Mending Soffit, and Other Stories

By Karl Wilhelm

Mending Soffit

Once, I killed a man. It happened in the small town where I was born, went to school, had my first kiss, tasted my first beer, and learned to fish with my father on the Trinity River. The town was Madison, up in Michigan. And the man was Beau Baker. His wife petitioned to have him declared dead seven years to the day after the fact, and his daughter, his only child, inherited everything he owned. The farmhouse, the fields, the livestock, and the equipment sold at auction. The widow, Claire, escaped back to the beach house in Florida, but the girl, Julia, was long gone by then. I was her teacher for a while.

The point of the story I will unfold, and its surrounding circumstances, is not meant to evoke sympathy for myself. Or to ask forgiveness. I'll take that up with the almighty when the time comes, assuming the religious notions my mother instilled in me, before she killed herself, are not all bullshit. Maybe Beau, that asshole, will be standing at heaven's gates, waiting to extract his ever-lasting revenge. I see him sometimes, when I dream. Mostly just his face, sinking into the black water. Whatever. How far can a man go might be closer to the heart of the matter.

Julia Baker sat in my fourth period Sophomore European history class. She was a tiny young woman, bird-like and sallow, dark and unkept, a carbon copy of her mother, who, like her father, I had known in school. The t-shirts Julia wore were of my favorite bands – Rush, Bob Marley and The Wailers, Led Zeppelin, the Grateful Dead. She was smart and well spoken. At least she had been, when I first saw her, and according to all

her ninth-grade teachers. A month into the school year, however, I had yet to hear her speak in class, other than to demure when called on. She had turned in no homework, none of the assigned essays, no discussion questions, though her tests and quizzes were perfect. A meeting was probably inevitable. I knew she was in there somewhere, I just had no idea where.

"She's being abused. Physically, at least. God knows what else," Elsa Nordgren said, as she and I and Marie Fletcher stood by the copy machine on a hot Thursday afternoon in early September. I was attracted to Marie, a second year Spanish teacher, despite being ten years older than her. She was lovely, and smart, and my desire for her would always remain a secret, of which I've kept my share. Elsa had been Julia's ninth grade counselor. "Look at her arms. If they're not covered, even on a day like today." Elsa added, and explained that she'd come out of the women's stall as Julia was washing, had seen the dark purple bruises on both forearms, that Julia had quickly rolled her sleeves down, and left without speaking. I knew who was responsible, before the words were out of her mouth.

"Beau." They both looked at me.

I explained that I had known him damn near my whole life, that Julia's affect might fit someone in trauma. That he would be capable of such a thing. Elsa and I agreed we would report the changes in her behavior to Ben Webster, her tenth grade counselor, and recommend Julia at least be approached by the school social worker. We agreed we were on shaky ground as mandatory reporters, that legally we should report our what we knew, but I convinced Elsa that Beau's reach included most of the local and county cops.

We made a pact of silence, and instructed Marie, a probationary teacher, that she had heard none of it.

I lived alone in the house in which I'd grown up. Once, it was a working farmhouse, but now the house, and the two acres around it, sat at the edge of town. A small barn, which we always used as a garage, leaned near the house. By the end of the month little had changed, insofar as Julia was concerned. There were, however, grackles in the attic above the back porch. The first ones had found a hole in the soffit and built a nest, and now there were more. I was pissed at the birds, and pissed that I had not heard anything about Julia. I was going to do something about the birds, and I was going to do whatever I could for her. I'd love to say, in retrospect, that my instinct to help was a noble one. Maybe I just hated Beau. Maybe it was my first tremor, on a Tuesday in late August.

I walked into the counseling office after school on the last Friday of September. Ben Webster looked at me from his desk. I had known Ben since I had taken this job. The year my parents had died. He was a good guy but he had been here a long time. He liked his job. He was putting his kids through college. When I asked about Julia he wouldn't speak of her. I said that I wasn't leaving his office until he did. We were all allowed to leave shortly after school was out on Fridays, unlike most days when we stayed for another hour. We both wanted to go.

"I might have asked Julia if she were willing to talk to someone," he said, finally. "She might have refused."

He added that had he pressed her, she might have threatened to call her father. And that that might be the end of it.

"That fucker," I said, and walked to my truck.

The first light of morning was a blush when I leaned the ladder against where the soffit met the house and pulled the electrical cord and skill saw to the top rung. Above me, the birds cried and scratched. In the corner, near the eavestrough, was a hole the size of my fist. I thought about simply plugging it, but didn't want the stink of desiccating corpses seeping inside. I didn't love this house, both my parents having died in it, or near enough to it, but the stink of rotting birds seemed somehow disrespectful. Instead, I would enlarged the hole, so that they could fly away, or become victims of the neighborhood cats. In either case, my responsibility would be assuaged.

The first grackle out of the attic wheeled, screeching, past my head. I felt more of them move in the space above me. I plunged the saw into the wood, cut a large rectangle, and hoped it had done no harm. I didn't want to kill them; I understood their will to survive, to find a safe place. When I lowered the wood, it stank of shit, and a half dozen more birds flew past me. I carried the mess down the ladder, to the burn barrel near the garage. The car my mother had used to kill herself sat inside it, beneath a layer of dust. I couldn't bring myself to sell it. The birds sat in the trees near the edge of the yard, and flapped their wings, and continued their screed. I swept the droppings from the attic and replaced the hole with new wood, screwed it to the rafters, caulked it all, and painted it to match the old. It was late afternoon when I finished. I sat on my back porch and drank a beer.

I wanted to fish the evening hatch, to be on the water. I wanted to listen to its voice as it moved over the rocks and around the sweepers. I wanted to look hard at the deep whirlpool where Madras Creek entered the Trinity River. I hitched my drift boat to

the pickup and drove west. I would have to take out in the dark, but I had fished this river since I was nine, mostly with my father, and knew its every bend and riffle. The old man's fight with ALS ended during my third year of teaching in Edina, Minnesota. My mother's suicide came six months after. I moved home that summer, and Madison High offered me a job when another teacher retired abruptly. I took it because I wasn't sure what else I should do. There were a thousand loose ends, and no one to bind them but me.

The drive paralleled Madras Creek down into the river valley, and when I reached the put in I had the boat in the water in short order. Ollie Longbow, who owned the local hardware, would spot for me, as usual. He agreed to leave the truck and trailer, and some of his home grown as well, at the take out near McNamara's bridge. It would be a simple operation as he had my spare truck key. I lit a joint. In those days I only smoked on the weekends, during the school year, and preferred Ollie's bud to anything else. He grew in a secret garden deep inside the national forest. He was my friend. I climbed over the gunwale and pulled hard on the oars. I floated, and backstroked, the joint in my mouth, until I threw the glowing roach into the water. *To the gods*, I thought.

The boat was light and nimble. My father had bought it in Montana but we never got to fish from it together; his disease only took a year to kill him, and I was in Minnesota then. The boat – 13'long, mahogany plywood, fiberglass, Kevlar, and carbon fiber, the trim and fittings fabricated one off – never failed to elicit a compliment, on the water or away from it. Compared to the boat I rowed with him when I was young, it was a starship.

In the half-light I began to row less, and drift more. The only sounds were of crickets and the occasional splash of a rising trout, and of the blades of the oars through

the water's surface. I thought of Julia. I had known her before she came to my class only as the girl who played Pompey in the school's production of *Measure for Measure* the previous fall. She was good. She acted with passion, and I was excited to see her on my roll the following year. I would cover Shakespeare, Elizabethan Theater, and the Earl of Oxford. I thought she might enjoy it all. The Julia I had in class was not the same young woman who had seemed so at ease on the stage. The character she was playing now was so much more thin and stretched out. I knew the far edges of that tension. I smoked, and drank, too much, but I was a grown man; and now, likely, it didn't matter that much. Maybe I wanted something for her that I couldn't have for myself.

The pool where Madras Creek entered the Trinity was deep enough to sink a city bus. The current stacked onto the far bank, and turned counter-clockwise against itself. The boat would always rise over it, which meant that the water piled against the riverbed as well, as if against a great slab of rock. It drove the streamers I cast deep, almost irretrievably so, but often in the jaws of large brown trout. These fish had ceased eating insects. They had become alpha predators, meat-eaters in the darkness below who rapaciously attacked the wounded minnow and crayfish imitations I threw. The fish I caught, and released, were always sleek and alligator-like, with kype jaws, and ochre bellies, their black spots ringed in crimson. I dropped the anchor above the pool; it took nearly all the rope before the boat halted.

On the slight bluff above the river a light shone from the Lundgren house. Belle Lundgren taught math at Madison High, and she and her husband had two girls, the oldest in the class behind Julia. I would never have daughters. Or sons. I carried my father's DNA for Lou Gehrig's. It's where all this began I suppose. This whole story.

Why I came home, and why I stayed, and why I've done everything I've done. I don't blame him though; it wasn't as if he chose suffering, and death, like she did. I guess I don't get to choose either, and neither will Beau. But Julia will. She might have been mine in another life, I thought. I knew her mother when we were both young. Claire was a varsity cheerleader and I wasn't above a pubescent fantasy of her. It was said that she slept around before Beau. A daughter. What would I want for her? What would I do? I had killed deer, and turkeys, and pheasant, more than my share of trout, alone, and with my old man. I hadn't killed anything, besides whatever grackle didn't survive today's ordeal, since the last time he and I hunted, when I was seventeen. I stared into the water. *A man is not a grackle,* I thought, and pulled on the anchor rope, eased downstream.

It had become dark in the river valley, though the tops of the trees on the bluffs were still bathed in sunlight. There would be no moon tonight. The take out at McNamara's Bridge was dark, and though there were bathrooms and garbage cans at the far end of the lot, there was no artificial light, no safety lamp. I winched the boat onto the trailer, and pulled away from the ramp, and sat, windows down, and listened to the high-pitched clicks of the bats, and the calls of the nighthawks, above the river, above the canopy of the forest. I reached beneath the seat and grabbed one of the dozen fatties Ollie had left me, and lit it. I took several deep hits. When I heard the car's engine I knew who it was, the growl of its V12 unmistakable. I ground out the joint on the side mirror, and put it underneath the floor mat. I thought I should leave, but couldn't make myself. I heard her downshift, downshift, downshift, and then the headlights flashed across me. The Dodge Viper rolled by, its top down, towards the facilities at the far end. I knew that it was Julia's, given to her by her father on her sixteenth birthday. Jesus, what was Julia

Baker doing way the hell out here? She sprinted from her car and into the women's bathroom. I reached for the ignition, then stopped, and got out of the truck, walked to the passenger side, and leaned back against the door. I was worried. What if she were ill? Too high, too drunk? Beaten again? She had seen me. Would she think I was a creep? When she reappeared, I called out and stepped away from the truck.

"You okay Julia?"

"Fine Mr. Church." She waved.

"Nice car. Must be a blast to drive."

"I'm late, and supposed to be home."

"I understand. Drive safe. Hey Julia."

She had turned to go, and then stopped and faced me.

"Think another Shakespeare play is possible this year?" I asked. Not very original, but I wanted to see her face, even in the dark.

"I don't know if I'll do the play this year. I'm thinking about going to live with my mom," she said, purely a shadow.

"Sorry to hear that," I said. I considered her lie for a moment. I thought that Claire Baker had been gone a long time, and if there were any grand reunification to be had, it would have already happened. I suspected Beau wasn't going to let her go anywhere. Especially not now.

She dove into her car and spun away from the lot. I heard her work her way up the gear-box, and then the sound was gone. She hadn't slurred her words or staggered. I walked to where her car had been, and there were no hastily disposed of empties in the garbage. The only weed I smelled was on myself, but I caught the scent of her perfume,

something clean and summery. There was a notebook was on the ground, though, and I recognized her handwriting on its cover, “Journal” scrawled across it. I walked back to the truck, relit the joint, and drove home, upstream, up out of the valley, Julia’s notebook riding shotgun. I sat for a long time on the back porch, just holding it. I looked at the garage and tried to remember my mother’s voice, and wept when I realized I had forgotten it. I sat Julia’s journal on the kitchen table, and retrieved a bottle of old bourbon, Blanton’s single barrel, my father had left me. I went back to my seat on the porch and drank, and smoked, until it felt as if the night sky squatted over me and I could not breathe. I groped my way inside and found the couch and slept. I dreamed I was fishing with the old man on the Trinity. All the trout we caught came to the surface burping fatally, as if the river was bottomless, as if they’d come from where the water was cold and hard, from where things were meant to stay.

I woke. Light poured from the living room window. My head hurt like hell. I showered in cold water, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, drank strong coffee. I stared out the window, across the porch, across the lawn. I sat at the table and stared at Julia’s notebook. I lifted and turned it. On its front cover was simply “Journal” in large, flowing script, but on its back was a drawing, in black ink, of a winged dragon. It swirled, mobius-like, filling the page. Small human figures crouched in the corners. Stick figures wearing triangles. The dragon’s mouth was open, and the undarkened spaces on the paper funneled towards it, as if it would consume everything, eventually.

I still think of that moment. As if it had been necessary to make myself believe. As if I wasn’t in the men’s locker room when Beau said he’d spanked a freshman

thrower, whose DQ had cost our team a spot in the state meet, with his own spikes until he bled. As if his trips to deer camp, before and after he was married, along with men we both knew – and the sex, drugs, and debauchery that went on there – weren't the stuff of local legend (in some circles at least). As if his wife's miscarriages were all faulty biology, and her frequent, then full-time, disappearance to Florida, some kind of thoroughly modern marriage arrangement. I cried. For Julia, and Claire, and the kid (I don't even remember his name) with the bloody ass – all of them afraid and alone in the dark with Beau, overwhelmed by him, by his size, his strength, his rage.

I hated Beau Baker with a purity I had never known before. It would be small sacrifice; not even as large as a single fucking grackle. And then I would leave here, and never come back. I would take my father's disease, which I had begun to know in earnest – the tremors, loss of self in space, the blurring of my peripheral vision – with me and fish somewhere far west of here, until I could not anymore. I imagined telling it all to Marie. I thought of her in the copy room, the moistness of her skin, her casual laughter, and thought that I could fall in love with her, but that watching me die would break her heart.

Monday dawned gray and cool, Indian summer having broken overnight. I woke at five and ran three miles and was in my classroom at seven. I set Julia's journal on her desk, until she was a no-show for class, nor was she there the following three days. When she showed up on Friday, she looked a wreck. Her hair was disheveled, more so than usual, and she wore sweat pants, an Oxford University sweatshirt, flips, and deep circles beneath her eyes. She seemed surprised, but said nothing until the period was over, and

the rest of the class had pushed their way out. It was lunch hour. I finished making notes in my notebook, and waited for her to speak.

"Thank you," she said, after a moment.

"You're welcome. You must have dropped it at McNamara's."

"I've been looking for it."

I imagined her panic, her fear of her father finding it. I wanted to tell her that it had been a random page, but that I knew enough. Instead, there was silence. Outside the door, a few stragglers made their way towards the cafeteria.

"Mr. Church?"

"Ms. Baker."

"It wasn't laying open or anything?"

"You mean did I look at it? Or read it?"

"I guess. Yeah."

I lied.

It would have all been so simple had she, or I, broken down. I could've walked her to Ben Webster's office, and we'd have summoned the school principal, called the state police, and Beau would have gone to jail for a long time. The wheel of karmic justice would spin without a wobble, for now at least.

"Thanks Mr. Church. I should go to lunch."

"Me, too."

The technology room was empty. I knew that it would be. I sat down at the desk near the front of the room and dialed the phone and hoped he would answer. Seven teachers, and who knows how many staff, and three hundred students used this room. At

least there would be plausible deniability for this part. He picked up as I was about to drop the phone and walk away.

He was reticent, but agreed that I could come out to the farm on Sunday, after dinner, after the cattle were fed at the end of the day. He'd meet me in his office, in the pole barn, away from the house. I told him I hadn't spoken to Julia about recommending her for honors and Advanced Placement courses, that I didn't want to until he approved. He said he appreciated the call.

