

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michael A. Bluhm for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on June 2, 2003.

Title: You Stay Here

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Tracy Daugherty

You Stay Here is the beginning of a novel that centers on the notion of family, community, and the expectations that drive our interactions within these circles. The novel tells the story of brothers Mills and Nance O'Malley as they interact with their parents, Richard and Margaret. The brothers own a landscaping business which they run from the family garage while living in the basement of their childhood home. Set in fictional Hatfield, Wisconsin, *You Stay Here* strives to uncover the intricacies of brotherhood amid crises, the role work plays in healing, and what happens when we try to escape our circumstances.

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You Stay Here

by
Michael A. Bluhm

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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.

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Michael A. Bluhm, Author

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You Stay Here

Part 1: Summer, 1991

Chapter 1

Mills sat next to his mother, staring at the lines on her face. He'd never really noticed them before, the wrinkles like tiny valleys across her forehead and around her eyes, covering her cheeks to her jaw. They were at the hospital – Mills, Nance and their mother, Margaret – on a brown couch waiting for Dr. Simmons. It was July, a week before Margaret's fifty-eighth birthday. On a television in the corner, a soap opera yammered. Coffee-stained health and family magazines, piled on the square wooden table, leaned as if about to tumble.

Nance stood up and paced the room. Then he walked behind his mother, touched her shoulder briefly, and left to drink coffee outside the back entrance.

"Hope for the best, we'll get the best," Mills told his mother. "A birthday present we'll never forget." She bit her fingernails and raised her eyebrows. Neither of them smiled.

There had been sleepless nights, 'what ifs' slipping into the O'Malley family consciousness. Mills was twenty-seven years old, and his optimism never sounded confident, mostly because in the days since the diagnosis, he realized how little he knew his father. His mother had always been his support, yet Mills couldn't look to her this time. He rested his elbows on his knees, cupped his hands around his jaw. He watched her picking at the dry skin on her arms, hacking off small scabs, rubbing her hands, glancing around the waiting room, her eyes alert and cautious, like a child seeing something and recognizing it for the first time.

Dr. Simmons walked toward them. He was short, with a receding hairline and thick glasses that looked heavy on his face. His sturdy brown shoes looked too big, and he wore blue scrubs over a striped shirt and tie. “Richard’s biopsy is complete.” He sat down. Nance returned, smelling of burnt coffee, and stood behind Mills and Margaret. Dr. Simmons nodded at Nance. “The growth is malignant, but it doesn’t appear to have spread.”

Margaret smiled through rolling tears and squeezed Mills’s hand. Nance patted them both gently on their backs and walked away, letting out a breath as he walked toward the coffee machine.

“We need to schedule the operation,” the doctor said. “Sooner the better.”

Mills rubbed his mother’s hand. Her skin sagged around the bones on top, and he traced his index finger up and down over them. He softly scratched her arm and she rotated it so he could get at it all. Growing up, he would do the same as they watched the evening news from the living room sofa. She would let him stay up past his bedtime, and Mills took pride in his ability to be *the* arm-scratcher, yelled at Nance when he’d told him that he did the same thing.

Nance returned with two coffees, and handed one to Margaret. He sat down with the other and sipped it. As summer storm clouds came and went, the waiting room grew suddenly dark, then light again. Air-conditioning made the area feel misplaced, out of time. The sliding doors opened, and a blast of hot air – wet and metallic – pushed in and lingered for a minute or two. But the hospital was slow this afternoon, and the stale, circulated air returned and made Mills cold. He eyed his mother’s coffee, then stood.

“You going to be here for a bit?” he asked. “I’d like to get some water, take a quick walk.”

Margaret smiled. “Yes, honey. We’ll be here until your father’s ready for visitors. Just don’t be too long.”

Mills bent and kissed her forehead, then walked toward the main entrance.

As he stepped through the sliding doors, the change in temperature was drastic, forceful. Mills breathed deeply; the thick air carried a hint of asphalt and filled his chest like bad tea. Within seconds, his hairline was damp and sweat rolled down his neck. He walked along the front of the hospital, and around the side. He found a black metal bench in the shade near the emergency entrance. The area resembled the parcel pick-up at Kahl’s supermarket – automatic doors led out under a concrete overhang and drive-up area with No Parking signs everywhere. Mills and Nance had been stock boys there in high school and they used to talk about the people who pulled in as if they were arriving at a hospital, people who acted like getting their groceries before everyone else made the difference between good days and bad.

An ambulance squealed into the drive. Wrought iron jutted into Mills’s legs and back, and he squirmed to get comfortable. He watched the back doors of the ambulance explode open and two female medics jumped out and lowered a stretcher to the ground. On it, a man with curly brown hair and sunken cheeks lay motionless. He didn’t look very old, but his eyes were closed and as the women pushed the stretcher, the man’s head flopped like a doll. They rolled him inside and all Mills heard was “No pulse” as the doors closed with a click.

In the parking lot, rows and rows of cars glimmered in the haze. Hundreds of them, neatly between the lines. A station wagon, a minivan with a dented fender, a rusty late model sedan. Mills thought of the different hopes or prayers that had driven in with each. One way or another, everyone would get an answer. A tear formed in his left eye, but didn't fall. He wiped it away and rubbed his neck.

He stood up and walked back toward the front door. For two weeks he'd expected something else, something dire. He didn't know why. Now he couldn't help himself: he grinned, and damn near skipped back to the waiting room.

Chapter Two

Richard sat on the sofa in the family room and completed another of the crossword puzzles that helped him pass the days. Every year for Christmas, he'd get a new book of crosswords from one of the boys. Back when they were kids, they'd fight over each other's new toys after brunch and Richard would slip to the same couch and begin working the new blanks. The tradition had continued even this year, when he got two books each from Nance and Mills. In the past three weeks, he'd been at them almost nonstop. August had arrived without much notice. Days slowly shortened, and Richard slept more.

He noticed Mills in the doorway and set the puzzle on an end table filled with books, magazines, assorted mail. Everyone knew not to mess with that table.

"If you had a damn death party down in your balls, you'd be itching to get it over with," he said. "Believe you me."

Mills nodded. He appreciated the one-liners, the wit, but he wished his old man would share more stories – the travel, the people, the experiences he'd had making pictures around the country as a photographer for the *Hatfield Journal*. Growing up, Mills found the job mysterious, fascinating; he even studied journalism in college, daydreamed in feature writing class about traveling to Rio or Mongolia. But he rarely got the inside scoop; his dad would get home from an assignment and spend weeks in the basement darkroom, sorting out his portfolio. During Mills's sophomore year of high school, Richard had spent a month with a street gang in Los Angeles, day after day following them around, capturing their world. In a photo spread in the *Journal's* prize-winning Sunday travel section, he exposed their poverty, neglect, revenge, dreams: pictures of

plywood-covered windows; a tricycle leaning against a curb all bent to hell and missing a rear wheel; a kitchen table covered in guns; three boys in bandanas, arms around one another's shoulders, smiling in front of palm trees and a swimming pool. When Mills asked his father about the places, the kids, he had responded, "Things aren't getting any easier to figure out." And that was it.

Last October, Richard had been forced into retirement when the *Journal* merged with the struggling *Hatfield Morning News*. He and most of the old-timers got canned under the guise of an early severance package, and the *News-Journal* hired twice as many rookies for what they'd been paying the seasoned journalists. It showed in the new product – editing errors, shitty pictures, naïve reporting – but that didn't keep Richard from renewing his subscription. Integrity, he'd told Mills when they discussed boycotting the new rag. Mills and Margaret figured they should've picked up the *Trib* or the *State Journal*. But Richard said no. A few of his cronies had been kept on, and he needed a morning read. Nance agreed – he lived by the weather page, and conditions in Chicago or Madison didn't cut it. After thirty one years as a staffer, Richard left with six months pay and two years of benefits. At the request of the union, he and some pals from the news desk were in the middle of a class-action suit for breach of contract.

Since the merger, Richard had shot occasional freelance work. But mostly, he took time to forget about time – tying flies in the old darkroom, or fishing on the Bonner River up near Southbank. He said Mills was welcome to join him, but Mills knew better – the river was his father's sanctuary.

Richard leaned back into the couch and crossed his long, gangly legs. His glasses perched near the end of his stumpy nose, and the dark hairs that remained on his head,

mostly bald now, sprouted up and curled back down over themselves like old weeds around a pond. He looked at Mills.

“What?” he said, his voice full of stones.

“Ready to go?” Mills asked.

Richard removed his glasses and folded them closed. He placed them in the pocket of his polo shirt without looking, an action he'd performed thousands of times in his life. He favored pocketed shirts not only for his eyeglasses, but also for easy access to plane tickets when he traveled, little pouches of pistachios when he attended ballgames, the mini-planner he never used but often *had* to have with him.

“I should be back on my feet by Labor Day and the trout'll still be hungry,” he said. “Hopefully I won't have to strap a piss bag to my waders.” Mills chuckled and extended a hand to help him up. Richard ignored Mills and pushed himself off the couch.

The drive was quick. Hatfield was dead today – a Sunday of church picnics, yard work, or trips to the swimming pool. During the week, the motorcycle factory plugged along, the meat packing plant fouled the air with sausage steam, and road crews paved over last summer's mistakes. The metro population had recently topped one million, and construction companies couldn't keep up with the demand for new homes in the suburbs that ringed the city. Ethnic enclaves, though, endured: Italians on the near-south side, Germans and Poles farther south, Irish to the north. But families had grown and moved around, intermingling across the city. Backyard decks replaced front porches, made it easier to host private parties, ignore new neighbors, be left alone.

The changes were inevitable. The motorcycle plant had doubled its production in just five years. Line workers got raises and built houses up north where land was cheap. The country's largest food company bought Tasty Pak Meats and added corporate jobs. Newcomers wanted to live closer to downtown, where they presumed the action would be. Some lifelong residents moved closer to the lake, farther from the lake, whatever. But most moved out, lured by suburban schools and more bang for buck. It was like musical chairs on a citywide scale. Block parties had been a summer ritual for Mills, a day during which he would dance with neighbor friends in front of the open fire hydrant. But he couldn't remember the last one, twelve years ago maybe, and the friends he and Nance grew up with had long since moved, their parents drawn by bigger houses. Hatfield remained one of the most segregated cities in the country, and on weekends not much happened anymore except for warehouse sales at the everything-stores in suburban strip malls.

Mills sat in the backseat of his father's car fidgeting his feet. His palms sweated, despite the mid-seventy-degree temperature and a decent breeze. Richard drove and his wife sat up front next to him. They passed Fitzgerald's, the pharmacy where Mills and Nance used to spend their allowance on Gobstoppers and Now-n-Laters. Even driving past it, Mills could recall the smell: an antiseptic, clean carpet-covered-in-chocolate aroma. Real pharmacists wore white coats behind an elevated counter, and middle-aged women gossiped at the lone register. A homemade banner announced a Going Out of Business sale. A few blocks later, Mills saw why: on a corner just past the freeway, an almost-completed national drugstore chain loomed in huge, faux brick. Grand Opening

Soon. Mills couldn't remember what the corner used to look like, but he thought it had been a small park with a fountain and wooden benches.

They got to the hospital, and Richard checked in, waited for a different doctor. The procedure's success rate had recently topped eighty-percent. Nance wanted to keep ahead of what forecasters said would be a record wet late summer, so he'd decided to work – thatching, aerating, weeding. It hadn't rained in more than a week, but Nance believed that meant they were due. Mills, three years younger than Nance, waited with their mother while Nance took care of the brothers' business. "She needs me there," Mills had said, though he knew the truth: he needed her, wanted to experience the results first-hand.

He held his mother's arm while they watched Richard follow Dr. Ambrose and a handful of nurses through the metal swinging doors toward the O.R. Mills wanted his father to turn and look, acknowledge them with a half-smile. But Richard simply walked, hunched forward as if pulled by some magnetic force toward the ground.

The surgery wing of the hospital was undergoing renovation, and huge sheets of plastic covered the floors and walls of the waiting room. Electrical cords peeked out from holes in the ceiling, the area smelled of paint. The receptionist looked annoyed to have to deal with it on top of unknown worriers. Mills and his mother sat in metal folding chairs, and he massaged her neck and arms, got her coffee. She asked him about the summer, his plans, the future of Turf Aid Lawn Care. She always asked about him, about others.

"I just think it's so neat that you and your brother have this little business," she said.

“Mom, it’s not that little.”

“Well, I still think if it doesn’t work out, you could paint. You have real talent, you know.”

“Thanks,” Mills said. “But I don’t think I’d make much money.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. You could find a job that didn’t take up so much time during the summers. You could relax a bit more, take a class, maybe have a gallery night at the Rosebud.”

Turf Aid was in its third year and adding accounts by the week, and Mills’s watercolors weren’t taken seriously by anyone but his mother. Even Mills questioned his own ability. She had always encouraged Mills to pursue his dreams, but he never settled on anything. He tried photography, but gave up when he couldn’t afford equipment and realized he’d never escape his father’s shadow. He’d had a position at the student daily, and after finishing his journalism degree, he’d moved to Colorado to continue writing. It’s where he started painting. He sent a picture to his mother as a Mother’s Day card. She responded with a note telling Mills that it had made her week. They continued to correspond that way: Mills with watercolors, his mother with thanks and random cash – a twenty or a fifty – and “I love you” next to a smiley face written on a card with an Irish blessing, “May the sun shine always on your window pane,” or some such thing. Mills didn’t take his mother’s care and love for granted; he had friends who hated their parents, and vice versa. Mills knew a good thing when it made itself as clear as his mother’s dedication to their family.

Dr. Ambrose came out to the waiting room much too soon. Mills stood.

“We’ve closed him up,” the doctor said. He held a metal clipboard and had a white, paper mask around his neck. He locked his eyes on Mills. “The cancer has grown. I’m sorry.”

Mills looked down. His mother stood up, then sat. She picked at her neck and chin, rubbed her tearless, hollow eyes. They had prepared for this moment a month ago. That had passed like a fire drill, a just-in-case. Mills slumped to the chair beside his mother, laid his head on her shoulder and stared at the hospital carpet. Tan and gray fibers wove together in an intricate pattern. His eyes adjusted to the gray-tan-tan-gray repeating across the floor.

Margaret felt her son’s head land on her shoulder; it felt like someone had thrown her a punch. She looked at Mills’s hair, the blond curls that wove in and out of one another forming a fluffy mop. Somehow, she wasn’t surprised. Despite the reassurances of doctors and statistics, she felt like her husband had invited this the evening before when he requested the procedure be terminated if the cancer had spread. He’d been so defiant, she remembered. No. End it. I don’t care. They’ll get it all out. He’d sounded like Nance egging on Mills when, as boys, they played basketball in the driveway. You got nothin’, Nance would say. But every now and then, Mills would launch a shot from behind the crack near the sidewalk, and the ball would clang around the rim and slip through the net.

Nance showed up at Mercy just before six. He’d worked all afternoon, felt tired but fresh. His boots clacked along the hallway, echoed louder than he liked. He walked toward Richard’s room, and as he neared the door, Mills grabbed his arm from behind.

