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G. D. McFetridge

RAILROAD BRIDGE

Everything turned on a dime in his imagination and then he mentioned the girl on the bridge. They were standing together near the railroad tracks, waiting for the train to flatten a dozen shiny pennies. The older brother ran his fingers back through his shaggy, sun-bleached hair, and reached for a cigarette pack in his T-shirt pocket.

"One of those hot college babes," his brother said.

A cigarette angled from his mouth. The younger brother nodded and glanced in the direction of the train.

A Marine helicopter flew high overhead making a heavy thumping sound that seemed to resonate from the concave dome of blue sky. He told his older brother how he and a friend had been surfing that morning—*perfect glassy conditions*—and watching college girls watch them from the cliffs by the university, a couple miles north of the old railroad bridge.

Nodding, his older brother inhaled and blew smoke into the summer air. It seemed to hang there, shimmering, like a cloud of iridescent motes.

Later he and the friend drove south to check the point break just north of the bridge. There were willows and sycamores in the canyon, running along the edges of the creek bed, and more willows underneath the high iron framework; and there in the sunlight, in the midst of it, in the midst of a cloudless sky, the girl was on the bridge, a silhouette backlit by rays, sea breezes blowing her blonde hair in a halo of yellow mist.

When they cleared the shadow of the high bridge, where the stream widened into a delta overgrown with shrubs and wild grasses, and where the surfers' footpath angled north toward the sandy beach by the point, he glanced over his shoulder to look for the blonde girl, but a tall sycamore blocked the view.

Pedestrians were not allowed on the railroad bridge. But the rule was never vigorously enforced. The older brother dropped his

cigarette and stepped on it, mashing with a worn tennis shoe in the dirt. "And so what happened next?" he asked.

The wind had come up and the ocean was choppier, and only a half-dozen surfers were still in the water off the rocky point. They paddled out through the breakers; the water was warm, the sunlight very bright and hot. He told his older brother that he watched the bridge between waves, wondering what had become of the blonde.

A rogue swell came unexpectedly, twice the size of the smaller sets that had been rolling in all day. A young surfer outside had a chance at the rising wall of water and took off as the wave peaked. Down the curling tongue of water he shot and leaned and then plummeted forward like an unstrung marionette, his body lingering for a second, behind and all around him seven feet of blue-green water spilling forward, thundering, taking him under in an explosion of white water.

The younger brother stopped the story and glanced in the direction of the train. Everything was quiet. The tracks shone in the hot sun there.

The older brother reached in his pocket for the pack and fingered out another cigarette. The breeze kicked up and blew out the lighter. He cursed and flicked the lighter a second time, then exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. "Keep going," he said.

"Are you even listening?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm listening."

They waited for the young surfer's head to reappear in the expanse of foamy white water. A more experienced surfer had caught the north shoulder of the immense swell and managed a long roller coaster ride, punctuated by yelps of delight. He was close to the shore now and wading toward the beach, toward a girl lying on a brightly colored beach towel.

The young surfer's board popped up cork-like, and a moment later his head. His eyes were wide, flashing white, and he spluttered out of breath, arms flailing for the surfboard. They watched until he reached the board and climbed on belly first. After the big wave the ocean flattened, eerily, a lake almost. And then the breeze died,

as if the world had stopped breathing, its breath held in anticipation of something bizarre and indistinct.

He heard a high-pitched female voice, a wailing sound that drew his attention toward shore. He looked at the railroad bridge and in the middle of the bridge he saw the blonde girl waving her arms. She went up on her tiptoes, knees flexing, pointing and calling. Pointing as if her fingers were fifty yards long and she was trying to touch something in the water. He turned to his friend. They looked at each other and shrugged it off, thinking that the girl was shouting at someone on the beach. The young surfer, his eyes still wide, paddled past and said that something had tangled his tether line; something was down there and had snagged his tether and held him underwater. He was still out of breath. The girl on the bridge was screaming louder, but the wind blew harder and her words were indiscernible, a mishmash of blurred sounds.

The older brother wanted to know why she was excited, but then he yawned as if only half listening to the story. Half listening was something that happened a lot, as if conversations had a one-sidedness.

The younger brother said he wasn't sure, but it didn't matter because the train's air horns blew suddenly from the south, from the beach town where the tracks cut across several streets and where the engineer always sounded warnings. The blonde turned toward the piercing blast and began running for the north end of the railway bridge. But her balance seemed awkward, as if running was unfamiliar to her. He had never walked on the bridge, although he knew many surfers who had, and they all said the catwalk was wide enough; there was enough room to avoid the train. Everyone agreed it was scary, terrifying even, because the train went by at sixty miles an hour.

The large wave had churned the blue-green water and the water was murkier than before, and something dark passed beneath them. The train's air horns blew again, louder this time, and the first of three massive pullers rolled onto the south end of the bridge, its triple headlights made weak by the bright sunlight. The girl had a hundred yards to go before reaching the end of the

bridge. They looked at each other, and he saw fear in his friend's eyes.

The cloudlike form that passed beneath them had made the water's surface ripple, as if from an upwelling current. They paddled for the shore, his heart pounding as he pulled his forearms and hands through the water. His friend had a longer board and moved quickly ahead. He could feel the darkness coming from somewhere underneath, menacing, rising like a cold shadow. The train's horns blew again, a loud, extended blast followed by another, as if to push the girl forward. He glanced up. Three big puller engines rumbled toward her, trailed by a long line of boxcars, clattering, the tonnage and sounds of metal on metal. The air horns blew again and again.

"Let's get out of here," the older brother said, "the train's not coming." He dropped his cigarette butt in the dirt but didn't bother stepping on it, then headed toward the road where the pickup truck was parked. The younger brother picked the dozen shiny pennies off the track; they were like points of copper light dotting the gleaming steel.

The younger brother remembered when he had nearly drowned in the swimming pool; how he'd fallen from his brother's tree fort and almost broken his neck; how he'd crashed his first motorcycle into the back of a parked car at forty miles an hour; and that his life had often seemed unreal and disconnected. His brother never listened to him, he occupied space.

They didn't enjoy each other's company that much anyway.

Or maybe it was more than that, some sort of unspoken thing only brothers understand, something wedged inexorably in the past. Mom had never loved them the same, and the old man was worse. Stuff buried down there in the unconscious mind, the baggage, the unseen forces pulling strings.

A fat ground squirrel hurried to its hole in a pile of rocks. A line of doves sat on an old rusted chain-link fence, their pastel shades of gray and brown washed in sunlight. He put his hand in his pocket and jangled the pennies. Then he got the truck key and opened the door.

"So then what happened? Did she make it?" his older brother asked, and reached for another cigarette.

"Yeah, sure, she made it. No one's ever died on the bridge."

Michael Onofrey

ARE YOU OKAY?

Wayne was almost finished with the job, a Wednesday, three-forty in the afternoon, Wayne up on a stepladder painting the last section of a two-by-six board that was part of a patio awning. Miriam, having come out the back door of her house, was walking around the yard while looking up at the hills. She was shading her eyes with one hand even though she was wearing a straw sunhat, glasses below the hand, her head tilted upward.

Wayne wasn't under the awning. He was out in the sun. He had already finished all the framing under the awning and was working on the capping that faced the back of the yard. Next to the patio, which the awning shaded, there was a brief grassy area before a wide curving swath of pebbled ground with chaparral plants began in front of the cinderblock walls that enclosed the yard. Wayne had done the labor that had transformed the yard from a water-thirsty entity to a single-sprinkler affair. Miriam had done the planning, research, and selection of plants—manzanita, sugar sumac, California sagebrush, desert lavender, deerweed. The yard's makeover had taken place in April, pleasant temperatures, occasional breezes.

"There's a fire," Miriam said.

Wayne wanted to get to the end of the board. It was hot and he had already stopped several times to clean his brush because of paint drying in the bristles. On Wayne's head there was a faded red cap. Wayne, like Miriam, wore glasses. Wayne's were bifocals, which were on a long face. The rest of his body was the same—long and rangy. He climbed down the ladder and moved it along and climbed back up. One more ladder-move would do it.

"A fire?"

"Yes. Off Angeles Crest Highway above La Cañada Flintridge."

The awning's framing was getting a blue-green color. Miriam favored southwestern tones. The supports for the awning were

brick columns. On top of the awning's wooden framing there were interlocking aluminum slats, green and white alternating. The patio, unlike many in southern California, wasn't a slab of concrete. It was a brick composition that reflected the Southwest, the bricks a variety of brown, orange, and beige. Jack, Miriam's deceased husband, had done the brickwork. By trade, though, Jack had been a stucco man. His mixer and scaffolding and hods were in the garage. Wayne had been in the garage any number of times to help himself to Jack's tools at Miriam's urging, but it was only those tools pertaining to landscaping that Wayne had used. Miriam parked her car in the driveway. The garage had gone largely untouched for five years, Jack dead for four of those years, sick for the other. Wayne had never met Jack.

"Do you know what the TV said?" Miriam lips were creased with small wrinkles, pink lipstick applied.

Wayne was coming down the ladder, paintbrush in the paint can, bail of the can in the crotch of Wayne's fingers. When he was on the ground he picked the ladder up with his free hand and moved it, and then started up, a pair of high-top Converse on his feet. Wayne brought the brush out of the can and ran it over the wood. He was at the end of the board.

"The TV said it's single-digit humidity."

A hummingbird came buzzing in at Wayne, the bird stopping two feet in front of Wayne's face. This had been going on since Wayne started the job. Miriam kept two feeders, but Wayne had taken the feeders down to work on the framing. When the first bird came zeroing in at him he had ducked to the side just before the bird stopped a mere foot and a half from his face. After that there were a few threatening seconds, the bird hovering like a stalled dart, and then it bailed out to the left and was gone. Some of the birds had iridescent red collars, others iridescent green bellies. The one in front of Wayne's face now was of the red-collared variety, its wings flickering in a blur. Wayne dipped his brush in the paint can. The bird flew off.

"Single-digit humidity?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know it got that low."

"Either did I."

Okay, job finished. All Wayne had to do now was clean up and stash his drop clothes and materials in his pickup truck, which had a camper shell on the back. He came down the ladder and lifted his cap and wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm.

Miriam was toward the corner of the yard looking up at the hillside. Wayne went to his brush-cleaning equipment that was next to a faucet.

"It's only ten acres right now," Miriam said.

Wayne submerged the brush in a couple of inches of water that was at the bottom of a plastic bucket. He then picked up a rubber mallet and placed the lid of the paint can on the can and gave the lid a couple of whacks after putting a rag over it so that paint wouldn't splash up.

"La Cañada is only about ten miles from here," Miriam said.

Wayne turned the water on and picked up a wire brush.

"Jack sometimes used to clear the brush back here." Miriam pointed at the hillside. "He thought it might would help in the event of a fire."

Wayne attached the brush to a brush spinner and put the brush in the bucket and gave it a spin.

"Do you think maybe you could get up there and clear some of that brush, Wayne?"

Wayne was watching the brush spin, but now he looked up at Miriam. Miriam was still shading her eyes with one hand while looking at the slope that ran up the hillside in back of her yard. She was wearing a muumuu and a pair of sandals, the muumuu a collection of parrots midst tropical foliage. On her cheeks and neck flesh hung like gathered drapes. Miriam had retired from teaching art at a community college last May. She had gotten Wayne's number from Kate Shilling, who lived in Studio City. Wayne had done some work for Kate. Kate was an art instructor as well, but Kate worked at a university. All of Wayne's work was by referral. Wayne looked down at the brush and unclamped it from the spinner.

"It'd be like the handyman/landscaping work you did," Miriam said. "Ten dollars an hour."

Miriam was five years older than Wayne. This had been discussed, along with other things, over coffee and muffins on the patio, over fresh lemonade and unsalted nuts on the patio, over orange juice and low-sodium crackers on the patio. Miriam was sixty-six years old, Wayne sixty-one.

Wayne dropped the brush and the brush spinner on the grass and walked over to a picnic table that was under the awning, the table covered with a drop cloth. Wayne picked up a plastic bottle of sports drink and uncapped the bottle and took a healthy pull. Miriam joined Wayne under the awning.

"Jack used to clear the brush to about there," Miriam said and drew a line in the air with her finger. Wayne screwed the cap back on the bottle and looked. The brush on the slope was dry and thick and it looked the same up and down the hillside.

"When was the last time it was cut?"

"Well, now, let me see . . . six, seven years ago, I think."

Wayne nodded, plastic bottle in his hand.

"Did Jack do this brush-cutting in August?"

"Well, I know it's hot," Miriam said. "But just take your time. Do it at your own pace, like you did the landscaping work."

Wayne was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a loose beige T-shirt, both paint- speckled. He shifted his weight.

"What did Jack do with the weeds after they were cut down?"

"I think he pitched some of them over the wall here, and put them in the green trash can. The rest I think he put in black, plastic trash bags and hauled them to the dump."

Wayne looked down at the bottle in his hand. It was almost empty. He looked back up at the hillside.

"How big is the fire?"

"Oh, it just started. And then there's another one near Azusa and Glendora, but that's pretty far away."

Wayne stepped to the edge of the patio and looked at the sky.

"No smoke."

"No, I don't see any smoke, either," Miriam said. "And no wind. They said that's good, you know, no wind, but you can never tell about wind, can you?"

Wayne unscrewed the cap on the sports drink and took a sip and recapped the bottle.

"Let me take a look in the garage," Wayne said. "I think I saw one of those power brush cutters in there."

"Oh, sure. Take a look. Now that I think of it, that's what Jack used, one of those things with a spinning blade."

The garage had a back door that faced the backyard. Wayne guessed that Jack had put the door in along with a couple of windows. The door was never locked. Wayne went into the garage and found what he was looking for—brush cutter, can of gas, plastic container of oil. Wayne came out of the garage and rejoined Miriam under the awning.

"I'll come in the morning," Wayne said. "I'll start from the wall and work my way up the hillside, but if I start feeling dizzy or something, I'm going to knock off. I don't want to get sunstroke."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes."

"Well, ah . . ." Miriam raised a hand to her cheek. "I thought maybe . . ."

"I'm not doing it today," Wayne said. "I'd die up there in this heat. And besides, I'm beat."

"Oh, okay. Tomorrow then. I . . . Oh, I don't know. I just hope the wind doesn't come up."

"Did they say anything about wind or about houses being threatened?"

"No. They didn't say anything about that."

"Okay. I'll come in the morning and do what I can."

"Oh, all right," Miriam said, her hand having moved to her earlobe where a silver earring hung. Wayne looked down at the bottle in his hand and shifted his weight.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Let me get you the check for the awning. I got it in the house here. I'll be right back. And, ah, what about the hummingbird feeders?"

"No problem. I'll put them up right now. I left the hooks."

His mother wasn't in her chair in the living room. The cat was in the chair, curled up and asleep. It had taken Wayne no more than fifteen minutes to get home from Miriam's. On the way he had stopped at a convenience store for a bottle of cold sports drink and a cheese burrito. The house seemed unusually quiet. The windows were open and the air-conditioning unit in the dining room window was off. Wayne started for his mother's bedroom, but before he got there he heard something and stopped. It took a moment and then he understood that his mother was moaning from behind the bathroom door.

"Ma? Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"Is something wrong?"

"I fell."

Wayne tried the door, but he couldn't open it because his mother's body was in the way.

"Scoot back, so I can open the door."

This brought more moaning.

"Can you move, Ma?"

"No."

"Okay. I'm going to push the door and try to move you along the floor."

Wayne pushed the door and his mother's body moved on the linoleum. He got his hand and arm in and pushed her further away from the door. She was wearing a cotton shift. When Wayne got the door opened enough he stepped in and stepped over his mother. There wasn't a mess in the bathroom and it didn't smell.

"Let's try to get you on your feet," Wayne said and put his hands under his mother's armpits and lifted her up and then helped her out of the bathroom and led her into her bedroom, where he sat her down on the bed.

"How do you feel, Ma?"

"My back hurts."

"How long were you in there?"

"Oh . . ." She looked puzzled. Wayne stood back and looked at her. Her skin was very white and her eyes were glazed.

"Do you want to go to the hospital, Ma?"

"Oh . . ."

"I'm going to call your doctor and see what he says."

"Oh, okay."

The emergency-room physician was a large woman with a clear complexion and big round glasses. Her name was Dr. Ross and she asked Roselyn, Wayne's mother, who the president of the United States was and what the date was. Roselyn was moaning and she was asking for painkillers. She said that the president was Nixon and that it was May.

Dr. Green, Roselyn's personal physician, arrived and started asking questions, but not about the president or the date. Dr. Green, a thin man in his mid-forties, asked the more usual questions—when did it happen, how did it happen, are you dizzy, is your sight blurry, where does it hurt? Roselyn said that her back hurt and her side hurt, and "Could I please have some painkillers?" After further discussion it was determined that it was Roselyn's lower back and her right side below her ribs that were hurting.

By the time Wayne left the hospital his mother was asleep in a room on the fourth floor. It was nine o'clock and his mother had an IV feed. There was also a plastic tube going to her nose, supplying oxygen.

Out in the parking lot of the hospital Wayne got in his pickup and drove to a Starbucks on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City. After he was seated at a table outside, he called Kate Shilling on his cell phone. Kate lived a block away. Kate said she'd be right down to join him. This wasn't unusual, Kate and Wayne meeting at Starbucks. It had started a year and a half before, when Wayne went to Kate's house to give her an estimate on painting her living room and a bedroom. At one end of the living room there was a black piano with a folded American flag on top of it, the flag a thick triangle. Kate's daughter had been killed in Iraq. Kate hired Wayne to do the painting that day, and then they had walked

down the street to Starbucks on a whim. They started talking and Kate discovered that it was easier to talk to a stranger than to friends and colleagues. Kate was a single mother "by choice." Karen, Kate's daughter, was Kate's only offspring. After Wayne finished painting the living room and the bedroom, Wayne and Kate continued to meet at Starbucks, usually during the evening, usually a couple of times a week.

"Did you finish up at Miriam's?"

"Yes and no."

People were strolling by on the sidewalk, a warm evening, ice cream cones epidemic.

"How old is your mother?"

"Eighty-one."

He worked from side to side, horizontally, on the slope beginning at the base of the wall. The slope faced south. He wore work boots and a pair of loose pants. He thought the leather of the boots might help in the event of a rattlesnake, but with the brush cutter swinging in front of him he thought he had pretty good snake protection. Miriam's house was at the end of a dead-end street, so Wayne cut the brush on the eastern slope that ran up from that side of her property as well. He had arrived at six-thirty in the morning, so he had the benefit of shadow when he began. Lizards flicked about, but aside from those reptiles nothing more. The cutting went quicker than he had expected. Up on the south-facing slope he stopped cutting when he reached a tangle of manzanita. He figured Jack had gone no further. The manzanita was about thirty yards up from Miriam's back wall. He cut a similar swath on the eastern slope, thirty yards. When he shut the cutter off he stood wiping sweat from his brow, sun gleaming from over the San Gabriel Mountains.

He was covered with flecks of dried weeds. He looked at the cut brush and understood that the real work was about to begin. He had to package all this up and haul it away, no easy chore. He got out his asthma inhaler and shot a spray of medication into his mouth and inhaled.

When he talked to Miriam later in the morning she said that smoke was building in some areas of the Los Angeles basin, because there wasn't any wind. People in those areas were advised not to exercise outside, particularly those with respiratory problems.

Wayne made two trips to the dump and then went to the hospital to visit his mother.

The next day Wayne was on the south-facing slope again, raking up what was left over, gloves on his hands, boots on his feet. It was quiet, except for crows cawing.

The previous afternoon, Thursday, one flank of the La Cañada Flintridge fire had gained speed under the influence of a breeze. By ten o'clock at night an evacuation order was issued for five hundred homes in the La Cañada area, the fire within a mile of those structures. Wayne had watched the eleven o'clock news on television, and at eleven- twenty his cell phone was buzzing. He knew who it was before he answered it, and he wasn't wrong. Miriam was concerned.

There were four fires burning in southern California, La Cañada Flintridge one of them. The temperature in downtown Los Angeles was one hundred one degrees, other areas in southern California eclipsing that. As Wayne was putting a couple of trash bags in the bed of his pickup under the camper-shell canopy, painting gear having been removed, the man who lived next door to Miriam's came over. He was a heavyset man and he wore a dress shirt and a tie and creased slacks.

"Hello, there." The man was smiling. He had a generous smile.

"Howdy," Wayne said and picked up a bottle of sports drink and uncapped it and took a drink.

"I see you cut the brush down back there." The man gestured. "Are you a friend of Miriam's?"

"I'm a housepainter and a handyman. Miriam asked me to cut the brush down."

The man was clean-shaven. A scent of aftershave clung to his vicinity.

"Handyman, huh?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you don't mind my asking, how much are you charging to cut the brush and haul it away?"

"Ten dollars an hour."

The man cocked his head and said, "By the hour?"

"Yes."

"You couldn't give me a price, could you?"

"I bid on painting, but for handyman and odd jobs I work by the hour because I don't know how long it's going to take me, and a lot of times people keep changing their minds about what they want done."

