

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

John J. Larison for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 20, 2007.

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Tracy Daugherty

Northwest of Normal is the first part of a novel that takes place along an imaginary Oregon river called the Ipsyniho. The story grows from valley's fertile loam like a blackberry vine, entangling a group of locals—fly fishing guides and midwives, artists and dope growers—just as a posse of wealthy out-of-towners threaten the vary river on which they depend.

The novel attempts to explore a specific western place in a time of drastic change (old resource extraction gives way to new eco-tourism; old John Wayne masculinity gives way to a new sensitive-manliness; old eat-whatever gives way to new organic-only; old weather-as-consistent gives way to new apocalyptic climate change) in an effort to unearth a more sustainable relationship to ourselves, our community, and our planet. The novel envisions a world where people grow to see their environment and their neighbors as more than a product for their use—an “It” in the words of Martin Buber.

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Northwest of Normal

by
John J. Larison

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

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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.

John J. Larison, Author

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Northwest of Normal

Chapter 1

This is no paradise, Andy Trib thought, leaning against the side of his driftboat in the morning fog. And yet it felt good to be in his waders again, to be listening to the Ipsyniho River slosh and splatter below: a familiar voice, unchanged by the year away.

Eight rods lay ready in the boat, fly rods laced with neon lines and fine wire hooks—strapped tight with various furs and feathers. Seven boxes of flies: two stuffed with mayfly imitations, two with caddis, one with stoneflies, plus two more boxes of bright steelhead patterns. Three life vests. One landing net. A cooler with sandwiches and water. A thermos, his own private thermos, heavy with mud-colored coffee. He poured a cup now, blew the steam off the top, and waited.

The sports arrived fifteen minutes late: a father, tall, lean, with broad shoulders, and his underdeveloped son, short, chubby, with shoulders narrower than his hips. Early forties and mid-teens, Andy guessed, although the son could have passed for twelve if he didn't have a grove of pimples sprouting from his chin. After handshakes—the father's name was Thomas—and thirty seconds of Thomas's briny bragging, Andy guessed the man to be a corporate lawyer or a large-firm contractor used to a small squad of minions working the pumps of his ego.

"I do a lot of fishing with the boys from the firm." Thomas stroked his goatee. "Mostly big fish. A bunch of us did a trip to Costa Rica for sailfish last year. But my boy, Derek, well, he's more into video games."

Derek traced lines in the gravel with the toe of his shoe.

“What games do you play?” Andy asked the boy. He’d need to develop some sort of relationship with the kid in order to teach him anything.

“Medal of Valor,” Derek said. “And Pimp Rollin’. Multiplayers mostly. We’ve got the all team record for--”

“We’ve been cutting back his hours,” Thomas said. “Derek knows video games will get him nowhere.”

Derek returned to his toe drawing.

Andy unhitched the boat and dumped it into the river. A sixteen foot aluminum driftboat, powered exclusively with two nine-foot oars and a good bit of sweat. The thing glowed against the dark water, a marvel of old school simplicity. The design had changed little since Herbert Hoover came west to fish from one. With a haul as flat as a pizza pan, it sat a scant three inches in the water when fully loaded. Curved like the leg of a rocking chair, it’d rock through the heaviest West Coast whitewater. The boat’s physical dimensions coupled with its feather weight—only three hundred and fifty-two pounds—allowed an experienced oarsmen to hold it dead still in the fastest current and actually guide it upstream in slower water. Rowing one was as close as a human could come to defying the physical properties of flowing water, to moving with the supple upstream grace of an anadromous fish, to taking tender treads on open water.

Derek climbed into the boat, wobbling with the river’s waves, and took his seat. Andy handed him a life vest and spoke as if they were sharing a secret. “Keep this nearby and put it on any time you feel the need.” The boy nodded and tossed the vest to the bottom of the boat.

“You should know, Guide,” Thomas said, stuffing his legs into his waders, “we’re only interested in steelhead.”

“Call me Andy.” Andy stuffed his hands under his belt and heard himself slip into his guide voice. Deeper, more confident. Even now, almost ten years since his first paid trip, he was still doing his best impression of the only real guide he knew—Danny Goodman. “This year’s been good for steelies. Lots of fish in the river. But it can be tough. Thomas McGuane once said, what you need to catch steelhead is a strong arm and a room temperature IQ. We might go all day and not get a hit.”

“I’m not worried about tough. My boy and I can handle tough.”

“For sure,” Andy said, “I can tell that already.” He oared downstream towards the Pressure Hole, the first stop on a long steelhead trip.

*

Andy’s nose was still sunburned from the Micronesian sun. He’d only been back three days. Just long enough to retrieve his home from storage and pay the deposit on his old place. He needed work—three or four trips would give him the cash to get reestablished in the valley, buy a new set of oars, a fridge full of food, a few bottles of good wine for his friends. All he needed to do was call the Ipsyniho Fly Shop, tell Rodger, the owner, he was back in town and ready for work. September always provided a surplus of paying clients—the fish were willing and the weather nice. But Danny Goodman might answer. Any given day, it might be Danny at the counter.

So he'd called Northwest Stream Born, a fly shop an hour away, in Eugene. He'd bailed them out a few summers before, a week's worth of work when Starbucks held a corporate play date on the upper river. They owed him a favor, and they delivered, three trips—although not without giving him a little shit.

“But you’ve been gone a year,” Alan, Stream Born’s owner, said. “Take a few weeks. Get to know your river again. The Ipsyniho had a big flood while you were gone, you know.”

“It’s my homewaters,” Andy had said, using a toothpick to pry a popcorn shard from his teeth. “I could be gone fifty years, take a client out the first day back, and nail fish.”

But now, as he oared the boat downstream with Thomas casting off the front, he realized hubris was coming back to bite him in the ass. A once perfect fish-holding trough was now a beach high and dry in the morning sun. A once clean riffle was now streaked with hundred foot Douglas firs and their waterlogged root balls. And in one place, the serpentine S-curve of the river bed was now a straight line. Not just any flood. A boomer deluge, the dreaded hundred-year-flood maybe, had scraped the river valley clean. It had probably come in March when the snow melt met a spring monsoon from the south. Back in March, Andy had been pointing out sea-run brown trout to vacationing Americans in Terra Del Fuego.

“I thought you said you fished for steelhead,” Thomas said.

Andy backed the stern of the boat onto the shore, dropping the anchor. Even if the river had changed, the fish hadn’t. They’d be holding in the transition water between the fast and slow, deep and shallow.

“This is the Pressure Hole,” Andy said. Or it used to be. The two Volkswagon-sized boulders near the tailout were gone, buried under mounds of displaced gravel. Normally, he’d have told Thomas to cast upstream of the furthest boulder and swing the fly on a taut line towards the near shore. But now...

“Most of the fish hold in that trough,” Andy said, his finger pointing to a line of dark water in the middle of the run.

“You catch them there?”

“Six out of ten trips,” Andy said. “You’re best off casting from upstream.”

With Derek and Thomas knee-deep in the Pressure Hole’s flows—the father’s line a floating tangle over his head, the son’s line swirling lifeless around his apathetic feet—Andy climbed the bank and hid amongst the blackberries. Just two minutes, he promised himself, then he’d come back and set them straight.

What hadn’t changed was the smell. The morning air—chilled by the lengthening fall night—hung like syrup over the brush. Blackberries, cracking at their seams, dumped purple nectar onto the emerald leaves below, the sweet aroma hanging heavy over the river. Northwest fall.

“Guide.” A voice echoed off the river.

Andy pretended not to hear. Under the sweet smell of the berries flowed the green musk of the river. Every river smelled differently, its own body odor. He could name a dozen rivers by a whiff alone. The Rio Margino in Chile: milky blue water fed by a receding glacier; it smelled chalky like a blackboard eraser. Fall Creek back in his hometown of Ithaca: yellow stones wearing a brown skin of fertile growth; after wading its warm flows in sandals, your legs smelled of compost. But no river

pheromones tugged at him like the Ipsyniho's. Emerald and turquoise stones under diamond-clear water, a clean smell like icy snow over a lavender garden. Andy took deep hits and shut his eyes. The river and its bleeding blackberries, his homemade apple pie.

Andy plucked a couple, popping one into his mouth and eying the other. The chunky globs held to the center like the moon held to the earth or the earth to the sun. Sunlight glistened like stars along the moist sides. Constellations. The Big Dipper near the top. The Southern Cross near the bottom. He turned the berry in his fingers, staining his skin with the purple juice.

"Guide!"

Andy plucked a baseball cap load of the berries and made his way to the river's edge.

Thomas was midstream. "I've been calling."

"Taking a leak. Sorry."

"Derek got himself into a serious mess. Fix it, would you?"

"Of course."

Derek's line, which should have been a straight chartreuse ribbon eager to dance with the slightest flick of the rod, sat like a fallen bird's nest atop the water. The kid kept it idling there from his sit within the boat, his feet up, his eyes shut.

"Here," Andy said, passing over his hat.

Derek cracked open his eye, looking at the berries. "What are they?"

"You've never had blackberries before?"

The kid reached for the berries, and forced three or four into his mouth. He squinted liked he'd just eaten a lemon seed. "Blackberry jelly beans are better."

The knot was a complex one, typical of a bored angler who continues to cast hoping to convince the damn tangle to untangle itself.

"Your dad made you come?" Andy asked. His fingertips unthreaded curls.

"Yep," Derek said.

They both looked downstream, catching the moment Thomas snagged his fly in the tree behind him. The man looked upstream to see if his failure had been spotted, then swore loudly for the benefit of his audience.

"I hate fishing," Derek said.

"Makes sense," Andy said.

He worked at the knot, feeding slack into the bundle. If he went at the knot willy-nilly, pulling at loops randomly, the knot would tighten up on itself. The trick with windknots like this one, was to find its core tangle. By feeding slack into the knot, the core tangle would become suddenly obvious, and once it was found, the entire knot would reveal itself—he'd know which loop to free in what order.

As Andy worked, Derek pulled a handheld television set from his bag. His fingers blurred over the red buttons along the bottom. Not a TV, a portable video game. A little figure ran across the screen, jumping to avoid clawing creatures.

Andy fixed the knot, reeled in the line, and laid the rod along the boat's gunwale. He walked down the shore to Thomas—receiving a decent tip at the end of the day would depend on a little one-on-one connection. "Any strikes?"

"I hooked two," Thomas said, "but they both spit the hook."

“Good start.” The man’s line contained no fly, although he continued to cast as if it did. He’d probably had lost it in the tree. “What do you say we try a new fly?” Andy asked.

Thomas passed him the rod and crossed his empty arms. He looked up at Derek. “Couldn’t get him interested, huh?”

Andy shook his head.

“His mother and I,” Thomas said, staring upstream. He seemed to forget what he was saying. “Whatever. We do what we can. It’s hard when you live six hours apart.”

“Yes it is,” Andy said.

“Do you have kids?”

“No.” Andy bit through the end of the leader. “My parents, though, you know.”

Thomas nodded, looked out across the river. For a moment, they stood there together, quiet. “I love this valley,” Thomas finally said. “The way the river mirrors the green trees.”

Andy reexamined his sport. The way he smiled at the water.

Thomas took a deep breath. “Have you ever noticed the smell of this place?”

“I have,” Andy said.

“It smells like—” Thomas shut his eyes, a gourmand trying to describe a swirling wine.

“—the desert after a thunderstorm?”

“—untapped potential.”

Andy decided on an Egg Sucking Leech and slipped the leader through the eye. “A regular paradise, isn’t it.”

“I’m working on getting myself a piece of this place,” Thomas said. “A slice of heaven to pass on to the boy. Talked to a realtor about it already. I wish my father had done something like that for me.”

Andy bit free the tag end from the knot he tied. The leech dangled ready for use.

“He’ll appreciate it later,” Thomas said, studying Derek in the boat. “The realtor I talked to specializes in river frontage. Told me about Steamboat Creek. You ever heard of it?”

He had. Steamboat Creek poured into the river upstream, just a mile down from the dam that sealed off the upper river from migrating fish. Eighty-eight percent of the Ipsyniho’s wild steelhead spawned there.

Thomas took the rod back and checked the fly over. “You sure about this one?” he said.

Andy nodded. “I’m sure. What about Steamboat?”

“The golf course is the real attraction. Pre-construction rates, if you buy in now. But,” he said, looking at the hole in Andy’s sweater, “I’m sure you’ve already got a nice place.”

*

Farther downstream, as the morning turned the water orange and Thomas worked his fly from the bow of the boat—talking all the while of a moose he’d killed in the Yukon while on a hunt with some colleagues—Andy spotted the grey shape of a

fish. A steelhead. A fine steelhead of ten or twelve pounds, tucked tight to the back of a pumpkin-sized rock. The guide in him started to speak, to point out the fish and tell the sport where to place his cast. But he stopped himself with a cough. The fish rose as Andy watched, opening its white mouth to take something in the current, before settling back to its lie.

Andy rowed the boat back upstream. “How many pounds do you think your moose would have weighed if that bear hadn’t gnawed on him?” he asked Thomas.

Andy positioned the boat fifty feet above the fish and dropped the anchor. The anchor rope hummed as it sliced through the current. He grabbed a thick steelhead rod, tugging at the leader to check the knots, and handed it to a nearly asleep Derek. Before the kid could say no, Andy helped him pull line from the reel. “Here, let your fly go below the boat. Just let it hang there. Keep sleeping if you want.”

While Thomas blathered on, Andy pointed his best guide finger towards a break in the current along the far bank. “Hit that one, Sir. A buddy of mine nailed a brute from there last week.”

“A steelhead?”

“A real hog.”

Thomas made the cast quickly, forgetting about moose and bears.

Andy poured a cup of coffee from his thermos, the creamy brew steaming in the cool air. He smiled, enjoying the final moments of calm.

Then, the pulsing screams of Derek’s reel and the fly line vanishing into a hole in the river’s surface. Derek jumped to his feet and raised the long fly rod towards the sky. “Holy fucking shit!” he screamed, “Holy fucking Jesus” as the fish rushed

downstream—the power of the creature torquing the kid’s body. Thomas dropped his rod and started to reach for his son’s. But Andy stepped to the son’s side, knocking Thomas’s arm wide. He pretended to adjust the drag setting on the reel.

The line razored open the water, a thread of river climbing the monofilament. And then it was beside them, airborne, its stainless steel body contorting wildly—a heavy bird taking flight. In a final effort to shed the neon fly line giving chase off its tail, the fish dove under the rushing rapid, now fighting both the rod and the current.

“Thomas, the net *por favor*.”

Andy pulled the anchor and brought the boat to the cobbled shore, helping its occupants into the calm water. With a little tutoring, Derek convinced the tired fish to leave the rapid and come nearby.

“When it turns on its side, slip the net under him.” In a moment, an arm-length fish—chrome enough to see your reflection in its skin—sat limp in the net, its lucid eye examining the men peering in on him.

“I want to kill it,” Derek said.

Andy got on his knees and lifted the fish from the net. A buck, its gaping mouth starting behind its eye. A solid twelve pounds, thick and heavy through the shoulders. The first steelhead Andy had touched in a year. Its adipose fin, the one right behind the dorsal fin along the fish’s back, was complete—uncut by a hatchery employee’s scissors. Its parents had spawned naturally somewhere in the valley, probably in some cobbled tailout up Steamboat Creek. The young fish had probably lived for two years near the site of its birth, before heading downriver and out to sea. By the size of the fish, Andy guessed it’d lived two or three years in the open ocean,

likely traveling all the way to the Japanese coastline following schools of pelagic baitfish before submitting to the magnetic pull of its home river and the work to be done there. The steelhead writhed in his hands, its gills working for water-bound air.

“We have to let it go,” Andy said. “It’s the law.” He pretended to be as sorry as his clients.

The fish gave a massive tail stroke—splashing them with a wall of river—and was gone.

“We should have gotten a picture,” Thomas said, squeezing Derek’s shoulder. “Nobody’s going to believe this at work.”

*

A pair of twenty dollar bills make a disproportionate bulge in an empty pocket. Andy passed his fingers over the lump as he pulled out of the boat ramp parking lot onto River Road. It was a miracle he’d gotten a tip at all after nearly missing the take-out. The river had changed course, creating a new island, and he’d positioned the boat on the far side from the ramp. He’d had to dump Thomas and Derek on the beach and muscle the boat back upstream against the current. “Don’t you live on this river?” Derek had yelled.

He needed to do some fishing on his own. Get to know the river’s new contours, where the fish stacked up. He needed to talk to somebody who still knew the water.

He couldn’t avoid Danny forever. The valley was too small, the river too intimate. Before long, they’d surely see each other on the water. And then what

would he say? He'd been in town for a few weeks and not called? Danny would know something was wrong, if he didn't already. If Shoshana hadn't already told him.

The town of Ipsyniho, a cluster of shops between the road and the banks of the river, sat at highway mile marker forty-six. The fly shop, which sat near the Co-op and The Keystoner Diner, overlooked the road. The valley there widened out, the ridges spreading apart and making way for farmland. Organic blueberry farms, hazelnut orchards, and endless rows of tear shaped Christmas trees lined the road. If he kept heading downstream, the valley would meet the Coast Range at mile marker twenty-two, the ridges pinching the highway and the river through a narrow canyon before spilling out into tidewater. For a moment, he considered driving all the way, selling his truck and boat at the port, and stowing away on a ship back across the Pacific.

He needed to stop at the fly shop now. He was running a trout trip the next day, starting at dawn. A trout trip. The clients insisted on fishing only dry flies. Last year, he would have taken them to Leaburg Flats, a quarter mile riffle where the caddis came off in thick clouds. But with the flood? He had no choice.

Danny's truck was parked in front of the fly shop, backed into the same slot he'd used for ten years. The same gray scares lined the body, old dents where the paint had peeled free. But on the front bumper he saw something new, a yellow and blue bumper sticker: BIODIESEL. Andy pushed through the shop door, and the familiar bells announced his entrance.

"No shit!" Danny said coming around the counter. "You're alive!" His fiery red hair was as stoked and blazing as ever. "There goes ten bucks."

Andy stuck out his hand, but Danny pushed it aside and embraced his friend, beating back the intimacy with firm slaps on the back.

Danny held Andy at an arm's length. "With skin that burned, you must of spent the last fourteen months on a bonefish flat."

A pair of thin wrinkles fanned out from the corners of Danny's eyes. Andy wondered if they were new or if he just hadn't noticed them before. "I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said.

"What, the wedding? Just a little fancied up talking followed by a serious bender." Danny glanced at his shoes before continuing. "Tell me where? The Bahamas?"

"No," Andy said.

Danny waited, his eyebrows hanging high—he wanted details.

"Mexico, Belize, Chile, then over to Micronesia. Everywhere but where I should have been."

Danny whispered, "Terra Del Fuego?"

Andy nodded.

Danny punched him in the shoulder and tossed his head back laughing. "Fuck you, that's great. You work the lodge scene?"

