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Prisoners like Us

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PRISONERS LIKE US

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
Sean P. Cavanaugh
B.A., University of New Hampshire, 1995
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For Sarah
Thank you for the time

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Based in part on the experiences of Joseph Knowles and his book *Alone in the Wilderness*, copyright 1913, Small, Maynard, and Company.

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ABSTRACT

A fictional work about a wilderness writer and a man who transports prisoners of war set in the Moosehead Lake region of northern Maine.

PROLOGUE

Nobody in town was certain when the sign appeared off the Golden Road. Maybe that's because to get there you need to drive out of Northville for at least an hour. You'll start along the banks of the lake and pass summer homes and one-floor camps. When you do, you'll be on a paved road. It'll weave around corners and hills just like any other country road in any town, but the houses will quickly disappear behind you, and you'll come to a line where the pavement ends and the road continues on as hard packed dirt. Your tires will rumble, flinging rocks to the road's edge and kicking up a tail of dust you can see in the rear view mirror. The trees will creep to the road's edge, and you won't be able to see more than fifteen or twenty feet into the wilderness around you. The only connection to the towns will be the Golden Road ahead and behind you, but the curves and hills will hide the long stretch from your view.

This one afternoon, in early May, just after the last days of mud season, you might be one of the loggers who still had work and happened to glance out the window as you barrel down the road. A flash is all it is—a nuance in the green blur outside your truck that you can't quite place. Later as you're driving, you can't even recall a road. No matter. Though the logging in the area had been scaled back, roads still appeared randomly. But the paper company never names logging roads. Numbers, yes, but not titles, no identity. Just block letters and numbers burnt and painted into slabs of wood nailed to the trees. Still, you convince yourself that it was nothing really, just a break from the typical routine. You didn't tell anyone in town, didn't expend too much thought on it either. But you didn't forget.

The next day, you slowed, and then stopped.

The sign was simple, stated the necessary, emblazoned with the crossed pistol emblem of the Military Police and the words, "Prisoner of War Branch Camp No. 10." An arrow painted at the bottom pointed up the road—the words entrance in block letters underneath it. You didn't

follow the sign's directions, didn't travel where the arrow pointed. Instead you continued with your load, down the Golden Road to Millinocket and the Mill.

The rest of the trip, you can't escape the sign. You might have overheard a conversation at the Legion, might have known they were sending POWs over this way. But nothing clicks. You're just like anyone else. You don't know much about the war, because it's simple to forget. Just materialized out of that blue New York sky. Not like Vietnam—though we never really learn any lessons from history, it's not in our nature. A kind of ground war off and on—find a terror cell—invade. They'd been bombing for years, hadn't forgotten that lesson yet, Iraq and Kosovo still shinning stars for the Pentagon laser guides, bombs that turn street corners at 200 mph. But most of us don't know much about the war, it is easy to forget, easy to let the real battles in our lives take over. But still, you would've remembered if the military made an announcement about the war coming to your backyard. You don't neglect that sort of thing. Neither does the news.

Later, you return to Northville, a border town in the backwoods of Maine. We can call the town this, not because it is near Canada—though it is—but because it has never escaped its own history. In past generations, the town was the last stop on the train from Portland to Montreal, and for years it was the only vestige of society before you entered a vast wilderness. Men forged jobs from the land. They trapped and logged. And when the train finally did make its way to town, they jumped it. Some stayed on as engineers, brakemen, machinists and had families, while other young men escaped on the train and rode as far as they could, to Boston or New York where some stayed, but still others jumped more trains and sometimes boats that took them anywhere you could possibly imagine.

Those who didn't work the trains felled trees. At first they did so out of necessity, to get to the deep mold, formed by aeons of fallen leaves and rotten tree-trunks. They sought dirt that produced more wheat per acre than men in Europe ever imagined. Settlers pushed the forest back from the ocean and then they conquered the land around the rivers. The Kennebec, Penobscot, and Piscataquis took them deep into the interior. Orchards and farms covered the southern tableland. But farther north farming became difficult, frost pushed an endless supply of boulders into land tilled each spring. Tired from cutting through the woods, and halted by the northern ridge of the Appalachians, the settlers ended their progression in Northville. And lumber became their cash crop.

Even now, men still harvest the trees. Instead of axes and cross-cut saws, they ride huge mechanical beasts that grasp trees and pull the roots from the ground. And when they lose their jobs, they don't jump the trains. They stay in town and drink and escape with any number of pills and powders. And these men are your peers, you meet at the Legion, drink beer, escape together.

Some of the men are talking. Little arguments over nothing at all, but most are silently hanging over their drinks. A voice drones from the radio. It's authoritative, strong, always correct. Sometimes a few heads nod when the voice speaks. Sometimes they even get angry, say that something should be done.

When you tell them of the sign, they look at you like you've been asleep, like you've been alone for too long. *Of course the prisoners are coming, where else would they go? Didn't you see the news?* How can you get away from it? It's been all they've talked about for the past two days—at least after the live action footage from the noses of smart bombs and web cam checks live from the front—with complete and thorough analysis by a panel of experts—professors, some—former politicians, maybe—pundits, certainly—mostly seasoned reporters.

The prisoners are coming just like they did in WWII. It worked out well then. *You didn't know we had 400,000 Krauts here in '45, your friends ask. A-yuh, they did all the jobs our boys would've—logged, picked cotton, caned sugar, loaded trucks. If we could handle half a million nazis, we can certainly take on a few thousand Serbs, or Muslims, or Aphgans—whatever they are.*

The war—we can call it that if we want, though it's more an overblown skirmish, a thousand asterisks in history, like Grenada or Somalia never ended—will be over soon anyway. We can't lose. These POWs will go home soon. Won't be able to find a soul who remembers they were here in the first place.

So you pass the sign when you deliver your next load down the Golden Road, and before you know it, the crossed pistols are as much a part of the scenery as the spruce.

There's just so much you see all the time, just so much to remember and not enough space to put all that information.

JOSEPH

Sunday, August 6

At that moment, I think it's over. When I finally see them in the clearing, long grass matted around, my decision has been made for me.

I was there. No doubt about it. Alone, like I'd set out to be. There in the wilderness. Into the primitive. At the end of the path I'd been walking since dawn. In the clearing I'd expected to find with its grass and splash of goldenrod. Moments from when I first noticed the aroma of the warm summer sun heating the pine needles and dried leaves left from the previous year. That smell calmed me, made me think of being a kid in these same hills and only punctuated the shock of seeing the men.

Between the trees, my eyes had been attracted to a hawk flying in great circles. I couldn't tell if he was following me, but I saw his enormous wings flap once and he'd hang motionless in the air before the canopy hid him from my view, floating on updrafts, scanning below.

When I came out of the woods, that trinity of elements from above washed over the clearing like waves falling over the hill at its far end. First, the wind smoothing the grass like a hand over a child's hair. But not in that one spot—it laid still. The clouds next, but they were there before me, floating all the time, casting wide shadows. And finally the yellow sunlight transforming the gray field by the foot, not stopping until it got to my eyes, blinding me. The hawk hovered and circled the entire field.

I expected the other smell too. I expected to find death. But I expected some animal. I wanted to find the bear I'd been tracking or a deer, because I'd become convinced I needed another skin. The bear had been wounded and I knew I almost had it. The skin would keep me here as long as I wanted to—I could smoke the meat and not have to hunt. All that was left was

to find the carcass and I was home free. I never wanted to find the men. *You* know I didn't want to find any of them. But my game had to end at some point; I had to succumb to the inevitable. We can never be alone—untouched by others—it's a reckless and dangerous prospect.

I walked steadily through the field to the matted area, not aware of what awaited me. They'd been shot—both of them. That's how they died. The blood was already black around the wounds. The tall one with his arm over the other. As far as I could tell, the birds hadn't gotten them yet. I've seen bodies before, and these looked new, not more than a week or two old. Naked—without identity. I had only slight notions of their fate—ghosts I'd dreamed. Maybe something else occurred to me. I can't tell now.

In two months these were the first people I'd seen. Or at least I could be certain that these were the first. I'd been dazed the last time I was here—overcome by the weakness of my own perception. Even now, I can't be certain of what I've seen. Reality seems so endless now. Anything can occur.

I'm leaving as soon as I can gather the courage.

PART I

RIOT

¹**riot** \ 'ri-et\ *n, often attrib* [ME, fr. OF, dispute] **1** *archaic a* : profligate behavior : DEBAUCHERY **b** : unrestrained revelry **c** : noise, uproar, or disturbance made by revelers “This was inevitable. That is, conflict was. They’ve been fighting for hundreds of years and will continue to fight long after they’ve forgotten and remembered the reason they started in the first place. But war takes a long time to filter into the small places in the world. Oh, that’s where they usually begin, in the smallest, darkest parts of ourselves, but we all can be pulled into it. Dragged into it. We must not let the lessons of the last century be lost for the next one. We will fight to save our allies. But we must fight ourselves. We are at war.” - *President Bush on the dispatch of the USS Enterprise Naval Battle Group to the Mediterranean. 5/10/2005* **2** **a** : public violence, tumult, or disorder **b** : a violent public disorder; *specif* : a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent **3** : a random or disorderly profusion <the flowers were a ~ of color> **4** : one that is wildly amusing <the new comedy is a ~> In 2004 Public opinion polls suggest that the only demographic concerned with the logistics of Montenegrin ground force movements were males between the ages of 45-60. ²**riot** *vi* **1** : to indulge in revelry or wantonness The declaration of war was the first statement of the kind broadcast over the Internet, reaching approx 1.3 billion people worldwide. **2** : to create or engage in a riot ~ *vt* : to waste or spend recklessly <~ed away his whole inheritance> — **ri • ot • er** *n* In a 2005 study, 96% (+/- 3%) of high school seniors could not locate Israel on a map. Canada: 57%. Their home town: 12%. **riot act** *n* [the *Riot Act*, English law of 1715 providing for the dispersal of riots upon command of legal authority] : a vigorous reprimand or warning — used in the phrase *read the riot act* A major motion picture directed by Steven Spielberg starring

Tom Hanks as an outcast homosexual Serbian priest was abandoned when Hanks converted to Eastern Orthodoxy while studying for his role: AP-Entertainment.com. **riot gun** *n* : a small arm used to disperse rioters rather than to inflict serious injury or death : *esp* a short-barreled shotgun “First you master the music, then you master the instrument, then you forget all that shit and you just play.” *General Barry Johnson, quoting Charlie Parker in reference to his plans for orchestrating the initial wave of the ground war*

riotous \ 'ri-et-es\ *adj* **1** : ABUNDANT, EXUBERANT <the garden was ~ with flowers> “I mean it really shouldn’t go down like that. I mean war; it’s really a bad thing. But I know music will help make them happy.” *Britney Spears on headlining the Bob Hope New Millennium Victory Tour. Bob was not there himself, but it’s the first time an interactive 3-D hologram has substituted an actual Human Being.* **2 a** : of the nature of a riot : TURBULENT **b** : participating in a riot—**ri • ot • ous • ly** *adv*—**ri • ot • ous • ness** *n*

GRAY

Sunday, January 6

CMGI Field at Internalware.com Stadium, Foxboro, MA—you can get there any number of ways. The possibilities are endless. For argument's sake, let's say you take a car. From the South you drive 495 from the Cape or even Rte. 95 if you had to live in Rhode Island. They're both good roads, and the state repaves them every other year. During the times when the troopers don't suspect drinking—afternoons and mornings, even during rush hour—you can drive at least 80 miles an hour and still be passed. You'll make good time, and for certain people time is important on mornings like this. Game-Day. Even on a weekend, these people have schedules, deadlines, places to be before they get on the road, checkpoints they mark on their watches. This is their day, what they've been waiting for all week—every week. Others don't mind; they're going to a ball game, to have fun. The organic kind, the fun that happens without effort. But what you determine to be fun isn't always a result of where you are from nor where you are going. The only thing for sure is the stadium and how you get there.

If you come from the East, you're probably a local (there's not much land between Foxboro and the Coast) and you know any number of back-roads, the kind that grew before the subdivisions sprang up in the 90's. These roads seem to hide in suburban country, weave in and around wooded areas and past planned roads only to reemerge just beyond some congested intersection.

The roads from the West stretch forever into rows and rows of houses conveniently placed on grids regulated by an endless string of traffic lights. Houses pop up around them like mold spores: some surround golf courses, others just flank strip

malls. The developments are cozy bedroom communities just beyond the hustle of the city, nestled in the foothills to the foothills. The neighborhoods are safe, mostly clean, and the traffic is orderly.

From the north you have the choice of 495 or 95, both are major arteries that rap around Boston and feed commuters to their jobs Monday through Friday. And if this is where you find yourself, heading in from the North, you'll be in a time warp. The further away you are from the city, the closer you are to the past. So each time you take this trip, a new office building will have miraculously appeared. And not just a small pre-fab shack. The new building will be like an ancient ruin-to-be. It will house some bio-tech or e-system provider and will look as if its part of the landscape, or should've been for years—an extension of the hill it rests on.

These buildings rise like stones in a graveyard—company names proudly announced. This is where all the advances take place. Cloned cells, microprocessors, ultra-fast connections to everyone in the world.

But before the buildings, you'll see the suburbs evolve, it'll be as if the towns of northern Massachusetts are the future towns of southern New Hampshire, like the town you came from is somehow separated from the history of the rest of country. If you travel from the far north, you see the landscape evolve with each passing mile south, strip malls grow to massive lengths. Super-BigMarts give way to Mega-BigMarts, stores where you can buy anything from raw lumber and bags of cement to frozen chicken patties and fresh bread—still warm. Stores freed to sell in such massive quantities by powerful network databases and well managed distribution sites, manned by someone, anyone—doesn't matter.

When you start your trip, you're isolated. One of a handful who happen to live on the frontier. You pass under mountains that look small from the road, but you remember them from another perspective. You remember seeing the same roads from high above, at the beginning of a path that took you hours to climb. Those mountains—you know on the road to the game—dwarf everything around them. Just staring at them, trying to find each individual tree makes you feel small. But when you pass them, you come into rolling tableland and apple orchards. Land that is more easily farmed surrounds the roads. Houses built hundreds of years ago, some restored some disintegrating, flash past you as you pick up speed. And finally, you hit the Maine Turnpike, Route 95. It's the only artery heading South. And when you've driven this far, you see pockets of population. More cars pass you. And the malls begin. And as you pass slowly, everything gains momentum. And all of sudden instead of mountains, the houses that line the highway make you feel small. If you are perceptive, you'll understand that you are now passing millions of people, all with separate destinies. And at last, you'll cross into New Hampshire, then almost imperceptibly into the future in Massachusetts. And you'll be feeding past it all on Route 95, heading to the game.

But on Game Day, no matter which route you choose, you'll end up in traffic on Rte. 1, waiting to tailgate or to park quickly and make it to your seats before kickoff. Since there's a playoff game this afternoon, traffic begins to stack up before eleven this morning. Kickoff isn't until four o'clock, but it seems that everyone in traffic understands the importance of the tailgate. The two teams are evenly matched, the salary cap has assured it, but the draw for live sports is strong and will be for a long time to come. And

it's a sell out. People from all over New England are converging. You're a member of something primal, a tribe. A migration.

You can be any of them and can be anywhere in that traffic too. You might be a drunken teenager or a sober mill worker, waiting in consecutive cars, brought to semi-togetherness by some random chance. You could be a young boy bundled for the cold by his mother, now sweating and asking his dad, "How much farther?" because this is his first game and he's so excited he has to consciously not wet himself. You could be stretched out in a limousine behind the father and son because your company shells out \$75,000 per year for one of the new luxury boxes off the 30-yard line. And no matter who you are your life could lead you down a path the ends up here. A chance encounter, a different choice, a bad decision—the circumstances of our lives are beyond us too often. But in the end, we can follow you, watch where you go, find out what you want . . .

We'll follow Gray. He's our man here—the main attraction. And this little bit is in a very roundabout way about him. His legs are cramping. He's in the car behind the limo. It's his friend Lefty's car. Gray and Lefty took 95 all the way from Greenville, an hour and half North of Bangor. They set out the night before after Lefty finished work, passed underneath those mountains, and felt small. An unusual couple, one incredibly large and the other impossibly thin, these men grew up together and share a bond and comfort that neither could or would put into words.

And they're just guys. Sure they have the eccentricities we all have, but they could be any person on the street.

Lefty owns what he calls an antique Impala, with the bench front seat. Gray can feel his hamstrings slowly tighten, preparing to grab. The seat is pulled too far forward,

so Lefty can reach the pedals. Gray's the type of person who blends into a crowd when he's sitting. But later, when Gray's waiting in line for a beer, or standing to cheer a long run, people will notice him. Will gape. Some will ask about the weather up there and a few will of course say, "Wow, you're tall." Or ask, "Did you know you're tall?" It happens every day of his life.

Gray forgets how people look at him and though he might not recall this particular moment of the weekend, when he thinks back on it, flashes of all these days will return to him. He'll refer to them as "The Mistake." Refer to them in the third person, as if they were an object, something other than an occurrence. In his memory, the whole episode will last just two days, but to Gray, the mistake will mean all or any moment of those two days.

And with his size, Gray has played in plenty of games like this one before. In high school and college he was just too big not to. He flattened the other boys seemingly without trying. In college, the game came easy to him too. At times then, when things were quiet, he was certain he'd be the best. But some things in life are beyond our control and Gray's life wasn't meant to be that easy. He comes from a long line of people who surrender to the world. When his forefathers died, it was more out of exhaustion, resignation that the world was too much work for them to handle. So Gray's football career ended with a neck injury. The doctors all said he would play again, but they opened a door for Gray, showed him Percocet and Vicadin, then a long line of potions to dull the pain and anything else that happened to be a problem. He was back in Northville when he finally settled on the bottom—living in his aunt's summer home, living off the fat of his uncle's practice.

Mistakes like this one start small and build unnoticeably until you can't deny them. Until they are so confused you can't determine how you ever played a role in them.

But presently, Gray Coates never sees the mistake coming. But we can see that it surrounds him like a fog.

Gray and Lefty grew up near each other, but didn't become friends until they had common chemical interests. No one quite remembers how Lefty got his name. In the past, friends called him Left Turn, Turnaround, and Round-about, due to various indiscretions Lefty had a talent for getting involved in. Each time Lefty spoke or acted before he thought, his name morphed to suit the new misdeed. "Left Turn" when he went the wrong way down a one way street and ran head on into a police car. "Round About" when he got VD from his girlfriend at the time—she had gotten it herself from just about anyone in town. Lefty, the name that has stuck the longest, happened one night at the Legion when everyone was drunk. A girl walked in on Lefty having some private time in the bathroom. His choice of hands dominated the conversation afterwards. The name was his for good.

This odd couple has been in the car too long. They made most of the trip, all the way to Boston the night before. And then stopped at Mega-Bigmart to buy beer and tailgate provisions. The plan was to rent a hotel room, but they started drinking in the car when they were looking for one, and sooner than either realized they were in a bar, then passed out in the car.

The beginning of Gray's mistake goes like this: a mash of images, memories that bleed into one another. His first memory is of a stand of old-growth spruce. In the

distance he hears the faint mechanical clang of a logging truck shifting gears. The other details aren't significant to him, they will evade recollection, slip away from his thoughts. He'd been working all day, but this is where he'll remember the weekend beginning, on a single-track path, buying drugs from his logging friend. Neither of them would get fired for this, but they have an understanding, they don't want to be associated with drugs. Hence, they're secretive and they hide off a small path behind the paper company checkpoint. That they're on this path is not unusual because this is a part of the country where people use dirt roads and footpaths everyday. They use them like the rest of us use sidewalks and interstates. They have no choice but to carry on business here. Where else would they?

The logger sells clean stuff. His dope is fluffy and green with little red hairs and crystals. The coke is pure—he claims—not like most of the stuff that makes it that far north—cut up a hundred times before it even gets past Lowell. Gray pays extra. But to him it's worth it.

To go back to the traffic. Gray is now groping around in the back seat. He's on his knees facing backwards and is opening a cooler. He's thirsty because, you see, he's high. He rolled a number of joints on the ride this morning. He lit the first one just when Lefty's car pulled to a stop in traffic on Rt. 1. At first Lefty wasn't happy about it. He gets nervous smoking with all the cops. They've been friends long enough that Gray can tell Lefty's disapproval by the way he twitches his head and stares at the cars around them, "Hey, why don't you just turn around and wait?"

Gray does turn around. Clumsily. Forgetting about the beer, he smacks Lefty in the back of the head with a pointy elbow.

“Watch it dip-shit,” Lefty says.

“Don’t worry, nobody will see, and if they do, they won’t care.”

They’re silent as traffic hiccups forward. But when Gray sees the stadium, he points at it, punches Lefty in the arm, and says, “Oh yeah.” The cold dry air has squeezed all the moisture from the horizon and the sun bleaches the sky pale blue behind it. In front of this clean backdrop, it’s as if the stadium rose from the ground today—that on any other day it would dissolve or disappear like an ancient fairytale village. Traffic picks up a little. Gray takes another long drag.

The drugs make the edges of the stadium more crisp for Gray. He notices the shadows more distinctly and sees the geometry of shapes and colors. This is one of his favorite moments. This is why he puts all this stuff in himself—for this flash when the chemicals take hold of him. The rest of the experience is usually a blur of blind desire for bigger buzz, but this second is religious—sublime. Everything opens up to him. All his senses sharpen and experiences solidify. This is why he does drugs.

“T minus five minutes and counting,” Gray says smoke pouring from his mouth. He doesn’t even know what he means by it. He’s already forgotten about the stadium and is now onto the other people outside his window.

Lefty moves to the left-hand lane because he wants to park across the street from the stadium in the old parking lot. It’s in the woods. Lefty’s Impala pulses forward and passes middle-aged couples in matching team jackets, old men in their hunting clothes, and occasionally a half-naked man covered in blue and red body paint. Despite the cold, the pedestrians plod along with traffic. They’re the types who only care about the game. They park miles away from the stadium to pay half as much and leave twice as fast after

it's over, avoiding the traffic. They'll be the first to trickle into the stadium. They'll watch the punters practice and the teams stretch together. Some will even think that this scrutiny will give them a better understanding of the game. Gray considers all this, lost in a reverie of drugs. He doesn't understand the walkers, doesn't understand how they could pass up the tailgate.

He rolls down his window and the sounds and odors from the outdoors pour in with the cold air. Radios blare guitar riffs of barely recognizable classic rock songs, random voices, the smell of sausage cooked in peppers and onions.

One man catches his eye. The man is middle aged and has a blanket in one hand, his wife in the other. He's dragging her through the other pedestrians. To her credit, she's keeping up. They're both pushing forward with purpose. Traffic moves in starts—in fits. Staccato. Enough for the couple to get 10 yards ahead before Lefty accelerates and gains 10 yards on them. This goes on for nearly half a mile. It's hypnotic. But when Lefty turns into the parking lot, he barely misses the man. The man punches the trunk. The thud is solid, makes the silence after it more dramatic.

Lefty's whole body seizes at this. "Hey, asshole!" He yells this facing forward.

The man doesn't say anything else, just throws up an arm.

It's the first violence of the day.

Traffic moves again. In the mirror out the car, Gray watches the man turn to his wife and point at the Impala.

"It was your fault," Gray says.

"Fuck off. I hope he didn't dent the car," Lefty replies. "Give me some money so I can pay the toll. And roll up your goddamned window. People can smell you."

Gray rolls up the window, finds a crumpled ball of bills in his pocket that he gives to Lefty who has now rolled his window down. They pay the parking fee and pull forward smoothly for the first time in hours.

In the cars in front of and behind Lefty's Impala, the other fans are waiting in their own particular ways. The boy in the car behind Lefty's still has to pee. It hurts. The mill worker is with his AA friends. The teenager pops a pill. The Millionaire, Wilson, a young man who made his money quickly, puts down the screen and says to the driver, "Turn on the sports station." Even though Wilson can control the system himself, the driver obeys. A small television rises from the floor, and a miniature roundtable of sports announcers and former players appear and drone over the speakers. All the men look like they've had one too many hotdogs everyday of their lives. Faces and stomachs bloated just slightly. One tiny person says, "No one expected the match up in the second week of the playoffs. The winner continues to play Houston, the loser goes home."

