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Rendezvous: Stories and a Novella

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Rendezvous: Stories and a Novella

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Heath Fisher

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ABSTRACT

People are often a product of their environment, and each of the characters in this collection is an example of that shaping effect. These stories take you to the southern plains—land of red dirt, Bluestem, and prairie wind. Themes like hope, loss, and the exploration of frontier appear throughout the collection. In each story the setting becomes a character, forcing us to recognize the importance of place in our lives.

KEYWORDS: Oklahoma, Highway Sixty-six, Southern Plains, Rendezvous, Stories

Highway Sixty-six Revisited

The bus accelerated down the long stretch of Highway 66 until it appeared as only a dot on the horizon, leaving Roland standing in front of the *Panhandle Diner*. A gust of southern plains wind pushed a cloud of gravel dust across the parking lot. He closed his eyes and relished the freedom of the open air, how it warmed his skin, the chalky taste on his lips. His clothes were old but they felt new. The snakeskin boots, blue jeans, and gray t-shirt were the same he wore the day he went to jail, four years earlier. There was a small hole at the right knee from where the Dewey County deputy had wrestled him to the ground after pulling him over in the brand new nineteen eighty-five Cadillac Eldorado he took off the lot.

Looking at the diner, he realized he was hungry. He hadn't eaten all day and he'd been going on thirty hours without sleep. Nobody sleeps the first or last night in jail. He started walking toward the diner but stopped when he noticed a phone booth off to the right, next to a barbed wire fence. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his final wages from working in the wood shop, sifting through what was left after the bus pass and two Cokes. Thirty dollars and change. He went into the booth and used a quarter to place a call, holding his breath as he punched the numbers, hoping they were still the right ones. He leaned against the glass and stared out beyond the fence, into the flatland typical of western Oklahoma, where a herd of longhorn cattle were grazing on the open plain. The line rang several times. He could feel the evening sun on his neck, warming the shirt against his back. A few yards away a large red-tailed hawk alighted on a weathered fence post and began preening its feathers with its sharp beak. It was the first bird he'd seen up close in years. He stood very still, not wanting to startle it. A chill ran down his back when the hawk finally spreads its wings and lifted into the air and out of sight.

The line rang twice more and then he heard a click.

“Hello?”

He cleared his throat and realized he hadn't thought about what he wanted to say.

“Hey, Jane. It's me, Roland,” he tried.

The receiver felt slick in his palm. He switched hands. The line stayed quiet.

“You there?”

“What are you calling here for?” she said.

“I'm out. Just two hours ago.”

“Congratulations.”

“Yeah. Well I was thinking maybe I'd come by. Actually you'll have to come pick me up. I'm over here at the diner near—”

“I don't care where you are.”

He switched hands again. An eighteen-wheeler roared past. He waited until the diesel growl faded down the highway.

“How's Buddy doing?”

“Buddy's fine.”

“That's good. Is he there? I'd like to talk to him.”

“I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I don't want to confuse him.”

“Confuse him about what?”

“Don't start, Roland.”

“What am I starting? I just want to talk to my little boy.”

She sighed into the phone. He could picture the face she was making, though it had been a long time since he'd seen it.

“He’s not really that little anymore, you know.”

“Well no, Jane. How would I know that? I haven’t seen him in four years.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“You could’ve brought him up to see me. I called and wrote.”

“I saw.”

“Well why didn’t you respond? You didn’t even visit.”

“I wasn’t about to show Buddy who his father turned out to be. Not then, not now.”

“What do you want me to say? I’m sorry. You know that, Jane. Please just let me talk to him for a second.”

“I don’t want you calling here again.”

She hung up before he could respond. The dial tone hummed in his ear.

A bell hanging on a leather strap dinged as Roland entered the diner. The waitress popped up from behind the counter and said she’d be right with him. It was a skinny place with a checkerboard floor. Black iron lamps were anchored above the windows at each booth, casting a warm glow against the wall. An elderly couple sat in a booth close to the door. A middle-aged man in overalls leaned on his elbows at the counter. Roland took a seat in a booth three quarters of the way down. The waitress walked over and dropped a menu on the table.

“You want coffee?” she asked, holding the pot over his cup.

“Please.”

She filled his cup, and as she started to leave he glanced up and they made eye contact.

“Oh my gosh,” she said, covering her mouth. “Roland? Is that you?”

He grinned and looked down at his coffee. “It’s good to see you, Kara” he said. “Been a long time.”

Sliding into the booth across from him, she leaned forward and whispered, “I heard you were in jail.”

“I was. Just got out.”

“Well,” she said, patting the table. “I bet you’re dying for a good meal. You just wait here. I’ll take care of you.”

After she disappeared into the kitchen Roland glanced out at the parking lot. The fading light outside brought the diner’s interior into focus. He saw his reflection. Without mirrors in jail, he’d learned to rely on glossy surfaces, like the back of a meal tray, or polished metal on the doorframes. After the first month he’d stopped looking. He rubbed the day’s worth of stubble on his face and ran a hand through hair that had grown long since the days before he went in. He turned back to his coffee and stared across at the empty booth.

Kara returned balancing three white plates, setting down in front of him bacon and eggs, a stack of pancakes, and two buttermilk biscuits.

“There,” she said, wiping her hands on her yellow apron. “That ought to get you started.”

He smiled up at her. “This looks great, Kara.” He looked down at the food and shook his head. “I don’t have a lot of money.”

“Don’t worry about it. The owner loves me. I can give food to a friend if I want to.”

“Can you join me?”

She glanced back at the old couple in the booth and the man at the counter. “One second.” She walked over and refilled their coffee, then hurried back and slid in across from him. Roland started eating, moving from plate to plate, not even bothering to put down the fork when

reaching for a napkin or coffee. She watched him until all three plates were empty. He looked up and caught her staring. She looked down at her lap and started picking at her apron. After a minute she looked up and leaned forward.

“Can I ask you something? Why’d you take off in that car?” She spoke in a soft tone that Roland found soothing. “Was it about money?”

He took a minute before answering, moving his attention to different items on the table.

“Sort of.”

She nodded her head like that was good enough for now. “I remember you in high school. I know we didn’t really know each other, but you had a reputation.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Come on. You know you did.”

“Well tell me,” he said, grinning. “What was my reputation?”

“You were kind of wild.”

“Is that what you thought?”

“I guess. You didn’t seem like someone who’d get pinned down.”

“The horse that can’t be broken, is that it?”

“Well that’s what I always thought. But then—” her voice trailed off.

“But then Jane.”

“Right.” She was looking at her hands. “I see her from time to time, you know. Is she waiting for you?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said, spinning the coffee cup in a slow circle with his finger. Reaching over with the coffee pot in one hand, she placed her other hand on his wrist to steady the cup. She lingered there a moment after she’d finished.

“What about you?” he said, when she leaned back. “What’s your story?”

“It’s not very exciting.”

“Any husband or kids?”

She shook her head. “Mom passed last year. Dad went a few years before. Both got cancer. I spent the last several years looking after them. I thought about college, but Dad left me his Airstream and now I want to travel. Go west for a while.”

“What’s keeping you?”

“Truck needs a few repairs before it’s ready for the road. Tips are slow. It’s taking me longer than I thought.”

“Well I don’t have much on me, but I’ll tip you what I can,” he said, winking.

She looked away and smiled. “You got any plans later? You probably want to see your boy, huh?”

“I’d like to. But I don’t think that’s an option yet.”

“Well if you need someone to talk to, I’m around,” she said, scooting out of the booth.

“I’d better get back to work.”

“You want to get a drink or something when you’re done?” Roland said. “We can finish catching up.”

She gathered the plates, stacking them in one hand and looked down at him.

“All right. Meet me out front in an hour.”

“Where we going?”

“My trailer’s just down the street. It’s the only place around here I know where the beer’s free, especially since you’re not going to be able to buy me one after you leave that tip.” She smiled and then headed off toward the kitchen. He took out his money and laid down a ten-dollar

bill and stuffed the twenty back in his pocket.

The gravel shifted under his boots, crunching with each step. He walked with his head tilted back, staring up at the night sky. He always thought the stars above the panhandle were brighter than anywhere he'd been. It was a nice change from the four years he'd spent staring at a concrete ceiling covered in plastic glow-in-the-dark stars he'd got by bribing a prison guard. Some guys wanted smokes or magazines. He wanted stars.

Dropping in the last of his change, he called his old cellmate Monty, like they'd discussed when Monty was released the year before. They caught up and then Monty filled him in on the plans he had for Roland once he made his way down to Texas, where Monty's body shop was located. Roland told him about his parole restrictions—how he couldn't leave the state. Monty said his parole officer wouldn't have to know. Roland wouldn't be gone for more than a couple days at a time. Monty needed him to bring him some cars. He'd gotten a list ready. "That's how I got popped," Roland said. Monty told him that's why he was perfect for the job. He'd be extra careful this time around. "It'd be quick, easy money," Monty said. "Big risk. Big pay." Roland said he'd think about it. Monty told him to hurry because other guys could be found.

Roland hung up the phone and stood in the parking lot, staring back up at the stars. They reminded him of one of the last nights he'd spent with Buddy. They had been heading home from the grocery store with a gallon of ice cream and a carton of cigarettes. At the last stoplight in town they pulled up behind an old El Camino and a beat up Chevy truck. The drivers were talking to each other and revving their engines while they waited for the green light. "See how they're swaying like that?" Roland said, nodding toward the vehicles. "It's the torque reaction created by the motor." Buddy looked up at him with big curious eyes and then out at the cars, his

three-year-old mind trying to process this. “Neither of them have any real muscle, but just about anything with an engine will sway if you rev it hard enough,” Roland added. “It’s part of the rush.” The light turned green and both vehicles peeled out, sending black smoke back at Roland and Buddy. The wheels made a high-pitched squeal on the pavement and Buddy grabbed his ears, frightened. But as they gained distance and the engine roar quieted, Buddy leaned forward in his seat and uncovered his ears. “Zoom,” he said, watching them disappear over a hill. “Zoom is right,” Roland said, smiling as he slowly accelerated through the intersection.

He drove the longer route home, hoping to point out constellations by taking highway sixty-six where it bisected miles of patchwork farmland on the outskirts of town. They were out beyond the reach of the town’s glow, with only a waning moon and starlight to lead the way, should the headlamps have failed. Roland parked on the shoulder of the road, near a wall of green cornstalks. They lay down in the bed of the truck. Staring up, Roland started pointing out what he hoped were the right ones.

“See there? That’s the snake,” Roland said. “Serpens something. I don’t remember all the Latin words.”

“I see it,” Buddy said, nodding his head, lying back on his arms.

“And that one’s Orion. He’s a hunter.”

“Ooh.”

Roland continued pointing out constellations—Ursa Minor, Gemini, Canis Minor—all of it he’d retained from a childhood fascination. When he got stuck, or couldn’t find what he was looking for, he made it up, using fierce animals like The Wolf and The Jackal and The Wolverine. He even tried to connect the dots on the outline of a ’67 Barracuda. After a few minutes he looked over and saw Buddy had fallen asleep, his head still resting on his arms.

Roland carried him around and buckled him in and drove slow the whole way home, making sure Buddy's head never bumped too hard against the window.

Sitting on the steps of the diner, Roland thought about Monty's offer. He knew what it would mean if he was caught, but the prospect of being able to set himself up with a place of his own and a new vehicle was something he couldn't ignore. It would take forever before he had his feet on the ground if he ended up working the night shift at Wal-Mart. He'd already spent too much time without Buddy. The best thing was whatever got Buddy back in his life.

Kara and Roland walked in the finely ground dirt on the shoulder of the highway, between the road and where clumps of Indian grass grew. She walked a step or two in front of him, with both hands tucked in her pockets. He followed quietly, enjoying the breeze and the white-noise songs of cicadas coming from somewhere in the dark. When they were a quarter of a mile away he saw the faint outline of several trailers off to the left. The sign at the entrance of the trailer park had *Whispering Plains* scrawled in white cursive over a picture of rolling hills. As Roland neared it he realized the sign wasn't as picturesque as the actual land around the trailer park. She led him down a narrow road, past creamy white single-wides and faded tan double-wides lining both sides, to the back of the park.

Her Airstream was silver and reflected the moonlight. There was a blue and gray early-eighties Silverado pick-up parked in front. He followed her in, nudging away the satellite dish cable hanging across the doorway.

The trailer was long. Inside it smelled like coffee and wildflowers. There were several plastic vases around the room. She cranked the handles on two of the windows and immediately a light breeze drifted through the trailer, gently waving the curtains.

“Sorry it isn’t neater in here. Wasn’t expecting company.” She gave a crooked half-smile, keeping her lips closed. But the room wasn’t really dirty, he noticed, looking around.

She pulled out a small roll of bills from her pocket and dumped it on the kitchen counter in front of the microwave. The change rattled to a stop. Roland watched the bills unfurl on the laminate surface.

“Beer’s in the ice-box,” she said, pointing down as she passed it, heading for the bathroom.

He took a beer and then stepped around the room, looking at her things. He saw a framed picture of her in front of the Grand Canyon. Standing next to her was a gray-haired man with his arm around her. She was younger there. Big smile, teeth full of braces. A row of tattered paperbacks stood on the window ledge curving along the rear of the trailer. On top of the books was an unfolded map with a section of Colorado hanging open. The bed was the couch, pulled out. The cushions were stacked on the floor by the door. The sheets spread over the bed were worn and white, covered with tiny embroidered flower bouquets. He looked around at the wildflowers in the vases—yellow Bitterweeds and purple Blue-eyed Grasses, something he remembered from Boy Scouts—then back at the tiny bouquets on the sheets. It made him smile. He sat down on the edge of the bed and sipped his beer while waiting.

Seeing the picture of Kara and the man he assumed was her dad made Roland think of his own father. He remembered standing at the sink washing two-stroke motor oil from his hands on the day his mother answered the door and invited the police inside. He was ten. Turning off the faucet, he overheard them tell his mother his father had been killed in an accident during a police chase. He had refused to pull over for speeding, they’d said. Roland could recall the moment vividly: leaning against the counter with his hands over the sink, unable to move, water slowly

dripping from his fingertips. His father had just begun teaching him about cars, having taken him into the body shop to show off how he and a few other guys stripped stolen hot-rods and luxury sedans. “The only real freedom is out there,” his father had said, pointing at nothing, meaning The Road. Roland never asked his father why he didn’t just work as an honest mechanic, but as he got older and reflected on what he had known of the man, he began to realize his father was happiest when pushing it, whether that meant the law, or the tach on a ’64 GTO. And if he hadn’t loved his mother when she forbid him to work in the same shop when he was sixteen, he might’ve went out like his old man: encased in metal, wrapped around a tree, adrenalized howl still faint in the air.

Kara stepped out of the bathroom wearing green shorts and a gray tank top.

“You look comfortable,” he said.

“So do you.” She grabbed a beer from the fridge and leaned against the counter, taking a long drink. They stared at each other.

“So,” he said, as she started toward him.

At first he worried about the sounds they were making—whether the neighbors could hear. But his concern quickly dissolved. The trailer gently rocked. A Clancy novel tipped over. Curtains swayed. He focused on baseball, trying to name every team in the American League. He clenched his biceps, a trick he’d used in high school. But baseball wasn’t working. He thought: This alone is worth never going back to prison. He increased his focus, hoping to stave off what was coming. But it was no use. And what a beautiful kind of failure, he thought later, as she ran her fingers through his hair and kissed the sweat on his forehead.

She rested her head on his bare chest and neither spoke for some time. He listened to her breathing.

“What are you going to do now that you’re out?” she finally asked.

“I’ve got to get my shit together. I want Buddy to know his father will be around.”

Somewhere down the road a car door slammed and an engine screeched to life. Neither spoke for several minutes. Roland lay there in the dark, listening to the sounds carried in on the wind: the muffled voices from a television nearby, a dog barking, crickets chirping. When the breeze died down it got quiet. He could hear her breathing steadily and wondered if she’d fallen asleep. And just like so many quiet nights in his cell, his mind wandered back.

Lazy Darrell had stepped through the automotive store’s back door to find Roland balanced at the top of a ladder, holding a stack of new spark plugs and reaching for the highest shelf.

“You look like your Dad did when he was your age,” Lazy Darrell said, calling up to the young man. “Same dark hair, same pointy nose.”

Roland started climbing down.

“What are you doing here?” Roland said, stepping off the ladder.

“Know who I am?”

“You worked with my dad.”

“That’s right. I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“What kind of proposition?”

“A job offer.”

“I got a job.”

“I can see that. What is it, five bucks an hour?”

“I get seven. And a Christmas bonus.”

“Good for you. How’d you like to make a lot more than that?”

Roland smirked, then grabbed the ladder and moved it down the aisle a few feet.

“And let me guess. The only catch is, it’s illegal,” Roland said, picking up another stack of spark plugs.

“Two thousand dollars for one day’s work.”

Roland stopped halfway up the ladder and looked at him.

“You got a kid now, right?” Lazy Darrell said.

“Yeah.”

“And if I’m not mistaken, you’ve been known to take joy rides in other people’s cars from time to time.”

“There’s no proof of that. I’ve never been arrested.”

“That just proves my point. You’re good at it. You’ve never been caught. And I’m sure you could use the money for your family. Way I see it, if you’re anything like your daddy, you can handle the wheel.” Lazy Darrell pulled a toothpick out of his pocket and began picking at his teeth. “At least he *could* handle the wheel.”

Roland stayed perched on the ladder, looking down at the floor.

“Look, you ain’t got to kill nobody, nothing like that. Just take a car somewhere. I’ll tell you more if you’re in.” Lazy Darrell took out the toothpick and looked at it. “Yes or no?”

After a few seconds Roland nodded. Lazy Darrell turned and started walking.

“They call you Lazy Darrell, right?”

He stopped at the door and half-turned. Still picking at his teeth, he nodded.

“Why?” Roland said.

