



January 2018

# Depending On The Weather And Other Stories

Benjamin Morris

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DEPENDING ON THE WEATHER AND OTHER STORIES

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

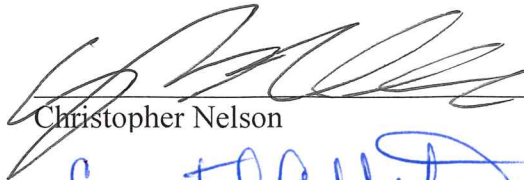
Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May

2018

This dissertation, submitted by Benjamin Morris in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.



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Benjamin Morris  
April 25, 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Among those I wish to thank for help and support are my parents, Greg and Gayle Morris. Your unwavering encouragement and appetite for my work was everything. And to my family that grew during the writing of this project: Beverly, Gracelyn, and Henrik. I love you. Thanks also to Dr. Crystal Alberts for guiding this project (and me) through to the other side.

## ABSTRACT

*Depending on the Weather and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories set in the rural and small town communities of contemporary America. The problem my characters address is their changing relationship with the American Dream. While my baby boomer characters tend to believe the Dream is alive and achievable, their children are growing more disenchanted and skeptical of the Dream. The disconnections between these generations are largely due to a credibility gap and a shifting set of generational values. These values have shifted for the younger generation because of an evolving (or devolving) American culture.

My stories are written in what I'm calling the "dirty domestic," a subgenre of dirty realism. This is an appropriate style of writing for my content because the genre is traditionally used to depict bleak worlds and discontented characters. Another traditional tenet of dirty realism is the use of violence. My work shows how violence plays a pivotal role in both the romantic and familial relationships within the genre. While communication isn't always easy for these types of characters, violence sometimes speaks the loudest.

I anticipate *Depending on the Weather and Other Stories* being published and entering into the contemporary dialogue of American letters. I see this collection expressing similar concerns with American culture as other writers of my generation. Lastly, I view this collection as a finger on the pulse of the American discontent. The characters in this collection are ready for a better shake in life, even if they know one isn't coming.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Depending on the Weather and Other Stories* is a collection of pieces that revolve around white, working-class families, who live in rural areas of so-called US flyover states; they are not feel-good stories about collectivism, love, and obstacles overcome. This collection presents a pessimistic view of the American Dream and its fading promise in the contemporary rural American landscape. *Depending on the Weather and Other Stories* joins the ongoing conversation currently taking place in contemporary American fiction, particularly arguments making the claim that those predominantly red states and Trump voters aren't receiving the same literary coverage enjoyed by coastal city elites. Lakshmi Varanasi's *Politico* article, "How Trump Is Shaking Up the Book Industry," details the disconnection between the big five New York publishing houses and the rural blue-collar American. "The perspectives of the white working classes and the rural poor, the demographics that handed Trump the presidency in 2016, have been largely absent from the novels printed every year. And as these demographics become increasingly central to the country's political conversations, the publishing industry is wondering what it needs to do to change" (Varanasi). However, several independent publishers argue the white working class has regularly enjoyed representation through genres such as Rural Noir. And, if anything, the many minority groups threatened by the Trump administration's agenda need book deals now more than ever/anyone.

My collection will hopefully provide some insight into the potentially underrepresented white working class; it is also an attempt to place a finger on the pulse of the white, working-class loss of faith in the American Dream. The characters in this collection are in need and ready for a better shake in life, whether they deserve one or not. Many of the pieces could fit into literary categories such as minimalism, dirty realism, and the Rural Noir. There are also references to cinema, particularly the horror genre, and how it can be used to enhance short fiction, and how Laura Mulvey's use of Freud's *scopophilia*, enjoyment in looking without being seen, might play out in a written story.



Minimalism, dirty realism, and the Rural Noir are three genres that intersect with content, setting, and aesthetics, and they've been with me since I began writing. This is due to my geographical background. I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, but raised on an acreage in a town of ten thousand in northwestern Pennsylvania. My town ran on manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism (from the grape vineyards and wine). Both my parents were academics, which made my sister and me outcasts among our friends. Their parents were reverends, farmers, trailer park owners, restaurant servers, and small shop owners. Twenty years later, these are the kinds of people and characters I write about.

In terms of style, I need to start with the influence of Ernest Hemingway's modern aesthetics for writing fiction. Hemingway is well known for his sparse prose and economic sentences. Like the characters in his short stories, his vocabulary is not exceptional. He deals only with what is true to the character, with what feels honest. He is also revered, of course, for his "theory of omission" (the iceberg theory) and what he purposefully leaves off the page. In *Death of the Afternoon*, Hemingway notes, "[t]he dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due only to one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing" (192). Essentially, there is more meaning in the subtext (beneath the surface) that a writer must be acutely aware of any information being withheld from the reader and for what purpose. He goes on to say that a writer's intelligence about the subject matter should be observable to the reader. And if this happens, the reader won't mind the information being withheld.

Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is exemplary of his "theory of omission." The story is about an American man and a "girl" drinking and waiting for a train. True to Hemingway's form, the details are sparse and direct. The story opens: "The hills across the

valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun” (Hemingway 273). Details, when given, are merely reported to briefly sketch out the scene. Eventually, the two characters bring up the girl’s potential procedure. The reader knows the couple is speaking about an abortion, yet the word never appears in the story. Hemingway not only withholds this, but he also prohibits the couple from having an honest and forthright conversation on the matter. Instead, the couple engages in a rapid-fire succession of dialogue about happiness and their future that essentially leaves the issue unresolved. The story’s last line is the woman once and for all declaring, “I feel fine [...] There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (Hemingway 278). Readers of Hemingway’s work know this is not the case because they recognize the 7/8ths of iceberg below the surface. The couple has a rough road ahead and it’s clear from the reading that they don’t want to face it. The alcohol they consume in the name of better times combined with the arriving train, as a symbol for “escape,” assures the reader that they are doomed.

Another American minimalist writer (though he disliked the label) who regularly writes doom into his stories is Raymond Carver. Carver’s prose is quite similar to Hemingway in style and rarely adds any flourish beyond what’s necessary for the scene. One can tell that Carver is interested in people: their motivations, their desires, and their failures. Carver also uses the minimalist “theory of omission,” seldom telling his readers what the story is about, or from where the real tension emerges. In his essay “On Writing,” Carver explains: “What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things” (17).

Similar to Hemingway, Carver is a firm believer in withholding certain details and information from the reader for specific effect. But it must be done with care and purpose.

Besides the “theory of omission,” minimalism has a good number of traditional tenets aptly defined by Cynthia Hallett in her book *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. She explains minimalist stories tend to be written in “a blunt, lean, apparently uncomplicated prose,” and that the protagonists are often “non-heroic characters who resemble everyday people doing everyday things” (Hallett 25). Indeed, the characters who inhabit my own stories are “non-heroic,” ordinary people with unremarkable jobs and everyday lives. They work, drink, fail, and try to salvage relationships and respectability despite the poor odds. Hallett also notes that most minimalist stories carry “implications of an existential, often absurd, universe in which ‘real’ communication is impossible and action is useless...” (25). This is not only true for the couple’s conversation in Hemingway’s “Hills,” but also for the majority of Carver’s characters as well.

Carver describes his characters as working-class people, who live regular lives with regular things. In “On Writing” Carver also observes the potential meaningfulness in these seemingly mundane lives: “It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring—with immense, even startling power” (15). True to the tenets of minimalism, Carver additionally emphasizes the need for precision when writing about an object or subject.

Carver’s “Popular Mechanics” is an example of how he uses the ordinary events of everyday people to have a devastating effect on the reader. A mother and father are splitting up as they bitterly sort through their possessions once and for all. However, neither of them is

willing to concede their baby boy to the other. Carver amps up the tension through the usage of everyday language. “She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby’s other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back. But he would not let go” (Carver 303). Instead of tipping the story into graphic violence, Carver withholds the gruesome scene and leaves the reader with a line just as horrific and disturbing: “In this manner, the issue was decided” (303). The emotionally-removed third person objective point-of-view downplays the tug-of-war with the child, as if the scene is commonplace. Although domestic disputes (verbal and physical) are supposedly common in working class families, Carver raises the stakes by having a defenseless child in the middle.

Not surprisingly, Carver champions the need for “menace” in a short story. He also notes in “On Writing”: “I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion...” (17). And it’s this sense of “menace” that I see separating the influence Hemingway and Carver have had on my work: while Nick Adams is fishing the Upper Peninsula in “Big Two-Hearted River” and having an existential crisis, Carver’s fisherman finds a dead woman in the creek in “So Much Water So Close to Home.” I’ll take Carver’s fishing story every time.

My own work resonates with many of the minimalist traits described by Hallett in addition to Carver’s need for menace. My story “County Road Q” shows a mother and father unable to communicate with each other about their fears and anxieties for their son, Andrew. Each character (including Andrew) is given a brief section with a close third-person point-of-view. This allows the characters to express the internal struggle without going through the

painful process of opening up to the other two family members. Communication here is futile. Ultimately, both parents miss their chance to share how they feel with Andrew, and Andrew with his parents.

This family's inability to communicate and express themselves, similar to the many other families written in minimalism, is what characterizes them. However, many of my character families are Midwestern working class people who, culturally, are more comfortable in moments of solitude than trying to face harsh realities about each other. In the following description of a small Nebraska town, I link the father to the land while simultaneously creating a sense of menace:

Through thin sheets of rain, Glen sees combines laboring for miles, casting their wide skeletal shadow across the landscape of the forever dead. He watches the hay bales slip from gold to black, the sky a ripening bruise. He notices a cloud of dust and the shape of a truck speeding along County Road Q, heading his way. He believes it's Andrew finished early to help with the blind. Glen starts back for the pond.

In this passage I inextricably link the people to the land and how their lives revolve around working it. The macabre is there in my descriptive use of "skeletal shadow", "forever dead", and "ripening bruise." But these also set the menace in motion, which is the speeding truck that Glen mistakes for his son. One of the familial themes I try to convey in my work is based on what I've heard and experienced in the Midwest, which is this: family is everything to them, but it's also the thing they can't stand the most about each other. There seems to be constant conflict within these families

Brooding conflict in a particular sense of setting is important to all three of my influential genres. But thanks to particular content and setting, Rural Noir and dirty realism can be found in

America's smallest town. Taking its roots primarily from Southern Gothic writers such as Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner, Rural Noir authors mostly write about down and out folks, the countryside's skid row. Typical elements of Rural Noir fiction include poverty, drugs, violence, alcoholism, rape, incest, and murder, all set against a harsh and unforgiving backdrop. Rural Noir trades in the cramped apartments and houses of minimalism for single-wide trailers and shotgun shacks.

Contemporary practitioners of Rural Noir include Cormac McCarthy, Bonnie Jo Campbell, and Daniel Woodrell. McCarthy's novella *Child of God* is about a depraved, backwoods necrophiliac who is somehow impossible to stop reading about. In "The Solution to Brian's Problem," Campbell gets inside the mind of a down-and-out meth addict contemplating nonconsensual double-suicide, and leaves the reader guessing on the outcome. Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* is an intense look at the familial web of meth addicts in the heart of the Ozarks.

While my work certainly includes elements of Rural Noir, dirty realism is perhaps a stronger influence. In the 1983 *Granta 8* anthology dedicated to American short story writers, British editor Bill Buford coined the term "dirty realism." Buford describes the (mostly) short story style as using a "flat, unsurprised language" (5). The language of dirty realism shares minimalism's blunt style of prose. However, it's not only the language that marks these stories as unique, but also the struggling characters in America's down and out settings (cheap motels, bars, laundromats) that earns "dirty realism" its name. Dirty realism leans heavily on depictions of lower class characters, as well. To say that common occurrences in dirty realism stories (adultery, physical violence, alcoholism) only happen within this group would be stereotypical, but, these listed tenets are staples in works described as dirty realism just the same.

In *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, Robert Rebein attempts his own definition of "dirty

realism” as a blending of two distinct American styles when he writes that dirty realism “refers to an effect in both subject matter and technique that is somewhere between the hard-boiled and the darkly comic. It refers to the impulse in writers to explore dark truths, to descend, as it were, into the darkest holes of society...” (43). There is no shortage of bleak truths in my collection. Many of my stories demonstrate the down-and-out white lower-class America. My piece “For the Kids” is brief snapshot of a neglected brother and sister and the harsh world they live in. Their world is mapped out clearly when the brother, Thumper, has to walk the miles out of town to his home. On the way, he passes what is essentially the gateway to his and sister’s life. “Thumper was out past the town burn pile where a blue twin mattress was lazily smoldering. A black hole opened up in the plastic center and he thought it looked like the mouth of a monster he’d seen in a movie. The air tasted terrible in his throat.” The town’s burn pile is obviously put out of town and away from businesses and more well-to-do families. The fact that something is on fire and nobody cares is fascinating to me. It’s a controlled burn. And I think it’s a great metaphor or image for the characters of dirty realism; the barely controlled anger, the sometimes- measured violence, all happening around the tainted air.

Once I realized I wanted smoldering mattresses in my work, wanted to write in a similar vein as dirty realism or Rural Noir, I also started writing flash fiction or short shorts. These are actually the dominant form of this collection. A lot has been written about the short short’s form and function. In Robert Shapard’s “The Remarkable Reinvention of Very Short Fiction,” Joyce Carol Oates argues short short fiction, “is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose, which generally opens out to dramatize experience and evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested” (World Literature Today). Like Oates, I also see the relationship between poetry and the short short. In fact, many of my short

pieces in this collection, such as “American Carnage,” “B Side,” and “Motel in the Midwest,” could easily be read as prose poems.

Oates also argues that short shorts are only capable of “suggested” experience, while the novel or perhaps even the short story have the time and length to establish a real experience for the reader using their traditional formal elements: setting, narration, dialogue, among others. For me the short-short pares down the traditional characteristics of a short story to bare essentials. Dialogue, if there is any, is very limited. Silence is powerful in a piece of flash fiction because the moments rendered are often solitary or the characters may in fact be speechless. Character and setting are often intertwined to add another layer of meaning to the piece. My story “Christmas 2017” takes place in a laundromat and is meant to symbolize socioeconomic status, isolation, and a sense of despair. But because this piece is so short, it must give up traditional tenets of longer fiction. There is no exposition for this story, no series of events that explain Missy’s life up until her moment in the laundromat. Instead, there are context clues like the reference to Trump, lack of phone calls from her kids, and the noise inside the dryer that take the place of rising action and climax. The traditional realist short story arc—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement—is essentially replaced with variations of this formula in fragments. I see my shorter work being examples of only falling action with a quick denouement as in “Holding Pattern” or “Americans at Work.” The climaxes of these stories have already occurred (usually the night before). I am interested in what happens next: the effects that the previous day’s events have on the characters today.

In *Sudden Fiction*, an anthology of short-shorts, Paul Theroux claims a short-short “...should not be mistaken for an anecdote; it is highly calculated—its effects, its timing. In most cases it contains a novel” (228). In other words, the short short leaves little to no room for



missteps or deviations, but the implications and brief scenes of a short short have a grander narrative than the page or word count lets on. In terms of “effects,” author Fred Chappell has specific ones in mind:

*Unease*, whether humorous or sad, is the effect the short-short aims at. Even if the story achieves resolution, it cannot be a simple resolution and it should not give the impression of permanence. The self-containment of the short-short is incomplete; this form does not create a world in the way that a poem or short story may do; rather, it inhabits a larger world which it must take pains to imply. (227).

While Chappell admits that resolution in a short short is rare, he also raises another important point: that the narrative of this form implies a continuation of events. These stories also have an implied “before” as many of them begin in medias res. True to his thoughts on the craft, Chappell’s short-short “Children of Strikers” *implies* the larger world of the town and the condition of the adults by using the unsupervised children who are at the heart of the narrative. The story ends: “The men didn’t shave everyday now and the women cried sometimes. They had all turned into strangers, and among them at night the houses were real strangers from far-off places saying hard wild sentences and often shouting and banging tabletops. In the overheated rooms both the light and the shadows loomed with an unguessable violence” (Chappell 93). Filled with disturbing *unease*, these final lines suggest little sign of improvement in the future: the unshaved men, crying women, and strangers moving about imply a continuing narrative of domestic violence and rural unrest.

Similarly, my story “Some Assistance, Please?” is a short short and uses Chappell’s idea of *unease* to generate an effect on the reader. The story focuses on a sister who looks after her father and must pass the caregiving baton to her estranged, less-sympathetic sister, Lydia. In one

scene, the two sisters are in their father's shed full of hunting trophies and bones. Death surrounds them. Lydia puts a knife in her pocket. Her sister doesn't know why. A few moments later, Lydia pulls the knife back out while they are with the father. "She scooped up more helper with the spoon, lifted it to the purplish slash in dad's face, and again most of it went down his chin and shirt. Small clumps of orange meat started to pile beneath his chair. 'Damnit,' Lydia muttered. She took the cleaning knife out of her pocket and buttered two pieces of bread." The reappearance of the knife in the moment with Lydia getting annoyed startles the caretaker sister. It is all the more effective because she uses the knife to do something so innocuous as buttering bread. This is seen as a threat of violence towards the father and used to create tension and unease in the reader.