Another says, "This is what sports is all about. You've got the rivalry with New York. The players hate each other. The veteran Jets versus the young and hungry Pats. And of course, you've got the weather. These teams are going to have to be mentally tough tonight."

The first, "I'm glad we're in the booth though. Gonna be a cold one. The team that runs better is going to win."

"Too bad the o-line is dinged up. Hopefully the young guys up front will be ready because they might just have to play. You know, looks like the Patriots releasing starters Light and Woody to make cap space just might come back to haunt them."

“I still think this team is a year away. Just because of that reason. This team will play hard, but how far can they really go? On paper, the Pats are the weakest team in the league.”

“You may be right, but anything can happen out there. That’s why they don’t play the games on paper.”

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about. This is as big a game as we’ve had since Parcels left town.”

A third itty-bitty man yells, “Can’t you just get over that guy? He’s gone. He’ll never come back again.”

The three men look for a moment as if they’re going to fight, but then an almost cartoon like image of Parcels appears in the middle of them. In a recorded voice clip the cartoon Parcels says, “Jambalaya.” All the tiny men break up at this.

The Millionaire listens and says to nobody, “I can’t believe these guys. Don’t they have something better to do with their time?”

He flips the channel and footage of a missile tracking its target appears in front of him. A British newscaster is speaking, “American forces continued their nearly yearlong assault on Serb bunkers. Pentagon officials released new statistics that over 35% of Serb ground forces have been compromised since the assault began.” On screen a BBC anchor appears. “Currently European Union ministers and U.S. generals are negotiating control of forces.”

With a sigh, Wilson flips back to the sports round table. “You’ve got to establish a ground attack in weather like this. Those young lineman are the key. Establish a strong front and take no prisoners.”

The offensive linemen they're talking about are inside the stadium. The teams are already warming up. They sit in rows on the ground and reach for their toes. Some, the backs and skill players, have no problem. But others, the linemen, only offer half-efforts. Their muscles don't give. They're built for power. Bulging and thick. One is Russ Johnson, second team guard. Johnson's ass is freezing. The original turf died late in November when the ground froze. The sod he's sitting on now was laid down during the week, and only had time to freeze. Johnson's trying to move around one particular rut, just under his right buttock.

A coach walks past him. The man is decked out in the team's garish red white and blue parkas with the Patriots flying Elvis logo on the back. "Loosen it up Johnson. Never know when you'll get your shot. Got to be ready."

Johnson hasn't gotten a chance though. He's a rookie, played at Maine, was cut during preseason, and was resigned to the practice squad. This is the first game he's dressed. Sat out the entire season too, only served as a highly paid hitting dummy during practice until this week when two of the starters went down in practice. Legs bent the wrong way, ligaments disintegrated.

Johnson actually had a part in one of the injuries. He was standing in as a noseguard. The play started slowly, but a body fell on him and then he tripped onto a knee. It snapped sideways fluidly. Johnson hardly felt it go, he just saw the leg fold in his imagination. Of course he didn't feel too badly about it—it's just one of those things that happens. A crew of trainers surrounded the downed man like a cloud of flies over a carcass. A coach yelled to move it up. The scrimmage obeyed, wandered forward—two or three stragglers looking at the man on the ground the way a member of the herd

watches another attacked by a predator. Curious. Johnson finished that afternoon at second string right guard. He's still there in the depth chart.

Mr. Kraft, the owner, is on the field too. His outfit seems odd out here. An expensive wool overcoat, Italian shoes, leather gloves. He sees the coach. Shakes his hand. Looks down at Johnson, whose been checking out the stitching in his shoes. Impeccable. Slaps the back of his shoulder pads. The plastic rattles. "Get it ready Russ. This is a big one."

Johnson is surprised this guy remembers his name.

Kraft sees a reporter and wanders off. Johnson watches him for a bit and then looks past him to scan the half-empty stands. There are more cameramen than fans. They're staking out ground on in the endzones, placing huge lenses on their cameras. This will be the biggest game of his life. The crowds in Maine were smaller than some high school crowds in other parts of the country. And suddenly it rushes over him. The excited heart-pounding exhilaration of game day. Just like that, in a flash. He'd kept it in check all week, but now he's ready to hit someone. Ready to lay into a linebacker just as he turns and feel that man carried away in the wake of his momentum. He's ready for violence, ready to use himself as a weapon, ready to show another man who's boss.

"Time to impose your will men. Get it ready," the coach yells, and Johnson knows he is. He lays flat on his back and a trainer comes over to stretch his hamstrings. Russ lies on his back and calms slowly as he stares into the clean sky. A blimp floats past and he watches it hanging in the air.

That same blimp drifts into Gray's vision. Lefty and he have made it to their parking spot. Directed to it by a cranky schoolboy in an orange jacket. Gray looks through the windshield and sees the blimp hang over the stadium. Lefty is kneeling backwards in the front seat, looking for beer in the cooler. He's noisy—clanking bottles, swearing because he keeps dropping them.

The parking lot is already filling quickly. It brings the crowd together, not just physically either. The crowd is joined by their common anticipation for what's to come. They've all hoped that their dreams from training camp on were true all along. In June and July, and even in April during the draft, these people have hoped that the Pats would finally put it all together. When most New Englanders had long since given up on the team. When it had gotten off to its typical 2-3 start, these people didn't waver. They had faith. That's what they're all thinking now. The reality though is that no matter what, Boston is a baseball town. The Pats have their runs, but the only team that really matters is the Sox. The Bruins, Celtics, and Patriots will have their turns, but the only team that has inflicted enough pain to be part of the people's ego is the Sox. Even so, when people come together like this, it's evident how easy it is to create history. Their common desire is just too great to deny now. They all hope that by sheer will alone they will propel the Patriots to victory.

Lefty finally finds two beers and turns forward. He passes one to Gray without a word and the two men open the beers and gulp them quickly.

"We've finally arrived my good friend," Lefty says. His voice is purposely like an advertisement. "Pass those drugs over here sir."

Gray obeys, digs a joint from his pocket and hands it to Lefty.

With a flick, Lefty ignites the cigarette. And just then, Gray looks over to see a kid in the window next to him. When he turns back, Lefty's sucking on the joint like it contains the last bit of his life. Gray thinks he looks like he's sucking a too thick shake through a straw—his face all contorted.

“Asshole.” *The kid has to see it all*, Gray knows it.

“Fuck you, you've been smoking since we were on 95. Wait your turn.”

“No asshole,” Gray says again. He elbows Lefty with one arm, then points to the kid in the car next to them.

Lefty glares at the kid and says, “Hey, beat it.” Like he's shooin' a stray dog.

Gray is embarrassed and gives Lefty a look that says as much.

“So? He can't be a Narc, can he?”

“Just cool it okay?”

“You look out for yourself big-fella.”

“I've got to piss. Make yourself useful and start setting up,” Gray says, then opens the door.

Out of the car the air is crisp but not altogether uncomfortable. The sun is still above the trees and sends rays into the lot. Gray weaves through the lines of cars past huddled groups of men and women. He feels for a second like Hal before the battle of Agincourt. Smoke from the fires rises in thin clouds, music from each car bleeds into the music of the car next to it. Some men even huddle around small televisions. And all the people deal with the tailgate in their own personal ways. Gray passes older folks in tents with generators pumping heat into them, passes men huddled around a fire boiling vats of

chili, he even passes a crowd bundled in bright yellow parkas, they must have bought the day before, eating shrimp and drinking champagne.

Along the edge of the lot, closest to the port-o-lets, Gray walks past a row of campers. A Ryder truck pulls past him. Gray stops just short, mesmerized by the color. The drugs are making him loose track of his direction. He watches the Ryder truck pull to the edge of the parking lot. One of the boys in orange jackets tries to stop it by waving his flashlight direction cones furiously. He looks like the ground-crew member at Logan. The truck ignores him and pulls to the outermost spot of the lot, next to the trees.

When the truck stops, the parking attendant walks over to the driver-side and stands impatiently. The driver jumps out and escorts the attendant to the front of the truck. In the meantime, another man jumps out from the passenger seat and walks purposefully to the rear. He looks decidedly military not only by the way he moves, but because he's bundled in a green parka with a neon green Jets ski hat and ski pants with the letters J-E-T-S up the leg—a sort of flamboyant camouflage. He reaches the rear of the truck, grabs the lever on the door, inhales deeply, and pulls as if he's unleashing something. And he does. The door opens with a swoop then bang and almost before it stops moving, a drill team of identically clad Jets fans pour through it. They all wear the same green jumpsuit. The first out assists the opener with the truck ramp. The next two wheel a grill down the ramp. The third hops down, pulls a piece of metal tubing from the truck and drives it into the ground with a rubber mallet he brought with him. A fifth man puts up a pole and with the help of the tubing guy strings a flag on it. They run the flag up and with it, they declare the birth of Jets nation in the parking lot.

Gray notices that several other folks are equally fixed on the display. They stare at the men from the Ryder truck and then someone boos. Gray hears a few people laugh and then join in. Deep inside he both loves and hates the men from the Ryder truck. He admires their precision, their attention to detail—they're already grilling food by now. But he knows that they could never be civil on a day like today.

Only one of the Jets fans seems to hear the chorus of boos. He looks up and then retreats back into the truck and comes out with another flag that he waves in broad strokes at the top of the ramp. Triumphant.

The line at the port-a-potty stretches ten deep, so Gray dips into the woods. He finds a spot yards in and urinates onto the cold. The steam rises.

When he's done, Gray looks around. He lights another joint, he pulls hard on it and listens to it pop and burn. Then he hears the crackling of footsteps in the woods. Before he can think to hide the joint, he sees the kid. The same one that spied him earlier. And the kid sees him again. The father does too. He just shakes his head. "Can't you guys just wait until the kids aren't around?" Slowly self-hatred pours over Gray. This has got to end.

Inside the stadium, the millionaire has made it to his personal suite already. Alone, the way he wanted it to be, he's walking around, lights off, simply running his hand over the furniture. He owns the suite because he was patient when the market went sour in Y2K. He had the foresight to keep his little industry profitable. And though it wasn't the sexiest on the market, for whatever reason, it made it. And when things picked up again a few years later, he took the market by storm. His luxury box looks like it could

be anyone's living room. Of course, that anyone would have to be able to afford leather couches and mahogany tables, but the room has that feel—like home, comfortable. This is how he always wanted it too. The best, the nicest. He hadn't been around long enough to get a suite right on the 50 yard line, but when he signed the lease, all he kept repeating to himself *was give me time, give me time.*

Wilson has never enjoyed coming to any games with the guys. It's the idiocy that he dislikes. The so-called knowledge—always bullshit—that men feel the need to pass around at games. Some guys just feel the need to show that their knowledge is greater and sounder than other men's. Like it's a mating ritual, a way to show the superiority of their genes. Only most women can't stand to be around men like this. Wilson has noticed that women treat these men like children. Wilson has also noticed that it doesn't change with money either. The same asshole in the college dorm, who knew just what was going to happen in any game. The guy whose screams would rise above everyone else's. The guy who spent afternoons trolling web sites and information on sports, who not only listened to, but called talk radio programs. These guys simply followed the same proportions of the privileged world. Money wasn't a factor for them. Sports assholes were the same in all walks of life.

Most of these guys don't even listen to the news. It's only sports radio. They couldn't tell where Serbia was on a map, no matter—but they could tell you the passing statistics for every NFL quarterback. Ridiculous.

Outside in the cold, Gray and Lefty flow to the stadium amongst a tangle of people. After Gray got back from the woods, they fired their own grill, drank several

beers, and broke out the coke just before leaving to keep them going through the game. The son and father never returned, so Gray quickly forgot about their run in. The crowd blazes paths around the cement. Paths that weave through the low brush and pine. Men stop several steps from the road to urinate. Most drink more beer as they do. Just beyond the woods, sausage vendors make a killing. Small crowds surround them like the vendors are performing magic. Closer to the stadium it's as if they're in a stream. Bodies are pulled along by more bodies.

There's a bottleneck at the gates. People push. It's like a huge house party. Gray enjoys being tall just for moments like these. He weaves through the bodies, seeing over virtually every head. But at some point there is simply no place to go because the crowd has to pass metal detectors then friskers. Bodies are pressed together like hotdogs.

At the gates several cops are pulling the pill-popping teenager from traffic away. The kid looks like he's screaming, but there's no sound coming from his mouth. His eyes open, angrily taking on all viewers. One cop has his arm twisted behind his back and is almost lifting him off the ground with. Another, an older cop is just staring into the crowd. Someone throws a balled up paper cup at the cop. People laugh—a soft reverent murmur. Except for Lefty whose guffawing, the laughter coming from his belly. The cops look their way, but before anything more can brew, the crowd splits and the cops push on through.

As they pass Gray, the cop twists the kid's right arm at an impossible angle and smiles, looking pleased. By chance, the kid looks at Gray and smirks. It's as if he just knows that Gray is one of his kind. That Gray is on something. People know these things

about others, can feel out those who share their desires. The kid's cigarette stained teeth instantly changes his essence. He's sinister.

Once they pass the friskers, Gray and Lefty head straight for the beer line underneath the stands. The players are being announced. Gray, hears the announcer's nasally drone, then the crowd roars for each man. Metal rattles with each roar.

They get two drafts apiece, because that's all the rules say they can get at a time, and head for their seats. By now, Gray wants to run. He loves this part of the game, the anticipation of something great. This is the beginning of history. This game could be something worthy to remember.

Lefty is dopier. He's trailing Gray like a small child. "Slow down, I'm going to spill my beer," he says.

But the bellows from the crowd increase as Gray and Lefty walk through the concrete hallways that ring the stadium. And the noise only pulls Gray faster. He catches glimpses of the field from the entrance ramps they pass, but doesn't linger on the images too long. He wants to wait until he can pause and take in the whole field.

And then he's there, at his entrance ramp. The seats are in the endzone. They belong to Gray's uncle, Frank, who had shared them with his brothers for years. But Frank and his brothers are all older men now, much more willing to watch a game at home on the couch. None of them wanted to even think about being in the cold. So Gray took the tickets when they were offered. Took them for moments like this.

With Lefty still in tow, Gray strides toward the opening. He can see the upper decks and the huge stacks of lights glowing. He can even see a corner of the massive replay screen. The image follows a player through the gauntlet of his teammates. And

then, finally, Gray reaches the top of the ramp and sees the field. There should be a carnival feel about it, comical really. The men running around in uniforms on frozen ground painted neon green with stripes. But it doesn't. The intensity of the moment fills the stadium that hangs around the field. It's as if the whole world should be there. And in some ways they are. It's a sea of bodies. The player on the screen is just about to the end of the line of teammates and Gray looks at him on the field, then once again on the replay screen.

Just as Lefty catches up, Gray is off again, making his way to the seats a few rows ahead. He squeezes past the other fans who push themselves close to their chairs, and the harder Gray tries not to, the more he steps on their feet and presses them against the seats.

When the last player is announced, the teams wander to the sidelines and the announcer says, "Before we sing the anthem, please bow your heads for a moment of silence for the brave men and women fighting for freedom overseas."

The crowd respectfully falls silent. Gray doesn't bow though. Instead, his mind is racing and he tries to look at individuals throughout the stadium. He can see the faces of those close to him, but those only a few sections away blend into one another. They become a mass, not people, but a thing.

When the anthem begins, some in the crowd sing along. Others look disinterested—almost angered by it, like the singing of the anthem is a long overdone tradition. But the song soon sends a trance over the people, captivates them like a gospel singing. Mostly because of the singer. A slight black girl with a voice too big for a woman twice as large as she is. A few fans start to clap when she sings "The twilight's last gleaming." She hangs the last note and a few hoots explode from unsuspecting

listeners. And the clapping slowly crescendos as the girl cries out the song. When she belts out “Oh say does that star spangled banner yet wave,” Gray notices another noise behind the crowd’s buzz. A hum. “Gave proof through the night,” the rumble is more like a freight train. And the crowd is on the edge of a frenzy. A girl next him is crying, but he can’t hear her. Just when the singer gets to “Land of the free,” he looks up to see three massive fighter jets roll across the early evening sky only hundreds of feet above the stadium. Slabs of metal tearing through the air. “The Home of the Brave” is inaudible over the roar of the crowd and jets.

The cheers feed on themselves. The singer smiles brightly, her face a story high and wide on the replay screen. Light bulbs flash like lightning strikes all over the stadium. People want to have a picture of this. They’re proud of the country. Proud to be American. They want a picture of the girl. Of the red white and blue fans, decked out in Patriot colors. They don’t want to forget it. But they will.

The crowd settles as the captains walk to the center of the field. The memory of the anthem is already slipping. Gray downs one of the beers. The man behind Gray in a Parcels uniform stands up. He yells, “We love you Tuna.” Under the impression that he was watching a game from two decades before. When he realized that he was funny, he played to the endzone gallery. People laugh because they’re on edge. Then sit. Except for Gray.

“Down in front,” A voice yells behind him.

“Sit down,” another voice yells.

“I think they’re talking to you,” Lefty says to Gray.

Gray turns around, smiles because he thinks this man's tone is supposed to be funny. He sees a row of green clad Jets fans together. It's the Ryder truck team Gray watched in the parking lot. But he is oblivious to it all now. His brain is overwhelmed by all the stimulus. He heard what Lefty said, heard the men yell, but he continues to stand and look around. Distracted by the entirety of the scene.

"Sit the fuck down," two of the Jets fans yell together this time.

But with that, the Patriots win the toss, and the crowd erupts again. The whole stadium is on their feet again. The referee announces that the Patriots will defer and kick off.

Strains from the Rolling Stones "Start Me Up" ring through the loudspeakers. It's been the kickoff music since the late 80's. The song is timeless. Never could be replaced here.

The teams take the field—the Jets' kick-returner in the endzone in front of Gray. The Pats fans taunt him. Question his manhood. Tell him to get ready for pain. The returner turns around and flaps his arms as if to encourage it. The crowd loves it. There's a charge floating in the air. Something has to give.

The kicker places the ball on the tee and walks ceremoniously behind the line of his teammates. Like a peacock he struts, then raises his hand.

The crowd buzzes again—the low rumbling becomes a din. Then the kicker drops his arm, the men charge and he strides to the ball. It seems that everyone in the crowd is letting a low guttural "OOOOHHH" slip from themselves. The decibels raise as the ball lifts from his foot. One special teams player, swims over his blocker and begins to track

the return man, and somehow, reaches him only seconds after the ball lands in his hands, and it squibs free. A Jets blocker dives for it, but pushes the ball into the endzone. And a pile of players converges. They're all in dark blue. Almost impossibly, the Patriots have the ball in the endzone. They've scored.

The other fans from traffic are still here too. In the luxury box Wilson watches the replay. He sees the tackler's helmet land squarely on the ball. Unlike anyone else in the stadium, he's silent. He chose to be so though. The box is silent as well—they've done a wonderful job insulating the luxury boxes.

The boy is overwhelmed. He will only remember a few details of this game. This is one of them: The rattle in his body from the vibrating bleachers. One will be seeing the field. Another will be watching a kid puke on the stairs in front of him. When he sees the news reports in years to come, he might blend some of those images to make new memories, but now everything is happening too quickly.

The Mill worker is only interested in the game. He studies the defense. Focuses in on the linemen charging the field for the extra point.

The kick is good.

Russ Johnson doesn't realize that he's about to get his chance. He's getting a drink of water when the starting right guard goes down during the extra point. A linebacker came over the top of the line, got pushed in mid air by the tackle, and the slammed into the guard's neck. They both slumped to the ground together. Nobody saw it

happen in real time. It's the sort of play that occurs a hundred times in a game. This time it was different though. When the teams shuffled back to sidelines to kick off again, the guard lay on the ground. The Jets linebacker got up and when he noticed the guard was motionless, he waved furiously at the sidelines. The trainers sprinted over.

A coach yells. "Get Johnson." The guy is right next to Russ.

The crowd is silenced by the injury. An ambulance is already rolling onto the field. It's eerie, Russ thinks, because it's as quiet as anytime that afternoon when he hears, "You're in the game."

Gray take the opportunity to get another beer during the injury. Lefty is practically immobilized again. The emotion has him paralyzed, so when Gray asks if he wants another, Lefty simply waves a no.

In line a woman giggles. Gray turns around to see her measuring her head to his back.

"Did you know you're tall?"

Gray doesn't answer and turns to pay for his beers. On the way back to the seats, Gray notices that there's no line to the bathroom. He stumbles in.

Inside, he mill worker from traffic is in front of him. Gray bumps into him, splashing some beer.

"I'm sorry," Gray slurs.

"Yeah," the mill worker responds.

"Had a few too many," Gray says. He hears himself talking, but doesn't quite have control over it.

The mill worker eyes him knowingly, as if to say, *you'll get it someday*.

In the stall, Gray pulls out the last of coke, cuts it into lines on the filthy back of the toilet seat and snorts it all in. He's revitalized too. Downs one of the beers and heads back to the seats.

With all the chemicals flowing through him, the game flashes by quickly for Gray. He barely notices any particulars. The Jets fans yell at him occasionally, he gets beer, the Patriots score, the Jets score. It's all becoming a blur:

In the second quarter the Patriots fumble and the game turns competitive.

At the half, there's some sort of performance. Gray misses most of it because he's in the beer line with most of the rest of the crowd.

In the third quarter, the crowd is clam. They've expended too much energy on the game already. The Jets score twice and go ahead by a touchdown. Everyone sits except for Gray. The Ryder truck guys yell more.

In the fourth quarter, the Jets's go ahead by a field goal. It looks impossible for the Patriots, but they drive. Gray feels himself coming back at this point. He turns around and makes eye contact with one of the Ryder truck fans.

"Look you goomba, how long are you going to take to realize that I can't see when you stand like that," the guy screams.

Lefty stands and yells back this time. "Why don't you stay on Long Island if you don't like it here."

"Oooh," the Ryder truck teams sings in chorus.

"I'm talking to you big boy. Not you're little pal."

Gray is staring at him, but ignoring him at the same time. What he does notice is a few of the other fans and the way they look uncomfortable. Gray sees it on them and knows enough that he doesn't want trouble. He sits.

But the Patriots score early in the fourth and the teams trade downs until the two minute warning. The Jets punt and the Patriots take the ball at their own 30.

On the field Russ Johnson has just broken a finger. The right index finger. It got caught in between his helmet and the shoulder pad of the linebacker he blocked on the last play. The backer never saw him coming and the guard knew he had him for the last three steps. The play was going to break and the backer had to turn. He's just felt the finger now that the quarterback calls out the play.

"Trips right. Over 23, Half-back counter pass on 2, on 2. Ready."

"Break," the offense barks in unison. Johnson jogs for the first couple steps, walks the other two to the line. He counts the linebackers and calls out, "61."

All this and he thinks, *Inside gap responsibilities check end outside*. He actually sub-vocalizes the words. Then the thoughts come at him without words. The kid in front of him is too fast. Pass block. Quick step. On two? Pain. What the hell am I doing here?

The quarterback: "Down. Blue 27. Set. Go.Go."

The ball is snapped.

It's all steps, automatic, no thought, he's out of his stance, punches one hand to the right. He hits someone; he's only looking for the man outside, feeling for him. The noseguard slides to the center's far shoulder, the backer from the last play is blitzing. Too quickly, the guard feels himself reach out, he's breaking the rules, he knows it. He

watches himself pull the man down. His arms are on him. Now the finger really hurts.
The pass is off. Someone slams him from behind.

The crowd watches the ball float in a small arc. It's a collective gasp, then hum a slow crescendo in volume and pitch. When the receiver comes down with it, everything shakes. Rumbles. The stadium is as close to hysterical as possible. Seemingly louder than any other time today.

In the endzone it's mayhem.

