

Spring 5-15-2015

Alsobrook

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Alsobrook

(~55,000 words)

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
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing (Fiction)

By

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May, 2015

For Nicole

To Ryan, Ben, Aimée, and Ike

Acknowledgments

The most thanks goes to Nicole, without whose support, critique, and encouragement this work isn't possible. Also thanks to Eli, Max, and Lucie for giving context to the work and to me. Thanks to my closest writing tribes, the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance and the Oxford 5, for the communities in which this all grows. Thanks also to the UNO Creative Writing Workshop, particularly Neal Walsh, Barb Johnson, Rick Barton, Joanna Leake, and Richard Goodman. Thanks to Tom Franklin for early insights and encouragement for the Alsobrook stories. Thanks to *The Rappahannock Review* for publishing "Hung Over" in its Issue 1.2, included in revised version here under the title "Muddy the Water"; to *The Carolina Quarterly* for publishing an earlier version of "Tree Houses" in its online complement to its journal; and to *Euphony Journal* for publishing an earlier version of "Addressing You" in its Spring 2014 issue. Thanks to my partners at the law firm of Jones, Swanson, Huddell & Garrison, for their support and understanding as I pursued the MFA. Selma, for what it's worth, thanks for raising me and showing me what the world is, and for giving me so much material. And thanks, not least, to Mom and Dad and my sister, Kim. To grow up in a house of intelligence and thought and awareness and love is the best start for any life, and particularly mine.

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Tree Houses

On a Saturday in January, late morning, Joe Alsobrook slides down the gully side into the creek bottom and hikes far along the creek by himself, a second-hand coat keeping him warm, and a hat that smells like camphor.

It's 1983, a new year, and Joe is eleven years old and lives with his mother and father and two older sisters in their small town in a small house with dirty green shag carpets, peeling linoleum in the kitchen, and an ever-present smell of dog piss. But the house is a good house because it sits next to the gully with the hardwood bottomland and the creek running through it.

The gully is a gash through the landscape of his small Alabama town of Meadowview, but the woods in it are like a forest, and the creek swims with minnows and tadpoles and small snakes and, in the deeper holes, Joe imagines there might be large bream and carp. Last spring, warm fronts invaded the winter cold with tornadoes and torrential downpours. The river backed into the creek and it swelled until it filled the gully. At night Joe heard the bellow of alligators, and the snakes crawled up into his backyard, and all the world contained adventure, the possibility of danger.

In the summer, when the big waters drained away and the creek bubbled through beds of soapstone and fine sand, Joe and his friends built dams from rocks and fallen logs and imagined they were explorers and pioneers settling a newfound land. They found arrowheads and tied them to sticks and chased imaginary redcoats through the woods, and sometimes rebs, too. Sometimes Joe's friends were the rebs and chased Joe and his cadre of Sherman's troops through the gully, splashing through shallow water, leaping across muddy bogs in the low places, yelling

their rebel yells, dirt streaked on their faces, cockleburrs carpeting their socks and stuck in the fine boyhood hairs on their legs.

In the fall the snakes grew fat. On cooler weekend mornings before the Alabama football game came on the TV, Joe would spy the plumped snakes sunning on broad rocks beside the creek as he explored the bottom. Large leaves of sycamore and hickory and smaller leaves of oak carpeted the bottom with a crunching cover that Joe piled together and buried himself in before he climbed the steep gully wall and came home with grubs and ants and twigs working into his jeans and his shirt and his underwear.

Now the creek barely trickles, the summer's dams busted, and the trees are skeletons and the leaves are damp and beaten and even the mud bogs are frozen. Joe shuffles along the bank, past the summer swimming hole, past the tree that juts out from the small dirt cliff, through the soapstone canyon, and even past the railroad trestle far upstream to where the Andersons' cow pasture comes down to the water.

A rusted barbwire fence is strung from one weathered, gnarled fencepost to the next, down the gully-side into the creek bottom, where it runs to an old corrugated metal barn, then from the barn almost to the edge of the creek, where it turns and bounds the pasture until it cuts back up the hillside on the upstream end of the Andersons' property. The barn seems little more than a jumble of metal and trash trees and old wooden beams, impenetrable and uninhabitable, probably knocked down in the spring floods, but the Andersons' small herd still commands the pasture.

As the cows low behind him, Joe sits on his haunches on the creek bank just outside the barbwire and thinks of girls, like Cindy, whose desk he leaves wildflowers on that he picks on his bike ride to school, and he thinks of Ms. Smythe, the exotic British math teacher who just

moved to town to teach his fifth grade class, and he wonders if they would like the creek bottom. He skitters stones across the thin ice at the edge of the creek, and occasionally looks over his shoulder to make sure the bull of the herd keeps its distance. Joe's friend Gerald told him once how his cousin got cornered by the bull and how it took three ambulance crews to pull him out of the pasture while fending off the bull's charges. Joe is never sure whether to believe Gerald, but he figures why take chances.

After the sun crawls past noon, Joe's stomach pangs with hunger. He leaves the cow pasture and retraces his route, past the trestle, through the canyon, past the jutting tree and the swimming hole, and back up the gully wall to his house. By the time he gets home, the sun has fallen the distance of the width of three of Joe's fingers held at arm's length up to its high-point in the sky, and he wonders if he will be in trouble for having been gone so long. He walks through the back door, letting it slam.

His mom is yelling at his oldest sister, Delilah, down the hallway toward the bedrooms. Yelling at each other is all they seem to do anymore now that Delilah is in her senior year of high school. His other sister, Ruth, sixteen and quiet, sits on the floor behind an easy chair in the den, headphones plugged into the family stereo, a stack of 45s strewn on the carpet beside her, her head bobbing, her eyes tight shut. His dad snores on the sofa, John Wayne on the television. His mom strides from the hallway, through the living room, on her way to the kitchen. She barely looks at Joe—"Your lunch is on the table"—before she's in the kitchen and pots are clanging. Joe sits down at the dining room table and chews a baloney sandwich and wonders what life would be like if maybe his parents were dead. He imagines it might not be too different.

Their death needn't be too violent or awful or protracted. A car wreck, maybe, but not their fault. They don't deserve to be punished or in pain. Maybe a drunk driver when they're on

their way home from one of their few nights out for dinner. “They didn’t feel a thing, son,” the cop would say, standing on their front porch, stooped down, a hand resting on Joe’s shoulder, the babysitter in shock behind him. “Died on impact.” Of course, the drunk driver would need to die, too, in the accident, or else everyone would expect Joe to feel some sense of anger and revenge, and that would get in the way of the receipt of the uncomplicated sympathies of girls. Could there be something cooler than being an orphan? Joe wasn’t so sure.

But then, of course, his grandparents might insist he move to their house in Arkansas. Or maybe it wouldn’t be enough that Delilah had just turned eighteen, and the government might not let him live at home.

But if they did, Joe could build a new house on the property. Maybe there was some inheritance his parents hadn’t let on about. Maybe they didn’t have to live like they did after all, thrifty with the coupons and the clothes from the second-hand store and the one chicken that his mom stretched to feed the family for a week. Maybe there was something stashed away from his other grandparents, the dead ones, his dad’s parents. He could take that and tear down the smelly one-story house and build a three-story palace like the ones on the western edge of town. It would perch on the lip of the gully, balconies looking into the trees, huge windows, and slides and rope ladders to get down into the bottomland, a deck suspended over the hillside, trees growing right through it. And maybe Cindy and her friends, Lisa and Tanya, would come over to bring him cookies because he was an orphan, and he would be listening to his sisters’ cool albums on the stereo and playing pinball on a new pinball machine, and then they would go out on the deck and Cindy would say, “It’s like living on a mountain, Joe,” all breathless, and Tanya would say, “You poor thing,” and Lisa would kiss his cheek and look away.

Joe finishes his sandwich and takes his plate into the kitchen and puts it in the sink. His mother looks up from the stove and says, “Did you have fun in the woods today, Joey?”

“Sure, mom.” So she had noticed. He goes out the back door and sits in the grass by the chain link fence overlooking the gully. The trees in the bottom start maybe forty feet below the level of his backyard, but they soar straight up and tower over the roof of his house. Maybe it wouldn’t be so good if his parents died, not at all. But still, Joe wishes he could escape above everything as easily as the trees did. He would build a series of platforms in the branches of the tallest tree, laddering up until he, too, could walk high above his house and his town. He would look down on everything and everyone. And in the neighboring trees he and his friends would build more platforms, and there would be rope swings and zip lines running from one to the other, large, thick ropes that would never fail, and trampoline nets stretched from one tree to another so that in case anyone fell they would bounce right back up onto a platform. But the nets would only catch him and his friends and their guests. Any intruders who fell would hit the spikes they would bury beneath the leaves below.

As the weather warmed, they would build thatched roofs over each platform, and string hammocks up in the canopy. They would live there, all together, Joe and his friends, and they would make dye from tree bark to darken their faces and hands so no one would see them as they moved through the woods. They would distill invisible ink from the juice of berries growing in the brambles on the forest floor, and weave paper from the grasses that lined the gully, and would send messages through the trees by affixing notes to the legs of doves. At night, their lanterns and elevated campfires would decorate the forest like an eternal Christmas, and their drums would tell stories and send warnings and make music. They would dance, up in the trees, and owls would shake their heads in disapproval.

Joe would be king, or president, or leader. His friends would present him with a pipe and they would stuff it with oak leaves and smoke together while he told them stories and legends of the constellations above their forest home. Tonight Joe would read a book of those stories and legends that he saw on the family bookshelf, and tomorrow he'd start building, or at least draw up the plans. There would be windmills in the treetops, and water wheels in the creek, to power their record players and turn their grinding wheels and their sharpening stones. Grain would need to be ground and blades sharpened, to make food and tools and weapons.

When everything was built and order created, they would allow girls in, to see it all. Maybe Ms. Smythe could come teach them class there, be their tutor, so enamored with the world they had built that she would leave the school. And if robbers came to their forest, or Russians, they would protect Ms. Smythe. They would have spears and arrows and large battering logs poised on ropes ready to swing down and obliterate four-wheelers or tanks or columns of troops. And if any of Joe's friends would turn into spies, he would know it, because he is smarter than all of them, and he would cut down the rope ladders and zip lines and live with Ms. Smythe in the tallest treetop, protecting her for all his days, and maybe one day, when it was hot, and they were both brown from the sun, she would kiss him, and maybe her blouse would slip off one shoulder, and she would say, "I love you, Joe Alsobrook. You've always been my best student. Kiss me again."

"Joe!" shouts his dad, bellowing and sleepy. He's at the back door. "I've been calling you."

"Hey, Dad. Didn't hear you." Joe gets up from the grass by the chain link fence and wonders what chore he's forgotten, what test has just been unearthed from his backpack, what he's done wrong this time.

His dad smiles. “You’ve got a friend at the front door. A girl. Says her name’s Cindy.”

Joe is unsure how to respond to the sudden panic in his chest, but his dad steps away from the doorway and into the house. Joe walks in and through the dining room and kitchen and sees his mom talking to Cindy in the front hallway.

“Here he is, dear,” his mom says with that smile she saves for people outside the family.

“Hey, Joe,” Cindy says.

“Oh, hey,” and Joe looks at his mom and wonders when she’ll go back to whatever she was doing.

“Want to come out?” Cindy asks. “My folks told me to go out and ride my bike, but Lisa’s not home, and I’m not allowed to ride as far as the next neighborhood so I can’t go see what Tanya’s up to. You want to ride bikes?”

Joe thinks of his bike in the side yard, two flat tires since the summer, three months of reminding his dad that they need to be pumped up. “Nah,” he says, “I don’t want to ride anywhere.” He toes the dirty welcome mat on the front porch, thinking of some way to keep Cindy from riding away on her pink Schwinn. “You want to go down to the creek?”

“Sure,” Cindy says.

Joe tells his mom, who was still standing just behind him, “bye,” and leaps off the front porch and leads Cindy around the edge of the house. They half run, half fall through the muddy mat of leaves down the gully wall until they stand at the bottom surrounded by tree trunks.

“My folks never let me come down here,” Cindy says.

“I come down here all the time.” Joe feels a little taller. He doesn’t feel as nervous around Cindy down here in the woods as he does when they’re in school. He’d never even told her that the flowers at her desk were from him. She always paused to look at them, then swept

them into her backpack. Joe wonders if they all collect there, compacted by books, melding together in the dark. “It can be kind of muddy and wet down here sometimes,” Joe says, gesturing to the woods around them, “but I don’t care.”

“I don’t either,” Cindy says. Joe looks down and fidgets his feet in the leaves.

“Want to go see the Andersons’ big bull?” he asks.

“Up past the railroad bridge?”

“Uh-huh. It’s awesome. That bull rammed into Gerald’s cousin once. Took six ambulance crews to rescue him.”

“You sure it’ll be all right?”

“Sure I’m sure. I know how to handle him. I was just up there this morning.”

The light falls through the bare tree limbs in late afternoon gold as they ramble over roots and rocks along the creek bank. A knocking sounds somewhere above and Cindy grabs Joe’s sleeve. He looks back at her and she points into a tree. Joe follows the line of her finger and sees a woodpecker, the bright red feathers on its head flashing as it works through the bark, seeking bugs for dinner.

“Why’d your folks tell you to go out of the house?” Joe asks as they keep hiking.

“They probably wanted to fight about something. They don’t like each other very much. Sometimes I come in and they’re screaming at each other.” Cindy sounds remarkably calm.

“That stinks,” Joe says. “My parents don’t do that. Seems they never talk to each other at all.”

“Your parents are sweet, Joe.”

“Whatever. They don’t even notice when I’m not there.” Joe feels wrong saying it, but right then he wants it to be true, wants Cindy to see him as tough, self-sufficient, someone she can rely on.

“How can you know that,” Cindy says, “if you’re not there?” She sounds irritated, but when he peeks behind at her, she’s smiling.

Ahead through the trees, Joe sees the beams that support the train trestle. “Almost there,” he says. It’s seemed to take no time at all, though he wants this walk with Cindy to never end.

Cindy reaches out and grabs Joe’s arm. “Stop a second, Joe.”

His heart knocks against his ribs. He’s immediately filled with joy and fear at her touch. Maybe they would kiss. Would he know how?

“Listen,” she says.

He only hears his own breathing, short and sharp. “What?” he whispers.

“It’s nothing,” she whispers back. “Do you hear that? Nothing.”

Joe knows it now, what she’s getting at. This far up the creek, this scar of nature, they are far from any cars or yelling parents or blaring radios. It might be the only truly quiet place in their town. “Yeah,” he says. It’s why he comes down here so much, though he couldn’t have put words to it until Cindy asked him to listen. Sharing this realization, Joe thinks, is like a kiss.

They stay still for minutes. Joe’s heart calms. Then, not far off, the bull bellows in its pasture.

Cindy lets go of Joe’s arm. “Thanks,” she says. “Let’s keep going.”

They cross under the trestle, rising towers of creosote-soaked beams, and fifty yards farther reach the barbwire fence. The cows have gathered a short distance off, at the base of the hill. The old barn is mounded to their right.

“What’s all that?” Cindy asks, pointing to the pieces of metal and poles jutting haphazardly.

“The barn I guess they used to keep the cows in,” Joe says.

“I bet the cows wish they still had it, at night,” Cindy says. “Even if they could just get up by the walls, be together. To not have a house must be awful.”

“I don’t know,” Joe says. “They kind of get to be free. I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Come off it, Joe. We should help them. I bet we could pull some of that metal out of the way so they could get back in there.” She’s looking at Joe reproachfully, but then she smiles instead. He could do this, sure.

“All right,” he says. “We can try. I’ll check it out.” Joe steps over a low fence post covered in winter-deadened honeysuckle vine and past a sheet of corrugated tin, its ragged edge catching for a moment on his coat, then ripping free, leaving a hole and frayed threads. He grunts and looks back at Cindy. She looks less sure. He shrugs his shoulders, then turns and walks up a sloping piece of metal. At the top of the slope, there’s a five-foot drop off the sharp edge of the piece of tin he’s just walked up, into what once was probably a little pen in front of the barn. Around the pen, now a clearing piled with leaves and strewn with limbs and torn up pieces of tire, sheets of metal and fence posts and old barbwire haphazardly rise in all directions, tangled with little trash trees and an impenetrable mesh of vines, leaving the pen as a clearing almost completely surrounded by these brambled walls. Across from where he stands atop the sloped piece of tin is the old gate into the pasture, and Cindy was right. Just a couple smaller pieces of tin blocking the way.

“Come on,” he calls back to Cindy. “We can fix it for them easy!”

He jumps down into the clear space, leaves flying in all directions where he lands. His knees buckle beneath him and he rolls a few feet and back up into a standing position. Cindy's footsteps echo on metal as she clambers up the ramped piece he's just jumped from, but then Joe hears her stop and gasp.

"Don't move, Joe!" she says. Joe turns his head and sees Cindy looking at the ground around him, her eyes big. He looks down. The pieces of tire and sticks that had been scattered around slowly move in sinews through the leaves, mottled spots of menace on their backs, poisonous triangles of snakes' heads at their fronts, forked tongues darting in and out, tasting the air that carries the smell of him.

Last summer, one foot on a little gravel island near the edge of the creek and another on the bank, straddling a fast-flowing course of water he was about to dam off with a large rock in his hand, he had watched as a copperhead like these dislodged itself from an overhanging root upstream and splashed into the water, smoothly racing down the current with its head just above the surface, floating and swimming up to him and then between his legs and on down the creek. He'd felt so calm, when it was just one of them, but this must be ten, bigger, fatter. Joe feels far less calm, but knows he can't show fear around the snakes or around Cindy.

"Fuck, Cindy, what should I do?" he asks, almost in a whisper, invoking the holy grail of tough words to mask his fear. Cindy's eyes narrow again, and she takes small steps backwards, trying to stay quiet.

She whispers back, nothing more than a loud rasp, "I'm going to run back and get your dad." Before Joe can protest, she disappears.

The snakes slow their movements. The closest one is about five feet away from where Joe stands still, trying not to lock his knees and pass out, and the rest are in a rough circle around

him, waiting. Joe wonders if they're coordinating their attack, sending signals and thoughts to one another, calculating which one should sneak from behind when Joe's head is turned, what sort of distraction to create or spell to cast to finish their job. Or maybe he's only momentarily aroused them from winter hibernation and they're going back to sleep.

The snakes don't move closer. Joe begins to breathe slower. He looks up to the sun, low on his left shoulder, and into the trees. Joe wishes he had wings. If he had wings, he would unfurl them now, stretch them slowly to their full spread so as not to alarm the snakes, and he would gently flap them and rise straight up out of the snake pit, until he could alight on a branch above. If his tree house village were in place, he could swing from one tree to another on the ropes until he could zip-line down onto the balcony of his house overlooking the gully. Except his parents were still alive and there was no balcony on a house overlooking the gully, just a dog-piss rank little ranch house with a yard and a chain link fence. But it's a good house, and a good yard, and in the summer at night the whole gully lights with fireflies flying from the forest ground to the tops of the trees, and he can see it all from that backyard, standing at that fence.

Joe wishes it were summer now, and not winter surrounded by snakes. He wonders if Cindy has made it back to his house, if his dad is on his way yet. He wonders what his dad will do when he gets here. Will he have his hoe with him? He used it to chop the head off a small copperhead during the spring floods, one that had slithered up onto the stoop by the back door. Maybe he'd have the hoe in one hand and an axe through his belt loop. He would wield the hoe to chop off the heads of the snakes on one side, and toss the axe to Joe to chop off the heads of the snakes on the other side, and they would, the two of them, be slinging blades, metal catching the rays of the setting sun, a blinding orange blur as Cindy watched, until they were tired, their arms spent from the swinging, and one large copperhead remained, its head still on, coiling and

slithering toward Joe, ready to strike, and just as it prepared to strike, Joe's dad would pull his old Army service revolver from a pocket, take aim, and shoot. The copperhead would go flying, headless, blood spurting a fountain across the leaves and corrugated metal, and they would cheer, Joe and his dad and Cindy, and then march triumphantly home. Together.

But Joe has no wings, the snakes keep their circle around Joe, and the woods are quiet. Even the woodpecker is silent. Late afternoon threatens to be dusk. Joe wonders if the snakes are sleeping again, returning to their state of hibernation, except every now and then he sees a tongue flick, imagines he sees an eyelid blink. He wonders if he'll have to sleep here, too, hibernate with the snakes. He wonders if he'll wake up as one of them, cold-blooded and venomous and slithering, when spring comes. He wonders if his parents will miss him. Did Cindy get his dad? He bets she just ran home, scared.

But then he hears footsteps, running, leaves crackling under feet.

"Where was he?" his dad's voice ask.

"Not much farther," Cindy says. "The Andersons' old barn. Just past that big oak. See the metal?"

"I see it, I see it."

"Tiptoe up that sloped piece, Mr. Alsobrook. He's right past it, and there's snakes all around him."

Joe hears stealthy steps up the metal, the tin groaning under the weight of an adult. He looks down at the snakes. Aside from their tongues, they don't move. His dad appears at the top of the ramped metal wall. He has no hoe in his hand, no axe through his belt loop, no gun in his pocket. It's just him.

"You see him, Mr. Alsobrook? Is he still there?" Cindy asks.

“Yes, Cindy. He’s OK.” His dad assesses the situation, looking from Joe to the ground around him.

“Dad? What are you going to do?”

“Just stay calm, Joe. You’re doing fine.” Joe’s dad lowers himself until he’s sitting on the edge of the piece of tin. He’s wearing the steel-toed work boots he wears to his job at the mill during the week, and that he never wears on the weekends. Joe’s dad slips off the edge of the ramped metal and lands with a shush of leaves in the clearing.

“Dad, no, we’ll both be trapped.”

“They don’t want you, Joe. Not more than I do,” his dad says, calmly. Steadily, he walks toward Joe. With each step, whatever snake is nearest to him slithers away to stay out of range of his boots. Without a further word, Joe’s dad stands beside him and the snakes are in a wider, looser circle. He lifts Joe and cradles him against his body. Joe feels small again, and protected, smelling his dad’s aftershave and cigarettes on his skin, feeling the roughness of his chin.

His dad turns and walks back the way he came in. At the wall he lifts Joe up and sets him on the edge of the ramp. Joe looks at the clearing. The copperheads stay in their circle, and he feels them watching him, feels their disappointment.

“Go back down and wait with Cindy,” his dad says. “That’s too high for me to get up on. I’m going to go out through that old gate on the other side and make my way back around to you.”

“But, Dad ...”

“Just go down and wait with her,” he says again, firmly. “She’s worried about you. I’m not coming back out until you’re down there with her.” Joe turns and sees Cindy, hugging herself

at the bottom of the ramp. He takes a step toward her, then turns his head to see his dad, already walking back toward the snakes to get to the gate on the other side.

“Go on, Joe,” his dad says, without turning around.

Joe walks down the corrugated wall until he’s standing with Cindy.

“You all right, Joe?” she asks.

“Yeah. It was nothing,” he says. He tries to wear a look of annoyance. “Stupid snakes.”

“It’s all right,” Cindy says. She touches his arm again, lightly this time, but Joe doesn’t notice.

“Thanks for getting my dad,” he says. It’s taking his dad longer than he thinks it should to come back around. His heart beats. Cindy’s hand stays on his arm. A breeze starts in the tops of the trees. The woodpecker begins again, tapping on the tree. Slowly, first in his hands, then up his arms and down his legs, and finally, in his gut, Joe starts to shiver.

“It’s cold,” he says, “the sun going down.”

“It’s all right,” Cindy says. Joe hears footfalls in the leaves, a stick break. He holds his breath. His dad pushes through the tangle of vines around the edge of the wrecked horse shed.

“Let’s go home,” his dad says, looking at the two of them and walking past. “Get these damn boots off.”

Cindy drops her hand from Joe’s arm and follows behind his dad. Joe watches for a moment, knowing already that Cindy will still not talk to him much when they’re in school, that he may still leave her flowers on her desk anyway, from time to time. He hurries his step to catch up and fall in line. Nobody talks. As they near the base of the gully wall adjacent to his house, quicker and closer than he imagined, it is already dusk in the creek bottom, farther from the sun than the houses up on the gully’s lip. Joe looks up and sees the reddened light of sunset reflecting

off the windows on the side of his house. It's a good house, with supper and sisters inside, and with parents who are neither dead yet nor yelling at each other yet, and when the gully fills with floodwaters or the trees groan with ice or the mud bogs freeze, the house will be there.

Muddy the Water

One Sunday morning in late spring when I was twelve, about to turn thirteen, I woke up with a hangover. My pulse pounded through my temples. My stomach was unsure. The sweetness of cola and rum had further distilled into something rotten in the back corners of my mouth.

“Get up, Joe,” Ruth, my sister, said, walking by my bedroom door.

I heard the clank and rustle of beer cans and liquor bottles piling together in a garbage bag. I went to stand, but was pulled back by the headphones still on my head and tethered to my stereo. I’d passed out listening to a mix tape Shaun had given me that Friday after school. I slipped the headphones off, looked over at the tape deck, and remembered about the canoe trip Shaun and I were supposed to take that morning.

“Damnit.” I got back up.

“Can you drive me over to Shaun’s?” I asked as I stumbled up the hallway.

When I emerged into the living room, Ruth was on her knees, scrubbing hard at a stain on the coffee table. A large black garbage bag in the center of the room overflowed with bottles and cups and pizza boxes. A haze hung in the air, of liquor fumes and stale cigarette smoke.

“Take your bike,” Ruth said. “I’ve got to get this place back to new before Mom and Dad get home.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

Ruth stopped scrubbing and looked at me. For a second she almost appeared concerned, but then frustration returned to her face.

“All the more reason for you to get out of here, OK? Mom and Dad can’t find out about this or I won’t be able to leave my room for the rest of senior year. Go on, Joe.”

And then she was on to the next spot, scrubbing, her hair falling into her face.

I went out the side door to the fenced-off storage yard where we kept the bikes, old cans of paint, tools, and lawn mower. An older kid was curled up on a pile of paint-spattered drop cloths, one of the cloths pulled over him. I stuck my head back in the door.

“Ruthie!” I yelled.

She had the vacuum cleaner screaming. It didn’t stop. I called her name again, with still no response.

“Screw it,” I said, then I stepped over the guy and wheeled my bike out to the driveway.

Ruthie opened the front door and yelled out to me, “Don’t come back home before three! I don’t want you or any of your friends messing this place up while I’m trying to clean!”

I waved my hand back at her without looking in her direction, more a swat than a wave. I was glad for the orders to not come back. I hopped on my bike and started the ride across town.

“Across town” was no big deal, not in Meadowview, in those days. I rode the sidewalk past the new cemetery, the football stadium, the park, the Country Club golf course, across the Valley Creek bridge and then through a stone gate and onto the dirt paths of the old cemetery. That part only took about five minutes. A cool ride under live oaks, past Confederate dead resting beneath mossy, granite slabs and monuments, then out the back gate of the cemetery, and then it was only another five minutes of antebellum cottages into downtown. A total of ten minutes of riding and I was already crossing Broad Street and into the black side of town.

The large old buildings on the high bluff of the river tapered down into docks, warehouses, and mechanics' shops, then quiet streets lined in trees and streaming vines, some streets paved and some not, and little bungalow neighborhoods.

After twenty minutes of riding that felt like an hour to my soured stomach, I coasted my bike into a patchy grass yard in front of a house painted dark green, a wide concrete front porch extending before it. Shaun sat on the steps, his chin cupped in his hands.

"Starting to think you wasn't coming," he said.

"I slept longer than I meant to. Ruth had a party last night while my parents were up in Tuscaloosa seeing Lilah at the University. Parents' weekend."

"You look like hell done ate you up." Shaun stepped down off the porch and started walking around to his backyard. I propped my bike against the side of his house and followed.

Behind his house, a shady yard stretched to some trees about a hundred feet back. Tumbled against the undergrowth by the tree line was a beat-up old aluminum canoe.

Shaun had told me Friday at lunch that he'd got a canoe, and I told him I canoed plenty in Scouts, and he told me that was fine, that I could teach him on Sunday morning, that we could take it down into the river. I'd told him it would be like a Huck Finn adventure. He'd told me he wasn't no goddamned Jim. I'd said that was fair enough.

"It's your uncle's?" I asked.

"Yeah. He said I could have it. When he was lying there in the hospital not talking to nobody else. You sure you know how to do one of these things?"

Shaun grabbed two wooden paddles from the weeds, and we each held an end of the canoe and dragged it down a hill through the woods from his backyard. We came out on a muddy flat by the river.

“This is sweet,” I said. “I thought having the creek by my house was awesome, but you’ve got the Alabama River in your backyard.”

“Yeah, but it floods, though, about every year,” Shaun said.

“Well the creek floods, too, when the river backs into it. Fills up the whole bottom. The river ever get up into your house?”

“Naw. Just up into the yard. One year we were catching catfish off the back porch and Mama was frying them up in the kitchen before they were even dead.” We pushed the tip of the canoe out into the water.

“You get in first,” I said. I held it steady while Shaun took one of the paddles and tight-roped down the middle of the boat until he was sitting on the front seat. I slipped off my tennis shoes and threw them into the back of the canoe. I pushed the canoe farther into the water, its bottom scraping along the mud, my feet slipping in the glop until I was up to my knees in the river. Little sharp sticks poked my soles. I swung one foot over the side and landed on the back seat, my other leg trailing in the water as I reached across to grab the other paddle out of the bottom of the boat. The canoe rocked perilously close to taking on water.

“Damn, Joe, I thought you knew how to do this!”

“I’m feeling off balance today a little. Calm down.” I brought my other leg over, and our rocking smoothed into a glide. “Where should we go?”

“Bridge and back. It’s just around the bend a ways.” We paddled out toward the middle of the river, enough to get away from all the snags along the bank, then I dragged my paddle on our right and the nose of the canoe swung quickly in the direction of the bridge. We sped along with the river, dipping our paddles in, alternating sides.

“Call out if you see any logs or anything so I can steer us around it,” I told Shaun. I watched along the bank. In spring, sometimes there were strange birds, maybe on their way back up north. It was hot. I started to sweat off the effects of the night before, though my head still pulsed.

“So what was a high school party like?” Shaun asked.

“I don’t know. Ruth gave me a big cup of coke, poured rum in it, and told me I could have it if I stayed in my room and didn’t bother them any.”

“You drank rum?” Shaun asked, turning around to look at me.

“It was sweet, mainly, but then I felt all dizzy. I put on my headphones to block out the noise of the party—that mix you made is killer—and I was listening to it turned all the way up, then the next thing I knew it was morning and I felt like a gutted carp.”

“Damn,” Shaun said. He turned around and kept paddling.

We heard the whine of a boat motor coming up from behind. A little open boat came fast down the river, towing a skier. An older, shirtless boy was hunched over the wheel, and three girls in bikini tops were seated by him, laughing. They didn’t slow at all as they approached and passed us. Another older boy was on a single ski at the end of the rope, and he swung out wide to the side until he was bearing straight down on our canoe. As he came in close, he swerved, throwing a wall of water toward us. We heard the boat’s motor roar and the girls laugh. I didn’t mind being wet. It helped shock me a little more to my senses.