“How’d it go?” Nance asked.

Mills leaned against the hallway wall. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Fuck,” Nance said, softly. “No good, huh?”

“Everywhere,” Mills whispered.

“How’s Mom?”

Again Mills shook his head. He nodded toward the room and they walked in together.

Richard sat perched in his bed. His face had more color than Nance had expected. Nance extended his right hand and his father took it; they shook like diplomats. Nance turned and hugged his mother; he could feel her heart pound, the weight of her arms around his back, and he held her until she released. He bent his lips up and looked at her. She looked suddenly older, but smiled back.

Mills leaned against a window sill. A nurse brought in Richard’s dinner; Richard ignored the tray and clicked the remote at the television, never settled on a program. Nance got coffees. Mills watched the channels flicker in and out. Margaret picked at her fingernails and every so often rubbed Richard’s arm or shoulder. She had decided to spend the night there. When Richard started to eat, Nance and Mills said goodbye.

“Are you sure we should leave?” Mills asked in the elevator.

“They need their time,” Nance said.

“I feel guilty, like we should be there for them.”

“Trust me.”

“How’s Mom going to handle this?”

“She’s tougher than we think.”

The elevator doors banged open. Mills watched the tips of his shoes as he walked. His rhythm felt off, like his toes weren't hitting the ground in stride. Nothing felt right, but he kept moving. He needed something to eat.

They stopped for pizza at Mama Mia's on Silver Spring. A pitcher of beer. Large cheese and pepperoni. Like always, it came out steaming, extra thin, cut into squares.

"Weeded the beds at Copy Plus and Herring's today," Nance said. He took a drink of beer. "I'm thinking we should hire someone, maybe the Littleton girl. She's always coming over and asking to water Mom's petunias, poking around the trucks, smiling at us. Her parents okay it and she alternates crews."

"She won't last." Mills grabbed a slice. "Not pulling weeds every day," he said, his mouth full of crust and sauce. Had they been at home, his father would have reminded him about talking and eating at the same time.

"I bet she'd jump at it," Nance said.

"What is she, twelve? She'll hate it and then bitch. Constantly."

"Wouldn't be much different than working with you." Nance drained his beer and slid his glass into the middle of the table.

"Do what you want. Hire her. We'll see." Mills placed a twenty on the table.

"Thanks, big spender," Nance said.

Mills didn't tell Nance that their mother had placed the bill in his hand and squeezed, told him to get some dinner on the way home.

They walked to the truck. It was dark, but warm. Nance drove and as they pulled into the driveway, the motion light drenched the side yard and back door. Nance parked the pickup and they sat there, staring into the backyard – silhouetted oaks stood guard,

moved slightly in a breeze neither boy felt. Mills hiccuped and started to cry. Snot slipped onto his upper lip and he convulsed with tears. The engine ticked, crickets worried, Mills sniffled. Nance looked over at him. "We'll manage," he said.

"I don't know," Mills said.

"We always do." Nance patted Mills's thigh. "We always do."

The motion light clicked off, and after fifteen minutes, they got out of the truck. The light clicked on again, and as they walked, it burned into their eyes.

Nance called the Monday accounts; they'd get cut later in the week. It wouldn't be a problem – the grass hadn't grown much. No rain. The brothers returned to the hospital late Monday morning to pick up their parents. On the ride home, nobody talked. The car windows were down, and wind chopped, seatbelts flapped. Nance drove, with Mills up front and their folks in the back, like kids returning from a vacation they'd wished would never end. Mills stared down the boulevard: all the trees looked bigger, the street longer. They passed the new drugstore; what had been a gravel lot yesterday was now simmering blacktop surrounded by perfectly formed concrete curbs.

Two weeks earlier, they had given thanks for health and eaten cake at Margaret's birthday dinner. "Here's to another of God's blessings," she'd said as she blew out the candles after an obvious wish. She kept her eyes closed for several seconds after the candles were out, and leaned near the cake. Smoke curled up around her head. Finally, she raised her face, and without acknowledging the tears that dripped down her cheek and into the frosting, said, "And to my boys, who have been the source of so much joy."

That first day home from the hospital, Richard threw up. He was tying flies when his stomach surged. He lumbered through the kitchen, covering his mouth with his hands. The bathroom door creaked, and then soft coughing echoed from the tiny, olive green half-bath. Everyone heard him. He'd done the same before the surgery, too, and thought it was food poisoning. Later, at dinner, he winced, doubled over, held his gut. He looked at Margaret, raised his eyebrows.

"I need another," he said. Margaret knew he wasn't referring to the fried chicken. She grabbed the plastic pill bottle from the kitchen counter and poured a glass of water. She handed both to her husband and tilted her head down to get a better look at him.

"Dr. Ambrose said to take two if it gets bad." Her voice lilted upward as she spoke, as if Richard was her sick child. She patted him gently on the shoulder.

He set two of the large, mint-colored pills in his mouth and took a hearty swig of water.

The next morning, Mills stayed in the basement apartment he and Nance shared. Nance headed for the garage to postpone Tuesday's route and clean the Turf Aid truck. Mills could hear the sputter and whiz as Nance ran a weed whacker. Mills had grown proud of his relationship with his parents and brother, laughed at most people who thought it odd that he still lived at home. "No reason to move," he would say. "Rent's cheap, parents are real, location is prime." The boys had their own entrance and operated Turf Aid out of the garage. Mills grew up liking Hatfield, their neighborhood. Most of his friends had moved on – Chicago, Minneapolis, New York City. Everyone his age wanted to get the hell out, check what the rest of the world had to say, even if it meant seeing

only one new city. Mills had, too. He'd been in Colorado Springs three years earlier when Nance called to ask him about a partnership. He tried to pretend he had a lot going on out there, to convince Nance that his freelance writing meant more than a few bucks and that his watercolors weren't just something he did after four or five beers or a joint. But the truth is he'd been living in a one-room studio, and the building next door blocked any views from the cereal-box sized window in his place. Most mornings he'd wake up, drink a pot of coffee, type a handful of query letters and then walk down to Colorado College and stare at girls in their halters and sandals, think of things he might say if he ever had the courage to approach one of them.

"I'm actually getting calls for my writing," he'd said when Nance first called. "Well, okay, I've gotten *a* call. But I think it might start jumping. And I'm getting way into this watercolor stuff."

Nance knew Mills was bullshitting, but he didn't press. "Fine," he said. "Sounds good."

He backed off, and Mills, like the younger brother he was, became undone, confused. He wanted Nance to pursue, to ask about life near the mountains, if Mills'd been to the top of Pikes Peak yet (he hadn't, just kept planning for it). When Nance didn't bite, Mills suddenly felt compelled to side with his brother. So he did, as Nance knew he would, and moved back to start the business.

He had roots, he'd explained to Nance the morning he moved his boxes downstairs. Returning to them seemed right – hot summers, typical Octobers. White Christmases, spring flowers. Family, home.

Nance, on the other hand, simply dismissed people who questioned his choices. During their first summer of business, Mills had walked into the garage from a night of beers down the street at Mickey's, when he heard Amanda, Nance's girlfriend at the time, yelling that it was stupid that he lived at home. They'd been dating for almost four months, casually, a few dates a week. When Mills had moved back, she got all pissy toward him and Nance, started harping that Nance ought to get his own place, so they could move the relationship forward, as she put it.

"Are you going to be Mommy's boy all your life?" she asked that night as Mills listened.

"Get out," Nance said.

It took Amanda almost a minute to realize he was serious. Mills, buzzed, started laughing at his brother's intensity.

"Fine," she said. "I'll call you later." She walked right past Mills and out the garage.

"Don't bother," Nance replied, as Mills walked in. There was Nance, still seated and staring at a blank television. He'd meant it too, and when she called, he told Mills not to answer, to let the machine get it. After a week, he finally picked up. Amanda apologized, wanted to see him again. They dated on and off the rest of that summer, but Amanda never seemed comfortable at their place. Nance continually explained that living there allowed him to start his own business. And in the end, he would be more independent because of it. Mills knew; he understood. But Amanda drifted away, and now Nance and Mills only saw her at Mickey's or driving her old Bug around town.

On a typical early-August Thursday, Mills would be in Fox Point cutting large suburban lawns. But today, Ted, a local high schooler, headed the crew and Mills stayed in bed until nearly noon. Nance returned to work, but told Mills not to sweat shit, to take some time. Ted was decent, worked hard, got things right most of the time, and had become an okay crew leader. Ted only had to worry about Donny, a thirty-five-year-old ex-bartender who himself needed a break from the drinking and had decided that cutting lawns was the trick. Drew, another local kid on summer break from a small college in Iowa, worked with Nance.

Mills went upstairs to see if his parents needed anything, but they were on a walk. He felt relieved, because he didn't know what to say to them anymore.

He'd dealt with death before but never like this. During Mills's junior year of high school, his grandfather had gone to bed one night and never woke up. JC Callahan had fathered five children (Margaret was the youngest), in turn fourteen grandkids. He had a sparkle in his sharp green eyes. But grandparents were supposed to die. And sooner or later, people remembered the good, hoped for the best: eternity, some sort of heaven where everyone played cribbage and sipped cold cans of Budweiser. Mills's senior year of high school, a few classmates lost control of a car over a hill at lunch break. Four dead, one paralyzed. That shook up the community, made everyone a little more cordial. In a school of almost two thousand, Mills hadn't been tight with any of them. But he and his friends talked death for a few weeks, traded stories about funerals they'd been to, the music they wanted played at their own. During a memorial service at the high school, Mills had daydreamed about the people who would attend his funeral if he died young, and how he hoped St. Luke's Church would be filled to standing-room. By graduation

they were getting drunk down by Lake Michigan again, doing head-stands on the end of the concrete pier as waves crashed, skinny-dipping in fifty-eight degree water, skipping rocks at one another.

Adult death felt different, like clouds that wouldn't lift. A bluntness seemed to infect everything, as if the clouds lowered by the day and were close to touching Mills's shoulders. He walked into his parents' dining room. A picture on the hutch caught his eye, a framed number of his father fishing the Salmon River in Idaho. The images blurred: the ripples in the river seemed to move, to rise, to wash away his father's hands as they delicately cast the fly rod in search of rainbows and browns. His father revered the fish, even before he set out to catch them. When he did reel one in, he would pull it from the net and look into the fish, almost through it, with an expression that bordered on love. He would trace the colors with his finger along the back and belly, keep mental notes on patterns he found, the flies he had used. Then he would release the squirming fish back into the river, where it would wriggle into a swim and disappear. Mills had seen it happen twice, both times when his father had stopped the car for an impromptu cast in roadside streams in northern Wisconsin. But Mills knew that's how it always happened when his father fished. Mills could see the same look in his father's face deep in the Idaho photo. The obscurity jumped from the picture, almost seemed to overtake Mills as he lost himself in the image, the memory.

The afternoon lulled along. Mills tried to paint, but stared at white space, then mixed colors until he heard the truck and trailer rattle into the driveway. Mills walked into the garage. Nance and Drew put away equipment and cleared out trash.

“Evening,” Nance said. He lifted a weed whacker off the truck and hung it on the garage wall.

“Hey Mills,” Drew said. He had a tired smile, one that gave away his excitement at being done for the day. He was skinny, and his long arms were sunburned. He wore jeans and a baseball cap, and whenever he reached, his T-shirt pulled back to expose his pale upper arms. “Came close to a personal best at the Kendall’s today: cut a diagonal pattern in front in eighteen minutes and the lines were tight.”

Mills nodded. Drew harped on his own improvement, routinely offered news on his progress. Nance appreciated the kid’s ethic, but Mills found it a bit annoying.

“Not bad,” Mills said. “How about you, Nance? Any records today?”

“Nope, but we’re just about caught up.”

Mills felt a tension, something he couldn’t quite place. He hadn’t taken a sick day since Turf Aid began, and he only took vacation when Nance offered it. He grabbed a broom and hopped onto the trailer, where he swept dead grass off the mowers.

“I’m back in tomorrow,” Mills said.

“Good.” Nance closed the right garage door. Drew biked out the left side.

“Later,” Nance said. Drew saluted as he pedaled down the driveway.

Mills jumped off the trailer, pulled the left door down and latched it. “Yeah, I’m in.”

The brothers went inside. Nance washed his hands and they walked upstairs.

Dinner had become a nightly ritual for the family for the first time since grade school. As kids, Mills and Nance knew that at six o’clock they had one place to be: washed and seated, ready to eat the meatloaf or chicken or pot roast on their plates. So it

was again: Margaret placed a bowl of boiled potatoes on the dining room table and smiled. Mills sat to her right and across from Richard. Nance spooned a helping onto his plate.

“Perfect every time,” he said.

“I’ve been doing it all my life,” she said. “And I enjoy it. It’s not hard to be good at something when you enjoy it. Like Mills and his painting, right honey?”

She filled Mills’s glass with milk. Her hands shook, and behind them, Mills could see his father’s hunched frame. The old man’s eyes grew more pronounced as his cheeks receded, and he lingered when normally he would pounce. He looked at the potatoes a few seconds before reaching, slowly, for his serving.

There was a mystery in Richard’s face, a look that seemed uneasy yet fascinated with his own death – his furrowed brow, tightened eyes, grayish, serious skin. But the family didn’t discuss it. Mills wanted to ask for his father’s thoughts; still he couldn’t bring himself to do it. The contradiction frustrated him, the privacy of death that figured so prominently into his notion of family. With so many stories untold, he thought the legacy of his family would suffer. What would he tell his kids if he ever had any? That he didn’t really know much about Richard O’Malley? Perhaps they wouldn’t care.

“Dad, can you pass the potatoes when you’re done?” Mills said.

Nance picked up the bowl before their father could and set it down firmly.

“Here,” he said.

“Please?” his father said. “Doesn’t anyone say please around here anymore?”

Mills’s and Nance’s eyes met. Mills squinted, Nance just stared. It was as if Nance knew something. Mills looked at his plate, but could feel his brother watching him.

They finished eating without talking, cleared the dishes and Nance started water for washing them. Mills went downstairs. He organized his paint brushes and unclipped the dried paintings that hung from a piece of rope in a corner of his bedroom. He'd done one of a barn with a sunset behind it from a picture his father had taken near Arena, Wisconsin, outside of Madison, by one of his favorite trout streams. The painted barn had leaked into the sun and it looked like a bloody egg had been cracked and dried on the paper.

Mills heard Nance walk in and open their fridge. Nance sat down on the couch with a thud, as Mills arranged his painting stuff in a neat pile on his desk.

"What was that look?" Mills asked, as he walked into the living room. "And no beer for me?" he added when he saw Nance's bottle.

"You know where they are." Nance didn't look up; he stared at something, but Mills couldn't tell what it was. Mills opened the fridge and pulled out his own beer. He twisted the top off and tossed it onto the counter.

"So?" he said.

"So what?" Nance said.

"When you set the bowl down, don't tell me you didn't give me a look, you know that look, the deliberate stare, when you look at me hard and wherever my eyes go, yours follow, locking me in."

"You need to stop watching Dad's every move," Nance said. "You probably don't even realize how often you do it. It drives me nuts; I can only imagine how it makes him feel."