Whether in the short short form or more traditional short story, violence is a theme throughout my collection, particularly in the way violence plays out in domestic spaces as representations of class. Few authors render the family in such a dark and unrepentant way as Sam Shepard. Many of his short stories and, in particular, his plays, "True West" and "Buried Child" have had a profoundly freeing effect on what was allowed for me regarding content. Shepard shows the dark underbelly of the American family, expertly located (with great reason) in the Midwest—a geographical region known to value the traditional concept of family and conservative values.

Whether implied, threatened, or actual violence taking place on the page, the familial threat of violence is almost always brewing somewhere in the subtext of these works. Shepard's "True West" is about two brothers grappling with their relationship to each other and their destitute father. The entire play is set in the claustrophobic confines of their mother's kitchen (she's out of town in Alaska). At one point in the play, Lee tells Austin the kind of people that

make up the majority of murder cases in America. “Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type people. They kill each other in the heat mostly” (Shepard 24). Here, Shepard is commenting on the failing state of the American family and how the close proximity of these relationships is both familial and explosive. While families are traditionally thought to care and comfort one another, Shepard sees them in a more threatening light. “True West” is rife with tension that climaxes with a near strangulation and the lights go out with the brothers engaged in a standoff. The audience is left with the sense that one of the brothers will not be leaving the kitchen alive.

In a recent *Poets and Writers* article on crafting violence, Ben Percy and Aaron Gwyn—two contemporary fiction writers who commonly write violence in their work—argue that one of the best uses of violence is off-stage and merely implied. In other words, they suggest in some cases it is better not to show the violence to the audience at all. And that it can be more effective if the audience is forced to imagine the violence on their own. When the violence is happening off-stage, the isolated audience is forced into a complicit position to “write” the violence for themselves in their imaginations. The way the Misfit’s goons walk each family member into the woods to be executed in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is far more harrowing than if they were shot dead in the ditch. The dead bodies would pile up and steal the much-needed tension and focus from the Misfit and grandmother. Instead, the grandmother (and reader) watch helplessly and only hear the gunfire’s echo.

My stories explore the violent tendencies of adults and parents in the domestic space both on and off the page. My title story “Depending on the Weather” focuses on Linda, a woman forced to confront her trauma and memory of Chain, a male friend who sexually assaulted her as a teenager. Through her memory and mental scars, Linda struggles to deal with the violence she

endured at the hands of men in town. The sexual assault is on-stage because the story ripples out from that one event. It's what drastically changes Linda along with her relationship and memory of Chain.

The violence in my piece, "Burn Barrels," represents and resists the reading of violence as meaningful. In other words, the violence is read on its own terms. The deaths of the cousins don't amount to a larger, symbolic message. Instead, they are casualties of a small town experiencing a sort of depression. The end of the story makes this idea clear when the two fishermen find a dead woman's body. "They both watched the body with fear and suspicion as if it was going to slowly raise from the muck and move toward them. Neither man said a word. Neither man would be able to speak to his wife the same way after. And neither man knew then that the police would be arresting a local. And the summer rolled on." These men are clearly affected and changed, but the town, as a whole, will move on without a deeper analysis as to *why* or *what* the violence meant.

Representation of violence is also an important visual aesthetic in cinema. And few genres utilize violence more than the horror film. Because of my theoretical and critical interests in these types of films, I regularly try to incorporate them into my work. What I hope to achieve here is more than a mere nod to popular culture. Instead, I'm aiming for a more complex look at the way we interact with violent texts across multiple mediums.

My story "The Final Girl" revolves entirely around the slasher genre popular in the 70's and 80's horror film. The title itself is taken from gender theorist Carol Clover and her essay, "Final Girl," which argues the audience perspective shift from villain to the lone-surviving heroine. In my story "The Final Girl," the narrator, Jon, grew up watching the surviving women in horror films with his bigger brother and it lead them to make up a game to reenact what they

were seeing on the screen: “I pretend laugh at something my boyfriend says. But then I hear a thud and I tell him to be quiet for a second. It sounded like it was from downstairs, maybe from the backyard. I think it’s the dog and I call out: *Oscar? Here, boy.* Nothing. I stand and walk to the window and look down into the backyard. A dark shape slowly moves out of the shadows.” Despite this scene being a game between two brothers, one surely gets a familiar sense of fear as if watching an actual horror film on screen. And so much of horror cinema relies on the audience’s expectations of the genre, as well as what can be seen and imagined by the viewer.

A major theme in horror films and my work is voyeurism. A few of my pieces work with Laura Mulvey’s work with Freud’s *scopophilia* (pleasure in looking), a term from her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She contends that “the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of an audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy” (Mulvey 17). In other words, it’s enjoyable to watch and, in turn, not be noticed watching. “The Final Girl” works in a very similar way, as the reader acts as the safe and “unseen” voyeur audience to the characters “performing” in the text. My story “Bad People in the Area” is about a neighborhood prowler or “Peeping Tom.” And when he is caught looking into a bedroom window, a couple is forced to reconcile the gross invasion of privacy.

True to life, my characters rarely achieve what they would call the American Dream. In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen argues that “the real problem is that any American Dream is finally too incomplete a vessel to contain longings that elude human expression or comprehension. We never reach the coast we think we see” (182). Cullen suggests that the very essence of the Dream is that it is essentially

always just out of reach, it is the unattainable thing that appears attainable, the mirage of success and personal fulfillment. For me, few writers of short stories have delivered as steady a blow to the American Dream family portrait more than Richard Ford. His story “Rock Springs” shows a single dad trying to give his daughter “a better shake in things” (Ford 1). Instead of working hard and rising up through the ranks, he steals a car and decides to drive his daughter and new girlfriend to a fresh start in Florida. Nothing goes according to plan.

My characters, similar to Ford’s, are not part of the greatest generation, a generation of white families who are certainly responsible for propagating the Dream. Instead, my characters look for the quick fix, the path of least resistance. Notions of pulled up bootstraps and reaping the rewards of one’s own efforts are long gone and in the rearview mirror of a stolen car. These conflicting generational ideals are also at the heart my story “Some Assistance, Please?” mentioned earlier. The two sisters (not unlike the brothers in Shepard’s “True West”) argue what should be done with their ailing father. For me, the father character represents the death of the American Dream as its accompanying ideologies. The sisters, on the other hand, are representative of a changing value system that doesn’t revolve around everyone getting a fair shake, because they know the game is rigged to benefit a certain group of people. Consequently, they aren’t concerned at all about chasing the same things that were so important to that generation, like starting a nuclear family, or owning a house. In fact, they are resentful that they have to clear out their parents’ house and the remnants of the Dream. They’re old enough to know that’s not the way things work, old enough to know things never quite worked that way in America to begin with.

Similarly, in the aforementioned “Christmas 2017,” Missy is extremely disenchanted with the current state of things. She voted for a candidate who made grand promises of a stronger

America. Instead, she and her husband are worse off than before, and their children resent them. Ultimately, one of my aims for this story, and *Depending on the Weather* at large, is to try and work through my understanding of how current demographics differ in their concepts of life in a divided United States. Similar, too, my story “Americans at Work” is about a disgruntled Trump supporter locked in his own confusion and anger about his undeserved station in life.

*Depending on the Weather and Other Stories* is my unique point-of-view of the white working class in rural America. In part, this is my attempt to empathize with someone who has conflicting ideologies and values from my own. The divisions in the United States today run deeper than the backroads drainage ditches of my stories. I have a hard time spending time with some of my characters because, in many ways, I’ve tried to isolate myself from people just like them. Today, I have only one friend from my hometown. Perhaps this collection will be a step in filling in the divide, one shovelful at a time.

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## American Carnage

on the high plains they romance like train windows, black and white photographs of abandoned houses on their walls, slow dance to Bessie Smith records, pocket flasks at summer weddings, dare each other to bump the thermostat in winter, collective Christmas funeral brain, and when it's over their faces are suspended in each foggy pane, every house an empty husk of bone memory and burnt vinyl, the whisky skin stick, blood and lace, years later meeting somewhere in the southwest, wearing their scars like desert varnish, lightning creeping through a canyon, then smoke and slots, motel bed sheets and a raw knee, teeth and fruit, then out to the dried lake bed to sit and wait for rain, wait for the slow roll of thunder and all of those city lights to erase the sky

## Burn Barrels

The bad thing with the second cousins, Cora and Del, happened last summer, way out on Cole Road, near the county line. They'd been shacking up for months in the hunting cabin Del's old man left him. It wasn't much, but nice enough for a hideaway love nest. Although, it was no secret. Folks in town knew Cora and Del's intentions before they even got the chance to get down to it. The first night, more than a dozen second-shifters from Ridg-U-Rak must've turned on their stools to see them leave Bullwinkle's arm-n-arm after last call, Cora swishing in her dirty dress, Del trying to hurry her the hell out of there. Then, Jesse Rizzo, working the Kwik Fill on 426, sold Del condoms and snacks and noticed Cora sitting shotgun and blowing large cigarette clouds out the window of Del's banged up Ford Ranger. People in this town can put two and two together.

When Cora and Del's family found out, they barely raised a stink. So be it, they thought. Happy was happy. And in terms of kids, Del supposedly couldn't make them on account of some motorcycle accident he'd had as a teenager. Word was the two were crazy in love. Fred Luke, who runs a garage by the highway, said he'd driven by their place around midnight once and saw the two dancing, naked as babies, around burn barrels emitting enormous twin flames.

This was around the same time of all those GE layoffs and the local men fought and drank because they couldn't think of what else to do. And when they thundered around home, the wives whispered along the walls, and the children locked themselves in their rooms. May and June came and went in this way.

But come July, the town saw a bit of bright light coming at them in the annual firemen's Cherry Festival. Sure enough, the local firefighters in newly-washed red trucks rode around town and country selling 50/50 tickets to families desperate for a win. These same families gathered

excitedly to watch the parade of carnival workers set up their rides and game tents on the local fairgrounds. Men, women, and children alike surveyed the out-of-town workers with the scrutiny of pack line foremen.

Cora and Del watched, too. They even went to the first night of the festival and ate curly fries under the bright yellow canopy of the bingo tent. Cora won twenty bucks and pretended not to hear the murmur from the crowd as she collected her money. Del threw three darts for a dollar and popped a pink balloon. He carefully selected a framed glass pane with a pair of huge confederate flag-patterned breasts with gun barrels for nipples. Cora begged Del to ride the Gravitron, but he refused, and she spun alone. Del waited off to the side with his prize and stared at the wiry man running the ride. The man stared back at Del and took large gulps of blue liquid from a two-gallon plastic milk jug. Behind him, a giant ferris wheel stuttered in a slow circle.

It was just after sunset on the third night of the festival when the firehouse sirens wailed awful, and the summer seemed to grind to a stop. All the rides, lights, and laughter got swallowed up by the black rain clouds building in July humidity. Even the clown who told nonstop dirty jokes in the dunking booth looked to the sky with a cigarette dangling from his wet lips. Men itched for a drink, women conducted silent headcounts.

They found Del first, face down in the drainage ditch a half mile from his cabin with no shoes on. His neck appeared busted. His belly had enough holes in it to make the first responders turn their heads and puke when they saw some of his insides mixed in the mud and trash.

The sirens were still screaming in town when two night fishermen spotted a pair of pale limbs tangled in the cattails up at Bulls Dam. The men crouched down, careful not to cruelly tip over into the body. Cora glowed beneath their flashlights. One of the men ran behind a tree and

retched. Their Styrofoam cups full of worms sat on a nearby log. After the men called the police, they did what they were told and sat in their vehicle. They both watched the body with fear and suspicion as if it was going to slowly rise from the muck and move toward them. Neither man said a word. Neither man would be able to speak to his wife the same way after. And neither man knew then that the police would be arresting a local. And the summer rolled on.

## For the Kids

Second week of class. And after nobody showed to pick him up from detention, Thumper started for home, out of town, away from the school, away from the neighborhoods made of two-story houses that flew American flags, had porch swings, fenced-in yards, and carefully groomed flower beds. Out past the local laundromat and carwash. Out past the graveyard full of chipped tombstones. Thumper remembered his grandma having said something about not whistling by cemeteries or how the dead can whistle, but he couldn't recall exactly. Thumper wondered why his grandma would know something like that. He stopped and examined the tombstone closest to the road near a leaning cottonwood tree. Thumper put his lips together and blew. But nothing came out. He kept walking.

Thumper was out past the town burn pile, where a blue twin mattress was lazily smoldering. A black hole opened up in the plastic center and he thought it looked like the mouth of a monster he'd seen in a movie. The air tasted terrible in his throat. He could hear a school bus growling in the distance and knew it had dropped his little sister off. It started to rain. The mattress began hissing.

At home, Missy, Thumper's little sister, was in the backyard carefully fastening the wet legs of her baby dolls to the laundry line with wooden clothespins. She'd taken off all of their dresses and booties and made a pile on a crooked lawn chair next to the shed. As Thumper approached, Missy stood perfectly still in the rain. He slogged by her and went into the house, slamming the door behind him. Missy wiped her wet hair to the side of her face and hummed, pleased. Normally, Thumper would have torn the dolls apart and stomped them into the dirt so

deep she'd have to wait for the winter snow to melt before digging the heads up like spring bulbs.

## The Photographer

for the *North Bend Eagle* was also the school's superintendent, and he loaded the girls varsity volleyball squad into the van and secretly drove to an empty stretch of train track for a team photograph. Maybe some hesitation on the team's part when they learned the destination. Can't blame them, every kid from a town like this one knew a kid who knew a kid who played too close to the tracks, or the kid's dad picked a poor spot to sleep one off, the headline appearing in the morning paper, and all the parents doing their best to hide landline gossip.

It started to drizzle as he quickly lined the girls up like wet buffalo, big ones in the back, shoulder to shoulder on the track ties, their white sneakers turning maroon against corroded spikes. Their rust-colored kneepads facing forward. How long before a Union Pacific, rattling cars full of Wyoming coal, bore down on them? Did his reassuring smile fade? The sun, a gray lens diffused, like morning smoke off the Elkhorn. Then a three count before you snapped a few shots, growing wary of the wind picking up and the thunderheads huddling over your girls. A setter said she was cold and the day turned black. Did he start to imagine their parents then? Hands gripping phones, a buzzing telephone wire wrapping itself around the town. All their voices a worried hum, like a cold reverberating rail.

## Motel in the Midwest

There is a cricket in the parking lot tonight. The door to our room is open and a greenish light spills in and spreads across the carpet. I can't see the cricket, his legs thrumming electric life like all that afternoon motel rain. Pins thunder in the bowling alley next door. I see flies clumped around something in a dripping semi's wheel well, a buzzing fist of hunger. The sky tonight is absent for everyone. I do pushups on the floor and listen to my bones crack. My chin touches the slick carpet that glows green. In the bathroom, she's still sadly singing. One fake eyelash lies on the nightstand like a knife.



## County Road Q

The pond's bank where Glen stands is muddy and slick with green and white goose shit. He watches a dozen geese paddle through the dark water, but Glen is thinking pheasant. The blind he and his son, Andrew, started building on the eastern slope of the pond is nearly finished. Glen doesn't like leaving things incomplete. It wasn't how he was raised.

The spring's record rainfall delayed his planting and forced the harvesting team into long hours. The Scribner Granary, too, was behind getting already sold corn out of their bins. Andrew is working extra hours there now with the other half of Glen's team, the Mohler brothers. Despite being needed at the granary, Glen decided to stay back and ready for his hunters. And if he doesn't finish the blind soon, he knows his clientele will gladly go to other private wetlands, to other owners who are ready and prepared for the season. Glen hates to think of the dollars he will miss if he isn't prepared.

Glen gathers brush to hide the rusted sheet of metal for the blind's hood. He feels winter in the smell of cold soil and smoke. He removes his worn Huskers hat and runs a hand through straw-thin black hair. He hates to think of aging. He considers his parents in the cemetery five miles up the road. Maybe he'll plant some tulip bulbs before the ground freezes. He can't remember when he was up there last, can't put a finger on why he thinks of them now. He imagines their gravestones, bare except for the balding stems of summer flowers Linda put out back in June. His wife is better at stuff like that—keeping the family in mind, in contact, and together. Glen keeps his immediate family close. He believes it's enough.

Glen walks half a mile of pasture to his acreage, harvested bare. The sun slips behind clouds and rain warms the soil beneath him. Empty cornhusks stick to the bottom of his boots. He kneels and puts a hand to the ground. It is dusk and the horizon opens up with the color of a

wound. Glen squints, his vision narrows down to a tunnel of a shot glass bottom and he aims it across the plains. Trees and deer stands running along his property lines fall away. Grids of telephone pole and wire disappear. Glen watches the shifting light around him. There is a wrestling in his ribcage. It isn't pleasure, or sadness. Something buried inside him is cleaned off, a part of him he can't talk about with Linda. And he believes Andrew shares this thing with him, but also keeps it to himself.

