

Fall 2020

Keeping people

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KEEPING PEOPLE

A Thesis

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For the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Fiction

By

John T. Davis

Fall 2020

THESIS OF JOHN DAVIS

APPROVED BY

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SHAWN VESTAL, CHAIR, GRADUATE STUDIES COMMITTEE

_____ DATE _____

SAM LIGON, GRADUATE STUDIES COMMITTEE

_____ DATE _____

LINDSAY WILLIAMS, GRADUATE STUDIES COMMITTEE

KEEPING PEOPLE

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COOL WATER

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KEEPING PEOPLE

ONE:

Patience and Vigilance

I had the day off.

Drove to Phoenix. I did this occasionally. Usually when things between Dad and I were tense but this time, it was so much more. Every aspect of the little forgotten town I lived in was chewing away at my patience. After Monica, someone I hadn't seen in years, texted me telling me she was back in town, it felt like my past, present, and future was looking me right in the eye. I felt like seeing home shrink in the rearview mirror, even if I was only headed to the city next door. Even though I hated Phoenix. I got out to take a leak at a gas station at one point, but really, all I did was drive. I zipped all over before traffic got bad. Drove through downtown, past Talking Stick Resort, Patriot's Park, The Planetarium...went by the ASU campus there...I then felt my anxiety crawling up my back over my shoulders. Before it was able to wrap its hands around my neck, I got on the highway and headed back. When I got home, the record player was on and the needle was scratching along the center of the spinning vinyl. Side A of whatever Dad was listening to was done, but the turntable kept spinning. A crackling hiss rolled out of the speakers in a looped rhythm. In the living room were two ragged couches, an old Magnavox TV set, and the record player. One of the couches folded out into a bed, where I slept. The kitchen was in the back, and a short hallway led to the bathroom and Dad's room. At the back of the kitchen was a door that went out to the patio. The dull, heavy smell of cow shit was everywhere. It was easy to grow used to the smell, growing up on the ranch, but with them all corralled in the small pen the smell was unbearable.

Dad was sitting in an old wooden chair, a teetering card table next to him. His bootheel rested on the iron railing before him, his right knee cocked up and pointed towards the evening

sky. On the table was a tall glass of lemonade next to a full ashtray. A half-smoked cigarillo rested in it; the burning end tipped downwards. Leaning against the iron railing was Dad's hunting rifle, the barrel pointing towards the purpling sky. Off in the distance, the brush buzzed with the sharp chatter of insects.

Leaning in the doorway, I pulled a smoke out of my shirt pocket and lit it.

"Still smoking those things?" he asked.

I snuffed out the match and tossed it into the dirt.

"Counted head today. I'm one short." He said.

"One short, huh?" I said.

"That's what I said."

"You double counted?"

"Yep."

"And you triple counted?"

"God damn you, yes."

A late spring overcast came in from the west, suffocating most of the starlight. There was still some orange in the sky over the house. Stale rays came through breaks in the metallic grey clouds. Between the sun setting, the heavy steel of the clouds, and the hint of the sky's dying blue, a wild spatter of soft shades hung over us.

"What the hell are you gonna do with that thing?" I asked, pointing the tip of my boot at the rifle. "Can't see shit out here."

"You can't?" He said and sipped his lemonade.

"You can't."

I took his drink and gave it a whiff.

"I made some this morning."

I took a sip, handed it back to him, and said, "You put too much sugar in it."

We sat in silence for a beat. Thunder started to break but the air still carried warmth. On the western horizon, white-blue flashes of lightning filled the bellies of the clouds before vanishing. A breeze came from the east, rushed through the valley and met us out in the shallow hills. The ridges north and south of us were lined with saguaros, brush, wild flowers, and red rock: curvy and jagged. Bright, deep, and thick. As if Hell itself invented desert stone.

“How’s Dan’s girl doin’?” Dad asked. He hadn’t seen Dan in at least two years. Since he stopped frequenting the Cabron, Dad became detached from the town, Dan and his family included.

“Still has a hole in her heart,” I said, “Gonna go see her tomorrow.”

Dad nodded. His cows stirred and groaned in the corral thirty yards away from the patio.

Dad had a good chunk of land just west of Crossroads Valley. For as long as he owned it, he had no idea what to do with it. He built corrals for his cattle but built them too close to the house. Everything reeked of cow shit. Your clean laundry: cow shit. When you get out of the shower: cow shit. Your bed sheets...I told Dad I smoked cigarettes to cover up the smell.

His dad bought the land back when fifty acres of desert didn’t cost a thing. What’s more, he bought up the property directly in the middle of Hollywood’s hard-on for Westerns. It was mostly B-movie garbage that was filmed out here but for letting these film companies shoot on his land, Granddad got a pretty decent little nest egg. I think the greatest moment of Dad and Granddad’s lives was when John Ford decided to shoot a slice of his film, *The Horse Soldiers* on the property. Whenever Dad got a chance, he told some poor bastard about the time he was a kid in a long sleeved flannel shirt tucked into quarter pants. He wore cowboy boots with plastic spurs fixed to them. Sitting on a fence post with his legs dangling below him, he watched John Wayne and his band of Union riders gallop on horseback across Granddad’s pastures while John Ford and his crew filmed them. The setting was supposed to be in Mississippi and Granddad’s land looks nothing like Mississippi. He got paid handsomely by the Mirisch Film Production company

regardless. Granddad made some decent money letting celebrities of all different kinds play cowboys and Indians on his property.

Granddad left Dad all of his possessions: the small ranch house, the money, the land, and everything that was on it. When I was about 5, Granddad died, and Dad took it all over. He never did much with it. He fancied himself a rancher. It killed time. The monotony of taking his cattle out to pasture, letting them graze, moving them to a new grazing patch, doing that again if necessary, and then bringing them back in when the time came kept him busy. It kept his mind off Mom. When I was seven, she left. That's all I ever knew about the subject. Dad always looked onward, never at me, whenever I got him to talk about Mom. When I was 18, Dad told me that six months after Mom left, she was found dead in an apartment in Flagstaff. She was found in her bathtub with deep gashes from her wrists to her elbows. We were sitting on the back patio when he told me. He, in his rickety old chair and me sitting across from him at his pleather-padded card table. He looked over the brush beyond the clearing behind the house as he spoke. Bright dust lifted into the air, caught in the lights from the patio, and swirled in an evening breeze. When I asked anything regarding how or why Mom did this, Dad just scanned the brush, or looked over his cattle and let my words die on his shoulders before they could crawl into his ears. I gave up on asking Dad about Mom years ago.

The town of Crossroads Valley was nothing more than a stretch of cracked pavement. It was an old highway that used to be *the* highway before they put in the I-10 way back when. Now it branches off the I-10 and people who don't live in Crossroads Valley rarely use it. It was nestled into the ass-end of a shallow valley about sixty miles southwest of Phoenix. There wasn't a crossroads anywhere in the area and nobody knew or cared why it was named what it was. There was the Grand Canyon General Store, but we were closer to Mexico than we were the Grand Canyon. There was the Hot Springs Motel, but there wasn't a hot spring for miles, and so on and

so forth. A couple streets branched off of the main drag on the western and eastern edges of town, mainly leading to small shops here and there and a couple neighborhoods.

Across from the motel was the Cabron, where I worked. Dan, my boss, lived in town with his wife, Sophia, and his daughter, Gloria. Gloria didn't really have a hole in her heart, that was just the easiest way to explain it to Dad without losing his attention. It was her tricuspid valve. One of the flaps that let blood through as the heart pumped was faulty. Her heart was pumping irregular amounts of blood through her body and because only two of the three flaps were functional, it created a strain on her. She had her first heart attack when she was five. She made it to seven without further incident, however no doctor in the area wanted to risk performing surgery on a seven-year old with a bad heart. Dan and Sophia had to watch as they cast their daughter off into a purgatory of prescriptions and temporary treatments. Dan once told me, after a couple of whiskeys, that one doctor gave Gloria an expiration date. He kept the date to himself and I didn't pry.

My old friend John and I visited Gloria in the morning before we had to work. We tried to do this as much as we could: bring Dad's box of old Western tapes and pick one to watch with Gloria. She picked *Two Rode Together*, and John popped it into the small TV with a built-in tape player that sat on her dresser. Gloria was in a hospital bed with the back lifted so she could sit up. Her parents, mostly Dan, were very cautious about what they allowed Gloria to do so she didn't get too excited. If it were up to Dan, he wouldn't let her out of that damned bed. I suppose you couldn't blame a man for feeling that way after he watched his five year old collapse in the backyard because she got herself overworked playing hopscotch. Sophia brought in chairs from their dining room and set them on either side of Gloria's bed so John and I could watch the movie by her side.

"This is the first John Wayne movie I ever saw, Gloria," John said. His heels were pumping against the hardwood floor and his knees shot up and down like pistons. He sat on the edge of his chair whose front legs groaned under the pressure of his mass.

“Better than *Two Mules for Sister Sara*?” Gloria asked as the opening credits rolled. She was skinny. Even at her age. Her skin looked almost as if it were draped over her frame. There were dips behind her collar bones, her cheeks sucked into her teeth. Her shoulders and knees looked like fleshy knobs and her elbows and wrists were sharp.

“You can’t really compare the two,” John said.

“Well, sure you can, Johnny. Could be an interesting discussion,” I said.

John’s glare told me to keep out of it. When he was fixed on a subject, one was better off just letting him ride it out. He had a point to make and any questions one had was seen as a challenge of his authority on a subject he was well-versed in. Unless you wanted to turn a five minute lecture on the acting chops of Clint Eastwood and John Wayne into an hour-long debate, you would be wise to shut up. As the opening credits were wrapping up and the introduction scene started, I heard Dan’s heavy ropers ka-lumphing down the hallway towards the room. After a moment, he poked his head in. His dark eyes were fixed on me and he tilted his head back.

“They’re both just so different,” John said.

“They’re both westerns,” Gloria said.

“Yeah, but they’re from different eras, different directors, different styles, *completely* different generation of filmmaking altogether, the style of writing...the expectations of actors were completely different. I don’t have time to talk about all of this, Gloria. Sorry.”

Gloria tuned him out halfway through his little rant and zeroed in on the movie.

“Hey guys, I’ll be right back, okay?” I said.

I could’ve stood there flipping them both off and they wouldn’t have noticed. Dan walked back down the hallway when he saw me rise from my seat and I joined him on the front porch. There was a dry creek bed just across from his front yard area that ran along the valley. We always looked out over it when we spoke to each other. I lit a smoke and Dan breathed in the morning air.

“How’s the ol’ man?” he asked me.

“Kooky as ever. Only getting kookier.”

“I don’t see him at *The Cabron* anymore.”

“He figured out a while back it was cheaper to drink at home.”

“Smart man, I guess.”

“He’s back and forth, you know. On again, off again.”

Dan nodded and asked for a puff of my cigarette. I gave it to him, and he checked through the house windows to make sure Sophia couldn’t see them and snuck a few puffs before giving it back to me.

“He thinks something is taking his cattle,” I said.

“What?”

“He’s missing one. Swears by it.”

“He go out and look for it?”

“I think he put in some sort of effort.”

“You help him?”

“Can’t really help someone who don’t want it.”

“Sure.”

“He’s asking about you, though.”

“Is that so?”

“Ever since he pulled a Dracula and decided to shut himself away from the town, he will occasionally ask about folks. It never sparks interest enough for him to come see for himself, though.”

Dan nodded.

Sophia came out with coffee.

“How are they doing in there?” Dan asked.

“They’re just fine,” Sophia said. Dan must’ve picked up on the looks Sophia and I gave him because he had his defensive statement cocked and ready. John always worried Dan. John

was an odd one, sure, but ever since Dan knew John, he kept one eye on him. He could never put his finger on it, but John just weirded him out.

Sophia, who never could understand why her husband was so hung up on Dan, changed the subject and told me about a doctor who just set up a practice in Flagstaff. They had an appointment set up to meet him that weekend. Dan had asked me earlier in the week if I could cover at the Cabron for the weekend but never told me why. It was as if even mentioning the reason for needing me to cover at work would jeopardize their chances at giving Gloria the treatment she needed.

“This stress is aging me twice as fast,” Dan said.

“With every opinion we get from a doctor, the closer we get to fixing her,” Sophia said.

“Yeah. I’m keeping my hopes up, mama,” he said, “I am.” They hugged. Kissed. I looked out over the dry creek bed. Then, Dan looked at me and said, “I have a meeting in Phoenix today, which means I probably won’t be in at all later. So I won’t be back until after the weekend.”

“We got all the work shit covered,” I said, “You just focus on Gloria.”

Dan nodded, shook my hand. He turned it into a hug.

I turned it into a brief hug.

The Cabron was the only bar in town. It was attached to a gas station/convenience store/souvenir shop. The only thing it was missing was a set of slot machines. I started working for Dan when I was a freshman in high school. I pumped gas. When I got older, I tended bar at the Cabron, and John was my bar back.

Dan took a step closer to me. He leaned in and asked with a low voice, “How’s he doin’?” He nodded his head towards the inside of the house.

“How long have you known him, Dan? He’s how he always is,” I said.

Dan nodded and backed away.

“He’s been working for you almost two years now. He shows up on time, he does his job and he does it well...sure he needs help here and there...but he does his job well.”

“I know. I know.”

“He’s a good guy. Gloria loves him,” Sophia said to her husband.

“I know. It’s just—I don’t know. He takes forever to learn shit and he weirds out the customers sometimes,” Dan said.

“Why do you still treat him like he’s a kid? He hasn’t had that problem since he first started working for you. And as for weirding out the customers...they’re coming in here weird already. John’s milquetoast compared to the lizards that frequent the joint.” I said.

“Alright, alright,” Dan said.

“Just let me deal with John. And everything else for now. Something pops up that’s out of my control? I’ll bother you. But if it can wait until Monday, it will wait until Monday.”

Dan nodded and tossed the dregs from his cup into the dry, dead front yard.

Dan’s gas station opened every day “with the sunrise,” or so the words painted on the side of the building said. Jacob usually got in and opened up shop sometime between six and seven...generally after sunrise. It never hurt business and Jacob was one of those old fellows who set himself in his own ways and not even Moses with a two-by-four could split him from them. The saloon side of The Cabron opened up at twelve-thirty in the afternoon, seven days a week.

Two lonesome gas pumps sat out in with one of those old air-hose signal-bells that lay across the way. When I was a kid working the pumps, that bell ringing meant I needed to pump gas and usually there was a tip in it for me. The siding of the building was made of lumber that was once the natural color of pine trees. After decades of the sun baking the structure, the wood was turning flat gray with splotches of dead black. It was dry and rough.

When we finished our movie with Gloria, John and I rolled into work, greeting Thomas as we came in. Thomas lifted his head to look at us. He ran the Gas station side of the building for Dan. He’d done that since I could remember.

“Hey boys,” he said, gnawing on his cigar stub. A thick string of white smoke rose from his cigar and swayed upwards, curling, rising, and spreading against the ceiling. We pressed through the heavy swinging doors and turned on the lights to the saloon. We had a routine setup and we went straight to it: I got the cash out of the safe, counted it, and set up the till while John took all the chairs off of the tables and the bar, got fresh dish water going in the back sink, and got the music going. John was just as particular with his music as he was with his Westerns. Dan liked us to keep the music roughly within the theme of country western...roadhouse tunes...but when he was away, that rule was rarely obeyed. John usually set up the music as his first order of business every time we started. As soon as we were clocked in, he hooked up his phone to the sound system in the joint and cranked the same playlist. Most of it consisted of very generic classic rock. “Dad rock”. Seger, the Eagles, Foreigner, AC/DC, Foghat, Hendrix, Thorogood, Petty, and so forth. In all seriousness, it wasn’t a terrible playlist until you’ve heard it on loop for the duration of almost half of the shifts you’ve worked. He screamed along to “Big Balls” as we got The Cabron ready for business.

John was a couple grades behind me growing up. We first met when I was pumping gas for Dan. John rode his bike up and down the main drag, most days, while I stood out by the pumps in my baggy coveralls. During the summer, he took laps up and down the street all day. Occasionally, I’d see him take a turn off onto a side street and disappear for a good stretch of time, but he mainly stuck to the main drag.

When he was a baby, he had a serious fever. Cooked his brain a little, I guess. Wasn’t getting enough oxygen to it, or something. His mom told me about it once. Most people in town just wrote him off as a retard. He wasn’t a retard, though. Sure, he wasn’t like me. I wasn’t like him. He wasn’t like anyone. Some things he got right away, other things he really struggled with. I don’t know a person free of that affliction. Social queues went over his head most of the time and he went about some things a little different than the rest of us, but he wasn’t a retard. He was just John William Denis.

When we were kids, John rode past me on his bike while I pumped gas; he looked directly at me. Staring with this big smile on his face. More often than not, days would be slow, and my shifts would drag. I was prone to boredom. It took a long time to convince Dan to let me bring a paperback with me to work to fill in the gaps of dead business between the occasional customer heading to and from work and my menial tasks I had to complete by the end of my shift. One day, John finally rolled up to the ancient gas pumps instead of simply rolling by. I welcomed the distraction with open arms. He approached with dark, squinted eyes. A Diamondbacks cap cocked on his head and he read aloud the name patch on my coveralls.

“Lynn,” he said.

“Yup,” I said.

“What’s that mean?”

“My name?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Just...Lynn, I guess.”

“How do you spell it? L-Y-N-N?”

“L-Y-N-N. Yup.”

“I’ll look it up tonight.”

“Sounds good,” I said with a nod.

“I’m John.”

“Yeah, I know you. Our dads hang out in there,” I cocked a thumb over my shoulder at The Cabron.

“Oh, okay! Yeah.”

I nodded.

“My name means ‘God’s Mercy.’”

I nodded.

“I have a card in my room from my grandma that says so. It’s framed and hanging up.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah,” John said.

He stayed and visited until the end of my shift and then he walked his bike with me to my truck before riding home. The next day, he came and saw me towards the end of my shift after a day of riding his bike all over.

“You look up my name?” I asked him.

“It comes from a Welsh word, *Llin*. L-L-I-N. Means Lake. Nice to meet you, Lake,” he said.

“Funny.”

“What’s that, Lake?”

“Uh-huh.” I said, walking away to grab a broom and sweep the never-ending dust from the driveway.

“Aw, does Lake not like his name anymore? Cheer up,” he said with a taunting tone and a goofy, snaggle-toothed smile. I smiled, pressed laughter through my nose, and shook my head as I swept. After a beat of silence, he said, “Also, the way your name is spelled...traditionally, that spelling is meant for girls.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

“Why did your parents give you a girl’s name?”

“Good question.”

“Maybe going by ‘Lake’ would save people the confusion.”

“What if I want them to think I’m a girl?” I said.

John paused, gave me a cock-eyed look, which demanded another press of laughter through my nose. John then shrugged and said, “Whatever works for you, man.” We became close quickly and rarely did we ever grow tired of each other’s company.

As soon as The Cabron opened up, Colin, Harry, and Stuart mozied in. Regulars. The tripod that kept The Cabron standing, really. Some days, I’d see them standing out in the parking

lot or in the souvenir shop shooting the shit with Jacob before I let them in and poured their first drafts of the day. John never cared for this time of day because it usually meant I turned his playlist off and put on some music that was a little more in the background and after Colin, Harry, and Stuart had their first beers I put on my blues playlist. Classic and contemporary. The three old men looked into their beers and muttered to each other as the aching guitar work of Muddy Waters filled the joint.

