

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

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These stories are an attempt to give a distinct literary voice to the people and places of rural Southern Indiana. They also strive to deal with certain elements indigenous to that region, some of which can be described generally as the tension between modernization and tradition, family and marriage as a source of both support and strife, and the ever-present sense of struggle and loss that comes from living in a region of economic depression and blue-collar sensibility. That said, they also represent the unique ability of the Midwesterner to face and overcome the most difficult of circumstances, even at high costs. Put differently, they seek to explore (though not answer) the questions of how and why people choose to press forward each day when tomorrow is not expected to improve upon yesterday.

On the craft level, these stories are an effort to explore such themes through the prism of discrete points of view. No single context can capture the varied experience of any place or people fully, and because of this, these stories, while standing alone as narratives, point to a larger, more complex method of establishing the voice mentioned above. It is the author's hope that they will eventually be collected in a larger volume of stories – some linked narratively, others thematically – that will offer one perspective on this underrepresented but compelling region of rural America.

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Patoka: Four Stories of Southern Indiana

by
Christopher M. Drew

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Christopher M. Drew, Author

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Patoka: Four Stories of Southern Indiana

Introduction

When I arrived at Oregon State University in the fall of 2005, I knew next to nothing about myself as a writer. I had been teaching high school for five years and only knew that I wanted to give writing a final serious try before settling into a career. In my time here I have learned a great deal about the craft of writing, though turning a critical eye to my own work is still a challenge. Generally, I'm just too close to it. I often think of Monet painting his water lilies from inches away while trying to imagine the entire twenty-foot canvas from the other side of the room. In place of the genius he enjoyed, however, I have often had to rely on blind luck – a poor substitute.

That said, one area in which I have a modicum of awareness is my writing process. Ideas tend to collect in my mind like insects drawn to a bug zapper. There's an initial flash and crackle of inspiration, and then the residue hangs on the wires of my subconscious. The lesser ideas blow away at the first stiff breeze, while others become lodged. If an idea sticks around long enough, and if I find myself working through its possibilities while walking to campus or fixing dinner, I commit to writing it down. Like most writers, I keep a notebook, but I can't honestly say that I've turned to it for the majority of my work. It's more a place to file away names and images that might find a home in my writing. The stories themselves, the ones I start and finish, tend to never dislodge from my mind after that first light show. I'm not convinced that this is the right approach, only that it is mine at the moment. Each story in this collection began in just this way, though each certainly had different growing pains.

My normal experience once I've sat down to write a story is to solve as many problems as possible the first time through. I've heard that Kurt Vonnegut would revise a single typed page until it was perfect and only then move on. While I'm considerably more open to revision, I confess a solidarity with the ideas behind such a practice. I don't tend to leave loose threads or confusing passages in my drafts for very long, almost always going back to revise them before soldiering on to the end, and I know that while this has helped me generate sturdy first drafts, it also has its drawbacks. One that comes to mind quickly is that my stories are sometimes tightened up prematurely. By the time I've got a finished draft, the structure of my stories are often too exact for me to go back and meddle without needing to scrap it all and start over, or at least it seems that way.

Another aspect of my writing process worth noting is my tendency toward digression, useful and otherwise. My understanding is that such a tendency is somewhat unusual (and perhaps distracting) in short fiction, which is what I've written during my time here, but is often well-suited to the less rigid pace of a novel. Regardless of format, however, the question still must be asked – why do I chase so many rabbits instead of staying focused on leaner, more muscular stories? I think there are two answers. The first, I'll steal from Andre Dubus. In his essay "The Habit of Writing," he tells of how he wrote "A Father's Story." He says that for the first thirteen pages, his character just talked. There was no action to speak of, but simply Luke Ripley speaking to the reader. Why does this work? On one hand it seems to go against the rule of "get your actors acting" that Janet Burroway espouses and that I have taught. But my understanding of Dubus's commentary is that if you are immersing the reader in the world of the character, if you are filling in every nook and cranny of their personality and their surroundings, and if you're doing it *well*, then readers will go wherever you take them from there. The key to my understanding here is the word "well," because in my own writing I have struggled to keep my digression focused and meaningful to the story. At my best, I think it works. A good deal of "Patoka" is made up of just this type of writing. The river passages and grandpa passages are two that come to mind. Most of both could probably be cut without crippling the plot, but their loss would lessen the story in important ways. To stretch a

metaphor, charcoal and watercolor are both legitimate ways of painting, but not every artist prefers both. I see myself working in the fiction version of watercolors and don't quite have the skill or inclination to relate my ideas through only their barest, most revealing lines. Of course, it doesn't always work for me. My first draft of "Miller's Field" had over fifteen pages of introduction and exposition before arriving at the brush fire. I liked the writing, but it was just too long. My current draft cuts that material to less than ten pages, and I'm conflicted because I feel like it was too much and not enough all at once. There is something too familiar about the opening scenes, but they also feel important for establishing resonance at the end of the story. The best I can offer at the moment is my current compromise.

The second reason I tend toward digression is related more to theme. And it's probably time to address the elephant in the middle of the room. Everything I write about takes place in a very particular corner of Southern Indiana. I'm not even sure I'd know how to write about any other place at this point. Sometimes, as in "Ribbon and Thread," the references are pretty oblique, but usually, place is a huge component of my stories. I don't think most readers are terribly familiar with the regional qualities of this area, so I spend a good deal of time trying to paint in the background for them. The coal mines of "Miller's Field," the sick river of "Patoka," and the sweatshirted old women of "Cased" all seem particular to my own experiences in Indiana, at least if I've portrayed them accurately.

And since we've broached the topic of theme, let's spend some time on it. While I have a distaste for obvious theme in stories, and have never (to my knowledge) written a story with one in mind, I also understand that any good story must use thematic elements to support and sometimes decode the narrative. One that I see occurring time and again in my stories is the role of modern technology and industrialization on small-town America. In "Miller's Field," the action of the story is set in motion by the great steel machines that have woven their way into the county's fabric. The fact that no one questions the danger of such operations seems significant to me, as does the fact that the father's complicity in the mine's destructive mechanics leads directly to his emotional devastation. The key for me here is that he was only doing his job. It wasn't really even a decision, just terrible fortune.

In “Patoka” this element is even more pronounced. For the purpose of clarity, I should mention that this piece was originally intended as the final story in a linked collection that began with “Miller’s Field,” and in fact the protagonist of that story is the grandfather in this one. “Patoka” shows the culminating effect of the mines on Pike County. The only reliable livelihood for its citizens has disappeared and left behind decay and pollution. Obviously, this also serves the purpose of mirroring Sam’s personal development, but it exists as its own lament on the waste to which this region has been subjected.

Both “Cased” and “Ribbon and Thread” deal more circumspectly and generically with the theme of technological advancement, but I do still see it in each of them. In one sense, the emotional center of “Cased” comes on page 55 in the moment when Meredith recognizes her hatred for “soothing pains caused by the chemicals they kept shooting into him.” It is not simply the fact that her husband will die that is hurting her, but that she is being forced to watch it happen in slow motion, thanks to the “hope” offered by modern cancer treatment. She resents the women at bingo for their simplicity, but she has her own limitations when facing the modern world.

The character of Amy in “Ribbon and Thread” is perhaps more obviously compromised by the struggle between daily life and the advances that promise to make it easier. She is a typical Indiana girl who has never needed to know about things such as genetic tests, and when they intrude on the life she has imagined for herself, she isn’t quite capable of dealing with them. It is not her child’s disease that unravels her, but rather her knowledge and subsequent dread of it.

Other themes in my writing are more general, but still present. I don’t believe in the idea of the “common man,” but I am willing to accept that I tend to write about people who might be labeled as such. For me, the true drama of the human race is not played out by the powerful, but by the farmer, the miner, the father, and the brother. No characters in my stories (that I’m aware of) would be noticed if you passed them on the street. They are not quite living Thoreau’s life of “quiet desperation” – I see too much hope in them for that – but they certainly know that their place in the world will never reach the higher end of the scale. In a very real sense, they are the human counterparts of the land they live on. It is rugged, sometimes beautiful, and never

quite given the chance to exist naturally. Its corruption, in the most basic sense, is their corruption.

While I have never written what I would call a religious story, faith is also an inescapable aspect of the settings I choose. I believe it comes up, at least in passing, at some point in every story I've written, and it absolutely should, because they all take place in a region where it is always present. However, I have no interest in writing stories where faith is the central topic. To me, it defines these characters around their edges, in the same way height or weight or clothing might. Even my most subtle references to the Christianity of the region are intentional. On page 66, when Amy thinks of the flowers in her dusty Bible at home, it's meant to underscore the challenge to her faith, both formally and personally. Likewise, when the father in "Miller's Field" loses his faith, it is meant to symbolize a loss that, for these people, may be even more profound than the loss of his own son.

Other themes poke their heads up from time to time in my stories. Certainly, I have an interest in the dynamics of family, especially fathers, sons, and brothers. (Though "Cased" and "Ribbon and Thread" were written partially from a realization early on that I was avoiding female characters.) How ordinary people deal with loss is also of interest to me. In fact, in looking over my stories, I can see so many things lost – faith, family, environment, hope, identity – and yet I believe that, were the stories to play out indefinitely, each loss would be overcome, because that's what these people do, however hollow their sense of victory. They are survivors. If I've managed to communicate that effectively, then I've succeeded on at least one level.

A different way of looking at these themes, and my writing in general, is to ask what it is about my writing, or writing in general, that drives me. Why do I do it? The easy answer is that I don't know, and I think in some ways it's the most honest. But there are certainly snippets of reasons that I come across from time to time, and there are also things that I know *don't* drive me. As I've mentioned already, I'm driven to create on the page a world that I know well, and I don't change much that isn't necessary. That isn't to say that I'm translating actual occurrences into quasi-fiction. In fact, none of my plots have much of a basis in fact, but they do have a basis in a

very particular reality. I have no interest in the absurd or the allegorical. I choose to write things that feel completely real to me, and that I hope feel the same to readers.

I also confess that I don't write out of a particular love of language, though I have huge admiration for those who do. I just don't feel that my command on the sentence and word level is one of my strengths. Certainly, there have been moments in workshop where passages have been praised, but I've always felt like a bit of a cheat when that happens, because it's not something I was aware of until it was pointed out. I love words, and agonizing over a search for the perfect one, but I don't consider my writing to be lyrical, or to possess much artifice. For me, it's always been a means to an end, and that end is usually character. As much as anything, I suppose it's my characters that drive me, because they are shades and permutations of people, or types of people, that have stuck with me for years and are important to me. I feel as much obligation to them as I do to any reader I might have.

Another topic worth discussing, though also one I'm not terribly comfortable with, is influences on my writing. This MFA is my first English degree, and because of that, I feel that I'm not terribly well-read. Certainly, as an undergraduate theatre major, I was exposed to many of the great dramatic works of the western canon, but while they might have taught me a great deal about dialogue and general dramatic structure, beyond that they are a fundamentally different art form than fiction. My personal reading skews a little more "classic" than the typical MFA, and while I don't attempt to emulate the style of these writers (or often even their subject matter), I am often inspired by the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Conrad, Hardy, and others. The shift to newer voices has been slow for me, but since enrolling at OSU and learning more about how to view my own authorial voice and interests, I have found new influences including Tobias Wolff, Carolyn Chute, John Yount, and William Maxwell. In each of these cases, I don't find myself trying emulate the author's style, though I greatly admire it, but rather trying to make some of the moves he or she makes thematically and narratively. Yount and Maxwell specifically have helped me gain focus in my own writing. Through reading Maxwell's *So Long See You Tomorrow*, which masterfully illustrates the personal and social complications that arise from the Midwestern sensibility, and Yount's *Hardcastle*, which shows the

miners of rural Kentucky as destitute beyond the need for pretense, I have come to recognize my own work as drawing from both of these wells. In fact, at the risk of overgeneralizing, I'd say most of my work (and certainly what appears in my thesis) falls squarely between these two novels, both geographically and thematically. Overall, what all of these writers have in common (for me, at least), and where they differ from many other "great authors" I've read, is that when I read them I not only appreciate their work, but desperately want to return to my own.

Finally, it seems useful to discuss the evolution of this thesis. My original concept, as I hinted earlier, was a series of five linked stories, mainly dealing with three generations of men living in Pike County, Indiana. I suppose the concept fit somewhere between *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Spoon River Anthology*, at least in its original scope. Over time, however, it seemed that I was trimming and reshaping some of these stories in ways that were disingenuous to their own dramatic structure. For example, in one story currently lying fallow, my main character made decisions that he would never make were they not needed to advance the plot of a separate story. Additionally, during the first quarter of my second year at OSU, I found myself hitting a bit of a stride on smaller, simpler stories. "Cased" and "Ribbon and Thread" are two of these, and it seemed a shame to remove them from consideration simply because they didn't fit a concept that was beginning to show its seams anyway. Ultimately, I included these two stories along with the first and last stories of my original five-story arc, "Miller's Field" and "Patoka." Eventually, I would like to fold the linked stories in with a number of stand-alone stories to constitute a single volume of short fiction dealing with the people of Southern Indiana.

Miller's Field

The thick, salty smell of frying bacon filled the house as my dad came tromping down the stairs. He was a tall man, thin in that Great Depression sort of way, with deep-set blue eyes. His face was leather from long days at the mine, and he always smelled like Old Spice. With the week's *Winslow Dispatch* tucked under his arm, he pulled a wicker-seated chair from the head of the table and sat with his left leg jutting out. A broken support beam in '39 had busted his knee and kept him from the war, but he looked over the paper every week to see if Hitler or Hirohito had gotten the drop on any Pike County boys. He mostly stayed above ground now, driving the dinkies back and forth to the tipple in Winslow.

My little brother Joe, seven years old, sat across the table in a pair of overalls, his face pink from washing up. He was trying noisily to balance his fork on the salt shaker. I was fourteen – old enough to be annoyed by it and young enough to wish I had thought of it first. Dad glanced over the edge of his paper, but said nothing as Mom brought a steaming bowl of pepper-flecked gravy to the table. She sat it next to a mound of biscuits and the bacon, then seated herself across from Dad.

“Who'd like to ask the blessing?” she said, looking around the table.

“Michael?”

I hated praying. Dad was better at it.

“Okay,” I said as we folded our hands. I waited for Dad’s go-ahead nod, then squeezed my eyes shut and began my usual thanks for the food. I wrapped it up and looked around the table, but Dad picked up where I left off.

“And Lord, please keep us all safely in thy hands as we go out to do thy work today. In thy son’s name we pray, amen,” he said.

“Amen,” Joe said.

I was glad that he had saved the prayer. Dad prayed in the King James style, something that I always held in awe but never had the guts to imitate. He picked up the plateful of bacon and dropped a half-dozen greasy strips on his plate.

“So what are you boys up to today?” Mom asked.

I told her that Andy and I might head to Gray Lake for a swim, or work on the fort we never quite got around to finishing. When Dad suggested we take Joe with us, I winced because I’d known it was coming. It always did. There were lots of reasons I didn’t want him along – he couldn’t swim, for one thing. He also tended to get in the way when we worked. He was too young to do much with a hammer besides smash his thumb, and when that happened, I had to run him all the way back to the house, screaming the whole way, so Mom could kiss it. I didn’t hate the kid, but I didn’t have much use for him, either.

