cottonwood

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Dennis McFadden

Cancer and Vixen

1. 1954

Voices woke him up. Jimmy was still in bed. The voices were so low he could barely make them out, and his first thought was to turn it up. Then it came to him that it wasn't the radio, he was in bed, it was Mom and Dad talking in the kitchen, bits and snatches drifting up through the heating grate in his bedroom floor, and he started to smile. But he didn't. Just in time he remembered he was sad. *Cancer*, his Dad said. An odd, familiar word. He thought he'd heard it before, but when? Where? Last night, stretched out on the living room floor by the big stone fireplace that smelled of coal ashes, he'd listened to "Boston Blackie" on the radio. Mona had pleaded in vain for her life before Billy had shot her—shot her down like a dog, the cop said—and a terrible sadness had fallen over Jimmy. Mona's last words were how much she loved Billy, but he shot her down like a dog anyhow, and Skippy, Jimmy's dog, was sick. He'd gone outside just before "Boston Blackie" came on, and had never come back in. Jimmy'd called and called into the dark. He could still see Mona's sad, scared face.

Good thing Buster wasn't there. He could picture his best friend, Buster Clover, teasing him for thinking his Mom and Dad talking was the radio. Jimmy pulled on his tee shirt, looking out his window to see the first signs of autumn, a yellowing of the green leaves up through the orchard. Could school be far away? Another sad thought. Beyond the trees, at eye level on the hillside, sat the old barn in the shadows of the woods. He listened to the voices. Only the loudest bits of conversation drifted up to his room, so as a rule he heard only trouble. Happiness was just a mumble in the morning, like a purr. Anger was loud. Like a bark. Which was it this morning? *Cancer* had been loud, but not really angry. Jimmy tried putting his ear to the grate. It didn't help. It never helped.

Downstairs, he was surprised to find his Mom and Dad in a good mood. “Good morning, Glory, did you see the rain, dear?” Dad asked him. One of his Dad’s favorites. In the corner on the yellowed linoleum Skippy’s dish sat full, untouched. No sign of his dog, no yawning, wagging greeting. Mom fixed him egg on toast for breakfast, his favorite, and his Dad told him he’d take him along hunting some day next week. When his Dad started wondering whether or not they might be able to afford a shotgun for Jimmy’s next birthday, and his Mom started wondering whether or not they might be able to afford a trip to Pittsburgh to see a Pirates game next year, Jimmy started worrying. Their mood was too good. Bad news was on the way, just as surely as school was. They were acting the same way they had last year when the bunny had been sick, just before Dad told him he’d have to put it to sleep. And now Skippy was sick.

The screen in the door was rusty. Jimmy looked out at the orchard; beyond that, further up the hillside, the barn. With the tip of his finger he touched the frayed hole in the screen in front of his nose. “Suppose Grandma and Grandpa’ll be stopping by?” he asked. They usually did on Saturday mornings.

The silence made him turn. Mom was watching Dad. “Yeah,” Dad said.

“Think I’ll go out and wait,” said Jimmy. “Have you seen Skippy?”

“No,” Mom said. “I don’t know where he is this morning.”

“He didn’t come in for his breakfast,” Dad said.

And he hadn’t eaten his supper last night. A black mongrel almost as old as Jimmy, his back was nearly bald from the fur falling out this past summer. *Mange*, odd word. The only dog he’d ever had. Last night he’d watched him sleeping on his rug by the cold fireplace, his paws, even the bad one, twitching as he ran like a puppy through a field in a dream, probably chasing Chestnuts’ cow again, like he used to. He yipped once, then whimpered. Woke when Jimmy petted his head.

But he wouldn’t even look at his supper, all evening, so Jimmy poured a bowl of milk. Skippy could never resist milk, but last

night he wouldn't even look at it. That was when Jimmy figured he must really be sick. The milk would make him better. Wasn't milk supposed to be good for you? *Don't you want to get better? Drink your milk!* Jimmy tried to make him drink it. Pulled him scooting to the bowl, pushing his nose down over it, but Skippy wouldn't drink. Shoved his nose in it, but still he refused. Shaking it off when Jimmy let his head up, wouldn't even lick it. *C'mon, drink it! It'll make you better!* Jimmy forced his old nose down again, but still Skippy resisted, trying to back away, paws slipping on the linoleum, knocking the bowl, spilling milk on the kitchen floor. Jimmy lost his temper, forcing his dog's head down again, slapping the balding rump. It was no use. Skippy's tail curled down between the legs as he let a whimper out. Jimmy quit. His dog stood still for a moment, head down, then limped on his three good legs to the screen door and whined once, looking up at the door handle. He kept looking up at the handle till Jimmy let him out.

Jimmy didn't care. He was mad. *Stay out all night, see if I care.* But he'd changed his mind after Billy had shot Mona down like a dog, and he'd called and called.

He walked all around the house calling Skippy's name, then under the shade trees in front, through the bushes on the bank by the road, and up into the high dewy weeds of the orchard. Pants wet to the knees when he stopped. No sign of the mutt. Calling up toward the barn, he stood still to listen, hearing only the breeze whisking leaves from the apple trees, annoyed at the noise. He sat in the sun by the mailbox. Skippy could find him here. It was their spot, after all, where they waited nearly every Saturday morning for Grandma and Grandpa to stop by on their way into Hartsgrove. Sometimes Jimmy got to go along. And just about every time, Grandma would give him the change from her coin purse. That was worth waiting for. He knew his Dad didn't like him taking the money—all the more reason to wait outside and get to her first. Usually it was around twenty cents, but sometimes it was more. Like lately. Three weeks ago it had been seventy-eight cents. And

it had been around fifty the last two. Would it be high again today? She always asked him first if he'd been a good boy, and sometimes she asked him if he loved Jesus. It didn't take a genius to figure out the right answer to those questions.

Jimmy waited. Scuffing his shoes in the dirt, making x's and o's. He made a batter's box. He practiced his wind-up, on the mound, two outs, a runner on third, rearing back, kicking his leg high the way his Dad did it, striking out the hapless batter on three straight pitches. The way his Dad did it. But the crowd noise soon faded, and he was bored again. Bored and worried.

Cancer. Out of nowhere, he remembered the Christmas poem. *On Dasher, on Dancer! On Cancer and Vixen!* But it was only August. Jimmy looked up at the blue sky; Christmas was an eternity away. Why would his Dad be talking about a reindeer anyhow?

Reindeer, rain-dear. Good morning, Glory.

He heard Skippy running down the road! He whirled, elated, but the road, oddly, was empty. He looked, blinking, up and down, then again. Nothing. Calling, he checked the ditches, along the banks, and back down the other way. Nothing. He was *sure* he'd heard him.

The wind gusted again, bringing a dead leaf skittering down the blacktop toward him, and he realized it hadn't been Skippy after all, just a stiff leaf in the wind, sounding for all the world like his dog's three-legged prance on the pavement.

Wouldn't Buster have gotten a laugh out of that one?

It was nearly noon. Skippy had never been gone this long. Except once. The time they'd found him after two days up in the barn with a pellet wound in his side, and figured Chestnuts must have shot him while he was chasing their cow but could never prove it.

He'd have to check the barn.

He sat and waited. He couldn't make himself move. Finally, the sound of the Nash coupe on the far hill saved him. Grandma and Grandpa.

Grandma was small and white, bony cheeks in a hollow smile, spectacles gleaming brightly, wearing her long dark overcoat despite the sunny day. She hugged hard but seldom tried to kiss,

which Jimmy appreciated. Grandpa, in his heavy plaid shirt, nodded but didn't smile, walking straight to the house.

"Have you been a good boy?" Grandma asked.

"Sure have."

"Well, let's just see what we've got here." Fumbling in her handbag, she pulled out a jingling handful of coins. "Do you love Jesus?"

"Sure do."

She laughed, dropping the coins in his hand. "Oh, you are such a good boy."

Jimmy politely didn't look at the money. But it felt good and heavy.

She put her arm around him as they walked up the driveway. "Did I ever tell you the story about the little boy who was lost in the woods?"

Jimmy lied. "No."

"Oh my goodness. Well, he was gone for days and no one could find him, even though they searched and searched, and everyone thought he was dead. And then one afternoon they looked down the road and there he came, all alone. But he was swinging his arm just like this—just like he was holding hands with someone—and when he got closer they could see he was looking up and talking and smiling. When he got home, they asked him who he was walking with, and he told them Jesus. He said Jesus had found him when he was lost in the woods, and had taken him by the hand and led him home."

"Holy moly," Jimmy said.

Grandma chuckled. "You only have to *believe*, Jimmy. You only need *this much* faith—" holding her thumb and finger close together "—only enough faith to fill a mustard seed. And then you'll live with Him forever."

Inside, he managed to slip away long enough to count his money. Ninety-three cents. His head whirled. He was ecstatic. For a moment even Skippy was forgotten.

Grandma passed around more hugs, Grandpa standing dourly. Mom smoked a cigarette, which she usually didn't do in front of Grandma and Grandpa. Dad never did. He chewed gum so they

wouldn't know he smoked. But they did. Grandma told Jimmy one time that she hoped and prayed that he would never smoke or drink like his Dad when he grew up. He guessed she knew about his Dad's drinking too.

Dad was really going at his gum now, the little muscles at the back of his jaw popping in and out like pistons. Mom kept picking tobacco bits off her tongue with her fingers, wiping them on the edge of her apron.

Grandma laughed. "Jimmy, did you know your grandmother was expecting?"

"Expecting what?"

"A baby!" She opened her coat to show her gray dress swelling out just beneath the high belt. "How would you like another little uncle?"

Jimmy said nothing, glancing from face to face. Grandpa was not amused. Mom tried to smile, but his Dad was as dour as Grandpa. Dad said he had to check the oil in the car. He told Jimmy to come with him.

Jimmy followed him outside to the Hudson in the driveway. Behind the car his Dad lit a cigarette, still chewing his gum. "Watch the door," he told Jimmy. "Let me know if anybody comes out."

He reached in to pop the hood. Jimmy watched, proud to be a lookout. Working with his hands, the cigarette hanging from his mouth, Dad tried to blink the blue smoke away from his eyes. Jimmy watched the door. He watched the hands under the hood too, big and hard and strong as they worked. Made his own seem puny.

He thought of those hands another time as they'd worked, his eyes glued to the muscles twisting and the small white ball in his hands, like a baseball, like the baseballs that his Dad could hurl so terrifyingly fast, only this time the ball was furry, white rabbit fur, and this time the rubbing and twisting was followed by the cracking sound that came from the small neck breaking. "Dad?"

"What?"

"What kind of mustard's got seeds? Ours has never got any."

"None I know about."

"Skippy hasn't been around all morning."

"Hope he isn't sick."

"He was sick last night."

"I hope he's okay now," his Dad said.

The hood slammed down. A last, long drag of his cigarette before he threw it down and tromped it out in the driveway, then buried it in the dirt with his toe. "Coming in?"

"Guess I better check the barn for Skippy."

Still, he couldn't head straight to it. He'd check the back woods first. Through the pasture, long overgrown, he walked looking down, his hand jingling the coins in his pocket, wondering if Grandma could really be expecting. He doubted it. The way she'd laughed. Into the trees he called Skippy's name, low at first, then louder over the sound of kicking through dead leaves. He went as far as the spring, circling up the side of the hill. No sign. He quit calling. Taking his time, he finally came in from above the barn.

It wasn't a well-lit, busy barn like Clover's, where he sometimes helped Buster do his chores. It wasn't an active farm they rented, his folks weren't farmers. The barn had been abandoned for years. He and Buster seldom even played there any more. It was dark and musty and rotted in places. Long cracks of white light striped the walls, boards black in between. You had to watch out for splinters. Jimmy crawled in to Skippy's spot, in a corner beneath a loft, not far from the wide door. Old straw and dirt stuck to his palms, which were damp. It was where Skippy usually napped in the rain or the heat, or spent the night outside when he chose to. It was where they'd found him after he'd been shot by Chestnuts.

But he wasn't there.

He searched the upper level where the light was better. Climbing the ladder to the high loft, heart thumping, it occurred to him there was no way Skippy could get up there in the first place. He felt foolish, glad, very glad, that Buster wasn't there to witness his blunder. He searched in the dark corners and crannies blindly, feeling hesitantly with his hands, afraid of what he might touch.

Still no Skippy.

There were rats in the basement. He'd seen them scurry in from the field. But he had to look. His dog might be down there.

It was dark. Walking in slowly, calling quietly. A cobweb caught his face and he recoiled, hands flailing. The walls were too damp and slimy to touch. He heard something. Too dark to see. He ran out. He'd have to get his Dad's flashlight and go back in.

Heading down toward the house through the orchard, the black shape fell across his mind like a shadow. Skippy. Under an apple tree not far from the barn, curled black fur, soaking in the sun. He looked asleep, but he didn't move as Jimmy came closer.

He stopped short, called, but the old dog never stirred. Coming closer, he saw the flies on Skippy's lip. Flies, bloated and green. Flies that changed everything.

2. 1995

Every couple of months he drove to Hartsgrove—where his parents now lived in a small apartment—from the town in upstate New York where he'd landed. This day, a late winter day of brilliant sunshine, he set off in high spirits, alone. Sometimes he brought his wife, Bev, and sometimes they brought their granddaughter, Emma, but he preferred solitude, free to adjust the heat as he pleased, to fart with impunity, to turn the radio up loud and sing along badly, or turn it off completely and flow with his own private daydreams. Today was his first visit in longer than usual, and he was pleased to leave behind all the sticky little issues like leaky faucets, asshole brothers-in-law, incompetent employees at the office he managed. He liked leaving his present to visit his past, memories rolling by with the hills down I-88, then across the southern tier and into Pennsylvania. After all the years, Hartsgrove was still there, his parents still there, most of his friends too, older, but still standing.

Jimmy had become many things by then: a husband, a father, a grandfather, and James. He'd gone to college, fallen in love a few times, and survived another broken heart or two since the first, when Skippy had died—followed so soon to the grave by his grandmother.

His father was in poor health, emphysema, hip replacement, cancer of the tongue. *Cancer*. He doted on his dog, Fluffy, an un-

likely white poodle—old, fat and blind, more decrepit than Skippy had ever become—and he seldom left the apartment. His mother, on the other hand, was church warden in the VFW Ladies' Auxiliary, senior advisor to the Hartsgrove Borough Council, usually out and about, leaving behind her moribund husband and his dog. In some of his daydreams his father was gone and he was helping his mother adjust, pouring over old photos (his father in his prime, in his baseball uniform, posing proudly), rearranging furniture in the little apartment, disposing of his father's things, the silly old wide ties, the pipes he'd quit smoking, the tarnished baseball trophies on the shelf.

He stopped for lunch outside of Corning, where he usually stopped. There was a pay phone in the vestibule of the Wendy's where he usually called home to check in. A grilled chicken sandwich, a plain baked potato, chili to pour onto the potato. Medium Pepsi. Should he eat first then call, or call before he ate?

Bev answered before the second ring, sounding upset. At first she wouldn't say why. Something had happened in the four hours since he'd left. For the longest time she wouldn't say what. James lost his patience, raised his voice. Then she told him. His father had called. His mother had died suddenly.

He didn't know which way to think, so many directions, so many things that needed thought. Mind in a hurricane. He felt impatient, get *on* with it, all the things that needed to be processed, get them moving, get them over with, get where you're going. He felt hollow, empty.

He felt hungry. He went to the counter to order his lunch. The girl there, a kid, smiled brightly. "How's your day going?" she said.

Over the hills in a bright white daze, cruise control, auto-pilot, he saw himself and his mother in the mirror. He didn't summon the memory. His mind, wandering through open doors, happened onto it. They were at a bar, watching the Pirates on the television above the long mirror. At the time it seemed an unlikely reflection, nothing more, and he kept glancing at the mirror between pitch-

es, between innings, to see himself sitting there beside her—she much shorter than him—in mirrored poses, elbows on bar, hands to chins, she staring upward, engrossed in the game. Glasses of beer before them. It might have occurred to him then only in passing—he can't remember if it did—but it was he and his father who were the die-hard baseball fans, Pirates fans. His mother usually left them alone to watch their game, sometimes sitting in the kitchen with Bev chatting while the men went about their silly *rooting.* Rooting, as pigs do. Yet this time there she was, just as engrossed as he, just the two of them, hanging on every pitch.

It was a Ground Round Restaurant, he remembered, near his upstate New York home, when his mom had been visiting, before Emma was born, after his father had quit coming up. After he'd moved to Cambridge Springs, Bev's hometown, to marry Bev and raise her daughter, Rhonda, they'd driven to visit his parents in Hartsgrove once or twice a year. And once or twice a year, his parents reciprocated, driving to upstate New York to visit their son and his newfound family. He and his father drank beer and ate pepperoni as they watched the game in the living room—whatever game it happened to be, the Pirates or another baseball game, the Steelers or another football game—while the women went about their business. Once they went to a minor league game in Albany, when the Pirates Double-A team was visiting. As his parents got older, James's visits to Hartsgrove became more frequent, while theirs to Cambridge Springs grew fewer. Eventually, his father quit coming altogether, letting his wife go alone. His hip hurt too much for the long trip. His mother reported this news perfunctorily, less than convinced. It was around the time his father had been made to quit drinking, though no one bothered to make a connection between the two happenings. It was during one of his mother's solitary visits that she and James had gone to the Ground Round to watch the Pirates.

