something he'd loved about Claudette. She'd loved to talk, but not in a self-absorbed sort of way. She shared with him interactions with customers, things she'd read in the paper, her concerns about Frankie (Winston hated Claudette's nickname for Francine, but he found himself missing it now, longing for it, even) all with such confidence and interest that they'd go whole evenings—even late in their marriage, even the night before she died—without leaving the dining room to go watch television or get on the computer.

“Don't drink anymore,” Paul said after they'd spent a few minutes in silence, watching the cats bat around a crumpled receipt on the floor. He had pushed his chair away from the table and was scratching at a stain on his pants. “That's what I came to tell Ma.”

Paul stuck his hand beneath his jacket and took a necklace out of his shirt pocket. “And to give her this.” He handed it over to Winston. Silver, old, a little tarnished. “I stole it from her when I was sixteen, right before I took off for good. I broke into the house, snuck in here, took it from her nightstand. When I turned to her, she was starin' at me. She moved to get up, and I slapped her and ran outta the house, didn't stop runnin' for a long goddamn time. I slapped my own mother. I know all this time I've been gone she's been thinkin' I'm a shit, just the worst goddamn person in the world.”

He took the necklace back from Winston and put it back. "I was hoping to change that, or at least start to."

"Oh," Winston said.

"I've been pretty straight for two years." Paul stood up, took out a pack of cigarettes, motioned that he was stepping out for a smoke.

"You can do that in here," Winston said. "My wife smoked in the house longer than you've been alive. I bitched about it all the time, but I'd be damned if I don't miss that smell." He usually missed it at night, when he'd wake up from something terrible happening in his dreams. He'd wait for something familiar to calm him down: Claudette's warm hand touching his leg; hearing her say "It's okay," with her sleep-fattened tongue; the familiar shape of the ceiling fan wobbling above him; the stale smell of cigarette smoke mixed with the scent from the lavender candle Claudette burned to cover it up. But nothing would come.

"When'd she die?" Paul asked, ashing his cigarette into Francine's wineglass.

Winston told him. He took another swig of wine. "Since I moved out here, it's not unusual for me to go days without saying a word." He walked over to the fireplace and put another log on the fire. "It's become a sort of game for me. I'll avoid people's eyes at the grocery store, I'll ignore the phone, I'll even stay inside when the postman drives up."

Paul dropped his cigarette into the wineglass, and they both watched as it sizzled out, as the white paper slowly turned purple. "I wonder where she is."

She's dead, Winston thought. Just like Claudette.

Paul's mother, it seemed to Winston, had died thinking that her son was a liar, a thief, a drunk. Claudette had died thinking, probably, that her husband was an intolerant asshole, a mean and rigid old man who had just called their daughter and her lover fat dykes. There was nothing either of them could do to change that, no matter how far either travelled, either to make amends or escape into valleys. They were both shackled to the women they loved, and in that way they were similar, as much as Winston hated to admit it.

After an hour, Paul looked at his cell phone, raised his eyebrows. "It's gettin' late."

The cats were asleep on Winston's lap. He pushed them onto the couch so he could get up. "Where you stayin'?"

"Got me a room in town," Paul walked over to Winston, shook his hand. "Sure appreciate that food. I was starving."

"Your fan belt's loose," Winston said. "Ought to get that fixed before you head back."

Paul took a cough drop out of his jacket pocket and popped it in his mouth. "Don't have the money to fix that now."

"Hold on," Winston said. "I might be able to help."

The belt was cracked, but not too terribly. Winston found some grease in the garage, then rubbed it into the cracks.

"Turn it on," he said. The belt sounded fine.

“I think you’ll make it,” Winston said, leaning into the car’s open driver’s side window. “But it’s won’t last—you’ll need to get it replaced pronto.”

Winston watched as the car disappeared down the lane. Inside, the phone was ringing. There was that familiar pulsing in his knuckles, but it felt different now, lighter, as if the snow might let up, as if Francine and Dana might make it back to Helena without any trouble, as if he might be able to go a day without being reminded of the weather.

III. TRAINS AT NIGHT

There I was, driving to the trailer park way down Montana Avenue in a car that wasn't mine. It belonged to Bertrand, a man in the Pre-Release Center. He was the only person I knew from Missoula. He cooked for a while up there. I had agreed to do business for him, even though I would've rather died than do dope again.

I looked like this: shaved head, pierced septum, nasty, purple scar from where I got kicked in the chin. I had this basement apartment at the time, though I can't remember much about it except that the lady above me was a cow. Every time she walked I could feel it in my spine.

Blanche got me that apartment and paid the rent for the first six months. I had to promise to stay sober. No loopholes, she said—this is the last time. She'd been keeping an eye on me ever since Ma died. I'd heard the "last time" thing before.

Sobriety wasn't going well. I'd relapsed a dozen times. The dopers smelled me coming. The day Blanche dropped me off I walked to a gas station. An attendant with bags under his eyes and a nasty canker sore on his bottom lip tried to bum a cigarette. I don't smoke.

"Cheyenne," he said, and he looked familiar; I knew him.

"Bertrand," I said. I hadn't seen him in two years, maybe three. I remembered that he had a son, that he liked the Smiths.

"You wanna get high?" he asked. I never knew how to say no to that.

The woman upstairs sometimes left me notes:

I couldn't get to sleep last night because of your slamming and carrying on.

Or

I woke up last night (at two!) and heard you speaking loudly. I think you should be considerate of your neighbors (especially those who work!) and keep your voice down.

I don't know who I was talking to. I didn't have any friends.

But I did have a job. I worked graveyard at Safeway. If I didn't, I would've been able to keep my promise to Blanche. If I had stayed inside, locked the door, and cut off my legs, I would've stayed sober. I would've made her proud.

I went down Montana Avenue that day because Bertrand had asked me to do a run. "Shouldn't be hard," he said over the Pre-Release payphone.

"I'm not gonna do it," I said. "I hate this."

"This guy goes way back with me," he said. I imagined a herd of men in orange lining up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "I'll give a gram and fifty bucks for the trouble."

I was broke at the time, I do remember that.

Bertrand's car was a tan Ford Escort wagon. The smell of its seats always reminded me of a part of my life I couldn't quite recall, before Blanche took me in, back when I lived with Ma. Cigarettes and booze. The car had slow leaks in two tires, and the back passenger side tire was just a donut.

It was four in the morning; I was the only one on the road. I got stopped by a train halfway there. There was a train track by Blanches' house. When I first moved in, her husband still lived there. He suffered horribly from Alzheimer's. When I was ten, he

kissed me on the lips. He used to sneak off all the time. Blanche put child safety locks on the doors, but he'd get through those, no problem. She'd tear her hair out worrying about him getting on the tracks. One night, she ran out of the house without saying a word. A train was coming and I chased her. I caught her and held her while she sobbed into my shoulder. The train roared past, its blazing lights mocking Blanche's misery. When we got back to the house, he was there, sitting in the living room like nothing had happened. A few days later, maybe a week, Blanche took him to a home and I never saw him again.

Since I'd been in Helena, Blanche kept sending cards with butterflies and biblical messages. Each card had a short sentence from Blanche written in a delicate hand congratulating me for another month clean. I'd been going to meetings here and there, slinking in late and weeping. I don't remember anyone's face. A million people had gotten sober. I remember a man who wore gray cowboy boots. He always reached down into them and pulled his socks up. There was also a woman who usually took off her high heels and stretched her legs out as far as they could go. She had rings on several toes and a camel tattooed on her ankle. I'd steal tokens that were given to people with one, two, three months of sobriety and send them to Blanche. I bet she waited by the door, staring at the mail slot, hoping and praying for the next nugget of proof that I was doing right.

Waiting for the train, I realized that if I put the car in reverse, turned around, driven two blocks, and took a right, I could've been in front of a church that had a meeting at six. I could've made it another pathetic, measly day. I was going to pray for

the power to do that, but then the train passed, the crossing lights stopped blinking, the arm lifted. And I drove on.

The park housed four ancient trailers. No one shoveled their driveways. A lone street lamp slapped C-7 with dirty yellow; there was a purple limo parked right in front of the steps. The windows of the place were foiled off. There was just a hint of light coming through the cracks of one window. Briefly, I thought maybe Bertrand gave me the wrong address. Maybe inside there was a mechanic, his wife, their two girls. Maybe the mechanic loved his family more than he loved dope. Maybe the wife volunteered at the library. Maybe the daughters were dreaming of winning the spelling bee, of singing in the opera or dancing ballet in New York City.

A woman answered the door. She had enormous breasts that hung like sacks of flour. They were much bigger than mine. Sweat shined on her forehead. She glared at me through the doorway. She didn't say anything; she just stared, grinding her teeth.

"Let her in, Amber," a man said.

Amber shifted from foot to foot, spit on the carpet, then obeyed. Cradle of Filth was playing low from a portable CD player sitting on a cardboard box. I hadn't listened to music in a long time. The man had on overalls and boots, and was stooped over a table. He was stapling jigsaw puzzle pieces together. An Insane Clown Posse poster hung above the couch. A shotgun with silver duct tape around the handle leaned against the wall. The TV was on, but it wasn't connected to anything; the screen emitted an ugly blue. There was a dog with a sick gray muzzle, ribs showing through its fur.

"Is this your new bitch-whore?" Amber snarled. "She doesn't have any goddamn hair."

“You’re Bertrand’s guy,” the man said. He looked up from his puzzle. His cheek was bleeding.

“Yep,” I replied. He shook my hand, then ran his hands up my shirt. Looking for a wire, I guessed. I stood there, smiling at Amber.

The dope had a venomous pink tint to it. The man told me I had to take it up to Rodney Street by Jester’s Bar.

“You know where that is?” he asked as he crinkled a piece of tinfoil.

“Yep,” I said.

The man sprinkled a line down the center of the foil. Amber came over with pliers and lifted the foil up carefully. He had a butane lighter with a Confederate flag on the side. The whoosh it made when he clicked down made my cavities ache. “First?” he asked.

The tinfoil cracked as the flame singed the bottom; the pink dust let off a white cloud, and I took the first, just like always. The pink grit evolved into charred black tar. Science. We were the same, the three of us. The man got the cut on his cheek from Amber earlier that night.

“He kept lookin’ out the damn window,” she said, “It was upsetting.”

“She’s a fuckin’ firecracker when she’s been up for a few days,” the man said, playing with a loose piece of her hair. Amber started coughing, then smacked her lips.

“My tongue’s so dry it could be pulled right outta my ugly face,” she said.

The two started kissing. Amber’s hand glided around the waistband of the man’s sweatpants. My head thumped like a bass drum.

Five in the morning. Blanche would be waking soon. She would get up, go to the bathroom, start a pot of coffee, get on her knees, and pray for me. Maybe I would call her, maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I was telling the truth, maybe I wasn't. It didn't matter—she prayed for me no matter what.

The man and his lover retreated to the bedroom. I smoked another foil and started plucking the hair on my arms. I took off my shoes; I wanted to break my stupid, ugly toes. There was a squeaking coming from somewhere. It sounded like a cat, but I couldn't find one. It wasn't coming from the sink. Not from under the stapled-down carpet. It wasn't the ceiling tiles growing fatter in their metal brackets. I thought it might've been the couch. Under one of the cushions I found several photos of Amber and her lover screwing. Under the other I found twelve hundred dollars.

The noise made me think of the woman who lived above me. She was very strange; sometimes I could hear her yelling. One freezing morning—twenty below, not including the wind—I came home from work and heard a cat. I found it in my window well. Its eyes were starting to freeze shut. We snuggled all day. I heard the woman calling for the cat in the stairway, even heard her crunch by my window a few times. Before I went to work I put it in the stairway, just in case it had to shit. It was gone when I got back, and before I went to sleep I heard the woman yelling again.

Dope doesn't make you hallucinate. People think we rip their skin off trying to get at imaginary bugs dancing on their muscles because of the drugs. Man, that's bullshit; the lack of sleep does that. When you first smoke you feel nervous, queasy. Blood flows like lava through veins. The heart sputters like a helicopter propeller spinning for the first time. You think that if you stop concentrating for just one second,

your body will lose control; bowels will open and breathing will quit. But if you hold on, if you stay focused and live, everything else—jails, rehabs, Blanche—seems as important as breaking a shoelace. I'll never forget this feeling if I quit for good, I kept thinking. I'll miss this feeling like I miss my mother.

Montana Avenue was starting to come to life as I headed back. A man was salting the driveway to a gas station. A woman with a cigarette dangling from her lips changed out the ad on the Osco Drug sign. I got stopped at the same track on the way home. Gray clouds hung in the sky. I could feel the cold through the frosted windows even though the heat was on full blast. My hands were sweating. My feet were trembling. The train was taking longer than usual. SWAT teams were about to smash through the windshield. Amber and her man were going to pull up behind me in the purple limo and shoot off the back of my ugly, bald head. Blanche was going to open the passenger door, slide into the seat and start sobbing.

I stopped at JB's to eat. I wasn't hungry. A meth cook once told me that the best way to keep your teeth was to eat afterwards.

"It'll save you lots of heartache," he said. He only had one tooth, a pathetic-looking thing off to the right side of his mouth.

I hated the waitress. When she turned to take my order, she put her hand to her chest. "Can I getcha anything?" she asked.

"Waffles," I said. Everyone in the restaurant turned towards me. Maybe they were staring because I was bald. A big fucker kept moving his lips. Who was he talking to? He seemed to be speaking into his sleeve while he kept his big, dull eyes on me.

"Who the fuck're you talkin' to?" I yelled.

A minute later a man in a bow tie asked me to leave. I didn't get anything to eat.

"My teeth are as good as gone," I told everyone. They weren't staring now. They were doing everything they could to not look my way. I was back in my car again, with a pocket full of drugs that weren't going to Jester's Bar and a wallet full of money that wasn't going back under the couch cushion.

I didn't feel like going home. I felt if I kept driving, I would eventually wake up in my apartment still sober.

I went up the wrong road that took a sudden turn into the woods. Most of the trees lining the road were bare. They hadn't had leaves for months, and I could see for miles. I could see the bottom of Montana Avenue, where I'd just robbed two lovers while they screwed the speed out of their systems. In Missoula, my ex-boyfriend and I used to stuff our backpacks with Pabst, cocaine, and Lord Byron and hike up to the M. I'd put my head on his lap while he read to me.

Blanche insisted I needed a new start after I broke up with him. That's why I came down here. He sang for Lazy Boring Sex. He was tattooed from his wrists to his neck. We never slept. We listened to old reggae albums on his record player. We went to shows. When the punks started getting crazy, heaving against us like waves against a cliff, he gripped my hand tight and put his body against mine. He broke up with me after I disappeared for two weeks, and I wanted to tell him that I respected his decision. Instead, I locked myself in the closet with a kitchen knife and our bag of cocaine. He kicked in the door and yanked me all the way outside. I heard he got a tattoo of my severed head on his calf. I don't blame him.

I made my way back to town. I stopped at a gas station and stared at the payphone. I wanted to call Blanche. Bertrand told me to call him at eight. It was nine. I felt my pockets for change and started over to the phone.

“Hello?” Blanche said. I hung up. Don’t ask me why.

I wasn’t sure if the car could make it to Blanche’s house, but I could stay there if it did. I couldn’t stay in Helena, I knew that.