Across from the bar, the far wall was lined with three pinball machines (Ghostbusters, ET, and an 'Old West' themed one), an old arcade golf game with the grimy white ball you spin and roll, and a hunting game complete with a small, bright orange pump-action shotgun attached to a thick black cable. The walls were meant to look like the old, warped wood of a barn or something. Autographed pictures of famous Westerns stars who have spent time filming in Crossroads Valley hung from those warped walls. The largest of those pictures hung behind the bar: Grandad standing next to John Ford, grinning like a kid. Their arms hung over each other's shoulders like they'd been buddies since before they could walk. I reached for a bottle of tequila next to where that picture hung and I poured a shot for myself, held it up in cheers to the Colin, Harry, and Stuart, and threw it back. A custom. Helped me prepare for the day.

The first couple of hours of the shift rolled by smoothly. John wiped down tables and I sliced lemons, limes, and oranges as Monica entered the bar. John's face lit up with a grin I thought was going to split his head in half. My guts began to wrestle each other. My skin went hot, and my sweat went cold. She sent me a text three days ago saying she was coming back into town. As much as I should have seen her arrival coming, I was still taken aback when she walked in. I hadn't seen her since my first year of college.

"Get a margarita goin', Lynn!" John said as he hustled to the bar. Monica smiled and hugged John when she got to the bar. Kissed him on the cheek. Our eyes had met when she entered, for a moment, before I looked back down at the lime I was slicing, but now that she was

just on the other side of the bar and I couldn't look away. I would only do that for fear of staring at her for too long. I smiled and gave her a hug from across the bar.

"When did you get in?" I asked.

"Last night," she said.

"Long drive?"

"Wasn't short. But it wasn't too bad. Hit traffic just outside of LA, but it stayed pretty clear after that."

She took off traveling after high school. Went through Europe, then parts of Asia...Thailand, those kinds of places...but she mainly bounced around from state to state out west. Spent some time in Seattle, then San Francisco, but left quickly after realizing how expensive it is to live there...she went back to Seattle after that, which wasn't much better than San Francisco as far as cost of living went. She headed down to Orange County, California after that. Long Beach, I think. I guess she found odd jobs here and there and stashed away as much cash as she could with each job before leaving for a new place. She'd been in Long Beach for more than five years.

I visited her once or twice in my freshman year. Almost ten years ago. We'd kept in touch through social media, mainly, and the occasional text message. I hadn't seen her in person in nearly a decade. She had put on a little weight, but god knows so had I. John, too, for that matter.

Monica's skin was familiar with the sun and her hazel eyes nearly cut me in half. I fixed up her margarita.

John leaned one elbow against the bar, staring at Monica.

"Meaning unknown...most likely of African or Phoenician origin," he said, pointing an index finger at Monica like a heavy Smith & Wesson, his thumb a cocked back hammer.

"God's Mercy, if I do believe," Monica said back to him.

“You got a lotta balls comin’ back around here, de Leon,” John said, complete with that violently wide grin and a deep-in-the-chest giggle.

I salted the rim of her drink and set it on the bar in front of her. There was a moat between us. It wasn’t too wide, but it felt deep. Either she sensed it and was better about hiding it, or she didn’t sense it at all. What’s more was I didn’t know why the moat was there and I wondered the whole while if she did.

“You still letting Lake hang around you, then?” Monica asked John, sipping her margarita through the stupid little double mixing straws.

“Yeah, Lake can’t get enough of me. I’m his goddamned favorite,” John said.

“You’ll be my goddamned favorite if you finish wiping down those tables,” I said.

We were locked in a standoff of half-joking glares before John finally broke and went back to work.

“How long you back for?” I asked Monica. She answered with a shrug. Her parents were still together. Alive. They lived in a house with a little piece of land just north of us, near the Richter Ranch. Much bigger operation than Dad’s. Serious ranchers. Actual ranchers who did something with their cattle.

“For a while. For a couple whiles, maybe. Haven’t figured it out yet,” she said.

“Three whiles, maybe?” I asked.

“Yeah, maybe.”

The Cabron’s tripod was ready for another round, so I pulled the drafts in fresh glasses and brought them over. They were leaning, piling on each other staring at Monica. Their eyes shifted back to me on their own time, with raised eyebrows.

“Enjoy, gentlemen,” I said, moving away from their end of the bar as quickly as possible. When I got back to where Monica was seated, I asked her, “What are you doing tonight?”

“When are you off?” she asked.

“We are officially closed at midnight, but John and I usually get out of here around eleven,” I said.

“Guess I got a lotta time to kill.”

“Well, you’ve already found a cool place to relax.”

“For half the damned day?”

I shrugged and said, “The fuck else is there to do around here?”

“I’ll hang out for a while. See what I want to do.”

“Sure. Just text me.”

Monica responded with two finger guns, a wink, and a click of her tongue.

We met in high school. Since freshman year, we happened to have just about every class together. Soon enough we found each other sitting within decent proximity of each other. Before long, we were sitting together. We grew to be close friends. She helped me in science and math classes, I helped her with history. English, she never needed help with. I always felt she carried most of the weight as we got through school. Before long, rumors started spreading that we were dating. The two hicks from Crossroads going steady. It never got to that, really. We crossed the “just friends” barrier here and there over the years, but nothing ever came of it. Never ruined our friendship, but never became something more.

She stayed a couple hours and then left with a tipsy grace. I spent the remaining hours of my shift waiting for my phone to vibrate. I imagined feeling it in my pocket and seeing the text notification from Monica on the screen. It proved to be a slow night for a Friday, but I didn’t complain. We were able to close up by eleven-fifteen. The men’s bathroom in The Cabron always had a few layers of funk to it. The walls, from floor to ceiling, had streaks of piss yellow decorating them, swiping in all different directions. One of John’s closing tasks was to clean the bathroom. Those walls drove John insane. No matter how many times I (or even Dan) told him

the only way those stains were coming out was if we tore the walls out and remodeled the whole damned room, John would set himself into a spell trying to scrub them.

After a while, I learned that giving him some time to work on it before addressing the issue with him was the best way to go about it. However, it did run the risk of him getting too involved in the project. Johnny scrubbing at the walls gave me plenty of time to make certain my till was balanced accordingly, though so most of the time, I didn't mind taking my time to make sure the money was right. I spent the entire time thinking about coming back to my phone to finally see a text from Monica. I had to recount the money over and over again as my mind wandered frequently from the dollar amount.

One of my final tasks was cleaning out the two ice bins behind the bar and stocking all of the glasses and bottles that needed it. After that, I stocked the domestics in the fridges below the liquor display. The bathroom walls were getting a real what for from John's scrub brush. A little time by myself as I fought my own impatience seemed like what I needed, so I let him go on for a while longer. I wasn't quite sure what it was but seeing Monica in person after so long made me want to jump over whatever mote I sensed between us. I imagined myself pole vaulting directly over the gap and landing flat on my feet right before her.

When the domestics were stocked, I paid a visit to John in the men's room and saw him in his usual garb when he performed the cleansing task: goggles...like the rubber goggles from high school science lab with the elastic headband. He kept those goggles tight across his face so that when he took them off, they left an imprint of a racoon-like mask around his eyes. He wore floppy yellow rubber gloves that nearly came up to his elbows, and a water-proof apron. He looked like a child trying to dress up as a mad scientist.

I tried not to laugh when he was dressed like that.

That night, he could smell the smile on my face before it was even there.

I didn't have a chance to laugh before he was huffing. He tried to make himself small, and failed, as he moved past me. I gave him the way, but his broad shoulders brushed against me

as he passed. It moved me like I was made of Styrofoam. I stumbled backwards several steps and I let him leave through the front door.

I took a deep breath and carried out the rest of my closing tasks as quickly as possible, then locked up. I found John in the street, taking off his cleaning gear and throwing it everywhere.

“God dammit,” I said, approaching him. The late-night sky was clear, and the stars stabbed the dark blue above us. The half-moon gave off a jaundice glow. The night buzzing of insect life was like tinnitus in the warm air.

“I can’t,” John was saying, tearing the goggles from his face and throwing them. He let go of the goggles too late in his follow-through and they jetted into the ground just a couple feet from him. This enraged him. John kicked them, chased them down, and stomped them into the tired pavement. He was broad shouldered, barrel-chested, and had strength he was not always aware of. I put my hands on his shoulders and pulled him away from the smashed goggles. I looked up at him, the top of my head barely reaching his shoulders.

He pulled away from me and balled his fists, pacing in a crooked figure eight.

“Those stains ain’t comin’ out, man,” I said.

“Fuck that,” John said, “Fuck that. You just have to, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“I didn’t laugh, man.”

“You would’ve.”

“You don’t know that. Instead you bulldozed me and stormed off to throw a fit.”

“Come on, Lynn.”

“You waste your time scrubbing the piss out of those walls while I’m doing the rest of your shit.”

“This is fucking ridiculous.”

“Yeah. It is.”

John slowed his pacing. He loosened his fists and spread his fingers out wide before balling them up again. He did this over and over again. We locked eyes and the warm air wrapped around us. He pressed his lips back over his teeth and bit down on them. He stood over me, breathing heavily through his nose. I pulled out my smokes and lit one. John squinted, then closed his eyes tight, before breaking into all-out laughter. It was a hyena cackle that echoed down the street. He held his gut and bent over at the waist as he laughed, his mouth agape and his eyes closed tight.

“It’s kinda fuckin’ funny, right?” I said.

John kept laughing.

“All that stomping around you’re doing ain’t good for the pavement. You don’t want the street to crumble away any more than it already has, do you?”

“I suppose not,” John said after he caught his breath.

“Good. Pick all that shit up,” I said.

John nodded. He picked up the cleaning gear, laughing like a god damned lunatic the entire time. I leaned up against the front of The Cabron, finishing my cigarette as he went. He walked past me as he headed towards the front door. His cackle settled into a giggle. He twirled the smashed goggles in front of me as he went. I snatched them out of his hand and threw them back at him. He opened the front door to The Cabron and tossed his gear into the darkness.

I locked the door when he was done, and I drove him home.

It was silent the whole way.

John said, “Thanks for the ride,” and, “I love you,” when I pulled up to his curb. I saw the glow of the TV through the living room window as John got out of my truck. I wondered if his ol’ man was still awake in there, or was it just the stale blue of the TV glow that had any life inside? I watched John walk up to the front porch, but halfway through my thoughts, I put my truck in gear and headed home.

The smell of cow shit was ripe. I expected to enter the house to find all of Dad's cows in the house shitting right there on the floor. I lit a smoke as I entered the place. The smell hit me like a stucco wall. The record on the table was still playing, at least. It even looked like Dad had gotten up to flip the damned thing. It was the B-side to Glen Campbell's "Rhinstone Cowboy." His cover of "My Girl" filled the living room and escaped out the open back door past the kitchen. I made my way through the kitchen, towards the patio. Dad's cigarillo smoke drifted inside from the patio and beyond; I heard his cattle stirring, groaning, pressing against the perimeter of the corral.

Dad was right where I left him. He moved his head to face me, but I knew his eyes were scanning the darkness that covered the brush beyond his corral. A bottle of tequila sat on the card table beside a shot glass and a small plate of salt and lime wedges.

"The hell you standin' in that doorway for? Ever thought of pullin' up a chair?" Dad said.

"What's it to you?"

"You look like a white trash Nosferatu looming behind me. Either grab some wood or leave me the hell alone."

I went into the kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cupboard and took a chair from the dining table and brought them out back. Sitting at the other side of the card table, I poured a splash of tequila into my glass, bypassed the salt, shot the drink back, and bit into a lime wedge.

"Run outta lemonade?" I asked.

Dad looked onward, gently nodding his head to Glen singing "I Miss You Tonight."

"Get to the bottom of it?"

"What?"

"Missing cow."

"Out there somewhere. She's out there."

I took a long drag from my smoke and splashed more tequila into my glass, threw it back, and bit another lime wedge.

“You ride out there? See if a fence is down or something?”

Dad puffed at his cigarillo. It was about to go out, but he saved it. My phone vibrated in my pocket.

“Well, how about this: I don’t think I can tomorrow morning...but the next day before work. Let’s ride along the property line. All over... If you don’t ride tomorrow, that is.”

Dad’s cows stirred. The ones on the outside of the herd pressed against the fences. They nudged each other and let out stir-crazy moans.

“Guess I don’t have to worry about you riding out by yourself anytime soon,” I said, putting my smoke out on the sole of my boot. I dropped the crushed butt in the ashtray and stood up. I searched my mind for something else to say. “Alright, then,” I said.

I sat in the living room on my folded-out bed, waiting for the record to end. When it did, I turned the stereo off and flipped the TV on. There was a late night *Seinfeld* marathon on, and I lay flat on my back, with the television’s volume low. In the shifting blue glow, I checked my phone and saw a notification from John: a text that read, “*The Searchers* is on AMC right now. Your dad’s favorite.”

I plugged my phone in and dropped it on the floor, my vigilance was dwindling, and I was unsure of how much longer I could stay awake in anticipation, hoping Monica would text me. The audience reaction to Kramer sliding into Jerry’s apartment lulled me to sleep.

TWO:
Dead Mothers and Distant Fathers

John was sitting on the front steps of his folks' house when I pulled up the next morning. He called it "mom's house." She'd been dead since before I graduated from high school. He shot to his feet when he saw my truck and hustled over to get in.

When he was buckled in and I pulled back onto the main drag and headed for the Cabron.

"You and your dad watch it? Last night?"

"Huh?" I said, "no. Dad was busy."

"When is your dad ever busy?"

"I don't know, man. Just...he was occupied."

John slouched in the bench seat and pressed his knee against the dashboard.

"That shot, man," he said. "That famous shot."

I pressed on the accelerator a little to shorten the time I had to listen to John deconstruct *The Searchers* for the hundredth time on the way to work. He didn't talk much, the closer we got to work. In fact, he stopped almost in mid-sentence when he saw the Cabron. I wondered if he sensed me pressing on the accelerator...it was like he could smell my passive movements and understood the meanings behind them.

When we got to the Cabron, Jacob was behind the counter at the gas station side of the building. He gave us a, "hey boys" as we walked by. Inside, I flipped the lights on, and John picked up his cleaning gear that was still on the ground. He kept quiet as he carried out his opening tasks. I took to my tasks and the silence in the place acted like a canyon between me and John. By the time I got the till set up and the money accounted for, John came from the back room with a sanitizer bucket and a cleaning rag. He wiped down the tables and every few moments, he looked up at me. I could feel his gaze from across that silent canyon between us.

"You wanna pick some music?" John asked.

“Want some music?”

“Yeah. Put something on.”

“What do you wanna listen to?”

John took a second, furrowed his brow, and looked at the ceiling. “Hmmm. Put something on that makes my eyes bulge out.”

“What?” I asked.

“You know,” he said. He made a gesture with his hands, signaling his eyes popping out of his skull. It was accompanied by a raspberry-like sound effect. I shook my head. “Just for like...until we have to open,” he added.

I put on a playlist that had just about every track The Toadies ever recorded. Loud, hard-hitting rock music with aching vocals. John banged his head to the tunes and muttered what lyrics he knew under his breath as he went back to wiping the tables. I found myself checking the front door to see if Monica would walk in even though we still had ten minutes before business hours started. I poured my preparatory shot of tequila and threw it back. At five minutes before open, John came back and pulled a domestic out of the fridge behind the bar and drank it down like it was soda. I switched the music in the bar to the outlaw country playlist and made sure all of the lights were on in the joint.

“Is Monica gonna be here?” John asked, gasping after his final pull from the domestic.

“I don’t know. Why?”

John shrugged.

“Go switch out that sanitizer water,” I told him.

“You got it, Lake.”

I locked my jaw tight at the sound of John’s nickname for me. Why the fuck was he allowed to have such a damned meltdown like he did the night before and then flip a switch as if his juvenile behavior never happened? I wanted to smack him, sometimes, and I probably would

give it a try if he wasn't built like a freight train and could put me in the hospital with nothing more than a sneeze.

I turned the OPEN sign on and unlocked the front door. Collin, Harry, and Stuart came in and took up their usual posts at the far end of the bar. I poured their Coors. Always drafts with those fellows. Never in the bottle. It felt strange, not pouring my shot of tequila after pouring their beers, but instead before. The custom felt incomplete. I poured my shot after I gave them their beers and held my drink up to them in salutation. Would've been a shame to break custom. Could throw their whole day off. I tossed the shot back and cut lime, lemon, and orange slices. The Cabron grew fuller with life as the weekend grew near. Today was no exception to that rule. A group of folks with wrinkled, leather skin came in: iguanas who had their share of sunbathing for the day and were now ready for some place cool...somewhere they could quench their thirst. Three couples, it looked like. The men wore felt hats that were somewhere between a fedora and a Stetson, the style of hat that was general issue to any white man who reached the age of fifty-six or so. Two of the women wore crushable straw cowgirl hats with the rims bent up and inward at the sides. They sat down at a table on the far end, close to the pinball machines and I began to wonder how long it would take before they realized I wasn't going to go out there and take their order.

John came out of the back room to do a routine check of the tables and floor. My attention was split between watching the front door and how the iguanas might respond to John making his rounds. I turned to check my phone that sat on the shelf behind me. No notifications. I turned back around and sure enough, one of the old fellows had flagged John down and they were giving him their order. While I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, I knew the theme of the conversation from the perplexed look on John's face. No matter how many times I'd told him to simply inform the customers they must order at the bar, he acted like he didn't know his thumb from his dick when it came to the matter. The flustered look on his face, the red cheeks, wide

eyes, and agape was more than enough to make me want to scream at him and the iguanas from the bar.

“Gotta order up here,” I said, waving the lizards over. The men of the group got up and hobbled over.

“I was wondering when we were gonna get service,” one of them said, his thin lips splitting open just slightly enough to pass for a smile. He was still wearing his sunglasses. I pointed at the sign that hung above the bar, PLEASE ORDER HERE.

“We take all of our orders at the bar,” I said.

“How about that.”

“I’ll take a whiskey sour and a Bud,” the other fellow said. He was returning to the table before he was even done with his sentence. His friend stood there, staring at our four tap handles for far too long. He had four choices: Coors, Budweiser, Blue Moon, and Pabst Blue Ribbon.

“Hmmm,” he said.

“Anything catch your eye?” I asked, starting his friend’s whiskey sour.

“Hmmm,” he said.

“Your friend opening a tab?”

“You know? That’s a good question.”

“Anything catching your eye?” I was looking across the tables and saw John was still standing with the old folks, chattering away.

“What do you recommend?”

“Huh?”

“What do you like here?”

“Can’t go wrong with a margarita.”

“Hmmm. Okay. Yeah. Two of them, please. Blended.”

“We only do on the rocks here. Hey, John! Those dishes done sanitizing in the back?”

John looked up at me, unsure of what to do. He was in mid-conversation with the two old cowgirls. His wide eyes told me he didn't know how to get back to doing his job. Dan's concerns about him began to take up residency in my mind. Even though he wasn't as bad as he was when Dan first hired him, it still took a certain level of patience to deal with John.

"That's just fine," the old man said.

"Your friend's bill is nine dollars, if he ain't startin' a tab," I said, starting the two margaritas. By the time I was done, John was finally making his way to the back room.

"I'll just get this whole round, how about that?"

"Great. Twenty-three, all together," I said. He left exactly twenty-three dollars on the bar. He asked me if I could carry the other two drinks for him. When John came out with the rack of clean glasses from the back, I set him to the task of helping the cheap sonofabitch carry his drinks back.

"I need you to stay focused, man," I told John when he returned.

"What? They were talking to me," John said with a shrug.

"We're getting into the weekend. How many times do I have to explain to you that it ain't gonna be slow like during the weeknights?" I said, trying not to speak too loudly. John looked over the bar. I knew what he was thinking and furthermore, I know he wasn't going to say it. Besides Colin, Harry, and Stuart taking up their usual posts at the bar, the lizards were our only other customers. I could've argued that was still more lively than our average weeknight, but the fact of the matter was John was right in what he wasn't going to say to me. God dammit, he wasn't going to say it, though.

