

Spring 2019

The painter's pause : stories

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The Painter's Pause

STORIES

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, WA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Sam Foley

Spring 2019

THESIS OF Sam Foley APPROVED BY

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The Painter's Pause

“They don't want to sting you, Dad. They die if they sting you.”

She is watching for my reaction.

“Yeah?” I say.

I spot the car and we change direction.

“If they sting you that's what happens. They die.”

“Mutually assured destruction, huh?”

“What?” She pauses to make a face at me, and then has to hurry to catch up.

“Dad, Skyla told me when *we* die, they take off our clothes at the morgue.”

“What? What are you and Skyla talking about?”

“Do they do that? Do they take off our clothes when we die?”

She has a genius for the conversational curve-ball. I have no idea what to say, so I default to honesty. I may be about to scar her for life. I take a deep breath. “I guess so, honey. Yeah, they do that. But you don't need to worry about...”

“Dada, do you think it's going to be pizza tonight?”

“What? I don’t know.”

We find the car and climb in. We have to roll the windows down now because last week Brady spilled a can of acetone in back while we were loading up, and the smell may never go away. Jayden plugs her nose and groans. “Brady!” she shouts, shaking her fist.

Brady has what we call, the *painter’s pause*. He’ll be talking mid-sentence and just freeze—cigarette two inches from his mouth. You’ll blink and stare and wonder if he’s having a stroke. Then he picks up where he left off, like he’d never stopped. Where did he go, you wonder? But he gets mad if you bring it up, so I don’t anymore. Jayden loves Brady. I always say, stay in school sweetie. You don’t want to end up like old Brady and me. She thinks that’s funny.

I close my eyes and inhale the hot tar, old engine oil. Tall weeds grow in the vacant lots and through the cracks in the concrete all over the city. At the stop light on Wellesley, three bums huddle in the shade of a small tree. A fourth man, shirtless, and holding a sign, shuffles toward us. Jayden leans forward when she sees them and reminds me to give them some money, which I don’t like doing and used to refuse to. But last March, we were waiting at this same intersection and the truck in front of us rolled down his window and smashed a Big Gulp full of ice and pop against the torso of one of these men. The man in the truck leaned out and yelled, “How about that! Does that *help* anything, faggot!” Jayden saw the whole thing. When we drove past, she witnessed the shame and humiliation. Later, she said, why didn’t I *do* anything? Which is a fair question, and one I’m not prepared to give her the answer for. So after that, I told her we could give them some money sometimes. But now, she’s not happy unless we give them money every time. It’s become a source of bickering. She hounds me about it, and if I say

not this time, honey, she'll give me the silent treatment. Today, I don't have any money, I tell her, maybe next time. So, she's grown quiet, sullen.

I say, "You know, some of these guys make as much money as I do painting houses all day."

"Mom says that's not true, Dad. That's a urbanith."

"Did she tell you they'll just use your money for drugs?"

"Drugs?"

"Honey, everyone makes decisions. Some people are just lazy."

She folds her arms. "Mom says some people need more help. She says everyone's got a story."

She's right. I know it. I don't like the feeling of her being right over me, but I know it's something I should get used to. I think seeing them just reminds me how little I have to give.

I don't scold Jayden for being angry. It's her right. We just ride in silence for the rest of the way. I find a place to park down the street from Lucia's apartment and we make our way down the sidewalk, through the courtyard, to the exterior stairs. We climb them in silence.

I'm expecting Lucia to come to the door, but it's Rob, her boyfriend. The truth is, I'm relieved. Rob's alright, really. He's always got work and Jayden likes him, so.

We say, hello. He looks down at Jayden.

"Hey-ya, kiddo," he says.

"Hi, Rob," she replies, straight faced.

He says, "Guess what? Pizza Night." She smiles. Then she turns to me, no longer upset, not wanting to be mad at me before saying goodbye. She's already learned to be big about this type of thing. I smile back and tell her to be good. She gives me a hug and disappears inside. And aside from a park visit on Wednesday, that's it for another two weeks. I head down the sidewalk, trying to keep my mind on the work week to come.

I'm back at my apartment opening my first beer in two days, standing by the window, looking out at the parking lot below. I walk past the bedroom several times. She has filled it with stuffed bears and dogs and rabbits and princesses, which she's smuggled over one by one from her mom's. I want her to feel she has a place to herself here.

The second beer goes down quicker. When it's done, I get a third from the fridge and go in and browse her drawings on the walls. Taped to the window trim above her bed, is an old bent picture from when I was a kid. She found it at my mom's and put it up there. I bend at the waist and stare at it. I don't know of another picture that has us all in it: mom, dad, Chloe, and me. We're dressed for warmth, it's fall or early spring. We are leaning against an outcropping of rocks somewhere in the Cascades. Looking at it, I can feel the damp and cold of the stone on my hands and legs. We're all smiling. Even my father. He'll be gone in a year from this photo and dead in three.

I have a memory of another moment from this day. We are driving up a logging road. I picture sitting in the car next to Chloe. I want only to reach up and touch them, my parents, to feel their shoulders, to keep them. They both seem tense, but I don't know why. I am trying to fix it with questions. "How far is it?" I ask. My questions are annoying him, but I can't stop asking them.

He doesn't know I am trying to bridge a gap, and *I* don't know it's a gap that can't be bridged. He says, "Will you just relax!" But I don't know why he's yelling. I can feel the situation spiraling. Chloe rolls her eyes.

Mom says, "That's great. Yelling at him to relax. That's helpful."

He says, "Oh I'm not *helpful*? I'm so sorry. I'll be more *helpful*."

"You're unbelievable," she says.

I'm right there, but I still don't have a finger on what it is I'm trying to pull from it.

I open my eyes and walk out of the room and open the front door, looking out over the parking lot. It's Trish and Geno, fighting again. If they're not careful, someone's gonna call the cops. I go to the fridge for a fourth beer and I crack it as Geno's Camaro lays rubber, the motor races up the street. I smile and wander back to the window and catch a glimpse of Trish retreating back into the darkness of their apartment, screaming what an idiot he is.

They've been doing this as long as I've lived here. People love talking about them. They like saying how Trish actually has a restraining order on Geno. They just can't understand it—how stupid he is. The cops could come for him any time, they sneer, sitting in their shitty apartments, living as long as possible, nobody coming for their nothing.

I close the blinds and get a fifth beer from the fridge and head out the door down to the river. I pass the belongings of the homeless people living there, and head for the bank to watch the sun go down. The river is quiet and slow, competing only with the quiet voices of those nearby. The sun goes without comment and the pink leaves the sky.

A caddis fly hatch swarms on the other bank—thousands of them—completing the final stage of their life cycle, the only aeronautical one.

I think about myself as a father. I will always do my best to be there for Jayden. That's the one thing I have to hold on to. I say that because my own father was *not*. But, really, does it mean anything to say that? Everything in life is a little different than how we see it; more complex, less complex, kinder, crueler, something. I wish for a crack to slip through, to slip out of, through which I could gain some perspective. Walking back to my apartment in the dark, the ghosts I pass on the trail seem more menacing than before. I stiffen my back and walk quickly till I'm back inside. Through the blinds, the white light of the parking lot streams. I watch the particles of dust it illuminates. It occurs to me how it is, how I'm living, how it will be.

By the sixth beer I feel something could happen, like anything could happen. For a moment I feel the apartment walls dissolve. I could go out and meet a woman. I could head down the street and something could happen. The walls begin to pulse. I can feel the energy of the world. I can sense a control I might have over my destiny. This feeling builds, it arrives, and then it passes.

The 2270

Joey said he could see *the ghost of the spark of life in my eye*. He said that's the most he ever saw; that he went door-to-door in the silent neighborhoods looking for the ghost of that spark, that he didn't really care if he sold anything or not, that he went whole days hearing nothing but the sound of his footsteps on the sidewalks and his knuckles on doors.

I stood, my shoulder against the door frame, squinting into the scorched summer light, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Nothing in the neighborhood behind him moved or looked like it ever had. The crumbling sidewalk curbs and cracked pavement on the street appeared as crumbled and cracked by the heat and sepia tones of this particular moment, appeared broken just now, as we stood there; not as a function of any prior moments leading up to this one, but only of this one, of now. The leaves of every plant in every yard wilted and the paint on the houses peeled, not as a result of years of neglect and

wear, but of this day, beneath this sun. And Joey appeared before it as a shadow, smiling, the only object apart.

I said, “Oh man, I hear ya,” though I didn’t understand what he meant. He asked me if I liked drugs and I shrugged. He smiled and said he could tell maybe. He came in and we sat at the table in the kitchen area, the only furniture I had left.

He placed his hands on the table. I noted their elegance, the fingernails clean and smooth, though not overly so, not groomed, per se. Rather, they appeared as if they maintained their condition naturally, as if dirt and grime didn’t stick to them, as though small cuts and dings did not occur.

I was glad to have him, though nervous, as I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had another person here. He took a long look around and appeared pleased with what he saw. “Nice place,” he said, and I nodded. I believed him sincere, but the compliment was undeserved. In fact, the house was in terrible disrepair. For starters, it was unkept (I didn’t even own a vacuum), and the smell of dry rot and mold from the leaking roof hung heavy in the air, not to mention the rotting lap-siding outside, or the yard, now only dirt and thistle weeds. In spite of this, Joey behaved as if genuinely at peace.

From a pocket of his baggy jeans, he produced a tightly rolled joint, which he lit and passed to me. It had been a while since I’d gotten high. For nearly a year I’d been alone in this, my dead mother’s broken little house, looking out through the blinds at the weeds growing up along the curb, waiting for my next unemployment check to come. The checks were minimal, didn’t cover the remaining mortgage payments, for example, which didn’t matter, because I’d stopped making them. I’d stopped paying everything, was just waiting for the axe to fall.

He said, “Kind of you to let me in. Most people aren’t so hospitable to strangers.”

I held up the joint. “Well, you’ve come bearing gifts,” I said, my confidence bolstered by all that ghost of the spark business. It wasn’t often someone took notice of me, so I was interested, and I hoped he’d say more. Then I took several, long hits. He asked me if I lived alone and I said I’d moved back from Denver to take care of my mother, and that my girlfriend and I’d split while I was here, leaving me with nothing in Denver to go back for. So for now, yes, alone.

I hadn’t always lived so listlessly. But it also wasn’t the first time. Years ago, in another place, I’d lived similarly, in a house with five roommates. Those were days of self-destruction and woe. We’d all been out of work for months and had spiraled down together. We’d hawk things to pay for booze. At one point, the repo was hunting Emanuel’s truck. For weeks, we helped him hide it in various places around town. But after we tired of all that work, he got the idea to destroy it. We went out in the night with our framing hammers and crow bars and knives, and we slashed the tires, cut all the engine hoses, bashed in the head lights and tail lights, broke all the windows, ripped the seats, and only left when a neighbor said she would call the cops. It felt so good and awful at the same time. When the tow truck arrived, we laughed. But the man didn’t seem to care that the truck was ruined; he just filled out some paper work and towed it off. In the years following, I’d become an active member of society and had begun to think the place of those old times as being in my past, something I’d outgrown. But now, having returned to them, more or less, I feared it was those productive times, which was the actual blip on my radar; that this was who I really was. That this was how I’d be from now on.

I held the joint to my lips again immediately, gracelessly, which is rude, really, but Joey seemed unconcerned. I handed it back to him the instant I was done. I kept my eye on it the whole time he held it, waiting to get it back.

He had beautiful olive skin and nice eyes—a very soft shade of brown. He was a little chubby, but not too chubby. He had pleasant chubby cheeks, I guess. But he also looked like a criminal of some kind. I heard once that charisma is the ability to project, simultaneously, two contradicting characteristics. If that's true, then he was loaded with it; chubby but skinny, dangerous but innocent. He was handsome and charismatic.

Joey was smiling, looking around. Had I been talking? I wasn't sure. "Thanks man," I said, coolly, as if I was cool. "That's great tasting stuff." Joey smiled back humbly, I thought. Sexually? I looked around at my filthy place. I was especially concerned about the giant, bird shaped stain on the middle of the carpet. I had no explanation for it.

I started to wonder if Joey was coming on to me with this ghost of the spark business, which he'd not mentioned again since stepping inside. The truth is, I'd always felt worthy of eliciting attraction from men. This in spite of the fact that, to my knowledge I never have elicited any attraction from men. In fact, though I would never admit it, pretty much every time I'm around gay men, I feel somewhat offended that they're not hitting on me. I wondered if that's why I never had any gay friends. I couldn't be sure, and I also couldn't be sure if this was sexual for Joey, or if Joey was gay, but I felt that it could be, and I felt I deserved it, and that felt very good.

Really, I'd become a shut in. In fact, the only time I left the house at all was to walk to the gas station for burritos, or to the thrift stores, where I'd wander the aisles

looking for a treasure of some kind. I was inspired by these TV shows I watched about people who find valuable, old things and then sell them for big bucks. On any day of the week you can find dozens of people just like me in every thrift store, fruitlessly scanning for anything to justify their efforts—something for nothing, that's the goal. On the surface anyway. When I'm feeling compassionate about our sort of people, I think maybe the reason we keep coming back is metaphorical, that we are hoping we'll recognize value in something that no one else has, and that we will be rewarded for that insight; we are hoping that likewise in ourselves there lies an unrealized value, which someone might someday uncover. We are all grappling, to varying degrees, with our awareness of the ever-decreasing chances of this occurring.