"Exactly. They're desperate for an English speaker who can give casting tips down there. In the Islands too. One lodge in Patagonia sent a car two days through the mountains just to pick me up. Easy money. We could work it together one winter, if you wanted."

“Right, right,” Danny said. His forearms were stronger than before, each wider than the fist below it, rowing veins bulging over the muscles. “I bet Bridge you were on some Jamaican green-water cove living off dope and shellfish and that we’d never see you again. But he said that was my fantasy. ‘Trib wouldn’t miss another Carnival for all the tropical pot in the world.’”

Andy stuffed his hands in his pockets, smiled. Wondering what to say next. He’d known Danny Goodman along time and he’d never had to search for words before.

“Well, goddamn,” Danny said. “You have to get your skinny ass over to our new place. Have some dinner. See all that’s changed. What do you got tonight? Shosh will scream when she sees you.”

Shoshana. “Yeah, I probably shouldn’t, not tonight.”

Danny laughed. “Yeah right. I’ll close this place and you can follow me up River Road.”

“I’ve got a trip tomorrow,” Andy said. “And today didn’t go so well.”

“Stop bullshitting me,” Danny said. “Trip, shrip. You’re coming over.” He leaned over the counter and turned the key on the cash register. “So, you’ve been out on the river already.”

Andy swallowed. “Stream Born sent me a trip before I’d even gotten settled. Haven’t fished once on my own yet.”

“Stream Born?” Danny said. “Why didn’t you call over here? I could have switched the bookings and given you a few trips.”

“And stick you in an awkward spot with Rodger?” Rodger, the owner, kept a suspicious eye on everything, including the guiding schedule. “Not a chance.”

“It wouldn’t have been any big deal,” Danny jammed some papers into a drawer.

Andy checked his watch. “A little early for closing?”

“Rodger can lick my balls. He’s drinking bourbon with those White Oak bastards. Won’t be driving past the shop anytime soon.”

“White Oak?” Andy asked.

Danny pointed towards the door, flipping off the lights. “A lot has changed around here, my friend.”

*

Andy followed Danny back upstream along River Road as the dropping sun climbed the mountains. Within a couple miles, they left the flat agricultural section of the valley, the ridges rising to ten and two overhead. Huge Douglas firs held their mossy arms over the road, speeding log trucks sending storms through the fingers.

The road swerved in and out from the river’s edge, and would continue to do so for the next forty miles or so. But as the foothills gave way to the Cascades, the river views would become more and more fleeting. Eventually, River Road would leave the river altogether—becoming Highway 121 on a map—before summiting the pass and dropping into the high desert of central Oregon.

Houses were few and far between along the upper river, the land rarely providing a flat and dry place to build. There were the mega mansions along Missouri Bend, a dozen or so three story homes built within casting distance of the river.

They'd be gone soon enough, once the river had a change of heart. And of course there was the Calapooia village somewhere up Deer Creek, although Andy had never dared venture up there. He wondered now, as he followed Danny upriver, where he and Shoshana had found a place to rent this high. A lucky find for sure.

Danny still drove the same, too fast around the corners. Andy could hear Danny's tires squeaking on the sharp ones, and imagined him working the pedals and gears. Danny drove like a crab walked, each limb shifting and turning and clutching and gassing, always in motion.

Years ago, they'd piled into Danny's truck and raced upstream in the morning darkness, trying to beat the dawn crowd at the dam. Just as they came around the blind corner near the Millican Boat Ramp, a deer appeared in their headlights. A white deer, perfectly albino, its eyes laser red. Danny had braked just when he needed to accelerate if the truck was to hold traction around the corner, and they'd spun wildly through a stand of five-foot trees and into a meadow. For a moment, neither of them said anything. Stared at their limbs, wiggled their toes. Then Danny broke out laughing and Andy did too, twenty-year olds, still alive, as always.

Just past mile marker sixty, Andy followed Danny up a thin gravel road that threaded Buckskin Valley—Buckskin Creek, a ten-inch trout stream paralleling the road. Andy had often fished the confluence of Buckskin and the Ipsyniho, the smaller creek drawing fish to its cool flows in the summer. But he'd never known there were houses up the slender valley. At the top, just past a mailbox painted the color of sunset, they turned down a driveway, and there, tucked into the ridge, sat a yurt—or actually, two yurts connected by what looked to be a hallway. The cedar siding

glowed orange in the dusk, and a deck protruded off into the woods. A domed skylight in the center of each yurt blasted warm light onto the surrounding fir trees. Smoke spiraled up from a chimney. The soil around the home was still bare, cleared only a few months prior—not even a blackberry vine grew yet. A wide garden sat nearby—Shoshana’s work no doubt—protected by a high elk-proof fence. On a wooden sign above the fence’s gate, in wobbly aquatic letters, read the words: “Arousal From Below.”

Danny’s aluminum driftboat sat tipped up along the side of the house. Beside it was another driftboat, a new fiberglass boat, “Osprey Guide Service” written on the side, the name of Danny’s company. A fiberglass boat cut silently through the current, bounced off rocks without cracking the occupants’ teeth, and flexed its haul to help clear shallow riffles. Andy had only ridden in one once, on a river in Montana. Danny had the most expensive version, low sides for easier mobility in strong winds, and a second casting platform on the back. Probably cost twice what a new aluminum boat did, enough that no other guides in the valley owned one. At least no one owned one a year ago. A lot had gone well for Danny since Andy left.

The yurt’s door opened. Shoshana appeared, a book in her hand. She wore flip flops and paint-smeared jeans, an old tee-shirt. Her brown hair absorbed the evening light. It’d smell of lavender if he got closer.

Andy wiped the sweat from his forehead and stepped out of his truck. He had no choice now.

She stayed on the porch, one finger keeping her page in the book.

“Look who I found floating downriver,” Danny said, slamming his truck door.

Their eyes met, the first time in fourteen months. “Some flotsam,” she muttered. She chewed the side of her cheek, and he knew she wanted a cigarette.

They needed to hug. This is what old friends did. He took his eyes from hers and came up the deck. She laid her arms around him, patting his shoulders. A balloon’s distance stayed between their bodies, but her hair blew across his face. It smelled just like he remembered.

“You look like a tomato,” she said, stepping away. Her finger slipped from the book.

“I know,” he said. “And an overripe one at that.” That Micronesian sun had burned the hell out of him with no ozone layer to tame it. “You lost your place,” he said, struggling to find a joke.

She stared at him like she’d fallen asleep with her eyes open.

“In the book,” he said. It was a worn copy of *Sometimes a Great Notion*. She’d told him about it years ago, insisted he read it. The book had changed him, made him see the world, Oregon differently.

Danny put his hand on her arm, and she turned and kissed him instantly. “Come in,” she said. “For god’s sake, come in.”

The yurt smelled of Doug fir and garlic. It wasn’t rustic like he’d expected. Tile floors. Stone counters. Stainless steel appliances. The Grateful Dead played quietly from recessed speakers in the ceiling, and a leather chair sat beside a south-facing window, the valentine-red quilt Andy had given Shoshana in college strewn over the top. A piece of wood snapped and collapsed in the stove.

“Hey cretin,” Shoshana said, pointing at Andy’s shoes.

He saw that he'd tracked red dust and fir needles over the clean floor.

Carefully, he set the shoes beside the others and asked after the vacuum cleaner.

"Don't be a mensch," Shoshana said. She stepped into the middle of the room, extending her finger towards the blanket in the chair. "The tour begins with my reading nook," she said. "The most important space in the house."

The blanket had a stain on it, coffee maybe. "What do you think of *Sometimes a Great Notion* this time through?" he asked.

"Still makes me glad I didn't live in Oregon in the fifties." She looked at the book in her hands, then tossed it on the chair. "You know how it is: Each time through you see something new."

"He wants a tour, not a college study group." Danny laughed nervously, like he always did when people talked about books or college—afraid, Andy figured, that he might laugh too late at a joke.

Shoshana pointed across the room. "Danny's fly tying nook. Notice the feathers and hairs exploding over the surrounding area. If you walk there, you're bound to get a hook buried in your big toe."

"Barbless, I hope," Andy said.

"Nooks," Danny said. "Everything is a nook now."

"What else do you do with a yurt?" Andy said.

"Got to nookitize it," Shoshana said. "We've become master nookitizers."

Danny signaled Andy to follow him down the hallway, and they stopped at a wide doorway. "The chambre de amor, the love shack, the nerve center of our union—this is no nook."

Danny stepped inside, waving for Andy to do the same.

The bed. Red and orange and big. The imprints of their bodies were discernable in the disheveled sheets. Andy leaned against the doorframe, keeping a healthy distance.

“Get in here,” Danny said. “You’ve got to feel the ambiance.”

Andy took off his hat, and stepped inside, determined only to look up. Shoshana stayed in the hallway.

A round room, lit with recessed lights, a domed skylight bulbing out the top.

“Can’t you feel the love?” Danny said.

“What’s this?” Andy pointed at something that wasn’t the bed, a framed document on the wall. The large writing on top appeared to be Hebrew, and the flowing cursive on the bottom looked to be an English translation. The English section was longer, the modern language filled with superfluous turns on the path to the same meaning. Shoshana could have read the Hebrew if he asked—he still remembered the glottal sounds, her voice like sandaled feet on cobbled ground.

“The Kattubah,” Danny said.

Shoshana’s voice from the doorway: “He won’t know what that is.”

“The Jewish marriage document,” Andy said quickly—wishing now that he hadn’t asked about the thing in the first place. He remembered the word, though he’d fled south before seeing the actual thing.

“We all signed it,” Danny said, pointing to the signatures along the bottom, four of them. “You were supposed to be my witness.”

“I remember,” Andy said. His stomach cramped and he must have flinched because Danny asked if he was all right.

“I’m fine,” he said.

In the kitchen, Danny filled a bowl with nuts and sliced a few slivers of mild cheddar cheese. Andy plucked at the food, drinking a glass of river-cold water between bites. Shoshana disappeared to the bathroom.

“Great house,” Andy said.

“Isn’t it? Energy efficient gas-powered heating—steam is pumped through tubes in the floor. Environmentally safe bamboo flooring. Sustainably harvested lumber. The whole deal.”

He couldn’t remember Danny—the country boy born and raised—saying words like “energy efficient” and “environmentally safe.” Shoshana had been a good influence. Andy nodded towards the driveway. “I see you’re running biodiesel these days?”

“Only way to go. I looked into electric, but nothing that runs on volts has the horsepower to pull the boat. Shosh and some other neo-hippies convinced the Co-op to put in a biodiesel pump behind the shop.”

Andy wondered if maybe one of these neo-hippies owned the house. “Who’s letting you rent this place?”

“Rent? Oh, no brother. You can’t rent a place like this. We bought the land from Bridge and he and I built the place.”

“You paid for this?” Andy examined the ceiling, the tile floors. Not cheap. “And you built it yourself?”

“Bridge knows what he’s doing,” Danny said.

Bridge was a long time resident of the valley, a contractor who lived with his lady friend, Rita, up Steamboat Creek. Good people. Andy had missed them desperately.

A door revealed a flushing toilet, and Shoshana walked back into the room, drying her hands on Danny’s shirt. Danny didn’t seem to notice. “I would have been happy with a one room cabin, but Shosh wanted it done right. And really, building sustainably is the only way to go these days—if you give a drowning-shit about your kid’s future.” He opened the refrigerator and extracted three beers.

Shoshana grabbed the bottle opener from a drawer. “We got some cash from the wedding. Figured we might as well put it to good use.”

Danny’s parents didn’t have money to give, Andy knew that. They both worked blue-collar jobs in Eugene and rented their own house. “Your parents?” Andy asked, avoiding Shoshana’s eyes. They lived in Boston, both professionals.

She cracked open the beers. “You know how they are,” she said. “They thought I’d never find a nice Jewish boy way out here on the fringes of the Diaspora.”

Andy slammed a fistful of nuts into his mouth. He remembered when he’d met her parents, years ago. When they’d come to visit Shoshana in Eugene. How she’d let go of his hand as the two of them neared her parents’ hotel room door.

“Awful nice of Bridge to sell you the land,” Andy said. “Did he give you a friend’s discount on the labor?”

Danny passed around the beers. “This lot was zoned residential back in the eighties and Bridge just sat on it ever since. We got really lucky. Isn’t that right, Shosh?”

She put her beer to her lips and nodded with her eyes closed. That’s when Andy realized she wasn’t drinking beer at all but a bottle of ginger brew.

“To life,” Danny said, holding his beer between them.

Andy lifted the cold bottle. “To your place,” he said.

“L’chaim,” Shoshana said.

*

The first beer helped, but the third really did the trick. He hadn’t done much drinking in the past year—the alcohol hit his mind with the sloppy speed of a flash flood. By the time the sun set, he laughed freely, the secrets a distant memory.

The beers loosened Danny up too. He tossed a hazelnut into the air, threw back his head to catch it in his mouth, and blinked as the nut hit him in the forehead. “Tell Andy about the guy who came into your studio,” he said.

Shoshana shook her head. “Andy doesn’t want to hear that. Let’s make some dinner. I need to eat.”

Danny pushed Andy’s shoulder. “He wants to hear it. He’ll love it. Don’t you, Andy?”

She opened the freezer. “We’ve got organic pizza, veggie lasagna...”

Danny begged. “I’ll rub your feet later.”

She turned around and her eyes met Danny’s. “Feet and shoulders, or no deal.”

“You name the price,” Danny said.

She squinted at him. “You better not fall asleep on me.” Then she turned to Andy, without really looking at him. “So this guy calls me up,” she started, “says he wants to see my stuff. I thought he wanted to buy a batik or something, so I told him to meet me at the studio. He’s waiting for me when I get there, waiting in a big SUV, wearing a suit and tie, the whole deal. Definitely from Eugene or Portland. I let him in, and he spends a few minutes looking around, saying things like, ‘interesting,’ ‘provocative,’ ‘robust colors here.’ But I can tell this guy isn’t seeing what he wants. Finally he turns to me and whispers, ‘You got any, you know, glass?’”

“Glass?”

“Glass. ‘What do you mean?’ I ask. ‘You know...’ he says.” Shoshana raised her eyebrows suggestively, towards Danny. “‘Actually, I don’t Sir.’ He huffs and stands up like he’s suddenly fed up with me, mutters something under his breath.”

Shoshana stood up and puffed out her chest like an ape. Andy had always loved her stories; once she started, no one in the room could look away.

“So I ask him to describe what he’s looking for, and maybe I’ve got it in the back. He swipes a piece of paper from the counter and pulls out a pen from his pocket. ‘This,’ he says, and draws a cucumber. ‘You want a drawing of a cucumber?’ I ask. ‘No,’ he says, and leans in real close, ‘I need a—my wife actually—would like an adult pleasure device. For when I’m out of town on business trips, you understand.’

“Like a dildo?” Andy asked.

“Like a dildo.” Shoshana nodded.

Andy didn't know where to aim his eyes. He targeted his beer.

"You should have seen his face when I told him he had the wrong shop," Shoshana said.

"Yeah right, he had a wife," Danny said. "Hundred percent flamer!"

Shoshana tossed a nut, hitting Danny in the cheek. "Don't be a buffoon. I'm not telling that story again. Two foot rubs."

Andy remembered studying Shoshana's artwork at the last Carnival he attended, spending the heat of the afternoon looking for something significant in the curving lines. He didn't know precisely what it was he was looking for, and he never found it. "Do you have a booth at Carnival this year?" he asked her.

Shoshana nodded. "They gave me a new space. No room to camp. If I didn't have the Community Booth I'd have to sleep under the table."

"Community Booth?" Andy asked.

Shoshana looked at Danny. "He hasn't told you about Trey and Misty?"

"I told you lots has changed around here since you left," Danny said to Andy.

"Trey is Danny's new best friend," Shoshana said into her ginger brew.

Danny squinted at her, then turned to Andy and said, "He and his wife...he and his partner, Misty, are starting a community here in the valley. Homes like these."

"You're friends with a developer?" Andy said before he could catch himself.

"He's not a developer."

"Bullshit," Shoshana said. "He used to be a realtor down south and now he wants to develop the river. Ask where he wants to build the community," Shoshana said to Andy.

Danny walked over to the stove and opened the door.

“Where?” Andy said.

Danny crammed a new quarter into the heat. “You know how land is out here.” The fire crackled as the new wood disappeared in a yellow wall of flame.

“Near the confluence of Steamboat and the Ipsyniho.”

“Can you believe that?” Shoshana said. “Danny Goodman helping to develop the Ipsyniho Valley.”

“Fuck that,” Danny said. His temper hadn’t abated in the last year. He walked back to the counter, glaring at Shoshana. “The confluence is getting developed. The zoning commission decided that for us. Now it’s just a matter of how it gets developed.”

She smiled at him. “All I’m saying is you weren’t interested in any of this business until Trey came around.”

Danny pushed the bowl of nuts across the counter, and it cascaded to the floor and exploded. The shards pinged against the refrigerator. Danny locked his jaw and stared. He looked three times bigger when he was mad.

Shoshana wasn’t flustered. She seemed so much harder now, more confident. “That’s no way to act,” she said and handed him the broom.

Andy pushed away from the counter and ducked into the bathroom in the hallway.

Danny was known in the valley for his lava temper. Once, years before, while Andy was finishing school and Danny was already guiding full-time, a story had traveled through the fishing grapevine. The counter jockey at Northwest Stream Born

had laughed as he told it. Supposedly, a client had chuckled under his breath at Danny while casting from the bow of the boat—over what, no one knew. In the same moment, Danny punched one oar and pulled the other, promptly dumping the Sport into the cold river. The man had nearly drowned and threatened to sue. Later, when Andy asked Danny about the incident, he shook his head and said, “Douche bag got what he had coming.” He’d say no more, still steaming about the incident. But for weeks, other guides were buying Danny beers.

Andy had always traced Danny’s temper to his origins in the valley. He’d grown up in Ipsyniho, the son of Jon and Nancy, a mill worker and a waitress. Neither seemed to have any friends—no one ever asked Danny how his parents were making out. Maybe they had been shut-ins. But in a valley of white Baptist and Methodist churches—nearly all of which had been bought and made into shops now—the Goodman’s religion must have been the subject of gossip. What did they have against Jesus? And why not celebrate Christmas? The old hippies that peppered the valley wouldn’t have thought twice about it. Many of them didn’t celebrate mainstream holidays either. But then again, the old hippies wouldn’t have overlooked how Mr. Goodman made his living. What kind of people would destroy the forests for quick cash?

Danny had found his place knee-deep in the Ipsyniho’s splashing flows, amongst the ospreys and otters and caddis flies. Lots of people fly fished—it required a level of single-mindedness that blinded a person to the shoreside trivialities of life. But Danny didn’t fish to relax. One time when they first started fishing together, over

a decade before, Danny had said, “I like the way you fish, Andy. It’s like there’s a monster on your ass, and if you slow down, you’ll end up somebody else’s bait.”