I turned to check my phone on the shelf. Still no notifications. On the shelf above me, that bottle of tequila kept looking down...giving me eyes. The Old 97's was on, filling the bar with one of their slower, aching tunes. I sang along under my breath,

The color of a lonely heart is bluuuuuuuuuuue

"Isn't this song a bit of a bummer? It's not exactly fun bar music, right?" John said.

“John said it,” Stuart spoke up, “Enough of this tear in your beer shit.” Colin and Harry joined Stuart in a chorus of chuckles.

“Isn’t there another rack of dishes back there?” I said to John. John shrugged, shook his head, and went into the back room. John’s laid-back swagger and devil-may-care attitude chipped away at what little patience I started the day with. I looked at the trio of middle aged men who looked like a Norman Rockwell reject: all the goofy intricate facial details with none of the charm

“Fellas want another round?” I asked them.

“Well, if you insist,” Colin said. His response. Every time. I poured their drafts.

“Hold down the fort, will you? I’m goin’ for a smoke,” I told them. They all nodded. I stepped out the front door, leaving my phone behind. I leaned against the front of the building as I smoked. I took long drags and held them in for as long as my body would allow...until my head grew dull and fuzzy. I thought of calling Dan, checking in, though I knew he had plenty on his mind. ‘Hey Dan, hope all is going well and that your daughter is still alive. By the way, John is being annoying. Can you help with that?’

Fuck.

Dan’s daughter had a fucking hole in her heart...meanwhile John is getting on my nerves and Monica won’t text me. Not much of a comparison of hardships. What if I added in the fact that I need to get up early and ride the property with Dad tomorrow, looking for an imaginary threat while he sits hunched in his saddle, looking over the brush? Not a word would be spoken the whole ride, at least on his end. Just us two, riding side by side, keeping the sun out of our eyes by looking down, angling our hats against the sharp early morning angle of the sun, and looking away from each other. We would absolutely avoid the topic I always wanted answers to...and Dad was the sole keeper of them. Still, this additional dilemma didn’t make my trials and tribulations equal to Dan’s.

The sun reflected off the pavement of the main drag and down the way, westward, heat waves slithered upwards into the air as the ground below shivered and sweated like a drunk when the shakes come on.

Since Monica left after high school, my mind became more and more occupied with thoughts of Mom. Sporadically, she would cross my mind and I'd become tortured with questions and hypotheticals without an outlet of relief. Over time, I developed ways to bury those thoughts. Without entirely letting it go, I allowed Mom to die. For the most part, I laid her to rest in my mind. Monica's return, and the days leading up to it, reanimated Mom. Every moment that passed where I didn't hear back from Monica, every moment that passed where she didn't text me, my mind became more and more full, almost to the brim, with thoughts on Mom and why she left.

When I walked back inside, Monica was behind the bar, making herself a margarita. She was being quite generous with the tequila. My heart ran like a radiator starved of coolant, and my face was so hot it was freezing. Colin, Harry, and Stuart seemed to be quite taken by her. John stood next to her, his hands on his hips, and a wide grin split his face open. John saw me come in.

"Lake! He's returned from abandoning his post. She's doing your job, Lake," John shouted. I gave him a look without having to say anything and he did exactly what I wanted to tell him. He went to the back room where he knew he should be organizing the backup domestics and spirits. I got behind the bar and watched Monica put the finishing touches on her drink.

"You done?" I asked. I tried to display a smile to dilute my frustration.

"Just about. I would've let you make it but..." Monica shrugged.

"I was just out front for a second. How did you get in?"

"Through the back. John let me in while he was taking mats outside to wash. I asked if I could sneak in."

"What a surprise."

"Yeah?"

"In more ways than one."

Monica walked around to the other side of the bar, sipping on her drink through two stirring straws. Colin, Harry, and Stuart didn't even bother to conceal their gaze as she walked past them and sat a few spots away from them at the bar.

"You free tonight?" she asked after taking a long pull from her margarita.

"Yeah?"

"You asking me, or telling me?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, so far what I have in mind is seeing if you're free tonight...so, are you free tonight?"

"All I got going on is work. If you're willing to wait 'til later tonight, I'm free."

"I got all the time in the world."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"For real this time?"

"This time? The fuck does that mean?"

"I didn't hear from you last night is what the fuck it means."

Monica drained her margarita, shrugged, and took a deep breath.

"Well," she said, "I'm for real this time."

"What are we doing tonight?"

"You tell me. It'll give you something to think about for the rest of your shift."

"Ah. What a relief. I didn't have enough to think about already, so thanks!"

"Make me another drink. It'll take your mind off everything."

For a moment, the muscles in my neck grew tense, my tendons became stiff as rebar. I pressed my lips together as we locked eyes. She cocked an eyebrow and gave me a half-smirk. I broke and returned the favor.

"Get your ass back here and make it yourself."

“Yeah?”

“Fuck it. I got shit to do, anyway.”

Monica took in the near emptiness of the bar and looked back at me, nodded, and made her way behind the bar. She did this two or three more times throughout the night as we worked. A few more regular patrons came in as the afternoon slipped into evening, especially once five o’ clock rolled around. A group of seasonal ranch hands who were staying at the Grand Canyon Motel came in and occupied a table near the pinball machines. They were working for Richter up north a ways and would be in town for the next couple of weeks. They came in semi-regularly to deplete our stock of Coors Banquet tallboys and occupy all of the pinball machines. They liked to shoot the shit with John, making him think they’re good buddies.

John was over by the lizard table clearing glasses when one of the ranch hands, whose name I discovered was Riley, was talking with him. They were both laughing, nudging each other’s shoulders. A couple of Riley’s buddies were joining in. Without even being able to hear what they were saying, I knew Riley and John were laughing for different reasons. I had to give Riley and his five friends a final warning a couple of weeks ago when Riley kicked a bar stool leg out from underneath Rawlins, an old-timer from Dad’s days at The Cabron. Rawlins called Riley a “two-bit shitkicker.” Riley grew red as a couple buddies stifled laughter. Riley moved quick and knocked the heel of his boot into the leg of the old stool and Rawlins was flat on his back before he knew what had happened, giving Riley’s cowpoke friends something new to laugh at. Rawlins hadn’t returned since the incident. I would’ve kicked them out for good that night, but I knew Dan could use their business. I didn’t tell Dan about it. He didn’t need the added stress. I did my best to keep an eye on them the rest of the night. Luckily, John got back to work sooner than I was expecting, sparing me from having to chew his ass out again.

A few more patrons poured in throughout the night, making the night go by faster with little incident, but that didn’t keep things like John, or Riley and his buddies, or Monica sneaking in through the back and hanging around from getting to me. At the end of the night, Monica sat at

the bar lazily sipping her fourth or fifth margarita. I was counting the cash in the till and placing it in the safe. John was cleaning dishes in the back room. After a while, he came out to clean the tabletops.

“Hey, John. We’re gonna clean the floors really good tomorrow instead of doing them tonight, alright?”

“Are you sure? They’re kinda gross.”

“Yep. Pretty sure. Let’s get outta here at a decent time.”

“If you say so.”

“That means don’t go scrubbing the bathroom walls, Johnny.”

John just gave me a look. It was all in his eyes. His mouth was closed tight and small. It felt good to know he was beginning to feel how I’d felt all day.

On the way home, Monica sat between John and me on the bench seat of my truck. It was a quiet ride until Monica hooked her phone up to my truck’s stereo and played some pop artist most people my age (who weren’t me) were familiar with. John bobbed his head to the music. I focused on the road. When we turned into John’s neighborhood, he said, “So are you two gonna go back to your dad’s place and bang or something?”

“Jesus Christ, John,” I said, dropping my head forward, eyes closed, tapping my forehead on the steering wheel. Monica busted up laughing.

“What? Just thought I’d ask,” John said.

“Next time think a little harder before you ask,” I said, pulling up to his dad’s house. John paused, looking into the front window of the house. We could see his dad passed out on the couch with the blue glow of the television flickering and filling the room with dim light. He was faced down, wearing only skivvies and an undershirt. All four of his limbs reached out to different corners of the couch. John sighed before getting out of the truck.

“Go get ‘em, God’s Mercy,” Monica said.

“Get who?” John asked.

“You know, just...” Monica shrugged, “...get ‘em.”

“Tomorrow. Same time?” I said from across the cab.

“Yup.” John said. He closed the door and walked up to the front door.

Monica did not scoot down the bench seat. She sat right where she was next to me as I put the truck in gear and drove off and rested her head on my shoulder. We didn’t say anything the rest of the way.

Monica was dozing, her head still on my shoulder, when we got back to Dad’s place. That night, the late spring offered a sample of what was to come when summer arrived. The heat was heavy in the air, though it didn’t cling to us. It passed right through us with a gust of wind I’d be hesitant to call a breeze. There was nothing breezy about it. As the warm air rubbed against us, our skin grew damp and our shirts clung to ourselves, and to each other. When I parked in the dirt driveway, I shook my shoulder some to wake her. She lifted her head and wiped the drool from her lip...the same drool that had soaked into my t-shirt sleeve and mixed with my sweat.

“We’re here” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay” she said, resting her head on my shoulder again.

“You good?”

“Huh?”

“You good?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just checking.”

“Yeah. I’m good,” she said with a smile.

“Shall we?”

“I’m waiting on you.”

“You got a door right over there.”

“Just get the fuck out of the truck and I’ll follow.”

“Yes ma’am.”

We piled out of the driver’s side door of my truck and went into the house. There was no record playing. There wasn’t even the sound of the needle from the player scratching along the end of a spinning record. I called for Dad. There was no response. I told Monica to hang out for a second as I walked towards the back door.

“It smells like cow shit,” Monica said.

“Fuckin’ A,” I said. I popped a smoke in my mouth and lit it.

“Give me one,” she said, and I obliged, walking back towards her in the living room.

I then stepped outside and found Dad, slouched in his chair, his chin dipped into his chest and his excessive neck skin was compacted into a wrinkled, stubbled stack of pancakes. His mouth was a lazy, soft frown, and his eyes were closed so innocently...the crow’s feet that branched out from the outskirts of his eyelids sagged, deep creases pointing downward.

On the card table sat a bottle of tequila (a little over half empty), a plate with a layer of salt on it (tracks where Dad imprinted his finger were scattered throughout, and a bowl of lime wedges sat next to it all. His chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm, but his shoulders shook, shivering even in the hot air. I went back inside and took the blanket that acted as a partition when I slept out to Dad and draped it around his shoulders. I checked his lap to make sure there wasn’t a half smoldering cigarillo that had fallen from his lips (there wasn’t) and left him alone, bringing the bottle of tequila, the salt, and the lime with me as I came back inside, holding it all like a waitress, across the bottom side of one forearm.

I found Monica in the living room, going through the records. I kept my records separate from Dad’s, not that he cared for most of my collection anyway. She was going through the milk crate that held my vinyl. As she did so, I grabbed two fresh glasses from the kitchen and set

everything down on the coffee table. She picked a record and put it on without showing me what it was. She took her time placing the needle down I could tell by the movement of her hips and the start of the song, she had not lost her technique from when we were in high school. She knew exactly where the song was and how to find it and drop the needle in a way that started the desired track without hearing the final seconds of the previous tracks.

“*Parallel Lines*, side two, track...9?” I asked.

“Does this sound like “Sunday Girl” to you?” She turned around and shimmied towards the couch, mouthing the first lines to “Heart of Glass.”

“Shit. Track ten. That’s right,” I said, pouring us a couple of shots.

“Don’t go acting like you know after the fact.”

I handed her a shot. She put a pinch of salt in her mouth, threw the shot back, and bit into a lime wedge. I followed suit. The appropriate gasps and ‘whoops’ came from us as we did so. Debbie Harry’s voice came through clear and bright. We looked at each other, but words did not fall from our mouths. The eye contact filled me with an energy that I didn’t know how to release. She smiled and I tried to match it with my own, which was a foolish effort. I looked away and filled our glasses again. She let out a playful laugh and swayed to the music, singing along under her breath.

“Why do you sing so quietly?” I asked.

“Huh? I don’t know. I just...”

“Sing louder.”

“Yeah?”

We did the tequila shot routine.

Salt.

Shot.

Lime.

‘Whoop!’

She sang loud, proud, and a little flat:

Lost inside

Adorable illusion and I cannot hide

I'm the one you're using please don't push me aside

We coulda made it cruising, yeah

It's just...no good...you tease that I could do better!

She was on her feet now, swaying to the music, shaking her hips, her hands above her head, her shoulders shimmying.

“Alright, alright settle down now.”

“Make up your mind, boy,” she said.

“You’re gonna wake the ol’ man.”

“You could run a stampede of his shit-stinking cattle through this damned house and it wouldn’t wake him.”

I shrugged, then stood, joining her in dancing to the rest of the song. She knew just when the track was supposed to fade out and lifted the needle before the next track started. “I’m Gonna Love You Too,” I believe the next one was. She went back to the milk crate and flipped through my collection again. I stood in the middle of the living room, my hands dangling at my sides, watching her squat over my records. My shoulders shook with a sensation I didn't know how to address.

I sat back down and poured a couple more shots, trying to distract myself from my thoughts. She got up, again concealing the record she picked again, and put it on. The first track started, and I sighed. Dad bought it for me before I left for ASU. Glen Campbell’s voice came in...

*By the time I get to Phoenix she'll be rising
She'll find the note I left hangin' on her door
She'll laugh when she reads the part that says I'm leavin'
'Cause I've left that girl so many times before*

She sat down beside me and watched me drink down another shot. I was damn near numb and the room looked darker than I knew it was. She took her shot as well...out of solidarity, it seemed. We bypassed the salt and lime.

“How’re things on the home front?” she asked after a moment.

“Homefront?”

“Yeah. Just...overall, I suppose.”

“Crossroads Valley is Crossroads Valley. Just like it was. Just like it always will be.”

“Same as it ever was,” she said with a smile.

“Same as it ever was.”

“John seemed to be in a mood tonight.”

“Yeah. He was excited to see you, it seemed.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I guess. Just a stressful night.”

“Wanna talk about any of it?”

I shrugged.

“Might help.”

I shrugged again.

“C’mon. If I wanted to have this kind of conversation, I’d go out and sit with your dad.”

My face went hot, and I looked at her for a moment. Her smile went away. I looked forward to the television that was not turned on. The black screen offered a dark, warped

reflection of us and through it I could tell she was sitting closer to me than I thought. She nodded to my pack of smokes on the table.

“Can I have another?” she asked.

I handed her my pack and the lighter. She lit one and nodded to the tune coming from the speakers. I wanted to tell her about Gloria and how Dan and Sophia were doing, but I didn’t have anything to say about it. I wanted a way to change the subject, but it was all one subject.

“We’re just on our own, you know? This weekend, I mean. I guess...I guess I hope it’s only for this weekend,” I said, finally. Glen had moved on to “Homeward Bound” by then.

“Yeah? Like...with Dan and them gone?”

“Yeah. Dan and *them*.”

“Gloria,” she said after tilting her head from side to side.

“Yeah. She’s...I don’t want to say she’s on her way out. But she also needs help. Soon. It’ll be a fuckin’ miracle if she lives past seventeen. I’m waiting for a phone call I don’t want to answer...one Dan doesn’t want to make.”

“Keep me posted about it.”

“Definitely,” I said.

She moved even closer to me. I saw in the reflection of the dead television screen. I felt her on my shoulder. My hands rested on my lap, lame and inactive. My cigarette was left unattended, resting between my fingers. A string of pale smoke swayed and rose to the ceiling where it spread and scattered above. Monica was still giving attention to hers, looking over the room. Her arm was now resting across the back of the couch, behind where I sat.

“Dad’s a fuckin’ mess.”

“Is that news?”

“I guess not,” I shrugged. “I guess we’re riding along the property tomorrow. Solve the case of a missing cow.”

“Riveting.”

“Sure,” I said, putting my smoke out of its misery.

“You think John was onto something tonight?” she asked.

“Huh?” I asked.

“When we dropped him off. You know?”

“Us?” My face went hot.

“Yeah. What he said. You think he was onto something?”

“I mean...well...”

She busted up laughing.

“Well, goddammit, what do *you* think about it all then?”

She kissed me hard on the cheek, moved towards the record player, using her hips to their fullest capability as she did so. I poured a final round of shots. Something told me we both would need it. She cut off Glen Campbell mid-verse and put on *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers*. She summoned me from the couch as the intro to “Breakdown” came through the speakers. I brought the drinks with and we danced in each other’s arms. She moved like a snake slipping across the surface of a pond and I moved like a stiff old pine directed by a gust of wind.

I didn’t think about Sophia, I didn’t think about John...I didn’t think about Dad. I danced like a blushing goon until my legs gave out. Crossroads Valley was scrubbed from my mind like a spring flash flood. My life was a washout with Monica and myself standing shin-deep in the current. We danced until we pulled out of the current and dragged each other to my fold-out mattress.

The innards of my skull pulsed and squirmed like a nest of hibernating rattlers woken by first spring’s light. We were sprawled on top of each other, Monica and I, and she held a pillow tight over her head. Couldn’t tell if it was from the hangover or my snoring. Either way, none of it was

helping her, I could see. I sat up, groaning, and slowly took in the environment. The partition blanket was pinned up.

Monica was stirring. I looked back over my shoulder at her. I was only able to keep one eye open. The other closed tight.

“Hey,” she said in a light, raspy tone.

“Hey yourself. You kicked my ass last night.”

“You kicked your own ass last night. What are you doin’ up?”

“Told you. Gotta help Dad find his cow.”

“Jesus. What year is it?”

I looked her over. Looked over the wreckage we left on the coffee table. Looked over our clothes all tangled and bunched on the floor.

“I was about to ask the same question.”

I pulled a smoke from my pack, lit it, and stood up. I damn-near went light-headed. I righted myself, planted my hand on the wall to my left, cracked my back and neck, and forced myself through the partition blanket and into the kitchen. The stink of cow shit was overwhelming in the kitchen, which made me retch in the sink. Barely anything came up, but the act persisted a while. The cows were groaning in the pen, stirring. Growing restless. Anxious. Tired of those around them.

“Dad,” I called down the hallway. “You up? Makin’ some coffee.”

I heard Monica groaning in protest to my hollering. Didn’t really blame her. I was against it myself. The smell of coffee brewing helped, though. I drank down a cup, waiting for Dad to come out. I had another cup of coffee and Dad still didn’t come out. I checked the back patio. He wasn’t there, thank God. I went to the fridge and pulled one of Dad’s breakfast Budweiser’s out of the fridge, cracked it open, and got dressed. Put on my hat. My god damned fucking hat: grey suede with a trail boss ridge on the crown, a beaded band tied around, salt-deposit sweat stains warping the color and texture all over. Darker stains from my forehead grease. There was an old,

frayed condor feather tucked into the band. Dad tucked it in there himself before he gave it to me. He gave it to me at the beginning of my senior year of high school. I couldn't remember the last time I had worn it.

“That’s for you,” Dad said about the hat when he gave it to me. “That feather. Is a buzzard’s feather. Because you were always hoverin’ around me. Hoppin’ around me. Like a damned buzzard.”

We laughed about it at the time. He punched my shoulder. I punched his. He swung at me for real. I swung at him for real. We clashed, wrestled until he pinned me, and I tapped out, we giggled the whole way. Like a couple of damned fools.

I took the beer out with me to the stables and saddled Prince Duke, Dad’s all-black mustang, and Waylon, my Azteca. By the time they were all set and ready to go, Dad came waddling up to the stables.

