

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

**FINAL READING APPROVAL**

of the thesis submitted by

Bradley Aaron Cook

To the Graduate College of Boise State University:

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

**DEFENSE COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

of the thesis submitted by

Bradley Aaron Cook

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The following individuals have read and discussed the thesis submitted by Bradley Aaron Cook, and they have deemed it satisfactory for a master's degree by the proportion of votes designated by the program.

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AMONG THE STARS

by

Bradley Cook

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Fiction

Boise State University

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For Michelle, Abigail, and Achilles

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## AMONG THE STARS

The left-fielder lays the boy's things across the passenger seat: a jersey worn by the left-fielder two seasons ago, an autographed baseball in a glass cube, new glove. He folds the note from the boy's father and slides it into his shirt pocket. Errands: bank deposit, clothes to the cleaners, a list from his wife of items at the store—bread, coffee, Capri Sun for Karl's lunches. He sits behind the wheel and watches Karl, his son, roughhouse with the neighbor kid. His son is tough, like he used to be. Different neighborhoods, but boys can be tough anywhere. The left-fielder won't let his boy cry. Makes him run laps around the backyard fence line if he believes Karl's gone easy on someone. From the day he brought Karl home from the hospital and the left-fielder's own father came to see his grandson and offered his sage advice: Don't let that boy grow up soft with all these rich folks. He honks the horn from the driveway. Rather than wave goodbye, Karl shoots a double-leg on the neighbor and takes him to the ground.

At the intersection, beyond the stoplight, clouds smear the sky rose and ash, the stains of summer's end. Brittle leaves cling haplessly to branches. In an instant, he feels, autumn is upon him; nights and mornings have grown teeth; everything, it seems, is withering, preparing for death. The left-fielder rolls down the window and sticks out his arm, hoping to catch some last-minute warmth inside his opened palm. This, he thinks, is retirement: meaningless autumn watching leaves die, geese that pepper the sky from sunrise to the now hurried sunset, like Norse shadows on their way down south to



Sarasota and Phoenix. Soon squash will bust themselves from their vines, the first frost trickling inside to soften their guts, rotting them from the inside out. His car slogs forward, the traffic slow and thick from stoplight to stoplight. Like cattle, he thinks, and imagines himself at the center of a giant herd of cars, roaming over prairies.

The boy he is going to see belongs to an old teammate, Charlie Bingham. When the left-fielder came into the league, Charlie had shown him what being a big-leaguer was all about: play like an all-star, party like a rockstar, hammer like a pornstar. The left-fielder was a kid then, he was single, he ate that lifestyle up. Now, the left-fielder believes, he owes Charlie. When Charlie called last month and asked for his help, when he handed the left-fielder the ball and the note, when he looked at the left-fielder through wet eyes and said I can't believe this is my life.

The boy is Charlie's, but he can't see him. In Charlie's mind, the boy's mother has no leg to stand on—she had known when they met that Charlie already had a family—but she could have hung him out to dry. If Charlie's wife and two daughters found out about his son, he would lose them all. According to Charlie, they didn't want to complicate things in the courts. The boy's mother believed Charlie would choose her, leave his wife and daughters to be with their son. When he didn't, she denied him any contact. Because no legal action had been taken, Charlie was left without a choice at all—give up his son, or lose his wife and girls. It got a little messy there for a while, Charlie had told him. Then she met someone. She accepts the checks he sends each month. Hush money, Charlie had said with disdain.

At last, he is on the highway headed north to the country where the boy lives with his mother and her husband. The houses thin in number, each one receding further away

from the road. The left-fielder was seventeen the first time he left the city, and this is the furthest north he has ever been on this stretch of highway. It all rolls past: the easy, sloping hills, thick with lush, delta grass; every few miles an intersection with a lone gas station looking out of place, an obvious urban intrusion on the moms and pops, boasting their prices-per-gallon from thirty-foot towers; in the fields, rusted-out hulks of farm machinery, like blue-collar carcasses picked clean by buzzards; finally that massive muddy river slicing the valley with its glacial ease and pace. He crosses the Clark Bridge and turns up Riverfront Drive, pushing against the current, following the bends and curves for eight casual miles.

At the boy's house the left-fielder walks along the cobbled path from the gravel drive to the porch steps, rows of gladiolas and azaleas, the empty swing rocking gently in the breeze, its paint flaking off. The doorbell chimes through the house. The swing's anchors creak like footsteps in the rafters. He takes a step back, not wanting to appear eager or intrusive, and smiles at the woman who answers the door.

The woman does not smile back, looks at the things in the left-fielder's hands.

Those for David?

The left-fielder nods.

From his father?

Some of it is, the left-fielder says, the rest is from me. I got a boy myself, about the same age as David.

The woman nods her head slowly. He phoned and said you were probably stopping by. And who are *you*, exactly?

Just a friend of Charlie's. We used to play ball. He asked if I could lend my hand, drop a few things off on his account.

He doesn't remember him, you know? His own father.

The left-fielder looks down. Yes ma'am, I know. Must be hard on him. May I come in?

The woman stands still for a moment then pushes the screen door open. I don't really approve of this, she says. My husband thinks it might be good for our son, but I don't. The door sucks shut behind the left-fielder, rattles and slams.

The hallway leading to the boy's room is dark; one fifty-watt bulb for the entire area, covered in dark glass, pumping weakly off the ceiling like a modest halo. Family photos line the wall. He walks to the second door on his right, just as the woman had said, pushes it open halfway and pokes his head inside. He raps his knuckles gently against the molding. Invited in, he pushes the door the rest of the way open.

Heaps of toys spill from the closet, miniature Nikes tossed in the corner, a mobile model of the solar system dangling above their heads, planets wobbling, dancing around a smooth, yellow sun. Sitting cross-legged on the bed is David. He gazes indifferently through thick eyeglasses at the left-fielder. His television lights the room like a hearth on a February night. The left-fielder sits down on the bed next to David, the walls feeling narrow, the carpet old and itchy-looking with frayed, auburn tendrils. The boy retrieves the remote control and shuts off his program. A small ache of light bleeds through the drawn curtains shaping an isosceles triangle that divides the room, churning flecks of dust the only movement. Glow-in-the-dark stars freckle the ceiling, and the left-fielder imagines the boy and his step-father hanging them one Saturday afternoon, standing on a

chair from the kitchen, or the boy sitting atop the man's shoulders, giggling with fright as he teeters above this god-awful carpet.

He looks back at the boy who stares at him, and the left-fielder forces a smile. He stands back up and offers the jersey, the glove, and the ball. He tugs the beaded chain of the lamp on the boy's desk, then sits back down, gingerly, in the small desk chair and watches the boy take each item one by one into his hands as if they are no more familiar to him than a set of alchemy instruments, studying them with concentrated wonder, as a toddler might study a new toy.

The left-fielder reaches into his breast pocket, pulls out the note folded into thirds. He opens it, looks at the bubbled printing of the boy's father: the deliberate, straight lines of individual letters, like plant stalks; the sweeping curves of vowels.

*David,*

*I want you to have this baseball. The signature is Roy Campanella. My father told me he was the greatest catcher of all-time, and I believed him. I have always held onto it. This ball means a lot to me, and I want you to have it. I'm sure you'll know why someday.*

*This must be hard for you to understand, and I wish that things could be different. Please don't think that just because I am not in your life, that you aren't a big part of mine. Although I can't see you, I think about you every day.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

The left-fielder folds the letter in half once, hands it to the boy. He watches his eyes follow each line across the page, then walks to the window and slips open the curtains. The ruddy autumn sun quivers with the end of its strength, as if it might blink out with a timid *pop*, but for now ekes a few fragmented rays for the two of them to share. He turns from the window and the frail light hugs the boy, still holding the letter, perhaps searching for words that are simply nowhere on the page. The left-fielder looks at the boy's delicate little fingers and thinks how he doesn't see the boy's father at all. He remembers lying on the bed with his own son. Karl had grabbed his hand and held his against it—every line the same, as if both sets were made together; the cuticles matched exactly, the white dots beneath the nails identical, twin sets of shallow corrugates along the backs of their fingers, even the hairs on the second knuckles matched. People tell him that Karl has his smile, his eyes. But his hands, he thinks, are perfect.

So, he says, what do you think?

Who is Roy Campanella? A baseball player?

Well, sure. He caught for the Dodgers. The Bums.

I don't really like baseball. Do you play it?

The left-fielder nods, suddenly embarrassed of his life's work. He feels foolish giving a kid a glove and jersey when he doesn't even like the game. He looks into the strands of carpet, onto the boy's desk, scratches his chin—something he does when he gets frustrated. He becomes conscious of his evasion, and stops.

I used to play with your daddy. That's how we became friends. But I'm retired now. The statement makes the left-fielder feel less important. A has-been. He reaches past the boy and grabs the jersey from the bed. I wore this in my final season. It's

supposed to mean something to some people. I guess I just assumed that you were a baseball fan.

The boy studies the jersey and whispers the name stitched on the back: Jackson.

Lenny, adds the left-fielder. Lenny Jackson. He waits for some sign of recognition from the boy at the mention of his name. The boy stares blankly at the jersey, his great, curious eyes searching the crimson thread, the weave of the cotton/polyester blend.

I like science, the boy says.

Science?

It's my favorite subject in school.

Well then, tell me about some science, the left-fielder says. Got a favorite? Dinosaurs? Bugs? He points to the mobile hanging from the ceiling. Astronomy?

I pretty much just like them all, he says grinning, looking down. Did you know that some plants eat animals?

Sure. Like a Venus fly-trap, right?

Yeah, but there are others. A sundew has a sticky substance on its leaves and insects think that it's food, but it's actually digestive juices.

You know, I have a son who's about your age.

Does he like baseball?

Seems to. I guess I've never asked. Now the left-fielder wants to leave, feeling awkward and ashamed. Why did he agree to do this? He preferred being the ignorant, retired superstar, sitting in his recliner watching the day game, sipping beer, waiting for his son to come home to play catch in the yard.

Is my dad coming to see me?

He knew this question would come, prepared for it. What he didn't expect was the sudden flush of blood in his face, his quaking fingers. This boy, sitting on his bed, looking to the left-fielder for the answer, his eyes big and round behind thick circles of bi-focaled glass, blinking like a kitten exploring the world for the first time.

Well, he lives up in Ohio, you know.

How come he didn't bring me his baseball?

I think maybe your mom ought to answer that. Hey, what do you say we try out that new glove? Never know, you might like it.

The left-fielder follows the boy's gangly, bouncing energy down the hall, thinking that the boy's gait reminds him of a marionette being towed through the house. He thinks about those words, *digestive juices*, how strangely inappropriate they seem coming from this boy, this kid. His own son would never use language like that, and hearing it from David, the words seem too big—too big for a boy's brain, too big even for his mouth, getting stuck somewhere between his tongue and teeth, clunking out with a hurried lisp that only wakens within the heft of certain words. What am I doing here, the left-fielder mutters softly to himself.

He stands for a moment on the porch watching the boy, who has hopped down into the yard. He feels uneasy yet optimistic, thinking that maybe this trip to the country, visiting this kid, will spiral into some useful moment of joy with a little game of catch, just like the left-fielder and his father used to find years ago—a fleeting, romantic hope that he might somehow better this boy's life. David stands ready in the middle of the

grass, poised with his new glove propped on his hand next to his left ear, like a still-frame of a good-bye wave. Finally the left-fielder joins him in the yard.

The sun is gone, but it has left behind enough of itself across the bellies of clouds that it isn't quite dark. The light from the porch and the tall klieg lamp in front of the shop frame the left-fielder and the boy in an electric glow that reminds him of some of the older ballparks he used to play in. He asks the boy if he is ready, then tosses the ball, trying to hit the glove's webbing. The toss, light as it is, pulls the glove off the boy's hand and it flops onto the grass. Without hesitation the boy picks up the ball, brings it around the back of his neck, and with his front leg raised comically into the air, he pauses a moment and hurls the ball past the left-fielder.

Sorry, he says and slides the glove back over his fingers.

The left-fielder smiles and walks after the ball, instructs the boy to squeeze his glove once the ball hits it, and tosses it again. The ball lofts gently through the air and the boy clamps the glove around it, looks inside. He turns the glove toward the left-fielder to show him, as if to say: And only on my second try. He reaches in for the ball, turns and aims, lofts a much more delicate toss that lands just in front of the left-fielder. Soon, the two have worked into a solid rhythm, the ball arcing between them, and the boy seems surprised at the fun he is having.

The screen door creaks open and the boy's mother steps onto the porch, her arms folded across her chest. How long was she there? Had she been watching? The left-fielder holds the ball, again feeling embarrassed, though they had been doing nothing improper, nods, waits for her to speak.

Come on inside, David. Time for supper.



Watch, Mom, he says and holds the glove open in front of him, his eyebrows high on his forehead, anticipating the ball. Once he makes the catch he looks to his mother for her approbation, which she feigns. The boy scampers behind her and into the house.

She nods to the left-fielder, thanks him for stopping by, her graciousness again feeling manufactured.

Thanks for having me, ma'am. You got a good boy there. Charlie's missing out, but I guess you and him already know that.

Hmm, she says. As if she doesn't really believe him at all, as if he is some sort of politician, some middleman not to be trusted.

The boy crashes back out the front door with the baseball in his hand. Wheezing air he hands the ball to the left-fielder. Can you give this to my dad?

The left-fielder looks at the ball a long time. The klieg lamp's bending stream of carbon hums loudly behind him. There is the purr of the river washing against itself across the road, the cricket-song chirring beneath the house. Finally he turns and walks to his car at the end of the gravel drive.

The sky has gone black and the left-fielder stands outside of his car along a washout on the bank of the river. Stars speck the heavens between the clouds, and the wind pushes a chill off the surface of the water deep inside him. He holds the ball in his palm, Charlie's ball, and reads the name scrawled between the seams: David, written in the distinct penmanship of a child—awkward, a half space too much between letters, the D slightly oversized. He thinks about that ball for a great time, in a way he has never before thought of a baseball; thinks how the boy could be the cork pill at the ball's core; layers of gray woolen yarn surrounding him, all those things his mother has told him

about Charlie, some true perhaps, surely most of them untrue; all of it wrapped and sewn shut inside tanned, full-grain leather; sealed with an hour-long visit from a stranger, a cryptic gift, and one hand-written note from a father he doesn't even know.

He looks back up the road towards the boy's house, as if he might actually see him there, as if this were some sort of romantic homecoming, and the boy might be running up the road after him. As if the two have forged some wonderful new bond. That's right. He is leaving now, but he will come back. He'll be back, and the two of them will play catch again in the yard and they will talk and get to know each other. He can tell the boy how to play first-and-third situations, how to go with the outside pitch or turn on a ball that runs inside. Runner's in scoring position, we got one out, what do you, David? He can teach him other things too. About girls and cars and astronomy maybe. He liked astronomy as a boy. He got a copy of *The Cosmos* from his school's book drive when he was young and read through it over and over, memorizing constellations and the order of the planets. He will teach David on cool autumn nights. He will point into the sky saying, That one is Perseus, the rescuer of Andromeda. He used the head of Medusa to turn Andromeda's captor to stone. Perseus and Andromeda fell in love and they were placed among the stars. But the boy isn't there to chase after him. The left-fielder rubs a small grass stain on the ball with his thumb and knows he is never coming back. The river's black surface purls and slides before him, glittered softly beneath moonbeams and starlight. He holds the ball for a moment, and then tucks it into the pocket of his chinos, as he knows then that he is keeping it for himself.

## REAR ITS UGLY

Snapper and Joseph and Bud wanted to see what his head looked like beneath that hat. Take off your hat, Burnt Stinky, they said.

They closed around Burnt Stinky where he crouched with his back against the wall of the remedial building during recess. Burnt Stinky hid on the side of the remedial building where he believed he could not be seen by the other kids. But they could see him there, squatted on his heels with his arms wrapped around the front of his legs with his chin against his chest and the bill of his cap shielding his face.

Take off your hat. Snapper and Joseph and Bud knew about Burnt Stinky's illness, knew that the treatments had made him bald. His name was Brent Finke but the boys in his grade had renamed him Burnt Stinky while he was away from class. Hats were forbidden in school but an exception had been made for Burnt Stinky. Snapper and Joseph and Bud did not think that was fair. The entire student body was told of Burnt Stinky's illness and there were gallon jars sitting atop the counter at the gas station and the Co-Op and the bank tellers' windows with Xeroxed photos of his face taped to the front of them. Burnt Stinky had hair in the Xeroxed photo.

Snapper and Joseph and Bud wanted to see what a bald kid looked like. They were interested to see if it looked the same as the old men they knew who had lost their hair. They each had grandfathers or uncles or men they saw at church with bald heads of varying degrees—some with age spots, some made shiny and browned by the sun, some

with a rim of silken white hair like that of an ancient and wise monk—and the prospect of a boy their own age who had gone bald electrified their curiosities.

Burnt Stinky would not show them. He buried his face and shook his head when they told him to take off his hat. He was a delicate boy, boney even before the illness, before the treatments which had made him bald. His elbows stuck out at mid-arm like separate, disfigured limbs and his knees were large awkward knobs. He walked with a peculiar, jerky gait which looked painful and laborious. He wore clothes which had once fit him properly but now draped his body like a theatre curtain. His hat was pulled down over his brow, just above the lids of his eyes, and forced his eartops to protrude out to the side.

Snapper and Joseph and Bud suggested again that he take off his hat or else they would have no choice but to take it off themselves which wound up being exactly what they had to do. Bud and Joseph each grabbed a shoulder and a wrist and Snapper stood waiting for the struggle which never came. Burnt Stinky's arms sagged limp inside the hands of Bud and Joseph and his head lolled loosely forward so that the button on the top of his cap pointed straight ahead like a cyclopean eye staring Snapper in the face. Burnt Stinky drooped, wordless. Snapper snatched the cap by the bill and hesitated for a moment before yanking it from Burnt Stinky's head.