“I guess it’s because I work real hard,” he said, and walked out the door.

Roland was trying to decide whether or not he should leave, when Kara sat up and turned on the light and looked at him.

“You know I’ve got a friend who owes me a favor. Comes in to the diner and I hook him up sometimes with a free lunch. He does landscaping work. Roofing. Outside stuff. Probably wouldn’t pay much, but I bet I could get him to take you on. If he needs an extra hand, that is. Which he usually does.”

“Why would you do that?”

She just smiled and said, “No sense in letting a perfectly good favor go to waste, right?” She turned off the light and settled back under the sheet.

“That your old man in the picture?” he said, after a minute. “The one in front of the Grand Canyon.”

“Yeah. I was thirteen there. It was the last family vacation we ever took.”

“What was he like?”

Putting her head back on his chest and running a finger along a patch of hair, she waited a few seconds before answering. “He was a good man. Unbending, and not very apologetic, but a good father.”

“Unbending how?”

She sat up on her elbow and looked out the window.

“I loved animals when I was a kid,” she said. “Dogs, cats, birds, raccoons—didn’t matter. Loved them all. And I’d bring them home any chance I got.”

“You brought raccoons home?”

“Well, no. Mostly just cats and dogs that wandered onto our property. They were almost always neglected somehow. Starved. Mangy. Beaten and man-shy. I was always begging Daddy to let me keep them. I didn’t have any siblings and those animals were my best friends.”

“So he let you keep them?”

“For a while,” she said, lying back. “Every stray I brought in, he’d let me nurse back to health. Even helped me sometimes, warming up a saucer of milk, making a bed out of blankets near the fire. He didn’t care for them like I did, but he could see I loved them, so he tolerated it. If it’d been up to me, I’d have had a yard full of best friends.”

Roland chuckled and rolled over to where he was facing her.

“But Daddy was always real clear about it. Get them back on their feet, Kara, and put up signs to find them a home. If they aren’t gone in a week they’re going to the pound.”

Roland watched her in the soft blue light that filled the trailer from the streetlight outside.

“Each time, I knew the rule,” she continued. “But it never got easier.”

“How many did you have to take to the pound?”

“Don’t have any idea. But I only found homes for three. I kept one dog. It was the first one I ever brought home. He made it until last year.”

“What was his name?”

“Roscoe the grateful.”

“Roscoe the grateful?”

She laughed and nodded. “He was a Chocolate Lab that used to curl up on my lap whenever I was busy doing something. He’d just get in the way and love me. He was a happy old thing.”

“Roscoe the grateful,” Roland repeated, lying back on his arms.

They both stayed quiet for a while. Roland watched the curtains swing in on a breeze and then fall back against the window screen.

“I know it’d be hard work,” she said. “Working for my friend. But it’s a fresh start, at least.”

He nodded in the dark. After a few minutes he could tell she was asleep.

He imagined himself on a roof in summer, bent over shingles, under the glare of the sun. Some rich person’s big yard with healthy grass and bushes that need trimming. Limb cutting, bricklaying, digging, planting—all backbreaking work. He pictured a new truck and a nice apartment, maybe a house. A place he could bring Buddy. But how long would he have to work for those things? He recalled his high school years. Those late nights Lazy Darrell had referred to, when Roland would go out and scout hot-rods, looking for the easy boost. The adrenaline rush of getting past the lock, rolling her away in neutral, crossing the right wires to feel her come to life. Torching dark country roads with the windows down, dodging armadillos and potholes. Leaving her on some forgotten back road for the cops to find. But never violated. Never a scratch. Always like he found them. It hadn’t been about stealing. It was about the ride. He could get paid for that now. Monty said good money. It wouldn’t have to be forever. Just long enough to get on his feet. He’d be all right after that.

He woke early, as the sun was just breaking the horizon, before it streamed through the windows. He dressed quickly, watching to see if she’d stir. As he was leaving he saw the money on the counter and picked it up. He rubbed the bills in his fingers. There was more than a hundred there, probably a week’s worth of tips. He could use it. The twenty he had wouldn’t get him far. He put the bills back down and took a quarter instead and slipped out, careful to shut the door gently.

He took a shortcut through the field toward the highway. The grass was wet with dew, rising halfway up his shin. By the time he reached the road his boots were shiny and the legs of his jeans were a deeper blue. The wet cloth stuck to his skin as he walked along the shoulder. The finely ground dirt bonded to the edges of his boots and dried into mud. Three cars sat in the diner parking lot. One was at the front, probably a customer's. Two were at the side of the building. He figured they belonged to the cook and morning waitress. He walked toward the phone booth but looked across the road, keeping his face turned away from the diner. He stepped inside and dialed the number he'd tried the day before. The line rang four times before someone picked up.

"Hello?" It was a young voice, one he'd never heard. Different than before. Roland's heart almost seized. He didn't know what the face looked like on the other end. His eyes became watery and his throat ached.

"Hello?" came the small voice again.

"Hey, Buddy, it's me. It's your dad."

There was a quiet shuffling, the sound of a television.

"You still there, chief?"

"Uh huh."

"How are you? What are you doing?"

"Watching cartoons."

"Is your Mom in there with you?"

"No. She's still sleeping. Want me to go get her?"

"No, no. I want to talk to you."

"You want to talk to me?"

“Yeah, of course. I’ve missed you, Buddy. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Well I do.”

Another silence.

“Do you remember me?” Roland said.

“Kind of.”

“You were pretty young the last time I saw you. But I sure remember you.”

“You do?”

Roland leaned back against the booth, resting his head against the glass. The cartoons got louder for a moment then quieted back down.

“Listen, Buddy. I want to tell you something, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I want you to know I’m sorry I haven’t been around. But I’m going to try real hard to make up for that. I’m going to come see you soon.”

“When?”

“I’ve got to talk to your mom about that. But soon. Don’t worry.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Can I go now? I want to watch cartoons.”

“Sure big guy. Hey, I love you. You know that, right?”

What came across the line in return was a hollow thud. For several minutes he stood there leaning against the side of the booth, listening to the sound of cartoons drift into the mouthpiece at the other end of the line, probably on the counter, forgotten. At one point he thought he heard Buddy laughing and he strained to listen, but he couldn’t be sure. Then he heard Jane’s voice

saying something about breakfast just before the line went dead. For a moment Roland could hear only the sound of the wind, then the dial tone came on and he gently hung up the receiver. He felt like a relic from a different time, a trophy packed away in a box in the basement. It had been naïve to imagine he could stroll back into their lives, he realized. But that was what kept him alive through the years. Without that hope he might not have made it through prison. Now he was out, but with nothing to show for it.

He walked over to one of the cars on the side of the diner, keeping his face turned away like before. He knew neither car was worth a damn. Marty hadn't told him what sort of cars he wanted, so anything he took was just to get out of there. Amarillo was only an hour and a half away. He could dump it after that.

Picking up a baseball-sized stone from the edge of the parking lot, he made his way to a silver Taurus. He stepped up to the driver's side door. He spun the rock in his hand, feeling the weight of it on his fingers. His reflection was clearly visible in the window. He looked as rough as he felt, and he was still wearing the same thing as when he last saw Buddy. But now his jeans were wet and his boots were muddy and his shirt was wrinkled and he didn't really have any money and he still hadn't slept much. He had the urge to hurl the rock through the window just to get rid of the reflection. He lifted the rock, and as he angled his body so the glass wouldn't shatter against him, he saw Kara pulling into the parking lot behind him. He turned to her as she pulled the truck up behind the Taurus, her elbow out the window. She gave him a knowing look and then nodded him over. He tossed the rock away and walked toward the truck.

“Decide to go for a walk?” she said, looking him in the eye.

“Something like that.” He scuffed the toe of his boot into the gravel and looked out over the parking lot.

“Come on. Get in. Let’s go see about that job.”

Roland looked down at his feet. After a moment he let out a big sigh and then looked up at her and nodded. He rapped on her door with his knuckles and then walked slowly around the front and got in. She pulled onto the highway and the truck quickly picked up speed. Warm morning air whipped in through the cab, ruffling his t-shirt. He stuck his arm out the window, letting it hang in the wind. He stared down the long stretch of empty highway ahead. He settled down in the seat and closed his eyes. The droning sound the tires made on the pavement settled him, lulling him into a peaceful state he hoped would last for a while.

Land Rush

Clara, Maggie, and Henry sat around a campfire in a grove along the Walnut River, near Arkansas City, Kansas. The campfire was one of a dozen strewn along the riverbank, each surrounded mostly by men. Some were farmers, rail hands, cowboys. All were looking to stake a claim at noon the following day, when Oklahoma Territory opened to white settlement. Base camps of the sort had popped up along the boundaries north, south, east, and west, where thousands of home-seekers looked to start anew. It was late April. The night air held a chill. Clara leaned into the heat, sitting on a tree stump with one arm wrapped around the waist of her twelve-year-old daughter, Maggie, who stood warming her palms.

“Keep your pistol,” Clara said. “I can handle myself without it. Been doing it six years now.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Henry said, holstering the Colt. “But talk is, there’s folks gone across the line early, hiding out in forests, looking to get a jump on the better claims. You’d best be on guard.”

Clara considered this without responding. After a moment, Henry continued with the next day’s plan.

“I hope to not be far behind. Maybe half a day,” Henry said, as he poked at the burning logs with a tree branch. “I should have the wagon there by dusk.”

Henry was the uncle of Clara’s late husband, Jacob. He had a horseshoe of ash-colored hair and a bald spot that was glossy in the firelight. Clara was glad he’d written her, inviting them down for the run. As head of her household, she was allowed to stake up to one hundred sixty acres, more than what her parent’s had left her, bigger than anything she could hope for on

teacher's pay back in Missouri. They'd agreed to split a claim and work it together. In this way, Henry was seeing to it that his dead nephew's family was taken care of, which Clara knew Jacob would have expected of kin. She was also glad for Maggie to know her great-uncle, her only other remaining family.

"By the time I arrive," Henry continued, "you'll have staked the lot and should be ready to file at the land office come morning."

"And this new horse of yours can hold a gallop the whole way?" Clara said. "Even with Maggie at my back?"

Henry stopped poking at the fire and frowned. "You sure you don't want to leave her with me in the wagon? Probably safer for the child."

"Me and Maggie stick together, don't we, June bug?" Clara looked up at her mute daughter who nodded in return. "I'm all she's got and she's all I've got," Clara continued. "I ain't leaving her."

Henry nodded. "And she ain't talked since Jacob?"

Maggie was staring at him. It was not an unkind look, but hard for a young girl.

"That's right," Clara said, and squeezed her daughter with the one arm already wrapped around her waist. Maggie gave a small grin.

"Well that mare ought to get you there quick enough," Henry said. "Man in Dodge City said she was as fast as he'd seen. I figure getting there first is about our only hope for that lot I scouted. I guess you know there ain't many men going to let you stand long on a piece of land they want. Even pretty as you are. You'd do well to remember that."

"We'll manage," Clara said, sweeping back strands of hair loosed from her braid. It was dark hair, the color of wet soil. She kept it braided back like a young Indian woman she'd seen as

a child, a woman whose beauty she'd never forgotten. Her own skin tended to darken in the sun, and on several occasions throughout her life she'd been mistaken for a native. Having seen plenty of sun that spring, hair braided to her waist, she'd drawn stares from men upon arriving at camp two days previous.

"You're kind to worry, Henry," she added. "But we've done alright this long. We can handle a few more days without a man's protection. Ain't that right Maggie?"

Maggie nodded. She was snapping twigs and tossing them into the flame one stick at a time.

"All the same. Be on the lookout. If this old stump was my only ailment," he said, and swung the branch down against his right pants leg, producing a muted thud, "I'd be riding out to make the claim myself. But the doc in Wichita said my back ain't getting better until it gets operated on. The wagon jars me up and down bad enough. There just ain't no way I can handle a gallop."

"That and you only got one fast horse," Clara said.

Henry nodded, looking into the fire. "Truth be told, I sort of feel like I'm letting down Jacob's memory, allowing you two to ride without me."

"Don't you worry about that," Clara said, combing her fingers through Maggie's chestnut hair. "You're doing more than right by us."

Most of the campfires were down to glowing embers and Clara was still awake, listening to Maggie snore softly beside her. She was thinking about the race, how Maggie and Henry were depending on her. She'd made a habit of holding a brave face for her daughter, having no choice

since Jacob took ill and passed when the girl was only six. But there were times when she felt the mask cracking.

She was twenty-seven and had been living in her hometown of Independence, Missouri the last six years, working as a school teacher. She'd brought Maggie back there after Jacob's funeral, and had taken care of her ailing mother until she'd passed, two month's prior to receiving Henry's letter.

It wasn't until they'd arrived at camp two days ago, seeing all of the tents and wagons and horses, that Clara fully realized she was leaving her old life and starting over. It felt right, and she allowed herself to be excited.

But the warm feelings only lasted a day. That morning she'd been accosted by a man in the camp, a vulgar cowboy whose name she didn't care to know. He'd approached her as she rested in the shade by the river, inquiring on the whereabouts of her husband. He towered over her as she leaned back on her elbows, sunlight obscuring her vision. Despite the harsh glare, she could see he had a flat-brim hat and wore a red kerchief knotted around his neck. His cream-colored long-sleeved shirt hung loose, flapping in the breeze around his arms and torso. The only thing she could not see was his face, hidden in the shadow of the hat's brim. Having not responded, he asked her again about having a man. When she curtly dismissed him he became offended and made crude gestures with his grimy hands, thrusting his hips at her. She'd remained there, defiant, until he spat a brown glob of chew near her feet and stomped away. Once he was out of sight though, her hands began trembling and it took half an hour to still them. She hadn't bothered mentioning the incident to Henry, fearing he'd recognize it as his duty to confront the cowboy. Bearing a wooden leg, bad back, and being twice the cowboy's age, she suspected it would cost Henry his life to defend her honor.

Clara stepped from the tent and surveyed the quiet camp. A thicket where she could relieve herself in privacy stood a few minutes walk from the edge of the grove. After pondering whether to wait until morning, she gathered up her navy blue skirt and hurried through camp. The ground was damp from an afternoon shower, soft and cold beneath her bare feet. A gentle breeze brought the river's earthy smell and whispered the leaves overhead. She ignored her trepidation about the darkness, making a point to enjoy the crisp spring air all the way to the thicket.

Afterward, as she was straightening her skirt, checking that she had steered clear of the fabric, the wind shifted and brought with it a sour whiff of dried sweat and body odor. She closed her mouth and breathed deeply through her nose, making certain it wasn't in her mind. But the odor was there, sharper this time, so acrid it settled near the back of her tongue. She stood up and glanced around. From somewhere nearby in the darkness came the faint jangle of a spur. She turned a slow circle, searching for its origin, but the half-moon's pale light couldn't penetrate the tree cover and she saw no more than a few feet in any direction except back toward the soft outline of tents. "Somebody there?" she called. No one answered. The breeze died and she held her breath, straining to hear. Another metallic jangle rang out, this time directly in front and very near. She took one step back and the sound came again, accompanied by the unmistakable crunch of leaves underfoot. She turned, not bothering to gather up her dress, and ran around the thicket back toward camp, keeping her arms outstretched for hidden limbs. The jangling became steady and rapid, accompanied by heavy boot steps on the forest ground. Her foot landed on a sharp branch that stabbed through her skin but she didn't stop. The sound was nearly at her heels. She thought of turning to look but couldn't. Darting through camp she weaved around the fires, careful not to trip on tie-down ropes, not stopping until she made it all the way to her tent. By the

time she turned around the jangling had quieted. No one was there. She scanned the darkness beyond camp. Hearing only Maggie's sweet muffled snoring, she decided to take Henry up on his offer of the pistol.

Clara cantered the mare toward the sea of gathered home-seekers. Maggie sat on the back edge of the saddle with her arms loosely wrapped around her mother's stomach. Henry was behind them, steering the wagon toward an area where other wagons were grouped behind a wide spread of single-rider horses. The portion of the starting line they approached ran across a slight valley and rose gradually to the east and west. The line stretched as far as they could see, disappearing over the horizon in both directions. The back of the crowd had no definite line, just a corral of nervous people packed tightly together, jostling for position. The front, however, was straight and rigid. A clean wall of horses, wagons, bicycles, and even a few hundred men on foot, all facing south, toward soldiers standing fifty yards out, leaning easy on their rifles. The soldiers were there to ensure no one rushed the gun. There beneath an unrelenting sun, on a vast stretch of shade-less plain, soldiers and land-searchers alike counted down to noon in their heads or with pocket-watches, waiting for the sound wave of rifle fire that would roll westward in response to the starting cannon in the east.

Clara slowed the mare to an easy walk, navigating around small islands of congregated people and horses.

"We need a lucky spot, June bug," Clara said. "Where you figure is the best place to start the race?"

Maggie shrugged her shoulders, not seeming to care.

“Maybe we ought to find us a rabbit’s foot,” Clara said, looking over her shoulder and smiling at her daughter. But Maggie only gave the same uninterested shrug and kept looking out at the sea of people.

Clara had learned to read her daughter over the years, a necessity since the girl was unable to speak. Whether her muteness was something she’d been stricken with, or simply adopted, Clara didn’t know. But in her daughter’s six years of silence, she had become adept at reading the girl’s moods from simple body language. Maggie often scowled unnecessarily at most everything whenever she was hungry. If she didn’t feel well, she would cross her hands over her stomach, sit down and lean against a wall with her head tilted back, regardless of where they were. Some of the behavior was easily interpretable, but there were times Clara was left to guess at the emotions inside her daughter. On more than one occasion this had led to yelling, with Clara accusing her daughter of selfish behavior and plain cold-heartedness. These episodes were always followed by Clara crying, while Maggie stood resolute, arms crossed and lips pursed.