“Ready?” he said, a cup of coffee in hand.

I looked the horses over. From the stable, the odor was a nice cocktail of cow and horse shit.

“Yeah, I guess I’m ready.”

“A’ight then,” Dad said, and he mounted Prince Duke. They trotted on out of the stable, past the corral, and out into the clearing. The cows groaned and called out for Dad as he rode past them. I resettled my hat on my head, looked at Waylon, and mounted. I rode past the cattle pinned up, trying not to breathe as I did so, and followed Dad’s trail out into the brush.

Growing up, I rode with Dad quite frequently. We would ride along the perimeter, ride through the pastures and check the grass...make sure they were getting enough water...but we’d always end up on this hill at the far western reach of the property. We’d crest it, set our horses up there, and look over the property and off into the valley beyond. Crossroads lay like a shivering wave of

pixelated landscape in the heat eastwards. After a while of sitting next to Dad while he looked silently over his land and the valley beyond, I'd climb down from Waylon and scurried through the brush. When I was really young, I'd find a stick that looked like a pistol, and play cowboys and Indians. Or I'd chase lizards through the rocks, catch them by the tail until they wiggled them loose. I'd chase them again as they scurried away with bloody stumps for asses. When I could catch them, I'd keep them in my shirt pocket until I could get home and make a shoebox home for them. Poke holes in it with pencils, fill it with dirt and grass...I'd spend my evenings catching crickets and other bugs for them to eat. It was hard to keep them for long before they'd escape or die.

Now, setting Prince Duke and Waylon on that hill, we both looked over the property in silence. The valley was green and lush from the recent spring rains. I'd never seen the pastures look so overgrown. Dad needed to get those cows out to feed soon. Keep the grass from growing so thick. It was strange, though, to see such a spread of shaggy green over the desert floor. Deep, full of wild grass clashing with red rock. Different colors of yellow, white, pink, and blue, flecked the green valley and pastures. Herds of saguaro stood in place, holding their fat arms up. They offered their empty hands to the burning, cloudless sky.

"Been some time, huh?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Ridin' like this."

"S'pose so."

"When did you go ridin' last? January? February?"

"Don't recall."

"Been a damn minute for me."

"S'pose so. Got that busted hat on."

"Yeah. Dug it up. Figured it was a good day to wear it."

"Time for a new one, maybe."

I took the hat off my head and looked it over at different angles.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I like this one just fine.”

Dad chuckled and shook his head. His shoulders lifted and dropped in a gentle rhythm. He pulled a cigarillo from his breast pocket, wet both ends with his mouth, and lit it. I lit one of my smokes and puffed at it. My head was still thumping, and my veins felt like they were full of cotton. My hands and feet were full of asphalt. I put the hat back on my head to keep the sun from cooking the snakes in my skull.

My nerves were shot with anxiety and I was not sure how to relieve myself of the feeling. Talking certainly seemed to help a little.

“Where do you think that cow went off to?” I asked.

“If I knew, I s’pose I wouldn’t be sittin’ here.”

“Guess you’re right.”

“Mm.”

“You sure you’re really missin’ one?”

Dad looked at me like I was about to pull a pistol on him. I chuckled. Not sure why. Relieve the stress or something.

“Might could be you miscounted, what with them all cooped up in that tiny corral. Just a thought. Maybe counting again could help.”

“Let off me, goddamn you. Last thing I need is a fuckin’ mother hoverin’ over me, ‘check this, check that. Do this. Do that.’”

He had drawn on me, with those words. I hadn’t even cleared leather and he put one through my chest. I balled a fist. Dad looked back out over the valley. Since he brought it up, I figured I’d make it the topic of conversation.

“You think about her?”

Dad kept quiet.

“I think about her,” I said. “Quite frequently. Just simple things. Little things, really, are all I can remember. Like when she would make French toast. Didn’t know what the hell she was making...but, uh--well, she called them ‘cat guts and gopher brains.’ Guess that intrigued me enough to eat them. See what guts and brains tasted like. Called French toast that for way too long, I admit.”

“Got that from me,” Dad said.

“What’s that?” I asked. I heard what he said.

“I said that to you first. She thought it was gross. Told me not to call it that. You were hesitant to eat it once you saw Mom dipping bread into eggs. You thought *that* was nasty. You got a mighty kick out of it once I gave it such a gruesome name. She was overruled in the matter after you put up such a protest in calling it anything else. Every time she made French toast after that, she called it ‘cat guts and gopher brains’ because of how happy it made you. Only way she could make you eat anything in the morning.”

“That so?”

“That is so.”

“My mistake.”

“Mm.”

“She sang when she cooked though, right? Hummed a tune, at least.”

Dad looked over the valley.

“It was always something...I don’t know...interesting. Different for our house, I guess. Patti Smith, usually.”

“‘Dancin’ Barefoot.’”

“That was the one?”

“That was the one. She loved that song. She cooked without shoes on and changed the lyrics a bit when you were in the room to make the song about cookin’ with you.”

“That so?”

“That is so.”

“That’s right. ‘Cookin’ Barefoot.’”

“That’s right.”

“Didn’t she also--”

“What the hell are you doin’ here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sittin’ here. Tryin’ to focus. And you just keep heapin’ on all this shit.”

“All you do is sit and tune everything out. All you focus on is not focusin’ on Jack shit.”

“You wanna try again, talkin’ to me like that?”

“I can’t even bring her up without you breakin’ down, lockin’ up, and shuttin’ me out.”

“She ain’t someone you can just bring up. It ain’t exactly common conversation.”

“When do we have common conversations? You’re more concerned about those fuckin’ cows all cooped up and covered in their own shit than anything under your own damned roof.”

“You wanna converse? Let’s do it, then. You start talkin’ about Mom, then you start tearin’ into me about whatever’s on your fuckin’ mind. It would be nice to have a conversation instead of whatever the hell you usually do to me.”

“What’s wrong with wanting to talk about her? Why don’t I get to know her?”

“You think you’re the only one? How many times did I try and know her?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know shit about either of you other than you treat me like a fuckin’ ghost floatin’ around the house. You’re on another plane of existence. You live somewhere no one else lives.”

“You--you don’t know.”

“What don’t I know?”

“You don’t get to talk to me like that. You don’t get to talk to me about her.”

“That’s healthy.”

Dad looked over his property, gnawing on a cigarillo.

“What’s keepin’ you here, huh?” He said.

“What’s keepin’ me here?”

“What’s keepin’ you from leavin’ again? What’s keepin’ you from gettin’ up off my damned couch and livin’ your own life?”

I sat on my horse, completely dumb.

“You--mmm. You fuckin’ piece of shit,” was all I was able to get out.

Dad chuckled under his breath; his eyes fixed on that goddamned valley.

“That’s it. Just laugh it off and drift away to your fantasy world where you’re some fuckin’ John Wayne cowboy rancher. The lonesome homesman. God forbid you deal with real issues.”

“You sure seem to know a lot for a young spitfuck dropout sleepin’ on my goddamned couch.”

“You son of a bitch,” I said through a locked jaw. I brought Waylon around with the reins I faced away from Dad.

“That’s the way. Fly off the handle. Ride on, now.”

I put my boots to Waylon’s belly. Too hard, I knew right away. He let me know, vocally. I tore down the hill and headed back to the house.

I got back to the house. I swear to Jesus Christ I could smell the cow shit from near half a mile away. I hitched Waylon at the trough outside of the stable and walked inside the house, trying to control my breathing before I got inside. I was huffing like my heart was about to fall out of me. I took a deep breath at the back screen door before entering so as to not scare the hell out of Monica with my temper, though she should be quite familiar with my temper and my relationship with Dad by now.

I went straight to the refrigerator and cracked open another beer. I could count on one hand how many gulps it took for me to put that beer away. I tossed the can and stepped into the living room, trying not to clench my fists as I did so.

The foldout was empty.

Her clothes were gone.

No note.

I checked my phone.

No texts.

No voicemail.

Nothing.

My throat grew hot and tight.

My chin twitched.

Tears ran down my cheeks.

THREE:

Violence and Liberation

I texted John before heading into town: ‘Going in early. Let me know if you want a ride when your shift starts.’

I rolled down the highway, not paying much attention to the speedometer as I went. I took a couple of Dad’s beers out of the fridge before I left. They sat on their sides on the bench seat of my truck, sweating and jostling as I drove. I cracked one open and drank it down quickly and tried to get my breathing under control again. My phone lay on the bench seat next to me as well, free of notifications. I rolled down my window and hung my left arm out. I let the wind ride

up my sleeve and fill my shirt with air that wasn't quite cool, but it wasn't quite hot either. It was perfect and soothing.

I crushed the first beer can and opened the second as Crossroads Valley came into sight far off in the distance. I had the radio turned off. The only thing I heard was the hum of my engine and the sound of my truck cutting through the desert air. That, too, was perfect and soothing.

I felt the precise amount of distance from my feelings I was looking for. By this time, I was rolling into town and making my way down the main drag. I drove past The Cabron and headed further eastwards. After a couple blocks, I hung a right into the neighborhood and found myself in Dan's driveway. I got out, taking the empties with me and tossed them in the trash can that sat in the side yard. I then made my way up the porch and to the front door. I had a key to their place, so I let myself in. I wandered through the house, drifting down the hallway and into each of the rooms, unsure of why I was doing what I did. Even with the house empty, it felt like it was full of a complete family: mother, father, and child. The living room was warm. I thought the rocking chair in the corner Dan sat in all the time was rocking, empty as it was. I pictured Sophia poking at white hot coals in the fireplace. I heard Gloria calling for her mom to pop in another VHS tape from Dad's box of Westerns. I walked back down the hallway to Gloria's room and turned on the little TV. I went through the box until I found a copy of *The Sons of Katie Elder*. I always found myself connected to this one. It made me wish I had brothers who could share the loss of a mother with me. When I was younger, I saw myself as a John Elder: The John Wayne hero. The stoic misunderstood one. The one who would set things straight and get answers regarding his mother's passing. When I got into high school and my brief college days, I liked to think of myself as Tom Elder: The Dean Martin wild card. The comic relief. Always ready with a parlor trick and a game to hustle. Still misunderstood, but always knew who he was and never tried to be anything else. Since I dropped out from ASU and moved back, all I've felt like was Bud Elder. Michael Anderson Jr.'s character, the youngest elder. The young adult filled with

angst and lacking experience from the real world. Prone to throwing fits and lashing out at his family. Only in the movie, Bud was headed to college and I was done with it.

I popped the VHS in and turned the volume up loud enough to be heard throughout the house and went back into the kitchen to sit at the table in there. John, Monica, and I would come to this house constantly throughout our years growing up together. Back when Dan and Sophia were first married, before Gloria was born, they would have us all for dinner several times throughout the week. They would never kick us out, either. We stayed as long as we didn't feel like going home.

Those nights were warm and unending. Dan and Sophia married young and enjoyed being young, but it was clear that they wanted a house lit up with the lives of kids. They found themselves in a beautiful position where they could be young with us while watching over us with a distance of age and experience. They could watch us grow without feeling old. It seemed as if whenever their dinner table was full, they were happy. If they could get us to be happy, they looked at each other as if their life were complete. A soft, closed smile from Sophia and a touch on her hand from Dan meant all was well that moment.

I closed my eyes and tried to bring my memories to life. I exhausted myself trying to fill the house with the sounds of music, John trying to reenact the Mexican stand-off from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* on his own, Monica sitting on the couch and Dan in his recliner laughing at John's energy he put into his reenactment. John soaking in the laughter and attention was always shown by a grin on his face he tried hard to hide but never could quite do it.

Sophia always chose the music if she was cooking. I always gravitated towards her liveliness as she bounced to the tunes she put on. She was a big fan of The Monkees...the Big Bopper...Buddy Holly...Ritchie Valens...more often than not, I was in the kitchen with Sophia, cooking with her, learning her gentle, slight dance moves she incorporated into her cooking. A lightness to her step as she moved from the cutting board, to the sink, to the stove or the oven...a shimmy in her shoulders...a bob to her head...she moved her hips modestly as well. She would

half-sing the lyrics while mumbling to herself, keeping herself on task, and giving me instructions as to how I could best assist her as she cooked. She seemed to do this conglomeration of actions at once without issue. I'd stand on the linoleum floor trying to inherit her entire presence by simply being in the same room as her. I preferred that over sitting on a couch and watching John reenact an entire western I've watched with him time and time again.

My head was pounding again, and it felt like my ears were filled with hot blood. A hiccup rose in me. It felt as if it started at the base of my spine and took all of my muscles to push it up. I tried to push it back down, worried for what else that hiccup might become. It turned into a wet belch which pushed me against the back of the chair I sat in.

I sat in an awkward position, holding my fist to my mouth. I was frozen in this pose for what felt like a minute. I was unsure if my guts were rejecting what I had put inside myself or the memories and thoughts which had found unlocked doors to the rest of my being. Either way, I flexed my abdomen and as a result, my throat closed off as if I were choking. I realized I hadn't breathed in what also felt like a minute and any attempt at air left me gagging, trying to fight back the stomach bile that wanted to leap from my mouth and spread across the floor.

It was an overwhelming process, but after a while I was able to desperately suck in air through my nose, clear my throat, gag a little, and get my systems under control. I had half a mind to get a pot of coffee going but instead I stumbled out of the kitchen, through the living room, and out onto the front porch. After a while, I pulled my phone out. There was still no response from John. I opened my texting app and tapped on the conversation with Monica. I started typing out a draft to send her: 'Hey hope you had a good time last night. I thought it was a good time. Just wanted to say—' then I deleted the whole thing.

I watched waves of heat slither into the air and hover above the pavement. The dried creek bed on the other side of the road sizzled and shimmered through the rising heat. An overwhelming, unrelenting, steady insect buzz screamed from the brush that ran along the creek

bed. Creeping germanders, rosewood, and yellow bells sat at the feet of the brush. A ways in the distance, the sandy, near-red face of the valley blushed in the late morning sun.

I called Dan. He answered right when I thought it would go to voicemail.

“Hey what’s up?” he said.

“Hey Dan,” I said.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“Just wanted to check in, I suppose.”

“Yeah. We’re hangin’ in there, I guess. How’s it back home?”

“Oh, you know. Just...the usual.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you know,” I said with a shrug. Then I was wondering why I shrugged for no one to see.

“The Cabron good?”

“You bet.”

“John good?”

“Yeah, you bet.”

“John’s good, then?”

“Yeah, Dan. He’s good.”

I heard Dan sigh.

There was a long pause where all I heard was the buzzing from the brush and Dan breathing slowly and heavily on the other end.

“So, uh...” Dan said finally.

“What’s up?”

“It looks like we’ll have to be away for a little while longer.”

“Yeah?”

“Gloria is, uh...she’s been real tired lately. Like, she can’t walk across the room without getting all weak and breathing like she’s been smoking her whole life.”

“Holy shit,” I said, “what’s going on?”

“All the travel and tests must’ve gotten her anxious or something.”

“Is she gonna be okay?”

“They got a doctor coming from Seattle to take a look at her. We’ll know more by the end of next week, is what they tell me. She’s on bedrest in intensive care until then.”

“Jesus. Dan...”

“I was gonna call you later tonight. Didn’t want to drop this on you.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“You need me to hold down the fort a little while longer?”

“At least for a couple more days. I was gonna talk to Sophia about me coming back in a couple of days, after we meet with the doctor--”

“Nah. You stay there.”

“I can’t just leave you stranded there.”

“Dan, you stay there with your family.”

There was another pause. He sighed.

“Okay. Okay,” he said.

“Alright.”

“Okay. Thanks, kid.”

“You bet.”

“I’ll give you a call soon. When, uh, we know more, I guess.”

“You bet,” I said. I could imagine the tears welling in his dark eyes. He sniffled.

“Alright, then.”

“Alright, then,” I said.

“I’ll see ya.”

“Yeah. I’ll see ya.”

Dan hung up before I did. I was left standing on his porch with dead air from my phone filling my ear, looking over the brush and the dry creek bed. In that moment, Dan’s house felt like the only piece of geography that existed in my world. There was a time in my life when that was a wildly comforting feeling. Now, it felt like the people in my life were moving away, ever expanding from me. They simply would rather move away from me than take me with them.

I was overwhelmed with these thoughts while our younger selves, like phantoms, filled the house inside. The sounds of John Wayne fist fighting his brothers echoed down the hallway inside.

I went back in and stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring at my boots and listening to the film playing in Gloria’s room. The way John Wayne was talking to his youngest brother, played by Anderson Jr., reminded me of how Dan would talk to me in my senior year of high school. I gagged at the thought of going to college. Dan brought the topic up with me whenever he had the chance. If I made a mistake on the clock working for his gas station, he made snide remarks like, “See? You’re not fit to pump gas. Guess you should get your ass to college and get yourself a real job.” He’d bring me pamphlets for ASU student organizations and programs, put them in the envelop with my paycheck every other week, or even on my plate when Sophia set the table for dinner. He went to ASU and he was proud of it.

The last time he talked to me about going to college was during the first semester of my senior year in high school. He peppered the ASU talk on me that entire week at work. Every afternoon, after school, I’d lock my bike up at a novelty hitching post that was in front of The Cabron, enter the building on the gas station side, jump in my coveralls I kept in my locker in the back, and punch in. As soon as Dan saw me, it was, “Hey, college boy” this or, “What’s up, Sun Devil?” that. I wanted nothing more than to get the fuck out of Crossroads Valley, don’t get me wrong. I couldn’t wait to get out of my father’s house.

I suppose I wanted to do what Monica did after high school: work, save money, travel, work, save money, and then travel again. The tragedy of my life at the time was that God gave me a deficiency in skills when it came to managing my finances. God also knew that there was no way Dad would fund my random travels. If his money wasn't going towards funding my going to college, his money wasn't going towards me. The fallout of high school graduation was this: Monica saved her graduation money and cash from working the register at the Grand Canyon General Store and began travelling. John still had a few more years left in high school (they kept him an extra year) and he started working with me, pumping gas for Dan after school every day until I was accepted to ASU.

I never had good grades in high school, but I never had bad grades either. With that kind of GPA, it made sense to me at the time my only option was a college that was out of town but was still close to home. Dad agreed to pay that tuition when I told him I was accepted.

Dan nearly deterred me from going to any college completely months before the fallout. It wasn't his intention, but his badgering finally tested my patience.

After dinner at their house, Dan always cleaned up the table, washed the dishes and made the kitchen spotless. I sat in the living room with Sophia and Monica. Sophia opened a bottle of wine after dinner and she let us have a glass or two. John sat on the rug in the living room, legs crisscross, and thought about everyone's names.

"Sophia. The name is Greek," he said. It was clear he was growing tired. From the waist up, he was swaying, his head resting in his palm and his elbow planted on his knee. "It means wisdom...or maybe skills, I think?" He looked at the ceiling as he spoke. One eye was closed, giving his face a Popeye quality. The cowlicks on his fine blond head left soft strands of hair shooting out this way and that.

"Greek? I'm not Greek, Johnny," Sophia said.

"Duh. It was also used by the English a lot."

Sophia looked at the skin tone of her arms, and presented them for John to see and said, “Does it look like I’m from England?”

“Well, you aren’t dark enough to be all Mexican,” John said without lifting his head to look at Sophia’s arms. Sophia and Monica chuckled.

“John! Jesus Christ!” I said.

Sophia flicked me in the back of my ear.

“What the hell?”

She flicked me again.

“Keep it up,” she said.

“Yeah, Lake!” John said.

“Yeah, Lake,” Monica said.

“Yeah, Lake,” Sophia said.

“Fuck you all,” I said. Monica teamed up with Sophia that time, flicking my ears from either side, piling on me so I couldn’t retreat or defend myself. John chanted *Lake! Lake! Lake! Lake!* as the assault persisted.