Gray sees the flag.

Lefty turns to the Jet's fans, points at each of them with his middle finger.

The players are huddled on the ground. Piled on the receiver.

The entire endzone is throwing things at the Jets fans. Cups, napkins. Strangers are giving each other high fives.

But then the replay screen focuses on the flag. And a hush falls.

"How do you like that big boy?" the head Ryder fan yells. Then he does it, he throws a cup at Gray.

Without warning, Gray spins reaches back and grabs the man by the neck. Pulling him over the crowd Gray looks disinterested. Still aloft, the man swings wildly and catches Gray in the ear. With that, Gray takes the man's arm and with a jerk, brings it down on the seat back. Everything in a radius of 10 rows stops because not only do other people see him do it, but they hear noise as well. You wouldn't expect it. So painful just

to hear. And the noise is the match into the tinderbox. Then the avalanche of bodies begins. The other Jets fans dive at Lefty and Gray.

In the luxury box, Wilson doesn't cheer when the Patriots score, doesn't flinch when he sees the flag. But moments later he sees something in the end zone to his left, he stands and walks to the window. The crowd noise builds when he nears the glass. It's rolling, like a brook. Occasionally one person's voice rises above the din. He knows what he's watching, but all he can think about are the bluefish runs he sees on vacation on the Vineyard. The fans look like a swell. Only instead of fish, he sees fists, occasionally a body will slump or be tossed a row or two down. He's right on top of the glass now. He presses his hands to it and his breath creates a fog. This is the most real thing he's seen today. And this is the only time he wants to be in the melee. He wants to experience something real.

"I'll be damned," is all he can say.

One of the bodies Wilson sees fall is Lefty. He goes down pretty quickly when things gets started—took it in the side of the head from the Jets flag. He never lost consciousness and was able to crawl through the legs towards the field. At first, the fight spreads through the sections like a virus. A number of people make their way to the exits when they realize the fight is spreading.

The security guards wade through only to be caught in the melee. They're useless, swallowed by the fight.

Lefty makes it to the field, where a number of the other fans have taken refuge. But Gray is in the middle of things. Actually, he *is* the middle of things. He's like the leader of a mosh pit. One of those guys who stands cross-armed and stoic. Men fly at him and he's able to throw them away, to toss them to the next row. But then Gray is hit too. He doesn't see the punch, but just feels the sting and throb of a punch in the face. There are just too many sensations to keep track of. The taste of blood. The ringing in his ears. The cocaine and adrenaline making his heart pound. They drown each other out.

But just as it appears the entire stadium will fall into chaos, a row of storm troopers in riot-gear charge from the recesses of the stadium, from the same gate Gray stood at when the game began.

In seconds, they club their way to the center of the fight. Gray turns, sees an officer, is just about to take him too, but then he's down—a blow to the stomach with a billy club does it. A storm trooper is on him, then two, and all he can see is feet. Scrambling feet. Then it's a blow to the back that knocks the wind out of him. Gray throws up. Pukes his brains out is how he'll tell the story later.

For Gray the mistake ends now, at this moment. On the cold pavement, vomit creeping toward his face. He's no longer in control. The consequences are next. Two storm troopers grab him, tie his hands with plastic and lead him up the stairs. Somehow it feels right, feels like this is the only way it could've happened. He doesn't struggle as the police guide him through the crowd. He even thinks about picking a person out of the crowd and smiling at them.

JOSEPH

Sunday, June 1

In just over twenty-four hours, I'll walk into the wilderness naked. I won't bring any tools, no knife, no matches, and I'll live there for two months without the slightest communication from the outside world.

First, let me get something straight: I'm not some crackpot. Sure, I have to be slightly off to try a stunt like this, but I'm no Jack London-Grizzly Adams-wannabe. I've never been a hippie transcendentalist with an agenda. My mission is not to champion any environmental cause. This is most certainly not a statement about the war. All in all, I am simply not very different from you. A modern man, I live in the city, work for a major newspaper, and have never been institutionalized.

Believe this, in an era when we love imitation, when everyone clings to impossible individuality even though movies and books are all remade reshaped ideas from the past, I am typical. I am no saint, no prophet. I pay \$10 for a movie ticket, I order the latest Faulkner re-write, and I watch the fashion network for the latest style. I am, in fact, a news-man, and many of you accuse my kind for our current problems. But I write for the papers. Not the Internet e-zines or major network streaming news channels, but the good old-fashioned papers. My words are printed on processed trees and people occasionally rub the black ink of my words onto their fingers.

What might separate me is that I've always wanted to try something no one has ever attempted. Alone. Just to test myself. Without others around to see my uniqueness.

I want to experience the true definition of being alone.

This notion has been gnawing away at me for the last couple of years, ever since I moved permanently to the city from the island after my divorce. But if you've read my column long enough, you know all about that.

It's obvious that we're increasingly tied to our cell phones, Inter-tainment™ centers, and radios, and I noticed that I was never truly alone for more than ten or fifteen minutes. I could certainly lock myself in a room and keep everyone away from me. Plenty of people do that. But even the most careful hermit has to hear or experience some sort of human interaction. Believe me, I tried to be alone.

One Saturday a week was to be my safe-haven. I turned off all my electronic devices. I unplugged Inter-tainment™ centers, telephones. I removed the battery from my pager. I even pulled my blinds lest I be tempted to stare at the girls in the building across from me. But whether it was the bickering couple in the apartment above mine or the traffic from the street below, my fellow citizens found me. They crept into my silence without effort or even knowledge of their transgressions. Eventually, like you, I blocked the racket out, became accustomed to it, and resigned myself to living inside the cocoon of society—noise and all.

The idea for this experiment came to me about a year ago while I was researching an expose on the new National Refuge in Northern Maine. After years of threatening it, the Feds were about to kick Great Northern Paper to the south and close off the northern woodlands from wide-scale human intrusion. No logging, no building, they wouldn't even maintain any trails. It was one of those ideas that sounded much better in the city. But the folks in the North Country weren't too happy about losing a couple hundred jobs. Just think about it, if you're a logger and have been all your adult life, what else are you

going to do? There are always the snowmobiles, but that's only a half-year job at most. You could open a campsite, but then you'd have to entrench yourself in the service industry and put up with other people's short tempers.

In the end the locals won. The land stayed private.

To research the article, I interviewed a handful of hunters and geologists and retreated to a cabin just north of Moosehead Lake deep upstate to put it all together. I was nursing the still sore wounds of my divorce, so I welcomed the solitude. Having just finished the article, I was walking from my cabin to the lake when my pager went off. The noise startled me. It was unexpected and altogether foreign in the relative silence, when even the leaves crackling under the step of a squirrel might draw attention—where the wind in the trees might be considered commotion. I looked at the number. It was my editor, obviously some emergency. I turned around and returned to the camp. He gets testy when people make him wait. But my cell phone was dead—the reserve power drained. I stormed out of the cabin, letting the screen door slap shut and got into my truck. Driving as fast as I could, it would take me over 20 minutes to make it to the nearest pay phone in town. But just as I pulled out on the main logging road, the truck coughed, jerked a bit and finally stalled. Wouldn't you know it, like an idiot I forgot to fill the tank. I could've gone back to camp and wait for someone to remember where I was, or I could've walked into town. I chose the latter.

I was pissed, inconvenienced by space and time. As I walked though, I began to consider that the trees wanted to swallow the road. I decided they would, just as soon as we left the roads to fend for themselves. The dirt roads would be reclaimed in one or two springs—the winter runoff softening the ground allowing grasses and vines, then saplings

to root. Even the paved roads wouldn't last more than a few years. Frost would crack most of it, and that which isn't broken by the cold would succumb to roots pushing their way through the land. Soon enough the tar would crumble into pebbles and the only hope for these paths would be that the deer might find it easier to walk on them.

Then, all of a sudden it hit me hard. Reverie. I was in a vacuum. All I could hear was the wind in the trees. I felt each pulse of my heart; the pine-filled-air burned my lungs. And though the whole walk took me several hours, these are the only details I remember.

I trudged into Greenville just before nightfall. I walked into the local bar, and when I explained what happened, the locals rolled their eyes and one actually called me a flatlander. But as I endured their ribbing, it struck me that it just might be possible for a man to be alone—truly alone—without any human interaction. Sure it would take a bit of planning, but why couldn't I do it? I was fit. At 35 I felt as strong as I'd ever been. I had hiked the A.T. and written about it. And most importantly, one of the beauties of my job is that I get paid to investigate my random thoughts.

So after a couple of drinks, I proposed it. At first I just brought it up to the guy on my left at the bar, a man who looked like the hard-drinking logging type. I said, "I'm going into the wilderness naked." He ignored me. But then I said it again, only louder this time. I felt the woman to my right get uncomfortable. Caught a glance from her. And that's when the bartender broke the whole issue open.

“Either you’re drunk or crazy,” he said. And everyone seated at the bar took this as their chance to laugh. But they had good reason to. Imagine, a man of the present day, leaving all luxury behind him. The idea is ludicrous.

“What would you do for fire?” one man asked.

I replied to that very quickly. A suitably dry stick and some friction is all it takes.

Another wanted to know what food I would be able to find in the wilderness. I mentioned a dozen ways I could sustain myself. And protection, they asked if I could save myself from wild animals. When I explained how I could easily fend off any predator, the entire bar surrounded my stool. Then it became like a game. Everyone wanted to see if they could poke holes in my argument. I answered each challenge.

When I returned to New York, I soon became tied up in all the distractions of life until one afternoon when my editor, Curtis, and I were looking for *the story*. That story that would pull the daily back to the top. To be truthful, we never discussed it, never said the words, but we both understood our lives depended on it. Now what happened next can only be chalked up to fate. As many of you know, the print media has taken a hit in the last few years. The widespread availability of Internet connections to the masses has cut into our market share. Why pay \$1.50 for a daily when you can pull it up on your palm pilot? The only reason people buy newspapers anymore is out of habit. It’s become like smoking.

Curtis was behind his desk. He was fidgeting. Playing with pens, bouncing his leg. I can read the guy like an open book, so I asked him what all the hand wringing was about. He told me that the publisher had done some market research and found that the

public was ready for another round of reality entertainment. “We can’t compete there. People want games, money, and sex. They want to see people in their bathing suits acting like children. They want the world cheap.”

“But that’s what we do,” I said. “We’re the damn news. We give them the world. All the news that’s fit to print and all.”

“No, they want imitation, they want something close to reality, but they want it with a twist. The news is too real.”

I almost wet myself with anticipation, but I held back. “So what are you going to do?” I asked.

“Don’t know, got any ideas?”

So I explained it all. My failed Saturday experiments, the pager in the woods, the months alone, I let it rip. But the clincher was the nakedness. His ears perked up at that.

“Let me get this right,” Curtis leaned into it. “All you want is a plane ticket to Maine? No expense account. No late night bar tabs, no mysterious bills from ‘health spas’?”

“That’s it. Me, myself, and the wilderness. We can hype it before I go. I’ll write a few columns.”

“That’s it? And you think the public will buy it?”

I was certain I had him. As I retell it now, it seems simplistic, how I expected his acceptance. But understand this. We are all fighting for our jobs. We, newspapermen, that is, need to keep this thing alive. The market might not be with us, but we need it. I need it. Though I’m going out in the woods for myself, I am not ashamed to say that this is a grab for readers. For souls to listen to me. To buy papers. The editors know it too.

“No.”

“No?” I could feel my face drop.

“It’s blatant. Nobody wants take the time to read it. Words are too slow. The public wants images, data on the quick. You want to do this, take a laptop. We’ll post updates on the web-site. That’s where this’ll work. Immediate gratification. Print is second rate, too slow for most people. You put this to paper and it’ll be a nice fluff piece for the Sunday Magazine. It’s not going to sell any more papers.”

“You’re wrong. Don’t you see I can’t bring a computer with me? Where will I recharge the damn thing? No. People will read it.”

“Let it go Joe. What else you have?”

“Don’t you see. I need this? I’m doing it.”

“Not on my dime. If you want to take vacation, fine, go ahead.”

So I quit. Right then and there. Stormed out of his office in triumph. Felt better than signing my divorce papers. I could make a go of it on my own, there’s nothing holding me back. It’s better that it turned out this way. It’s better that I am on my own in all senses. This is a pure endeavor.

Presently I’m en route to Portland, Maine on a turbo prop from JFK. It’s hard to imagine that in less than a day this will all begin. When I boarded, I intended to get a jump-start on this piece, to write my last connection to civilization on my laptop at 15,000 feet. Usually when I’m on a plane, this is what I do, turn on the laptop and get work done. But once the plane lifted, I found myself nostalgic for all I was about to leave. With all our problems, the war, the congestion, flight still amazes me. And for the first

time, I considered calling this whole thing off. Why do I need to go into the woods? Why not just walk naked in subway tunnels or live in a crack house for three months?

But then I looked out the window and something happened.

At first it was as if the night had a new notion. The black sky found a slight hint of deep blue. The shift in colors was ever so slight, but I saw it. I craned my neck and watched the sky slowly fade to Technicolor in the small oval window. It reminded me of the oil painter I watched on PBS as a kid. The sky spread across his canvas, split by a line of burnt umber clouds. Three distinct brush strokes filled the sky. The ominous mauve ground-to-be below in sharp contrast. Each time I saw him cover the canvas in pastels and neons, I thought he'd never been in the real world. Nothing in nature is this artificial. But now, I began to wonder how many people notice that particular bit of color, which, from a standpoint of faithful portrayal, was as important as the crumbling barn or babbling brook he was about to paint. In the real world all the eccentric colors exist.

So this experiment is the antidote to what ails us as a nation. I'm not talking about the obvious. War is never a thing one can overlook. But our nation is in need of a reawakening—a new look at the old. I will bring us back 10 years in news delivery, but I will also bring myself back 10 thousand years. Until recently, I would laugh at the idea of doing anything for the world. Probably all of us have wild dreams now and then. I am beginning to think that wild dreams are wonderful things to have.

PART II
REFUGE

¹refuge \ˈref-(,)yüj , -(,)yüzh\ n [ME, fr. MF, fr. L *refugium*, fr. *refugere* to escape, fr. *re-* + *fugere* to flee — more at FUGITIVE] (14c) “I began my adult life with the hypothesis that it would be possible to become a Stone Age native.”—*Gene Rosellini on his 30 years living in the wilderness* **1** : shelter or protection from danger or distress “The Bedouin does not dote on scenery, paint landscapes, or compile a non-utilitarian natural history...Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery, and danger.”—*Paul Shepard* **2** : a place that provides shelter or protection “Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature, apparently so inarticulate, or in the wordlessness of long, grinding labor, of sound sleep, of true music, or of a human understanding rendered speechless by emotion!”—*Boris Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago* **3** : something to which one has recourse in difficulty “What distinguishes that summit above the earthly line, is that it is unhandselled, awful, grand. It can never become familiar; you are lost the moment you set foot there.”—*Henry David Thoreau, Journal* **²refuge** *vb* “We have in America ‘The Big Two-Hearted River’ tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversion, a rest or whatever. And as in the Hemingway story, if your wounds aren’t too bad, it works. But this isn’t Michigan (or Faulkner’s Big Woods Mississippi, for that matter). This is [the North Wilderness].”—*Edward Hoagland, “Up the Black to Chalkitsik”* **ref•uged**; “To go into solitude, a man must retire as much from chamber as from society.”—*Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature* **ref•ug•ing** *vt* (1594) : to give refuge to ~ *vi* : to seek or take refuge “The physical domain of the country had its counterpart in me. The trails I made led outward into the hills and swamps, but they led inward as well.”—*John Haines, The Stars, The Snow, The Fire* **refugee** \ ,ref-yü-ˈjē , ,ref-yü , \ n [F *réfugié*, pp. of (*se*) *réfugier* to take refuge, fr. L *refugium*] (1685) : one that flees; *esp* : one who flees to a foreign

country or power to escape danger or persecution “It is true that many creative people fail to make mature personal relationships, and some are extremely isolated...But this does not mean that solitary creative pursuits are themselves pathological...”—*Anthony Storr, Solitude: A Return to the Self*

ref•u•gee•ism \, i z - e m \ n “I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams.” — *Jon Krakauer, Into the Wild*

GRAY

Gray still read the newspapers, so it's no surprise he understood that the trouble swallowing the country also awaited him. Since the fight, he had sensed that the worst was in front of him. He hid from it—his uncle's money made it possible for any real consequences of the fight to fade into his memory. The lawyer Frank sent to the stadium lockup, an old friend from college, took care of most of the legalities—Gray left the stadium with a class-D possession charge, a fine, and a long walk from the police barracks to his car. His pride was the biggest casualty, that and his job. The paper company somehow found out about the conviction and terminated him the next day. But he'd been out of trouble for months and had a plan to right himself, but sometimes the pressure of fate is too much for even most careful man. A phone call is all it takes. Clattering. From nowhere it crept into Gray's dream. The noise melted to a rattle and then to pulses. Bells. They surrounded him, vibrated him. Finally a telephone.

He woke in darkness.

From where was lying in his bed, he could tell where the phone was, and in a quick movement his hand engulfed the receiver and knocked the rest of the console to the ground with a bang. Some small thing rattled on the ground. Still slightly asleep, Gray recognized it, imagined the plastic chard from the phone slide under the bed. He'd done this before, woken too quickly and sooner than he could control his size, he broke something. This was one of the reasons his bedroom looked the way it did, why he placed things away from the bed when he went to sleep. The lamp and alarm clock were safely across the room.

The only reason for the phone was that he was expecting a call—not this one—so it rested on a stack of sheet rock at the edge of his bed.

“Hello,” he said when he finally found the phone. The receiver was by his cheek, but in a moment he realized that the rest was detached under the bed.

“Gray, Betty here,” her voice echoed from the answering machine. “I hope I’m not waking you, but I wanted to get you before you started your day. Call me in Cambridge.”

The machine beeped and the only sound left was the rain as it drummed the roof. Gray listened; it sounded like someone dropping handful after handful of pebbles from a few feet above. Soothing. But he could only see a shadow from the tree outside blowing in the wind. *Still raining*, he thought and noticed that the bedroom was raw, damp. His head ached. Throbbled from the cold. Usually the house only gets cold like this in the winter, not June. But the weather has been anything but usual, and the insulation was still missing from half the room. He sat up, banged his ankle on the footboard. “Fuck.” The pain woke him and he jumped out of bed to walk it off.

Outside the trees blew steadily and Gray watched them but could only think of his Aunt. It couldn’t be good news—whatever she called about—Betty calls with serious information in the morning. She’s done it since he was a kid in prep schools in Massachusetts. Even if the tragic event took place in the middle of the previous afternoon, she would call while Gray slept. And whenever the phone call involved his cousin, Byron, she found a way to slip in a small hint of the family secret he had revealed. And Byron always gives away the secrets. A few years back, the doctors finally settled on a diagnosis. Bipolar disorder. Manic Depression. He’s a window into family gossip. It’s as if insanity is his truth serum and it breaks down his resistance to the good graces of social discourse. He doesn’t keep anything to himself. Last year, he woke in the middle of the night, drove to the Catholic church in Northville and started playing the organ. A

priest, frightened, called the police. On the way to the station, Byron couldn't stop talking about the nurse his father screwed in the 80's. It was all in the police report.

Gray knelt and pulled the phone to him with the cord. Running a finger over the edge to confirm what he suspected, a wedge of plastic was missing, he lifted the receiver, heard a dial tone, and the receiver electronics dangled below his chin.

He looked for the lamp, still bewildered by sleep. When he turned it on, the room glowed blue from the wallboard. He'd been refinishing the house to sell it—another possibility his uncle's money made possible—and had spent the last two days on the bedroom. First he tore down the old plaster with a crow bar and then stuffed insulation in the cavity. A spot behind his left thumb still itched from the fiberglass. Even though he worked well into the night, this was the first room he'd finished with the wallboard. At least three walls of it. The other wall was still only siding, only pieces of wood between indoor and out. In the daylight, thin cracks of light pushed between some boards. He had hoped it wouldn't take this long. At this rate just the inside of the house would take months.

But it was his. A thing Gray was creating on his own, a way out of his trouble, a mechanism to gain control over whatever was leaving him empty. He hoped for this house the same way most people hope for the lottery. He was really hoping for a new beginning, a way to erase all mistakes and start with all the knowledge he made from them.

Then he looked at the phone again—beyond repair—the mouthpiece hung below the rest of the receiver by a wire. It was a relic anyway. He should've just broke down and rewire the house. Anyone who lived here would need to put in a fast connection anyway. It couldn't be that expensive anymore. He quickly calculated how much he had left in his account. Enough

certainly to buy a media line, but with so much to do on the house, a broken phone wasn't a priority.

He walked into the darkness of the hallway and passed the other room upstairs. The light from his bedroom poured in just enough for Gray to make out the flowered paper the previous owners put up. The flowers were huge, only three to a wall. Gray looked in and felt the sinking in his stomach. Quickly he saw the room as a number of days, instead of a space. He added them. One to rip the paper and plaster beneath it. Two more to put the nail the wallboard up. A third to plaster. A fourth and fifth to paint. Finish work on the last day. And suddenly, it occurred that he'd never get the house done. Horrifying—a sensation that traveled from his legs then his gut, a quickening behind the eyes.

When he realized that he had been just staring into the room, he made himself think the words *Live in the moment. You can't control the future.* Months ago, when he first considered buying this house, and days after the fight, when he considered how lucky he really was—not in jail—he'd taken up rehearsing 12-step sayings, or at least what he thought they might be. The idea of actually finding out about them was just too close to admitting that AA was a good idea. Solitude was his answer, didn't want to pour his guts out to a bunch of former drunks. It was all just too cliché. But the sayings, as Gray imagined them, had a sort of simple logic that made it easier for him to keep on.

The stairs creaked under his feet and he tipped his head to the side to avoid the tilt of the ceiling. He descended to the bottom of stairway where the light from the bedroom couldn't reach, but Gray knew the ceiling was too low at the base of the stairs. He never hit his head there before—probably should have—and if he were staying, Gray would have to fix it.

He opened the door to the outside and listened to the wind. The house was on a steep hill behind the main strip in town with the lake just beyond it. The paper came early and was in the middle of the lawn.

Since he'd stopped drinking, and the last traces of THC had left his bloodstream, the last tar his lungs, Gray noticed the cold. The comfortable cocoon drugs gave his body was gone. It was as if the cold didn't exist before. Gray could do almost anything when he drank. He was invincible. Once, he spent the night in January in the driveway because he passed out coming home from the Legion. Even the next day, his senses were dull. But now, he'd just noticed in the past couple of weeks that there was an avalanche of sensations in the world. And it was like he felt them all over again.

He waded through the soggy lawn to the paper. The headline read, "Negotiations Fail: European Union Leaves Talks." Under the fold, on the left, was the picture of a naked man, his back to the camera. What you looked at was his ass—white and skinny. The caption read, "New York Man Into the Wild." The other headline read, "Prisoners Arrive This Week."

Gray didn't think too long on any of them. Like most Americans, he understood that there was a war—you couldn't escape the coverage. Early on, everyone wanted revenge. But now, long since ground troops had invaded and were cleaning up—years of cleaning—the war was secondary. Gray's problems didn't confront him in the news, instead they were in front of him when he turned to look at the house—he only noticed what had to be fixed: the paint had peeled on the south wall, worn from the sun; the foundation needed to be hidden with shrubs or bushes or even flowers; the roof could use shingles. And he calculated the days for all the projects. Avoided thinking about the money. His heart raced.

Even the porch needed to be painted, but with a fresh coat it'd be as good as any he'd ever laid his eyes on. Each time Gray studied it, he didn't think days for this project. Instead, he saw its potential. For seconds he lived in his vision—sitting on the porch watching the reds and purples of the fading sun mirror the lake below. The view from the porch would sell the whole house on its own. Gray expected that the first potential buyer only had to stand and take in the view below and they'd put money down on the house right then. At times, he even sees a man with a briefcase full of money, opening it on the porch, in the sunset. Gray's romantic dream. The vision was always in letterbox too—the top and bottom of his imagination black and framing the rest.