The man nodded. Wayne opened the door of his truck and set the bottle of sports drink on the floor and closed the door.

"You wouldn't happen to have a card, would you?"

Wayne got out his wallet and took a card out and handed it to the man. The man looked at the card and then looked at the hills.

"Jack used to clear the brush back there," the man said.

"Yes. That's what Miriam told me."

He brought his mother Nero Wolfe books that he had gathered from around the house. His mother read mysteries, Rex Stout her favorite. She had already read all of the Wolfe novels, but she greeted the five books Wayne brought with enthusiasm, as if she hadn't read them. Whenever Wayne came into her room the TV was on. Sometimes his mother was asleep. Other times she was awake. It didn't seem to make a difference, asleep or awake, reading or not reading; the TV was on.

They were preparing a brace for Roselyn's back. The pain in her side was identified as a bladder infection. She complained to Wayne about not being able to get enough ice water. Her arms were bruised. They had been bruised at home, but they were more bruised now because of needles. It took forever for the bruises to go away because she was on blood-thinning medication. Whenever she was asleep Wayne would turn the TV off and sit in a chair and read. He always brought a book, but not Rex Stout. His

mother was in a private room. When the TV was off, it was quiet, except when his mother was snoring.

By Saturday the La Cañada Flintridge blaze had a name: Station Fire. It had started near Angeles Crest Fire Station, thus the name. Of the four fires burning in southern California the Station Fire had emerged as the most serious. Down drafts at night pushed the fire toward homes; up drafts during the day ran the flames uphill into terrain that hadn't been burned in forty years. Firefighting in the San Gabriel Mountains was a tricky operation, slopes too steep for bulldozers, firefighters often having to work with hand tools on the sides of canyons.

On Thursday night one leg of the fire went northwest toward Tujunga, one town over from Sunland. Miriam Snell lived in Sunland, her home in the vicinity of Big Tujunga Canyon where that vast watershed came out of the mountains. Wayne's cell phone was buzzing.

"Jim Corman talked to me this morning, Wayne. You know, the man next door. I think he's going to call you. I think he wants you to cut down the weeds in back of his house."

A pall of smoke hung over the San Fernando Valley. People were advised to stay indoors and to run their air-conditioners. Jim Corman called Wayne ten minutes after Wayne was off the phone with Miriam. Ten dollars an hour was no longer a problem.

Early Sunday morning Wayne was back on the slope clearing the brush in back of Jim's house, Miriam saying it was okay for Wayne to use her brush cutter. Ash was in the air. The Station Fire had taken a frightening turn late Saturday afternoon, tripling in size and spreading in all directions, 21,000 acres burned, 1,000 homes evacuated, 1,800 firefighters at the blaze, ten helicopters and eight air tankers engaged. In Big Tujunga Canyon the fire had destroyed three homes. At night flames to eighty feet flared, hillsides a spectacle, resembling the workings of a volcano. And still, no substantial wind, no Santa Ana. Triple-digit temperatures continued, and so did single-digit humidity.

Wayne was two hours into his work when Jim peeked over the wall and said, "Can I do anything to help?"

Wayne had the weeds cut down and was using a hefty tree cutter on a nest of manzanita. Wayne came over to the wall and said, "Yeah. I'm going to start raking this stuff up and shoving it into trash bags. It'd save me a lot of legwork if I could toss the bags over the wall into your yard, and then if you could take them out to my truck and put them in the bed, it'd really help."

"No problem," Jim said, and then looked at Wayne with a curious expression, which might have been concern. "Do you want something to drink or anything?" Jim asked.

Wayne was covered with bits and pieces of brush, sweat, and dust, rivulets of it drizzling down his skin.

"I got this sports drink here," Wayne said and reached down to the base of the wall and brought up a plastic bottle and uncapped it and took a drink.

As Wayne was lobbing trash bags over the wall into Jim's backyard, two young men came over the wall of the house next door. They had a brush cutter and a couple of rakes, and then two more young men came over the wall of the next house, and they, too, had brush-clearing equipment. Miriam's three neighbors were doing what Miriam had thought of on Wednesday, but on Wednesday it was paranoia, whereas by Sunday it wasn't.

Monday brought more destruction. Eighteen homes, mostly in Big Tujunga Canyon, were lost. The fire stretched nineteen miles from east to west, sixteen miles from north to south. Mount Wilson was threatened. Its world famous observatory was in the fire's path, along with broadcasting and communications structures. 2,800 firefighters and twelve helicopters and eight air tankers were engaged. 42,500 acres of Angeles National Forest had gone under. One leg of the fire was moving toward Sunland.

Wayne was at Miriam's in the morning. On TV the night before, Wayne had seen people setting up sprinklers on their roofs. Before going to Miriam's Wayne stopped at Home Depot and bought a couple of garden hoses. When he got to Miriam's

he found Kate there. Kate and Miriam were packing things up, Miriam frantic, Kate calm. The sky was orange-brown and ash was falling. Wayne got a ladder out of the garage and got up on the roof with a sprinkler and roll of duct tape. There were eight houses on Miriam's block. People were spraying their roofs with water. Pickup trucks and vans were arriving and people were carrying things out of their homes. Miriam had gotten a phone call and it was a recorded message that told her to evacuate. While Wayne was on the roof a patrol car entered Miriam's short block and stopped. A uniformed police officer got out with a bullhorn and announced that everyone should leave. After this the officer got back in the car and the car turned around and left.

Wayne used an old bracket that was left over from a TV antenna to secure the sprinkler with duct tape the best he could. He thought of wire and went down the ladder and back into the garage and got some wire and climbed back onto the roof while trailing a garden hose. He further secured the sprinkler with the wire and hooked the hose to the sprinkler. He could see the fire in the hills. Helicopters were going back and forth overhead. Something on the slope caught Wayne's eye. He looked and saw four coyotes trotting high on their paws across the area where he had cut the brush. The coyotes were moving eastward. When they got to the end of Miriam's property, they went right and disappeared down the eastern slope where the street ended.

Wayne looked out over the neighborhood. A man was carrying a flat-screen TV to a van. A woman with a computer in her arms was behind him. At the next house two bicycles and a microwave were going into the bed of a pickup. Suitcases were common, some sitting curbside as if waiting for a cab. Dogs were barking. Wayne saw a woman with an animal carrier, probably the family cat. This went into the front seat of a Lexus. From a double garage a man with a Dodgers cap on his head cradled two cases of Budweiser, while from the front door of that same house a little girl in green shorts dutifully evacuated stuffed animals.

Wayne climbed down the ladder and secured the hose at the ground so it wouldn't move. He turned the water on, and to his

surprise the contraption worked, water and soot trickling down over the roof's shingles.

There was Wayne's pickup with its camper shell and Kate's midsize car and Miriam's midsize car. Miriam had thought her framed watercolors important. They had come off the walls. Miriam kept saying, "Oh, my God." They would haul what they could to Kate's house, which was where Miriam would stay.

That afternoon Wayne went to the hospital to visit his mother. The back brace was ready. It was sitting on a chair near his mother's bed. His mother was asleep. The TV was on. Wayne picked up the remote and turned the television off. The IV was gone, but the tube of oxygen remained at his mother's nose. Wayne sat down on a chair and looked out the window. The sky was honey-colored.

Wayne had brought a book, but he didn't open it. Instead, he started thinking about the events at Kate's house—arriving, unloading the vehicles, piling everything in the living room, turning the TV on and sitting down with cups of coffee and raspberry muffins.

And then he thought about what Miriam had said: "I don't know what I would have done without you two. I just can't thank you enough. Wayne, let me get my checkbook. How much do I owe you?" And it had taken Wayne a moment or two to understand, and when he did, he shook his head and said, "Oh, no, Miriam. The clock stopped the other day with the cutting of the brush. You paid me for that. That's finished. This—is something different."

His mother's room was empty. At the nurses' station he was told that she had been moved to the rehabilitation wing, which was on the same floor but on the other side of the elevators.

Looking for his mother's room, Wayne ran into her in the hall. It was an odd meeting, because at first he didn't recognize her. Actually, it was she who recognized him, Wayne walking along the corridor checking room numbers and then hearing his name from someone in back of a walker, a uniformed woman alongside. The woman, it turned out, was a therapist. Finally, Wayne said, "Ma." His mother smiled. After that she started complaining.

The back brace was on and she hated it. The therapist said, "Let's continue walking. I want you to finish one lap." Wayne walked beside them, his mother groaning. One lap was one time around the corridor, which was circular because the buildings of the hospital were circular towers.

Returning to Roselyn's room in the rehabilitation wing, the therapist took the brace off Roselyn's back and then had Roselyn sit in a chair. Roselyn's room was no longer a private room. There was one other patient, a large woman who looked to be mid-fifties. Roselyn, referring to the back brace, said, "I'm glad that damn thing's off."

The therapist put a piece of putty in Roselyn's right hand and told Roselyn to squeeze it. Roselyn said, "What for?" The therapist said, "It's exercise." The therapist put another piece of putty in Roselyn's left hand and said that Roselyn was to squeeze that, too.

Wayne stood and watched, and then he said, "Ma. I'm going to go downstairs to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee. I'll be right back." Wayne glanced at the therapist. She gave him a wink. Outside in the hall Wayne started laughing as he walked to the elevators.

The Station Fire had destroyed sixty-two residences and had blackened 127,500 acres. There was more humidity in the air now and temperatures had come down a little. Twenty-two percent of the fire was contained. Santa Ana winds remained absent. When Wayne called Kate, Kate said that Miriam was taking a nap. They had been up late, watching TV.

On Wednesday evacuation orders for Acton, Sunland, La Crescenta, Tujunga, and La Cañada were lifted. Miriam went directly home, leaving Kate and Wayne to ferry Miriam's belongings from Kate's house to Miriam's. At Miriam's, Wayne turned the sprinkler on the roof off. Miriam's yards, front and back, were a gooey mess where the water had come off the roof carrying soot.

By now the Station Fire had become the largest brush fire in the history of Los Angeles County, 150,000 acres burned,

sixty-four residences destroyed, three commercial buildings and forty-nine outbuildings gone. Over seventy percent of the blaze remained out of control, eastern front raging, western front having slackened a bit. Miriam and her neighbors were on the western front.

Wayne's mother continued to fight the back brace. The walker, though, was okay. Regarding the wads of putty, they often fell to the floor from a flaccid hand.

The woman sharing Roselyn's room, Betty, spent a lot of time putting makeup on her face with a hand-mirror while propped up in bed. Under Betty's bed there was a large suitcase. Betty liked to talk, but she never talked about her ailment. Wayne wondered why she was in the hospital.

The muck surrounding Miriam's house had dried. Wayne used a shovel and a wheelbarrow to move it to the chaparral garden in the backyard, where he dug it into the soil. Inside Miriam's house Kate helped Miriam put things back where they belonged—framed watercolors on the walls, clothes in closets, documents in drawers, photo albums on shelves.

Wayne had trouble sleeping. He was tired, but he couldn't sleep. His mother's house was a two-bedroom stucco affair in the east valley, a neighborhood of pit bulls, car alarms, and helicopters in the night. Wayne sat in the kitchen with a paperback book and the cat. The cat's name was Billy, but Wayne called him Buddha.

On Friday, the start of Labor Day weekend, Wayne drove to Miriam's and found her around back, sitting on a bench in the patio, weeping.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just . . ."

Wayne leaned and put an arm over her shoulder.

"I'm just so happy, and so scared, and so . . ."

Wayne patted her shoulder and said, "How about a glass of iced tea, Miriam? I could sure use a glass of iced tea."

Miriam looked at him. "Oh, okay," she said and took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes with her hand, which smeared her mascara. She put her glasses back on and stood up. "I'll get that iced tea."

That afternoon, as Wayne was coming out of his mother's room, Ms. Kemp was in the corridor, waiting.

"Mr. Fisk, if you have a minute I'd like to talk to you."

Wayne followed Ms. Kemp to her office, which was across from the nurses' station near the corridor that led to the elevators. Ms. Kemp sat down in back of her desk. Wayne sat down in front of her desk.

"Mr. Fisk, your mother is going to be discharged from the hospital in a few days. Monday, no probably Tuesday. If I am not mistaken, you are away from home during the day working, and your mother is at home alone. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

Ms. Kemp wasn't wearing a uniform. She was in business attire, a skirt, a beige blouse. Her hair was dark, but there were streaks of gray in a neatly cut pageboy. There was a pin on her blouse that declared her a registered nurse, and there was her name, Ms. Kemp. She had her own office and the door was often open. In passing, Wayne had seen middle-aged people sitting before Ms. Kemp's desk. The conversations looked serious.

"It's dangerous for your mother to be at home by herself. The elderly have a tendency to fall and injure themselves, sometimes severely."

A window with mini-blinds was in back of Ms. Kemp. On the walls of her office there were framed certificates. Ms. Kemp had a warm smile. On her desk were a computer monitor and a keyboard, but both were off to the side, which allowed for eye contact. The mini-blinds were gray and they were open and light was coming in.

"Of course you are aware of this because this is exactly what happened to your mother."

Wayne was in his working clothes, a pair of stained khakis, a loose brown T-shirt, a pair of Converse.

"Since you are the responsible adult, you might want to consider a care facility for Roselyn. Here is a list of facilities in the valley."

Ms. Kemp handed four sheets of paper stapled at the top-left corner across the desk to Wayne. Wayne took the papers and started glancing through them. The first thing that struck him was that the facilities were ordered according to price, beginning with the most expensive.

"If I may direct your attention to the top of page three," Ms. Kemp said and held her copy up and pointed to show Wayne where to look. Wayne flipped to page three and looked.

"It's a homey facility, four houses at the end of a block. One of the nurses in the wing your mother was in before she was brought over here to rehabilitation helps administer the facility."

Wayne looked up from the sheet of paper. Ms. Kemp was looking at him. Ms. Kemp's eyes were very blue.

"I suggest that you look at a couple of these facilities," Ms. Kemp said. She smiled, and then there was a pause coupled with a soft expression. A more personal voice followed.

"We can only hope," Ms. Kemp said, "that our children think of us when the time comes, think of our safety, think of our well-being." Ms. Kemp smiled.

Wayne thought about correcting the part about children. Wayne had no children, no wife, but he chose not to say anything. Instead, he smiled, which seemed to elicit a comfortable moment between him and Ms. Kemp.

Ms. Kemp then smiled anew, but this time her smile seemed to indicate that their discussion was over.

"Has my mother been told about this?"

"Your mother?" Ms. Kemp said. "No, this hasn't been discussed with Roselyn, Mr. Fisk."

Wayne nodded.

"Health care power of attorney allows you to make health care decisions. You're the one to make these decisions, Mr. Fisk."

"Yeah, well, that's if my mother is incapacitated."

Ms. Kemp was no longer smiling. She said, "Mr. Fisk, you are the responsible agent in these situations."

Wayne looked down at the papers on his lap. Ms. Kemp shifted her weight. Wayne could hear her chair creak. Wayne looked up.

"She might not know who the president of the United States is, but she knows where home is. If I put her in a care facility, she's going to know she's in a care facility. She's going to know that beyond doubt."

"It's for her own good, Mr. Fisk. Twenty-four-hour supervision. And it is not only your mother whose welfare is at risk. This is also for you. Caring for the elderly puts a tremendous strain on a family member."

"Yes," Wayne said. "The diarrhea, the stool samples, the walking around at night and turning the TV on at three in the morning, the dropping a plate of food on the living room floor, the weekly visits to the doctor's office."

Ms. Kemp nodded.

"But, I mean, this is it, isn't it?" Wayne said. "In the hospital with tubes stuck in her body, or in a care facility surrounded by strangers, or at home on the floor in the bathroom." Ms. Kemp had her hands on top of her desk, hands together, fingers intertwined.

"I don't know," Wayne said. "The way I figure it, it's payback time. When I think about when I was a kid, and when I was a teenager, and all she put up with, I just shake my head."

Ms. Kemp's blue eyes were remarkably clear. Wayne moistened his lips with his tongue. His lips were chapped.

"I'll be right back," Wayne said. "I'm just going to go and ask her, even though I already know what she's going to say."

"Well, good for you," Kate said.

Starbucks, a balmy evening, people on the sidewalk, the summer's last weekend holiday, 4,700 firefighters fighting the Station Fire. Kate smiled. Wayne brought his cup up and sipped.

"I'd hate to have Ms. Kemp's job," Wayne said. "She's the messenger of what studies and science have concluded. It's a tough job. She's seen it all."

Kate nodded.

"And, you know," Wayne said, "while I was sitting there, there were these thoughts, and one of them was that the care facility

Mr. Kemp pointed out would eat up my mother's Social Security almost to the dime. I wondered about that, you know—how much information was at her disposal. And then there was this other thought, which had to do with my mother's Social Security check gone, and me in a bind. The way it is now the money I earn from painting and handyman work pays for my health insurance and the insurance on my truck and the breakage insurance in case I drop a can of paint on someone's Persian carpet, and then there's dental insurance, and after that there's upkeep on the pickup, plus gasoline, plus other things, such as asthma inhalers and any other medicines I might need, like when I get a sore throat or a cold or whatnot, plus blood tests. Anytime there's something amiss they order a blood test. Of course they're cheap compared to what I'd have to pay without insurance—ten dollars a test. But I've gone in there to the hospital and they've ordered up five separate tests, just like that, bingo."

A man walking by on the sidewalk with a small monkey on his shoulder drew Wayne and Kate's eyes. The monkey was turning its head this way and that. It had its little hands on the man's neck.

"And my mother's Social Security," Wayne continued, "covers the insurance on the house and the utilities and the property taxes and the medicines she needs from the pharmacy, plus the weekly doctor's visits, which Medicare helps with but doesn't cover completely. It's the same when she's in the hospital. Medicare pays for the lion's share of that, but I'm still going to have to write a check for . . . who knows, four, five hundred dollars."

"It adds up," Kate said.

"It sure does."

The man with the monkey had disappeared midst the crowd on the sidewalk.

"The way it is now," Wayne said, "I'm okay. But if my mother's two-thousand-dollar-a-month Social Security check went for a care facility . . ."

"Wayne."

"Yes."

"If you get in a jam, please tell me."

Wayne set his hand on the table and looked at Kate. Kate was fifty-one years old, hair short and lying on her head in a way that made her look younger.

"I mean it," Kate said. "It's nothing to be ashamed of." Kate's eyes were brown. She didn't wear glasses. "You've been the world to me. You helped me deal with my daughter's death in ways I can't . . . express."

Saturday morning brought blue skies. Wayne got dressed and made coffee and drove to Miriam's and found people going in and out of their houses as if in the throes of spring cleaning. The sky seemed contagious even though the fire remained a threat. Only about fifty percent of the blaze was under control, its eastern sector burning strong. Miriam was in the backyard filling the hummingbird feeders, a couple of hummingbirds flicking around. The hummingbirds had disappeared for a few days, but now they were back.

"Good morning, Wayne." Miriam was in a lavender muumuu and a floppy hat.

"Good morning. I just stopped by to see if anything needs to be done?"

Miriam straightened and looked around the yard. She put a hand on her hip and said, "Well, no. I can't think of anything."

"I'll leave that sprinkler up on your roof for the time being," Wayne said. "It won't hurt anything up there."

"Oh, okay."

"See you, then," Wayne said and went around to the front yard, but before he got to his truck, Jim Corman hollered, "Wayne!" Jim was coming across Miriam's lawn.

"How are you?" Jim said and held out his hand. Wayne shook Jim's hand.

"Fine, Jim. How are you?"

Jim was in a pair of Dockers and a polo shirt. "Not bad. Not bad at all." Jim had a big, soft hand.

"I was thinking that I might want to turn my backyard into something like Miriam's. She said you did the landscaping."

"I did the work, but Miriam's the one who selected the plants and did the designing."

"Yeah, well, not right now, but maybe when the weather cools. I'll give you a call, okay?"

"Sure."

Jim smiled and looked up at the hills.

"They're already talking about sandbags and winter rains and runoff," Jim said. "What do you think about that slope?"

Wayne looked, but of course he had looked any number of times in the last couple of days. "I think this block might have gotten lucky," Wayne said. "The ridge is burned, but for whatever reason the fire didn't come down the slope. There's plenty of foliage between the burn and where we cleared the brush, and the cleared area is only thirty yards or so. I don't think that's going to create a problem. And the roots are still in the ground from the cut brush. Just keep the storm drains back there cleared and it should be okay."

"That's what I was thinking," Jim said and smiled anew. "You've been at this for a while, haven't you?"

"At what?"

"Landscaping/handyman work."

"Actually," Wayne said, "I did some of this when I was young, but to tell the truth, I got into this three years ago when I came back from abroad. My mother was, and still is, old and sick, so I had to come back. I'm the only child, the only one she has. I tried getting regular work, warehouse work, but no one would hire me. Probably my age. Anyway, I started painting my mother's house, and one of the neighbors came over and asked if I'd give her a price on painting her kitchen. She had a big crack in the ceiling from an earthquake, you see. So I fixed the crack and painted her kitchen and then a friend of hers called me. After that, I went to a copy shop and had some cards printed."