I kissed my front door goodbye before I went down the stairs to my apartment. There wasn’t much to bring. I had sold all my records already. Even Rancid’s “. . .And Out Come the Wolves.” I could sing first track to the last word for word. I stuck my toothbrush and deodorant in a plastic bag and surveyed the kitchen. The pots Blanche bought me had never been used. I left them.

I heard something in the hallway upstairs. I imagined Amber’s man and a pack of his pals creeping towards my door. I imagined them with matching cheek wounds and sweatpants and armed with duct-taped shotguns. I grabbed the shower rod from the bathroom as quietly as I could and tiptoed up the stairs and yanked the door open. I didn’t look.

“You bastards!” I screamed, swinging with eyes shut. The rod connected and vibrated in my hands.

I opened my eyes and saw the woman who lived upstairs sprawled out. She didn’t look at me. She had her arm above her face. A roll of tape and a note were in her hands.

The streets were icy and bleak and I was driving too fast. The tires kept slipping and catching. I steered clear of all the busy roads: Eleventh, Montana, Prospect. The

Henderson stoplight was down. A cop was standing in the middle of the road directing traffic in the clogged intersection. As soon as I saw him, I slammed on my brakes, causing a Dodge Ram to honk and swerve around. I swung into the Van's Thriftway parking lot, ran into the market and bought a roll of aluminum foil, drove around the building, walked behind the row of dumpsters, and got high all over again. It was the only thing to do.

Next to Van's was a music shop, so with some of the stolen money I bought Blanche a keyboard. When she drove me up to Helena she told me her fingers were getting too weak to play the Eavestaff in her living room. She learned how to play "I Want to Be Sedated" when I was in high school. The clerk insisted on taking it to the car for me. I realized I didn't know what was in the trunk. Could've been a dead body or a case of chocolate almonds.

"I'll get it from here," I said.

"Your tires're about flat."

"Thanks."

The cop didn't look twice as I drove through. A half mile later there were no more houses lining the road, just mailboxes with driveways promising homes on the other end. Every time I let go of the wheel to finger my drugs or money, the car veered sharply to the left. I knew I'd make it, though. I had a gift to deliver.

I felt guilty then, but about the stealing. About Blanche—I was going back to her, and she'd be sorry she let me in again. Last chance, she would tell me. No more fooling around. But I would fool around. I would ruin my chance. My throat swelled and I

wanted to pull over and pray. If I stopped, I knew the car would never run again. I would be stuck until the cops came.

But then I changed my mind. Everything would be repaired—I was sure of it. If I ever got sober, if I ever got to making amends, I would pay them all back, everyone. The fat woman, Amber and her man. We would become friends. I would send Christmas cards to all of them. I could picture Blanche, wilted like an old rose, answering the door. She'd be excited at first, then she'd square me up, notice me jaw grinding away, my eyes shining and suffering. I took a left instead of a right at 90. It led me towards Butte, that city of rot and comfort. This is better for both of us, I thought.

IV. DARRYL STRAWBERRY

You steer the snowplow around the bend, toward the pale humps of the Sapphire Mountains. Ricky Towner's boy—Brian? Brandon?—is out in a field, doing his best to dig his back tires out of the fresh snow that fell last night in fat, packing-popcorn gobs. Mailboxes wobble in the wind, and spilled envelopes dance in the ditch by the sharp, splintered edges of broken fence. This was where he came in, you deduce. He must've been hauling ass around the curve and hit some black ice. Towner's boy is bent at the knees, throwing the snow between his legs hound-dog style. He's not wearing a jacket, just a hooded sweatshirt. He pauses, looks around, blows on his hands, rubs them together. He played on your son's baseball team—outfield, maybe third base. He wasn't as good as Henry, but no one in Hamilton was. This, of course, was before the trouble. You shake this thought off—work is the one period during which you've trained yourself not to think about your son.

The sound of the plow reaches him; Towner's boy sees you and begins galloping unevenly through the lumpy snow. He wants you to stop, of course, give him lift to school, home, Whitman's Towing, but that's not what Ravalli County pays you to do. It is your task—for nineteen years now—to push the muck toward the ditches and drifts and drop a little salt and gravel behind you for good measure. It's not perfect, of course, but nothing is in February in Montana. Towner's boy is close now, jumping and waving like an idiot. The sky pushes down over the valley like a gray lid. More snow will fall tonight. You can tell just by the look the clouds, the way they loiter so close to home,

how puddle-black veins run through their center. You shrug, shake your head at the boy. I'm sorry, you think. Don't come out in this shit if you can't take it. A week earlier, Chinook winds blown in from Idaho melted the snow and gave the valley a false sense of spring. Teenagers shed their parkas and drove around with the windows cracked. The owner of Chapter One Bookstore rolled the discount rack outside to tempt foot traffic. The sun even broke through the clouds for the first time in months. This was also the day the police showed up with a warrant for Henry—the second one this year, and this time, since he's eighteen now, meant adult court—because he didn't pay his fines, though you gave him the money to do so. He'd been coming in late and sneaking out sometime during the day, while you were out plowing the roads and Nora was teaching at the high school, but he hasn't been home since the cops showed up.

Somehow, since the warm winds have kept you inside the shop, servicing the plows and watching daytime television, you've theorized that the weather and Henry's momentary disappearance are connected. This is Nora's fault—she always finds messages in nothing. Though you hate to admit it, she's been right a time or two: when you were living in Missoula while she finished up her degree and she found a blue ribbon stranded in a tree branch outside the spare bedroom and she was convinced you'd have a boy; six months ago when you two saw that wreck on Ricketts Road and she turned to you and said, "He's in trouble."

As you twiddled your thumbs and watched Maury confront teen gangsters on TV, you wondered if these powers were somehow transferable—did she give them to you? Even stranger: last night you found a curled note under the windshield wiper: *I'm sorry. Can you meet me tomorrow at American Legion Field at six o'clock?* You read it twice,

crumpled it, smoothed it out, stuck it your pocket. Later, after you said nothing about the note to Nora and brushed your teeth, through the window you saw snow falling. That seemed about right.

The note sits sandwiched between the visor and the plow's roof. You will not—repeat, will not—pull over and read it again.

The silver Taurus with the blue tarp in place of the back passenger side window pulls out of the Town Pump on First. You've seen Henry in that piece of shit before, months earlier, though he denied it when you asked him. You squint, trying to see if you can spot Henry's slumping frame, but there's too much snow on the trunk. When the Taurus takes a left on Desta you shake off the urge to follow it. It's the If You Give a Mouse a Cookie thing: if you follow Henry, then you'll wonder whether or not he'll show up tonight; whether or not Nora called in sick again so she could search the trailer park by the river or the apartment complex behind the hospital for any signs of her son; whether or not she'll wake up in the middle of the night and wander around the house like a ghost looking for someone who won't be showing up. Hell, you might even call her, spill your guts about the plan to give him money again. Focus on the scraping of the shovel against the road and the shape the flakes make as they swirl across the blue air.

The radio plays the same songs you've heard for twenty years or more: Springsteen's "Born to Run," Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man," "Big Shot" by Billy Joel. You're parked with your back to Safeway's bright parking lot; all you can see are the shadowy outlines of the bleachers, the dugout blocked by dirty clumps of snow, the

skeletal cyclone fence that runs parallel with the first base line. On nice days, you and Nora picnicked by the fence and gave Henry encouraging fist pumps before he stepped onto the mound. How long ago since then? No more than two years ago, which might as well have been forever.

Your phone vibrates in the cupholder.

“You check the P.O. box yet?” Nora asks. Nora expects a postcard from Omaha or Los Angeles or Honolulu from Henry: *Don't worry! I'm happy and sober and not wanted by the police!*

“Nothing,” you say. “Sorry, babe.”

You hear a flick from her lighter, the quick inhale as she takes a drag. She'd quit for seven years but took it back up a month ago. She doesn't mention it and doesn't hide it, either. Every morning you find her butts on the corner of the porch. You've thought about asking her, about mentioning that she smells like smoke, but the two of you have gotten so used to taking in each other's lives without comment or conversation that you're rusty, and don't know how to get started again. You kick the goddamn butts into the yard and bury them in the snow with the toe of your boot.

You say, “He'll call.”

“Did you pay the fine?”

“Yup,” you say, touching the pocket that holds the money.

“Good—I wanna get to him before the cops do.”

“Watcha gonna do with him?” you ask, though you know her plan. She wants to ship him off to a boy's ranch in Kalispell, where he'll bunk with boys worse than him. The same type of backward-capped, spine-bowed sons of bitches you've chased off your

front porch. You've been trying to rid Henry of losers for two years, and Nora wants to hand him over freely. Your father checked into a dozen of those kind of places throughout his miserable life, and all they did was make it harder for your mother when it didn't stick, when he showed up drunk and angry, looking to take out everything on her. Nora's idea is the worst one you've ever heard.

“Comin' home for dinner?”

She's inside now. You can hear the whir of the dishwasher, the cackle of canned laughter from the TV. See her now as if perched on the window sill above the sink. She's in Henry's old Montana Grizzlies sweatshirt, the one with thumb holes chewed into the left sleeve. She's got her left hand up to her head, tugging on her bangs. It's something she does now and then. She did it for six months when her father passed. He'd been on the wagon for six years—something she mentioned all the goddamn time. The image of her the night before last comes without warning: curled in the tub, the slick, snail-trail lines from tears down to her neck. She wouldn't come back to bed. She told you she kept dreaming that Henry was in prison, or dead, or never existed at all. She went into the kitchen and dusted every glass in the cupboard. For a moment, you want to tell her where you are, what you'll be doing tonight, how it's the best thing for everyone.

You say, “I'm meetin' Mitch at the Gold Nugget. I told you earlier.”

“I'll leave you somethin' in the oven.”

“Where you gonna be?”

“It's Thursday.” This means she'll be at the Parents of Teens in Crisis meeting. She'll hold hands with strangers as they cry their makeup off. Pastor Gildner will say “Stay tough!” and “Be a rock!” They'll sip burnt Folgers and talk ghosts. The pastor

will show pictures of his fat daughter, the one who spent three years strung out on heroin in L.A. The few times you went, they pointed their chins at you and gave encouraging, coffee-stained smiles. They wanted you to share about your father, the bastard who, flushed from whiskey, left a window open when you were two-days-old. It gave you pneumonia—you still can't weather a cold without it turning into bronchitis. And that wasn't the worst of it. They wanted you to confess, to wobble your Adam's apple, let your eyes bust a leak. You haven't been back.

“Might wanna stay in tonight.” You ignore the click she makes with her tongue.

“The roads're slicker than cowshit. I saw four wrecks before lunch.”

“If I wreck you'll have to come rescue me.”

And then she hangs up, leaving you with the dead line, nothing but dead space in front of you. It's thirty-seven minutes after six.

Henry emerges from the black of center field, kicking rooster tails of snow. He watches the snow for a few seconds before taking the next step, producing a bigger cloud than the last. When Henry was younger he loved to run through the yard after a fresh dusting, displacing thousands of defenseless flakes until he grew exhausted or bored. These were the days when he didn't steal from Nora's wallets but needed her to guarantee he'd be able to sleep each night. He couldn't get a wink without it.

At the pitcher's mound he stops and pretends to toss a scorcher to an imaginary catcher. You crank down the window.

“Hurry up, for Chrissake,” you shout. Your voice isn't strong enough to push past the cold and reach Henry; he goes into another windup. For a second, you think that

Henry, in his beautiful nostalgia, is too distracted to hear. That perhaps this is something he still gives a shit about, something more important than wrecking everything around him. Get real, you think. He's too doped to give a good goddamn.

"I'm sorry," Henry says as he gets to the car.

"Knock the snow off your shoes," you say. "You're late."

"I'm sorry."

Even in the dull light you hate the way Henry's face looks: cheeks sagging more than an eighteen-year-old's should, bags under his eyes bulging like a toad's throat, loose skin hanging from his chin. He's wearing an orange beanie, the kind crab fishermen and bums wear. Thick globs of snow stick to its fibers. Christ, you think.

"Did you pay your fines?" You ask.

Henry puts his seatbelt on, runs his fingers along it.

"They're gonna throw you in the can again."

"I'll take care of it."

"Still got the money?" you ask. Though you know the answer, you want to hear it. He needs to start owning up to his own bullshit. This is why he must pay the fine himself. Nora doesn't understand this, and she never will.

"I loaned it to a friend," he says. "I want to pay it, Dad, I do." He seems sincere, but you can't be trusted to make this judgment. For fourteen years you believed your father every time he crawled back sorry, even after your mother started throwing the deadbolt when she saw him limping onto the front porch.

"It's your ass, not mine."

"Where's Mom?"

He looks skinnier than he did last week. “Hungry?”

Without waiting for an answer, you put the truck in gear and pull out of the slushy lot.

You pass Crazy Mike’s Video, where you’ve spent countless hours reading the backs of cases, deciding whether or not Henry was mature enough to watch the movie in question. A few blocks later you pass the Dairy Queen, where on many summer nights you celebrated Henry’s victory or bought him a consolation cone after a tough loss. He seems oblivious to these places. He keeps his head down, scratching at a stain on his jeans. You remember the long days you spent popping flies to Henry. He waited until the ball vanished into the sun, then ran his heart out with mitt outstretched and eyes clamped shut. Usually he missed completely—it would bounce over his head or smack him in the nose. You told him to stay on his feet, that sliding catches almost never worked. Henry never listened. And every once in a while he’d make a good catch and you’d think: Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch.

In the beginning, when you could pretend Henry was just sewing oats or acting out, you and Nora walked the river trail every evening the weather held. She’d talk about how her Algebra I students were finally getting a handle of quadratic equations, how Mrs. Brown slipped in the parking lot and broke her leg, bless her old heart. When you got home, you watched Henry’s old games on video. “This’ll pass,” you said to one another. Back then, you were sure that come spring, once baseball started up and Henry fell in with the right kids again, the ones who brushed their teeth twice a day and woke their parents up to prove they were in before curfew, everything would be fine.

Henry keeps coughing. Wet, bottom-of-the-lung ones.

“Got a cold?” you ask.

“Naw, just not gettin’ enough sleep.” Henry fakes a yawn. “Last night I stayed up ’til three watchin’ an old Dodgers game from ’92.”

“Need to start takin’ better care of yourself.”

“They show old games in the middle of the night on one of the sport channels. So, Darryl was up, right? The announcer was all ‘Strawberry hasn’t hit anything in since June,’ and right as that asshole finished his sentence Strawberry shot a fuckin’ triple into the left-center gap.”

Say, “Watch your mouth.” Pull into BJ’s, the restaurant you two always eat at when Nora isn’t around.

“He stole home on a wild pitch.” Henry’s looking you in the eye—something he hasn’t done in months, maybe years. “He knocked in two more runs and made a catch at the warning track in the ninth. It made me wanna play again.”

Since he was a kid, Henry’s favorite player has been Strawberry. Not Henderson, Jackson, Ruth, Gehrig, Mantle, Rose. You tried explaining Strawberry’s trouble to him, but he didn’t seem to care, even when he was young. This, too, seems like one of those messages Nora finds in things, but on this matter you stand alone; the one occasion you brought it up, Nora patted you on the cheek, said: “You’re overreacting.”

You snort. “Strawberry’s luck lasted longer than he deserved. He’s a scab who happened to be all right at ball. He had a .259 average over sixteen years. Big deal.” Henry opens his mouth to reply, but you cut him dead. “I don’t want to hear it.”