Danny adolescence arrived at the end of an era, just as the trees ran out. And as the mills closed and the last of the money was trucked down River Road, a flood of cheap land hit the market. In less than a decade every available acre had been bought—mostly by out-of-staters looking for a slice of paradise. As Danny’s parents followed the work downriver, their house was bought and demolished and a grand new summer cottage built. That was another thing Danny wouldn’t talk about.

If Andy knew anything about Danny, it was that Danny would sooner trample a person than back down on anything. When the muscles in his jaw flexed ridges into his cheek, he might as well have hardened into a dam, unable to relent despite the building weight against him. At such moments, Andy would turn and leave. Give him a few days to recover. But now, as Andy flushed the toilet, he wondered how Shoshana dealt with it.

He cracked open the bathroom door, peered into the kitchen. At first he could only see Shoshana. She looked beautiful there, confident and happy. She’d always wanted a life in the country. She spoke, but at that distance her words crumbled into mumbles. Then Danny passed by her with the dust pan in one hand and the broom in the other. He leaned them on the counter and took Shoshana in his arms. They stood there holding each other, their foreheads pressed together. Andy watched as they swayed back and forth, dancing to a song he couldn’t hear.

Andy stepped into the kitchen. “I better go.”

“You’re not driving home in your state,” Danny said, looking up. “Let’s do dinner. Something big. Sober you straight.”

Shoshana slapped Danny affectionately on the ass and walked towards the sink.

Danny watched her walk away, then turned to Andy. “Hey,” he said. “I’m sorry about, about that little outburst. I’m working on things.”

“I really should go,” Andy said again. “I’ve got flies to whip up. That trip tomorrow.”

Danny shook his head. “I’ve got all the flies you need. Stay for dinner. Then a soak. Hell, just spend the night here.”

“Let him go home,” Shoshana said. “He wants to go home.”

“Who doesn’t want a soak?” Danny said. “We’ve got a new hot tub, screaming your name. Besides, you’ll be closer to the ramp if you sleep here.”

It’s true, he would be.

Shoshana turned to him. “What do you want to do, Andy?” The answer was in her eyes.

But it would look suspicious if he turned down Danny’s offer. If it was a year and a half ago, he’d have stayed. “Okay,” he said. “But I better tank out early. Dawn trip.”

Danny slapped him on the shoulder and walked out the front door, leaving Andy and Shoshana alone in the same room.

She was doing something in the sink. Andy looked out the window, but it was night outside and he couldn't see anything except for his own reflection in the glass. He wondered what Danny was doing, if he could see right in, clear as day.

Their refrigerator was a time capsule. Inside he found the same kinds of crap that he'd always found in Danny's apartment refrigerator. The store brand versions of everything. Yellow mustard. Wheat bread. Cheap cheese. A bottle of ranch in the door. He'd have expected Shoshana to have better taste. In a bottom drawer, he found a pile of zucchinis and tomatoes and onions, most still covered in garden dust.

Only ten feet away, Shoshana stood at the sink, lathering her hands. The muscles in her arms flexed. "What do you think Danny's up to?" Andy asked.

"Not sure," she said.

Andy bit his lower lip, surveying the kitchen. The bottle of ginger brew sat on the counter. "I see you're not drinking beer."

"Could you grab the lasagna from the freezer? Might as well get the salmon burgers too." She didn't look up from the sink.

He set the frosty packages on the counter. Snuck a glance at their reflection in the window. To a stranger, looking at them for the first time, it would look as if they shared this house together. "I really missed you," he said, then quickly added, "Really missed you and Danny."

"Stop it," she said and turned up the volume of the water.

He took one step to the side. Now in the reflection, it looked as if they were touching. "Shoshana, I want to apologize—"

“Shut up about that,” she snapped. She held her breath, rubbing the soap between her hands a little faster.

“But I owe you, and Danny, an apology. I wasn’t myself and I shouldn’t have—”

“—Andy, please. Let it be over.”

Danny had probably gone to the wood pile to grab more quarters for the fire. “I take it you haven’t told him anything.”

She shut the water off, her eyes squarely meeting his. “Let it lie, Andy.”

He imagined Danny just outside the room, piling wood in his arms, smiling to himself, unaware of all that had happened and was happening. And suddenly Andy shivered. He walked over to the stove, warming his hands against the heat. “Why are we always hiding our heartbreak?” he said. The words almost came out as tears.

“Don’t be so dramatic.” She ripped the plastic free from the frozen lasagna.

The door opened, and suddenly, Danny was back inside. He grinned at Andy. “You know what my favorite part of this house is?” He waited for Andy to ask *what?* Finally he continued anyway. It isn’t the microscopic energy bill or the flawless sound system. It’s being able to arc my fluids from the deck. I’m blessed, aren’t I?”

*

The hot tub scalded Andy’s toes. He watched as Danny slipped his legs in, then cupped his hands over his balls, and submerged the rest of his body. “What? Try it. Keeps them from melting off.”

Shoshana had gone to bed inside, waving good night to Andy from across the room. She claimed the meal had made her too drowsy for a soak.

The blue hot tub lights glowed through the steam, an artificial aurora borealis above them. Danny lit a joint, puffed it twice, and passed it. Andy shook dry his hand and pinched the paper. He hadn't seen any weed since he'd left the Ipsyniho.

"Love this thing," Danny said. "Soak in it after every trip. Loosen up the muscles and drown away the memories. One thing hasn't changed since you left: Guiding still put knots in your back."

Andy remembered a trip on the upper river years ago, six golfing buddies and three boats, Danny, Andy, and Ethan Malloy. Afterward, they'd all gone up the hot springs for a soak. Ethan had gotten in nude, laughed at them for wearing their boxers. "How's Ethan?" Andy asked.

"You didn't hear?" Danny watched the steam, quiet for a moment. "Ethan left. He had an issue—an accident, in Coffin Rapid."

"Is he okay?"

"He came out fine, physically at least. But he was guiding when it happened. A radiologist and his daughter. "The guy died."

Andy shook his head, wondering if he'd heard right, if the pot had morphed the words.

"He lost an oar on the cliff, went broadside through those first waves, filled the boat. By the time he got the extra oar ready, he couldn't pull free from the Steel Rock."

"Low water?"

"Real low. August. The boat broadsided on the rock and tipped. They think the gunwale hit the guy on the head. Search and rescue found his body the next day."

Andy couldn't imagine Ethan losing his boat. He'd started guiding about the same time as Danny. Wasn't much of a fisherman, but he could sure handle a pair of oars. "How'd he lose the oar?"

"Don't know. Probably didn't ship it fast enough. You know how the cliff sneaks up on you." Danny pulled hard on the joint. "Anyway, he left town as soon as he could. Florida or Georgia or some shit. No more rivers."

The valley without Ethan in it. They'd never again share a cup of coffee at a boat ramp after a day on the river. Ethan could make a mean cup, and he always carried extra. What would the guy do without the Ipsyniho? Maybe he'd see how convoluted the world looked without the river in it. Maybe he'd come back.

A coyote howled on the ridge behind the house, chatty and broken, not long and sustained. Another one yelped nearby. Danny flipped the joint over the deck, even though it was only half gone. "You haven't told me."

"Told you what?" Andy said, thinking about the joint smoldering away in the green moss. Then of Ethan wiping his brow in Florida.

Danny chuckled. "Why you're such a dirt bag?"

Andy wiped his own brow, and felt dizzy. Did Danny know? Had he figured it out and been playing dumb all night? Andy lifted himself from the water, sitting up on the edge of the tub.

"Skip town a week before your best friend's wedding? You were supposed to be my fucking witness." Danny didn't laugh this time.

Andy pulled his feet from the water, resting them precariously on the edge. The stars blurred into circles.

“There’s a hose over there if you need to cool off,” Danny said.

Andy found the nozzle, but tangled his feet in the hose and almost fell. He’d practiced his answer a hundred times. A thousand times. Perfecting his elocution, his intonation. But now he had nothing. Just the spinning and the icy water running down his neck. “I snapped, I guess. Didn’t have anything to do with you or Shoshana.”

“Snapped?” Danny wasn’t smiling. “You owe me something better than that.”

“I had a little freak out.” Pieces of his practiced answer came back. “Like when you dumped that client in the river.”

Danny watched him.

Andy continued, “I had a series of real assholes in the boat, put me over the edge. We were coming up on the fall rush. I just couldn’t do it.”

“Why not call the shop and cancel?” Danny said. “Take a job doing something else? Why not tell me what was going on?”

“Like I said, I snapped. Booked a flight and was gone.”

Danny squinted at Andy as if he was on the far side of the river.

“It was stupid, I know. And selfish.”

“Not a phone call to me or Shosh for fourteen months?” Danny said.

“No excuse,” Andy said. “I should have let you know.”

Danny chewed his cheek, his eyes burning a hole into Andy’s. Clearly, he wasn’t buying it. Then he turned and dried his hand on a towel, and plucked a second joint from the edge of the hot tub. He struck a wooden match and held it to the end of the paper. A ball of smoke left his mouth and disappeared up his nose.

The spins came back. The salmon burgers in the back of Andy's throat.

The coyote howled again.

Danny came across the tub and handed the joint to Andy. "Well, I'm glad you're back now."

Chapter 2

Andy told the clients to fish their way up a side channel, to cast towards the seams between fast water and slow, that he'd be right behind them. A mossy rock, flat as a table, offered a place to sit and organize his thoughts. Two minutes, no more.

Behind the rock, a small eddy formed perpetual spirals. A drowned mayfly, a baetis it looked like, did circles. Floating atop a billion water molecules. Two hydrogens and an oxygen, whatever that meant. Individual molecules *had* to spin free occasionally, disappearing into the passing riffle, drifting downriver, past Ipsyniho, past the Coast Range, into the tidal flats. The sun would probably pull it skyward then, and the northwest breeze would blow it onshore, over the valley, to the edge of the mountains, where it'd meet millions more molecules, and eventually fall back onto the green slope, sink into the soil, and follow the lava bedrock to the nearest aquifer. It'd reappear at a spring along a mossy slope, and drip into the river below, caught and brought downstream. Maybe the molecule would drift through the gills of a holding steelhead—would it lose its component oxygen then? Maybe it'd be pulled into the city's canal, pass through the purifier, and end up in a glass at the Keystoner Diner—then would it enter our own hydraulic system, drifting through the rivers of blood to the massive deltas of the lungs? Or maybe the soil would pull the molecule away

from the river before the steelhead's gills or the Keystoner Diner, and a blackberry would suck it up the vine towards the clusters of ripening fruit—where it'd stay until the berry fell to the river below, and was pushed out over the tidal flats. If only a water molecule could remember all the places it'd been.

Things with Shoshana hadn't always been so twisted. It was simple love in the beginning. They were university freshman—a full two years before he met Danny. It was her hips, how narrow they were. So petty and childish it seemed now. But then, they were everything. The hips of a runner, not a mother.

They'd kissed the first time in the forest, under an umbrella, the fall rains dragging the clouds to the ground. She said he kissed funny. Too much lip and not enough tongue. "The tongue is the most persuasive organ," she said. Later, in front of the mirror, when no one was looking, he practiced being persuasive.

They sat on her dorm room bed, wrapped in a quilt, and watched the first storm of winter, the wind shaking the building, the rain glazing the window. "It's like we're in the river, holding our breath, staring up at the surface." She leaned forward with a match in her fingers, and lit the first candle of Channukah. "It's fire for fire's sake," she said. As she sang the words, words he'd never heard before, he watched the flame flickering against the river's surface.

He knew now they'd confused the giddiness of sudden freedom—the release from the confines of their adolescent homes—with the giddiness of fresh love. The real love wouldn't come until later.

But first her family came from Boston just before Spring Break and took a suite at the Best Western across the street from campus. She changed her clothes five

times, asking his opinion while she examined her profile in a mirror normally tucked away behind the door.

“Great,” he said without looking. “Do I need to change?” He wore the same clothes he always did, the work pants, the sandals—his college uniform.

She glanced at him, took off her shirt. She wore a bra. She never wore a bra. “Maybe you shouldn’t come.”

“I’ll change,” he said.

They walked along the millrace, the water mud brown and burping over its banks. He knew the Ipsyniho, a short drive to the south, must be flowing near 8,000 cubic feet per second—blown-out by the same spring rains. “Just don’t say anything about us,” she said. “Pretend you don’t know what my bedroom looks like.” And then she’d pulled her hand from his as they neared the hotel.

He met the Barnetts in their room, the low hotel ceiling shortening his breaths.

“Andy, this is my Bubbie.” The old woman took his hand and waited for him to kiss her cheek. Her blouse slid up her wrinkled arm, and he saw a faded tattoo—a number where a sailor would put an anchor. She said something, but her Yiddish accent muffled the word. He smiled and nodded and looked away.

“Andy?” Shoshana’s mother said, looking at his clean slacks. “Andy what?”

“Trib,” he said. “What do you all think of the Northwest?” He should have asked about Boston.

“Trib,” she repeated to herself.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Shoshana's father stepped forward, offering his hand but no smile. "Thanks for coming out," he said. When he looked at Shoshana, her eyes fell to her toes.

Later, when they were safely alone again, Andy asked if the tattoo was what he thought it was. Shoshana recounted how her Bubbie had survived the camp when all her sisters hadn't. She delivered the words quickly and without emotion. But that night, in the darkness of the room, the tears came, tears that made her body shake and heave. He took her in his arms, but tears only came faster. And then he realized: he was the reason she was crying.

He slept at his own place for the next week. And her family left without seeing him again.

For the next year, he and Shoshana lived as if her parents had never come. Studying at a campus coffee shop during the day, sharing her single dorm bed at night, escaping to the river on warm afternoons. On a sunlit beach, the emerald water gliding by, she'd dare him to a rock-skipping contest. "You don't stand a chance," he might say. She'd just smile and hop a stone a dozen times over the surface before it planed high and dove under in a spray of white. She always won—he never figured out how to get more than four skips. But no matter. Winning put her in a kissing mood, and they'd end up with sunburns on their butts.

That summer, she took him to see The Grateful Dead—Autzen Stadium stuffed with more people than came to the Oregon Ducks football games. He didn't like the music then, thought it was too loud, too abstract. But he liked how happy it made Shoshana. She'd wear her torn jeans with the teddy bear patch on the hip and spin as if she were the only person at the show. Afterwards she asked, "Will you come to

more? After we graduate, we should spend a year on the road with the band, don't you think?" "Definitely," he said. But Jerry died that August.

Months later, she couldn't raise herself from bed. He brought her a cup of soup, instant ramen he'd nuked in the dorm microwave. She sat up against the wall, her hair matted and perfect. The soup's steam misted the space between them. She looked up at him, her lips quivering, and vomited. On the test, two blue lines appeared. Three more tests confirmed it.

She stared out the window, watching the rain slide down the glass, her knees pulled up to her chest. She wouldn't say anything, and he didn't dare ask. He struck a match and touched it to a candle, but the flame flattened when she let out a breath.

He imagined a baby between them, smaller than a fish. Imagined holding it to her breast, keeping it warm with both their bodies. He'd have to get a square job. Nine to five. He might make it to the river two Saturdays a month. And he'd have to call his father and ask for money.

Later, they walked the sidewalks, talking about everything except what mattered. Conversations about the weather or politics took on a feverish urgency. Anything to fill the space between them. She ate crackers to keep the stomach acid down, and he snuck a few for himself. Once, while she used a public restroom, he vomited in a trash can.

That night, in the blackness of her dorm room, he said it. The words slipped out in the semi-consciousness before sleep, but once they had been freed, he couldn't retrieve them. "I can't have a child right now."

She broke at the words.

“It’s just, we’re so young,” he begged. “What kind of life can we offer a little person?” But it didn’t help.

She didn’t say a word that night. And he didn’t sleep.

The next morning, she asked him to leave. “I need sometime alone,” she said.

“What am I supposed to do?” he said.

“You’re a grown-up,” she said. “Make your own decisions.”

An entire day passed, and she didn’t call him. He knocked on her door, and her friend Becky answered. “Come back later,” she said through a three inch crack.

Finally, his phone rang. Shoshana’s voice: “Tomorrow, 3pm. Can you take me?”

At the clinic, babies lived on the walls and on the counters, pictures of smiling children everywhere. He shook his head against it, and from his bookbag, extracted the new issue of *Fly Fisherman Magazine*. He held it before his face, and didn’t see anything.

He didn’t see anything until Shoshana was suddenly beside him, watching him read about fishing.

Afterwards, as they taxied back to her dorm, she kept her eyes shut. He helped her upstairs to her bed, and still her eyes stayed closed. That night, he couldn’t tell if she was asleep or awake. He waited up until dawn, running his fingers through her hair. Starting on her cheek and swirling over her ear and dropping down her neck. On the pillow, his salty tears mixed with her lavender hair, and he wondered what amniotic fluid smelled like. No one had ever loved another person as much as he loved her then. This was their pain and they’d survive it together.

Afterwards, she took up smoking. She took up smoking in her pajamas in the middle of the night. He'd wake up to find himself alone, the sheets beside him cold. She'd be on the roof, the night breeze rippling through her clothes, her feet dangling over the edge. The first time he found her there, he thought he was looking at her ghost. "Leave me alone," she said. "I need to be alone."

A couple nights later, he found her there again. This time, spring rain soaked her shirt, and she shivered against the cold. He laid a blanket on her shoulders. "Tell me everything is okay," she said.

"Everything is okay."

And for a time, things seemed okay. Or at least they did the same things they used to when things were okay. Except now, when they'd walk along the Millrace or have beers with friends, Shoshana kept a pack of cigarettes nearby. And now, there were subjects they avoided. The future, for instance.

In late May, they went to the river, to spend the day in the sun. While on a quilt spread over the ground, they ate an entire bag of cherries from a farmer's roadside stand. Andy stood up and said, "Watch this." He hopped a stone and it skipped once, twice, then maybe a dozen times before diving. "Holy shit. Did you see that?"

She spit out a seed. "Do you think you'd ever convert?"

"Convert?" he said. "To what?"

In June, over a jug of four-dollar merlot, she ended it. "I need to move on," she said. "I need something else. I'm thinking of spending the summer in Chile."

He should have sensed it coming. But he hadn't. So, he fled to a room along the Ipsyniho and spent six straight months fishing the river. One July dawn, a tall fellow with bright red hair appeared along the bank, a hatchery steelhead held up by its gill. "Hey cowboy," he said. "Try hanging your fly behind that rock." As soon as Andy made the cast, a fish took.

That winter, back in Eugene to finish school, Andy found Shoshana hadn't left for Chile at all. Often, he saw her crossing campus, thin reading glasses dangling from her fingers. Sometimes, he'd walk a fly cast behind her, hoping the breeze might carry a whiff of lavender, hoping she might see him and smile, hoping she might change her mind.

After graduation, he moved up the Ipsyniho Valley, to the steady guiding work he'd found there, to Danny and the community he'd come to know as family, and he lost track of her. He figured she was on another continent, happy, or at least trying to be. He'd go weeks without thinking of her. And slowly the pain of what they'd suffered slipped further into the background.