I taught a single afternoon class; the last two hours of my day were free. I wanted to go home. I needed a drink. I wanted a bong hit. Instead, I sat in my room and listed what I'd need – the boat cover, extra anchor rope, the spare 40lb. pyramid anchor, ratchet straps, carabiners, scissors, the flask of bourbon, the last old bottle of Blanton's my father had left me, spiked with Ambien, and the sap the old man had kept in the garage. When the bell rang, at the end of the last period, I picked up my briefcase and walked outside. Sunlight filtered through the trees at the edge of the teacher's parking lot, whose leaves had overnight turned crimson and umber. A light breeze rattled through them. I drove to the Ace hardware. I would need Ollie's help, but wanted him to be as clean as fresh snow. I laughed at the thought. Ollie grew weed, cheated on his taxes, slept with several women simultaneously, and hated all police. He had told me one evening, drunk and stoned, that in North Dakota his father had volunteered to shoot an FBI agent, that he wished he would have, and it was the first time he'd ever spoken of it.

"Yo," I called out, and stepped inside the empty store. It was common that no one was there, save Ollie. I had never seen more than a customer or two in the store, at any one time, in years. It could've been because the place resembled a thrift shop more than a

hardware. Shit lay, or was hung, in every available space. Spades and rakes, power tools, new and old Schwinn bicycles, a thousand gallons of paint, all sat, covered in a light shell of dust. Some of it had been there for a long time. People in Madison wondered how Ollie's business survived. Most of them chalked any success Ollie had up to the fact that he was "an Indian," subsidized by our own leftist government.

"Hola," came Ollie's baritone. I heard the stairs from the basement creak beneath his weight. Ollie was often asked if he was the actor who played "Chief" in that Nicolson film, and I didn't blame them because Ollie could have been his double, but it always struck me as akin to saying that all blacks looked the same. And though this place is still a part of me, even now, as I recall being there, I hate its smallness more than ever. It was Friday afternoon and the farm trucks were parked grill to bumper in front of Barb's Bar and Grill. A John Deere tractor sat on the next block. Ollie stood at the top of the stairs.

"I have a favor to ask," I said

"About all you got brother. You look like shit."

"Not sleeping well my friend."

"Need to add some Indica to the mix. I can take care of that."

"I wondered if you'd spot my rig, Sunday evening, later than usual."

"What are you doing out then?"

"Mousing."

"Maybe too late in the season for that. I'll go along. Make sure you come back in one piece."

"This needs to be a solo trip. I need to think some shit through."

"Your parents are together my brother. They're at peace. Why not you?"

"Just an angry young white man, I guess."

"Yeah, I'll go out and inspect the crop. Get your rig on the way back in. Bring you something to make your dreams sweet."

I walked across the street to my truck. I looked in at Barb's, and could hear the voices inside through the open door; a Toby Keith song played on the jukebox; some of the voices sang along.

Saturday came and everything I would need was in the boat by noon. I opened the garage door and trickle charged my mother's old Saab. I pulled it onto the lawn, facing the street, and washed and waxed it. I placed a "for sale" sign under the wipers. Everyone here would know the story, but here isn't the whole world, I thought. Fuck them anyway. I'd take the first offer I got.

I promised myself I would not drink, that my hands would need to be steady, my wits about me. Beau Baker was a big man. His high school shot and discuss records still held, and he'd posthumously enter the Dedham County Sports Hall of Fame. He was larger now, in middle age, than he was then. I was a miler, a twig. Still, I was intractable, a heat-seeking missile with a heart and a mind. I sat on the porch and chain-smoked Ollie's weed. I slept, and woke only when a mosquito flew into my ear. It was dark. The courthouse tower chimed twice.

Sunday dawns unseasonably warm. The truck and trailer are parked in the yard. I run until the sweat drips from my fingertips, my legs and chest ache, and I hear the rush of water in my ears. I sit at the kitchen table and study the week's lessons, but don't know why. Just after lunch a couple from Lansing look at my mother's car, and ask what it would take to buy it on the spot. They take it for a long drive, and are surprised when I

agree to take their check, and sign over the title on the spot. They drive it home, and the garage sits empty. Shadows from the trees elongate across the yard. I walk inside and eat. I take a long pull from my flask. I check that the pills have dissolved in the bottle I will hand Beau and repair the wax seal. I clean an old glass. And wait.

I pull into the driveway of Baker Farms at seven minutes after six, but it's still nearly a quarter mile to the house and barns. There are no lights on in the house as I go by, though Julia's car sits out front. I roll to a stop near the largest barn, and see Beau, behind his desk, through the screen window of the office door. He looks up at my truck. I gather the old bottle and the cut glass tumbler I've brought; my own flask tucked in my shirt pocket. I take my briefcase, and climb from the truck, walk towards him, tell myself to breathe.

"Jarvis Church," Beau calls out. His baritone voice reverberates off the metal walls. I step through the door.

"Nice to see you, Beau," I tell him, and hand him the bottle and the glass. "Thought you might like this. It was my old man's. Won't find this in the liquor store here."

"I've sworn the stuff off, but feel free to pour yourself a glass," Beau says. I pull the flask from my pocket. "Brought some from a sister bottle – been out on the river all day."

"That's right, you're one of those fly slingers."

I nod. There's no other plan, no other way, I think.

"What's up with Julia's classes? Beau asks.

"Would you honor a dying man's request Beau? From an old team mate, an old school mate?"

"What the fuck are you saying Church? I thought this was about Julia."

"Would you?"

"I would."

"I've got ALS Beau, same thing that killed my old man. I'm going to die just like him. I have a couple of years maybe."

"Jesus, Church. Why tell me?"

"Have a glass of old bourbon with me."

He uncaps the bottle and pours a tall shot and drinks it half empty.

"Who knows?"

"Just us Beau. Appreciate if it stayed that way."

"Sure thing," he says. I believe him.

"Damn fine stuff though." I raise my flask. Beau drains his glass and pours another. Time is all I need now, and consider the irony of it. I consider what I shared with Beau, I consider his promise to me, its weight, and his weight. I will need to get him out of that chair. I wonder if he has had enough whisky, and if I am up to this. *A man is not a grackle.*

"Let's take a break and get some air. Come on outside and check out the drift boat," I say.

Beau rises unsteadily. "Jesus Christ," he says.

I open the door for him, and follow him into the cool evening air. It is almost dark, a last sliver of magenta on the horizon.

Beau leans on the gunwale of the boat. "What the fuck, Church," he begins to say when I lift the sap from one oarlock and strike him behind the ear. He staggers. I strike him again, harder, and drop the sap. I put my shoulder into his midsection and lift him over the side of the boat. He groans, still conscious. I pick up the sap and beat him until he does not move, or make a sound. I am careful not to wound him. I want no blood. I cover him and the boat. There is no light in the farmyard, and I don't turn on the truck's headlamps until we are far down the road. When we arrive at the launch it is empty, and I'm relieved.

We are in the main current for almost two hours. I push the oars to gain what speed I can. Above the pool I drop the anchor. I have added extra rope. When the boat ceases to drift I let go of the sticks, and climb over him. I don't know if he is still breathing or not; I don't care. I only think through what is necessary. I cut his clothes off, and remove his boots, and put them into a duffel bag I will burn, and till the ashes into the garden. I ratchet strap a pyramid anchor to his legs, and roll his torso over the side. I imagine him waking when his face hits the cold water, but he does not. I step on the boat's anchor release, and we move downstream. Directly above the whirlpool I throw the anchor strapped to his ankles over the side and his body is pulled down. I think I see his eyes open as he disappears into the darkness, though it is only an illusion. The boat spins. I pull hard on one oar, but it is now pointed to where the current smashes into the bank. I backstroke hard, away from it, point myself downstream. I drift.

At the takeout Ollie is waiting with my truck and trailer. It is nearly midnight. We trailer the boat, and drive back to Ollie's truck without speaking. I see him study me in the dim light of the cab, see the questions that he ultimately decides to keep. I drive home

and park in the empty garage. I dump the duffel bag in the burn barrel and pour lighter fluid on it, ignite it, and wait until there is nothing but ash. I sit on the porch for a long time. I sleep.

I am in my room at seven. I read, and reread, my lecture notes, and drink strong coffee. The bell rings at 8:05, and I teach all day. Julia is in class. She wears a Van Halen T-shirt, the bruises on her arms faded to almost nothing. I drive home. Till the garden. Think of what I have done, and that I will not fish again this season, of my parents and of Julia, and then I don't think anymore. After today, nothing will be as it was. The school year will slide into phantasm, autumn will give way to winter, and winter to spring, as if it were part of a dream. Julia will be gone by Christmas, first to her mother's, then to prep school somewhere out east. Spring will come, then summer. I will resign, sell my parents' house, and buy a new truck. By the time I wake I am here, on the edge of nowhere, on the spine of a mountain two-thousand miles from home. I've lived several years beyond what anyone expected, including myself. But I tremble so badly now I can barely finish this. I will float the big river at the foot of the mountain one last time.

1955

When I was nine, Jimmy Foster's family owned the property next to ours. My grandfather had bought our place, seventy acres and the farmhouse, in 1913. He intended to grow vinifera grapes here, like the ones he saw in northern Europe when he traveled there after competing in the half-mile at the Olympic Summer Games in Stockholm. Jimmy's family had been here a generation before that, and his father had the same intention, though Jimmy's old man had never been to Europe.

Jimmy was four years older than I was. We played together because we were the only two kids for miles. Madison, the county seat, was half an hour away in the old Ford truck. If it weren't for Jimmy, it would have been just the dogs and me. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have seen the big rooster pheasant he brought down with a sling-shot. I would have missed watching him clean the guts out of the bird, then step on its head and pull it by the legs to skin it. If it weren't for him, I would never have fallen in love with the river, and the trout it held, and the art of catching them on a fly.

The soil, where the grape vines were to be planted was loose and rocky. Unplanted ditches terraced the hillside. We, Ruby and Jade, my black Labrador retrievers and I, met Jimmy at the boundary of the two properties. He held a clump of dirt in his hand.

"What's that Jimmy?" I asked.

"A grenade."

"Looks like a dirt clod."

"It's what the Germans lobbed at us and we lobbed back at them."

"Why?"

"To win the war, stupid," he said. "Let's play trench warfare."

“What’s that?”

“It’s easy. I’ll be the Germans and sit in the trench over there. You can be the Americans and sit in this one, and we’ll lob grenades at each other. First to three hits wins.”

“I don’t want to be hit with a dirt clod.”

“Then look up. If some dirt lands on your sissy ass it’s a hit. Is that better?”

“Yeah.”

The dogs and I crawled into the shallow trench nearest us. Jimmy walked twenty yards away and then disappeared.

I took my first shot in his last known direction. He laughed.

Jimmy retaliated with several throws, one which burst close enough for me to yell “hit.” The dogs moved down the ditch, away from me.

“Die Yankee,” Jimmy yelled.

I picked a large chunk of earth from beneath my feet. It felt dense. Part of a brown glass bottle was embedded in it. I knew that I shouldn’t throw the glass, but figured that it didn’t matter because my shot would never come close to him. I lobbed it towards the sound of Jimmy’s voice. Several more clods burst close to me. I waited.

At first, I thought Jimmy’s shriek was amusement at my pathetic aim. I poked my head above the dirt wall. The dogs whined. Jimmy staggered out of the trench with his hand over the side of his head. Blood and vitreous fluid streamed through his fingers and down his face.

“My eye,” he screamed.

Ruby and Jade made a beeline towards the farmhouse. Their deep barks echoed over the ridge.

The doctors managed to save Jimmy's eye but he would never see out of it again. The butt-end of the pint-bottle had shattered on impact. A large shard of glass cleaved Jimmy's eyeball in half. The gash on his brow required a dozen stitches.

That night I sat at the kitchen table across from my father. I thought he was going to whip my ass with his belt. He had done it once before, when I'd pushed my mother after she'd beaten me badly at a game of cards and had tried to hug me in consolation.

My father smoked an unfiltered Camel cigarette and drank from a dark brown bottle of Pabst beer. The bottle looked a lot like the one I'd lobbed into Jimmy's eyeball. My father took a long drag, and blew the smoke out through his nose. He raised the bottle, and when he had finished his drink, he looked at me.

"Today you learned that once you squeeze the trigger you can't take it back, no matter how much you might want to."

There was silence.

"Your mother is still down at the Foster's. Put yourself to bed," he told me.

I stood, and then climbed the stairs. In the darkness of my room I wished he'd have beat me with his belt until I bled like Jimmy.

Fishing with Kate

Kate throws tight, delicate loops from the front of the boat. The flies she casts are tiny, and alight on the water effortlessly and without ringlets. Her father, Harrison, sits at the oars. It is early, barely light, and a mist hangs over the Trinity River. A blue heron appears out the gray air, glides downstream, and lands atop a dead tree that has tipped into the water. Harrison has always felt this was a sign of good fortune. He is proud of his daughter. Today, he hopes for the chance to tell her so. She is a fine angler and tomorrow she will turn fifteen. There will be cake and ice cream and pizza, and a handful of Kate's friends; they will swim in the river, and later roast marshmallows or make s'mores over the bonfire. There'll be no party dresses or themes. Kate is not that way.

Kate's mother, Belle, still sleeps; she doesn't share her husband, or eldest daughter's, piscaphillia. Kate's sister, Margaret, sleeps too. She is only seven. The Lundgrens live in a house above the river, near where it widens and deepens, and becomes big water by midwestern standards. From there it flows, undammed, into Lake Michigan. Harrison and Kate put in from their backyard, which abuts the river, and later Belle will bring Margaret, and the truck and trailer, to Stewart's Bridge, where they will take out, and the four of them will ride home, talking all at once over top of each other; or it will be quiet, and Harrison and Kate will replay the fish they caught, and those they lost. Margaret will ask to stop for a bratwurst, and a vanilla ice cream cone at The Creamery. After, they will roll into the house like a herd, and Sammy, the black lab, will be so excited that he will need to go outside and piss, and eventually the girls will sleep, each in their own rooms upstairs. Downstairs, Belle may invite Harrison inside her. She likes the way she feels when he orgasms, as if he enlarges within her momentarily, fills

her beyond what she used to imagine was possible. She will collapse on top of him, and he will feel her skin cool, her sweat evaporate. The only sounds they will hear is the rush of the water below them, perhaps the wail of a coyote, the clicks of the bats who hunt above the river.

It is late in August, and Harrison thinks this may be their last float, the last real time he and Kate are alone together, until the river becomes dark and cold and the steelhead come. School will start. Kate plays basketball, and starts practice in November; Belle teaches high school Math; Harrison writes, mostly short stories these days, and the single finished novel, and teaches evening classes at the community college down in Lansing; Margaret will be in second grade this year. He supposes he will fish the winter run alone. Last season, on Christmas break, Kate caught a bright hen that went twenty pounds. He is sad for a moment.

"Tricos?" Kate whispers.

"Definitely Tricos," he replies.

Hundreds of tiny flies are in the air now, beneath the dissipating fog. The fish rise to those that struggle on the surface to dry their wings and become air born. There are a hundred circular forms around the boat.

"Where should I cast?" She asks.

"Look for the biggest ripple, some nervous water."

"Then what?"

"Let it hunt."

Kate casts above a set of shoulders which push against the current. She waits. Her line tightens and she is attached to a large trout.

"Don't horse him," he says.

She laughs. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Why not, 'don't pull too hard?'"

He laughs with her.

"Don't pull too hard," he says.

By lunch time Kate has caught several fish, though none as large as the first. They anchor the boat near the bank in the shade, and eat ham and cheese sandwiches and potato salad that Belle has made for them. Kate drinks lemonade. Harrison has a black IPA. They gather wild blackberries that grow along the bank and put them in zip lock bags and then into the cooler. Belle will make jam from them, and at Christmas Kate will tie red bows on the Mason jars, and they will be a small gift from summer to the dark and cold of winter. Harrison eats the berries by the handful before they make it to the bags. They are warm and sweet.