“He’s dying right in front of us and it’s intimidating. I just want to know what’s going through his head.”

“You can’t go there,” Nance said. “The guy *is* dying. He’s probably got a million things fucking with his conscience.”

“Don’t you wonder what they are?”

“I’ll sort through the same shit at my time,” Nance said.

Mills had always viewed his older brother as wise. Mills stood a few inches taller, a few hairs over six feet, lanky like his father. But Nance had a stronger frame, a better center of gravity. Ever since Mills could remember, his brother had tried to figure out how things worked. Most times, Nance got them right. The day before, after nine hours of cutting, he had rewired the backpack leaf blower that hadn’t worked since they bought it used from Carter’s resale. One pull after an hour of tinkering and the engine coughed out white smoke and fired to life, louder than any of their mowers.

“Don’t press him on it, Mills,” he said now.

“Don’t I have a right to ask?”

“A *right?* What the fuck does that mean, a *right?*” Nance slammed his beer down on the coffee table, rattling the glass top. “How about, *he* has the right to die in peace, without a bunch of naggy shit from his kids.”

“Jesus, settle down,” Mills said. “Sorry for loving him and wanting him to know I’ll miss him.”

“Look, maybe if you really want to let him know you care, you could help Mom around the house instead of bailing down here whenever things get hectic. Or ask him about fishing, not his fucking cancer. Just don’t be a pain in his ass.”

Mills walked back into his bedroom, leaned on the stool that faced a painting table Nance had built for him. He took a long drink from his beer. The ceiling creaked above him; whenever anyone walked through his parents' living room, Mills heard it. The clunking and dragging of shoes on wood were unmistakably his father's. In the past few days, the dragging had become more pronounced, the walking heavier. Mills looked at the ceiling and the little plastic stars he had put up as a kid when he and Nance used the basement as a play area. Mills imagined his father's shoe crashing through and destroying his re-creation of the Big Dipper. Then he thought maybe his father would come to some profound realizations, share them at the dinner table or over sodas in the garage. Sometimes when Mills and Nance returned from working, their father would sit in the shop and listen as the boys talked about the business and what they were doing to make it grow. Rarely did he offer any stories or advice in return.

Mills and Nance planned to join their parents on a drive to Madison that weekend. Their mother thought it would be nice to get out of town, spend the afternoon on State Street, eat lunch on the Capitol lawn like they used to when the brothers were at the university. Back at work for the first time all week, Mills spent Friday double-cutting, missing spots, scalping edges with the weed whacker. By the middle of the afternoon, he was content simply completing his accounts. Ted and Donny held their own and overall, Mills had experienced worse days. At least he didn't have to hear Drew go on and on about records. Ted and Donny just got their shit done, and then on breaks or in the truck talked about the Brewers latest losing streak, the hot girl who babysat for the Mitchells, their softball teams. They pulled into the shop just before six.

“You guys are working with Drew tomorrow,” Mills said as Ted and Donny pulled their coolers from the truck bed. “One crew. Nance’ll leave the list on the desk, should be able to knock it out by two. We’ll probably still be here when you guys start, so I’ll see you in the morning. Cool?”

They nodded and walked out into the driveway. Ted biked every day and Donny drove up from south of downtown.

“I’m going for a record tomorrow,” Donny said. “I’m going to try to make it until lunch without telling that kid to shut the hell up.”

Ted and Mills laughed. “Go easy on him,” Mills said.

“See you tomorrow,” Ted said. He hopped onto his bike and coasted toward the street. He gave Donny a thumbs-up as he passed him, and Donny waved back as he walked toward his Buick.

Margaret could tell her boys were tired, so she made a standard Friday fish fry – walleye and perch Richard had caught earlier that summer up north, salad, potatoes, rolls. She talked about Madison and the football games, the farmer’s markets.

“What a beautiful city,” she said. “The lakes, the people. I always thought you boys might settle there. But I’m thrilled you’re even closer. I worried you might go somewhere far and never come back, like all your friends. Of course, I do think it’s nice that you’ve had the opportunities to travel. There’s just so much to learn.”

“That isthmus is a pain in the ass with all those damned one-ways,” Richard said as he stared out the dining room window. Mills looked outside to see what his father

might be watching. Nothing there but the browning arbor vitas that straddled their backyard.

“You get used to the one-ways,” Mills said. “It’s a conceptual thing. If you lived there, you’d figure it out.”

“Conceptual what? That makes no sense,” Richard said. “It’s a pain in the ass.”

“Can I get anyone anything?” Margaret asked. She stood and smiled. The men looked up at her for a moment. Richard lowered his head and shoveled half a perch into his mouth.

“No thank you,” Nance said, when he noticed that his mother hadn’t moved. She nodded and walked to the kitchen.

Mills finished his potatoes, dropped his plate in the sink and went out back with the hose. He made sure each of the shrubs received a good dose of water. Perhaps, he thought, he could rig up a watering system. Nance could put it on a timer and they could restore some green in case the late summer rains never came.

Originally, Mills and Nance had planted the row of arbors as a wind block for their mother’s garden; they had grown into a perfect privacy screen, affording the family a secluded retreat from the regular inquiry of neighbors: Are you boys looking for your own place? Is it awkward having adult children living in the house? Do you feel like you are still raising them? Don’t you want to be alone?

The questions came often. The O’Malleys appreciated neighborliness, liked the narrow streets and sidewalks where they lived. But as the area changed, so did attitudes. The folks who moved onto the block wanted the dirt, and hosted cookouts to find out who was screwing up. It hadn’t always been that way – Mills remembered growing up

among people who shared tools, borrowed eggs, saved the morning paper when they went up north for a week. In recent years, new neighbors just bought nicer tools and then flaunted them, stood at the end of driveways and extolled the virtues of the latest and most expensive gadgets. Margaret would tell Mills of the snoopers and they would laugh, especially when someone asked if she and her husband wanted to be left alone. Even Mrs. Grimmer, who had lived across the street since long before Richard and Margaret bought their house in 1960, seemed caught up in the gossip. "They did graduate from college, didn't they?" she had asked earlier in the week. It was as if a degree required the brothers to live somewhere else. The arbors, though, were taller than anyone on the block, the branches intertwined and strong. Not even the neighbor kids, who slowly took control as people like Mrs. Grimmer kicked off, could penetrate the shrubs to retrieve a mis-hit baseball or to cut through to the next block.

As Mills wound the hose, his mother came out the back door.

"We thought a walk would be nice," she said. Mills smiled at her and reached for her hand. "Your father and brother are out front."

Post-dinner walks had been one of the things Richard and Margaret used to do together, alone. In recent weeks, Mills and Nance had tagged along.

Turf Aid had a few accounts in the neighborhood that Mills and Nance showed their parents. "See the diagonal crosscut there?" Mills pointed to a larger yard. "We lowered the rollers on the Scags to keep that pattern down longer. Not the blades; don't want to scalp the grass. Just the rollers. Customers appreciate it."

The day's end came slowly and Mills felt like a child again, the nights when the sky had changed a hundred shades of blue as the stars appeared, one by one, and the

temperature remained warm. He and Nance and the kids on the block used to play kick-the-can in the street or fifty-all-scatter until someone's mother called bedtime.

In most ways, it was a typical August night. But Richard's condition had deteriorated. Dr. Ambrose hated speculating on time frames – he said each case was unique – but Richard had pressed him, and the doctor mentioned “a few weeks to several months.” Madison likely would be his final trip. The family stopped to rest at a corner bench. They took turns sipping from a metal water fountain that wouldn't turn off, and talked about bygone summers.

“We got away with quite a bit,” Nance said to his folks. “But you always covered for us.”

“I can't believe you lied to the cops about the windows at Harder's,” Mills added.

“That bastard over-charged me more times than I can count,” their father said.

“With the money that scoundrel made, he could afford to fix a few panes of glass. Besides, a broken window beats the hell out of drunk driving or smoking dope.” Mills and Nance looked at their father, whose lips bent upward, holding back a smile. Their father had busted them both, Mills for parking the car on the side yard and passing out in a lawn chair by the back door, and Nance for getting stoned in the garage. He never said a word to their mother, not even tonight.

“I sure am proud of you boys,” their mother said. “The way you stayed out of any real trouble. I never did like that Sgt. Ramsey anyway, always trying to make issue out of a hill of beans.”

A car honked somewhere beyond the houses behind where they sat. Four children laughed and jostled as they walked across the street, their voices rising and

falling, a yelp, a squeal, more laughing. A charcoal grill burned, probably spent by now, the steaks settling into a family of stomachs. The pavement cooled, and the first stars pushed through the blue-black sky, grew more pronounced as the light fell to another part of the world.

“Don’t banana splits sound good on a night like this?” Nance said. “How about, last one home makes ’em?”

“Oh yeah?” his father said. He raised a bent arm and stepped up in a pretend sprint. They all laughed. Then he leaned over coughing, grasping his wife’s hand. His hacking echoed off the house behind them, a loud series of chokes. Mills stepped away from his parents, as they sat back on the bench with a thud. Nance sat on the curb and looked down the street toward their house. Richard wheezed and struggled while Margaret stroked his back, her eyes instantly filled with water. Mills wanted to run, to go back to that time when pain involved cuts and scrapes on his knees and elbows. He tried to look at his father, but instead he watched a pigeon amble into the street hoping for some crumbs.

They ate ice cream while watching a *MASH* rerun. Margaret squinted. “Cold headache,” she said. “I should know better.”

Mills chuckled. “How many times in the last twenty years have you warned us to slow down with our ice cream?” he said. “Serves you right.”

“Watch yourself,” his father said. “She knows more than you might in your lifetime.” Probably true. The plaque on the family room wall said it: “Age and treachery before youth and skill.”

They finished and settled into a movie. Margaret couldn't shake the headache and took some aspirin. Richard fell asleep on the couch. The brothers cleaned up and helped their parents to bed.

Mills stared at the ceiling and the faded, glowing stars. It surprised him that they had any light left after all these years. Day by day, he thought. He fell asleep thinking about the impending funeral, the people he would see, the concern they would show.

Screaming. Loud shrieks through vents, into the basement. Mills sat up and heard it again: a crying, horrific yelp of pain. Nance flicked on the light and they looked at each other, unblinking. It was real. They ran up the back stairs. Their father threw down the phone and pushed a dining room chair toward the table. Then he pulled it back out before racing into the kitchen. He kept moving.

"Jesus Christ," he said, wheezing.

The crying continued. "Where's Mom?" Mills asked. His father didn't say anything; he just moved from room to room. Mills and Nance sprinted upstairs and found their mother leaning against the bathroom door. "Mom, what's wrong?" She shook her head and as she did, tears spurted like a sprinkler from her eyes and face. The brothers helped her downstairs and an ambulance arrived.

The emergency crew pulled a stretcher through the front door. Mills watched them – the family never used the front door. Two men and a woman dressed in navy uniforms with orange trim sat Mills's mother upright on the stretcher. The look on her face was nothing Mills had ever seen – her mouth clamped tight, eyes folded over themselves and so red, her hair wet and matted like a dog's after a fight.

“Can you tell me what’s happening here?” the woman paramedic asked.

“I don’t know,” Mills said. “Dad?” he yelled.

Richard leaned against the banister at the base of the stairs behind Mills. He appeared winded, like he had just finished running several miles.

“She just kept holding her head,” he said. The shrieks continued as they finished strapping her in.

“Lightheadedness? Pain?” one of the men said. Everyone was moving toward the door and onto the porch. The wheels of the stretcher dropped as they went down the steps. The crew picked up their pace. Mills followed close, turned his head; his father didn’t keep up.

Nance backed a car down the driveway. The crew kept asking questions. Richard’s sweaty forehead glimmered in the street lights. They were at the curb. Margaret had passed out. Richard shrugged.

“She had a headache earlier that wouldn’t go away,” Richard told the crew. “She rolled over in bed and just started screaming.” He backed away as the doors closed on the ambulance. “Margaret.”

“We’re going to Mercy,” the taller of the two men said. He wore a short sleeve button up, and his silver watch reflected the red lights of the ambulance. “You know how to get there?”

The men nodded.

“You go,” Richard said to Mills. “I’ll ride with your brother.” Nance opened the passenger door and his father slumped into the car. The woman grabbed Mills’s elbow.

“Come on,” she said softly.

She guided Mills to a seat and turned to help the shorter of the men, who had thick, black arm hair, and who worked methodically as the ambulance sped up and cruised the quiet streets. The stretcher's metal bars were cool, damp, and Mills leaned over his mother, who lay strapped down, the buckles tight and unnatural. Her eyes were closed, her body still. The ambulance slowed, and hit a bump. The stretcher heaved, but was locked to the floor, and Mills watched his mother's body bounce slightly. He heard the engine rev, and stared through the small square window on the back door. The streets were dark, and he couldn't see any cars behind them. They turned a corner and he noticed the familiar row houses on the side street behind the hospital. He'd expected the ride to last longer, like slow motion. Middle of the night, though. He wondered if people got sick more during the day, if that contributed to traffic congestion.

The ambulance lurched to a stop and the crew hopped up and unhitched the stretcher. The man with the arm hair jumped out; Mills waited, then followed behind the woman through the side door. Her lilac scent reminded him of the times as a boy when he'd helped his mother water her flowers, lugging the metal watering can around the yard, bouncing it involuntarily off his knees and spilling most of the water. He saw the bench he'd sat on a few weeks before, and the words came back, louder than ever. No pulse. They played over and over in his head as he walked through the Emergency Room sliding doors.

A doctor blocked Mills's way. "Sorry," he said.

Mills watched as the crew, surrounded by more people – doctors, nurses, hospital folks – hurried around a corner and out of sight.

All around him, doctors and nurses worked, some harried, others relaxed. A middle-aged lady pushed an elderly woman in a wheelchair. A big LCD clock said 4:37 in green square numbers. Nance and Richard arrived. They were silent. Wheels squeaked across linoleum and clipboards clanked on counters.

Chapter 3

Nance pressed his foot toward the concrete floor and felt the pedal resist. He leaned more forward, and the sharpener fired faster. Sparks exploded downward. Despite his bulky leather gloves, he eased the mower blade against the spinning wheel. Most cutters he knew went by the sound – the impossibly loud grating of metal on metal, which had prompted his father to ask for ear plugs, from time to time, and always *after* Nance had finished sharpening. Some landscapers, like Otis over at LawnMore, looked for sparks; he could tell if a guy under-sharpened or was burning up blades by the sheer volume of glitter. But Nance worked by feel, turned and slid the Scag's center blade just slightly to create a razor edge. Sparks bounced off the concrete floor. He wore large, clear plastic goggles and a Braves baseball cap, backward, that had once been navy but faded into a dull brown with white sweat stains.