The porch canopy covered the front of the house and wrapped along the three other sides. In front, the porch was barely off the ground, but in the back, the yard slowly dipped and the porch hung ten feet off the ground. The long slope of the hill to the lake below could be on a postcard. The yard in the foreground above the village. Then the lake and mountains as blue and clear as the sky above it all. Another fantasy he had was of a family coming to stay on the weekend. He saw them eating dinner late one weekend and then they'd sit idly deciding whether to wait just one more day, deciding to put off thinking about their jobs back in Boston or Portland or even Hartford. The family could hide from it all on this porch. This house was made for this view, and absurd as he'd tell himself it might be, he also knew that people buy houses—others build them, why couldn't he?

Another selling point was a stone wall that stretched from the road. It was the sort you may find walking in the woods—built when the ground was tilled for planting—each stone taken from the field and stacked. Long slabs of shale on top made the corners square and sides straight, when you first studied it, the wall looked artificial—like it was plaster poured into a mold—the

type siding some houses. But on closer study, you could see that it was hand made—no cement, no molds, and even its imperfections—the spaces between the rocks—only improved its beauty. This wall was remarkable not just for the placement of the stones—as if each stone grew from the earth’s beginning to be placed in its exact spot, but also because of its height—at least twice as high as any other wall of its type. When Gray bought the house, he walked next to it, the wall followed the slope of the hill with the top stones just at the top of his shoulders. The wall, at a constant height circled the yard before it fell off sharply, and wrapped behind two pine trees—straggly hangers on that reached skyward. The trees stood between Gray and his postcard view. When the house was built, the trees were just saplings. In the years since, people must’ve forgotten about them, then become accustomed to their shade. And when the trees blocked the view, the previous owners took them for granted as if they’d always been there. If only he could pull those trees up like weeds, then he’d have a clear view to the water, he’d have his postcard.

The way the wall wrapped around them—too close—made it impossible for Gray to get at them himself without the trees crashing to ground, scattering the ancient stones.

The cold ground finally chilled his feet and he walked back inside.

Gray finished the living room downstairs first. All except the painting. He’d finished it the in two weeks. This was before the dread came in waves. Each morning, he’d get up, excited by the process, the anticipation of what he could do. The original floor was hemlock, so he tore it up, turned the planks rough side out and used them on the walls of the laundry in the basement. He bought the new flooring in Bangor, laid it out and finished it, more careful with each coat of varnish. Now, the floor was smooth, polished, gleaming—his feet felt as though they’d stick it with each step. The room looked barren though. He had a television. A computer. He’d had both since college. A stack of newspapers, and a chair—strange how simple technologies hold on. His

table was two saw horses and a piece of plywood, all the furniture sat on drop cloths so as not to scratch the floor.

When he bought the house, the kitchen hadn't been much to look at either. It had outlived its life span—looked used, but not maintained. Burnt grease stained the stove, splattered the walls next to it. The refrigerator still constantly hummed and needed to be replaced; even the linoleum floor needed to come up. He could wash it a hundred times and it still wouldn't look clean. Gray demolished it next. Tearing at the old flooring and stained walls was fun, a release. All the time he demolished, he imagined the some tile, new cabinets, the place could work, just because it looked out into the yard. He even tore out the wall and built the framing for a picture window so that you could get a better view of the back yard.

Now, the floor was still waiting for its tile and the cabinets were on order. Watching the trees. Gray carefully measured and ground his coffee.

Just as the coffee machine began to gurgle, Gray found the phonebook. The yellow pages were thin but had several listings for tree removal, a check mark next to each. Weeks ago, he'd called them all and gotten quotes. All seemed out of his budget. He'd even called Lefty because he still worked for the loggers, was one of the lucky who had been kept on. But the little bastard never got back to him, maybe he was trying to teach Gray a lesson for not drinking with him anymore. Didn't matter though, Gray knew where to find him.

Gray rinsed out his favorite travel mug, filled it, then walked upstairs to his bedroom with the yellow pages under the other arm. Once there, he pulled on the same clothes he wore the day before. Dusty and smelling slightly of his own sweat. The body odor didn't bother him, besides he wasn't leaving the house.

The phone rang again.

He lay on the bed, and as the ringing echoed, he thought of what he wanted to accomplish that day, and he felt his stomach tighten. He also felt the tension in his temples. *The house*, he thought, *I need to get something done today*. Recently, each morning was a struggle this way. He'd go to bed the night before with plans, goals for the next day, and some days he'd be working the moment he woke, others, he lay in bed or read the paper until noon, cursing himself the whole time. Memories of the fight came at him some of the time. Visions that would wander into his consciousness—specters that simply walked in the room and overtook him. Gray sometimes wondered if he could change that day simply with desire, could make himself stop at any point. Don't get high. Stop from snapping the arm. Now, he was paying his penance. In his memory, that fight felt like he was skidding on ice or hydroplaning towards a ditch, or tree, or a parked car. Caught in inevitable momentum of disaster, watching it all come at him, and now he had the resolve to make it right. Not penance for the Jets fan, but rather for himself. The guy deserved what he got, but Gray knew he did as well. He was punishing himself for not having control, for not resisting the call of chaos. The ringing continued until the answering machine clicked on.

“Gray? I tried earlier. It's Betty again, I was going to call you later, but it's Byron, he's back in the hospital. He was pulled over in your uncle's Porsche yesterday afternoon. They arrested him.” It all comes at him too fast. She spoke too quickly.

“He's fine.” A pause. “He'd been smoking reefer.” She hesitated again and this time Gray felt it in his chest. That pause, he knew she wanted him to say something. To deny it. “Your uncle and I will be up there tomorrow. Come by the house; we want to have a talk with you. Until then, you can't go to the bank; the account is frozen.”

This changed his plans, and the quickening came again. The account was frozen. He needed to call her. Straighten this out. But with the phone in its current condition, he was stranded. He decided to give up on the bedroom and start tearing down the stairwell so he could accomplish something. Later that night, he'd go to the Legion and ask Lefty about someone to get rid of those trees. The money would be there.

He pulled the crowbar from the floor and again, he walked by the bedroom with the flowers. *This is all for the best* he thought. *I'll finish this house soon enough and I'll be out of here for a long time. Someplace warm. Someplace new.*

But next, he took the crowbar and dug into the huge flowers then frail flaky plaster. The destruction felt comfortable as chips fell around him.

Later that night, Gray stood just inside the entrance to the Legion and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the bar. The bar felt alive, lit by red Budweiser signs and the white glow from the cooler—the overhead lights barely on for the mood. Even during the day, the Legion gave the impression of nighttime—dimly lit with shadows covering people and furniture. The owner tinted the windows so only the piercing white that invaded from the front door reminded everyone inside that it was too early to be in a place like this. But for most people there, it was what a bar should be—a simple space to get drunk. Some bars hide that fact, make themselves a place to meet women or a spot to watch bands. And even though the regulars didn't go there to talk, that's what they all missed when they went on the wagon. The camaraderie.

Gray also saw Lefty's reflection. He was slightly hunched at the waist, using the bar to reserve energy. He'd been there a while. Gray had stared into this mirror before. Occasionally measuring his worth in the moments before he got drunk, he would silently ask himself if it was a good idea. He never stopped.

Seconds passed before Lefty noticed Gray in the mirror, a smile washed over his face, as if Lefty had just met Gray at the airport. It was easy to tell couldn't control it. The smile eased out of him like blood from a wound—nothing then a steady flow.

The bar was full. Not just because of the number of people, but because of their size. Gray almost looked average, like he'd landed on some island like Gulliver and the people had magically grown. As he moved through the crowd, he even felt short, and a bit nervous. His invincibility was no longer certain. Someone here might actually manhandle him, thrash him without effort. He wedged next to Lefty at the bar. "What's this all about?"

"Tall Persons' Club. They're from the Commonwealth. Spending the weekend here. Rented out the hotel. Jacky is pretty excited," Lefty said and sipped his drink. Jacky, the Legion's owner, took a marketing class in Orono the last month. Amtrak had recently restored the Maine Line to Montreal and with some people were still weary of flying, weekend trips on the train to the mountains were in vogue. Jacky had been working with Junior Graham at the hotel to bring tourist groups to take advantage of the opportunities. "Voight's pretty excited. I think he's mixing with the freaks," Lefty said and pointed to a towering crowd in the far corner.

"Look at them. I feel small." He was always the tallest in the room. The centerpiece. Whenever another tall person came into the room, he inevitably shared a glance. They somehow found a way to gravitate together. Not unlike the old west, but more subtly. Then maybe a friend or an acquaintance would ask who was taller, would slide them back to back and the measuring began. It was as if the tall people were children. Like they'd only recently hit their growth spurt. But now, he felt unsettled.

A guy next to Lefty spoke up. Gray had never seen him before. “At least they’re better than when one of those hippy bands come in. Those freaks just dance around like weirdoes. At least these freaks aren’t going to turn into businessmen.”

“Gray meet Pike. Pike—Gray. He’s the guy I told you about.” Pike reached his hand in front of Lefty. Tattoes ran in blocks from each finger up the back of his hand only to disappear in his sleeve. Was he part black? Gray couldn’t tell. It had something to do with his eyes, they stood out from his head. The whites contrasted in the way photographs of Middle Eastern women’s eyes always did in National Geographic, but up here, there aren’t any black people. This guy wasn’t black, but he also wasn’t any specific nationality either. Maybe just a mix of them all. Gray took his hand and squeezed firmly. Almost too much so.

“This is the guy who started that riot in Foxboro. Most amazing thing I ever saw. Mayhem all around him and Gray’s just tossing Jets fans rows away.”

“You’re not quite as big as Lefty said you’d be. I thought maybe 8 feet tall and 400 pounds would do it.”

“Don’t let him fool you, I’m really a pacifist.”

“Don’t be stupid. Nobody is really a pacifist.”

A silence overtook them then, none willing to continue a talk about ideas. A Tall Person wedged behind Pike to get to the bar, bumping him. Pike paused, raised his eyes to the others to acknowledge this. Gray shrugged.

“What’s up with you guys?” Gray asked Lefty without looking at him. Instead he watched the Tall Persons’ Club in the mirror. One woman caught his eye. It was the color of her hair that first caught his eye. Not red, or brown, but the color of faded copper. In any other place

she'd have been the focal point, would've towered over other men. But here, she looked proportionate, beautiful.

"Have a drink," Lefty said and followed Gray's gaze to the woman.

"Sorry man, I'm trying to cut back. I got a lot of work to do on the house."

"But tomorrow's Saturday. Everyone needs a day off."

"Not me. I work for myself. I can't rest ever," Gray wanted a drink though. Just one to calm himself.

"So you're not drinking, that's just perfect. Why the fuck are you here? To pick up tall trim?"

"Need that tree guy. The ones in the book are too expensive."

"Here's your man," Lefty pointed his thumb to Pike.

"Pike, you remove trees?"

"I could if I wanted to," Pike replied. He was sharp, you could tell just by the confidence in his voice. "Look at her. She almost looks normal." He'd found what the other two were looking at.

"Pretty hot for an amazon. I'd fuck her if I wasn't afraid she'd break my neck," Lefty turned to stare at her.

"Not me," was all Gray could say. The others didn't understand the ambiguity. He didn't mean he wouldn't sleep with her, rather that he wasn't afraid. *What would it be like to be with a woman that big?* And then the words were gone and in his thoughts, he saw himself climbing on her. *How many woman think of me like that?* He wondered. But then he saw her look at herself for the first time. A slight peek in the mirror was all that it took. She glanced at herself and shook her head, like she disappointed herself just by the way she looked. But she wasn't unattractive. In

fact only her height was the problem. And then only by an inch or two. If not for the little extra, she'd be a model. She was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Maybe she knew it. Or maybe she thought to herself that she had been somehow cheated by fate. She could've been an athlete. Probably a person as tall and strong as her had to want to compete. She had wanted overcome that size and use it somehow. It was too easy to suppress. And then that's when the other notion hit him. Men were afraid of her.

When she melted out of her own self-reflection, the woman found the stares from the men, and she made her way to the bar. Busted, Lefty and Pike averted their eyes. Not Gray—he had yet to stop staring, that's why she extended a hand to him. "I'm sorry, but I've never met you before. Did you come with someone?"

He took the hand, it was warm and soft. "No. I'm here by myself."

"Then you're a new member?"

"No, I don't belong to the Legion."

"Legion? No, I meant the Tall Persons' Club."

Behind them, Gray noticed the seven-footer lean over Pike. The guy's chest curved over his back, he ogled the bartender as if to summon him by telepathy.

"What the... Watch yourself freak!" Pike hopped out of his seat. Gray saw the beer spill over of the counter. The Tall Person must have hit it.

In the mirror, Gray tried to make out this guy's face. "I'm sorry, I think my friends are a bit rowdy," he said to the woman.

"Say, man, who the hell are you?" The Tall Person looked down at Pike. He might have been a banker or office worker, the only thing for sure was that he definitely wasn't from around here.

“You heard him. Who are you?” Now Lefty was excited.

“You guys drunk or something?”

“What?” Lefty hopped from the stool. It was at his waist, the other guy’s knee. “Who the fuck are you?”

The Tall Person glared at Lefty. They faced off as best either could manage. Lefty eye-level with the Tall Person’s nipples.

“Alright guys, time to leave.” Gray stepped between the men.

“Can’t kick me out though. I don’t care if you guys are the Tall and Angry Club, I’m not leaving my bar,” Lefty said thumping his chest.

Gray stepped back and watched the men size each other up. He felt a hand on his shoulder, the woman squeezing on it.

It’s difficult to know what to expect from men about to fight. Lefty had been around brawls, but his experience was typically quick lived, and his balls came from his friends beating the piss out of his opponents once they’d been dispatched. Anyway, he could only do so much damage. And despite what Lefty might have imagined, this wasn’t the movies where a little martial arts fighter could take a whole bar. Lefty could take maybe two or three guys out on his best night, and even then it’d have to be one on one. Most of the Tall Persons’ Club women could handle him easily. But to Gray, Pike looked like someone who wasn’t afraid to finish a fight quickly with a sucker punch, catching the other guy when he was walking away or grabbing the guy’s balls and squeezing until they popped.

“Do something,” the woman said pulling her hand away, seemingly aware she was too close.

The others in the bar were excited by the fight, gathering in a tight circle around the men. Some smirking, some with worried glances, all a comical collection of tall and short.

“Settle down. Let’s walk.” Gray took his two companions by the arm and looked at the woman. “Sorry.” The Tall Persons’ Club looked at them in unison as they walked to the door. Gray wanted desperately to just hit one of them, but he couldn’t afford it, so many of his plans were on the cusp.

Outside. The air was clean, not smoky. Even in town, there wasn’t much light, and the stars filled the sky like a million pinpricks. Gray watched Pike and Lefty walk the rear of a van. They took bumps from a small vile.

“What you on tonight?” he asked when Lefty and Pike returned.

“Meph. Pike scared some up last night. Cleanest shit I ever had too. This is like the best coke you ever got, except it lasts all night. Want some?”

“No I wasn’t asking for that.” It would’ve been too easy to take a bump. But he had to meet with Frank and Betty the next day. The future was too important for a few hours of the jitters. “Look, I got to go. You two stay out of trouble.”

“Hey don’t go so fast,” Pike came out from the van. “Thanks for helping us there. Those things suck when no one really wants them to happen.”

“I know I don’t need trouble.”

“None of us do. Maybe I can help you out. I got this easy work that needs taking care of. You drive truck right?”

“Used to.”

“I got some government work on the side. It’s an easy way to pick up some extra money,” Pike said lifting the vile between them. “But in my present condition, I’d never pass the screening. You think you game?”

“I don’t know. I have a lot going on.”

“Don’t answer yet. I’ll ask again when I come by about those trees,” Pike said.

“See you then,” Gray said and walked to his car, then home, then to sleep, then to the same day he’d had for the past half year.

JOSEPH

Sunday, June 15

A heavy gray sky and drizzle greeted me on my first morning in the woods—the remainder of a Nor’Easter stalled in the Gulf of Maine that sent bands of Atlantic rain into the mountains for over a week. I had been in Maine all that time. Waiting. After flying in from New York and driving in from Portland, I spent a day in Greenville to let the authorities know that I was actually going to follow through with my plan. I was pleasantly surprised to meet Edmund Voight, a town selectman, who greeted me at town hall and agreed to gather a team to escort me to a suitable campsite.

Voight talked more quickly than any Mainer I’d ever met. Usually people in Maine calculate their speech. They repeat what you say as if mocking your words. For instance, when I came into town, I couldn’t find the town hall. I pulled into a gas station and a man actually came out to pump my gas. When he finished, I asked him for directions. He stood out my window and didn’t even bend over when he replied, “Ayuh, the Town Hall you say. It’s right over there-ya.” He pointed across the street to a sturdy brick building. My cell phone rang at that exact moment. It was Voight.

“Mr. Knowles. I thought that was you. Edmund Voight here. Look out your window.”

I obeyed. There he was, on the steps. A small man, Voight didn’t look like a Mainer either. Actually, he had the air of someone who looked out of place anywhere he was. Not that anything in particular about him gave him away either, Voight was just that special combination of small sturdy man who always seemed to have more ambition and energy than brains. He ran across the street, dodging a car.

“Don’t worry Charlie,” I heard Voight yell from behind the gas station attendant. His voice also echoed in the cell phone. “That’s Joseph Knowles, the wilderness writer.”

“Ayuh. Wilderness writer,” Charlie said to me.

“He’s going out in the Fed Reserve naked.”

“Ayuh, going out naked.” Charlie bent and stared at me then. And before I knew it, Voight was in the passenger seat.

“I’ll give you a tour of town,” he said taking my hand to shake it. “Turn left out of the gas station. Thanks Charlie. See ya later.” He said what he did past me. Pointing over my head and seemingly speaking to somebody just beyond me.

We drove through the town, passed worn buildings of the past reused and shaped to suit their present needs, passed streets that should have been filled with vacationers, and passed a few men in green fatigues waiting aimlessly on the street corners. Greenville had been through so many facelifts that its history was finally showing itself again in the buildings. The town looked like it could be the bastard cousin of an old gold-rush town.

Voight explained that he was in the bar that first night I talked about my journey and he hoped that I’d follow through with it. “I knew right then that the publicity would be good for the town. Ever since they closed down the forest, tourism has slid,” he said. “Some of the older folks are afraid. Couple years ago, a girl from Yankee magazine came up here and trashed the snow mobile trails. The older folks felt like she was talking down about them, called them hard drinkers and stuff. Me, I think any publicity is good now. Hope you stay out there for a long time. This town needs it.”

He was right, you could see the steamship Katahdin moored in the harbor. We drove by a sign showing its cruising schedule. All cancelled but one. “We’re ready for a comeback. I can tell you that.

“You know, you’re not the only one who’s done something like this. A few years ago we had a guy swim the length of the lake. He started on a Thursday night and swam straight through until Saturday morning. Had a boat next to him taking his temperature and feeding him soup every fifteen minutes. I road in a boat behind him on Friday. We had news cameras from Portland and three papers to meet him. Amazing what the human body will do.”

Back at the town hall Voight introduced me to all the appropriate authorities. I spent an hour studying maps with a military man who informed me of the areas I should avoid. It seems that there is a POW camp out here. It surprised me because I hadn’t seen any news of it anywhere. Who would’ve thought that the government could hide such a thing? Sergeant Toomey didn’t seem too worried about security though. Just told me that if I wasn’t careful, I might run into a couple of GI’s and ruin my time away. He even showed me a map of the area I intended to be at. A small logging operation would be working there late in July.

When Toomey left, my posse had arrived. The local newspaper had a photographer ready. He was a small man, who looked like he needed to get out this small town. He greeted me with a picture—the flash stung my eyes. Beside him stood a wiry man in coveralls. It was June and this guy was dressed to sit on a stand and wait for deer in the snow.

“Jack Johnson, local game warden,” he said shaking my hand vigorously. “Those are protected woods, you’re going into.”

“Nice to meet you too Mr. Johnson,” I replied.

“We won’t tolerate poaching.”

There was a silence. Voight broke it. “Oh I’m sorry Joe, Jack gets a little anxious sometimes. But the folks from the Department of Fish and Game want you to sign this.” He handed me a sheet of paper.

“You can’t kill a thing out of season,” Johnson said.

“But you know what that means?”

“Yes. It means I’m enforcing the law and you’re obeying it.”

“But you are the law. You can make an exception.”

“If I’m not making an exception for people who need deer meat, I’m not making it for you Mr. Knowles,” Johnson said.

I was dealt my first setback even before I’d left town, but I didn’t worry. It was meant to be.

Just past nightfall, Voight took the photographer and me to Pittson Farm. During the winter, it serves as the main camp for snowmobilers, but it lays barren in the summer months. I actually had quite a small crowd around me. With the exception of the sergeant and Charlie, all the men I saw that day clung to me. Even the game warden came along. Coward. I think they were somehow jealous or simply strangers—locals who only wanted to see what the commotion was about. I’d catch them studying me, attempting to discover what exactly was making me tick.

But then the waiting began. Each night I agreed to suggestions that I wait another day until the storm passed. The men argued that it would be best to wait for a couple dry days. First, they said that my feet would suffer. Then it was the fire, “You won’t find a dry stick, and then what’ll you do?” they asked. As I saw their logic, I took the time to brainstorm ideas and bounce my theories for survival off of them. I was pleased that they had time to give to me and I thanked them, but as the days past, slowly my resolve faded.

A group of men alone, we drank every night at Pittson Farm. In the basement, they had stores of beer and whiskey. We drank and talked about sports and hunting, government, and the war. My companions had radical views, ones I disagreed with, but I respected them the same. I even suspected that some of the men were using drugs. Not all mind you, but two or three of them would sneak away and either come back talkative and energized or slow and dim.

This continued for several days. I woke in the mornings with the low ache of a whiskey hangover clinging to every inch of me. This made my tasks difficult because I spent the days preparing my body. I took long walks on the snowmobile trails that surrounded the farms. A dog belonging to one of the men followed me on these walks. At first, it pleased me to have the company, but the dog simply didn't know how to be alone and would cause such a commotion in the woods that I'd have be more anxious after the walks than before. Thankfully, this time in the woods allowed my feet to become accustomed to the sticks and rocks underneath them. I'd stand outside and let the cool mud slide between my toes, and after a few days I felt that they'd hold up.

Each night we listened to the AM radio for the weather report out of Bangor. The storm was stubborn. The waiting deadened my resolve though, made me not want to leave. It was like gaining weight. At first, the nights of drinking and conversation felt harmless, a guilty sin before I sequestered myself in the wilderness. I actually thought they would help me, give me added resolve. But after a few days, I began to distrust myself, to see how the flab of my personality began to unfold on me. Panicked dreams of failure woke me from drunken sleep. Finally, I couldn't take waiting any longer and decided that I must begin despite the rain. I reported this to my companions and they reluctantly heard me out. The next morning they agreed to take me across Unknown Pond to a deserted section of the north woods.

I felt my first pains for society—low aches in my stomach that have haunted me since—on the ride across Unknown Pond. The only thing I can compare it to now is the feeling a child has on the bus, when on the first day of school, they look out the window and remember all the warm days of summer or that feeling that creeps up on you know that your marriage is over—that low empty chasm of forever. We took a pair of boats. I rode in the second, Voight and a rower with me. My photographer and the local game warden, with their own rower, were in the boat ahead of us. I sat in the rear so I could watch the shore as we rowed near it. When we first boarded, the opposite shore appeared no further than a football field away, close enough to swim, but our slow crossing proved my sense of the breadth of the water wrong. The two rowers dipped their oars into the cool gray water in a regular pattern. I'm certain they didn't intend to, but I'm thankful because the oars' soft splashing was comforting to me then. Each stroke seemed so effortless, but the splashes filled the relative silence. Even my own breathing couldn't keep the sounds of the dripping water from consuming me. I watched the circles from the oars swept under the hull. One extended to the middle of the lake where a loon hung in the water. Mostly all I could see was his head, a slight black parentheses above the water line, his beak tipped to the sky as if he were balancing an invisible ball on it. Alone, the only bird on the lake, blanketed by water, he didn't seem to notice the two rowboats pushing past him.

