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Black River

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BLACK RIVER

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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William Daugherty

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BLACK RIVER

by

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Critical Introduction to *Black River*

Introduction

For many young parents, what it means to raise a child successfully eludes them to the point of frustration. They might feel at some point they've "cracked the code," so to speak, when they reach some epiphany about how their own child behaves and reacts, the euphoria short-lived when their child befuddles them yet again. Parenting seems to be a living organism in which the parent, child, and parent-child relationship all grow and change simultaneously, the end goal not really an end goal at all, but a series of smaller goals, goals that enact a relationship of understanding and empathy, but not until after the parent learns to reject approaches of domination, control, or ownership. Parenting then isn't really specific to parents. It's not really a search for what good parenting is, but what humanity is. What is it that makes us human? I suspect a working answer lies in my understanding that I, each of the systems in which I participate, and each of the relationships I cultivate, are living organisms subject to consistent change. Humanity isn't a condition then, but a navigation of a process. My thesis project, *Black River*, is a novel in stories about Tom, a cynical, self-hating ex-musician turned thief, who stumbles upon Janie, an orphaned young girl abandoned in a home from which Tom steals, and he feels obligated to take her for the sake of her own survival. At the time Tom finds Janie, he is in a somewhat dormant state of mourning over his own daughter, Charlie, now several years deceased. Tom and Janie's story is told through many interconnected short pieces, and these are punctuated by additional stories about characters outside the novel's main story. The chapters that involve Tom and Janie are each a snapshot of moments on their journey north from the Las Cruces, New Mexico farming valley up Interstate 25 to Ft. Collins, Colorado where Tom's

mother lives. As a whole, the novel is thinking about parenting, some definition of humanity, and what it means to care for anything or anyone. I understand my novel to function at its core according to a mirroring of its themes and its structure. That is, the themes, parenting and a search for humanity, move in the same way the novel's structure does, which meanders nonlinearly for a while, finds unity or understanding at a later point, and then attempts to build upon that unity. Part One recounts Tom and Janie's path through New Mexico, the stories jumping forward and backward through time, recalling the disjointed learning process through which parents struggle. Part Two begins at the southern border of Colorado and follows a linear path northward up I-25 after Tom learns better how to reenter society after having been a loner for several years, and after he better understands his role as a caretaker for Janie.

Something Interesting, Something Beautiful: A Theoretical Framework for *Black River*

Stories are commonly about something personal that pushes a syringe into the heart of the author's thinking, and so a description of plot is just a narrative skeleton on which the writer lays the meat of the story. Thoughtful readers don't tend to think of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a novel that is about a man and his son traveling to find safety among post-apocalyptic America. Instead they might think of it as a story about defining humanity, what's been the definition, what it's capable of being instead, and what it should, could, and might be in a post apocalyptic future. Of course *The Road* is a novel about a father keeping his son alive. Why then does McCarthy focus on humanity's easy slip from reason into carnage (when people are used as food, their bodies kept in the belly of an overturned semi truck), our perversions of invention (when travelers use a woman to provide renewable food, fetuses upon which to feed)? We have an animalistic proclivity for ease, which affected by our power to reason, can devolve into something horrid. McCarthy sees this happening somewhere in the confusion between a remembering of beauty and a remembering of something interesting—beauty the thing that has preservation at heart, and something-interesting the thing that shakes the mind in a way that recalls the feeling of beauty but does not aim at or have a stake in preservation. The images McCarthy writes in which we see the father and son truly alive, or perhaps truly human, are more impregnating than those images of horror: A waterfall drawing them in for its promise of life that they must desert to keep alive. An apple they eat “core and all,” that serves as a symbol of power more than it serves as a symbol of desperation, though it does both. All of these moments, though, serve the book's thesis: fathers want to keep their sons alive. The question the novel seeks to answer then is not *how* to keep alive but what *alive* is, and so what humanity is. The

father and son have the fire that they will not let go out. They have a remembrance of humanity and of beauty, fire that they cup a hand around, dodging wind, sure of step in order to not drop it. The novel demonstrates what it means to remain in this state of grace, one we take for granted, when there is nothing left to support us, when we are utterly alone.

In *Black River*, Tom previously had a wife, raised a child, and earned a meager living as a musician, but he did so with a society to back him, to remind him how and why he did it. When that guidance disappears for him, he easily slips from society, and so his grasp of his own humanity slips as well. He begins to case homes in order to steal what he needs to survive, and to sit in strange living rooms, imagining his dead daughter still alive, playing on the floor. After finding Janie, he is still for a time preoccupied with what I've described as "something interesting" (imagining his daughter still alive) about life, instead of something beautiful (a real relationship with another human being). He doesn't have preservation at heart, but instead some warped remembrance of his previous humanity.

McCarthy's novel demonstrates this preservation of humanity by keeping the story linear, and so it builds the reader's understanding cumulatively. It is a structure that supports the characters' steady fight to keep their humanity. The father is fair and honest, but in a manner that does not discard the value of sheltering his son. The father explains their plan by using a tattered map, owning up to the near impossibility and futility of their task, to reach an unknown beach, but he also keeps the boy safe, both practically in feeding him and protecting him, but also in guarding the boy's mind from the ideas of brutality and anarchy he knows the boy cannot yet handle given his age. The reader can keep track of the father's process because the process is dealt linearly, because the story is structured according to that theme.

My choice to write the bulk of Tom and Janie's story in *Black River* nonlinearly denotes the difference between Tom and Janie's relationship and that of an actual parent and child: it is an unnatural pairing and therefore forced. They don't know or understand each other. They are reluctant road companions and their individual desires slowly push them toward something that resembles a parent-child relationship. Janie is an orphan who has rarely witnessed love from her father, so she desires familial structure and love. Tom is an outcast plagued by guilt, so he desires resolve from the responsibility he feels in his daughter's death, and to reenter familial structure and love.

In *In Our Time*, Ernest Hemingway uses the story "Soldier's Home" to do the careful work of unifying the separate short stories of the book through the theme of splintering relationships, particularly those of soldiers. If there is a central character in the novel, it must be Nick Adams, a boy in an early story, who later goes to war, and returns for a subdued and introspective last section of the book. So what should a reader make of a story within the book that makes no mention of Nick? "Soldier's Home" instead focuses on another American soldier, Krebs, who returns home from war two years too late to enjoy the hero's welcome he'd read about in American papers while still in Germany (69). The reader imagines Nick's experience at war while reading about Krebs and an explanation of a returning soldier's plight. The story presents a marriage of American experience and a soldier's experience. In subsequent chapters, the reader can wonder what Nick would do, feel, or think in Krebs same situation, but this is especially possible because their experiences are similar enough. Rather, they are each tied to a similar theme: the relationship between Americans (namely soldiers, but not exclusively) abroad and Americans at home, and the relationship those who break away from society have with their disintegrating world.

“Soldier’s Home” climaxes in the moment Krebs tells his mother he doesn’t love her because it is a moment of honesty. Had this truly been a moment in which he misspeaks, that he “was just angry at something,” the climax would carry no weight (76). Instead we understand that war brings about a splintering for the soldier in which the breaking isn’t only a breakdown of character, but a breakdown of the interrelationships between the soldier and America. America itself splinters when its youth splinters and the splintering should (and has as we can now see ninety years later) carry through history. Krebs ultimately resigns himself to live in a subdued state that ignores his desensitization, the numbing and the isolation he feels as a result of the war (77). The war is the precipice of his life at a young age, and he’s now rolling down its hillside, grabbing at old roots he’s told matters because that’s all that seems to have possibility to matter any longer. This story zeroes in on the moment of realization a soldier has upon return and so it explains something about Nick Adams without having to trudge through a possibly arbitrary-feeling scene in which Nick has that same moment of realization. This approach, including a separate but similar character within the book, makes for far more powerful evidence of a soldier’s experience than would some forced truth we might feel in a scene starring Nick. Instead the reader can infer how different a man Nick is from Krebs in his slow, quiet search for solace in the final chapter as he fishes a river (155).

In *Black River*, Tom is the same sort of character that both Krebs and Nick are. Tom’s war though is with himself in feeling guilt in being partly responsible for his daughter’s death. He doesn’t feel he belongs to a society that pays bills, buys groceries, and raises families. He therefore behaves ghostlike, as veterans sometimes do, defaulting to a repetitive routine that recalls human behavior superficially, but does not engage in humanity meaningfully. He plods through time and not life, describing on occasion his desire to not live any longer. He cases

houses in order to rob from them as if it were a job, he visits his mother sparingly as if his presence alone cultivates that relationship, and he imagines his daughter alive and recalls stories as if that act still made him a father.

Because one's personal sense of humanity hinges on his or her ability to navigate elements of life that are in constant flux, time shifts within a narrative can function to amplify the confusion a character feels during that process within such a story. Toni Morrison structures her novel, *Song of Solomon* using time shifts, crafting the images and the circumstances just before and after those shifts to clarify the novel's themes. Time shifts in narrative cause the reader to be preoccupied with a previous chapter. Very little time elapses in the act of reading, so the action, drama, and suspense of one chapter will bleed into the next, but when a time shift occurs between chapters, that suspense charges the reading of the next chapter with an energy that wouldn't exist otherwise. It's our desire as readers, not the characters' desires, that gives the subsequent chapter energy and clarity. For instance, in *Song of Solomon*, Macon III (or Milkman Dead) is born the day after Robert Smith jumps from the hospital on Not Doctor Street in his blue wings. There seems to be significance in Milkman's birth happening at that moment, a connection between him and the man with the blue wings, perhaps akin to reincarnation. When we see Milkman and his family four years later, riding in a car, we're preoccupied with finding evidence that he's somehow still carrying Robert Smith's desire to fly. There is indeed affirmation of that connection immediately when we see that Milkman is devastated as a four year old "that only birds and airplanes could fly [and] he lost all interest in himself" (9).

Milkman grows up to still desire flight, to escape his family, and perhaps especially to escape racial oppression by ignoring it. In this way, Milkman is a character similar to Krebs and Nick in *In Our Time* in that his defense mechanism is to retract from society. His story reflects

many Americans' disjointed understandings of race in the early twentieth century. We see Milkman in stark contrast to his friend Guitar who joins a radical group that fights (be it mindlessly) rather than taking flight. Milkman's northerner-like response to ignore Emmett Till's death feels like flight, and the reader is easily able to make that connection because of Morrison's time shifts. The comparisons between Milkman as a child and Milkman as an adult are drawn for the reader by abutting those moments. Similarly, in *Black River*, Tom and Janie's struggle to learn their respective roles in their strange relationship as transporter and passenger, baby-sitter and charge, caretaker and cared-for, and parent and child, wouldn't be as clearly troublesome without the time shifts. The reader's experience of following the disjointed structure reflects Tom and Janie's experience.

Again, perhaps most importantly, Morrison's time shifts accomplish the difficult task of describing systemic racial oppression. I wouldn't know if it's possible to explain such a thing at all to an outsider, but I do think I understand better than I ever have what it meant to be black in America in the first half of the twentieth century after having read this novel. The lesson isn't stated anywhere in the story exactly—it's more of a slow realization the reader has: nothing ever changes. The book spans from the 1910s to 1963 just before the bulk of the civil rights movement, and not once does it seem that anything is getting any better. Not only that, but no character has hope for change—they demonstrate anger and frustration and perhaps they seek solutions to individual problems regarding race, but the machine is firmly in place for each of them. How do you actually explain this though? This is a common phrase about this moment in American history before: *nothing ever changed*. But that phrase, and a quick, history-book explanation does nothing to cause an audience to understand. Morrison's way of explaining this idea is to simply tell characters' stories over an entire novel and allow the absence of absolve or

retribution or hope slowly explain to the reader what it meant to be black. That slow, eventual unfolding of a theme is crucial for *Song of Solomon's* success. Evidence of long-term cause and effect helps to prove Morrison's point about that racial oppression.

In *Black River*, I'm writing about parenting or the misconceptions inexperienced parents have about it. If I were to explore only those micro moves in Tom and Janie's parent-child relationship, ending before the reader can see their growth coming to fruition, I would leave out the higher stake implicit in every parent-child relationship: long term success. To speak to this idea that long-term effects such as those I've mentioned about *Song of Solomon*, I included in my novel a story titled "Backyard Tomatoes," which follows a family through its deterioration over several decades. It was important to me to think about a nurturing of one's own humanity and therefore a parent's nurturing as a living organism that requires consistent work to keep functioning. "Backyard Tomatoes" follows the marriage of Keith, a manic-depressive firefighter who resigns from his family by escaping into hobbies, and Gloria, a depressed housewife who pretends her family's problems don't exist, and who escapes into an affair with another man. There are intermittent moments of clarity and love for the couple, and the effect is a demonstration of how small successes in a relationship don't necessarily add-up to its overall success. Their relationship rots over decades, only perfumed occasionally, and therefore not cared-for consistently so that it can flourish. This story suggests the highest stake Tom and Janie face: long term failure following the small success they have when they unify in Colorado. Placed just after Tom and Janie crossing over the New Mexico-Colorado border, "Backyard Tomatoes" makes sense of Tom and Janie's struggle in New Mexico but warns of future possibility after Tom and Janie reach Ft. Collins, Colorado. It's there where they'll decide to either stay together, to press onward up I-25, or to go to Tom's mother to figure out another

solution to Janie's abandonment. "Backyard Tomatoes" causes the reader to wonder which choice is right considering how difficult and uncertain any family's relationship can be.

The Recursive River: Temporal Discontinuities in 20th Century Fiction

Novels that depart from linear storytelling throughout literary history are often challenges to how we think of cause and effect in our own lives. Because of the way we understand the flow of time, we naturally figure the events in our lives are results of accumulation—energy flows through each event of our lives leading up to some seminal point. The order of causes greatly determines the resulting effects. This could be true. What else could be true? Is it possible that instead the order is arbitrary and that our societally derived understanding of the flow of time causes us to assign more importance to order than need be? In *Black River*, I've ordered the first section of Tom and Janie's stories so that they jump forward and backward in time. If a reader were to reorder these chapters so that they were linear, the causes and effects within would not betray our regular understanding of time—earlier moments do in fact impact later moments in recognizable ways. I instead wanted to alter that sequential order to make a point about the totality of cause and effect before leaps in learning occur for a parent, or in this case, Tom, a struggling and confused caretaker of sorts. The accumulation of knowledge before one learns is a mess. I argue that people, and so of course parents, don't learn sequentially. It's not trial and error when the subject doesn't understand how the task should be accomplished and can't explain the process. William Carlos Williams' "The Use of Force" points to that difficulty parents have when they fail in providing care to a child they don't actually understand. In *Black River*, Tom doesn't immediately learn after he realizes his questioning of Janie on a public beach in Elephant Butte only causes her to recoil. He repeats the offense in a strange truck stop diner, and though he comments on his folly, he still doesn't learn. The effect is something like Donald Barthelme's story, "The School," which wonders about how superficially we sometimes understand children, or how little we care to understand the effects of our "lessons." I present

Tom and Janie's stories out of order, but the effect is the same as if they were chronological. In fact, the chapters in Part One of *Black River* could be presented in a multitude of ways, and although some of the nuanced effects by juxtaposing them the way I have might disappear, I believe the overall experience would be similar for the reader—parents struggle with themselves to understand what they're doing right and what they're doing wrong because humans do the same when trying to grasp their own humanity.

There's a freedom in the form of a novel in short stories that allows an author to utilize snapshots to penetrate any subject matter without the need for a belabored narrative connection between each of the stories. Each story can live as a separate entity, and remain connected by some other means, such as theme. Because Hemingway's *In Our Time* is such an early instance of a possible novel in short stories, (in company with Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*) and because it is a formative entry from a writer that provides groundwork for thousands of authors to follow, its form proved necessary for me to study since my novel functions in similar ways.

On first reading *In Our Time*, one gets a sense that Hemingway is considering America on a global scale. In the first story, "On the Quai at Smyrna," Hemingway describes a common American soldier's perception of World War I—the bloody atrocities due to a human appetite to destroy (12). The story shows, as many other stories do in the collection, the larger world and at a distance from an isolated, safe America, but interestingly, it's able to do so by looking at characters under a microscope. It's as if America is trapped in a time bubble at some point in the past, separate from the carnage overseas. This seems to evidence Hemingway's desire to play with our understanding of time—war something that quickens it, peace something that slows it.

In effect, the stories all living together in a single volume seem to contradict each other, therefore challenging our notions of the flow of time.

With *Black River*, I explore a possible understanding of time—that it matters less than we assume it does—to pinpoint humanity’s frustration with an incomplete conception of time. Just as Nick struggles to assimilate to the slowness of peace when he returns to America, Tom struggles to learn how to care for Janie having been isolated from society for years beforehand. Nick assimilates to peace just as Tom assimilates to conflict, but interestingly, the effect is similar. Both men witness a disparity in the flow of time and are unsure how to cope in their new realities.

When discussing works that challenge the common approach to the novel, it’s impossible not to mention William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. The book seems to strive for something unconventional. It follows the societal fall of the Jefferson, Mississippi Compson family through the first several decades of the twentieth century. Its four sections are each told from different points of view, the first of which from a mentally-handicapped, thirty-three year old Benjy Compson, who seems to be detached in time. With this section, Faulkner deliberately provokes his readers to challenge their understanding of time, cognition, order, and meaning-making. The opening section Benjy narrates is a monument to objectivity. Not only is Benjy’s point of view devoid of value judgments of those around him or even simple commentary, it’s also contrary to humanity’s conception of time. Benjy’s moaning and crying in reaction to anything that upsets him, particularly anything that deals with his sister, Caddy, often occurs in the present though he’s reacting to something that happened in the past. Benjy slips into memories, and without the cognitive framework to understand memory, he simply reacts to whatever flashes in his brain. Faulkner uses the conditions of this particular mental handicap to

show a point of view that's free of the constrictions of time. When people encounter hardship, "time heals all." This isn't true for Benjy—he can't distance himself from his life's emotional moments like he were separating positive and negative jumper cable clamps. Everything in his life is connected at all times. Faulkner is challenging how novels flow through time in order to make a point. Removing time from the human experience allows Faulkner to ask his reader to question reality: Is Benjy's experience of life more complete than ours? Is it more honest or true? Are we handicapped by our preoccupation with time? Benjy's present is the span of his entire life and every moment therein plays against and with every other moment continuously for the duration of his life. He is never numb, absent, depleted, or jaded. His emotional responses hold their power indefinitely. Faulkner breaks down the conventions of the novel in order to challenge the value of perceiving life chronologically.

Similarly to Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, Tom in *Black River* flows in and out of memories, particularly those of his deceased daughter, Charlie. She is more real and impacting a person to his current consciousness than anyone alive, even after Janie enters. He tells Janie stories about Charlie—putting together a puzzle, fearing a charging bull, telling him a story about cows. He does it in such a way that the reader wonders if he's elated to finally tell them out loud to another person, Janie. He's materialized Charlie by breaking into homes to visit their living rooms, and imagining her playing there, possibly telling himself these stories in his mind. Her existence in another mind other than his own, Janie's, now makes Charlie more tangible to him than she'd been since she died. Even after he coalesces with Janie late in the novel, he continues to tell stories about Charlie. When the reader learns in one of the final chapters that Charlie had died at two, and that many if not most of his stories were fabricated, the reader finally understands the extent of his delusion. It's uncertain that he'll ever break from this

delusion, but I wonder (and therefore so does the novel) if his delusion is harmful or wrong. If our understanding of time is incomplete, who's to say that his memories can't be as real as what we've decided to characterize as a standard reality?

Just as twentieth century novelists have challenged the form according to structure, they've challenged it according to theme as well. Our ideas of any given theme do not remain stagnant so that they can only be altered according to how we order stories about those themes. Historically, authors have often romanticized war in literature, ostensibly in effort to understand it better, but is that ever the end result, at least in a tangible and useful way? In *Slaughterhouse Five*, perhaps Kurt Vonnegut wants to explain the absurdity of war. He wants to explain away the reasons to romanticize it. He wants to theorize about his inclination to denounce war's prominence in literature. How would one do this, though? By explaining a leader's infirmity of purpose when he proposes the reasons to enter war? By explaining the insanity the soldiers feel during the war, watching senseless acts of violence unfold before them, actions solicited by governing entities without clear reason? By explaining the logic of the war's proceedings, as if ideologically forced violence was something natural to an individual? To Vonnegut, none of these questions are explicable because none of them can possibly be grounded in logic. War is illogical to Vonnegut. War is a senseless act learned from previous societies, perpetuated by those faults in human learning processes, which is essentially guided by lessons in behavior and not ideology. If ideologies guide anyone, they do systemically from some point in the past. What really leads a person from action to action is simple behavioral learning from person to person—from mother to son, from father to daughter, from general to Lieutenant, from Lieutenant to Private. I don't think Vonnegut wouldn't dare explain any of these ideas though, perhaps because

they would seem silly to him. War is something that is silly because of its causes, but is serious because of its repercussions.

As an author, how do you explain this understanding of war, or rather, how do you explain this conundrum? Vonnegut recognizes that dramatization does no good. To tell the story with a beginning, middle, and end would ground the story in some sort of logic that wouldn't represent what war does. To describe senseless violence by providing it with the logic of conventional story telling would betray the reality of war. War is simply senseless. It is a byproduct of a human tendency toward dominance. It is a perverted amplification of a single person's desire to be above another. If that is the definition of war, it is an indictment too—war is only societal, and so it is imaginary. Stories are not imaginary, though they seem to be. Instead, they are (hopefully) accurate accounts of what people want, need, and feel. War is not an instigator of any of those things. Instead it is a societal byproduct that inadvertently causes those things—wants, needs and feelings—during the time we live, and during the time soldiers fight. To speak about war as if it were a logical process would be to equate it to love or hate or regret or volition. Vonnegut's answer to writing about something so illogical is to scatter temporal markers, to distort our understanding of time and therefore distort our understanding of cause and effect within war since any reported causes and effects are simply invented.

Similarly, in *Black River*, Tom detaches from the war of society because it isn't real for him any longer, and he tells stories, mostly about Charlie, as though they were realities. In fact, almost every minor character in the novel also tells stories in this way. Phillip the wandering Christian Scientist tells a rudimentary fable he intends to use when he becomes a minister as though it spoke truths simply because he invented it. An old man that briefly takes Tom and Janie into his cabin for shelter has written a story from the point of view of a river, and explains

to Tom that it's "not a story to [him]. That's what happened on [his] land during [his] time. That's history." A Native American selling pottery shards to a line awaiting a truck-stop restroom tells his life story, filled with impossible details about his grandmother nursing his entire family for what must have been a hundred years in such a convincing way, that Tom believes it must be true. The mystic speaks in a way that justifies Tom's own delusions that his daughter, Charlie, is still somehow alive. These moments point to Vonnegut's assertions that the narratives we invent guide our consciousness and our view of reality. In Vonnegut's novel and also in mine, narrative drives human comprehension of what humanity is, though Vonnegut focuses on warning of the dangers inherent there while I wonder if perhaps narrative is a construct indeed worthy of explaining humanity as any other.

Black River: Parenting as a Process of Empathy

Black River centers on Tom, a young father turned drifter after his daughter dies at a young age. He steals from isolated houses in the country to survive, but also to revisit the domesticated setting of his past. When he finds Janie, a seven-year-old girl whose father has just hung himself on the front porch of their house, alone and helpless, Tom battles with himself before deciding to save her by taking her with him. Afraid he'll be arrested for kidnapping, he attempts to leave her at a fire station, but fearing that she'll fall in the wrong hands given what he's read in her father's suicide note, he instead takes her north to Ft. Collins, Colorado where his mother lives. Along the way, up I-25, the two struggle to connect, but their loneliness and their desires for familial love cause them each to eventually give the other a chance.

The structure of *Black River* mimics the movement of parenting. Tom struggles, nearly blind, with just rough, singled-out memories of his own upbringing to reference. He forces solutions, and remembers prior moments with Janie too late, so that instead of learning lessons, he vaguely understands what he's done wrong when it's already too late. His is an intellectual and emotional struggle that seems separate from Janie's until he realizes that hers is the only struggle that matters. He realizes that "[w]hen you have a little one, why think from any other place than the wet newness they've yet to spill?" Later in the story, throughout Part Two in Colorado, Tom makes decisions thinking of Janie first. He worries an old man's cabin won't be suitable for them, to the point that he doesn't trust the old man, even without reason. This stands in stark contrast to Tom and Janie's hitchhiking episode with Phillip the Christian Scientist. Whereas in New Mexico, Tom made decisions based on what he was capable of doing alone (hitchhiking), in Colorado, he is cautious about accepting help because he's learned to put Janie first. This shift illustrates how the story functions: the New Mexico half is disjointed, presented

outside of chronology, and has little cause and effect, at least in regard to Tom's understanding of Janie. After the truck stop in extreme northern Raton, New Mexico, Tom almost loses Janie, and they cross the New Mexico-Colorado border. Here the story becomes linear. Tom learns how to parent for the first time instead of treating Janie as a totem in place of his deceased daughter, Charlie. He now has no reason to invent picturesque stories about Charlie in which he is a perfect father, but he still does.

Cause and effect is therefore introduced to Tom and Janie's relationship in Colorado. The entire state serves as a slow resolution for Tom and Janie's conflict that had climaxed near the New Mexico-Colorado border. Parents struggle blindly and slowly accumulate the ability to guide by learning how to do so, and the structure of my story follows that same struggle—disjointed and haphazard at first, and more controlled and focused (though not entirely sure-footed) after Tom learns to be a parent.

In order to have the structure of *Black River* reflect that parent learning process, I decided to write the New Mexico section to be non-linear, though I saw the benefits of writing linearly in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Tension accumulates as the father and son move onward with deliberation although they might never have had an actual destination. The exact setting in *The Road* is purposely obscured, and in part, I see this as an effort for McCarthy to comment upon the futility of the journey they take. In *Black River*, I wanted to disorient readers by shifting in time, so I decided to be very pointed about locations for clarity's sake, even to the point of creating maps to clarify the time shifts and to distinguish the Tom and Janie stories from the other pieces in the book. Still, travel generally functions similarly in my story. When two people travel together, they move over a landscape, the setting in a state of flux, and each character becomes the only orienting focal point for the other character. This is a test for any relationship.

People on the road tend to do one of two things: glom onto each other for comfort and camaraderie, or they resign from each other, either in favor of the exciting newness of the ever-changing landscape, or perhaps just in frustrated resignation from everything. In Tom and Janie's case, they shift back and forth between connecting and disconnecting, and it's unclear whether they'll glom onto each other or resign from each other until they reach Colorado where they finally unite. In this way, and unlike *The Road*, *Black River* is less a story about parenting in a strict sense, and more about two characters with a unique mix of possible connections. Are they traveling partners? Are they strangers bound together? Are they parent and child? Are they kidnapper and the kidnapped? Are they each other's last hope? My personal answer is that they are all of these things, and they act, react and think accordingly.

Since Tom and Janie have a peculiar relationship dynamic, it was important for me to include additional stories within *Black River* that speak indirectly to Tom and Janie's story as parent and child, to highlight that possibility for their relationship. The additional vignettes and short stories that punctuate Tom and Janie's story should cause the reader to compare parent-child relationship dynamics in these other stories to those in Tom and Janie's relationship. It should cause a reader to wonder if Tom has the same haunting connection to his dead child, Charlie, that Marie in "A Family of Quail" has to her daughter who'd died of Leukemia, and if he'd have the strength to bury the family of quail though one chick seems to still have life in it. The speaker in "Don't Forget the Ice" should cause a reader to wonder what sort of father Tom would be, and perhaps to wonder what sort of father Tom had been when Charlie was alive. In ways, "Backyard Tomatoes" relates to Tom and Janie's story similarly to how "Soldier's Home" relates to Nick's story in *In Our Time*. Krebs is sort of a foil character for Nick, and Keith is a foil for Tom. Keith is a loner trapped in a family, and Tom is a failed family man trapped being a

loner. More than that though, “Backyard Tomatoes” is a centerpiece that gives the entire work a grounding by providing a short piece about a decades-long span of a family’s history. It shows quickly how families can dissolve and unite and reform and dissolve again. It demonstrates what is still possible for Tom by the end of the story: he could still fail. In fact, he most certainly will fail in some regard again. If parenting is a process of learning in order to succeed, that process never finishes and so parenting successes and failures ebb and flow indefinitely throughout a parent’s life. Tom won’t know if he’ll fail irrecoverably—he needs instead to decide if caring for Janie is worth the risk of him failing, and if he does decide to, does he do it for himself or for her?

In *Black River*, I’m thinking about the way children and child-like minds receive their world. Without “Mile Marker 279,” the chapter in which Janie remembers her home back in the valley between El Paso and Las Cruces, her background and the complex and descriptive way she sees her surrounding environment couldn’t otherwise exist in the novel. Her voice, as reported through a third-person personal account describing Tom’s thoughts, is mostly ignored, or at best hazy, without her voice to report it. She is only heard so directly from within the time parameters of the story (there is a chapter from her first-person point of view recalling her abduction from a later point in time) in this one instance, and the rarity of her voice recalls how children are widely understood by adults—in fleeting moments but with an intensity that makes adults wonder about what else lies inside a child’s mind. Her voice in this chapter is clear and descriptive so that the reader can feel what it is to be a child. For instance, Tom catches a glimpse of the inner workings of Janie’s mind when she improvises a dark story of war and regret between dinosaurs that wish to look like cows. In Janie’s story within a closet, where she is scared and ironically escapes to a memory with her abusive father, something equally as

frightening to her, the reader can see Janie's perception and confusion about her world. The reader can subsequently imagine (because the story commonly wants to imagine possibility) what she's thinking in any given scenario thereafter. This is about the most access children have into the workings of the complex and befuddling world around them. A child's rough understanding, or rather an adults rough understanding of a child's rough understanding of their universe, is a powerful lens through which adults can view the world to learn how to parent. Understanding that a child you care for has little to no agency in the complex, harmful world that engulfs them is difficult for a parent to reconcile. In fact, that idea is haunting. Tiny moments in which a child's true thoughts are somehow drawn out with some articulation are impacting and therefore will confuse, trouble, but ultimately guide a parent forward.

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A Family of Quail

Marie wasn't the type to cry, but a family of quail is a hard thing to flatten. She pulled over, tugged the emergency brake and gripped the steering wheel, her white skin and green veins stretched tight over knobby knuckles. She grasped her forehead and slid her hands over deep, black eye sockets and wiped tears collecting on her bull nose-ring. Hitting a deer wouldn't have made her cry. It didn't when she was nineteen headed to her grandmother's cabin up in Cloudcroft. A doe sent the car engine a foot into the car's cabin, and the firemen used the Jaws of Life to snip at what looked like a metal flower blossom wrapping her leg. She watched the deer as they snipped, its head hanging over the edge of the asphalt shoulder, its head bobbing slightly when semi trucks zoomed by, but she didn't cry.

The deer didn't make Marie cry, but the quail did. The mama's head plume covered a baby's face, and so she thought of her daughter at three, her ponytail dripping down her neck and covering her brown shoulder. Then she saw her daughter as a baby, shirtless and asleep in her bassinet on a June morning, her lips parted, toothless gums inside, waking any moment now to reach for Mama. Then she saw herself holding hair clippers, her daughter three again, crying in the bathroom screaming that she liked her hair. The ponytail fell to the floor and so did the rest of her soft hair, the buzz of the hair clippers still sounding in the air like a grim reaper's scythe held still after the swing.

Marie remembered the doctor leaning forward deliberately and apologetically, his fingers woven to be sure he was taken seriously when he said "Leukemia," the nurse acutely aware of his lack of bedside manner. The two women trembled in their hug afterward in the hospital hall.

Then Marie saw herself pregnant and dancing in her dining room, the turntable spinning

Otis Redding. She bit into a mushroom slice on her plate of eggplant Parmesan. Her sister had told her that eggplant triggered birth, so Marie had her husband go to Olive Garden to pick up a plate to go. She hesitated to bite into the eggplant. What if it worked? What if she bit in and her daughter came hurtling out of her ready to nurse, then take a bottle, roll over onto her belly, crawl down the hard oak floor, stand against the couch arm, stumble ten steps, say mama, say milk, say poopos, say I love you, say mama, I want to go to the park today, the one with the secret lion under the slide.

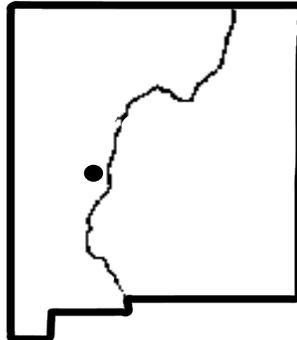
Marie took her hands off her face and opened the car door to go to the quail. She imagined a ponytail over there, lying limp on the gravel like a severed tentacle. She walked to the family of quail, pushed them gently with the butt of her palm into her opened nylon coat, their heads bouncing over the zipper, and then she walked to the side of the road to bury them. A baby still had a little life as she pushed the dirt over it, an opened, black eye disappearing behind the brown dirt, and she packed the earth as tight as she dared.

Part I
New Mexico

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 115



The smell of piss touched every bit of the Santa Fe Diner and Truck Stop in Magdalenas, New Mexico, but the dining room smelled least. Eight avocado vinyl upholstered diner booths lined the walls of an old Santa Fe Southern Railway train car now swallowed by additions—the kitchen, a bar, a women’s room and that awful men’s room emanating the piss smell.

Janie said it smelled, hugging the red blanket, Tom agreed, and they sat across from each other in the last booth, furthest from the men’s room.