Her last visit had been five years ago, just after Emma was born. She was excited about seeing the brand new baby girl. He'd waited. It got late, she was overdue, and James and Bev began to worry. Finally his mother called. Her voice sounded odd, like

someone imitating his mother, poorly, trying to make her sound like a frightened old lady. She was lost somewhere near Amsterdam, had been driving around for an hour with no idea where to go. When he found her sitting in her car outside the Portuguese grocery store on a dimly lit street, she was barely visible above the headrest as he parked behind her, seeming even shorter than she'd always been. She was sorry to have troubled him, angry and frustrated with herself, still imitating the voice of a frightened old lady, though one who was greatly relieved. He averted his eyes from hers, which were suspiciously red.

Well past dark, he pulled into the parking lot of the plain, two-story brick building that was the Queen Anne Apartments. A solitary lamppost across the lot. Retrieving his bag from the back, he saw his father outside, illuminated by the light in the entryway halfway down the building. He was standing bent. His head was bowed. James wondered if he was thinking about life and death under the vast night sky, mourning maybe. Then he noticed the fat white bundle near his feet, sniffing, then doing her business at the edge of the alley where the sidewalk ended. Swaying on his bad hip, tugging the fat poodle by her leash, his father headed back up the sidewalk. James stood watching from the shadows, white breath in the cold air, reluctant to interrupt the ritual, one that had taken place every night for years. Just outside the door, his father stooped to wipe the rear of the dog with toilet paper. James gave them time to get inside. Seemingly nothing had changed. What did he expect? Of course the dog still had to go, his father still had to take her, life still had to go on. But his mother was not inside. She was gone. How could he still be wiping a fat dog's ass?

The dim foyer shared by the four ground-floor apartments was buried in crimson shag carpet, hushing the sound of his footsteps. He tapped on the door and walked in. His father looked up from his recliner in front of the soundless, flickering television. On his lap was a towel, on the towel was Fluffy, who looked up, blindly, dirty white head pointing and sniffing toward James. His father waved, a faltering gesture. He made no effort to disturb the dog by getting up. James went and took the raised hand, grasped the

bony shoulder, leaned toward his father. “How’re you holding up, Dad?”

His father’s grip, once the terror of innocent hands, the killer of baby bunnies, was weak. “What am I going to do?” His words were thick, his tongue maimed by the cancer surgery.

“We’ll get through,” James said, “we’ll get by.”

He took his bag into the spare bedroom. Glancing into the kitchen, he saw counters crammed with bowls and plates and platters that were not theirs, fruit and veggies and baked goods that would never be eaten. He pictured his father hosting the confusion of friends and family that would have been there that day, imagining all his grimaces, forced smiles. His mother had always hosted. His father had always avoided and averted. James went back out and sat on the chair next to his father’s. Not where he usually sat. His mother’s chair.

“No games on tonight?” he said.

“I don’t think so,” his dad said. Small, fur-bearing animals on the television—the Nature Channel apparently.

“How did it happen?” said James.

They’d gotten up early, as usual, and she’d made Cream of Wheat for their breakfast. She was excited about James’s visit, planned on getting her hair done, and they talked about whether they should go out to dinner tonight, or cook at home. She had to meet Mrs. Manzell early, some VFW business, so she dressed and left. When she returned she did the dishes. His father had meant to do them, he said, but Fluffy had fallen asleep on his lap, and he’d hated to disturb her. The old dog needed her beauty rest. He sounded almost guilty, as though doing the dishes might have killed her. After that she sat for a while, but quickly lost interest in her knitting. She said she felt tired, she hadn’t slept well, and went back to lie down for a while. Told him to call her in an hour if she was still back there. She was, he did, and she never answered.

“At least it was peaceful,” James said, and his father said nothing, his allotment of words exhausted. They stared for a while at the television, a creature burrowing underground, and he wondered why his father had the volume off. His hand rested on the old dog’s head.

"How old's Fluffy now?"

He lifted his hand for a look. "About ten, I think."

"How old was Skippy when he died?"

"Let's see." His father stared up at the ceiling. "I'm not sure."

"I'd like to see Mom," James said.

"The viewing's not till Sunday."

"I'd like to see her now. You feel like going down?"

His father shook his head, staring at the television. Fluffy on his lap never stirred.

Main Street was lighted by rows of replica gas street lamps. *Historic Hartsgrove*, the Chamber of Commerce had declared. All the ghosts occurred to James as he crossed over the bricks of the sidewalk and onto the wide, wooden porch of the Victorian house that was Himes Funeral Parlor. Another viewing was taking place, somber white faces stretched tight over skulls. James told the man in charge that his mother had died that morning, she was here, he'd like to see her. The man's nametag said *Chip.* Chip was perplexed; this was, apparently, an unusual request. He asked him to wait in the office.

There were paintings on the wall. Civil War battles. Gettysburg, Bull Run, Antietam. Men fighting and bleeding and dying and dead, fancy frames and matting, little gold plaques, artful vistas of carnage and slaughter. Appropriate for a funeral home, James decided. Chip returned and led him down the hall, down stairs, past more bloody battle scenes, to the basement—a large room full of caskets. His mother lay on a gurney, conclusively still, shrouded in a white sheet up to her chin, eyes closed, a faintly troubled look on her face, as if she'd been annoyed by the lights coming on.

Her hair looked different, fuller. He touched her shoulder, like plastic, kissed her forehead and tasted something like oil, shocking and bitter. Chip stood in the doorway. "Doesn't her hair look nice?" James said. "She had it done this morning because I was coming."

Chip nodded noncommittally. "I'll leave you alone."

His mother was gone. There were gurneys and caskets and tables and lamps and chairs and walls and her. He was the only living thing in the room. She was an inanimate object like all the others. His mother was alive, if you could call it that, in his memory, and if she was alive anywhere else, he had no way of knowing. He wondered why he was here. A sense of duty? Something owed his mother? To show he was a better man than his father? The possibility his mother was in another place—heaven?—seemed unlikely, and, above all, irrelevant. There was no way he could know, no way anyone could know, so what difference did it make? All he could do was go on.

Going on, back up the stairs, past bloody battles, it occurred to him that his mother had not had her hair done. As his father had told it, she hadn't had time. James wondered, as he made his way outside, alone, without saying goodbye, if Chip had appreciated the compliment.

He met Buster Clover—who preferred *Russell* nowadays—at the Rod and Gun Club, which they often referred to as the God and Run Club, especially appropriate today. A large crowded room, a long bar, Friday night busy, jukebox blaring country and old time rock and roll, cold beers going down fast. On the long soffit above the bar was the ornate club seal, a crossed rifle and fishing rod.

His friend was taller than him, lanky, his middle-age spread more prominent than James's despite the fact that he had been the more athletic of the two back in school. Buster had starred on the basketball team, James had been the sports editor of the high school paper. Now it was Buster who worked for the newspaper, *The Hartsgrove Herald*. He asked James how he was holding up.

"Holding up what?"

A series of nods from Buster. "You know, you can be a real asshole."

"So can I," James said, in bright astonishment, a nonsensical punchline appropriated from his friend. A moment of silence, a companionable lull. "I just went down to see her," he said.

"How'd she look?"

"Pretty darn dead, to tell you the truth."

"I see," Buster said. "And did that come as a surprise?"

"Yeah, actually." James nodded. Buster thought he remembered heart trouble, and James said, yes, she was on meds, she'd had a stent or two, but she'd been fine lately. Still bowling, even. So, a surprise—he'd always expected his father would be the first to go. Buster asked how his father was doing and James shrugged, and they talked about Bev—James had to go to the airport tomorrow to pick her up and Buster offered to do that for him if it would help. Friends and acquaintances and people he couldn't remember approached them at the end of the bar offering condolences, slurred but sincere, while others came up joshing until Buster informed them, and then the condolences were sheepish and slurred and sincere. The crowd grew larger and louder. A few beers in, James could taste the bitter oil from his mother's forehead on his glass, and he saw her, gray and bright and troubled, beneath the overhead light in the basement. He saw himself sitting there, talking to Buster, talking to strangers, an almost out-of-body thing, and he wondered if this was how his mother was looking down at him now, and for a brief moment such a thing seemed possible, his mother holding hands with Jesus, sitting beside his grandmother, smiling down.

A man came up to them. After a moment James recognized Mr. Manzell, an older, mousy man with plastic-framed glasses, an accountant. "I was so sorry to hear about your loss," he said.

James said, "Thanks."

Such a wonderful lady, so dependable, so full of life, so active, such a shock. James agreed. They'd gotten to know her well, Manzell said, especially his wife, in the VFW Ladies' Auxiliary, and, in fact, only that morning, his wife Mariam had given Elva the proceeds from their bowling tournament to deposit—she was headed out of town, couldn't make it to the bank herself. And—this was the awkward part—the deposit had never been made. Apparently his mother hadn't gotten to it before she . . . Manzell hesitated. "I was wondering if you might be able to look around. Maybe ask your father?"

"How much was it?" James said.

"Three-hundred and twenty-three dollars," Manzell said. "We stopped by this afternoon, but it didn't seem like a good time to bring it up. There were other people there, your father was pretty upset."

"Sure," said James. "Let me check."

When Manzell was gone, Buster said, "That probably accounts for the new television."

"Naw. If I know mom, she blew it all on drugs."

Despite the precaution of two aspirins before bed, Saturday morning did not come gladly. He smelled the coffee, heard his father in the kitchen, not loud, but every little slide and scrape and clink reverberated in his aching head. Normally he would try to go back to sleep, but his conscience made him get up. He should not leave his father to face it alone, his first morning without his wife of fifty years.

His father was in the tiny kitchen, counters still covered with dishes. "Coffee?" he said, picking up where his mother had left off. James didn't drink coffee, never had, yet his mother had offered it to him every morning. He found tea bags. Took a cup from the cupboard and boiled water in a sauce pan—no kettle to be had—while his father took Fluffy out. Through the kitchen window he watched them at the end of the walk, where he'd seen them last night, the old dog doing her thing, his father standing by with the toilet paper. Clouds had moved in under cover of darkness, an overcast morning. When he came back in, they sat at the table. James asked what needed to be done.

"I have to take her clothes down this morning. I'm not sure what to take."

"I can help," said James. "Let's go pick something out."

He followed his father's swaying gait down the hallway to the dim bedroom—the drapes perpetually pulled—where only one side of the bed had been slept in. His father turned on the little lamp on the nightstand by his mother's side, began going through dresses hanging in the closet, a clatter of hangers. James noticed the bag from Wein's, the clothing store down on Main, on the little chair by the door. "What's this?" he said.

"That's a new dress she bought last week. She was going to wear it to dinner when you came out."

"Why don't we use it?" He sensed his father's reluctance. The price tag was still on it. It had never been worn. He'd intended to return it. James took it from the bag and held it up, an early spring fashion, light green, white flowers. He said again, "Why don't we use this?"

His father said nothing, giving a nod of assent—or annoyance. It occurred to James that his parents' income had been limited. He wondered if he should offer to reimburse him for the cost of the dress—maybe offer to buy it for his mother, which might seem less condescending. His father looked away.

"Should I take anything else?"

"You mean, like—underwear?"

"Yeah. I was wondering if I should take that."

They considered for a moment. It wasn't as though she really needed it, but still. "I guess she'd probably want to be buried in underwear."

"I guess," his father said.

He left him alone to retrieve his mother's underwear, and when he came back out James asked if he'd like him to go with. He wasn't dressed yet, he needed breakfast, to shower, brush his teeth, but he asked anyway. His father said he didn't have to. Fluffy would keep him company. The old dog was waiting by the door, leaning like a fat drunk against a lamppost. After he dropped off the clothes, he was going to take her for a ride in the country, see if they could see any deer. "She likes that," he said, "don't you, Fluff?"

"I should go for a run," James said, not pointing out that the dog was blind.

"When's Bev coming?"

"Her flight's at three-twenty. I think. I better double-check."

"We'll be back before that," his father said.

"Oh, that reminds me. Manzell, Mariam Manzell's husband—I don't know his name—he asked me to ask you if you knew anything about any VFW money his wife had given mom. Mom was supposed to deposit it for her, but apparently she never did."

His father pursed his lips. “No. She never said anything about it. I never saw any.”

“Three-hundred and twenty-something dollars.”

His father shook his head. “Maybe it’s still in her pocketbook.”

They looked. They looked in her purse, through all her things there, lipstick, keys, mints, tissue, change purse—no money. They looked in the dresser drawers in case she’d stashed it there before her nap—why, God only knew—and they looked in other places, other drawers, in the living room, the kitchen, in her car. They found nothing.

He resisted the temptation to go back to bed, opting instead for a run. A dodge against mortality? Things mortal were much on his mind. Hartsgrove was a town built on hills, and the Queen Anne Apartments was on top of one of them. Down the hill, not too far, he jogged by the house where he and his mother had first lived in the basement apartment when they’d moved into town not long after Skippy—and his grandmother—had died. He was going into seventh grade and his father was gone, down south, looking for work. James had heard, thought, uttered that phrase a hundred times, but over the years, as things had been revealed and distilled in his mind, it had begun to leave a bad taste in his mouth: *down south, looking for work.*

Suddenly he was Jimmy again, bringing in the mail: a plain white envelope addressed to his mom, no return address. When she opened it later, she took out a newspaper clipping that she read with a flutter of paper and eyelashes. Then she went back to lie down. Had she told him to call her in an hour? A shelf in the hallway held his dad’s trophies, little golden pitchers on little golden baseballs, as dusty then as they were to this day. Jimmy peeked in at his mom on the bed, arm over her eyes. The picture that usually stood on the nightstand—the same nightstand beside her bed to this day—was gone, a picture of his dad with a cocky smile, hands on his hips, *Oxen Hill* across the chest of his uniform. Then he saw it next to her hand, face down on the bed beside her, the triangular prop pointing up in the air like the sail of a little boat.

Later, after she'd gone to work, he found the clipping stashed in the nightstand. It was from a South Carolina newspaper: John C. Plotner—Jacey, his dad—was in jail on a charge of moral turpitude. No letter, just the clipping. Later, Jimmy told Buster. Buster didn't know what moral turpitude meant either.

He jogged on, across the hill, past the site of the towering old stone high school building, long since razed, now a park of sorts, an empty space, an absence. Through the neighborhood, tidy streets, neat homes, little life to be seen on this glum and chilly morning. *Down south*, *looking for work*. Last year, at his parents' golden wedding anniversary celebration at the Holiday Inn, they'd walked in together holding hands, his father swaying on his cane, his mother glowing, and they'd kissed for the audience. It had worked itself out, somehow, behind his back. Life had gone on.

He walked the last quarter mile up the hill, his cool-down. Alone in the apartment, he did his stretches on the living room floor, close quarters, then he rested, staring up at the low white ceiling, feeling the silence of the room where his mother had so recently made her living sounds. Took his running shoes back to his bedroom, then went to his parents' room and rifled through the dresser drawers. His father, after all, was seventy-eight—who was to say he mightn't have missed it? He looked in all the drawers, on the shelf in the closet, then through the drawer in the nightstand, the same drawer where he'd found the clipping some forty-odd years before. Nothing.

The trophies were in the living room, on a bookshelf. The dust around one was disturbed. The base was hollow, and there he found money. He took it out, counted it: three-hundred dollars even. He held it in his hand till his palm was sweaty, and his legs began to grow weary. Finally he put it back, positioning the trophy just so, the same way it had been before. Who was to say it was the missing money? It might have been his father's—or his mother's—rainy-day stash. Who could say for sure? But he was wary of the path of least resistance, the path his father had always taken. He didn't like seeing his father in himself.

When he was still Jimmy, James had been the first in his family to go to college. He'd won scholarships, borrowed money,

worked in the fraternity house kitchen for his room and board. His father was unemployed at the time, and his parents hadn't helped. Once they came to visit him. James was eager to show them where he lived, his room, the fraternity house kitchen where he worked, introduce them to his fraternity brothers. This he'd done with his mother. His father, however, had refused to come inside, waiting the whole time in the car.

He picked up Bev at 3:30, drove her back to Hartsgrove, twenty minutes away from the rural airport, to meet Buster—Russell—at the God and Run Club. Late afternoon on a Saturday, the place was already filling up, beards and bad teeth, flannel and leather. Over beers—white wine from a jug for Bev, much to her displeasure—James told them about his find in the trophy.

Buster said, "Three-hundred even, huh?"