“No, Dad,” I protested. “He’ll just whine about not having anything to do. Let him go help Grandpa at the store.”

My grandpa owned McGlasson’s Trading Post, about a mile down from us on the Scottsburg Road. Everyone spent their meager mine checks there.

“What do you say, Joe? Want to go help Grandpa stock the shelves?” Dad asked.

“Nope,” he said. “The store smells funny. I wanna go with Mikey.” I hated it when he called me that. It diminished me.

“But Dad—” I started. His eyes told me where it was going.

“Michael, you know I’ve got to work today, and your mother won’t be able to keep an eye on Joe and get any work done. Just take him with you,” he said, then glanced over the back page of the paper.

“Okay,” I said dully.

“Yes!” Joe started, but Dad turned to him.

“Listen a minute, Joe. If your brother comes back and tells me you’ve been pestering him and Andy, I’ll tan you good. Hear me?” This I liked. Dad rarely whipped either of us, but the threat was enough. If I had to take him along, at least he’d be afraid for a while.

“Yessir,” Joe said.

Usually, Mom defended Joe in situations like this, but I guess the thought of a free day to get her work done was too much to resist, because she didn’t say anything. We sat mostly in silence, broken by the occasional scrape of silverware, and by the time Dad had wiped the last bit of gravy from his beard and headed out the door with his lunch bucket, I was plotting to get rid of Joe.

The sun didn’t get all that high by September, and the day was coming off just barely warm enough for a swim. As I sat in the swing under the pin oak out front waiting for Andy, Joe pattered over toward me, kicking at acorns. The shafts of morning light steepened as they caught the countless specks of dust hovering in the air from weeks without rain, casting a golden shimmer. I could already hear the great machines lumbering over at the Number Eight mine where Dad worked. It was quieter then, before the highway came through, and sometimes you could catch sounds from miles away or go hours without hearing a car. Joe broke my contemplation by pelting me with acorns.

“Mikey!” he yelled. “Take cover! The Germans is after you!” He continued lobbing acorns in a high arc while making the whistling sound of incoming mortars. I’d played this game with him a hundred times, but I was still angry that he’d charged into my perfect day uninvited. I picked up one of the acorns and whizzed it straight back at him, striking him on the cheek. His howl was instant, and it brought Mom sailing out the front door in her billowing apron.

“What are you two doing out here?” she shouted. Her shoes kicked up dust behind her.

Joe, the classic victimized brother, reached up to her with his eyes spilling tears that ran onto his welted face.

“Mi-Mi-Mi-,” he started, taking great gasps of air between each syllable. “Mi-Mikey hit me with a acorn. Right here.” He gestured to the red spot on his cheek. Mom examined the wound then turned her stern face to me.

“Is that true, Michael?”

“He started throwing them first,” I said. “Was I supposed to let him keep winging them at me?”

Mom exhaled and her expression darkened momentarily, but then she softened a bit, kissed Joe on the cheek, and perched in the swing.

“What you’re supposed to do, Michael, is act like his older brother. What would you do if you found somebody else chucking acorns at your brother?”

I thought for a minute, as Joe snuffled himself dry. I’d been in this trap before, and I knew the answer. Once I’d found a great hulk of a kid named Bobby Morton picking on Joe, and I’d just about beaten him into the dirt. I wasn’t a rough kid, but when I saw Joe on the ground with Bobby laughing over him, a lever had been thrown in me. I got a good switching for that, but I always felt like Dad hadn’t really been upset.

“I’d probably beat the tar out of them,” I said.

“Well, I had better hope you wouldn’t,” Mom said. She hadn’t forgotten Bobby Morton either. “But you’d want to, that’s for sure. So why would you want to make your brother cry, if you wouldn’t want anybody else doing it?”

I never had an answer for this, so I just put my head down. “I don’t know.”

“No, I guess you don’t,” she said. “If your dad was here, he’d lay into both of you for acting foolish like this when I’ve got work to do. But I’m not going to do that, because I don’t have time. Now you apologize to each other.” If it had been Dad, I could’ve gotten away with a furtive ‘sorry,’ but Mom watched for such things. I looked at Joe, with his red eyes and the pink welt on his cheek. He sniffed again. I wasn’t sorry.

“Shake?” I put my hand out.

“S’aright, Mikey,” Joe said. “Sorry I threw ‘em at you.” He put his little hand in mine and we jerked them for effect.

“That’s more like it,” Mom said. “Now look, there’s Andy coming down the road. Stop all this foolishness and get out of here before I put all three of you to work beating rugs.” With that, she turned back to the house.

Andy Barrett was a good kid, tall and lanky, always a little sad, and he was my accomplice as we ambled down the dusty path through the woods to Gray Lake. Don’t let anyone fool you – fourteen-year-olds have a mean streak, and I’m not talking about mischief. They may grow up to be war heroes, and more often than not they’ll help you across the street with your groceries, but they’ll also hatch the vilest of plans, and I was working on a doozy that morning.

There was no way to get rid of Joe without taking him swimming with us, because I needed time to fill Andy in on my plan. When we got there, we went to the highwall on the north end because we knew Joe wouldn’t want to jump off it with us. It was a sheer drop of about thirty feet, the only high-dive we knew anything about and a rite of passage for boys worth their salt. While we jumped, Joe mostly waded in the shallows down the shore. After a few cannonballs, I swam up to a little outcropping of rock and waved Andy over to me.

“We’ve got to get rid of Joe. We’re not going to be able to do anything as long as he’s around,” I said.

“Yeah, I was pretty much thinking the same thing, but I don’t think your mom’s going to be too happy if we take him back to your house. She’ll just tell us to take him back out with us when we go.” Andy picked at a chunk of mud between his toes as he spoke.

“But that’s only if we go back with him.”

He gave me a cockeyed glance. “Come on, Mike, how’re you going to get Joe to go back home by himself? If you yell at him or something, your mom’s going to whip you when you get back.”

“Yeah, she would. But only if she thought I’d sent him back on purpose. If he went on his own, it wouldn’t be my fault, would it?”

He looked at me skeptically. As I leaned in to explain, the only sound was Joe’s feet splishing in the water down the shore as he cavorted with the minnows.

* * *

When we left Gray Lake, instead of taking the path through the spoils as I had planned at breakfast, we walked along the eastern edge of Miller's Field that bordered the woods. It was vast and golden in the September sun, with a dark stretch of trees on our left that rose and fell on the spoil banks that cascaded beneath them for miles until they flattened out into the west shore of the Patoka. The spoils were long stretches of parallel hills cut into the countryside years before by the first mining outfits that had pulled bituminous out of the ground there. Our house was on the northeastern corner of the field, and Number Eight was on the far south side about three miles away. The only break in the gently swaying grass was the dinky track that ran north from the mine, continued east of our house, and ended up at the tipple in Winslow. My dad drove that line every day – the job he'd gotten after smashing his knee. The dinkies were like locomotive engines, only half-sized, and it was always exciting to see my dad's face in the cabin window as it hurtled toward town.

The tracks were quiet as the three of us walked south along the tree line, a path I'd chosen because I knew when Joe lit out for home it was a straight shot across the field to our house and there was no way he could get lost.

Shortly after we broke out into the field, Andy heard something in the woods. He stopped and tilted his head to one side, then put his finger to his mouth. Joe and I stood for a moment, not noticing anything at all.

"You guys hear that?" he said.

"Nope," Joe said with concentration on his face.

"I don't hear anything," I said.

"Sounds like deer," Andy said. "I think I'm going to go have a look." Deer season came in November, and it made perfect sense for Andy to sniff around to see where they might be rutting.

"Fine," I said. "Whatever you want. Me and Joe are going ahead to the mine. Just catch up with us when you get done."

"We can wait on him, Mikey," Joe said. Andy glanced at him, then at me.

"No, Joe, I want to get over to the mine before lunch, so we can see the diggers running. Don't you want to see the diggers?" I asked.

“Okay, Andy, have fun with your deers!” Joe said, then turned and started walking toward Number Eight again. I flashed Andy a little two-fingered salute and followed my brother as Andy walked into the tree line and ambled up the first spoil.

The cool wind was starting to blow harder as Joe and I walked through the dying grass together, me hanging back a bit and Joe stomping through it like a tiny elephant. It came almost to his chest, but that just made it more exciting for him to be there. I was keeping an eye on the trees to the left, so I didn’t notice Joe stop up ahead and turn. I might’ve walked right over him if he hadn’t spoken.

“Hey, Mikey,” he said. I stopped and looked at him, not completely sure what he was up to. He often pestered me, but rarely spoke to me with intent.

“What, runt?”

He looked at me, his bottom lip working in and out. The starlings were screaming in the woods as the cool autumn sun lent its light, but not its warmth.

“I’m glad you let me come swimming with you guys. It was fun.”

Had he been thinking about it all morning?

“Hey, that’s okay.” I felt a twist of guilt in my stomach. “Now stop sniveling. It’s okay, really. I’m glad you got to come along.”

Those were the magic words. A smile cracked his face and he beamed at me with a missing front tooth.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell anybody.”

His grin widened, and for the first time I knew the reason Mom sat us down over and over and made us apologize to each other. *Let not the sun go down on your wrath*, Dad had said to us so many times, and it suddenly made a lot of sense.

At that moment, Andy came tearing down the spoils out of the trees.

“Hey guys! Gypsies!” he cried. “Gypsies in the woods! Mike! Joe! There are gypsies in the woods!”

I glanced back at Joe and saw a look of terror impossible in anyone older than ten. One that can only come from a mind that still believes in the dark things of the world. The one that is later replaced by worry. But Joe wasn’t worried. Joe was terrified. The gypsies that camped down by the river were harmless, but Mom and

Dad's dark tales of them kept Joe close to home and I had taken advantage of them. I took a step toward him to tell him it was okay, then stopped. I wanted to tell him it was a joke. That everything was fine and we could go watch the earth movers. Instead, I watched him creep away from the spoils as Andy tumbled to the ground next to me and sprang to his feet.

"Joe, there are Gypsies in the woods! Run on home and tell your Mom and stay there! Me and Mike are going to take a closer look!" he shouted, milking it.

Joe looked to me, waiting for my instructions.

"You better go," I said. He shot me one last glance and was off, running through the field like a jackrabbit. Andy watched him for several seconds then collapsed in a fit of laughter.

"Did you see the look on his face, Mike?" he yelped. "That was the funniest thing I've ever seen."

"It's not funny," I said, plopping down onto the ground.

"It was hysterical. He was like a scared coyote. He's probably home by now."

I picked at the brown Johnson grass wavering in front of me. "It wasn't funny, Andy. I know I told you to do it, but I shouldn't have, okay?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Let's just go get him."

"No way, pal. I just ran over a hundred spoil banks to get to you guys. I need to sit a bit," he said as he plopped down in the grass. I reached down to grab him by the arm and hoist him up, but I was frozen in place by the worst sound I could have imagined. Three shrill blasts on the shift whistle at Number Eight. One meant a shift change, two meant lunch time, but three was something you didn't hear very often.

The dinkies were an accepted part of the world we lived in at that time, but they weren't exactly safe. Any time you drive a coal-fired locomotive through a field of dry grass, fate is tempted. Hot ash could escape from the smokestack or embers from the furnace could be dumped while they're still smoldering. Even sparks from a sudden stop could set things alight if it was dry enough. A couple of times a year, the three blasts from Number Eight would signify that Miller's Field was burning. Those

blasts shut down the mine, and all the workers would head out to the field to fight the fire. It wasn't a perfect system, but it usually kept things under control. Some portion of the field was always recovering from a good scorching, but I'd never seen it get truly out of hand until that day. The summer had been dry, and the countryside was tinder, waiting for an excuse to come blazing to life.

The three whistles sent Andy and me speeding back to the house. It was at least a mile, maybe more, and as we ran we could see dark smoke rising south of us. The wind picked up the sparks and dashed them about the field the way a man might salt his food. Usually the fire was contained in a single area, but this was something else. I counted four separate blazes during our sprint home.

When I got to the house, Mom was standing in the backyard by the brooder, her apron whipping in the wind. She had one hand up to her forehead, repeatedly pulling a stray wisp of hair behind her ear as the wind blew it loose. When she saw us coming she rushed to meet us, but her face went cold before we reached her.

"Where's your brother?" she shouted as she ran.

I kept running, unsure what to say. I just hoped he was around somewhere, perhaps looking for Mom in the house. She met us in the edge of the grass and dropped to her knees, grabbing me roughly by the shoulders.

"Where's your brother, Michael? Where's Joseph?" I'd never seen her so starkly afraid.

"He should be around here somewhere," I said. "He took off running ahead of us." And it should have been true. He was lightning when he needed to be, and he'd left first. "Are you sure he's not in the house?" It was all I could think to ask.

"No, I just came from there," she said. The whistle was repeating, and the whisper of burning grass rose as it crept closer. The sun was going gray from smoke rolling into the sky. Digging her short nails into my arms, she pulled me closer. Her face was pure panic. "You were supposed to watch him, Michael."

"I know, Mom. I thought he was coming straight here." I was beginning to feel the same dread rising in my throat. He had to be around somewhere. I turned to Andy. "Go take a quick look around the house. Make sure he's not in the swing or

something. Look close, and hurry.” Andy took off in a streak. Mom renewed her grasp on my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

“When was the last time you saw him?” she asked.

“About ten minutes ago. We were over by the woods, about halfway to Number Eight. He took off running back to the house. I thought he’d be here—”

“Why was he running back without you?” she asked. I searched for an answer, but there was no way I could own up to my wretchedness. She gripped my arms tighter than I thought possible. “Michael, *why was he running away?*” I was close to tears under her glare, but before I could say anything, Andy came barreling back.

“I didn’t see him anywhere. Not on the swing, not on the porch. Nowhere.” He put his hands on his knees and panted. Mom stood, forgetting her interrogation as she tried to think things out. The smoke began scratching my nose and thickening to tears in my eyes. She stood and tucked her hair behind her ear again.

“Michael, we’ve got to find your brother. I’m hoping he’s at the mine – went there when he heard the whistles – but I don’t know. I need you to run over there and check. I’ll go out into the field and yell for him, but with the wind blowing like this, neither one of us needs to be out too far in it. This fire will change directions in a hurry. Make sure you run on the edge, down by the creek, and if it gets close, jump over on the other side, or right in the water if you have to, and get back here as fast as you can, you understand?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now get going.”

“Want me to go too?” Andy asked, his guilt mixing with adventure.

“Not on your life, Andrew Barrett. Your mom would kill me if you did. Besides, she’s probably looking for you. Get on home to her. Do me a favor, though. Stop by the store on your way and see if Joe’s there. He might’ve gone to see his grandpa. Whether he’s there or not, tell Dad what’s happened. Maybe he’ll have an idea what to do. Now get!” With that, she smacked him on the rear and he took off at a gallop. She turned back to me and said, “Go, Michael. And pray for your little brother. Pray as hard as you run!”

Twice told was enough for me. I took off like the devil and all his angels, trying to keep the creek in sight on my right. I don't remember much about that run, except that it got hard to breathe because of the smoke, but it was Joe I was running to find, and the wind rolled off my heels like water. I just couldn't figure out where he'd gone. But I prayed. I prayed to God and Jesus and would've moved on to any others I'd known. It was the simplest of all prayers – *Please let him be okay, please God* – but it drove me forward.