"Will I feel older tomorrow?" She asks him.

"That doesn't happen until later I think," he answers.

"How much later?"

"Like when you're old."

"Like you, and mom?"

"Yeah, like us."

Kate smiles.

"I guess I should take my turn on the oars," she says, and stows her trash in the boat.

The rule between them has always been *land a fish, get the sticks*, but Harrison suspended it earlier so that Kate could fish all morning.

"No. You fish. I'm an old man, but I have more time to be out here than you do."

"I didn't mean really old."

"I am old. You have the whole river. What do you want to do?"

"Throw streamers."

Harrison keeps a streamer rod in the boat. It is something that he loves to do, not just because it moves, and catches, more big fish, but for the shear physicality of it. You throw a weighted fly on a sinking line, and rip the retrieve ninety degrees across the current, imitating a baitfish or something large and edible, evoking the flight or fight response of an alpha predator, a brown trout measured in pounds rather than inches. Kate has fished streamers before, and, because her cast is natural, she does not struggle with the extra weight of line and fly. She is not a large woman though, not tall like her mother is, or her sister will be. She lacks the leverage and stamina to power long cast after long cast against the bank, and strip the line across the heavy current, like her father. Instead, she rests sometimes, and allows the streamer to float below her and twists the line with her hands on the retrieve, a herky-jerky pattern, but regular enough that the fish always ambush the fly between twists.

The afternoon wears on, fishless. Kate has exhausted her father's tactics, and her own. Harrison has changed the colors of the streamers she fishes – dark, light, yellow, something chartreuse and bejeweled that does not exist in nature – and still nothing, not even a follow to quicken their hearts momentarily.

"I'll row now. We're not far from the take-out. Please fish," she says.

"Arm tired?"

"Yes."

He knows that may be true, but she is not used to being shut out either. Wordlessly, they switch positions in the boat. They have done it often enough to know each other's movements – counterclockwise, oar handles pointing upstream, the rod stowed where Harrison can lift it and cast in one motion. He looks back at his daughter. He worries that she is unhappy.

Droplets of water spray from the heavy line as Harrison's casts unfurl across the water. Kate keeps the boat in the middle of the river as her father bounces the big fly off the bank. A hundred yards from where they will takeout, Harrison finally hooks a fish. Kate can see her mother and sister, who wave.

"Hold us here. It's bull-dogging down deep," he says.

Kate backstrokes; she pushes her feet against the braces and lays into it with all of her hundred pounds.

"I don't know what this is Kate; doesn't feel like a brown."

"Has to be dad."

"Carp? Big sucker?"

"On a streamer? You snag it?"

"Maybe."

Kate works hard to hold them stationary in the current, but the best she can do is retard their drift. Harrison drops his rod tip sideways, parallel to the water, and coaxes the big fish to follow. Harrison wonders if he has hooked a rogue fish, an early steelhead, or a rare northern pike. He doesn't want to imagine the brown trout it might be. It would be huge, prehistoric looking, with a kype jaw and a great, round, caramel belly. He has taken back very little line for the last seventy yards.

"Kate, can you get us close to the takeout? Where I can hop in and fight it from the water?"

She is determined to do what he asks. She is tired though. She breathes deeply and pulls hard against the river, and then feels it release her as she nears the river's edge.

Harrison climbs from the boat and wades out waist deep. The current piles against his upstream leg. A smaller man, a more inexperienced angler, would be floating down river, their waders filling with water. Harrison knows the day will come when he will not risk such a move. Today though, he takes one step deeper and the fish runs. It is as if he is attached a VW bus, his reel spins, line peels from it until there is nothing but backing. Harrison presses his palm to the reel, and then regains the line he has lost.

When the fish breaches, Belle and Margaret and Kate are standing near the boat, which Belle has helped Kate pull onto the bank. A fish as large as Harrison's arm hurtles from the water. It shakes its head, and its body follows in a close arc. It is the largest fish Harrison has seen in this river. In the low light, the atomized water from its body forms a prism around it. It is twenty-five feet away, and he bows to it. He can feel the eyes of his wife and daughters on him. Blood pounds against his ear drums, his vison tunnels. The fish crashes back into the river and runs, runs out the end of the backing on the reel, runs until Harrison hears the high note of the leader give way, feels the rod's tension release and the line go slack. Alone, he would swear; blaspheme Yahweh or Jah, or whatever god he could think of in the moment. He reels up all the backing and fly line and examines where the leader has broken, halfway up, no failure of his cinch knot or terminal connections. His family waits for him to walk from the water. When he does, they all hug him silently because they know there are no words to make it better for him.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he says. His wife smiles.

They winch the boat onto the trailer and Harrison ties it down and then checks and rechecks all the straps. Kate and Margaret pile in the backseat of the truck. Belle sits beside him and pulls herself into him.

"Ew," Margaret says. Kate laughs.

They stop at The Creamery for bratwurst and onion rings and hand scooped ice cream in waffle cones. Margaret doesn't have to ask. They park in front of their house, and hear Sammy bark. They stand in the yard and pick out the stars they know as Sammy pisses in his favorite spots.

Margaret is inside first, and Sammy and Belle follow. Harrison and Kate stand in the yard still.

"That fish was amazing. I'm sorry dad," she says.

He wraps his arm around his daughter.

"I left it there for you."

"Thanks."

They walk inside the house.

Kate and Margaret sleep, Harrison sits down at his desk, and Belle whispers to him to "not to stay up too late." He begins a new short story, whose opening line is, "She walked with a limp but what he wanted from her didn't involve walking." He writes until one in the morning, fueled by a pint of Guinness and three fingers of Jefferson's bourbon. He forgets his wife's admonishment. He wants to make a Monte Cristo sandwich but has had mixed results in the past, including a small grease fire. He opens the desk drawer and takes out the birthday card he has bought for Kate. The chair groans underneath him.

He thinks of the moments he might have spoken to Kate today and wonders why he didn't. They are gone now, like the water they fished, absorbed into the river of time. Are there are magic words into womanhood anyway? Should he have said that life promises nothing permanent but change? That he will eventually disappoint her. That he considers himself a failure because his second book has not published, and he believes it never will. His fiction is too ripe with thwarted desires that express themselves in the form of imagined affairs between men and young women, and in descriptions of meals he is not skilled enough to prepare. "No one reads that shit anymore, too many trees, not enough strong female characters," his agent says.

He asks himself if there is wisdom in total honesty. Should Kate know that their finances are precarious, and that he and her mother's marriage is strained? That he obviously cannot see the future, but sometimes he lays awake at night, and imagines it all undone, and thinks that she should begin to hate him now. Margaret too. Isn't he supposed to be king of the castle of ignorant bliss?

He wants to ask her if she sees herself with children, someday. He wants to ask what adventures she will pursue. She is a fine angler now, and she will be better than he is, and she should know all the world's water. He imagines her in the ocean, the edges of sky and water indeterminate; her casts are all long and perfect, and the fish she catches are iridescent blue chrome. She releases them back into the transparent sea.

He opens the card, and writes.

The Vivian Maier Diet

I drive to the Art Institute in Chicago to look at photographs by Vivian Maier, who will come to be known as the finest American photographer of this century. Her images, in black and white, are as if she were not there composing them, moments picked out of time, like notes sustained. In her subjects there is a longing for a wholeness they did not know. So, I go to Rodger's Park Beach, where she used to sit, to try to find her. The lake reaches as far as I can see, but she is not there, of course, having been dead for years now. I walk, hobble more accurately, a long way to East Walton, then Michigan Avenue; I shop in all the windows, and look for her there. I'm hungry from walking and eat Carne Asada tacos inside of Macy's, and don't want to trudge on my shitty limb back to my car, so I call an Uber and ride to it in the back of a late-model Toyota.

My driver, Maude Nesbit, is a middle school English teacher during the week.

"I've never heard of her," she says, when I tell her that Vivian Maier had lived nearby.

I'm struck by the incongruity of it, and want Maude to see the photos, as many as she can. I want her students to see them too. Near the lake, I hand Maude a Benjamin.

"Will you buy a ticket and go, and tell your class about it?"

She nods and takes the cash.

Chicago is half-way between the Mayo Clinic and home, in Michigan. I cannot stand the whole ride at once anymore, and have met Chicago, though not like Vivian Maier met Chicago. I have tried to eat my way through its big shoulders, barbequed, roasted, grilled and sliced thin. In Minnesota, the doctors will take the lion's share of my right leg, which has suffered and died from the diabetes, and it will be incinerated in the

bowels of the Mayo Clinic. A unanimous diagnosis, but I sought second opinions until there were no more. I will surely disappear from this disease as much as I will die of it, and I fear my death done unwell. The subjects of her pictures would have understood that.

From the seventh floor of The Drake I try to see Wisconsin, whose bratwurst and cheese I love, and whose trout streams I have largely, stupidly, ignored. I wonder if I might still fish the Kinnickinnic. *Not this go around*, my only daughter tells me, via text message. *If I am fully recovered by the winter I would like to fish Argentina; the beef there is some of the best in the world*, I reply. There is no definitive *No*. From my window, if I squint, I can capture the curve on the horizon, and think that before I go south I will buy a camera, and laugh at myself.

Later, for dinner at Gibson's, I settle for the small Porterhouse and a large salad, beginning my post-operative diet early. My waitress, Caitlyn, sees me reading the exhibit guide and asks, "have you come to Chicago to see Maier's work?"

I lie, and tell her that I'm a writer, working on a novel whose main character falls in love with Vivian, and whose love is, alas, unrequited.

She says she has seen Vivian Maier's exhibit multiple times, that she is twenty-five, and a student at Loyola Law. She is not even my daughter's age, but she's striking, with dark hair and green eyes, and I think of how easily I could fall in love with her. She could nurse me back to vitality, though she would eventually have to leave me because her love was too deep to bear watching me die. A writer friend once wrote that it was the fear of an unlived life that made us want women so young. I tip her overgenerously, and walk into the crisp autumn night.

I dream in black and white, like the photographs I can't get out of my head, though some of the images are mine, not hers: Caitlyn whispers to me in Latin; my ex-wife, now dead, sits beside Vivian Maier on a bench at Rodger's Park Beach, and they talk of bluegrass music; my father leans his motorbike against a black walnut, crouches, twists the sight, slows his heart, and squeezes the trigger, the Nazi major hears the window break, then nothing ever again; the smell of familiar perfume comes from I don't know where. Dutifully, at six, I wake and drag my dead leg two blocks for a maple custard and bacon long john, and a coffee with cream. In the early autumn light I wait while two men my age bring my bags and car to the hotel's front door. I think of going back to Gibson's, but cannot wait for them to open, and imagine Caitlyn, freshly woken, eating *huevos rancheros* with her boyfriend.

O'Berry's Service

Woodrow "Woody" Jones sat in the pale-yellow City of Madison Parks and Cemetery truck with the heater running, his khaki Carhart work jacket zipped up to his chin and his hands in his pockets. Woody's wispy grey hair was combed over to hide his balding scalp. He was five-foot-three, maybe, a hundred and twenty pounds dripping wet. Ezra Eugene Duncan, who went by the name of Easy, leaned against the driver's-side door and reached across the top of the cab. He wore a thin Gore-Tex shell over a goose down vest and gloves and a hat and tortoise shell Wayfarer prescription sunglasses. In a month Maple Grove Cemetery would be closed for burials, the ground too hard to dig without the large, specialized equipment a city Madison's size couldn't afford to buy. Any bodies to be interned over the winter would rest in the old Mausoleum until the ground thawed.

From where Easy stood he could see a several winding blacktopped roads lined with mature Oak, Maple, Ash, and the few miraculous elms. Some were a hundred feet tall with canopies almost as broad, all turned to shades of red, orange, yellow, and umber. Easy and Woody waited for the first sign of the hearse and the cars that would follow. The Madison Parks and Cemetery Department oversaw all the graveside services and burials in Maple Grove. During the summer much of the work would have been done by part-timers, but now it was just Easy, who was in his first season as the department head, and Woody, the only full-time employee the department kept year-round.

Easy had grown up in Madison, had been born in the hospital in Lansing, ten miles away to the north. Now, at twenty-seven, after almost ten years, split between college and his years in the Army, he was home again. Easy stayed above his parents garage in a two-room loft. His mother cooked his meals and even sometimes delivered

them to him, collected and did his laundry for him. His father mostly sat in his living room chair watching the television.

Woody lived at home with his mom too but his old man had been dead for nearly half a century, and was buried in the northwest corner of Maple Grove. Woody had been a full-timer in the Boneyard since he was nineteen and freshly graduated from Madison High School, almost forty years ago. Easy liked Woody. Though he thought him a simpleton. Their conversations hadn't ranged far from the weather and baseball and the particulars of their jobs. The environment and American sponsored wars in other countries were subjects well beyond in Woody's intellectual wheelhouse. That was fine by Easy. The irony was not lost on him, however, that his own situation was not that far removed from Woody's. He had begun to pray that he would not die in the same fucking place he was born.

Easy and Woody had dug Stephan O'Berry's grave the afternoon before and covered it with plywood overnight in the hope that exposure to the cold would harden the earth a little. It had been a wet autumn and the ground was saturated, which made the freshly dug earthen walls more likely to cave in. O'Berry's internment, and the setting of his monument were a big deal, and the mayor and city administrator had made it clear that Easy needed to put on a good show. O'Berry had been a kind of local hero, a small-town kid made good, rising through the state and national legislatures and then to a seat on the Michigan Supreme Court. Easy was anxious for procession to begin.

Woody had been reticent to speak all morning, which was unusual.

"Think the Lions will finally make the playoffs?" Easy asked.

"I don't think Chuck Long is leading them anywhere but to five-hundred."

"Me either."

Quiet returned to the truck. They would have turned on the radio in the cab but there was a gaping hole where it should have been. The City of Madison had purchased the last fleet of city vehicles in the bicentennial year, more than a decade ago, from a public auction in Vincennes, Indiana. None of the vehicles came with radios, or power windows, or power anything. The trucks were mostly 1974 International Harvester 200's, three speed manual transmissions with the shifter on the steering column. "Three on the tree," Woody used to say.

"Got big plans for the weekend?" he asked Easy.

"Yeah Woody, I'm headed to Paris with my supermodel girlfriend."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing Wood Man, I'm not doing anything."

"Just wondered."

"How about you?"

"Thought I might wander the booths at Down Home Days with my mom, go to the street dance maybe."

"Sounds awesome Woody."

Down Home Days was an annual festival of crafters, bakers, artisans, and flea-market vendors that took place in Madison every third weekend in October. The booths would be installed on the county courthouse lawn on Friday afternoon, and the gathering lasted throughout the weekend, punctuated by live music, a beer tent, and a street dance on Saturday night. Easy had enjoyed these weekends when he was a child, but now all it meant for him was odd looks and questions about what was he doing at home and what

his plans were. *If I had a fucking plan, I wouldn't be standing here*, Easy imagined saying, but he knew the locals were just being simple and kind. *They didn't drag your sorry ass home*, he reminded himself.

"What else do you know Woody?"

"I know the funeral procession is late and we may be eating lunch in truck."

"That would suck since my lunch is at home."

"I'll share one of my sandwiches with you."

"I don't eat red meat."

"Yeah, that'd suck."