"Yeah," James said. "Not three-hundred and twenty—what was it, three?"

Bev said, "Well, it wouldn't have to be the exact, same amount."

"No," said James, "it wouldn't. But that definitely would have made it more suspicious."

"Maybe," said Buster, a doubt in his eye.

Down the bar sat Manzell. Buster waved him over. Manzell told them no, the money still had not turned up.

"Ask yourself this," Buster said, later. "If that's not the money, then where *is* it?"

His father was in bed by the time they got home. James imagined him there, in the dark, the emptiness beside him. He and Bev looked at the trophy. They exchanged glances. They didn't touch it, didn't say a word.

The viewing was the next day, his mother in her pretty new spring dress, his father standing like a trooper beside her as long as he could on his bad hip, a surprising and surprised survivor. He was in pain, though James was hard-pressed to say if it was more from standing on his hip, or from talking to people. All through

the viewing, all that night as he and Bev and his father talked, watched television, cleared the kitchen, sat in silence, all that time James felt the force field radiating from the trophy in the dust on the shelf. He would have to say something, he knew. He'd known all along, and Bev knew, too.

At the funeral next morning, it was only Bev who cried. James and his father sat side by side, dry-faced, stone-faced. James listened to Father Ron, to the sniffles, shuffles, and coughs of the congregation, staring at his mother's coffin, the crisp white linen of the pall. He thought about the letter. He wondered if his mother had died believing it was among his treasured mementoes.

When James was in high school, his father had written him a letter. His father wasn't gone, not then, he'd returned home from *down south, looking for work.* Even though they were all living together in the basement apartment just down the hill from where the Queen Anne Apartments would someday be built, his father nevertheless had put what he had to say into writing. His mother gave him the letter one day when his father was out. In it, he apologized to Jimmy for not being more of a "buddy" to him. He said he was proud of him. He said more, though James couldn't really remember what. He did remember his mother beaming as she handed him the letter and stood watching him read it. Wasn't it a wonderful thing for your father to do? Such a precious thing to have. James couldn't remember what else the letter had said because he'd ripped it up as soon as his mother was gone, and it was never brought up again. He never mentioned it. His father never mentioned it.

Just before they left for home, James took the money from the trophy when his father wasn't looking. Bev stood watch, his silent accomplice in the spontaneous conspiracy. He shook his father's hand. Bev gave him a hug, they said goodbye. James said goodbye to Fluffy—who was staring up blindly, dumbly, by his father's foot—making no effort to pat the old dog's head, making no effort not to detest him. On the way out of town, he stopped at Clover's and gave the money to his friend, along with another twenty dol-

lars, and asked him to give it to Manzell. He was not pleased with himself. He was, after all, his father's son.

3. 1998

The cancer came back. When his father died, James was at his bedside. The money had never been mentioned. All the flies were gone.

John Talbird

Amanda Huginkiss

The St. Augustine avenue is lined with sycamores. Walking close in the carless cobbled street, Jan and William's bare arms occasionally brush as they pass the oddities in colonial-era shop fronts. The store with the creepy china-faced baby dolls crowded behind glass. Or the one devoted—"365 days a year!" a painted sign proudly proclaims—to Christmas paraphernalia: silvered miniature trees, glittering ornaments, and robot Santas. Mostly, Jan and William are silent, enjoying the occasional breeze sibilating dead leaves in narrow alleyways, cooling the light sheen of sweat on their faces and necks. The only hint it's late fall is the chill they feel when they step into the shade, the light yellow the trees' leaves have turned.

Rounding a corner, they briefly spy the pre-revolutionary Spanish fort looming over the city. They're avoiding it because they know it will be crowded with tourists and about ten degrees hotter, a giant stone bowl catching the Florida sun. Jan takes William's T-shirt sleeve between two fingers and nods toward a store. He pulls the heavy glass confectioner's door open for her and they step inside where it's cool, the chattering voices of a half-dozen girls in shorts and sandals creating a playful nonsense. Jan orders a block of butterscotch fudge and one of peanut-swirl. Breaking off a piece of butterscotch for William, then one for herself, she leans close to the picture window separating customers from the fudge maker, a burly man in white stirring a metal vat of melted chocolate with a huge wooden spoon. The vat is beaded with condensed steam and the man wipes his forehead with the back of a hand. His face breaks into a grin when he notices Jan, close enough to fog the glass with her breath. Chewing on her fudge, she smiles back, gives him a quick wave. She leans against the glass, sticking a huge piece of fudge into her mouth, eyes closing, a slight moan coming from between her lips as she slowly chews. "If I worked here, I'd be a cow."

"You'd be a beautiful cow," William says.

Her eyes open, bottom lip between her teeth. "Kiss me," she whispers on tiptoes to reach him, hand on the back of his head. His lips taste like chocolate and she doesn't care if anyone's watching.

"Hey," she says to the girl in pigtails at the register. "Can I have an application?" The girl pulls a standard form from a drawer beneath the counter, hands it to Jan with a smile. The application and bag of fudge in one hand, she takes William's in the other and pulls him from the store, moving quickly, zigzagging between tourists as she skips down the street. "Here," she says suddenly, stopping at a sunny sidewalk café and plopping down in one of the wooden chairs. William sits in the other and, when the waitress steps outside, Jan says, "I'd like a beer, something dark."

The waitress turns to William. Blinking like he's not sure where he is, he says, "Yeah, me too."

"Okay," the waitress says, smiling and revealing a gap between her two front teeth. "We've got a porter on tap. I don't know what it's like cause I don't like dark beer." Her tongue is pierced, the stud clicking against her teeth.

Jan, rummaging through her purse, nods without looking, and William says, "Two porters." The waitress disappears back inside and he says, "Are you looking for a job?"

"Oh yes, I hate Book Purgatory," Jan says, referencing the bookstore in Gainesville where they both work. William is the manager. "I hate the people who work there. They make me ill."

"I see," he says. "Isn't that a long commute? You don't have a car."

Jan looks up. "Good point. I think I should be able to hitchhike."

"That's a good plan."

She pulls a red ballpoint pen from her purse as the waitress sets their pints on white cocktail napkins decorated with a blue-inked coat of arms and the name of the café.

"Would you like to see a menu?" she asks, thin eyebrows rising prettily.

"No," Jan says, "I'm thinking . . ." Her eyes roam upward toward that enamel blue sky, two fingers tapping the small table. ". . . do you have anything in the chips-and-salsa family?"

The waitress fiddles with her huge hoop earrings, nods once, and goes back inside. Jan bends to the application, writes *Amanda Huginkiss*.

William shifts his chair to see. "You're using a pseudonym?"

Jan runs her fingers through her hair. "Actually, 'Jan Pender' is my pseudonym. You might as well know." She shrugs. Under *Address* she pauses for a second, tapping her pen against the table, then writes, *Wherever I lay my hat*.

"I didn't know you had a hat."

"It's a metaphor." She clears her throat, a noise that sounds like "stupid." She wants to grin, but likes the seriousness of the game. She taps her pen against *Past Work Experience*.

"Having trouble?"

"Yes, frankly. My past experience—waiting tables and working in a stationary store—might be good enough for a dump like Book Purgatory, but I doubt it will cut it at The Fudge Shoppe." She pronounces the last word, "shoppy."

William nods. "Exxon CEO?"

"Excellent suggestion." Jan fills in that part of the application as the waitress brings the chips and salsa. "Oh, yummy." She drops the pen and shoves aside the application, cramming several of the salty blue chips into her mouth, the salsa a sweet green concoction. Drinking more beer, she picks up the pen again. She writes *Stunt Double* next to *Exxon CEO*. "No one goes straight from high school to Exxon CEO, William. *Duh*."

"That's true. But perhaps even stunt double is a bit advanced for a straight-out-of-high school gal?"

"Maybe so." She nods. "What do you suggest?"

"I was thinking shoplifter. Shoplifters are the kinds of go-getters I always look for."

"Thank you, William. That's very considerate." She writes it in the box, then skips down the page to the *Hobbies* section: *Eating Free Chocolate*. "They might as well know."

"I'm sure they would want you to be familiar with the 'product,'" he says. "How about 'Stealing from the till' while you're at it? It would show that you've got previous retail experience."

"Good idea. You are so smart." She squeezes his arm.

The waitress returns with two more porters on a tray. "We didn't order these," William says.

"I know." She nods over her shoulder at the darkened doorway where Irish music drifts out. "James, the bartender, bought them for you. He said you guys looked like you were having such a good time it made him feel good and he wanted you to stay longer." The bartender—a skinny guy with a reddish beard—leans on the bar and gives them a lazy wave.

"Thank you," Jan calls. "That's so sweet."

William lifts his beer in a toast. "Enjoy," the bartender calls.

"Jan," William says, nudging her as he pulls into her driveway. "Someone's here."

"What?" Jan jerks awake, something lurching in her throat. She shakes her head to clear it, feeling grumpy as she often does when she's not ready to wake up.

An old green Mercedes is parked in the driveway, the carport too jammed with boxes and toys and bags of old clothes to comfortably make room for it. A woman sits on the hood of the car, leaning back on one hand, not turning as William cuts the engine. She raises a hand to her mouth, lets it fall, leans back and lets a stream of smoke rise into the air. Jan gets out of the truck. She leaves the door open so William has to lean across the seat to pull it closed. "Mom?" Jan asks, pausing halfway to the car. The woman turns her head slightly to look. She's about Jan's height with the same dark brown, almost black, eyes. Her hair is a little longer than her daughter's. But whereas Jan's is curling and disheveled from being pressed against the side window of the truck, her mother's is straight and black and neatly cut in a pageboy. Her complexion is also much lighter than Jan's, a delicate pale, and she has a beauty mark on her left cheek. There's almost no trace of the twenty years that separate them.

"Daughter," she says to Jan, dropping her cigarette and stepping down to hug her.

"Um, um, um," Jan says, trying to process this first-ever solo visit from her mother. She can't even bring herself to hug back, arms hanging awkwardly at her sides. William looks as awkward as she feels.

Her mother holds Jan at arm's length regarding her. "Your hair is so short. And boyish. Like a lesbian's."

"That's William," Jan says, pointing at him.

"William," Jan's mother says, turning suddenly and extending her hand. "My name is Juliette." There is a formal quality to her speaking and just the slight trace of the French accent she's never completely lost although she moved to the states before she was a teenager. "It's so good to meet you. I *like* your tattoos," she says, looking him up and down. He opens his mouth to speak, but she cuts him off. "I've heard so much about you."

"You have?" William asks, shaking her hand. Jan shrugs, shakes her head *no* at him.

"Why are you here, Mother?" Jan asks.

"Where is my grandchild?"

"He's with his dad. Why are you here, Mom?"

Juliette sighs. "Well, you might as well know. I've left your father."

"What? Why? What? I don't understand."

"What is there to understand? He is at home, I am here."

"Are you going to live here?" Jan asks, feeling afraid for the first time.

"No, silly. I just thought I'd visit my girl. I'm going to get a job."

"Doing what? Since when have you had a job?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I've had plenty of jobs. Let me worry about that." She pulls open the door of the Mercedes, retrieving a bottle in a brown bag. "I've got a nice little cabernet with me. Corkscrew?" she asks, looking at Jan, then William.

"Does Dad know where you are?"

"Yes, don't worry. Your father is well aware of my location. Corkscrew?"

***

They order deep-dish pizza with mushrooms, olives, and sausage from Da Vinci's and, after they finish the bottle of wine, Jan opens a larger and cheaper bottle and they take their glasses outside to sit in the little folding chairs in her backyard. Juliette is reticent about the reasons for the split, so eventually Jan lets it drop and tries to relax. The night is crisp and clear and the three of them race to name constellations.

"That's the Big Dipper," William says.

"That's the little one," Juliette says.

"There's Orion's Belt," Jan adds.

"There's Tacks on the Sidewalk," Juliette says.

"There's Lite Brite Doing Things with Light," says Jan.

"Let's play lawn darts," William says, getting up to pull the fat, primary-colored darts from the grass.

"Yay," Jan says. "Whoever loses has to drink."

"We *are* drinking," says Juliette. "What kind of wager is that?"

"We're poor, Mom. That's all we've got."

"Let's just say," William says, groaning as he folds himself up into the tiny lawn chair, "that whoever loses has to get up and get the darts." He tosses a dart in a neat arc and it comes down almost in the center of the target.

"Hey, good shot, man," Jan says, punching his shoulder. She throws hers too, hitting a spot near the edge. Then Juliette tosses hers, which lands a good foot outside the target. "You suck, Mom," Jan says and laughs.

"Show some respect for your mother," William says, throwing his dart, this time so high it disappears for a second.

Around midnight, William says, "It's time to go."

"Don't be silly," Juliette says before Jan can respond. "Don't do anything differently just because I'm here. You're together, right?"

Jan and William stare at each other, blink in the glare of the outside light, a cricket chirping in the scraggly bushes lining the back wall of the house. "Uh, gee, Mom, this is a little awkward."

Juliette throws her hands in the air as she walks toward the back door. "Well, sorry to put you on the spot, but if my boyfriend had been drinking wine all evening, I think I'd be concerned about

him driving. I assume I'm sleeping in Hank's room?" She doesn't wait for an answer and goes inside.

Jan stares after her, can feel William watching. She scratches her head with both hands, shrugs. "That's just her way."

"Yeah," William says, after a long pause, shrugging too. He slaps a palm against his jeans. "Well, see you."

Jan takes his wrist quickly and pulls him a step closer. "She's right, you know?"

"She is?"

"Yeah, stupid. We've been drinking all night. Don't drive. *Walk* home." She grins. "No, just kidding. you can sleep on the couch if you want." She raises her hands, palms up like she might be balancing something. "Or you can sleep in my bed. With me. Whatever."

"All right." They turn toward the house. After a couple steps, he pokes her head with an index finger.

"Ow, what's that for?"

"Don't call me stupid." They forget the empty bottle on its side in the grass.

It's mid-morning and the three lounge in the kitchen, sipping strong coffee, dishes and frying pan in the sink, smell of bacon in the air. "We're painting the kitchen baby blue," Jan says, stretching her arms above her, yawning.

"Why?" Juliette asks, fingering her pack of cigarettes.

"Mom, could you not smoke in here?" Juliette jerks back from the pack and tilts her head to the side and frowns. "What do you mean *why*? Because I like blue. Hank picked the color." Out of the corner of her eyes, Jan can see William staring at her, probably giving her a *calm down* look. She shifts her chair so as not to see him.

"No, *dear*," Juliette says, running two fingers along her lips as if she were smoking a pretend cigarette. "I meant why are you planning to paint a *rental*?"

"Because we live here, Mom." Jan raises her hands and lets them fall to her lap. "The landlord said he'd reimburse me for the paint."

"Well, you know best, honey," Juliette says, patting Jan's knee and looking out the window.

Jan feels that coil of annoyance inside her unravel. Her brows run together and her mouth opens to say something else. Then the front door opens and there is the sound of quick sneakered feet on the wood floor and Hank is in the room, saying "Grand-mere! Grand-mere!" Instantly losing her cool aristocratic affectations, Juliette jumps up pulling Hank close, running her fingers through his hair and kissing his head and cheek, cooing to him in deep-voiced French. Jan's anger dissipates, going so quickly she's almost disappointed. Ray leans an arm against the doorjamb, surveying the room coolly. He's wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and black jeans and boots. His blond hair is tied in a ponytail and his eyes are a little red, the expression around his mouth tight and yellowish as if he's been chain-smoking for the past eight hours.

"Hey," she says, turning before he answers.

"Hello, Jan," he says to the back of her head. Juliette nods at Ray from her crouching position next to Hank. "You're looking well, Juliette."

"I think I should go," William says, drinking the last of his coffee.

Jan feels a surge of fear, too quickly arriving to know what it's about. Grabbing William's hand as if he might disappear, she says, "Wait, you're not working today, are you?"

"No."

"Why don't you stay?" she asks, the need making her squirm inside even as she looks at the floor. "You know, if you want. We're making ice cream." She smiles, pokes him in the stomach.

"Yay, ice cream!" Hank says.

"Excellent, I love ice cream," Juliette says to Hank.

William does stay and Jan and Ray set to work making the ice cream while Juliette and Hank throw a Frisbee in the backyard. Jan's best friend, Rain, is a member of the garden co-op in her neighborhood and she keeps bringing Jan fruit and vegetables; this week it's a pint of blueberries. Jan and Ray have made ice cream together so often little needs to be said. She smashes blueberries

with sugar while Ray beats eggs with milk, salt, and sugar, then transfers it to a saucepan on the stove. He knows where things are, moves around the kitchen with ease as if he belongs here, and this makes Jan feel both sentimental and anxious. She taps the tines of the fork against the bottom of the metal bowl with the blueberry mush in it. William shifts from foot to foot, raises his eyebrows. "Can I do anything?"

"Sure, man. Put on music."

He disappears to the next room and Jan beats the blueberries some more. She looks up from the bowl and catches Ray watching. "What?" she asks.