However, in the last year both had undergone something of a shift, a softening to each other’s pain. It seemed to Clara that Maggie lately did her best to illustrate for her mother what she wanted, or was feeling, whenever the occasion arose. And for Clara’s part, to soften her frustration over Maggie’s silence, every day she reminded herself that just as her love for Jacob had been different than Maggie’s, so too was her grief.

Clara gently pulled the reins, stopping the horse. She turned her body as far as she could in the saddle, putting one arm on Maggie’s dangling leg.

“Something’s bothering you, June bug. What is it?”

Maggie didn't bother shaking her head to disagree. Instead, she held her mother's gaze for several seconds, unblinking. Clara didn't register anger in the girl's eyes, but there was something there. Worry, perhaps?

"Is it about the race? Are you scared about the race?" she said, searching for confirmation in the girl's expression.

Since she'd received the letter from Henry, she'd thought many times about their arrangement and whether it might become too complicated, for her or Maggie.

"It's something about Henry, isn't it?" Clara said, going with her instinct.

There was the slightest reaction, a change in Maggie's eyes.

"Henry is your great uncle. You don't like him?"

Maggie shook her head quickly, then nodded up and down, as if to say that wasn't exactly it.

"You don't want to live with him?"

This time Maggie shrugged her shoulders and looked down at her hands, where she was rubbing one thumb with the other.

"Do you think I want to marry him, Maggie?"

Maggie shrugged her shoulders again, still looking down. Clara gently cupped her daughter's chin in her hand, raising it until their eyes met. Clara was smiling, amused at how a simple glance or shrug could suddenly illuminate everything.

"I loved your father. You know that."

Maggie's eyes became glassy. She nodded slowly, her chin still cupped in her mother's hand.

“I don’t aim to replace him,” she added, “or give you another Daddy. Henry may not directly be my kin, but he’s still family. As good as blood to me, and he *is* your blood. You understand my meaning?”

Maggie nodded again, this time more assuredly.

“This just happens to be a good situation for us. A way of starting over.”

Clara let her daughter’s chin go and looked out over the crowd, staring off toward the horizon as though they were alone on the prairie. “I did my best not to let on what I’m about to say, mostly because I felt it was my duty to protect you from such things. But losing your daddy put a hole in me, and now I admit I’m a bit lonely. I thought it would help when we moved in with your grandmother, but then she passed and I felt it all over again. So when I got the letter from your uncle Henry, I knew it was a sign from God that we should go.”

Clara looked down to fidget with her blouse, picking away invisible specks of dirt. “I’m not looking to make Henry my lover,” she continued, “but with his back, he’ll need our help on this claim. It’d be good to have a man around, too. Even if it is only for a little while. God knows Henry ain’t no spring chicken,” she said, then laughed. She looked down and saw in her daughter’s face what she hoped was understanding, or if not understanding, a willingness to accept what she would one day understand.

“Does that help, June bug?”

Maggie leaned in and hugged her. Clara did her best to hug back, still half-turned in the saddle.

Their conversation had occurred invisibly to the surrounding mass of people, all too distracted with last minute preparations, as the secondhand moved closer to noon. Invisible to everyone except the cowboy who sat astride his horse not more than twenty paces away, close

enough to hear the soothing timbre in Clara's voice, to see the shine on her long braid, to sniff the air as though breathing in a taste of her.

Clara nudged the horse forward, passing the cowboy on her right, just another face in the crowd. She didn't see him then when he closed his eyes and licked his lips. Maggie saw him, though, and the look in her eyes was cold and hard.

Clara dismounted and made one last check of the saddlebag. Packed inside was the white claim flag and wooden mallet, its head braced at both ends by two wrought iron bands. Beneath the mallet and flag was the cotton tent canvas with wooden stakes and braided rope rolled inside. There were two canteens of water, four biscuits, and a small jar of honey to last them through the day and night in case Henry was delayed with the wagon. Sitting on top of all this was Henry's Colt, loaded with six bullets.

Clara untied the yellow ribbon that held down the blue poke bonnet she'd been wearing, fearing the wind created by the horse's gallop would blow it off her head. She stuffed it down into the saddlebag and wiped the sweat from her brow with a flower-print kerchief. When she tried to wipe Maggie's brow the girl leaned away, frowning.

"That's my strong-willed darling," she said, winking at Maggie, who was staring back with her arms crossed, the tiniest smile in her eyes.

It's almost time, she heard someone shout from nearby in the crowd. Those standing with their horses began to mount, while those mounted nudged forward, as though the few feet gained by packing together would afford them a better start.

"Hop up," Clara said, "quickly."

She bent with her fingers locked together and lifted Maggie onto the saddle, then climbed up herself.

Moments later the boom of rifles came rolling down the line from the east at a tremendous rate.

“Hold on tight,” she yelled, as nearly simultaneous rifle-fire erupted in front of them from the hundreds of rifles held skyward.

A stampede ensued, as tens of thousands of eager home-seekers whipped the reins and spurred their horses, moving forward as one, a rumbling wave across the prairie grass. Those on foot and bicycle were quickly swallowed up and left behind by the mass of horses and wagons.

Maggie held Clara tight around the waist and kept her cheek pressed against her mother’s back, staring out at the thinning field of galloping riders. Within a few miles many of the seekers had fanned out and were now spread across the frontier, far as the horizon.

The wind was warm and felt good as it dried the sweat on Clara’s face and rushed through her blouse, cooling her skin under the many layers of fabric. It whipped the loose strands of hair around her eyes and made the long braid dance through the air around Maggie whenever it slipped free from between their bodies. They rode hard and Clara did her best to keep up with the fastest riders. The mare’s hoof-beats flushed several prairie dogs from the tall grasses, sending them scurrying. The occasional Red-tailed hawk floated above in the updraft. Clara had pointed toward one as it dove toward the ground, claws open for prey. They rose and fell with the slope of the land, a vast stretch with little tree cover. At the occasional creek bed they would trot, in order to navigate the loose or muddy terrain around the water. When they came to the wide banks of the Cimarron River they were forced to a slow walk, allowing the mare to drink from the water that rose to their ankles. They continued through the afternoon, only slowing when the terrain required it. Every mile the land thinned of riders, to a point when several hours

into the ride, Clara looked around and saw only a dozen or so scattered hundreds of yards apart as far as she could see.

When the sun was in the low in the west they crested a small hill and the land they were looking for came into view, marked by a single Post oak rising mightily out of the savannah, a prairie lighthouse to guide them home. A narrow stream, branching south from the Cimarron, cut a few hundred yards west of the oak. Henry had told her it should suffice for water initially, until a well could be dug. The land will harvest well, he'd said. With Clara's help they'd be able to plant wheat in the fall, when the heat lessened and the house was built. Eventually they'd acquire horses, a few head of cattle, chickens. The opportunity for growth was endless, he'd convinced her.

"Oh Maggie," she said, bringing the horse to a stop at the top of the rise. "This is it. We've made it."

Maggie leaned around her mother and looked down the slope toward the tree and the large plot of land spread around it.

"We'd best get down there before someone beats us to it," she said, spurring the tired horse to a trot. The few riders in the area seemed to be continuing toward Guthrie, a proposed new town still half a day's ride south. Clara laughed as they raced down the hill toward the oak, its green canopy and shadow growing larger by the second. She couldn't wait to pitch the tent and drink from the cool stream. They would rest in the shade until dusk, then a fire would keep them warm as they fell asleep under the heavens, lying on the soft grass bedding of their new home.

Clara jumped from the horse while it was still trotting. She led it by the reins and hitched it to the tree, knotting the leather straps around the trunk.

“Grab the mallet and flag, Maggie,” she yelled. “Do it quickly.”

Maggie did as she was told, reaching into the saddlebag to retrieve the items. She jumped from the saddle and ran toward Clara, who was already tugging at the lot’s identifying marker. She pulled it from the ground and tossed it aside. Maggie stabbed the claim flag into the ground near her feet and handed the mallet to her mother. Clara made several hard swings of the mallet down onto the wooden stake. When she was done they both stepped back and looked at the stake where it stood erect on its own, the flag waving in the wind. Clara grabbed Maggie by the shoulders and pulled her close.

“This is the start of something, June bug,” she said. “I can feel it.”

They pitched the tent between the oak and the creek. Maggie fetched a jar of water and gathered what few sticks she found along the creek bed, enough for a small fire.

When the cowboy ascended the rise, Clara was tending to the fire and Maggie was lying on her back, pointing up at stars just beginning to poke through the settling dusk. Atop his horse he watched them a moment, then circled around to where he could approach from behind the tent. So when his horse gave out a loud snort, prompting Clara to cry out in alarm, he was already towering over them. Maggie hopped up from her place in the grass and ran to her mother, staying mostly hidden behind the bell of Clara’s dress.

The cowboy smiled. Even in the fading light Clara could see his yellowed teeth. On their first encounter near the river he’d not bared them, giving only a puckered scowl.

“Looks like you ladies got yourselves a fine plot of land here,” he said, pushing up in the stirrups. The fire’s soft lighting did nothing to warm his harsh features. His eyes were sunk deep and set wide on his face. The mustache curving around his mouth was slick from chew spit and oil from his hands. He smoothed it down as he watched them.

“That’s right,” she said, trying to smile, wrapping her right arm around Maggie, still pressed against her right leg. “We were lucky, I suppose.” She hoped her tone was as warm-but-firm as she’d intended. The cowboy looked sun-crazy, like maybe he could be easily set off.

“Luck out here don’t last long,” he said, and then grinned. “Luck in these parts means taking what you want.”

He looked from Clara to Maggie, slow and deliberate with his gaze.

“Afraid your luck might be changing,” he said, losing the grin.

“We got here first,” Clara said. “This plot is ours now.”

“You don’t seem to be listening.”

“I am. But my man’s coming with the wagon. Ought to be here any minute,” she said, and made an effort to stand more erect, forceful.

The cowboy laughed. It was animal-like, between a cackle and a howl, wild and warning. “You mean that hobbled old man? I seen him on my way here. Believe he was having trouble with his wagon wheel. Suspect he might be a day or so late.” He laughed again, and Clara felt Maggie press tighter.

“He’ll be right along just the same,” she said. “He’s got a fine temper and if he sees you messing about, he’ll not think twice on shooting you.”

The cowboy leaned over and spat in the grass. A thin strand of saliva hung from his lip. He wiped it away with the back of his glove, then swung his leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. Turning his head to both sides, he stretched his neck and back. Then he looked down at Maggie and a wicked smile formed.

“Ain’t you a prairie rose,” he said.

Clara turned and spoke quietly to Maggie, who walked toward the tent, halfway between Clara and the cowboy, several paces to the side.

“You don’t got to go nowhere, darling. I won’t bite,” he said. “At least not too hard.” He erupted in laughter and it scared Clara more this time.

“You ain’t interested in her,” Clara said, stepping farther from the tent, angling his line of sight away from Maggie. “I know what you want.”

“Yeah?” he said, hitching at his belt with both hands. “And what is it you think I want?”

“You want this land.” She was close to the fire now, could feel the heat against her dress and ankles. “And I guess you aim to take it?”

“Now that you mention it, I probably will.”

“Ain’t there some better lot out there? What’s so special about this one?”

The cowboy smiled and took a step toward her. “Them other lots ain’t got everything I want. This one here comes with something extra. Two somethings.”

Maggie was standing in the doorway of the tent. The fire lit her face well and Clara could see the fright in her daughter’s eyes.

The cowboy took a step toward Maggie. He was rubbing his leg firmly up and down with his hand, over and over. Staring intensely, like he’d forgotten about Clara.

“I’ve got a proposition for you,” she said, trying to regain his attention.

The cowboy turned back, and she saw something in his eyes that wasn’t there before. She’d seen the look once, in the eyes of a weasel about to pounce on one of her chickens back in Independence. She’d happened to walk around the barn one evening, catching the weasel in a crouch, seconds from scooping up an unsuspecting chicken busy pecking at seed. The look was a

cold blend of hunger and anticipated pleasure, and just as the weasel's eyes had seemed oddly large, so too did the cowboy's, shining in the light like two polished quarters.

Clara reached behind her with both hands and untied her braid. The dark hair untwisted as she ran her fingers all the way through it. Moving her head from side to side, she shook the hair out. It swung freely through the air like a pendulum.

“Why don't you just take what you really came for and be on your way.”

The cowboy let out a low groan.

“But let it be me and nothing further,” she said. “Then you'll be on your way. Do we have an agreement?”

The cowboy only grunted.

“Just let me retrieve a blanket from the saddlebag so we'll be more comfortable.”

She started walking toward the horse, still hitched to the tree. She tried to keep her steps even and unhurried. She was only ten paces away, her heart pounding rapidly, when she heard the *click* of a pistol being cocked.

“You don't need no blanket,” he said, real quiet. “And whatever else is in that saddlebag.”

Clara turned and saw the pistol, felt her legs go weak. It was aimed in her general direction, down at his side. Maggie stirred at the entrance to the tent and Clara did her best not to look at her, not wanting to remind him.

“Get on back here,” he said, grinning. “Lay down over there by the fire.” He motioned toward it with the gun. “Don't want you to catch cold.”

The hungry look on his face was replaced with pure meanness and she turned away. She got down on her knees by the fire, falling back on her hands as he stepped close.

“Lay down and hike up that dress or I’ll shuck it off myself,” he said.

She did as she was told, laying back on the soft grass.

“Turn away, Maggie,” she said, her voice loud and shaky.

He watched until Clara had gathered up all the fabric and laid most of it across her stomach. The fire’s heat was warm on her bare skin. Staring down at her, his chest rose and fell in deep breaths. He took one look around the surrounding darkness then holstered his gun and went about unbuckling. Dropping to his knees between Clara’s feet, he was panting as he fumbled with his gun belt and pants buttons. Clara closed her eyes. She tried to let her mind drift away to a better place, but each distinct sound in the otherwise quiet night yanked her back into the present: the tinkling of his belt buckle, the dull thud of the holstered gun against the grass, that awful jangle from his spurs as he moved closer toward her, the crackling fire, the thick rasping of his breath coming through his gaped mouth, several quick padding steps off to the side somewhere.

She opened her eyes at this last sound but forced herself not to look over at the tent. Instead, she tried to see through the corner of her eyes. Though the cowboy was almost on top of her, making it impossible to see the tent, she felt certain Maggie was not there. First terror, then relief flooded her mind as she began to hope maybe her daughter would get away in the dark and could hide until the cowboy was gone. Clara had no illusions that he’d leave peacefully when he was finished with her, but she thought there might be a chance that if Maggie got away, it would spook him into thinking she went looking for a marshal or sheriff and maybe he’d take off. She wasn’t sure she’d be alive to see how it played out, but she sent a prayer up for Maggie’s safety regardless.

The cowboy leaned over her. She could smell the same sour stench she'd caught in the woods the night before—the reek of weeks-old dried sweat and body odor. The stench turned her stomach and she almost retched. She considered closing her eyes, but the anger she felt forced her to keep them open in defiance. Just as the cowboy had all his clothing down and was moving at her, Clara heard a strange sound coming from behind the cowboy's back. It was a shrill and terrifying scream. Clara saw the cowboy's brow wrinkle at the noise, and in that very instant a blur of movement—something like a stick of wood—arced down toward the back of the cowboy's head, striking firmly against his skull with a heavy *thunk*. Clara felt something wet splatter against her forehead and cheeks. For a moment she thought the cowboy would lose consciousness and collapse on her. Then his face went from dazed to a scowl, and he sat up on his knees, feeling at the back of his head with both hands.

“I'll slit you open you little whore,” he yelled, and began flailing his arms around, searching for Maggie.

Maggie jumped out from behind him, holding the mallet in both hands, its blonde wood covered at one end with blood. She was standing too near though, and he grabbed her blouse with his left hand and began pulling her toward him. Digging her heels into the ground, she leaned back and began swinging the mallet wildly. Clara sat up and saw the pistol still holstered on the belt, nearby on the ground. She yanked it out and gripped the handle with both hands, cocking the hammer back with one thumb over the other. Hearing the sound, the cowboy let go of Maggie and looked down at Clara, still beneath him. He lunged forward but she leaned into him, stopping his momentum. Afraid to miss, she jabbed the pistol up under his head, poking the barrel into the soft skin between his chin and Adam's apple.

“Wait!” was all he managed to shout before she pulled the trigger. The recoil was less than she’d expected, but the echo of the gunshot was thunderous, rolling away over the land in the darkness. Fragments of bone and a fine red mist filled the air, covering Clara’s and Maggie’s face and clothing and arms. The acrid smell of gunpowder tingled Clara’s nostrils. She felt comforted by the harsh odor, the assured safety in it. She watched the life go out of the cowboy’s eyes like a snuffed candle, and his body went limp and fell backwards, collapsing back on his legs. When the echo of the shot had faded, only the sounds of crackling fire and heavy breathing filled the air.

In the morning, as the sun peaked over the horizon, shedding darkness from the plain, they sat around the fire and ate the biscuits dipped in honey. A layer of dew sat heavy on the grass. Birds chirped from high in the oak. They ate the breakfast in silence, exhausted from the night’s work.

Most of the night had been spent digging a large hole far away from the lot. Using the pointed end of the lot stake and their bare hands, they got down on their knees and scooped out handfuls of soil. Slowly their adrenaline faded, and when they cleaned their hands and face in the creek, the cold water sobered them. To make use of the mare in moving the cowboy’s body, they looped a rope through his gun belt and secured it to the saddle horn. The body dragged behind the horse like a rolled rug cinched at the middle, his torso and legs trailing in a V.

The morning unfolded, bringing with it the heat. By mid-day the sun beat down through a cloudless sky on land vacant of any breeze. They stretched out in the shade of the oak and shed their heavy dresses, remaining only in white undergarments. They went often to the creek. Maggie did not seem as troubled as Clara might have expected, sitting quietly against the tree for most of the morning, occasionally strolling through the tall prairie grass. Clara was concerned for

her daughter, fearing that her mind might now be further damaged from what she'd not only seen, but done. Clara had always hoped she'd hear her daughter speak again one day, but now there was no way of knowing if she would ever break free from whatever it was that held her voice captive. But Clara had long since let go of the idea that she knew how to help Maggie. All she could do was be there for the girl. She knew that Maggie would eventually let it show if she was feeling troubled, and if she did Clara would be ready to help. So Clara made no effort to speak about the incident.