But then the motorboat made a wide turn in the river up ahead, keeping up speed. They set up to come for another pass. Again the boat came on, then turned to swing the skier toward us. This time he kept his line straight, and as he passed within feet of our canoe he took one hand off the ski rope and flipped the bird at us. The boy in the boat and the three girls with him

laughed even harder than before, and the motorboat kept speeding back in the direction from which it had come. That kind of thing seemed to happen more and more as we grew from harmless kids to easy targets. By twelve, I was already starting to get the feeling I couldn't wait to get out of that damn town.

"Really?" I said to Shaun. "They going to flip off kids like they're big stuff or something?" The motor boat's wake rocked us heavily, so I pushed the paddle against the water to turn us perpendicular to the wake, pointed at the shore, so we wouldn't overturn.

"Shoot," Shaun said, "if it meant something every time some white kids drove by the house flipping birds and yelling 'nigger.' I'd just be scared all the time."

"Guess there's no point in that," I said, no clue how I'd deal with it if I were him. I turned the canoe so we were headed again toward the bridge. The passage of time meant little in 1980s Meadowview. Once, after I'd gone off to college, I was driving on the interstate outside Montgomery and saw a billboard put up by the visitors' bureau of my home county, with pictures of plantation homes and women in hoop skirts and civil war cannons, proclaiming in large letters, "HISTORY LIVES!" But when I was still twelve and hung over in Shaun's uncle's canoe, it was just how a Sunday afternoon went.

"Log ahead," Shaun called out. I feathered my paddle to our right, taking us a little closer to the bank. The log held still in the flow of the river, perhaps an old tree pulled down during a flood, snagged and held in place on the river bottom. But then it seemed to move against the current.

"You know, it might not be a log," Shaun said, and of course right then we could both see that it wasn't, that what had appeared to be two knots near the leading edge of it were actually two yellow eyes, that the "trunk" trailing it was actually a body and long tail, all told maybe

twelve feet of armored skin and muscle, swishing side to side evenly and powerfully, that before its eyes were jagged teeth lined along its snout, that it watched us closely, studying us as we came even and passed within twenty feet. All was quiet, except a “garumph” from the direction of the gator and the dripping of water from our paddles, which we held out over the water, not daring to dip them in and mimic a helpless dinner. We watched to make sure it kept going in the other direction, that it wasn’t turning to follow us.

“Damn,” I said.

“No shit,” Shaun said.

We resumed paddling, in silence. I don’t know if Shaun was consumed by thoughts about racist teenagers and man-eating gators, or about his dead uncle, or what. I was watching the surface of the water all around us, worried about what might come next. Snakes, I figured, thick-as-your-arm cottonmouths, or the Loch Ness monster’s Alabama cousin.

As we approached the bend in the river that would swing us around to where we would see the bridge and downtown clinging to the bluff, I looked up in the branches of the trees lining the bank. We were pretty close to the bank after the run-ins with the boat and the gator, and I saw a girl’s Sunday dress swinging from a tree, a long yellow satin ribbon swaying out from the bodice in the breeze.

“Shaun, look,” I said, pointing.

“I see her,” Shaun whispered, “be quiet.” Before I could figure out what he meant by “her” or why I needed to be quiet, the dress dropped down to another branch and then I could see what Shaun was seeing. The girl—young woman—was further up the bank, the spring leaves of the trees barely obstructing our view of her pale, naked skin.

I heard her voice, but couldn't make out what she was saying. Then we saw the guy behind her, and he was naked, too, and his eyes were wide. He looked scared at first, and that's when it hit me that what the girl had been saying was "Don't worry, nobody can see us down here," but the guy saw us and he ducked down and yelled, "Get out of here, damn kids!"

Shaun began to dig hard with his paddle, but I back-paddled against him so we didn't go anywhere but turn in circles.

"What the hell are you doing," Shaun asked, looking back at me, real terror in his eyes.

"Look at her," was all I could say. I'd never seen a naked woman before, for real. I mean, there was that time we found Chris Cashio's dad's stash of *Penthouse* in a box in the crawl-space under their house, and that had just been confusing, but this woman in the trees was like some angel descended.

Shaun slapped his paddle hard on the surface of the water to send a spray of water over me as we circled and I craned my head to keep my eye on her. "Come on, Joe, get us out of here!"

The guy had pulled up his underwear. "Hey!" he yelled, and started charging down the bank toward us. "I swear I'll kill you, little twerps!" The woman ducked down where she was, only sort of, and I remember her look as almost a smile.

"All right," I said, and started paddling forward, too. I didn't care right then if we were going to get rocks or sticks thrown at us, cussed out. I figured it was worth it, a stone to the head.

Shaun yelled "Fuck!" as we paddled frantically. We never really used that word much.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said.

"No you ain't." He kept paddling, looking straight ahead. I chanced a glance behind. We were far from the bank already. The couple both had their clothes grabbed up and were

struggling up the bank and into the woods. When I turned back around, the bridge and the downtown were in front of us.

Living in it, Meadowview seemed so big. It contained our entire childhoods, which were our lives. Schools and homes and churches and fights and drunks and courthouses and fire stations and bullies and tire shops and even a peppermint candy factory and five grocery stores and six barbecue joints and a pizza restaurant and three discount stores and a mall out on the bypass. But looking up at it where it perched on the bluff over the Alabama River, it looked small. It looked like a toy village. Yet it was full of so much history, contained times before Shaun and I ever were around.

The bridge swooped like a silver hawk, ready to catch up the town in its talons. It was massive and definite. Its dominant feature was a large metal arch soaring from one bank to the other, grid work holding a concrete decking high above the water, for all the cars and trucks entering and leaving the town. The bridge had been named for Peyton Edmunds, a lawyer in the 1800s who, during the Civil War, was captured four different times by the Union, but made his way up to the rank of Brigadier General. After the War, he became a Grand Dragon of the Klan, then a U.S. Senator from Alabama who helped end Reconstruction. Shaun and I were learning all about him during our seventh grade Alabama History class that year.

“It’s hot,” Shaun said.

“I know.” The previous night combined with the high sun and the hard paddle to get away from that couple, and I was starting to wilt. I didn’t want to turn us around, yet, though. It was too early to go home and face Ruthie’s wrath. She was full of needless worry and empty threats, usually, but my life was easier if I didn’t cross her. I steered us under the bridge, where a concrete revetment sloped down to the water at a gradual enough angle that we could pull up. As

soon as we were parallel to the pavement, Shaun stepped onto the concrete and held the canoe in place while I got out. He pulled a piece of rope from where it was tied to the front of the canoe, and we walked up the slope to one of the girders, where he tied it off. We sat down on the cool, bridge-shaded concrete. Shaun dug in his pocket and brought out two mashed up granola bars.

“Thanks,” I said, and we pulled broken pieces of granola out of the wrappers and ate them while we rested.

“So you think there’s always so much stuff happening on the river?” he asked.

“You mean like the skiing and the gators and the sex?”

Shaun looked at me sideways, pursing his lips. “Yeah,” he said. “And why you had to do that with them people? You want to get us beat up or something?”

“What?” I said. “Was he going to swim out after us in his underwear? I mean, did you see that girl? You ever seen anything like that?”

“No.”

“So wasn’t that all right?”

“What if they recognize us? What if they see me later walking around, you think it’s going to be all right for me, looking at that white girl?”

I felt sick again right then. Of course it hadn’t crossed my mind. “They ain’t going to recognize us,” I said, hoping it was true. “Besides, right now, not walking around later, but right now, wasn’t it all right, seeing her?”

Shaun was quiet for awhile, crunching up the rest of his granola bar. When he finished, he swallowed hard, and said, “Yes.” Then, “Damn. You thirsty?”

We stood and walked out from under the bridge into the ruins of an old riverside hotel. It was probably a grand place before the last fire burned it down sometime before we were born. It

was a maze of half-collapsed staircases going down the bluff, held up by kudzu and blackberry vines. You had to watch out for scraps of rusted metal and homeless folks sleeping up in the old hotel kitchen carved back into the river bluff behind curtains of leaves. Grown-ups used to tell us stories about kids getting grabbed and pulled behind the vines and murdered, just to scare us from going down there, but nobody we knew ever went missing, so we figured that was all a lie or in the past.

Shaun and I picked our way up a charred staircase until we were at street level. We pushed aside a piece of plywood that was screwed at one corner to block off the entrance to the property, and we were out on the sidewalk, at the intersection of Broad Street and Water Avenue. One block up Broad was the orange and blue neon of the Rexall Drug Store. As we crossed Water Street, a big Buick honked at us. Once we were on the other side, we turned and saw a young couple in the front seat, their hair sweat-matted and mussed. The guy in the driver's seat pointed at his eyes and then pointed at us, but didn't say anything.

Shaun and I turned and walked quickly up the sidewalk. "Was that them?" Shaun asked.

"The sexers? I don't know. Maybe." Could've been anyone trying to mess with us.

The bell rang above the front door of the Rexall as we walked in. The drug store smelled like my mom's nail polish remover. A rattling AC unit mounted in the transom over the door blasted over everything. The balding man at the register narrowed his eyes, looking at us over the top of a bass fishing magazine as we walked past him and to the back of the store. I dug some quarters out of my pocket and we got two bottles of Coke out of the machine. Glass bottles back then. After we dropped our quarters in, we opened a tall, thin door on the front and yanked the bottles out of their slots by their necks. The Rexall probably had the same machine for decades; maybe still does. We pried the tops off and stood in the cool aisles of the store, drinking the cola

as fast as we could. When we were done, we thunked the bottles down on the counter by the register. The man opened the register and fished out two nickels and slid them across to me, then took the bottles and put them in a wood crate on the floor behind the counter.

The clock behind him read 1:30. Still too soon to head back.

We walked back down the block and crossed the street and sat on a bench outside the barricaded entrance to the old hotel. Shaun pointed to a sign hanging by the intersection where Broad crossed Water and started to ascend the bridge. “Y’all going to that?” *Bloody Sunday Anniversary March*, the sign read. A reenactment of a voting rights march from the 60s, though without the mounted sheriff’s posse and the tear gas and the state troopers and the clubs.

“I might ride my bike down and check it out.”

“You ought to come to our church with me and my folks before, and do the march with us. My mom thinks you’re a damned saint or something.”

The traffic downtown was sparse, halfway through a Sunday afternoon. All the Methodists and Baptists and Episcopalians at the big white-folk churches up the street had all gone home to their neat houses on the west side of town for Sunday dinner. Most of the stores were closed up. Even the Rexall would close around three, about the time I would have to head home.

“Did you hear about that guy who jumped from the bridge last week?” I asked Shaun. The week before, there’d been a picture on the front of the *Times-Journal* of a skinny man hanging from the bridge deck by his fingertips, in a tank top and sweatpants, the cuffs of the pants bulging around his ankles. The story said the man let go just moments after the picture was taken and dropped into the river, that the cops figured he had rocks or bricks tied up in his pants

around his ankles to keep him under when he fell. They were still waiting for him to pop up drowner somewhere.

“Yeah,” Shaun said. “Don’t know why somebody’d go off and do something like that. Ain’t like you can’t just leave this place if you don’t like it.”

I thought about that for a moment. Leaving Meadowview sounded right, but not the way that skinny man’d done it. I didn’t know yet about the things in life that might make you want to leave the whole thing altogether.

“You know,” I said, “Gerald says his cousin got a diving rig one time and went down to the bottom, by the bridge pilings. Said it was seventy, a hundred feet down, and that there were ten-foot albino catfish swimming around, blind in all that mud.”

“That sounds about right,” Shaun said. He stood and went to squeeze back through the opening behind the plywood. “You coming?” I got up and followed him.

We picked our way over to the top of the old staircase. As we stepped down onto the first step, I was hit by a wave of nausea. It grew as we went down the steps and reached the bottom.

“I think I might throw up,” I told Shaun.

“Well don’t do it on me. I ain’t going back in my house smelling like that. Mama would have my hide, and yours, too.”

“I’m serious, man.”

“Go up in those vines, then.”

I ducked behind the vines into the old hotel kitchen area, all the old stories be damned. I immediately bent over and let out the coke and the granola bar, and probably the rum and snacks from the night before, too. When I caught my breath, I felt my head clear.

It was cool back in there. My eyes adjusted and I saw little strips of afternoon sun weaving in through the vines. If anyone lived behind here once, they were long gone. It was dank and musty, but there was no sign of recent life. No homeless murderers. No bundle of bedding. No fire ring. No child bones.

“You all right?” Shaun asked. I peered out from the vines. Shaun was standing close, like he wanted to come in and check on me but was unsure what he would find there.

“Yes,” I said. “Better. Much better.” I stepped into the light. We walked back over to the revetment under the bridge. This time I got into the canoe first while Shaun held it steady. I held my paddle against the concrete to keep us from tipping while Shaun got in.

We pushed off from the concrete with our paddles, then I dug hard on our left side, paddling backwards while Shaun paddled hard forwards on our right and we swung around. Before the current had a chance to push us out from under the bridge, we were turned around and pulling hard to head back upstream.

It was harder going than the ride downstream had been. Ahead of us somewhere was that alligator, maybe those kids in the motor boat. We stayed quiet, concentrating against the afternoon strain. We pulled for what felt like an hour until we finally got back around the bend, and only then did we turn around and look back. By then, there was nothing to see but muddy, swirling water.

Addressing You

1.

Amy, I'm addressing you. It's me, Joe Alsobrook.

I want to reach out to you, write you, call you, google you, friend you, email you, text you, see you, talk to you, touch you, tell you that I love you. Tell you I love you in a simple sentence, no modifiers or qualifiers. No silliness, no triviality, just real, transcending, complicated, miserable, hand-holding, fall day, summer sweat, knees weak, relating, elating, love.

We let them get to us.

Not that "us" was more than two months of teen-aged soap drama, high school seniors, twenty years ago. What the hell am I doing even looking you up online? Your family pictures, your smile, your children, while my children call up to me from downstairs. Fuck all.

It's been so long, I'm mostly convinced I dreamed you, dreamed us, dreamed them. Probably dreamed me, too – probably still am. Fuck all.

2.

Old hate-filled hometown, I'm addressing you now, your heart and history heavy with strange fruit. I deny you now, you know. Deny that I have anything to do with you, or you with me.

Do you remember the start of it? Band practice, the week before the first game of the season, on the practice fields across the back street from the high school, hot, August 29, 1988.

It's sweat I remember first. Sweat because it was hot and we had been out there marching and playing for two hours. But mainly sweat because I was a nervous teenaged boy about to play a song for a girl I had worshipped for almost three years, since we were freshmen, wandering the halls, lost, each from our junior highs on our own sides of town, now in the same high school, the one public high school sitting on Broad Street, the road separating the east and west sides of town, what was black from what was white.

Not that Amy would know I was playing for her. She likely didn't know I existed, or so I figured. I raised my trumpet to my lips, pressed the cold hard metal of the mouthpiece against my tightened muscles, felt the blood feel good as it flowed fast into that damned vein that popped out on my forehead whenever I blew real hard, hard like I had to blow to play a crazy love song for a girl who'd never said a word directly to me, whose body moved in ways that made me feel God, to play it loud enough to rise over the band departing from the practice field, to reach the ears of the lithe majorette practicing her baton throws on the sidelines, Amy Jones.

And then she said it, and I know you heard it just as clearly as I did. "Joe's just about the goofiest ass white boy I ever saw," she said over her shoulder to one of the other majorettes. That could have meant anything for my chances. It could have meant that I'd touched her heart, that she would be mine forever until the end of time. It could have meant that she thought I was goofy and an ass, and white, and not in a good way. It could have meant she thought I was funny. Or that I was a pervert, or a bug. Anything. But the one thing I knew it meant for sure was that she knew who I was, that she knew I existed, that she heard my song.

3.

Google search entry: "Joseph Alsobrook." 6,690 results.

Google search entry: "Amy Jones." 763,000 results.

We could be anyone.

Google search entry: "Amy Jones Alsobrook." No results found.

4.

I think I found you, Amy.

Saw you have a video-chat account. I could totally just click a link and see you, talk to you. But what would we do then? It could only be one of two things: Awkward small talk that ruins everything I hold in this memory of you. Or you see in me what I see in you, we realize the same things about time and history and mistakes, and we smile knowingly, feel a rush of physical pleasure and danger. But then what are we? What am I? Just another clown pulling his pants down for a webcam. I'm not that guy. I'm not him. Forget I even thought it.

5.

And so it was always you, my hometown. You were always looking, watching, waiting for your moment to pounce.

After the first game of the season, you were there. We were all mixed in together, the band members, the majorettes, the cheerleaders, the football players. Combined, we were you, our town. We were at the municipal stadium, headed for the buses for the ride back to the parking lot behind the school.

My uniform tunic was unbuttoned, my black concert t-shirt underneath drenched in sweat, my trumpet gripped in my right hand. I was walking next to Shaun. He was draped in his sousaphone. I had talked to Shaun at least a thousand times about Amy. But now we weren't talking at all. I was watching Amy as she walked in her majorette uniform just ahead of us. Shaun was looking at me and shaking his head. He knew what was going on.

In my head, Amy turned around and caught my gaze, but she liked it, liked me. She was all smiles between lips like soft berries. In my head, she said, "Stop staring, goofy-ass Joe, and kiss me already," and her arms were around me, pulled me against her body, and then here's the unbelievable part, I knew what to do, I kissed her, just like in the movies, with assurance and manliness, and I wasn't just one big quivering erection and anxiety, but I was suave. I knew things. And she knew I knew things. In my head.

"Dude," Shaun said, "take a picture, bruh, right?"

I dropped my eyes. I was not suave. Amy kept walking on in front of us, elbowing her friends, talking about things I would never know about.

"Damn, Shaun, what do I do?"

"Don't do anything. Don't be a freak. That song the other day was one thing, but man, don't make her feel stalked, or like you're some kind of weirdo."

"I've been invisible for two years."

"Relax," Shaun said as we got up to the band bus, then he looked over his shoulder at me. "Come to Johnny's tonight. She'll probably be there."

You know about Johnny's house. After every home game, it's where half the seniors and juniors went to hang out and party, the black half mainly, except for the occasional white football

players thinking they could score some weed there easier than on their side of town. They always left empty handed, but feeling cooler, somehow in on something. They never stayed.

“You think it’s cool?” I asked Shaun.

He looked back at me in the aisle of the school bus, crinkled his brow, exhaled sharply.

“Man, please.”

6.

You have lost it.

I am addressing you, Joe Alsobrook, aging face in the mirror, googler of old girlfriends and wives never married, ignorer of family, betrayer of customers, progenitor of fatherless children.

I saw you the other day, shuddering in fear as you drove through the wrong part of town. I saw you lock your doors at the downtown intersection. You can’t escape me.

7.

Amy, I love you.

You know I’m not the clumsy jerk I make myself out to sound like, right? That’s just some personal myth, the myth of the regular white kid. It goes like this: I was a slob at Johnny’s. I was clueless, dressed only in the clean t-shirt and jeans that I had stashed in my car, while everyone else was dressed sharp. Tailored, low-cut, high-cut, unbuttoned, relaxed; skinny neckties, just enough cleavage, shiny shoes and heeled sandals; hints of cologne and perfume; hair in perfect fades or elaborately sculpted curls. And me, the goofy white boy.

But you knew that was just myth, that there was a man inside of this boy waiting to be looked at, talked to. I saw you sitting on a sofa on the other side of the room, squeezed in between friends, surrounded by noise and pressing bodies, and you were looking at me, only at me. Shaun said something to me, and I smirked something in response, but I don't remember now, and I doubt I knew then, what we were talking about.

And then he pushed me across the room, a hand in my back, me his puppet, across the carpet and through the crowd. Nobody cared I was there, except, it turns out, you. And then Shaun grabbed the hand of the girl next to you, a piccolo player, and pulled her up, said something about the ragged formation of the woodwinds on the field, and you were left looking up at me, waiting for me to say something, and then I did it, I spoke.

"Hey, Amy," tasting your name as if I hadn't said it countless times to Shaun, to myself in the mirror, to you in dreams, because I had never actually said it to you. I tripped over my big sneakers into a sitting position next to you.

"Joe. What was that song you were playing the other day?"

"I don't know," I lied, "just something that had been stuck in my head. Best way to get it unstuck, you know."

And you laughed, and then you nailed me. "Sounded like 'Just the Two of Us.'"

And then I laughed, too. "Huh, maybe it was. Must have been on the radio or something. I was probably hitting the notes all wrong."

"No, I thought it was cool." And then you looked around the room, like you were as nervous as I felt, though I couldn't take my eyes off you.

"Well, my embouchure was shot," I said. "I don't know. It was nothing." Then you looked back at me, steadily. You put your hand on mine.

“You want to go outside?” you asked. “It’s not so crowded out there. It’s stifling in here.”

Even me, oblivious, goofy Joe Alsobrook, even I knew this was a time to move.

8.

Old hometown, can you believe that Amy was the first girl I ever kissed? A senior in high school, that’s right, and never laid lips on a girl before that night out behind Johnny’s house, Shaun honking his horn out by the street because his curfew was coming up. If you had known, maybe you would have tried to stop us sooner.

For a good while after I left Amy behind and Shaun behind and you behind, a voice in my head opined how strange a white girl tasted. But then it struck me one night a couple years later, kissing a white girl in the old cemetery behind my white college, that that whole business about the taste of Amy’s kisses was just you talking, not me, that skin tastes like skin, lips like lips. Like my son tells me now, “Underwear is underwear.”

9.

You, Shaun. You stuck by me through a lot. Or maybe I stuck by you. Or maybe we were kids and we were in the same place at the same time and it was just easier not to be repelled by each other. But you were there that night when Amy and I kissed for the first time.

I thought you’d be steamed at me when I made my way around the side of the house and out to the street where your heap sat idling. You had a midnight curfew, something we had pushed many times before, but never shattered in the way we did that night. But you weren’t mad. You were grinning, actually, looking at me sideways as I slipped through the passenger door.

“Whoa, cuz’, what’s that all on your cheek?” You grabbed me by the jaw and swiped a rough thumb over Amy’s lipstick marks.

“Just a little something. It’s nothing,” I said low and into the floorboards, before I cracked a grin myself, “Wow.”

“Damn, Joe.”

We drove through darkened streets, going slow over potholes and one unpaved block on our way back to where my car was parked at the high school. As I climbed out of your car, I could tell you wanted to say something, the way you didn’t smile. “What?”

“Joe, not to discourage you or nothing, but you know what this town is. You know how people are, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, just be sure you know what you’re doing.”

“I am.”

“Then, good luck.”

Of course, I didn’t know what I was doing. I was seventeen and had just been kissed for the first time. You knew I was off the rails.

“Joe, really,” you said. “I know you think some folks are down with you. I know you think it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

“I could give two shits about what the other people think. This fucking town.”

“Well, I’m just saying that you got to have your own back sometimes.” And then you smiled again. “Just be careful what you do, Joe.”

Amy, do you remember the first week? It dreams in my memory like a year of sunlight. On that Monday, I jumped from my chest waiting to catch sight of you in the morning parking lot, to see if you would smile, or if you would glare, or if you would just walk on by. It almost didn't matter which, because it would all be happening in a different world than any smile or glare or snub before.

Twenty minutes later, your dad's minivan stopped next to the chain-link fence separating the lot from the street behind, and you stepped out, looked around, and spotted me. Then you headed straight for me. Do you remember what you said to me?

"You didn't call me," both anger and hurt on your face at the same time.

I stood there smiling, an asshole. "I didn't have your number. I looked, really. I even thought about going through and calling all the Joneses in the book asking to speak to you, but have you looked you up in the phone book? There's like a half a page of Jones."

"You could have asked somebody." I could feel a thaw, maybe. I kept smiling, not meaning to, not planning to, but just smiling anyway.

And then that was it. The last ice floe sloughed into the warming sea. You slid your hand into mine as the bell rang, and we walked, holding hands, backpacks slung over our shoulders, into the bandroom, jostled on either side as we went through the door, our arms touching.

11.

Old hometown, you couldn't let that first week end like that, five days of warm breezes and cool nights, holding hands and late-night telephone calls when our fathers were sleeping. No, you couldn't just let kids grow, learn from each other.

“Nigger lover,” remember? Scrawled on scraps of notebook paper slid under my books on my desk in American History class, or balled into a crumple and stuffed in my backpack, or muttered under your breath in the cafeteria. Remember? Sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I’m not sure I even caught it those times to begin with, nonchalant and oblivious, just trying to *be cool man*, as Shaun never forgot to remind me.

That first Friday, lunchtime, Amy grabbed me by the arm as our lunch-study class walked down the hall toward the cafeteria, and pulled me down a set of stairs, laughter silent on her face.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“Let’s have a picnic, Joe, out on the side steps where nobody goes. I packed some sandwiches. We can get away from everyone.”

I looked back up the stairs at the last of our class going down the hall. I didn’t want trouble. I looked back at Amy.

“Come on,” she said, “we never get to be away from everyone looking all the time. Let’s go.”

Out on the side steps, away from you, we laughed and talked easily about people we had known and things we had done over the past three years, realizing we both knew all the same people and both went to a lot of the same places and both listened to the same music and read the same books and felt the same way about things and both were too shy to ever talk to each other, and found out that we both had a thing for each other all that time and we tried to trace it back to the particular point in time and event that made us realize we had that thing. For Amy, it was something I said in ninth grade biology class, or the way I slouched in my chair, all cool without knowing I was cool, something vague, really, that I didn’t quite get. But I laughed and felt good about it anyway when she recounted it for me there on the steps. For me, it was easier, no vague

sense of anything. More like thunder following lightning right on top of you on a summer night. It was the moment I saw her for the first time, walking through the hall with her first semester schedule gripped in her hand, the way her hair swayed down her back, the way her large, almond-shaped eyes took in everything before them, heavy-lidded and confident, the shape of her body, the stride of her walk. She was freaking Venus; it didn't get much simpler than that.

So there we were, talking like that, knowing each other, inching closer to each other each chance we could until the full length of my leg was pressed against the full length of her leg, and our hands touched each other's hands as we talked, and our breath mixed as we laughed, and we didn't have the awkwardness of the lunch table around us, and we were happy.

And then you were there, and you saw us. You were in a late-60s Mustang speeding noisily up the side-street beside the school, and you yelled out the open window, "Kiss her, nigger lover!"

I dropped Amy's hand, spilled my sandwich remains from my lap, and was on my feet before I knew what I was doing, what I was saying. "Fuck you, asshole!" I yelled at you.

"Cool down, Joe," I heard Amy tell me. Then we stuffed things into the backpack and we tried to get back inside to the cafeteria before somebody came to see what all the yelling was about, but we were too late. We both got a day of detention for skipping lunch. I got two more days for cussing.

12.

Your arms were strong, Amy, when you held me in the front seat of my car, on that dirt road north of town, as I shook and you told me, softly, to calm down, that we didn't need to worry about anyone else.

“Fucking McDonald’s,” I spat, “fucking assholes.”

“Baby, it wasn’t the Big Mac, and it wasn’t no McDonald’s. Those people are jerks no matter where we might have run into them.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care.” The stars were layered like rime across the black sky outside my car windows.

You kept holding me. I don’t know why you held me so long, or held onto me so long. It was two months before the end, but if you had any sense maybe it should have been two days. I couldn’t help it. Those people, that town—I had never experienced fury like that before. I was used to being the oddity, the one who was picked on, excluded, whatever. I had developed a tough skin. But this was different. This was me in love with someone who loved me, or at least who kissed me and held my hand, and now they were aiming their arrows at you.

You remember the McDonald’s that time. Another couple Friday nights into our dating, after another football game, everyone headed to get burgers and cokes before whatever parties started. We were there when the football team from the seg academy came and saw us together and made comments about how they could pay you better than what I was but only if you would do better things for them. I swear, if I knew how, I would have killed someone. But then our football players were there, too, white ones and black ones together, and you pulled me, yelling, out the side door as the punches and the blood and the ketchup started flying.

13.

You poor soul, Joe Alsobrook, you poor scared kid.

Homecoming night. You danced with Amy held close in the darkened gymnasium, hoping it would never end, the darkness of the dance, the rotating sparkles of lights from the

disco ball hung from the rafters by the decorations committee, the smell of Amy's hair as she nestled her head against your chest. You didn't want it to end, but you knew it would, knew this was the night that she would lead you out of there early, right after you had your pictures taken to prove to her parents that you were there like you said you would be, that soon you would be in your car on that dirt road again, that she would have your pants all the way off this time, not just pushed down where she could touch you, that her dress would end up folded neatly on the back seat to avoid getting wrinkled or worse, that she would be naked in front of you, that you would be afraid to really look at her, all of her, that you would kiss the skin of her throat and her chest and her neck and her ears and her cheeks over and over, not quite sure what to do or where to go, how far down, what to touch, what was OK, what was forbidden, what was both.

And then it was too much and there it was, the desperation, the clumsiness, the expectation, and she pulled you toward her, on top of her, the car seat reclined back as far as you could make it go, and you tried to go places you had never even properly seen, had no idea how it all worked, how it all fit together, and she coaxed you, shifted you, trying to make it right, and then you both forgot who you were doing it for, and then, just as you were trying to figure out how to laugh it off, find a way to not do it but to not hurt her or hurt you or, god forbid, never get the chance to do it again, and when she sounded like she was ready to give up, too, you were in.

It must have been half an hour of complete foolishness to get there, but then it was better than any hand, hers or yours, had ever been, so different, so clearly like what the pursuit of life for the rest of your life would be about. But you didn't think about that then, because once you were in you wanted nothing more than to stay in and nothing more than to be out, and you were filled with the fear of every sex ed class you had ever had, sperm and eggs and money and desperate afternoon phone calls and beige clinics and babies or not babies and parents'

disappointment and furor and your own shame, and forget about college and grad school and a decent job and cocktail parties where you would be the hit of the evening, and forget about art movies in a big city with sophisticated friends, and forget about concerts with your lover by your side, her hand in yours, and forget about leaving this place or the places like it.

And then Amy was catching her breath short and you were back there with her on that homecoming night, junior year, your blue 1978 Japanese hatchback creaking on its springs, the windows fogged up, Amy sweating underneath you even though the night was cold, and you opened your eyes, which you just then realized had been squeezed shut tight, and her face was loose and her eyelids open but her eyes rolled back in her head, and you felt her hands on your naked butt, and felt her legs moving under yours and you realized that your whole life was about to end and you said, quietly, “Amy, no, I can’t,” and then you backed down off of Amy to the floor at her feet.

And then she laughed and twined her fingers in your hair, and you realized you had no idea what a woman is or what a woman wants, but you knew that this was enough, whatever it meant, whatever it was.

14.

Of course, hometown, you couldn’t have that. Maybe you saw us slip out of the dance. Maybe you figured out why. I think at that point you were already counting the days until the end, knew it would come soon enough.