"Well," said Jim, "if you do good work for a reasonable price, people are going to call you."

Wayne grinned.

"How long were you abroad?"

"About twenty-five years."

"Twenty-five years?"

"I came back a couple of times to visit at Christmas, but, yeah, about twenty-five years."

"Where were you?"

"Europe, North Africa, Middle East, India. I was in Malaysia before I came back. I was teaching English in Penang, a private school, a storefront operation really. High school kids, Japanese businessmen, the wives of Japanese businessmen. You know, they needed to practice with a native speaker."

Jim cocked his head.

"How was Malaysia?" Jim asked.

"I liked Penang. A mix—Chinese, Indians, Malays. Good food, beautiful beaches. But . . ."

Jim waited.

"I wasn't young anymore, and there were these feelings, nostalgia or something."

On Sunday, when he entered his mother's room, he found her bed vacant and neatly made.

The big woman with heavy makeup and the suitcase under her bed said, "You should have seen it last night, everyone in here, machines, nurses, doctors—everything."

Wayne turned and went to the nurses' station and was told that his mother had been moved to a private room. It was in the wing his mother had been in before. He walked over there and found his mother asleep, an IV drip in her arm, a clear-plastic mask over her mouth and nose, a tube fastened to the mask. Wayne went back to the nurses' station and found out that his mother's lungs had been full of fluid the night before.

Fifty-six percent of the Station Fire was contained, but the humidity had dropped and wind had started to blow.

On Monday Wayne's mother was jabbering gibberish in a strange voice, eyes half open, eyelids fluttering. A slim man was raising and lowering the amount of oxygen that fed into the mask over Roselyn's mouth and nose. Oxygen therapy.

"She's not in pain," the man said. "It's like she's dreaming."

Wayne's cell phone was buzzing. He reached and grappled with it in the semidarkness of his room, faint light at the windows. It was a short conversation, and when it was concluded Wayne got dressed and drove to the hospital.

At her bedside Wayne stood, looking down at his mother's face. It seemed to him that she had gone back to childhood—so small, so frail, so delicate. The IV and the oxygen were gone, bed neatly made, Roselyn's head on the pillow, her face just above the folded-down sheet.

A young nurse came into the room as if on an errand, but when she saw Wayne she stopped and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll leave you. Take your time. Come to the nurses' station when you're through."

Morning light from the window was slanting into the room. Wayne placed the back of his hand against his mother's cheek. Her skin was warm and soft. After a few moments Wayne took his hand away.

He filled out forms and then he phoned a place in Burbank that cremated bodies. When this was concluded he left the nurses' station and went downstairs and got in his truck and drove to Starbucks in Studio City. Sitting at a table outside at the edge of the sidewalk, he called Kate. The day was warming up. Temperatures in the nineties with humidity around ten percent were forecasted. In addition, there would be wind.

"It didn't seem like she suffered."

"That's good."

Wayne sipped his coffee. Kate sipped her coffee. There weren't many people on the sidewalk.

"When do you start teaching?"

"Next week."

"I watched the news last night," Wayne said. "Forty-six hundred firefighters, some from Georgia, Idaho, and Montana, are still at it. It's only sixty percent contained." Kate was looking at Wayne's face, watching him talk.

"Are you okay?"
"Yes, I think so."

On the day the Station Fire was brought under full containment, Wayne was working in Jim Corman's backyard. Jim wanted practically the entire yard turned into a chaparral garden. Wayne was working alone, Jim and his wife at work. Now and then a hummingbird came buzzing by, a shimmering glint.

Wayne looked at his watch and put his shovel down and went over and poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos he had brought. He sipped his coffee and looked up at the hills. An article in the newspaper said that the carcasses of bears and mountain lions and bobcats and coyotes and gray foxes and deer had been found in the burnt area. Wayne sipped his coffee. The fire had burned for fifty-two days and it had taken the lives of two firefighters. Wayne lifted his cap and wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm. Two hundred and fifty square miles of the Angeles National Forest burnt, eighty-nine homes destroyed, twenty-two people injured. Wayne put his cap back on. Officially, the Station Fire was a forest fire because of the timber it had consumed at higher elevations, the San Gabriel Mountains, peaks to 10,000 feet. As a teenager Wayne had fished for trout in Big Tujunga Creek, both upper and lower.

Wayne brought his cup up and sipped, a ruby-throated hummingbird whizzing by. The fire's cause was arson.

H. E. Wright

JUST SAY PLEASE

In a forest, if you fell down and died but no one was there to witness your dying, did you really die?

I said, "You're right. Don't think about it; it doesn't matter. Don't think about that girl lying there in the tall weeds for four days. Don't think that it was winter. Don't think that she lived for three of those four days huddled in upon herself for warmth, waiting for somebody to come out and find her and just take her fucking home. It doesn't matter."

"Stop it! " She said this and started to cry. "That's why you shouldn't think about it."

When she started to cry I didn't know what else to do, so I made love to her until she stopped. After, I felt like someone had hit me in the head with a brick.

I could imagine that at that moment when the girl—who we did not know, but had just read about in the newspaper—when she died, maybe the girl thought of smooth alphabet blocks that maybe her father had made out of a soft wood for her for Christmas. I made blocks for Allie.

I could imagine that the dying girl thought she was stacking the blocks up into words: SOS HELP ME OVER HERE HELP. I could imagine that, if I tried very hard.

Everything they taught me did not prepare me for this world.

Really, right at this moment, I am sitting in my underwear in a hotel room in St. George. After midnight. I am sweating. It is too hot to sleep. I feel as ineffectual as an old toothbrush. Rachel, my lover, and her six-year-old daughter are sleeping across the room from me. I am trying to be quiet. The lamp's light does not seem to bother them. Neither do they seem to be disturbed by the relentless

heat. Rachel will be thirty-five next month. She asks me every day if I am going to actually use a comb to comb my hair. She knows I won't. Allie always sings me "Happy Birthday" because it reminds her of me, she says. She tries to wink at me. She asks to ride on my shoulders. When I am working, she sometimes sits on my lap, hypnotized by my turning of pages or the gliding skate of my Papermate, blue, across a canary yellow sheet of paper. Rachel is content to brush the hair out of my eyes with her fingers as she walks past me at the pool.

I say to her this afternoon, "Works as well as a comb, don't you think?" Our eyes are somehow the same, which we both know.

I work as an accountant in an advertising agency. I go to night school, where I am studying philosophy or physiology or psychology, or something along one of those lines.

One night last week when Rachel and I were sleeping, one of my old lovers broke in through the bedroom window. She made sure she woke us both up.

She had a gun and a knife and some rope and a razor blade. "Don't be afraid," she said. She came over to my side of the bed and touched my elbow. "Tag! You're it!" And she was gone again, just that fast.

I grew up. Rachel grew up and had Allie with someone else. We grew up a little more and fell in love. Now we have one of those electric, coin-operated ponies in our kitchen—the kind of thing you see on the sidewalk just outside the supermarket. We could only get it through the back door, and then we couldn't get it past the kitchen. Allie puts her dime in, then hops up on it for a five minute ride. Then she goes on to some other toy. I'm glad when she gets off. It's not the noise that bothers me. I just hate to think of that horse bucking her off and leaving her for dead on the kitchen floor where maybe no one will find her for four days.

I want her to like me.

The farther you go in the playoffs, the deeper the wound when you lose.

Sometime before Christmas, Allie came in and got me out of bed in the middle of the night. She had an earache. It hurt her so much that she couldn't cry right. She looked at me with those eyes that said: I had no idea anything could hurt like this.

I carried her to the picture window in the front room and we sat in the big chair, watching the snow cover the city and sparkle beneath the streetlights. The city looked like a big, wet Christmas tree, asleep on its side for the night.

"Sing me that song," she said.

"Which song?"

"Sing the blue song."

The blues, she meant.

I sang to her until she finally fell asleep, her body fevered and ornithological in my arms.

The next morning, she made me a gift which still hangs on the wall in my office at work. She had fingerpainted large and wonderful swirling whorls of blue and yellow abstractions which she brought to me shyly. She stood next to me while I was making breakfast. She stood there holding this picture, waiting for me to see her. She handed me the still-wet construction paper as though it would break—with her heart—if I refused it. This matters, I think. More than anything else, it matters that this child and I and her mother splice our lives into each others'.

She ran to find the Scotch tape before I could even tell her I adored the picture. She likes me, I think.

We're on vacation here in St. George. Tonight before we went to bed, Rachel was in the shower. Allie was in her boxers and she and I were laughing and jumping on the bed. Rachel came out in her towel and started jumping with us.

"You shouldn't teach Allie to do this," she said as she jumped up and down, holding on to her towel.

"She *made* me do it," I said as I jumped, holding on to Allie.

And now that I've found them—now that they love me—how am I supposed to ever look away and let them fall out of this hotel window, where maybe I might not find them for four days?

George Keithley

GHOST DEER

1
At the Water Hole

On a pale green patch of grass that shot up from tawny soil a dozen impalas, ears cocked upright, stared at her camera. Or at the photographer herself, standing in the open bed of the all-wheel-drive Rover, leaning against its metal frame, careful not to move. Large or small, a herd still might be found grazing in this region. That's why she'd left Nairobi on a flight into the bush.

Leaving her eleven-year-old son in camp with the cook and the bearers, she had arrived here among the acacias and the open grassland with a Kikuyu driver and a gun-bearing Somali guide in the last cool hour of the night. They'd waited while the sky turned from black to gun-metal grey. Then the silver dawn awakened the world around them. The overcast paled and the air gleamed.

It was her favorite time of day, when light seemed to create itself, and for her project it was the ideal hour. In that first-light birds flew from the acacias, launching out over the plain. Insects chirred for a long while before clouds of them wafted into the warming air. Then the impalas stepped soundlessly from among the trees and approached the water hole.

All twelve were does and they arranged themselves around the murky pool. How lean and agile they looked, standing on long spindly legs. Their coat was a reddish tan, with a white belly. Their black-tipped ears were mouse-grey and the shape reminded her of an open hand, slightly cupped.

The woman watched them intently. She had large vivid eyes, liquid, brimming with dark light. And a lilting, musical voice though it was often muted. She spoke softly, almost as if singing to herself. In fact, like many solitary people, she did talk to herself. Questioning, berating, giving advice. Often it was her own inaudible voice that told her what to do next.

She tried too soon to photograph the impalas, using the large camera mounted on the tripod. The slightest sound caused their ears to flare out and turn toward her. She froze—*be still*, she thought—and they stared in her direction.

The guide had told her the impalas were prey for lions and leopards. That's why those large eyes were set high and well back in the narrow skull. Wide peripheral vision was, he said, one of their few defenses. His bearing was stern, and in his self-assured way he had something of the old-fashioned schoolmaster in him. He liked to lecture her, she was certain of that. She wondered if he spoke this way to most of his clients, who were men. Most likely he did.

The does watched and she waited.

In one respect this herd reminded her of wild horses she'd photographed back home—they couldn't see what was at their feet unless they lowered their heads. *See and be seen*, she told herself. Finally convinced the Rover posed no threat, they ducked their heads to drink. Now she noticed a dark brown cap on the top of each skull. "When you see that skull-cap," the guide told her, "you're like a leopard in a tree. Because you know you're out of their field of vision." She began to capture the impalas in one still frame after another.

When two ibis flew low overhead their curved beaks cut the air like short swords. The impalas heard wings flapping, saw shadows rowing across the water, and tossed back their heads in alarm. The next instant the ibis were gone and the does again arched their slender necks over the water's edge. Side by side they sipped from the pool, as quiet as when she first saw them.

She took the final photos in this set without interruption. Then waited until the impalas withdrew among the trees. She remarked that the does retreated—almost invisible under those dark boughs—without a sound. "Because they are ghost deer," the driver explained. "Listen to your soul. Or you will never hear them in this world."

But the Somali scoffed sharply. True, he said, she could not hear them. Yes, they arrived and they vanished in silence. "In time everything vanishes," he argued: "Are we all ghosts?"

Was he passing this off as wisdom? Or simply testing her? To see if this foreign woman would accept whatever he told her. This was not the way of her driver. The Kikuyu was quiet, he spoke little, and never tried to take advantage of her, to parade his knowledge or experience. But the guide? *Yes, certainly, he would speak smartly like that if he could get away with it.* He waited for her reply but she said nothing.

She hoped that soon she might discover five or six stealthy does encircling a fawn. Or at a water hole she could come upon a whole herd sidling up next to each other. Appearing suddenly and without a sound. Like their habit of crowding together, she supposed, silence too was a strategy for survival.

"They are quite beautiful," she said.

"If you please," her guide replied.

The photographer thought he meant to say, "If it pleases you to think so," implying disagreement. But he was not haughty like that, and he was so precise in every manner that she decided he must have spoken correctly, but with a meaning that eluded her.

He was a slender, clear-eyed Muslim of a deep fundamentalist faith. Born and raised in Mogadishu, he'd journeyed down the coast to Mombasa, then worked his way into this landlocked region by accompanying tourist caravans and hunting parties. He spoke of the impalas now, as he did of all animals, in a matter-of-fact voice in which she sensed a restrained excitement. Lions and leopards, he said, found these swift-footed does difficult to catch but easy to kill.

Had he meant to shock her? No doubt. She'd seen how he watched the herd with keen attention. *You don't fool me for a minute*, she almost told him: *You think they're splendid creatures too. But utterly vulnerable. That's why they worry you.* For most of the year the does kept apart from the rams. But now, if they sought safety in numbers, they were too few. Where were the others—out on the plain?

"It's a small herd," she remarked. The guide agreed.

"In this season we might find thirty or forty together." He allowed himself a wry smile. "Or none at all."

The herds were hunted from Lake Victoria down into South Africa, he lectured her. Here, on the Masai Steppe, they grazed on tender shoots and young grass, near water, and huddled under the acacias. Or in olive groves or among the thorn trees. As she heard him out she wondered, *How soon will these does disappear*?

To photograph them in their native habitat she used one of two cameras, both dust-proof, each with with an image-stabilizing telephoto lens.

Her images of zebras, and a still sequence of giraffes on the run, revealing their graceful stride, appeared in the anthology *At Home in the Natural World.* The book, featuring photographs of wildlife, had been an international best-seller, with its spare English text translated into French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. She would send her photos of the impalas to the publisher, for the new edition. But she meant to distribute them also through the galleries that displayed her nature studies, a network extending from New York to San Francisco.

She took pride in her craftsmanship, which she felt grew from patience, anxiety, and her devotion to detail. And something more. Once she committed herself to a task she would complete it. This sureness was a quiet source of pride. She would follow through.

But lately she worried that she was neglecting her son. He accompanied her now for the first time. Her late husband had encouraged her solitary work ethic—at what cost? A question she couldn't answer on this brightening morning, but could never keep far from her mind. *Fear and care are not the same*, she scolded herself. *Will you worry away every last minute*? *Move on*!

2
"A Visitor Makes Us Laugh"

On the second day at the water hole the boy was with her. Three years ago when she'd photographed the zebras and giraffes—creatures of obvious beauty but also a remote grace that inspired her—she'd come to Africa with her husband after they enrolled their son in boarding school. Now that he'd lost his father

she couldn't bear to leave him behind. She knew her husband would agree. He was a stockbroker who loved travel, as she did. He'd framed her photo of a zebra looking pensive in the lowering sunlight of a late afternoon with its shadow aslant on the grass—winner of the prestigious Evelyn Middleton Award—and hung it in his office. But just last year he suffered a brain aneurysm and collapsed while playing handball with a former classmate from Duke, now the Lieutenant Governor, at a racquet club on Long Island. He died in the ambulance before reaching the hospital.

This morning the overcast lasted longer, but when it lifted the impalas approached the water. They startled two sand grouse that ran along the ground and scurried into the bush. The woman watched the impalas through her binoculars, then exchanged them for a small quick-shutter camera that she looped around her neck.

The Rover had remained in the same place since an hour before dawn. The impalas seemed to take it for granted now, this bulky object in the middle distance. While she photographed them with the mounted camera, they dipped their heads, drank briefly, then looked up. Again, rapidly, as if they were just tasting the water.

"It's the lion that makes them hurry," the guide whispered.

"Is there a lion here? This morning?"

"No," he said. "But they know lions."

The guide slipped from the far side of the Rover, and with his gun in the crook of his arm he went along one of the thin trails weaving across the plain, through the near bush, to the grove and the water. To see what might be about.

Far off, the plain lay undisturbed by the faint breeze, and she saw clumps of dark green trees that would prove hard and dry. Here at its tender edge the bush, so often tawny, was almost green.

The boy sat on a campstool in the bed of the Rover, his elbows resting on his knees, a shock of light brown hair sticking up at the back of his head. His shoulders were high and narrow. When he'd put on his backpack in the dark, one strap was loose and now the pack tilted to that side. His mother resisted the impulse to offer her help unless he asked for it, and he hadn't. He watched the impalas in silence.

The talk about a lion was unfortunate. She wanted to reassure her son they were safe with the guide accompanying them. The Somali, she said, was knowledgeable and efficient. "Yesterday, coming back to camp, I saw him kill a leopard with one shot."

"He won't kill these, will he?"

"Of course not."

"I want to remember what they look like when they're drinking. Like they're nibbling the water. Or the way they stand at attention when the wind is up," he said. "I don't need to see how they die."

That was it, you see. He didn't have his father's exuberance and she thought maybe he never would. But he had his father's death to deal with, and perhaps that was the reason for his reticence. Still he looked more settled within himself than he had at any time in the past year.

When the guide returned he climbed into the bed of the Rover, his face creased with an uncommon grin. He pointed to the camera on the tripod. "Watch what's coming," he warned. "Be ready."

All was quiet for a moment and then nothing was.

Around the far side of the grove came a great bull elephant in that slow ponderous walk that set the trees shaking beside him. Sunlight flashed from the leaves. Birds flew from the branches, shrieking. The photographer reached for the lightweight camera around her neck. The elephant, his huge scalloped ears wagging slightly, rounded the water hole and took his place among the impalas. Politely they parted, a few feet to the right, a few more to the left, to let him in.

The wide-eyed boy broke into a big smile—it gave way to a raucous laugh he tried to stifle by pulling his shirt up over his mouth. The hair on the back of his head twitched. The Kikuyu too couldn't contain his mirth. His shoulders shook. His thin high-pitched laugh played upon the air in little trills: "Tee-hee! Tee-hee-hee!"

The elephant towered over the impalas; his leathery bulk made them look like finely formed miniatures, but they were not frightened away. They dipped their heads and drank. The elephant

lowered his trunk to the water and spooned a first taste up to his mouth. Then another.

The driver hugged himself, shivering with delight. "This is our good day. A visitor makes us laugh," he declared. "Tee-hee-hee!"

3
The Old Pilot

On their arrival in Kenya the photographer and her son had been flown from Nairobi out to the undulating grassland by an elderly German gentleman, a post-war pilot with nearly thirty years experience in the bush.

"*Jambo*!" he'd greeted her in Swahili, which made her feel welcome. "*U hali gani*?" he asked, and she assured him that she was fine. A reserved man rarely seen in public, he lived in the capital but wasn't truly part of The Colony, as the older generation called themselves. She couldn't imagine him at their dinner parties where champagne, port, and claret flowed with the conversation; in her husband's clubs and their friends' homes where gossip mingled with laughter among clinking glasses of whiskey and gin, and, in that bright season, a potent sweet-smelling liqueur the investment bankers and traders called "bush brandy".

The pilot spoke English softly, in clipped sentences. Her husband, who'd met with investors in Nairobi, could be unreasonable on a point or two. He rarely mentioned the culture of bribery. Or anyone's drug use or drinking. But he deplored the English spoken by the most privileged of The Colony—corporate executives, their spouses, their renegade young who wore army fatigues and filched their parents' coke or whiskey until, in their twenties, they found work and moved in with their friends. They spoke in loud voices seldom heard in the bush. And their tone, her husband said, was either challenging or dismissive, for unless you're one of them they expect you won't understand them.

The old pilot remembered her husband. He'd flown them here three years ago. He looked at the boy appraisingly, then remarked:

"His father." She was delighted that he'd seen the resemblance. "The hair and the eyes," he said. Nairobi had an incredible network of news and rumor, some of it true. The Colony surely knew of her husband's death. But did this silver-haired German? He had the good grace not to speak of it.

He'd guided the plane down the narrow landing strip that ended in a clearing surrounded by high grass—the ground beaten down by people gathering here, over the years, to exchange news or settle disputes. Or to celebrate. Flights arriving or departing were rare; a favorite animal—a goat, commonly—might be sacrificed. She was grateful to the pilot for taxiing the plane to the edge of the clearing, where her son couldn't have seen the carcass if there was one.

Today, returning from the water hole, before they reached the airstrip, they drove past a mile-long column of Masai *morani*; warriors moving their cattle in search of better grassland. They walked in single file, twenty feet apart, beside the herd. Swathed in a dark red robe, each man carried a spear and glowered into the open bed of the Rover as it slowly drove by.