Truth is, the procession wasn't that late, but it would be a solid hour after everyone left before they could break for lunch. Easy knew Woody's lunch routine never deviated. He would sit in a chair near the kerosene stove in the Quonset building they used for the mowers, grass trimmers, and hand tools, for shelter when it rained, or in Woody's case, snowed. One of his duties was to keep the cemetery's roads plowed in the winter. When the weather became warm Woody brought a fan from home and pointed it at his chair where he sat and drank instant coffee in the mornings. His lunch always came in a cooler rather than the standard brown paper bag, and every day there were two meat and cheese sandwiches, potato or macaroni salad, a piece of fruit pie, sometimes two, and more instant coffee. Woody said that his mom got up every morning to make his lunch and pack the cooler. She would lay out his dark blue Dickies trousers, fresh boxers, and long-sleeved shirt with City of Manchester embroidered on the left front pocket. She placed clean socks atop his boots. All Woody did in the morning was roll out of bed, stuff a Jimmy Dean sausage and cheese biscuit in his mouth and walk out his front door. He

lived half a block from the Boneyard. He said he could see his old man's grave from the window of his upstairs room.

"Here they are Woody. Almost right on time."

"It'll still take forever. There'll be a thousand mourners. You don't know who this guy is?"

"Vaguely, Woody. I've been gone for ten years."

"Former state Supreme Court Justice, State Senator, Madison's Mayor. He was the Elementary Principal at the Lutheran school my mom sent me to after my dad died."

"Was he a decent guy?"

Woody was quiet for a moment.

"Not really."

Woody stared out at the procession. Cars began to line up two and three abroad for fifty yards on the Boneyard's tight, curving road.

"But it was a long time ago."

"No statute of limitations on hate."

And Easy knew hate. He was intimately familiar it, though he hadn't always been. Hate came to him on a hot-as-hell June morning, in small village just over Nicaraguan the border. The bodies, more precisely, the pieces of the men and the boys. Sandinista soldiers had killed and mutilated those who would not join the revolution. Their machetes no match against the soldiers' automatic weapons. The rebels had scattered the legs and arms and heads and torsos about the small field of vegetables adjacent to the village, and in the tall grasses beyond it. Easy and his men collected the pieces and buried them and

consoled, as best they could, the mothers and wives and daughters. This was not the operation Easy had planned. His intel had been bad. His squad a day late.

"I'll shit in his hole for you Woody. It'll be after lunch when we finish, a little coffee, who'll know but you and me?"

"That'd be desecration," Woody replied.

"Fuck desecration."

"No."

Easy lowered his head and walked towards the gravesite. The rest of the incoming vehicles crept into the cemetery, the small, orange flags on their hoods making them resemble the flocks of crows in the boneyard's few tall pines. Easy could feel the heat rise from his skull. Frank Franklin, Madison's mayor, stood next to Curtis Dixon, the funeral director.

"Curtis, Frank," Easy said.

They looked at him and nodded, and continued to speak among themselves, as if Easy weren't there.

The pallbearers slid O'Berry's casket from the back of the hearse. It was a pale grey metal box, with dark wooden panels inlaid on its sides. Stainless Steel and walnut. A rich man's box.

"We have this Duncan. You can make yourself scarce," Franklin announced.

It sounded more like an order than a question.

A dark blue Suburban with government plates and a United States Marine Corps insignia pulled into an opening near the gravesite. Seven Marines in their dress blues exited, opened the back doors, and unpacked their M-16's. They looked sharp. Not like

the ones Easy knew. You couldn't have cleaned them up in a fucking car wash; they were dirty from the inside out. Guys who'd pitch one prisoner out the side door of a helo at two hundred feet, about where you could still hear a body hit the tree line, to get the others to talk. Easy reminded himself that he didn't judge them. He had no right.

The service began and Easy returned to the truck.

"Did you ever tell your mom about this asshole?" Easy asked.

"She got the notes from school. Told me to mind my P's and Q's. Told me to think of my dead father."

Easy stood outside the truck and Woody sat inside it for another hour, mostly in silence, until all the mourners had left. Easy thought about what Woody had left unsaid. It squeezed him and dug at the same darkness he'd felt when they'd found a Sandinista reconnaissance team hidden in the jungle five kilometers from the village. His men executed them summarily, with single shots to the head, and hung them in the trees. His squad was off the reservation now, Second Lieutenant Ezra "Easy" Duncan in command.

"Thought they'd never leave," Woody said.

"Let's get the lid on this SOB and then we can break for lunch and come back this afternoon and finish up," Easy replied.

They set up the tripod with the block and tackle and chain, and attached the lid to it, and lowered it onto the vault. Woody jumped into the hole and checked the seal. He pronounced it good to go. They broke down the equipment and returned to the Quonset building.

Easy rode his bike into town for lunch. He ate at a small café across from the courthouse. A bookstore, a pharmacy, an ice creamery, and other shops encircled the

courthouse square. Built in the Beaux-Arts style, the courthouse's rotunda could be seen for miles over the canopies of the trees. Easy ate a bowl soup, and a slice of bread with butter. He read the community newspaper, whose front page carried a long piece on Stephan O'Berry. It might have been an impressive biography if it weren't for what Woody had said. A sidebar carried the schedule of O'Berry's enshrinement, the burial and setting of his monument to coincide with Downhome Days. Like a three day wake, Easy thought.

When Easy returned to the boneyard he found Woody in his chair by the kerosene heater finishing a piece of Rhubarb pie. Easy was breathy and moist with the beginnings of a dense sweat.

"That thing fast?" Woody asked, between his last bite of pie and a long tug at his coffee cup.

"Yeah I can pretty much haul ass anywhere I want to go."

"Sweet."

"I read about old man O'Berry at lunch. Said he died of brain cancer. Had a long, lingering shitty death."

"Yeah. So?"

"Thought you might appreciate the poetic justice."

"We'd better get to it if we want to finish filling in the grave, and manage to get anything else done today," Woody said.

"Ok." Easy replied.

He wondered why Woody hadn't expressed something like satisfaction that the son-of-a-bitch had suffered and then died. That O'Berry was worm food. That they were setting the table.

Easy let Woody drive the old truck to the gravesite.

"Let's be done with this shit," Easy said.

"What's the matter?" Woody asked.

"Three day funeral for a great man who wasn't."

"Things were different then Easy."

"Bullshit."

"You weren't there to know."

They took turns shoveling dirt over the cement box, and Woody intermittently tamped the dirt around the sides of the vault with a 2X4. When the box was covered, Woody began to shuffle around the hole, packing the final foot of earth with his boots. He looked like an Irish folk dancer as he bounced from one foot to the other, holding his hands and arms by his sides. It amused Easy, no matter how many times he watched it.

"Woody, I have to go piss. Sure you don't want me to let it go in here?"

"No. Walk over to the woods. I'll finish this."

Easy walked the fifty or so meters to the edge of the trees near the creek. He thought about what Woody had said earlier, and felt his ire begin to unravel. It had been a long time since he had felt this way. It didn't matter if he were there or not. Woody stood in the hole and leaned on a shovel. He watched Easy return.

They replaced the same twenty-four squares of sod they had removed the day prior, and swept the grass, and then swept the dirt from the foundation for O'Berry's

stone. At seven-and-a-half feet high, the granite headstone would be the tallest in the cemetery. By the time they had finished cleaning up it was late in the afternoon. The trees and monuments cast long shadows across the dull yellow grass.

"Hard day," Woody said as they loaded the hand tools into the back of the truck. It was twilight when they returned to the Quonset building.

"Punch out. I'll put this shit away in the morning. Hey Woody, come over and have a shot with me," Easy said.

Easy had never asked Woody to his place before. He hoped he might, after a drink or two, convince Woody to say more to him, to make it simple for him, to justify what he had begun to consider.

"No, I'm late for supper as it is. Mom will be worried."

"Why does it matter that I wasn't there to know Woody?"

"We didn't wear bike helmets, we rode in the back of pickups and farm wagons, we got our asses paddled. Somehow we survived."

"Not everyone."

"Next time on the drink thing," Woody said, and walked into the building. Easy heard the thud of the time clock.

Woody walked to his grey Buick Regal. He backed the car out and drove across the small bridge that led out of the cemetery. Easy closed up and locked the Quonset building and grabbed his bike from where it leaned against the building. He followed Woody out of the Boneyard. *What the fuck is wrong with you Easy?*

The apartment was small, maybe twelve by twenty-five; it was never really intended to be living space, more his old man's dream woodshop, but his father had no time these days for much else besides ESPN and CNN. There was heat and electricity, and a small wet room off the kitchenette with a can and a standup shower. The ceiling pitched sharply on two sides and at six- foot-four he couldn't stand up fully along the walls. The only furniture Easy kept was a futon near the middle of the room and in front of it were a half a dozen milk crates that held a MacIntosh receiver, a CD player, and a hundred CDs. A set of tower speakers stood in two corners of the room. He had a bookshelf, and a drafting table and stool, where he read. Underneath, was a small refrigerator, and inside a case of Anchor Steam Ale, a beer he couldn't buy in the Midwest. A buddy, who lived in Pismo Beach, California shipped him a case once a month. A half empty bottle of Grand Centenario tequila sat on the drafting table. He stowed his bike, helmet, and boots near the steps. It wasn't much, but it was better than the accommodations he was used to, and he was grateful his parents let him use it. Be part of a shit-show operation that came down from the top and ends up going south, and see where you end up, he thought. He changed out of his work clothes and into basketball shorts and a T-shirt and sat at his drafting table, and stared into the empty street. He drank shots until he couldn't anymore.

Easy usually didn't work on the weekends, but this was no ordinary weekend. He knew the boneyard was to be without flaw when O'Berry's headstone was set. He opened the Quonset building the next morning to a message on his machine from the Mayor. Easy's head throbbed. Franklin said that O'Berry's monument would arrive from the stone-cutter's early in the day on Sunday, early enough that Easy and Woody would need make

the grounds look good by end of day today. Franklin said that he hoped Easy would shine a positive light on the city. Woody rolled in at 6:59.

Easy and Woody spent the day emptying garbage cans and checking headstones, making sure no one had violated any cemetery regulations, like decorating their loved one's grave with a plastic jack-o-lantern, or a miniature skeleton. They took a long break at mid-morning and another in the middle of the afternoon. Woody took an extra fifteen minutes for lunch while Easy slept outside, the sun on his face and the cool grass underneath him. Near the end of the day they cruised the cemetery one last time, making sure it all looked sharp. Easy and Woody returned to Quonset building, where Easy pulled two cold Hamm's from the fridge below his desk and gave Woody one and cracked his own. Easy said nothing and took one long pull and then crushed the empty can and tossed it towards the trash. It landed inside it cleanly.

"Swish. See you tomorrow Woody. Enjoy the street dance," he said.

"Maybe I'll see you there, but I doubt it, huh?"

"Probably not."

Easy hadn't been to a Down Home Days street dance in a decade. The last band of the night was a local rockabilly act Easy had seen before, when he was in college. It was a good band. He sat in his room for a long time though, unable to make himself go. He asked himself why he couldn't summon the courage to stand in the street among a bunch of yokels. Why he couldn't find polite small talk. He had been in the shit. He had lived in a horror show far away from here. This was supposed to be benign. This was supposed to be where you could leave the rest behind. He felt the invisible arms around his chest, his breaths quicken, his head thrum. Finally, he managed a deep breath and a

long exhale, and then another, and then another. He stood and lifted his light down jacket from its peg by the wall and descended the stairs. He wanted to drink beer and enjoy the band. He wanted to find Woody.

Easy walked the back alleys between his place and downtown. It wasn't a long walk. He could hear the band startup as he reached the courthouse square. He bought two draft beers and went looking for Woody. He saw several faces he knew from high school, and some who would have known his mother and father. He nodded at them and smiled politely. He hoped they did not recognize him. Ten years was a long time. Easy took long drinks and finished his beer by the time he found Woody, who stood on the corner of the courthouse lawn farthest from the stage. He bobbed his head and shuffled. Movements not unlike his grave dance.

"Wood Man," Easy yelled.

Woody looked up. Easy closed the distance between them.

"I thought you were in Paris?"

"What's Paris got on all this?" Easy replied.

They both stood and listened to the band play "Brand New Cadillac." Woody bobbed until the song was over.

"I should just blow the son-of-a-bitch's monument to hell." Easy said, finally.

"You're drunk Easy."

"Tell me what he did Woody."

"I did tell you. It was different then."

"That doesn't justify anything. Did he hit you?"

“Everybody got spanked Easy. What’s the matter with you? I’m no victim if that’s what you’re looking for.”

Easy was silent.

“What are you looking for?” Woody finally asked.

The music and the voices faded as Easy walked. The boneyard was down the hill, in the small stream valley not far from town. Easy unlocked the Quonset building and stepped into a world of dark shapes. He sat at his desk in the semi-darkness, and stared at the jerry cans stacked against the opposite wall. He took a beer from under his desk and drank it, and then drank another. He walked out to where O’Berry lay.

Easy sat in the grass at the foot of the grave, his legs splayed in front of him. It was quiet here. He was not afraid to be in the boneyard. He had been among the dead before. In a few hours O’Berry’s monument would be set. He imagined coming back to torch the whole thing, imagined the fire he would set lighting up the sky. He knew, though, that the stone would not burn entirely. It would be something botched. It would be the same as it had been before. There’d be no intercession on his behalf from a full-bird colonel. No resigning from this, no honorable discharge, no quiet packing up and moving home. This was all there was. He wondered at what point he had to come this? When had the ghosts inextricably bonded to him? He wanted his past, and Woody’s past, to be clean again. He wanted to burn the rest of it away. He wept.

It was early in the morning, still dark, when O’Berry’s monument was set. The stone company brought a crane, with lights, to lift it off the truck and drop it on its foundation

without disturbing one blade of grass. It was a huge slab of jet-black granite, “O’Berry” carved in Gothic letters a foot tall. It cast shadows in multiple directions in the lights of the crane. When the heavy equipment was gone, Easy and Woody swept the dirt from the monument, and swept the sod too, so that the grass looked unscathed. They stashed their tools in the truck and leaned against its cab. Easy retrieved the large wreath draped with the American flag from the bed of the truck and leaned it against the base of the monument. Easy and Woody returned to the Quonset building and sat inside. The gravesite ceremony proceeded without them. Homage was paid to Stephan O’Berry.

“You’re okay Easy,” Woody said.

Easy nodded, though he didn’t believe it.

Dedham

Rain was in the forecast – light precipitation early, showers in the afternoon and through the overnight hours. It was nearly nine in the morning, but Cleat Jones needed the headlights of his old Ford 100 to navigate the mile and a half from his home to a parking spot near Beaux Arts, the coffeeshop across from the Dedham county courthouse. Cleat's pickup had belonged to his old man, and so did the Carhart jacket that Cleat wore against the rain. The tool set, which rode on the passenger floor, was missing pieces now, but it had been too. Cleat's father had been dead for fourteen years. The courthouse offices on the first floor did not open until ten, but the courtrooms and judges' chambers and holding cells on the second floor would be open an hour before that. Cleat still had a little time. He walked inside and ordered a black coffee, and sat next to the large front window that looked onto the street and onto the lawn of the courthouse beyond it. Sylvia Jones, though soon to be some other surname, likely her mother's, angled her old Chevy to a halt in front. Its headlights briefly illuminated her father.

He had told her on the phone last night that they should meet at the coffeeshop across the street, and walk into the courthouse together. She told him he was confused.

"You don't need to do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"In fact, you don't even need to be there. Didn't anyone tell you that?"

The last thing she had said to him was "I'll be free of you, and you won't see the inside of a cell, and beyond that I don't give a shit."

How could you admit to what you didn't remember? He wanted to talk to her. He wanted her to know. He pressured her into acquiescence.

"I'll meet you at 8:45. I'll buy my own coffee," she had said.

Sylvia was Cleat's only daughter. She lived with her grandmother, Cleat's ex-wife's mother, in a modest home out near Spirit Creek. Sylvia had lived there since her mother abandoned them and moved to Santa Barbara.

Sylvia entered and did not look at him, but he smiled and raised his cup in her direction nonetheless. She ordered and slumped in the chair opposite. She looked older than seventeen. Her long blonde hair was pulled back tightly, she wore no makeup to hide the dark circles beneath her eyes, and her gray pantsuit did not fit her well – too tight in some places, too loose in others. She hugged a brown paper binder held together by a rubber-band. The waitress brought Sylvia's latte, and Sylvia leaned forward and looked at her watch.