The cap Burnt Stinky wore was a Los Angeles Dodgers cap given to him by his uncle. The Dodgers had won the World Series that fall in five games over the Oakland Athletics which was epitomized by Kirk Gibson's pinch-hit walk-off homerun in Game One, a moment made legendary by the words of Jack Buck: "I don't believe what I just saw!" When Snapper pulled off Burnt Stinky's hat, Snapper and Joseph and Bud could

only stare, themselves in disbelief. Burnt Stinky was not bald. He still had patches of thin hair in spots, and his head was oddly shaped and bulged like his knees. Burnt Stinky's face was no longer hidden by the bill of his cap and he looked down and his lips pressed against one another. Snapper dropped the hat and it landed on the top of his foot and he kicked it off as though it were a thing alive and might bite him.

Joseph and Bud loosened their grip but still held on to Burnt Stinky's arms. Tommy Lasorda had said once that he bled Dodger blue and it looked to Joseph and Bud that Burnt Stinky did as well. The back of Burnt Stinky's skull was stitched with veins they could see through the pale skin and the veins were the same color as the Dodgers cap he wore. When Joseph and Bud finally let go Burnt Stinky bent down and picked up his hat but did not put it back on his head.

Next time we tell you to do something you better do it, understand? Burnt Stinky had no response and maintained his stare at the ground. The recess bell rang and Snapper and Joseph and Bud ran quickly for the entrance where all of the kids were to line up single-file before going inside.

Did you see that thing? Snapper whispered to Joseph and Bud once the teacher had passed them for head count. Damned if he don't look like the boogerman.

Where's Brent Finke? the teacher asked. Has anyone seen Brent Finke? But no one answered. The teacher left the children standing in line before the entrance doors and went around the corner of the remedial building and out of sight. She did not reappear for some time and when she did she led Burnt Stinky who had his hat back on and his head down. With both of her hands on his shoulders, she escorted him to the front of the

line. She looked down at all the boys in line and before opening the doors looked directly at Snapper and Joseph and Bud.

Burnt Stinky sat in the front row of class, and Snapper and Joseph and Bud spent the rest of the day staring at the back of his Dodgers cap where it met the nape of his neck. They could see through the small hole, where the hat's size was adjusted, the pale and veined skin which covered the boy's skull. They had seen what none of the other kids had seen and they knew what a bald kid looked like. When the students were released that afternoon and their teacher had not made them stay after, Snapper and Joseph and Bud all laughed and celebrated as they walked down the sidewalk to where the busses were parked. There they watched as Burnt Stinky's mother had to help him up into the passenger seat of her pick-up. Snapper and Joseph and Bud all stopped while the pick-up drove away and they could see the royal blue cap go with it, along with what the cap held hidden.

\*

Joseph and Bud were twins, identical at birth but by this time one could easily tell them apart. Joseph had been bitten on the face by their family dog and wore the scars along his cheek and upper lip. Bud had a lazy left eye that followed a person beyond Bud's control if the person moved around to his side. Joseph could ape Bud's wandering eye by gazing sideways with his left eye and looking straight on with his right, setting each eyeball adrift in different directions like a chameleon. Joseph's impersonation of his brother's stare would rile Bud without exception which, of course, pleased Joseph to no end and Joseph's subsequent curled-lip grin would hide for a moment the bitescars left by the dog upon his maw.

Joseph and Bud's family was Catholic but their house sat across the street from the LDS Church and, on the day of Burnt Stinky's funeral, Joseph and Bud stood side by side in their front lawn and watched all the people who came for the boy's service, waiting to see Snapper arrive with his mother. When Snapper and his mother pulled into the parking lot and got out of the car, Joseph and Bud yelled Snapper's name from their yard and waved, but Snapper would not look over. Snapper's mother turned her head toward Joseph and Bud and her face was stern and clouded dark. She put her hand on Snapper's back and hurried him inside.

\*

Snapper saw Burnt Stinky's casket as soon as he walked into the chapel where it sat lengthwise on the stand, surrounded by flower arrangements that even Snapper thought were elaborate and impressive, if not beautiful, in the intricacy of their individual blooms. Bishop Harvin was seated to the right of the casket along with several Elders and Sister Finke sat with them, having no other family at her side. She wore a white dress with blue flowers patterned over the material and she sat without expression as though she could have been waiting on an oil change. She looked down on the ward members who were already seated or those, like Snapper and his mother, who were entering now and she nodded occasionally or mouthed the words, thank you.

Snapper and his mother sat in the center of the chapel in brown fold-out chairs that had been set up behind the pews. Snapper's family belonged to the church, all of them baptized and they kept the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants upon the bookcase in their living room, but rarely did any of them attend church. The visiting teachers stopped by often and when Snapper's father heard the teachers knock, he turned

down the volume of the television and shushed everyone inside the house until the teachers caught his drift and finally left. Snapper could not remember the last time he had been to church and he had never been to a funeral at all before. School was set to start again in a couple of weeks and Snapper's mother was taking him shopping for school clothes after the funeral ended. Before they had even sat down Snapper wished the funeral was over.

An opening prayer, a closing prayer, and in between there was plenty of talk about the faith, of the teachings, introductions were made of all the important men in attendance. Most everyone, save for a few pre-teen boys like Snapper, joined in singing "Each Life That Touches Ours for Good," and several members walked to the pulpit to testify memories of Burnt Stinky. All the while Sister Finke sat expressionless as she had when Snapper and his mother first entered.

They raised the lid on Burnt Stinky's casket and the ward filed past and looked down on the small boy inside. When Snapper realized what was expected he do, he looked to his mother in hopes that, without words, she would perceive his fright and likewise wordlessly excuse him from facing Burnt Stinky where he lay.

To no avail.

Snapper followed those before him, his mother gently nudging him along with her hand on his back and Snapper forced his gaze downward at the heels of the woman in front of him, noticing a small run in the woman's nylons and judging her for it. It wasn't until it was his turn to stand before Burnt Stinky that Snapper looked up and as he did so he could make out the boy's profile and Snapper spun around and made one more attempt to alert his mother of his reluctance. Snapper's mother put her arm across Snapper's



shoulder and stood beside him and together they viewed the body of Burnt Stinky, which looked to Snapper not at all like what he had expected. Burnt Stinky's hair had grown back some. His face was stilted and smooth and his lips, rosy and upturned slightly at the corners, and it appeared as though he were merely having an easy and pleasant dream.

\*

Burnt Stinky's father was gone. Not dead, just gone. He left not long after they found out Burnt Stinky got sick. Their family had a dairy farm outside of town, just a modest outfit, only about fifty or so head, which they inherited from Burnt Stinky's grandfather when he passed on from the cancer. The last thing Burnt Stinky's father told his wife was that he was going out to feed the Holsteins.

Burnt Stinky's mother had a choice: sell the dairy or try and run it herself. She did pretty well on her own with the help of some hired hands who lived in a single-wide trailer along the rim of the property. But still she needed extra help, and the ward discussed Sister Finke's predicament and they came around every so often to lend a hand or to bring a box of food goods that had been collected or to pick Burnt Stinky up from school when Sister Finke was away at the auction.

A lot of the members knew that she was going to lose the farm. That's just too much for a woman to take, they said. No way she can deal with that sort of thing and run her place the way it ought be run.

Even sick as he was, while he was still alive young Burnt Stinky still tried to do his part when he could. He helped her feed the stock and when a new calf was birthed, if he could make it out of bed, he was right there hanging on the corral fence ready to fetch whatever it was his mother needed fetching. You could just tell watching him carry a

grainbucket from the silo in the thick of winter, breath pluming from his nostrils in twin ropes of white steam, Burnt Stinky did not want to be the reason his mother lost their dairy. Already he believed he was the reason they had lost his father.

\*

Before his death, Burnt Stinky was forced to miss school quite often. When Burnt Stinky wasn't able to attend class, Snapper never let it go unnoticed. Here we have to be in school all year and the boogerman gets to stay at home, Snapper said to Joseph and Bud. I say we take the boogerman's hat from him for good when we see him next. Then everyone can see that thing he calls his head.

Burnt Stinky made it back to school in late November. The frost on the grass of the playground was slick and white and Snapper and Joseph and Bud each took turns having a run and then saw how far each could slide over the top of the frosty yard. School had yet to start for the day and the kids were gradually filling the playground as the busses unloaded or their parents dropped them off. It was Joseph who saw Burnt Stinky first and he stopped where he was and pointed to the blacktopped section where the basketball hoops stood. The recess teacher on duty was Mrs. Lamb and she wore her whistle looped around her neck and held in her right hand at the ready to be blown upon the sight of any horseplay. Standing at her side was Burnt Stinky wearing his Dodgers hat and a heavy canvas jacket. He held himself up with two aluminum crutches that looked a size too big, wedged deep up into the armpits of his coat. His right leg was there but the left was gone and in its place was an empty denim pant leg that was folded and fixed shut with safety pins about the spot where his knee should have been. When Mrs. Lamb moved, Burnt Stinky likewise moved so that he was always standing near her.

Snapper didn't say anything to Joseph and Bud. None of them took another turn over the frost.

\*

Can I do it, Mom? Snapper asked.

I'm not sure. I'll need to ask Sister Finke. Either way I'm awful proud of you.

Burnt Stinky was never baptized. His mother and father had planned to allow one of the elders to perform the baptism when Burnt Stinky turned thirteen but he never made it. To do it earlier was to Burnt Stinky's mother an acknowledgment that her son would not live to be a teenager.

A proxy was needed for Burnt Stinky to be baptized on his behalf. A baptism for the dead. Only then would it be certain that Burnt Stinky could enter into a covenant relationship with God. This need was mentioned at church on Sunday, and by Monday, Snapper had heard about it himself. The intricacies of such a plan dumbfounded and wowed Snapper and he knew he must hold some part. There were things going on above us all, laws and regulations, red tape and fine print, which Snapper could not even begin to comprehend. What he did best to understand was that, according to Mormon law and doctrine, Burnt Stinky was up there somewhere, and he could only be reunited with the Heavenly Father once a boy about the same age as Burnt Stinky was immersed in the gold-plated baptismal within the Temple in Salt Lake City. Snapper required first, of course, the approval of Burnt Stinky's mother. But what kind of mother in her right mind would disallow Snapper to take a quick bath if it meant unequivocally that her son would therefore find eternal salvation?

Snapper wondered what Burnt Stinky might think about him saving his soul. The two of them weren't exactly friends, but he was making up for that now. Any misgivings Burnt Stinky had would surely be forgotten once Snapper personally gifted his spiritual deliverance. He wondered if Burnt Stinky would thank him for his thoughtful deed someday when Snapper himself was welcomed into the Kingdom.

Upon returning home from school Snapper took the family's copy of the Book of Mormon down from the shelf and skimmed the pages in search of direction. He knew the basics—Snapper gets baptized, Burnt Stinky is saved—but he figured there was probably more to it. But the Book offered him little. Most of what it offered him was confusion. It didn't matter, ultimately, he figured. Anything he would need to know would be told to him.

I'm going to save Burnt Stinky, Snapper announced to Joseph and Bud later that day. It was unreasonably hot, still summer though school sessions had begun, where the days are cut in two by time spent at school, but are still long enough to enjoy well into the evening. The three of them were playing catch with a football in the street in front of Joseph and Bud's house. Joseph and Bud didn't seem as impressed as Snapper thought they should have been.

How you going to do that?

Thought he was already dead.

It's called a proxy baptism. You don't believe in them. Just throw me the ball. Snapper said no more to Joseph and Bud about his plan. Sister Finke's pick-up had been parked outside the church and Snapper noticed her as she left through the side entrance and made her way through the parking lot. Her body stooped, her head sagging off her

neck. Don't you worry, he said softly, making sure Joseph and Bud couldn't hear. I'm here to help.

\*

The snow cover is beginning to recede away from the highway, opening up the pasture grass to the sun along the dairy. The air is warm and Burnt Stinky peels off his canvas coat, and the act feels miraculous. The cows lumber through the loading chutes and Burnt Stinky can smell the sweet scent of broken earth rising up from their hoof prints.

There is much work to be done and more doctors to see. But Burnt Stinky will not concern himself with such things. For now he will soothe the skittish Holsteins who stamp nervously inside the chutes, their wet eyes strained against their lids, their plump, black snouts damp and covered with grain and half-chewed alfalfa. He will hold his hand out before their snouts and the cows will belch hot breaths into his palm. Burnt Stinky has taught himself to walk without one of his legs. He no longer skids nor drags his remaining foot, trying to keep himself upright. He glides across the farm, the simple harmonic motion of his tiny body swinging between his crutches like the golden pendulum of a grandfather clock.

\*

Right away, even before he had proffered his service to Burnt Stinky's mother, Snapper set out on becoming an expert in proxy baptisms. He knew that at the age of twelve, boys were allowed to perform Baptisms for the Dead, en masse, as a way to save the souls of those all over the world who had died before formally being baptized themselves. But this was different. This was a boy they all knew, and Burnt Stinky was

out there somewhere waiting for Snapper's assistance. This much Snapper knew. What he did not know was how to go about preparing for his ordeal.

After speaking to one of the elders, Snapper learned that he should earn his own money to pay for the trip to Salt Lake City, as well as for his lodging there. His parents could come along, but they would not be allowed inside the temple as their standing with the church was not good enough as to allow them entrance into the sacred house.

His game plan was simple: a garage sale and a lemonade stand. He would advertise. One day only! Help Snapper save Stinky! On Friday night, Snapper sifted through the toys in his closet, forming two piles: toys he would sell and those he would keep. There were plenty of toys he no longer played with, and the revenue that they were sure to produce would get Snapper on his way to Salt Lake.

Once everyone was in bed, he snuck out to the front yard and set up card tables he'd found in the garage, the plastic lawn set from the back patio, milk crates with a sheet of plywood across them for a makeshift countertop and covered it with his mother's tablecloth from the kitchen cupboard, the one with the expensive china that they only used on Christmas when Snapper's grandparents visited. Earlier he had gone through all of the boxes in the garage and separated everything into sellable and not-so-much, and he now took all of the sellable items and laid them out over the tops of the tables. No need for price tags. He would employ a simple bartering system. All reasonable offers would be considered.

After the front yard had been set up, he went into the kitchen and mixed four Kool-Aid packets into two large pitchers with sugar and water and set them in the refrigerator. He looked in the pantry for a lemon to slice up to add to the drink, but there

was none. Lemonade was a summer drink and even though it was mid-September, and no longer summer, it was still warm in the afternoons, too warm for apple cider, and he didn't know how to make apple cider anyway, so lemonade would have to do. Besides, this was for a just cause.

He had set his alarm early—six o'clock a.m.—and the sun was just starting to come up over the bluff mountains to the east when Snapper finished setting things up. The sky was washed in pink and the mountains were a purple color Snapper had never seen before. He stood and reflected on what he was doing, how good it felt, while he watched the sunrise. With the sky golden, and the mountains blue and then brown, he took up the signs he made on sheets of poster board, upon which he had written with his magic markers in big block letters, "Yard Sale for cancer. Lemonade only \$1." He taped the signs to the lamp posts at both ends of his block. When he returned from placing the signs, there was somebody already standing at one of the tables.

Good morning, sir. I see you've noticed our tool section. Snapper positioned himself on the side of the table opposite the man, his father's power tools laid out between them.

I don't see any price tags. How much you want for these?

Make me an offer.

The man rubbed his chin and narrowed his eyes at Snapper. I'll give you fifty bucks for the whole lot.

Snapper tapped his lips with his index finger, trying to look contemplative. Sixty-five.

Sold. The man took out his billfold and handed three twenty dollar bills and a five to Snapper. Snapper helped the man with his father's tool chest, screw gun, his hammers, impact wrench, router, skill saw, wrench set, hand planers, two drills, and several loose tools that Snapper had found. Making this money was going to be easy, he thought.

\*

The paper towel dispenser was the first thing to see once one entered the boy's restroom and that is where Snapper stopped and watched silently while Burnt Stinky stood before one of the urinals. Burnt Stinky had just finished and now had the arduous task of closing the front of his trousers. The crutches which supported him were wedged so deeply into his armpits that the poor boy could not quite reach his fly and so had to take one of the crutches away and lean it against the blue metal divider between the urinal he stood before and the urinal to his right. From here he could reach down with his right hand as he propped himself likewise against the metal divider. He struggled with his fly, nearly losing his balance altogether on two occasions, but in time managed to find himself put back together and then replaced the crutch beneath him and turned around to see Snapper watching. Neither boy spoke. Snapper realized this was the first time he had ever been alone with Burnt Stinky and suddenly feeling nervous and unsure where else to look, gazed down at Burnt Stinky's empty pant leg and felt sorry for it immediately. When he looked up, Burnt Stinky had his chin put back against his chest so that the bill of his Dodger's cap hid again his face and Burnt Stinky made his way past Snapper and out of the restroom.

\*



Snapper rode in the passenger's seat while his mother drove the two of them out of town to Sister Finke's dairy. Snapper felt as though some giant and buried balloon was slowly being filled inside his chest and, if it had not been for the seatbelt keeping him tethered, he would ascend heavenward on the power of his own nobility. His breaths barely moved, squeezed out of him by the balloon's pressure.

Snapper's mother insisted that he be the one to knock on the door and speak to Sister Finke. When Sister Finke answered he turned to look once more at his mother who stood behind him waiting at the bottom of the porch steps, as though seeing her approving smile would bless him with the needed courage to go through with his request. He turned back around to face Sister Finke. She stood in the doorway with the screen door closed, her arms folded over her chest.

What the hell do you want, you rotten little bastard?

Snapper tried to find the words he had recited the past several days, the words he had chosen so carefully for this most delicate situation, but there were none. He stood mouth agape like a simple idiot.

Well? What do you want? If you're looking to besmirch my boy's gravesite you've come to the wrong place, I buried him in town. But, to be honest, I really do believe you did enough while Brent was alive.

Snapper felt his eyes pucker and then the tears leak over his cheekbones and down to his chin. The balloon in his chest collapsed in on itself like the cataclysmic death of a neutron star and its girth became a funnel of enormous gravity through which Snapper's integrity drained.

By this time he was joined by his mother on Sister Finke's porch. What's going on? Snapper, what does she mean?