Occasionally, he'd find himself fancying some Ipsyniho woman, usually as the fall nights grew colder and longer. Once, he even moved in with someone, Tamara, an elementary teacher. They'd lived together for almost three months when something strange happened, a few days after his twenty-seventh birthday.

After a day of guiding, he stopped at the Co-op for some dinner ingredients. Tamara had begged he make an eggplant manicotti. In the Italian aisle, a man with a pony-tail and a beard kneeled, whispering something to his little daughter. She might have been five or six years old. A pair of pink, oversized sunglasses barely stayed on

her face. She giggled and said, “Don’t be silly, Daddy.” And suddenly the scar was a wound again.

That night, and many nights after, he woke up in a start, the smell of lavender still in the air. “What’s the matter?” Tamara asked.

“Nothing.”

And then as if he’d conjured her, Shoshana appeared, at the Saturday market in Eugene. He and Danny had come into the city to pick up a new boat trailer—Danny’s had been mangled when a man driving an RV hadn’t stopped in time. She sat at a table, dyed fabrics hanging from a wooden cubical around her. Her hair was braided, hanging down each shoulder. And she laughed loudly with the woman next to her.

She fell silent when she saw him.

“This is Danny,” he said.

Bluegrass played on the stage nearby, and a man with a cup of coffee bumped into him.

Danny knew the ancient facts, knew what they’d been through together, but he also knew about Tamara, knew that seven years had passed since Andy and Shoshana had been together. They were grown-ups now. Different people. So, who could blame him for sticking out his hand and saying, “Danny Goodman.”

Later, while fishing Leaburg flats one evening, Danny admitted she’d looked up his number and called him. “She asked if I wanted to come down for dinner. Of course,” he said, threading his leader through the eye of a tiny dry fly, “I told her I had to check with you. Because of the history and all.” Danny had been lonely for

sometime, living alone and rarely venturing out to meet women. And in that moment, he looked up and the sunlight caught his eye.

“Do it,” Andy said. “Of course. What happened between us was a lifetime ago.”

And six months later, Danny showed up at his door, his Bubbie’s wedding ring in his hand. “Do you think it’s too soon?” What could Andy say then?

*

The trip went poorly. The Sports (he couldn’t remember their names) were *avaros*, the Chilean guides called it—too stingy to tip. They’d complained most of the float about one thing or another. He swung the truck around the house and backed the boat up under the car port. He’d done it so many times over the years, he barely needed to use his mirrors.

His place sat in the middle of a hazelnut orchard, the evening sun reflecting in the tree’s waxy leaves. The river lay a half mile down a razor-straight orchard row, the blackberry bushes purple and green in the distance.

His wrists ached from rowing all day, gritty cement hardening along the tendons—carpal tunnel maybe. It happened to older guides, their fingers forever bent as if around an oar. But he was still young, and tomorrow he knew he’d wake up, his wrists as strong as ever.

He found a stump from the wood shed and rolled it into the middle of the unkempt lawn and poured a handful of sunflower seeds onto the top. The tailless squirrel, Stubster, Danny called him, would find it in no time—if he was still around. Andy grabbed a bucket and headed through the hazelnuts, towards the river.

River blackberries were the crème of the crème. They were different than inland blackberries. The water kept their roots moist all summer, swelling the ripening fruit with black syrup. Inland berries might be as big around as a bottle cap, but river berries looked more like black golf balls dragging their parent limbs towards the soil. The trick was to find a patch on high ground near the river, a patch that could be tended and cared for, raised to its fullest potential.

Just past the orchard, Andy found his familiar high ground patch. The deluge of the winter before had carved a new stream bed between the hazelnuts and the berries but had left the soil under the fruit unscathed. Clumps of juicing purple shimmered in the last rays of the day. He held a clump in his hands, two pounds worth maybe, careful not to bruise the delicate crop. More than half the berries were still red at their core. Edible, but not perfect. The peak would come late this year, in another two weeks. Three berries gushed under his tender squeeze, and he plucked each one, biting it down the center and letting the violet juice run between his fingers. He inhaled on the bite, like he'd seen the owner of Tyee Wines do after swirling a glass of pinot noir.

The first berries of the year always delivered a sweet forebite—the promise of what was to come in the later fruit—and a metallic finish. The metal flavor, he figured, was the vine flushing its limbs of the soil's metals. He savored these early nuggets. With each bite, he swallowed land, microscopic flecks of the Ipsyniho Valley. He'd heard that metals never flushed from the human body; they become an intrinsic part of the flesh. He licked the escaping juice from between his fingers.

The rows he'd cut two Junes ago were overgrown now—the patch would give fewer berries than normal. But the floods had been good for the soil, helping hydrate the crop through the summer. What this crop lacked in number, it'd make up for in flavor. Two more weeks.

Walking back up through the hazelnuts, the smell of purple honey filling his nostrils, he knew he could never live in a land without blackberries.

Stubster picked at the sunflower seeds on the stump, his back a little whiter than it'd been the year before. He bolted when he saw Andy coming, looking more like a rabbit as he ran.

For six years, Andy had rented the one room house from the Kepingers. It'd been built in the forties, in a time when farmers housed their hired help. He took care of it, fixing the gutters when the orchard leaves clogged them, building a shed for firewood, a carport to cover the boat. No one had lived in it while he was gone, the same wood stacked next to the stove. And although Mr. Keping said he'd tried to find a renter, Andy figured he hadn't tried hard. "I knew you'd come back," Keping had said when Andy showed up at his door a week before.

Now if only he could find enough work to pay the rent through the winter.

A guide made more than half his money from repeat business, clients who called every year or every season or every month wanting to book a trip. He'd been gone for a whole cycle, and his established clientele had surely found someone else—Danny probably. Hell, maybe his old clients had paid for that new boat. He'd need to get the word out that he was back, and wrangle as many trips from the fly shops as possible. The profit from three trips would pay his rent. Another trip for food. A trip

for gas. And a trip for insurance and odds and ends. Six trips a month weren't hard to find in early fall when the river was always in shape and Sports took their vacation time. But winter was a different story—the river often flowed unfishably high for three weeks or more. And if the run of winter steelhead was less than predicted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, an article would run in *The Oregonian* and the few Sports interested in fishing in the rain would go to another watershed where their prospects weren't as grim.

He knew he could call his father, that money would be wired instantly, but then he'd have to talk to the man, feign some interest in his new life and his new family. A prospect worse than sleeping in his truck.

It was time to get his shit together. Learn the river's new twists and turns. Stop thinking about Shoshana when he needed to be pointing out fish. He called Danny.

"What do you got tomorrow?" he said.

"Nothing," Danny said. He was chewing something. "Had a trip reschedule and Rodger is working the shop. What's your pleasure, steelhead or trout?"

"I've got a chromer trip day after tomorrow."

"Done," Danny said. "Let's meet at Millican at five am. I'll show you the new go-to slots."

Meeting at Millican Boat Ramp meant they'd leave the runner car there and put the boat in at the dam. The thought of that cement wall, the roar of the water coming down its face—the image of Shoshana in a summer dress, her head in her

hands... He couldn't go to the dam, not right now, especially not with Danny. Not before he cleared things up. "What if we meet at Missouri Bend?"

"Yeah, right." Danny laughed.

"No, seriously," Andy said. "What if we tried that section?"

The other end of the line went silent. "For real? There aren't half the number of steelhead in that drift. Did that tropical sun fry your steelhead sense?" Danny took another bite of whatever he was eating—it sounded like a donut—and his voice became muffled. "I'll meet you at Millican. Five am. My boat."

Andy hung up and popped a berry in his mouth. It'd be okay. He'd just not think about her. He paced the room. Jammed two berries into his mouth at once.

*

Two years ago, just days after Danny asked if he could have dinner with Shoshana, she'd appeared at his front door. Andy had seen her at the Saturday Market less than a week before, but prior to that, it'd been years. Behind her, the afternoon breeze blew waves through the ripe rye fields.

He must have looked like a hermit, wearing no shirt and red long-john bottoms. Tamara was at work, although she was supposed to be home anytime.

"I looked up your address," she said. "This is a hard place to find." Strands of her hair caught the wind.

He couldn't say anything.

"This isn't what you think it is," she said. On the thigh of her jeans, there was a patch, a dancing bear.

"I don't know what this is," he finally said.

“Well, its not, you know, what some might think.”

The bear danced on one foot, its arms tossed high in the air, like it was spinning. “Come in, come in.” He pointed inside of the house. “I have frozen blackberries.” The bed wasn’t made.

She looked to her feet, not moving. “It’s been a while, Andy. Hasn’t it? It’s been a long time since we knew each other.”

She wasn’t coming inside. He leaned his weight against the doorframe. “Sure, I guess it’s been a while,” he said. She looked marvelous. “Shoshana...” but at the sound of her name, he forgot his question.

With her finger, she chipped a piece of paint from the door jam. “You and Danny are good friends?”

“Something happened a few months ago,” he said. The memory of the little girl in the Co-op. “Something massive.” He needed to tell her. He needed for her to hold him. Tell him everything was okay. She was the only one who could.

But she asked again after Danny. “He’s a good guy, right?”

And suddenly, the pain became anger. “He’s Jewish, if that’s what you mean.”

She looked at him and bit her lip. “That’s not what I mean. I mean you guys are friends, right? You guide together?”

“Why are you here, Shoshana?”

“I just want to be honest,” she said.

“About what?”

“I don’t want to cause a rift,” she said.

“A rift?” It was probably an accident, but at that moment she leaned to the side and her tank-top fell off her shoulder, revealing a white strip of flesh, a tan line. All at once, he wanted to love her and slam the door in her face. He retreated to memory. “Do you remember that one time when we fell asleep along the river? I told you to put sunscreen on, but you didn’t. You were so burned you had to lie on your belly in the backseat while I drove us home.”

She squinted at the top of the door jam. “Sure,” she said. “I remember.” But she obviously couldn’t. And he realized their memories meant more to him than they did to her.

“What happened between us,” he said suddenly, “happened a long time ago. I barely ever think about it, to be perfectly honest. If you’re worried about causing a rift between Danny and me, don’t be.” He chuckled and waved his hand at her, shooing her away. “What? Did you expect to find me here pining after you, or something? What we had, Shoshana, was sweet—in a kid kind of way. Sure, we went through some shit together, but that was a long time ago.”

“Good!” she said, letting out a pent-up breath. “I figured, but we hadn’t talked in a long time, and I was worried that—”

“Don’t be silly,” he said.

She stepped closer. Her middle and ring fingers touched his arm. “Thank you, Andy. I don’t know what I thought. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

He laughed. “You didn’t really drive all this way just to see me, did you?”

“And to see Danny,” she said, checking her watch. “In fact, I’m running late.”

*

The memory of her at the house that day kept him pacing until he'd finished the fresh berries. Then he went to the heap of boxes in the corner. Since he'd returned, he'd yet to unpack his novels. This was hardly the time to start. Underneath a box marked "A-F," he found one marked, "Kitchen." With a fillet knife, he sliced the clear plastic tape.

The cookbooks.

He laid each tome on the counter, smelling the pages for mildew, examining the corners for damage. He'd organize them later. Now, he needed one.

From the 1977 edition of *The Moosewood Cookbook*, a book with a pencil mark on the inside cover, "\$12.50 mint condition," he found instructions for "Zuccanoes." The Ipsyniho Valley grew big blackberries, big steelhead, and big zucchinis. He'd picked up a half dozen at the Co-op on the way back from the river, and now he ran the knife down each, lengthwise.

Andy figured, good cooking grows from good music, so he switched on KWST, the local Country and Western station. Johnny Cash's voice filled the house.

Just as he flipped on the burner and began sautéing the mushrooms and onions and garlic and sunflower seeds, the phone rang.

"Trib?" said a voice.

"Yes?"

It was Alan Raymond, owner of Northwest Stream Born. "I just got a call from Mr. Anderson."

"Mr. Anderson?"

“Your client from today?”

“Right.”

“Listen.” Raymond’s voice became stern, almost paternal. “I never thought I’d have to have a conversation like this with you, but you leave me no choice.”

He wouldn’t cancel a future booking just because of one bunk trip. Andy was sure of that.

“I’m pulling your trip day after tomorrow. You’re not ready. You’ve been in goddamn Timbuktu for a year and our clients deserve better.”

“You can’t cancel a trip inside of forty-eight hours,” Andy said.

“Take it up with the Marine Board. I’ve got a business to run, and I can’t have guides sitting on their asses while their Sports go fishless.”

“You’re right,” Andy said. “You have every right to cancel. But today was a fluke. I promise.” Andy walked outside, away from the hiss of the sizzling vegetables. “I know this river and I know its fish. Today...it was a personal issue. Alan, it involved a woman.”

“Like I said, my clients deserve better.”

“But I worked it out with her. It’s fine. I’m a hundred percent healed and healthy.”

The receiver was quiet. He must have convinced him. “Andy, you bailed us out on that Starbucks fiasco a few years back. I haven’t forgotten that. So, here’s what I’ll do. I’m pulling your trip day after tomorrow. But I’ll put you down for another next week.”

“Next week is Carnival.”

“This is what I’m willing to do for you,” Alan said.

“You’ll give me a trip then because you can’t find any guides working those days.”

“Take it or leave it.”

Andy paced from the house to the boat and back. He could always leave Carnival and work one day. He needed the money. But more than the profit from one trip, he needed to get back in Stream Born’s good graces by winter. “Alright, Alan. Just tell me one thing. Who’d you give my trip?”

“Danny Goodman.”

The fire alarm sounded inside, and he caught a whiff of burned zucchini.

*

Six months after Shoshana showed up at his door and just days before Danny proposed, Andy went to dinner with them at the Wildfire Grill in Ipsyniho. Tamara was supposed to come, but she’d left Andy the day before, citing his obvious lack of passion for her. “No, no, of course you’re still coming,” Danny had said when Andy told him he didn’t want to be a third-wheel.

Before the food would be served, a bouquet of dry flowers on a nearby table would fall into a candle and catch fire, and they’d be forced to flee into the parking lot as the restaurant’s sprinkler system kicked on. But in the forty-five minutes before the fire, they sat together at an intimate table, drinking cocktails and laughing. Andy had managed, in the past few months, to cleanly suppress his desire for Shoshana. If anyone had caught on, they weren’t showing it. And even after a pair of sipping-tequilas, he could enter the repartee without risk to his façade.

But then Danny stood up. “Got to use the head. Order me the Ginger Glazed Salmon.” He slapped Andy’s shoulder. “We’ll see if they have anything on your fish.”

Suddenly alone with Shoshana, Andy hid behind his tequila. But soon the booze was gone.

“What’s the point of serving tequila in a receptacle the size of a petree dish?” Andy said.

“You don’t seem too broken up by the whole Tamara thing,” Shoshana said.

“It’s getting to be spring anyway,” he laughed. “No time for a lady friend when the river is in shape.”

She rolled her eyes. “You guides and your mistresses.”

Andy signaled the server for another round. “Danny is probably the worse cheater in the valley.”

“At least he only has one mistress,” Shoshana said. With both hands, she pulled back her hair, and while her speech was cluttered by a hair pin, said “Besides, we’ve all got to have our ride-on-the-side.”

“Right,” Andy swallowed.

She reached for the appetizer plate, lifting a kabob to her mouth. A thick piece of lamb disappeared behind her lips.

“Downed your drinks already?” Danny’s voice.

Andy jerked and slammed into the empty table behind him.

“Whoa there cowboy,” Danny said. He turned to Shoshana, shrugged his shoulders. “There’s a line for the head. Figure I might as well wait here.”

And then a server yelled, and Shoshana and Danny jumped out of their seats. Andy turned to see a ball of fire on the table behind him. He'd knocked the vase over when he bumped the table.

Outside, standing in the pouring rain, underneath the neon "WildFire" sign, a siren screaming in the distance, Shoshana started laughing and couldn't stop.

"What?" Danny said.

Andy got it, and laughed too. "Irony is a bitch," he said.

Danny laughed, but it was obvious he didn't get joke.

Chapter 3

He heard Danny's truck coming through the darkness, first the gurgle of the biodiesel and then the familiar rattling of a driftboat trailer at speed. Danny's headlights panned across the parking lot, blinding Andy for a moment.

"Brought you some coffee," Andy said, passing a cup through the window.

"Let's move," Danny said. "I saw Scrapper's boat sitting at the gas station, probably waiting for clients."

Andy heaved his dry bag into the bed of the truck and snapped three of his steelhead rods into the rod rack. Scrapper lived in the Rogue Valley, an hour and a half to the south. He was a different kind of guide, one who'd travel to any river within a thousand miles for a paying client. He spent time every fall on the Ipsyniho, swiping clients from locals. Scrapper fished fast, in the Rogue style, covering lots of water in a single day. If he got to the river first, he'd pluck out every hot fish in front of them.

Danny's tires squealed, gaining traction on River Road.

"I tied these up last night." Danny unhooked a big pink fly from the visor and handed it over, never taking his eyes from the road.

"You trying to put me in the poor house?" Andy said. "Raymond called last night."

"Raymond? He called me too." Danny shifted into fourth gear, pointed at the fly. "Check out the cross-cut rabbit fur in the body."

"He took my trip away. Gave it to you." Andy pinned the fly to the visor without looking at it. "You trying to starve me out?"

Danny downshifted and gassed through a corner, not saying anything.

Andy realized he'd gone too far. He chuckled to lighten the mood.

But Danny didn't laugh. Finally he said, "If you're low on money, why don't you call your fucking daddy."

They rode rest of the way in silence.

In the darkness, the orange lights surrounding the cement dam and the roaring water cascading down gave the place a strange urban feeling, more like the Santiago Airport than the dam behind Shoshana on that long-ago day. Out of the corner of his eye, Andy thought he saw Danny glance at him—did he know what had happened there? Maybe Shoshana had told him, and he wasn't letting on.

"Are the lights new?" Andy asked, trying to concentrate on the night-oiled water, on the orange figures dancing over the sheen.

Danny pulled up into the neck of the boat ramp and reversed into the throat. He stopped with a jolt and jumped out. “Damn it,” he said just as Scrapper’s truck and boat pulled into the lot. “He’s going to hop us first thing.”

Andy ran to the trailer, loosening the crimp strap. Danny tossed the gear bags into the boat and laid the pile of rods along the gunwale. Together, they gave the boat a push and dropped onto the river’s surface.

“Look who’s trying to steal our fish!” The voice of Scrapper, always too loud, always as if you were a friend who’d just tried to sneak one past him. His clients swung their feet out of the truck’s cab, testing the pavement below as if it might be icy. “Thought we’d beat the recreational anglers getting here twenty minutes before fishing light. What, did you boys bring your spotlights?”

Danny dropped the anchor on the boat, while Andy walked up the ramp for the requisite shake. Scrapper always tried to crumple your knuckles when he shook.

“Scrapper,” Andy said.

“Trib.” The man’s eyes were shaded under the brim of his cowboy hat.