“College boy!” Dan called from the kitchen.

Monica and Sophia didn’t so much as falter in their flick-attack on me, no matter how much I yelled, “Dan needs me! Dan needs me!”

I fought off their attacks as I fled to the kitchen. Dan was listening to his mariachi tunes on the old AM/FM radio that sat on the windowsill over the kitchen sink. The static came in and out of the music as it pleased.

“You let two girls and a kid like John whoop you like that?” he asked.

“Kid like John?” I asked.

Dan gave me a look.

“You know what John is,” he said.

“Whatever you think John is, he’s built with battleships for arms and he’ll send your jaw flying into next year if he really wanted to.”

“You looked at the fall quarter class schedule yet?”

I looked at the floor and took a breath. It wasn’t like I shouldn’t have seen this topic of conversation coming. I simply didn’t have the energy for it, and I didn’t know how to make my same response to this line of inquiry seem fresh.

“Registration date’s comin’ up quick.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you won’t let me forget that. ‘Registration date is gonna come quicker than you think.’”

“So you know full-well on it, but you ain’t doin’ shit about it?”

I just shook my head and looked at my boots. I felt Dan’s eyes on me the whole time while I just stared. I felt detached from the room. I felt like I was standing in the dried creek bed out in front of their house. I was sinking in the soft, burning sand. The earth was swallowing me whole and the shrubs were crowding in on the spot where I stood.

Dan went back to washing the rest of the dishes while I stood there for I don’t know how long. He hummed and whistled through his teeth, occasionally, to the tunes coming from the cracked speakers of his radio. I came back to the present when Dan was finished washing all of the dishes. He went to the fridge and pulled out two Tecates. He popped the bottle caps off them on the edge of the kitchen counter, gave me one, and he led me out into the back yard.

“Something on your mind?” Dan asked.

“No, not really,” I said.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “I mean...why? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Just like. In general. How’s life?”

“I don’t know. Same old shit,” I shrugged. I knew I was shrugging too much. My face grew hot over how futile it was to try and stop shrugging.

“School’s going good?”

I glared at him. He backed off the subject.

“How’s the ol’ man?”

“Drunk. At your bar right now, I bet.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he said followed by an awkward laugh.

I sipped my beer.

Dan looked up at the sky, one hand in his pocket. He sipped at his beer and took a deep breath.

“You know what sounds good?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“Getting the fuck outta here.”

I looked at him.

“Not like. Forever. I mean, just for a couple days. Shit. Even for a day.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“When was the last time you got out of town?”

“Ah, Jesus. I went with Monica’s family to Palm Springs a couple years ago.”

“That was the *last time*?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Holy shit, man.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What’s your work schedule next week?”

“I’m off Thursday and Saturday, I think.”

“Hm,” he said. “Do you have plans for Saturday?”

I shrugged again. Dammit.

“Wanna get outta here? At least for the day?”

“What were you thinking?”

We drank down the rest of our beers while Dan talked me into a day trip into Phoenix to check out the city. He had Diamondback tickets. First base line. Terrace level. I wasn't a fan, but they were playing the Giants, and I would kick myself if I passed up a chance to see them play in person.

Dan spent that entire Saturday talking to me about how great it was being in Phoenix and how cool it would be to live in the downtown area. As obvious as it may seem, our conversations began to dwell on the topic of ASU and how great the school was. The student community, his own experience getting his business degree...Honestly, our dialogue was hardly a dialogue after a while. It was simply Dan peppering the college talk on me as I nodded or tried to focus on Tim Lincecum throw some serious heat.

We were navigating the congested streets of downtown Phoenix after the game, trying to find our way back towards the I-70 to get home. Dan had one more idea before we got on the freeway: go see the campuses. Just drive past them. That's it. Nothing more. Promise. I wanted to lose my shit on Dan. Cuss him out. I wanted to scream vulgar nonsense at him, then jump out of the car, slip through the traffic and disappear into the thick crowds moving in a lazy current on the sidewalks. However, I felt I owed it to him to go along with the detour since he got me out of Crossroads for a day and treated me to a damn good ballgame. He drove me through the campuses and pointed out various buildings...the dorms in Manzanita Hall...I simply looked where he pointed, nodded my head, and said things like, “yeah?” when he had something to say about what he pointed at.

It had to have been over an hour by the time he was finished, and we were on the highway. What frustrated me about the whole experience was that this was Dan playing it cool. This was him *not* laying it on thick. His manipulative approach of inviting me to a ballgame and

spending a day in Phoenix just to get me to consider going to ASU should've been something I was more suspicious of.

I was silent the whole ride home and I think Dan got the message. For some reason, I still felt bad I was treating him this way. I sat silently, conflicted, wrestling with the feeling of being manipulated and trying to exercise caution as to not show my frustration to a guy who's done almost more for me than my own parents ever had. For a while, I wished John was in the truck with us so his constant talking would eat up the silence that began filling the cab.

After a while, Dan asked if I would mind if he put on the radio and I said no. We didn't say another word to each other the whole ride home. The classic rock station played the same ten songs they played every day as we went down the highway.

At the end of the following week, I picked up my paycheck after work. The envelope felt thicker than usual. I opened the envelope as I walked towards my truck and found my paycheck inside, along with two thousand dollars in cash. Along with it was a note that said, *put this towards your college funds. I just want you to succeed. -D*

Before I knew it, I was driving to Dan's house, going way too fast. It was the wrong thing to do, for sure. I was near blind, filled with such white-hot rage. I tore into his neighborhood without a plan in mind. When I got to Dan's house, I stormed up to Dan and Sophia's front door and pounded on it relentlessly until someone answered.

Sophia answered and looked at me with wide, baffled, dark eyes.

"Lynn, what are you doing?" She said.

"Where's Dan?"

"What is going on?"

"Dan! Dan!"

"*Lynn!* What are you doing?"

I heard Dan coming from the kitchen.

"What's going on?" he asked, a concerned look on his face.

“Don’t fucking talk to me like you have no idea what’s going on,” I said.

“Both of you need to explain what’s going on,” Sophia said.

I took the cash out of my paycheck envelope and threw it on the ground. The bills fluttered downward and scattered across the scuffed hardwood.

“Lynn,” Sophia said.

“Really?” Dan said.

“Is there any other part of my life you’d like to plan for me?” I said.

“Look, Lynn—”

“Wanna arrange a marriage for me, too?”

“*Lynn!*” Sophia shouted.

“What jobs are okay for me to apply for? Should you also decide what kind of degree I get?”

“Sophia, just give me a second,” Dan was saying to Sophia as I continued to tear into him.

“What’s my fuckin’ major gonna be, Dan?” I said.

“Someone better explain what’s going on before I throw you both out of my house,” Sophia said.

“Fuck this,” I said and headed back towards my truck, leaving the cash scatter across the entryway of their house. Some of their neighbors were watching from their front doors and yards. Looking back, I often wonder why I responded to someone who only cared about me and wanted to help me create the life I wanted. I suppose it was because I didn’t know for certain what kind of life I wanted. Or perhaps I was just afraid to create such a life and had no desire to conspire alone on the subject, let alone conspire with someone.

The memory was photographic in my mind as I stood angry, hungover, and drunk in Dan’s kitchen, listening to the Elder brothers being put in shackles in the other room.

I never got a text back from John before work started, so I headed to The Cabron to open up alone. He was sitting at the curb when I got there. He stood up and came to me after I parked my truck.

“There you are,” John said.

“What do you mean?” I said, climbing out of my truck.

“What? I mean there you are.”

“Yeah, well, did you see my text?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Well...did you think to text me back?”

“Did you watch *The Searchers* the other night?”

“The fuck are you talkin’ about?”

“I texted you. *The Searchers*. Your dad’s favorite movie. You never texted me back.”

“You wanna have that talk right now?”

“Isn’t that the talk you wanted to have?”

“No. Let’s just...” I paused as I unlocked the front door. “You know you could’ve gone in through the gas station and had Thomas let you into the bar.”

John paused for a second, then peeked out and looked down at the gas station entrance to the building.

“Aw. Shit.”

“Yep,” I said.

We went in and John rushed past me, unaware of the fact that he may as well have shoved me to the side as he went to the back room. He was full of energy. Ready to work. I hated it.

“Don’t you touch that auxiliary cable,” I said, anticipating him rushing to hook his phone up to the sound system and picking out a music playlist.

“I wasn’t even gonna!”

“Set out the matts—”

“—I know—”

“—Start up the dishwasher and sanitizer—”

“—I know—”

“—Don’t forget about the tables and chairs out here—”

“—I *know*—”

I shook my head and set myself to my daily tasks. The longer I could keep John occupied, the longer I didn’t have to deal with the direct energy of another human being. I hooked my phone up to the sound system and turned on a playlist of Patti Smith on shuffle. I was burdened with so many feelings: anger, sorrow...I was damned nervous...I was afraid, confused, hopeless. I was a Hank Williams song. I kicked myself for thinking something so pathetic and cliché.

I hadn’t even noticed, but the song had changed to “Because the Night,” and my head was bobbing to the tunes as I sliced up oranges, limes, and lemons. I was lost in the tunes. Before I knew it, “Dancing Barefoot” came on: a song I was waiting to come on the entire time. I felt a smirk distort my face as I sliced through citrus fruits. My shoulders began to move to the rhythm of the song, I bobbed my head and hummed along. When the chorus came on I wanted to sing my mom’s version:

I’m cookin’ barefoooooot

But I wanted to put my own twist on it:

I’m prepping shiiiiitfaced

I chuckled to myself and wondered if Mom would think something like that was funny.

Before long, it was time to open and Colin, Harry, and Stuart filed right in as soon as I unlocked the door. I made my way back around the bar and pulled their drafts.

“How’s it today?” Harry asked.

“Oh, you know,” I said, setting their beers in front of them.

“Sonovabitchin’ Diamondbacks got hosed last night,” Stuart said.

“Well, it’s early in the season, still,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s true,” all three of them said.

It was the standard exchange of words we had with each other during baseball season.

“When the hell are we gonna get a TV in here to watch the games, Lynn?” Colin asked.

“Want me to pass along your millionth lack-of-television-in-the-bar complaint to Dan?” I asked.

Stuart and Harry snickered at Colin.

John came from the back room, carrying a rack of dishes up front.

“Whattaya say, there, Johnny?” Stuart asked.

“Just working with this grumpy turd,” John said, jerking a thumb in my direction.

“That’s me,” I said, slicing into a lime.

“He know how to be something else?” Stuart asked Johnny.

“Not at the moment,” I said.

“He’s got sour grapes because he was up all night with a girl,” John said. “Probably didn’t get much sleep.”

My face went hot as soon as he said it. Colin, Harry, and Stuart cooed at me and made kissing noises.

“These grapes will be less sour once you get the rest of those chairs down from the tables and you wipe everything down,” I said. Based on the reaction of the room, it seemed as though my words carried more venom than I intended. It wasn’t so much what I said to him, but the tone in which I said it. Upon reflection, I realized I had cracked the words at John like a bull whip.

John's face went white, then red. Colin, Stuart, and Harry looked down at their pints with no intention of looking up. John went about the rest of his tasks with the constitution of a whooped dog. It got to me. I know I had snapped at John, but he had to have known I didn't mean to deliver my words so viciously. In the couple hours that followed, I focused on my daily tasks and only spoke when a customer needed something. I kept my own music choice going, straying further and further from the usual tunes that rang through the joint.

Folks trickled in gradually as the day went on. The desert lizards from the night before must've moved on with the morning, no doubt travelling to a better piece of desert where they could get stoned on sunlight. More regulars came in and I gave them courteous nods as they approached, though even doing that zapped me of my energy. I was afraid I had kicked my own ass too early in the day. The place began to rise to life as people decided to take advantage of our pinball machines and other arcade entertainment. Folks older than me with more life in them than I did came up to me asking me to break ones and fives into quarters for them so they could slap a little metal ball around with a set of worn out flippers, or hunt virtual animals with a tiny, orange shotgun.

After a while, the energy was a little contagious. Their youthful drive rubbed off on me and I surrendered my music choice to the type of music the patrons liked to hear: country western. I refused to play much of the newer stuff (anything beyond the mid 80's was new to me) however I didn't mind some Dwight Yoakum, so that's what they got. The Cabron had a pulse after that. It was pumping steadily, like a teenager running a 5k. The vibe in the bar was impervious to my disposition and I contracted a little happiness from it. I didn't check the front door, hoping for someone specific to enter. I didn't check my phone for someone specific to send me a text, or to call me. I didn't occupy myself with happy memories that now made me devastatingly sad. I didn't torture myself with hypothetical thoughts, like what my mother would think of this or what my life could be like if I had done that. I was surrounded by life...life constructed by those who loved where they were and what they were doing. If ghosts stood

behind them...if devils sat on their shoulders, they could've screamed in their ears and danced an unholy jig before them and my patrons would be deaf to their voice and blind to their steps as they were baptized in libations and good company.

Before long, Riley and his cronies filed in. They smelled as if they had come straight from the ranch. It reminded me of the stench that soaked everything on Dad's property, only it was cut with something more sinister. I questioned their intent before they even did anything, but I checked my attitude. I was reluctant to let anything alter the lightened state I found myself in.

There was something Sophia taught me growing up, whenever she sensed my delicate sensibility being rattled by someone.

"Assume that all are filled with good," she would tell me, "even when their actions don't display it."

I nodded to them as they entered. They carried the belief on their shoulders as if they were a troop of John Waynes and Dean Martins with the same lack of sobriety but without the charm or charisma. They were living in their own world, corralled amongst themselves. They thought they were greater than the pin of stink they rolled around in.

The lead swine of the outfit sauntered up to the bar and tossed a credit card on the counter.

"Six Coors. Banquet." Riley said, leaning on an elbow planted on the bar. I looked at him for a second, checked myself, and took up the card.

"Where's that fine piece of trim was in here yesterday?" he asked as I went to run his card. My jaws pressed together tight, until I heard the hinges of my skull begin to crack and pop. My face went hot, and I really hoped a noticeable redness didn't reflect that heat. The look on the fella's face was all I needed to know that I was wearing my emotions on my sleeve. I swear I saw Satan swimming in his pupils. I ran his card and charged him for his beers.

"Sorry," I said, "card was declined."

The look on his face went from Dean Martin to Ringo Starr.

“That’s shit.”

“Whatever you call it, it didn’t go through.”

“Run it again. That’s shit.”

“You say so,” I said, and charged him for another six beers. “Yep. Still not going through.”

“That’s shit.”

“It’s declined,” I said.

He went back to his gaggle of shitkickers after taking his card back. I watched them bicker as they pulled together some cash. After a beat, he came back with more than enough cash to pay for the beers.

“Six Coors. Banquets. And six shots of your well whiskey,” he said.

I took the cash and went to work cracking open the domestics and setting them on the bar. By the time I was pouring the shots, he walked away.

“We’ll be at the table in the back,” he said, and headed towards his cronies.

My jaws locked together even tighter until a sharp pain ran up my right molars and into my temple, spreading across the top of my skull. I set all the drinks on a server tray we hadn’t used in years and called John from the back room.

“Take this to that table of cowpoke in the back there,” I told John when he showed up.

“Ain’t they supposed to order and pick up here?”

“Just do it. It’s a good night. Let’s not spoil it,” I said.

John looked at me as if I were speaking Mandarin to him.

After a moment, he conceded and picked up the tray. He walked as if he was humiliated in being asked to do something like that. He’d willingly scrub a shitter until his knuckles bled, but this was too much for him, apparently.

I went back to serving customers, welcoming the distraction from the group of Walmart outlaws who took up space in the back. The sheer number of people increased the temperature

inside the joint, causing patrons to more frequently order cold drinks. No matter how busy it got, I always made sure to scan the place, to make sure everything was running smoothly. Tonight, that part of my process fell to the wayside for a moment. I simply had too much on my mind I was trying not to think about. I needed to be part of the positive environment.

Before long I remembered, however, that it was necessary to scan the joint to make sure everything and everyone was alright. Towards the back of the bar, I saw John at the ranch hands' table. Riley was rubbing John's shoulders and directing his attention to a table full of ladies that were about twice his age. He was whispering in John's ear and John had a wild, bewildered look on his face. He looked like he was smiling, gasping, laughing, and cringing all at once. He was blushing and occasionally, he giggled at whatever Riley was saying to him.

I found myself blind with anger again I scanned their table and counted out how many ranch hands I saw. When I was satisfied with having all six of them within my line of sight, I decided to walk out from behind the bar and do something. Colin, Stuart, and Harry were watching me. I felt their eyes on me as I moved. They rarely ever saw me leave from behind the bar, so it must've been an alarming act to them.

When I got to the ranch hands' table, I told John to get back to work.

"C'mon!" Riley said, putting on a show for his pals.

John looked at the ranch hands.

"Don't look at them. You don't got business with them anymore. Get back to work."

John was visibly frustrated, but he knew it was best to get back to his tasks.

"You gonna keep a man from talkin' to a fine group of ladies?"

"The fuck were you sayin' to him?" I asked.

Riley looked at me with wide, dark, empty eyes.

"Answer my question."

"Is there a problem?"

"Seems that way. What did you say to him?"

“We’s just havin’ some fun, that’s all.”

“Does it look like we’re all havin’ fun?”

“We was, yeah.”

His accent was thick. I guessed he was from Texas. For some reason, there was no more ranch work for him back where he came from. He had to bring his shitty attitude out our way. He was standing up to me, puffing out his chest and squaring up his shoulders. He had half a grin on his face, mainly for his buddies to see. They, too, were smiling in a tense sort of way. I stared straight into his eyes. At this point, I noticed at least half of the other patrons were looking at us.

“Look,” the fellow said after a beat, “we was just tellin’ your friend them gals over there think he’s good lookin’. I was tryin’ to get him to go talk to them. You know. Boost his morale. Make him feel good. Talk him up. All that.”

“You leave my employee, and my other customers alone. Got it? You and your buddies wanna drink here? You keep to yourselves,” I said. I turned and headed back to the bar, refusing to give him a chance to respond. By the time I got to the bar, I noticed he was following me.

“What’s the big deal, friend? Just havin’ some fun. Your buddy didn’t seem to mind it,” he said.

I ignored him. As I tried to get back behind the bar, he put his hand on my shoulder. It was a tight grip. I spun around and swatted his hand away.

“That’s it. Get the fuck outta here,” I said.

“Whoa, now,” he said, putting his hands up, playing innocent for the rest of the bar. As long as he had an audience, he was king.

“You lay another hand on me and I swear to God,” I said, pointing a finger in his face. His friends started to walk towards me now, too. Everyone was watching.

“Everything alright, Lynn?” Colin asked me from down the bar.

“You bet, Colin. You need another beer?” I said, still looking into Riley’s eyes.

“Oh, it could wait, I suppose,” Colin said.

Riley was taller than me. More built, too. And his five buddies behind him didn't make things any more even. I stepped back behind the bar, and they closed in a little more. I heard nervous murmurs among the patrons throughout the place. Two of the ranch hands were headed for the door. The rest stayed to back up their fearless leader. I pulled a Louisville Slugger from behind the bar. It was tucked in next to the nice machine, to the left of the register. I held it up in both hands.

"Hey, Colin?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"You wanna dial up 911 for me?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, his voice saturated with concern.

"Riley, let's get outta here," said one of the ranch hands standing by the door.

"Yeah, man. C'mon," said the other.

"Get the fuck outta here, Rodney," I said. "Don't bother comin' back."