I think you must have got to Shaun. Maybe you threatened to beat the crap out of him, or offered him a job, or maybe a twenty. Maybe you told him he had a shot with Amy if I was out

of the way, that she belonged more with him than with me. Or maybe Shaun was just with you the whole time. Whatever it was, you sent Shaun to do your dirty work.

It was the Monday after homecoming. Amy and Tonya had gone over to their desks to look up something in the textbook, and Shaun and I were alone at our lab table.

“What the hell are you doing?” Shaun whispered.

“About what?”

“You and Amy. Y’all kissing and holding hands and being all nice on each other, that’s one thing. But are you fucking her now?”

I felt cold sickness drop into my stomach. “Maybe that’s none of your damned business,” I said. “I love her, Shaun. Shit, you shouldn’t be surprised.”

Shaun looked down at his hands, turning his next words over in his head before he said them. Then he looked back at me, right in my eyes. “You a nigger lover?” His whisper broke a little too loud.

And then there was Amy, standing behind him, the textbook in her hands, her mouth dropped open. I couldn’t say anything back to Shaun’s question. It didn’t feel like him anymore, but like you.

But then I was on one side of the lab table looking at Shaun on the other side of it, and Amy was on that side, too, and I couldn’t say anything. Amy herself had told me repeatedly the word was nothing. But maybe coming from Shaun, it was all upside-down and inside-out.

You got what you wanted. It’s a blur, the time between that chemistry lab and the official end of Amy-and-me. A blur of flat-voiced conversations, avoided eye contact, lifeless hand-holding. But there it was one day, after lunch. In the time it took to get from the cafeteria to the lockers in the bandroom, Amy laid it out.

“Look, Joe. We need to be friends.”

“But we are friends. Are you dumping me?”

“I just don’t think it’s working out.”

“Is this because of homecoming night?”

“It’s got nothing to do with that.”

“Is it because of Shaun?”

“You don’t get it, Joe. It’s not working out.” And she turned and walked in another direction through the halls. That was it.

15.

You. I don’t know what to do with you.

I don’t know what to do with you, Amy, though I suppose even now I have to let you go, again.

I don’t know what to do with you, Shaun. When I remember you, I really only remember you as a friend, and I don’t remember that one day in chemistry except when it’s dark out and I’ve been awake too long or I’ve had too much to drink. Maybe it wasn’t you who fucked it all up. Maybe I screwed myself up, with how bad a lover I was or how I couldn’t stand up to people for Amy or how I was just a dork, or maybe we were just seventeen and this is how things start and end for seventeen-year-olds everywhere, no matter what it is that makes them different from each other.

And you, hometown, what do I do with you? Mainly I hate you, and I don’t feel bad about it. But maybe you deserve better? That’s a question, not a statement, and I don’t know the answer.

But the biggest question mark is for you, Joe. I don't know where you are sometimes, or who you are. Are you still that kid? Or are you someone, something else? Look at you. You are these things you hate and love. Maybe you feel good to sit back after twenty years and assess it all, like you're removed from it all, above it all, beyond it all. Or maybe you're down in it.

Marchers' Season

Gray Alsobrook heard muffled voices outside his bedroom window. Car doors slammed and a boy yelled out “Fucker!” and he was awake. Tires screeched and the voices faded away. Gray sat up at the edge of his bed. Doreen snored behind him.

Gray’s knees popped and creaked as he stood. He shuffled across the carpet to the window, a draft of cold January air coming in through a crack. Familiar pain shot up his leg. In the shifting shadows of his front yard, long white tails of toilet paper hung from limbs of pine and oak. When their two daughters had been in high school, there’d been half-hearted attempts to roll the trees in the yard, followed by sheepish boys with their “yes, sir” and “sorry, sir.” His daughters were gone now—Lilah newly married in Birmingham and Ruthie on an extended path through the university in Tuscaloosa—so this time it was probably aimed at their youngest, Joe.

Gray admired the scope of the job. There was real commitment in it, not a single tree ignored.

He heard the front door hinges squeak. Gray made his way down the hall to find the door ajar. Joe sat on the front steps, looking out at the yard, chin cupped in one hand, his other hand drooped in front of him.

Joe would leave for college in the fall, but lately whenever Gray looked at him, he saw his son as he looked at ten, only barely still a child. Gray could still understand Joe at ten, but now he seemed a stranger to him. He was tall and scrawny and had let his hair go long. Too long,

thought Gray. Joe only seemed to come to life when a friend was over playing basketball at the backyard hoop Gray had set into a plug of concrete when Joe was twelve, or sometimes when Joe was running out the door on a Friday or Saturday night to go to the game or hang out with friends. He made good grades, though, and never came home smelling of cheap alcohol or cigarettes the way Gray had when he was a teenager. Gray figured he shouldn't complain, except for the feeling he'd missed his chance somewhere along the way.

"Joe," Gray said almost in a grumble.

Joe didn't startle or flinch. "Daddy," he said.

"Know who did this? One of your friends?"

"No, sir. None of my friends would do it. Don't matter. I'll clean it up in the morning."

He still didn't look back at Gray.

"All right," Gray said. "Use the ladder from round back if you need it."

Joe turned. "Want to help me with it?" he asked.

Gray wanted to tell Joe he would. Wanted to be out in the brisk morning cold with him, doing something together, even if it was just fishing toilet paper out of trees. "I can't, Joe. Going in to the mill in the morning. You'll have it cleaned up before I get home."

Joe looked for a second like he would question Gray about going in on a Saturday. Gray would tell him about the three log skidders and the busted up pickup that were in the equipment and machine shop he supervised, that they had to be back in the woods or on the road by Monday, about how he had men relying on him to be there and a company relying on them to get things fixed. But Joe dropped his eyes and didn't ask.

Instead, Joe stood and slipped in the door, keeping a hand behind him. He brushed past Gray and into the kitchen. He dropped something into the trash can before he turned and said,

“Night, Daddy.” As Joe passed, he gave Gray a little slap on his arm, what went for a hug anymore, then walked down the hall toward his bedroom.

“G’night, son,” Gray said. When Joe’s door clicked shut, Gray walked into the kitchen and pulled a crumpled sheet of paper off the top of the trash. He turned it over. Scrawled in red was a hangman drawing like the kids used to make when playing word games on family car trips. On eleven dashed lines under the drawing were the all-capped letters, N I G G E R L O V E R.

Gray could feel his pulse pound in his temples. This kind of thing, still, in 1990. He felt dizzy as he walked to Joe’s door. He wanted to find out who did this, ask Joe what it was for or why he hadn’t shown it to him. But when he raised his fist to knock on Joe’s door, he stopped. He dropped his hand to the doorknob, but paused again without turning it. He would talk to Doreen about it in the morning. Together they could figure it out.

He folded the paper neatly and walked back into his room.

* * *

When Gray finished breakfast, Joe was still asleep. Gray pulled on his steel-toed boots and went out the front door to his company truck, all white except for the red corporate logo of the Canadian paper company that had bought the mill fifteen years before. Toilet paper fluttered in the fragile light.

It was early yet, only six, but the mill was an hour’s drive away over Alabama back-country roads. He turned on the radio as he pulled out of the driveway. The fishing and hunting report would come on soon. Maybe the next weekend things would be calmed down enough in the shop so he could head out in the woods before deer season was over.

A news reporter launched into a story. “In the wake of Wednesday’s school board vote to not renew the contract of the school system’s first black superintendent, Russell Livaudais, approximately fifty students gathered on the front steps of Meadowview High School yesterday afternoon. They blocked the line of cars waiting to pick up children after school. Many held signs, saying ‘No Justice, No Peace,’ and ‘Keep Racism Out of Our Schools.’”

Gray snorted. The board’s six white members had voted against renewing Livaudais’s contract, and the five black ones had voted for the renewal. There’d been some community meeting the next night—something about “Save Our Schools”—and the stories in the paper quoted the usual agitators talking about racism in the government, but Gray always figured there was more to the story.

A woman’s voice came on in the report. “Is this what they’re teaching our kids? Instigate trouble and block innocent children from getting to their parents?”

The news reporter came back in. “Those were parent Linda Maples’ questions, as she was caught up in the protest outside the school. One of the few white students standing in the blockade, senior Joe Alsobrook, had this to say in response ...”

Gray looked at the radio, as if he would see his son’s face there. He turned up the volume. Joe’s voice, older than he ever imagined, came through the speakers. “We all grew up together. If we’ve learned something, it’s that color doesn’t ... shouldn’t ... matter. Doctor Livaudais is a good superintendent. He comes around our classes. He knows all of us. By name. He cares about us. It’s the Board, now, that’s taught us a lesson. We’ve got to be heard.”

When the story was over, Gray grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the console and lit one, then cranked down his window a crack. Cold wind roared in his ear. Joe sometimes brought black friends to the house to shoot baskets or study, but none of them ever seemed the angry,

protesting kind. The two-lane in front of Gray was empty of cars, and Gray looked off the roadside at the sunlight cutting through the trees. He tried to picture Joe standing at the head of a pack of students, talking to reporters, facing down angry mothers, but he couldn't. Joe wasn't so serious as that. He was just a kid.

Three deer, a large buck with an eight-point rack and two does, stepped out from the roadside brush and froze on the shoulder, staring down his truck. Gray swerved, said a small prayer they wouldn't jump out at him. They didn't.

The pickup truck in the equipment shop had a caved-in grill and smashed radiator from one of the dumb beasts. The deer had flipped up over the hood and crashed through the windshield. The driver of that truck had to be taken by ambulance to the little hospital in Grove Hill. He came back with a bandage covering one eye and a stitched gash down his cheek from a deer hoof, a splint taped to his nose, and his arm in a sling. He'd said the deer had mauled him in its scramble to get out of the cab, then shook its head after it was out, jumped a guardrail by the side of the road, and tore off into the trees. Gray had heard similar stories a handful of times, as deer looking for easy forage along roadsides would smash up cars, almost always giving worse than they got.

Gray watched in his rearview as the the three slowly walked across the road. He rounded a curve and they were gone.

* * *

When Gray was little, all the grown-ups around their small Arkansas town called him "Little Joe." His dad, Joseph Gray Alsobrook, Jr., was "Big Joe." Big Joe had a red face, big arms, and

flat gray eyes. Gray remembered the sound of a big laugh, but only through a wall or from down a hall. With Gray, Big Joe was almost wordless, grim, a belt-wielder when Gray brought home a bad note from the teacher, a doer out of Saturday chores before he headed into town “for supplies.”

The most Big Joe ever said to Gray at one time was the morning after Gray’s tenth birthday. It was a Monday morning in October.

Gray was out in the front yard, pushing his new bike through the yard to ride to school. It had been a birthday present the day before. It was a 1952 Schwinn Hornet, bright metallic green, with the rack on the back and even a fender light on the front. Gray had been eyeing it for months, and couldn’t believe his luck.

Big Joe hustled out the front door. “Hold up, Little Joe,” he said. Gray stopped and looked at his dad, not sure what he’d done.

“Yessir?” he asked.

“Let me take that,” Big Joe said, grabbing the top bar of the bike and wheeling it toward his pickup. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll drive you to school.” Big Joe never drove Gray to school. Gray rarely ever saw him on weekday mornings at all, with Big Joe usually up and gone to his construction job before Gray ever woke up, and that was on the mornings when Big Joe wasn’t sleeping over in whatever little town he was working in.

Big Joe lifted the bike over the tailgate of his pickup. Gray hoisted himself up into the cab and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Whatcha’ think, boy, ‘bout being ten?” Big Joe asked as they bounced over the dirt ruts of the lane they lived on.

“It’s all right, sir,” Gray said. “I like it good enough.”

Big Joe glanced at Gray, then stared back in front of him. “Good enough,” he repeated after a moment. “Good enough. Yeah, well I guess that’s about the song of it,” he said.

The two of them rode in silence for a couple minutes, until Big Joe reached the end of the lane and turned out onto the black top of the county road. From there it was another mile into town.

“Where you working at this week, Daddy?” Gray asked.

Big Joe looked over at Gray. “Huh,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe Montana, I’m thinking. Or California.”

“How’s that?” Gray asked. “They’re a long way from Arkansas.” Big Joe was usually working all over the little hill towns of northern Arkansas, sometimes even as far away as Little Rock or occasionally up into Missouri. One time he had a job in Memphis and was gone from home for three months.

“Don’t question me, boy,” Big Joe said softly, not harsh like he usually said those words. He pulled the truck over into the weeds beside the road. In the distance, Gray could see the brick school buildings.

“Why we stopping?” Gray asked.

Big Joe turned and faced him. “It’s time you stopped being called Little Joe,” he said. “You’re just Joe now.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Gray asked.

“You need to be a man now, son.” Big Joe wrenched the door handle and got out of the cab, but didn’t close the door behind him.

“Come on, Joe,” he said, “climb across.” Gray slid across the bench seat and climbed down. Big Joe put a foot up on the running board and leaned down eye level with Gray. “Joe,” he said, “I’ve got to leave.”

“What, Daddy?” Gray said. “Why? How long’ll you be gone?” He had to squint at Big Joe, because the morning sun was shining down over Big Joe’s shoulder and straight into Gray’s face.

“Look, I’ve given my time to you, and we ain’t going to pussyfoot around this. My daddy only stuck around until I was three,” Big Joe said.

“What’re you talking about?” Gray asked.

Big Joe straightened up, throwing Gray’s face back in shadow. “You’ll understand when you’re growed up, Joe. Alsobrook men, we don’t root down. We ain’t trees. We’re rivers. My daddy went off. His daddy, the first Big Joe, hell, he didn’t even stick to see my daddy get born.” Big Joe leaned back against the seat, and the sun shined back down into Gray’s eyes.

“You ain’t leaving,” he yelled at Big Joe. “You ain’t leaving!”

Big Joe balled a hand into a fist and looked down at his boots. Then he slid backward onto his seat, loosened his fist and reached out to put his hand on Gray’s head. “You’ll run, too, one day, Joe. Then you’ll understand. We’re like rivers.” His hand fell from Gray’s head and reached out to the door handle. “Now, get on to school. And when you get home, you be strong for your Mama. You’re the Joe in the house now.” And then Big Joe slammed the door shut.

The red pickup started to roll up onto the pavement, its big rounded fenders smooth like a greased pig. Gray yelled out, “Hey!” The pickup stopped, half up onto the roadway. “Hey,” Gray yelled again. Big Joe rolled his window down, scowled out at Gray.

“What is it, boy?” he asked.

“I ain’t your Joe,” Gray said. “I ain’t no one’s Joe. Not Little Joe, not Big Joe, not no kind of Joe. I ain’t taking your damn name. I’m Gray,” he said. “Gray Alsobrook.”

Big Joe’s scowl turned into momentary puzzlement, then he looked away, through the windshield in front of him. Gray saw him pump his neck, like he was cussing. Then the pickup rolled onto the pavement and took off down the road. Gray Alsobrook stood on the roadside, alone, angry, without his bike. He kicked a pebble, then walked the rest of the way into town.

* * *

Gray pulled the company truck into the front gravel lot closest to the mill administration building. A couple other company trucks, belonging to other managers, were in the lot. The back gravel lot farthest from the building was dotted with the pickup trucks of the weekend crews. In the administration building, the receptionist’s wood paneled alcove was empty. Gray passed by the time clock used by the hourly employees and out the back door, where he cut left behind the main boiler building and toward the equipment yard and shop.

As he walked through the large open garage door into the shop, he called out, “Yo,” to Cyrus, his foreman, who stretched over the engine of the damaged pickup truck. The crinkled hood lay on the concrete floor. A new one leaned on a pallet against a wall. Cyrus was the first black foreman in the shop, the first promotion Gray had made when he was elevated from foreman to supervisor. Cyrus had been in the shop longer than anyone in the time that Gray had been there, so when Lon, the old supervisor, retired and Gray was promoted, it just made sense. He heard a year later, during the renewal negotiations with the union, that the white union leadership were raising a stink over the blacks starting to get promoted over whites. He was

called into one of the VP's offices in the admin building and asked whether he wouldn't create a new position above foreman, an assistant supervisor, to put one of the young white union bucks into.

"Don't need an 'assistant supervisor,' Harold," Gray had told the earnest-faced Canadian executive.

"I know you don't, Gray. It's what I told them, that you don't need one and you wouldn't go for it. But the union's holding it over us," Harold had said.

"Cause I got a damn black foreman in my shop? Hell, Cyrus has been at this mill thirty damn years. Best mechanic in the place."

Harold had held both hands up to Gray. "Don't go getting agitated now. I know it isn't right, and I'm not going to make you do it. Heck, Gray."

"Well?" Gray had said.

"OK, then," Harold had replied. "Leave it be."

Not long after that, every white employee in the shop had transferred out to other parts of the mill. Gray was fine with that.

"Good Saturday, Mr. Gray," Cyrus called back to Gray as he made his way to his little office walled off in one corner of the shop. Willie and Tom, two other mechanics, were under one of the skidders. All three of them were getting time and a half, as well as a day off from their wives. Gray smiled at the nude Miss January on the calendar on the wall outside his office door, before squeezing through the door and around his metal desk and into the creaking green leather of the second-hand desk chair. Even three years after Lon's retirement, the office still smelled of the old man's cheap cigars. It was familiar. Sometimes he thought that maybe old Big Joe

must've smoked cigars in addition to his pipes. Cheap cigars and pipe smoke equals fathers.
Stove-burned milk equals mothers.

As Gray looked over the stack of invoices on his desk, wondering where he should start, Cyrus poked his head through the door.

"Hey, boss, just the three on top are new. Sign those and I'll stick 'em back in the mill post," Cyrus said.

Gray picked up a pen from the desk, and straightened the stack of invoices. "Thanks. Then I'll give you a hand with that truck?"

"If you want to, but I got it. You salaried folks ain't getting no extra pay on a Saturday." Cyrus grinned. This was an old pact. Cyrus knew he'd never shake Gray on an off-day when there were heavy machines in the shop that needed to be out in the woods. Gray knew every man in there would rather be sitting by a stream somewhere, or in a deer stand, or flushing turkeys out into a field. Or visiting the sex woman the next town over, around the next bend, on the way out "for a pack of cigarettes, be right back." The mill generally let Gray and his shop run on its own, no interference from the higher corporate dictates, but in exchange Gray took care of his men, and made sure the mill's equipment was never out of commission for long.

When Gray got back over to the pickup Cyrus was working on, Cyrus had the grill off and had lowered the new radiator into place. While Cyrus was tightening the nuts on the radiator bracket, Gray leaned down to look at the grill.

"Didn't see an invoice for a new grill," he said. "Think we can bang this thing back straight?"

"Sure," Cyrus said between grunts as he torqued the last nut into place. "Just bent one way. Got a mallet that'll take care of that."

“Yeah,” Gray said. He picked up the grill and carried it over to a large table under a window at the front of the shop. He picked out a heavy rubber-headed mallet and began to steadily beat the grill back into shape. It wasn’t going to be showroom ready, but nobody in the woods or on the backroads would care much about that. It would do the job, let air through and keep the brush and rocks out.

As he walked it back over to the truck, Cyrus was standing back to look at the radiator, wiping the grease off his hands with a shop rag he always kept stuffed into his back pocket. Willie and Tom leaned against the side of the truck.

“This do?” Gray asked as he handed the grill back to Cyrus. He knew it would more than do, but he liked his guys to see him work, and work well.

“Yeah, boss. That’s all right,” Cyrus said, looking at the grill before leaning it against the front of the truck. “Break for some coffee?”

“Yeah,” Gray said. They walked over to the folding table outside Gray’s office, where a coffeemaker sat, guarded over by the nudie calendar. They sat on some folding chairs by the table, steaming styrofoam cups of coffee in hand.

Tom looked up at the calendar. “She pretty enough,” he said, “but ain’t no March.”

“Ain’t nobody gonna be like March,” Willie said, and they all laughed, even Gray. After Lon had retired and the next year turned over, he hadn’t put up the new calendar from the engine supplier, not right away. But the men had complained enough times that Gray put it up and didn’t blink about it again.

“But June sure was nice, too,” Gray said. The other men smiled at him, then looked back at January.

“You don’t got to say that, you know,” Willie said.

“What? I mean it.”

“Now, you a white man who likes his chocolate, then, that’s all right,” Tom said, and laughed again. June had been the only black calendar girl that year. There was always one.

“Just women, Tom. Ain’t no problems with that,” Gray said. He wished he’d just kept his mouth shut. Sometimes it wasn’t worth trying to talk.

“That’s right,” Cyrus said. “That’s right.” He’d been quiet, laughing a little softer and a little less, sipping his coffee, concentrating on the floor. Then he said, “Tell me something, Mr. Gray, your son still in school?”

“Sure. Though not for long. Graduating this spring.” The pictures in his office were ten years old, the kids young and looking like angels in wide lapels.

“His name Joe?” Cyrus asked.

Gray felt uneasy. “You heard that radio news this morning?”

Cyrus nodded. Willie and Tom looked up at Miss January some more, pretending they weren’t listening.

“Yeah,” Gray said, “well I don’t really know much about what’s going on up there, you know, at the school.”

“Well he sounded real grown up, Mr. Gray. You doing good,” Cyrus said.

Gray sipped more at his coffee cup, though there was nothing else in it, then looked up at Cyrus. He nodded his head, grunted. Then the four men stood and walked over to look at the skidders.

* * *

On Gray's thirteenth birthday, he was determined to become a man.

A couple months before, Gray had been crawling in the cool dark under the raised house, waiting to ambush the lead battalion of the Chinese Red Army in the DMZ, when behind a brick pier he found Big Joe's left-behind stash of tobacco pipes, a metal flask of something that made Gray's eyes sting when he unscrewed the lid to sniff it, and a blue tin of Kentucky Club. *The thoroughbred of pipe tobaccos*, read the faded label.

On his birthday, after the birthday cake candles had been blown out, the cake eaten, and all his friends but Tim had gotten back on their bikes and pedaled back down the driveway toward their homes, Gray kissed his mom on her cheek, said "thank you, ma'am," and headed with Tim out the back screen door and into the woods that closed up on the backyard.

"So what's back in here," Tim asked as the two boys whacked at vines and branches with a couple sticks, like jungle explorers with machetes through thick undergrowth.

"You'll see," Gray said, trying to pitch his voice deeper. "It'll put hair on your chest, though, I guarantee that." Gray hoped it was true.

"What's it? A girl?" Tim laughed. Gray let a branch slap back into Tim. "Ow!"

"Naw, it ain't no girl. It's something men do and don't have to worry about no girls."

"I don't want to get in trouble," Tim said. "Besides, you ain't no man yet."

Gray stopped in a clearing just big enough for the sun to reach down to the spot of ground where he stood. He turned and faced Tim. Gray felt the ugliness that welled up when he needed to push tears and lip-trembles down.

"I am, too, a man," Gray said, working to control his words. "My daddy says the Jews treat their boys like men when they turn thirteen. And he says we're better than them Jews

anyway.” Then he spit on the ground to the side of Tim’s feet. “You a sissy, Tim Butler, or are you a man?”

Tim’s face grew calm. “Boy, don’t talk to me about no Jews. Like you even know any. I been thirteen a lot longer than you. And your daddy’s done left you anyhow. What, three years? Shit.”

“Ain’t true,” Gray said. “He’s off in Korea, fighting. That’s all. He’ll be back.”

“Boy, knock it off. I heard my mama telling about how your daddy left you and your mom, up and left, how he’s no-good trash. And there ain’t no more Korea. That war been done with now a long time.”

Gray wanted two things. He wanted to tell Tim he was right and apologize to him so he could have a friend he didn’t have to lie to, so he could have someone who knew his secret and didn’t care. But he also wanted to punch Tim Butler right in his mouth, make his lips bust open and bleed down his shirt, pop his teeth out, make him cry. Not only couldn’t he do both, but he realized he couldn’t do either.

“Go home,” he said to Tim. “Just go on home. I don’t want you out in these woods.”

Tim looked at Gray for a long moment, then he shook his head, turned, dropped his stick, and walked back out of the woods.

When Gray couldn’t hear Tim’s footsteps shuffling through the leaves any longer, he kneeled down in the center of the clearing and pried up a large rock he’d been standing on. Underneath, in a hollow he’d dug and scraped out with his pocket knife, was a rolled-up, dirty canvas sack. When he unrolled the sack, the flask, one of the pipes—a red wood, maybe cherry—and the blue tin of tobacco tumbled out onto the ground.

Gray popped open the tin, pinched out a wad of dried up tobacco, and smushed it down into the bowl of the pipe. He dug a book of matches out of his pants pocket, struck one, and held it down into the pipe while he sucked in on the stem. Immediately, his head swam in circles. He felt like he couldn't breathe. He coughed out a cloud of smoke and then couldn't draw in enough breath to cough again. He sipped in air as he bent down to the ground. He dropped the pipe so he could hold onto the dirt with both hands. When he finally had air back in his lungs and caught his breath, his stomach began to turn.

He eyed the flask, still lying on the ground. He grabbed it and twisted off the cap. Without stopping to smell it, he put it up to his mouth and turned his face to the sky, the liquid burning across his tongue to the back of his throat. As soon as he swallowed it, though, he felt it all coming back up. The smoke, the alcohol, the cake, the barbecue he'd had for his birthday lunch. And it did, all over the pattern of leaves on the forest floor. White icing, bits of yellow cake, strips of sauce-lacquered meat, red like blood, then endless bile, yellow, green, then just clear strands of spit as his stomach kept rebelling even after it was empty.

When Gray's body quieted, his breathing eased, and he stood up. The daylight was almost gone. He reached down and put the flask and the pipe back in the sack. He rolled it up. He hefted it in his hand. He was calm. He cocked his arm back, and threw the sack as deep into the woods as he could.

* * *

On Sunday mornings, Gray had a regular coffee-and-grousing session with a group of silver-haired bastards. He was a good ten years younger than most of the other men at the formica-

topped table at the Downtown Pancake House—*Nothing International About It*, proclaimed the menus—but they seemed to enjoy his company. Made them feel younger, he figured. They would all drink bad coffee and some would eat runny grits and runnier eggs, and they'd trade insults and lies and complaints about their wives, and pass over the events of the week. Then they'd drive off to their various churches to meet their families for eleven o'clock service.

"My boy Will and I got us a six-pointer yesterday morning," Bill Youngblood said, after a loud slurp from his coffee cup. "He had his oldest boy with us. Eight years old. His first time."

There was a chorus around the table of "good for him," and "six points ain't bad, but ain't eight," and "when you going to bring me some venison sausage," and assorted huzzahs, before Blaine Cranston, who used to own the mill and all the land around it before he sold it to the Canadians, waved his hands at the table and said, "So what'd the boy think, the young 'un?"

"He was wide-eyed, you know," Bill said.

"That's the critical time right there, where you grip him up and show him the way things work," Blaine said. "What'd y'all do?"

"Well, we made him walk out in front of us, lead us to where the buck fell. When we got there, the buck was still strugglin', you know. Will's boy looked up at us. Wasn't sure whether he was going to cry or something. I gave him my hunting knife, and Will lay across the buck and showed the boy how to slice cross the jugular." Bill stopped, raised bushy eyebrows across the table at Blaine.

Gray broke in. "Did he do it?"

"Course he did. His first kill. Drank the blood and everything. We smeared it on his cheeks, made him look like a little wild man. His mama was mortified when we got him home, but I was proud of that boy," Bill said.

Joe had begged off of hunting the last couple seasons, and Gray hadn't pushed the issue much. Gray liked the woods alone.

The waitress, Glinda, came around the table and topped off coffee mugs, and the hubbub of the men settled down. "Get y'all anything else this morning?" she asked.

"Naw, Glinda, we're all good here," Blaine said, putting a business smile on. "Thank you, girl."

"All right, then," Glinda said, her smile thin and pasted on.

Blaine watched her walk away, then turned back toward the table of men, leaning in a bit. "So y'all see what them jungle monkeys all up to at the school?"

Gray's stomach churned, and he looked to see if Glinda showed any sign of hearing, then he returned Blaine's stare. The other men chuckled low until Jimbo Smitherman, red-faced, said, "Always agitating about something, them people. Now their kids're getting in on the act."

"Yeah," Bill joined in, looking over his shoulder before adding, "Ain't nobody saying a word about how them nigger board members all voted together, too. How come they ain't being called out?"

"Don't work that way," Jimbo said. "You know that. We all know that."

"What you think, Gray?" Blaine asked. "I heard they're going to march on the Board of Education building after school one day this week. Stop traffic and everything."

Gray wanted to leave it be, but Blaine's question had everyone looking at him. He wondered if they'd all caught on that his son was in on the protests.

"I hadn't heard about that, about the school board building," Gray responded. It was true, he hadn't. Blaine always seemed to know things before they happened.

“Well now, I don’t know. Maybe it ain’t happening,” Blaine said, “but I wouldn’t be surprised. Always trying to ape it up for the cameras, you know.”

Gray took a moment to slurp at his coffee. “Hell, Blaine,” he said, “I suppose there’s a little bit to what Jimbo says, folks just protesting so they can protest.”

“Yeah,” Blaine said, turning his gaze down to the formica tabletop for a moment before looking back squarely at Gray. “But these kids, now. They’re impressionable. It’s bad news.”

“Ain’t nobody going to stay living around this place,” Jimbo interrupted, “if folks keep living in the damn past.”

They were all still looking at Gray, though nobody’d yet mentioned Joe. “Well, maybe there’s real issues folks should think about,” Gray said. “I mean, the protesters, of course,” Gray said. “I heard it’s all knee-jerk, that there’s reasons the board could’ve voted the way they did. Like some teachers didn’t like Livaudais’s management style or something.”

“I heard that, too,” Blaine said, “or maybe they just figured out before it was too late that you don’t let the animals run the zoo. What do you think about that?”

Gray couldn’t figure why Blaine would keep on him so heavy, except that he probably did know about Joe. Not that Blaine ever had to worry about anything with all his land money. His kid would never worry none, either.

“Well,” he said, and the old mens’ eyes stayed on him, “I think marching never hurt no one.”

“Bullshit,” Bill said. “What about after ‘Nam? All those troops coming home to them hippies marching in the street, spitting on soldiers in airports. Shit.”

“Not that you’d know a damn thing about it,” Gray said, “but it sure beat having ‘Cong shooting at you all the time.” This was Gray’s one bit of seniority over the men around the table.

They'd all been too old to go to Vietnam and too young for Korea. A lost half-generation of damn war-mongering dilettantes.

Blaine tightened his lips into a thin line and red crept up his cheeks. The conversation had already slipped away from him. Glinda came back around to the table and dropped the bill in front of him.

Jimbo turned talk to the weather change coming later in the week. The weatherman had promised an unusual January warm front was going to sweep across from the west coast, pushing the chill out with a posse of storms and a few days of muggy warmth.

Bill sighed, "Linda's afraid it's going to confuse all the damned azaleas."