Andy squeezed as hard as he could, but his wrist was still sore from the day before. Scrapper had him beat, and continued to tighten even as Andy went limp, the bones grinding under the pressure. Finally Scrapper let go, but not without a parting throb of pressure.

“Goodman,” he called over Andy’s shoulder. “New boat? Didn’t think you boys found enough work to buy yourselves anything nice.”

Danny pushed past Andy and took Scrapper’s hand. At the sound of the snap, the clients stopped whispering and turned to see their guide drop to one knee.

Danny didn't release. He pushed the big man onto his ass, the cowboy hat falling to the pavement. "It's always a pleasure to see you, Scrapper." Danny stepped back, like he might kick the down man. But instead, opened the truck door, and revved into the parking lot.

*

They had the river all to themselves. The only other boat on the water decided to spend the morning on the first pool.

Danny's new boat moved through the river as silently as a leaf. And it was more stable too—more like a mobile dock than a traditional driftboat. Danny oared while standing, his osprey eyes always calculating their position in relation to the features of the bottom. He slowed the boat with a pair of powerful backstrokes and dropped the anchor by tapping his foot to the rope release. They stood on their seats and Danny pointed to a dark patch of water in the middle of a long riffle. "The slot's only ten feet long, right there where the current moves at walking speed."

"A trough?"

"Only six or eight inches deep, but it works. Producing hook-ups seven trips out of ten this summer."

It had been years since Danny had given Andy a tour of the river, of its secret holding lies. For the first year after Andy graduated and moved to the valley, they spent every free moment in Danny's boat, drifting each section from the headwaters to the ocean. "If you're going to guide on a river, you've got to learn its every turn," Danny had said.

Now, as Andy listened to Danny, he realized how much he'd loved that time, how exciting it'd been when the river and his new friend possessed more mysterious features than understood ones. What did it mean when the broken surface of a riffle suddenly glided flat, or the curved corner of the lip suddenly fell straight? What was coming when the steady northwest wind swung around to the south, or an older fisherman chuckled under his breath? In those moments when most details remained shrouded in insignificance, there remained only the promise of exploration, of discovery, of deepened connection. Nothing had been complicated yet. He'd taken it all for granted then.

Then they drifted by Steamboat Creek. The clear water sloshed over a staircase of stones and collided with the Ipsyniho at one of the river's deepest holes. The turquoise currents spun wildly here, their upwellings pulling mounds of water onto the surface. It looked like a tornado must look from above the clouds. Once, years before, Andy had dropped his anchor here, just to see how deep the pool was. All thirty-five feet of line played out, the lead anchor still hanging free below the boat. Hundreds of native steelhead probably held near the bottom, protected from hooks by the massive currents overhead. As soon as a freshet brought the Ipsyniho up to the level of Steamboat Creek, they'd all disappear up the fragile tributary.

"I never thought you'd help develop the river," Andy said, "especially not along that creek."

"It's not that simple," Danny said, pushing hard downstream. "It's either us—people who care about the rivers and fish—or it'll be those White Oak assholes."

Sports looking for another vacation rental. Whoever can make Mr. Willis the best offer come December.”

“Just doesn’t seem like something you’d get your claws into, that’s all.”

“There, in the tailout,” Danny said, his eye aiming down his arm. “Chromer under that log.”

They released three wild steelhead by lunch.

*

On a shaded pebble beach where the Boulder Hole used to be, they sat cross legged, leisurely chewing cold beef Andy had roasted the night before. The sun dappled through the trees, laying emerald patches on the shaded water. Fingers of spring water extended from the mossy bank. It must have been ninety-two degrees.

“I might take a swim,” Andy said.

Danny didn’t respond. He was staring at his sandwich, not eating.

“Good fish today,” Andy said.

Danny didn’t seem to hear. Then he wrapped up his sandwich and said, “There’s something I got to tell you. Shosh asked me not to, but I’m going to anyway. Not coming out about it feels like a lie.”

Andy swallowed. “Did you win the lottery?” he laughed. “I knew you were lying about buying that house with wedding money.”

“Yeah right,” Danny said.

And Andy knew instantly by the twitch in his friend’s eyebrow that the house hadn’t been purchased with wedding money. “What is it?” he asked.

Danny stood, tucked his hand in his pocket. Then he took a breath and said, “Shosh is pregnant.”

The sentence cleaned Andy’s mind. *Pregnant*. Air wheezed through his nose, distracting him. He stopped breathing. *Pregnant*. A sharp rock under his ass. He stood up. “It’s yours.”

“Because of your guys’ history,” Danny said, “I wanted to tell you myself.”

“How many weeks?”

“Twelve. We’ve been trying for a while. Since before the wedding, actually.”

Andy struggled for a breath.

“We had some trouble.” Danny picked up a rock and threw it. “An ectopic pregnancy. Shosh miscarried just about a week before you left.”

He saw her, the memory of her, on the ground, at the dam.

Danny’s shadow poured on the bone-white cobbles. “We’re having a little party tonight to announce the good news. We’d like you to come, to be there.”

Andy walked into the pool, up to his knees. “Of course,” he said. “I wouldn’t miss it.” A scolding breeze wafted upstream. “You must be stoked.”

“Actually,” Danny said, looking off into the canopy. “I don’t know what to think. It’s not that I’m scared or anything. But having a kid, man...” He targeted a stone and spit. “I just don’t want to raise him poor, and it’s hard to make a family wage guiding.”

“It’s hot,” Andy said. “I’m going for a swim.” And with that, he dove under. Utter silence, except for a tinkling of spring water. He saw them crying together over a tiny sleeping child, and he hated them both.

On the bottom, ten feet down, he saw a boulder and swam down beside it, his ears popping against the pressure. A two inch sculpin bolted from the edge of the rock as he laid his fingers beneath it. He'd roll the rock over his feet. Stay there until he passed out. Quick and easy.

But of course, he couldn't move the stone. And his air ran thin and his lungs caught fire and he pushed towards the surface.

His eyes landed on Danny. Danny stood in a white beam of sunlight, his face bright, his hair a fireball. His lips moved, like he was asking a question. River water clogged Andy's ears and he heard nothing but blood pulsing through his head. He took a big breath to go back down, to heave that damn rock, and stay under.

But suddenly Danny flung off his shirt and dove in. When he emerged, he blinked the water out of his eyes and shouted, "Fuck me! This river's a real weenie-shrinker!"

Andy flipped and started down, but this time his breath ran short before he got to the bottom. When he came up, Danny was waiting for him. "But you know what makes me feel better about this whole baby thing? Knowing that a guy like you will be his uncle." He smiled and the sunlight turned to diamonds in his hair. "Come on." He nodded towards the beach. "Let's get out here before we drown. We're fisherman, not otters."

As Andy climbed from the pool, dizziness nearly knocked him over. Before he could stop it, vomit splattered onto the sun-bleached rocks. Then came a cramp and another spurt of acid.

“Jesus!” Danny shouted. He rushed over to Andy’s side. “What happened? Are you okay?” He tentatively touched Andy’s shoulder, but the gesture must have felt too intimate because he quickly took back his hand.

“Swallowed some water, that’s all,” Andy said. He righted himself and brought his hand to his own forehead. “A lot of water.”

“What do you need?” Danny asked. “I’ve got some juice. There’s some herb in the boat.” Without waiting for a response, he went straight for the boat.

A few moments later they were sitting in the sun. The cramps in Andy’s stomach were subsiding, but the nausea was still there.

“I know this must be hard on you,” Danny said. “Shosh and me having a baby after what you--”

“No, shut up about that,” Andy said. “Ancient history.”

Danny watched him like he’d watch a fish under a heavy current. “Be honest with me.”

“Fuck yes. I’m stoked for you, really. Congratulations.” He forced a laugh, still slightly out of breath. “You’re going to have to get in your fishing while you still can.”

Danny looked out over the river. “I know.”

Andy lay on his back, drying, seeing a child’s hand in Danny’s. The way the tiny fingernails reflected the sunlight.

He heard paper rustling and knew Danny was rolling a joint.

“You going to keep burning when you’re a daddy?” Andy asked.

“You sound like Shoshana. Better pot than whiskey.”

Danny passed the joint and a wooden match. "For your stomach."

"To the Goodmans," Andy said, striking the match.

*

As Andy pulled on his waders, Danny said, "Listen, if I'd known that was your trip tomorrow, I wouldn't have taken it."

"I shouldn't have mentioned it," Andy said, kneeling down. "Besides, you're going to need the money more than me."

"And I'm sorry about what I said, you know, about your pops."

Andy rose and they stood there, less than an arm's length apart. So close, Andy could see the black dot the size of a pepper grain in the olive sea-grass around Danny's pupil. He felt water building behind his eyelids. And he realized he wanted to embrace Danny, to be held, to come clean. Instead, he bit his tongue and stuck out his hand. Danny took it, and they shook.

"I'm glad for you," Andy said.

"I'm glad for you too," Danny said, then faltered. He let go of Andy's hand.

"You know what I mean." He looked out over the river. "Best get back to it."

"Won't catch fish sitting here."

Without another word, they finished loading the boat and jumped in. As they neared the tailout, the river coming together in a rush of white water, Andy searched for something to say. Then something came. "We should get a hatchery fish for the party tonight. Barbeque it up right. I could make a blackberry sauce."

"We were just going to do pizzas," Danny said.

"No, no. We've got to do something special."

Danny thought about it. “Shoshana would like that. She wants more fish protein. Thinks it’s good for the baby’s brain. I’ll anchor us up in the Hatchery Hole. See if we can’t convince a fish or two.”

“Perfect.” Suddenly Andy wanted to catch and kill a fish desperately. “Let’s keep our limit.”

“Don’t jinx us.”

*

The sun set and they still hadn’t caught a fish for the party. Soon the remaining rapids above the take-out would be unrunnable, darkness hiding the rocks and holes. They’d spent hours wading the riffles and troughs around the hatchery facility’s outflow, the hatchery that raised young steelhead before setting them free to roam the ocean, the very hatchery the adults tried to reenter upon returning. A metal grate was the only thing stopping them from refilling the cement tanks in which they’d spent their youth.

The fish were visible in the clear fast water, tucked up in the lee behind rocks. But other anglers had spent hours putting flies and lures and bait in their noses over the summer months. Most anglers avoided other sections of the river, not wanting to catch wild fish that they’d just have to let go, and concentrated their efforts right here. Some days, fisherman stood shoulder to shoulder, two hundred people visible along a hundred yard stretch of water. Only those hatchery fish immune to an angler’s offerings remained this late in the season.

“You’d think between the two of us, we could convince a dumb hatchery clone,” Danny said while walking down the beach, his fly line kept aloft by short

strokes. No one could cast like Danny. He leapt onto a rock, the movement of his torso and arms already gaining speed, and then he delivered the forward stroke: the rod arching into a C then snapping straight, a yellow curl of line blurring towards the distant horizon and unhinging—at precisely the same moment, the whole fly line collapsed onto the river.

Andy's line went tight. He raised the rod, shocked by the telltale thump, thump, thump of a steelhead on the other end. He called to Danny, who traded his rod for the net. The fish jumped once, ran towards the deep water downstream—water spinning from the reel in a circular plane—and jumped again. A few minutes later, the steelhead tired and came near shore. With a sweep of the net, Danny had it.

He trotted up the bank, beaming at the net in his hands. “Good fish,” he said.

Andy reached in, took the fish by its gill, and pressed it to the stones. He lifted a rock and smashed its head. The body throbbed under his grip, trying to find the water and escape. Andy came down two more times, fast and hard, and finally the body quivered—its spinal cord severed. He looked at the dead fish, at the rock, at his own hand, shocked at his own viciousness.

“Andy.”

He lifted the fish into the air by its gill. A stream of blood ran down its lateral line.

“Andy,” Danny said. He pointed to the tail.

There, fat and obvious even in the low light, was a healthy and natural adipose fin. The dead fish, still quivering in his hand, wasn't a hatchery fish at all, but a wild one. Suddenly, the nausea returned.

Danny ran to the boat and grabbed a towel. He tossed it to Andy and scanned the banks for any witnesses. “Wrap it up, quick.”

Andy wrapped the body and tucked it in his dry bag, under his rain coat. No game officer would search Danny’s boat, always trusting a fly fishing guide to be honest—how many times had Danny or Andy reported a fish poacher?

“Let’s move,” Danny said.

They made it to the take-out and loaded the boat without seeing another soul.

*

Andy followed Danny up River Road, past the dam, sweating a fever’s sweat. He rolled down his window, and mist from the cascading water dewed his face—as it had her sunburned cheeks that day.

Andy had begged Shoshana to meet him, and finally she said she would between errands for the imminent wedding. He’d picked the dam; it was neutral, public space, and yet private enough that no one would see them. She seemed to smile when he pulled up.

“Why couldn’t we just talk on the phone?” she asked, uncrossing her arms and revealing her breasts. The nipples bulged through her dress.

Things were confused. He hadn’t slept in days. For a moment there were two of her, then there was one again, and he took her in his arms.

“Andy?”

Her hair blew across his face, and they might as well have been staying in her dorm room. Her hand touched his hip. And he kissed her.

She instantly pushed him away, nearly falling backwards. “What the fuck!”

Her saliva was on his lips. “What?” he said, surveying the parking lot. “Is this too public?”

She wiped her arm over her mouth. “Jesus Andy. Are you drunk?”

“Of course not.” He smiled. “Ride on the side.”

Her face pinched, the way it did when she bit into sour food. “What are you talking about?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but turned and started for her car.

A log truck sped by on the road, deadening the air with its jake-breaks. Andy bolted after her and yelled, “I thought you...” He touched her arm to stop her, but she pulled away and kept going. And then he said it. Maybe he thought its sincerity would cancel out its cruelty. “Do you ever wish we’d done things differently?”

She stopped and turned, too scared it seemed to take a full breath.

“The baby,” he explained. “Or a child now, really. It’d be eight and a half.”

Her cheeks faded to ash and she stared at him, through him, her eyes unblinking, cold stones. She started to say something but stopped, and instead, turned for the car. But with each step, she seemed to get weaker, and when she reached the door, she just leaned on it. And then suddenly, she collapsed to the ground like the life had been shot out of her.

He rushed to her side. “Shosh. Shosh, look at me.”

“Don’t you dare call me that!” she screamed, her eyes fire. She pushed him away and then she punched him in the neck. “How dare you! You fucking bastard!” And then the tears came down her cheeks. She screamed the words again and again until her voice broke. “You don’t know anything! How could you? You hid in your fucking fishing magazines.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You don’t know anything.” She sobbed now.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He thought this would go so differently.

“Just leave,” she yelled at him, pushing herself to her feet.

When he reached for her, she slapped his hand.

“Shoshana please.”

She got in the car and slammed the door.

He knocked on the window, hoping she might roll it down. But instead the tires spun.

“Don’t tell Danny,” he yelled after her. “Please.”

But she drove onto River Road without slowing down, an oncoming car swerving in a blur of smoke and screech.

He’d known then, and still knew now, that there was no way of undoing that wrong. He had meant each and every word, but that—somehow—made them all worse. Especially now: had the miscarriage come before or after that day?

And Danny. That kiss. If he ever found out.

Andy rolled up his truck’s window and turned on the radio, nice and loud.

*

Cars and trucks lined the driveway leading to the yurt. A few of the clean ones had California plates. By the house, one spot remained, for Danny’s diesel and boat. Andy turned around and finally found a place out on the gravel road.

Danny waited for him on the driveway. He had the fish on the ground, a knife in his hand. He’d cut the adipose fin free. “Won’t fool Johnny Law, but it’ll get us to

the barbeque.” He handed the quickly blackening fish to Andy—the fresh cut an obvious white line.

Andy kicked the severed fin into the ditch.

“There’s a dude here I want you to meet,” Danny said. “He’s a little different, Nor-Cal type, an acquired taste maybe, but you’ll like him.”

“Is this Trey?”

“Exactly. Misty and the kids are still down south. You’ll meet them at Carnival.”

People peppered the porch, drinks in their hands. A few he recognized from the valley: Isabelle, who managed the co-op; Wendy, a farmer and Isabella’s partner; Sky, the owner of the bookstore and a fine bait fisherman; Reuben, who taught high school English and snuck the students copies of *Howl*. Dozens of people Andy recognized but couldn’t attach a name to, The Wildfire Grill’s owner, the bartender from the Woodsmen, the librarian. But most of the faces were new, clean cut, nice clothes, swirling their wide wine glasses between sips. Andy followed Danny through the crowd, his fingers through the steelhead’s gills, a bag of blackberries in his pocket.

Voices came at Andy: “Of course Andy Trib wouldn’t return from the Sahara without a fish to fry. Where’d you go, anyway?”

“I heard you died in some Nicaraguan mud bank.”

“Skip your best friends’ wedding?”

Andy laughed and said the things he needed to say, then held the fish up between them and said, “Better get this to the coals before they go out.”

“Of course, of course.”

Along the quiet side of the house, Danny flipped on a light, revealing a table made from an aluminum frame and a long plastic cutting surface. A fish cleaning table. Two knives sat ready. Plastic containers for the fillets. A hose for washing the mess. A drain tube directed the waste off the deck and down the steep hillside.

Andy slipped the blade into the fish's belly, and pink and brown organs bulged through the slice. He'd never put a knife to a wild fish, and doing so made him nauseous. Two long strips of pea-sized red eggs, each running the length of the body cavity, glowed in the light. Eggs that would have ended up in Steamboat's gravel. With a quick finger, Andy removed each strip, laying it on the table. The rest of the organs he tore free and dropped into the wide drain tube.

"Nothing fancies up a party faster than a little Northwest caviar," Danny said.

Andy ran the knife down the fish's back, working as quickly as he could, and sliced off a fillet of meat, fat marbling the grain. He flipped the fish and did the same on the other side. With the smaller knife, he sliced out the steelhead's cheeks, two more nuggets of fatty meat. He wouldn't let any go to waste.

"Do you have a pot?" Andy asked holding up the boney remains. "I'll boil this and make stock."

"Don't bother," Danny said. "Toss it over the rail. A bobcat—Shosh calls him Leo—comes around every few days to check for scraps."

"I'd rather boil it."

But Danny grabbed the remains and flipped them into the woods. They crashed through the leaves and landed with a thump. "You didn't know," he said.

"Be done with it."

Inside, Andy poured the blackberries into a bowl and mashed them into a purple pulp. A little honey, a dollop of sour cream, a pinch of salt. The sauce spread evenly over the fillets. He added a sprinkling of rosemary—more for aesthetic value than taste. He could at least make it beautiful.

Danny handed him a tea pot of nearly boiling water. After stirring in a palm's worth of salt, Andy poured the water over the roe and began separating the eggs from the grey tissue holding them together. Danny placed a half-dozen of the bright orbs on a cracker and popped it in his mouth. "Perf," he said still chewing. "I can already feel my arteries clogging."

The thought of the eggs exploding under Danny's teeth made Andy sick. "Any difference in taste?"