When I reached the mine, there was a flurry of activity. Grimy-faced miners running all about. Pickup trucks roaring out of the gate, full of men with buckets. I didn't know how anybody could make sense of such commotion, but everyone was moving with purpose. Jerry Young, a good friend of my dad's, was near the gate when I arrived, and when he saw me he grabbed me by my collar.

"What in the samhell are you doing here, Mike?" he shouted over the din. "Your dad will skin you if he finds out you're not at home. This is no place for you to be."

"Mom sent me," I said. "We can't find Joe."

"What do you mean, you can't find him?" Jerry asked.

"I don't know." My voice was about an octave higher than normal. "We were playing up by the woods, and he took off for home ahead of us, but when we got there, he wasn't around." I was breathing hard, but the sweat was turning to ice on my body. All I wanted was to see Joe. "Where's my dad?" Dad would know what to do.

"He took the dinky over to Winslow to fill it up at the water tower. Mike, you need to get inside the gate. It's not safe for you out here."

He was right, but it wasn't safe for Joe either, and for all I knew he was out in that field somewhere. I had never wanted to see my father so badly in my whole life. My mind just kept racing around the two of them. Joe and Dad. I needed them both. Without even consciously making the decision, I tore off into the field, now trying to keep the creek on my left.

"Michael, come back here!" Jerry shouted. "Get back here right now, dammit!" He might have sworn some more, but I was lost almost instantly in the noise of the fire and the men fighting it.

Years later I'd go to Korea, but that was the day I learned the look of men in a losing battle. That fire was going to best them, and they knew it.

There was only one place I could think of to go. Miller's Field was more or less flat, but on the western end it got hilly and there was a high point called Goose Hill where you could look out over everything from the houses at the north to the mine at the south. It was no straight shot to get there with all the tendrils of flame snaking their way around, and I wondered as I ran if Hell might not be a bit like this. Ash was mixing with the sweat on my face, stinging my eyes as it ran into them, painting me like an Indian in a Saturday matinee. Smoke seemed to be everywhere, and as I ran I saw all sorts of creatures trying to escape the rising inferno. Rabbits, squirrels, foxes. They all wanted out, and I wondered if they'd seen my brother.

I finally reached Goose Hill as the sun was starting its downward climb from noon, though it was a dark sun now, blood red in the smoke and shimmer of flame. There was no one else there, but as the wind picked up, the smoke cleared a bit and I looked out on the scene before me. It was a holocaust. In some places, the whole field was burning in a great mass. In others, there were corridors of fire, slowly expanding to choke off the alleys of grass and brush between them. I could see at some distance the mine gate with its explosion of bodies running this way and that. As I looked closer, I saw a single thread without flame running the length of the field. The dinky tracks. Squinting against the smoke and the rain of ash, I zeroed in on this small swath, in some places as narrow as the eye of a needle, and suddenly there he was, not that far away, but separated from me by a lake of fire. He was standing on the tracks at one of the narrowest points, where the grass grew so close on both sides that there was nowhere else to go. Flames swiped in toward him at the wind's pleasure, probably singeing his overalls. The dinky track was a lifeboat. He was safe, but needed to get to me.

"Joe!" I shouted with all the force I had in me. "Joseph!" He couldn't have been more than a couple hundred yards away, but the fire roared all around me. I screamed until I thought my throat was going to split open, and as I did, I watched Joe walk first one way and then the other, turning back and forth on the track as he tried

desperately to decide where he needed to go. What was he doing there? I could see that his narrow refuge opened into a little area of relative peace just a couple hundred feet to the south, but it was around a curve, and he couldn't see it. If I could just get him there, get him to see where it was safe, it was an open path all the way around and up the hill to me, but I had to get his attention. "Joe!" I shrieked, and still he didn't hear me. I started jumping up and down, flailing my arms like some sort of lunatic as I bellowed. He stood frozen, not knowing in his fear that the safest place to be was anywhere but there. He looked so small, and the whole world had turned to fire around him.

And then, in a horrible instant, my voice died and my whole body went cold. The smoke, the noise, it all seemed to slip beyond my comprehension as my senses locked up. My sight and my hearing telescoped to a single object, and I was paralyzed. The dinky, my dad's dinky, was barreling down the tracks from Winslow back to the mine, and Joe was standing between them. I felt like I was standing in molasses, and try as I might I could do nothing but watch the event unfolding before me. The dinky, speeding along the track; my brother, rooted in Hell's bottleneck; the open field just ahead of him, but in another world for all he knew; and me, too far away to get to either of them in time. Why hadn't I tried to go down and get him when I first saw him? Why had I wasted my time shouting? Too slowly, I began to find myself again.

"No," I said. A whisper. My mind was trying to turn over like a truck on a cold morning. "No." Louder this time. I tried to pull myself back into the moment, to reset my mental circuit breaker. "No!" I began to wave my arms and jump again, this time toward my dad, who I could see clearly in the engine of the dinky. He wore his red neckerchief up over his nose and mouth, and his face was grimy with sweat. His eyes were blue steel rimmed in red, and I had no doubt that he was pushing the limits of the engine to get the water back to the mine. The whole world snapped back into focus and doubled in speed as I found my voice. "No, Dad! Stop the engine! Joe's up there! *Stop!*" I shouted until my lungs ached, and finally, he saw me. He was about a quarter mile from Joe and steaming right toward him.

He looked at me as a man might look at a preacher walking into a bar. The expression on his face showed confusion, but all my thoughts at that moment revolved

around two words. “*Stop!*” I shouted, then flailed my arms toward the tracks ahead of him. “*Joe!*” I repeated these words about five times, and he finally realized what I was saying. Above the blaze, like a single trumpet in a symphony of discord, the squeal of brakes cut through the dark afternoon, and blackish water splashed out of the dinky’s cars. At the sound, I saw Joe straighten as he realized there was now only one way to go. He took off in a flash toward the open field ahead of him. I could see flames licking in on both sides of him as he ran the fiery gauntlet, and I knew the burns were unavoidable. But burns could be healed. There was just nowhere for him to go yet. The brush was grown up so tight on both sides of the track that I could only see him from the shoulders up, holding his arms to his face, trying to see any escape. “*Run Joe!*” I screamed. “*Goddammit you run!*” It was a foot race now. It looked like he would make it. All he had to do was get far enough to fit between the track and the fire. Roll down between them and stay safe until the dinky was past. Dad would come back for him after it stopped. It wasn’t much further at all. Another fifty yards and he was going to make it, I was sure of it.

Then came the moment when a person sees with absolute clarity the event that is about to happen, when no amount of hope or prayer or anything but the laws of physics is going to matter a damn. The dinky was too fast and Joe was too slow, and there was no other fact that made any difference. My stomach twisted to icicles inside of me, and I might have screamed. All I remember is my dad, framed in the window of that engine, his face twisted in a mask of pain that would define the word for the rest of my life; his whistle bellowing; his whole being groaning as he pulled the brake, every tendon in his body standing straight out; a howl escaping from his throat; and my kid brother, running as hard as his legs could possibly carry him, wide-eyed in terror. The crazed look of the animal that knows the chase is ending. I think he tried to jump away at the very end, realizing that the fire might be preferable to the locomotive, but by then it was too late.

The dinky struck Joe from behind, and the cowcatcher scooped him up and to his right, sending him sailing through the air. I need to believe that the impact killed him in that single heartbeat, because his little body flew in an arc and dropped into the

sea of fire like a stone dropped in a lake. He was just gone. I fell to the ground and didn't care whether I burned or not.

Sometimes I wish I had. I'd inhaled enough smoke to keep me bedridden for a couple of days, and most of what happened next still comes to me only in flashes. Jerry Young picking me up off the hill. My dad screaming at the mine gates, being held down by five or six other miners. My mom collapsing by the charred remains of the brooder as Dad came to her with me in his arms. The tiny coffin that sat closed in our living room for two days. The frost that met us the morning of the funeral. Dad's flat expression as he bore Joe's pall. The promise of the minister that God would wipe away all tears from our eyes, that there would be no more death.

I suppose we healed in time. I eventually had two more siblings, a brother and a sister. Mom and Dad overcame as best they could, though I don't recall ever seeing them carelessly happy again. They were separated from the world by grief, and though they could see through it, they couldn't escape it. I waited, but Mom never asked again why Joe had been running from me; Andy and I never discussed it, and I never told anyone. I guess I didn't see any reason to. My brother died, and nobody really wanted the details.

Dad worked security at the mine after that, even though it was a pay cut, because he couldn't stand the thought of climbing back into the dinky. And there were his prayers. He had once been able to pierce me with them as keenly as a blade, but not anymore, and never again. He still said them, and still made sure I said them too, but the power behind them, the palaver with the Almighty that had given me so much comfort, was gone, replaced by a hard sense of duty. He never said a cross word to God as far as I knew, but most of his faith had burned away in that field, and faith is not easily resown.

In the years since, I've thought of Joe often, sometimes of the day in September, and sometimes of other, better days. Building blanket forts in the living room, hunting Germans in the spoils, or climbing the pin oak in the backyard. I remember climbing that tree with Joe long ago and being proud of him for making it all the way to the top with me. Mom and Dad had been proud, too, though Mom had

worried about Joe. *He'll break an arm*, she said. *No, Clara, he'll do fine*, my dad told her as she wrung her callused hands. *Besides, Michael's up there with him. Just look at him climb.*

Patoka

Sam had lived within a mile of the river for twenty-one years without ever wondering what its name meant. Even though the word had crept around the county – into the township’s name, onto the engines of the fire department, onto the faded billboard on the front of the bait shop – he had never questioned its origin. It was a part of his vocabulary in the way his Chicano friends at Camp Echo still clung to the words of their Mexican ancestors. But he’d seen the last of Echo.

As Sam and his dad drove across the bridge, Sam caught a glimpse through the gnarled oaks of the brown water swirling below, then looked over at his father. Sam had never seen him in a tie, except at Mom’s funeral. The collar was too tight, pinching his neck. He’d probably never buttoned the top button before today. As the trees gave way to the first houses of Winslow, Sam wondered how he could tell his dad, full of pride over his son’s years of military service, that he had about a month to turn himself in before MPs showed up and led him away with zip-ties around his wrists. Maybe it was a good thing his grandpa was dead. He dreaded disappointing his dad, but the thought of Grandpa Mike seeing him labeled a deserter turned his guts to ice.

At funeral homes over the years, Sam had noted how a dead face that echoed its living form was a point of conversation and even congratulation. But if the face became too waxy, too saggy, or just too dead, its aspect was mentioned only in

whispers near the ashcan. Either way, Sam found such talk pointless, like commenting on the elegance of the casket. So much time spent on something that would be dropped in the ground. His interest now was in his grandpa's hands – powdered, but not made up. Even in their posed mutual grasp they offered more to see than the carefully rouged face.

A scar on the meat between the thumb and forefinger showed where a rabbit had bitten him one day while he was trying to show Sam how to take it out of a trap. So much blood had flowed from the wound. Grandpa laughed all the way back to the house just to keep Sam from panicking while the wound dripped on the rusty floorboard of the truck. The same hands had held Sam as a newborn, switched him when he misbehaved, pushed him in the tire swing. He wrapped his own fingers around them now, but they were cold. Fingernails filed perfectly instead of chewed jaggedly to the quick; no wedding band, but a pale line of skin that hadn't seen daylight in fifty-two years.

Sam's recent experience of death had nothing to do with quietly piped-in hymns or visitation registers. It was elemental and brutal. Three days ago he had been sitting in his tent outside of Ghazni, noshing on an MRE with a wet towel on his neck when Robbie got through on the sat-phone. Now, measured in miles, it was half a world away. He was home.

Grandma sat at the front of the receiving line, conversing at length with even casual acquaintances and keeping the tears back as well as she could. Sam stood with her when it was his turn, and even caught up with a few friends he hadn't seen since high school. There had been no time to change out of his cammies after his dad picked him up in Louisville that morning, and everyone had questions. Had he seen combat? Gotten tired of the heat? Killed any ragheads? He flashed them a smile no more real than his grandpa's and changed the subject each time. Standing by Grandma in her Sunday dress and freshly-permed hair, he felt that he was really helping someone for the first time in months. Still, he was ready to head home and change into some civvies, to escape the suffocating smell of fresh-cut flowers and the pointless small talk that he'd longed for while away. His mom's visitation had been

here, too, but it was different now. The entire room sat at a strange angle, as if someone had bumped it without noticing.

Eventually, he slipped out to the sidewalk for some secondhand smoke. The Thomas family had been running the only funeral home in town for generations, and since they were friends, his grandma had never considered going anywhere else. The problem was that Sam's grandpa had been a very popular man in a very small town. Deacon in the church for forty years, Lion's Club president, Babe Ruth League sponsor, and about a dozen other offices and titles that ran together in his mind. The line of people had snaked out the door and down the street since nine that morning, and it would be just as long at closing time. It made him proud, but weary. He didn't know how many time zones he'd been through in the last two days, or even what day it was with any certainty, but he knew that the funeral home, with its dark paneling and thick brown carpet, ranked as one of the most claustrophobic and depressing places he'd been in recent memory, and that was saying something. He wanted to smoke a cigarette himself, but with his family all around he thought better of it. He would be letting them down soon enough. As he considered sneaking around back through the grass, Robbie walked out the door.

"Hey, where you going?" Robbie was three years younger than Sam and in his second year of college in Evansville studying music. When Sam had enlisted for lack of any other real prospects, Robbie had still been a hopelessly geeky middle-schooler. Now, flirting with adulthood, he resembled old pictures of Grandpa Mike, all cheekbones and smiles. Most folks made it a special point to joke that they had never seen two brothers less alike.

"Just trying to get away from everybody asking so many questions for a while," Sam said.

"Dad was looking for you."

"He's the worst one."

"He's just curious what you've been up to. And proud of you. Seems like that would be nice." Robbie's mouth flattened at the edges.

The army had cemented Sam's place as the good son, despite the old scuffles with his dad. They were alike in their practical-mindedness, and they'd watched

Robbie grow up with his nose always buried in some book, wondering if he might be from another planet. Sam had always secretly enjoyed the superiority, even used it against Robbie in his worst moments. Now, he wanted to switch places. Let Robbie answer questions for a while. What did they eat? What kinds of guns did they carry? What were his friends in the unit like? His dad didn't seem to care about combat or the politics of it all, just the daily life of his son, the soldier. Sam had liked the prodding when he came home from basic, embellishing stories about getting kicked in the ass by his foul-mouthed drill sergeant and barfing in his hat after the gashouse, but it wasn't entertaining to him anymore, even if the details still lit up his dad's face.

"It is, I know," Sam said. "I just wanted to get some fresh air. You know, without sand in it." It was April, with skies blue enough to swim in and daffodils screaming yellow along every sidewalk.

"Mind if I tag along?" Robbie asked. "I'm getting sick of cocktail weenies and Sprite." The Thompsons spared no expense in their funerary considerations. Not that anyone would ever complain.

"Come ahead. I think I might go for a walk, actually. The Fiddler's probably not too busy on a weekday." The only thing that sounded better than a cigarette was a cheap American beer. MGD, if they had it.

"Oh. Well, you'd better go without me. Still not twenty-one, remember?" Robbie said.

Sam didn't know whether to admire the kid or smack him.

"You're kidding, right? You think Dave's going to keep you from having a drink on a day like this?"

"I don't really know Dave."

"I do. Come on."