Gray dropped cash on the table for his coffee and left for church.

* * *

After church, Gray and Joe went to work on the piece of bottomland that dropped off on the other side of the driveway, up by the road. Closer to the house, the creek bottom gully was an easy hike through well-spaced and towering trees. The kids had practically lived down there when they were little, Joe particularly, coming home with tadpoles and crawfish and snakes that he'd keep in tubs full of muddy water or in cracked-glass old aquariums he'd find god-knows-where, all arranged on the side porch of the house, stinking like sewer and dead things. But the piece of bottomland closer to the road was a tangle of undergrowth and tight-packed saplings. And when the whole creek bottom would fill up with flood every spring or two, any trash that couldn't wash through the culvert under the road—whole trees, tires, discarded furniture, rusted barrels, and all manner of cans and paper and litter—would catch up in the bramble, too.

Whenever there was a weekend without grass to cut or leaves to rake, Gray would put Joe to work with him clearing it out, hacking at it with axes and saws, little by little clearing it away, then dragging the large piles of it up the steep gully-side to stack by the road.

“Why we gotta do this?” Joe asked that Sunday afternoon.

“I’ve told you before,” Gray answered between swings of his axe. He thwacked at the base of a sugarberry tree, exposing the white pulp inside the gray bark. “Keep the rodents down.” Thwack again, the wood splintering at the trunk. “Which keeps the snakes from getting too many.” Thwack again, clean through, the little tree jumping down, standing for a moment, then falling to the side.

Truth was, Gray didn’t know why he did it, really, clearing the bottom out. Sometimes he dreamed about building a little workshop down there, or something Joe could use as a clubhouse, or that grandkids one day, maybe, could play in. He wasn’t going to eradicate all the rodents, or make a dent in the population of snakes running through all this bottomland and up into the backyards of him and his neighbors, not by knocking down one stand of trash trees. It was something for him to do, and maybe more important, for Joe to do. Keep him working, from being spoiled like Blaine’s kid. Maybe teach Joe a thing or two, like he never had anyone do for him.

A couple hours every weekend of this, or the lawn mower in spring and summer, or the rake in the fall. Blisters on the hands, bug bites. Sweat. It wasn’t much.

And maybe, when he and Doreen were old, they’d stick around this town and have a nice place, a pretty piece of property to gaze at. Roots of their own.

When they were done for the afternoon, Gray and Joe stretched out on the sofas in the living room, a John Wayne movie on the television and a bowl of popcorn between them. An

hour into it, Joe was asleep. Gray went into the kitchen, where Doreen was polishing the good silverware. It had been jumbled in a pile in a corner of the counter since Christmas dinner a few weeks before, washed but tarnished.

“Hey, hon,” Gray said. Doreen looked at him, one strand of her barely graying dark hair escaped from the ponytail holder and running down the side of her face. She smiled at him. His heart lightened. “Was thinking about throwing something on the grill for supper, steaks or something.”

“Sounds good,” Doreen said.

“Joe’s napping on the sofa. Want to ride to the Winn Dixie with me?”

Doreen looked down at the knife in her hand, buffing out the last of the polish. She put it in a stack of shining utensils to her right, then waved her hand over at the diminished pile of silverware still to do. “Sure, Gray. I’ll save the rest for later.”

“You been saying that for weeks now,” Gray said to her, gently. He didn’t want her to think he was telling her what to do. It was more just ribbing than anything, things husbands and wives got away with saying to each other if they’d been friends long enough.

“You’re the one who asked me to come,” she said. “I can just stay here.”

“Naw,” Gray said, because he really wanted her with him. Maybe they’d talk. “We can take a drive after, just you and me.”

The Winn Dixie was five minutes away, near the western edge of town. Often it was peopled with folks from out in the country, stopping off at the closest real grocery to their farms or their little crossroads collections of houses. But Gray and Doreen would always run into someone they knew from town. Meadowview was the big town around there, twenty-thousand people, the county seat, but it wasn’t so big. Late afternoon on a Sunday, an hour before the store

closed, pale winter light coming in through the big plate-glass windows at the front of the store, there were more folks than usual pushing baskets up and down the narrow, linoleum-tiled aisles.

Gray and Doreen browsed over the cuts of beef in the meat case along the back wall of the store. Doreen eyed them for lines of gristle and marbling of fat. Gray hefted them for weight and looked at the “good by” date. Janice Youngblood, Bill’s wife, was working her way slowly toward them, pushing a basket and looking at poultry parts. Gray elbowed Doreen and nodded his head toward Janice.

“Hello, Janice,” Doreen said, putting that smile in her voice like she did at church or at the kids’ school events. Gray liked that Doreen could be the social one, the nice one.

Janice looked up at Doreen and Gray, startled. But instead of replying, she made an audible huff, set her shoulders, and pushed her basket into an adjacent aisle.

“Janice?” Doreen asked, but not to anybody, because Janice was already halfway down the aisle. Doreen stood, holding the steak she’d been examining. “That’s weird,” she said to Gray.

“You think so?”

“Of course it is, Gray. People in this town don’t just snub you like that. It takes too much energy.” She looked at Gray. “I hate to say it, but I think it’s got to do with Joe.”

“Yeah. Probably.” Gray was glad she’d brought it up. He hadn’t talked to her, yet, about the hangman note he’d found in the trash two nights before. When she’d mentioned the toilet paper in the trees when he came home from the mill on Saturday, he’d just told her that yards get rolled all the time. But he’d had the note folded up in his pocket, next to his wallet, for when they could talk.

They walked toward the checkout lanes with two packs of steaks. Gray felt stares from everyone, though no one was looking their way when he turned. “Fellas at the Pancake House were kind of strange, I thought, today,” he said to Doreen. “They didn’t say anything specific, but they brought up the protesting and were looking at me. Expecting something.”

“I’m sure they know Joe’s involved. It’s a small town.” They paid for the steaks and walked out to the car, the big Oldsmobile they’d bought a few years before. The sky above them was a deep blue, almost violet, a single contrail stretched across it. The wind out of the north was brisk, though it wasn’t otherwise too cold. Not the Arkansas cold Gray grew up with.

Gray steered the car out of the parking lot and headed east onto the two-lane roads that wound through the hills rolling outside of town.

“So I found Joe throwing away a note Friday night, when I got up and saw the yard rolled.” He slipped the folded paper out of his pocket and handed it over to Doreen, keeping his eyes on the road.

Doreen unfolded it and sighed. “He’s just so visible,” she said, turning to stare out the window at woods and farmland.

“You think we should worry more about it?” Gray asked.

“I don’t know, Gray, I really don’t. I know we’ve always said we can feel at home in this town, that everybody watches out for everybody, but sometimes.”

“Ain’t anybody lynching anybody around here, not these days.” Gray wanted to not be worried, wanted to trust this town he’d decided would be their town, where they’d raised this family.

“It could be just kids, Gray, getting out their Friday nights on the first person they can think of. It was just toilet paper. You said it, right? Yards get rolled all the time.” Doreen carefully folded the hangman note back up.

“I wonder if folks would even notice who was doing the protesting,” Gray said, “if it was just black kids.” He turned onto a smaller county road that would wind them back north of town. “Maybe we should ask him if he shouldn’t stop.”

Doreen jerked her head toward Gray. “You know that ain’t the right answer, Gray Alsobrook.”

Gray put his hand over on Doreen’s knee. “I know it ain’t ideal, but he’s so close. So close to getting out of this place. I know we don’t mind it here.”

“But it’s got its flaws, all right,” Doreen finished his thought.

“You can see it chafe on him. He ain’t ever doing things easy. That girlfriend last fall” Gray let his sentence trail off. Joe had never said anything, never brought the girl, Amy, around, and it hadn’t amounted to anything, but for a couple months there’d been the uneasy whispers about the white boy and the black girl dating at the high school. “... And now this.”

The sky was darkening into dusk. Though it wasn’t night-dark yet, Gray switched his headlights on. They illuminated a hulk of brown fur heaving on the roadside a hundred feet ahead.

“Pull over, Gray,” Doreen said. Gray let off the accelerator and glided to a stop on the grassy shoulder, the headlights washing over the animal. As Gray and Doreen sat in the car watching, the animal lifted its head. A huge buck with a spreading rack of antlers. It struggled, flopping its legs. As it did so, Gray saw the blood spurt up from its body.

Gray got out, and Doreen opened her door. “Be careful, hon,” he said. “It’s just as likely to gore you as look at you.”

“You hush, Gray. He’s too hurt to fight anyone.”

And he was. Gray stepped carefully up to the deer. It laid its head back down, watching out of one large, dark, wet eye. The hide over its mid-section was ripped away, and its intestines spilled out onto the grass. A pool of dark red blood spread around it.

“He’s magnificent,” Gray whispered. He counted the points on the rack in the light from their car headlights. Thirteen.

“Poor thing,” Doreen said. “Too bad you don’t have your gun with you. Put him out of his misery.” She knelt down, way too awful close to that rack of antlers, thought Gray. She put a hand on the deer’s neck. “There, there,” she said, almost cooing to the thing.

The sky grew darker, and the shadows beneath the trees beside the road lengthened until their blackness reached right up to the edge of the headlight glow. The deer shut his eyes, opened them, then shut them again, leaving them closed. Doreen picked her hand up off his neck and stood.

“He’s gone,” she said. “Dogs’ll get him tonight.”

“And the vultures tomorrow,” Gray said.

* * *

When Gray came home from his third tour, he was no longer surprised that the stories were myths, that nobody actually spit on him in the airport. Hell, nobody did anything, except maybe make an effort to *not* look at him. It was mid-summer, 1970. They were all as tired of it as he

was, he figured, though being tired of things seemed pretty petty for folks on their side of it. He'd seen their marches on the television. Drums and flowers in downtown streets, angry-smile chants, fists in the air. Gray's march was silent and alone on airport terminal tiles, surrounded by ghosts, at least until he turned a corner and saw Doreen and the girls.

Little Ruthie, five, bounced like a cork on a fishing line, all dark curls and smile. Delilah, seven, stood still, a serious look on a face framed by long, straight, light brown hair parted down the middle like a curtain, as if she were wondering how long this time before her dad went back over there, to a place she knew from the nightly news was trying to kill him, to a place that filled her nightmares. And then there was Doreen, tall, legs, a beige dress cinched in at the waist, gracefully lining out—all of her—in just the right directions and just the right ways from there, every bit the beauty queen he'd fallen for and knocked up while they were both still in college, twenty-one, young and not young. He'd enlisted, the girls had come, one then the other, he'd re-enlisted, and then he was in-country, three times, thirty-days' leave between each, never enough time.

Gray spent the next thirty days driving across country with Doreen and the girls, hopping from one national park and roadside attraction to another. He tried not to watch the news when they stopped at diners, or nights in motel rooms. Instead, evenings, hot, distant lightning flashes in the sky, he'd sit outside the motel room door in a folding lawn chair, whiskey in a motel glass tumbler in his hand, Doreen in a chair next to him, his girls cross-legged on the ground at their feet, and he would feel the warm American breeze on his skin. He would catch Lilah, and sometimes Ruthie, staring up at him, then looking away, then looking back. He knew that feeling, that distrust that dad would be there. He aimed to beat it back, with a small smile here or there, covert, in the rearview mirror or across a diner tabletop. A squeezing of hands on the rim

of the Grand Canyon. A sip of beer from an icy mug slid across a wooden table in a cavernous, bayou-side fish camp, and a wink, a don't-tell-your-mother conspiracy.

By the time the thirty days were almost up, and the Alsobrook family was rolling down the last miles into Fayetteville, North Carolina—FayetteNam, home of Fort Bragg—he knew he wasn't going to sign the papers to re-enlist again. He was done.

* * *

On Tuesday night, the wind roared in the tall trees rising from the creek-bottom, cold. The weather was readying to change, the winter gathering up its skirts ahead of a train of warm, moist air out of the Gulf, a wrinkle of front making a faint north over land, high enough up into Alabama to catch their Black Belt town, maybe then as far north as Birmingham, stretching for Cullman, Huntsville, Nashville, before sweeping back south again and east, past Atlanta and out to sea through Savannah and the long beaches of Tybee Island.

When Gray got home from the mill, it was already dark out. A strange car was in the driveway, probably one of Joe's friends. Gray came in the side door of the house, into the kitchen, and slammed the door against the wind. As he pulled his arms out of his coat and hung it across the back of a kitchen stool, his nose filled with the smell of garlic and charred onion. Doreen was pulling a meatloaf out of the oven.

"Whose car?" Gray asked.

"Shaun's," Doreen answered, raising an eyebrow as she said it. Shaun was from the other side of town, but he and Joe had been best friends since the fifth grade, at least until the previous fall.

“Thought they weren’t hanging out any more, after that thing with the girl.” Gray crossed the kitchen and put a roughened hand on Doreen’s hip. He pulled his face in close to hers.

Doreen let a chuckle escape from her throat. She closed the gap between them with a kiss before pushing him gently away, her hand on his chest. “Well, they seem pretty tense with each other. None of that music and joking around like they do. Haven’t had to ask them to quiet down once.”

“They shoot ball when they got home?” Gray asked.

“Of course.” Doreen had her back to Gray now, working at a bowl of steaming potatoes with a potato masher. “Go wash up, and stick your head in there and tell them boys dinner in five minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gray walked down the hall. Outside Joe’s door, he paused a moment, then knocked.

“Yes, ‘m?” Joe called out.

Gray opened the door. Joe sat at the little desk they’d bought for him from a second-hand store when he started high school. Shaun stretched out on the floor. They both had notebooks open in front of them, scribbles in purple and green ink.

“Oh, hey Dad,” Joe said, stifling a grin. “Thought you were Mom.”

“Nope,” Gray said. “Shaun, how’s your folks?” Shaun’s mom and dad ran an office supply store downtown. Good, hard-working folks, Gray thought.

“They’re doing good, Mr. Alsobrook, real good.”

“Glad to hear it. Supper will be ready in a couple minutes, boys. Y’all come on up to the table.”

“Yessir,” Joe said.

Gray paused a moment again. He never quite knew what to do around his kids' friends. He wouldn't mind it if they thought he was a nice guy, friendly or funny, but he didn't want to embarrass his kids, either. He ducked back out of Joe's room without saying anything else. Maybe it was best just to be a piece of furniture.

Back at the dining room table, Gray pushed meatloaf and mashed potatoes around his plate, glancing at Doreen between furtive glances up at Joe and Shaun. Shaun used to be a constant fixture at their house after school at least a couple days a week, since he and Joe had met in homeroom the first day of middle school. They'd been in band together, and most classes. Shooting baskets, practicing their music, studying with books and sandwiches piled on the kitchen counter, or laughing and listening to Joe's stereo back in his room, too loud usually, and sometimes staying for supper, particularly the last couple years with the boys old enough to drive themselves to each other's houses. But then something had happened in the fall, involving that black girl Joe had been seeing. Gray pinned it to some jealousy between the boys, but Joe never talked about it and Gray never asked. Shaun had just stopped showing up.

Shaun and Joe were eating quickly. The only noise they made was the working of their jaws as they chewed the meatloaf, and the clank of their forks as they scooped up mashed potatoes.

"What's the project y'all are working on?" Gray asked, about halfway through. Gray wondered if Shaun was part of the protests. He'd always been a happy-seeming kid, and anger and seriousness didn't match up with Gray's thoughts of him.

"Just a school thing we've got due tomorrow," Joe said between mouthfuls.

Shaun nodded and took a large gulp from his glass of milk. "This is good meatloaf, Mrs. Alsobrook," he said after he'd put the glass back down.

“Thanks, Shaun.” She glanced at Gray.

Gray cleared his voice. “So, Shaun, what class is y’all’s project in?”

Shaun looked at Joe, but Joe seemed particularly focused on his plate as he loaded up his fork for the next bite. “Civics, I guess, sir,” Shaun said.

“You ‘guess.’”

“Yes, sir. I mean, yes. Civics.”

Joe pushed back from the table. “Thanks for dinner, Mom,” he said. He stood. “Can we be excused so we can finish up our work?”

Doreen motioned at his plate. “You aren’t going to finish?”

“It was good, Mom, but we should really get back to it. I’ll eat more later.”

“OK. Just put it on the counter. I’ll cover it up for you.”

Joe and Shaun cleared their plates from the table and walked back down the hallway. Gray listened to the shuffling thuds of their teen-age footsteps until they disappeared behind the soft boom of Joe’s door closing, then he looked up at Doreen. She was watching him.

“What about you?” she asked. “You not hungry either? You’ve been pushing that food all around but barely taken a bite.”

“I guess not,” Gray said.

“You still thinking about what those folks said on Sunday?”

“I am, I guess. But I honestly don’t know whether I’m worried about anything. I don’t know if I even should be.” The wind gusted harder. The panes of the dining room window rattled loosely in their frames, and Gray heard a crack in the trees outside. There was the sound of metal scraping against concrete on the side porch outside the dining room windows.

“I better go make sure nothing needs to be tied down out there,” Gray said, getting up from the table.

He stepped into the kitchen and grabbed his coat off the back of the stool. He shrugged it on as he opened the kitchen door onto the side patio. The cold immediately bit into his cheeks and stung his nose. It was hard to believe that the temperatures were supposed to be like spring behind the coming front, but after twenty years of Alabama weather Gray knew anything was possible at just about any time. If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes, folks always said.

Gray spied the source of the scraping sound. His old wheelbarrow had been turned on its side to not catch water, and the wind had blown it over and pushed it up against the chain-link fence that overlooked the bottomland. He grabbed it by its splintery handles and righted it again, and pulled it over closer to the house, parking it snug up against a lean-to he’d built that he kept tools in. He saw a stack of old paint cans that were probably the next to go, and gathered them up and placed them inside the wheelbarrow. Then he opened up the door to the lean-to and fished out a length of rope. He closed the lean-to door, tied one end of the rope around the door handle, weaved it through the handles of the paint cans, then under the wheelbarrow and back up to the lean-to door, where he tied the other end tight.

“There,” he said, the word puffing out in front of him into the cold. Maybe the whole stack would stay put for the night.

Again Gray heard a cracking sound come from the tree-tops. He looked up into the trees that towered over his house. The leaves whipped wildly in the wind. Clouds passed across the moon, covering and uncovering it in quick succession. In the mottled silver light, large limbs

stressed at their junctures with the tree trunks. He heard the crack again, and feared one of those limbs might let loose, and who knew where it might go.

But Gray also knew there was nothing he could do for it. He couldn't move the house to somewhere safer. He couldn't tie a rope around every tree limb and lash it to its trunk. The wind would take the limb when it was ready and throw the limb where it wanted.

The kitchen door opened behind Gray. He figured it was Doreen wondering what was taking him so long, so he was surprised when he turned around and Shaun was standing there. He had his backpack slung over one shoulder.

Gray held his hand out to Shaun. "Good seeing you around again, son."

Shaun grabbed Gray's hand and shook it. It was a strong grip. "Yes, sir. Thanks for supper." Shaun went to walk around the side of the house to his car, but stopped after a couple steps and turned. "Mr. Alsobrook?"

"Yes?"

"It's not for civics class, the project."

"I thought it might not be," Gray said.

"I didn't want to lie to you."

Shaun looked at Gray. Gray waited. Shaun looked like he wanted to say something else. But then he just dropped his eyes.

"I'm not upset," Gray said. "I know sometimes y'all got stuff going on."

"Yes, sir," Shaun said, looking back up.

"OK, then." Gray took a step back toward the kitchen door. "Go on home. Tell your folks we said hello."

"I will. Thanks," and Shaun turned and jogged to his car.

Gray went back into the kitchen. The walls and the ceiling felt close. It was a little house, but he felt safe inside it, away from the cold and the wind and whatever else the weather was bringing. It had been a safe place for him and Doreen to raise the girls, and they almost had Joe launched out into the world from it.

Joe leaned against the counter next to the sink, holding his plate and finishing his supper. Doreen was talking to him.

“... but you have to promise me y’all will be careful,” she was saying.

Joe looked exasperated, that look he had most times they tried to talk to him, but it was a look that Gray remembered from the girls, too, when they were that age. For a moment, Joe was just Gray’s teenaged son, no drama, something Gray could accept and reconcile.

“Of course, Mom,” Joe said. “Nobody’s going to do anything serious. They all talk a big game, but that’s all it is,” he said.

Gray put his coat back on the kitchen stool. “Your Mom’s right,” he said. “Plenty of cowards in this world. But you haven’t been around long enough—hell, we haven’t been in this town long enough, none of us, not after twenty years, even—to know when you’re crossing over someone’s line.”

Joe scraped his fork across the plate to get at the last of the mashed potatoes, and didn’t look up when he said, “Y’all think I should stop?”

Gray glanced quick at Doreen, then back at Joe. “You’ve got to think about what you want your relationship to be with this town. But you shouldn’t stop if you think this is right.”

“Well it is.” Joe put his plate into the sink, then looked at Gray. Gray felt like he was looking into a mirror at his own eyes.

* * *

“You’re what?” Gray said to Doreen, incredulous.

“Pregnant,” she said. The rain fell down around their car in almost a solid wall, allowing only occasional glimpses of the depressed old downtown along the main drag leading up to the bridge. To Gray, though, it was a bright and sunny day, and this was the best little town in the universe. Gray had just gotten a solid offer on what might be a decent job, so the months-long dry spell since he’d left the service was about to be over. And now this. 1971 was looking to be a good year after all. He slowed the big Ford Galaxy and angled into a parking spot in front of an old storefront. A pink-tubed neon sign hanging from the façade above the green metal awning announced “Carter Drug Co. RX.”

“Wow,” Gray said. Then he repeated, louder, his eyes big, “Wow!” He slid across the front bench seat and wrapped Doreen in his arms. Through the windshield and the large window of the pharmacy he saw a skin-and-bones old man with wisps of white hair, watching them. Gray let go of Doreen and pushed back so he could look at her. Her cheeks were flushed, a smile beginning to strain her cheeks, but he thought he saw some worry in her eyes.

“So we’ll have three of them back there,” Doreen said, cocking her head in the direction of the back seat.

“I guess so.” Gray ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair. It was finally starting to bush out from the military buzz he’d worn it in for the nine years previous. Then he felt a flash of the anxiety that had come upon him from time to time in the past few months.

“Hey,” Doreen said, putting a hand on his arm, “I see that look. Don’t you start worrying about any of this. It’s all coming together. You’re doing good!” Seeing her smile, feeling the steadiness and smooth warmth of her palm on his forearm, Gray knew she was right.

He looked back at her and grinned. “So I guess I ought to take that job then.” Gray laughed. He was probably going to take it anyway. They’d been staying long enough with Doreen’s parents in Little Rock, where the girls were while he and Doreen drove down to Alabama for Gray to interview at the paper mill looking for a shop foreman. Not the most glamorous job or glamorous place in the world, but it came with the promise of advancement and settling down. More than anything, Gray was ready for that, for settling down, putting down roots. After the years of moving around from base to base, and after he’d decided not to re-up a few months back, he’d heard about what had happened to Big Joe.

“So is this the place, then?” Doreen asked, looking out the car windows. A tall black man in a tan suit and a brown tie, a brown fedora on his head, and a battered black umbrella in his hand to shelter him from the rain, walked briskly along the sidewalk, looking at them out of the side of his eye as he passed the front of their car. No one else was on the street. “Meadowview?”

“That’s what they said at the mill, that most folks either live here or in Thomasville, but the schools are better here.” Gray and Doreen looked out the windows. “The big city,” Gray said. The rain was slacking off some, but was still coming down. The downtown stretched in either direction up and down the street. They could see the bridge over the Alabama River a couple blocks in one direction, and the bell towers of a cluster of downtown churches in the other.

“I guess it can’t be any worse off than being in Little Rock,” Doreen said, “and close enough that my folks can still come visit.”

“Hmph,” Gray said. He would be glad for some space, he thought, space he could lay claim to, more than anything. “You know,” he said, “if it’s a boy ...” He looked over at Doreen’s stomach, just barely rounded, what he thought maybe was just eating her mom’s home-cooking for the past half a year and not the result of anything they’d done after he returned from that last tour.

“Yes?”

“I want to name him Joe.” The thought was clear to him only the moment he said it, and it felt right.

“Are you sure? I thought you didn’t want anything to do with that name?”

“You know, he’s dead now. He doesn’t get to take that to the grave with him.” He wanted to add *the sorry son of a bitch*, but out of respect for the dead he left it unsaid. A couple weeks after he and Doreen and the girls had showed up in Little Rock, an attorney had called him, told him Big Joe had been dead of a heart attack seven months before. There’d been a will that mentioned Gray. There’d been no kind of inheritance, but the probate attorney had kept a note to try to track Gray down if he could.

“So what would it be, then,” Doreen asked, her voice sounding gentle in Gray’s ears, “Joseph Gray Alsobrook the fourth?”

Gray thought about it for a moment. The rain slacked the rest of the way off. He cranked down the car window and fingered a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket. “Naw,” he said. “He’ll be his own man. And we ain’t royalty, anyways. Why don’t we give him your daddy’s name, too?”

“Joseph Allen Alsobrook,” Doreen said. “I like that.”

Gray lit the cigarette, then pulled the Galaxy back out into the street, headed for Little Rock to pick up the girls.

* * *

On Wednesday, Gray left the noise of the mill's shop behind in the early afternoon, telling Cyrus that he had an appointment to see about his knee.

"All right, boss," Cyrus said, waving him out.

The hour's drive back to town over crawling-log-truck two-lane roads seemed less numbing than it usually was at the end of a day. Gray tapped his knee with one hand while he worked the steering wheel, passing trucks and beat-up old cars whenever there was a straightaway. He was less worried whether he'd miss the march than whether the marchers would miss the storm. Clouds were already pouring in from the west, ahead of the threatened front. It wasn't supposed to start coming down until in the night, but the sky looked sinister. Part of Gray hoped they'd call off the march. He pressed down a little more urgently on the gas pedal.

When Gray told Doreen Wednesday morning he planned to leave work early, she'd asked, incredulous, "Gray Alsobrook going to a march?"

"I ain't going to be *in* the march, Doreen. I just want to make sure Joe's all right."

"You know you can't pull him out of it, right?" Doreen had asked.

"He won't even know I'm there."

Gray slowed when he entered the western edge of town. It was just a quarter after three, so there was no need to rush. The streets were still dry. Ten minutes later, he pulled into a parking spot about a block from the Board of Education building. With the high school probably

a twenty-minute march away and school having just let out, he had time to have a smoke and check out the surroundings. He cranked his window down. The wind, still bitter despite the warm air coming, blew in even fiercer gusts than the night before.

A small group of news reporters and photographers stood by the front steps of the education building, gathered in a knot with their jacket collars turned up, probably talking scuttlebutt while they waited for the kids to arrive. He knew there'd be the *Times-Journal's* folks, for sure. Probably someone from the *Advertiser* over in Montgomery. Maybe even as far away as Birmingham. He'd heard there'd even been some fellow down from Cincinnati asking questions over the weekend. Wouldn't be long before reporters from the networks showed up. Folks ate up a juicy race story.

Between the education building and where he was, a dark blue American sedan was parked in another spot, with three men inside. They were dressed in suit coats and ties, sunglasses. One of them was fiddling with a bulky video camera. They all looked like they were laughing, turning to each other every now and then but mainly looking in the other direction, toward where the marchers would be coming from the school. Gray figured he'd make sure they stayed between him and the education building, so he could keep an eye on them.

Gray lit a second cigarette and got out to lean against the side of his truck. The darkened sky took on an almost greenish hue. Skies like that promised nothing good.

The first sign the marchers were nearing was the unknotting of the gaggle of reporters by the school building, as they turned their attention down the street. The photographers got their cameras ready, lens caps tucked in jacket pockets, gloves off and fingers ready to work. Then the suited men in the sedan came to attention in their car, eyes and video camera trained down the road. Then Gray heard faint snatches of chants on the gusts of wind.

As the students came into view in the next block, Gray saw they were all dressed in black. In front of the larger mass of kids, six students carried a coffin, and behind them two more held a banner. "Bury Injustice," Gray made out from the writing on the banner as they neared the steps of the education building. Then, behind the banner-bearers, Gray saw Joe, the one white face among forty or fifty black marchers, chanting in unison, arms locked. And as they got closer, the snippets of chant became a song in Gray's ears. "We shall overcome," they sang, until they were arrayed in front of the education building.

The handful at the front of the larger group, Joe among them, mounted the steps of the building, and the two banner bearers slid in behind them, raising the banner high. The pall-bearers set their coffin down at the foot of the steps. Gray wondered if all the news cameras were aimed at Joe. He wondered what Blaine and Jimbo and the rest would have to say at the coffee table on Sunday. Surely they'd all see his son now, not smeared in blood, proud, lifting a deer's head by the antlers at the back of the sports section, but front page, black and white, a protest song on his lips.

Each of the student leaders up on the steps took turns speaking. Gray could only catch the occasional word, not enough to put them together. He wished one of them had thought to bring a megaphone. At least the students could hear themselves, as they would murmur or clap or occasionally cheer in breaks in the speeches.

After three of the black student leaders had spoken, Joe stepped to the center of the steps. Now Gray really wished that the kids had thought of some way to amplify their voices. He didn't want his first hearing of what Joe said to be when he read it in the paper the next morning. The cheering of the gathered marchers seemed like it might be louder in the breaks in whatever Joe was saying. Gray felt a mixture of pride and anxiety for Joe. If only he could hear better.

Gray began to slide out from where he stood behind his truck, thinking maybe he could get a better vantage by walking up behind the sedan with the men in it.

But as Gray went to step on the sidewalk, a handful of large boys, white kids, polo shirts stretching across football player torsos and tucked into faded jeans, loafers and tennis shoes, brushed by him, walking toward the education building. They kept walking until they were just past the sedan. One of the men in the car turned his head toward them, then back to where Joe was still speaking on the steps.

The group of white boys lined out. Slightly in front of the rest, Gray recognized Baxter Cranston, Blaine's step-son. Blaine complained about Baxter every few weeks, his young second wife's son. A mailbox-basher and weekend pot-smoker. Blaine had kept him out of trouble with the police so far.

At the next pause in Joe's speech, between the cheer and the next sentence, Baxter yelled out, "Race-traitor!" His gang of preppy rednecks yelled out, "Yeah!" behind him, as if to back him up, though to Gray they looked nervous, ready to bolt. But Joe kept on talking. Only a few students in the back of the crowd turned and looked at the white boys.

Then another of the boys yelled out, "Hey, faggot! Shut your dick-hole!" Baxter turned and poked the yeller in his ribs, but then high-fived him. Now four students in the crowd, two large boys and a couple girls, turned completely around and took a step toward the boys. At the same time, a cheer went up from the rest of the students. Everyone looked up toward the steps again.

At the top of the steps, the door had opened, and the superintendent, Russell Livaudais, stepped out. He held both hands up and out toward the students, but they only cheered harder. The white boys fell quiet. The superintendent walked down the steps to the knot of student

leaders, put a hand on Joe's shoulder and leaned in to say something in his ear, then Joe stood aside for the superintendent.