Maybe you ought to tell your momma about how you and them twins done to my boy. Burnt Stinky, ain't that what you called him? Took his hat from him when he lost his hair?

Through his blurry, tear-streaked vision Snapper could see his mother standing with her hand over her mouth, looking more shocked than mad. He wanted to leave, but he knew that he was not allowed and that he must stand there and take what he deserved like a man before a firing squad.

What else you do to him? Go on, tell your momma. Bet she be proud to hear the way you act. She might not know what kind of monster you are, but I do.

I'm sorry. I had no idea he did these things. Had I known, I never would have brought him here. Don't worry, his father is going to have a long, hard talk with him when we get home. I'm so sorry, Debra.

You're not the one needs to be sorry, and I ain't the one needs to be sorry to. But it's a little late for all that.

Snapper's mother made him ride in the backseat on the way home. She had him take off his shirt and cover his head with it so she couldn't see his face. I don't even want to look at you. You make me sick. He rode all the way home with his shirt covering his eyes and when the car slowed and then stopped and his mother turned off the ignition, Snapper knew that he would have to go inside and tell his father everything he had ever done to Burnt Stinky, and he would never have the opportunity to save the boy's soul.

## BARN CATS

Ma Barker, that was my best cat, she had a litter of kittens that summer. I found her in the corner of the barn, six black and white squirming bodies attached to her stomach, mewling teeny cries. They had claws like needles and when they dug at her teats, Ma Barker purred louder than my dad's brush mower. We had a lot of barn cats, but Ma Barker was my favorite. She was black as the river on a new moon, and always brought me mice and gardener-snakes and all kind of birds to my windowsill. She'd leave them for me so I could find them in the morning, and it was like she knew I wanted proof someone was thinking about me.

\*

Most folks where we lived in Idaho worked either in agriculture or with livestock. My dad farmed. The property we lived on was the property my dad worked. The woods bordered our property and running at the edge of the woods was the Payette River which also served as the county line. There was an old graveyard in Gem County, and you could see it up on a hill from our side of the river. It was surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence and had white headstones that had weathered and gone gray with age. There was a statue of an angel cut from marble which stood at the graveyard's entrance, and the angel was gray like the headstones and one of her wings had broke off. Mamma said the graveyard was filled up with people like my dad, people who put their whole lives into the ground and when it finally killed them, they didn't know where else to go.

\*

Judd and his family lived in the house across the field from our place on Silver Leaf Road. He was a few years older than me but we were close enough of age that we still played together. Judd used to take me back behind our property and we'd play games off in the woods. We'd play jail a lot of times and he'd press me into a tree and I could feel the middle of him up against my butt. He'd say, "You're under arrest." He'd hold me that way for a while and then tie my hands together behind my back with a stretch of bailing-twine he'd brought with him. Then he'd spread my legs apart and search me for weapons. Countryband, he called it. He'd run his hands up and down the insides of my legs beneath my dress or up under my shirt along my ribs.

\*

Our family didn't own the land we lived on. Our house and the land was property of an old man named Mr. Whitehead who had a fat stomach and would sit out on the porch with my father and big beads of sweat boiled out of his forehead and cheeks. Mamma would bring them sun tea and Mr. Whitehead would take it from her and not say thank you or even look up at her to smile. My dad would just look back at Mr. Whitehead real serious while he talked and never got mad at Mr. Whitehead for being impolite to Mamma. I could tell that Mr. Whitehead was the boss of my dad which was sort of weird to see.

\*

My dad had a lot of sayings that meant one thing or another. If he said, *We're shitting in tall cotton now*, that meant things was going our way. Once he told me about how he lost control on his pickup truck, the backend fishtailed on him and he almost rolled it down

into a culvert. For that he said, *I thought I ate the green weenie*. But when he was tired he'd say he was *Sucking hind tit*. When I watched the kittens feed, I always wondered which tit was the hind and which one the front, so I knew who was sucking on the hind because I figured they must be the runt.

\*

Judd let me play the jailer sometimes too. So I'd tie him up and rub my hands up and down his legs like he done me, looking for countryband. "You have to search my waistband, dummy. Case I got something stashed there," he'd say. He'd stand up real straight and I'd reach my hand part way into the front of his pants. Every time we'd play jail and Judd would search me, he'd move his hands up higher and higher on me and tell me I wasn't checking good enough to see if he had something stashed in his waistband. Then he'd want to play again.

\*

I got my boobs early I guess. I put on a shirt that I had outgrown, so it was a bit snug fitting. When I came into the kitchen to eat breakfast my dad looked at my chest and said, "Aw, shit. Here we go." Mamma told me later that I was turning into a woman which I liked for a little while. She said my dad didn't want to see it happen because I was his little girl.

\*

One day me and Judd was playing and he lit out on a run off towards the woods. He yelled out, "Come chase me! Come chase me!" I couldn't catch him, but I kept after him because that was our game that time. When he finally stopped and let me catch him, we was so far back in the woods you couldn't barely hear nothing but the birds and the river

trickling by so low we could have walked right across it into the next county. Out there with nobody around Judd said he wanted to kiss me on my tits. That's what he called them, tits. I didn't see much harm in it, but I knew he wasn't supposed to so I told him no. Mamma told me they were part of my no-no zone, along with my business down below. She said I could touch my own no-no zone, but not nobody else could. I wasn't real sure what she meant about me touching myself down there, but I knew that Judd wasn't never supposed to put his hands on me unless we got married in the church.

\*

First born, kittens are blind. Their eyes was glued shut, and they craned their heads back and forth listening for Ma Barker's purr, their mouths ready to clamp down on her nipple. They call it rooting when babies do that. One day their eyes opened, and their eyes were blue like new denim and when you picked one of them baby kittens up and looked them in the face, they looked back at you wrong-eyed, like their eyes were too big for their face and they had to cross them to see straight.

\*

Judd said he wanted to see my privates. Mamma said no touching, but never said nothing about looking. I didn't see no harm in it. I looked sometimes. It always made me feel good that Judd wanted to play with me. It was kind of the same with him wanting to see me naked. Nobody had ever asked me before and it made me feel special. So I hiked up my skirt and I dragged my panties down to my knees. Judd started to cackling and pointing and when I asked him what was so funny he said, "You just a pup yet. Ain't even got no hair down there." I didn't even know I was supposed to.

\*

Only a few weeks old and them kittens was tearing and clawing at each other. When I would pick one of them up they'd claw and bite at me. I just wanted to hold onto them because they were so cute and it was easy to feel love when you touched their soft fur. The one I was holding would stop clawing at me and turn to look at its brothers and sisters carrying on in the hay. Then it turned back and bit into my thumb. Their teeth were small and pointy and only stung a little bit. But they looked cute even when they was trying to hurt me.

\*

I told Judd that I bet he didn't have no hair down there either and he asked me had I wanted to make a bet. I told him I did, though I didn't know at all whether he did or if he didn't. I wasn't much sure why I should even care. He undid the buckle on his belt and unzipped his pants. Then he said if I wanted to see, I had to check myself. Again I didn't see no harm in it. I asked him how I was supposed to do that and he said, "Just reach your hand in there and make real soft like you was holding a baby bird and just lift it out." He was standing with his back up against a big old willow tree and when I reached my hand inside his undies he went to wiggling and pushing down his pants.

\*

When I would go out into the barn sometimes to watch whatever my dad was doing them kittens would come scattering out from beneath the hay and run all around beneath my dad's feet. Sometimes he would trip or have to stumble because one ran between his feet and my dad would yell at me to get my goddamned cats out of there. Once he scooped one onto the toe of his boot and sent it flying back to where Ma Barker was lying and the

kitten spun in a circle through the air like a fan blade with its paws all stretched out like that. Soon as it landed it took off to running again.

\*

Judd's thing was big and red and had tufts of hair growing where it met his belly. When I held it for a few seconds just looking at it, it started getting stiff like when my dad said I could feel his muscle to see how strong he was. It was leaking something clear out the hole in the top and when I told Judd he took his thumb and rubbed whatever was leaking out all over the top and made it shiny like my patent-leather shoes Mamma bought me for church.

\*

That summer my dad thought he could grow corn. I watched him drive the tractor up and down the fields behind our house chopping up the stalks into silage. The tires on his tractor kicked up a dust so thick I could hardly see my dad at all. The corn got chopped up and spit out into the silage wagon he hauled behind the tractor. I used to like to watch that stuff fly through the air, like water spraying out of a garden hose. It was so green and sweet looking, and you could tell by the way it flew in the air that it was wet and heavy. That summer the silage was real yellow, and when it shot out of the harvester, the wind would catch a lot of it and blow it away so that it missed the wagon.

\*

Mamma used to tell me a lot around that time that everything was okay, and I didn't ever ask her if it was. "Everything is fine. Your daddy is just tired. We'll be okay." I always figured things were fine anyway. I didn't think nothing of him kicking my cats across the



barn because they was running under his feet. Mamma liked to sit at the breakfast table and look out the window for a long time.

\*

Judd asked me if I wanted to put that thing in my mouth and I told him I didn't. So he said I could just lick it. "Make pretend it's a lolly," he told me. I thought it might make Judd happy if I did it, so I pretended it was a lolly, but it tasted like salt and I got one of them hairs left on my tongue. But it was the smell that bothered me most. It smelled like the inside of our barn. Musty is what Mamma would call the smell. It smelled musty too and I tried real hard to pretend it was a lollypop but the more I licked it the more the clear stuff leaked out and it was slimy and I tried to make believe it was sweet like syrup but I couldn't pretend it and I just kept trying to make Judd happy because he was the only one who ever wanted to play with me.

\*

My dad wasn't always as quiet as he was that summer. He used to play with me a lot more too. That summer if he talked at all he was yelling. Either at Mamma or at me when I left my tea set on the living room floor. I got scared when my dad yelled like that. Sometimes when he'd yell I would run out to the barn and pet my cats. Some didn't like to be held as much as others. But Ma Barker always let me hold her and she would get to purring and when I'd scratch her beneath her chin she'd look up at Jesus in the sky and then close her eyes. When I stopped scratching her there she looked at me like she didn't understand why I stopped, like it might have lasted forever.

\*

I asked Judd if that was his pee hole and he said yes and I asked if that stuff was boy pee and he said no. When I asked what it was then he said, "Here, let me show you a trick."

\*

One night, real late, I woke up hearing my dad banging away out in the barn. I never knew what he was doing when he worked in the barn late at night. I was never allowed to go out there after dark. It sounded like he was hitting one piece of metal with another piece. I watched through my bedroom window and he come out from the barn and the lamp above the door shined down on him and he was all sweaty and breathing real hard. He stood in the light and looked up at Jesus and held his arms out at his side with his palms up like he was waiting for our Lord to drop something into his hands.

\*

Judd took my panties the rest of the way down and told me to lie on the ground. My skin felt itchy and hot and I watched him push his pants the rest of the way down to his feet. He got on top of me and rubbed against my no-no zone with his. It felt warm against me. And then a bunch of wet stuff spilled onto my tummy. When the wet stuff spilled out, Judd stopped moving and closed his eyes and craned his head back so it looked like he was a baby rooting up to the sky for a rain. Then his arms went tired and he rolled off and lay next to me on the ground. I looked down and the wet stuff was in my belly button and I looked at Judd's thing and it was purple like a turnip and I could see his heartbeat inside it.

\*

My dad came out that night after making noise in the barn. He had a gunnysack in his hands. The sack was moving and my dad carried it over to the side of the barn. He

brought the sack around over his shoulder and swung it like a baseball player and hit it against the barn wall. He took a better grip on the sack and swung again and again like he was trying to chop down our barn with the gunnysack for an axe. When he finally stopped he was panting and dropped down on his knees and covered his face with both hands. I think he might have been crying. He carried the sack away and when he got right below the lamp I could see that the bag was soaked red and I didn't know that it was my kittens inside the bag until I went out to the barn the next morning and saw they were all gone. Ma Barker was hiding up in the hay loft and I couldn't get her to come back down for nothing and I wondered if she thought it was me who took away her babies.

## MY MOTHER'S PARTY

When I was a boy I lived with my Uncle Lloyd and his wife, Aimee. Their house sat up on stilts in case the river should flood. It slid past our place with only the narrow highway and about two feet of bank separating our property line from the river's muddy depths. I can remember once the water spilled up over the highway and covered the lawn. Aimee worried that one of the stilts would sink into the mud and the house would shift and come apart at its seams. I thought for sure that the water would rise all the way above the roof and we would be swallowed up. That night I dreamt of us underwater, catfish darting in and out of our rooms, the three of us drifted weightless, our hair fanning like dye in the current.

From my bedroom window I watched the river pushing south at night when I couldn't sleep, and on the nights when the moon was big in the sky, it glittered the water's surface and looked like a million nickels bouncing along its ripples. I pressed myself against the pane of glass and felt the coolness of it against my face. When there was no moon, I could still make out the black shape of the river and I closed my eyes and listened to it washing against itself and waited for the water to speak to me.

There were nights that Lloyd would take me across the highway and we would stand together on the short bank and skim pebbles out over the surface. Sometimes one of our pebbles would disappear into the darkness before falling into the water and I imagined it skipping along the surface forever, or maybe rising up high into the air and

vanishing among the blanket of stars draped over our heads. I remember Aimee sitting at the foot of my bed some mornings when I woke, how she smiled at me, and I wondered how long she had been watching me dream; I remember that I didn't usually notice the sound of the river when I woke up, though it was so noisy when I had gone to sleep the night before, the house always filled with other sounds in the morning: Lloyd and his brother talking from the kitchen table about the work they had to get done that day, the bubbling and hissing of coffee brewing in the percolator, Aimee's breakfast of sow belly with potatoes and peppers frying in her black cast-iron skillet on the stove, the hum of cars moving up and down the highway; I remember the way Aimee leaned her hip into the kitchen counter drinking her coffee with one hand, the other tucked into the pocket of her grease-spattered and snug apron as she watched us eat. After breakfast she would wipe her wire-rimmed bifocals with a red handkerchief, a single thread of smoke unspooling out of the ashtray behind her.

Alton in those days was just another river town. Barges and steamships and ferries pushed up and down the river, stopping sometimes down at the locks. Earlier in the century Alton had been a major port city, but those days were long past when I was growing up. There were no longer docks or wharves. I remember some old pilings behind the flour mill that were the remnants of a previous wharf, but that was as close as it ever got for me. The face of Alton began to change around then. Once a successful river port, residents had to rely on the steel mill and the glass works and the box board. We were an industry town. It seemed like everyone I knew worked or had a parent who worked in one of the factories.

There was still plenty of activity along the river that I could watch from our front yard or from my bedroom window. During the day barges moved up and down in schools of ten or more pushed by tow boats. They could have been carrying anything. I often imagined that they were taking away the wheat and grain that Lloyd and his brother harvested. There was a limestone quarry to the east of us and great stone blocks were hauled away right before me. In summertime there were excursion boats which came up from St. Louis. My favorite was the Moonlight Cruise, a steam-operated paddle boat that washed out of the darkness and cut the dank July air with the sound of drunken laughter and coins spilling from slot machines. From where I stood booze sounded like fun aboard the Moonlight Cruise.

My parents split up when I was young, maybe five or six, and I bounced back and forth between each of their homes. I'd stay with my father for a while, until he got sick of me being around, and then he would convince my mother that I needed to go stay with her. By the time she had gotten tired of me interrupting her own social life, my father had gotten used to living by himself. Lloyd and Aimee always wanted kids of their own, but Aimee was never able to carry a child to full term. They had parented six miscarriages before they accepted it wasn't in God's plan for them. When my mother asked Lloyd and Aimee if they would mind me staying with them, they nearly insisted. I was just glad to be in a house with people who wanted me there.

Everyone knew my father as Bum. He never remarried after he split with my mother. My mother's first marriage was to a man everyone knew as Bull. Bum and Bull, my mother's two loves. My father's forearms were taut, ropey muscles you could see

through the skin. He had a barrel chest and knobby square fists. When he told you something, it was easy to believe what he said.

Bum had an old mare that he would bring into his house. He owned a small one-bedroom on the riverfront, and his mare took up nearly the entire living room when she was inside. He fed her cans of beer, and she would nicker and nudge the refrigerator with her nose when she was thirsty. He had been a machine-gunner on the deck of the USS *South Dakota* during The Great War. My clearest memory of my father was watching *Victory at Sea*, a documentary that captured many of the sea battles my father had fought in. He told me stories of firing his gun at the enemy, his feet sunk in the blood of the other sailors on deck. Pretty hard to keep your feet planted to the ground in a mess like that. He sometimes would recognize men he knew in the footage, some who made it back, some who did not. I watched his face, bathed in the soft blue light of the television, and it took me a long time before I understood why he never spoke during the show and his expression never changed.

After Lloyd and his brother went off to work the fields, Aimee and I would play rummy or pinochle at the kitchen table. Then she would give me a list of chores I had to do before I could go outside to play. I would rush the trash outside, slop my blankets across my bed, fling any toys I had on the floor into the toy box Lloyd made for me, and then I would get the okay to go out. From the front porch I could watch the barges slog upstream chugging gray smoke into the air. When one of the steamships came by I would run to the edge of the highway and wave my hand madly until my arm nearly came off at the shoulder. Sometimes the skipper would see me and toot his whistle for

me, and that was all I ever wanted. I would wave and wave until the ship wrapped around the bend and drifted from sight.

Sometimes Aimee would let me take my bicycle up the road from our house to see the Piasa Bird. The legend of the Piasa comes from an old Illini story about a giant bird that carried men off in its talons to a cave to be devoured. The Piasa had antlers like a deer, the scales of a lizard, and a tail that wrapped all the way around its body. Several hundred years ago, the Illini painted a picture of the legendary bird against the face of the bluffs along the river. I would go there and imagine a bird so large that it blacked out the sun swooping down to snatch men from their plows. There were caves along the bluffs beneath the image of the bird, and I often wondered what lay within them, if there were piles of bones picked clean and shining white, or if the Piasa himself were there, nesting. I never had the courage to go in, but once I climbed up a small ridge and walked up to the mouth of one of the caves and looked inside, but just as my eyes hit the blackness, I pictured a giant beak opened wide and letting out a shriek so loud and shrill that it knocked me backwards off my feet. I got so frightened of what I might actually see that I turned and ran before I saw anything at all.