Shortly after she'd shot the cowboy her hands had begun shaking, just as they had at the river the day before. They'd finally stopped while burying the cowboy, and since then Clara had replayed the events over and over in her mind, each time coming to the same conclusion: She was not sorry she'd taken the cowboy's life. She'd repeated this thought to herself throughout the morning, and in that way became comforted by the idea that one day she might look back on that night and it would be nothing more than a bad dream, but one that would not haunt her.

Around noon, through waves of heat shimmering above the grass, they saw a wagon slowly take shape over the rise they'd ascended the previous day. As the wagon came into focus they saw it was Henry, and Clara and Maggie embraced each other. Clara gave a small laugh of relief, and then waved to Henry with both arms. She thought about the long days ahead, how nothing about this free land was a promise. She hugged Maggie tight with one arm and decided that it wasn't a promise, but hope, that mattered. So she allowed herself to hope then, with one hand over her eyes, as she watched the wagon grow larger, swaying left and right on the uneven ground, cutting two long lines behind it through the sea of grass with its rickety wooden wheels

Rte. 28 Believer

Gil showed up on his uncle's front porch one Saturday morning with a backpack and an old acoustic guitar. He grinned when his uncle opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. The porch was rotted in places, chipped of its paint by years of sandy Oklahoma wind. Squinting through wire-rimmed glasses, his uncle asked him what it was he aimed to do there. Gil set down his bag and turned out to the land in front of his uncle's place—a small turn-of-the-century two-room farmhouse. The Texaco station his uncle owned was a few miles down the road. Its star-sign, awning, and square building stood out like an island on the flat plane. Way out in the distance, across miles of dry, cracked earth, Gil noticed the top of a rock outcropping, jagged against the blue horizon. He turned back to his uncle and shrugged.

“Figured I'd work for you.”

His uncle didn't have any employees. He'd worked the place himself for two decades, seven to seven, with the automated pumps taking over after close. Gil's timing had been good. The long days were taking a toll on his uncle and he told Gil he'd lately considered hiring someone. The job wasn't hard: man the register, top off oil, clean a windshield from time to time. Dry Gulch was in a dry county so they didn't sell beer. Smokes and sodas brought most of the money not from gas. The store was rectangular and thin, wide enough for two aisles filled with the usual candy and chips, cleaning essentials, and a rack of magazines.

“It ain't much,” his uncle said, pointing at a cot in the windowless supply room in back of the store. “But I'll pay you to sleep. Hard to beat that kind of deal.”

“Yes sir,” Gil said, tossing his bag onto the cot. “Works for me.”

The room was six-by-six, with barely enough space for his guitar and bag. Gil had volunteered to sleep there after his uncle mentioned that people sometimes stopped late for gas and he worried about the store with no one there. They'd come to an agreement Gil would be paid a fraction of his hourly rate during the hours he slept there. He took the seven-to-seven shift, four days a week.

The place had survived over the years by being the only station on a fifty-mile stretch. A lot of the customers were delivery drivers. There was also the occasional blue-highway tourist, and the thirty or so occupants of the *Whispering Plains* trailer park nearby. Many of the residents filled up twice a week driving long distances between places like Amarillo and Elk City. Most days were slow, and in the evenings, when three hours could pass without a customer, Gil would sit on a chair out back and pick on his guitar, watching the sunset color the west orange and purple.

The first time she came in the store Gil was stooped over with a broom, sweeping the floor near the chips display. She was braless under a yellow tube-top, with bare shoulders and frizzy blonde hair. She wore generous amounts of red lipstick and turquoise eye shadow. Her earrings were fishing lures, silver and shiny, dangling two inches from each lobe.

Stopping at the front, she looked around, taking in the whole store as if there were dozens of aisles to consider. Gil straightened up and stared at her but didn't say anything. She turned and went down the first aisle in front of the car supplies. Nothing about her was hurried. She walked slow and chewed her gum slow. Gil stared at her mouth, drawn there by the lipstick. He watched her jaw move crookedly from side to side. He guessed she was probably only a couple years

older than him, but something about the confident way she moved told him she knew a few things about the world, or at least men.

Gil walked over to the register and pretended to be busy with receipts. Three different times he glanced over and each time she caught him looking. Every time they made eye contact she smiled, holding his gaze until he turned away.

She rounded the first aisle, keeping her eyes focused on him. Coming straight at him up the second aisle, she didn't stop to look at anything on the shelves. Gil couldn't keep from looking out the corner of his eyes at her tube-top and how freely she moved beneath it. When she got to the counter she leaned in and smiled up at him. He turned to face her, folding both his hands in front of him. Clearing his throat, he said, "What can I do for you?"

She tilted her head to the side and squinted a little as if she was thinking. "Do have any gum?"

"Yeah. Definitely," he said, nodding. "We've got lots of gum. It's back there." He pointed behind her at the aisle she'd just walked through. "You probably just missed it. Gum is pretty small."

This made her laugh and she reached forward and touched his arm. "I'm a klutz. I just didn't see it."

When she pulled away his hand tingled.

"No, it's easy to miss," he said, smiling. "I can get it for you. What kind would you like?"

"I got it, cutie," she said, pushing off the counter with both hands.

He watched her slink back down the aisle. She grabbed a quarter-pack of Big Red. Glancing at him, she made a big show of hiding the gum in her top. “Just kidding,” she said, then skipped all the way back to the counter.

“You’re in a good mood aren’t you?” he said.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” She slid a quarter across the counter and started unwrapping the gum. “You want a piece?”

Gil opened the cash drawer and put the quarter in. He didn’t bother mentioning that with tax the gum was actually twenty-seven cents. She was looking at him when he turned around.

“Sure, I’ll take some,” he said.

As he unwrapped the stick she started for the door. Gil tried to think of something to say, something to keep her there. When she was almost at the door he leaned across the counter and said, “Hey, come back in sometime. The next one’s on me.”

Leaning back against the glass door, she took a minute to switch out the old piece of gum she’d been chewing with one from the new pack. When she was finished she looked up and tossed him the chewed gum, balled in the wrapper. He caught it and grinned.

“Is that what you *really* want to give me?” she said. “A free pack of gum?”

Then she backed out of the store and Gil watched as she walked past the pumps and down the side of the road until she was out of view.

Gil grabbed his uncle’s .410 gauge shotgun from under the counter. It was just after seven in the evening. He flipped the “closed” sign around on the front door and locked up, then headed out back with a box of shells.

Out behind the station the land ran flat all the way to the horizon where the rock outcropping stood silhouetted against the setting sun. Around this time every evening Gil usually played his guitar, working on a mix of old folk standards by his heroes, guys like Woody and Dylan and Prine. He dreamed of writing his own album someday. Songs about time spent traveling the land, meeting women, running with the wild ones—whatever they were. He often fantasized that life farther out west was still like it was in old movies, as it had been a century earlier. He imagined somewhere in smoky saloons men still gambled in corners, playing cards on tables sticky with blood and whisky, the room filled with music from a tinny piano. In his songs he'd be there. And when it came time to leave town he'd walk the tracks through dusk until a freight train came whistling. He'd hop a flatcar and write more songs about where he'd just been, slowly crisscrossing the frontier one night-sky at a time. These were the dreams that filled his head, the songs he meant to write and sing.

But this evening he didn't want to play guitar. He wanted to shoot his uncle's gun. He'd stayed up late the night before watching *Hombre*, a sixties film where Paul Newman defends his fellow stagecoach passengers from marauding outlaws. After the movie he went and got the shotgun from behind the counter. He held it in his hands in the dark, running his fingers over the smooth Walnut stock and the cold rusted steel barrel. It was heavy. The weight was comforting, reliable. Sitting on the edge of his bed he tucked the stock into his shoulder and swung the barrel around the room, aiming at his door. He made firing sounds with his mouth, imagined men dressed in masks bursting through the door, there to get him. He saw them flying backwards with chests full of buckshot. He slept with the gun on the floor next to the bed.

With a half-hour of light remaining, he carried a large cardboard box once filled with paper towels, out fifty yards into the grass behind the station. He placed a brick on top of the box

to keep it stationary against the wind and in case he hit it. He walked back and loaded a shell into the barrel. The gun was slick in his palms. He'd never fired one before and wasn't sure what it would feel like. For a moment he wondered if the sound would be a problem, but there were gun racks in nearly every pickup window he saw, so a few shotgun blasts were not likely to draw much attention, particularly in the middle of nowhere. He tucked the stock into his shoulder as he'd done the night before, like how he'd seen in the movies. He tilted his head to look down the barrel, moved his finger inside the trigger guard and felt for the trigger. His breathing was so heavy the end of the barrel bobbed up and down, the sight at the end floating around the box. He held his breath and waited for his aim to steady. He squeezed the trigger. The shot was louder than he expected, booming out across the empty land, ringing his ears. But the kick had been almost nothing. That was easy, he thought, lowering the gun. The top right corner of the target was peppered with several holes. A few hundred feet beyond the box, dust floated in the air from the dry earth. He'd hit part of the target on his first try and it felt great. Adrenaline was coursing through his body and for a moment he thought of the girl who'd come in the store a few days earlier. This was almost the same feeling he'd had talking to her. He grinned at the partially tattered box. The wind picked up, bringing with it a wall of swelling clouds in the southwest. Watching them unfold still dozens of miles away, he guessed it'd be another half-hour before the dark and the rain hit. He broke open the barrel, pulled out the spent shell and loaded another.

On the good days he found a way to touch her. She started coming in regularly, though she never stayed for more than a few minutes and there was never much conversation. It was almost a cat-and-mouse game. She would come in and walk the aisles, make eye contact several times, then buy a single pack of gum. The only real variation was in the flavor of gum she bought. Though

not much happened, these moments never seemed casual to Gil. Each one was like a small step toward something, but what, he didn't know. Once while he was sweeping, she leaned in to look at something on the shelf, brushing her chest against his arm. He always made a point to leave his hand on the counter in case she wanted to reach out and touch it, lingering there as she handed over a quarter. She came in every day for two weeks, playing this mostly silent game, and it became the highlight of his day. He looked forward to it every morning, and in the second week, when he realized she was showing up every day, he asked his uncle to let him take on more shifts.

Then one day she came in with a man. Gil was restocking sodas in the refrigerated section. He looked over at her and they held eye contact until the man noticed, and Gil looked away.

He was about Gil's height and rail thin, maybe thirty, with long, straight greasy hair and a mustache. His camouflage ball-cap was dirty, the bill frayed. An orange tank top highlighted a deep arm-and-neck tan. Tattoos of snakes and barbed wire and old-west revolvers covered the man's shoulders and arms. Gil also noticed the girl's tattoo around her bellybutton. He could see from across the store it was of the sun—it's yellow triangular "rays" partially hidden by her gray sleeveless cutoff. Gil took a long look at the girl's shirt and decided she was again braless. When he looked up she smiled. He blushed and went back to restocking.

They spent several minutes walking up and down the two aisles, picking things up and putting them back. Gil glanced over occasionally, sometimes locking eyes with her, once or twice with the man. When Gil was almost finished restocking, the man came around the end of the aisle and walked right up to him. Gil was holding a bottle of Mountain Dew, about to place it on one of the refrigerated shelves.

“Give me that,” the man said, grabbing the bottle from Gil’s hand.

Gil let him take it, nodding his head. The man stepped around behind him and then leaned in close to Gil’s left ear.

“I see you looking,” he whispered, “and I don’t like it.” Gil smelled the sour odor of cigarettes and alcohol on his breath. “Best watch yourself, kid,” the man added, then walked to the front. Gil watched him place the drink on the counter. The girl was in the far aisle with a concerned look on her face.

“Hey, kid,” said the man, waving a bill in the air. “You want me to pay for this or what?”

Gil walked behind the counter and took the man’s money.

“Give me three packs of Camels and some matches, too,” the man said.

Gil handed him the cigarettes and gave him his change. The man leaned over the counter. “Good talk,” he said, smirking, then walked out of the store. At the door the girl looked back and mouthed the word *sorry*, then followed him out to the road. Gil watched until they were out of view, then locked the front door and flipped over the sign. He went back into his room and lay down on the bed. Staring at the ceiling, the man’s voice echoed in his head. For the last week he’d thought of nothing but seeing the girl again. But he’d never anticipated any trouble. There was something about the man that scared him. The look in his eyes had been wild, a little crazy. Gil lay there for several minutes until his heartbeat finally slowed. He decided to put her out of his mind. She was trouble, and obviously not available. He told himself if she came back in, he’d just ignore her.

The skin around her left eye was purple and swollen when she came in late in the afternoon the next day. She walked straight to the counter and stared up at him. Her right eye was red and

puffy from crying.

“Do you have anything I can put on it,” she said, looking down at her feet.

Gil ran around the counter to the refrigerated section. “I don’t have any ice but you can put this on it,” he said, handing her a can of Pepsi.

She brought it to her face and looked at him through her good eye. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

Gil nodded and then spent a few seconds moving things around on the counter.

“You want to sit down?” he said after a minute. “I’ve got a room in the back. You can sit on my bed.”

Holding the can to her eye she nodded.

They sat on the edge of his bed, neither speaking for a moment. Gil kept his hands folded in his lap, trying to think of something to say. After a minute he looked over and saw she was smiling.

“What’s funny?” he said.

“I was just thinking how strange it is that I’m sitting on your bed and I don’t even know your name.”

Gil shifted and cleared his throat. “My parent’s named me Gilbert, but I just go by Gil.”

He looked at her, waiting for her to laugh, just like everyone always did when he told them his full name. She kept her smile but didn’t laugh.

“I thought for sure you’d make fun of that,” he said, after a moment.

“No. I think it’s really cute,” she said. “I guess it fits.”

He could feel his cheeks getting warm so he looked away. She reached over and put her hand on his. He didn’t look at her. He just stared at the wall, not knowing what to do other than

remain still and hope she didn't change her mind and pull away. After a moment she told him her name was Marnie and that she was from Boulder. She told him how she'd run away from home at seventeen and for all she knew her mother had never bothered to look for her. Her boyfriend at the time had taken her along when he joined the rodeo circuit. Eventually they'd broken up and she fell in with a rough crowd, which was how she met Cole, the man who'd come into the store with her.

"He said he was done with all that stuff," she said.

Gil watched her talk. He couldn't look away. The attraction was so strong he felt drunk with it.

"And he *was* different for a while," she continued. "Then he got laid off and ran out of money. Now he's back to dealing and he's in trouble again."

"What sort of trouble?"

"He owes money to people you shouldn't owe money to."

"Why does he owe them money?"

"Because he can't keep his hands off what he's supposed to sell."

"What does he sell?"

She looked over at him and smiled. "You're a nice guy aren't you Gil? I can tell."

He didn't know what to say so he just shrugged. When he looked back at her the sad look on her face was gone, replaced with something else.

Without saying anything, she scooted across the bed and lay back. He followed suit, lying down next to her. They stayed there on their backs looking up at the ceiling for a moment, neither of them speaking. Gil listened to her breathing. It was steady and soft. His was short and rapid, and he wondered if she could tell he was nervous. While thinking about this, he felt her

hand slide across his leg to the inside of his thigh. His whole body went rigid. After a minute she rolled on her side and put her lips close to his ear.

“I want to do something nice for you. Just lie still.”

She sat up and started working on the buttons of his jeans. Gil’s breathing got heavier and he didn’t bother trying to control it. His pants were halfway down his legs and her fingers were curled around the waistband of his underwear when she stopped. He craned his head forward.

“What’s wrong?”

“I know this weird, but I kind of like to chew gum when I do this. Tastes better,” she said, grinning. She hopped off the bed and went to the door. “I’ll be back in ten seconds,” she said. “Your pants better be off when I come back.”

She closed the door and he started tugging at his jeans. She reappeared in the doorway a few moments later with a giant pink bubble ballooning from her lips. She kept blowing until it was the size of a softball and it popped, covering her mouth and nose. They both laughed as she peeled it away.

“Want me to show you this trick I know?” she said, then climbed onto the bed and started crawling toward him.

He spent the next two hours after she left restocking and mopping the tile, letting the scene in his room replay slowly through his mind. He imagined a future with her where they made love in motels, travelling the country. They’d take pictures in front of Mt. Rushmore and camp in the wild, waking with their arms wrapped around each other inside a tent in a quiet forest.

But those dreams were stripped clean from his mind around six that evening when someone finally stopped for gas. As he opened the register to make change for the customer he

looked down and saw the drawer was empty.

The camera on the wall behind the register fed to a VCR attached to a ten-inch monitor under the counter. Every night Gil rewound the tape and the next day's feed would record over the previous one's. After the customer left he locked up and went to check the tape. He rewound for several minutes until he saw her leave the store, just as he'd seen her do from the doorway of the backroom. She'd stopped and waved, and he remembered her saying she'd see him around. He rewound some more until the grainy black and white footage showed Marnie come out of the back room and go straight to the front door, which he hadn't realized until now had been left unlocked when he took her back into his room. He'd been so distracted by her black eye and the thought of being close to her that he'd neglected all sense of security in the store.

On the footage, he watched as she opened the door and stepped outside. She looked around for a second and then began waving her arms to someone out of frame, motioning for them to come to her. After a moment a man appeared, and even if Gil hadn't been able to see his face and the distinctive mustache curled down around his mouth, he'd have recognized the tattoos under the tank top. The man had a green duffle bag in his hand. He followed her inside the store, and as she went down the aisle for gum, he crept around the counter. He moved straight to the register and apparently knew how to operate it because the drawer opened immediately. The register wasn't particularly loud. Gil's uncle had turned off the chime years ago. Gil thought back to the moment he was watching and tried to recall if there'd been any sound while he was waiting in bed, something he might've missed or ignored. Then he remembered she'd closed the door. Standing bent over the counter, staring down at the small black monitor, Gil slammed his fist down, rattling a glass jar filled with purple suckers.