The rising heat made the woman's clothes stick to her. The instant the Rover clumped into the clearing she stood and shook out her blouse. Her son clambered to his feet and tugged at his backpack. Yes, it *was* a good day. When he turned toward her she saw he was still grinning about the elephant.

4
In the Long Grass

They'd started down the short trail into camp when she halted and turned back. *Not yet*, she thought.

She was pleased with her work at the water hole but at the same time dissatisfied. "We're almost finished," she told her son. "But there's something else I need."

She sent him back to their camp with the guide while she remained with the driver. This man with the bird-trill laugh—she trusted his quiet nerve. And his deft hand on the steering wheel in

open country, over terrain where the only roads were mud-dried ruts.

He wore a crucifix from his boyhood in the Catholic mission school for the Kikuyu. It hung from his neck onto his blue-black chest, and he often touched it with his forefinger for reassurance, especially when he spoke English. On his wrist was a green-turning-brown snakeskin bracelet to ward off the devils that dwell in tall grass and in the woods, like the Forest Devil.

Hanging from the dashboard was a wooden mask hardly larger than her hand. The narrow face was black and chalk-white; its eyes were heavy-lidded as in old age, but the mouth was full of finely carved little teeth. Adult or child? When she raised the question he pretended not to understand. He turned to her and smiled tenderly but made no reply.

She asked him to drive her out to the distant grassland. Not for a day's work—she was done for today—but to search for a location where she could photograph the impalas when they passed through, as they did in mid-morning or in the late afternoon. Tomorrow or the day after. This was the season when the grass is that short-lived shade of green after the rains, and it's flecked with little white wildflowers. When the does form their herds and seek out the rams in their home territory. It's a brief time, for the lush grass is soon parched by the heat.

Already the overcast had burned off and the rising warmth made the air shimmer. They'd driven away from the airstrip and the clearing and left the camp far out of sight. Now they came nudging their way onto a long swale of grass that might be the ideal location. The air had a fresh, tangy scent. "Slowly," she said. Then, "Stop."

But here, removed from the sparse shade trees, the water, and the silent herd at the fringe of the bush, she found no point of reference that she recognized. The sun, climbing high overhead, cast its vibrant light everywhere. Stepping down from the Rover, she waded into the long grass. She felt disoriented. As if her shadow always fell in front of her. Whichever way she turned, she couldn't avoid that dusky image of herself striving in the grass.

5
A False Blind

Setting up at the water hole was not too difficult, she reminds herself. Taking still photos at close range on the plain is another matter. In the wide sweep of open territory there's nowhere to conceal the vehicle, her guide, or a mounted camera. No natural terrace overlooks the grassland, and there's no place to construct a blind. Only the undulating plain covered with sharp-scented grasses in the simmering heat. Why not leave the Rover and walk far away from it? She might wear the small quick-shutter camera around her neck, carry the larger one in both hands, and the tripod on her back; she'd done that before. But the gun-bearing guide would have to accompany her and it would still be risky. Wherever the impalas gather, leopards or a pride of black-maned lions will be on their scent. The leopard, on its approach, crouching so low to the ground that all you see is the irregular runnel in the grass until it strikes.

Here in the open country, the guide cautioned her, the impala does are especially vulnerable, separated from the rams, though they have a broad field of vision. It's his opinion that they see poorly in full daylight, and he may be right. Those large eyes will alert them to a flanking lion, he says, but is it too late? He can't entirely conceal his excitement. Even a cheetah, he warns her, might snatch a small fawn from the herd and carry it off.

She's determined to make the Rover a false blind, in plain sight. The driver brings it onto an untracked portion of the grassland and they'll remain there quietly, day after day, until the impalas have no fear of it, and approach them. For three days she stays hunkered down in the Rover from early morning until sunset. She arrives while the impalas are still visiting the water hole and leaves only when they've finished grazing and return to their groves of broad-branched trees.

6
Wonder Or Fright?

Now she has incredible luck. It's late afternoon on the fourth day, she's sweltering under the khaki sun-roof covering the bed of the Rover, and her hands ache from holding her binoculars for so many hours. But a herd of impalas appears on the plain nearer than she'd anticipated; they must have come up from a shallow decline in the plain, looming suddenly into view. They trot along gracefully, leisurely, their lean legs almost prancing through the high grass, their rumps jouncing. The herd seems to notice the vehicle all at once. They veer away; then, as with a single mind they wheel around, coming straight toward her. They stop within thirty feet and she catches her breath. Not a whisper from the driver or guide either. For a long moment while the impalas gaze in her direction they're motionless, their back-set eyes absorbing the stationary vehicle. The black-tipped ears are fanned out, alert. She counts two dozen does. A few rams must be near but she can't waste a moment looking for them. She'll take her chances with the lightweight camera that's already at hand.

When she has finished photographing the herd she waits for them to move on, to drift away to another part of the grassland. Then she puts her hand-held camera into its case and removes the larger camera from the tripod and collapses the tripod and lays it down in the bed of the Rover. Small movements. But any one of them might have startled a single doe, spooking the herd, and they'd spring up in a series of sudden leaps that look both frantic and rehearsed. It's an age-old strategy of distraction and escape, she thinks, when they fly across each others' backs —"six ways at once" her husband used to say—then bound over the plain and out of sight.

It's a lovely spectacle, she reminds herself. The lean-limbed females grazing in the bush, with a long-horned ram nearby, when suddenly the herd is startled and they begin to leap in all directions, or so it seems, gracefully sailing over each other with no sound but the rustling grass; landing for an instant and leap-

ing again. Then great puffs of dust floating above the grass as the impalas rush off to safety and you realize they haven't scattered—it only looked like panic—they knew where they were going, and they're gone. *Beautiful! When it works they accomplish their getaway by a splendid bluff.* Yet that's not what she wants us to see. Her focus has been on their physical appearance, of course. But in framing those features she hopes to capture on film something ever-present in their nature. "Listen to your soul," the driver had told her. Without this trait the impala wouldn't exist. *Be still. And wait*, she cautions herself.

Finally, this is what she means to show us: not their celebrated leaping—that athleticism merged with a dance-like grace—but their poise in the instant before they bolt. She believes it is pure instinct. But is it wonder or fright?

If she succeeds she'll help us to see the discipline that sustains the impala's slight frame. An attentiveness that fills the deep-purple eyes of each doe. The stillness that holds the herd together in the dignity of their daily survival.

Now.

7
At Dusk

The sunset is slow, violent, astonishing—a great flaming-out, all red, orange, a sliver of green, the horizon shrinking and darkening beneath it. She watches it with her son, speechless. She thinks it's a petty thing to wish for, sentimental and perhaps proud and self-pitying, but she hopes he'll remember this sight for the rest of his life. It's a thought that leaves her with a sudden chill because of the hour. Dusk comes quietly into the camp and cools everything it touches. The grass, the cookware, blankets. The impalas have retreated into a grove for whatever shelter the trees will give them. Birds—all of them dark in the failing light—glide toward the treetops.

The boy helped gather kindling for the cooking-fire. Later she sees him helping the bearers secure the tents. Then they stoke the

campfire for the night, to discourage the lions from approaching. Her guide has breeched his gun and inserted two cartridges, and he closes it now. He tells her he'll take the first and last watch tonight. She almost envies him.

A breeze stirs the fire and scatters their shadows around in a ring. There's no moon, the cool darkness has huddled them together, but overhead the sky is an enormous sea of stars. They'll have clear weather for the flight out tomorrow.

8
Vultures

No telling what had died overnight or in the early morning hours that she loved best. But when the woman looked up, vultures were dark against the bright blue sky. It hurt to look straight up into that light with your naked eye, but she made the effort. They were high up and veering widely; they had not yet lowered and begun their circling, so she thought it must be a recent kill. When she first saw vultures looming over a lame horse abandoned in a pasture—their great wingspan fully extended—she was surprised by their horrid beauty. But when she witnessed a pair picking apart a dead giraffe, the ferocity of the beak and the power in those strong talons alarmed her. As did the bald blood-red head.

Now she remembered the ritual killing of a beloved animal that was necessary if they were to hope for a safe flight. The creature would be tethered to a pair of stakes driven into the earth before its throat was cut with the fire-seared blade of a machete. She felt sure the Masai would not do this. Not because of their love of livestock—her guide told her they count their wealth in the number of cattle they own—but because they have no belief in good or evil spirits of any kind. No; a few gentle-hearted Kikuyus, who believed in witchcraft, spells, and devils, and the good and wickedness that we mask as chance and circumstance in our everyday life, would perform the sacrifice in their place. Or a devout Somali, seeing that the beast was first fed, then scrubbed down, and the blade was cleansed by fire, might kill it in

a heartbeat. The ceremony would be performed swiftly and out of her sight.

The bearers had brought her cameras and the weatherproof cannisters of film to the plane. Already they'd loaded them into the rear compartment with the luggage. The plane sat in the clearing, only half a mile from the camp. The photographer and her son could have reached it quickly. But once they'd decided to leave, it seemed they both wanted to delay their departure. They took a roundabout trek through waist-high grass that rustled like silk all around them. They walked single-file on the path and he kept a stride ahead of her. Several times she wanted to reach out with her fingers and brush the hair on the back of his head, but she knew better. When the boy spoke he didn't look over his shoulder but continued walking in a purposeful way, and she told herself she admired this new quality in him.

"Did you get what you came for?"

His mother thought a long time about her reply but then the rustling grasses gave way to the trampled earth. Across the clearing in an unbroken stillness a half-dozen men stood shoulder to shoulder. Each held up, at a slant, a brightly decorated shield and together they formed a close ring. Except for the six ceremonial shields they were naked and their dark flesh glistened in the white hot glare of noon. By surrounding the zebra where it bled out on the ground they protected its carcass from the vultures circling overhead.

What had gone wrong with the sacrifice? Surely the animal was secured before its throat was cut. Did it break free at the first touch of the hot blade? The photographer almost regretted her fascination for details. She saw two stakes lying a few feet apart. She saw splotches of blood here and there in the worn-out grass. The men must have hauled the zebra back shortly before she and her son arrived. They'd wrestled it to a staggering halt and tied its hindlegs and forelegs again. Finally it went down and they encircled it the way she saw them now.

She put her hand on her son's shoulder to steady herself. Just beyond them stood the plane, its fresh coat of yellow paint brilliant

in the midday sun. She looked for its pilot, the man who would fly them to Nairobi's Wilson Airport. Where they must connect with a Lufthansa flight to Cairo. Then overnight to Paris, changing planes at four in the morning, and on to New York.

She was sorry not to see the old flyer today. She appreciated the German's courtesies, his thoughful concern for her, and in a moment of panic she wondered what had become of him. "Everything vanishes," the guide had told her. She remembered his remark but refused to be haunted by it.

Here was a different bush pilot, a younger man. At first she hadn't noticed him because he stood motionless, facing the field where the sacrifice was made. The six men with their shields. The smell of blood in the rising heat. As he turned and came toward her, a cigarette clamped in a corner of his mouth, his stride was both impatient and reluctant. When he stood before them he was silent, the cigarette twitching. Sunlight struck the silver ring he wore on an antique silver chain around his neck. The photographer guessed the slim chain, if not the ring itself, was the gift of a young woman. A recent conquest. For a moment she imagined it once belonged to the girl's grandmother. *A gift, all the same*, she was certain. But why did it make her uneasy, this relic from someone else's life? Living or dead. She saw that her hand still rested on her son's shoulder, and she removed it.

The man's long blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail, with a few strands escaping. He wore a black tank-top tucked into fashionable camouflage pants. Half-submerged in a side pocket was a metallic flask with a ribbed screw-top. He lifted one foot, wavered, then stubbed out his cigarette on the heel of his boot before he spoke. She was not surprised when he greeted them in Colony English, and from his breath she could tell he'd been drinking bush brandy since the middle of the morning. *While we've kept him waiting. But, no, perhaps not as much as I fear. Go on, now. Do as you must.*

They followed him across the bloodied turf of the clearing and boarded the plane.

Joanne Lowery

My May

On May Day the enthusiasts are still praising
the caramelized cotton candy crabapples
and the tulips quick as death.
I smile, nod, miss winter.

But then the second weekend of the month dares
to rain until green overrides green
and new leaves sag water-tortured.
I, who have been drought-stricken,

do not complain when a deluge two days later
darkens green to photosynthetic charcoal
and on Thursday morning lightning
begins before dawn, augur of more rain.

Now things are as they should be.
Soon by the river gnats will speckle
the damp air, mud tug at my feet.
I want to forget how years ago

May rained like this for me and my lover
in all the places where we walked
and that one Friday before dusk,
a different river cresting, his hand

pointed to a black-crowned night heron rising
from the reeds with a harsh cry.

David James

THE INVISIBLE MAN'S HALF SISTER

She comes and goes
right before your eyes,
dissolving on the couch,
vanishing in an elevator.
Her gift, if you call it that, is the ability
to become invisible, clothes and all,
but there's no rhyme or reason
to her disappearing.
One minute you're at a restaurant,
staring into her crystal eyes. You look down
to read today's appetizers and glance back
to find an empty chair.
Even after years of marriage,
it bothers you, this imagined absence.
She's there, you know.
You talk to the chair like an old friend,
ignoring the off-hand looks from customers,
until she materializes, face darkening,
a body filling in the space
of her life.

What was at first exotic
is now annoying.
As you're shopping, she disappears and wanders off,
leaving you thumbing through neck ties.
On the dance floor, you twirl no one,
moving by yourself in the corner.
Drivers gawk as you sleep in the passenger's seat
while your wife steers down the road, invisible.

There is one minor consolation
for all the grief. On those nights

when you're making love, she melts into thin air.
You kiss a space inches above the pillow,
your naked body suspended in the room
as your hips thrust back and forth.
In the fleshy darkness,
you can make love to anyone
you can imagine.

Kendall Klym

BALLERINO

n (1) butt of jokes
with well-developed buttocks,
presumed gay; *a* (2) lustrous as
a skua nestling in an
Antarctic oil spill; *n* (3) smooth
landing in Mephistophelean
mizzle; *a* and *n* (4) Adonic:
waltzing 'neath rosebud,
frozen in fishpond; *n* (5) faux
finishing technique established
by Hercule de Cul during
the reign of Louis Qua-
torze; *v* (6) to sweat droplets
of bravura through the instep;
a (7) ephemeral as a spark
of electricity on
the backbone of an
inkling; *n* (8) brief summer
respite on Mykonos, nude;
v (9) to preen; *n* (10) rare breed
of workhorse with unprecedented
ability to lift sylphs . . .
and wilis.

Angie Macri

Rush of Apples, as Cardinals

My daughter mistakes it
for a dancer, this sculpture
of painted steel called Defender.

A puma has one summer
to teach her cubs to hunt,
so we move on to a painting

(that shows what I might
tell of prairie and bois d'arc,
the cardinals in their pulses,

fruit from flowers, apples
from the family of rose).
We mark the time

when apples bloom,
those days before it ends
with rain or wind

or heat, the kind
that brings on leaves
suddenly, like kerosene flame.

Victor Enns

AFGHANISTAN CONFESSION 117

I want a blue covered woman
to wash my dusty feet
in a white porcelain basin
perfumed with anise.

Norman Nathan

AT THE TOP

If you were one in a million,
there'd still be six thousand like you,
pinpoints in the world;
crowded all together,
how could you endure each other?

would you prefer to rush apart
and shine upon the lowly,
to be treated like a star,
unworried that too much light
kindles a flame
that time burns out?

Kevin Hadduck

In a Small Café

In a small café, shouts and a truck passing
Take us away from our stoneware cups.
Against the clarity of window glass I glimpse
The fall and rise of your eyelashes.

In a park, where light and shade spill from a tree,
Dappling us and our bench, you turn and look
Across your shoulder at the geese along the shore.
Curves of your ear and brow gather sudden light.

At the market, I come back to your aisle.
I catch the profile of your lips and chin, your hand
At some unruly hair, hovering near your face.
You are bending to inspect apples.

You wait with me on a corner as the light changes.
Then, in a medley of shoulders and purses and
Wind-tousled heads, I hurry to keep pace with you,
Your quick glance to the left exposing your cheek.

Within the flourishes of our hands and dancings
of our lips, there among the rumpled sheets,
I find you. In the glow of our nightstand clock,
I catch the silhouette of your face, turning.

Jeremy Schnee

WENDY AND TIM

There in the open purse next to the old woman, sat an envelope full of money. As Wendy walked down the aisle of the bus, she first noticed the open zipper, the crinkled flap of the envelope, and then she noticed just how unaware the old woman was. Not until she leaned a bit closer did she see the money, a lot of money, scrunched tight inside like a little green accordion. Wendy didn't mean to abruptly stop and look suspicious. That was the last thing she wanted. The floor began to rumble with the bus's acceleration and she slid into the window seat across the aisle from the purse, fighting every urge to smile.

From the commotion of her boyfriend plopping into the seat next to Wendy, the old woman turned from staring out the window. She had a hat full of flowers and, though the day was sunny, an umbrella across her lap. Wendy nodded at her, and hoped that in her yellow sundress she appeared innocent enough, like she just came from church or something. Both she and Tim were dressed up on this Sunday afternoon. He kept pulling the collar away from his neck and saying she was right, it was too hot for a tie today.

Tim hadn't noticed the money like Wendy. He was so distracted watching the shuffle of Wendy's hips as she squeezed between seats in the skintight dress that he almost tripped over his own feet while stepping down the aisle. Ever since walking to her house a few minutes earlier and seeing her rocking on the porch in her new dress, her red painted toenails, straps on her heels that ran up her ankle like a coiling snake, and the tan muscles of her legs flexing with each rock of the chair, he'd been able to think of nothing but what he wanted to do to her when they got to the back of the bus.

"Why are we sitting way up here?" Tim asked, tilting his head toward the back. Wendy didn't answer, still watching the old woman from the corner of her eye, who was fidgeting with the cotton flowers of her hat and absorbed in the scenery rushing by outside the window.

"The back seats are open," Tim said. He and Wendy always sat back there, and this was the bus driver with the thick glasses Tim nicknamed the owl. He knew they could do just about anything back there and never even get noticed in the rearview mirror.

"I like these seats today," she said, grabbing his hand and hoping he'd forget the back seats. He was a bit of an obstacle now. Taking that money with goody-two-shoes around certainly wouldn't be easy. Already, her heart beat fast and her back felt a little moist. She was afraid to take the money, terrified actually. But the things she didn't think she could do, didn't think she should do, were the things she liked to do best. She'd never pick-pocketed, but the old woman was practically asking for it. Despite her nerves, she could do this. Her heels drummed on the floor as she tried to calm herself.

"Are you nervous to meet my dad?" Tim asked when her knee bumped his leg. She shook her head "no." She wasn't even thinking about the dinner at Tim's dad's house. If he weren't here right now, maybe she'd just sit down next to the old woman, start chatting by complimenting her hat, and see just how close she could get to the purse. But then again, she always felt protected when he was around, and maybe he could somehow help her get the money. Plus she liked it that he liked the side of her that left restaurants without paying the bill, knew how to distract the sales ladies at jewelry counters, and changed into new clothes in stores and walked out wearing them. Not that he did these things himself, but he seemed to like calling her his bad girl.

The relationship was still relatively new. They'd been dating over a month, and to Tim's delight, calling themselves a couple for the past few weeks. They were on their way to his dad's house where he couldn't wait to introduce her. Today was sort of a big deal. He'd brought her around his mom several times, but Tim was barely ever invited over to dinner at his dad's house. His dad was always working, always so busy; Tim barely had the chance to see him. And he couldn't wait to impress his dad, not only with his first real girlfriend but with Wendy, an absolutely beautiful girlfriend. She wasn't just some dainty little blonde either. She was athletic enough to have a small trace of stomach muscle.

He always pretended to himself, and others when they asked about his social life, that he didn't mind being alone; he hadn't dated much in high school or these past two years of college. He was kind of short and had big ears, not bad looking though. People told him his eyes were a smoky blue that made them pretty. Wendy was a cashier at the supermarket where he worked his summer job. When he first started there, he remembered how he walked past her register looking at the floor, afraid not of checking her out, but of her seeing him check her out. So he sometimes looked at her through displays, stocking the chips near her register more often than they needed. Kind of pitiful maybe, but his shyness didn't matter anymore because he was with her now.

For Tim, Wendy was what he considered his first real girlfriend. For her, boyfriends came and went, and it didn't usually matter much to her anyway. Tim was different. She especially knew this because if she were with any other guy right now, she'd ditch him somehow, or start a fight to get rid of him so she could focus on the money.

They met a couple months ago at work after she knocked over a stack of milk crates. It was a huge mess; half the store was one big white puddle. Tim had been the one stocking the milk, and left the tower of crates on the floor. It certainly wasn't his fault, but when the manager ran over, yelling and cursing, Tim said it was an accident. He blamed his clumsiness and took the fall for her. She didn't know why, didn't even know his name then. He had no reason to help her. She watched him mop up the mess, and then she watched him walk into the manager's office. Through the door, she heard lots of yelling. Peeking through the blinds, she saw Tim just sitting there saying he was sorry over and over, and she realized it was one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for her. Once they started dating, no guy had ever been like him: bringing her flowers, holding doors all the time, and writing her poems. He even walked her home from work in the rain last week, holding his jacket over her head and keeping her dry while he got soaked.