Since they’d been there, four different truckers arrived, each greeting the full-figured cook under a mountain of Aqua-Netted black hair by name. *Pammy, what’s cooking? Pammy, sugar—how are you? There’s my lovely Pammy. She’s mine, Harold. Like hell, she is—Every pancake, egg, and burger’s made just for me. My Pammy’s just too sweet to let you poor bastards go hungry.*

Crusted tears spotted the outside corners of Janie's eyes making him want to lick a thumb and wipe them away. She'd said something yesterday he didn't like. She said that little kids can run away when no one's looking. Considering that, spreading his saliva on her face didn't seem like a good idea.

The crust spots glimmered in the dim light of a tabletop Christmas tree in the corner. Janie slid deep into the booth, spreading the blanket over her lap and sopped up the red, green, and yellow light of the Christmas tree. Janie herself was still gray despite all the light. Pammy giggled, the sound something like a puppy playing, and that sound must have reverberated inside Janie until she leaked the slightest smile.

"Pammy's pretty popular," Tom said, shining a light on Janie, washing her smile out. She stared at the dusty Christmas tree adorned with red and green cloth chili peppers, and as Tom adjusted to the twinkling lights, their magic disappeared, Janie just an object like the ketchup bottle or the salt and pepper shakers in front of her.

The saltshaker reminded Tom about being a waiter in the Monte Vista Retirement Center when he was sixteen. He'd fill the saltshakers, mop the bathrooms and tear the dinner rolls apart and toss them in linen-lined, wicker baskets before the residents would file in for dinner. They'd hobble around the tables for their preferred seats, the youngest of the old men straightening their spines as they walked past the oldest men. The young-old men didn't want to belong there. The old-old men didn't want to belong downstairs, a place some called the morgue.

They'd all order tilapia or chicken and rice from a short menu they all had memorized, and Tom would bend at his waist to hear their low murmurs. They really did have old-fashioned names like Edna and Agnes and Rupert. Tom heard from the older waiters that Edna and her curved spine were most likely headed for the basement next. The basement, downstairs, the hole,

the morgue, really just the lower level of the complex, was where they all eventually went to die. Toward the end, they all walked slower, they all spoke less, they all needed someone to wipe food from their sagging cheeks. The teenage wait staff weren't trained to do this or change diapers, or administer medicine, so the almost-dead were sent away to specialists, and that drop to the basement made them die quicker. After just six months on the job, Tom could tell when someone would be headed to the basement next because they'd cover their meals in a sheet of salt when no one was looking so their dying tongues could taste something, anything, while they still had a little time. From the round kitchen door window, Tom watched Agnes shake a sheet of salt over her Tilapia. Her family came to see her last when she was ninety-one. She was ninety-two when he watched her salt her Tilapia, and she never saw ninety-three.

Tom looked at the saltshaker, a ketchup stain near its base, and wondered what it could possibly be doing in front of Janie. What could it possibly be doing for a little girl with nearly all of her sparkly life spread out before her needing no salt at all? He watched her face turn to strange sounds around the dining room, and the stagnant red, green and yellow lights shone on her like shiny metal pins in a dissected frog. She undoubtedly was a science experiment, and Tom wondered with a shudder if she was his science experiment.

Two truckers slid into the booth behind Janie. The bigger one lit a cigarette and propped his cap on the back of his head revealing a red line on his forehead loosely covered in wisps of wet hair. The other, his back to Janie's back, scratched his head, sending a flurry of dandruff on the back of his dark blue t-shirt and a little fluttered down to Janie's black, greasy head. Tom let it go, and even welcomed the smell of the cigarette over the smell of piss until smoke billowed over Janie's seatback like morning clouds falling down a mountainside, and Janie squinted in the smoke. He remembered her squinting in his own cigarette smoke back in the shed a few

mornings ago, and he licked his lips. It would have been a relief to see her eyes not so nervously wide, but instead Tom clenched fists under the table. He'd need to get her safely to Ft. Collins, not be caught or noticed, and now added to the list, avoid confrontation with a jackass trucker.

The red, green and yellow Christmas lights pinned Janie, and he could see she was somewhere as far away as she could get, and that Tom wasn't any different than the truckers or Pammy or even the smell of piss.

"I always played a game with my mom when we were in a diner like this," Tom said.

"Want to try?"

"No."

"Come on, Charlie, I mean Janie. It'll be fun. One of us would think of a Disney character and the other would have twenty guesses—"

"I'm not Charlie."

"I know that, Bean. It just slipped."

"I'm not Bean."

She said Bean like it was an insult of a nickname, or maybe like a slur against her kind, but neither of them knew what her kind really was. To Tom, she was not his daughter Charlie, and to Janie she was not a rat in a cage, though Tom wasn't sure she'd ever seen a rat in a cage. Tom said nothing more, figuring silence had a better chance at setting them to zero than speaking did.

He noticed the roll of silverware on the table in front of him, figured it might come in handy, checked Janie's eyes, and then slid the silverware roll off the table and into his jeans pocket. Janie attached her gaze to the Christmas tree again.

Cigarette and Dandruff caught each other up on the latest in their lives, trucker's gossip, while Janie stared, ignoring Tom, but shot a glance once at his waist. Clever little one, he thought.

Cigarette's kids were all right. Brian had straight As and knew the hell out of his states and capitols, would recite them before bed whether Cigarette's wife wanted to hear it or not. Dandruff joked that all little kids had straight As, laughed and apologized, but Cigarette laughed, too. Cigarette was hauling drywall down to El Paso and a little behind because some Goddamn fucking roller skate wouldn't get out the fucking way.

The cigarette cloud collected in the dining room's sky above Janie, and Tom let the curse words go, imagining little Brian lying in yellow nightlight in a bottom bunk saying Texas, Austin, Utah, Salt Lake City, Vermont, Montpeely Air.

Dandruff's boys had both gotten oil field jobs, making pay hand-over-fist. One man fell to his death last month, and Quinn, the younger one seemed worried, but Dandruff knew he raised careful men. Dandruff had turned over a new leaf and wasn't messing around with lot lizards no more, and Cigarette thought that was funny as hell but he was proud because pickle park's a good way to get your dick all tore up.

"Fellas?" Tom raised his voice and sat up tall so Cigarette could see his face. "You want to watch the language? Got a little girl here."

Dandruff glanced over his shoulder and shot a quick nod. Cigarette took another drag, and said no prob, Bob. Smoke hissed out the corner of his mouth, blowing out into the middle of the dining room, and he dabbed his butt in the ashtray. Pammy came to the end of Tom and Janie's table and fixed her greasy apron around her middle as she spoke.

“Evening, strangers. Special’s the Hatch green chili burger with fries and a coke,” she said and reached into a pocket behind Tom’s seat for a couple of menus, and he felt her heat and smelled her Aqua Net, perfume, and grease. She laid the menus down on the table and smiled at Janie and said Hey, Sugar and Janie scrunched up embarrassed. Tom said thanks, and added they needed another roll of silverware. Pammy apologized, saying she swore she put two down, looking at Tom.

“Do you skateboard?” Pammy said to Janie. Janie shook her head.

“Well you ought to. I was brought up with dolls and lipstick and all that nonsense. My niece skateboards. She’s out day after day on the half-pipe her daddy made her, even until after dark.” She looked at Cigarette with raised eyebrows to punctuate the truth of it. “I’d be afraid she’d break her neck out there, but you know what?” Pammy said, leaning toward Janie.

“What?” Janie said.

“She’s a girl, so I don’t need to worry,” Pammy said and winked. She took a little toy skateboard out of her apron and left it on the table in front of Janie.

Pammy returned to the kitchen, touching Cigarette’s skinny bicep propped up on his seatback as she passed. Tom saw it and he and Cigarette caught each other for a moment. Cigarette held longer than Tom, who looked down to leaf through the menu.

“So I was down in Lordsburg,” Cigarette said, “Where they working on a new overpass.”

Tom could hear Cigarette’s smile in his speech and knew he wasn’t really talking to Dandruff. He was talking to Tom.

“Dundee told me—you remember Dundee? Like Crocodile Dundee? Always had the hat and the alligator boots? Well old Dundee told me a doozie. A doozie! Apparently there’s a cartel family hiding up that far, up in Lordsburg? Imagine that. That far up. I’m telling you, they’ll be

flooding us out sooner or later. Any rate, one of the younger ones, the cartel family that is, is working construction as a front. So some other Mexican come up looking for them, but the Lordsburg family knew he was coming and caught him. They threw him in a trunk, drove him out to the construction site in the middle of the night, tossed him under one of them big old jackhammers. Look like a Bobcat? Know the kind? They toss him under there, face down, the jackhammer over his spine and they just went to town on his ass.”

He paused to light a new cigarette and raised a finger from the lighter at Tom.

“Oh, that’s right. Language,” he said and sent a tidal wave of smoke past his teeth. “They went to town on *him*. They went and went and went until they split that poor Mexican right in half,” Cigarette said and lightly karate chopped his silverware and it clinked.

Tom pushed his fingernails into his palms under the table not knowing what he’d do with his fists. He imagined his fist slamming into Cigarette’s cheek, and then the Christmas lights shining pins against them as they struggled between the rows of booths, Pam yelling for them to cool it, Tom struggling to find Janie’s face, her not being there, him hearing her say that *kids can run away when no one’s looking*, seeing her booth empty save for the red blanket hanging from the edge of the seat, seeing her out near I-25 alone, near zooming semi trucks, tired travelers, and country drunks switching lanes like they were playing ping pong, Tom being beaten against the linoleum, wondering what the police would say when they finally arrived and propped him up from the floor.

“How’d they get the key?” Dandruff said.

“What do you mean?” Cigarette said.

“They have those construction sites locked down real good. Foreman’s always got the keys to all the equipment and they never give them up, cartel or not.”

Tom thought to reach for Janie's hand, thought better of it, but caught Janie's eye and wondered if she wanted his hand as bad as he wanted to give it.

"I don't know," Cigarette said. "They got the key. The kid works there, I told you."

"Nah, he's just a kid. No way no foreman's going to let that key out of his sight. Cartel or not. They'd lose more than their jobs. Insurance behind those construction companies are a son of a bitch. They'll bankrupt a whole town if they can figure out how."

"I'm telling you, they jackhammered him. The cartel. Meanest Mexicans you ever heard of. Dundee knew it first hand."

"First of all, that's second hand at best. He wasn't there. Second of all, I heard much worse from the cartels. Heads in mailboxes and shit. Sorry." Dandruff shot another lazy nod over his shoulder to apologize to Tom for the curse word. "And third of all, Dundee's a moron. Can't even land a local job. He's been stuck doing red-eye OTRs for years."

"Some people like that."

"He don't."

"I know what I heard."

"I hear what you heard, but you heard wrong."

"Shut up."

"Ain't no way."

"Shut up, I said."

Cigarette slouched, shook his head, and dabbed his cigarette in the ashtray. Pammy returned with a couple of glasses of ice water for Tom and Janie and asked for their order. Tom got the special and asked Janie what she wanted, but she didn't say anything, fiddling with the toy skateboard in her lap. Pammy suggested the grilled cheese, fries and milk. Janie whispered,

Yes, thank you, and Tom felt like a fool. Of course that's what she'd want. Tom saw Cigarette shaking his head as if to say that anyone would know that a little girl would want a grilled cheese, fries, and milk. Pammy walked away and then whispered back, you're welcome, and Tom wondered if he had a place there in the diner at all.

Cigarette and Dandruff got their meals and they ate in silence. Tom watched the universe of the truck stop, the way Cigarette daintily poured cream in circles into his coffee. The way Pammy flipped open a compact, licked the lipstick from the corners of her mouth and then rolled her eyes at her own reflection. The way Janie chewed her upper lip while spinning the skateboard's wheel with her thumb as she stared way past the Christmas tree. The way the three-hundred-pound trucker called Care-Bear teetered off his stool, fished through his jeans pocket, sifted through change, and shoved everything but quarters in the slit on the March of Dimes can on the bar.

"Hey, man," Cigarette said to Tom. Tom glanced up, and looked back down. Tom registered that Cigarette really meant to speak to Tom, and so Tom looked back up at him.

"Got carried away," Cigarette said to Tom. "You got a kid. I got kids. Just a little road-weary. Your girl okay?"

"She's okay," Tom said.

"You okay, little girl," Cigarette said to her greasy black hair.

"She's okay," Tom said. Janie said nothing, Tom shook his head at Cigarette, and Cigarette did his best to stay quiet.

The diner eased into a lull, Creedence Clearwater Revival humming low, something about the rain out boom box speakers in the back of the kitchen. The old truckers had heard Cigarette's apology, Pammy'd heard it, and Tom heard it loud, wanting to ask Cigarette a

question about his load as if he knew a thing about trucking, as if striking conversation would do a thing, as if he knew a thing about anyone anymore. It had been more than he'd heard from another human being since months before finding Janie.

Tom watched the three hundred pound trucker, not eating his meal, sitting erect, probably waiting for Cigarette or Tom to speak, and he wondered how long the three hundred pound trucker had. Would he end up in a home like Edna? Would he end up dying unexpectedly on the road? Maybe a heart attack while driving, the semi jack-knifing, taking out a rollerskate filled with a little family?

"I'm naming it Pammy," Janie said, still fiddling with the skateboard in her hands. Tom detached his gaze from the three-hundred-pound trucker, said that made sense, put his glass of water down, and put his hands in his lap.

"She needs a place to live though," she said.

"Keep it in your pocket for now."

"She's not going to like my pocket."

"I'll work on it."

"My Daddy got us a lizard for Christmas," Janie said.

"Us?"

"Me and my brother."

"You have a brother?" Tom said as urgently as though he'd left a loaded gun in a preschool. Cigarette and Dandruff turned their heads as far as they dared.

"No."

"You do or you don't," Tom said, almost whispering.

"Not anymore."

“Not making much sense, sweetheart. This past Christmas?”

“I could tell you, or you could keep asking questions,” Janie said without hesitation, like it were a phrase bored in her memory. Cigarette and Dandruff shifted in their seats and snickered, and Janie recoiled in embarrassment the way seven-year-olds do when they strike conversational oil and don’t understand how they did it.

Tom picked up the glass of ice water, took a sip, and then held it in his lap. He nodded at Janie, knowing his words hadn’t helped her to speak since Elephant Butte. She relaxed and continued, telling it all to the Christmas tree or something past the Christmas tree, the red, green and yellow lights pinning her to the booth.

“We heard lizards grow their tails back. So we took the lizard into the shed and got one of my daddy’s big knives in the shed and put it up on the table. Jamie didn’t want to do it, so I told him he was being a wimp, so he took the knife and put it on the lizard, and I told him careful but he’s not real careful anyway, and he tried to cut the tail off but he slipped or something and cut it right in half. There was blood and you could see his bones in there, and Jamie cried and I told him shut up and we knew Daddy’d be mad, real mad like on my birthday when I dropped the cake, so we hid. We hid in the shed. We turned the light off and we hid. But it was cold. There was snow outside even, and we didn’t have our jackets, but we were scared so we hid. We waited and waited, but Daddy went to sleep for a long time because he had beers and when we came out in the morning, Jamie was sick, and Daddy took him to the doctor and then they took him to the hospital but he wasn’t okay, and I told him I was sorry when he was in the hospital but he couldn’t say anything, and I told him I’d save up for another lizard, but he didn’t say anything.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to talk when you’re in the hospital.”

“He was gone,” Janie said, a tear running down her cheek and into the corner of her mouth and she licked her lips. “And then Daddy hung from a rope on the porch.”

“Okay, Bean.”

“And then you found me.”

“Okay, Bean.”

“And then you took me.”

“That’s enough, Janie.”

“Is that your kid?” Cigarette said. “Or not?” Cigarette sat upright against the vinyl-backed booth, his hands flat on the tabletop.

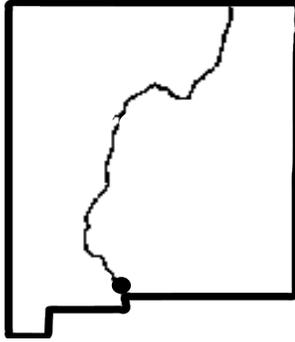
“I’m her uncle,” Tom said. “And it’s not your business, bud.”

Tom waited for Janie to say he wasn’t her uncle, watching her mouth and her eyes. Red, green and yellow Christmas lights shone on her brown skin, her squinted eyes not leaking. She seemed to cry, but no tears flowed out. Nothing flowed out to wash over the crust he’d wanted to lick away. He watched her not speak and knew suddenly that speaking was a thing we did when our bodies were connected to the air around us, when the words could float around other words just like it, when tears or screams or silence weren’t something easier to produce. She stayed silent, and he could see himself turn his back so the *kid could run away when no one was looking*, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t turn his back, and so she couldn’t either.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 4



The little girl had been curled up asleep on the sooty cab floor of the pickup when Tom pulled off I-25 onto a dirt road. A pile of his clothes hugged her back, her head against his air force jump boots, everything blackened from the soot of yesterday's fire. Panicked about stealing a little girl, he had burned the clothes he'd been wearing inside a large paper bag in a dry rivulet bed figuring there'd be some way the police could track him. He thought of the skinny punk kid working the register at the gas station where Tom stopped just before heading over to the girl's house. Tom handed his driver's license over, placed a box of granola bars on the counter and asked the kid to open pump five, that he'd come back in to pay with cash. Annoyed, the kid eyed Tom up and down.

Tom took a folded green flannel shirt from the girl's father's dresser to wear instead, one that hadn't seemed to have seen light of day in years, the fabric discolored along the creases. He wore it as he burned his own shirt and anything else that might be used to identify him—a denim jacket and a Padre's baseball cap.

He took Janie's father's letter from the jacket's chest pocket and read it again. He tucked it under the denim jacket so that a corner stuck out and held his lighter to it, but stopped short of lighting it. He took the note out, folded it, and slid it into the green flannel shirt pocket, and used the gas station receipt still in his jeans pocket for kindling instead.

Standing away from the blaze, he realized too late he had left his wedding ring in the chest pocket of his denim jacket. He waited for the fire to die down, going to the shed in the meantime to find a shovel and a pair of work gloves, and returned to black smoke still rising. He stamped the remaining fire, squinting and coughing. He sifted through the rubble calmly at first and then panicked until he found it. He rolled the gold circle between his gloved thumb and finger, wiping the black off. He buried the soot with a shovel, slapped the soot from the gloves, and after the fire was out, he buried the blackened spot in the dry riverbed with fresh sand. Then he replaced the shovel and the gloves where he'd found them hanging in her father's shed.

Tom sat a while longer near the smoldering ashes, rolling his wedding ring between his thumb and finger, and thought about the girl asleep in the passenger side foot-well of his pickup. He'd found her hiding in the belly of an old, yellow cupboard on the second floor of her house. He had trouble looking at her, thinking of her father's dead body hanging from the porch rafter, the rafter creaking from his weight, his face already stinking and gray.

Tom had pulled out the cupboard's drawer, saw her little face, and then opened the bottom cupboard door to uncover her, and she cried. He stayed squatted in front of her as still as he could, hoping his stillness would ease her wailing. Really, he had no idea what to do. He never knew what to do when a child screamed. He was usually clueless when his own daughter, Charlie, screamed and cried about nothing at all, years ago. Charlie once cried about the space under her crib, and he pictured monsters or lions or something else sinister to a toddler hiding

under her bed. He peered between the crib's wooden frame and the carpeted floor and saw nothing at all, not even a stray toy, so he could think of nothing to tell her. He waited dumbfounded for her to tire from crying and then he carried her around the house until she fell asleep against his chest. He laid her sleeping body in her crib. He watched her sleep and wondered if he'd done the right thing. If saying anything at all—*monsters don't exist* or *I got rid of the wolf under your bed and he won't come back*—would have been better. Instead, he kept quiet, and the inexplicable images she imagined must have infected her brain until she was too tired to keep them lit within her. He had allowed that terror. He had allowed a terrifying world to continue to be inexplicable.

He thought of the calluses on the little girl's fingers, laced over her eyes as she cried in the yellow cupboard. Why would a little girl have calluses? What did she do to earn them? Did she carry the wood he'd seen stacked against the shed out back? Did she clear some of the weeds from the yard? She seemed to be too young to do those things, but this was the country, and he knew that country children felt the harsh touch of work earlier than most. He wondered about the calluses even as he told her someone would come as she cried. She couldn't have heard him. He told the air between them that she hadn't seen him, okay? *You didn't see anything or anyone*, and he shut the yellow cupboard door against her wailing.

Then Tom went to the pickup and started the engine. He sat in the driver's seat, his hands on the steering wheel, before sliding the gearshift into first, and looked at the farmhouse in front of him. He'd cased a house down the highway a week earlier, broke in, and sat in its living room through the afternoon. The owner was a farmer out of town attending an irrigation conference in San Antonio. Tom found out by sifting through the farmer's trash for mail.

Tom used the spare key the farmer kept in a storage shed to get into the house, and he used the bolt-cutters in his truck to snap off the combination Master Lock. He sat on the farmer's couch and imagined his daughter, Charlie, crawling on the farmer's living room rug, pointing at the television, wanting him to play a VHS tape of *The Little Mermaid*. The image of her crawling and pointing replayed in his mind for an hour as he sat slumped on the couch.

The little girl in the yellow cupboard had a dead father hanging underneath her. She must have been hungry. She was more alone than his little Charlie had ever been. He remembered a fire station up the interstate. He could take her there. He reached into his jacket pocket for the note he'd taken from her father's dead body and read it again. He couldn't solve her problems, and maybe the firemen couldn't either, but he'd take her there anyway. That was her best chance. He turned the ignition off, and left the pickup to go to back to her.

As he drove away from her house, the little girl curled up on the pickup's floor, the soot tickled her nose and throat so she coughed in her sleep, but after a while, he heard nothing. The bumps in the dirt road jostled her head against the truck floor but didn't wake her. He didn't know how much she'd had to eat or drink since her father had left her inside the house, his body hanging like it was inside a medieval gibbet cage on crossroads, warning trespassers to stay away and her to never leave.

As Tom navigated the road with the headlights off, he looked down at her chest to see if it would fill with air, though he knew there shouldn't be a reason for her to die. He remembered his little Charlie, the way she lay limp on his living room rug, her hair still golden but her skin gray, her body empty and lifeless after just minutes. He figured it could happen again, figured of course it would happen again and that again it would be his fault. He watched the road and then

her chest, the road some more, then her chest, but nothing. When the girl coughed, he knew she was still breathing.

The road hugged a burlled Gray Oak, its base nearly the size of the pickup, knots like black eyes set in the burl, bulging like tumors. It was a tree peculiar to New Mexico, peculiar among the slight, skinny things that adorned the arroyos, spiny, splintered and lacking the water to ever make them bulge. The Oak was the real reason he chose the shed built against the tree as a hideout during his picks in this valley. Never mind the clueless old woman who inherited the property after her husband died last year. Never mind its low lie under the horizon that kept it from being noticed. Never mind its central location. He really picked this spot because he was allured by the Gray Oak, its spirit, size and audacity in thriving and filling it's enormous trunk among a barren expanse of living things that knew how to survive skinny and dehydrated.

The moonlight shone down on the slant roof shed and into its four-pane window, revealing a handsaw hanging on the far wall, framed squarely in the window, but who would ever see that other than him? Or rather, who would ever see it other than the girl and him?

After parking the pickup, he lifted the sleeping girl by the backs of her knees and her neck, carried her out of the pickup, and took her inside the shed. He placed her on his sleeping bag on the shed's floorboards and set his palm on her chest until it lifted. In the moonlight coming through the window, he saw a streak of soot across her cheek. He wiped it with his thumb, but it just spread wider. He covered her in a wool blanket, and then took down from the wall behind her a folding chair and an old .30 carbine rifle. It had been there when he found the shed, but he hadn't dared to touch it until now. He didn't know why he took it down. For a cop

yelling into the shed in the night? For the old lady or someone she sent? He wouldn't shoot any of them, but he pulled the rifle off the wall anyway.

Sitting, he stood the rifle up between his knees, he took the note he found—the one from her father's swinging, dead body—from the green flannel shirt pocket. He unfolded it, read it again, folded it back up and tucked it in his jeans pocket, not knowing how long he'd have the green flannel. He leaned against the wall next to the window and positioned himself so he could rest his head and still see out, and he closed his eyes.

An awful wind kicked up in the night, burrowing tunnels through the oak branches, whistling out through the thick juniper surrounding the shed. There was white moonlight and white air and the brown desert earth beneath them. Tom slept in flashes, and so must have the girl, seeing the opposite of blinking, fitfully fighting both sleep and life.

“I thought you said it wasn't in the desert,” she said, on her tippy toes looking at the morning sun out the window. He hadn't shared a room with anyone at dawn in a while. He thought it must have been Charlie, and she must need a glass of water. The voice was high and raspy, and Tom didn't know Charlie to sound that way. She always sounded like new moss in a new trickle. This wasn't Charlie. He remembered it was the little girl. The rasp came from the lack of water in her body. He wondered if the little girl was always raspy, or if her dead father made her raspy. Maybe the dead made those sounds materialize around them. Her jeans clung to her calves, and he figured they couldn't possibly still be her size. Wrinkle creases zigzagged across her back from the night ride in the pickup truck, or perhaps from the nights she spent alone in that farmhouse, alone and wondering if anyone else was alive since her father was dead.

She had a little brown birthmark on the back of her neck that looked like a turtle, and Tom decided then and there that he'd never say anything about it.

Tom sat up in the folding chair and clutched the rifle leaning against him. She backed away, sat on the sleeping bag, and watched the rifle.

He coughed into a fist. He tucked the rifle behind the chair and then went to the window.

"This isn't the place yet," he said. "Won't be for a long time." He took a pack of Marlboro 27s from his jeans pocket and a lighter tucked inside the carton.

"You hungry?"

He lit a cigarette, drew from it and turned to her. The smoke swirled in the orange morning light and fell low until the draft from under the door blew it up again. She squinted through the swirl of smoke at the orange cherry at the end of his cigarette, her soft child's face fixed on the tiny fire like it was the pilot light in a dragon's nose. He dabbed it out on the workbench, and left the remains for later on edge of the tabletop.

He asked if she liked granola bars, but she said nothing, so he went for a green backpack leaning against the wall next to her, and she pulled her knees up to her chest. As he fished through the backpack for the granola bar, he spoke quietly enough that she might not even hear.

"The hippies ate granola in the sixties like it was some kind of super food." He removed the silver wrapper and tossed it on the workbench. "But it's really just a cookie in disguise." He held the granola bar out to her. "You want a cookie for breakfast?" She gripped her legs tighter, so he placed the granola bar at the end of the sleeping bag and stepped away.

He told her about the nice firemen again, and how she had been sleepy so he let her sleep. "I've been nice, haven't I? This is my food I'm offering you, and I could just as well eat it. Don't refuse food when I know you're hungry." He thought of her curled up, coughing on the pickup's

floor, and saw instead his little Charlie, on his living room carpet, flicking at a wooden block with her meaty fingers, as if they could do a thing, as if building were a thing babies should do.

Janie sat holding her knees and watched the window.

He wiped his face with both hands and then scratched at his stubble. A dove cooed outside and they both watched the window. He stood, hunched over the workbench, opened tiny, plastic drawers in a small-parts organizer and took out a matchbox, a screw and a nail.

“I have a plan, sweetheart,” he said, laying the items out. “I’m the screw, you’re the nail, and the matchbox is the fire station I’ve been talking about. Will you listen to my plan?”

She lifted her head to look at the little drawers, coughed and looked at the cigarette peeking over the tabletop edge.

He thought to say, *I won’t smoke any more*, taking the cigarette and tossing it in a wastebasket in a corner of the shed, adding, *if that makes it any better*, but he didn’t. He took another shallow drag and pushed smoke out the corner of his mouth, smoke that billowed up and fell down the same place it’d be if he’d pushed it past his lips directly in her face.

She looked at the granola bar through the smoke and pulled her black hair against her face.

“Cookies for breakfast don’t sound half bad, huh?” She shook her head and pulled her hair against her cheeks to keep from smiling.

“Grab it up whenever you like, Bean. If you don’t want it, you don’t want it, but there’s plenty more where that came from if you do.” He thought of the punk kid in the gas station, ringing up the gas and the granola bars, and felt the square of folded cash he had left against his thigh in his jeans pocket. He rolled the head of the nail on the tabletop with his index finger and

then with his other hand, felt for the ring in his shirt pocket. Janie coughed, and he looked at his cigarette, but didn't extinguish it.

"I'm sorry I was such a grouch just now," he said, taking a knee. "Just like little girls, old, ugly guys need to mind their manners, too," he said with a wink. She crawled on her hands and knees to the granola bar, took it and backed up against the wall to eat it, coughed, and Tom smiled as best he could. He dabbed the cherry on his cigarette on the corner of the desk and left it there, waiting until he could ignite it again soon.

"Before I reveal my master plan," he said, pushing the last bit of smoke out, "let's play a quick game. Can you close your eyes, Bean?"

She stopped chewing and shook her head.

"It's okay. I just want to play a memory game. I want you to describe what you can remember without looking to see how good your memory is. See? That's fun, isn't it?"

She chewed some more, but kept her eyes open.

"Will you close your eyes for me?" She closed them. "Thank you, Beanie. Now let's see what you remember. Where are we right now?"

"That's not my name."

"I know that, sweetheart. I thought that's what I was calling you." She said nothing, and he waited, not knowing if he was waiting for her to say something else about her name or about the game he'd invented.

"I don't know where we are."

"Well, what kind of place is it, sweetheart?"

"A shed."

"What's it look like?"

“It’s like mine but it has windows and it has a wood floor so it’s fancy, but it’s old and no one cares about it and I don’t think it’s yours.”

Her eyebrows raised over her closed eyes.

“How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“You sure you’re not older?”

She opened her eyes.

“Close your eyes. We’re almost done.”

She closed them and slid back a bit, tucking her legs up Indian style.

“Okay. And how did we get here.”

“We drove.”

“In what?”

“A blue truck,” she said. He winced and looked out the window at the truck.

“What did the drive look like?”

“There were the farms and the road.”

“What kind of road?”

“The big one that goes to town.”

“No other roads?”

She shrugged.

“Good, Bean. Okay, one more thing. What do I look like?”

“You’re big and kind of hairy.”

“What else?”

“You have my dad’s red hat and his green shirt.”

“I’m sorry I took those. I just needed some clothes, but I can give them back if you don’t like it.”

“And you have a crooked nose.”

“Hey, watch it, that’s my nose your talking about.” She dropped her head, and he feared that she’d start crying, but she was laughing. She tried not to, but she laughed with her eyes still closed and he touched his nose for a joke in case she opened her eyes and saw.

He watched her in the morning quiet, newly void of the night wind. He looked at her head as if he could peer into her mind. Shirt, hat, truck, shed. A lot to take care of. She flipped the remainder of the granola bar in her hand, still chewing and her closed eyelids fluttered in the extended silence.

“You have an excellent memory, sweetheart.” She stuffed the rest of the granola bar in her mouth and chewed, her eyes still closed.

“And you have a bird on your wrist,” she said, garbled from the granola.

“What?”

“There’s a black birdie on your arm.”

He pulled his shirtsleeve back, uncovering a black, stick and poke sparrow on the inside of his wrist.

“When’d you see that?”

“Last night. When you were carrying me.”

“I thought you were asleep,” he said, raising his voice, and she opened her eyes. She scooted back against the wall, her hands walking on the floor, and her hand landed on something like a huge calloused knee. Her hand jumped up and she looked down at a burlled tree root

coming up out of the floor through a gap in the floorboards, which were cut to fit around the roots.

“It’s okay, Beanie. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s my fault,” he said as he unbuttoned the green flannel. He took the shirt and the red baseball cap off, and tossed them in a paper grocery bag he had in a corner of the shed. He untucked his white undershirt and looked out the window at the blue pickup.

“I want to go home,” she said, hugging her knees, staring at the burlled knee on the floor.

“I know you do, sweetheart. All I can tell is that that’s not a good idea. You might not be safe there. We can figure out how to get you safe, but first, I’m going to take you to the nice firemen.” She fixed her gaze on the tree root and clenched her hand that had touched it tight.

He wanted to take her father’s letter from his pocket to read it yet again, to make sure that taking her was the right thing to do, but he left it there.

“You remind me of my daughter. Pretty and sweet just like you,” he said, only half to her.

She held her gaze on the root. He caught on to the spell the root had over the girl, and tossed the wool blanket to cover it up. He turned back to her on a knee, and lifted her chin with a finger so she’d look at him.

“I got a letter. A letter from your daddy. It tells me that you can’t go home because it’s not safe there. Do you understand?”

The girl wouldn’t look at him.

“You don’t have to look at me if you don’t want to, but I need to know that you understand.”

She nodded, looking at his jeans pocket, and he wondered if she'd seen him put it there. Wondered if she'd read it already. Wondered if she'd unpinned it from her father's dead body days before he found her. Wondered if she'd climbed him to put it back after she'd read it. Deciding it'd be too hard to ask her if that was the case, he didn't, and he'd never know again whether she'd read it or not. He'd just burn it with the green flannel and the red baseball cap, turn it all to black and hope that'd be enough.

Tom pulled his blue pickup truck around the corner from the fire station and put it in park. The girl sat on the floor fiddling with something in her hand. He asked what it was and she showed him the screw from the workbench back in the shed.

"That one was supposed to be me, wasn't it?" he said, and she nodded.

"What's your name?" the girl said. He hesitated.

"Tom," he said.

"Tom," she said, looking at the screw and then stuffing it in her jeans pocket.

"Let's go over the plan again," Tom said. Careful across the street and go straight on in to the firemen. They'll take care of you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Let's go over the don'ts. Don't look back at the truck after you start walking, don't tell them about the bird on my wrist, and don't tell them about my crooked nose. That last one would just be plain mean," he said and winked. "Now you tell it back to me. What are the three don'ts?"