I was always proud that my father had fought for his country. The older I got, the more his service meant. When I turned nineteen a lot of my friends were getting drafted to go fight in the war in Southeast Asia. I never saw myself as fit for the army, all that walking and handing out food rations, so I followed my father's footsteps and enlisted in the US Navy. It was never made clear to me how much of the fighting was being done over there by sailors, but I imagined there had to be plenty. It was my time to serve, and I wanted to serve exactly as my father had done before me. I never made it overseas one



time during the entire conflict. I was stationed as a medic in China Lake, California. I changed bandages on Marines missing limbs, tried to calm down eighteen-year-old boys when they woke from dreams, the horrors of which I could not imagine nor did I want to. I was in the barracks one evening after mail call. I never received a lot of mail, but I had a letter from my mother, and it took me a long time to build the courage to open it. When I did I was so surprised by the first line that I read it over and over and did not notice the petty officer who had entered the room. Because I did not jump to attention, but stared at the only words my mother had ever written to me, the petty officer grabbed the letter from my hands and without any hesitation I punched him in the face. He went out like a bad Christmas bulb, and I went off to the brig. I received a dishonorable discharge and went back home to Alton. I never finished reading her letter.

I was joined back in Alton by a young woman I had met in China Lake. Her name was Colleen and she was from North Dakota. She bragged to me on our first date that her daddy was a cowboy. I didn't tell her anything at all about my folks. We got married, and I took a job at the gunpowder plant. When my twelve-hour shift was over I drove up the old highway, following the bends and crooks cut by the river to Lloyd and Aimee's house where we lived just as I had when I was a boy. One night after I got home, the four of us sat at the kitchen table playing rummy and drinking coffee. Colleen was about four-months pregnant with our first child, and she and Aimee both shined like the early sun with the prospect of new life. We all sat studying our hands, and when it was Lloyd's turn to draw and he didn't, Aimee said to him, "Come on, you old coot, draw a card." We looked at him and it seemed to me that he'd just fallen asleep. His cigarette still burned in the ashtray in front of him. Somehow I remember hearing him let

out three tiny puffs of air and his breath made the smoke rising off his cigarette seem to dance, and I knew those breaths were his last. An ambulance came to our house, and I followed behind as it raced to the hospital. I tried to look at how the red flashing lights bounced off the water, but I couldn't see them.

Some nights I dream that I am a catfish, swinging my wide head from side to side as I churn through a river stained red. Sometimes I swim into Lloyd and Aimee's house through an open window and they are sitting at the kitchen table and Lloyd tries again and again to strike his Zippo. Other times I see the Piasa swoop out of the sky and carry the ambulance and Lloyd away into a black sky. But what wakes me most, the one that keeps me from falling back asleep is this:

Uncle Lloyd was the biggest Brooklyn Dodgers fan in the county, which made me the second. Most everyone cheered for the Cardinals just down the river in St. Louis. Every time the Dodgers were in town to play the Cards, Lloyd made sure he had two tickets to the game. He would wake up extra early to get a jump on work, or he would work well past dark so that we never missed a single inning. I sat across the bench seat of his Ford pickup as we drove to the city, smacking my mitt, picturing a foul ball from Duke Snyder or Jackie Robinson landing inside the pocket. We always sat behind the Dodgers' dugout, and when the players ran on or off the field, they were so close I could nearly reach my hand out and touch them. You could hear Don Newcombe grunt when he'd rear back and unfurl a fastball. Sitting there in the stands of Sportsman's Park watching the Dodgers with Lloyd I think I was as happy as any kid ought to be.

One afternoon after the game Lloyd walked me out to the right-field bleachers where some of the Dodgers' players were signing autographs. One of the players was my

childhood hero, Roy Campanella. I stood in line to meet him for what felt like hours in the muggy July sun. When I finally got to the front of the line, Roy Campanella asked me what my name was. I was frozen, the first and maybe only time I was ever star struck. I just stared at the way his wool uniform stretched around his shoulders, and how thick his jaw and cheeks appeared, tiny pearls of sweat sliding down his face. He looked up at Lloyd and the two of them chuckled to each other. When I asked him if they were going to beat the Yankees this year, he winked and smiled and said, "I hope so, son." Then he handed me back my baseball with his name scrawled between the seams. I can't remember a time that I was more overcome with joy as I was that entire ride home. I kept looking at that ball, kept showing it to Lloyd, kept asking him if he thought this would be the year that the Dodgers finally won the Series. I smiled so big and so long that my cheeks hurt.

Once in a while when I was staying with Lloyd and Aimee, my mother would get a sudden change of heart and want me to come back and live with her. This was during one of those times, and Lloyd pulled up to my mother's house, and I got out with my glove and my baseball and headed up to the front porch. Just as I was opening the screen door, I heard the sound of glass breaking from inside the house. I spun around to run back to Lloyd, but he was already driving away and had turned the corner. I worried that my mother and her new boyfriend were fighting, feared that he might be hurting her, yet still I could not open the door. All seemed quiet then, and I crept around to the back and peeked inside through the window.

My mother sat on the kitchen floor, porcelain chips sprinkled across the hardwood. Her back was pressed against the wall but her bottom was out further away so that she

was sitting crooked and her posture forced her chin against her chest. The hem of her dress was up over her knees and I could see the dark tops of her stockings which made me feel ashamed. She looked like she was weeping and, never having seen my mother cry, I wondered if she fell and hurt herself. I pushed the door open slowly and stepped inside. She turned her head my direction as though she didn't recognize me. Then she began to giggle. She raised a glass filled with ice and something clear that I know now wasn't water and tilted it my direction, like I'd seen people do in the movies, then she took a long drink with her eyes closed.

The winter before, an ice storm had crippled Alton. The town sparkled like a great jewel and clean icicles toothed tree limbs and eaves and the streets were glazed with a sheen of ice. Cars slid into each other or into ditches on the side of the highway. I had been looking at the frozen neighborhood one Sunday morning through the latticework of ice on my bedroom window from the second floor of my mother's house. Our neighbor, the widow Mrs. White, was going down her walk to her car parked on the street to drive to church. She took careful, choppy steps, but she slipped and landed hard on her back. I didn't know why, but I cried. The longer she laid there on the cold ground, not moving, the harder I cried for her. I say this now, because looking at my mother on our kitchen floor reminded me of Mrs. White, how nobody came to help her back to her feet. I could have gotten help for Mrs. White, but I didn't. I didn't offer my mother any help.

When she spoke her voice was gruff and she told me to bring her the china bowl that was on the counter. I hesitated and she barked for me to hurry up. The bowl was cream colored with a navy blue ornamentation of leaves and branches woven together, two bluebirds whose wings intertwined were fired into the bowl's center. She took the

bowl into her right hand, brought it up over her head and then smashed it into the floor, showering both of us with porcelain debris. The blow cut her hand, and she bled onto her dress. “Quick, get me another one,” she said, then took down the rest of her drink. When I didn’t move she threw the glass and it exploded just to my left and chipped the paint on the wall. I had ducked my head, and when I looked up she was staring at me. Not a muscle moved in her body, and her eyes were directly on me. Then I began to cry.

Sobbing, I slid over to the counter and picked up another bowl. She had put her hands beneath her and her feet flat against the floor and was pushing herself up against the wall trying to stand. She wiped the side of her face with her cut hand and blood smeared across her cheek. She walked over to me and gently took the bowl from my hands and sat it back on the counter. The tears came harder and I couldn’t find my breath. Kneeling down in front of me, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and patted the back of my head.

“Shush now,” she said. “There ain’t no need to cry. Mommy’s just having a little party. Shush now.” Her breath was hot and sour and tickled my nose to smell it. Our bodies rocked side to side and she kissed my forehead. I tried to stop the tears but couldn’t. She squeezed me against her, the weight of our swaying nearly brought both of us to the floor. “Now,” she said. “You be a good boy and clean up this mess.” She left me standing there, and made herself another drink and took it into the living room where she fell asleep on the couch.

Shortly thereafter, I was back with Lloyd and Aimee. Lloyd hung some shelves on my bedroom wall, and I put the baseball with Roy Campanella’s signature on the top shelf. Sometimes I felt like taking it down to look at it, or play catch with one of my

friends, or just hold it in my hands. One day, years later, some friends and I used it to play a game of workup, and I hit the ball where nobody could find it.

The first night I spent at Lloyd and Aimee's house after that, I lay in my bed unable to sleep. I felt as if the river's current were sucking at my legs trying to pull me away. I got out of bed and went to my window. Outside, the moon hung heavy and brilliant in the sky and opened up the night. I could see the shapes of the trees along the far bank. There was the familiar sound of the river's course that was as comforting to me then as Aimee's hand on my shoulder. When the stillness was breached by the glow of the Moonlight Cruise coming up from St. Louis, I waved my arm hoping to be seen until the ship slipped past the front of our house and disappeared again from sight.

## GINGERBREAD BOYS

July's sun drained the cheat grass and hemlock, drying them into wispy scrub. Dust hung in the still air and slowly sifted to the ground. Thirsty weeds stood dry and brittle.

"You ready?" Daniel said.

Jacob ripped off a cut from his tobacco plug and spat onto the hard, caked dirt. White dust layered the toe of his boot. Footprints along the trail leading into the bird refuge were a quarter-inch deep in the fine loam. The walls of trees made the refuge look as though it sprung out of the ground all at once. Beyond the treeline the sky stood fixed and blank.

"Think it might be too hot for fish," Daniel said. "You?"

Jacob said nothing. A salt-ring of dried sweat marbled his cap. He was Daniel's younger brother. Earlier that afternoon, their older brother, Ray, told the two boys he was taking them camping. They knew that meant Ray wanted them out of his hair so he could have the house alone to entertain his new girlfriend. Their father died less than a year ago, and their mother now spent the weekends away in the city with the man she had been getting to know. Which left the two boys in the way. Their father used to bring them here. Camping in these woods brought memories of him. That made it easy to deal with the hard ground and the heat.

“Dusk be here in about two hours,” Daniel said. “We can set camp. Where you aim a try?”

“River.”

“Don’t want to try the ponds?”

“Thinking on another spot.”

“Up to me, we’d fish the ponds,” Daniel said. “Why you don’t?”

A barbwire fence bordered the sanctuary, toppled over in places and strung through cracked, sun-drenched woodposts. Jacob spat a stream of tobacco juice that splattered against the dirt and looked like heat-blackened blood. Jacob watched the tobacco dry into the dirt and wondered how anyone could live in the city. A penned-in sky. No woods. Nothing but concrete, artificial light, and exhaust so thick it casts a velvet sunset.

“Remember a time I come here with Dad,” Jacob said, “and we found us a hole in the river with bullheads in it yay long.” He held his hands out wide.

“How come I don’t remember?”

“You wasn’t with us is why. Just me and him. Told me never to tell nobody about it.”

“Why you telling me then?”

Jacob looked at his brother, then looked away.

“Well?”

“Telling you’s different. He didn’t mean don’t tell you.”

“Give him your word? Man’s only as good as his word.”

“No,” Jacob said. He took off his cap and looked up at the sun. “But he never asked for it that time.”



Daniel looked up, chin out, squinting.

“Sun feels like a hundred degrees.”

“Hundred- and-one feels like to me,” Daniel said. “Hottest it’s been all summer.”

He looked into the trees as though he’d seen something move. “We going to be back in school before long.”

Two men emerged from the tree cover, a shotgun laid across each man’s forearm, broken open at the stock. Each man carried a handful of busted birds at his side. The boys nodded to the men and the men nodded back. They got into a flatbed pickup, started the engine, and drove off, the old truck kicking up dust and belching black smoke into the air. The boys finally began up the trail and into the trees. Even after a full minute had passed, they could hear the lope of the truck’s engine skip when the driver shifted gears. Beneath the tree canopy it felt ten degrees cooler. Spangled sunbeams fell through gaps in the leaves and lit the boys’ faces.

At the river they saw an old man who stood on the bank where Jacob said he’d found the bullheads with their father. The old man stood staring at the water as though waiting for a signal. He wore a pair of overalls and no shirt beneath, gray hair covering his gaunt shoulder blades. The boys walked a wide path to arrive on the shore at the old man’s side. They looked down into the water with him and none of them spoke. Ropey vines of treeroot extended out over the water from the bank like arthritic fingers.

Daniel slung his bedroll off his shoulder and tossed it onto the ground. Jacob watched, wondering if his brother would wait until the old man left before he tried fishing the hole. Jacob wouldn’t say a word, would wait instead for the old man to leave, wait

until morning if he had to. Then he could plum the hole without fear that others would learn of its presence from the old man's loose lips.

Daniel nodded his head toward the water. "What you got there, sir?"

"Cats," the old man said. He spit a stream of heavy tobacco juice at the water and it bled and fanned like ink in the cross-current. "Biggern y'leg."

"Howdy, that's big," Jacob said. He tossed his bedroll to the ground, and then looked into the water with a deeper concern. "You say there's catfish in there? Well, I don't see none."

The three of them all stood there on the bank looking down. Years before Jacob stood much this same way with his father at his side. In one hand his father had held his rod, the bail of his reel already flipped and locked, and his father simply dunked the line down into the hole. In seconds he brought out the biggest fish Jacob had ever seen, all with one hand, the muscles in his forearm gone taut, the veins standing. Jacob remembered feeling his excited heart beat all the way up into his ears. The fish thrashed at the end of the line. Jacob held the net for his father.

The old man hobbled over the rock and mud of the bank to his tackle box. He squatted down and tied a hook to his line, spinning his head and blinking like an owl as he looked to the water, to the boys, and then back to the water.

"Gus's boys, aintcha?"

"We are," Daniel said. "But how'd you know that?"

The old man worked his tobacco to the front of his mouth and bit it in two, using his front teeth like a saw. He took one end of the tobacco and balled it onto the end of his hook while he returned the rest to its position at the back of his cheek.

“Got his face. Can see him in you clear as the day.”

The old man stood and then dropped his bait into the water. A dark stream of tobacco juice ran off the hook and moved downstream. The old man bobbed the bait up and down, making it dance. He paused for a second and then his rod bent down toward the water. He walked it backward, spinning his reel.

“Watch yourself, boys. Got me a fish on.”

The old man offered a sly grin and winked at the two boys.

“I’m Howard,” the old man said. “Used to run a bait-n-tackle shop in town, that’s how I knowed your daddy. I was sorry as hell to hear about what happened. Gus was a damn good angler. Told me about this spot here. Said he only told one other person in his whole life about it.”

“Using stink bait?”

“Hell no. WD-40.”

The old man took a small can of WD-40 from his pocket and bent down and sprayed the water with a fine mist that swirled in a rainbow-colored cloud into the hole. As he did, the bottom of the water erupted with the thrashing bodies of bullheads trying to catch a whiff of the oil.

“Used to have me a whole store full of lures and gizmos. Nothing catches catfish like WD-40 and my Levi Garrett. Ready to skeet a cut?”

Daniel stepped up and nodded his head.

“I’m ready, by damn. Watch pot don’t boil.” He spun around to face Jacob and held out his hand. “Give here some of that bait.” He jabbed the air between them with his opened, upturned palm.

“My brother here was born early, sir. That’s how come him to be such a skirt. Says chew is bad for you. I always heard it toughened you up. I’d say he could use a bit that. You?”

The old man grinned and spit into the river. Jacob moved past Daniel, took up his own rod and put the entire ball of tobacco from his mouth onto his hook. Daniel looked down at his feet like a scolded hound.

“Fixing to rain,” the old man said. “Best find some cover.”

“You think it’ll rain hot as it is?” Jacob said. “How come you to think that?”

Daniel walked up to Jacob and the old man as though he were suddenly an outcast. The catfish the old man caught snapped its body while the old man pried the hook from its mouth with a pair of needle-nose pliers. “I have some?” he asked of either.

Jacob reached into his pocket and took out his pouch of tobacco and then handed it to his older brother, all without looking at him. Jacob wondered if he would really do it. It was one thing to have the wrong convictions. It was another thing altogether to go against your convictions just to make an impression.

“Land’s needing it,” the old man said.

“Don’t make it so. Been needing it for a while.”

“Trust an old man. Find you a cover.”

“I’m needing it myself,” Daniel said. “I could go for some cooling right about now.”

“Might take you a swim if you need cooling.”

“Not me,” Jacob said. “I come to fish. Rain or shine.”

“Me too,” Daniel said. “But I don’t aim to sleep in no puddle neither.”

A bullhead nearly as long as Jacob's arm came from the water tethered to the rod by the twenty-pound test line. The sun bounced off the bullhead's black scales. On the bank it lay panting in the open air and one whisker twitched. The old man grabbed the fish he'd caught earlier, holding it at the tail, and swung it up over his head and brought it down hard onto the flat side of a large rock, and with a subtle crunch broke the catfish's skull. Jacob imagined how good that must have felt. He imagined the sound running up the old man's arm and all the way through him. Hearing that sound made Jacob eager to take his own fish and smash its head into that rock.

After pulling two more bullheads from the water, the old man left the boys. By this time, each boy had caught two fish of his own, which they knew was plenty. Without either of the boys noticing, the sky to the west was suddenly black and dense with storm clouds. A slow and deep thunderclap pealed over the horizon.

The boys settled into a duck blind they knew about not far from where they'd just been fishing. The blind sat right along the river bank, had a tin roof covered with tree limbs, a bench seat wide enough for both boys to sleep on, and a trap-door that could be used to store their fish. From the comfort of the blind they could watch the storm roll in. There were other blinds along the river that the boys knew about. Some they'd been inside hunting fowl with their father. He had been friends with most men in the area. The men that their father knew were the type to share goodwill if they had it to share. The owner of this blind was the only one the boys had never met.