The men on my boat remained silent, as if they were reverent to the task I was about to undertake. But the men ahead, in front of my boat, were friendly in the way some men can always be with other men. Their voices carried over the water and I listened as they talked about the Red Sox. How pitiful this whole region is. Nearly a century of pining—Pitiful.

I remember the moment directly after the baseball conversation as clearly as any in my life. I'm not certain why, but I was overwhelmed with fear because this was the only time I considered that I might miss certain pleasures. Games, scores, and the like. I enjoyed them. My rituals were important to me. I read the paper the same way every morning, looked for the game write-ups, then columnists, and finally the standings. I'd stopped watching the Inter-tainment™ centers because I felt overloaded with data. Mornings with newsprint and old-fashioned reporting always were a religious experience with me. A grounding.

The crunch of the boat on the sandy shore brought me back from my daydream. I told the others to wait as I got out of the boat first and pulled it ashore. I was going to take off my clothes anyway. The water chilled me—a chill that would last for three days.

I pulled the first boat further in and waded out to the second. Upon my return, the cameraman took a landslide of pictures—of me, the land, the loon, anything he could capture. The mechanical clicking contrasted the slow lapping of the water.

When all the men disembarked, I quickly scanned the shoreline—for what I didn't know. Then my eye fell upon the hollowed trunk of a once great tree. And before I could speak, Voight had walked behind me.

“That tree over there,” he said pointing to the stump I spotted. “You can leave the dispatches in it. Phil here will come next week to check on them. If you have any problems, just get back here and leave us a note. We'll send someone out every couple of weeks to check on you.”

The other men nodded. Voight patted me on the back. I hated him at that moment.

“You want one last cigarette? I suspect you'll need one soon enough,” he said.

Though I had quit smoking long ago, it seemed to be appropriate. I smoked it down to the filter in several deep breaths. No one spoke.

Just beyond the tree was a narrow gap in the thick spruce. It appeared to be the best place to start. I snuffed my butt and handed it the warden.

“Throw this away for me.”

He gave me a look that seemed to say *just throw it on the ground*.

“And litter? If I can’t kill a deer, I certainly won’t litter.”

He looked puzzled at first. Actually, I now recall that he may have looked at me angrily. A brief silence followed.

“What time will you be home for dinner?” a rower yelled behind us.

Laughter filled the air and scared a bird from the trees.

“I guess it’s time,” I said. And with that I took off my wet clothes. How embarrassing it was for me, I even turned around so that they could only see me from behind as I removed my underwear. I felt more naked than I’d imagined. But I gathered my dignity and said, “You all see that I have no clothes and you’d be willing to pledge your word to confirm that?”

They agreed and silently each man came forward and shook my hand—all except the game warden who was obviously one of those men who had to feel in power. He came up next to me, pointed to path I’d already spotted and said, “You keep on walking that way and you won’t hit a road for days.”

“I studied the maps.” I considered adding you jerk or some other slur, but I think he got the picture by the way he sheepishly retreated.

The cameraman swooped around me to get the most tasteful but tantalizing shots. I turned to go into the wilderness, the nicotine making me slightly lightheaded. I didn't even wait to listen to the group push off behind me; I wanted to get as much distance between them and myself as possible. It was as if I needed to move away from society before it sucked me back. Luckily, the path I was on was in good condition, and I made good time for the first half-hour.

Now, I'd never quite conceptualized what I'd actually do my when I made it out there. But even when the footpath disappeared, I pushed into the brush until I came across a natural game trail. I followed the trail in a sort of trance. I don't recall much except for the drive inside me to continue walking. It was like that first walk I had into Greenville when I decided to take this trip. Time became secondary to my experience.

What I do remember is what some may call monotony. To some this means seeing a tree then another tree, then another tree. To the man of this mind, those trees are all alike. I cannot say that I wasn't of that mind myself that day. But what happens when you're forced into that kind of repetition, is that you find pathways from it. You slip into a trance and find pleasure in the smallest details. I had a drive, a purpose, and I didn't stop to look at the individual trees to notice that the spruce and birch fought for space alongside the oak and pine. I simply pushed on. Later I'd not be so oblivious.

At some point late in the day, I found a thick stand of trees that provided some shelter from the weather—a place where I could pace back and forth to stay warm. The cold rain continued as the sun slowly faded. How cold I'd become, and so quickly, I was afraid to sit still because I felt I might freeze. As the night wore on, I moved faster and faster until I was running. I only stopped when my body could no longer continue moving.

Sitting down, I thought to myself all I have to do is make it at least one night. You can go back tomorrow, slip from town and nobody outside of that little hick town will think any less of you. I stared into the darkness then, some creature cracked through the underbrush. In hindsight, I remember the sound as being small. It was probably a raccoon or a curious possum, but at the time it frightened me greatly. So I stood and paced back and forth throughout the night to distract the animal. It now occurred to me that I was now alone, naked in the woods, in the dark, miles from camp. The petty fear of broken routines that I felt on the boat was now replaced with fear for my own safety. Fear that I had made a grave mistake.

At the first lightening of the dawn sky, I considered sleep, but instead decided that I should walk some more. If I were heading back to the city, I might as well get a good hike in. The game path continued in front of me and I decided to follow it. I wasn't sure where the path would take me, but I suspected that I'd be heading somewhere. Though the forest may look wild and haphazard, in actuality, it follows rules rather strictly. Small game trails lead into larger ones, then larger paths even then. And finally, they converge on water. It's true that all living things need water. So it only makes sense that the paths we traverse will always lead us to it. With this in mind, I made my way down the path hoping for an opening, an oasis in the trees. I never quite knew why, but I think it had to do with breaking the monotony I had come to notice the day before.

There is something that draws a man or animal to a place of relief in the woods—any opening, any sheet of water, or spring, or anything that is different for the miles and miles of trees which become so tiresome. In case there is no clearing or sheet of water in the country round about, the most natural thing is to climb to the highest peak you can find, where the great

open sweep above the timber offers a different kind of picture. We're curious, it's one of our greatest strengths, the need to know, the drive for the comfort of knowledge.

In the midst of this monotony of trees, as I'd expected, the slope of the game trail dipped and suddenly lured me in to an opening. I had been carried to Lost Pond this particular morning. Scarcely had my eyes traveled to the opposite side shore when I noticed a beaver dam a little to the left of me. Movement caught my eye.

At first I assumed that it was simply the rain. It had picked up again and I'd seen other phantoms created by falling water. But this movement was constant and slow. Slowly, I realized that I saw a deer on the opposite shore. How comfortable she looked. I cringed inside, felt a sort of hatred for her, because I was freezing. My skin had become puckered all over from the constant rain. I must admit that I envied that deer right then. Immediately I envisioned myself on top of her, tearing that hide off. I never did think of her as a source of meat, just envied her hide.

Then I remembered Voight and his Fish and Game buddy. My pledge to them gnawed at me. They both had the right to grant me a permit. The first primitive men were not prostrate to the rules of an outside-civilized world! With this thought I found myself screaming. I didn't expect it, nor could I control it. And with my primal yell the deer took off like a bolt. She crashed into the trees with such a ruckus that a pair of ducks in the middle of the water became spooked. The pair beat their wings and slapped the water. I watched as their small bodies lifted inches off the surface and I saw their legs futilely running on top of the water. I expected that they'd stop there, but with the deer making so much noise the ducks slowly lifted into the air.

I saw them pass a dark spot in the woods on the other side of the lake. Drawn to it, like anyone is drawn to a change in color or difference, I walked along the shoreline past logs that looked as if they'd been hollowed into a corkscrew by the constant turning of the water, past

blocks of granite deposited by glaciers thousands of years ago, and past patches of swampy grass. And finally I made it to a stand of trees charred several feet from the round. A few trees had succumbed completely and were burnt relics of their former selves. This fire wasn't old, must have happened only this spring. But life had already returned. Brambles of berries clustered over all the stumps.

These burnt lands are natural in the forest. Fire is just another step in the life cycle of the wilderness. Since I hadn't eaten in over a day, I greedily stuffed myself with all the berries I could.

At this point, the brambles and thorns of the berry bushes were chaffing my legs. I gathered long thick strands of swamp grass and bunched them around my legs. I then tied them with the sturdiest stands of grass to make a sort of makeshift pair of chaps. My first clothing.

The chaps weren't my only first that day either. Having just filled myself with as many berries as my stomach could hold, two sensations possessed me. First, I felt the need for sleep, and I considered stretching out on the ground right there. But thankfully another sense pulled at me. Fear. Berry patches like these are favorite among bears. How awful it would be to wake to a mother black bear dining on my leg with a side of blueberries. I again scanned the shore and found that my original entrance was the safest place for me. From there I could watch any predator, and was sheltered slightly from the wind that still blew carrying with it the rain.

It was then that, I built my first shelter: a lean-to of spruce. It kept me surprisingly warm. And I fell fast asleep. I dreamed of restaurants, the laughing men at Pittson farm, my ex-wife even.

I don't know how long I slept, but the last drops of rain still fell when I woke. And I could feel my body covered in a crust of mud, pine needles, berry juice, and sweat. So I made

my way to the water and waded in. It was cold. Freezing. The rest of my sleep shot from me. And I went under. I felt it all wash away. My grime, my doubts, my weariness. My sin. I looked down and saw nakedness and was proud. Proud that I'd made it this far. And that's when it became clear to me that I just might make it work in the wilderness.

I resurfaced to a rain-free sky. The clouds broke just enough that fog from the water captured the sun in a glow. A halo, like the sun shining through a snowstorm. The forest had changed too. I walked from the water and sat under my lean-to. What else was I going to do with all this time? The sky calmed me as I watched bands of gray clouds glide over and beyond the dark mountains—shadows on the horizon.

I stayed there and rested still as the evening sun burned through the fog and then warmed everything around me. I could smell it by the end of the day. The familiar aroma of life. Summer had returned, and I was grateful.

GRAY

Thick stands of birch and poplar rise from the road above Betty's house. The trees cloak the house when you drive past, but you can see the entire green expanse of the lawn when you stand in her living room. And since the house sits on the east side of the lake, the steep slope seems to fall into the mirrored reflection of the hills behind it as they dance on the lake most mornings and afternoons. On evenings like this one, warm summer nights when the sun sets late, the drone of motorboats and jet-skis hang in the air like a swarm of flies. The lake was silent when Gray was a child and spent his summers here, you might see a fisherman on his canoe—Gray even remembers watching one man in a canoe catch a ride from one shore to the next by grabbing onto the hump of a moose. But more and more summer residents from the south—Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York—have established summer cottages and brought their motorboats. Gray's aunt and uncle are no different. Since Gray was a child, before he came to live with them, Betty stayed here the entire summer. But now, Frank and Betty drive from their home in to Cambridge almost weekly. When it begins to snow, they might come for a long weekend or for an extended skiing holiday and every few years the family may have Christmas here, but Betty was no longer a resident in the town she grew up in, she was a tourist like the rest.

Gray stood in front of the carved fireplace at his Aunt's house, windows open so the noise of the boats crept in the room. A small card framed at the end of the mantle read, "Thoreau's Headboard." Next to it, a short write-up describing the scribe's stay at a local inn during his famous trip to Mount Katahdin. Thoreau stares out blankly from a black and white etching on the card that looks as if it could be on a dollar bill. The scraggly beard around his chin looking like a reverse halo below his chin. Betty had bought the bed from a local barn sale many

years ago. It sat in the garage until she brought it to one of those antique appraisal shows on PBS. When she tells people about it, she says that she had the shock and joy to find it to be a headboard Thoreau wrote of in an obscure journal. She nods her head and lowers her voice slightly on the obscure part. The next week, she had it mounted over the fireplace. A copy of the notebook entry was also framed next to the etching. His Aunt has a thing for photographs, she collects and displays them in the same way that some people display glass figurines, sports memorabilia, or artwork. Photos of her family cover the walls and tables in the rest of the room. Framed photos of Frank and the Governor; pictures of Gray and Byron—childhood portraits; prints of original newspaper photos; a wedding photo—her parents—his parents. A wallet sized photo on the mantle caught his attention—a picture of Byron by himself when he was very small, maybe on four or five years old. In the picture he sat on the steps of the house in Northville. It must've been cold because he wore a puffy sleeveless parka and the leaves had fallen from the tree. Already he looked pensive and confused, like he needed someone to protect him. And though the photographer, probably Betty, was only a few yards away, in the photo Byron looked so alone.

Gray studied the only other photograph on the mantle, one he hadn't seen before. Two women stood at the end of a dock. They looked familiar but were at the edges of his memory. Behind them loomed what looked to Gray like a wooden castle—a massive turret with a pitched roof flanked by two ells of pillared buildings—behind it, Kineo Mountain. The older woman looked almost identical to Betty if it weren't for the obvious age difference. Same thick hair and high bright cheeks. The younger was a smaller, more frail the other. They both stared stiffly into the camera, in the way people did at the time, like the photo was a solemn record they had to honor.

“That’s my mother and grandmother. I found it while I was going through some things.”

Startled, Gray turned to find Betty in the doorway behind, bags in her hand. “I didn’t hear you.”

“We just arrived, you uncle is unloading a few things in the boathouse.”

“I’ve never seen this before,” Gray said holding up the photo.

“It’s funny how that picture became so dear to me. I’ve never been one to wish for the past. But I just missed them. It was taken when my Grandmother worked at the Kineo Hotel. She changed sheets. The older I get, the more I wonder about them. That place burnt down even before I was born. Your grandmother said she was happy about it, I don’t know why. That woman loved your father though. My grandmother used to rock him to sleep all the time. They loved family.”

Gray never met either woman. Betty was really the only mother he’d ever known. When he was a child she’d walk with him around the room, show him pictures and tell him stories about his parents. Gray imagined them in fairy tales, myths, and special stories just for him. Photos that showed his mother as a teenage girl bore stories about chaste virgins with sweet voices. A picture of his father as homecoming king spurred stories of how the town worshipped him as if he was true royalty. Gray would imagine that Northville was his kingdom to reclaim when he matured. A wedding photo when they were barely out of high school looked as if it could be a dream. There was even a photo of his father in army dress when he left for Vietnam—a war hero in Gray’s mind. The stories were an explanation, an escape, a kind of hope.

The photos didn’t tell the whole truth, and Gray discovered pieces of reality as he got older. He overheard comments at family reunions or from conversations with townspeople. Like blazes on a trail, the real story of his mother and father became clear, with each new detail. It

would've been simple for Betty to be forthright with him. But even now, she never slipped. She never put up any photos that showed that his father never fought in the war. None of the photos showed that most of the family believed Gray's father was even discharged in basic training for some incident. Drinking too much or carousing—nobody quite knew the whole story. She never showed him a photo showing that his father was angry at the prospect of having a baby—wanted to abort. The pictures on the wall never told him fairytales about his father's impatience—never explained that his father's boyish nervousness never faded .

Most of all Betty never put a photo of his mother's funeral over the mantel. She never told Gray a myth about how his mother died in childbirth or about how his father was as a wanderer. Never told a story that explained how he'd been in Gray's life off and on for the first few years, or how the man would disappear without warning. Gray had photos in his mind though. The one that played the most was of one of the days his father had just shown up on Betty's doorstep with Gray and didn't return for weeks. Nobody knew exactly where he went, or with whom. The audio that played with the photo was a phone call—an argument he overheard when Betty found a receipt from a boarding house in New York dialed the number on it. Whenever Gray asked why Betty took him on, she simply replied, “You're family. We won't let you be alone.”

In the living room the two of them stood in silence until the breeze blew the door shut.

“I'm sorry about Byron, have you seen him?” Gray asked pulling back. What he wanted to talk about was the money.

“We'll discuss that later. Go bring in the rest of the bags so I can start dinner. You will stay won't you?”

On his way to the car, Gray hoped that Frank was hidden in the boathouse below. A memory came on him of how Frank once hit him so hard in that boathouse that a tooth fell out. Gray was no older than ten. Byron and he'd been playing, and Gray spilled a can of paint on the new lawnmower. Before he could do anything, Frank was in the boathouse, yelling, swinging.

But none of that mattered now. What mattered now was what was to come, the things he could control. He'd been embarrassed to take his money in the first place. He thought about what he might say if Frank was next to the car. He'd make the appropriate small talk—yes, the remodeling was going well, he was making headway on the second floor, was creating something to show in his future. But something in Gray pushed him to ask for another loan, just to take his mind off of it. Apprehensive to ask for more now, he needed what had already been promised. The house needed it. He was so close to making it work. But still, he knew that taking money was like a confession of his own failure, of his inability to act responsibly in the adult world. And though Frank had never castigated Gray over the loan, he never gave freely and always reduced Gray to begging.

The contempt each held for the other was obvious to Gray. Gray for Frank's stiffness, the reckless way he cheated on Betty, and his money. Frank for the reckless way Gray led his life.

So when Gray caught Frank out of the corner of his eye at the car, he made certain not to acknowledge him, because the weight of their interaction would be too much bear. Their relationship wasn't necessarily this way because Betty and Frank took care of him as a child, but because Frank lacked that certain quality that lets some men feel close to their family. In contrast, Gray was always shocked to see him with his colleagues, by the way he worked the room, laughed at bad jokes, and held people's arms at the elbow when he greeted them. His patients made him cakes and gave him gifts at Christmas. But at home, with the exception of

Betty, it was as if his family couldn't reach his standards. His boy and nephew drained his hope. Frank wore his disdain in the way he looked at them

He stared at the back of Frank's thin frame, hoping to find an answer to him in his movements. *What makes him do what he does?*

On his way back to the house, Gray saw Betty watching him from the living room window. The three of them, alone but still connected. She looked down when he waved.

Dinner followed a familiar pattern—Betty the bridge between the men. She passed the food, accepted glances from both men, and filled the silences with questions about what each wanted. More rice? Extra asparagus? Or she talked about the prisoners. *It's amazing, being that far from home, a soldier captured. They must be frightened. They can't escape can they? Aren't you afraid to have those terrorists in your town? What if they escape? I'm so glad we have such a good man in the White House, otherwise I'd be more frightened.*

Neither man did more than nod or grunt in agreement. The clinking of forks filled the room.

"So Byron is okay?" Gray asked Betty only.

"Yes. He just stopped taking his medication. The doctors think he should stay until he gets his blood levels back up."

"Same stuff as before?"

"Yes, Thorazine—the doctors said the marijuana would interfere."

"He said he got the dope from you." Frank looked at Gray directly when he said it, an obvious act of aggression.

Gray was afraid of this. Byron was a child, an open wound of information. He'd just talk and find ways to bring others down. Betty and Frank wouldn't have been so formal about inviting him over. That crazy, lying son-of-a-bitch.

"We're worried about you," Betty said. "Have you gotten any help with that problem of yours?"

"Problem?"

"Gray we're adults here, let's not play games," Frank said, the implication that they were not all adults in his view was clear in his tone.

"Look, I didn't give him anything. I feel guilty enough about all that's happened lately, but—"

"Guilt means nothing. You can go on feeling guilty and sorry for yourself, but guilt is not contrition. Only actions can make things better. So, I'm not paying for that house anymore," Frank said like he'd rehearsed it.

Gray didn't expect to feel the quickening in his stomach. They were treating him like a child. But he wasn't, or at least he hoped so. "But the house, I'm making progress. I'm doing what I need to."

"But you've been working on that house for so long now. What has it been, five months? We thought it'd been done by now. And you spend so much time alone. How can that be good for you? Look at you, you don't look happy," Betty said. "More Bread?" Her tone searched for middle ground.

Did he look that bad? "I told you when I took the loan, I just wanted some time to clean myself up. Anyway, it's turning out better all the time." It may have been a lie, he didn't know.

"But how much longer is to going to take?" Betty asked.

“I can’t say for sure. It just takes time.”

“We’ve been letting the two of you slide along for long enough. You need to get your life in gear, and we’ve only been helping you stay children. I can’t do anything else for you. Especially if you’re on drugs. I’m sick of being the fool. You need a job son. I tell you, your generation are just a bunch of hanger-ons. Go to a bank. Try to get a real loan from them, see if they give it you with your record.”

“We can get you into a group session in Cambridge,” Betty interjected as she spooned more asparagus onto Franks plate.

“Can’t you see, I’m not on drugs.” Gray knew he’d lost it now. There was no way they were giving him any more money. But he had to make it clear.

“Doesn’t matter because I don’t believe you. I’m not helping you anymore. You’ll have to make a way for yourself.”

Gray didn’t want to fight anymore. At the very least he needed to retain his dignity.

Betty pushed from the table and took the plates from the men. At the kitchen door, she turned. “Who wants dessert?”

Another morning. Gray woke to a sun lit sky outside his window. The rain had let up a couple days before, leaving the sky clear except for two thin jet-stream clouds that stretched from one side of the window and disappeared behind the trees. The night before, after dinner he came home and finished the wallboard in the bedroom, fired by nervous energy. With that work done, the rest of the day was open. He walked from room to room deciding what to do with his time. The place was beginning to look clean and new, and somehow his steps echoed as if the cleanliness made it more hollow—stripped of its past. In the second bedroom door, he decided

that he may just leave the wallpaper. Refinish the floor and add some crown molding—something antique might be nice. The new owners—that pit in his stomach—could strip it if they wanted.

Outside, the grass was already warmed by the sun. *Fucking weather*, Gray thought. It'd snowed the first day he began working—a foot and a half. That day he pictured himself putting the finishing touches on a warm summer morning like this. Beyond the paper in the lawn, at the edge of the road sat a dusty pickup. A truck he didn't recognize. Then he saw movement under the trees, the stragglers. A large yellow dog burst through the yard, a streak. It disappeared in the neighbor's yard. But even when it was gone, Gray could still see something moving. Pike emerged from behind the trees with his back to Gray. *Was he feeling the wall?*

Gray called to Pike from across the lawn, "You're up early."

He turned, saw Gray, and nodded. "I've got things to do today," Pike replied turning to feel the wall again. Gray couldn't help but see the thick tattoos cascade up Pike's arm.

When Gray got closer, he studied the man for a second. He looked like any other laborer, stained Levi's, flannel shirt over a faded T-shirt. His hair was cut close and neat though, like he'd been in the military, or was a cop, tight on the sides with only a hint of hair on top. His complexion and features were undeniable. It was as if he were a combination of all ethnicity.

"Things have changed. I don't have the money to pay for this."

"I've never seen anything like this. It's a work of art."

"Thanks can't take credit for it though. People in town say it's been up as long as anyone can remember. About what I said. I can't pay."

Pike finished with the wall and turned to face Gray. He smiled, extended a hand, like they'd been old friends. With a toothy smile, he said, "I heard you the first time. That's fine. I can do you a favor. I can tell you need one. One question though."

"What are you talking about?"

"The question is, have you really been clean since the winter?"

"Who put you up to this? Tell Frank he can..."

"Settle down Too Tall, just answer the question."

"Yes. I haven't had a thing since the game. Clean as a fucking..."

"Good. I'll do you two favors. That job I told you about the other night, you take it and I'll get that little bastard Lefty over here and we'll take the trees down, the three of us. We'll chop 'em up and sell 'em as cordwood. We split the profits three ways."

"Three ways?"

"Well I can't not pay Lefty, and they're your trees. Your property."

"Fine. I just thought...About this other thing, I don't need anything illegal."

"Illegal? This shit is beyond legal. I know this guy who works in the army. They're looking for some local guys to drive some POW's around. It's not much work. Most will come in at the beginning, in the first couple weeks when you pick them up from the camps. You can get a few hours during the week because they'll come into town for work details. They're renting them out to the local businesses real cheap. Freddie down at the snow-mobile hut is going to us his to clean up the trails south of town. The paper company is laying some of us off because they can contract to the prisoners for next to nothing. They need some guys who know the roads to drive 'em around. The army supplies the trucks, you just drive 'em."