The whole thing had only taken twenty seconds. The man grabbed the cash and stuffed it

in the bag then went back around the counter and out the door. Gil watched him disappear out of frame and then rewound the tape twenty seconds so he could watch Marnie's face through the whole process. He followed her as she went down the aisle and grabbed a pack of gum, stripping the packaging away and quickly stuffing two pieces into her mouth. Watching her chomp on the gum, Gil was suddenly disgusted by the angry and crooked way her jaw worked from side to side. The camera wasn't state-of-the-art, so he couldn't see her facial expression as clearly as he'd like. But the picture was sharp enough to see there was no remorse or sorrow on her face. No evidence that she didn't want this to happen. Gil watched as she paused at the door after the man had left, her back turned to the camera, and ran her hands through her hair. He remembered how she'd come back in smiling, with that big pink bubble growing out from her mouth, like someone carefree, or even falling in love. He stared at the grainy footage and imagined her forming the smile and blowing the bubble, prepping for her role. He stopped the tape and stared out at the flat landscape, wondering if he had it in him to get the money back.

In the four months he had worked for his uncle, Gil had saved just over three hundred dollars, which he kept inside a Folgers can under his bed. There'd been two-fifty in the register. Gil had taken thirty from the can to repay the customer and put the rest in the drawer to replace what was missing. He smashed the tape with a hammer behind the store and hurled it out into the grass, fearing his uncle might see it in the trash. Then he made a plan to get his money back, though it required finding out where they were.

Borrowing his uncle's pickup during his time off, he spent the next two months driving up and down sixty-six, stopping in every town and trailer park in a fifty mile radius. He walked through stores and cruised small town streets and parking lots, hoping he'd spot them

somewhere. He was enthusiastic at first, but after a few weeks it had begun to seem hopeless. They could have gone anywhere, and there was no reason to think they were from nearby in the first place. It was possible they ran scams like this all the time, roaming through small towns, looking for gullible men behind cash registers. More than once he thought of giving up, and if it had only been about the money, he would've already. He'd since earned back most of what had been taken. But it was about more than money. He'd felt something for Marnie, something he knew she felt, too. Maybe he wasn't the only man to get played, but she had looked at him differently, he felt certain. She had stared into his eyes and kissed him with her tongue, and that had to mean something. After all, she hadn't needed to seduce him. The money was already gone when she came back into the room. She could have changed her mind, said she didn't feel good. She'd have been long-gone before he found the money either way. So why had she done it if she didn't want to?

It occurred to him she might have been forced to do the whole thing, that she was scared of the man. Maybe he wasn't her boyfriend or lover, but someone forcing her against her will. All of these thoughts swam through his head during the two months he searched for her. Then on a cool late afternoon in November, driving through a Wal-Mart parking lot in Elk City, he saw her.

Keeping far behind and often ducking into another aisle, he followed her through the store for several minutes. She stopped in the pharmacy and scoured over the cold and sinus section for a minute until she found what she wanted. He watched her check out and then followed her into the parking lot. Knowing she wouldn't recognize his uncle's truck, he didn't bother staying far behind as he followed. She drove an old Buick sedan. It was long and slow. She kept to the speed limit through town and on the highway. He thought about her motives.

Maybe she had a little sister being held hostage? Maybe the man was blackmailing her somehow? As dusk came on and the sky grew dark, he decided he wouldn't give up on her completely, not yet.

Her taillights lit up and she began to slow near the gravel driveway of an old beat-up two-story. The yellow siding was warped and peeling. The gutters on the house had fallen in places. The support beams on the front porch leaned to the left. Behind the house stood a faded red wooden barn with a collapsed roof. Past that the land ran flat to the horizon. Gil drove by as she turned in. He memorized the yard and the house, making sure he could locate it again.

The next evening Gil stood in the grass about a half-mile behind the rundown house, waiting through dusk for the night. They were home. There was light inside. He could see it in the room upstairs and through the sliding glass door in the back. Through a set of binoculars he saw the blinds were drawn across the doorway.

His uncle's shotgun lay in the grass near his feet. There were six shells in his sweatpants pocket and one loaded in the barrel. He had on gloves to cover his hands and a camouflage hunting-mask pulled down over his head. The crisp late-autumn air cooled his neck and brow, where sweat had begun to bead. He wore a matching black sweatshirt and pants.

When it was full dark he moved closer. Crouching in the darkness a hundred yards behind the house, he surveyed the land. He didn't want to sneak through the darkness only to stumble on someone having a cigarette or taking a leak in the grass, though no one had come in or out the back since he'd been watching. Once or twice he thought he heard a car door shut from around front, but there was no way to be sure how many people were there. He couldn't even be sure if Marnie was home. He decided to get closer and see if he could look inside. He stayed low

as he moved toward the house, crouching near the ground with the gun held across his chest. The gun felt light in his hands, almost unreal.

He made it to the house and leaned against the siding with his left shoulder. Leaning close to the glass, he peered through the cracks in the blinds and saw the legs of someone sitting in a chair, in what appeared to be the living room. The legs were long and thin and he thought he recognized them as Marnie's. Past that was a couch where two people were sitting, though he couldn't see if they were men, or if there were more than two. He nudged the handle to the glass door and felt it begin to slide with almost no sound. He closed his eyes and told himself to stay calm and not do anything stupid. Then he counted to three.

After he yanked the sliding glass door across its tracks, he burst through the blinds into the kitchen. On the couch, the two men sat up simultaneously. One of them was Cole, who'd taken the money from the register. The other had a shaved head and wore a blue set of mechanic's bibs. They stared, both holding a can of beer, but neither said anything. Gil looked over and saw Marnie frowning up at him from the chair. She was sitting on one foot, with the other perched on the end of the chair, cotton swabs between each toe. She had a bottle of nail polish in one hand and the applicator in the other. She didn't seem frightened by Gil's intrusion. Gil swung the shotgun slowly across the room, listening for any indication someone else was in the house. "Stay where you are. Don't bother getting up," Gil growled, trying to disguise his voice.

The man in the bibs looked confused and little worried. Cole, who Gil wanted to beat senseless with the stock of his shotgun, was staring hard at him from across the room. For a moment Gil worried he'd been recognized, but he told himself to calm down and if nothing went wrong, they wouldn't find out who he was.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Marnie said, the nail polish still in her hands.

Gil ignored her, keeping his attention on the men. On the coffee table in front of the couch sat a green duffle bag, the top open. Stepping slowly across the room, Gil kept the gun trained on the two men as he neared the bag. He stopped a few feet away, not wanting to get too close. He could see a pile of cash in the bag, but he couldn't tell how much. There were several clear sandwich bags filled with yellowish rocks. Gil stepped closer and reached for the bag.

“You don't want to do that,” said Cole, balling his hands into a fist.

Gil stopped and aimed the shotgun at him. “Why's that?”

“Cause that ain't all ours,” the man in the mechanic's bibs said.

Gil swung the shotgun toward him. “That's not my problem.”

“It will be if you take it,” said Cole. “And you don't want to get in more trouble than you're already in. Believe me.” Then he leaned forward and put his beer down on the coffee table. Gil stepped back and leveled the shotgun at his chest. “Stay put,” he said.

Cole looked up at him, squinting, as a smile came across his face. “That's a single-shot four-ten you got there. Ain't but one shell in the chamber. There's two of us here on the couch,” he said, nodding toward his buddy.

“Well which one of you wants to be the hero?” Gil said, widening his stance as he tucked the stock into his shoulder.

Neither man spoke. Gil swung the shotgun to the left, to where a glossy black lamp with a cream shade sat on an end table only a few feet from the man in the bibs. Gil fired the shotgun. The lamp exploded into hundreds of shards, sending Cole and the second man ducking into the couch, holding their arms over their heads. Marnie let out a short scream but Gil didn't bother looking at her. The shot was deafening in the small house. Before the two men even looked up,

Gil had the barrel open and was pulling the spent shell out. He was pushing another shell into the chamber when Cole leaned forward on the couch, ready to jump at him. Gil jerked the gun up, snapping the barrel closed and pointed it straight at Cole's head. The man sank back into the cushions with a look of resignation on his face. The man in the bibs lowered his arms from over his head.

Gil stepped forward and grabbed the sandwich bags and threw them on the floor. He grabbed the duffle and hooked his arm through the straps, then took hold of the shotgun again. He looked over at Marnie in the chair. The wife-beater she wore hugged her body tight, allowing her pink bra to show through.

"You stay where you are," he said, nodding at Marnie. Keeping the shotgun trained between the two men. "You two lie down on the floor. Hands on your heads. Facing away."

"This'll come back to bite you, buddy," said Cole, crawling off the couch.

"Shut up and get on the floor."

With both men facing away, he went over to Marnie and grabbed her by the arm, leading her into the kitchen, near the sliding glass door but out of view of the men. She didn't protest when he grabbed her. She was looking at him closely, as though trying to figure out who he was.

"Either one of you get up and I'll blow your nuts off," Gil shouted toward the living room, then pulled up his mask and looked at Marnie.

She took a step back, completely surprised. "You?" she whispered. Gil was glad she'd kept her voice down. "How did you find us?"

"Do you want to come with me? Do you want out of here?" He was holding the mask up above his eyebrows. The light in the kitchen was soft and kind to Marnie's features. Suddenly the two months he'd been looking for her seemed like a year and she was even prettier than he'd

remembered. “We don’t have a lot of time,” he said. “If you want to go with me we have to go now.” He nodded toward the back door. She looked down at the gun he was holding in his right hand and then to the bag in his left. She looked back toward the living room. Gil pulled the mask down over his face.

“I want you to come with me, Marnie. What do you say?”

After a moment she nodded. Gil grabbed her arm and pushed her toward the door. “Go through the field,” he whispered, and then turned back to the living room. “I’m going to be watching this door,” he shouted. “Follow me out and I’ll paint the house with you.” He backed out with the shotgun pointed toward the living room. When he was far enough they couldn’t hear his footsteps he took off running.

He drove them west three hours, stopping around sunup at a truck stop to call his uncle from a payphone. He explained something had come up and he needed to borrow the truck for a few days. His uncle protested, but when Gil told him he was already several hours into Texas, he let it go and told him to be safe.

From their conversation during the drive, Gil learned Marnie could hotwire a car if they needed another vehicle. But this option scared him because he’d never been in trouble with the law and stealing a car meant they’d always be looking over their shoulder. Instead, he wanted to use the money in the duffle to buy a used truck from one of those small roadside dealers. Somewhere that wouldn’t need a lot of paperwork and appreciated cash. They could return his uncle’s truck and set off for good. But Marnie convinced him they should wait a few days before they spent anything. Let the dust settle, she’d said. They grabbed a burger in the truck stop diner and hit the road again, keeping west all afternoon through the Texas panhandle and into New

Mexico.

Marnie was quiet for long stretches at a time, smoking cigarettes out the window. Twice he reached over and grabbed her hand, holding it for several minutes.

He turned off the highway just before dusk, on the outskirts of Santa Fe, and headed north on an old dirt road marked Rte. 28, cutting a line into the desert across red terrain knotted by shrubs and small cacti. “This is perfect,” Gil said.

Thinking ahead to a spot like this, back at the truck stop Gil had used some of the money to buy two sleeping bags and a few logs of firewood. They kept to the dirt road for ten minutes. Outside Marnie’s window a series of mountains loomed in the fading light.

“Is that where we’re going?” she said, pointing.

“Pretty close,” he said, grinning. “How about a quiet night under the stars, just you and me?” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“All right,” she said, looking out the window.

“You know what? This is probably close enough,” he said after a few minutes. He pulled the truck onto the shoulder and jumped out and started stretching. They were miles from the highway and any light, other than the moon-covered occasionally by drifting clouds near the horizon—and faint starlight overhead.

“Are we safe out here?” Marnie asked, rubbing her hands up and down on her arms. She was shivering, despite wearing Gil’s black sweatshirt.

“You bet,” he said, lifting the shotgun out of the bed. Together they carried the sleeping bags and firewood out into the desert, walking for several minutes until they found a cleared patch of land. He stacked the logs and used Marnie’s cigarette lighter to get a fire going. They zipped the two bags together and crawled inside. Gil curled up behind Marnie and held her in his

arms. He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her ear.

“How much money you figure is in that bag?” he said, after a few minutes.

“I don’t know. Maybe ten, fifteen thousand.”

He thought about that for a moment. “You know we could go anywhere with that kind of money. Just drive around and see America. Maybe go to Alaska or something. Where would you want to go?”

Marnie shrugged her shoulders. “Never thought about it.”

“Really?” Gil sat up on one elbow. “You never wanted to get out and see things? You never wanted to travel?”

She rolled over on her back and looked up at him. “Where I come from that was never an option, Gil. My parents didn’t talk about going places. They didn’t do a lot of talking in general. What they did was a lot of drinking and a lot of drugs. They never had any money and if they did it wasn’t for travelling.” She turned her head to the side and stared at the fire. Gil could see her eyes begin to turn glassy. He leaned in and squeezed her with his arm. “Well now we’ve got some money and I want to take you somewhere. Anywhere you want to go.”

She looked up and smiled.

“You pick first,” he said. “We can go anywhere you want to.”

She reached up and grabbed his head and pulled him down on top of her. “This is what I want to do,” she said, and stuck her tongue in his mouth. They kissed hard for a minute and then Gil pulled away, smiling. He rubbed saliva from his lips with the sleeve of his undershirt.

“Why did you stop?” she said.

Gil lay back on the sleeping bag next to her. He stared up at the night sky and tried to search for constellations but there were so many stars he couldn’t decipher any pattern to them.

“Why’d they make you do it?” Gil said, after a minute.

Marnie was facing away, looking into the fire.

“They were forcing you to help them, right?”

She rolled over and looked him straight in the eye.

“No they weren’t,” she said, and looked away. “I wanted to do it.”

Gil sat up and looked out at the darkness, then down at Marnie.

“What do you mean you *wanted* to? Why?”

“I needed the money.”

“No way. I don’t buy it. Nobody needs it that bad,” he said, shaking his head.

“Look, Gil. I’m sorry about it. But you don’t know me.”

“Have you done this before?” he said, his voice rising.

“Sort of.” She kept her back to him.

“What about this?” He motioned at the fire and the blanket.

She rolled back over and looked at him. “Not exactly.”

“What about Cole? Were you and him really, you know?” he said, letting the words trail off.

Marnie nodded.

“So why’d you come with me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Gil lay back down. “I must be a damned fool.”

“Hey,” she said, sitting up on her elbow and leaning into Gil. “Don’t be like that. I’m here now aren’t I? Stop worrying about everything else.”

Placing her hand on his cheek, she turned his head toward her and leaned in and kissed

him. At first he was stiff, not kissing back, but after a few seconds he gave in and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her onto him. They made love and fell asleep as the fire crackled, its orange light dancing over their bodies.

The sunrise broke over the eastern ridge of the mountain, spilling light across the desert floor and over Gil's face, waking him. He knew before his eyes were open she was gone. He could feel it in his body and in the chill of the desert air. He didn't even bother looking around. Instead he stared up at the morning sky. A faint cloud of breath rose from his mouth. When he finally sat up he saw the lone twenty-dollar bill held down by a rock near the edge of the sleeping bag. Across the face of the bill, written in red lipstick, was the word SORRY.

Gil rolled the shotgun into the sleeping bags and kicked dirt over the burnt wood, smothering the coals. He looked at the spot where they had slept and then set off for Rte. 28, back toward the highway.

As he walked along the dirt road he thought of how he would tell his uncle he'd lost the truck. He didn't want to lie, but trying to explain everything that had happened was unimaginable. Twelve hours before he'd had thousands of dollars and a girl. Now he'd have to work for two years to earn enough to repay the truck. He thought about Marnie, wherever she was, and realized he wasn't even angry with her. Mostly he was just embarrassed that twice now he'd looked foolish because he couldn't see something for what it was. Part of him knew he deserved everything he'd gotten for being so overcome that he couldn't keep his head straight. But the other part knew it couldn't be helped, and that there was no use trying to explain it to himself, or anyone else. His uncle would just have to understand, or he wouldn't. But it was a thing that had happened to him and there was no denying it. He felt how he felt, despite the cost.

As he realized that, walking the gravel road, he began to feel better.

Two hours into the walk, with the highway visible in the distance, he saw the truck come into view over a rise in the road. It was moving fast, kicking up brown dust that floated east in the breeze across the desert landscape. He glanced down at the shotgun rolled into the bag, making sure it was out of sight. But a minute later he saw it didn't matter. Marnie hit the brakes and slid the truck to a stop, sending loose bits of rock rolling across the road. Gil closed his eyes as the dust cloud enveloped him. Some of it caught in his nose and settled on his tongue, tasted bitter. When the air cleared, he stepped up to the passenger side window. Marnie turned off the engine and rolled down the window.

"I got as far as Albuquerque," she said, keeping both hands on the wheel and staring forward out the window. "Something told me to come back."

Gil put the shotgun and bags on the ground by his feet and leaned into the window. "What was it?"

Marnie looked at him and gave him a weak smile. "I don't know. Never heard it before."

Gil nodded but didn't move from the window.

"All right," she said, and scooted across the seat toward the passenger side. "Let's see what happens."

Gil stood there a moment and thought about it. A part of him wanted to drag her out of the truck and leave her there on the road. But he grabbed his stuff instead and tossed it in the back, then walked around and got inside the truck. He started the engine and put it in gear and drove down Rte. 28 toward the highway.