When the students quieted down, Livaudais's deep voice carried clearly so that even Gray could make it out.

"Thank you," he called out to the students. "Thank you for making an effort, and for speaking out." Cheers, but then a respectful silence.

"These decisions will be made by those who have been chosen to make them, but know that they hear you." Livaudais pointed up to the building behind him. He paused and glanced toward the knot of white boys, his face hardening for a moment before shifting his eyes back to the gathered students.

"You are amazing students," he called out. "All of you. Your determination is admirable. And that your methods are peaceful," he paused, letting that word sink in, "is the best thing to your credit. Do not let that go." The students cheered again, and kept cheering as Livaudais turned and walked back up the steps. He turned and waved one more time before going in the door and closing it behind him.

The knot of white boys turned and walked back toward Gray. They were elbowing each other and saying amongst themselves, "showed them" and "damn niggers" and "fucking faggot," even laughing, as they walked by. Baxter threw a conspiratorial smirk toward Gray as they passed.

Gray turned back toward the education building. The students were gathering back into a looser formation, clumps of them already headed back up the street toward the school. Gray looked hard among the groups of departing students, but couldn't see Joe.

“Daddy,” called out a voice from across the street, to Gray’s right, startling him. Joe must’ve seen him and walked down the street toward him on the other side.

“Joe, come on,” he said. “I’ll give you a lift.”

Joe looked at the departing students, then back across at Gray. “All right.” Before he could step off the sidewalk to cross the street, the sedan with the men in suits backed out of its space, and drove toward them. The sedan drove slowly, and the man in the passenger seat with the video camera aimed his camera first at Joe, then, as they drew adjacent to them, turned and focused in on Gray. They neither slowed nor sped up, but kept driving steadily by and in the direction of City Hall, toward the river.

“That was strange,” Joe said as he crossed in the wake of the car.

“Yeah,” Gray said as he opened the driver’s side door of his truck. “Strange day.” He got in and slammed his door.

Joe climbed into the passenger side of the truck. “Strange town,” he said.

Gray pulled out and headed toward the school. He looked over at Joe, but Joe was staring out his window. He figured he should say something. “Good thing y’all got it in before the rain.”

“Hm,” was all Joe said in response. Then he sighed.

“Something wrong?”

Joe looked forward out the windshield. He opened his mouth as if gearing up to say something, closed it, then opened it again, finally saying, quietly, “Just don’t know any of it’s going to do any good.”

* * *

Wednesday night, the storms started. Lightning flashed, showing trees bending from the sky toward the ground, and thunder crashed down so hard that even Joe came out of his bedroom to watch the weather with Gray and Doreen. Again Gray had the illusion that Joe was a young kid still, scared out of his room and into his parents' room by a summer storm, except now it was winter and Joe was bigger and Gray couldn't reconcile this vision with what he'd seen that afternoon at the march.

The radar on the television screen glowed yellow and orange and red. The counties just to their west were covered by tornado warnings, and there was no reason to believe the same wouldn't come through their county later in the night.

After everyone was in bed again, Gray lay and listened for a freight train roar to separate from the general howling of the wind, until he was asleep. He woke to a jarring ring. It was still dark, but the winds had quieted. He heard the ringing again, and shot his hand out to catch the phone receiver from its cradle before it woke the whole house.

"Hello?"

"This Gray Alsobrook?" a man asked on the other end of the line, clearly trying to mask his voice in a low croak.

"What is it?" Gray whispered into the phone.

"Your son better watch himself," said the man.

"Who is this?"

"You all better watch yourselves." And then the line clicked dead.

"Who was that?" Doreen mumbled from her pillow. Gray sighed.

"Just a wrong number," he said.

* * *

1978 was the hottest summer since they'd moved to Meadowview. Joe was six years old, and Gray found himself up at the city pool not far from their house many evenings after he got home from the mill and most weekends. It was always crowded, and Gray would keep an eye on Joe while sneaking sips from a sixer of cold beer he kept in a brown bag by his feet. The evenings were hot, the heat encasing them all in a sheen of sweat, with the air totally still, through the end of May and into June.

Doreen's job was the more difficult one, it seemed to Gray, watching over Lilah and Ruthie, now 15 and 13, as they hung around with a group of teens in a clump of stretched-out towels and deck chairs by the high dive. A group of mothers, mainly, talked and laughed near the teens, pretending not to be watching hawk-like over their kids. Gray would've had a stroke over there, so he was fine with his job watching Joe.

By the shallow end and the adjacent baby pool, the territory where Joe roamed, parents kept more to themselves and the kids weren't up to anything nefarious, not like the middle kids or the teens arrayed through the deep end and by the diving board. The worst thing Gray had to deal with was clueless kids who might wander over and pick up one of Joe's pool toys to play with, not to steal it but just because they figured it was lying around waiting for someone to play with it. Even that was anxiety enough for Gray. He'd watch as Joe puzzled out how to react. Joe never seemed to care, but Gray would then try to keep mental inventory of the various toys as they moved around the pool area, scooping them up as soon as they were abandoned by whatever kid had appropriated them. Those kids' parents ought to teach them better, he figured, or bring their own pool toys.

The summer of 1978 was also the first summer the public pool on the east side of town was closed, and black families were showing up at the main city pool for the first time. Gray hadn't thought much about it until one sultry evening after work at the beginning of June. Gnats were starting to rise up as the sun sank, but the heat was still hours from breaking for the night. Gray was stretched out on a chair by a table watching Joe and sipping his beer when one of the other white dads sat next to him and announced, "Ain't bringing my girls back here after tonight. Ain't right. Them burrheads pissing and sweating and snotting in the same water as our kids."

Gray looked hard at the man to figure if he should recognize him from church or the mill or something, because he couldn't figure out why the man had just told him this. "Excuse me?" Gray said.

The man continued, "Well, you know they got those weird viruses."

Gray laughed then and said, "Shoot, I hear you might catch that black, too. What if your girls turn black?"

"Hey, buddy, screw you," the man said, sitting up on the edge of his chair, looking at Gray with a bewildered look on his face. Then he stood up and stomped over to a different table.

Gray didn't see that man any more at the pool. In fact, he noticed several other of the white families disappeared over the next couple weeks, but steadily a few more black families seemed to show up on a regular basis, too, and all in all it was only slightly more crowded than previous summers. By mid-June, Gray was back to his usual worries of keeping track of Joe's things, trying not to worry about how small his girls' swimsuits were over in that hive of boys on the other end.

Most of the kids in the pool seemed to settle back into their standard patterns, too. Sharks and minnows, races, splashing, dunking, horseplay, diving, Marco Polo, and all the rest.

On the Saturday afternoon before the Fourth of July, Gray was with the family at the pool. As usual, it was hot, and it was crowded with families. Two beers into the afternoon, Gray heard shouting coming from out in the parking lot and noticed some of the other parents had gotten up and walked over to the fence. Joe was in the middle of a holding-breath competition with some black kid about the same size who he'd been playing with the previous few times at the pool, them taking turns going under while the other one counted, so Gray got up from his chair and walked over to the tall chain-link fence that separated the pool from the parking lot to see what was going on.

Seven or eight Klansmen marched back and forth in a picket line between the parked cars and the pool fence, white robes, pointed hoods, but no masks, their faces red and belligerent, shouting, "Protect our children! Coloreds go home! Protect our children! Coloreds go home!" on and off, shouting it a few times, then falling silent in their march, then shouting it four or five more times, a little louder.

One of the black dads standing near Gray said, though not too loud, "You go home," but the Klansmen either didn't hear him or didn't care. Gray looked over his shoulder and saw that many of the parents had started to situate themselves between the fence and the pool, while most of the kids kept playing, not noticing. By the teens near the diving board, one large white boy turned up a boom box that had been playing a local radio station, as loud as it would go. A couple of white families with smaller children gathered up their things and their kids, and some of them quickly left out the gate and edged around the marching Klansmen to their cars.

Gray felt a hand on his arm and looked beside him. Doreen was there.

"Honey, we should take the kids home," she said.

"This can't be serious," Gray answered. "You can't just let these assholes scare us off."

“I’m not scared, Gray Alsobrook,” Doreen said, “and you know it. I don’t want our kids to have to see this. It’s ugly.”

Most of the other men who had walked over to the fence had gone back to the pool, closer to their kids, closer to their wives. Probably trying to figure out what to do, too, just like Doreen and him. The dad who had quietly told the Klansmen to go home still stood at the fence, arms crossed over his chest, his face looking like it was on the verge of twisting into a scowl or a shout. The Klansmen let out another chorus of “Protect our children! Coloreds go home!”

“Just go back over by the pool and keep an eye on the kids for a bit,” Gray said.

“What are you going to do?” Doreen wrapped both hands around his arm, pressing him, like the heat. Gray pulled his arm away.

“I’m just going to go talk to them,” he said. “Now go where you can watch the kids. Please.” Gray saw a police car at the back of the lot, parked close to the street, the cop inside with his window rolled down, watching the Klansmen, an unconcerned look on his face.

“Be careful,” Doreen said, and turned and walked over to the edge of the pool where Joe was laughing at something his new friend had said.

Gray walked to the gate, keeping an eye on the Klansmen. One of them, a tall, lanky fellow in little round-lensed glasses, watched him while the rest let out another round of shouting. “Protect our children! Coloreds go home!” Gray opened the gate and crossed the small strip of grass and sidewalk to the picket line. The one who’d been watching him stepped out of the procession.

“What you want?” he challenged Gray, with a smile on his lips that didn’t extend to the rest of his face.

“Why don’t y’all just go on,” Gray said. “You made your point.”

“Fella, we ain’t leaving ‘til them coloreds are gone from here or they close the place.” He was taller than Gray by a good five or six inches, and his white robe only fell about to his knees, paint-spattered khaki work pants and boots underneath. He looked down into Gray’s face without blinking.

Gray looked over his shoulder toward the pool. The black dad who’d retorted earlier was still at the fenceline, and a handful of white and black dads had separated from the parents by the pool and were arrayed slightly behind him. They weren’t necessarily trying to show any force. There was clearly some indecision about what their role would be, between the laughing kids, the worried wives, and Gray and the other dad who were confronting the marching Klan. Gray knew it was a tough spot for everyone, and he wasn’t quite sure why he’d put himself in the front of it. Gray looked back at the tall hooded man in front of him.

“There’s children here. Please,” Gray said, “y’all go on home now.”

“It’s our children we aim to protect,” the Klansman said, almost yelling. “We don’t want them getting mixed up with each other. It ain’t right. It ain’t what’s intended.”

“Take your children across the street, then,” Gray said, getting louder, too, and pointed beyond the Klansman toward the town’s Country Club, surrounded by pristine golf greens, its white clubhouse haunched on thick columns, serene, just across the street from the municipal recreation complex.

The Klansman let out a snort, then laughed, his amusement stretching up to his eyes. “Fella, you something else. I ain’t got that kind of money, and they probably wouldn’t have me anyway.” He stopped laughing. “Why don’t you just take your nigger friends and make your own damn club.”

“Look, mister,” Gray said, trying to sound firm, “if y’all don’t choose to go home on your own, then I’ll get that police officer over there to make y’all go.” Gray tried to stand up as tall as he could, but the Klansman laughed again.

“That’s something, buddy. That cop’s with us.”

Before Gray could think what to say next, from behind him he heard a shout, loud, repeated, insistent, in a solitary voice: “Go. Home. Go. Home. Go. Home.” He looked behind him. It was the dad who had retorted earlier, shouting, one word at a time, pumping his fist into the air with each word. Three other black men separated from the grouped parents and took a step toward the fence, each joining in the new chant. “Go. Home. Go. Home. Go. Home.” Their fists, too, slowly went into the air and joined the first man’s. The white parents just watched and looked unsure.

At that moment, the sound of a police siren startled Gray to turn back around. The one cop car from the back of the lot screeched into motion and sped toward the pool. At the same time, two more police cars came speeding from a side street where they had been out of view. All three cars squealed to a stop between the Klansmen and the pool fence.

“All right, all of you,” crackled a voice through a speaker atop one of the police cars. “This pool is closed.” Three cops got out of one of the new cars to join the one from the car that had been in the lot, and four got out of another. Only one stayed behind in a car to continue his directions over the speaker.

“What do you mean, closed?” called out one of the dads at the fence.

“We ain’t done nothing here, officer,” yelled another one. “It’s those Kluxers causing all the trouble.”

“Now that’s it,” crackled the cop through the speaker, “No more of that riot language. Clear the pool in five minutes and no one gets arrested.”

The men inside the fence looked at the cops in disbelief, then at each other, then back at the families by the pool. Everyone was watching, the kids’ yells and laughter quieted. One of them said, “We’ll take it to the City Council.” Someone else said, “or the court,” and the officer on the speaker crackled, “Five minutes. Once the pool’s closed, y’all will be trespassing.”

The Klansmen stood in a line watching the police and the activity inside the pool fence. Children swam to the edges of the pool to pull themselves out, mothers corralled kids into towels to dry off, and dads began stuffing belongings into bags, shaking their heads. Gray saw Doreen and the kids come out of the gate.

“Come on, Gray,” Doreen called out to him as she herded the kids toward the side street for the walk home.

Gray jogged over to his family, and grabbed up Joe’s hand in his. Joe kept looking over his shoulder at the scene in the parking lot. Car doors were slamming, other families were still filtering out the gate, young kids screaming and unhappy.

“Who are those men, Daddy?” Joe asked Gray.

“Ignorant fools,” Gray said.

“Are they why we had to leave?”

“They’ll be gone tomorrow,” Gray said. “We’ll come back then. We live here, Joe. Don’t ever forget that. They can’t chase us off. You hear?”

“Yessir,” and Joe turned back to their walk.

But they couldn’t get back in the next day, or any day through the Fourth of July weekend, either. A padlock was closed tight on the gate, with signs that read, “Pool closed.” By

the middle of July, the pool was drained and dump trucks full of dirt showed up. A section of fence was removed and they dumped their loads into the pool, one load after another, for two weeks. Men, black men mostly, with shovels, were dropped off at the end of each day to move the dirt around and even it up, and at the end of two weeks the dirt was an even fill, a foot below the lip of the pool all the way around. At the beginning of August, the cement trucks showed up. In three days, a concrete cap had leveled off the rest of the pool. By the middle of August, the fence was rebuilt all the way around, and that was the end of the summer of 1978.

* * *

Thursday wasn't as bad as Gray feared it would be. The tornadoes did touch down in town in the night, but in sparsely populated farmland outside of town. In town, there were downed tree limbs, some shingles blown off roofs here and there, a lot of bleary eyes from storm-interrupted sleep, but no one hurt, nothing destroyed.

And the front page of the paper was devoted to the odd weather, a picture of a gas station canopy toppled over in Mississippi from the afternoon before. There was a picture of Joe at the march, slightly blurry and off-center in the frame, the photo focused instead on the superintendent on the steps, but folks had to open the paper to page three to see even that.

The promised heat had definitely blown in behind the storms. Mid-January, and the temperature reached 79 in the afternoon, where the day before the high had been 50. Gray was sweating in the shop. All the men were.

Friday was even warmer because the nighttime temps hadn't gone too far down into the 60s. By eleven in the morning, Cyrus asked Gray if they could open the shop bay door, the big

overhead door they raised up to drive in the large skidders and tractor-trucks. A warm breeze, like spring, swept in the large opening, and Gray's crew smiled as they continued their work.

At noon, the mill's break whistle blew. Gray finished checking through a cabinet of cables and belts, marking off a checklist to figure out the next week's parts order, then he joined Cyrus, Willie, and Tom at the little table and chairs outside his office door. Tom and Cyrus were halfway through cold-cut sandwiches. Willie was spooning large chunks of meat from a thermos, a scowl on his face.

"Soup, Willie?" Gray asked. He pulled his own sandwich from a crumpled brown bag, then pulled an apple out and set it down next to it.

"Beef stew. Cel made it Sunday," Willie said. "It was still cold on Sunday. Stew was good then."

The men laughed. Gray liked not worrying about anything momentous, even for just a short time. The phone started ringing in his office.

"Damnit," he said as he got up from the table without having taken a bite of his sandwich.

"Yo," he said into the phone. "Shop. Alsobrook."

Doreen was on the other end. "Have you heard?" she asked.

"What are you talking about, honey?"

"They're sending kids home from the schools. I don't know what's going on. My shift's not over until five. Someone said something about a riot at the high school, and someone else said it was at the junior high, then someone else said it's nothing but rumors."

"Slow down, Doreen," Gray said. "Now if the schools are shutting early, Joe's got his car and he'll come on home. And if they aren't, he'll be fine."

“How can you say that, Gray?” Gray heard the panic in her voice, and he started to get concerned. Doreen was always the solid one in the family, the one who could make all the plans and make sure everything got done.

“You should’ve seen him Wednesday afternoon,” Gray said. “There’s a lot of kids at that school who like him and believe in him. He won’t be in any trouble.” But Gray also thought about the small group of white boys and their taunts, and he wondered who exactly was causing what kind of trouble.

“All right,” she said. “You’re probably right. If I hear anything more, I’ll call you back?”

“You know you can call me here whenever you want, babe.”

There was a pause on the other end, then, “I love you, Gray.”

“I love you, too, Doreen.” Gray peeked out his office door. The other men were talking low to each other at the table while they kept eating. “I won’t be late tonight,” he added before hanging up.

Gray went back out and ate his sandwich quickly, put his apple back in the sack.

“You ain’t hungry, boss?” Tom said.

“Naw,” Gray answered. “Would rather get some of this nice day out there before the whistle blows again.”

“Heard that,” Tom said.

Gray walked over to the bay door and stepped outside. The constant din of the mill’s machinery filled the day as it always did, the screaming of saws, the knocks of various pipes and hammers, the grinding of gears, and behind it all the low, constant roar of the fires in the boiler, generating the power to run it all.

Gray pulled his pack of smokes out of his shirt pocket and fished out a cigarette. He thought about Joe at the march the day before, and about the kids clapping for him. He thought about the white boys and their insults. He thought about the black kids who had started to break from the larger group to confront the white boys. “Damnit,” he said again, softly in an exhaled cloud of cigarette smoke. He threw his cigarette down to the ground, half-smoked, and smashed it into the dirt with his steel-toed boot.

“Cyrus,” he called out as he stalked back into the shop. “I’ve got to go.”

“You all right?” Cyrus asked.

“I’m fine, but there’s something going on in town. I have to go check on Joe.” Gray was already into his office, looking for his keys.

“He all right?” Cyrus leaned against the frame of Gray’s office door.

“I’m sure he is.” Gray stopped to look around his desk, make sure there wasn’t some invoice or bit of paperwork that needed his immediate attention. Then he looked back up at Cyrus. He could see the genuine concern on the man’s face. It struck him that, if he weren’t the boss, in some other world they could be friends. “I hope he is,” he said. “I just have to go see about him.”

Gray drove fast, flashing through the countryside, but the hour to town never seemed longer. He kept thinking about the look Baxter Cranston had thrown him as the pack of boys had left down the sidewalk on Wednesday. *Damn niggers* echoed in his head. *Fucking faggot. Watch yourself.*

Gray’s drive into town brought him past his house, Joe’s car not in the driveway, so he kept driving straight on to the high school, sitting on Broad Street in the middle of town. He turned into the long driveway that went up into a horseshoe at the front doors. The parking lots to

either side of the drive were empty, and a lone police cruiser was parked at the apex of the horseshoe. Gray pulled his company truck in behind the cruiser and put it in park, not even stopping to turn the engine off or take the keys from the ignition before he swung the door open and got out to walk over to the driver's door of the cop car.

A large white cop sat in the driver's seat, semi-reclined, the window open. He looked up at Gray through mirrored lenses.

"School's closed, mister. Can I help you?"

Gray looked from the cop up to the school's front doors. A chain hung loosely from one of the door handles, no lock attaching its ends, and the door was slightly cracked open.

"I'm looking for my son. He ain't at home," Gray said, "and I thought ... Well, sometimes he's involved with things at the school."

"Forty kids in the cafeteria," the cop said, "having a sit-in or some foolishness, but your son ain't in there."

Gray didn't know this cop, not that he knew of. "Can I go in and be sure?"

The cop looked at Gray for a moment, his jowls hanging loosely, then he said, "Hang on." He pulled the handset from his radio and toggled it. "Yo Billy, there any white kids in there?"

Gray heard a voice come back over the radio speaker. "Naw, just black ones."

The cop in the car looked up at Gray, his eyebrows raised over the tops of his sunglasses. "You check with his friends?" he asked.

Gray hadn't. "No. I just thought he might be here. Thanks for the help." Gray turned to walk back to his truck.

The cop called out, “You be sure to let us know if you don’t track him down,” but Gray was already in his driver’s seat and putting the truck in gear.

As he drove back up the long drive toward the street, he saw two more cop cars go speeding back toward downtown, followed a moment later by a van from one of the Montgomery TV stations. Gray turned in the same direction and followed as close as he dared. After rumbling over the L&N crossing and taking a couple turns, Gray figured they were headed for the Board of Education building.

Again, Gray parked a block away, but this time it was because he had to, no parking spots any closer. A small crowd was gathered outside the building, where the two cop cars had pulled up. Gray got out of his truck and walked quickly up the street toward the building. As he approached, the police officers opened the back door of one of the cruisers and escorted two well-dressed, older white men, school board members, through a crowd of parents packed on the steps and going into the building. The crowd seemed evenly mixed, black and white, and Gray recognized the parents of some of the kids from Joe’s class in among them. Gray heard shouts of “What are you going to do?” and “Fire him!” and “Sign his contract!” The school board members disappeared behind the police into the front doors of the building.

The crowd began to file up the stairs and squeeze in the door behind them. Gray asked an older black woman walking up the steps next to him, “What’s happening?”

“Emergency school board meeting,” she said. “They going to do something about what happened over at the junior high.”

“What happened at the junior high?”

The lady looked at Gray. “Nobody really knows, but they all say they do. None of them were there, but they’re saying kids got pushed down in the halls. Trying to set us up and blame somebody.” She kept walking up the stairs. Gray followed.

He squeezed down the hall and through the door of the school board’s meeting room, the last person to make it through. The room was packed, all the benches filled, shoulder-to-shoulder, and along the walls parents stood, squeezed in next to each other. So many were talking that they were shouting to be heard over each other. At the front of the room, the eleven board members—six white and five black—were seated at a long table, with a florid-faced man with a shock of white hair in the center, the school board president, banging a gavel on the table-top. In front of them, at a small table between the board members and the chaotic audience, sat Dr. Livaudais, facing the board members, waiting.

“Everyone please quiet down,” the board president shouted, “Please. So we can get started. It’s been a long day for everyone.” Slowly, the crowd quieted down to a murmur and a scattering of cleared throats and grumbles. “Now, Dr. Livaudais, thank you for accommodating us. It’s come to some of our attention that your continued presence is creating a distraction, and some would say a dangerous situation, for the students.”

“This isn’t right,” one of the black school board members, an older man down at the end of the table, said.

“Now, Hiram,” the board president said, “just hold on. Please. We’ll all get a vote on what to do. But first I want to know what Dr. Livaudais has to say about all this.” They all turned and looked at the superintendent.

“Well,” he said, “I’m here to do a job. I think I’ve been doing a good job for three years. I only think the students are trying to tell us that they agree. Nobody asked them in the review.

That being said, I serve at the will of this Board, and I respect the process. Now I've had reports back from the principals at the schools today. The calls we've had from some parents had alarmed us that there had been some event at the junior high, but that turns out to have been misreported. There were a handful of kids outside one of the classrooms when that classroom was letting out. Some of them weren't entirely watching out where they were going, and perhaps were being inconsiderate of others, and two students fell down in the hall. None were hurt. We have some students who will be called in to speak to the principal in the morning about what happened. This is no different than discipline issues that happen everyday, and there's no reason to think it's related to any of the lawful protests that other students have been engaged in."

The murmuring in the crowd began to increase in volume when Dr. Livaudais was finished, and the school board president gaveled the room back into silence.

Hiram Weeks, the older black school board member who had spoken up before, said to the school board president, "I'm satisfied, Dr. Morgan, and I don't think any action is necessary. I think calling this emergency meeting was ill-advised."

"Our parents in this district were concerned, Hiram," the president returned, "and we must be responsible to them. Any motions?"

One of the white woman school board members, to the other side of the president, raised her hand. "I move that we amend the contract status of Dr. Russell Livaudais, and terminate him from his position immediately." The room broke out in loud shouts.

"You can't do that!" yelled out one woman from the middle of the room. Dr. Livaudais sat silently at his table. The school board president banged his gavel.

"I will have the police clear this room if the audience will not quiet down!" he called out over the din. "This will be an orderly public meeting, or the public will be asked to leave." He

continued to bang his gavel. Three uniformed officers stood out from the crowd and filed in behind the table of board members, and the crowd again quieted.

A spectacled, short white board member at the end of the table raised his hand. "I second Edie's motion," he said.

"All in favor of the motion to terminate Dr. Russell Livaudais's contract immediately," said the board president, "say aye."

"AYE," spoke out all six white board members, in unison.

"All opposed?" the president asked, and turned to look down the side of the table where the five black school board members sat.

Hiram pushed his chair back from the table and stood. "I will not participate in this vote," he said. "It is illegal, and reprehensible." He then pushed past the crowd, brushing past Gray on his way to and then out the door. The other four black school board members also stood, and filed out of the room.

"The remaining board members are a quorum," the president announced, "and have voted, six to nothing, and the motion carries. Dr. Livaudais, thank you for your service. This meeting is adjourned."

Gray slipped out the door as the room erupted once more.

Gray drove back home. Joe's car was in the driveway. When Gray got out of his truck, he heard the hollow bounce of the basketball against the concrete pad in the backyard, the rattle of the ball on the metal rim of the goal. He walked around the side of the house and found Joe alone, shooting baskets. A small purple shiner sat above his right eye.

"You all right, son?"

Joe stopped dribbling and held the basketball loosely between his hand and his hip. He'd worked up a sweat. "It's nothing, Dad. I've got this."

Gray held his hands out for the ball. Joe bounce-passed it to him, one pneumatic thunk against the concrete between them. "Your mother's not going to like the looks of that." Gray held the ball up above his head, eyed the rim of the basket twenty feet away, pumped his arms back and lofted the ball toward the goal. It banged high off the backboard and bounced toward Joe.

"I can't help that," Joe said, dribbling the ball back up into his hands. He hooked it in an arc high over his head. It dropped through the bottom of the net.

As Joe slow-walked over to grab the ball, Gray hustled up to him and boxed him out with his hip, scooped the ball up himself.

"Dad!" Joe said.

Gray held onto the ball with both hands. "Son, you promised to be careful, and I trust you to be going about this right. Were you over at the junior high today?"

Joe looked at Gray for a second. "No. I don't even know what went on over there."

"Well, what happened then?" Gray asked, looking at the darkened patch covering Joe's eyebrow. "Don't tell me it was nothing. Too much has been going on in this town today for it to be nothing."

"Give me the ball, Dad. Come on," Joe said, holding his hands out.

"Did one of the other protesting kids do that to you?"

"No, Dad. It wasn't that." He dropped his arms back to his side.

"Was it that Baxter Cranston, or one of his friends, then?"

Joe said nothing.

“It was, wasn’t it. I’ll go drive over to his dad’s office right now.”

“No, Dad. Leave it be. I started it.” Joe stepped toward Gray and put his hands on the ball. Gray held it tighter.

“You’re just saying what you think is right, Joe. You didn’t start a fight.”

“No, today, they were yelling shit at my friends, so I ran and tackled one of them. It was me, Dad. I started it. I don’t even know if it was one of them or the parking lot that did this to my face. Just drop it.”

Gray stepped back from Joe and let the ball drop between them. “Put some ice on it, Joe. I’ll talk to your mom when she gets home.”

* * *

Gray and Doreen sat in the anteroom outside the superintendent’s office in mismatched, cracked-leather chairs, Joe in between them. Gray should’ve been at work. The main fire engine from the mill’s emergency department was in the shop, the cab tilted backwards and all Gray’s guys working on the engine. Instead, Gray was back in town, waiting to find out what would happen to Joe, after a call from Doreen that they were both to go with him.

Vice-principals at the high school—white assistant football coaches with too much damned power, thought Gray—wanted to expel him. Said they had multiple witnesses that Joe was swigging alcohol from a jar before he tackled the Cranston kid’s friend, and that the other kid got the worst of it. That was all Doreen knew when she called him and told him to meet her at the Board of Education building.

The superintendent's office door had been closed since they got there and the secretary told them to have a seat. Gray wondered who would be at the desk since the previous week's firing. He wondered if there was some vice-superintendent or line of succession. Probably some mayor's stooge. He really needed to be back at the shop.

The office door opened up, and the white board president backed slowly out, a smile on his face. "Well, glad you're back, Russell, glad you're back."

Dr. Livaudais followed him out, and clapped him on the shoulder. "We have unfinished business, Carl. Let's get this done." He looked down at the Alsobrooks, then back at the board president. "Let me get back to work."

The board president looked down at Joe, sitting between Gray and Doreen, and his smile flattened into a thin line. "Yes, I see you need to do that."

"Joe, Mr. and Mrs. Alsobrook," Dr. Livaudais said, "come on in my office. This won't take long." Joe was the first one up out of his chair and following him into his office, ahead of his parents.

"But, Doc, I thought you were fired," Joe said, standing by Dr. Livaudais's desk while the superintendent walked around to the other side to sit down in his big desk chair.

Dr. Livaudais smiled a little, and lifted his chin and indicated in the direction of the door behind them. "The board knew they couldn't do that like that. They were in a panic trying to figure out how to end that sit-in, especially once they made the asinine decision to close the schools over it, and they knew the kids would listen to me. So I made a deal."

Gray and Doreen sat down in two seats across from Dr. Livaudais's desk. "What sort of deal?" Doreen asked.

“I get the kids to end their occupation at the high school. That was easy. I just told the students that if they ended it I would get my job back. So now I have my job back, at least until my contract runs out in June. I also made them give me the final say on any discipline of the students involved in the protests.” Dr. Livaudais turned his gaze from Doreen to Joe.

“Yes, sir,” Joe said.

“What’s this about drinking?” Gray asked Dr. Livaudais.

“That’s what I want to know, Mr. Alsobrook. Now, Joe, you know I appreciate the way you’ve stood up the last couple weeks, but if you were drinking on school grounds, I can’t just let you off. We suspended three black kids on the track team for drinking last month, for passing a bottle of beer around on the team bus after a meet. I do nothing to you if you were drinking, and we’ve got a whole different set of problems. They say you were drinking grain alcohol from a mason jar?”

“It’s not true, Doc. They’re making it up,” Joe exclaimed. He turned back to Gray. “I didn’t do it, Dad. The coaches are just trying to get rid of me.”