It was Sunday, early, and Nance needed to do something. He hadn't worked in a week, and figured the blades could use a fresh edge. But the sharpener pedal had a habit of sticking. Oil didn't work. Nance'd tried WD-40 with the same shitty results: the pedal would move too freely for a few days, the wheel spinning nearly out of control and much too fast for safety. And then slowly, the resistance would return and after a while, the thing would stick worse than before he'd ever tried to fix it. Last month, his brother had suggested buying a new one. Nance said no; he thought he could make it right. When they'd first started Turf Aid and needed a sharpener, despite Mill's insistence that they should just pick up one of the models Otis stocked, Nance decided to make his own. He scrounged some materials from around the shop, ordered a few parts, and rigged up a pedal system based loosely on his mother's sewing machine. A typical blade sharpener

had nothing more than a wheel and a switch – no pedals – and the speed was constant and regulated. Nance wanted more control, though, hoped to get extra precision from his homemade rig.

Today, however, it wasn't cooperating. The spin speed kept jumping as he tried to put uniform pressure on the pedal. He pulled the blade back a hair, but then the machine slowed, so he pushed forward. The sharpener kicked up a notch, creating a loud thunk and covering his head in a shower of sparks. The blade almost ripped from Nance's grip, and he hopped back. As the machine whirred down to a stop, he looked at the blade, still in his hands. Near the middle, a half-inch gouge glinted in the shop lights.

"Close enough to the center that it shouldn't affect the cut too much," Mills said, looking over Nance's shoulder. "Pedal sticky again?"

"Jesus, don't sneak up like that," Nance said, turning.

Mills stood, hands in his pockets.

"I lubed it last time," Nance said. "Maybe I just need a new pedal."

"Scags have been cutting good anyway."

"Until Ted caught a huge rock last week at Bardess with the older one. Hit it so square that the fricking belt jumped off. It didn't look bad on the blade, but I wanted to even her out."

He held the blade chest-high toward Mills and ran a gloved hand along the edge. He could feel the still-hot metal through the thick gloves; the gouge was deep and there'd be no way to make it smooth.

“Shit,” Nance said. He looked down: metal shavings covered the floor of the shop, camouflaging mud stains and paint splatter. No sign of the big chunk he’d lost.

“It’s worse.”

“It’ll still cut,” Mills said. “We need to order a few new sets anyway. Third summer we’ve been using the same ones.”

“These shoulda lasted to the end of this season.”

“I suppose. What are you doing this today for anyway?”

“Last Saturday I didn’t have time—” Nance stopped. He looked up.

Mills turned away and leaned toward the trailer. He clutched the black metal frame that ran the trailer’s length, his hands just above his waist, should-width apart, and bent slightly at the elbows. Dead grass clippings and cracking paint and oil made the bar feel dry but slippery.

Nance stepped toward Mills, removing his gloves and tossing them onto the trailer with a hollow smack. He placed a hand on Mills’s shoulder and squeezed. The Saturday before, they had been at Mercy, dealing with doctors, calling relatives, making arrangements. Mills hadn’t been much help, and finally had walked across the street to the Up and Under Pub, where he downed several shots of whiskey by himself. After they’d gone home, Mills had passed out while Nance and Richard talked to Ferguson Funeral Home, and then sat at the kitchen table in silence. Since then, neither brother had talked about that day.

Now Mills quietly cursed the tears that dripped on the bar between his hands. He felt his brother grip his shoulder and it made him want to slump to the floor.

A door squealed. Richard walked from the basement apartment into the garage.

“Hungry?” he asked. He limped up behind Mills and Nance, stopping a few yards away.

Nance relaxed his hand and patted Mills. They both stood up straight and turned to their father. Mills wiped his nose with his thumb and forefinger; Nance flicked off the sharpener switch and its soft buzzing ended. The three men looked toward each other, but seemed to focus on something in the middle of all of them, as if the air had suddenly taken form and demanded attention. Their heads were tilted slightly back and away from each other, eyes glazed and pale. After a moment, they moved toward the garage door together.

Nance unhitched the latch and rolled the door just high enough for the men to get out. He pulled it back down and followed a few steps behind. The double garage sat near the back of the house, thirty-odd yards from the road on a driveway almost two trucks wide. The August sun reflected off Richard’s silver station wagon, parked on the street, even glared off the concrete. Nance shielded his eyes, felt the humidity already wetting his forehead.

As they walked, the men formed a triangle, Mills near the edge of the grass on the outside of the drive, Richard closer to the house, and Nance behind. Richard always lumbered, but lately, he moved lethargically. The disease continued its spread, and pain hovered above and below the surface, despite chemicals that made him puke. But he wouldn’t be forced back into the hospital, and all three of them knew that Richard didn’t have much left. Mills overtook him and the triangle of men grew longer, more awkward. Nance caught up, too, but he slowed and stayed at his father’s side until then they were at the car.

Richard pulled open the driver door and hesitated.

“Christ,” he said. “You’d think I’d remember I don’t drive anymore.” He tossed the keys over the roof to Nance.

“It’s not that far, Pop, if you want to give it a run,” Nance said. He tipped his head and shook the keys in the air.

“If we’d fit, I’d have you on my lap to steer like when we were little and you’d let us drive roads up north,” Mills said.

“Seriously,” Nance said, tossing the keys back over the car. “Drive.”

Nance got in the passenger seat and closed the door. He cranked the window down and felt the car shake a bit when his father landed heavily on the driver seat.

Richard grimaced. His entire midsection – stomach, lower back, hips, crotch – throbbed with a pain that came and went like a blender losing power. He felt every movement. But, as he’d told Nance the night before, he’d “be damned if this shit would keep him from a decent breakfast.”

Richard last drove two weeks ago, the day he went in for surgery. Nance had brought him home and since, there’d been no place for him to go, except for Margaret’s funeral earlier in the week. Nance had driven then, too. His car had felt too big that day, with just the three of them in it. Margaret balanced the men, evened out their moodiness. Without her, Mills wandered, Nance didn’t talk, and Richard complained. Richard missed that about his wife, her ability to hold things together. Now, as he turned the key and felt the gas pedal loosen under his foot, there was an awkward silence in the car. He pulled the shifter and accelerated down the street – no cars, no bikes, no kids running along the boulevard. Safe. Easy.

But Richard felt an urge begin in his stomach and he hoped it wasn't going to end up on his trousers. A stain on the left inner thigh of his gray pants remained after an incident that morning in church. He shouldn't have gone alone, but wanted some time at St. Luke's. He'd sat in the last pew and stared at Father Tom through the opening prayer, the readings and responsorial psalms, up until the gospel acclamations. That's when the rank taste hit the back of his throat. He'd made it into the hallway, but not to the restroom. He caught most of what came out in cupped hands. A few bits overflowed and hit his slacks and then the floor. He dropped what he'd caught into a trash can, and stomped the stuff on the floor until it looked clear. Then he rinsed his hands at the drinking fountain and walked the three blocks home, exhausted and hungry.

"Would somebody say something?" Richard said as he flipped on the radio. An evangelist belted out praises of the Lord Almighty, Savior of all men. Richard turned left on Wilson and switched the radio off. He leaned toward the window, and the burp finally came. Just air. He relaxed. The car lurched a bit and then slowed and he evened out a few miles an hour below the speed limit. "It's too damned solemn in here."

Nance looked ahead, kept an eye out for bad drivers, errant balls or uncontrollable kids who might get into the street, into their way. The stoplight half a block ahead turned green; he hoped it would stay long enough for them to get through and to The River Nook. He hoped Mills would keep quiet, not ask their father what it felt like to be driving again.

"Fine," Richard said. "Fine. Everybody just stay shut the hell'd up."

They made the light and Richard turned into the parking lot. The restaurant had been his favorite since it opened, twelve years ago, because they kept the water glasses full

and the coffee hot. When Nance and Mills used to come home from college on weekends, he'd often treat. He planned to do the same today.

Nance stepped out of the car and the asphalt felt rubbery in the heat. He breathed deep, inhaled long and could feel the dust dig into his lungs. August air did that; the humidity held little bits of the summer that built up starting in late May or early June, and bore into him. It had been a very long six-minute drive. He exhaled and walked.

As they slid into a booth, Richard winced, took a breath, and placed the keys and his wallet in the middle of the table, between the salt and pepper.

Across from Richard, Nance leaned back, the vinyl sticky on his sweaty shirt, and wiped his forehead with a napkin. The air-conditioned restaurant felt too cold, and it would take a minute to adjust.

Three coffees – one with cream for Mills – and three orders of French toast – two with bacon, one with a side of potatoes for Mills. Standard orders all the way around.

“You know, all you'd have to do is eat some bacon like the rest and this'd be real easy,” Debbie said to Mills. She'd been waiting on Richard for the last seven years and when he came alone, would put the order in before he even sat down.

“Sorry, Deb, but I'm feeling potatoes today,” Mills said.

“You're always feeling something; if it ain't potatoes, you want your bacon extra crisp, or you want Canadian, not regular.” She laughed.

“That's why I like this place,” Mills said. “Choices.”

“I’ll give you a choice,” Richard interrupted. He closed his fist and held it up for all to see. Nance and Debbie laughed; Mills shook his head and looked at the floor with a grin. “Yeah,” Richard said. He, too, cracked a smile.

“I’ll put this in and get your coffees,” Debbie said.

They all downed their food – even Richard – in short order, and as Debbie cleared the plates, Nance pulled the car keys from the table. He went outside as Richard paid, and drove the car up to the entrance.

“Next week?” Debbie said as she rang up the bill.

“Assuming I make it,” Richard said. He picked at his teeth with a toothpick.

“Gee, that’s the spirit,” Debbie said.

“Oh I’ll be here,” Richard said. “And the boys’ll be along, so get your pen and eraser ready for this one.” He thumbed at Mills, who looked in the full-wall mirror opposite the register at the sunburn on his neck.

“You all enjoy your Sunday,” Debbie said, smiling.

Nance drove home, Richard slumped on the passenger side staring out the window, Mills in the back seat softly practicing bird whistles to himself.

Monday morning, Nance assembled Ted, Drew and Donny into a single crew and fixed them up with route sheets and a truck and trailer with mowers, whackers and blowers as he had the week before. He called clients again. Most apologized again, asked if there was anything they could do. Nance made sure service standards were being upheld, and asked for honesty. He explained that quality shouldn’t be affected, and that he and Mills might not be around for a few more days. Mrs. Hartsley expressed concern;

she loved to treat Mills and his crew to lemonade and tell stories about Hatfield in the thirties. Mrs. Hartsley was ninety-two and lived in the same house Mr. Hartsley had bought in 1926, just after they married. She remembered details about life in Hatfield after the first World War, but since her husband died, she had no one to tell them to. Nance assured her that Mills would be back around in good time and that he, too, missed their chats.

Nance and Mills made lunch for Richard. They had learned a system: Nance on the sandwich, Mills readying the sides and a beverage. Today: tuna surprise – extra onions – with corn chips and a tall milk. It worked like clockwork, mostly because they'd done the same all last week, on the days leading up to Margaret's funeral, when they also dealt with out of town relatives, accepted words of encouragement, sorrys. Their apartment had gone to hell, but there wasn't much they could do.

When Mills went to get groceries, Nance trimmed the shrubs along the front walk. He used a level from the garage to square off the tops, make sure they were even. The grass was short and clean, but Nance wanted to test out the blade he'd sharpened over the weekend. He rolled the Scag from the trailer, unhooked the spark plug and propped the deck up. Granules of concrete gravel dug into his bare, bony kneecaps as he double-checked that the blade was tight. Nance had inherited his father's chicken legs, and despite a beefier torso than Mills, from the waist down the brothers were almost identical: lean thighs, knees that rounded inward, tight calves and tiny ankles. Nance pulled the cord and let the Scag warm a bit, walked the yard to check for tennis balls or dog shit.

Mills drove up, got out of the car and pulled two bags of groceries from the backseat.

“Not much to cut,” he said.

“Just want to check that blade I fucked up,” Nance said.

“Seems like a waste of time and gas.”

“Better know now than later this week when we’re at some account.” Nance saw a look in Mills’s eyes, one that hoped they’d take an extended vacation, like he never wanted to work again.

“Still seems like a waste. There’s nothing to cut.”

“Good thing you’re not doing it then, right?”

“Whatever,” Mills said. “I got some corn on the cob, and a bunch of boneless chicken breasts that I thought I’d marinate in something. Toss ’em on the grill, with a salad.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’m gonna get at it. How’s Dad?”

“Fine, I suppose. Feel free to ask him.” Nance smiled. Mills did not, and he walked toward the side door.

Thursday, the boys returned to work. Linda, a nurse, had moved in to look after Richard, who was instructed to heed directions and be helpful. Nance doubted he would.

Each Monday through Wednesday Turf Aid cut large companies, Thursday and Friday houses, and Saturdays they pulled weeds and handled make-ups, miscellaneous jobs. Nance always left time for contingencies. Despite reassuring the clients, accounts

had fallen a bit behind. Mills had wanted another day off; Nance argued that they needed to get back at it, keep things in shape and under their control. He won, and they started catching up with business accounts.

The smell of two-cycle exhaust always comforted Nance. Today, a slight wind blew from the south. The noise of commercial lawnmowers blocked out other sounds and voices. There was something soothing about walking or riding for hours with a lawnmower as it spit cut grass out the side chute. Nance noticed how the belts kicked in each time he pulled the cord or engaged the blades at a new site. The blades would fire into a menacing spin and go about their work. Alternating shades of green lined up as Nance and his brother moved back and forth across football-sized sections of grass in the corporate parks in and around Hatfield. The patterns often looked like linear artwork, the cut from previous weeks faded but still showing underneath the latest mow. Amid the large tracts of concrete buildings, parking lots, and industrial grade streets, the lush grass had a similar order, was subject to the same constructs as the world around it. The green, seemingly natural, often came via chemicals sprayed on year after year and followed up with water from reservoirs. But it looked good, and Nance knew that's what customers cared about. And Turf Aid was one of the best. Even in just two and half years, the company had earned a reputation for its top-notch cutting.

Nance eased the truck to a stop in the front parking lot of Needleman Color Press, a regional printer of newspaper ad inserts and direct mail. Mills finished a banana and tossed the peel into the truck bed as he walked to the trailer. The brothers hadn't worked together in almost two years. The business had expanded, the work had spread,

and each headed their own crew. The past weeks had changed that. After their time off, Nance kept Ted in charge of Donny and Drew, and he and Mills took the larger jobs.

Nance pulled the pin that held his side of the metal trailer gate in place. Mills did the same on the other side and they lowered it to the ground. The gate creaked and felt heavy, but as they eased it to the asphalt, Nance smiled.

“Feels like the first time,” he said. He hopped up on the trailer and jumped into the seat of the Dixie Chopper. The riding mower had fat rear wheels and a floating deck with stroller-like front wheels. Two metal arms with foam padding folded over the operator’s lap, and they were pushed and pulled to drive. Steering meant manipulating the arms – forward on one and backward on the other, so the two rear wheels would provide power in opposite directions. It could turn one-hundred-eighty degrees in the space of a compact car, just by pushing forward on one arm and pulling back on the other. Nance started it and backed off the trailer.

“I’ll do the north side and back lot,” Nance said. “You do this front area and start trimming. Cool?”