On Leave

The first time my father came home on leave I was fourteen. He bear-hugged me in the airport terminal and put his arm around my neck as we walked to the parking lot. Mom drove while he described the enjoyable parts of his job—catching the sunrise on patrol, soccer games with village children, the way soldiers celebrate American holidays in the desert, with fireworks and silly games like catch-the-scorpion or canteen-chugging. I watched in the rear-view mirror as he scanned the grass medians and highway shoulders while he talked. Every time we came to a crowded stoplight he tensed up.

We played catch in the backyard while Mom made dinner. He was impressed with my curveball, but said I needed to “throw heat,” and have a slider or a change-up if I wanted to play past high school. He duct-taped a big square strike zone on the fence and told me that when I could hit it every time, I should get more tape and make a smaller square.

When we came in, Mom made him a drink and we ate at the dinner table as a family for the first time in a year. We watched *The Late Show* and I fell asleep on the couch. When I woke up, the living room was dark. As I passed their bedroom on the way to bed I could hear mom laughing.

When the weekend was over we took him back to the airport. “I bet that square will be smaller when I get back,” he said, shouldering his green duffel. He looked back twice before disappearing through security.

By the time he came home again, I could hit a square the size of a dishtowel from sixty feet. I was so nervous it took four throws to prove it. When I finally nailed it he patted me on the back

without saying anything, then disappeared into the garage. I kept throwing, hitting the next three. He returned with the roll of duct-tape. "Make it smaller," he said, tossing it to me.

We ordered pizza and ate on the couch during the news. There was a special segment on about the war—how some soldiers were being made to stay in the army even after their tour was finished. Dad's eyes seemed glazed over, and I thought he'd stopped paying attention until Mom started to change the channel and he wouldn't let her.

That night, I heard them arguing when I got up for a drink of water. The next morning Dad took me out for breakfast, explaining Mom didn't feel good. When I asked him if he was going to have to stay over there, he said he didn't know, but that I shouldn't worry about it with baseball season coming up.

We were supposed to play catch when we got back, but he went inside first, saying he'd be out after he talked to Mom. I threw the ball at the fence for an hour. When I went inside, their bedroom door was closed. I knocked and he came to the door but only cracked it. I could see Mom sitting on the edge of the bed.

At the airport, he told me he'd try to get back in time for the playoffs. I told him I'd go home and practice right away. Mom started crying, but she turned away so we couldn't see. He hugged us both, and after kissing Mom, asked us to leave first because he hated being the one always walking away. When I looked back, he motioned like he was pitching to me. I crouched down and pretended to catch the ball way outside of the strike zone and just shook my head. He laughed so loud that several people in the terminal turned and looked. He gave a little wave, and when I looked back the next time he was gone.

My pitcher's mound was a pile of sandbags and a rubber mat I had to stomp flat. I

practiced all the time—in the rain, in the heat, and when it snowed, so that I had to hunt for the ball after each throw. Every evening after practice I'd come home and throw more. Sometimes Mom would pull up a chair nearby and read a book. There were many nights she had to drag me inside to keep from eating alone. I threw until my sunburns became tans and my blisters turned to calluses. More than once, I had to wrap an icepack around my shoulder and hold my elbow in a bucket of ice water. When I splintered the boards I put up new ones and kept throwing. I got to where I could hit a square the size of a cassette tape seven throws out of ten.

We finally made playoffs my senior year. Mom was there for every pitch that season, wearing my jersey in the stands. She put together a highlight tape for the scout who came down from Detroit to watch me in the second round. He told her I might have a real shot someday. She fielded phone calls and kept my college recruitment letters on the kitchen table.

On senior night, she stood with me near home plate, squeezing my arm tightly when they announced our names. The day I signed my letter of intent, she jumped up and down in the living room clapping her hands and crying, saying how proud of me she was—how proud he'd have been.

The duct-tape strike zone came down after I moved to college. Whenever I return home on break, I go out and stand on the weather-beaten mat and lumpy sandbags. Even with the tape gone, there remains a series of faded overlapping squares.

Rendezvous

Commander Winters and I were standing two hundred feet above the ground on the roof of Shuttle Hangar B, at the north end of the C.A.S.T. campus, overlooking the Tashathese Reservoir where Team B was conducting water-retrieval tests on the splashdown capsule. We'd gone up after Winters' own training, to watch the back-up squad and enjoy the sunset. It was something we did from time to time. A good way to end a long day. The sun was low over the horizon, appearing to settle on the small town of Burns Flat to the west, where all of us in the program had been living in temporary housing the last two years. The ten thousand acres of Bluestem surrounding western Oklahoma's Center for Advancing Space Travel rolled in golden waves, bending to a steady southern plains breeze. We'd been there a few minutes and Winters hadn't said anything. I assumed he was taking in the view like I was. But then his voice cracked as he began to speak.

"I haven't been sleeping well, Driggs," he said. He stared out over the vast flatlands, shaking his head. "I can't stop thinking about it. Whenever I close my eyes I see them in the car and picture it happening."

I took a sip of the beer we'd carried up and waited for him to finish.

"Mostly I just can't understand it. A garbage truck driver has the same route all the time. So how does he miss a stop sign?"

There was nothing to say. He wasn't really asking me anyway. It had been six months, but the time hadn't done anything to help us get our heads around it. His wife and daughter were gone, and nothing I could say would comfort him, so I stayed quiet. Squeezing his shoulder, I thought of the first time I met Liz and Junie.

It was a few months after Winters had come on board, after I'd recruited him out of the navy into C.A.S.T. We were at a welcoming barbeque at a park in Burns Flat, put on by the company bigwigs. As Director of the upcoming Rendezvous mission, I stood on a picnic table and gave a little speech welcoming Winters and the other recruits, most of whom were scientists and research assistants. Looking out over the crowd of fifty or sixty, I spotted Liz holding onto Winters' arm, looking up at me, smiling. I think maybe Junie was running around the playground with some of the other kids. Liz was beautiful. I remember thinking what a sight they were together.

Afterward, Winters introduced me, telling me things I already knew from my background investigation on him during his recruitment: where they met, where she was from. They'd been married a couple years, but watching them, you'd have thought they just started dating. Liz couldn't keep her eyes off him when he talked. It wasn't awe, or some kind of brainwashed husband worship. Just honest devotion. It said something about both of them. Liz was the kind of person who gave love like you read about in books, who would do anything for her husband. And that was the effect Winters had on people. You were just naturally drawn to him. He was handsome and obviously fit being a Navy pilot. But there was an intangible quality too. I liked him immediately, as I'm sure Liz did.

No question though, his biggest fan was Junie. That little girl was a whirlwind of energy, and so beautiful. She ran everywhere, asking "why this" or "how come that" about everything she encountered. She was the sharpest seven-year-old I've ever met. She would have done something great, I have no doubt.

I always wanted what Winters had. The family and the love. But I wasn't jealous. I was thankful just to see it, to know it existed. I'd made choices in my own life that over the years had

sifted out any chance for that kind of happiness. I couldn't deny my work came first. I wasn't willing to give someone the time it takes, and I was happy enough with that choice. I lived with it. Still, I hoped something like Junie and Liz might come along eventually.

It was also at the welcoming picnic that I met Rachel. I'd looked at everyone's files beforehand, so I knew the basics: a Stanford grad, Ph. D. in Applied Physics, only child, born and raised in Dallas, math professor mother, librarian father. There had been a photo in her dossier, but it was black and white and failed to capture the freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks, and the warm mahogany color of her eyes. So when we were introduced and shook hands, I embarrassed myself by staring at her too long with my mouth open. I was shocked by how plain the picture had made her seem by comparison.

"Director Driggs, I just wanted to say thank you in person for this opportunity," she said. She let go of my hand and folded hers in front of her. "It's an honor to be part of the Rendezvous program."

"You come highly recommended, Ms. Green," I said. "We're happy to have you."

She smiled. Tiny wrinkles formed at the corner of her eyes, partially obscured by her glasses. She was about six inches shorter than me, with a small frame, so there was nothing intimidating about her. But I felt bare as she looked up at me. I put my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels. I made some comment about the weather and as she turned and looked up at the sky, I reminded myself that I was the director, that I oversaw hundreds of people and gave orders and speeches every day. There was no reason to be made nervous by my new research assistant, someone ten years younger no less. After she excused herself I watched her walk away and join a cluster of young new hires around the ice chests full of beer. Before the day had started, I wouldn't have thought it was possible to be more excited about the program. I

knew I was lucky to be doing what I loved. But I spent the rest of the party in a daze, mingling with co-workers and meeting family members, glancing around every few minutes, hoping to make eye contact again.

The first time I met Winters he was thirty-one, a few years younger than me. He was stationed on the U.S.S. Obama in the Persian Gulf, spending the last few months of his duty as part of the “Bounty Hunters”, a squadron of F-14 fighters who routinely patrolled the borders of the no-fly zone around then-newly-formed People’s Liberated Iran. I was there to recruit him. Having done my homework, I suspected he was just what we were looking for. If he signed on with us, he’d enter C.A.S.T. immediately after his service in the Navy ended and begin training for the Rendezvous program, which I had been made director of a year earlier.

The Rendezvous ship was to dock with Nebula-IV, already in sub-orbital revolution over Mars, and then continue deeper into the atmosphere to conduct the first manned reconnaissance of the red planet. It would take more than just a skilled pilot. We needed someone who could live on the razor’s edge and not blink. The tip of the spear, as they say. On paper, Commander Albert H. Winters appeared to be just that. But I needed to meet him in person, and then if it felt right, I’d offer him the job.

It took me twenty-seven hours, three planes, and a transport chopper to reach the U.S.S. Obama from western Oklahoma. As a private offshoot of N.A.S.A., C.A.S.T was built in the southern plains because of tax breaks, a low-density surrounding population, and an abundance of flat land, which made it easier to build the necessarily long runways and training reservoir.

When I arrived on the carrier, Winters was coming in off a five-hour patrol. It had been routine, no action. It was after dark, which meant he’d be coming in for a night landing. I was

standing on the observation deck in front of the bridge, watching through a pair of night-vision goggles. A tropical storm was building up in the southern Persian Gulf, which was rare, and the seas up north where we were had been getting bigger and bigger over the last few hours. We were on course to get out of the storm's path. Massive swells were rocking the carrier up and down. Wind gusts cleared water from the deck in large sheets of stinging spray. Winters was one of the last patrols to come in that night. I tracked him on approach through my goggles. The wind was nudging him left and right, tipping his wings up and down like a seesaw.

Later, when we finally got a chance to sit down, he told me the guys in the squadron keep a board with a running count of each pilot's points from good landings. He explained how the carrier has four grab cables that snag the jet's landing hook as the pilot touches down at full throttle. The goal is to hook the third cable for a perfect landing, which gets you the most points on the pilot board. Get enough points and you get a special patch with a different bird of prey on it. Winters had six. The whole time I was on board, the most I saw on anyone else was three.

"How it works is, if you catch the first cable it means you came in too shallow and could've painted the front of the carrier with your jet. Hit the fourth cable and you almost miss the whole thing, which would mean immediately taking off again."

"You ever have to do that?" I asked him.

"Only in training. But nobody's flawless."

"According to that scoreboard in the pilot's room it looks like you might be."

He shrugged it off and began toweling his hair from the rain. "Your score on the board is a big deal around here. Shows everyone just how good you are. A lot of these guys," he said, nodding to a group of four, smoking cigars around a card table. "They like to measure themselves all the time," and then he grinned.

I remember how he talked about the other pilots as though they were different. Saying “these guys” instead of “we”. But I never got the sense he thought he was better than them, like he was too good. I think he just didn’t care much about the points, even though they kept giving him more each time he did it right.

About a quarter-mile out on approach, Winters leveled his F-14 and kept it steady, coming in on an invisible line. Squinting as rain peppered my goggles, I watched him bring it in fast, afterburners screaming, setting the jet down right on top of the third cable for a textbook grab.

A few minutes later, when he finally got out of the cockpit, he stood up in the seat and stretched, yawning, as though he’d just gotten out of a five-hour movie. Most guys would be bug-eyed from the adrenaline after landing on a carrier at night in the wake of a tropical storm. But Winters didn’t seem fazed. You could tell he was the kind of guy that didn’t rattle. Flying to him was as easy as it is for most people to drive their minivan to the store for a carton of milk. He was simply the best there was, and that was evident by how every other pilot’s name was listed below him on the tally board.

“It’s looked like that since I got here,” a younger guy with a buzz-cut had said, nodding to the board as he walked past, while I was waiting for Winters to come out of the shower.

“How long have you been here?” I asked, thinking he’d say a month or two.

“Two years next month,” he said, without turning around.

That was Winters. Perfect landings meant steady hands and an easy heartbeat. He was a natural, which was what we wanted.

He said yes to Rendezvous before I even finished his briefing.

One afternoon still several months out from launch day, I was sitting in the cafeteria working on a sloppy joe when I looked up and saw Rachel weaving through a white-coat crowd of doctors, scientists, and lab techs. She was coming toward me with her lunch tray tight against her chest and an anxious look on her face, as she eyed her water glass sliding left and right with each step. I pushed my papers aside, opening a space. She sat the tray down and, with a sigh, fell into the seat across from me.

“I almost covered some poor guy in a white lab coat with my lunch,” she said.

“Job’s got enough stress without having to worry about that doesn’t it?” I said.

She started to nod and say something, then she stopped and grinned. “Since you’re my boss, I can neither confirm nor deny that this job stresses me out.”

I laughed. “Fair enough,” I said. “And I won’t say anything if your hair starts going prematurely gray.”

This made her laugh and she had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from spitting her salad at me. It was the first time I’d heard her laugh. It was fantastic. Her face went a little red and her eyes watered, and afterward her shoulders relaxed some.

“But seriously,” I said. “Do you like it here? We’re not working you too hard?”

She quickly shook her head. “I love it here. I think it’s fantastic to be a part of something so,” and she stopped to think about the right word. “Vital,” she said, after a moment.

I put my fork down and looked at her. “I’m glad you used that word. I think it’s vital too.”

“Absolutely it is. We’ve got to understand what’s out there. There’s so much we don’t know just waiting to be discovered.”

She spoke with passion and conviction. It made me want to know everything about her.

“Did you always know what you wanted to do?” I said. I pushed my tray to the side and leaned forward on my elbows.

“Actually I always thought I’d be a zoologist or a veterinarian. My grandfather had a ranch and I loved being around animals.”

“What happened?”

She waited a moment before answering. “It’s kind of embarrassing, but I thought I was in love with this guy in college. A friend of a friend. He was an astronomy major and whenever we hung out he was always talking about the stars and planets. That intrigued me. So I enrolled in a class he was taking, to give me an excuse to see him more. Maybe join his study group.”

“What happened with the guy?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Turned out I was in love with astronomy, not him.”

“Well, I’d say you made the right choice,” I said.

She looked up from her salad and smiled. We held eye contact for a second and suddenly my face felt warm. I looked away, pretending to scan the cafeteria for someone. She went back to eating. It was quiet for a minute, and then she pointed her fork at me.

“How about you, *director*? What’s your story?”

“I don’t have any kind of romantic story. I was just a nerdy kid who liked to read science fiction. I had a good physics teacher in high school and he nurtured my curiosity, helped steer me in the right direction.”

“I’d say that’s kind of romantic,” she said, not looking up. “Knowing what you want and going after it.”

I grinned but she didn’t see it. “Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, that’s pretty much it. Lots of school, lots of work, a little luck, and here I am.”

“That’s it? Just a workaholic? No hobbies? What do you do with your free time?”

“Well,” I said, and thought about it. I had played the guitar when I was younger, but hadn’t picked it up in years. The truth was, I didn’t do anything except work, but I didn’t want her to know that. It’s one thing to know you have no social life, but to admit it to someone, to put it out there in the world is too depressing. It’s like saying, Don’t bother with me, I’m not interesting.

“Don’t laugh,” I said, “but some nights I like to stargaze.”

“Yeah? Why would I laugh at that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it makes me seem one-dimensional.”

“No way. It’s great. Where do you do it?”

“Just out in the fields. I’ve got a pretty good telescope. I go out late sometimes, but it’s been a while.”

“I think that sounds fun. I’m jealous.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe I’ll take you some time,” I said. But as soon as the words left my lips I regretted it. It was exactly what I meant, but too soon.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, nodding, as she started to collect her plate and napkin onto her tray. “You know I better get back. I’ve still got a ways to go cataloguing those reentry temperatures from the flight simulator.”

“Oh, of course,” I said, and reached for my papers. “There’s always more work to get done.”

She picked up her tray and started to go, then turned back around. “Thanks for the company,” she said.

“My pleasure.”

I watched her walk across the cafeteria and out the door, then went back to my work.

It was a green blur of Ragweed and Bluestem to my right, pavement and spinning gearwheels underneath me, and the broken yellow dividing line to my left that filled my vision while I kept my head down and pedaled. Winters was a bike length ahead and seemed to be working half as hard. For months, my Saturdays had been pancakes at The Diner before heading into C.A.S.T. for the day. But for some reason I'd let Winters talk me into a sunrise ride. The fields on both sides stretched out for miles to the horizon, broken only by the occasional irrigation rig, grain silo, or weathered barn.

"Just a little farther," he yelled back. "Keep pushing."

Sweat and wind held my t-shirt tight against my body. My legs were on fire and about to go numb. "I'm fine. Not really even trying. Why, you need a break?" I barely managed to get the words out between breaths. Winters turned around and grinned.

"Let's find some hills," I shouted, and then shuttered at the thought.

We slowed to a stop a moment later and walked the bikes down a gravel turnoff. Winters' clothes were dry, only his forehead contained little sweat beads. I peeled my shirt off and draped it over the bike as we walked. The spring morning air was cool against my skin. We leaned the bikes on a barbed wire fence and walked out to a pond where we sat on the cracked-earth shore and watched a turtle creep toward the brown water. The sky was clear and the sun was a third of the way up behind us in the east. Winters seemed in a good mood. He hadn't said much, but he was humming a tune I didn't quite recognize, twisting a long blade of grass between his lips. I hated to break the nice vibe, but there was something I'd been meaning to ask him, and it seemed like as good a time as any.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

He turned and looked at me. “Shoot.”