He shrugs, lowers the heat under the saucepan. In the next room, there are four snaps of the snare and Lou Reed sings about how it's hard being a man, living in a garbage pail. "Great choice!" she shouts to have something to shout, but William is already back in the kitchen before the last word has come from her mouth. "Blueberry mush?" she asks, forking a little of the stuff toward him. She's a little surprised and maybe disappointed that he says, "Okay," and steps forward and takes the fork into his mouth.

"Mushy," he says, grinning.

He is holding her wrist and she blinks down at his fingernails, then up at his face where some of the blueberry has collected in the stubble there. Taking a napkin from a drawer, she dabs his chin. "You're looking scruffy. Growing something or lazy?"

"Haven't decided."

They both turn at the same time to see Ray regarding them. "We have to let this cool," he says, taking the saucepan from the stove and putting it on a shelf in the refrigerator.

"By the way, my name's William," William says, taking a step toward Ray.

Jan makes an exaggerated show of slapping her forehead even though she hadn't really forgotten to introduce them and isn't sure why she didn't. The two men shake hands and watch her as if she's their audience. "You work at the bookstore," Ray says.

"He's the manager," Jan says. "My boss."

"The boss," Ray says absently. "I'm reading a good book now. Perhaps you've read it?"

"Maybe," William says. There is a squeal of laughter from the backyard and some unintelligible words from Juliette.

"So? What's the book, Ray," Jan says. "Hello," she waves.

"It's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*." He shakes his head and smiles a silly grin.

"That's a great book," William says, "one of my favorites."

"Yeah," says Ray, looking directly at William for the first time, grinning back. "At first I wasn't sure I could get into it—all the Spanish names, it's really dense—now I'm having trouble putting it down to go to work or sleep at night. I've even been reading it while I eat or," he shrugs, "sit on the pot."

"Thanks for the image," Jan says.

His smile shifts slightly. "Can I have a beer?"

Jan looks at her watch, scratches an eyebrow. "It's noon somewhere. Sure, let's all have a beer. Get one for Mom."

After ice cream Ray leaves with Hank. Jan, William and Juliette eat Vietnamese noodle bowls and drink hot tea at Drunken Boxing. Then they head down the street to Leapfrog's because Juliette insists they go dancing. Jan knows she'll never get William to dance and, truthfully, doesn't want to either. It's too early, though, to go to sleep. William works tomorrow and Jan realizes she hasn't been alone with her mother for more than a few minutes since she's been in Gainesville. Each time she anticipates what they'll talk about, she gets this twisting sensation in her gut and tries to think of other things—the next meal they'll have, what she can do to entertain her mom, Jan's desk shift at the store on Monday.

There is a band playing mostly bland rock cover tunes at the bar. They find a table near the back wall. When the singer says, "I can't hear you," to the crowd, William yells, "I don't think I'm going to be able to take much of this."

"Can we have drafts?" Jan yells to a dyed blond waitress with a fake tan in a miniskirt.

"And a shot of tequila," Juliette adds. "Kids?" she says to Jan and William, eyebrows raised. "It's on me."

"No," William shouts, "Designated driver."

"Me too," Jan says.

Juliette makes a point of pouting, then yells to the waitress, "Just me."

The waitress pops her gum and slouches away, sandals slapping the wood floor.

"William, let's dance," Juliette says.

William's mouth opens and closes and he looks at Jan for help. "Mom, William doesn't dance."

Juliette appears to be shocked by this news. "Why not?"

"It's against his religion."

The waitress returns with their drinks and Juliette hands her a credit card.

"Run a tab?" the preternaturally bored young woman asks.

"Yes," Juliette shouts. "A tab would be glorious." She lifts the lime wedge and shot glass and downs the liquor in a gulp, biting the lime and grimacing. "That's ridiculous," she says to William. She looks around the bar as if there might be proof somewhere of how ridiculous not dancing is. "You'll see," she says as she gets up.

"Mom," Jan says, but her mother just brushes a hand at her and walks to the dance floor. Jan wonders why she feels fear fluttering in her stomach all the time.

Juliette speaks to some tanned boy in ball cap and khaki shorts with huge pockets, points with both hands toward the dance floor, lips moving quickly. He smiles and his teeth are a slash of white in the gloomy lighting. They move into the crowd of people dancing with enthusiasm if not inspiration. On stage, the shaggy, unshaven hippies playing a Dead cover stare with beery smiles, the singer saying "Take it" when it's time for the guitar solo. Jan and William sip beer, watch Juliette tip her head and laugh, throat graceful and white as a new teacup handle. After the second song, the kid says something to Juliette, reaches out for a handshake, lips clearly mouthing the word "sorry." As Juliette comes toward Jan and William, she offers a shrug and for a second, Jan can see herself in her mother. There is something fragile and somewhat sad

behind her mother's cool, sophisticated facade. Jan's eyes glisten and she takes William's hand beneath the table.

Jan stands, in tank top, over the stove waiting for the coffeepot to percolate. Pressing her temples with her index fingers, she yawns. "God," she says, "we need to dry out." William murmurs something from the kitchen table, slowly turns the page of the newspaper without glancing up. She stares at him, then back at the coffeepot. "Percol, damn you, percol," she whispers. The pipes groan down the hall as her mother turns up the hot water. "I was thinking I'd take Mom for a walk out on Payne's Prairie."

"Good idea," William says. She glances at him, but he's looking over her shoulder out the window. The sky is as blue and flawless as a child's marble, uncut grass in the yard rippling like a van Gogh painting.

"You should come with us," she says to the coffeepot.

He turns another page and then, after a long pause, he is standing behind her, palms on her shoulders. She can feel his chin on the top of her head, and she pats his hip absently. "I can't, I've got to work."

"Not till three, right?"

"Right." He touches the side of her neck and she leans into him. "I've got stuff to do."

"Like what?" She cranes her neck to see him.

"Stuff. Being alone stuff. You could use some time with your mom, or are you trying to avoid that?"

There is a step in the kitchen and Juliette is there in a robe, toweling her hair. "What's for breakfast?" She smiles and William steps away from Jan.

"I was thinking..." Jan says, pausing because she truthfully hadn't thought of breakfast yet, and suspects she has nothing to eat. The phone rings and she's grateful to take the two steps to the wall to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby girl," says a gravelly voice on the other end.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Dad. Who else calls you that?"

William takes the coffeepot off the eye and pours three small cups.

"No one does, Daddy. I'm glad to hear from you. How are you *doing*?" This last sentence comes out of her mouth as if she were speaking to a mentally slow person; she cringes, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"I'm great, babe, haven't felt better in a long time. I've been going to the gym three or four times a week since summer and I've lost about five pounds. It's really good to have a reason to leave work and, you know, get the old ticker ticking."

"Yeah, I bet so."

"So what do you think of the car?" he asks.

"The car..." She turns to her mother, who is sipping her coffee and watching her closely.

"Yeah, the car. Were you surprised?"

Juliette mouths the words slowly so that it's quite clear that she is saying, *Play along*.

Jan furrows her brows, but her voice is cheery. "Oh, yeah, *totally* surprised. The car is *great.* Really great." Her guts wrench.

Her father laughs and says he's pleased, very glad that he and her mother could help out. "When do you think I can see my grandson again?"

"Well, I haven't worked out Christmas with Ray, but Hank and I had been talking about Fort Lauderdale. Maybe."

"That's great, baby girl. Just keep us in the loop. Why don't you put your mother on? Take care."

Jan holds the phone to her mother, staring at her sideways, refusing to let the hand piece go until Juliette forces it from her grasp.

"Hello, dear," says Juliette. "Yes . . . ah," she turns and glances at the clock on the wall. "Yes, in about an hour-and-a-half. That's right. I love you too. See you soon," she says brightly, hanging up.

Turning, she lifts her coffee cup and sips, although it's black and she takes it with cream and sugar. Her hand shakes slightly.

"So, *Jules*, what's this about?" Jan asks after a moment.

Juliette blows on the coffee, sips. "Cream?" Jan takes the carton of milk from the refrigerator and puts it on the counter. Juliette

pours milk into the cup, reaches the sugar bowl down from an upper cabinet. Stirring the sugar into the coffee, she stares at the ceiling, spoon dinging the cup.

"Well, Juliette, it was great to finally meet you," William says, standing and putting his hand out. "Jan has spoken of you so often, I felt like I already knew you." Jan tries to remember ever having spoken to William of her family.

"Oh, put that down," Juliette says, swatting his hand away. She opens her arms and steps toward him so that William has no choice but to hug her. Juliette presses her cheek into his chest, then looks up at him, not letting go. "Consider coming down with Jan and Hank at Christmastime."

"Uh," he looks at Jan who has stepped to the sink, washing piled dishes, furiously scrubbing bowls and plates, clinking them aggressively into the strainer. "Okay," he says. "Jan . . ." She washes, not turning. "Um, I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, okay," she says, scrubbing at a spot of hardened food; she wants to break the plate rather than clean it. She doesn't turn until she hears the front door close. Her mother stares at the clock on the wall, then the tiny gold watch on her wrist.

"Do you think you might give me a ride to the airport, honey?"

"Mom . . ."

"In your new car?"

"You're giving me the Mercedes?"

"Yes." Juliette takes a step, raising a hand. It floats in the air as if it's weightless, or perhaps she's waiting for a high-five. She puts the palm on Jan's shoulder, lets it fall back to her thigh, business-like. "I bought it last year, but don't really like it. Not that it isn't fine. Better than fine, really. You'll like it. Your father thought you could use it. He's not all bad." She smiles.

"I didn't think he was any bad. Wait." She shakes her head as if to rid it of static. "Forget the damn car. Why did you give me that story about leaving Dad?"

"I *did* leave your father." She smiles mysteriously and Jan waits for more.

Jan wants to scream for some reason. “He doesn’t seem to know that.”

“Well, your father was always a bit slow, you know.” Juliette winks, sips her coffee. But Jan doesn’t smile back, doesn’t move her gaze. Finally Juliette says, “All *right*, I didn’t *really* leave him. Happy?”

“Not really, lady. I’m just trying to understand.” Jan smiles, nudges her shoulder. Juliette looks at the floor, blinking, and for a moment which terrifies Jan, she thinks her mother will cry.

But she doesn’t. Instead she smiles that coldly cultivated grin at her daughter. “I was just trying it out. I wanted to hear how it sounded when I said it. I kind of liked it.” She sighs. “So, will you take me to the airport?”

“Sure, mom, I will.” Jan hugs her mother so tight then that she hears a pop in one of their backs, she’s not sure whose. “I love you very much.”

“Me too, precious girl.”

“Get your stuff together. We’ve just got time to get waffles.”

Later that night, Jan sits, lotus position, on the couch, sipping hot tea and rereading the sections she loves from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* plays on the stereo at low volume. Out on University, there is the low moan of a motorcycle picking up speed, becoming a dull whine and then nothing. Her cat, Smoke, lies stretched in the middle of the carpet, licking a paw and meticulously running it over his head.

There is a knock at the door and a smile appears on her face. Tossing the book on the coffee table, she runs across the carpet and into the foyer, bare feet slapping the floor. She swings the door open and Hank yells, “Mommy,” and she says, “Hey, buddy,” and bends so they can hug.

“You sweet thing,” she says, kissing his head, rubbing her hands through his hair. “Hey,” she says in a different tone to Ray, who stands in the doorway with Hank’s gym bag full of toys and a few changes of clothes. For some reason she thought Ray’s smile was charming when they were together, but now it often seems

smug, nearly a sneer. “Thanks for bringing him home,” she says, reaching for the bag.

Ray pulls it back, so that she steps forward, stumbling. “Here, Hank,” he says, handing the bag to his son. “Can you carry this to your room and unpack it?” There is a pause and Ray nods slowly at him. “Remember what we said about putting things where they belong?”

“Okay, Dad,” he says, taking the bag which is heavy enough that he has to carry it with two hands.

“Can you get that by yourself, Buddy?” Jan asks.

“He can get it.” Ray steps in and closes the door.

Jan watches Hank disappear down the hall and then turns to Ray, eyebrows raised. “And?” she finally says.

“Can I have a beer?” Sighing, her eyes close just a bit and her mouth comes open, but he cuts her off. “I know, I know. You’re tired. It’s been a long weekend. You need some time with your son. Etcetera.”

She closes her mouth, waits, then says, “Yeah.”

“I’ll be just a minute. It’s about our son, the fruit of our loins. It’s very important business.”

“Yeah, I can tell by your tone. I’m sure whatever it is won’t piss me off even a little.”

“Come on, slugger.” He tips a mime beer to his lips. “You could probably use one too. You’re about this close,” he raises his thumb and pointer to demonstrate the distance, “from being a real pain in the ass.”

She groans and turns to the kitchen. Pulling open the refrigerator, she gestures at the yellowish beer in clear bottles. “Help yourself.”

He takes one, points it toward her. “Bottle opener?”

“Twist-off.” She smiles sweetly, goes to the living room, mutters, “Pussy.”

There is the carbonated sound of a bottle opening, then the clatter of a bottle cap against the kitchen floor as Ray misses the can. There is no sound of retrieving the cap. In the living room, he rests his arm across the back of the sofa, crosses his legs so his cowboy boot rests against a thigh. He stares at her with that smug

look, teeth glistening in the dull light. She reaches over and turns the halogen light up, leans back, arms folded, and waits. His grin is wider. “What?” she finally asks, almost a bark.

“So what’s going on between you and the boss?”

“I thought you wanted to talk to me about the fruit of our loins.”

“I’m just making small talk.” He tips the bottle back, belches.

“Well, don’t.” She cracks her knuckles. “Nothing’s going on. We’re friends.”

“You seemed like more than that yesterday.”

“Ray...” She chews at her lower lip. “It’s none of your business.”

“Mom,” Hank calls, coming into the room. He stands there blinking at his father, smiling shyly. “I didn’t know you were still here.”

“I am.” Ray grins at his son. “Sit down.” Hank struggles up onto the couch, Ray tugging his shorts to help him. “Thattaboy.”

Hank climbs onto his mother’s lap, putting his arm over her shoulders. “Are you staying over tonight?” he asks his father hopefully.

Ray smiles at Jan.

Jan smiles back. “No,” she says, “Daddy’s got to go. He needs to get up early so he can make money to send us.” She kisses Hank’s ear, then says quietly, “And last month’s too.”

Unfazed, Ray sips the beer and reaches for his son, lets his fingers brush gently across his shoulders. The move is tentative, awkward, and Jan feels a rush of sadness.

“Hank,” Jan says, voice hoarse, bending forward to clumsily put him on his feet. “Go put on your pajamas and pick out a book. I’ll be in to read to you in a sec.”

“Night, Dad,” he says, grabbing Ray’s sideburns and kissing him wet and loudly on the mouth. He runs down the hallway, bare feet pounding, and then the squeal of an opening drawer.

“Finish your beer and go, please,” she says.

Ray tips back the beer, drinks, but doesn’t finish it. “I want more time with him.”

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean?"

She rubs her dry hands together, raises her knees to her chest. "How much more time?"

"I want him half the time."

"He starts school next year. Won't that be awkward for him to divide up his time between two houses?"

Ray makes a show of yawning. He drinks the last of the beer and puts the bottle on the coffee table. "It might be awkward for us. Kids adapt to anything. If we tell him this is the way things are he'll accept it. Besides, I think he'd like it."

Jan chews her thumb, staring at the carpet. "I have to think about it."

"You do that." He stands, stretches. "But realize it's not just your decision."

She opens her mouth to say something, but there are no words to serve her. Not only does she not know what to say, she can't even name how she feels. Ray puts his palm upon her cheek and leans down to her. He opens his mouth, but he too says nothing. They each wait, one on the other.

Kristel Rietesel-Low

Persephone in the Midwest

Jogging to the creek she stops
in her gelled trainers

where all the dead leaves curl
into intricate broaches,

cubic zirconia reflected
on dead grass aprons

turned upside-down, pinned
to clouds. Beyond the spoked river willows

where the nests of deer decay
from wet arches, each blade

slowly springing back
to remembered form,

the last Creeping Charlie blooms
in frost-rotted invasive circles

like prized cabbage. Above,
geese that thrive in parking lot

drainage ponds on the move for the next deal
on corn and stagnant water, then

cranes, the sound of an abacus—
their calculation spread

across the sky: *Leave,*
now, go. The silence of

precocial killdeer
nurturing false broken wings

south of the first rumbling
ceiling of snow; where to put your own

solid step, egg hatched
from rock, pebble

and sprinting plover? You can't run
forever, wounded wife

or willing hostess, as you stop
to tug burs and stickweed

from your shoelaces and pull up
your fawn-colored hood,

as the stream moves silently
under skim ice like muscle under skin.