"What about my possession charge?"

“You’re not driving the goddamn school bus here. As long as you’re clean now, you’re fine. Anyway, these guys are a bunch of nothings. It’d probably be better off if you were drunk and crashed them all.”

“Why don’t you drive?”

“I’ve got vices.” Pike never raised his voice. “You just go down to the town hall today at noon and ask for Sergeant Toomey. Tell him I sent you. Lefty and I will come by soon for the trees.”

Later that morning Gray walked to the town hall to meet Toomey. A good day to walk, he enjoyed being in town, enjoyed being able to stop and talk with the locals. It was part of what he liked most about living in a small town, even one that thrives on strangers. As Gray got older, economics in the north country had changed. Trains didn’t need to stop in these towns—they ran from port to the city smoothly. The mills were more efficient and logging was not in demand. Companies could get cheaper stock from South America. The men in the 20th century who serviced trains and cut trees had sons and daughters who moved away and worked for the insurance companies and law firms in Boston or Concord or Portland. Or they started a store. There were doctors and bankers, store managers, and restaurant owners, but most others, who never left worked in the service industry, working on cars or manning registers. These people made ski-mobilers, leaf peepers, hikers, and summer residents comfortable. Up North, small towns didn’t have much else to keep most folks going except tourism—a winter without snow or a cold rainy summer could cripple them.

Gray spent enough time alone at work that he needed to see people during the day. He wanted to see familiar faces. There wasn’t a water cooler to stand around to talk about the game,

he didn't have gossip about the asshole VP with the mistress and coke habit, he couldn't flirt with the new young secretary or intern, he didn't have the comfort of seeing the same old people doing the same stupid shit. So the woods were no refuge to the silence of his day.

Gray didn't know many people though. As a kid he never was a local, a visitor, he'd come up for a few weeks now and then. He still felt from away, and the townspeople were used to strangers, treated them kindly but kept them at a distance. But the more Gray was in town since starting the house, the more the woman who worked the morning shift at the store recognized him and said hello. The more conversations he'd have with the old men sitting at the bench at the intersection downtown, the more they'd wave or even consider what he'd have to say.

Sometimes when he walked, he thought of the time he visited Manhattan. Frank got some deal from the drug company—a weekend in Manhattan—and he couldn't use it, so he offered the time to Gray. Just out of college and single, Gray wanted to take an adventure, so he went solo. He stayed in the Millennium on Times Square—a huge circus at the center of the western world. Staring at the signs and crowds were enough to make him sick. Not out of disgust though, sick because it was all so electric and ready with life—like he'd just gotten off the spinning circle at an amusement park. He hadn't stayed in the city long enough to get discouraged by all the things that slow you down in life and over time his memory let it grow and fester, making the New York beautiful better than any travel ad. Gray spent the days walking to every spot in town until the bottoms of his feet had become one big blister. All the people shamed and exhilarated him at the same time with their fine clothes and swaggers. At the time, it was too much to take. But now, he knew how to read strangers, he had a sense of how to only

give others what they needed. And on these walks through town, he would sometimes decide that when he sold the house, maybe he'd try Manhattan.

This morning, he wanted to walk because he knew the woman from the Legion had to be in town somewhere. On the way back from the town hall, he'd go by the hotel just in case she was still in town. Gray knew he wasn't a player, guys his size are novelties, but her own size evened the playing field, and he hadn't had this pull since he lost his drug jones. The need to immediately fill the void was too much for him to fight.

Main Street circled a cove, as Gray walked it, he heard someone call hey. And like his hopes had made her materialize, there she was standing on the dock to the Steamship Katahdin. During the summer months, the Steamship floats past the mountains once a day, twice on the weekends. And like it was a perverted dream, she was in a bathing suit, bikini top and jean shorts. The joy he felt seeing her in a bathing suit made him feel a bit like a stalker, but he could pass this off as coincidence.

As she jogged over to him, Gray had to force himself not to watch her breasts. He needed to be on best behavior. He looked past her, to the Steamship where a couple of Tall Persons pointed towards him.

"I wanted to thank you for your help the other night." She was confident, like she worked in some business where talking was necessity. Advertising? Law?

"Don't mention it. I'd do that for any tourist." *Find her eyes, keep yours up.*

"I'm Penny," she said raising her fore finger slightly to her hair. "Because of the hair. My parents weren't very creative."

"Gray. Nice to meet you."

"We're taking a cruise," she said and thrust a thumb towards the steamship behind her.

Gray followed it and watched the two Tall Persons swing around and laugh. Seeing them made it easier to look at her the way he was.

“Want to come along?”

“Love to, but I’ve got some business.”

“Business? Sounds fun. What do you do?”

“I break knee caps for the local bookie. I’m in my morning commute now.”

“You too?” she said and laughed. “But what do you really do?”

What he wanted to say was that he refinished houses. But could you say that when you hadn’t finished the house? Can you say that you’re a builder when you’ve never actually built a damn thing? Sure you’ve helped build a shed, or fixed things around the house, but unless you are employed or sold a house are you a builder? Gray hoped so, that’s what he was banking his future on, but trying to explain that to this woman was too difficult.

“I’m working on my house. Refinishing it.”

“You are? I’m considering working on my house in Boston. Could I come by and see what you’ve done?”

“I haven’t finished it, so I’m not sure it’s much to look at.”

“Help me out, I need an excuse to avoid the cruise.”

“I’m in that white house with green trim on the hill. I’ve got this thing to deal with now, but I’ll be there all afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

On the town hall steps, Edmund Voight stood atop a step-ladder with a white canvas banner draped over his head. It appeared to Gray that he was struggling with a hammer

underneath. The word welcome showed in large block letters, but the rest of the message was folded behind Voight's back.

Inside, Gray walked to the second floor, the only spot with empty offices for the military. There, he found a door with a frosted glass window with a hastily applied decal for the United States Army and Sgt. Toomey spelled out in stick-on letters. The door was shut, but Gray could hear a conversation taking place inside. Light glowed from the door's window and illuminated most of the hallway enough for Gray to find a thick wooden bench to sit on. He wanted all this to end quickly so he could make it back in time to meet Penny. She filled his mind. Not just her body now either, the way she talked to him made him feel confident, funny. Seconds or minutes could have passed when the door rattled open and a man Gray thought he recognized walked out. Both men nodded at each other and Gray stood and filled the doorway.

"Jesus son, you're a big one," Toomey said from his chair inside. He was sitting, behind a cluttered pile of papers. He had on a military uniform and looked to be in his mid-forties.

"Yes sir," Gray replied, not knowing his responsibility to the officer's title. "Pike sent me about the driving job you have."

Toomey sat up in his chair and looked at Gray. "Good. You're in the right spot. Fill these out." He handed Gray some employment papers. "Just the standard stuff. Tax papers, employment records, release forms, oaths of allegiance. The standard stuff. Hand over your license and social security card, so I can get a copy."

Taking the clipboard Toomey extended, Gray sat and began filling out the papers. The office was stuffy, no air-conditioning and bands of dust hung in the light from the window.

Toomey continued to talk as he made copies of Gray's identification.

“This is an easy job Gray. I run a tight ship, but goddamnit son, these boys ain’t running away. My CO, he’s real concerned with civil rights. You don’t kill any of them and we’ll all get our paychecks.” Toomey put the copies next to his mouth and spoke softly, “Between you and me, you flip a truck and take out 30 of them accidentally, that’s no big deal either.

“We’re getting 65 prisoners from Syria. They’ve been captured in a sweep from Turkey to Israel. It’s been all over the civilian news. You know of it?”

“I read about it in the local paper.”

“Don’t trust all that shit. They must get their news from the AP—liberal fucking newspapers. Bet they said these guys were Al Queda or Jihad or something,” Toomey said, pausing for Gray to either confirm or deny.

“I don’t recall—”

“Well they’re not. These are just the regular soldiers. They keep the real hard-liners in Cuba or in some of the nasty hot camps in the South. These guys are just following orders like the rest of us. Nationals. So we got rules to follow. Protocols.” He paused again. Gray wasn’t sure what to do. Then Toomey flipped through the application. “Looks good. Okay. This is what you have to do. Come down to the train yard when we contact you and drive ‘em all out there. Then we’ll set up a schedule with a few of you guys to drive work details. Local businesses put in requests to the military for the use of POW work crews. They get paid per the Geneva convention. You just drive the truck. I don’t foresee any problems. Any questions?”

“Nope,” Gray said handing the clipboard back.

“Good. Fill this and leave it with the nurse down the hall, I’ll get call you when we need you,” Toomey said and gave Gray a cup.

Voight was finishing his banner when Gray came outside. Above him hung the words Northville Welcomes You.

Gray was about to jog home so he wouldn't miss Penny when Voight said, "You gonna work for the military there?"

"Ayuh."

"Transporting those prisoners I suppose. A few other fellas have gone before you this morning. Good for the town is what I say. Give us a couple jobs."

"Can't hurt," Gray said trying to keep it short.

"This going to interfere with the house?"

"No. Everything is right on schedule. I just need a little extra cash."

"Glad to see you making an honest dollar. Looks like you're getting yourself on the right track."

Gray was about to tell him to fuck off, but Voight just kept right on talking. "Bet you didn't know this, but my family was directly related to the POW business back in World War II. I've hear this story a hundred times at family gatherings.

"My grandfather, on my mother's side was Horace Scheksneider. He owned an apple orchard during WWII across the down the road a spell on the flatlands on the other side of Squaw mountain. Right where Old Town Road used to cross the East Branch of the Piscataquis, it goes down on the west side and strikes right where his orchard was. Some frogs bought it—my grandfather died in the 50's and the frogs bought it, but it went under in the 70's and now the house is just falling over, the trees are practically barren.

“In WWII because the labor shortages were so strong and because it can take forever to pick those apples when you don’t have enough manpower, they used German POWs to get the apple harvest in.

“The German POWs, as the family story goes, were mostly men from the Afrika Korps who had been captured and sent over here. This was by the late war; I would suspect. And because my grandfather was a Scheksneider, an obvious German surname, the Afrika Korp guys always wanted to meet him and talk to him. He spoke no German, they spoke some fair English—it was just sort of a Germans’ German in the world. My mother, who was a young woman at the time, always said—and she opens in the family conversations—that these German were beautiful men. They were fit tan gorgeous men. She said, they were just as attractive as you could ever find.

"But the orchard a couple miles up from over from my grandfather’s, was owned by another old German family. I don’t think the Speigs—I can’t remember Mr. Speigs’s first name—I don’t think the Speigs had been in the country as long as the Scheksneider’s. They probably came over after the Civil War. Old man Speig was suspected of being a Kaiser sympathizer in WWI and was watched at that time. And so when it came to sharing out the German POWs to work, they wouldn’t give him any POWs, because they suspected his being disloyal. So he went broke, because he couldn’t get a labor force—so the family story goes. And my grandfather later bought all the Speig family furniture and everything. He bought a plantation desk from him and as the family story goes—I never saw the picture itself, but the story goes that my grandfather was cleaning Mr. Speig’s desk and found a secret drawer and he opened the secret drawer, and there was a picture of the Kaiser. So apparently Mr. Speig was a Kaiser sympathizer. Enough to keep a picture hidden from everyone else.”

“That’s a nice one. Good thing we don’t have any Muslims in town now,” Gray said walking down the steps

“Not for a couple days anyway. We’ll take all comers here.”

Penny was sitting on the stoop when Gray arrived. It made him happy to see her, and he couldn’t help but smile though he also felt both let down and relieved by the fact that she’d put on a shirt. When he saw her, he felt immediately nostalgic. If only he had a camera, because this was a moment he wanted to hold onto, and he knew it would slip from him, would seep into the recesses of his memory.

He waved and tried to walk comfortably, not too fast or un-cool.

“I decided to skip the cruise,” Penny stood and walked to him arms extended. She hugged him like they’d been friends for years. It felt odd to Gray, not just because he didn’t know her, but because he’d never hugged a woman without bending over. She pressed against him tightly.

He stared at her for a second thinking how ridiculous the situation was. *This doesn’t happen to people. It’s not real. But it happened. It was happening.*

“Thank you for looking at me like that.”

“Sorry,” Gray stammered. Caught, he pulled back and opened the door and the chemical air seeped from it. The house smelled like it was getting worked on. He turned his back to the open door, blocking it from her view. “You’re the first to see this, so be gentle.”

Penny squeezed by—Gray tried to move so as not to be too forward, but her breasts rubbed his chest. Inside, she gasped in that polite way that people do when they get a Christmas present. “This is great, ” She said as she walked ahead of Gray. “These floors are beautiful.”

“Really?” Gray said, trying as hard as possible to hold back a smile. His pride too strong curled the corner of his mouth. “Hemlock. The previous owners had this hideous carpet on it.”

“No, I mean it. You have some talent. It’s so perfect. You took your time”

They toured the house, Gray wishing that each moment would burn itself indelibly in his mind and keep him safe.

JOSEPH

Sunday, June 29

Sunday in the forest is just the same as any other day.

On the second Sunday of my experiment I did one thing I'd not done before—I marked the days I'd been out here on a long stick. This calendar stick was crude—just a branch of decent length from an oak—but in the short time I'd been away, the days had already begun to melt together, and I needed something to give me control over time. I etched a line for each day since the men dropped from the canoe. For this Sunday, instead of a simple mark, I made a large X—I hoped that this would protect me from forgetting a day or to if I kept track of the weeks—not that it would matter. I've never been one to go to church, not since I was a kid and my folks dragged me to modern post Vatican II brick and odd angled church. It wasn't just the shape, sort of like a ski lodge with pews, that made it hard to accept as a place of worship but the way everyone filed in, sat glazed eyed and then filed out. This wasn't church to me, it was a duty—a dull incense filled obligation. But the first time I went into the forest, I understood something about the faith the people so desperately wanted. There was this inner peace you get when you scale a mountain, or wake up next to a waterfall, or when you see a wild animal for the first time. On my way down to the spring, the thought came to me of how little churches would be needed if everyone knew and understood nature. Nature is, in truth, a religion of herself. It has its own rules, its own rituals.

At the spring I scooped a birch-bowl full of water, and as I knelt there drinking, I caught a sight of my image on the mirror-like surface. Wild looking, I saw a naked savage with disheveled hair and scraggly beard. When I first planned this expedition, I was only concerned with how I might survive physically. Would I find enough food? How could I withstand the

elements? How would my body hold up without the ease of modern life? In just a few short days, it was clear to me that the body is a resilient machine, and mine was creating its own armor. My skin was already beginning to bronze, my face was rough with whiskers, and thick calluses protected my feet from the sticks and rocks I crossed with each step.

Before I left, I couldn't imagine I'd have this type of confidence in my body, so I did what I could to prepare for the worst. I trained myself, ran daily, lifted weights, and ate as much as I could to build my store of fat. I even went to the doctor to be certain there wasn't something lurking inside me waiting to spring on me once I was beyond the reach of medical supervision. The man looked at me in that strange knowing way doctors do when I told him why I was there. But then, after checking that my insurance would cover it, he put me through the ringer and declared that there was nothing to keep me from going. He did warn that the wilderness might drain the body of nutrients and to be certain to eat enough. Hypothermia worried him much more than it did me. But I felt a chill run up my spine, almost a shock from the paper covered table when he cautioned me to be intensely careful not to suffer severe injury, and this caution played on me. In the first several days I was afraid to venture much further away than my immediate surroundings, I didn't explore much more than the shores of Lost Pond, and even then I saw each branch or rock as a hazard. It's not like I could walk to a clinic if I fell. And when I looked at all these obstacles, I imagined myself crumbling to the ground snapping a bone or a gashing a tear open in my skin. Any carelessness would mean the end of the experiment but it may mean the end of me too.

An injury I suffered early on hobbled me already. I stumbled on an exposed branch and cut the sole of my foot. For several hours, I imagined the infection that would undoubtedly fester through my leg and convinced myself that I should leave while I still had some semblance of my

health. But after my hysteria waned, it became clear to me that the cut was no more than a scratch. Using some heavy cedar bark, I wove a sort of foot covering fitting them perfectly to my feet. These shoes were awkward at first, but they offered me as much piece of mind as they did protection.

In those early days alone, I spent most of my time attempting to fulfill my needs in the familiar territory around my camp. With the rains gone, each moment brought new tasks to accomplish to make life in the woods possible. Each morning I walked from my shelter to the burnt lands to gather berries in two vessels fashioned from birch bark—peeled strips woven into simple bowls. After I ate as many berries as I could stomach, I'd fill the bowls and return to camp to dry the rest in the sun. Now, it was clear to me that if I had to, I could survive until winter on berries alone. But I didn't want to emerge from the wilderness all skin and bones, and the doctor's advice danced in my memory. Anyway, I wanted energy to be productive.

The deer from the first morning floated in and out of my mind. With each handful of purple berries, I imagined what a nice slab of flesh would taste like. I'd eat for weeks if I could get her. And the skin would keep me comfortable at night. This was one of the few aspects of living in the wilderness that I hadn't become accustomed to. Though the days were pleasant, at night, the woods of northern Maine are comfortably cool if you're wearing jeans and a tee shirt, but try covering your naked ass with leaves to stay warm—I could only keep my fire going for so long. I had been forced to move around and stock it with logs, but it occurred to me that I could rig a kind of skid leading to the fire, one which I could stack small logs in such a way they'd slowly roll into the fire when they had burned. To my delight it worked. But even with all this, I wasn't sleeping well.

This Sunday morning, I'd walked back to my lean-to and was patching some of the holes when, I heard rustling in the bushes beyond the burnt lands. I peered through the trees and saw the red deer stepping gingerly to the water to drink, I lifted my arm slightly, and immediately her head shot up. She had seen me.

Wanting to play it cool, I watched her for a moment, and then, as if not interested, I went on with my work. After a few moments I lifted my head and looked again toward the spring. She was in the same spot, gazing straight at me, standing transfixed. My mouth actually began to water, and it occurred to me that she could see it in my eyes or even smell how much I wanted to get her.

Then it all changed. Behind her, some distance in the open timber, stood a white fawn, as immovable as her mother. A little beauty. At first I couldn't be sure she was real because she was as still as a lawn ornament, like she was chiseled out of pure white marble.

I exhaled and was about to return to my shelter, when the red deer again stepped slowly to the spring. The little fawn, however, did not budge. As I looked again at the doe, she scarcely paid attention to me. She knew that I wasn't going to harm her. But the fawn wasn't so sure.

"How are you this morning old lady?" I shouted down to the mother. Her head shot up in a flash. The fawn wheeled about and bounded back a few paces. Then seeing I'd not pursued her, she turned again and became once more statuesque.

"You aren't scared of me, are you?" I called again. Then I turned away my head and made believe I was very busy. The animal began drinking. Then she leisurely joined the fawn and together they disappeared.

The next morning, at about the same time—I couldn't be certain—the pair came to the same spot again. As before, the deer watched me closely for a while with one ear forward and the other backward.

As the days went on, they came with marked regularity, and it got so I could walk about the camp and talk with them while they drank from the spring.

They were great company. I found that I needed to speak to them, to fill the long silences. I think language is something that is so hardwired into us that extracting it would be like living without our lungs or liver. Impossible. So, I found that I needed to speak and at times I took to thinking out loud. Strangely, the thoughts that I spoke were the most base. I swore when I dropped a log on my foot, yelled bitch when I thought of my ex-wife, and mumbled any number of curses whenever I recalled the game warden. All came out of me like sneezes. But when I considered theories or contemplated how I might better my situation in the woods, I felt self-conscious uttering the words. I knew that nobody would hear, but I only could put those thoughts in writing. But even so, I needed simple chatter. We all do. Granted, some people only live in a world where they tell the same banal stories in tedious detail about the minutia of their lives—the antics of their children, the idiocy of the coworkers, what they ate that day, or about the sale at the supermarket. But though I always prided myself in not boring others with this talk, I found that I missed it. The utterance of our simplest perceptions helps us deal with a grotesque and unpredictable world. These words are like my simple shelter; they shield us from the onslaught of reality.

Instead of a wife or cube-mate for my rambling, I used the creatures around me. A chipmunk, which lived in the tree behind my shelter, took to barking at me whenever I stood around camp. The only way I could keep the little bastard quiet was to bark back. It would send

him further up the tree and I'd have silence for a few moments. He drove me nuts until I used him as a sounding board. I spent a lot of time psychoanalyzing almost every aspect of my life with that chipmunk. Even in the woods I couldn't escape this modern fascination we have for explaining just about anything that comes at us. The Chipmunk heard mostly about my divorce. About how I'd come to decide that the real reason I wanted to be alone was because that bad bitch burned me so badly.

A raccoon that foraged at the edges of my camp at dusk heard about how much I missed fast food. Pizza mostly. He didn't seem to care too much. The raccoon was a bad listener.

The deer and fawn came to the water with incredible regularity, so I was able to gain some of their trust with my banter. I found many friends in the animals—I squeaked at foxes, chirped at partridges, chased off a rowdy squirrel for my chipmunk friend, and watched hundreds of other creatures. A pair of beavers set to working on a dam on a stream at the far end of the pond. They had selectively cut a number of young trees, and I spent much time studying their architecture. At night, I'd listen to the beavers fell saplings and drag them to the dam. Of them all, the deer captivated me the most.

I admired them greatly as I studied them more closely. The slope and bend of the mother's neck, her black opal eyes, the ears that dwarfed her head and were surely meant for another, larger beast. I also was fascinated at how stunning the white fawn was. Such animals are freaks of nature. Their conspicuous color is a mark for every other animal in the woods, as well as the hunter. And in watching them, I felt guilty whenever I considered sneaking up on them to rob them of their flesh. I suppose that in the long list of attributes that separate man from animals, one of the most valuable is the way we can cloak our intentions with ethics.

Since I couldn't bring myself to eat my new companions, I needed to uncover other sources of food. Most people don't know this, but it's relatively simple to catch more fish than you can eat by simply tricking them. From the burnt lands, I could see a stream slide off from the lake. I spent an afternoon digging a shallow ditch. Along the edges, I placed several tree branches for shade. When I finished, I made a thin channel and the ditch filled with water. The next day, I could see several trout darting back and forth in the ditch. I closed the canal with rocks and dirt, and then opened the far end to let the water drain out. The fish were trapped and I was able to grab them with my hands. I smoked buckets full of trout every couple days, and I built up quite a store.

I also fashioned a crude bow by burning and bending a thick branch in my fire. I used a vine from the trees around me and spent some time tracking wild fowl. My luck was poor though because the vine loosed after a few shots, and lacked the strength to propel an arrow more than just a few yards. I even tried to shoot the trout by tying an extra vine on the end of the arrow. I'd stand over the water, still like a bird of prey, and shoot down. I'd miss most of the time, but occasionally a red halo would float up from the arrow and I'd snare a fish. Certainly this wasn't as efficient as draining the ditch, but it was great fun and helped to pass the time. I also caught partridges with crude vine lassos and roasted them whole. The forest was a bounty of nourishment.

I spent most of my early days by the water. I did this not simply for the food, but for the comfort of light. The forest changed colors around the lake, especially during the early morning hours and when the sun fell. At those times, the high areas and spots away from water seemed as if they were washed with shadowy grays and browns. Darkness seemed to gather itself there,

biding its time to cover the rest of the forest. But at the water's edge, the colors were brightest. Buttery greens and yellows reflected from the pond to the leaves above me. I longed for the light the most in the afternoons because morning provided expectations. I knew I had to accomplish certain tasks, and since the whole experience was so new, I was preoccupied with the tasks of finding. But nights were too quiet for darkness.

The nights were uncomfortable. Not just physically as I've mentioned. What was more troubling was the freedom my brain had to tease me with thoughts. Once I'd assured myself that I could survive, my mind was free to create anything it wanted to. The nights were like being in a crowded bar and listening to all the conversations surround you. I was in a planetarium of my thoughts, able to experience snippets of life. It was frightening staying alone with the distorted images of my past. During the day, I found activities to preoccupy myself, I had schedules. These games I played with reality. These rules I made for myself. But when the sun set, the only way I found to quell the voices was to squeeze them on the page. This act of writing made them something different, a manageable creature with boundaries.