Not everyone at the thrift store is like that. You'll see single moms in there, pragmatically buying clothes for their kids at good prices, or picking up needed housewares. The single moms like that aren't living in a fantasy land. They are respectable. I would always hope people assumed something like that about me. But I knew they didn't. It made me depressed and being in those places made me depressed, but I still often went.

In truth, I'd only ever once found something of unrealized value at a thrift store. It was the day of the 2270, the greatest of all the thrift store finds. I'd gone to the store of the Salvation Army. The moment I walked in, I wished I hadn't. Sad people were everywhere. I walked up and down the aisles, finding no treasure. I was kneeling at the rack, trying on a pair of some dead man's shoes. They had a foul smell, but they looked to be real leather. I was trying to decide if I liked them. I stood up to take them in,

holding my foot out, so I could see over my bulging, stained t-shirt. There was something about these shoes.

That's when I looked toward the back where the new arrivals come in. As I did, the swinging doors opened and out walked a man in a maroon apron, carrying something in his arms. At first, I didn't register what it was. I rubbed my eyes and squinted. No, I thought. But, yes. The man was putting on the shelf of the electronics section an old Marantz receiver of some kind. People go crazy for old Marantz receivers. I could see from where I stood—it was mint. A hush fell over the store, as the greasy heads of baseball capped and bearded men rose in unison, all sizes, all colors—all evaluating their chances. A woman gasped. A small child screamed. I left my old shoes where they were and B lined it for the Marantz. It seemed the whole store was moving in that direction. I broke into a loosely-controlled speed walk. In the next aisle over, (women's dresses), a white man in his fifties, wearing Carhartt pants and a flannel shirt, knocked over a small boy holding his mother's hand. The man did not slow down. I kicked it into gear. I was in the lead. I began to jog. A male voice from behind me called out, "It's mine!" and a chorus of desperate male voices followed, "No, it's mine!" And I was yelling, too, but for a different reason than they were. I was yelling because I'd won. I slapped my hand down on top of the Marantz, and dammit if an ephemeral beam of light didn't burst from within the thing and shower the whole store in a brief, warm glow.

Maintaining constant contact with the walnut case, I knelt before the Marantz. In its reflection my wide eyes. It was beautiful. I couldn't believe it. I ran my fingertips over the elegant instrument panel, the graceful font, the sexual switches—flaccid, power off—

erect, power on. Behind me a crowd gathered, several hands reached out, but I slapped them away. Then the man in the maroon apron stood and held his arms out.

“give him space, guys! Give the man some room.” The gawkers, heart-broken, went along their sad ways, pulling at their beards and adjusting their ill-fitting pants as they went. To this day, I can close my eyes, and I’m right back there in the glory.

Joey leaned back in his chair. He held on to the joint for a long moment before casually placing it against his lips and taking a hit—like an after-thought—like he could have taken it or left it. It impressed me. Joey had class. He wasn’t saying much. He looked very comfortable. To fill the silence, I asked him, “So, is it hard going door to door?”

He looked at me and grinned. Then he exhaled. The plume that came out of him engulfed me. It engulfed the whole room, the whole house. My eyes grew wide, having never witnessed anything close to the amount of smoke leaving his lungs. He could tell I was impressed. When he was finally done, I could just make out the dim shape of his form across the table. “People make little prisons in their minds,” he said. “They just live in them. I see it all day.”

I nodded and looked around at the walls. “The prison of the mind,” I whispered. I started to wonder if it smelled like garbage in my house. I hoped not. I wanted him to say more about me, about this ghost of the spark business. I was trying to create an atmosphere where he felt comfortable expanding on that idea. I knew better than to ask directly. I was sure that to ask directly would not be cool. So, I waited. But he just sat there getting stoned.

Joey began shifting in his seat. Could he read my mind? I often wondered if people could, if that was the reason people didn't like me. He stood up then and began walking toward the living room. "Why don't you show me around," he said. He paused in front of the bird-stain, tilting his head. "Is that a bird?" he asked. I shrugged, stupidly, and said nothing.

I followed him into the bedroom, where I had a mattress on the floor, and into the other room, where I kept the few things I'd found at thrift stores. There was an old art deco space-heater, some crappy records, two Pendleton shirts (which had turned out to not really fit me), a crock pot, and of course, the Marantz 2270. This was the sum total of all my finds over the course of a year and maybe a hundred hours spent in thrift stores. "What's this stuff, huh?" he asked.

"It's just a little business I have buying and selling vintage wares," I lied. I'd never sold anything for a profit. The Marantz was the only item with legitimate resale potential. He nodded, reaching down to touch the graceful curves of the space-heater, feeling the rough and sturdy fabric of the shirts. He looked pleased.

"They don't make shirts like this anymore," he said, smiling. Then he made his way to the Marantz.

"Now this is a real beauty," he said. "People go crazy for these, don't they?"

"I pretty much find this stuff all the time, then sell it for big bucks."

"And that's how you make your living?"

"Yes sir," I said. But that was only true in theory. In theory, someone had once paid big money for a Marantz 2270 in New York City, maybe, or in Los Angeles. But it was a demonstratable fact that no one in Spokane had ever been able to scrape together

more than a hundred dollars cash money to spend on anything. I'd avoided facing this reality by never trying to sell it.

He was running his hands along the top of the Marantz. I could tell he was really appreciating it. Standing above him, I began to notice the graceful shape of his body, how his lateral muscles fanned out across his back, protruding from his polo shirt, how elegantly they tapered to his waist. He stood and turned toward me.

"Pretty impressive," he said. I thought I saw in his eyes a look of genuine admiration, and I felt ashamed. Then he squared up to me, and like I was a delicate forest creature, he reached up and placed his finger beneath my chin. I didn't move.

"Do you know how we can never really know another person?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"That's the killer," he said. "No matter what happens, we're on our own." I nodded. "And you know about that?" The room was spinning, and I couldn't stop nodding. He just smiled at me, knowingly. I did know about that. He said, "So, then, what's with this ghost in here?"

"I don't know," I said. Then Joey lifted my chin and kissed me. He hooked his left hand around my waist and pulled our hips together.

"Wait," I said.

"No?" he asked.

"No, no. I didn't say, no—I said, wait." I left him there and locked myself in the bathroom. I leaned on the sink. How was even the bathroom filled with smoke? It seemed outrageous. I stared deep into my reflection. I didn't know what I was feeling. It wasn't arousal, exactly, not how I was used to feeling arousal, anyway. But it was something,

and all I'd felt lately was nothing. I cringed at my double chin, sloppy clothes, ugly, pale skin. How could Joey want anything from me at all? And all the lies I'd just told! But that's not what I was thinking. I was thinking this was a magic moment of some kind. I was thinking he was a magic man. I was thinking that maybe the chances for two people to reveal to one another their humanity comes seldomly, comes when you don't expect it, and when it does, you have to take it. And no matter what else I said to myself, I knew I wasn't going to miss this chance. I took a few deep breaths and came out of the bathroom, ready for anything.

"Joey," I said, walking through the smoke-filled living room into the kitchen area. Whatever he wanted from me; I was prepared to give. "Joey?" I queried, through the haze. Goose bumps were popping up all over.

I turned the corner into the kitchen. But Joey wasn't there. It was slow to sink in, though once it finally did, it sunk in all at once, and I didn't need to look to know, though I did anyway, walking down the short hallway and into the other room—he'd taken the Marantz.

I stepped out onto the porch, into the scorched light of day. I looked up and down the silent street. But he was gone. I down on the porch. From across the street, Alma peered at me from behind her blinds. I closed my eyes and listened for a long time. But all I heard was nothing. Such is the desolation of the suburbs.

I came back in and softly closed the door. I stood in the living room, staring at the bird-stain on the carpet, expecting it to peel its powerful wings from the ground, to beat the air, hover for a moment above me, before disappearing through the ceiling. I waited a long time for it to do just that.

On the day I'd found the Marantz, one thing I'd failed to consider before leaving the Salvation Army with it in my arms, was how heavy the thing was—Jesus, was it ever—and after the first city block, I needed a break. I sat down on a bench for a long while, the Marantz in my lap. I had two miles home from there, at least. I could make it, I told myself. I had to. The fall air felt hotter and hotter. I was out of breath and sweating, gathering concerned looks from the homeless men and women I passed on the sidewalk. I could feel the road-dust caking my pores. Take it slow and breathe, I said.

Then, crossing the Maple St. Bridge, I felt a strange thing happen in my lower back—something in there snapped. The pain nearly dropped me, but I didn't fall, like almost anyone else would have. I had to think about the Marantz, I told myself. I kept on across the bridge. No matter how bad the pain got, I kept focusing on the end of the bridge. And when I made it over, I dropped to my knees in the brittle shrubbery on the other side and laid down in the dirt, next to the discarded fast food containers and energy drink cans. I wasn't half way home, and I'd just thrown out my back. I tried not to think about how there was no one I could call. I stayed where I was for a long time catching my breath. Then my eyelids grew heavy and I slept.

When I woke, it was twilight, and I was thinking of Malati, of the time I'd gone back for the last of my things, how she'd looked at me like a stranger then, how it had confirmed for me, something I'd always expected about people. Her look made the sound of a coffin closing. I'd thought, we're alone, and when we think we're not, we're just pretending.

And then, lying on my back by the bridge, I realized, I'd been in that coffin ever since. Above me, a low hanging cover of clouds had appeared over the city, and the wind

was picking up. It was going to rain. If the Marantz got wet, all of it would have been for nothing. I had to get moving. But when I tried to get up, a punishing shock of pain shot through my lower back, and I fell immediately. Done for, I thought.

But then, I looked down at my shoes, and there they were—unpaid for—the dead man's shoes. I wasn't done yet, I thought.

I wrenched myself to my feet, ignoring the pain. I felt the hot breath of life fill me, and I took the Marantz to the edge of the bluff, overlooking the bridge and the city, and I felt a change, felt I was looking out over my kingdom, I was kicking open a coffin lid. I felt perspective. I carried it through the twilight and well into the dark. Knowing the rain could start at any moment, I took off my shirt and covered the Marantz with it, and kept walking down the dirty sidewalk along the busy street, baring my shoulder hair and back hair and extra body mass for all to see. I didn't care. In the midst of the shame and the physical pain, I felt my strength grow. I carried it past Garland and Wellesley, up to Francis, over to Crestline, down to Diamond and through the darkness of my front door, and the moment I stepped inside the sky opened, and it poured.

I'd misunderstood myself. I was not only fragile and alone, not just a pouty sad sack, not just privileged and entitled. I was also beaten and strong. There was a strength in me to endure that no one could touch. Even if I don't know how to use it for anything else. It would prove to be a realization I was fated to forget and be reminded of many times in my life. And I was reminded of it now, sitting in my empty living room.

Toward evening, the metallic noise of the mail slot sounded, followed by the shuffle of the mail lady's feet. I walked to the window and watched her. She grunted down the steps, looking back and forth at the tops of the landscaping trees, like she was

wondering why no birds ever sang any more, and worse, why no one seemed to notice. She came to a stop, still looking at the trees. She stood in her big black boots and oversized mail carrier pants. I felt such compassion for her, I felt very near tears. And though I'd not made a sound, she turned, and looked right at me—as if she knew—her upper lip curled, and her nose crinkled, peering beneath her glasses. I placed my fingers on the window pane and leaned toward her. We made eye contact and it held. And then she turned and went the way she always went. And though there was no way for me to know if she was feeling the same, I never for a second doubted it was possible.

Two months later, a crisp, young couple bought the house on a bank-forced short sale. I saw them, once, walking around the house, taking inventory of all the projects they'd be tackling after the sale closed. It was just before my final day there. I was in the kitchen where they couldn't see me. I watched them talking in the back yard, taking notes on a clipboard. They were so ambitious, I thought, so capable, so strong.

The Great Halloween Potluck

They tried getting the kids to eat first: noodles with tomato sauce, oven baked freezer fries with ketchup, and store brand dinner rolls with butter. The parents brought it all out to them where they played in their costumes and their masks.

“No one trick-or-treats till your plates are clean,” they said. But the parents were bluffing and everybody knew it. “At least a few bites,” they conceded. But the kids were too excited—not one of the plates had been or would be touched by any of the little dinosaurs or princesses, cowgirls, or tigers. One by one, the parents retrieved the plates, carried them back to the kitchen, and stuffed their own mouths with the food.

What would they talk about? That wasn't yet easy to determine for this group. In the coming decades, many of them would grow very close, even love one another, some would even visit one another's graves. But none of them knew that now.

The neighborhood itself was something they'd talked a lot about at first—was it changing? They'd been nervous about that. And yes, in fact, the neighborhood *was* changing. In previous decades, the neighborhood's residents had been the families of doctors, corporate lawyers, bank executives, and academics. That's why the new residents had moved here, that their own children might be raised among the children of doctors and lawyers. They'd all really stretched the budget to do so.