"Don't look back at the truck, don't tell them about the bird, don't tell them about your nose." She was a bunch of dead leaves blowing over dry sand.

“Very good. It was nice to have met you, Bean.”

“My name is Janie.”

He smiled. “All right then. You’re going to be with family real soon, Janie.” She lowered her head and her lip quivered. He wondered who there was for her at all, if what the note said was really true. Then he wondered again for the thousandth time what Charlie would be like if he’d died instead of her. Would she have gone to college? Learned guitar? Started a band like him? No. Became a lawyer or a doctor, wearing clean, pressed suits. No. Had a soft little baby with blonde hair like her, and they’d sleep together in a soft little pile night after night until the baby told her she loved Charlie, and Charlie called her own mother to tell her the news. Anything would be better than the truth.

He reached down, lifted Janie’s chin and looked into her eyes. “Don’t worry. I’ll be with you, remember? You got that screw, don’t you?” She looked down at the little lump in her pocket and nodded.

“I guess I always was a little screwy,” he said, and she smiled.

“You just squeeze old screwball there if you feel nervous, but everything’s going to feel better in just a bit. We’ve been here too long, so you have to go, Janie. On the count of three.” She reached up for the door handle. “One, two, three.”

As she crossed the street, he muttered to himself, a hand over his mouth.

“If she doesn’t look back, she can listen. If she don’t look back, she can listen.”

She stepped up onto the sidewalk and walked along the red brick wall of the fire station, passing big clear-paned windows like wide eyes, her fist clenching the screw.

“Don’t look back. Don’t look back. Show me you can listen. Show me you can listen, Janie.” If she made it, she’d be with men better than him. Or maybe she wouldn’t be. Maybe

she'd be with men worse than him, clocking in, hearing the alarm and then running the fire engine out like a dog on a leash, the siren a howling that signaled the end for those they drove over hoping to save, knowing how few they ever got to save.

She shuffled her tennis shoes against the sidewalk. She wasn't strong enough to lift her feet. She might not be strong enough to jump down from a pickup and walk a block. Surely, the granola bar inside her must have worn out by now.

She stumbled a little on the sidewalk.

“This is stupid, Tom.”

He heard a television faintly and then the firemen erupt in laughter from inside as she reached the street corner. She turned back and looked into Tom's eyes.

“Shit.”

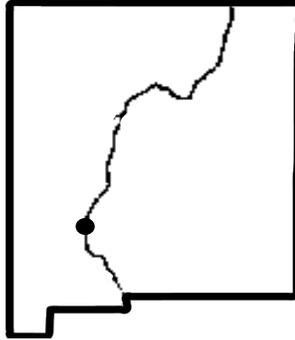
He pulled the truck up to the corner, told her to get in, she did, and they drove away. She said she was sorry, that she didn't mean to, but Tom said it wasn't her fault, reading her father's note in his mind, wishing he didn't burn it the night before. He realized then that he'd asked her not to turn around because he knew she would. He tricked himself into trapping her.

In Tom's rear view mirror, he saw a fireman stepping down the front stoop, watching the blue truck climb the hill. He'd have to lose the truck, maybe at the junkyards north of Las Cruces. He wanted to burn the shed to the ground, lighting the Gray Oak first, watching it all go up in a blaze with his clothes, and his ring, and his body, but now he had a little girl again, and she needed him to keep her alive this time.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 92



Tom sucked the peanut butter off his fingers, and offered Janie another scoop, but she shook her head, her fingertips still in her mouth. He screwed the red cap back on the jar of Jiff with his thumb and pinky and pushed the jar into the sand so it wouldn't fall. They crouched at the bank of the Elephant Butte Reservoir and scrubbed their fingers with fingers until the mess of peanut butter worried away. He splashed water on his forearms, and Janie mimicked him as though the fuzz on her arms was dark brown hair, thick as his. Janie looked up at a towering island in the center of the butte, whipping water off her hands.

“Looks like an Elephant,” Tom said. “That’s why they call it Elephant Butte.”

Janie studied the rock formation, an ancient volcanic core, following the curves of the elephant’s ear, finding the hint of a trunk, and then fixating on his closed eye.

“He’s dead,” Janie said. “He didn’t drink the water.” She looked down at the bits of peanut butter floating in the lake, spreading out into the water, out to a ripple headed for the

collapsed elephant, ancient dust blowing over its back. A breeze blew in off the water and Janie shivered and pulled her knees closer to her chest for warmth.

Tom told her the reservoir was man-made, that there wasn't much water here before they put up a dam.

"Moon," She said, jerking her head behind her. "So they gave him water after he was already dead?"

Tom paused to think. Why had she said *moon*? He scanned the sky and found a thin crescent moon faint in the afternoon light behind them. What of the water comment though? Was she talking about the elephant not having water?

"It's a rock, Janie."

"It's an elephant," she said, pointing.

"You're weirder than I thought you were," he said with an eyebrow cocked, watching the last of the peanut butter leave his fingers.

"Be right back," he said.

Janie turned away from him and then put the tips of her long brown hair in her mouth as he walked away. He'd noticed her place the tips of hair in her mouth twice before—on the floor of the pickup before she fell asleep, and after she first saw him fold and keep the note that had been pinned to her father's chest hanging from the porch rafter. Each time, she put the tips of her hair in her mouth and chewed, each time when she thought he wasn't looking. He thought of telling her to stop now, but realized that'd be the same as calling her weird again, and calling her weird had just gotten her hair in her mouth. When he got back to Janie, he stood behind her a moment, looking out over the water and spotted a jet-skier out in front of the elephant.

“Nice here. I never did take Charlie.” He tossed a red blanket over her shoulders and sat down next to her.

“Where’d you get this?” she said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll call him Elephant,” she said, petting a corner of the red blanket like it was an elephant ear.

He asked Janie if she did puzzles, and she nodded almost imperceptibly, as she pet the elephant ear, her hair still in her mouth. Tom said Charlie loved puzzles when she was Janie’s age, and he told her a story about Charlie putting a puzzle together. Kittens in a barn. He plodded through the story, telling it slow—as slow as he would put a puzzle together. He talked about finding the corners, stringing the edges together, forming a couple bales of hay, a few kittens, all on the carpet in Charlie’s room.

Janie chewed on the ends of her hair, and spit the little black ends out. Tom struggled to pretend he didn’t notice.

Tom told Janie about how he and Charlie wrestled on top of the puzzle, ruining their progress, elbows slamming down and little jigsaw pieces flipping on the carpet. He said he’d fallen backward on the carpet, pretending to faint and Charlie rolled off him. She crawled to the bed and removed a purple pillowcase from her pillow. She shoved handfuls of the puzzle pieces into the pillowcase and Tom came to, realizing what she was doing.

“I told her,” Tom said, “we weren’t done with the puzzle, but she shoved the last handful of puzzle pieces in the pillowcase, and bunched it up in her little hands. She said it was done so I asked about the gray kitten on the box we named Toby and she said he was in there. I asked about his special piece of hay, we made that up, too, and she said it was also in there. She just

kept shaking the bag no matter what I asked. It was all in there. I asked if Toby was in the dark, and she said no, so I asked how she knew, and you know what she said?”

Janie shook her head, her tips of her hair almost slipping out her lips.

“She asked me how I knew Toby was in the dark. I said because it’s closed, and she said I wasn’t in there so I didn’t know. I couldn’t argue. Always thought that was nuts, but I loved it.”

“She was your daughter, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Charlie’s a boy’s name,” Janie said.

“It’s a girl’s name, too, sometimes.”

“It’s a boy’s name.”

“Take your hair out of your mouth and stop chewing on it. You have little bits of hair all over your lips. That’s gross, Janie.”

Janie pulled her hair out of her mouth, and pulled her new red blanket up to her cheeks. Tom was frustrated with her, but didn’t know what to say to her so he sat silent a while. Then he started talking to himself.

“We named her after her grandfather,” he said, “but Charlie is a girl’s name, too. It’s not that I wanted a son instead. It was that he was important to my wife and to me, too. He raised my wife and died from cancer a year before she was born, and that always tore us up—that he didn’t get to meet her. I always pictured him holding my little girl because he could make babies fall asleep in like two minutes. It was like the heat of his body. Or the heat of his soul, even. That’s hokey. Whatever. I’m not the type of guy to project some masculine thing onto a girl just because I wanted her to be something she wasn’t. I loved having a daughter. I felt like even more of a man having a daughter and teaching her right—how to speak her mind and how to not let

people shut her down because she was a girl. I was damn good at it, too. She would have been a strong woman. Because I'm a strong man. I don't have to steal from houses. I don't know why I do, really. I won't say that I wouldn't ever make apologies for it, because I probably should, but I don't make apologies for it. It's just what I do now. But I don't have to. I could cut a folk record in Chicago, you know? Pete said he'd go in on writing duties and we'd make a hell of a record together. Could always finish each other's musical sentences, so-to-speak. I don't have to steal stuff and sleep on the side of the road like this. I could have a real life if I decided to."

Tom saw movement behind the red blanket covering Janie's head.

"Get the hair out of your mouth, Janie!"

She stood and walked away, wrapped tight in the red blanket. Tom walked after her.

"Stay with me, Janie. It's just not good for you to be chewing on your hair like that." He tried to grab her shoulder to slow her down.

"You're not my dad."

He let go.

"No, I'm not."

As they walked along the beach, Tom behind Janie, they saw families throwing sand and building castles and readying jetskis to take out to the elephant, that massive crag overlooking all the endless sand. From the sky, it must have looked like starved ants gathered around a dried carcass, and the reservoir was like a fast drying puddle. But up close, they were families, alive and calm on a Saturday they'd waited for all week. None were treading North like Tom and Janie, unsure and nervous. None were wondering if this is what they should be doing. None were dying in the sun and circling an elephant carcass before pressing on, wondering if there'd ever be another.

Tom saw little boys flapping adult-sized flippers in the sand and a father picking a boy up by his wrists and dangling him over the water. Tom saw a little girl reaching up to her mother for half a sandwich. He thought again of Charlie on the carpeted floor in her room, but there were no puzzle pieces and she was just a baby, crawling naked, Tom anxious about her peeing on the carpet and wanting to flip her on her back to diaper her. At the same time though, he reveled in her freedom, shuffling one limb ahead of another, repeating small successes, every jutting motion similar to the last, every jiggle of a leg roll the same amount of bounce, every grunt the same pitch, and Charlie wholly satisfied with all of it.

He felt a little hand in his, and he withdrew. He recoiled and his arm shot up and his other hand touched the spot that Janie had touched. She'd tried to hold his hand. He forced himself to relax realizing the look of what he'd just done would be received as jarring and unnatural to the families around him. He looked up and locked eyes with the woman who'd just handed her daughter a half peanut butter sandwich, and she looked away. Embarrassed, Tom hastened and Janie followed his pace.

She wasn't Charlie, his little girl with blonde ringlets on a mission crawling on carpet. In that moment along the beach at Elephant Butte, Janie looked grotesque to him. She looked like some greasy, black-haired rag doll, her dirty knees pressed up against her lips. She looked like something stained. Something that couldn't be cleaned and was better off being thrown out. Something he could toss in a lost and found bin like a ring of dirty keys.

Janie walked the beach a few arm-lengths away from Tom, behind him now. The moon had hung herself up high and bright in the twilight. Tom wondered why the moon appears so early sometimes, not remembering high school astronomy. Then he thought of course Janie was

wondering about the moon too, and so he looked away from the moon. If she wanted the moon she could have it for now.

Don't Forget the Ice

My grocery list follows the order of the store. That's something my dad taught me to do, to save time, but whenever we, my wife and I, write these lists, I always think I'm writing a love letter to commerce. They order these places just so, you know? So that you buy more.

Hungry when I walk in, I want bread, so that's a good start. A loaf of sliced wheat, shitty tortillas because I don't have time to go to the Mexican-style market in the valley that hand presses them, and bagels for rushed mornings when a three-year-old's unfinished homework sparks an argument about the value of homework at such a young age. Kate and I would look at each other, look at the homework, look back at him gazing zombie-like at the television blaring Power Rangers. One of us would mouth *fuck it* so we could start gluing paper squares to a page in a spiral notebook. Pictures of things that start with the letter K—a koala, keys, a knight, to the next page in his alphabet notebook, the minutes ticking by to seven-fifteen, event horizon, the moment I knew I'd be late if I wasn't already in my Nissan pickup. If I were late, I'd surely step into a room of rolling eyes at my Professional Learning Community meeting the half hour before first period.

I pressed the koala down on the wide-ruled paper and joked, starting to glue the newborn's stray hospital bill I found nearby, saying it was Karma. Then I tried to glue her, Kate, to the notebook and she finally laughed, the argument ending in a kiss (I thought of gluing the kiss down, too, because it starts with K, but didn't) and her smiling on the way to the bathroom to wash purple glitter glue off her forearm, the newborn fussing in his bassinet a foot from our bed.

Can't forget the cream cheese at the opposite end of the store. And muffins because the kid loves them, and why not, I'll get a couple of chocolate muffins—one for Kate and one for me

and the kid to share. I feel eyes on the back of my neck, and turn, expecting to see someone I know, maybe stupid fucking Chelsea and her idiot kid for the billionth time (does she ever leave the Goddamn grocery store?) but I see no eyes on me. Somebody's fucking looking at me. I know it.

I think of Kate, nursing the baby, reaching for the chocolate muffin on the end table flanking the couch as we watch *Dateline*. She's asleep ten minutes in, the baby suckling from her sleeping breast, before Stone Phillips can fully explain why black market drugs are filtering into legitimate American pharmaceuticals. I see two finger-pinched craters in the chocolate muffin top next to her.

"Be good, remember," I say, "or you have to go in the cart," as he runs his little palm over a cute potted fern strategically placed near the front of the store. The front of the store is the place where you still believe you have plenty of money.

"I walk. I good."

"Touching isn't good. You're not being good," as he touches a clear plastic container of chocolate-chip wafer cookies.

"I want to be good," an index finger still on the cookies, a whine that really means *I want you to think I'm good*.

I tell him then *be* good and don't touch and he says he want to be good, whining again. Thank God he leaves the cookies.

String cheese and slices of mild cheddar, orange cheese as he calls them. Provolone slices too, and a package of deli-cut roast beef. Kate won't eat it, but I will. I'll eat the shit out of it.

The salad bar is useless, so we cut to the packaged meat, aisles of wine stretching along side it. Cabs and Pinots and Red Blends and whatever else behind me, I read the vague list in her

lilting cursive and can't figure out what meat she wants. Beef strips for stir-fry, Italian sausage because it's on sale, and a package of unnaturally enormous chicken breasts will have to do.

A Cab on the second shelf from the floor, one step above a total lack of self-respect, and why not, this red blend on super sale because it's on the second to highest shelf and that must mean it's good. I'll open one tonight. The Red Blend. It's Sunday, but the sophomores are just doing vocabulary, and the seniors are presenting modernized versions of Macbeth. I don't have to do shit tomorrow. I know that's not true, that I'll have to make on-the-fly teaching points about why a group in seventh period's take on Banquo's ghost scene doesn't work, that Pablo Escobar isn't a direct parallel to Macbeth, yadda-yadda-yadda, but it was funny, so good job. I think about putting the Red Blend back, seeing Kate's brow furrow over a fake smile when she sees it and the Cab, but I leave both bottles in the cart.

He's holding two river stones he found in a wicker basket erecting a fake palm tree.

"You're not being good."

"I am being good."

"Put those back then. They're not ours."

He does and then runs down the Cab aisle.

I tell him that's it, that he's going in the cart, and I abandon the cart to pick him up.

"I good, I good!" and then he runs back to grip the grate on the side of the cart and I pretend I'm appeased. He tells me he just touching them and I say he shouldn't and he repeats that he just touching them. Next time, he's going in the God-damn cart, and I'm just waiting for it to happen now.

"Let's hide together!" he says.

I say that Mom's not here, that we just need to get in and out, Bud, to stay with me and be good, okay, Buddy? He says nothing, and walks alongside the cart, and I'm still waiting to pick him up against his struggle, kicking his legs so that his feet don't easily slide into the square, metal leg-holes, and thrust him into the cart seat.

Apples. Good apples, damn it. A new breed of honey crisps, the trees pollinated by bees, called Sugar Bees, are too good to give a damn about the difference in price between them and shitty Galas. Eight's an even number. No nine, because Kate will actually eat one, the kid will want two with peanut butter a couple of times during the week before he's tired of them, and then I'll need another five for myself Monday through Friday.

Someone is looking at me again. I turn, the thought of Whomever looking at the kid too flushing me red hot. There's no one. I see no eyeballs—just the listless crowd of grocery store shoppers like islands, quietly shuffling down aisles, punishing themselves, lauding themselves, and reciting mantras, all of it deep in their own heads. I'll call this fucker, the one I know is looking at me somewhere, Eyeballs. I think it's a guy. It could be a woman. I have no idea. I feel it's a guy though.

The kid looks depressed poking at a green bell pepper in a low bin.

“Okay, let's hide together,” I say.

He lights up and runs. I yell for him to stop and to get in the cart and then we can hide together. He tells me I walk! No cart! So I bluff and tell him then we can't hide together, but he says he just wants to. I tell him to step up in front of me so he steps up onto the rail of the cart's undercarriage and stretches his arms to hold the cart handle above his head. I push the cart, waddling around his body and search for vegetables.

“There's a stegosaurus over there, bud.”

“No. T Rex.”

“There’s a T Rex over there, bud.”

“Let’s hide together!”

I remember him in the cart seat while Kate searched for the just-right bundle of asparagus. We cut through the wine aisles as he hoped she wouldn’t see us and I looked for her blonde head and denim shoulders, hoping she was in on the game.

“Can she see us?” I said.

He whispered No! He crouched low, wearing the smile my sister wore when we were kids. Her meaty smile as we hid from my mother’s vacuum cleaner. We hid on the side of the couch, my mother pushing the vacuum in exaggerated arcs closer and closer to where we giggled. My sister placed a hand on the carpet at the wrong time, and my mother ran it over. My sister screamed, crying that mama vacuumed her fingers off, my mother shutting the machine off, crouching low to kiss pink fingers, saying of course she didn’t. Of course she didn’t mean to.

The green bell peppers are cheaper and more nutritious than red, yellow or orange. No-brainer. I grab the one he touched to apologize to the store and because I now like it more than the others since he touched it. Cabbage would go with the sausage. Where’s the cabbage? The kid jumps off the cart and runs.

“That’s it.”

I grab him near the cabbage, there it is, and he cries, a kick just missing a woman inspecting broccoli. I catch her eyes, alarmed and blank like two freshly minted quarters, and everything about her, her spandex, Oakleys dangling from her neck, tight skin around her silvery eyes, telling her true age, tells me she doesn’t have kids, doesn’t know kids, doesn’t like kids, and I wonder how much longer she’ll live than I will.

He's now in the shopping-cart seat, which I've strategically left empty and slung open. I buckle him against his cries and his thrashing, telling him why I did it, that he almost kicked a woman, that that was really bad. A man holding a bag of precut baby carrots glances at me. He's not Eyeballs. I can tell. He's an asshole, but he's not Eyeballs. I wish he'd really kicked that woman, for her sake and for mine. The worse the offense, the more warranted the reprimand. And also, fuck her.

Milk, two cartons, creamer for Kate's coffee, and two large containers of yogurt too, because that's cheaper than buying individual cups. I'll scoop some into an old jam jar we recycled for dishware. Five-thirty in the morning, he'll hold the cup off-kilter, spilling a trickle of milk, watching Bugs Bunny singing opera in a Viking helmet we taped on VHS, naked because he's always naked if he can manage.

In the cart seat, he places his hands on my cheeks, staring into my eyes and I drop my face to his uncontrollably. I walk down a couple of aisles aimlessly, and he whispers that I'm a good dada.

The umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck, and the emergency C-section ripped me from Kate, from massaging her lower back with my fist over a cool, damp washcloth as she moaned. A nurse instructed me to put the scrubs on over my clothes too soon. I wasn't yet ready.

I sat on the dad's bench outside the surgery room, a doctor calling me bud as he came and went, another doctor singing Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" poorly on purpose. I tapped a foot, nauseous, memorizing the hallway, the floorboards dirtier than I imagined from my recollection of TV hospitals. I saw cracks under the doors seeping air to my wife and her taught belly, air from the rest of the hospital where people were surely dying somewhere.

The nurses had hung the curtain too low, so I saw her split belly, what seemed like a hand-width of flesh. It was the wall that separated my boy from the cold airy Earth, but he cried immediately, and so he was alive. After nurses readied him on another table, I carried him to her face, and we three breathed the same tiny pocket of air for what I feared might be the only time as Kate's head jerked here and there while the doctor sutured her belly back together.

The anesthesiologist, who'd just butchered Marley in the hallway, lamented about his golf game, as if to say *of course she'll be fucking fine, guy*.

Granola bars, the kind with chocolate in them because I like that shit, single applesauce cups because shoveling it from a large container into that recycled jam jar is sloppy. Apricot jam, which he calls orange jelly, because he'll actually eat it and it's actually my favorite, too. Kate prefers blackberry. I pause before leaving the aisle. I don't feel anyone watching me, but if I'm quick, maybe I'll catch Eyeball's stare as I leave this aisle and make for the coffee aisle. I turn the corner, but again, I see no one. I don't see the person I know I ought to see.

"I tired," he says, pulling his hair into a Mohawk, so I don't bother with the coffee, thinking *let's just get home*, forgetting Eyeballs.

Thinking of how the couch forces me asleep within moments, *Macbeth does murder sleep*, I push the cart hard toward the coffee aisle, hoping the spandex-Oakley lady isn't around the corner and in my way because dada needs coffee. Maybe Eyeballs is over there.

I give the kid the grocery store's generic breakfast blend coffee to toss in the basket behind him. I'm involving him. This is good. He slaps it instead. I tell him be good, and he tosses it over his head. It bounces on the rim like a desperate lay-up and falls to the floor. I bend, groan, hoping no one hears me groan, and toss it into the basket, and push us to the checkout.

There's a lane where a cashier waits for one fewer customer than the other lanes, but that guy's a dick—that cashier calls me bro and doesn't make eye-contact. Instead I choose Maria, a legal midget though proportional, though we can't say midget anymore.

Maria reaches over her shoulders to bag the man's groceries ahead of me, and eyes my kid. She loves him, and waits for him every time we come. She prefers Kate to me and, spotting the apricot jam jar on the conveyor belt, she once told Kate all the ways to use marmalade—to marinate chicken, to make a salad dressing with vinegar and something else, to leave on the table as a spread for exactly everything you could imagine including pork chops, and Kate didn't tell her the jar was filled with jam, not marmalade, acted surprised at all marmalade's uses, and agreed that the kid was a good boy and deserved one of the honey sticks for nineteen cents in a cardboard box on top of the cash register.

The man ahead has a little girl with him who looks nothing like him, and I wonder who he is. He looks up at me, and I realize he's Eyeballs. I never saw him once in the whole store. He never looks at me again, just takes his receipt and leaves, holding the little girl's dirty hand, carrying a single paper bag. I missed seeing what he'd bought.

The kid can feel my strange energy and kicks me in the sternum, halting my breath.

“Charlie!” I yell a few seconds later when my diaphragm lets me, louder than the clanking cash registers or Paula Abdul singing out of the loudspeakers above. It feels as though everyone and everything, customers, cashiers, custodians, the ferns, cash, checks and cards, are all stopped in time, staring at me. Really, it's just Maria and Spandex-Oakley in the next aisle, paying for her perfect bouquet of broccoli and whatever else, who are stopped.

Charlie wails, his face red and wet, pudgy like a soaked sponge, so I grab his shoulders to calm him, but he shoves me off and screams something short and awful like a patrol car siren

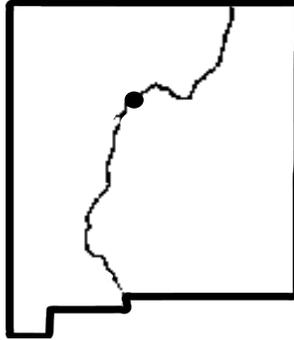
bleeping once. I see Kate in the dark hallway as we listen to Charlie screaming Mama then Dada then Mama then Dada in his room the first night we put him to bed in his big-boy-bed, both of us wondering what to do, the smoke detector flashing its red bulb every minute as it always does. We sat in the dark hallway on the hardwood floor, every minute marking the hours I felt in my head.

I feel more grocery-store-zombie's eyes on me, breaking from their inner monologues as I tell Charlie don't do that, you're not being good, but I'm just talking to myself. I grab the receipt from Maria, the legal midget, stuff the receipt in my pants pocket, and wheel a mental patient out past Spandex-Oakleys, the cute little ferns, and other peaceful parents, and through the same automatic doors we entered an hour ago.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 262



A car approached from the dark south, humming progressively louder and higher in pitch, like a moan from a hospital bed, until it shouldered a burst of air at Tom and Janie, tossing their hair, and then the car rumbled lower and lower down to a ghost, into more dark ahead to the north.

Tom adjusted the straps of the green, army-issued body-bag he got from the Goodwill on his shoulder, reached down to grab Janie's arm near her armpit, and tossed it up and up like a length of rope until he had her tiny hand in his. He hadn't tried this with her before, and tried it now hoping to catch her off-guard. He did it to be sure she wouldn't step into the interstate, and to his surprise, she let him hold her hand. She even walked in the deepest gravel, further from the asphalt, as if trudging made her stick to the ground better. Or perhaps she was just tired. Tom knew that kids tend to make things harder on themselves when they're tired. That would also explain her giving in and holding Tom's hand, and so it probably wouldn't last.

A strip of purple spread thin on the western horizon did nothing to light their steps. Tom's extended thumb lit up blue in a pair of headlights, and then turned red in the taillights, so he dropped his arm. Janie would flick her head left each time a car passed, perhaps to catch a face in the car's passenger window. Tom and Janie's faces glowed red in the taillights over and over again with each passing car for what seemed to be hours. He looked for the purple strip on the horizon, but it had vanished, replaced by dim stars. Stars pinned up high on a black sheet, and solid black down low where the Earth covered up the stars, a secret horizon separating the two.

Tom slipped on a stone in the shoulder but lifted Janie by her skinny arm clear off the ground to save her from his stumble.

"I'm tired," she said upon landing back in the gravel.

"Okay. We'll sit a while."

He let go of her hand and wiped their sweat on his jeans. They stepped lightly into the ditch that ran alongside the interstate, Janie sliding on the gravel, and then they sat against the opposite bank.

"The cars are too scary."

"You'd rather walk in the desert with the rattlesnakes?"

"Yeah."

"My thumb doesn't work in the desert."

"So?"

"So we need them to see us, Bean."

"I thought no one was supposed to see us."

"A ride is different."

"Your thumb doesn't work anyway."

Janie took Pammy-the-toy-skateboard out of her pocket, and then pulled her knees to her chest and sat in a tight ball, clutching the skateboard in her fist like it was a stuffed bear's paw. Tom leaned back against the bank of the ditch to face the brightest stars above. Tom sat still listening to the movement inside all the stillness. The blood in his temples. Janie's breath flowing out her nose and past her dry lips. The dust still lingering in the air, kicked up by car tires. He thought of the dust landing on the pebbles they sat on, and the pebbles sliding underneath them, but the way clouds drift through a windless night, or the way tectonic plates scrape against each other, or the way planets revolve, or the way God says hello. And so he thought of Janie slipping unknowingly in a trench as ephemeral as the still, evaporating puddles in the desert all around.

"My high school science teacher," Tom said, "told us that the universe is getting bigger. That all the stars are stretching out away from us."

Janie kept her chin on her knees but rolled her eyes up to the starlight.

"You can prove it too. Their light looks red, and red means they're leaving, not coming."

"Like the cars?"

"Like the red tail lights on the cars, yeah."

"They're going away?"

"Getting further away, yeah."

"All of the stars?"

"The whole universe. It's going like this," he said as he made his fingers and hands and arms all explode outwardly.

"That's scary."

Janie rolled the skateboard on her knee with one hand, and with the other she grabbed a fistful of gravel. Tom imagined she wondered how much of it she could hold, wondering if the pebbles would all just float away, too. He wondered how much he could tell her and still keep her calm, but wondered also how little he could tell her and still keep her engaged so she would stay calm. He could feel her slipping like the pebbles.

Another car whirred closer and higher in pitch, and she threw the fistful of gravel at the car as it passed.

“What the hell are you doing, Janie?”

She clutched the skateboard and hugged her knees.

“You’re going to get us caught,” Tom said.

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“We want to get safe, not caught. Jesus.”

They sat a while, and Tom watched Janie’s hands to be sure she wouldn’t toss another handful of gravel at a passing car. He took a handful of gravel himself and thought of standing up in the ditch, throwing it into the desert behind them. He imagined telling her he was stirring up a rattlesnake, to make a comparison, to get his point across, but realized she’d cry and that he’d be as much a child as she.

“One time,” Tom said, “We took Charlie to Florida—“

“We?”

“My wife and I.”

“You have a wife?”

“I did, yeah.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“Are you going to let me tell the story?”

Tom crushed the gravel in his fist before continuing. Janie spent the remainder of the story chewing on the tips of her hair, sitting on bubbling questions more than she listened. At least her hair was clean. He’d finally found her a suitable truck-stop shower the day before. She was now a shade lighter with all the grime gone. He felt guilty for missing the grime, missing her looking like the dirty desert he loved.

“Charlie’s mom’s family had a big trailer out on a bunch of land. A bunch of cows. They had a great big screened-in pool out back. The pool must have cost more than the trailer. Nice trailer though. Almost looked like a house, but still. Never could figure that pool out. Anyway, Charlie had been swimming all afternoon with cousins. Tossing around frog-shaped inner tubes and hitting each other with those foam pool noodles.” Tom remembered Janie’s weed-ridden yard and the eerie farmland surrounded by juniper speckled desert hills and wondered how much, if at all, she’d swum in a pool.

“You know, like at Walmart?”

Janie nodded her chin yes against her knees.

“Charlie climbed out shivering, and I wrapped her in a towel and said we should go in, but she wanted to see the cows. I got her flip-flops for her, wrapped her up tight in the towel, and we went to the fence between the backyard and the pasture. We walked along it naming all the cows. Jasmine and Belle and Ariel like from Disney movies. There was a big, old bull in the middle of all of them. Mufasa. He ruled the roost. All of a sudden, she told me about Mufasa the bull all. She just took over. She talked about how he loved all the cows, and he was their papa and that he read them cow books before bed. Books about cows making dinner and cows going

to school. My favorite was about T-Rexes with black and white cow spots.” Tom looked up at a passing car, and then released a trickle of gravel from his grip in the red taillights.

“Did the T-Rexes just want to fit in with other cows?”

“I guess so.”

“And did they eat little cows when no one was looking because they were hungry?”

“No.”

“But the T-Rex cows would get hungry,” Janie said. “And they would eat cows, so that makes sense. But maybe they learned that it was bad to eat cows, but they had to keep it a secret.” Janie quieted to a whisper. “Because they ate all the babies.” Her eyes were wide, and just as Tom was going to speak she blurted out more. “So they ran up to the mountain and hid and tried to wash off their spots, but they couldn’t, so the cows found them and told them they had to go away?” She finally turned to him.

Tom looked down at Janie and watched her brain foaming out her ears, barely next to him at all. Instead she was at the top of T-Rex Mountain, counseling and giving black-and-white, spotted T-Rexes answers to the problems about their hides.

“Let me finish, sweetheart.”

“But some of the T-Rexes wouldn’t want to wash off the spots, so they would go away. They would go away to a different mountain where no one could see their spots.”

“Janie.”

“And the other T-Rexes who wanted to wash off the spots would fight the T-Rexes who didn’t want to wash off the spots. The ones who wanted to hide. And—”

“And what?” Tom said it louder than she’d been speaking, so she stopped. A car rushed by, screaming as it neared, dying as it passed. In the returned silence, he couldn’t help but

wonder what would happen to the T-Rex-cows seeking asylum in the mountains when the purist T-Rexes came to confront them. He had begun his story about Charlie determined to calm her, and resolved himself to finish, so he rushed the end.

“The bull rushed the fence.”

“A T-Rex bull?”

“No, the real bull. The actual bull I’m talking about. He rushed the fence. Two tons of meat and bone and anger and protection and whatever else all just charged this tiny, three-string barbed-wire fence I knew wouldn’t hold him. We panicked.”

“Did you run to the mountain?”

“There aren’t any mountains in Florida. Listen, Janie.”

“But what if he wanted you to go to the mountain?”

“There wasn’t a mountain. Listen, Janie.”

“But what if he wanted his cows to be safe from the T-Rexes, so he made you go where T-Rexes would beat you up and leave his cows alone? Real cows.”

“This isn’t a made up story, Janie. It’s not pretend. I’m telling you a real story. Fuck.”

The curse word made her stop, and so he regretted it. It was the most he’d heard her speak since he’d essentially abducted her.

“Sorry, Janie. That slipped. I’m just tired, too.”

She stood, turned about-face, and crawled up the ditch to sit at the top, facing the desert.

Tom turned to watch her, to make sure she didn’t run away. His eyes adjusted to the dim starlight, and so a mesquite tree blossomed from the darkness in front of her. Just its shape, black sticks sprouting miniature leaves. The light from miniscule dots spread high above their heads

shone periods and commas between their thoughts as they sat staring at the same spot but wondered about infinitely disparate things.

His eyes adjusted even more, and he spotted a prickly pear's silhouette under the mesquite, jutting into the black nothing sky as though it hadn't been there until they'd observed it.