You both order burgers with fries, Cokes. Henry picks up a pack of saltines from the container and crushes it, then pours the crumbs into his mouth. When he was younger you corrected this, but this time you're just glad to see the boy eat.

"You know better than to wear a hat at the table," you say, holding up your own as proof. Henry pulls off his beanie. His hair looks thin and sparse, exposing pink patches of scalp all over. In the orange light from the hanging lamp his face looks even more deeply lined. A cut you didn't notice when he got into the car oozes above his right temple. Across the room, a man lifts a baby up and down, smiling like a fool the whole time. At another table, a man wags his index finger at a sullen boy whose head is buried in his chest. You look again at your own son, who's trying like hell to stifle a muddy cough. Christ.

"That looks bad," you say.

Henry dabs it with his sweatshirt sleeve.

"Does it hurt?"

"It's irritating as hell is all."

"Need to go to Dr. Brandt?"

Henry waves you off. "It's just a zit I picked too much."

"Quit pickin' it."

Another good thing about BJ's: no one you know comes here. Of the local places, BJ's is the worst. Its paneled walls give it a Moose-Lodge feel. The waitresses are ugly in both ways. But it's a sentimental place, where you can think of evenings

spent sipping hot cocoa after a long day of sledding up Skalkaho Pass. Not once have you seen a cop in here—they go the Coffee Cup.

Henry opens another bag of crackers. “I’m serious about playin’ again. Maybe I could get on with Western Washington. I screwed up that scholarship, but they might let me be a white shirt freshman or whatever.”

“Red shirt,” you say. Henry’s eyes are wet from something—shame or sincerity, you guess. You hope to hell it’s a little of both. “You gotta have a high school diploma to get into college, no matter how good you can pitch.”

“I’ll get my GED. They give prep classes at the library.”

This could be as sincere as steaming elk shit, but is it? There’s something in Henry that hasn’t been there before. Any time Nora thought Henry might be full of it, she put her hand to his forehead like she was checking for a fever, then she’d squint the same way she did when trying to decipher her student’s chick-scratch handwriting. But this never worked for you; Henry always could get his dad to believe anything. That’s what Nora always said, anyway.

Fuck it. You say: “If you’re serious, I’m sure your mother’ll help you.”

“How is she?”

“Worried to death.” Henry stares at the table, grips his hands into fists, lets them go again. “Probation officer called yesterday. He said you’ve gotta see him pronto. Might have to do a weekend in jail, but they won’t remove the suspension on your sentence if you take care of this mess quickly.”

But he’s focused on something above your head. In the glassy reflection of his eyes you see little cubes of color. Henry’s watching television.

“Goddamnit,” you say. “You’re up shit creek without a boat or a paddle.”

Henry gives you his squint, the look he always gives when you’ve proposed something reasonable he doesn’t want to hear. “The food’s comin’,” he says.

The waitress brings the check. Your cell phone vibrates in your pocket. Nora. “Excuse me,” you say to Henry, putting a twenty on the table. You step over toward the bathroom, keeping Henry in sight.

“Hey,” you say.

“You eaten yet?” Her voice is cheerful, like you’ve caught her at the tail-end of a laugh. She’s about to go into the meeting; the sound of obnoxious gabbing makes you pull the receiver away from your ear.

Henry keeps his head turned toward the TV and traces his fingers around the edge of his water glass.

“Yep,” you say. “Got a burger.”

She pulls away from the phone for a moment to talk to someone else.

“Hello?” you say.

“Your heartburn’ll keep you up all night.”

“Where are you?”

“I’ll probably be gone when you get back. I’m gonna look for Henry.”

Through the back window, you see the snow’s still falling steady, slowing down traffic to a snail’s pace. Nora doesn’t like driving at night in good weather, so you don’t like the idea of her out there by herself, face two inches from the windshield, doing her best to see what’s in front of her. Enough’s enough—tell her. Hell, maybe even call

Henry over to the phone. But you see Henry look toward the waitress, who's bent over another table sweeping crumbs off a table and into her hand, then he pockets the money for the check. This, of course, is what you were testing, what you were afraid of.

"Fuck," you whisper.

"Don't talk to me that way." Her voice has turned cold and sour, the way you've gotten used to it sounding.

"I'm sorry," you say. "I jammed my finger. Where you gonna look?"

"The regular places."

"That'll do you a lot of good."

"I washed your work clothes. There's a cup of coffee waiting for you in the microwave."

"Just head home after the meeting." You try to sound concerned, but it doesn't come out that way.

"I'm trying to find my son," she says.

"Listen," you say, but it's too late. She's already clapped her phone shut.

Outside, you find Henry scraping the ice off the back window of the cab. The windshield's been cleared and the hood's free of all the clumps. A cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth.

"How's Mom?" he asks.

"Give me back that goddamn money."

Henry smirks, pulls his cigarettes out of his pocket and takes the money out from the pack. "I was just screwin' with you."

“Get in,” you say.

Henry flicks his butt toward a coffee can with a muffin top of snow over its mouth. He lets off a couple of forced coughs, wipes his nose with his sleeve. “Let me come home.”

And what if Nora walked in and saw Henry on the couch, showered and shaved, eating ice cream and watching a ball game with his old man? She’d hug him for a long time, put him to bed. Then she’d be on the horn with her Parents of Teens in Crisis pals in a heartbeat. He’s sick, they’d say. These things take time, sacrifice. Call the police. Drive him to rehab. Hang him by the ankles in the town square for all to see.

And she’d believe them no matter what you said, because all that bullshit worked for her old man, the pandering doctors and the back-patting shrinks. Your father was a monster who died in jail. The plan to make Henry pay for his own fines to teach him some responsibility, teach him how to tame the tides of his bad blood like you have, wouldn’t mean shit to Nora.

Henry pulls his pack out again and lights another one.

“Don’t smoke so much,” you say.

“I’d like to see her.”

“Pay your fines tomorrow, then maybe you can see her.”

He pulls at his beanie and coughs into his elbow. “I don’t have the money.”

You pull out the fifties and hand them to your son. “Now you do.”

“Here’s good,” Henry says as you pull into the parking lot of the ball field. He opens the door, sending a yellow shaft of light across the falling flakes. It’s coming

down as steady as before, but it feels colder. He turns to you now, looking scared, childish. “You could just take me home.”

But nothing would change if you did. You’d be back here again tomorrow, doling out fifties and stoic slaps on the back. It’s too much. The dam’s got to break. This may be the last time you see your son. You’ve mulled this over for hours on your shifts (though you’re not supposed to think of Henry on the road), and you’ve come to terms with it, or part of you has. There’s another part. One that wants to yank Henry over to your side of the car and slap him on the face ’til he gives, one that wants to drive him up to the Parents of Teens in Crisis meeting and turn him over to Nora.

“Pay your fines,” you say. “It’ll kill your mom to see your name in the police blotter again.”

He’s standing now, leaning into the car, waiting for you to say something else. You clear your throat, say, “If I bring her tomorrow will you be on time?”

Henry nods distractedly, turns quickly toward the field, as if something important was about to flash across the darkened diamond.

“I mean it, not a second late.”

“I’ll be here at six exactly.”

“Wash your hair and clean that cut.” You pull his head to your face. He smells like cigarettes, oniony sweat, mildew. But there’s something else—a hint of the old Henry, something you can’t describe. He pats your shoulder and ducks out. You watch for a few minutes before you get out, too, leaving the engine drumming.

The sound of snow under your feet is unreasonably loud, as if you're crunching over tin cans or old bones. You wait every time Henry takes a step in front of you, looking up to see if he's noticed. He hasn't. Even so, you linger, slinking like a cartoon burglar, terrified the groan of frozen ground under your feet will send Henry prancing into the darkness like a frightened whitetail. You limbo through a hole in the fence and maneuver around the ice-stiffened bushes on the other side. You're in a cul-de-sac of aging, snow-heaped trailers. Henry's out of sight; you can only hear the sound of sneakers on snowpack. You jog ahead until you see someone go into 7-A.

It takes a few seconds to build up the courage to venture across the lawn, stepping over the caved-in trash can and crumpled dog food bag, and it takes even longer to look through a gash in the blinds.

A man sits slouched on a brown, triangle-patterned sofa. He's wearing a black t-shirt with "Born to Spawn" above a crudely illustrated salmon. His pants are pink and checkered and remind you of the tablecloth Nora uses in the summer. The man stares at someone who you guess is Henry. He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. You can see your son's shadow above the fucker on the couch. Go to your room, you think, walk to the bathroom and take a shower. Sneak out and never come back. Henry takes a seat on the miserable couch and hands the money over to the guy. The look on Henry's face isn't the same look you have seen on Nora's dad when you and Nora picked him up in Butte, drunk and weeping, the day he dried up for good. It isn't the look your own father had when he'd wake you up in the middle of the night and drag you out to the living room and make so he'd have an audience as he slapped his wife around 'til he got every dime she had in the world. Instead Henry holds the same look he had when he'd come into

your bedroom, dragging Pete the Panda behind him, tug on the comforter 'til you and Nora woke up, and say, “Ma, do you guarantee I’ll be able to sleep tonight?” Nora would pull him up, kiss him on the forehead, feel for a temperature, and hold him 'til he was sleeping again.

You walk away from the window, carve a snowball out of the powder in the yard, throw it as hard as you can at nothing. There were nights early on—before Henry—when you’d come back too drunk, and Nora would light into you about your father, hers. You’d yell back, go to the sink, fill up a glass with water, splash it into the basin just to try and prove that you’re different. You’d be convinced until she turned out the lights and sent you to the couch, where you’d think about whether or not you’d ever punch Nora in the mouth if you were drunk enough, or if you were capable of siphoning Henry’s college fund down to nothing, as Nora’s father had. These questions held you captive 'til dawn snuck up on you. But then you’d go about your days. You have a drink every now and again, get drunk every now and again, pay your bills on time, come home every night. You are not like your father, but right now that isn’t the issue.

Just go home, you fucking moron. You go back to the window for another look. The man’s gone. You almost elbow out the window, wrangle through the son of a bitch, yank your deadbeat son out by the ear. But you’re too slow. The man’s back with a sheet of tinfoil held with pliers. Henry pulls out a lighter, holds it under the foil. He sucks in a venomous cloud of coiling smoke. He lets it loose the mouthful like he’s blowing out a birthday cake. You pull out your phone, then put it back, uncertain who to call.

At second base, you see a car parked next to your truck. Feel the urge to scuttle spine-bowed back to where the parking lot lights can't find you, but resist it.

Someone looks through the open driver's side door as you crunch forward.

"Hey." Your voice quivers like a child's.

"This doesn't look like the goddamn Gold Nugget to me," Nora says. She takes a drag from her cigarette. A blast of wind sends her hair dancing like seaweed in a tide. You shiver, but not from the cold.

"Well," you say. In a town this small, you should've known that Nora wouldn't have to try very hard to catch you in the lie; she has to pass both the ball field and the Gold Nugget to get home. Your alibi is as flimsy and fragile as the ones Henry's given over the years. Someone struggles out of the car's front seat: a man, clad in a ski jacket, which is unzipped, exposing a white shirt and a black tie. He stands, stretches his back by leaning and pressing his hands to his hips. His hair is white but looks blue in the dark. He turns, waves.

"Who the hell is that?" you ask.

"Hello," the man says. "Nora asked me to come."

You recognize his voice immediately: Pastor Gildner.

"Where is he?" she asks.

Think of the time you found a joint in Henry's snowboard boot. Instead of telling Nora about it, you climbed up to the roof, smoked half, then listened to the radio in your shop with the lights out for three hours, feeling high or ashamed.

"What's he doin' here?" you ask, jutting a thumb toward Pastor Gildner.

She shakes her head, drops the cigarette in the snow but doesn't stamp it, just lets it sit on top for the world to see.

"We're all here for Henry," Pastor Gildner says. He walks closer, sticks his hand out. Don't take it—let it hang in the air until he pulls it down.

"Nora," you say.

"I don't wanna hear it," she says.

Behind her, you see a snowplow—must be Ernie. He's at the intersection of Main and First, where the asphalt's glowing clear under the streetlight. Black ice. Bad news. Soon, after the snow settles thinly over everything and everyone starts creeping their way toward whatever, they'll be in for a nasty surprise. There's not a goddamn thing you can do about it—no amount of salt or sand or shovel-pushing will fix it.

"I called Serenity Park in Missoula," Pastor Gildner says. "There's a bed open."

"Listen, man," you say, trying to keep your voice level. "This isn't your business."

"Nora asked me to help," he says.

"We haven't talked about this," you say. Nora puts her hand over her eyes, as if trying to block out the sun. Pastor Gildner puts a hand on her shoulder.

"We haven't talked about anything," she says. "You won't talk about a goddamn thing with me."

"Why don't you get out of here," you say to Pastor Gildner. Stick your finger out, point it at his chest. Step toward him.

Pastor Gildner shakes his head, lifts his hands up in surrender. He takes a flashlight out of his pocket, clicks it on. "Is he this way?" he asks.

After a few moments, he walks ahead, stepping carefully through the snow. He's following your path through the field. "Come on," he calls.

"Where is he?" Nora asks. She struggles to light a cigarette. The flame dances in front of her. Her hand's quivering from rage or fear or too much Folger's. Cup your hand around her lighter. After she gets it lit, she brushes snow off of your jacket. You put your hand on top of hers; she pulls away.

"He's not your father," Nora says. "He's not you." Now she's turning, walking toward the baseball field, toward Pastor Gildner, toward Henry. "You don't know what's good for him."

Say: "I know."

V. HOMECOMING

In Lee Gammel's Dodge Shadow, we huff gasoline from Mountain Dew bottles and welcome the purple spots that float inside our eyelids like smokejumpers. Those of us who couldn't fit in the Shadow sit in a teal Ford Escort, a cowpie-colored Chevy pickup, a powder blue Chrysler LeBaron—the kind of cars our parents expected to find curled around trees or broken down on Highway 93, or just gone. We're in the high school parking lot, taking up the row closest to the Smoking Tree, which has been stabbed with cigarettes so many times it wears a black ring around its waist like a belt. Our fathers used to park here a million years ago. When they've had enough to drink, they tell us how they, too, would pummel the hell out of the Corvallis kids every homecoming. They flex their hands, showing the purplish, shiny marks on their fists from where they hit a tooth. In a place like this, sometimes staying true to tradition is the only thing to do.

We wait for the cue from Lee that it's time to shoot out toward Corvallis and get revenge on Mike Westman and the rest of those pukes for throwing a milkshake at Lee's windshield. Smashmouth plays on the radio, but we don't give a shit. Normally we'd curse the DJ or try to tune in one of Missoula's stations. But we're distracted. We replay the scene from *Kids* where the dude hits the other dude with a skateboard. Our knuckles throb from punching trash cans.

Our mothers are at home, we know, packing meatloaf sandwiches and cans of Hamm's into coolers. They avoid the view from the window, the smoldering Bitterroot Mountains, dropping their gazes to the scorched skillet from breakfast or a tomato seed wedged beneath a fingernail.