But life had played a bit of a nasty trick on them—as they'd all gradually gathered—*none* of the new residents were doctors or lawyers, not even close. As it turned out, the young and successful of this generation, sensing the encroachment of a less dynamic type of people, were moving elsewhere. The parents of the new families were mostly medical techs, cubicle workers, journeymen. It was becoming apparent, that instead of raising themselves to the standards of the neighborhood, the neighborhood had lowered its standards to them.

JP busied himself with the hosting. Did everyone have forks? What about napkins, who needed one? Also, he made sure the pasta dishes stayed neatly arranged and that the dessert trays did not get mixed in with the salad area. He was annoyed he'd forgotten to buy beer that day and then had forgotten to ask Sarah to get it when *she* was out. At first, he'd thought it would be OK, assuming others would bring plenty. But JP only drank micro brewed IPAs, and he'd watched in horror as one by one the other dads strolled in carrying nothing but domestics and pilsners. “How do you drink this stuff?” he'd said to Alan, pointing at his Miller Lite. But Alan couldn't seem to respond. JP lacked personality, but he made up for it with opinions.

Steve looked on at them both, amused.

His neighbor, Manny, opened a beer and leaned against the wall next to Harry, asked him if everything was good and Harry said it sure was and Steve assured Harry likewise and they looked out at the children playing

It would perhaps be possible to attend a thousand soccer games with Harry and never really notice him, which wouldn't bother him to know. He was content with the size of his world and his place in it.

Harry's wife, Colleen, grew up in a small farmhouse thirty miles south of town. She'd grown up sweet and happy and kind, and she radiated these traits. People couldn't help but smile when they came in contact with her. She'd always been aware of this. She fed off it.

Following the birth of her third son, she'd found the weight impossible to lose. In fact, the weight had piled on, and kept piling on. It made her feel out of control and insecure, and left her with a new, slightly bitter dimension to her personality. Seeing this bitterness reflected back on her from people she came in contact with only fed her growing pain. It had gotten so she felt the bitterness was all there was left, which wasn't true, and Harry knew that, but not in a way he could get into words. To him, she was beautiful, and no less so than she ever had been, but he couldn't convince her. He began to take her despair personally, so that every time she expressed her feelings, he became angry with her for not being happier. They'd hardly touched in months. He noted to himself here tonight, she hadn't even tried talking with anyone. Geez, he thought, she hadn't even taken off her coat.

Also in attendance was a new family, just arrived from Portland. The dad was elsewhere, but the new mom brought the kids and she stood in the kitchen, everyone milling around her, careful not to appear desperate for her attention.

Was the new mom one of them? Gloria was leading the questioning, mustering the wit and confidence of her Instagram persona. She worked from home part time, writing articles for a local weekly—defiantly financially stable, in spite of the general deterioration of the industry as a whole. Gloria lived under constant anxiety of losing the income from this job. It could disappear at any moment. If it did, she would need to be prepared with a plan B. Writers these days need a lot of irons in the fire, so to speak. But Gloria did not have any other irons in any other fires. Her anxiety had gotten so bad lately the moment her kids and husband left for work each day, she retreated to bed, cowering under her sheets, scrolling aimlessly on her phone. She wrote her articles hastily, sloppily, finishing them moments before deadlines. With each hour she spent hiding under her blankets she was sealing her fate. She knew this, and knowing this only drove her deeper. Some days she would not leave her bed at all. She would lie there staring at the patch of tree and sky out the bedroom window and think, this is how I have always felt and it's how I always *will* feel, because nothing ever changes.

“Such great food in Portland!” she said to the new mom. “We go all the time. Have you been to Veritable Quandary? It's our favorite.”

“V.Q! That *was* so good!” said the new mom. “They're gone now. Geez, that was five years ago.” The new mom was smiling as she said this, happy to strike a conversation about Portland. She looked at Gloria for the next question and Gloria looked back, but in pain. Had it been five years since they'd been to Portland? How could that

be? She topped off her glass and side stepped over to the veggie dip tray, trying to recall the events of the past five years.

Rick knitted his eyebrows. Veritable Quandary? Veritable Quandary? What the fuck was a Veritable Quandary? He took a long drink of his beer and mosied out of the kitchen.

Then a waist-high astronaut and a witch needled their way through the crowd. The witch straddled an old broom. They were in cahoots. The witch kept poking the handle into the soft bellies and bottoms of the parents as she went. She pretended these assaults were accidental. “Excuse me, pardon me,” she kept calling in her witchiest voice. The astronaut walked through in slow motion, his arms held wide, crashing fluidly from one parent to the next, pretending they were asteroids.

“There are no explosions in space!” the astronaut called.

Standing dangerously close to the liquor cabinet, the oldest three mummies discussed strategy for the night to come. “First we go up Birch and come back down Pine. Then, we hit the blue house on 21st, full bars there. After that, bam, we head over to Maple, and take it all the way to Main street,” said the first zombie.

The second mummy cocked her head. “Well, Ok, but that skips all those houses on Oak.”

The third mummy grabbed her wrist and stared at her through his bandages.

“We don’t go on Oak Street. Understand? We never go on Oak Street.”

“Why?” she asked. The first mummy edged a little closer to the liquor, and then Allan swatted them out of the kitchen.

At his office, Allan had recently been up for the same promotion he'd been up for three out of the last seven years. Earlier today, he'd gotten word they'd passed him up again. The first time he'd been passed up, he'd gone all-night drinking with some friends from high school and then moped around for weeks. This time, his only noticeable reaction occurred while driving home from work. He'd stopped for a red light and, while waiting, closed his eyes. The car behind him honked for a full ten seconds of green before he jolted back and carried on his way.

Abigail stepped up to replace Gloria in the questioning. She said, "Don't be discouraged that it takes a long time to find a good job here. It's a tough market."

"Really? I guess I've gotten lucky then. I've actually turned down a few offers, we're going to focus on the family for now. It's actually Lee's work we moved here for. He's on some fast track thing." The neighbors nodded. Abigail blinked.

It had taken Abigail a full year to get a job offer when they moved here eight years ago. And that had been with a failing family care practice and only part time. She'd spent five years finding a full-time job with benefits (could you even call them benefits anymore?).

Maybe the new mom was not one of them.

Cynthia jumped in. "How are you liking the schools?"

The new mom looked up. "I've heard such great things. But they're at Augustine. We've just gotten used to private school." The neighbors nodded again.

No, the new mom was not one of them. They could tell they would have nothing to offer her. They could see she would realize that fact soon enough, if she hadn't

already. It was OK. They moved on. They left the new mom alone, and carried on with one another.

The monsters were approaching a breaking point with the waiting. Running in and out of the kitchen. All across the room, wizards and super heroes and little clowns with pillows for pot bellies were tugging on the shirts of the parents, trying to pull them toward the door. The astronaut floated by, using a swimming technique. Comments began to spring up. “Are we taking these guys trick-or-treating or what?”

“Who should go?”

“Clare doesn’t want to go anywhere! She’s on her third glass of wine!”

Nobody volunteered to go and no one stopped eating pasta noodles, nobody stopped eating cheesy penne, or Costco salad, or hot bread and butter. Rick opened a beer and drank the whole thing in three swallows and then opened another. Allan did the same thing, and then so did Steve. Gloria and Clare uncorked another bottle of wine. Cynthia held out her glass to them. The volume in the room got louder and louder and laughter began to break out sporadically here and there. The new mom looked on in interest.

JP decided maybe he *could* drink domestic beer. Maybe just this one time. He began dropping comments to the other men in hopes of being offered one.

“Must be nice to have a beer,” he said to Rick. “What type of beer is that again?” he asked Harry, who looked blankly at the Budweiser label on the can and then turned it back so JP could see it. But having no way of understanding his change in stance, they assumed JP was still ribbing them, and did not think to offer him one. Considering himself too manly to beg or to drink wine, JP found himself in a self-constructed prison of sobriety. It was a Halloween nightmare.

A princess and a ballerina and a gumball machine began jumping up and down on their father's shoes, yelling, "Let's go! Let's go!"

Cynthia stood up, her cheeks flush. "Let the dads take these kids out! The moms should just stay here and relax." The response from the dads was a universal shoulder shrug, some lazy eye contact. They were happy to do it, they supposed. Clare thought this was a great idea, and Colleen raised her glass, but then no one said anything. They continued eating—spaghetti with Bolognese sauce, spaghetti with vegetarian sauce, salad with croutons and bleu cheese dressing. Roger removed the top of the Kraft Parmesan cheese and piled it over the seven-layer bean dip. "Great idea," said Clare, who followed suit. Then someone broke into the grocery store chocolate chip cookies Lucy's husband Bill had picked up in a huff at Albertson's on his way home, (a stop that added eleven unhappy minutes to his commute). Here came, floating by, the little astronaut again..

"I'm on the moon!" he was calling. "I'm on the moooooon!"

Outside in the dark, the wind whipped the wet, brown leaves from their branches, and spilled them sporadically about. Two monsters and the other princess and a cheetah stood with their noses to the window, musing about what they were missing out on. They were considering trying to slip out unnoticed. The younger children watched them closely. Over the trees and the houses, the moon loomed gigantic and full, ridiculously so. It consumed the entire night sky.

Clare and Colleen poured wine into one another's glasses and giggled into each other's ears. In the corner, a Tyrannosaurus Rex showed off her sling-shot to a Disney Princess.

Rick and Allan babbled in the corner about what was *really* going on with America. The two vampires took turns hanging one another upside down from the stairwell.

The new mom was left leaning against the corner of the new refrigerator, watching the chaos around her. Cynthia's husband Steve (out of work) bumped into her on his way to the Chex mix. "Pardon me," he said, warmly, a little drunkenly. She was pretty, he realized. He wouldn't have thought so on first glance, and he hadn't. But now that he stood before her, and really looked at her, he saw that she was in fact deeply beautiful. That was the best kind of beautiful, Steve thought, the kind that is only revealed *after* you'd really paid attention. He felt compelled to make conversation. "So what part of the neighborhood do you live in?" he asked.

The new mom smiled and looked up. "Oh, we got a great deal on a house on Oak Street."

A subtle but unignorable drop in volume fell across the room. Clare paused and asked, "Oh. That's so nice. Where at on Oak?"

"Just over from 22nd. You know, the real estate market in Portland is so crazy, we were able to pay cash for our house here. Isn't that nuts?"

No one stopped talking and the children were now going completely insane, but an unutterable silence began filling the room all the same, like a big balloon. Time had suddenly slowed. It may have been because they were in outer space.

"East or West of 22nd?" asked Steve, who leaned against the counter and knocked over a full jar of croutons. He bent down to pick them up and Gloria helped, but Allan

moon-walked slowly and obliviously over the pile, crushing dozens of croutons beneath his boots without noticing.

“Allan!” Abigail yelled.

“JP! Where’s the broom!” Called Cynthia, who disappeared through the kitchen door.

The new mom smiled. “Two houses in to the.... west? Yes, to the west. Yes. How come?” They were all looking at the new mom.

Someone said, “Did you say you bought the house on twenty second and Oak? Two houses in to the west?”

“On the north side of the road?” whispered Cynthia.

People began looking at one another out of the corner of their eyes. In the other room, the children had begun chanting at the top of their young lungs, “*trick-or-treat! Smell My feet!*”

The new mom took a slow sip of her wine. She narrowed her eyes.

“Is something wrong with the north side?” she whispered.

JP, who’d been helping his youngest daughter clean up a messy poop in the bathroom the whole time, re-entered the kitchen with the broom, the witch protesting behind him. But instead of sweeping, he dished himself some lasagna, and shoved a heaping steam full in his mouth. Then he looked around and wondered why no one was saying anything.

“So, JP,” said Clare, clearing her throat. “Candace was just telling everyone which house they just bought here.” Nodding, knowing. They looked at JP. The new mom tilted her head.

“Uhhuh,” muttered JP, indicating, yes, with his head. “Next door to the Tate house.” The lasagna was burning the roof of his mouth. “I saw the moving truck.”

“Tate?” asked the new mom. Now, only JP’s feet remained on the ground. It seemed like everyone else was airborne, pushing gently off cabinets and countertops.

JP nodded, wheezing, eyebrows furrowed, turning red. They were staring at him, slack jawed. Were they shaking their heads? He swallowed painfully. The new woman was shaking her head in confusion, wine glass held inches from her lips. “Yeah, you know, Terry Lee Tate. The serial killer.” He could see she didn’t know. “Oh man, yeah, he murdered twenty something people in his basement. Buried all their heads and hearts in his back yard. Unspeakable things.”

“What?” She whispered. JP filled a glass with water and drank it, he’d almost certainly burned the roof of his mouth. It was going to hurt for days.

“Oh yeah, like ten years ago. Real big deal. They only found like half of the torsos.” He could not figure out the looks that everyone was giving him. “Kids won’t even *walk...*” but JP trailed off, having just reached a conclusion, and stuffed another piece of scalding lasagna in his mouth.

A panicked look engulfed the woman’s face. Then she smiled.

“You’re messing with me,” she said, looking around.

But no one was messing with her. With eyes wide, Gloria watched the room and finished her glass of wine. The witch snuck over to the corner and snatched the broom.

Here came the astronaut, arms out again. He was not tired of his game. He would never be tired of his game. “I’m on Jupiter! I’m on Mars!” he called, on his way through.

The monsters and super heroes in the next room chanted at the top of their lungs in unison,

“If you don’t, we don’t care, we’ll pull down your underwear.”