“Son, why don’t you sit,” Dr. Livaudais said, pointing to a chair beside the two his parents sat in. Joe sat down and stared at the edge of the superintendent’s desk. “They want to expel you, which is absurd. They’re overreaching, which is how I’m sure it isn’t true. You’ve pissed them off. You’re not playing by the rules they thought they knew.”

Gray felt a lump rise in his throat. He moved his hand off his lap and let it rest on the arm of Joe’s chair. “So what should we do, Doc?” Gray asked. “What about that other boy? I’m sure his parents aren’t going to sit still for it if Joe isn’t punished somehow.”

“That’s bullshit, Dad. I’m sorry, Doc, but he had it coming,” Joe said.

“No, Joe, he didn’t. What did I tell all of you when you marched over here? Stay peaceful, I told you. That’s where your power is. Now you’ve put you and me, both, in a bind.”

“But he yelled out across the parking lot so the whole school could hear. ‘Nigger girl, suck my dick,’ and nobody was going to say anything to him. He needed to be called out.” Joe leaned into the back of the chair.

Dr. Livaudais looked at Joe for a second, made sure he was done. “Even if that’s true, Joe, and even if you’re the one who needed to call him out, you did more than that. Boy’s parents say he has two cracked ribs.”

“You can’t expel my son,” Doreen said. “You can’t even suspend him, Dr. Livaudais. He’s got scholarships lined up, and they won’t give them to a discipline case. My son is not a bad kid. He’s better than most of those kids at that school, and you know it. And we know it.” Her voice remained calm, but Gray knew she was seething.

“Mrs. Alsobrook, I do know it. I also know cracked ribs is an awfully convenient diagnosis. I can’t see the truth of that the way I can see Joe’s face. Despite what those white board members think, I’m not stupid. But what I’m going to do is this. We’re going to announce a three-day suspension for Joe. But it’s not going on the books. Basically just stay home from school for three days, Joe. Mrs. Sewell in the library is going to gather your assignments and drop them off at your house each afternoon, and you have to get it all done. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Mrs. Alsobrook, are you good with this?” Dr. Livaudais asked.

“I don’t like it. I want that other boy suspended, too, but I understand it.”

Gray stood, and everyone else stood then, too. “Doc, thank you.” He reached his hand across the desk. “Whatever’s going on in this town, thank you. Joe thinks real high of you, and I trust him.”

Dr. Livaudais grasped Gray’s hand.

* * *

The last day of Joe’s suspension was the last day of deer season. The week had already been long. The fire engine had gotten back on-line, and was followed by four pickups, three log skidders, and a forklift. They got them all back working again, and Gray took the day off.

While it was still dark, Gray slipped into his camo cover-alls and hunting boots, grabbed his thirty-thirty from the cabinet in the corner of their bedroom, and tried to pad as quietly as he could down the hall to the kitchen. He poured cereal into a bowl. When he turned from the fridge with his milk, Joe was standing there. His hair was bed-mussed, but he had on jeans and an olive green sweatshirt, a beat-up pair of hiking boots.

“Come with you?” Joe asked.

“Don’t you have schoolwork to stay up with?” Gray asked.

“I’ll finish it up when we come back. It’s the last day of the season, ain’t it?”

Gray set the milk carton down, and turned and grabbed another bowl from the cabinet.

“Pour yourself some cereal, and be quick. I’ll go grab you the twelve-gauge from the cabinet. Don’t know if it’s been cleaned recently.”

“No, Dad, I’m not going to shoot. Just want to come hang out in the woods with you. I’m going to bring my camera.” Gray looked at Joe, thinking about it, a day in the woods with someone who wasn’t there to hunt.

“I’m glad to hang out with you, Joe, but you might get bored. We aren’t going to be there to talk.”

Joe poured cereal into his bowl. “I know how it goes.”

An hour later, Gray and Joe sat next to each other twenty feet up in an oak tree in one of the mill’s tree plantations, surrounded by medium-growth pine, probably two more years to harvest. Their legs dangled over the edge, and they leaned their backs against the trunk of the tree. Gray had two thermoses between them, one filled with coffee and the other with bourbon. He held his rifle loose across his lap, pointed down toward the ground as he slowly scanned back and forth through the green needles of the pines. Joe, too, was quiet and looking. Every now and then, Gray heard the shutter click on Joe’s camera.

The camera had been Gray’s, a basic K1000 he’d bought the first year they came out, in 1976. He’d taken a decade of pictures with it, children at Christmas and Easter, Lilah and Ruthie with prom dates, boys who looked too confident in their rented tuxedos. When Joe was a freshman in high school and started showing an interest in photography, Gray gave the K1000 to Joe and moved up to a fancy Canon that never satisfied him the way his old camera did.

Gray reached down to the whiskey thermos and unscrewed the top and took a sip. The day had dawned gray and wet, a cold front coming through and reasserting itself after the previous week’s freak weather. The bourbon felt good, better than the coffee. He offered the thermos to Joe.

“It’s not the coffee, Dad,” Joe whispered.

“Just take a small sip, then,” Gray whispered back. Joe took it, and slurped from it. Gray expected Joe to cough on it, but the boy didn’t even flinch as he handed the thermos back to Gray. Gray screwed the cap back on and set it down, then patted Joe on the shoulder as they both kept looking through the trees and brush.

A fluttering of wings exploded from a nearby tree and two doves took flight. Joe’s camera was on them quick and he fired off four shots.

“You focused that quick?” Gray asked, startled by the sudden action such that he’d forgotten to stay quiet.

“Think so, and had my exposure right, too,” Joe said back in a whisper. “Guess I’ll see later when I can get them into the darkroom at school.”

For the next hour, all was quiet, except for the dripping of gathered mist and dew from the trees to the ground below, the occasional metallic sound of the thermos caps unscrewing and screwing back, the breathing of the men.

As the clouds began to thin, a colder, brisker wind blew. In the brighter glare of the clearing day, Gray saw movement in the trees below, at about thirty yards. Close. He elbowed Joe and pointed in the direction of the shifting limbs. Two deer stepped into view, a medium-sized doe followed by a young buck, maybe six or seven points on his rack. They stopped and raised their noses to the air. Joe and Gray stayed still. The deer lowered their heads again, rooting through the carpet of pine needles, pulling up weeds and grass hiding underneath.

Gray raised his gun to his shoulder, sighted down the length of the barrel at the buck. Before he closed one eye, he saw Joe bring his camera up. He’d told Joe on the drive down that, if they saw any deer, he was to hold his shutter until after Gray got off a shot, to not spook the deer with the sound of the camera.

The deer continued grazing, stepping closer slowly. Gray kept the rifle trained on them until he had a clear shot, no limbs between him and them. Joe continued to hold off with his camera. Gray took a deep breath, held it. The world stopped around him, the deer coming into sharp focus. He began to squeeze the trigger slowly.

But another shot went off from the other side of the deer, just as Gray put the final pressure to his own trigger. The doe bolted, and the buck's legs tensed to jump after her when Gray's own rifle went off, and the buck fell, stone still, to the forest floor. Joe then got off three shots of his own, winding the film fast between shutter clicks, before Gray lowered his gun and said, "Come on, Joe, let's get down there."

Joe scrambled down the ladder first, jumping the last five feet. Gray followed, more slowly, taking the rungs all the way to the bottom so he wouldn't jar any old injuries. Last day of the season, and there would be venison in the deep-freeze after all. Tenderloins, steaks, packs of ground venison for burgers or meat sauce. Sausages. And Joe here for the kill, too.

As they quickly closed the ground to the fallen buck, they heard footfalls coming from the other direction. An older white man, a camo-patterned down coat and thick canvas camo pants, a long-barreled gun in his hand, came walking up to the deer, their deer.

"What you doing, fella?" he asked, not nicely.

"Getting ready to take care of my kill," Gray said. "You having any luck today?"

"Ain't your kill, mister. I just shot him from my stand over there," he said, pointing the tip of his gun up and behind him. He shifted his look over to Joe and narrowed his eyes.

"I hate to disagree with you, sir," Gray said, "but I know it was my shot that got him. Had him in my sights for ten seconds, and squeezed down careful on him. Look," Gray said, easing

with the toe of his boot at a dark hole in the upper right flank of the fallen buck, red blood pumping from it. “That’s where my shot went in.”

“What’re you even doing in these woods? It’s my brother’s land,” the man said. He raised the point of his gun up ever slightly, not exactly pointing it at Joe and Gray.

“We have a misunderstanding, then, mister, because this is my company’s land, and that stand over there is the stand I’ve hunted from for ten years,” Gray said, dropping a layer of civility from his voice.

The man looked in doubt for a second, his bluff called, then he looked back at Joe’s face, then down at the camera gripped in his hands. “Boy, what you doing out here with that thing?”

“Sir, it’s my camera, but I know good enough about hunting, and I’ve killed deer before, if that’s what you’re getting at,” Joe said.

“Now Joe, don’t be impolite,” Gray said.

“Sorry, Daddy. You know, that’s clearly a thirty-thirty wound in that deer, and this man’s got a twelve-gauge. Maybe he put a load of shot into that doe, but he didn’t drop this buck.”

The man’s gun lowered an inch, and he took a step back. “Smart boy,” he spat. Gray knew he likely wanted to say “smart ass” but had the sense not to.

“That’s right, he is a smart boy,” Gray said. “Your doe ran off that way,” he added, pointing off into the brush.

The man didn’t move to walk away yet, though. He stared at Joe’s face again. “Boy, don’t I know you?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so,” Joe said.

“I’ve seen you in the papers or something?”

“You don’t know my son,” Gray said. “Now you get on, and I won’t report you for poaching on mill land.”

The man sneered, an ugly smile, mean, crooked across his face. “That’s it,” he said, still looking at Joe. “You’re that nigger-loving kid. I know I’ve seen you. And you,” he said to Gray, “raising nigger-loving kids. You can keep your piss-poor little six-pointer.” He turned and began walking back off into the woods. “Shit,” he said as he retreated.

Back in the cab of Gray’s truck, the deer in the bed behind them, heading for home, Joe said, “Daddy, I’ve been thinking, I could finish my senior year up at Central High in Tuscaloosa.”

Gray looked over at Joe, then back at the road in front of them. “What? Move in with Ruthie?”

“I was talking to her yesterday, and she brought it up. I told her no way, but I don’t know.”

“What? That thing with the man today?”

“Well sure. I’m not doing any good here, and that man talking like that to you. And the other day at Dr. Livaudais’s office; I mean, he’s still going to leave in June. It’s just, it’s not what I ever thought it would come to.” Joe was staring out the truck window as he talked.

“It never is,” Gray said.

They drove in silence. Five minutes later, Joe looked back over at Gray. Gray felt the boy’s stare on him.

“What?” Gray asked.

“So what about Tuscaloosa?”

“I’m going to tell you this one time, Joe, and I want you to hear it,” Gray said.

“Yes, sir?”

“Alsobrooks don’t run. We stay where we’re rooted.”

“Aw, come on, Dad, we don’t have roots here,” Joe said. “You now that.”

“What I know,” Gray said, turning to look at Joe, “is what I can control. And I say we have roots here. Now you go off to college and maybe you don’t want to come back. That’s what you control. But right now you’ll stay here with your mom and me.”

Joe turned back to look out his window.

* * *

Two days later was Sunday again. Gray rolled out of bed and headed to the Pancake House for the first time in two weeks. A thin casing of ice cloaked every pine needle and shined from the low spots in the gutters along the road, as if winter had never left.

All the old bastards were already gathered around the table when Gray pulled up his chair and turned a coffee cup over. “And *damn* if them azaleas didn’t all bloom and then freeze for sure,” Bill was saying. “Linda’s having a fit. Says I’m going to have to dig them all up and plant new ones in the spring.”

Blaine had eyed Gray as he sat down, but turned back to Bill. “Didn’t you just do that a couple years ago, Bill?” he asked.

“Shit don’t change,” Gray said. “Shit don’t never change.”

The old men all shook their heads and murmured agreement.

Riding in Cars at Night

I pass the highway exit for Dauphin Island, driving from one southern state to another across Alabama's toe, dipping south into the Gulf. Every couple of years I have occasion to pass this exit, and it always makes me think of those particular days and nights, among many days and nights spent on the island. My wife sleeps beside me in the car, and I imagine telling her about Dan and about Lotte, at least how it all really got started that day on Dauphin Island, about the kids with the gun, the birds, the blood, all of it.

Dan wasn't there in my dorm room the afternoon, fifteen years ago, when the acid we'd dropped was kicking in and Lotte was naked in front of me, all of her, glowing from sex, triumphant, smiling.

"Ask me to marry you, Joe Joe," she said, sunlight falling through the window and pouring down her skin. In the addled light and color, the joy filling my chest, it made sense, what she was saying.

But, "You've only known me for, like, five months, Lotte."

Her smile never left her face, because in that moment she had the answers. "And I know all of you, Joe, and you know all of me. There's nothing to hide." In a way, it was true. We'd spent so much time together. We were in theater together, with Dan, and so the three of us were always with each other it seemed, at rehearsals, at meals, hanging out, running lines, whatever. The only times we weren't together were when we were in class or sleeping. Hell, sometimes

even sleeping we'd all pass out on a sofa together, some CDs on repeat on the stereo. And that's how we'd been, the three of us, just friends, but best friends, except some nights I found myself alone with Lotte and we would kiss and let our hands rove freely. Then that afternoon, for whatever reason, when Craig had come around with the acid and we'd dropped a few hits, Dan wasn't around. So I was torn, a little.

"So marry you? Now? You're eighteen. I'm nineteen. Your parents will hate me."

I hadn't even met her parents yet. They were back in Arkansas.

Lotte giggled. "I know."

"Then marry me," I said, dropping to my knees and pressing my cheek against her stomach, her hands in my hair.

"Yes," she said.

When night came we ran, our gang, some high, some tripping, a few sober, full speed like nightbirds along the shadowy places between the buildings, under trees, pretending we were criminals, subversives, deviants, fleeing from the campus security guards who we supposed knew what we were up to in our rooms, what we talked about in our huddles on the quad, and we hurdled low, hundred-and-fifty-year-old stone walls, flying into the old Jesuit cemetery where the shadows were darkest and where real honest-to-God ghosts canoodled on moonless nights, glowing along old brick promenades beneath gnarled magnolias. In the shadows among the stones we sank down, waiting for headlight beams and spotlights to pass above us and move on, and then we kissed and smoked before getting up and running again, taking flight to the next shadowy place. Playing at danger. Games.

When the sun rose the next day, I sat on the edge of Dan's bed in his room, watching him rub his eyes and prop himself up on his elbow to smoke his first cigarette before even getting up to take a piss.

"You what?" he asked, his voice a croak with the labor of being stunned to life so quickly.

"Engaged," I said, fast, still flying from the night before. "Engaged, Lotte and me, to be married, man and wife, for life, all of that, all of it."

"Are you insane?"

"You'll be my best man, and her maid of honor, too," I said. I laughed. It was all funny, at least at that moment, all of this escape from home, two years away by that point, away from all the seriousness and drudgery and dispute of Meadowview, three hours up the old highway. It had been Dan, one year older, wiser, cooler, who'd pulled me out of my skulking and persistent cheap beer drunkenness my freshman year to go to the theater and try out for plays and then down to Dauphin Island to bodysurf by moonlight, naked to the fish below and bare to the sky above, who insisted I drop my worrying about what was to come and what was past, to just dive into the experience around me at any moment. Everything was funny and alive and full of joy and not to be believed. And then the next year Lotte arrived and we immediately connected with her when she showed up to audition for the play fall semester. *Taming of the Shrew*. Lotte was Bianca, the ingenue, and Dan and I, of course, were her suitors, Dan playing Lucentio, who pretends to be Cambio, and I playing Hortensio, who pretends to be Petruchio. All those disguises couldn't hide us from each other.

A few hours after I woke Dan, under afternoon sun the three of us were in the dunes on the west end of the island, fifteen minutes' walk past where the road and the rich folks' houses

ended. Dan shucked his T-shirt and ran straight to the waves while I stayed up in the dunes with Lotte and spread our blanket in a shallow hollow between two dune-tops crowned in sea oats. She stood in the full wind, a white cotton skirt swirling around her ankles, a loose black t-shirt falling off one shoulder, dirty blonde hair whipping about her face.

I sat up on the edge of the blanket. “Would you look at that fucking ocean?” I asked Lotte.

“It’s not an ‘ocean,’” she said, “It’s a Gulf. If you’re going to marry me, you’ve got to get that straight.”

The water had kicked up in the late afternoon wind into two series of breakers. Big swells rolled in from the deep Gulf and broke over themselves about thirty yards out where a submerged sandbar rose up, then another zone of closer, smaller, wilder waves stood and fell, tearing from the sandbar the rest of the way up to the broad, white beach.

“So you still up for that?” I asked. “Marriage?”

“Did you think it was the acid talking?”

I looked over my shoulder. Lotte wasn’t looking at me, but had a little smile on her face as she dug through her backpack. Dan was out past the breakers, treading water. I had a joint in my pocket I wanted to smoke, to mellow out the mania and exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours. I wanted Lotte to come over by me, block the wind, share the joint.

Instead, she stood back up. She had a sleeve of crackers in her hand. She dug one out and threw it up toward a passing gull. It caught the cracker in its beak and came closer and hovered, flying against the wind coming off the Gulf. Within seconds, it was joined by more gulls, ten of them in formation. Lotte started breaking the crackers and tossing the pieces up. The seabirds circled, taking turns catching the pieces and rotating to the top of the flock to be replaced by

another. I remember the percussive whoosh of feathers beating air, the snap of beaks clamping on crackers, and a tiny laugh like a growl from deep in Lotte's chest. This early Lotte appears in my mind like a wild goddess, barely separate from the birds.

In the distance we heard a whoop. Back down the spine of the island toward the road-end and the houses, I saw a truck, no more at that distance than a glint of sunshine reflecting off metal and a cloud of dust at least a mile down the rutted, sandy trail that ran along the backside of the dunes. Then we heard the stacatto rap of a gunshot.

At the sound, the flock of birds split open. Some darted toward the ocean, some toward the sheltered water that runs along the backside of the thin-spit barrier island, the rest up toward the sun. Lotte jumped down, put both hands on my shoulders, and pushed me onto the blanket. "Get down," she said.

She stretched flat beside me and we peeked over the rim of the dune. Locals in pickup trucks wouldn't give a shit about us, but pretending at danger was our fun, one of the things we did best. The sand shifted beneath our weight. Lotte's breath was moist in my ear. I smelled her sweat and my sweat. Our hearts beat. The pickup truck approached quickly, its body banging against its chassis as it sped through the ruts and bumps, its tires kicking up sand. Four teenagers, our age probably, were crammed into the cab of the truck, two muscled guys with two girls in between them. Two scrawny, girl-less boys stayed low in the bed, hollering every few seconds.

They passed, and I assumed they were gone another five miles to the end of the island. Lotte kept watching after the truck. I asked her, "What is it?"

"Nothing, but don't you ever wonder what that's like? To be them, like those kids. Nothing holding you back. To go all the way to the end?"

“I’ve been there once, with John when he was trying to impress that local girl.” John had an old four-wheel-drive Bronco, the only kind of vehicle that could get through the miles of sandy path all the way to the end. Walking it would take hours, and any old car like the ones we drove would never make it, the sand so soft it would swallow them up to the chassis in seconds. I still think about that time John drove us to the tip of the island, and still try to comprehend the place, where old Broncos like his and Jeeps and newer pickups jacked up on huge tires turned perpetual circles in the spinning sand of the wide expanse of beach where the island stopped, water breaking on three sides, girls grouped in the middle around piles of driftwood, old bonfire rings staining the strand, coolers, loud music, a teenage apocalypse of blow jobs and dancing and blackouts and bikini tops and testosterone.

I grabbed Lotte around her waist and pulled her on top of me. I brought my face to hers. “Those kids don’t know what they’ve got,” I said. It was easy back then to pretend to be cool, to say things that didn’t mean anything, to pretend I understood things I didn’t. I rolled Lotte off me and hopped to my feet. I pulled off my shorts, leaving just my boxers.

“I’m going out,” I said. I leaped over the dune rim and ran across the beach.

Lotte yelled after me, “Let’s get a ring tomorrow!” I ran faster, into the waves.

Out past the breakers, I treaded water in the bobbing swells twenty feet away from Dan. I licked the salt from my lips and willed myself not to shiver in the late-March bottom-of-Alabama breeze. Dan swam closer to me.

“Y’all still engaged?” he asked. Back on the beach, Lotte stood atop the dunes, looking west.

“Yes. You’re not so funny, you know.”

“And you’re a weak man.” Dan smiled. The orange light of the late sun softened him.

“Look, you’re the one who always said to stop worrying so much and stop being so serious,” I said, “to ride the wave in front of me.” He did say this, the summer before when I went over to Montgomery to visit him during break, catch a movie, smoke cigarettes, drink beer.

“Marriage is serious!” he yelled as a swell raised him high above me.

“It was a wave,” I yelled back to him. “I’d started tripping, and it was in front of me, Lotte, my whole life, the last five months, the next fifty years, all of it. It was some vivid shit.”

Dan looked over at me. “What, did she just have sex with you or something?” There was an edge to his voice as he asked it.

“Look, you weren’t there. Everything, it was right.” I spit some saltwater out of my mouth. “I was the guy there, and I made the choice.”

Dan stayed quiet. We watched the gathering swells. To the east a ghost-silver sliver of moon slid above the horizon. Fifteen yards from where we treaded a ripple gave way to a tightly winding whorl as a dark shadow swam away from us. A jet trail bisected the sky’s deep blue, clean and quiet, a glint of plane ahead of it. As I watched, I felt my body lifted up to it. Dan let out a yell. We fell quickly down the backside of a huge swell as a wall of blue lifted before us.

“Not yet,” Dan yelled. We went higher on the next wave before plummeting into the chasm behind it. Then Dan yelled, “Turn,” and “Dig!” We pulled hard against the back-current behind the second wave as we were swept fast up the face of the third wave. We hoped to neither be crushed by it nor get left behind as it passed. The break pushed Dan ahead of me. He was carried in front of the wave’s lip. He extended his arms like wings, and his yells came back to me like laughter. I stalled behind him on the wave top, missing the ride. Dan’s legs kicked behind him in the air as the wave rolled beneath his mid-section and flew him beyond the last trough and toward the beach.

I dropped into the trough, and in my disappointment I tried to force the issue. I started swimming again behind that third wave of the set, and the next wave lifted beneath me, against my stomach, against my thighs, and then there was the tension where the water wanted to suck me down and push me to the top at the same time, and when it was done the pushing won, and I was speeding far faster than my own swimming could propel me, but then it was too fast and the whole ride collapsed. The bottom dropped out from beneath my torso and then the wave clutched my ankles and twisted them back over my head and dragged them ahead of the rest of me. I was stuck in the looking-glass-side of Dan's ride. My face hit the sandy bottom and dredged a path toward the shore, and my lungs burned for air until, at once, I was lying in the surf zone at the edge of the beach, a roaring in my ears as the wave receded.

I sat up as Lotte ran up to me. "Stop sitting there, Joe Joe, let's go!" she yelled. She tapped me on my head then kept running up the beach, a rule-less game of duck duck goose. I shook my head and stood, woozy from the surf's mauling. Fifty yards past Lotte, Dan stood in the shallow surf, facing the two scrawny guys from the back of the pickup truck. They were in T-shirts and cut-off jeans. I looked down at my own skinny, slightly sun-pinked arms and chest, my thin boxers pasted tight against me.

Dan's arms opened wide and I heard his laughter blowing down the beach on the wind. I jogged up to the dunes and was pulling my shorts on when I heard Lotte yell, "No!"

I looked down the beach and saw the two kids from the truck, Lotte beside them. Dan was still standing in the surf, ankle-deep. Birds were circling around Lotte and the boys like they had when we were up on the dune, but nobody was feeding them. Lotte's hands were up on her face. One of the kids was holding a gun straight out, aiming wildly from one bird to another, with Dan on the other side of the flock, watching, saying something. The other kid flapped his

arms around, dancing with lanky imprecision, as if to make fun of the birds or make them fly off. But they didn't fly off.

The birds started flying in a tighter circle in front of the gun kid, like they thought he was holding out food to feed them. Dan walked out of the waves behind the birds and started flapping his arms, too. The four of them stood there, Dan on one side and the tall kid on the other, both in their flap-armed dance, Lotte possibly horrified or enthralled, the gun kid steady and still with his gun held out.

I saw gun kid open his mouth, and a split-second later heard, "Like a goddamned video arcade," yelled onto the wind. His head cocked back, then I heard his laugh. He swayed the arm holding the gun in circles with the birds. One gull flew closer to him, dancing with the gun, and reached its beak out toward it. I couldn't believe what I was watching. I looked behind me and around, as if there would be an audience. Then I heard a gunshot and snapped my head back around.

Lotte was stooped over something on the ground. The two kids were standing over her. The birds were gone. I didn't see Dan.

I jumped off the dune and sprinted across the beach. When I was ten feet from the group, my feet pounding against wet sand, the gun kid turned toward me. His gun glinted in his hand. I launched and hit him square in his abdomen with my shoulders, and we both fell to the ground.

"Get this crazy sonuvabitch off me," the boy called out.

"Joe, what are you doing?" Lotte asked, behind us.

Someone pulled me off the kid, strong hands on my shoulders, and I heard Dan's laughter again, like I had heard it the first time from down the beach. I shook out of the grip and turned to see Dan, a bewildered smile on his face and water pouring down him from emerging again from

the waves where he had ducked to avoid the gun. “Dan,” I said, “I heard that shot, and I didn’t see you, and I thought ...”

“I’m OK,” he said, his laughter dissipating into a concerned smile and a look that said to be careful. “I’m OK.”

I turned to look closer at the kid on the ground. As he got to his feet, he picked a .22 pistol up from the sand, brushed it off, then glared at me. “Fucker,” he said, with no real conviction.

Lotte still crouched on the sand, stroking the dark-stained feathers of a large gull, its eyes night-black, a large hole seeping blood from just above where its wings joined its back.

“Isn’t it amazing, Joe?” she asked. She seemed halfway between a laugh and a cry, a little kid just barely hidden under her young woman’s skin, someone I wanted to hold and protect and share with, everything, always.

“I shot it,” said the gun kid.

“What the fuck,” I said. “Dan, what’s going on?” Another set of large breakers pounded down just this side of the sandbar and rushed toward the beach.

The other kid, the one I hadn’t tackled, spoke up. “Chill out, dude. We’re just having a little fun.”

I took two steps toward the kid who’d just spoken to me. He was taller than the gun kid, taller than me. “Who are you to tell me to chill out?” I asked him. “You and your friend. Where’s your buddies in the truck?”

I was so close to him that we touched, my chest against his chest, my feet overstepping the sand covering his feet.

“On down the beach. We fell out of the truck.” He grinned, like it was OK to fall out of a speeding truck and get left behind by friends, like we’re all forces of nature spinning out of control, rolling into each other until we wash up on some beach with a bunch of fucking lunatics.

I backed away from him. “You could have gotten hurt,” I said, channeling my mother, maybe channeling his, too. He probably appreciated it just as much.

“Dude,” he said, “it’s just a day at the beach. Don’t be so serious.”

I looked behind me at Dan. “Am I being too serious?” I asked him. This was our conversation that the tall kid unwittingly walked into. I even smiled.

Dan said, “Marriage is serious.”

I said, “So are guns, don’t you think?”

“A day at the beach isn’t serious at all, Joe,” he said. We were telling inside jokes; only they weren’t funny to anyone, even to us. I felt the sands shift again, beneath my feet, between my toes. I crouched next to Lotte, who no longer looked so amazed, but only sad.

“What’s wrong, Lot?” I asked, trying to be quiet, imagining I was there with only her. I put my hand on top of hers, which was still resting on the bird’s feathers.

“It’s all so real,” she said, looking from the bird up to me. She pulled her hand out from under mine and my fingers fell onto the feathers. Lotte pressed her hand down on mine, so that I felt beyond the spiky structure of the feathers to the bird’s body, still soft, barest warmth. More blood pushed out of the hole by the bird’s wing.

Gun kid shuffled around and stooped to face us, kicking sand over the bird and onto our hands. He looked relaxed, happy.

“Helluva fucking day,” he said quietly. “Ain’t missed a damn thing I shot at. That never happens. Usually fucking miss something, you know? Mailbox on the way down here. Couple sand crabs. One of them beach mice.”

“You know those are endangered,” Lotte said, getting more agitated.

“Well they sure are now,” the tall kid laughed. Gun kid laughed with him.

Gun kid continued, “After I hit that damned mouse, figured I might could hit anything. And I hate these damn birds, shitting everywhere, screaming.” Darkness crossed his face.

Behind us, Dan cleared his throat. “Why don’t you put the gun away, all right? Stick it in your pocket.”

The tall kid rushed over to Dan and got in his face the same way I had been in his, though he didn’t tower over Dan the way he did over me. Dan was tall, and strong, even though he didn’t hold himself that way normally.

“The fuck are you to tell us what to do, motherfucker?” Tall kid said. Lotte and I stood. Dan didn’t back away.

“Stop it, Dan,” Lotte said beside me. I didn’t know whether to stay by her or to try to intervene. “Leave it be,” she said to Dan, then to gun kid, “You’re fine.”

The gun kid jumped to his feet and let out a loud “Wooooooooooooo!” Behind him, the sun was fully red, a fingernail of empty sky separating it from the western horizon. Dan stepped past the tall kid to stand on Lotte’s other side. She grabbed both our hands. These weren’t games anymore. I didn’t know what to do. Yet I felt a dissonant calm. I’d never thought about how I would react when I had an out-of-control kid waving a gun in front of me, until it happened, and when it did all I could think about was the sun and the waves and the blowing sand and Lotte’s hand in mine and Lotte’s hand in Dan’s.

“Fuck!” gun kid said. “I got one bullet left, and I ain’t gonna waste it!” He was pure, scrawny, short-statured joy. “What do you think, Tommy?” he asked the tall kid.

“You ain’t gonna shoot nobody, Hank,” tall kid said. He stepped to the side, where he could watch his friend and watch us.

“Damnit, Tom, it ain’t going to hurt, much,” gun kid said. He rubbed the end of the barrel against his cheek, scratching an itch or chasing a thought.

“Hank?” I said to gun kid, unsure if using his name would help. “Come on, man. Look, we danced with the birds with you, we did this with you. I’ve never had an afternoon like this. Let’s be cool. You’re not going to shoot anyone. That’s not like shooting birds.” Lotte’s hand squeezed mine tighter. I wriggled my hand free, for what I’m not sure.

Gun kid seemed to think harder for a moment, dropping the gun from his face down to his side, but then he looked resolved, and raised his gun up. “The fuck I ain’t gonna shoot,” he said. “Fuck that shit. You don’t tell me what to do.”

“Hank,” tall kid said, “you ain’t gonna do this. You always getting this way when you drink that shit, and you always threatening to shoot people. Leave these fags be, Hank. They don’t know how you are. Look at ‘em. They’re scared shitless.” But the worried look on tall kid’s face wasn’t reassuring.