Two months ago the fire broke out, spread from being a routine, pain-in-the-ass brushfire to one giant fucking juggernaut that burned three hundred thousand acres and counting—the biggest in Montana since 1909 or something. CNN flew up and tried to interview our dads but got doors slammed in their faces. After a few weeks, the reporters got reassigned or bored, left town for Kenya or Peru or Massachusetts. Other people have left, too: teachers, the head librarian, our dentist. They were sorry, they told the rest of the town, but they didn't want chew their nails till the snow finally came again. They were tired. They needed a change. Our fathers called them cowards, and our mothers acted like no one left, like everything was fine. Every church in this goddamn town prayed for the fire to stop before it swept into the valley and wiped us out. They prayed for rain, for no wind, for more fire crews, for the firebreaks to hold. But the fire still chews its way toward all of us.

Our mothers have been watching the forest burn this whole time, the forest where they scoured for wild flowers and arrowheads as kids, where our fathers took them camping when they were freshmen. Now our mothers look away, trying to think only about the homecoming parade, something they've looked forward to every year for as long as we can remember. They enjoy the orange leaves lining the trees on the street, the feel of our fathers' arms around the back of their lawn chairs, barely touching the nape of

their necks, seeing everyone they love and resent and fear and despise all packed on one side of Main Street. They're trying not to think about us.

Our fathers are slumped on their stools at the Gold Nugget. Since noon they've been sinking quarters into the jukebox and picking the same Three Dog Night song over and over again. "Carson's finally got a handle on that cannon of his," they say to each other, to the moose head mounted above the bathroom door. "But Niederkorn still fumbles every other goddamn handoff."

They don't talk about how the fire swallowed Blodgett View, the new development six miles up the road from us, the one they've been building for the past two years. They don't talk about how the Broncs' homecoming game will be played in Missoula this year, something that's never happened before. They don't talk about how they wished they'd settled on the Corvallis side of the valley—never any fires over there, and everyone has wrap-around cedar porches. Any minute now they'll stagger out into the smoke-choked streets and wander a block down to Main where those who haven't evacuated yet will be waiting for the homecoming parade to start, waving and smiling and doing their best to ignore the ash that sticks to their hair and shoulders like snow.

The sound from the band geeks blowing out Toto's "Hold the Line" a couple blocks away penetrates the windows, washes out the music on the radio. The sound shakes us loose, reminds us where the hell we are, what we're about to do.

"Let's get movin'," we say. Even though we're blind from gas, we can tell that we should've left twenty minutes ago.

"Not yet," Lee slurs. "Wait a goddamn minute."

We were born here, happened to be friends because we lived up by Blodgett Canyon and our fathers all worked for Davis Contractors. We've caught frogs and garter snakes together, egged Peckenpaw's house a hundred times, blown up ant mounds with firecrackers, begged Tillie Fackler to peel off her clothes in front of us. We've burned each other with cigarettes, sworn never to talk to each other again, smacked each other in the balls for no reason at all.

We're seniors now. This means better parking, fewer classes (for those of us who didn't flunk Earth Science II), and—most importantly—we get to kick the teeth out of those Corvallis pigshits one more time. After this, no more humping wheel barrels for our fathers, no more ass-whippings for coming home drunk and after curfew, no more waking up to our mothers sitting rigid and red-eyed at the foot of our beds.

There have been times this past summer, after sneaking out of our windows and meeting at the mailboxes to pass around a pop-can pipe, when we stood in silence, imagining we could hear the fire screaming as it licked its way closer. In the dark, the fire plays tricks on you. Sometimes it looks like a dying match, barely capable of lighting a cigarette; other times it looks tall as a tower, close enough to reach out and burn the hair off our arms.

One night, after the fire jumped down the mountain five miles in a day, we saw Colin Ander's mom run out of her house in a pair of Broncs sweatpants and a sports bra.

"Shit," Colin said, dropping the pipe and crouching behind the mailboxes.

But she wasn't coming for us; she opened her car and hopped into the driver's seat. Mr. Ander stumbled after her in his boxers. She tried to shut the door, but he threw

his hip against it. In the cheap glow of the dome light we saw her shaking her head.

We'd heard that Mrs. Ander had been trying to convince Mr. Ander to evacuate.

“She’s been having a hard time,” Colin said.

We almost talked about our own mothers, how the week before we came home an hour past curfew, drunk and covered in hickies, and saw our mothers staring out the sliding glass door. When our mothers noticed us they didn’t seem surprised or angry. They called us over to the door and began to cry, and, because there was nothing else to do, so did we.

As Mr. Ander took his wife inside, we turned to the fire, the cones of smoke climbing up to join the starless sky. Colin took out a cigarette. He said, “I can’t wait to get out of this goddamn place.” We said: “This weed’s kickin’ my ass,” and “I’d like to tongue-punch Crystal Towner’s fartbox,” and “I hate this goddamn fire.”

Not a hundred yards from where we sit, the Hamilton Broncs bang out of the gray gym door. For reasons that have eluded us, all of them wear the reverse mullet: head shaved nearly to the skin in the back while in front hangs a tongue of hair that touches their eyebrows.

“My folks left this morning,” Lee says. He pulls out a pack of Kleenex from underneath his seat. “Anyone wanna blow their nose?”

The Broncs trot across the parking lot to the float. Decorated with hay bales and two thrones—one for Carson and the other for Niederkorn—the float looks the same as

last year's, and the one before that. The players' cleats clattering across the blacktop cracks us up.

Lee holds a tissue to his nose and fires off as hard as he can. "I can't get this goddamn smell outta my head."

"Where'd they go?"

He waves his hands in front of his eyes, trying to clear away the spots. "My uncle's place in California," he says. "They're fuckin' idiots—this town won't burn."

"I'd give my right arm for a California blonde with big, freckled tits and a gift for givin' great head."

Lee pulls out a Marlboro from the pack on the dashboard, forgetting about the open Mountain Dew bottle filled with gas in the cupholder. We look at each other, wonder whether or not we should mention it. We don't.

"This town'll burn any day," one of us says. "You mark my words."

We elbow him in the ribs, flick his ears, hiss at him so he'll shut his mouth. Lee lights the cigarette.

"Great head, huh?" Lee shakes his head. "Like you'd know the difference. I'd take Tillie Fackler over the finest piece of foreign ass." Tillie's dad sent her down to her Grandma's place in Wyoming. Lee doesn't mention this, though. He turns up the radio, hits the seek button. "Your folks plan on liftin' their skirts and runnin', too?"

"Nope," we say, though our mothers have spent their weekends packing boxes full of baby clothes, photo albums, files and files of tax returns, yellowed notes our fathers gave them in study hall. Our fathers refused to leave the first two times the sheriff's office called for evacuation. "I'll be here 'til it's close enough to kiss my ass,"

they said. We sat on the roof with them that night, hoses loose at our feet, talking about the Broncs, the Mariners, Senator Burns, mad cow disease. After they pulled the tops off their seventh beers, our fathers started acting strange. They told us how they drove truck across the country, took courses at the U of M, cleared hiking trails in Idaho, took our mothers down to Mexico, all before we came around. They told us about how they needed to get out, break loose from this goddamn town. But they always stumbled back. Something about the dark, or the hitch in our fathers' voices as they mentioned our mothers, made us turn away and look at the mountains.

The gas high fades like a sneeze; the Broncs' float pulls out. Lee starts the Shadow and smiles at us, revealing his gray-tinged front tooth. He took a Doc Marten to the face last year. Later, he broke the jaw of the kid who kicked him. Lee's parents yanked him out of school and hauled him off to some behavioral boot camp in Utah for six months; the lucky bastard didn't graduate on schedule, so he gets to fight again. He's eighteen. He doesn't even sleep at his parents' house. He sleeps in his car since the weather's been decent, but he hasn't had to face winter yet. We've asked him what he'll do when the snow comes, but he never answers.

A few of the Hamilton guys Lee fought next to last year are already gone, the dudes we grew up hating while quietly, desperately wanting to be them. Mitch and Campbell took off for boot camp over the summer; Shane got on with a contractor in Sun Valley; last February, Indian Lonnie got shot in the face by a Ravalli County Deputy.

We caravan down Fourth, right behind the blessed Broncs. The Broncs do their very best to keep their eyes on each other, leaning in for whispers every few seconds.

“Pussies,” Lee says, “Every last one of ’em. Wearin’ those things like a bunch of babies.”

Since July, the Broncs have been going around wearing surgical masks to protect their lungs. Coach Weston told the paper he’s concerned about the “respiratory aftermath” of all the smoke on his little warriors. He was so concerned about it he arranged for them to practice forty miles up the goddamn road.

“I can’t believe they’re playin’ in Missoula.”

“The sky looks pink to me,” Lee says. He slaps himself across the face, cranes his neck forward, stares at the sky again.

“I don’t give a shit where it is,” one of us says. “I’d rather eat Rosie Tolbert’s asshole than watch another goddamn Bronc game.”

Lee reaches behind the seat, punches one of our knees. “Quit bitchin’,” he says.

We hit Main, about a block from the action, and take a right. Lee punches the steering wheel. “Here we go!” he says. He steps on the gas, leans on the horn, and starts passing them.

“Hi, girls,” he says, giving them the clamshell wave. Carson and Niederkorn, sitting on their thrones, look down at their knee pads. They’re not wearing surgical masks; they’ve got nasal cannulas and oxygen tanks.

We lean out the windows and pepper them with crushed Pabst cans, cigarette boxes, moldy, sticky pennies wriggled loose from cupholders. We look at Coach

Weston, hoping to see his mustache dance as he hurls curses our way, but he stares straight ahead.

As we drive up, we see that the library, Gracie's Pawn and Loan, Big Sky Candy have all flipped their locks and pulled their open signs. The town has already swept the sidewalks clean of cigarette butts, sunflower seed shells, and ash. Maroon and silver streamers hang from stoplights and telephone poles. Someone even climbed up Marcus Daly's statue and strung two streamers around the old bastard's neck. Each corner's light post is draped with a fresh American flag courtesy of the Boy Scouts. Even the glass from the long-defunct Bitterroot Creamery's front windows has been cleared from the sidewalk, where it glittered since the Friday night in January when we smashed them. But there aren't as many people here as usual. To make up for this, everyone has surrounded themselves with shit: extra chairs, garbage bags filled with whatever, coolers big enough to feed orange slices and Capri Suns to three soccer teams.

Everyone gets off their lawn chairs and crowds up to the bales, eager to see what's coming. Children break away from their mothers and dance around the curb, hoping to get first dibs on the candy thrown by the Broncs. We holler, bang on the roofs of our cars, clasp our hands, shake them side to side like heroes returning home. They see the Dodge Shadow and the rest of our shitcans and return to their seats, shaking their heads.

"Fuck you, too," Lee says. He looks like he might start crying. It's probably the gas, we think.

Our parents wear their sunglasses and Broncs hats, just like normal. They've set up their big umbrellas they use only twice a year: once at the homecoming parade, once at the big cookout we have every year up on the north shore of Lake Como. Not this past summer, though; the helicopters drained the lake to the size of Peckenpaw's pond by July, and by August they drained Peckenpaw's pond to a puddle. They even skimmed the deep pockets of the Bitterroot River where we used to splash around, get stoned, and watch girls' bikini tops slip to the side. Now the river's nothing more than a runny nose on a scarred rock bed. All that water, and none of it put out the goddamn fire.

Our hands go up to wave at our parents, but we hold each other back. What's the use? This morning, our mothers said, "You better get your tail over to the parade." Their voices were weary, like they'd stayed up all night. "We want you close, just in case we've gotta evacuate."

"No one's gonna evacuate," our fathers said, stirring their coffee and keeping eyes on us. "Let him do what he wants. But if he or his shit-for-brains friends had any respect for their parents, they'd get their asses down to Main without smokin' any grass beforehand." We nodded to our fathers, put on our shoes, and met each other at the mailboxes. "I ain't goin' to that parade," we said to each other.

We're past them now, and we do our best to forget that they're shaking their heads, too.

We take First past the Super One and the Bob's Sporting Goods Outlet, the Town Pump and the RV park. Past the firefighters' tents at the Ravalli County Fairgrounds, Lee

turns up the radio—"Radar Love," Golden Earring—and screams "We're gonna kill 'em!" He repeats it, turns it into a chant. He honks the horn on "'em!" The chant disintegrates, turns into the noise you make when someone jumps out of a closet as you walk by. Colin's excused himself from the ritual; he slumps against the door and presses his forehead against the window. We ring each other's necks, yelling and spitting inches from each other's faces. By the time First turns into Highway 93 our voices are shot, our faces are on fire.

The Corvallis kids wait for us by the rotting circles of hay in Hammond's field, about two miles past town. They lean against their trucks' tailgates, hands in pockets. Lee stops ten feet away from them. Mike Westman has on his Blue Devils Wrestling hoodie and his Route 420 hat. He has cauliflower ear and a tangerine-sized divot in his head from Lee's tire iron. Since the day the fire broke out, Lee's been vocal about how he thinks Mike Westman started it. The police questioned him, but they questioned a lot of people. Principal Conwell. Our fathers. Us. We watch as Mike Westman undoes his belt, pulls out his dick, and starts pissing towards us. This is how it always begins.

"We're gonna kill 'em!" we say, sitting on our trembling hands.

Lee hands out a couple white pills. "Chew these." From under his seat he pulls out a dented bottle of Old Crow. "To get the taste out of your mouths. Don't hurl." He makes sure it goes from car to car, nodding curtly as we choke down the muck and give him thumbs up.

On this side of the valley a magpie moves lazily through the smoky sky. A potato chip bag snagged on a barbwire fence squirms in the wind. The dry grass on the Sapphire

Mountains waves at us. Towards Idaho, a herd of deer makes its way across the ridge right above Moose Creek. When we were younger, our fathers took us up there to fish for brown trout. When they'd get a bite, our fathers would whistle us over, give us the rods, and help us reel in whatever was on the other end. "Look at what you got!" they'd say, holding up the fish. On our side of the valley, the wind lifts the crown of smoke enough to reveal a jagged snake of fire slithering closer.

We smack our lips and grimace. Our mouths taste gritty, medicinal, aspirin and ash. "Fuck, it looks close."

"It ain't close," Lee says. "Let's go."

We go.

The pills Lee gave us were meant to speed up our blood and blow away the fog the gas threw over our brains. They make our arms hurt and our feet heavy like stones. Lee's in front like a sergeant.

We break apart. Colin surges ahead while some stagger like wounded deer and one of us drops to a knee and breaks Lee's rule. Lee grabs Mike Westman's head and pulls it into his knee. We grab and swing and kick. We duck and move back and cover our faces with our hands. We dance horribly with each other.

Everyone's got a partner, which is right, traditional. Westman's down for now, but we don't count him out. Lee's sitting on his chest, dropping his fists on Westman's face. Colin stands over some kid, pollinating his white shirt with bloody knuckle marks.

There is a sound like a pumpkin being tossed against the concrete. We look up, see a Corvallis kid with a goatie and blood dripping from his nose holding a metal softball bat. Below him, we see one of us sitting down with his head against his knees.

“Eric? You okay?”

He doesn't answer; he looks at us, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth open, as if he might sneeze. He stretches out like he's about to do some pushups, then lays down, covering his face with his arm.

On the road, the Bronc Bus slows down on its way to Missoula. Carson and Niederkorn hang out the window, waving their hands and cheering us on. We watch as they drive up the road, the bus shrinking 'til it's gone. Behind them are Carson's and Niederkorn's parents' cars, stuffed to the brim with their valuables—boxes of clothing, pets, paintings—as if they're leaving for good. We see other players' parents, our parents. They pull over onto the shoulder and get out. Our fathers encircle their mouths with beefy hands. We hear our names.