The clouds blacked out the sun, the darkness quieting the birds within the trees. The river rushed past. Daniel danced like a drunken aborigine along the bench seat, yodeling with a shrill falsetto. Rain pellets rang off the metal roof and burst against the

surface of the river. Jacob drew the blade of his pocketknife and sliced open and gutted his fish. He tossed the entrails through the window. The rain fell straight down as if each drop were attached to lead sinkers. Jacob tore two sheets of aluminum foil from the roll in his pack, wrapping a sheet around each of his fish. Daniel danced on like a thunder-crazed wildman. Jacob shook his head at his brother's antics and lifted the trapdoor on the floor of the shelter. Before he'd tossed his fish down into the stash box, something caught Jacob's eye. A brown paper sack sat in one corner. He reached inside and drew out the bag.

Jacob dragged out a handful of photographs. He looked up at his brother, who continued to act like a maniac. Jacob flipped through the photos, hoping to recognize someone in one of the shots. A man and a woman posing beneath a highway sign that read *Welcome to Arkansas*; the couple playing in the snow; standing in front of an apartment building. Mixed in, Jacob found a picture of the woman sitting on a bed completely naked. She looked apprehensive, her big round breasts drooping slightly, her nipples staring Jacob in the eyes. A thick triangle of black hair between her legs.

"Who's that?" Daniel said. He'd stopped dancing and stood right before Jacob.

Jacob hid the picture at the bottom of the stack. He knew they shouldn't be seeing these pictures. "Ain't nobody. Go back over to where you was," he said. "These ain't for you to be looking at."

"You're looking at them. I want to see."

The nakedness in the palm of Jacob's hand beckoned him; the woman in the photograph, a siren moaning to be looked at.

"Alright, but then we need to put them back."

He pulled her photo to the top of the stack, and the two of them stared, mesmerized. They'd seen nude women inside the pages of the *Playboy* magazines Ray kept in his room, but this was different. This woman was from around here, and she looked like the women they knew—women at church, friends' mothers. The big naked ass of the centerfolds looked more like a dream than something real. This woman's hips looked like their homeroom teacher's hips, thick and wide like an apple in Eden, begging to be consumed.

“Is there more?” Daniel asked.

Jacob hadn't thought to look. “No, just Christmas and such.” He flipped through the stack and then came to a photo of a girl they knew from school. Her name was Connie. She was timid and blonde and didn't have many friends. Her family lived somewhere in the country, along Route Seventeen. Jacob held the picture and neither he nor Daniel could say a word.

She was in a bedroom somewhere, naked and hairless from her forehead to her feet. She looked away from the camera, arms behind her back, her chin tucked against her chest. She looked to be eight or nine in the picture, but it was her for sure. Jacob had always wanted to see girls in his grade naked—Tyler Nash had told him about a hole in the girls' locker room where you could go and watch the girls shower after gym class—but this was not what he had wanted to see. Connie was just a girl, and she looked frightened and ashamed, and Jacob couldn't look away. When he flipped to the next picture, it was Connie. This time, whoever took the photo made her pose in an army jacket that covered her arms and shoulders, opened in the front showing her dainty, naked

little body, her hand clutching the barrel of a rifle propped on the carpet next to her, her pigtails sticking out of a doughboy cap on her head.

“Where do you think they came from?” Jacob said. “You think her dad took them?”

“She don’t have no dad. He died when we was little.”

“Well, who you think took them?”

“I don’t know.” Daniel coughed and then spit out into the river. “Don’t think it matters.”

“Hold these here,” Jacob said to his brother. “If we leave them here, someone else will see. Not right she be seen that way.” His voice got quiet. “No one should see them.”

Daniel took the pictures and looked away from them, intentionally ignoring the nude girl on top. He spun his head quickly to face his brother. “Whoever put them here will notice they’re gone.”

Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

“Hell with whoever put them here.”

“Might think otherwise he come after you.”

He snatched the pictures from his brother’s hand, and some fell face-up onto the floor of the blind. One was a shot of Connie and the boys stared, as though she were looking up off the ground directly at them.

“Maybe we should show them to Ray?” Daniel said.

“Maybe, I guess. He’d know what to do with them.”

“You just going to put them others back? The ones of Christmas and whatnot?”



Jacob thought for a moment.

“What if whoever left them here comes back. He’ll notice that these are gone.”

Jacob and Daniel took the pictures to the bank of the river. In their attention to the photos, they hadn’t noticed that the rain had stopped and the sun breached the heavy clouds. One by one, they tossed every photo into the water. The photos rode the current south like fallen leaves, the sun glittering them as they bounced over ripples, littering the river’s surface like some strange ticker-tape parade, strewn across the water in celebration of their disappearance.

Jacob crouched at the bank beside Daniel, who stood, and looked up at his brother. Black storm clouds rolling east limned Daniel’s body. Jacob stood to his feet.

“Think we might need to find a better place to spend the night,” Jacob said.

“Don’t want to be sleeping in that blind and have whoever owns it come up on us.”

A deep rumbling thunder rose out of the west. The sky was split in thirds, storm clouds mantling sunshine. It wouldn’t be long before the second half of the storm found them. Daniel took his bedroll from the blind, walked up toward the trailhead.

Jacob joined him. Rain began pelting their cheeks. They hurried to the nearest shelter they knew of.

“Think it might belong to those two men we seen earlier?” Jacob said.

“They shot doves.”

“Don’t mean they don’t own that blind.”

“Don’t mean they do neither.”

Jacob tore off another chunk of tobacco from his plug. They settled into one of their father's friend's blinds, and after a few seconds, were swallowed by the steady drumming of raindrops all about them. They sat and listened pensively to the sound.

## THE MOONLIGHT CRUISE

We saw the moonlight cruise ship from our front yard at nightfall, shining like bones and chugging smoke as it made its way up from St. Louis. It appeared seemingly from nothing as though we had wished it so, pushing around the bend to the east of us and gliding past our house on River Road just outside Alton, Illinois. This was in July, during one of those nights in the dead of summer when the air is so hot and so muggy you feel its weight lay over you.

Uncle Lloyd and I were out skimming pebbles across the dark water—I don't remember if we had been speaking, but it seems to me now that it were as quiet as any night I can recall—when the moonlight cruise breached the calm: her massive double-deck parting the river like Moses himself, resisting the heavy current's tow, gliding with more grace than anything that large should conceivably possess. Everything around us was so still that you could hear the prattle of the passengers and make out when the clarinetist ended his solo and the banjo picker began his. And no sooner than we had dropped our pebbles back onto the bank, the ship was right in front of us, singing with drunken laughter and the river breaking across its bow. The sounds of joy on board were so fierce and so inviting in their wonder, that it nearly broke my heart in two to listen to them. Sensing my envy perhaps, Uncle Lloyd laid his thick hand over my shoulder, but did not say anything, just listened to the air with me until it was empty again of sound.

The moonlight cruise vanished, and neither of us tossed another pebble. Uncle Lloyd motioned for me to follow him across the road to our house, it was late enough. I had no intentions of sleep, the furious sound of moonlight still chirruping in my ears. My uncle was a kind man, but he would not be disobeyed, and besides, he had something inside he needed to show me—something he said he had planned to save for breakfast, but that I might as well see now. He stood on the bottom step of our porch, hands inside the pockets of his overalls, waiting for me to catch up.

His wife, my Aunt Aimee, was waiting for us at the kitchen table and I could see in her face that Lloyd's secret was hardly a secret at all other than to me. Aimee was a short woman with bifocals and a gentle voice who was never able to carry children. She and Lloyd had parented six miscarriages, but Aimee was the closest thing to a mother that I ever knew. Their house, an old houseboat dry-docked on River Road, was the setting for all of the memories of my childhood that I look back on with any sense at all of longing.

I played coy as long as I could stand it, though both Aimee and Lloyd commented on the thrumming of my legs beneath the table. I knew that whatever Uncle Lloyd had for me, he would eventually give it up, but the more eager I seemed, the longer he would keep it from my grasp. When my exhaustion finally began to wear on me and I let out a wide yawn, Aimee insisted that Uncle Lloyd just give in already before I fell asleep sitting up. He pretended not to know what she was referring to, and she narrowed her eyes at him. He looked at me with feigned fright, then patted all of his pockets and took off his cap and scratched his head. He kept up the rouse, looking inside the sugar tin, getting down on all fours to look beneath the stove, then put his hands on his hips and

looked at me as if he were in deep thought. He laid his hands on the table and leaned close to my face, staring me in the eye and trying to hold his grin at bay. Slowly, he reached up and drew two tickets from his chest pocket and handed them to me.

That night I sat up in my bed wondering what I knew could be nothing less than extraordinary. Truth was, I owned only speculation. I could not know what the next day would bring. But with two seats, one for me and one for Lloyd, behind the visiting Dodgers' dugout for their game against the Cardinals, my immediate future seemed to be filled with promise. I had never seen a live game before. There was no context for me to use in imagining what it was to be like. But it is that mystery prior to experience that charmed me as a child. The same reason I could never sleep the night before Christmas. The hope of what might be was not always more rewarding than what actually came about, but my hope never disappointed. In my bed that night, the tickets laying safely on my nightstand beside me, I hoped that I would be granted admission into a new and separate experience better than anything I could have imagined.

When I woke my room was filled with sunshine. I would like to say that my first thoughts that morning were thoughts of going to the game with Lloyd, but that would not be the truth. Initially the morning felt like any other summer morning: it was warm already, even before ten o'clock; the sky out my window was shale-colored and severe; I could hear Aimee working in the kitchen. I may have even rolled around in bed for a short time trying to fall back asleep, back when dreaming for me was pleasant and I didn't wake up sweating and panicked about where I was or who was still with me. I can't recall the precise moment that I realized it, that I would be going to that day's game, but once it hit me, I felt as though I had been awake for hours. I hopped out of bed and

ran down the hall and into the kitchen. Lloyd was at the table snapping the pages of the Alton Telegraph, cigarette smoke hung just below the ceiling waiting for a breeze to pull it through the open window. He tried to act as though I were not there, a smug grin cutting into his cheeks. "Aimee, is that lazy boy still asleep?" he hollered over his shoulder. "Much as I hate to say it, I may wind up going to the ballgame all alone. Shame. He really loves them Dodgers from what I understand." His cigarette sat in an ashtray before him and he lifted it up and tapped the ash off its end then stuck it in the crook of his lips. He got neither the help he hoped for from Aimee, nor the reaction he wanted from me; Aimee did not answer, and I did not flinch. I took a step closer so that I was nearly touching him, standing still with my arms down at my sides. He jumped and put his hand over his heart. "Mike, you nearly scared me to death. Thought I was going to have to leave you behind."

After breakfast Uncle Lloyd and I climbed into his Ford pickup and waved to Aimee, who stood inside the screen door of the porch, as we eased away down the dirt driveway. And like that, we were on our way. This is not something I remember thinking at the time, but something that I feel I should say now: I hate to imagine what type of childhood I would have had, if it weren't for Lloyd and Aimee. At that moment, my designated spot, the one made just for me, was sitting across the bench seat of that pickup with Lloyd. I am confident that, without me in his life, Lloyd may have gone to watch the Dodgers when they were in town, but I am more confident that he made it a priority that I go along with him and see the game with my own eyes. I am sure that Lloyd knew then what I know now, that experience is often so much more rewarding when you get to share it with somebody.

Once we were on River Road, the old highway that connected Alton to Grafton, I finally felt like it was real, that I was going to see a real game. Back then River Road was still just two lanes, and it seems easy for me to remember every time I was on that stretch of road that the drive was as casual as the water flowing next to us. Nobody ever seemed to be in much of a hurry in those days, and as anxious as I was to get to the ballpark, I cannot say that we were in much of a hurry that day either. We moved smoothly on our way to St. Louis tracing the bends cut eons ago by the river. I leaned back into my seat and smacked the palm of my mitt, forgetting all the worry over my mother and father and who wanted me with them and who did not, as if I had decided at that moment to let go and just allow the current to pull us along our way. The only thing that mattered then was a simple game of baseball.

The river led us into Alton before we crossed over the Clark Bridge and into Missouri. Alton's peak as a port city was long over at this time, and residents supported their families with work at the box board or the glass works or the new steel mill. There was indifference in the people as we passed them in town. Here lives had been changed, when once there were more millionaires per capita than anywhere else, now there were factory workers who carried their lunches to work and drank coffee from thermoses. The days of prosperity were gone for Alton, and what was left was honest, everyday living. In a way Alton failed the people that lived here who had dreams of bright futures. We pushed on grateful for what we still had.

Though you couldn't see it through the thin veil of overcast, the sun bounced off the hood of Lloyd's truck so that I had to squint when I looked at the road through the windshield. The road stretched out before us and into Missouri, dividing vast fields of

lush delta grass interspersed with maple trees and willows, unassuming houses sitting far back into the fields. As our tires rolled over the fresh blacktop, the rubber made a washing sound that, combined with the wind passing over us, hushed the inside of the cab. Again, I cannot remember being aware of an awkward silence, but it seems to me now that it was. I looked out my side window at the fields beside the road.

Only a few miles into the twenty-five-mile trip, Lloyd's face stiffened. I didn't even have to look at him; I could feel it somehow. When I did finally look up, he stared straight ahead at the road for a time, and then turned his head to me and tried to smile, the authenticity of which I remember questioning. He reached his hand over and put it on my knee. He and Aimee were often affectionate towards me in this very way, but something about the gesture this time made me leery of what was to follow. "Your mom called," he said suddenly, and I suppose I knew what he was about to say next before he said it. "She thinks it's nigh time you go back and stay with her for awhile."

Uncle Lloyd just nodded then and patted my leg with his palm. We were on our way to watch our beloved Dodgers from the first-base bleachers of Sportsman's Park, to eat hotdogs and drink Cokes, sweating comfortably in the company of each other beneath the summer sun. We were going to get there early and watch the players take batting practice. I might have even gone out to right-field after the game and gotten Duke Snyder to sign my autograph. We drove on, and all of the confusion that overwhelmed me as a boy was right there in the cab of Lloyd's truck, but I did not know what any of it meant then.

Uncle Lloyd led me to our seats and I was taken immediately with the sight of it all, of the enormity of a big-league park. There they all were, all of my heroes. Snyder



and Campanella and Jackie Roosevelt Robinson. There was a time that I could have told you every stat of all the players from that team, but I could not tell you one of them now. When they took the field to open the game, I felt my chest heave and my heart seemed as though it might burst, and I smiled so hard that my face quaked, and it was everything I could do to not break down and sob. I could see in Lloyd's look he was aware that my joy had been cut with something else entirely, and I could tell as well that he felt awful about that.

We watched and cheered as the Dodgers jumped out to an early lead and were taken by the tension when the Cardinals tied the score in the late innings. I stood up during the seventh-inning stretch and looked around at those seated near us and only saw a handful of boys my age. They were Cardinals fans I'm sure, and I envied them without knowing so much as one of their names. I was unfamiliar with the term, but it was their stability that I envied. There is no way for me to have known, but I believed that all the other boys in the stands that day must have had parents who always wanted them around. Before I sat back down I reached over and took a handful of Lloyd's overalls and squeezed it in my palm, thinking that I might be able to hold on to him this way for good. The game was nearly over, and once we got back to Alton I would pack my things once again and change where I called home. Uncle Lloyd looked down at my hand clutching his pants' leg, and he said "I'll see what I can do about getting tickets the next time our boys come to town."

I still have no idea why Lloyd thought to tell me about my mother before the game—why he didn't wait until the ride home. I would like to say that it was out of sheer spite or cruelty. At least then it would make sense to me. But I know my Uncle's

heart, and there was no room in it for such things. Parts of me believe that he did not know better, that he assumed I would look forward to being reunited with my mother. Other times I think he was hoping to teach me something about the way life sometimes is. Either way he was wrong to think that the afternoon at the ballpark would have been the same without that knowledge. In the bottom half of the ninth, with the Dodgers ahead by one run, we secretly prayed for our team to triumph as we were surrounded by a mass of chanting Cardinals fans. Even as those fans serenaded me with the time-honored singsong of the ballplayer, *Say batter batter, what d'ya say, batter batter*, my prayers reached heavenward and included more than just a victory, but received only a partial blessing when the Dodgers held their lead.

We stood together along the riverbank later that night until the final stains of purple vanished from the horizon, until the stars overhead burned brilliant and sheer like a sea of rare jewels. The porch lamp across the highway, the only other light for us to see by. The river pushed past us, oblivious and unapologetic. Birds bickered from unseen tree limbs somewhere across the water, their cries faint and indifferent. The darkness stretched out in all directions as far as I could see, and the world seemed larger and full of things I feared I would never understand. I would have done anything at that moment to know how long it would be this time, how long before my mother would grow tired of me being around, how long before I would change addresses once again. I was at the mercy of the way things were, I had no voice, no leverage at all. The tickets I had been given the night before changed the way I looked at the future, but before I got to use them, my perspective was changed once more.

Although the hour was much later than that which I was typically allowed to stay up to see, Uncle Lloyd did not suggest that we go back home. I suppose he knew that our time together would again be taken away, as if he wanted to hold on to that moment as much as I. Before long the night grew so calm, so steady, that it seemed like it might just work, that the moment might have lasted forever. When the moonlight cruise washed out of the darkness, I could not bring myself to look, there was nothing charming about it any longer for me. Its mysteries and promises were ones I now felt I should question. I reached up and took Uncle Lloyd by the hand and told him I was ready to go home. And even as I said it, I was not sure exactly where that was.

## ON THE ALTAR OF AMBITION

Todd Prince was on his way home after spending the better part of the afternoon running errands with his daughter in tow. Madison was worn out, and sat sleeping in her car seat behind him. He had been sneaking peeks at her through the rear-view mirror, when he looked up and saw the woman pumping gas into her tank. She was blonde, had the same full breasts, wore those short khaki shorts that showed all of her tanned and muscled legs. When he saw her flip her hair, that social tic she had, he knew it had to be Molly. He changed lanes quickly, pulled into the gas station and without much thought at all, got out and walked to her.

“My, my, my,” he said.

“Well, hello there, stranger,” she said.

“Been a long time, eh?”

She nodded. “A long time.”