"Okay, then. Let's keep going," he said, dumping the gravel from his hand, wiping the dust on his jeans as he stood, and then holding his hand out to help her up and down into the ditch.

"I'm tired."

"That's fine. We'll sleep here. I'll make the tent."

"I don't want to sleep in a tent."

"It's what we have, Janie."

"I don't want to sleep in your stupid tent."

"Jesus, Janie. Do you see a God damn hotel?"

"Don't curse."

"I'm sorry. There's not another option. Work with me here."

"There are rattlesnakes."

"I thought you weren't afraid of the rattlesnakes."

"I'm not afraid of anything, and I'm not afraid of you."

She pushed her face into her knees, and Tom dropped to her and rested his hand on her back. She shoved him off and returned to her knees. Her father was dead, she'd been torn from her home, she was headed somewhere strange with a strange man who would have her hitchhike to get somewhere she knew nothing about, sleeping with rattlesnakes along the way, and she was

seven years old. She should have cried before this. She should have been crying this entire time. She shouldn't have taken the granola bar in the shed. She shouldn't have let him scoop her up and put her in the pickup. She shouldn't have come out of the yellow cupboard in her father's upstairs office. Why was she here? Why did she get back in the truck after the fire station? Why did she invent a story about T-Rexes for him on the side of the interstate in the dark? She must have wanted all of it. She must have desperately wanted to leave. But he couldn't ask her about it now, and he didn't know if she'd trust him again. All he felt he could do was to make the tent and speak as little as possible. He wasn't even sure she was crying. He hoped she was. He'd let her cry as long as she liked. In fact, he'd let her do anything she wanted.

In the dark, he took the tent pack from the body bag. He'd made a tent countless times. He'd never slept in a house he'd stolen from. There was no way to sleep in a place he went in order to remember Charlie. There was no way to sleep in coffins where he meditated on couches, trying to find her on the other side of death. So tents were often his home.

In the dark, he laid down the groundsheet, spread the tent over it, snapped the sectioned poles together, slipped them through the guides, tied the guy ropes down, and pegged the tent into the ground, facing south, downhill, so their heads would be elevated at the back. He unzipped the door and sat in the dirt in front of it, waiting for her to lift her head from her knees. She did after several cars passed, and then lay down in the dirt and so he listened to her breathing to tell when she fell asleep. He looked down at her limp body and it occurred to him that no one was looking for her. There hadn't been any cops. He hadn't seen anything about her missing in newspapers or on the television screens in convenience stores or restaurants. A thief would have felt relief. Tom didn't feel like a thief. Her little limp body on the desert ground under him, a

little girl no one wanted, depressed the hell out of him. He scooped her up, placed her in the tent, got inside and zipped it closed.

When Tom woke in the morning, he was alone in the tent. He shot to his feet, his back snapping sections of the tent pole apart, making the dome collapse over him. He struggled to find the zipper, found that it was partially open, crawled through and flung the flysheet off his head. She wasn't there. He looked to the interstate, but saw nothing. He slapped the tent out of his way, his boots catching on the ground sheet, and tripped, slipping in the dirt as he found his footing. Behind him, she was sitting Indian-style, facing north, her oily black hair, dirty and needing another shower already, shining in the morning light.

“Jesus, Janie.”

He walked and stood behind her. She had arranged rocks in a design in front of her. A circle with lines pointing north, south, east, and west.

“Did you see that on a flag?”

She remained still.

“That’s called a Zia. Did your dad have a flag that looked like that? The New Mexico flag?”

She stood and walked over the design on the ground, her feet dragging, her shoes kicking a few stones out of place as if she didn’t know the stones were there. She stopped and stood looking at the road. He didn’t know if she would follow him again.

He took the tent apart alone, looking up occasionally to make sure she was still there, slipping the sectioned poles out of their guides, folding the fly sheet and then the tent, wrapping the guy ropes over his thumb and elbow, pulling the pegs from the ground, wiping them off,

slipping them into their sack, and packing all the parts into the body bag. He slung the bag over his shoulder, grabbed Elephant-the-red-blanket, and walked to her again, standing to her side.

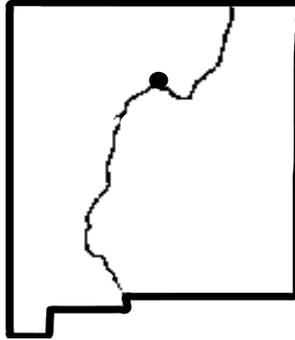
“We should get going.”

He held out his hand, but she walked forward, slipping careful steps in the gravel into the trench, climbed up the other side and walked along the interstate. And so he followed her.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 279



“I don’t want to,” Janie said, but Tom pushed her spine between her shoulders into the closet and the rectangle of light on the clothes rack in front of her grew large enough for him to pass through behind her. She heard the closet door slide on the runner, the rectangle of light shrinking to a slit, and then they were in the dark.

She whimpered, so Tom covered her mouth with his hand and she wriggled her head and kicked the shoes on the closet floor until he took back his hand and grabbed her by the shoulders to turn her toward him and he whispered in her ear, his stubble scratching her cheek.

“We can’t make a sound,” he said. “If we’re quiet, it will all go away. I won’t let anything happen to you again,” and he grabbed her shoulders, lifted her, turned her and sat her in his lap on the floor and covered her ears with his hands, his long, dry fingers wrapping her forehead.

Quiet in the dark, she saw only black and heard only the thumping blood in his palms and the thumping blood in her brain, and she thought of her brother. He lay white as ice on the metal

hospital bed with his eyes closed. He couldn't hear her tell him about the new lizard she'd buy with the money she'd save up. Maybe Daddy'd pay her to move the firewood from the side of the shed to the fireplace. He didn't say anything back when she asked him what kind of lizard she should get, and he didn't move when she shook his shoulder, and then the beep from the machine next to him slapped her hand away, and it went and went until the hospital people rushed in and pushed her back and her daddy told her it would be okay and she believed him at the time.

In the dark, she realized she was gripping Tom's knees and slid her hands to the floor instead. There, she felt something small on the carpet in her right hand. It might have been plastic. She felt legs and she shimmied it in her grasp and felt two more legs and then a head. It was a toy animal, but what? She felt the legs again and found its feet which spread wide. It wasn't an elephant. She moved along its middle and found the front legs shooting down like thick roots, just as the hind legs had. It wasn't human. She found the head and rolled her thumb around the skull. It wasn't a rhinoceros or a hippopotamus or a horse or a cow or a buffalo or anything. She felt for a tail and felt nothing. It was a gorilla. She slid her thumb along its back and felt the curve of its spine reach the perky butt. She felt its face and found two tiny holes—nostrils. Suddenly, she was deaf in a closet, hiding from something monstrous, with Tom and a silverback daddy gorilla, and she closed her eyes.

She heard the bedroom door open, so she opened her eyes, which had adjusted so she could now see the squiggly lines of dresses and pants hanging from the clothes rack in front of her. She reached out to touch a dress, rubbed the silk between her fingers and wondered if her mother ever wore silk. Had she worn a dress like her Barbie, the brown-haired one in blue? Had

she worn red silk pajamas like the women in the movies? Had she worn Janie in a sling like that screaming baby in the grocery store she saw with Tom? Did her mom bounce and shush and pat Janie's bottom? Janie's hand slipped down the length of the gown to the floor where she found another figure on the carpet. Two legs, a torso, two arms, a head. It was human. Not a face—a helmet. A soldier? Did he hunt the gorilla?

She heard someone tossing things around the room outside the closet door, and gripped the toys tight. She dare not put the gorilla and hunter together, so she kept her hands apart on the carpet as she sat in Tom's lap. But she felt the hunter want the gorilla, and she felt the gorilla want the hunter, and in a moment she knew something new without knowing how to say it. She knew that every animal on the planet was prey but only some animals got to be predators. She dropped the figurines and batted Tom's hands away from her ears and heard a girl's voice on the other side of the closet door.

"I'll meet you out front," the voice said on the other side of the door. "I just need my jacket. Shut up! No I'm not! Sometimes it's cold out there. Shut up! I've never been shooting. You're so stupid. Just give me a second, okay? Yeah. Bye." She heard plastic slam against plastic with a little metallic ping at the end, and she remembered her daddy slamming the phone.

Tom slid Janie to the carpet between his legs and pushed himself back, making himself a human cage around her. She knew he also wondered if the girl would look for her jacket in the closet.

Janie remembered her daddy taking her and her brother, Jamie, out to the desert field next to their yard, a shotgun in one hand, a cooler filled with beer and a watermelon in the other, Janie carrying another watermelon. They reached the center of an expanse of desert sand dotted with prickly pear and yucca. The shotgun slipped in her daddy's hand, but he caught it, it's nose

dragging a line in the sand, and she looked up at her house to see if her mother was in the window. Nothing there but dark rectangles behind dark mesquite tree branches clutching the house.

Their valley was strange to everyone. Her teacher taught her whole class one day how strange Janie's neighborhood was, excited and looking at Janie like she was special, but Janie just felt weird. El Paso sat down deep in the Chihuahua desert, hugging the Franklin Mountains, the way bright lichen hugs gray limestone for shade or moisture or protection or life, but Janie's valley wasn't really El Paso. It wasn't New Mexico either, big blue sky covered New Mexico, with its rivers and deserts and canyons and mountains and forests. Their valley was weird, and all the bushes and the trees and sand and the trickling river and the cactus lived together like they were pretending to belong together. They were family though they shouldn't be.

Her daddy's land was on a tiny island next to other tiny islands. She'd watch the sun each new morning peek through the jagged mountains her teacher said were the Organs, shoots of orange light shining between the pointy tops down to the valley. The cactus-dotted desert below the mountain bubbled up with green bushes when it was wet and dried brown when the rain wouldn't come. The farmland soaked in the spilling water from the ditch and it all bloomed their neighbor's cotton, alfalfa, and pecan trees in rows.

She'd ride her bike very fast past them to watch the pecan tree rows flash by until she was dizzy. Sometimes the pecan trees were black from the farmer's fires they lit on purpose. Their wildest roots spread out into the desert sand, but couldn't get far.

In the big patch of desert next to the pecan trees, she played in her arroyo she named Deadfish River. Ocotillo stalks stretched up for drops of rain in the sky because the Pecan trees

wouldn't share the farmers' soaking floods, and the ocotillo's little purple buds opened skyward, sad and hoping.

Thin strips of plants grew wild alongside the ditch and bloomed flowers, purple, red, and yellow. If you were lucky a few wildflowers might pop up in your yard. Most of the color in Janie's yard came from tiny sage green leaved bushes tucked squat underneath the black mesquite branches. Her daddy's yard never had wildflowers. She always thought wildflowers were very smart.

When Janie and her brother Jamie walked this strange terrain, they walked ready like the sneaky Greek gladiators from her book about Troy, tiptoeing over rounded stones in dried up riverbeds. As they walked back for dinner, they walked like outlaws, like the ones the Lone Ranger tracked down—tired, nervous, careful and hopeful for a bed lifted above of the stickers and the rattlesnakes and the black widows creeping to their beds in the dying evening light.

She killed a rattlesnake out there when she was five with a hiking stick. Her father yelled at her at first, but then he was proud. She pulled her brother out from under a prickly pear patch the same year. She hid from her father when he was angry. She hid under anything—a tree, bush or cactus. She remembered hiding every year she could speak sentences. She hid the day of the watermelon, too.

She remembered her father taking the extra watermelon from her hands and setting it up on a dead tree stump and counting his paces back to twenty. He stepped long, yelling the numbers, and she could tell he thought he was funny, but her and Jamie didn't laugh. He told them to get behind him, so they ran and stood far back, watching the shotgun. He blasted the shotgun, and they covered their ears. He said he was too far away for a shotgun, so he got closer, and blasted again. The watermelon wobbled, but stayed up on the stump. Janie and Jamie backed

up, and their daddy stepped forward until he held the shotgun to the watermelon's nose. He blasted and green and red splattered everywhere, and Janie grabbed Jamie's hand so she could run him inside, and they ran through the kitchen, passing their mom asleep on the living room chair. They climbed the stairs and rushed into their bedroom closet, slamming the door shut behind them.

Tom pulled Janie's hands from her ears.

"Janie," he whispered. "She's gone."

"Should we just stay here though? We should just stay, right?"

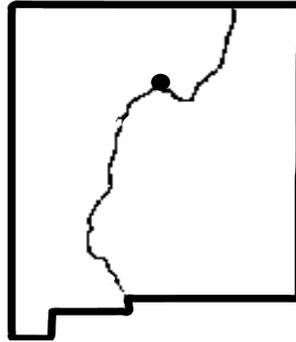
"Yeah, let's wait a little longer, but we can get out soon."

She felt for the gorilla on the carpet, patting it in a panic, but she could only find the hunter. She left the hunter there, lying on the floor drunk, and she hoped the Gorilla was safe somewhere in a tree as deep in the closet as he could find. Deep enough that when Tom finally slid the door open, the slat of light opening wide like a mouth couldn't swallow him. She hoped hard, hoping Tom would slide the closet door open soon. She also hoped he wouldn't ever let the light in. She hoped it all at the same time, and thought about how it hurt to hope so much. Again, she knew something new without knowing how to say it. She knew that every animal on the planet was prey but only some animals *had* to be predators.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 278



In the distance, a car, maybe blue or black, flashed its turn signal and slowed, so Tom lowered his thumb, squinting in the dawn's dim light. Tom slung the body bag over his shoulder and Janie threw Elephant-the-red-blanket over hers, whimpered and stood behind Tom. He tried to read the lift. He always read a lift to make sure it was safe before he got in, but safe enough for Janie would be different. He struggled to read in the dull dawn, so all he could read was the rattling sound coming from the car. Janie whimpered again. Lifts rarely drive new cars, so Tom kept hope and shushed Janie. A string of four cars trailing the lift moved left into the oncoming lane to pass, each car jerking and then accelerating all the way to eighty or ninety to make a point. As they passed, the four drivers each glared down at Tom like dignitaries. Like the stone-faced Presidents on the backs of ones and fives. Where could they be going, so early in the morning? Commuters? Travelers? No one at all like Janie and him, so they couldn't possibly matter.

The lift, alone now on the interstate, dipped down onto the gravel shoulder still some distance away, and Tom and Janie listened to the sound of its tires crushing loose gravel in the sand. A late seventies dusty blue Honda Civic hatchback, peeling paint, orange rust blooming on the wheel wells and fenders. It stopped a couple car-lengths short of Tom and Janie. They looked at each other, and Janie shook her head.

“I do this all the time, Janie. We need the ride.”

She shook her head again. Tom looked through the windshield, but in the dim light, all he saw was a dark figure behind knuckles on the steering wheel and dull light reflecting off the lenses of the driver’s glasses. Tom turned back to Janie. She shook her head again, covering her face with Elephant, and he thought of her hiding behind it an hour before when she woke him so early, when she then refused a granola bar for breakfast saying that cookies aren’t good for breakfast. He pleaded with her, but she went silent, so he stuffed the granola bar in his jeans pocket to try again later. He could feel it, warm and flattened against his leg now.

“I’ll protect you,” he said.

Peeking over Elephant, she winced and then rolled her eyes.

“Get in the car, Janie,” he said already stepping long to the car. He flung open the back car door, told the figure hello and thanks, tossed the body bag into the backseat, left the back door open, opened the front passenger side door, got in, closed the door, and fastened his seatbelt before looking up at Janie knowing she could only see his black silhouette. She dropped her head, pulled the red blanket to her stomach in a bunch, walked to the car and got in.

The man turned to Tom. A surgical scar ran into the center of his receding hairline. The man caught Tom looking at the scar, a raised, pink line with dots on either side, and so he dragged his long lock of red hair from the center of his head, longer than the rest, to cover it.

“Phillip,” he said, extending a hand Tom shook. “Santa Fe?”

“That would be great, Phillip. Thank you.”

Phillip asked where they were from as he pulled back onto I-25, and Tom said El Paso and Phillip said he heard people were Catholic down there and asked Tom what he was and Tom said he wasn't anything.

“Do you know much about Christian Science, Mr...”

“Tom.”

“Do you know much about Christian Science, Mr. Tom?”

“Just Tom. Not a whole lot.” Tom looked back at Janie so they could regret taking the ride together, but she was panicked, scanning the car, undoubtedly searching for the source of wind blowing dust around the cabin. Tom looked too, figured the wind always whistled through the cracks in the car's hull, but then he spotted a hand-sized hole in the Civic's floor between his feet. He saw Janie had spotted it too and now both of them stared at the asphalt blur between Tom's feet.

“There's a hole,” she said to Tom, and then sank into her seat.

“It's fine, Janie.” Tom could sense Phillip try to say something about it, glancing down at it and licking his lips, but instead he stiffened, pretended no one had said anything or noticed the hole or noticed the surgical scar on his head.

Tom remembered Janie nestling herself against the blue pickup's passenger door after the failed drop off at the fire station. She was as far away from him as she could be without tumbling through the air over I-25. He had thought he'd leave her with men paid to provide safety, freeing him to return to solitude. To analyzing houses alone. To casing armor chinks among comfortable suburbia. Cracked windows on hot days. Vacant houses, the owners on spring break vacation in

South Padre. He could return to sitting still on strange couches in strange living rooms, staring at the space on the carpet Charlie could crawl if she were there with him. He sat there motionless, wanting to die, breathing sickly air in the margins of society, and he'd do it until he finally didn't breath any longer.

But Janie was a blast of oxygen, and he'd somehow slurped her up, maybe on accident, maybe on purpose. He could have left her. He could have let her walk around the corner of the fire station, up the concrete steps, past the screen door into the fire station living room where several men charged with decency would have checked boxes on a list of procedures, handing her treats from the fridge until child services made her disappear. By then he'd have already returned to the shadows of the margins, wanting everyday to die, but dying very slowly instead.

Instead he kept her. Instead, he read the note attached to her dead father's shirt pocket, and knew she wouldn't be safe unless he crept out of the margins and delivered her someplace else among the written pages of society. His mom up in Ft. Collins made the most sense. He only visited her twice last year. He was sure she'd tear him to pieces for this, but he'd been preparing himself for that since last Thanksgiving anyway. If nothing else, at least she could help Tom figure out what to do. Tom took his wedding ring out of his jeans pocket, wanting to ask it out loud what to do. It never knew the answer. He hadn't asked it anything in a while, because its silence hurt him. He rolled it between his thumb and finger over the hole in the floor of the Civic, and almost let it go.

"I don't just pick people up to tell them about my faith," Phillip said. "I want you to know that, because everyone always assumes that of me. I'm a normal guy, you know. I work at Postal Annex, and I have an apartment, and I've had girlfriends. I'm normal as they come, but I'm also a minister. Or I plan to be. That's my plan. I'm a reader in my congregation, so I read

scripture, and I teach a bible study and I'm in line to do it. To be a great minister. In my heart I'm a minister already. People ask me why I chose Christian Science. You were wondering it, weren't you?"

"Sure, I guess so," Tom said, tucking the ring back into his jeans pocket.

"I knew it. People always wonder why I chose Christian Science. It's super weird to people. I'll ask you again because I suspect you must know a little bit, given how smart you seem to be. What do you know about the faith?"

"I know you all refuse medical treatment," Tom said, thinking about Phillip's scar.

"That's absolutely correct. Well done. My mother died shortly after giving birth to me. She bled internally until she was gone and my father didn't cry. Christian Scientists generally allow medical assistance for new mothers, but she was more resolved than most in the church. My father knew she would refuse treatment if it came to it, so he didn't cry when she died. I've never cried about it myself. It was God's plan for her to die. It was God's plan for her to die and for me to live and for me to remember and revere her sacrifice so it would shape the minister I would become."

Phillip recited the tenants of Christian Science, as if from a memorized script, and Tom tried to ignore him. *Sickness and medicine are illusions, harmony is the only true and fixed condition of man. We exist only in spirituality.* Phillip spoke erect and practiced as if he retched the ideas up his spine like it was a fissure in the Earth, and his skull spit ticker tape messages about harmony out his mouth regularly as a geyser. He blinked behind thick, wire-framed glasses with the regularity of an atomic clock as he spoke. He blinked tight blinks, his only other movement to fix the displaced lock of greasy red hair that kept slipping away from the scar.

Tom was uncomfortable with the conversation, but soothed because he realized Phillip was harmless. He poached hitchhikers to deliver sermons, and that was fine by Tom. So he slouched in the passenger's seat and erased everything around him in his mind. It was something he did in the living rooms of the homes he burglarized. He'd watch Charlie's ghost crawl on the living room floor for a while, and then he'd erase everything in the universe.

Tom zoned out to erase Phillip while the Civic putted on to Santa Fe. Tom was tired. Too tired to hear about Christian Science, even too tired to worry about Janie, so he focused his mind and erased.

He erased Janie, a curled up pile asleep in the back seat, an empty stomach in her tiny center. He erased the warm, flattened granola bar in his pocket. He erased the military-issue body bag Tom and Janie used for luggage on the floor of the backseat. He erased the Goodwill in Las Cruces where he'd lifted it, rolling the bag into a tight cylinder behind an aisle of obsolete eight-track players, Betamax players, coffee machines, and whatever else, sliding the body bag tube up the back of his denim shirt, half of it sticking out past his shirt tail as he hastened out the door, a bell jingling from the outside handle as he waited for Janie to emerge behind him. He erased the wind whistling through a thousand cracks in Phillip's 1978, dusty blue Honda Civic hatchback, and then he erased the Civic too. He especially erased Phillip's droning voice, like a single, flat, black piano key, ringing without decay for all eternity, or at least until Santa Fe where Tom would finally leave him.

Tom could erase everything except for Phillip. Tom tried but couldn't help seeing only the strange driver's skeletal body in his pressed, pink oxford shirt and khaki slacks sitting, leaning forward, hands at ten and two. Tom saw Phillip floating alone in that seated position, a flesh and bone zigzag, a foot off I-25 North moving at seventy miles an hour, his wind tousling

the mesquite that speckled the dirt flanking the road. And then Tom erased I-25 and then New Mexico and then the Earth and then the bits of whatever matter that was sprinkled all over the universe, but there was Phillip, still floating, hands at ten and two, seated on nothing, floating on through nothing and so he didn't float at all. He just stayed still in one spot. He stayed still but he also zoomed at the speed of light at the same time because why not?

And then Janie reappeared in Tom's universe, starting with her empty stomach, the rest of her materializing slowly around it, so he pushed her out, erasing her again.

What if she died? What if she died on his watch? What if she died like Charlie? Tom had cremated his own daughter. He and his wife had sat silent in front of an awkward, bald funeral director in a pin-striped suit, reciting procedures on his side of an enormous oak desk, just as he'd done thousands of time before, each time more devoid of emotional connection to the grievers sitting opposite him than the last, and Tom and his wife decided with a murmur and a checking of a box with the director's Parker pen that their only daughter's tiny body be burned by fires hotter than fires possible by their personal power of combustion down to dust. The gray powder didn't spread the way ash did in either of their recollections. It didn't spread the way the large flakes did in fires they knew. It didn't spread like the ash from the only bon fire they'd lit for Charlie on a camping trip in the Gila National Forrest. Charlie had picked the ash up in two handfuls the morning after and they yelled no! Charlie's ashes weren't like that fire's. Instead, Tom and his wife each flung a handful of fine gray powder that disappeared in the wind, and they couldn't be sure it rode the wind down toward the Rio Grande Valley. They looked down to see lumps of the ash that didn't take flight plopped down near their feet on the side of South Franklin Peak just off the interstate.

Tom wondered again about what they should have done. Do you destroy or preserve when you part with your dead child? Do you rid them of the world and rid yourself of everlasting grief, or do you instead preserve the body morbidly, knowing how slowly it would rot in the ground? Knowing worms and time eat your baby slowly until she's as dusty as if she'd been incinerated in a moment? Did Christian Scientists cremate or bury? He didn't dare ask Phillip, the dim-witted representative of something Tom thought of as a pseudo-faith. He didn't dare ask the drifter who rambled fanatically in a rusted Honda Civic. Tom grunted in frustration, shut his eyes and erased the Civic again.

Phillip drove too fast, and mile markers still flitted by like the thousands of ocotillo stalks, and Tom struggled to erase each one. He was losing the battle, and worse, he began to hear Phillip's droning over the corroding Civic whistling through the air like rusty steel wool.

Janie had finally fallen asleep. She was half covered in Elephant-the-red-blanket, still crumpled like a newborn, or a dead frog, he couldn't tell which.

He clenched his eyes shut and erased the newborn frog and the rusty steel wool, and then Phillip said something strange. He said, "There once was a spider and a cow." He was holding the steering wheel at ten and two, pitched forward, his back not touching the driver's seat. Just those strange words—*there once was a spider and a cow*—and absolutely everything Tom had erased reappeared like bubbles inflating at the end of a wand, and Phillip pulled them all along in his strange cloud. His Civic, Tom, Janie and the body bag were just flies caught in his zooming aura. Tom sat up in his seat, surrendered, and readied himself for Phillip's sermon about the spider and the cow.

"What's that?" Tom said, annoyed.

“Just Listen,” Phillip said. “There once was a spider and a cow. The cow chewed her grass and then chewed her cud and then chewed her grass again all day near the barn. While she did this, she noticed the spider never ate and only spun her web, and then tore it down, and then spun her web again. The cow asked the spider, ‘Have you still not caught a single fly, even with all that work? You must be hungry. Please, take some grass.’ But the spider refused, saying, ‘I cannot be nourished with your food. I must spin my web to obtain the nourishment I require.’”

Tom looked up from hole in the car floor to check on Janie. Somehow, this strange fable sounded more like cryptic last rites, and he was glad to see she was still asleep and hadn’t heard any of it. He turned forward to see a road sign that read, “NM 14 Cerrillos Road 278 B,” the first exit for Santa Fe. In the new morning light, he watched other cars instead of the hole in the floor.

“And so the cow chewed her food and chewed her cud and continued to worry about the spider who continued to spin her web and tear it down. But one day, the cow became terribly sick and lay down in a dark corner of the barn.

“When the spider came to visit the cow, the cow said, ‘I’m very worried I’ve come in here to die.’ The spider replied, ‘There’s no need to worry. Worry is simply another word for preoccupation. You have become preoccupied with your grass and your cud and it has led you here, to death.’

“The cow said, ‘haven’t you become preoccupied with your web and with tearing it down? How are you not even sicker than I?’

“And the spider replied, ‘I have not been preoccupied, but instead occupied by the spirit of art, which is the spirit of love, which is the spirit of God. The act of spinning my web is how I nourish my soul.’”

Phillip turned to Tom and smiled with the left side of his freckled face, the side with the surgical scar.

“I made that up,” Phillip said.

Tom held Phillip’s dead gaze a moment and then turned back to the Santa Fe traffic.

“How’d you get that scar?” Tom said.

Phillip didn’t answer and drove on. The long lock of hair slid off the scar, but Phillip left it this time.

“Sorry,” Tom said. “I’m tired. Shouldn’t have asked you that.”

“No you shouldn’t have.”

Tom said he was sorry again and Phillip said Tom already said that.

“My father opted for me to have brain surgery when I was seventeen.”

“Alright. Again, I’m sorry. Don’t need to know. Just glad for the ride, bud.” Tom checked on Janie, still curled up, but saw a flash of her eyes, open a sliver for just an instant.

“You asked because you need to know.”

“I don’t need anything, bud.”

“I had a tumor but it wasn’t malignant. That they knew of.”

A second green road sign for a Santa Fe exit passed over their heads, but Tom slouched in his seat, the way he’d been before the sermon.

“I didn’t want it, but he made me do it. The lord can heal all, and I knew that even then. My mother knew it always.”

A green Subaru Outback cut Phillip off in the exit lane and he slowed to give traffic room.

“Sometimes you do things with your own body you don’t want to do because you care more about people than you do your own body.”

“I hear you there, bud.”

“I’ll never know if I could have lived with the tumor or not. He didn’t let me know. The lord would have let me live with it, and so would my mother.”

“You said you didn’t know if you could have or not though.”

“The lord would have let me, believe you me. My father was weak. Didn’t want to lose another. He didn’t have the faith like me, like my mother.”

The green Subaru exited ahead of them and Tom sat up.

“Follow that Subaru,” Tom said.

“Follow?”

“No time to argue, Phil,” Tom said, restraining himself from grabbing the steering wheel.

“It’s Phillip.”

“Just do it, Phillip. That car’s going where we need to be dropped off.”

So Phillip flicked the turn signal on his Civic and tailed a forest green Subaru Outback, half a dozen environmental awareness stickers on the back window.

Siberian Elms choked out the neighborhood they entered, following the Subaru. The trees jutted out past juniper bushes, shouldering up against concrete-block walls, cracking the plaster. The trees dangled brittle and broken branches after a recent wind and shed yellow pods like deflated lima beans a handful at a time, and the tiny discs careened down, skipped against the asphalt with the wind, and piled up by the millions in the street gutters all across New Mexico. Tom rubbed an eye at the piles and said audibly that he hated Santa Fe to no reaction.

Suddenly, Phillip pulled over and put the car in park. Tom watched the green Subaru disappear over the top of the low hill ahead.

“I’m not going any further until you tell me what you’re up to,” Phillip said.

Tom sighed, looking through the hole in the car floor. A yellow Siberian Elm pod tumbled up and stopped on the asphalt under the hole, shaking and anticipating in the breeze.

“Why? Why do you need to know, Phil?”

“It’s Phillip. I’m escorting you, and so I’m implicated in whatever it is you’re up to.”

“You’re preaching, and I’m held prisoner. I’m implicated in whatever it is you’re up to.”

Tom turned to see Janie still curled up, her eyes soft, closed slits in smooth flesh, her eyelids faintly purple and needing water.

“If you don’t want to hear the true word of God, I honestly feel for you, but that is your choice. It’s your choice to get out right here if that’s the case.”

“I’m going to break into one of these houses,” Tom said directly to Phillip. “So I can steal some money.”

Phillip laughed nervously, his hands still at ten and two, straightened the hair over his scar and then returned his hands to ten and two. He told Tom he must be kidding and Tom said he was not.

“Look at her,” Tom said and Phillip looked in the rearview and then looked back over his knuckles on the steering wheel.

“Drive a little bit,” Tom said. “I’ll show you.”

Phillip turned to Tom, his mind visibly fuzzy, holding his focus somewhere in the middle of Tom’s head.

“I’ll show you how to case a house,” Tom said, eyebrows raised and smiling.

“You must realize,” Phillip said, “I would have no need for that kind of information.”

“Phillip.”

“And furthermore, this discussion is absurd. Absurdly illegal at that! Why on Earth would you tell this to a minister of all people?”

“Not a minister yet, Phil.”

“Phillip!”

“Fine! Phillip!” Tom put a hand on Phillip’s shoulder and breathed out slowly and so Phillip did also. “I’ll show you,” Tom paused and smiled again. “How to case a house and steal from it.”

Phillip looked at Tom’s hand on his shoulder and then back over his knuckles. He put the car in drive, checked his mirrors and drove. Tom settled into his seat, wiggling his shoulders.

“Where there is one Subaru,” Tom started, “there are likely many more.” He pointed to a sky blue Forester in a driveway as they passed it. “Subaru people are all the same—trusting hippies, and this city has a ton of them. They all have those damn bumper stickers. Save something-or-other, never shake a baby. They’re educated. Or they’re educated just enough. They’re optimists. They’re suckers. They’re suckers who buy houses in secluded neighborhoods so they can leave windows cracked and doors unlocked. Subarus are a good start.”

Tom wiped his nose and scanned houses silently for a block. Phillip glanced repeatedly at Tom as if to jump-start the burglary lesson, got a word stuck in his throat and then Tom continued abruptly.

“These houses are Santa Fe style of course, rounded plaster at the corners and the window openings. They look like swollen, pudgy faces. I hate Santa Fe.”

Tom found a fast food napkin in the glove compartment and blew his nose.

“1950s neighborhood” Tom said. “A few 60s. Santa Fe plaster, and occasionally exposed vigas, but really just post war tract houses with makeup.

“It’s getting warmer, so the Subaru hippies will be holding out on air-conditioning, instead airing out their houses by cracking windows. I’m looking for houses with straight lines and aluminum-framed windows. I’m looking for modern, baby.”

Phillip kept his hands at ten and two and searched for Subarus in driveways to be sure he was still within the parameters of the Subaru neighborhood.

“Why modern?”

“Built-to-order fifties tract homes always had the hot new fashions available, modern stuff, but just in the cosmetic details, so they could charge a little more, whether it matched the style of architecture or not. Cute little Youngstown kitchen cabinets with the atomic chrome handles, even cheap-ass aluminum-framed picture windows. They’re shitty and I don’t like the look of them, but people dug them in the 50s. And of course, the coveted sliding glass back door. That’s what I want. The coup de gras. The slider. Where there are cheap-ass, aluminum-framed picture windows cracked open just a bit, in the Spring, in a Subaru neighborhood, in stupid, fucking Santa Fe, New Mexico, there are sliding glass back doors also cracked open just a bit.”

Phillip turned to Tom in disgusted awe, his hands still at ten and two.

“You know,” Tom shrugged. “For air flow.” He pointed at a parked car, and Phillip swerved to miss it.

“Jackpot,” Tom said, spotting a cracked aluminum-framed window. “Make a left a block up and you can leave us there.”

“How can you be absolutely sure that one will work?”

“I can’t. I might be wrong.”

“Why not just go through a cracked window? Why the slider?”

“A big dude boosting a little girl through a front window in a Subaru neighborhood? Not a good look. We need to go through the back.”

“But you might be wrong anyway.”