As the bus hummed forward, stopping and starting, people getting on and off, Wendy kept an eye on the old woman while

Tim talked about his dad and step-mom, and said something about not mentioning animals or pets. His step-mom's bird just died. Across the bus aisle, the old woman sat quietly, occasionally moving her umbrella in her lap. The ride seemed to go on forever, Tim talking while she nodded, and said, "uh-huh." Then at the stop in front of the fire hall, the old woman stood, hung her purse from her shoulder and stepped into the aisle as the bus rocked to a stop. Wendy jumped up and stepped over Tim's feet.

"After you," Wendy said to the old woman.

"Hey Wendy, this isn't the stop for my dad's." Tim pulled at her hand. "It's not for another mile or so."

"Come on!" She winked and pulled at him. "Just follow me, okay."

It wasn't the first time she asked him to follow her. Good things usually happened when she led him somewhere. Not having many friends in town, home from college and bored with nothing to do, the first couple weeks of summer were dull as could be. He'd sit at home reading, watching TV, and missing the busyness of loads of schoolwork. Then she made that huge mess of the milk at work and he couldn't let the girl he had a crush on get in trouble. It paid off too. The next day she introduced herself and invited him to a party at one of her friend's houses. Together they drank shot after shot; she kept telling him to drink more. He'd never been so drunk. Actually he'd never been drunk before. At school he never went to parties, instead focusing on his grades thinking they'd pay off someday. That night at the party, he realized there was a lot he was missing out on.

It wasn't just the alcohol that night, or the yelling, laughing, and just not caring about anything as much as he danced with her on a couch when there wasn't even music. It was she who was exciting, especially after the party. So late no one was out, not even cars; he walked her home. With all the few and far between other girls he had dated, it seemed like it took weeks to even get to that first kiss at the door. Wendy pulled him down an alley on the walk home, and they kissed outside against a fence until she told him to follow her, and broke the window of some little greeting card shop. He couldn't believe it. She reached through the broken

glass and opened the door, then pulled him in. He kept asking her what if they got caught, or there was a silent alarm and the police came. She took off his shirt, and then hers, and when he felt her warm skin pressed against his, he didn't even care if he got busted and went to jail. That was, up until then, the most exciting night of his life.

So he stepped from the bus, even if it meant being a little late to his dad's.

Wendy stepped onto the sidewalk and watched the old woman, who walked surprisingly fast for her age. Tim reached for her hand and laced his fingers in hers. He'd really changed since they first met. She taught the poor dull boy to have fun: partying, drinking, staying out all night, and the big one, the sex. The thing he had no idea about their first time. She loved to see him trying new things. Last week she convinced him to skinny dip in one of the sleeping neighbors' pools. He had hesitated, standing at the edge of the pool in his underwear. But he finally did jump in and afterward kept saying he couldn't believe what they had just done. They laughed about it the rest of the night.

"What are we doing?" Tim said. "Are we going to sneak off somewhere secret and, you know, fool around?" He grabbed her waist.

"Hold on a second," Wendy said. She waited for the old woman to distance herself from them a little so she could explain. Next to them, the bus pulled away from the curb and coughed dusty exhaust at them.

"We have to follow that old woman," Wendy said. "But don't look suspicious about it." The sidewalks were pretty bare, but a lot of cars passed in the streets.

"If we're not going to do anything important," Tim said, "we should really get going to my dad's house." As much fun as Tim had with Wendy, partying all night, sneaking off any hour of the day and having sex in closets and bathrooms, he still liked to maintain an appearance of responsibility, especially in front of his parents. They both said how proud they were of his hard work, and all his accomplishments at school, and he couldn't show up hours late for dinner like Wendy expected now that she was distracted.

"Let's just go to my dad's, Wendy. We'll have to wait another fifteen minutes for the next bus, but we won't be too late if we walk fast."

She didn't want to go to a lame dinner to talk about weather, and tulips in the neighborhood. She wanted to do something to make every inch of her body tingle. Just getting him to steal a bottle of liquor from his mom's cabinet was a steep uphill battle. He was sometimes just plain boring. She'd admit it. But still, he was wonderful, and every morning she woke up and couldn't wait to see him. Not to mention he seemed to understand her better than anyone ever had. Let her stay over at his house all the time. She was smack dab in the middle of six brothers and sisters. Her dad was always working, and her mom, in between keeping the house spotless and drinking, was usually passed out. She liked to think she and Tim might live together sometime in the future. Even though it'd only been a couple of months now, sometimes—as ridiculous as she told herself it was—she imagined a nice house with him, maybe even kids who got good grades at school, and even a dog. She never had a pet in her life, but she wanted a golden retriever, and they could have one and name it something cute like Bo-Bo.

"Where are we going?"

"Look!" She pointed at the old woman.

"At what?" Tim said.

"I saw something I wanted...the purse."

"But you have one right here." He pointed at the little yellow purse hanging at her side.

"Not the purse, Tim. There's a lot of money. It's just sitting in that woman's purse." He looked puzzled for a second, then seemed to understand.

"Are you kidding me?" he said. "You want to take money from an old woman?"

Telling him was a mistake.

"Why?" he asked.

She didn't have an answer for him. Not one that sounded convincing anyway. But it'd be fun, and it'd be nice to get some extra money. And this was an easy opportunity she knew wouldn't

come again soon. But he had been going on about this dinner at his dad's house for the past week or so, eager to impress the guy who was barely around when he was young, and she didn't want to let him down either. Now the way he kept clearing his throat and almost saying something, she figured a lecture might be coming on.

"I have a great idea," she blurted. "You should do it!" This would be a perfect opportunity for him. He couldn't lecture her if he did it himself, and what a thrill for her to watch.

He didn't want to steal, especially not from an old woman, and couldn't believe how she kept telling him it was going to be fun and daring and there was nothing to worry about. Her words went straight to his chest, tying him up.

"Do you trust me, Tim?"

"Umm, yeah," he said. It scared him the few times she talked about the other guys she dated. They always seemed like they didn't mind sneaking into movies or staying out all night. What if she decided he was too boring for her?

"I want to share this with you." She squeezed his hand tight and pulled his arm. "We have to keep up with her."

The two walked fast. Ahead, the old woman crossed the street, and they missed the walk light. In the four-lane road in front of them, cars whizzed by. Blue, gray, and red blurred into a brown wall of traffic. The red hand on the Don't Walk sign flashed. While they waited on the corner, the old woman moved further away, her purse bobbing at her side. Tim turned back and forth to Wendy and the traffic. He couldn't do what she wanted and the closer they had gotten to the old woman, the more his throat had clamped up.

"We have to cross," Wendy said. "She's getting too far away from us."

"Look at this traffic," Tim said. "Let's just go back to the bus stop. Why do you need the money?"

"Because," Wendy said, "It's something we're not supposed to have. That's what makes this so much fun."

"This is awful," Tim started to say before Wendy pulled at his hand.

"Now!" she yelled. She yanked on his arm, jumped off the curb, and stomped in her heels onto the street. Tim followed her into the brief opening of the speeding cars. A truck honked as they neared the other side and it had to brake to give them enough time to dash in front of it. They hopped onto the curb. The wind from cars speeding behind ruffled the bottom of Wendy's dress, and swirled Tim's hair.

"We made it!" she said, breathing heavy and laughing. "We almost died!"

He didn't laugh with her as she looked back at the traffic. At first he had been amazed by the way Wendy did whatever she wanted. Like sneaking into the men's restroom with him once at a museum, telling off snotty customers at work, and showing up outside his window at two in the morning, asking to sleep over. Sometimes at work, groups of co-workers gathered when he bragged about her and the wild things they did. But she was hard to keep up with. He always seemed to be late to work after a night with her. He didn't always want to go to parties, or stay up until dawn. And another thing he hated was that she had so many past boyfriends. While he was sharing these new things with her—holding hands, walks in the rain at night, cuddling in bed, and yeah, the big one for him, the sex—she'd probably done these things twenty times over with other guys, and how could he even feel special to her? But then again, she was the most fun he'd ever had.

They talked about the future once. She planned to visit his dorm on weekends when he went back to school, and she even talked about places they could move after he graduated. He loved that she sounded like she wanted to be with him. He wondered about her future. Right now she was just a cashier. She didn't seem to have any other ambitions, and he wondered if he might just be the one to get bored of her someday. He glanced over as she stepped onto the sidewalk and pointed to the old woman. Wendy was gorgeous, and maybe right now nothing else mattered.

Wendy waved Tim to her. He was lagging when they had their chance to catch the old woman. She wasn't too far ahead.

"Hurry, Tim!" Wendy said. She was starting to get really annoyed. His shoes scuffed the sidewalk. Maybe he was stalling and thought if the old woman got away, they'd just go to his dad's house.

"Could you walk any slower?" she yelled. The fact that he was still there though impressed her. Maybe this was a little too much for Tim. He called customers at the store sir and ma'am, and she even heard him quote from the Bible once or twice. She didn't want to push him too far.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Tim said.

It wasn't as though Wendy had to have the money. She had almost no bills living with her parents, and the money she made cashiering was enough to buy or save for most things she wanted. The first time she ever stole anything had been on accident. It was a good five years ago and she'd been out school shopping with her mom and siblings. She was given money to get a jacket and was trying it on when her mom yelled for her to watch her younger siblings. They ran out of the store fighting so she chased them. Not until outside did she even notice she was still wearing the fake suede jacket, one that she thought sort of looked ugly on her. But no one else noticed she left with it on either. Not the sales lady, her mother, her brothers or sisters. She could have run back into the store to return it. It didn't really even fit her body. The urge to confess quickly wore off. Having the jacket, seeing it hanging in the closet, wearing it in front of family and friends, people complimenting it, she knew every time she felt its weight on her shoulders or the fibers of the sleeves scratching her arms, she had a secret about this jacket. It was a long time before that stomach-dropping feeling of what if someone found out wore off.

"I mean we're already late for my dad's anyway," Tim said. He grabbed Wendy and tried to stop her.

She just smiled, not annoyed like he thought she'd be.

"Do you want to know why it'll be amazing?" she said.

He shook his head, not sure what to say. Then she grabbed him. She reached around the back of his head, squeezing handfuls of hair; she pulled him in and kissed him. Her hands slid down his neck, and her nails clawed at his back and shoulders. He kissed

back, hugging her tight, feeling the hot breath from her nose on his cheeks and lips. They were right there on the sidewalk too, cars racing by, people going in and out of shops, and he knew everyone could see them.

"Whoa!" Tim said when she pulled away. He took a deep breath. "Why'd you do that?"

For passion, excitement, just the fun of it, these were the reasons for the kiss. She touched her hand to his chest and through the branches of ribs felt the beating of his heart against her fingertips.

"Beating a million miles a minute," she said.

"Well yeah!" Tim said. "If you're going to kiss me like that, what do you expect?"

"And that's why stealing the money from the purse will be fun for you. It's something different, something terrifying, and something wonderful."

Her bright unblinking eyes stared into his. He thought he wanted to say no, but his lips felt like dry clay and he couldn't move them. She still stood so close to him, cupping the back of his head, the strawberry smell of her shampoo strong in the air, her heart beating right next to his.

"Okay, I'll do it," he blurted. Some of the things she convinced him to do were more exciting than he could ever imagine. The way she smiled now, bounced on her toes and squeezed his chest, he knew this was something he could do to make her happy. Yes of course he could steal the money. How hard could it be? Then after, she'd be giddy all day and they'd go to his dad's house for dinner and everything would be fine.

"Come on," she grabbed his shirt and pulled. "Look! The lady is going into that little pharmacy. Let's hurry."

What timing! Wendy knew how distracted people were when they shopped. They'd follow the old woman into a nice secluded aisle, and then, easy prey.

"This is perfect, Tim," Wendy said. "That old woman is clueless."

Next to her, Tim was silent and hesitated outside the doors.

"Don't be afraid," she said, pulling him along once again. "Trust me."

The cool blast of air conditioning hit them as the automatic doors swung open. It wasn't crowded inside. A young girl stood behind a checkout counter and smiled when they casually walked in and looked between the walls of aisles for the old woman. They found her near the back of the store.

"Come on," Wendy said. "I'll be close the whole time. You can do this!"

He couldn't catch his breath. She was right about how fast his heart would beat. It drummed so loudly he swore he heard it. When they turned down the aisle—the old woman standing at the end of it—Tim saw the purse. It was open like Wendy said. From this far away he couldn't yet see any money. Every step they took the louder his heartbeat grew, and everything else, the store music, Wendy whispering encouragement, and the click of her heels on the floor, was a distant muffle under the fast thudding inside. His head felt like it was floating, and he felt his ears pulsing. In the aisle a cloud of perfume made him want to sneeze. He supposed there was no turning back now.

"Just walk up next to her and grab it," Wendy whispered in his ear. The two stopped a few feet behind the old woman, so preoccupied with the rainbow display of make-up and nail polishes to even have noticed them behind her.

Wendy was so wild, so irrational, sometimes just plain foolish, but Tim couldn't help but care about her. Sometimes he wanted to pretend his interests went no further than the physical, but fears of not seeing her, not talking to her, were lonely, really lonely. What if this stealing was just a phase? She was only twenty. Maybe she'd change as they grew up a little more. There had to be a way out of this, and for them to still be together.

"I have some money saved," Tim whispered. "You can have it, Wendy, all I have. We don't need to do this." She was just caught up in the moment. He didn't need or want the money, and was sure she didn't either.

"Please, Wendy."

"Go!" she whispered and pushed him away toward the old woman. Tim stepped forward while she stood behind, pretending to look at a display of lipstick. He stopped next to the old woman, and glanced down in her purse. For the first time he noticed the money. There was a lot in there. That envelope was in sight, plain as day, and he could take it; it'd be easy, just like she said. The old woman glanced at Tim. He grabbed a package of eyeliner off the display, pretending to examine it.

From a few feet away, Wendy tried to look inconspicuous by glancing over displays, but as Tim got closer to the old woman, Wendy couldn't take her eyes off them. Searching the eyeliners and nail polishes, he ever so slightly slid closer. When Tim took his hand out of his pocket and reached toward the purse, a tingle ran up her spine. His fingers inched closer. Wow, he was going to do it! His hand opened like a claw and reached in the purse. She held her breath. His hand slipped deeper. The old woman held a blue box of nail polish close to her eyes. Wendy was sure the tips of Tim's fingers were scraping the edges of the dollars bills. He had it now! All he had to do was grab and pull. But that's when he stopped. He suddenly pulled his hand from the purse and it was empty, completely empty. He didn't turn back to Wendy, just stared ahead at the wall.

The old woman grabbed something off the display and turned to head toward the register. Tim had blown it and now the old woman was leaving. Wendy turned into the aisle to head off the old woman, and got so close she almost bumped into her. There was a moment of hesitation on Wendy's part as the old woman passed—she smelled like potatoes and oddly enough this reminded Wendy of her own grandma—but she had to act now or never, and she had to show no sympathy, and she had to pretend like Tim wasn't standing there a few feet away, and she had to just do it because the money was right there in that purse and she had to have it and it was going to be such a sensational thrill.

"Excuse me," Wendy said stepping around the old woman. The purse swayed liked a pendulum against the old woman's hips, and the money was right there. As the old woman passed, Wendy

spun and reached forward, and all it took was a pinch of the fingers around the envelope. It slid from the purse, ever so slightly scraping the leather as it pulled free. The old woman walked off, not noticing a thing.

For a second, Wendy didn't move, couldn't; the envelope dangled between her forefinger and thumb. Her knuckles twitched with the weight in her hand. She did it! The money was all hers. Tim hadn't even turned from the display. The pale peach of his back shone through the white of his shirt in a sweat puddle stain. She shoved the envelope into her purse.

"Let's go, Tim."

He didn't want to face her, but she gripped his shoulder and turned him. "Sorry. I wanted..."

"Don't talk about it," she said. He didn't know she took it, and this was probably for the best. She wouldn't tell him.

They turned and Tim saw the old woman, up ahead, walking toward the register. It was over with, and Wendy didn't even seem angry.

"There's something I've wanted to ask you since we first met," Wendy said. She stood there in the aisle, looking back and forth between him and the old woman.

"What?" Actually she didn't seem angry at all.

"I've always wanted to ask you about something I think of a lot," she said. "That time at work when I knocked over all the milk crates and made that huge mess, why did you take the blame for me?"

Wendy had apologized to him about the mess a few times, and he always told her it was no big deal cleaning it up. After all, it gave him a chance to get to know her when he probably would have never talked to her otherwise.

He wanted to help, and he hoped for at least some reward, maybe a smile, or a hello if they ran into each other on lunch break. She looked so pretty that day, wearing one bright pink orchid in her hair even though the dress code forbade such things. To think she was his girlfriend now. But at times like this he wondered if any of it had been worth it. He'd almost taken money from

an old woman. He hated that. She was good, really good at the manipulation. All she seemed to care about was herself and what she wanted. He knew she wanted to think he was some knight in shining armor.

Tim shrugged. "I'd do it for any of the pretty girls at work."

"Oh," Wendy said. She waited for him to smile, to laugh, to show some indication he was joking. For any pretty girl? Really? She knew he had a crush before the mess, before she ever talked to him. She'd spotted him checking her out from behind displays and across the store. Any time she looked his direction he looked away. He wasn't the only guy who checked her out though. Didn't he realize how lucky he was to be with someone who looked like her? She had thought he was the nicest person she ever met.

"I did it on purpose," Wendy said.

"You what?" Tim said.

"I was pissed because I just got yelled at for, do you remember, I wore a flower in my hair that day. Actually got written up for it, and so I saw the stack of milk crates sitting in front of the display. No one was around and I wanted to make a huge mess before I quit."

"It was on purpose! I got into a lot of trouble for that," Tim said.

"I know," she pretended to laugh. Though she wanted to quit that day, she still worked at the store, even these months later. The only reason was because he was there.

"Can we go to your dad's house now?" Wendy asked. "I want to get out of here."

"Yeah, sure," he said. He couldn't help but still fantasize about a perfect dinner, about how they'd hold hands walking through the door, and he'd put his arm around her while he introduced her, and Wendy would be her fun self, and his dad and step-mom would say how much they liked her. Yeah, maybe perfect.

They walked down the aisle toward the door. The old woman stood at the checkout counter. As they passed, Tim glanced at her. He saw the old woman searching through her purse. She seemed frantic, pulling change out that clanged on the counter, make-up

and brushes that seemed to hit with an echoing thud, and then she tipped the whole purse, spilling tissues, pictures of grandkids, and a glasses case that bounced on the counter once before rolling to the floor. Wendy guided him alongside her, grabbing his elbow, fingernails pinching into the skin as the hot air of the outside rushed through the fibers of Tim's shirt. He turned and looked back inside, seeing the old woman shuffling through her pile. Wendy grabbed her purse, hanging at her waist, and held it to her chest. He didn't know how and when, but she had the money. He wanted to tell her to give it back. He wanted to tell her he knew and how disappointed he was. But Tim knew it wouldn't matter to her anyway.

Wendy held the purse tight, hoping to hide from Tim the small leather bag, which before had been loose and almost empty but now was stuffed like a pillow. He knew. She'd seen him looking back into the store at the old woman. That's right, she did it. The money was all hers. But her adrenaline wasn't pumping. Instead she felt a pinching emptiness and began to wonder if she made a mistake. She wished he'd congratulate her, lecture her, or even tell her she disgusted him. Having the money wasn't as exciting as she thought, and she wanted to be far from him now and the guilt she was starting to feel.

They both hoped the other would say something, anything. Start the conversation, talk about work, the dinner they were going to, or if they could do something together tonight. Then maybe things could go back to normal. Maybe despite the thoughts they were both having, the relationship could be saved. Tim stared ahead at the sun glaring off the windows, traffic, and the bus rounding the corner in the distance. Wendy hugged the purse to her chest so tight it crinkled like it'd burst. They walked back to the bus stop in silence.

Wendell Mayo

CELL STORY

We arrived at a checkpoint, barriers set in the road like monstrous red toy jacks. We slowed, passed the red jacks, gears clunked, and our minivan, what the Driver called Pig Snout, grunted forward, skirted lights on the water of a dark lake. I saw headlights of a truck ahead that seemed to slide and smear into pale, luminous streaks against black farms. A red light blinked in the distance. Or was it distant? Its size and intensity did not seem to change with each blink.

Dawn, we arrived at the Hotel Third, an odd arrangement of concrete slabs whose stability we swore depended on each slab leaning on others, balanced, just so, such that vectors of gravitational forces cancelled one another out.

"You will be safe here," the Driver assured us, "for now—until the Transitional Government can complete negotiations with your embassy."

He dropped our bags on the stoop and sped off.

On our way into the lobby, Raul pointed excitedly at a cross street a block down.