It happened that fast. “I’ve missed you,” he said, and it was partially true. Todd had missed certain things about Molly since they broke up five years earlier, two months before he’d met the woman who became his wife and the mother of his child. But he and Molly had ended badly, they fought a lot, mostly over her not giving in and sleeping with him; Molly was saving herself for marriage. At first, Todd told Molly and himself how much he respected her decision, but by the end, when it was clear they wouldn’t last, it became his obsession to get Molly to concede to his sexual desires. He felt as though the

two years they spent together would all be in vain, if he did not sleep with her. It was her parents. He'd told his wife how they were "obnoxiously religious," filling her head with all that *nonsense*. *Shit yeah, they tried to convert me. They thought I was going to marry their daughter for Christ's sake.* He despised them for it, for standing in the way of their daughter's chastity, something that after two years, Todd felt, was rightfully his. He said to Molly, "Are you living here in town again?"

"Me? No. Just visiting my folks," she said.

"Where are you living then?"

"Virginia still."

"Still in school?"

She hung up the nozzle and screwed the cap back on her tank. She looked at him confused. "What?" she said, and before he could re-ask his question said, "No. Finished last year. I was in Texas, remember?"

"Oh, right. I wasn't sure. You left for grad school after we—look, I got somebody in the car I want you to meet."

"Is that you, the Escalade?" she asked, pointing to his car.

"Huh? Yeah that's me, alright." Though it wasn't. The Escalade was in his name, but it definitely wasn't *him*. He could barely afford the payments each month, and although it sat eight people, Todd and his daughter were generally the only passengers.

"Wow, Mr. Big-Time." She followed him to his car and waited. "So who is it, your wife or something?"

"You'll see," he said. "Are *you* married?"

“Are you kidding? I’ve been so bogged down with school, I hardly have time to think, much less get married.”

“You must be pretty busy.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

Todd pointed to the backseat where his daughter sat sleeping. “That’s Madison. My pride and joy.”

Molly didn’t say anything, her face devoid of expression. “You’re kidding. So you *are* married, then?”

“About two years now.” He held up his left hand and wiggled his fingers, showing her the band as proof. He knew that would get to her, his being married. It was all he remembered her talking about, as if marriage had nothing to do with love or commitment, but was a social rung, like owning a house, or having a career.

“Well, congratulations. Do I know her?”

“Oh, I doubt that. She’s from Iowa. Met her through one of my jobs.”

“Happy?”

“Are you?”

They both smiled, seemingly at the absurdity of the other’s question.

“I was thinking,” she said, “maybe we could get together while I’m here. You know, catch up.”

“I’d like that,” he said.

“When are you free?”

“Me? Never. I’m up to my hips in shit every day. But I’ll make time.”

“Here, give me your cell number.”

Once their numbers were exchanged, Todd said, “Gosh, it’s good to see you. You look great,” remembering that Molly and her parents hated the Lord’s name used in vain, feeling himself fall right back into line, losing his sense of himself while attempting to be the man he thought Molly *would* sleep with.

“Thanks,” she said. “So do you.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“A personal question?”

“Oh, let me guess.”

He grinned and looked away from her, embarrassed, but finally said, “You still a…”

“What? A virgin?” She shook her head and smiled. “You never change,” and gave him that coy look that used to drive him mad. She moved in close. “Tell you what. I’ll answer that when you buy me coffee. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

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He started to wonder about the possibilities right away. She drove off, and he sat behind the wheel of his car, his imagination running crazy. The way she’d put off answering his question made him certain that her virginity was no longer an obstacle, and that had been, in his mind, the only thing stopping him from having her when they had dated. They’d gotten close several times, but she always stopped him right before, saying “I can’t. I made a promise to save myself.” She used to tease him mercilessly, beneath a blanket on her parents’ couch, the four of them watching a movie, she would reach her

hand inside his pants and play with him, a look on her face that seemed to ask, “Are you going to give us up with my father sitting two feet away?” In the car it seemed his obsession came back all at once, and he felt like he did years ago, that he *had* to sleep with her, in order to somehow validate himself. He’d battled the frustration of it for two years when they were together, begging pathetically, pleading his case in the usual ways, like an undersexed teenager.

He looked into the rear-view mirror and was hit with the sobriety of his situation. Madison sat slumped over in her seat, working her pacifier as she slept. He was twenty-nine years old. Married for two of those years, a father for one-and-a-half. He worked two jobs: one, doing data entry for a freight company; the other, a part-time gig as a DJ for hire, playing weddings, high school dances, office and Christmas parties. Guaranteed to bedazzle your booty, so said the business cards he had printed up. On top of work, he took classes at the university, working towards an Electrical Engineering degree that, he hoped, would someday bring financial security for him and his family. All that and he raised his daughter Monday through Friday, nine to five, while his wife answered the phone and checked in clients at a lawyer’s office downtown. Their opposing schedules worked well in bringing up their daughter, but did their marriage few favors.

Madison grunted in her sleep when he turned the ignition over, and then his phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out, and Molly’s number flashed on the screen.

“My turn,” she said.

“Your turn for what?”

“To ask you a question.”

“Okay.”



“You still want to be a big-league umpire?”

“What?” he said. He hadn’t thought about that for years. Not since Madison, anyway.

“Don’t you remember? You told me once that was your lifelong dream. To go to some umpire school in Florida, and work your way into the majors. Remember?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I remember.”

“Well?”

“You never answered my question,” he said. “You first.”

“No.”

“No what? No, you won’t answer my question first, or no, you’re no longer a virgin?”

He dropped the car into reverse, and sat on the brake. Looking over his shoulder for cars, he glanced at his daughter. He didn’t feel shame, necessarily, but instead he felt self-pity; he was forced into this situation, really. If Molly had slept with him years ago, this conversation would never be taking place.

“No, I’m no longer a virgin.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Why not,” he said. “What happened?”

“I slept with somebody,” she said.

“I know that. But why? Why now?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just figured that after we broke up, I wasn’t going to meet anyone that I might marry. Not for a long time, at least.”

“Really?” he said.

“Say something else, okay?”

“I’m sorry. I just, I don’t know. I always wanted you so badly, you know? You turned me on in ways I can’t describe, more than anyone before or since. It drove me nuts to not have you.”

“I know it did,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you really think we would get married?”

“Sure. Didn’t you?”

“Maybe. Not if your parents had their way.” He eased his foot off the brake, backed up, and again drove towards home. “Do they know?”

“About my virginity? Of course not.”

“So tell me this, what happens when you *do* get married? You going to wear white?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Isn’t that dishonest?”

“Maybe a little,” she said. “Did your wife wear white?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Come on. You said you haven’t been married even two years yet. Your daughter is more than fifteen months old, isn’t she?”

“Eighteen months, to be exact.”

“Okay then.”

“So who was the lucky guy? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“A guy I met at school. Nobody special, unfortunately.”

“So what do you think,” he said.

“About what?” she said.

“About sex. Is it everything you hoped it would be? Was it worth waiting twenty-five years for?”

“Honestly, it hurt like a mother f-er. I cried, actually.”

“Wow, that bad, huh?”

“Mostly, I cried because the guy wasn’t you.”

The light above him at the intersection seemed as if it had been stuck on red for ten minutes. Finally, it changed to green, and he moved forward.

“No,” he said.

“No what?”

“No, I don’t think about being an umpire anymore. They only want young, single guys. Guys without families who can move around all summer. When I found out I was going to be a dad, I just sort of gave up on the idea.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Do you?”

“Which? Losing my virginity, or not losing it to you?”

“You pick.”

“Yes.”

“Me too,” he said. He wasn’t even sure if he meant it, but now that he had said it, it seemed to him that maybe he did regret getting married the way he did: his wife’s big

belly sticking out of her gown, ambling up the aisle; no honeymoon, just back to work the following Monday. He remembered once when he had stayed the night with Molly, the way she looked in her nightshirt. Her untouched, soft body beneath the cotton, all his if he could just act Christian long enough to become a husband. And now he was a husband, and he still couldn't have her.

“So what about now?” he said, and hoped that she would pick up on his subtly, and not make him come right out and ask for it. He wondered if he would even have the courage to ask if she did make him.

“What *about* now?” she said.

“Do you still want to meet tomorrow?”

“Not if you're feeling guilty.”

“Why would I feel guilty?” he said. “It's just coffee, right?”

“I think so. Why, you got something else on your mind?”

“Okay,” he said. “You got me.”

“Starbucks,” she said. “Downtown.”

“Not downtown, alright?”

“Why not?” she said.

“How about the one on State Street? State and fifteenth.”

“Okay. Any requests on what I should wear?”

“Can I say ‘nothing’?”

“You can say it. Doesn't mean it's going to happen.”

“Maybe after coffee?”

“Good-bye, Todd. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't be late.”

He tried to think of something else to say, something to keep the conversation going, that might somehow get her to commit to something. But before he could think of anything, she had already hung up.

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That night was his one day off from work and school for the week. His last night off had been spent fighting with his wife; a fight that erupted when he made a comment about not having any money since they had gotten married. He hadn't meant anything by it, was trying to be playful, but like many of his comments lately, it was mistaken for malice. Tonight was no different. His wife had come home from work, Madison was down for a nap, and the two of them sat at the dining table over a pizza Todd had ordered earlier. Home-cooked meals were as rare as the couple's affection. Todd knew his way around a kitchen for the most part, but never felt much like making meals, drained already from the juggling act that was his typical day. His wife couldn't cook; she tried from time to time, but it simply wasn't a skill she possessed. The first few slices were chewed and swallowed without a word from either of them. Todd was somewhere else, at the gas station, at Starbucks, with Molly five years ago. He wondered if he should mention his running into Molly to his wife, thought better of it, and reached for another slice of pizza. She seemed to be elsewhere too. She chewed her food slowly, sat staring out the window. Her phone chimed as she received a text message. She got up, and read it in the other room, then came back to the table smiling.

"Who was that?" he said.

"Nobody," she said. "Just David from work."

"David? What does he want?"

Her smile waned. She'd mentioned David a few times before, telling Todd about something cute or funny that he'd said to her. She was typing a response to David's text on the keypad of her phone while she and Todd talked.

"Nothing. Just asking what I'm up to."

"Why? What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Todd, stop it. He's just a friend from work."

"Why are you getting so defensive? I'm just asking what else you might be doing besides spending time with your husband. He does know you're married, right?"

"Of course he does. Everyone at the office knows. I talk about you and Madison all the time."

"Oh, so he just doesn't give a shit. I see."

"I'm not having this conversation," she said.

"Why not? Because it's something I want to talk about?"

"No, because it's pointless and stupid."

"Is this what you guys do while I'm at work? Sit here and text each other all night?"

"No."

"Oh, so this is the first time? Why does he have your cell number anyway?"

"I don't know, because I gave it to him."

"Why? Why would you give it to him?"

"Stop."

"No, tell me why you gave it to him."

"Let's see your phone. Whose numbers do you have in there?"

He couldn't believe he was thoughtless enough to save Molly's number in his phone under her real name.

"No, Christine, don't try to spin this on me. I want to know why David has your number. Who else has your number?"

"Nobody, Todd."

"Well, why not? If it's not a big deal, why doesn't everybody in your office have it? Is he single?"

"What difference does that make? Yes."

"Ah."

"Ah what?"

"And you think that single David from the office just wants your number so he can randomly check in on his buddy Christine to see how she's doing?"

"Yes, that's what he does. We just chat when I'm here by myself. I get scared when I'm here all alone."

"What else do you two do when I'm not around?"

"You're right. While you're at work, I have all the men from my office over for a big gang bang in the living room. I just put Madison in her crib and turn on Nickelodeon. She cries sometimes, but you can't really hear her over all my moaning, so it doesn't bother anyone."

"Yeah, make a joke. What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Bullshit, you've been acting weird lately. Getting text messages, sleeping on the couch, you don't even ask me how my day was."

“When was the last time you asked me how my day was?”

“Whatever. Go ahead, talk to David. I’m sure you have more in common with him than you’ve ever had with me.”

“He’s just a friend from work, I told you that.”

“What did you write back to him?” Her phone chimed again. “What’s he say this time?”

“I told him I was having dinner with you, and he wrote back,” she read directly from her phone, “Sorry to bother you. Tell Todd I said hi.”

“I’m going to the store. I need gas.”

But Todd didn’t need gas, he needed to get out of the house. He needed to take his phone, change Molly’s name. If his mind wasn’t made up before, it was made now: he was going to cheat on his wife. He had been feeling guilty prior to his dinnertime conversation with Christine, but he now felt vindicated. They didn’t get along. Their marriage was strained, and he understood the possibility of things not working out. His thoughts moved to Christine and her relationship with David. Was Todd driving his wife into the arms of another man? Had he driven her there already? The outcome of such an event became suddenly and alarmingly clear to him: not only would he be a cuckold and lose his wife, but he would lose his daughter, at least partially. Madison would become the child of divorced parents, as Todd himself had been; bouncing back and forth from home to home, different rules for each house, meeting mommy and daddy’s new lovers, all that confusion. He coasted to a stop in the middle of the road near their house, and stared out the front windshield. What would his life be like if he lost his daughter? He had only begun adapting to how impossible it felt: loving another human being the way



he loved Madison. Their days together would be cut in half, he would miss her birthday every other year. What if, in the naivety of childhood, she said something about Christine's new boyfriend that he couldn't bear to hear? He slowly eased forward down the road, turned around at the end of the cul-de-sac there, and headed back home.

Todd tried his best to apologize to Christine. He told her how he feared she would leave him, how putting financial interests and the wellbeing of their daughter ahead of his relationship with his wife was a necessary, but temporary evil. "It won't be like this forever. We'll get through it," he'd told her. She held him, and he felt more secure, believing that if she had been thinking of straying, she would give him at least another chance, and try to work things out between them. They slept in their bed together, and with Christine lying next to him, Todd couldn't help but think of Molly.

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Starbucks was busier than he thought it would be. After ordering his coffee, Todd sat at one of the tables near the magazine rack, grabbed a copy of *GQ*, and turned the pages without so much as noticing a single word. He feared being spotted by one of Christine's friends, or worse yet, someone who knew him long enough to know who Molly had been to him. At the same time, he was anxious for what might happen after Molly showed up. She seemed excited to see him, excited more so about the prospect of meeting him here. He sipped his coffee and waited for her, watching as casually as he could through the plate-glass windows for Molly's car, or any other he recognized.

When she pulled up, he watched her check herself in the vanity mirror behind her sun shade, then watched her walk all the way inside. She moved with such confidence, something Todd had learned was completely artificial; she was terrified of what others

thought of her. He compared her movements with Christine's: Molly practiced her posture, her shoulders held back, arms gracefully sweeping past the outside of her thighs; Christine moved as though her insecurities were a weight pulling her forward, arms crossed over her stomach to keep herself bound. Molly came inside, gave Todd a smile, then ordered. Not wanting to seem overeager, Todd settled on a page in his magazine and stared at it while he waited for her to join him.

"Where's your daughter," she said after she had sat down.

"A friend is watching her. You remember Doug?"

"Sure. Your old roommate?"

"Yeah. He's pretty good with her. She'll probably sleep most of the time he's there anyway."

"She's cute. I don't think I told you that when I saw you yesterday. I was still shocked that you were married."

"I'm still getting used to it myself."

"You been here long?" she said.

"Nah. A few minutes is all."

"What'd you order? Vanilla latte? See, I remember."

"Coffee. Black."

They sipped from their cups, the espresso machine behind the bar whirred and hissed, two middle-aged women sitting next to them droned on about their days.

"So," he said, "is this all we're going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I don't really know what to say."

“Tell me about your wife.”

“What do you want to know?”

“How did you meet?”

“Do you really care?”

“Honestly?”

“I didn’t think so.”

“What about work?” she said.

“I’m not happy with her,” he said.

“You’re not? Then why are you married to her?”

“For Madison.”

“That’s not a good enough reason, Todd.”

“I know, but I can’t stand to think of the alternative.”

“Which alternative is that? Happiness?”

“I am happy, when I’m with my daughter. It’s more as if I married Madison.”

“That’s sweet, but stupid.”

“I guess it does sound stupid. But you can’t understand, unless you’re in my position.”

“No, it makes sense. I understand. But why can’t you have both?”

“How?”

“Be with someone who makes you happy, and be with your daughter.”

“A lot easier said than done.”

“Didn’t I make you happy?”

“Of course. I loved you. It was just that *one thing*.”

“You crack me up. You’re relentless.”

“That’s just who I am. When I want something, I don’t stop until I get it.”

“Would that make you happy?”

“What? To sleep with you? Hell yes, it would.”

“I don’t understand. What’s the big deal? Why me? Doesn’t your wife satisfy you?”

“Not lately. When we first met, we clicked really well. And yes, we slept together before marriage. You and I both know you were the only virgin in our relationship. And it was good, you know? But I never *needed* it, not like I did with you.”

“Don’t you think that was just because you knew you couldn’t have it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So, if I slept with you, where does that leave me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you want me so bad just because you can’t have me, if you get me, you won’t want me anymore, right?”

Todd put his hand on her leg, and she looked down at it. “It’s not like that at all. I’d want you know matter what.”

“But you’re married.”

“For now.”

“You don’t think it’s going to last?”

“Probably not. Not the way things are going.”

“Can I confess something to you?”

“Absolutely.”

She looked into her cup for a long time. The café was clearing out. The two middle-aged women had left. Todd moved his hand to the inside of her knee.

“What is it,” he said.

“It’s hard to say out loud.”

“It’s just me here. You can tell me anything.”

“I wasn’t really a virgin when we were together,” she said, and when she looked up at Todd, her eyes were wet and red-rimmed, and she dabbed at them with a napkin, seemingly mostly conscious of her mascara.

“What?”

“I wasn’t a *virgin*,” she said, whispering that last word like a bad secret.

“Oh. I see.”

The anger building inside Todd wasn’t what he wanted, but it was there, growing. He’d been deceived, and it made him feel more foolish than anything had before. He stood up to leave.

“Wait,” she said.

“What for? Do you have any idea what kind of hell I went through for those two years?”

“Please? Just let me explain.”

“What’s to explain? Our whole relationship was built on a lie. Then you ask me to meet you here, and this is what you tell me?”

“Just sit down so I can explain.”

“I have to go. I’m going to be with the one female who truly loves me back.”