“That can’t be right,” whispered the new mom. “Next to *our* house?”

Cynthia took the new mom’s hand and held it, affectionately. “It’s fine,” she said.

“It’s going to be fine,” refilling the new mom’s glass.

In the other room, the children tipped over a table lamp, knocked a picture off the wall. No one seemed to notice. The new mom heaped pasta onto a paper plate, took deep breaths.

Harry and Colleen, standing in the corner, looked long into each other’s eyes, embraced, and kissed, deeply, passionately, feeling within one another the bursting lust of their first date. They paused, but only briefly and then leaned farther in to one another. Harry reached his long thin arm around her waist and pulled himself against her. She squeezed her arms around his back and fell against the table. She felt hot as an asteroid coming apart on entry. She grabbed Harry’s collar and pulled him into the bathroom and shut the door.

Then the children crowded in front of the front door, the oldest, strongest children in front, the younger ones farther back, all shaking like electrons. The walls rattled. They were chanting now, pumping their fists. It was all out there for them. It couldn’t go on, the waiting. The oldest of the children, gathering the full support of the younger ones, raised their arms together and thrust them forth. The front door burst off its hinges like an escape hatch. For an instant, silence fell upon them. Then they, too, burst out over the porch without further pause or reflection, without rancor or grace, without judgement,

kindness, or morality. Out ran the monsters and the unicorn, the gumball machine and the princess, the astronaut and the other princess, out came the witch and the batman, the little doctor, the vampire, the cheetah, and last, holding up her skirt, a tiny little fairy. Out they all spilled, unable at last, to spend a single additional instant not handing over everything they had to the night.

The Ladder

Before the widow departed that morning, she let Brady know, in clear certain terms, he was to be finished today, that it was in the contract. He considered sharing with her his own views on deadlines of this nature regarding projects of this kind. He was painting her house, not publishing a newspaper. Would another day or two really matter? But he didn't say anything like that. Brady had experience. He'd arrived here on the current of a long river of clients. All kinds: Picky ones, easy ones, reasonable, unreasonable, hardliners. Brady usually knew when to push back, and he knew when to just shut up and smile nice. Like now. Besides, He figured he could finish today no problem.

"I'm not going to be taken advantage of," said the widow. "No more skirting off to your other jobs, leaving early, showing up late, etcetera."

“I hear you loud and clear, ma’am. I did have those other things to finish, but now I’m all yours. Focused right here. Finishing today.” He smiled.

“Today, Mr Brady.”

It was a big, old, lonely house, set up on a small hill, looking out. It was three stories high, and had a tall steep gabled roof. He stood at the very top of his thirty-foot extension ladder, the tallest ladder he owned, wielding a six-inch brush, painting the soffit and the gable.

Clients never complained about the quality of Brady’s work—always immaculate, and cheap. However, finishing a week or two behind schedule, smelling strongly of marijuana, those were things he’d received complaints about. But Brady didn’t let those complaints worry him. The important thing to Brady, was the quality of the final product. He spent more time than anyone sanding and scraping old paint, peeling out dried-up caulking. He was also probably the last painter in town to not use a sprayer. When asked why not, he would lift his chin slightly and gaze back at the asker,

“I suppose I’m working toward a different aesthetic,” he would say.

Most people were more understanding regarding his approach to schedules. He guessed in the case of the widow, that she’d felt insecure about her role, unable to identify whether she was being had or not. When people aren’t sure what is going on, conservative attitudes are often adopted. He didn’t hold it against her.

He worked quickly with the brush, the bucket of paint hooked to the rung of his ladder. Down below, the air was still, but up here, way up here, Brady felt a cool and steady breeze that lifted the long strands of his thick, white hair. He dipped the brush in the paint, deftly tapped it against the side of the bucket to prevent any dripping, then

reached high above his head to paint the corner where the gable and soffit met; the clouds and the breeze, and the blue sky keeping him company.

On the ground below, the Widow's son, Frankie, having crept out of the dark of the kitchen screen door, set a doughy fourteen-year-old hand on a rung of the ladder, thinking of his mother's specific instruction to stay out of the painter's way. She'd been very clear about it before she left. But Frankie was ungodly bored. He'd been sitting inside all week playing online games and eating corn dogs, and wondering about this guy on the ladder out there. He'd been curious about talking to him, but he wasn't positive whether the guy was a weirdo or a pedophile or something like that.

Specifically, Frankie had been thinking about how the guy seemed so at ease up high on the ladder. He wanted to ask him if he'd ever been afraid of heights. Frankie had always been terrified of heights and longed not to be. He wanted to ask the guy: is fear of heights something everyone starts out with and must overcome? Or is it something where some people are born afraid and some people are born not afraid, and that is just the way it is?

This question had festered in Frankie as he'd sat in the dark house day after day that week until finally, he'd mustered the courage to come outside and ask. But now, standing below the ladder, he couldn't think of *how* to ask it, so he just stood there with his hand on the rung, looking out, his nose wrinkled up under his glasses, pressing a finger to his largest and sorest pimple, his brain in a sort of fog. He was thinking, he couldn't start with that question. He needed a good opener. Something to help work up to this question about the nature of the fear of heights. But Frankie was stumped.

Up above, Brady was starting to find the rhythm of the morning. He was painting and watching the clouds motor past. He called the clouds his 'no-talking teachers.' He couldn't emphasize this enough. Real teachers. Sometimes he would even talk to the clouds a little while working alone, way up high like this. He took a moment to turn and admire a few wispy ones floating by.

Below him he noticed the widow's boy standing with a hand on a rung of the ladder. Brady thought this might be the first time he'd seen the boy outside all week. It seemed strange the boy was just sitting there. Had the boy said something he hadn't heard?

"Hello, boy!" he called down. The boy didn't answer, though. He just looked up at him, mute, his nose all wrinkled up. Brady said, "You need somethin', bud?"

Still the boy did not respond.

"My mom says I should ask if I can help you!" It was the first thing Frankie thought of. But the moment the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

Brady smiled. It was always good to see a young person interested in doing a little work. "I can always use a helper!" he shouted back.

Frankie kicked the dirt. He'd hoped the painter would tell him not to worry about it. He'd never painted before or done anything like it, for that matter. He felt, acutely, the separation between himself and the video game he'd been playing. Like sort of a panicked feeling about it, actually. Also, the man's upbeat attitude seemed awkward. This old guy. It was weird.

"But, I don't really know much about painting!" Frankie said, now entirely regretful he'd come outside at all.

Brady wondered why the boy would say that. He'd just asked if he could help! The boy must be nervous. That was understandable, he thought. He would just encourage him, he thought. "No one does until they learn!" Brady yelled, smiling at the boy. He felt comfortable in this leadership role. He felt aware of all his experience and knowledge. The boy appeared nervous, but eager. He smiled down at the boy, white knuckled on the ladder rung. "I'll tell you what, I'm running low on paint up here. How about I lower this bucket down on the rope, and you fill it up. How about that, my boy?"

Frankie was thinking about just leaving without another word. He considered for a moment the social ramifications of simply walking back inside and locking the door. He said, "Well, I don't know much about painting, really."

"That's alright. You just pour some paint into that bucket. We'll take it one step at a time."

"Alright," said Frankie, awkwardly.

The painter lowered the bucket and Frankie took it off the hook.

Frankie cringed. Things had gotten out of hand. He wasn't supposed to be bothering the painter at all, let alone pouring his paint. The paint bucket was on the plywood-and-sawhorse table. Frankie took the bucket over and poured part of it into the bucket, which he carried back over and hooked back on the rope. He looked up. Then he remembered his question about the fear of heights thing.

"Mister, are you scared up there?" he blurted, while Brady hauled the bucket up.

Brady paused. Scared? Did the boy think he looked scared? The accusation stung. He worked hard not to look scared, but deep down, he knew, even after all these years of experience, he still was a little.

The truth was, Brady possessed only a functional confidence at heights. He'd spent a lot of time thinking about it. Over the years, he'd come to accept it as a fundamental part of his wiring. He saw traces of the same psychological processes in other areas of his life. When he was a boy, for example, Brady's family went to church every Sunday. Sitting in the pews, he would have these weird thoughts. Brady would imagine standing and shouting horrible, unforgivable things. Things like how much he loved the devil, or how bad he'd like to see the boobs of the organ player's daughter, Beth, who sat each week in the front row. Brady had tried hard to stop those thoughts, but he couldn't. What if he couldn't stop himself, he'd wonder, from acting on them, from jumping up during the silent prayer and defiling the sanctity of the ceremony? His palms would begin to sweat and he would squeeze them together, anything to keep from shouting, "Fuck you, Reverend Perry!"

Soon he began to feel afraid of going to church, of sitting in those quiet pews, listening to his screaming perverted thoughts. He'd carried that shame for years, not still, but for years. He knew, now, that kids are just weird. All kids do and think weird things. It's just a thing about kids. It wasn't something to be hung up on.

As a younger painter, Brady had come to recognize this same mechanism at work regarding his considerable fear of heights. He wasn't afraid he'd slip, or that the ladder would fall over for no reason. Brady was afraid he would jump. Brady was afraid part of him *wanted* to jump. That's where the fear of heights comes from.

The knowledge of the roots of the fear helped Brady cope with it, and after years of discipline, he'd learned to keep it under wraps, even learned to enjoy the benefits of working up high; the quiet of it, and the peace that came from total concentration on a

task. Brady took pride in his mastery of the fear. He felt courageous about it. He knew some people were born without fear of heights. But for people like that, Brady knew that the act of working at heights was less meaningful. If you weren't afraid of heights, then being up high wasn't courageous at all, it didn't mean anything. But Brady was afraid, and he'd learned to overcome it, and that was meaningful, that was courageous. In that way, he was grateful for the fear, of the growth he'd undergone because of it.

But at this point, he'd assumed, to an outside observer, he wouldn't appear afraid at all, and he liked having that secret, it was like a little secret sacrifice he made every time he went up on a ladder. So it miffed him that the boy had apparently noticed how afraid he was. It made him feel exposed, like there was a disparity between his perceived self and his actual self. His body had betrayed him, he felt.

The boy was looking up at him, blocking the sun with his hand. It took Brady a moment to pull himself together, to think of how to respond to the accusation. He was annoyed.

"Well, I'm doing it aren't I?" he growled. "I'm up here, don't you see? That's the point." The boy stared back up at him. Confused. "Courage is being afraid and going on anyway! That's what courage is!"

Frankie winced. Why was the man angry? Maybe this old guy *was* a pervert or something, after all. "I think I hear the phone ringing," he said, and he walked to the back porch and inside the house.

Brady watched him leave. He wondered if there was something wrong with the boy. Autism or something like that. The widow hadn't mentioned it to him. He shook loose his injured pride and continued painting with the dwindling supply in his bucket. It

would have been nice to have the boy retrieve things for him, to save him a few trips up and down the ladder, but oh well. Brady was used to doing things for himself. He looked out, and closed his eyes to the wispy clouds and the breeze.

He was getting closer and closer to the top of the gable. He was reaching higher and higher with his paint brush.

Brady referred to the clouds as his no-talking teachers in a strictly metaphorically sense, but sometimes he really felt like he could understand the clouds word for word. Like he could talk back and they'd understand. That's how much wisdom he got from them. He imagined it being like it might have been for the old Buddhists, whom he didn't really understand, but whose writings he did try to study, when he wasn't too stoned. He had a lot of those old books, among others. Lots of philosophy books, he liked to keep around, and whose purpose he also felt very near to understanding, though never quite enough that he could apply them to his life. A smile came to Brady's face as he worked back and forth with the brush.

The clouds were really talking to him now. Here came a truck. It was Espinoza, the contractor. Brady guessed Espinoza had probably forgotten something and was coming back to get it. Espinoza got out and strode gallantly, in a hurry, no doubt.

"What'd you forget?" Brady called, bending down to grab hold of the top rung.

"My level!" Espinoza called back. "I forgot my level! Had to come back for it."

"Oh, brother," said Brady.

"There goes an hour, right down the crapper!"

"Tell me about it!"

Brady and Espinoza got along great. Brady got almost half his work either from Espinoza, or on jobs somehow connected to him. Espinoza would get Brady all kinds of work, but then act like he wasn't doing Brady any favors, necessarily. Almost no one is like that. Espinoza was gracious, and Brady liked him for it.

The widow was contracting this particular job herself, to save on the contractor fees, and she'd only hired Espinoza to do the carpentry, which is something contractors hate more than anything. If he were busier, he'd have said no, but things were slow in town that fall. She'd offered him the carpentry portion of the job and, though he had tried to convince her of the value of his contracting services, she'd decided she was perfectly capable of hiring and managing everyone. Then a week later, she'd called him and asked for a good plumber, electrician, drywall guy, and painter, the exact information, the knowledge of which, is half of what makes you a contractor in the first place. As a general rule, a contractor would never grant such a request. But that was Espinoza for you. Too gracious for his own good.

"You starting the new job?"

"Yup. It's going to need some paint. Think you could take a look at it today?"

"I don't know, the widow wants this one finished tonight. She stressed the importance of it."

Espinoza cocked his head and gave Brady a strange look, but then said, "Ha! I bet she did. I bet she put you right in your place. She don't take no guff!"