“What're they sayin'?”

“We've gotta get Eric somewhere.”

“They're callin' us over.”

“Should we call the ambulance?”

“They're cheerin' us on!”

Our parents wave and jump up and down the same way they do when Niederkorn jukes past the defense and giddyups toward the goal line. Colin looks up, takes a few steps toward his parents.

Lee, bent in half and dripping spit from his lips like a faucet, sees Eric stretched out in the dirt. “What the fuck happened to him?”

“Something's wrong,” Colin says.

Our parents are pointing. We look around, but nothing seems out of the ordinary. Mrs. Ander starts sprinting towards us, her husband in tow.

“What the hell’s she doin’?” A few other cars have pulled over now, watching.

“We better get going,” Lee says. “Don’t want any trouble with the cops.”

Eric hasn’t moved; every few seconds he whispers, “You fuckass.”

Mrs. Ander grabs hold of the barbwire and starts climbing over. Mr. Ander grabs her and pulls her back up the ditch. He gesticulates at us again, balls his fists, howls at the moon. He wants some ball to drop, for us to remember something right in front of our fucking faces, but we’ve forgotten about everything but the ache in our arms and the sour taste in our mouths.

“Let ’em go,” Lee says, waving at the Anders. “Let ’em crawl up to Missoula like cowards.”

Then Colin runs toward his mother.

We look at each other, back at the highway. Our parents turn away from us, walk toward their cars with their arms around each other. Should we follow? Yes, we think, no. We imagine running toward them, scaling the fence, and jumping into the car with them. But there isn’t enough time; Colin’s parents and the rest of them are long gone.

“That woman’s nuts, and her son’s a pussy,” Lee says, pulling a piece of skin off a knuckle with his teeth.

The Corvallis kids have already retreated to their cars. We pump our fists at them as the pull out. We try to think only about our victory here, but the overwhelming smell of smoke is too much to push away.

“Let’s get outta here before the cops show up,” Lee says.

“What about him?”

Lee nudges Eric with his shoe; Eric calls him a fuckass, looks up just enough to show us that his face is drenched in red, as if he went bobbling for apples in tomato sauce.

“I guess we better call someone,” Lee says. “But we gotta be gone before they get here.”

Main street is boneyard still, save for the streamers waving in the breeze and the husks of candy wrappers sliding around in the gutter. In the twilight the streamers have surrendered their color. They look like black feathers tickling the air. Past the bridge, far ahead of us, we see the twinkling lights of a fire truck screaming toward our neighborhood.

We put our heads down, looking at the Bud caps embedded in the floor mats beneath our feet. The wind’s been blowing down from the Bitterroots since sunset. We’ve been drinking Old Crow in a grove of pines that blocks the view, bragging about the bruises and black eyes and swollen hands we wear. We had to take Ricketts all the way back to town to avoid the roadblocks. We know what the wind means, but we haven’t mentioned it. We haven’t mentioned Eric or Colin, either.

As Lee drives over the Main Street Bridge toward our neighborhood, we notice the fire’s orange glow. It’s bright enough to see Lee’s eyes open wide for a second, just long enough for us to get nervous.

“It’s closer,” we say.

Lee says, “Nah. It’s the same.”

Lee stops at the mailboxes about thirty feet from our houses. In front of us, it looks like the flames are lapping at Peckenpaw’s fence line. All our houses are dark. The cars are gone. No doubt all of the boxes our mothers packed are an hour north with our parents. Every report card, every teary-eyed baby photo. I imagine my father’s silhouette outlined by the fire. He’s sitting on the roof, waiting for what’s coming. But he isn’t here—no one is.

“Shit!” one of us says. “It’s right there!”

“Shit,” Lee says. He wipes his face. “This is nothin’.”

He lifts his eyes to the fire, stares at it, works his jaw up and down. “We gotta get to the roofs.”

I try hard not to think about my mother, how she and my father must be in a motel, watching one of the late shows or washing her hair in the sink because she’s scared she’ll get athlete’s foot from the floor of the shower, doing everything she can not to think of our home cracking apart like kindling. She’ll wake up in the middle of the night, pound on my father’s shoulders, beg him to go and find me. My father will hold her, rubbing her back the way he’s done to me after I’ve taken water down the wrong pipe. “Our boy has enough sense to leave when he has to,” he’ll say. Colin’s safe with his parents. I try to convince myself that the fire’s playing tricks again—it’s gotta be two miles away at least. But it isn’t. It’s climbing up the pines on the far side of Peckenpaw’s field.

“We can’t stay,” I say.

“Well,” Lee says, “we’re going to.”

“You fucker,” I say, and they turn to me. “You fucking coward.”

I expect him to pull me out of the car by my feet, beat my head into the gravel.

“Get to your houses,” he says. He puts the car in drive, but stops as I open the door. Lee calls out my name, but it’s hard to hear—the gravel crunching under my shoes and the sound of trees crackling makes Lee’s voice so insignificant I start laughing.

Once I get down the road a ways, I turn back to look: Lee has propped a ladder against his house and climbed to the roof. He has brought a hose with him; I can see it dangling. The others have climbed onto their own roofs now, and they flick their lighters to show Lee that they’re okay.

I start walking toward something else, toward safety.

VI. THOSE WHO GO AND THOSE WHO STAY

Five-hundred and twenty-one miles away from Seattle, back in Hamilton, Montana, the town where Franklin grew up, his brother, Larry, had drunk too much. Or maybe it wasn't just that. This was at the end of January, and, though the sky was clear, the moon wore a crown of ice crystals. That meant snow, and the clouds that came with it. Likely they wouldn't clear out 'til March. Or maybe it was the fact that Hamilton had lost to Lolo. Whatever the reason was, folks that had been at the Gold Nugget that night would tell the reporter that "Larry seemed off, like something was botherin' him." Larry got into his Chevy 1500, and, after a few bad starts, drove his truck home for the last time. That's how the article put it, anyway. But Franklin didn't know this at the time. All Franklin knew was at around 10:30 Dara would go off to bed. If asked, Franklin would say he hadn't thought of Larry in seven years.

As Larry swerved his way home, Franklin sat in the living room with Dara listening to a scratchy rendition of something by John Williams played by Dara's seventh grade intermediate orchestra class. They were sharing their nightly glass of wine and joint—an agreement drawn up and signed by both Dara and Franklin in therapy a few months earlier to promote "couple comradery." The therapy started after Franklin went to San Francisco for a work-related conference (he was to give a presentation on how to keep investors at ease during recessions) and accidentally smoked cocaine with a blue-

haired teenager named Piper. Hotel security found Franklin in the parking garage without his pants on. His wallet was missing and he was singing “Spoonman.” He kept his job, probably only because Dara’s brother, who got Franklin the job in the first place, covered for him. As per instructions, they started the session this evening by kissing each other on the lips and saying, “Honey, I love you.”

Dara had her feet on the coffee table. She bounced her big toe to the song’s wobbly rhythm. She held her glass out in front of her with her left hand, as if she expected a waiter to walk by and refresh it, and held the joint in her right by her lap. It released a lazy cone of smoke as she sat there smiling, perhaps imagining how Ralph Greybeal’s trumpeting was improving or how Desiree Alvarez was finally mastering the art of spiccato bowing. This was something Franklin admired about her—though they all sounded like puke smells, she saw them growing imperceptibly toward something else, something better. “Don’t they sound wonderful?” she asked, still keeping her eyes shut.

“You’re camping on that,” Franklin said.

She opened her eyes, looking surprised, as if she’d forgotten he was sitting in the Laz-E-Boy not four feet from her. He pointed at the joint with his wineglass.

“Can you hear how much they’ve improved since the recital?” She leaned toward him, passing him the joint. She’d had it for three minutes and had yet to take a puff. She’d probably only sniffed her wine. That didn’t seem like she was living up to her side of the bargain, but Franklin wasn’t going to say anything—the whole “couple comradery” hogshit wasn’t his idea.

“They sound all right,” he said. “There’s certainly room for improvement.”

There would be some question as to where Larry stopped on his way home. Too much time passed between departure from Golden Nugget and arrival at his trailer, authorities believed. The Sheriff's Office's press release stated, though they were still waiting on the toxicology report, they had reason to believe he stopped somewhere and ingested methamphetamine. Though they found no paraphernalia on his person, they pointed to his rap sheet as proof of his ongoing struggle with that particular substance. Larry's girlfriend, though, said: "Larry's been off that crap for six months. Only beer now, and not even that much of it. He was getting better. The pigs got it wrong, as usual."

The piece's complexity increased; Ralph, Desiree, and the rest of them couldn't keep up. Parts were missing. Alvarez or one of the other violinists sounded like they were sawing away on a shoe string attached to a stick. The trombone player—Franklin knew which one, too: the dumpy, acne-streaked boy who looked better suited for playing tuba—seemed to be making it up as he went along.

"How'd the session go today?" Dara asked.

This was another infraction: During this hour, there was to be no talk of therapy. They were to discuss their day, nothing more. Something interesting they saw on the bus, a funny article someone forwarded to them—that sort of thing. This was, according to Dr. Abbott, a time to practice being friendly with each other, to regain the ability to talk about nothing. This was skill Franklin thought he had down; he was an accounts

manager at an investment, and his only duty was to send reassuring emails to millionaires about the increasing value of their funds or the volatility of the market, how all setbacks are temporary if you're patient. But with Dara this was tricky; she wasn't interested with small talk, couldn't shoot the breeze to save her life. She was only interested in the things that mattered, the whys of what made people do the things they did, and currently therapy seemed like the best way to get to the why of Franklin smoking crack and parading pantless through a parking garage singing a song she didn't even know Franklin liked, let alone knew by heart.

“We're not supposed to talk about that stuff right now.”

He hadn't actually gone to the session. It had been raining when he got off work, and when he got to the bus stop twenty people were smashed together under the awning. Maybe it was the rain, or the way everyone looked so goddamn beaten down. Franklin thought: I can't take an hour of being told that I'm hiding from something, that when I moved here I was taking the “geographical cure.” To Franklin, the “geographical cure” was what people did when they expected their surroundings to change them. He, on the other hand, had actually been a different person once he moved. He went to college, he stopped the drugs, whittled down his drinking. But the shrink never believed him, she just sat there with that clinical smirk and said, “Interesting,” every few minutes. No, Franklin thought, I can't do that today. Instead, he'd taken a cab home, waited until he heard Dara's Saab pulled into the garage, then snuck out the basement's bathroom window. He walked to the market and picked up some milk, smoked a cigarette he bummed from a teenager with a pink mohawk, walked home.

Dara nodded, took a sip of wine.

“Work?” she asked.

He shrugged. His phone vibrated in his pocket. A text message from a number he didn't have saved: *It may be colder than tits on a witch, but it sure is beautiful.*

“Any more talk about transferring you to sales?”

“I'm not going to push it,” Franklin said. He finished his wine and started inspecting the spines of the books on the shelf by the stereo. “Your brother told me he'd let me know when he thought I was ready.”

“You can't count on him,” she said. “I'm sure he's forgotten all about it.”

Franklin offered her the joint, but when she saw how short it was she waved it off. He took one more hit and tossed it in his empty glass. She still had more than her half of her wine left.

“I don't understand why you keep putting this off,” she said. Both her feet were flat on the floor now. She was sitting with the rigidity she had perfected for speaking with the parents of goofy and disruptive kids.

“Look,” he said, sitting up himself, scooting to the edge of his chair. “I don't think I'm in any position to make demands over there.”

She sighed, then walked over to his chair and sat on his lap. She started massaging his temples with the pads of her fingers. “No one knows about that.”

“We're not supposed to be talking about this,” he said.

Dara kissed him on the cheek. “The hour's over,” she said, pointing to the clock.

At 10:11, Larry pulled into his driveway. A neighbor who happened to be wheeling his garbage can to the end of his driveway at the time observed that Larry got out of his car, walked past his girlfriend's car, stopped, walked back, bent down, and inspected a yellow streak tattooed into the passenger-side rear bumper. Larry got down on hands and knees, looked under the car, said, "Fucker!" then went inside. Crystal told the paper she'd swiped a pole while pulling out of the bank earlier that day. Crystal also stated that Larry was "real quiet," when he went inside. He fetched a Hamm's from the fridge. He kissed his kids good night. He turned on the television, but turned it off after a minute or two. He went back outside and started rummaging through the shed. That wasn't altogether unusual for him. "If something was botherin' him," Crystal told the reporter, "He wouldn't be able to sleep 'til he fixed it. He's always been like that."

"This was nice," Dara said. "Sorry if I ruined it."

"You didn't." Franklin took the two wine glasses to the kitchen, polishing off the last of what Dara couldn't finish.

When he went to the bedroom, Dara was naked. She was brushing her teeth and rubbing her foot against the bottom hinge of the closet door. Athlete's foot. She walked to the bathroom and spit into the sink. Franklin took off his shirt, unbuckled his belt.

"Coming to bed?" Dara asked. She took off her glasses and rubbed her nose with her right palm. The noise of cartilage shifting under skin reminded Franklin of his childhood, of Larry. In his crueler moments, Larry used to sit on Franklin's chest and dig his palm into Franklin's nose and rub it counterclockwise until Franklin cried uncle.

He fastened his belt again. "I'm gonna see if the Seahawks won today."

“Can’t you check tomorrow?” she asked, she tilted her head to the side, then swung her hips back and forth playfully.

He walked over to her, rubbed her shoulders and kissed her neck. “I’m beat,” he said. “Rain check.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, then turned off the lights. She made two punctuated kissing noises into the dark.

Since Crystal remained tightlipped as to what exactly happened, the only thing that was reported was this: the same neighbor who witnessed Larry coming home woke up to the sound of crunching. He thought someone had dozed off at the wheel and grazed a parked car, but the sound didn’t stop—it went on for a seconds, like the motorized belch of a garbage disposal. As he became more lucid, the neighbor noticed other sounds: shouting, a screen door opening, then a sort of hammering. He got up and crept to the window. Outside, in the yellow flood of Larry’s trailer’s porch light, the neighbor saw Larry punching, then ripping Crystal’s bumper with his bare hands. “I’d never seen anything like it,” the neighbor said. “He was pulling at the thing like it was the top of a chip bag.” He called 911.

Franklin took out the bottle of Beam he kept hidden in a bag of dog food they had left over from watching Dara’s brother’s chocolate lab. Deputy Rose pulled up at Larry’s trailer. Franklin took three pulls, like he did every night—no more. He wanted more than a glass of wine, but he knew he had to keep things under control; that’s what, in

Franklin's mind, separated him from Larry, from all the men in his family tree: control. It's what got him out of Montana, into and through college. Larry was still out there, sitting on the steps. Crystal had apparently locked the door, waiting for him to cool off. According to the Sheriff's Office, Larry was acting hostile. He stood up—he was five inches taller than Rose—and put his hands above on his head with his elbows pointed out. He answered Rose's questions in single, monosyllabic grunts. The neighbor, who was still up and watching, said that after a few minutes of talking, Rose started pointing to the ground. Larry didn't take the hint. He shook his head, turned around, and started pounding on the screen door. Rose grabbed Larry by the shoulder. At this moment, the neighbor claimed his dog licked him on the ankle; he looked down. Before he had a chance to look back across the street, he heard a pop: "It wasn't as loud as you'd expect. It didn't even sound as loud as the shotgun blasts you hear during deer season."