He left her there at the café, and didn't care if he ever saw or spoke to her again. As he drove home, sweat rolled down his ribcage, and his stomach jittered. When his phone chimed that he had a text message, he didn't even look to see who it was from. When he got home, he thanked Doug for helping him out. Doug told Todd that Madison had just lain down, and then asked what was wrong.

"Nothing, man. Just girl trouble."

"Hang in there," Doug said. "Christine's just going through an adjustment. She wants to be home with you and Madison, but you guys need her income."

"Has she talked to you about it?"

"Yeah, a little."

"What did she say?"

"She said she feels bad that she can't be there for you. She's worried. She thinks you're going to leave."

"When was the last time you talked to her about it?"

"Last night, after the fight I guess you had."

"She called you?"

"Come on, man. I'm a friend. She needs friends."

"Did she say anything else? About David?"

"Who's David?"

"Nobody. Don't worry about it. Thanks for helping me out with Madison."

"Anytime. Do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Take Christine out some night. I'll watch Maddy. You two need it."

“I’ll take you up on that.”

Once Doug had left, Todd took out his phone, and he intended to phone his wife and apologize, but he saw Molly’s text message. *I was raped*, it said, and without thinking, he dialed her number, praying that she would answer.

“Hello,” she said.

“Molly, I am so sorry. I had no idea.”

“I know. Can I come see you? I really need to be with someone right now.”

“Of course.”

He gave her directions, then told her again how sorry he was. To occupy the time, he straightened things around his house. He unbuttoned, and took off the shirt he was wearing, letting his t-shirt drape untucked over his slacks. He wondered if he should still try to call Christine to apologize, but figured Molly might show up in the middle of his conversation, and he’d have even more explaining and apologizing to do. He sat on the couch and waited.

\*

He let her in, and wrapped her in his arms. She looked like a wreck, obviously crying since he left her at the café. He held her like that until she leaned back away from him to look him in the face.

“It was a friend of my fathers.”

“You’re kidding?”

She shook her head. “More than once,” she said, then buried her face back in Todd’s chest.

Todd rubbed the back of her hair, and tried to tell her it was alright. He eased her face away from his chest with his hand beneath her chin, and after only a brief hesitation, the two were locked in a clumsy, groping kiss. They pawed at each other's clothes and were soon standing naked in his living room. He moved her to the couch, and laid her down there, keeping his mouth clenched to hers. On the couch, he slid between her legs, moving his head southward, and then stopped around her navel, turned his head, which had her fingers held against it, gripping his hair, and thought of his wife. He couldn't do it. Not now, not ever.

He stood up, and embarrassedly hurried over to the pile of clothes that were half his, half Molly's on the floor. He put on his pants with his back to her. When he turned around, she was still naked on the couch. It surprised him how unattractive she looked, disheveled, her make-up smudged around her eyes, slumped over with her legs still open, all that artificial confidence drained out of her. He held up her bra in his hand.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you," she said. "You don't want me anymore, do you?"

"It's not that, Molly. I'm married. I made my own promise."

She began crying again, and he handed her clothes to her an item at a time. When she was fully dressed, she left without a hug or a good-bye. Todd stood in his living room, in pants and bare feet, and wondered what to do now. Over the voice monitor, he heard Madison jabbering in her crib, and her voice at that moment became the sweetest sound Todd had ever known. When his phone rang, and he thought it was Molly calling to tell him what a bastard he was, something he'd already known, he almost didn't answer it. But he did answer, and Christine was on the other end.



“You son of a bitch,” she said.

“What?”

“I went through your phone last night after you went to bed.”

“So?”

“Who is Derek?” And before he could answer she said, “Funny how Derek’s number has Molly’s voice mail attached to it.”

“Wait, Christine, let me explain.”

“There’s no need, Todd. I think I have a pretty good idea what’s already been going on.”

She hung up. Todd stood there in his living room, staring at the empty couch, and tried to take in the situation he now found himself in. He had ruined everything. Once he understood that Christine knew that he’d talked to Molly, and most likely believed that they were sleeping together, Todd lost all sense of ambition, all the dreams he had for himself and for his family were gone, and there was no longer a future for the three of them; not one that Todd could bring himself to see. He felt the world shrink in size until all that remained was Todd standing half-dressed and alone in his living room, and his daughter’s voice crackling over the monitor. He wasn’t aware of Christine on the other side of town; the two of them were as distant as planets. Madison was in the other room, separated from Todd by two thin sheets of drywall, but he couldn’t face her, couldn’t get her from the crib and hold her; all he could do was stand there and listen to that charming, blameless voice, and wait for her to tell him that everything was going to be all right.

## A GOOD BIG ENGINE

This town, the town where I grew up, sits at the bottom of a bluff mountain range called Squaw Butte. The land rolls out away from the foot of the mountains and spreads down in all directions as far as one can see. On this side of the butte is flatland, miles and miles of it, and on the other side is wilds: forest, glaciated-out lakes, the river slipping through rock, more mountains. Seen from the top of Squaw Butte, the town looks like it just slid off the side of the mountain after a heavy rain. There is a patchwork of homes, each one with a different colored vinyl roof than its neighbors, sitting in a tight square where town begins and the butte stops. Each summer the length of town stretches out another few rows towards the sunset, and men in white construction trucks drive through the newly-added streets jabbering into walkie-talkies. When the streets get too thick with them, a foreman will come inside the Big Willow Lodge and start up rumors that the other crews are using cheap spic labor to drive up their profits.

\*

One of the town's original residents, Claude Jameson, owns an old treeing walker that climbs the steps of the Presbyterian Church every morning but Sunday and bays into the dusk. An artist from back east, vacationing here with his family, hoped to commission a bronze statue of the old hound and set it at the doors of City Hall. There are bright yellow signs throughout town warning against the discharge of firearms within city limits, but every year during the rutting season, one or two mangy white tails will get flushed

out of the backwoods and into the streets for someone with a left-over tag to fill. At night sometimes the drunks will file through the Lodge's front doors and circle around Two Dogs Johnson, hopping around and making whooping noises, drawing back invisible arrows and shooting them from imaginary bows. Two Dogs makes drawings of stick-figured warriors along the sidewalks with a number-two pencil.

\*

Colonel Pleasant climbs to the top of the butte to watch over the townsfolk. The sky behind him is the color of squash meat. He stands like a tree with his arms stretched out at his sides and deer eat Ripsnorter sweet feed from the palms of his upturned hands. The Colonel rides up and down the streets atop a roan gelding that was given to him by our town's redeemers. He rides with a Mossberg .308 slung across his lap, and obeys all the traffic lights. Up on the butte, coyotes choke and giggle like lost children. They poke their heads up and let out a yip, then dance back into the brush. The older generation of townsmen know it is bad luck to shoot at coyotes unless the moon is full and in plain sight. This is Stone Quarry, and it is the only place I've ever called home.

\*

They pay me to take tourists out into the woods and track game animals for the tourists to hunt. But more and more the animals don't want to be found. Knowing this, as I do, makes my job hard to live with. When I take the tourists into the woods with me, if I spot an elk or pronghorn or something I know that the tourists haven't seen themselves yet, I'll lead them in the other direction to keep the animals safe from the tourists' bullets. The animals and I have this little pact: I'll only let enough of them die that I don't lose my job. But the hunters keep coming. When Stone Quarry was renovated, they set fire

to all the old log homes that used to stand here. As the fire burned hotter and hotter, all the creatures stole out of the forest and lined up like spectators at the top of the butte, gawking at the giant inferno that once was our happy town. The redeemers saw the animals lined up like that, and shot bucks and rams and black bear cubs from the cabs of their pickups, sending the animals rolling down the face of the mountain into a tidy pile at the redeemers' feet. The flames blackened the side of the butte, and you can still see the high-water mark where the flames reached their peak. Pastor Brown howled against the evils of burning a church to the ground, and he locked himself inside along with a handful of parishioners, ringing the church bells until the fire brought the steeple down on top of them all. He locked his horses in their stables as well, and they kicked themselves free from the fiery wood, and ran burning like meteors into the night.

\*

The surveyors who came to carve out plots of land told the new mayor they saw a pair of cougars slinking through the charred remains of the homes. The cougars have become the town's new legend. Soot-covered and dark as night itself, they roam the neighborhoods with a thirst for baby's blood. I have never seen the black cougars of Squaw Butte. But I've found their tracks on hunting tours through the backwoods, and when I tell the tourists which animals had made them, they tear out like someone set their asses afire. Colonel Pleasant says there is a cougar inside the mountain who grants wishes to those who touch its fur. The giant cougar sings in a woman's voice, breathy and tender, and when you go to her, she swallows men whole.

\*

Colonel Pleasant was never a real colonel. He was a simple mountaineer who logged and fished and fixed things with his hands. In the early days of the reformation, when the new residents had already started to move in, something was making the children sick. Many of them died, and the Colonel went around to the different homes and asked if he could see the children living there. He said out loud the ancient words of healing—which were told to him by his grandfather after the Civil War—then ran his hands around the children’s heads as if he were shaping them a new face out of clay. Within days all the children in town were well again, and the townsfolk began to refer to him as the Saint of Squaw Butte. But the Colonel didn’t think it was fair that he get credit for his grandfather’s healing words, and demanded that the man who had taught him to heal be the one referred to as the Saint, and he would adopt his grandfather’s old name of Colonel Pleasant. He lives alone in a three-bedroom house, and wears his long white hair in a braid down his back.

\*

Pastor Brown’s parishioners who did not lock themselves inside the church during the fire sifted through the ash once it had cooled and dug up the old church’s steeple bell. It had been warped by the fire, but remained mostly intact. The parishioners took the twisted hunk of metal to the town blacksmith, and had him melt it down and cast a new bell. The first time they heard its sound they said to whoever was with them, *In the final days of judgment the bell will toll on behalf of the forsaken.* The bell’s metal is too brittle now to be used regularly, so it sits inside the new church’s steeple attached to a rope only the elders are allowed to touch. On the anniversary of the reformation they ring the bell once for every member of their congregation lost to the fire.

\*

When I go out in search of the black cougar, I gut out a fresh gilt hog and leave the innards at the top of the butte. I holster my daddy's .45 on my side. Winchester .30-06 across my shoulder. Jacob, friend to me since we were boys, follows along some nights. He does not believe in cougars that grant wishes. I stay in the woods all night, and listen for song to spring from the mountain. Sometimes I'll find coyotes with four fang punctures at the backs of their necks lying near the pile of hog guts I've left. I bring the bodies home and stretch their pelts to give to Two Dogs Johnson when winter comes.

\*

At daybreak I meet the tourists at the Lodge, and go back into the woods. Stone Quarry makes its money off vacationers who want to live out fantasies of the frontier by having someone like me point out an animal that they can shoot with a high-powered rifle from three-hundred yards away. All the residents who lived here before the reformation received brand-new houses, and were given jobs working for the town. We all drive company trucks the town gives us. Except for the Colonel who never learned how to drive. The town made Colonel Pleasant an honorary Sheriff. He isn't allowed to make arrests, but once a week he reports what he sees to the other deputies. One of the girls that the Colonel cured with his grandfather's healing words brings him lunch every day. She lifts a plate covered with plastic wrap to the Colonel on his horse, and he chews his food up in the saddle. She once told me, *When the Colonel laid his hands down on me, I felt the sickness wash away like meltwater.* There is a gift shop in the Lodge that sells camouflage vests and boots, bright orange hats with pheasants stitched into the front. The tourists all wear the clothes from the gift shop when they come with me into the

woods. They look at me funny when they see that I'm not wearing them too. Once, while he waited for the traffic light at the corner of Fifth Street and Antelope Avenue, Colonel Pleasant said to me, *Someday you will go into the woods and when you come back your heart will have emptied.* I find that I must go deeper into the trees every year before I can no longer see the lights of town shining up over the butte.

\*

Sometimes during the night—the tourists all gone to bed, their bellies full of venison and imported beer, dreams of taking down a charging grizzly spinning in their heads, the mountain bikers oiling their chains and gauging tire pressure for the morning ride, and the redeemers laughing in their mansions sifting through stacks of hundred-dollar bills—I go up to Tomahawk Rock Ridge. From here Squaw Butte lays before me, silhouetted by the lights of town. I can see her whole body: her hands clasped over her stomach, the two peaks of her breasts, her hair streaming down into the valley. On the anniversary night of the reformation, residents fire their rifles into the sky, and from Tomahawk Rock their bullets look like dozens of grease sputters sent up from a giant frying pan.

\*

New residents who don't know his story like to have their fun with Two Dogs Johnson. They draw up phony treaties on table napkins from the Lodge and try to get him to sign over the deed to his house for a dollar-and-a-half. If he hasn't been seen around for a few days, more than likely someone said something to him about the Ghost Dance, and Jacob and I will find him dehydrated in his basement performing the ancient ceremony for days nonstop. Colonel Pleasant says that Two Dogs will someday rise like the embers of the

great fire and become one again with the earth. The owner of the Lodge takes him blankets when Two Dogs sleeps in the snow.

\*

This is what life is like in Stone Quarry: in the spring, when the bears wake from their long naps and rummage angrily through the forest for food, the world seems clean, and you shake free from the spell you've been under from three-months of snowmobile motors and pellet-stove fires, and you venture out into the sky like a newborn. There are pamphlets which list all of the game animals in the area, and which seasons are open, but nobody reads them, and you find fox cubs mewling for their lost mother. In April the rains wash the butte of its memory, and the forest floor rises up a smell like my daughter's skin. There is no other scent like it in the world. At the edge of town bulldozers grumble to life, and new roads are paved, stretching ever westward like a bridge to the end of days. Men hear about the opportunity to own a piece of wilderness without sacrificing the luxuries of the city: satellite television, foreign cheese spreads, the whores of Madam Sally's. In summer gunshots crack the air like thunder.

\*

The town of Stone Quarry popped up like a mushroom—centered between the territory's two most lucrative mines—after gold was found here in 1862. The town built saloons and brothels, barbershops and bakeries, even an opera house where prospectors could spend their new-found riches. But as quickly as the town sprung to life, the gold rush petered out, and prospectors left in droves. My daughter's name is Sarah. Her mother moved away from here and does not talk to me. Once a week a bus shuttles in new faces from the airport. The bus stops at the town square, and I see them file off in collared



shirts with camera straps around their necks. The town asked Claude to keep his treeing walker chained up until the bus unloaded on Monday mornings. Their plan, of course, could never work. The old hound refused to play along. There are things that happen without reason, and you just can't expect to control them. Sarah told me that the voices of animals sounded sad, and wanted to know why. It shames me that I can't explain it to her. There is an outfit that comes from the city and coats the town with retardant in case the forest should burn. After they lay down the foamy spray, everyone seems to feel more safe. If the forest burns, our way of life goes with it regardless if our homes do not. This is something no one understands.

\*

I heard that Jeremiah Sterns left everything he owned inside his house before the town was burned down. There was a push to make Stone Quarry the capital when the territory received its statehood. They had more residents living here at that time than Portland, Oregon, but the hope of becoming the capital city dwindled when the mines dried up.

\*

Before she left, Sarah's mother was the third-grade teacher at the elementary, and ate the lunches I brought her with the appetite of ten men, sitting on a blanket with me along the playground. Her class laughed, red-faced, when I kissed her good-bye. She cornered me in my kitchen and pounded my chest with her fists while she screamed, *How could you let this happen? Why can't you do something?* I have to tell the fireproofing outfit that I would rather my house burn if the woods should catch fire.

\*

Each winter downtown is decorated for the Christmas season, and storeowners string colored lights from their awnings, and every streetlamp is spun with red and white garland to look like giant candy canes. A tree is lit in the Square unceremoniously. A small gathering of businessmen clap when the lights begin to blink. The streets fill with snow embossed with snowshoe tracks. None of the homes ever have decorations on them.

\*

Sarah stood in my yard on Christmas Eve in a shiny red parka she chose from the window of The Sportsman's Wearhouse; snowflakes danced all around her. With gloved hands, she rolled three big balls that would make up the body of our first snowman. She smoothed her hands over its round, white head, and stared into its charcoal eyes. My breath barely moved from my lungs. I have never in my life been more grateful for the birth of our Lord. What I could not prepare myself for was this: my daughter, Sarah, got sick. Jacob tries to hide from me how sorry he feels. I am working until I pay off the hospital's bills. Once they are paid I will follow Sarah's mother and leave Stone Quarry. It will not bother me to leave.

\*

Jacob snaps his fly rod out over the river like a bullwhip, and I am sure that the nymph at the end of his line will crack the air. He drags rainbows from the water the size of small dogs, freckled and shining like mercury in the crisp dawn sun. His creel dances on the bank. We fish near the center of the valley, where the forest levels out. Just before the sun rises, I wade out and climb onto a boulder that divides the current. From here I can watch for cougar as the night's shadows slip away.

\*

Jacob has a wife, and their kids are quick and tough and don't like to hunt. Jacob says just hearing their voices will sometimes make him weep. Those old enough to remember say that on the morning of the fire, Jeremiah Sterns set off on horseback following the river up into the woods. When someone asked Jeremiah why he locked all of his belongings inside his house to burn, he said, *There ain't nothing but ghosts inside that old house, and I don't want to be around to hear their screams.* Two Dogs says he talks to the dead. I am afraid to know what they say to him. When Sarah cried into my chest I felt like a fraud because I was more scared than she was.

\*

Jacob is a terrific father. He understands that our parents did the best they could, and tries to make up for their shortcomings. Sometimes I dream of Sarah with skin so sheer that I can see right through to her veins. The image of her stays in my head all day, and Jacob begs me to try and forget. He is lean and quiet and is the type of man that will fight a stranger over simple matters of respect. I feel that our town could be well served if he were allowed to teach a class on the subject. He took his daughters to the community Easter egg hunt at Kiwanis Park, and the girls stuck next to his sides like limbs. Some mornings I nod off on top of the boulder and dream of a woman's voice that freezes the river. At the Easter egg hunt I saw Jacob politely ask a man, who had knocked into his daughter and did not apologize, over to the parking lot and then beat him until the man needed an ambulance. When he returned, he smiled and helped the girls find more eggs.