"An open mind begins with humility," said Brady.

Espinoza nodded, surveying the remaining work. He looked at his watch.

"Better get your foot on the gas, if you're gonna make it!"

Brady looked down. He didn't like the way Espinoza phrased that. "You're talking like a contractor, but I heard you're just a carpenter!" he said.

Espinoza nodded, slowly.

"You still good standing up high on the last rung of those ladders?"

"Seems like I'm always up here!"

"Well, you let me know, and we can get a guy in here to spray the soffits."

"I won't hear of it!" Brady shouted down. "I like it up here!" he dipped his brush in the paint and made a few graceful, demonstrative strokes across the corner.

"You're the boss!" Espinoza called up, and then he was driving away again, taking with him a certain energy that he always brought to a job site, leaving the quiet of the morning behind.

The breeze changed directions, then. It swirled and stirred piles of wet leaves and blew a piece of paper down the sidewalk. He saw the shape of a small girl approaching. She was maybe ten years old, with a crooked smile, wearing a blue tunic.

"I'm selling cookies for my troop, the Daisies!" called the girl.

Brady could see even from way up where he was, the girl was sharp and eager and sincere.

"Cookies, you say?"

"I'll tell you one thing about the new S'mores ones. They let us try one at our Daisies meeting, and they are DE-lishiss!" The girl smiled up.

"I see!"

"So! How many should I put you down for?"

It made Brady joyful to see her. She reminded him of his own daughter, now grown. All of her humor and defiance, and this quiet resolve to believe in herself and the value of her own experience.

“Have you sold many boxes already?” he asked.

“Not too many,” she said. “I’m supposed to sell twenty-five. You can win a dinosaur lamp! But you have to sell 2,000 boxes, I think.”

“That seems excessive.”

“The money goes to our troop! So we can, you know, pay for projects, take classes, even go on trips!”

“Wonderful!” said Brady.

“So! How about a box of Tag-a-longs and a box of Samoas?” She indicated to the order sheet with her pencil. The sun was shining brightly in her eyes so that she squinted and had to block it with her elbow.

But Brady frowned. “Well, I’m just the painter. That’s the only thing,” said Brady, apologetically.

“OK!” the girl yelled back, undeterred.

“You’d have to come back later and talk to the homeowner, is what I am saying.”

“Oh,” said the little girl.

“Sorry,” said Brady.

He put some paint on the gable, and then looked back to say sorry again, but the girl was gone. Above him on the roof, a little song bird landed and looked at him. The sky seemed especially blue and the wispy white clouds, especially white and especially

close. It seemed like they were right there, like Brady could talk to them, like one of those clouds might say something directly to him.

“You couldn’t have ordered one box of tag-a-longs?” asked the cloud.

“I know, I know,” replied Brady.

“Just kidding. Hey, that poor kid in there. He’s really bumming me out! Why don’t you try and give him some encouragement? Couldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah? Poor kid. That’s got to be the most awkward stage there is. So filled with angst.”

“Anxiety is nothing more than potential freedom, yet to be realized.”

“Yeah, that’s good,” said Brady.

“Kierkegaard, I believe.”

“Kierkegaard is it?”

“I believe so!”

“I’ll have to remember that one.”

The little song bird returned to her routine: procuring bitter morsels and returning them to her young. Leaving Brady again to his thoughts.

Inside, Frankie was trying to figure out how awkward the exchange outside had been. Maybe not that awkward. What was that the painter had said? Courage is being scared and what? He thought he’d go see if the guy needed more paint. He went outside.

“You’re back!” Called the painter.

“I’m afraid of heights,” said Frankie.

“Oh!,” said Brady. “Well, everyone is at first!”

Frankie nodded. It made him feel hopeful.

“One step at a time though,” said Brady. “Look here.”

Brady climbed down from the ladder.

“Before you worry about being a daredevil, you first have to learn the basics. Watch.”

He demonstrated: First you need a clean brush and a stirring stick. Check. Then you need your little paint bucket. Check. You’ll also need a paint key or a flat head screw driver and a clean rag ready just in case. Check, check. Brady cracked the seal on the can with the screw driver and peeled the lid off and with the brush he gingerly removed the paint hanging on the lid so it wouldn’t make a mess either. Then he stirred the paint, thoroughly, but also carefully so that no paint splattered over the side.

“You see, thorough and careful. Everything has a balance.”

Done stirring, he took the brush from the little clean bucket and brushed the paint off the stir stick and placed the stir stick on the paint can lid. He did this and then looked at the boy and smiled. Next, he picked up the can by its handle and carefully poured one quarter of it from the front of the can in to the little bucket, then immediately brushed up the stream of paint that had spilled down the side of the gallon bucket. Finally, he placed the brush into the little bucket, put the lid on the paint, and placed the stir stick on the lid.

“See?” Brady exclaimed. “Easy as pie, and no muss.”

Frankie looked unimpressed.

“It’s all in the details. One thing leads to another. See?”

The boy was looking toward the back door of the house, and Brady frowned.

“Here. This will be *your* brush. Take care of it, and when I call down to you, you refill my bucket with paint from this gallon. Just like I did. Sound good?”

Frankie shrugged and watched the painter climb back up the ladder. So he guessed the guy wasn't some pervert, but definitely a loser. He tried to imagine who the painter would be, if he was a kid at his school, and he grouped him generally with one of the burn outs, the stoners.

He wondered if his dad had been afraid of heights. Not likely, he thought. Then he was thinking about Stacey at school and sort of rocking back and forth to the movements of her body and he realized the painter was calling down to him. He walked over and took the bucket off the hook and took it to the table where he poured some paint into it. He took it back over and hung it on the hook.

Brady pulled the bucket back up, noticing the trail of paint splatter the boy had left starting from the table, leading across the lawn, to the bottom of the ladder, which he'd then stepped in on his way back and was now tracking to the back porch.

"Hey!" Brady called. "Your shoes! You've got wet paint on your shoes!"

Frankie froze and saw what he'd done. What an idiot. What a total fart stick. He should have never come outside. He jumped on the porch and hid in the kitchen.

Brady frowned, watching the boy's retreat, then shrugged. The sun was beginning to feel warm on his back. He enjoyed it for a moment as he puzzled after the kid. What an awful stage of development. He imagined how difficult it must be for a boy without a father in this world. In ancient times, not having a father meant you were an outcast in the society! Now it's not like that, but still. A boy needs someone to show him how to make his way in the world. How to be strong. The right way to do things. Things only a father can teach. He felt a great deal of pity for the boy, and even a certain closeness to him.

The wispy white cloud appeared directly above him again.

“I thought you were going to encourage the kid, not bore him to death.”

“He has to start at the beginning, doesn’t he?”

“The beginning?” asked the cloud.

Brady dipped his brush in the bucket and swirled it around in there. He felt very unsettled about the entire exchange.

Frankie was so mad at himself! What could be more basic than pouring some paint into a bucket? And he couldn’t even do that right. He slunk way down in the chair, wrapped in shame and self-hate. The guy had just showed him how to do it without making a mess. Why was it so impossible for him to do anything right?

He wondered if it wouldn’t be too weird for him to go back out there. Maybe he should try. He poked his head out the door and saw the painter on the ladder. He tentatively stepped out.

“Sorry I made such a mess,” he called.

The painter put his brush in his bucket and turned around.

“You just need to listen, that’s all. And to focus.”

“That’s what my mom is always saying. I guess I assume I’ll learn to focus someday.”

“There is no someday! Only this moment!”

“Do you need more paint?” He asked, meekly.

“What?” called Brady.

“Do. You. Need. More. Paint?”

“Well sure!”

He tied the rope to the bucket and lowered it down to the boy.

Frankie retrieved the bucket from the rope and this time carried it over carefully, mindful of every step. He poured the paint in to the bucket, careful not to spill a drop. Then he brushed up the runny bit so as not to make a mess, just as the painter had showed him. He turned and headed back to the ladder, and as he approached he looked up and said, “Did you notice! I didn’t spill a drop!” But as he spoke, he tripped on a rock, hurtling the bucket of paint into the air, splattering the window and the driveway and as he ran to try and catch it, he slammed into the ladder, sending Brady and the ladder careening.

As the ladder tipped, Brady clutched instinctively to it—like an animal—for dear life, calculating instantly the compound fractures, the potentially fatal internal injuries, he was about to receive on the rocks below. The top of the ladder fell in a great arc that picked up speed as it went. Frankie, below, was holding on to the rungs, trying in vain to stop it. Brady took all this in and was surprised to find that, to him, the whole process was taking a remarkably long time. In fact, he felt very calm about it. He looked up and saw the little song bird watching him, head cocked.

“Woah, buddy,” said the cloud. “What’s going on *here*?”

Brady shook his head. “Kid knocked the ladder over.” Brady indicated Frankie at the bottom of the ladder. The cloud whistled.

“Oh man, that’s a long way down.” The cloud looked back up at Brady. “Is a fall like that even survivable?” But Brady wasn’t listening to the cloud anymore. He was thinking about the little Daisy girl who was selling those cookies. Why hadn’t he bought any? Why hadn’t he taken five minutes of his time? Why hadn’t he been a better father? That’s what he was really thinking about now.

“I just never had the right philosophy to give her. I never knew the lessons to teach.”

“Oh,” said the cloud, still looking down at the rocky landscape below, a little surprised at the change in subject. “Well, you know. Philosophy is pretty overrated, really.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, yeah. Have you ever met a philosopher?”

“No, not really.”

“Miserable people.” The cloud was wearing sun glasses. It was very preoccupied with the situation at hand. More so than Brady, strangely. “Yeah, I mean. Did you know that Schopenhauer pushed his own mother down the stairs?”

“Really?”

“Total asshole.”

The little song bird on the roof jerked its shoulders back and conveyed a look of horror, which is hard to pull off for a bird.

“Huh,” said Brady.

“Yeah,” said the cloud. “It’s time, really. Not insight. That’s all there is. That’s all anyone has to give.”

“I guess I thought it was philosophy and not money,” said Brady.

The cloud laughed a little. “Really? No, that’s way off. Time. That’s what you have. That’s what love is.”

“Why are you just telling me this now?” Brady cried, very annoyed with the cloud. But Brady was all alone. He was all alone and somehow, he was dangling from the third-floor window sill and the ladder was crashing to the ground below.

“Oh, shit! I’m sorry!” Frankie cried. The painter had somehow managed to reach out for and hold onto the window sill. He was kicking his feet and saying something in a shrill and strangled voice. Frankie jumped to his feet and stood under him, prepared to catch him if necessary. “I gotcha! I gotcha!” He was screaming. What was the that the painter was saying, over and over?

“The ladder!” The ladder!”

“The LADDER!” Frankie turned around and bolted for the ladder. It was much heavier than he’d imagined and Frankie struggled to stand it up, and after several failed attempts, he went to one end of the ladder, stabbing the other end in to the ground and pushed it above his head as he worked his way down the ladder until it fell against the house. It was still three feet away from the old man, but the man swung miraculously over and grabbed the ladder with one hand, swinging underneath it and then finally pulled himself over on to it.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Frankie sang, dancing back and forth. But the painter did not respond, only clutched the ladder like a cat, before finally working his way down. When he reached the ground, he sat against the house for a long time.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Frankie was saying. “Are you alright?” The painter was wheezing deeply, wordlessly. Frankie wondered if he should be calling an ambulance. Should he call his mom?

“Should I call an ambulance? Should I call my mom?”

Brady put up a palm and waved the boy off. He was waiting for his heart to slow down, wondering if it would explode like a bomb, and feeling like it could. *Calm*, he was thinking, over and over. Colors vibrated in front of his eyes. Finally, he looked up to yell at the boy and found him shifting from foot to foot and crying. Crying? Yes, crying. He wasn't sure what to do about this crying boy. He looked at him for a moment, watched the earnestness in the boy's tears, the fear, the self-hatred. He patted the earth next to him. The boy didn't move. He patted it harder and waved with his other arm, finally voicing a breathy, "Come here. It's alright. Come here, boy." They sat together in the sun for a long time. Brady patted the boy's back and then put his arm around his shoulder, still catching his breath.

"It's ok, boy. It's ok. No one's hurt." After a few moments, Brady began to laugh. The boy looked at him, confused.

"I've never seen anyone pick up and then stand, a fully extended thirty-foot ladder!"

The boy wiped his eyes. "What?"

"I've never seen someone move so fast!" Brady was laughing.

Frankie was confused. Hadn't he almost murdered this weird old painter? But the painter was laughing so hard he was leaning over.

This made Frankie start to laugh a little. "You swung over and grabbed on to that ladder like Spider man." They spent a long time after that sitting in the sun and talking. Frankie told Brady about Stacie and Frankie listened and remembered how exciting it all was to be young.

Then the two cleaned up the spilled paint on the window and Brady showed Frankie the correct way to clean spilled wet paint off glass and off the house and off the pavement, all of which were tricky and time consuming. Frankie was eager to learn. Pretty soon, Frankie was mixing paint and sending it up to Brady and telling Brady all about school. They got so much done together, they almost finished. Considering the calamity earlier, Brady thought, pretty good achievement for the day. At the end of the day, Frankie helped Brady pack up all his supplies in to his little truck. Before Brady pulled away, he said,

“Thanks for all your help, Frankie. You were a big help today. Gonna’ help me finish up tomorrow?”