“Why didn’t you back out?”

He waited a moment before responding. “There’s a lot of reasons. But the simplest one is, what else am I going to do with my time?”

I let that hang in the air for a moment. “Are you afraid?”

He shook his head no.

“What about if you knew for sure you wouldn’t come back. Would you still go?”

He nodded yes.

“Is that because you don’t care if you live?”

He looked at me. “I don’t want to die, Driggs. I’m just not scared for it to happen.”

“I wish I felt that way,” I said, as I wedged my finger into a thin crevice in the dirt. And it struck me then how true it was. I wasn’t in the habit of considering death. But having felt its affects both recently and in the past, and knowing the probability of it for the mission—low as it was—it was something I’d been thinking about.

“I don’t think there’s any reason to be scared,” he said.

“Why do you say that?”

“I guess it’s because I don’t believe in heaven or hell. Death might be painful, but nothing lasts forever. And when you’re gone, you’re gone. You won’t even be aware of it.”

I understood what he meant, but it didn’t do much to comfort me.

“Not believing in heaven or hell,” I said. “Does that make life easier or harder?”

He didn’t answer right away. We watched the turtle make it to the edge of the pond and continue on until it disappeared beneath the surface, leaving behind a brownish swirl in the

murky water. Winters wrapped the blade of grass he'd been chewing around his index finger, then he tossed it into the pond, where it floated and slowly rotated in a circle.

“Both I guess,” he said.

Though I couldn't know what was going on inside his mind, I thought I understood him. I saw Winters as a man struggling with his resignation, having gotten what he wanted out of life, then having it taken away too soon. I imagined it was like looking through the window of your home, watching your old life play out like some movie. And you can't go inside, and you're supposed to keep moving down the street, but you know once you leave, the place will cease to exist. When I thought about it like that, I couldn't blame Winters if he was still standing in the window.

After a few minutes we walked the bikes back to the road and biked home at an easy pace, neither of us saying much.

The small boat we were in rocked gently in the wake created by the splash-down capsule. Rachel held the side with both hands and stared wide-eyed at the triangular shaped pod bobbing in the middle of the Tashathese. I was sitting on the boat's second bench, behind her. I'd been watching her between tests. She turned toward me and raised her eyebrows.

“You know what? Getting dropped in the ocean inside a sealed metal container is the one thing that keeps me from wanting his job,” she said.

The engine on the barge crane began to moan as Winters was slowly hoisted from the reservoir in preparation for another drop. A dozen waterfalls streamed off the capsule as it ascended more than one hundred feet into the air.

“It wouldn’t be the takeoff, the long trip, or even orbiting Mars,” she continued. “None of that would bother me as much as the last few seconds before hitting the water, hoping the structural integrity hadn’t been compromised from reentry.” She looked back at me and shook her head. “The thought of sinking to the bottom of the ocean gives me the willies,” she said, and then laughed off the thought as she rubbed her arms.

“That’s why we do so many of these,” I said. “But you’re not giving yourself enough credit. I’m sure you’re brave.”

She thought about it for a moment and then shrugged.

“What’s the bravest thing you’ve ever done?” I said.

She tilted her head as she thought about it. “I saved my neighbor’s house from burning down one time,” she said.

“You’re kidding. What happened?”

“Saw smoke coming from her backyard, so I shouted for my mother to call the fire department. Then I hopped my neighbor’s fence and found half her yard on fire. There was a garden hose coiled near the house and I used it to spray the grass until the fire department showed up.”

“That’s pretty impressive. I’m going to start telling people we’ve got a genuine hero on our team.”

She batted away the compliment like it was something I’d tossed her. “It wasn’t much.” But as she looked out over the water she smiled, and I could tell it was a moment she was proud of.

I returned to my notes, regretting that I'd asked the question because I knew she'd likely turn it around on me. I tried to look as though I was busy, lost deep in thought, tapping the pen against the pad.

"What about you?" she said, after a minute.

"Me what?" I said, stalling for time.

"Anything exciting ever happen to you? Got any good stories?"

I didn't know what to tell her. I could come up with something on the spot, something boring and easy. Or I could tell her the truth: how in the most important moment of my life, I was a weakling and a failure.

"Come on, let's here it." she said. "Rescue an old lady's cat from a tree, maybe?"

"Very funny."

I tried to think of something else. Anything would do. I just needed to come up with a random brave moment, or make one up. But instead, for some reason I can't explain, I opened my mouth and began to tell her about Tim.

Tim and I were best friends. Growing up in northern Montana, every year we spent our winter afternoons skating on the lake behind his house. We'd play hockey, or race each other to see who was fastest that week. We were thirteen and we'd been doing it since we'd learned to skate, which was not long after we'd learned to walk. The lake was big, maybe a half-mile wide behind his house. It was February, so the ice was a couple feet thick in most places by then. We'd seen ATV's and even pickups drive across it, so there was no reason to worry about falling through. At least there shouldn't have been. But Tim hit a large ice-fishing hole that had only just started to freeze back over. I was only three feet away when he disappeared. I looked over and he was gone. We'd been moving pretty fast so by the time I stopped and got back to him, the

only thing I could see of him were his fingers gripping the edge of the hole. I dove forward, sliding across the ice toward the hole, but just as I reached him he lost his grip. I screamed his name and plunged my head into the water. The cold was like being slapped in the face by a thousand tiny hands. The current was strong under the ice. I caught just a glimpse of him being pulled away before he disappeared into the darkness. I jumped up and skated in his direction, leaning forward close to the ice, hoping to track him. I caught up to him and saw he was pawing at the underside of the ice with both hands. His cheeks were bulging. He looked right up at me. I'll never forget the panic in his eyes. The only thing I could think to do was skate ahead and try to break the ice. I took a wild guess at where he'd end up and got down and began stabbing over and over with the heel of my blade. I rolled over on my stomach and tried jamming the toe down as hard as I could. But the ice wouldn't break. I don't even know if Tim went under me at that exact spot. Maybe he slid by underneath and saw me trying to help him. Or maybe he was pulled off in a different direction, alone in the dark. Even after I knew he was gone, I went back and forth across that ice, hunched low, screaming his name for several minutes, feeling completely out of my mind. His dad finally took me in his arms and I don't know if he was comforting me or if I was comforting him, but we held each other for what seemed like a long time. It took the police a week to break the ice enough to retrieve his body. My parent's wouldn't let me be there to see it.

When I finished talking I looked up and saw Rachel was pale. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"Shit. No, I'm sorry. I don't know why I just told you that."

"No, it's okay. I just don't know what to say. That must have been so awful."

A bell tolled and we both looked out at the capsule as it fell from a tether and crashed into the reservoir, sending water thirty feet into the air. Another series of waves came at us,

lifting the boat several feet before dropping it back down. We began to rock again. When the boat finally settled, I leaned back and started the motor.

“I guess we better get back to the lab and look at the data,” I said.

She nodded and turned around to hold on. I throttled the motor. The boat lurched forward and the bow rose up out of the water. A light spray blew over us each time we bumped a wave slowly making its way toward shore.

About a month prior to launch, I took Rachel to Winters’ house one night for dinner. She had been with the program for almost a year and like everyone else, she’d quickly become friends with Winters. I’d grown tired of imagining him at home every night alone in the dark at the dinner table, spooning cereal or scrambled eggs into his mouth, staring blankly at the wall. I brought Rachel to add some life to our conversations that had grown stale with talk of work. I thought that if all Rachel did was be a woman in a place that so badly needed a woman, it would be enough. I’d never known it in my own life, but I saw in Winters that a man used to love can grow dry and hard after that love is taken away. I don’t know what I expected, exactly. Maybe I thought Winters would enjoy spending dinner talking to a pretty woman instead of just me. Or maybe I was afraid I alone couldn’t help him get back to wherever it was he needed to be. I guess I just wanted to see him smile more often. And that night he did. He made meatloaf, and Rachel and I brought salad and potatoes and two bottles of Malbec. We sat around the table for two hours after we finished eating, laughing and enjoying ourselves, talking about anything but work.

On the drive home, Rachel and I listened to a mix of Billie Holiday songs on an “oldies” station with the windows down. Cicadas sang along in their droning buzz from the trees and

Bluestem fields we passed. The summer night air and the sweet hint of honeysuckle vining on barbed wire along the road drifted through the windows. The seatbelt vibrated and hummed, as Rachel's brown curls danced in the wind. I felt good, though about what and why exactly, I could not have said.

“Did you notice his fridge?” Rachel said, holding her arm out the window, letting her hand rise and fall like a rollercoaster in the wind.

“What he had inside it?” I said, as if I didn't understand what she meant, though I did.

“I mean on the *front* of his fridge. Those Crayon drawings. It was heartbreaking to look at.”

“Oh. Yeah. I've noticed that.”

“That family picture Junie drew, with her and Liz standing in the grass by the house, looking up at Winters in that cute little space ship next to the sun.” She went quiet for a moment, letting her arm fall against the side of the truck. I waited for her to finish.

“I don't know how he can stand to see that everyday,” she said, after a minute. “I know I couldn't.”

“Maybe it helps him?”

“Maybe. But I mean, do you think he's okay? Is he, you know, all right to go through with all this?”

I looked over at her. She was looking back at me. “Absolutely. Winters is ready. This is everything to him.”

I drove on, staring at the tiny bugs crisscrossing in the high beams, dying on the grill and windshield. I counted the road markers disappearing under the left side of the hood at two per-second and thought of telling her what I'd seen upstairs.

The downstairs toilet had been broken. “Use mine,” Winters said, nodding up at the ceiling. I walked up the stairs as Rachel was beginning to tell Winters a joke about how we know Saturn was married more than once. I went into his bedroom before I heard the punch line.

I smelled the aroma before I stepped into the bathroom. Next to the sink was a round glass bottle of peach-colored perfume, brand new, completely full, with the box and receipt on the counter next to it. The bathroom was filled with a blend of floral and woody and vanilla scents lingering in the air. I opened the glass cabinet behind the mirror and saw the same bottle sitting empty on the shelf. I closed the cabinet and stared at my reflection for a moment, then flushed the toilet and went back downstairs.

“What are you thinking about?” Rachel asked, pulling me back to the present.

“Why do you ask?”

“It was the look on your face, like you went somewhere for a minute.”

“I was just thinking.”

I looked over at her and could see she was waiting, but didn’t want to push. We were friends, but we hadn’t spent a lot of time outside of work and I think she didn’t know where the lines between boss and friend intersected and diverged. I smiled.

“I was just thinking about dinner. How I had a good time.”

She nodded her head slow, like she would let it go, but I could see she didn’t believe me.

“Me too,” she said, and stuck her hand back out the window.

A part of me wanted to tell her. But I couldn’t. I’d recognized the perfume, and it didn’t seem like something people needed to know about.

When I dropped her off she got out and said goodnight as she started to walk away. “Hey, wait,” I said, waving her back. She leaned against the door, resting her arms on the window seal.

“What was the joke you told Winters?”

She smiled. “How do we know Saturn was married more than once?”

“I don’t know. How do we know?”

“Because he has so many *rings*.”

I shook my head, groaning. “That may not have been the best joke to tell.”

“I almost didn’t tell it,” she said, nodding. “But he laughed, like he genuinely thought it was funny.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Yeah, I guess he would.”

She pushed off the truck. “See you in the morning, Driggs.” She started up the sidewalk and I watched until she was inside.

Back in my rented house, I sat on the couch with a glass of bourbon to help wind down and fall asleep. I imagined Rachel in a sundress holding a glass of wine, sitting with her feet folded under her, on a white bed sheet spread out in the fields near the reservoir. The sun was low in the sky, warming my back. Soft light kissed her skin, drawing out the rose color in her lips. We didn’t speak. Just to see her that way was enough. Behind us the rocket suddenly ignited, blooming fire and waves of smoke. We watched Winters lift off, perhaps never to return. We shouted and cheered, raising our glasses to the rocket, watching as he soared into a clear sky, leaving us behind, as he became only a golden light in the blue. We followed him until it was no longer possible. Then we kissed and I ran my fingers through her hair.

I woke later on the couch, depressed that it had only been a dream, and because I knew that as perfect as it was, it could never happen. My role was in Mission Control, to be there for

Winters, not picnicking in a field with my assistant. And I had no way of knowing whether she'd ever accept my dream, or if I was alone in imagining us together. But that's the magic of dreams. You don't need permission. You can be with anyone you want.

One week after the dinner party Winters told me of the dreams he'd been having. He'd been on the Pons for several weeks, gradually increasing the dosage on his IV drip before bed every few nights, as per our discussions with the medical team. We knew it was important for his body to be acclimated to the drug because it was such a foreign event to his entire nervous system. And because we needed him to be ready to segue into an extended sleep by the time he passed the moon, three days into the two hundred eighty-five day journey.

Astronauts in space encounter extreme levels of radiation, and because he'd be out there for such a long time, we had a special lead-coated sleeping chamber designed to minimize his exposure. But spending weeks at a time inside a lead bed means you need a serious sleep aid. R & D had originally developed the Pons as a safer way to medically induce coma in brain trauma patients. The Army funded the research, but then Congress put a halt to the grants and cutoff spending. Fortunately, we were close enough to the finish line that we understood it was worth investing our own money and time to see it through to the end. And the Pons turned out to be more than we imagined, though we didn't understand that until much later, when we turned on the B-WIAT machines.

Winters understood it was a very real possibility that if something went wrong, the mission would turn into a one-way journey. But that didn't mean he expected it to. So he had agreed to start on a small dose of the Pons as soon as we had it ready. It had been in animal testing for two years, and it was in the early stages of human trials when Winters began.

Calculations had put the first leg of Rendezvous at just over nine months. After his recon work in orbit above Mars, the total there-and-back time would be more than a year and three-quarters. So besides the extreme length of time the mission demanded, the Pons would help combat the loneliness of space by allowing him to sleep through a large part of the trip.

Engineered to liquid form, the Pons induced a mild coma state, with the depth of the coma dependent on the dosage. After it wore off, you'd wake up. We named it the Pons after the area of the brain that contains the sleep paralysis center and plays a role in generating dreams. There was some speculation about its effects on memory during REM sleep, and some of the researchers were excited about the possibilities it might open up for real-world uses, like sleep-inducement for a more accurate retrieval of eye-witness testimony. But most of us were concerned with its use for space. We believed it would pave the way for future interstellar travel, eventually allowing pilots to stay suspended in a dream-state for up to several years, while hooked to intravenous lines for vitamins and nutrients. The theory was that as long as Winters remained stabilized within an anti-gravity environment, his muscles would keep from atrophying.

The medical team and I discussed whether Winters should be monitored at C.A.S.T., sleeping in one of the surgical rooms with observation glass. We eventually did it that way, but initially I wanted him to be comfortable at home, taking very small doses, which the IV machine could be set to administer automatically. Human trials had shown people woke feeling very serene, though a little disoriented, and I wanted him to feel safe in his own bed. The other thing was that he was about to leave earth and everyone he knew for almost two years. He'd been through a lot in the last year and I wanted him to enjoy the remaining few weeks sleeping at night in his home, relaxed.

When he finally told me of his dream, and how it was reoccurring, I didn't know what to think. Junie and Liz were in it, so in a way I was happy for him, because he hadn't been sleeping well before taking the Pons. I figured seeing them in his dreams was at least better than not sleeping.

"Liz and I were at this little diner drinking milkshakes," Winters said.

We were walking across the C.A.S.T. campus toward the medical center for his weekly physical. He was describing what he'd been seeing the last few nights in his sleep, since stepping up the Pons dosage to one-point-five milliliters. We had estimated between three and four milliliters would induce coma for a month. The sky was overcast, the air cool for summer. Clouds were blooming toward the southwest, rolling out of Texas, tinted green like they might carry a storm.

"My bike was chained to a tree out front," he continued. "The diner, I'd never seen it before. It was almost too perfect, like how movies re-imagine the fifties nowadays. You know what I mean? Brando and Monroe and Coke bottles, all that stuff. Anyway, Liz and I used to get milkshakes a lot, back before we had Junie. But Junie was lactose intolerant, so we just sort of stopped going."

Winters stopped talking and stepped off the curving sidewalk path. He walked over to the waving Bluestem that reached to his knees. Snapping off a piece of the stem, he stuck it in his mouth and walked back, staring at the ground as he twirled the grass in his lips.

"So it was a dream then?" I said, when he rejoined me on the sidewalk.

"I guess. It's funny though. Liz and I went and got milkshakes the day we met, after I almost ran her over with my bike and flipped into some bushes. But the diner I've been seeing in this dream isn't the same one we went to. It's like it was real, but not entirely. Not the way it

actually happened. There was this one part where halfway through our milkshakes, this waitress comes out of the kitchen holding Junie, like she'd been babysitting her in the back. And obviously that never happened in real life. When she sat Junie down in the booth next to us, I saw the tattoo on her arm. It was a hawk, with its wings spread, like if you were looking up as it flew overhead."

"Was that significant?"

"I don't know. It seemed like it, but I can't figure out why."

"But none of what you saw ever happened in real life?"

Winters shook his head. "Not like I've been seeing it."

"Well it sounds like a normal dream to me. Dreams are always strange. They mix the real with the fake and they almost never make sense."

"Yeah, maybe. But there was something about it that I can't explain. I had the sense that if I kept sleeping, kept watching, I'd have seen more. Maybe something real."

"Memories?"

"I know this doesn't make sense. I'm just feeling a little trippy and weirded out from this stuff."

"But you're all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

We finally understood what the Pons could do when we hooked Winters up to the B-WIAT machines. He'd been at home taking the Pons for a couple weeks. Launch was six days out and we wanted him on campus being monitored as we did the final dosage increase to one-point-eight milliliters. All indications were that sleep-time and dream-depth were increasing

exponentially, so we couldn't go very high with the dosage. Anything above two milliliters and he'd be sleeping through the night and likely into the next day, and there were still final preparations and last minute run-throughs to take care of.