Mills closed his eyes and nodded, as if he’d heard his brother say the same thing thousands of times. Color Press, one of the largest accounts they had, wasn’t that hard a gig – lots of wide open lawn, not many trees or obstacles – and it made them big coin because they typically knocked it out in just over an hour. But Mills looked beat, his eyes drooped and dark like he hadn’t slept. His movements were slow, deliberate, as if he’d never worked a mower or string trimmer before. He yawned. Everywhere he looked, he sensed his mother: getting groceries earlier in the week, he’d felt an awkward maternity, noticed that the women in the market smiled at him and nodded, as if they knew: *get used*

to this. The food's gone the moment you get it in the house, and we'll all be back tomorrow. In front of Color Press, a car passed, a woman at the wheel. Mills stared; she was middle-aged, nothing like his mother, but her hair, shoulder-length hazelnut, was enough, and despite the mower fumes, and the cut grass, he could smell his mom's shampoo: a hint of strawberry mixed with fresh flowers.

Nance squealed the tires of the Chopper, leaned forward and bounced a bit in his seat as he rolled toward the back of the long, low corrugated building. Mills lumbered up to get the Scag, clicked off the hand brakes and let the mower's momentum take it down off the trailer. He yanked on the pull start and it sputtered but stopped. He pulled again. Same. Finally, he put enough oomph into it, and the mower coughed and rumbled loudly, gray exhaust choking from its motor. Once he got walking, Mills eased into the mode, and before long, he was getting almost all he could from the mower's fifty-four-inch cutting width.

They cut until dusk, then headed to Mickey's for beers. Nance had pounded a small glass before Mills got done pissing. When he joined Nance at the end of the bar, two of the drafts sat waiting in front of him.

"That was good," Nance said, starting his second glass. "Color Press, PCA, Avco Supply and Stewards before lunch? That's huge."

"Yeah," Mills said. "I suppose we did all right. Why the small beers?"

"All right? You know we kicked ass. By the end of the day, your cut was near-perfect."

Mills warmed at the comment. He swilled a third of his beer.

"These shorties are on special. Nick said they're cheaper'n pints. What the hell?"

“Just checking. Did you know that most kindergartners will take three nickels over one quarter something like eighty percent of the time? Same with cups of Kool-Aid; they’d rather get three or four Dixie cups than a gallon. Something like that.”

“What?” Nance said.

“Forget it.”

“Seems like it took you a while to get going today. I know you didn’t want to be out there, but this *is* what we do.”

“It’s been almost two weeks.”

“That’s actually what made me feel so good. Like when you haven’t played hoops in a while, but you go out again and everything’s butter. I was in a zone today. Just cruising.”

Mills flicked a quarter into spins on the bar and tried to stop it with his index finger. It fell and wobbled to a stop. “Cruising on the Dixie all day.”

“You’re pissed because I had the rider?”

“I’m just saying. Walking takes more than riding. I don’t care who does what, but it might explain why it took a bit to get on track.”

“I can’t believe you’re pissed. I hope I’m not supposed to feel guilty. Say something next time. I don’t care what mower I use.”

“Sure you don’t.”

Nance gulped most of his half-full glass. “Jesus, Mills. Here I was feeling good, buying beers for us. First day back together in however long.”

“What can I say? You’re better, more prepared.”

Nance looked across the bar. Smoke settled up in the rafters. The front door, held open with an upturned cinder block, let in the sounds of passing cars and an occasional diesel rattle, but not a hint of moving air. Glassware clanked, people talked, music played: a mish-mash of inflections, voices, twangs. Pleasant, energizing. Nance picked up his glass and noticed the sweat on his forearm. Lately, even the overnight lows had been in the seventies.

“So you want the Chopper tomorrow?” Nance asked.

“I don’t fucking care,” Mills said. “Seriously.” He hung his head low, leaned over his folded arms and the bar. He ran a hand through his greasy hair, scratched above his right ear. “You thought I was scared after Dad’s news?” he continued. “It’s been thirteen days, man, and I just don’t feel much.”

“Right. You get the surprise, and then you get *the* surprise. Quite a change.”

“Do you always have to talk like that?”

“Sorry.” Nance finished his beer, felt his throat clench.

“It’s just crazy,” Mills said, flicking the quarter again. This time he just watched it spin, wobble and come to rest. “Dad looks OK, gets around all right. Pretty fucked up how fast it came and how quick it could go. And Mom?” He kicked the bar just above the fake brass footrest. His quarters jumped.

Nance shook a little as he felt the bar move under his wrists. He caught Nick’s eye, who looked over from the far end of the bar, and tapped next to his glass, held up two fingers. He leaned back on his barstool, felt the vinyl cover stick a bit, and cracked a peanut shell. He pulled the two meaty halves out, tossed them loosely in his hand, like dice, and popped them into his mouth.

“There’s nothing we can do,” he said. “Nothing anyone can do. In some ways, that kinda makes it easier to swallow, you know?”

“No,” Mills said. He ground his teeth and clenched his fists, fighting off tears. He accepted two shelled peanuts from Nance and crunched them hard, and followed them with half of his newest beer. He shook the overflowing foam from his hand and wiped his palm on his jeans.

“Maybe if you didn’t think about it so much,” Nance said.

“We have all day to do nothing *but* think. What the hell goes through your head on a rider for ten hours?”

“Lots of shit. Renewing accounts, getting caught up, new blades, patterns we haven’t done, the order we go to these places.”

“OK, I get it.”

“Someone’s got to remember all this stuff.”

“Not now with that shit, Nance.”

Every six months or so, Nance and Mills argued about responsibilities. Nance had offered half the business to Mills, but he felt he did more paperwork and repair. They both renewed contracts, ordered supplies, dealt with customers. But Nance fixed things – a faulty trigger on a weed whacker, belts that stuck on a Scag, leaky oil on the truck – better than Mills. At the beginning of the summer, Nance had suggested they write out job descriptions and take titles like president or CEO and the like. Mills agreed, but neither had done much about it.

“I don’t know either, but we can’t just sit around and wonder on it all damn day.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You don’t get it.”

"Maybe, *you* don't get it." Nance looked at his beer. Bubbles floated from the sides of the glass up through the beer and into the foam on top. He took a pull and set it back down. More bubbles, hundreds of them, racing for the top. His neck was sweaty and his stomach growled. The clock above the bar said 9:10.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," Nance said.

"Yes you did. You don't think I have any clue, you think I'm going to fuck this up, too. You're wrong."

"Seriously, I'm sorry. Don't get all uppity."

"Uppity. Nice. Whatever. It's like we're not even related sometimes." Mills stroked his beer glass, the wetness cold and slippery.

"Burgers?" Nance asked.

"Best thing I've heard you say all day. Hell yes, burgers."

They drank a few more beers, ate their burgers, and went home.

The house was dark, and Richard asleep. Nance grabbed the note on the fridge:
"Mickey's? I'm sure. Wanted to join but too tired. Wake me before you head out tomorrow. R.A. PS - I don't think I pissed Linda off that much. She's still here."

Nance set the note on the kitchen table, and walked to the bathroom, where Mills brushed his teeth.

"Nice work today," Nance said.

"Sure," Mills responded, mouth foamy.

"It'll be easier tomorrow," Nance said. He slapped his brother on the shoulder.

Mills nodded, felt Nance's palm on his bare arm. It stung, hit right smack on the reddest of that afternoon's sunburn. He pulled back, and turned to spit in the sink. "Yeah."

The next morning, Friday, they went out again. The brothers cruised through residential accounts, efficient and effective, Nance on the Dixie Chopper, Mills with the fifty-four inch Scag. With their separate crews, each would do between twelve and eighteen houses a day. Today, they finished twelve by lunch and by four, had gotten half of Saturday's make-ups done. Effortlessly, they moved from job to job, cutting, trimming, and blowing.

At the Duffy's, as at most smaller jobs, they only needed one mower, so Nance took the Scag off the trailer, left the trimming to Mills. Nance made the first pass along the front walk of the large, brick Colonial, and aimed the grass into the lawn, away from the porch. As he walked, he felt like someone was watching him, and as he turned to look, he felt a surge of heat rip through his left calf. He let go of the mower and yelped. The mower shut down and stopped at the end of the yard.

"Jesus Christ," Nance shouted, limping toward his brother, who backed up slowly.

"I was trying to scare you," Mills said. "I swear I didn't mean to make contact."

"God damn it," Nance said. He sat on the porch step and winced as he pulled up his left jean leg. From just below the back of his knee to the top of his sock, red welts like licorice strips crossed his calf. They throbbed in the afternoon sun. Mills looked at his brother, who studied the lines.

"That's intense," Mills said.

"It's insane," Nance said. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Mills just stared. He alternated his glance between the scarred skin and his brother's face. He shook his head and a smile crept through his body.

"You think this is funny?" Nance said.

Mills's smile became a soft laugh and he nodded, as if he had been given an answer to a riddle. He didn't say anything.

"What's your problem?" Nance asked.

Mills set the weed whacker down and as he stood back up, he noticed the redness in his brother's face. "What?" Mills said. "It was a joke."

"Real fuckin' funny, asshole."

Mills stopped laughing.

"You're such an idiot," Nance said. "You're a fucking time bomb, man."

"Sorry," Mills said, loud. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I didn't mean to hurt you."

He turned to walk away.

"Fuck you," Nance said.

"No, fuck you," Mills said, even louder. He faced his brother, who walked toward him. "At least I think about my mistakes. You don't even think. You can fix a mower but you can't take the time to figure out your own head."

The brothers stood chest to chest on the sidewalk.

"You think just because I don't cry every night that I don't hurt? She's gone, Mills. And Dad's on his way. Deal with it, or you'll be stuck."

Mills could feel his brother's voice, the moisture of his speech, could smell the stale coffee on his breath. His eyes burned and blurred with the hint of tears. He stood his ground.

"Go ahead," Nance said. "Cry some more. I'm tired of tiptoeing around you. These things happen and I'm not saying it's easy but, Jesus, don't whack me. That sure ain't going to get you closer to the truth."

Mills felt the heat in his face. His entire body tingled. He wanted to strangle his brother, to reach out and grab hold and squeeze. He breathed hard through his nose. When finally he could stand it no longer, he stepped away.

Mills backed up and grabbed the weed whacker. A tear rolled off his face and he could see a prism of color in the corner of his eye, the wetness reflecting in the afternoon sun. He slammed the weed whacker into the truck and walked off, down Sycamore Street. He heard the mower crank up behind him and it struck him as the loudest and most painful sound he had ever heard. He never wanted to hear it again, he thought. About a half block down, he heard the gate rattle on the trailer and a few seconds later, Nance pulled up.

"Get in."

Nance drove alongside in silence while Mills looked straight ahead, walking. Two shirtless kids stood under a basketball hoop in their driveway. They stopped playing, watched as the truck and trailer crept down Sycamore. Nance tapped the wheel. "Fine," he said and drove off.

He steered with his knees and took off his hat. He flexed the brim back and forth, wiped his sweaty hands on it. He looked into the rearview and his brother got smaller

until he looked like a thin tree in the middle of the road. As he came to a stop sign,

Nance slammed his hat into the bench seat of the truck and pounded the wheel with both fists.

Chapter 4

Richard stood at one of the family-room windows. His nap had lasted longer than usual, almost four hours. It was early evening, and he was overdue on his latest round of medication. He looked out on his backyard: long strands of horizontal sun poked through oak trees that towered seventy feet high on three sides of the large lot. A couple months ago, he might have decided that this moment was worth preserving. But last week, he'd retired his last camera, hung it on a hook underneath a bunch of jackets in the basement without telling either of the boys. They'd find it sooner or later, he figured. Even if the sunset offered something he'd never gotten before, unlikely given his thirty years of shooting, going to the basement for the camera would have had him back on the couch for a breather.

When he and Margaret had looked at this house thirty years ago, he'd known the moment he stepped into the back room: windows that opened, a double yard and trees in a neighborhood four miles from downtown. They signed the papers that evening. Growing up on the north side of Chicago, Richard never had this kind of view. Saw mostly muted red and gray, not green. Didn't know an oak from a telephone pole. Thought all lawn mowers were tractors with big blades and extensions that could cut a baseball outfield in six sweeps. He and his buddies had invented games that they played on sidewalks, in the street, in parking lots – variations on what they called snatch-ball: they threw a tennis ball off something like a garage or a brick building, and then tried to catch it on the fly. It had been every kid for himself, and usually, the crew of six or seven boys knocked each other over and the ball rolled away without any of them scoring points.

City sounds always echoed through his memories of boyhood, memories that sometimes weren't good or bad, just there, like the buildings themselves. Chicago had been a place of quick learning, of knowing things whether one was ready to or not. Richard had seen his first dead body when he was eleven, an old homeless man cold and white in the middle of summer, curled against a curb. No blood, just wide open eyes and the whitest skin he'd ever seen. After a moment of staring into the bum's eyes, Richard had sprinted sixteen blocks home to tell his parents about it, to ask the questions any eleven-year-old would. He dropped a shoulder into the oak front door and ran into the kitchen where his mother usually sat smoking cigarettes and prepping dinner. She wasn't there. Neither was his father, though he had expected that. And so he sat, alone in the kitchen looking out the open window at a fight between two drunks. Neither guy connected; they leaned on each other and then pushed off and as they moved away from one another, and out of range, the punches flew.

His father spent most of his time working to close insurance deals with big shot Chicagoans, and his mother tried to figure into a social scene Richard never understood or cared about. He was an only child, and they rarely left the city, his parents content to mix amid the chaos. Now, the same sounds – the rattle of the El, non-stop cars and their horns, people cursing and singing and yelling – rang through his head as he viewed the backyard where he had raised two boys, taught them to play catch on a solid patch of green in a tranquil neighborhood. He couldn't hear the blue jays that cheeped on the patio, or the window screen that flexed and whined slightly with the wind.

The old oaks formed a canopy which shaded the lawn, hid it from the burning summer sun. A southerly gust sent the limbs flailing. The deep green leaves looked heavy;

they clung to their branches, tried to shed the moisture that built up and weighed them down on these humid August evenings. Richard stared at the features of the closest oak, one that sat just inside the neighbor's fence, followed the bark from its base, where it pushed the earth up and out and formed a bulge in the lawn. In his head, he heard a jackhammer. And then the hiss of a city bus, like steam released from pressure. The old bark resembled dry, cracking skin. Knots contorted parts of the trunk, and a few small circles where branches had been cut off were smooth and black. But still it lived on, commanded the attention of anyone who ventured into the backyard.

Richard heard a loud clank, metal on concrete, and stared at the birdfeeder that stood like a flagpole near the middle of the yard. Then the ripping of an engine pushed into his ears. Richard shook his head so slightly it barely moved, as if he'd only given the idea half a thought. He tried to shake the intruding sounds; he couldn't. Dr. Ambrose had said these things would happen sometimes, that his mind would jumble reality, interpret things not as they were but as he remembered them. The machine noise grew until finally he saw Nance walking behind a large, orange mower. Richard felt a slight twitch of relief, his shoulders fell, and he raised a hand to wave. Nance didn't look toward the house, though; he pushed a long, black lever forward and steadied the mower from the patio into the backyard grass.