“Yep. But this one had a Sonic Youth sticker in one of the front windows, which equals latchkey kid. Latchkey kid equals double likelihood of a cracked slider.

“What’s a sonic youth? Why would parents advertise having a latchkey kid?”

“No, it’s a band. Never mind, Phillip. Lesson over, okay, bud? Just drop us off.”

Phillip pulled around the next corner and put the Civic in park. Tom reached back and jostled Janie’s knee, she opened her eyes and her arms reached for the body bag like sprung mousetraps.

“What happens to the cow?” Tom said over the sound of Janie struggling with the body bag.

“What cow?”

“What cow. Jesus. The cow in your story. Does she die?”

Phillip frowned and pushed the lock of hair back over his scar.

“I don’t know. Yes, I think. It doesn’t matter.”

Tom smiled and shook his head and spoke as he reached for the Civic’s wire clothes hanger on the floor. Phillip had talked about it while Tom was erasing the universe that morning, and Tom was surprised he remembered. He slipped the clothes hanger into an open cavity where the door pull should be, and unlatched the lock on the passenger side door.

“It matters, Phillip. It matters a lot. Or I don't know. Maybe it doesn't matter at all. But I'll tell you what.” The latch popped, and the door swung open, and Tom got out, sat on the curb, and tied his boots.

Tom knew he was being a jerk to this guy. He didn't care. Phillip was a drifter who drifted in to Tom and Janie's world. Phillip drifted into whatever he could find, and whatever he got was what he deserved. Tom was a drifter, too. But Tom drifted into blank canvases when no one was looking so he could paint a picture of Charlie and remember so he could struggle on a strange couch, keep himself from crying, and leave before he had the chance to fall asleep. Tom was a drifter in his own mind, so he felt he had the right to be left alone. Phillip made himself into a customer service desk. Phillip was not true God-damn drifter.

“We'll call your cow Schrodinger's Cow,” Tom said. “Both dead and alive at the same time, depending on how you look at it. Thanks for the ride, Phillip.” Tom started to stand when Phillip stopped him.

“Wait. Are there really just clothes in the body bag?”

“Yeah, man. What do you think?”

Phillip cocked an eyebrow and looked around the Subaru neighborhood.

“Show him, Janie,” Tom said, and Janie, now on the sidewalk with the body bag, reached for the zipper.

“Wait,” Tom stopped her, his hand reaching her way.

“Never mind. I'll leave it a mystery,” Tom said. He took a handful of Siberian Elm seedpods from the street gutter, reached into the car, and dropped them through the hole in the floor of the civic.

“Both dead and alive at the same time, depending on how you look at it. So long, Phil.”

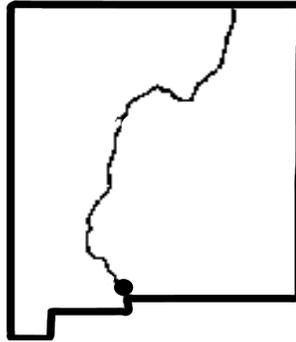
Janie hoisted the body bag up to Tom, and he slung it over his shoulder. Tom pushed Janie along by the space between her shoulders, and she gladly hastened speed with him, away from Phillip and his grumbling Civic until they reached the corner, but they never heard Phillip's Civic sputter off. He stayed there, stunned.

Tom could feel Janie trusting him again, in awe of the power he just asserted over Phillip. When they turned out of sight, Janie asked what a latchkey kid was, and Tom said she was a sneaky sleeper, and she asked what a latchkey kid was again, and he said never mind. That he just made a lot of that shit up.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 0



When I was a girl, seven years old, I lived in an old farmhouse with my father among all the other old farmhouses between El Paso, Texas and Las Cruces, New Mexico. Then my father killed himself a few months after my brother died of pneumonia. He hung himself on the porch and pinned a note to his shirt pocket. I didn't know if he meant for me to retrieve it from his body, swinging from the porch rafter in the breeze, or if he meant for me to leave it there for someone else to find. Really, I don't think he meant for anything else to happen at all after he kicked the chair out from under him.

I remember it. I remember finding him. I was in the living room looking out the window, but I didn't go out there. I cried for a while, and then I fell asleep on my mom's old La-Z-Boy. I woke up hungry and cried, and then fell asleep again. When I woke again and went to the kitchen, the lights wouldn't flip on. The electricity shut off. I knew it then because it had happened before. My father cursed on his way to the breaker box, and then drove into town,

leaving me and my brother Jamie alone, so he could use a pay phone to call the electric company. I remember feeling bad for them as we waited for him to come back.

So I went to the breaker box, stood on a stool in front of its open door, mystified by all the switches, imagined myself electrocuted and dead on the opposite side of the house from my dead father, and slammed shut the breaker box door. So I had to stay in the dark.

I got tired of crying, but I was too hungry to sleep, but too tired to hunt for food. We so rarely had food in the house, it didn't seem worth it. I just sucked on the paw of a stuffed bear and waited. I was seven years old, sucking on the paw of a stuffed bear like I did when I was a baby. I sucked as I listened to a mesquite tree scratch against a windowpane, and I was very quiet. I waited for my mother, whose face I'd forgotten and whose voice had left me, too. I even began to wait for my father.

I woke the next morning and pushed a chair over to the pantry so I could reach the highest shelves. I found a box of Froot Loops and cans of green beans on the top shelf. The cereal box was half empty, so I finished it. I threw up there on the kitchen floor and cried again. I looked at all the colors of the Froot Loops in a pool on the kitchen floor and thought I'd be in trouble when someone finally came to get me. I went out onto the porch to wait, not knowing who would possibly come. I didn't have grandparents. I didn't know my aunts and uncles, or rather, I didn't know who was still alive. The living ones mostly lived in other states. I had an uncle Willie in Ft. Stockton, but I remember my mother telling me never to talk to him. *Nunca le hables a ese viejo hijo de puta*. He'd probably be the one to come get me, and I thought about trying to read the note pinned to my father's chest to know.

I yelled for my mother every once in a while out the front window, but I wouldn't step onto the porch where my father swung from the rafter.

I took another nap. When I woke up, I went to the kitchen to try to open the green beans. I had seen my father open a can before, and I knew what the can-opener looked like, but I didn't know where it was. I pushed the chair over to some of the drawers so I could easily look down inside them. There were knives in the first drawer, so I threw them on the floor. In the next drawer, I found some other utensils that I thought might work to stab a can open and threw them on the floor, too. I climbed off the chair and tried the strangest looking utensils first, figuring they might be strange can-openers that didn't look like can-openers. When I got frustrated, I tried stabbing the can with a knife. It made dents on the top of the can, and I got excited thinking it might work. I stabbed harder and harder, gripping the knife as tight as I could. I slipped and cut my leg with the knife, and the blood mixed in with the Froot Loops on the floor. I cried until I fell asleep again.

I woke up on the kitchen floor in the late afternoon because I heard footsteps. They didn't sound like my mother's footsteps though—they sounded loud and heavy like a man's. I thought maybe they were Uncle Willie's. I went around the corner and up the stairs to hide. I heard the footsteps trail in and out of rooms, and I heard someone pulling out drawers and emptying them onto the floor.

I went upstairs into my father's study to the yellow bookcase where my mother kept the Spanish children's books she used to read to me. I opened the cupboard doors of the bottom half of the bookshelf and pulled out *Papelucho* and *La Cabana en el Arbol* and everything else so that I could fit in there. I crawled in, and pulled the cupboard doors closed behind me. A little light shone through the cracks of the old doors, and I stayed quiet again, touching at the dried blood on my leg, wishing I were just hiding from the scratching from the mesquite tree again.

I heard the footsteps come up the stairs. I closed my eyes tight so that I could hear them better. The footsteps went to another room first. I could hear doors and boxes opening in my mother's room and the chimes of small, metal things falling to the floor.

My cupboard door creaked open on its own, and I pulled it shut again. I heard my mother's room go quiet. I heard the footsteps come down the hall and then come in the room with me. The steps were slow and heavy, and the floor creaked under his feet. His shadow blocked out my streaks of light when he stepped in front of the cupboard.

I heard the closet door fling open and then it was quiet. I heard the clothes hangers holding my father's clothes slide slowly, screeching against the metal rod. The footsteps came over to the bookshelf. The drawer above my head opened, I watched the drawer bottom slide over the runners and away from me, and more light shone in. The drawer flung out onto the floor and I could see his face. He had a short beard and a dirty, blue baseball cap. I covered my eyes with my hands and tried to keep from crying. He opened the cupboard door, and I screamed with my eyes closed. I didn't want to see anything.

He didn't speak while I screamed. I was sobbing silently when I finally opened my eyes.

"Where are your parents, sweetheart?" he said.

I looked to the floor and stayed silent as he questioned. When are they coming back? When did they leave? What happened to your leg?

He took a step back and knelt down.

"I'm sure someone's coming to get you," he said. "Stay there if you want. I don't see anything wrong with that. You didn't see me."

He closed the cupboard door with me still inside, and I heard him walk out the bedroom, down the hall, floorboards creaking down the steps, and then I didn't hear anything anymore. I

stayed there. I had nowhere to go. I couldn't stand to visit my father's hanging body out on the porch. I was hungry, but I didn't have anything to eat. I didn't feel safe going down stairs to find food. I didn't feel safe doing anything at all. I watched the well where the drawer should have been and waited for it to fill with light, thinking he'd return. I wanted him to come back. I had no idea who he was, but I wanted anyone with me instead of the dark in the yellow cupboard. I waited a long time, but I fell asleep eventually.

I awoke when he opened the cupboard door again.

"What happened to your leg, sweetheart?" he said.

I started crying again. He stood back up, closed the cupboard door on me, and walked to the bathroom. I stopped crying so I could hear him. He was opening the drawers in the hall bathroom. When the cupboard door opened again, he was holding a brown bottle and some bandages.

"Okay, little one, I've got to take care of that leg. Are you going to let me help you, sweetheart?"

He held out the bandages so that I could see them, and I looked him in the eyes for the first time. I remember he looked like a deer to me. He opened the bottle and put a cotton ball over the top of the bottle, turned it over and soaked the cotton. He asked my name and I didn't answer.

"Fair enough," he said. "I'll just keep calling you sweetheart. I need to put this on your cut, but it's going to hurt a little. Can you be a brave girl so that I can help you, sweetheart?"

I nodded and stuck my leg out of the cupboard. He held the cotton ball over my cut.

"Here comes the worst part, and then it's all downhill from there, okay?"

He cleaned my wound with the cotton ball and I held my mouth as I cried, but I'd had alcohol poured in my cut before. I knew it didn't hurt all that bad. I don't know why I covered my mouth and cried so hard then.

“You are the bravest little girl I have ever seen in my whole life, you know that?”

He peeled three bandages to cover my wound, and left the wrappers there on the floor. He asked if I was hungry and I nodded. He told me to stay right there and that he'd be back, sweetheart. I closed the cupboard door on myself and listened to him walk down the stairs.

He was gone a long while, and I listened hard for his footsteps and only caught them now and then.

A while later he came back with a bowl of chili beans, a spoon, and a glass of water. He stood holding it all and said nothing. He just stood there, I thought staring at me, but he could have been staring at anything.

“Have you been out on the porch, sweetheart?” he said. I shook my head. It was true. I hadn't.

He handed me the beans and told me to be careful because it might still be a little hot, and he set the water on the yellow cupboard shelf.

I ate the beans. They tasted so good, because I'd been so hungry. I still get hungry for those beans. He told me not to go too fast, so I didn't.

“I think I'll call you Bean instead,” he said. “That sound okay?”

I didn't say anything and I drank the entire glass of water.

“I'll take that as a yes,” he said, and he wiped my face with a damp towel and moved the bowl and the spoon off to his side on the floor.

“What do you know about what happened here?” he said. I shook my head.

“You haven’t been on the porch?” he said. I shook my head.

He thought a while, and I saw him feel for something in his shirt pocket. It must have been father’s note. But I didn’t say anything. That square of paper couldn’t make me whole and I imagined it would make this man less than whole if he kept it, and that suited me fine. At the time, that suited me fine.

“There haven’t been any cars here for a couple of days,” he said, after a while. “Have you been alone here all that time?”

“Yes.”

“It speaks,” he said. I pushed myself back into the cupboard.

“She speaks. Sorry. And you don’t know when your parents are coming back?”

I cried, and he let me. When I quieted down, he tried again.

“Since your parents are stuck somewhere for a bit, I think it’s a good idea if you come with me. Do you want to go ahead and come with me, Bean?”

I shook my head no.

“Look, honey, I’ve been a very nice man up until now, haven’t I? Didn’t I clean your cut? Didn’t I get you something to eat?”

I didn’t answer.

“Where I come from, it’s only good manners to say thank you when someone helps you out the way I did.”

“Thank you.”

“There we go. We’re going to go somewhere now, Beanie, and you don’t need to be scared at all, okay?”

I didn’t answer.

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

He held my hand as we walked down the stairs and out the front door. I was afraid to let go of his hand because I was afraid of him. I felt like his hand was a choke chain on a dog. He had a blue pickup truck, and he lifted me by my armpits into the passenger seat and buckled me up. I didn't need him to do any of that. When we drove away, I watched my house get smaller and smaller and the mesquite trees swallowed it up, and I hoped the scratching would just stay back there forever. I asked him where we were going.

“We're going to go to a nice place with a nice lady.”

“Is it in the desert?”

“No, it's not in the desert. It's in a forest, and you're going to love it.”

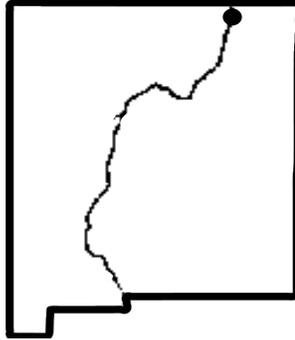
We drove for a while without the radio on or anything, and it felt good to smell the cool desert air and to hear the tires on the road under us rolling so fast. I breathed the desert in over and over as deep as I could so that I couldn't smell it anymore, so I could imagine I was in the forest already. I resolved myself then to not cry anymore. I had cried enough for both my dead brother and myself. Enough to last us to adulthood. I didn't want to cry again, but really, I stopped because I didn't need to anymore.

It was soon dark, and the pickup seat was comfortable and smelled like my father's shed where I'd slept many times before, and thought that shouldn't have made me feel good, but it did. The strangest things make you feel better when you can't possibly feel worse. I was very sleepy then, so I closed my eyes to drift off into something black. The black of the yellow cupboard, or the black of the mesquite trees, or any deep black I might crawl into next.

New Mexico

I-25

Mile Marker 450



The Ponderosa pines shook and shivered in the cold Colorado wind shooting down from the north. The trees speckled the mountains like an old man's sparse hair, like they'd snap off if the wind were any colder. The wind had raced down northern New Mexico, slaloming through the trees, funneling into streets lined with 1880s Wild West facades, rattling wooden shutters, rolling over gray shrubs dotting the wide valley at the edge of town until it reached the Raton Truck Stop where it suffocated Tom. The Colorado wind scooped the New Mexico air out of his mouth, so he turned his head to gasp, causing his temples to thump harder. His chin in his chest, he opened his wince to see a crusted spot on his jacket and suddenly he remembered that he *did* vomit last night.

Then he remembered Janie sitting on the parking lot curb and straightened up. He walked the slow dignified walk drunks fake the morning after, when they sacrifice speed for feigned grace. She sat with her jaw in her palms, elbows on her knees, staring at the Hello Kitty backpack on the ground between her shoes.

“You should wear it,” Tom said. “It’s cool.”

“I stole it.”

“Hey, I didn’t make you steal it. Besides, it just kind of happened. I don’t know that you really stole it.”

Her jaw in her palms, she tapped her cheekbones with her finger tips and rocked on the curb. Tom realized he’d seen her do this before. He’d seen her do this before just like he’d seen her nibble off the tips of her hair. She hadn’t done that since Elephant Butte though.

“That girl hadn’t used that thing in forever,” Tom said. “She’s too old now. It would’ve ended up in a landfill at some point anyway. It’s okay, Janie.”

“My brother never stole nothing.”

“Anything. And you didn’t steal it. You never steal anything. You...adopt things.”

Tom wanted to say her brother didn’t live long enough to witness the temptation, but swallowed it easily instead. A slow swirl began in the pit of his stomach, something yellow, acidic and rotting. He hadn’t had a drop in four years, but he remembered how it felt and how the process to deal with it felt. He needed a bathroom, but now wasn’t the time.

“I remember Charlie stole something once,” he said. “A geode. Know what a geode is?”

Janie shook her head against her cupped hands. Handcuffed to the night before, he spoke the way he walked, slow and slick, afraid of slurs that popped up like weeds. He spoke to prove that he could speak.

“A Geode’s a rock that’s like an egg. In layers like an egg too. The empty middle’s surrounded by crystals, and the crystals are surrounded by rock. Regular rock. You have to crack one open to see the purple amethyst in there. Or white quartz or brown or people dye them. All sorts of colors.

“It bummed me out because we’d just gone rock hunting out in Baker’s mine, and she found a good thunder-egg. That’s what they call geodes. Thunder-eggs. It had white quartz inside. About the size of her little fist.

“But she wanted another one, I guess. She siped it. *Swwwiped* it.” He wiped his nose on his wrist, embarrassed of the slur.

“From the end of a display table at the Tucson Gem show. I took her for her eighth birthday. Ninth birthday. No, eighth. One of the biggest gem shows in the world. Really.

“She swiped it, a clean, purple amethyst one, stuck it in her backpack, and when we got home, I found it. I was looking for her thing, her thermos, so I could rinse out the cocoa, and there it was, a little half thunder-egg, the price tag sticker still on the bottom. Seven ninety-five.”

“Did you teach her how to steal too?”

“What?”

“You taught me how to steal.”

Tom couldn’t argue with it. He’d found the cash, the granola bars, and the jerky and stuffed them all into their body bag. She didn’t see, but she found it later. The part he’d taught her was the part he taught Phillip, the whacked out Christian Scientist when they cased the house.

The thought of the jerky made him gag and he stepped away and looked up toward Colorado and another blast of wind pushed his chin into his chest. Though the cold should have soothed his aching skin, the punch of air that stole another mouthful of breath transferred down his esophagus and struck him in the stomach, quaking the yellow puddle in there.

“I’m going to the bathroom. Don’t leave this spot.”

He turned and walked his slow exacting walk along the sidewalk, keeping the yellow puddle in his belly level. A stream of people spilled out of a Greyhound bus, its brakes hissing and its engine left on and humming. Most were alone, but a family and pairs of travelers made their way to the convenience store. A trail of them instinctually spotted the line for the bathrooms outside, to a flat steel door on the side of a separate cinderblock structure, and Tom followed them, but his slow, nervous step kept him from passing anyone, and by the time he reached the line, he was at the end of it.

A gorilla of a man went in and struggled with the door, which was set crooked. Once he was inside, the door jerked from his little repeated slams, like a ghost's in a horror film, until the door stood flush in the frame and the bolt slid and clicked.

Tom felt something strange somewhere around him. He looked back at Janie who still sat on the curb, lightly kicking the Hello Kitty backpack. As he turned back to the line, he spotted something in his periphery. Tom saw a black mop of hair first, thinking it was the apparition of a little girl, until he focused and saw the greasy black mop topping a man, sitting like a pyramid alongside the line. He should have been something like a cartoon to Tom. Tom usually would have felt some twinge of guilt in ignoring a native American man capitalizing on tourists' perception of indigenous people's, both the traveler and the spectacle perpetuating the exchange, and so it was all worth ignoring. Anything was worth ignoring to an outlier like Tom. But this man scraped his index finger with his thumbnail, humming some low tune, not of this earth. Though Tom hadn't noticed him until approaching the line, he somehow knew he'd been there all along. He was a permanent fixture. He could have been waiting there since the sand blowing around him first chipped off the mountain stone. He wasn't a cartoon, though he should have been. He wasn't like anything Tom had seen before.

He pivoted his head up, his eyes pinning Tom like two pins on a dissected frog, like Janie pinned against the vinyl backed booth at the Santa Fe Railcar Diner in red and green Christmas lights.

The black haired man addressed the whole line of travelers, though looking just at Tom. He spoke a homeless man's speech, fevered and intent, his dirty hands stoking his ancient Nikes crossed in his lap. Raspy and ignored, he made the sort of sound that reaches far out into the sky but somehow not loud enough to lance a traveler's disquieted mind. He began his speech, a sales pitch of sorts, and all stood still in the line, all doing their best to ignore him. Tom made eye-contact with the man though, drawn to him, knowing his speech would be the sort of crazy he wanted. It would be the sort of crazy his mother showed him. The sort of crazy she instructed him never to call crazy. Crazy was a bad word to her, and he wanted the bad word now. This man's speech would be crazy enough that Tom could ignore the yellow puddle in his belly. He could forget Janie for a few minutes. He could forget Charlie for a few minutes. It would be crazy enough that he could feel sane, and so it wouldn't be crazy at all.

Tom wondered if the Indian would speak long enough for Janie to wander onto a bus, freeing him forever.

I took these from the desert because I am an Indian and I can and you all cannot. These old pottery shards are not shards of the Earth, as they seem to be. Well, okay, okay, okay, they are. They are the shards of the people of the Earth and so they are of the Earth, but really nothing is of the Earth. Everything is of everything, so when I scrape my thumbnail along the edge like this, the sand under my nail isn't sand. See? Those are stars. Why not? These little ancient clay windows through spacetime are for sale, and you all can buy them with the dollars

in your little leather wallets. You have time to think. The line is long, so listen and think. Each of you will need to relieve yourself once it's your turn for the bathroom, and so you can think some more in there. When you're done, you even have another thirty yards or so to think one last time before you step up into your long silver bus and slip away like a slow bullet, away from my truck stop. Really, each of you can flee and you'll all still have until your bodies turn to pillars of salt and those pillars collapse and blow over this desert and all your white is lost in all this brown. I'll be here. I've never not been right here. Why not?

This is Elk. This is not a pottery shard though it appears to be a pottery shard. Elk was a beautiful woman with long, black hair. She nursed my grandmother and my mother and my aunts and my uncle and my sister, but not me. Never me. She wouldn't slip her long dark nipple over my slick gums. She did for my older sister though, who's only a year older, who didn't stop nursing until she was three and a half, saying things my uncle taught her when he was drunk like, 'tit, mama!' or 'tit, Mama Moose!' who was really Elk, but Elk is hard for babies to say, so by the time she could say Elk, she was used to Mama Moose, and it stuck. Elk died when her tribe, the Yaquis from Mexico, died, and so I put her in this shard. They left enslavement from the conquerors to the south and they stopped short of the Apache brutality to the north. They squirmed and survived and died naturally one by one until she was the last and spent the rest of her days firing simple pots that didn't take too long to form since watching your back takes a lot of time. She fired them alone knowing she'd been swallowed from above and below until she died in a foreign era. There aren't even any Elk or Moose around anymore, not by a long shot, but the babies called her Mama Moose, or Moose, or Moo-moo, or just that warbling, searching sort of cry newborns do when they're not sure they'd ever be heard, as if that's every newborn's first thought. Every person's first thought is, "I don't think anyone is coming back." Mama Moose

would flick my sister's cheek and sing an ancient song about rattlesnakes into her ear and my sister would suckle Elk's long brown nipple, and I can remember it though I was a newborn baby, if you can believe that but you probably can't believe that. You didn't understand me about the black hair. Elk's black hair. Down to the dimples above her bottom that all the other women were jealous of. And a large nose, a man's nose. She carried her nose the way a dove carries a twig—with care and the consciousness that it's doing so, but with the precision that suggests the dove and twig are one.

Think of it this way—if you buy ten shards of pottery, you are buying ten access points, for ten distinct people. That's ten consciousnesses to which you now have access that you didn't have yesterday when you kissed your babies goodnight. Imagine what they would say about this shard!

I was born into a toilet. My mother squatted to relieve herself, empty her bowels. Take a shit, folks. Right? Hah! And I appeared instead. She had no idea she was pregnant. She was Indian, so of course she drank, and so of course she drank during her phantom pregnancy, and so of course I have problems with my mind, but of course my problems are my virtues. Of course you're not laughing because you aren't allowed to laugh at that because you are not Indian and I am, but of course you're allowed to laugh at that because it's funny and you're here. In the universe, that is. I can say the word Indian and you cannot, because we say Indian, even when we mean Yaqui, or Mogollon, or Pueblo, and you say Native American because you're scared, but of course you can say the word Indian, too. It's a word, and you can speak. Toilets are still made of actual porcelain. You think they'd be PVC or stainless steel by now, something cheaper, something easier. But no. Porcelain is still somehow easier and more economical, and so American Standard and Saniflo and Kohler and Delta and Eljer and TOTO and Mansfield still

take clay from the earth and fire it in fire hot as a sun flare eating up an asteroid. Why not? They fire it deep in the belly of a kiln. I emerged from my mother's body into the observable universe, fell seven inches, and splashed in a small pool of water in the center of a pot made from Earth once transformed by fire. After she passed me, my mother collapsed, and on her way down, her head hit and knocked off the tank cover, and a corner of it broke off. Pottery corners are rare. This is it. This is the corner piece of pottery from the toilet I was born into. I keep it in the ankle of my shoe. See? Ah ah ah, I don't think so. I know what you're thinking. This one is not for sale. All of my pottery is magic and all of it is worth the price of your dollar bills in your little leather wallets, but not this one. Although I have freed myself of the shackles of commodity and worldly treasures and matter and protons and neutrons and electrons and muons and quarks and strings, I have yet to break free of this God's trance. It is entrancing, isn't it? Or isn't he? Or isn't she? See how she's retained her white sheen even after all these years? Hah! Strings! That's funny isn't it? I broke free from the strings in a muon like Indian Pinocchio. You keep looking at her. Does it bother you that I toss her in my hands? That I tempt you? Would you like to feel how smooth? This is my mother, my God, and my universe, as slippery as a silver stripe of stars spilling from the tip of a brush swiped across that black endless canvas. You don't need to lock the bathroom door. I'll protect each of you, one at a time. Think hard while you're in there. You still have time. Time is nothing, and so it is all we'll ever have.

The yellow puddle in Tom's belly scorched his esophagus, splashed against and corroded the back of his teeth. He knew that because he'd thrown up so many times before. Back when he used to drink. It all spilled past his lips and sprayed into the truck stop toilet. Once he opened his

wince, he saw it sloshing softly in the water, petting the brown ring on the toilet's base, and he wretched again, this time nothing coming up.

He wanted to run to Janie, but walked swiftly instead, only realizing he'd passed the line and the mystic Indian when he reached the sidewalk, and another freezing blast of Colorado wind stole his breath, and forced his head to look back. He pushed against the wind and walked on. He sought out Janie, the little girl hunched over a Hello Kitty backpack she resented, and stood in front of her on the parking lot asphalt and spoke.

"I never wanted to do this to anyone. I've torn you away and killed who you could have become and I don't know who that is or would have been. Neither do you. You had a future and I didn't think it was good, so I shoveled you out and drug you North by your little roots to replant you without knowing you'd survive."

He cupped his mouth with his hand, and wiped a bit of saliva on the corner of his mouth.

"Are you surviving?" he said. "That's not fair."

He spun around and looked at the mountain spilling out the Colorado air and turned back to her.

"You could still be anything, Janie. Anything."

But he didn't know that was true—in fact he suddenly knew it was false. She could now never be anything but an outgrowth of him. She had no choice the way children never do when they're raised anything but wild, and of course none ever are. But now she was either falling or climbing a hole he'd shoved her in, and he cried in front of her knowing the trip would end, their tether would fray and split and he'd never know which direction in that hole, the one he'd forced her into, she would head—up or down.

She lifted her head to him, despondent, and he awaited some seven-year-old wisdom or defiance or innocence or anything he could throw his hands up in response to and say, *yes of course that's right. Let's do what you want to do.* But instead she vomited onto the backpack, her own little yellow puddle sloshing in a depression over Hello Kitty's face.

Tom said Jesus and oh my God and all the things that fall out someone's mouth when words fail because silence is better, and he pulled her into his lap and hugged her hoping she wouldn't shove him away. She reached up to wipe her mouth in the cage of his arms, so he figured she'd stay there. She pushed her elbows back against him, stood from his lap and went to sit on the curb. He didn't know if the alcohol made him vomit or if it was Janie, but he knew it was him who made her vomit. It was him who'd stirred a little girl like she was a cauldron, and he couldn't blame her father or her mother or the desert or the I-25. He'd been her witch and she'd been his cauldron, black and bubbling higher each mile marker they'd passed.

"I'll clean this up for you," Tom said, picking up the Hello Kitty backpack with both hands out in front of him, balancing the puddle on top, like it was an inert newborn he'd carry to the first doctor he could find.

He took the backpack to the bathroom, cutting the line and the mystic Indian's speech, and pounded on the big metal door. He ignored timid protests from the people in line, leaving them for the wind to take. A woman emerged shortly, startled and eyeing the backpack in Tom's hands. He must have been as crazy to her as the mystic Indian, so she skirted around him, and he slammed the metal door shut behind him with one try. While washing the vinyl backpack in the sink, he knew at once his mistake. The backpack didn't matter to Janie. He didn't matter to Janie. He couldn't think of a thing that mattered to Janie but her dead little brother, and Tom had just left her sitting on a curb near a bus so he could do the first thing he could think of that might

make her feel better. He did it not thinking from her head, and that had always been his problem with her. He did everything thinking from his own head, a dry sponge sopping up dry sand in the dead desert. When you have a little one, why think from any other place than the wet newness they've yet to spill? He felt now how he felt when Charlie had died—desperate, empty, and dry as a fake cough.

He knew she wouldn't be on the curb when he got there, but he ran anyway, grasping the Hello Kitty backpack tight, like it was Janie's wrist. He ran past murmurs from the line, and the mystic Indian pouring another round of white or maybe rainbow or maybe black into deaf ears. Tom saw from a distance that he'd been right—she wasn't there on the curb—and he saw a long silver bus pulling onto I-25, its engine pushing hard onto a black asphalt line cutting the desert in two. He chased it, dropping the backpack on the shoulder of the road, sprinting, his boots slapping against the asphalt, gasping in deep gulps of cold Colorado air, ignoring the gusts, ignoring breathing when he had to, sprinting on, until the bus was out of sight, and a red Suburban zoomed past him, honking its horn. He stumbled to the shoulder and vomited again onto a mesquite tree. He turned back to the Raton truck stop, and saw a little shiny black dot atop a skinny body on the shoulder of the road. He could feel it speaking to him, and knew it must have been the mystic Indian. It called him to come back, and he felt compelled to comply, but knowing it was the Indian, he fought it. The figure held something up in its hand. Something colorful. Pink and blue. It was the Hello Kitty backpack, and the figure was Janie.

Tom trotted back to her, though she stayed still for him. He didn't want to take the chance that she'd run for another bus.

“I thought you left me,” Tom said through gasps. He looked into the ditch behind her and saw rocks arranged in a pattern. A circle at the center of lines pointing north, south, east, and west. It was another Zia.

“Sorry I threw up on the backpack,” she said.

“Don’t say you’re sorry, Beanie. I thought you didn’t want to use it. Because you stole it. Because I taught you to steal it.”

“I adopted it,” she said. Tom smiled at her and pet her hair.

“I kind of had to,” she said, “because I threw up on it and because you cleaned it for me.”

“You still don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Her name is Charlie,” she said. He felt her studying his face for a reaction.

“Is that okay?” she said.

“That’s fine, Beanie. I like that a lot, in fact,” he said.

“I stole this from you,” Janie said. She took his wedding ring out of her jeans pocket and held it out to him. “Sorry.”

“What the hell, Janie?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You can keep it.”

“What’s her name?” she said, rolling the ring between her finger and thumb.

“Sophia.”

Janie looked up at the road behind him so he turned around to see what had caught her attention. It was Phillip in his late seventies dusty blue Honda Civic hatchback, whistling high in the cold wind. They watched him drive south until they were sure he wouldn’t turn around to find them.

“It’s kind of cold,” she said. “Are we almost to the forest?”

“Yeah. We’re at the foot of it. Should we keep going?”

“Your thumb?”

“I don’t have cash left.”

“You don’t want to steal some?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

They walked along the shoulder up to Raton, and he pointed out a mountain peak far north to distract her when they passed the mesquite tree still dripping his vomit.

Backyard Tomatoes

Gloria had it all—everything she needed for her wedding. She had something old, a deckled-edged photograph of her favorite Tia, Ruby, swiping black bangs from her forehead with skinny fingers, her face a little blurry in the photo, but maybe that's why everyone said she looked so pretty in it, her hooked nose flattened a little in the blur. Gloria had something new, a green, felt fedora for her childhood doll her mother had finished sewing together just in time for the wedding, something Gloria always wanted as a child. She teared up when she found it under tissue paper in the tiny handmade hatbox, her mother telling her *better late than never*, and Gloria thought maybe she'd just go ahead and become a child again, forget the wedding, and give the fedora to her doll still on her bedside table back in her and Keith's studio apartment and marry the doll instead. Gloria had something borrowed, a coveted beaded garnet necklace from her mother. Gloria's mother said she could keep the antique necklace forever someday. Gloria told her, *but not today*, as if to tell her mother she'd be around a long, long time, longer than something Gloria knew how to measure. Gloria had everything but something blue.

Panicked, unable to find something blue just moments before her and Keith's procession as the speakers in the backyard blared a violin recording of *Here Comes the Bride*, Gloria and her mother struggled with a corkscrew and emptied a blue bottle of Riesling in the kitchen sink, and smashed it against the metal tub for a shard of blue glass.