Riley looked around the joint, taking in all the eyes on him. Colin, held up a phone to show that he in fact had typed in the numbers 9-1-1, ready to hit 'dial.' After that, it wasn't long before Riley folded and lead his pack of cow punch dickwads out the front door. The energy in The Cabron quickly went back to normal. It had been a while since the bar had seen a rowdy night, but the regulars were clearly still familiar with that kind of atmosphere. I went back behind the bar and pulled three fresh drafts for Harry, Colin, and Stuart. I set them in front of the three of them.

"On the house. Thanks, Colin," I said.

Harry and Stuart grinned and clapped Colin on the back. I did my best to keep the positive energy going from before. John stayed in the back room for most of the night. He came out occasionally to check the tables, clear empties, or bring out a rack of clean glasses.

“Whattaya say, Johnny?” Harry said to him once as he came out. John didn’t respond. He acted as if there was no one else in the bar and went about his tasks. I knew the feeling and I found it hard to blame him for feeling that way.

For as lively as the night was, people filed out early. I suppose that kind of excitement drained their energy. It reminded them of how the place used to be in the eighties and nineties, and as a result that reminded them of how old they were, I suppose. Harry Colin, and Stuart were the last ones in the bar. They stayed behind talking me up and trash talking the ranch hands, no doubt hoping for another free round. When they got the message that the night was over, they filed out, saying goodnight. They told us to be safe and that they would see us tomorrow.

I locked the door behind them and went back to my phone. No notifications. That was fine. I switched the music over to John’s favorites: classic rock that dads blasted while they barbequed. I cashed out the register and locked the money in the safe with AC/DC’s “Thunder” as my soundtrack. By the time I was finished with my tasks, John came out of the back room with his bathroom washing gear on.

“John,” I said. He kept walking towards the bathroom. “John?” He stomped, now, as he went to the door. He pushed open the door and went inside. The door slammed shut behind him.

I walked out from behind the bar and went to the bathroom. I pushed the door open and found John right where I thought he would be: futilely scrubbing the piss color off of the bathroom walls.

“John,” I said.

He kept scrubbing. He was heaving and huffing as he went, putting his entire body into the effort. I honestly thought he was going to put a hole in the wall. The man weighed close to three hundred pounds and Lord knew he wasn’t always aware of how strong he was. I’d seen him move full beer kegs like they were made of balsa wood.

“John!”

He stopped and looked at me with murder in his eyes.

“Let me do this! I just...I just need to do this!”

“You can’t just do whatever the fuck you want, John! I’m—”

“You don’t get to treat me like this! You don’t get to treat me the way you did! You can’t! You can’t!”

“Dan put me in charge, goddammit,” I said. My attempts at keeping a sunny disposition withered and rotted away right on the floor in front of both of us. We were two children fighting over the rules set out by dad. It was like I was treating him like a lesser...something I never cared for when Dan did it.

“Fuck you, *Lake!* Fuck you! You don’t talk to me like that.”

I was even more frustrated at the fact that I wanted to laugh at him for calling me ‘Lake’ as a legitimate insult. It was emotionally and mentally draining, reasoning with John...in every way one could think of. I wanted so bad to lash out somehow.

“Grow up, John. Those stains have been there since before we were born.”

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! I hate it when you talk to me like that! I need to do this! I *need* to do this!”

I knew what he meant when he said that. I knew that he needed something for himself. Being vulnerable enough to admit that, though...being the person to show him I understood that, stand down, and let him carry out this task for himself...was something I couldn’t do. He was not on the same level as I was, and I was sick of sinking down to communicate with him. I didn’t know what to say, civilly, but I spoke anyway.

“Alright, you fucking retard,” I said. “Do whatever you gotta do. I’m goin’ for a smoke out front. Come get me when you’re done with this bullshit.” I didn’t wait for John to respond. I went back to the bar, grabbed the tequila, and poured myself a shot. I poured another after I downed the first in an attempt to move past what I had said to John. Silence filled the bathroom. I didn’t even hear him return to scrubbing.

I went out front and lit a smoke and looked up at the sky. It was such a deep, dark blue. It was like the night sky refused to get darker. The more I looked up, the more stars appeared. They hung from that massive ceiling, fat and bright. They seemed close enough to touch, yet miles away if one attempted to touch them. I took long drags from my smoke, hoping for something to cross my mind to distract me from what I had done to John. The only things that came to my mind were the following: my father living on a different planet as he sat on his patio refusing any human interaction or intimacy, Monica leaving this morning, the thought deep down I couldn't blame her for not wanting to spend time with a sun-dried college dropout who slept on his father's pullout couch, and the fact that Dan and Sophia (my real parents) were more than likely going to lose their own little girl. I thought about all the times John and I came over to watch westerns with her...how excited she got when I told her John Wayne shot scenes on Dad's property. Her eyes lit up when I told her that Dad and Grandad knew him.

"Can I meet him?" She asked me, as if she was asking for gifts from Santa Claus.

"He died before I was even born! I didn't even get to meet him!" I told her. She was genuinely disappointed.

"You know who's still alive, though?"

"Who?"

"Clint Eastwood. Maybe you'll meet him one day," I told her while we watched *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. She lay back in her hospital bed in her room, happy and content. Not all the thoughts running through my head were bad...but even the good ones left a trail of breadcrumbs back to the bad. I wished so badly for just one thing I could do to do away with it all...to free my mind of everything even just for a moment.

I heard the quick footsteps coming from my left, but the buzz I had caught kept my attention on the stars. A fist crashed into the left side of my head. I felt my right shoulder and the side of my head hit the sidewalk. My smoke rolled away from me, towards the gutter, ash and sparks scattered across the concrete. My first instinct was to get my cigarette back. As I reached

for it, I heard at least four different sets of boots knocking on the sidewalk, surrounding me.

There were a pair of busted square-tip boots planted over me, the tops of which were consumed by Wrangler jeans. They kicked my smoke away.

When the other sets of boots gathered around me, they preceded to kick the Jesus Christ living shit out of me. I covered my neck, guts, and groin as best I could. It felt like hours of boot tips and heels crashing into me and grunts of *faggot, pussy, fucking piece of shit*, and other simple, yet hateful remarks of the like in different variations. The most active I remember being, was reaching for my smoke throughout the beating. The glow of the lit end lay just out of reach.

Before long, the boots ran off down the street and I rolled on my back. There had to have been at least four men total laying into me.

My head throbbed intensely. It almost felt as if someone was still thumping on it. The lower ribs of my left side seized and begged me not to take too deep of breaths. A thick, wet thread of warm blood unraveled from a gash above my right eyebrow and cut my vision in half in my right eye. The wind was knocked out of me and my back was bruised all over. My legs were sore and cramped from being flexed solid through the entire attack. Before long, I tried sitting up. My ribs protested the entire process and I couldn't help but let out a yelp and a suppressed groan that would've been a scream in pain if I hadn't tried to put a lid on it. My smoke still sat on the sidewalk, glowing. I picked it up and took short pulls from it. The act of sitting up blurred my vision and left my head spinning. It was hard for me to take in my surroundings. I was thankful I was familiar with the area I was in, yet at least half of me felt as if I had no idea where I was. The side of my head puffed up, and my left jaw ached sharply. I wiped the blood from my eye and put a finger on the source of the bloodstream. The gash was set ablaze with the contact of my fingertips. I groaned again as I finished my cigarette.

There was a silent, echoing voice that told me to go inside and tell John. Go inside and tell John. Go inside and tell John. Go inside and call 911. Go to the goddamned hospital. That incantation was soon drowned out by the pounding in my head. A ringing in my left ear began to

develop as well, which left me entirely deaf to the voice of reason telling me to get help. The blood began to run into my right eye and down my face again.

It took a few different tries over a span of at least five minutes before I was able to talk myself into struggling through the pain in my ribs and back as I stood up. I was more vocally expressive as I stood in my busted ropers, teetering. My vision blurred and the dizziness set in. I planted a hand on the front of The Cabron and puked.

After a moment, I felt level enough to take a few steps and before long, I stumbled back inside. The lights from the inside blinded me and made the bells in my skull ring louder. My head throbbed more, and I put a hand on a table near me for stability. When my eyes adjusted to the lighting, I was able to make out John sitting at the bar, sipping a Budweiser domestic. He did a cartoon double take, complete with obscenely wide eyes with the second go around, when he saw me. Even with everything that was suddenly wrong with me, I didn't feel as if I was as bad as I looked, apparently. John looked at me like I stumbled out of a George A. Romero film.

"Holy fuck, Lynn," he said, rising from his stool, still wearing his absurd bathroom cleaning getup. John only stood there, his hands at his sides. I staggered towards the bar and sat at a stool a few spaces down from where John was sitting.

"Hey, man. You do me a favor?" I said, between heaving breaths.

"What happened, Lynn?"

"Just...please."

"Lynn."

"Please..."

"What do you need?"

"Get me a wet rag, that bottle of well vodka over there—"

"—Okay--," John said as he hustled around behind the bar.

"—if you could find a baggie—"

"—Gotcha—"

“—put some ice in it—”

“—Okay...” John said. He moved quickly, so quickly that he wasn’t given the time to process what was happening. I knew the feeling. He began huffing as he hustled, trying to collect himself as he scooped ice into a baggie, soaked a white rag in cold water, and went about the remainder of my requests. By the time he returned to me with everything I asked for, he was pink in the face, snot lowered from his nostrils, and a few tears ran down his face. No matter how much turmoil my appearance stirred in John, he did not waver in his tasks he carried out for me. I asked him to grab me one of those domestics and he did just that. He popped the top and set the ice cold bottle in front of me.

After he brought me everything I asked for, I splotted the rag in vodka and gently put it to the gash in my head. It felt like I was filling my skull with gasoline. It was icy, and it stung from within, pressing outward.

“Can you open your left eye?” John asked.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Your face. Over here,” he said, touching the left side of my face.

I pulled away as pain radiated through my skull in waves and I winced.

John wiped the tears and snot from his face with his sleeve.

I put the ice to the other side of my head.

“What happened?” John asked.

“Got the fuck beatin’ outta me. What’s it look like?” I asked.

John shrugged and dipped his head down, some. His tears had fogged the goggles and he lifted them above his eyes.

For a beat, we were looking into each other. I could feel him trying to pull something out of me and I wondered if he felt me trying to do the same to him. I looked straight ahead. John tilted his head and lean forward to get my attention. He did this a couple times before he gave up and looked ahead. I worked on trying to find a good rhythm of breathing that didn’t hurt so much.

After a moment, John spoke up.

“I don’t think you ever called me that before.”

“What?” I said.

“That word.”

I eased myself forward and rested my elbows on the bar. I knew what he meant. I was pretty sure he was right.

“You know my mom.”

“Yeah, Johnny. I know your mom.”

“She was sick. ‘Course you know that.”

“Yeah, Johnny. I know that.”

“She was in her hospital bed a lot towards the end. And she wanted me around to watch TV with her.”

He told this to me as if what he was talking about happened last night.

“She liked watching *Jeopardy*. I didn’t. She’d call out the answers to the questions...or whatever...it always seemed like they were speaking a different language on the show...but my mom always seemed to speak that language...anyway, *The Simpsons* would always come on right after. Two episodes. Then *King of the Hill* after that. If I sat through *Jeopardy*, my mom would sit through my shows with me. I sat in the big chair by her bed. My dad set it up there, but he never really sat with her long.”

I wanted to tell him that he’d told me all of this before. A few times, in fact. But too much of my energy was spent holding off the pain...keeping it from swallowing me.

“I always sat in that big chair. I never reclined it, though. My dad did whenever he would actually sit with her, but he would always fall asleep. I didn’t want to do that. So I sat up in that chair always.

“She wanted me to hug her. Wanted me to keep her company. It was hard to hug her with her in the bed and all. I told her that one time, and she said to climb in. Keep her company. Don’t let go

of her. That kind of stuff. And I would. Whenever she would ask...well, once or twice, I would do it on my own accord.”

“Yeah, I remember that. Remember the shiner you got when your dad pulled you off the bed, cussin’ at you,” I said. My face grew hot at the mention of his dad. Always did.

“He didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“Yeah.”

“He didn’t, Lynn, and that’s not the point of this.”

“Okay.”

“It ain’t, Lynn.”

“Then get on with it, would you?”

“It was like...well...it was like. It was like if I did—hold her, I mean—if I did that, then she wouldn’t go anywhere,” John said.

Tears rolled down his cheek and met under his chin before dropping off onto the bar. I looked at him for a moment, then looked straight ahead again. I had never seen John cry like that. If he was in tears, he was usually too worked up to string together this many words and be coherent. I’d heard him talk about most of what he was talking about now; it was always at random or so it would seem. He only discussed it on his own terms.

“And you’re right, Lynn, my dad got real mad when I would climb into mom’s bed. I would get into trouble, no matter how much my mom tried to tell him. She tried. He told me I was gonna kill my mom if I kept it up. He told me that she would die because of what I was doing to her. I just wanted to keep her right where she was. With me,” he continued.

I nodded my head.

“I’m not a retard,” John said.

I looked at him. He looked forward.

“I know,” I said.

“I’m not.”

“You’re right. You are absolutely right.”

“But...I don’t know how to keep ‘em. You know? I don’t. They all just leave eventually and there’s nothing I can do to keep ‘em.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t move.

“Me neither, man.”

We sat in silence and the dim lights in the bar poked at the bruises that were developing inside of my skull. I closed my eyes tight and my left eye, nearly swollen shut, lit up in pain. I groaned.

“You sure you’re okay, Lynn?”

“You bet.”

“You look like absolute shit,” I said.

John was done crying.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Did you fight back at all?”

“Nah.”

“Did you even throw a punch?”

“This isn’t some kind of *High Noon* one man army bullshit.”

“Hell no, I guess not. You don’t exactly look like Gary Cooper right now.”

I laughed. John smiled.

I thought about Mom. I thought about her singing in the kitchen. Dad sitting at the table, watching her, smiling with wet, half-closed, bloodshot eyes. She made porkchops. Garlic mashed potatoes. Rolled her own biscuits. Dad liked applesauce with his porkchops. Mom and I never understood that. We teased him. I know that wasn’t the last time I saw Mom, but it’s the last thing I remember doing with her. I wondered if John had even one memory of he and his parents together while everyone shared a smile. I felt as if I could answer that question for myself, but I never thought I would know for sure.

There wasn't a soul out on the street. No one else seemed to witness my getting the shit beaten out of me, and if they did they were kind enough to stay out of it and not help me out in any way. I thought of what John and I had to go home to: distant, quite possibly inebriated, lonely fathers who didn't care too much for the company of their own sons. It was a clear reason why we were both still planted on the barstools, sitting in the semi-lit Cabron. After a beat, I got up from my stool. I had sat long enough to forget the fact that I was in pain all over and I assumed I could hop of the stool without issue.

My body was quickly consumed in a cocktail of both sharp and dull pain. My head throbbed violently, constricting my skull with every pump. I stood for a moment, gaining my balance. John grabbed my shoulder.

"Let's go," I said.

"What?"

"Let's go. Come with me." I walked slowly towards the front door, pulling my keys out of my pocket.

"Lynn, you can't drive."

"Get your ass on out here with me so I can lock up."

John took all of his cleaning gear off, dropping it on the floor, and hustled outside. After I locked up, I gave John the keys. He looked at me as if I were telling him to strangle a kitten.

"I can't drive. I can only drive a bicycle."

"This is just like riding a bicycle," I said, wincing at both the pain slithering through my body as well as the more than apparent cheesiness of the line I had just used on John. But he teed it up just perfectly for me.

"What are we doing?"

"We're goin' back to Dad's," I said, walking towards my truck parked at the curb.

"Lynn, that's a little ways away. Can't we do a shorter drive? I don't know what I'm doing."

“You know I was wrong, right?”

“What?”

“That word I called you earlier? I was wrong. Dead wrong. You can do this, Johnny.”

John had been following behind me frantically as I walked towards the truck. Now standing in the middle of the road, he looked at me, then westward down the main drag where the road turned into the old highway that would take us out to Dad’s. I opened the passenger door of my truck and eased myself in, groaning the whole way.

“Just head westward. It’s a straight shot until you have to turn off towards the ranch,” I said after rolling down the passenger window.

John took a long breath. His wide shoulders and his broad chest lifted and expanded as they filled with air. He let out the air twice as fast as he sucked it in and climbed in the truck.

“Seatbelts,” he said, putting his own on.

“Yessir.” I said.

“Okay...” John said to himself. He put the key in the ignition and started the truck.

“Put her in drive. See that red notch? Move that gearshift until that red notch is on the ‘D.’”

“I know how to put a car in gear.”

“See? You *do* know what you’re doin’. The fuck were you on about earlier, sayin’ you can’t drive?”

“Okay...” John said to himself again as he eased off the breaks and pulled away from the curb. He executed a U-turn quite well and before we knew it, we were headed westward and a steady, yet careful pace. I could feel consciousness escaping me some.

“I might shut my eyes for a moment. You got this?”

“I think so,” John said through a sigh.

“Feel free to turn on the radio if you want. Just keep the volume low.”

“I like it quiet if I need to drive.”

“Yessir,” I said, slowly adjusting my body. I suppressed groans as I tried to find a way to sit that hurt as little as possible. “Once you get outta town, go ahead and give her some gas. Don’t be afraid to open up.”

“Who’s driving? Me, or you?”

“Message received.”

“I’ll drive the way I drive.”

“Fair enough. Seems like you got everything under control.”

“Sometimes, when I was a kid, my dad would make me drive him to places around town when he couldn’t drive himself.”

“Well, I’m glad I can help you relive those lovely memories tonight. Wake me up when you get close to Dad’s.”

I didn’t here a response from him, but my eyes were already shut. Reality had all but completely slipped away. My head was filled with familiar voices that faded in and out of my mind. At one moment, they seemed to be conversing with each other, though none of the voices directly addressed one another or coherently responded to each other. One moment, Dan was speaking to me, but what he said made no sense. His tone, however, was familiar. It was a tone that implied that I should be doing something more with my life. The next voice was Mom’s, and I could make out what she was saying clearly: “I don’t know what’s keeping us here. I don’t know what makes us stay.” Mom had been gone a long time, and my memories of her are fleeting, for the most part. But I do remember the kind of language she’d use when she knew I was around, whether she was talking directly to me or not. I knew for a fact she had never uttered the words I was now hearing in her voice around me as I slipped away from this world. Dad’s voice came next. It was loud, lively. It was active and with out a note of the dismissal tone he had developed after Mom left: “Go get ‘me, Tom Horn!” He used to shout that at me when I was a kid when I’d run out into the brush with my pellet rifle. Next, came the voices of the ranch hands that did me in not an hour before John and I left for Dad’s: “That’s shit.” I imagined Riley and his

goons beating me to a pulp right there in the bar when he clearly wanted to. Along with that, came the barrage of insults and curses they peppered me with as they beat the sweet Jesus Holy Hell out of me. With this, came a wave of pain that started from my skull and washed over the rest of my body. As I rode out the spiking pain, I heard the voices of Gloria and John having their ever-growing debate over whether Clint Eastwood's Westerns were better or whether John Wayne's Westerns were. John's voice felt so real it sounded like it was coming from the cab of my truck and penetrating the state of delusion I found myself in.

I woke with a start.

"What? Why are you going on about that?" I said.

"Huh?"

"You...you just—give it a rest for a moment."

"What's going on?"

"You tell me."

"Wish I could."

Just keep the chattering down."

"I'm not talking, though."