"Not a bit," Danny said. He pointed over his shoulder. "I'm going to check on Shosh."

Andy carried the fillets to the grill. A pair of huge flannel shoulders hunched over it: Bridge. A stick, the size of a pencil, protruded from his graying beard. "You live!" he said, his voice deep and soft at once. He took Andy into his arms and lifted him from the ground. "You've been missed, brother." He looked at the fish.

"Blackberry sauce? You knew I'd be here, did you?"

"Your handiwork," Andy said, waving at the yurt. "Stunning."

"Sweet of you to say. Simple, really. Put the beam where the plan tells you to."

The stick in Bridge's beard bounced with each syllable. Andy started to point it out, but stopped short.

“That tropical sun sucked you dry, didn’t it?” Bridge said. “Where was it, The Bahamas or some shit?”

“Couldn’t afford the Bahamas. Fifty bucks for a damn sandwich. How’s Rita?”

“She’ll want to see you.”

“And the boys?”

Bridge chuckled, looking off into the trees. “Oh my boys.” He couldn’t speak of them without his eyes watering. “Neil is living in Eugene now, started college, says he’s going to do the Peace Corps like his mom when he’s done. And Cameron got a great paramedic job up in Portland, big check and only works one day out of three. They were just here for archery season. Cammy got himself a little bull.” Bridge pointed to the grill, where a thick roast splattered fat drops into the heat below. “Passed on a few pounds to the old man.”

“That time of year already?”

“Elk season ends in a week, brother. A bit out of touch, are we?” Bridge sized up the fillets, then cleared enough space on the grill—sliding over the roast, and a dozen or so black bean burgers. “For those with lower standards,” he said. “Or Disney-marinated imaginations.”

Rita appeared beside Bridge, her silver hair pulled tight into two braids. A more regal version of her younger, hippie-self Andy had seen in pictures over Rita and Bridge’s mantel. She plucked the stick from her man’s beard and flicked it over the rail. Then did a double-take at Andy.

“Hey Rita,” Andy said, feeling his face flush. He felt fabulously lucky whenever she looked his way, like he had attracted the queen’s attention.

“Andrew!” She smiled, wrapping her arms around him. Her hugs were always long and meaningful, never trivialized by social etiquette. “The tropical sun turned you into a tomato.”

Rita and Bridge had met at Berkeley in ‘68. Bridge was the son of the son of the son of some of the Ipsyniho’s first White settlers, Rita had been born and raised in California. Andy had pieced together traces of their early lives from Bridge’s stories. He knew they’d gone their separate ways after college, Rita heading to Mexico—where she’d studied midwifery—and Bridge dropping off the government’s draft radar just in time. He’d holed up in the same dark Northwest fringes as his old friend Ken Kesey. They’d wrestled each other back in high school. He claimed that Kesey wrote *Sometimes a Great Notion* in an apartment in Florence over the course of one winter, a winter spent in steady Benzedrine frenzy. “That’s why Kenny didn’t write much after—he burned himself out that winter.” Bridge had been invited to Kesey’s funeral when he’d died a couple years back.

Rita was the valley’s midwife, a celebrity of sorts. She knew most of the valley’s babies from their first breaths, and guided their parents through some of their most intimate moments. At Carnival, she could hardly make it from one booth to the next without families she knew surrounding her, asking if there was anything they could do for her. Boxes of garden-fresh produce and homemade bread and jams appeared on her doorstep regularly—Bridge would occasionally trade what they couldn’t finish for fresh fish. Andy imagined Rita’s skirts sweeping through the night,

appearing beside the worried sides of mothers-to-be, her hands wiping the sweat from their brows, her words lifting their worry. Each dawn birth had worn a wrinkle into her skin, and she wore the wrinkles with pride.

She looked at him now, squinting, the way Danny looked at water. “Is everything alright, Andy?”

“Of course,” he said. “Glad to be back.”

She nodded, but didn’t look away.

“I’m perfectly fine,” he said, laughing. “Fine as can be.”

She leaned into his ear. “She is wonderfully happy now, you know.”

He stepped back. “Oh, I know. Totally. Completely. I’m fine. I’m glad for everyone. Really.”

Rita slapped Bridge’s chest with the back of her hand. “Andy here needs a good meal. What do you say we cook up something nice for him tomorrow night?” She looked to Andy. “Are you available?”

Andy nodded.

“Hell yes,” Bridge said. “Come over. Have some wine, and we’ll catch up.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Andy said. Over Bridge’s shoulder, he saw Shoshana coming through the crowd. “Would you mind dropping those fillets on the heat for me? I’ve got to, um...”

“Certainly,” Rita said, spotting Shoshana. “Go. We’ll take care of it.”

Inside, the party pulsed. An impromptu band played in the corner. Takken, wearing the same dirty overalls he’d worn a year ago, tickled a mandolin. Claire strummed a banjo. And a man wearing business pants, a clean white shirt, and big city

glasses kept a simple rhythm on a soup pot. Women laughed together and clanked their wine glasses. Men tapped their feet and bobbed their heads. Alison and Marcus, organic blueberry farmers, were pressed into a single form, swaying a half beat behind the music.

“Found you,” Danny said, punching Andy’s shoulder. “I want to introduce you to that guy.”

Andy nodded towards the man in city clothes who was beating on the soup pot. “Who’s this?”

“I don’t know his name,” Danny said. “A prospective resident, like pretty much everyone else here. You know, for the community.”

Danny led him down the hallway, to the bedroom, where a group of people—none of which Andy knew—gathered in a circle. The bed was neatly made, as if no one had ever lain in it.

A shorter man with a goatee turned away from the circle and smiled. “You must be Andy. I’ve heard only good things. I’m Trey.”

Trey was clean-cut, wore a button up shirt—the pressed kind he could latch a tie around at a moment’s notice. His age was impossible to determine. Certainly older than Danny, but by five or fifteen years, Andy couldn’t tell. They shook: a soft hand with thin, crusty calluses—the hand of someone who’d recently traded a paperwork job for physical labor.

“Danny tells me you want to develop the land along Steamboat Creek?” Andy said.

“We’d rather not,” Trey answered. “That creek, as I’m sure you know, is ecologically delicate. But the zoning commission leaves us little choice.” Trey put his hand on Danny’s shoulder.

“They won’t open up any other parcels,” Danny said. He would have shrugged off any other man’s hand, but he let Trey’s stay.

“No offense,” Andy said, “but I don’t see why the Ipsyniho needs more McMansions.”

“Sure, sure,” Trey said, smiling. “The valley doesn’t need any more luxury houses or condos. That’s why it’s so vital that we get that land.”

“Better us,” Danny said. “They want to put in a golf course.” He shook his head. “Imagine all those herbicides seeping into the creek.”

“What’s the difference between your houses and theirs?” Andy asked. “You’re both threatening the watershed.”

Trey raised his eyebrows and nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “Totally right.” He took a sip of his beer. “But I think for a stream like Steamboat to survive the twenty-first century, it will need a community of compassionate people living along its banks. Lookouts, in a way. The people you see here will care about that stream’s health. The White Oak people probably won’t.” Trey smiled at Danny. “But anyway,” he said. “Tell me about this trip of yours. Danny says you went to Micronesia?”

Andy caught a whiff of barbeque. “I just remembered,” he said, “I left that steelhead on the grill. Excuse me.”

“Of course,” Trey said.

As he turned to go, Danny yelled, “Andy, what do you say to a little session later?”

He saw them both watching him. “Sure.”

Outside, Bridge still worked the barbeque. People on the deck were eating the black bean burgers, green lettuce and red tomatoes squeezing out between the buns.

“A good roast is worth the wait,” Bridge said.

Andy checked the fillets. Another minute or two. He plucked the cheek nuggets from the hot grill with his bare fingers, tossing one to Bridge. “Try this.” Bridge blew on the fish with a precise stream of air, then popped it into his mouth. “Summer steelhead,” Bridge moaned.

“Does it taste alright?” Andy still held the fin-sized nugget in his hand.

“Well, it doesn’t have much on a slice of elk roast, but I’m not complaining.”

Andy’s stomach roared and he realized he hadn’t eaten enough—after giving his lunch back to the river. He popped the fish into his mouth, exhaling the steam as he chewed. His first bite of steelhead in fourteen months.

The meat, encapsulated in a crispy layer of fried fat, exploded on the first chomp: the musky smell of the Ipsyniho, its ripples illuminated by the noon sun, blackberries hanging within inches of the water’s surface, doug fir needles swirling in a soupy pool. And then the image of that severed fin.

Andy slid the fillets onto a serving plate and carried them inside. The blackberry sauce had caramelized over the top just as he’d hoped. With a fork, he cracked it as if it were crème brulee, and leafed off a few ribbons of meat. Inside, the fillet was still translucent, the heat having barely penetrated that far. Ideal—but he

wanted nothing of it. Smelling it made him want to vomit. He pushed the fish away and looked for something else to eat. A slice of mushroom pizza remained in a gaping take-out box, the cheese now room temperature.

“What kind of fish is that?” a man asked.

“Steelhead.” Through the crowd, Andy saw Danny and Shoshana together, leaning against the wall. They were close enough to kiss, laughing together. Danny kissed his hand and laid it on her belly.

“Is steelhead some kind of salmon?” the man went on.

“Yeah,” Andy said.

The song ended, and everyone clapped for the dancers. Danny grabbed a glass from a guest and a fork from another and clanged the two, and the room fell silent.

“Shosh and I have an announcement,” Danny said. Shoshana stepped out where everyone could see her, hiding her face behind her hand. “We wanted all of our friends to find out at once,” Danny continued.

Andy pushed away from the fish, and swam through the crowd towards the door. He made it out before Danny could say the words.

Outside the air had cooled. The stars flurried against the blackberry sky. He knew the Umpqua valley, a few ridges to the south, had steelhead year round. He wondered how blackberries did there.

A voice beside him said, “Do you ever think about having kids?” It was Trey, looking up at the stars.

“Never,” Andy said.

“I didn’t want any myself. Had too much work I wanted to do. Kids would get in the way. My lady friend pushed me into it. Well,” he said, chuckling, “some might say she tricked me into it, if you know what I mean.”

Inside, everyone erupted in cheers.

Trey said, “I’ve been thankful for my babies every day. Their smiles make the sunshine brighter, the fruit sweeter.” He turned and looked inside. “Danny and Shoshana will make great parents, won’t they?”

Andy nodded. His stomach cramped.

Trey said, “They’re so full of love for each other and for this place. I can’t think of a better environment to raise a family.”

“When did he tell you?” Andy said.

“About what?”

“About Shoshana being pregnant. I found out today, around noon.”

Trey studied Andy for a moment. Then he looked to the stars. “The way I figure it, you did the valley a favor by introducing them. Their kids will be the next generation of advocates for the place. These days, every place needs its ardent defenders.”

“Yeah, it does.” Andy stared at Trey and tried to stand up straight, despite his stomach.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Trey said, still kindly. “Hypocritical, right? A developer talking about sustainability. But that is the wave of the future. If we’re to last as a culture, as a species, every developer needs to be an advocate for

sustainability.” He looked out over the valley below. “I want you to know I’ve got this river’s best interest at heart. I’m confident you’ll come to see that.”

Andy walked away, without another word, leaving Trey by himself. He followed the deck around to the grill, hoping to find Bridge sliding a knife through the roast. But everyone was inside now, toasting. His truck was just a few hundred yards away. He gripped the rail, his stomach cramping again. He bent at the waist.

The yurt’s door opened, and he heard Rita’s voice. “Get in here,” she said. “You’re going to miss the toast.”

“I’m not feeling well,” he said, hearing his voice rattle with tears. “I’m heading home.”

“You are home, silly,” she said.

She took his hand and led him back inside, and as they came through the doorway, she whispered, “Your stomach will heal itself. But you’ll have bigger problems if you don’t heal the real problem.”

“I just ate some bad fish, that’s all.”

She raised her glass and looked, like everyone else, towards Shoshana. “There’s a time for moping,” she said, “and there’s a time for moving on.”

Chapter 4

People ducked in and out of the Co-op, the automatic door perpetually open. Old school jazz, a collection of tings and pings and titee-tats, played overhead. Shoppers slung words like “organically cultivated” and “permaculture.” Someone asked an employee, “How much post-consumer product is in this bag?”

Andy had spent most of the night sitting on the toilet, dozing off, only to be jarred awake again as another round of cramps gripped his abdomen. The cramps had cleared up sometime around dawn, leaving his head fogged with lack of sleep.

He needed a scone to fill his stomach. And he needed wine for the dinner at Bridge's and Rita's that night. At least two bottles, a red and a white. "It'll be an Italian meal," Bridge had said when Andy asked what to bring. "Show up with a rainbow of wine." But money was tight. Hopefully two bottles would do.

People carried cloth bags, stuffing them with local organic produce: onions from Washington, red potatoes from Idaho, avocados from California, local tomatoes and lemon cucumbers and black figs. Steaming breads. An entire wall devoted to the cheeses of the world. A walk-in cooler of free-range, organic meats. Another cooler of bulk tofu and tempeh and bizarre soy meats. A man with curly gray hair puffing out the sides of his baseball cap—someone Andy had seen here before—lifted a loaf of cheese, read the label, smelled it through the plastic, and set it back down.

A placard near the lettuce read: "According to a recent study by a Cornell economist, 4021 calories of petroleum energy are used to deliver every 80 calorie serving of lettuce from the farmer in California to the store front in New York. Buy local!"

A woman, her blond hair up in a handkerchief, squeezed four loaves of spelt bread before selecting the one for her bag. Two men about Andy's age, both wearing clean leather shoes with tucked-in shirts, plucked at the greens and spoke about which dressing might "bring out the astringent qualities of the arugala."

The Co-op had taken over the Thriftway Grocery storefront only ten years before. Andy used to stop in to the old establishment on his way back from the river, to grab some jo-jos from the deli, and maybe a cup of their bitter coffee if he was fading. Every year since the switch, the Co-op had expanded, adding solar panels to the roof, a community garden space across the street, and now, the biodiesel pumps out back. He couldn't imagine what Danny's parents would think of the place if they still lived nearby. Most of the hold-outs from the logging days drove the forty-five minutes to Roseburg or Cottage Grove to get their groceries. "That new place charges three times as much for the same thing," Andy had heard a bait fisherman say one day as he plied the hatchery pool. "A working man just can't spend sixty dollars for twenty bucks worth of food."

Now, Andy moved to the long wine aisles. Five people stood nearby, their cloth bags on the floor, their reading glasses on the tips of their noses, studying bottles. He swam between them, moving to the Local Section. He found pinot noir from the Ipsyniho Vineyard, a family-owned winery that sat in the hill country fifteen miles downriver, and tucked it under his arm. The owner had once traded half a case of pinot for a pair of big hatchery steelhead Andy caught. Whites were tougher. But he soon found a pinot gris from a small vineyard near Portland, and turned towards the scones.

There, halfway in the bulk salsa bin, stood Shoshana. She held one flip-flop in the air, balancing her torso as she leaned over to get a scoop at the bottom of the bin. Her jeans—her gardening jeans with red dirt permanently coloring the knees—slid up

from her ankle, revealing a small tattoo, one Andy had never seen before. A swirling line, a river eddy, maybe.

For a moment he froze, and a woman who'd expected him to keep moving bumped into him with her cloth bag.

"My mistake," she said.

"It's nothing," he said.

Shoshana lifted her head from the bin and turned. She had salsa on her cheek.

"Hi," he said. He tucked both wine bottles under one arm and stuck his free hand into his pocket. But the gris slipped free and he had to dive to keep it from crashing to the floor.

"I guess there's no avoiding each other, is there?" she said.

He didn't know what to say. "You have salsa on your cheek."

She wiped it off. "I was saving it for the chip aisle."

"I want to apologize," he said.

"No," she said, looking around. "Water under the bridge. Please. Drop it."

Water under the bridge didn't make him feel any better. "I need to—"

"This isn't about what you need," she said. Her hand fell absently to her belly.

He nodded. "Okay." She needed to be thinking of the future, not rehashing old pain. "But I need to come clean with Danny."

She stared at him, the first time she'd really looked at him since he returned.

"Why did you come back, Andy?"

While in Micronesia, he'd told himself to get back before he missed another year of blackberries and Carnival. "This is the only place that makes sense to me," he said.

"Is that the real reason?" She didn't wait for a reply. "If you tell him," she said, "things will never be right between you two again. You realize that don't you?"

He did. But things weren't right now either.

"Look," she said. "You weren't yourself then. Things were crazy." She glanced at her watch. "Trust me. Keep this one quiet. What happened at the dam should stay there. It was a long time ago."

"It was last year," Andy said.

Shoshana nodded, her eyes wide and serious. "A lot has changed since then." She put a plastic container of salsa in her basket and pushed past him. Her shoulder scraped his.

He held his breath until she was passed, then called after her, the only thing he could think of. "He's my only family." But she rounded the corner of the aisle and disappeared. A trace of lavender remained.

Driving up River Road towards his house, he felt tears in his eyes. He reached for the radio. The familiar voice of Downtown Deb, the host of "Dead Air" on Eugene's public station, popped into the cab.

"A little number from the show at Oregon State Prison, in the year nineteen hundred and eighty-two. One show I didn't attend," she said, her voice like warm butter. Tears ran down his cheeks and the song "Reuben and Clarise" filled the truck.

Andy spent the afternoon alone, tying flies, the warm air slipping through the open windows. Stubster worked diligently outside, sitting atop the stump, both hands holding a sunflower seed to his little teeth. Once his cheeks were full, or his hawk-paranoia sparked a tweaking fit, he'd leap from the stump and bolt towards the cover of the hazelnut trees.

On the table, beside the vise, sat a small square of scrap paper: Tamara's number. He'd dug it out and laid it there an hour ago, checking it occasionally. It wasn't that he necessarily wanted to start things back up. He didn't need a relationship right now, not with trying to get settled back in and all. Yet with each passing minute he felt himself more inclined to pick up the phone.

Shoshana could be so cold. The way she refused to talk about it. She would rather he have died somewhere in Chile, never come back to the valley to make things uncomfortable for her.

Andy hated her for that. And yet, he understood why she felt she did. The things he'd said.

He whip-finished the head of the fly, cut the thread, and grabbed the phone.

4:30. Tamara would be arriving home from school.

Tamara's high, bouncy voice answered. She was out of breath, "Hello."

"Hey," he said. "It's me. Andy."

There was a long pause, then she said, "Andy?" Maybe she was joking.

"You know, Andy. You may remember me from such debacles as that night I spilled wine all over your dress. Or the afternoon I threw a log to your new puppie and hit her in the head. How is Chloe anyway?"

“Oh, you mean the self-involved Andy with commitment problems?”

“No. I’m the dwebby looking Andy with a driftboat.”

“Same one,” she said. “Andy Trib.”

“That’s me.”

They spoke for sometime, discussing safe subjects like pets and mutual friends. He asked after her puppie—Chloe was her name—and about school. She told him about the new principal and about the lay-offs last summer, about how she barely kept her job. She asked where he was—she’d heard he was never coming back.