"You have twenty minutes. My lawyer is meeting me inside the courthouse," she said.

"That's all?"

"It's nineteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds more than anyone said I should give you."

Every word that Cleat had rehearsed the night before became lost and he felt vertiginous. He had quashed his desire for a tumbler of whiskey this morning, but it hadn't helped – his memory, or his fear.

"Cleat?"

He fingered the edges of his cup.

"I stayed up half the night thinking of what to say. Now I can't remember any of it."

"I'm not sure there is anything to say. I shouldn't have come."

"I'm glad you did."

"I just want it to be over."

"I don't remember what you do. I've tried. I don't remember anything from then."

"We've been over this."

"I just want you to know."

"I do know. It doesn't matter. It doesn't change anything."

"You're all I have left."

"Then you have nothing."

Cleat wiped his tears with his sleeve. He wanted the words he had practiced, wanted them, like a magic spell, to become something that would soften her hardness. He wanted to tell her that he remembered her dressed as Cinderella one Halloween when she could only call herself "Gut-ta-la," remembered holding the ice bag to her eye all night after she had fallen from the swing set, remembered her first middle school basketball game. But he remembered the cops too, and Sylvia's tears, her standing in her grandmother's front lawn, a blanket wound around her – how could he have stolen her if she were his? That was all he remembered though. Cleat wished he were thin enough to wedge himself between her and the brown binder she held.

"If that's it, then I'll just go wait by the courthouse doors," she said.

"Don't."

"Cleat. I need this to be over. So do you."

She looked through him, as if he were a bad dream she was trying to shake. There was little else he could do, he would not find forgiveness today, this would be all there was.

Sylvia finished her coffee and stood. She stared at him, and then turned and walked out the front door and across the street. He watched her as she became a silhouette, only slighter darker than the air, in the pale light of the courthouse doors.

The walk to his truck was unsteady, and for a long time he just sat. The rain began to fall in earnest, and what little light there had been was subsumed by the fog. Cleat reached beneath him for the bottle of Wild Turkey he kept there. He drank from it, and pointed the truck south, towards the river.

Cleat drove, and drank, and finally turned onto Madras Creek Road, ten miles from town. The road was gravel, and made a rapid descent before turning hard to the west. From there it began to parallel a steep bluff and the creek below it, running down into the Trinity River valley. Twin, reflective yellow signs announced the turn, and in the light of day the tree tops behind them would have reinforced the peril. Cleat drank until the bottle was empty and dropped it beside him. The diamond-shapes and black arrows apparated ahead of him. Cleat felt an aloneness he had never known before, like an explosion from the inside out. He cut the headlights and pushed the accelerator to the floor. He disappeared into the fog.

The Derby

In the winter of my seventh-grade year my grandfather died. He was my mother's father and I knew him only a little; he and my grandmother having moved to Florida some years before. The only images I could summon of him came from the yellow-edged photographs of him that my mother kept stored in albums in the library, and of the stories she had told me about camping as a child on the great rivers in northern Michigan when you could still catch Grayling on a fly. In late February, several weeks after his death, I came home from school to find a long leather case with brass buckles and a wooden box sitting on the kitchen table. My mother and father were talking when I walked in, but my mother stopped and pointed at them.

"They're yours, she said, "from your grandfather."

I unclasped the buckles and inside, on a cress-green bed of velvet, was an old-style cane fly rod. The rod looked barely used. Above the handle was written in black script – *Paul Young and Sons 7' #3. Parabolic Taper.* I waved it in the air. It was light and crisp; it whooshed as I brought it past my ear. Beyond the old sepia-colored pictures of my grandfather and his buddies dressed in their wading boots and tweed coats holding their catch between them on a wire, I knew little of the sport. If this rod, though, was at the heart of it, I knew it must be something beautiful. The finish on the bamboo was clear and clean and reflected the kitchen's overhead light and the green silk wraps were tight and unfaded by time. In the box was a spotless Hardy reel loaded with still supple silk fly line. Once together, the rod and reel sat perfectly balanced, with my index finger on the darkened cork handle. From that moment on, it would be the lodestones against which I judged all things that were rare and lovely.

"A fairy's wand," my father announced.

My mother reached out and touched the rod. "I remember this – his trout rod. He kept it after he sold the rest and only fished for brook trout up north."

My father sighed and cleared his throat.

"What the hell are you going to catch with that thing? Spend more time with your line in the air than on the water. You're not thinking of fishing the Derby with that?"

The Derby, of which my father spoke, was the big fish Derby held every second Saturday in April, the opening day of trout season. It was held on Madras Creek, a small stream that ran through the center of town. For the past three years my dad had taken his place among the rest of the town's sportsmen, with a hook loaded with a night crawler, or kernels of canned corn, and a bobber. He would chose a spot, near a deep hole beneath an exposed root-ball of a large maple or cottonwood, and wait. He would sip one of the cold Stroh's beers he had brought in a cooler he also used as a seat, and lean his back against the trunk of a tree. Sometimes he napped with the rod held across his lap. More often than not, one of the locals would pull an impressive brown from beneath one of those snarled root-hands. I always imagined that just once one of those wise-old hands would grab the line and pull back, snapping it, and leaving some unhappy drunk shaking his head at what he had just seen. The fish, though, would be summarily dispatched with a thump to the cranium, and the largest of the weekend would be mounted and displayed as a trophy by one of the local sponsors, Barb's Bar and Grill, and no one would bother with our small stream until the next year, no one considering it worthy of the kind of attention given to the Au Sable, the Manistee, or the Pere Marquette, all just a couple hours' drive north.

I stared at my mother.

"I didn't learn to fly-fish until college. I had to take a class. Your grandfather never taught your aunt or I," she said.

"Why me?"

"You're the only grandson he had. Maybe he had an inkling you'd know what to do with it."

My father shook his head as my mother went on, "he let your aunt and I watch him fish, sometimes, if we stayed away from the bank and sat quietly. When he cast, it always reminded me of dancing, the rod and he and the line all connected. I remember thinking for a long time that it was the dancing that made the fish come near enough to him to be caught."

"The Madras is too small. There's no room for a back cast. He'll spend all his time pulling flies out of the alders. Smart money is with bait."

"There are ways around that," she turned towards him, and replied.

"Can you teach me?" I asked her.

She laughed.

"It's been a long time. I'll have to scrape off some rust, but I think I can show you the basics Jacob. The rest you'll have to teach yourself."

"Maybe they'll let you enter the Derby as a team. You'll make quite a pair."

My father sat back in his chair and I thought that although I could understand his disappointment in losing his job, even his fear of what now would be an uncertain future, but I had never known him to be mean in the way his words now sounded.

"I don't need a team. I'll kick all your bait fishing asses with it," I said.

I had never sworn in front of my parents before and certainly not at them, and I'm not sure why I chose this moment to try.

"Jacob Walton, straight to your room!" my mother shouted.

My father's face was blank for a moment, then he grinned.

"You're saying you think you can out-fish a whole town of old-timers, guys who have been fishing that little shit hole of a stream for longer than you've been alive, with a switch of bamboo you don't even know how to use yet? You willing to put your money where your mouth is? I've got a whole list of chores you can take over this summer."

He stared at me, and I should have admitted he had a point.

"What if I win?" I asked.

My father stared at me.

"I tell you what. You win I'll take you to Montana to fish some real trout water. I'll even throw in a new rod and reel to boot. Deal?"

I reached out and took his hand. His skin was callused and stained from the fix-it projects he had been doing, and though it no longer enveloped my own as it once had, his grasp was firm enough that I winced.

"Deal," I said.

If the winter hadn't been mild I might have regretted my wager almost immediately. The Sycamore, remarkably, was completely clear of ice by the end of February, and winter finally yielded fully to spring during its last week. March rolled in, with dull gray skies slouching about the maples and oaks in the Madras' small stream valley; it was unseasonably warm, and a steady week-long breeze out of the southwest melted the last

of the snow in the woods by the seventeenth. But maybe that's just what I wrote in my journal. Perhaps there were hidden patches of snow protecting the myrtle in the maple groves along the Madras' banks that went unnoticed. I was focused solely on learning how to use my grandfather's rod, and how to out fish my father and the rest of the town's bait fisherman. And as luck would have it the DNR had, that very year, made it legal to fish year-round for trout in all Michigan streams, provided an angler practiced catch-and-release.

School became a liminal zone. The sole respite of which was my seventh grade English class. Mr. Chapman, a forty-something pheasant hunter, whose classroom walls were adorned with sporting art, encouraged my obsession. He allowed me to read Robert Traver, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and others, instead of the textbook stories the rest of my classmates read. He said these writers didn't only write about fishing, but that when they did, they were the best. Our front lawn, however, was the only classroom I cared about, one in which my mom instructed me in the basics of the false cast, the roll cast (the technique she mentioned that day in the kitchen, which allows an angler to cast forward without using a back cast at all), and the rhythms necessary to make the rod and the line an extension of your arm, and more importantly, of your brain. She taught mostly by example, talking as she demonstrated, and then made me repeat her movements and afterwards asked me to explain to her what I was doing, right and wrong, and how I felt about it. She left books on the desk in my room that she checked out of the public library – *The Orvis Guide to Beginning Fly Fishing*, *Silent Spring*, *A Modern Dry-Fly Code*, *The Cast*, by a Villanova professor of Physics, and several by a Michigan writer named Jim Harrison.

My mom had never been a teacher, like her father or mine, but she should have. The neighbors sometimes came outside and sat on their steps and porches to watch us practice on the lawn and probably thought it odd to see a mother and son waving a stick and line with a small piece of florescent yard tied to its end. I didn't care.

"I feel like I still don't have much control about where the fly line goes," I said one evening as the sun was setting. It was very early spring, and, as the darkness fell, it became cold. Steam rose when we exhaled.

"It's because you're not repeating the same mechanics. So you get different results every time," she said.

I didn't understand.

She thought for a moment, then walked behind me and pulled my right elbow in tight to my body. "Cast," she said.

"I can't cast like this."

"Then you're trying to overpower the cast, not repeating the basic movements, not paying attention to the rhythm of your line in the air. Just try."

I folded my elbow in tight to my body, and used only the top half of my arm, like a Tyrannosaurus, I thought, and cast. The line came off the lawn, and unfolded straight behind me, and, as I moved my Cretaceous appendage forward, the line responded again, unfurling itself directly to my right and above me. The bright orange yarn fell as softly as a dandelion seed to the lawn.

"Very good," she said. "Let's try that a few more times."

When she pulled me in close to her so that she could hold my casting elbow tight to my body she smelled of Clorox and sweat, cinnamon, cloves and Channel #5. I can close my eyes and smell it still.

As late winter faded into early spring, I spent as much time as I could on the Madras. I taught myself to read the water, to reach and parachute cast, and something, according to Orvis, called high-stick nymphing, using an indicator of the same yarn with which my mother and I practiced. Basketball, for me, had finished a month ago, and since I made no friends here, I was free of worry, and when the afternoon bell rang I'd run the half mile or so between school and home, dump my books, and run another mile, my grandfather's rod and reel strapped on my back, between our house and the Boneyard. I was happy then. I usually fished upstream from the northernmost edge of the city park into the Boneyard, from where I could, once it became dark, cut a direct path through several yards, including our next door neighbor, through our own backyard, and into the back door in six minutes tops.

The upstream section was rarely fished by the locals, during the derby or otherwise, given its wildly forested and uneven terrain, and I spent most of my time there, working a riffle section and a series of deep pools that ran through a small wetland. Late in March, through some luck, my dogged persistence, and my mom's off stream tutelage, I began to regularly hook decent fish. Some nights, after it had become dark and cool, I would sit on a deadfall and watch Orion and Sirius stalk the Big Bear towards morning. I listened for the rare deep thump that signaled a huge fish taking a moth, a smaller trout, or even a field mouse. It was in these times that I also began to consider the fact that I

would have to keep and kill any large fish I landed in order to win the derby. I had read, in one of the Harrison books, about him reviving a huge Tarpon he had fought for an hour in the Florida Keys, so that it could live to be caught again, and about how he thought that the ancient circle between predator and prey could be complete without the kill. Up to now I had released every fish I had caught. To do otherwise would have been be poaching, but I also came to see them like living jewels, in their vivid blacks and reds and caramels, and I enjoyed watching them fin their way back into the deep green mystery from which they had come as much, or more, than I enjoyed hooking them.

The closer it got to derby day though, my father remarks, like, “It’s the fairy and his magic wand come out of the woods,” or “you’re going to need all the magic that wand can muster come derby day” grew more frequent. He was applying for coaching jobs at community colleges in Iowa and Minnesota and I knew he felt the pressure of finding a job that didn’t seem, to him, like part of a downward spiral; my inner gyre hoped for a different path. I had lately read, and memorized, W.B. Yeats’ “Song of Wandering Aengus,” and thought it not so far-fetched that grandfather’s rod could evoke a kind of magic, something mysterious yet real, like the jazz music my mom listened to late at night, like the way she taught me to cast her father’s flyrod. My dad’s words, however, only cemented my resolve to find and catch a large trout, even if it never became Yeats’s magical fish, even if I decided not to kill it, even if I was a bad son for hoping that no new job would come.

With the Derby just less than two weeks away, I asked my parents’ permission to stay out on the stream late on a Friday night. I thought I would try for one of the larger trout I knew fed after dark using some of the large flies I had been tying, maybe a deer

hair mouse for fun. They acquiesced, being fearful only of my walking through the boneyard at night, and of the local gossip that a group of high school students used it on weekends as a place to drink and smoke weed and make out. I assured them I could hold my own, and besides I would take the shortcut home which end ran the whole mess anyway.

Friday dawned overcast, with a threat of a rare late March thunderstorm. School seemed to last forever, except for English. Mr. Chapman had me reading a novella about an Iron Giant that came crashing to the earth from outer space. He said its author was the poet laureate of England, a land rich in fly-fishing history, and that he was maybe the world's most famous Atlantic Salmon angler, using a long, two-handed rod and a technique called "spey casting," and that his wife had been a great poet too. By the time the last bell rang the sky at least had a gray-blue quality, and as I ran home to grab my gear I noticed some insects in the air, probably blue wing olive mayflies I thought to myself. That would be okay. I had plenty in my fly boxes, and might be lucky enough to catch a spinner fall if the weather held.

I walked to the city limits and then fished upstream, back towards town. It was a fine evening. Mayflies were coming off the water surface like tiny kernels of popcorn, and trout rose steadily to them well past twilight. I caught a good number of fish, but nothing of the size that it would take to win the derby. I had saved the deep wetland pool for last, knowing that if there were a large fish it would be there, feeding under the cover of darkness. I knelt and made several casts into the main current, changed my fly to a down-wing pattern, and cast again to a crease of foam just off the opposite bank. Just as the last light was fading below a huge grove of old maples, a large fish struck and I set

tight against it. The fish sounded and I could feel it shaking its head against the hook, but otherwise it remained unmoving at the pool's bottom. I pulled, easily, against the fish, trying to raise its head, as I had read you were supposed to do, and suddenly it began to run, downstream, peeling line from my reel. Everything seemed in slow motion as the fish broke from the water, breaching to loosen the fly in the corner of its mouth. Slowly, I gained line, and then the big brown came close enough to net. I measured it against my rod and it reached from the tip of the handle to nearly the first stripping guide. It was a good fish, I thought to myself as I released it, maybe good enough to win.