“They better be scared,” gun kid said. “And you stop telling me what I ain’t going to do, Tommy.” Now gun kid was shifting his aim slowly back and forth between us and tall kid. “You all are always saying I won’t do it. You don’t believe in me? Don’t none of you believe I can do this shit?”

“I ain’t saying nothing like that,” tall kid said. “Let’s just go use that last bullet on something else. Something fun.” Tall kid’s hands were raising up by his side.

Gun kid looked at us. “The girl looks pretty fun to me,” he said. “What about you come kiss me, girl, then maybe I won’t shoot one of your faggot boyfriends, how about that?”

“Come on, man,” I said, as if that meant something. A small plane flew overhead, not close enough to witness the scene on our stretch of beach, but enough so that the sputter of its engine caught gun kid’s ear.

He glanced to the sky. This was the moment to jump. But it was Lotte who made the first move.

She let go of Dan’s hand and stepped over the dead bird.

“No, Lotte,” Dan said and moved to grab her. Gun kid shifted his aim toward Dan, and then the tall kid rushed from the other side toward gun kid. He swung the gun around and fired. Another wave pounded, closer. The tall kid jerked back and fell to the ground. Gun kid turned the gun to Lotte, right in front of him, and pulled the trigger again. I flinched. Lotte didn’t. The gun only clicked.

The gun kid looked at his friend on the ground, rolled into a ball, groaning and clutching at his arm. For a flash gun kid looked like a child, scared, but then his features hardened. He turned and ran into the dunes. He kept running toward the west, toward the end of the island.

Dan leaned over the tall kid, but he pushed Dan away and sat up.

“Shit,” he yelled. The right shoulder of his T-shirt was ripped, blotched dark red. I reached my hand out to him, but he ignored it. “Damnit,” he said. “Fucker wouldn’t’ve done nothing.”

“What do you mean?” Lotte asked.

The tall kid struggled to stand. His shirt grew redder, wetter. “Look at me,” he said, pointing to his shirt. “I told him he wouldn’t shoot nobody, and he wasn’t going to, either, you fucking whore. You stepping over to kiss him? You’d’ve fucked him, too?”

Lotte got close in his face. I was sure she was going to spit, but instead she pushed past him and walked back to our little encampment in the dunes. The three of us, Dan, me, and the kid, watched her until she sat down on the blanket and out of our view.

I turned back to the kid. “We should get you to a hospital or something.”

He threw his arms out, wincing and immediately dropping the right one again. “You want to get me in trouble? Get Hank arrested? Stupid rich college kids. You think you know everything and you don’t know shit.” Then he turned and walked off, following the path left by the gun kid, stumbling against larger drifts in the sand as he walked.

Dan and I watched him until he rounded a curve in the beach and was gone. My knees started shaking, then I felt it in my hands, then my gut. All the adrenaline. I was immediately angry and sad at the same time. I’d had no control over the situation. My brain had been static and nothing else. And yet I was still standing.

The sun hit the horizon and melted down in the ocean.

Without turning to me, Dan said, “You know I like Lotte, too. I thought you should know.”

I looked at Dan. It wasn’t a secret. And right then I knew that the engagement was a farce, that we would all talk about it maybe the next day or maybe the next week, and Lotte and I would feel foolish and probably act mad at each other, but then we would be the three of us again, stronger than ever, just less kissing.

I reached my hand out and grabbed Dan around the shoulders and pulled him toward me, watching his eyes for any sign of anger, disgust, anything. I only saw my friend there. We walked back up to where Lotte was rolling up the blanket. The sky was deepening, streaks of cloud still glowing orange across blues and purples. She looked up at me, and her eyes seemed to still hold the light from the sun, glowing golden.

“I want to tell you to leave me alone,” she said.

“But you won’t?”

She stood and kissed my cheek. “Joe Joe, leave me alone. It’s OK.”

The three of us walked down the beach, back toward where we’d left Dan’s car parked at the end of the paved road. We didn’t walk together, but followed each other just close enough we could still hear each other breathing.

Once in the car, an hour drive back to Mobile ahead of us, it was night already. Lotte lay across the back seat. The music played from the car’s speakers heavy with bass, something more majestic than the scrawled-label cassette it came from would suggest. I sat up front next to Dan. Despite the action on the beach, or maybe because of it, Lotte was asleep quickly, or seemed it. The windows were down, and the wind came in like a lover would, with a soft force, a compulsion to press against us, take us over. It ran its fingers through our hair. It reached for the cigarettes clutched in our fingers, whipped sparks out the window and down the road behind us, trailing all the way back to the bridge to the island. It tried to be louder than the music. It tried to steal our words from our mouths before we spoke them. It pulled gently at our clothes, caressed our cheeks, wiped the ocean water dry from our skin, leaving salt.

Here in my own car, fifteen years passed by since that day, I look over at my wife. She shifts in her seat as she sleeps. She doesn’t know anything about that day, or about that crazed

kid who could have just as easily ended things for me, one flinch in any direction, a misplaced whim, if maybe I'd jumped before Lotte did, how I'd never have left that beach and made it to the day where I met her. We've left the Dauphin Island exit and its memories behind and approach quickly the tunnel that will run us under the Mobile shipping channel. I roll down my window. As we plunge into the fluorescent-lit tube, all sound echoing back on us from the bright-tiled walls, I lick my lips, imagine the water all around us and above us.

Flock Apart

The boiler was an oven, three stories high, the inside tiled in innumerable iron plates. It burned bark and limbs and waste wood to power the electricity generators that ran the paper mill, incinerating tree scraps twenty-four-seven, except when, like that afternoon, it needed to be overhauled. That's when they fed people like Mo and me into the boiler.

When the boiler got below 120 degrees, the supervisor sent us through a two-foot-high opening running along the bottom. We balanced on our hands, the heat coming up quickly through our leather work gloves as we turned sideways to slither in—first Mo, as I slid scaffolding pieces through the opening to him, then me, joining Mo on the inside. The heat pressed through the soles of our steel-toed boots, blasted through the thin white T-shirts we wore, and drenched our jeans with sweat and soot as we built scaffolds around all the walls. The bandanas under our yellow hardhats failed to stop the sweat from running down our faces to sting our eyes.

We worked fast and spoke little. “The hammer, Joe,” Mo said.

“Go right,” I said.

“Watch your fingers,” Mo said.

“Fuck,” I said.

We banged metal against metal. Our flesh burned. By the time we were done, it had cooled down another ten degrees. We slipped out and the skilled mechanics, clean under their

green and blue hardhats, entered and scaled our scaffold. In the summer sun outside the boiler building, it was close to 100 degrees, refreshing after where we'd just been. We sat on the edge of the trailer we'd used to haul the scaffolding over from the shed. I offered Mo a cigarette.

"You know what I heard Billy say in the crew shed this morning?" I asked. Billy was one of the other kids working that summer with us on the labor and relief crew. "Said 'it's hotter than two rats fucking in a wool sock.'"

Mo didn't respond.

"I thought that shit was kind of funny, you know?"

"Billy's a redneck," Mo said. "He's no Shakespeare or nothing. That's just shit rednecks say." We stared over the field behind the paper mill toward the tree line that ran along the river.

"Well, I'd never heard it." I didn't hang out much with Billy or any of the kids on the white side of the crew shed in the mornings, though I often eavesdropped on their talk, smoking cigarettes and drinking the thin brown coffee the crew chief made.

"I thought all you white folks were up on your redneck sayings," Mo said. "I know you're from the big city of Meadowview and all that, but you ain't so fancy."

Over the trees, a hawk flew in erratic jerks and circles, dodging three sparrows. Every few seconds, they nipped his tail feathers.

"I was late to the Klan meeting where they handed out the book of sayings," I responded. We laughed, easy. The hawk spiraled higher into the sky, riding warm currents. Two of the sparrows continued to chase. The sky was silver hot, all color wilted out of the air. The birds were stark and black as they climbed.

"You ever wonder about the hats?" Mo asked.

"I wonder about a lot of things. Hats ain't one of them."

“You know what I’m talking about. You know. The hardhats—white hats and yellow hats and red hats and green hats and blue hats. All that shit. Color and power, like we’re goddamned morons, always needing everything color-coded for us.”

Yellow hats were us. Laborers, bottom of the totem pole. And Mo and Billy and a handful of other college kids and I were at the bottom of the bottom, nineteen- and twenty-year-old children of employees, the summer work program being the only time the long-term yellow hats had someone to boss around. We’d all been thrown together at the beginning of the summer, from different colleges. Mo and most of the rest were from one of the two big state universities. I went to a small liberal arts school down the road in Mobile. We weren’t far from the end of that summer of 1992, when we’d all go away again.

The green hats, the skilled laborers, had us tote their tools for them from one job to the next. Blue hats were the union leaders. Red hats were the mill’s fire and emergency guys. White hats were what white always is, management, power, the pricks at the top. My dad was a white hat back then, before the mill got bought out and he got “reorganized” into early retirement. I drove in with him most days that summer, from my folks’ house close to an hour north of the mill. Mo’s mom was a blue hat. They lived fifteen minutes up the road, in Dixon. Billy’s dad was a blue hat, too, from Camden, fifteen minutes the other direction.

“They probably don’t think about any of it enough to think we’re morons,” I said. “Hell, maybe they’re the morons.” After a pause, I added, “Or maybe it’s just coincidence, the hats.”

“Shit it is.” The river’s smell waved in on the summer heat. From out of the routine hum of the paper mill, the sound of a truck engine separated and moved closer. A dust plume trailed behind a white pickup, moving our way along the network of dirt roads.

Mo hopped down. “White hat’s coming. Probably Jones,” the labor crew’s supervisor, a short, tough man, but fair, and one of the few black white-hats at the mill. “We better move this shit back to the yard.” I got up and grabbed one end of a stack of leftover scaffolding.

“You got anything going on this weekend?” I asked Mo, who was lifting the other end of the stack. After we heaved it onto the trailer, I went around to the front and hitched it to the tractor while Mo tied the load down. I jumped onto the trailer and sat astride the scaffolding.

“Probably going with some of my boys up to Meadowview,” Mo said. “Get a few in at the Lucky Cue, then go wherever the women bring us.” He climbed up onto the tractor and started it, the engine turning over twice before catching into a chugging roar.

The tractor lurched forward, jarring me. We passed other workers, some hats blue, some green, most yellow. I nodded my head, barely perceptible, lifted an index finger where my hand rested on my knee. That was hello.

My dad drove us home. I stared out at passing red-clay ditches, pine woods, shack houses, cross-road gas stations, a blur of greens and browns and oranges and paint-peeled whites and blacktop patched and re-patched and never ending.

“I’m going out tonight,” I said, about twenty minutes down the road. Dad looked over. He and I didn’t say much to each other back then, after I’d left home and went to college and before I’d gotten old enough myself—a real job, a wife, our boys—to understand what it was to be him and we’d start to really talk again.

“Didn’t think you much wanted anything to do with folks at home,” he said to me. “Not after the way everyone was treating you back in high school.” The protests my senior year, is what he meant. It was weird how we didn’t put a name to it or talk about it much, even just a few years after. Maybe he was just relieved I hadn’t gotten more than a black eye out of it before it was over and I graduated.

“It wasn’t everyone,” I said.

“Damn near.” Dad turned his attention back to the road. “Keep an eye out for deer.” It’s what he always told me when I rode with him; still does.

“Maybe nobody cares about any of that anymore,” I said as I looked back out the window.

Dad snorted. “Not a lot else for people to get worked up over. Getting worked up is what Meadowview does.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling restless. “Whatever. It’s been six weeks since I came home from school. Another weekend with just you and the dogs and I’ll go out of my head.” Mom had been up in Birmingham all summer looking after Lilah, the oldest of my two older sisters, pregnant and sick with a double-shifting husband incapable of doing much for her. “Ain’t nobody going to bother me. It’s a Friday night. I’ll just drive around.”

When we got home, I showered off the layers of sweat-caked dirt, dressed in clean jeans and a shirt not too stained from the mill. I tried to call a couple old friends, but the few I thought might be up for harmless driving around and shooting shit weren’t in town. One’s parents told me he’d gone over to Montgomery to see a movie. There were always better places to be. I headed to the Winn-Dixie. I picked up a six-pack from the cooler case in the back corner of the store. On the way to the check-out, I saw Cindy, a girl I used to know.

“Oh hey, uh, Joe,” she said.

“Hey, Cindy. Been awhile.” In fourth grade, I picked flowers from the roadside on my bike ride to school and left them on Cindy’s desk in homeroom at least once a week for a couple months. By high school, we hung out in entirely different circles.

“Yeah,” she said. “Long time.” Her smile seemed obligatory. She dropped her eyes to my torso, my arms, away from my face. “You look like you been out in the sun.”

“Working down at the mill this summer. It’s brutal.”

“Right,” she said. She fidgeted. She lifted her hand, fresh red nail polish, up to her blonde hair. Then she closed herself off, crossing her arms in front of her.

“So, you know anything going on tonight?” I asked. “Thought I might catch up with folks.”

“I don’t know about any of them folks you hung out with back in school,” she said, “Marcus or Shaun or them.”

“I don’t know, either,” I said. “They’re not walking the aisles of this Winn-Dixie, you know? I haven’t seen anyone, really, all summer.” Cindy still stood with her arms folded, that frozen smile, not giving back anything. “Been beat from working at the mill all the time. Just figured it was time to get out before the whole summer went by.”

Cindy looked around, maybe hoping for a friendly face. I could tell she didn’t know what to do with me. “There’s a thing going on down at the old river landing later,” she said finally. “There’ll be a bunch of folks there.”

“You think it’ll be all right, me coming out there?”

Cindy wrinkled her forehead, looking puzzled for a moment, then unfolded her arms and waved off my doubt, “Oh, that?” she said. “Nobody cares about any of that anymore,” and her

smile looked real then, like I really was off the hook. I thought maybe that was what it was to grow up, that we all just mellowed out and everything really was OK. Bygones and all that.

“Cool,” I said. “Maybe I’ll check you later.” Besides, I thought, there might be some of my other friends out there I might run into, kids drawn to each other at the end of the summer like mosquitoes to a bug-zapper. Even if Cindy and the kids who had little to do with me back in school would still rather have little to do with me, a party at the landing would have plenty other people who’d welcome an open invitation to a friendly conversation and a beer from my Winn-Dixie sixer. A couple years away from each other, and I was harmless, tired, hot; they ought to be, too.

I drove the periphery of town, past fast food joints whose signs are beginning to light the sky, past the bowling alley across from the skating rink, through quieting subdivisions smelling of charcoal pits, into rolling farmland, listening to old punk rock mix-tapes, until dusk fully draped the sky. I headed south and felt my way to the dirt road that led to the boat landing just upriver from where the Cahaba emptied into the Alabama.

I parked at the end of a long line of cars and pickups. I heard laughter, music from someone’s truck stereo, a fire crackling. Girls talking. I smelled weed. “Shit, Joe,” I whispered. It was then or never. If I cranked the car back up and drove out of there without seeing anyone, I’d never know if I still had friends rooting me back to the place where I grew up.

I stepped out onto the dirt and gravel. A wind came off the river through tight-packed trees. Cottonwood. Sycamore. Hickory. River-bottom hardwood black against the purpling sky. In the spring, the river would swell and swallow that part of the county in a tangle of cottonmouths and catfish and muddy swirls. Some local boy always got his picture in the *Times-Journal* holding open the mouth of a gator he shot in the backwater.

I picked my way through the trees toward the fire, the light of it illuminating the undersides of the leaves in the higher limbs. The river wind shifted my hair, grown long over the spring and summer. I kept it tied up under my hardhat all day, so at night I let it go.

Small clumps of people huddled in the shadows under the trees. I couldn't make them out, really, and nobody said anything to me. Maybe they weren't friends of mine, but they didn't seem to be enemies either. They let me pass, just another white kid headed to the fire.

When I got to the fire circle, I saw Cindy across from me. A lanky boy, tow-headed and blue-eyed, had his arms wrapped around her from behind. I'd seen him around town, but didn't know his name. So many kids from around the county went to our big high school, and I'd stayed so focused on what I had in front of me—the protests, sure, but also girls, and, of course, classes, trying to get a scholarship, anything to get the hell out of Meadowview. And then there were the two seg academies in town and I didn't really know a lot of those kids. Some faces seemed familiar. Maybe mine did to them.

Cindy's eyes caught mine. I lifted my chin slightly, mouthed "hey" at her.

The conversation and music lulled as Cindy said, "Oh, Joe—hey!" She was tipsy, loud. A new song started. Cindy said, "Didn't think you'd come."

"You know, Friday night, gotta' do something." But Cindy wasn't listening for my answer and I just sort of said it to no one. Her eyes were closed. The tow-headed boy's hands rubbed up and down her sides. I looked around the fire at all the knots of kids. They were tanned and toned, without cares, white teeth and bare summer skin. I wondered who to join, whose name to try to remember.

Then my eyes rested on one large mound of a kid staring at me from his perch on a cooler he threatened to cave in. He set his jaw and glowered under the brim of a baseball cap. I didn't know him, but I knew the look he was giving me.

I turned my body and tried to appear engaged in the conversation of the kids to my left. The Mound had none of it.

"Hey, faggot," he said. At first, no one stopped their conversations. I kept looking at the group next to me. I nodded my head, smiled like I really liked whatever it was they were saying.

"Hey, queer-boy. You know I'm talking to you." People looked at me, tried to gauge what it was that had roused the Mound. I looked, finally, back at him.

"Hey, friend," I said, holding my hands out to show how harmless I was. "There's no problem here, right?"

"Who the fuck are you? I'll tell you if I got a damned problem with you."

"That's Alsobrook," a skinny kid to my right with a brown mullet said about me. "The nigger lover." I remembered him from middle school. His name was Brian. He had been the quietest kid. Small-framed and meek. I used to try to smile at him in the halls because it never looked like he had any friends.

"Well, shit, buddy," the Mound said to Brian, "I think you may be right. That right, faggot? You that sonuvabitch Alsobrook?"

"I'm Joe," I said.

"Fucker," the Mound spat. "Y'all all remember this sonuvabitch said all of us at our school was racists? And all y'all transferred out of the high school to our school was racists, too?"

The night balanced on a fulcrum. Kids shifted their feet, watching the Mound, looking at the fire, looking down at the ground, not looking at me. They'd come to the landing to get loose, get drunk, get high, get laid, get something, all kinds of things I wouldn't've minded, either, but then I'd showed up and the Mound had interrupted all our expectations.

"So is that still right, faggot?" the Mound asked. "You still think we're all racists?"

"Hey," I said. "I don't even care about any of that." I felt nausea creep into my stomach, sick at what I was saying as much as scared.

The Mound shifted forward, his face closer to the firelight, flickers shooting orange up his jowls toward his eyes. "Who said you could come out here?"

I flashed eyes toward Cindy. I looked back at the Mound. "Nobody. Just heard folks were getting together tonight. Wanted to catch up."

"You don't belong out here, Mr. Long-Haired Faggot Freak. I reckon I got a jack-knife in my pickup says you need a damned haircut." The Mound flicked his head behind him, to a clump of trucks parked deeper in the woods.

Sweaty bodies packed tighter around us. Nobody looked distracted anymore. I had become the night's entertainment, at least for a little while. I stayed quiet. It would have to be the Mound's move.

"Tell you what," he said after a moment, "I'm going to walk over by my truck. I got to piss something awful. Then I'm going to have a little talk with my knife, and if we come back over and you're still here, we'll just fucking see what your night's going to end up like." When the Mound rose, he was a head taller than me, and weighed at least two of me. He stepped out of the circle, kicking a couple crumpled beer cans from around his feet.

“Oh, knifey,” he yelled. “Where ya’ at, Big Bill? Got us a job to do.” Brian smiled at the boys around him. They appeared to laugh, but I couldn’t hear it. I’d retreated to a place in my head where I could only hear the Mound’s zipper grating open, his piss hitting the leaves at his feet, a snake slithering out of his reach, a cloud gliding through the sky to cover the moon, steam rising from the dirt at his feet, his zipper closing, his gut shifting back into place.

“I’m opening my truck door, Assholebrook,” he called out. “Oh, Bill, oh dear, sweet Bill. It’s been a long time, my brother,” he said, loud enough to carry from his truck over to the circle. “We got us a faggot nigger-lover to go see,” he said. I imagined his thumb running across the blade. Around me, there were giggles and laughter.

“Well,” I said, “guess it was good seeing everyone.” I tried to put a smile on my face. I backed up a couple steps, turned, and, as slowly as I could force myself to, walked back into the woods. Blackberry thorns scraped my ankles. Undergrowth saplings grabbed my arms. I smelled wood smoke, expected any second to hear a lumbering through the leaves behind, but all stayed quiet. Only the fire crackled.

When I stepped onto the road and the breeze hit my face, I realized how still the night had been in the press of kids and fire. I quickened my step, got in my car, breathed. Then I pulled a three-point turn, yelled “Fuck you!” out my window, and headed toward the highway back to town.

I was pissed. Not so much at the kids at the river landing, but more at myself, thinking I could just hang out with people, pretend they were my people. That’s all I wanted. To hang out. I didn’t think it was such a grand request. After all I’d been through in that town, I should’ve known better, but a couple years in college, free of strife, plenty of good times to help me forget,

and I'd grown naïve again, I guess. Jadedness filtered through some sex, drugs, and rock n' roll until it turned again into idealism, or at least apathy.

Ten minutes driving the two-lane highway and the road widened to four streetlight-punctuated lanes. Not far from my neighborhood, distant headlights in my rear-view mirror sped up until they became a red pickup riding close on my bumper. I saw mud caked on its fenders. I put my beer down in the cup-holder and passed my street.

I pushed my foot farther on the accelerator. The driver of the pickup followed suit. Approaching the road that turned off by the Country Club, I maintained speed, then jerked my steering wheel and turned suddenly, tires singing. The truck sailed through the intersection, its brakes squealing. I was halfway past the golf course and headed toward the sawmill that sat on the other side of the railroad tracks from the Club when I saw the headlights turn onto the road behind me and approach fast.

I bumped roughly over the tracks. The whining buzz and roar of the sawmill couldn't drown out the yells and hollers from the truck coming up behind. It pulled into the oncoming lane, empty of traffic, and came even with me. The Mound was at the wheel, Brian riding shotgun, windows down, with Cindy and three boys in the truck bed. Brian hollered, "Fuck us? Fuck us? You want to fuck us, we'll show you fucking, mother-fucker!"

The three boys in the back howled—the tow-headed kid and two big kids, short hair, football players probably, muscles stretching their polo shirts. Cindy looked at me, yelled, "Hey, Flower Boy, how about these roses?" and lifted her shirt over her head. The boys howled harder.

Just past the sawmill was another intersection. I cut the wheel right. The Mound fell in behind me and followed, somehow not throwing his crew from the truck. I swept around a long

curve and across the bridge over Valley Creek. The Mound's truck was back on my rear bumper. I ran a red light past the Big Bear grocery. A couple of blocks more, I approached Broad Street.

On the other side of Broad was the black side of town. The Mound slowed. I went straight across Broad, running another light. The Mound stopped. As I watched in my mirror, he turned onto Broad and was gone.

The jukebox at the Lucky Cue alternated between John Lee Hooker and Whitney Houston, a lovers' quarrel between grit and grace. Four old men slapped cards down around one table. Three young women laughed around another, their dates stationed around the pool table. It was half past ten.

I drained my beer and ordered another. As I sat back at my own table, the door slammed open and voices filled the space. It was Mo and four guys I didn't know.

The bartender said, "All right, Country, don't be bringing no foolishness in here tonight."

"Damn, Pops. Why you always got to be busting on me?" Mo said. His friends laughed. I laughed, too. Mo turned and saw me, his eyes growing wide as his smile. "Joe Joe? What the hell you doing up in here? Lost your way?"

"Trying to find it, actually."

"I'm going to get a beer, then you're going to tell me some stories," Mo said. His friends barely glanced at me before they were at the bar, throwing cash on the wooden top, ordering drinks.

I dragged my chair over to the table where they landed. “How’s Dixon this fine evening?” I asked Mo.

“Hoppin’, dude, but the wrong kind of hoppin’. That’s why we’re here.”

“I’ve heard some stories about Dixon and what’s hopping around there,” I said. “You know Luther at the mill?”

“The carpenter? Yeah.”

“He was talking to me about Dixon the other day while I was helping him frame out that concrete pad.”

Mo stopped me, a hand up, palm outward. “Luther don’t talk to nobody. Especially no white college boys.”

“Shut up,” I said. “He didn’t say much the first few weeks, but now he tells me shit almost every day.”

“Well what’s he got to say about Dixon, then?” Mo’s friends listened in closer.

“He says that he and all the other old guys around there pay this girl our age to have sex with them.”

They all looked at me like they were expecting more to the story. “So?”

“So, I didn’t think a place like that was even big enough to have hookers.”

“Boy, what are you talking about?” Mo asked. “What else folks going to do around there?” His friends chuckled. “Y’all hear that?” Mo called out loudly, addressing everyone in the bar. “Our white friend here thinks small town country folk don’t get no paid pussy!”

“I told you, Country,” the bartender said, “don’t come in here and start stuff.” The old men at their card game stared over at us. The women at their table stopped laughing.

“Damn, old man. Just trying to make this place more lively,” Mo said.

“Get out, you and your white boy.” I looked at the bartender, unsure what I’d done. “Your other friends can stay, but I’m tired of you.” Then he looked right at me. “You pack up with the riff-raff and get the hell out.”

“Come on,” Mo said to the table, “we can go buy beer where folks know how to be hospitable.” I got up. Mo’s friends didn’t move. “So that’s how it is?” Mo said. His friends looked at each other, then up at Mo with faint smiles. “Fine, then. Let’s go, Joe. You’re my ride now.”

Mo only overturned one chair on his way to the door. In my car, I said, “I’ve got a few more beers in the cooler in the backseat.”

I drove back across to the white side of town, to the playground behind my old elementary school. I parked on the grass beside the ball field and reached into the backseat for the six-pack, four beers left. I opened my car door. “Come on,” I said to Mo.

“Why here?”

“There’s this fort thing we can climb up in on the playground where nobody’ll see us or fuck with us. Drink in peace.”

Mo looked over his shoulder at the houses across the street.

“It’s fine,” I said.

He followed me across the field. We reached the playground, built out of old tires half-buried in the dirt and railroad ties bolted together. We crawled up a wooden ramp, crossed a swinging bridge with jingling chain railings, ducked under a metal bar, climbed a splintery ladder, and shimmied into the fort. Eight feet above the playground dirt, in a space roughly five feet square, wooden walls hid us while we sat and opened our beers.

“So,” I said to Mo, “second place I’ve been kicked out of tonight. Appreciate it.”

“Only my first.” Mo took a swig. “Where else you get kicked from?”

“White kid party over at the old river landing.” I pulled a pack of smokes from my pocket, put a cigarette to my lips, tossed one over to Mo.

“What’s wrong with you, anyway,” Mo asked. “You don’t hang out with Billy and them at work. You don’t go out in your own town. And, when you do, you get chased off by your own kind.”

“Looks like you’re not doing so well with your own kind, either.”

Mo smiled, “That old man just has it in for me. Ain’t city enough for him, I guess.”

“Well, I ain’t white enough for the white folks.”

“You black and I don’t know about it?”

“Not quite. My grandmothers’ grandmothers, on both sides of my family, are Cherokee. Like one-eighth Cherokee blood in me, but I think those white kids can smell it or something.”

“Come off it, Joe Joe,” Mo said.

“What?”

“Now you know all you white folks think you got some Cherokee in you somewhere. Y’all think it’s romantic or it absolves you or something?”

“Come on, man,” I said, “it’s true. I got that blood in me.”

“All I’m saying is that’s got nothing to do with why they don’t like you. Somewhere along the way, you had the choice to be like them.”

“Not true,” I said. “Not true.”

“If all those rednecks by the landing tonight had welcomed you with open arms, hugged on you, given you their beer and shit, would you have been like them?” Mo looked at me, an eyebrow raised.

“No,” I said, cringing at how I’d tried to talk my way into those kids’ good graces earlier.

“Ain’t none of us perfect,” he said.

“So what about you? How come your friends didn’t back you up back there?”

“It’s always that way,” Mo said, “Kids up at the University think I’m too country, but I’m too college for the boys back at home. Or I’m too city around the fellas at the mill and then too country when I come to town.”

“Fuck ‘em,” I said.

“Shit,” Mo said. “It’s like birds of a feather flock together, but the rest of us ...”

“Right,” I said.

The evening’s earlier breeze had blown the last remnants of clouds away. The square of sky framed above us was textured with stars. We smoked and drank in quiet for a few minutes after that, until we heard a truck engine, the rattle of a vehicle leaving the road and crossing the ball field, the muted skidding of tires on grass. Headlights beamed through the boards of the fort.

I peered through one of the cracks. It was the Mound’s truck.

“I know you’re up there, faggot boy,” the Mound yelled. “Saw your car over by the road and knew my luck had changed. Get on down from there, boy.”

Mo looked at me. “Sorry,” I said.

“For what?” Then Mo stood up, his chest and head above the wall of the fort. I grabbed the last beer bottle by its neck and smashed the end off on the wooden floor. Then I stood, too.

“Ooh, got yourself a friend,” the Mound said. “Who are you, nigger?”

“Let’s get down there,” Mo said so only I could hear him. A section of wall was missing from one side of the fort. I bent down, grabbed onto the edge at the opening, then swung to the

ground. As I straightened, Mo landed beside me. We stepped out from under the fort. I held the bottle slightly behind me. The truck headlights were blinding.

“You ain’t running away this time?” the Mound asked.

“No,” I said. “Hey, Cindy.” I waved in the direction of the truck, though I saw nothing but light.

Somewhere behind one of the houses across the street, a dog barked.

The truck doors opened, then out of the glare of the headlights the Mound and Brian walked from either side. The Mound held his knife. He walked up to me, his gut pushing against me, and pointed the knife at my throat.

Beside me, Mo said, “Asshole, fuck you.”

Brian positioned himself between Mo and me. “This don’t involve you,” he told Mo.

The Mound’s knife was closer to me, an inch from where the blood pounded through my jugular. “Now you, faggot, you and me and Big Bill here have to have a little talk about a haircut.”

I circled my right hand up fast to knock away the arm holding the knife. The broken bottle was still in my hand. It caught fire in the truck headlights, sharp edges scraping past the Mound’s chest. Streaks of red beaded through little rips snagged across his shirt. The Mound brought his other arm up and pushed me roughly. The bottle dropped from my hand and I staggered back. To my side I saw movement as Mo and Brian began to get into it, heard the smack of one’s fist hitting the other’s head. I brought my left fist up, not knowing quite what to do with it, but before I could swing, the Mound ducked and all I saw were his truck lights. That’s when I felt a sharp hit on the back of my head, the light intensified, then all went dark. I felt

sensations of pressure, pains all over my body, heard hooting and laughing and cussing, all of it in a disoriented swirl, and then I felt and heard nothing.

