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Advent

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ADVENT

A Thesis

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

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by

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ABSTRACT

The novel follows the lives of a family in a Texas tourist town after a stranger's arrival.

PART ONE

We saw the rescue party boxed in by the aftermath of a small altercation on the road. Deke was driving the truck, George, with a strange three-legged dog on his lap, sat beside him, and a handful of men George knew were squatting in the bed. It was late afternoon, just before dusk, and they looked miserable and tired. They had hurried getting organized, and now this. A tourist bus had tried to turn around in the middle of the too-narrow road, and reversed into a brand-new Volvo. The crash hadn't left a mark, nothing, but the owner of the car, a silver-haired elegant woman, was livid and kept threatening the bus driver, a diminutive bald man with glasses.

Because the accident had stopped traffic, people wandered into the street to mingle. Like it was a party. Tourists on foot, tourists on dude-ranch horses, and locals trying to sell cheap merchandise filled the street. The men were stuck behind this mess for twenty minutes, not able to reverse through the bodies and traffic jammed behind them. During that time, somebody asked George where they were going, and he said the dog had found something.

Did the dog tell you?

George didn't answer.

Well, how's he going to lead you from inside the truck?

George said they'd either figure it out or they wouldn't, but the dog seemed frantic enough to try. It was trying to leap out of his lap. Deke raised his eyes when George made this argument, and the men in the back laughed a little thoughtlessly, knowing George's history with rescue parties, and shrugged.

Traffic cleared, and somehow that dog led them, barking toward the right directions, whining at the wrong, into the countryside, down one road and up another, passing cattle, passing old cars and trucks rusting in the dim but violet sun of that September. They came to a hill where the road stopped, turning either left or right, but the dog didn't bark at anything but straight ahead.

It must be this hill, said George.

Deke took them as high as they could get, until they had to hike the rest. Except for Deke, who stayed, slouched, and turned up the radio. They all took flashlights, the beams of which scattered against the trees. The dog was right. It led them up a narrow path, bordered on

each side by succulents and small bushes, until even the men could smell the scent they were approaching, which was very sweet at first, but as it lingered in their noses it grew sour.

A man, sweating and gray and afflicted, lying beside a tree, was what the dog had brought them for. They caught him all at once with the flashlights. His leg was foul, cut by something, and everyone winced when they saw it. It was dark evening then, and by the time they'd fixed a makeshift splint to his leg, lifted him up, carried him back to the truck, and got moving, it was night. They were gathered around him in the bed, posing their faces to the wind to avoid the stench.

A while later, when the truck turned onto the big road toward San Antonio and the air cooled, the men in the back folded their arms. There were four lanes instead of two, and the dividing lines were bright and the surface smooth. Around them, lights in the hills flickered. The sky went from moon-gray to artificial violet, city-over-the-hill lit. A car passed going the other direction, and another. The rescue party watched restlessly ahead of them. Then the truck came around one long dipping bend finally, and at the foot of it a gas station, then a traffic light. They went under a bridge and the whole city burst forth after.

At the hospital, George told Deke to get more cigarettes.

Why don't we just leave him? asked Deke.

George looked at his son-in-law. We brought him down here, he said. We might as well see if he'll make it.

Deke turned and walking back to the truck said, Whatever, into the wind, quiet enough so no one would hear though everyone did. The swagger that his legs made made George sick. Feet wide in circle swing, heel scraping pavement.

When Deke got in the truck, he looked at the men standing around like bored schoolboys and yelled, Somebody want to come with me?

The men who had come along with George were all George's age, or near it, except for one, a man named Kyle, Deke's age, maybe thirty-five, who said he'd go, and hurried over to the truck. Kyle wore an old baseball cap and looked horrendous in it. No one ever said so since his crimped red hair was worse. He had some freckles on his arms and his skin sagged flabbily at his chest and waist.

George and the others turned back around to the hospital, which showered them in dim red light. Deke's truck squealed out of the lot, and the others retreated to the grass. The men forgot the dog had come along, and one of them tripped over it, yelled and kicked its ribs hard enough to knock it over.

It was your damn fault, said George.

It's late and I'm ready to go.

Me too, said another.

All right, said George. When Deke gets back we'll go.

Everyone's hopes sunk when George said that, since they knew Deke and knew Deke didn't care, and since the bars were still open and presumably there were women there who wanted company. And their hopes sunk further when George dug through his pack and pulled out a single cigarette, saying, This is it. It was midnight then.

And down the road, maybe four or five miles, Deke did have his arms around some beautiful woman, ordering her drinks and speaking into her neck, while Kyle sat at the bar wondering if they ought to go back soon, but dying himself to speak to the woman. Kyle would

turn to Deke and say, Listen, I ought to walk back, though Deke would just say, Good idea, and he would slump back to his beer. He had never meant to actually go but only to get the woman's attention.

The woman's eyes were sleepy, and her head sank and bobbed. She wore a black top and gray skirt and a gold bracelet with diamonds in it, and it was impossible to say how she could've started talking to Deke in his jeans and t-shirt except for all her martinis and maybe curiosity, since under his rags Deke was statue-handsome, with black hair and dark skin and brown, Labradorlike eyes. She asked Deke's name a dozen times and once or twice Deke told her, but got tired and had her guess it eventually. She would smile and her eyelids would seem to lift though it was instead her whole head that rose, and she would ask, You married? Then her head would fall on Deke's shoulder.

On and on it went with Deke and the woman, and his hand going up her bare leg wasn't being stopped. Kyle was watching them intensely, but embarrassed and trying to hold in his stomach, and Deke saw this and winked at him, and introduced him at last, saying to the woman, Meet my buddy Kyle. He likes you too.

She said, noticing how Kyle's cheeks bunched under his tiny eyes and his ears under the hat, You married?

You like him? asked Deke.

The woman laughed. Is he married?

And finally it occurred to Deke. Hey, he asked the woman, are you married? to which she rolled her eyes and smiled and didn't answer. Hell, said Deke, we're all married.

I bet you drive a truck, said the woman, and the cigarette she had lit but hadn't smoked burned down at last to the filter and went out. She lit another and put it in the ashtray. I want to see it.

It was past one by then. The three of them walked out with a bottle of vodka and the woman walked by a Mercedes and kicked a fender with the toe of her expensive black shoes, and then dropped a set of keys beside a tire. Deke and Kyle didn't say anything. Deke put his arms around the woman's waist and lowered his hands while Kyle's heartbeat was pumping and his hands and chest burned so much he wanted to grab this woman and take a mouthful of her, thigh, breast, back. He walked a few steps behind Deke and the woman, focusing his eyes on the skirt, and when Deke's hand pulled it up Kyle nearly died.

Deke and the woman kissed beside the truck for a few minutes. The truck was old and always breaking down, and Deke had plans to buy another. The woman seemed to like it as it was, rusted and falling apart, and she rubbed the body when she wasn't rubbing Deke. Kyle wasn't sure what to do apart from standing there and growing bitter, wanting her. He bit his fingernails. He took his hat off and rubbed his head, caught glimpses of her skin when Deke pulled at her clothes. Finally Kyle wiped his lips and came up from behind and pressed himself against her. She turned to find him, and squirmed away from them both. A handful of people far behind them were standing outside the bar watching. Let's go for a drive, said Deke, who had a gift for saying things like this without effort, and held the woman's hand.

So windows wide open and gusts of wind rushing through and everything in the truck's cab rustling or flapping, they drove, the three of them, with the woman in the middle leaning over Deke and rubbing his jeans while Kyle looked on. It took longer than any of them thought to break out of the San Antonio, since they had gone not back north toward the hills but west,

looking for some abandoned plot of land. The radio played something that wasn't so much music as a crackling over some instruments, and any of them could've turned the knob to find a hundred stations but didn't.

Stop somewhere, said the woman, who now had a leg over Deke's. She went to kiss him and Deke tried to kiss back with one eye on the road and one hand trying to get between her legs. Kyle coughed, since he couldn't think of anything else to do. Let's get rid of your friend, she whispered, but right out in the open. Kyle's hopes for that night and that drive burned up inside him. Deke heard her, and wished she hadn't said it, since it seemed to him apparent all along that they were both going to get her, and that was going to be the fun of it. Kyle noticed the huge and widening space between him and the woman. The woman's hands were between Deke's legs. Deke's face was blue from the dash lights, and Kyle could hear what he was thinking, thinking, God damn if it was anybody else she'd do us both. That was when Kyle grabbed the woman by the neck and turned her around lying under him and brought his fist down on her. Deke screamed at him, but Kyle did it again. The truck cut off the highway past the shoulder and onto the sloping grass, and it slid side-to-front, teetering, and cut huge brown grooves through the ground as it went, stopping finally in a fence that it had half-pulled down, engine dying.

The woman was out, lying contorted between them. Kyle's left hand was still behind the woman's neck but his right hand was relaxed.

Calm the fuck down, Kyle, said Deke. What'd you hit her for?

Kyle let the woman go and reached under him for the bottle of vodka. He slumped against the seat and took a long drink from it. What the hell do I do now? he asked.

Nothing, said Deke. On the highway behind them, not a single car drove by. With the engine cutting out, the headlights had dimmed to nearly nothing, like tint candleflames, and the emptiness of that late night engulfed them. Kyle made a fist and hit the windshield.

Christ, Kyle, said Deke. Get hold of yourself.

Kyle went weak and fell against the side window. Deke grabbed the bottle by the neck and put it on the floorboard beneath him.

The truck started up easily, and as it reversed up the slope it drug some of the fence with it, wire and wood, pulling down a whole new section of the fence. Deke was about to speak when Kyle opened the door of the truck and hopped out, falling onto the ground and spinning. Nothing ever looked so random or ridiculous. Deke stopped the truck and yelled at him to get back in, but Kyle just sat there. What the hell are you doing? asked Deke.

Go on, said Kyle. I'll make it back.

It'd take you a week to walk home, Kyle. Get in.

Kyle thought this over. After doing something so hideous he had done something that embarrassing. To get back in meant Deke would make fun of him for life, but he couldn't *walk* back.

He stood, closed the passenger door, and limped to the back of the truck and hopped in the bed. I saw a Texaco back a couple miles, he yelled. Drop me off there.

Deke wasn't going to stop to drop off Kyle and he wasn't going to get George or the others, who had grown a year older in one night from fatigue. They loathed Deke and the whole night and George and the stranger and most of all the dog who had led George all the way up

there to find the stranger. They chased the dog around the hospital whenever it got close. After two, George had to go get cigarettes himself, even though he was done smoking.

Where's Deke? asked one of them.

I'm gonna kill him, said another.

I have to work tomorrow. Three fuckin hours.

One man turned to George privately, saying, Maybe you ought to call your wife.

George nodded. She'll kill me, he said. I'm sorry about all this.

The men gave up when George apologized, since he was so perfectly pitiful doing it. They reached down and pulled up chunks of grass and threw them, wondering which way the wind was blowing, and wondering how long they could all just stand there waiting for Deke. For another hour they wandered around the little slope of grass outside the hospital, like cows. They were as dreary-eyed. They imagined Deke passed out in some bush, having gone there to piss. They imagined him in handcuffs waiting for a cell door to close so he could sleep it off, or driving the city with a woman on top of him. They didn't picture Kyle because they'd forgot he'd ever come along.

All Deke wanted was breakfast. The woman was waking up beside him. She didn't have any marks on her face but her right ear was red and swollen. Christ, thought Deke, he hit her in the *ear*. Her eyes were opening. Behind him, Kyle was bent and asleep in the bed, tumbling around when Deke took corners. The woman moaned and turned, and her hand fell on Deke's lap.

Outside, streetlamps shined down on the road, and there were billboards in Spanish lit along the roadside, and run-down buildings. It was almost four and it seemed bitterly cold to Deke though it wasn't at all. Deke's hands were shaking on the steering wheel and he had to put one arm inside his t-shirt. He thought about the men at the hospital again, pictured them begging nurses for cigarettes, and cursing him. He shook his head, but grinning, and looked down at the woman, whose eye opened. She raised her head and her hair was tangled, and she seemed to look at Deke like she was trying to remember him. Then she touched her ear and winced.

Don't worry, said Deke, I made my friend sit in the bed.

She moved all the way to the other side of the seat, and put her head in her hands.

Deke asked if she was going to get sick and the woman shook her head, and he lifted the bottle of vodka and offered her some but she turned to the window.

Guess you want to get back to your car, he said, thinking of breakfast. Hope your keys aren't missing.

The woman didn't make a sound. The road ahead widened, and Deke noticed some of the billboards were in English though the buildings didn't seem any less run-down. He sipped the vodka and it warmed the inside of him, even if the outside of him still shivered.

By the time they reached the bar, the sky had gone from black to blue but was still dark. A hairline of white light was drawn over the landscape in the distance—clouds had broken there—and it made Deke sick to know it was almost morning. The woman's car was there but the keys weren't, and Deke figured someone must've left them at the bar but didn't say it. All he could think of was breakfast.

The woman got out, stumbling, hurrying, trying to escape him. She got down on her knees to search for her keys, reaching under the Mercedes, and Deke admired the shape of her

ass in the skirt she wore. He looked in the rearview mirror and Kyle was curled up in a corner, and Kyle's stomach was drooped down and resting on the metal.

Five minutes later, still in blue darkness, Deke drove the truck by the hospital, sped down the road right in front of the men who weren't looking anymore and didn't see it. By then George had called Ingrid to come not for George (who would've rather stabbed himself and crawled into the hospital) but for the others he'd brought and trapped, and they were waiting for her big Lincoln to appear. George had asked to see the man inside, and a nurse had led him to the bed with the stranger in it and drawn the curtain around them. George turned to ask what had happened but the nurse had disappeared, and George suddenly felt ridiculous, and had nothing to say and no point being there. He chewed on his nailless fingertips and felt tired. He rubbed the gray stubble on his face. His eyes closed and he slept standing there like a horse, or thought he did. When his eyes opened he left through the curtains and found a doctor, and asked him if the man was going to make it. The doctor asked him who he was and George couldn't lie—he said he was nobody, that he'd found the man alone in the woods after a three-legged dog led him there. That's odd, said the doctor, and George agreed with him. Will he make it? asked George. Oh, he'll make it, said the doctor, who yawned and rubbed his eye. You want another sandwich? thought George, who didn't nod or shake his head, but said, Thank you, and turned to leave. He came to the exit and the doors opened for him. He didn't feel as redeemed as he'd hoped. He didn't feel like he got what he came for.

Outside, there were two nurses, a man and a woman, talking about going to get drinks at seven, when the morning's first bar opened. George saw the men who'd come with him sitting or sleeping on the grass, and he knew he owed them. Beyond them was the dog sniffing circles in the grass. The blue darkness was pale and brightening now, and the clouds were breaking.

George's stomach was growling. He took a cigarette to fight off his appetite. He lit it and smoked one long drag and started coughing. It made his throat burn. He stomped on the cigarette and sat down beside the others. It was Wednesday now.

At six Deke pulled into a diner and ordered his breakfast. He left Kyle in the back and didn't order him anything. Deke still felt cold, and as he ate his eggs his hand shook. He kept losing half or all his bites, and sitting on his stool he called himself names and tapped the counter in frustration. When he finished he went outside and started the truck. Kyle had left. Deke pictured him down the street in a telephone booth not knowing whether to kneel or collapse with guilt, his wife on the other end telling him not to bother coming back, already packing his clothes into a suitcase. Fat fucking idiot, Deke thought. The food had made him tired and the four cups of coffee even more tired, somehow. He picked up the vodka and drank from it. He had bought that pack of cigarettes, at last, and now he smoked one. The keys kept falling out of his shaking hands and he pounded the dash and elbowed the door to stop his shivering. When he finally got the key in and turned it, he yelled and revved the engine.

The sun was up now, and heat filled the air. Deke couldn't believe any of it. The woman was in his mind as he drove, turning onto the road that led back home, and just as they had come into the city suddenly, he left suddenly, and after a traffic light and gas station there was very little but the trees and the hills and dead grass and every now and then a crossroads and a little town with low speed limits and a restaurant, and George had seen it all a half hour before, driving back with his wife, who wouldn't speak a word. The other men were cramped in the

back seat. They had abandoned the dog with the hope that someone from the hospital would have it put down.

When George and the others pulled into town, finally, there were tour buses driving in already, diesel smoke stinking up the streets, some men and women learning how to ride horses without losing grip on their video cameras, and George went straight to work to sell the antiques and souvenirs and trinkets and even old bones found by scavengers. Deke pulled into town a little later, drinking a Coke. He turned down the main road, and his face was worse than all the others, pouring sweat, one eye closed, broken cigarette in his mouth—broke from trying to light it with a hand that wouldn't stop shaking—and he came to a stop sign and didn't stop but rolled softly and slowly through it, into a telephone pole. The collision was nothing. The truck jerked and stalled and Deke slumped to the side slightly, and fell asleep. Some tourists took pictures of him. After about ten minutes George came outside his store, beyond exhaustion, and no one can really say why he tried to stay awake in the first place, but after he pushed Deke over and parked the truck under some shade he mumbled to himself and walked away from the store, which towered above all the other buildings, grand and picturesque among the drab, toward his house.

*

Tired, wasted, weak like his bones were made from the box-cardboard spilling out of dumpsters around him, he was stepping through drifts of high snow beside the predawn emptied streets of Chicago, first day of January, all dark or white, when a huge wind raging off the lake blew him over. It must've turned a dozen corners, charging like elephants, to weave that far west. Fallen, he was a foot deep in a bank, had sunk down through it, and above him the tops of buildings leaned in like curious pedestrians and shook their heads, and when they shook snowflakes blew off them.

Two streets down a small dark alley (where was he?), the day's first el rumbled through the morning. He picked his head up and watched the train go by. Rolling and empty and full of sad blue light, the noise it made told the story of the whole city's lonesomeness, and he could hear all the lonesome sounds that echoed it: loose sidewalk-stones scraping, apartment doors rattling, windows shaking, and inside those sounds he thought he could even hear glasses stacked in cupboards stir, water in old flowerpots lap, and all the sleeping people snore and rustle awake, pulling limbs back under bedspreads.

And then he blinked and he was a wanderer in Wyoming watching a rodeo, and then washed up drunk on a beach in Oregon with no money, then being beat down by a man in Oklahoma with a pool cue, crawling out the door and begging for his life. He was a hundred other times at once, and a story was buried in their heap. But first, more than anything, was snow, white and blustering. He came to his feet and shook it off.

He'd thrown a New Year's party and couldn't remember if he'd invited anyone, and no one came, and he stood at the door listening for footsteps shuffling up the stairs. When he heard nothing, nothing above cars passing on the street below, he sat in his living room, searched his surroundings, slingshot rubber bands against a poster of a famous painting, picked up some shoes and played with the shoelaces. On wall shelves, above him, there were a dozen, two dozen books, some he'd read and some he hadn't. Many were halfway yellowed, began over and over but always unfinished. He scoured through a desk drawer, found paper clips to string together, and tried to weld them with fire from matches. Then, ass in air, knees and elbows on carpet, he dug through an old trunk, dragged from under a clothespile in a closet. He was bent in prayer. Like a Muslim. His five toes were five mushroom caps through five holes in his socks, flexing in the cold. Inside the trunk, there were photographs, disordered piles of them that came out like individual, reptilian scales, layer after layer, and he dealt them on the floor like playing cards. They made a strange audience around him, smiling and delighted, and he could recognize likenesses but not quite people.

Except Dara. There was one of her at fourteen, when he last knew her, in sunlight, at a beach, and for a tiny instant he felt the sensation of being near water. And then it vanished, and the air was the stale radiator heat in his apartment.

He came up, prayer finished, hands on thighs. He held the picture up to light, wondering if he could make the image alter, grow older with him. In it, Dara looked not toward the sunset but the water. It was just her face, but he knew how she was sitting, hunched around her knees, waiting for her father's car to come get her.

He took it to the bathroom, put the seat down and veed his legs embarrassingly. The seat was cold and chilled his body. He was twice as old as Dara in the photograph. It shook in his left hand. Around him was his unclean bathroom, faucet dripping, rust around the drains, mildew infecting his shower walls. His face was red in a mirror he couldn't bear to look at. Finish, he thought, finish just finish just finish.

He pushed toiletries aside and put the photograph on a small surface beside him. An alarm went off in the kitchen. He was sweating and rebuckling his belt, and didn't know what to make of it. *Oven*, he thought, Christ. He ran, holding his pants up, buckle jingling, remembering the food he'd made for the party. The room was a dungeon and impossible to breathe in. He waved a towel and opened the stove and there were two dozen black flaming things he had to throw in the sink. They sizzled, dampening, in a shallow, stagnant pool of dirty water. Disturbed, it suddenly stank, and as he held one hand over his mouth and nose, he turned the faucet on, squirted some dishwashing liquid, the last of it, into the basin, then off, then went to the living room.

Outside, wind chimes pounded the semi-silence, first intimations of an oncoming blizzard. He opened a window to the fire escape and sat on the cold iron, and he left the window cracked since the natural and supernatural were mingling in his mind, and he thought it might have been possible for Dara to appear underneath the boxed door arch in a black coat, shaking the cold off her shoulders, asking, Am I the first one?

The wind gusted, and his collar blew up, and when he pulled it back down he saw the first snowflakes pouring out of the sky like white wonderful insects. He opened his mouth and ate them. He spent half an hour out there. His hair turned to ice. His nose ran and he wiped ice across his face.

When he came back inside, the heat exhausted him. He made a drink and turned on his radio, and stood before the spyhole in his door, looking down the staircase curving downward, wondering if a crowd wasn't lost outside trying to find him. A long time passed, and he was enamored with the way the lens could curve objects, and a while later there was the muffled noise of cheering, maybe on the radio, and behind him, through the window, though he did not look, fireworks screeched into the air, silencing a moment, then burst.

His eyes closed and opened. He was in a dark, empty room, and he could not know it was a hospital, could not know that a man named George had been visiting, hoping he'd recover, that he had been drawn out of a ditch by some men and rushed to where he now lay. Out his solitary window he envisioned those fireworks, a white streak flaming upwards, then disappearing, then above the sudden disappearing a red sphere exploded and faded, white again at its tips.

He closed and opened his eyes again, and he was in Nebraska. All the snow he had seen before, even in Chicago, was no snow at all. It was here, on a night he was reliving in his mind,

and monstrous, and it moved in infinite directions at once, falling out of the sky and sweeping in from the distance and springing from the ground. He hopped out the backseat of a man's long Cadillac in Central City and bought himself a twenty-four-ounce steak because it was the smallest he could find. A waitress came to his table and reached across his shoulder to wipe the grime, and her huge unfathomable breasts rode the whole curve of his neck from back to chest. He drank coffee with his steak, and the tastes didn't mix. He poured in six or seven creamers and ruined it. Then a man sat down at the table next to his. The man was in overalls and filthy, and he wouldn't look at anyone but the waitress. She eventually came to him, smiling. She moved his salt shaker and he held her fingers, softly. A beer, the man said. Enviously, imitatively, he, the wanderer, said, Same. The man and the waitress both looked at the him. He smiled and raised his coffee, which spilt over its rim and around the steak. The waitress nodded, and went to fill the orders. When she put the man's down, he held her arm at the elbow while he drank it in a single, ravenous gulp. He wiped his whiskers. Another, the man said. The wanderer got his and tried to drink it down, but it wouldn't go as easily, and by the time he'd finished she was gone. Then another man came in and sat beside the beer drinker. The waitress got back to work, and the two men talked about machinery.

They sat for the next few hours at the two small tables in this part-bar, part-restaurant, part-gas station. The wanderer eavesdropped on their stories. They grew drunk and he grew drunk beside them, trying to match their drinks. The waitress came more often, even sat in the beer drinker's lap for short breaks, and it all seemed like happiness until a gigantic woman wearing overalls dirtier than the beer drinker's crashed through the door. Snow blew in with her, sought out all the emptiness in the place and filled it. White tumbling somersaults. The waitress was off the man's lap, thank God. Everyone turned to see what this filthy woman had come for, and she stomped over, grabbed the beer drinker, and pulled him up by the skin on his neck, his *neck*, and he swung his arms like a man drowning, gasping for air or one last sip of his beer, and the wanderer watched him pass, dragged like an animal, from the dim light of that place to the cold blizzard light of outside. Then a car door slammed, then another.

Then he was walking through Chicago, back in Chicago, and again it was the same night, the night the wind had blown him down. He was waiting for the dawn of the new year to begin. It was fifteen below and the snow seemed maniacal. He was wearing nothing but wool slacks, a button-down shirt, and dress shoes. He walked all the way down Clark, into the loop. When he finally looked up he found himself surrounded by metal and stone and glass, reaching up into the clouds and through the downfall, and illuminating all of it with flashing light.

He stepped inside a hotel lobby and followed elegant people to a massive banquet room, the immensity of which astounded him. The ceiling was hangaresque, a huge vault, and a million glass panes in white decorated frames held the blizzard back. He made his way along the crowded floor. People turned in mild disgust at him. The snow had soaked through his clothes, and he was wet, dog-in-river-wet. The women were in long and sensual dresses, cut low around their perfect necks and breasts, and oblivious. The men were in perfect black coats with their arms around these women, moving them away from him. Under the glass curve of ceiling they were all dancing in beautiful circles. A waitress came by. She wore a tuxedo without the jacket. He took champagne off her tray, drank it down, and moved closer to the center of the dancing. Before he could find it, though, the music shifted suddenly, brass to guitar, then drums, and then all these elegant people were dancing like Africans, but hopelessly. Some women laughed at

him, though he thought they might be smiling, and he tried to hop with the beat, but gave up when the same women rushed away howling. It was not clear if they were rich or just employees of some rich company, rich for a night. A waiter or manager in a red jacket came to him. Are you looking for someone? he asked. I don't know. If you aren't a guest you have to leave. I'll leave. Now. I'll leave.

So he walked back out into the snowy, blustery, incomprehensible night. The idea of the women in the beautiful dresses stayed with him, down Michigan Avenue and over the Chicago River, which was blanketed white. He passed other women on the street, but they didn't look at him until he'd passed, and then only to wonder or to laugh or to pity. When he came over the river the groups of women were gone, and suddenly he noticed dozens of men walking by themselves, passing each other in silence, heads turned down to their own trudging feet.

He kept on walking. His legs grew heavier and colder, and each step seemed to slow him down, as if he were a man gradually turning to ice, but he kept on walking. In a matter of what seemed like minutes but must've been an hour, the snow built a fortress over the street, ankle-high and bitter, and it wouldn't relent. It was the dreariest weather to walk through. The night was full of the lights and noises of the city, then even more than before, and they pierced and yawed through the darkness and the cold.

He was inside the dark room again. Outside the solitary window, there was a wild and terrible thunderstorm, and tree limbs bent and swept behind the glass. Everything was visible in lightning strikes. He felt his leg burning unbearably but didn't know why, and he reached down to grab it and felt a huge hole above the knee. He was finger deep in his own leg, and he screamed for help, panicking. A tree branch whipped the window, and he looked and thought he saw a man outside it, rapping and desperate to get in. He couldn't make sense of anything.

This man at the window, his silhouette quavered in the thunderstorm. He was grossly thin, or his shadow was, and a woman opened a door beside the window, and saw him, and it was his own self, there shivering in the rain and cold. Hello, she said.

I used to know someone who lived here, he said. Dara. She was fourteen.

The woman moved back slightly, and he said, I was fourteen, but we moved.

It was impossible to speak over the rain and thunder, and he barely had the energy to try.

Are you all right? asked the woman.

Dara? he asked.

No, she said. I've only been here for a year.

He smiled, and turned and walked down the woman's steps, and the rain grew stronger.

He spent a whole month in that town looking for Dara, living through the images of his memory. He slept in a ditch near his old house, and saw himself in the upstairs bedroom listening to music, drumming the bedposts. He never found her, but found her mother in a nursing home, sitting numbly in front of a television, after a stroke left her paralyzed. Her hands were curled like lobsterclaws, she was one big eye and one small one, and when she saw him she mumbled, and an orderly wiped her mouth. He couldn't think of anything to tell her, and he couldn't ask her anything either. So without knowing if she'd recognized him, he sat with her for a whole afternoon watching a television whose picture wouldn't stick, but scrolled and scrolled, and when they wheeled her off he stayed a few moments, wondering if the scroll had a pattern.

Then he was in San Francisco. He was sleeping on the streets and cold and the brown fog made love to him in the gutter. After that, he was in Phoenix, where a man let him sweep a road for money, so he could eat cheap tacos, and when it was hot a gray miserable haze buried the city and would not blow out of the bowl of the mountains. Here he met the most miserable creature he had come across, a brown short-haired mix breed with three legs, abandoned and thirsty. They swept the road together.

Then silence, or not quite silence but the unrhythmic static of many unimportant things happening at once. The buzz of an air conditioner, telephones ringing and being answered, a coffee pot filtering, and so on, cacophonizing blur. As he heard these images, they materialized out of a gray peaceful cloudiness in his thoughts. And he went around these noises like a magician swinging a wand until the whole scene was built perfectly. There he was at his desk filling out a form, which had come from the noise of scribbling, and a man came up behind him.

While you were out, somebody called. Started with a D. Like Dana.

Dara?

That could be it.

Did she leave a number?

No. Said she'd call back.

From that moment he didn't want to leave his desk. When he went home, on the bus that trudged back into the city from the suburbs, which were waste lands, then the el, then walking frustratedly around jammed traffic, he would say little prayers that she would not call until he returned to work.

He sold insurance. Or he did not quite sell insurance, but when an agent did, he would take a client's information for the agent. The days bled through him in the gray unimportant static that brought him to this memory. But he could not leave, since it was the number Dara had called, and would call back.

She did, months later, while he was out. The message came from a different man, who said she had a sexy voice, Dana, Dara, something, but had left no number. The news gripped his head at the temples like a vice, and the man apologized, promising to get her number the next time.

He began to work all hours there, at his desk. Because he put so many hours in, they offered him a step up, which meant managing the people who took client's information, but he would not leave his desk. Now the days were heavier and slower, like he was adrift on a raft in a desert.

More messages came, spaced by months, and his attention to anything else deteriorated. He began to stink. He watched the phone intently, and rushed clients through, making up details. One morning the phone rang and when he answered a woman said, I love you. He said, Dara? And then the woman hung up. He stood and looked around the office, moving in its usuality, its stale buzzing unimportance, and went to the bathroom. He sat down on a toilet and his heart was pounding in bewildered panic, and suddenly there was a massive explosion of laughter from the office. He rushed out and found men hugging each other, in fits, crying with joy.

What? he asked.

Later that day, the woman who called took pity on him. She left a note on his desk that read, They made me do it. Sorry. And underneath that note was a small uncrumpled sheet of paper with his doodling all over it. Everywhere, leaving no empty space, not at the borders nor

the edges, he had scribbled Dara's name. He had done it unconsciously one day, bored with no work, then thrown it away.

But it was not this humiliation, strangely, not alone, that made him flee the city, since he stayed on at that same job, with those same people, friendlessly toiling, for a year or more.

Then he was in the dark room again, and it was instantly filled with light, like someone had drawn curtains away from the window, and it shot through him like electricity, and his back arched in pain. The light was all haze and he couldn't see anything through it, and for one horrifying moment he believed God was in the room, and when his back came down to the bed again he became perfectly silent and still, and waited. He felt something hovering over him, and didn't dare move. The light grew intense, white beyond white, and then it was dark again.

In this darkness he was overcome by an ethereal urge. He drifted in it, encountering images. There was a bottle of wine in his hand. There was a woman pulling him down a street. Lamps were dim above them, and muck was under their footsteps. His eyes opened and closed sleepily. His shoulder dragged against the wall. Even in the night, it was a hundred degrees easily, and the wine was no colder. He imagined he was melting, turning to wine. He could smell the ocean. The woman turned a corner and let go of his hand. He put his hand against a wall to hold himself, and she undressed and laid herself down in the muck. He watched her naked back and thighs settle into it. He knelt between her legs. The last few swallows of wine were unbearable, but he put them down. He imagined Dara again and her suntanned body lying on a rug, and he took this woman under him, in the sludge, in whichever alley they had floated to, and the motion he made must have filled her with sludge and pollution, and all the while he was suffocating from the urge to go on, and he was certain he could sink no lower. But he motioned on and wiped his face with hands he'd planted into the filth, and rubbed her waist and chest, and suddenly the muck became their romance, and she rubbed it over herself.

*

There was one week in November, before Thanksgiving, when it got cold. It was the first real cold since the winter before, eight long months, below freezing on a night or two, and Deke, exhausted, working constantly, who would not sleep, caught the flu. It had warmed since then, back to the eighties, sun out again and heating Deke's neck and arms and legs through the windows of his brand-new truck, but Deke was still sick. He was sitting behind the steering wheel blowing his nose into a tissue, and a pile of wet tissues had grown beside him in the passenger seat. His eyes and face were red, and he had a short haggard beard. And even in this state, despite the coughing and sneezing and dishevelment, when he pulled into a gas station twenty miles west of Van Horn, two women watched him eagerly.

He had just come back from a run, had just smuggled two dozen Mexicans from somewhere in the Chinati Mountains and driven them to El Paso. Another smuggler had taken them across the border, a man Deke hadn't known, which was often the case. Now, he was happy to be heading home, and he needed cough drops and some coffee and some more fucking tissues. The two women were smoking on a bench, enjoying the sunlight, and one was fat and one was skinny, both Hispanic, and when Deke passed them they whispered to each other.

The air was hotter inside than outside, and the change in temperature made Deke want to faint. He pulled his sweater off and bundled it under his arm, and he could feel perspiration coming to his forehead. The gas station was split into a store and café. A man, woman, and little boy, sitting closely together at one of a few small round tables, were eating cheeseburgers. Deke sneezed into his cupped palm, and without any tissues around him, had to stick his hand inside the cocoon of his sweater.

Deke walked through the aisles looking for medicine, tapping everything on the shelves with his finger. He coughed in patterns, three increasingly louder, then a fourth, a big, ribbed, bass-drumming cough that made him pause and bend over. When the fourth came, the store seemed to shake, and when he stood back straight his vision went white for a while, then came back in tiny dots.

He got his coffee and a package of cough drops, and at the counter a sudden sensation of ice filling his body came over him, so he put his sweater back on, but when he did it was like someone had lit a fire beneath him, so he pulled the sleeves to his elbows and pulled the sweater's collar below his chin out and blew down it. The man behind the counter, white

whiskery beard, asked if he was okay, and Deke tried to smile but coughed instead. The sympathy on the man's wrinkled face infuriated Deke, so he bought cigarettes.

A truck with a camper over the bed screeched down the road out front, though the noise was because its tires were bald, must have been, not because it was speeding, because it wasn't, and everyone looked over at it. Deke had driven one of those once from near Laredo to Houston, brown and topheavy, with eight exhilarated Mexicans cramped in the back. Where he was now, or Van Horn, twenty minutes away, was where Highway 90, a thoroughfare for illegals coming out of Marfa territory, a vast unsecurable space stretching a couple hundred miles high and across the border, intersected with Interstate 10. Traffickers would come through, hit the highway, and in be in El Paso within a few hours.

The man with the woman and boy stood, and kissed them both on the forehead. He put an apron on and looked up at a clock. The woman and the boy—maybe he was five, six—got up and put their trash in a big red can, then passed Deke on their way out. The man watched them, and watched Deke watching them, until they had disappeared from the parking lot. Then he picked up a broom. Deke had been standing in the same spot for a long while but hadn't noticed. When he moved, at last, to the door, the door buoyed and jerked in his vision, as if he were walking along a wobbling floating dock toward a boat in water.

The two women were still whispering when Deke stepped outside. He lit it and gulped the smoke down, which rushed back out in round, whopping coughs.

Ick, one woman said to the other.

Deke had made four runs that week, trying to get ahead of the down payment on his new truck. Now, he dreamt himself—though, slipping out of consciousness, he did not know whether the dream was sleeping or waking—standing in the huge empty space of George and Ingrid's store, an architectural outcast in a town full of drab, boxed buildings, which should already have been his, or so George one night drunk had promised, if he would marry Jenny. In his vision, the antiques and kitsch George and Ingrid sold were gone, and there was a big truck outside ready to unload Deke's merchandise, though he did not know yet what it was.

Deke heard the women talking to each other, and he woke from his dream to see, far down the road, the woman and the boy walking. They were black shadowy specks, but he knew it was them. Deke drank his coffee, and the warm drink in the warm air made him feel awful, and on top of that his eyes hurt from exhaustion and the sunlight, and the caffeine was drawing all his concentration to a single point between his eyes, and pounding.

Down the road, coming toward the speck of the woman and the speck of the boy, a car materialized out of the light. It was driving slowly, and it stopped when it came to them, and an arm came out the window, tapping the door and waving at the little boy.

After they had what seemed to be a conversation, the car started moving again. It came dully forth, even in the light, and slow. The uneven and pocked pavement made it shake and waggle, approaching, like the shell of a crawling insect. The motion hypnotized Deke, and he thought the women might be trying to ask him something but he could not hear what they were saying.

It pulled just beside Deke's truck. The car was a white Taurus, with sheriff's markings, and a short plump Hispanic man stepped out.

Hey, he said to Deke.

Deke squinted to make out the sheriff's face and sneezed, and the sheriff looked at Deke. You okay?

Enfermo, said the skinny woman.

Deke started coughing, and the women moved away from him.

Muy enfermo.

Deke stood and ate another cough drop. He reached for his coffee but tipped it off the bench. Fuck, he said. He ignored an urge to kick the bench, and walked to his truck, digging through his full pockets for keys. He climbed inside, cracked the windows, and lay down along the cloth seat, knocking his pile of wet tissues on the floorboard. He could hear the sheriff and the two women talking and laughing, and then a bell as the door to the gas station opened, and then their voices disappearing inside. At last there was silence, and Deke made fists under his head for a pillow, and it was paradise. A minute later, though, he realized lying down was drawing congestion into his throat, and wouldn't let him breathe. He tried four or five different positions, and with each one he had to come up, cough it out, and blow his nose.

When he settled, finally, on sleeping sitting up, resting his head against his window, he thought he heard a siren, and he turned to see the road going toward the highway, the opposite direction the woman and boy had taken, empty. If he could sleep ten minutes, he thought, he could push on, so he turned back and closed his eyes, and another dream began to take shape, again between sleeping and waking, in which he was living in a very old city, which he thought might be in Europe or South America. In the dream he was listening to music on a high patio. But then he thought he heard the siren again, and he wrenched himself awake, to investigate. Still the road was empty, and he couldn't hear the siren anymore. He pressed his fists tight against his ears. Then he looked down the road in the opposite direction, where the woman and boy had gone, and there was nobody.

The sheriff was inside eating a hamburger, standing, talking to the man in the apron. They were laughing, and the two women were sitting down, eating french fries. The man with the white beard was resting on his elbows, at the counter, and he yawned.

Very quietly, the electric noise of a voice began to speak. It was coming from the sheriff's car, but wasn't loud enough to hear inside the station. Deke tried to listen, but it was too muffled. Deke could feel something developing, and he shook his head trying to wake himself fully, so he could leave. If he had to, he thought, he could pull over later and sleep.

There was a screech, far away, and then the siren, real finally, now round and now narrow, and when Deke turned he saw some objects whirring out from invisibility. He stared dumbly out his rear window, sniffing. It was the same truck from earlier, the old one with the high camper over the bed. Behind it was a big green Bronco with red lights flashing through the grill, Border Patrol. Fuck, Deke said. He took his keys, and put them in the ignition. In his rearview mirror he saw the truck losing ground to the Bronco, then another car with flashing lights, black, DPS, behind them both. The sheriff and the women and the man in the apron were at the window, pressed curiously against the glass. Deke looked back to his mirror, and it startled him to see how close the truck was.

When it was within yards of the parking lot, it swerved, and its bald tires, yelping and wiping the gray pavement black, lost traction, and the truck began a long circular sweep toward Deke. As it turned sideways, the truck started to slow down, and Deke knew that, had the tires a hint of tread, the truck would have flipped. But there it was spinning smoothly.

Deke saw his way out, a little space still there in front of the truck's closing sweep. He grasped the gear shift on the steering column and thought he moved it down one notch, to reverse, but he had brought it down an extra, into neutral, and when he hit the gas the engine made a big burbling howl and went nowhere. Instinctively, he hit the brake, and when he was about to try again, he looked back in the mirror and saw that the space had closed, and that he would be hit.

The sheriff was coming out of the station, jogging to his car. He put his hands over his eyes and turned his back, crouching. Deke, when he saw that, closed his eyes too, and loosed his whole body. A second passed, maybe two, and then, to his surprise, he only felt a little clip, and his truck shivered, but after that there was an enormous, biting crash, followed by small metallic chiming. Deke opened his eyes, and saw the rear end of the truck balanced over the trunk of the sheriff's Taurus. The truck was rocking from movement inside. The window to the camper, above the tailgate, came open hesitantly, and faces appeared. The sheriff saw them, and started shouting. They looked around the landscape in awe, like they were people coming up out of the ground, and when the tailgate opened their bodies came tearing out, over the sheriff's car. The green Bronco and black cruiser pulled calmly to rest at the edge of the parking lot, and when the drivers saw the Mexicans rushing out, they opened their doors and gave chase.

The sheriff pinned one to the ground, a small one, and was telling him not to panic. Deke was wondering how bad his truck was damaged, and when one Mexican jumped from the sheriff's car to Deke's hood, Deke screamed and honked his horn, and the Mexican slipped off and fell between the vehicles.

Two Mexicans ran inside the gas station, and the other five or six sprinted around it. Deke finally got out of his truck, and the border patrol officer yelled at him to get back in, and Deke said, Go fuck yourself, and sneezed.

The collision, the small clip the chased truck left on Deke's, was a brown smear across the chrome of Deke's bumper. Deke kneeled and scraped at it with his fingernail, and could feel the tiny slope of a dent. Everyone was shouting around him. Mother fucker, he said. He sighed, and stood. The two women were still at the window. The sheriff was stuffing the man he'd caught into the still-intact back seat of his car. The border patrol officer was hunting through the brush, and the DPS man was looking around the the opposite side of the station. It looked somehow childish to Deke, like they were all going to start hopping and laughing.

Then, from behind the store, three men went running. One was the man in the apron, untying the apron to run. Both officers shouted, and took off after them, and when that happened a group materialized out of the brush, and sprinted in the other direction. Deke heard the border patrol officer say, Christ, and turn alone to follow. The sheriff locked his man in the back seat of his Taurus. He mouthed something to the women, and the women pointed. He pulled his pants up and ran, and Deke, remembering he had stopped to talk to the woman and boy, figured he was going to try and help the man in the apron.

Deke opened the tailgate of his truck and sat. He was going to stay there until someone told him who would pay for the dent. He was so angry that he stopped coughing for a while, and in that silence he heard something moving, inside the other, crashed truck. He stood up in his own high bed to see into its cabin, and there he was, the driver, lying along the floorboard. They'd forgotten the driver. Deke hopped down on the pavement, and went to the truck, and opened the door. The driver coiled up like a snake, and tried to reach for the other door.

Come here, said Deke, and took hold of him by his light jacket, then by the neck, and dragged him out.

The man was begging not to be hurt, and Deke could see something wrong with his leg already. There was some blood on his jeans at the shin.

Deke pointed to his truck. You hit my truck, he said.

The man stopped begging. He was older than Deke, and Hispanic.

My truck, said Deke, and pulled the man closer to the bumper, like a dog being scolded. Then he pointed. The man blinked and asked a question.

Deke dropped the man and let him lie there. This is your fault, said Deke. Don't move.

Ten minutes later, the officers came back. They hadn't caught anybody. The border patrol man got on his radio. When he was finished, he said to Deke, I thought I told you to stay in your truck.

I caught your driver, said Deke. That sheriff caught somebody, too.

The sheriff was coming back slowly, tired and coughing and spitting. When he got back, they all stood around in a circle around the driver, and Deke said, interrupting a conversation they were trying to have, Who's going to pay for my truck?

They all looked at his bumper. I don't see a dent, one said, not a big dent anyway.

Then they turned to see the truck and camper, upended, and the sheriff's Taurus, its trunk demolished.

This is a brand-new truck, said Deke. Somebody's got to pay for this.

One officer joked to the other, pointing with his feet at the driver, Think this guy here's got insurance?

Deke started coughing again, and the DPS man said, Its hardly a scratch.

It's brand fucking new, said Deke, and I was just sitting here.

Another green car, a big cruiser, was coming down the road, and the two officers picked up the driver and hauled him over to the Bronco to arrest him. When the new officer climbed out and joined the first two, Deke and the sheriff stood by as they talked and pointed toward where the Mexicans had run.

The women came outside and lit cigarettes. They were a little bit in shock, and weren't whispering any more. Deke swallowed another lozenge and another coughing fit frustratingly began. The officers appeared disorganized, and a few kept walking toward their cars, then turning back, then turning toward them again. He could see all this taking hours, and it made him feel sicker.

More green vehicles pulled up, in the long, dreary moments that followed, and more black ones, and no one seemed too concerned with Deke's truck or the sheriff's Taurus. The women kept going back inside to eat french fries and then outside to smoke cigarettes, and Deke kept going to check the clock in his truck, wondering how much longer he'd have to wait.

When the first DPS man finally came back to Deke, he said, There are some forms you have to fill out.

He seemed a little more serious now, and tired. Behind him, the green vehicles, four of them, were beginning to scatter, going to hunt illegals down. Deke flipped through the pages of the form.

The officer said, You can take it home.

No, said Deke, I'll do it now. You got a pen?

I need mine, he said.

So Deke had to buy a pen inside the gas station, and he sat down with another coffee, and he sneezed on the top page of the form and wiped it with his sleeve. The old man with the beard was sitting beside him, spinning a coin on the tabletop. The sheriff and the two women sat down together and he got a coffee and they got soft drinks. Outside, the air was turning orange. Deke wouldn't be home for seven or eight more hours, in the middle of the night, if he drove ninety.

The familiar places on the way home unraveled in his mind, and the expectation of the drive seemed almost as bad as the drive itself. The form required a few lengthy answers, and Deke wondered if it weren't possible to incriminate himself somehow, if, in his exhaustion, he might trick himself into confessing why he'd been there. On another page, there was a blank box in which he was supposed to draw the scene of the accident. He put the balls of his palms into his eyes, and pressed.

The sheriff and the two women were talking about the man and the woman and little boy. Deke understood their sentences in small flashes. He understood that the man was supposed to be safe. The sheriff also talked about his car, and began retelling the events of the accident, in detail, and when he rendered his frightened crouch he laughed at himself, and then made a big clap that startled the women.

Deke stood and walked outside. The DPS officer came to him. Finished? he asked.

I think so, said Deke.

The officer took it, and Deke sneezed and the sneeze was so vicious that the bones in his shoulders ached. The officer stepped back and signed a few lines with his pen, and then he said, Now mail this in to this address.

I have to mail it?

It's not that tough. You ever mailed anything before?

What?

I was just kidding, he said. Yes, you have to mail it.

Deke took it back and folded it twice. The officer stood there waiting.

Well? asked Deke.

The officer smiled. He was taking pleasure in the fact that he couldn't do anything else to help Deke, and rocked back and forth on his feet.

I guess you didn't catch anybody, said Deke, except the two the sheriff and I got for you.

The officer looked down the road and sighed. He didn't care one way or the other. Deke turned then and went back to his truck, coughing. A few were just for effect. When he sat down in the soft seat, he envisioned himself overdosing on a bottle of cough syrup and sleeping for a week. He imagined dream-free sleep, just black silent distance and unconsciousness. When he started the engine, he turned the radio on, found a station playing very bad Tejano, then turned it off. He left the windows rolled up as he drove out of the parking lot, and because the truck was new there was no sound coming at all, and the new shocks made driving feel like running atop soft white cake, and, except for the red and glaring images of his sight, it was as if he had found a way to escape sensation.

Parked to the left of him, there was still one black DPS and one green border patrol cruiser. The officers were standing together with crossed arms, not really doing anything. There was a huge difference between the intensity with which people talked about pursuing illegals and the intensity with which they pursued them. Then one officer pointed down the road, past Deke,

just at an angle behind the edge of his truck, and Deke turned. There came the woman and the little boy, presumably to have dinner with the man, or maybe to walk home with him. She was a long way off, and Deke realized he might be blocking her sight of the cruisers, though he did not know if seeing them would make her run toward the station, worrying something had happened to the man, or away from it, worried she and her boy might get deported, might have to spend another life's savings to get smuggled back across.

So he waited, idling. The officers lost interest in her, and went back to talking, but another car was coming from behind her. It was a green Bronco, and when it passed her and the boy, it stopped, and Deke thought, Don't run, and they won't bother you, but she grabbed the boy and sprinted out of view. The Bronco's driver opened the door and leapt to the roadside. He landed with his legs spread, and when he started giving chase, he hobbled, running in a slow gallop. But he would get them. Deke looked in his rearview mirror, and though he could not see inside, he thought of the sheriff and the two women inside laughing and wondering how long border patrol was going to stick around, pleased with themselves for keeping the man in the apron safe.

When Deke pulled out, toward the highway, unveiling the stopped Bronco on the road, the two officers looked at each other and shrugged. It was nice to be moving. When he got to Fort Stockton, he was going to stop at an actual drug store and get some Robitussin. It was a few days to Thanksgiving, and as far as Jenny knew he would be home for it.

*

George woke one summer morning before dawn and sat up on his side of the bed, legs spread out and bent. The mattress wasn't high or long or very wide, and George looked giant on top of it. His wife rolled on her shoulder, and moved farther away. He grabbed the pair of jeans he'd taken off the night before and thrown to the floor and put them back on, and he pulled an old pair of tennis shoes from under the bed and slipped into them. When he stood, the wooden floor creaked, and his wife opened her eyes. They looked at each other but did not speak.

He took off his nightshirt and dug through a drawer and got himself a tattered red button-down still buttoned and cylindered it on, then ran his palms over the wrinkles in the cloth, straightening nothing. His footsteps through the house were lumbering and deliberate, and Ingrid put her pillow over her head and cursed him. George stood over the kitchen sink for a while, looking out the window. Up the steep rise was his outhouse and garage, and behind it the sky above the tall horizon was indigo, and above the indigo black. The moon was out and made the ground gray. George looked at the clock on the wall and it showed quarter past five. He turned the light on finally and the room turned yellow, and the window went opaque. There was his reflection in the window.

There was just enough coffee for one pot, so George made it. He sat at the kitchen table and watched it brew drop by drop. The coffeemaker seared and bubbled and George heard Ingrid get up and stomp out of bed and go to the bathroom, slamming doors as she went, then back to bed. When the pot was finished, George poured all but one last cup into a thermos. The thermos was from his own store, and he was embarrassed by it, covered in cattle and lassos and cowboys, made for children.

He stopped for a moment and walked into a closet. A string touched his forehead and he pulled it. A light bulb came on. In boxes, all the unsellable antiques and souvenirs stacked high against the walls. The closet was the first space filled in the house. Since then, the boxes of valueless items had spread like a rash through the empty corners and hallways and rooms, his daughter's room, his son's. He took out a fishing vest and hat. Then he pulled the string and the light went out, but he imagined the things inside the boxes were stirring like living, reproducing animals.

He went out the front door because the back door was blocked by more inventory boxes, things to be dropped off at the store, put on shelves for a year, then brought back here to overwhelm the empty spaces of his house like the dying bodies of very very old people. Outside, it was fresh and a little humid. The moon was bright, and George wasn't sure if it was full or only almost full. Beside Ingrid's Lincoln in the driveway was George's small light-blue truck,

his Datsun. Even the tourists laughed at it, and Ingrid wouldn't let him park in front of the store. The whole town was an appearance. People wanted to see Deke's big brand-new GMC, which he cleaned fifteen times a day, jacked up with all its lights, or the horses (did they know how old they were?) from the ranch that wasn't even a ranch anymore, and every once in a while the bikers that rolled through like armies, who were sometimes the real thing but most times businessmen from Austin.

George made the way up his long, slab-broken cement driveway, up to the outhouse. Its swinging doors hung loosely from their hinges and overlapped and sank and cut arcs out of the ground when they opened. George knocked on them, and said, Hugo, you ready?

This was the name George gave the stranger in the hospital, when at first the stranger, recovered, wouldn't speak. When he began to, at last, bit by bit, he asked to keep the name. He had run away from his old one.

The door creaked and the first thing to come out was the dog. It too had lingered by the hospital, nowhere else to go, and when it saw Hugo come outside with George, heading home, it stowed away in George's truck. Halfway through the drive, George noticed the dog, hobbling around the bed, and stopped to abandon him. This seemed to sadden Hugo, so George let the dog come too.

The dog licked George's tennis shoes, and George pushed it away. And then Hugo came out, pushing the door that scraped along the ground. I need to fix that, said George.

Hugo smiled, and when he smiled his face seemed to stretch like two hooks were pulling apart his face from his ears. He carried two fishing poles and some bait, and as they went back toward the truck George took them and put his hand on Hugo's shoulder, and Hugo hobbled beside him. When a breeze blew by, his right pantleg whipped and flapped.

This is the morning, George thought. I will tell him or I won't.

Hugo was young but didn't look it anymore. He had his hair buzzed close to his scalp and a tiny scar under one eye. He squinted when he looked and grimaced when he walked, and even the men out drinking Tuesday and every morning felt ill watching him go by, saying, Would you look at that?