“I’m your man!” said Frankie, smiling.

“Just tell your mom what happened. Under the circumstances, I think she’ll understand.”

Frankie froze at these words and did not respond, which Brady found odd. But, he thought, as he drove off, Frankie was a weird kid.

The moment Brady pulled away, he reached in the glove box and retrieved a joint he’d rolled earlier and stuck it between his lips, planning to smoke the entire thing on his way home. But holding the lighter up to it, he demurred.

That night, he called his daughter in Portland. Their conversation was forced and awkward, as usual. Brady wanted so badly to get something across to her, but wasn’t sure what or how. He didn’t tell her about the near disaster on the job site. She would over react, and tell him to stop working on ladders. But what was he supposed to do? Stop painting? He’d be homeless in a month. He kept thinking about Frankie that day, and of

how this near-death experience had somehow made it possible for he and Frankie to communicate. The tragedy had opened a portal, almost. Why wasn't it like that with he and his daughter, he thought? But he could never quite get in the right spot with her to make room for any communication.

At seven AM the next morning, the replacement painters arrived. The sun just up and beginning to shine on the lonely old house. One of the painters stayed in the van, finishing some coffee and a stale strudel, wrapped in cellophane. The other painter stepped down from the van and stood there. "Hey, Rick," he called to the driver of the van. "Don't you just love an old house, up on a hill, looking out?" But Rick only grunted. Together, they lifted the paint sprayer from the back and the one painter wheeled it over to the house. By the time Brady arrived, at ten, the painters were nearly finished busily climbing up and down their ladders, long spraying wands in hand.

"Oh. Come. On," said Brady. "Give me a break," he muttered, pulling in behind the van. The widow watched the men from the sidewalk. The other painters recognized Brady from previous jobs in previous years.

"Hi, Brady," they each called out.

Brady stood, perplexed, as the widow approached him.

"What are these guys doing here?" Brady asked.

"I hired these men to finish your job for you, Mr. Brady," said the widow.

"I was practically finished!"

"I'll be deducting their charges from your final bill, sir!"

"Oh, man," said Brady.

“Frankie told me about how you had him out here helping you. You could have gotten him killed!”

“Is that what Frankie said?”

“Never mind what Frankie said! You’re lucky I don’t sue, Mr. Brady.”

Brady shuffled his feet and put his hands on his hips. He glanced up at the house and saw a figure in the front room, looking out. It was Frankie. Frankie was waving his hands and shaking his head. Brady adopted a sympathetic expression, looking at the little opening in the blinds.

“Ms Wendell, please.”

“That is all, Mr. Brady.” Brady shifted his weight again, but there was nothing else to be done. The widow turned then and left. He felt a little twang in his heart. She’d somehow gotten the wrong idea. He imagined Frankie trying to explain it to her. He certainly would have tried, poor kid. But the widow, having already experienced more loss than she good bear, would have been unable to hear him. What a shame, Brady thought, walking to his truck. Even when the universe does conspire to open up a line of communication, something else comes to close it back up. He shook his head.

This is like a metaphor for my daughter and I, he thought, as he climbed into his little truck. Frankie was like his daughter and the house was time—was the widow his mind, then? Like a prison guard keeping him from his daughter? Was that it, he thought, driving away down the street? Pulling up to an intersection, he noticed, perched on the Stop sign, a small song bird with its head cocked, looking right at him. “Hey, buddy!” he called, reaching in the glove box for that joint.

Down the street, the little girl in the Daisy outfit skipped along, clipboard in her hand, ready for whatever the world threw at her. Up on their ladders, Rick and his partner sprayed away the soffits, coughing and hacking at the fine mist. At this rate, they'd be finished and cleaned up by noon.

The World We Live in

Like a murder of bickering crows, the Sokol family crossed the icy parking lot at the ski hill. They moved as a tattered unit, dropping goggles, dragging skis, bound by the tethers of discord, by the wailing and gnashing of teeth. The parents, through red and bleary eyes, gazed up at the ski hill where they watched, despondently, the other families already skiing; children laughing and playing, gaining skills gradually and with intention, following their parent's instructions carefully, with trust; exuding a quiet pride in regard to their new, hard earned skills.

This is how it was for the other families, but not for the Sokols—not today. No, the Sokols would not be laughing or learning anything, today. There were so many factors that played into their current emotional state, it would be difficult to list them all. The two girls had woken up crabby, for one. The parents had bickered while packing, for

another. And now they were late—big time. There'd been a miscommunication regarding who had packed the girls' snow pants—no one had. This was revealed on the drive up, when, forty minutes from home, the mom had made a small sound, which only the dad could know meant trouble. He'd flicked his eyes at her, which only she could know meant, *what, now?* She'd whispered slowly, "The girls snow pants. I don't remember seeing them."

They'd pulled the car over and ransacked the contents. Nothing. They had to turn around, and they knew it. As they'd wheeled the car around, the kids went bananas in their car seats, and by the time they'd retrieved the gear and driven back to the ski hill it was nearly noon, and they were all considering adoption.

The mom was disgusted. She'd had four thousand things to remember to do that morning and she'd remembered three thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine of them. All of this, while he'd done almost nothing, oblivious. He'd, what, packed the skis? Buckled the kids? And now he was annoyed with her for being stressed out. This was because he was stupid. She had a stupid husband. She couldn't even look at him.

They made their way through the parking lot to the lodge where they stopped to try and make sure everyone had at least the minimum supplies needed to survive the day's activities. The kids complained about each and every article of clothing that went on to their bodies. The mom was way past caring about the sideways looks she assumed were coming from the other parents. By this time, the dad had ceased to communicate, had taken on a brittle stoicism, which he wore like a prison sentence—if the emotional landscape of their family unit could be thought of as a space station, then he'd just climbed into the escape pod and ejected.

She knew that inside that dopey escape hatch of his, he was wondering why it had to be like this. Why did there have to be four thousand things? Why did the kids need to be coddled so much? Why couldn't everyone just relax? This was because he was stupid. He was a stupid man.

A hasty decision was made to split up for the day—the father agreed to take the older daughter and the mom would take the younger daughter. That way, each child could be allowed to ski to their own relative ability and perhaps as pairs they'd get along better. Also, if one of the parents needed to murder their respective child, the other parent could not be implicated.

The dad was optimistic about this idea. He felt hopeful he'd be able to use this time to showcase how much smoother things go when you're cool and collected and aren't so stressed out about everything. But he was wrong.

The older daughter complained, unceasingly, the entire day. And as he saw it, in his little emotional escape pod, this equated to his utter failure as a leader and a father. She complained so persistently, the dad wondered how she was even breathing. At some point the dad found he'd crossed to another plain of existence where he could still hear the whining, but it sounded far off, and like it was being heard by someone else, someone he pitied a great deal, but for whom he knew no one else would pity at all.

He began making broad, sweeping generalizations about his life. Should he really have been a father? He didn't know how to be a father, that was clear. Or maybe there was just no way to be a good father. Was he learning a cold truth about life? Were all families destined toward the kind of disfunction and resentment that had defined his own

childhood? Or was it something about *his* DNA, specifically? Maybe he had a bad blood line. In his mind he drew an unbroken line between his own life and those of each of his ancestors. He imagined prehistoric relatives. He imagined all of them hating their parents, each of them thinking the problems created by their parents were problems that could be fixed, then becoming parents themselves, realizing too late, their dream of a happy family had never been possible. It was a trick of biology or something. It would make sense, he thought. It was a well-designed scheme. People could propagate forever that way, be miserable forever that way. This would point to the existence of a cruel God, something he'd been suspicious of recently anyway. This is how fragile the dad was. One bad morning, one little push on his ego, and his whole world came crashing down.

The dad spent the entire day in a fog of this thinking. When it was over, they all met back at the lodge, where both parents resembled frayed pieces of rope. Around them other families looked relaxed, happy to be in one another's company; fathers with their arms around the shoulders of their children, children with their heads pushed dreamily into their mother's hips, enjoying the easy and simple humor the body enjoys following well-earned exhaustion.

But those were the other families. The dad was in danger of exploding. The mom looked to him in empathy, but because the dad had locked himself so deeply in a pit of his own self-pity, he could not see that the mom's day had been equally harrowing. He lumped her in with the rest. He was isolated, silent, and the longer his silence held, the further was driven the wedge between him and the world. He was all alone. The mom could see this. She could see everything he was thinking. This is because she wasn't stupid. She was not a stupid man.

They walked back through the parking lot, dragging skis, losing goggles, dropping gloves, the girls yelling at each other over tiny, petty things. But when they reached the car an ominous silence fell over them all. A glimmer of humanity seemed to be flickering in the older daughter's eye. "Daddy, was I complaining today?" This is when the dad lost all of his shit. He curled his lip and flared his nostrils. He had adopted the persona of self-righteous indignation. No persona is more seductive, more soothing to the existential pain caused when one's identity has been challenged. Nothing feels better to the wrong than shouting. And he did shout. He yelled and shouted about how ungrateful the girl was and about how they'd all ruined what could have been a simple, enjoyable day. Afterward, the girls cried. They cried and cried and cried and fell asleep. The mom and the dad drove home in silence.

Back home, the kids, pajamaed, teeth-brushed, and tucked neatly into bed, *did* stop whining just long enough to say some cute things, give their parents kisses and hugs, thus securing their survival for another night, before diving head long into sleep.

Long ago, when the parents were first married, an argument meant separate sleeping arrangements. Not so anymore. They'd learned how to be around one another, even when they weren't speaking. For better or worse. In silence they followed their nightly routines, got into bed, looked at their phones, and fell asleep.

At some point, the dad woke and looked over at the mom, knowing now, he'd been wrong. Knowing now about the four thousand things. He even knew, now, the reason the kids whined so much is because, around loved ones, they feel comfortable venting their concerns, that even the whining was an expression of love. He knew also

that his life wasn't miserable—the opposite—it was full of joy. In the morning, he would apologize. His apology would be sincere and earnest. He'd become very good at them.

But the morning was a busy one. They all slept in a little and it was a struggle getting everyone out the door. The mom was doing the thing where she was courteous to him but with dead eyes. So he pushed the apology back, fulfilled his minimal morning obligations, which included finding socks for the girls and getting their jackets on, and then he went off to work.

He was on a job twenty minutes north of town, and it was behind schedule. The whole crew was under the gun to finish by Friday, and it wasn't looking good. To make things worse, the HVAC guys were starting now ahead of schedule, putting them in the same space-time. So all the electricians and HVAC guys were bumping elbows and grumbling.

Then that night was the elementary school talent-show tryouts, the pure, unfiltered humanity and drama present, in which, could melt any heart. The mom and dad leaned into one another and smiled. When their oldest daughter went, the whole world dissolved.

The next night, they forgot they were fighting long enough for sex, then it was the weekend, with little time for discussing anything, other than what the moment required.

Before dawn Monday, the older daughter opened her eyes to the thin band of light beneath her door, meaning her father was awake. She crept out of bed and gently pushed the door open, leaning out as she did. She could see him reading something. It seemed strange to see him there, unaware of her surveillance. At first she enjoyed the novelty of

it. But that novelty shortly gave way to an uneasiness she didn't understand, until finally, she would leave the room and sit down beside him on the couch, press her cheek into his chest and feel completely at ease.

The dad had woken earlier from an anxious dream. There were so many things that could happen at any moment, which he could not control. Everything was out of his control. There was economic collapse, zombie apocalypse, solar flares, asteroids, alien invasion, artificial intelligence, social media, global warming, vaccinations, public education, over population, mono crops, genetically modified agriculture, sea life collapse, gluten, refined sugar, magic sky dad, hell for that matter! money, money, money. That was a small list. It didn't even include any of the regular things that could become disastrous for him or his family.

But his thoughts were interrupted by the girl, whom he loved more than anything, whose presence he enjoyed at all times. He was happy to have her there, but was also frustrated she was awake so early, that now there would be no way to get anything done.

The mom was awake too, though she remained in bed, trying to keep their youngest daughter asleep, which was certainly an impossible task. Never-the-less, she managed to keep the child down for another hour, and it was quarter to seven when the mom finally came out to the kitchen with the youngest. With the mom awake, the oldest daughter lost interest in the father and went out to try for her attention. With both girls talking to her and in various stages of contact with her body she made them breakfast. Actually, she made three breakfasts, because the second daughter changed her mind and decided she would not eat cereal. Because it wasn't worth arguing, the mom made them French toast, for which the dad scoffed, saying they were spoiled, as he came in for his

second cup of coffee. Then the mom made the girl's lunches, dealt with thirty-seven of the girl's questions, before putting out their clothes for the day and then changing out a load of laundry. After that, she took a shower, while both girls pounded on the door and the dad got ready for work. When she got out of the shower and started speed dressing, the dad thought she was just a little too tense. He gave her a look, which said just that.

The mom was at work before she even caught a breath. She sat down in her windowless office, and reviewed her calendar for the day. It was madness. It would never not be madness. By eleven her husband had texted her three times. Thinking of you, smiley face, hey how's your day? She knew this was because he was feeling insecure. Why did he think this was the solution for all that? Why did he think it would be enough? Why didn't he stay just a little more engaged at home so that these petty gestures weren't necessary? She didn't know. She couldn't say.