Friday, Richard remembered. His sons always finished with their yard – cut it, trimmed it, edged it. Even when it didn't really need any work. He watched Nance: his son limped heavily, moved more slowly than usual behind the machine. Thin muscles flexed in his arms, tanned from a summer of wearing dusty T-shirts. He gripped the handlebars and appeared to struggle with the mower as he reached the back of the yard.

He looked odd, out of sync. Then again, Richard thought, who knew when his diseased mind and body were distorting things anymore. He didn't see any sign of Mills.

When Mills and Nance were kids, Richard would toss pop flies to them as the charcoal readied before a cookout. The boys would push and throw elbows as they tried to catch the ball. Nance usually won, and Mills often ended up on the ground getting grass stains. But whenever Mills did make a catch, everyone heard about it. Richard smiled at the thought of his younger son parading around the back holding the baseball above his head like a souvenir. By the time they were in their early teens, neither boy ever asked Richard to throw. Or maybe he never offered. He wasn't sure. Sometimes one of the boys would go out front, and one would stay in back, and they'd throw balls as high and as hard as they could over the garage to each other. Richard let them be, and by their late grade school and high school years, he spent most of his time travelling for work. But they were good kids, he thought, as he watched Nance limp behind the mower, maintaining order in his backyard.

"Mr. O'Malley?" Linda stepped into the family room holding a dish towel, a pill cup and a glass of water.

As Richard turned, he felt his pants stick to his inner thigh. He looked down and noticed a streak of wetness from his crotch to his foot and onto the carpet.

"Christ," he said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Richard turned toward her. "I didn't mean to startle me either."

"It happens to people more often than you think," Linda said. She set the pills and water on the end table and walked toward him. "Let me help."

“I’ll clean myself. Maybe just get some stain remover for the carpet.”

Linda nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. Richard stood a moment, staring at his pants. Lately, he’d been dealing with flu-like symptoms. Now this? What’s worse, he thought, was that he hadn’t even felt it. His stomach turned, and he labored toward the bathroom. As he flicked the light switch, his stomach settled. He stripped his pants and tried a conscious piss. Dry. He wrapped a pink towel around his waist. Pain ballooned in his midsection, and a sudden lethargy led him to sit on the toilet seat. He looked in the mirror – the lights were too bright, and his skin looked almost transparent. His eyes seemed sucked back in his head, and somewhere deep in the reflection, he sensed a mocking. So this is it, he thought. This is what happens.

He glanced around the bathroom: the crusty mat crumpled against the heat vent; a tiny vase that never held flowers; Margaret’s square bottle of perfume. Richard picked it up, brought it to his nose. The scent pricked all the way to the top of his throat, and he coughed. The glass felt smooth, even on the edges, slightly sticky near the neck. He unscrewed the cap and extended his arm. He pressed the top and watched a mist disappear into the air. He breathed in his wife’s smell, closed his eyes, and the bottle fell to the floor. It bounced on the tile, but didn’t break, and Richard leaned quickly to grab it. A few drops had dripped out; he wiped around the top and returned the bottle to its shelf next to the mirror.

He hadn’t even reached sixty. Neither had Margaret. His father had died at sixty three, his mother when she was sixty one. Cancer had its own history in his family, in so many families. At least he had some time to think, to process, to know. That seemed important, somehow. Margaret was just taken, stolen. And for Nance and Mills? It didn’t

seem right. They'd been caught, trapped in these unexpected moments, like pictures.

On the surface, so many things seemed the same. His sons would have to deal with this like so many others before them. It happened to everyone. But when captured in a singular moment, everything had its unique instance. The way light hit water at just the right second during a Canadian sunset – a daily occurrence. But when stopped, frozen, it became something. Richard had taken several photos on fishing trips of sunrises and sunsets on middle-of-nowhere lakes in Saskatchewan or near Thunder Bay. One such photo hung in the living room and he often noticed something different each time he stared at it: the slight hint of amber coloring the tips of a pine; the ripples of the water reshaping reflections; the different shades of darkness in the middle of the photo at the heart of the trees.

A few years ago, Richard had shot an entire Midwestern summer of clouds. High, fluffy popcorn clouds that rested on the blue of a spring sky. Dark green and orange clouds that preceded tornadoes. Low, dense, deep gray clouds that held onto rain until they burst open with enough water to back up storm drains.

He had portfolios of each boy, photos taken through the years during random rituals: Nance leaning forward from the kitchen chair tying his shoes at age 4 and again at age 12; both of them drinking lemonade on the patio after Little League in grade school, and doing the same after a twelve-hour day at Turf Aid during their first summer of business. He tried not to imagine them now, their expressionless faces, their deliberate movements. But there they were, imprinted in his mind like the little flower stencils that ringed the bathroom floor.

He stood up and noticed the side-by-side paintings: the boys had each done one in third grade, Nance's "There's a tiger sleeping in the bush" and Mills's "Rainbow Forest." Richard looked for the tiger, but still couldn't find it. He held out a little hope that maybe it really was in there. Next to it, a solid purple rainbow arched against a green background.

Richard felt another surge in his gut and unfastened the towel and tossed it on the floor. He lifted up the toilet cover and sat back down. To hell with it, he thought; might as well take care of business. He looked back in the mirror; he wanted to smile at the craziness of the moment, but a spasm of pain ripped up through his stomach and he clenched his teeth.

Faint shadows of leaves danced around on the patio. Richard wore clean pants and he'd put on a different shirt. It felt itchy. He sat on a lawn chair and the strands of nylon fabric stretched under his weight. He squinted into the yard, where his older son continued to work.

Nance backedpedaled, still with a limp, while weed whacking along the arbors near the garden. Chopped grass flew from the spinning string on the trimmer into his lower legs, covering his jeans with deep green. When he saw Richard, he flipped his head but didn't stop. He sped up a bit and moved along the perimeter of the yard. As he walked onto the patio, he flicked a switch and the sputtering stopped.

"Howdy." Nance lay the trimmer down and sat on the picnic bench.

"Looks nice," Richard said. Fresh-cut swaths about four-feet wide alternated back and forth, light and dark, across the lawn. Not a single blade seemed out of place.

“It’s nothing.”

Nance looked out over the yard. It did look good – healthy, under control. Just the way it should. A trail of damp grass imprinted with little diamond shapes from the Scag’s tires jotted a line across the patio. He’d have to get the blower or the hose to clean it up; he didn’t want anyone tracking clippings into the house.

The wind had settled a bit. Richard rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. Minutes passed as he and Nance stared at the yard. A leaf floated onto the picnic table between them. Nance picked it up and rubbed the waxy side.

“A couple months and we’ll have to get out the sheet again,” he said.

“The leaves are a bitch when they fall,” Richard said. Each year, as the leaves had turned orange, red, then brown and fell into the yard, they needed to be raked and deposited on the curb for the city pick-up. When the brothers were in grade school, Richard paid Nance and Mills in ice cream for helping, and the three used an old bedsheet, raked the leaves into it and made trip after trip to the curb. Sometimes, it’d take four or five afternoons to finish the job and get the yard clear. Leaf fights were standard, burying one another common, though Richard typically left the joking to his sons. Last fall, the men had rekindled the tradition, but despite the pleas of Nance and Mills, Richard had still refused to be buried. He wondered now why raking leaves had been something the three decided to do together after the years. They’d never gone on annual trips, and vacations had been random, dependent on Richard’s work, the boys’ school and sports schedules, family finances. Richard realized they didn’t decide; he had noticed the boys working one afternoon and joined them, just walked out back and placed his shoe on the corner of the sheet to keep it taut.

“We’re getting a bit old for leaf fights,” Nance said. “Just have to get her done.”

Neither elaborated; both knew it would be a two-person job this fall.

“Where the hell’s your brother?” Richard asked.

“Not sure.”

“He take a different crew out today?”

“We got in a fight.” Nance pulled his jeans up and showed off the red lines on his calf, dulled by the half-light of dusk.

“Jesus.”

Nance pointed to the trimmer on the ground and Richard tilted his head back as he looked at it. “He was trying to mess with me, give me a scare.”

“Looks like hell.”

Nance walked across the patio to the hose and turned the water to a trickle. He cupped his hand and after it had filled, rubbed it on his calf. The water felt cool, comforting, but stung, too. He brought the hose to his mouth and drank for a few seconds; it tasted like iron. He turned the volume up and sprayed the patio; little pieces of grass washed together and flowed into the edge of the lawn. The round ceramic faucet handle creaked as Nance screwed it off.

“Well, maybe we ought to go see if we can find him,” Richard said. “A dollar says he’s at Mickey’s.”

“He’ll be fine.”

Richard’s stomach gurgled and he adjusted himself in his chair. He tried a deep breath, but quit when it felt like someone had punched him in the gut. He took quick

breaths, like he'd been exercising. He wanted to lean back and inhale as much fresh air as he could, and then let it out slowly. The pain wouldn't let him.

"Why in the hell would he hit you with that thing?" he said.

Nance shook his head, and leaned toward his father, looking at him. When their eyes met, Nance raised his brows, tilted his head, and then glanced away.

"That's no excuse," Richard said softly. He leaned his elbows onto his knees.

"Shit, I suppose. What'd you do to him?"

"Nothing. He wouldn't take a ride home."

"You sure he'll be all right?" Richard asked.

Nance nodded.

"Hell, I oughta get to bed. Seems like it's been a long one for us all."

"You need anything, Pop?"

"Bladder control." Richard half-laughed. "I pissed myself watching you cut the grass before. And not because I was excited by your work."

Richard pushed himself up from his seat. He placed a hand on Nance's shoulder, coughed, and held on.

"Ice might ease that swelling," he said. His left hand on his son's shoulder. "I'll see you in the morning."

The yard was dark. Nance could only see halfway across the lawn. He heard a mosquito buzz near his ear, but didn't swat. He leaned back and noticed a few stars warming up in the sky beyond his father's head. The effect of the broad sky and the silhouette of the trees made Richard look small. The hand on Nance's shoulder was

warm, too warm, and then it was gone and where it had been felt suddenly cold.

Richard ambled toward the side door.

“Good night, Pop,” Nance said. He rested his elbows on the picnic table behind him and sighed, let all the air escape before he sucked in again. He hated how fast darkness edged out these later summer days; it didn’t seem so long ago that evenings hung on for hours. His eyes slowly adjusted to night, and a shiver rippled through his body. He walked to the edge of the grass, unzipped his fly, and pissed. The yard seemed small. When he and Mills were kids, hitting a wiffle ball from where he now stood to the back fence was epic, and meant bragging rights until the other matched it. Growing up had been about one-upping each other, being able to tell of some new feat at the dinner table. He zipped his pants and turned around. The house seemed smaller, too. Light from his parents’ bedroom window looked bright against the dark gray siding and black shutters. Mostly, Nance remembered his mother congratulating one of them and immediately asking the other what they had done. She spread the praise, buoyed both of the boy’s spirits. His father usually just reminded them that baseball caps were not to be worn inside the house. He picked up the trimmer and walked to the garage. He pulled the door down, grabbed a beer from the mini-fridge next to the desk, and went inside to wait for his brother.

Dust floated in the rays of morning sun. Richard rolled over in bed and felt the sheets stick to his back. He’d never believed in air conditioners, and wasn’t about to buy one now. He figured if someone wanted cooler air, they could drive to Canada, which he often did during summers on his vacation. He’d fold down the back seat of his wagon,

load in his fishing and photo gear, a sleeping bag, and go. Most times, he'd get enough good shots to sell around and cover his expenses. Today, his butt was asleep, and the pain in his lower back slowly zoomed in closer. On the oak nightstand in front of a clock: a glass of water, a cup of coffee, and a dish of pink and green pills. A picture of him and Margaret in an ugly, gold frame sat near the edge of the table, behind a lamp. It, too, was dusty. Richard reached for it and wiped the sheet across the glass. The dust looked black on the damp sheet, and Richard fell into his pillows and closed his eyes. He could still see the picture in perfect detail: he and Margaret ten years earlier on their twenty-fifth anniversary, leaning against the railing of a cruise ship somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico. Deep blue-green water to infinity behind them, distorted by the last flickers of an already hidden sun. The flash from the camera lit them in an unnatural whiteness. Wrinkles were barely visible in his wife's face, his forehead was sunburned the color of salmon they had eaten that night for dinner. He could feel her arms around his waist, the way she locked her fingers together and held on, and the wooden rail smooth under his large hands. Salt and an occasional hint of diesel returned to his nose. He opened his eyes. The metal frame slipped a bit in his grip, but the picture confirmed his imaginings.

They had decided on the cruise partly as an escape. Though they'd never told Mills or Nance, Margaret had spent a few evenings with one of Richard's colleagues from the *Journal* that year. The boys had been in Madison, Mills in his first year of college. Richard had been gone on travel three weeks of every month then, and Margaret had an empty house. Richard understood the allure, had been tempted time and again on the road, but he never surrendered to his urges. He'd written a letter to Margaret expressing his concerns, how he wanted to believe they weren't on the brink of the end. They rarely

fought out loud about it in front of the boys. Richard told Nance and Mills that he and Margaret were struggling with loneliness, that she wanted him to work less, standard marriage issues. The boys took it in stride. Richard asked for more local assignments, tried to be around more. The pain, the intrusion of adultery, receded with time, but was always there. His colleague John Sterling divorced his wife and moved to Rockford. It had been somewhat of a new beginning for Richard and Margaret, but he knew then and now that if the boys found out, they'd have trouble forgiving her. To both of them, she had been the perfect mother – she never forgot a birthday or special event, baked pies for no reason. And she never let go of her secret, held it close to her heart. There'd been times when Richard knew the past burned into her, like Nance's twenty-fifth birthday, which was immortalized when his college sweetheart, Anne, called to bail on dinner. Her reason: she'd slept with Bruce Donahue, a high school classmate, and loved it. That's how she ended their relationship. Richard had never seen Margaret's face so red as when Nance repeated the story over dinner. For a moment, he thought his wife might open up, expose her own infidelity. Instead, she'd excused herself and went behind the garage to sneak one of the cigarettes she occasionally smoked. She'd said the same to Richard, when he pressed for details: "It was great, better than we've had in years." He hadn't known how to respond. It was her moment of shame but she championed it, held it in his face like a gold medal. That's when he realized how distant he'd been. Things improved, and just before she died, they'd put the issue to rest when she called it the most important mistake she'd ever made, and apologized at length.

Richard set the picture back on the nightstand. His stomach growled, and he reached for the cup of coffee, put it to his lips and took a sip. Lukewarm. The clock

showed seven-fifteen; he'd awakened within the same half-hour for the past thirty years, and most mornings, Margaret had steaming coffee and the paper on the nightstand. Richard never did quite understand how the coffee always tasted the same – the temperature always felt perfect – but he hoped that eventually Linda would get it right.

He took another sip. Decaf. Doctors had nixed caffeine. At first Richard had laughed, asked why it mattered. But the drugs he took didn't do so well with caffeine, and he quickly learned to deal with decaf. But as he took his third sip this morning, he could almost taste the lack of flavor. He set the cup down, dropped his pills into his mouth and finished the glass of water. He sat up in bed and rested a moment. He swung his legs to the floor and waited again. It usually took close to ten minutes for him to get up and out of his room.