I looked outside. Even in the darkness, I could see the desert landscape rolling by at a steady, yet slow pace. Saguaro, sage, and brittlebush scooted across my line of sight. I looked at the speedometer. John was keeping us moving at 35 miles an hour. The needle sat firmly on the notch between thirty and forty without wavering in either direction. I concluded John, in his experience driving, had never gone faster than that...nor had he ever had the need to. I decided not to comment on it. I figured we were a little under half-way to Dad's. I slipped back into a restless unconsciousness. Visions flashed through my head. I saw Gloria running in her backyard, Sophia watching from the porch. Dan stood in the dying grass that lay in patches behind his house. All of this washed away in an aching current of light and what I saw next was a vision of Mom holding me. I couldn't have been older than two. I wondered who I was seeing this image through and

asked myself it if was through Dad. It inspired me to reach out and hold the sight before me. I came back into consciousness, waking to find that I was in fact reaching outwards. My throat tightened and my eyelids swelled.

I felt John's eyes on me and the worry radiating from his mind. I acted as if I was stretching, reaching for the dashboard with my fingertips.

"Looks like we're about there, then," I said, clearing my throat, looking forward through the windshield. I nodded towards the dirt road turnoff we were approaching. John's eyes were still on me. "John," I said. I saw Dad's mailbox, the old fence post next to it with the address hand painted in white, vertically, the old wooden street sign Granddad made, and Dad refinished when I was a kid that said, 'BIG JAKE DRIVE.' "John," I said again, with more immediate concern in my voice, "eyes on the road, man, we're here!"

"I know! I know what I'm doing," John said, snapping his head forward again. Without letting off the gas or pressing on the brakes even a little, he cranked the steering wheel to the left. The side of my head thumped into the passenger door window; my shoulder pressed against the door. I didn't have time to react to the pain that stung my skull and electrified my neck and shoulders as I saw us head straight for the mailbox and the fencepost. I dug my feet into the floorboards and braced my hands on the dash. "Johnny," I yelled.

John smashed his foot on the brake pedal as my truck left the pavement and skidded across the opening of the dirt road.

By the time we stopped, the mailbox and the fencepost were nowhere to be seen. I got out of the truck as John sat frozen behind the wheel, panicked. I slowly bent down to look under the truck. The mailbox and fencepost were laid flat on the ground. The fencepost was all but shattered and the mailbox was crushed like a beer can, countless days' worth of mail was scattered in the dust. I stood up quickly and my head went light. I heard John put the idling truck in park. He hopped out and rushed around the front of the truck.

"You were distracting me!" he said.

“John,” I said.

“You looked like you were having some kind of fit.”

“John.”

“I couldn’t focus.”

“Hey.”

“What the hell were you doing?” John shouted, his hands in the air, palms facing the stars.

Dude,” I said, walking towards him. John was huffing. He balled his fists and knocked them against his thighs. He then puts his hands on the top of his head and pulled on his hair.

“John,” I said.

“What?” he shouted. In the glow of the headlights, I saw tears welling in his eyes.

“You see me freaking out, man? It’s all good. You hurt?”

John, taking deep breaths, shook his head.

“Good. That makes one of us.”

John’s huffing broke into laughter. It sounded like a laughter he didn’t want to give up but once it was out, there was no taking it back. I took it a step further and worked up my best impression of The Duke, which wasn’t much.

“Now buck up, pilgrim,” I said. “Stand up straight. Get your butt back behind that wheel and ride straight and true.”

John laughed, knowing full well he did a far better John Wayne impression than I ever could.

“And if I see ya shed another tear, I’ll shoot ya,” I added. He seemed to appreciate my attempt at the voice.

We climbed back into the truck, John still giggling.

“What character was that *supposed* to be?” John asked.

“No idea. Something between Rooster and McLintock.”

“I was actually thinking that.”

John backed the truck up, put it back in drive, and drove us steadily down the dirt road toward Dad’s, leaving the mailbox and fencepost behind.

The smell of cow shit filled the cab immediately. It was quite noticeable at the beginning of the dirt road, but by the time John parked the car in front of the house, the air was thick with it. It created a lining in my sinuses and filled my skull. It created a blanket over the throbbing in my head, which dulled the intensity of it, which was helpful. I only wished it didn’t fill my entire being with the stink of shit.

“What are we doing? Gonna watch a movie?” John asked as we got out of the truck. I heard the cows groaning at each other around back.

“Keep your voice down,” I said, walking around the side of the house.

“All the movies are at Dan and Sophia’s, so we can’t do that. I think they’re still in Gloria’s room.”

“Shh,” I said. John followed me.

“Does your dad know we’re here? Is it okay that I’m here?” John whispered.

“Who gives a shit? Wanna do something fun?”

“Shouldn’t you go lay down or something? Put some ice on your face?”

“Just follow me.”

We got to the back yard. To the right, the barn sat with its big doors wide open. I heard Waylon grunt inside. Prince Duke was hitched to a post out in front of the barn, still saddled. I looked to my left at the back patio. Dad was in his usual spot, his head dipped down, chin resting on his chest. His steady breathing slowly lifted and lowered his head. His arms were crossed, hands tucked into his armpits. He still wore his big Stetson.

The cows stirred, leaning against the fencing of the corral. The ones on the outskirts of the herd grew anxious the closer we got. To the left was the corral's big gate, facing eastwards. John stood next to me and we looked over the cattle. They grew more and more anxious. The moonlight and stars casted a ghostly light on us all and even in with my vision limited by the night, I could see the cows covered in their own feces and caked with mud.

"Get on over by the gate," I told John, pointing at the eastern end of the corral.

"The hell are we doing?"

"Just get to the gate. Keep your hand on the latch. Don't do nothin' else 'til I say so."

I walked to the western end of the corral before John could protest. Without even having to turn my head to watch John, I knew he was walking cautiously to the gate. When we were both in position, I slowly climbed over the fence, ignoring the protest of my aching body. The cows near me became more and more vocal and moved away from me as I climbed into the corral, surrendering what little free space was left.

"John," I said in a shouted whisper.

"Yeah," he responded in a louder whisper.

"Pull the latch. Open her up."

"What?"

"You heard me, goddammit."

"What about your dad?"

"What about him? Pull the latch," I said, "open her up."

Reluctantly, John did just that. I stood, peeking over the cows' backs, watching him. The cows closest to him barely waited. As soon as the gate moved, they were pushing on it. After a few seconds, John had to hustle out of the way as the cows pressed out of the corral. The ones closest to me were confused, unsure of what was happening. The cows farthest from me began to let out moans...different from the ones they made when they were locked up. These sounds suggested a feeling of relief. I shooed away the cows closest to me, pushing some...smacking

others on the ass. Before long, they got the message and followed their comrades that were closer to the gate. Before long, the cows had all poured out of the corral and rushed through the yard. The shit and mud sucked down the heels of my boots. I struggled to pull them free and in all of the excitement I fell on all fours.

“Thank God,” I said. “Jesus Johnson.”

I looked over to the back patio to find Dad wide awake now and worked up into a panic. He hustled in a stiff, bow-legged motion towards the corral. His cows were scattering across the clearing in the backyard in every direction. They knocked into each other and lowed with confusion as they did so.

“What in all hell!” He screamed.

John watched, wide eyed, as the cows worked themselves into a frenzy, confused and irritated. Eventually, they all agreed on a direction and ran towards the pasture, shoving each other all the way.

“Did you see that? Did you *see* that?” John shouted, pointing at the cows rushing off behind him.

I worked towards pulling myself back up to my feet but went lightheaded as I tried to regain my balance. I was tired of being upright.

COOL WATER

By the time her ninth birthday came around, Roxanne concluded that she needed to have friends. Not make friends. Have them. She had tried making friends of people at school. She weirded them out. Girls thought she wasn't girly enough, because she spent most of her class time drawing rather vivid images of monsters that only existed in the realm of her imagination. These monsters were usually fighting each other, eating each other, or attacking and eating other humans. She often made sounds she imagined the monsters would make under her breath as she drew. Boys didn't like her, either, as she scared them. Was she too boyish for the boys? That was the safest conclusion. It didn't bother her. Truly, it didn't. What bothered her was that she couldn't find someone who did want to spend time with her, doing what she wanted to do. It wasn't a matter of trying to get them to like her. It was a matter of finding a true friend.

She spent most of her childhood thumbing through her father's sketchbooks. She found sketches of dead people, or at least that's the conclusion she came to. The first few sketches were rough, but that's what death was, she guessed. They lay on the ground in strange positions. There was nothing beautiful about the sketches. As she thumbed through her father's sketchbook, the corpses took on more of a rotten quality. The more she thumbed through the pages, she noticed the detail of the corpses develop more and more: skin falling off the face, noses rotten away...leaving the stout bone exposed in the center of the face, a missing eye giving way to the black chasm of the skull, the other eye lazy, rotten, and wild, looking directly at her. The lips curled back to show chattering teeth and an excessive skeleton smile. The corpse made a hunched, limp-like shuffle towards her on the page, one hand (half bone and half flesh) reaching for her. She wanted to reach out and touch that hand. She wanted something that she could create, but something more than a drawing on a page. Something like that could never be a friend she could take everywhere...to go on adventures. Therefore, it was important to find something real

she could make into something else. She wanted a friend. A perfect friend. Roxanne wanted to find a body to find such perfection.

No, bodies at funerals didn't count. Naked, cold, clean corpses on sterile metal tables and tags on their toes was not what she wanted. She wanted a twisted body in mangled clothes, holes fraying the sleeves of the jacket, face-down in a ravine. Leaves and forest droppings tangled in its hair. Like it was sleeping in an awkward, or even embarrassing, position. That would be ideal.

A couple of days before her birthday, she wandered into the woods behind her father's house and found a dog laying on a bed of pine needles. It was leaned against the base of a young ponderosa. She didn't know what kind of dog it was, but it was about half her size. Great big floppy ears. Its eyes were covered by thin, fleshy, hairless slits. She approached with caution, but the dog didn't move. If it was aware of her presence, it didn't show it.

Asleep, she thought. She called out, whistling and clicking her tongue. It lay still. She stood over it, now, and she saw its ribs pushing up against the skin. There was no collar around its neck but in its stead a rope was tied. The other end of the rope was fastened to the base of the tree, giving the dog less than a foot of slack. She squatted down and worked at freeing it. Its head flopped as if there were no bones in its neck. The eyes still shut. The more she moved it, the more it smelled like beef forgotten in the back of the fridge, or under a car seat.

Her father barked her name from the back porch of their house and into the woods. She heard his sharp, sturdy voice come in waves through the trees. Roxanne held the dog by the scruff; its head rocked backwards, big floppy ears reaching back and slapping its shoulder blades. She looked back and squinted through the trees to see if her dad had a line of sight on her.

A ways northeast of her father's house, a small creek ran. The wild grass around the creek was lush and green compared to the grass that lined the floor of the woods. The dead brown and tans of winter still clung to the ground surrounding the pine trees, but spring was alive and

sprouting colors along the creek. She liked to sit at the running water's edge with her shoes off, her feet in the cold winter runoff. The cool water washed away pieces of her and rubbed in new life. She knew this is where she needed to take her new friend, but the water would have to meet the puppy later.

That day, her father called her name again and again and the sound bounced off of rocks and stumps, the creek carried it downstream back home. She tied the dog to a tree by the water and ran home, chasing her father's voice as the sun tucked itself behind the hills to the west.

The following evening, she ignored her father's calls and waded into the creek with her new friend. And something wonderful happened. She washed away the pain in the puppy's bones. It limbered up. The wet, matted fur felt warm, even in the icy touch of the creek. Roxanne rubbed the dog's sides as she fought through short, rapid breaths. The water, up to her waist, numbed everything below. The current lifted the dog's paws, so they bobbed at the surface. They floated and tickled her abdomen. She chuckled.

"Look at you go," she whispered. The dog's left eye popped open and looked right up at her. A dark, empty, wet eye. She sucked in a deep gulp of air and shuddered. A wide grin stretched tight across her face. Roxanne stared deep into the eye, deaf to anything around her but the sound of the creek's current. She wanted to crawl into the dog's eye and curl up in its skull.

Before long, her father was upon her, stomping through the water and grabbing her shoulder. The bruising went straight to her bone. His other hand grabbed the scruff of the dog. He separated the two of them and shoved Roxanne to the bank. He screamed, horrified, questioning her. Her mouth was open, and she hoped for an explanation to crawl out but any that she had lay dormant inside. Her father held the dog by the hind legs in one hand. The limp dog flopped this way and that, its ears stretching towards the ground, forelegs reaching past its bobbing head. She wanted to tell her father that he was hurting it, but she knew how ridiculous it would sound. How was she supposed to justify this kind of new friend? He stretched his hands out, almost as if he

was presenting the puppy to her. He was not, though. She knew that. He wanted her to see it. Not have it. He wanted her to understand what she had done. But what had she done? Who had she hurt? What could she say that made sense to her father in this moment?

He turned and pitched the dog far into the wild grass on the other side of the creek. She thought about how bad that hurt her friend, then tried to get to her feet and hustle her way back home before he got to her and dragged her back.

Her father was an incredible cartoonist. She watched him sketch, outline, and ink comic book projects through heavy summer evenings. Cool air drifted from the creek, through the trees and into their living room. He sat on the shag carpet, with his legs crossed, at the coffee table. His work was scattered across the tabletop: sketches, designs, scripts, and panels. He explained to Roxanne when she was younger that one person usually did the writing, one person did the sketches, and one person did the outlining and the inking. Sometimes the artists split the writing tasks if there were only two people on the project.

“It’s not coloring,” he said. It was important to him that she understood that. “It’s called inking. If you want to color, then take your crayons and scribble on scrap paper.”

But with “ATOMIC WARRIOR,” his writer sent him the scripts, the dialogue, and the story boards, and he did all of the art himself. “Tramps like us,” her dad said. He always brought this up whenever it was something they had to do for themselves. Others had folks to get things done for them. Roxanne and her father got things done themselves.

When she turned ten, her father gave Roxanne her own sketchbook, her own set of pencils, and markers. She lay on the couch and scribbled away in her sketchbook on summer evenings while her father assembled panels for the latest issue of “ATOMIC WARRIOR.” The comic recently passed two hundred issues.

She filled the pages of her sketchbook with beasts. Creatures that seemed to only half-exist. Hybrids. Abominations. Half this animal and half that animal. Half animal, and half human.

Half human, and half something conjured from her imagination. A stretch of pages contained sketches of her dog that she kept when she was younger. The first several drawings of the dog were full of color. Trotting around, tail wagging, tongue hanging out. Others showed the dog prancing through the creek with Roxanne, splashing. As the pages progressed, the drawings of the dog grew more and more gruesome. Each drawing was more graphic than the previous. The puppy lost more life with each drawing. Upon flipping the pages, one would see the puppy rot away more and more. It shrunk, wrinkled, and crumpled into a ball of dried, rotten flesh. The eyes were sunken black dots, the lips shriveled and peeled back from its teeth. Matted fur stretched tight across rotten bones.

Her father looked through them, one day, his eyebrows crashing into each other above his nose. The pages of the sketchbook reflected off his coke-bottle glasses. His mouth shrunk, lips nearly puckered.

“No,” he said as he flipped through the remaining pages. “You gotta let this go. Leave that stuff alone. It’s all in the past.”

He tore the pages out, crumpled them up, and walked out onto the back deck. He turned on the barbeque, placed her drawings on the grill, and closed the lid. Thick white smoke billowed from the barbecue and drifted towards the woods as her father walked back inside and sat down at the coffee table to pour over his sketches. The branches of the ponderosas beyond the backyard swayed in the wind, reaching for the smoke. Roxanne’s guts felt hollow and brittle as she watched small flakes of ash flutter upwards. It was near impossible to think of a way to show him her vision of the perfect friend...how much better things would be with the perfect friend.

At the end of the summer, he went through her sketchbook again and found dialogue matching sketches of reptile humanoids of some sort. Most of them were bipeds in space suits, holding ray guns and terrorizing humans. There were rather vivid drawings of reptiles feasting on people, blood dripping from their chins. The corners of her father’s lips made the slightest curl

upwards. Aside from her drawings of the dog, her father rarely missed an opportunity to praise her artistic abilities.

“Almost eleven and already outshining the ol’ man,” he said, gently knocking his knuckles on her shoulder. He meant it, too. Roxanne knew she was talented.

Through the following fall, winter, and spring she developed storyboards, built outlines, worked on sketches, characters, and catalogued it all in a massive three-ring binder. By the time she was out of school for the year, she presented it to her father, proposing they make it a summer project of theirs to bring her ideas to life. His eyes, magnified through thick lenses, grew wet. He nodded and hugged his daughter. Three nights a week that summer, her father put time aside to work on “LIZARD PEOPLE FROM SATURN!” with her, as long as her chores were done.

She sat at the creek with her pant legs rolled up to her shins, her feet in the water. She leaned back with the heels of her hands planted in the soft, wet ground. Roxanne looked across the creek into the wild grass. The sun fell behind the trees, stretching fragmented rays of light through the pine needles that sat in contrast against the sky. The mosquitos had started to come out, and with them the swallows. The tiny birds chattered and swooped low over the creek, picking off the bugs. Above them, a dozen bats or so flew in a cluster of chaos, taking care of the insects that ventured above the water’s surface.

The creek was so cold, it felt as if there was nothing below her ankles and she loved it. Looking into the wild grass always made her think of her dog...her lost friend. She thought about how she went in search for it when her father let her off a long restriction for playing with it in the first place. After thoroughly searching through the grass, it was nowhere to be found. Roxanne thought she would be heartbroken if she couldn’t find the dog but the sense of freedom after two weeks of being locked in her room dulled the pain of letting go of her pet. When she came to the end of her punishment, she seemed to want something more than a dog for a companion.

The sound of the trickling water gave her peace of mind.

Now, sitting at the creek, she wondered what the creek could offer her. She lifted her feet out of the current and pulled them back. Squatting on her heels, she looked into the water. Her distorted reflection, a shimmering mirage of her face. It smiled up at her. She rolled up the sleeves of her flannel shirt and looked down at the purple and blue bruises, the fresh ones. The older ones faded into a stale yellow around the edges, the blue in the middle faded to a grey, then white. Sometimes, it took a while for her father to forgive her wrongdoing. He needed to work on “moving on,” he always told her. But instead, he made her pay for his shortcomings.

Her fingernails were nibbled down to raw stumps. Roxanne’s hands shook as she looked them over. She plunged them into the water and scrubbed them. She clawed at the mud at the bottom of the creek and slapped it onto her hands and her forearms and scrubbed it into her skin. She rubbed it in until her skin grew pink and raw. She scrubbed it into her knuckles, and into her palms, then stood and held her arms up to the final rays of the sun. The mud dried on her, from her fingertips to her elbows.

Roxanne squatted back over the creek and plunged her arms in. She sat still and watched the current pull away the mud in swirling clouds. When she took her hands out of the water, she swore upon everything she held sacred...her skin was soft, pale, and unmarked.

In the middle of the week, that summer, she and her father sat on the shag carpet, legs crisscrossed, at the coffee table. The sliding door to the back deck was open, letting in the muffled rumbles and thick, heavy air of a thunderstorm. The smell of lightning was laced with the subtle breeze coming in. She sketched out panels and passed them off to her father, who cleaned them up and worked on tracing. When she finished sketching out the panels, she moved on to dialogue and narration. She filled in narrative boxes and speech bubbles and watched the project develop a pulse. When they found a good meeting point, they converged and worked on inking together.

This became their ritual.

Only after Roxanne was done with her chores, to her father's liking.

The more progress they made on the project, the more it started to look like an actual, quality comic. The storyline needed a lot of work, still. The arc in general was pretty well-constructed, but the nuts and bolts of the piece needed attention. That's what her father called it: "nuts and bolts."