The drive to the lake was a half-hour long, and it began over the black-asphalt streets through town, onto the gray road heading up the hills, then past a gate with No Trespassing hung on it, and up a dirt trace growing treacherous. The Datsun bounced and jerked over the holes and ridges—its struts were old and unforgiving. Someone had tried to build a golf course in the harshness of this landscape, but went bankrupt. Abandoned, it was a wasteland of flat clay surfaces and calcium rock cliffs, steep walls cut out of the hills, and they were bright white in the violet hours before dawn.

The end of the trace came at a hilltop. George pulled the key out and there was no sound but the men's rustling. They opened the doors and stepped out, and sank into the clay beneath them. They pressed through a line of trees and came out on a long slope leading down to a lake. They walked beside each other, and the slope was made of round rocks and boulders, so George held Hugo as they went, by the elbow. George looked at his watch and the hour was still before six, and the sun was not up, so the day was between the fourteenth and fifteenth, pulling forward endlessly.

If I can say the words before the sun comes up, I can tell him. If I can get him to the water and set him down and tell him. How I looked down and his face was white and how we all

yelled and heard nothing from him. How we ran this very place, not a hundred yards from it, and saw the hole beside the bicycle, my son's. How we tried to throw ourselves down there but couldn't, and had to wait while half of us went back for shovels. When we dug at last the dust crumbled from the walls and fell on his white face and we had to wait again while the trucks came sirens blaring, and a dozen men at first, but five dozen before the night was done, came out with all kinds of tools and cranes and rope. They even tied a man no more than four feet tall to a line, and tried to send him down. And we stood around and looked down and then Ingrid running through the night in a white nightgown like some crazed ghost, howling at all of them. Get away from him, she said, and what did she think she'd accomplish?

But not just this. More, that afterwards we had to go on and live in the house this catastrophe built and began to tear down, and how something just fine can go so immediately wrong and never get better. And not just this, but that time doesn't heal the thing but makes it worse, since I can think of it all and be numb to it, since I have grown old enough to outlast whatever I thought that morning. And that walking down these rocks I wonder now if I could be numb to everything. And even more than this.

But now I can walk Hugo down to the lake and put the tackle down and have him sit and I can tell him. And maybe I can get some of it back. If I can just say the first word the rest may come. I will never know if I don't start. And before the sun comes up, otherwise another year begins.

The air got hotter, and the sky brighter, and George led Hugo down to the lakefront staring at his watch and staring at the second hand jumping around the face. He knew that each space the second hand hadn't reached was his desire and each space behind it was his memory, and he couldn't fix a moment in the present since each desire was turned to memory the instant he thought of it. He stood with Hugo and turned him around so that they faced each other. George took him by the shoulders, and Hugo looked around for the bait, avoiding him.

How do I begin it? Why won't the first word come? Twenty years ago they sent the tiny man down through the hole headfirst, and his shoulders stuck three feet down, and his feet waved in the air like little flowers, and we didn't know if he was trying to wiggle down more or cry for help. They pulled him out, and when he came to the ground, set down softly from the crane and rope, he looked like a tiny ballerina, one leg down and one up behind him, arms out for balance.

Children on bicycles, the ones who had come to get me earlier that evening, were asked what happened. They said he was riding along and made a noise and disappeared. They were calm and eating candy bars.

A big tractor with a drill was driven in. They put the drill beside the hole and went to make another parallel. The rock just feet under the silt was calcium and no one there thought it would collapse. I went to him while they drilled. I shined a flashlight down and spoke. He was sleeping. Ingrid came beside me and asked to see in, and I let her, and she bent over and I remember seeing her underwear through the nightgown, and I thought how terrible it was that everyone could see her underwear. Then she screamed, muffled under dirt, and her head came out. He's awake, she screamed, as if I could put him back to sleep. She shook my arm and said it again. So I grabbed the light. I shined it down and his eyes blinked. When he saw the light he tried to move, but couldn't. His face began to go purple. I told him to relax, but he must've been terrified, staring up at a light and not being able to budge. I yelled at the men on the drill to

hurry, and the men yelled at a man holding a lever, and he pulled the lever down, and that was when the ground collapsed, and most of us went down with it, but above it. There was a moment where everyone went silent, spread out like skydivers, trying to be light, waiting to see if the ground would move again. Then everyone realized what had happened, and every person man woman child came running, and grabbed shovels or sticks or helmets or with bare hands and dug at the earth, and the men with shovels had to fight the others off, and there I went, and here it is, here is what I have to tell but can't, here is what followed me, what Ingrid saw and never forgave and what the other men saw and never spoke of—that I crawled out of the sink and went to a tree and hid behind it, and couldn't move or speak, and let the time go by. They finally pulled his lifeless body from the rock and dust, and except for the fact that he wouldn't speak or wake or move, he had not changed. Did I expect him to look different? They put him in my arms, but Ingrid ripped him from me, and laid him on the ground. That night was the pure and explicit end of me, even with another child to raise, already five. Jenny. I didn't want to look at her and never did in the way I should've, which made it even worse for Ingrid who has done everything since. I can tell this to myself over and over. I cannot get the words out. Every year buries the year before.

George let Hugo go, and Hugo tripped back on the rock. The sun shouldered through the horizon, first in a brilliant crystalline white light, then burst over it, into the sky, and turned it yellow. It was ten degrees hotter instantly, at least. Like reptiles, they warmed in it, and went soft. They sat beside each other. George looked at his watch again and the seconds were still moving by. It took Hugo a whole minute to sit himself down but he got there, and they put bait on the hooks and cast them shimmering out over the gray water.

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There is a place where every night it snows, and every morning thunderstorms, and at noon it grows as dark as night, inexplicably. Fog moves through damp evenings like a sad rug unrolling over a wet street, and the afternoons are sultry, and the green leaves wilt in the heat. But there is a moment some days at dusk when it is clear and orange and calm and all the elements are at rest, and only a breeze moves through the air, and lightly. It is in this time and only then that the old lighthouse appears to passersby, round and made of white-gone-gray brick, and ruined, sometimes in the valley and sometimes on a hill (its ocean has dried up, or it never had one), but always ruined, and leaning.

If you walk far enough into the woods, you may find it. It leans each day a little more, but will never reach the ground. You will hear the story about an old man who lives at the top of the lighthouse, and how he sweeps the staircase when it rains and curls into bed with a candle when it snows, and who watches out a tiny window when the fog comes. He wants no visitors, and if you knock on the door he will chase you with a broom and fall down weeping in the grass. And then the hour will grow late, and it will all disappear and you will be wandering again, but without knowing it you have cursed yourself, and you will never want to go anywhere but there, and you will never want to speak to anyone but the old man who will never speak to anyone. And you will ask yourself and ask yourself and ask yourself, What does he look for out the window? Who does he sweep the steps for? What does he dream of when he blows his candle out, and the snowflakes come down against his bricks, and send his tower over, but not down?

When Hugo walked through town, hobbling on his mutilated leg, this was where his mind was wandering. And as he spent his days here the earth grew as strange as this place. And the town wasn't the town anymore but a town that only seemed like the town, as if it had grown ill, and all the people were its wounds, and it was impossible to say if this had always been the way and his coming had revealed it, or if he had blown in like a season and brought the illness with him.

Hugo tumbled out of some weeds. He had lost himself up a hill and, hearing rattles, run down frantically. He cut some picture running. When he came to the road, he put his hands on his knees and bent over, opening his mouth big to breathe. His right leg felt molten. Dust inflamed his windpipe and gagged some coughs out of him. But the familiar road had eased his worry, the road back into town, and air came to him eventually and he straightened.

He had been to church that week, for the first time since, he thought, he'd made communion as a child. Mass, after a few harmless jokes and welcomings, had been about Cain and Abel, and what distinguished them. What made one man hate vagabonds and the other want

to be one? For murdering his brother, Cain was exiled into the world he most despised, the nomadic. Now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. When thy tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. So Cain became Abel, the opposite of his nature, imprisoned by his unbelonging. If Abel had killed Cain, would God have imprisoned Abel in a city? A city that stretched so far in all directions it was impossible to leave, so large that the bottom districts wound to the top, so that you were always at the same time going to a place and away from it, so that you were the embodiment of the contradiction of your life.

Hugo walked slowly back to town, slowly because there was nothing to hurry for. He stopped in at a restaurant and had a coffee. The waitress recognized him, even touched him on the shoulder. She called him Hon.

When he finished his coffee, he paid with nickels and pennies. He apologized and the waitress just smiled, as if no amount of cheapness were too hideous for her. He continued down the road. George was standing in the doorway of his store, talking to someone inside. Hugo crossed to the road's other side and shielded his face away. But George caught sight of him, just as Hugo had passed, and came out and yelled for Hugo to return. And as Hugo pushed on, George waved like some idiot trying to stop a train, hopping and curling his arms, and when Hugo was out of sight George looked around himself embarrassed, tucking in his shirt, which had come out while waving.

Hugo walked out the other end of town, worried George might be there if he turned around. He found himself coming up a steep slope, winded, and held his cramping sides. When he came around a corner, he saw that the road would not level out, and decided to stop. Beside him was a wooden fence, and three horses were grazing behind it, two brown and one spotted, gray. When he leaned over the top rail, letting his frail arms dangle, the brown ones came curiously to him, heads sideways watching him. Their eyes were watery and black, and Hugo stuck his hand out to be sniffed. One stomped at him, and the other neighed and stepped back, and both seemed to gather and discuss him, and a few seconds later they abandoned him at the fence, with his arm stretched over. The spotted horse did not move, and Hugo wondered if it were dead, died standing, perfectly balanced, and was waiting for a big breeze to nudge it over.

Hugo stepped away from the fence, wondering what it would be like to ride a horse, even one so old, when he heard a car coming round a corner. Fast down the hill.

It was Deke's truck, but Hugo didn't recognize it. Deke was eating a piece of cold chicken when he saw him. There's the freak with the limp, Deke thought. The replacement. A face only George could love. And give the store to. Well we'll see.

Deke picked up speed when he passed, and sent the back sliding out, and oh did the dust billow up. When it cleared, Hugo was the color of the dust, all of him, and stood there spitting with his eyes closed.

Deke couldn't stop smiling. He turned the radio up. Went fast till the road was paved, and then the speeding wasn't fun anymore. I will say one thing about this world and that is that everybody thinks a mystery is intrigue. A man with no name and no money and nothing to say, named Hugo by George (and put that one down as unhealthy), everybody thinks he must be something special.

Deke was on his way to get Jenny at the store. Second time in one month. This time she left a note. God I'm ten minutes late and she is running to her mother. Well, an hour and ten minutes. Deke honked the horn at some Mexican kids crossing the road. San Antonio kids up for the dude ranch's summer camp. Then he stopped, skidding, and they came to the side of his truck. Como estás, muchachos? They laughed. You kids want a ride? Some screeched at the thought of it, some started piling in the bed. Then a woman came screaming into the street, out of the dust he had kicked up, behind him, which was following him like a ghost. The children jumped out and the woman ran to his window, screaming. He hit the gas and said, qué? Qué? QUÉ? Then he let the clutch go, and he put down fifty feet of black tire, and looked back to see the woman still running and the children dancing in the street.

When he got to the front of the store, he honked the horn, and Ingrid came out. He rolled down the window and hung his arm out. Ingrid said, You can't even get out of your truck. Deke said, Oh shit don't fucking start.

Where've you been?

Jenny stepped out the door, timidly, a prisoner wobbly into light, gripping a small suitcase. Ingrid glared at him, and he hopped out to throw the suitcase in the bed. Jenny wouldn't look at him. I was a little late, he said. That's all.

They pulled out. Put your seatbelt on, he said. She finally looked at him. What? he asked. They drove back in the direction he had come, and he wondered whether that woman was still chasing him. Jenny wouldn't put her seatbelt on. When he picked his speed to forty-five she opened the door and started moving out. He grabbed her. Jesus Christ why is everyone jumping out of my truck? He pulled over and locked the door and did her seatbelt and placed her hands in her lap, holding them. Don't move, he said. She didn't. She was quiet, looking ahead. Wasn't it awful the way her eyes floated when the truck bounced? Oh, said Deke, look at this—Hugo out wandering as usual. Jenny picked up, and saw his figure on the roadside, still covered in the dust Deke's sliding truck had thrown up. He looked like he'd been painted light brown. Hugo got a good look at them and Deke decided not to dust him again, and Jenny watched him squint at the truck as it went by. You get a look at him? asked Deke. Jenny didn't answer and Deke knew she wasn't going to.

Hugo couldn't get the dust off his tongue, scrub as he might. He had turned around to walk back toward town. The children that had run to Deke hid in the bushes from Hugo. The old screaming woman pulled a curtain barely to the side and watched with one curious eye.

Town was in full afternoon bustle. Sightseers in the streets, obese and sweating. Children on shoulders eating ice cream. Man spinning lasso at fence post. George and Ingrid's store towering above the buildings. Diesel putter putter. Hugo was battling his limp, and some old men outside the bar drunk beyond balance yelled and howled each other down. You got some dust on you, boy, said one. And another old man with a gut like a pillow in his shirt laughed so hard that he farted.

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Deke watched two dozen legsleppy Mexicans teeter down off a hay trailer. They hurried, a few injured from crossing, across a wide space hidden from the road by woods. Massing at the other end, they jumped or got pulled up into the trailer of a bigger truck, which he would drive up past San Antonio. The truck rocked as they stepped into it. It was after dawn on some day that wasn't obviously hot or cold, but gray steel like a ship and stale and wet, and Deke smoked a cigarette. When the cigarette was finished he threw it on the ground, and he ground it down with his toe. Then he yawned. The yawn went on for what could've been ten seconds, and it was a wide, eyes-shut teeth-yawn, and he could not get rid of it. Frustrated, he shook his head and made a noise as he exhaled, and then his mouth clamped down, and then he blinked. The wind blew and he turned the collar on his raincoat up and then it stopped and he put it down. A man in a dark blue shirt named Marquez walked over to Deke and startled him by tapping his shoulder. Tired?

It was the first time Marquez had brought illegals across himself.

What? Deke asked.

Tired. Are you tired?

Deke said he was fine. Marquez walked away and went to watch an old fat woman get lifted into the trailer. The men pulling her were cartoons. She slipped and cut her shin. She cursed her shin angrily. Then a man lay down to be a step, but her feet pulled back and forth at his loose skin, and she fell into a web of hands behind her. Deke looked at his watch and counted how many hours it'd been since he'd slept. He shifted weight from one leg to the other and put his hands in his pockets, then pulled them out. Christ, he said, let's get a fucking move on.

When the last person was in the trailer and they were all sitting on crates or the floor, they were laughing and shaking each other, and Marquez told them they'd have to be quiet soon. He told them not to ask questions when Deke, though Marquez used no name, only pointed, let them off, and not to say a thing in the meantime.

Marquez pulled a rope that brought the trailer's gate crashing down, and he closed a padlock over a latch and slapped his palms against the door and said *Cállate*.

Deke coughed, trying to get some attention. Marquez heard this and took a bandanna out of his shirt pocket and wiped his forehead with it, then came over to Deke holding an envelope. It was a long time since Deke had been paid, and this was why Marquez had come across, maybe, because he had to go down into Mexico and get it. Deke didn't care what the reason

was. Hombre, he said, and gave the envelope to him. Deke opened it and tried to count the money inside. The bills were ragged and soft, like cotton.

How much is in here?

One thousand.

Deke didn't respond, but folded the envelope and put it in his pocket.

They had come through near El Indio. They had walked ten miles through irrigated ranchland rising verdantly out of the river, and beyond, into the brown nothing of Texas, same as the brown nothing of Mexico. Did they wonder if they'd walked a circle? Is this the great fear? Deke drove them to the dropoff. He was hitting his own forehead to keep his eyes open. He checked the road ahead and behind, and his mirrors and his gas and his speed. He stayed off the obvious routes, but not too far. Not too fast and not too slow and not too medium. And the landscape—there were not words for the emptiness. A man could walk his whole life from one horizon to the other. *Is this?*

He drove. He chewed tobacco and it fucked him up. He was empty-stomach sick and he couldn't stop anywhere. By San Antonio he was on the interstate, and he passed Mexican fast-food upon Mexican fast-food, and he would've paid all his thousand dollars for one chorizo and egg taco, but it would only take one howling wetback, thinking they were caught or home free or suffocating or left behind, to ruin him.

Deke wiped sleep out of his eyes. He thought of the store, which he still didn't own. He tried to think of how it could make money, that huge building being used to sell scrap, wondered why George and Ingrid, struggling to climb out of lifelong poverty, didn't just give it up. He worried about Hugo. Since he'd arrived, George had given up all other interests in his life, though he had few, to wonder why Hugo did not want to be George's surrogate son. Deke worried that George, mind faltering, might try to give the store to Hugo, and forget that Jenny was his daughter. He thought, That poor girl really got caught in the middle. I suppose because I married her. But Christ, who else was going to? You never saw anyone in your whole life so constantly devastated by little things. Everyone knows why: her own father hates her for living.

He hit the loop and it took him from the flat miserable not-even-desert and into the cat's-back hills. He'd been trying to sleep on the straightaways, and the turns and slopes now kept his eyes open. He pulled into the grocery store at three o'clock. He wasn't forty miles from home, and he could feel his couch. The parking lot was full, and cars were stopped in the aisles and waiting. The drivers watched people coming out with carts, like hawks. Deke took the small road around back. It was shadowy, under the angle of the high wall, and Deke maneuvered, reversing into a dark corner where branches hung out over the cement, and turned the engine off.

He got out and came around back and undid the padlock. Deke felt like he was going to die from being sleepy. As the Mexicans came out, they looked around. They gathered in the woods whispering, confused, pointing at Deke, like he would tell them what to do. Deke saw that the last of them was off, even the old fat lady with the scuffed knees, and pulled the door shut.

Deke never looked at them. He walked down a slope into the delivery entry to the store, and some employees watched him pass but did nothing. Deke opened two swinging doors into the grocery store itself and walked down the snack aisle and grabbed a bag of tortilla chips. He

didn't pay for them. Someone saw him and pointed, but a man in a tie let him go. Deke was thinking only of his truck by then. It was parked where he left it, sulking in the gray day.

It took him twenty minutes just to get out. Someone in front of him got cut off by a woman in a station wagon, a man with two kids sitting in the back seat playing hide-and-seek with Deke (I'm not playing, he mouthed), and the man leapt out his car charging after the woman. She saw him and tore out, hopped a curb and slid tires spinning on dirt. He was probably going to kill her. Let him. Just let me go. Deke looked behind and honking cars were stacked upon each other jaggedly. The man on foot chased the station wagon off the lot, onto the main street and down it, out of sight. Mother of God. Deke put his head against the steering wheel, and waited. Like nothing, the man came back. He walked back slowly, horns and yelping, they were nothing. Deke didn't make a face or honk or say anything, but the man stared him down furiously. Nobody's going to fuck with you, muchacho. Just drive.

Deke got back on the road. Moving from the big truck to his own made him feel like he was driving a green pea. He pressed the gas, and it lurched. He turned the steering wheel to feel response. This is how he drove for ten minutes. The radio was barely on and he drove to it, swerving to the shoulder and back to the yellow line.

And then he gave up. It was too much. Ten minutes from home, from his couch and the television, he pulled off the road and down a steep drive into a mysterious little basin, and he stopped. He grabbed his baseball cap beside him and put it on and pulled it over his eyes, and tried to sleep.

He dozed without relaxing. There were gnats or mosquitoes or something biting him but he couldn't see them, and he scratched at them roughly, making welts on his neck and arms. When he dreamt he turned and threw his limbs around, so much that he'd wake himself. He was dehydrated and wished he had water, but didn't have the energy to wake up fully and get some.

An hour or two or three later (and it wouldn't get hotter or colder so it was impossible to know, and he couldn't lift his arm to see his watch), he half-woke, limbs powerless, and saw the figure of a man standing outside his truck. He didn't know what to make of it and closed his eyes and then tried to open them when he realized he could've been in danger, but he found himself caught in a space that wasn't waking and wasn't quite sleeping, where he couldn't move even though he wanted to, and he grew a little frantic until at last he came awake all in one moment, almost leaping over the steering wheel, and saw nothing. He took his cap off and scanned the lot, and when he didn't see anything he slumped down into his seat and breathed, and put the key in the ignition.

He looked at his watch. Half past seven. It didn't make sense, unless that curious moment, not asleep and not awake, but in darkness while vividly alert, had gone on for hours and he didn't know it. And then he felt a little sick picturing some man staring in at him. He messed around with the radio stations, and nothing was on. He shook his head and turned it off. He drove the truck out of the basin and didn't feel like going home now that he'd had some sleep. He went another direction, just driving.

A little store on the roadside passed him by, a half hour into this wilderness. He thought and scratched the stubble on his neck, then turned the steering wheel. The truck made a wide turn, cutting off the pavement, and its tires sank into the wet ground. Mud scattered up into the wheel-wells, and huge black lines were dug in the grass. Deke was thirsty for water. He wanted a cigarette and maybe something to eat. His body felt empty and wasted. He felt the money in

his pocket and cursed Marquez. The truck turned off the road and slid over the loose stone of the parking lot. When Deke stepped out he saw a group of tourists in bright clothes riding horses up a nearby hill. They all waved at him like idiots having the time of their lives moving slower than walking, and he picked at some sleep in his eye.

He was wearing lace-up boots and he dragged them over the ground when he stepped. He was too tired to lift his feet. A long way off a train was moving through the woods. An airplane was above him, but Deke couldn't see it. Before he opened the door, he breathed deeply and shook some dwindling tiredness out of his head.

The woman behind the counter was reading a magazine, and Deke went there first. Hey May, he said. Hey Deke, she said. What're you doing out here?

Long night, he said.

She looked at her watch and shook her head. Sure was, she said.

You doing anything later? asked Deke.

May put her finger to her lips, then pointed to the back room. Deke nodded. Hey Earl, he yelled. There was a brief silence, and Deke winked at May. Then Earl's voice came creaking from behind a door.

That you, Deke?

It is.

A drawer closed and then the sound of a man standing and then footsteps. In the meantime Deke ran his finger across May's hand, and she left it there as long as she could, and then the door opened and there was Earl, maybe fifteen years older than Deke, already gray and thin at the top and slow from some limp he got years ago, and exhausted. Earl shook Deke's hand and asked how Jenny was doing. Fine, fine, said Deke, I'll tell her you said hello.

Good, said Earl, and then he slapped the counter and said he ought to get back to work.

All right, said Deke. I'm gonna grab something to eat and drink.

Earl waved and limped back through the door. Deke walked down an aisle with junk food all over it, and didn't have the appetite. He turned and went down another, grabbed a bottle of water, and thought he might as well get beer. He had to stoop to get to the cheaper cans, and when he stood May was beside him, and she put her hands up his shirt. Hey, he said.

I'm going to The Cactus Room, she said. Tonight. You wanna come meet me?

He kissed her, and walked her back to a corner, and untucked her shirt and squeezed his hands down the front of her jeans, and she trembled. Somehow he held on to the water and beer, and when they heard a car pull up he let her go, and said, Okay. They parted and Deke, on his way out, passed a family coming in. He nodded, saying Howdy (and laughing in his head, thinking they would go back to wherever they were from, telling everyone a cowboy had said Howdy), and then he got back in his truck and stared at his beer and water, and smiled at how much nicer things were when they were free. Deke got his truck started and reversed.

Miles from anywhere, and burning up the road, he leaned back comfortably. He felt a little rested, sipped from the water, and then opened a beer. He closed his eyes when the odor struck him. The scent turned him weak with happiness. When his eyes opened, the reflection of a face was looming in the rearview mirror. Deke slammed the brakes and the beer flew out his hand, and Hugo's face came crashing into the back window. Smoke rose from the road and the tires and the truck laid down a hundred feet of black rubber. They stopped. Fuck, said Deke. He grabbed his beer from the floorboard and sucked the foam rising out of it. When he had

rescued it, when the foam had all disappeared, he hopped out and ran around back. He peered over the tailgate, pulling himself up to see, there was Hugo, knocked cold and sprawled on the metal. Mother fucker, said Deke. He hopped in to see if it was still alive, turning it onto his back (he touched it like an it, like he might catch whatever it carried). Hugo's eyes were closed and blood was trickling out the side of his mouth. Deke pushed Hugo's head with one extended finger, and it rocked.

He left him lying there and got back in the cab. The beers beside him were sweating. The road was empty. A drop of water that was water but light as a snowflake touched down on the windshield. Another. And pretty soon the truck was moving and Deke was drinking and deep back in the seat with one arm stretched out across the back of it and the whole world was drizzle.

Jenny was holding a piece of bacon but not eating it. She had made it that morning and left it all day, all day and evening and now almost night, and finally she had come back to eat it. When she heard Deke's truck pull into the driveway she made no face, but kept on not eating. And when Deke burst through the door and kicked his shoes off, she pulled the collars of her bathrobe farther over her chest.

Deke came into the kitchen and saw Jenny at the table. It's nighttime, he said. What are you still doing in your robe?

Jenny rubbed at some hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. She put the piece of bacon down and took a drink of Diet Coke. Deke had made himself a sandwich with old bread and old cheese and old meat, and as he passed Jenny going out the kitchen he thanked her for shopping, and then turning a corner he said, Oh yeah, I found that freak who lives with your dad. He's knocked out in the back of my truck. Then seconds later the television turned on, and the noise of Deke's big chair reclining creaked. A crowd cheered.

Jenny picked her plate up and put it in the sink. She tiptoed through the house in slippers and peeked around the corner to the living room, and Deke was sleeping already. All his features were so delicate. Jenny imagined that someone had painted him. His skin was tanned even though there hadn't been sun in what felt like weeks, and his hair was thick and black and ragged and still perfect.

She left him sleeping on his chair and went outside. She watched the drizzle come down on her sleeves, and the drops didn't sink into the fabric but stayed above it, holding there like fragile mosquitoes. Hugo was still in the bed, and out cold, and he was covered in the crystal-colored drops, like he was a field they grew on. He and she and the truck and the night and road-dreary distance were lit by one low streetlight. Jenny put her hand on his shoulder and tried to push him awake, and when his body shifted all the drops sunk into his clothes, and drenched him. He shivered but did not wake. Jenny put his hand in hers and rubbed the prominent bones in his wrists. They felt like wet pebbles. When he stirred she let his hand go, and crawled out of the bed backwards.

*

Jenny threw a leaf into the creek, the creek that had once been a river. Back when the town had a purpose, it was where cattle drives used to be watered. Drought and overuse had killed it. Its death, as the water dropped, was the slow collapse of its banks, earth trickling down, until tree roots came out, and the trees themselves sank down, leaning over the riverbed and shading it. Jenny grabbed another leaf. The water's surface was all leaves, like the scales of a brown and gold snake, and as the water pulled slowly underneath, the leaves moved like the snake was edging forward. She was walking alongside it. The legs of her jeans were rolled up, revealing her ankles, and she was carrying her tennis shoes and socks in one hand and a book in the other. She wondered if it was safe to step into the water. The little stream of leaves narrowed at one point, and the leaves were bunching in walls. Jenny knelt down to pluck one out, one that was struggling at the top, and it came out in a clump of others. Farther down, minutes later, she came to a place where the water stopped and leaves were collecting like barnacles on stones. She looked ahead, twenty feet, and saw that the creek began again. A small sliver of clear water. Between them was nothing but gray-brown ground, and she stopped there and put her shoes down and the book and dug in gently with her hands, wondering if the stream were running under the surface. It was moist, and the ground clung to her hands, but there was no running water. So she clapped her palms together when finished, holding her face away. She couldn't imagine that the river, for all that distance, was nothing but the moisture in the silt pressing microscopic inch by inch. But it came out, and the water flowed again, and Jenny sat there and put her feet in, where the water was clear and coming out of the ground.

She was sleepy, and the book she'd brought to read seemed too heavy. She flipped a few pages and put it aside. It was morning, and all night she had stayed up by herself waiting, watching television. By the end her mind felt like gunpowder, and still no Deke. It was autumn, and the sun was up coldly in the sky, and she could see it through the empty branches. Her feet in the water were numb, and when she took them out they turned bright red as the blood flowed back. Jenny was wearing a sweatshirt, a gray university sweatshirt though she had never gone to college, and she pulled her arms from the sleeves into her body, and lay down on the ground, and tried to rest.

She heard rustling in the woods behind her, and turned to look. The sound came and went, moving in a line through the trees. Jenny knew it was Hugo. She had followed him a few times around town, since the night that Deke came home with Hugo in his truck. She knew the

directions he went, the things he found interest in, and had come here to encounter him. In privacy they might have something to say, she hoped as she put on her shoes and socks and rolled down her jeans. The noise was getting nearer, and she wasn't sure what way to best let him find her. Would she leave her hair pulled back, or let it down over her shoulders? Would she be sitting or standing, and how so? Her heart raced with expectation. When she finally found a comfortable pose to wait for him, she heard the rustling moving past, away, still behind the trees.

She gathered her book and went after it. She walked along the soft riverbed, parallel to the noise in the trees, not looking but hoping to be seen. It was far back, the noise, and as she listened more carefully she heard more than two footsteps, and thought maybe that dog had walked with him, which it sometimes did. Then the noise turned, and started coming toward the creek, so Jenny stopped. She opened her book to seem like she was reading, to make the accident of encounter seem possible, but as she did she realized how ridiculous she looked, and closed the book, and looked for anything around her, something to be looking at, or holding, so that when Hugo walked out of the woods she wasn't just standing there, lost animal on a stoop, wanting to be found.

When it wasn't Hugo, when she realized how heavy the noise was, and saw the shape coming out, she was crestfallen. It was a child on a horse, terrified beyond crying, just red scared eyes and snot down her nose. The horse, old and harmless, must have wandered off a trail, escaped a group of dude ranchers, and taken this child with it, a little brown-haired girl holding on to the reins like they alone could keep her from harm. Jenny took the reins and petted the horse, and asked the girl her name. The girl wouldn't answer, so Jenny led the horse and girl back to town, rubbing the girl's knee, telling her her mother would be waiting, and wouldn't she be glad to see her. When she wasn't talking, Jenny was listening into the trees, looking for shadows, and wondering if Hugo weren't, possibly, following.

*

Hugo followed the priest and the little Mexican girl named Anna up the dirt road, but he walked in the bushes and they did not see him. It was the girl's birthday, and Father Rudolfo had her birthday present in a bag and a cake in a box he carried, and was telling her the story he told her every birthday. A man, he said, came knocking at my door. It was night. I let him in and gave him a cerveza. You are too young for cerveza. He was holding you in his arms and he was trembling, but you were calm and brave and weren't any bigger than my fingertip (and here he always jabbed her with his fingertip and tickled her). I told him how much I admired you for your bravery, and that he ought to stay. I gave him food and he admitted he didn't know how to feed you, so I nursed you that night with a bottle, and when I was done he wept and held my arm and told me he couldn't find your mother, that you had all come here together and been split up, and I told him to be quiet so you could sleep. He put his head against my arm and said Padre, Padre, I have to find my wife. Could his child stay with me while he went to find her? I put my hand on his head and told him I would stay with you as long as I had to, and he kissed you a hundred thousand times and cried over your tiny body and held you again and went running into the night, and I realized he hadn't told me your name, so I called you Anna, since it was my mother's name, and promised to give you your old name as soon as he got back. And out the window I watched your father run up the hills and down them, through the desert, and over a tall mountain, and your mother was nowhere to be found, and one day he was standing at a cliff and heard your mother's voice down below, and didn't think at all of himself but leapt with joy off the cliff. As he fell he thought of you, his pobrecita, and his heart ached with longing for you. He called for your mother as he drifted down and she appeared in front of him as an angel, and your father, who loved you and always wanted to come for you, he never hit the ground. Now he and your mother are angels, and they walk beside you everywhere you go.

Anna listened and went slowly up the hill as Father Rudolfo told the story, but wouldn't touch his hand when he held it out. He stopped and knelt beside her. Twelve years old, he said, looking her over. Too old for the story.

Anna nodded.

They walked up the hill and reached a meadow at the top, and Father Rudolfo laid a blanket over the high grass, and stepped on it to make it flat. He was old and all this tired him. His face sagged at the eyes and chin, and his old bones showed when he bent down or reached or when the wind blew. Anna sat legs crossed and head on fists, and Hugo watched them from the surrounding woods. She was in jeans and a loose yellow t-shirt, and her skin was dark and her black hair came down in a ponytail over her bent back. Father Rudolfo tried to lift her spirits,

and pulled the cake out of the box. Anna looked but turned away again. He lifted the present and nudged her with it, and her head lowered. Then a breeze picked up, and the corners of the blanket flapped and curled in, and Father Rudolfo hurried gathering stones as weights. When he placed the last, a long and booming gust came across the hilltop, and blew the canopies of trees furiously, and laid the grass down all in one direction. When it seemed the wind couldn't go longer it came through like a locomotive, pressing and low and unstoppable, and brought an immense yellow cloud of honeysuckle blooms that floated over them. The priest saw this and tried to show Anna.

The gust finally gave and the honeysuckles came down a hundred yards behind the priest and the girl. The trees went quiet, and the only sound was what had been blown up falling back to ground in the stillness. Anna had shifted to get away from the breeze and Hugo could see her face, and he bent down and squinted.

Hugo heard a noise behind him, and he turned swiftly and guiltily. It was the dog skipping, hopping feebly around him—Hugo was too slow to hinder it—and into the meadow barking. Hugo froze for a moment and watched as the priest, surprised at first and worried, like it might be rabid, turned to see the dog, but recognizing, finally, the gait on three legs. The dog ran to Anna and pushed his snout under her arm. Anna looked at the dog happily, but did not pet it. Instead she pushed her head against its head. The priest stood up and began to scan the woods. Hugo stood and limped through. He had to come out then. The air in the meadow was cool and dry and refreshing. The priest saw Hugo and waved, and then said to the girl: Anna, this is Hugo. Be polite to him.

Anna moved her hands from her face to the ground, and leaned back, and watched Hugo approach. Hugo could see all of Anna now, and in the blue light and the cool air and high green grass and a hundred yards off a swimming pool of honeysuckle flowers, she was perfection, and she stole the attention from everything around her. Hugo stepped in a hole and almost tripped, and Father Rudolfo moved to help him. He held Hugo's elbow and brought him down onto the blanket.

Hugo, said Father Rudolfo, this is Anna, and she's twelve today. He turned and said, Anna, this is Hugo, and he has come here from a long way away.

Anna asked Hugo how far, and Hugo shrugged.

What's wrong with him? she asked the priest.

Nothing, said Father Rudolfo, scolding her for being too inquisitive.

Anna asked Hugo if he wanted some cake. Hugo said yes, but he didn't hear himself. He was inside himself an hour before, outside a small restaurant where he was paid to sweep the stoop and take out trash, and he saw the priest he'd seen so many times with a girl he'd never seen, and he propped his brush against the restaurant's stone walls and wiped grime from his hands. It had rained earlier that day and the evidence was puddles that sparkled, evaporating in the sunlight, and Hugo could not stop himself from following. In this memory he was overwhelmed by the sense of being himself on the hilltop and being himself at the restaurant, and both selves seemed to stand at opposite ends of a long corridor, trying to explain the past and present to each other, but when one tried to speak it was dumb and when one tried to listen it was deaf, and then there was another self behind the past self, further back by days, sitting in George's house painting a wall blue because Ingrid gave him money to do so, and there Jenny was behind him, shy and about to crumble into herself, asking with all her might what kind of

music he liked, and he wasn't able to think of anything at all, and she asked if he spoke much and he didn't really know. Hair in her face, she mentioned getting coffee sometime, and he couldn't say no and he couldn't say yes because he couldn't say anything. He was the self with paint dripping off his roller, imagining Jenny as his wife and regretted it already, but he was the present self too, the self on the meadow, who was already another, and that self flushed Jenny out and then it became another self and another and another and it was like fireworks in his head, and all the complications he could dream of screeched and pierced through darkness, and he put both hands on his ears and pressed and Anna said, Here, and she handed him some cake on a paper plate.

Now Anna's gift, said Father Rudolfo.

He pushed the box toward her. She took the bow off the top and undid the tape and drew the folds back, and the wrapping paper came off perfectly, politely, and inside was a box of artist's pencils, secondhand, some long and some short, and colors missing, but she hugged him anyway. Then Father Rudolfo pulled a small sketchbook from the bag. She's a very good drawer, he said to Hugo. Maybe she'll draw something for us now. Will you, Anna?

What would I draw? she asked. She was reluctant and looked toward one end of the meadow, and was she imagining running into those woods and holding some other girl's hand, and disappearing like fog burning up in light, and never coming back?

Hugo's dog, said Father Rudolfo.

What's his name, she asked Hugo.

I never gave him one, he said.

That's an awful thing to do.

Necia, said the priest.

I'll *draw* him, she said.

She took the sketchbook and her tongue slipped between her lips, and she watched Texas hop around them, and penciled. In five minutes she told them she was done, and showed it to Hugo first. It was a long brown egg-shape with three brown sticks for legs and one brown stick at its side for a neck with a small brown egg-shape for a head attached to it, and two red triangles for ears and two black ovals for eyes. Do you like it? she asked.

Hugo didn't say anything, but looked at Father Rudolfo, who craned his neck to look, and said, That's beautiful, Anna, and then he asked her to draw Hugo, and she blushed.

Don't you like your pencils? he asked.

Okay, she said. Sit still.

Hugo crossed his legs and put his hands on his knees and went rigid, like an animal trapped by curious light. While she worked, he hardly breathed.

Finished, she said, showing it to Father Rudolfo.

That's nice, he said.

I'll add a flower, she said.

Good. Make it yellow.

She pulled green and yellow pencils out and went back to her book. When she finished she held it at arms length and compared it with Hugo. Here, she said.

Hugo looked at it, relaxing. It was a scene on a hilltop, and green, and there was a sky filled with honeysuckle blossom, and under it was the image that must have been Hugo, drawn

clumsily in blocks. He liked it. His shoulders slumped over his chest and he took the sketch. The flower was in one corner and bright and thriving.

Can you draw? she asked Hugo.

Father Rudolfo, slightly behind her and out of her sight, stuck his chin out and nodded. Anna gave him the sketchbook and the pencils. Her hand touched his. Draw a horse, she said.

A horse is difficult, said Father Rudolfo.

But Hugo was already remembering one he had seen in New Mexico, drinking wild from a pool a rain had made. It was spotted and tall and old and alone, and weak, and its legs shook as it drank. Hugo watched it through a thicket, and horseflies were circling round it and gnawing, and the horse would stomp and shake its back, and blink and nod its head when they flew into its eyes, and Hugo wanted to rush out and grab its neck and pull it into the water, drowning it. Then the horse knelt on its front legs, then on its back. It seemed to Hugo that the horseflies knew what was coming, since they were swarming and didn't look at all like flies but like a shadow of a horse that had clouded over the horse. Then all four legs collapsed at once, and the distended body crashed into the water. All that was left of it was an inch of belly above the surface, and one side of its old head floating.

I can't really draw, said Hugo.

Nonsense, said the priest.

But Hugo gave the pencils back. Father Rudolfo put his hand on Hugo's shoulder, and smiled, and it drew some of the weight out of Hugo. The priest began to tell Anna not to worry, that not everyone could draw like her, but she was already up and running at the dog, and as she ran the wind held her in suspension like a kite, so that she always moved and never seemed to. The dog looked as if he would come apart with joy, and ran ten steps ahead of her.

Hugo and Father Rudolfo stretched their legs, and what the spring sun beat down on them the wind blew off. Father Rudolfo said, There is no waste in nature.

Hugo watched his right pantleg whip about, and he wrapped his hands around his thigh. The knuckles of his fingers overlapped. He moved them down just above his knee and felt the wound, the hole the doctors had cut out of him, the sliced-short muscle and the slope to the bone, scars that had gathered, ballooned tissue.

The dog barked. Hugo blinked, and he awoke from his thoughts. There were footsteps, and Hugo turned to see Anna running at him, looking behind her at the dog, chasing, tongue long and slapping at its eyes. Hugo lay down to avoid her, and she ran directly over him, a wide stride above him like a leap from the top of one high building to another. In a waking dream Hugo reached for her, and they were caught together in an instant of sunlight, and turned explosively to air. She came down on top of Father Rudolfo, knocked her from his hands. Necia! he yelled, but she ran on, toward trees.

Anna's not very good at drawing, he said, smiling at Hugo, but I buy these things because she likes it so much.

They watched her. Anna stopped beside the honeysuckle trees, and started drinking nectar. The dog lay down with her.

A wind blew through, later, and the afternoon was swept away. The sun was ripe on the horizon, and orange. Father Rudolfo stretched his arms and yawned. I'm getting hungry, he said. Anna was lying with them then on the blanket and said Me too. The dog was asleep, and its ears cocked when Anna spoke.

Anna crawled over to pet him. Are you hungry, Eddie?

Father Rudolfo told her that was not the dog's name.

I've changed it, she said. If he misbehaves I call him Eduardo.

The priest grumbled. Hugo stood up.

Will you eat with us?

Hugo shook his head and took one last look at Anna. He walked off the blanket, over the grass, and into the woods. He was a shadow that Father Rudolfo watched, and then it was impossible to tell if it was him or a bush moving, and then he was gone. The dog followed, hopping, and slipped into the trees.

A week or two passed. A spring rain came, full of heavy warm drops, and Anna put on red galoshes, stuck her pencils and paper in a backpack, and went outside with no umbrella. She avoided the cracks on the sidewalk until the sidewalk was nothing but cracks, filling with rain, then moved onto the road, which was archipelagos of dryness. Anna hopped from one island to the next. She came to the main street and looked in both directions. It was empty except for a man and woman trying to see inside a window. She ran across then up another road, a couple blocks over. On one side of it, there were old houses that sank in the middle, slouching or tipped to one weak side, and the yards around them were mud.

She stood outside George and Ingrid's house. There was a shack, an old garage, sinking into the ground, and she knew Hugo lived in it. She stuck her tongue out to catch raindrops. When she knocked, Hugo's head came through a door within the door.

Hello, she said. I brought you the pencils. Father Rudolfo thinks I like to draw, but I don't. And I thought you might like a hobby. I also brought the paper. She wiped her face. I'm wet, she said.

Her hair was matted to the sides of her head and black-gloss.

Hello, said Hugo, putting shoes on nervously.

So I give you the pencils, and you let me play with Eddie.

There was a cot in one corner of the outhouse, and sheets were draped over it. When she said Eddie, a dog's snout lifted the sheets and came through.

See, said Anna, that's his name.

A door slammed at the house, and Hugo turned to see Ingrid running through the yard with a big umbrella. Hey, she yelled. Who's that?

Ingrid moved up the slope, stepping in puddles. She was nimble, and wearing George's raincoat that was a whole body too big for her. When she got to them she held the umbrella over the girl.

Anna, said Hugo.

Anna?

I live at the church, she said.

Ingrid said, My God you've grown. What are you doing here?

I came to play with Eddie.

Who?

The dog.

Ingrid looked behind her, toward the road. Rain was battering the ground and turning it to a slide that rolled down the hill. You picked a bad day to play. Come inside.

She put her hands on the back of Anna's neck, and led her away. Anna seemed perturbed, since the rain didn't bother her. Ingrid turned to Hugo. You come on too, she said.

Inside, Ingrid took a towel to Anna's head and scrubbed it. Anna scowled, then closed her eyes. Better, said Ingrid. Then she threw Hugo a towel that he draped over a chair before he sat down.

I'll call Father Rudolfo, Ingrid told Anna, hand on the little girl's shoulder. Let him know you're here.

He went out today, she said. He'll be back tonight.

Ingrid called anyway, and when there wasn't any answer she made tea for Anna and coffee for herself and Hugo. They sat together in silence until Ingrid asked Anna when she had met Hugo, and Anna's eyes turned dreamily opaque for a moment.

Outside, headlights lit up the front lawn. Then two doors slammed. Ingrid went to the window. It's George and Jenny, she said.

Hugo was staring at Anna's wet hair, which clung to her cheeks. She caught him and they smiled at each other, and that was when Jenny walked in, carrying a bag. George, behind, held the door for her, and she stopped at the threshold when she saw Hugo. George bumped into her, made a noise, and both Hugo and Anna turned to them. Jenny hid her face and turned into another room. She tripped on boxes of antiques and souvenirs in a hallway. George put down another of Jenny's bags and came directly to Hugo and put a hand firmly on his shoulder. Hugo nervously tried slipping out of his grip, and when George wouldn't take his hand away Hugo got up and said he had to go to the bathroom.

They ate dinner together, and everyone had small helpings because Ingrid had only cooked for one, George. When they were served, they looked at each other, perplexed, wondering if this were it. Ingrid stayed in the kitchen, pretending to wash dishes. George ate his dinner in two bites and then crossed his arms. He asked Hugo what he'd been up to, and Hugo said, I've been walking around. George said, You ought to think about doing something for money. Anna laughed, and Hugo felt tiny. He was wishing Ingrid had never come out to find Anna, and that they were alone together in his outhouse. Jenny sensed something in the way Anna laughed, like she wanted him, twelve years old or not, and for the rest of dinner she watched how Anna watched Hugo. They had conversations:

Jenny asked Anna, Do you have a boyfriend?

Anna smiled, and her smile seduced the whole room, and she said, No.

An hour later, once Father Rudolfo had called back, apologizing for Anna's inconveniencing, George drove Anna home. Jenny and Hugo stayed at the table, and Ingrid was still inside the kitchen. There were ten minutes of nothing, not a move, then the hard callused bottom of Jenny's foot scraped the protruding bone of Hugo's ankle, and Hugo started. His chair squeaked on the wood floor and the metal stubs on the legs tore a line through the finish. Jenny wasn't looking at him, and hadn't been. She was staring at her plate. Then she stood and walked into the kitchen. Hugo sat in the emptiness of that room and that evening, and listened to the rain crash on the tin roof of the porch (...and that night in the warped old wiry cot Hugo slept on, sheets around his ankles, he dreamt that he was drowning, reaching for a hand to rescue him, and whatever lake or river or sea he was sinking into was black, and the sky above was black and starlit, and the air was wet and warm and heavy, and when he looked over he saw Anna swimming breaststroke slowly through the murk, and her shoulders were bare and when she

kicked, skimming forward, her brown back came fully out of the water, and it was bare and girl-muscular, and he wished he could capture the moment and not live an instant beyond it, so that Anna would always be this naked girl swimming breaststroke around him, and never age, and then in the dream Anna made one last stretching pull and her body went flat and floated just over the surface, and Hugo saw two small perfect hipless humps, and a wave came, swallowing him, and he tumbled in the water and could not tell where the surface was, and here, for a moment, his tumbling body touched Anna's tumbling body, legs perhaps, or stomachs, it was impossible to know, and then he came scuttling onto the beach of an island, and Jenny was pulling him by his armpits over sand, and put him down, staring at her own hands, which were helpless and bone-tiny, and Hugo stared into the ocean he had come from and saw nothing, no girl swimming, nothing but white break on black and the noise of noise...).

*

Turn here, though, far down the road, and pull the vines from your face, and walk beside the old crumbling wall. This is the ruined mission, San Domingo. Long rubble, a clay fountain in a meadow-overgrown courtyard sits in its remembrance. The fountain is dry and may have always been. What is a fountain without water? Is a stone fountain left to fall to pieces any better than a rock? The fountain will not answer. It sits dryly in the light.

One early morning Hugo set out from his outhouse, his lowly digs, the pencils and small sketchbook Anna had given him in a duffel bag. The two of them were going to the mission. He still had a lopsided walk, but his leg was improving. He went past the men drinking at the bar, and they laughed but seemed a little short of laughs those days. Maybe one of them had died that week. He passed men and women who recognized him, and they mumbled. He dropped by church and Anna was still there, studying. Hoping to encounter Anna at work in some room, and tell her he was on his way, Hugo volunteered a few minutes of help. Father Rudolfo thanked him, gave him a rag and a bottle of water with vinegar, for the windows, and asked if he would like to meet them later, to watch a movie he'd rented, and Hugo patiently declined until pressed to accept, and accepted. Lurking down a corridor, ten minutes later, he saw Anna in an office, head in three or four open books, and she pointed at a clock on a wall, and said An hour or so. He said he'd meet her.

The deserted mission, older than the town, was built a hundred years before white settlers, for Indians. One day, painting the store's exterior red, he had asked Ingrid about it, and Ingrid said the town had tried to make it a tourist attraction but realized it was too small and ugly, that no important figure ever lived in it, and no battle ever was fought.

It was a twenty-minute walk. On the way he bought bottled water at a gas station, and the man behind the counter said, Man, can you believe they charge you for *water*? When he came out into the bright sunlight, mirrory, he thought he saw Jenny watching him from a crafts-shop window. So when he turned the next corner, he stopped to make sure she wasn't following.

The mission was buried in weeds and trees. If man doesn't want something, nature takes it back. Hugo fought his way into the courtyard, watching for snakes. Inside, he sat beside a wall and ran his fingers into decorative grooves cut in the stone. He took out his pencils and sketchpad and gazed on the fountain. He'd been trying for some weeks to draw it, ever since he and Anna first wandered here. At each session's beginning, he would erase his most recent decisions, and he did this again. Two hours later, a little after noon, he heard Anna coming. Her feet made the loose ceramic tiles scrape and knock. She sat beside him and looked at the open sketchbook.

Is that the same fountain?

Hugo erased a curve. Yes.

Maybe you're not good at fountains.

Hugo flipped the page. Take your shoe off, he said.

Anna slipped the shoe and sock off her left foot, and Hugo grabbed it, thrust it on the paper, and tried to trace a line around it while Anna tried to squirm out, though not too resolutely, shouting, It tickles, Hugo.

George was sitting in the open hole of his front window smoking cigarettes. When Hugo returned, around three that afternoon, George leaned out the window and saluted, asked if he had time to chat. Hugo waved and said he was going to see Father Rudolfo, that he had work there.

George said, Oh. He scratched his neck. Well.

Hugo paused, looked at his wrist, and though there was no watch, he said, capitulating, I need to be there by six or seven.

George hopped out his window. When his feet hurt terribly, since they were dangling all morning, waiting on Hugo, and filling with blood. He lifted one, then the other, like a flamingo, holding them and squeezing, and wincing.

You okay? asked Hugo.

They walked around the house to George's truck, George on the outsides of his still-pounding feet, knees bent out, and Hugo limping after him. George couldn't remember the last time he'd been alone with Hugo, and he was battling the urge to say something and the urge to say nothing. It had been, now, almost two years since George had brought Hugo back from the hospital, the day they'd arrived, when Deke and Ingrid were arguing in the kitchen, and Jenny was sitting in front of a radio, but hadn't turned it on. George, in the long fishhook of his arm, was holding Hugo by the shoulders, and Hugo balled himself uncomfortably in the grip.

When he told everyone it was the man he'd found in the woods, Ingrid said, Well, what's he doing here? And Deke said, Hey, don't change the fucking subject. They were arguing about the store. Jenny turned and watched the stranger. She looked like someone had stuck a dunce cap on her and demanded she sit in a corner.

Hugo's arrival had revitalized George. But it did not last. Hugo wouldn't tell him where he came from, or why, or what he'd been searching for in the woods, or if he'd found it. He just sat in the outhouse George had cleaned up when Ingrid wouldn't allow a stranger living in the house, and came out to do odd jobs, and was now mysteriously vanishing for hours by himself in the daytime, with a bag.

Hugo put the bag in the outhouse, tossed it carelessly, and returned.

George asked, What's in the bag?

Hugo didn't answer, but the way he shrugged was a kind of answer.

They drove by the store, and Ingrid came out and gave George a piece of paper with directions, which she explained three times despite George saying, I know, I know, I understand. When she returned to the store, George lit a cigarette. They departed, pulling thoughtlessly back into traffic, and Hugo heard a car's brakes wawp to avoid a collision. Ten minutes later, George had not ashed his cigarette. It hung in his barely opened mouth, hooked downward, all ash, and fluttered. When it broke, the ash spilled into his lap, and he didn't notice.

Your cigarette, said Hugo.

George crossed his eyes to look at it in his lips, then down to the ash. Jesus, he said, and then he wiped his pants.

Where are we going?

Down this way, he said, pointing.

The truck hiccuped along. George pulled another cigarette into his mouth, but the lighter wouldn't catch fire and the uneven road made the truck and the insides of the truck, the seat and dashboard and gearstick, bounce and hesitate, and clink like glass, and jerked his hand around. He gave up.

George almost spoke a few times, would hold his breath on the verge of a noise, then sigh. He would turn to Hugo, then away, to the road again. George could feel the absurdity of this, but with each hesitation his embarrassment increased, and the noise of voices in his head amplified, voices above the voices telling him to speak, telling him to be quiet, until at last the cacophony of this argument was the perfect copy of the truck noisily popping and clanking down the road. Hugo could see George struggling. The old man's hands were tightening around the steering wheel, so Hugo stuck his head out the window.

After thirty minutes George finally said something, because he had to. He said, We're here.

Hugo looked at the house they were pulling aside. There were trucks and vans parked there already, and men carrying things out. The house was gray, tired, drooped at its eaves and ledges, and one of the few front windows was cracked, a long rickety crack from one corner to the other.

It's all crap now, Hugo heard someone yell. Too late.

George got out, and Hugo stayed inside, a little frightened. A man was carrying a stuffed bird by the neck, and another man yelled, What the fuck kind of bird is that?

The man picked it up and looked at the wooden base. Says here, he said, says this bird is a goshawk.