Henry Goldkamp

1996 Soda Shopping

1

Shop n' Save, a chilly desert of yellow tile,
their chipped corners revealing tight zig-zags
of black glue beneath. A cactus of lemon crèmes,
a coupon for dill pickles and denim lemonade
far away from the olive aisle, bags of bouncy balls
hung next to asparagus, hating each other, or Jolly
Green Giant's canned crops. I gawked at the 25 cent
plastic bubble machines—my first seedlings of greed,
a miniature ninja figurine, a sticky blue tattoo that never
adhered properly. Mom and me were like businessmen off to lunch.

2

I wandered tipsy with a half-munched sugar cookie
down floury lanes, smelling fresh dust. She would tell me
"take one"—she must've had a tab, because she never paid.
She would even hold up the plastic lid as I scrunched thin
wax paper over the grainiest. Almost got caught. An angelic robot
made announcements over a PA: *Little Debbie's chocolate cake donuts,*
Yoplait Delights, and GoodValu pretzel sticks, and Trident—all half off.
Like my buddy, God—he was invisible too. I wondered
what they looked like, if they knew one another,
if God was telling my secrets.

3

After lady-handling cold inch-thick steaks like a credit card,
testing the airy weight of chip bags, wrapping manicured nails

around a salsa jar, tapping the lid to see if it was popped and
poisoned,
Mom would take me to the soda aisle. Like licorice I would snap
my face from the Sega Gamegear and pump my fist, or jump a
few inches
with my arms up and say “Yes!”

4

There were two sides to this aisle: name-brand, off-brand.
I’d glance over at the Sprite and Mug’s and Sunkist side
like it were my mother changing, getting ready for work.
Each aluminum can a bra, holding fizzy mystery, like Jello.
I’d root through bottom shelves I could reach like a mechanic.
She would find a cardboard flat and stock it with whatever flavors.
I was still learning about the Bible and Paradise then and believed
in both. Mom looked like an angel of cracked ceramic under
fluorescent lights, pondering our lives down Aisle 4, alone.
I cheered her on.

5

A couple cans always leaked on the shelf—
a wet wipe was ready each time, waiting with patience
to rub any pineapple-flavored sap out of my wings
that wondered what I was missing on television.

Antony Oldknow

Inside at Night

I sit in here in my raincoat waiting again
for rain or the knock on the door of the figure
dimly seen walking backwards and forwards
in the grass across the road though it is
the middle of the night. I shall not open in any case
either to go out and hear the steady thumping on
the skin of the umbrella nor to see the pointed teeth
opening to make another cave of jagged
darkness seem familiar. I will stay inside this
stale air trying to persuade myself I have thoughts.

Suggested by Edouard Manet “Le dejeuner sur l’herbe” 1868

Donald Levering

Memory Help

I seem to recall saying unwelcome things in a bank before being hustled into the airplane's cargo bay with hillocks of mail sacks. Lulled to sleep by the vibration in the belly of the plane, I dreamed of a beach full of disoriented whales sounding sick. I awoke woozy at this lake whose name escapes me. I have no recollection of landing or being taken to this labor camp. I gather from the guards I'm working for my rehabilitation. Not sure of my offense, but I think I must have made objectionable remarks in a bank. My task is to fertilize all the fish eggs in the river that feeds the lake. Timing is everything, I'm admonished, so I dash from landing to landing with the rubber bladder of milt, squeezing it into the stream. But I feel queasy, and the timid, bear- like woman who has teamed with me (are we married?) is clumsy and lame. I'm betting her name will come back to me before I need to say it. I help her climb on top, she helps me to remember.

Clayton Adam Clark

Bones, Granite, Dirt, and Brains

Wood siding on my neighbor's home crawls
with silverfish. At night they run the planks

and dive into cracks. I can't see their legs,

just scaled, metallic abdomens that flash
in electric light. They disgust me, their molt,

casting aside whole shells of younger selves,
but I've seen no animal grace with age.

Parked in a leather chair, my grandfather's body

endured long after his mind had moldered.
I remember the cowbell he rang, flat peals

for needs my grandma attended, and how my brother
snatched it once and ran. The old man's mouth

formed a great lacuna where meaning had been,

but his yelled words decayed in me. The body can
be monument. Bones, granite, dirt, and brains

are filled through with spaces, and I can see
the future if I trace my present's bloodline.

My father loses words, a stutter-like stall

of sentence completion. I hear me
do it sometimes. I try to prepare my wife:

will you ever be ready for arrant care?
When do I forget diatomaceous earth,

the fossils of hard-shelled algae,

dusted near molt can kill the silverfish?
A younger form of me wanted a statue built

for his memory, but like all else absurd
and living, that has passed. Repotting

houseplants for spring with soil we'd bought

the autumn prior, my wife found living worms.
They overwintered in a sack of dirt

we'd stored in the basement, oblivious of what
still writhed within. Some rejected their bright,

new windowsilled homes. Trying to be helpful,

I vacuumed them from the carpet, their sun-crisped
bodies breaking down in transit to a bag

where they amalgamated with our hair,
dead skin, and the domestic dusts we shed.

Ann Marie Wranovix

Seismic Risk

When the New Madrid Fault gives way
and Midtown Memphis turns to mud
and quicksand, Mississippi flood
swamping the shear resistance
of the soil, each grain of sand
unlocking from the next, to free
our streets and trees and houses,
newscasters in New York will talk
of liquefaction. I wonder
if I'll think of Herrick then,
as I do now, and his delight
in Julia's clothes, their brave
and liberating tremors,
dazzled as he was by silken
surfaces. If I remain
unshaken then, will I still
question whether, taken by
the gravity of a moment,
he glanced again to wonder
how that sweet ripple slid across
the uncertain ground of her being?

Cathy Porter

The Light

Is it fair to ask you to come along
in all this darkness, as wind and
rain pound at the door? These are
the days that drag, pull down
the shades and hide the bodies.
The nights are cold and messy—
we dance in awkward motion,
but you sneak a feel when my
guard is down. I answer the phone,
catch myself laughing at old sitcoms.
There is no subplot—we rise together
for morning walks that leave me
breathless, waiting for daylight to
break through the clouds. Is it too
early to fall in line—to comfort
the hours that nobody wants?

John Sibley Williams

Field Sermon: Reenactment

Somewhere in the close darkness,
pinned to shadow, in the small hour
just before those delicate fires dawn
ignites in you take hold, a mule deer
steps into range and your father asks
is this not what we've prayed for?
and you answer again with a bullet
that misses its mark. Then morning
comes with its empty hands raised
overhead like surrender. Later, war.
Then another autumn with its trees
undressing into your mouth and that
sticky metal sleeplessness of having
learned, finally, to kill. Then there it
is: another boney halo of antlers, lit
from behind, though detached now
from a body's fire, a body's grace.
Another chance to make him proud.
Yet another breathy chant to no one
in particular. Your father is dead.
And his Father. The morning hung-
over from night. When you ask it,
the world gives you its throat.

John Sibley Williams

Speaking of the Coal Bed My Father's Father Fed to Keep the Old World Lit

How close the sky must have felt.
Sun spread flat at his feet, shoveling
up sparks that burned small stars
into his skin, making a nest in his
lungs. & how he must have craved
what the gods crave: a brief respite
from fueling the machinery fueling
the wars fueling the intimacies born
of seeing the world for what it is.
How I imagine him flush & fully lit,
like meat glistening from old hooks,
like a constellation tearing into that
greater darkness. As his sky slowly
buckled at the knees. As the clamor
& cry of trains swept strangers no
closer or further from home. Even
as he carried that collapsed heaven
home to us every night in balled up
fists, how I imagine helping shave
off those black bits of lung to hear,
finally, what gods once sang about.

Holly Day

A House for Tiny Spirits

When I die, trap my soul in a birdcage
With a little plastic bath, and a plastic bowl for food
Wrap the bars in cellophane so I can't slip through

Because I will never be ready to go.

I will learn all the right songs to convince your guests
That it's a bird in the cage, and not your dead wife
I will finally learn how to whistle in key.

Stephen Murabito

Recognition

> Alzheimer's is the cleverest thief because she not only steals from you, but she steals the very thing you need to remember what's been stolen.
>
> Jarod Kintz, *This Book Has No Title*

The Cotters were up that July morning before 6:00 AM, all packed and nearly ready to leave Brookhaven, West Virginia, when Sammy ran downstairs and announced to her parents that she had her trumpet, her copy of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and her little brother's Hi-C juice box. "Me and Nate will be out in the van. Don't worry. I'll give him this and buckle him in. And I've got my horn to play for everybody maybe. We can't wait to get back to Oswego."

Carol shook her head. "That girl blows my mind. I can't believe she's only eleven." She sipped coffee from a travel mug and asked, "You told her to bring her trumpet?"

"Yeah." Her husband, Danny, acted surprised. "I figured she could play something if the cousins stopped out. I wasn't thinking of my brother. Paul hates music unless there's a stripper involved. I never could understand that about him."

Carol nodded and zipped up her purse.

Sammy had winked at her dad and was gone.

The sunrise made sapphire ribbons of the mountains surrounding Cheat Summit as the Cotters hit the highway.

Carol cued their getaway song, *Hey Jude*.

Sammy called, "Come on, Daddy, sing. You love this part."

"Yeah, Dad," Nate said, "it's our get-going song."

"God damn it."

"What, honey?" Carol opened her hands. "What'd you forget?"

"My coffee. It's sitting right there on the dresser. I can see it."

"Well, no problem. Pull in here at the Go Mart."

The kids chanted the song's refrain, their faces reddening in the rearview mirror. He looked out the window, rubbed his chin, and hit his turn signal.

"Babe," Carol squeezed his thigh, "take it easy. I know it's a hurtin' thing with your mom's Alzheimer's and everything else, but we're going to have some fun. I mean, to see the lake again. Man. It'll be a shot of vitamin life. Besides, don't you know it's good luck to make a cup of coffee and then forget it?" She gathered her blonde hair into a scrunchie and whispered, "It means something's waiting for you when you get back home, sweetie."

He gave a slight smile, pushed the one bitter memory back, back, back, put the van in park, and was out the door.

In the car *Hey Jude* ended, and Carol said, "Look, you guys, at least for now, I'm putting in some of Daddy's classical music. He'll be okay once we get in New York. Like I told you, Grandma Cotter's gotten worse with that stroke, and she probably won't know him, and that's going to break daddy's heart. I mean, Uncle Paul says she doesn't always know who *he* is, and he sees her every day. So let's be extra quiet, okay?" She took out the Beatles' CD and slid in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

At the mention of their uncle's name, Sammy blushed, and Nate softly said to her, "Uncle Paul's fun, but sometimes he's mean to daddy."

Sammy and Nate waited, but Carol didn't turn around. She studied the landscape out her window as the notes left the piano and fell with the shafts of light through the trees. Then she squinted as if recognizing something or someone near the fast stream that ran off the highway.

Danny stood by the Go Mart doors and lit a cigarette. He moved a small but powerful hand through his auburn goatee. The night before, he had peered into the bathroom mirror and tweezed out some white hairs. Carol pressed her breasts into his back and said, "Why do you do this to yourself whenever we go home? First, the three-mile runs after work, and now this. I wish you'd stop it. I told you a hundred times: Nothing happened between me

and Paul. I was only on that internship at the foundry office for a week, anyway, before the college found me a better situation. A bunch of us went for drinks a few times. Then I met you. He introduced us. Remember?"

Their eyes met in the mirror, and she kissed his neck.

She set the tweezers on the sink, hooked his briefs, and led him to bed. She touched his moustache. "Look, you've got to get past whatever it is between you two, all right? It's festered long enough. Okay, we all know he's a jerk. But down deep, he's got a good heart."

When they finished making love, she drew the deep, even breaths of peaceful sleep.

He stared at the ceiling and tried to push the memory back, but it took five minutes for his one fist to uncoil.

Now, Carol beeped to get his attention, and her blue eyes widened.

He nodded, put out his smoke, and they were back on the road.

Sammy read her book.

Nate worked a crayon into his *Cars 2* coloring book.

Soon, they were asleep.

Carol checked the back seat and then ran a finger over Danny's arm. "All of these country roads. You know, leaving them undiscovered is such a lover's shame."

"Yeah, it makes you wonder about the famous explorers: Were they only looking for new places to have sex?"

She laughed. "Sure they were, and when they found them, they made the mistake of telling everybody where they were, and even drawing maps."

He touched her ear. "I promise, the next time we can put the kids in that nice summer camp for a week, and—"

"—and get arrested for indecent exposure somewhere in East Jesus, West Virginia."

He handed her his pack of cigarettes. "Here, go ahead, light one. We'll pretend we're driving back from doing it up in those hills."

She said, “Oh, Baby,” and cracked her window, but she didn’t take out a smoke. She twirled the Marlboro Lights in her hand, and in a few hours Chopin’s *Preludes* took them further into Pennsylvania.

A week ago, after they had finally cleared their schedules enough to make the weekend trip, Danny promised a new way to travel this time. Leaning forward at the dinner table, he said he didn’t want to take the superhighways. He wanted the kids to see, really *see* America’s beauty. He spoke about the wonder of the Finger Lakes, how they were so narrow yet hundreds of feet deep, and that was why the area was perfect for grape-growing and wine-making. He said, “The lakes hold the heat of summer into autumn, and then the cold of winter into spring. This matures the grapes, and it protects the young shoots from early burn-off.” They listened politely but seemed more interested in their peach pie.

Now, though, as Route 14 North ran mile after mile in the cold sunshine alongside Seneca Lake, Charlie Parker filled the car, and Danny smiled as they marveled at the arbor-lined slopes and steel blue water from Watkins Glen to Geneva.

“Jesus,” Carol said, “you weren’t bullshitting. This *is* beautiful.” She touched his knee. “We’ll have to come here alone sometime, okay?”

But he studied his sideview mirror and bolted past the car ahead of them.

“There were thirty-one wineries,” Sammy reported. “We counted them. Thirty-one.”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “Thirty-one, and some of them were big mansions, even huger, I bet, than Gramma Cotter’s hospital.”

“Honey,” Carol said, “Grandma Cotter isn’t in the hospital. She’s in Saint Luke’s Nursing Home.”

Nate asked, “Is a nursing home the place where nurses live? Like their house?”

Danny passed a winery-tour limousine, lowered his window, and lit a cigarette. He stuck it out far into the wind, and

the tip became a bulleted ember as ashes clung to the Odyssey's tinted side windows.

"Danny," Carol slid in a Lady Gaga CD, "slow down some. This isn't like you, honey. And let that cig go."

The kids kicked their feet to *Just Dance*, and Sammy sang the words as if she knew what they meant.

Danny closed the window, and the butt flashed orange when it hit the bridge carrying them across the upper tip of Seneca Lake and further north.

With Lake Ontario for a back yard, the white Cape Cod stood on the rocky western shoreline of Oswego, New York, about a hundred yards from its nearest neighbor, Nunzi's Lakeside Inn. In a summer dress or an old green parka, Marianne Cotter loved to read on her wraparound porch any time of year; in his Crestliner 1850, Bill Cotter, who had died three years ago, loved to fish along the coast. And now that Danny's big brother, Paul, spent so much time back home, all he had to do was follow in his father's footsteps for beers after work at the foundry. A scrap of cardboard hammered to a front column said as much: "At Nunzi's. Dinner on me. Paul."

Carol laughed. "Frigging Paulie Bunyan or what with a message pounded to the porch? Let's go. I could use a beer. We can unpack later."

She started off with the kids.

Setting the last suitcase by the front door, he watched her wrinkled shirttail fall over the swishing hips. He took down the note and squinted at the buckshot of nail holes behind it.

Dark blue clouds became purple as Danny made it to the gravel parking lot of the tavern. Carol promised the kids that they could eat Nunzi's famous fish sandwiches and watch the sunset on the enclosed part of the back deck, like the last time—two years ago, right before Grandma Cotter started to repeat entire shopping excursions or forget her way to Saint Joseph's on Sundays, only to become lost on the streets of Fulton, Mexico, or Phoenix.

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At the end of the bar, they found the big man still in his steel-toed boots and green work Dickies. He shouted to Margie for a pitcher of beer.

"Hey, hey!" Danny opened his arms.

But Paul gave Carol a hug, and they lingered a few seconds.

She stepped back and dabbed her eyes.

A regular bit a wooden matchstick, gave her the once-over, and nodded his approval.

Then Paul had Danny's hand in both of his, and the two stood at an awkward distance like world leaders meeting for the first time.

When Paul bent to hug the kids, Nate blinked up in awe tinged with fear, and Sammy offered her cheek but winced at the scruffy beard.

Carol poured mugs of Genesee, and the three adults toasted.

The kids took Cokes and headed straight for the wall of mounted fish.

Carol set down her glass, collected herself, and said, "Oh, get over here, Paul. I can do better than that." She gave him a bigger hug and kiss. "There," she insisted, "*now* I feel like we're home!"

Margie and the dozen or so regulars clapped and hooted.

Danny turned to the lake, lit a smoke, and pushed the memory back as hard as he could.