Gloria couldn't help but squeeze the blue shard as she walked the grass aisle, and blood filled the cracks of her palm, and feeling the wetness, she still couldn't catch a red drop before it dotted the satin skirt of her white dress.

The red spot could have been her cue to run, she thought. Maybe the red spot dripped from Orlando's red and blue Leatherman jacket tigh across his broad shoulders. She had admitted to Keith two nights before that she still had feelings for Orlando, and while Keith sputtered that he was not a second place sort of man, that he deserved more, punctuating with his fist against the plastered wall of their ancient Sunset Heights apartment like a little baby, she wondered why anyone deserved anything. Wasn't anything you got or got torn away just another random slipping step in the El Paso desert sand? He hadn't said he deserved more from her or more because of something he'd done. He deserved more and that was all. She'd wished she'd used stronger words when telling him about Orlando while Keith pounded and spit as he talked through his teeth. She wished she'd said she was still deeply in love with Orlando, but it was too late for that now.

Standing in front their families in her father's backyard, Gloria stared at the red spot on her wedding dress and remembered her school guidance counselor interviewing her after her sixth grade teacher reported a disturbing journal entry. In her Reading and Writing Journal, Gloria described The World of Her Life's Story as a mean place with dark rooms where anything happens. The counselor and her parents pried for an answer, in English at first and then in Spanish, and then English again, but Gloria insisted the journal entry didn't mean anything, and she tried disappearing from them all, sitting in her room for hours with a roly-eyed doll that she dressed as a boy. She wished she had a fedora for him. She and the doll would roll on the floor deeply in love and talk about their future life out in California where they'd lie at a secret beach with no one at all and they'd build a fire and never sleep again. Instead, her mother rapped on the door, waited a minute, let herself in, and lay on the carpet next to Gloria's bed, asking her strange questions answered with silence until they were both asleep.

Gloria's best friend, Leti, from her spot as maid of honor next to the priest, smiled through a deep tunnel of hair sprayed curls aimed at Gloria so only she could see. Leti smiled as if to say, "What's up, girl? Remember last night?" Gloria had said Keith was like a toy soldier her cousin had as a boy, a gold tipped gun across its chest, something exciting all-wound-up, something that left everyone wondering what would happen next, and the two smiled and took another shot of well-tequila at the Five Points bar. Gloria winced, a wedge of lime for teeth, and thought about adding that the toy had been broken, and that's why it danced erratically on her grandfather's parquet floors, but they ordered another round instead and danced until closing.

Leti's smile was enough to stand Gloria tall though, so she looked up at Keith who hadn't noticed the grief in her face, who never noticed when she stayed silent as his buddies, partners in their upstart moving company, told crude jokes about nuns and pubic hair and getting lucky, ignoring her, the only woman near them.

She thought about Orlando passing a football and then running to the sideline to ask her out that night, getting yelled at by a coach and running back, falling along the way, jumping up to face her and wave, and so she knew he was real and not in a movie, but maybe he was just in the sort of movie she wasn't used to watching.

He also left her crying in a bathtub at a Friday night party in the valley. She screamed telling him that he didn't really love her, and she vomited onto the bathtub drain plug. The teenage boy told her that she was never going to stop doing this, though she'd only done it a few times, and she recalled an actress in a movie, perhaps Farah Fawcett, and told him that he was never going to love her, but something in her delivery shook him to his spine and he really did leave her there in the bathroom, drove his Chevy C-10 to the empty lot next door to his parent's

house, burned to nothing in a house fire a year before, smoked a cigarette and then went inside and to bed.

She lost her appetite to ever drink again that night, and she hadn't had much past a sip here and there at parties all through college. And so of course she wretched the tequila shots from her stomach this morning in the toilet and sat relieved on the floor when she was done, an arm draped over the toilet seat, staring at the bathtub nearby, watching Orlando's ghost walk out years ago.

Standing tall as she dared above her father's backyard green grass, stretching a hot-tempered belly under her red-spotted wedding dress, she felt the tequila swirl brown and red in her blue veins as the priest recited a prayer.

*Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that these your servants,
now to be joined by the Sacrament of Matrimony,
may grow in the faith they profess
and enrich your Church with faithful offspring.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.*

She focused on Keith's nervous green eyes and thought of a little boy they'd have one day that might look something like Orlando.

It was the summer before his senior year in college when Orlando finally gave up on her. He seemed surprised when he said out loud that he didn't love her anymore, and she was surprised she slapped him. She hadn't slapped anyone before, and the twinge of pain on her

fingertips lingered when she touched doorknobs, bed sheets and the fingers of her other hand massaging them until sleep. She'd watched him through a window just afterward, his hands stuffed in his Leatherman jacket pockets, as he walked to his little white C-10 parked against the curb, and she narrated everything he did peering through mini blinds in whispers, *climb in, pull the emergency brake lever, push off the radio for quiet, touch your face where I slapped you, press the clutch down how you showed me, lift the column shifter behind the steering wheel, and push the truck into first*, and she felt the way one does when there's too much too feel, or too much new to know how to feel, so she didn't cry.

Keith was the teacher's assistant in her Jacksonian Era history course with Dr. Crawford, during her sophomore year of college, and within a month of tutoring, she and Keith were making love in his windowless shoebox of an office on the third floor of the library. Keith locked the door and pushed every book, notebook, pen and water bottle off the table with his meaty forearm before gently laying her on top. His eyes glowed green, it felt good and she smelled books as he thrust himself inside her, and so she thought it all must be right.

Her mother's first comment after meeting Keith for the first time was that he looked a lot like Orlando, and he did, only white-skinned, and a little shorter. Little bulb noses, eyebrows like boomerangs, round strong jawlines, and green eyes, Orlando's green always and Keith's green sometimes. Each time Gloria brought Keith by, her entire family was preoccupied with the resemblance, whispering about it in the hallway here and there, but they were far more preoccupied with his strange temperament. Gloria told her sister, Debi, and Debi told their parents about the way his eyes would change from hazel to green when he got angry. They were skeptical (something that came up in the hallway) but then witnessed his green eyes, the wild dog lurking in Keith, at a cookout when Gloria first brought him home.

Gloria's father, Raul, arranged for the cookout after he learned of a new boyfriend. He was mostly annoyed with Gloria's recent dramatics, but also a bit worried. She had confined herself to her room since Orlando, leaving only for the bathroom or the kitchen. During those rare appearances, she dragged her slippers against the tile and held her robe closed at her neck, waving her depression like a gray banner, insistent that if her father were to see her, he would see her slow, hovering ghost and contemplate what he could have done to keep his daughter from her untimely death. He'd peep from the edge of a wall to watch her shuffle back to her room, shut the door behind her, and through the door, he imagined her standing silent and still, waiting for his knock so they could talk. Instead, he'd rub his baldhead, resist, and leave her standing in her cell.

It was soon for her to enter a new relationship, but he missed his daughter and was tired of her charade. He decided he would make the best of this *Keith*, and so he splurged for steaks.

Raul salted and peppered the ribeyes in a Pyrex dish, handed it to Keith, and led him to the smoldering red hibachi in the backyard.

"Gloria tells me you're a firefighter?" Raul stabbed one of the steaks out of the dish in Keith's hands with a grilling fork, causing Keith's arms to drop and then spring back up. Keith knew Raul had been a firefighter for a decade or more before he started his air-conditioning business.

"Careful there," Raul said. "So firefighter, right?"

Keith said he was and they ironed out the particulars in short blurts, like morse code until Keith said he was on B shift.

"All the assholes were on B shift. I'm sure it's different now."

"Nope."

“Not different, huh?” Raul said. Keith swallowed, his gaze on the embers.

“You going to test for driver?”

“We’ll see.” Keith said. Raul studied Keith’s face and picked out the bits of Orlando Gloria’s sister had warned about. That infamous green flooded into Keith’s eyes, which were locked on a steak hissing in the red hibachi. His arms at a ninety-degree angle, his knuckles white against the edges of the Pyrex dish.

“Studying’s not for everyone I suppose.”

“I’ve got an M.A. in History from The University of Colorado Boulder. I think I know something about studying, old man.”

“Alright, mijo. I just figured you’d want to try for driver, that’s all. Watch it with the old man business.” Raul stabbed another one of the steaks in Keith’s hands, but Keith emptied all of the steaks onto the hibachi and the blood drizzled over the coals sending up a column of gray smoke.

“What the hell is wrong with this kid, Gloria?” Raul’s stunned family watched Keith drop the Pyrex onto a patio table and step long to the sliding glass door, slide it wide open and disappear into the house.

Against her family’s warnings, she stayed with Keith, trudging through days like gauntlets, keeping her sights on all of the Orlando in him. His carved nose, mustache and bowtie lips mouthing *I never should have left you*. She secretly loved Keith’s anger for flooding his hazel eyes green, as green as Orlando’s, and filled with rage or love—it didn’t matter which. Her father took her onto the back porch, away from her mother and sister, a month before the wedding to talk her out of it. She stared at the hibachi’s hull as he spoke, at a brown drip-line of steak blood still there from the cookout for Keith earlier that year. Raul told her not to make a

commitment like marriage before she was ready, Mija, that she'd get over Orlando. She told him that he married Mom when he was seventeen. Who was he to talk? She told him that she wanted to be happy, and that she wanted him to want her to be happy. He said that that's exactly what he wanted. She insisted that she just wished everyone would just let her be happy.

“No one's trying to stop you.”

“You are trying, but you're not going to. I will be happy.”

It was a June wedding, and the hot suburban concrete in her father's neighborhood cooked the backyard party until no one would dance. Everyone packed into the house for the air-conditioning, so Keith and Gloria danced outside to the speakers still blasting Diana Ross and the Supreme's “Stop in the Name of Love.” Keith looked through the mini blinds at everyone eating the last of the tamales, and then led Gloria to the shed in the back corner of the yard. They consummated the marriage there, Keith muscling a lawn mower to a corner, and Gloria leaned against shelves of paint, pesticide and gardening tools, and their sweat dripped down on the grass trimmings dusting the floor, and Gloria watched the red spot on the skirt of her dress swing with the movement, and the green stench of rotting grass strangled them until it was done.

Gloria spent the first few months excitedly nesting. White curtains would of course brighten the front of the house—the windows were the eyes—and her house would be pleasant and welcoming from the street. Blue glazed pots overflowing with geraniums would need to line the walkway if guests were to be drawn to the dusty yellow front door. There they would see she had splurged for the nicest mailbox available at Home Depot, the wrought iron one with the floral details. Guests would enter onto a red Persian runner rug she had found at an estate sale on the West Side's upper valley just after they moved in. The dead widow's estate included a

collection of Lladro porcelain figurines, and Gloria restrained herself and didn't spend the hundred and twenty five dollars for one in particular. The soft, pastel and ivory almond-faced woman twisting under a parasol was alone and perfect. Its image was fixed in her mind, and she saw it twirling and sad as she vacuumed her living room later that day. She arced the vacuum in the carpet forming curved stripes the way the glass woman would glide under the parasol, cool and without a fingerprint upon her.

Gloria sped back to the estate sale hoping to catch the proprietor before he left so that she could buy the figurine, but it had already been sold. When she got back home, she found the vacuum still running upright in the living room, its raspy motor clicking and exhausted, a thick smell of burning carpet. She rushed to unplug it and the house fell dead. The walls each took a silent step forward and pushed Gloria to her knees like a limp doll. She was out crying in the side yard when Keith got home.

"What are you doing over here?"

"Nothing." She turned, wiped her face and bent down to pick up a garden trowel in the gravel.

"I was thinking we could plant some tomatoes over here. It would be a good spot with the sun."

"Were you crying? What's wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking it would be nice to have a little garden. Maybe we could do some strawberries too."

"What the hell's going on?"

"I'm fine, Keith. Drop it, ok?"

“I’m not going to drop it if you’re going to be crying out in the side yard when I’m not around.”

“I had a moment, and now I’m fine. What do you think about the garden? I really want tomatoes.”

“I think I don’t give a shit about the garden. I want to know what’s going on with you.”

“Keith. I told you I had a moment and now I’m fine. Drop it.”

“Well now I’m having a moment, and I want to know what’s going on with my wife. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes, Keith. I’m going inside. I need to start dinner.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

That weekend, Keith picked up some gardening soil, compost, a trellis, and two tomato plants, one Early Girl and one Supersteak. He figured those varieties stood the best chance of surviving long enough to bear fruit considering it was already September. He wove the bit of vine on them that had grown at the nursery through the wires on the trellis, and with his fingertips, pushed down on the white speckled topsoil he’d poured from plastic bags. The dead vines hung from the trellis all winter, haunting the side yard like scarecrows so that Gloria had no where to hide.

After arriving home about midday from his shift at twenty-twos, Keith slumped his duffle bag of dirty laundry on the kitchen floor, unloaded groceries onto the countertop, and got to work on a tomato pie. The recipe he tore from her *Good Housekeeping* magazine said it should be served room temperature, so he’d have no time to lose before she got home from her parents house that evening. He pre-baked a store-bought pie shell for a few minutes. He sliced Roma

tomatoes into thin slices and lay them in a single layer in the colander, sprinkling salt over, letting them rest for ten minutes. He took a paper towel and blotted the excess liquid. He combined mayonnaise, cheddar cheese and mozzarella in a bowl. He layered the tomato slices into the bottom of the pie shell and chopped basil and green onions and sprinkled them over the tomatoes. He smoothed the cheese mixture onto the top of the pie, and slid it into the oven until it browned. He smoked a cigarette out the cracked living room window while he waited. He pulled the pie out of the oven with the strawberry printed mitts she'd just bought and sat it on the same windowsill.

When she got home, she was very hungry, so they ate the pie on the porch straight out of the dish with two forks, and she said nothing about the faint smell of cigarette smoke, and they made eye-contact more than they spoke, and then made love gently, held each other in bed in the dark for an hour before they were too hot to remain touching.

Kaitlin and Louie came two years apart and there would have been a third, but Gloria lost him early in the pregnancy. She somehow knew it was another boy. The night after the miscarriage, she stood over Louie as he slept in his big-boy bed, a crib on its lowest setting and the guard-rail removed, imagining another boy like him. She crawled into the crib spooning Louie and the lost boy, and she picked both boys up and held them against her chest and nuzzled her face between their heads and the lost boy's soft fuzz and Louie's wild hair tickled her cheeks until Louie cried that he was sleepy saying no and no and no into the dark.

In the morning, she watched Louie silent, hunched over a toy fire truck, wheeling it in slow, short arcs, his head cocked to one side and a crease in his neck shifting slightly as he pushed. He always made sound effects, *pshh*, *cruskshhh*, *ffft*, *plshh*, but not now. She'd never

seen anything so lonely in her life. Then he took a toy gorilla and a toy soldier from behind him and put them on top of the fire truck. He made the two toys fight, slamming them together, still not saying anything. He slammed and slammed until Gloria yelled for him to stop.

She loaded Louie in his car seat, and she and Kaitlin dropped him off with her mother for the day. Gloria took Kaitlin by her hand and left Louie behind, wailing on the living room rug of her mother's house, but she blocked the sound out, and it died a little when she closed the front door and it died some more as she walked to the street, but once she shut the car door and asked Kaitlin what she'd like to do on their date, Gloria faintly heard the upright vacuum cleaner from her memory, raspy and clicking.

Gloria took Kaitlin shopping for dresses. They found a yellow and white plaid dress with a pink plaid bow off-kilter on the front, a pink sleeveless dress with a skirt of pink flower pedals, and a green cap-sleeve dress cinched at the waist with a coral polka-dotted yoke. Then they went for manicures and pedicures, but when the manicurist pensively resisted service because Kaitlin was only five years old, Gloria took her home and painted Kaitlin's nails herself. Louie's grandmother brought him back after dark, and asked the kids to play in their room, showing them how a bunk-bed could be a castle, Louie the dragon and Kaitlin the damsel. Gloria brushed her mother off and insisted she hadn't forgotten Louie, that time had just gotten away from her. After Gloria's mother left, Gloria cuddled Kaitlin as they watched *Anne of Green Gables* while Louie played with the fire truck on the carpet between them and the television.

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One April, Keith bought three tomato plants, an Early Girl, a Supersteak, and a Yellow Stuffer. He liked the idea of the odd Yellow Stuffer with all of its hollowed out lobes shining in the sun like an old man's face, proud and happy. They reminded him of his grandfather's

bulbous cheeks as he slept in the sun, reclined poolside on a lounge chair. Keith's mother slipped rubber inflatable armbands on him and his father tossed him into the pool without a word. Keith flailed and screamed knowing he would sink to the bottom, hearing his own splashing against the surface and deep laughter from all of the men surrounding the pool. When he pulled himself over the lip of the pool, his grandfather sat up, and wiped laughter tears from his eyes saying that Keith was invincible with those dang boxer arms. Through the water in his ears, Keith heard *kangwasher arms*, and so he called the armbands Kangwashers, and the adults all laughed and he felt proud for having survived and making adults laugh. It was the first time he would remember something always.

Keith also planted strawberries, a grape vine, Sage, Sweet Marjoram, and Rosemary. Next to the herbs he planted a Mexican Chaste tree, which would flower either pink or purple someday, but more importantly, its fanned-out and narrow leaves camouflaged the marijuana plant he bought from an old college friend. The fire department had neglected to conduct random drug testing, and Keith hadn't been tested in over two years. No one had. Keith figured someone at the top understood what had to happen. The five-day shifts compressed many of the men into loaded springs, and noon of the fifth day of their shifts hurried the alcoholic firemen into bars for lung-fulls of piss as they downed the first beer like toilets flushing. The relief still coating their atrophied stomachs, they signaled bartenders for another and another and another.

When the other firemen would goad him out for a drink or five or ten, he would decline thinking of the last time he was really piss-drunk, late after a Christmas dinner at the Ruidoso cabin decades earlier. When everyone else had gone to bed, he told his father work was something only known by those who struggled for what they had, that someone who had things fall in his lap wasn't shit. His father, the country's most renowned social worker, director of

United Way during the sixties, set up two shot glasses and a fifth of Maker's Mark and said *let's see who peeters out first*. His father had worked with the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He'd been the first person Walter Mondale called after Jimmy Carter asked him to be his running mate to confirm that it was indeed a good idea.

Keith spoke over the phone with his father the night Walter Mondale called, all the excitement in his father's voice sounding like a dead man's last breath pushing out helium from a balloon he'd sucked. Keith hung up the phone in his Sunset Heights apartment near The University of Texas at El Paso, and walked southward on Oregon Street, downhill, passing the interstate, passing the railroad yard, passing homeless men asleep on benches, arriving at the closed shops filled with hats and streamers and plastic toys on El Paso Street where he looked up at a half-moon and sat on a bench wondering if he had the energy to walk back up the hill.

Keith vomited the Christmas Maker's Mark into the cabin's toilet in the first floor bathroom, passed his father asleep in an arm chair, and crawled hands and knees up the stairs to the loft bed above, only railing and air between him and his father, to sleep it all off.

Keith had discipline now. His four days off from the fire department brought him communion with himself. His mind was a beaker of volatile chemicals just barely balanced, and he shut out the pollutants, the sounds of the house, doors slamming, televisions blaring, Louie crying, and carefully carried the beaker of his heart level and still to the garden and his tomatoes and all his coveted quiet. Escape was all he could do to keep his temper from erupting.

By June, the Early Girl had already produced, and the Supersteak was on its way, little red buds like giant pimples. The Yellow Stuffer would take another month, and it needed careful attention. If he wasn't on his shift at the fire station over the weekends, Keith was in the garden

instead, checking the acidity of the soil with a kit he'd bought at a nursery in the valley, while Gloria and the kids stayed inside the house doing God-knows-what. The garden became his war trench too. He'd crawl into it if Gloria and the kids didn't go to grandma's house on Saturday. Then on Sunday, he'd crawl back in the moment they got home from church. He'd gone to St. Pius with them a handful of times, eating bowlful after bowlful of menudo as he waited for Sunday school to end. The onion, radish, and red oily broth floating chunks of intestine and hominy the only thing that brought him back a second, third and finally his last time suffering through a priest raising and lowering a complacent crowd from their seats on the pews, holding hands, reciting psalms, greeting each other monotone, the phrase *God be with you* something Keith couldn't repeat so he just mouthed it instead and hoped the low murmur in the Church was enough of a mask to cover his silence.

Keith's garden was safe and silent and he never played music or invited anyone to see it. If Gloria came to check on him, he'd answer with a word or two and never look at her. Glass of water? *No thanks*. Can I get a tomato? *Not ready*. Are the strawberries here yet? *Couple*. She had given up by July, and Keith was finally free to smoke the weed. Thankfully, Gloria pretended not to know. He sat in the dirt, between the Early Girl and the Supersteak, his back against a rock wall, and he sucked at the joint and filled himself.

The following November, Keith had winterized the garden and begun construction on an office in the garage. He didn't know it at the time, but the Early Girl, the Supersteak and the Yellow Stuffer would never produce again. They returned but soon shriveled without care and littered the soil with cracked brown limbs and leaves that eroded to dust, and the three sticks

stood like posts missing scarecrows until Louie uprooted them all for swords. Keith hardly noticed. The office was his new war trench.

In the two-car garage, he'd erected two walls, one cutting the garage in half, and another a few feet short of the garage door to allow it to close properly. He had an IBM computer and a dot matrix printer on a desk he made out of plywood, and he had an old vinyl upholstered futon on a maple frame. Occasionally, the kids would come in and marvel at his ability to type without looking at his fingers or the screen, and he'd show them how to play card games, Hearts and Cribbage, on the computer. They'd grow bored watching him play, and eventually they stopped coming in to visit.

Hearts took his morning, from eight to ten or perhaps eleven if his score had not improved significantly enough. Cribbage had his afternoon just after lunch, but only for an hour as he'd return to Hearts, his priority. Listening to the buzz of Louie's remote control car he'd received for his birthday, Keith thought of his last cribbage game with his mother in Albuquerque before they both swore off the game for life. He left her a pair of Queens in the crib as a forced gift, keeping two fives and two jacks in his hand. He lifted, the cut card a Jack, so his mother claimed two points, saying *two for his heels*. He played a nine and then she a six for fifteen-two, a queen for a go and so on until the round was done. At the show, Keith counted first, fifteen-two, fifteen-four, a pair is six, and the three jacks made twelve. With the twelve, he slotted his peg into the winning hole, his mother just behind the skunk line, so he pegged two wins. His mother said that was nonsense, that he was still at the brink, and he said he counted it fair, and she said his father never played with such anger, that he was even-tempered, and Keith said his father was never even-tempered and she said Keith was this way from birth, always finding some way to be right, and he said it's not finding if it always just is, and they went to bed

and didn't speak until Louie was born, pink and furry with lanugo on his back lying in the hospital crib, infinitely upset about not being in Gloria's belly where he'd been comfortable before, as Keith and his mother struggled to smile at each other while Louie writhed beneath them.

Louie's remote control car ran into the garage door once, breaking Keith's concentration during a game of computer hearts, and Keith yelled through to the other side. *This is my office! I'm working, God damn it!* Louie added the driveway to his list of places to avoid. Gloria on the other hand, never attempted to go into the office. She had always known what it would be. It was the garden, and like the garden, there was nothing there for her.

At first, Keith told Gloria that he'd accidentally fallen asleep at the computer when he didn't come to bed. Eventually, he bought a set of sheets for the office futon and Gloria learned to sleep in the middle of the bed. The moonlight dripped into her room like white paint and everything was so bright she couldn't ever sleep, even when there wasn't a moon in the night sky. Keith would stuff a towel in the crack beneath his office door so that no light or anything could get in, and the black opened up the walls and expanded outward in every direction, up and down too, swallowing even the sun.

On a hot June day, Keith got home from his five-day shift in the early afternoon while the kids were at summer camp. He'd make his regular ham sandwich on rye with pickles, mustard and lettuce, grab a beer and go to his office to smoke. He took everything from the fridge, a butter knife from a drawer and constructed the sandwich on the kitchen countertop. He knew exactly what the moaning was the moment he heard it, though he'd never heard her sound like that before. He continued constructing the sandwich, mustard spread thin on the rye, a few slices

of butcher-cut ham, pickle slices from the jar. He licked the pickle brine off his fingers, placed the other slice of bread upon his sandwich, and carried it down the hall toward the moaning. He approached her door, and picked the sounds apart hoping to conclude she was alone.

Keith held the bedroom door handle in one hand, the sandwich on a plate in his other hand, and listened to Gloria on the other side. He heard rocking and movement and finally, he heard him. Keith opened the door slowly and stood in the doorway as Gloria and the man flailed and covered themselves with the sheet like two birds correcting after a sudden gust of wind. Keith and the man stared at each other, like two identical pigeons, and Keith knew this must be him. This must be Orlando. Keith said nothing, but Gloria saw his eyes switch to green and she placed a protective hand on Orlando's chest like she would to Kaitlin sitting in the passenger seat at an abrupt stop.

Keith turned, the sandwich plate still in his hand, went to his office, shut the door and sat at computer screen glowing an empty green card table in the black of the office. He placed the sandwich plate next to the mouse. After a few minutes he heard Gloria and Orlando walk through the house to the front door, heard it open and close, and then he strained to hear a truck engine start through the thin wall he'd erected and the garage door, probably two or three houses down the block.

Gloria opened the office door but didn't step in. She stood and waited. She stunk like perfume and Keith's office stunk like pot and they strangled each other with the green cloud until Gloria finally spoke, staring at his sandwich in the dim light from the kitchen.

"Can it be over?" she said.

He stayed still to choke her with the green silence, and she knew it but she waited anyway.

“You’ll hate him too, you know,” he said.

“I already do.”

She shut the door, got her car keys from their hook in the kitchen, and left. Keith lay down on the futon and pulled the sheet over his shoulders and though the light was on and the computer screen glowed an image of a green card table, the room went black and it pushed the walls out in every direction, up and down too, and Keith didn’t know which way he was falling.

Years before, Keith and Gloria closed on the house at Lone Star Title and Loan. They signed with a silver pen that was theirs to keep, and Keith handed Gloria a manila envelope holding the keys to 6708 Amposta Dr.

Gloria tore the envelope in half and flung the keys out onto the dash as Keith drove. He hunched forward on the steering wheel, grimacing maniacally like a cartoon villain headed for his evil lair and Gloria laughed. They ran to the front door, jostled the keys to find the one labeled “front” on its bow, swung the door open wide, and they went straight for the bedroom. They made love on the tile floor and lay there afterward and joked about the bruises they’d have and wondered what they would hang on the blank wall in front of them, maybe Keith’s Jimi Hendrix poster, but probably a print of geese Gloria saw on sale at Pick N Save, what their little boy would look like, no, their little girl, no, their little girl and their little boy, and maybe another, another boy, another whatever, let’s look at the other rooms, okay, cover yourself up, there’s no curtains or anything, and they ended up dropping their shirts they used to cover themselves to the carpet and stood naked, looking out one of the back windows flanking the living room fireplace, telling each other what they’d plant, and Gloria insisted on tomatoes.

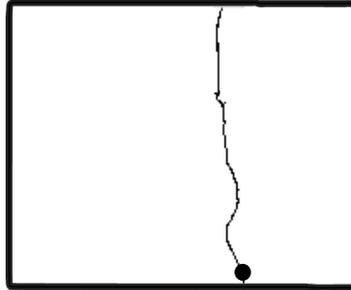
Part II

Colorado

Colorado

I-25

Mile Marker 8



The old man waved over his shoulder for them to follow into the woods, and Tom and Janie did so timidly, glancing back to the sparse traffic zooming quietly on I-25, until they could no longer see it. Tom wanted to hold Janie's hand as they stepped over tree roots, crinkling the leaves between, but he couldn't. He couldn't hold her until she held him. They found the path the old man traversed with ease, as if he were blind, his head parallel to the downward slope, sight nothing more than memory to him. Tom stepped ahead of Janie, imagining he clutched her hand behind his back, and he learned the path for her.

“Step where I step, Bean.”

His boot dropped into cold water, so he stepped back and squinted at the ground.

“Unless I step somewhere stupid.”

He lifted Janie by her armpits over a creek before she had a chance to argue. She seemed to appreciate it instead. The old man's silhouette bobbed with his step far ahead, and Tom wasn't sure how to trust someone who wouldn't warn them of the creek.

The old man's cabin popped up like just another tree, only the flickering orange in its tiny windows separating it from the forest of black stripes standing tall against the blacker expanse beyond. The cabin's features crisped slowly as their eyes adjusted to the new light. A small empty porch, long logs stretching horizontally on its side, a windowless door at the center.

"You can leave your boot and sock here," The old man said. "Should've told you about the creek."

Janie grabbed Tom's hand on the porch, so he stopped to look down at her. She wouldn't look back at him, but then she did, and he looked away, up at the door in front of them. He gripped her hand tighter, hoping his intensity wouldn't scare her hand away.

They entered to the smell of beans, earthy and brown like the rest of the unadorned log cabin. A wooden chair facing a crackling potbelly stove, a futon tightly covered in an orange and red serape blanket, paperback books stacked chest-high in a corner.

The old man offered them a bowl of candy, unwrapped tubular chews, still separate from each other in their bowl because of the cold, warmth the thing that could melt them all together. Tom caught the old man's eyes a moment in the exchange, white-blue orbs set in a web of wrinkles above a gray beard, the outermost sparse hairs blooming from his cheekbones. Tom felt Janie's hand slip from his, but she walked inside the cabin as if it were home, and her comfort comforted him. The old man left the bowl in Tom's hands, and watched Tom place a candy in his mouth before turning to the kitchen, a single burner camping stove on a makeshift counter top and a commercial bathroom sink set in a makeshift frame of two-by-fours.

The candy tasted unlike any candy he'd had before. Molasses. Maybe mint in there somewhere, too. He studied the candy cylinders in the bowl, their irregular shapes and sizes, and

he decided they must have been homemade. Tom shook his head at Janie, so Janie didn't take a candy, and Tom chewed hard on it, something chewy as bone marrow.

"*Brief History of Time*," Tom said between chews, nodding to the stack of books in the corner.

The old man stirred the pot on the single burner and nodded.

"I just picked it up," Tom said, remembering stealing it from a used bookstore in El Paso only to leave it behind the backrest of the blue pickup they abandoned in Las Cruces.

"Haven't read it yet," Tom said. "Where's the nearest decent bookstore? Colorado Springs?"

The old man nodded at the stove.

"I wanted to get it when it came out, but didn't get around to it. What do you think of it?"

"Book like any other, I guess," the old man said. His voice crinkled like paper.

"No opinion?"

"What opinion is there to have? It's written."

"The bit I read sounded like physics was God and we're just molecules in a mathematical equation."

"I thought you didn't read it,"

"The bit I read, I said."

Tom and Janie looked into each other's eyes, two familiar spots a piece in the strange cabin. Hers had always been two entirely black spots incessantly scanning, but now he picked out strings of brown sprouting outward from her pupils. He thought of her staring at the soldier figurine on the floor of the teenage girl's closet back in Santa Fe after they'd almost been found, after a teen age girl came dangerously close to finding a grown man in her own closet, sitting on

the carpeted floor, holding a little girl. The sprouts of brown stripes surely were there, too. When he finally opened the teenager's closet door, Janie had looked up at him and then at the room, and then didn't want to look anywhere else other than his eyes, but he hadn't seen the brown in her eyes then. Still, he picked her up, her legs straddling his torso, to take her out of the closet, out of the room, out of the house, all the while holding her head in his hand and keeping his eyes on hers so she wasn't scared. He tripped over clothes on the teenager's floor, and tripped a little on the tiled step under the front door, fiddling blind with the locks, until they left and he didn't drop her gaze or say a word to her until they he had carried her a block away. They'd spent an hour or so in a house he'd cased for robbery, and he regretted stealing the granola bars and the jerky and convincing her to try on the Hello Kitty backpack. He didn't remind her she was still wearing it as they walked through the Subaru neighborhood.

“You have a books like *Brief History of Time* and *Odysseus*, but no opinions?”

“You want some beans?”

Tom looked at Janie, who'd been staring at the dish of frozen marrow candies. She looked up at him excited, and they smiled at each other thinking of his nickname for her. Their first inside joke.

“Yeah. We'd love some, thanks.”

The old man dished the beans into coffee cups he pulled from a shelf above the stove, dropped spoons in them he took from the same shelf and handed the cups to Janie and Tom, who nodded. Janie shoveled some in her mouth and winced, so Tom told her to blow first and she did, and they ate.

“We need more wood,” The old man said. “I don't need help. Make yourself at home.”

The old man took his coat and left out the front door. Janie said she liked him and Tom said he did too, so she eased into the couch, but Tom studied the room for clues that he shouldn't trust the old man. Opened mail on a shelf above the sink he could check. River sandals standing neatly against a corner. Normal enough.

He thought about how we look for imperfections in things to identify them. How he thought of Janie when he first found her. Her hair was greasy again. He needed to find another suitable truck stop shower soon. Sure, people would notice how dirty she was, but now he just wanted her to be clean for her own sake.

He thought of how people received him, how people had always told him he had eyes that would dart around when he thought no one was looking. He thought of his best friend in high school, Pete Landerman, and the day they became friends when Pete struggled in Tom's half-nelson during wrestling practice, breaking free after the three-second pin, and told Tom he didn't trust him before because he always looked around everywhere all crazy. Tom asked why he'd bring that up at such a moment, and Pete said that Tom had just been doing it, while throwing Pete around like a madman.

Tom found a red one-subject notebook, tattered on the edges, the metal spiral bent, on the coffee table. He looked to find Janie asleep on the couch. Through the window curtains he saw the old man's silhouette standing still on the porch, and Tom smelled a cigarette. He thought for a moment about joining the old man, but remembered Janie staring through smoke at the orange cherry back in the shed. He looked again at the red notebook, wondering if the old man left it there for finding.