Goshawk. How do you spell that?

What do you mean? Why does it matter?

Goshawk?

That's what it says.

I'll give you five for it.

The man looked at George, asking, What about you? What'll you give me?

George closed his door and said he didn't want the bird.

The man with the bird said to the other man, Well, I'll take it.

The men made the transaction and parted. George motioned at Hugo to come with him, so Hugo stepped timidly out. They were at an antiques store in another tourist town. A man had been left by his wife, both owners of the store, and he was vengefully giving everything they owned away. Someone had told Ingrid, and Ingrid made George come investigate.

The weedy grass was high and patchy, beginning to brown. When George and Hugo walked through it, toward the front door, crickets and insects buzzed out and orbited their knees and ankles.

The men clearing the house were either antiques shop owners or were hired by such owners, thought George, since they didn't seem to realize it was all worthless. Hugo was scratching all over. Somehow the insects had gotten inside his pants legs.

The house was stripped, though George didn't care. Some of the men were already sitting on the floor with cans of beer, and the others were on their way. Everyone was sweating and dusty, and talking.

Anybody get anything good?

I got a... what is it?

A goshawk.

A goshawk.

Well I found one of them helium tanks.

What're you gonna do with a helium tank?

I'll fill it with some fuckin helium.

Pure genius, ain't he?

I found some old *Playboys*.

That shut everybody up. The man who said it was old and skinny, far down the row of men along the wall, and they way he stared dreamily ahead made everybody burst with laughter.

How old? someone asked.

Old.

Where are they?

I put them in my truck.

Well go the fuck get them.

The man said, I don't want to lose any.

But he stood up anyway. The others sat in silence, childishly. George and Hugo walked around, and in a room off to the side that might once have been a kitchen, there was a man on a stool, elbows resting on his knees. From the way he seemed both satisfied and miserable, it was obvious who he was. George said, Excuse me, and left.

In the big main room, where the men were waiting while the old man with the *Playboys* was in his truckbed digging through boxes, where the walls were yellow, there were dark yellow rectangles.

A huge desk or table had been dragged out, George noticed. Metal legs carrying something heavy had scraped four arcing lines from the back of the big room to the door, where the piece had finally been lifted. The lines curved liquidly around, so that they seemed to imitate the marks a pair of figure skaters might leave in ice.

The skinny old man came back in, and he had six or seven magazines. The men rushed him and ripped them from his grip, and he kept saying, Easy, easy. When his hands were empty and he was waving them in small panic, the men made half-circles around the opened pages, and the one holding the magazine would twist and angle it, and the men beside him would crane their necks, trying to tilt their sight around the pictures' two dimensions.

They all grunted and stomped pleasantly, lasciviously, until one man, very young, said, You know, this one's almost as old as my grandmother now.

Another turned his magazine over and, reading the date, said, March, 1968? That's old.

The others checked the dates on their magazines, and their heads floated slowly above their bodies while they counted the years, imagining the old women they knew. Some shivered, eventually. One man asked another to hold the magazine, and wiped his hands.

Aw Christ, said a short one, middle-aged, I'll take what I can get.

You're fuckin sick.

It's just a picture.

They stood dumbly, waiting for someone to disagree. The short man took two or three for himself and sat down alone, flipping through them. After a few seconds, bored, loitering like caged zoo animals, the men gradually took seats on the floor again.

Hugo and George left. They walked through a curious maze of back rooms, curious because they all seemed to be additions to the original house, but done haphazardly, with no design, reflecting both expansion and uncertainty, until they came at last to the back door, opening into a garden, or what had been a garden.

There was a small stone birdbath in the center, and Hugo couldn't help comparing this with the courtyard in the mission, the birdbath with the fountain.

The birdbath, said Hugo.

George didn't seem to know what he meant. The birdbath?

Is it worth anything?

It's too heavy to carry, said George.

Hugo nodded and knelt down. He put his hands on the stone edge and pushed. A small pool of water, standing despite evaporation, stirred. Hugo pushed harder, and the birdbath rocked.

It might move, said Hugo.

It won't, said George.

Hugo was scratching his legs through his pants. He looked uncomfortable, and there was adolescent disappointment in his posture that made George think this same scene might have been played out between him and his son, some years ago.

Behind them, the back door opened. They looked, and the man they'd seen in the side room stepped out.

Hey, he said.

George responded by squinting.

Hugo said, Hello.

It's over, he said.

George and Hugo moved to either side of the birdbath.

Wife and store, the man said. Now all I need is for this place to burn down. You know, she'll probably come back in a month or so, wanting half of everything. I'm going to sit right out front and wait.

Then the man lifted his leg, put his foot against the birdbath's edge, and kicked. The birdbath started down slowly, but when the weight of the bowl going over became too great for the weight of the bowl that was balancing upright, it crashed, thudded in the dirt and grass, and the man saluted and returned to the house.

Hugo said, See. It'll move.

George said, Try and lift it.

So Hugo bent down at the knees and grabbed the bowl wholly, and his back made big arching strangulating yanks until he said, Maybe not.

It was after seven when they pulled into the driveway, back home. George put the handbrake on but left the engine running, and he almost said, My son, a long time ago, he died. That after all was what he still needed to tell. It was playing a continuous track in his head, and

all he needed was to catch the phrase at its beginning, at the top of the loop, and speak it, move his mouth, but each time it came around, the words shocked him—words themselves, masquerading around like they could explain his behavior, and by the time he quelled that momentary fear, the loop had moved on, and he found himself waiting again.

Hugo said good-bye and stepped out. George turned off the engine, which chortled, irregular heartbeats, dying. They were under a bright round moon, and when George finally turned his dim yellow headlights off, the outhouse went from dirty and pale to suddenly black, and a bright halo of moonlight hummed around its shape.

George lost sight of Hugo. He swiveled, looking through the back window, but saw nothing. He opened his door. His stomach was still full from dinner, so he got out slowly, legs first. He had stuffed himself to keep from speaking, though conversation was the reason he'd stopped to get food. George looked at his house and saw the kitchen and living-room windows lit. He did not want to face Ingrid, who would want to see all he'd brought back from his excursion.

George burped. He was waiting for a big gassy belch to empty his overwhelmed stomach, and that was it. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, then crept inside Hugo's outhouse quietly, so Ingrid would not hear. It was dark, and his leg struck the corner of the bed, but not painfully. He sat down and waited for his eyes to adjust. When, after almost a minute, they hadn't, George cracked the door open to allow in moonlight. He sat down again and waited. Shapes near him formed first, a little table, a coffee mug. When he had put the scene together, he turned to the corner, trying to imagine a person who could be satisfied living in such small space, and there in the corner, in a chair, was the undeniable shape of a person sitting. George's eyes made this connection before his mind did, and when his mind finally caught up, his heart started racing. He reached along the dark wall to find the light switch. When it flipped, after a momentary blindness, he saw Jenny sitting quietly, legs together.

For Jenny, it was a kind of relief to be caught. Because someone else had seen her waiting for Hugo, or perhaps lingering only to be near where he had been, it made no difference, her interior imaginings, desires known only to herself, had taken palpable shape in the world. They were facts now. Her chair squeaked when she adjusted, loosening, relaxing. She waited for her father to speak, but was disappointed by his nervousness, his searching the room for an excuse. Finally, he picked up a pile of clothes.

I need to wash these for Hugo, he said. He asked me to. You probably shouldn't be in here.

Jenny nodded. She expected no more. Still, it had passed, and though George might keep it secret, might never speak of the night, he could not deny it to himself.

Hugo could see the television's blue-gray screen through the windows, flashing and illuminating the walls. There were two couches pushed into an L, and on the big one, facing the television, Hugo could see Father Rudolfo's head jutting over the cushion. Anna, he thought, would be lying under covers on the other. He entered, and the door creaked. Father Rudolfo turned and smiled, and waved him in.

They were watching an action movie because Anna had a crush on the star. They were at a scene in which the character was swimming, and she was telling him to reverse the tape to watch him rise half-nakedly out of the pool. She was saying she hadn't heard what was said.

Father Rudolfo repeated the lines without reversing, shaking his head, and Hugo sat down beside him, on the other side of the couch, where he was closer to Anna. Anna waved when he sat, without looking, and Hugo touched her fingers.

The movie was cumbersome, sentimental, and implausible. Father Rudolfo and Anna both fell asleep. Only Hugo, now looking at Anna's bare shoulder above the covers, now looking to see that Father Rudolfo wasn't watching him watch Anna, stayed awake. He wished he could draw his vision in separate directions, push each eye to opposite corners of his face. After a while, Anna turned from her back to her side. Her arm struggled to find some place to rest on the narrow space left in the cushion, but couldn't. It dropped off, dangling toward the floor.

Hugo moved his leg closer to the arm, sinking down in the couch so that his back was nearly flat, and his neck bent uncomfortably up. So close to the perfection of her brown, young arm, which crooked slightly at the elbow and wrist. Her hand was curled gently, as if it were holding an egg just moments before rolling it along the floor.

There was an explosion in the movie, and the priest and the girl woke momentarily. Father Rudolfo cleared his throat, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes again. Anna turned to Hugo. By then he had stretched as forward as he could without falling. She moaned, trying to get comfortable, and looped her arm around his leg, above his injury, between his knee and crotch, and went to sleep.

*

Morning-still-drunk, face burned red, sleeping in his truck again, was Deke. A girl across his lap, and her jeans pulled down to her knees, as if Deke had begun but, so drunk or tired he simply could not proceed, given up. He came awake slowly, mouth full of dried saliva. He opened the door, leaned out, and tried to cough out what was caught inside him. The noise of it echoed in the hills. He spit, and the phlegm unraveled out like scarves from a clown's coat pocket. He wiped his mouth with the tail of his shirt, then his hand, and he leaned back in, closing the door.

Pretty, said the girl.

Deke turned to see her lifting herself above the seat to pull her jeans on. He watched her naked pubic bone disappear. What's today? he asked.

Sunday, she said.

Deke looked at his watch. He stared blankly around him. What?

She pointed to her mouth. I could use some water.

Deke started the engine, hit the gas, and the huge truck lurched out of the deep dirt he had driven into, past a line of trees to a road. He didn't recognize the road, so he flipped a coin in his head and turned left. It led to another road, deeper into trees, and Deke shrugged. He turned right. The girl fell asleep beside him. That road went for twenty minutes, winding out of the hills and down onto a flat white stretch spreading west, twinkling in the rising light. It didn't make sense to see the desert. Deke didn't believe it. He turned the truck around and sped back, but didn't recognize anything, and missed the turn he'd come from. The girl was sinking further into the seat, pouring mercurially onto the floorboard. Deke vaguely remembered meeting her, but not when. He came to a big intersection, but the road signs were shotgunned and ruined. He turned right. How could it be Sunday? Lost and nonplussed, he hit the roof of the cab with his fist, and the metal clang woke the girl, who had seemed boneless until then, and came up all at once, like one of those wooden toys with strings inside them. Deke pulled over and put his forehead to the steering wheel. The girl said, You lost?

Something like that.

Can we stop and get water?

Deke looked at her. When did I meet you? he asked.

Friday, she said. No. Thursday.

Deke put his head back on the steering wheel.

You supposed to be somewhere?

Deke leaned back, and reached his arm over the back of the seat, an inch above the girl's left shoulder. Not really, he said. You got any money?

How was Deke so handsome after three days of drinking? The girl slid into the angle of his arm. I've got money, she said.

Deke looked at the woman's arms folded under her chest and smelled cigarettes in her hair but never mind, and her legs sprawled open on the seat. An hour later she was under him and over him, sweat on sweat, all flesh, noise, heat, in a small motel that sat inconspicuously in a lot beside an empty restaurant. Unfinished food was beside them, and the room smelled like hamburger. The air conditioner sat in the window blowing almost nothing. It was old and loud. Deke turned her and turned her and was amazed to find no fat. The last few days came back to him, but not clearly. A parking lot. He was drunk and pissed off because Marquez was giving him less money for more work. Some guy in a sports car was yelling at this girl. She was crying and kicking his door. Deke asked her if she needed a ride. He told her they needed money, and they snuck into a house, hers, he guessed, to get some. She told him to stay outside but he wouldn't. He was lascivious and grabbed her around the waist and kissed her, and she drew him down to the carpet in the darkness, and he pulled her jeans down to the ankles and slid his whole body into the diamond of her bent legs connected at the ankle, and a shadow moved through the room they were in so silently that Deke only felt it, and he told her he thought someone was in the room but she wouldn't let him stop, and he looked up when it was over and saw a nightgown trailing down a hallway. She got some money. The next days were blurrier. Sex in bathrooms, in his truck. In the motel, though, beside the hamburger, this was the first time he'd seen her body in light.

How old are you? he asked.

Old enough, she said. You can do anything to me.

So he asked her to do the terrible things he could dream up, and she agreed to them all. When it was over, he watched her sleeping body on top of the covers. He smoked a few cigarettes and the room smelled like smoke and burned meat. The curtains were yellow and the room was yellow from light through the curtains. She would've done more than he'd asked. Deke didn't care, but didn't want to be around her anymore. Asleep, her naked body cutting through bunched covers, she was childlike. There were red welts on her body and arms. He stood up and opened the front door, and light barreled into the room, like it had been water slowly building, growing brighter instead of heavier, and it turned the room white and hot. The girl turned on the sheets, to her stomach, and her legs were spread wide to Deke. He went outside to a payphone.

Marquez.

What's happening, Deke?

You don't pay me enough fucking money. That's what's happening.

I've got family here. It's Sunday. Call later.

Go fuck yourself.

The wind blew some dust up in a miniature tornado, and Deke cowered as it went through him. It lashed debris against the metal of the phone booth.

What'd you say? asked Marquez.

I need more money.

How much?

At least as much as I used to make.

There's too much competition. People are out there doing it for almost nothing.

Deke heard a bell in the distance, and turned to see an old man coming out of the restaurant, rubbing his stomach.

Listen, said Marquez, I'll give you what I can.

Deke coughed.

Well?

All right.

Good.

And they each hung up, and knew nothing had changed, and the wind usurped the whole space around Deke, and the dust and sandgrains sawed against his skin.

Deke ran inside the restaurant and had a coffee. He was sober and felt it. His limbs were heavy and weak. The insides of his eyes were on fire. The booth he sat in was beside glass. It was green vinyl and hot, but Deke felt better with the sun burning down on him. He took a coin out of his pocket and flipped it, then held it sideways on the table and flicked it, and watched it spin and spiral down. The man who seemed to own the place, and who also seemed to wait and cook and serve, came to him. Heads, he said.

Deke looked up. The man filled his coffee cup.

Deke said, Where are we?

The man told him.

Christ, thought Deke. Shit gets away from you.

The man smiled and walked away. Deke grabbed the coin and put it in his pocket. Here I am a million miles from anywhere. I ought to just keep going. Fuck George's store.

Time isn't money, he thought. You've got to choose one or the other. When's that girl going to wake up?

Deke watched outside, at the motel and the empty lot around it, wondering how it and the restaurant stayed in business. He could see the door to his room from where he sat, and wondered if the girl would panic when she woke and couldn't find him.

The wind blew the whole white ground up an inch and hurried it. Deke followed with his head. Four billion years in the making, and making. When are people finally going to die out? What will the cockroaches think of this fucking motel? Deke lit a cigarette he had to hunt himself for. It was cracked and bent at the end, but it drew. And when he blew the first draw out, it came out of him like sandpaper, biting the back of his throat, and his head went light and a needle pierced his eye from inside. It shuddered and closed. He sipped his coffee, which was not cold but almost. It didn't matter. His throat felt smooth again and the needle slipped out of his eye and his head stopped spinning.

Strange countryside. Countrycide. Ha. Place without purpose, with bad music with poor people with no water with nothing with nothing, Christ. This place has time, but the wrong kind. *If I owned hell and Texas, I'd live in hell and rent out Texas.* If I owned my truck. How long is that girl going to sleep?

By the near-end of the cigarette, it was wonderful to smoke again. He wanted another but there wasn't one. The motel was quiet, and Deke watched it, like something you imagine might move if you stare close and long enough. God what I would do for a second cigarette. Then the door to their room opened and the girl, dressed again, stepped out and was swallowed

in the huge light, the huge, pounding, glassy light. Deke knocked on the window, one-bent-knuckled it. As if he hoped the knock would be so quiet she would go wandering off without him. She waved. It was one hand still down at her waist that she hardly raised at all. She limped when she walked. Deke felt ill watching her. It was so bright she had her eyes closed walking.

She came in and the man said Howdy to her. Hey there, she said, twang-saying it. Where did that accent come from? She sat across from Deke. He wished her face would go away.

There was a red mark two fingers thick behind her ear, when she turned. When she looked out the window, risen neck, baseballsize red. You hungry? he asked. She shrugged, and dug in her jeans pocket. Cigarette? she asked. Oh Jesus yes, he thought.

He smoked about half the cigarette, and said, Well I'm hungry.

Get something. I'm thirsty. Could you get drunk again?

Sure.

The man was beside them. He was sweating and staring at the girl.

Give me the chicken fried steak, said Deke.

Do you have salad? asked the girl.

We have some lettuce and ranch dressing.

Just lettuce. One big leaf.

He wrote it down. He wrote with one eye on the paper and one eye on the girl. She winked at him. My God is she for real? Taunting this old man? Deke brushed her foot with his foot, and when she looked Deke shook his head. She smiled.

Deke and the girl looked up at the man, jotting down the last few things. Is he writing out each word? Is he writing one of us a secret note? Okey-dokey, he said. Then he poked his pad and smiled and walked away.

Deke smoked the last half of the cigarette like it was the only thing in the world that he loved.

Do you know where we are? she asked.

He told her. She coughed. No shit? No shit. Are you kidnapping me or something? No I'm not kidnapping you or something: we've been on the road four days.

The girl was bathing in the light. She had her arms to the window.

Do you ever think about getting the hell away, for good? asked Deke.

She shrugged, and the way her shoulders lost interest with the question made Deke feel a hundred times older than he was. Why? she asked.

Just thinking, he said. All Deke could get his mind around was time and money, and it was one or the fucking other or none at all but never both, not unless you were so filthy you didn't give a damn about either. What would I give up? All the years I've spent waiting for George to give his store up, turn it in to, what, a McDonald's? Maybe so. I swear you could put two next door to each other in an uninhabited motherfucking jungle and both would make money.

His eye caught the menu and he read the price of a chicken fried steak. Six dollars ninety-five cents. He could've dug in his pocket but there wouldn't have been a point.

Say, he said.

Yes, she said, and she wasn't looking at anything but the brown of her arms, I have money. She was bored of him now, without drink, and Deke knew it was ruining everything. He felt the idea of hitting the road slacken in his heart. They didn't say anything, and Deke motioned for another cigarette and she gave it to him, and he sat there smoking it wishing he had a crossword even though he hated them, just to look busy.

The food came eventually, and the old man stood over them while they took the first bites and nodded and Deke smiled as appreciatively as he could. The girl said Mmmmm, and Deke was wondering if she was going to leave him now to be with this old man for two days, then leave him and this again and this again, infinity. He thought of the house they'd gone into that first night, and he remembered it being big and a big new car out front, and he sat flummoxed by all human behavior, but not too.

The man walked finally away, but stood at the bar watching the girl eat little leaves of lettuce with her fingers.

Hey, she said, while Deke took a big bite and grease slithered down his throat. He's watching us. I could suck your dick right here and see what he does.

Deke let the bite of food sit in his mouth, turning soft. The girl was finally excited about something. Let this go and it is all done, champion. No, he said. I just want to eat.

... Was it hot or cold that day Deke was gone for what seemed like an eternity, when Hugo passed by Jenny sitting at a bus stop, surrounded by suitcases? Was it summer or winter? Was she shivering all day on that bench, letting bus by bus pass, or melting? Some things seem so vivid and others so vague.

She had the cases piled around her like sandbags, and if everyone driving by hadn't known her life, they would've laughed at the sight of her. Maybe they did. No. It was hot. She had a long skirt pulled above her knees and the top buttons of her blouse unbuttoned. She was rubbing her forehead with the inside of her elbow. Makeup ran from her eyes, behind huge black sunglasses. Hot. One blistering August. Same August Philip Geiger stepped out of the bar at two in the afternoon, tripped into a ditch, and died of heat? God that was some funeral. His wife brought all his unfinished booze and buried it with him. She's gone now, isn't she? With the next-door neighbor, who loved her all his life, since kindergarten?

The sunglasses were too big for Jenny's long thin head, and a little too fashionable. She had packed all the cases sometime in the night, as she had done a dozen of the hundred Deke-absent nights before. At the mirror, undressed, she turned and turned in her reflection, trying to find beauty. She sat on the edge of her bed. She was naked and holding her arms over her stomach. Then she lay on her back, in the center of the bed, and thought of Hugo.

She went to the bathroom to put on makeup. She put all her clothes in bags and one suitcase. She carried them like all her children onto the road, and it wasn't a hundred yards when she had to stop and move them around, these straps from this shoulder to the other, this bag from one hand to the other. Another hundred yards and she had to rest and wipe her brow. It was night, but hot night, and her make-up was loosening in the humidity. A man in a huge ranching pickup came by and asked if he could give her a lift, and she said she'd be fine, and moved her bags around once more and kept walking.

It was dawn by the time she reached the busstop, and there were a dozen people there already, waiting for the San Antonio bus, and they had seen her a couple times before, out there

with her bags, but never this many. She moved through them to the bench, and there were a few old men sitting there and they wouldn't move.

Nobody made any noise at all, not a whisper or cleared throat. Cars went by, and eighteen-wheelers, and the people stood silently like stalks of wheat. A bus came by, and everyone got on but Jenny. A woman motioned to Jenny's bags, asking to help, and Jenny said she'd wait for one less crowded.

When it left, gargle-engined, and she was alone, she wondered why she'd brought absolutely everything with her. She looked around and knew she didn't look serious, and the embarrassment was like tiny red mites eating her toes and fingers. And when the next bus came by, and another dozen people who had collected there got on, she stayed. And it was the second defeat, and how many could a person endure before she surrendered? The day moved ahead, and her wanderlust disappeared in the heat like dew, like it had the times before, and she didn't want to think about walking back home or facing her mother. Then mosquitoes. Suddenly everywhere. Buses came and stopped and the drivers watched her for a while, then drove off.

And that was when Hugo spotted her. He was one confident step one cautious step, slowly moving through the morning, and his hair was cut into something of a style, and Ingrid's food had filled him out some.

It was after noon by then and Jenny was being freed of the makeup, wiped off by some old woman passing by, some old woman who saw Jenny sitting there burning in the heat, and didn't ask anything but took a clean white handkerchief and rubbed her face dry, and Jenny was suddenly a child again, soft and obedient, and didn't move. When Hugo came limping through he saw this child in Jenny, who at that moment could have passed for an acrimonious Anna. He crossed the road to her.

Are you leaving? he asked.

She shook her head. I don't know.

He sat down beside her, and rubbed at his leg. Jenny's eyes wouldn't let go of his hands over his jeans.

Hugo sat with her a long time, watching her turn more innocent in the cooling. The buses started pulling into town, and people filed out. They were as quiet as they had been that morning, but their feet made more noise. They stared exhaustedly ahead and up, like a line of mountainclimbers in a blizzard, and stopped only momentarily to gaze at Jenny, shake their heads, and move on.

Finally Hugo said, I'm hungry.

Jenny put her hand on Hugo's wrist. They had chili at the tourist restaurant, and were surrounded by people reading old plaques on the walls, talking about the town's history.

Your bags, said Hugo.

Jenny, childlike, like a shy girl, twisted her spoon in the food.

It was slow like that, in the beginning. They went to San Antonio, and saw a matinee. It was a soppy film and Hugo watched in disbelief as a woman beside them cried, and Jenny almost fell asleep. Their feet didn't touch until the end, not until the credits rolled up, but they had been an inch apart the whole time, and when their toes at last came together, and then heels, Jenny and Hugo turned to little statuary, afraid they might crumble if they moved. The lights came on and a young boy came through with a broom and vest and looked at them for awhile, then let them stay while he worked.

They took day trips to San Antonio and Austin, and when Jenny would suggest they stay the night (would Deke care? Or know?), Hugo would want to go back. He thought of Anna coming by and looking for him, which she had done once or twice, late, sneaked out of the house. And when Jenny asked to meet him in town, Hugo said it was a bad idea. He didn't want Anna to find out and stop coming by, lose interest. So he and Jenny spent secretive parts of mornings and afternoons outside of town, though nothing physical passed, not until the day that Jenny and Hugo took George's truck out, far toward the west. George saw them leave together, walked down the road behind them until he'd walked an embarrassing distance, then came back enviously.

Hugo and Jenny were miles from anywhere, hours later, and the wind was terrible and throwing the Datsun around. They came down a high hill and stopped at an empty rest stop, to wait for the wind to ease.

In the elements, fierce, and worsening, the old truck rocked. That old Datsun. Whatever kept the engine running was a secret.

Hugo pointed. Just inside their sight, on the horizon. Up there, he said.

You've never seen a duststorm? asked Jenny.

Hugo shook his head, hands on dash.

They're nothing, she said.

He nodded.

Jenny faced him. She pulled hair back above her ear. Looked at a scar under his eye. Hugo, how many hours have we spent together? How many lunches?

Hugo couldn't help himself. The whole west was sand-tan, and awful, and on top of them. In all his traveling, he had not seen anything like it.

In truth, it was a small duststorm, and Jenny couldn't see why it enthralled him. She took his hand and put it on her leg, and this finally got his attention. She leaned in to kiss him, and reflex drew his head back to the glass, and it thumped, and Hugo grabbed the back of his head.

Sorry, she said.

No, he said. I wasn't...

And that was when the sand struck. It eased against the Datsun, which whinnied and creaked. The sand caressed the body. For a few minutes, Jenny and Hugo and the truck disappeared in a cloud. Little was visible. An army could've marched by. All the mysteries on earth might've crawled by like insects, and been missed. And then there were pockets of transparence. A loosening of sky. The wind quieted, and there the blue truck was, covered, and through the windows Jenny and Hugo, in clothes, were embracing. He let her go. She was a little stunned, and unfulfilled, and waited to continue. Hugo wouldn't. He rolled the window down and looked out.

*

There he was awalking, Hugo, persevering. And he awalked himself inside a bar one night, dark and neon-twinkling (a bar is always beautiful), and sought the sought thing in half a dozen vodkas. For a man who don't drink, Lord. He was tongue and chin on bar, law law law law. Bartender told him if he didn't put his tongue back in he would nail it to the bar. Lub laaw? Yes, the laaw. Shit. Have some water. Waba. Oh my God.

Then came, wouldn't you know it, also awalking, Deke and three men, Hank and Velasquez and Larry. They were just as law law law, but on twelve beers each plus shots. Cute little waitresses with test tubes of orange best guess, boy weren't they lovely? The waitresses.

And wasn't it not ten yet? Oh Jesus it was ugly already, and there were five more hours at least.

I said, Deke! Hank! Velasquez! Larry! Sit down and have a drink.

Ha! they said, hello there Joe Patterson (me) and hoo man, did they sit down like they were ready to drink. It was good to have friends together. Deke drank a shot of a shot and a sip of a beer, and then he turned around. That Hugo?

Yup, I said.

Damn he's drunk. Hank, is he drunk?

He's drunk.

Hey you, he said, and Hugo turned his sleepy eyes Deke's way. (Ever seen a man green, I mean *green*, which strangely isn't green at all, but like skim milk?) Law, he said. How's my wife? asked Deke. Oh shit, thought I and Hank and Velasquez, and I thought Larry too, but Larry seemed to like it, but then Deke laughed. C'mon and sit with us.

Well, you had to've been there to understand how funny it was when he stood and tried to walk over. He made me feel sober, and I'd had a whole afternoon and night. Velasquez howled, he howled, and hit Deke in the back, who spewed beer from his nose, and I, well, I couldn't do anything but fall off my stool. Larry poured his beer on the ground, and Hank ran in little excited circles.

Hugo didn't understand. You see, he was ten feet farther away than when he started, massive sweeping plane dive that took him through a crowd of quiet tourists wondering where to get wine (oh I know this lovely lovely lovely), and he drove his bent-down head into a post. Oh Jesus. We all felt our heads on that one. That was when we started laughing, and when he saw us even he started laughing. Christ you have to respect a good sport. Can you make it? He held

up one finger, and he paused, and then he honed in and went for us all at once. Through the tourists again. They grumbled and shook their heads—bobbledy bobbledy, like those wobbling miniatures in cars. Whatever. Go back to Wisconsin. Hank laughed so hard he snorted some saliva into his windpipe and had a coughing fit. For a second I wondered if he'd die, and wished he wouldn't, since he was the only one of us with money.

We caught Hugo like tree branches catching a parachuter: he was tangled up in us, and squirming. We had to put his two hands on the bar so he could stand. Bartender said, He's ready to go home. Bullshit, said Larry, we all need one more, then we'll all leave quietly. So bartender did it, and Hank paid, and we drank vodka since that was Hugo's drink tonight. I didn't know if it was good or bad, but I almost threw up. Hugo held his, pure miracle. Even seemed slightly steadier.

You want a cigarette? Deke asked him.

Oh yes, said Hugo. He was talking again. Tongue back in his mouth.

Then Larry said, Hey, there's George Strait.

Well I thought it was another joke, until I looked and there he was, George Strait, drinking a Budweiser.

Maybe he'll sing. Oh he's got a purty voice, said Hank. Who hates country music. Never mind Hank, Hugo, said Larry, go get his autograph, and Deke said, Yeah, get him to write it for your girlfriend Jenny. Isn't she your girlfriend?

Now that wasn't sporting. And Velasquez said, Lay off, Deke, and Larry said, Why? And Deke laughed and said, Naw I'm joking, c'mon. I'll get you another, Hugo. Long as you get George Strait's autograph. Bartender said, He ain't drinkin one more, not a drop. Okay okay. Go get it anyway, would you?

Hugo must not have known who George Strait was, since he shrugged and said he could go one way or the other. All right, said Larry, we'll wait. All I could think was what we'd do when we left. I just wanted a couple more drinks to sleep. Then I could wake up around noon and get a sandwich and come on back. As it stood that night, only one bar left in town, and they'd kick us out too. If I had to go home and watch TV I'd kill myself.

Well, Hugo walked himself right up to the George Strait, and I guess walked isn't the best word for it, but he got there, and stood beside him, leaning a little. The Strait made a confused face. Hugo leaned a little more, and he must've leaned far enough to not be able to get back right, and holy shit he fell right on top of him, George fucking Strait, ha ha ha. And if that weren't enough, when the Strait pushed him back up Hugo sat down beside him, and put his head in his arms. Hank actually threw his beer can against the wall he couldn't think of how to laugh harder. Bartender said All right all of you out. Aw shit, said Hank, I can't breathe. Velasquez was dead. He sat there eye-open-corpse and didn't make a noise. He was past laughing.

George the Strait looked over at us, and then he pushed Hugo off the end of the bench. Hugo went down like wet meat, and his legs were caught in the table and he was stalled in one last hopeful dive, head mashed to the floor, which had sawdust on it (tourists love this yes they do). Let's go get him, said I.

Deke and I went to Hugo, and didn't say a word at his majesty. You okay? Hugo spit sawdust out his mouth. Nodded. He was something. Let's mosey. Deke motioned, and Hank and Velasquez moved. When we got out to the street, Deke said, That wasn't even George

Strait. No wonder he looked so damn confused. Was too, I said. You're drunk if you think so. Then Larry said, Deke's right, that was not George Strait—why do you think I put him up to it? I wished they hadn't told me.

So we went to the next bar. We put Hugo's arms around my neck and Deke's neck, and we pulled him a hundred yards down the road to the other bar. Hugo went the whole way on the tops of his feet. There were bikers out front looking mean, but they were business-bikers, talking about the open road. Real bikers talk about which guy they're going to murder. We walked right by them and they tried to look as mean as they could, and ho boy I think we could've made it if Hank hadn't started giggling. Velasquez squeezed his eyes together and bubbles started coming out his nose. Deke laughed, wide open, see me. So I shook my head and said no no no no not again, and Hank said HOOOOOLY SHIT, and we spilled inside. Hugo fell down, and Deke and I let go, so Larry dragged him by the wrist to the bar. He ain't drinking, said this bartender. Well, said Deke, we are. So give us five beers. No you're all drunk. Come back tomorrow. Five fucking beers and if I say it again I'm going to climb back there and get them. All right five beers.

So we got them, and to be honest Deke and the bartender were old buddies, so we knew all was peachy. But one of those bikers didn't. He came inside and said we ought to leave. A, said Deke, bikers don't stop fights. And I thought that was pretty accurate. B, look at your outfit. You made it dirty on purpose. And I guess he did, looking at it. So, went on Deke, we'll kick your ass if you want. Larry pointed at Velasquez (he would've pointed at Hank since Hank's bigger, but Hank was under the table, laughing). Velasquez pulled his collar down and there was a tattoo on his neck, and it didn't mean a thing but that rich biker didn't know.

The guy left. He twisted a bandana around his neck nervously and didn't say anything. Last piece of evidence. The bandana. And we started laughing again and even Hugo opened his eyes to watch us watch him gurgle, and Hank said, What is that a tattoo of anyway? And Velasquez whispered that it was the name of a horse that had won him five thousand dollars at a race. Jiminy Cricket. It scared the hell out of that guy and my eyes and cheeks were tired of smiling and laughing, so I stretched my face. Lord.

So there we were, adrinking and atalking, and I swear my face was never so sore as that night. When we heard the bikes start up and head down the road it still wasn't even midnight, so at Larry's suggestion we hopped in Deke's truck and drove down to a place just outside San Antonio, so we could see women naked from the waist up. I never much thought of us as lonely people, since we were together, but I suppose there were never six lonelier people living. And I was sure I'd seen the most hopeless of all lonesome lives when Deke gave a woman who was fat and old and drugged up twenty bucks to dance for Hugo. She climbed on top of him and put her breasts in his face, and Hugo couldn't even lift his arms to stop her. He would tip to one side and Larry would come by and straighten him. Which of them had it worse, Hugo or the dancer, was a question that had no answer. There was a girl on top of my lap and I told her I had to go to the bathroom. Imagine that. She got up and I stayed sitting. I never had a wife. I wished I could be the drunk I was hours before then for the rest of my life.

We left. We'd all spent a bunch of money buying our own misfortune, and now we were deep in the doldrums, and we drove a different way back, and stopped by a bridge over a river. It was shallow and full of rocks and boulders, and Deke skidded into the ditch just before it, and he grabbed Hugo out of the back and pulled him by the neck to where the bridge was highest off

the water. I'm not sure if it was me or Hank who said it first, but What's he doing? was asked. Jesus Christ. We came out of the truck running, despite Larry saying, Let him, and we saw Deke punch Hugo in the stomach, and lift him by his collar and a belt-loop halfway over the rail. Hugo wasn't fighting back. If he was awake he was calm, and hoping it would end soon. We got to Deke in time, and pulled him back. Nothing you could say, really. When Hank reached to pick up Hugo, Deke said Leave him or none of you are coming. So we left him. We drove right by him, lying on his face in the road. I bet he didn't move for a day or two, or maybe he did and crawled down to the river, hoping to drown himself. God it was an awful thing to do.

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Mr and Mrs Henry Cake Cavan requested the honour of everyone's presence at the marriage of their daughter Elizabeth Ashley to Guillermo Hector Espinoza Lieutenant United States Navy Saturday the first of March at one o'clock in the afternoon, and everyone took them up on it. It meant nothing to know them. Cavan was a man who lived rich up in the hills, and he wanted to throw a party. Everybody said, Let him.

The sunshine was weightless and bold, and it was burning up a final, unexpected frost of winter. So that driving up to the ceremony, woods on both sides, you felt like you were driving through a giant illuminated diamond. Hugo slept on the way up. The calm and twinkling light made him so happy he grew tired. George and Ingrid drove him.

Mass was short and Catholic, and Elizabeth was so beautiful that women cried at the sight of her. All the men had their finest suits on, and it was awful to see the disappointment on their faces when a dozen men wearing dress whites stormed in, and made them look like awkward schoolboys. They all huffed and straightened their ties.

May the Lord send you help from his holy place and from Zion may he watch over you. May he grant you your heart's desire and lend his aid to all your plans. Hugo sat uncomfortably in the middle of a full pew, and knelt and stood and sat back down confusedly. As the service began, he watched the others in the pew for guidance. I confess to Almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do. There was a fat man next to Hugo whose right arm spilled onto Hugo's leg. The man could barely breathe, and he made indecipherable noises with his nose and mouth, and sweat was pouring down his face. There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, They have no wine. And Jesus said to her, Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come. His mother said to the servants, Do whatever he tells you. Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, Fill the jars with water. And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward. So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now. Jesus did this, the first of His signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed His glory;

and His disciples believed in Him. Hugo heard this read and looked around him. No one stirred. The pews were full and people stood in the aisles and one man even had a cat on his shoulder. The man beside Hugo pushed again, making more room for himself. A few rows ahead were Deke and Jenny, slumped and squeezed between two old ladies. Then the marriage. I do I do. What God joins together, man must not separate. May the Lord confirm the consent that you have given and enrich you with His blessings. The priest asked the pair to kiss, and the congregation erupted. This was what the people wanted. Guillermo dipped her he was so hungry, and some of the jealous old ladies laughed and went red. Hugo didn't know if it was over, but he hoped so. It wasn't. He saw a man turn a page in the missal and sigh. Love is people's origin, love is their constant calling, love is their fulfillment in heaven. The love of man and woman is made holy in the sacrament of marriage, and becomes the mirror of your everlasting love through Christ. Hugo watched Jenny's head to see if it would move. He looked down his row and saw George drawing something in a missal. Hugo could barely see the altar, but the wife and husband were smiling and the groomsmen were eyeing the bridesmaids. All of them were from somewhere else. *Acclamation of the People*. Let us proclaim the mystery of faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ your Son. We, your people and your ministers, recall his passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory.

And then it was over. The pair came out of the church and everyone threw things at them. Guillermo led her by the arm, and coming down the steps she was the embodiment of grace, grace in excess of her embodiments, and was smile, shoulders, train, and she looked at Hugo and smiled, and Hugo felt like she had blessed him in particular. He wanted to kiss her before even one hour made her older. They stepped into a limousine and everyone cheered. Hugo clapped. He was swept.

It was a three-mile journey from the church to the reception. Ingrid had to park outside a gate. It was tall and iron, and balloons were tied all over it. Hugo moved it as he walked by, and it creaked so loudly it startled him. Seemed like a million people were walking up the long driveway with them. They were talking and laughing and holding each other. There were so many women, and Hugo didn't know where they'd come from, since he hadn't ever seen one of them before. They were all necks and calves and shoulders. A breeze kicked up, and as if they had practiced the choreography all year, all the men took their jackets off and gave them to the women. Hugo expected the women to spin and pirouette, then fall into their escorts' arms.

The driveway went steeply up for a few hundred yards, and when they crested it the huge house was visible and magnificent and all by itself on a hill. Hugo said it was a big house and George said thirty-seven rooms. Vineyards sloped down from the side of the house. The guests made a huge pastel-colored ribbon, and the wind blew it by collars and hems.

There was a long line to shake the father's hand. Call me Cake. Glad to see you. Well it's been forever. They walked into the house, and six large ice sculptures of Cake's daughter were being admired by eyes and fingers. On a white wall they were already showing a video of the wedding, edited, with music. They watched it for a while, hoping to be in it, and then moved through, onto a back porch stuffed with eating and drinking bodies, then onto a green lawn that stretched toward cliffs and a massive landscape of hills and the lake within them. Inside a tent, a band was playing but no one was dancing yet, except for a child and her mother. Then a voice came over a speaker and said Everyone look up! Hugo didn't see anything. He scanned the sky

above and around him, and there was nothing but a bright color between blue and white, which was so intense in the immense openness that Hugo grew dizzy, and felt like he might fall into it. Then George nudged him. There, he said, pointing back at the house. It was a hot air balloon, green, and then another, rainbow. And another. The guests cheered, and the people in the balloons threw down streamers. And another. And then it seemed like twenty all at once, and more. Bright paperlets feathered down on top of them. When there were no more balloons coming over the house, Hugo turned to count them, and the whole bowl of the sky was colored and drifting by peacefully, and the first few were already pinpoints in the distance.

George went to get champagne for the three of them. When he'd gone, Ingrid said, I'm going to mingle. Hugo was looking for the bride so he could kiss her. In his imagination she was continually coming down the steps in perfection. He wandered into the tent. Someone gave him a beer but he couldn't unscrew the top, so he was walking around with it. In the back of the tent, in a shadow, Deke and Jenny were sitting on opposite sides of a table. He was drinking and she wasn't. Deke had never been with Elizabeth, who knew only ambitious men. He had never been more miserable and angry than sitting beside Jenny watching Guillermo inherit a billion dollars at the altar, and get Elizabeth while doing it. He vowed to get her in bed one day. Jenny saw Hugo and waved. It had been a long time since they'd been together, and Jenny was hoping he'd come talk to her. Deke saw her do this and took another long swallow, finishing it, and stood. I'm going to get another. You want anything? She did and didn't. There were only twenty people at her wedding, and the ones that weren't drunk were gone before dark. When she didn't answer, Deke shrugged and left her.

George and three champagnes returned to where he and Hugo and Ingrid had been standing. He waited there for a long time thinking they would come back. People passed him. Thirsty? Miss your meeting? Can I get you another? Ha. It seemed everyone was a stranger, and despite this they made a fool of him. After five minutes, three champagne glasses warming in the claw his fingers made, and in the daytime light, however chill, George saw Deke lingering by a pole. Deke saw George and slipped under a thin shadow cast by a wall, then the wall. So George found a table to put the glasses on, wiped condensation off his fingertips, and walked toward the far end of the property.

He knew only a few people that he passed, and they stopped talking long enough to nod, but never to invite him over. He felt like a unpopular schoolchild looking for a place to sit. Then a woman touched his shoulder, and George turned, hoping it was Hugo. The woman asked him to move so she could take a picture of her children. He smiled and stepped out of the way, and said, Good-looking kids, to which the woman responded guardedly, unsure how he meant it. George took a last look at the children, posing by a tree, and though he did not see the ghost of his son running in the woods behind them, he wished he did. He tried to make his mind hallucinate, tried to see his son hopping in the high grass urging him to follow, since he was following already. He passed the last straggling group smoking cigarettes and he did not look but they all wore disdainful scowls and wished the wedding was over. He followed the hallucination he did not have into a thicket, down into the slow slope of the last few acres of Cake Cavan's grounds, careful not to think land and be just another cowboy, and climbed over a weak wooden fence that came apart in soft little splinters.

When he was over, he still saw no boy. He wished he could impose delusion, merely, seek the relief of madness and find it. Out there in the woods, near no one, not even strong

enough to invent hallucination, George Rasmussen surrendered, and simply told himself his son was right there in front of him, and held his hand out. And he had to tell himself his son ran away from him. George too ran, old frailty, pushing through branches and hobbling over rocks, until he came to a small hole in the ground near a huge tree, and told himself his boy was down there, and dug into it with his hands, opening the hole a little. He saw no face nor eyes, so he said out loud, There his face is, there his eyes, and he stuck his head into the hole, whispering, Hugo, Hugo. When he tried to pull out, he felt his head caught between two branches, and could not lift it out, and if someone had seen him from above, they would have seen him curled lifelessly over, as though his body had been shot like a fleshy arrow into the ground, stopped at the head, and all gone limp. It would take him hours to realize turning his head to the side would release him.

Left alone, Hugo had walked into the house to find the bride, and he saw a crowd around her and pushed himself into it. Everyone was telling her how lovely she looked, and people were holding her like she might lift off the ground if they didn't. She had brown hair to her shoulders, and copper-colored eyes, and Hugo leaned in. Hello, she said. Hello. She shook his hand, and he couldn't think of anything at all to say. So he said Kiss the bride. He could've killed himself for saying something so idiotic, but she laughed and leaned her cheek to him, and he kissed it. With his one free hand he held the side of her, and barely squeezed. Then a man in the crowd said I want some a that, and everyone laughed, and Elizabeth smiled at Hugo one last time and the crowd swept her away cheering.

Hugo took himself and his unopened sweating beer outside again, and turned right, and walked into the vineyards. He sat down in the dust and watched the afternoon roll by. Resting amongst the vines, he half-slumbered. He looked down the hill and lived that kiss again and again. At dusk, when the sun was reddening, it grew cool again, and Hugo crossed his arms and thought about returning. He sat up, and dusted his legs off, and turned around when he heard some cheering. Jenny was a foot behind him. Hi, she said. She took his hand so he could stand up, and held on to it, pulling him farther down into the vineyards, then out of them, and into the woods at the hill's bottom, up another. It was cold there, and the frost hadn't burned up. Hugo and Jenny stepped through it, and their feet left wet indentations in their path. She walked him all the way to the river, miles, in evening darkness. And they came through a thicket, and there was the river. It barely moved. It was like heavy red wine. She lay down in ice-cold dirt and wilted grass, and brought him down next to her. She undressed and put her arms shyly by her sides, and she turned blue and limp like a dying trout, and her breaths were shallow susurrations, and she was going to have a wedding night or she would tie iron to her neck and throw herself into the shallow water.

Hugo tried to take his jacket off, but his arms shivered in the cold. He shook his head, and Jenny sat up to help him undress. The jacket came off awkwardly, and he held his arms high while Jenny pulled. He couldn't think of a reason to avoid this any longer. He put the bride in his head, and saw the white dress slide off her, and his hands on her back. Then he laid down in the dirt and let her undo his belt, and pull his slacks down. It was the first time she or anyone in that town had seen the wound in Hugo's leg, thigh cut to the bone, the purple, pouting scar tissue. It would never be anything else. She put her hand on it. Then her head on his stomach. What was she listening for?

Behind a line of brush and trees, on the other side of the river, there was movement. Heavy encumbered rustling. Hugo opened one eye dreamily, and saw it, steamy breath rising out of the branches: horses. They moved darkly and secretly through the trail. A dozen of them, and they passed him and Jenny as quietly as possible, and were gone. And it was hours later when Hugo realized there were no wild horses where he was, and that there'd been riders, all those old people with cameras and hands on mouths (some of their cameras had become hands and mouths) to hide their gaping, but if they were so aghast why were they so open-eyed?

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Something huge died on the outskirts of town, and the air in the valley went sour for a month. Rancid-sour. Intestine-sour. So that folks in town went coughing vomitously into the daytime. Vultures turned a small circle of sky to a coal-gray whirlpool, but when people (about twenty men with handkerchiefs tied about their faces, ha, oldtime villains) went out searching for the carrion to burn it up, to cook the stink from the rot, they found nothing. This scared the Jesus Christ out of a lot of people. Some thought the military was poisoning them, others God, and prayed like monks. And then it went away. Like that. Father Rudolfo came outside one morning for his paper, down his long stone walk, and the new clean air suddenly occurred to him. He smiled and picked his paper up and slapped it on his leg. He looked down his street and saw a neighbor, who waved. They were too far away to talk so they shrugged at each other. Extraño. Weird. He went inside and started cooking breakfast. Anna was turning thirteen. One whole life runs away from you, then another.

He went into her room to wake her. She was zonksleeping, arm, leg, and head off the bedside, and the sheets were piled on the opposite bottom. On the floor beside a footlocker. Where she used to keep notes to her father, so she could give them up when he returned. If you ever stop to think about the optimism of children, it will destroy you. Father Rudolfo shook her shoulder, and she blinked. Breakfast, he said. She put her head back on the bed and under a pillow. Happy birthday, he said. She threw the pillow from her head, huffed, and stormed to the bathroom. He crossed his legs and scratched his face perplexedly. The shower turned on. He thought, Her food won't stay warm forever.

Later, they ate, and Anna wouldn't speak at all. When she finished she turned on the television. He watched the back of her head burrow into the brown cushions of the couch. Her hair wove into the crevices, chocolate on chocolate. It was not that couch, but that color couch and that spot, where your mother gave birth to you. I haven't told you this story. I won't now, not from spite.

Mass that morning was empty, just a handful of souls. It had been standing-in-the-aisles when the air stank, and for Easter, but that morning Father Rudolfo could hear one woman way back in the pews knitting something. He cleared his throat and went ahead. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The handful of parishioners said menamenamen amen. His thoughts mingled distractingly. Two men had brought a woman to him, in her twenties, who'd collapsed on the street. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. And and also you with you also with you. I'm not a hospital, he said. She's not sick, they said, she's drunk. They were two

Mexican ranchhands, big as elephants, and they were drunk too, but not so. My brothers and sisters, to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins. I confess to Almighty God.

The men told him she was pregnant, that she'd admitted this and then passed out. Her clothes were filthy. He took them off and found some clean things from donations. She didn't look pregnant. She was dead weight, and it took everything to get her into bed. He had to have a cigarette afterwards, which he's since given them up. When she woke, a day later, she cried for a long time. He kept giving her water. Let us pray.

For days she didn't know where she was, and asked me to call her mother. I just said okay, okay, I'll call her. Then one day she flew into my room without clothes on, and shouted, Who are you? I threw a blanket around her, and she went quiet. Like covering a horse's eyes. Sleep. I tried to ask her what had happened, but she was too distant, and roamed through my house and the church. Dim light, nightgown, and always close to the walls, like she could turn and slip into them. Did she want to be the church? That would be a story. The opposite of Christ's. Time to timelessness. Flesh to ghost. She was so beautiful. All I could do was make her sandwiches.

I hear my Beloved. See how he comes leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills. My Beloved is like a gazelle, like a young stag. See where he stands behind our wall. He looks in at the window, he peers through the lattice.

I never asked if she knew where the father was. Nothing could have been more obvious. She wept into her pillows. I read her the newspaper at night, to put her to sleep. Other people's misery. Wanted to let her know that misery is not special. Does not belong to one person. That misery in fact is boring and can put you to sleep. I skipped the happy stories. They made her hysterical.

Jesus said to his disciples: Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray? I tell you solemnly, if he finds it, it gives him more joy than do the ninety-nine that did not stray at all. Similarly, it is never the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. This is the Gospel of the Lord.

One day she fell to her knees and grabbed my wrists and begged forgiveness. She could not stop herself from loving. You could love your child instead. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, and grimaced. She was showing at last, at four months.

I'm not sure when it happened. Not exactly. But it happened. We were sitting outside one picnic-calm day, eating sandwiches. You make good sandwiches, Rudolfo. Rudolfo, she said. Thank you. She smiled, and laughed, and pushed my shoulder. Maybe that was when it happened. She sat there holding her stomach, sipping apple juice, and she was my other life. If it had not been Christ it would've been her. She was my other life's wife. I was in love with her, swollen as she was, it didn't matter. I was the sum of my regret suddenly. I had mine. A life. Some decision someday somewhere, which meant I wouldn't have another. What to eat. Anything. It seemed impossible.

I sought Christ ever since I could remember. Sought Him in thought and scripture, in nature and in people. Found only fairweather parishioners. Is the search for Christ real or metaphysical? Finding Him triumph or reason's defeat? Keep faith, padre. Christ defeats time. They count it backward to Him, forward from. Time alterer. Redeemer. But isn't every birth?

Time moves in one direction toward it, one direction after. You are young, you grow old. Where is the sundering? You ride the cycle up then down, then dust. What lies between the up and down, what moment? This is where Christ was born.

And I had a woman living with me. Ever more beautiful, even as her stomach ballooned. But it wasn't me she wanted. At night, she talked in her sleep, and it was nothing but another man's name, incomprehensible. I couldn't help but listen, as if I were strapped to my bed, and she was whispering the name to me, and I knew it wasn't mine.

One night I crept into her room and stood beside the bed, and when she woke startled I begged her to stop saying his name. Had I come to that? She held my hand in the darkness, and I was idiot-quiet. Wasn't I a priest? I dreamt, waking, that I had impregnated her, betrayed Christ, and the guilt was like white feathers blowing through the room, but so was the joy. I sat down beside her on the bed and asked God to give me one minute in her womb. I would speak to this child. In my other life it would've been mine. If I persuaded it to switch identities with me, would she have borne me? Steady, padre.

Breakfast, next morning, in a bathrobe, she was eating and smiling, your mother. The soft top of her breast. I'm going to be happy, she said. Good, I said. And who knew it was a lie? When you were born, Anna, your mother left. She saw you once and didn't say much. She put her clothes on and had something to eat and ran toward the father, and who knew if she knew where to look? I brought you home. I would've given up Christ for your mother. This broke me, and all my life since I've devoted to you. I will carry you across the water.

Father Rudolfo suddenly heard knitting, and thought, Have I spoken this aloud? The woman far back in the pews with her needles smiled at Father Rudolfo. No. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Why come if you're going to knit the whole time? Where am I? What comes next? Body and blood of Christ. Yes.

When he walked home, he caught Anna outside sucking on a lollipop. All Father Rudolfo could think of was cavities. No wonder she hates me.

What do you want to do today?

Nothing.

It's your birthday.

How do you know?

Father Rudolfo went inside. He wondered intensely if there were anything to do. How bad adolescence would be. He resolved it didn't matter. All of her mother was in her, but innocently. He looked out the window down the road, and wondered how he would pay for her college. Ay mija.