* * *

Wind roared over me. My eyes wouldn't open. Someone's hand grabbed me by the chin, squeezed, forced my lips open, and I felt a glass bottle stuck between my lips and burning liquor pour into my mouth and down my throat.

"Wake up, boy!" yelled a voice. I finally opened one eye a little. Lights streamed by, streetlights, fast. I saw the face of one of the big football player kids in the center of my vision.

"What?" I tried to ask.

"Oh, you want more? Give him more." And the bottle was in my mouth again. I lifted a hand and pushed it away.

I managed to open my eye more and squeeze my other eye open a slit. We were riding in the back of a pickup truck. The Mound's pickup truck. My head was pulsating. I felt sharp pain whenever I breathed in, and my eyes stung from the passing streetlights. At least that meant we were still in town.

"Where we going?" I managed to ask. My mouth felt funny.

"Dropping you at home, boy," said a voice to my right. "We're sick of your ass."

I turned my head and looked. It was the tow-headed kid, leaning against the side wall of the pickup bed, an arm draped over Cindy. The Beastie Boys screamed out from the cab of the pickup, fighting for their right to party.

"Where's Mo?" I asked.

The tow-headed kid pointed behind the truck. “That boy’s been following us in your car. Boy coulda’ been all right. Didn’t have no care about him, but had to kind of beat his ass a little when he wouldn’t mind his business.”

I recognized the streets then that we were driving through. We were in my neighborhood.

The back-glass of the cab slid open behind me. “He awake?” It was the Mound’s bellow. I was already too familiar with it.

“Yeah,” the muscle kid said.

“Good, ‘cause we’re here,” and I felt new pain in my ribs as the Mound bounced over the curb up into our half-circle driveway. “Get his ass out of my truck.”

I tried to stand, but the muscle kid and the tow-headed kid stood first and grabbed me under my arms, pulled me to my feet. The Mound got out of the cab and came around the back and opened the tailgate. The boys half-dragged me to the end of the bed. I saw my car pull up on the street by the driveway, the lights off, and wait.

The Mound grabbed me around the legs so I fell over his shoulder, a fireman’s rescue carry, and he grunted and heaved me over into the grass beside the driveway, set me down roughly so I was lying face-down. I put my hands down on the ground and started to push myself up, my whole body protesting in pain, but then I felt a boot on my back push me back down.

“You hold on a second, boy,” The Mound said, whispering loudly enough for me to hear.

Then I felt my head jerked backward by the hair, lifted up, then a quick ripping cut and my face slammed down into the ground.

“Whooooo!” the Mound yelled out. “Marcher boy got a haircut!”

I rolled over and looked up at the Mound, standing above me, holding a fistful of my hair above his head. Then I heard two sounds, my car door slam shut as Mo got out of my car, and my house door wrench open.

I heard the mechanical, unmistakable *schick-ik* of the pump-action of my dad's twelve-gauge, ready to shoot. "You've got exactly four seconds to get the hell out of here," my dad called out.

"Shit, man, get back in the truck." I think that was Brian's voice, and I heard footsteps as the Mound beat it to his truck, the squeal of tires, Cindy shrieking, a whoop from the boys, and then they were gone.

"Joe? Is that you?" Dad asked as he walked down the front steps and over to where I lay in the yard.

"Yes, sir." I sat up. I was mad at the Mound and his gang, sure, but I also was a little afraid just then, of what Dad must've thought.

"Mr. Alsobrook?" I looked over to where my car was still parked on the street. Mo was standing behind my car, ready to duck, I guess, if my dad was still inclined to shoot people.

"Mo Williams, is that you?" Dad asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, come on over here. Help me get Joe in the house." They helped me stand up.

"You all right?" I asked Mo.

"An evil headache, man," he said. I could see a dark blotch on his cheek expanding into a pretty serious-looking black eye. "You got the worst of it, though, I think. At least until my mom gets hold of me."

We walked up the steps and into the house. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” I said. I meant it. I’d’ve probably bawled, but I was just too hurt to. Breathing was killing me, like big rubber bands were wrapped around my chest, squeezing in.

“Just hush. Mo, phone’s in the kitchen. Why don’t you call your mom and tell her you’ll be staying here until the morning. She knows me. She should be OK with you staying here. I’m going to try to clean Joe up some.”

We walked into the half-bath off the front hallway.

“Sit down, son,” Dad said, motioning to the closed lid of the toilet. As I went to step past the sink, I was stopped by my reflection in the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet. A large purple and yellow blotch covered my left temple. Dried blood crusted the right corner of my mouth. Then I lifted my shirt and saw both sides covered in blue bruises like shit-kicker boot-prints.

“Fuckers,” I said. I winced and sat down on the toilet.

“Well, I told you folks don’t let go of things around here. You want to call the cops, make a report?”

I looked at my dad. I could tell he meant it, that he’d do it, he’d take it up. “No, sir. Wouldn’t do any good. Besides, you and Mama have to live here.”

Dad opened the medicine cabinet, pulled out the brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a little bag of cotton balls. “We don’t *have* to do anything. We live here because we want to. But we can take care of ourselves.” He opened the bottle and poured some carefully onto a cotton ball. He applied it to a cut by my eye. I flinched. “Now you hold still.”

* * *

In the morning, early, I slipped into jeans and a T-shirt, laced up my steel-toes. Mo appeared in my bedroom door. His face already looked a good bit better, the swelling gone down.

“You know we don’t go into the mill on a Saturday,” he said.

“Yeah, I know, but I figure if I’m going to drive you all the way back to Dixon, I might as well go by the mill, too.”

“Why?”

I stood up from the edge of my bed. Everything hurt. “I’m done, man. With this summer, this fucking place. I’m going to drop by the administration building and quit. Get my final check or whatever. I’ve got to get back down to Mobile.”

Mo said, “Well, all right then.”

Back in my car, I sped south. The sun had risen and poked bright through the trees. Mo drifted to sleep. I began to feel light-headed, queasy. After I passed the cut-off to Camden, I pulled to the dirt shoulder. I opened my door and stood outside, leaning against the car, letting the sun hit my face. My head began to clear. I walked up into the trees by the road and took a leak, and then I felt good enough to get back behind the wheel and continue the last twenty minutes to the mill. Mo’s eyes cracked open. “Y’alright?” he asked.

“I guess I will be,” I told him, but he was already sleeping again. So I drove straight through the flashing light at Dixon and kept going.

At the mill, I skidded to a stop in the gravel of the far parking lot where the yellow hats parked. “Mo,” I said. “Come on, man, get up. We’re here.” Mo climbed out of his side of the car and slammed his door in unison with me.

“Yeah. All right,” he said when he saw where we were. “What the hell, I guess I’ll go ahead and quit now, too.”

“No, man, I meant, just walk with me.” I opened my trunk and grabbed out two yellow hard hats, my regular one and an extra I’d had to take one day I forgot mine at home. I tossed one to Mo.

“Hell, summer’s almost over anyway,” he said. “Give me a smoke.”

I handed him a cigarette from my pack, and lit one for myself as we walked across the parking lot toward the mill entrance. At the administration building, we threw them to the ground and went in.

A middle-aged man sitting at a desk in the ante-room, a white hard-hat sitting on the desk beside him, looked up at us. “You boys here to work on the boiler overhaul?”

Mo and I looked at each other, then back at him. “Is Jones there?” Mo asked. Since he was our supervisor, if he was around he’d be the one I really needed to quit to. He’d been nice to me all summer.

“Yes. Y’all better hurry on up.”

In the boiler building, a group of white and green and a couple blue hats huddled around the control panel. Mr. Jones stood behind them. Two yellow hats were pulling the scaffolding pieces out of the boiler opening and stacking them next to Jones.

“Mr. Jones,” I said as we walked up. “Good morning.”

He looked at us, me, then Mo, then back to me, his eyes widening only slightly. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing. Just got into a place I didn’t need to be.”

“Didn’t happen on mill property, did it?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

“Sir, I’m leaving for the summer,” I said.

“Yeah. Me, too,” said Mo.

“Just wanted to tell you,” I added.

Jones looked back and forth from one of us to the other, like he was putting it all together. “Mm-hm,” he said. “Well, y’all gotta’ be gone out of here, then.”

The workers opened the safety door off the control panel and flipped the master safety switch. The boiler walls shuddered. A red glow showed through the opening at the base, quickly heating to white.

“I just wanted to ...,” I started.

“What? Thank me for your excellent summer? Fine, you’re welcome, but ain’t going to be a gold watch or a cake or anything.” He looked at us, then flicked his chin in the direction of the door. “Go on now.”

We stepped out into the morning sun. The sky hadn’t heated up to the heights of the day before, was still blue. A dot far above the tree line fell closer and closer, until it became a hawk, wings outstretched, dive-gliding to the treetops, shifting slightly then grazing down along the field, talons outstretched, grabbing something, a mouse, a squirrel, a smaller bird, and rising again, wings flapping, strong muscles rippled with golden feathers, guided by yellow eyes, back into the sky.

Leaving for the Last Time

“Whatcha up to, kiddo?” Mom says. She’s standing outside my door. She won’t cross the threshold, won’t as much as poke her head into the room, unless I invite her in. I’m not sure whether to be glad for the sense of boundaries or offended that she’s scared of me.

“Mom, I’m almost twenty-four years old. Hardly your ‘kiddo,’ you know.” My suitcase is already packed, but it’s lying on the floor on the other side of my bed where she can’t see it.

“Do you want to come with me to get some lunch at the Diner?” Every Thursday Mom has sweet tea and meat-and-three with a clique of ladies from church.

“No thanks, Mom. Sounds like hell.” Mom’s probably not really scared of me, but just weary from my negativity. I can’t blame her, though sometimes I wonder at what I am, whether fear isn’t the right emotion after all.

“Joe! They’re nice women. They’ve loved you since you were little.”

“I don’t want to give them any fodder for their gossip circle, Mom. I know how this town works. I’ll make a PBJ.” I give her my calmest look.

“Well, I’m not leaving for another half-hour, so if you change your mind ...,” and she’s already backing away from my doorway. She looks relieved. I would be.

Lotte jumped off the roof of the dorm building almost exactly three years ago, in the late spring of my junior year, down in Mobile. Dan graduated that year, a month later. Pretty much

from the moment Lotte landed on that dark lawn below the dorm, Dan and I haven't talked. I've been trying to get to the point where that isn't excruciating.

Dan and I were already great friends before we met Lotte, but it was uneven, that friendship. I was trying to live up to him, and he was trying to teach me things. He brought me into the theater. He took me body surfing at midnight off Dauphin Island after rehearsals. We jousting over philosophy and art and music at cast parties or on road trips or in the quad after lunch, but there'd always been a little bit of me in his shadow. When Lotte came into our college my sophomore year, Dan's junior year, and we all hit it off, fast, as friends. Something about that triangular strength stabilized things until Lotte and I started messing around.

We'd already promised, the three of us, that we would just be friends for each other, be the people we could each count on, no matter what. So when Lotte and I couldn't hold back any longer, we tried to keep it secret from Dan. In some ways we tried to keep it secret from each other, make like we were just passing a good time, making each other feel nice, but that it wasn't something more, wasn't love. I even denied it, outright, to Lotte's face, a mere hour before Dan found her crumpled body behind the dorm building. I wanted to tell Dan everything that night at the hospital where they'd brought Lotte and hooked her up to all those tubes, but I felt strangled by the guilt of it all.

When I got home to Meadowview a month later for the summer, I wrote Dan a letter, mailed it to his parents' house in Prattville. I didn't write the part about how, the night Lotte jumped, I'd yelled at her that I didn't love her, but I did tell him the initial betrayal, the truth that I still loved Lotte and that I knew that played some part in fucking the three of us up. And if he'd written back, then I was going to tell him the rest of the truth, too, how I felt Lotte jumped off

that roof because of me and how I just wanted to fix any part of that I could. But he didn't respond. I waited all that summer for anything from him, but nothing.

It's been three years, but I have to write him one more time, before I can let it go, before I can move forward.

I get out a sheet of paper. I write the date at the top of the page. *13 May 1996*. I write *Dear Dan*, and then I stop.

* * *

I arrived in Birmingham in May 1994, a year after Lotte's jump, straight up from Mobile after I graduated, behind the wheel of a small U-Haul truck. I pulled up to the apartment building perched high on Red Mountain looking out over downtown, unloaded everything, which wasn't much, all except my bike, then coasted that U-Haul down the mountain on fumes and rolled on up into the lot of the gas station where I had to return it.

I smiled at the lady behind the counter, tossed her the keys, then grabbed my bike out of the back of the truck and walked it back up the mountain. That first summer in Birmingham was hot and hilly, and I walked my bike up roads quite a bit, until I got used to it.

My first night in the apartment in Birmingham, I stepped out onto the slim little balcony outside the sliding glass door from the living room and sat on a plastic chair with a cigarette burning in one hand and a juice tumbler filled with vodka in my other hand and looked out at the city. Waves of heat made the lights twinkle in the windows of the office buildings and medical complex on the valley floor of the main drag downtown. The roofs and trees closer up the mountainside were lit red from the WBRC-6 neon sign on the crest of the mountain a couple

blocks behind my building. A breeze lifted out of the valley and set the leaves of the trees by the balcony to whispering.

I started work at a copy editing gig my college adviser had hooked me up with. An old buddy of his was a senior editor at one of the magazines for this publishing group, cooking and decorating tips and the kinds of essays that Southern ladies-who-lunch like to read about lemonade on porches, hound dogs. But when I got there, in this office park in a desolate stretch of warehouses, nondescript cubicle farms, and barbecue joints stuck between downtown and the first ring of suburbs, they told me the lifestyle magazine was all filled up with a couple new hires a week before, but that they had a need for a copy editor at a construction equipment trade magazine run by the same group three buildings down. So I started editing copy about wheel loaders and backhoes and hydraulic system preventive maintenance, and the occasional essay that general contractors like to read about pickup trucks and GPS and power tools.

I shared an office with another copy editor who had been there for three years already. She was kind of pretty and I would think about her sometimes at night out on my balcony but I never could entertain the thought of actually asking her out on a date or anything because her breath was something awful. Nobody hardly ever came into our office, just left new pages in the box attached to the wall outside our door. I didn't mind that meant people would pretty much leave us alone.

I made it through my stacks of copy every day—articles, these list things barely converted from press releases, advertisements—and once a month the color keys and proof pages right before production. There was a new stack every morning that I whittled down to nothing by 5:30 every evening, then I would go to Alvin's, a little bar in a grittier part of downtown. I drank pitchers of cheap beer and played pool on the crooked, torn-felt pool tables. I would usually drop

a few bucks' worth of quarters in the jukebox so I could sing to myself and not have to really talk to anyone if I didn't want to, and I never wanted to.

But one evening at the end of that first summer, August supertime sunshine streaming through the propped open door of the bar, a woman I'd never seen walked in. I was down to my pitcher's last mug. I squinted up at her as she stood at the jukebox next to my table. A plain white v-necked T-shirt a size or two too big for her, paint-splattered jeans, brown hair back loose in a ponytail.

It had been quiet. My songs had all played, and most of the old gray-heads who I shared happy hour and the pool tables with had either left for their homes or settled down into a curmudgeons' daze at the bar. Everyone had a cigarette lit.

She was unfazed by my watching her. She read carefully through the song list, then pressed the button to flip the pages of the display, going through each one before punching in her selections. I heard the CDs sorting in the machine, the mechanical click and whirr as one was pulled out and slotted into the player. The clanging, charging opening riff of a Pixies song started playing, and she smiled to herself before looking over at me.

"Take a picture?" she said. But I didn't mind the sarcasm, or that I'd been busted staring, because when she looked at me her eyes were oceanic and blue, even in that dark bar, and when she looked at me it was like Lotte looking at me. The last time I'd seen Lotte's eyes, they were lifeless, drained, as Lotte lay comatose in that hospital room.

"Uh, hey, yeah," I stammered. "Want to play some pool?"

She thought for a second, then said, "Sure. My name's Annie. You rack them while I get another pitcher." She grabbed my empty pitcher and walked to the bar, her arms loose by her side. I was waking up, not from a nightmare, but from more than a year of deep nothing. My

hands trembled as I racked the balls. I kept glancing up where Annie was standing at the bar, making sure she was still there, real.

She kicked my ass in three games of eight-ball while we drank from her pitcher. The sunlight drained from the doorway.

“There’s this punk show at Sloss Furnace tonight,” she said as we sat back at my table finishing the beer. “You game?”

It was already pushing nine o’clock and I had another full day of copy editing the next day, but I was drunk and I had just turned twenty-two a couple weeks before and I was ready to follow Annie to the ends of the earth, or at least to the edge of downtown, where Sloss was located. It was an old pig iron foundry that had been converted into a concert venue. Lots of concrete and rusted metal and who knows what all buried in the ground under the weeds and broken beer bottles.

I threw my bike in the back of Annie’s hatchback and she drove us there. The show was already under way as we paid our five bucks and got our hands stamped at the entry gate, and we ran through a maze of broken sidewalk pathways to where the stage was set up under the old corrugated metal roof of the furnace. Annie dove straight into the whirling mass of the mosh pit, and I was right behind her, and we were a hundred-strong maelstrom of cocked elbows and swinging knees and ducked heads and jutted chins and boots and blood and teeth and bruises and yells and laughter.

After, we lay on the hood of Annie’s car looking up at a dark sky, our arms pressed together, and my heart and breathing slowed down.

“You were kind of a maniac in that pit,” Annie said after we’d been lying quiet for a while.

“I know it’ll sound weird,” I said, “but I’m just feeling so, I don’t know, alive all of a sudden.” I wanted to turn my head to the side and look at her, signal to her that this waking was to her credit, but fear kept my head looking straight above.

After a pause long enough I was certain I’d lost her by sounding like a doof, she said, “I get that. I can feel pretty numb sometimes, too. But something about this evening.”

“Yeah,” I said. Her hand slid over onto mine, and she pushed herself up on one elbow and looked down at me. I was actually kind of happy there for what seemed like a good long while, what felt like it could stretch forever, starting that moment.

We went back to my place and got naked and drank some of my vodka and listened to my stereo and then shared a tall glass of water and went back and forth from my mattress where it lay on the floor in my bedroom, to the WBRC-6-lit balcony to smoke cigarettes, and we held each other and napped in the dark early morning and then stirred again to watch the sun rise over downtown and drink coffee before Annie left and I showered and went to work.

All that day I thought that this isn’t how it happened, that someone like Annie doesn’t just walk into my bar and I don’t just drink and dance and hit it off with her. But I pushed that thought down. Then we spent the whole weekend together, meeting after work at a Waffle House out in Hoover, going to a small club for another band, three dollars’ cover and bad drinks, then waking up in her apartment the next morning to go hike around on Oak Mountain south of town. And that thought about the impossibility of it all left me for months.

The cracks started to open up when the days were cold and at their shortest, the holidays bearing down. Annie was a studio art teacher at one of the private schools in the suburbs, so when school let out she left to go home for a couple weeks to visit her family in Macon. I didn’t

go home to Meadowview, but stayed in Birmingham, alone. We were backed up at work, and I was helping fill in with copy editing for some of the other magazines in the group.

I didn't bother with a Christmas tree, just me, but I did string lights around the sliding glass door in my living room. I hadn't really felt the loneliness since August. Annie's side of the mattress was cold, yet when I closed my eyes it was Lotte I saw, Lotte's eyes, and I would feel her soft against me and then feel air falling fast on my skin, falling, and with a rush I would wake up, sweaty in my sheets.

After repeated nights of this, the thought began to gnaw at me that this was all I had coming for me, falling, that happiness wasn't for me. With Annie not there, and Lotte returned to my thoughts at night, nobody could reassure me that I wasn't trying to get away with a lie. A lie of happiness, of not being guilty. That whole holiday, the sun would never be up, would seem to never rise, only gray overcast gradually lightening outside my windows, and I would drink coffee and go to work under clouds, day after day.

By the time Annie returned at the beginning of January, I was a jittery shell. It was hard to look her in the eye, and after a week we were out at Alvin's one night and she grabbed my shoulders roughly and shook me until I looked at her.

"What?" I snapped.

"What's wrong with you? Are you tired of me? Have you been fucking around on me?" she asked.

"No." I tried to look down, but she put two fingers under my chin and lifted my face so I had to look at her, so I asked her, "Annie, what do you see in me? Tell me."

“I don’t have to *see* something in you,” she said. “It’s enough that we have fun together, that we enjoy music and beer and each other. Be happy with that, Joe Joe. But something else has gotten into you.” She let go of my shoulders and I turned to sit down at our table.

I lit a cigarette and gave it to her as she sat down, then I lit one for me. I stared at her for the first couple drags, saying nothing, and she watched me, waiting.

“I need to tell you about something,” I said, and so I started telling her about Lotte and Dan and me.

After I was quiet for a moment in the tale, Annie asked, “So you think she jumped off that roof because of you?”

“Well,” I said, and let the rest of the sentence go.

“Don’t you think that’s a little conceited?” Her words were harsh, but her voice softened.

“Of course it is,” I said, “and I’ve thought about that, too. I hope it is just that. But at the least, I know I screwed things up with Dan, too. Even if I’m not responsible for what Lotte did,” and then I just had no idea. It was easy to put the thoughts together in an intellectual way that everyone was making their own choices, causing their own damage, but at the heart of it, at the heart of me, I knew we were linked, and suspected I was the one who had torn those links.

“Can you do anything about it now?” Annie asked, bringing me back up to the surface.

“No.”

“I’m with you, Joe. Don’t let something you can’t change come between that.”

That helped for awhile, and I was really doing better right on up through to when March opened up and the sun started to come out and there were hard buds and young leaves on the trees. But the dreams of Lotte came back every few nights, still, making this underside of dark to everything that I tried to conceal. The unexpectedness of Annie, and her solidity, and even the

moments of outright joy, were friction against the dreams and the guilt. I couldn't tell if it was all better or worse than the absolute numbness I'd been in before Annie woke me up.

It was as if Annie were a cruel joke, someone hired to prank me, to get me good and solidly in love, in her hands where she could crush me like Lotte had been crushed. Sometimes at night, I would come in from my balcony from having a smoke, and she would be on her phone on the futon in my living room, talking low, and she would glance sideways at me and say something else into the phone before hanging up. Or we would be out at a club and she would say she had to go to the bathroom and then a half-hour later I might find her standing outside talking to people I'd never met, and I'm sure all of it was innocent, but if I were particularly close to one of those Lotte-dream nights it would put me on edge. So I'd pour another drink and smoke some more cigarettes and we would either have sex or I would be unable to get it up and I would feel miserable.

But then sometimes would be OK, many times, really. And I could never know when the switch would flip. One night, late March, Annie decided to stay at her own apartment. It was actually fine, not altogether unusual. We'd had dinner together, and I'd told her this big long joke I'd ripped off from part of a Thomas Pynchon novel, a joke nobody ever laughed at, more an interminable story whose humor was in the interminability of it, about a boy born with a golden screw where his navel should have been and all the lengths he went to throughout his life to get rid of that screw, specialists, magic potions, until one day he found a plastic-handled screwdriver during a strange dream that removed the screw and he jumped up for joy only to have his ass fall off. And Annie laughed so hard and I felt so good, so when she said she had things to do around her apartment and I said, "That's fine. I do, too," it really was fine.

But that night, alone back at my apartment, I felt the darkness descend fast over my vision and over my heart. I'd stripped down to my boxers, wanting to feel the cool air on my skin, and I was out on the balcony, smoking, thinking about Annie and our good time at dinner, when I heard Lotte whisper to me in the young leaves and the breeze. "Fly," she said. Clear as day, I heard her. I stood to listen closer, but couldn't make sense out of the sounds of the wind in the trees, so I climbed up onto the railing, balancing there, Red Mountain falling steeply down below my feet and all of downtown spread out sparkling like a dying campfire.

I closed my eyes to it all and listened for Lotte's voice, but she didn't speak again and the quiet stabbed into me and I fell backwards onto the balcony and against the sliding door, cracking the glass with my head. I grabbed my head in my hands, and felt the warm stickiness of blood. I brought a hand back in front of my face and saw it wet and red. I stumbled inside. At my kitchen sink I filled a mixing bowl with water, leaned my head over the sink and poured the water over me. That's when I heard her again, the voice, maybe it was Lotte or maybe it was Annie—it was all mixed up in my head, like the voices in anyone's head—and she said to me, "Go over the mountain. Go, Joe."

Annie lived not far over the crest of Red Mountain, and it made sense to go see her. I could warn her away from me, or maybe she could comfort me, make me better. I was in no shape to hop on my bike, so I walked out of my apartment and the couple blocks over to the Red Mountain Expressway. I could catch a bus or hop in a taxi or hitch a ride, I figured, but by the time I got to the expressway and crossed over onto the median, three lanes of honking, screaming traffic going one way and three more lanes streaming the other, I was so dazzled by the light and noise that I couldn't think about any of that. I walked down the median, over the crest of the mountain and down the other side, toward Mountain Brook and Hoover. Sharp pebbles and

broken glass cut at my feet. I tripped and fell, just catching myself with my hands, slicing my palms on the rough pavement.

As I got back to my feet, staring at my bloodied hands, I heard brakes screeching and was covered in flashing red and blue lights. I felt rough hands close on my arms. I tried to shrug them off, but they threw me to the ground. “I have to save her,” I tried to tell them. I don’t know who had called the cops, but maybe it was a good thing they did.

Annie came to see me the next day in the hospital. My parents had come up in the middle of the night and moved me into a private room from the ER. My mom was sitting in a chair between my bed and the window, harsh sunlight coming through it, when Annie walked in.

“Mom, please,” I said, nodding my head over at Annie. Mom looked at her, and I could tell she was trying to assess Annie, see if she had something to do with how I ended up there. “Just a couple minutes, Mom.”

She stood up, smoothed her hands down her blouse and pants, said, “I’ll go get a snack from the cafeteria. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Then she left without actually greeting Annie.

Annie stepped over to the side of the bed. She put her hand out toward mine as if she was going to hold it, but stopped short when she saw the I.V. tube sticking in it. Her hand rested awkwardly on the sheet next to mine. “So you going to be all right?”

“Whatever they’ve got going into me,” I said, looking at the tubes, “I feel fine, like nothing really.” I made myself smile.

She smiled back, but it was so different than those smiles at Sloss or at the Waffle House or in the red glow on my apartment balcony. “God, you’re like a mummy.” I had bandages on my arms and hands, my feet, my head. “I can bring you something from your place, books or music or something.”

“Hey,” I said, “let’s not do this. Neither one of us did something wrong here.” I could see a protest maybe starting to form on her lips, so I said, “I’m clearly just not able to do this right now.”

“But maybe you will be. You’ll get out and you’ll be fine.”

“I’ll get out and my parents will take me back to Meadowview, is what’s going to happen. So, let’s not do this.”

She turned and looked out the window. “OK,” she said.

“OK.”

* * *

Mom was looking at me with that unblinking concern at breakfast again today. I hate that. I prefer Dad’s way of avoiding any eye contact at all, like last night, eating those hamburger steaks and mashed potatoes, his jaw working at it like it was the only thing he had to do in the whole world. Chewing and waiting for death, or for me to leave the house, whichever comes first. I’m not the easiest son, and I’m not making things any better, either. Probably ruining that damned idyllic small-town dream of his. I bet he’ll be happier when he gets home from the mill this evening and I’ve hit the road.

I’ve been long enough back in this town, a year almost; too long, really. We’re a profound disappointment to each other, this town and me. It got quieter and smaller since I was last here. It looks at me like I don’t belong here, like it barely tolerated me long enough for me to graduate and get out after high school. Then there were a couple summers home where I learned it was best to just do whatever summer job I had—down at the mill that one summer, the

graveyard shift at the radio station another summer—but otherwise just stay to myself. I certainly wasn't supposed to come back and live here, not all broken. That's for sure.

There's always one of three reactions from people in this town, none of whom are strangers because nobody's a stranger here, for better or usually for worse. The first kind of reaction is from older white ladies, out at a restaurant or in the aisles of the grocery store. "Ohh, Joe," they say, huge fake smiles plastered on their faces, their eyes wide and exaggerated like they're talking to a baby, "How *are* you, dear? It's so *nice*, you helping your folks out. We're so *glad* to see you!"

The second kind of reaction is from the few people my age who will still look at me and talk to me. "Man, I always figured you was crazy," they say. Every single one of them, without fail. And then maybe they realize what they've said and they always try to clean it up real fast, "You know, back in high school!" At least they're shooting for honesty, so I cut them some slack.

The third reaction is the predominant one, though. They look around me or through me or in the other direction altogether. If they accidentally look at me, they wince and look down. Downtown, the few times I've had to go pick up my own prescriptions from the Rexall, I swear people actually cross the street when they see me.

When I first came home, I spent the days down in the creek bottom by the house, sitting on a log and listening to the water burble around soapstone rocks, watching the sunlight shift through the trees. When it turned to winter, though, when the leaves were all gone and I could see the neighborhood houses up on the rim of the gully the creek ran through, and they could see me, I just stayed in the house, in my room.

Mom comes back to my doorway. "Sure you don't want to come, Joe?"

“I’m sure, Mom.” She turns to walk back down the hall to the door, but I call out to her.
“Mom!”

She comes back to look at me. “Yes?”

I look for some words. I’m a little surprised I’d called out to her. “Thanks. You and Dad, these last few months. You know. Thanks.”

She screws up her face, like she might cry, but it resolves into a smile. “Of course, Joey.”

I know I’ve confused her, but as she walks back down the hall and I hear the front door slam, I know it’s the best I can say to her. I turn back to the page in front of me. *Dear Dan*, it still says.

I scratch out the *Dear* and complete the letter quickly:

~~Dear~~ Dan,

Three years. How about that. Three years and not a peep from you. I don’t expect you even live by your parents anymore, but it’s the only place I have to mail this. Who knows where you are? I don’t care. Took three years for me to realize you didn’t, either.

Maybe that’s my fault. Or maybe it’s yours.

Joe

I can’t think of something better to say. I can’t capture it all. It’s not Dan’s fault, any of this. I don’t suppose it’s Lotte’s fault, either, or Annie’s, or even mine. And that’s why the doc my parents make me see once a month says he thinks I’m good to go now, why he says I’m better, because I don’t care whose fault this past is anymore. I stick Dan’s letter into the envelope and scrawl out his parents’ address on the front. I stick a stamp on it, grab my suitcase and head

down the hall. I leave the letter in the mailbox, flip the flag up, then throw my suitcase in the trunk of the little beater car my folks got for me this year.

State highway 22 stretches south out of town. It'll join up with state highway 5 in Safford, then U.S. highway 43 in Thomasville, everything draining me down toward Mobile. Then I'll leave even the geography of my past behind. I'll drive west on I-10. New Orleans? Maybe. Or Houston, San Antonio, Tucson, L.A., the ocean. It's all ahead of me now.

VITA

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