After they ate, Paul's buddies waved him to the bar to settle a fishing bet. Danny saw Carol admire how the bettors introduced themselves and then reverently delivered the question: "Do brown trout swim out to the deepest parts of the lake and suspend?"

Carol spun all the way around in her chair at the hush that fell over the place.

Paul puffed his cigar. "It's really fuckin' rare, but it happens. Yes, it *does* happen."

Danny finished his beer but walked to the far end of the bar to order a new one from the other waitress.

One of the men pumped his fist in the air; the other hung his head.

Sammy shuddered as the bar detonated.

"Does the man know, or what?" Margie high-fived a regular, and the music blared.

The loser paid in wrinkled bills and bought a shot for the winner.

Then the two men both bought beers for Paul.

That was the deal going in.

When Paul came back to their table, he dealt hands of blackjack and then gingerly handed Nate and Sammy the jewelry of red-and-gold Gurkha cigar bands. They adored the ornate portrait of the Nepalese soldier testing the sharpness of his fighting knife.

After Nate tore his ring, Margie handed Carol a roll of Scotch tape. Paul pointed to his heart, and Carol crisscrossed pieces over the embroidered name on his work shirt.

"X marks the spot, ladies," he said to Carol and Margie.

Margie patted the tape. "Poor boy's got a boo-boo."

Everyone but Danny burst out laughing.

Carol fixed the ring and gave it to Nate. "There." She held it at arm's length and smiled. "It won't tear on you anymore." She didn't hear Sammy ask to play her trumpet for her uncle.

But Margie did hear. She sent Danny for the instrument and then quieted the crowd after he got back. Ceiling fans swirled in smoky silence as the girl played the first half of *Hey Jude*.

Horn now at her side, Sammy beamed and took a bow.

They stood and clapped, and a few regulars tapped shot glasses on the bar.

Carol slapped Paul's arm. "Can you believe that?" She poked Nate and Danny. "My God, you guys. Can you believe that? Can you freaking believe she knew that?"

Danny watched Paul puff and rave and then refill Carol's glass.

Outside on the open deck, Danny took a deep breath and sipped a beer. The waves breathed in, and small whitecaps broke on the rocks. The last of the sunset was a braid of colbalt blue and maroon.

The memory hit, but he pushed it back and back.

Carol came out and toasted drinks. “I still can’t get over that. She did great. Did you *hear* her? I’ll never forget that as long as I live. And Paul. So far, so good with big brother, too, huh?”

He said, “Sure. I guess so.”

“I mean, dinner and drinks, and then those fancy cigar rings. Isn’t he sweet to save those for the kids? I guess they’re from a special anniversary cigar.” She giggled at her own whistled s-sounds.

“My dad and I fished right out there dozens of times.”

“What did you catch?”

“It’s funny. Paul was born knowing more about fishing than Dad even. But me—I never could remember their names. If you laid them out, I wouldn’t be able to tell a trout from a bass from a perch any more. I don’t know why that pissed off Paul so much, but somehow it did. All I remember is going out there, and especially this one time when the three of us caught so many that Dad traded buckets of them to Nunzi for cases of beer. Dad phoned home like five times before he finally got Mom to come over, and the bar went nuts when she got here. Nunzi was so happy to see her that he fried us a bunch of the fish. I was thirteen, and Paul was seventeen, but still, they let us drink beer that night. I guess that’s why I’ve always loved these tall-necks.”

“That’s cool,” she rubbed his back.

Paul and the kids filled the archway. “That ain’t *exactly* it, Dan. The time we caught all them catfish, we were on the river—up river, almost to the canal gate.” He comically moved his hand like a fish, and Sammy and Nate grinned. “And that’s when old Nunzi fried a bunch and traded us those cases of Genny Cream. Nunzi and Dad *both* called Mom. They kept, like, pranking her until she gave in and walked over. I can see it clear as day. When she got here, she said, ‘All right, you two jackasses, go ahead, pour me a beer, but make it a *short beer*.’”

Sammy and Nate giggled at how he raised his voice and squeaked out *short beer*.

Danny squinted toward Oswego, but then his face opened. "Yeah, they *were* river catfish."

The bar rocked into the Friday night ritual of Bobby Darin's *Mack the Knife*, and Margie pulled Paul onto the dance floor.

The kids were out there too, jumping, holding hands, and kicking in a circle.

At the doorjamb, Carol clapped and laughed. "That's right," she yelled back to Danny. "It slipped my mind: It's fucking Friday. I love this song."

After it ended, Margie made the rounds with shots of Jack Daniels.

Carol sipped one, her face working through degrees of sourness to a broad grin.

When no one was looking, Danny poured his over the railing.

The crowd thinned.

Paul and Margie sat at the end of the bar.

At their booth, the kids drowsed.

"It's late," Carol said. "We'd better get these guys to bed."

When Danny put out his cigarette, Paul caught her eye and held out a shot of bourbon.

Carol waved him off, pointed to the kids, and put sleepy hands by her ear.

Paul looked disappointed at first but smiled and re-lit his cigar.

Margie leaned forward, let Paul light her smoke, and then ran a finger across his forearm. She sipped her drink and gently set down the glass.

Carol left hand-in-hand with Sammy.

As Danny lifted Nate, his cigar band fell to the floor.

Danny left it there.

Danny's old bedsprings stopped cheeping.

Carol kissed him and said, "That's all right. It happens sometimes. It's been a long, long day, and besides, you don't drink bourbon."

He drew a breath, started to speak, but she pulled up the covers and rolled over.

Danny went to the window and looked across the beach at the bar. The wind hummed in the old window frames and the waves sprayed over the rocks. Nunzi's front lights went out, and the shadows of Paul and Margie moved onto the back deck, melded together, and sank to the floor.

Danny crossed the room and sat at the small desk. His high school history, biology, and geometry textbooks stared back from between the Yankee bookends.

The sunrise made the lake a topaz blue but the kids were exhausted, and Danny and Carol were hung over. After they did get out of bed, Sammy and Nate complained that Uncle Paul forgot to buy their Cap'n Crunch and there wasn't any milk in the refrigerator, anyway. Danny opened the old Norge, shook his head, and then lifted the door so it would close.

"You should see it down there." He came back upstairs to Carol. "The guy must have two cases of beer, and packs of bait—always bait—but nothing, I mean *nothing* else, not even butter, milk, or eggs. There's no coffee, no bread. What the hell? He asked me what we wanted, and I emailed him three times. I even offered to *bring* food if he couldn't swing it. He never saw me then, and he still looks straight through me now. I don't care what you say about his heart."

Carol held some bath towels and calmly made an offer: She'd get the kids ready if he'd run out for coffee, juice, and donuts. "Please," she pecked his cheek, "it's almost seven-thirty. Paulie said we should get there around nine. Mom's better in the morning after her breakfast."

He sat on the edge of the bed, rammed his feet into his sneakers, and looked as if he wanted to say more.

"I know. I know," she started. "But maybe we could give him a pass this once. Look, he's a big lovable fuck-up, but he's probably every bit as nervous as we are." She crossed the hall and closed the bathroom door.

His face tightened.

He heard the faucets crank open and the water slam into the tub.

He called to her. “Nervous? The bastard’s never been nervous a day in his life.”

She frothed the bubble-bath and didn’t hear him.

Out the bedroom window and across the stones, the lake wind rippled the awnings at Nunzi’s, and Danny felt the room shift, felt the light shift, felt the nerve-cell certainty of everything shift, felt the familiar thing descend unstoppable inside his chest, and the memory of that October Saturday night was a beehive exploding in his stomach and racing heart, and his hands trembled, and his breath was leaving, and he was sweating, sweating, and back at Nunzi’s for the thousandth time. He and Carol had only dated for a few months, but they fell in love hard and fast. Danny was meeting his best friends to tell them that he would propose to her in two months at Christmas. The place rocked, and Mountain’s *Mississippi Queen* blared from the jukebox, and people drank and smoked and danced and shouted to be understood, and Paul was telling a story at the bar with his back to the door. Danny only caught pieces, but he heard Carol’s name, and her name again rising on a gesture of opened hands to a rip of applause, and he believed from that day on that Paul bragged to his foundry buddies about being with her. When Paul’s two pals saw Danny, one’s flushed face turned to the wall and the other studied his swirling ice, but Paul blew out cigar smoke, sang his brother’s full name, touched his shoulder, and poured him a foamy draft.

Danny steadied himself at the bottom of the stairs, his pulse slowing.

Carol came out and rubbed the top of the bannister.

He managed, “So don’t let him bullshit you.”

She said, “I think he *is* nervous. Look, Margie told me he hasn’t been to see Mom in two weeks. He can’t bring himself to go, and it’s killing him. He works and then comes straight to Nunzi’s. She’s worried about him.”

Danny drew a breath to answer her, but instead headed out the front door.

His boots unstrung and his work shirt dangling, Paul sauntered toward the house. He held a cup of coffee in one hand and a smoldering cigar butt in the other. “Morning, brother. Where you off to?”

Danny saw a partially nude Margie inside the back deck. She threw on a shirt, ran her fingers through her hair, and lit a cigarette. “We gotta be there for nine, right?” Danny patted his pockets until he heard his keys, hopped in the minivan, and cranked the engine.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Dan,” Paul said. “So what’s the fuckin’ hurry?”

Danny sped down 104, trotted into the Ontario Diner, gave his order to the hostess, and waited by the register.

When she came back, she said, “Are you okay? You’re pale as a ghost. You look like you been through a wringer.”

When the food came, he dug out the cash but dropped his wallet.

A busy waitress passed by and booted it like a hockey puck across the turquoise tiles.

Back at the shoreline, Danny rushed up the steps and tipped one of the coffees.

At the kitchen table, the kids ate bowls of Cap’n Crunch and sipped orange juice from big green Genny Cream Ale mugs. They hooted at the end of their uncle’s fishing story and followed a big smoke-ring as it whirlpooled to the ceiling.

Nate announced, “Daddy, Uncle Paul says he’ll take us out for steelheaded trout. They’re like their brothers, the rainbow fish, except they’re stronger and go out to the deep water for years and years but then come back to get married. So we’re gonna catch a trophy steelheader. Uncle Paul promised. We’ll use homemade spinners and spoons.”

Carol and Sammy burst out laughing.

Paul buckled over.

Danny dabbed a napkin at the coffee stains on his shirt.

Carol rubbed Nate's head and high-fived Paul on her way to the sink. "Don't worry about that now." She handed Danny a wet cloth and led him to the hallway. "Paul had everything down cellar. Says he stocked it a bit at a time. That's all it was. He's got a refrigerator *full* of food down there, and the freezer in the back is brimming—steaks, salmon, all kinds of things. Sammy played her trumpet while we brought stuff to the kitchen. Like some kind of a march she learned at school. We had a riot." She gave him a soft kiss. "Go on, honey. Take a shower real quick, and then we'll head over. We'll all go together and save gas."

They arrived at Saint Luke's.

The van's doors opened and then rolled shut.

Heads down, they moved across the parking lot.

The lobby smelled like spent flowers, stale food, and mildewed furniture.

They stepped onto the elevator.

Paul's finger found the button.

Grandma Cotter slept in a wheelchair, a *King of Queens* rerun on her TV.

They crowded into the warm room.

A nurse offered folding chairs and helped Carol seat the kids.

Paul joked, "Hi, Mom. Long time, no see."

Carol said, "Hey, Mom, we finally made it." Then she urged the kids to say hello.

After a few seconds, they greeted Grandma Cotter, almost in unison.

As his eyes searched his mother, Danny was a man on a dock peering through the fog.

The family stood around her.

Ten more minutes ticked by.

Carol told the kids to look at the way the morning sun ignited the arrangement they had sent. Quietly, she named them: "Purple pansies, pink hawthorn, yellow snapdragons, white baby's breath."

Paul looked up at the suddenly sultry list, and Danny saw her shoot him a smile.

"And our special four red roses," Carol pointed, but Sammy and Nate moved toward the plastic dancing solar flowers flapping on the windowsill.

Danny excused himself.

He came back in the room and leaned against the wall.

They stood breathing.

Their faces emptied.

Paul folded the *Syracuse Post-Standard*. He reached over and tried to wake his mother, the big hand touching her left arm.

She made a noise, pain crossed with confusion and sleep.

Paul sat back down on the edge of the bed.

Danny bowed into the whisper that he, Carol, and the kids were there. He patted his mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry we're so late, Mom."

Sammy rubbed her grandmother's hand, but it recoiled into her lap and the girl's face reddened.

Paul turned away.

Grandma Cotter opened her eyes, looked at Danny, made a bitter and uncomprehending face, and shook her head *no*. She squinted at Nate, and he took the first breath of speech, but her face closed in wrinkled defiance.

Paul unrolled his newspaper, and, a minute later, he rolled it up again.

Carol picked a few fallen petals from the dresser. When she rotated the yellow vase, its etched blue dragonfly flew from sight.

Nate struggled with the remote control until the TV flipped to *Witness for the Prosecution.* Charles Laughton was holding forth with dignified authority. Nate nudged his mother. "Look, Mommy, that guy smokes big cigars, just like Uncle Paul."

Carol grinned at Paul.

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Danny walked past the nurses' station and found a corridor, and then another. At the end of that hallway, a copy of Edouard Manet's "Boating" hung on the wall. In it, a young couple sailed on the water—the man all in white and wearing a blue-banded straw hat, the woman in a long purple dress and wearing a black-and-white bonnet. Her beautiful mouth was partially opened, as if she were starting or ending a story. She looked like Carol, and it was safe for Danny to stare at her. He promised himself that if he kept looking and looking, even until she blurred, he could push, push that night back further and further out of his mind.

Paul found Danny by the painting.

Danny said, "She didn't even know me. She stared right through me. I wasn't fucking there. Jesus."

"I don't know." Paul looked out the big window at the locks of the Oswego River. "Maybe after her lunch. Maybe if we get the kids something to eat someplace, any place, and then come back."

"I guess."

"Look. She might not completely know who you are now. But when she *did* know you, she knew you completely. Do you see what I mean? They knew us *completely*. Okay, so she doesn't know you in this doorway—she knew you in a hundred others. She knew you better than you knew yourself. Get it?"

"Yeah." Danny returned to the woman's face. "Sure, I get it."

Back at the room, Danny told Carol the plan to take the kids somewhere for lunch.

"Yeah, sure," she said, "I know."

"What do you mean you know?" he asked.

But the kids hugged his hips and legs and backed him through the archway.

Sammy looked at him. "Daddy, she woke up and looked at us. And then she fell back asleep. She looked like she forgot the answer to a question."

Nate said, "She looked like she forgot the question."

Danny saw his brother move closer to Carol and hand her a piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

Carol tapped their list with one of Paul's blue foundry pens. "Okay, so that's everybody's order except Danny's."

Her eyes found his. "Hey, hun, we decided to go to the Sub Shop."

"It's on me," Paul offered.

Carol readied her pen and waited. She asked, "What kind of sub do *you* want, Danny?"

They made their way back to the van with Carol and the bouncing kids steps ahead.

Paul's hand found Danny's shoulder, and the brothers stopped. Behind them, across Route 481, the hydroelectric plant opened its roaring spillway. The deep green river water foamed white, and Paul's low, husky voice was almost drowned out. "So why did you cut out so many times, man? We needed you in there."

"What the hell, Paul?" Danny brushed away the hand, its pressure. "I was only talking to the nurses and then to Mom's doctor. Nobody knows a goddamned thing."

Carol packed Sammy and Nate into their car seats.

Paul stared him down. "It didn't need to be about *her* in that room—whether she opened her eyes, whether she talked to us—all of that. Your problem is that you came here for *her*. You need to come for *you*. There's a big difference. Dig it?"

"No, Paul. I don't *dig* it. What the hell do you mean? She was my mother."

Paul made eye contact again. *"Was* is right, man. Look, she's gone. She's not there. They don't get any better. Every day's another slip down and down. You don't come here and get all bent outta shape if she doesn't recognize you. This whole pissing thing isn't about recognition. You have to let her go. And then, after you do, it's about you remembering all of the things that she did—"

"Right," he said, his mind whirling. This was the same old pattern, Paul telling him how it all was, how to see life itself. "The things she did. Sure, sure. I remember the things she did, and I know one thing she'd *never* do, and that's make lunch plans for my family behind my back."

"Christ, you're such an asshole sometimes. If you wanna pick up the tab, if that's it, then be my guest. And you can pay for my three beers too, man. Mooseheads. Ice cold. God damn."

As they crossed the Utica Street Bridge, Paul said, "Hey, Carol, Margie's comin' over later. We planned to get that grill going. Is that okay with you?"

"Shit, yeah," she looked back and smiled. "Sounds great. Why wouldn't that be okay with me?"

Paul raised his voice. "Dan, that meal plan okay with you?"

Danny put a cigarette in his mouth, but he didn't light it.

Sammy and Nate laughed at the words *meal plan*.