She couldn't wait, because soon they would work on the cover art together. She had already begun to sketch it out. An iguana-looking biped in a 1950s B-movie style space suit, holding a ray gun in one hand and a damsel in distress in the other. Its mouth was open in a predatory grin, baring its razor-sharp teeth and a long, narrow, slithering tongue hung out. Yellow eyes with wide black slits in their centers. She imagined the dinosaur-like screech the Lizard People made. In the background were more of them, in space suits, resembling all different kinds of reptiles, chasing and shooting at humans with their ray guns. At the base of the cover, a crowd of humans ran in terror.

She noticed the lines in the carpet from the vacuum before he did. He was quite immersed in their work that night. Half the nights her father worked on "LIZARD PEOPLE FROM SATURN!" with her, it was quite clear he wished he were working on one of his other projects. Or perhaps he simply wanted to sit on the back deck with a beer and listen to the choir of frogs ring along the creek. Whatever reason it was that made him so invested in their work tonight, she was thankful for it. It was so nice to have one hundred percent of his attention on his free time, working on something like this together. It also distracted him from the lines in the carpet. What made it worse was the fact that she was starting to think his dedication to their project that night was a result of his satisfaction with the results of her diligent housework.

She swore she got all of the tracks out before her father got home earlier. After vacuuming, she always got the tracks out. Her father said they were an eyesore. He couldn't even look at them. It made his jaw lock shut. He'd close his eyes tight. His fists would ball up.

It was to the left of her, to her father's right. His eyes were focused on a stretch of panels, the colors from the scene he was working on reflected off his glasses.

A glass of water, she thought. She would get up, like she wanted some water. She would make sure to walk over the track on her way to and from the kitchen and drag her foot across it as she did so. Certainly, that would take care of the track or at least make it far less noticeable. Perhaps if it weren't so glaringly obvious, it wouldn't be as much of an issue when he discovered it.

As she began to rise to her feet, her father got up first and said, "I need to use the john."

She was quite sure he discovered the tracks right away. He was already looking downward, speaking to her. As he turned, his vision had to have dragged directly across the transgression. What was for certain was he was upon her quickly. He was nearly quiet. She got to her feet and moved around the coffee table, trying to keep it between her and her father. He grabbed the coffee table at one end and flung it to the side. The pages of "LIZARD PEOPLE FROM SATURN" fluttered through the air and scattered across the carpet. The shove came next, the plaster on the wall she stumbled backwards into cracked. It gave in on impact. The back of her head bounced off and the room tilted. Her father stood on the other side, his hands covering his mouth. His eyes wide.

The slider leading to the back deck was directly to her right. She spun and leapt out. She ran and ran and ran through the woods. Her father's voice, his barking of her name did not follow. Her name did not bounce off rocks or stumps this time, as she made her way to the woods. The creek did not whisper, "Roxanne" as it trickled along. Everything was absolutely silent. She was even deaf to thunder and numb to the occasional heavy raindrop. The swallows didn't chatter, the squirrels in the trees didn't chuckle, the bugs didn't screech through the night. The frogs lay mute along the water. She ran until she found the creek and fell in, face-first.

Her father could really make her hate him. The lashing out was almost preferred to how he was able to disarm her when she was upset with him. She wanted to just be allowed her frustration. She was entitled to it. Instead, he would confront her, his head bowed and black rings from tears and exhaustion outlined his eyes. Instead of being given permission to express her anger, Roxanne would listen silently as he explained why what he did was so wrong and how he shouldn't ever treat her that way no matter what and that he was going to work on being better. He was going to be better about "not doing that anymore."

What really felt poisonous to her was how she would go out of her way to make him feel better. Every time. She would go to him, hug him, rub his shoulders. Tell him everything was okay. She loved him. Most of that was true. She did love him, but everything was not okay. Of course it wasn't. His visit to her room two nights after he shoved her into the living room wall was no different.

She woke to a weight pressing down on her comforter in the middle of the night. Her right leg was pinned below his weight on the blankets and she had to squirm free. She sat up and saw her father sitting at the foot of her bed, his elbows planted on his knees and his head in his palms. The muscles of his upper back tensed under his white t-shirt. His shoulders shuddered and a shaking moan came out from deep within him. She turned on the lamp on her side table. He let it all out. Gave himself time to blubber. She sat there and took long, calculated breathes. She hid her hands under the covers and balled them into tight fists. He was going to be better about "not doing that anymore," she predicted the words coming from his mouth.

After he had run through his usual lines, they sat without speaking. Her father sniffled and wiped away tears. He took deep breaths and grunted, trying to bring himself together. When he figured she wasn't going to say anything, he broke down weeping again. His hands fell on his lap and his legs gave in. He slid down off the bed and fell on the carpet, his back leaned against the side of the bed. He covered his eyes with his hand and sobbed. "I'm such a piece of shit," he said, "You shouldn't be treated this way. And you're so damn smart. So. So talented. Just. It's

amazing what you're capable of. You're so talented." he took a shaky breath, "There's no excuse."

She had never seen her father get this bad. He was insistent. His unrelenting weeping came over her like a blitzkrieg. In these moments, he usually approached her in a sheepish manner, his head bowed. It was always clear that he had been crying, but he never did it in front of her until that night. He always seemed genuine, which also upset her. To sound so genuine with every apology was insulting. But he had already done what he did. When it came down to it, though, she found it hard to argue with such transparency. Guilt crawled over her and sunk into her skin. She knew what would make him feel better. She had something she could show him, and she knew it would make him feel so much better.

She crawled out of bed and sat next to her father. Roxanne rolled up her sleeves and held her arms out in the dim lamp light.

"It's okay, Dad. Really," she said to him.

He lifted his head.

"Look," she said, holding out her arms, wrists facing up, "they're all gone. I've taken care of it. I washed them all away. I'm better. We're okay."

Her father quieted down and looked at his daughter's arms. His eyes squinted and his brow furrowed, bewildered. His chest shuddered and he wept again.

"We're okay," Roxanne repeated.

"Oh god," he said, "Oh god."

She woke to the smell of pancakes and the sound of Harry Belafonte from the stereo. Her father called it "good mood tunes." She never could make out the lyrics as Harry sang too fast, but the rhythm was irresistible. She came down the hallway and into the kitchen in time to see her father standing at the stove, his head bobbing and his shoulders shimmying to the beat as he lip-

synced the chorus. Roxanne entered the kitchen in time for her favorite part (and the only words she was able to remember in time), “Okay! I believe you!”

She walked over to the coffee pot, but she saw her father had already got a pot going for himself. The syrup was on the kitchen table, already warmed, the butter too...there was even a bowl of strawberries, blueberries, and chopped cantaloupe. Her father always told her “fruit was like candy for breakfast.”

Roxanne moved to the stove and stood beside her father as he put his entire body into the music, applying a silly face to his lip-syncing routine. She could not help it. She laughed. Her father responded with a smile and intensified his act to an extreme level of silliness. She bit down on her lips and fought back more laughter as she examined the pancakes. One was poured into the shape of an ‘R’ and the other was a cartoon face of a puppy dog, which looked like it belonged in a Felix the Cat cartoon.

After breakfast, they worked on the cover image for “LIZARD PEOPLE FROM SATURN.” Roxanne looked over the complete image as the ink from the markers dried. The skin of the Lizard People were all different shades of a very sharp green. The neon orange of their space suits, the flashing white of their sharp teeth, the fleshy pink of their tongues...and their gums, and the blood dripping from their chins...bright and dull at the same time. Her father didn’t want her to spend so much time on the blood. “They’ll get the message,” he told her. When her father’s focus was on other aspects of the project, she would add hints of brown, and even some pink.

Pastel rays of purple and salmon filled the background, along with rising columns of smoke and piles of rubble.

In moments alone, especially after forgiving her father, Roxanne would find herself in her room, or in the woods when she was allowed to go out. She would pace in tight circles with her fists balled so tight, her elbows would ache and her forearms would cramp up. Her jaw would

tighten so hard; muffled cracks in her jaws, deep below her teeth, would push throughout her skull.

The reality was, she could not forgive her father. It was harder to feed herself such justifications. Despite the episode in her room. Her father weeping and begging her forgiveness. Despite her not just telling him but showing him that everything was okay, it was not. It was not okay. A desire for vengeance roused in her more and more with every tight circle she paced.

After her pancake breakfast with her father, after she had paced in the woods with the sound of the creek running close by, she decided to start visiting the neighborhood on the far end of the woods.

The following week was full of days where Roxanne's father allowed her to do whatever she wanted. The next several summer days were filled with little to no restrictions. She was relieved of any housework, and she more or less made her own curfew. Her father spent more time on "ATOMIC WARRIOR" and running errands a parent is left to run.

Roxanne walked through the woods towards the neighborhood that sat between the acres of land behind her father's house and the school she went to. She wandered around the feet of the ponderosas, stepped over stumps and logs, jumped over dips in the ground only after looking into them first. It was still a dream of hers, in the back of her head, to find something dead, laying lame and twisted. Laying in a ditch, under a log with pine needles in their hair.

She wanted a new friend, and she was going to find one She was going to find a better friend than her puppy and her father was going to meet it and he would know everything was okay. What was wrong with having a friend?

When Roxanne got to the edge of the woods, she came across an old, paved road that ran east-west. Across the road were a series of backyards that were sectioned off by chain link fences about as tall as her. She walked along the fence line, trying to go unseen. In the middle of a weekday, even in the summer, this proved to be a rather easy task. Parents had jobs to go to, kids

had summer camps and playdates. Roxanne drifted throughout the neighborhood like a ghost, moving from one backyard to another. With each backyard she crept through, she tried to find signs of a friend: dog houses, food or water bowls, chew toys scattered across the grass. More often than not, the dog houses meant big dogs. Too big to be Roxanne's friend. The smaller dogs were kept inside to bark and jump at her with a sliding glass door between them.

In one particular backyard in the belly of the neighborhood, it hosted a wide range of small structures that sheltered all sorts of animals. There was a small coop in the back corner of the yard surrounded by a perimeter of chicken wire fencing. Three chickens were roosting outside of the coop. She heard a few more clucking inside. She learned quickly that they were standoffish, if not flat out mean. Adjacent to the chicken coop was a small pen and shelter built low to the ground. She got on all fours in order to see into the pen and found four bunnies crawling around inside.

Roxanne rose to her feet and made her way towards the house the backyard was attached to. The lights within were off and there were no signs of activity inside. She looked into the windows, cupping her hands around her eyes to better see inside. When she was convinced no one was home, she returned to the pen where the bunnies were held.

She took her new friend to the creek. They both needed it. The bunny didn't seem to know how to be friendly. Not like her puppy was. It scratched and clawed at Roxanne when she was finally able to get to it and that was not how Roxanne liked to play. She wanted to swim. She wanted to wash her new friend. She wanted to scrub away the marks the bunny left on her.

Standing in the numbing water, holding the bunny outward, her fingers wrapped around its soft belly, she squatted into the creek, taking long, calculated breaths as she sunk into the freezing current. The bunny stirred and grew more excitable as Roxanne plunged it below the surface.

Her new friend felt much heavier. Soaking wet and limp. She made the bunny wait outside on the deck while she vacuumed the living room carpet. She moved the furniture, the coffee table, and vacuumed underneath. When she was finished, she put the furniture back where it belonged and smoothed out any tracks the vacuum left behind. Her father was out running errands, but she wanted him to meet her friend. Surprising him would be key, but she knew it would be best if she was not around for such a surprise. She looked at the crack in the drywall next to the slider.

Roxanne went out to the back deck, picked the bunny up, and brought it into the living room, where she laid it on its side on the freshly vacuumed floor. Its wet, matted fur began to soak the carpet around where it lay. She opened the eye of the bunny that was facing up and stared into the black of it. She smiled, closed the bunny's eye, and left the house through the back door and made her way into the woods.

She stood ankle-deep in the creek. The icy water numbed her feet so when she pulled them out, they immediately felt warm. It was a wonderful sensation. As soon as she gained feeling back in her foot, she plunged it back in the water and pulled out the other. The drastic change in temperature radiated deep through her body. It twisted up her legs, swam through her shoulders, and rested in the backs of her eyeballs. It allowed her to see. Her skin, glowing in the midday sun, was untouched. She dragged her fingernails across the insides of her forearms. Red streaks began to glow along the tracks her nails laid. She could barely feel it. Then, the red scratch marks faded back to an untouched pale. She looked up at the sun for a moment before it totally blinded her. She closed her eyes tight without telling them to. Roxanne then looked downstream, blinking the sun spots out of her vision. The shade from the woods helped her sight return. Old ponderosas stood along the crooked path of the creek and more filled the shallow valley where her father's house lay.

In all, there weren't very many of them. They were simply massive, and they were spread out enough to where it didn't feel crowded. Much younger, scrawnier, fir trees lightly filled in the gaps between the ponderosas. The young trees had thin jagged trunks with rubbery branches full of thick, short, green needles. The floor of the woods was a carpet of all different kinds of pine droppings. Bluestem grass poked through it, along with bright western blue flax that had lazy posture. The pedals looked sad and they dipped low to the ground. Plucking them would be putting them out of their misery.

Her tennis shoes and her socks sat square on the bank of the creek behind her. She looked down at her arms again.

Why couldn't her father see?

She came back home in the late afternoon, through the sliding door. To her left, there was a crack and indentation in the drywall where her father had shoved her. Looking at it now, it was hard to associate her herself with the damage to the wall. It didn't feel as if it were her her had father shoved...practically threw, really. There were no bruises, no scars, no hurting bones, no headaches, no concussed brain to show it ever happened. That hole in the drywall and the vacuum tracks in the carpet were the only bits of proof to the entire incident. They seemed like fixable problems. She wanted to find her father and tell him how easy it would be to fix everything.

The bunny no longer lay in the living room. Roxanne wondered if her father had met her new friend Perhaps they were off getting along somewhere? There was no way the bunny got up and went off on its own way, right?

She only entertained these speculations for a moment before reality laid low over her. How could she think her father would get along with her new friend? How could it be that the bunny got up and walked away? Her new friend knew better than that, didn't it? Her father had to have met her new friend and he had probably done something to it. With it? It was foolish to think for one second the two of them would get along. She deserved punishment for leaving her

friend where she did, but it was not fair for him to take it out on her friend. Regardless of what had happened to her new friend, surely the blame would ultimately fall on her and she would suffer for it.

She was wrong, after all. She knew how she should vacuum. Her father had told her many times before. She was lazy. She didn't care to fix her mistakes. As a result, the carpet looked tacky. Each visible track from the vacuum cleaner was an absolute eyesore. A direct result of her failure. She was grown up enough to realize and accept that. It was up to her, and only her, to fix everything. It would be smart to cook for him too, she thought. A nice gesture. A good addition to the start of an apology.

It was time for her to start taking more responsibilities around the house, anyway. She lived under his roof. He provided for her. Helped her with her artwork. Gave a lot of his free time to her. It wasn't fair that he had to deal with her laziness.

It was strange for her father to not be in the living room on an evening like this. Working on "ATOMIC WARRIOR" with *Jeopardy!* playing on the television in the background or music coming from the stereo. He never stayed in the back of the house too long. Only to shower, sleep, or get dressed. Was he terrified? What was there to be scared of? She washed it all away. She rose from the freezing water, untouched. Nothing hurt anymore. There was no mark on her skin to remind her of the past. It was not healthy for one to carry around someone else's mistakes their whole lives, or one's own, for that matter. She passed the spare bedroom on her right, which had a window that looked out over the front yard. She poked her head in the room to look out the window. Her father's car was in the driveway.

A sudden urge heated inside of her. If it was foolish to think about her father and her new friend getting along, then it was foolish to remain within the walls of the house. It was most important to seek safety. Sanctuary? That was a word she'd heard her father use, or perhaps it

was on the television. It seemed applicable for what she was thinking of. She needed to get to a safe spot and the creek was the only place she could think of. The icy water to numb the pain and wash it away. Ponderosas towering. Watching over her. Soft mud cushioning her as she sits on the bank. The spindly branches of the pines swatting away the final rays of sunlight at the comforting moment where the final waves of the days heat surrendered to darkness and the cold air of the running water. The frogs and insects in the tallgrass screaming, signaling dinner time for them, the fish, the swallows, the bats. Away from the house.

Away from the house.

She thought about the last time she saw her dog and felt so helpless as her father did everything in his power to put an end to that chapter of her life. He didn't understand what that dog did for her. The stillness, the gentleness of it. It gave her life, which radiated through her body. There was such a rush in trying to find life within the creature. She wanted to share it and the rabbit was the perfect opportunity to do just that.

How wrong she was. Roxanne knew she was going to pay, but instead of facing that...instead of wondering what wall her father was going to put her into...instead of wondering what he was going to bounce her head off of this time...instead of wondering if she would survive it...she took to the woods.

She went for the creek.

She weaved through the pines, following a trail she had begun to form between her father's house and the spot at the creek she liked to visit. Roxanne could hear the water in the creek running, and the screaming frogs and insects only got louder as she ran. As her spot at the creek drew near, she could see the swallows swooping low over the water. Bats flying in a haunting, fluid spiral up above.

Roxanne stopped dead in her tracks, as if she had come across a steep drop-off.

Her father was in the creek. He had to have been on his knees because the water was nearly up to his waist, his back turned to her. The chorus of natural sounds in the woods, creek-side, overwhelmed her, but her father must've heard her approach. He turned to look at her. He seemed overcome with peace. A faint smile. A harmless glint in his eyes. She could see it behind his glasses. Her father shuffled on his knees until he was fully turned in the water to face Roxanne. In his hands was her new friend. The fat, heavy bunny was limp. Like it had liquid bones. It was soaking wet. Matted fur. Eyes closed. Fleshy slits.

“Hey,” her father said.

She looked him over. His pants were soaked, and his dress shirt was well on its way down the same path. He hadn't blinked since she came upon him.

“Who's this?” he asked.

She felt sweat form and fall from under her arms, down her sides, and along the backs of her legs. The sweat felt cold compared to the heat her skin generated.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Who's this little guy?” he asked.

“I...met him a couple days ago,” she said. She closed her eyes. Awaited the flaming tirade that was sure to come.

“He's kinda cute, right?”

“Yeah,” she said, opening her eyes. Her father was in the same position. On his knees. In the creek. Holding the bunny.

“What's his name?”

“I don't know yet?”

“What’s that mean?”

“I guess...I just never got around to knowing his name yet.”

“Well come on then!” he said.

Roxanne looked at him.

“Get in here! Join us,” he said. “Let’s you and I find out what his name is.”

His smile grew some.

“You’re not mad?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking about you told me about this place. And...after meeting your new friend, I...I asked if he could take me here,” he said. When Roxanne was still cautious of the entire scene, he added “I really want you to show me what you’ve been talking about.”

Her father was smiling. The same kind of smile he had when he discovered her talent for drawing. He shuffled on his knees until he was turned back around, facing away from her.

Roxanne smiled. Before she knew it, she was taking her shoes and socks off. She was overcome with warmth, which triggered a sense of relief. The cool of the water meant nothing to her. Her skin welcomed the freezing bite of the creek like a familiar friend. The sky was a pallet of purples and blues as the sun began to set. Stars were shining randomly above. She stopped to watch for a moment. The more she stared, the more stars appeared. As more and more stars appeared, more and more of the blue in the sky faded into darkness.

“Hey,” her father said.

Roxanne looked at her father. She took in his gentle smile.

“Can you show me how it works?” he asked.

She nodded.

VITA

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EDUCATION

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Taught an introductory level course on Literature to undergraduates at EWU during my studies while pursuing my MFA.

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Worked as a Responder, helping students of all different backgrounds and disciplines with any part of the writing process.

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Between my last year as an undergraduate and my fourth quarter as an MFA student at EWU, I worked as part of the editing team for the fiction department of Willow Springs reading assigned stories from the slush pile, attending regular packet meetings as well as galley meetings.