I forgot my promise to my parents as I walked home, cutting straight through the Boneyard, past the improbable shapes of the old monuments of Civil War veterans and the small mausoleums of the city's wealthy citizens. I saw neither cars with fogged up windows, nor got a hint of the pungent smell of marijuana, the things of which my parents had warned me. I crossed the last footbridge over the Madras into town. I walked beneath the huge canopies of trees that lined the streets and over hung the sidewalks, and stopped in front of my parents' house where I could see them inside watching television. I wondered if this would be one of the nights when, after he fell asleep in his chair, my mother would quietly turn the television off, walk into the library, and put on her jazz records. She would keep the volume low and sway to the music. I had watched on occasion, unbeknownst to her, when I snuck downstairs for something to eat, or to pee in the small bathroom off the kitchen. I imagined this was how she and my father danced when they were young and not yet married or with me. I thought of her watching her father fish. I crept in the back door and up the back steps in the kitchen to my room and climbed into bed.

I woke early on the morning of the derby, having slept lightly at best. Outside my bedroom window the sky looked clear, and the moon was the color of smoked cheese, and squatted just above the western horizon. In my room I could smell the cinnamon rolls my mother must have made very early in the morning and padded down the stairs so as to not wake anyone. On the kitchen table I found an envelope with my name on it, and inside the envelope was a card with a picture of a young man sitting on a boulder, fly rod on his shoulder, amidst a cloud of tiny flies and great rocks; a deep green pool was below him. Inside, in my mother's handwriting, was simply, *Good luck. We love you very much. Mom and Dad*.

When I looked up my mother was standing in the doorway.

"Your father's been gone for an hour. He went out to Waldo's farm to dig up some night crawlers. You should have some breakfast; it'll be a long day for all of us."

I ate two rolls slowly, with a glass of cold milk, reminding myself I didn't have to hurry. My best chance of catching the sort of fish I was after was later in the day, and in the wetland's pool beyond the boneyard. My mom and I listened to the weather report on the radio which predicted mild temperatures for the morning, but that a cold front was expected to bring rain late in the afternoon. I helped her clear the table and paused as I was leaving the room. I turned and, for a moment, watched her doing the dishes.

"Mom?"

She stepped away from the sink and wiped her hands on a towel she had tucked into the waistband of her trousers.

"Yes Jacob."

"I don't want to move again."

I don't know how she knew what was coming next but the words were no sooner out of my mouth than I was sobbing and my mother had her arms around me.

"I don't want to move again." I repeated though the tears.

"I know. It's ok.

"I hate him."

"No you don't and he loves you."

"Then we wouldn't be moving again."

She stepped back to look me in the eyes.

"Jacob, are we moving?"

"Not today. But we always do."

"You need to say that to your father."

I shook my head and then wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

"He needs to know the truth from you so he can deal with it."

I shook my head again, and looked up at her.

"He doesn't care what I feel. All he does is tease me about everything."

"He doesn't know how to talk to you anymore. You might have to give him an opening to try."

"Mom, I don't even know what that means, but at least you know. I need to go fishing now."

I turned and climbed the stairs. My gear was neatly arranged in the corner of my room, including the wicker creel I had found at a local antique store for two bucks. The store's owner told me it was just like the one in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," which I knew was a lie. Nick had carried his all the way from the war and it would have

been beaten and weathered. This one looked as if it had been woven last week. It was, though, light and still large enough for a big fish. I bargained with him before giving him the eight quarters I had brought into the store. I thought I would, as Nick had actually done, line it with grass soaked in stream water and my fish could rest easy in the wet, cool darkness. I dressed and slid the creel on so that its straps and those of my rod case crossed my chest. I imagined I looked like the picture of the Iron Giant on the cover of my book. When I came to the bottom of the stairs my mother was putting dishes in the cupboard. She turned when she heard me, and walked to the refrigerator where she took out a brown paper bag and handed it to me. "I made you some sandwiches, and there are some cookies, chocolate chip, and a couple pops. If you want more your dad will have things in his cooler for you too."

"Thanks Mom."

"Think about what I said earlier Jacob, will you please?"

"Yeah."

I took the back way into the Boneyard and hiked through the wetlands, all the way to a small bridge near the city limits. I planned to fish upstream as I had before when my luck was good. Wanting to fish light I rigged my rod, put one fly box in my shirt pocket, hung my net on the belt of my jeans, and left everything else under a small cottonwood. I would come back for it later. I began with a Griffith's Gnat, a fuzzy black fly, floating it in the slower water, sinking it with a tug where the water was faster. I changed it when I had made twenty-one casts without a strike, a number I had chosen after reading a story about Christ and Simon Peter, and the one-hundred and fifty-three large fish they caught together. I fished this way for several hours until I came to a deep bend in the stream

where another angler's red bobber floated in the middle of the stream. Laying my rod against a small maple I jogged to where I had left my backpack and creel, gathered them, and walked back to my rod. I wondered how my father might be doing, and thought about finding him and eating lunch, though it would have been in silence. I was afraid to tell him that I didn't want to move, afraid to say I thought he was being selfish. I didn't want him to know I didn't make friends because it always hurt to leave them. I wanted to be pissed at him. Instead, I sat beneath the small maple to eat one of the sandwiches my mother had made. It tasted good. The ham was sugary and smoky, and the cheddar cheese and the horseradish cut its sweetness. And even though the Coca-Cola was warm, it washed the dryness from my mouth.

I looked below me and saw that the angler who had been there had disappeared, but that several small ringlets dotted that section of the stream. Farther down, there was the sudden, unmistakable sound of a splashy rise. In front of me several dark mayflies came off the water, then several more, and in minutes there were hundreds. Reaching in my fly box I found the blue wing olives I had tied the night before, knotted one to my line, and began casting to the edge of the far bank. No sooner had the fly met the surface when the fish struck. I quickly landed it, and then several more on successive casts, the largest being perhaps fifteen inches – a good fish, but not good enough to win – and I released them all. I worked upstream into the wetland, just above the deep pool I had hoped to fish all day, catching fish as quickly as I could return my fly to the water. Downstream, several guys, all fishing with bait, reeled up and watched me.

The sky continued to darken and light rain began to fall and the flies seemed to come off more slowly now, though there were a few larger ones, like erratic helicopters,

wildly trying to ascend. I stopped casting and took a large dark fly from my fly box and knotted to my leader as quickly as I could. On the twenty-first cast, at the bottom end of the wetland pool, as the fly swung below me momentarily suspended in the surface tension, the fish struck. I had seen its head, and the white inside of its mouth, and my stomach tightened as I set against the fish. Its immediate response was to breach, violently shaking against the hook in its lower lip; I bowed to it as it arced back towards the water. One of the anglers below me called out, “need a hand with the net?” I shook my head in an emphatic “no,” and followed the fish upstream, keeping as much pressure as I dared against the thin tippet. Then I chased it upstream on one more run. I recognized the angler who had offered help; it was Dave, the barber, who cut my and my father’s hair, and hosted the Saturday morning coffee klatch for the local coaches, high school and college, and their cronies. He stood and watched me.

I added pressure to the line now that the fish had ended its run. I tried to gain control by lifting its head, disorienting it, turning it back towards me into shallower water rather than back into the deep pool. It still felt solid, and unyielding, a sort of electric quiver between the thin line and the small bamboo rod. Slowly, it moved towards me into the head of the pool, into the shallow water, and I saw it clearly for the first time. A male brown with a huge kype-jawed head and shoulders, leopard-like black spots, some ringed in crimson, and a belly the color of coffee with cream. Well over twenty inches I thought to myself. I swept the water with my net and felt the fish enter it, and knelt into the stream. I swung the creel from my hip, held the net between my knees, and slid both hands under the fish’s belly to usher it to the basket. I could feel its weight. It was a beautiful fish. And we had done a dance, like my mother had spoken of. I twisted the fly

from the fish's lower lip and let it rest in my hands, suspended in the soft current, for what seemed like a very long time.

What was I afraid of? I simply needed to get it in the creel and that would be the end of it. I thought of my mother. We had never spoken of this moment. Perhaps we hadn't seen it coming, and that if it did I would know what to do. I imagined my father's face as I showed the fish to him, but he didn't look as I had hoped. I saw a mixture of surprise and disappointment, not pride. One more dead fish wasn't going to keep us from moving again. The trout finned for another moment, and when I pulled my hands away it swam slowly towards the deep water, and then it was gone. I gathered myself and climbed from the stream.

I collected my gear from where I had left it and walked towards the Boneyard, towards home. Beyond the maples the sun cast violet rays through the broken clouds onto the monuments and stones, and through some of the small, still bare trees and onto the damp, green grass. There, on the edge of the boneyard and the city park beyond it, I saw many of the derby anglers still sitting on the banks, waiting. I crossed the last footbridge and walked through our neighbor's backyard and into ours. When I came in the back door Mother was taking a pie from the oven and the house smelled warm and sweet. She looked at me quizzically.

"Home so soon? Bad day?" She asked.

"No, Mom, it was a pretty good day."

We stood in silence.

"But you're not going to tell me how it went?" She asked, softly.

"I'll tell you later, okay? I'm going to go read awhile."

"I can't wait to hear," she said.

I walked up the stairs and thought about that fish jumping against a gray sky and me bowing to it. I lay on my bed and read from a Hemingway story about a father and sons who fished in the ocean, and when I finished the book I cried until I fell asleep.

When my mother woke me it was dark.

"Don't you want some supper? It's getting late."

"No thanks, I'm alright."

"Come down anyway; have a piece of pie."

I followed her down the stairs and found my dad sitting at the table. He was eating a large piece of rhubarb pie covered by a small mountain of vanilla ice cream. I sat down, not wanting to hear what he would say, but knowing it would be over soon enough. He chewed his last bite for a long time, and my mother took his plate and napkin, and he sat back in his chair. I took a long breath.

"I've taken a new coaching job Jacob," he said. "I'll be a video assistant at Alma College. It's a little bit of a drive, but we won't have to move. Your mother thought I should tell you."

He took an envelope from his shirt pocket, reached across the table, and handed it to me. Inside was an I.O.U., scribbled in my father's handwriting, for train tickets from East Lansing, Michigan to West Yellowstone, Montana, and a new rod and reel from Orvis.

"Dave told me what you did. Said that fish maybe went five pounds. Twenty-two inches at least. That it was the nicest fish he'd seen out of the Madras in a long time, and

he couldn't believe you released it. Said he stayed a there and tried to catch the damn thing himself, and that he thought you were one goofy kid."

"I told him I didn't think you were a kid anymore."

My father and I arrived in West Yellowstone in the last week in August. We stayed five days and fished the Yellowstone, Madison, Firehole, and Jefferson rivers. My dad hired a guide named Vince who worked for an outfitter out of Ennis. He told us that since part of the park had burned that summer and it was late in the season that we'd have most of the backcountry to ourselves. We fished on the Madison one day from a wooden drift boat and saw a sow grizzly bear and her two cubs. They followed us for a while along the shore and then disappeared into the brush. Vince said they were probably hungry and that many bears would die in the coming winter because much of their food was likely burned in the fires.

By the last couple days of the trip Vince had my dad roll casting the Orvis rod he'd bought me. Vince said that my cane rod was a classic, and that I should take good care of it because it would be worth a fortune one day, that it was a generation ahead of its time, and that the man who made it was dying. It would be one of the last of its kind.

I landed a rainbow one day on the Firehole as large as the trout I'd released on the Madras, but it wasn't the same. Vince had put me onto the rising fish and coached me as I tried to accurately cover its rhythmic sips; it was his catch as much as mine. On the last night of the trip we camped near the Jefferson and my father offered me a beer, since Vince had said that drinking beer in Montana doesn't count as drinking. I sipped it, though I didn't like the taste, and it made me sleepy. Soon after the Milky Way had

almost filled the whole of the night sky I unzipped our tent and crawled into my bag and slept and dreamed of trout.

Patty

Patty Wilson came to live with us – my mother, father, and me – in the summer of 1958. She was sixteen, and would be a high school junior that fall. My father, Walter, had hired her as a field hand, but, when my mother, Ruth, learned that Patty had expressed college aspirations, she told him she could use the girl's help, in the house.

"She'll need to learn something more than how to deal with a sore back to make it in academe, considering where she comes from," my mother added.

Patty's family lived in a four-room shack with a tin roof and a pine floor. They heated the place with wood when it got cold, and opened the doors and windows to let in the cool breeze off the lake in the summer. My father thought Marvin Wilson, Patty's old man, was a drunk, and stupid. Over the years he had watched Wilson sell off his land so he had enough money to sit in the Silver Rail Bar and drink and tell stories of being in England during the war. Wilson was unhappy that my father had hired his daughter as a field hand, more so when he learned Patty would work in the house with my mom. My father said Wilson knew she was an educated woman. The implication was that Wilson couldn't take care of his own, which, besides Patty, consisted of three boys, Clark, Clement, and Clair, who were all younger than me. Wilson's wife, June, was a slender, deaf-mute woman. On Patty's first day of work at the farm, her father came with her and demanded my father pay him directly for her labor. My father told Marvin Wilson that was between he and his daughter, and regardless, she would be paid at the end of each Friday, in cash, like everyone else.

I had no strong feelings about being "baby-sat," as Jimmy Foster called it. I thought of her helping my mom, and her living out in our old carriage house, as being

more for Patty than for me. But, Jimmy was my best friend, and at fifteen, four years older than I was, and far more wise in the ways of the world. I had accidentally put out Jimmy's right eye, when he was twelve, and we had forged an uneasy peace since that morning on the ridge of the vineyard. Jimmy and I, and the Labradors, Ruby and Jade, still met, even though old man Foster had forbade it, on the small river near the border of the two properties, where the woods were dense and hid our presence.

"Seen her bare tits yet?" Jimmy asked one afternoon when I found him sitting on a wooden bucket near a spot he called his "honey hole." A red and white bobber floated in a seam between the faster water and the bank. The dogs sat next to me.

"Jesus Jimmy," I replied.

I didn't swear like Jimmy, or Jimmy's old man, or my own father, for that matter, but I had no conscience about tossing around God and Jesus and Satan, but only out here on the stream. In my house, or at school, I feared being caught. My mother, an English professor, made sure her son didn't speak like a soldier, a yokel, or even her husband.

"She's got great tits. And a redhead too. You know what that means right?"

I kicked at the dark, river earth. Jimmy lifted his rod, and tossed his bobber and the gob of nightcrawlers on the hook upstream.

"It means she wants it all the time," he answered himself.

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

"You're fucking stupid. You'll never get any ass."

"I've got to go eat Jimmy. You catch anything?"

"No. Fucking trout. Tomorrow I'm going to try a new weapon though."

I was curious, surprised that there was a weapon Jimmy hadn't tried.

"What?" I asked.

"Fly rod."

I had no idea what that was. The labs paced.

"I have to go Jimmy."

"Remember what I said about Patty. You'd tell me if anything happened, right?"

"Go to hell Jimmy."

After I went to bed that night, I heard Patty's voice downstairs, and watched through my window as the lights in the carriage house came on, and went off. I dreamed of her that night for the first time. She stood on a black sand beach somewhere. Behind her was a burning barn. Her dress was the same color as the sky. An elephant waded knee-deep in the ocean, then entered the fire. Patty takes my hand. Then the elephant became a cat who extinguished the flames, and curled up on the charred roof beam. It sleeps. Neither of us ever speak though, and it always ends there.

When I came down the stairs in the morning, Patty stood beside my mother, who was flipping pancakes. I saw that Patty's left cheek was scraped and swollen and her left ear was split open. I wondered what had happened to leave marks like that. I'd been scraped enough to know that her injuries hurt.

"Are you okay Patty?" I asked. I was sad for her.

"Just a meeting with the bunk bed down at the old house. Clumsy me," she added.

My mother wrapped an arm around her. I thought of what Jimmy had said about her the day before.

To say that Patty and I became like brother and sister would be too obvious, and inaccurate as well. I loved her immediately and deeply, though it was the love was of a boy who knew little of love's vagaries. I couldn't imagine why she would come to live with us, couldn't imagine leaving my own family. I wondered if she was afraid. But by summer her presence on our farm had turned my world to an impressionist's landscape. The days all stretched into each other, and were filled with the smell of the grapes in the vineyard, and of Patty's perfume.