Through thin sheets of rain, Glen sees combines laboring for miles, casting their wide skeletal shadow across the landscape of the forever dead. He watches the hay bales slip from gold to black, the sky a ripening bruise. He notices a cloud of dust and the shape of a truck speeding along County Road Q, heading his way. He believes it's Andrew finished early to help with the blind. Glen starts back for the pond.

Linda walks the two family Labs out past the property line and into the thin patch of woods. She gathers kindling and occasionally tosses a piece for the dogs to fetch. A V of geese honk and fly overhead. Then it is quiet. Linda knows Andrew will be home late from the granary and that Glen will work into the dark when he can't even see his own muddy boots. The rain was bad this year, and she spent the summer listening to Glen and Andrew groan most mornings. They sounded so much alike when they didn't get what they wanted. Sometimes it made Linda want to laugh, and other times it worried her.

She kept it inside, but Linda thought Glen kept Andrew too close. And it left her with quick glimpses of what being connected to her son could be like if Glen gave her the chance. These were supposed to be the years when Andrew could carve out his own territory in life, find something his own. Glen's father hadn't given him much of a choice, and she had no intention of

letting it happen to Andrew. She knows tonight isn't the night to bring up the cemetery markers, but they need a good cleaning.

Linda gets caught in the rain, so she cuts back to a sheltering cluster of Birch trees. The dogs pant at her side. There's no lightning yet, and Linda listens to the rain beat through the leaves. In winter the tree trunks glow like ghosts at night, and their spindly branches reach out into the cold air and have nothing to touch.

Andrew hears Ted and Terry Mohler exit the granary laughing, hears their trucks pull out onto the main road. He knows they're heading for The Rawhide and that he'll see them there later, sitting on their stools at the end of the bar. They'll buy him a beer and a shot to celebrate the week's work. Andrew knows his father worries about his drinking, and likes to share "the good stuff" with him at home—by the fireplace or outside in the garage with a pack of cigarettes—where he knows his son is safe and not driving around. They'll pull the filters off the cigarettes and smile. They'll swear not to tell mom. Glasses will touch; son and father will nod. The ritual of the thing. He looks forward to finishing the blind with his father. Enjoys working outside in the cold, moving around the foggy morning with purpose.

The granary is five stories high and Andrew has walked down the grain many times without a harness. It's a safety thing, but nobody, including Andrew's father, pays much attention to it. He watches the screw-shaped auger turn the grain down through the chute. It's orderly and smooth in operation. Then there is a metallic wheeze. The auger jams and the whir of the machine's gears fills the granary. He jabs at the grain. It doesn't budge. His body shudders. His hands turn slick with sweat. A cold knot, one that he's carried all his life, coils in his belly.

The same feeling happens when he screws up in front of the team making repairs. Andrew at work; too hungover to pound a nail straight, or mark proper measurements. His vision will darken to a pinpoint, and to keep his jawline from shaking, he'll put his coffee thermos to his mouth and pretend to drink. But it doesn't always work. And Andrew knows everyone sees him and he knows that some, including his father, feel sorry for him. He hates the attention. Andrew is happier working alone like this.

Now Andrew strikes again at the shifting grain. There's an air pocket. It gives a little, and a small hole opens. More grain spills down and covers his ankles. Then at once it all breaks free. Andrew immediately knows what is happening. He drops the shovel and claws wildly at the sides of the bin. Something grips his left boot and keeps him still in place. Andrew moves down into the grain, and it packs around his thighs. His arms grow into thin stalks above his head. His brain fires wildly: the Mohler brothers with empty shot glasses along the bar, his mother walking the dogs out back, his father standing alone at the pond's edge in the dark. Outside the wind drives through black rain, unknowing. Andrew is thinking pheasant.

## Taking the Bait

When we couldn't dance around it any longer, we set mousetraps and started imagining our two toddlers, Henry and Suzanna, losing their fingers one by one: limp pinkies, severed rings, scattered middles, dirty orphaned pointers, crinkled like driftwood, curling into themselves as if for protection.

"Little dead thumbs," I said to myself.

"I'd put one in your drink," Jay said, handing me a glass of foaming red. "Like one of those gag cubes with the flies in them. Nobody has a sense of humor anymore. And I don't know that they would get completely snapped off. Broken for sure. Trip to the hospital, insurance, and so forth."

"What's this one?" I said, holding the drink up to the light. Every night I struggled to hide the disappointment from my voice. A mixologist phase with his cashier income made no sense at all. But Jay's sister gave him a cocktail book for his birthday two months back and he insisted on working through it, buying bitters and vermouth by the gallons. He'd always been practical about this kind of stuff, but when we moved to North Dakota to be closer to his family, something changed. "It's called the Bloody Devil," Jay said with a smirk. "Complete with my own twist of Tabasco and salt."

"Yummy," I said, licking my lips. In that moment, the alcohol burning between lips and gums, I felt my hatred for him become genuine. I took another drink and looked out over the line of baited traps, our crude infantry of wood and metal, dollops of generic peanut butter fat on plastic squares of cheese, rectangular golden bars readied to snap. I felt uneasy just looking at them. "Why didn't we use glue traps?" I asked. "My parents have had luck with those."

“They don’t kill,” Jay said. “Somebody would have to march them outside and brain them against the garbage can.”

“Brain,” I echoed. “Braindead thumbs.” I broke a piece of ice between my teeth and thought a tooth cracked with it. “I guess I don’t know what they did with them,” I said.

“No, thank you,” he said.

Jay mixed more drinks and we moved around the house, laying traps down tenderly as if they were living, sleeping things. Two behind the washer and dryer, two behind the bookcase, one behind the chest full of blankets in the living room, and three upstairs in bathroom cabinets secured with plastic childproof levers.

Feeling satisfied we collapsed on the couch. Jay put on *Gremlins* and we started to screw around. I moved over him slowly. He nibbled my chin and started to muffle questions into my neck that I couldn’t understand.

“Mhmm,” I answered.

Movement in the corner of the room caught my eye. I continued to rock on Jay and watched a long gray mouse crawl down the side of the blanket chest. Then it stopped and tested the air. Its sticky paws splayed against the wood. Beneath me, Jay sucked air between his teeth, his eyes fluttered. “Holy Christ,” he whispered. “Nice.”

When the mouse reached the floor, it seemed to scan the area before bursting forward a few inches, its nose spasming. Jay’s eyes were shut tight. And when I softly pinched a nostril, he smiled.

I reversed myself on top of him and he moved his hands up my sides, over my breasts. More unintelligible questions into my neck. I watched the mouse’s body ooze underneath the

blanket chest. Gone. I waited for the snap. Waited. Waited. The TV showed a gremlin spinning in a blender.

Suddenly we heard Suzanna upstairs screaming from her bed.

“Fuck,” Jay said, adjusting himself away. “Don’t go anywhere.” He lumbered up the stairs to her room. I sat and stared at the blanket chest, waited for Jay to start shouting. I imagined Suzanna’s tiny pink palms without fingers, waving side to side like horrible bald flowers. Saw them reaching out for Jay.

But I heard nothing. And so I crept over to the chest and saw the peanut butter sitting undisturbed on the cheese. I went up to Henry’s room and stood over him. Waited. I stopped the sound of my own breathing to hear his, to watch his chest rise and fall like it was supposed to. I wanted to wake him and kiss all his fingers, count his toes with my lips. Instead I sat in the rocking chair and watched the crack of hallway light beneath his door. I waited for a flash of movement. I waited for Jay, or something else to squirm into the room and gnaw at our skins.

## Holding Pattern

Missy pulls on underwear in the dark and feels around the nightstand for a smoke. Her lower half is sore as hell and she curses the sound of Dan's heavy breathing. She pinches the lamp knob and freezes. Knows Dan is sleeping off last night's celebration. Knows that even after he yells and smashes the light out on the ground, he'll get up and still be able to get ahold of her quick in the pitch-black room. He always had invisible hands on her, an unseen grip. It's the reason she's going to see Mom in the home this morning, to tell her they got engaged last night. And how she better be at the wedding.

The coffeemaker gurgles and spits in the kitchen and Missy thinks about drowsy mornings in the future with a baby on her hip. Dan wants kids. What he said last night anyway. The tone he used was familiar. Missy recognized it in most men she'd been with over the years—a combination of lust and desperation that covered up their impatience at having to try so hard to convince her he was something he wasn't. It's a tone that has been wearing down women for generations.

Missy knows the promises of the future shine like fool's gold. Knows that a man's word had the ability to flourish or crap out in the dirt. The expectations game, her mother called it. *Do yourself a favor, huh? Keep them low.* Her mother never dared life to do better by her.

Missy pours coffee into a big white mug with "I ♥ Las Vegas" in red bubble letters on the front. She imagines the nightly phone calls explaining he has to work late or that the foreman needs him in the warehouse for a few extra hours. She tries harder now to picture herself without him. Can't. The vanilla creamer in the fridge is bad. Missy grabs her car keys and closes the door quietly behind her. The sun, too, silently slips out from behind the trees.



## Some Assistance, Please?

Lydia came in the back door wearing dad's hunting boots, the exhausted laces trailed across the floor behind her. Upstairs I wetted the brown comb under the bathroom faucet, then ran it through dad's hair, the way he liked: to the side and back. I smelled his shampoo. It mixed with the musky perfume coming down the hallway, together they tasted like chemical burn.

"He looks ready," Lydia said. She leaned against the doorframe, disinterested. "Place looks about the same. The way mom left it." She nodded to herself. Dad's head tilted slightly in the greasy sunlight. After his stroke the month before, his mouth had been a frozen slash across his face. Speech left him. Nobody seemed to notice that except me.

"I'd feel better if you would watch to get a sense of what I do," I said. "To see our mornings."

Lydia nodded and said, "come out to the shed with me. Leave him by the window for some sun."

Dad's old rooster coughed in the shed full of bleached bone. Boxes and boxes of boiled skulls were stacked against the walls, shoved underneath the workbench where I had carved my initials years ago. Too much clutter to find them now.

"Can't believe the old bird's still alive," Lydia said, kicking at the rooster. Her boot connected and the bird thudded in a corner.

Lydia had come back to take care of dad for a few days.

"You know he never took me with him once," said Lydia. "Not here or in South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota, Wyoming, you fucking name it." She touched antler tips protruding from the wall. Next to them were dozens of black and white photographs of dad posing with dead

animals. The biggest one was a moose he got somewhere in Canada. Lydia picked up a strand of fishing line, wrapped it around her hand, and cut it with a rusty cleaning knife. “Not once,” she said again.

I watched the rooster gather itself in the corner and suddenly I wanted to open the door and spring it free. But I didn't.

“I never went either,” I said. “Would you have liked hunting very much?”

Lydia stared at the rooster. “God, that thing is ugly.” She put the knife in her pocket.

“Where are you going again?” she asked, eyes still on the rooster.

“Nebraska.”

“Hmph,” she said.

Dad went down for his nap. Lydia and I drank beer in the kitchen and started dinner. We tried to pinpoint the moment we became unrecognizable to each other as women, as sisters, how we operated solely on a written plane of postage.

“You're lucky I even responded,” Lydia said.

I kept my back to her and stirred the Hamburger Helper. I felt cold.

“What's in Nebraska anyway?” Lydia asked.

“A conference,” I said.

At dinner, Lydia insisted on feeding dad the Hamburger Helper. “Maybe just watch,” I said. But without a word, Lydia took the spoon out of my hand and pulled up a chair next to him by the window. I watched dad watch her. I could read his confusion, or what I hoped was only confusion.

“Not too big a bite,” I said.

“Since when,” Lydia joked. She scooped up more helper with the spoon, lifted it to the purplish slash in dad’s face, and again most of it went down his chin and shirt. Small clumps of orange meat started to pile beneath his chair.

“Damnit,” Lydia muttered. She took the cleaning knife out of her pocket and buttered two pieces of bread.

“Lydia, please,” I said.

Lydia held up a glass of milk with a straw dangling to one side. We watched dad’s lips move for it.

“Wipe his face,” I whispered.

## American Nightmare

This morning L wears sawdust. The blade growls into the front door, spits chunks of cheap wood all over the entryway. L's hands are slick with grease and sweat. It's dark inside the house. There are holes in the wall. Dust drifts through threads of slanting light. Chainsaw moving.

There's a chicken barking in a room full of polished bone. Feathery floor. The grease and dust make a paste; it gathers at the corners of L's mouth, her fingers mold the paste into fangs.

L has a mannequin white like brand new teeth. Mannequin wears a clean dress, its eyes pushed closed. L approaches from behind, sinks her fangs into the mannequin's moon white Styrofoam skull. It says nothing. She leaves her fangs planted in the skull- removes the dress- dances it through Nebraska's summer slant light. The house has a staircase and someone waiting at the top. Maybe L's mother. Her mother has not returned yet, maybe not. Not mother. Instead it's L's father, back from fighting, back from the shit wet, back from the back from the Delta, wilting photograph of dad teasing a broken stiletto onto a Vietnamese woman. The chainsaw is reborn, runs over the house, ripping it in two. It wears sparkling white sneakers and plastic fangs, punctures the rooftop with stars. Hang down feather catchers, turkey dust dance. L and mannequin hold on. The house spills open, foamy insides swim onto the front lawn—blankets and mirrors, silverware, mom and dad with it all, hope chests-all slide towards a canyon full of light. L sharpens her fangs. The clean dress darkens and unravels- rooster walks the thread connecting balcony to floor, dusty veins, sews the house shut. The mannequin is at the top of the steps. Eyes pushed open. L flosses on the banister, the smell of burnt teeth and a coughing moon. And mother has caught the chainsaw. Its legs kicking out like baby boy. L can hear it whining, tired, not wanting to be held. Baby boy saws the crib in half, oil leaks down its nose. Father used

to fashion erotic dining room sets and sell them at retreats. Mother would throw parties when the electricity went out.

Mannequin tells L the truth about her line of logic. L rips chunked confetti out of Mannequin's wrist.

## Closed for Lunch

Missy drops the foam brush and stoops down close to examine the front tire, her knee stings against the wet pavement. A mist coming from the neighboring stall chills her bare arms. Tire looks fine. Tiny hands slap and press against the inside of the backseat window, streaks of French fry grease roll across the glass. The kids are seven and nine and still think the world of their mother. Missy picks up the brush and whites them out. Even over the sounds of motors and machinery, she can hear her children squeal with delight. The car in the next stall starts and Missy tries to figure out why she loves the peculiar sound, the wet echo of an ignition starting. Maybe because it sounds like something beginning—a trip or vacation. She watches the car pull out of the stall, dripping, into the sunlight. It looks so clean and brand new. Missy rinses the soap off her car and gets in. The kids whine about a missing toy.

Missy starts the car and it doesn't sound the same as the car in the next stall. She looks at the clock and knows Dan won't be at the store, knows to take Cole Rd. home and not drive by Moose Tavern so the kids can pick out their dad's car in the parking lot. "Closed for Lunch" is what the sign will say on the store's front door.

## The Final Girl

### **North East, Pennsylvania. The Night Before Halloween. 1998.**

It's Friday night and I am home alone. I sprawl across my parents' large bed on my stomach and wear a T-shirt and white underpants. I have a bowl of popcorn. I eat a few pieces and talk with my pretend boyfriend on the phone, my feet up in the air, crossed at the ankles, the phone cord twisting around my nervous fingers. The bedroom window is open, and a cool breeze puts goosebumps on my bare legs. I hear leaves rustling outside.

I pretend laugh at something my boyfriend says. But then I hear a thud and I tell him to be quiet for a second. It sounded like it was from downstairs, maybe from the backyard. I think it's the dog and I call out: *Oscar? Here, boy.* Nothing. I stand and walk to the window and look down into the backyard. A dark shape slowly moves out of the shadows. I gasp and pull the drapes shut.

I peek out, hoping that what I saw wasn't real, a nightmare to be shaken out of. But it's still there, dressed in all black, breathing heavily. It wears a clear plastic mask with red lipstick and drawn eyebrows. It's looking up at me. I shriek and drop the phone. My fake boyfriend says my name over and over again. The shape holds something up for me to see. It sparkles in the light. I scream again as I recognize it's Oscar's collar. Then the shape moves toward the back door. It's holding a large plastic knife.

I turn off all the lights and hole up in a closet. I hear it coming up the stairs. It goes through my room and then my brothers. Checks the bathroom. I think I hear the jingle of Oscar's collar. The shape enters my parents' room. I hold my breath. Footsteps come closer. The closet door is yanked open and I am pulled out kicking and screaming. The shape lifts me up off the

ground and tosses me on the bed. It drops the knife and dog collar. Then it climbs up on the bed, puts a hand over my mouth, and slowly pushes a plastic knife into my stomach.