It was his first night sleeping in the observation room. We were mostly concerned with his levels. Heart rate, blood pressure, brainwave activity, that sort of thing. That's why we had the B-WIAT hooked up. But we never imagined there was any reason to turn on the monitor and check the images. Brainwave Imagery Analysis Technology had been around for a while. Every scientist worth his or her salt knew how to capture a dream image. The problem had always been that the images were too blurred or grainy. Looking at dreams was like looking through a waterfall. You'd get glimpses of the dream, but the technology just wasn't there yet. So we were just using the B-WIAT digital readout to monitor his vitals under the effects of the Pons. What we realized though was that the Pons was boosting the signal sent from the brain to the B-WIAT machine. So instead of a weak transmission leading to the waterfall-effect in the image, we got clarity never seen before on the monitor. How we discovered the images was pure luck, an accident really.

I was about to go home for the evening that first night. One of the night shift medical team members was coming in to observe Winters until the morning. I had sent Rachel into the operating room we'd turned into a sleeping lab, to check the B-WIAT readout, having already checked it myself the last few times, every half hour. I was watching through the glass as Winters slept on the surgical bed in the middle of the room under a hanging light that was turned off. Rachel entered from the opposite wall. I watched as she tiptoed through the darkness to where the B-WIAT machine was set up on a table near the wall. I wasn't really paying attention to what she was doing, too distracted by a daydream. In it, Rachel and I were in the field again,

this time naked, wrapped together in the sheet, flattening the tall grass as we rolled over each other. It took me a second to register what was happening when Rachel turned on the B-WIAT monitor, which she later said she did without thinking. Why she did it, she couldn't say. It wasn't necessary to check Winters' vitals. Just happenstance.

The monitor brightened to life, cutting a wedge of darkness from the room. The images blinked pale light across the walls and Winters' sleeping body. The screen showed jet fighters screaming past, low over a crowd. It was an air show. Then the angle of our view tilted up and back, and the upside-down face of young Junie appeared on screen, smiling down at me. When I saw her there on the screen, my knees went weak and I had to sit down.

The footage was grainy, like one of those old home movies that my great-great-great-grandparents shot during the fifties and sixties. And it was all from Winters' perspective, like looking through his eyes. Rachel and I both stood there watching the scenes play out. At one point she turned and mouthed the words, "What do I do?" I shrugged and twirled my finger in a small circle, meaning let it play. It was safe to say that neither of us—no one in the world even—had ever seen something like it.

On the monitor the crowd shuffled around, moving in herds toward different airplanes parked down a runway. Junie was off Winters' shoulders, walking beside him, holding his hand. She was talking but we had no sound. Her forehead glistened, hair lightly matted with sweat. She looked happy. Winters turned his gaze upward at a cloudless sky. Into the frame soared a Red-tailed hawk, its wings spread wide, floating on a draft.

We watched for more than an hour, until it was clear the scenes had started over and were repeating.

"Should we wake him?" Rachel said, when she came back into the observation room.

“I don’t think so. Let’s let him sleep.”

“Should we tell someone what we saw?” she said, frowning.

“Not yet. The B-WIAT records any feed linked to it, so we can show it later if we need to.”

“What were we seeing? Was that a memory or a dream?”

“I’m not sure.”

I thought of asking Winters that same question when he finally woke at six the next morning. I’d stuck around, catching a few blinks on a cot in the observation room. He came out looking good, said he felt fine, refreshed. When I told him what we’d seen he only nodded his head to confirm it was what he’d experienced too. He didn’t seem surprised or even impressed that we’d stumbled onto a way to actually watch what he saw in his sleep. I think he was still coming out of the dream. I decided not to ask if what we’d seen was real or not. I figured there’d be time to talk about it later.

Every night that week we saw different scenes. There was one where Junie was squealing as she held tight to the merry-go-round bars in the middle of a playground somewhere, as Winters pushed her round and round. Another one had Liz looking concerned, standing near the north rim of the Grand Canyon, as Winters put on a show of precariously treading the canyon edge with Junie perched on his head like a balanced water jug. Junie couldn’t stop giggling, that’s how safe she must have felt. There was also this sweet short one where Liz is in the garage, standing over a plastic drop cloth next to a half-finished blue dresser, wiping sweat from her brow with a paint-spattered forearm. There are faint blue speckles strewn through her bangs and she’s just standing there, smiling at us. At Winters.

Every night we increased the dosage one-tenth of a millimeter and every night he slept a little longer, a little deeper. I wish now that I, or one of the doctors, had asked him if we were seeing memories or dreams. Our watching felt invasive though, and I didn't want to intrude more than we were. What we were seeing was meant to stay in his head.

Three days before the launch I watched Winters field questions from reporters about Rendezvous, on a stage set up in front of Hangar B, where in the door hung a waving seventy-foot American flag.

Commander Winters, what will you do to pass the time onboard? Have you thought about whether or not you'll get lonely away from human contact for so long? How do you feel about being so isolated? Isn't it true you'll be the most remote man in all of history? Why do you think you are the best person for this mission? What'll it feel like to be mentioned with names like Columbus and Armstrong from now on? Do you think your wife and daughter will be watching from out there somewhere?

He handled each question with grace and dignity, as expected from a man of his station. When asked about whether Junie and Liz might be watching, he paused and looked out at the swaying Bluestem. "I don't know if they're watching," he said. He pursed his lips into a sad grin, then added, "But I hope so."

After the questions he spent several minutes standing in front of large cardboard backdrops depicting iconic American images—the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Mount Rushmore—being photographed in his sky blue C.A.S.T. flight suit. When the professional photographers were finished, parents herded their children toward him. Winters smiled and wrapped his arm around each child as photographs were taken. Most of the boys had fresh buzz-

cuts, shaped high and tight the way Winters kept his.

I watched him, trying to discern what it was I saw in his eyes. Fear? Hesitation? Trepidation? I'm certain no one else picked up on it, but I'd known him long enough and become too close a friend to miss the quick far-off gaze that occasionally crossed his face whenever he'd glance out at the fields, or up at the sky, waiting for a parent to get their camera ready. Then he'd flash his white teeth in a big smile that to the entire world must have seemed genuine, coming from America's next hero.

"Cheeks hurt yet?" I asked, when he came over after all the children and reporters had left.

"You ever smile for two hours?" he said, rubbing his face.

"Never had a reason to."

"Never?" he said, grinning. "Some love life you lead."

"Hey, how you plan on flying to Mars if you spend all your time worried about my sex life?"

He tilted his head and looked up at the sky. "I guess I'll find a way. Getting you laid and reaching Mars, I don't know which one is more historic."

"Hey now. You want me to fire you? Let your backup get all the glory?"

He laughed a little and raised his hands in surrender, then started walking away.

"Hey, Winters," I called out.

He turned around and kept walking backwards.

"You good to go? Everything feel okay?"

He gave me a thumbs-up.

"And the dreams? Since taking the Pons they've all been about Junie and Liz."

He stopped and nodded.

“Is that going to be okay up there? Will it get to you?”

He walked back toward me with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the concrete.

“I hear what you’re saying,” he said, stopping a few feet away. “Believe it or not, that’s what I’m most excited about. For the next nine months, I’ll get to see them all the time.” He was looking over my shoulder. There was a blank stare on his face. “You can’t imagine how real it feels, Driggs. They aren’t like any dreams I’ve ever had. Something about that stuff, it’s magic. I’ve actually been excited to sleep. When I close my eyes, they’re back.”

I nodded and rested my hand on his shoulder. He put his hand on my arm for a second, like he was saying, Thank you, and then he walked away. I watched him for several hundred yards until he disappeared into one of the buildings across campus.

The morning after Winters spoke to the reporters and took pictures with kids, I showed up to work and found him asleep in the operating room. It was unusual because every morning Winters got up at five to work out, and by the time I got there at eight, he would already be in the simulator or running over the Nebula-IV docking sequence. So when I walked into the observation room with my coffee and saw he was still in bed, I knew something was wrong.

I radioed Rachel to meet me in the operating room while I checked the logbook used to document Winters’ sleep schedule, dosage levels, and vital stats. I flipped to the last page and saw where Rachel had noted Winters’ bedtime as: 7:15 the previous night. Next to “Dosage” it read: 1.9 ml.

Rachel came running around the corner and met me at the operating room entrance as I was going in.

“Why did Winters go to bed so early last night?” I asked, heading toward the automated IV machine.

“I don’t know,” she said, following.

“He didn’t mention feeling sick or unusually tired?”

“I didn’t talk to him at all.”

I turned around. “What do you mean you didn’t talk to him? It didn’t interest you that he wanted to go to bed three hours earlier than normal?”

“Of course it did,” she said, stiffening. “But he was already asleep when I came in at eight, which is when I always come in. Ordinarily I’m in the room two hours before he shows up. So there was no reason to think I should have been here earlier.”

“But you marked his sleep time as starting at seven thirty. How could you know that if he was already asleep?”

She looked away and I could see she was a little embarrassed. “I was estimating. I asked someone in the cafeteria what time they thought he left. They said about seven fifteen. I came in at eight.”

Looking at Winters I noticed he was not at all disturbed by the volume of our conversation. I walked over to the bed and, grabbing him by the shoulders, gently shook him.

“Hey buddy, wake up. It’s Driggs. Can you hear me?” I checked his pulse and then patted his cheek with my palm. “I need you to wake up, man. Come on, buddy. Snap out of it.” I began slapping him harder. The clapping of my palm against his cheek seemed to boom off the walls.

“Oh my god,” Rachel said, holding her hand over her mouth.

I checked the IV machine. The digital display read: 4.5 ml.

“Shit! Rachel what happened?”

She came over to where I was standing, staring down at the blinking green digits.

“That can’t be right,” she said, backing away.

“You wrote one-point-nine in the log book,” I said, feeling my stomach swirl.

“I wrote that because that’s what I set it to.”

“When?”

“In the afternoon when I checked the equipment. I always do it then, that way he can go to sleep whenever he’s ready if I’m not around.”

The room seemed to tilt as a black wave flooded my vision. I collapsed onto my knees. “He turned it up,” I said, as sickness crept up in my throat. I bent over and vomited on the floor. I felt Rachel’s hand on my back. “He turned it up,” I whispered, wiping spit on my shirtsleeve.

When I finally looked up at Winters he appeared relaxed, on his back under the blanket, a faint smile on his lips, as though he were sitting on a beach somewhere with the sun warming his face.

The security footage confirmed it. Winters walked into the room and went straight for the IV machine, where he casually adjusted the dial, increasing his dosage to more than twice the amount calculated to put him in a coma for a month. The angle didn’t show his face clearly, so I couldn’t even guess how far he had meant to go with it. But he knew the danger. Maybe he thought it wasn’t that much? Maybe he’d changed his mind about Rendezvous? Maybe he just couldn’t wait to see them?

When the medical team had checked him out and concluded he was stable, we turned on the B-WIAT to see what was happening. On the monitor, Winters was on a bicycle moving fast. He was riding on the sidewalk of a busy street, heading straight toward a woman holding a camera to her eye, not paying attention to her surroundings. Just as he was about to pass her she

stepped into his path with the camera still pressed to her face, taking a picture of something out of frame. Swerving to the right at the last second, Winters rode straight into a line of low-standing bushes that grabbed the bike, flipping him headfirst over the handlebars. All of this played out for us through Winters' eyes, as though he were carrying a camera. The picture stayed sharp and surprisingly steady as he rotated through the air. When he landed in the grass he remained still, staring up at the sky. A moment later Liz appeared at the bottom of the frame, upside down. She was speaking quickly and seemed very frightened. Then she stopped and seemed to be listening to Winters. A moment later a smile came over her face and it grew wide until she began to laugh. Rachel and I watched her tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and then bend down to help Winters up.

“Stay here and make sure you call me the second anything changes,” I said, starting out the room.

“Where are you going?” Rachel said, a slight tremble in her voice.

“To Winters' house. I have to check on something.”

Driving the six miles from the C.A.S.T. campus to Winters' house in Burns Flats, I thought about the afternoon I met Liz at the welcoming barbeque. She had laughed through the entire story, pausing to regain her composure every few moments. I had asked her to tell me how they met, having gotten only a few details from family and friends during my background investigation. Winters had rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, she'll tell you. She loves to tell that story.”

It concerned me that what we'd just seen on the B-WIAT monitor was completely real, almost word for word as Liz had described it that day, right down to the way Winters had her

laughing seconds after she'd caused him to wreck in the bushes. The first thing he'd seen after taking the Pons, when he first began to see them in his sleep, had just been a dream. A moment in a diner drinking milkshakes. But if at some point he had begun to see memories, it could change everything. The reality was, if the memories were coming, whether chronologically or not, at some point he would experience Junie and Liz dying again. I knew if that happened while he was under, he'd never wake up.

Inside his closet, I pushed aside his clothes hanging on hangars, swept my hand over the shelves behind and above them, pulled open his dresser drawers. The space under his bed was empty except for a guitar case. The shelves in the garage were bare. The kitchen cabinets contained only what I'd expect to find. Then I noticed a shoebox sitting open on the table in the dining room. There were pictures stacked inside the box and fanned out on the table. I sat down and picked up a handful. They seemed to span the years before Winters and Liz met, up until not long before the accident. The majority contained Junie, from when she was a tiny thing, to the precious seven year old I had known. There was Junie in her Easter dress. There was Junie photographed from across the room while throwing a tantrum, her face scrunched in misery as Liz bends down close to her. I flipped through them, one after the next, looking for something I'd recognize. It only took a minute to find one. It was a picture of Liz in the garage with a blue-tipped paintbrush in her hand, crouched next to a half-finished dresser. The next one was of Winters holding Junie above his head at the Grand Canyon like he's about to toss her over the side, as she beams back at the camera in delight. Every picture became more familiar: Junie squinting in front of a jet at an air show; Winters pushing Junie on a merry-go-round; a blue-jay drinking from a fountain, upstaged by a blurry Winters flying upside down over the handlebars of a bicycle stuck in a row of bushes.

I sat the pictures down on the table and, though I've always been more a man of science than faith, began to say a prayer for my friend. I said, God, if you're listening, let him know he might not have much time. Ask him to wake up. To let them go.

I'm sitting in the observation room with my feet propped against the glass. A lukewarm cup of coffee grows cold on the floor next to the chair. Staring at Winters' thick beard and shaggy hair, I jot a note at the top of the notepad I'm holding that says: haircut and shave—do it myself? Then I go back to sketching the room, trying to get the shadows in the corners just right.

After I resigned they agreed to let me stick around and keep an eye on him. Instead of moving him to a hospital, since he had no family to consider, they brought in the necessary equipment and kept him in the observation room. Cheaper for them, not having to pay hospital bills when there are doctors here on campus. His vitals have been stable for three months. The docs that have been in say there's no way to know if he'll wake up. They give him fifty-fifty odds, which to me is the same as asking a random person on the street. But I think he's got a better shot. He just needs to want it.

Rachel comes in at noon with lunch. She resigned too, out of guilt. I'm here more, but she brings me lunch every day and we play a game of cards or Scrabble after we eat. A few times I've caught myself plotting out where we might go from here, but then I stop and shove those thoughts to the back. It's not right to think about that now. But maybe someday, when Winters wakes up, or finally goes. Until then I've decided I'll stay here as long as I can. It feels like I owe that.

Rachel hands me a sandwich and pulls a chair next to me. In the room with Winters the B-WIAT monitor is turned on and facing us. I'd hoped that as time passed the Pons' effect might lessen and we'd see it in the diminishing clarity of the images, which would be good news, but that hasn't happened yet.

"Anything new?" she asks, before taking a bite of sandwich.

"Actually, yeah. Earlier I watched them dance."

"Winters and Liz?"

"Yeah. They were on the floor of Hangar B. It was empty, just a cavernous space, open on both ends. Sunlight was spilling in at the north entrance, spotlighting them as they slow-danced across the concrete. It was really beautiful."

"I wish I could've seen that," she says, putting her sandwich down. "Another memory?"

"No, and that's why it's so interesting. Liz died before Hangar B was finished. So it couldn't have been a memory."

Rachel turns toward me and places her hand on my shoulder. "Wait, that's got to mean something, right? What does that mean?"

"I've been thinking about that." I put my sandwich down on the floor and step close to the glass. "For months now he's been doing nothing but reliving memories. But now he's dreaming again. He's creating moments. He's not giving up. His subconscious isn't okay with just withering away as his life literally replays in front of him."

I turn to Rachel and see how bright her eyes look. She's taken this as hard as anyone and it breaks my heart. She stands beside me and I grab her hand. "I think it means he wants to come back but doesn't know how yet," I say.

The monitor flickers in the operating room as a different scene begins to play. Winters is rowing in a canoe, as Liz sits at the other end with her hand on Junie's back as she leans over the edge, trailing her finger through the water. They're on a lake, on a cloudless day.

"See, look at this," I say, nodding toward the machine. The monitor is filled with blue sky as Winters looks upward. "What do you think he's looking at?"

Rachel steps close to the glass. "I don't know. Maybe that hawk that just flew into view."

I don't bother looking at the monitor. I look at Rachel, at the strands of hair hanging loose from the bun held up by a pencil. I watch the smooth rise and fall of her chest as she breathes. I notice her lovely small ears. "Look closer," I say. "Because I think he's staring past that. I think he's looking beyond the blue, out to the black of space where he belongs. I think, in a way, he's telling us he'll come back."

Rachel looks at me and smiles, and I feel so much hope.

Vita

Heath Fisher was born in Claremore, Oklahoma. He obtained his bachelor's degree in Sociology, with an emphasis in Criminology, from the University of Oklahoma in 2005. He obtained his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans in 2012.