According to official statement, Larry swung a haymaker that connected with Sheriff Rose's neck. Rose thought that he was going to lose consciousness, and that if he did Larry might kill him. As he fell, he drew out his gun and shot Larry just under his left eye. The Ravalli County Coroner's office reported time of death at 11:47. At the moment his brother died, Franklin was listening to an old Sneaker Pimps song while looking at nip-slip photos of actresses whose names he didn't recognize.

The next morning Franklin got a call from his mother. He was on the bus, holding onto a greasy leather strap. He pressed the ignore button, telling himself it was because he didn't want to be rude to the other passengers, who drowsily nursed spill-proof mugs or were staring at their phones or attending to crossword puzzles. Truthfully,

Franklin hadn't answered a call from his mother in weeks, maybe a month. True, she called at inconvenient times—usually in the middle of the day—but that wasn't the real reason. He was sick of their sterile conversations, always nosing around important subjects (his brother, why he hadn't been back for a visit since he left for good seven years earlier), then retreating to safer topics: the weather, her constant complaints about Fox Lumber, where she'd worked as a receptionist since before Franklin was born. It wasn't as if he wanted to tackle the things they avoided; if anything he wanted to avoid coming close to them all together.

After he got off the bus, he listened to her voicemail.

“Frank,” she started. She was in the laundry room; he could hear the whine of the dryer, the unsteady wobble of the washing machine in spin-mode. “You gotta call me.” She paused, trying to catch her breath. “Something bad happened.”

Franklin hung up and inspected his phone for a second, as if the reason for her call would appear on the screen. He started calling her back, but hung up before the first ring. It was eight fifty-five—she wouldn't have enough time to tell him whatever happened before he'd have to go in to work, and that would just hurt her feelings. He decided he'd wait until lunch, when he could devote the time and attention to whatever it was that happened to his mother.

Around eleven, after he'd already dealt with a retired engineer from suburban Detroit and his concern about his stagnating, dwindling 401k, and a teacher from Indiana who'd thrown in her every cent into a struggling blue chip growth mutual fund, Franklin received an email from his mother. He didn't know she had an email account, didn't even know she had the internet.

The subject line said: THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT

He clicked it open.

Frank,

Since you won't answer my call, you'll have to find out this way. I can't even write it out. This article should tell you everything you need to know. You'll need to come home. Call me please.

There was a link attached to the email, but he didn't click it. He took his phone out of his pocket, looked at it, then took a sip of lukewarm coffee. I should call her, he thought. He sharpened a pencil. He closed out his browser, then reopened it. He read a story from his home page about how a man from San Antonio killed his infant daughter by putting her in the microwave for twenty minutes. When he opened his email again, followed the link.

After he read it, he went into the bathroom. He felt hot; he wet two paper towels pressed them against his neck and cheeks. He was an uncle. His brother was dead. He thought of his brother, thirteen-years-old, crouching in the cattails, staring at Crystal's bathroom window, hoping to get a glimpse of her tits. She'd showed her pair to anyone who asked—Franklin included—except for Larry. But now she was the mother of his children, and the reason he was dead.

Franklin let the water run down the drain, watched it as it gathered around a yellow, dried up piece of mucus with a sunflower seed attached to it. Who spits in public sinks? he wondered. What selfish monsters. Larry was a shameless spitter—he used to spit on the carpet in the living room when their mother wasn't looking, then rub it into the carpet with the tip of his sock.

He tried to push these thoughts away, tried focusing on the rest of his afternoon (more emails, a meeting at two), but Larry's face wouldn't leave. It loitered there, grinning, waiting for Franklin to say something.

A man Franklin barely knew walked into the bathroom. He was talking on his phone. "Fuck those warty twats," he said, then smiled at Franklin. "How's life?" the man asked, but didn't wait for an answer before going into a stall and locking the door. Franklin stood there with the towels hanging from his ears, which dripped down and darkened his shirt at the shoulders, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to respond.

The day before Franklin left Hamilton, he and Larry drove up Blodgett Canyon and parked at the third picnic area. In summer, the view is useless: nothing but trees in front of you and the base of Blodgett behind. But this was November; at that height, all the leaves on the trees around them had curled to the floor, but the ones toward town still fought on, which gave the valley a sort of orange-and-red shag carpet look. Franklin, though he didn't know it then, would come to long for that spot once he'd been in Seattle for a while. Sometimes, before he'd met Dara, when he'd accidentally drunk too much, he'd wander up the hills, looking for that picnic area, thinking to himself, it's gotta be 'round here somewhere.

"I hope it doesn't snow 'til January," Larry said. He fished a crumpled pack of Marlboros out of his front pocket and pulled out a joint. Larry's truck had no heating; Franklin could see the scars on Larry's hands glowing purple from the cold.

"What's the difference," Franklin said. "That'd only mean the snows would last 'til July."

Larry took a few hits and passed it to his brother.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Franklin said.

Larry cranked down his window like he was going to spit. “Congratulations.”

“You should come,” Franklin said, knowing that Larry couldn’t; he was still on probation for another year. “I’m thinking about Seattle, maybe Portland. I’ll decide at the bus station.”

“Do whatever you want.” Larry took the joint back. “Go to Alaska and can salmon. Go play nose tackle for the Cleveland Browns.”

“I already told Ma.”

Larry started the engine again. He opened his mouth, but paused. He looked past Franklin for a minute. “Well, at least the girls will be prettier. Take care you don’t get something nasty in your dick over there.”

“You’re the one liable to scrape the bottom of the barrel,” Franklin said. “I’ve got standards, man.”

Larry seemed satisfied with that; he snorted and turned on the radio, then headed back toward home.

At lunch, Franklin didn’t go to the taco cart a block from the office as he did most days. He wondered around for a while. In the daytime, he was always shocked how empty the sidewalks were, how, if it wasn’t for the cars in the street or the people occasionally walking past windows in the buildings, he’d think the town was empty. For no reason he was aware of, Franklin walked toward his neighborhood. He found a place called the Black Pit a few miles from his house. By the time he sat down, he only had

four minutes left before he had to be back to work. I won't make it back for the meeting, he thought.

Two other men sat curved like question marks at the bar. They were the types you'd expect to see drunk in the early afternoon on a Tuesday: they both had long, unkempt beards, dirt under their fingernails. One man's beard was dark with a few gray streaks around his chin; the other man's dingy white with nicotine-stain yellow around his mouth. These types of men were familiar to him—his father's side of the family was plagued with them. His father probably would've been one of them had he lived long enough.

He ordered a vodka and cranberry—something light, he reasoned, just in case he decided to go back to the office to catch the tail end of the meeting. He sat at a table pocked with graffiti and cigarette burns with his back to the other patrons. His phone vibrated, but he kept it in his pocket. The bartender walked over to the jukebox, put on something by Thin Lizzy, not one of the hits. Once, on a trip to Billings to pick up some dope, Larry had stolen a Thin Lizzy cassette tape from one of those racks in a gas station outside of Butte. They'd listened to it 'til its innards fell out, and decided that if they ever learned how to play instruments, they'd start a tribute band called Chubby Beth.

He finished his drink, ordered another. Why was he thinking about all of this? Was this what happened when people you hadn't seen in seven years died? He'd experienced the death of relatives before: his father, all four of his paternal uncles. But they had all been distant, blurry deaths, incidents that had either occurred before he was born or so far away from him that they seemed removed somehow, like reading about a stranger in the paper. His father had shot himself when Franklin was still in the womb;

his Uncle Shannon, who didn't believe his brother capable of suicide, got stuck by the man he thought had shot his brother. Uncle Teddy died in Deer Lodge while serving out an assault with a deadly weapon charge, and his Uncle Franklin simply disappeared on a camping trip near Paradise Valley. I'm the only one left, Franklin thought. Lucky me.

After the fourth drink, his phone vibrated again, but only once: A text message from Dara. "Where r u?" it said. It was only 3:46, and she didn't expect him home from work until six. That meant her brother snitched. *Snitched*. Now that was a word that reminded Franklin of Larry.

Before he could answer, she called him.

"Hey," he said. One of the bearded men turned to him and said, "What?"

Franklin covered the mouthpiece on his phone and shook his head at the man.

"Where are you?" Dara asked. "My brother called the school to get ahold of me. He's never done that before."

"I don't understand why he'd do that." His ears felt hot again. He tried to take a sip from his drink, but the glass was empty.

"You missed something important." She sighed. He heard the static clatter of children in the background.

"Are you in class right now?" he asked, embarrassed and angry. "Are you crazy? I don't want you talkin' about me in front of your students."

"I thought you were in trouble." She paused. "Are you drinking?"

"No, heroin this time," he said. "I'm on top of the Space Needle, naked and ready to jump."

“It wouldn’t be a stretch for you,” she said. “I know you missed your appointment yesterday. We still have to pay for it, you know.”

He wanted to tell her about what happened, about her brother, but that would take too long—first he’d have to start with backstory, about their childhood, about their fathers and uncles. He couldn’t just say that his brother, the person he’s never talked about or visited in the years they’ve been together, had been accused of domestic battery and meth-smoking, had been shot in the face. But if he told her the whole story, they’d be on the phone for hours.

“Excuse me.” The man with the blonde beard was at his table. He smelled like seafood with a hint of lavender, maybe thyme.

Franklin covered the mouthpiece again, shooed him off, but he stayed. “Can you take this outside, man?” The man was fingering a tattered piece of his jacket. He looked back at his friend, who nodded encouragingly. “You’re upsetting me.”

“Who was that?” Dara asked. Franklin couldn’t hear the children anymore; she must’ve stepped into the band room’s storage area. “Frank, what’s happened?”

She was crying now. He could see her there, surrounded by dismembered oboes, button-less trumpets, trombones cut in half, a hundred black cases etched with “Property of King County School District” in white block letters. He had the urge to taxi himself over there, to comfort her, to ask for forgiveness, to surrender himself to her, to make love on the firm bristles of the room’s orange carpet. But that would require admitting, explaining. He didn’t even know how he’d be able to get to her from here.

The bearded man stood in front of Franklin, his hands in his pockets, apparently waiting for something.

“What the fuck do you want?” Franklin said. “I’m dealing with something here.”

“Hello?” Dara said, her voice lumpy, clogged by something in her throat.

“I’ll be home ’round nine,” he said, “probably before then.”

He pushed his way past the man, paid for his tab, and walked outside, where the grayish darkening of the day and the cold breeze coming from the Sound felt comforting. He sent Dara’s brother a text message—*sorry, man. Stomach trouble. Don’t eat at that taco place three blocks east of us.* He braced himself against the wind and started walking in the direction of his house, hoping to find a place where he could kill a few hours.

Franklin came home at five to nine. A plate of cold salmon and soggy, sea-salt-crusted asparagus sat on the kitchen counter; he ate it standing up, using his hands as a fork. He couldn’t see or hear Dara, but he could see proof of her: her purse slumped into itself on the floor; the dishes done and in the drainer; the faint smell of ginger and coconut wafting of the candle on top of the refrigerator. He watched the clock on the stove march toward nine, expecting Dara to appear from the living room, assume her usual posture when she was angry at him—spine straight, arms crossed—but all was quiet. He thought he heard a toilet flush.

At nine on the nose, He saw Dara’s shadow appear in the living room. He ducked for a moment, expecting her to enter the kitchen. He didn’t know what he was going to do when she walked in—spring up from behind the table with his arms spread wide and start singing “Happy Birthday”?—but she didn’t come in. He heard the first few notes of

the *Dracula* soundtrack drift in from the stereo. When he stood up, he could see a bottle of wine on the coffee table standing next to two glasses. He smelled pot.

“You’re one minute late,” Dara said, startling him.

She sat in her normal place with her legs crossed at her ankles. “Sit,” she said.

She offered him the joint; he shook his head. She shrugged and took a dainty drag.

“How are you?” she asked. She was in her University of Washington sweat pants and a t-shirt that said “Honk if you love orchestra.” This meant she showered, and since she did it hours before she went bed, this meant that she had been crying.

“I’m all right,” he said. He moved from his chair and sat on the arm of the couch, next to Dara.

She tightened her back when he touched her shoulder, then relaxed, then tightened again. “Where were you?” she asked, facing him.

“I don’t feel like talking about that now.” The wine tasted sour, and the booze from earlier was making his hands sweat. He tried to look away from her, hoping that she’d sense that what was happening to him was none of her business, was the type of private pain a person had the right to keep from everyone, but she caught his chin and turned his face back to her.

“You’ve been lying to me,” she said. She pinched his chin with her nails.

She took a drink from her glass, and two drops trickled down her chin, which she wiped off with the corner of the blanket hanging over the sofa.

“I’m just a big, boring joke to you,” she said. “I’m not a fucking idiot.”

He had the sudden urge either to start giggling or weeping. “I don’t think we should talk right now.”

“You missed your appointment yesterday.” She was standing up now. She took a hit from the joint, then forced Franklin to take it. “I suppose you didn’t plan on telling me that.”

“I know,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I knew it’d be the same goddamn thing as usual.”

She took a step away from him. He realized that he was standing, that he probably just yelled at her. She put her hands over her eyes as if to block the sun.

“See,” he said, “This is why I don’t tell you anything.”

She sat down on the La-Z-Boy. “You haven’t told me a fucking thing.”

He followed her over to the chair and sat down on the floor next to it. He put his hand on her foot, pulled her big toe until it popped. She smiled at him, briefly.

“I’m doing my best,” he said, running his hand up to her knee.

She sat slumped against the brown leather with her head resting against her shoulder. “It seems like all you’re trying to do is avoid getting caught.” She no longer sounded angry—curious, maybe, tired.

“Getting caught doing what?”

She walked over to the stereo and turned off the music. “You tell me.”

He wanted to grab her by the ankles, to pull her down to the floor with him, to hold her until he was able to explain it to her, but she had already picked up the wineglasses and was in the kitchen, gone.

The strange thing about being in a bar at closing time: even though Franklin hadn't done it in a long time—on the occasions when he drank more than he intended to he did it at home, usually in the basement or the bathroom—it felt familiar, something that seemed as natural as walking to the bus stop or brushing his hair. This was four days after he found out about Larry. He'd been home, occasionally, but spent most of his time in the basement, reading the article about his brother's death over and over.

As he stepped into the street, a heavy fog made everything look distant, blurry, as if the lenses of his glasses were covered with honey. The street lamp in front of him looked like a yellow drop of broth glowing above him. I've had too much to drink, he thought.

People were milling around him, talking loudly, hanging onto each other desperately, joyously, preparing to make the pilgrimage home. He took out his phone, but for the first time in a few days, it was silent. Out of the fog, a red-haired man with dreadlocks approached him.

"Hey, dude," he said, stepping close to Franklin. "You need something?"

The man's corduroy jacket was open, so that Franklin could see he was wearing a Phish t-shirt. "Yes," Franklin said, not bothering to ask what it was the man thought he needed.

"Forty," the man said, and looked behind him.

"I'll have to stop by an ATM," Franklin said.