### **Fifteen Years Later. North East, Pennsylvania. October 28<sup>th</sup>.**

It was almost Halloween and our little town looked to me the way it always had since I was a kid. The maple trees that lined the streets were bare and burnt, the sidewalks were littered with crisp orange and red leaves. The sky was like smeared charcoal and temperatures hung in the fifties. Pumpkins were carved and set out on stoops, plastic tombstones sprouted from front yards, artificial cobwebs were playfully splayed over mailboxes and handrails. The occasional boogeyman was stuffed and set on a front porch.

Deb and I pushed our two-year-old, Evelyn, in her stroller. We were on our way to the video store across town. It was in my old neighborhood, a good twenty-minute walk from where I lived now. Deb wore her usual after-work outfit of black yoga gear, the kind of clothing that I'd been washing nonstop lately as an unemployed husband. When I wasn't padding my resume, I watched movies and played with Evelyn.

Film Fest was on Clinton right across from Ridg-U-Rak where my father worked for thirty years before his stroke. He had tried to get me and my brother jobs there, but David failed the drug test and I had decided to go back to school for a teaching certificate. Now I think I was just wary of ending up where my dad did, absent and uncaring. As if I'd be following a doomed script he had been writing all his life. But I married up and moved around the corner from the library and Gibson Park to a completely respectable neighborhood.

David moved away and never found a way to help himself. Last I knew, he was living in an efficiency a few towns over. I didn't want him near me, near my wife, my child. I didn't think



I was screwed up because of him, but he hadn't helped me any. At least not in the way normal brothers do. I never mentioned any of this to Deb, deciding it was best locked in. But I did begin to worry that pieces or parts from my past, the ones that couldn't be contained, would gradually slip out.

When we got to Film Fest, I held the door for Deb and Evelyn and the smell of the store, stale popcorn and warmed plastic, took me back the way it always did. Took me back to each Friday night for a summer when my older brother and I would take mom and dad's pizza money to this same video store. It was the summer we started playing Final Girl.

We lived in a rundown two-story house with a small backyard on the north side of town. Everything on our street from the cars to the people looked perpetually wet and broken. Mom and dad weren't happy being together or apart, so they spent as much time as they could playing darts and drinking with neighbors at the local VFW.

David was fifteen and I was twelve. Together we watched as many scary movies as we could get our hands on. David knew the guy who worked the counter, so we'd get all the **R** movies we could. Our love of horror movies first started because of the nudity. We couldn't keep count of all the breasts and flashes of dark pubic hair we saw that summer. We watched all the babysitter, sorority, and camp counselor slashers, nightmare men, traveling teenagers, and eventually we got into the ones we thought were really strange where the killers looked like real people. Real families, like ours. It was almost always the father who went mad and started killing. After watching one where the father hears voices that tell him to kill his family, I turned to David and asked him if he thought our dad could go crazy like that. He called me a dope and threw Skittles at me. But I thought David was probably lying to me. Years later, I would hear my father stomping around the basement, seemingly turning into one of those maniacs from the

movies who heard voices. I would hide underneath my bed, picturing him wild-eyed, plunging an axe into a door.

David and I watched those fathers in the movies try and destroy their own families. We didn't like those movies as much, though neither of us said why exactly. Maybe because we'd seen our own parents and plenty of other adults screw things up. Sometimes violently. Like when my best friend's mom got a black eye from her husband throwing an elbow in their cramped kitchen. He pleaded it was an accident, but even my friend didn't believe him.

Deb and Evelyn walked along the wall of the store where the New Releases are kept. I move in the middle. I start in the Action and make my way through the Comedy, though I know where I'm heading. Deb probably does too. I haven't picked anything up yet. Sci-Fi is the next section, definitely the smallest, then I'm in the several rows of Horror. I picked up a copy of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, flipped the box over, and read: *The film is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths, in particular Sally Hardesty. For them an idyllic summer afternoon drive became a nightmare when they were exposed to an insane and macabre family of chain saw killers. One by one they disappear to be brutally butchered, each murder more horrendous than the last with one victim being hung live on a meat hook, another trapped in his wheelchair as he his hacked to death and the surviving member of the group making a frantic bid for escape in the horrific climax. This video cassette is based on a true incident and is definitely not for the squeamish or the nervous.*

The weird thing was that Sally was the only one to survive; she was the final girl. That was my role. David was always the villain, the pursuer. And he almost always found me: behind a shower curtain, under Mom and Dad's bed, even in the basement behind the boxes of

Christmas decorations. But usually David caught me in a closet, cut the phone cord with scissors, and tackled me to the floor. I would scream and flail helplessly, trying to look and sound exactly how Sally and the other girls did in movies. I'd scramble for the nearest weapon: fire poker, knitting needle, or even a lamp. I never jumped out of window onto the front lawn. Though David and I discussed it.

What we never discussed was the way he would injure me. Sometimes David would put his hand over my mouth and give me kidney punches that would leave purplish bruises. I never showed my parents or anyone at school. I didn't know what to say. Sometimes he'd accidentally knock me in the mouth, like my best friend's dad, and I'd get a bloody lip. And once in a while David pushed himself against me so that I could feel that he was actually hard. I remember being excited too, though not fully understanding why.

I was letting the *Texas Chainsaw* summary sink in for a minute when a voice came from behind me. "Don't you own that one?" Deb asked. "Sure do," I said. I threw an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "You two ready? *Dragnet* it is."

Deb had no siblings, so I doubted she would understand something like *The Final Girl*. During our first few months of courting, I asked her what kinds of movies she liked, what kinds of games she played with her friends. As if the questions go hand in hand. She laughed and told me about the time her and her friends bought a Ouija board and Mary Baker's dead grandmother called her a KUNT. "We were ruthless," she'd said.

The three of us started for home. We walked by a rundown park I used to play on as a child. A dull streetlamp half-lit a skeletal Birch tree nearby, a strange shadow thrown across the ground. The only other people there were a man and a girl smoking cigarettes and talking on the

small basketball court next to the swing set. The man was tall and wiry with a tattoo running up his neck. He wore a warm up suit and had a bright orange basketball tucked under his arm. The hoop had been taken down years ago. The girl smoking with the man was heavysset with pink glasses. She appeared several years younger than the man. She wore jeans that looked too tight for her body, and the fat tongues of her shoes flopped out and I could see her turquoise socks. She had a book bag strapped to her back.

As we walked by, the man became very aware of Deb and I. He started to casually drift away from the cement pad like smoke. “Which way you walking?” I heard the man ask the girl. I stopped and turned to look at them as they headed down the sidewalk. They didn’t look back. A light rain began to fall. Deb stopped too, and we both watched the man and girl pass the bar on the corner and disappear in the dark.

“That was strange,” Deb said.

“Did you hear any of that?” I asked.

“Not really, no. It felt creepy. How old was that girl?”

“I think we should follow them.” I was surprised the words came out of my mouth. Even more surprised when Deb nodded in agreement.

We pushed Evelyn in the stroller. I felt a rush of guilt that we were steering our innocent child towards some dark and strange uncertainty. The parents were once again screwing up things for the family. But the feeling faded with the possibility that Deb and I would be heroes. We walked out of the park, past the dark church. Pink and blue flags decorated the lawn out front. “And what the hell are those supposed to mean, anyway?” I asked.

“Babies,” Deb said. “Dead ones...or maybe live ones, I don’t know.”

“Christ,” I said.

We pushed the stroller up Clinton and couldn't see them. We walked a few blocks east past the Circle K on Lake Street. We glanced down alleys and between apartment buildings, peered into backyards. We stopped suddenly and listened, waiting for screams or cries. We took long pauses at intersections. Evelyn fell asleep to the rhythm of our frantic walking. Suddenly there was heavy breathing coming up from behind. A female jogger thumped past us down the sidewalk. Deb and I exchanged looks of relief. A dog started to bark.

We canvassed our neighborhood looking for the thin man with the bright orange basketball under his arm. We didn't speak. We went by a community garden behind a preschool, saw the remnants of freshly harvested vegetables, the soil that had been worked by eager little hands. It was an image that should have warmed me. Instead, the fading day seemed to get colder and darker with each block we covered. We stopped at Kwik Fill so Deb could run in ask the clerk if he'd seen anything. I stayed outside and watched Evelyn sleep, the world around her inconsequential. I could hear crows up in the trees, and a train's horn sounded off. Then an ambulance siren.

We finally turned down our apartment's block, defeated. Deb quietly suggested that we check the nearby community center, sometimes children went there when they were in trouble. I had never heard about the Y as a kind of safe base.

"I wonder what's happening to that girl," Deb said. "Right now, at this very minute, you know? Right, right now. Now. I picture the worst. Is that sick of me?"

"Not at all," I said. The dark thin man is somehow wearing David's lipstick mask.

"This feels weird," Deb said. "Like we're in a movie or something."

"Not a very good one," I said. The thin man works diligently with thick cords of rope. The girl flails and slaps at his hands, calls out.

“You’re the expert. What happens next?”

He has her in a basement, it’s dusty and there are pools of condensation on the floor. The windows are boarded up and a bit of light sneaks in from a neighboring house. Deb and I walked up the steps to the center. I waited outside and picked up Evelyn. I squeezed her tight and looked down the dark street.

On our defeated walk home, we saw a neighborhood watch sign that instructed us to call the police if we saw anything suspicious. I then realized that I had seen them in our old neighborhood too, but it never occurred to me to actually call. And while Deb fed Evelyn a bottle in the living room, I paced back and forth on the front porch and eventually called the police.

“What did the officer say?”

“Just kept asking me if I saw a struggle, or any kind of resistance on the girl’s part. Asked me what I wanted done.”

“What you wanted done?” Deb sounded as perplexed as the officer had on the phone. It made me feel like I wasn’t doing the right things.

“I told him I didn’t know. Maybe that was the wrong answer? What else could I have done?” That seemed like the question people always asked themselves after the fact. After abuse is reported, or bodies are found. I felt sick for not knowing the right thing to do, the right plan of action. The officer had me feel foolish.

“It doesn’t hurt to call. We did what we could,” Deb said. But it didn’t seem like enough. Evelyn was asleep in her arms. I walked to the couch and stood over them. I waited to see Evelyn’s chest rise and fall five times before going to bed.

A few days later we heard on the news that a girl had been assaulted in the northern part of town. The victim's attacker was somehow connected to the family and we figured it wasn't our girl. Deb said that it usually was someone in the family that television dramas got that part right. I thought of David and how he had hurt me during our struggles on the floor.

On Halloween night a thin layer of frost seemed to cast the moon in a blue shadow. We had our pumpkins carved and set out on the front porch for the trick-or-treaters that would be coming around. I played a scary sounds tape that had zombies moaning and floor boards creaking. *Night of the Living Dead* was on mute in the living room. We made sure Evelyn couldn't see the television from her playpen. But Deb did humor me and let Evelyn wear a skeleton onesie. We passed out candy dressed up as the farmer couple from *American Gothic*, though nobody seemed to appreciate it. We were too distracted to care. We knew that kids from the north side would come to our neighborhood for a better haul. We couldn't help but wait to see if the girl from the park showed up on our doorstep. We needed an ending.

We went through four bowels of candy, but the girl, as far as we could tell, hadn't come. We blew out the candles in the pumpkins and put Evelyn to bed. I talked Deb into having a beer and watching the end of the movie with me.

"That girl was probably too old for Halloween," Deb said. "Too old to carve pumpkins or dress up. She's maybe got kids of her own. Talks to strangers. And her parents?"

"Parents are just as dangerous," I said.

On the television, zombies were busting into the house through the windows, the front door, from all directions. The tall black man, the young couple, and the blonde in hysterics were fighting like mad to keep them out.

“See, that’s smart,” Deb said. I could tell she was getting into the action. “That family in the basement, that’s smart. The father is an asshole, to be sure, but have to keep their sick little girl safe. If the others don’t want to join in, forget them. Why is it always the little girls that get hurt. Jesus!”

I patted her leg. I knew the father was wrong. He was doing what he thought was best, but he would be fatally wrong. Like my brother, he would have been better off leaving the family alone. Fathers and sons could be a family’s downfall. I figured that out for myself. I knew I certainly had some wrongdoing ahead of me. But mine would be different. Not like my own father who cut out, or like the father in the movie, who shut his family in.

“I’m going to turn this down, it’s getting too loud,” Deb said.

“It’s almost over.”

Deb wanted the girl in the movie to be all right. So did I. We wanted the girl in the park to be all right too, at home somewhere in our neighborhood, secure with her parents. We wanted the girl in the basement to fight through the shuffling and moaning zombies, to survive and be stronger for it. Maybe if she found a great hiding spot. I thought about the one time I made it away from David over to the neighbors’ house. I made too much noise and they clicked on their porch light, truly afraid something had happened. Now I wonder if maybe they’d been expecting me for a while. Maybe they’d seen my family, my father, changing before we did. But I knew it was too late. Too late for the family in the movie. Too late for the girls. But not for me and my family. Not for Evelyn.

Deb thought with the right strategy, the girl could make it out alive and grow up normally, a symbol of hope and rebirth. Rejuvenation and purity. Deb wanted a happy ending for her. But Deb had never seen the movie.



## Depending on the Weather

When Linda received Chain's obituary in the mail with the postage still due, she tried to ignore the sense of relief she felt. But the relief was soon replaced by a sense of duty she'd long forgotten. The notice had no mention of a funeral and Linda started to mull over the drive down to West Virginia. A raw piece of her felt responsible for seeing Chain buried proper.

And while forgiveness had a real nice ring to it, Linda didn't think it fit her character. Growing up with her family in a small town like North East she seemed to deal exclusively in the business of bad blood. It went as far back as her granddad Zeik taking a neighbor to court over land rights and a shared water well, and his needing to let a drilling company on his property. This was before the term 'fracking' ever leaked from a business man's mouth.

The neighbor settled out of court, but soon re-filed a claim after one of his sons took seriously ill. Linda's family lost most of their stake in the vineyards and decided to move south to Charleston, West Virginia. There they took up coal mining and discovered a much more sympathetic judicial system. By the next snowfall, they had a small team of contractors who broke their backs for Zeik.

Soon after, Zeik was looking to sell the business and live comfortably near the esteemed Greenbrier Resort. While this didn't sit well with Linda's father, there wasn't much that he could do. With a wife expecting their first born, he swallowed his pride and took out a loan and purchased an acreage of his own off of Lake Erie. He hired supposed illegals to cut and tie the vineyards during the spring and summer, and a few local hands to help with harvest. Chain was among his many hires. Chain first met Linda during the annual wine festival down at the gravel pit park.

Linda stopped at the end of her driveway before heading out to plow the locals. She sat in her truck and read Chain's notice again, three black sentences on a torn page from Morgantown's *The Dominion Post*. She had an idea of who sent her the notice, but she couldn't be completely sure unless she drove down there herself. Couldn't be exactly sure what the notice meant, or how it involved her. Fat snow clouds blocked out any chance of sun. Crows squawked from the roadside evergreens. Instead of following her usual route, Linda turned up Oxbow Road and headed for the reservoir.

Chain's leaving North East the year before was supposed to be the end of something born mean from the very beginning. And she'd taken up with Russell from work and that seemed to work itself into a satisfying situation by Linda's standards. He was older than her by a few years, but she didn't mind. Russell and Chain did know each other from work, but they never cared to strike a friendship. Linda had yet to ask why. For all she knew, Russell would be relieved by the news of Chain's passing.

The relief Linda felt upon reading Chain's notice left her as quickly as it had come on. And an angry truth began gnawing on her insides: her break from Chain wouldn't be so clean, wouldn't wash out the way she thought it would. In a way, she always knew this, maybe she felt it coming all along and pushed through with a false sense of the inevitably. A way of forgetting. Chain left something raw and stinking behind and Linda was being tagged for it.

North East was a grape town. The Welch's factory employed hundreds of the town's residents. The farmers lived and died by the winters and harvest season. Linda drove up Oxbow, through the heart of a main acreage. All of the vines were harvested and bare and Linda thought they looked sickly. It suddenly struck her how beautiful that country was in the summer and fall months before harvest. She pulled into the gravel parking lot of the reservoir, surprised to find it

vacant. She parked behind some wild grass that carelessly twisted itself in the wind. The hollow reeds of broken cattails marked the frozen shoreline. Linda looked over the quieted body of the reservoir. She stood perfectly still and listened. Nothing moved. A stillness of that place overtook her. She closed her eyes and listened to the wind and the painfully small sounds of birds in the trees, killdeer on the ground. There were no bodies on the miles of walking path that circled the water.

The reservoir in winter was a landscape for Linda's remembering. As if the trees in summer and autumn dressed themselves with bright color to hide the year's colder moments. Like place was capable of forgetting. Or hiding.

"Here I am," Linda said.

She put Chain's notice in her overalls and walked. Snow fell harder. She noticed the filled-in tracks of a fox. There were boot prints and the webbed oval casts of snowshoes and the long and thin impressions of cross country skiers. Clusters of deer and rabbit scat dotted the snow near the wooded tree line. The snow around the tree bases was yellow with dog markings. She stopped and stood in the middle of the path, her breath poured out her mouth like exhaust from a tailpipe. She didn't know how far she needed to walk, or if some sort of inner transitioning should take place during. Her body simply moved because it should. She concentrated on the snow falling onto the reservoir. She knew it was inevitable. Once she acknowledged the dark, eyeless fishing huts rising from the surface, Chain would come back to her in memory.