“I’m back now,” he said. “Took my old place at the Kepingers.”

“Oh,” she said. “So you’re here? In Inpsyniho?”

“Yeah.” He held his breath and went for it. “And I was curious if you might want to, you know, have dinner or something.”

“Dinner?” she said. “Ah, that’s really sweet of you to ask.” She didn’t say more.

He waited until the silence sprawled into awkwardness. “So what do you say? Keystoneer or Wildfire tomorrow night?”

“Actually Andy, I’m with someone now. I didn’t realize you were in town. Maybe we could do coffee one afternoon, or something,” she said.

“That’d be nice.” But it was clear neither of them really fancied the idea. They played small talk for a while longer and then she said she needed to go. Andy heard someone else’s voice in the background.

Andy hung up and a truck shut off out front. A cloud of dust drifted across the room. He stepped outside to see Mr. Kepingier creaking shut his truck door.

“Howdy, Trib.”

“Mr. Keping. What can I offer you? Is it too early for a beer?” Andy knew the man would say no. He was here to ask after the rent.

With a sweep of the hand, Mr. Keping waved away the beverage offer, then looked out towards the river. He wore the same clothes he always did: dusty jeans, tucked-in flannel shirt, and a red baseball cap that sat too high on his head. A thin hazelnut stick protruded from his mouth like an oversized toothpick. And a cell phone was holstered on his hip. “Some weather we’re having,” he said. “Ninty-nine days, now, without a speck of rain.”

Not a single cloud hung in the sky. Andy realized he hadn’t seen only a few clouds since returning home, mostly empty wisps in the evening.

“Imagine this ain’t kind on the fish,” Keping said.

“Really?” Andy asked. “Ninety-nine days is it?”

“Yes sir. Longest streak I’ve seen. Course I only been here since about the time Jesus burst forth from Mary.” Keping didn’t laugh—he never laughed—but he glanced at Andy to see if his joke had been appreciated. Then he spit.

Andy smiled, then said, “Blackberries are behind schedule. I wonder if there’s some connection.”

“Listen son,” Keping said. “I don’t mean to ride you or nothing, but the wife’s starting to ride me, if you know what I mean.”

Probably a lie. Keping had used that one before.

“Any chance you got the rent money?”

Andy had two-hundred and twenty-seven dollars. He'd had two-hundred and fifty two before buying the wine that morning. "I've got half of the rent," he said. "After next week's trip, I'll have the rest."

Kepinger chewed the stick. "Half now will probably settle the wife."

"You think Mrs. Kepinger could settle for a third? I need some gas money to run that trip."

The old man spun slowly until he was looking back up at his house. He tossed the hazelnut stick into the orchard and turned back to Andy. "That'll work. Why don't you drop the bills by the house tonight."

"No problem," Andy said. "Thank you."

Kepinger nodded. "But Trib," he said. "Let's not make a habit of this. I got to live too."

Back inside, Andy recounted his bills. The trip next week would finish off the rent, but then who would he cover food and gas until he managed to find another trip? He'd been desperate like this before, twice, both times in the winter when trips were scarce. But never in the fall. Before, he'd called his father and asked for a "loan." Both times the man had consented and transferred funds into Andy's account at the Ipsyniho Credit Union, and he'd never asked to be repaid. His father liked to wield money, especially over his son. It was a chance to wordlessly say "see, I told you so." Andy could have gone into corporate business or state politics or law. But instead he'd "dropped out," as his father called it, and become "just" a fishing guide.

Fuck it. He'd worry about money tomorrow.

Rita and Bridge lived in a section of dense woods a mile up a gravel side road, along a small tributary to Steamboat Creek called Echo Creek. Echo splashed its way over white stones, through caves of overhanging limbs, and finally leveled into a marsh of beaver ponds just before its confluence with Steamboat. Andy had watched young steelhead dart in and out of the willows there in years past, wondering if he might touch them in three or four years as adult fish.

Rita and Bridge's house sat on a bench in the steep slope, overlooking both Steamboat Creek and the Ipsyniho River. A dense forest of Douglas firs and ferns grew behind the house, hiding it. As you came down their driveway, the house appeared first as a wall of windows. On a good day, they mirrored the vista below. But as you parked, the sloping roof revealed itself, and suddenly, those windows appeared as the opening to a cave. The roof itself contained the same grasses as the hillside behind it, an "organic top hat," Bridge called it. He'd built the structure almost thirty years before and claimed the natural roof locked in more heat in the winter and kept the house cooler in the summer. The only drawback was that twice a year Bridge had to summit his creation and pluck the yearling blackberries that were determined to take over the house—"let those things stay and some morning we'll wake up to vines tickling our faces." Sometimes, Andy imagined what would happen if they left the house to the land, how long it would take until the blackberries to bury the house, how absolutely invisible the place would be.

Now, as Andy turned off River Road, he couldn't wait to see the house again. Time spent there felt like time spent in a different dimension, a fairy tale's rabbit hole—without the hallucinations. After what felt like fifteen minutes, he'd look at his

watch and realize two hours had passed. The house was like the river in that way, a reality outside the herding dogs of time.

But as Andy turned down the driveway, he realized something was profoundly wrong. The forest surrounding the house was gone. Only a thin veil of trees remained along the property line. Between their trunks, the brown remnants of a clearcut baked in the sun. A fresh cut, probably from last winter. A war had exploded in Bridge's and Rita's backyard.

Bridge sat on the tailgate of his truck, looking down the steep hill at the valley below—as if he didn't notice the expansive devastation behind him. He wore one of his many flannel shirts. "Thought you'd never show," he yelled, a wide smile across his face.

"Picked you some river berries." Andy left the wine in his truck and came over to Bridge, hopping up on the tailgate. The Ipsyniho sparkled miles below. He could just barely make out Missouri Bend, the afternoon sunlight sparking off one of the mansion's windows. "What the hell happened?" he asked.

Bridge glanced at the hillside behind the house. Then he popped a berry into his mouth, and looked back to the river.

The front door swung wide and Rita emerged, not in the billowing skirts Andy had always seen before, but in a pair of well-worn work pants.

"The boy brought river berries, babe."

"I don't think he qualifies as a boy any longer, dear," Rita said, kissing Andy on the cheek, and at the same time, taking a berry from the bag. She bit the fruit in half and chewed slowly. "You always have the kush blackberries, don't you?"

“It’s the little things,” Andy said. “What happened to your mountain?”

Rita didn’t look at the clearcut. “That’s the thing,” she said. “Wasn’t our mountain.”

Most of the land on the hills and ridges along the Ipsyniho was public, either National Forest or Bureau of Land Management. In fact, the river itself was technically public property, state land up to the top of the river channel.

Bridge put his massive hand on Andy’s shoulder, a smile on his face. “Got a proposition for you. A little change of plans.”

“Don’t pressure him,” Rita said.

“We need to make a run up the ridge before he can have dinner.”

Andy followed Bridge’s eyes to the bed of the truck where a pair of backpacks sat. Between them was Bridge’s bow, a stick and a string with a four-arrow quiver attached to the side—only three arrows remained. “Did you catch something?” Andy asked.

“Fishermen ‘catch,’” Bridge said, “hunters ‘shoot.’”

“Yes, he caught something,” Rita said to Andy. Then to Bridge, “It just sounds less violent to say ‘caught.’”

“No sense in hiding the reality,” Bridge said. “If you’re going to eat a dead thing, better you understand the reality.”

“Better yet,” Rita said, “quit eating meat altogether. Live a torture-free existence.” She’d been trying to convince Bridge to give up meat since Andy first met them. And he assumed, based on how old and worn their vegetarian cookbooks were, that she’d been trying for years before that.

“I went veggie once,” Bridge said. “Thinned out so bad, I nearly blew away in a wind storm.”

“So what’s your proposition?” Andy asked.

Bridge told of how he’d snuck up on a bull elk in the heavy forest down the ridge. As the bull trotted past at ten yards, chasing an evasive cow, Bridge loosened an arrow, and watched it disappear into the animal’s side. The bull followed the cow down through the woods, and vanished in the ferns. They needed to find it and get the meat off the ground before the bears got to it during the night. “Sorry to spring this on you,” Bridge said. “I tried calling, but I guess you’d already left.”

“You’re welcome to come with us, or we could reschedule,” Rita said.

No way did Andy want to go back home.

“Or,” Rita said, “You could collect chanterelles while we find this elk.”

In all his time in the Northwest, he’d still never collected mushrooms. “Let’s go.”

They piled into the pickup and drove up the road from the house, Andy riding in the middle seat with both his legs tucked with Rita’s in the passenger’s well, leaving room for Bridge to shift gears. The road used to be a tunnel through the thick forest, but now it was entirely in the sun-beaten open. They kept the windows down to stay cool.

Andy spent the drive trying to imagine what an elk looked like up close. He’d only seen the animals at the end of a distant field or swimming across the river several hundred yards ahead of the boat. Even at that distance they looked enormous. He’d

heard that a mature bull stood five feet at the shoulders. And they looked strong—when one walked, you could see its muscles flexing through the hide.

But one image proved stronger than the rest: the image of a bear lifting its head from a bloody carcass, its hawk eyes narrowing into a menacing stare. Andy studied the bow in the bed of the truck. It looked delicate enough to be busted over a child's knee. "You all done this before?" Andy asked, wiping a glaze of sweat from his forehead.

"Once a year."

They stopped where the road ended, at a level platform on top of the ridge. To the west, the craggy Cascades clawed at the sky line, their sides still hoarding snow. The peaks were visible because the new clearcut sprawled out before them. In all four directions, yellow stumps protruded like warts from the dirt. Below, maybe a mile below, Andy could see his own truck parked in the yard of the house. The house itself was invisible.

"This is where they put the Skagit crane," Rita said. "Ran a cable all the way to that ridge over there. I came up when they did it. Watched them cut away the mountain's skin." She rubbed her forehead. "The sight of it still makes me sick." And yet, there was nowhere else to look.

Ridges extended for hundreds of miles to the south, each rise increasingly greyed by the distance. Mount Shasta's bulbous top shimmered on the horizon. Closer, the ridges were quilted by square clear-cuts, yellowed brush, and dead stumps. Andy didn't remember so many fresh cuts the last time he'd come up this high, probably two years before.

“Sustained yield, my ass,” Bridge said. “Every time I come up here, I want to slap some sense into the guy who signs the logging permits.”

They stood out in the middle of the open, the sun abnormally hot without the trees. A grasshopper leapt into the wind, clattering as it zipped past.

Bridge studied the hillsides, his beard blowing out before him. Andy had never seen the man so dour. “Logging ain’t what it used to be,” Bridge said.

“What happened while I was gone?” Andy asked. “I don’t remember so many fresh cuts.”

“D.C. decided to up the board-footage cut from public lands,” Rita said. “They bypassed the ecological assessments in the name of fire prevention. Trees can’t burn if they aren’t there.”

“All in the name of healthy forests.” Bridge spit over the edge.

Andy watched a lizard sunbathing on a stump just down the hill. The reptile watched him back. “What’s this ‘sustainably harvested’ thing Danny keeps talking about?”

“Instead of treating the trees like corn,” Bridge pointed out over the clearcut, “sustainable logging only cuts selectively, at a rate the forest can perpetually maintain.”

“No sense in getting worked up over this again,” Rita said. She looked out towards the Cascades and the sun hanging above them. “Only got a few hours of daylight, anyway.”

Bridge grabbed his bow and pair of backpacks from the pick-up's bed. He gave Rita one of the packs and slipped his arms through the other one, buckling the waist strap tight.

"I can carry that pack," Andy said to Rita.

She buckled the waist strap tight. "Why didn't you offer to carry my man's?"

Andy stuttered.

She winked at him. "You might think about that."

They set off down the bare ridge, towards a fence of uncut trees. As Bridge walked, he pulled a small GPS unit from his pocket. Bridge had a fetish for the things. Once Andy found him in the Co-op's parking lot trying to input the store's location into the little computer's memory. "He's down there 1,800 meters," Bridge shouted over his shoulder. Andy had to trot to keep up.

Between the stumps, no brush grew. Skeletons of blackberry vines and bracken ferns and cluster maples sat frozen in the wind. Killed by the herbicide sprayed from helicopters. Sprayed so that new, soon-to-be-planted trees could grow back faster. Andy wondered if Rita and Bridge had been home during the spraying—he hoped not.

With the trees gone and the brush dead, the sun had baked the earth, melting the soil shut. Next time the clouds opened and showered their loads, the water would run over the soil as if it were concrete, probably carrying any remaining herbicide directly into Echo Creek, then Steamboat Creek. Young steelhead and trout, still in the alevin stage with their red nectar orbs attached to their throats, might inhale the poison and die. Once, Andy had found scores of dead alevin stacked against a beaver

dam on Steamboat. He'd reported the fish kill to Fish and Wildlife, who'd told him it was probably the result of a recent herbicide "application" in the drainage.

Andy kicked a dirt clog, and it exploded into a ball of dust, drifting uphill with the breeze.

When winter brought the monsoons, the rain would soak the barren soil, turning it to slush. With no hardy roots to hold the muck together, it'd probably slide, dumping thousands of cubic feet of mud into Echo. Certainly, the sediment would work its way downhill, possibly all the way to Steamboat's gravel—suffocating any eggs tucked between the rocks. These irresponsible logging practices were probably the greatest threat to steelhead stocks in the Ipsyniho drainage—and elsewhere. And yet, some big logging company had still managed to get a permit to clearcut in the Steamboat watershed.

"Who did the cutting?" Andy asked.

Rita answered, wiping sweat from her forehead. "Cherry Creek Timber. Who else?"

Cherry Creek had decimated watersheds from Oregon to Maine. The headquarters of the company, according to signs Andy had seen on log trucks, were in Texas. The people running the show would never have to see what their business did to the land.

Finally, the three of them stepped into the shade of the forest, and within a few hundred yards, were out of the heat of the clearcut. Jade colored moss covered the ground, and ferns grew up to their waists. Trees decomposed all around them, the wood chipping off in red chunks. Wild rhododendrons blossomed, the pink flowers

like stars in a sky of green. Beams of sunlight splintered through the canopy, and Andy realized he could only see fifty feet in any direction. In all his years in the valley, he'd never been in a forest this far from the river before. And after a few minutes of walking, he suddenly realized he couldn't determine from which direction they'd come. Without Rita and Bridge, he would be lost.

"Those chanterelles are over there, three or four hundred yards," Rita said.

"That's okay," Andy said. "I'll stick with you guys."

"Over here," Bridge said, stuffing the GPS back in his pocket. He examined the trees, the disturbances in the moss. "I was right there, and the bull came through here." The elk had been within spitting distance.

"How'd you get so close?" Andy asked.

Bridge put his finger to his lips, then whispered, "Same as fishing. Just got to know the spots."

Rita went to work, bent over at the waist, her eyes on the ground. And Bridge followed along behind, his bow at his side, his eyes scanning the surrounding woods. Andy imagined a bear standing up in front of them. And then he remembered the picture on the front page of *The Oregonian* years before, "Mountain Lion Mauls Hiker." "Are there cougars here?" Andy asked.

Bridge turned. With dire seriousness, he whispered, "Lots. We see them all the time. But don't worry about me. They like to eat the guy in the back of the line."

Behind Andy, the ferns still shook from his passing.

"Here's some," Rita whispered. "And some more."

Bridge pointed to a fern, to a tiny pin drop of red on the green leaf. Andy touched it, and the blood smeared over his skin like blackberry juice. It was thinner, redder than fish blood.

Over the next few minutes, Rita guided them a hundred yards or so through the brush, connecting red dots. And then she found half an arrow. Bridge snatched it up and held it in the light, a wide smile on his face. “Do you see how the blood is frothy, not smooth? Means the arrow passed through both lungs,” Bridge said. “As painless and lethal a hit as possible. He probably wasn’t on his feet for more than four or five seconds before he passed out. We’ll find him soon.”

Without a word, Rita and Bridge traded places. Bridge went first, an arrow on the string—in case he walked headlong into a bear or cougar?—while Rita maintained their course by following the now profuse trail of blood.

Andy double checked over his shoulder, then whispered, “Why didn’t Bridge find the elk himself this afternoon?”

“My man is color blind,” Rita said. “He can’t tell the difference between green and red.” She stopped and pulled a water bottle out from her backpack, drank a sip, offered some to Andy.

“He needs your help to hunt?”

She nodded and stuffed the water bottle into her pack. “Although he’d never admit it.”

“So why--”

“—do it?” she said. “Because without hunting, my Bridge isn’t himself. One year, the year Cam was born, I asked him to take the season off, to stay home. He did,

of course. But he went a little tweaky. Spent hours staring at the woods, bouncing little Cam in his arms. And then he got sick that winter, really sick. Depressed sick.” She shrugged. “I wish he could find what he needs in a damn garden, but that doesn’t seem likely.”

They heard a yell from up ahead, and busted through the ferns towards the sound. The hillside turned steep, cliff steep. Andy could touch the slope by sticking his arm out. Down on a bench in the slope, he saw a wide patch of yellow, the flank of an elk, red slime on its side. Andy slid his way down the slope, and hit the flat area with a crash.

Bridge kneeled at the elk’s head, its antlers black as sticks. He looked like a child beside the massive animal. His hand covered the elk’s eyes, and he mumbled.

It was dead. It had been walking and eating only this morning. Had spent the winter down in the valley with all the other elk. Maybe Andy had even seen it then. But now, ticks crawled out of the fur, onto the nearby ferns, abandoning the body. The smell of musky urine hung like smoke in the air.

Andy walked a few yards down the bench and sat down in the ferns, facing the opposite direction. His stomach hurt again. He remembered the quivering of the broken steelhead, the panic in its eye the moment before Andy delivered the rock to its skull. And it felt new. Like it had just happened.

Rita laid her hand on his shoulder. She looked at the dead elk on the ground and sighed. “It never gets any easier.”

Bridge still knelt beside the animal.

“Will you come with me and pick mushrooms?” Andy asked Rita.

She shook her head. “Got to help quarter the meat. So we can get it done before dark.” She handed him the water bottle. “Drinking water will help.”

Over the next couple hours, Bridge and Rita cut the hide away, spreading it over the ground like a tarp. Then they cut thick blocks of muscle from the bone, dropping the meat into cloth bags, and tying the bag shut when it contained what looked to be about thirty pounds. As the elk began to appear less and less like an elk, Andy found the work easier to be near. By the end, he was able to help carry the ten bags from the animal’s bones up the slope to the tree in which Bridge was busy rigging a pulley.

He had two ropes laid neatly on the ground. A wide limb projected from the tree twenty feet above their heads. To the first rope, he tied the blue pulley. “Hold this,” he said to Andy, handing him the end of the rope. Bridge tossed the pulley up and over the limb, took a couple steps over, and caught it before it hit the ground. He fed the second rope through the gears, tying one end to the bags. Andy pulled on his end until the pulley dangled just inches below the limb, and then tied it off—as Bridge guided him—to the tree. Moments later, they both heaved the meat up into the air, until it dangled fifteen feet from the ground.