That fall, my mom began to teach two days a week at Hope College in Grand Rapids, an hour's commute each way, in good weather. So, once our local school started, Patty drove the farm's old Ford F-1 into town, dropping me on the Junior High side, and then parking in the Dedham High lot, in the back of the same building. In the afternoons we repeated it all in reverse order. At first, the rides to and from school were quiet. I was happy not to have to ride the bus, and happier still to be with her. Patty always drank coffee out of a large gray mug that had been my dad's, and the cab was full of its smell. She was the first person I ever saw steer with her knees. She would, coffee mug in her left hand, clutch with her left foot, push her right knee against the wheel, shift the old column mounted three-speed with her right hand then return it to the wheel and her right foot to the gas pedal.

"Shit. Sorry, Paul. I shouldn't be teaching you bad habits," she said one morning late in the winter, when her knee accidently slid off the steering wheel and we were momentarily pitched into the path of an oncoming sedan. "Don't tell your parents about that okay?" She said. I laughed. She had spilled coffee across her jacket and shirt. She sat the mug on the floor and tried to wipe any excess away.

"Great, what am I going to do? I can't go back to the farm or else we'll both be late," she said.

"My shirt would fit you, I have a T-shirt in my gym locker I can use."

"You'll be a sight walking in to school bare-chested," Patty laughed.

"I have my coat to put on," I replied.

"I suppose that'll work Paul. You sure?"

I nodded again, slipped off my coat, unbuttoned my shirt, and took it off. I put my coat back on, and zipped it up, and threw my shirt over the backrest between us. I felt like one of Arthur's knights, who I was reading about in English class.

"Eyes on the road Paul," she said, and took off her coffee-stained shirt, the steering wheel between her knees. She slid mine on and began to button it. The edge of her bra showed from behind the last button. "Thank you," she said. She smiled widely. When I found the shirt folded on my bed the next day, I could still smell her on it. I hung it in my closet, and, for a long time, went to it when I thought of her, and breathed her in.

After that our conversations became more animated, and deepened, until, on a cold winter morning I asked her why she came to live with us.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go Paul. My old man drinks and losses his temper. He frightens me some. I could've stayed with my Aunt I suppose, but he would have come and got me after a while. He's scared of your dad, Paul. He won't come here."

"He's scared of my dad?"

"You don't see him yet for who he is, your mother either. They're wealthy, educated people. They're important here. My family is nobody, trash."

For a long time I thought about she said. I didn’t ask her again why she came to live with us. I just imagined she was happy here. I longed to tell her I had loved her since the first day I saw her, and that I would always love her.

When summer came again, my mother and Patty became constant companions, and the farm fell into the same rhythm as it had the summer before. Since I would turn thirteen in July my father let me work in the field and the orchard, as well as in the vineyard, which would, for the first time, bear enough fruit to crush for wine. Mom and Patty brought lunch and water to the laborers, so I saw her, morning, noon, and evening. After it was dark I ‘d watch the light from inside the carriage house stretch across the lawn. I grew four inches that summer, and by my birthday I was an inch taller than Patty. I could look directly into the pale brown eyes that disturbed my sleep. I imagined her in the carriage house alone in the dark. I would go to my closet and smell her on my shirt. I wanted to know the warmth of her skin, the rhythm of her breathing. I began to become erect and wondered what was wrong with me, and that Jimmy would know, that I’d figure out how to ask him.

We stood in the knee-deep water of the river and took turns using Jimmy’s flyrod. Ruby and Jade lay in the long shadow of a mature oak tree. The casting part had only taken a couple weeks to master, Jimmy told me, as he taught me the basics, one evening in June. He said that the rod, and the artificial flies it cast, were far more efficient killers of trout than any of his other fishing gear. My first casts, under Jimmy’s tutelage, were awkward and unwieldly. After several dozen failures, however, I began to get the rhythm right. Within an hour I made multiple drag-free floats that brought several violent strikes.

Jimmy was pissed that what had taken him a month to learn took me only a couple hours, but he killed and took home every trout that I caught, no matter how small.

"C'mon, you had to have seen something by now. Some tit, maybe her fur, coming and going from the shower. You've watched her window for year." Jimmy said. He sat on the bank and wrapped his knees in his arms, as I cast a dry fly into a small pool on the opposite side of the stream.

"She stays in the carriage house. She has her own shower. How would I see her?"

"You're bullshitting me. You can't be such a pussy. No quick kiss, no I'll let you watch but you can't touch, no nothing, that's what I'm supposed to believe?"

"Thinking of her makes me feel strange."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I feel warm, sometimes it changes, you know, moves."

"You mean you get a boner? Jesus. Now we're talking."

Jimmy pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboro cigarettes from his pocket and lit one with a big silver Zippo. I knew that Jimmy smoked, he had even offered to make me his accomplice when he began sneaking singles from his old man. I had demurred without knowing why; almost everyone I knew, save my mother, smoked. A brown trout violently took the fly twenty feet below us.

"Fish on," Jimmy yelled.

It was not a huge fish, but it was the first of the afternoon, and whether it was the comingling of the algal smell of the river and Jimmy's Marlboro, or the sound of the riffle beside them, it felt to me, as if our past was something gone by now, like the water downstream. Jimmy squatted beside me as I unhooked the fly from the roof of the fish's

mouth. He held it for a moment, and looked at it, before slamming its skull onto a nearby rock. I knew Jimmy's catch would feed his family. Nonetheless, I felt sorrow for the trout. Jimmy then sat back down and explained to me what was happening to my body in lurid detail, and how to "relieve" myself, just shy of some sort of demonstration.

"I need three more fish for dinner," Jimmy said.

"You'll get that easy."

"No, but you will. Get to it."

"It's your rod Jimmy."

"Yeah, but it's like you were born to do this."

"No, here." I offered him the rod.

"Just catch three more fucking trout, and say more about Patty."

The kitchen smelled of bleach and hot water. The sterilized jam jars sat capped on the kitchen table. There were still more than a hundred left for Patty and I to finish. We had drawn the responsibility of prepping for the raspberry jam. We had to sterilize the jars, wash and clean the berries, bring out the sugar and the pectin and the lemons and the large pots. My mother would join us later and we would make a dozen cases of jars, many of which were destined as holiday gifts for friends and the full-time employees on the farm. Patty and I wore long rubber gloves, and fished the jars from the bleach and hot water bath, and rinsed them. Whether it was the extra button she had undone on her shirt in the heat of the kitchen, or that my head was undone by the same heat, and the smell of bleach I asked, "Do you have a boyfriend Patty?"

"I thought you were my boyfriend Paul."

"Really?"

"I'm mostly happy without one okay? School's become a pretty big deal, and that's good."

"But you've had a boyfriend?"

"Yes, Paul. I've had boyfriends."

"Boyfriends?"

"I'm almost eighteen. A couple of boyfriends wouldn't be unusual. My family may be poor, but I'm not a tramp Paul."

Her answers often left me befuddled. They came from a life I couldn't comprehend.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. But a gentleman never presses a lady about her past. Haven't you read that in your King Arthur books?"

I should have asked more, but my mother was her usual punctual self, and the topic turned to jam and jellies and freezer sauce. By the time we had cleaned up it was nearly midnight and I slogged off to bed. I didn't sleep before I saw her light go out though. I lay there smelling raspberries and her and bleach until finally, the silence took me down.

Labor day weekend my parents regularly attended the Michigan State Fair in Detroit. This year they not only wanted see the fair, but also some of the open-air markets found in the city's ethnic neighborhoods. My father had begun to wonder if these sorts of local, outdoor markets were viable in rural northern Michigan during the summers. If they

might be to sort of place we could sell our fruit, and wine. They would be gone for three days.

"I left enough food in the refrigerator for the weekend and more, but if you need something, Patty will take you into town, okay?" My mother told me on Thursday afternoon. They planned leave early the next morning, long before I would be awake.

"Sure you're okay here alone? Patty can sleep in the house if you want," my father added.

"I got Ruby and Jade here. We'll be fine. I'm thirteen." I wanted to add 'for Christ's sake,' but thought it would go underappreciated.

When Friday morning came I could hear her downstairs, and smelled bacon and toasted bread.

"Good morning Paul. I made breakfast" she said, when she saw me.

Her red hair looked as if it had darkened in the summer sun, rather than lightened, as mine had. It was now a sort of an auburn color, like Katherine Hepburn's. She had it pinned in a bun at the back of her head. The khaki shorts and the pale blue chambray shirt she wore, with the sleeves rolled up, had once been my mother's. Her feet were bare and tanned. Freckles arched across her cheeks and nose, and I realized that she spoke in that odd, Ozark-inflected way that is unique to the rural northern Midwest.

"Sure. Thanks," I said, and sat at the table.

I wore a pair of pajama bottoms and a t-shirt and my feet were bare too, though they were pale from having boots on so often. I rubbed them against each other, as she handed me a mound of fried bacon and eggs.

"Too much? God, I'm terrible at this even after watching your mom."

“I’ll eat as much as I can. We can give the rest to the dogs. They’ll love that.”

She sipped at a cup of coffee and watched me eat. We didn’t speak. I was afraid to look up at her, but wanted to; I wanted to look into her eyes and pull her against me and say everything that I had laid awake and thought of. Instead, I ate until I couldn’t take another bite, though it was half the amount I usually managed. I took what remained on the plate, and walked over, and split it between the dog’s dishes. Ruby and Jade dashed from under the table.

“You got plans today? Suppose you’ll meet Jimmy at the river sometime, huh?”

I was surprised that she knew Jimmy at all, let alone the fishing sessions on the river. I looked at her sideways.

“Jimmy’s old man is a long-tail cousin of my old man, and half of them people down the river are related to each other.”

“But ….”

“I may not speak to the old man, but I talk to my brothers and aunts and uncles and such. I know all about what happened between you and Jimmy. I know how your father made it right.”

“We’re not kids anymore, doing stupid stuff. Jimmy has a flyrod and I’m really good with it. I catch fish and Jimmy takes them home.”

“It’s ok Paul, I’m not out to get you, or Jimmy, in trouble. His old man would scald his ass, though, if he knew all those trout were your’ doing.”

I remembered old man Foster’s words to me on their porch when my father made me apologize for putting out Jimmy’s eye. He told me that I owed Jimmy an eye. But

since I couldn't pay that debt, that I owed him much more than that. That my old man had made it right, and to "get the fuck off his land."

"Are you going to college next year?" I asked.

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

Maybe I was. Maybe I didn't want to imagine what might happen to Jimmy if his old man found out, that I had caused him enough suffering already. But, god, I loved that flyrod. I loved the water, and the light, when the fishing was fine. I loved it nearly as much as I loved her.

I was silent.

"I'll be around here all day, trying to make a pie. Supper is grilled cheese and potato salad. Holler if you're headed to the river, just so I know," Patty said, finally.

"Holler."

She smiled.

I grabbed my hip waders and whistled and the dogs appeared beside me. We shot through the back door and across the porch and were a quarter mile away before we slowed.

"Let's go up towards the headwaters," I said to the dogs, and their noses turned, and I followed them to the place where both small streams emerged from the same spring-fed pond. They diverged at a boulder the size the farm's deuce-and-a-half. One stream north of the other for a solid mile, until they converged again near the edge of our property. The rock had always been strange to me, unworldly. Jimmy said that "the Indians brought it here, from out of the lake, and worshipped it, and made sacrifices on it, and other things." The dogs and I followed the south creek, the larger of the two streams.

I put on my waders and entered its first knee-deep pool. The dogs followed suit and lapped at the cold, clear water. Below me hundreds of small insects rose and fell, erratically, like helicopters whose tail-rotors had failed. I knew these were caddis flies, dropping their eggs on the water before they fell from the air and died, and that because of this ephemera the fishing would good. I stepped from the water and sat on its bank. The dogs leaned against me. I scratched their necks. None of us cared that we were all muddy and wet. We sat for a long time in the summer sun.

Jimmy was in his usual place as the dogs and I emerged from the woods. He sat on his overturned wooden bucket with his fly rod leaned against a small poplar tree. He wore baggy jeans held up by a too-large belt and the same white t-shirt he wore every day. The shirt was stained across the front and more gray than white. His leather boots were far larger than his feet. A billow of smoke wafted upwards. It smelled different than his usual Marlboros.

“Jimmy. Why aren’t you fishing?” I said, as I walked towards him.

I had obviously startled him and he dropped the small cigarette.

“Jesus Christ Paul, you scared me. I thought it was my fucking old man.”

“What’s that?” I pointed to the butt that still smoldered on the ground. It smelled sweet and pungent, like a brushfire after a lightning strike.

“Marijuana. It makes you high. The migrants all smoke this shit. Want a hit? There’s a couple left.”

“Nah. I just thought I’d come fish.”

Jimmy wheeled on his bucket and picked up the cigarette and put it to his mouth and inhaled on it and held his breath, then exhaled and coughed. He looked at the water. I thought I saw a sadness in his stooped shoulders, heard hesitation in his voice.

“Yeah, well I guess there’s a problem there, Paul.”

Jimmy shoved his hands in the pockets and stared at the ground.

“My old man asked me to show my cousin where all the trout were, and to help him take some home too.”

“So?”

“So I told him I couldn’t. That it was a honey hole and I wasn’t showing it to nobody. He got pissed and told me he’d tan me if I didn’t.”

“I still don’t understand Jimmy.”

“We can’t do this anymore. My cousin will be out here shortly. If he sees you, he’ll tell the old man and I’m in deep shit. You can’t be here anymore.”

“This is our fucking property, Jimmy.” It felt good to swear at him, but I wanted to cry.

“No. Your old man’s property ends about fifty yards upstream, near the headwaters. This is my family’s land, and technically you’re trespassing, and I could, legally, kick your ass if I wanted. My old man said so.”

The tears began in earnest then. The girls moved close, and leaned against me.

“Fuck you,” I said and turned away down the path.

Patty was standing in the kitchen as the dogs and I blew through the back door and up the stairs to my room. I lay on my bed and refused to cry anymore. I wondered if my parents

would buy me a flyrod, like Jimmy's. I'd fish upstream from them, Jimmy and his stupid fucking cousins, and catch trout after trout. The thought crossed my mind that they might chase me down and try to kick my ass, or worse yet break my new rod, but knew Ruby and Jade would be there, and that none of them would touch me.

Patty pushed my bedroom door open.

"Paul. Are you awake?" she whispered across the darkness.

"Yeah." I could see her outline in the light from the hallway.

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah. It's OK. Just Jimmy. I fucking hate him." It was the first time I had cursed out loud to anyone but Jimmy. I felt better as soon as the words were out.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Not really."

"Do you mind if I stay here a while? It gets lonely out there at night, and mostly it's so quiet I swear I can hear myself think. I can just sit on the floor," she said and knelt down. She leaned her back against the side of my bed.

"I don't mind," I said, though I thought it was odd. I wondered how I would sleep with her there. I pulled the sheet up and rolled over.

Whether it was because of what happened with Jimmy, or something else, I was tired and soon asleep. I thought I was dreaming when I felt her climb in the bed and wrap herself around me.

"It's ok Paul. I just need to hug somebody. Go back to sleep," she said, and crawled beneath the sheet. She was warm and soft and smelled like sunlight. I felt myself become erect. I was embarrassed and leaned my hips into my mattress.

"It's totally natural Paul," she said, as she reached into my shorts and grasped my penis.

"Does that feel good?" She asked.

I nodded, afraid to speak. My mouth and throat were dry. When she moved down and put me in her mouth I thought I might pass out. I felt my body spasm, as if I had grasped an electric fence. My sheet was warm and wet and I was afraid I had pissed myself.

"I'm guessing that took about thirty seconds," she said, and rolled up onto me. She looked into my eyes. I began to cry.

"It's ok Paul. That's how it's supposed to work," she said, and stood, and undressed herself in front of me. I thought this might still be a dream, or that maybe I had died in my sleep, but it was neither, and she climbed back into my bed and did not leave my room that night.