The four blocks from the funeral home to the bar were a cross between Norman Rockwell and the melting clock painting in Sam's high school Spanish book. People mowing their lawns, kids riding bikes in the middle of the street, but moving a fraction of a second slower than he was, like some kind of bad time travel movie where the special effects blurred everything. These people didn't worry about what was behind the bushes.

The houses were old; Sam couldn't remember if he'd ever seen a new one go up in town. But then, there was the Simmons' house, built when a tree had fallen into the living room of the old one. Its fresh vinyl siding had sparkled when it was built, but as he passed it now it had already begun to take on the grime of the surrounding houses. A bit of dirt around the window frames, a few scuffs from stray basketballs, birdshit on the roof. The same wornness hung on the people busy in their yards, though he hadn't seen it when he was younger.

"So how's school?" Sam asked as they walked. He had dismissed his brother's artistic streak with variations of the word 'gay' since he'd tried out for his first musical as a high school freshman, but college apparently suited Robbie, who had a full-ride scholarship.

"Not bad. I've got a lot to do this week really. But it's nice to not have to worry about it for a day or two. I mean...not nice, but—" He looked at the ground.

"Nah, I know what you mean. I think he'd be happy to know he got us both a little break from all the craziness."

"Yeah, I wish you could've seen him again." Robbie's mouth tightened.

"Me too," he said. Another way Sam was like their dad – uninterested in showing emotion when he could keep it corked inside. Robbie took after their mom, and he'd been ridiculed for it when they were younger. "You can cry if you want. It's not gonna bother me."

"Nah, I'm fine. Sorry about that. Wish I could keep it together like Dad."

"I'm sure he's having a hard time too."

"I guess."

They walked the last block without speaking, letting the year's first grass-cutting sting their noses.

The Frisky Fiddler didn't have a tap or serve any beers other than Miller, Bud, or Busch. Coors, Sam had learned at an early age, was scab beer, and had no place in a union town. Suspended with chains from the ceiling of the main room was a 1979 Harley-Davidson Fat Bob, the place's only dubious claim to fame. Behind the bar, Dave Duncan was dusting liquor bottles. He owned the place and worked all but the

busiest shifts alone to keep from paying bartenders. He was the bane of the local churches, but Sam had been drinking here since he was sixteen and found Dave to be a decent enough guy.

“So how’s business at the Home of the Hanging Harley?” he asked as they walked up. Dave’s eyes widened.

“I’ll be damned. Sam Harris. I wondered if you’d be back for things. Hoped you would be.”

Mike cast a quick eye around the room, which was empty except for Botsie Woolsey, drunk, on his usual perch at the end of the bar. Botsie’s daughter had left home at an early age and ended up posing for *Juggs* magazine. Her father was so proud of her that he carried a wallet-size print of the centerfold in his wallet, showing it to anyone who cared to see.

“How you holding up?” Dave asked.

“Honestly, I’m not even sure what day I slept last. What I really want to do is go home and take a shower. But I’ll settle for a couple of MGDs for me and my brother.”

“That your brother?” He looked at Robbie. “Looks kinda young.”

“He is. Two beers, Dave.”

“Coming right up.”

They sat down at a crumb-strewn table by the window. Across the street, two boys were trying to skateboard over a makeshift ramp. Sam watched Dave twist the caps off their beers and after a moment’s consideration stick a lemon wedge in each. Botsie moved to the jukebox.

“You let me know if you need anything else,” Dave said as he clunked the beers on their table, “and don’t even think about paying for these. Not many war heroes around here.”

Robbie tore at the edge of his napkin without looking up.

“Thanks, Dave.” Sam trotted out the wax smile again as the bartender scooted away to continue his spring cleaning. Willie Nelson sang about cowboys.

“So you know him pretty well?” Robbie was taking the whole room in, and it occurred to Sam that he’d probably never been there before. His brother had never

tried their dad's patience as Sam had, flipping cars, frequenting the drunk tank, and generally making a nuisance of himself. The number of times he'd forced his dad to lie to Grandma and Grandpa about various misdemeanors was something he tried not to think about. And still Robbie had finished in second place.

"Well enough, I guess. So do you get home much during school?" Evansville was less than an hour's drive with the new interstate bypass.

"Oh, probably once a month. Whenever I've got a full laundry bag."

Sam put the beer to his mouth and thought it was maybe the best thing he'd ever tasted. Robbie followed suit, but his nose puckered as he drank it.

"What's wrong? Don't you drink beer in college?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, we do, but it's usually something a little heavier. This tastes like the tap water at Uncle Jeff's."

"So what do you like? Maybe I can get you one."

"Um, I don't know. Newcastle's pretty good. I like Guinness too."

"Okay, I don't even know what Newcastle is, and I can guarantee you that Dave doesn't have any motor oil back there."

Robbie cracked a smile.

"What are you drinking faggy beer like that for, anyway?" Sam said.

The smile withered.

"It's okay. This is fine." Robbie took another swig, larger this time. "So how long do you get to be home for?"

"I don't really know." Sam looked into the neck of his bottle at the lemon wedge. "I'm supposed to call the duty chief at Fort Campbell before Monday and figure that out, I think." It sounded convincing enough.

"You think?"

"Well, it was kind of spur-of-the-moment. I didn't have time to get as much paperwork done as a guy usually would."

Robbie nodded his head as if it made sense.

"But that's boring shit anyway. Tell me about school. What have they got you singing?"

Robbie looked at him skeptically. “Probably nothing you’d like. Mostly faggy stuff.”

“No, I really want to know. This is cool, what you’re doing. Nothing I ever could have pulled off.”

They were the right words, and Robbie’s face softened.

“You really wouldn’t like it, probably. I don’t like some of it myself. Lots of Italian. I’m doing one by Verdi called ‘Ah, La Paterna Mano’ that’s not too bad. It’s about Macbeth.”

“Okay, I’ve heard of Macbeth, but that other one’s new to me.” Sam was impressed.

“No big deal. I’m not even sure what all of it means. I just know I’ve got to sing it for juries next week.”

“Sounds like you’re doing alright.”

“I guess so. I’m not sure dad thinks so, but I didn’t really expect him to flip over the idea.”

“He’ll come around,” Sam lied as he drained his bottle.

“Maybe.” Robbie looked at his half-finished beer. “Want the rest of mine?”

“Sure.”

After the extra half a beer and a ‘see ya’ to Dave, they headed back out into the sunlight, near-blinding after the dank Fiddler. Robbie started back toward the funeral home, but Sam hesitated. The alcohol slowed his pace to match the rest of the town.

“Tell you what. You go ahead back and tell Dad and Grandma that I’m just too beat to come back with you. I’m gonna walk ahead to the house and take a shower. Maybe get some sleep. I’ll be back this evening.”

“You’re gonna walk home? It’s a mile and a half.”

“I’ve been humping my ass around the desert for the last year and a half. You think a mile walk on the highway’s gonna stop me?”

“Good point.” He turned and Sam watched him head back down the street with the extra bounce of a lightweight. It reminded him of backyard whiffleball as a kid, when Robbie had wobbled precariously around the bases.

* * *

The walk took Sam south on Highway 61. After about ten minutes, he came back to the bridge they'd crossed earlier. When he was young, it had been one of those great iron behemoths, stained green by the years, but the last time he'd been on leave, the iron skeleton was gone, replaced by a simple paved span. The county probably saw it as another eyesore out of the way, but to him it was one more bit of the world forced into memory, and he wished he'd gotten a chunk of it before they hauled it off to the scrap yard. He'd spent the night under the old bridge on the Saturday after his mom had died, too drunk to go home, too sober to pass out in the rain. He'd had his first real fight with his dad because he'd broken one of her old LPs while he was sorting through them, looking for a few to add to his collection. His dad had come unhinged when he saw Joni Mitchell lying in two halves on the living room carpet, and though Sam knew now that it was probably an excuse to vent the emotions he'd bottled up through those stifling days of visitation and burial, at the time they'd nearly come to blows. Instead, Sam slipped away into the dark August rain with half a bottle of Yellowstone from under the kitchen sink. The complete blackness of that night had stayed with him for years, punctuated by searing flashes of lightning. He'd been jarred awake in the middle of the night by a tree on the opposite bank exploding in sparks and fire, falling into the swollen river to become driftwood. At his drunkest, he was afraid that the swelling tide would wash him away too, carrying him down to its midnight depths. Mostly, he remembered the sound of the water rushing along, becoming more melodic as it sped by. In the early morning hours when it had calmed, he sat and pondered how it fed into ever-larger rivers. From the Wabash to the Ohio, the Mississippi, all the way to the ocean. But it started in Indiana.

As he looked over the bridge now, it was more of a stream. Usually April brought plenty of rain, but conversation at the funeral home had been about the recent drought and how the farmers would be ruined if it didn't change soon. The bare, dusty banks on each side showed where the shore had been before it waned. But the current still moved, slower but still determined. His grandpa had told stories of pulling flathead and channel cat out of it as a boy. Sometimes they filled a whole stringer to feed the family, and other times they would just pass the hours, throwing back whatever they caught. As the years went on, the strip mines became more and more

invasive, and eventually the acid from the runoff killed most of the river's life. Grandpa Mike had worked at one of the mines to help out his folks until he went to Korea. By the time he got back, most of the fish he caught were misshapen, filled with tumors when he cut them open. Sam had seen some of these fish himself, even though the mines had shut down in the sixties. The wounds they left were lasting, not least to those who learned they had inflicted them. It could be worse, though. The last river Sam had seen was the Arghandab, filled with burned-out humvees.

He awoke to the sound of his dad's truck pulling into the driveway. The headlights painted moving boxes on the ceiling of the dark house. He'd meant to take an hour's nap, but instead the evening had melted completely away. He sat up on the couch, wearing sweat pants and his old Aerosmith T-shirt. The smell of the house swept over him, full of grease and dry rot. He'd never thought to miss it. The back door creaked open in the kitchen, and warm light spilled down the hallway toward the living room. He could hear Robbie humming. Slipping to the doorway, he pressed his back against the wall and waited for his brother to enter the room. When he saw an arm reach for the light switch next to him, he struck out for a death-grip.

"Gotcha!" he shouted as he had countless times before, then dropped Robbie to the carpet.

"Ooof," came the response, but Robbie scissored around with surprising speed and got Sam in a leg-lock.

"Come on, man," Sam said. "Do you really think that's gonna stop me? You may sing like a canary, but I've been trained to kill you in less than five seconds." He twisted Robbie's arm further behind his back, feeling the cords of muscle strain against his grip. "Give up yet?"

Robbie struggled like a fish under a boot for a few more seconds, then spat out their traditional surrender.

"I submit! I submit!"

Instantly, Sam was off and helping him up.

"I bet you missed that," Sam said.

“Yeah, right.” Robbie rubbed his wrist as Sam flipped on the lights, momentarily blinding them both, and landed a sucker punch before Sam’s eyes could adjust. “Take that, G.I. Joe.” He was off down the hall in a flash. Sam started after him, but his father appeared around the corner, stopping him with a raised hand.

“Have a nice nap?”

“I guess so.” He still had a smile on his face from the scuffle, but his dad’s tone shifted his attention to the headache blooming behind his eyes. The sudden light didn’t help. His dad sat in the recliner, so Sam went back to the couch. “How’s Grandma?” he asked.

“She’s doing okay. Uncle Jeff’s over at the house with her tonight, so she won’t have to be alone, and I took the day off from the plant tomorrow.” He kicked his shoes off one at a time and loosened his new tie, then leaned back in the seat. “Have a drink, did you?” It wasn’t accusatory, just an observation from smelling his breath.

“Yeah, on the way back. Thought it’d help me get to sleep. Hadn’t had one in a good while.”

“Hmmm.”

“Something wrong?”

“Got no problem with you having a beer or two, Sam. Your grandpa might’ve, but not me. God knows you’ve earned it. But do you think this was the best day to slip off for drinks?”

Sam looked at the floor. He had grown used to a good ass-chewing when he screwed up in his unit, but his dad never got angry. The passive questioning was somehow worse.

“There were a lot of people there who haven’t seen you in a year or two,” he continued. “All of them asking where you were. What do you figure I should’ve told them? Especially after your brother comes back smelling like the Fiddler.” He wasn’t looking at Sam, instead picking at some loose wallpaper beside his chair.

“I was tired, Dad. I’ve been up for a week, it seems like. I just wanted to get away from everybody asking questions and get some rest. Why are you on me about this?”

“I’m not on you. People just wanted to talk to you.”

Sam was tired of being treated like a museum guide. He’d liked it better before he enlisted, when he’d been invisible unless he fucked up.

“I’ll talk to people when I want to, okay? You ever think that maybe I’m not real crazy about telling people things I don’t want to be doing?” He shouldn’t have said it. He wasn’t ready to lay everything on the table yet, but his dad just kept picking at the wall.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked without looking at Sam.

“Nothing. Listen, I’m sorry I disappeared. I’m gonna go get some more sleep, if that’s okay. Early morning tomorrow.”

His dad took a long breath, then waved his hand dismissively.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I guess I just want to show you off a little bit. It’s good to have you home anyway.” He picked up a copy of *Outdoor Life* and started thumbing through it as Sam headed to his bedroom. His dad never let things hang in the air. No matter what Sam or Robbie did, there was never more than one conversation about it.

In the bedroom, Robbie was sitting at the computer downloading songs. Sam expected more opera, but instead, as he collapsed on the bed he heard gospel. He would’ve listened to yodeling as long as it came with the first comfortable mattress he’d felt in ages.

“What do you think of this song?” Robbie asked before Sam could slip into the second leg of his coma.

“Didn’t we used to sing that in church?” The platoon chaplain preferred more formal songs, so on the rare occasion that Sam attended services, he was treated to bombastic ditties like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” instead of the hymns he grew up with.

“Yeah.” The printer spat out lyrics. “Grandma said he wanted me to sing something out of the old blue hymnals for his funeral. This is the best one, I think.”

It was a solid tune, not too morbid, but not so light that it would seem inappropriate. Hopeful, maybe. The only thing lately that had struck him that way. More importantly, it reminded him of home, of growing up, and of Wednesday nights

in church with the windows open and hard-shelled bugs clinking on the light bulbs. Sam had never really gotten around to hammering out his beliefs in the way that his grandpa had, but he knew he believed in something, and the songs he'd learned as a child between naps in the church pews expressed it as well as anything. Since he'd left home, his faith had turned inward like some burrowing animal, refusing to exist alongside the horrors he'd seen.

“I think he would like it just fine.”

“Hope so.” Robbie tidied the stack of papers, then started leafing through a worn copy of *Heavenly Highway Hymns*. “So is Dad mad?”

“Nah. Just wanted me to come back to the funeral home for a while. I thought rest sounded better.”

“You didn't really seem like you were sleepy when we were at the Fiddler.”

“There's a world of difference between sleepy and tired,” Sam said, then rolled over and began to doze with the lights still on.

The morning of the funeral, the church was full of last-minute visitors. The final ones to enter were the local honor guard from the VFW. Though it was one of the few organizations his grandpa had never joined, Sam watched each of them walk down the aisle to the casket, salute with shaking hands, then turn on their arthritic heels and march stiffly back out the door. Occasionally, the silence of the sanctuary was broken by a coal truck barreling down the highway, oblivious to the solemnity.