\*

In the early fifties the town of Stone Quarry was a safe haven for those who grew up with the woods in their blood. Most of the buildings that were put here during the gold rush had been abandoned or put to different use: the bowling alley became the blacksmith's shop; the opera house was turned into a saloon that doubled as a dance hall on the weekends. Sarah stood in my yard in a red parka, rolling snow. The owner of the Lodge has no family, and shrinks with age every spring. We all wonder to ourselves which summer will be his last. Businessmen already bid on the property.

\*

There are days here when it feels better to watch the sky change color through your window than to step out into it. The clouds shear away from themselves around the tips of the conifer trees on the crest of the mountains standing beyond the butte. My window bleeds with condensation, and the clouds shred against the needles in wisps, and I know I should go outside but I don't. Logs snap and pop in my fireplace and the woodsmoke reminds me of winter nights in my parents' house when Isabelle was pregnant. Her round stomach poking out, the skin stretched taught and creamy between her pants waist and the hem of her sweater. Sometimes the sun comes out over the tops of the clouds and turns the clouds from gray to white and the mist falls from their bellies.

\*

I have tracked and killed cougar. Jacob suggests I give my obsession a rest. He does not understand it, and that seems to bother him. I keep their pelts in a stack inside my woodshed. Their fur is lush and the color of tree bark and feels like the dresses Sarah's mother used to wear, the ones she said were from the Orient. But none of them are black. None of them grant wishes. The Sheriff says he has been told to keep an eye on me. The

owner of the Lodge refuses to sign a will. I should be gone whenever the new owner takes over. I have read this in the newspaper: chemicals commonly used in flame retardant have been shown to cause cancer. Everyone in Stone Quarry drives four-wheel-drives. The Ford Broncos that the police use are painted brown and do not have lights or sirens on them.

\*

Most of the new residents here are transplants from California. It is easy to spot them, though they try their best to be like us. They have all earned too much money doing very little work, and their hands are soft and look like those of dolls. I hate them for what they have made me become, and I hate myself for needing them. They elect themselves to the city council, and carve out new chunks of land to fill. None of the new residents live here year-round. Stone Quarry is not really home to any of them.

\*

The owner of the Lodge was born here in 1917, in the municipal building during a snowstorm. He was the only child his parents had that did not die before age five. He and his father built the Lodge by hand in 1943. His name is Harold Billings and he tells us stories about the way things used to be. The whole town would shut down, Harold says, on Saturday nights when they held barn dances in one of the empty buildings downtown. Everyone would be drunk on potato moonshine or grain whiskey, and music played until three o'clock in the morning. But when the band finally called it a night and packed up their instruments, and people slowly made their way back home, that was when the night filled with melody: young couples like my parents disappeared into the moonlit night, and from the woods their bodies thrummed like the wings of insects. The

only hum I hear now is that of the streetlamps, mayflies spinning drunk off their halogen aura. Harold says that back then you knew what type of place you were from. The night air, he says, was charged, like the insides of a thundercloud, and you felt the hair on the back of your neck stand on end when the music stopped because you knew that there were naked women out in the trees who still had the rhythm pulsing through them, and all you had to do was find one and she would be yours.

\*

I think I see them some nights. Out in the woods I will catch glimpses of milky-skinned figures slipping into laurels and underbrush, their hair the color of copper wiring flipping across naked shoulders, and when I follow them, they are gone. They leave no footprints, and I wonder if they are visitors from out of town, with too much booze pushing them out into the trees, or if they are the ghosts who talk to Two Dogs. Before she moved away Isabelle used to cut me off in the hallway of her house as I tried to leave for work, and she would wrap one long buttery leg around my waist, pushing her center into mine, and I wouldn't be able to leave, ever. *I hear them talking on the wind. I hear their voices whisper along the bedrocks in the river bottom,* Two Dogs tells me. There are places where the ashes from the old town still lay, pressed together with the passage of time and weather, like slabs of black cement.

\*

Those of us who remember will tell you about the night before they burned our town to the ground. There was a feeling that things would be great soon. That the redeemers would come and give us work, build us all new homes, that our town would become a vacation hub for movie stars and diplomats. There would be plenty for everyone, and

enough time to spend it all. No one expected our town to come alive: growing and transforming from year to year. Those who remember will tell you that Anna Robins chained herself to her late husband's rocking chair inside their bedroom and locked the door. They will tell you about Marty Madsen who piled all of the ammunition he had stored in his gun closet into a box and left it in his garage, hoping that when they went off the rounds might find one of the redeemers. I may be the only one here who can tell you this: when I gave Sarah a bath I could count every last one of her ribs, and all of the bones in her back stuck out of her like doorknobs.

\*

I have heard stories about the town congregating in the old church, prepared for mass suicide, but no one could get the recipe right for the killer Kool-Aid. Or how we all took off our clothes and ran naked through the streets like mad woodsmen, swinging hatchets and raping young women. But none of those stories are true. They dug trenches around the town to keep the fire from spreading. Bulldozers filled the trenches with ash and dirt weeks later. No bodies were ever pulled from the heaps of cinders, and they were mixed and spread across the floor of the new town.

\*

There was a time when everyone here knew everybody else, and they all got along with one another. No one said shit if they had a mouthful. Quiet and friendly. Good folks who ate what they hunted, and were more than willing to lend a hand should someone need it. The hippies stayed away. Nobody in town had heard rock n' roll until the seventies, and even then nobody cared much. Visitors to town were from nearby who had heard about the good fishing the area offered, and left with memories of a woodland

paradise locked inside them like a secret. Colonel Pleasant used to teach school kids how to ride horseback through the mountains. He has a whole language of clicks and whistles he would show the children while they manipulated steep ridges and creek beds. The apostles were liars and the pious are altogether mad; I lay in the great inequities of His brightness and splendor, humbled to my very core.

\*

The doctor in Boise said Sarah was terminal. *Is there a chance you're wrong?* Isabelle said. *What if you're wrong?*

The doctor turned in my direction but did not look at me and said, *I cannot say for sure. It could be three weeks, it could be three years. There is simply no way to tell.*

\*

They say that Jeremiah Sterns rode his horse north until he reached the Nez Perce reservation in Lapwai. He got a job working as a janitor at the high school. He was the only white employee in the entire school district. The Nez Perce called him the quiet ghost, because he never uttered a single word the entire time he lived among them. One day he vanished into the woods and didn't return, like a wounded animal going off to die privately. I've often wondered what happened to Jeremiah's horse, and I imagine him running through green fields along the Montana border.

\*

Isabelle said, *You promised that she would be alright. You promised.*

The doctor said, *I know how hard this is to hear.*

Isabelle said, *No, no you don't understand. There is no way you can understand.*

The doctor said, *You're right.*



\*

The Lodge almost burned down once when Rufus Mailer threw a Molotov cocktail through the picture-glass window of the building next door because he thought that his wife was screwing her lover on an old mattress he'd found upstairs. He said when he smelled the mattress, it smelled like his wife's perfume. We got the blaze under control before it spread to the Lodge, but deep down inside all of us, as we fought back the flames, we worried that the only remaining landmark from our old town would be lost. They say that Jeremiah Sterns was a champion bull rider, and he wore a silver belt buckle he'd won in the Pendleton Round-Up that was as big as a trashcan lid and shined like a mirror in the sun.

\*

One night a barefoot young Indian woman named Alice Johnson wandered through the front doors of the Lodge and told those inside that she had been raped by a dozen slick white men in business suits. Two Dogs says that the drawings he makes on the sidewalk are from a dream he has every night, and in his dream a thousand warriors swoop out of the sky to reclaim the lost land of their ancestors. He wears flannel shirts and a buck knife on his belt.

*That poor girl, Harold says, was as pregnant as Mary the night before Christmas, and when she opened her mouth to speak her teeth were so rotten she looked like a jack-o-lantern eating a Snickers bar.*

Harold came around from the bar to try and soothe her as best he could. She puffed up her chest and stuck her big belly out trying to appear less vulnerable than everyone knew she was. Harold approached her slowly, holding his hands out in front of

him. Alice bent over a bit, pulled the hem of her dress up, and gave birth to Two Dogs right there standing in the middle of the Lodge foyer. Harold didn't know if he should get some towels for the mess, or a chair for Alice to sit in. Two Dogs lay still on the floor as glossy and dark as molasses. There wasn't a sound or a movement in the whole place. Colonel Pleasant got out of his seat, unsheathed his Bowie knife, and in one motion severed the umbilical cord and lifted Two Dogs into his arms and puffed delicately against the baby's lips.

\*

Jacob on the riverbank, his fly line cutting the air, tells me that it isn't my fault, that these things sometimes happen. Sarah was too beautiful for this world, that's all.

\*

Two Dogs lay on his side when Jacob and I found him one night during a lunar eclipse. He hadn't been missing for more than a couple of days, but Jacob and I knew right where to find him. I had my own key made to Two Dogs' house for times like these, and as I pushed open the door and saw the way he was slumped on the floorboards, as though he had been clubbed over the head, my stomach folded in on itself. I saw that he was still breathing and quickly drew some water from the kitchen and splashed it in his face. When he woke he grinned up at Jacob and I and told us that he'd been knocked out by a vision so powerful he couldn't bare to see it. *Jesus stood atop the mountain with a hundred wolves tethered to his hands with leashes, and one by one, he released them into town.* What Isabelle said is true: you can't understand. She used to make griddlecakes on Saturday mornings, and Sarah and I ate them on the sofa in our pajamas. *Our moon*

*has turned the color of the beast's eye, Two Dogs said. The wolf has been sent to protect me.* Jacob handed him a towel and told him to take it easy.

\*

*You're going to be fine, Isabelle whispered into Sarah's hair. Daddy's going to make it all better.*

\*

There was a time when I thought that Isabelle and I might get married, even though I had long ago made up my mind that I wasn't the marrying type. Alice Johnson didn't want her baby. She said that he was wrecked goods after what the slick white men had done to her. Harold tried to raise Two Dogs himself after Alice disappeared. He sent him on trips to the reservation up north in the summer, hoping he could learn some of the customs of his people; a sort of Scout Camp for the one Indian boy in town, where Harold hoped he might learn to rain dance or the proper way to apply war paint. When I mentioned it to Isabelle, she said that no church would sanctify our union and I should go ahead and forget about it.

\*

Clouds of mayflies veil the river, and Jacob takes a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

Exhaling smoke, the cigarette buried deep in the crook of his twisted fingers, he tells me:

*Sometimes when the clouds are thin and barely moving like they're stuck in the air and the sun is just about to set, the world seems dunked in pink and purple and the hills are the color of flowers. That's God's way of showing us just how beautiful our girls are.*

Harold tried to help Alice too, but she refused because of her distrust of white people.

Who could blame her, really? He still feels obligated to Two Dogs. I think it makes him

sad to see the way Two Dogs has turned out. Harold says, *There's only one person I would leave this place to when I die, but that dumb Indian would only use it for powwows with his imaginary friends.*

I stayed with Two Dogs after Jacob left, and we sat in his living room and drank hot tea until the early morning talking about coyotes and wolves and the Great Spirit. I forgot to mention to him the wolf that was shot by one of the tourists I had taken into the woods on a deer hunt. Isabelle said over the crackle of phone wire that connected me to her new home, *So much has changed. I don't even know who I am anymore.* I drove Sarah and Isabelle to the doctor in my father's 1968 Chevrolet. The seat upholstery is broke in and soft, and it's got a good big engine in it. Two Dogs said that the vision he saw would make him a great leader, and I shut my eyes and asked him to tell me again what he saw.

\*

In February nights get so cold and quiet it feels like everything around you could shatter as if it were made of glass. Ice flows cluck and purl in the river's eddies and it sounds like music. Everything is whitewashed and the forest seems to glow. Tourists rent snowmobiles and snowshoes and none of them come with me into the forest. There is a shuttle bus that takes visitors to the ski resort on the other side of the woods. By crow it's only a few miles to the backside of the mountain, but the bus has to take the highway for sixty miles to get there. The skiers pile on and off the bus in shiny outfits that make them look like multicolored spacemen. Jacob's wife is pregnant again, and he looked ashamed to tell me about it. Just before a good storm you can go up into the hills and feel the air change: it's blank one minute, and then the next thing you know the sky is humming and

you feel ice kissing your cheeks. Colonel Pleasant stands at the top of the butte and snow drifts down around him like sleep and he fades away behind a blanket of flakes. Two Dogs wraps himself in furs and howls into the moonlight. Nights in February get so cold and lonely it feels like winter might never end.

\*

Mid-March brings a false hope of spring when the sun breaches the clouds, and icicles drip like faucets along the eaves. But another storm will come and dump more snow and the meltwater will freeze solid and tourists will spin through the streets in their cars as if they were on skate blades. Slowly the snowmobile motors fade, and tourists begin to heed the warnings of falling into snowdrifts on their hikes, and within a few weeks some spots in the lowlands are free from snow cover and the ground is solid and moist. The tourists don't stay to watch winter change into spring, so the town is quiet for the most part. Businessmen meet in the square and discuss plans for future shops and cafés up and down Main Street. I scout the woods in preparation for the opening of bear season. Two Dogs cups his hands over his ears whenever he is outside because the dead talk to him most when the snow melts. The wind pushes in from the north, and one night it sounded like screams and it woke me from a dream: Colonel Pleasant stood in the street with a sword in one hand and a baby in the other as a mob of cougars stalked him from the shadows. I get the most sad when I see how small Sarah's last pair of shoes are. No lights come on in half of the houses in town for the entire winter, and whole streets seem abandoned.

\*

In the spring, robins dance scarlet-chested and stout through the wet lawns. In the hills torch flowers ignite the horizon in wild clouds, and tourists point at the rose-colored smoke and snap photos. Herons slog through the air with smooth strokes of their wings as if they were underwater, and they stand like reeds in the river's shallows. Jacob said, *I hope we have a boy this time*, and I could see in his eyes he wished he could take it back. I saw the darkness moving along an outcropping just beyond the butte, as if a shadow were edging through the trees. I could see two jade eyes glinted by the moon and staring right at me. No sooner than I could draw my pistol, the eyes were gone. When I felt the hairs on my arms rise up, I knew I was being hunted. And I ran like hell. In the bedrock of our town Anna Robins sits across her husband's lap rocking in an old wood chair. Pastor Brown and his parishioners sing hymns about the glory of the Almighty. Wild horses dash along the night dripping fire. As I ran through the woods, I swear I could hear a woman crooning over my wheezing breaths.

\*

The last week of April the sky opened like a piñata and rain fell out for days without relent. Clouds stuck to the air like gobs of tar and water ran through the streets like Venice. Despite the rain, the temperature was unusually high for April and leftover ice chunks in the higher elevations washed down the face of the mountain. Everyone in town was battered into their homes, and nothing moved outside. The rain lasted for ten days and nights and then it just stopped and the sun burned through the clouds. A gray wolf stood all alone on top of the butte, and I wondered if he had been there since the rain began.

\*

Minutes later everyone was out on their porch steps staring up at the wolf. No one had a gun, and we all smiled up at her as though she had cleared the rain herself. While we watched, someone hollered that there was a man up on the butte. It was Two Dogs and he approached the wolf on Colonel Pleasant's horse. Everyone stared, not sure what to think. Then, before anyone seemed to realize it, a pack of ten wolves had surrounded the horse and it reared up on its hind legs and you could hear it whinny all the way down into the valley. The old gelding stamped around in a circle, and people ran inside their houses for their rifles. I screamed up to Two Dogs, *Get to the backside trail*, but I knew he would never hear me.

\*

Two Dogs jerked the reigns from side to side, whooping out a war cry that shook the trees. The wolves seemed discouraged and slid backwards on their bellies away from Two Dogs and the horse. He charged the pack but spooked the horse and it skittered back so Two Dogs charged in again, and we all marveled at the ballet in the sky atop the butte. Those who had their rifles drawn, lowered them as we watched Two Dogs fend off the wolves using something other than weapons.

\*

We all let out a great yell and shots were fired into the air when Two Dogs reared the horse one last time and the horse danced on two feet across the butte. He led the horse down the front face of the mountain, and as we clapped him home, there was a low rumble, then the ground slid away beneath him and Two Dogs was gone. You could see part of Colonel Pleasant's horse for a moment—tumbling ass over teakettle and covered with mud, but then it vanished too, swallowed up by the sliding earth—but Two Dogs

was never seen again, as though he had been sucked right down into the center of the rock. Down in the valley we all stood around dumbfounded as if we'd just seen the sky fall. Colonel Pleasant started to walk up the butte, and a group of us hurried behind to help try and dig out his old horse. But when we got there and saw how much earth had moved, we knew there was no way we would ever find them. They were part of the ground now. The wolves came back and stood in a line looking down on us. Harold Billings emptied his pistol from one of the rear windows of the Lodge, but didn't hit a one. By the time he had reloaded, the wolves were gone back into the forest.

\*

Harold's heart stopped that night. I loaded my father's Chevy with all of Sarah's things and a single change of clothes for myself. I drove down the streets of town looking for the courage to merge onto the highway and leave. Along the streets were the new homes given to us by the redeemers and shops and restaurants and wholesale grocery stores, and all of them were built on top of the lives of good men and good women, and I watched their lives spring up out of the ground as I drove: Colonel Pleasant stood before all the children of town and wrapped them with a magic blanket; a cougar the size of a school bus and black as pitch climbed out of the butte and kneeled down purring for men to lay their hands upon her coat; women with skin like fog danced out of the trees; a dozen shirtless warriors came from the sky wearing blue jeans and riding winged Appaloosas; Alice Johnson held a beautiful baby boy against her chest; Sarah covered her mother's griddlecakes in corn syrup and butter and pulled her long black hair into a thick braid across her back; Jeremiah Sterns swept the sidewalks in white coveralls; Anna Robins and her husband joined hands with Pastor Brown's congregation and they all swayed and



sang, *Lord of light whose name outshineth*; Two Dogs shot out of the granite, burning like a roman candle and burst into a million glittering embers that sprinkled down into the valley; Colonel Pleasant climbed to the top of the butte, surrounded by a hundred bleating lambs, and looked into my eyes from up on high and nodded that it was time for me to leave.