Anna finished the lollipop and threw the paper rod in the grass. She one-leg-hopped down the stone walk. She stood by the mailbox for a while, opening and closing it, raising and lowering the flag. She turned back to the house, and a shadow moved through it. Then she turned to the road, and tore down it, skipping, tore a red streak on the memory of the gray rock beneath her, in her outfit. A neighbor watched as she went, eyes behind his sunglasses, and waved. She waved back. God it was sunshiny and bright and the air was clean, pure blue-white light, and a girl that young and beautiful was skipping down the road, pa ping pa ping. Yes. Hold on to that.

And she turned onto the main road, slowing in the traffic. It was spring and cars had come out all this way to honk at each other. She drew the attention of the street. Her eyes poured right out of her.

She came to the old crumbling mission. She went slowly over a white sidewalk, turtleslled by weeds and roots. There was a wall beside her, and branches and vines that she pulled from her face. She came back into the courtyard, and Hugo was sitting there with his sketchbook, pencil in mouth. He nodded as she came in, and she smiled. He had the life he wanted, almost. The dog was curled against an old pot, and dozing. She took a seat on the grass. What's up? She eyed his drawing. How many times have you drawn that fountain? He said, It's not a fountain, it's a birdbath.

It was the birdbath he had seen on the trip with George to the antiques store, where that man had come out and kicked it over. He was no artist, but when there was no inspiration in the world he could see immediately, he turned to the one he could extract from memory, and in that way he made fewer mistakes.

It's my birthday, she said.

Hugo thought a while, realizing he'd forgotten. Sorry, he said. Happy birthday.

Whatever. Who knows anyway?

Anna pulled at weeds and threw them in the air, and Hugo looked upon the fountain, realizing the object he was drawing, the birdbath, had begun to resemble the fountain, which had crept into the memory of the birdbath unconsciously, and, as always when Anna arrived, he put the sketchbook down. She held her feet out, and he rubbed them. He lay in the pillow of the tops of her feet. Sometimes he would tickle her, and they would mock-wrestle, and when they quit she would lie against his chest, and he would hold his arms an inch below her forming breasts. Maybe she was what he sought. Father Rudolfo said: when a man doesn't know what he yearns for, but yearns, he will always find God, but in the wrong way. Keep that in hat.

He hadn't said a word to Jenny since the day at the river, and was spending more time here to avoid her. In his mind, he pretended sometimes it had been with Anna, other times with Elizabeth Cavan, formerly. He wished Jenny would finally follow through, leave town and Deke, and be gone.

Anna crawled on her knees to the dog. Hi Eddie, she said. She rubbed its ears back, and the dog woke. Hugo stared into the dog's dumb eyes.

Nice day, said Hugo, looking up, twisting his forearms in the sunlight.

She whispered to the dog, and Hugo picked his sketchbook up and went through drawings he'd done. Each a hundred times worse than the previous, growing uncertainty, frustration that ultimately the fountain conceals itself within itself, and the birdbath does not exist. Hugo shook his head because it didn't matter. He grabbed Anna's leg and bit it, playfully, and she slapped at his head. When he let go, Anna turned her head to the ground, and dug at some gray dirt with her thumb. What a boring birthday. Can we go somewhere?

Where?

I want to go to the beach.

I don't have a car.

She stood up, and he got up beside her. She walked, and he followed. He grabbed her waist and she waved his arms away. The air turned white as she walked through it, and Hugo wanted to be thirteen with her, and lie naked by a river, and skinnydip, and drown.

Jenny stirred under her sheets. She pulled them from her face to breathe. Nothing to get up for. She would sleep for a year if her body would let her. She stuck her leg out to cool it. It was white and unshaven, and she slipped it back under. She would cut her feet off at the ankles, and never leave the bed.

The phone rang, and it was Ingrid again, and she spoke to the machine again. Offering to come make lunch, to take her shopping. Said she'd call back a little later. Jenny looked at the clock by her bed, and the second hand was ticking two seconds at a time, which meant the battery was dying.

Deke came by and brought her water, every so often. She told him she was just sick with a flu, and Deke said he'd better sleep on the couch. He coughed every time he came into the bedroom, waving his hand at the air, and opening windows. Jesus Christ Jenny you won't get better in here. She told him: I'll give you the store anyway. I don't want it. Just leave me. He would shake his head. You just try to sleep.

She turned and turned in her sheets, and talked to herself. Love is people's origin, love is their constant calling, love is their fulfillment in heaven. Eventually she made herself sick, for real sick, and Deke brought her medicine. Wasn't that odd? Was she something he could keep torturously, and punish for his life his whole life? If they would've only given him the store when they promised, he would've left her by now, and this wouldn't be this wouldn't be this.

At that moment Hugo was walking with Anna, just behind and to the right of her, and there was no thought in his mind but the way time conceals itself within the future, and begs to be uncovered. He moved completely behind Anna, and he tried to step in the prints her feet made, and his swallowed hers. They were walking just to the side of the road. He imagined being a boy, and pulling her into the woods to kiss her.

Cars came by with some frequency, driving far to the left to avoid them, obnoxiously far. Then Deke's truck came by, and passed, and its brake lights flashed. He stopped in the road and reversed to them. Hugo felt like sprinting into the hills with Anna, so she would never speak to anyone but him again. Hey. Hey. Hey. Deke looked smirking at Hugo, who blushed and leaned from leg to leg. Deke chewed his gum noisily.

Anna touched the door. Do you want to go to the lake? It's my birthday. Deke smiled and his straight white teeth humiliated Hugo. Even women who hated him wanted him, and now this little flirtation. I can't go all the way to the lake, he said, but I'll take you back to town.

Will you drive fast? she asked.

Sure, he said.

Deke opened his door and let Anna climb over him, her back and ass and legs just under his nose. The way he didn't look at her, but kept his gaze solidly on Hugo, was also humiliating, since Hugo could not help but stare enviously at her body. When Anna had come across Deke's lap, she flipped and came upright in the seat next to him. Good job, he said, turning finally away from Deke. Thanks, she said.

Deke closed the door and hit the gas, and the truck zipped off, a hundred yards down the road, until Anna begged him not to leave Hugo by himself, though she was laughing about it. He stopped the truck. Just kidding, he said. And then he reversed madly back to Hugo, wide open, swerving all over the road. Hugo, a speck in the rearview mirror that came in and out of view, was too terrified to move. When they were back, beside him, Deke and Anna were laughing so hard their eyes and stomachs ached.

Hey Hugo, said Deke. We forgot about you. Sorry.

Hugo said he'd walk, but Anna stopped laughing long enough to ask him, earnestly, holding back giggles, if he'd please come along. Hugo moved obediently in, and each time he tried pull himself into the cab Deke hit the accelerator, which made him and Anna howl with delight.

I'll walk, said Hugo.

No no no, said Deke, get in.

And Hugo would step in again, cautiously, and just as both arms fastened to the truck, and he bent his head forward, Deke would hit the gas again, and Hugo would flail back, gain traction on the ground, and run alongside a few steps.

Christ man I'm sorry, Deke would say. It's just so fucking funny.

I'll walk.

All right come on.

At last, Deke let Hugo in. But only after he and Anna were both tired of laughing. Hugo sat next to Anna, pushing her into the center, and fastened his seatbealt, then hers. Anna put both hands on the dashboard and said, Okay, drive as fast as you want.

Deke opened it up, tearing down the back country roads that no one ever drove down, and Anna sat entranced. Hugo knocked about angrily. Now and then, when a curve seemed too sharp, or when the back end slid too treacherously out, Anna would grab Hugo's arm and shut her eyes.

They came to a stop, eventually, at a small intersection, and Deke asked Anna, You want to drive?

Really?

When he nodded, she clapped. Come sit here, he said, unbuckling her seatbelt and positioning her between his legs. You ever driven?

Yes, she said. Once.

She pressed the gas, and the truck crept forward. Little more, said Deke. Okay okay, said Anna.

Deke had his hands on her waistsides, guiding her down the road, and the image of them made Hugo sick with contempt.

Anna drove them back to town flawlessly, and Deke never had to touch the wheel or step on a pedal. He even lit a cigarette, which Anna took a few puffs of, unimpressed. Don't start, Deke said.

They stopped at the gas station, which was a few blocks down from the store, and Anna said, Next time, let's go to the lake.

How old are you? asked Deke.

No one really knows, she said.

Well, why don't you come looking for me in six or seven years?

Anna sighed. I just want to go to the lake, she said, but not to anyone, already climbing out of the truck. Hugo was holding the door open for her, and just before he closed it, Deke said, And you, I'll tell Jenny we had a good time today.

Hugo didn't nod or shake his head, but gave him a look which said he didn't care one way or another. Deke smiled and said, looking at Anna, Have fun.

Hugo and Anna walked down the road together, but after a few blocks Deke noticed they went separate ways. The attendant came out and leaned on Deke's truck.

Hey, he said.

Hey.

While Deke filled up with gas, the attendant spoke non-stop. Deke nodded when the man would pause, briefly, and said Yeah every now and then.

When Deke got home, he watched television for a while. A baseball game. He made a sandwich from some old ham and lettuce, and it was the nicest tasting thing he ever ate.

He walked through his halls, and toothpicked his teeth with his fingernails. He sat down beside Jenny, who turned, and was smiling in her sleep. Smiling. That smiling was the last moment of happiness she ever knew in her life. She saw Deke when she woke. I've got some water for you.

Thanks, she said.

He placed it on her nightstand. Oh, and guess who I caught hanging out at that old abandoned mission.

*

Summer came, and this old man died. Funniest thing—even people who didn't know him came to the funeral, in the dead of August. Man was named Jimenez, who'd worked the ranch since before it was a dude ranch. He must've been over a hundred. And he died. Boy it was sad to hear he'd died, though most everyone thought he'd done so already. There was a kind of legend to him—he was insane, hell to breakfast—and the legend was about how his horse died of thirst fifty years back, or something, it's always different. And ever since, he used to go fill the horse's trough with water he carried in this old poisoned rusted bucket, even though he didn't have a horse to water, and after a while they found him doing this at night, in his pajamas, and even talking to the horse, but no one ever took him to the hospital, since he seemed so happy, and ate with all the other dude-ranch hands, who as a sordid joke cut a hole in the bucket, the bucket he'd used since his horse died, and he was pretty old by then and frail and didn't shave much, and looked awful, but tourists asked to see him, but this hole in the bucket, wasn't it the cruelest thing you ever heard of? So he'd fill it, and walk over to the trough, only to find it empty. Bewildered, he did it again, and again, and they had him doing this ten hours a day, scratching his head, wanting his horse back, mourning it fifty or however many years gone, until he'd collapse.

And the people went to the funeral with the full expectation of solemnity. But some drunk idiot snickered while they were lowering his coffin into the ground, and suddenly everyone was snickering (not Father Rudolfo, who sat there damning everyone with his eyes), and then laughing, and then the hoolawds, and men holding each other to stand, and bright tears down everyone's faces, and stumbling off to one of the two bars in town, and that may have been the most memorable night in history, and love was everywhere, and dancing.

PART TWO

Great terrifying God did the sky come down one night. Brimstone, city on the plain, unreal night. All day it had loomed, to the north, and black. Then the sun went down and the storm crept over, descending the staircase the hills made, and it broke. My God it broke. There was a rumbling, and a white spiderweb across the sky, and its thunder, and then rain, and then wind. Was this wind ever a wind. From down the road, a bicycle came slipping, and a man after it, tumbling, and trying to get up. His baseball cap was soaring away like a bird, and his arm stretched every so often to wish it back. Some men made a chain of men, coming out from a building, arms linked in arms, and tried to step across the road to save the man. They tottered and couldn't stand, like men trying to walk into a fast river. The snake their chain made slithered on the road, trying to get straight, and the man came spinning down, and they yelled at him to grab on to somebody, and he screamed My hat! as he blew by, and disappeared. The disappointment broke the chain, and all the men in it dispersed, and shot down the road, and the few still standing, linked together by the building's door, nothing they could say.

That wind tore everything up, roofs, fences, blew out windows. Turned over anything light, fragile, or topheavy. Some old houses just came down, just gave and gave till they broke by seams, and splintered, and blossomed, and withered.

The thunder was two oceangoing ships colliding in the clouds, iron hull to iron hull. The noise trembled the earth. The lightning burned perfect designs in the ground. The raindrops were two hundred billion little tiny shovels digging up the mud.

George was inside his house watching. He thought it was God. The walls croaked and shivered. The power was out. Ingrid sat in the kitchen surrounded by candles, communing with her dead son and, now, her dead daughter. She was huddled over numbers in a book, red and showering down the page. How to sell the store to anyone but Deke. The numbers wouldn't sit still in the candlelight. They flickered, and the flickering made them shrink and enlarge, so that they seemed to erratically hop on the page. Ingrid never cried nor asked for pity (she was the strongest, wasn't she?), but the numbers gave her a headache, and she was out of children, and tired. She rubbed her temples. And George. He couldn't save one and he wouldn't save the other. There, at the window, mesmerized, tonight would answer one question—which is stronger, reason or imagination? This was the night if there were a night. O make tonight come. Bewildering night. Night where all things meet.

Had it ever been blacker? (Wait. Was that a horse running through the yard?) The only light was lightning. So that everyone in town was photographs, immortalized in flashes. A collage of them would've told nothing, but it would've been a story. George wasn't moving. Not for a while anyway. He was all men's exhaustion. Teetering on the brink. Would he come back or would he go over? (Was that a horse, there, running through the yard?)

Back in the kitchen, Ingrid scribbled. She looked at some insulting offers for the store. She needed something to make it more valuable, and thought about the big white ceiling. She heard George making noise, and shook her head. She wished she was gone already. That she could sell the thing for a decent amount, store that never made a cent, but sure kept non-buying idlers busily, Look at that wonderful this and Oh my gosh how lovely this is. No. Sell it, and leave George to fend with Deke. Move maybe to New Orleans. She looked at the numbers again, which momentarily seemed to be trembling.

She gazed at the window. It was flat and black, so she blew the candles out, and sat by herself in the darkness. Slowly the outside became an image in the window. Like a picture developing in solution. She thought it was beautiful, how this happened so slowly. It was strange how everything could seem to go wrong, and suddenly something just peaceful. Wait. What was that huge shape running outside, just there? Was that a horse?

Ingrid stood, and walked to the window, peering. The storm was magnificent. She rested her palms on the counter, and watched. There was another shape. And another. Those are horses. Jesus Christ. She wiped her hands together, lit a candle, and went to George in steps that made sad creaks on the wooden floor (how old and troubled was this house?). There he was, not a move in hours. He looked awkward in the darkness, like a wax statue of himself. Something you might come across at night in a museum, patrolling it. Just standing in the darkness. And you might stop to admire him for a moment, the detail of his eyes and fingernails, and those hanging jowls. But this passes, and suddenly you feel pity for a thing that can look so lifelike and not be, and wish you hadn't stopped.

George, she said.

Not startled, he turned.

This may sound crazy, but I think I see horses running around outside.

George didn't say a word. He'd seen them, but he thought the horses were his ancestors. This uncle and this great-grandfather, this old captain of a Swedish ship, and on, and this medieval peasant, and this wanderer, naked, traveling through the woods. They had come to be known. They were galloping wildly through the night.

Ingrid blew the candle out, and stood beside George. After all they had gone through, and so long, give them this. This quiet moment by the window, and this darkness. It was a history. George could barely keep a thought in his head. The horses ran from ear to ear, and he felt like clasp his head with both hands and wrenching it off. Just for a second. Just to have one thought pause for a moment.

I ought to call the sheriff, said Ingrid.

George moaned. His leg pressed against a box of souvenirs. How many things could a man buy and not sell? The antiques, the trash, by day they were quiet, but at night they were cockroaches, and they skittered through his house, and ate the wood in the walls, and stole all his belongings. And some nights they climbed into bed with him, and gnawed on his skin, and slipped inside his open snoring mouth, and slept in him. He could see them do this now. He felt

them stir inside his body. My God would you look at those horses in the lightning. What would they do if they saw old George, stumbling lonesomely outdoors, not galloping at all?

Phone's dead, Ingrid said. I should've guessed it. She slumped in a chair. The candleflame twisted and stretched and shrank, and it made the living room a theater of dancing operatic shadows. Ingrid put her feet on the coffee table. She stretched her blouse below the waist, locked fingers over her stomach, and closed her eyes.

George finally moved. His feet scraped the floor when he walked, like his feet despised walking, to the bedroom. Then some rustling, and his feet again, with boots on, lumbering clunks, coming back. He didn't speak as he went outside. The door opened and the wind blew howling crashing barreling in, then it closed, and the air stilled, and the candle was out. Ingrid's eyes opened, and she lit the candle again.

George went to get Hugo, who was sitting in bed with a newspaper over his head. The roof was leaking in a dozen places, some trickling, others gushing. The mattress had sponged, and bled where he sat, into his jeans and down them, and his shoes, spilling over at the ankles, and the floor. He was fascinated by the thought of himself as a conduit, and hadn't moved for an hour.

Come with me, said George.

Hugo put the newspaper down and stood, and shook his legs, which did nothing. He grabbed a raincoat and threw it over his shoulders, then a baseball cap. Never did he say, Not in this. He opened the door and walked out into it. It blew his coat high behind his head, and he grabbed the edges and pulled them down, and zipped himself shut. And waited for George to come out. Who came out.

They walked down the driveway saying nothing, and the wind had quickened, and the rain, and they couldn't walk a line. The ground was all mud now, or rock without topsoil, and they sank and slipped as they stepped toward town, like some old ruined hero and his sidekick, mud up to ankles, wet to the skin, and aimless, or seemingly so. Ahead of them, a horse tore across the road. The sky turned white and made the beast black and immense. George hit Hugo and ran after it, across the street, and Hugo slipped and fell in the mud, and got back up uncertainly, and tried to run behind him, and God he looked hopeless, like someone trying to run across ice.

They all crashed through the woods, one behind the other, toward town. The lightning turned the night landscape to a mysterious gray daytime, but only for instants, and then it was always more black than ever before, and the trees were invisible, and they walked with arms out in front of them, though even then branches slapped at their faces, and roots grabbed at their feet. Hugo yelled for George. He heard rustling and kept going.

When Hugo came out into the open space of a parking lot, George was there, bent over and trying to breathe. Beyond him there were two firetrucks and red circling lights, police Broncos and Cherokees and red-and-blue lights, other trucks, a dozen of them, and a huge trailer that men were leading a horse into. There must've been fifty other people huddled in a circle, and the trucks' headlights lit them and the crystal-white rain that beat down. Not a one with an umbrella, they all wore cowboy hats. Hugo'd seen them worn, but never needed. The water flowed off them like beautiful diving rapids. Hugo watched the scene breathlessly. If he could die that night, doing that.

It was a slope going down, not steep but perilous nevertheless, slick, rocky. They held each other's elbows descending it. Hugo waved at some men who looked over, and they put arms up back.

They pushed into the circle, and joined a fit of nodding and handraising. There are over a hundred horses loose, said the man in the center. We won't get all of them tonight. Teams of four. That's it.

The men split, and Hugo and George didn't have a team. The man from the center asked them if they wanted one, and gave them to two huge cowboys, but teenagers, waiting by a truck. One was working rope into a lasso. They looked indifferently at George and Hugo. Chaw chaw chaw. Swallow. Hugo's hands went weak with wonderment. He asked for some. One of them, miles higher and looking down, smirked and held a pack open. Hugo plunged his fingers in, pulled a hunk, and put it in his mouth. He smiled at the boy, and his teeth were black and leafy. Shit, said the boy.

Hop in the back, said the other, and giving him the lasso, said, Take this.

They jumped in, Hugo eagerly from the side, and catlike, and George lumbering over the open tailgate, pulling his knees with him. Hugo stood in the bed, looking forward, hands on rollbars over the cab. The rain and wind pounded his face, and he wished there were more of it. George sat in a corner, made a bill with his hands, and watched the movement and the lights behind them.

It was the night his son died. Wasn't it? These lights but yellower. These men but more solemn. The truck came to life. Diesel. Sputtering and bellow-pitched. If he could save him tonight, he would. And Hugo. Wasn't that sick, to name a poor stranger in the woods after his own son? No one said anything about it, not even Ingrid. And look.

The truck lurched out of the ground, and Hugo slipped and hit his jaw on the rollbar. He came up holding it, and realized he'd swallowed his tobacco. Oh no, he whispered, an elbow latched to the bar, a hand on his stomach. George, he said.

George was talking to himself already. It was happening. Night of all nights. It was his mind against the universe. Hugo began to feel hot and dizzy. George, he said, tell them to let me off for a sec.

George answered, You'll be old yourself one day, or maybe one night.

Hugo grabbed his stomach, and at the next big bump vomited all over himself. He fell to his knees, elbow still around the bar, and knocked on the window. Those boys were singing and listening to loud music. Hugo vomited again. The truck made a sharp turn and broke through some trees. Hugo tried to look ahead and was hit by a light branch, that stung and knocked him down, but his elbow still held. Inside, the boys were drinking gin from a bottle. Gin? The driver saw a big hill and sped to it, and the truck came off the ground and crashed down slinging mud around them in a fountain. Hugo's eyes were half-closed, and yellow, and he vomited again. George, he said. Tell them to let me off for a second.

One of the boys inside howled, and the truck hit another hill, and angled in the air, and when it came down the whole thing caught like a spring and twisted, and threw George across the bed, and flopped Hugo again, but his elbow, it hung on. He beat his fist on the window.

And wasn't this the nature of things? Wasn't it? Two drunk teenagers driving wildly through a storm and woods and the pitch-black night, a man between youth and not youth riding

this truck like a bull, and an old man who was their futures tossing around in the bed, facing all the darkness?

The truck stopped. Hugo slipped his arm out from the rollbar, but it wouldn't unbend at first. Isn't that funny the way it. There it goes. He looked forward, and there in a clearing was a horse, standing. One of the boys tapped his knuckle to the glass. I see it, said Hugo, who in a new excitement forgot his nausea. Nothing could be heard over the rain, but seen. He took the lasso. Oh Christ how does this work?

The truck began to creep forward. And George was up finally, staring ahead. Hugo was standing, trying to figure which end to hold. When he had it right, it seemed simple. This knot and this loop, made for him already. The truck sped up, and Hugo slipped around on the wet rusted metal bed. Hey George, he said. You know how to use one of these?

George didn't answer. He and the horse were staring at each other. I know you, don't I? Hoofstomp shakeintherain. You were man named Lars, weren't you? And you lived in a village thirty miles from Goteborg, and you were alone all your life.

Hugo had his hand on George's shoulder, trying to rouse him. Lasso, he said.

I won't let them, thought George to the horse. One of the boys stuck his giant head out the window. You ready? Hugo didn't want to admit he wasn't, so he put his thumb up. We're going to come around the side and then haul ass all at once, so then. Hold on. Hugo nodded. This was going to be something. George put his hand on Hugo's leg, and this was the night if there were any.

The truck took a leap at the horse, and the horse took off. Hugo held the lasso like a sheet he could throw over its eyes, and when they got close enough one of the boys screamed Now! and Hugo tossed it out, limply, and it plopped. Poopadoop. Hugo pulled it back in. Missed, he said. But nobody heard him. They were thirty miles an hour through the mud and woods in chase, after the horse. The horse was light and soft and only itself, and it bounded ahead. Christ it could run. The truck carved a swath, barreling, and all the low branches beat the windshield and whipped at Hugo and George, ducking and cowering in the back. Bushes breaking and mud being dug up and tree limbs snapping, and the truck's engine throttling higher and higher, this harsh symphony, this was the music man and nature made destroying each other.

They shot into another clearing, and the headlights lit the air and rain. The horse was ahead of them, stopped, and the driver slowed, and tried to come around the back of it. Tired, it beat its hooves in the ground. Swung its long neck down and shook its head. The driver came up slowly, not leaping like before. The horse was too exhausted to run, and stumbled ahead. They got within ten feet, and the boy put his head out the window again, whispering, Now would be fine. Hugo picked the lasso up and began swinging it above his head. It was more like TV, better. The next move was anyone's guess, though. Hugo didn't care. It was his heroic moment. He stood there twirling the rope thinking This is what I wanted. Okay said the boy, how fucking close do you want? Hugo closed his eyes and tossed the rope, and in his mind it had caught the beast's neck and snapped tight, and it was over. He imagined this moment and lived it. Jesus Christ, said the boy. Hugo opened his eyes. The rope was still in the bed, beside George, who rubbed it (he was gone, good-bye).

Did the rain get worse just then? Yes, the wind died a little but the rain got worse. Hugo was a wet poodle. But he'd had that lasso going, and the night wasn't over. Shit, said the boy, drunk, who climbed out the window and into the bed. How was he so huge and so drunk and

still so dexterous? The horse didn't move. It looked at them like they were idiots. George was having the longest conversation of his life with it. When he saw the boy come into the bed with them, he was thinking Run now, go. His arm swiped at the horse, and it brought the horse nearer, seven or eight feet. It was a dude-ranch horse, after all. The boy worked the rope back, and got it twirling, and George finally worked up the energy to yell, and the horse stirred just in time to miss the rope. What the fuck was that for? George got up and jumped at the boy, swinging his old tired fists into the boy's chest and neck. The boy grabbed George by the neck and turned him around. Hugo tried to step in and break it up. The three of them fighting in the back was enough to spook the horse, and it sprinted off. The driver gave chase, and the first lurch brought George and Hugo and the boy down.

The clearing narrowed into a tireworn path going up a hill, and the horse took it, so the truck followed. The three in the back were finished with the struggle, but were trying to stand again. The horse slowed and cut into the middle of the path, and the driver turned to tell them it was now or never, and saw them all lying down and didn't understand. He tried to knock on the window to get their attention, and then to yell something through it. He didn't know the horse had stopped, and he struck it, sideways. The collision knocked the horse down and sent the driver into the steering wheel. The three in back all slid from the rear to the cab, crashing.

Shit, said the driver. I hit the fucking horse.

The boy in the back stood up. What the hell was that?

They both got out and walked to the horse. They swayed and stumbled, dizzy, and for a long time they were silent. The horse was breathing and moving its neck, and there was a gash in its side where the truck's winch gored him. Holy shit, said one boy finally. What do we do?

Hugo opened the tailgate and stepped out, leaving George in the bed, who was gasping for air. He was big enough but old. That boy must've punched him in the stomach. Hugo knelt by the horse's head. And there it was, dying. The rain was pouring down the hill, and it made the ground slide, or appear to.

You got a gun? asked one to the other.

No.

We gotta kill it.

I guess.

We could run it over.

Jump on its head.

Hugo stared at them. He put his hands over the horse's eyes. It was the most awful thing imaginable, to have to watch a thing dying, since it wasn't either life or death, but the last glimpses of one and the first uncertain glimpse of the other. So what if it was just a horse? To George the horse was everything, and he was coming in fragile steps toward it, and he saw it there and lay beside it in the mud, and oh he was past any hope then, a man without a past or future.

Listen. We could get that rope and swing it over a branch, and hang it.

You know how much a horse weighs? A branch'll break.

Well, it's dying. We could just let it.

It's bad luck.

Really?

He shrugged. They stopped talking. They scanned the woods for anything.

Shit shit shit.

You said it.

The truck's headlights made their shadows stretch a hundred yards up the hill. One boy moved his hand to watch his shadow change. The other boy said, Here: tie that lasso to the horse and tree. Run the winch line around the neck. We'll break it. That's quick.

He got the rope, and tied the horse's body. He made the horse drink gin, hoping to get it drunk. George wheezed and pawed at the boy, and begged him to stop. He couldn't untie the knots because his hands shook.

Then the boy tied the rope to the tree, and pulled as hard as he could, making sure the knot was fast. Then the winch line. George held the horse's neck and there was nothing anyone could do for him. It was going to be over.

They turned the winch on, and the horse dragged a little, straightening between the truck and tree. Its legs stomped the air, and when both lines went taut, its legs shot straight out and hovered there woodenly. Hugo started vomiting again. They watched, and five slow seconds passed. The boys wondered when the neck was going to snap, because it wouldn't. The rope was eating into the hide, and the winch line was up around the head, and the neck looked a foot too long. It was more hideous than anyone had thought. Its eyes were bulging out of its head, and blood was pouring out of its nose and mouth, and all the veins in its body looked ready to explode. And all this with George riding it quixotically, trying to be the horse's grief, or something. One boy panicked (weren't they so confident before?) and screamed at the other to stop the winch, and that one started crying, two hundred fifty pounds of pure lean crying teenager, and Hugo knew he was the only one in charge now, and wasn't that the most ridiculous awful circumstance for this horse? Hugo ran to the winch, and let it go. Who knows? One more inch and it could've been finished. The rope and line went slack, and the horse snapped back like rubber, and it shook and couldn't breathe. George was still embracing it with all his might. Hugo went to him, and pulled the old man's shoulders. George lifted up slightly. The horse's eyes were on him. Were they punishing or forgiving? Then it died.

Hugo looked. One boy was standing and one boy was sitting in the mud. They'd been witness to their own cowardice, and maybe it was the first time. Now it was all going to be different. Hugo lifted George higher, but he didn't want to stand, and he looked down at the horse as a man on a cliff might peer curiously into a canyon, and he hovered over it like he was trying to jump.

Hugo pulled him up, finally. George, he said. George wobbled, and fell. Hugo went to him again, and George beat his hands back. The old man got his legs under him and leaned on his knee, and pushed himself up on his own. Then he walked down the hill. Hugo didn't know if he ought to follow or let go. Behind him, the boys moved closer to the horse. Hugo grabbed a handful of earth, and it was all coming down the hill now, rain and dirt and blood and grass and rock, and he might as well go with it. So he followed George, got within a bus-length of him and slowed to the old man's pace. George had brought him along for something, but for what, to witness? Where would they go now? They had chased George's past up the hill and killed it, and now they'd come down. George saw and knew everything. His mind had opened up. The universe had shot through his head and scraped it hollow. That howl he heard, that one big frightening yelp, that was truth. Wasn't it?

The rain was still the rain, and it wouldn't relent. The trees drooped like tired soldiers waiting for a war to end. George touched them as he passed, maybe trying to find his way in the black and maybe not. Ahead, Hugo saw lights pass through the woods' blanknesses. More trucks following a different horse. Faintly illuminating George, then not. Hugo hoped the old man wasn't going to chase after it, end up killing another. He'd seen his past set free, then murdered it. And there were infinite pasts still wandering around. George didn't. He kept on, winding toward town, ankle-deep in earth, Hugo behind. Is this all there is? Stumbling after the noise an old man with no mind left made in the flat-black wilderness? Is this what Jenny saw? His shoelace untied, and he went to tie it while walking, and fell. Mudnose and mudmouth, hands and neck, outfit. Night of all nights, what did you do with hope? The trees said nothing. George said nothing. Hugo stumbled to his feet. The lights nearby sagged into other darkneses.

And then they were on a road. Some men on horses passed them by. Ones they caught, then sent out to catch. Only a horse can chase a horse. Boy it was genius. They tipped their hats and water gullied down, perfectly. George mumbled. Hugo tried to smile, but they shined a flashlight on his face that made him turn. The riders asked Hugo a question but he couldn't hear through the rain, so he said yes, and they galloped away. He watched them, and wished he and George and those boys hadn't killed that horse. There was no hero left in him that night. He kept his head down and walked.

It was less than five minutes later that Hugo, not paying attention, bumped into George. George was looking out into a dark field, guarded by trees. Big ominous shapes. Stay here, he said. For a while. Hugo nodded. George's eyes were pupil-giant, lost in the back of his head. He turned and walked a small road through a gate.

Hugo shivered in the rain, held his arms close to his body, and watched lights scramble in the distances. One horse would've done it. To bring it back gloriously. He didn't know how right he was. He checked his watch. He didn't have one on.

It was obvious, thinking back. Past lost, mind gone, George went to mourn his future. Hugo finally wasn't waiting anymore, after half an hour, and walked through the gate. He noticed all the headstone-rows, and still didn't know what it meant. So he walked, over all the graves and flowers and gifts for the dead, tiptoed, as if that would save him.

It was pitiful. George down on his knees, scraping the earth with his fingers. The soft ground came up like dough, but it would've taken a year to dig six feet down with his bare hands. He was finally weeping, which meant it didn't take a mind to suffer. Jenny's was the grave next to his son's, but it was fresh. Hugo looked at the boy's headstone: Hugo Alexander Rasmussen. Hugo took a knee. The last few years were suddenly and bitterly complex.

Hugo left, and the next morning George was on top of a big boulder, trying to stay above a small flood that had risen around him, mysteriously, and kept rising. He had mud all over him, and he was saying See, see? because he was living in the night his son had died, and he had gone down to get him, and he had saved all that had happened from happening. It was the dog who'd found him, three legs jumping at the rock face, wondering how George got up there, and the men who came round to see said to each other, My God that dog finds some curious things.

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Blame my ass for everything. But those dead Mexicans aren't my fault and I still want my money. You think you can screw me on this one, Marquez? God some shit makes me so angry I need to throw up I'm so angry. Blame my ass for as much as you want, but not this. I already lost my truck. Off a cliff. How do you like that? Now I get to drive this piece of shit around, this flivver. I think it's eastern European. Christ it's awful. Answer the phone, Marquez. What is it out here, minus sixty-five degrees? God I despise Texas. Hello? Hello? Christ.

I came out here into the Marfa mountains in December in early unusual snow. I'm wearing a shirt and jean-jacket. Maybe I'm the idiot. I slam the phone down enough times to shake some of the cold out. If I don't get that money I'll be digging ditches. Instead of smuggling wetbacks I'll be working for them.

This restaurant here it looks fine. I cup my hands around my ears and walk across the parking lot. It's been a long time since I've seen snow. There's one car out front, besides mine, and I look inside the building's window. One waitress looking back at me, bored. Why does there always seem to be a half-abandoned restaurant at all the low points in my life?

Those poor Mexicans. All I did was show up one hour late. And they didn't wait like they're told to. They weren't going back and I know how that feels. So they ran into the desert, all forty of them, into goddamned Marfa, suicide, and most of them froze but some of them starved, and this is my fault? I was an hour late. They couldn't wait an hour?

There's a bell when I enter and this strikes me as funny since I'm the only one there and the waitress is looking right at me. Hey there, I say.

I take a seat at a bar covered in broken pink tiles. There's a motel across the street, and no one's at it. Truly amazing. Things we've built. What is that motel waiting for? Someone one day must've thought it could've made. Coffee. And a menu. Money. Well there you are whatever your name is.

Say, you know who owns that motel? She shakes her head. I don't know if that means she doesn't know or she doesn't speak English. I tell her my brother used to own it. She shakes her head but she thinks me talking is funny. Why didn't I marry some trust-fund girl from Long Island? I would never set a foot on Texas again. I would live in Paris. Put all your money on that.

I look at the menu. What are your enchiladas like? Verdes. I'll take them.

Maybe I belong in this life. I'm so sick of complaining and moaning, and all the people around me so sorry for themselves, eating their sadnesses like apples. You know how easy I

could do that? Sometimes you wonder if people ever stop to think that other people have it worse. Wherever you are right now feeling sorry for yourself some kid in Africa has a disease and is barefoot fighting a war that killed his mom and dad and all his fifteen brothers and sisters. The truly rare thing would be to drive down the road and find some mother fucker who was happy. Some guy walking around with a smile on his face.

She's right there watching a soap opera, and I find myself wondering what the people are talking about. She's almost pretty, or maybe she is and doesn't care. The kind of woman who could go either way, like a color that becomes another color in new light. She'd be a billion times better looking if she left this place. That's always the way. You sort of grow into where you live, and turn into it, or an aspect of it. Dry, brown, unfashionable. Ancient early. There are two women on the screen smiling suspiciously at each other. All sex and murder. It's the only thing people have ever wanted to watch. Better writing would make soaps masterpieces. She catches me watching. Turns the volume up. Shit that was nice of her. Do you have any beer? She turns around. Cerveza? Pretty voice. Sí, say I. Some, says she. Tecate? Okay. I'm suddenly in the mood for this. I point at her. You drink? She looks at the TV. No no, she says. I can't quite figure it. What does the TV tell you? I ask, but she doesn't understand. I pour salt into my beer. Sour and wet and perfect.

We watch TV for a while, five ten minutes, I finish my beer, then go out to make another phone call. I freeze the instant I touch the outside air. My fingers hurt to bend. I have to dig deep in my pocket for a quarter, and I guess I could've done so in the restaurant. This makes me fucking angry for a second, digging. The receiver is ice cold, and I have to rub it to put it on my ear. God the numbers seem small with these fingers. Ring fucking ring. I know you're home, Marquez. I told you I was coming. I'm going to let it ring until you pick it up. Eleven. Twelve. Answer. Hello.

Listen.

You listen. I did everything right.

Forty of them.

I need that money.

You didn't do anything. Besides, you think I'm running this? Hell I'd give you the money.

Everything I owe and everything I've borrowed is in the telephone booth with me, like severed heads of other bankrupt people, and I'm so tired of Marquez talking me out of things. Not this time, I say. I'm giving you a chance to bring me the money. Otherwise I'm coming over and getting it. Your wife and kids and all your cousins home or not. Comprende?

I'm shivering. My mouth is freezing shut, and I can't be sure how much Marquez is getting. Then the restaurant door opens. There she is, apron and dress and arms and legs in the cold. The snow is picking up. My enchiladas, I think. She runs toward the phone booth. She has white snowflakes all over her black hair. Marquez is saying something but I'm not listening. She's got a big coat in her hands. She opens the door and hands me it, saying, Cold cold cold. Then she runs back in. For a while I don't quite get what has just happened, and then I wave at her when she looks back.

Deke?

Yeah.

Where are you.

I tell him, and tell him I'll see him at his house if I don't see him here. This might never have been necessary. But I've got nothing on the horizon anymore. Oh, there were times I walked over to tell Ingrid I could buy her little shop, and that any man who buys it not being me buys a burned-down stack of wood. She would tell me to go on home I was drunk. She said she felt sorry for me. That struck. I never thought Jenny had it in her. My truck too. Go on home, said Ingrid. So there I was telling myself okay now's the time to get some money together and show her. How long's it been? Two and a half mother fucking years. Even if, I couldn't make it into something. It'd be skins and skulls till I'd be George, who they locked up for six weeks after he tried to dig up Hugo, the real Hugo. Sitting next to him eating my sheets. You goin' to eat that pillow? How 'bout that lamp?

Hugo thought it was his fault. That was better than killing him. I swear I never dreamed it. I spent that whole next day looking at all the things she'd left behind, like a magazine she put a bookmark in. Like a plate of food she hadn't touched. I wondered which did it. Or neither.

Said and done, two and a half years down the line, one colossal joke. That's what it feels like. Let's play a prank on Deke. We'll have this guy come in from out of town. And now, no store and no money. I guess this'll be the last of Marquez and me.

I open the door and snow fills the empty space of telephone booth. The coat she brought me is perfect. I even stop to look around. Snow on the mountains. I'd like to live somewhere like. But not Texas.

My enchiladas are under a heat lamp. Sorry, I say. Thanks for the coat. I sit at the bar again, and she gives them to me. Rubbery, but okay. Tic tac toe, she says. She pulls a pad of paper out her apron and makes a grid. I guess there is bored and then there is bored. Sure, I say. You first.

Middle square. Right middle. Lower right. Upper left. Upper right. Lower left. Left middle. Nope. Top middle. Not this game. Bottom middle.

Again? she asks.

Okay.

And I've got time. I let her win the next one, and she knows I have, and touches my arm. My enchiladas are getting cold, but I hate to eat in front of people. Cervezas, I say. Dos. I'll drink in front of people. She shakes her head. C'mon. Play again, she says.

The door opens, and until then I don't notice how quiet it's been. The snow blusters through and two big ranchers come in shaking their coats and yelling at the cold.

Bring us two coffees señorita. To our table.

One has a beard and one has a mustache, and I hate them already. The whole world has to hear what they're saying. Oh my bones oh my legs oh my head. Why don't you kill yourselves. On and on.

How long's two coffees take?

She's watching a new pot drip. Puts her hair in a ponytail and I can see a scar creep out of her dress. Wonder what from. Ranchers light up cigarettes, and now I have to smoke one. Always like that.

There's a mirror behind the bar, and I can watch the snow inching up. So odd seeing snow, though it's more common out here. She brings the coffees out, and they ask for a menu, and I watch one put his hand on her back and slip it down, and she hurries out, gets menus and leaves them. Hey, they say, like We was just jokin'. Don't look. Ignore them or you're in for it.

Fuckin wetbacks, they say.

Come up ever day.

And they know. That sidearm. Can you see him shooting aliens on his side of the river? This land my land. Nobody tell him nothing. He'd kill me if he knew I was the enemy. Right here in this restaurant. This is a reason I got into this in first place, people like him thinking they're such badasses. That and money. Used to be a lot of damn money. Wouldn't that be something dying in this restaurant?

Give us two cheeseburgers.

No cheeseburger.

Yes cheeseburger. Meat and cheese on bread.

She looks at me. What am I supposed to say? She sighs. Goes into kitchen. I saw all this coming.

Say, they say.

This too. I turn around.

Dumb ass Mexicans, says one. Lazy as hell. Meat cheese and bread, huh? Then he makes a face.

I turn back to the bar. What makes one human being think another wants to talk to him?

Whoops, says the other. Must be her boyfriend.

Couple old pros. I finish my cold enchiladas. She comes back out and stands in front of me. Tic tac toe, she says. Okay okay, cerveza por favor. Sí. Dos. No.

One mocks us. Other howls laughing. Shit it is her boyfriend. Strange place to find one. Man I'd give her twenty bucks an she'd be right here sittin' in my lap.

Roll my eyes. Get her smiling again. Hand on her hand to say tic tac toe. How long has she been through? We play. She won't let me lose so we draw and draw and draw. Doesn't she ever get tired? That snow is something. Where the hell is Marquez?

A bell dings in the kitchen. She ignores it to finish a game. One cowboy screams You fuckin' deaf? and she draws an O and wipes her hands, and goes.

Miss her yet? Remember the money. He's in love. Remember money.

Well there she comes and those ranchers aren't going to like it. Loose ground beef between white bread. Beans and rice on side. Where's my french fries, one's about to say. I bet you two thousand dollars.

What the hell are these?

You ain't got no french fries?

No way. Take em back. I'll come back there and make 'em myself.

I watch the kitchen door creep open. There's a very scared short man with glasses looking through the crack. When he comes out this whole thing is going to blow up. Why don't you idiots just eat and leave?

There's some laughing, and I turn to see one of them with the bottom of her apron in his fist, and pulling her. He's looking straight at me. Wants a fight. Shit all the way out here he wants to beat a stranger up. You want the hero down the road, I think. Grab her all you want. I finish my beer and stand up. Run boy. Aw. They won't say a word once I leave, with no one to fuck with. Tired of the waitress already. She's untied her apron and the guy's still holding it, wanting me to come on back.

Leaving, I don't look back at her. Don't give them any more reasons to be assholes. I open the door and push through snow. Warmth wears off in seconds, and I'm running to my car, snow into ankles of shoes, snow into neck and under cuffs. Keys keys. Car covered. Man it's coming down. The door creaks open. Snow falling off it like glaciers. It's twenty degrees colder in the car. Oh please oh please crank up. I don't think this car could take a long freeze. Good girl. Wherever you're from.

I don't turn the heat on till the temperature comes up, and I'm already five minutes on the road chattering and shivering and dying from cold. When the warm blast blows through, I feel like all my muscles relax at once. I take my shoes and wet socks off, and this takes what feels like forever, and I'm all over the road.

No matter who you are or where you come from, all the really bad things that happen in your life will happen within a few years. You will lose all the important things you ever wanted, and find yourself driving around looking for something that doesn't even matter. This money. I need it, but I'll need it again. But I know it's there, and that's why.

Either there's a change or there isn't. I can't see one coming, not in all this snow. That waitress will play tic tac toe until she dies from being beat up by some drunk cowboy. I don't know if I deserve this. I never dreamed Jenny'd do what she did. The men in her life: that's a funny one.

This is his road, this narrow little thing pitching off the main one. Bumpy son of a bitch. Sounds like all the car's parts are held together with thread. Reminds me of that one where the guy's driving and his car falls apart and pretty soon it's just him and the steering wheel.

Third mailbox. That was the first. Unlucky mother fucker who has to be this mailman. Wonder how often he stops his little truck to stare out into the desert and mountains, and figure his place in the world. Ask him what it all means. There's either a million answers or none. He'd say, If I ever get to them mountains if I ever get to them mountains if I ever get to them mountains. That's the fucking horror.

Second box. Isn't that cute? Someone took the time to carve a dove and make a mailbox out of it. Maybe I could sell stupid little mailboxes at my store. For every stupid idea there are ten million Americans willing to pay nineteen dollars and ninety five cents, no matter how many installments it takes. No. I'd already decided. I knew the day after Jenny did it. Isn't that funny? Suddenly the idea and no way to see it happen. It would've been something: a total tourist package. It's a town that could do it. Lake, horses, river (if I could've got it flowing again), music, food, camping, hiking, history, honeymoons, I'm running out of fingers. Plan it all so they don't have to. Some jackass with his two-thousand-dollar tent and heater and goretex sleeping bag will still think it's nature. You can never sell too much authenticity. I would make that town so much damn money they'd build a statue when I died. The young me, not the old fat rich me I'm going to be. Just like the Elvis stamp. They would know my name. I'd have Marquez drive my ass around just to be seen smoking cigars. One day too late.

There the mailbox is. Inch of snow on top, like a white toupee. Turn down the driveway. Bumpier. I've been here once before, and I don't remember it being so bad. How many rusted things can you have in your yard till someone says they pity you? Fuck them anyway. New snow makes almost anything white. I'm not sure this car's going to hold. But snow melts and it's worse than before. Or seems so. There is nothing but seems. Or does it only seem so? Ha.

His house is an old ranch-style with four windows in front. There are Christmas lights up and a tree inside. That's cute now give me my money. I get out. I don't turn the car off since I don't know if it'll start again. There he is at the window. Shadow of him, drinking something. I point, and he moves. Door opens.

Deke, he says.

I can barely see him, but I see a cast on him. Now he's in the light. He's bruised and one eye is shut from swelling.

Come inside, he says.

No I've got the car running.

He looks at the piece of junk and I know what he's thinking, but what does he expect with the way things've been going. Look at him anyway.

What happened to you? I ask.

They died, and a couple of them were important.

Oh, I say.

And it had to be somebody's fault.

Well.

Well I can give you a little, but there won't be any more work. I'm out.

How much is a little?

I can give you three hundred. That's all I've got.

If you're ever negotiating you ought to get someone to beat you up beforehand. I can't argue with him. Every time he blinks he winces. I can tell he's got a brace on under his shirt.

Give it to me.

He pulls an envelope out of his pants pocket and says he's going to find other work. I look at the mountains and all the snow and I know what he means. Good luck, I say. There's shouting in the back. Two children fighting. He looks at me, and he looks like a man who has just a few days before lost all his dignity by begging for his life. There are a thousand ways to lose your dignity. Begging for your life is somewhere in the middle.

At least my car's still running. I get back in and what the fuck did I come all the way out here for? Three hundred dollars? The snow is worse. I wish I could drive faster out of here. Who knows if they're coming after me too? If they killed me, I'd tell them they'd be doing me a favor. When Bogart said that you knew he meant it. (But he was acting.) It's a wonder Ingrid didn't pull the trigger, with that kind of hopelessness weighing the world down. How do you say it in Spanish?

God the snow is impossible. What time is it? The light of my headlights is brightening, meaning dusk is coming on even though I can't see it. There's that wooden dove again. We are all dying every day and someone thought a wooden-dove mailbox would help. That tells you all you need to know about human beings.

I get to the main road. The car doesn't want to get over a hump to it, slipping and dying and revving, but it rolls up eventually. I wonder what that waitress is doing now. Practicing her English in soap-opera dialogues. Astrid I love you Brad my heart beats for you. Oh I could talk to her all night. Roll up in the sheets and listen. Imagine a world where everything is on the surface, all plot. Who fucked who? Who murdered who? Who came back from the dead? God that would be a world I could live in. I could make money in that world.

Not too many cars out here. Some trucks. This is where eighty percent of new illegal traffic is crossing from Mexico. This route. Used to be biggest out of Maverick County. Eagle Pass. Piedras Negras. Normandy and Quemado. But now the traffic is moving up, through the real desert.

Day or night, makes no difference, they are always crossing. Go out one morning and investigate. Abandoned bailout cars, all the doors open and reminding you how frantic shit gets. Trash everywhere, condoms and underwear and shells and casings, and I shit you not you'll see them wandering north. One guy I took had a broken leg. He walked ten miles with one arm around another guy's shoulder and a broken leg. How do you like that? I think he got sent back when someone took him to the hospital. I bet he'd rather have died. If you could watch the river with binoculars, you'd see binoculars watching you back. You might see a bunch of men with machine guns but those aren't the ones who are crossing. Sometimes drug smugglers will pay a big group to be a diversion, to run across and make as much noise as possible. They say there never used to be guns, but there are always guns now. And the ranchers on the Texas side, they patrol and arrest and stumble upon some of their own dead cattle. They've been pissed off enough to kill a couple times, and no one's going to prosecute. It's a whole other fucking world. Shit you wouldn't believe what could happen. If you're a coyote and one of your wetbacks pisses you off you can kill him. Bye-bye. Who's going to argue? Marquez said he saw two men beat a man they'd stripped naked, almost to death. He left them. He said that like it made him a hero. And the funny thing is that the illegals who get caught know the border patrol folks by name, and when they cross back the border patrol guys say Mañana and the Mexicans say Mañana, and they laugh. There is no such thing as progress at the border. The Mexicans get more ingenious and the American technology gets more sophisticated. It will never end. And two hundred miles away somebody's having a barbeque in San Antonio, and a bunch of good-looking kids are diving into a big swimming pool. And the husbands and wives are all so happy, admiring their fruits. That's another reason I do what I do. If I can enrage one person a day even indirectly I'm never going to find myself sitting in someone's sunny backyard asking Is this it? Is this? I never worry about getting caught because there is a plan in place for everyone like me, the drivers, lawyers who will send us to Mexico, and a whole new life waiting.

And now I'm thinking about the waitress again. The kind of woman who might find herself waiting tables out here when most of the customers are dickhead ranchers like those. Maybe she likes the life. Maybe she wants to find someone who gives as much a shit for backyard barbeques as her. Yes. I can see us at one smoking cigarettes around children and drinking ourselves blind, and when Chad tells us we're being a bad influence she says Chad I know you're fucking Susan, and I fall off my seat laughing since Susan is right there between Susan's husband and Chad's wife.

Out in the distance, the stretched white snowy landscape between the mountains, in the low light, gray actually, the signs for the restaurant and the motel across the street are lit. Maybe she's still working. As I approach I find myself hoping she is. In the lot, I see five cars. Five of them, and I haven't seen even one on the road since I left. I pull in. Snow is high in spots because tires have shoveled it into grooves, and this piece of shit hates it. When I park and turn the engine off, it rumbles for a while, wanting to stay running. I open the door and put my foot into some sludge. Mother fucker.

Inside, I shake snow out of my hair. I don't see the waitress, but all those cars must be together, since there's one full table, maybe fifteen people, celebrating something. I sit at the bar. The TV is playing bullfights. The table is loud and happy, and eating. There are presents on a table next to it. This is the strangest place on earth to have a party, but what of it? The kitchen door opens, and there's a waitress, but not the waitress. This one's fat and exhausted. This is this day. This kind of day. Como estás, she says.

Tecate, I say. It must be a Mexican station since they show the matador stick his sword right into the bull's neck. You can't even get that kind of shit on a documentary. Cruel and unusual. Spaniards and Mexicans and how many others. Not us. Why are we so afraid of actual violence, but adore simulated violence?

She gives me the beer.

I ask if she speaks English, and she says Sí, and I love that kind of irony. Well, is the other waitress still here?

Dolores?

I don't know. Dolores. Maybe.

She's in back. She's finished.

Can you get her?

She looks suspiciously at me and I know what she's thinking. Tell her I was in here by myself earlier. Say it's Mr. Tic Tac Toe.

Tic tac toe.

Yeah, I say. Gracias.

She disappears behind the door, and a man at the table spins this strange thing around and makes a rattling sound. Hee haw. It looks like they've gathered four generations together, from skin-and-bone elderly to almost-teenager. I think it's a party for the oldest. They're sitting together in the middle and they aren't talking.

The door opens, and there she is, Dolores, already bound up in a coat and ready to leave. Hello, she says, and I've been here a million times and suddenly realize I don't have much to say if she won't understand.

Hi, I say. How was it earlier, with the two cowboys?

She shrugs. I make a shape of a hat on my head, and say Cowboys. Oh, she says, then shakes her head. It was okay.

Good, I say. Pendejos.

Sí.

Have a drink with me, I say, pointing to my can of beer.

Here?

Sure.

She doesn't say anything for a few moments, like she's trying to think of someplace else, then can't, then nods. Bueno, I say. Come on.

I buy her a beer and we take a seat at a table all the way across the restaurant from the big party. We don't say much. I tell her my name and she laughs. Yes I don't care much for my name either. What we do say we say only in elementary English or Spanish. We finish our beers and get more. Then she says tequila, and that's a word the whole world understands, and it doesn't mean the drink so much as it means I like you very much, and I'm thinking about kissing you. I ask for two tequilas. The new waitress is obviously angry about serving someone she

works with. When I come back I move my chair next to Dolores's, and sit beside her, and we watch the celebrating table, and I don't understand much but she understands all of it, and she tries to translate what's happening but her translation is almost as hard to understand as their fast Spanish. It takes us thirty minutes to sip our tequilas, and halfway through I move my left hand over far enough so that it's on top of part of her right hand. Finger on finger. I've done this a million times, and I can go easy or I can go hard, and whichever way I go I can change when I have to, pick the pace up or slow it down, and sitting here I'm guessing she knows this and doesn't care much, and I feel a little stupid but what of it?