He leafed through the pages. Notes about Colorado wildlife, checklists of fish species in faded pencil: Cutthroat Trout, Rainbow Trout, Kokanee Salmon, Mountain Whitefish, all their

boxes checked with different pens. He flipped past blank pages to find some toward the back filled with writing, edits in the margins, crossed out sections, all in black ink. He scanned some of the writing and figured it was a story. He looked through the curtains again and saw the man still standing there, and Tom breathed in the faint cigarette smell, picturing the last cigarette he smoked, half still back in the shed outside Las Cruces. He flipped the pages of the story to find the title, *River*. Was it a fish watcher's journal? A story about the old man on the river? What river was nearby? The Green River? That was the only Colorado river Tom knew. He flipped through the pages to see how long it was, how much time it would take to read it. He placed the notebook on his lap and turned so that he could see the old man in his periphery, his silhouette through the curtain. He found the beginning of the story again and read.

River

I roll over smooth stones, and little strings of algae break off and rise up in my water, floating to my top where I touch the warm air above. The trees stretch up and up on both sides of me, stealing the sky peeking in at me behind the trees, so all I have is the long blue stripe above, mirroring my long body, where clouds pass over, spit and feed me in tiny drops so I slowly feel full, so I spread wide over the black earth on either side, covering the tree roots at my banks.

A boy squats and dips his hand in me, and he is tiny but warm. His oil swirls off his fingertips making me dizzy for a moment until the oil spreads, thins and flows down my body, away from his spot at my bank. A few of my fish smell it and chase it, flicking their tails, tickling my middle.

The boy takes a flat rectangle of white from inside his leg and folds and folds it and places it on me so that it floats along my rippled top, and he follows it, walking along my bank,

stepping over the stones and the tree roots just outside my reach. I carry the folded white rectangle faster down a slope and he hastens, but the rush of my water is too fast, so he slips, his legs dropping into the eddy at the bottom of the slope. I'm dizzy again from his oil, but he scrambles out, and by the time I focus again, he's gone, into the trees, somewhere out among the sky the trees have stolen.

Tom heard a hollow thump outside, wood against wood, followed by a muffled roll. Tom laid the red notebook open on the coffee table, thought better and flipped it closed. Tom opened the door, and outside, the old man hunched on the porch floor, a couple logs tucked under his arm, reaching for the log he'd dropped.

"Get back inside," the old man said, his voice hoarse opening dry against sharp Colorado wind. He said it to the warm air flooding out the cabin door, Tom little more than a cat that had pawed an ajar door open, and so he corrected himself.

"Thanks for the concern," the old man said, "but I've been getting firewood long before you were born. Tend to the girl. I'll be in in a minute."

Tom closed the door and wondered how long it had been since the old man had practiced courtesy, frustration quivering in the old man's voice as he determined what was nice and what wasn't after it had already left his mouth. Tom thought of his mother in Ft. Collins, a caretaker visiting her twice a week and scolding her about missed dosages of this or that. Sonia watered nearly dead snake plants in each of the corners, picking cat hairs off her scrubs and flicking them to the floor as she watered. His mother would call out into the house to Sonia that her body knew when it needed medicine and when it didn't.

“Books can tell your brain things,” she’d said, a liver spotted hand cupping her temple when Sonia was back in the living room. “But they can’t tell you what goes on inside,” she said, stabbing at her chest over her heart with a rigid index finger as she coughed.

Tom imagined his mother’s face upon meeting Janie. He saw her smile and kneel in her cable knit dress she made. It took her a year. She knew that well, and reminded Tom of it often, because he hadn’t visited once that year. That’s how she remembered how long it took to knit the dress.

The Grateful Dead would be playing quietly out boombox speakers in her kitchen. She’d say something like, *you look like you want to tell me a story. Maybe a story about the wind.* Then he saw another scenario. His mother scanning Janie head to toe, looking at him and waving a hand over Janie’s body, partly to point, partly to block the image from her sight, saying, *what is this? What did you do? What kind of man would take this kind of gamble? What kind of man would toss an injured baby bird inside a dead nest?*

Janie’s eyes were squinted closed. She wasn’t asleep. She liked this trick. Tom picked up the notebook again, leafed through and found where he’d left off, figuring the old man had invited him to read on.

I flow and look for the boy past the trees and there is a block made of stacked dead trees back there among the stolen sky, and I know that is where he lives. Flat rocks piled up against the side of his dead-tree block spew a pillar of smoke into the stolen sky. It’s black like the smoke the trees let out after they’ve caught fire and fall in me, turning me black so I can’t see when my tadpoles and fish die and float to my top. I find them later washed up further down my banks, illuminated by the flickering orange fire behind. Sometimes their little bodies flip on my bank

before they're gone, but there is no spit from the clouds so I can't swell wide. I can't pull them back home to me, so I just watch their round eyes, thin wisps of black smoke grazing them, until I'm sure my fish won't flip again.

The blue stripe above turns black, and the sparkles in the black are dim because the white circle is round and bright, lightening the black to gray. I wait, tossing sticks and leaves in the fast spot just before the eddy the boy fell in, where my top froths white, hoping I can reflect the white circle on my white froth and shine a light out past the trees to him. The forest has her trees and the trees have their roots, and the roots have their soil and the soil has its crickets among other things. They chirp in sharp echoes, the sound reflecting off each tree until dissipating somewhere beyond the limit of what I can hear or see. The crickets sit on me sometimes, floating on my top, but they cannot chirp on me. I am too wet. I reserve, against my will, the low, round sounds for the forest air to carry. A cricket sits on me now in the dark, but I won't wake him. What would be the sense since I wouldn't hear him chirp?

The cabin door opened, and Tom closed the red notebook and slid it to the couch between Janie and him.

“Found some reading material?” the old man said. “Not *Brief History of Time*, though.” He curled a finger around the doorknob and shut the door behind him as he held six logs, three under each arm, twigs for kindling in one hand.

“Sorry,” Tom said.

“Don’t be. I said make yourself at home.” He dropped the kindling from his hand on a leather sling near the fireplace and slid the logs carefully down each of his legs in two neat stacks.

“Why take us in?” Tom said. “Doesn’t seem like you ever take anyone in.”

“She eat enough?”

Tom made sure not to look at Janie.

“She’s fine.”

“What do you think of the story?”

Tom remembered Charlie telling him a story about a fish. A toddler, her story was mostly garbled nonsense, but learned phrases like *time out* and *she wasn’t listening* and *go to the park* popped up like daisies in a wild meadow. Tom had goaded her on, and learned about himself hearing his words in her mouth, words from a man scolding a baby about things she couldn’t hope to understand.

“Are you the river?” Tom said, a hand on the red notebook.

“I’m pretty sure I’m a fish,” the old man said smiling as he placed a log on glowing embers. Tom looked at Janie’s silvery eyelids, slack like her gaped mouth and knew she’d actually fallen back asleep.

“Anyone who takes us in, I need to figure out,” Tom said. “I don’t mean to offend you, but I don’t know you, brother.” Tom didn’t mean to, but he was staring at a half gone bottle of Maker’s Mark bourbon he hadn’t noticed before.

“You want some?” the old man said. Tom shook his head thinking of the bottle he stole from the grocery store south of Raton. He broke his vow of sobriety, and almost lost a little girl at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere while he vomited yellow into a truck stop toilet. Hating

himself for it now, he was pretty sure it would be easy to return to sobriety, but his subconscious stare at a bottle of bourbon made him second guess his confidence. It made him wonder how powerful guilt could really be.

“To begin,” the old man said. “I’m not your brother. I’d be your daddy, I suppose. I can’t wait for y’all to be gone. Sorry, but it hurts to see your girl. She reminds me of my granddaughter.”

Tom asked how so, ready to jump in front of her if the old man said anything aggressive. The old man said he hadn’t seen his granddaughter since she was a baby, and always wondered what she’d turned out like. Little girls at the grocery store, at the post office, at the farmers market where he sold river rock necklaces, all tore him up. He stopped selling the necklaces because of it. Tom asked what the old man wanted from them.

“Shit. Nothing, son. Aren’t you listening?”

The old man poked at the log with an iron prodder, and sprinkled kindling at its base.

“Looked like good people,” the old man said to the erupting flames around the log. “Did you get to the good part?”

“What’s the good part?”

“Finish it and tell me.”

Tom smiled and looked at Janie sleeping, and stopped fighting his desire to read the red notebook.

The stripe is blue again, but I can’t find the boy. I follow my body further, hoping there’s somewhere I don’t know, banks with which I’m not familiar. I flow down to the place where I am thinner, but it’s strange here to me, and I’m slow and shallow here where my fish never swim. I

see black smoke far out in the stolen sky behind the trees and so I surge, but I am weak, so I slow, unsure of why I surge on. The smoke is not spewing from the boy's block, so I don't know if this black smoke is the boy's. My flow is strange, so I'm not sure that it is truly my own.

I wash over the round rocks peeking out over my top. The biggest stones are dry on their tops. I find the shriveled end of my body and see a puddle of my water just beyond it, but it is not me. It is dead, floating a leaf that spins in the wind and not in the water, which has no current, and I don't want to touch it for fear of what it could do to me.

I turn and climb back up my body, and though it's difficult, I flow up, pausing to rest at each of my eddies. I want to look for the boy out past the trees, but I'm too scared of the dead puddle behind me. I surge over the fast spot where the white froth sent the boy into my eddy, and keep surging, fearing the dead puddle more than I yearn for my boy. These are stretches of banks and rounded river rocks I don't know well, where my water feels thin and clear, empty of the grain of my favorite algae, sticks, leaves and fish. This place is new and so it feels wrong, but I remember the dead puddle behind me past my shriveled end, like a round fish eye staring up at the blue stripe, and I imagine black smoke rolling over its unflinching surface, so I surge on and away to where the water cannot be dead because it is new.

I come to the spot where the big tree fell long ago and pause at my first eddy, which now seems to me to be my last eddy. I watch the slit under the tree where my water comes from, churning in the black earth at my bottom. I surge out of the eddy's safety, down through the slit under the tree and up to the other side, a place in my body I've never seen, and I can feel myself forget the human. What was it he spilled in me? What were we chasing? What am I flowing from and why am I afraid? I continue flowing up anyway, finding eddies, searching for the next, nervous when they're too far apart.

There is white froth here and it is loud. The blue stripe above has turned orange and I know soon it will go black again, but I can't remember what it is that shows up in the black. It was bright, I think.

Out beyond the white froth, there is water, like me, but it is not me. It flows greater than I know how, and it is deafening. Though I am afraid, I flow in to it. Giant fish rush through the water's current, and giant dead logs root into the earth on its sides, deep to the murky depths below. I realize this water is me, realize this is the river and I never was. It is deep, too deep, and I can't remember a thing.

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I roll over smooth stones covered in algae, but I'm too weak to break off strings to watch them dance in my ripples. There are trees above, but these are small, and so there is less stolen sky, the strip above me too wide, and I'm afraid. I feel my body, and I am not the deafening river, deeper than the stripe above is when it's black and sparkling. I am small, like I was before, but I don't feel the same.

I feel dizzy, and remembering the boy with the rectangle of white, I surge as best I can down my body to find him. There are fish, small as my own, but I don't know them. I don't toss them back and forth playfully as I usually do, but pass them, avoiding the dead stare of their round eyes. At an eddy I don't remember, there's a human dipping something in me, rubbing his hand over it, and the oil makes me sick. This is not my boy's oil, and this is not my boy. Crinkled strings, something like dry, gray algae covers his chin and cheeks, and his nose is the shape of

the dry, jagged rocks out past my banks, not the shape of my tadpoles, the way my boy's nose looked.

I sink into my bottom where the black Earth makes me murky and dim. I am water but not a river. I used to be water but not a river, but I am not the same water now. I know the deafening river surges somewhere behind me.

I settle into my black mud. Strange sticks and leaves flip in my current above, and I try to still my current so they'll float up to my top and go away, but I am powerless. Maybe I always was. Strings of algae flow in to join and dance with the sticks and leaves. A fish flows in and bites a strange silver stick, shiny and smooth like the sparkles in the stripe above when it's black. She holds it in her jaws, its end poking out her lip, and the fish flips her tail wildly in a circle above me against a current that can't be mine. She dances like I've never seen a fish dance. I feel terror, but is it the fish's terror? It's probably my own. Terror is a thing a moving river like me can't tell about, can't think about. The sticks and leaves and algae and the fish all dance in me without me dancing back. I don't want to dance. I don't even know how anymore.

“I'm guessing the good part,” Tom said, “was when the river found the real river.”

“Guessing? You have a critic's heart.”

“I enjoyed it.” Tom sat back on the couch and flung an arm on its back over Janie's sleeping body. “Actually did. Thank you for letting me read it.”

“You read history, son. History. That's not a story to me. That's what happened on his land during my time. That's history. An opinion about something done is an opinion that has the safety of hindsight, the safety of study, the safety of thinking that analyzing is something useful,

but all that's useful is what we do in the here and now. All that's useful is beans on a stove and logs ready to fire. There is no safety within what we've decided to—what we call time.”

“So that's your reading of *Brief History*?”

The old man muttered something like a sputtering car engine when it dies and poked with his iron prodder at the logs and the kindling in the fire.

“Sorry,” Tom said. “You said you don't care to discuss books. I don't get it, but I'll respect it.”

“The river's dumb like you.”

Tom laughed, cracked his neck and smiled a fake smile.

“You're a kid. Kids are dumb. Dumb enough to think that that little girl needs you. She needs something, because she's a little girl, but is it you?”

“I don't know. Probably not. It's that obvious she's not mine?”

“Pretty damn obvious, son.”

Tom hunched forward, his elbows resting on his knees and thought, and the old man watched Tom think.

“Raising a child is the saddest thing you'll ever do,” Tom said suddenly to the floor. “They're a certain person one day, and then someone different the next. They change too fast. You realize they'll never be the person they were yesterday ever again, and you miss them like hell. You'll never see your little girl again. And then the new little girl you have today, well of course you fall in love with her, too, and then you'll never see her again either after tomorrow. And it happens over and over all the time you knowing it's going to happen again and again and you say goodbye in your head but you never get to out loud.”

“How old is your own daughter?”

“She’s dead.”

“Sorry, son.”

“Don’t call me son,” Tom said sitting back. “Your river is inept, but it’s beautiful that he’s inept. Him being uninvolved in anything but being a river is natural to him, so anything outside that is murky. I want so much to be your river. I want that clarity. I want to be the man that understands what he is, and learns a single idea of his place in the universe, if only to learn what the universe could be. I enjoyed your God damn story.”

“The river’s a she.”

The men stared at each other, the crackling of the fire popping loud. They held long, neither wanting to break the stare, neither wanting to be weaker than the other.

“Ah. I don’t even respect it,” the old man said, “What I said about discussing stories. Don’t know what the hell I’m talking about. I’m going to give you a truck.”

Tom tried not to react, but his head, his neck, his eyebrows, were all pointed at the old man.

“I have a truck I’ve been meaning to get rid of, and y’all might as well have it. I won’t get anything for it, and selling it’s not worth the hassle. Thinking about giving it to NPR anyway.”

“Is it blue?” Janie asked, turning her head toward the old man, and blinking her eyes awake to catch up to her ears. The old man said it was red.

“Good,” she said. “The last one was blue, and it didn’t work for long.” Tom remembered telling her they were leaving it in a ditch behind some mesquite trees because it was broken. He felt a cold sweat wondering again if he’d burned the note from her father or if he’d left it in the blue pickup. No. He’d burned it. He was sure.

“Am I too dumb to drive it?”

“No, son. You’re not dumb.”

The old man stood from the fireplace, grabbed a folded blanket from the corner nearest the fireplace and threw it at Tom.

“You’re both stupid,” Janie said, “my mom said.” The old man laughed at her, nodding his head, picking up the dirty coffee cups.

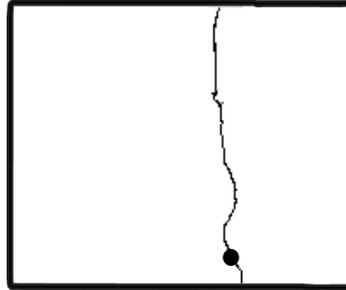
“I thought you’re mom only spoke Spanish,” Tom said.

“Los hombres son todos estúpidos como el infierno.”

Colorado

I-25

Mile Marker 30



Janie pulled down on the red Datsun pickup's passenger-side window crank just until the window glass split from the rubber gasket so a cold sheet of Colorado air could spill in. She inhaled the way bats sip air at cave entrances there at the gulf of their world—the cusp where their guano's cloud meets a black promise of starlit sky speckled with slow mosquitos and slower moths.

“Cut it out, Bean!” Tom said over the wind. “Don't do that.”

She rolled the window down further. Her smirk wound a pulley in her arm, cranking her bony elbow, too, and the new chilled wind blew the greasy hair on her head like it was a sickly pompom.

He yelled over the wind again for her to roll the window up, so she did, shutting out the wind and her smirk.

“We'll get cold and then stay cold. This thing doesn't have a working heater.”

His tone sounded more annoyed than he'd intended. In the new quiet, Petty yelled whispers about falling free out the pickup's tinny speakers, the silence between Tom and Janie

much louder. Tom pushed the knob on the receiver to shut it off, but regretted it immediately. He thought of his mother, cranking Roy Orbison's Pretty Woman on their Victrola, the LP spinning on a TV tray at his eyelevel. The record was bowed a little from heat. It spent most its life inside a crate on the porch of their cluttered single-wide mobile home, because his mother never cared for much else other than him. She cared for him more than she cared for herself. Her face was covered in acne scars, but he'd hold it in his little hands when he was a little boy just the same. He'd hold it like it was the smooth face of the pretty princess who kissed the lowly frog.

The needle on his mother's record player gripped the record's groove, fighting the undulation, sopping up sound desperately as a dry sponge on damp concrete. The bend in the vinyl made Orbison waver in pitch, up and down and up and down with each revolution, his mother seeming to not notice, or else she did, embracing the ups and downs, dancing wild around her grandfather's oval mahogany dining table taking up half the mobile home. Her arms twisted around her waist the way the needle clung to the record, wild and focused on being wild.

Tom cranked his window completely open, pushed the power on the receiver, turned the dial, and let Petty and the Heartbreaker's Telecasters scream. Janie lit up and cranked her window wide open too. Tom sung the chorus, pounding the steering wheel at every cymbal crash with his fists. He sung and heard his mother singing, kicking dirty laundry out of her way, placing a hand on the mahogany table here and there for balance.

Tom's voice was good, like sand flowing in water, and Janie noticed and went still, peering through the wisps of her hair at him, singing good as anything she'd ever heard.

He returned to his mother and danced around the oval mahogany table, kicking clothes and touching the blue paint spot on the table from the time they painted a terracotta pot without newspaper or anything underneath. The pot stood on the mobile home's stoop holding three red

geranium blossoms until one fell off and then another and then the entire plant dried to brown a few months later. He looked at it, shriveled and brown, everyday when he let himself in from school until they lost the mobile home. His mom tossed the blue pot in the park's dumpster, and they moved to Las Cruces to live with his grandmother.

Janie rolled her window up and slumped in her seat. Tom yelled to ask what was wrong and rolled his window up when she wouldn't say.

"I'm cold," she said in the new quiet.

He turned the dial down as a DJ spoke over Petty, the station's call letters, KBCO, and then something about the cold front, and the engine rumbled just louder, and they ceased to hear anything at all in the nothing of white noise somewhere between silence and sound.

"How do you sing?" she said.

"My mom taught me."

"How?"

"I guess she didn't really. She just sang and so I knew what it sounded like and then I tried eventually."

"You sing pretty."

He thanked her and thought of his mother painting a watercolor of their mobile home and hanging it on the wall above the couch. Though the single-wide was green, she painted it blue, but she stayed true to the dead geranium plant. She chose a vivid brown and orange mix she called her "half-and-half lobster mix" after seeing a picture of a half-brown half-orange lobster, a one in fifty million catch, in a National Geographic that lived on the floor for months after she was finished with it. The colors were nothing like the dead plant, but they're all he remembered

about it after living with the painting above his head, staring at it, his head in her lap as she watched Ed Sullivan.

She threw the watercolor along with the pot in the dumpster when they moved out, and he climbed in to retrieve it, but she snatched it from him as soon as he picked it up and told him to get out of the damn dumpster. He cried and said he wouldn't, so she left him there in the dumpster and tossed the painting under the mobile home, and went inside, slamming the door behind her. He climbed out of the dumpster and crawled under the mobile home to retrieve it. He pried the wooden frame off, rolled the paper watercolor up and stuck the tube in his sock, rolling his jeans down over it.

Later, they loaded into her blue Pontiac to leave, and she petted his face, gently tugging on the bit of a tail on the back of his head and said they'd get a haircut tomorrow after they settled at Grandma's. He dropped his head, so she pushed his chin up and said she was sorry, but that she just wanted to forget this place if they couldn't have it anymore, that he deserved better anyway. He told her he liked it here and that they should just stay, but she said they couldn't, so he climbed into the Pontiac, and whenever she was distracted enough, singing over Aretha Franklin or the Beach Boys on the radio, he adjusted the painting in his sock to keep it from chafing his leg.

Tom looked over at Janie, twiddling with the circular knob on the window pull, and remembered Charlie. Then he remembered his mother before Charlie. She expressed a want for a grandchild to care for, if only (as he thought of it) as a means for redemption. He wanted then to tell her she didn't need to be redeemed. He wanted to tell her that he was happy and in love with his life, with a daughter who tugged on his stubble with her little fingers in the early morning, and a wife who petted his head as he pretended Charlie's pulls at his stubble hurt. He wanted to

tell his mother then that the happiness he felt was because of her, because she'd taught him to love how he did. But sometimes when someone doesn't phrase something just right, you can't phrase your something just right either.

Then he remembered his mother having an episode with a man she was dating, Dale, a handsome truck driver from back East. She'd left Tom in the house alone for a week when he was six. He went hungry for two days until he knocked on a neighbor's trailer and they took him in until she was back. Through semantics, something about it being life or death for the man, and she had helped him so he'd survived, and wasn't that worth it?, she made it okay. Okay enough for them to both continue eating and breathing and sleeping until they'd both forgotten it. He realized only now that it wasn't okay.

The first night in his grandmother's house, they both slept in her spare bedroom filled with antiques—porcelain dolls in laced dresses, needlepoint pillows picturing Victorian gardens, ivory makeup brushes on a mahogany vanity that matched the cut of the table they gave to a neighbor in the trailer park.

They tried lying together in the queen-sized, four-post bed, but the pit of the mattress, where her Grandmother had died ten years prior, slumped them to the middle, so he stayed in the bed, and she took a sleeping bag from the closet and a needlepoint pillow and lay on the floor beside him. She hadn't sung him to sleep for a year or more, but he still remembered her version of Auld Lang Syne and sang it along with her low enough to hear her voice over his. He'd placed the rolled-up watercolor under the bed on a sort of shelf he found behind the bed skirt and wondered what she would do if she found it, finding her half-and-half lobster mix against the blue mobile home. She reached under the comforter to hold his hand as she sang.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot

And never come to mind

We'll drink a cup of kindness yet

For auld lang syne.

And never go too far, my dear

And never go too far.

We'll drink a cup of kindness yet

For auld lang syne.

She sang the two verses she knew over and over until he fell asleep. He awoke at one point in the night to find his hand still in hers, her hand reaching up high into the bed, her struggling to rub the meat of his hand between his thumb and finger. He pictured the watercolor still hanging on the wall above his head, Ed Sullivan's quiet jokes and the low roll of a laughing audience, as he pretended to be asleep until he really was.

“When you sing,” Tom said, “you find a spot in your chest that feels good and you push the words through. That’s important—always push words, not notes. Don’t worry about the notes. Don’t worry about anything. It’s about feeling good.”

“Could you show me?”

“I think so. What song do you know?”

She thought too long, and he could feel her empty, so he asked if she could sing Happy Birthday to start, and so they did. They finished and he felt nothing, so he was sure she felt nothing as well.

“My mom sang a song to us,” she said, “but I don’t remember.”

He told her to hum what she could and that he’d figure it out, and she hummed something high out her nose.

“Was it in Spanish?” he said.

She thought, realizing it might be and shrugged.

“Did your mama only speak Spanish?”

She shrugged.

“Did she speak English?”

She shrugged again.

He remembered how they’d blown through two checkpoints to get to Southern Colorado, the highway patrolmen, almost annoyed, waving their white skin by, and thought about her dark brown eyes and her chestnut hair. He remembered her father’s dead blue eyes and his wisps of red hair hanging from his balding head as he hung still from the noose on the porch. She had been a girl, strange enough to him if only for being someone else, someone other than him alone, a charge he’d taken essentially on a whim, and now she was suddenly more a person than she’d ever been, a little girl with a dead father and a living mother. Maybe a deported immigrant mother. Maybe a mother still somewhere in El Paso or Cd. Juarez or maybe a mother in California or Montana or Ft. Collins for all he knew.

She seemed utterly alone when he’d carried her asleep into the old woman’s shed, but now she wasn’t. Knowing this, which was nothing at all but knowing that more asphalt would

rise up out of the horizon as he held the accelerator down, clenched his heart so he could barely breathe, but he breathed in deeply and sang to her the song he figured she'd hummed, as best he could remember it. His wife had sung it to his baby Charlie, whispering as she leaned over the bassinet as Charlie's fussing dissipated into peace. Janie sang a few words here as she remembered them.

Duérmete mi niña, duérmete mi amor

duérmete pedazo de mi corazón.

*Este niña mío que nació de noche
quiera que la lleve a pasear en coche.*

*Este niña mío que nació de día
quiere que la lleve a la dulcería.*

*Duérmete mi niña, duérmete mi amor
duérmete pedazo de mi corazón.*

She said she didn't know the words, and with her index finger flicked and spun the blue circle on the window crank, but he told her that didn't matter, that words are bits of feelings and she could feel it, so it was more than enough—she could feel it couldn't she? and she nodded.

He asked if he could teach her another song, already pushing the radio on, and he spun the dial. Crackling voices surfaced and then left as he turned—President Clinton at a press conference, tubas thumping cumbias, basketball sneakers squeaking on a court, Michael Jackson's Black or White, and finally, like some kind of cosmic joke, Van Morrison's Brown

Eyed Girl. He wanted to laugh, but the thought of Janie's mother somewhere far away, wondering what she looked like at seven, clenched his heart so he couldn't.

He caught on during the first verse, recalling the lyrics from muscle memory when he'd sung it in a cheesy cover band years ago to pay bills. He could only ever remember the song bombing on the Aceituna's patio, when a graying drunk woman in fur coat yelled they were playing it wrong, her freezing breath clouding up around her face caked with makeup in the cold February air.

When it got to the chorus, he told her to sing *you my brown-eyed girl*, but she was nervous. To the right of the interstate, a brown cow held its head over barbed wire, staring at the blur of passing traffic, but he didn't point it out to her. Over the second verse he told her to keep singing the words *brown-eyed girl* anywhere she could, even though that's not what the man was singing, and he showed her how. She finally chimed in, off pitch and quivering, but his excitement encouraged her and she did again, this time better, and then the refrain came.

Sha la la la la la la la la la latida

They sang those nonsense words effortlessly, she instinctually knowing what to do, and from the words they felt the bits of feelings he'd talked about. He tore down every wall he'd ever erected in his head against pop music's banality. *Sha* and *la* and *latida* became better words for music than any word he could teach her, and he imagined her mother sitting between them on the pickup bench seat, speaking to her in Spanish, *quiera que la lleve a pasear en coche*, though Janie only knew English, Janie somehow understanding every word because the words were her own mother's.

He thought of the old man giving them the Datsun. He knew he'd given the truck to Janie and not him. Really, the old man gave the truck to his granddaughter, imagining Janie was her, and Tom knew he'd do the same if he could. He'd give anything to anyone who reminded him of Charlie.

Van Morrison disappeared behind the DJ, reciting "KBCO," hyping again about the freak cold front in March, not really so freakish in fickle Colorado. Tom turned the volume down to white noise again and took the steering wheel in both hands, holding tight to the question he was about to ask.

"How did that feel?"

"Good."

"Really good?"

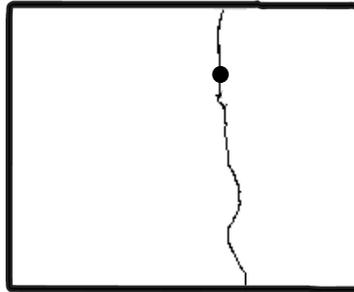
"Really good. Again!"

He cranked the volume knob again, keeping it on KBCO to Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia", Freda Payne's "Band of Gold", Sly and the Family Stone's "Everyday People", Jackson Browne's "Running on Empty", Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman", Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run". He saw himself skinny and dancing drunk in dark clubs afterhours with the bartenders as he packed cables in his guitar case, his mother dancing around his grandmother's table on Christmas day, his wife dancing the night they met on New Years Eve, ignoring the ball drop because Diana Ross's Endless Love, which he hated, was blaring equal in volume to Dick Clark's narration. His youth rocked back and forth in time, his singing a radio of its own, broadcasting every emotion humanity had ever known with just twelve notes.

Colorado

I-25

Mile Marker 238



Tom asked Janie if he ever told her the one about the bull charging him and Charlie out in Florida. He fed a clump of grass to the cow sticking its head between two strings of barbed wire. The snow-capped Rockies behind them looked over their shoulders at the cow, waiting for Janie's response. She spoke softly, somewhat ashamed. She said she did hear the one about the bull, but they had a fight so he didn't finish. He said that's right, that her ending was much better than his. He asked her if she wanted to hear the end of his version. She said yes with an enthusiastic nod of her head, and she held out another fistful of long yellow grass for the black and white cow. The Rockies behind them reflected in the cow's glassy, brown eye, the mountains teetering as she chewed.

“Well this black and white spotted T-Rex was at the top of the mountain—”

“That's not it!” she said, laughing.

“It's not?”

“There aren't any mountains in Florida!”

“So you were listening, you little weasel!” He flicked some grass against her nose, her eyes squinting as she laughed. He was glad she’d closed her eyes because he needed the moment to remember an image. Charlie’s tiny face under her yellow curls, when he’d called her a weasel for running down the hall from him, her diaper crinkling like gift-wrap tissue all the way down the hall, and then disappearing into her bedroom.

“Well this big old bull,” Tom said, “flies buzzing all around his hump, didn’t like us looking at his cows. Bulls think all the cows around them are theirs, and I don’t know about that, but I’m human, so what do I know?”

Janie fed another clump of grass to the cow, and Tom told her to be careful and that they shouldn’t feed her too much.

“The bull turned toward us, and my wife let out an uh-oh, so I turned just in time to see him storm the fence. He was so big he could have charged through the barbed wire no problem, feeling hardly anything, and in a split second I knew he might really do it. Anyone would have thought the same. Didn’t matter how much you knew about bulls. This guy really would have flattened the wires,” Tom shook the highest wire above the cows head to illustrate, startling Janie.

“Sorry. He could have charged through, knocking the posts down, too, flattening us into the dirt on the other side. We all ran, my wife gripping Charlie tight, and we ran back towards the covered pool where Charlie had been splashing her cousins.”

“Did he slam through?” Janie said.

“No. He turned into a T-rex and roared—”

“No, really. Did he slam through?”

“No. He stopped short and we all went inside the trailer so the kids could dry the pool water and get warm. We told her grandparents about it, and they just laughed like they knew we would have been fine no matter what. Old people know too much sometimes. They know things as if their brains were watertight. They know as if the truth was something stamped in concrete that dried a long time ago. Getting excited about a bull almost killing you even if it didn’t really almost kill you is what’s worthwhile about living. I don’t want to get that old.” He figured he’d lost her again. He just recited something he’d thought a million times not thinking of his audience. She made him feel comfortable enough to yammer, and he felt bad for her because of it. But then he looked down at her thinking, holding another clump of grass, obeying him and not feeding the cow too much, and he knew that she was listening to a grown-up’s thoughts, thinking best as she could about what the words meant, and learning something, even if it wasn’t the something he had learned that day in Florida.

“You should get old,” Janie said. “You won’t be like that. You’ll be a good old man. You’re more like a kid.”

Tom noticed they were standing a distance back from the barbed wire fence, both subconsciously feeling a new respect for its weakness, and they looked out past the cow to the pasture she enjoyed in freedom. She was safe in captivity, and so she could be free. They stood a long while, and realizing Janie was okay just sitting still a while, knowing the red Datsun was parked safely away from the freeway, he let himself remember the day Charlie died.

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Tom started awake, a fresh diaper sliding down his nose. Even delirious, he figured immediately that she’d tossed it on him.

“Get up, Hon,” Sophia said.

He swatted the diaper to his chest and laced his fingers over his eyes. The bathroom light leaked through a crack in his fingers, her shadow passing across the slat of light and then he heard the bathroom door shut and it was dark again.

He looked around the room in dawn's blue for his jeans. A rocking chair, dirty and clean laundry on the floor, boxes of eighteen months diapers they'd gotten on Charlie's birthday stacked against the dresser.

He reached to feel his thigh and felt he was still wearing his jeans.

Sophia opened the bathroom door, and he squinted in her light.

"You're not hung over, right?" she said.

"No."

"You knew I had a closing this morning."

"I'm not."

"You smell like alcohol, Tom."

He tossed the diaper to her side of the bed, and with his elbows, erected himself against the headboard.

"Then why ask?" he said, focusing. "Why do you ask if you already have an answer figured out?"

"I smell alcohol, Tom."