A plate of sliced cantaloupe sat on the kitchen counter. Richard picked up a piece and ate it in two bites. He heard a loud crash and walked to the open kitchen window. The truck was stopped in the driveway; the gate of the trailer had fallen. He watched Nance hop from the driver's seat and limp to the trailer.

"Don't worry, I got this by myself," Nance said toward the truck, where Mills slouched on the passenger side, and didn't move.

"Seriously," Nance said. "Give me a hand." He pulled a glove from his back pocket and threw it at the rear window behind Mills.

Mills opened his door. "I'm not the one who forgot to hitch the gate."

Richard stood still near the window, as if moving might give him away. Mills, he noticed, looked defeated: didn't stand up straight as he walked toward the trailer, dragged his boots along the driveway, hair a wreck.

"No shit," Nance said. "But I'm tired today and just want to get things done."

"And we always cater to how you're doing."

Nance smiled. He wanted to get to an account and lose himself in his work. He bent to grab the metal gate and as he lifted, he could tell Mills wasn't doing shit. He let go and the gate slammed into the concrete again.

"God damn it, Mills. This is ridiculous. Hold your own or stay the hell home."

"I'm tired too. It's not like I wasn't lifting."

Richard continued to watch. He wanted to say something; fifteen years earlier, he would have grabbed Nance and Mills by their collars and told them to figure it out, and that if they didn't, there would be consequences. They'd always ironed things out, resentfully, afraid that their father would ground them or suspend allowances. If Margaret were there, Richard thought, she'd walk right outside and ask what the problem was and explain that getting all worked up never solved anything. The approach had always worked, and the boys latched on to her, asked her for help with everything from math problems to girl stuff. Richard tried to recall a meaningful conversation with either of his sons about any of the girlfriends they had brought home over the year. He couldn't.

As the boys had gotten older, Richard used to let them go at it a little bit, get in each other's faces. But he never wanted the brothers to do or say anything with lasting effects. Whatever he decided to do, he thought it meant little compared to what the brothers did themselves. Recently, though, he questioned his reluctance to do anything

but punish. Certainly he could provide some lessons. Richard leaned forward over the sink and opened his mouth; a surge jumped from his stomach into his throat.

“Pick up the gate,” Nance said. “And let’s go.”

“Nice fucking partnership,” Mills said. “Pick up your own goddamn gate.” He walked to the cab and hopped in the truck. Nance stood still.

Richard burped and spit up acid-flavored phlegm. He spit again and as he looked back to the driveway, he made eye contact with Nance. Neither moved, until Nance bent over and heaved the gate up. Richard stood silently, a dribble of chunky spittle on his chin, as Nance looked up at him again. Nance put his head down and made his way to the truck. Richard wiped his face with the dish rag, and lumbered to the family room. As he picked up the paper and slumped to the couch, he heard the truck rattle out of the driveway and down the street.

He tried to read, but couldn’t concentrate. He grabbed the phone and dialed the number. “Dr. Ambrose, please,” Richard said.

After several minutes, a soothing voice came on the line. “Richard, good morning.”

“I’ve got some issues. You said I could call.”

A pause. “The first two weeks involve a lot of denial and anger, as I remember from the psych rotation in med school.”

“It’s not about that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I pissed my pants yesterday.”

“That’ll happen.”

“Okay.”

“Your motor skills deteriorate, and you lose control of certain functions. It’s the same reason you’ve been vomiting for the past few weeks. Given the location of the growths, anything related to your stomach, bowels, even breathing, could be affected.”

“I’m hearing noises, distracting sounds.”

“To be expected. We don’t really understand that as well, but the fact is, your body is under attack, and just like when you get a cold, or a virus, or a fever, the body reacts.”

Richard let the doctor’s words sink in. He didn’t feel rushed, knew his doctor would wait on the other end for him to continue. Although he never thought he’d be talking about these things, he was thankful for the man’s honesty, his straightforward demeanor.

“How, exactly,” Richard continued. He paused. “How do I actually die from cancer?”

“Would you like to come in? Or I could stop by in the next few days?” Dr. Ambrose said.

“I just want an answer.”

“I usually have these discussions in person.”

“Not this time.”

Dr. Ambrose cleared his throat gently, as if to remove any impediments.

“Consciousness,” he said. “You’ll lose consciousness. Leading up to that moment, you won’t really feel anything more than the pain you already have. Then, once

you've passed out, either your heart will stop working, or you'll stop breathing. But you won't be aware of any of it."

"That's it?"

"Well, physiologically, there's an entire world at work behind these things. But for you, and what you'll experience, that's it. Now, and we've been over this before, the symptoms you described above could go on for months. And that's where things get tricky. There's still so much we don't know. For every percentage you hear, there are individuals who don't fit the results of the group."

"And my medication?"

"What you're taking doesn't fight the disease, just the symptoms. But you already know that. They are separate issues. Even when the symptoms aren't at their worst, the disease could be close to consuming the body. And the inverse is true. The symptoms can be horrible, the cancer relatively under control."

Richard felt the coolness of the phone in his hand. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

A cardinal landed on the power line outside the family room. Richard watched it's head dart side to side, up, down. It flew away.

"Linda's been good."

"She's been doing hospice care for fourteen years. I'd trust her with anyone," Dr. Ambrose said. "You be sure to let me know if you need anything else, Richard."

Richard said he would, thanked the doctor again, and hung up the phone. He sat back on the couch, and his shirt lifted, exposed a slice of his stomach. Like a little boy, Richard pulled the shirt even farther, poked his stomach. It tickled a bit, but underneath,

pain bubbled like fizzing soda. His skin looked soft, tight. A dribble of sweat rolled from just below his breastbone and toward his belly button. The long surgery scar formed a pink line, like narrow railroad tracks, from the right side of his stomach to below the waist of his sweatpants. That had healed more quickly than anyone expected. He lowered his shirt and rolled onto his back.

He stared at the wooden beams that held up the family room ceiling. The tiles around the beams looked worn out and saggy. They'd need to be replaced soon. He'd have to remember to tell Nance and Mills. He drifted into his morning nap, thinking of things they would need to discuss.

Chapter 5

They were at the Nelsons in River Hills, an old suburb where houses sat on at least an acre, and the cheapest cars cost more than both of Turf Aid's trucks. Barry Nelson headed the marketing division at Tasty Pak Meats, the largest employer in Hatfield, and Mills had interned for him writing press releases one summer during college.

Two years ago, as Nance assembled accounts, he'd asked if Mills knew anyone they could hit up for jobs. Mills called Mr. Nelson, who promptly invited both brothers to the house for a barbecue. They ate steaks from a guy Barry knew who owned a small cattle farm near West Bend, an hour north. They drank imported bottles of beer on a granite patio. A porch wrapped around the front of the three-story Victorian, and in back, the patio faced a football field-sized lawn. A split-rail fence surrounded the yard, and beyond it, a ditch, which ran the length of the property. Grass sloped toward the center of the ditch, where a five-foot wide river of muck stood still. In summer, mosquitoes hatched by the thousands, and bug dope was as necessary for cutting the lawn as fuel for the mowers. Nance had mentioned that as an issue when they walked the property, informally surveying the ins and outs.

"Breeding grounds," he said. "Not a huge factor, but something to consider."

"How long would it take you two to do this job?" Barry asked.

Before Nance could throw out the numbers he spent weeks calculating for a yard this size, Mills started.

"We're looking at about an hour to an hour and a half of cut time alone, so right there you've got two man hours, minimum." He finished the last of his fourth beer.

“We’ll have to do a walk-through each week for downed branches, especially given that the moisture in this area will keep this grass long enough to hide foreign objects. With some of these thunderstorms we get rolling through here, you gotta figure these oaks are gonna lose limbs. And then there’s the issue of removal; depending on local regs, you may not be able to just have a pile of woody debris at the end of your driveway for three, four days. Not to mention what neighbors around here might think.”

Mills had never been on a sales call, and Nance stared at him, his head forward, eyes firm. He wanted to tell Mills to shut up, but never got the window.

“So, what, one-fifty a week, with options for contingencies should you need to add services?” Barry said. His legs were tan, and he wore loafers with no socks. His yellow polo shirt sported an upturned collar, and when a mosquito landed on his white shorts, he casually flicked it.

Nance almost choked on his beer. His shoulders eased and the brothers smiled at one another. They didn’t say anything.

“Write it up, send me a copy to sign and we’re on,” Barry said. He offered his hand and they all shook on it. “I think my wife made some dessert if you’re interested.”

Apple pie, with lattice work across the top. Sweet house. Nice grass. Huge paycheck. They had decided to hit Mickey’s after closing the deal. Nance wanted to ask who the hell Mills had thought he was, to explain that Nance would do the selling. He let it go, focused on the bottom line. He bought the beers and patted Mills on his shoulder. “Not bad. Not fucking bad.”

“Don’t get too close to the ditch,” Nance said this morning, pouring gas into the Dixie riding mower from a five-gallon plastic jug. “It’s straight swamp in the middle.”

Mills snorted – Nance had placed the Nelson stop on Mills’s route sheet when they split crews last year, and Mills had plenty of experience working around the ditch.

The job was their third this morning. Saturdays were trickier than weekdays because they had to deal with careless kids, customers working in their yards, guests over for lemonade. But they had fallen behind. In suburbs like River Hills, traffic picked up on Saturdays. During the week, suburbs offered a respite from the congestion of central Hatfield. Just the birds, an occasional dog left in a fenced yard all day, station wagons coming or going with wives and children. The city, though, had a pulse: Hatfield moved to its own blue collar rhythm, factory shifts letting out across the city three, four times during the day, workers filling taverns to take the edge off. Most of Turf Aid’s commercial accounts were inside city limits, and the shop and house sat only a few minutes north of downtown. Unlike his brother, who thrived on the noise and movement of the city, Mills preferred the quiet of River Hills or Bayside. Except on Saturdays, when often customers or neighbors watched them cut, or worse, didn’t get out of the way.

Mills sprayed a thin mist of insect repellent over his body and tossed the can into the back of the truck. He leaned on the handlebars of the Scag, lifting the front deck off the ground a few inches. From the operating position behind the mower, the Scag was similar to an old bicycle: handlebars extended backward from the machine, about two feet apart. Black rubber grips covered the ends of the bars, and just under them were hand brakes. Mills bobbed the front of the mower up and down like a teeter totter, dropping it as close to the ground as he could without letting it touch. Nance was focused on the

spout of the gas can – wasted fuel is wasted profit, he always said – and his hands moved slowly, tilting the container up. The veins in Nance’s forearms stuck out like thin strands of rope. Sweat soaked his gray Turf Aid T-shirt under his arms and along the neckline. In August, nothing stayed dry. Even this morning, the sun seemed to send bits of moisture into the air on its thick rays. Sweat covered Mills’s palms and the front of his mower dropped to the driveway with a loud metallic crack.

Nance cringed, and his eyes and neck tightened when the Scag hit the concrete. He jerked and the spout popped out of the tank. Gas leaked down the side of the mower and dripped onto the lower deck. He righted the gas can and looked up.

“What the fuck?” he said.

Mills grabbed the black plastic handle and pulled the start cord on the Scag; it recoiled halfway out, yanking his arm back and scraping across his hand before it smacked into the mower. “Shit,” he said.

“Serves you right,” Nance said, pulling a rag from his back pocket.

The phrase sounded familiar, reverberated in Mills’s head in a voice similar to his brother’s. He looked at Nance, who shook his head as he cleaned the spill, and felt a twinge in his hand.

A half-inch-long piece of skin hung from Mills’s palm, but didn’t bleed. Salty perspiration seeped into the cut; ripping off the skin would hurt like hell, so Mills pulled his leather gloves from his back pocket. He gripped the cord with his other hand, started the mower, and the deep sputtering choke of the engine echoed off the Nelson’s three-car garage. Mills had heard mowers start thousands of times; this morning, he felt it in his head, and it burned like his hand.

He used to enjoy the layers of sound – the constant hum underneath the sputter and shake of the engine, the surge of noise when the blades kicked in, the rhythms created, the power – but lately, every time he'd get going at a new site, the trees and birds and dogs are what he most wanted to hear.

The right brake felt a bit loose, and Mills had to pull on that handle to maneuver. Mowers in top shape made the job a lot easier. With the walk-behinds, both rear wheels provided power. The hand brakes connected via metal rods to each wheel and stopping one side allowed the opposite to propel and turn the machine. Loose brakes could be fixed in fifteen minutes at the shop, but until then, Mills would have to squeeze the brake hard *and* pull to turn right.

As he walked, he saw Nance in the backyard on the rider. He didn't notice the wrist-sized branch in the grass. A deep and loud hollow thumping resonated from beneath the mower deck as the blades hacked apart the wood and kicked it out the chute in fist-sized chunks. The mower vibrated heavily, and Mills jumped a bit at the initial sound, but as it continued and diminished, he smiled. A piece of bark shot across the ditch.

"Shit yeah!" he yelled, looking at the pieces as they shot out, like skeet. Nance sped along in the background, staring. Mills smiled and gave his brother a thumb's up. Nance scowled in return.

When Mills turned at the corner and headed back for his second pass, he saw Nance on the street rolling toward him on the Dixie. Mills mowed and smiled, and just as he reached the chunks of broken wood – their insides white and fresh – Nance pulled up.

Mills kept cutting and even smaller pieces of bark flew into the street near Nance's mower.

"Turn your blades off," Nance shouted over the din of the competing mowers, shielding his eyes.

"What?" he yelled.

Nance threw his arm out, pointing at the pieces of grass flying up into the street and onto his mower. "Shut it off!"

"What do you want?" Mills squinted and crinkled his face.

Nance kicked a metal lever on the platform of the Dixie and his blades kicked in. He pulled on the handles and rolled a few feet in reverse and then pushed forward again.

Tiny pebbles and dirt pricked into Mills's bare legs and arms. Something flew into his right eye, and he let go of the hand brakes on his mower, threw off his gloves. Water welled, and his eye itched and burned as he rubbed it.

"Mills, Jesus!" Nance shouted.

Mills looked up and saw his brother standing on the Dixie's deck, as if paralyzed, his mouth wide. Mills followed Nance's stare to the ditch: the Scag rolled and veered left down the slope.

Nance hopped off his riding mower and both brothers sprinted the ten yards toward the Scag. They bumped shoulders; Mills stumbled and almost fell. Nance reached for the handlebars but couldn't get a grip. His left boot crashed into the ditch and disappeared into the ankle-high muck.

The Scag caught the lip of the ditch and as it did, the blades sunk into the wet turf and scalped through the grass, exploding water and mud. The front of the deck tipped

toward the water, but didn't fall. Nance stepped from the ditch and leaned to pull the blade lever to off. It didn't matter – the mower had already quit.

Mud covered Mills; he'd been standing right in the line of fire. He wiped his face and hair; he could still feel something in his eye. He breathed deep, rested his hands on his hips, looked toward the ground.