On one of the nights, I sat up and considered how some of you may be wondering by now how it is possible for me to correspond to you. I don't expect to edit these entries greatly when I leave the woods, because I have almost too much time to go over my manuscripts now. And that's what they are, just like anything I could accomplish in society. Very similar to the handwritten versions of Twain's novels you see in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On paper with a crude pencil.

Let me say right off that it is a task that anyone is capable of. I stumbled across the idea for this quite simply. When I was a child, my cousins Maureen, Jennifer, and I spent a lot of time together during the summer. We vacationed at my Uncle's cabin on Moosehead Lake—hence

my connection to the area. I was born into one of the last generations that didn't expect a television and computer at every house. Instead, we actually went outside to play.

Since you could only take so much swimming and board games, the three of us played in the woods. Huge spruce trees surrounded the cabin and provided us with our own personal emerald Sherwood Forest. We'd build castles out of dried orange pine straw and sticks. And the girls always insisted on being Queens, because at the time, all we knew was Elizabeth in England. I'd argue that only men were allowed to be President and since I was the only man, I should be in charge. History backed me up on this. Or at least the history that we knew at the time. In school all we heard about was George Washington, Abe Lincoln, Truman, JFK, and all the other men. Even on TV, Reagan was always in some icy country for a summit with any one of the Soviet leaders, who seemed to die every other year. But Maureen and Jennifer would be undaunted. They'd say that since Castles came from England—a fact I couldn't argue against because like the male presidents, it was what we knew from school—and that Elizabeth was Queen, that only a woman could be a monarch. So we spent afternoons building fortified structures with the remains of fallen trees. Sometimes the castles were small replicas and we'd have to imagine ourselves waltzing through the massive stone hallways. Other times, we toppled young trees and made green canopies that, though less intricate than the miniatures, actually dwarfed us. But no matter how we made our castles, I was always the courier. You see, Jennifer and Maureen had a healthy sibling rivalry and both were fascinated by international diplomacy, so I got to be the courier. I carried messages back and forth from kingdom to kingdom, messages that announced jousts, weddings, dragon sightings, and the like. Each time an event actually occurred, I then acted out each part before the royal court. At times, a servant waving palm fronds over the girls' heads, and then a guard at the door. The whole event just seemed one of the

many humiliations young men put themselves through to be around girls. I knew a kid who let his sisters dress him up like a girl and even put makeup on him. The pictures come out every Thanksgiving.

So this one particular summer, a bloody war erupted and there was much diplomatic wrangling to be done. It didn't have anything to do with any real war either. We were just babies during Vietnam, most people my age couldn't tell you where it was. We know more about the revolution in New England, guys I met in college from Louisiana or Georgia, they knew the Civil War. A few didn't seem aware that it was over either. All of what we actually knew came from cartoons, the horrifying clips of nuclear explosions on the news, or from the half-baked stuff they taught us in social studies.

In my role as courier, I'd taken paper from my uncle's typewriter—paper he used to print out letters to the office. One day, as I was tearing towards the kingdom in the woods with a ream under my arm, my uncle and father were out drinking beer. They stopped me and confiscated the paper, explaining that although paper did grow on trees, it was not in the least inexpensive. They laughed at this, pleased with their wit. At the time, I didn't realize how much they actually drank. And they were well into the afternoon then, hammered. They took the paper, told me to stop working for the girls, because there'd be plenty of time for that later in life, and sent me on my way.

Woefully, I trudged back to my Queens, afraid of the punishment they would dream up for me. So I sat in a birch grove between the Kingdoms and absently began to pull at the bark. Standing, I prepared to accept my punishment, when I dropped my royal pencil. To my surprise, it was lost in the pile of birch bark. Then it hit me. The bark. I could use it as paper and actually earn some points with the Queens. I did.

The girls loved it and promoted me to court scribe for the day. One of the first examples of my stupidity as an asset in my dealings with the fairer sex. Unfortunately, the trend didn't continue. What was worse was that by the end of the summer, I stripped the entire grove of its bark and it ended up dying by the next summer.

At present, my childhood experiences have come in handy. After constructing my shelter and securing food, I turned to the task of writing. I spent the better part of one morning scouting out the birch stands in the forest. And I stripped several trees of their bark, careful not to take too much. Instead of using the thin strips of bark as paper, with a sharp stone, I carved a small hollow out of one of the stumps I used for my shelter and proceeded to grind the bark into a light pulp. In the sun, the pulp dried quickly after I laid it out on the rocks around Unknown Pond. My pencil was crude. I simply charred the end of small sticks and used the soot. The resulting work was not the most durable writing ever, but it worked well enough for my needs.

Some people may say the life of the writer is a cowardly one. We spend our time on the sidelines. But I disagree. Words can create reality. We can transform the world into a palatable mass. Sure, so much is beyond us, but cowards we are not.

We stay at home and sit by ourselves in front of a desktop. The only other people who do that have subscriptions to porn sites, or are 15 and talk on the chat-sites, or are 35 and talk to 15 year olds on the chat-sites, or of course terrorists. But to me this is the time to write. These are eras where greatness lives. When the world changes on a single day. This is when man's nature emerges. People lose all the pretenses of peacetime—the guessing at what you believe. Human nature can't hide now. The last half-century was slow for literature because all we had was the vacuous wondering on morality or loneliness, a bunch of tired baby boomers reliving their middle class upbringing when they may or may not have been fucked by their priest which of

course led to their drinking problem, bad parenting, and/or divorce. But with all that's happened in the past few years, we have the world again, and we need writers to help uncover it.

I spend my nights out here writing trying to comfort myself and using written words to make sense of it all.

This is why I don't have a laptop and cell phone. Sure, they're easy to carry. They're efficient. I could email and see the world. But sometimes you need to get away from the noise, the commercials, the news, the data. But you also have to go further. You can't have that last chance. That fear of an end. So many people carried phones after the trade towers crumbled. There was a time when the tragic phone-call before you died was only for death row inmates. But now it could be for the woman at the grocery store, or for the father on the plane. That last chance to say goodbye to all that's good and hopeful to you. To give your own potential a final farewell. So we all carried the phones. We saw ourselves the heroes, alerting the authorities to that the plane was going down because of the evildoers on board. But immediacy is not always perfect, and as time passed, and the tragedies slowly faded, we were back to talking on the phone to fill the silences of the day until there were none left.

Possibly anything can be a religion. Possibly this technology can replace nature—plenty of folks are equally as alone at their terminals as I am here miles from any other man. I think about these things often out here, and the silences of night give me time to hate everything about the modern world. But the night also gives me time to hate the wilderness and to hate everything about myself. Each night I convince myself that I will leave.

Tomorrow I'll walk back to the spot the men dropped me, and leave a note telling them that I'm in fine shape—I'm convinced that I'm lying. It will be as close to leaving the woods as I've come yet, but I pray that something deep inside me will keep me strong.

Looking up into the flickering light of my fire, at the parallel lines of trees, the forest ebbs and flows. The trees find their own spots, their own worlds. Man does as well; I haven't found mine yet.

GRAY

Gray spent much of the next several days plastering the upstairs rooms. Just before sunset he'd finished the final coat on the stairwell. Quiet and meditative work, time slipped by as he scraped and smoothed each new layer. When he was done, he sat on the deck picking small pieces of plaster from his fingernails and the crevices in his knuckles. The plaster fell onto the piece of paper he was trying to write a letter to Penny on. The words just felt too clumsy, felt like he was a fool for even doing this again. With each sentence came a hundred other thoughts of how silly he was for pining over this woman he hardly knew. In the beginning, he tried to describe the mountains' reflections as they swayed on the lake below, the sun disappearing behind them before it set completely. Tried to write about the noises as they rose from the town—a child laughing, a logging truck shifting gears, somebody's mother hollering from the back door. But he just felt foolish. This would be the third letter he was sending her. She'd replied to one and left messages on the machine for the other.

Finally, he settled on writing about the house. About how this job took the last of the plaster. The blue-board was gone too, so this was about all the construction he could do for now. What was left in the bank would keep him fed and the utilities paid. What he wanted to describe was that how in the past couple days Gray felt a certain momentum to his work. That he felt useful, productive. But all he could get down were the banal details of the days he'd lived and that if he had a little more money the house would be done in weeks.

As he sat over the letter he convinced himself that patience was key now. Thoughts of what he may do next melted into one another. He could go to Frank, show that he was clean, ask for the money, but just thinking about it made his chest tighten.

After Penny got the second letter, she left a message on his machine and offered to pay him to refinish her brownstone in the Back Bay, even offered to give him a loan to finish this place off. He didn't accept—though he knew he should've. She had gone back to Boston with the rest of the Tall Persons. During the week the Tall Persons were in town, she'd come by every night. They slept together on the last one, and now he pictured her naked body as it was then—over him, under him, standing, laying down. Gray felt like a champ. He laughed at himself because he remembered how at first, he was nervous to be with a woman that big. But now, the fear that she could actually hold him down made the whole experience a bit more taboo. Another memory came at him—when she'd stay and lay in his arms, he felt he was where he needed to be.

He was thinking about holding her hips—when, from inside, he heard the answering machine click on. The voice wasn't recognizable—just a hollow murmur echoing from the empty house.

He eyed the trees and listened closely to the voice, hoping that it was Pike. If he could take down the trees and sell the wood, it'd give him just enough money to keep on until the first driving check came in. Gray hadn't been to the Legion since Penny left town, and neither Lefty nor Pike came by. Not seeing the two of them didn't bother him until the money and supplies ran out.

Gray stood and walked inside, ducking at all the appropriate spots—doorjambs, stairwells. The phone was still broken, and he'd left all the messages on the answering machine. It beeped when Gray pressed play. There was that early morning message from Betty. He hadn't seen them since eating dinner with them. Penny had called a few times; her voice was sweet on the phone. Toomey left a message telling Gray he got the job and to be at the train stop at

twenty-one-hundred hours tonight. The prisoners would arrive at nine and they needed to go over protocol with him and the other drivers. The new message was from Byron at the hospital.

“Gray this is Byron. I need to talk to you. Not now. Because you’re not there, but it’s important that I tell you something soon. Call me soon. My mother has the number.”

Gray imagined driving back to Betty’s to make the call. In a flash he’d constructed the argument. This time, he’d stand up for himself, refuse to be treated like a child, and wouldn’t feel the humiliation that came with most talks. With any luck she wouldn’t be there.

The trucks, twelve ten-wheelers with army-green canopies, came through town the previous afternoon. Each had a handful of soldiers in them. A military parade of sorts. Talk in the legion that night settled on safety for the people of Northville. Jacky contended that the soldiers didn’t look battle hardened. Most were middle-aged—men from anywhere USA, reservists who’d not been called up in the years since the conflict began. They had the glazed look of men who’d long since run out suitable conversation and just stared blankly at the townspeople as they passed along Main Street.

At the train stop, the trucks had to be backed in from the main road. All but two of the trucks parked in a line on the far side of the Hitching Post diner parking lot. The soldiers piled into the remaining vehicles and after a short cigarette break, set off to the camp off The Golden Road. Children in groups of two and three came by during the day and gawked. A few of the more adventurous ones even hopped in the trucks once the soldiers left. Edmund Voight was there too taking pictures of the trucks and reservists with his new digital camera. He told everyone that they’d be posted on the official Northville web-page that evening. Some of the

older locals drove up in their cars, stared for a few moments and left. There really wasn't much to see. No guns, no guard duty, just a handful of standard issue army transport vehicles.

The camp itself was far enough out of town that no one really paid much attention to it before the prisoners arrived. Its lore grew in large part because most of the men who'd been hired to build the barracks and other administrative houses weren't locals. Laborers with an outfit out of Bangor, they did however stay in town for the few days it took to build. One night at the legion, one of the laborers had some beers and told a few of the locals that it wasn't too special a setup either. Simple structures meant to keep the men out of the elements. The locals nodded, pleased that the prisoners would be treated just well enough but not so well that we Americans would look soft.

But the fact that the majority of the guards appeared to be slightly overweight and middle-aged reservists stirred doubts in the Legion the night the trucks arrived. In his first show of civic pride, Lefty tried to organize a posse of Legion regulars to re-scout the troops when the prisoners arrived that night. He offered to act as an official town rep at the transfer site, and said he would return to the Legion with an accurate accounting of the nights' events. Pike stayed behind, letting everyone know that his friend Sergeant Toomey would handle any problems with the utmost care. Several of the older guys, a few former soldiers themselves who had served since WWII, called Lefty a Pinko-asshole.

From his stool, Lefty sat straight. "Fellas, this is our duty. We are Americans—free citizens who must defend our right to free information. Who's with me?"

Not one person moved, so Lefty stood, grabbed his beer, and made for the door. When Jacky told him he couldn't leave with a full beer, Lefty placed it the floor.

Beer-less, Lefty walked to the gas station on Main Street and bought a six pack. Since this was a special occasion, he bought the glass bottles.

Outside, he ducked into the woods behind the station and downed one quickly. Then, thinking that he couldn't walk and drink at the same time, he had another. Then, since he felt a bit lightheaded, he took out the small baggy of coke he'd been saving. He took a bump. Feeling energized, he darted from the woods back to road, and not factoring in the curb, he tripped.

The bottles and baggy soared through the air as if in slow motion and almost seemed to stop in mid-air just before they shattered on the road. Speckles of gravel embedded in his cheek, Lefty watched as the beer seeped into the plastic turning the powder quickly into sudsy sludge. Overcome by the tragedy, he rolled over and curled into himself.

This is where Gray found him, on the side of the road weeping with his elbows on his knees and head in hands. On his way to the prisoner transfer, he noticed Lefty's something odd on the shoulder. Stopping, Gray rolled down the passenger side window and yelled, "Hey dipshit, need a ride?"

Lefty stood, wobbled, and got in the truck.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

Lefty then recounted events of the night in surprisingly detail.

Gray ogled him in disbelief, patted him on the shoulder when Lefty went silent, and then laughed until he couldn't breathe. At first Lefty's face went soft, then he too joined in and the two of them shook Gray's pickup with the force of their cries.

"You going to drive those prisoners?" Lefty asked.

"How did you know about that?"

"Pike talks."

“Really? Where’s he now?”

“Legion.”

“Where you going then?”

“Same place you are. I’m the official Legion rep. I’ve been elected to verify that—”

Gray turned the truck around.

“Wait a second. This is the wrong way.”

“I need this job, and I don’t need your drunk ass fucking it up for me.”

They drove in silence back to the Legion. When Lefty stepped from the truck Gray hollered, “You let your friend know that I want to get to work on those trees soon.”

Lefty lifted his arm in a sloppy wave. Gray watched as he opened the door, and heard the others howl in laughter as Lefty picked something from the floor.

At the train stop a pair of soldiers sat at a table. Behind them, a group of other men and soldiers milled about in front of the line of trucks. Gray gave his name, the soldiers gave him a number and told him wait for instructions. He recognized a couple of the other drivers and nodded to them. They nodded back, but nobody spoke.

Moments later, a jeep rolled next the men. Toomey hopped from it and walked to the men as if he were General Patton himself. “Train will be here in fifteen minutes. When we break here, you’ll get in the trucks and wait until they are loaded. A guard will ride in front with you and the two in the rear. You’ll have to back each truck in from the road to get the prisoners. Once you’ve got your load of POWs, line up on the far side of the lot. When we head to the camp, simply follow the truck in front of you. Any questions?”

In the truck, Gray heard the train approach, the brakes squealing as it stopped. In the rear view mirror he could see the prisoners march from the train towards the line of trucks. Single file, in red suits with POW in black block letters on their sleeves and chests, the men were undeniably Arab. Most wore beards and small turban like caps. None looked overly distressed, instead it appeared as if they were businessmen waiting for the next leg of their morning commute.

He jumped a bit when Toomey got in the passenger seat.

“Coates it’s nice to see you again. I’ll be riding with you,” Toomey said.

Gray’s truck was in the middle of the pack, and all he could do was watch the headlights invade the rear of the truck in front of him. The canvas covering the tailgate bounced with bumps, and he could see the shoulders and a gun of one of the reservists. Beyond the soldier were the barely lit outlines of the prisoners’ faces. Each man wore the same blank expression.

For the first several minutes he and Toomey rode without speaking. Gray broke the silence “So how do you know Pike?”

“We worked together a few years back.” Toomey said, rolling down the window and letting the cool night air fill the cab. The rumbling trucks couldn’t drown out the crickets. “When I heard my guard troop was being stationed up here, I gave him a call. I thought I could help him out. I don’t approve of some of the things he does. The drugs and all—but I know how hard it can be to do without.”

An uneasy silence followed.

“We get along well because we’ve both seen a enough of this country to have an opinion about it,” Toomey said.

“What parts you seen?”

“All of them. I was born out west, went to school up here in Massachusetts, worked down south. I been all over. Pike too, we seem to meet up in different spots.”

“Not me. I’m trying to get myself together to do see some new places.”

“What I’m saying is something completely different than what you’re hearing. You ever really *seen* other places?”

Gray felt uncomfortable at the intensity of Toomey’s question. It felt like he was a preacher asking about salvation.

“Let me tell you about this time I was down South. And when I say that, I don’t mean down south like Virginia. Or even Massachusetts like the rubes around here think. I mean The south. The place where Twain and Faulkner were from. I lived there for a few years, working on one of the rigs. I lived with my wife, in a part of town with other white folk. We didn’t have any of the kids then so naturally, I was a different man.

“But you see Gray, down where I was, there were a bunch of Blacks. African Americans if you like, but we’re not going to get hung up on words are we?” He eyed Gray, looking for a clue in his reaction.

“No, I’m not offended.”

“Good. So this one night, my wife and I wanted a quiet night at home. So I get into my car and drive to the store to get me some fish, some things for her, and a movie. At the drug store, I see this guy outside sitting on the ground. I didn’t think much of him. He’s homeless,” Toomey said, then turned with a jerk to face Gray. “You might not have seen much, but you know what I’m saying. When people are on the ground, you don’t look at them. You just keep walking. Keep going on about your business.

“Now all them southerners are saying that they’re not as racist as anyone else is. And they’re right. Same things happen up here, but a whole lot gets done because they think they’re not as racist as the Yankees. Same way Yankees think they’re not as racist as Southerners.”

“For some reason I’m thinking about this, and I stop to ask this guy what his story is. He tells me he just got out of jail. Just got freed. ‘13 years reduced from 26. My God saved me.’ Now I don’t believe in God more than anyone should, but this man had passion. He was the type of guy who meant something. He’d been locked up, his life with shit, but he tells me he came to God. Armed robbery is what he claimed got him in trouble, and he said he was a bad ass for the first few years. Then after he gets a few more years tacked on for getting caught up with drugs, he realizes things have got to change. So he pretty much memorizes the bible. He was spouting off passage after passage.”

“So when he gets out of prison—he said that was just a couple days earlier—he goes to the church to see about getting a place. He walks up to the preacher’s door and knocks. When the preacher comes out; he tells this guy to beat it. Then he says, ‘All you bums are ruining the neighborhood. All you bums are ruining the whole black community.’

“Can you believe that? A supposed man of God turning away the most needy. That’s the problem with this country, too many people saying they care about others when we all know that they’re out for themselves.

“By this time, the homeless guy was near crying. Then I can’t tell if he’s blubbering more than he’s rambling on about some psalm or scripture or whatever. So I ask what he needs. Of course he needs money, so I give him some change. But then I say, ‘I got some fish. You want that?’ He takes it, and I feel like I’ve made a difference.

“Listen, here’s the point. This man talked like he found peace. I don’t know, maybe he did. Here’s the thing Gray. I saw that same son-of-a-bitch every day at the same goddamned drug store. That’s not exactly what pisses me off about the situation tough. I saw that same shit every day down there. You see the same shit in Boston and New York too. What gets me is that we got all these people here who for whatever reason are just killing themselves. It’s rotting our heart away. And we got lots of rich folks, you know most of them aren’t black either, and they don’t care. It’s going to destroy us.”

“We got problems Gray. I can’t stand to see my country go down like this. There’s a time when people have got to stand up for what they believe. This thing with those Muslims is taking too goddamned long. Religion. It’s this religion that fucks it all up. The problem with all those true believers is that they’re going to kill the rest of before they kill each other. The anthrax, bombs, and all the rest are awful, don’t get me wrong, but we got problems here that are way deeper than a few Arabs getting mad at us. We need to do something terribly impressive and get rid of them. When I say that, I mean we need to do something so terrible that anyone cannot be impressed by it. That way we’ll be able to get back to the issues at hand.”

Gray could still feel Toomey’s gaze on him. There was something familiar about his rant, something Gray wanted nothing to do with.

“Sure Gray, every country has their problems, Everyone has a dark spot. It’s just that we got more than a lot of other people. See those trees out there, hasn’t rained in over a month. Won’t take much to turn the tinderbox into a forest fire. I should know, I’ve started fires before. Not big ones, just in my yard,” Toomey said. Then he paused and turned to look at Gray. “There’s not much difference between the wilderness and society. They both burn. I got fire Gray.”

They were on the Golden Road when Toomey went silent. Gray studied the sign as he passed it—crossed pistols emblazoned with Prisoner of War Branch Camp 10. Ahead, the convoy turned up the road towards the yellow glow of the camp. Once the truck stopped, Toomey hopped out the door without saying goodbye.

Gray waited still a bit stunned by Toomey's sermon. The sharp rattle of a rifle on his window startled him. Another reservist was beside outside. He rolled down the window. "Just follow the other trucks in. Stay in the truck until we get the prisoners in their barracks."

He pulled forward with the rest of the caravan past thick barbwire fencing and a gate manned by two reservists with sub machine guns. Inside he was waved to pull side by side with the truck in front of him. The truck rocked as the men piled out, and the sound of guards ordering the men poured in the cab. Gray looked over at the drivers on either side of him. Both sat transfixed ahead of themselves.

After several minutes another reservist rattled on the window. This time it didn't startle Gray, and he climbed from the truck.

"You smoke?" the guard asked holding out a pack.

Since he'd stopped drinking he'd not smoked either, but Gray took one anyway. The two slowly walked from the shadows between the truck and stood at the rear. The camp was smaller than Gray expected. Behind the trucks was a small parade ground, surrounded by wooden structures that looked like undersized barns. The ground was flat and all dirt—leveled by bulldozers—a sort of anti-oasis in the middle of all the vegetation of the forest. A larger structure sat at the far end, presumably the kitchen. A tall chain-link fence with razor-wire one top surrounded the entire camp, with watchtowers at the corners. Beyond the first fence were coils of more razor-wire and another fence.

“You ride in with Toomey?” the guard asked.

Gray nodded.

“Crazy fuck. He go on about the blacks and stuff?”

“Sure did.”

“That guy has been getting weirder and weirder.”

Just then, he fished the cigarette and the drivers gathered in a semi circle as Toomey emerged from one of the barracks. “Thank you for your work tonight gentlemen. We’ll contact you when your services are required again.” With that they filed into a truck and rode back to town.

The next afternoon, Gray’s stomach dropped when he saw Frank’s car in the driveway. At the door, Gray rang the bell and studied the lawn. Green and lush—the grass looked nothing like his lawn, which had all but dried out completely in the drought. Betty had an irrigation installed years earlier.

Frank answered the door.

“Byron called me. I thought I could use your phone.”

“What’s wrong with yours?”

“It’s broken. I can’t afford to fix it.”

“Okay. Come in,” Frank said stepping aside. “Do you know the number?”

“No.”

“I’ll get it from your Aunt.”

Gray stood in the middle of those photographs. The windows closed, dust hung in the beams of light from outside.

Hushed voices then the sound of footsteps came from across the house.

Betty arrived, “We didn’t expect to see you.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Neither did I.”

“Here’s the number. It’s a pay phone on the ward. You’ll need to ask for him.”