“At night, the breeze runs downhill,” Bridge said. “Any bear that hits that scent stream will come trotting up the slope. Hopefully, he gets too full on the scraps we left on the ground to climb into the tree and knock the meat free.”

“Are we just going to leave the hide and all those bones?” White ribs stuck into the air like fingers, the meat between them cut free.

“I’ll take the femurs tomorrow for soup stock,” Bridge said. “But the rest stays here. In six months, it’ll all be gone. First the bears and coyotes will have their fill, then rabbits and deer and even other elk will eat the bones for the calcium. They make better use of it than I would.”

Rita stuffed one comparably small bag of meat into Bridge’s backpack. The backstraps, maybe. “Let’s get those chanterelles and get back to the rig before dark,” she said.

She led them to another bench on the slope, only a few hundred yards away. Once there, she pointed out a yellow mushroom growing from the moss. Its edges wavy like an oyster shell.

“This is what we’re looking for,” she said. “There isn’t anything dangerous that looks like it right now.”

They spread out and walked down the bench, peeking through the ferns. Bridge caught Andy watching him. “What’s on your mind, Trib?”

“Nothing,” Andy said, turning back to the search. But there *was* something. “What do you feel after that?” Andy asked.

“Sore,” Bridge said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

Bridge stood up, a soft chanterelle cradled in his hand. “It’s fucking heavy,” he said. “Never gets easier. But that’s the point, isn’t it?” He laid the mushroom in a paper bag. “You know how it feels,” he said. “You kill fish.”

“Yeah,” Andy said.

They arrived back at the house as the sun disappeared over the horizon. Bridge shut down the truck, and another car could be heard revving up the hill. A Volvo appeared, and without hesitating, parked beside Andy's truck. Trey stepped out, all smiles.

"Fresh steaks tonight," Bridge bellowed. "Glad you got the message."

"Dinner after dark tastes better anyway," Trey said. "I brought wine. But the guy at the Co-op didn't know which reds would go with elk. So I picked up a few."

Trey hugged Rita, then Bridge. "You guys stink." And then he came to Andy, stuck out his hand. "I was hoping you'd be here." He grinned like they were old buddies.

Inside, the house felt the same as it always had. Smart, secluded, and eerily technologically advanced. On the wall, a digital weather station that monitored the conditions both inside and out the house. Bridge touched a computer's mouse, and an image reappeared on the screen: a map of Pacific ocean, storms marked in various shades of red. "Still no rain," he said.

"Will we go a hundred days without a drop?" Andy asked. Nobody could predict the weather like Bridge. Sometimes in the winter, when the difference between a shower and a drizzle could make or break a steelheading day, Andy would call Bridge. The man knew how to read weather data.

"Might go a hundred and twenty at this pace." Bridge clicked the mouse and a different image appeared, this one in various shades of grey. "They say the Northwest's summers will get longer and our winters more catastrophic."

“Global Warming should be good for the wine industry,” Trey said. “The grapes will benefit from the long falls.”

“Bad for the fish.” Andy turned his attention to the bookshelves.

One shelf contained hundreds of books on birth and pregnancy and parenting. The books were worn, frequently read. Another shelf contained various how-to books, mostly construction and bow building texts. And, of course, Bridge’s treasured copy of *Trask*. He’d lent the book to Andy years ago, during a bad winter when the river stayed unfishably high for a month straight. Andy hadn’t been able to put it down. Maybe he’d ask to borrow it again.

“Any new chef titles?” Andy asked.

Bridge handed Andy a glossy book entitled, *The Polynesian Gourmet*.

“Polynesia has it all,” he said. “The mixing pot of flavors. A thousand years of explorers brought everything from the corn of Central America to the curries of India to the bouillabaisse of France. Combine those with the native fruits and fish and you’ve got near perfection.”

Andy thumbed through the book.

Bridge put on some music, a mandolin and a guitar, and then he and Rita disappeared into the back, to take a shower and clean up. Andy headed for the door, for the solitude of the deck. But Trey stopped him.

“A little *vino* before you go,” he said, pulling two glasses from the cabinet—he knew exactly where to find what he was looking for. Trey filled each glass with dark wine and handed one to Andy. “Cheers.”

“I’m going to step outside,” Andy said, the book in one hand, the wine in the other.

Trey looked at the book. “I like to look at their books too. Such a collection. But my favorite,” Trey set his wine down and grabbed a book from the shelf, “is this one. Have you seen it?”

Midwifing a Community: A Study of Midwifery’s Affect on Village Life in Central Mexico. “No,” Andy said, “never seen it.” Then he read the by line: *Rita Ortiz*. Rita was an author? How did Andy not know that?

“Never?” Trey acted surprised. “She’s working on a new one, you know?”

Trey pushed a button on the stereo—the music shifted to the speakers outside—and pointed towards the door. “Shall we?” They moved outside. “It’s about the culture and practice of homebirth in the Northwest.”

Outside, the sun turned the sky’s single cloud—a piddly cirrus puff—fluorescent orange. Might the fall rains never come?

“Catastrophe back there, eh?” Trey said, nodding at the clearcut behind the house.

Andy sipped his wine, but didn’t look at the hillside.

“In a strange way,” Trey continued, “that clearcut is responsible for me coming to the Ipsyniho.”

“How so?” Andy asked, suddenly interested.

“Bridge and I always talked about retiring together, building a community of just our friends, and living the good life. But deep down, I figured Bridge and Rita

would never leave this place. A great house in the middle of a great forest? Why leave?"

A beep sounded from Trey's pocket. He pulled a black cell phone out, looked at the screen, and put it back.

"Bridge called me the day they started sawing the trees. I came right up."

"How did you meet Bridge?" Andy asked.

"Friends of friends." Trey sipped his wine. "Once I got up here, we starting looking for available land. Got word through the grapevine that Mr. Willis had plans to sell." Trey swirled his wine and chuckled. "That clearcut got the ball rolling."

After just a few sips of his wine, Andy already felt tipsy. He hadn't eaten enough today, and the hike had dehydrated him.

It was Trey's smile he didn't trust. Too friendly, the smile of salesmen at work. Danny probably didn't notice it—he couldn't read people as well as he could read a river. And he wasn't one to make new friends, especially not with people who didn't fish. It had to have been that smile that won Danny over. "How'd you meet Danny Goodman?" Andy asked.

"Bridge introduced us. D and Shosh were newlyweds, living in an apartment in town. Cute kids." Trey smiled. "We built their house, you know."

"I knew Bridge built it," Andy said. "Didn't know you helped."

"Bridge ran the show. I just pounded nails where he told me to."

"Expensive place," Andy said. The first star appeared beyond the clouds.

"Figured we needed something nice to woo investors," Trey said. "But we want all the houses in the community to be similar to that one."

Andy finished his wine. “Must have cost a fortune.”

Trey shrugged his shoulders. “That’s the nice thing about business expenses,” he said. “They don’t feel like real money.”

“So you paid for it?”

Trey sipped his wine. “Why do you ask?” he said.

“Just curious.”

Trey looked back at the sky. “We’re going to need a lot of help between now and the time construction starts in earnest. If you were willing to help out, put in some hours between guide trips, the business might be able to help build a place for you.”

There was another beep from Trey’s pocket. He pulled out the phone, a gray one. Hadn’t the last one been black?

“I better take this,” he said. He left his wine on the porch and walked towards his car. He spoke quietly into the phone—Andy couldn’t hear a word, especially not over the speaker’s mandolin. Finally Trey returned and said with a shrug, “A realtor’s work never ends.”

Rita appeared on the porch, wearing a robe, her silver hair wet. “You boys need a refill?”

“We’ll come in,” Trey said. As they stood, he put his hand on Andy’s shoulder. “Think about it,” he said. “We could use another trustworthy pair of hands.”

“Rita?” Andy asked quickly, as if he hadn’t heard Trey.

She was building a fire in the stove.

Andy handed her a piece of wood. “How come you never told me you’d written a book?”

She smiled up at Trey, who said, “I couldn’t resist.”

“It was a long time ago,” she said, sparking a match.

“But I hear you’re writing something now?” Andy said.

“I’m failing to write something now,” she said. The paper caught and instantly sparked the pine kindling. She turned and looked at Trey. “Last time I tell you a secret.”

Trey winked. “Some secrets deserve to be told.”

Bridge was at work in the kitchen, chopping vegetables, his hands working at blurring speed, the blade slicing reds and yellows and greens. No one could cook like Bridge. PBS could hire him on as a TV chef, Andy thought. “The Wilderness Gourmet.”

The counter held various plates with foods—the meat, a pair of soy sausages, a roll of polenta, the chanterelles—all awaiting their turn to be metamorphosed. Whenever Andy watched Bridge work, he’d try to imagine the architecture of the finished meal. But he never could tell until the moment the plates were made. Up until the garnish was laid, Bridge’s kitchen boiled with contained chaos: smoke and steam and splashing and frying. But Bridge never let the anarchy interrupt his train of thought. Despite this, in the final moments of production, everything—always—came together.

Bridge’s mouth worked nearly as fast as his hands. “The strangest part about having boys, grown up boys, is now they have grown-up nads,” he said. “The last

time I saw them sans boxers was before they were in middle school—pre-pubes even. Up until this past month I still thought of them as having little-boy nads, I guess. But in elk camp there's no hiding secrets—we camp out on Hash Point, you know. Got to bathe daily in the creek to keep your scent down. This year, I stumbled down there when it wasn't my turn, and let me tell you—Neil has some big stones,” Bridge chuckled. “Although that icy creek does do a number.”

Bridge took a break from the stove to refill Andy's wine glass and to grab one of his own. “What'd you think of that book on Polynesia?”

“A masterpiece,” Andy said. “When I was there, I enjoyed several of those meals. My favorite was the Giant Clam in Black Sauce.”

“When were you there?” Bridge seemed surprised. But he shouldn't have been; Andy had told him about that leg of his trip.

“Two weeks ago,” Andy said. “Micronesia is a section of islands in Polynesia.”

“Oh, right,” Bridge said, checking Andy from the corner of his eye. “I forgot.”

But Andy could tell that Bridge simply hadn't realized where Micronesia was. Andy poured river-cold water over the yellow chanterelles, grabbing one and rubbing at a dirt spot vigorously. He heard Trey and Rita laughing in the other room.

“If I went to Micronesia, I might never come back,” Bridge said.

Andy didn't say anything, wondering how a person could live 50 something years and not know where Micronesia was.

A moment passed, as they worked side by side. Then Bridge asked, “Why did you leave those islands, Andy?”

“I couldn’t go another day without Mountain Man Elk Roast!” Andy slapped Bridge on the shoulder. “I’m going to use the head.”

Andy returned from the bathroom to find Bridge rubbing sea salt into two foot-long sections of meat. Then he pressed in mashed jalapeno peppers and garlic gloves, and topped the dry marinade off with a crust of cracked black pepper. Andy watched as he carried the meat outside and stashed it in a barbeque filled with chunks of smoldering hickory.

In the dining room, Rita tossed back her head and laughed at something Trey said.

Bridge stepped back inside.

“So, how do you know Trey?” Andy whispered.

“Known him for years,” Bridge said. “We met through an old client of mine. Good guy, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Andy said. “Real personable.”

“You should see him work a deal,” Bridge said.

*

Finally, the meal was ready. “Perfecto,” Bridge yelled, throwing his apron across the room. Each place setting contained an oval plate. Over the plate hovered a yellow polenta base, a layer of fried vegetables, and a creamy white sauce poured like cursive on the top. Beside it, on a few green and purple salad greens, rested thinly sliced backstrap, topped with chanterelles, and garnished with shredded mint greens. Rita’s plate differed only in that golden soy sausages replaced the meat.

Trey raised his glass in a toast. “To the chef.”

“Cheers,” Andy and Rita said in unison.

“To the elk,” Bridge said, tapping his glass against the others. “Let’s remember who it is we eat.”

“And, of course,” Trey said, smiling, “to the baby!”

“Here, here.”

*

Outside, later, wrapped in fleece blankets, the four of them sat in wooden chairs, their necks cricked back. The early fall night was as crisp as any of the year, the distance between the earth and the stars seemingly condensed by the clean air. When a shooting star cut across the sky, its flash illuminated the porch.

The slivered moon appeared over the distant ridge, first just a big star, then a white claw projecting from the black forest, and finally a hot crescent floating over the land. The dark part of the moon glowed blue, its round edge especially apparent as it slid over bright stars. It looked massive when it was close to the land. Andy had heard in a college astronomy class that when the moon first formed—following a catastrophic meteor hit that blasted millions of tons of Earth-dust into orbit—the moon had been close to the earth. Supposedly, in its infancy, the moon had taken up a third of the sky, a huge rock hovering just overhead. With each orbit around earth, the moon slowly slipped further and further away. It was still doing it. Now, as luck would have it, the moon and sun were the same size from the perspective of Earth. A magical time, maybe.

“The night my first daughter, Ella, was born,” Trey said, watching the sky, “I brought her outside for a minute. She looked up with wide eyes. We had a full moon that night, and it reflected in her eyes. When she looked at me, the sky looked too.”

“The two greatest highs of my life,” Bridge said, “came the first time I held each of my two boys.” A shooting star flashed over them.

“Better than LSD?” Andy laughed—he was the only one. Although, Rita made a drowsy smile.

Bridge and Trey kept talking about their children. Each story sparked another, and Andy saw what it must be like for a non-angler when he and Danny talked steelhead. As Bridge and Trey spoke, their voices lowered, became more private, and the words were lost to their intimacy. Danny would soon be allowed in this conversation.

He leaned closer to Rita. “Yesterday, you said I needed to move on, forget about everything that happened.”

“One person’s opinion,” she said.

Andy whispered, “I have a question.” He swallowed. “Do you know why I left?”

“I know some things,” she said. “I know what I need to know to be a good midwife.”

“I left because--”

“Don’t, Andy.” She held up her hand. “If something happened between you and Shoshana, something that caused you to leave, it isn’t something I want to know.” She looked up at the stars. “It’s between the three of you.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m not trying to gossip. I just need to know what to do.”

She turned to him, and he felt like a child for asking. “Secrets always make their way to the surface. You should know that by now.”

Bridge suddenly stood up, looked downhill, a watch dog on alert. In the distance, Andy heard an engine.

“Who would be driving up here at this hour?” Rita said, standing up.

“Might be a poacher,” Bridge said.

Slowly the engine got louder, and Andy could tell by the evenness of the shifting that it was an automatic transmission. But the engine also sounded deep and smooth, a truck for sure, and gas-powered, most likely. No one he knew owned such a vehicle.

Lights flashed through the trees overhead as the truck turned down the driveway. And before they could even see the vehicle, Bridge said, “It’s Carter.”

“What’s the Sheriff doing here at this hour?” Andy asked. He knew that Bridge and Carter went way back. They’d grown up in the valley together, and had both been on the high school wrestling team the year it won the state championships—back when the Ipsyniho was a valley of logging boys. But now Andy’s pulse quickened and he steadied his hand on his knee. Had someone seen him bash that fish to death? A hatchery employee maybe?

The big white police truck stopped in the driveway, blocking the only entrance, and Carter got out, leaving the truck running. He always left the truck running, as if he might get a call so urgent he wouldn’t have time to start the truck on the way. He put on his hat and walked towards them, his leather holster creaking with each step.

“Everything alright, Cart?” Bridge called.

Rita put her hand on her hip. “Carter, what’s going on?”

The sheriff stepped out of the moon shadows, the night’s light giving shape to his face. “What? A friend needs a reason to stop by? That’s what this valley’s coming to?”

Rita sighed. “I just thought maybe, you know, bad news.”

Carter stepped up on to the porch. “Everybody is fine. Nothing like that. Take it easy, Rita.”

Bridge asked Carter if he wanted a beer or a glass of wine. He chose beer and pulled up a chair. Bridge disappeared into the house, and Carter noticed Andy. “That you, Trib?”

“Yes sir.”

“Didn’t know you were back. Rumor had it you skipped town the night before Danny’s wedding.” Carter waited for Andy to say something, but when he didn’t, Carter turned to Trey and stuck out his hand. “Dave Carter,” he said. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Trey Turner. A pleasure.” Trey sat straight when he shook the sheriff’s hand.

“Is that your Volvo there?”

“Yes sir.”

“California man, huh?”

“Yes sir.”

Carter sucked air through his teeth. “I don’t have nothing against you folks, myself.”

“Save it, Carter,” Rita said.

“I don’t mean no disrespect,” he continued. “Just a lot more of your type around than before, that’s all.”

A moment of silence spread out between them, the truck rumbling in the driveway. Andy was trying to think of something to say when Carter focused on him. “You’re an Oregon boy, ain’t you, Trib?”

“Upstate New York, actually, if I had to pick one spot. And yeah, I did skip town before the wedding.”

“Hum,” Carter said, looking to his feet, sucking through his teeth. Finally, Bridge returned with a beer. Carter took the bottle and downed a gulp and said, “Thanks for this, Furry.”

“No problem,” Bridge said.

“I don’t mean to crash the party,” Carter said. “Stopped by because I heard something today that I thought might interest you.” A cloud of exhaust drifted over the deck, and Rita coughed. Carter didn’t seem to notice. “Stopped by Mr. Willis’ place today. He’s had some trespassers in there, cutting across his property to reach the Steamboat Pool. They’re tossing bait and hauling up wild fish. Anyway, I stopped in to see if he had seen anybody in there lately.”

“Good of you,” Andy said.

“It’s my job, son,” Carter said. “Anyway, Willis told me he’d found his buyer. The Eugene realtor for those White Oak guys made him a big offer this week.”

Trey leaned towards Bridge. “I thought he said he wouldn’t make a decision until December.”

Carter eyed Trey, then turned to Bridge. “He in on this thing with you?”

Bridge nodded and then asked, “Has Willis signed anything yet?”

Carter shrugged. “Not sure. But he told me they offered one point six.”

Trey and Bridge shared a concerned look.

“Anyway,” Carter said, “thought you’d want to know. Personally, I’d rather that land get bought up by locals—or mostly locals,” he said, looking at Trey—“than see it turn into another shit heap of summer homes.” He tipped the beer and drained the rest. “Well, I better get. Crime to stop, and what not.” He looked around at everyone. “Good to see y’all.”

Bridge walked Carter to his truck. They shared a laugh and then shook hands. As Carter snapped his seatbelt, the red brake light illuminating the dark forest, he yelled out the window to Bridge, “You headed to Carnival?”

“Got a booth,” Bridge said. “Up along Long John Creek. You?”

Carter nodded. “Running the drug prevention booth again. I’ll come by with a cooler and we’ll catch up.” The truck reversed down the driveway quickly, and then accelerated down the hill. They listened to it disappear into the distance.

“One point six,” Trey said to Bridge.

“I’ll talk to Willis tomorrow morning,” Bridge said.