Nance leaned on the metal handlebars of the Scag to hold it still, one foot in the ditch and one on the wet grass. He looked at his brother, ignored the mosquitoes that swarmed his legs.

“Nice save,” Mills said.

Nance bent down and scooped a handful of mud and laughed, almost violently, and chucked it at Mills. He lifted his left leg and the suction of the water squealed as he pulled up his boot.

The mudball spread apart as it flew, and Mills ducked. Pieces hit him in the shoulder and ribs; they felt soft, cool. Whenever the brothers aerated a lawn, something they did only on occasion, they would toss the small, goose-shit-sized plugs of dirt at each other. Those often stung a bit, even left welts if thrown hard enough. But they typically took it easy in battle and then tried landing shots in the back of the truck, or throwing the farthest.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Nance asked, as he shook his foot.

“I thought you fixed the auto-shut off,” Mills said. He looked at the clumps of grass and mud near his feet. He wriggled his toes, worked a small chunk up onto his boot and flung it gently in front of where he stood. It landed without a sound in the taller grass just a few feet ahead of where the Scag had veered off course.

“I don’t believe this,” Nance said. He turned away from Mills and pushed on the mower. It budged about an inch. He stepped into the ditch with both feet, unhooked the spark plug. His right foot slid along the bottom of the ditch and a mosquito bit into his eyelid. He smacked at his eye, left a dirt print. He bent over again and heaved. His cheeks puffed out; the mower lifted up a few inches and he pushed. The entire front of the mower was sitting a half a foot into the grass now. He stood up, sloshed to his right, and clicked the hand brakes into neutral. He placed his hands underneath the handlebars and without hesitating, squatted up and pushed the back end of the mower, removing the left rear wheel from its six-inch burial.

Wiping the mud from his face and arms with a sweatshirt, Mills watched his brother, who bent over to catch his breath. He smelled fresh dirt, which reminded him of digging for worms as a kid. The brothers had thrown those at each other, too.

Mills walked to the truck, tossed the stained sweatshirt into the cab, and took a drink from the three-gallon water cooler they had mounted on the side of the pickup bed. The water was cold, and coursed down his throat, into his chest and stomach. He felt it hit the spot in his gut, whatever that spot was, but it felt hollow, and the water did little to quench his thirst. His mother used to say it all the time: Boy, that sure hit the spot. She would spend summer afternoons in her garden, pulling a small hand hoe through the rows of carrots and beets. Sweat would drip onto the vegetables, and she’d wipe her face and leave streaks of dirt. Mills would watch from the yard, until he heard his father yell for him to get his mother a glass of lemonade. Mills’d race to the kitchen, fill the glass as close to the top as he could, and then stare at it as he tiptoed to the garden. His mother would stand barefoot in the grass, a bandana in her hair, and tilt her head back as she

drank. That sure hit the spot, she'd say. Mills would ask where the spot was, and she'd tell him that when he hit it, he'd know. He wasn't so sure anymore. She'd always told him that life could be whatever he wanted. That was no longer true; what he wanted was for her to be in their backyard on a chaise in her large brown sunglasses reading a book when they pulled in later that afternoon. He wanted her to tell him to come and sit for a minute before he showered, to ask about his day. He wanted more about how she met his dad, how she was attracted to his deep brown eyes and his charisma, the way he could ignite a crowd by telling an obscure tale about floating down the Nile on a wooden raft. In some way, he felt betrayed, like she had let him down. But he knew that wasn't really true – she hadn't chosen to die. It was a fluke, and he wanted a do-over, the way Nance would sometimes let him have four strikes when they played wiffle ball.

He turned to go check the mower and Nance walked into him.

“You are not going to fuck up my business, okay? That will not happen,” Nance said. His teeth were tight, his face red from more than sunburn. His eyes reflected the dull sun, and his pointed finger hovered an inch from Mills's face. Mills felt his back on the truck. “I'll fucking fire your ass. I am not kidding. Keep pulling this, keep messing with me. Without me, and this job, you'd have nothing. Nothing. This shit—” he pointed to the scalped grass and the mud-covered mower “is not helping. So figure it out.”

Nance stepped away and nodded, as if to confirm that what he'd said was correct, the right thing. He couldn't shake the image of his father puking into the kitchen sink. He hadn't told Mills and wasn't going to; their mother's death had scared the shit out of Nance, mostly because he knew its inevitable effect on his brother. Already Mills spent less time working and more time glassy-eyed and unaware. At work, Nance reminded

Mills about procedures – he could picture Mills losing a toe to a mower, or blowing up a gas can. Anytime they went home, Nance was afraid Mills might start asking their father how he *really* felt, what he thought about afterlife. Nance spent his mowing time trying to figure out what he and Mills were going to do. He had to find an answer, and he knew time was short. “Figure it out,” Nance said again, louder, as he turned around on his mower.

Mills’s head felt inflated, filled with humidity and words. *Fire. Nothing. Think.* It was like he was sick with a high fever, one that he wasn’t sure would ever go away. The truck’s metal pushed into Mills’s back, scraped against his shirt. He ran his hands through his hair and untangled the strands, pulled out little chunks of mud. Nance sped past, cut to within a foot of the ditch on the far side. Mills walked to the Scag and pulled on the cord. It fired up and when he pushed the blade lever, more mud and grass flew out. He cut the rest of the road-side of the ditch and guided the mower back onto the trailer.

As he hopped down, he looked at the scalped section of lawn. It was noticeable from the street, a few feet wide. He’d already replaced a large chunk and stamped it down with his boots. It was okay. Not good, but nothing he thought they’d lose the account over.

Mills leaned under the water jug and pushed the button. He filled his mouth and gulped, and when he couldn’t drink anymore, he let the water spill onto his face and hair. He breathed deep as the coldness washed over his eyes and forehead. The water slowed to a trickle and he kept his finger on the button. Finally, he let go, shook his head and hair, rubbed his hands on his jean shorts.

Their newest weed whacker had a self-feeding string mechanism. Trimmer line wore down as it repeatedly smacked fences, rocks, trees, and with the older numbers, Mills had to stop working, turn it off, and pull open the bottom casing to manually unwind more line. But now, Mills simply had to bounce it on the ground once and a few inches of string kicked out.

Mills eased the whacker effortlessly along – pieces of grass flew into the water, his legs, anywhere. What remained was order, each blade the same height. He hit a cattail and his arms bounced back slightly; the stalky plants offered resistance that grass couldn't. Mills held the trimmer to the cattail for a second or two; it usually took a few hacks. But it fell, toppled like a mini-tree. This one, like all of them, landed without effect, a small ripple in the water or a soft “poof” on the grass – Mills didn't watch.

The weed whacker looked like a thin aluminum barbell. A small two-cycle engine the size of a shoebox sat on top, and a plastic head like a hockey puck spun on the bottom. Near the engine, a trigger under a grip controlled the spin speed, and just below that, a basket-like hand-hold stuck out. Mills swept it along the fence, eased it around trees, kept it steady. His white socks were deep green from thousands of pieces of grass and his legs had small red bumps from little rocks and sticks the trimmer hurtled into him.

Large stones with designs carved into them (an elf, a harp, a stump) anchored the corners of the patio. Grass grew from underneath them, sprouted up at odd angles. Mills held the whacker in different positions trying to clip the grass. The plastic string buzzed as it continually connected with rock, and a couple foot-long blades somehow eluded the whip, danced in the small windstorm the whacker created. Mills's ankles itched, sweat

rolled into his eyes. He hunched his left shoulder and rubbed his face on it. The air was still and humid, and the sun found the place above the trees where it could shine straight down, unimpeded. Mills had emptied the water jug and had nothing to look forward to at the end of this job. An orange had rolled into a storm drain at their first account, and they still had four jobs left. Mills finally bent down and ripped the grass out by hand.

Mills continued to trim along the concrete, worked around another rock. The line had worn down, and he tapped the bottom of the trimmer on the patio for more. Nothing came out, and he tapped again. Still nothing. No line, no response. A brand new trimmer bought for its feature that already didn't work. Mills bounced it again, a little harder. Nothing.

A mosquito landed on his calf and dug in. Mills slapped at it and squashed it, leaving a nickel-sized circle of blood and broken insect tangled in his sweaty leg hair. He straightened and pulled the trigger tight; the spinning head whizzed through the air. Another mosquito poked into his forearm and he head-butted it dead. He held the trimmer like a baseball bat and raised it a few feet off the ground. He tapped it harder, and no string released. He lifted higher and slammed the head to the patio. A metal lawn chair shook slightly. He needed a little string. Mills put the trimmer up over his head and swung as hard as he could, driving the weed whacker into the concrete. The plastic head cracked. He slammed it again and several pieces of plastic spit across the patio. Mills took some shrapnel in the shin. He kept banging. The head splintered and pieces flew in every direction. The metal shaft bowed. Mills pounded the ground.

Nance shut off the Dixie and sprinted toward his brother, stopping a few feet away. He shielded himself from the pieces of plastic that continued to fly from the ground, in progressively smaller pieces. The sound was like stones hitting a steel fan.

A door opened at the back of the garage. Barry Nelson walked onto the patio. Car keys dangled from one hand, and with the other, he held a light brown briefcase. He noticed Mills holding the fully-throttled trimmer over his head. "Hey!" he yelled above the engine buzz. Nance hopped around a patio chair toward Mr. Nelson.

Mills gripped the trimmer like a sledge. It felt lighter. He swung it into the patio. The head dangled by a wire and the shaft was bent to shit. The engine quit. He spread his hands out on it, hoisted it high in the air.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Mr. Nelson yelled again. His face had turned the color of his pink oxford and a line of perspiration showed around his chest. "You can't do that here." He stepped toward Mills, but Nance stopped him.

"Let him go," Nance whispered into his ear.

Mills paused, stared through Nance and Mr. Nelson, and hurled the weed whacker into the ground. The plastic gas tank smashed open, and fuel splattered the patio. Nance turned away. It didn't ignite, but flowed slowly as the patio let it, down into a crack where it meandered toward a few small weeds.

"Look at this mess. My patio."

Nance gripped Mr. Nelson's arm, tight. "Not now, please."

"This is my house and I determine the rules."

Mills fell to the ground, right on the puddle of gas, and began crying. Fifteen feet away, Nance and Mr. Nelson stood eye to eye. Nance squeezed harder, waited until he

Mr. Nelson's face showed recognition. Only then did Nance slowly let go of his wrist and back away. He tiptoed like an intruder, and knelt next to his brother, who sobbed.

Mr. Nelson held his hands on the back of his head, locked his fingers together and rubbed his thinning, blond hair. He looked at his yard, the straight lines and deep green grass, tailored like a fine suit. He could smell gas, and looked at the boys sitting on his patio, heard Mills chortle.

Mills sucked for air, his chest heaved. He tried to stop his tears, to take control, to settle. He trembled, his body moving against his will. Nance leaned away, looked over at Mr. Nelson, who had walked to the edge of the patio. Mills felt air hit his shoulder where Nance had been, where the warmth had been, and moved with his brother, closed the gap so no cool breezes could get in. He shook his head.

"Sorry," Nance said.

Mills shook his head.

They rocked back and forth, in a pool of gasoline, and for a moment, their surroundings slipped away. All Mills could feel was the sweat of his brother, the heat. His eyes blurred with wetness and he sniffled.

"There's no fault," Mills said.

A church bell rang. It felt later than noon. Mills always tried to be done with the Nelsons before the bell.

Nance hugged Mills, touched his brother's back, felt sweat and a few pieces of grass. Nance imagined their mother, wished he could call her to explain this, to ask for pointers. He tried to mimic what she would do, and raised his hand to Mills's head, and held on. Nance knew what his brother needed but he wasn't sure he could provide it. He

had watched Mills grow up dreaming of different lives, noticed the connection he had with their mother, the way she always regarded him as her baby, told him he could be anything. In her absence, they were on their own, even their father, and in some small way, Nance figured things might just be easier when he finally passed, too.

Mills's soaked armpits reeked of onion-scented body odor. Nance helped him stand. They walked, arms over each other's shoulders, past Mr. Nelson toward the truck. Nance opened the passenger door for Mills.

"I'll be back in a second," he said. He jogged to the backyard, picked up the larger pieces of the trimmer and put them on the deck of his riding mower.

Mr. Nelson walked out the sliding screen door from the kitchen holding a dish towel. He wiped his forehead. "I hope you don't expect to get paid this week. I noticed the gouge by the ditch, and this behavior back here is just unbelievable."

"I understand that you might be upset," Nance said.

"Upset? I've never in my life experienced such lack of professionalism. Is Mills on some sort of drugs?"

Nance approached Mr. Nelson, stopped a few feet away. "I apologize. We'll take care of the grass out front. If you feel it's necessary to withhold payment this week, I understand. It's been a long couple of weeks."

"Damn right I'm not paying. And I expect that grass to be resodded by Tuesday when I'm hosting a dinner for some colleagues."

"A dinner?"

"Yes, and the place needs to be perfect. I've a good mind to terminate our contract and get someone else, someone who won't go crazy on the job."

“A fucking dinner?” Nance said. He tilted his head. He took a deep breath, tried to compose himself. “You’re worried about some stupid dinner?”

Mr. Nelson smiled. He puffed his chest slightly. “Are you insulting the customer?”

Nance looked around the yard. The mosquitoes were a pain in his ass, and he knew his brother hated how long and thick the grass always grew. Mills had complained of routinely cutting it twice a trip. They never charged for it, either, because they believed in making the extra effort. The money was good, but Nance knew that Mr. Nelson thought he was doing the brothers a favor by hiring them. Nance considered Turf Aid’s more profitable accounts. He couldn’t think straight, but he knew the Nelson account was one of their best.

“You don’t know what it’s like to host the president of a Fortune 500 company,” Mr. Nelson said. “So I’d mind your adjectives. Now clean up that spilled gas while I try to forget this episode.”

Nance knew that Mills did better with customers, especially the jackasses. He watched Mr. Nelson walk onto the wooden step just outside the kitchen.

“Fuck you and your bullshit lawn,” Nance said. “You know how many times we’ve double-cut this pain in my ass without charging you? Find someone else. They won’t do half as good a job.”

He hopped onto the Dixie, fired it up.

“Pardon me?” Mr. Nelson turned around and walked toward Nance.

“Yeah, pardon you,” Nance said. He pushed the throttle forward and drove the mower along the side of the house to the driveway. He wiped the hair from his forehead

and breathed deep, sucking in mower exhaust. He pulled the Dixie onto the trailer, then threw up the gate, which felt lighter than it ever had. His hands shook slightly as he flipped the clamp closed.

Mills leaned his head into his hands. Gas fumes filled the cab. When the Dixie hit the trailer, the truck rocked forward slightly, and for a moment, Mills thought he was on a boat. He imagined the ocean, or Lake Michigan. It would be nice to leave land, get out into the middle of an endless body of water. No roads, no directions. Just the same thing everywhere he looked. He closed his eyes. Maybe he was already there.

Nance got in and drove.

Mills kept his eyes closed. He imagined waves, a new rhythm, all-day floating. Light pushed at his eyes; he squeezed them shut even harder, and held onto his view of whitecaps and water.