She smokes more cigarettes than I do, two to my one. This makes me so happy. We're not beside a window but I can see through the big one in the front, and the motel is right there bright pink in the darkness. I don't have to say anything. She sees me looking at it and takes one last sip from her glass, and there wasn't anything there anyway. Vamos, I think, standing. I take another look at the table. I wonder if the old couple is happy around the rest of them, or wishing they had it all back, to do it over again but differently. I'll never know why they chose this restaurant. The waitress at the bar is watching us jealously, and I order six more beers to go.

We step out and it's cold enough to walk closely and for me to put my arm around her shoulder. All types of weather serve to remind people of seasons, and that everything keeps going and you don't mean much at all. Snow is the worst of these, especially when you don't have a coat, but sometimes snow is a little romantic too, and some nights would never happen if it weren't for snow.

We have to wait a while for the room, since the man in the restaurant's kitchen has to come all the way over and give us a key. It's funny the way he doesn't say anything to Dolores, and she doesn't say anything to him. In the staircase on the way up, I stop and put the beer down and kiss her. I put my hands inside her coat and both her hands are around the back of my neck. We stop after a while and go on up the stairs. I asked for a room with a view of the restaurant. And there it is when I open the curtain. The cars still out front and lights still on. It's cold in the room, and I try to work the heater for a long time and try to drink my beer with one shivering hand, and she looks bored of watching me, so I surrender. She's got a beer in her hand and is shivering too, even in her coat.

The TV has a dial for channels, thirty-five. I ask her which one gets the bullfights, and she doesn't understand. Toro, I say, matador. Oh. Doce. She kneels beside me and turns it to the channel, and adjusts the antenna, and I kiss her before she can finish, and lift her up, and we jump into bed under the covers, and undress each other for warmth. I notice that moving to the bed has fixed the reception, and we've got a bullfight with no volume in the background. I think that's pretty damn funny. It's so cold even under the sheets, but after a while it's like an oven, as long as nothing slips out.

I wake up in the middle of the night, and she is sleeping beside me. She looks peaceful. I put my hand on her back and she moans, like this is also the dream she's having. The bullfights are still on TV. I can't help but watch. They've been on for hours. That bull there is going to die. So is that one. And that one. And that. An entire culture in love with a sport that always ends the same way. Maybe to see how gracefully a kill goes. Maybe it's to see that one matador get gored. I bet a dead matador goes directly to heaven, no matter what sins he's committed. A matador killed is the one rare glimpse of anything outside the regularity of days.

Maybe some proof that we exist. You'd have to ask a Spaniard. Anyway I can't help but watch it. Then after ten or twenty minutes I'm getting cold again, and wake Dolores up by turning her on her back and diving down under the sheets.

I leave the curtains open, and hours later dawn comes dramatically through, sun right through the window, warmly. I lift my head and look outside, and the restaurant is closed and the sky is huge and blue with not a single cloud, and the white ground is unbelievably white, and all the mountains.

In the room, away from the light, it can't be more than ten degrees. Dolores is stirring, and I slip back under the sheets with her where it's warm, and kiss her. One eye opens and then the other, and we lock all our limbs together and don't move until she decides to let me have her one more time before we get out of bed.

She takes a shower and I watch TV. Nothing's on. Then she comes out and I take a shower, and when I come out she's watching a talk show. She must have strange idea about what life is like farther in. It's cold and we get back into bed and I try my best to avoid the talk show but can't. Here the world is, humiliating itself. I never dreamed so many poor women were lesbians with husbands. The only shows they do anymore are about cheating. And still people go there when they're told their wives or husbands have surprises for them. This proves that ninety-nine percent of these shows are faked, but there's that one percent where a guy goes home wanting to kill himself, and you've watched it, and witnessed what has to be the lowest point in his life. I saw one once where a man's wife admitted she was having an affair with a woman, and they wanted to live together but promised, the two of them together, to have sex with him whenever he wanted, and that man just burst out crying and weeping and couldn't even sit in his chair, and all the audience just laughed at him. I bet that one was real.

Dolores wants a cigarette, and there aren't any left. We try very hard to talk about where we might get some more, but this conversation is beyond us. We get out of bed and get dressed and I ask if she wants a beer. They're still ice cold. No, she says, no beer. Hungry? I ask. Breakfast?

She likes the idea, and when we check out she tells the short man with glasses that we want breakfast, so he charges out across the road and we follow him, and it is colder than anything I've ever felt, but still so pretty. We go inside and the man turns the heater on. I wish I could wash my clothes and brush my teeth. Instead we smoke a couple of cigarettes she buys at the bar. The man comes around finally and takes our order. I get breakfast tacos and she gets pancakes, a huge stack of them.

When we finish, she gets up and I think she's going to the bathroom, but she comes back out with an apron in hand and picks our plates up. This depresses the hell out of me. Into the kitchen and back, and sits down. The man yells something and she yells something back. Then she rolls her eyes.

I think I want to hold her hand. God that's ridiculous, but I'm looking at it, there it is, and I want to hold it. What are we going to talk about now? I point at my watch, say How long? She says she's working right now. Well that's wonderful. Our cigarettes are almost out, and she's trying not to smoke hers and I'm trying not to smoke mine, but what else will we do? The little man comes out the kitchen door speaking faster than any human being I ever heard. She says okay okay okay, and stubs her cigarette out.

I stand up and she stands up and disappears. I wait for a while, and when she doesn't come back I presume that was our good-bye, and I head outside and the door dings and I walk to my car. It's cold and getting windy and there's no time for anything. Then the door dings again, and she's walking slowly over to me, looking back to make sure the little man isn't chasing her. I'm not sure what to do when she's right in front of me, so I wipe some hair out of her face. All yesterday was odd, and now it doesn't seem any less so. I kiss her, and she goes back inside. My car starts, and that's pretty damn strange too.

*

Before that December, though, before Deke had run an hour late where forty Mexicans were waiting but gave up, and wandered north into the Marfa desert, it was April. Ingrid was beside Hugo, staring up at the store's big ceiling and a boy, eighteen, nineteen, named Simon, atop some wobbling scaffolding. Another boy, Jake, a little rotund, was sitting indian-style beside two paint buckets, dipping his thumbs into the colors. Simon's head peered over his platform, and a beautiful mop of black hair collapsed in his face. Jake, he yelled, get your fingers out of my paint.

Ingrid was admiring the fresco taking shape on the ceiling. It looks nice, she said. Simon turned around, disappearing behind the wood. I don't know, he said. He was directly under the painted-purple blossom of a cactus. Too blue. This purple needs more red.

Well, it's nice from down here.

Ingrid, tired of imagining what might most capitalize on the store's blank ceiling, and with no help from George, had called the fine arts department at the University of Texas and asked if any young students wanted work, so that they might propose an idea. A dozen had come down, but Simon had impressed her most.

A raspy, tinny noise was eeking out a small radio, and Hugo saw Simon's foot dancing to the beat. Jake's thumbs were back in the paint, and then in his mouth, curiously. He had plump, doughy skin, like baby fat, and big dumb eyes, but also a small feathery mustache, and a little bald spot at the back of his head, so that he looked both, not between, a man and boy. Paint dribbled out his mouth, down his chin, and he grimaced.

The front door of the store was open, and letting in a breeze and the brilliant daylight. A man was carrying merchandise in boxes through the back door, and when he opened it, backwards, pushing with his ass, letting the wind run a line through the store, the tarps would fly up wildly, like a magician had brought them to life.

Hugo, said Simon, pass me up some more red.

Hugo looked at the paint he and Simon had mixed earlier, in small canisters. He got the red and climbed up the ladder to the platform. Below him, the white tarp was covered in bold colors. Above him, on the ceiling, the colors were softened.

When Hugo handed Simon the canister, Simon asked, How does it look so far?

Good, said Hugo.

Simon was on his back, and tried to take in as much of his ceiling as possible. I don't know, he said. How does it compare to the original?

Hugo didn't answer, since he didn't think it was a real question, and climbed down. The radio fizzled and hawked, and Simon hummed along with it.

When Hugo passed Jake, Jake was trying to say something, but his mouth was full of paint and at the same time he formed the words in his mouth he was working paint out with his tongue. Hugo shook his head, so Jake pointed to the door, which was empty. Hugo sat down in his chair and picked up the tall massive book, *The Sistine Ceiling*, one of many Simon brought along with him every day, and opened it to the page he'd marked.

A minute later, Jake made another noise, pointing, but the doorway was still empty.

What? said Hugo.

Jake's lips and fingers were bright blue. He stood and began walking to the door, gesticulating, so that his hands looked like two glowing wands, and his open mouth, which made a bright blue beacon of him. Hugo put the book down and followed. Simon leaned over the platform, asking, Where is everybody going?

Hugo and Jake came outside, and it was momentarily so bright, coming out of the store, that the white spring light seemed to undulate, to pulse. When it darkened, or when their eyes had become accustomed, hands flat against their foreheads, they saw Anna standing by the curb, jumping on and off it, back to the road.

Hey, she said.

Hey, said Hugo.

She wore shorts and a t-shirt, and tied around her neck was the red neckstring of a bikini. She sat down, and Hugo walked beside her and sat, and Jake moved toward Anna, to touch her, but Hugo dragged him down the cement.

She nodded toward the store. What's going on? Who's this?

There was one night, two or three months after Jenny's death, while George was still at the hospital, when Anna, lying in Hugo's arms, within the courtyard of the mission, after he had traced her hand on the sketchbook, tried to kiss him. He had wanted something like it so badly, and let her for an instant, grappling her tiny body above his, but when he felt that it wasn't Anna but the idea of Anna he wanted, he stopped, and she was so embarrassed that she would not speak to him all that autumn, winter, or spring. When she turned fourteen, Hugo gave her a present, something small and unmemorable, but she had written him a letter of thanks. Since then, in the year that had almost passed since her birthday, they were beginning to spend time together again, but cautiously, less often than before, and without mentioning the kiss.

The ceiling, said Hugo, is being painted. And this is Jake.

When Jake heard his name, he rolled up, off his big round ass, and went, across Hugo's lap, to hug Anna, so Hugo had to grab him by the shirt and pull him back.

I don't actually know him, said Hugo.

She did not seem troubled by Jake. Instead, she bit a little sliver of her own hair. A moment later, she asked, So are you painting the ceiling?

Not me, he said. Someone from out of town.

Hmm.

Something fell inside the store, and Simon cursed whatever it was. He yelled, Hugo! and Hugo turned but did not stand. He turned back to Anna, who was now peering curiously over his shoulder. Simon was coming down the ladder. They could hear this. They could hear the ladder

teeter and moan. And when he was down, his footsteps made agitated scawp scawps on a tarp, toward the door.

Hugo, he said. What are you doing? He was in the doorway, scratching the hard bare skin of his belly. Then he saw Anna's poking head watching him, and he said, Oh. The way he said Oh, nervously and surprised, verified what Hugo had suspected, that Anna hardly seemed her age, that she had a woman's special beauty even if she didn't know it. He took a pack of cigarettes from his t-shirt pocket and walked onto the road. He offered one to Hugo and to Anna, and when they declined he lit one for himself.

Simon stood a slender, underfed six-foot, or an inch or two taller, he had wide bony shoulders like bat wings. His clothes and hair were paint-speckled, as were the tips and knuckles of his long fingers, which spackled the white cigarette with color. Then he winked. It may have been smoke in his eyes, or a particle of dust blowing down the road, but he winked, and Anna laughed.

Hugo said, looking back and forth at both of them, a little jealously, This is Anna.

Anna, said Simon. That's pretty.

She turned back to Hugo, unimpressed. I'm bored, she said. I want to go to the lake.

Hugo said he'd be there for a few more hours, and Simon, finishing his cigarette, said, If you wait a while, we can all go together.

Anna looked up at the sun, squinting. I'm bored, she said.

Simon was measuring Anna up and down, and Anna pretended not to notice, but leaned back on her arms, offering more of herself.

Well, said Hugo, we should get back.

Simon took another cigarette out of the pack, put it in his mouth but did not light it. Do you like painting? he asked.

Anna said, Whatever.

Come see the ceiling, for a second.

Hugo wanted to object but couldn't fathom a reason, so he sat mutely, powerlessly by, as Anna said, Maybe.

Simon held his hand out. Anna took it, and he lifted her, brought her small body to within inches of his. When he smiled, she escaped him, but before she could go into the store, Jake had wrapped his arms around her naked legs.

Whoa, boy, said Simon. He wrenched Jake back by the shoulders, pushed him to the cement, and walked over him. On his back, Jake tried to roll himself over, turtlelike, but he was too fat and helpless. Hugo watched him for a while, wondering why he ever came around at all, and when it had gone on so long it was pitiful, horrendously so, Hugo stood, picked Jake up, and the two of them followed Anna and Simon inside.

Anna was given a book that was opened to the big sweep of the Sistine Ceiling. Simon was beside her, pointing at the unfinished ceiling above him. Hugo was standing against the wall, watching, wondering what Anna must have been thinking of his fountain and birdbaths, how ridiculous they were in comparison. Jake was sitting beside him, head by Hugo's knees.

Simon turned down to the book: You know, I saw it once, a year ago, while I was living in Rome. It's magnificent.

Then he said: Originally the project was only the twelve apostles in their thrones sitting in the spandrels between the arches, but it expanded in scope to the history of the world waiting for Christ. The central scenes, the nine alternating rectangles, they tell the story of man's first sin and fall and its echo in the second fall.

He pointed. This here, just above us, is my Fall and Expulsion. And this cactus will be my Tree of Knowledge. I'm going to put the battle of the Alamo on one side and the expulsion of Santa Anna on the other. My little Sistine Ceiling.

Hugo coughed, and Simon ignored him. Anna, though she was not quite sure what it was all about, smiled admiringly.

He continued: The architecture's transverse arches were actually tops of twelve thrones where the prophets and sibyls sat, foretelling the coming of Christ. At the corners of the scenes, above the thrones, those twenty male nudes. Do you know why they were nudes? Because all art is essentially about sex. It's the core creative force.

Simon winked again, and Anna's legs started shivering. Hugo couldn't watch. He turned toward the light of the door, and after a short while a long silver car pulled up. Jake's big brainless head swiveled bovinely at it.

Ingrid came through the back, wiping her hands on her pants. She did not look at Simon, but said, Take a break.

Simon had moved closer to Anna, leaning over her: in the vault compartments above the windows, and in the lunettes around the windows, that's where the ancestors of Christ are. The fourteen generations, in Matthew. Abraham begat Isaac, and now you'd better look out. I don't have vaults or lunettes, so I'll have to use triangles. Paint some famous Texans.

Ingrid and a man came in. Anna closed the book and walked to Hugo. The man shook hands with Simon, and when they all looked up, scanning the project, the man clasped his thumb and forefinger knuckle about his chin.

Ingrid said, This would make a great site for an art gallery.

Yes, the man said.

We've done well here. It's the nicest building in town.

It is, said the man.

You'd have so many options, said Ingrid.

I think you're right.

Ingrid took the man by the elbow, and led him toward the back. The man praised Simon's work, stumbling over the obstacles of paint and scaffolding and trash. When they were out of sight, Simon mocked the gesture the man had made, thoughtfully holding his chin, and took out a cigarette. He winked again at Anna. Let's go outside.

She crossed her arms and looked at him indignantly. Then she leaned into Hugo's body, her legs split against one of his. Simon shrugged. Suit yourself, he said. When he walked out, Anna ignored him. She rocked from one leg to the other, massaging Hugo's jeans with her ass, and he instantly had the urge to put his hand in his pocket. When the desire became unbearable, and Hugo nearly wrapped his arms around her, as he had done many times before, she grunted, angrily, knowing she'd been beat, and followed Simon out.

Sitting beside her on the curb, basking in the sunlight, Simon let Anna have a drag off his cigarette. When Hugo came through the doorway, Jake behind him, he saw Anna's head tilted

back, drawing in the smoke, and Simon's hand scratching her back. She coughed, made a sour face, and gave Simon the cigarette back. I'm still bored, she said.

I have to work till two, said Simon. Then we can go to the lake.

I'll only go if Hugo goes, said Anna.

Jake said, Lake lake lake.

Simon said, Well? Will you? and Hugo didn't know, but then Anna turned to him, big dark childlike why-won't-you-love-me eyes, and Hugo broke.

Anna left them for the rest of the morning, and promised to be back at two. Jake hadn't wanted her to go. When she went bounding down the street, he chased her, and Simon said, Down boy, grabbing him by his jeans waist. They were loose and Jake looked like he was trying to run out of them.

Inside, Simon spent that morning lying dreamily on his platform, doing no work. Hugo hoped the scaffolding would tip, collapse, and bury Simon in the trash and buckets, and imagined himself pulling a leg out. Instead, he opened the big book again, and read: A certain strangeness is an element in all true works of art, that they shall excite or surprise us. But that they shall give pleasure is also indispensable. A lovely strangeness. So that a true piece of art is always moving in multiple directions. Bestial and divine.

Hugo looked at Simon's ceiling. In the corners of the chapel, Michelangelo put the big paintings, *David and Goliath*, *Judith and Holofernes*, the *Crucifixion of Haman*, and the *Brazen Serpent Upheld by Moses*. The four sinister acts that saved the people of God. Simon's sketches have planned the *Ascension of the Discovery Spacecraft*, the *Striking of the Oil*, the *Spanish Trail Cattle drive with Cowboys*, and *William Travis's Heroic Line in the Sand*.

Hugo flipped a few pages, and read on: Michelangelo was the greatest abstract artist who ever lived, who attempted to accomplish what could never be combined with the abstract, and in such scope. It is a work that cannot be viewed in its entirety, never seen as Michelangelo perceived. And even in its immensity, there is unquestionably more genius in the finger of God, calling Adam to life, than in the work of any of Michelangelo's forerunners. The greatest work of art in all history is also the most monstrous.

Above Hugo, Simon stirred. His head came out from behind the wood, and he said, I can't believe she's only fifteen.

She's not fifteen yet, said Hugo. Next week.

Simon's head disappeared again, while he was thinking, but popped over when he said, Well I'm not that much older. Besides, almost fifteen is fifteen, which isn't as young as it used to be. Then he smiled.

Ingrid reappeared. How's it going, Simon?

Simon said, without moving, The Cactus of Knowledge is finished.

Ingrid paused to look at the ceiling. Jake's eyes followed hers up and around. Hugo was buried in the book when Ingrid finally turned to him. She said, When Simon is finished, I need you to move some things from the store to the house. And I need you to bring some food to George. I don't have time for him today.

It was two then, and Anna returned. She said, Are you ready?

Simon's head came up and struck the ceiling, and Jake clapped. Ingrid looked at Hugo and said, I'll be in back.

I'm really bored, said Anna. I've been watching TV all day.

Simon climbed down the ladder, rubbing his forehead. Well let's get out of here.

Simon put his arm around Anna's shoulders, and when he squeezed, Hugo noticed how her breasts pressed together. She didn't look fourteen. She was growing hips, and she had black glamorous eyes.

Simon said, Hugo has to stay and work.

Anna pulled herself out of Simon's arms and hurried to Hugo, grabbing his waist so that her breasts now pushed softly against his ribs. Do you?

No, he said. I can come.

Good, she said, and she skipped outside, right by Jake, who reached for her. Simon gave Hugo a head-nod. Fifteen or not, pretty cute, huh?

Hugo hurried to Simon's car, which Anna was already beside, leaning against. Simon took his time, opening Anna's door for her. Jake took a seat beside Hugo, in the back. Since no one really knew him, or where he came from, or anything apart from a beeping little watch that told him when to come and when to go, they tried to tell him he shouldn't tag along. He didn't understand at first, but when he realized they didn't want him, he howled, and they had to say Okay okay okay, calm down. He sniffled and buckled his seatbelt. Hugo couldn't understand why Anna hadn't sat in back with him. As they drove, he and Jake sat forward, trying to join the conversation, like two unpopular kids wondering if they are liked at all, or just props in someone else's story.

Simon couldn't keep his eyes off her, and when he shifted gears he would brush her leg with his fingers. You could pass for twenty-one, he said. Anna smiled. She let herself fascinate and bewilder him, let him stare directly at her breasts and neck and thighs and stomach.

They passed three crowded beaches, drove into the woods, got out and hiked over a long hill that sloped abruptly. Simon took his clothes off and charged out, sprinting till he came to water, ass white as pearl, legs deepening in splash, slowing the run, until he fell. Anna was beside Hugo, taking her shirt off, then her shorts. Hugo couldn't bear not to look at her figure in the red bikini. She was beautiful and monstrous. Jake was next to Hugo wearing the same expression.

Are you swimming? she asked.

Hugo wasn't going to show his leg to anyone, not again. He said maybe he would later, and Anna shrugged. He'd hoped Anna would lie beside him, and let her rub her arms and legs, which she, when they were spending every day together, had liked, and never mind Simon. But she turned and splashed into the water, and Hugo could think of nothing to say to stop her. She swam out twenty yards, and Hugo, head up, didn't see Simon anymore. Just Anna spinning her arms, then on her back drifting out. Then something underneath the surface pulled Anna down, and she screamed, gurgling under the water. A moment later she and Simon both came up, laughing. She swam away from him, and he swam after her. Hugo could feel them touching under the water. He kept his eyes on her, hoping she would turn and acknowledge him.

When they came out, Anna walked beside Simon's naked body, dry clothes over a small patch of black pubic hair he didn't bother covering. She was laughing at him, but looking. You're skinny, she said. She put a towel down beside Hugo and sat there, and Simon put his jeans on without underwear.

Four bodies lazily roasting in the afternoon light, high far silent sun, they lounged and dozed. Sailboats moved across the water. Anna turned on her side to face Simon. Hugo watched her jealously on the other.

It's my birthday next week.

Is it?

She threw some sand in the air. Simon closed his eyes and held his breath, and when the sand had all come down, he turned to Anna, who, in her red bikini, was posing, her top leg crossed over the bottom, her head resting on the bicep of her stretched arm.

Could you paint me? she asked.

I could, he said. For your birthday, if you want.

She lay back down, on her stomach. I want, she said.

Jake was snoring, belly out of shirttail, white. Hugo watched shadows creep across the other side of the lake. A spider was on a rock, and it had a shadow. It moved under the rock, disappearing. And then the rock had the shadow.

Anna stood up and stretched her arms by looping them behind her back, and arching, and then ran her forefinger under the bottom of her swimsuit, pulled down what had crept up while she rested. She walked to the water and put her feet in, then her hands as a visor over her eyes, like she was looking for a boat. Hugo almost got up to be close to her, but Simon stood and slapped sand from himself, and he walked quietly to where Anna was standing. He crept, turning to Hugo with a finger over his lips, then back to Anna, and pushed her playfully into the water. Anna screamed, balancing on the big, slippery, mossed-over rocks, until she fell over, ass into the water. She took a handful of water and splashed him. He kicked and doused her, retaliating, and she screamed again, and was suddenly running up the shore. Simon gave chase, and they disappeared into the woods together. Jake was awake and frantic. Hugo wanted to slap Jake silent, but it would've made him worse, and Hugo knew it. In the woods there was laughing that was faraway and vanishing. When their voices were gone, Jake calmed, and it was just Jake and Hugo and the slow undulating branches in the wind, and the water moving vastly in small chopping breaks, offering quiet ironic applause. Jake put his tongue on a rock, then grimaced.

Then their voices were loud again, and rustling came with them, and he and she broke through the trees and onto the beach, and Simon caught her, and they stopped for a moment while he embraced her from behind. Then she squirmed out and sat between Hugo and Jake, putting her hands on Hugo. She said, I'm hungry, let's go. Jake was so happy she was back. He crawled into the space of her lap.

Simon's face was in a mildly frustrated scowl. As if swindled in some bet. I'm ready to go, he said. Hugo felt satisfaction creep under his skin, finally, after all the day had given him. Simon watched Anna climb into the back seat of his car, and he shrugged at Hugo, *Women*. Hugo got in the back with her. Jake was so thrilled to ride up front that he had to run and go to the bathroom in the woods. On the way home Simon played the radio too loud for anyone to talk, and when he admired Anna he did so stealthily, in the mirror. Anna held on to Hugo's arm.

They stopped at Ingrid's store. When they got out, they stretched their stiff limbs. They had sunburns and were just then realizing. Simon stretched. Food? he asked. Everyone nodded, so they went into a café nearby, someone's house with extra tables. They ate dinner there, and when they finished, it was all but dark. Last whisper of light in the west.

Then Jake's watch beeped, not like earlier, but over and over, alarming him of something. He started to whinny, tried covering it, but it wouldn't go quiet. And then he looked at Anna for a long time, like he was memorizing the last glimpse of some landscape, and walked away.

They watched him disappear around a corner. They expected him to turn and gallop hysterically back, but he didn't. They walked to a building with long steps out front, and sat on them, like Roman senators. They watched daytime tourists roll out and nighttime tourists roll in.

Simon, taking Anna's shoulders in his hands and rubbing them, asked, Wouldn't it be nice to be famous?

Hugo sneezed. It was a messy sneeze, and he wiped it on the steps when Anna looked away.

I'm bored, said Anna.

Simon said, You've bored her.

Anna got up and sat beside Hugo. You rub shoulders too rough, she told Simon.

Simon asked her to give him another chance.

Maybe some other time, she said. She sat between Hugo's open legs, and leaned her arms over his high bent knees. Simon rubbed his hair back and forth, looked at his watch and said, I'd better get back to Austin. He got up and told Anna he was serious about the painting, that he'd see her next week. Then she did something that turned Hugo limp with jealousy: she hopped down the steps to Simon, grabbed him by the arms, and kissed him. Simon kissed her back, heavily, and when she let go of his arms, Simon moved his hands inside her shirt, on her back. Hugo turned and watched a store across the street, which was closing. After they separated, and he could watch them by dim reflection in the store's windows, Hugo looked back. Simon wiped his hand over his hair and said, Next week. Anna turned red. When Simon walked to his car he smiled and pointed at Hugo, and said, You too. Don't be late.

Hugo and Anna were alone on the road. She watched Simon's car drive off, watched the lights go over the hill and still watched, maybe hoping he had left something. Country music was filtering out of a bar, loud when tourists opened a door and muffled when they went through.

You want to get some ice cream? she asked, already tugging him along. She was happy, and Hugo couldn't believe that she could act so normal after what she had done, right in front of him.

The restaurant was empty except for an old couple, and they weren't speaking. Hugo and Anna ordered. They sat down, and Anna started chatting. She was loud and animated, and for a long time she didn't notice Hugo's silence, not until she had finished her cone.

She kicked his leg under the table. Now you look bored.

I'm not, he said.

Then what?

Well, he said. I wish I were good enough to paint you.

You can't even draw a fountain, she said.

He smiled and poked his ice cream with a spoon.

Let's go, she said.

She stood first. Then Hugo. In his envy and exhaustion, he looked a great deal older than Anna, and this made the old couple uncomfortable. The woman shifted and whispered, and the man told her to eat her ice cream.

They walked to Hugo's house, his shack. As they went by the main house, Hugo saw television light bouncing on the window. He walked by quietly, since Ingrid, if she saw him now, would berate him for skipping out of work.

Anna said, You sit over there, and I'll lie on the bed, and you can draw me.

Hugo prayed he hadn't thrown away his pencils and paper, found them in a pile of things he hadn't used for a long time.

She clasped her hands together. When he sat down and opened the sketchpad, she looked at both ends of the bed. Which way will I lie? she asked.

Hugo said, Put your head up by the pillow.

She took the bottom of her shirt and pulled it off, over her head, which got stuck inside for a moment, because of her ponytail. She laughed nervously, then took off her shorts. Hugo hadn't asked for any of this. It was cool, and with only her red bikini for warmth, she shivered. I'm cold, she said. Go fast.

She lay down on her side. She let one leg fall subtly over the other, as she had done earlier for Simon. It made Hugo think of Simon doing it a week from then, but perhaps asking her to take everything off, for the sake of authenticity, for art. He felt himself exploding, and could not help himself from wanting her. When he looked at her legs and arms, Simon's fingerprints were all over them. He could hear him saying, The artistic impulse is fundamentally sexual, try to tell me it isn't. He wondered where Anna fit, as something to be drawn, between the fountain and the birdbath. Whether she was memory or fact, and what would be left of her when it was done.

Anna asked how far he'd come, and when he didn't answer, she asked if he was okay. Hugo put the sketchpad down. He stood, over her, and she stared back at him. Then he sat beside her in the bed. She started to move away to give him room, but he held her in that spot. He asked her to be quiet. Then he undid the neckstring of her swimsuit, and the strap, and it was silent, and Anna looked ahead, like a bird going limp in a cat's mouth, terrified of dying.

Later, the outhouse door creaked open, and the noise from the bed was so loud they didn't notice. Anna had her hand tight around a rusted bedpost, and she opened her eyes to the dog just as Hugo pressed as hard as he knew, and the pain was so immense that her hand slid down the post, and shredded on flakes of metal. She howled into the pillow. Hugo leaned back, up and onto his knees. Anna's face was still buried. Her hand was bloodied and the dog was licking it. Hugo sat at the bed's edge and the dog stopped to look at him. It was an awful, knowing, witness stare.

Hugo tapped Anna, and she didn't move. He shook her, and the dog growled at him. He threw a book at it, and it tripped without a fourth leg. So Hugo picked her up and pulled her enervated body into his lap. The sheets draped down his knees. There was blood on them. Anna was lying, naked, her perfect, young, athletic figure, with the low of her back in the space between his slightly spread legs, one arm in his lap and one arm lifelessly swaying, bleeding at the hand. Her left breast was straight and full but her right, that side was trying to fall, the right dropped flat and nearer her armpit, where his hand was holding her. Her head weak and away from him in repulsion—how he tried with his elbow to lift it. He looked at the slack and crooked shape of her stomach, the dimple where it twisted. Where children came from.

He shook her again, and she winced, waking. Anna, he said. Her eyes opened, and the first thing she did was grab her right wrist with her left hand and cry out.

How bad is it? asked Hugo.

She curled up into him. I'll get something, he said. He dressed and went into the house, where George was watching television, to the medicine cabinet. He brought out everything he thought would help. Tiptoed out like a criminal, across the lawn, wishing the dog weren't there accusing him, crouching in a small tuft of tall green grass.

He opened his door and there was a smell that turned his eyes yellow. Paint and blood and sex and rust, and sweat. Like they had been boiled in a cauldron together. Anna had left him already. She was running down the road. Crossed roads at full sprint, surprising cars. Father Rudolfo was at late mass, and she ran hysterically into the bathroom. Poured cold water. The temperature eased the pain eventually, and revealed the wounds. Tiny, after all that, four small lines in the palm of her hand. She looked at them, wondering how they hurt so much. She wrapped a paper towel around her hand and went to bed. She held it up as long as she could stay awake.

*

They, Ingrid, unveiled the ceiling in December, which happened to be the same day, or very near the day, Deke, with three hundred worthless dollars, returned from Marfa. Father Rudolfo and Hugo were walking. The priest was hunched over and feeble. Anna had begged to be sent away, to a girl's school in San Antonio, and her absence, since April, had aged him immeasurably. The new priest was a good one, McGowan, and he went with God. Father Rudolfo still sat in at mass when he had strength, but drooped, craggily postured, a mysterious man-shaped rock.

Hugo was in the pews five days a week. He never prayed nor took communion, but hunkered, always ponderous, admiring the stained-glass windows and reading the missals, as if he could unscramble a code, the light through the darkness. Father McGowan asked if he were considering Catholicism, and Hugo shrugged him off. Hugo had nothing left but odd jobs. A few months before the ceiling was complete, Simon, like Michelangelo six hundred years before him, demanded to work alone, in secrecy. Oh, it was the low time. Nothing kept him there, in town, and nothing spurred his leaving. It was the long wait, the great wait. Did he think the saints were going to crawl down from the windows and carry him?

Today, though, day of the unveiling, Father Rudolfo had strength. Simon was there, in a suit so small his ankles seemed like bowling balls. He'd worn it as a joke. He was shaking a hand with one hand and smoking a cigarette with the other. Is that the artist? voices asked. He looks so artistic. Some of the women, patrons of the arts, arts council, arts in their lives, arts arts arts, they were wondering, would he please make a whore of me? The unveiling brought folks in from all around. Friends of friends of friends. Well how do you do. How do you do. How do. Howdy.

God was it chilly. News said worst winter ever (ever?) was coming, or something. Barreled down from Siberia, or Canada, depending on who told you, but the whitest coldest bitterest winter, full of the world's misery. If you lived in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, you were dead already, blizzard-dead. The whole Midwest was a joke, bye-bye. And there was no slowing in sight. Whole new systems were developing. Deke had seen this in Marfa, but in central Texas, at the store, it may have been bleak, yes, but there was no blizzard, and the people outside crossed their arms and held on to their partners, eagerly hopping to warm up, waiting for the doors to open, like a big crowd just bursting to dance. Oh open the door! Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors from their jambs!

Father Rudolfo turned abruptly to Hugo. I will tell you the story the way I heard it as a child. Hugo asked, What? Father Rudolfo coughed, fist to mouth, and repeated, I will tell you the story the way I heard it as a boy.

What story?

Listen, Hugo. A child was born.

A what? Hugo had his eyes on Simon. He was wondering if Anna, who had returned to town a few times to visit Father Rudolfo, would come to see the ceiling. She had never come for her portrait, never spoke to Simon or Hugo again. Hugo concentrated on the fringes of the crowd, ready to retreat, terrified he might encounter her. He was convinced the instant she looked upon him she would tell the world what he'd done.

A child. Pay attention, Hugo.

Hugo turned back around. He had seen this face on George, by the lake, and on Jenny, by the river. Okay, he said.

Okay. A child was born, in the village of Tepehuanes. His name was Ignacio. Now Ignacio was brave and adventurous, and he wandered the desert and the mountains as soon as he could walk. He was afraid of nothing.

Hugo looked away again, but Father Rudolfo took his arm. It won't take long, he said, but I'm telling it.

People passed by, wondering what was so secret, and the priest began again: Tepehuanes was a village of twenty. There were three families and few children, and none Ignacio's age, so he had no friends. The most important thing in his life were his brothers and sisters, and his mother and father. They worshipped him. To repay their worship, every day he brought home gifts from the mountains. His parents worried, since he was too young to wander in the desert, but they couldn't watch him every minute, and if they let him out of their sight he was gone, running into the openness.

Now, the gifts he brought them were usually stones, beautiful colored stones a billion years old, or stones with mysterious fossils in them. Once that whole land was under ocean. One day he found a gold medallion and the family lived on it for a year. Who had it belonged to? Surely it was priceless. On another day, when he was older, and had traveled farther than ever before, he came upon a tiny river in the ground, a river not even big enough for mice. Maybe a huge river for ants. He looked down as far as his eye could see, and the little dark red river ran. He followed it. It was getting hot so he drank the water. Then the little river disappeared, under the ground. He dug down to follow it, and came around a hill, and before his eyes was a green and vast orchard. Full of oranges. He leapt with joy. They would never go hungry, his family, and would never know disease. He put as many as he could fit into his pockets and his satchel, and raced home.

Hugo tried to move away, wondering what this was about, and Father Rudolfo squeezed his elbow:

When he got home, however, no one was there. He realized what time it was, and he had never been gone so long, so he put the oranges down and left a note, knowing they had gone out to find him, thinking he was lost. *I will bring more oranges.* They could not be angry if he brought more oranges. And so he raced off again. He climbed all the same cliffs and crawled through all the same crevices, and came out to where the river was. He took a drink from it and followed it again. It didn't seem to take as long, and there was the magnificent orchard. He walked into it, and began to pluck the best fruit. Then he heard a rustle, and some whispering. He froze. He dared not let one orange drop, lest the orchardkeeper catch him. He closed his eyes. The rustling came closer, strange rustling, not through the plants but above them. Until it

was right on top of him, and he knew he was caught, so he opened his eyes. Can you imagine what he saw? In front of him was no orchard keeper, no, but a huge and ghastly vulture, with the green eyes of a man. And it spoke. You, Ignacio. Ignacio dropped his oranges, then he dropped to his knees, begging, My family is poor.

The beast said, You are doomed. Your fate is to murder your whole family. And then it flew off. Ignacio stood, and looked around him. Had he imagined the encounter? When did a bird ever speak? Perhaps it was the heat. He ran home, as fast as he could. Blood ran through his nose he ran so fast. But it wasn't fast enough. When he got home he saw all his brothers and sisters, and they had eaten the oranges, and they were poisoned. He was just a young boy, and even as brave as he was, he couldn't stop crying. Then his parents came home, and they saw all their dead children on the ground, dead all but Ignacio, and they dropped and held each one of them. Then they went to grab Ignacio, and embrace him for being alive, and he screamed, I am poisoned, never think of me, and he leapt through a window and tore into the desert.

There was applause around them suddenly. Hugo and Father Rudolfo looked up, and Ingrid had Simon, uncomfortable Simon, by the shoulders. He thought every last one of them an ingrate, but that was the fun of it.

Someone yelled out, Speech! Simon shook his head. He was thinking, No no I mustn't. I despise every last one of you. Then Ingrid whispered something in his ear. He nodded, pulled his short cuffs down over his wrists (but when he pulled one down the other came up. Ingenious!) He turned back to the crowd, bravely reluctant, all fifty of them, and said, Thank you very much for coming. His handsome shy uncomfortableness made the women weak. Ingrid said, Well, let's move inside. All right all right said the crowd, who shuffled and politely squeezed toward the the door. Who would get to touch him first?

Father Rudolfo held on to Hugo, trying to keep him out. Let me finish. Hugo tried to pull the priest inside. I want to see how this turned out. Hugo was stronger, and his will won. They were the last two in and arrived to cooing noises. Their arms were up and twisting like antennae. Like a bunch of scientists counting stars. Would you look at that? What's it supposed to be? Oh don't ask just enjoy.

It took up most of the ceiling, a long colorful rectangle, and Hugo wanted to come under all of it before he looked up. Which he did. He was jostled about. Oh excuse me no me did you see that he just pushed me out of the way *well*. Neck craned, still being juggled by the crowd, looking, he was blinded by color. Great big blues and reds and violet. He was directly under the Cactus of Knowledge. Then Simon put his hand on Hugo's shoulder. What do you think? Hugo said it was fine. Simon smiled, saying it had been a long time, hadn't it? Yes I suppose so. It was subtle, but Simon was leading Hugo across the floor. Sort of a let's take a walk without you knowing it. Simon talked about the real Sistine Ceiling, something about Christ the Destroyer. Then he stopped, saying, Well, I'd better go mingle. Hugo watched him disappear into the hands that were adoring him that day, and saw Father Rudolfo outside the crowd, drinking punch. Hugo remembered he was telling a story, and waved. He looked up. There was Anna. Not quite her face, but her body, lying seductively on a bed. The perspective was from above and behind, precisely how Hugo had taken her. Was this why Simon had asked to work alone, so he could paint Anna's naked body in seclusion? Because the intimacy of art, her figure from memory, was as close as he could come to sex? Hugo looked at Simon, who was smiling at him from across the room.

The priest came over, sick of waiting, and led Hugo out. I haven't finished my story, he said.

So Ignacio, this boy, you remember where we left off, this boy left his parents and ran as far as he could go. He ran south, and everything grew greener. He had to eat insects and lizards. The vision of his brothers and sisters lying dead haunted him. Then one day when he was older he was trying to catch a little cockroach to eat, and he had lived these long years all by himself, he saw a bright colorful parrot resting on a branch. He looked and looked, and saw that it had the strangest blue eyes of a man. Then the parrot spoke. To save yourself from the curse, you must find the greatest leader and follow him not for your glory but for his. It alighted. By now he trusted the words of talking birds. So he asked some people in a village who the greatest leader was, and they all yelled Miguel Hidalgo de Castilla, waving flags. So he traveled a very long way and met Hidalgo, and offered his service. Hidalgo gave him a gun. Ignacio took it and ran out into a battlefield and killed twenty gachupines. He was carried back on his comrade's shoulders, and Hidalgo offered him a feast and some women. Ignacio declined. He said all he wanted was to fight. Oh that brought cheers. He fought day and night. When there was no battle, he would make one. He would have swam to Spain and killed everyone if Hidalgo had asked him.

But at the Battle of Calderon, Hidalgo lost to the gachupines. It was a devastating defeat, and Ignacio was the last man fighting in a great and bloody retreat. When it was over, he was in the woods, and he thought to himself, How could the greatest leader in all the world lose a battle? So he picked up his gun and abandoned Hidalgo, and he wore the saddest face you could imagine.

On a deserted road, dying of thirst, many many many days later, he saw a man walking toward him. He asked the man, who is the greatest leader in the world? The man smiled and slapped him on the back. Jose Maria Morelos de Pavon! I am going to fight with him. Come with me. The man gave Ignacio some water, and Ignacio turned around and walked with him, and when they met Morelos, Ignacio told him he would fight anywhere he was told. Morelos said, I've heard of you, Ignacio. They say you are a great soldier. I will make you a captain. So they gave him a hat and a gun and he led the fiercest battles in the country. They sent troops from Spain to stop him, and he buried them. But in the end there were too many, and Morelos was captured. Ignacio found out that he surrendered, and he thought, the greatest leader living in the world would not surrender. So he picked up his gun and left his hat and walked away again. Nothing in his life went as he had wanted. He dreamt of his mother and father, and wished he could find the leader so he could see them again. A boy who never had a family, that was all he was, growing into a man.

He wandered this way for a long time. He asked some people who the greatest leader was and some of them said Guerrero, and others said Oh not that sow! You should be the leader. Everyone knows of your heroism, and would die for you. He said he needed to serve another great man's glory. And then one day he was coming down a road when he saw a parade coming through. He watched it, and at the back there was a man waving at the crowd, and this man saw Ignacio and ordered the parade to stop. He looked like a king. He said, You are Ignacio. We have heard of you. Come fight with me. Ignacio whispered to a man standing next to him, Who is he? The man said That is Augustine de Iturbide, the greatest leader living in the world. Ignacio said he would fight for him then. Iturbide said, I will make you my highest general.

You will control all my armies. So they gave him a gun and a sword and a hat and a jacket, and Ignacio went out and destroyed the enemy. He beat them till they had no strength left to fight. He tore out their hearts and minds and all their hopes. When it was over, Iturbide said You were a great general. I proclaim myself emperor of Mexico. Ignacio wondered what he'd do with no wars to fight, and surely being an emperor made Iturbide the man Ignacio had sought. But how could it be proved? Only by finding his parents and not murdering them. This he couldn't be sure of, and if he couldn't be sure then Iturbide could also not be the man the bird meant. Ignacio spent days in the wilderness hoping another bird would come and tell him it was time to see his mother and father. It never came. Then one day the army he had led and fought for came and arrested Iturbide, and executed him. Mexico was a republic. So it was voted, Iturbide was not the greatest leader. Ignacio threw his gun away. Some men told him his life was in danger—and anyone who was an ally of Iturbide. Ignacio was older and so tired, and he asked why they would want to kill him, he who had won so many battles. They told him to go far away.

When Ignacio's mother and father, who had heard of their son's great battles but were afraid to see him, heard his life was in danger, they sold everything they owned and went to find him. It was very difficult since where he lived was a secret known only to a handful of men, but they said they were his parents and at long last they were told. They bought two donkeys and set out to find him and protect him, the greatest warrior in the world.

Ignacio was living in a hut in the middle of a jungle. He spent all his days capturing birds, and he built a cage large enough to hold ten thousand. Every day he went into the cage and waited for one of them to speak. They just quawked or peeped or tweetle-tweetled. One day when he was coming back from his cage he saw two people creeping around his house, covered in black cloaks. He drew a knife and slew them, thinking they were assassins, and when he turned them over and their faces were revealed, he saw that he had murdered his mother and father. His curse had come true, all of it. He ran to the cage he had built and broke it into a thousand pieces, and he burned his own house down, and beat on all his meager possessions, and ran away as fast as he could, which he had done many times before. His life was a ruined life, but at least there was no one left to murder.

One day he came to a river, and there was no way to cross it. He thought to himself, all his blood cold and his senses numb, I have time. I will build a boat and work the ferry here, in case anyone wants to cross. So he did, and he also built a hut. And that was where he lived. He sat all day in front of his hut, waiting for travelers. None came. He had nothing to make him want to stay. But why would he leave? he asked himself. He had to stop sometime. He had wished to die before then, oh many times, but that day was the first day he asked for God's help dying. When God didn't, Ignacio stopped eating, trying to starve himself. He drank no water, and hoped he'd die of thirst. But he could not die, and he didn't grow thin, and didn't have thirst. And it seemed his curse now that he could never die, that he would live forever with the faces of his dead family in his nightmares.

Then one night there was a freak and terrible storm. The trees were blown sideways. His little hut shook, and wind and rain came through all the crevices. Then he heard someone shouting. He put a shirt on and went outside, and through the driving rain and lightning and over the thunder he saw and heard a figure on the other side of the river. He hopped in the boat he'd built, and rowed across the river that was swelling and crashing around him, and the boat began

to come apart but Ignacio didn't care. When he got to the other side, he saw the figure's face when the lightning struck. The face was awful and deformed. A disease had taken the nose, so that there was only a gaping hole in the middle of his face. He had two sores where eyes used to be. Ignacio grabbed the man, and put him in the boat. The man was shivering. Ignacio fought back across the river, and lifted the man out and took his filthy clothes off, and threw him in a bath. There were sores and scabs all over his body. Nothing Ignacio had seen was ever so hideous. He was ashamed there with him, that he had wished to die when a man like this lived. Ignacio cried, greatest warrior who ever lived, while he bathed the man, who could not stop shivering. Ignacio dried him off and put him in bed, and covered him in blankets, and still the man would not stop shivering. So Ignacio took his own clothes off and crawled into bed with him, hoping his heat would warm the man, even if it meant catching his disease.

The man stopped shivering, and fell asleep, and Ignacio lay beside him, looking at the man's deformities. Then Ignacio fell asleep. When he woke, he looked and the man was beside him, but all his sores and disfigurements were gone. The stranger was beautiful and young and clean. Ignacio said, Who are you? And the man said I am Christ, and Christ embraced Ignacio, and Ignacio wept so loud that his hut exploded and blew into the wind, and the river changed directions, and he felt his skin disappearing, and knew it was going to be over, and he had lived a life of such great anguish so he might truly feel the wonder of everlasting joy.

Father Rudolfo put his hands on Hugo's shoulders. They had walked back to the priest's house and Hugo hadn't even noticed. Why did you tell me that?

I wanted you to know why I became a priest.

Hugo bent down to pick a piece of trash up. Which part made you want to be a priest?

Because the end had been there from the beginning.

Hugo threw the piece of trash back down. Well what now?

Come with me, he said. Do you drive?

Hugo shook his head.

You have to. I'm too weak these days. My arms can't move the steering wheel.

A drizzle began, cold and feathery. Father Rudolfo would not tell him where they were going, but only which direction to take at interections.

Hugo considered the possibility that Father Rudolfo knew what he'd done to Anna, and this would be the day when the priest would confront him. But why out here? The drizzle turned icy, but was melted instantly upon the windshield. Father Rudolfo rubbed a shirt cuff against his fogging side window. Gloomy, he said, and Hugo thought that was exactly what the day was, from the moment those store doors opened. The tires lost an inch of traction on a slippery corner, but enough to make both their hearts skip. Slow slow slow, said the priest. I can barely see, said Hugo. Father Rudolfo put both hands flatly on the worn dash, saying, It's not much farther, but he wouldn't say how.

Hugo squinted. He moved his head to keep in rhythm with the slow, ineffective windshield wipers. They were lofty in the hills and fog and cold, and the roadsides were rockfaces on one side and cliff falls on the other.

Did you know that in the summer this area is very beautiful, and on the other side of this hill is a huge tourist resort?

Hugo shook his head.

Here, said the priest. A right, here.

Hugo pulled into a small paved drive with brick walls laid high to the sides. They drove for a hundred yards, rounded a bend, and a little guardhouse appeared. A bright light was on inside, and a man in a uniform put a hat on and walked out. They stopped.

The guard didn't say anything, but lifted his clipboard. Father Rudolfo leaned over Hugo to say, We're not staying long.

Oh, said the guard, hello Father. Go on in.

Hugo had trouble getting the car going, stalling a few times. My car, the priest pleaded. Be careful.

They parked beside a giant undecorative building. Tall flat walls with tall mirrored windows. As soon as Hugo turned the car off, the air inside turned frigid.

Where are we? asked Hugo.

This is the hospital they took George to, after Jenny died. He stayed here six weeks.

Hugo asked how he knew the guard.

I come up here once a week, said Father Rudolfo, just to see if I can help.

Are we getting out? asked Hugo.

Father Rudolfo sighed. No, he said. I want to talk to you about something.

Hugo braced. He now imagined ten policeman closing in around him. They would torture him in prison, he thought, if they knew what he'd done to a little girl.

I want to talk about George, he said.

George?

Yes. He can't take care of himself. Ingrid does everything for him, but when she sells the store I think she's leaving. It would be nice if I could tell her you'd look after George.

Why did we come up here?

Father Rudolfo breathed into his hands, then rubbed them together. I wanted to remind you, he said, that he found you dying in the woods, and saved you. That he has lost his son and daughter, and his mind for a while, and pretty soon he will lose his wife.

Father Rudolfo told Hugo to start the car back up, then continued. I don't think he cares if anyone is around to take care of him, but she might.

Hugo let the heater blast warmth back into the car, and said, so relieved that the question hadn't been about Anna, that he would help.

On the road back, hardly a word spoke in half an hour, Father Rudolfo, as if suddenly recognizing his surroundings, said, There's one more place I want to take you. Hugo said he was tired but the priest insisted. No. This isn't out of the way. Turn right up here.

The road the right took them on wound down erratically. Paved on the tight jags of the rock. Father Rudolfo watched with one eye. Slow down, Hugo. I thought you couldn't drive.

Hugo had faced enough of the day already, and he didn't let up. The back end swung slackly into the narrow margins, the dirt between the road and the cliffs. The priest peered out the window with childlike timidity. He thought a Hail Mary. Then the road straightened, became wide by its edges, and a deep valley opened out. At the bottom, by a stream, another road wove into the landscape.

Pull over.

Hugo slowed down, pulling into a huge half-circle with toll-binoculars set up in front of a fence. There were two picnic tables. Everything was silver from drizzle and frost. Father

Rudolfo opened his door and walked toward the drop. Hugo followed him, cupping his ears for warmth.

Do you know what you can see with these binoculars, on a clear day?

Hugo shook his head.

The interstate. Between two cliffs that direction.

That was the instant when the drizzle intensified, but it did not turn into rain. Father Rudolfo wandered in circles, as if investigating, turning his head here and there. He finally stopped and looked up. He said, This is the spot where Jenny went off. Father Rudolfo bounced on his feet without lifting them. This very ground. Then he pointed, a small ways off. That's the tiny white cross they made for her, there. Do you know they built the fence back up within a week?

The priest stepped back, leaving Hugo there alone. Hugo walked to the edge, trying to look down. It was hidden and foggy and dismal emptiness.

When he turned to go back to the car, the priest was in the driver's seat. I may be too weak to steer, but you'll kill us. Hugo sat without speaking. They pulled onto the road, windshield wipers squeaking, moving the drizzle from side to side, but not away. Father Rudolfo was the slowest driver living, in all history, and cars honked on the tight roads as they flew frustratedly by. The priest paid no attention. He turned news radio on, AM 1200. Stories from around the world. The big one: forty illegal aliens frozen to death near Texas border, found days ago. Next a long story about the problem of illegal immigration and its effects on economy etcetera. Experts. Eight Mexicans shot by ranchers in last five years. So many? So few? Stricter enforcement needed. Investment in Mexico needed, relaxed enforcement. Give ranchers guns and tell them to kill on sight. Send the army in. Long dumb silences.

Father Rudolfo said, I wonder if some made it farther than others, or if they all froze in sleep, or if some were killed for holding the rest up. You know?

Hugo watched the drizzle lighten as they came down. His ears popped. He didn't want to spend any more time with the priest. Could you drop me off in town? he asked.

The priest nodded. Have you ever talked to Deke, Jenny's husband?

Why?

Oh, he replied, very now-that-you-ask, Deke ought to know more about this alien business. He used to be involved, bringing them across, but I don't know if he is anymore. It's a secret and he doesn't know that anyone knows. Father Rudolfo looked at Hugo looking at him. I know it's illegal, he said. But people are trying to survive.

When he dropped Hugo off, the priest touched Hugo's arm. That was all he did or said. He left Hugo to wander into the dim afternoon. The car sputtered off, and Hugo was at an intersection. He was thinking about Jenny, George, and Anna. That was the order in which they had fallen. It was as if—though it couldn't have been, could it?—Father Rudolfo had reversed the order, taken him back through the disasters, to the beginning. He was thinking about Deke, about a man carrying Christ across a river. Was the sun going down or not? It was gray like just before night, but who could tell with the cloud cover?

Hugo went back to the store. He pulled the door open and saw five or six drunk men with loosened ties, cow-eyed at their wives or dates, who had made a laughing highly intelligent and artistically sensitive circle around Simon. Hugo went to the table of men, pushed his way through to a drink, and made it. Scotch in plastic clear Solo.