When it was time to begin, Robbie stepped to the pulpit with a guitar. When had he learned to play? After strumming a few plaintive chords, he began to sing, and Sam was shocked by its beauty, clean and sweet – so much purer than the tinny hymns piped through the loudspeakers at Echo on Sunday mornings. The words seemed to hover over the mourners, offering a chance to rise from their pews and meet above the fear and sorrow. *We shall sing on that beautiful shore the melodious songs of the blessed, and our spirits shall sorrow no more.* The flagrant possibility of the words pricked Sam's ingrown hope. He was glad the funeral was at the church, with its lavender and cream stained-glass windows, instead of the dark funeral home.

The preacher delivered a short sermon, offering comfort to the family and praise of the man who had been a cornerstone of the congregation for half a century, but Sam's mind was still up with the music, released momentarily from its doubt. Eventually, the congregation rose and began filing past the casket. As a pallbearer, Sam stood off to the side with Robbie and some churchmen, watching his grandmother stroke her husband's hair a final time, then turn and file out with his father and uncle. As the undertaker closed the casket, the rabbit scar disappeared in shadow.

The sunlight through the newly-budded trees dappled the windshield of the truck as the procession meandered along the county roads. Without exception, all the cars they met pulled off onto the grassy shoulders. At the graveside, Sam instinctively moved to attention when "Taps" was played and didn't blink during the rifle salute. For a moment, he wished that he'd brought his dress whites home with him.

Back at the fellowship hall, he ate like a horse, relishing the home-cooked pies and meats that crowded the countertop. When people asked him questions, he answered, but lied when it suited him. The extended family posed for a few pictures. He had just begun thinking about the difficulties of the next few days when Robbie sidled up with a plate full of pasta and a cassette tape.

"This is for you. Grandma's handing them out to people."

Sam took the tape and looked at it. His name was scratched on the label in his grandpa's spidery print.

"What is it?"

"Don't really know. A few of us got one. Grandma said he wouldn't let her hear any of it. Kinda creepy if you ask me."

"So we're just supposed to listen to them?"

"Yeah. By ourselves, Grandma said."

"Great." He stuffed it in his back pocket. "Think you've got enough macaroni salad there?"

* * *

Sam crawled into the driver's seat of his dad's S-10 as soon as they got home and turned the key to the aux position. Skynyrd rattled from the blown speakers. Robbie and his dad were probably getting out of their ties and jackets as quickly as possible, but after countless parade reviews, Sam had quit noticing ties, or at least being bothered by them. The inside of the truck smelled of cigarettes and pine air freshener. He pulled a half-smoked Marlboro out of the ashtray and lit it, watching the small slivers of tobacco cling to the glowing coil, then slid the tape into the deck. The first thing he heard was Hank Williams, then silence followed by Grandpa Mike's voice. He sounded like he was at the bottom of a well, and Sam guessed he had no idea how close to the recorder he needed to be.

"Is it on?"

"Well, you said it was whenever the red light's on." Grandma's voice.

"Are the things turning?"

"It looks like they are to me. You're not blind, Michael."

"Alright, alright. It's going. Now get out. I don't want you hearing any of this."

"Mercy, what to do with a secret-keeping man? You'll say it all again in your sleep anyway." This was followed by the sound of a door being pulled to.

"So let's see, who am I up to now?" Pages flipping. *"Oh, Samuel, that's right."* Sam's throat tightened at hearing the voice so soon after seeing him lowered into the ground. *"So what I'm doing here, Sam, is leaving the last few bits of wisdom I've got rattling around upstairs for my kids and grandkids. You don't have to listen to me. Lord knows that I'm wrong as much as I'm right. But either way, here it is."*

"The first thing I want to remind you of is that you don't need to be sad. I'm telling that to everybody. I've been in church regular for fifty years, and born again since July seventeenth, nineteen-sixty. I know where I'm going, or where I am, if you're listening to this. I know you don't get to church like you used to, being overseas and all, but you're born again, too, you know. Watched you baptized when you were seven years old. Don't you forget that."

"I know it's probably hard thinking much about God when you're seeing the things you are. I know we've never talked about it, but I watch the news. And I've"

been there too. I don't know that I ever told you this, but I was at the Chosin Reservoir in fifty-one, and you know enough about what I saw there. But you'll get home to stay, too, someday, and it'll get better. Just got to let it go. Not something you want to hold on to anyway, believe me."

Sam wanted to tell him that he was home to stay now, then remembered it probably wasn't true.

"Another thing for you to remember is that you and Robert are brothers, and that better mean something to you. I know the two of you are like night and day, and that you give him a hard time for being different, and that's fine. But when it counts, don't ever forget he's your blood. I had a brother once. Maybe your grandma's told you. Died long before you or your dad was born, and I'd give anything to see him again. For you and Robbie, though, remember he's your family, Sam, just like your dad and your grandma and me. You don't get another one.

"Speaking of your dad, it's been hard for him to raise you boys by himself after your mom died, seeing her face in both of you every day. He'll never talk about it, because that's not his way, but you need to know that he made sacrifices, and he's never been prouder of anything than when he got that first picture of you in you in your uniform. He wanted to join the army when he was your age, you know, wanted to be drafted to Vietnam, if you can believe that, but he already had mouths to feed, and the government wasn't ready to pull a daddy from his wife and baby, thank God. I think he still regrets it sometimes, but I think plan B worked out just fine.

"Last thing, and then I'm gonna stop jawing. Remember when the garage window got busted when you were ten, and you swore it wasn't you? Well, I know it was. Saw you do it, in fact. I'm telling you that so you can remember someday when you have kids and grandkids that there's a time to show your cards, and a time to let them figure things out for themselves.

"You know I love you, Sam, and I'll see you on that crystal shore." There was a brief pause, then he spoke less deliberately. *"Now let's see. How do I turn this thing—"* There was some fumbling, followed by a click, and then Hank began warbling the second verse of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Sam sat until the end of the song, then turned off the ignition.

* * *

“Dad, I think it’s my turn to talk to you.”

His father was standing in a T-shirt and boxer shorts, his suit slung across the bed in a pile.

“I don’t think there’s anything I hate more in the world than wearing this stuff.” He sat on the edge of the mattress. “Did you listen to your tape?”

“Yeah.”

“Haven’t gotten to mine yet. I think your brother’s doing his right now. How was it?”

“Mostly things I knew, but needed to hear again, I guess.” Sam leaned against the aged doorframe that wore layers of paint over his and Robbie’s yearly height markings, opened his mouth to speak a couple of times, then closed it.

“If you think I’m still upset with you, don’t worry about it,” his dad said. “Really. I’m just glad you’re home for a little while.”

The breezy words hid a difficult apology. It made Sam want like hell to not say his next words. He focused his eyes on the dresser clock.

“It’s not that, Dad.” He took a focusing breath. “The thing is, I’m not supposed to be here.”

His father looked past him.

“Well, I mean, if it’s important that you get back soon, I understand. I was hoping we’d have some time to—”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m not supposed to be here *right now*. I’m absent without authority.”

For the first time in the conversation, his father looked directly at him, pulling Sam’s own gaze up from the clock. They stared at each other.

“What do you mean, ‘without authority’? You mean AWOL?”

“That’s not what they call it anymore, but yeah, that’s what I mean.”

“That doesn’t make sense. It’s not like you could’ve just jumped a fence and walked home.”

“How I did it’s not really important.”

“Humor me.”

“Okay, well. I had a friend who’s a clerk. He owed me for getting him some DVDs. I told him if anyone asked, I’d say I stole the forms myself.”

“You stole your leave papers? Forged them?” His dad’s voice rose. “Why would you do that? Why would you have to? It’s not like they won’t send you home for your grandpa’s funeral.”

“They already did. Twice. The last two times I was home. I wasn’t up for leave either time, but I had to get out of there.” He looked away, trying to imagine his dad wasn’t ashamed of him. Disgusted by him.

“I don’t even care about that right now, okay? You’re...Jesus, Sam, you’re a wanted man right now.”

“Well, not exactly. I’m only absent without leave. I’m not a deserter until thirty days are up. That’s when they release the hounds.” He started to smile, then thought better of it.

“Don’t be a smartass. Does that really make a difference to you?”

He grinned at the question.

“Well, yeah, Dad, it does. For being A.W.A. I get court-marshaled, or sent back if I’m lucky. For being a deserter in wartime, I get shot.”

His dad’s mouth hung open for a few seconds before he spoke.

“You’ve got to get back, then.” His voice was thin, as if he had suddenly come down with something. “Take whatever they give you. I’ll drive you there right now—” He reached for his keys.

“Relax, Dad. I don’t think I’m a very high priority at the moment. They won’t show up with guns or anything. I’m not suicidal. I’m just not cut out for killing people. I’m going to Fort Campbell next week to turn myself in.”

His dad’s face showed clear, physical relief, but it didn’t last long.

“What the hell were you thinking, anyway? We wanted you here, but good Christ, son, we would’ve been okay without you. You didn’t *need* to be here.”

“See, that’s the funny thing, Dad. I really did.”

At that, his dad stood and left the room.

Long into the night, Sam and Robbie lay in bed and listened to him banging away at some project in the garage.

* * *

The rain finally came the next week, and it seemed to replace conversation in the house. Robbie had to go back to school for juries, and Dad went back to work. Sam spent most of his time doing crossword puzzles and watching *E.R.* reruns. Toward the end of the week, as the rain slacked off, he started going for walks into town and back, stopping to watch the river swell and then having lunch with his grandma. She was stronger than he expected, dry-eyed and chatty, telling stories about Grandpa's days working for the mine as they picked at the leftover funeral food. After they ran out of meat and cheese trays, she made his favorite meals – pork chops, salmon cakes, beef roast – and talked about the fuss everyone was making over her. Sam's dad stopped by on the way home from work each day, but by then Sam had already gone back to the house.

On Saturday morning, Sam awoke to find a scribbled note on the kitchen table.

Don't go anywhere. Fishing at noon.

-Dad

He puzzled over the note through a cup of coffee. By the time he got out of the shower, he found Robbie in their bedroom digging through his dresser.

"What are you doing here?"

"Dad called and said he needed me to come home for the day. Didn't say why, but I saw the note on the table. We going fishing?"

"I guess so. He didn't say anything about it, though. He was gone when I woke up."

"Weird."

Robbie had slung clothes all over the room, and Sam resisted his hardwired urge to pick them up and fold them. They fixed some breakfast instead, and when the microwave clock read 11:45, the S-10 came crunching up the driveway. Their dad busted through the kitchen door with several Styrofoam containers and his old tacklebox.

“You boys ready? I’ve got nightcrawlers.” The coolness that Sam had been subjected to for the last few days was gone, or at least buried.

“What’s going on?” Robbie asked. “You called me so we could go fishing? I suck at fishing.”

“Well, maybe today’ll be the day you snap your streak. You ready, Sam?” He was wearing his old Evansville Triplets ballcap. Possibly the funkier hat in existence, and the one item besides his open-faced reel that he never fished without. Sam hadn’t seen it since high school.

“I guess. Where’d you find the hat?”

“It’s been in my tackle box since the last time we went fishing.”

Sam’s stomach twitched at the thought of that fishgutting hat stewing in a box for five or six years. As they headed to the truck, their dad tossed the keys to Robbie.

“Feel like driving?”

“Sure,” Robbie said, looking like the kid in the old Mean Joe Green Coke commercial.

“Alright. Me and Sam are gonna get some chairs out of the garage. Be there in a second.”

As Robbie headed to the truck, Sam eyed his dad.

“Everything okay?” Sam asked as they began digging lawn chairs out from under some timber.

“Nope. For either of us. But I don’t really want to talk about it right now.”

“What’s going on, Dad? You’re freaking me out a little here.”

His dad stopped pulling at the lumber and stood, facing Sam eye-to-eye.

“Why’d you tell me the truth about coming home?”

Sam wasn’t sure how to answer. “I guess because I felt like you’d be disappointed if—”

“I mean, what specifically made you tell me when you did?”

“Oh. Grandpa’s tape, I guess.”

“That’s what I thought. I got one too, you know.”

“What did it say?”

“That’s really none of your business. Now can we have a morning to fish?”

“Sure.”

They tossed the chairs in the back, then piled in the cab and headed to the river.

The north shore of the Patoka was high again after the week’s rains, but Sam’s dad said it helped stir up the fish, made them more likely to get up off the bottom. The confusion and resentment that had been swirling around in Sam’s head all week withered as he watched his dad tie hooks and bite split-shot snug onto the lines. His cast was still the smoothest Sam had ever seen, a breezy side-sling that hung impossibly long before blooming into the shade of the opposite shore.

Robbie still couldn’t fish, though after an hour or two he managed to snag a box turtle. He also lost a bass lure in a tree branch and caught Sam’s forearm with his hook during a lousy cast. He apologized, but Sam just slapped a band-aid on it. He’d had worse.

The sky was full of fat white clouds creeping east across the blue. A breeze flowed occasionally through the river bottom, and the only sounds that intruded were a few coal trucks rattling over the bridge a mile or so upstream. The muddier parts of the bank filled the air with a deep clay aroma that mixed with the honeysuckle growing on the fence line behind them. They sat in their lawn-chairs, reeling in occasionally to see if they still had bait, their hands stinking of chicken livers.

When the sun touched the treetops, Robbie’s rod tip slammed forward, almost through the surface of the water, and he nearly toppled as he sat up and started reeling. He’d been half-asleep.

“Hang on, hang on,” their dad said. “Let him run with it for a second, then set your hook. If you just start reeling he’ll spit it out.” He hurried to Robbie’s side, but refrained from reaching for the rod. When they were kids, Sam and his dad had taken it away whenever he got a bite.

“Um, okay.” Robbie looked down at the rod as if he were holding a bomb.

“Okay, now set the hook, but not too hard. You don’t want to jerk it out of his mouth.”

Robbie yanked the pole backward gently, and the line stayed taut.

“Looks like you’ve got something there,” Sam said. “Look at that rod bend. Probably a channel cat, don’t you think, Dad?”

“Yeah, it’s diving straight down. Bass would be going back and forth.”

They stood tensed on the shore for the better part of five minutes, Robbie struggling with the rod, Sam and his dad coaching him through it, explaining how he needed to let the fish run to keep it from snapping the line, and how it would wear itself out from fighting. Eventually, a murky white patch flickered at the river’s edge. Sam grabbed the dip net and moved to the water, kicking his shoes off as he went. The water was cool on his feet. It was the first time he’d been in the river since his baptism. He’d been terrified then, sure that the poisoned river would sweep him away from the preacher’s soft grip and empty his bones into the ocean once the scavengers had picked them clean. Though the preacher had used comforting words like resurrection and rebirth, Sam had been too terrified to consider them. Now, the water was full of potency, the opposite of the desert he’d wandered in for so long. He imagined letting it carry him away without fear. He would float through the wilds on a river of life that no preacher had ever considered. A dead thing resurrected.

Wading out past his knees, he focused his eyes on the fish. Robbie shouted and the catfish rolled, twisting the Spider-Wire in its drive to be free. Sam took a few more steps in and slid the net under the whiskered creature, raising it slowly out of the water. He walked toward the bank, stopping short of putting his feet on the shore, and then slid his thumb and middle finger under the cat’s side fins, feeling the familiar slime, gripping its skull tightly. He worked the barb loose from the bony ridge of the bottom lip, then held the fish up for them to see.

“Looks like a seven-pounder, Rob. Six for sure. Nobody’s going to say you can’t fish anymore,” his dad said.