"Dogs," Raul piped. "A pack of them!"

In the cold November air, clouds of vapor rose from their red gums. I heard the strangest voice calling after them, "Zeno! Zeno!"

We walked to the hotel Director's office to get our room key, down a hall littered with large sprays of rue and rosemary. Raul dug into the chest pocket of his camouflage jacket, swiped at a dark lock of hair that swung over his eyes, removed his I SMART! 9000, expanded its keypad, and powered it up. He swung an arm in front of me, stopped us both where a woman, bent over, dabbed at a greasy corner of the building with a willow switch. Raul gazed a long time at the I SMART!, its blue-green marble glow, image of the earth from the vastness of outer space, a small planet, but just seeing its magical glow in the I SMART! made me long for our homeland.

"No bars!" Raul groaned.

"I see one." I pointed at a birch-bark shingle hanging above us with the image of a fat friar, red frenetic hair blazing about his bald spot. Below the friar sat a mug of beer and the words, STRANGE MONK.

"Smart ass." Raul wagged the I SMART! in the air. "I mean my cell has no bars."

"Come on, Raul." I lugged him forward as he tenderly slid the I SMART! into his chest pocket.

When we arrived at the Director's office, Raul rapped three times on the door, following the third with, "We'd like our room key."

The Director's voice came loud and muffled.

"Again?"

"Our ROOM KEY."

"In the box on the wall."

Raul found our key and we found our room—no cable, no wireless, no landline, no nothing, as in NO, NOTHING!

Raul searched the earth light of his I SMART!

"Nada," he hissed.

We set out once again for the Director's office. We knocked.

"We'd like to use a telephone," I said.

"What?'

"A TELEPHONE."

Once again the Director's voice throbbed through the door.

"Mine is the only telephone in the village," he said. "But you have to complete the proper forms, which were all lost in the Transition."

Dejected, and so early in the day, we made straight for the Strange Monk, open, to our surprise. We ran a tab and drank beer served in shallow earthen bowls that smelled of marigolds. The Barmaid explained that the Third would charge our cards for room and meals, but we would have to pay for our beer in the currency of the Transitional Government. She kindly offered to make the exchange. We traded our native tender for foil-wrapped chocolates minted in three denominations—the Lion, the Elephant, and the Giraffe.

"You'd better get plenty," the Barmaid warned, wiping the bar hard, biting into her lower lip. "Inflation," she went on, "like you never dreamed of."

We sat in posh black vinyl lounge chairs. We drank our marigold beer. We all but disappeared. When we partially emerged from the chairs, the glass tabletop dug into our knees. A spot of blood on Raul's pant leg began to grow, then stopped at about the size of a dime. He dug again into his chest pocket, removed the I SMART!, and set about caressing its dark, glossy edges. The Barmaid returned to collect a giraffe for our beers.

"Do you want something else?" the Barmaid asked, scowling, close to closing time—noon!

"A telephone?" Raul squeaked.

The Barmaid left and returned with the proper forms!

We rejoiced over another bowl of marigold beer, completed the forms, and returned to the Director's office.

Raul knocked.

"Get away!" said the Director.

"We have the forms," I said.

The Director opened the door and, startled by the appearance of the completed forms, snatched them from Raul's hand and closed the door in his face.

The Director's voice came loud and muffled through the door.

"How did you obtain these forms?"

"The Barmaid," Raul replied. "At the Strange Monk."

"Lucky guess," the Director growled.

When the Director let us into his office, we could see our own breaths, cold clouds that rose and flattened against the raw cement ceiling. The Director was not pleased, his expression horrifically magnified by a dull light in the yellowed lenses of his thick, black-rimmed spectacles. The telephone was maroon, covered with dust, and sat directly on yellow shag in one corner. The cord was about ten centimeters long. I got on my hands and knees, then lifted the receiver. The Director stood over me while I tried to call home. The Operator, her voice cutting in and out like an astronaut's heading for the far side of the Moon, explained that since the Transitional

Government had seized power, the area was not yet equipped to handle such a call.

"Perhaps," she crackled, "in a year or two."

The Director took the receiver from me and replaced it on the cradle.

"I will get you for this," the Director said.

After a restless evening in our ill-equipped room, we went directly to the Strange Monk for breakfast—a tail piece of fried fish and a boiled potato each, which we ate greedily. Then Raul dug himself out of the chrome and glass canyon of our chairs and approached the bar. I followed.

"Have you a repeater in this village?" he asked the Barmaid.

"Say again?" she said.

"You know." Raul's voice grew grim. "To boost cell phone signals?"

"I think," the Barmaid said, wiping the bar in lugubrious circles, "there's one in a room in the Communication Center but it's been shut down and that room locked—cutbacks like you wouldn't believe."

Raul leaned in close, touched her wrist just enough to stop her wiping.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, "do you know where the key is to this room?"

The Barmaid slung her dishtowel over one arm. She smiled like an iguana.

"The Director had a key. But yesterday, before you arrived, it slipped from his pocket into Zeno's dog bowl. He saw Zeno gobble it up with his chopped horsemeat."

"Shit," I said.

"That's it," Raul said and tapped his chest where the I SMART! lay resting. "The key has to be in one of Zeno's stools."

"Swell," I said and dragged him away from the Barmaid since he was reaching a hand around the back of her neck "How're you supposed to tell Zeno's shit from others' in that pack of wild dogs?"

"Do we have a choice? We can narrow it down by only looking at relatively fresh piles of crap."

"How'm I supposed to tell fresh dog crap from stale?" I asked.

"I don't know," Raul replied. "Maybe if the I SMART! were up and running we could get an answer."

"What do you mean *we*?" I said. "I'm not poking through the shit of a dog named after an ancient Greek philosopher."

"You won't?" Raul said with puppy eyes.

"Forget it, Raul."

"Fine," he whined, "I will. Jeezcripes, you go and locate the Communication Center."

He headed out the front door of the Third. I followed him as far as the stoop and watched him pass a small kiosk occupied by a large woman with a moustache shadow on her lip, whose prominent wares included cigarettes, aspirin, and bottles of beer called Devil's Bones. Raul looked left, right, then reached out and snapped off a low branch of a birch tree. He made his way down the street, paused to poke at an errant pile of dog shit, then leaned down close to inspect it. Then he dug out his I SMART! and held it above his head, gazing hopefully up at its screen, trying to catch a signal, as if some power on high might feel sorry for his rummaging through shit and magically grant him a signal.

I went inside and returned to the Director's office.

"Might I," I started through his door, "borrow Zeno's dog dish and some horsemeat?"

"Why?" came the distant reply.

"I want to catch Zeno and retrieve your lost key."

"No," he said. "I am not feeding that infernal beast one more gram of my best horsemeat!"

So foiled in my first effort to assist my poop-prodding companion, I went directly to the cement stoop of the Third to find the stubble-bearded Driver sitting on the hood of Pig Snout, legs swinging back and forth. In one hand he clenched a bottle of Devil's Bones. He pointed his chin at the noonday sun like an unlikely wolf—

"Zeno!" he barked. "Zeee—no!"

When he spotted me, he closed one eye, snarled, drew his lips back, and stuck the bottle of Devil's Bones to them. He rather

resembled the dog-faced baboon; he kept twitching his head left and right, as if reacting to flea bite after flea bite.

Off-putting as the Driver seemed, I was determined to find the Communication Center. I carefully approached him like great game in the wild. He snuffled when I drew near and trained one red eye on me.

I lurched forward before he could flee.

"Would you be kind enough to take me to the Communication Center?"

The Driver removed the spout of the bottle from his mouth. He snorted. A drop of dark liquid fell from the tip of his chin

"Do you have any elephants?" the Driver asked, placed a forefinger in his mouth, and dug a bit of meat out lodged between an eyetooth and incisor.

"Four elephants," I said.

"Four elephants won't get you to the Communication Center." He tossed his empty Devil's Bones at the pack of wild dogs that suddenly appeared at the end of the street, where it burst. "Zeno!" he shouted. The dogs scattered, and he went on. "You need eight elephants to get to the Communication Center."

"Eight?" I said. "That's outrageous!"

"Sorry. Zoning—like you can't imagine."

"I have lions and giraffes in my room," I pleaded.

"I accept elephants only. Eight big ones."

"Can you at least tell me what this Zeno looks like?"

"Zeno?" He grew suddenly solemn. "He's red with the shortest legs imaginable. They move twice as fast as other dogs'. They seem to take him nowhere, but you'll never catch him."

I returned to the Strange Monk. I set my four elephants on the dangerous glass tabletop, sat, and stared at them awhile. I tried to think of another way to get to the Communication Center. Then I rose once more from my black vinyl abyss, by the narrowest margins escaping the jagged edges of the glass table. I went outside to speak again with the Driver, who, still perched upon the hood of Pig Snout, had fallen asleep. I thought if I caught the Driver in foggy moments of just waking he might groggily accept my four

elephants in exchange for transport to the Communication Center. I approached him ever so quietly and, at the crucial moment, whispered, "Dear Driver," which only resulted in his sliding off Pig Snout. He massaged the stubble on his face, during which I pleaded with him to accept my four elephants in exchange for a ride to and from the Communication Center.

"Why do you want to go there?"

"To activate the cell signal repeater."

"The key is lost."

"I know. Zeno ate it."

"Then you have no hope."

"Look," I told the Driver.

I pointed at Raul who'd just appeared on the far corner. The Driver and I watched him post his birch branch to the ground to balance himself, kneel, and pick through a large lump of dog leavings with a twig.

"Like I said," the Driver said, still watching Raul, "you have no hope. And four elephants is simply not enough," he explained, "not in this economy."

I felt my eyes blaze and the big vein in my neck jiggle with racing blood. If I could just get to the Communication Center, perhaps I could somehow force the door open. I was desperate and could scarcely believe my next words.

"Tell me how to get to the Communication Center on foot!"

"I don't," the Driver started, and then I caught his bloodshot eyes glance past me and upward, to a tall building topped with a transmission tower and four vertically aligned blinking red lights, and by the time he added the word "know" to his deceit, I was off.

I'd hardly gone half a block when Raul caught up to me. He seemed to limp and used his birch branch to help walk.

"I have searched every instance of fresh dog crap in the village," Raul said. "The key must still be inside Zeno."

Judging from the angle of the afternoon sun we headed south, fixing and adjusting our direction to the winking transmission tower. We passed an abandoned train station and sign.

FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS AND DEPORTEES ONLY

Raul paused, I thought out of a kind of reverent awe, but instead he stuck the I SMART! into the air and waved it about like a flag of surrender.

A little further we encountered another sign.

TO CHECKPOINTS

Raul waved the I SMART! at it, too.

Wind snaked down the street and stung our faces. We pulled our woolen collars high about our necks. We linked arms and made our way farther south, passing buildings in partial states of completion, stacks of red and gray brick scattered among gape-mouthed cement mixers, mounds of sand, and powdery bags of mortar. Half-complete walls rose in irregular, jagged angles. We arrived safely at the Communication Center, a gray, three-story structure that loomed above all the unfinished brickworks of the village. The main entrance was padlocked with a contraption like handcuffs one might use on the wrists of a giant. All the windows had been bashed out and the ground beneath splashed with broken glass and gypsum. It was vaguely artful—so much trouble to fully render the scene of destruction, to pulverize the drywall, then dash it out the broken windows. We walked quickly to a window on the first floor, picked remaining shards of glass out of the frame, and entered the Communication Center.

Inside, our breaths hung about our heads like gauze shrouds made for the dead. But we weren't afraid. At last we had a purpose, a mission! Perhaps we could force our way in and find the repeater. We swept through the building like people with new hope, noticing right away that most of the interior walls were gone, with the exception of those forming a small room in the center of the first floor: thick sheet metal walls with a stainless steel padlocked door. Upon seeing the impassable door, Raul was crestfallen, then quickly asked me to boost him up to peer inside a small window above the door, which he did—and there it was, Raul said—equipment like we'd never seen before, so miniature, exotic, with shiny gray components—it had to be the repeater.

"It's in there," he said "I know it!"

Raul hopped out of my interlaced fingers.

We jiggled the shiny brass lock on the door fiercely; we pressed our sneakers to the door; we tugged on the handle. Eventually, exhausted, we sat on the floor, panting, ready to formulate a new plan. How to get the key to the door!

Soon, big white snowflakes filled the sky and drifted inside through the bashed-out windows of the Communication Center, beautiful snow, snow we remembered from our homeland, snow that seemed to preexist everything not snow. Then Raul, who'd been sitting on his hands to keep them warm, jumped up and pointed at a window, through which a dog looking like a poodle-rottweiler mix had just leapt and now stood panting, its once domesticated eyes full of a kind of wise, terrible light. And then in came other mongrels through other windows, collies cum shepherds, dachshunds cum Great Danes, and wolfhounds cum terriers. Soon all the windows around us were guarded by the interbred beasts. We rose. We circled. We stood back-to-back, observing the terrible ambush!—when Raul, shouting, "What ho!" and brandishing his birch branch like a scimitar, adding, "I vanquish thee, Cerberus!" suddenly made a break for one of the windows guarded by a red dog, eyes scared wide, stubby legs—Zeno! I assumed. Raul galloped toward Zeno, chirping "Ha!—Ha!" All the other dogs reacted to Raul's dash for the window, changed directions, slipped on a slick plaster made by the gypsum powder and melting snow, so much so that Raul and Zeno cleared the window well before them

By the time I exited the building, I saw, in a dusting of snow, Raul's footsteps mixed with a collage of paw prints; then the wind whisked the snow away and piled it against a curb. I returned to the Third and the cement stoop to wait for Raul. The Driver passed by a couple times in Pig Snout, didn't stop, and each time ejected an empty Devil's Bones out his window, which popped and shattered on the pavement. I shivered in the cold, snow-filled air, gazed with tired lost eyes down the street for any sign of Raul. My shoulders collected flakes, piling high—higher. Then I left and went inside to sulk in the Strange Monk, closed, but the Barmaid let me in when I told her I'd lost Raul. She came around with my beer, stinking of earth and flowers.

I handed her my last lion.

"I will get them for this," I growled.

"Sure you will," she said

At dusk, I left the Strange Monk and returned to the stoop. Two stars glinted in the gloaming, one each side of the vertical red lights blinking on the Communication Tower. That moment I wanted more than anything, more than bars, or the I SMART!, or repeaters—more than seeing my homeland again—I wanted to name those two anonymous stars myself. So bright in the sky, I knew someone had already named them. But I wanted to name them, to own them. If I could just name them, I'd need only find them in night skies, speak their names, and command them to stop their winking mockery.

I was about to go to bed when suddenly Raul appeared out of the alley containing the kiosk and the woman with the moustache shadow. First, Raul's head and torso appeared, slanting out from the corner of the Third, then his right leg. Finally, his left leg appeared, lugging Zeno behind it. The fiery little beast growled and gurgled, its jaw clamped on the cuff of Raul's pant leg, all full of bubbly slather and bright red threads of Raul's blood.

The moustached woman yelped.

"Look!" Raul called to me with a mixture of joy, panic, and pain. "I've got the infernal beast!"

Whether Raul had Zeno or Zeno, Raul, passed my mind briefly.

Then I asked him, "What can I do?"

"Get him! Gut him! Get the key!" He danced in a circle on his good leg like Rumpelstiltskin around his victory fire. "Get him! Gut him! Get the key!"

From the cold, cold stoop of the strange, strange Third I lunged for the vicious little creature with all my remaining strength—but it released Raul's leg and scuttled away, down the sidewalk, out of sight, its nails tapping the cold concrete. The Driver pulled up, now at the zenith of his incredibly inebriated state, stumbled out his Pig Snout, and, throwing his arms back for leverage, jacked his ass onto the hood. He swayed, belly-laughed, scratched himself

under one arm, and when I begged him to take Raul to the hospital, he growled, "What hospital?" and continued to laugh as if the final notes of human kindness were contained in it. Then he shouted, "Zeno!" and fell off the Snout. He split his lip on the bumper, and, bleeding into his open palms, added, "Anyway, the little fucker used to answer to Zeno."

In days that followed, I alone braved packs of wild dogs in the streets. Raul survived the ravaging of his ankle, no sign of rabies, and now he joins me in my daily forays into the village. He takes one block, I the other, and we inspect dark droppings of dogs on snow, follow icy paw prints, seek a red flash of fur and whirring legs.

Curiously, I have found that in this village I can hear Raul perfectly for as far as one block. As we search, he shouts—

"Anything?"

I look up from my frozen dog feces and reply—

"Nothing!"

I begin to believe all our hopes hinge on finding Zeno himself, one dog, our Sirius in the maddening night skies spread with so many others. We holler the name of the infernal beast, hearing the horrid half-made walls of the village give its name back many times, until in our desperate search its name begets none but its name, until its name names everything we've ever known, know, or will know, even this alien land in which we now live.

"Zeno!"—damned moniker! "Zeno!"—hellish echo! The place in which we're always utterly alone, whatever meaning we assign it, whatever we might imagine exists beyond its vile borders.

David Salner

THE CHINAMAN'S MULE

CRIPPLE CREEK, COLORADO
1893

The Chinaman grabbed Frank's hand and pulled him into the lift-bucket, held him there as they fell through the utter darkness. Frank felt the air and dust shooting by, glimpsed the rocky outlines of the shaft above the yard high rim of the bucket. Between this iron lip and the rock wall, an arm could be sheared off, a man could be ground to sparks. His being pulsed from his bowels up his spine leaving him sick with the force of the descent. But the Chinaman was there, gripping his hand, holding him still as they fell. Then the rock wall began to slow, and he felt the iron pushing up against him, felt his lips parting, forced back away from his teeth with the sudden deceleration. The Chinaman began kicking him in the leg, pushing him through the gate, for the bucket had halted only momentarily and began to ascend with an even deadlier speed than it fell.

He let the wiry man prop him in a tunnel just high enough for him to stand. A thought began to form in his mind: This man has saved my life. In his fifteen years, Frank had never had anyone save his life before. He had thanked William for saving his life, but that was an exaggeration, the kind of thing you said to an older brother because he expected it.

But *Sam Wu has saved my life* was not an exaggeration.

Why had Mr. Pollard, the shift boss, pushed him into the bucket without warning him about the danger? Frank could not answer that question, at least not then.

Back home in Oklahoma, he'd thought of himself as fully grown. He knew how to hunt and fight and worked a job at the stable. And he was tall, though still skinny But here, in this new world of flickering shadows, even his height was a drawback. He towered over Sam Wu's agile movements. The little man was

grabbing his shirt, pushing him down the tunnel, where a candle burned in the distance. As they drew closer, he saw that it was glued with melted wax to a stone ledge. It had been left there by the previous shift. In the flickering light, the rock walls underground appeared rippled and wrinkled like the wax.

Sam pushed Frank against the wall beside the candle. With his index finger, he motioned him to stay, the finger wagging across the boy's face, the shadow crossing over his eyes.

Then Sam Wu said, "Stay!"—like he would order a dog to stay.

Frank stayed. He watched Sam bend over and remove another candle from somewhere inside his shirt, light it from the first, then disappear down what looked like a hallway in the earth, lower and narrower than the opening of the tunnel he'd been left in. Sounds returned—of digging and scratching, dry sounds, like the earth was coughing.

Was it always like this in a mine? The one you could understand, who spoke good English, didn't care if you lived or died—the one you couldn't understand at all looked out for you and kept you alive. He took a deep breath and his back straightened against the rock wall. He relaxed a little but didn't move from where Sam had pointed his finger: "Stay!"

"Look at me," William had told him before their first day in the mine. Frank turned questioningly toward his brother. He was almost as tall but not muscled-out. William was three and a half years older, already a powerful man with deadly fists. "Not like that," William said. "Your eyes are telling me you're scared. Look at me like you just shot a rabbit, you're carrying it home. Mom's proud of you, and we'll have a feast. You don't have a care in the world."

That should be easy, Frank thought. A thousand miles from home, instead of hunting in the fields and woods he knew like the back of his hand, he was going underground to work with men twice his age who couldn't care less if he lived or died. Nothing could be easier, he laughed to himself.

"That's it. That's what I want to see," William said, clapping his brother on the back.

It was *his* decision to come west to Cripple Creek with his brother. Hell, he'd found the *HELP WANTED* flyer and brought it home for William to see. He was the one who read it to his mother and explained why both of them had to go.

"The price of gold is way up right now. I read about it in the papers," he said, as he watched his mother suddenly take a seat on the front porch of their cabin. "They need men to mine it. We'll make good money out there."

She looked up at him like he'd just smacked her. It hurt him to see her react like that, but in the end she didn't argue against him, not a word, only that look. What could she say? There was no work in Oklahoma. Ever since The Panic had set in, in the beginning of 1893, there'd been no work anywhere in the whole country, except in the gold fields. He was the one who wanted to mine for gold, and he'd get used to it. He knew he would. He'd never shied away from anything—not a dare and not too many fights, even at the risk of a sound beating.

But below the earth's surface existed a world of mournful darkness, of fire and startling light.