What happened was, the younger daughter slipped out of the cafeteria when the lunch lady was arguing with Stanley about seconds. They noticed she was gone as soon as they got back to class, but by that time she was eight blocks away, had played with two dogs, discovered a secret hideout within a Hydrangea bush in someone's front yard, and blocks later, had encountered a very old woman, who'd brought her inside for a small impromptu tea party. The oldest daughter had told the very old woman all about her adventures on her walk, what her best friend smelled like, how her sister was sometimes nice but sometimes mean. She did not tell the very old woman which kindergarten she went to. The very old woman assumed this was because the little girl wasn't yet aware enough to know. But in fact, the younger daughter knew exactly where she went to school, but was intentionally withholding the information so the very old woman

wouldn't take her back. Not yet. Not while she was enjoying herself so much. The very old woman was enjoying herself very much too. She began telling the little girl about stories from when she was very young. But then, for reasons unexplained or unexplainable, she began telling the little girl all of the stories, she began telling the little girl *the* story. She told the younger daughter all about Finland in the thirties. She told her about the Nazis. They came for her parents and she'd been smuggled out, escaping only with her life. She told the youngest daughter about arriving in New York after the war as a teenage girl, things she'd never told anyone. Far from being traumatized or repulsed, the youngest daughter was enraptured by the very old woman's story. She touched her hands during difficult moments and ooohd and awwwd at the tale of her wedding. When she lost her husband of forty-three years, the youngest daughter cried and held on to her tightly. When the shadows grew longer, she told the very old woman which kindergarten she attended and the very old woman walked her back.

Mr. and Mrs. Sokol snatched their youngest daughter and put her in the car, both yelling hysterically. The police officers stayed in the parking lot to debrief, but aside from a brief meeting outlining a new lunch room policy, everyone in the school went back to business. As the car pulled away, the younger daughter looked back at the old woman, who stood small and alone on the side walk, waving. They would never see each other again, but the little girl would never forget her, and she would never fully understand what she'd been given—the entire story of another—that she alone carried the sole copy of that story in her heart for the rest of her life.

At home the parents were maniacs. They'd had a real *coming to Jesus*, they kept saying. They'd finally been given some *perspective*, they went on. The dad was walking

around switching the laundry out and helping with dinner, and the mom was humming up and down the hall, talking and making jokes with the older daughter. They made popcorn and all watched a movie together. The parents were holding them both extra close. That night, the mom put the girls to bed a little early, the younger daughter thought, and practically skipped out of the bedroom. She could hear giggling and laughing from down the hall. She snuggled in with her stuffy. Her family was very strange, she thought. She was thinking about the very old woman and her story. She knew about the danger of the world. Not in the way that adults know things. But the way she knew things, in her blood, in her bones. She knew that she lived in a world where horrible things happen all the time, where it is possible for children to be snatched by giant birds and eaten, where starving bands of others might attack a tribe in the night, killing everyone, snakes and spiders slip into tents and poison people in the night. where monsters lurking around every corner. She lived in that world. She wasn't in denial of it, like everyone else was. The very old woman's story fit in that world. Her eyes were growing heavy. This is the world where I live, she thought, as she smiled and curled up and fell asleep.

The Blizzard

There'd been an accident in Washington—our brother was dead.

Because I was in Billings, six hours closer than the others, it was up to me to drive over and identify his body. When she called to tell me, it was early afternoon. I hadn't been out in days, was asleep on the couch. I answered right away, then took a few minutes to gather my senses. I said, I could leave right away.

I made some coffee and took some time to sober up. I packed a bag, went out and got the truck going. The snow, weeks old now, had crusted over, and the weeds were poking through. I walked the path to Jan's trailer. It was below zero outside and stood to get colder still. Jan's porch was rotting and all the boards were loose. I'd put about four thousand deck screws through them over the last few years, but it was futile. The whole thing needed to be replaced. I knocked, then opened the door and stuck my head in. "Jan, it's Cal!" I called. When she didn't respond, I tried again. "Jan, I'm leaving. Call Darryl if you need something."

I paused. Then I heard her yell over the TV. "Cal, is that you?"

"It's me, Jan. I'm leaving for—"

“Cal! Close the door, Cal!” There was no way around it. I went in and closed the door, crossed to where she sat in the dark, blankets over both windows and a small space heater whirring by her feet. Fox news played on the TV, lighting the room blue. She said, “While you’re here, make me some tea, would you?”

“Well I’ve got the truck running,” I said. But she gave me that pasty old smile of hers. I walked past her into the kitchen, where I filled the kettle and put it on the stove. She was still watching the talking heads on the screen. “Jesus, why do you watch that all day?” I said. She didn’t reply, tired of the subject. When she looked directly at me, her eyes suddenly narrowed and she leaned forward.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Nothing,” I said, avoiding eye contact.

She leaned forward on her cane and looked at me. “Cal, what’s wrong?” But I wasn’t prepared to talk about it yet. “Is it Nathan? Cal, is it Nathan?” I felt my knees giving way.

“I’ve got a job in Moses Lake. I’ll only be a few days,” I said. “Darryl can help you out if you need anything.” She withdrew and leaned back, focused again on the bright colors.

“I don’t like Darryl,” she said.

It was a lonely drive. I hit the storm outside Livingston. White out conditions. Took me all night. I can drive forever though. It doesn’t matter. I once drove non-stop through the night from my place to Winnemucca. No reason. I just woke from a dream with the town’s name on my tongue. I put on my boots and I left. Long into that drive, I’d

lost focus. It began to seem pointless. I'd grown angry with myself for even setting out. But I kept going anyway. I kept going till I got there.

I arrived at the hospital in Moses Lake late the next morning, bleary-eyed and loopy. I asked in the lobby and they paged the coroner, but couldn't reach her. The lady at the desk was very busy. Everyone was very busy. I waited in a little vinyl chair in the hallway. People kept coming in and out of the freezing cold, making dramatic gestures, shaking the snow off their big coats. After an hour of this, the coroner's assistant came out to take me downstairs to see him. He showed up with a little paper work. On the way, he told me about other freezing deaths they'd gotten over the years—the boy who fell through the ice, the lone hunter who broke his leg in a fall, the snow-mobile enthusiasts fallen in a tree well.

His tone, it occurred to me, probably stemmed from his guess that Nathan was a junkie, which he was, often homeless too. It reminded me that nobody cares about a junkie—what a rush we're in to dehumanize. The whole way down, I thought about choking him.

In the room, he pulled back the sheet and I exhaled and looked away, then back again. Nathan was curled up on his side, frozen. His lips were peeled back from his teeth. The man apologized they wouldn't be able to get his mouth closed or straighten his legs out, until the body thawed. I told him to get out. He shrugged, and left. I wanted to try and manufacture some kind of dignity for the event, though even after the man had gone, I failed to do so.

The room was cold. I listened to the emptiness of the room. Inside the clothing, I thought, where my brother should be, was a frozen corpse. I couldn't put it together.

Something was pulled apart in the physical world and it took all my attention just to get out of the room. The angles had stopped making sense.

The man waited with the paperwork.

“When can we take him?” I asked.

“That’s sort of hard to say,” he said.

“Hard to say?” He was drawing out the information. I thought he was enjoying it.

“Well, they had a lot of *heroin* on them, for one thing. So, they’ll need autopsies.”

I nodded. “Is this where it happened?” I asked, pointing to the *location* box on the form.

He sighed. “We only got them apart this morning, and that took two hours with a hair dryer.”

“*They?*” I said. I didn’t understand.

He looked at me like I was missing something obvious. “They were frozen *together,*” he said. “Like spoons.” I put the pen down.

“I guess I don’t have a lot of information,” I said.

He shrugged. “The Sherriff has the details,” he said.

“I thought he was living on the coast,” I said. “I don’t know what he was doing here.” I was having trouble focusing.

He took a breath and relaxed his shoulders. “Look,” he said, slowing the tempo of his speech. “Call the Sherriff. Ok?” he said.

“Got it,” I said.

“Ok,” he said. And we headed up the stairs. “You don’t have to stay in town,” he said as he pushed the door open. “You can make arrangements from anywhere.”

In the parking lot, I called my sister. I didn't mention the details. She only asked if I was ok, if it was bad? I told her I was fine and that, yeah, it was bad. She made me promise I would stay with him, escort him to the funeral home, that I'd personally see to his treatment. I didn't mind, I said. I had nowhere else to be.

I headed up the road. Everywhere, there were snow plows clearing parking lots and people digging out driveways. I stopped at the last motel on the way out of town. Being closer to where it happened felt important. The owner, a small man with no affect, wearing a little knit multi-colored vest, came out of a back room as soon as I stepped in. I knocked the snow off my boots on the mat, asked for one night. He rang me up in silence. While the card was going through, we met eyes.

“Some weather,” I said, nodding outside.

His gaze followed my nod out the plate glass like he hadn't noticed. The receipt took its time printing. He tore it off and placed it on the counter in front of me.

“Yes. Very bad,” he said, and kept staring out.

The room was run down, though neat enough. I doubted it had been smoked in for years, but the smell lingered. I heard voices and car doors and I pulled back the curtain. Snow was piled up on the few cars. Visibility dropped off sharply beyond the office. Crossing the lot together were a man and woman. They walked slowly with their heads down. I dropped the curtain. I tossed myself onto the bed, stared at the popcorn ceiling, and left a message for the Sherriff.

It was around noon and I wasn't ready to call the Sherriff. I took a drive out to the location on the medical report. Snow had already piled up on the truck and I wiped it off

and climbed in and headed north. The highway was covered in snow, one long line in both directions. The sky was a low white cloud that consumed the fields on all sides. As I drove, I looked for some sign of a wreck, but I saw nothing. I drove for a long time, then pulled over and got out. I left the diesel running and stood behind the truck, hands stuffed in my pockets, staring out. I stood there for a long time without seeing any other traffic. It was pointless looking for some sign of where they might have gone off the road. Any sign would be under a foot of snow already.

In the motel, I opened the Evan Williams and called the Sherriff. He said, a plow truck driver had called in the wreck, but the car was abandoned. They tried to walk for it, he said. But that wasn't obvious at first. Any number of circumstances can lead to abandoned cars. It was only a hunch that led him to check the barn the next day when they didn't turn up anywhere else. Maybe they mistook the barn for a house, he said. They'd covered themselves in hay. But it looked like they just fell asleep and never woke up. It was twenty below that night. I'm sorry, he said. I asked if the woman's name was Julie. He said, yes, her name was Julie.

I turned on the TV and it was CNN. "Jesus," I said, and poked around the menu until I found the Braves game. Then dad called.

I could hear him pushing something around on the kitchen counter; a beer can, I thought. "It should be us out there," he said.

"How's mom?" I asked.

"You try to prepare," he said. "She's doing the best she can."

There was a pause.

"I think Nathan was heading to Jillian's," I said.

“She’s not there, though.”

I said, “But maybe he thought he could break in or something.”

“Jesus,” he said. “You think he’d do that?”

Another pause.

“Julie was with him.”

“I know,” he said, and cracked another can.

There was a long pause, then.

I said, “I was in the Sawtooth for a few weeks in the fall. A place outside Augusta. Way up there.”

“Sawtooth, huh? That’s good country up there, boy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It really is.”

I sat in the room for a long time thinking about all of it. Then I thought I should try and find the place where it happened. I thought that might have meaning. I picked up some beer and a pint of rum at the grocery and drove back out to the mile marker the Sheriff gave me. I put on my big coat and gloves and warm hat and insulated boots and headed down the highway on foot, taking little sips of rum along the way, until the barn appeared behind a small hill. I left the highway and made my way to it through the deep snow. It was much farther than it had seemed from the highway, which made sense, I thought. By the time I got there, I was winded from walking through the deep snow.

I shoved open the door and ducked under the police tape. I kicked around at the straw for a while, drinking rum and looking around. I laid down on a hay bail and kept taking little sips from the bottle till it was gone. I closed my eyes and wondered what it was like to die. I dove deep into my memories, both good and bad, of Nathan throughout

his life. I was trying to find a specific one to pin down and play out in my mind. But I couldn't pull any one thing apart enough to make sense of it, and the only image I found at all was of him lying in the morgue.

Then the cold reached all the way in and pulled me back out. I couldn't stay there. Even in all my gear, I could feel the ice creeping deeper beneath my skin, gathering up the heat, pulling it down into the hay bail. In this physical way, I began to lose track of where I ended and the winter began, and I thought it wouldn't be bad to die this way, in an open field. I imagined a night that was cold and clear, to feel your life dissolve into the weather. At that, I sat up. It was time to go.

When I stepped back out it was almost dark and the snow was falling hard. Still deep in thought, I took no notice of the visibility dropping. But then I looked up and I had sight of neither the highway, nor the barn. I turned around several times looking for either, but saw nothing. I couldn't see ten feet in front of me. And like all perilous situations, this one revealed itself, not little by little, but all at once, and with clear understanding of the folly that lead up to it. I was already cold at my core and I was getting colder by the minute. I looked for my tracks, but they were gone. Dark was closing in. I couldn't have been stupider.