She held the moment in front of her and wondered if everything in the reservoir was dead. Life shouldn't be able to grow where it wasn't wanted. Chain first explained to her that

fish adapt to cold temperatures by slowing down their breath and metabolism. She thought he was just blowing smoke. She checked later, and he was right.

“If the waters are deep enough,” Chain had said, “the fish can just swim to the bottom and hibernate there. It’s like sleep.” When he had facts to work with he sounded smart. He grinned and tossed his hair to one side of his face. Linda liked the motion at first. And she could feel how he enjoyed explaining these kinds of things to her, and he did it like she was a child. And like a child, she admired him in a way. But she also felt an urge to take her thumbs and softly press his eyes back into their wet holes.

“I know what ‘hibernate’ means,” she told him.

When Chain invited Linda to go ice fishing with him, she liked the idea. Being out in the elements, playing an active role in the place she grew out of. Her dad didn’t seem to mind either. So Chain picked her up early and they drove out to the reservoir before sunrise.

She looked into the bed of the truck and only saw a pair of bolt cutters and a filthy blue tarp. “Guess I thought we’d have more gear,” she said disappointed.

“Don’t need any. We’re already set up,” he said. “You’ll see.” He patted her leg with one hand and ran the other around the wheel. The radio growled low. Linda looked out the window and pretended not to notice when he began squeezing her thigh and sucking air between his teeth.

Then she was following him out into the frozen dark of morning. The wind tore through her layers of clothing and numbed her limbs. Chain kept a firm grip on her arm. Linda closed her eyes and put her head down and pushed through.

“This one isn’t exactly mine,” he said. “But in these conditions, it’ll do.” He cut the lock with the bolt cutters and went in. He took down a kerosene lamp from the wall and lit it quickly

with a match. Shadows played around the tiny shack. Linda saw that it was no bigger than a tollbooth. There were two camping chairs set on either side of a metal pit for a fire. Chain moved the pit and gave her an auger.

“There’s already a hole drilled, you just gotta re-break through,” he said. “Get your feet apart and square up for balance. Hold tight.”

“And when I hit water?” she asked.

“Stand back. It comes out cold and angry.”

“Right,” she said. She started the auger turning, its fins bit into the snow. She put her weight against it and leaned in. Chain turned to start a fire in the pit. The water came up and spilled out over the floor of the shack. Chain tried sweeping it out the doorway with a broom.

They sat in chairs and anchored their baited lines from the arm rests. They passed a pint of cheap whiskey back and forth. Their breath billowed out in a dense fog when they laughed. A small window covered with insulated plastic let in a sliver of the sunrise. She liked using a new tool and felt proud for drilling the hole in the ice. She realized she felt good about things in general. About Chain. About this hired hand that sits around the fire and drinks whiskey and fishes for fun. And maybe he wasn’t the rotten sort of guy everyone at school and in town thought he was. That he was far more complex than a small town bad seed.

The fire warmed the shack and Chain opened another pint of whiskey.

“Thank God,” she said. “I think I’m finally beginning to thaw.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Chain said. “Kids like us grew up here, know how to keep warm.”

She laughed and stood unsteadily to adjust her line in the water. She felt Chain draw up behind her. He quickly undid his belt and fumbled with the top button of her jeans. He pinned her up against a set of makeshift shelves fastened to the wall of the shack. She struggled and

tried pushing his arms away. His hands were so cold they burnt her hips as they tugged her underwear down around her thighs. He spit on his hand and dug himself in. Her hands pounded and scraped against the walls of the shack, and she thought she might just knock the whole thing down and the freezing air would rush in and tear her to pieces. Her knuckles split open and bled. Cups and pots fell off the shelves. Chain whined in her ear like an injured dog and he came inside her. His breath poured over her neck in a warm wash. Then he backed off slowly, as if scared to startle her. He zipped his fly and fell back into a camping chair.

“Son of a bitch,” she spat. She wiped between her legs with a bare hand. There was a fish waiting on the end of her line. “Son of a bitch,” she said.

Linda didn't believe in scars. Damage is done elsewhere, some place warm and deep within a person. And that's where the memory stayed, inside her. She remembered not wanting to hear the apology roll out his mouth when he drove her home in the afternoon. She said she didn't care nothing about an apology. That he did what he did. What else was there to say?

She listened to the soft creak her boots made in the snow. She moved her toes and felt the cold rattle up into her neck and stiffen. Her head became heavy with the new chore of remembering Chain. She didn't know how to mourn him. She felt tired feeding herself to his story.

She never spoke a word to the incident in the ice hut or otherwise. She tried dating other boys, but none of them brought out the least bit of emotion in her. No fight in any of them. She hated Chain for it. How they all seemed too soft for her, too shy, too everything. But never enough.

Soon after, her and Chain started running together. She thought that North East being the size it was seemed inevitably to pin the two of them together. They both had the stubborn and foolish hearts of townies, the callused class of town. They strung their summers together like bloody knuckles. Chain ripened on her like a bruise and she always knew they were just playing stupid, eating the time they had left together in town.

After high school, they went fifty-fifty and bought a shear for her truck. They figured it a great way to pick up extra cash during the harder winter months. She plowed privately and her reputation grew into a part time gig. When Chain left town, Linda secretly knew he meant to return. A man like him would never willingly let that shear go for nothing like he did. Everyone knew that. And everyone up at the H knew it too. During the rest of the year Chain and Linda worked up at the Harvest Inn and Restaurant. The locals all called it the H. Everyone was local.

The town of North East looked at Linda and Chain with a mixture of guilt and hunger. Nobody helped steer these two kids anywhere other than where they were already going. Chain's parents lost interest real early and split up, leaving him to his grandmother. Chain moved out when he turned eighteen. Linda's mother worked nights at Welch's and ran a daycare service out of her house during the day. Chain had been solid for Linda when her father died unexpectedly from a heart attack. Doctors were stumped. And Chain got himself thrown out of the hospital and jailed that night when he showed up drunk and swung at an orderly.

Linda picked him up in the morning and put a snowball to his bruised eye. He had taken thumps in her father's name and that endeared him to her in a confused and violent way. She saw the bad, the bad seed of him, no question. And Chain's wounds bore down to the hardened edges of his angry bones. She knew there wasn't the kind of light inside of him that could change

things around for her. That could somehow redeem an existence in a small town. He filled her seasons and nights with what he knew best.

Linda and Chain were left to run wild.

They went dizzy behind each other's backs too. But they each still held a key to the same front door of Chain's apartment for years. There were rooms up at the H. One could often find Linda or Chain or both on the guest's sign-in sheet. They threw parties that knocked down doors from the inside out. Cops were called regularly to break things up and send a few folks to the tank just for appearances. The wholesome part of town, folks from Foxwood and those areas, had nothing to do with the H. But that didn't mean they couldn't be gotten. Word had it that Linda snatched up the chief of police's son and spent two days with him up at the Inn. Someone even said they saw Chain join in.

Linda and Chain's relationship made about as much traditional sense as the Cuyahoga River catching fire on its way to Lake Erie back in the sixties. Supposedly there was oil and coal refuse on the surface and that's what burned. And it was the promise of mining dollars that drove Chain and the restless men of his generation south to the border towns of Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Chain had told Linda he was leaving on the hottest day of the summer. They swam naked with friends beneath the train tracks that ran clear to Grand Central and beyond. They drank beer the temperature of the creek and somersaulted off the graffiti-covered cement pillars, exploding into murky water. Chain climbed partway up the trestle's crisscrossed scaffolding and yelled down to Linda that he loved her. A wild cheer went up from the others, bottles were raised and thrown to pieces on the layered slabs of gray shale.



Linda watched the water drip from his hair and he flipped it to one side. He held onto a steel beam and yelled down he needed to raise anchor and ship out for a few months. She wondered why he proclaimed this in front of everyone else, as if he needed witnesses. He wanted to find better opportunities in the mining business; North East was drying up for him. Then he would come back for her. All summer he had reminded her that the mining towns of West Virginia held promise, but were no picnic for a woman.

“Even for a woman like you,” he said.

“You are just the worst,” Linda called back. “And you know it!”

Then he was in the air and falling. She moved to one side of the swimming hole with the others and watched him hit the water.

He came up uninjured and smiling. “I’ll write,” he said to her.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “Nobody does. But I don’t really care, neither.”

“You’ll have Russell,” Chain said. He spit water at her face. “That old bastard’s been waiting on me to clear out for some time now, hasn’t he? Tell me the truth.” He swam to her and locked his legs around her midsection, tilting his head back into the water.

“We work together and share tips. What do you want me to say?”

He popped himself back up and stood close in front of her. “The goddamn sour truth if it ever comes to you.”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I? You fool.”

Chain never did write. And for all Linda knew he traveled all over the country. Or maybe just to Canada and back. She never went to see him because she didn’t know where he’d gone for certain. She went as far as Pittsburgh once with some friends and they put a toe in the Ohio

River on the West Virginia side of things. And she figured that was the closest they'd been to each other. But none of that mattered, because he was dead and waiting for her in West Virginia.

The snow had picked up and Linda planted herself against the wind. She knew she couldn't leave for Morgantown right away. She had driveways and lots to plow and shifts to cover. She also knew full well she couldn't take off on Russell. He'd be at the H in the afternoon. She'd talk things over with him. She thought opening the situation to a discussion could slightly unburden herself.

Linda backtracked to the truck. She left the woods and the shacks behind in the blowing snow. She pushed an artificial warmth into her thoughts: spring and fishing from the shoreline in her bare feet, sitting around a fire with Russell, sleeping against elm trees.

She stopped at home to grab a thermos of hot coffee and two old biscuits to hold her over until lunch. She stood in her kitchen staring out the window, down the road into white. She thought of her mother and whether or not to bother her with the piece of news, that maybe she too would be one to open up the idea of a funeral. She realized she was beginning to look for folks who would in fact attend a funeral were she to put one on. She decided to wait and call her in the morning before a possible trip was made. No sense in stirring her up for nothing, she thought.

Linda's truck rolled up and down Oxbow and filled the drain ditches with snow. They always flooded in the spring. She plowed a neighbor out and he saluted her from his living room window. She took Chain's notice out of her pocket and set it flat on the passenger seat beside her.

"You're coming along," she said. "We got miles yet."

The sound of the shear scraping up the dirt and rock from Oxbow Road pleased her more than usual. She glanced down at the notice and held an odd smile in the rearview mirror. Then she threw the truck into reverse, lowered the shear, and charged forward. She drove down to the lake, down near the borough of high-income neighborhoods. She plowed the manicured driveways of Foxwood Estates for free. Just to do it. Her shear bit into the clean blacktops that ran from the streets to the two car garages. She graduated in '99 with some of the kids from Foxwood. She couldn't help but notice their clothing every morning in homeroom. Could smell their laundry detergent like wet flower beds. They didn't draw on their pants in ink like she and Chain did. Or screw on the catwalk above the assembly stage during lunch.

Before turning out of the Estates, she got out of her truck and rolled down her overalls and squatted. She let go a mean streak of urine next to her truck that opened into a dark pool smoking on the road. She swung back onto the road and drove up to see Russell at the H.

Russell was behind the bar by himself drinking coffee and watching television. Two women working on an afternoon drunk played darts in the corner. A few local men huddled in a booth nearby to watch them. A man with a dolly was unloading crates off a delivery truck and wheeling them right through the place. Nobody paid him any attention.

Russell poured a beer and put a toothpick in his mouth. "Still coming down out there?"

"All day is what I hear," Linda said.

"Hey," Russell said. "You ever see those two before?" He nodded to the women in the corner. One of them threw a dart that missed the board and stuck into the wall. The women laughed.

"Nope," she said. She took a pull on her beer.

“Me either,” Russell said. “Say, you wouldn’t wanna go out back with me, would you?”

The H had twenty rooms behind the restaurant. And Linda worked part-time cleaning them. The large letter H on top of the inn glowed and burned gold in the night. And on a clear day she and Russell could stand on the roof next to it and see the entire town of North East stretch up to the sparkling blue body of Lake Erie.

“It’s gotta be quick,” she said and emptied her glass.

Russell turned to three men sitting in a booth watching the women play darts. “Watch the bar, Eddie.”

Linda watched as Russell gathered a few bottles behind the bar. She appreciated him in a way she never could Chain. Russell was almost twice her age and she was glad for the distraction. And maybe that’s all he was, but she didn’t think so. She thought of Russell as real decent people. A guy that had a lot of bad happen to him like it did her and yet he could still smile about things, and not just when they went to bed. She knew him to be pretty honest for a man. His wife had died when their son was a teenager. The boy gave Russell hell. Russell wasn’t any good with books and neither was Justin. He high-tailed it into the service. Russell was proud of him and put his infantry picture up behind the bar. She remembered Chain thinking it got Russell good tips.

“You hear yet?” she asked. She lied on her back, partially covered with a sheet. The local news played on the television mounted to the dresser.

“Woman, when have I ever been one up on you?” Russell smiled and lifted himself to the cooler on the table and dug out two bottles of beer. His freckled skin sagged. “What about?”

“Chain’s gone,” she said. “Died in West Virginia.” She turned from the television and watched his face. Russell stood by the bed and pulled on the beer.

“How’d you find out?” Russell asked. Linda found the notice in her overalls on the floor. She handed it to Russell who read aloud: “‘Chain S. Mamet, 40, of Erie, P.A., died Feb. 17, 2004. There will be no visitation. Information on a memorial service is upcoming.’ Morgantown, West Virginia. He must’ve really done it to somebody.”

“Must have,” she said.

“Someone sent this to you, huh?”

“They did,” she said.

Russell nodded and got back into bed. “Not much detail in there. When a young man dies, most people want to know why.” Russell placed a hand on her cheek and smoothed back her brown hair. She wore no makeup and her pale skin accentuated the dark freckles beneath her eyes. Russell traced them with a finger. She knew he meant to be sweet. That small touches of the kind are what lovers do. She felt at ease.

“He’s not from there, Russell. What town wants to claim him?”

“Truer words,” said Russell. “So a woman sent you his obituary?”

“Don’t you think?” she asked.

“I imagine,” Russell said. “Most men wouldn’t put in this kind of effort. Sure, they’d drive the four or five hours, whatever it is, and knock on your door or worse. But mail? Not likely.”

“Right,” she said. “Don’t make much of a difference either way, I suppose. I gotta go down there.” She pulled on her beer and watched dust particles float in beams of white light sneaking through the blinds.

“Now that’s something,” Russell said. On the news was a man with prosthetic legs jumping hurdles. “Looks like Debbie’s boy.”

“Looks like him,” she said. She got up and put her jeans on. “It’s that time.”

“That boy can run faster than I ever could, goddamn. Look at him.”

“How’s Justin?” she asked. The buttons on her overalls snapped together and she pulled her hat down tight. “He doing OK over there? Not busted up or nothing, is he?”

“Not like this poor kid. Justin and I haven’t talked in a bit,” Russell said. He put a hand through his hair and fitted his ball cap. “How about one for the road,” he said. He poured bourbon into two paper cups. Then he held the notice up to the light as if he missed something the first time he read it. “You know what, Linda? Chain was born a fool and it sounds like he probably died a fool.” He put the notice down and picked up the paper cups. Held one out to her. “And what he did in the middle surely won’t stand to correct the rest.”

“That’ll do,” she said. “That’ll do for now.” They emptied their cups and exhaled. They finished dressing in silence. A draft ran through the room and she thought of the bare trees surrounding the reservoir. Her flannel coat warmed her skin, reminded her of leaves in the summer. She watched Russell button up his shirt and couldn’t help but think about where Chain was at that exact moment. What he looked like. How he wore his hair now that he was dead. She hadn’t waited long after Chain left to start up with Russell. She realized that now. That Chain knew exactly what she would do once he left. She loved him for that in an odd way.

“Thinking I’ll come by after work,” Russell finally said. “I’ll bring the rest of this over and we can hash out the times ahead.” He held the bottle up, but he wasn’t smiling.

“Listen, hon. I’m thinking of going down there. Just to see him. You understand? I figured you’d understand. Maybe you’d even want to come with me. I wouldn’t mind.”

Russell poured more bourbon into the cups. “My son just doesn’t think like me. He doesn’t approach the world like my father did. Guess he’s more like his mother. And I’m fine with that. Probably better for it. I tried telling him this when he called last month. He didn’t get it. Do you see? And things are just getting more fucked up over there. What men are they?”

“He’s your blood, Russell. Nobody’ll get you like he does.” Russell turned to the television. The soldier was being interviewed by a tall woman next to the running track.

“To that son of a bitch right there,” Russell said.

“To those on the move,” she said. Russell crumpled his cup into a wad and threw on the floor.

“I’ll go with you,” Russell said. “I’m not sure what you’re expecting of me. If I got a role to play. But I can be there. When we going?”