“That’s a big fish. No two ways about it.” Robbie sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Sam ran his hand along the fish’s belly as it gawped for air. At its center, the belly was distended, the skin pulled tight, and Sam’s heart sank. He’d imagined that this fish would feed them, like the stories his grandpa had told. Instead, it hid a tumor in its guts.

“Dammit,” Sam said.

“What is it?” His dad moved toward him.

“Sick fish.”

His dad reached for it, and it let itself be handed off without a struggle. He looked it over for a minute.

“I don’t think this fish is sick, son. I think it’s filled to the gills with eggs.”

Sam had seen pregnant fish before, but couldn’t tell if his dad was right without cutting it open. He took the last few steps out of the water.

“Want to hold it?” his dad asked Robbie.

“Sure.”

He showed him how to get his hands around it without getting finned, then moved to the water’s edge to rinse off the slime.

“You want to keep it?” Sam asked.

“Nope. No reason to. If it’s sick like you think, we couldn’t eat it anyway, and if it’s got eggs, we better leave it be. More fish for another day.” He stood and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Alright, Rob. Put it back before it drowns on air.”

Robbie took a pitcher’s stance on the shore between Sam and their dad, tossing it in a high, spinning arc out over the water. It hit with a sharp splash and disappeared into the murk.

Cased

They descended on Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church every Wednesday night with their dobbers, quilted purses, menthol cigarettes, and McDonald's drive-thru food. Their husbands, for the most part, stayed home and watched IU basketball if it was on, or maybe caught the evening news. A few men appeared at the bingo tables every week – local parishioners who felt it was their duty, husbands too henpecked to stay home, mama's boys who'd never gotten around to leaving home – but mostly this was where the women went. They washed and fed and mended all week, but Wednesday nights were theirs.

It reminded Meredith of bees packed in a hive, all of them with their neon-colored ink-dobbers in hand, hunched over newsprint bingo boards or the fancy new computers that reminded her of the Speak & Spell she'd kept in her classroom. She didn't enjoy bingo much, but she tried to be a part of it, mostly at Bill's urging. "You gotta get to know the local wildlife," he'd said. She'd been coming for almost a year and still she sat alone at the folding table closest to the fresh air of the exit. No one sat nearer to her than crowd size demanded, but tonight was a packed night, despite the winter chill.

"G-39," a pimply young man said into the microphone. He stood on a raised platform trimmed in moth-eaten gold and burgundy fabric, the words echoing through an old portable speaker that puffed dust with every syllable. Meredith tapped her foot on the concrete floor. The old bingo board on the wall showed too many numbers,

and she knew that soon one of them would get what she was looking for. A shout would break the tension of the room, and someone would pocket five hundred bucks. To her surprise, though, the silence remained and the kid went back to spinning the wire barrel. The Ping-Pong balls ricocheted around as she looked at her own numbers. She was cased in the bottom left corner, as close as she could get without winning. N-41 would send her home with some good news for a change.

Glancing around the room, she took in the locals through a thick haze of smoke. Most of them looked to be about her age or older, overweight, and dressed in clothes the Salvation Army would think twice about. The woman across the table wore a dark green sweatshirt drizzled with tartar sauce from her Filet-O-Fish. Occasionally, she smiled across the table in the distantly social way Meredith had gotten used to, revealing a chocolaty gap where a front tooth should have been. On the table in front of her was a regiment of bingo dobbers, a thermos of coffee, and a half-eaten bag of cheese puffs. Orange crumbs dotted the deep lines around her mouth. Meredith had begun dressing down for her bingo evenings but couldn't quite blend in with even the most basic leftovers from her years teaching school.

"B-7," the spinner called.

"Bingo!" came the reply from across the room. A fat woman with freckles and a flattop haircut waved her stubby hands in the air. An attendant descended on the woman and read a series of numbers to the spinner.

"That's a confirmed bingo," he said. "Payout of five hundred dollars."

The room's stillness broke as the old ladies hustled toward the main exit in droves. Meredith knew it wasn't worth her time to try and be the first out, so she waited. While everyone else ran to their cars or bought up the last of the pull-tabs to try and recoup their losses, she sat at the rickety table and folded her last bingo sheet neatly, trying to keep her thoughts focused on numbers as long as possible.

"Did you win anything tonight, honey?" asked a creaky voice from behind her right shoulder.

"No, Myrtle Jane. Not tonight." She smiled as the ancient woman came into view, and then turned back to place her sole dobber in her purse.

Myrtle Jane was the only person who regularly spoke to Meredith at bingo, but she spoke to pretty much anyone else, too, whether they were listening or not. She was a sweetheart, but her constant questions wore on Meredith when it was her turn to field them. The old woman hobbled slowly around the end of the table and lowered herself into the chair earlier occupied by the XL green sweatshirt.

“That’s too bad, dear.”

“Oh, you know how it is. I mostly just come out to help the church.” She didn’t attend Mass anymore. Had only been once since leaving Arizona two years ago. She’d started going to the Baptist church with Bill when they’d moved, mostly because it mattered more to him.

“Now, didn’t I hear you were Catholic?” Myrtle Jane asked for the hundredth time, pronouncing it as always ‘cayth-lick.’

“That’s how I was raised,” Meredith said, pretending it was a new question.

“Well,” Myrtle Jane said with obvious doubt, “I guess we’re all free to try it our own way.”

“I guess.” Meredith smiled again.

Myrtle Jane’s thin white hair shot up in crazy shocks and her taped glasses betrayed trifocals. Angels with trumpets and a gold banner that read NOEL! adorned her sweatshirt, even though it was early February. Meredith wondered what it was about Indiana that made every woman over fifty wear sweatshirts nine months out of the year. She stuck to her blouses for the most part. Twenty-five years with second graders made it hard to get used to anything else.

“Well, you know, I only come out to the bingo to keep Ruthie company,” Myrtle Jane said, gesturing toward her daughter, a tubby redhead munching on Doritos as she flirted with a volunteer half her age. “I can’t even play anymore. My eyes water too much to see the numbers.”

“I know, you’ve told me—”

“Even if I could play, I’d give the money away if I won. What do I need it for? Most of these people should stay home anyway. Out here spending money they don’t have. Gambling in a church.” Her eyes lost focus for a moment. “What is it that you Catholics call a church?”

“A church.”

“Seems like I’ve heard other names for it.” She raised herself with effort back to her feet. “Well, sugar, you be careful going home. Watch for deer.” With that, she pattered off toward Ruthie.

Meredith stashed her lone dobber and moved toward the exit at the back of the room, away from the crowd at the main doors. She was glad she didn’t live in town where she could bump into any of them on the street. Where she lived, there weren’t any streets for her to worry about. Just a pitted highway with coal trucks rumbling by at all hours. Bill pretended not to notice them, but she knew he wasn’t that deaf. More than once she’d seen him turn the volume up on the television as the trucks passed.

The air was icy in the parking lot, and even after two years she wasn’t used to how mind-numbingly cold winters could be here. Just one of the many things she hadn’t adjusted to. She’d get a respite in March and April, but then the thick humidity would ooze in, so different from the dry heat of home, and she’d swelter until September. Bill also tended to ignore the weather, or pretended to enjoy it, using words like “invigorating” instead of “sub-zero.” But he hadn’t been outside since before Christmas, staying wrapped in thick blankets on the hospital bed they rented from the nursing home. Meredith’s stomach surged and she almost longed for another conversation with Myrtle Jane. No matter how much the Hoosiers bothered her, she still enjoyed her moments away from what Bill called their “ancestral manor.”

When Meredith got home, she found Nancy Harris doing crossword puzzles on the couch while Bill slept. Nancy went to the Baptist church with them. She’d lost her own husband, Mike, to cancer a couple of years earlier, and was always willing to sit with Bill when Meredith needed a break. She was a small woman, but thick around the wrists as most older ladies were here, and more or less the only friend that Meredith had within two thousand miles.

“Win anything?” Nancy asked, looking up from her puzzle book. *Three’s Company* played on the television.

“Of course not,” she replied. “Everything went to the computer girls again. Maybe I should break down and try one.”

“I wouldn’t,” Nancy said. “‘Don’t trust machines,’ Mike always said. He wouldn’t even use the ATM if he needed money. Cut up the card they sent us.” She rose and tucked her puzzle book into her purse, then cast a glance at Bill, fast asleep in the hospital bed that dominated the living room.

“How’d he do for you?” Meredith asked. Whitish-pink gums hung dry in his open mouth. She still couldn’t get used to seeing him without his teeth. His smile used to get him pretty much anything he wanted. It had helped bring them here.

“Didn’t eat as much as he should’ve, I guess. Kept saying he wanted chicken and dumplings.”

“I get that from him a lot. I guess I’ll have to whip some up soon. He gets something in his head and it’s settled, that’s for sure.” She moved toward him and brushed some cracker crumbs off his pajamas.

“I could probably make some and drop them by, if you wanted,” Nancy said.

Meredith wasn’t ready to lay down her duties yet. “No, Nancy, you’ve done plenty already. Why don’t you get home before the weather turns again? They’re saying snow sometime tonight.” It was a lie, but she wanted some time alone and Nancy didn’t even drive in the rain.

“Oh, well, I’d better get going, then.” She moved to the door before turning back to Meredith. “If you need anything at all, you call me, all right? Doesn’t matter what time it is.”

Meredith watched headlights crawl across the far wall, then dropped onto the couch without taking her coat off. Bill snored softly. For the first couple of months, she had cried when she looked at him like this, but now it was just what he called “the norm.” Instead of weeping, she let it knot up inside. For two years, he’d been her rock, her guide in this land of farms and coal mines and potlucks, and now she was helping him slip away from her as peacefully as possible. She would be alone here soon.

She zipped her coat and went back outside, lighting a cigarette once she was on the porch. She’d started again when Bill was diagnosed, after having given it up in

her forties. It was her dirty little secret, certainly something that Bill wouldn't approve of, but it helped her get through the dark hours which were unbearably long in the Indiana winter. It was hard not to smoke at bingo, sitting in that haze for hours, but the ladies' cold shoulders weren't melting, so she refused to give them the pleasure of identifying with her. She had really tried in the beginning – bringing recipes to share, trying to learn the latest gossip. They just didn't seem to need new blood.

The frost-covered yard glowed in the moonlight as she sat in the rusty porch swing, Bill's favorite spot to survey the land he'd grown up on. It was a fluke that they were even there. Bill had left home to fight in Korea when he was eighteen, then got sent to the southwest for electronics training after the war. They'd met shortly before he was discharged and decided to put down roots. Happiness came easy, and they enjoyed the warm desert nights in their first porch swing, drinking glasses of iced tea that Bill sweetened beyond all reason. The students at DeMiguel Elementary had voted her teacher of the year twice, and Bill made a frame in his woodshop for each certificate. They'd never had kids of their own, though they'd tried, and instead clung more tightly to each other. He took early retirement at fifty-five, and within six months got restless. They went on a couple of vacations in the west, ambling around Yosemite and Yellowstone, and then he brought her to Indiana for a week so he could catch up with some old friends, particularly Mike. She assumed the itch was scratched until the phone rang one night a month later. Mike had seen that Bill's old house was back on the market. They argued for weeks about it, but Bill and his smile were persuasive, and at the age of sixty, Meredith left home.

Now she stepped into the backyard, watching thin, ashy clouds wisp around a bleak sliver of moon. Instead of the brilliant white she remembered from childhood, it had a yellow tint. The oak tree that shaded the yard in summer was dry and crackling, with its gnarled branches twisting toward the night sky. There were no birds or insects to break the silence as she smoked her Kool down to the filter.

As the chill began creeping through the seams of her coat, she heard a bell ring faintly through the thin wall of the house. After a last drag, she stuck the butt under a decorative rock by the porch and went back inside. Bill was sitting up, clutching a

small chime that Meredith had picked up at a yard sale four months ago. His face was pained, but he cut it with a smile.

“I wondered if anybody was left around here,” he said, dropping the bell on his topmost quilt. “Nancy get taken off okay?”

“About twenty minutes ago.” She sat on the edge of his bed and ran her hand over his head. She used to brush his hair aside as an unconscious gesture, but it had been burned away by the chemo, leaving gray patches of stubble. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a million bucks.”

“Any pain tonight?”

“Some, I guess.” His “s” sounds whistled without his teeth.

“Nancy said you didn’t eat much.”

“Look on the bright side. At least I won’t throw up much.”

“You know the doctors want you eating to keep your strength up after treatments.” It was a familiar conversation, and she hated badgering him. “She said you thought chicken and dumplings sounded pretty good.”

“It does when I’m hungry.” His eyes narrowed and he took in a quick hitch of air. “Right now, though, I’m not. How was bingo?”

“It was good,” she said. It made him happy to think that she was.

“Did those old cows give you a hard time?” he asked.

“I gave as good as I got.”

One of the first times he’d convinced her to go, she’d made the mistake of calling bingo on the last game of the night without having the right numbers. By the time it was sorted out, half of the women had left, and those remaining were whispering conspiratorially. She’d made a joke of it to Bill, and he’d laughed at her telling of it, but she still remembered how alone she had suddenly felt.

“Are you sure you don’t want something to eat?” she asked.

“I just don’t think it’d stay down. My belly’s doing flips.”

“I know, sweetie.” His head felt hot to the touch. “You’re awfully warm.”

“Feed a cold, starve a fever,” he said with another toothless flash.

* * *

The bell woke her around one in the morning, and she found Bill with his covers thrown to the ground and his knobby frame writhing in sweat. At first, she thought he had rung the bell to wake her, but then saw he was still in a fitful sleep. He'd kicked his blankets to the floor and the bell had followed them, probably bouncing off the end table. She looked at him, exhausted and half-naked as he whispered in his sleep. He said her name several times, along with Mike's and some that she didn't recognize. Probably from the Army, or maybe his childhood in this house.

She thought of their home in Flagstaff, with its soft grass and open rooms where sunlight touched every corner at least once a day. The walls around her now were covered with cheap brown paneling that probably hadn't seen the light of day since it came off the truck. Even in the summer, the room felt hollow, cave-like. She'd asked him many times why he loved this place so much, but he just smiled and said "I grew up here."

She went to him and replaced his blankets. As she tucked them in, his eyes shot open and he took a sharp breath. It sounded like the seal breaking on a can of peanuts. His looked around the room for a few moments as if he didn't recognize his surroundings.

"Are you okay?" she asked, a little frightened.

His eyes slipped into focus. "It hurts."

"I know." She put her hand to his head. It was even warmer than before. "You're so hot. I'll be right back."

She went to the kitchen, wrapped a damp dishcloth around a few ice cubes, and went back to his bedside. When she dabbed his forehead, he flinched at the cold and then let his head sink into the sweaty pillow. She hated that all of her time was spent soothing pains caused by the chemicals they kept shooting into him. "It's for the best," a young doctor had said when she questioned the side-effects. She'd sat in the waiting room for another hour, imagining what it might be like to douse him with his own radiation.

The ice began to melt, and rivulets ran through the deep, loose creases of Bill's face, over the top of his head, and into the hollows of his ears. She was soaking the

bed, but he seemed calmer than before, so she let it wash over his face and neck, through the dark pits of his joints. She opened his crumpled pajama shirt a couple of buttons and began wiping the sweat from his chest, being careful around the port-a-cath below his left shoulder. She couldn't get used to seeing it, so mechanical. His ribs stood out like bars on a jail cell, and he didn't move while she caressed him. Eventually the ice melted away and all the cold seeped out of the wadded cloth. When she sat it on the cluttered end table, he opened his eyes.