They walked in silence a few blocks, Dreadlocks in front. Maybe this is how I'll go, Franklin thought. He imagined himself, blue and contorted, discovered in a

playground by some kids, or in an alley on a pile of trash, xs over his eyes like a cartoon drunk. Would they send him back to Hamilton? Would Dara pay for that? Did his family have a burial plot? Would he lay next to his brother, father, uncles? He'd never seen his father plot before, didn't even know if he had one.

Finally, they found an ATM in front of a convenience store. Dreadlocks took out a white handkerchief and patted his mouth with it. "All yours," he said.

When Franklin stepped up to the machine, he heard the man rummaging in his pocket for something. He turned and saw that the man was holding a pistol—silver barrel, black handgrip. It looked heavy and expensive. Stolen, probably, or maybe it belonged to the man's father.

The man threw the handkerchief over the ATM's camera, then put the pistol's nose against Franklin's temple. It felt hot, which was not what he expected.

"This is a surprise," Franklin said. His voice sounded whiny, like he was begging his mother for another piece of chocolate.

"Withdraw the max," Dreadlocks said.

"I don't think I have that much," Franklin said. Though he hadn't spoken to Dara for a few days, he imagined that she'd transferred the lion's share of their money to a savings account he didn't have an ATM card for. She was always smart like that.

"My wife is going to kill me," Franklin said.

It turned out that he had \$218; he took two hundred out, accepted the 3.50 fee, took his receipt. He turned around, but Dreadlocks shoved him back toward the machine.

"Keep your eyes forward," Dreadlocks said.

"I've already seen you," Franklin said.

“Count to ten.” He could hear the man arranging himself: crumpling the bills into his pocket, stuffing his pistol back into his waistband or wherever it is people keep their pistols.

Franklin thought, you should elbow him in the balls, bite his eyes out, you should do something that’ll make a good story after he kills you. By the time he turned around, the man was gone, and Franklin was still alive.

VII. PERU

The hardest part about vanishing was dealing with the daylight. As soon as the sun meandered its way into the sky the first day they left, Liza's father, the manager at Fire Tower Coffee, and her friends from the dorm started calling, texting, emailing. *Where are you?* They wanted to know. *Who took you? Why have you left me without saying a word?* Night made it easy to forget she was a daughter, a friend, an employee. At night, she only belonged to Cody, and in the darkness he felt like the only person she had ever known. At night, they drank something or took something and her head was on his shoulder and he told stories most people would find terrible, in bad taste, and all she could see was his face, hollowed out by the dark. Only his lips could make the skin on Liza's lower back stand at attention. But in the day, his lips felt like anyone else's—like Tanner from Intro to Sociology or that red-faced boy she met at a football game she didn't want to go to in the first place. In the day, she couldn't shake the image of Cody's wife and children wandering around Helena, looking for him, or her father, locked in the bathroom, ignoring his wife's knocking, drinking wine from the bottle and staring at his phone, begging it to show him an answer for why his daughter was gone. At night, Peru seemed as easy to get to as Miles City or Idaho Falls or Butte. In the day, she had to deal with the fact that they were in Crawford, Oklahoma, and out of money.

Liza sat in the passenger seat of her '92 Nissan Sentra, a high school graduation present from her father last year. Next to her, Cody picked at his fingernails with a weed stem. He stared at the gas gauge, which had been blinking orange for the past twenty miles, as if he could startle the needle back to a half tank. They were parked in front of a police station.

“All right,” Cody said, turning toward her. “Go in there and tell the person at the front desk that you’re on your way to your mother’s funeral, that you ran out of gas.”

Since the air conditioning had quit somewhere in the yellowed nothingness of Kansas, they’d had to ride with the windows rolled down. There was an arch of dirt smudged across his forehead, and around his neck, near the long purplish scar he got from a car wreck back when he was Liza’s age, a grayish limp leaf clung to his skin. Liza inspected the imperfections on his Nirvana shirt: the toothpaste smeared near the shoulder, the brownish blood drop staining the blond of Curt’s stringy hair, the stretched and frayed neckline. Near Cody’s left sleeve, she could see the blue tentacles of the octopus tattoo he did himself while he was in a group home outside of Great Falls. This was the one he hated, the one he always talked about getting covered up when he had enough money—that’s one of the reasons he’d gotten the second job at Fire Tower—but it was Liza’s favorite. She loved how, when he turned his arm a certain way, it looked like a big, bumpy brain.

“Don’t make it complicated,” he instructed. “Your mother died. You’re going to the funeral.” Liza stared at the windshield. Above the wiper, a moth’s wing waved at her. “It’s gotta be your mother—no one gives a shit about fathers. Keep the story in the front of your mind, just in case they question some detail.”

She wondered what it would be like to be on her way to her mother's funeral; Liza hadn't seen her mother in—eight years? Ten. Jesus, she thought, can't even remember how long it's been. She felt a splash of shame warm her cheeks, but she shook it off. Her mother was the one who left.

Liza brushed off Cody's forehead with a McDonald's napkin, plucked off the leaf, flicked it out the window. "How'd you not notice that?"

"They'll have to help you." He scratched the spot where Liza removed the leaf. He squinted into the sun as he spoke. This made him look older—his features, she thought, were made to be scrutinized in moonlight or the merciful beam of streetlights, not bald, unforgiving sunlight. No, she reminded herself, this makes him look his age: thirty-six. "Every city's got an Emergency Assistance Fund."

"This isn't a city."

"You've got one, too." He reached over and pulled a twig from her hair. His hand lingered for a moment. He ran his fingers down to her ear and squeezed it. He always told Liza he loved her ears. He lit a cigarette, handed it to her. "The smaller the better. Bigger places have so many goddamn resources it'd take us days to talk to the right person."

"How do you know every place has this?" Liza's phone vibrated in her pocket; Sara. *im borrrred. if anyone wants to go to canyon lake hit me up.*

"The money's to keep bums from settling in," Cody said. "All you need is a sad story and a valid driver's license and no warrants."

She looked out the window at the station—a beige-bricked, two-story building with an American flag lazily wagging above it in the stale, hot air. Above, the sky was an obnoxious sort of blue, the kind most people used to describe a beautiful day, but to

Liza this kind, without any clouds, no hint of a change in weather coming, was oppressive, depressing.

“It’ll be a piece of cake,” he said. He put his hand on her thigh. “You’ll have no problems—I got all the way to Ohio and back doing this trick.”

This was one thing she loved about Cody: he knew things most people could go their whole lives not knowing about. That Senator Burns has size six feet but wears size eight shoes, for instance. That most employers don’t actually check if you have a college diploma before they hire you. Everything he’d shared with her since the start of the summer interested her more than the things she’d learned in Macroeconomics, Freshmen Writing I & II, 19th Century American History—facts she studied for hours. Now, if she tried to focus on just one thing she’d been told by her professors last year, she came up with nothing.

“I think I’m still buzzin’ from the codeine,” she said. She shook her head, shielded her eyes from the sun. “I can’t do it.”

A little boy came out of a house across from the station eating a red Popsicle. He looked young, maybe eight or nine, Liza thought, though she was often surprised how wrong she was when she guessed kids’ ages. The boy kept his head forward and held his hands out, careful not to stain his clothes. Liza turned and saw that Cody was watching; his mouth was now open, as if he wanted a bite of the Popsicle.

“Thinkin’ about them?” Liza asked. She touched his hand. She hoped that he might say something here, might give her a reason why leaving with her in the middle of the night was more important than staying with his children, or at least staying in the same state as his children, or at least saying goodbye to them one last time.

“You have to do it,” he said quickly. He took his hand away from her thigh, leaving a wet handprint on her shorts. “You have to. We’re outta options.”

“You do it.”

“They’ll be more inclined to give it to a girl. Plus, you never know—I might have a warrant.”

He pulled himself out of the car, stretched. “I’m gonna walk ’round the corner, just in case they come out to make sure your tags aren’t expired.”

She stayed in the car; Cody walked around to her side and opened her door. “Let me borrow your phone. I’ll see if my 401K payment’s been processed yet. Plus, I got a friend in Broken Arrow who might be able to help us out.” She knew from studying the map on her phone that Broken Arrow was out of their way. Even if it wasn’t, she didn’t want to meet any of his friends.

He took her face in his hands, kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, babe. Once we get the money from my 401K, it’ll be smooth sailin’ all the way to Peru.”

Her phone vibrated—a text from her father. *ur friends tell me that ur safe, ur away with someone. Why won’t u tell me?*

“Okay,” she said.

The police station’s tile floor was white with dark cracks like spider webs zigzagging through it. The walls lining the hallway had posters endorsing safe sex, wearing seatbelts, the prevention of underage drinking. Close to the Plexiglas window, behind of which a red-headed woman sat in front of a computer, there was a corkboard tacked with photos of WANTED or MISSING people. When she was younger, Liza used to

go to the Post Office, looking for her mother. Since she was only considered missing—as far as the police were concerned, anyway—for three months, Liza was always disappointed as she stared at the grainy faces of the disappeared. Even so, she kept riding her bike to the P.O. for years, hoping to see her mother.

“Can I help?” the woman asked. She gave a smile but corrected herself, as if she’d been instructed not to.

“Hi,” Liza said. For a moment she thought she would tell the woman that she’d been kidnapped, that she needed to call her father. “I hope you can help me.”

The woman’s earrings had pink kittens playing with yarn on them.

“I like those,” Liza said, pointing to the earrings.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m on my way to Wichita Falls,” she said. She looked down at the stainless steel countertop in front of her. She shook her head once, then looked back at the woman. “To my mother’s funeral.”

The woman dropped her gaze to her fingers. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m out of gas,” Liza said. “If there’s anything you could do...” She let the thought stay there a moment.

The woman shook her computer’s mouse, looked at her screen like it might hold the answer she was looking for. “Did you check with the Baptist Church down Delaware Street?” she asked after a moment.

Liza opened her mouth, but couldn’t think of how to respond. Cody hadn’t told her what to say to this question. She was irritated that he’d overlooked this—of course

they'd ask if she'd tried to get help elsewhere. Without being entirely sure she'd made the right choice, Liza said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Is there anyone you could call?"

"No."

"Your father?"

"He's dead, too." Liza brushed a piece of hair off her forehead. She was disgusted, impressed at how easy it was for her to say it.

"Well," the woman said, getting out of her chair. "Hold on."

Liza thought about walking out, lying to Cody about the whole thing. She felt certain now that Cody was wrong, that this woman would come back with her hands open and empty, shrugging. She was so surprised when the woman came back with a manila envelope in her hand that Liza started crying.

"It's all right," the woman said. She handed Liza the envelope, explained the contents. She paused, looked at her fingertips for a moment, then nodded to herself. She fished out a twenty dollar bill from her pocket and stuffed it into Liza's hand.

"It's not much," the woman said, "but it might help."

"You don't have to do that," Liza said.

"God bless you," the woman said.

Cody came into Liza's life in small increments. First, they exchanged phone numbers about a week after Liza got the job at Fire Tower, just in case either of them needed a shift covered. Then they'd share a joint after work—not every night, just sometimes. He'd text her things like: *whatcha reading?* or *Did you see that dude with the*

blue macaw in the store today? I once smoked meth with him for three days. He's got a Viking sword from the ninth century at his house. or If you ever want your mind blown, listen to Bach stone sober in the middle of the night. I'll never be the same. or Bukowski's brilliance is directly proportionate to his butt-ugliness.

One night, after they finished hosing down the mats and took out the trash, Cody asked Liza if she wanted to walk home with him.

“My car’s right here,” she said.

“So what?” he replied. “It won’t kill you to walk back by yourself.”

“All right,” she said. “But if I get murdered by methheads I’ll haunt you forever.”

“I’ll take that risk,” he said.

As they walked the four blocks together, Liza noticed how empty the streets were, how after ten at night Helena seemed to stop existing, as if when the sun went down everyone froze in place, only to come to at dawn. He told her about his childhood: His mother was dead; his father left when he was young, was probably dead, too; His brother hopped trains, had for about ten years. She told about hers, and for some reason, maybe because she was stoned, maybe there was another reason, she didn’t skip over the fact that her mother had disappeared, for no apparent reason, how her father had been royally nuts about her, how she figured he still was, but he refused to talk about it.

“Shit,” Cody said after she’d finished. They were outside his house, a rickety-looking duplex with paintskins peeling off the window frames and plastic toys scattered around the grass like mines. Even though the windows were dark, Liza kept expecting someone—Cody’s wife—to burst through the front door and come after her. “Moms are important. Dads you can do without, but losing a mom can really fuck you up, man.”

“You really think dads can be tossed out like that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what I’d have done without my mom.” He looked at his house for a moment, then turned back to her. “They can do without me. No problem. But they need her more than anything.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” she said, but she thought of how unnecessary she felt at her father’s house, like she was some gaudy armoire left behind by some long-dead relative, kept only out of some nagging sense of duty.

They were quiet for a moment. “I’ve stayed because I wanted to be different, good. But’s that stupid. I’m the same as him.”

“I better get going,” Liza said. She turned around, but stopped when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

“I like you,” he said.

After that, things changed quickly, but in an organic way. It didn’t feel rushed, awkward, or inauthentic. At work, she liked the way he touched her back as he walked by to get more whole milk from the back cooler. She liked the way he smiled at her for no reason at all. She liked, when they made love for the first time, how he didn’t apologize for anything, how he just did things without pause, and didn’t ask her if it was good or if she came or if he came too quickly. When it was over, he just said, “You thirsty?” and offered her a drink from his water bottle.

If she couldn’t sleep, she’d drive by his house, wondering what it might be like to make love to him in a bed rather than in her car behind the Target. She’d even wondered what it might be like to take a vacation with him, to drive to Seattle for the weekend, to go to Curt Cobain’s house.

She didn't think it would feel this way.

Liza spotted Cody pacing near the mouth of an alley. His knuckles were red and he kept shaking his hand as if it had fallen asleep.

"How'd you do?" he asked. He walked back and forth across the dirt, stirring up red clouds by his feet.

"There's no 401K anymore," Liza said.

Cody took the envelope from Liza's hand and pulled its contents out. "Fifteen-dollar gas card and a five-dollar gift card to McDonald's." He crumpled the envelope and dropped it to the ground. "Fuck."

He stopped walking and looked at Liza for a moment. Does he know I've got money in my pocket, she wondered. Can he smell it? She couldn't bring herself to mention the twenty, felt as if doing so would somehow change their situation irreparably.

"What now?" she asked.

Cody pulled out a cigarette from behind his ear, lit it, then handed it to Liza.

"That bitch filed for divorce. 401K's locked until we settle in court."

"Sorry," Liza said. She kissed his forehead and pulled him to her chest. He stayed for a moment.

He said, "I called my friend. Said he'd be able to pay us for our services."

"What services?" Liza asked.

"Didn't say."

A group of children on bicycles pedaled past them. One, a deeply tanned boy with a Sooners cap turned backwards, went up for a wheelie, then stuck his tongue out at his friends.

“Jesus,” Cody said. “Those boys should be wearin’ shoes. They’ll rip their toes off.”

“The gig’s up,” Liza said, disappointed, relieved. “Time to go back.”

“No, it isn’t.” He took a penny out of his pocket and flicked it at a sun-battered Chevy Astro parked in front of them.

“The money always runs out,” he said. “We’ll always have to do something to get more.”

This is the perfect time, she thought. All you have to do is walk around the block, call Pop. He’ll get you on the next plane. But, as she watched Cody put his head in his hands, she wondered just how far they could go. Could they make it to Peru? If they did, would things be all right?