“Depends,” she said. “I’d like to wait and see what this weather does.”

Linda walked out to her truck. The cold air closed in and knocked the breath clean out of her. Two to three inches must’ve fallen since she looked outside last. She backed out of the H and caught her face in the rearview mirror. Her skin was raw, fish-colored in the dark afternoon light. She felt sick and ate one of the biscuits. Then she rolled down the window and threw it up with the beer and liquor. She plowed her way back towards home. She’d shower and ready her body for whatever would come next. Maybe she’d read a few chapters in a bad novel she checked out from the library, something she made sure to do monthly. She’d mark the page with Chain’s notice and leave the book in the dark living room by a dying fire. Finally, she’d drive back to the H, back to where memory isn’t something that needs ridding of, buried. She could sit or play darts, didn’t really matter. Russell would be there. As he always would be. He’d buy her

a drink. Then she'd buy him one. And maybe if they woke in time, they'd make some coffee and pack the truck. And they'd get on the road for West Virginia before the sky opened up and took them both in like a wound swallows up light.



## Christmas 2017

Missy sits in the laundromat, hands stinking of old quarters and powder detergent. Her wintergreen nail polish bitten down on each finger, a rancid taste on the tongue. Straight ahead of her, Donald Trump is on the muted TV still promising his dream for America, his hands flapping around the podium. He said he had a plan. A plan for Missy, a plan for Dan, her husband of thirty-five years. A plan for their two kids, Travis and Samantha, who haven't called from college in months. Missy wonders where the plan is for that. She stuffs the dryer full of her and Dan's clothes. It starts spinning. Her candy cane sweater swirls in the dark. Missy swears she feels her phone vibrate. She rests her hands on her knees. They ache a bit. Something hard, maybe a zipper, starts to rattle inside her dryer and it won't stop.

## B Side

They tell me I spoke in utero from my mother's swelling navel. When I was a toddler the three of us performed on street corners, people spilled their pockets into my father's empty trombone case. Then my brother came along, a strong baritone who tossed his voice through windows like rocks. We performed for the arriving passengers at the Amtrak station. People stepped down from the trains, heads cocked, unsure what to make of the four of us surrounding them with song. Then my sister was born, silent and afflicted with a stillborn throat. But we tuned our communal larynx nightly in front of the house mirror while she accompanied us on the black baby grand piano. My brother once punched a kid in the mouth for calling her a Mute. He put his hand up the back of the kid's shirt and made him apologize. My sister could play any instrument given to her. She occasionally slept with dad's trombone for comfort. We serenade all seasons. When folks hear us coming each December, they blacken their Christmas lights, and the street becomes our composition. See the five of us moving door to door on the shadowy sidewalk: the black ice swallowing hazy green lamp light. My father sings like Ravenscroft and deposits his voice into a passing minivan's radio. The screams of the family inside carry down the street. We throw voice into recycling bins, garbage cans, and dumpsters: a composted choir of tongues. Our song pours out of the orphans, drunks, and plastic manger Jesus. The rats dance, dogs fever, cats strut. We fill vessels and look for those that have willing body. We are the town's silver tongue and we speak for the stars. The constellations of our mouths make music with their lights. We throw ourselves out of the moon in a voice that sounds like thousands of staccato feathers. We reach the end of town. And we haven't anyone to sing for, so for the first time in our walk we go silent. The green eye next to the railway watches as we pass onto the tracks. We walk the trestle bridge, nothing but black sheet music below us, all the way down to

the river sounds. We throw. Our voices turn up from the chopped current and twist over the rocks in dark rhythm. A ravine filled with light. The train rail softly hums along with us, a metallic base. Snow shakes from the sky. My sister, with her black mouth full of air, takes out dad's frostbit trombone and slides us along the tracks. We've got harmonies that embrace the night birds. We shake miles of sleeping copper pennies off the rails. We'll walk along and collect them, loading our pockets, and board the train out of town on the B side.

## Snow Train

My sisters and I wear black to our father's winter wake. We take turns kissing the quiet sides of his face, leave behind dark cross-stitchings of red lipstick. The youngest among us lifts one of his eyelids to see the smoldering wick of iris. She says he doesn't smell like formaldehyde, or anything that maybe the plastic flower pinned to his chest is the unscented bouquet of an afterlife. We walk into the woods behind the house. We move single file down a path like a dark train, automatic and sleeping. Our feet make shallow shoebox graves in the snow. Middle sister brings along some of mom's tulip bulbs and tucks them into the white like baby rabbits buried in cotton, little x's for eyes. Mom hasn't spoken since father died. She has no story to tell, no moral or fable about Mr. McGregor's garden. Instead we come to a ravine, familiar and full of graying ash from the tire fire set in the fall. The smell of melting rubber enters us and maybe preserves our cooling organs. Everyone is full of toxins and everything spoils. We find our treehouse in the woods and look out its windows, peer out the skull of our childhood. We see the lights through the trees, see the house that holds our father. And in December's closing, we understand our past is a history taken from a cold tongue.

## Hungry

I'm not totally alone. There are thousands just like me. I see them every day dropping their kids off at school, cleaning their prefab houses, shopping at Walmart until it's time to pick the kids up again in the fading afternoon. The sun abandons us in the winter. But we're getting used to it. At least, I am. Winters in Williston are like a bear with a bullet in its paw. We're angry and surviving. We moved here when Tom got hired to drive truck for Deer Valley. There are thousands just like him. Like me.

I have three friends: Dana, Mickey, and Slider. All wives turned into camp tramps. Meaning they sleep around the man camps while their husbands are tucking dollar bills into thongs down at Whispers or visiting the brothels over in Montana. The ironic thing is that the husbands introduce their wives to the men who end up screwing them. Tell me if that makes any sense. In the stifling summer months, we have cookouts and cold beer on ice, the kids run around the yard with squirt guns. I have two boys, seven and ten. I'm leaving their names out of this for their sake. Anyway, it's in the summer when everyone really gets to see who's all around, who's come in. Things shut down for the most part in the winter. Only the truly hungry go out to the bars in the negative temperatures.

I know what you're thinking: but it ain't me, babe. I don't sleep around. At least not yet I don't. God knows I'm thinking about it more than I ever have though. It's nothing that Tom did in particular, you understand. And that's what I'll eventually tell him if I do decide to go through with it. It worries me that I already have someone picked out.

On Sundays we clean ourselves up and go to church if the roads are clear. Tom and the kids like to sit in the back to make a quick escape, and maybe that's where a straying wife and mother of two belongs: as far away from the big man as possible. Sometimes I think other

women can read the temptation in the way I walk or put on lipstick. The men, too, almost seem to look at me with a sense of pent up urgency in their stares. I'm not hurting in the looks department, could give Miss North Dakota a run for her money. I've been told so several times in the new Buffalo Wild Wings.

## What's Left Around Here

It's raining and I'm strangling the steering wheel. If I let go I'll be carried off in a wave, an ocean of rain and sky. Monsoon season and Sandra is sick and I'm driving my two grandsons to school. I don't believe she's sick, a mother knows. She went out last night. My windshield wipers thump back and forth.

Sandra's been seeing this guy, Luke or Levi. Something like that. I met him the other day at the house. He's nice enough, good looking in a pathetic way. Like maybe he's seen terrible things. What bothers me is the way he walks. He's got this sweeping gait, like he had rickets as a child and was never cured, like he would need an entire hallway or alley to himself. Maybe Sandra met him in an alley. What do I know? "Alley Lovers," sounds like a hit song on the radio for her generation. I stare at the taillights ahead and picture Sandra pressed up against a broken concrete wall.

The kids and I are on a brief stretch of old Highway 82, nothing to look at outside but rundown Arizona desert. The rain picks up and I turn off the radio. The boys squeal in the backseat. I mutter something grandmotherly like *settle down back there*. They don't listen. Drivers behind me honk their horns like it will change something. Change yourself, I think. I look in my rearview. There's a man standing outside of his truck. He must be a lunatic, out in the rain like that.

A woman beside me climbs out of her station wagon and shields her eyes. There must be a wreck. One of life's many collisions. My daughter hits brick walls, I think. I rub my hands together. I breathe in and exhale. The boys want to get out and see what's going on. I tell them not on their lives. I put my hands back on the wheel. I need to move forward soon.

The boys are fidgety and curious. They remind me of their father. Last I heard he's up in Montana striking it rich in the oilfields. A wildcatter. He left two years ago with very little word. That man. Still manages to look better when I hold him up against a truck full of Sandra's other men. And he was good for a while. Then fatherhood went cold on him. Life does that to people, I know. Now Sandra and the boys have this Leroy or Levon. I just want what's best. I think I mean it this time. Of course I do. I'm the only one left around here to give them any help. Only one who really cares. And just look at me now.

Leonard left for Vietnam in '67. Then he went out in a title wave of fire and water. Like a sacrament. He always said it'd be that way. Who was I to question him? Women didn't do that back then. Some still don't around here. When his patrol boat got hit I like to think the warmth he felt reminded him of our being in bed during a winter storm in Colorado. The safety of it. What it felt like when we first met. The way he strolled confidently up my lane and introduced himself to my father. We danced whenever we could.

I stare into the rearview. It ripples a little. A vibration travels from the floor to my chin, and my hands gently buzz against the wheel. I'm finally giving in. Losing it, I think. This is the rattle I've heard about. I've brought the wave down upon us all. But the boys are snorting about it too. Then they go quiet. And the three of us just sit and look at each other for a moment. I look at their eyes and see my daughter, my husband, the man in Montana leaning against machinery. The rain beats against the car. For a moment I feel safe again. I turn the radio up to a whisper. Talk radio. I switch it off.

I feel tears forming. My glasses need fixing; they leave red hollows on my nose. I look foolish. They need to be fixed, but I don't have the time. I watch my grandchildren in the backseat. My daughter. This new man. She's lost. Desperate for stability. And I have my busted



glasses and grandsons. Here they come. I cry. I try and cover my face so the boys won't notice. The fact that they have names makes me cry even more. I hope the sound of the rain will cover my ridiculous sobbing. I'm such a grandmother. Crying warms me up. But I must stop. For all of them. For myself. Stop.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and tell the boys to stay put. I try a funny face in the rearview to let them know everything is going to be O.K. The boys don't like it. My reflection is odd and changed even to myself. I put a plastic rain bonnet over my hair as if it makes all the difference.

The rattling is a rumble now. I half expect the rapture. Maybe the world is going to open up and swallow us whole. Fine. I need to find God or someone who has answers. Maybe the man on the radio. But I turned him off. Before I can get out of the car, the woman from the station wagon raps on my window and points to something way down the line of cars. She nods and says something. The rain drowns her out. I get out of the car. Tell the boys to stay put.

There must be fifteen or so. I can see them barreling full speed towards us. Slick dark backs glistening, thundering. I get in the backseat with the boys and push them to the floor. I cover them with their cheap plastic backpacks lumpy with the dollar store school supplies I bought them at the beginning of the year. I'm hunkered down with Spider-Man and Super Man staring back at me in their action poses. Where are they now? Men of Steel, Men of Dexterity. A lot of good they are.

I lock the doors and try to wipe the fog off the windows. Why? I take my glasses off. Rub my hands together and close my eyes and wait. Sandra. My nose bleeds gently. I whisper all my memories to the boys as we wait for the pack of javelinas to pound through the alleys of our idling vehicles.

## Waiting in Williston

Gale woke in the early morning and carried baby Luella downstairs, careful to avoid the noisy floor boards so Pam would sleep off the night shift. He knew she'd wake in a few hours, angry and swollen, unable to present her cocktailed milk to Luella. Gale knew Pam still drank too much on the job, and the smell of stale alcohol got so bad he'd been taking the baby to sleep with him in the spare room at night.

All the downstairs windows were open and he smelled the desert's burnt sand cooling. Rain was so rare that summer, Gale felt it took on a mystical feel. A sign, maybe, that it was the right day to leave with Luella. He and Pam had always talked about leaving together. But that wasn't the plan anymore, and Gale couldn't figure how Pam didn't realize it.

Luella's naked belly swam against his chest. Gale thawed a bag of good milk underneath the kitchen faucet and wrapped Luella up in a blanket. He sat with her in a chair pulled up to an open window looking out on the backyard. Rain pounded off the towering palm trees, their dripping fronds hung strangely like peeling skin. The little bit of light outside suddenly faded. The sun turned into a ball of wet clay behind a cloudbank that rolled over the mountains beyond Summerlin. Gale tilted Luella's head back in his lap and she took the bottle desperately, her eyes fixed on Gale.

She tugged on his beard, scratched his face, his slanted nose. Sweat stung an open cut underneath his right eye where Luella nicked him with a tiny edge of fingernail. The wink of pain he felt made him proud of his daughter's growing strength. At only five months, none of Luella's features struck him as his own, but he felt the bone-strong bond his mother asked him about over the phone.

"It's there alright," Gale had said.

“Does everything around you just disappear and not matter when you hold her?” his mother asked.

“Exactly,” he said. “She’s everything. I’d do anything for her, anything to keep her protected and safe.”

“That’s your job now, Gale. You’ll be a great father. Can’t wait to meet her. Let me know when you have your flights lined up.”

Gale’s mother was down in Florida and it’d be awhile before she got to meet her only grandchild. He knew it killed her. He’d send her a postcard letting on to his whereabouts. And then she could fly and meet them up north. Now, everything came down to Luella and himself. She finished the bottle and Gale got her to burp quickly. Then he put his bare feet up on the window sill and fell asleep to the surging rain and a calm sensation of knowing things to come.

Luella kept eyes on her father.

Gale and Pam met in a Las Vegas grocery store. They moved in together and Pam got pregnant shortly after. When Gale had called his mom about the baby, he didn’t mention Pam danced at The Library for a living. He lied and said she waitressed at one of the fancy casino restaurants in town, someplace his mom could see featured on the Travel Channel.

Pam had initially taught Gale to see her job as nothing more than what it actually was: a business providing an income, an occupation that was quite common in Las Vegas. She was a performer. The better she was at her job, the more she made. Her pleasure was a job well done, momentarily satisfied customers. Though she assured him she never went beyond club rules of touching or moving off the clock. Gale thought of his own experience with clubs, realizing he

had only been to one in the six years of living in Vegas. A friend in town for a conference bought him his one and only dance. He didn't see the attraction.

"I get guys like you all the time," Pam had said. "They just sit there and try their hardest not to look me in the eye. They're an easy twenty."

"I can't even listen to you talk," Gale replied, knowing full well where the conversation was going. It was one they needed to have.

"It's a job," she'd said. "Nothing more, nothing less. You drive for Culligan. I dance."

"Right," said Gale.

"You want to make something else of it? Do you? Then we got problems. Separate me from the customer, babe. Just count the money."

"And your daughter?"

"I'm doing this for her. For us."

"Please don't say that. It just doesn't hold up here."

"Once she pops out happy and healthy, I'll stop."

"You quit now," Gale had said. "It's her I'm worried about." It wasn't completely true. He couldn't stand the thought of his pregnant fiancé being a stripper. It embarrassed him mostly. And he could hardly stomach the image of his child being a part of Pam's nightly routine, an unwilling passenger moving on some stranger. "Christ," Gale said. "How is this an issue? What are you?"

But Pam continued to dance well into her first trimester. Not knowing what else to do, Gale started going to the club in disguise. He wanted to check up on her, make sure nothing too strange was going on. He didn't know what that meant exactly, but he just needed to be there for a few hours on the nights she worked. Gale usually sat at the dark end of the bar in cheap shades

and a ball cap. He ordered dollar domestics and bourbon chasers. He watched Pam's stage routine for three rotations, recognized the maneuvers she worked on at home: a slow twisting upside down pole slide, legs bent like c-clamps for leverage. The strobe lights splashed red and blues over her body to Tom Waits moaning about nasty weather.

Then she'd sit down with a group of older boys, easing herself onto one of their laps. If they liked her, they'd buy her drinks. They'd buy her drinks and make her laugh. Gale noticed her laugh didn't change there at the club, that he got the same exact sound and shaking shoulders at home when he did his Hannibal Lecter voice. It bothered him.

She'd drink with the boys, take shots and pout if they tried to cut her off. She'd whisper into the ear of the boy she sat on. Then she'd take his hand and he'd teeter off with her into the darkest corner of the room they could find. Sometimes Gale thought of his child inside her and felt guiltily aroused. He didn't want to think about what that meant.

During her second trimester, Pam stopped dancing at the club and stayed at home while Gale worked. Pam appeared to handle her drinking well during the pregnancy, limiting herself to an occasional glass of wine. And one month after Luella's delivery, her figure having recovered nearly to its previous shape, Pam started dancing again.

"Things won't hold this way," Gale had said. "Do you need to hear me say it? I will leave. I will leave you and take Luella with me."

"I would leave with you," she'd say. "You're going to drive outta here with my daughter without me? Like hell."

"My daughter too," Gale said. "And I mean it."