The other miners seemed to accept the fact that life was cheap, their lives anyway. Frank had seen dejection in the faces of men in Oklahoma, of many men, but he'd never seen this rough look, how the whites of their eyes glared back as they waited in the shaft house. My life isn't worth much but yours is worth even less, so don't mess with me, was the message they transmitted as they jammed together beneath the gallows head-frame of the hoist, about thirty men lit by a single dangling electric light.

He was the youngest on the midnight shift, by several years. He'd heard them muttering in different tongues. He'd picked out Spanish but there were other languages he couldn't understand at all. German, maybe, or Polish. Jack, from Cornwall, swore he spoke English, but Frank could hardly make out a word.

One light burnished the skin of every man, shadowed the crags and wrinkles Their eyes flickered—fierce, unpredictable. Or maybe they were just frightened like him and had long ago learned to hide it.

These images flashed through his mind in the moments he waited for Sam to return to his side from scratching in the tunnel.

"Here!" Sam said, pointing to a stick of dynamite. He said the word again—"Here!" Apparently it was one of the few words he knew in English, for the rest of his message was conveyed in gestures and grunts. He formed a ring with his thumb and forefinger and ran the stick of dynamite into it.

Other men might have greeted this gesture with an obscene leer, but Frank took his new partner seriously. What else could he do? He crawled into the tunnel until he reached a face of rock. He felt in the dark, in the blind darkness in front of him, his hands playing over the rough wall. He found what seemed like a hole. He tamped the stick into it, fuse end out, and went back, not surprised to find Sam waiting in the light of the candle with another stick. This process was repeated several times until Frank saw Sam's hands on his hips, no stick of dynamite.

The skinny fists gripped Frank's shirt again, pinning him against the rock wall. The boy was beginning to understand these gestures, a mute language punctuated by force. Then Sam composed himself and held the candle so the light shone over his bronze cheeks. From the distance, he seemed to have the skin of a boy, but close up, Frank could see that a thousand wrinkles spread like tiny branches from the outer corners of his eyes.

With his free hand Sam pulled another stick from his shirt and moved it toward the candle. Frank worried for a moment, but the older man backed it away without lighting the fuse. He put the stick away and walked his index finger and forefinger through the air, walked them again and again. His skinny body swayed with the pantomime.

"You want me to light the fuses and run like hell," Frank said aloud and ran in place to show Sam he understood. For the first time, the apprentice saw his partner's face light up.

Frank took the candle, crept into the tunnel, and fumbled at the face until he was oriented. He stared at the four fuses sticking out of the rock. Then he paused long enough to put a good light on each one and ran like hell, ran back to the shaft, where his

partner was already stooped over, hands over head, muffling his ears. Frank had just time to hurl himself to the ground, falling over his partner as a roar swept over them and the floor they lay on seemed to lurch into the air.

Frank was no stranger to work. In addition to mucking stables, he'd trapped for hides and gathered firewood. Those skills were easy to pick up, familiar as the clay under his feet or the sky overhead. By day, he'd worked—at night, he'd gone home to his mother's house.

But a boy who wants to be a miner has to study, to heed. Underground mining was more than a skill. It was a foreign world, a language of darkness. To make your way, a new set of habits had to be learned. Leave things in the light or you won't find them again. Always keep an extra candle with you. Leave the area when your candle goes out for that was a sign of bad air. Look for trouble spots. Run an eye over each timber, over the roof. Everything was different. Bright colors appeared washed out, almost gray. Food did not taste as good when you could not see the reddish brown of the meat, the green of the beans.

Only smells were the same; in fact they were more important than above ground. On the first shift, the two of them sat down against the rock wall of the tunnel that was to serve as their dining room, and Frank opened his lunch bucket and stared at the dinner he'd purchased at the boarding house, a few strands of meat mixed with a potato, and some overcooked cabbage. The colors were washed out, barely distinguishable in the darkness, but the stale smell of the cabbage was overwhelming. He was resigned to eat it, but the prospect did not please him. Then Sam opened his bucket and a cloud of spices entered his nose, a rich spray of odors. As the smells filled the tunnel, Frank realized he'd never experienced such a thing. He'd smelled oily and tangy food before but not like this. Sensing the boy's fascination, Sam held his bucket out. Frank hesitated. He did not want to eat another man's food. Plus, he doubted he'd like it. He scooped up some rice and meat on a wooden spoon. As he brought it up to his mouth, the smells almost

took his breath away. It was definitely not something he could eat.

But Sam was looking over at him as if he had a stake in how well the boy liked this strange new food. He would take a bite and pretend to like it for the sake of this man who'd saved his life. The only trouble was, how would he pretend to like the food without having it thrust on him time and time again?

This was a problem to which there was no easy solution, Frank thought to himself as he shoveled the rice and meat in his mouth. Immediately, he felt something unusual, not a burning so much as a complete washing of his taste buds and then a stinging aftertaste, a smell of fire and garlic, a clean breeze, a whiff of parsley or something similar.

He leaned back against the wall of the tunnel, slowly becoming aware that Sam was still crouching over him, peering into his eyes. Frank looked up and laughed and signaled that he wanted more. From then on, Sam brought in two lunch buckets.

Frank made quick progress interpreting the underground images of this new world. A rhythm of shadows punctuated by unusual events. One night, as he and Sam took their dinner, he heard the squeal and clatter of something alive hurtling down the shaft, rapid and weighty. He stared as what looked like a giant sausage passed in a blur, descending below them to the sixth and then to the bottom level. Only after it had fallen out of sight did Frank realize this was a mule rigged to the hoist cable, blindfolded and trussed so it would not injure itself pawing the rocks.

In this mine, the owner bought mules to pull carts over tracks to the shaft. The carts were dumped by way of a trap, and the ore went clattering into the bucket. Sam and Frank had to push their own cart. "You know what they say about you?" William had asked his brother one Sunday morning. "They say you're the Chinaman's mule."

Frank did not envy the fate of the creature he'd seen plunging past him. He would often hear miners say that the owner treated mules better than miners: If a man died underground, another would take his place. You had to spend good money to replace a mule.

Even the mules were treated poorly in this mine. It lay on the eastern edge of the Cripple Creek gold district and was the first mine Frank and William had encountered as they headed west from Oklahoma. This mine took advantage of its location on the path followed by hungry men seeking work. The two often heard complaints that the wages at this mine were considerably below those in the rest of the Cripple Creek area. William made only about $9 a week and Frank $7—if they made their weight.

Out of these wages they had to pay for their room at Mrs. O'Neil's boarding house and send money home to their mother. They should have been paying for only one bed, since they worked opposite shifts. Frank would come back to the lodging in the morning, after his brother had left for work, eat the leftovers from the breakfast of the day-shift men, and take a bath when there was hot water left in the boiler.

Except for Sundays, Frank seldom saw William. Sunday was their day together, to play cards and chat, almost always to hunt with the Colt they'd brought from home. William sometimes bought a bottle of whiskey from a man who packed them on a mule and visited Mrs. O'Neil's. This cut into the money they sent home.

"Because of your drinking, we only sent ten dollars to Ma last month," Frank complained one day.

"Because of my drinking! I make a full man's wage, and you let that goddamn Chinaman rob you blind. I'd better not hear you complain about what I do to relax."

Frank didn't say anymore, just then. It didn't pay to argue with William when he was angry.

Frank had learned that all miners could give an interesting account of their lives, sometimes true. But none could lay claim to a genuine odyssey, none except Sam Wu, who had kept his silence. Even if he could have spoken better English, he had no one to speak to—until Frank, who struggled to learn the older man's story, which began in a distant land. At lunch, the two miners sat there, backs against the timbered rocks, talking more with hands

and eyes than words. They refused to let their exhaustion interfere with the need to conquer not the dull stone that miners routinely face but the subtle shards of language, the remains of thousands of years of custom, breaking into powder, slipping through their fingers.

"You were taken in the hold of a ship from Shanghai to San Francisco?" The boy peered through the dust of the tunnel as he waited for answers. The candle burned in the ore-laden haze as he squirmed and burned with impatience to have his questions answered: Was this like being a slave? Where is San Francisco? How long does it take to cross the Pacific Ocean? How many died on the voyage? These and other questions tumbled through Frank's mind until he learned how difficult it was, this slow work of words.

A hint of a grin lifted the corners of Sam's mouth as he met the gaze of the wide-eyed youth. Over the course of many lunch breaks, Sam told his story. He'd left Shanghai when he was about Frank's age, not entirely by choice, but that was something he didn't go into. He'd settled in San Francisco, but only for a matter of days, then taken off to follow the already well-traveled trails of his countrymen.

"Railroad . . . men." At first Frank thought he was describing the fact that many Chinese men had laid the tracks through the West, but Sam shook his head.

He drew the tracks, two fingers scraping lines in the dirt to represent the set of iron rails. Then he put a hand down beside the tracks. "Man," he said. Frank looked up, but Sam was staring fixedly at the hand he'd just placed flat in the dirt. Then he put his left hand down and again said, "Man."

He repeated this gesture over and over, and thus Frank learned how Sam had come upon the corpses of Chinese workers spread out beside the tracks they'd laid.

The thought suddenly filled him, these yellow people, these railroad workers and mining settlers, were the bravest pioneers of the West. No one gave a thought to their unmarked graves. It was like the slaughter at Wounded Knee, which was widely discussed,

at least by the Indian people he knew in Oklahoma. But this slaughter was a secret, until Sam shared it with him.

Sam continued to stare at his two hands, still pressed flat in the dirt. The mine itself seemed to hold the silence of Sam's horrible secret.

Then he lifted his hands and rolled the palms up and held them toward Frank. Does he mean for me to take hold, to make a pledge to remember these nameless men, the boy wondered? But Sam's mind had already moved on. He was gesturing for Frank to hand over his lunch bucket to be refilled the next day.

Before drifting off to sleep that morning, the boy remembered the palms pressed flat in the dirt beside the two parallel scratch marks.

Most of the men staying at Mrs. O'Neil's spoke English, but there was little gossip over the morning meal. The men Frank ate with were from Missouri, Utah, Colorado, two brothers from Poland by way of Chicago, and three from Mexico, all drawn by the national craze for gold. These men, who would live and die poor, felt the pull of the gold, felt the blood quicken in their veins, felt themselves move under the sway of its magnetism. Frank felt it also. It had drawn him here as part of a great tide. It created in him a tension, a wonder. He lay in his bunk and lifted his head to study the bunkhouse, to make sure he was really there, at Mrs. O'Neil's, one of fifteen miners trying to sleep after midnight shift. He could sense that the other men were awake also. The bunkroom was long and narrow, five rows of three cots each. Frank slept in the center and could almost touch the cots on either side. Outside, the sun would be high in the sky. He saw it only once a week, but no one complained about not seeing the sun or the lack of windows in Mrs. O'Neil's bunkroom. The sun was their enemy. Without daylight streaming in, they could pretend it was night, they could fool their bodies into a few hours of sleep. They lay on their bunks in the semi-dark, staring at the lattice-like patterns of light through vents and chinks, hoping that sleep would overcome the twitching and cramping of overworked muscles—calf, thigh, lower back.

All shift they'd been fighting to move the great weight of the earth by the shovel-full or with their shoulders pressed to carts loaded with oar. All shift they'd craved nothing more than this moment when they could sleep, and now sleep eluded them. All except Frank, who fell into a deep sleep, the sleep of the innocent, as he listened to the sound of a jug of whiskey being passed from one hand to another in the darkness. He felt a shadow cross over his bunk as the jug passed from the miner on his left to the one on his right. He was the only one who didn't drink, who never asked for a slug of the precious whiskey.

He drifted off to the sound of the jug being tilted back, to spasms of dry coughing, a pickaxe scratching in shale.

The bunkhouse was alive with the sounds of men unable to sleep, but Frank floated on his back, dreaming in black and white of the long shift underground, the bright fire of lunch. He woke on his back also, woke to the sound of the men leaving the bunkroom for dinner. Now he had to hurry. He wanted to sit down when the men sat down, not to hurry in late as he often did.

"Come in late again and I'll eat your potatoes," one of the older men, Erin Rogers, told him, reaching across the table, threatening to snatch at his dinner

"He would too," another man added. "He'd steal the last meal from his poor old grandma. Erin is a wolf."

Before coming here, Frank had never sat down to dinner with a roomful of men. Dinner, six o'clock at night, but it felt like breakfast, the first meal of the day. An hour of verbal play, of sparring, a few hard jabs tossed in. Frank held his own. He had a ready smile, and he never mooched whiskey. Only Erin refused to return Frank's efforts at friendship.

The boy had quickly identified two threads in their talk. The first was hostility to the owner of this death trap of a mine—the second was Sam, referred to simply as the Chinaman. Sam was the last of the Chinese miners in the Cripple Creek mines. This distinction won him the respect of some, like the two Polish brothers. To others he was no longer human, a sort of devil responsible for the hazards of their lives.

Sam may have viewed himself as a small creature, not worthy of comment. But everything he did was examined, and his sins were discussed at length, especially by Erin Rogers. One day, in the spring before Frank and William arrived, Sam had found a little boy playing in his garden. At least so the story went. He accosted the boy in such a loud, shrieking voice that several neighbors ran into the clearing around Sam's cabin. They saw Sam shaking the boy.

"Except for Mrs. Wylie and Donald running up, the Chinaman would have broken the poor child's neck," was the way Rogers recounted it over dinner.

"We should have lynched him then and there," Jesse, another miner, added.

The sudden turn of the discussion sucked Frank's breath away. Then he remembered what William had told him about looking like you don't have a care. He leveled his gaze at Rogers: "Were you there as a witness?"

"Or you?" he questioned Jesse.

Jesse's eyes would not meet Frank's, but Rogers fixed a cold stare on the boy and added: "You'd better believe me when I say it happened."

"I don't like lynch," Stan, one of the Poles, quickly responded. He shivered in an exaggerated way for emphasis.

"Me neither," someone else added. "Too much like work."

The conversation moved to other topics. One man began a joke about a woman he said he'd known. Frank thought he'd heard this story before and stopped listening. His eyes wandered around the table to find that Stan was smiling at him. When their eyes met, the Polish miner gave him a slight nod.

Another man was telling the tale of why he'd left his wife in Texas and wouldn't go back, wouldn't send her and her baby—who probably wasn't even his, he said—a thin dime. As the man talked, Frank's gaze had circled the table to Rogers, who was glaring fixedly at him, a half-sneer creasing his face. He's been staring at me the whole time, Frank thought. The boy had been used to winning people over, even hostile people. That would not be possible with Rogers, he realized, as he returned the glare.

The next day at lunch, Sam returned to the story of his travels through the West. In Idaho, he had stayed with Gao. He held up four fingers to show that Gao had four daughters. The youngest was Lin, almost Sam's age. She had a polite smile and, he thought, some affection for him. She left her family as his wife.

Over the years, the couple traveled south and east, working second-hand claims, finding second-hand gold. This they parlayed into a stake for the next year while they labored in towns and on ranches for their daily bread. The couple had a son, lived in Wyoming several years, but there was little work there. Crossing into Colorado—"*See them,*" his wife called out, pointing to her right at the Uintah range rising in the distance, towering in waves, grayish-blue, with great white caps.

They lived through even leaner years in Denver. Then Sam learned of a new mining district where great rocks of ore had only to be uncovered. He took the family savings, prepared to throw everything into this one last chance. He left his family in the spring of 1890. By rail and then by mule he crossed the highest peaks he had ever seen. He would tell Lin Gao they were more rugged than the *"See them"* mountains.

Settlers had already begun to stake claims over much of the Cripple Creek region, so Sam continued east, to an area where two streams met. There he worked in the streams with a pan, placer mining, but the results were disappointing. He abandoned the streams and his pans and dug a tunnel ten feet into the mountainside, finding a rocky substance he knew to be good ore, lower grade but bountiful. He drove a stake into the ground with a sign—*Sam Wu Mine.*

He registered his claim on the way back to Denver and made the return trip, this time with his family and enough supplies to get them through the winter. But not everything was the same on their return. At the location that should have been their site, Sam's family saw a large wooden structure.

"We have begun a vertical shaft," Mr. Pollard explained, in words Sam didn't understand. "Your claim wasn't valid, but the owner wants me to offer you a good job as a miner. You should

be grateful, he's a fair man . . . More than fair, if you want my opinion."

Frank and Sam had been hauled up late to the shift house. Mr. Pollard controlled the hoist and did not consider it important to give them a reason for the lateness. Frank missed breakfast at Mrs. O'Neil's and picked at leftovers, some dried biscuits and cold bacon. He forced himself to eat, then went into the kitchen to see if there was hot water left for a bath. The morning light streamed in through the windows, steam layering the dirty glass. Turning toward him with a smile was Shannon, Mrs. O'Neil's daughter. Frank did not know for sure but guessed she was a few years older than he was. During the day, when he was off work, she was not often around, at times in the background helping her mother with meals. He'd never spoken with her but had heard the things men said. He doubted those things were true. Most of what men said about women was not.

In the heat of the kitchen, her shirtwaist clung to her slender frame.

"Here it is Mr. Little, I saved you some," she said. It struck him as odd that she addressed him with such respect. Perhaps she's making fun of me, he thought. She turned the valve to release the steaming water from the boiler. He watched her steady the pail, sweat breaking out along the down of her forearms. As he reached down to help, his elbow brushed hers.

"You mix this with some pump water and get in. I'll bring the next bucket when it's hot."

She handed the pail of hot water to Frank, her hand nestling against his. He carried the hot water into the adjacent room, a warm spot lingering from where she had touched him. The room was empty, the other miners having already bathed, and he poured the water into a tub. He refilled the pail from the pump outside, shivering in the cold as the rusty pump coughed a few times and then caught, pouring out a stream of icy water. He carried it inside and poured it into the tub to mix with the hot water and waited.

Was he to stand there, dirty as a salamander, while the water chilled? Rather than wait any longer for Shannon to bring the

second bucket, he decided to do as she'd said and slid his filthy clothes to the floor. He stared at the work jeans at his feet, a mixture of mud and cotton, relieved to be free of the grime. He stepped over the rim of the tub and into the water, still warm, and settled back, felt the dirt dissolving from his skin, his blood warming, rising through every vein of his body.

"Frank Little!" he heard a voice call and opened his eyes. Shannon was looking down at him, such as he was, dressed only in water, and not much of that. Her eyes danced like sunshine from his toes to his face. "Hold your feet up and I'll pour this in . . . And take this soap. I want you to get good and clean," she laughed.

Frank lathered and rubbed his skin pink with the course chunk of soap, dried himself, and pulled on a clean pair of jeans and walked back toward the kitchen with the soap. Shannon was still there. She removed the soap from his hand and put it down on the sideboard. He met her eyes and heard her inhale. She sighed the breath away like a secret. Then she stepped toward him, took his hand, guiding the open palm to the small of her back. He felt the two ropes of muscle on either side of the long hollow running down the spine. Then she stepped closer, pressing her body against his, and his hand slid down her back, felt the soft outward slant and roundness of her flesh through the light cotton shift. She held him tighter, kissing him lightly on the lips. She ran her hand across his cheek, under his chin, and placed her lips on his again.

She looked up at him, drew her face away for a moment, the sun through the windows finding highlights of a sandy orange tint in her hair. Her lashes fluttered against his cheek and he heard the words, "Come to my room, Frank."

He followed behind her as she moved toward a door that led from the kitchen into a compartment under the stairs. They had to duck to enter. A tiny window in the far wall cast a column of light in which she moved, skinny arms lifting the shirtwaist over her head, revealing her knees, the slender thighs, the bush of hair, the small breasts. She kept her necklace on, he noticed, and it swayed above her breastbone as they fell to the mattress, which billowed

and sank. He had never felt such softness, and it was all around him, and then Shannon was pulling him toward her, pulling him in.

Half an hour later, she woke him, "Frank, my mother will be home soon."

He had fallen into a deep sleep and wondered where he was for a moment before hurrying to pull on his clothes. She stood beside him, still naked, belly slanting up against him so hard he thought he could feel her hair through his jeans. As he pressed his hands to her back, he could feel that the warmth had faded from her flesh. He lowered his eyes to her upturned face.

"You're a fine man—I like you best of all the men," she whispered, pausing for a moment, her eyes searching his. "If you give me three dollars, I can buy a pretty night gown . . . for the next time."

She continued to search his eyes while her own eyes were a screen, not revealing what lay behind them.

He did not have the three dollars on him. He lifted his hands from her back and pulled out the inside of his pocket to show her. He gave her a boyish look, a look he thought she would sympathize with, but she stared back at him blankly. As he turned back from the door, she was still staring after him.

The kitchen was chilly now. He picked up his shoes and old jeans from the room with the tubs and walked all the way through the house to the bunk room.

He lay on his cot thinking that he would not have given her three dollars even if he'd had it. That was for his mother. How many of the men had Shannon been with, he pondered? Who had given her the necklace?

She had called him a man, but no matter what she called him or why, his boss would still call him a boy. That's what Mr. Pollard would call him tonight when he showed up for midnight shift under the light of that one hanging bulb. It was a different world altogether.