When they stepped inside the Sub Shop, Paul's friends back on the sandwich line yelled out his name. Carol walked him to the counter and placed their order.

Nate stared wide-eyed at the framed hockey jerseys of Eric Cole and Jimmy Howard.

Sammy tugged her mom's hand and said, "Mommy, don't forget the cheese curds. We love cheese curds."

Danny set drinks on their table. In the center, the three green bottles glistened.

Paul took his first Moosehead outside and pushed a stogie out of its cellophane sleeve.

Through the bay window, Danny watched the ritual of Paul's perfect light: The blue butane flame making contact, the precise turning of the cigar, the round and even glow, and then the plumes of smoke ascending.

When their food came, Carol shook pepper on Paul's sandwich.

"Damn," he said, "extra pepper. You remembered."

The kids laughed.

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Paul and Margie agreed to watch Sammy and Nate for the afternoon.

Danny and Carol went back to the nursing home and sat in silence.

Grandma Cotter opened her eyes twice in three hours.

Soon after Danny and Carol left, Margie and the kids piled onto Paul's boat, and he drove it a couple hundred feet off shore. He and Margie helped the kids put on life jackets and bait their hooks, and it wasn't long before they jumped for joy at the perch, catfish, and bass they reeled in. Toward the end of their trip, the sky darkened, and a wave kicked up strong enough to douse Margie's cigarette and send Nate halfway overboard. His pant legs were soaked, but after he was hauled back on deck, he said, "That was the most fun ever, even better than the bumper cars at Camden Park last summer." They gave him a round of applause, and Paul and Margie cracked open new beers.

Danny pulled beside the house, and Carol pointed to the dock. "Oh, look, here they come now. Paul must've taken them fishing. Bet they had a blast."

Danny squinted, saw Nate's drenched lower half, and stepped out of the van. His right hand trembled, but he wasn't going to back down this time. He and Carol made their way over the rocks to meet them. "Paul, what in the hell happened to Nate? He's fucking soaked."

The boy beamed. "We didn't catch a steelheader, but we got lots of other fish to cook tonight. Look." He pointed to Sammy's string of fish. "That one's a smallmouth bass. He even jumped out of the water when I was catching him. I got him with a fake worm."

Margie, Paul, and Sammy laughed.

Danny bent over. "Okay. But why are you so wet?"

"I fell over the side some, but Uncle Paulie caught me. It was great."

"Hey," Paul hoisted his beer. "What don't kill ya makes ya stronger."

Sammy lifted her string. "Look at them. Aren't they beautiful? I caught this one."

"No you didn't," Nate said. "I did. You caught *that* one."

Danny pointed at his brother. "I never gave you permission to take them fishing. That fucking water's choppy as shit today."

"But you knew I was going to take them. Nate told you, remember?"

Carol said, "That's right, Danny. We decided this morning. You were hung over, is all."

Danny's face burned with remembering, and he hated how she said, *we decided*.

Paul cut a fresh cigar but couldn't stoke it with a regular Bic lighter in the kicking breeze. He looked disgusted. "Yeah, well, maybe if you could hold your booze, we wouldn't have half of this bullshit."

Margie touched his arm. "Paul, go easy."

The kids blushed, and Carol started them toward the house.

Paul faced the lake, cupped his hands, and got the cigar partially started. "Go easy, nothin'. He's been an asshole to me ever since he got here." Then under his breath he bit out, "And I never slept with her. Never."

Margie leaned to his ear. "Look, baby, you two gotta work this shit out. Apologize if you have to."

The Gurkha lit unevenly and burned wildly down one side. "Fuck," he shouted into the wind and then spun back around. "You're a fucking asshole."

From the porch, Carol, Sammy, and Nate saw Danny draw back a clenched fist.

They saw Margie move aside and put both hands to her face.

They heard the men scream at each other. Danny pushed Paul. But then Paul's hand rose above his brother's cocked fist and slowly lowered it.

They saw the big man's shoulders shake.

They saw his head fall.

They heard his voice say, "I miss her. I fucking miss her."

It was only for a second, but the brothers embraced.

Margie tugged at Paul's arm, then at Danny's tee-shirt, and she motioned them toward the bar. "Come on," she said. "Come

on. I'll open up early, and we can fry them fish. We've got those steak fries the kids like, too."

In ten minutes, the kids would watch their uncle clean the fish and Margie bread the filets and line them on a sheet pan. In the silence, Carol would set the table on the deck, get Cokes for the kids, and bottles of beer for the adults. And in the back room, Paul would wash bowls, the cutting boards, and knives, and Dan would toss him a towel to dry his hands.

But now, Margie tugged at them one more time, and the brothers moved on either side of her.

She waved for Carol and the kids to follow.

And they caught up across the lakeshore stones.

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett

The Red Canoe

Maybe it was the mention of the red canvas canoe that triggered his decision to return to the Adirondacks for a few weeks—the red canoe Jude remembered taking out as a kid, then as a bigger kid, skimming the shorelines, looking for a trace. Looking for Slater's lost boy. Still looking years after the boy's disappearance.

Summer at the family place at the lake was always the same summer in his mind, the summer of red flashes in the landscape—the red canoe, the Swiss Army knife his father gave him, the red and white Super Cub on floats that had flown the waterways near Heron Pond in search of signs of Slater's boy, the red pennant that flew above the diving raft, the red bandana knotted on the Slater boy's backpack the morning he left to go hiking. The red knife was lent and would never be returned, the floatplane had flipped landing in a crosswind just after Slater's boy went missing. The canoe was the only lost-then-found survivor of that summer. After being stolen, it had been found a few miles down the road when the thief pulled over to re-secure it when it started to slide sideways off the top of his van—a neighbor on the lake stopping to assist recognized it.

A few summers later—when Jude was eleven, maybe twelve—he found two vertebrae in the leaf litter, almost as invisible as a weathered pine knot or a half-buried stone in the trail, mottled the color of the forest floor. He hadn't breathed a full breath for hours after, not until he found his grandmother on the porch of their camp and silently placed them on the railing. "Deer," she had said, "Just deer bones." The ritual of looking continued and tied summer to summer until he stopped heading to the Adirondacks at all. Slater's boy—the caretaker's son—had never been found.

Slater's kid had gone off with friends for a weekend, hiking a pair of small mountains with unmaintained trails. These were experienced kids and Slater, the story went, gave his consent even though his boy was younger than the rest. Maybe this is what stuck

for Jude, who had been the youngest of the cousins. The fault never seemed to be that Slater had let the boy go in the first place, but that he hadn't noticed his son missing soon enough. The boys had hiked up in two groups and each assumed Slater's boy to be with the other. Slater himself had stayed across the bay that night at another camp, where he was helping with repairs. By the time anyone knew for sure that a twelve-year-old boy was missing, it had begun to rain and kept raining: any traces were washed away. After that, Slater moved to town and only came out to Heron Point for the summers, and then only for the days. After his parents' divorce, Jude came back for a few years and then stopped.

And then the call from Charley, his half-sister, urging him to come to camp, calling him *big brother*—a new development over the couple of years since their mother died.

"Oh, come on, big brother," Charley had said. "Everyone will be here. Bring the boys. They've never even been to Heron Point." Jude said no because of his business—custom framing, frame restoration, a fall gallery show to frame for—but she was relentless. "They'll love it here, like all the kids do. Just like we did all those summers growing up."

"Most of the summers that you were a kid I was doing some summer job here in Connecticut or I was in Québec on fishing trips—with Dad. My dad." His father had died before his own two boys were born. "And Jill has the kids until August," he said. "They're all going to spend time with her folks in Seattle." The divorce was in its second year but he felt like he was still getting used to whatever the new patterns were.

"Funny," Charley said. "I remember you as always being here when I was a kid. But bring them next year, then—tell them they can have the Sunfish to sail and take the kayaks out for a paddle. And you come this year anyway. We still have the venerable old red canvas canoe you used to take out."

"Who will be there?"

"Mostly just family—the kids, Grammie. Maybe some others. Jimmie has to stay back in White Plains." Jimmie was her husband.

"Mitchell?"

"My dad? Of course, he'll be here. I'm sure he wants to see you. Just come."

Jude wondered what his father would have thought of this return to the lake. He imagined his advice would be to fish as much as possible and leave as soon as there was an opening. Jude regretted saying yes by the time he hung up.

Within the week Jude was driving down the seasonal road toward camp. White pine and balsam came virtually up to the road's shoulder. Patches of blackberry thicket emerged where the sun fell on an open spot in a bright splash. Jude turned down one of the forks in the road at the sign that read "Heron Point" and let the car roll down a steep one-laner, past a gatehouse and a slab-sided garage with six stalls, sliding into a parking spot just behind Spruce Hall's kitchen. The view of Heron Bay opened through a break in the trees. Looking down the slope toward the water, he saw the diving raft with its red pennant stirred by the wind. All as if no time had passed.

Charley came up from the boathouse to greet him with a missing person's report. "Big brother!" she said, hugging him. "You're here, finally. Now you can help me find Grammie. She's missing—haven't seen her since lunch. You go through Spruce Hall," said Charley, "but don't call out in case she's dozed off in a chair somewhere. She startles easily." Nothing would have startled the grandmother he had known as a kid.

His welcome back to this place of lost things was to be a search for a lost old thing. Spruce Hall stood two stories tall against a view of the silvery water of Heron Bay. Forest-turned-edifice, it was sided in half-rounds of spruce log with porch columns that rose like the tree trunks they had been, lifting bracings that resembled branches and limbs to support the cedar-shingled roof. The camp's main building was a domesticated wilderness that had made Jude uneasy as a kid.

He went in through the kitchen—it had been Aggie's kitchen when he was a boy. In this room, Grammie and Aggie had been

part of the team that outfitted lunches for the massive search effort for the missing boy and it was here that hundreds of lunches had been packed. Now there was no elderly woman fixing herself tea here or gearing up to provide sandwiches for a rescue mission that would fail.

Any word? Aggie's voice, as clear as if she were here now. And then his grandmother's. *The dogs found nothing* The stretch of decades gone in the instant of remembering.

He searched the upstairs bedrooms then came back down and went through the immense main room—remote shafts of light came in through the triangular windows that flanked the chimney, like sunlight through a break in a forest canopy. A pair of doors opened onto the porch that nearly wrapped around Spruce Hall. Slowly, features took on more dimension as he looked around. The stuffed heron and the footstool with the deer's-foot legs were still here. The cousins had turned the taxidermied ottoman onto its back dozens of times when he was a kid, playing at imagined hunting expeditions.

What kind of joinery could attach bone and hide to a frame, he wondered, seeing Heron Point for the first time as his cabinetmaker father must have. Patrick had made furnishings with fine inlay for the private offices of bankers and major insurance companies. Probably, it occurred to Jude now, for architectural firms like Mitchell's, which had done work for Jude's grandfather when he built his new restaurant. When Jude was a kid, he hadn't fully comprehended how complicated this little spot on an Adirondack map might have been for Patrick. After the divorce, Jude had spent most of his growing up with his father, with the exception of summers—and all his father would ever call Mitchell was *the architect.*

This furniture must have made my father crazy, he thought. Rustic, eclectic. Mission style couches and tables. A bark-edged dining room table that was capable of expanding to mead hall length—its chairs with legs like milled hickory limbs. He spotted a chair that hadn't been there when he was a kid. Its back was a fan of forked branches—creating the impression of both a Windsor chair and of an impenetrable thicket. There was a table in the

main room with an intricate twigwork mosaic design ribbing its top and an immovably heavy trunk with muscular roots forming its pedestal base. Jude's father had done inlay in fine-grained walnut and rosewood and mahogany that never brought the notion of stick or branch to mind. Jude thought it possible that the furniture alone could have driven him away.

For Jude as a kid, the interior of Spruce Hall could become a forest that might, in the dark, unbend from the tops of rockers and unfurl new leaves, send branches up from the trunk holding the table top, pop dowels and nails, run wood glue and linseed oil through its limbs like sap. It could reclaim the interior of Spruce Hall and let the hoofed footstool gallop free through the newly recreated forest canopy. It was home to Slater's son. It was a place for small boys to be lost in plain sight.

No Grammie to be found in this indoor wilderness. No grandmother doing a crossword puzzle at the corner of the dining room table. That's where she had stayed up late, waiting for news from the search. That's where he could find her back then when he couldn't sleep. They would rim the edge of the newspaper that had her crossword with tic-tac-toe. His own concern for Grammie had been slim when he started his scour of Spruce Hall, but it was rising by the time she appeared at the screen doors that led to a porch. Backlit and silhouetted against the silver lake, Grammie seemed briefly as elegant and composed as ever.

How old is she now, he wondered as he crossed the room to greet her. *Eighty-five? Ninety?* "Hi, Grammie," he said, as he raised his arms to hug her.

"Are you going to fix the Evinrude?"

She's mistaking me for Slater, or some new caretaker, he thought, *come to fix a boat.* He let his arms fall. "I'm Jude, Grammie, Jude."

"Yes, of course, you are," she said. He didn't think she remembered him or even the idea of him.

"Grammie," sang out Charley, coming in the front way. "Finally, we've found you. This is Jude, remember?"

"Charley," began the old woman, her shoulders sagging, "where have you been? I've been waiting here so long."

Charley steered her away, looking over her shoulder at Jude. "Dinner in an hour. The boathouse deck. Get settled. You're in Little Green." All the cottages were named after Adirondack wading birds—some great grandparent's idea. "We redid it. Just past the caretaker's old place."

Jude knew where all the cottages were—he and his parents always stayed in Little Green—and where Slater's place was. He didn't bother to say *I know.* At Little Green, he dropped his gear and then looked around to see if the framed map still hung on the wall. The frame itself was rustic—lap-joined birch branches—but it was the map itself he was after. The pale blue and green whorls and outlines of the topo showed the southern end of Lake Colvin, with Heron Point at the northern tip of the small, deep bay called Heron Bay. Their camp, close to the point it was named for, was the only one on it. Beyond the point and facing the silver sheet of the larger lake was the Walsh camp, another sprawl of rustic architecture and their closest neighbor. Both camps were small black squares on the old map. Further up the eastern shoreline there were other camps and then state forest preserve. The state dock was marked on the map in block letters. The state dock was where Jude saw Slater's boy for the last time.

The summer they spent time together, Jude was eight. Slater's son, at twelve, was one of the big kids. Big enough to help his father repair and repaint the shutters from the cottages. While he stacked the green stained panels against Little Green, he asked Jude if he'd seen the no-tail chipmunk that year. Later, he would show Jude where to leave sunflower seeds for it. Once Jude and Slater's boy shared cinnamon sugar piecrust twists that Aggie, the camp's longtime cook, had made while they sat on the back steps of the kitchen. Both of them wished they could have a ride in the little red and white Piper Cub that had been put up on floats and sometimes landed near the Walsh camp, puttering up to its dock like a boat on stilts. When the boys ate, the no-tail chipmunk emerged from under the planking and accepted crumbs from their hands.

Sometimes Slater's boy worked on the boats. *Want to help?* he asked, handing a scraper to Jude as he flaked paint off a wooden

rowboat. *Make sure you just go in one direction. Pull toward you.* The paint flecks caught on their clothes. Later that summer, the pair of them together had put the red canoe up on sawhorses and sanded and repainted it.

On the morning, all those years ago, that he last saw Slater's boy, Jude was supposed to go out fishing early with his father. He had slipped into Aggie's kitchen to get the lunches she had packed—peanut butter sandwiches wrapped in wax paper: two for him, two for his father. From the pantry's tall window, he glanced down the hill toward the boathouse where he knew his father would have the aluminum boat out, the one with the 8-horse Evinrude outboard that purred slowly while they trolled their lines in the water around the edges of the islands beyond Heron Bay and into the wider parts of Lake Colvin.

Framed by the window, the view held the figure of his father at the little beach by the boathouse. Dressed in his sport jacket. He was standing in the water, ankle-deep, the cuffs of his pants rolled. He was looking down at the lapping water—silver glints in the bright morning overcast. Hands in his pockets, coat fanning out behind his elbows. His fishing poles were zipped in their red nylon case. His suitcase was on the wood planking beside his shoes.

What Jude had hoped for that morning was simply for last year's fishing trip to repeat itself, with one addition. The year before they had puttered around the islands in the early mist, a pair of spinning rods in the bottom of the boat, the tackle box open to red-and-white bobbers and trout coming up to feed on the early morning hatch of insects. Jude always sat in the middle of the boat, on the widest plank. *Next time*, his father had said, *maybe it's your turn to navigate us back across the lake*. Jude had been imaging sitting back at the outboard and taking the tiller and angling them home across the wide part of the bay since they arrived.

Watching his father wade out of the water by the boathouse, Jude realized that there was going to be no fishing. His father hooked his shoes by two fingers at the back of the heels and picked up the rest of his gear and made for the steep path to the garage. Jude pushed his own hands in his pockets, compressing the peanut butter sandwiches in their brown bag between his arm

and his ribcage. His father vanished from view. That was the day Jude canoed to the public boat launch with Slater's boy. No one would mention Patrick's disappearance.