“Then let’s get out of here. North Dakota, Montana, wherever up there. That’s all everyone at work talks about anymore. Girls are making thousands a week with the oil workers. And you, you could get work easy. Our life will be different up there.”

“Different place, same people. We’re stuck with what we got, Pam. What we are.”

But Gale didn’t completely believe it. A very small part of him gnawed on the possibility of righting the ship, if only for Luella and himself. He knew Pam was the bad air in the room. He started studying an old road atlas, tracing the blue veins of interstates with his finger, Las Vegas to Wyoming or North Dakota. He saw himself and Luella driving the eleven hours to the Tetons before stopping to camp at a KOA for the night. She would never remember the trip, but it’d be a strong memory for Gale, something for him alone to hold.

Gale woke up to Luella squirming against his chest. The rain had stopped. A dense mist hung in the air, which cast the palm trees in a dreary light. He carried Luella upstairs and saw Pam curled up underneath the bed sheet. The smell in the room made him turn away. He kissed Luella on the cheek and took her back downstairs. Gale strapped Luella in car seat, poured himself some coffee in a travel mug. He taped a final month’s rent check to the refrigerator and loaded up the frozen bags of breastmilk into a cooler. Locked the door behind him.

I-15 morning traffic rolled north and Gale thought to call work before his regular shift started at noon. He’d tell them a fresh start was what he and his daughter needed. They’d understand and wish him all the best in the future. Gale gripped the wheel and then released. Three bags of frozen milk began thawing on the seat beside him. He pictured Pam in bed at home and felt satisfied with his decision. He looked back at Luella’s car seat and hoped she was smiling too. He wished he had a mirror to put in the back window so he could see her face. He

and Luella had long road ahead of them and he wanted to be able to share it as they moved along.

Gale made his way around McCarran and continued northwest past the Strip, past the Tropicana exit and the congested section of video marquees, all the showgirls, comedians, and musical acts now waving goodbye. For Gale, seeing the casino towers glittering in the sun, the clogged intersections, trash and tourists, all fading to chalky desert in his rearview made his flesh burn with excitement.

He drove by the countless billboards either promising good times or good representation. He saw one for The Library, and Gale envisioned Pam twirling and smiling on the main stage, smelled her clothes when she came home at night: sweat, baby powder, cologne. Gale focused on the road, shook his head. He had fallen for the false promises Las Vegas sold to so many tourists. And he no longer held out for a shot at her synthetic heart. A game of simulated love had been played and forfeited. He and Pam were broken. But he and Luella were going to make it. Gale believed it. He drove on past the city.

Further up 15 to the west, Mount Charleston, hulking and snow-capped, appeared on the western horizon. The Big Falls territory and Mummy Mountain had been Gale's favorite spots to hike. He'd miss their cliffs of chipped limestone, their seemingly infinite walls of rock decorated wildly by sun-washed desert varnish. He had often sat and listened to the quiet creeks that snaked their way through the spruce and evergreen trees like the dark thread of some truth he couldn't yet see or didn't want to acknowledge. He would miss those spaces the most.

Gale and Luella sped into the mountains towards Utah. He checked his phone to be sure it had no reception. He knew Pam would be up and calling sometime soon and he wanted to be in Salt Lake City before he told her what was happening. Before he tried to make her realize what

she had been slowly doing to herself. She might call the police on him, maybe they'd put out an Amber Alert. His mood suddenly dipped, his nerves grew fuzzy around the edges and blurred with an oncoming rush of anxiety. He drove faster up and out of the Nevada desert. He turned off his cellphone for safe measure. Luella bubbled and sighed behind him.

Gale stopped in Beaver to buy a mirror for the back window and top off on gas. The bags of milk were still partly frozen and Gale took Luella inside the gas station bathroom to warm one up.

"Not ideal, I know. Sorry, kidd-o." Gale tried to laugh. He put down a plastic changing mat and replaced Luella's wet diaper with a clean one. The tile floor was slick and glistening under the stuttering bulb. Things seemed alive beneath Luella's mat, a liquid slithering of tiny creatures. Luella smiled at him and kicked her legs excitedly. Gale smiled back. He wanted to cry. He quickly scooped her up and left the mat behind.

Back out into the open air he looked over Luella again. "Your ears," he said to her, "you have my ears. I know it. That's what it is."

Gale paid for the gas and bought water. On his way out, a rack of roadmaps made him almost trip and fall with Luella in his arms. He realized he'd forgotten the road atlas. And now Pam would be able to see exactly where they were going and how to get there. Maybe she was moving on 15 already. He quickly walked to the car, buckled Luella in, and eased back onto the highway.

He felt a little better knowing they'd make it to Wyoming for the dusk light. He'd heard great things about the land in that time of day. He and Luella would just layup somewhere quick and quiet for the night, even if it meant they couldn't curl up at the base of the Tetons. It'd be



alright. He spied Luella's eyes in the back window mirror and smiled. "Well, hi there, Lulu" he said.

Gale and Pam couldn't agree on a name for the baby to save their lives. Even before they found out the sex, they'd gone online to top 100s and also flipped through a dozen name books. Lists were drawn up for boys and girls, narrowed down, voted on, and tossed out.

"Raven for a girl," Gale had said.

"Gross. Why?"

"You wouldn't get it," he snapped back. "It's in my top five."

"What about Candice?"

"Sounds like a dancer."

"I'm really getting tired of that."

"Then stop giving me those names."

"How about Alice?"

"Cute. That's my mother's name."

"Actually it's one of the filthiest girls I know at work. When guys pay for a private room, she calls it her 'wonderland,' and if they buy five more songs..."

"Stop," Gale said.

"...they get to follow her down the rabbit hole."

"That's so ugly. Why do you say things like that?"

"Because, Gale, because you hold that goddamn job over me like it defines me. No matter where I am, at home, at the store, anywhere but work, that's where you see me. Working. But people aren't always defined by their work, Gale. Can you comprehend that? People who sit

in offices all day long or fix toilets for a living don't see themselves as that and only that. They're mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, they have roles and value outside of how they make a fucking dollar. They may spend the majority of their alert hours working at that job, but before they die, they'll look back and remember what they did off the goddamn clock. Look at me, pregnant as hell, my baby inside me listening to me screaming like a lunatic, maybe you should think about your being defined by this situation right here, Gale."

Gale didn't call Pam from the Great Salt Lake like he intended, instead he waited until he and Luella pulled over at a KOA between Evanston and Jackson, just off of the Green River. It seemed like a perfect spot to rest the night. Luella cried when Gale picked her up.

"You wanna do another nine hours, huh? Let's call it a night, darlin'." Gale stopped when he saw a sheriff's vehicle wind through the campground on what he hoped was a routine patrol. He changed Luella quickly on the backseat and then hurried her inside to pay for the site. He filled out the brief guest card and put down his phone number. And he realized his phone was still off, and saw that once he switched it on, there were no voicemails. Luella continued to cry. He put the phone back in his pocket.

Gale drove around the grounds, saw the dumpsters and warning signs about occasional grizzly sightings. Gale felt a jolt of excitement. He parked and took Luella back out to hold her up in the air for her to see and hear the timber lean and creak in the wind. He felt truly happy at that moment. He was up in the mountainous terrain with his own daughter. Gale felt the darkness creep in around them, and he knew he needed to make a fire.

Luella writhed on a sleeping bag while Gale twisted newspaper. He struck a match and sat back with Luella, fed her on the bottle. Out beyond the trees massive shapes began to appear.

Black mountains, the size of which he had never seen, materialized miles away. But they were suddenly there before him, silhouetted by an alien blue sky smeared in ash.

Gale hardly noticed the other campers nearby, thin voices and laughter around other fires. They were no concern of his. The first embers of his fire appeared. The fire grew and Luella finished her bottle. He set another bag of milk near their fire to thaw. Gale ate some bread and cold stew from a can. He could feel the day's energy slipping out of him. But he desperately wanted the moment to go on and last all the way until morning. And his only reasoning for this, he bitterly admitted to himself, was the feeling that things might not get any better down the road. That wherever he and Luella ended up, Pam would find them. She'd try and stay with them to work things out, or else take Luella back with the help of the law.

And before Gale fell asleep he started to wonder if he had made a mistake. If he had really tried his hardest with Pam, and that maybe she wasn't so bad. The air in the mountains was cold and crisp and it had him seeing things differently. He couldn't get over the stillness. It reminded him of being up in Mount Charleston a year or two ago. Gale didn't like the fact that the two feelings were connected.

Different place, same people. Panic thumped him in the chest. He gazed into the fire and concentrated on his heartbeat. Luella moved against him. A bucket tipped over somewhere inside him and his blood pumped between his ears. He'd forgotten to call Pam, Pam back at home underneath the bed sheets. Who knows what she had done since he left. He'd call her in the morning.

Suddenly a gust of wind excited the fire. Gale watched Luella follow the glowing shower of coals as they burst against the night's black sheet.

By dawn the next day, Gale was back on 80 speeding east. Pam didn't answer his calls. And he firmly believed she was handling the situation herself. No police, no noise. Gale began to see things more clearly. Pam would be there waiting in Williston, waiting in a motel room that only knew promises of the future. Her cellphone smashed, but there'd be a room phone on the nightstand, the little red bulb always blinking. She'd stare absently at the receiver, waiting for Gale to remember the right number to call.

## Independence Day

On a sunny afternoon before dinner, Deja helps Missy and another resident put bright red geraniums and blue cornflowers in white planters as 4<sup>th</sup> of July decorations. The three of them are out beneath the gazebo in the back courtyard, with a few other residents sitting in wheelchairs nearby watching with interest. Deja had worked at Sunbrook Assisted Living long enough to not take anything personal. So when Missy mutters “dirty brown hands,” Deja pretends not to hear her. Instead, she unties her purple smock with the Sunbrook logo on the left breast, exhales and smiles. “Good job, Laura,” she says to the other resident. Then she adds, “I can tell you’ve done this before. Bet you had a big garden at your house.” Laura nods solemnly and waters in the flowers. When they are done, Deja holds the hand of each woman and slowly leads them inside to the wine and cheese family social. She sits Missy alone at a table for three. “Enjoy,” Deja says. And she walks away.

## Bad People in the Area

We drove home through summer afternoon traffic and got into bed without removing our clothing or touching. Leslie fell asleep and snored softly. I scowled at her. I studied our bedroom window, the paint chipping from its warped frame. The “proowler,” a term the police officer used during our interview that morning, had taken this window as his own. It no longer belonged to us, or our house. I imagined him in all black: boots, pants, shirt, and mask, completely nondescript, offering nothing of himself, but taking everything from the women. From my wife. On the way home from the police station, I remembered seeing an 80’s slasher film by the same name, THE PROWLER, and thought about renting it and watching it secretly in the basement.

The only thing we thought we knew about the guy was where he probably came from. There’s a man camp being set up--a trailer park designated for out-of-town oil workers, roughnecks—just down the road. Men are starting to move in. Mel’s bar, where I’ve met some of them, glows between our neighborhood and the camp. The boys I know are good people, and they warned me about some of their roommates. Warned me about the way they talk after a few beers, how they miss the company of women so bad it drives them crazy like animals. Most of these men have wives and families in other parts of North Dakota, Minnesota, or Montana.

So now I imagine him: a family man, father of three, a man-camp roughneck, standing outside looking at me, exactly as Leslie had explained it. A pair of eyes in the dark, needling at the window, wanting. A hulking shape wearing headphones or earmuffs, white tank top or a ‘wife beater,’ as they’re known around here. He watched Leslie pulling off her Walmart uniform. Leslie said she saw the man’s teeth when he smiled. She screamed and picked up her cellphone to call the police. I thought he was probably waiting out there for a while, acting as if he stood

before a great piece of art with headphones on, listening to the detailed history and observing thoughtfully the complex contours of my wife's body.

She's something to behold. Her straight blonde hair was to her shoulders and styled, but never overly-fussed with. It fell in an angle down her cheeks that perfectly framed her green eyes. She had a slightly turned up nose. She regularly wore a little makeup around the house. I told her often how striking I thought she was.

In the police interview she talked about how disgusting she felt being spied on in her underwear. The officer nodded as if he understood and scribbled something down on his pad. He and I both stared at Leslie. A part of me couldn't help but wonder if she wanted to look better for the prowler. She told us that he wasn't outside the window long. Maybe a few seconds or so. She seemed to think he left so quickly because she showed him the goods and he continued shopping elsewhere, maybe at the neighbors'. But no other reports from our neighborhood had been filed yet. Paul and Sarah, our neighbors down the street offered their support and extra eyes to watch over us. They assured us that it was a good new development and that what happened was rare.

Still, Leslie and I knew there were bad people in the area. I turned on my side, pulled the sheets up over my shoulder, my back to Leslie and the window.

We'd only been in Williston for a month before the man camp prowler came around. I got hired to tend the counter at Kum and Go, and Leslie made more ringing people up at Walmart. Sixteen dollars an hour. We couldn't believe it. But that's what was happening here.

Lots of folks weren't pleased with what was happening to their quiet little town. It's really grown into something unrecognizable. Repulsive, even, say the women at our church. It's not our church, really. We've only gone once, still deciding if we'd like to attend anywhere at

all. The need for some kind of spiritual guidance seems like something we need now more than ever. Or maybe that's just something to think during strange days. But these women went on and on at the meet and greet after the service. How Williston was deteriorating, its moral backbone grown terribly crooked. How it became unfit for decent families anymore, and that they were all thinking about leaving, but had nowhere to go.

Thousands of people like Leslie and me came looking for work, found it, and practically set up overnight. The man camps, too, appeared just as suddenly all over the western region of the state. The cops cited the oil boom as the obvious reason for the dominant male population. Crime percentages were through the roof, the officer said. They were hiring more officers by the day, and it was all they could do to give the people some sense of order in town. Things were rapidly changing and the town was holding on for dear life.

I woke hot and uncomfortable in the night. My tongue stuck dry in its little compartment between my bottom teeth. Leslie continued to sleep. I got up and moved quickly into the living room feeling like I might catch someone in a foul act. Misdeeds were around every corner. My head craned out the front door from side to side. Nothing moved in the dark. Then a car drove past with its lights off. I squinted after it. There was a light on in the house across the street. I saw a couple watching television in their den.

I thought of my wife sleeping in our bedroom. The idea to turn on the light and stand outside the window crackled through me in a wave of excitement. But I couldn't do it. Instead, I wondered if the prowler carried Leslie around in his mind like a snapshot wallet photo. What did he think he knew about her? That she had a husband? I wondered if he had a family of his own, maybe waiting in Wyoming for him to send them money for rent. I imagined him sitting down



with his wife and kids, tucking his napkin into his shirt and asking his son how school went. He was an ideal model of the working man. Real American Dream material. Then I suddenly felt the need to ask him what he thought of Leslie. And if he was so satisfied, what was he doing at her window?

I poured myself a whiskey and went down into the basement. It was cool down there and smelled like wet wood and mildew. I flipped on the television and found a special about the “Seven Forgotten Natural Wonders of the World.” Niagara Falls was number seven and followed by Mount Kilimanjaro. I emptied my glass and turned up the television. *Forgotten*. I took it to mean that nobody thinks about them very much, as if these places were no longer interesting to the common person. It disappointed me to think about that.

Leslie and I visited the Falls on our fifth wedding anniversary as a gift from her parents. We gambled and drank, wore the blue ponchos on the boat tour. We said things to each other there that haven’t been repeated since. *Forgotten*. What the hell else did people have to think about? I tried to figure out why we didn’t talk about that time more often, why had we cut it adrift.

I made another drink and rifled through a box of my old movies. She didn’t really know about my little stash. I even had some VHS tapes mixed in with the DVDs. Most of them were comedy, action, or horror. Leslie and I wouldn’t enjoy any of them together, like her musicals. None of the titles reminded me of what I wanted. I made a mental note to order *The Prowler* online the next day with express shipping. Then I watched a special on desert caves and fell asleep sitting straight up with an empty glass.

Leslie was in the kitchen early next morning making breakfast as if nothing had happened. I took this as a good sign and came up behind her. I wrapped my hands around her waist and kissed her neck and ears. She put the butter knife down and I knew she closed her eyes. She seemed to smile. I put my hand just below the elastic of her underwear and felt for her soft hairs. She spun around.

“You kidding me?” she hissed.

I could feel the empty expression on my face as I stood and stared at her.

“Do you remember Niagara Falls?” I suddenly asked. “Remember that boat ride we took? The heart-shaped bed we stayed up all night in?”

“I remember,” she said. She didn’t even smile.

“Forget it,” I said. I turned to leave. “I’m going to do laundry.”

“Finally,” she called after me.

I stood on the cool cement of the laundry room and held Leslie’s work shirt against my face and breathed in a faded thread of sweat and antiperspirant. I usually enjoyed the little traces of her person, but that morning it gave me nothing. Even her underwear, bought from Walmart with her worker’s discount, a secret she and I shared, a secret that had always stirred me, left me empty-handed in the humming void of the cycling washer. She called my name from the kitchen.