As he tried to doze off—men hacking around him, mining the dry air—he asked himself what it would be like to have a

girlfriend, a wife. It was hard to imagine in a mining camp, where there were so few women. Shannon's words came back to him: "If you give me three dollars . . ."

Early in Frank's apprenticeship he was loading a cart and bent down to hoist a scoop of ore when Sam knocked his shovel down. It wasn't the brusqueness of this action that surprised him. By now, he'd learned that courtesies were nothing in a mine—scorned, ground under foot. But work? Don't interfere with a man's work!

Sam plunged his fingers in the ore, reaching for something the next shovel would have buried, held up a clump of clay with a little sparkle to it.

He gestured for Frank to put his hands out and crumbled it into tiny specks, a metallic glint in the candlelight.

"Highgrade," he said. Frank had heard that term before.

"Yours," Sam said when Frank tried to hand it back to him.

To take highgrade ore was strictly illegal, but it was done. From the miners' talk, he knew the only reason it wasn't done more often was that highgrade was rare. To a miner, it was a prize that helped compensate for the danger and hard work he endured, for the fact that injuries were punished not compensated, weights shorted, wages withheld.

Highgrading was one of Pollard's favorite topics: "You men think you're getting away with it, but I know who you are," he warned them on several occasions. "One day I'll get the sheriff here and we'll search you fellows from asshole to elbow."

Following Sam's example, Frank began to accumulate his own small stash of highgrade. He'd strained out as much of the clay as he could and packed it in the rusted barrel of an old Remington he'd found on one of his Sunday excursions. Now it lay under his bunk with the rest of his belongings—two changes of clothes, winter boots and coat, and the book he'd brought with him from Oklahoma, a recent novel called *Huckleberry Finn.*

Sunday was the only day of freedom. The two brothers tried to spend it hunting, but were often unable to during the hard fall

rains. When that happened, Frank wouldn't even bother to wake William, still sleeping from his shift. Once, he'd walked through the rain to Sam and Lin Gao's for lunch, sat down with them, wet to the skin, in the one large room of their cabin.

They warmed near the center, by the iron stove, which was for cooking as well as for heat. Lin Gao smiled at him as she brought several large pans and a pot of rice to the table. His eyes wandered around the room to the joists overhead, the peak of the roof, the loft where the two must have slept. They sat opposite him at the table, eating slowly, chopsticks ticking against wood bowls.

"Good," Lin Gao said, pointing at his fingers. Few Americans used chopsticks. He clicked them together and the three of them laughed.

Most Sundays when it rained, he tried to drop in on a good card game but usually ended up with his book. After reading *Huckleberry Finn* twice all the way through, he knew which parts to read and which to skip. He passed over the parts where Tom Sawyer made Jim the butt of a prank, usually scaring the black man half to death. On his second reading, he realized how cruel Tom was. Why was Huck friends with him anyway?

He liked the idea of fishing for his daily food and having a friend like Jim he could count on. He'd sit in a corner of the dining room, by a window, listening to the rain and peering at the mud outside. He'd read a few pages, daydream of moving swiftly down the river with Jim, their raft turning in the high water.

Once winter set in, the two brothers went into the woods without fail. He'd be up and off for breakfast, well-rested, eager to shoot rabbits or at least try, to go exploring for deer prints, to talk with his brother about home in the silence of the snow and the great pines.

The first Sunday in December, he came back to the bunkhouse to wake William, leaned over, listened to him sleep. Amid the snores of the other men, he could pick out the rustle of his brothers lungs. He had grown up with this sound, would know it anywhere, even though it was no longer the light snore of a boy from Oklahoma. In just a few months it had changed to a miner's

wheeze. As he bent over, he breathed in the stink of his brother's body. William lay on his back, the blanket rising with each wheeze. The boy studied him for a moment and then pounced, pinning his shoulders to the bunk.

"Wake up, William Little!"

William's eyes opened, not showing a bit of surprise, as if he was used to such rough awakenings. A smile creased his face, and a little color began to replace the pallor of sleep. Then he pitched his body away, breaking Frank's grip, leaping from the bunk in a blur of long underwear. Another bound and he was beside his brother, seizing his right wrist, twisting it around behind his back.

"You're a dead man if you don't give," he spat in Frank's ear.

"I guess you don't want the buttered roll I saved you," Frank grunted in pain.

"Give it to me now, and I won't break your arm off."

Frank nodded toward the floor behind the bunk. "Wrapped up in my pack." When William turned away, his eyes scanning the floor for the pack, Frank broke free.

William found nothing in the pack—"Damn little shrimp, now where's my breakfast!"—and lunged at Frank, who skipped away to avoid another half-nelson. As his brother closed in on him, the boy quickly explained there was still breakfast left in the dining room, if he'd hurry.

After William's breakfast, they set out across the settlement down the one deeply rutted road where the mud showed through the accumulating snow. They walked over boards crossing a stream just beginning to freeze and scrambled up a rocky slope into a pine forest. As they ascended, their breath came harder, lungs pumping thin cold air. The chill of the woods rinsed their bodies, scoured off the clammy feel of the mine better than a hot bath.

The snow in the air and the light blanket on the ground added some brightness to the gray of late morning. As the brothers trudged into a clearing, their eyes scanned the snow for prints, deer or small game. Both were hunters and good shots but Frank was the deadeye, as William readily acknowledged, so the younger brother carried the old Colt.

They found no sign of deer as they walked across open ground and back into pines. Then Frank grabbed William by the shoulder and the two froze. About fifteen yards away was a red fox. It turned its eyes lazily toward them, understanding not the full depth of its predicament. Frank raised the Colt and fired and the animal looked away, trotted a few steps, and dove in the snow, legs pulsing for a moment. Its eyes seemed to follow the two brothers as they closed in on it.

"I'll skin it up right here," Frank said. Mrs. O'Neil bought fox hides for a dollar. He worked his knife from the right leg, under the tail, and down the left leg. Then he gripped the knife in his teeth and began pulling up on the pelt with both hands. It made a snapping sound as he tugged the hide free of the body. He paused to slice at the greasy membrane still holding the skin fast in places.

"Don't try to take the head," William said. "Skin it like a muskrat or we'll be out here till nightfall."

"Maybe not," Frank said, as he cut close to the skull, holding the ear canal and then the muzzle in his left hand as his knife worked through the reddish fur and the gray of the snout. His blade never hesitated, but the operation was intricate. William stamped in the cold.

Finally he was done and handed the bundle of red fur to his brother. "I'll throw the guts out in the field for the buzzards."

A smile spread across William's face as he said: "Maybe you should give it to your partner, so his wife can serve it up for dinner."

"What do you mean, Will?"

"You know what people say about Chinamen. They're not like us. They eat garbage."

"You believe everything people say?" Frank shot back. "Sam looks out for me, so I stand up for him. That's the way you taught me to be."

Frank stared hard at his brother a moment longer until William buried his eyes in the soft red fur. "Pretty clean. You did alright with the head. We'll get a dollar fifty from Mrs. O"Neil."

He hefted the hide and nodded approvingly. "Maybe we ought to go in for hunting and trapping. At least we'd be out of that damn mine."

"I see you got a mule on your level. Maybe we'll get one soon," Frank commented to the big Irishman, McPhee.

"That damn Chinaman ain't getting a mule. He don't need one." McPhee grinned derisively at the boy as he spoke.

"What's that supposed to mean," Frank spat back at him, feeling the tension rise in the shaft house, McPhee looming over him, hatred in his eyes.

"Hey, Frankie, come tell me about the fox you skinned up last Sunday," Stan called out. Frank had already clenched his fists for a fight but let himself get drawn away by the friendly Pole.

Then Sam walked in. As he made his way toward the bucket, miners parted to let him pass. Sam's face was a mask. Did he understand what some of these men were thinking, Frank wondered?

Stan walked over and shook hands with Sam, greeting him with an elaborate show of respect. Frank followed this example, realizing he'd never before shaken hands with his friend. Another Pole came up; then Joseph, one of the American miners, followed by a Mexican, and Jack or Cousin Jack, as some of the men called him. They stood around Sam in silence. Finally, all the miners— those grouped around either Sam or McPhee and those who milled nervously in between— realized the lift bucket was waiting and the shift was about to begin.

The bucket began plunging into the darkness with its freight of human flesh, one trip after another, crew after crew descending from the bright light of the shaft house to the intricate dungeons they worked in. As Frank and Sam fell into the darkness, the young miner thought about McPhee, whose face was filled with a rage he hardly tried to contain, as if he prided himself on that rage, on the fear it could instill. Where does such a powerful hatred come from, Frank wondered?

To open a new level the miners dug a tunnel from the shaft, mining as they went. More men were sent down, as many as four or six working on each level. Soon rails were put down and a cart was dropped to replace the tubs they'd been dragging to the bucket. Blasting continued. Before long, a mule took the terrifying journey to the new level, at which point production would often double. With a mule on the bottom level, all the miners now had them—except Sam and Frank.

As Frank sat on the ground taking lunch, he wondered at the fact that they worked alone and without a mule. He finished his pork and noodles and handed the empty tin back to his partner.

"Why no mule?" he finally asked.

"Hate," Sam stated flatly. He pointed to himself. There was a pause during which Frank imagined he could hear the men on the next level eating their dinners, scraping their metal cups against the side of the water bucket.

"Why do McPhee and the others hate you?"

Sam smiled at his friend's question. The candlelight flickered over his face, caked with sweat and dust. He grabbed a rock and held it up. "Gold," he answered.

Sam had a son. Frank had learned this over the course of several discussions. "Your boy is fifteen?" he finally guessed as the two finished dinner.

He imagined a boy like himself. Where was he? Did he like to go fishing? Frank pressed forward on these questions the next day at lunch. He wondered that people didn't take the trouble to talk to this man. With only a few words in common, you could still talk if you were willing to use a little sign language. Why would some men avoid understanding people because they spoke a different tongue?

They took an extra-long dinner before he got it. Sam's son had been denied work in the mine and had left for Denver. Sam's hands climbed in the air to represent the tall buildings in that thriving town.

At lunch, Frank learned more about Sam's life in the West. And when they went back to work, amidst the filth of their sweat

and the dust of the blasting, the clang of steel on rock, he learned that you had a partner, a buddy. As a teacher, Sam could be brusque—maybe because he spoke so little English. Sam taught by example. From him, the young miner was learning that he and his partner were shackled together. The fate of one was the fate of the other. Life must prevail for both—sullen, rough, but life itself.

It was Sunday, and he was headed back to Mrs. O'Neil's to find William for a day in the woods. The early winter had begun to harden the earth, so he knew they wouldn't find much game. But you could still get lucky and find a late-season deer or a few rabbits. A frozen haze clung to the shaft house and the roof of Mrs. O'Neil's. He was enjoying the sting of the air on his checks and neck when he sensed someone at his back. He turned even before the rasping voice of his shift boss broke through the windless chill.

"Hey Frank! . . . How about a meal out for a change, a break from Miss O'Neil's Sunday grub?"

Why was Mr. Pollard inviting him out? The shift boss had never even called him by name, never called him anything but "boy." Better go along with him, he thought. William probably wasn't even up yet.

He let Mr. Pollard take him by the elbow and guide him back down the road toward a tavern at the other end of the settlement. It connected to a building that served as an inn for merchants and other visitors.

"A day off work is a day for a good meal and a drink," the older man said, eyes bulging, face wrinkling up in a grin. "I use to go to the whorehouse on Sunday—but now I like a friendly drink."

As Frank paused at the door, he felt Pollard wheezing behind him. The old man gestured impatiently, and the boy stepped across the threshold. He was surprised at how well the dining room was furnished. The plaster walls were smooth as a sheet and decorated with paintings and two photographs, one of General Grant, one of a man he didn't recognize. There were four tables, round, with white tablecloths, surrounded by armchairs.

Mr. Pollard pointed toward the only empty table, by the wall near the kitchen. Maybe it was reserved for the shift boss. Before sitting down, Frank caught a glimpse through the kitchen door of someone laboring at a black iron stove. He'd never seen a man cook before, certainly not in Oklahoma, where his mother did the cooking. The man moving quickly between two skillets was Chinese. He must know Sam. What kind of stories, what kind of history could this man tell? Frank was not sure why but he had a feeling he would never know the answer to this question.

"Whisky?" Pollard's question pulled Frank's thoughts back to the clean white table cloth spread out before him.

"No thank you, Mr. Pollard."

Ham, eggs, potatoes—Frank attacked the food as soon as it was delivered. And then a slice of pie appeared. After the meal, he waited, hands on the tablecloth, for what the old man had to say. He thought of the cook sweating over the stove. Did anyone else in this tavern even think about the person who cooked their dinner? He scanned the room and took in the three groups of men sitting around larger tables. He'd seen several of the men before, red faced, beefy men with ties at their throats, talking, laughing every few moments.

"Now you'll have a drink. A man has to put a charge in every so often, right, Frank?"

Frank let Mr. Pollard buy him a drink, which he tossed off without coughing, the way William had shown him. As Frank put his glass back down, Pollard reached across the table and put his hand on the boy's arm. Frank quivered under the touch. A moment passed during which he listened to the sounds of knives scraping on plates, to the desultory chatter of a roomful of men.

Satisfied that he had the boy's attention, Pollard withdrew his hand and wiped it across his drooping moustache. "You like working with the Chinaman?"

"I'm still learning from him—and Sam's wife fixes lunch."

"You eat that damn noodle and cat slop?" Disgust swept over Pollard's face. Then in a voice throttled by anger, "You think you're learning the trade when all you've got for a teacher is a squint-eyed Chinaman?"

Frank stared back at the bulging eyes and the gnarled face, which softened into a smile. "Listen, a smart young fellow like you could earn a lot more working with Rogers or McPhee, somebody who speaks English. Before long, there might be a job above ground. You know your letters and numbers—you could clerk for the weighmaster."

Mr. Pollard ran his hand across his moustache again and winked, as if they'd reached an agreement. After all, it was an open and shut case. All he had to do was remain silent and, come Monday, he'd be assigned to work with another man. He'd make more money, be on his way out of the mine into a decent job. He wouldn't have to explain the situation to Sam. He might work a different shift, might never see him again. Sam spoke so little English no explanations would be necessary, or even possible. Frank thought of the bucket falling toward the center of the earth and the hands yanking him away from the wall.

"Thank you, Mr. Pollard. Someday I'd like to work for you above ground. That would be a fine situation for me. But for now, I'll stay where I am. I figure, if I learn things the hard way, with Sam, it'll stick."

"You won't learn much from a Chinaman," Pollard growled. "Maybe what I've been telling you was an opportunity, maybe a warning. Just remember I told you."

Frank realized the fine meal had come to this—his boss had given him an order and he'd refused.

The leathery face was now full of anger, lips narrowed to a knife-edge. The boy got up and pushed his chair to the table while the old man sat there.

"That sure was a great meal, Mr. Pollard." As he spoke, a smile flashing across his mouth, he had only the slimmest hope that the old man's face would soften.

"Another whisky over here!" Pollard called, ignoring the boy entirely. He held his glass high in the air for the waiter to see.

"Wake up!" It was William's voice. But he was supposed to be in the mine, Frank thought, as he struggled to pull himself from

a deep river of sleep. Had William gotten drunk instead of going underground?

"It was that big Irishman, McPhee, and three Americans. Pollard sent them down in the bucket." His brother's voice hurried on in a whisper. "We were eating lunch, and they yelled at me: 'Are you for the Chinaman or are you a true American?'"

Frank jumped to his feet and grabbed his jeans.

As William stood by the bunk, he outlined in a whisper how he'd attempted to sidestep the issue. "Jesus fellas, can't I finish lunch and take a piss?" He was no more successful than Frank had been over breakfast with Pollard the previous morning. Four against one, or two if you counted William's partner, Reilly, who was not much of a man for a fight. They hauled him into the bucket while Reilly protested, cursed, and started after them with a shovel.

"This has nothing to do with you, Reilly," shouted McPhee, as Reilly's shovel clanged uselessly off the iron.

William was a fighter, not afraid to take on McPhee—but not all four of them. He'd gotten into more than one argument defending his brother. Several miners often gathered around to defuse the situation, but where were they now? Down below, eating lunch. Even if they knew what was about to happen—how could they help with Pollard in control of the hoist?

The four men and their captive sped upward until the cables began to screech in the headframe and the shaft house came into view. William peered into the shaft house. To his surprise, he saw only Pollard and the lift operator, an ancient Hibernian. No lynch mob. The shift boss had a snarl on his face, but he couldn't fight. And he wasn't armed. Maybe he'd expected William to agree to the offer presented by his goons.

McPhee stepped out first, the huge shoulders looming over the hoist platform. William yanked his head free, leapt to the platform and kicked hard, boot like a hammer driving into the hollow at the back of the knee.

The big man crumpled to the ground. The old lift operator took a step backward, eyes widening above the pillow of his beard.

William bolted past him and Pollard, sprinting the fifty yards to the boarding house.

Frank was dressed, tamped the highgrade out of the old muzzle and into a leather bag while his brother finished his story and checked to make sure the Colt was loaded.

The miners around them stirred in their sleep. Several woke up, leaned on an elbow, stared curiously as the brothers crept through the shadows of the bunkhouse

William leaned on the outside door, holding Frank back. In the sunlight, there was no sign of the commotion he had described. The mud in the road was frozen, rigid as gray iron. Here and there the light was refracted through a drop of water forming on a patch of ice.

"They'll come out with guns blazing," William said as they stared at the shaft house door. And then the door opened and a man peered out. It was Rogers. William fired and the door slammed shut.

"We've got to go to Sam's house," Frank whispered.

"You trying to get us killed?" A moment passed by—a lifetime during which William looked into his younger brother's eyes.

"Okay, let's go," he finally responded, pushing Frank out the door. They entered the woods at a hard run and saw the smoke from Sam's chimney.

Frank held up his hand for his brother to stop at the edge of the clearing. Before them was the cabin, the frozen ground, the empty hog lot, the winter remains of a garden. Maybe Sam and Lin Gao were still there. Maybe an advance party of Pollard's men were already inside, had performed the lynching they'd often alluded to. For a moment, Frank saw the bodies of his two friends twisting in the air, hanging from a joist in the large room he'd once had lunch in. He motioned for his brother to drop to the ground and cover him with the revolver. Then he walked up the path and knocked on the door. A few seconds passed. He kicked open the door and lunged inside, landing on the floor. No shots came back in his face.

He got up slowly as William barreled in behind him. The two brothers stood there, William with one hand on Frank's shoulder,

and scanned the room. A bowl was on the table; behind that, a pot steamed away on the stove. Around them, clothing, other scattered possessions, a life left in haste.

Then Frank saw it, by the stove, the same lunch bucket Lin Gao had so often sent into the mine for him. He sniffed—pork. He grabbed the bucket and grinned at William. "They got away."

As the brothers headed out the door, Frank thought of how the same rich pork smell had pervaded their lunch breaks in the mine.

Frank and William went over the hill from the clearing and headed for the rail line, here and there marching through drifts. It would have been easy enough for Pollard's men to follow, but why? They'd forced the Chinaman and the two Polish brothers out of town. The shift boss may have wanted their blood as well, but how far would they hike through these frigid mountains to get it?

Now, they were walking across the Rockies, not sure how far it was to the nearest town. But, Frank thought, railroad tracks always go somewhere. There had to be a town not too far away. They'd make it by nightfall, or at least before the chill hours of early morning. They kept to a fast walk, continuing along the rail line through the shadows of a long gorge. To their right, a creek with a shell of ice.

They decided to eat the pork and noodles before it got cold. Frank leaned against the rock wall and stared across the creek to the facing wall, which rose almost straight up. From deep in this pit of icy shadows, he could see blue sky above the mountains. Sun above, darkness below, just like in the mine. He ate with the chopsticks he'd stuffed into his jacket pocket at Sam's house and passed the bucket to William, offering the chopsticks as well.

"I got something better to eat with," his brother grunted, holding up a knife. He wiped it on the sleeve of his coat and began scooping out the remains from the bucket.

"I wonder which way they went," William said as they resumed walking.

Frank had been wondering the same thing, wondering if his friend would survive, if he'd ever see him again. "Sam knows these mountains like he was born here," he told his brother, a

confident grin spreading over his face. "He's survived closer calls than this."

After a few hours of steady marching, William grabbed his brother's arm. "You hear that? If it's not cannon fire, it must be blasting from another mine."

They looked at each other, thinking it had to be charges going off underground, which meant a town was near. The brothers stood stock still and listened to another charge.

"Charges are awful close together," William murmured.

They walked on and heard another great blast. By now, the canyon they'd been walking through had opened up on a stretch of high plain. Frank shielded his eyes and looked into the bright afternoon sun. A smile played at his lips as he pointed for his brother to see. In the distance, two bighorn rams were squaring off, galloping straight at each other, crashing, and the sound of their hard boned heads colliding split the air. It was a standoff, a near-fatal standoff. The two bighorns trembled back away from each other. Then they became aware of the humans nearing them and trotted off together like the best of friends.

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