"You smell the bar. Joey spilled a beer on my amp and I sat on it," he said.

She sat at the edge of the bed next to him and touched his elbow.

"I'm serious," he said.

"So you're wearing beer-soaked jeans in the bed she rolls around in?" she said and let go of his elbow.

“No.”

“One way or another, you’re a bad liar.”

They heard Charlie yell Mama from the next room like a rare but familiar bird calling to the early morning.

“Your turn,” she said. “I need to finish my face.”

He pinched the soiled blue stripe on the front of Charlie’s diaper to see how much she had peed, pulled the tabs on the front of her diaper, slid it away from her, and folded it over itself, velcroing it into a little ball. She sleepily played with her hair, her blonde curls flattened on the side she slept on, and squinted in the lamp’s orange light as she blew raspberries at him and he blew them back.

She peed another puddle around her bare bottom on the changing pad, and he told her Charlie, no, and she laughed. She rolled toward the edge of the dresser, but he caught her, used the wipes to clean everything up, threw her pajamas in the laundry basket, and got a fresh diaper on her.

Carrying Charlie, he met Sophia in the hall. He lowered Charlie to the floor by her wrists until her feet met the tile and she stumbled to her mother’s legs.

“Take her,” he said. “I need to hit the bathroom.”

“You’re not going to puke, are you?”

“I told you. I’m not hung over. I’m completely fine. I just need to go to the bathroom. Jesus.”

He returned from the bathroom and took Charlie from Sophia without saying anything, and she hastened down the hallway to finish getting dressed.

He packed Sophia's lunch for her in a plastic grocery bag while holding Charlie—yogurt, a granola bar, a banana, a can of tuna and a handful of saltine crackers to shovel the tuna. He struggled to slide the saltines into a Ziploc bag as he held Charlie against his hip.

“You're okay to have her, right?” she said, tying the handles of the grocery bag shut.

“Don't ask me that again. I sat in beer. I'm sorry I left my pants on. I was just tired. I hardly drank last night.”

“If you're too tired, I could reschedule.”

“Go close the house. We need it.”

“Then be a good dad. We need that.”

“What the fuck, Sophie?”

He hoisted Charlie up higher and then slid her down his side, straddled against his hip again.

He bent to whisper in Charlie's ear and smiled at her. Something snarky about her mother Charlie wouldn't understand.

“You really didn't drink?” Sophia said.

“I had two the whole night.” He held Sophia's eyes. She had a way of making him do this. When he lied, he couldn't hold her stare. This time, he held her stare the way a mountain holds a stream.

“This isn't fair of you, Sophia,” he said toward Charlie.

“It's not like you haven't done it before.”

“Not in a long while. If I'm doing better, you should encourage me, not pick me apart.”

“So you really didn't puke in the bathroom again?”

“I'm done, Soph,” he said and left the kitchen, carrying Charlie high against his chest.

“I’m done,” he said loudly in the living room.

Sophia slammed the door to the carport behind her. Tom carried Charlie to the living room, then turned around, and carried Charlie out the front door, running to stop Sophia’s car. She rolled the window down and he told her he didn’t want to leave it that way. She said she was sorry and that he had been doing much better. Sophia forced a smile and blew him a kiss and continued in reverse down the driveway.

Tom lay with Charlie on the living room carpet, and scattered small wooden alphabet blocks from their wooden crate on the floor. She stacked a wooden letter block on another block.

“Just like yesterday,” he said. “Good job, sweetheart.”

He stacked a third and placed a fourth in her hand.

“Do this one, baby,” he said. He remembered his guitar in the backseat of his car, and the summer heat coming in a few hours to warp the neck. It was a semi-hollow body Thinline Telecaster, and the heat can mess with the cavity, too. Might even throw the Bigsby off.

“Screw the guitar,” he thought. He wasn’t hung over. He really only had two beers the night before. But he was tired. That guitar made him perpetually tired. He was tired as he drank in the fleeting days Charlie was two, and he didn’t want that. He wanted to throw her up in the air by her armpits every day because one day, she’d be too big and he’d never have the chance again. Maybe he could sell the guitar, give up music for good, or at least until she was a self-absorbed teenager forcing him to have free time again. He could use the money to buy Charlie a jungle gym for the backyard.

He reached out and held the tower together in one hand so it wouldn’t fall under her clumsy hand. She stacked the fourth block upon the tower.

“Wow, Char!” he said. “Who’s my little architect?” He picked up another block. “Here’s a C for Charlie the civil engineer,” he said.

He saw last night’s tiny crowd, a few watching, a bearded college student yelling into his date’s ear and motioning to the exit. He felt pathetic. He was resolved to sell the guitar.

“We’ll get it so tall, Mommy could see it,” Tom said.

Charlie focused on the wooden block and tried setting it on the top of the tower, but it fell off. The tower stayed standing, and Tom figured he’d have enough time while she tried again to retrieve his guitar from his car. Maybe he could do a little work on it during naptime so he could get as much as possible for it.

“I’ll be right back, sweetheart.”

He trotted through the house, feeling powerful in his resolve to sell the guitar, and swung the wrought iron door open to the carport. He came in again for his car keys hanging from the hook just inside, and then he ran back out.

His neighbor, Camille, was outside, watering her geraniums in a pot against the wall separating her property from his.

“Did you have a gig last night, Tommy?” she said.

She wore a sunhat always. She wore the sunhat even when there was no sun. She loved her plants, and he knew from her expressions of disappointment that she was upset that he’d let his yard die over the last two years since they moved in. Still, she was always intrigued that he was a musician, asked questions about his band after hearing them practice in his backhouse. The backhouse was one of the main reasons he and Sophie bought the house in the first place: he wouldn’t have to rent a practice space downtown for an extra two-hundred a month, and Sophia would have him close by, no matter what.

“I did,” Tom said, turning the key in the driver’s side door of his Mazda hatchback.

“Did it go well?” Camille said.

“It was fine,” Tom said, struggling to pull the tweed guitar case out of his back seat.

Sophia had bought him the case for his twenty-seventh birthday. They’d been together since high school, and he knew that was the best reason Camille had for not hating him for his dying yard. He could keep something alive, and that was enough for her.

She was a widow, and her husband had been an excellent harmonica player, even did studio work in Los Angeles for a while. The rare moments they’d talked about Tom’s shows were the highlights of her month. He could see her picturing her husband instead of Tom as he reported the minutia of his bar band shows. She wouldn’t let him back inside to Charlie until he’d given her something to think about through her afternoon of carefully watering the rose bushes lining her front windows, so he spoke quickly.

“The sound guy was kind of a jerk, but he figured out the feedback on the lead, so I was nice, you know? We played to almost no one, which is usual, but there was a table up front that cheered loud after every song. It’s hard to tell when someone really likes your shit, or sorry, your stuff, or when they’re just having fun with you. These people really dug it. They dug the harmonica on the third song, and cried out, ‘Dylan!’ when we finished it, and they bought a single tape for the four of them at the end. Sadly, that’s pretty good, at this point of the game.”

This point of the game was a new band Tom had begun after leaving a band that was signed to a large indie label out of Chicago. The previous band had a record in Best Buy, placements on MTV television shows, and he once heard his own song in a Dillard’s in west side El Paso, a place he never went, his chords coercing unknowing buyers to buy, buy, buy. He was

always afraid that that moment in Dillard's inflated his ego. He quit that band and played down his achievements as a result.

"Well, I love Neon Rain," Camille said. "I love it to death. The harmonica, and the rhythm and everything you're singing about are all just right. I love it, Tommy."

"Thank you, Camille. Really, that means a lot. Well, I have a little girl fumbling around the living room carpet, so I better get inside."

"Of course, Tommy. Get in there before she knocks over a guitar or worse."

When Tom returned to the living room, and dropped his guitar case on the carpet, Charlie was no longer there among the wooden blocks. He looked into the empty hallway and then ran back to the living room to look at the corner where she once played with the television cable plugged into the wall socket. All at once, he felt a dark shroud cover him.

He ran to Charlie's bedroom and saw her lying on the carpeted floor face up, motionless and blue. He thrust a finger into her mouth and plucked a little wooden block out. She was dead, but he thumped on her tiny chest anyway, and breathed into her mouth. He screamed come on, sweetheart, and don't do this, and not now, but she was gone.

Tom watched Janie feed the cow another clump of grass and then sit down, watching the sky above the cow, as if the cow had at some point rained down from it. He had nothing to tell her, and he feared he might never have another thing to tell her. Charlie was dead. She was dead at two. He had invented stories of her childhood afterward to tell himself in the living rooms of the houses he burglarized. He then passed on a few of those stories to Janie. It was what he knew of Charlie, those invented stories, but they were all dead for being imaginary, and so wasn't

Janie now partly really dead, too? Wasn't Charlie just as imaginary as the stories about constellations? Wasn't she just a speck of sand blowing past the mystic Indian? Wasn't she just the mile markers that flitted by Janie as she traveled north, not knowing why she moved, not knowing how exactly she'd be fed, taught, and loved as she crept through the hours of her marginalized life? Tom and Janie lived in the margins. Tom had been in the margins for longer. Janie had been living in margins of her own since before he found her scared and crying in the yellow cupboard in her dead father's office. She didn't need margins. She needed life, and life was written on the pages. In the pages that the old man filled with ideas about rivers, and the pages stuck together with grime on Pammy's menus back in the Santa Fe Diner and Truck Stop in Magdalenas, New Mexico. A southwest quesadilla with a side of avocado slices, or the waffles drizzled with raspberry syrup, covered with a cloud of Cool Whip, or the grits filled with butter and salt and the things we crave in the night when we can't sleep and everything seems to exist for a purpose we don't know and can't imagine.

“Where do the cows go when it's raining,” Janie said.

“They just stand it.”

“They don't go under trees or in a shed or anything?”

“No. They just stand it until it's gone. They can even sleep in it.”

“Even this cow?”

“Yes.”

“Even Marie?”

“Is that her name?” he said, studying the cow's black spots on white, studying how the grass she ate formed into the pattern on her hide, knowing even Marie would be eaten someday.

“You’re not going to adopt Marie, too, are you?” he said.

“No. I want to, but she doesn’t fit in the red truck.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Tom said, “but close your eyes tight.” Janie did. He told her to put Marie the cow in her Hello Kitty backpack with Tom the screw, Pammy the skateboard, Elephant the red blanket, and Sophia the wedding ring. He told her to have them all introduce themselves to each other and to buckle up because they needed to get in the truck. While she had her eyes closed, Tom picked up a smooth, light gray rock from the side of the road. He’d seen a black permanent marker in the glove compartment, so he’d use it to give the rock some spots and a cow face, and he’d sneak it into the Hello Kitty backpack while Janie was asleep.

Hoyle Hearts

My mother and I are not close. After my dad passed, whom I call Dad but was really my step-father, she lost thirty pounds and lay despondent in her bed often, petting one of her six cats, or else she petted a time-stamped receipt from the grocery store she received at about the time my step-father fell to the tile floor from the toilet in the hallway bathroom and died. She'd left a cancer patient alone for forty-seven minutes, and he'd gone to the bathroom alone though he was forbidden to do so. Then, fourteen months later, she married a minister.

She knew the minister in high school. She knew my step-father long ago, too, my father not exactly surprised to know *the other man's* voice when picking up the house phone in his office on the opposite end of the house. He heard the two of them planning another night at Village Inn. They called each other a pet name, *Mi Amor*, like idyllic teenagers reciting the script of love as they understood it, in a tone sweeter than my biological father had ever heard directed at him in his fourteen-year marriage to my mother.

My dad was studying for a fire department test. I think it was the Lieutenant's test, or at least he was faking it, playing computer Hoyle cards instead, Hearts mostly. If you end the game with a heart, you take a point, and points are bad. You play the game like a careful politician, always doing just the right thing, and bluffing to cover up flubs, taking hearts like they were skeletons in your closet. If, instead, you decide to *shoot the moon*, to miraculously take all of the hearts, every single one, you skunk your opponents and you jump a game ahead in the score, a three-in-four-thousand-games-occurrence.

I always imagine him opening one of his fourteen fire department manuals on his homemade, spray painted fire-engine-red, L-shaped desk, and then beginning a computer Hearts

game, playing against cartoon-avatar algorithms named Charlie, Eve, and Christine, and taking as few hearts as possible. Maybe he took too many to win the round and picked up the phone to call someone for help. This is the moment the picture in my head falls apart. Who would he call? His college friend and my Godfather, Bob, to ask him about some mundane detail about a Grateful Dead bootleg? *Was it the Carousel Ballroom show in San Francisco show that they used to build their second studio album Anthem of the Sun, or was that the Winterland show?* As if it were question fourteen of one-hundred on the Lieutenant's exam. Or maybe the computer characters were Grateful Dead fans and they'd be impressed, forgiving one or two of his hand's hearts. No. That wasn't it either. Hoyle had no heart.

Maybe he dialed a magical number to my future self, after I'd already had two boys and was still close to them after fourteen years, to ask how a man sticks around when questions, requests, and love just piss you off. You remember their first smiles as babies, releasing from the nipple drunk and happy to see smiling eyes hovering above before uncontrollably falling asleep. You remember how they say things like *I'm drinky* when they're thirsty and clutching your jeans as you lift the tap to fill their favorite blue plastic cup with filtered water. You remember when they explain that it really was love they felt for that girl though they know fourteen is simply too young to know, and they cry upon your chest, leaning against it tightly, as they blubber that they were okay, and after they shut the door to their bedroom, you touch the tears on your shirt with your fingertips afterward, wondering how one keeps wet from drying.

The call to my future self probably wasn't it either though. My boys are still babies, and I don't know how much they'll still love me when they're fourteen and seventeen. No one ever does. And besides, I hate The Grateful Dead.

Most likely, my father had heard my mother on the phone through a door weeks earlier, or he'd seen her in the parking lot of Village Inn with Him, or he'd received an anonymous tip from a St. Pius patron, and, at his loony therapist's suggestion (the only person with whom he'd speak at length) waited for just the right moment to pick up the phone to hear her say *mi amor* in clarity, for himself. He noted none of this in the divorce papers months later.

Although psychiatrist's success is marked by their ability to exit their patient's lives, my father's psychiatrist, Walter, hung around for the remainder of his life. They sat in a little room in a strip mall every Thursday (or Wednesdays the year Walter married at fifty-seven) and both men pushed silvery hair behind their ears as they spoke, mostly about things from the sixties, such as my father's father, political protests that informed their disgust at any current issue, and The Grateful Dead.

At any rate, my father said nothing into the receiver after hearing who knows how much of the Village Inn conversation, placed the receiver on the stand quietly as to not disturb the Village Inn plans, and stayed in his office alone. Did he continue playing hearts?

My mother and I are not close, and the old adage about a man's reliability, his worth, his likelihood of being a good husband and father hinging upon his relationship with his mother, is something I consider here and there. I seem to not be a good man if it's all true. What if you allow your relationship with your mother to be whole, not missing the parts when choice sentences through the years of your growing-up peck and tear like harpies?

Life is a bowl of cherry pits and then you die, mijo.

I just live—I never wanted any kids and I'm just waiting to die.

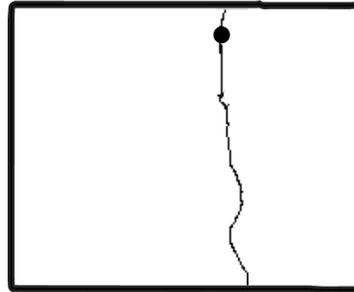
My parents let something awful happen to me, and so why wouldn't I do the same?

She didn't mean any of it. We all say whatever is on our minds when we feel free to, and sometimes what's on our minds feels like krill stuck in a blue whale's teeth.

Colorado

I-25

Mile Marker 271



“I was telling Charlie a bed-time story once,” Tom told Janie as they pattered up I-25 in the old man’s red Datsun pick up. Tom loved that it had manual windows, loved Janie flicking the circular knob round as he spoke, something she did in his blue pickup, but it felt right this time, like she did it to make herself comfortable, and not to make him uncomfortable. He loved the forest smell of the Datsun, like the Colorado ponderosa pines had swirled up into a smoky spirit, wisped down through a cracked window to take a nap inside the truck, woke early in the morning, and wisped out quietly just before Tom and Janie climbed in and drove off. The forest wiped sleep from its eyes and scratched, watching them from the side of the road until they reached another forest further north.

“I told her about a leopard,” Tom said, “who only had one spot. I think it freaked her out. Didn’t go the way I’d hoped. I don’t know what I hoped though. I was just making it up as I went. Did that with all her bedtime stories.”

Janie found a pine needle on the seat and stuck it in and out of the hole in the center of the circular knob on the window pull.

“She was three or four,” Tom said. “Must have been three, speaking in broken sentences, yelling when she didn’t get her way. She had ideas. They didn’t make sense to me, but I recognized they were ideas to her. Some made sense. Like... the toy alligator couldn’t play with the T-Rex because the T-Rex was just bones but the alligator came from Florida where grandma was. I tried telling her the T-Rex was a real T-Rex, to get her imagination going, but she was hard-nosed about it. Grandma knew every alligator ever. Grandma didn’t know any T-Rexes. Grandma never told her any of this was the case.

“I guess figuring alligators and T-Rexes couldn’t know each other was as imaginative as figuring they could. Made up laws are as imaginative as anything else made up.” He was losing Janie.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m just yammering.”

“I like it. Nevada,” She said, pointing out past the windshield. “What was the story?”

They’d begun a state license plate scavenger hunt, and Janie was winning. Tom looked at a maroon LeBaron rolling away in the passing lane, maroon numbers and letters against a murky gray background, a maroon NEVADA across the top, and so he winced so Janie could feel her victory.

“That’s right. The story,” Tom said. “Well this leopard only had one spot. A bunch of zebras made fun of the leopard for only having one when all other leopards had tons.”

“Mean zebras.”

“That’s what I thought. So these mean-ass zebras told the leopard they had lots of stripes, enough stripes to wrap the leopard up into a ball, and they laughed at the leopard and her one spot. Oregon.” Janie sat up and checked to be sure he’d stolen Oregon from her, found it, and slumped back down.

“The leopard said her one spot was bigger than all their black stripes put together. Zebras didn’t like that business. They eyed the leopard’s big spot on her side and said it wasn’t that big, so she said she’d prove it and asked them to turn around. When they did, she took the big spot off her side and slapped it on the ground.” Tom slapped his hand on the Datsun’s dash and rubbed the spot out big and flat.

“She yelled, ‘catch me if you can, you mean, old zebras!’ And off they went. The leopard ran through the forest with the mean, old zebras hot on her tail.”

Janie looked out the window to the pine trees flitting by, brushing the blue sky clean of the clouds.

“But one of them fell into the spot,” Tom said. “It wasn’t a spot at all now. It was a big old hole in the ground, and one of their buddies was stuck in it, it’s striped head and neck sticking out and braying loud.” Tom brayed loud and drummed on the steering wheel erratically. “All the zebras kicked and brayed and stamped their hooves and yelled, ‘Our buddy’s stuck! Our buddy’s stuck!’”

Janie laughed and said it was silly.

“Think that’s silly? See what happens next.

“Montana.”

“Damn it.”

“Don’t curse.”

“Sorry. So the leopard swung out from a vine from the middle of a big old Banyan tree, landed next to her spot with the zebra stuck in it and said, ‘Hole’s pretty big isn’t it?’ The Zebras all brayed and cried and said, ‘Get our friend out! Get our friend out!’ So the leopard clawed at her spot, flung it up in the air with the zebra still stuck in it, and it landed flat against her side

where it always was before, the zebra head sticking out of her middle still in the big old black spot.” Tom slammed on the middle of the steering wheel and the Datsun honked its horn, so Janie squealed and pushed her feet against the glove compartment so that she was sitting upright.

“Wyoming,” he said, and she slumped back down. They were in traveler’s country, and Tom knew the game would be exciting and fast-paced until they ran out of western states.

“The leopard drew a breath in deep,” Tom breathing in past his tight lips for the sound of a long high wisp of air. “And she blew out a big roar.” He roared from inside his nose so that it wasn’t loud, but quietly booming low instead, and he wondered what Janie thought of it, wondered if she would think it was right, knowing it was right remembering Charlie the last time he heard her roar.

Janie turned to him. Maybe to see how one roars in such a way. Maybe to see if he was okay since the roar was something personal for him, but how would she know that? He’d heard Charlie push out the same low, deep-inside growl, something she’d recognized in the animals she so wanted to be, when she was just a baby, and pushing it out his nose now seemed like it could be anything—a memory, a wish, an apology. A green exit sign for Ft. Collins, next four exits, flew by, and so did a cool rush of panic inside Tom.

“The zebra popped out of the leopard’s big spot on her side and tumbled out into the forest. New Mexico.”

“We already saw New Mexico.”

“Not since we started the game.”

“And then the zebras,” Janie said, “wanted to take turns jumping in the spot.”

“Well that’s not—”

“And they stuck their hooves in the spot.”

“Listen, Janie.”

“But the leopard didn’t like it, so she threw the spot off again.”

“Bean.”

“And it landed in a river and a fish went in.”

“And then what?” Tom said. Janie paused, not expecting Tom’s surrender. He could feel her looking at his crooked mouth, noticing the smile in his eyes, if it wasn’t apparent upon his lips.

“And then,” Janie said. She thought, her sock feet on the dash, her big toes flicking inside.

“The fish jumped out and yelled at all the zebras,” she said.

“What’d the fish yell?”

“The fish yelled at the zebras and said ‘leave the leopard alone!’”

“Did they?”

“Mmm hmm. And they said sorry, and the fish told them the spot was magic and so it was bigger.”

“Bigger than all their stripes?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“That’s very clever, Janie. You are a very smart girl, you know that?”

Janie looked into Charlie the backpack and pulled Pammy the skateboard out from under her legs, and Tom didn’t want to lose her, but spoke anyway.

“The stuff you think is wonderful, Janie. That’s a great ending to the story. Maybe Charlie wouldn’t have been weirded out had it ended that way.”

Janie looked at him, and he looked back, his expression telling her he meant it.

“Kansas.”

“Damn it.”

“Don’t curse.”

“Right. Should get your feet off the dash. I drive safe, but there’s no telling what could happen.”

She did. She did and she was calm. Calmer than she’d been before he’d spoken. Before he’d just told her what to do.

Tom saw another green sign for Ft. Collins fly by and thought of his mother the last time he saw her. Her inheritance had covered a caretaker, though she swore she didn’t really need one, but it didn’t take much for Tom to get her to sign the papers at AMADA Senior Care, agreeing to have Sonia, a retired nurse, show up three times a week to check on her. Sonia had more gray hair than his mother did, but a cleaner face, not dimpled with acne pockmarks. His mother had plenty. She’d accrued them at different times of her life, even into her fifties—acne brought on by stress. She said she’d been riddled by a Tommy gun, but Tom understood she meant abandonment, or rejection, or those simple stabs of worrying that she was indeed a good mother.

He knew she didn’t call it a Tommy gun on accident.

All her pain caused her pores to clog up, thrusting out large white heads she could never wait to pop. Sometimes she’d come out of the bathroom and hold eye contact with Tom, a drop of blood plumping up round and then trickling down her nose like a fat rain drop on a window pane.

“Oooh! Hawaii!” Janie said.

“Dang, kid! Good one!”

Sonia had a streak of purple in her gray, and how ridiculous was that? How ridiculous was it to tend to yourself in a way that wasn't what nature had intended? Popping zits was natural. It was a reaction to past evils that finally surfaced and wanted release. At least that's what his mother said. When she was feeling optimistic, she said her acne scars were the tick marks of life, and the older she got, the less they meant.

Sonia was twenty years younger too, and that made Tom feel better, but not his mother. She figured she'd learned enough over the last twenty years to know Sonia didn't know shit. Sonia didn't know that her own grown kids, her daughter, a speech pathologist and mother-of-three, and her young, dumb son, a social work doctorate candidate at The University of Colorado Boulder, could each turn crazier than a jackfruit at the drop of a pin. Kids in their fifties didn't know more than old women. Real old women. Old women who could give up because their lowest roots were dying too. The hopes real old women like her had for grandchildren had gone, and now everyone they knew was dying there on the back end of life, and no one they knew was living toward the middle. When she'd said this to him during the first of only two visits the year before, Tom asked her if that was really how it worked, and she nodded emphatically. He asked if he, her own son, was dying and not living, and she nodded, reluctantly so he knew it was true, at least to her.

Before his second visit of the year, on Thanksgiving, his mother rifled through photos for a week or more to find the perfect photo for each of his family members. She had them laid out on her dining table, equidistant from each other across the length like a timeline. When he arrived, he noticed the array immediately, but she redirected him away from the table, telling him how things had been in her usual way, that two of the cats were doing well and not arguing anymore, that Sasha still destroyed the toys, but that Roscoe had given up on toys so it seemed

they'd reached an impasse. Mini was dead, and they shouldn't talk about it further. It happened on Valentine's day, and she didn't give a shit about Valentine's day, but it still hurt worse for some reason, but they still shouldn't speak another word because what good would it do? She asked why he didn't ask about Mini during his last visit and then told him to never mind, that it didn't matter now anyway.

He glanced at the photos spread out neatly in a line on the dining table, but pretended he hadn't, and his mother pulled him by his wrist as if to reprimand him, her bony, dry grasp alarming him. It shouldn't have been alarming—she'd done it to him a hundred times. Pulling him by his wrist this way and that without warning since he was a baby. Maybe this time what alarmed him was the scratching of her dry hand down his arm, down to his wrist. He thought of her obsessively lotioned hands from his youth. She'd always loved lavender. If something smelled of lavender, it smelled better than anything else for sale. He hadn't smelled lavender in her home for a decade or more, but didn't dare ask about it. To her, something dead wasn't worth talking about. Lavender, apparently, was dead. He wondered what else was dead. What killed lavender? He never spoke of Charlie to her, and that chasm between them deepened by the month. She had no idea. Or so he imagined. Remembering the lavender scented lotion Sophia rubbed on Charlie, he wanted badly then to ask if Charlie had killed lavender.

He knew what the timeline was before he was introduced to it. It was a map of mental health in their family. She'd hinted at her desire to figure out what it was that made her tick. It might have been Charlie's death that set her quest in motion, and he wondered if her showing him photos of dead people meant he could bring up Charlie to her, and his heart fluttered with nerves, his nose filled with lavender.

He spotted the photo he knew would be on the table—Grandpa Wilberth. Tom looked exactly like Grandpa Wilberth. It was scary how closely he resembled Wilberth, to the point that he didn't show his wife a picture of Wilberth until late in their relationship, even after Charlie was born. The eeriness of it stunk of a curse to him. When he finally showed his wife a photograph, she paused too long before remarking, so he buried the photo under others and changed subjects. He figured she could sense Wilberth's sickness just from looking at the photograph of his face.

Wilberth was Tom's mother's great grandfather. She barely knew him. To Tom, his mother really didn't know him at all. He must have been a fixture in her youth that represented God-knows-what, and she couldn't possibly know what that was at the time (a God-damn baby). Tom knew, sort of, that all she'd ever done was to assign strange stories, invented or real he couldn't tell, to Wilberth. He was a soap-box preacher sometimes. He was a carpetbagger other times. He was a wife-beater while also a crooked philanthropist (whatever that meant) other times. Anytime she mentioned any one of these possibilities, she'd dismiss the thought with a toss of her hand like she was swatting a fly away from her face. She killed memories like flies, and once the flies were dead, she could easily slip back into ignoring the past. He spent his entire life watching her swat flies dead, and the ground between them piled up with the flies' bodies turning it black and greasy. Neither of them were allowed to look down at the mass of dead flies. Neither could ever look directly at what they saw in their periphery—silvery glimmers like reflective eyes floating on a bog on a moonless night.

“Texas,” Janie said.

“We already saw Texas.”

“Not since we started the game,” she whined, mockingly, and he forced a laugh. He could feel her ungluing from him because of the fake laugh, feeling the distance between them though they’d been doing so well.

He looked for another exit sign for Ft. Stockton, saw a green mile marker fly by instead and couldn’t remember what the last sign had said—If they’d already passed all the exits for his mother’s house. If they’d have to turn around if he decided to go through with it.

Tom had stared at the photograph of almost-himself many times in his life in secret. He’d remember his aunt’s cryptic explanation of who Wilberth was and how he caused all of the family’s strife. If he was a terrible person, which he most certainly must have been considering his mother’s unrelenting disdain for his image, he was also a scapegoat. There was nothing that was wrong in the world that didn’t have something at least a little to do with him. He popped out more flies for her to swat dead than anyone or anything else could. He was a monster in the worst way, but Tom never found out why. To Tom, Wilberth was a monster because he was elusive. Worse, his victims couldn’t even speak about him. What wouldn’t you blame on such a person? Or perhaps instead, who could receive blame more easily than that?

Grandpa Wilberth looked exactly like Tom, and his mother loved Tom without reservation. Tom had always wondered how she pulled that off. It was her greatest show of strength. He thanked the flies for that. On a few rare occasions, she’d stared at him, a lanced zit trickling blood somewhere on her face, the stare ending in the swat of a fly, and she’d walk away without a word. Those flies were swatted dead without a given reason. He knew that she swatted those flies, the ones born out of silence, because she loved Tom, not because she hated Wilberth. Tom’s realization of this may now have become the pulley that pulled his string north to deliver Janie to Ft. Collins. Now though, the crazy lady who needed a caretaker seemed like the wrong

choice. He chuckled remembering that she'd taught him that crazy was a bad word. That it was just the lazy nothing-word for something that wasn't easily understood.

“Crazy lady.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, Bean.”

The gritty desert clench of cacti in the New Mexico desert, clinging to loose sand and waiting foolishly for rare rain was always something that reminded him of his mother. It reminded him of the word crazy. It reminded him of her because the desert rain was a symbol of faith, and alternatively, from the arroyo's perspective, it was a symbol of consistency.

Was she that? Was she either of those things? Was his mother really just an old woman with little left to give, or was she the oracle in the north that would answer his questions, Janie's questions, and even Charlie's questions? Of course, she never recited memories of Charlie or asked questions about Charlie or even spoke of any moment within the two years she was alive. Was his mother perfect for Janie because of her power to forget the dead, to swat flies so life could breath easy? Or was she exactly wrong for Janie? He imagined Janie would keep the flies as pets and show them around the living world like they were distinguished guests. Tom felt the coldest of rushes Colorado could flick down his spine and into the seat of the Datsun, and so he was sitting firmly against something that didn't feel right.

“What do you want to do next, Janie?”

“We're going to the lady's house.”

“We are, but I just want to know what you really want.”

He thought of asking her something about her father or her mother or her brother. He thought of asking her that if they came back as flies buzzing around her head, what would she

do? Would she bottle them up and keep him in her Hello Kitty backpack? Would she let them fly free and hope they'd stick around? Would she swat them dead and never look down at their little black bodies? What could he ask her without scaring her?

“You think the lady doesn't really want us?” Janie said.

“Us?”

Janie looked at her feet, and then grabbed the circular knob on the window crank, as if she might roll the window down and jump out.

“You still want my stinky butt around?”

She smiled, looked at him and nodded.

“You're still not tired of me?”

She smiled brighter and shook her head.

“I don't know why you'd want someone like me around. I can't even play the damn license game.”

“Yeah. You suck,” she said.

“Don't curse.”

She laid her hand on the seat between them as if to keep him from floating away and said, “You'll remind me of my brother.” He looked at her to gauge what it meant. If remembering her brother was something she wanted. If using Tom to remember her brother was something either of them wanted.

“I never met your brother.”

“But you know about him. And my mama too.”

“And your daddy?”

She shook her head. She spun the circular knob the way his mother swatted the air in front of her face. Janie had kept two flies and swatted the third. Tom was her jar without a lid, and he imagined Janie's little brother, Jamie, who died of pneumonia after cutting a lizard in half, and her mother who only spoke Spanish and sang to her before bed. He took those incomplete sketches of people and added on in his mind. He added that her brother pulled his hair into a Mohawk when he was sleepy. He added that her mother slept with her mouth wide open, Janie putting things inside and laughing, a little hand over her little mouth. He imagined her brother and her mother as flies fluttering in and out of his jar as they pleased, sleeping on Janie's shoulders at night, and fluttering back in the jar when it was windy.

"Illinois," Janie said. Tom watched the last green exit sign for Ft. Collins fly over their heads and looked for a dirt turnaround on I-25, like a dry rivulet shooting off of the river at low-level.

"I wonder if you would like Chicago," Tom said. "I have a friend there who could teach you the piano."

"The guy you want to make the folk record with?"

"You pay attention too much. Yeah. Him."

Janie thought and watched the trees out her window give way to a pasture, a couple of cows feeding from damp grass shining in the distance.

"Is it far?"

"It's pretty far, yeah.

He wondered if far was bad or good. If far was good it was because it meant time was good. He wondered if time indeed was good. He wondered if time healed or opened them up to more hurt. The clock ticking is an open invitation for anything to happen, and so it's partly an

invitation for more pain. He wondered if the trees and the grass and the cows here grew vibrant and bold because forest and pastures were superior to the desert. He wondered if the prickly pear and the mesquite trees and the lizards, sand blasted in the wind, were stronger than the grass and the pines and the cows.

Tom didn't wait any longer for Janie to respond. Instead he told her about the polar bears in the San Diego zoo. Three of them. He told her that when the zoo first got the bears in, they kept the water arctic cold. Then one time, the water-chilling machine broke down and the water got warmer for a while. They fixed the machine and chilled the water for the polar bears, but then they wouldn't get in anymore. They'd gotten used to the warm water. So they turned off the chiller and let the water go warm. They let the water get as warm as the polar bears wanted.

Vita

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