She left my bed early in the morning, before it was light, and Ruby and Jade took her place. I slept soundly until late morning, when I heard her in the kitchen. I rose and pulled a t-shirt over my pajama shorts and followed the dogs down the stairs. She looked up from her bowl of Cheerios. I sat down across from her.

"I'm not going to tell anyone. Are you?" She asked.

I must've looked at her for a long time.

"Paul?"

"No." I shook my head.

"I'll say I'm sorry if you want."

I pushed my lips together and shook again.

"It felt good to be held Paul. It all felt good. I'm sorry anyway."

"I'll never say anything to anyone," I swore. I thought this was what I was supposed to say, to uphold her honor. I imagined that she was in love with me now, like I was with her, even though none of the words had been said.

"Good," she said, and returned to her cereal.

My parents would return in the middle of the afternoon on Monday, Labor Day. School would begin, for Patty and I, the following day. My mother did not have to go back to the university until later in the week, and I thought she was lucky.

The farm, though, had already begun to be abuzz for the final push at the end of the harvest season. Patty and I had not spoken, beyond awkward pleasantries, since the night she came to my room. She had not returned. On Sunday, after walking the orchard with the girls, I found my bed made with clean linens.

My father almost bolted from the pickup towards the main barn after they arrived, but my mother greeted us both in the yard. She hugged Patty first and then me.

"You guys look great. Everything go ok?

"Swell," I said.

"Really good, Mrs. B, really good," Patty said, and smiled.

I felt a slight breeze, and the air smelled like her.

Summer dragged into autumn. I missed fishing with Jimmy, who was reported to have landed a twenty-pound Steelhead, an anadromous rainbow trout, finally beaching it well up one of our streams. I wished I'd have been there. I longed for Patty in ways I could not

have imagined. I wished my parents would go away again. I prayed they might become stranded in town in a snow storm, or have a minor accident with the farm truck, and was ashamed of myself. I wanted Patty to come to me again. I wondered if she might have a boyfriend now, and was jealous of the thought. Our morning and afternoon rides, which last year were lighthearted, felt heavy. And though we talked about school and life on the farm, there seemed, to me, much that was unspoken.

"I love you," I finally announced one morning in early December, as we rode to school. Patty slowed and pulled off onto a dirt road and stopped the truck. She pushed the parking brake down with her left foot, and turned towards me.

"I'm sure you think you do Paul, but you don't, really," she said.

I was struck dumb, and wanted to cry, but stopped myself because I didn't want her to see it.

"I wish I could take it back Paul. You're going to be a fine man someday, and I want you to remember this was all my fault. Understand?"

I could only nod. Anything else, a word, a grunt, a guffaw, would have unleashed what I held inside – hatred, sorrow, despair – all wanting to boil over.

"We don't have time for this Paul. We can't be late for school. If you want to talk later we can," she said, and popped the parking brake and made a U-turn back on to the main road. My vision tunneled and all I could hear was the roar of the wind. I didn't know whether it was outside the cab, or just in my own head.

Patty dropped me in front of the school, as was the custom, but I didn't even allow the truck to make a complete stop before I leapt from it, and slammed the door shut

behind me. As luck would have it, Jimmy had climbed off his bus twenty feet away. I avoided his eyes, but he rushed to meet me.

“Lover’s spat? He asked.

“Fuck you Jimmy. Let me be.”

“Must be true then.”

“If you say it again Jimmy, I’ll clean your clock.”

He couldn’t resist, of course, and when I hit him, I hit him with every fiber of my being, attacked him with something primordial, something from the deep, from where love and hate co-mingle. Jimmy was a head taller, and had thirty pounds on me, but I was the Tasmanian Devil, and he couldn’t have known what was coming. Even if he did it wouldn’t have made any difference. When Mr. Anderson and Mr. O’Malley, the Phys. Ed. department, and Mr. Borgshatz, the Assistant Principal, pulled us apart, Jimmy bled from his nose and mouth and left ear, and from a gash above his good eye. My coat and the shirt underneath it were torn so badly they hung off me in strips. I could taste copper inside my mouth, and pushed my tongue into a tooth that easily gave way.

My father was furious. He picked me up after the school had called him, and told him what had happened. I was given a three day suspension.

“What were you thinking? He demanded. It was not rhetorical.

“I don’t know. He said something.”

“What?”

“He said something.”

“And so you just took a poke?”

I looked into my lap, where my hands rested. They were cut and scraped, and there was dry blood on them, Jimmy's and my own.

There was silence the rest of the way home, and I was glad for it. My father sent me to my room, and made me go without lunch. He must have notified the school to let Patty know she need not pick me up. I heard her pull the old truck in shortly after school would have dismissed. I could hear the two of them speak, but not their exact words, and then my mother's car pulled in and I could hear them all. Eventually, I heard the back door open and shut, twice. I watched Patty walk to the carriage house and go inside, and her lights come on. My father climbed into the cab of his truck and headed up the driveway. It wasn't long before my mother rapped on my bedroom door.

"Paul?"

I sat on the edge of my bed. The dogs lay near me. My mother walked in and stood.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Your dad went down to the Fosters to try and head this off. What were you thinking?"

I bowed my head.

"Patty told us you were fine when you got out of the truck."

I was disappointed to know that Patty had lied, that she hadn't broken down and spilled the whole story. It would have been easy then, but I knew that wasn't entirely true either.

“I’m flabbergasted you’d do such a thing Paul. Especially after everything that’s happened with Jimmy. I told your father that an indefinite grounding seemed appropriate. If you won’t say anything more to me about it, then that’s the way it will be.”

I had nothing to say. The scrapes and cuts from the brawl hurt, but the pain I felt now emanated from somewhere inside me, and radiated outwards until it enveloped me and became all that I knew. My mother turned to leave the room and then looked back at me.

“I’m sorry Paul,” she said, and closed the door behind her. I cried myself to sleep.

It was still dark when my father shook me awake. “Get your ass up son. If you think you’re getting an early Christmas holiday think again,” he said.

Downstairs, I sat and wrapped my robe around me. I wiped the crust from my eyes. My father poured himself a cup of coffee and drank from it. Patty sat dressed for school, her ubiquitous grey mug in front of her. My mother was silent. Patty looked into her cup.

“I had a long talk with Old Man Foster last night Paul, over some very good Calvados. So tell me again, who took the first swing?” He asked.

“I did.”

“Why would you lie to us Paul? My mother interjected.

I was flummoxed. My father stared at my mother. Patty looked up at me.

“Jimmy told his dad he took the first shot Paul,” my father said. “Old Man Foster said that it was long overdue for Jimmy to beat your ass. Said he was proud of his son, but it still wasn’t anywhere close to even,” he added.

I looked at him, with what must have seemed like genuine anger.

"So who's not telling the truth?" He asked, and sipped at his coffee.

I put my elbows on the table and my chin in my fists. I wanted to look at Patty, but was afraid of what my eyes would give away.

"I, we, your mother and I, and Patty, talked about this for a long time last night son. So, if it were you who swung first, you'd have everything to lose, and it doesn't add up. You understand? If, on the other hand, it's Jimmy, I guess I could see why. He's had to listen to his old man's crap about what happened to him for years."

"Is that true son?" My mother asked.

I didn't know what to do. I stared at my mother. I felt myself nod.

"It doesn't exonerate you Paul, and it still doesn't really explain anything, but I can't make you talk," my father said.

"If you ever fight in school again we'll ground you for a year. Or take away your car, or not allow you to call your girlfriend, or something equally as Draconian. Do you understand?" My mother added.

I should have felt the weight come off my shoulders, or the tightness in my chest loosen, but neither happened. Patty had said nothing the whole time. I wanted her to repeat "it's my fault." She didn't, and I knew then that she couldn't, and never would.

Until Christmas Eve, Patty was a ghost to me. I would catch glimpses of her, coming to, and going from, the main house, and of her lights. I could hear her voice, sometimes, mostly after I had gone to bed, speaking with my mom and dad. I felt an emptiness that could not be assuaged by the holidays, though I'd always loved Christmas on the farm. My mother baked and decorated, and it was our tradition to trim the tree on the night

before Christmas. Since my grounding, I had kept to my room, and read from the Narnia books that my mother had given me almost a year ago. The only pleasure I took in my father's granting me a pardon, on Christmas Eve morning, was that I might finally be near Patty again.

"Have you seen Patty?" Were the first words I uttered to my mother. She sat at the kitchen table, reading a book that she would teach next semester for the first time. She had done her hair, and put on her pearl necklace and earrings. She looked up as I stepped off the stairs, out of my dungeon, for the first time in a week.

"She took the truck to Traverse City for the day. She said she needed to pick up one more gift there."

A large coffee cake sat on the table; it smelled earthy and sweet. My father walked in the back door, his barn coat covered in light snow.

"She'll be here to trim the tree with us, right?"

My mother looked at my father, who took off his coat and hat and gloves. He hung them on one of the hooks by the door, and removed his boots. He slid his feet into his slippers. Only then did he look at us.

"Yes she will Paul," he said to me.

"She asked if she could borrow the truck to go down and see her family later. I told that was okay. I thought it was a good thing to do."

Patty returned late in the afternoon, just as the sun was setting. It had snowed, lightly, for much of the day, and now the whole of my known world was covered in white. She came in the back door, and behind her was my father with the large Fraser fir he had cut that morning, and which he would raise in the great room beyond the kitchen,

by the stone fireplace. Patty had done her hair, and wore a tiny silver cross on a silver chain. I might be able recount everything about from that day – the small wrinkles of her mouth when she smiled and laughed; the loose auburn hairs she brushed behind her ear; the timbre of her voice; the way her body moved beneath her clothes. But perhaps my memories are clouded by time and sadness.

I tried not be a thirteen-year-old boy with unrequited love for the woman who had taken him somewhere unimagined. Who'd spurned him, and enraged him to the point he had beaten up someone who had been his only friend for a long time, despite everything. But I didn't know how to be that man. I blushed every time Patty came close me, as we hung the ornaments and garland and tinsel. I pinched myself, several times, at the prospect of an erection. I was afraid that everyone in the room could see through me, that I was wearing my love for her like I was wearing my khakis and white button-down shirt and navy-blue sweater.

The three adults sipped eggnog spiked with rum. I only know because I sneaked a sip from the kitchen. By the time the tree was finished it was almost eleven o'clock, and the four of us sat on the two large sofas near the fireplace and admired our work. Patty looked at my father, who stood.

"I'm going to go warm up the truck," he said, and walked towards the kitchen, and the back door, and then the driveway beyond, where the old Ford sat.

"Paul, say 'Merry Christmas' to Patty. Though you'll see each other early enough in the morning I'd guess. Patty, I told him he cannot get up before eight," my mother said.

Patty laughed. She was beautiful

“I’ll come in when I see the lights on. Whatever time that is,” Patty replied.

“Merry Christmas Patty,” I said. I held my breath, afraid of what might escape if I exhaled.

“Merry Christmas Paul,” she said, and hugged me. I didn’t cry. I hoped my mother couldn’t see how tightly I held Patty, for that second, before she stepped away.

I heard my father shut the back door and stomp the snow from his boots. He came in the room in his slippers, but still in his coat, snow on his shoulders.

“It’s still coming down pretty good,” he said.

“Walter maybe you should drive her down there,” my mother added.

“I’ll be fine Mrs. B. I’ve lived here all my life.”

“We’ll wait up until you get back,” my father told her. “I need a few words with the guy in the red suit anyway.”

I had ceased my believing in Santa Claus several years earlier, when I had found half a dozen of my letters to him tucked into my mother’s copy of *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*, but my father still insisted he was real. I loved him for it.

“Make sure he takes Paul’s gift out of the Carriage House and puts it under the tree if he beats me here,” Patty said to my father. She glanced at me sideways.

“Will do,” he said

“I should go now. They’ll be back from Mass soon. Their once a year trip to church,” Patty said.

My dad followed Patty through the kitchen and, after helping her on with her coat, watched her out the kitchen window as she drove the truck down the long driveway towards the road. I sat in the great room and stared into the fire, which had become low.

When my dad came back in I wished my parents goodnight and trudged up the stairs to my room. Jade and Ruby, who had been sprawled in front of the fireplace, followed me.

I sat at my desk, in the corner of the room, and wept. Ruby and Jade climbed onto my bed and resumed their slumber. I slid open my desk drawer where I kept a boy scout flashlight and took it out and pushed the button you had to hold to keep the light on. I flashed the light across the books on the shelf above the desk. The gold leaf of one flashed back. It was Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which my mother had given to me when I was a child because it had illustrations by Dore, which she admired. I knew that it was the story of Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable. Perhaps it would remind her of a time before this, when I felt so apart from her. I took a pen from my desk and inscribed the book, and then removed the covers from a couple Batman comic books and wrapped it without tape, tucking the ends in like an envelope, a trick my father had taught me. I waited until the house was silent and slid down the back stairs and put my gift for Patty under the tree. I stood for a moment, returned to my room, and lay on the bed. I slept and didn't wake until the lights flashed in the driveway.

At first, I thought I was dreaming, but the lights continued to strobe in red and blue off the wall, and the girls were off my bed, headed down the stairs. I went to the window, where I saw my father, and the county sheriff, standing outside, in the ankle-deep snow, between the sheriff's car and my father's truck. My father looked up to my window, and shook his head, and I heard my mother's footsteps. She opened my door and looked at me standing by the window.

"Paul, you'd better get dressed and come downstairs," she said. I imagine she'd been crying already, or didn't see me well enough in the darkness to know that I was still dressed in the clothes I had on last night. "Something's happened to Patty."

I continued to stare out the window where the two men still talked.

"We'll be in the kitchen Paul. Please come down," she reiterated, and closed my door.

I listened as my father explained that Patty had missed the big turn before the road climbed up from the river, and that the old truck had pitched, then plunged, thirty feet or so, until an old oak had stopped its inertia. Patty wore no seat belt, and as such, it stopped her inertia too. Snow had covered the tire tracks so no one would have seen them, and she had been dead long enough to be cold by the time the Sheriff found the truck, on his way home for a pre-dawn Christmas breakfast.

My parents paid for Patty's funeral service and her burial, which would not be held until the spring because the ground was frozen. I remember Patty's closed casket, and my parents weeping, though I did not. I remember Patty's family, all five of them, dressed in clothes that looked as if they'd been sewn at home. Marvin Wilson loomed over them, well over six and half feet tall. He looked as if, at any moment, he might pull the sticks and strings from behind his back and hold them over his sons and his wife, so that they could move. The three boys were virtual copies of the old man, tall and dark and gangly, dressed in ill-fitting charcoal suits with white shirts buttoned to the chin, and whose eyes were an odd shade of pale brown. Patty's mother was half their size, with a wild shock of red hair streaked in gray, whose plain black dress hung on her like sack.

They looked like a family of black herons, I thought, their queer darkness at odds with the light of the sanctuary. I can remember the words, and music, of her Requiem Mass.

Epilogue

Her Christmas gift to me sat near my desk, close to the book wrapped in comic book covers that I never had a chance to give her, well into the spring. My parents asked, on several occasions, whether or not I would ever open it, my mother saying that she would understand if I didn't, but that I might want to, now that the weather would turn warm. I thought for weeks about it, and finally opened Patty's gift on Easter Sunday, a week before she was to be interred. I had told my mom and dad of my intentions and opened it at the kitchen table while they watched. Under the mahogany-colored paper and gold bow was a wooden box and inside that, laying on a bed of gray velvet was a flyrod, like Jimmy's, but not like Jimmy's. This one, had two tips and a stripping guide made of Agate, and it was signed by its maker near the cork handle.

"She had it made for you, by a man in Traverse City," my father said

I opened and unfolded card. Inside it said simply, in her handwriting: *Merry Christmas Paul*. *This is for you now, and the man you will become someday. Love Patty.*