One man watched him drink it. He was twirling his wedding ring. Observing his wife's paid-for taste. Not an artistic bone in his wallet. His own drink dried many times over, the man was thinking of Simon, I could take that boy hunting. *Accident*. Hugo looked at Simon, and Simon winked. He didn't know how, or what it was, but they were in something together.

Ingrid came over and asked the men if they were enjoying themselves. They grumbled and nodded. Hugo knew then that one of these men was going to buy the store. He made himself another drink.

Come over here, Hugo.

Simon and the women were waiting eagerly for him. He drank his drink and poured another, then made his way.

Say Hugo old boy.

Say.

I've been telling everyone that Léger was actually much more talented than Kandinsky. They think I'm crazy. You've been chosen to settle the bet.

Hugo jumped through the women and threw a punch that missed, then tried to strangle him, before Ingrid, old frail Ingrid, ripped Hugo off. The women were aghast. Simon was checking to see if he was hurt, and when he realized he wasn't he stood and moved toward Hugo. Ingrid prohibited. Go away, Hugo, she said, looking at Simon. Hugo rubbed his sore elbow, overextended in the lurch. Was that the first punch he'd thrown in his life? He turned and walked under the ceiling on his way out. He looked to see if the men approved of him, hoping they would, but they were sagging like sad clowns, drowning in drink, too lifeless for joy, even minuscule happiness.

Hugo walked out the door, and women's shrill laughter followed him. Like hands chasing him into the dark, finally dark. All the light was drained out of the clouds, white only from streetlight, and building-window light. He looked across the street. There in a brown coat, against a post, cigarette smoking, was Deke. He had come to see his dream devoured. Hugo made sure it was him, then waved. Deke tossed his cigarette and walked away.

*

One more ought to whoops hello did you see that? Hello? Anyone ever ask if vodka comes out? That's *right*. You with beer yes you and that t-shirt—How do you count the number of wetbacks in a lowrider? Come on it's funny you bastard fine go on back to wherever you came from. Hinsdale, Illinois. Is everyone still living and dying in Hinsdale, Illinois? Would you stop please would you? Isn't that just like them? Where did everybody go? You count the number of arms out the window. HA HA you fucker. I'll watch it. When you kiss my ass. No really just a bit of fun, Christ.

Are you a Catholic I was. Just like a Mexican. Meskin. Where are you going, barman, busy barman? How many does that make? Five? Five alive take a dive she's got a beehive for a head. When will the gentleman arrive? Impossible muchacho. Don't charge all of them, would you. I don't have to drink here. I just like watchin you work. Oh shit it's just a little eensy weensy teensy bit of fun. Fuck. Oh you can't be serious. Yes I've had a few but Christ it's boring at home. Me? You've got the problem if you don't want money. Fuck you yes fuck you I said fuck you, yes. I'm not coming back (for an hour). Wipe what smile? Aw come on I'll see you later. Put some on ice. Iss just an espression.

Outside now. Bitterly fitterly. Where will Larry go? Lovable Larry, Lawrence of Arabia, baldheaded hairy Larry. Biggie Smalls. Holy mother of God it's cold. Will the hairs in my nose freeze? Will I ever sneeze again? Catholic. I was. Larry doesn't lie. German catholic. What rhymes with catholic? That's all I need to have this in my head. Don't you hate that? It's going to kill me all day unless I can think of it. Make an angle in the snow. I mean angel. How many angles does it take to make an angel? How many angels can you fit on the tip of an angle? Five my ass. Five for breakfast, five for snack, could five do this?

Going down the road, gray road, gray icy road. What if I rested? Would I turn to ice be the Iceman George Gervin? Here she comes here she goes. Erp. That was the biggest damn burp I ever made. Escuse me pardner.

Will Larry continue to be merry? Or will he grow angry? At the center of this soft shell named Larry is a hard center named Larry. They love each other. This is as good a place as any. There is nothing easier than urination not breathing not sleeping nor waking. Sometimes I want to cry pissing makes me so happy. That ever happen to you? Oh you yes you across the street wondering how drunk I am you too can go fuck yourself. Man must piss. It is written. Look how the steam envelopes me. I wish I had a pair of Indians Injuns red Injuns with a rug so I could make smoke signals. That reminds me I need a cigarette. I would rather have ten Indians

than one Mexican why you ask *why*? You walking by do you have a huge jellyfish for a bladder? I do. Keep walkin. Walk walk walk. Hey where are you going?

Ever have the funny feeling that everyone but you is heading in the same direction? Well there goes another with his wife and another. Let Larry love! Maybe someone down the road has let them know the world is ending *but be quiet about it*. Larry is a man of action, and he follows. Did you know a Meskin stole my job when I was broke, and he was Catholic?

Long live Larry. Larry who doesn't have a care in the world. My scarf if I had one would trail romantically behind me. I would be whimsical. Did anyone ever say I had lovely eyes? Of course they have. Man about town how do you do it? Interest in the world is the sincerest form of love toward it. That's how, with remarks like that. Straightforwardness is the sworn enemy of whimsy.

Do my eyes deceive me? Is that Joe Patterson in his own cloud of steam? Joe I say Joe over here.

Hold on.

Piss all you want. What's the mystery?

Oh it's you Larry.

I need a cigarette. You got any?

He begrudges me all cigarettes I ever borrowed but gives them up because he has no spine but I won't ever say it. Don't have such a scowl it's a cigarette.

What mystery?

The mystery of where everyone is headed.

Church I guess.

Is it Sunday?

Yup. And Christmas Eve.

Oh. Ah, this cigarette is very Larry. You wanna go?

I don't care what you do.

Are you drunk?

Are you?

He looks like a buoy floating in the ocean there's his head there it isn't there it is there it isn't. We're two old Japanese men bowing to each other Larry-san Joseph-san. Kadate. Not yet not if we were cold and oh I was oh I was. Yes I've got you by the arm shut the hell up I need your cigarettes let's go to mass.

This is a long arduous trudge in high snow why did we go through the woods so you could piss every ten steps? Uphill unnecessary lungs dying heart dying mind dying is this the fastest way to God? Nope he says pulling his jeans down leaning on a tree smoking his cigarette.

Carry Larry to the light. Deliver him. Christ how many times have you gone today?

I don't know he says.

Put your cigarette out. I don't know if we're late or early but I'm afreezin.

I think there's a hole in my bladder I think maybe I busted it open he says. Can I die from this?

We'll sit in the back and you can slip in and out.

Christ look at him pondering a windmill of thought could we get the wind going any faster? Hold up there Joe stay standing. Listen I'm going to freeze to death and I don't care if you do.

Do you have any beer?

Yes I say I have a whole bunch inside come on.

I love a church. I love the importance of walking into one. Colored windows and the pews and that funny smell and all those people praying let the Dallas Cowboys beat the ever living holy mother fucking shit out of San Francisco. Please. Never mind the wetbacks praying all hundred thousand of their cousins will make it over and live in one house and do all Larry's work for him. Larry is better off without them. Funny thing about Mexicans is that they keep all the black people out like keeping spiders so you don't have mosquitoes.

Well well looks like they can smell us yes go fuck off. Last row is just fine with me it's just as toasty as the front. Nobody moving everybody whispering one out-of-town-kid (has anyone noticed there are no kids in this town?) crawling on the floor Joe are you falling asleep? At this time of day? That's a problem my friend. Here comes the priest draped in his purple blanket. He looks like a display table. Fight urge to touch display table. His ministers. That old old Mexican priest with a cane so slow you wonder he's dead every step he takes.

Entrance Antiphon. Look we can follow along Joe. Joe open your eyes open your eyes. All make sign of the cross. Greetings. We are all welcome on this the fourth Sunday of Advent. Priest introduces mass: *Simplicity of the child.* The type of world we live in almost dictates the qualities of the Christ-child we adore. We become people who guard what we want, and avoid enjoying what we need. There's much in life we don't need and can get by without. Three major grammatical mistakes. The child reminds us of that. *Lord, in the middle of our complex lives, of our desires for success, remind us that you live simply in our hearts.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.** Larry be with you. **And also with you.** Joe a woman is staring at you. My brothers and sisters to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries let us call to mind our sins let us flush the toilet before we put our hands down it. Clean underwear. **I confess to Almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters that I have pinned the tail on my own donkey in my thoughts and in my words in what I have done and what I have failed to do and I ask blessed Mary ever virgin even though it must have bored her to tears all the angels and saints and you my brothers and sisters to pay for me to the Lord our God.** May almighty God have mercy on us forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life. **Flush.** We are flesh seeking word and God is word seeking flesh and this is who Christ is the bridge between us and he was always trying to help the lepers so why are good Christians always so worried about being clean *those pillows are expensive.* I have to go says Joe right now or I'm going to die. Then his eyes close and he slumps but he is still awake.

Let us pray [as Advent draws to a close that Christ will truly come into our hearts]. Lord fill our hearts with your love and as you revealed to us by an angel the coming of your Son as man, so lead us through his suffering and death to the glory of his insurrection for he lives and rains with you and the tasty spirits one God for greater leverage. My toes are cold again let me take these wet shoes off. Lord fill our toes with warmth. Lord fill our wallets with money Lord fill our cities with successful sports franchises Lord let us know if we are alone in the cosmos. Let us know if the cosmos is a real thing and not a big eyeball we are floating in until like all

light we are absorbed. A reading from Malachi. He was my favorite. The Lord God says this: Look, I am going to send my messenger to prepare a way before me. And the Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter his temple; and the angel of the covenant whom you are longing for, yes, he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. Who will be able to resist the day of his coming? Who will remain standing when he appears? Not Joe. For he is like the refiner's fire and the fullers' alkali. He will take seat as refiner and purifier. Take seat. What does that mean? Know that I am going to send you Larry the prophet before my day comes, that great and terrible day. He shall turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse. This would be the opposite of whimsy. This is the word of the Lord with a little help from Larry.

Joe you're beginning to snore. You're the only person I've ever seen snore while mostly awake. That's just laziness open your nose or your mouth and draw air in like a human being. I could use a drink how are your toes? My toes? he says. Well at least he's speaking.

The Lord's is the earth and its fullness the world and all its peoples it is he who set it on the seas on the waters he made it firm. **Let the Lord enter! He is the king of glory!** Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? The man with clean underwear and a full heart who desires not worthless things. **Debt the landlord's renter! B is the first letter of Boring!**

Joe are you ready to go I think my toes have warmed up. Wake up Joe Joe are you living? Christ you fucking scared me I thought you were dead. A second reading. There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* Larry. He came for testimony, to bear witness to a flashlight, that all might find a place to *piss* in the woods. He was not the light, but *was sent* to bear witness to that light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. Well Joe lets go to where the sinners are. Let Larry carry all men toward the light, the light that shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. Larry was a Catholic let no man argue that. He was many things once but now he is a man who knows true whimsy awaits him.

Say goodbye to all the parishioners I wouldn't be surprised to see a few of them in thirty minutes. They will have the homily on us, so we need three drinks on them. Interpretation is the source of one hundred percent of all misunderstandings on earth. Joe you've fallen you're playing to the stereotype of a drunk. Get up dust yourself off I promise that if you can make it someone will give you a drink. That's the Joe I know. Say your name. How many ways can you say drunk? What's your address? How many fingers is this? Keep your eyes open Joe. Let's take the road this time. There are bears in the woods our mortal souls are in peril *our mortal souls*. And my toes are wet and cold already.

Tell me that isn't Hank there. It is bless the Lord. Hank the bank. Hey Hank! We're over here Larry and Joe. Yes it's us knee deep in this crazy ice and sludge you ever seen anything like this? It probbly won't be this cold again till 3000. That's the year Joe. Where are you going to us too let us buy you a drink I insist no I do I do, well if you insist. Pie easy. This is heaven.

Hank how many ways can you say drunk? One he says. That's a good answer.

Is Joe pissing in his pants?

Oh Jesus Joe you're pissing in your pants. You're gonna smell like piss all day unless we do something. No you're not going home if you go home we won't see you again you'll turn the TV on and open a beer and then it's goodbye Joe. Take your pants off. Like Hank or me gives a

shit about your bird legs. All right we don't have forever. There. Now stuff the jeans in that sludge there, that melting ice, leave them till they soaked right through. Now sit in that ice and roll around no I'm not kidding. I know it's cold and dirty would you rather smell like piss? Come on there that's not so bad WELL HELLO THERE *Kyle* (big redhead fat-while-married fatter-now-divorced Kyle).

Kyle we're wondering how many ways to say drunk and whether Joe is better off frozen or smelling like piss and what rhymes with Catholic. No answers (as usual). Our foursome will play through. Joe that's enough put your pants back on your lips are turning blue. When the water dries the piss will have vanished trust me.

If this isn't a tradition it ought to be. Everyone together for drink at Christmas. Everyone. Everone.

Christ Joe you don't look good your whats won't move? Your legs? Here put an arm around Hank he'll carry you.

So Kyle what are you doing these days?

Digging. That abandoned golf course somebody bought it.

Digging. Spic work.

Yup. But it pays.

I spose.

You?

Oh I say you know me just letters to the editor.

Stone face, didn't get it. Never mind I'm thirsty ain't we all? You're not going to die Joe. I can see the bar already just a little further. Four pilgrims to the promised land four pilgrims bearing crosses. You know they used to crucify people on Xs not just Ts. I'd rather go on a T since the X spreads your legs and imagine the pain after a while in your groin and the heat with curious boys looking up at you with long twigs giggling no thank you.

You can't feel your whats? Your toes and fingers? Well what did you expect pissing in your pants? One drink and you'll forget everything. We're there. Zion waiting, four thousand years of waiting. Daughters of Jerusalem shout for joy! Soy sauce! Rob Roy! Coy ploy! Entrée.

Look there's Steve and Jimmy and that spic Velasquez best Mexican you ever met keeps his arms inside his windows doesn't dig for a living. There are Mexicans and there are spics. You know most people around here are afraid to say Mexican because they think it's a derogatory term. Isn't that funny? Aren't the funniest things always true?

Steve Larry Jimmy Larry Velasquez Larry Hank Kyle Steve Jimmy Velasquez. What's wrong with Joe? He's dying. Hello bartender. Wipe what smile?

Howdy do let's begin this. Did you see all the old men at the other bar Christ they smell. Tell me we're not them one day. I know you all think it's a pussy drink but I'd like a vodka Collins. Yes the one with the cherry on top no I do not want an umbrella I want to get the drink I always used to drink in the big city.

Y'all hear about those wetbacks freezing near the border? Velasquez you lose an uncle or two?

Fuck you Larry.

Well I think they took a risk and paid.

I agree says Jimmy.

Steve says Did you know there are more Mexicans than whites in Texas? Didn't we win a fucking war? Anyone remember the Alamo?

Isn't that a rental car company?

Let's kill Velasquez.

Hardy har har.

Hey is that Deke walking by?

Where?

Right there I say right there walking down the street.

Yup.

Well somebody go get him.

Man if you told this bunch there was a million dollars on the floor it'd take them ten years to reach down and grab it. Want it done right do it yourself. Oh my legs how did they get so sore? Joe you look awful go stand by the heater. He's sittin there shivering on a stool hasn't even peeked at his drink. Hey DEKE!

Here he comes fellas look alive. He's jogging looking around him. Ding ding he's inside. Rub that cold head. He is unhappy about something. Christ it smells like piss in here he says. That's just Joe I say. When he turns back to the window I think Are you listening? What are you looking at?

He says You see Hugo?

Who?

Hugo. Guy won't leave me alone.

Never mind come have a drink.

Now we've got ourselves a club and mass hasn't even let out and I've already finished my drink. Another! In my mind there are streamers raining down upon us showering us in color keeping us alive where is the CHAMPAGNE? Except Joe maybe I shouldn't have told him to roll around the melting ice. I guess if he dies it was a bad idea. Would somebody put a coaster in his mouth so his teeth won't be so loud chattering?

So Deke what've you been up to?

Nothing.

Us too.

Kyle says (joy in his fat mouth), Did you hear Ingrid sold the store? She's out, gone to New Orleans.

Yes he says yes I just heard it.

Guess who bought it.

Deke turns his back and starts talking to Velasquez but Kyle won't let him go. That guy who married Liz Cavan that navy guy what was his name Guillermo Spicinoza?

Don't bring down a house we just built it's Christmas. Steve saves the day by ordering Joe a tequila. It'll get you warm again. Joe spills most trying to hold it. It takes him two swallows to put it down but it goes down and we all watch him to see if he stops shaking. Earth calling Joe. No such luck. Blue lips green face red eyes cartoon. Get the phone ready to call an ambulance no I don't think we'll need it but who knows? I've seen Joe drink an army's drinks, walk right down the street chipperly wanting one more one night even threatening to walk to Mexico.

Somebody put on some country for Joe.

Hank says No fucking way I hate that shit.

Hey who's freezing you or him?

Hank is laughing saying to Deke and Velasquez Remember that night Joe thought we met George Strait?

Deke is unhappier than unhappy. Doesn't want to talk. Then he turns his head and his eyes roll back into his skull and he says Oh here we fuckin go.

So we all look, and in walks a white trembling starving Hugo. He and Joe should start a water polo team. He smiles when he sees us looking at him and I don't give a shit if he lives or dies but it's a public place so take a seat.

A wall asks Steve to Jim You think a wall will make a difference?

Not just a wall but an electric wall dug twenty feet into the ground with automatic gun towers every twenty feet *something* I can't go shopping anymore nobody fucking speaks English.

Well they ought to learn the damn language I say if nothing else they ought to be able to fucking communicate with people from this *country*.

Hugo walks right up to Deke and taps him on the shoulder and Deke's shoulder slumps like Hugo's touch disconnected all his bones and he turns around. Hugo you have to leave me the fuck alone.

So I say Hugo have some tequila with me Hank get us three tequilas calm down man just have a drink and relax. Does anybody know a word that rhymes with Catholic? Christ it's killing me thank you very much Hank. All right bottoms up. I don't imagine that starving body of his can take any more so I must remember to get him as many as possible. You know lots of Mexicans are actually Indians and can't hold they drinks they all look the fucking same.

Now minding my own business getting the next drink I happen to turn to the bar's door opening and in steps a woman with the biggest motherfucking tits I've ever seen and I say holy shit and Steve drunk says LOOK AT THOSE TITS! Oops and Kyle has his mouth wide fat open fat and he's fat looking like he might fat drool fat all over him fat self. Christ would you eat a salad go run around the block until you have a heart attack.

Woman sits down at other end of bar by herself orders shot of whiskey can of beer.

Jimmy says Velasquez do you consider yourself an American or a Mexican (then to us) I mean that's the question isn't it? You are one or the other.

Velasquez finishes his beer and says American and Jimmy says See we need more fucking Mexicans like him. Then Jimmy says I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America one flag to the republic for which it stands under God forever and ever. Steve slaps him on the back of his head and Jimmy says the capital of Maryland is Annapolis South Dakota Pierre North Dakota Bismarck Maine... Maine is... Maine is um...

We might as well be floating in a boat this bar seems so all by itself, and easy. ANOTHER! Larry is a five-star general watching his troops battle in the trenches. Larry will not tarry. The great struggle of the century is going on right here in this room and every man must pull his weight.

Hugo slips off his stool toward Deke and I grab him. Let Deke get drunk then talk to him buddy have another shot oh Hank you ready for another? My used to be cold toes are tingling sleigh bells ringing children singing I completely forgot it was Christmas. When's the last time a Mexican ever accidentally got lost in the suburbs and thought Oh shit I'm in a *white*

neighborhood. You get some guy from Hinsdale Illinois coming down telling me my jokes aren't funny does he have to live with them in Hinsdale Illinois on his golf course? Don't think so what do you think Deke? Oh come on Deke snap out of it.

Kyle says You know it was Guillermo Spicinoza who also bought the golf course? Man he's got plans for this town. All that money from Liz Cavan's old man. Wants to make us famous bring in lots of money.

Why don't you shut the fuck up Kyle says Deke and Kyle makes a face like Moi? Moi?

I thought we'd need to get Kyle's fat ass out of the bar when the bar's door opens and a big group of revelers come in reveling about some carolers coming up the road. Eight maybe nine people in the big group mostly women *all right*. Hank let's buy these women some drinks I think one was sort of looking at you. Hey how is Joe doing? Standing right there by the heater good thinking Joe no you still look like shit. I'll get you another. Another.

Carolers in range. Men let's prepare for the worst. Very melodic I'm thinking we kill them. Who are the carolers ladies? I'm Larry this is Hugo this is Joe this is Deke this is Velasquez this is Steve this is Jimmy are you ladies listening or not? Thank you and this is Kyle. What was that one's name they all ask. Oh that's Deke he's in a bad mood maybe one of you can cheer him up.

Do not be wary. Larry will lead men *and* women to the light. Those tits are fake Steve says. He says it looking right at the woman. They ain't fake she says go fuck yourself. Steve turns to Jimmy says they fake I can tell them fake a mile off.

They ain't fake she says mind your own bizniss.

Oh they're fake he says but nice.

She orders another drink and Steve says I'll tell you what if they're real I'll buy all your drinks for the rest of the night.

Go fuck yourself she says.

Fine have it your way.

Hugo needs another drink I think. Clink pink mink drink. Hank would you honor us? Joe is still shivering guess it was a bad idea after all. Deke and Velasquez are deep in conversation. Jimmy and Steve are laughing betweenst themselves and Kyle is fat by himself in the corner. Larry, let no lull linger. Hows about we play some pool? All heads turn toward tattered table. Cut up velvet missing banks one stick length of my arm. Think of it more as a true test of one's skills no pain no Spain.

Oncoming carolers. Approaching over ridge. Men spread out and take defensive positions on the hill. They're singing outside a restaurant the luvly ladies tell me. I'm out again thank you Hank. They're really going down like water. You want to play some pool? You and me versus Joe and Hugo. Just one game. Stand up Hugo finish your drink get another find me a cigarette come play pool. I know you want to talk to Deke but you'll get your chance. Don't act so strange and maybe he'll listen. No I don't want to hear about it come on and play some pool. Joe. We need you.

What time is it? Feels like we've been here for hours. It's still light outside. You break Hank. Hit it left or the cue will fly off the table. Yes it's a little unfair playing these two fellows but do you want one of them on your team?

Well listen to this I'm watching Jimmy and Steve at the bar. They're staring at their beers not speaking. Then Jimmy yawns. Steve turns to him when he sees the yawn, looks at him

for a long time, and then as if suddenly not liking the yawn Steve pours his beer on Jimmy's head. Jimmy doesn't move for a second and the beer rolls down him darkening his shirt and jeans. Then Jimmy picks his beer up and I guess Steve knows it's coming so he just closes his eyes and Jimmy pours it slowly trickling onto his head. They stare at each other and one makes this gasping snort and the other starts laughing wide-open mouth and slapping bar. Hank misses a shot finally and gives Joe the stick shaking and shivering and ghost white I can't watch after all I feel a little responsible. Steve buys the woman with the huge tits a drink. Come on they fake, ain't they?

Two of the lovely ladies have walked over to Deke but Deke wants nothing to do with them. They don't like Velasquez so much maybe it's the pockmarks on his cheeks or the tattoo on his neck or maybe it's just him standing so close to Deke like a fingerpainting next to a Botticelli (did you hear that drop did you?).

Listen I'll buy all your drinks even if they're fake I just want to know.

Her eyes are like sandbags now Steve is wearing her down I wouldn't want to take those tits home but see them that'd be different. One of the ladies says the carolers have gone into restaurant which means attack has been postponed. The armies of Christ that's an odd phrase. What is *song* what is its *nature* what if everyone unable to express themselves with words suddenly broke into tune since it was easier to show *emotion*? Why don't we cut out bullshit reduce everything to two howls one for joy and one for misery. You want authenticity that's it but not anymore.

Hugo you aren't even trying. Kyle says Yep we've needed something like this to come around somebody with a vision Mexican or not.

The heir to the empire will be a half-caste.

You know I never thought about it like that.

Well now you have.

We already get a billion tourists how can we get any more?

Build says Kyle build out and populate. I've got a fun idea why don't we go around and each of us can say what we would've done with Liz Cavan's money.

Deke isn't moving not even budging not even blinking just there neon light pouring into his drying eyes staring at a shelf full of liquor.

Steve says with all that money I'd buy myself a look at those fake tits.

I drink more drinks and I say I say howsitgoing to the ladies what are you doing in this place Visiting grandparents Oh how lovely are they dead or living Did I say that how embarrassing for me What are their names maybe I know them Oh yes I know *of* them small world Sure is.

Hank has been at the bar for an hour and Joe and Hugo are still waiting by the table. Oh that's pitiful like sick lost dogs. Well that's the mystery of the strangers solved how about that woman she don't look like a person with grandparents. If she shows them we'll have solved her.

Hey that's a catchy tune who put it on the jukebox? Was that you? How bout a dance? Only if your friend can dance with Deke? Oh sure Deke'll dance (do this one for Larry would you?). Come on Deke hit the dance floor. Honey why don't you go over and get him.

There she goes to get her wild stag she is a bunny rabbit. Larry's dancing everyone's drunk the sky outside is darkening. Are those snowflakes? Larry, thank you for this day. Give us as good a night. The girl is pulling on Deke I can see his face at last I did not know he was so

drunk or is that disinterest? She's pulling him like a person trying to pull an elephant with a rope God bless her. He is stubbornly set no I don't want to dance she's drunk yes you do yes you do yes you do yes. Velasquez is beside him curiously observing. Some guys have all the luck. Luckleberry Finn that's who Deke is. When did we move from order into chaos? Isn't that how all drunk nights are? There you are sipping your drink carefully noticing the time and suddenly you turn around and fifteen people are having sex under the pool table and your best friend is taking off his clothes on the bar and the bartender is yelling last call last call you don't have to go home etcetera?

The bunny rabbit pulls one last furious time and the wild stag comes sprawling off his stool onto the disgusting floor onto tourist sawdust. He just lies there for a little while and the girl puts her hand over her mouth aghast at what she's done. She only wanted to dance because he was so damn good-looking, curse isn't it? Then Deke stands up slowly wiping wood out of his hair and off his face and not looking says Leave me alone and the girl obediently goes back to her table and suddenly Steve and Jim begin to laugh then Kyle and then Velasquez trying very hard not to snickers and even the bartender and suddenly everyone's in a contagious fit of trying to suppress the giggles except for Deke and the girl and Joe who's going to become a block of ice *will he never warm up?* And Hugo. Let's get him another. I'm still dancing never mind the stopped music never mind the no partner.

Then there is silence. There is a fear that the first person who speaks will be killed by Deke. The girl is beginning to cry and who knows why? Maybe she does the sort of thing often. Someone break the silence someone put a quarter in the jukebox. Hank how bout you buy a round. Something special. Anybody have a cigarette? Deke can I have one of your cigarettes? Maybe later I can see you'd rather stare ahead angrily.

Hank even bought a drink for the woman with the tits. Now that's just plain sweet. She drinks it and almost slides off her stool. We're officially lulling, and even Larry knows some lulls are ununlullable, so he rides them. Put some easy songs on jukebox.

Outside there's a big wind and the snow is still trickling (tomorrow all the news stations will scream SNOW SNOW in the Hill Country) and half the sky has broken. It's night now. People will head back to mass in a few hours let them find what they're looking for. I hope this bar stays open. I forget if it does or does not. Knot on my watch. Hmm. In this lull there is a lot of drinking, ferocious drinking like fish wouldn't it be lovely to have gills? There is also a long and serious discussion about the state of things in Texas.

Who's committing the crimes? I hear you.

Who's below the poverty level? I hear you.

Who lives in the ghettos? I hear you.

What do they want from us? I hear you.

Resolved: that the state of things in Texas (and by inference America) is shitty and it's time to stop blaming white prejudice. Resolved: that if they don't like it they can go back to wherever they came from. Resolved: that it's shittier where they came from so why again are they complaining? Resolved (for Velasquez): that not all of them are bad but it's sad the way the majority ruins it for the minority. Eleven rotten apples spoil the twelfth.

Then Steve says. Listen. I can prove those tits are fake.

How? she asks.

That's it I think *Isn't it?*

Hold on he says walks waggling over sidles to bar looks her in the sandbags. Steve wears the eyes of a scientist now. Lift up your shirt ma'am. No way she says. You asked how so now I'm going to show you. Lift the shirt please.

About this time everyone in bar is leaning or tiptoed or stretched or wide-eyed grinning or spellbound. Jimmy has his hands together praying eyes at the ceiling Lord let us!

And she pulls it up Christ I never thought she would but there her top is coming off drunkenly arms trying to get out of sleeves victory at last. Off! Then she reaches around her back and undoes her bra and wait just one minute I think he said *lift* not *take off* this is *unheard of*. When the bra comes loose the huge tits massive nipples flop down like two alpine avalanches then unnaturally buoying back. They are the divine tits. The Christ tits. Then Steve takes hold of them right there in his damn hands pressing and massaging scientifically monitoring shape elasticity and turgidness. We might as well all be paintings on the wall of a museum not a breath cough or sniffle. Then he says hmmm and bends down to smell them and the woman lifelessly holding arms up almost falls asleep until Steve puts his mouth on one of her giant nipples and starts giant whopping suckling noises waking her. Now her arms come down holy shit embracing him and wanting more squeezing his face into her chest and his arms and legs begin to squirm. Mother of God Steve did it. Out, released, he is a butterfly from a cocoon and we cheer him. The woman holds the bar to keep from falling. She wants her shirt back. Hank is lying on the pool table beating his fists into the velvet he is laughing so hard. Jimmy is down on his knees thanking God Steve is fixing his hair smiling a somebody-better-buy-me-a-drink smile. The ladies have all crossed their arms the boys with them are asking to leave.

Where is her shirt? Not bothering to be covered revealed to the world she spins cautiously around on her stool staring at all the men's faces, Do you, Do you, Do you? Then she gets to Kyle. He's got them in his hands holding them out of her reach. What possessed him? Don't you hate that one idiot who waits until someone else makes a crowd laugh then jumps in at the end like he was part of it? Well that's Kyle big bulbous chin shaking no you can't have them ha ha. The woman gets down from her stool this could get ugly. Give them back she says Come get them he replies. Then she takes him by the center of the neck right at the windpipe and digs her fingernails paralyzing him right there fingers inch deep in his fat pressing till he turns red and slaps gingerly helplessly at her arms momma momma.

Who will help him? Somebody order drinks we're going to need them now. I kind of like seeing Kyle get strangled so it seems does everybody else Velasquez tried to go over but Deke held him by pinching his shirtsleeve. When the police come they will call it depraved indifference and we will say oh come on now would all these people actually sit and watch a man *get murdered* we thought they was jokin. We sip some drinks looking at the spectacle of half-naked woman with largest tits any of us ever saw in our miserable lives on top of fat redheaded helpless man wishing one of us would save him.

At long last our fearless bartender politely asks her to stop. She grabs her shirt and stands above Kyle who has turned onto his stomach to cough and to act like a pussy. When she looks our direction we all go scrambling to the empty spaces of the bar like children *somebody buy her a drink*.

When Kyle picks himself up fifteen maybe twenty minutes later he has finished coughing and crying and goes sheepishly out of the bar into the cold night. Not a word. Go dig your spic

ditches. Let's get a couple more drinks before the carolers come. The boys and girls have snuck out behind us. When did that happen? We are alone but for the woman and her two fake tits.

Drink up soldiers. Joe are you still cold I think you may have caught a bug. Mass will begin again ten to eleven. Midnight mass two hours early for the old folks. Dare Larry go again? Man from Hinsdale Illinois will be there with his whoever father or mother-in-law wondering why anyone would ever live in Texas. Whispering that's the guy who tells the Mexican jokes but he'd rather see me in a dark alley wouldn't he?

Hugo sickly, eyes without light, falls. Picks self up holds backs of chairs saunters dives balances. Ends up beside Deke somehow, says something in complete drunken gibberish, and Deke holds his finger out right above the bridge of Hugo's nose but does not speak. Hugo waits and waits hovering there drunk balloon and Deke finally turns to the bar and says one bottle of Scotch. And now I think it's a little early for whole bottles but I will not hinder an ambitious soldier so I say well let's do it. But when the bartender gives him the bottle he throws his money down and puts the bottle inside his jacket and heads out the door. We all stand curiously by, shrugging to each other. Guess he doesn't like our company. Hugo lurches out his walk is an outrageous circus act. Hey come back I shout our numbers are thinning. Can't you see?

Everybody is itching to follow. Except the woman and the bartender. And maybe not Joe but it's hard to tell through his shivering. Maybe it'll help to get him back out into the cold. Let's go gentlemen helmets rifles leave behind your trifles bring your drinks. Down the road there Deke is Hugo a football field behind him.

When we get out to the road we walk in Deke's and Hugo's footsteps, which have made little sliding tracks in the little bit of snow that has stayed. Everything in light is white, from snow, or glittery, from ice, and everything in shadow is black. Can you see him I ask Velasquez on point Yep I can see him just ahead he's stopped. I peer over all the shoulders and can see Deke standing outside the store Ingrid and George used to own and now that spic I wonder could he turn the whole town Mexican? Will we all have to go around in panchos and sombreros to please tourists? I wish Deke would burn it down in the blowing wind we could clear the whole street and maybe even heat up Joe back. Joe you are a hero if you pull through tonight.

Do you know how fast trash burns? Like gunpowder. But there Deke goes again, when Hugo gets close, and climbs into his car. Do you remember how nice his truck was? We stop. Guess he didn't want us after all. His tires spin out of the icy space he'd parked in, reversing, then forward, down the road, leaving Hugo drunk on the road a little speck of a man casting a shadow the length of a bus in three or four directions. Velasquez looks at me and says what now? Back to the bar I guess maybe we'll get another look at those tits Steve see if she remembers you. I see Hugo kneel and stand again and sit down on the curb, then lay himself down and I know exactly what that head feels like. Then the restaurant door opens between us and the bar and the happy carolers come singingly out admiring all the wonder in the world and I look at Jimmy and Steve and Hank and Velasquez and say There's not enough snow for snowballs. Don't be afraid to throw rocks.

PART THREE

When the speck of Hugo's arm-waving shape disappeared behind the hill, or in darkness, or having given up to rest, so drunk, Deke looked up through his windshield. Quickly opening, the sky was violet and star-filled in spaces, and looking into it seemed to draw Deke out of his own body. Snow was driving sideways, blowing from precarious stoops back into the air, and swirling, so that to Deke it seemed it was falling out of the clear sky. When his gaze drifted back to the road his eyes caught and followed the wipers moving across the glass.

Deke was driving with his elbows. The bottle of scotch was between his legs, and he tried twisting the top of it off with one hand. In the other was a lighter that would not burn, and he flicked it again and again, half-watching the flint's spark, half-focused on the road, invisible edges, ice or white, trying to get smoke from the cigarette that dangled from his lips. Then the road to his house came, and he turned the wheel with his elbows, and the car slid gently over the cold road.

He was in a moment of perfect invincibility, of quiet relief, and only the snowflakes broke the tranquility. He was acutely, flawlessly awake. The shapes of trees and boulders brooded quietly to the side, and were the unchanging aspects of the town. The houses he passed, disguised by the little bit of snow, and some icicles from days of freezing drizzle, as quaint as gingerbread, were white on roofs, on angles of windowsills, on mailboxes' tops. But year by year they had grown more feeble, sagging, shedding coats of paint, paling or yellowing in sunlight.

Deke was finally smoking. It burned a straight, clean line into his lungs, and he held his breath and let the smoke settle into the fleshy crevices of his body. It heightened his already intense awareness to the things around him, and he began to draw the outlines of the horizon with his eyes, counting, as distant as they might have seemed, the grooves and imperfections of the road. There were lines and angles, and within each one another smaller one, and another, smaller still, and all in motion both of their own, infinitesimally, and in relation to him. Each new perception was the proof and contradiction of the previous, and every moment was one in the sum of moments of every human being on earth, and, in Deke's enhanced acuity, bore that weight. It was being between the feeling of relief and the feeling of imminent significance, of all things in such lazy drift and also such hurried expectancy, that held him in his tightened, awakened suspension. That drive, between the instant he walked past the store's façade and the instant he would leave his house again, was the invisible, unknowable instant between a thing's

end and another's beginning, and yet he could see and fathom it, and relish it, and no cigarette in his life had so much flavor, and no drink.

As he approached his house, snow was thickening in the air, and powder was looping behind him, drawn into spirals by the wind, now tight at their centers, now wisping at their huge edges, lit by streetlights. When he hit his brakes, in the driveway, the snow behind him turned red in his mirrors. He opened the door and the long ash at the end of his cigarette broke and burst through his car. He looked at what was left, a tiny, burning bud just above the filter, and tossed it into the snow. Then he opened his glove compartment to make sure the envelope was there, the six thousand dollars he had withdrawn, everything he had, when he heard the store was sold. He opened it and felt the edges of the bills. Embarrassed he'd left the money in his car all day, he put the envelope in his jacket's inside pocket and stepped out onto the softening ice, snow-speckled, which squeaked under the rubber of his shoe soles. To him the sound was like bedsprings, and he moved his feet back and forth to reproduce it.

He was expressionless throughout all this, and he felt he could see everything in two directions at once, both forward and backward. So that he could see his house standing darkly in front of him, covered in shadows and blue light, and its past. There was Jenny waiting at the door in her wedding gown, hoping to be carried. Deke had been elsewhere, though he couldn't remember exactly, or with whom. So she entered on her own, and slept in an empty bed with the top of her dress pulled down to her waist, tiredly trying to be a wife. There was no father to give her away and no husband to take her, so she watched the bedroom door until her eyes wouldn't stay open. Then Deke blinked, and other women passed in and out, secretly, holding their underwear in a bundle, kissing him through the cracked-open door, one of his eyes open to watch the road. They had neither names nor faces, and all their bodies were one same shape.

When he looked behind him, above the road and trees, he could see a bright Christmas star atop the church's steeple, which was visible in winter, when no tree leaves obstructed the view. The steeple itself was a shadow under the star's light. It seemed to Deke like a chip chiseled carefully out of the dark paint of the sky, revealing a darker sliver. He looked at his watch. It would be Christmas in a few hours.

Deke twisted the key and shoved the door open with his shoulder and leg. He had left the heat on, accidentally, and standing in his doorway was like standing half in winter and half in a balmy, equatorial summer. He left the door open to let air in and went to turn the heat off, grappling with his clothes, undressing as he walked. When he finally took a seat, not bothering to turn on the television, he could feel the outside air finally beating through the warmth, and he opened the bottle of scotch and lit another cigarette.

There were no signs of Christmas in his house. He thought there might have been a box in one closet, full of tree ornaments and decorations, maybe stockings, but they were gifts from Ingrid and George, all antique Texas trash, and had never been put up, not even when Jenny was alive. The empty walls stared back at him disinterestedly. There were pots full of dirt in the corners, where plants had thrived once. They had an old, distinct smell, and Deke didn't know if it was the dirt or the clay pots, or something underneath that may have seeped out when Jenny last watered them. As he looked around, he began to think of other things in relation to the last time Jenny touched or saw them: the dirty blinds and curtains, which she had bought and put up when he wouldn't help; candles on the mantelpiece, which she bought by the bundle, hoping they would make the house romantic, but never lit; the apron hanging on the wall in the kitchen,

with Best Chef in Texas stitched into it, which Ingrid had given Jenny for a birthday present even though she couldn't cook a thing, but she had worn it one night to impress him, and he had walked indifferently by her out the door, and those moments flashed in his mind, but the moment he could picture them, the moment they were clear enough to describe in words, they lost viscosity.

Outside, sleeping and awake, loud and silent, the Christian world was celebrating the birth of the one man who could rescue it from endless frustration, to reveal the light of God's design. Deke took another drink. He could feel it pour warmly down each tiny slope and ridge of his esophagus. Then he thought of Hugo, worried he was crawling drunkenly up the road, and might ask Deke to bring him along, no matter what the destination. How did the search for purpose remain man's most resilient quest—where the significance of each fact or idea was the expectation of another fact or idea, so that the quest's nature was to prove over and over its fruitlessness?

Deke didn't ever want to see the face of anyone in town again, most especially Hugo, so he took one last drink, closed the bottle of scotch, and went to his bedroom. He pulled a suitcase out and stuffed clothes hurriedly inside, tossing some on the floor. His house was growing cold, even back in the bedroom, and when he zipped the suitcase closed, he shivered. There was no use turning on the heat again, so he wrapped himself in his blanket, over his head. He looked like an old, hooded woman going about an abandoned house, gathering. He took a ring that belonged to Jenny, his engagement ring to her. There were three small diamonds in it, gray from neglect, so he rubbed the ring on the soft cotton of the blanket and put it in his pocket. He took an old hunting knife he had sprung from George's store, blade tarnished black, cutting edge dull. Someone had written Shiloh 1863 on it as a joke, maybe Ingrid, maybe some stranger, and George had tried to sell it as a priceless antique. He went to the bookshelf in his living room and scanned it for something large and tedious that would take him forever to finish. He was unsettled by the books Jenny had bought, some read and some unread, but all standing beside each other like testaments to her past. He chose one that seemed old and excruciatingly dull. He read the first page and knew it would take him all his life to read the rest. Satisfied, he put the knife and book in his suitcase, felt for the envelope of money in his jacket, ran his hand over the ring in his pocket, and rubbed his short hair forward.

He was coming out of the moment between moments. He could feel his perfect energy leaking from his fingers and eyes, the first growing light and bloodless, the second more weary, and drying. He could feel his inquisitive sharpness subsiding. Then he yawned, shaping his mouth to hinder it. He looked like someone who had smelled something awful, or who might sneeze at any moment, and then it was over, and his face resumed its expressionlessness.

The boards of his wooden floor gave and croaked as he stepped on them, and the wind through the front door was blowing all the loose, light objects in his house, and the very weight of the air on the roof made gasping noises in the attic, and he felt as if he were wandering through a corpse he had murdered. The noises neither accused nor forgave him. At that moment, while moving toward the open door, ten steps away, he could see Jenny holding him back by his thigh, arms wrapped like claws around it, sliding on her knees as he tried to get away from her, begging him not to love another woman. I don't love anybody, he said, and then she fell flat on her stomach, and placed both hands around one of his ankles, weakly, now begging him only to come back when he was finished. He told her she was pitiful, and she stopped, and

got to her knees again, but couldn't stand. Her robe had come undone, and Deke could see her naked body, the unmatched breasts, one smaller and sloping left, the other hanging low, larger, paler nipple, and the dark tuft of her pubic hair.

And then he saw her through the archway, sitting at the kitchen table, long after the begging, with no more energy to struggle, understanding her life and her father and her husband. She couldn't lift her eyes to watch him go, and Deke knew even then she would never leave him, because she was raised to be unloved by men, because it was her fate to be betrayed by her desires, and that it was only he who could release her from the life she had no choice but to embrace, and even then it would be the same thing sometime later, as indeed it had been, Deke thought, with Hugo.

Behind him, he could hear Jenny whispering from the bedroom. She was asking about the weather. He looked toward the voice. Then she asked—and he could barely make the words out through the noise of the wind—if there was anything for dinner, and if he could cook for himself. Curious, Deke walked to the bedroom, suitcase in hand, and peered through the door. She was there lying with a pillow propped behind her, nudging a body beside her. He stepped inside, around the bed, and saw himself lying with one leg and one arm off the bed, passed out. She nudged his sleeping body again. You could rent a movie, she said. Then tears were in her eyes, and his body stirred in the bed, but did not wake. When she tried to kiss him on the side of the face he swatted her unconsciously. She sat back, silently, and said nothing for a minute. Deke, standing beside the bed, knelt, trying to see her face. Was this something from his memory? Was a part of the sleeping Deke's mind listening, so that he could play this image back with such accuracy? He fought the notion, since the accuracy of a memory is precisely what reveals it as fiction. Then Jenny spoke. She asked, Why did you Hugo why did you? Deke stood. The Deke in bed kicked at the sheets, and Deke could see the filthy pantleg of his jeans. Jenny didn't notice. She asked, Why did you why did you fall in that hole? Deke wondered, To which Hugo was she speaking? Then she stood, and when she was gone the sleeping Deke happily usurped the bed, sprawling. Jenny left the room, but Deke stayed to watch himself. Outside, in the kitchen, Jenny was making a racket. The sleeping Deke put his pillow over his head. A door opened, then closed, and in the clandestine moment between one and the other came the imperceptible noise of a body stealing out of the house. At last Deke recognized the night. The truck's engine fired up, revving, and the sleeping Deke awakened in a panic, hearing it. He ran through his own house, and Deke followed him, walking, and they came outside, into a warm, clear night, after a rain. The truck was zigzagging down the street, and the Deke in Deke's imagination tore after it, barefoot.

When the image of his own body sprinting into the night crested and disappeared behind the hill, the warm night in his memory broke, and it was cold again, and snow was spread over the ground, and the old car he'd bought as the truck's replacement was beside him. He stopped, realizing he had walked out of his house without thinking, ending—and how it had consumed him to that point—the moment between an end and a beginning, so that he stood firmly on the side of beginning. He put his suitcase down and rested his knuckles, popping them. Perhaps that was how all beginnings came about, with no clear demarcation, but set fluidly in motion, realized only in retrospect, in the instability of recollection. To be unconscious of an experience in order to truly experience it, that was a paradox. He felt overwhelmed by the notion that consciousness of a moment, or of an object, or of a sensation, slowed down one's apprehension

of it, that self-awareness was a cumbersome weight between a person and the reality they inhabited, so much that reality, as it existed, was permanently out of human reach. That, in fact, every act was a flawed memory of that act, already flushed into oblivion. Listening to music was remembering the music at the exact moment the note had vanished.

But he was out of the house. And this fact did not change with his realization of it. As long as he did not return it remained irrefutable. He stood in the driveway, holding his suitcase. He lifted the bottle. Tired, finally, the long road ahead of him, he held the scotch to his mouth until the drink burned his tongue and cheeks. The alcohol would slow things down, allow him to relax, and this above all was what he desired, since at that moment, with each move he made, each unwanted, meandering thought, the entire dark universe seemed insatiable, growing and accelerating in appetancy, like a body approaching the speed of light. Deke's next drink was more soothing. He felt drunk, or at least heavier.

Deke picked up the suitcase and put it in the front seat of his car. He settled in beside it, and yanked the door closed. He turned the key and the engine ground, not starting, then again, and again, until finally the car came alive. He put the heater on and crossed his arms, waiting for the air to warm. The cold rush from the vents, in the meantime, worked to refrigerate the inside, and Deke shook his head from side to side and stomped his feet against the hollow-sounding floorboard to keep himself from turning to ice. When the cold air turned slightly lukewarm, he flicked the headlights on, and the massive transformation from the darkness he was in to the whiteness of the headlights and the snow's reflection of the light and of itself in the light blinded him. He rubbed his eyes, and the sensation of pushing them inside his head made him nicely dizzy, and there were lights in his vision, and he was flying forward. When he took his hands away, the lights remained, dying softly, still coloring regions of his sight, then less, then not at all. He looked in his rearview mirror for obstacles, and everything was white in red light, and then, above the ground, black and shapeless. The world was either hugely visible or not at all, as it had always been for Deke.

His car was out of gas. He noticed this at the exact moment he told himself he wouldn't stop for anything, that another five minutes in town would've been too torturous to bear. The coincidence exhausted him. When he got to the main road, he turned right, and the steering wheel felt alive and struggling not to budge. He drove against the uneven flow of cars and trucks on the way to mass, and prayed that the gas station was still open. The lights above the pumps were on, but not in the station's small store, or the garage beside it. He stopped and stepped out of the car. Snow was still carrying by, and flakes caught his eyebrows and eyelashes. He picked the nozzle out of the pump, placed it into his gas tank, lifted the metal lever, and waited for the price to roll to zero. Everything he touched was freezing and difficult to hold. When there was no response, he flipped the lever a few times. Then he walked to the dark store, put his hands to the glass to shade his eyes from outside light, and peered in. The steam from his breath turned the glass cloudy, but he could see enough to know the store was empty. He knocked against the glass, called out a few times, and nothing. He went back to see how out of gas he really was—already below the E. He honked the horn, hoping it would rouse someone, and it made a helpless, laughable gargling noise, and the wind smothered it. He shut the door, stepped away, and kicked the fender above the front tire as hard as his exhausted body could. The metal bent in as easily as a Coke can. Another car, passing by, driver gawking, seeing Deke do this, honked, humiliating him with a sharply trumpetlike and authoritative horn.

Deke watched the car disappear up the road, hoping it would turn and come back, and that one of them would kill the other.

Bells began to ring. The noise filtered high above the treetops, sustaining, slowly dissipating, like fog roasting in sunlight, as if it were a note in the one range the wind could not instantly silence. Then a light in the garage turned on, and a man, yawning, holding a beer, walked out. Hey Deke, he said. Deke forced a friendly smile, and told the man he needed gas.

The man nodded, standing there. If one watched carefully, one would see the man swaying. Deke noticed this because the blue edge of a sign was vanishing and reappearing behind the man's right shoulder. Are you open? asked Deke, and the man, startled, said Oh, like Deke had yanked him from a waking nap, or daydream. Yeah we're open, he said. Christmas fuckin' Eve. The man finished his beer, tipping himself backward to get every ounce, holding the can an inch or two above his thirsty mouth, and the last spilling droplets showered onto his beard. Deke noticed ice had formed under the man's mouth, in the thick black hair that was less a style than laziness, an inability to find a reason to shave every day. He threw his beer can at the trash bin, but not in. It slid instead across the snowy cement, and the man shrugged and walked away, back through the garage, disappearing for a minute. Then the lights in the store came on, and he was inside, walking through the aisles, stopping to get another beer for himself, then turning the pump on. While Deke was filling his tank, the man came out again. Where you goin', Deke? he asked.

Mexico, said Deke.

Oh, said the man. When you comin' back?

Never.

The man said Oh again, and together they watched the numbers roll by as the gas flowed into the tank. When the nozzle clicked off, and the numbers halted, the cent dial stopped between a four and a five, the man squinted at it. Which one? he asked, and Deke said he didn't care. The man leaned in at it, jokingly. Hell we'll call it a four.

Deke gave him the money. The man took it reluctantly, and asked, hoping he might have some company, if there were anything else. Snowflakes were falling on his beard, then melting, and when Deke shook his head that there wasn't, the man slumped and turned, telling Deke to wait for change. Deke stood alone while the man ran off, slipping on a patch of ice and laughing at his own stupidity, and the bells, first just the hint of them, like the impression of a scent, then definitively, again began to ring. The man, just disappearing into his garage, yelled Stop with the fuckin' bells everybody knows what day it is.

There were no reasons anyone did anything. The church and the man honking and this idiot working a gas station drunk, and the other cars going by, and the bells, and the snow in December, and Jenny's death, and George's madness and surrender, and Hugo, and what could anyone even begin to ask about Hugo? Each deepening probe into their nature, each more-magnifying lens, revealed greater complication, not greater understanding, and the mistake was to combat this notion, rather than embracing it, the oceanic dilemma of contradictions, since it was only within such an irrational landscape that a paradox could hold its shape, where one fact could exist in two places, or a hundred thousand trillion, and resist simplicity. The only way to tell someone's story was to untell it, to see everything as it wasn't, to release the very thing you want to hold, not to find connections that explained predicaments but to witness the unfathomable absence of everything else. To re-create the situation of death. The man was

running back to Deke with money in his hand. Deke sat inside his car and rolled the window down. He took keys from his pocket and put them in the ignition. The man was slipping deliberately, riding the ice and snow like a surfer. Deke took the money and wished him a good night, and the man nodded unhappily and Deke turned the key. There was a click, but the engine did not turn over. The man said, Whoops. Deke put his head on the steering wheel. What does it sound like? he asked.

The man was grinning now. Sound like you in trouble.

Deke opened the door, shoving the man away, and got out. Starter?

The man thought. He lay down under the front and prodded. The car shook back and forth. After half a minute, the man crawled out and stood, saying, Your solenoid's busted, loose as a motherfucker.

Deke crossed his arms. The man asked him if he wanted a beer, and Deke said no, reaching into his car for the scotch. The man said Howdy there and cocked his head. Guess you got me beat. Then Deke lit a cigarette, and the man told him he couldn't. Deke didn't look at him or respond or do anything but smoke, deeply and indifferently, and the man finally said it probably wouldn't do any harm. Deke closed his door and leaned against the car's cold shell.

You in a hurry?

If he was or wasn't, he couldn't explain either. He could feel time slipping by him, age wasting his skin away, cell by cell, but he could also sense a vast reservoir of hours and days ahead of him, inviting possibility, and if there were an arc of electricity between these two points he was it.

Suddenly, the two men were bathed in light, and their long and branchy shadows were darting in woods like phantoms. They turned to see a car speeding in, brights on, wheels locking as it braked, without regard for peril, its own or anyone else's. It was white, massive and immaculate, with darkly tinted windows. As Deke watched it slide into the station, headlights pummeling the whole night, he held his hand up as a visor. The car pulled in to the other side of the gas pump, and its engine turned off. The man beside Deke said Damn, and went around the pump, to the rear, to get a better look. Deke's car, dead, looked ridiculous near something so expensive, like something better left rusting in a junkyard, and Deke wanted to abandon it, grab his suitcase and walk.

Aston Martin, said the man. Holy shit.