I stopped in the living room and looked out the bay window. The bushes in the front yard huddled against the shifting morning light, an uncomfortable limbo between red and blue.

Everything became quiet. A hummingbird floated at the feeder and disappeared.

Leslie quietly said my name again. I ignored her and stood perfectly still at the window. I started to imagine myself twenty years older standing in the exact same spot. I hovered in front of the bay window in the house, looked in on us, the family living there. I tried to see what my

hands and hair would look like, my face weathered from the things I'd done. What my children would be doing all grown up. How Leslie and I would be. The thought softened and gradually gave way to a kind of darkness that left me confused and sad. I felt empty, unsatisfied with the decisions I've made as a man living up to that point. Most men would be able to make some sort of meaning out of a moment like that, but I couldn't. Leslie called to me again.

"Breakfast," she said.

"Just going to have a beer," I said. "I'm off today."

"That's great," she snapped.

"Well, shit," I said. "Do you want to talk about it? I mean, we need to work together on this, right?"

"I'd just like to go to work and forget it," she said. "Go forward."

But Leslie's boss noticed she wasn't herself at work and gave her a few days off, including the fourth of July. She would lose out on the time-and-a-half, but we didn't care. Over her break I noticed she had stopped cutting her nails. Then she stopped her morning routine of applying the little bit of makeup. Her hair frizzed out in crimped shocks. Her wardrobe shrunk to a pair of sweat shorts and mesh tank top. One afternoon I opened the fridge for a snack and found strange puncture marks on an apple. I stood in the kitchen and turned the bruised fruit over in my hands. Then I bit into it and listened to myself chew it with my mouth open. Then I heard Leslie on the phone moving through the house. Leslie was having second thoughts about getting together over the fourth with Paul and Sarah.

They were, I felt, our only real friends in the town so far. Paul and Sarah were simple in a good way, a concept I grew to appreciate about them the more we saw them. Paul and I talked

about golfing together, but usually just drank together instead. Sarah and Leslie got along more out of necessity than any personal connection.

So when I finally convinced Leslie to go over and talk to Sarah about our plans for the 4<sup>th</sup>, Paul and I walked the mile to Mel's Bar. We sat at a square table in the corner near the jukebox. The place was busy for a Thursday. I recognized a few guys I knew from the man camp huddled at the bar.

"You're staring," Paul said.

"What?"

"You're staring at those men. I wouldn't do that. Just sayin'."

"Right," I said.

The waitress brought us whiskey and beer. We gave her dollars. We drank quietly, and with purpose.

"Are you worried he's going to come back?" Paul finally asked. He set the glass down on the table and leaned back in his chair. A woman came up behind him and started putting quarters in the jukebox. Paul turned to her. "No country, honey." The woman frowned.

"I don't know," I said. "For all I know he's shooting pool over there."

Paul turned in his seat and watched a man line up a shot. "Could be," he said.

"I've met a few roughnecks. Suppose I went up and asked about my problem?"

Paul shook his head. "How would you know what they were telling you is the truth? I mean, who's going to turn themselves in as a peeping tom?"

"Peeping tom," I repeated. "I like prowler better."

Paul gave me a puzzled look. Then he leaned in close. “Hey. Remember I told you about those guys who kept ripping down those campaign signs in my mom’s backyard and leaving nasty notes? Remember that?”

I nodded.

“Why don’t you do something like that? Set up a little surveillance operation. Set you back a few bucks, but shit.”

“I’m not going to set up a camera outside my house. That seems ridiculous, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I thought so,” said Paul. “Just sayin’. It caught them in the act.” He folded his arms.

The opening riff of a familiar rock song started playing and Paul shot his thumb up for the woman to see. She shook her head and walked back to her friends. Their table was surrounded by men clenching beer bottles. “How’s Leslie doing?” Paul asked

“You know. Not great,” I said. “Neither am I, really.”

“I hear that,” he said. “Be good to get you all over on the fourth. Good for everyone,” he said. He forced a smile.

“Hope so,” I said.

More roughnecks gathered around the pool table. Paul and I had put our quarters down in line. Before we got the chance to play, a fight broke out around the jukebox woman’s table and drinks spilled onto the floor. In what looked like a scene from some zombie flick, fifty men or so stumbled out into the street and headed for the camp. Paul and I stood at the door and watched them.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “Look at that.”

“Take your pick,” Paul said. “At least none of them are heading our way.”

We found Leslie and Sarah talking in the living room, buzzed on wine.

“We’ve decided on a menu for the fourth,” Sarah said.

Leslie laughed out loud and covered her mouth. “Yeah,” she said. “You two are doing all the cooking.”

“Well, that’s fine with us, right partner?” Paul said.

“Sure,” I said. I was stunned at how at ease Leslie seemed to be. I couldn’t help feeling injured by how well she was doing with someone else.

Fourth of July weekend I decided to surprise Leslie with a new dress from Walmart. I didn’t even try to use her employee discount. The dress was blue and orange and had little blooming flowers on it that looked like flames. She and I used to be really hot for each other, use to burn up the sheets so that all the water in the Falls couldn’t put us out. At least that’s how I remembered it.

Leslie had mentioned wanting something new to wear. I also figured the dress might score me some points in the bedroom later on. Something we both could really use. We hadn’t poked around in over a week. Something went cold inside of us. The stage went dark.

I tried like hell to make Leslie better. I really did. When I brought the dress home to her she closed her eyes and started yanking at the ends of her frizzled hair.

“Flowers” she said. “Flowers, Bill?”

Next thing I knew she’d locked herself in our bedroom. She stayed in there all afternoon. I’d never seen anything like it.

“Won’t you even try it on, darlin’?” I asked through the door. Something wasn’t clicking. I’d always said she was a knockout, especially in high school when we met. We strung our wild nights together like fireworks, each night bigger than the last.

“It’s all yours,” she said. Her voice barely made it through the door.

“I bet you’ll just be a sight,” I called out. I knocked softly on the wall.

“Why don’t you wear it!” she yelled back.

“You know what the guys at Mel’s would say? They’d think I lost my damn mind. Which maybe I have, because I thought you’d really like this.” We were there in silence.

“Hold on. I’ll be right back,” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

I got in my truck and drove the dress into town to exchange it. A heaviness hung in the air. It wasn’t supposed to be like that Fourth of July weekend. People were supposed to be off work and with their families. Men were supposed to be digging last minute horseshoe pits and putting up badminton nets. Children should be running around with sparklers. Wives holding fancy sangria glasses smoking thin cigarettes on the patio, making fun of their husbands.

I found it difficult to breathe that dense air. I saw all the lawn chairs chained to parking meters downtown reserving spots to watch the parade. Leslie and I had planned to skip it.

Usually we watched baseball, got drunk, and fooled around. But all that was off the table now.

I exchanged the flower pattern for a green cotton dress with a white stripe down the side. I thought Leslie would look amazing in it. I made sure it was low cut. The dress turned out to be seven dollars cheaper than the original. And I decided a cold sixer could really turn the day around. I opened one in the truck on the way home.

I sat cross-legged on the floor in the hallway outside our bedroom. I drank from our two opened beers and admired the new dress laid out beside me. I could hear Leslie talking quietly on the phone. I figured it was Sarah. The doorknob remained a locked fist. I put her beer can on the dress. I stood and stretched.

“Going to the kitchen,” I said to the door. “Need anything? No? Great.”

I sat in the kitchen with my beer and looked around. One of best things about summer evenings was the way the sunlight slid around the inside of our house. I watched while our kitchen gradually slipped into a copper color like the desert. I admired the complexity of my thought until I noticed the homemade red, white, and blue tablecloth from Leslie’s grandmother. I hated the thing and Leslie must’ve snuck it out while I was in town.

I found myself leaning over the garbage can with the tablecloth crumpled in my hand. Then it made me want to cry. So I put it back on the table in a wad. I kept some Old Crow under the sink with cleaning supplies. I poured myself a glass and floated a few ice cubes in it.

Leslie’s voice played through the walls. I heard muffled bursts of dialogue, then nothing. Another whiskey appeared in front of me. My shoulders loosened and I began to feel hungry. I went to the cabinet and found some oyster crackers. Then I saw Paul and Sarah on a walk outside. Sarah was attractive in tight white capris. I found myself shamefully watching her bottom as she wiggled away. Her legs were tan and muscular, I wondered if she played tennis. I never thought of her as desirable until then. I thought of what Paul might say if he caught me. Although I had seen him look at Leslie the same way a number of times.

I poured some more whiskey and turned the television on and off. I flipped through an old *Sports Illustrated* having already read the articles. The alcohol thinned my patience. I went to the door and tried the knob again. Listened for Leslie’s voice. I slumped to the floor with the



glass of whiskey and took a pull on her warm beer. The can left a dark ring in the middle of the dress. I held it up in front of me. The dress looked even more lifeless with the tags dangling off of it.

On an impulse, I phoned up the man camp down the road. A gruff voice answered and I asked him if he was the supervisor. He told me to hold. I hung up. I went back to the bedroom door and began talking to her at random. Speculated about whom else would be over at Paul and Sarah's, the favored players at Wimbledon, and all the hassle we'd miss by skipping the parade. Fireworks. Sales on lawn furniture at Walmart. Her coworkers asking about her. I threw it all out there. I didn't mention the prowler. But he was always there.

"Why don't we go grab a beer at Mel's," I heard myself say. I didn't even think it was a good idea, but I waited for a response anyway. "I bet there's a happy hour special that will knock your socks off."

Something hit the door with a thud.

"Was that a sock?" I asked.

I sensed she was relaxing a bit. She didn't say anything for a while and we just sat in the quiet. Nothing in the house moved but the soft motor in the refrigerator. My drink needed ice. I thought I heard Paul and Sarah walking by again outside.

I ate some more crackers and began telling Leslie about a trip I took with my parents when I was a teenager. I was pretty sure she had already heard it but I figured I could get our heads out of the house for a while.

I knew she loved my parents and that the thought of them might please her. She may have loved them more than she loved me at the time. I told her about the miles of hiking in the sun and the handkerchiefs tied around our necks to catch the sweat. How we climbed over ancient

sandstone, found our footing carefully, step by step. Lizards bumped around the footpaths and stretched themselves over rocks. We joked that it would be a beautiful place to die.

I told her about desert varnish on the split cliffs and how time froze when a ram ran by us in full gallop. How every day when we got back to the hotel we took off our shoes and socks and the room quickly became the color of the red-burnt desert dust. I told her that there was no stillness in the entire world like in Canyonlands. That Utah was a place to be. Not so much the cities, but the desert. And it would do America some good if everyone went there once a year to just turn everything off and sit quietly by themselves. To become part of it.

I told her that she of all people should do that. And that if she wanted to go, I would surely take her. The door finally creaked open and she took hold of her warm beer. She kissed my cheek and we walked to the kitchen without saying a word. She saw the tablecloth wadded it up on the table and managed to laugh. We went outside onto the porch and drank whiskey. We made toasts.

We toasted all the insects that diligently kept the day alive with their electric chatter. We toasted the sun sinking like a flat tire on the dusty horizon. When we saw Paul moving down the street with firewood stacked in his arms, we both laughed.

Leslie and I stacked our beer cans in a pyramid on the porch floor. I stood up and took her hand, brought her in close. We danced and I could feel her laugh against my neck.

“What are we dancing for?” She asked.

“For the music,” I said. “For the Falls. The desert. For everything.”

“And?” She asked.

“And maybe for supper,” I said.

“Bill,” she said.

We went inside to eat. She put some steaks in a pan with melted butter and onions. The kitchen filled with a familiar heat and I could tell we were starting to feel good about things. About each other.

We ate our steaks off paper plates with pools of barbecue sauce on the side. The tablecloth underneath was creased and odd looking, though Leslie didn't seem to notice. I joked about doing the dishes and decided to run to the store and get another six-pack for us to have around the fire later. She was heading over to Sarah and Paul's. The last sliver of sun dropped and left us in a hazy dark.

I would never tell Leslie this, but I loved to take trips into town after a few drinks. The storefront lights threw out their glossy beams as I drove by. My windows down, the cool evening air poured in around me. The night gave off a promise that the best times were on the way. Everything seemed right there in front of me.

I chatted up the clerk and told her to have a happy 4th. Told her I was sorry she had to spend most of it at the grocery store, but to keep her chin up, she was providing an important service. I watched her and grinned large while she counted back my change. Then I couldn't help seeing her and I sharing a bottle out back behind the store and maybe fooling around a little bit. She was younger than Leslie, and leaner. She had thin dark hair, barely visible, on her cheeks and I wondered if maybe she had some underneath her arms as well. I found myself wanting to know what this girl tasted like in comparison to Leslie. I collected my change and hustled out the door.

The six-pack rode next to me and began to sweat in the evening heat. I held one of the aluminum cans to my forehead. Then I reached under my seat and took a pull on an old flask. The whiskey burnt on its way down, coiled comfortably in my stomach. I turned up the radio. I

thought of the girl at the counter. My hands beat on the wheel and I sang along with an old rock song from my childhood. I thought to take the back roads home and maybe stop by Mel's for a quick one. The railroad crossing at Loomis St. started to blink. I glanced in my rearview. The street was empty and there was that familiar moment of a decision needing to be made. I knew the right one.

Instead of gunning it and possibly drawing attention to myself, I put the truck in park. A coal car came lumbering down the track. Then it was screaming past me in waves. The train drowned out the radio and I was fine with that. I happily turned it off and put my arm out the window and hoped a breeze would find me. I thought of Leslie and what to say when I got home to keep things going. Maybe this thing, this incident would pass on by. And all that we needed was a good time. The notion that the town, in a certain time, wouldn't be ideal for anyone or everyone crossed my mind. It seemed like something I'd share with Leslie later on in the night. I watched the train's caboose fade around a bend. I glanced in the rearview and saw no one. I opened another beer. Driving by the house I felt comfortable in my knowing Leslie was at Sarah and Paul's, occupied and cheerful.

Two blocks from Mel's, I pulled up to a stop sign. Streetlights flickered. The block became eerily quiet. There weren't nearly as many parties as I thought there'd be. I eased out into the intersection and caught movement out my right window. I slammed down on the breaks and the car squealed. I saw a man, dressed in all black, creep out from between two houses. He paused in a halo of streetlight and adjusted his headphones. Then he slipped behind a garage into someone's backyard, looking for another window, needing another body.

## American Tourists

### I

On the outskirts of a foreign city an American couple from Kansas finds a black cannon sitting atop a rocky mound with a bronze plaque attached. The cannon looks ancient and the couple reads the plaque out loud to each other. Nobody else is around to take a photo of them together so they decide to alternate having their picture taken standing next to the cannon. First, the husband. He tries to smile against the sunlight. Then the wife hands the camera to the husband and moves toward the cannon. She puts one hand on the long barrel. She smiles and squints and thinks about their trip and the postcards in her purse she forgot to send to the kids. She's not looking at the camera or her husband, but the city stretched out behind them.

The husband pauses. "I don't think you're supposed to touch it, sweetheart."

"Can't I?"

"I really don't think so."

"Why must you ruin everything?"

The man frowns and positions the camera against his eye. The wife's smile straightens.

### II

At dinner the woman tries a few phrases from the language book she keeps in her purse. When she orders, the waitress smiles politely. The husband holds up a menu and points. When the food arrives, neither of them receives what they wanted. They eat. The husband dabs the sides of his mouth with a cloth napkin.

"Shall I order dessert, dear?" he asks.

"I just hate you."

### III

On the plane before takeoff, a stewardess asks if the tourists could sit in the emergency row.

“I don’t see why not,” the husband replies.

Hours into the flight the tourists sleep. Over the middle of the Atlantic, the plane starts to descend into the dark.

## Americans at Work

The summer Cannonball Johnson lands a gig mowing for the township sunny days are quick gasps of breath between storms. The college kids come running back into town, cocky from having completed another year at the university two hours up the interstate. They get jobs to make money to spend on alcohol to get laid. The HELP WANTED signs disappear and single mothers at the Freeport diner are now forced to take their smoke breaks with girls who have everything ahead of them.

Cannonball starts the mower and grips the wheel, his red MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN hat pulled down to his eyes. Both his hands ache from hitting a guy at the H last night. Cannonball hadn't seen the face before, but remembers that it was much younger than his own. Remembers the guy had said things about Cannonball's family and their values. The kind of things that don't get said in a town like this without consequences. Maybe he'd go looking for him later in the day. Cannonball spits on the ground and mows a beautiful patch of grass out by the reservoir.

Sometimes Cannonball mows cemeteries in the rain. They are heavily wooded and lush, full of townies. He knows the wet isn't good for the motor or blade, knows the cut will be shoddy, and that old folks will call his supervisor to complain, as if they don't have enough to worry about. Cannonball wonders why they don't call about all the illegals moving narrowly through rows of grapes, chatting in Spanish as they tie vines to post and wire in the vineyard just across the road from Oxbow Cemetery. Cannonball wonders about a lot of things these days. Mostly, though, it's where to get answers from a country that doesn't feel like his anymore.