She walked over to him and put her arms around his shoulders. “Let’s go meet your friend.”

Liza’s father worked for a non-profit that helped Native Americans get into college. He woke up at the same time every morning, jogged on his treadmill for exactly 4.9 miles, then cooked breakfast for his new wife. He smiled at little kids in grocery stores, bought Girl Scout cookies every time they came knocking at the door in their berets and sashes. When Liza applied for colleges, he spent hours researching each university. Every morning she’d find a rubber-banded stack of brochures and articles

he'd printed off the Internet about each place—the top programs, the crime rates of the towns the schools were in, the cheapest restaurants, the most flexible employers for college kids. He put everything he had into her; at night, she'd find him on the couch, head back, mouth yawned open, and could barely acknowledge anything she said to him. She knew that it was because of her that he was so exhausted, so empty. She knew, too, that part of why he did this was her mother.

Her mother simply left one day. No fighting. No note. Though she didn't remember things during this time so well, she knew that her father spent hours away. He filed a missing person report. He spent hours in interrogation rooms getting insulted by detectives. He hung posters. He talked to the papers. He drove to Great Falls, Missoula, Spokane, Billings. He lost the hair on the top of his head. He took more vacation time than he was allowed. He bought boxes of wine and drank in the bathroom with the door locked.

About a week after her mother disappeared, Liza sat in the living room watching cartoons. It was dark outside, probably cold. She heard a voice—constant and unintelligible, like the hooting of an owl—come from outside. When she opened the backdoor, she realized that the sound she heard came from her father, clomping around the woods behind their property, calling her mother's name.

Six months later, her mother called and said to the answering machine: "I'm sorry, Brian. I don't want to be a wife or a mother anymore. It isn't your fault. I don't need any money." Later, after Liza had turned fourteen and her father had remarried, she found a shoebox full of artifacts about her mother. Her father had kept a notebook filled with details he heard on the voicemail: a car honking, a train whistle (a foghorn?),

someone coughing, the sound of rain on an awning. The box also contained a parking ticket with her mother's name on it from Arizona, a map of California with a town called Willitts circled in blue and yellow highlighter. Her mother's disappearance held him captive, it seemed to Liza, tethered to that moment when he realized his wife hadn't been the victim of something mysterious and terrible, that she wasn't coming back.

As Cody steered them through the dusk-struck landscape, red and purple and flat, heading toward another stranger who might take pity on them, Liza couldn't shake the feeling that her running off reminded her father of the way his first wife, the mother of his only child, left. Still, she couldn't will herself to pick up the phone.

"You know the best part about Peru?" Cody asked, reading from a piece of notebook paper on which he'd copied a bunch of meaningless facts about Peru from his iPhone before his wife shut it off. They were parked outside of a bar called the Tyrant. Cody passed her a Steel Reserve he bought with the change he stole from a car's ashtray back in Crawford.

"He's late," Liza said. They'd been there for forty-five minutes. Her phone vibrated; a text from her father. *Just tell me where u r and whether or not u r coming back. Then I'll leave u b.*

"If you go to the slammer over there, you'll be in better hands than a free man."

"How's that?"

He lit a cigarette, searched the radio until he found a crackly Earth Wind and Fire song. "The prison's form of government, run by the inmates, is more efficient than the entire country's.

“They got industry, money, rig-free elections.” He offered Liza the smoke, but she refused it. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Maybe we should turn ourselves over to the cops as soon as we get there.”

He laughed. “I only know about the men’s prison. They’d probably have you hangin’ by your toes on the women’s side.”

When she didn’t say anything, he read on. “They got 1,879 bird species in Peru. We should become experts, give tours to Americans.”

“I’m sure there’re plenty of tours already.”

“How many in perfect, American English?”

“I thought prison was your plan.” She’d meant it as a joke, or at least she’d wanted Cody to think it was a joke, but she could feel his eyes on her, could sense his face tightening up, his jawbone dancing up and down. She’d seen him this way before, when he’d talk about his wife.

“What’s daddy sayin’?” Cody asked, pointing to Liza’s phone. The last bit of sunset burned out; finally night had arrived.

“He called the F.B.I.,” Liza said. “They’re gonna swoop down on us any second.”

Cody let out a bark-like laugh. “They won’t take us alive.”

He snatched the phone from her hands and read through her father’s texts.

“God,” he said. “He’s obsessed with you.”

A black Dodge truck pulled up next to them. Its back window was gone and had been patched with clear plastic and duct tape. A tall bald man got out of the car and leaned down so that his face was level with Liza’s window.

“Cody,” the man said.

Cody got out of the car and the two men hugged. They spoke quietly for a minute, exchanging inside jokes and laughing too hard, heads back, hands on ribs.

“French, I’d like you to meet my Liza.” French had on a black t-shirt with a white dove in the center. In the glow of the dome light, she could see a small piece of skin like a loose corner of a strip of scotch tape sticking up from the top of his head. His beard was graying like her father’s. He stuck his hand into the car.

“Pleasure,” he said. Cody had a lot of stories about making it from Helena to somewhere else with nothing but a pocketful of change, but now she knew why: he had friends all over, friends that were willing to give him a hand out—a bus ticket, a tank of gas, a couch to sleep on for a while—and this disappointed her. Everything since they left disappointed her.

“How do you know this one?” Liza asked, pointed toward Cody.

French looked over his shoulder, considered this a moment. “We worked together, years ago.”

“Where?” she asked. “He’s had so many jobs, it’s hard to keep track.”

French leaned away from the car, put a thumb over his left nostril, and then blew as hard as he could through the right.

Cody clapped his hands. “What’d you got for us tonight, hombre?”

French stood up. “Have a drink with me,” he said, motioning toward the bar. “I wanna run somethin’ past you.” Without waiting for an answer, he started walking toward the bar. “Nice to meet you,” he called over his shoulder.

“Asshole,” Liza said.

“Who?” Cody asked, grinning. “Me?”

“Let’s get outta here. I don’t like him.”

“It’ll just take a second.”

Cody leaned through the driver’s side window, puckered his lips and let them hang there, waiting for her. “I’m not goin’ ’til you lay one on me.”

“He’s waitin’ for you,” she said, and she didn’t turn toward him until she heard his footsteps crinkling across the parking lot.

Her father texted again. *I can’t understand why u won’t let me know u r alright. R u injured? R u on drugs? Do u have enough money?*

Liza looked around the console for a cigarette, but there weren’t any.

She typed *I’m fine, Dad*, but couldn’t press send. It looked cold, cruel. For years she’d been angry at her mother for leaving them, mainly for doing such a terrible thing to Dad. She’d missed her, of course, usually when she saw other girls with their mothers—getting their cheeks wiped off in an ice cream parlor, or dropped off at the mall, or scolded at a stoplight, mother’s finger wagging, daughter’s eyes pointed at the dashboard. But these were fleeting moments, more superficial, she thought, than the anger she felt. For years, she’d imagine running into her mother again. Liza would be on a horse in the desert, and she’d come upon her mother, propped up by a cactus, dying of thirst. Liza would glug from her canteen and then ride off, leaving her mother to rot. Or she’d be in New York City in a white limousine and spot her mother digging in a trash bin. Liza would pop out the moon roof, point at her mother and laugh, then order the driver to speed away.

A couple walked past the car holding each other's arms. The woman held her head down and had a hand cover her mouth—either laughing or crying, Liza figured. She wondered where her mother might be right now, what she might be doing. New Orleans, working as a dental hygienist? Pittsburgh, selling peanuts at a football stadium? Was she still alive, or did she suffer a stroke or lose a long-fought battle against ovarian cancer or AIDS or typhoid? Did she have new people in her life, a new family? Did her mother wake up some nights and wonder what Liza was up to, what grades she was getting, if she was involved in sports or speech and debate club, whether or not she practiced safe sex? What did her father do to make her vanish like that?

The dull, fluorescent shine of the bar swept across her and Cody and French walked out. They were smiling, trading jokes as they crossed the lot, spraying pea gravel with every step.

“French is gonna help us out a little bit,” Cody said, getting into the car.

“How nice of him.”

He lit a cigarette, handed it to her. Cody dipped into his pocket, pulled out a clamshell of bills. He fanned them through his fingers, put them to her nose; they smelled like sweat and cinnamon gum. “The only thing is,” he said, squinting into the dark for a moment. “You’re gonna have to do somethin’ weird.”

“Me?” she asked. “What the hell’s going on?” She hadn’t realized how scared she was until she heard her voice—unsteady, high-pitched. She hated this fact, hated Cody for putting her in this position, for not telling French to take his money and go suck an egg. “Does he want me to fuck him?”

Cody turned to her now with his mouth open. He clucked his tongue, shook his head. “Give me more credit than that, will ya?”

“I don’t want it.” She moved her arm to toss the money out the window, a stupid gesture, one she knew she’d never go through with. Cody caught her at the wrist, held her in place. She turned to him, saw his jaw bone jumping like crazy.

“Don’t be childish,” he said. “Act like a fuckin’ adult.”

French turned down a well-lit street flanked on both sides by stores Liza recognized—Wal-Mart, Target, JC Penny. Cody followed. She took out her phone, scrolled through her contacts, let her thumb hang above her father’s number.

“All you gotta do is allow yourself to get pantsed in a public place on camera,” he said.

She laughed. “Pantsed? Gimme a break.”

He smiled, moved his hand to her leg. “That’s not what he called it, but that’s what it is. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“What’d he call it?”

“Sharking.”

She shifted to the other side of the seat, causing his hand to fall off of her. “I’m not doin’ that.”

In the parking lots, cars were buttoned in neat rows all the way to the entrance of each store. French slowed down at the gaped-mouth entrance of each place, crawling to ten miles per hour before deciding to drive on at the last moment. “What the hell’s he doing?” Liza asked.

“Twelve-hundred dollars, babe.”

“And then what?” she asked, pointing herself at him, ready to block or swing a punch if she had to. “We can’t go to Peru.”

“Yes, we can.”

“We don’t have passports, plane tickets.” She stuck a finger in his face. “You don’t have any idea what you’re doing.”

“I’ll take care of all that.” He took hold of her finger and holstered it in between her legs. “He sells the videos in Iceland or something, so you don’t have worry about people ’round here seeing.”

“I could Google ‘pervert sharks woman’ and see if you’re right.”

“No one would do that in this country,” Cody said. “That’s my point. Americans want to see pregnant girls bite off some tied-up schmuck’s nipples.”

French turned into a Safeway.

“No one you know’ll see this,” he said. “Trust me.”

Liza and Cody sat in silence. She watched French smoke a cigarette in his car, focusing on the orange tip, how it grew brighter when he brought it up to his mouth and took a drag. Cody kept sighing and clearing his throat, signaling her to turn toward him. She knew that if she did, he’d give her that look—eyebrows up, mouth almost in a smile—that always said, “I’ve been down this road before, you should follow my lead,” and she’d have to comply.

“Babe,” Cody said, touching her hand.

She moved away from him. She said, “Give me a cigarette.”

“We’re out.” He held up their cigarette box in front of her face, opened the top to show it was empty, then crumpled it. “We’re out of everything.”

A Toyota Tercel pulled into the parking spot next to French’s truck. A stocky man wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood pulled up got out and went over to the truck’s driver’s side window.

“Who’s that?” Liza asked.

The man and French kept looking toward Liza. What would they do if I ran, she wondered, or got out of the car and started yelling? The man stepped back so that French could get out the cab. He motioned for Cody and Liza to follow.

“Let’s go,” Cody said.

“I’m not going,” she said, but she found herself opening the door anyway. And when Cody met her at the hood of her car, she allowed him to take her hand and lead the way.

French pulled out a box from the bed of his truck, unfolded it, and took out its contents. “Here’s what I want you to wear,” he said, handing Liza an orange tube-top dress and a blonde wig.

“Where should I change?” she said. She held the wig away from her. “How many people’ve worn this thing?”

“Change here,” he said. “It’s too suspicious to walk in there with clothes in your goddamn hand.”

“Jesus,” she said. “Right here?”

“You can do it in the car,” Cody offered.

“Your hair’s too short,” French said. “Take off your bra and panties. Remember this aisle: fourteen. Home and Housewares.” He held up one finger with one hand and four with the other. “Fourteen. That’s where it goes down. I’ll be following you with the video camera before that, but don’t pay attention to me; you’re shopping. Put shit in your cart. Knock on melons. Sniff avocados. Got the idea?”

She nodded, but kept her eyes on Cody. He stared at the cratered asphalt, tearing apart a wadded paper towel with the toe of his shoe. She was suddenly aware of sort of high whistling noise. She looked around, but couldn’t find the source, and it seemed to be getting louder. “What the hell’s that sound?”

“Cicadas,” Cody said.

“How do you know?” Liza said. “You don’t know anything.”

“Don’t lollygag, don’t stall,” French said, “We’ll have to be in and out quickly. But don’t rush, either. Remember: shop.”

She took off her shirt; Cody stood in front of her, blocking her from French and the other man.

“She’s not an idiot,” Cody said. “You don’t have to act like she’s a goddamn kid.”

“In aisle fourteen, reach for a red spatula,” he said. “It’ll be towards the center—you’ll see it.”

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt lit up a cigarette.

“Give me one of those,” Liza said. As she bent down to take off her underwear, she held onto Cody’s shoulder for balance.

She heard her phone vibrate in her shorts pocket; a number she didn't know.

Garrett wants to tell his dad goodnight. Oh, Liza thought, shit. She handed the phone to Cody.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Your wife."

He looked surprised. He put his hand out to take the phone, then paused. "What's she want?"

"Here," Liza said, pushing toward him. "Find out for your fucking self."

"Pay attention," French said. "I'm almost through."

"Hey," Cody said. "Listen." Liza turned away from him, nodded for French to go on.

"Once your arm's fully extended, Bart's gonna pull the dress to your ankles," French said. He coughed into his elbow. "Gasp, but don't scream—we don't want assholes sticking their noses in what we're doing. Still, look surprised, cover yourself up relatively quickly." He smiled. "It should be good."

Cody was on the phone now, his back toward Liza. "What?" he asked. "I can't hear you, pal."

"That's all he's gonna do?" Liza asked, pointing with her thumb at Bart. Though it was dark, it looked like his fingers were blackened, maybe by oil or tar. She imagined his fingers digging into her flesh as he pulled down the dress—would whatever the hell was on his fingers give her an infection? Cellulitis? Tetanus? Would she be able to get treated for that in Peru? She pictured straw huts with crude, drippy red crosses painted on

them, and inside the waiting room chickens pecking around the bare feet of patients. Shut up, she thought. You don't know anything about Peru.

Cody walked in semi-circles, holding one foot out while balancing on the other. "That's great," he said. "I miss you, too, bud." He reached the outer circle of light thrown from one of the parking lot's fixtures; Liza could see that he was smiling, laughing. She couldn't hear him anymore, but that didn't matter.

"Ready?" French asked. He had his camera out now, its little red light glowing thirstily.

Bart, who was smoking his third cigarette by Liza's count, nodded gravely. He put on a black stocking cap and rolled it down; he'd cut eyeholes into it. All she could see of his face when he put his hood up was the slight, grayish glint of cars' headlights reflecting off his teeth.

"You?" French asked her.

She looked for Cody, but he'd wandered out of sight. "Yep," she said.

"After you," French said, motioning for her to go first.

VITA

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