Deke positioned himself to see the driver's door, to gaze inside when it opened. He drank from his bottle, finished his cigarette, and lit another. Deke could feel the driver watching both of them, wondering which one would run to fill the car's tank, like servants overjoyed just to be near money, to breathe it. The tinted windows stared blankly around, superior and emotionless.

You know how much one of these babies goes for?

Deke shook his head, telling the man to keep quiet. The man raised his shoulders. Then the driver's door opened slightly, like a tiny opening in an egg shell. Dim lights turned on, revealing two bodies, a man and woman, but from his height Deke couldn't see their heads. Deke wanted to see himself step out, wanted to see his own face emerge and encounter his alternate self, his poor and unlucky self, and he would awaken loudly somewhere in Europe, sweating, and the woman in the car would be beside him in the bed, and stir, lifting her half-sleeping hand to his chest, rub it, and moan about going back to bed.

A leg came out. A man in a suit. Then the door swung all the way open, and a hand with a thin gold-and-silver watch around the wrist grabbed the top of the door, and then a body, head still down, looking inward, large and still young. Hey there, said the attendant to the driver. The driver asked for gas, and the attendant went sprinting off.

The driver turned, and as he lifted the nozzle out he saw Deke, and nodded a masculine hello, a hello between private men. Deke recognized him, or thought he did. It had been over three years since he'd seen Guillermo Espinoza, at the wedding, marrying Liz Cavan, now Cavan-Espinoza, and he had been in uniform and his hair cut closely to his head. This man was rounder, with full hair, but it could have been him. Or perhaps, merely, he had been hiding somewhere on Deke's mind all day, after Deke had heard the news about the store, and he was envisioning this as he had already envisioned so much.

The man moved away, opening a line of sight to the woman, but only her legs, crossed, in a skirt above the knees, were really visible. Her stockinged calves were absolutely perfect, impatiently bouncing. The skirt was charcoal, and Deke could see, concentrating, the moment of her skin where her naked legs would have uncrossed, and when he saw this he spread her, in his imagination, flatly on top of a bed, or countertop, arms raised above her perfect face, which he could not then see, but knew unquestionably, and drew her legs, muscular inside of her thighs, apart with one finger, gently against the knee. In his mind he could hear her make a noise like a huge gate opening, and within the noise was the scent and lights of money effortlessly intermingling with beauty, aggrandizing each other.

Deke heard the nozzle click, and the man stepped into the line of sight he had opened briefly. The man saw Deke looking his direction and smiled, but unhappily, wishing to be left alone. There was a noise, a dinging, and Deke turned to see the attendant running through the store's front door, which he had finally bothered to open. He looked so excited to be busy, and he tried to leap over a small pool of ice, but came down on another one, and his legs spread in splits as he came down—wide, groin-destroying splits, and something in or near his right hand, planted into the pavement instinctually, cracked, made a sound like a broomstick snapping, and he screamed in agony, and fell to his back and arched up like someone holding an electrified fence. The man didn't know which to grab, his wrist or his groin, so he alternated. He cursed the weather, and beat his elbows against the cement, and the back of his head, hoping to draw the pain away by adding more elsewhere. The man in the Aston Martin, and who else could it be but Espinoza, walked carefully to the man, and knelt.

Are you okay? he asked.

The attendant, tears streaming out the sides of his closed eyes, didn't offer a response. Espinoza, if it were Espinoza, gave him a twenty and told him to keep the change. Money could buy back all the world's guilt, Deke thought, because it could put distance between the wealthy and the signs of the world's misfortune. If Deke had enough money, he could've stepped into the Aston Martin, put his hand on the woman's leg, winked, and bought their way out of the memory of abandoning her husband. A year in Istanbul. Nothing was impossible. But all the money he had in his jacket pocket, the six thousand dollars that represented his total value on Earth, was a laughable amount to both this man and woman, and couldn't even buy a glimpse of her leg again, or skirt, or flat stomach, all of which disappeared when the man, getting in briskly, closed the door, finally understanding what Deke was staring at.

The car started, and it spun its tires like an animal cartoonishly trying to get traction, finally reeling forth, within a few feet of the attendant, still writhing on the ground, who, afraid he wasn't seen, tumbled out of the way, shouting. The car missed him and swerved onto the road loosely, and shot down it, toward the church. Deke didn't do anything for a moment, and then he heard the attendant yell for him. Deke, the man cried, rolling himself filthy, snow and dirt and oil, I'm hurt.

Deke went over and told the man to stop moving and whining. The man sniffled like a child, and came to rest.

I think I tore somethin' in my legs, he said.

Deke was looking at the size of the man's wrist, large as a softball. Wrist's broke, Deke said, and the man nodded, holding his forearm. Help me, he said.

Deke told him he'd be fine, and picked him off the ground, throwing the man over his shoulder, in the way one soldier rescues another. The attendant yelped, and Deke told him to shut up. They walked to Deke's car, and Deke opened the door, and put the man in the front seat. The man, almost crying again, said he couldn't drive, that his crotch was on fire.

Listen, said Deke. I've got to leave this fucking town. Now hold the clutch and pop it when I tell you. The man watched horrifiedly as Deke spoke.

Push it down, Deke continued, helping the man by his knee, and the man depressed his left foot, begging Deke to stop, and Deke leaned over and put the car in gear, and before he went to push it from behind, he grabbed the man's arm, saying, You either take the car out of gear or you push that fucking clutch in once you're moving, or we're doing this again. The man was pleading now, and Deke told him it would be over in a second. He hurried, pushing and turning red in his face and eyes, blood like a river in his head, and there was little room, so he yelled quickly at the man to let the clutch go and prayed he'd pushed it fast enough, and it fired, coughed, almost died, but picked up. It didn't stop. Oh hurry, the man yelled, I can't push it down. Deke jumped forward, thrusting his foot inside the open door, stomping on the man's foot on top of the clutch, which made him squeal and beat on Deke's arm. Deke grabbed the gear stick and pulled it into neutral, then smashed the brakes, halting just in front of the storefront, and the car sat idling there, threatening to stall, while Deke looked in on the attendant, whimpering and holding his groin. Come on, he said, and grabbed the man under his arms. He came out heavily, like the carcass of an animal, and Deke laid him down so his head was resting on a cement stoop. His wrist was bigger than before, and Deke told him to put ice on it, when he got the strength. I'm sorry about this, he said, and then left the man lying there. He put the car in reverse, and when he turned to angle out, his headlights shined on the man who had known Deke's name even though Deke hadn't known his, and it reminded him of a performance on stage, in spotlight, of an actor trying to wrest emotion from an audience, but as soon as he was in the light the light had moved, and Deke was pulling onto the main road. When he shifted into second gear, noticing no cars behind him, he lit another cigarette.

Jenny had turned that direction. Deke hadn't seen it, but when he had stopped at the end of the road, wheezing, leaning on his knees, a car pulled by, full of drunken men, and the driver said, Hey Deke, I just saw your truck tear round this corner. You chasin' it? The men inside cheered. Deke waved them away, too fatigued to speak, and the car drove off. One of the men inside shouted at another, pure joy, and a beer can flew out an open window, tumbling on the road, then laughter, louder than the car, but softening as they drew away, until at a certain

distance the noise of the car and the laughter were equal, and then no laughter at all. Deke's stomach was in knots from running so far. He squatted, and his knees popped. He tried to fight off these details to remember others. What color had that car been, or was it a truck? He couldn't figure out why some memories endured, and others didn't, if they were hallucinations chosen in order to impregnate the past with the mood one wanted, to build a series of loosely bound symbols based on an always fading impression of some event. Detail was another paradox, since it fashioned a story at the same time it ruined it. To pluck one detail out of an many-detailed scene was to give a story form, to bring shape to the world's shapelessness, but it was also to betray the shapelessness, and to lie.

It had taken Deke half an hour to walk back to his house. His thighs and calves felt like unstretchable leather. His heart felt like a tiny, scalding iron ball in his chest. The road was wet, and he felt hung over. He considered licking the moisture off the pavement to get rid of the cottony webbing in his mouth.

Deke turned left, onto the highway that would take him to San Antonio, where Jenny must have gone straight, higher into the hills. He was home an hour before he telephoned George and Ingrid, had showered, stretched his legs, while monitoring the clock, imagining where she could have been. He explained that Jenny had left in a fit, as usual, but this time in his truck, and asked to be told when it arrived. You mean *she*, said Ingrid. Deke didn't know what Ingrid meant. You said *it*, but you meant *she*. Deke said, Just call me, and hung up.

He looked at his watch. He had to angle it so the metal hands would catch a dim light behind him. The highway began sloping into the valley, curving as it descended, offering one long and diminishing vista. The old Spanish Trail had run through the valley, and some entrepreneurs had established a town where travelers could rest, one last morning or night, and of all groups the Mormons came to save them, and the German Catholics after, ranching. How many towns in Texas had suffered the same, or similar, fate? And how many of them, now, were tourist towns?

If a town neither produces nor consumes anything but its own contrivances, does it exist? If it can sell the bits and pieces of itself in its stores? This is what Deke had understood, and finally wanted to embrace, to make a machine of the town, built to whore itself. Not competition but collaboration. Not five of the same restaurants, but five different cuisines, five themes. The secret was the appearance of choice, not choice itself. People no longer had any sensitivity to affectation. They were happiest farthest from a thing's underbelly. Deke drank. His imaginings of his rich self, putting this together, reaping wealth, was, with no details to betray, more vivid than any memory. But they also expired, also lost viscosity, when the scrolling theater of the snowy road required his focus, reminding him which night it was.

He had driven the highway to San Antonio a thousand times in his life, and had constructed a faultless representation in his head of each decline and incline, each curve and road sign. He could drive it blind. But was this a real memory, this representation, or was it the sum of memory shards, stripped of their recollective energies, pieced together to merely predict his next direction? It was as if, for a memory to mean anything, it had to broadside a mind, crash into the mind's eye from the depths of unfamiliarity like a wrecking ball, and then, seconds later, it would be gone, leaving only the lifeless shell of the memory, like a photograph one might see every day on the wall, like Deke's perfect knowledge of the road.

Deke, Deke thought, *shut up*. He popped his aching neck and looked at his eyes in the mirror, and wondered when to smoke his next cigarette. He was coming to the bottom of the valley, where the road would cut through a pass and head upwards again. On the roadside was an entrance to a Christmas tree farm. People drove up from San Antonio to cut their own trees instead of buying them in a nursery. This was the new rugged individualism, he thought. A small stand, locked shut, was unlit beside the driveway to the tree farm. Behind it was a metal gate, locked by a chain wrapped around a fencepost.

The snow was in patches over the road, and wet from travel, so that the cyclones he'd been kicking up were nothing now, or splattering invisibly behind. It was time for another cigarette. He rolled the window down slightly, for the smoke, and noticed the air had become warmer, but not warm, and slightly more humid. Curious, he rolled the window down completely, stuck his hand out, and let the churning air seep into his sleeve. Deke could feel the weight of the money, nestled on his ribcage, as the fabric of his coat and shirt bustled around it. He had asked for twenties and hundreds, and the teller had looked sadly at him, pitying his mistakes. There were always a handful of strangers, all bankers, who, if interested, could know a man's flaws and secrets by the movement of his money. When Deke had asked to withdraw his savings, in cash, and close his account, the teller first seemed exhilarated. The prospect of moving a man's life in dollars enlivened him. Then he pushed some buttons. Sweat was on his forehead. Then his face lost its strange combination of fear and joviality, and drooped. Oh, he said. Here it is. But six thousand dollars in Mexico was different than six thousand dollars in Texas, Deke told himself. As he thought of the teller's saddened face, Deke reached inside his coat pocket, opened a corner of the envelope with the tips of his fingers, and felt the edges of the bills. He wondered, Why did people who lived and worked around money, though they had none themselves, hate the poor just as much as the rich? Hate the types who fly coach, though they fly coach? There was nothing worse than a man who, eating dinner, hears a nearby table ordering a house wine and snickers, who will not let the waiter mispronounce a French vineyard, but will drive his Ford Taurus home just like everybody else. I'll order the wine you have to be *so* careful. The words rang like huge bells in Deke's ears.

He was coming to an intersection with a flashing yellow light. A flashing red light was stopping traffic, though there was no traffic that would have crossed the highway. There were no signs of civilization at the intersection, no gas station, no restaurant, and it seemed a little ridiculous, to have sent men out there to set the contraption up to control the potential for traffic. He had thought this many times, but it seemed most poignant then, on his way out, as if all the landscape's strange eccentricities were asking to come with him, like all the trees and abandoned shacks and these streetlights had been waiting patiently in the cold, watching exhaustedly down the road, for Deke to set them free. The red and yellow lights blinked and lit the scenery with color, which spilled into the now lit, now unlit spaces in its distances. From far away, one could see where the red light eroded, the last visible object glanced by the momentary flash, but up close this was never the case. As one approached the border that had once been so clear, one found the line in ruins, nowhere and everywhere, and it compelled the presence of another contradiction, that proximity confounds the senses, rather than enlightening them.

He passed the lights, concentrating so deeply on the idea of light and darkness that he did not even notice them, and five minutes later, awakening from his thoughts, he looked up and wondered where they were. He was going up a steep hill, and had to shift from fourth to third

gear to keep from stalling. The engine fought and whined, and the incline persisted, and Deke had to drop it into second. He had his forehead on the steering wheel by then, not even watching the road, hoping no one would see him driving twenty-five miles an hour, now twenty, up this hill. The temperature gauge was rising. If he lost his radiator he was going to walk into the woods and throw himself off a cliff. There were a few hundred yards left to crest the slope, and Deke, in a moment of weakness, of loathsome desperation, began rocking back and forth to help. He turned the heat on, fully, to draw the hot air from the engine, and rolled the window down to keep himself from suffocating.

They hadn't found Jenny for two days. Her body was fresh, like she had wandered through the hills for a day or two, and been there only a short while. It was that possibility that left open Deke's alternative theory, which he'd believed for a long time, that she had tried to steal his truck in a moment of courage, believing she had the power to leave him, but had got lost, and that going off the cliff was an accident. It was George who'd brought Deke the news. He was in his robe, barefoot, and had found out from the sheriff, old friend of his, and without bothering to dress George had gone for a walk, and found himself at Jenny's house. Deke answered, and George said, They found your truck. He was already too far gone to come back. Deke could see him talking earnestly and rapidly to the emptiness around him, like he was in a circle of very concerned people. They walked to George's house together. Ingrid was at the dining room table, watching the telephone ring. There was a man in uniform on the couch. Deke sat down across from him, and the man outlined the details of the accident. Deke was leaning back, looking absently into the arm of the chair on which he sat, and when there was a stretch of silence, he asked, Aren't you supposed to tell the husband these things first? The man in uniform didn't answer. He had a hat ring pressed into his thick white hair and a white mustache that twitched when his face changed expressions. Ingrid picked up the ringing phone, held it just above the receiver, then hung up. It rang again a minute later. Two and a half years later, now, Deke found himself wondering why she didn't just unplug it. Indifferent, or exhausted? Or was it that the pattern of the noise, the grind of the ringing, gave the otherwise maddening silence shape, that it sustained the framework of the moment so it couldn't be denied?

Womanizer. When he walked through town, in the months after Jenny's death, he had to drag the term with him, like it was chained to his ankle. The word itself was meaningless. Used at one time, by the same men and women who would use it to condemn him, to flatter and desire him, it was not an issue of behavior, but celebrity. Through windows, heads shook when he passed, that had once turned and gathered excitedly. Both acts, both loathing and admiring, in Deke's opinion, were fruits of an essential vacancy in people's lives, people who impose no or trivial form upon the world and must seek it in the greatness or evil of others. Not long after, George had been committed, and the strange story of his rapid collapse, though it had been a slow, uneventful twenty-five year deterioration, relieved some of the attention. When he came home soon after, everyone seemed a little depressed by his appearance, like he hadn't given them enough time to milk his misfortune. And the incomprehensibility of it all is that each accumulating scrap of misery improved the lives of these people, since it was information, the appearance of everyday vitality. Lighting another cigarette, cresting the hill in second, finally, Deke believed that if there were things worth cherishing, it wasn't information.

When the road sloped down, Deke took the car out of gear. The temperature of the engine, as the slow drift down began, plummeted. He relaxed the heater, and the cool air through the windows flushed the suffocating cabin. He was within fifteen miles of the city's outer loop, and he could see the dense texture of the overcast sky because the city's immense light flooded it. It was the city in a vague, impressionistic reflection, and as the clouds moved north, toward him, it was like the paint of a portrait remaining still while a rough, irregular canvas was crawling underneath. A city was, more than its place, its people. Deke, cigarette in his mouth as he looked up, caught by the peculiarity of the sky, knew he had played a small role in transforming the landscape of the city, and the state, and wherever else his aliens had traveled to. There had been innumerable lives he'd brought across, and people those lives had encountered or left behind, and they were why stories were inadequate, why details were lies, because a rendering would have to move outward, not inward. It would have to expand, seek out the story of every untold detail, and each detail contained within those details—to watch meaning unravel, not coalesce. But it would take more years to tell than years to live, and too many people, and be unrecognizable.

Womanizer. Because he had wanted to keep the sensation of sex alive in his thoughts, because the stale memories of past intimacies could not satisfy the body's hunger. They could not be relived, nor felt, and were less palpable, even, than fantasies. Only women, flesh, lying beside him, wanting to give themselves to him. Only the actual female figure, not his mind's representation of it. The shoulder, the neck, the breasts, the calves, knees, and insides of thighs, not imaginary, lifeless figments, altered by remembering, all perfection or hideous, but never real. Only, finally, pushing into a woman, watching the loosening of her face, as if a drug had slipped into her bloodstream, the motion driving all the externalities out, focusing the moment, working toward an end, a gasping, fleeting end, one that needed to be sought again, and could be found anywhere. Womanizer, because he was so good-looking.

It was minutes until midnight, and he told himself to keep checking, wanting badly to see one day pass officially into the other, a recognized moment, but his attention waned once again, and when he snapped back, later, noticing an absence of trees around him, he found himself in the outermost sprawl of San Antonio, closed shopping centers, huge, abandoned parking lots, and dull, washing light. A sign outside a bank told him it was six minutes after twelve, and forty degrees. He had missed it. He put his arm out the window to check the temperature, and the air was full of moisture, and heavy. The land was flat there, predominantly, a mile or two before the loop, and littered with stores where once there had been nothing. At the loop, five years before, not more, there had been no bridge, no entrance ramps, no turning lanes. There had just been a stoplight, and the lines of the lanes, yellow and white, had been fading into the gray of the pavement. There was nothing to be done. Residents protested, made human chains in front of old buildings, wrote letters to corporations, but when the new stores opened, they shopped there, and when restaurants, they ate. The bridge, slowly coming into view around a corner, was basking in a giant, transfixing orange light from a cluster of high futuristic streetlamps, so perfectly arranged and so bright they extinguished the possibility of shadows. Coming out of the darkness of the hills, to Deke, it was like a hazy ball of polluted sunlight, trapped in a dome. He used his hand as a visor, driving through it, to see his turn, and curved up the entrance to the loop, going east, toward the interstate. A headache was beginning from not drinking scotch, so he lifted the bottle again, and poured it down his throat, and after it was down he yawned, though

he did not feel tired. He would not allow himself to sleep until he was across the border, when going home would take more effort than staying.

Away from the bridge, the roadsides were free from sprawl. In the dense trees rising from the loop, to the north, the odd tree was adorned with Christmas lights, evidence of neighborhoods under the canopy. They would be annexed soon, if they hadn't been already. There was a car a long distance ahead of him, going his direction, and another, in the opposite, with its brights on, blinding Deke. He held his hand out to block the light, and if he had been in his truck he would have put his own brights on, flooded the highway in retaliation. They passed each other, and Deke wondered if the driver was alone. He could imagine a family watching television, hearing the noise of cars rolling sadly by, and pitying the drivers, but Deke gained pleasure out of traveling, out of being in transit at a time when everyone around was settling in, or slumbering, protected by the serenity of familiar faces, of old scents and rituals and Christmas colors, the perfection of a television commercial. The red sweaters and slippers. Happiness. Ever closer to the ideal of someone else's vision, so that the memory of one fine Christmas could be sparked by an advertisement, and one could not be sure if an event had happened or one had only wished it, having seen it on TV. He thought suddenly of Jenny, on the first Christmas they had shared together, and could see her sitting by the tree, opening presents she had bought for herself with his money. When she opened them, she had come to his lap and kissed him on the cheek, and he had said, trying to see around her to a football game, You bought them.

If memory drew from a single, already problematic instant in space and time, further and further from its origin, decaying in half-lives, losing vitality, what accounted for Deke's guilt, which had deepened with distance? What explained George's breakdown, and Jenny's suicide, if not the persistent vitality of memory, which finally overwhelmed their minds? Was it possible that a memory of an event had two natures, one that eroded, and one that gathered strength? Deke's headache was worsening. He drank again, and lit another cigarette. There was no snow on the road, and what had been snowflakes was now cold drizzle. Two miles from the interstate, he drove under a huge green sign telling him so. To turn right would take a car toward Houston, left, El Paso. And this was the position of San Antonio in Texas, that it cut a line through the state, between east and west, north and south, culturally and racially, in landscape, in foods, music, in wealth. Austin, north along a different interstate, and like San Antonio bordering the Hill Country, had this quality as well, but which was more so was an unimportant argument, since they were predicted to meet in a few years, eighty-five miles of development, anyway.

He turned steeply down a ramp, merging into the sparse interstate traffic, and as he came into the city, brightening with stores, car dealerships, and restaurants, a truck passed him on the right, beaten and rusted. As it went by the driver turned to Deke, and watched him, and Deke to him, just those few seconds of passing, like they were comparing each other's reasons for being on the road, wanting their own to be more interesting. It was a mysterious syndrome, suffered by everyone on earth, to a degree, that as a situation worsens the person in it begins to take pride in his bad luck. When it was ahead of him, the truck cut sharply into Deke's lane. It kicked up filthy wet rainwater, spraying Deke's windshield. He turned the wipers on, and they streaked the glass with brown, arcing lines. He turned them off. Perhaps it would rain again, and the water would clean them. Deke changed into the other lane, trying to escape the spray, but the truck exited, opening the highway.

He finished his cigarette more quickly than he had hoped, and it had not quelled a small but increasingly aching emptiness in his stomach. He looked inside his pack, shook the remaining cigarettes around, and decided not to smoke another for a few minutes. He began to scan for an open place to eat. Each half-mile was identical to the previous half-mile, with only names on buildings changed. Always ugliest near the interstate that ran through it, littered with its worst, blandest restaurants, a city would resemble every other city, where only license plates distinguished one part of the country from another. Nevertheless, Deke was certain, there were tens of thousands of people living near there, or driving through daily, who thought the scenery was full of important differences, one exit to the next, and many who thought the landscape had character. It was too late to be envious. That someone else was living off the happy misperceptions of others.

He felt one eye close, and slapped the side of his head. Nothing was open. Everywhere, outside lights were on, coloring the scene, but no lights inside, and no parked cars. His stomach growled. Earlier, he had passed an open pancake house, but hadn't wanted to stop, worried he might change his mind, or that his car would give up on him. There had been a few cars out front, and Deke thought it must've been one waitress, one cook, and one customer. In his mind he imagined the customer sitting in a booth, drinking his sixth cup of coffee, the waitress standing over a countertop, staring into the customer's coffee, thoughtlessly, and the cook smoking a cigarette by the dumpster. He wondered why they all didn't run off together, hop in the cook's big Lincoln and go to California. Deke lit his next cigarette, finally conceding. He would get a snack at a gas station, if it came to it. The interstate split into business and express lanes, the first low, on the level of the streets, the second high above them, as it approached downtown San Antonio. He took the express lane, and the city's small skyline colored the horizon. The buildings had been decorated with red, white, and green lights, bursting modestly into the low clouds. He imagined some child asking his mother if Christmas came from Mexico. The streaks on his windshield were much worse in the brightening air. The streetlamps were closer together, and illuminated billboards hovered over the roadsides. He saw the sign for Highway 90, toward Del Rio, and switched lanes. He had passed one car, full of people, going ten miles an hour in the fast lane. He took his exit, which left him headed directly west, toward Mexico.

The rough road stayed Deke's pondering. His dashboard was shaking, and he could hear various sounds from the frame and engine, as if his car were held together with twisted coat hangers, and falling violently apart. He hummed to hear the vibration rattle through his throat. There were orange barrels in the fast lane, which was more uneven and pockmarked than his own, and as he passed them they made deep thumping noises. It was a strange tuning of instruments, seeming chaotic at first, disconnected, but, as it continued, Deke could hear the sounds fall softly into a rhythm. The rhythm made increments of time, gave the night measurability. It was only him and the action of the road and the action of his car, forming an undeniable truth on the empty highway. A shining fact cutting a line through the murk of what was and what wasn't.

The clouds were darkening. Whereas in the north the city had rushed to its edges, pushing out of its borders, here it was happy to abandon itself. Unwanted real estate, inexpensive land, resting placidly, it was amazing to see how oddly picturesque uninterest left a place, how by diminishing a thing could flourish, simply because it was not the awful landscape

of expansion, of horrific similarity. Without daylight, and with the few blue streetlamps on the highway or in parking lots, everything was silvery. As he went by, farther and farther out of the city, the darkening brought his focus gradually down to his headlights, the forward illumination, spilling dimly out, the color of amber. It was warming noticeably, and he let his window down. The wind blew ecstatically inside the car, and churned there, and whipped at Deke's ears. Moving his open palm up and down, he could almost feel water in it, and looking at his filthy windshield, wondered if rain were ever going to fall. All the billboards were in Spanish, and most unlit, and Deke watched eagerly for an open service station. More than anything he wanted a bag of tortilla chips, but it was all disappearing so quickly. Was it possible for a city to literally move, to molt, break out of its old, dead shell, and move geographically, leaving its remains to rot? Deke drank a little more from his scotch, then counted his remaining cigarettes, wondering how far they would get him. The orange barrels were gone, and the road was only two lanes in each direction now, rolling up and down the sparse hills, which he could feel instead of see.

He checked his watch again. The hands flashed under a low lamp. It wasn't quite one o'clock. Had there been a more inopportune time to rush to Mexico, leaving everything one owned behind, Deke couldn't imagine it. He would get there and starve. His only relief was that Hugo hadn't hidden in his backseat and emerged suddenly, begging to help traffick Mexicans. That, finally, was what he had wanted, why Hugo had followed Deke around all week. Feeling a momentary sense of panic, despite having already looked, Deke turned to his backseat, reaching behind him. The gritty, uncovered metal of the floorboard cut his knuckles, and he snatched his hand back. He could see Hugo already, as Hugo pictured his heroism, driving a bailout car across a ranch, border patrol chasing him, ranchers firing, cattle dispersing over a ridge. It almost would have been worth it to let him witness one day and night of crossings. There was a special kind of horror at the border, and Hugo would have wept at the sight of it. Deke saw Hugo wading to his chest in the Rio Grande, yelling at a group of sleepy, lingering Mexicans, who would follow him reluctantly, and a child might drown, a young girl, and Hugo would lose his mind swimming after her. Compassion would make the job impossible. This is what Deke had been told in the beginning, by a man named Umberto, who spoke English without accent, in a restaurant in Piedras Negras, the Mexican city on the border with Eagle Pass. Deke had gone down, years before he had married Jenny, for a Saturday night. Umberto was the bartender, and for a long time he and Deke didn't speak. Deke would raise his hand and Umberto would bring him a beer. It was only when a beautiful woman walked out of the restroom, and both men stared hungrily at her, that they spoke.

Go get her, said Umberto.

Deke smiled and craned his neck to see who she was sitting with. She was a white woman, expensively dressed, and she sat down beside a Hispanic man and a young boy, who must have been their son. Deke turned back and shrugged. Maybe the next one, said Umberto. Maybe, said Deke. At that time he did not know the bartender's name was Umberto. When Deke asked, he had answered Jose. And later, when Deke had forgotten it, and asked again, the bartender said Hector. Deke nodded, drank, and, catching the difference, said, I thought you said Jose. Umberto said that he could call him either. And that had settled the matter for Deke, who drank the last of his beer and ordered another.

Hector, Deke asked, how is your English so good?

I used to live in San Antonio, he said, most of my life. I got deported three weeks ago.

Deke drank his beer. They spoke for a while about San Antonio. It was still early in the afternoon, and the long, elegant mahogany bar inside the restaurant was empty, and the waiters and busboys, none of whom spoke good English, were slumped in one corner, wearing tuxedos. Does it get busier? Deke asked.

The restaurant is always full, he said. The bar gets packed on weekends, but not for a few more hours. What are you down here for?

Deke thought about the question for a while, not knowing how to phrase his answer. I've been in Eagle Pass all week, he said, working. Then he rubbed chipped ice off his bottle, and poured his beer into his short round glass.

I know some places, said Umberto. His face did not change expression when he said it, still going about the work of wiping the clean bar, and Deke felt like he had slipped him money in a handshake, and so he did not let his face show interest either. If you want, he said, I could go with you. Sometimes I do this for guys who come down by themselves.

Deke nodded. Are they far away?

You couldn't walk there, he said. But I can drive your car.

Deke shrugged. My car's on the other side.

Umberto threw a white towel into a bin. Well. We could take a taxi. And then, like a good salesman, he left Deke to ponder.

Behind Deke, a man was taking a guitar out of a case. He was short and round, young, and his shirt was unbuttoned low down his hairless chest, where a cross hung. Deke hadn't noticed the elevated floor until the man was on it, positioning a tall stool. Deke watched him, and when the man saw Deke watching, they nodded at each other. The man sat, lifted the guitar into his lap, and strummed it.

The man asked in Spanish if Deke wanted to hear anything, but at that time Deke had no Spanish at all and turned his hands up apologetically. Umberto came back with a piece of laminated paper. This is what he'll play, Umberto said, pointing to a short song list. Then Umberto said something to the guitarist, and instantly there was a loud, bellowing rip in the air from the man's voice, rising, which broke at its height, withering down into the instrument's sad, slow rhythm. Deke smiled. He looked over the list and knew nothing, but chose a few songs randomly, La Puerta Negra and Volver, Volver, to request when that song ended.

And even as he had these thoughts, Deke began to mistrust them. Had it happened like that, in that order? Deke was passing through the small town of Castroville. Empty and closed for the night, it too passed quietly, and the road after it rose suddenly up a steep hill, covered in trees, and when he had come to the top he looked back into the darkness and imagined the landscape in light, the whole flat valley in a wintry, purple evening.

How much money will I need? he asked Umberto.

Depends, he answered. How pretty do you want them?

Deke nodded, understanding there were no real answers, and looked in his wallet. There was a crowd gathering in the bar, and Umberto's visits were less frequent, and their conversations briefer.

Will you try to go back, he asked a little later, to the states?

Umberto scratched his thin mustache, which contrasted with his youthful, curious face. Soon, he said. My sister is pregnant though, and lives here, so I'm staying with her for a while.

Is it easy?

Depends. For some, no, for me, yes. Since I don't have an accent. I could walk across tomorrow, and maybe they'd stop me and maybe they wouldn't.

What do the others do, who don't speak English?

Swim, he said. Most go in groups, pay a man their life savings. Some try by themselves.

Deke had at last become drunk, and began to eat peanuts by the handful. Umberto told him he should get food from the restaurant, but Deke told him he was saving his money for later. He learned that the guitarist was named Miguel, and when Miguel took breaks he and Deke drank tequila. Miguel had only a few words of English, but together they had mapped a conversation out of gestures and proximities, and Deke found out, through a ridiculous communication of near-understandings, that Miguel's wife was a professor of philosophy at Kansas State University. It made no sense to Deke, how such a thing could be the truth.

Later, though Deke could not remember how the conversation had come about, Umberto asked, Do you know what the most amount of money I ever made was? Ten thousand dollars in a week. As much as Deke tried, that remark would not fit into the context of a sequence, but hung out, protruding in his thoughts, not drawn by the events before it, not fulfilled by the immediate events that followed, but chiseled out of the larger memory's veined marble, and as Deke forced the issue in his head, his car still humming through the dark emptinesses of the landscape, now Christmas, he presumed that Umberto must have come back, momentarily, to say what he had said, and gone to serve another drink.

At eleven, Umberto took his black jacket off and asked Deke if he was ready. Let's get Miguel with us, said Deke. Deke gave Miguel a thumbs up and Miguel gave one back, not knowing why he had done so. Sure, said Umberto, Miguel can drive. It took Umberto twenty minutes to convince the manager to release his guitarist, and Deke didn't understand a teaspoon of it. But they walked outside, and the night was sweltering, hot and heavy, and suddenly Deke remembered all this had happened one August. He was happy that a thing in the past came back to him so perfectly, without a catalyst, without a scent or sound, but within the chemistry of his memory alone, a heat he could feel even with cold wind somersaulting into his car seven years later, or six, or whatever. But just as he thought, as he tried to form a picture of the three of them in that air, walking through the parking lot, or of what he was thinking, the intensity the heat lost physicality and was just the words that described it, sweltering, balmy, unbearable. It was enough, however, on that night, to have reproduced a thing so faithfully, if only briefly, which had brought him rocketing to a history so far back, before he had married Jenny.

Miguel brought his huge car around, an old Cadillac, worn down, chipped and scraped, tattered on the inside. There were bubbles in the roof liner. The vinyl seats had tape on them, clear tape that curled at its edges. Deke sat in the back. He tapped Umberto on the shoulder, and Umberto leaned into the space between the two front seats.

Tell me how you made ten thousand dollars in two days, said Deke.

Umberto said, That's my secret. My name's Umberto, not Hector or Jose. I'm American.

Deke nodded. The car had no air conditioner, and he had to hold his head near the window to get air on it. Umberto was from San Antonio. The ten thousand dollars was from trafficking drugs and illegals.

That much in two days?

Yeah, he said, but I'm finished, for six years, at least.

Deke leaned away from the window, toward Umberto.

I got caught smuggling coke, he said, because my fucking brake lights didn't work. They bailed me out, and now I have to live here for six years.

Who?

Who what?

Who bailed you out?

Lawyers. I don't know who they are, they just show up and tell me to go live in Mexico for six years.

Deke smiled. Shit, he said. At least you aren't in jail.

Yeah. This is all right. I like Piedras Negras. I want to own it.

It struck Deke as momentarily odd, that there were such things as aliens in Mexico, trying to conceal their identities, living underground and working illegally, as if anyone ever thought such a fact was worth telling, but there it was, and he wondered how many Americans, fugitives, were living in border towns, waiting for however many years, working and wandering around, in order to return, older but as desperate.

And you used to take people, too?

Wetbacks? Umberto lit his cigarette and offered one to Deke. Deke took it and borrowed matches. Wetbacks, he said, swiping matchsticks against the box, unsuccessfully, until Umberto gave him his cigarette for a light.

Running illegals is less risky, he said, but doesn't pay as much, either. I did what I had to, depending on the money I needed. Oh, and my sister, she's actually my wife, sort of. She's a fucking bitch.

Miguel burst out laughing. He must have been able to put *wife* and *fucking bitch* together and make sense of it. Deke leaned back, smoking relaxedly as they drove through the small streets. It seemed pointless that they had had a conversation in the bar at all, if it had all been untruthful. They were driving out of the lit streets, into darker neighborhoods. The streets were narrow, and often, when another car came out of the opposite direction, one would have to pull onto the curb. Trees hovered over the road, breaking through sidewalks, if there were any, and leaves and branches brushed the windshield. Umberto pointed into some trees on his right. That's Texas, he said. Deke looked and could see lights twinkling in spaces. That's the Rio Grande? Deke asked. Yep, said Umberto.

They came down a hill with a pool of water at the bottom, which Miguel drove through as slowly as he could. Deke leaned out to see how high it was, and in his memory it was close enough to touch, but filthy and thick. When they came across, the road was dirt and stricken with ridges and holes, and the three of them bounced around until, a minute or two later, it smoothed.

Only five or ten minutes, said Umberto.

Deke asked if Miguel had a radio, and waited while Umberto translated, and then Miguel spoke, and Umberto, laughing as he listened, finally turned to Deke. Miguel says singers don't need radios. Miguel, perhaps at the sound his sentence made in English, or perhaps knowing just that his joke had been said again, laughed loudly, joining Umberto, and Deke told him to sing something. Miguel must have been used to Americans saying Sing something, because he said okay okay, and began both deeply and softly, slow and melodic, to sing a song that sounded very

sad to Deke, maybe because he couldn't understand. Words simply couldn't be serious, not like sound could. It made him, driving, now, years later, think that emotions had sounds, possibly, but not names. Miguel finished, and Deke clapped. Umberto made a whistling noise.

There were lights ahead, on the left side of the road. Umberto pointed. We're here, he said. Miguel said, Weer heer, but slowly, and not caring what it meant. The lights were from buildings in a small, gated area, and a guard looked inside as they passed into it. The guard was dressed casually, but wore a large, official cap that kept sliding down his forehead. Umberto and Miguel said something to each other, like they might have known him. They parked, and a wave of dust floated over the car, some drifting inside, through the windows. Deke put his shirt over his nose and mouth until it settled, or blew by. When they were out, standing and looking at the half dozen possibilities, Deke watched packs of other American men stumbling from one building to another, some young and reveling, some old and like walking skeletons with cowboy hats—the old, dying ranchers—and all jaggedly moving in the dusty parking lot. In one corner was an old yellow building with a dozen or more doors three or four feet apart. Some windows were lit and others weren't. Music, nearly imperceptible above the roaring Americans, was seeping out the doors of the clubs. Umberto put his hand on Deke's shoulder, and Deke turned around. Look, said Umberto, and Deke looked out beyond the gate, across the road, and the small, thin-trunked trees had been cut, swathed down, like big trucks had run them over, left them lying dead, so that the river and Texas were perfectly visible, less than a hundred yards away. Some people, Umberto said, just get drunk and run for it.

Which is the best place? asked Deke.

This one, he said, already pulling him by the arm, called Fifty-four. Miguel was humming behind them. A woman at another club, sitting on a stool outside the door, cried out at them, and when they looked she spread her legs widely and lifted her feet off the ground, twirling them in circles. Umberto yelled something back, and she waved him off. Deke squinted to see inside the shadow of her legs and skirt, and Miguel patted him on the shoulder. When Deke looked back, Miguel wagged his finger. Feo, he said. Translating, Umberto said, Ugly. Deke hadn't considered the possibility that a border-town prostitute could be anything but.

Umberto opened the door and held it as Deke and Miguel came in. The room was dark and small, with a tiny stage set at the midpoint of the far wall and surrounded by tables. No one was dancing, but there were women sitting in one corner, and their heads turned as the three of them came in. All the tables but a few were full. Miguel pointed to a spot near the stage, and Deke nodded. The music was loud, thumping American pop. Umberto nodded his head to the beat. When the song finished there was silence, and the juggling sounds of conversation made the air hum.

Deke said, So this is your punishment? Six years of this?

A man came by and took a drink order. It was clear that Deke was buying all the drinks, and he didn't mind. Umberto leaned over to him. Unless it's the girl you want, he said, don't buy them drinks. The bar charges extra. And even if you want her, you don't have to buy her a drink.

There was a girl's angry voice talking from behind the doorway leading out onto the stage, and everyone went quiet, trying to listen. Music started, and she came onto the stage, still talking to someone behind the doorway. They were having an argument, and the girl planted her hands onto her hips. When she turned around, she avoided looking at the men, all watching her

intently, and began to dance unnaturally. Her arms moved in little, irritated spirals. She stepped forward and backward, all against the rhythm of the song. Deke thought she was immensely good-looking. She was young, and her body was muscular, and she had tall white boots and white gloves that fit up to her elbows, and a white ribbon in her hair. Umberto saw Deke's interest in her, and held his arm. She's the most expensive, he said. Marisol. Those girls over there, he said, pointing to the eight or nine sitting together in the corner, those are cheaper, and dirtier. He smiled. Deke raised his eyes, though as drunk as he was his eyeballs didn't move, but rested above his like balloons after a party.

How does it work?

Umberto said, If you like one, I'll go talk to her. I'll set it up.

No, said Deke. Driving the Mexicans. The drugs.

The beers came. Deke pulled out his wallet. A week's worth of work was stacked into the bills.

Umberto said, It depends.

Deke's attention was drawn away by the girl dancing. She had seen him with his wallet open and was dancing seductively now, on her knees, clawing at the worn wooden stage. She still had her clothes on, however, and Deke turned away. Everything depends, he said.

You got it, said Umberto.

For you, then.

For Umberto, it had been simple. He would go to the mall in Eagle Pass, find the car they told him to, and hop in. The key would be under the mat. Then he drove it to an address in San Antonio, or Houston, or El Paso. So the drugs had already passed the border.

This is what they tell you, he said. Don't drive too fast, too slow, or too medium. Don't look suspicious and don't look not suspicious. If they ask to see inside the truck, let them see inside the trunk. Nothing is ever inside the trunk.

And then what?

Umberto shrugged. And then nothing. I met the man, and he would tell me to follow him for a while, and then we'd drop the car off.

That's it?

Yeah. They tell you, if you get caught, don't say anything. A lawyer will come get you, and then you have to get out of the country.

Six years.

Yeah. Next time longer.

Deke leaned back. And what about Mexicans?

The work's harder, but less risky. You wait for a guy, who brings you a whole bunch, you throw them in a truck and drive them into a city, at a place you can dump it. Same thing. Not too fast, too slow, or too medium, and if you get caught you get to spend some time in Mexico.

What happens to the truck?

I never asked.

The girl in the white gloves and boots was taking off her clothes, and Deke turned his chair around to watch. Her top untied from the front, and she held her hands over her breasts while she worked the bow. When she let them go, her breasts spilled out. They had tiny, perfect brown nipples, and they did not sag. Deke imagined she was quite young. Umberto said,

sucking on his lime, Fake. Once her top was off, she danced for Deke again. Deke crossed his arms and watched her, but would not give her money. On her knees, she made acrobatic arches backward. It was as if she were saying, This is my whole body, every inch of it. There was a special kind of arousal one felt watching a woman undress like this, who could be bought. There was nothing particularly appealing about the nakedness of strippers who couldn't.

When she stood again, she slipped her thumbs inside the waistband of her small white shorts and pulled them slowly down, below her straightened knees, over the white boots, to their ankles. When she couldn't gracefully pull them any farther, she held a chrome-colored pole for balance and lifted her legs slightly, drawing them under the high white heels. There was nothing on her now but the accessories, which glowed like bright lamps beside her brown, flawless skin. She had carefully triangular thin pubic hair, and the shape of her body, the gently receding bezel toward the inbetween of her legs, was visible through it. Deke saw himself on top of it, and told Umberto, without turning, This is the one.

Umberto said, Easy. It's early. There are other places.

He looked back, and Umberto was shaking salt onto his hand, holding a lime, but drinking no tequila. Miguel had a girl on his knee. Deke asked Umberto, Do you want a tequila for that?

Umberto said, I stay sober, you get drunk.

Miguel said, Tequila, sí, bueno, so they had tequilas brought to the table, and Miguel drank one and Deke drank two, his and Umberto's. Miguel and Deke made sour, laughing faces at each other. When Deke turned to see the woman dancing, she had left the stage already. Another girl, younger, more athletic body, but not as good-looking, was jumping around to happy music, smiling, and some men were cheering. She did a flip while holding the pole, and everyone, including Deke, clapped.

Can I get two at once? Deke asked.

Easy, said Umberto, let's walk around.

Deke drank his beer, hoping the girl would undress before he finished it. When there was nothing left, not a drop, they stood, and the girl on Miguel's lap protested. Deke could tell he was something of a catch in Piedras Negras. Miguel rubbed the girl's shoulders and tapped her frowning chin. He's telling her we'll be right back, Umberto said to Deke. They were already at the door, waiting. When the girl finally let go of his shirt, which she had been tugging on despite letting him up, Miguel scampered toward them, apologizing, then wrapped his thick arm around Deke's neck, and spoke. Deke didn't understand, but they forced a conversation, drunk and slurring, out of the strange compatibility between their two languages. It was the essence of a conversation. What else but those girls could they be speaking of?

The first place they went was across the street, and the woman who had spread her legs was inside dancing on a man's lap. He looked like he was sleeping. They passed her and sat down in a corner. The place was empty compared to the other, and a girl, quite hideous, was onstage sitting in a chair, waiting for someone to come watch her. They ordered beers, and while they were waiting the first girl, who had left her drowsy client, came up behind Deke and covered his eyes.

Guess who? Deke asked himself, removing her hands. She instantly sat on top of him. She started talking, and Deke said, No habla Español. Umberto spoke for him, and it sounded very serious. She thought for a while, then answered a question he had asked. Umberto looked

at Deke. Thirty dollars, he said. The girl was looking at Deke again, running a finger along the straight line of his jaw. Miguel was behind the girl, waving his arms that he shouldn't. He was mouthing Feo, feo, feo, and Deke said, It's early, maybe later. The girl must have understood his English or the expression on his face, or perhaps the tone in his voice, since she stood frustratedly and went to the bar. Umberto said, grabbing Deke's wrist, Come back in three hours and you'll get her down to twenty.

The place was uncomfortably bright, and they all drank fast, hurrying to leave. The girl in the chair yelled something at the bartender, and the bartender yelled back, and the girl slumped farther down, and stomped her feet. Later, Umberto told him, when all the cheap guys get tired of watching the expensive girls dance, and want to get laid, they come here. Miguel mocked a dance to the awful music scratching above them, leaking painfully out of old, half-destroyed speakers. I want to give you my heart, he sang, echoing the song, just noises to him. He asked Umberto, I want to give you my heart? and Umberto said it in Spanish. Miguel laughed.

At the next bar, Umberto, slowly sinking into a stupor in spite of his plan not to, started lining women up, one by one, in front of Deke, and asking if he liked them. Deke declined them, paying close attention to a show where two girls took a shower together, soaping and cleaning each other behind a glass barrier. A group of men who, because of their closely cropped hair, Deke thought looked military, were glued to the barrier, shouting when girl rubbed the other's breasts. One was older than the other and was more vigorous. The younger was confused, staring emptily into the glass. There were bright lights inside the shower, and Deke didn't think she could see out. The older one kissed the younger one, on the lips, and the younger moved her face, letting her neck be kissed. Her hands numbly rubbed at the older girl, who, hearing louder cheers, pushed the young girl against the tile wall, spread her legs, and put her hand aggressively between her legs. The young girl shifted away, though trying not to ruin the show, and all the military men fell backward in their seats, together, cursing. The older girl, sensing the catastrophe of no business, put herself against the wall, took the young girl's hand, and sucked her fingers. The soldiers perked up, grew brutishly aroused, and as the older girl's face showed greater earnestness, the men banged each other's knees and backs. Then she took the young girl's arm by the wrist and the palm, and yanked her fingers down and into her. The younger stood dumbly by, unable to watch her own hand, instead turning sadly back to the glass, knowing only that it would be over, that the other girl would fake an orgasm soon and the men would come running. By then Umberto was pulling girls from other tables and bringing them to Deke. The tequila and beer kept coming, and Miguel was singing to a girl straddling him. Deke was anxious to get back to Fifty-four. Outside, in the dusty lot that all the bars and clubs looked onto, men were crowding noisily. There were lights from cars trying to find a place to park, beams through the hovering dust.

When they left, returning, Deke hoped, to the woman in white boots and gloves, Marisol, they were stumbling, all three soused, though Miguel held his the best.

Listen, said Umberto to Deke, you could make a lot of money doing what I did.

The seriousness with which Umberto spoke sobered Deke for a moment. Umberto was the kind of person who, when drunk, had to touch people in order to speak to them, and Deke remembered thinking that it ought to have bothered him. He thought, if there were any person in

the world he truly liked, it might have been Miguel, and it was only because they could not communicate.

Inside, Deke could not find Marisol. Umberto asked some of the girls, and they said she had stormed off. Deke sat and waited. The girls watched him closely. There were other men around with money, but none who had his looks. Deke, Umberto, and Miguel smoked cigarette after cigarette. An hour passed. Miguel, singing love songs when the music was off, had the girls around him swooning. Umberto was talking in secret to a man, and it seemed possible to Deke, with Umberto's English and ambition, he might actually own Piedras Negras. When Umberto finished with his conversation, Deke asked him, Will you go back when you can?

Umberto scratched his mustache. Probably, he said. I don't have to live in a place to run it.

I fucking hate Texas, said Deke.

Umberto ashed his cigarette. Me too.

At four, after watching each dancer twice, with no sign of Marisol, Deke picked the playful, spirited young girl wearing tight white pants that glittered. If she weren't a whore, thought Deke, she could have been a gymnast. He told Umberto, Get me her and another, I don't care which, and tell the second she's only there to mess around with the first. Umberto said okay, but that the second girl might be more expensive than the first. He was gone for what seemed like ten minutes. He had the girls huddled around him. They were animated, and when the huddle broke, Umberto had the first girl, beautiful, perfect body, and a second, decent, nice face, on either arm. Hundred fifty, he said. Pay them when you get to the room.

Miguel hugged Deke on his way out, pretending to cry. Sex with the two was awkward, since the young girl was so active, and since Deke couldn't tell them what he wanted. The second girl tried to kiss the other's romping body, but she moved too fast, too violently, and in the end the second girl just held the first's breasts as she bounced on top of Deke. She talked as fast as she bounced, and Deke wished she'd be quiet so he could admire her body. Mostly, he remembered the soggy mattress beneath him. The chipped walls, fist-size holes that cut through to the next room. The noises around him. Old, old men grunting and coughing. If they died, he wondered, would their bodies just be thrown in the river? He remembered the squeak the bedsprings made, and how badly the sheets itched. With great hope, he put one girl on top of the other, and tried to explain he wanted to watch them alone, with each other, but they didn't understand why he would want that, and simply waited, naked, breathing, breast on breast, for him to return.

When they came back to the bar, twenty minutes later, Deke entered from the front, and the two girls walked around back. Umberto and Miguel were sitting without drinks, and girls were with them. Deke sat down and asked Umberto for a cigarette. You're going to be pissed off, he said. And Deke had already thought of it, in the room with the other two, that a minute after he had left, Marisol had walked in. She's over there, Umberto said. I told her you wanted her, so she's waiting. Deke looked in his wallet. He had fifty dollars left. He had spent almost three hundred.

How much?

She's a hundred. There are ten guys here waiting behind you.

Shit, he said. What time is it?

Late, said Umberto. He was still shaking salt onto his hand, licking it, and sucking limes. They were all sobering up, and Deke knew Umberto wanted money for the night, so he said he was ready to go home. Miguel and Umberto yawned when he did, as if they had finally been given permission to look tired. He didn't bother saying anything to Marisol. She had her arms and legs crossed and sat beside a soft drink with a cherry in it. It was almost five, and there were men, some boys, still wide awake, full of terror, waiting for another girl to get naked. It meant everything to see another breast, to witness another nude female body.

Here, the continuity of Deke's recollection dissolved, and he was in between two worlds. He could not remember leaving Fifty-four, but knew that, driving back, he had begged Miguel to stop for water. When they pulled over, Deke bought two giant bottles and began drinking one immediately. A man and his wife were rolling a shut-down taco stand down the road, finished for the night, and Deke yelled Alto! All three of them were starving, and offered to pay extra, with Deke's money, if the man would start his stand going again, heat the grease, and make tacos. In the meantime, Deke had asked Miguel to play Volver, Volver, and Miguel had played it and a few others, and filled the decrepit street with music. People came out of houses to listen. Deke listened and relaxed. The tunes always seemed light, harmonic, but the singing always like someone's child was dying, sad beyond hope. It was awful and cheerful in the same instant, in one note. Deke lay down on the pavement and looked up. It was such intense balm, to be waiting on tacos at five in the morning, listening to music he couldn't understand, in Piedras Negras, which felt a thousand miles, then, from Texas. They ate like dogs. The tacos were tiny, smaller than fingers, and Deke ate them in single, gulping bites. He could not remember saying good-bye to Miguel, as hard as he concentrated, but saw himself and Umberto outside the parking lot to a motel Deke had found, Autel Rio, smoking last cigarettes. They talked for a long time about what Umberto had done before he came to Piedras Negras, and Umberto gave Deke a phone number to call.

The name is Marquez. He can set you up.

Deke gave him some money, which had been understood from the beginning, he presumed. Umberto was a businessman before all things, and, coming back into the present, he thought it was possible that, in the time since that night, Umberto could have worked his way above Marquez, could have ordered those men to beat him for the mistake Deke had made. Deke felt suddenly sick when he thought that, since he had walked himself into an admission of guilt for the first time. He turned his attention back to Umberto's ambition. It didn't matter how unlikely it sounded. It would have brought Deke and Umberto, years later, into the same story again, made a cycle out of time.

When he got into his room, he fell asleep with the television on. The phone woke him in the morning. He sat there watching it ring for a while, wondering what he would say if they didn't speak English. He picked it up, thinking, however improbable, that it might have been Umberto, and said, Hello. A woman on the other end spoke rapidly, in Spanish, for about ten seconds. Deke said Okay, and hung up. Light and heat were burning through the curtains, and Deke was sweating. He got up, changed socks, drank the rest of the water he had bought, and walked out. The housekeeper was in the room next to his, and he guessed the phone call had been about her, or from her.