"That hit the spot."

"I'm glad. Feel like eating anything yet?"

"Maybe before I go to sleep. But could you just sit here for now?" He took her hand. "I was having bad dreams, and when I woke up, I thought I was back in Flagstaff. Nothing looked familiar until I saw your face."

"Well, I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

When he slept, she went to the kitchen and took a chicken from the freezer. As she began to run it under the hot tap water, she breathed in a thousand different meals, thick and oily. They had soaked into the walls, the countertop, even the floor tiles, filling the room with everything from beef roast to cobbler. She'd learned to cook those dishes for him years ago – starchy, fried foods – and developed a taste for them herself. Now, as she took the butcher knife to the wing bones, she wondered how many of them it had taken to give him cancer.

The first Wednesday in March, Meredith pulled into the parking lot of Sts. Peter & Paul, sitting for several moments before getting out of the car, or even turning off the ignition. Across the street was a row of unattractive houses with big trucks and motorcycles parked out front. The lawns were more or less kempt, but nothing like the manicured Flagstaff suburbs. The grass here was abrasive under bare feet, full of cockleburs and acorns even in the springtime. Why couldn't she get over this? It's not like they'd moved to the moon, or had left family behind in Arizona. As the blue-hairs began drifting into the hall, she put her head against the steering wheel and closed her eyes, trying to imagine herself home, but the peaty smell of Indiana was

unmistakable. When she looked up, Myrtle Jane and Ruthie were crossing in front of the car. Myrtle Jane waved like a five-year-old.

Inside the hall, everything seemed louder than usual. The weather had broken, so even the timid souls had come out, filling the concrete-and-cinder block room almost to capacity. Meredith took her normal isolated seat, but by the time bingo started, she was boxed in on all sides. The last seats to fill up were directly across the table. Ruthie and Myrtle Jane.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi,” Ruthie replied, then began tending to her board.

“How are you today, dear?” Myrtle Jane asked with a denture-perfect smile. Meredith resented her for making it to ninety with her false teeth still planted firmly on her gums.

“Fine, Myrtle Jane. How about you?” Meredith prepared herself for a litany of ailments and nosy neighbors.

“You don’t look fine. You look like somebody’s been dancing on your grave.”

Nobody here was direct until Meredith didn’t want them to be.

“No, I suppose I don’t look fine. I haven’t slept for more than three hours at a time all week, and my washing machine is full of rags soaked with my husband’s vomit. I guess that will take the fine out of a person.” Some of the ladies around her glanced over and then quickly away. Ruthie shook her head with a disapproving flick of her eyes. Everyone except Myrtle Jane looked offended. “I’m sorry. That was probably more than any of you wanted to know.”

The heads went back to hovering over bingo boards, but Myrtle Jane leaned over with her smile still in place.

“You get used to it,” she said. “When my Earl was sick, I thought I’d go crazy in that house, and I probably did for a while, but the Good Lord helped me through it all right. He’ll do the same for you, too, dear.”

She was trying to be helpful, even nice, but the words implied kinship, and though Meredith had been starved for intimacy, she had come to realize that she didn’t like the thought of bonding with these women who had learned to exist without their men. She imagined the widows going home to cans of condensed soup and

government cheese. Getting sucked into that, even if it meant support, seemed repulsive. She wanted Bill to live for selfish reasons, to keep her sane here. How could he leave her alone with Myrtle Jane while their house in Flagstaff held the young family they'd sold to, full of tiny feet on the living room carpet?

"Meredith, are you all right, dear?" Myrtle Jane had apparently been waiting for some time.

"I suppose so."

Bingo began directly, and all of the women hunkered down over their boards, dobbers in hand. Myrtle Jane, with her bad eyes, rose and wandered about the room, pestering whoever she happened to light on. Meredith was happy to see her go, but had trouble focusing on the game. The partition that divided her mind from Bill at the bingo hall felt rickety. He hadn't been in pain when she left him with Nancy, but he was quieter than usual. She tried to stay, but Bill would have none of it.

"You need to get out and see your friends," he'd said. "What are Myrtle Jane and Ruthie going to think if you don't show up?" She couldn't bear to tell him that Ruthie wouldn't even notice and Myrtle Jane would just bother someone else. She'd created a phantom life in his mind, filled with people who didn't give her the time of day in reality. It made him more restful, thinking that she was slowly putting out her feelers, imagining her happy when he was gone. Looking around the room, she knew it could never happen. They were too different, too distrustful of non-natives. They were kind, but only to each other.

As the evening moved along, Meredith thought of Bill enduring *Three's Company* with Nancy and began to get restless, even missing a few numbers. Occasionally, she was distracted by Ruthie's Pepsi-fueled belches. Even the meeker women in the room began to annoy Meredith. Green sweatshirt picked her nose at the other end of the table.

She tried to focus on her board. The next game was speed bingo. The spinner would call the numbers as fast as he could, and the first person to cover every square on a board won. It often cured her of her thoughts, requiring her undivided attention. A hush fell over the room, and the drink machine was unplugged. No one was

supposed to speak, though this wasn't enforced on Myrtle Jane as a rule. Most people just ignored her until it was over.

The room was still, dobbers in every hand hovering over the newsprint boards. No computers were allowed. The click and rattle of the ball cage kicked into high gear. With the TV off, everyone waited to hear the numbers. It reminded Meredith of Bill when he went fishing. He would get a nibble and every muscle in his body would tense, waiting for the strike. No slapping at bugs, no whispering.

"B-3, B-14, O-72..." The spinner took off at a breakneck pace and the sticky sound of dobbers filled the room.

"G-46, O-68, I-17..."

Meredith's whole world was on three five-by-five numbered squares. The one on the left had every number so far. Eighteen to go.

"B-7, N-39..."

Her wrist rolled the dobber onto the numbers in a fluid motion. N-39 hadn't been there for her, but it was still a good start. She only needed two more Bs to fill that column.

"B-12, I-29..."

It was the best speed board she'd seen in a while. She'd only missed two numbers so far. The prize was \$200, enough money to fill the gas tank for several more trips to the doctors in Evansville and maybe even stop at Red Lobster if Bill was up to it.

"G-49, G-58..."

"How are you doing there?" Myrtle Jane whispered as she slid back into the seat across from Meredith.

"I-27, B-1..."

She had her Bs.

"Looks like you're off to a pretty good start." Myrtle Jane was using her church whisper.

"Shhh," Meredith hissed without looking up from her board.

"I-31, B-3..."

No more Bs, she thought. How about some Os?

“Thelma Hays over there didn’t get a single number on the first five calls.”
More church whisper. How could she not see that Meredith was occupied? Why didn’t her daughter shut her up long enough to finish the game?

“N-42, O-75...”

The pace picked up.

“What do you need now? Os?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Meredith sputtered between dobs.

“Did you get O-75?”

“Yes.”

“No reason to get snippy.”

“I’m not getting—”

“B-13, I-30, G-47...”

She cut her words off to try and catch up. Had she missed a number? She didn’t think so.

“I’m only trying to help,” Myrtle Jane said.

“That’s sweet, but could you please—” How could everyone else in the room be ignoring her so completely?

“G-57, G-60...”

“I don’t think you dopped fifty-seven.”

“No, I didn’t, because you won’t shut up.” She didn’t have time to consider her words. Myrtle Jane made an offended snort, and turned to her daughter, who was dopping madly. The numbers were coming faster, and Meredith knew she had lost a couple to Myrtle Jane. She bore down again, trying to remember what she’d heard while she dopped the new ones.

“I think you owe me an apology,” Myrtle Jane said, without a whisper this time. A couple of ladies glanced her way, but kept marking their boards.

“N-33...”

“I don’t think I do,” Meredith said without raising her eyes. She was cased on the left side. O-73 would do it for her.

“Well, I would have thought that someone like you would be glad for some help,” Myrtle Jane said.

“Mom, hush,” came the late admonition from Ruthie, whose eyes were still glued to her board of pink dobs.

“B-11...”

For a moment, Meredith let it pass, but *someone like you* popped to the front of her mind, blocking even the numbers. It made her feel ashamed. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Myrtle Jane said. “Just dob your numbers.”

“I-27...”

“No, tell me, Myrtle Jane, why would I be glad for some help?” Her jaw tightened as she moved her dobber away from the board. Myrtle Jane sank back into her folding chair, slapping her hand onto the flab of Ruthie’s arm. Ruthie shot a quick glare.

“Bingo!” came the cry from the other end of the table. Meredith hadn’t even heard the last numbers. The business of proving the win was over in a few seconds, and as an attendant made the payout, Myrtle Jane leaned over, peering at Meredith’s board.

“Hmmm.” Myrtle Jane’s eyes swelled through the lenses of her glasses, looking like a giant squid’s. “Sweetheart, why didn’t you dob O-73? You would’ve won.”

Meredith looked at the wall unit that displayed all the numbers in play. It was there, and she had missed it.

“You poor thing,” Myrtle Jane cooed.

The room was suddenly too small for Meredith, too full of smoke and sweat. She stared at the numbers on her board, her vision dimming until it was all she saw. Without looking away, she reached out for her dobber. She could feel the purple ink between her fingers, oily and cold. Myrtle Jane spoke, but Meredith ignored her. She didn’t want to hear what any of them had to say anymore. Deliberately, she rolled the foam tip over O-73, feeling its stickiness on the paper, and then dropped the dobber into the wastebasket beside her. As her tunnel-vision subsided, she saw that Ruthie and the other ladies at the table had begun staring.

“Mom, maybe you’d better shut up and leave her alone,” Ruthie said.

Meredith said nothing. Instead, she tore the winning board from the booklet and stood up, smoothing her blouse with her free hand. She looked up at the young bingo spinner, preparing the next game, and then back at Myrtle Jane.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked, her eyes still huge through their Coke-bottle lenses.

Meredith wadded the bingo board into a tight ball and threw it as hard as she could into Myrtle Jane’s gaping face. It lodged between the old woman’s glasses and her temple as Meredith turned to leave.

The air was cool enough outside that her breath hung faintly in front of her. The dusk-to-dawn light on the front of the church cast a rusty glow on the cars in the parking lot. Her heart raced. Where had she parked? It wasn’t a large lot, but her car had disappeared for the moment among thirty or so others. She walked between them, keeping an eye out for their little Ford. In the distance, a car stereo bleated electric guitar into the night, mixing with the sparse traffic over on Main Street. The sounds swirled in her head as she sat down on a worn bench in the churchyard to catch her breath. The music grew louder as the driver moved through a nearby alley.

“Where’d you go?” a voice boomed from the doors of the church. “Are you still out here?” Meredith leaned forward and saw Ruthie approaching from her right. Her first instinct was to run for her car. She could see it now, parked under a telephone pole at the far end of the lot, but Ruthie was too close.

“I’m here,” she said.

Ruthie tromped up the bench, her considerable chest bouncing with each step. Her breath shot out in steamy bursts, like a bull Meredith had once seen in a cartoon.

“Who do you think you are?” she asked, planting herself between Meredith and the Ford. There was anger in her face, tightening around her eyes and mouth, but Meredith also saw embarrassment. Meredith had hit this woman’s soft spot – a white-haired mother with nothing better to do than follow her daughter out at night.

“Nobody,” Meredith said. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, Nobody, my mom may be a pest, but you don’t have any business doing what you did in there.”

Meredith saw several women peeking out through the glass doors of the church, watching the drama unfold. She had finally gotten their attention.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Meredith said. “I’ve looked foolish enough for one evening, I think.”

“And what about my mom? Does she look foolish enough yet?” Ruthie’s cheeks were red. “What’s wrong with you?”

She considered explaining herself, down to the last puke-rag and pain pill, but decided not to prolong the show. “You wouldn’t understand,” she said, then stood up and walked past Ruthie, hoping she wouldn’t try to physically stop her from leaving. It didn’t matter, though. They had beaten her.

“You’re full of shit, lady,” Ruthie called after her with a lowered voice. “I understand you just fine. You’re not the only person who’s got somebody to take care of.”

Meredith turned, trying to muster a last burst of dignity. “Do you even know my name?”

Ruthie stared, blinking her false eyelashes a few times.

“That’s what I thought.” Meredith started walking again, wanting only to put an end to this final spectacle. They couldn’t understand her, and she knew now that she didn’t want them to. She didn’t want to imagine having anything in common with them. Bill was enough. She got in the car and started the engine, aware of Ruthie’s eyes on her as she pulled out of the parking lot. How many more watched her through the windows of the church? They would talk about this for weeks.

Ribbon and Thread

The doctor said the baby would have Huntington's disease. Amy didn't understand what this meant, but she knew it was bad from his expressionless face. She tried to speak, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, so Scott asked the questions. The doctor's words seemed to fall on the desktop between them. No symptoms until the mid-thirties. That made her feel better, until he explained what those symptoms would be. Involuntary muscle spasms, loss of language skills, eventual breakdown of the nervous system resulting in death. About ten years from start to finish. All for someone who didn't even have a gender yet.

For months they'd been trying to get pregnant. Ovulation calendars, vitamins, green tea, uterus tilting. When they found out it had worked, they'd rushed out and bought every book on the "Expectant Mothers" shelf at Barnes & Noble. They waited to tell everyone until after the first five weeks, just like the books recommended, and lingered secretly in the newborns aisle at Wal-Mart every chance they got. Scott started grabbing all the overtime hours he could at the power plant, telling Amy that they would spare no expense. It had been the best five weeks of their marriage.

Now Scott sighed as the doctor spoke. She had quit listening, focusing instead on the dead hum of the room's fluorescent lighting, the assortment of knick-knacks on the doctor's desk. A mahogany-and-gold nameplate, an aloe plant, a miniature Evansville Aces basketball. After a moment, she noticed that no one was talking and she looked at Scott. He was ashen.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” she asked the doctor, a balding man with liver spots on his forehead. Behind him was a poster of a fetus taking a drag off a cigarette. “What brand does your baby smoke?” it read.

“I said that Huntington’s disease is an inherited condition without a cure, passed through a dominant gene on the short arm of the fourth chromosome.”

Inherited? The room warmed by degrees. She tried to breathe without hyperventilating.

“So what are you saying?” she asked.

He paused to adjust his glasses. “Either you or Mr. Baker must also have this disease, I’m afraid.”

Her heart thrashed against her breastbone. She looked at Scott and saw his eyes half-closed and his lips moving slowly, forming silent words as the clock ticked thunderously on the wall.

“Do you understand the implications of this, Mr. and Mrs. Baker?” the doctor asked with clinical compassion.

Implications? The sterility of the word. Her guts churned inside of her.

“One of us is sick, too,” Scott said.

No no no no no. Her eyes lost focus. *This is just a checkup for Christ’s sake. It doesn’t go like this.*

“I’m afraid so,” the doctor said, brushing his knuckles absently across the marble surface. “I realize how much of a shock this is, and I’m sorry to have to tell you this way. The truth is, medical science had no way of testing for this disease until about ten years ago. Before, we always relied on family history to chart the disease.” He glanced down at the files on his desk. Amy hated them. “Now Mr. Baker, your medical records say that you were adopted, so genetically speaking your family tree is blank.”