This was the same morning Slater's boy left to go camping, his sleeping bag secured to his pack frame and a red bandana knotted on the pack's strap.

Why the bandana? asked Jude when the two boys' paths crossed near Heron Point's boathouse.

Easier to spot your gear, he said. The older boy was going to cut across the point to meet friends at the public boat launch. From there they were all going to hike to the nearby forestry school where one of the hikers' dads worked. He had agreed to give them all a ride to the Gibb Mountain trailhead, which was a dozen miles away. Jude wanted to ask if he could come, but it seemed like it was too late for that and he was too shy to ask, anyway.

If we take the canoe over to the launch instead of hiking the trail, I might get there on time, said Slater's boy. *Do you think you can paddle it back if you come over to the launch with me?* If Slater's boy had asked him to swim back towing the canoe behind him by a rope he held in his teeth, he would have said yes. Jude decided that there was no one he needed to ask permission to do this. This was camp, after all. No one would even know he was gone.

Out on the water, Slater's boy double-checked his gear and started patting his pockets, looking for something.

Forget something? asked Jude.

My knife, said Slater's boy. *I lost my jackknife. And no time to go back to get my old one.*

Take mine. Jude put his hand in his pocket and produced the Swiss Army knife Patrick had given him. Everything was right about the knife. A pair of blades, an awl, a mini-saw and a can opener with a screwdriver tip. Lightweight—but heft enough. Always in his pocket.

Nice knife, said Slater's boy, accepting it. *I'll be careful with it*.

They glided toward the shore and the canoe gently grounded itself on the gravelly bottom beside the dock. *The other kids must have left already*, said Slater's boy and hopped out of the canoe

a few steps prematurely, soaking his sneaker. *I'll have to try to catch up*. He gave the canoe a push back into the water. And then the older boy assembled his gear in a hurry and turned to take off down the steep trail to find his friends. Over his shoulder he called, *That J-stroke of yours is getting better*. A few feet from shore in the shallow water, Jude poled backwards. From out in the canoe, it looked like Slater's boy had stepped into the hemlocks and fallen out of the landscape.

The search for the boy lost in the woods began in late July and lasted into August, through blueberry season and the rest of their stay at camp that year. The search had two centers: one that involved all of Lake Colvin and the surrounding terrain and one that was miles away, closer to the cluster of small mountains the boys had climbed. No one even knew for sure if he had ever found a way to get to the mountain on his own. Jude sat on the dock early one morning in a light drizzle as men dragged their bay and then the rest of the lake.

During the search, Jude's grandmother and Aggie spent evenings packing lunches for the search teams that gathered at the gym of the nearby forestry school. He helped by boxing the bagged lunches. His father was already gone, back home Jude assumed then, though he wasn't there when Jude and his mother returned—and wouldn't be in time to come. The rest of the men from the camps around the lake, though, were part of the search teams. They came back weary from pushing back underbrush. Mitchell searched, too. Jude watched his mother slide in next to Mitchell as he ate, or didn't eat, a late dinner alone at the big dining room table.

It rained the first night they looked for him, and it kept raining for most of the week that followed. Two dogs were brought in, but their efforts were finally stopped by the continuing wet. *There's always a trace*, Jude heard a uniformed conservation officer say, *but not this time*. On the first day of the search, they found what they believed was the boy's flashlight on the trail-less north side of Gibb mountain. *Since then*, the man said, *not so much as a bandana*. There was no hint that he might have wanted to run away.

Tom Slater wasn't spotted along the stretch of road to town, but maybe he caught a ride and no one noticed. No friend came forward to say they had given the kid a ride. Alerts went out to Vermont and Pennsylvania and across the border to Canada. The flashlight was all that had emerged, and that kept the search going at Gibb Mountain. In the end, though, Tom had remained here near Heron Bay in Jude's mind, here where he had last seen him.

That summer, Jude overheard things everywhere. He heard Slater in the kitchen on that first morning, before anyone knew the boy was missing, saying to Aggie, *Have you seen my boy?* The rain had been drumming down and Jude was looking out the window in the pantry toward the boathouse and the lake. Jude at first mistook the voice and thought it was someone looking for him. Maybe his dad. His father had only been gone a day—there was still hope he might come back.

Haven't seen him this morning, Aggie answered. *How did his camping trip go?*

Wish I knew, Slater said as he left. *I stayed across the lake last night*.

That night Jude heard Grammie say, *The boy is lost*.

The next afternoon Jude overheard his mother and one of the Walsh mothers on the porch. The women's chairs were pulled close together and they were talking about Tom, calling him *Slater's boy*. They probably didn't know his name. His mother said, *He must be hungry. At least the blueberries are out*. Jude wouldn't eat the blueberries that year, even the ones on the few bushes that straggled around Heron Point—saving them just in case Slater's boy made it that far. And he probably hadn't thought of his friend as *Tom* after that overheard conversation. It was easier, somehow, to look for someone called *Slater's boy* than a lost friend.

Who saw him last? asked Aggie the first night of the search as they made sandwiches.

I don't even know that, said Grammie. *His father said he saw him the morning of the day before. I saw him the afternoon before. None of the boys he was to go with saw him that day at all. I wonder why they didn't wait for him?*

Big kids never wait up, thought Jude back then. *And neither do grown-ups*.

Jude had overheard Mitchell say that all Slater's boy would have to do would be to lie down in the ferns or the brush and no one would ever find him. He secretly reserved two lunches for himself and the next morning slipped out with them shoved into plastic bread bags before true light. He was soaked to the knee before he even made his way out of camp. The boat launch area itself had been searched already over and over—he knew that just from what he had heard people say.

His plan was to head beyond the point, to the thickly wooded area of forest preserve. He and his father had often trolled along that shore while fishing. He plunged into the densest stretch of woodland he could think of between Heron Point and the public dock—he felt certain Slater's boy was there. If his father had still been at camp, Jude believed back then, they would have found the boy together, brought his friend home. It seemed to him that no one else had noticed his father was gone. Apparently there were no search parties for lost fathers.

Jude pushed through the underbrush, working in a grid from the edge of the lake for the count of one hundred, then backtracking and starting again a few feet away. He lost a sneaker twice and retrieved it twice. He dropped to his knees and tunneled through the underbrush to make sure he missed nothing—disappearing completely in the wet and shining moosewood and witch hobble as he did. At lunch, Jude opened one bag and ate the peanut butter sandwich, all six cookies, the apple. He tied the other sack to a branch at eye level with a red bandana.

When he came home, Grammie was sitting alone on the top step of the porch, leaning against a pillar. Waiting for him. *There wouldn't be any need to do that again*, she said as he approached. *There isn't any need for two lost boys.*

Jude mumbled an apology.

Let's get you cleaned up. One eye was swollen with insect bites and his cheeks were badly scratched. He looked down at his wet and ruined clothes, heavy at the knee with black mud.

Dad's gone, he said to Grammie as she sat on her heels to sponge away the dirt and blood crusted on his bites and scratches. *Maybe for good*.

I think so, said Grammie. She rinsed out the cloth and ran it under more warm water.

In spite of the stinging, the soft warm cloth felt good on his cheek. *I think I was the last person here to see him*, Jude said.

In the morning?

Yes, said Jude. *At the dock*.

You probably were the last then, she said standing up.

Should I tell somebody? he asked.

Well, she answered, *you just told me*. And then she guided him to the kitchen for the cold chicken and macaroni salad that Aggie had saved for him on a plate in the refrigerator. He ate with Grammie and Aggie while they bagged lunches for the next day, relieved not to have to recount having seen his friend step into the woods and out of sight after all.

No one ever asked him about the details of the day he and Slater's boy had paddled to the public dock, and it didn't occur to Jude until much later that Grammie must have thought he meant that he was the last to see his father, not Slater's boy. Keeping the lost distinct wasn't always possible.

The search went on for weeks. The pace of ordinary life at Heron Point was reconfigured, and the annual sailboat races on the lake were cancelled. The next summer parents were, briefly, more attentive to everyone's whereabouts.

The next summer Patrick wasn't there at all, and when Jude looked off the dock or over the side of the boat and into Heron Bay, he always wondered whose face he might see looking back. Had Slater's boy drowned? The missing could be anywhere, everywhere.

Sometimes in the next few summers Jude would take the canoe out, wondering in the first year or two if he would find a waterlogged shoe, a tattered bandana. Perhaps the boy himself, as if he would be discovered simply sitting on a rock, waiting. Then, in the last year or so of his visits, simply looking. Jude didn't re-

member if he had stopped looking or simply stopped returning to Heron Point at all. And here he was.

On his way through Spruce Hall to dinner, Jude saw two newspapers folded open to the same story on the mosaic-topped table. There was a picture of a helicopter that had flown a fallen hiker from Gibb Mountain to the medical center and one of her distraught companion looking down at the rescue operation. The injured hiker, barely conscious, hadn't known that she had landed someplace where someone had landed before. That was discovered by the rescue team member who had been lowered to where she had plummeted. The bones had absorbed the color of the mountain, pine needles and fallen leaves and debris turning to earth in crags and crevices and ledges.

The architect came up beside him. "It's not him," he said. "The bones belong to an older man who was lost hiking maybe five or six years ago. I just heard."

At dinner, Charley said, "We were just talking about that kid who disappeared from here years ago. The one everyone around the lake thought they might have found. Tish Walsh's mom was telling us about it today. That story always scared me. Were you here then?" Charley looked from the architect to Jude.

"It was a long time ago," answered Mitchell.

"I was just a kid," said Jude. For once he and Mitchell were in it together, neither of them wanting to talk about the old search. It didn't feel like it was a long time ago at all.

He called Jill after dinnertime on the landline. "Where are the boys?" he asked. Matt and Jeremy. Eight and nine. Charley was right—they'd love it here.

"Someplace with Philip." Her new partner, partner-to-be.

"Where is someplace?"

"The Pinball Museum, I think. Don't be so intense about it."

"It's a big planet. They are small boys. My small boys. I gave up weeks of this summer with them for this little adventure. I'd just like to know where the hell they are."

"Call back at 8—our 8—you can talk to them then. They'll be glad to talk to you. They miss you, you know."

The next day it was raining and he decided to drive into Lake Placid.

"I wouldn't go and leave her here with Mitchell," said a clear voice behind him as he headed to his car. Grammie.

"Leave who, Grammie? Charley? Charley gets on fine with Mitchell."

"That's the problem, isn't it?"

Jude began to understand. She thought he was Patrick—and had slipped the gears that kept daughter and granddaughter separate. Or the years separate. It was all happening all at once for her. He could sympathize.

"Mitchell is the only one who doesn't disappear to deliver furniture that could wait to be delivered," she said. "My husband disappears to sign papers at the restaurant, hire a new cook for fall—all that could wait." Her husband had been dead twenty years. The daughter she was worried about had been dead nearly two years.

Too late to worry about Mitchell and your daughter now, he thought, but didn't know how to break the news to Grammie. Jude wanted to tell her who he really was and how it had all played out back then. He wanted her to recognize him as Jude again—but just then he was feeling his own relocation in time and he needed to say something kinder than what his name really was to this fading woman who had always kept track of everyone at camp. So instead he simply said, "I'll be back before long, Grammie."

She was already turning and waving her hand at him over her shoulder. He saw her make her way back toward Spruce Hall. Her gait was more certain than her sense of time, but he watched till she was safely up the pair of steps to the porch. As he drove up the steep lane through the red maples and balsam, he decided that he and Grammie were lost in the same time zone.

Jude drove into Lake Placid, wound through the town as the sun broke through to glint on the lake. His old Volvo joined the bright line of cars and trucks and campers strung as close as beads on a cord. The Gallery on Main had local artists' work shrink-wrapped in open portfolios, some nice woodcut prints of wildlife.

There was also a selection of rustic furniture and frames. Jude looked intently at a vintage Adirondack mosaic frame—twigwork and birch bark, the forest floor made orderly—and shopped antique stores looking for a frame to restore. In an art store, there were posters of a Winslow Homer painting—"Leaping Trout." He had seen this in an exhibit a few years before, loved the speckled red of its belly, the red of its fins reflected in the water. His urge was to frame it—to buy the store out and frame them—all just to catch the beauty of its leap.

And then he headed toward his real destination—driving out the other side of the village, taking a sharp turn and then another until the traffic thinned to something sparse and local and he pulled up to a hardware store. In the window of the store, an immense electric Swiss Army knife, four feet tall and in motion, swimming like a mechanical turtle, blades stroking the air, screwdriver-bottle opener nosing upward. The window display had been accumulating dust and displacing air for decades.

Can I have a knife, Dad? Can I have a knife? The memory of being here with his father was as real as the traffic through the village had been just moments ago.

Inside, the clerk said, "Can't go wrong with one of these!" as Jude stood in front of the display case of knives. She didn't point to any specific knife, just the case that held them all, three shelves worth. There were tool options that folded into the metal jacket of the knives that looked like they could solve any problem the woods could offer, though Jude knew better. Jude skipped over the ones with scissors, the second screwdriver and the tweezers, and decided on the one with the pair of blades, the awl, the mini-saw and the smaller can-opener-screwdriver. Light enough still for a pocket. It was called *The Camper Knife.*

"I want three," he said, pointing to his choice. *Can I have that one, Dad?* he remembered saying those years ago, *can I have that one?* He remembered stubbing his finger against the display case, Patrick sliding the bills across the counter. He would keep one and go back home to his boys with souvenirs. At dinner, their first night together, he would lay the red pocket knives out, tell his kids

to each take one. *I told you I'd bring something back for you*, he would say. He would promise to take them to camp the next summer, and they could bring their knives with them. He would keep his eye on them. No one would go missing.

At dinnertime that night, a red and white Super Cub landed on the lake, did figure eights on the water, motored its way toward Heron Point's dock. Jude watched from the porch as it skittered down to the docks. In his peripheral view he saw Mitchell approaching.

"That's the Super Cub that used to fly here summers when you were a kid," said Mitchell.

"I thought it snubbed up on takeoff years ago," said Jude. Jude had been avoiding the architect for the past few days but they were on a conversation he wanted to have.

"Did," said Mitchell. "It's been hangared all this time, downstate. Langley, the guy who owned it, died a couple of years ago. A friend of the Walshes bought it. It's been reconditioned. You probably don't remember Langley."

"I do," said Jude.

"Never liked him much," said Mitchell. "He asked your mom if he could fly you around the lakes sometime. All the kids were pestering for a ride. I told your mom not to. Didn't trust him. He spent a lot of time flying low, though, looking for Slater's boy."

"Tom," said Jude. "Slater's boy was named Tom."

"Tom," said Mitchell. "He was your friend, wasn't he?"

At dinner, Jude sat next to the pilot—Marcus, a relative newcomer to the lakes. His camp was a few ponds away. "Just got my float plane rating last summer," he said. "Finding out about this warehoused Super Cub was a dream come true. Trish told me all about how it used to fly up here. Want to go for a flight sometime? Cruise the lakes?"

"I've been wanting to since I was eight," said Jude.

The Super Cub was a two-seater, one in front of the other. Jude sat behind the pilot, thinking about what Tom would have said about this flight. He felt the plane rumble as it taxied into the

main body of the lake, angled into the wind to begin its takeoff run—felt the instant that the boat became a bird, leaving the water for the air. They climbed and banked around the rim of the lake, Jude watching the glint of sun on the water, looking down into the pines below. He could see the boathouse, the red pennant flying over the diving raft.

"As good as a wind sock," said Marcus. And then he asked Jude to hand him his sunglasses. "They're in that little tackle box on the floor," he said.

Beneath the sunglasses was a clear zip bag and in it, bits of red—like the carapace of some big beetle. Bits of rusty knife blades. A Swiss Army knife that had rusted away to its component parts. A camper knife. The red casing was the shape of a canoe.

"Found it when we uncrated the plane," Marcus said when Jude lifted it out. "I kept thinking I could find a way to put it back together, but there's too much rust on the blades—and I'm not sure how I would do that anyway. Must have been Langley's. Couldn't bring myself to ditch it."

Somewhere on the birch-framed topographic map was Tom—not on the mountain. *Whatever happened to the nice knife I gave you?* Jude's father had asked while they fished on a Québec lake sometime after Tom had joined the roster of the unfound. *Lost it*, he had said. The bones on the mountain hadn't been Tom's. And those bits of old knife didn't have to be his old Swiss Army knife—but they were.

Where had Tom met up with Langley at the big lake by the forestry school, looking for friends who hadn't waited, trying to redeem a day of plans gone wrong? Where had Langley flown them? Where had they landed? The mountain gear store sold topographic maps—Jude would buy them, come back summers, paddle each lake in the red canvas canoe, paddle until he knew he had rimmed every lake big enough to let a floatplane land and take off. He would find Tom, again and again. He just would never know where or when.

Contributors

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