He took a long, slow walk to the border. The streets were filled with cars and pedestrians. The market was bustling, and there were a few drunk Americans still wandering

around. Deke couldn't fathom how such a thing was possible so late in the morning. He bought tacos, and they looked the same as those he had eaten the previous night but tasted awful. The streets were poor and unclean, but there was color everywhere, like walking into a fifty-year-old carnival. As he came by a huge square full of people sitting and reading the newspaper, eating, or loitering, he heard bells from a cathedral. It was the only truly beautiful building on the street, with a dark red façade, and people were crowding at the entrance, trying to get in. A man with no teeth was holding the door open for Americans with cameras, and he held it open for Deke. Inside, mass was beginning. It was all gold and pink marble, though less gaudy than he would have expected. He didn't stay long. He listened to the priest tell one joke, or something that made the people laugh, turned, and walked back out. The heat should have been miserable, but it was refreshing. Deke felt toxins evaporating out of his body, felt like sitting down and sleeping in the heat.

Feliz Viaje, he read on a sign he walked under, leaving Mexico, knowing what *feliz* meant then, and knowing what *viaje* meant in the present. He walked across the bridge. Cars trying to leave Mexico were backed up, and fumes made the air tremble. In the other direction a car passed rarely if at all. The river ran narrowly under it, and on the Texas side, of all possible atrocities, the first thing one saw was a golf course. People were teeing off beside Border Patrol Broncos parked in the weeds. He looked along the Texas side of the river, and tall poles with cameras were watching. He stood and took it in, letting people pass him by. It was exhilarating to be in a place under such close scrutiny, to think of all the illegality mining through it. The customs agent gave Deke a hard time, asked to go through his bags and frisked him for weapons and medicine. Mexicans came through, and some were sent into a room where a hundred already sat, and some passed by unencumbered.

Unlike Piedras Negras, Eagle Pass was silent. Originally forts built to watch each other, they were the smallest of the many sister cities on the border. Deke felt depressed coming back into Texas. The streets widened, multiplying the distances between things, disconnecting the town from its own life. Where there had been taxis everywhere in Piedras Negras, there were none in Eagle Pass, and Deke began a mile-long hike, in a hundred-and-ten-degree heat, no longer refreshing but syrupy, down his shirt and jeans, to his old truck, the beater he had used to drive Hugo to the hospital that night, when everything changed. And now, early Christmas morning, all these years later, he remembered what had set this long flashback off, the comic image of Hugo, too full of what he thought was compassion, wanting to smuggle wetbacks into Texas, giving meaning to his life.

The last image he had taken, the last vivid memory of his time there, was driving back, a few miles outside of Eagle Pass, ranchland on all sides, no traffic, when a helicopter passed above him, so low Deke thought it was crashing, then another, much higher. To the left, where they were headed, there was a wall of white dust above the brush line, something driving faster than Deke, doubling his speed. He stared, trying to glimpse the vehicle. The helicopters turned when they got to it, flanking it. Then the vehicle hit a jump, an incline, and shot into the air. It had the green stripe of the Border Patrol, just as the helicopters did, and then it was out of sight again. Deke turned back to the road, thinking of trying to get by these people. It wasn't long before he noticed that the tall metal poles on the roadside, which he thought were for electricity or telephones, had cameras on top of them, as they had along the Rio Grande. He had no idea then how easily these things could be avoided, but stared in awe at them. A checkpoint stopped

him, saw his haggard face, and told him to open the trunk. No problem, he said, thinking, Nothing is ever in the trunk.

He awakened gradually to the present, coming image by image from one time to another, and for a few moments, confused by the scotch, didn't quite know which was which. The irresistible emergence of the past, however flawed in his memory, had connected a long-distant night to the one he was living, and the scotch tasted better. He had driven a long way in the wrong direction, on purpose. He was on an empty road off a main highway. Ahead, the silhouettes of two buildings stood across the road from one another. It was the hotel and restaurant he had been to just the week before, when he had met Dolores. There was one other car in the lot. His stomach felt full of nails and wood, and he had no more cigarettes. He turned his car off, but remembered he would need help to get it going again. Realizing this, he spent a long time with his forehead pressed against the steering wheel. He sat back only when the comfort of resting his head made him consider sleep. Whatever it took, he would stay awake until he got to Piedras Negras. The whiskey would have to substitute for coffee. He drank a sip and walked to the front door of the hotel—the two-story, five- or six- or seven-room hotel that couldn't possibly make money—and knocked. It wasn't worth waking anyone, so he didn't bang. He went back to his car, pacing around it to stay awake. Nausea came to him in massive, nearly breaking swells, and he would lean against the car until they settled. Nothing but food and sleep would cure him.

At dawn, he did bang on the hotel's door. By then he needed food or he was going to die. The man with the glasses came out, and Deke hoped he would recognize him. There was no sign of it, if he did, and he rubbed his eyes and face.

Deke said, Can I get some food?

The man, without answering, began closing the door, but Deke pulled his money out, and showed it to the man. I'll give you a hundred dollars for some breakfast tacos.

Tacos? the man asked.

Please, said Deke, por favor.

The man considered it. He finally opened the door, bringing Deke in, and said, You give me a hundred dollars, pay for a room, and I'll make it.

Deke said, I'll pay for the room if I can go up now, and you bring me the tacos. Six chorizo-and-egg.

Six chorizo-and-egg, the man repeated.

Deke gave him the money, and the man, still in his robe and blue pajamas, handed him a room key. Deke took him by the arm before he went to make the breakfast. Also, I'm looking for Dolores. Then he gave him forty dollars more. Call her and tell her the tic-tac-toe man is here. Tic tac toe.

The man nodded. Tic tac toe, he said. He was as short and as round, as flat-faced as Deke had remembered from the week before. He charged into the barely lit morning, still overcast and bleak. Deke looked at the number on the key, and it was the same one he and Dolores had used. He went up the mildew-scented stairwell to the second floor, remembering that they had not made it more than a few steps before they were lying down together. The room was not as cold as it had been, but chilly nevertheless. The television was tuned to the same station he had left it, and he turned it on, adjusted the antenna, and waited for the picture to develop. There was nothing but static, so he flipped the channel down, and found a car race in

Brazil. He wondered why anyone would be racing on Christmas, but only briefly. He sat on the bed to watch it, and began to grow drowsy at once, so he stood, undressed, and stepped into the shower. He had it warm at first, steaming in it, relaxing his muscles. He thought about singing, remembering Miguel, but didn't. When he arrived in Mexico, he promised himself, he would order a drink at the Moderno's bar so he could listen to whoever the guitarist was now. And he would ask about Miguel. His new car hadn't come with a radio, just a hollow slot with wires, and people had asked if he wanted to install one, and though he did he never got around to it. It was as if, for two-and-a-half years, no task had been finished. He turned the hot faucet off, and stood shivering in the cold water, getting his heart pumping, invigorating himself. He felt an artificial sharpness, which would have to do, and stayed inside the spray until he couldn't bear it.

He came out in a towel, and saw a white bag on his bed. He looked in and saw six tacos wrapped in foil, and tore the first one open immediately. As he reached for the second he felt the first already on its way back up, and sprinted to the toilet. He threw it up and flushed. He was still hungry, though, and when he sat back down he ate the next one slowly, nibbling at it, taking long breaks between bites. The drone of cars zipping around the racecourse held Deke's attention while he waited for his stomach to accept the next bite. He was thinking that nothing would keep him bound to Mexico, that he could spend a few days in Piedras Negras, get on a bus, and work his way down, however long it took, to Rio de Janeiro. He might find himself watching this race live next year, or the year after. He yawned. He ate two tacos and set the others aside.

He wondered if Dolores was going to come. She was the only woman Deke had been with since Jenny's suicide. It was astonishing, that something which had once been so familiar had vanished from his life. He crossed his legs and rubbed his ankles. He was tired of the race. Scrolling text across the bottom said it had been recorded. The clouds were whitening, and Deke checked his watch. He was too tired to go downstairs and ask if the man had reached Dolores on the phone. He knelt in front of the television and scrolled through the channels. There were thirty-five, but only three had reception. Besides the race, there were cartoons. One channel was in Spanish, dubbed, and the other in English, and Deke watched both. He wondered how long it would take to learn Spanish, but wasn't sure if he would bother. There was something satisfying about all these incomprehensible sounds. It was a constant alibi, as well, and no one ever saw you as significant, so that you could slip through their focus and be nobody.

Noon passed, and Deke was playing tricks on himself, closing one eye at a time, trying to half-sleep. He opened the window and took his clothes off, since even the thought of warmth, of crawling beneath the sheets, made him drowsy. He took a few more cold showers, until he ran out of dry towels. At one miserable point, he hopped up and down. At a few minutes past one in the afternoon, he went down to ask the man with the glasses what had happened. He rang the bell at the counter, and no one came. He shouted. Had the man left him here alone? Deke walked outside, trying to figure a way to start the car by himself, if it came to that. He walked across to the restaurant, which was closed, and knocked on those doors. He stayed outside for a while, got his things from the car, and went back to his room. Opening the suitcase, he saw the book and knife. He laid the knife on the table beside the bed, and it reminded him of Jenny's engagement ring, still in his pocket. He took it out and put it beside the knife. The first page of the book, which he browsed again, almost knocked him out with boredom. He laid it on the

table. He kicked the suitcase under the bed, but half of it stuck out, and Deke was too tired to force it.

It was three hours later, while Deke was running cold water over his wrists, that Dolores knocked. He was undressed but for a pair of boxers, and hurried to put jeans on, asking her to wait, and a shirt, which he misbuttoned in rushing. He opened the door, and her eager look turned curious when she saw Deke so disheveled. Tic tac toe, she said. Deke asked, Do you have a cigarette?

She reached in her purse and took a pack out, and Deke lit it. Dolores watched him cautiously, since it was not as she imagined. It took a few seconds, pulling the smoke as far down into his lungs as he could, but Deke could keep his eyes open again. Hi, he said. Hi, she said. They sat down on the bed, legs touching legs. Deke rubbed his hair back and forth. He could not think. Dolores said, Merry Christmas. Deke nodded. He was so tired that ideas would not form in his head. They were like gray depthless reflections. It was getting dark outside. Deke couldn't make sense of how it had become so late.

I'm sorry, he said. I haven't slept.

No sleep? she asked.

He nodded. Two days. Dos días.

Sleep now, she said, pointing to the bed. She stood and pulled the sheets down. Deke could feel the moment tearing out of his grasp. If he slept and woke rejuvenated, none of this would make sense. It was only the exhausted mindset he was in that could carry him to Mexico. He stood. She walked back over to him and held his arm. When he did nothing she began unbuttoning his shirt. He wasn't sure if this were preparation for sex or for sleep, but when she pulled the shirt down from his shoulders he could feel sleep coming, and to fight it off he kissed her above the eye, then on the eye. He took her coat off, pulled her shirt over her head, and put her coat and shirt on the floor together. When he could not work the zipper on her pants, she let him go and pulled them off herself, leaving her in underwear alone, standing in front of him. He sat down. She kept her underwear on. Deke prayed all this would keep him awake. He prayed that it would focus his thoughts, make enough sense of them so he could speak. She stepped forward and pushed his chest, laying him on his back, on the bed, and stayed standing above him. He hoped she would hurry. His eyes were closing. She undid his jeans, and tried to lift his waist to pull them down, boxers with them, and Deke responded, lifting himself, letting her undress him, and he opened one eye and closed the other, then the other, trying to stay up, but the energy to hold his thoughts together bled out of his mind, and when he went to close one eye and open the other, he could not get the second eyelid to lift, and though he still felt himself awake everything around him went black, not a void, but warm outside air, at night, overcast. He could feel wind at his face. He was sitting, and could feel himself rolling forward. Objects were molding out of the shadows, and he recognized them, tree branches depending over a narrow road. Someone was singing. Ahead, through the dark night, as Deke moved his head into the warm breeze, outside a window, he saw a small, dim speck of light, which opened barely, like an iris. He lunged for it, and saw a boy running toward a house, and in his sleep he tried screaming, to tear the iris open with his hands, but it shut, and everything was beyond his conscious mind, beyond knowing, then, untranslatable, and Dolores dropped Deke's body, half-dressed, breathing loudly, and sat beside him. She shook him, poked his shoulder, but he would not wake.

*

Dolores got off the bed and stared at Deke's body. He was spread with his legs off the bed, arms flat by his sides, and he smelled like soap, just like a bar of inexpensive hotel soap. She sat and the bed shook on its frame like a raft in water, uneasy and weak, and had they done that, themselves, a week ago, had they broke a bed? She had pulled his jeans below the high bones of the pelvis and a smooth tan bowl of skin sloped between them that she touched and watched breathing, rising. She lay down beside him like his wife and if she could hold that illusion while he slept then this was Christmas husband afternoon full of food and dozing, but Deke swallowing and his small snoring gulps kept saying stranger, man blown in, no history and no future. The windows were open. Outside the sky was so gray it turned the ground gray and the breeze brought the gray inside the room, and the drawn brown curtains stirred like long overcoats of people standing lonesomely on a gray windy wintry beach.

He was catastrophically perfect half-nakedness, all stretched out, like a sculpture of a man slain by the unhappiness of his own beauty. Dolores thought: why won't he stop making noises for a minute? She wanted to admire themselves there and read a paper or watch television and pretend they shared a bedroom, and when he woke she would ask, Are you rested? But his mouth opened and it hung open and made the unusual clattering noise of a locust, or locusts, and she pushed herself up the bed to the pillows, one she stuffed under the other, and beat her fist down on both to shape, though the pillows were cheap and it made no difference. She leaned against them and some hair fell into her eyes and she blew it up and up again when it fell exactly as it had before, and finally she pulled it behind her ear. Bored, she scanned the walls and furniture and saw the bathroom attacked by wet towels, lying like corpses everywhere, and the antenna on the television twisted and arranged to reach the metal frame of the bathroom's door for reception, and she came around the room like a roaming camera, stopping finally at the nightstand: a book, a knife, and an engagement ring.

She leaned over and rolled to her stomach, planting her elbows sturdily down. She looked at the objects and looked at Deke like clues to a crime she had not witnessed but would piece together if a link could be discovered or another clue, and she could not help but think that they had special meaning, that any three things formed a triangle. She lifted the book and laid it out, and not one word made sense in the densely packed page that seemed to have no paragraphs but long tedious gibberish without pause or exclamation. She closed it, pronounced the author's name with her lips slowly and with effort, but made no sound. Before she touched the knife she pushed Deke again to make sure he was still sleeping heavily and she pressed down hard into his neck, and he did not move not even to swipe at her or wince. The knife had one serrated side and one thick grooved side, and she rubbed them both against her forearm, and the cold metal on

her skin made her realize her nakedness, and goosebumps stood all over her body. She set the knife down. It wobbled from unevenness so she tried to quiet it by forming a wall with her hands between the knife and Deke's ears. Deke still did not move. She tried to imagine why anyone would not sleep for two days, and if he were in trouble, why the knife, why not a gun? The third object was the ring, the most curious, and she pinched its band between her thumb and forefinger, and inspected it like an artifact, as if the slightest disturbance in air would shatter it. The diamond had no luster. It was filthy and there was no bright light nearby to kindle it. She puzzled over it and wiped it against the white sheets and slipped it on her finger, and it fit. She rolled onto her back and lifted her hand into the gray light, angling it, worrying about herself and the woman it must have come from, and a small headache began between her eyes.

The wind came in and cooled the room, and Dolores held her arms over her breasts, and shivered. The brown curtains shrugged against the wall and a lampshade shook noisily and the book opened and the first few pages snapped back. Deke finally stirred. She was above him, lying across the bed, and looked down the long line his body made and wished he were all naked, that his jeans weren't still around the bottom of his hips, concealing him. Was he cold? she wondered. She turned back onto her stomach and crawled to the bed's edge, and leaned over it, looking for anything to cover him with, and half jutting out was Deke's opened suitcase, and past it was the brown mound of his winter coat, which had almost made it to a chair to hang upon. Dolores squinted at them. She reached down and pulled the suitcase out, and opened it, and picked through some of the hastily bunched clothes. He was on his way from one place to another. Deke jerked in his sleep below her as if he were reaching for sheets, so Dolores closed the suitcase, shoved it to where she had found it, and crawled backwards off the bed. Standing up, she was freezing. The wind swept from one window to the other, and when she stood in the draft she trembled and could feel heat trailing out of her. She hurried to close one, then the other, tiptoeing, and when both were shut a calm took over the room, and though the air was cold and no heater would warm it, at least it was still. She picked his coat up by the sleeve and collar, and held it out before her, as if she might buy it. It seemed to big for him, and she compared the size with the body lying on the bed. Then Dolores tried it on, and wrapped it like a blanket around her, overlapping in the front, and curled into a chair with her knees inside the shelter and watched Deke sleep from a distance, and any way you saw him he looked like something made especially to bring light into the world, to be beauty. And she watched the knife, ring, book, and suitcase, and rubbed her her temples, since her headache was spreading.

When Deke tried again to pull sheets over him, flapping his arms, Dolores took the coat and went to drape him with it, and as she did the envelope fell into the bend of Deke's elbow, and the money spilled out between his arm and body and for a long time she did nothing but loom, bewildered. The wintry gray outside, while she stood, was turning charcoal, passing into night, or its precipice. She finally reached to take the money, pushing it carefully back into its envelope, holding her breath, drawing it up, lip bit, theft of a museum piece. When she had it she counted it beside the bed, going through each bill individually, disbelieving the moment, and watching Deke for signs that he had seen her do so.

Finished, she sat in the chair again. She had the coat in her lap and the envelope in the clutch of both her hands. Fifth and most incriminating clue, evidence to connect the strange combination of objects, she guessed he had abandoned everything, picked up all that mattered, and what other reason would a man be traveling with these things and all this money on

Christmas on a road so close to Mexico waiting for a woman he didn't know, and what was she for? Was she another clue? A sixth? She curled the money in her hand. The room was growing warmer, and outside still the darkening. He could sleep all night. She wondered, Am I supposed to wait here in the cold until he wakes?

Dolores pressed the soft skin of her closed eyes until she saw lights, shooting, in her vision. She tried to soothe the headache that was now locking like jaws into the bone of her skull at the forehead, above the eyes, and until then she thought the headache might have been from the cold, from empathy for Deke's exhaustion, for concern at his reason for being there, but when the headache dulled a little, eased and familiarized itself with her, she knew it was because thirty-eight years ago a man named Jesse had come down into Mexico with all his possessions in a sack, because he met a woman in Nuevo Laredo and took her with him to Mexico City, and lived with her one summer, in an apartment, and made her pregnant, but ran out of the money he had brought. Because broke he had run back to a life he'd despised, easily enough, like he had made no impression in a new one, like the facts of one summer had no consequence, left the woman and her unborn daughter, who was Dolores, and never wanted them to follow, never thought of them or wrote or returned. Because she never knew a thing about Jesse nor saw him, but had to put him together by pieces like his sack (who would carry a sack?) and his summer in Mexico (why Mexico and why then?) and the abandonment (to where?) and a pair of cowboy boots he wore (with white stars on their sides), and had hoped as a girl to meet him and grow up in Texas on a ranch, since this was what she imagined he was, a rancher. Because, even as an adult, with the simplicity of a child she wondered if he'd ramble by one day or night on the road to Mexico in search of her. Because a man that distant could be so close to living in her thoughts that another man could come mysteriously by and resurrect him.

Because one night when she was nine or ten or eleven she and her mother had given up all they owned to cross the border with twenty other Mexicans fording the shallowest part of the Rio Grande at Big Bend, running, no sound in the mountainous distances but feet crashing through water, and she could remember that sound above all other things in her life. Because a man left them all in the desert and said Go that way pointing vaguely into the darkness, who had taken their money and promised safe passage, and they had no other choice but to go, and for three days they had walked and two women were left behind in the spring heat like animals and when they found a place to rest it was no better, except that they ate... Because what if Deke had come to take her back? They might live one month, one year before he left her, before he ran out of money or lost interest as she grew uglier and he handsomer, and how many children would be her burden and what man ten years later would lead them back across the border, to return to this? Because men had no instinct to protect the accidents they'd left behind. Because there were such things as accidents for them, and such a thing as relief, and Deke epitomized this so soundly asleep on the bed, as if this were a beginning and not another point on the circle, not the upswing or the downswing returning to each other. Because he was so good-looking, and he had come back.

Because one day she came home and found three women standing by her mother's bed, watching her cough into a handkerchief. She was white, like paste, and Dolores poked through the women to watch but could not touch her. Dolores was sixteen and that was in summer and her mother died the next winter. There was no money to save her but there was money everywhere around them and it seemed like the great contradiction of America that poverty was

so close to prosperity and one always seemed like an illusion to the other. She had gone in search of Jesse while her mother was dying, for money. She had known his last name and knew he had come from San Angelo, but she did not have a word of English, and got inside an eighteen wheeler with a man who looked kind and old and who spoke Spanish. They got to the small town of Uvalde, which was less than forty miles down the road, and he asked for money, and when she said she was on her way to get some but didn't have any he put her in the sleeper cab of his truck and sodomized her, that kind old man, and at least she didn't have to see it, and when he was done he left her on the street and she couldn't walk but tried to, and cars with men driving passed by like the sight of a teenage girl struggling down the road walking so awkwardly was nothing, not anything, and finally an old white woman stopped in her big Cadillac and brought her to a hospital and paid her bill. When Dolores was released there was an envelope with money in it from the woman, not much but enough to get to San Angelo and back.

Because she never dreamed everyone in a place called San Angelo would be white, and no one would speak Spanish. She had Jesse's name on a piece of paper, and gave it to a man, and the man yelled the name *Jesse* as loud as he could in the street, and when no one answered he gave the paper back to her and patted her head. She started showing it to strangers, and men ignored her like a beggar unless they stopped to whistle, and women stopped and said they didn't know, but they stopped. She couldn't go to the police because the police would send her back to Mexico, and they had no right because her father was a Texan but it couldn't be proved, not unless she found him, and back then, all those years back, she still believed if she had asked to be taken Jesse would have taken her. Because of that.

Because to get home another man who was round and short and smiled wanted naked pictures for a ride, some man who asked her to lie down naked in the backseat of his car and when he pulled to the road's shoulder and told her it was time, she opened the door and ran back into the absence of oncoming traffic, down the hot wide empty road white sun blistering down hoping he wouldn't run or drive after her. Afterwards, alone, sitting on the roadside in the evening, hungry, with no more clothes or money, she wished she'd let him, anything he wanted, if she could be home. When night came, Dolores walked, since to walk in the day would be suicide, and that next morning in another town she nearly collapsed from dehydration, and a woman had mercy on her, a woman who owned a tiny moneyless restaurant, and let Dolores work there. She cooked and washed dishes and swept and slept in a bedroom with four other teenagers in a tiny house that leaned as if drawing back from the road in apprehension, and everyone in the house was from Mexico and most talked about going eventually to big cities like Chicago or Los Angeles or New York, and months later when she left to return home they watched her like a criminal, because she did not choose a city.

Because her mother was dying when Dolores returned, in and out, weakening in the mind, and admitted she had made Jesse up, that no man had come swaggering rebelliously into Nuevo Laredo, exiled like some heroic myth, that there never was a romance in Mexico City, and then she fell asleep, and when she woke she took Dolores's hand and said somewhere there was a man named Jesse who was her father, who had come down into Nuevo Laredo carrying all he owned in a sack, as if she were telling it the first time, and then days later, when Dolores brushed her mother's thin silvery hair and asked, praying she would tell the truth, if there were such a man as Jesse, her mother said, Jesse was the son of Obed, father of David. So Dolores sat on her chair and wept, and her mother died a few weeks later.

Because right there in the room with Deke, upswing or downswing, Dolores had all this money in her hand and the man who it belonged to couldn't be awakened. She put the money just under her nose, and ran the bills' edges over her dry lips. Because it was all the money he had in the world. The car he drove was proof. A man carrying that much money driving that car had no more, nowhere, and it meant everything to him. She imagined him the next morning crawling out of the hotel with nothing but his knife and book, one hand holding each, by his side. Because to take his money was to take all he owned, to leave one circle to join another. Still, was she supposed to leave this stranger's money, and go on living here long after he was gone, or go with him and pray he wouldn't tire of her?

Because the money was so much to Deke and so much to Dolores, and so little to so many others. Because there were people who would not notice losing that kind of money on the street, people who would shrug that money off, women who spent that much on gloves. The bills felt dry and stiff on her cheeks, like they were all brand new, and smelled like clean wet rocks, and reminded her of the desert. Deke was still lying prostrate on the bed, and his breaths were slowing, like he was drifting deeper into sleep, and Dolores cursed his jeans. She thought of her home, where she'd lived the last few years, in the refurbished attic of an old woman's house. Dolores had her own door and stairway and hardly saw the woman—a widow who sold a ranch after her husband's death—but could hear each one of her emphysemic breaths. Once a month the phone rang and Dolores guessed it was a child or grandchild but there were never any visitors. Sometimes Dolores sat and listened to the woman sitting directly under her, like they were keeping each other company. Sometimes Dolores bought the woman cigarettes and dropped them through the mail slot, and the woman left notes to thank her. Sometimes they spoke if they happened to be outside together, if the woman were on her porch or admiring cactus in her yard, and they would talk about the heat or the horses the woman used to own, and one day a few months ago the woman had returned Dolores's rent check and said she needn't pay to live there anymore. Because to take Deke's money would be to never see that woman again, or listen to her sitting. Because leaving did not guarantee happiness. She thought of where she might go and no place seemed better than another, except that some places were hotter and some colder, some places had hills and some didn't, and some places had trees and some had lakes, or oceans. But she could not help thinking that stripped of their idiosyncrasies all landscapes were deserts and everybody in them was dying.

To begin again was to realize the imminence of one's own death. Dolores felt her age. She felt herself within time and felt time moving, and knew that it couldn't be stopped, be grasped by the shoulders and brought down violently to the ground, since time did not have a nature but was its own nature, a pure thing, inalterable, and could not be known in parts. She saw her past trailing into the far corners of her memory like dying sparks drifting into a well. She was a child once, wasn't she? Was she supposed to let this chance pass, let the night go by, and wait to see why Deke had come? She felt this decision crawling over her like centipedes, like she was buried in the sand to her shoulders and time was creeping over her face and the child that she used to be was sitting in the sand beside her asking her for help. She could feel herself growing older in increments now and if she measured one increment she knew there were more within it and suddenly she was aging twice as fast, and again, and multiplying. Was she supposed to not get dressed and steal out of the room? Was she supposed to let Deke go, or stay with him for a while until the inevitable, and return here, and hope another chance would come

and she was not too many years beyond hope? Was she supposed to obey his looks? Was she supposed to go back to Mexico if he asked, even though her mother had given up everything to get them here? Maybe, she thought, if no fate was better than another. She looked again at the money. Was she supposed to put it back in his jacket?

*

Hugo opened one eye, then the other. He could make out three kinds of light—the gray, irresolute eke of an afternoon through a window, a static and glowing nightmare-blue from a television, which reminded Hugo they had watched a pornographic film while passing out, and a small lamp on a side table that Velasquez was sleeping beside. When Velasquez rocked or turned, the bulb inside the lamp would flicker.

Hugo was lying on a long tan couch that smelled like socks, maybe dog, depending on which part you sniffed. He had a painful erection, and when he turned to see who else was there, he saw Joe with his head elevated on a pillow, hands on his belly, fingers intertwined, looking at the bulge. Hugo couldn't tell if Joe was staring, lascivious, or merely distracted by his thoughts, zoned out.

Hey, said Hugo.

Joe didn't move for a moment, only opened his eyes a little rounder. His head began to tilt though his gaze remained fixed on Hugo's crotch, until, once his cheek was almost to his shoulder, Joe straightened suddenly, awakened from his daydream, and shook his head.

Today's Christmas, right? Joe asked Hugo.

Velasquez stirred by the side table. Shut up, he said. He pulled a pillow over his face. Now I'm awake. If I don't get back to sleep I'm going to fucking kill one of you.

Joe shrugged. He leaned far over, struggling to reach for the remote. Hugo rolled over on the couch, onto his stomach, and pushed his face into the pillow. He heard the VCR begin to rewind, accelerating as it went. Joe stopped it after a minute. Hugo heard the click and rev of the mechanism, and turned his face to watch. First there was static, then a few jumping, still pictures, and at last there were three women about to have sex with each other in a playground, all wearing school uniforms. Joe muted the volume, and they watched the scenario play out in silence.

Hugo snapped his fingers to get Joe's attention. He asked, only after Joe reluctantly turned his head to listen, whose house they were at.

Larry's, said Joe.

Velasquez groaned under his pillow.

Hugo had to go to the bathroom, but was hoping his erection would vanish. He lay on his stomach for another five minutes, watching the tape, until the pain in his bladder became too severe. When he stood, he put a hand in a pocket to screen the erection.

The house was small but confusing. He went down one hallway and found nothing but bedrooms. In one room Steve and Jimmy were lying together on a bed, cuddling. The door made a loud creak when he opened it, and Steve and Jimmy woke to find themselves within each other's arms and legs.

Jesus Christ, said Jimmy, and hit Steve on the shoulder. What? said Steve, I'm on my fucking side. Then they spread as far away from each other as possible, pulling the sheets in a tug-of-war.

Hugo closed the door and checked another. He found Larry sitting up in bed, reading a book. There was a coffee mug on a nightstand, and a half-eaten sandwich. Larry looked at Hugo cheerfully. Good afternoon, he said. Merry Christmas.

I just need to go to the bathroom, said Hugo.

Bathroom through kitchen, said Larry, already back into his book. He wore reading glasses that rested on the tip of his nose.

Hugo closed Larry's door. He stood outside it for a moment, stupefied. Was that the Larry from last night, the drunk and reckless man who first rallied everyone to the bar, then got them all to drive around the countryside?

In the kitchen, Hugo noticed a wall clock beside the refrigerator. It was five-thirty.

He opened the bathroom door and found Hank lying in the small box of the shower, enclosed by fogged glass, in his underwear, gasping. Turn the water on, Hank said.

What? Hugo looked down and saw with relief that his erection was gone.

Turn the water on, said Hank. It's the only way I can get my heartbeat to slow down. I'm dying.

I have to go to the bathroom, said Hugo.

Just turn the water on first. I can't reach up.

Hugo leaned across Hank's coiled body cautiously, worried Hank might grapple him down, that this might be a ruse, and turned the faucet on. The shower head shook and choked for an instant, and pipes whined within the walls, and then water dribbled peacefully out. Hank said, Thanks, and fell asleep.

When Hugo was back in the living room, Larry came out in a white and turquoise terrycloth robe. Everybody awake? he asked.

Velasquez turned over. I'm hungry, he said.

Joe said, I could use a drink.

Larry pondered this. He went to the kitchen, and Hugo heard the refrigerator door open and close, then some cabinets and drawers.

Hugo felt an intuitive need to escape the house, but also a sense of comfort in the thought that nothing, here, was expected of him.

Larry came out with beer, and handed everyone a can. He sat down beside Hugo.

Joe, said Larry, let's watch something else.

Obediently, Joe stopped the tape and switched to the television.

Velasquez said, Food?

None, said Larry, unfortunately. But we can go get some.

Joe reminded him it was Christmas, and that they'd have to drive thirty minutes to get to an open grocery store, but Larry said they'd just break into the small grocery in town.

Break in? asked Joe.

Not actually *break in*, said Larry. I know where they keep the key, and we can write down what we take and pay them back later.

Joe nodded. He would believe anything Larry said. Hugo knew it was a lie, but chose not to speak.

When it was dark, they decided to get food. Velasquez had begun to beg Larry by then. Lifting his shirt up and pointing to his gut, he wanted everyone to listen to his stomach's grumblings.

In Larry's driveway were two cars and one truck, and Hugo remembered them all racing around the hills the night before. The tires and wheel wells were splattered with grime, as were the grilles and windshields, meaning they must have gone off-road, or at least swerved accidentally into ditches.

Larry got Velasquez to drive the truck. Everyone else but he and Hugo sat in the bed, bundled in blankets that were thick and woolly, stolen from moving trucks. Steve and Jimmy complained they were itching before they even touched the blankets. Hugo sat on the hump between Velasquez and Larry. He couldn't remember how they had tricked him into coming along the night before, only that he had seen Deke's car vanish, and didn't have the will to chase him any more.

Larry told him to make a list of things they needed for dinner.

I don't have a pen or paper, said Hugo.

Well, help me remember.

When he began naming the things he wanted, he put his arm along the back of the seat, behind Hugo's head. There was something uncomfortably seductive about it, as if Larry were going to ask Hugo if he wanted to join a society. Hugo didn't listen to everything Larry said, but when Larry finished and asked if it was all clear, Hugo said, Yeah, got it.

On the way to the grocery, they drove by George and Ingrid's store. It was somebody else's now, and Hugo wondered what would come of it, if anything in this town would ever really make money. Larry said, You would've been in that spot all night if we hadn't come and got you.

A few blocks later, and without warning, Larry had Velasquez turn off the main road and down a narrow alley, so they could enter the grocery from behind. Velasquez swerved drastically, and Hank, Joe, Steve, and Jimmy all crashed into one another. They screamed, and when Hugo looked back he saw how cold and irritated they were, getting situated again. Hank gave Hugo the finger, or maybe it had been directed at Velasquez through the rear-view mirror. In either case, Hugo turned around and said nothing.

With the decision to leave Deke alone, and with Ingrid's departure, something had changed, and Hugo felt a new kind of emptiness, a greater emptiness. If these were his acquaintances, and George his responsibility, this afternoon was the rest of his life, unless he set out again, left town for nowhere in particular, in search of hope. To embark on that, however, was to surrender all the time between that very moment and his departure from Chicago, to capitulate whole years.

They hopped out of the truck and stood by a dumpster. Now that the wind wasn't in their faces, the men who had to sit in back all lit cigarettes, as if that alone could warm them. They hopped up and down without quite leaving the ground, and they had their hands in their pockets.

Now where's that key?

The men watched as Larry scrounged around the small lot behind the grocery. Velasquez looked ready to faint. I'm so fucking hungry, he said.

Hugo knew there wasn't a key, and wondered if anyone or everyone else knew. It was, he thought, probably an act put on for Joe. Larry grunted, saying, It's just under this stone.

Then he held the stone up, strolled casually to the back door, and tossed it through a window. The glass shattered, and Larry craned his arm carefully through to reach the doorknob. He worked cautiously, tongue between his teeth, trying to unlock the door. When it opened, he said, drawing his hand gradually, unhurriedly out the window, like a surgeon removing something vital from a body, Voilà!

Joe said, I don't think this is a good idea.

The other men didn't think so either. They told Larry to get back in the truck.

We're out of drinks, he said. At least let's get some beer.

This made sense to them, and, except for Hugo, who said nothing, they all voted Joe to go in and get it. This was Joe's place in the group. He knew it, and sighed. Larry said, I'll go in, too, and Hugo. Hugo, you remember what we need for dinner?

Now Hugo understood. It was a trick, and until then only Larry had known it, but now everyone else was in. Hugo knew this from the way they watched him eagerly. Larry was going to go in last, it was perfect, and when Joe and Hugo were inside, he would sprint back to the truck. They would abandon them. Joe, at this point, also seemed to realize the trap, but in a resigned manner, like he was going to do it anyway, if it would give them something to laugh about later. The emptiness inside Hugo was replaced momentarily with sorrow. Was there any difference between him and Joe, any reason to think he might not fall for Larry's gag? Joe looked pitiful. He would go in even if the store was on fire. Since he'd left Chicago, Hugo had protected himself by becoming invisible, replaced his identity with the conceptions of others. But once the self was totally annihilated, when the alternative of saying no was as bleak as the alternative of yes, there was Joe, dumb, neither eager nor hesitant.

Something had changed. Hugo knew a tiny success was at hand, now, if he could assert himself, simply avoid the prank, and decline. He said, I don't think so.

The men stood around, a little stunned, and Larry came running over. What?

I'm going to take off, said Hugo.

What are you going to eat?

I'll find something.

Hugo walked into the alley and Larry yelled at him to come by later if he wanted a drink.

Hugo stood for a while on the sidewalk in front of George and Ingrid's store. He didn't want to go back to his outhouse. It was dark now, and frigid, and he wished he had a thicker jacket. He looked down one way and then the other. Nothing was moving. He waited a few minutes to see if the truck was going to spin onto the road and gun past. He imagined that if he stood still one of the men would throw something at him. His was dizzy from hunger now, and thought he might catch whatever they threw and eat it. No, it was better not to be humiliated. He walked across the street, away from the direction of George's house.

Once he was half a block down, he heard the truck surging on the main road behind him. He expected them to be shouting and wahooing, but, except for the big clattering noise of the engine, it zoomed by uneventfully. Just the white lights announcing it, the truck itself, and then red light trailing away.

If escaping them had been a victory, it had no consequence. He had committed an irredeemable act, had made a part of his past too heavy to escape. He had stolen Anna's adolescence. The wind bit into his eyes, and the cold burned his cheeks. Had everything since

his last night in Chicago happened so that he might be the ironic repetition of himself then, trudging through the bitterness, when at least there seemed like reason leaving? His toes were in pain. He wore the same clothes he had on yesterday, the same sweat-saturated socks, which were ice now, nearly.

A siren whirled out of the silence. The noise was diffuse and airy, and seemed to come from whichever way Hugo listened. He moved off the road, closer to the trees, and while he walked he watched behind him, turning every dozen steps. The ground was half soft and half stony, so that his feet sank in some places and slipped in others. It made him think of treading down the back of an immense reptile.

Outside Father Rudolfo's house were four cars, his and three Hugo didn't recognize. It was Christmas, and Hugo knew that if Anna had come back to visit, it would be that day, and he could watch her through the windows. Someone had strung lights along a row of hedges—perhaps Father Rudolfo himself, since the hedges were all he could reach. Hugo was getting nauseous from hunger. He held a mild stitch in his side and approached the window above the lights. When he peered in, bending over the hedges, he had to clutch either side of the windowframe to keep from falling into the glass. He couldn't believe how quickly this tired his arms, how they trembled at some angles and simply would not hold at others. Inside, he could see half a dinner table. Father Rudolfo was at the end. He was seated feebly with his legs crossed. There was a man beside Father Rudolfo, holding his round belly, concentrating on his breathing. Hugo's stomach ached enviously. A woman was clearing the table, and when she tried to take the full man's plate he slapped at her arms and began to eat again. The woman stopped and put her arms on her hips, then spoke to someone else, someone at the end of the table whom Hugo couldn't see. A moment passed, and then Hugo saw Anna, holding armfuls of plates and saucers, pass through the visible part of the room, and then she was gone again. Hugo pushed himself away from the window, back into the darkness of Father Rudolfo's yard.

He felt a little paralyzed there, wondering what to do. Seeing her hadn't had the effect he expected. Rather than satiating him, the sight of her had complicated his guilt. She was the same, at least in the brief glimpse he'd captured. Still beautiful, as she had been lying on his bed. He heard laughter inside, the kind of muted laughter that foretells an evening's end. Hugo stepped back farther, into a concealing wall of trees, and waited as the lights in the house flashed on and off while the guests made sure nothing would be left behind. Then the light outside the front door came on, which made an amphitheatric stage of the yard, and pushed Hugo back even more.

The door opened, and the muted laughter came outside with the people. They were speaking Spanish, and all seemed very tired. There were three couples, one older and two younger, who, upon waving good-bye, hurried through the cold to their cars. Anna stood by Father Rudolfo in the doorway, holding her shoulders tightly. It had been eight months, Hugo counted, from the night in his outhouse. Whatever sickness in himself, whatever pestilence that had made raping her possible in his mind, was a disease Anna now had. Even within the shell of her still-perfect body. Hugo imagined it as a few infected cells devouring the healthy ones around them. And dividing. And it would not relent unless she told it. It would weaken and debilitate her, day by day, until loathing so saturated her mind that all her thoughts would drown in fear. Hugo would never shake the sickness—to perpetrate something so foul meant he was

born with it—but Anna had to be curable, he thought. All she had to do was tell the truth, and help would come running.

Once the guests had shut their doors, Anna darted back inside. Father Rudolfo stayed outside to make sure all the cars started, got out the driveway safely, went the right way down the road, and disappeared. And even after that he stayed outside, just breathing. Hugo tried to stand as silently as the trees around him.

Father Rudolfo, as if intent on letting the cold know he was not afraid of it, remained in his doorway. Hugo could see his own breath, knew it too could give him away, and tried to hold it in. When that made him dizzy he took shallow breaths instead, and these the priest could hear.

Hugo? said Father Rudolfo.

Hugo's heartbeat started to rush painfully. He wanted to run, but something so strange, after already being found hiding outside the house, would surely incriminate him.

Come here, Hugo.

Hugo came out of the woods and into the light.

What are you doing lurking in the trees?

I was going to come by, said Hugo, but saw you had company.

Never mind company, he said. Come in. Anna's home for Christmas.

Hugo thanked him, but said he'd better go, that he had to be somewhere.

From a room inside the house, far back, Hugo heard Anna ask who Father Rudolfo was talking to. Father Rudolfo didn't answer her. He asked Hugo, Are you hungry? We have food left.

Hugo couldn't pretend he didn't need to eat, even though he tried to say no. Father Rudolfo told him to wait while he put a plate together. So Hugo stood in front of the house, moving to the stone walk in front of the open door, and waited. He looked at his own feet for a while. There was mud and grass in clumps covering his shoes, and he tried scraping one with the other. When he looked up, Anna was in the doorway. He noticed there were highlights in her hair, and he noticed her breasts, which were larger.

I'm not staying, he said. I'm just getting food.

She nodded. They stood awkwardly and did not speak. What would they talk about? Hugo ran a dozen subjects through his mind, and all implied something in the past, and all the past implied the rape. Then, despite standing in the biting cold, cold to his bones, Hugo began to sweat. Perhaps she would speak. Perhaps she would come down from the doorway, take his hands, and forgive him. But she merely loitered there, too staggered to withdraw, astonished, likely, he had dared to come by.

Hugo couldn't make sense of her expression, nor of the fact that she remained, but he relished the sight of her. If he felt true guilt, wouldn't he collapse at her feet, and beg her understanding? But he too merely stood, content, at least while unable to speak, to scrape his muddy feet.

Father Rudolfo called for Anna, and she answered. Oh, he said, coming into the doorway beside Anna, I thought you were in your room. He had a platter piled with meat and vegetables, covered in plastic wrap. This ought to be enough, he told Hugo, for a couple days.

Anna said she was tired, and disappeared. Horrified with himself, Hugo could not suppress the instinct to still admire her body from behind. She was wearing tight black pants, and Hugo saw the half-inch of space between the top of her legs, the space he had been before

anybody. He took the platter and thanked Father Rudolfo. Was that it? Was that all he would see of Anna? Father Rudolfo told Hugo George might like some food, then he touched Hugo's arm, just below the elbow. You remember what we talked about, he said.

When Father Rudolfo went inside, Hugo heard three locks fasten. If Anna had only spoken, only shown she was willing to accept Hugo's presence, he could've left then. As it stood, however, his visit had explained nothing, offered no insight toward his guilt or her intentions. Coming here had only made the problem of both seem impenetrable.

He put the platter beside a tree and walked quietly around the front yard, beside the house, to Anna's bedroom window. A light was on, a lamp on a desk, and the blinds were cracked slightly open. He knelt in the ground, careful to stay within darkness. He would simply tell her how sorry he was, and beg her not to tell a soul. But if he begged her to keep quiet, wouldn't that be an implicit admission of his guilt? There was a small chance that she, more than he, had assumed guilt for what happened. This slim possibility was the only thing that would keep her quiet forever. But he did not want that, he told himself. He did not want Anna to carry the entire burden, or any of it, if such a thing were possible. He would knock on her door and simply talk to her. Simply begin. Then she walked by the window, through which Hugo could see sufficiently, while pulling her shirt off. That erased all thought in Hugo's mind. It was as if all working parts of his brain threw themselves frantically to the task of being entranced, being beyond thought. If she took off all her clothes, her bra and pants and underwear, would Hugo have watched this also? It was a question he didn't have to answer. Anna saw the cracked blinds and twisted them shut, opaque. Hugo was both relieved and crestfallen. He got to his feet. If he knocked now, surely she would think he was watching her undress.

He surrendered. He walked as slowly to the front as he had walked to the back, but now not as secretively. He got his platter and went back to the road.

The night was quiet again, and Hugo picked up one corner of the plastic wrap to nibble on some food. It was so delicious that he considered sitting down where he was, moving not one inch more toward George's house, and eating every bite.

And yet he charged ahead. The longer he stayed near Father Rudolfo's, he knew, the greater the chance he might turn back again. Then someone whispered his name. At first he believed the voice was in his thoughts, trying to tell him what to do next, so he thought to himself, What? He stopped in the road with a turkey leg in his mouth. Had the voice spoke once more and not revealed itself, Hugo would have done whatever it ordered. But when the whisper came again, Hugo could see a figure coming slowly out of the woods, Joe.

Is that you, Joe?

Is that food?

Hugo let Joe take a big cut of turkey breast. Joe was carrying a case of beer and put it down to eat.

I'm so hungry, he said. His hands were shaking. You want a beer?

Hugo took a beer. He had to cradle the big platter in one arm to drink. He asked Joe what happened, and Joe told him Larry and the others had left him at the store, and when he heard sirens he had dropped all the food he'd gathered, grabbed some beer, and run off. Joe said

a policeman had chased him into the woods, but he found a tree to climb up and hide in. Then he said, Come to think of it, maybe he didn't chase me.

Hugo was glad to have something to drink, but he wanted to get home and eat the rest of his food, so he told Joe he was leaving.

I'm coming with you, said Joe. I'm never talking to those fuckers again.

As Joe spoke, he tried to grab one more piece of turkey. Hugo was closing the plastic wrap over, trying to keep the food warm, and jerked the platter away, but Joe lunged greedily and knocked it from the cradle of Hugo's arm. Both men tried to catch it while it fell. In the instant before the platter crashed to the ground, which lingered painfully in time as if time and the platter had conspired together, both men made embarrassing gropes in the air. When it hit, it broke in quarters, and food spilled onto the pavement. Hugo couldn't do anything but look, but Joe got to his knees, made a bowl with the plastic wrap, and filled it. He ate handfuls while doing this, as if the food might disappear if he didn't.

It doesn't matter, said Hugo.

Most of it hasn't touched the road, Joe said. He was chewing, and he stopped to pull a leaf out of his mouth.

Hugo started walking away, and Joe ran after him, holding out the pouch of food he'd saved. There's still a lot, he said.

When Hugo took the food, looking suspiciously at the mush it had become, Joe asked, You still going home to eat?

Hugo shrugged. He finished his beer and tossed the can into the woods, and Joe offered him another.

Can I still come with you? Joe picked something else out of his mouth. It looked like a piece of rubber. Shit, he said. All those guys ever do is fuck with me.

Hugo told him to come on, and going up the road Joe told the story of another trick Larry had played on him. Another childish prank, thought Hugo, made depressing by the fact that an adult had fallen for it, and adult, like Hugo had been in Chicago, who would not retaliate, and would be there when the next prank began. Never again, said Joe, when he finished telling it.

They were at the main road, and Hugo could see, in the far distance, two police cars outside the small grocery. Another car was parked on the curb, the owner's, Hugo guessed. In his mind he could hear them all saying, Jesus Christ, and on Christmas. Joe saw them too, and stopped talking. He leaned into Hugo, pointing at the police, and whispered, Can you believe they would've let me go to jail?

Then Joe started crying. Hugo flinched when he heard Joe snort, and considered running. Joe squeezed his beer can and threw it down, then struck himself squarely in the mouth. His shoulders shook and he leaned forward like he wanted Hugo to hold him, but Hugo moved back. Then, as quickly as it had come, it went away, and Joe looked up and said, Sorry, sometimes I just get so angry.

They crossed the main road at a point where the streetlamps did not light, to stay out of sight, and stepped across in darkness. They opened two more beers on the other side, and by then the alcohol was hitting Hugo. Joe called it the shampoo effect, that when you drank two nights in row heavily, you got drunk faster the second. Like shampooing hair twice. Try it, said Joe. Hugo told him he was probably right.

Not probably, said Joe. Right.

It was uphill to George's house, for the most part, and after ten minutes Hugo and Joe were winded. They leaned against a stone wall outside someone's house and had another beer. I hope they all starved to death, Joe said.

Hugo nodded, but he was thinking about Anna, about how time from now on need not pass in abstractions, in seconds, in hours, or years, but could be measured against the inevitable revelation of his guilt. So that each moment, each breath or thought, was always one increment less distant to punishment than the last. It was like a countdown where each tick closer to zero was twice as fast as the one before, except Hugo did not know when zero would come. If Anna, however, chose guilt for herself, if she believed the fault were hers, and the embarrassment if people knew, Hugo's zero might not come, but to want that was to want the rape to continue, even now against the cold stone wall with Joe, and beat ever more viciously on.

When they got to the house, they saw a single lit room, the den, where the television was. The dog was on the porch, asleep. It woke when it heard them. It had been a great number of places with Hugo, and for a long time, but now it only stood painstakingly and moved farther away. Joe said, Doesn't look like much going on.

Hugo agreed.

Then Joe asked, Is Ingrid really gone?

Hugo said he supposed so. He wondered where a person could go to, who had lived a whole life in one place already. Did Ingrid think a new town would erase the memory of this one?

They went inside without knocking. The motion of returning to the house, thought Hugo, was in the absolute opposite direction to Deke's, driving fiercely toward the border, exhausted and beat. Hugo could see Deke now, pulling one last cigarette out of a pack to keep awake, toiling through the elements. Hugo and Joe walked through a dark room and dark hallway, and found George sitting on a recliner watching television. He swiveled when he heard them in the room.

Joe said, Merry Christmas, George, and sat down on a couch.

Hugo said they had food and went to the kitchen to get plates. He got two, one for him and one for George. When Joe asked where his was, Hugo pointed to the bag of mush.

Hugo filled his plate as high as possible, gave a couple forkfuls to George, and left only crumbs for Joe, who didn't complain. George was watching a movie, and a character told a joke that made him laugh. George slapped his thigh and then rubbed where he had slapped. He took the food Hugo gave him, and ate a couple bites before he spit a big chunk out. Did this fall on the ground? he asked.

Joe said, Not all of it.

Hugo stared at his mound for a long time. He picked a few leaves and rocks out of it, and finally pushed it to Joe. George gave his back, and said he wasn't hungry. Hugo passed that too. Joe said, Really?

Hugo couldn't watch Joe eat without anything himself, so he made two slices of toast, without butter. To give them flavor he sprinkled them with salt and pepper. Christmas dinner, said George, and Hugo nodded. Joe ate almost all the food Father Rudolfo had given him, and dozed fitfully for an hour. George and Hugo drank Joe's beer and watched the movie end and another begin. When Joe finally woke up for good, he did so explosively, coughing in the middle of a snore and bolting upright. He spit into an empty beer can and opened another.

Not much beer left, he said.

A commercial came on, and George flicked around. He zoomed past stations like a teenager. Nothing on, nothing on, he said. Maybe I ought to get satellite.

He settled on a commercial. He laughed when it had finished, and said, That one always gets me.

Joe yawned and stretched, saying, I might head off. Larry and them are probably going out.

He spoke as if none of the night or day had happened, as if, now awake, he had merely found himself somewhere his friends weren't, and wanted to be where they were. Hugo didn't know if this instinct were tragically simple or enormously complex, if it took all a person's faculties to decide to face a man like Larry again, knowing what Larry thought of him—someone like Joe or Hugo—or no faculties, if it were just a homing drive, a dull noise that got louder the closer Larry was and quieter the farther away.

Joe stood, took his glasses off, wiped them with the untucked bottom of his shirt, and put them back on. Bye, he said. Bye George.

George pointed at the television, and Joe grabbed a final beer from the case before leaving. For the road, he said.

Hugo watched him stumble away. Joe was not drunk but tired and disoriented. Before he left the den, he zipped his coat up, raised the collar, and clapped his hands. There was a longer than expected silence from then until the moment the front door opened, which meant he must have walked out very slowly. Once the door was open, there was another unexpected silence. Then Joe called out, Hey, it's not that cold anymore.

When the door closed, and the noise of Joe's footsteps trailed off the porch and onto the sound-extinguishing softness of the grass, Hugo raised his feet, taking over the couch. George said, shaking his beer to see that it was empty, Who was that?

Hugo almost answered, but George's eyes closed. It made Hugo uncomfortable to imagine George's only hope in life, now that Ingrid had left him, was that he wouldn't last long without her. She had liberated him by leaving. He was now allowed to rot. This was why Father Rudolfo wanted Hugo to look after him. When George started snoring, great throaty snores like revving lawnmower engines, Hugo got up. The noise George made was the siren alert that confirmed the great emptiness Hugo felt. It was the sound of gloom's arrival, the sound of George waiting to die, of Hugo's life compared to Deke's. Hugo left the room, went slowly toward the front door, noticing how quickly the house darkened, and how difficult maneuvering was. This was why Joe had taken so long leaving. Hugo ran his hands along the wall, looking for a light switch, but didn't find one until he was at the door. He flipped it, and the dirty yellow porch light appeared just outside a window.

He held the doorknob but did not twist it. Here, in miniature, was the awful dilemma of where he had been and where he was going, the thing he knew now and didn't know then, that nothing distinguished him on one side from him on the other, that the illusory space of the threshold made no difference just by being walked through. For a moment, stuck and discouraged by this fact, before he stepped out anyway, all he could see in his mind was Deke, again, standing in wild darkness, awaiting his poor wet travelers.

VITA

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