Scott nodded. She wanted him to react. Raise his voice, throw a chair, hit this charlatan and draw blood. Something. The doctor turned his eyes toward Amy. They reminded her of the lamps that hung in interrogation rooms.

“Mrs. Baker, your records show that your mother is still living but your father is deceased. Could you tell me how he died?”

“It was a car accident,” she said, thinking of the pressed flowers she kept at home in her dusty Bible.

“And his father?”

“Died in Korea,” she whispered. “I never knew him.” Such stupid convenience.

“Well, these circumstances are unique then,” he sighed, pushing back from his desk a bit in his overstuffed chair. “Mrs. Baker, your mother could not have passed you the gene, but any of the three remaining biological parents could have.” He glanced at his hands for a moment. “I don’t want to pressure either of you, and there’s absolutely no necessity for doing this, but you should be aware that a genetic test would identify which of you has the gene. If you decide you want to know.” He sat watching them both for a moment and Amy looked to Scott, who was twisting his hands together. *He doesn’t even know he’s doing that.* He still had clippings on his collar from a haircut that morning. She’d told him that she didn’t want him looking scruffy for the doctor’s appointment. As if impressing him would somehow make their baby perfect.

“Well,” Scott said, and cleared his throat. “I think that...I mean...umm—” He glanced at Amy. She had never known him to stammer. “I think we’ll need some time to think about all of this.”

“Of course,” the doctor said, then rose to show them out.

As they walked through the waiting room, Amy looked at a half-dozen women in various stages of pregnancy. Some of them read *Cosmo* or *Good Housekeeping*. A few glanced at the toddlers playing at the far end of the lobby.

The power lines that ran along the interstate reflected on the dusty windshield and curved to infinity. They had sat silently in the truck since they’d left Evansville. She glanced at him every so often, still half-hoping for some kind of outburst. He clenched his jaw, the muscles bulging and relaxing in rhythm, but remained still. Merle Haggard sang on the radio.

She thought of her father. Like Scott, he had always driven. Amy couldn’t remember her mother on the driver’s side while he was alive, except for trips to the

post office and grocery store. They had been happy together, at least in her cloudy memories. He would come into her bedroom at night, sometimes with coal dust still in the slight creases of his forehead, to check under the bed for monsters, and she wouldn't let him leave until he told her a story. Her favorite had been Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. She couldn't guess how many times she'd made him tell it. *If'n you don't let me loose, I'm a-gonna haul off and hit you again*, Brer Rabbit would say, but Tar Baby would just sit there. She would lie with her eyes wide open as Brer Rabbit came unhinged, then cringe under her blankets as Brer Fox and Brer Bear hauled him off to be eaten. In the end, she would always howl along with her father, "Pleeease don't throw me in that briar patch!" and they would laugh until her mother stepped in and reminded them that it was past Amy's bedtime.

In the second grade, she came home from school one day to find a strange car in the driveway, and two of her uncles in the living room. Something about a coal truck on a wet mine road. It was February, and the day before the funeral she'd heard one of her relatives say that the ground was frozen solid. She cried because she didn't think they would be able to bury him until spring.

Now she placed her hand discreetly on the small bulge at her waist without Scott noticing. There was no movement yet. Thirty-five years was a long time. But she was already twenty-eight. And Scott would be thirty in a month.

I-69 narrowed into State Road 57, and the power lines were joined by oaks that towered over them, blocking out the sun as if they'd entered a tunnel. Scott was still silent across from her. Someone on the radio was shouting about Crazy Larry's Waterbed Superstore.

"I hope it's me," she said.

Scott's foot came down hard on the brake pedal, and he jerked the truck onto the gravelly curb, turning to her as the air conditioner pumped a faint whiff of burned rubber into the cab.

"What kind of shit is that to say?" he asked, his eyebrows digging downward.

"One of us had to say something." A lame deflection.

"Why?" He looked at her as if he expected an answer, but she didn't speak.

"Because that's what people do? Do you really think there's a routine for something

like this?” He deepened his voice in mockery, maybe of Amy. “Oh, let’s see. ‘When you want to get pregnant, do jumping jacks every morning. If you want a healthy baby, take lots of Vitamin C. When you find out either you or your wife is dying, sit on the side of the road and talk about it until it goes away.’ I wonder which one of those fucking books at home has a chapter on this annoying little goddamn predicament.”

He hit the dashboard hard enough to knock the face off the stereo. It clattered from the blue plastic cup holder to the soft gray carpet at Amy’s feet. It was the reaction she had been waiting for, and now she couldn’t decide if it was better than the silence. Blood rushed through her ears, and the sound reminded her of the seashells her father held to the side of her head when she was small, telling her to listen for the ocean.

“We’re not talking about this,” he said. “Not now.”

Amy stared at the cup holder a moment, and then looked up. The skin on his knuckle was split, and dark blood pooled in the opening, swelling outward as it oozed. She didn’t want to provoke him anymore, so she watched him bleed, thinking of the million particles in that drop fluttering around like tiny ribbons. Were they defective, or were hers? Sitting in the Ford together, one of them was broken.

“Let’s just go home,” Scott said, and pulled the car back onto the highway as the swollen evening sun hung in dark reds over the horizon.

This too shall pass. Everyone has their favorite saying, and this was her mother’s. She said it several times when Amy stopped by to deliver the news in person. When she tried to explain that no, actually nothing about this would pass, her mother pretended not to understand. “Maybe the doctor’s wrong,” she said more than once, and Amy didn’t have the resolve to try and explain how unlikely that was. Her mom had been raised in the southern part of the county, as far from medicine as a person was likely to get in Indiana. To her, doctors were more or less useless. They had let her husband die, and now all they told her was to get out more and eat less. Of course, she comforted her daughter in the ways she knew – with assurances that she and Scott would be on the prayer chain that very night, and that she’d ask around at

the next Ladies' Auxiliary meeting to see if any of her friends knew about such things. That was how it worked.

The next day, she took the day off from the bank without telling Scott and instead went to the library in Petersburg to search the shelves for information. She'd considered going to Evansville, where they had the internet, but she wasn't ready for that yet. Being in the same city as the doctor and his marble desk made her too sad to think about anything else.

Amy had gone to school with the librarian, a girl wearing a Def Leppard T-shirt behind the circulation desk, and she made polite conversation, trying to avoid tears in front of a casual acquaintance. An old woman saved her with a question about a mystery novel that didn't seem to be on the shelf, and Amy slipped off to the card catalog. She had spent her afternoons here as a child when her mother had gone shopping, digging through the shelves for the next two weeks worth of books – often Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, or pretty much anything else with the yellow “mystery” sticker on the spine. She wished her new search could be reduced to such a label.

Most of the cards in the “H” drawer were brown around the edges, and probably hadn't moved since being typed and placed there. The first few books on the subject had dates in the '50s and '60s, but then she found a crisp, white card that read *Chromosomal Abnormalities*. The publication date was '92. Three years ago. It was important to have up-to-date information, wasn't it? Of course, she didn't know what she expected to find that the doctor hadn't already told her, but she wrote down the call number and headed off, careful to take the long way around and avoid the front desk.

Above the title of the book was a logo that read “Science Facts,” as if it was part of some Time-Life series. In it, she found diagrams of chromosomes, actual cross sections of brains (*sliced like lunch meat*), and some fake family trees, showing how the disease was passed between generations. The carriers' names appeared in bright purple, her favorite color. Was she really making these sorts of connections? She flipped to a random page in the center of the book to clear her mind, and a picture in the bottom corner caught her attention. In it, a chubby woman, maybe an Eskimo, was

leaning over a man in a blue chair. She had a pleasant smile on her face and a hand on his shoulder. She looked to be no older than fifty.

But it was the man that held her attention. He wore a red shirt with suspenders, and had a long face, made longer by a scraggy beard. Glasses sat crooked on his nose. His eyes were focused on the camera, but his head was tilted back, causing him to look down his nose. His right arm was raised toward the woman at an odd angle, and he wasn't quite touching her. Loose skin hung pale on his body. In the frozen moment of the picture, he almost looked normal, but Amy could see the movement contained in the image. The struggle to tilt his head forward, the wild gestures with his arm. The woman holding him down, trying to calm him for the photograph. His smile reminded her of a running dog, lips peeled back on either side in a mix of happiness and disregard. There were hot air balloons painted on the wall behind them.

Amy's eyes began to warm, despite the air-conditioned chill of the room. She didn't want to be seen losing control, so she moved as quickly as she could without drawing attention. It didn't matter where, as long as it was away from the man and his dog-smile. After crossing through every door she could find, she stopped and began to sob as quietly as she could. After a minute or two, she regained her composure, wiping her eyes as she looked around. The periodical room. There were copies of the *Press-Dispatch* hanging on wooden newspaper sticks all around her. She'd brought her mother to this room a few times to look up old issues, usually to settle arguments at Auxiliary meetings.

She sneezed at the dust she'd stirred up with her sudden entrance. Two monstrous microfilm machines dwarfed everything else in the room, and an old Farmer's Almanac from 1985 sat on top of one. With nothing better to do while her eyes dried, she began looking through the film cabinets. She saw *February 1975*, pulled it out, and loaded it on the machine without thinking. She had her own copy of the photographs at home, of course, but the thought of looking at them here made it more immediate, as if it had just happened. There were four or five pictures of the wreck on the front page – various angles of the coal truck and its dumped cargo, a shot of the ambulance pulling away with the sheriff's deputies caught in mid-step – along

with an article headlined “Wet Roads Lead To Fatality.” It was the picture in the bottom right that she always remembered, though, because whoever took it had started clicking away before the ambulance crew finished their job. Nothing could be seen through the windshield because the hood of the car had been peeled back, but hanging out of the drivers’ door, amid the hectic scramble, was a booted foot. In her own clippings, it had turned yellow-brown over the years, but on the microfilm it was jet black, as she thought it had been in her childhood.

When Amy got home, Scott had dinner on the table. It wasn’t unusual for him to cook, but there was something about the attention to detail that struck her. Folded napkins. Potholders. He came up from the basement as she was looking over the chicken on the stove.

“Hey,” he said. “How was work?”

She’d read that pregnant women have some sort of sixth-sense, and while she didn’t really believe that, something told her that lying was not the right answer.

“I actually didn’t go to work today,” she said, watching him.

“Yeah, that’s what they said when I called.”

“Were you checking on me?”

“Not really. Just wanted you to pick up some barbeque sauce on the way home.”

“Oh.”

They sat down at the table and Scott talked about his day at work. One of the scrubbers had gone offline, and he’d had to climb the smokestack to help repair it. Amy pictured him tethered six-hundred feet in the air, probably while she was nosing about in the library. His job at the plant was often boring, but sometimes frighteningly dangerous. More than once, men had fallen to their deaths doing such work.

“So are you going to ask where I went today?” she said.

“I thought you’d tell me if you wanted to.”

“And if I don’t want to?” she asked, trying to sound playful.

“Then I won’t tell you the next time I’m hanging from a string over the plant.”

He winked and started stabbing up green beans.

“I guess I asked for that.”

“Not really. Consider it a freebie.” He popped the beans into his mouth. “Besides,” he said as he chewed, “don’t you think you’d be happier not knowing that I’m up there?”

“Probably.” *Definitely* was closer to the truth.

They finished eating and then watched some TV, Scott in his chair and Amy on the couch. It was a medical drama – a doctor was trying to diagnose a fat man’s illness before he slipped into a coma. Scott was interested, but Amy was only half-listening. The last couple of days ran together in her mind. Her own doctor, with his fake concern; the man in the red shirt and his tilted head; the face of the truck stereo knocking against her shoe; the booted foot on the microfilm screen. She mixed them as she sat there, wondering what kind of shoes the man in the red shirt wore, and if her doctor ever got angry. Scott laughed at the witty surgeon on television and his sarcastic humor. Outside, the sun had disappeared, giving way to insects crying in the night. Again, she imagined her husband dangling in the air, and she realized she had no idea what it would look like – if seeing it would make it seem safer or more terrifying. Surely they took the proper precautions. Weren’t there rules about such things? Her mind raced until she needed words to clear it.

“We should get tested,” she said. The words barely overcame the clever doctor.

Scott looked over at her, unblinking, but didn’t say anything. Instead, he rose, walked to her, and placed the remote control on her leg. He kissed her on the cheek, then walked to their bedroom and closed the door behind him as the television droned on unwatched. The look on his face had been rigid and undecipherable. The entire time they had known each other he had never hit her, or even threatened to, but she wondered if a closed fist would be preferable to this. At least when he had gotten angry in the truck, she had known his feelings.

The pale light of the flashing screen cast long shadows on the wall beside her. She wanted to follow him, try again, but she sat instead, feeling as lonely as she could ever remember, thinking of her father and his bedtime stories. She’d laughed as a child when Brer Rabbit had gotten tangled irretrievably in the Tar Baby, his struggles

only further entangling him, but it didn't seem funny now. She missed her father, and imagined the child inside of her doing the same. Or maybe its mother? Clicking off the television, she walked to the bedroom door and opened it quietly. There was a thin strip of light under the door of the bathroom, and the shower was running. She tried the knob gently, but it was locked. As she loosened her grip, a faint noise mingled with the water. Ignoring her own absurdity, she lowered herself to the floor and put her ear to the small crack. At first she couldn't make it out, and then she found a familiar pattern in the sound. He was crying.

When he came out of the bathroom ten minutes later, she was already in bed. He moved beside her, hanging his arm over her side. She had decided to let him sleep without saying anything else, but he spoke instead.

"Can we not stick this thing on one of us yet?" he said. "Maybe we can just live until something stops us. That's what most people do."

"And the baby?" she asked.

"We can deal with that, too. Besides, at least one of us will get out of dealing with a teenager." He kissed the back of her neck and rolled over. Amy draped her arm across his side, brushing her fingertips through the coarse hairs on his chest. He liked it when she did that, but she wondered if the man in the red shirt had ever felt such things.

Two weeks later, she walked into the doctor's office alone, staring again at the balding man across the wide expanse of his marble desk.

"Are you certain your husband can't be here, too, Mrs. Baker?" he asked. "It seems like the sort of situation you should both be present for."

She could see he thought it was wrong, but his opinion didn't matter to her.

"No. I'm sorry. He can't be here." She didn't want to draw it out. "I'd like to know."

"All right. You tested negative for the genetic markers that correspond with Huntington's."

Amy gave a slight reflexive lurch forward in her chair, then settled back. She was motionless for a few seconds, then stood with effort and extended her hand.

"Thank you," she said. It felt like cheating now that it was done, but she forced herself to look in his eyes. "I have to ask you to keep this between the two of us. I'm sorry." She waited for a response.

"As am I," the doctor said. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He walked out past her without a second look. Already Amy was unsure. There was no unknowing. She told herself that it was necessary, that she couldn't have been blind to it all those years. This familiar thought calmed her, and she walked out of the office and down the hall toward the parking garage.

As she drove home, she weighed the bitter new knowledge in her mind. What did she really have? A well-meaning mother, a dead father, few good friends, and a half-formed family that would fail. She thought of her dad now, and for the first time wondered if he hadn't gotten out at the right time, missed so much of the hurt that came after. There were plenty of fat oaks along her side of the road, and she imagined the headlights wrapping around the tree, staring at each other; the sick, popping light-bulb sound of the impact. Then she thought of Scott, hanging from a thread in the sky, and continued home, oblivious to the passing world.