I stood and waited for a break in the weather, turning in slow circles, wishing I had a little more rum. And it was a long moment like this. My feet grew numb and painful. I hopped a little from foot to foot. I knew better than to pick a direction and go, as it could easily be wrong, lead over the wrong hill and I'd be done for. So I waited.

It was then, without trying, that a memory did come to me. We were kids, heading down Homestake Pass with the old man, in a storm as bad as this one. The visibility got

so bad, Dad said Denise would have to drive while he got out and walked in front. Denise didn't believe him at first.

She said, "Dad! I only have my permit!"

Nathan and I sat in the back. We were cracking up at first, but then she started to cry and Nathan leaned forward and said, "You can do it, Denise. I know you can." And if I would have said that, it wouldn't have changed anything. But it was Nathan that said it, and so everything settled down and Denise drove the van and we watched the snow and the headlights and our dad out front, and everything turned out fine. It was a good memory. I was glad to have it. The three of us alone in that warm van together, the snow falling all around us, the situation serious, but our resolve strong.

And then the sky lifted, the truck appeared. It took a long time to warm up in the cab. I scolded myself for being so stupid. The whole way back to the room, I thought of a hot shower. I thought of taking a shower for days. But when I got there and stepped beneath the hot water, I was warm in minutes and could no longer relate to being cold at all. I cleaned up and got out, just like I always do.

Nathan's body wasn't available the next day. I spent a lot of time at a diner inside a truck stop up the highway. I ate lunch there, then came back to the motel. I ate dinner there, then came back to the motel. I kept seeing that same couple coming and going from their room. When I saw them, I studied the lines on their faces, the way that each of them moved, how stiff he was, how she always held her head up. They seemed to be everywhere. I saw them again at the grocery store. We passed each other walking down the aisle. The man was speaking and didn't look at me. But the woman and I locked eyes, hers seemed to be asking something.

On the afternoon of the third day, I called the hospital. Following a long hold, I got the same guy I talked to before. He was rushed, annoyed I'd disturbed him.

"No offense, sir," he said. "With all due respect, buddy. Like I told the girl's parents, they have to thaw first. They're just frozen all the way through."

That evening, I sat in the room, drinking, looking out the window into the parking lot. When it stopped snowing, I drove back to the diner. I was alone in there, but I sat at the counter and ordered coffee. I'm always alone. It doesn't bother me.

I spend more time with horses than people. I've got a gift for horses, for seeing how different each of them is, what a different place they're all coming from, how each of them needs something a little different than the other to make them feel at ease. This gift keeps me in high demand spring through fall. During those times, I travel all over Eastern Montana and Wyoming. I keep a single wide in Billings, and I've kept it for years, but really, I live out of my truck. It's not that I don't like people, the opposite, in fact. I'm very good with people. What makes them different from horses is their capacity for delusion. The delusion in a person is the gap between how they want to be seen by others and the person they really are. Once you see the difference between those two things, then you know how to deal with them. The wider the gap, the more attention required, generally. You can think of a horse as a person minus delusion. This isn't bad or good. It's just the way it is.

I was staring into my coffee when I heard a woman ordering nearby. I looked up and recognized her as the woman from the motel. She sat next to me and then asked if I minded. I didn't know what to say. The waitress brought her an orange juice, and smiled at us both. When the waitress left, the woman pulled a pint from her overcoat and poured

some into her cup. She offered it to me. I slid my cup to her and she poured, then drank directly from the bottle, before slipping it back into her coat pocket. I wondered how much she'd already been drinking.

“Can't sleep?” she said.

“Not tonight,” I replied. I wasn't certain what was happening. Through the window came the sounds of the cook scraping the griddle. A group of four teenagers, two couples, entered the diner and made their way, stoned, to a booth across from us, whispering to each other.

Settling in, the woman said, “Julie was my *step*daughter. I feel like I should say that. I'm not claiming to be her mother.” She was watching the cook through the little window. I wasn't quite sure what she was saying, but I thought, maybe, she didn't either. “Are you his brother?” she asked.

“Yes. He was my brother,” I said.

“I figured,” she said. “He came down once.” I was surprised. I hadn't considered that. “She stole my mother's jewelry that time. Isn't that such a cliché? I found it all at a pawn shop, but Josiah won't let us press charges, so I had to buy it all back.”

The teens were trying to get their orders in with the waitress, but could barely keep it together. They kept cracking up when they spoke. The waitress walked back to the kitchen, rolling her eyes. I asked, “Where's Josiah, now?”

She pointed toward the motel. “Ambien and a six-pack of Budweiser.” she said.

“Is that ok?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I can't seem to stop him,” she said. The teenagers had coupled off. One couple was kissing and talked quietly, while the other couple sat in silence, wrapped

in each other's arms. The girl of that couple appeared to be counting the freckles on her boyfriend's arm.

"It makes him do weird things," she said. "He walks around, talks to himself. Once he tried to drive the car and I had to wrestle the keys from him." She made funny little expressions while she talked. She was funny, I thought.

"It sounds bad," I said.

"Yeah, it's bad," she said. "It's bad. Everything's bad." Outside the wind was picking up. I started to worry about these stoned kids out on the road.

I wasn't ready to apologize for Nathan. And I was telling myself I wouldn't. But then it was the first thing I did. "I'm so sorry," I said. I tried to say more but I couldn't work it out. She patted my hand.

"I'm sorry for you, too," she said.

The next day I couldn't even reach the coroner. I went down to the hospital in Moses Lake, but I couldn't get any answers at all. It was all very frustrating.

I was in the diner again. It was close to 2:00—day—but in this weather, the label seemed arbitrary. The waitresses knew me now. We were old friends at this point. I was drinking coffee and staring out the window.

Then they were standing in front of my booth. I hadn't seen them come in. I stood so fast I bashed my knee on the table top. I wiped the coffee from my overgrown goatee. The man looked older than her, but unmovable, and there was hate in his eyes.

"We're sorry to bother you," she said. "We can't reach anyone, and it's so frustrating and we thought, well, maybe you knew something."

He said, "We know you're his brother. Coroner's assistant told us."

“I’m Cal,” I said. He remained silent.

“I’m Shannon,” she said. “This is Josiah.”

“Shannon,” I said. “Please, sit.” I gestured. The man rolled his eyes, but slid into the booth and she followed. I told them I’d driven down to the hospital that morning and couldn’t find anyone who could tell me when. I said how no one seemed to be able to reach the coroner. Maybe it was the weather.

“Us either,” he said. He tapped the counter. He was looking out the window. Or was it his reflection? I couldn’t tell. She was looking at the kitchen. Then she excused herself and walked toward the restroom.

He leaned over the table and looked at me, eyes all black and hollow. He was well over six feet tall. His arms were long and, in spite of his age, were taugt beneath his shirt. He leaned back and looked out at the plow truck clearing the lot. “Once you lose a child, that’s it,” he said. “No coming back. End of fucking story.”

I didn’t tell him how hard we’d tried to save Nathan. How my parents drained their savings for the rehabs, about the interventions, how they lost their house in Livingston and were living now in Bismarck on social security. How it had broken our family. It wouldn’t have mattered. Shannon came back and took her seat. He said, “We met him, you know, your brother. They came down once. Julie’s third time. Sober.” Still I didn’t bite. He stiffened again. “Fuck,” he said. “I can’t be here. Shannon, let’s go.” She looked at me, darting from eye to eye. Then they left.

She hadn’t told him about our encounter at the diner the night before. That probably meant nothing. But still, driving back, I wondered. I imagined her coming to my motel room and falling into my arms. It was ridiculous and shameful. And anyway,

during the last two out of three casual romances I'd encountered, I'd failed to perform. On both occasions, I'd achieved an erection during foreplay, no problem, but had been unable to maintain it just prior to intercourse.

The owner was standing behind the counter when I went in to pay for another night. I didn't attempt conversation with him this time. I'd taken the hint. But then he surprised me. He said, "taking permanent residence, Mr Patton?" Which was funny.

I said, "I hadn't been planning to, but then, the weather's so nice." He smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Some weather." I wondered about his accent. South Pacific Islander I guessed. I was interested. But it's rude to ask someone with an accent where they're from. It's all they ever hear, for one, and rhetorically, it can create a marginalizing tone. So I looked around for something else to ask. "Do you like to golf?" I said, pointing at a framed portrait of Yang Yong-Eun on the wall behind the counter. He stood and turned toward the photo.

"Yes," he said. "The great Yong-Eun. PGA Champ."

"Poor Tiger," I said. "I don't think he saw it coming." His eyes warmed a little, his posture lengthened, just slightly. It's what I was looking for.

"No, I don't think so either," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and went back to my room to drink.

I walked to the diner this time. I ordered a sandwich and poured some Evan Williams in my Coke glass. It seemed like a real obvious work around, to cope with the lack of bars. I was pretending that I wasn't waiting for Shannon. In a booth down the way from me were two truckers. Both were large, overfed men. Both looked tired, cynical. One was white, of some Scandinavian descent. The other was Native American. They

both leaned over their food, took long drinks of their pops. Both held their swollen hands aloft like the appendages no longer belonged to them. Like they'd been given away, piece by piece to a thousand crescent wrenches, framing-nailers, and steering wheels; knuckles broken and healed, arthritis setting in, carpal tunnel surgeries conducted. I'd put them both in their early forties, but they were about used up. It occurred to me I wasn't far behind. The men finished eating and leaned back, emptied their drinks, chatted quietly. The world had just used us up.

I was getting too drunk, and I was starting to think about Nathan and Julie; frozen in that barn, two days like that. I mean, they were frozen together. And I was spiraling and noticed I was hunched over the counter. So I sat up straight on the stool and looked around and there was Shannon, sitting in a booth. I hadn't seen her come in. She walked over and asked me to join her.

The waitress came by to take the order. Before she left, she leaned over and said, "You're not allowed to drink in here." I looked out the window. I was tired of seeing my reflection. I wanted to say to someone they were frozen together. I didn't want to keep it to myself.

Shannon said, "You shouldn't blame your brother, I don't blame your brother." I looked at the window. "It's hard to say right now, but I wanted to say it. So there I said it."

But I did blame my brother.

I said, "I think the last thing I said to my brother, was, I wished he *was* dead. I've been thinking about it, and I think that's the last words I ever spoke to him."

"How long ago was that?"

“Over a year,” I said.

We were the only ones in the diner then.

She says, “I had a joke with my first husband. When we turn eighty, we said, we should get into bed some cold night, turn off the heat, open the windows and just go to sleep. It seemed romantic. I worked at nursing homes. I never wanted to be like that. Isn’t that so weird? That we said that. That’s what we said.” I close my eyes. I could hear the halogen lights of the diner above her voice. I was losing track of where I was. I liked her. I liked Shannon.

Not wanting to be alone, I’d gone to the continental breakfast. It was morning. I was drinking coffee, still drunk from the night before. Fox News played on the TV in the corner, and I watched it in silence. Shannon came in and made an English muffin with butter and jam and sat next to me.

She said, “How are you feeling today?”

I said, “Is it today, already?” She watched the TV with me, and sank lower and lower in her seat. I looked for something to say. I needed a good thing. Like one good thing.

I said, “So you work at a nursing home?”

“Administration,” she said.

When I watch Fox news, I’m trying to figure out what draws people to it.

She said, “Josiah went down to Yakima to see family down there.” I don’t want to talk or think about heroin or car accidents or frozen bodies. I don’t want to be alone or feel alone.

We were just sitting there, watching the screen. She said, “This shit is dehumanizing. That’s what it is. It’s just all-around dehumanizing.”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s exactly what it is.”

“Where’s the humanity?” She asked.

We smiled and locked eyes. I felt some air come into the room. Her shoulders dropped and she seemed to relax a little. I thought about her turning off the heat story. I said, “So this is your second marriage?”

“Yes,” she said.

“What went wrong with your first marriage?” I asked, and immediately wished I hadn’t. Great, I thought, divorce, now we’re going to talk about divorce. One more bad thing. It was the opposite of what I was hoping for. The owner of the motel came in and unplugged the waffle iron, started cleaning up the breakfast items.

“Oh,” she said, and sighed. “Cancer. He died of cancer.”

And the light left the room, and it left the sky, and on Fox news, a doughy white man, backlit in fuck-you blue, blustered moronic, and it was relentless—the nothing—it was merciless and relentless, and it would never stop and I felt paralyzed by it. Beside me I could feel her eyes welling up. I thought I would sink into myself and sit like a stone when she started to cry. I was afraid that would happen. But it didn’t. She started to cry and she leaned into me over the arm of the plastic chair. I put my arm around her shoulder and she cried and she leaned into me from the plastic chair and I pulled her close, and she cried and she didn’t try to stop.

The next morning, the coroner called and let me know he’d finished the autopsy. I drove down and signed the paperwork, made arrangements between the funeral home in

Moses Lake and the one in Bismarck. I oversaw his transport to the funeral home and left immediately after. It stormed the whole way back. Outside of Coeur d' Alene I started taking little sips of rum. At points, I couldn't even see the road, but I just kept going in the darkness. The snow in its silence.

VITA

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Assistant Fiction Editor, *Willow Springs*, Creative Writing
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Scholarship, Squaw Valley Writer's Conference, 2017,

Publications: "For the Mail Lady, Whom I Love," *Hair of the Dog*, Willow
Springs Books, Spokane, WA, 2019

Professional
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