She stood in the doorway while Gray dialed.

A girl answered, “Who’s this?”

“Byron Roy please, this is his cousin Gray.”

The girl grunted and yelled for Byron without taking the phone from her mouth.

Seconds later Byron was on the phone. “They said you’d call yesterday.”

“How are you feeling?” Gray asked.

“I’ve just taken the first step on the path I’m travelling. When I’ve been here before, I just tell myself to slow down. But I’ve got to remember the ugliness. I’ve got to remember the times friends cut themselves. You remember my girlfriend. Jessie. The blood.”

Gray did remember. Byron met her in the hospital—she’d been a bleeder. She once told Gray that she would cut herself whenever her life got a bit too taxing. She didn’t explain exactly what that meant, but for some reason Byron focussed on her when he got manic.

Byron was exhaling heavily. Probably smoking. Between breaths he said, “Let me tell you something Gray. I’m never going to let them get to me. I’ll take these drugs, but at some point I’ll start thinking again. I’ll start figuring stuff out. You’ll see. You’ll understand what I’m talking about. Not like my father. He just doesn’t get it. You know that. He can live his hoity-toity-I-got-three-houses life, but not me. They’ve given up me. They just don’t care.”

“Byron. You’re getting a little wound up.”

“Maybe you’re right, but you know how it is. They go to work, spend all their days playing some game and then they come home and expect me to play too. Then when I don’t do exactly what they want, they pump me full of these drugs. And then I shake, I put on weight, I get sluggish. Then I’m crazy right? I’m the one who needs to be put away. Fucking ridiculous.”

“But you need to be there right?”

Byron paused. Gray heard a lighter flick, then a deep exhale. “That’s what I called about. I’m leaving. Can you pick me up? I know you probably don’t want to, because I know how you are trying to be a good boy now. I can respect that. I’m going drug-free too.”

“Byron, slow down. You can’t leave can you?”

“Sure I can. You know I was thinking that we need some family counseling. If we could all get together and talk out all our problems, things would be so much better. If my father could just admit he’s a cheater. He has before you know. And then maybe you could tell us how you feel about the family. Because you’ve had a tough time too.”

“Byron, *you* need to get yourself straight before we can do anything.”

Gray’s watched him smoke when he’s manic. Byron lets the ash hang in a long gray catacomb dangling at the end of the filter. Byron doesn’t notice it, as if he forgets that you must tap the cigarette. Gray would watch it, knowing that the ash would eventually fall, but he couldn’t do anything about it. He wants to grab the cigarette, de-ash it himself. Usually, the ash falls in a straight line down Byron’s chest. He’ll look at the trail of ash, brush it away, and then continue with whatever he was rambling about.

“They restrained me twice already. I didn’t even touch anybody. The rules around here are ridiculous. I’m not taking my Haldol until they change. Sort of like a drug fast. Do you still

do drugs? I could use some pot. Do you know that that football game wasn't your fault? He had you followed. My father did. He has us all followed."

"Byron. That was my fault. Frank had nothing to do with it."

"You think it was. But it wasn't. You just don't understand. He's got people in the government following you. They've got a military tribunal waiting for you now. I've been reading the paper. They won't let us use the internet on account of its addictive qualities. So I read about this guy up where you are. He's gone in the woods naked. He's the only holy man around. I'm going to find him. I'm going to follow him. He knows something. I know it. But my father won't let me. That man needs counseling."

"Byron. Stop. You're wrong. He's a good man. Just because he has money, doesn't make him bad. He works hard. You need to take your medication and stop making yourself worse than you already are."

"Well thanks for calling. I have a meeting with my psychiatrist soon then I have a group therapy session. You'd better go. I can feel myself getting tense. I'll see you later. I can't call you. Well, actually I can, but I only have one call. But you can call me. You can get the phone number off the payphone and call me on it. One of the girls hogs it. But I'll ask her to stay off if you'll just let me know when you'll call."

"I'll call Monday night. How's that?"

"That's good. Maybe you can pick me up then too. You better go now."

Gray hung up the phone. Betty was in the doorway.

"How is he?" Betty asked.

"He's stopped taking the Haldol."

Betty nodded her head and stared at the floor. “Your uncle wants to know if you need any help.”

“What do you mean.”

“He feels badly about what he said the last time we saw you.”

“Really? What changed his mind.”

“We saw Mr. Voight downtown when we got into town. He told us about your job.

You’re driving for the Army?”

“I need the money.”

“Are you sure it’s the best idea?”

“What do you mean?”

“With you’re problems and all. We’re worried about you. We have a proposition; we’re willing to pay for a realtor to sell your house as is. Surely somebody will be willing to buy it. You can pay us back with the profits.”

“What?”

“It’s time to let your family help you. We’re just worried. Your uncle and I think you should get a real job. Something you can build on.”

“You’re worried about me? That’s just fucking great. Betty, I appreciate your concern, but—” instead of finishing his thought, Gray turned to leave. Behind him, he heard Betty say, “We just want what’s best for you.” Gray was in his truck before she could say anything else.

On the way back, he had to resist driving too fast, had to resist the urge to drive off the road, or into a tree, or all the way to Boston—to Penny—to anyplace where he could escape even for a minute or two. The pickup came to a stop in his driveway. He sat in the seat and screamed until he started to cough.

JOSEPH

Sunday, July 27

How quickly it can all change. I had barely begun to venture from my shelter on Lost Pond when I found a new companion at the burnt lands.

Bored with my routine, I felt that there had to be more for me to experience in the wilderness—the cold nights and chorus of thoughts increasingly wore on me. I thought that maybe I could find a cave or a hollowed tree that would provide warmth at night, so I'd finally be able to shake all the thoughts. I began to take short walks into the woods. At first I'd just go for an hour or two, I was getting a good feel for several miles surrounding my camp. I knew where the game trails led, found stands of trees perfectly suited for their habitat, looked for new animals, and I busied myself during afternoons by marking blazes around my known domain to ensure that I could easily find my way should I get disorientated.

This one morning, I had been scouting a high ground spot. I'd been considering another camp, and miles from the Lost Pond camp, I found one in a grove of cedar trees on the upsweep of Bear Mountain. Drought had ensued since the beginning of my adventure, and the heat warmed ground that was soft with moss and decaying cedar branches. It was in stark contrast to the cool wet land near Lost Pond and the change was welcome. I spent the afternoon weaving a type of nap-sac from the bark of the trees, and the aroma from the stripped bark soothed me.

The next night, I had trouble sleeping and decided to venture to the Bear Mountain spot to work on a larger, sturdier shelter. I came back to find a large black bear clearing my berry patch of what seemed to be the last of its cache. Across the pond, I was safely out of his reach, and seeing me, the bear raised his head slightly, smelled the air and continued to gorge himself on my berries. Now, I'd been lucky to be free of such a nuisance during my stay. Bears are

master scavengers. They'll find burnt lands full of berries, like the one I'd stumbled across, and eat them clean during the summer months. When the air begins to turn cold, they'll fill themselves with nuts and acorns for the long winter hibernation. But they're not vegetarians—Bears will also eat any carrion they come across and are adept hunters and fishers. With this thought, I considered my trout pond. If this bear had found it, I'd just as soon pack and leave right then, because he'd soon just move into my shelter. So, I decided to spook that furry bastard like he'd never known. Grabbing two large fir branches, I started jumping and screaming. This got his attention, and as I charged the burnt lands, the coward took off into the brush.

As I'd expected, he'd cleaned out the berry patch, and sadly, there were several trout carcasses littered near my fishing grounds. The fat days apparently were coming to an end for me. That night, as a precaution, I stuffed my dried and smoked food into the new sac and hung it from a tree.

The next day, on my way back from the cedar camp, I was humming a song I couldn't quite place. I had been watching a hawk circle the pond from afar and for some reason was rapt by how pointed and threatening it was in the sky, floating on updrafts just waiting for that perfect moment to strike. So efficient in his design and movements, the bird of prey simply appeared menacing. Simply circling, waiting for chance to present opportunity. An easy unsuspecting meal.

When I neared Lost Pond, I heard an unearthly screaming. The noise alone made the hairs on my neck prick up, and my stomach dropped. It sounded like a child was being beaten feverishly with a switch, waves of terror filling the air.

As I ran in the direction of the sound, it came again, and this time to my right. I turned and went in that direction. After a time, I heard it once more, only louder and apparently on the

left. Filled by the noise, I was so panicked, feverish, that I nearly tripped over the mother deer in my path. Her neck gashed open and bleeding. She was on her side panting, struggling to breathe—her eyes bright with fear. Seeing me was of no comfort to her either. I was a violation to her world, a predator despite how I tried to comfort her with my voice, and it was all in those eyes—glassy orbs that conveyed so much. She rocked slightly but without effect when I bent.

I knelt by her, my eyes drawn to the bright blood pooling along her side. I stared confused until another scream came at me—this time from the shore. I don't remember how—time is meaningless in such memories—but suddenly I'd made it to the clearing by my shelter, I saw the fawn swimming the narrows for the opposite shore. Terrible crashing and snapping of branches echoed over the water, and just as the small deer emerged on the far side, the bear tore out of the trees and pounced on it. I couldn't help but yelp in anger. It caused the bear to drop the small creature, but only momentarily—allowing it to scramble forward. It then picked the poor thing up and carried it into the trees.

Stunned, I trotted light-headed back to the mother. By the time I returned, she had passed. The eyes were empty—had lost that gleam of a soul. I still don't understand why, but her death stung me. I wept. Everything was so pent up in me that I needed to let it out then. I have only cried a handful of times in my life, I seem to be doing more so now that I am older, and my tears embarrassed me. Redoubling my efforts to straighten up, I managed to choke them back momentarily, but the more I pressed myself to stop, the more pitifully I sobbed.

I didn't want to leave the body unattended, afraid the bear would eventually come back. If he didn't, a wild cat or the hawk would take advantage of her. I took hold of deer by the neck and head. At first my hands slipped as blood covered them, but when I repositioned my arms

under her legs, I was able to move her. A large animal, I was quite exhausted by the time I dragged her back to camp.

That night, I stared into the fire convinced that I'd leave the next morning. The bear was a danger, and without a gun I'd be hard pressed to defend myself against it. I'd been here long enough to prove to most anyone that this experiment could be accomplished. Nobody could doubt me. Still the sickness in my gut remained something more than the disgust of death—I felt impending regret. Watching the embers float and disappear into the air, I wondered how the world could change so quickly. Fickle and callous—just when you figure it out, or gain upper ground, all can turn with the slightest action. And with that thought came another. Why did I have to cause myself so much suffering? I should just leave at dawn. The men who dropped me would certainly not be able to make light of the months I'd been here. They'd surely pat me on the back and congratulate me on a successful journey. I'd proven my point. And if I stayed the whole time, what would that add? In time, nobody would remember how long I wanted to stay out here. I'd even done this time without breaking any of the game warden's laws and until this morning my circumstances were constantly improving, and yet though I had everything, my mind was starving. And now that the bear had come around, my prospects for easy food around Lost Pond were fading. I went as far to consider how long I'd have to walk towards Pittston Farm before I could hitch a ride—if anyone would stop.

I went blank for a moment and listened to wind and popping of the fire, heard the leaves rub one another in the canopy above.

In that moment of safe harbor, as has happened so many times in this adventure, the obvious washed over me. I had a perfectly good skin lying next to me. And the venison could feed me at least a couple weeks if I smoked it. And there are plenty of other berry patches and

other sources of food. Why would I let this get me now? What's more was that I've come to discover that the mind can be more torment than any other in the quiet times of our lives. I have lived enough to regret, and this experiment is a way for me to put all the regrets of failed jobs, marriages, and selves behind me. I wouldn't give either the game warden or his buddies the satisfaction of having anything to hold over my head. So I told myself, said it out loud, "Just one more day." And I repeated this over and over again until the words lost their edges and all blended together into a constant hum.

I slept soundly, worn out by my struggles earlier. In the morning, I set to skinning the deer. Finding tools was not difficult because if the woods of Maine have anything, it's an abundance of rocks. I searched for the sharpest edged stones from the surrounding ledge, tossing away those I had come across when I found better ones.

I could have waited a day or two to drain the deer and let all its fluids dry, but I was afraid that any delay in getting the skin would keep me from staying. What's more is that I couldn't stand to look at the deer any longer. She had become a friend, and I needed to do the dirty deed of butchering her before I created a voice for her in my imagination.

I tried to make the process as clinical as possible. I'd never skinned a deer in my life, only having seen companions do it, and until now, the prospect always excited me. But the blood lust was strong. I'd been eating so many berries and fish, that just the thought of a steak made me work faster.

I rolled her over on her back—oh what I would have given for a knife then—and began sawing back and forth on the inside of one of the hind legs. I'd never done myself, but had read about it, and watched a butcher slaughter a buck for a close friend. Imitating the act would not be difficult.

My shoulders quickly tired before the hair had even curled up under the rock, but as soon I broke the skin, it tore back smoothly. The blood hadn't fully coagulated and it covered my hands in a greasy paste.

I then proceeded to work down the legs, up the stomach, and then up and down the inside of the front legs. I would never pass for a surgeon—the cuts were crude and jagged, but I made nice progress. The skin came off with less effort than I imagined it might. Alternately working and resting for short periods, I took hold of the skin in one hand while I ripped it away from the flesh by scraping between the two with the sharpest stones I had. Of course, quantities of meat came off with the skin, but I could scrape that off later.

Not until late in the afternoon—judging by the sun—did I finally pull that skin entirely off. By that time, my hands were scraped and cramped into claws, every muscle in my back and shoulders ached, but I still felt the draw to complete the job at hand.

To prepare the hide, I laid it out on cedar logs and fleshed it clean by scraping it with the rocks and pulling it over the logs. Next, I took a sheet of birch bark and made a water tight dish. Filling this with water, I threw in some small pieces of rotten wood, and began to steep it over the fire. When it had cooked enough, I spread the deerskin and poured the liquid over the skin side. Repeating this process several times tanned the skin to a certain extent.

That night I butchered the animal. I cooked one steak on a spit and smoked the remainder of the meat. In the civilized world, I'd never been much of a meat-eater. I felt too removed from the process. Going to the local grocery store to pick up flesh rapped in plastic on a thin wafer of Styrofoam always seemed too artificial—too distant from the reality of the substance's origin. But this meal was as close to perfection as I could imagine. The flavor of this steak coated my

mouth and filled me so that I felt it for minutes after the meal. For the first time during this adventure, my stomach ached full of food.

Over the following days, I let the hide dry on the rocks by the pond, working it to make it pliable and soft. I also prepared the meat using branches I'd soaked in the pond; I smoked as much of the flesh as I could. The resulting meat wasn't much to look at, but it would keep.

And during these days, I began to think of the bear more and more. He'd come back when he was hungry. Bears have been known to travel hundreds of miles to known food sources. When they find trash or the like, bears will become a nuisance. Communities have tried moving them deep into the woods, only to have the beasts return within days. So my deer killer would be back. I decided to be ready for him. I made a crude but warm tunic out of my deer hide and the thought of a bear skin overcame me. As did revenge. It may sound strange, knowing that I'd been eating the deer, but I missed her company, and I wanted to exact some vengeance in her memory. I'd trap the bear.

For over an hour, I walked about searching for a suitable spot and finally found the right place. I'd seen a documentary on Native Americans out West hunting grizzlies. They'd constructed intricate deadfalls with logs and boulders to crush an unsuspecting bear. For me though a deadfall alone was impractical. I didn't have the expertise to make a good one, so my plan was to build a combination pit and deadfall. My hope was that I could at least injure the bear with the deadfall and keep it in the pit until I could finish him off.

Digging a pit meant a lot of work. I started in by loosening the ground with sharp pointed stones and hornbeam sticks. To say it was slow work would be an understatement, but I made steady progress. After much experimentation, pieces of flat shale turned out to be the best tool for scooping the small amounts of earth from the pit.

I worked for several hours that day, returning to my partially excavated hole the next day and again setting to work. In a strange way, it felt like a job. The tedium was reassuring because I knew the outcome was worth it. Even the walk from the camp at Lost Pond, which was as close to a commute I'd come, made me smile. I don't know how many hours I worked on that pit; it might have been ten or fifteen during the two or three days I kept at it. Time was quickly losing its grasp on me. I felt at times to be in a sort of meditation when I dug that hole. Maybe I was in a cocoon as well—lost inside myself.

The Maine wood's resources often turn to obstacles, and as I dug, I came across huge rocks, like they grew there. I cursed myself for even considering this project, but I was too far into it when my enthusiasm waned.

When the pit was large enough to hold a bear—about four feet deep—I bedded two logs on either side in the earth I had scooped from the hole.

I had an image of the deadfall the Indians used in my mind and the one I constructed was a crude replica—a crosshatch of sticks covered with some of the excavated rocks.

Then I tied a piece of stale deer meat over the trap, knowing that the smell of death would attract the bear. I put it high enough so that he'd have to stand on his hind legs in the weakest part of the deadfall. If all went to plan, the bear would fall in through the middle and be trapped by the weight of the rocks and logs on the pit ceiling. All I had to do after I captured the beast was to club him on the nose. Normally I'd find it impossible to do such harm to an animal, but this was different. First, man has needs. If I was to stay another month, I needed another skin and food. I also required a degree of safety—this bear was a threat to that safety. He was vicious and had shown a ferocious ability to kill. All nature is predicated on survival of the fittest. Certainly

modern man has bastardized this prospect, but since I didn't have a gun or knife, I felt that the playing field was somewhat leveled. At this point it was he or I.

The truth however was that I wanted to kill him most of all for the deer and fawn. The mornings by Lost Pond were not as enjoyable without my friends and their absence cast a pall over the entire area. I'd convinced myself that I could exorcise the bad spirits by avenging the death.

I returned to the pit daily, but it appeared undisturbed and no bear was in the trap. I began to doubt my invention until the third day when I saw that one of the mounds had fallen in on one side. I grabbed a thick branch and stripped it to a club, and approached the pit slowly. No sounds came from it, and I assumed that one of the logs had fallen on top of the bear and killed it. I crept slowly, afraid that the wounded bear would spring from the trap. I even lobbed a stone from several yards away to test the pit. The noise it made reported a problem. It was a clinking sound, like rock on rock—not the soft thud of rock on dead bear. With the sound, my caution disappeared.

The tracks in the dirt and claw marks in the log showed that the murderer had in fact fallen in, but my skill as a bear trapper was proven to be as phony as I feared.

Tracking a healthy bear would be foolish, because they are much faster, stronger, and more agile than I could ever hope to be. He could simply outrun me, and if he got tired, he could climb into a tree too tall for me to scale. But an injured bear was something else. I guessed that he had a broken leg, the track away made that obvious. He was cut too, judging by the blood near the pit. With any luck he'd be lying dead within a few hundred yards. If not, he'd only have a few hour head start, and I could make that time up. I might as well find him.

Maimed, the bear was clumsy. There were obvious signs of his passing, dried blood and broken branches along a game path I'd become familiar with. I'd expected to walk that day, so why not have a destination?

Early on that afternoon, I fully expected to find the bear around each corner, but as more and more time passed, it became clear that he wasn't as badly injured as I'd first anticipated. When I'd come to the end of my blazes, I stopped. Could it be that I was tracking another animal all together? Could the trail just be a figment of my imagination? Continuing much farther would force me to stay away from either of my camps. What did it matter though? I had eaten well that morning, the deer skin would keep me warm, and I didn't have any plans. No one would miss me. I knew too that the even injured the bear was still clever. I'm certain that he knew I'd been following him, and if I truly wanted to catch him, I'd only have to be persistent. I wasn't familiar with these particular woods, but I had all the time I might need.

The decision was made for me when a pair of jays began to screech loudly. Piercing alarm calls. Suddenly a black blur fell from a tree only paces from me. The bear was off. Without forethought, reflexively, I gave chase. For a gimp, the bear was still fast, and given his condition, I was lucky he didn't simply turn and come at me. But in a short time, he was gaining ground on me. The deerskin kept me from lengthening my strides completely so I stripped off the tunic to give me more movement. I dropped it on the ground knowing I'd find it later.

We charged together into wilderness. Oh what a chorus we must had been. My focus was too great to take it all in then, but our audience of wildlife was treated to as crazed an assembly of sound as you might hear in the wilderness. Snapped branches, screaming, panting. Beauty in its ugliest purity.

Bliss. I was as alive as I'd ever been, but I'd lost almost all sensation. A reactionary beast—I kept my eyes trained on the bear and cleared woods instinctively. Loosing track of my surroundings, I must have crossed miles—up hills, over ledge, under great fallen trees, through stands of reeds that whipped my face and hid him, and when I felt the grass tufts of a swamp I had him, I knew it.

But then I fell.

Hard—so much so that I lost my breath. The bear must have felt the same way when he tumbled into my trap. Feet suddenly useless as the earth pulled me towards it. Stomach down. At that moment the exhaustion I'd kept one step ahead of in the chase leapt on my back—it forced me motionless.

In those seconds I waited for the uneasy slow throb of pain to come. My ribs were vulnerable. And with the uneven ground they'd crack easily with a spill like this one.

I lay face down listening to the wisps of the bear crashing ahead of me slowly fading into the wind. He was gone.

Once the initial fright of injury left me, I was a jumble of sensation. Anger is as close as I could say. But joyful at the exertion. But what I didn't know then was what lay in wait for me.

Standing, I realized how screwed I was. The reeds around me hid the edges of the bog from my immediate view, and my wager with the sunlight hadn't paid off—the sun had already faded behind the horizon. All I could see were faint outlines of the sparse thin trees in the bog. This place must've been in a valley because mosquitoes filled the air, slowly at first, a few on my arms. But then a cloud was on me so thick that I could hardly inhale without breathing in a mouthful. The direction I headed at this point mattered less than that I moved at all. I trudged on as straight as possible with the cloud of parasites trailing close by. I'd have stopped and made a

fire if I thought I could stand the swarm, but soggy ground would require a great deal of effort to even find dry wood. So I moved on over fallen timber so slippery I crawled under it for fear of falling, through knee deep sludge, and on top of tufts of grassy earth surrounded by mud.

While I had been slogging into the marsh, my thoughts turned to how absurd my existence had been. It occurred to me that the differences between my waking life and the cold dreams around me were slim. Back in the city, the distractions of other people, of the overflow of media, and of a career made these worlds quite distinct. Everything around us in the civilized world confirms order; even absurd horrors fit a waking mold. A murdered child or poverty or illness all have boundaries in ways dreams do not. The horrors end. They always do. But dreams have an unconditional expansiveness. Our minds are free to create and bend all realities. I'd been losing this. I didn't have the boundaries and order of society. And over the past weeks, my unconscious had time to create its own world in the daylight, without restraint. I'd been able to hide in memories of the past. But as I became more and more fatigued in the swamp, I felt my grip loosening.

Once the moon rose, I saw some kind of clearing in front of me—higher ground against the black sky. It was a stand of old cedars, some fallen and rotting. A mud-sogged streambed cut through the middle and led me towards ever-drying land. All I needed was a tree to cross, and after another eternity, I found it.

When I fell for the second time, I was beyond anger. A spent beast, I'd gotten careless crossing the fallen log. Clouds filled the sky, and inky blackness again consumed me. I tried to stand as still as possible, but the rotting bark under my feet sloughed away. My foot slipped and I went shoulder first into a pond of muck. If it suited me, I could have stayed there and let death take me. Just like an old infirm man, I could fight, or just relax and let my fate take me. But

thankfully, I still panicked at the thought of death and struggled. Shifting sideways, I pulled each limb free and crawled until I found solid ground. I slept then.

Upon waking, I found myself on the edge of the cedar grove. If there had been Spanish moss, it would've looked like the bayou. Prehistoric, fog hung in the rising sun, and the mist acted like tobacco filter. I actually felt the heat surrounding me too. I was burning up from the inside. Fever. The edges of my vision went black when I stood—I nearly fell a third time, but slowly the vision returned. A spooked blue heron sprung from a small pond in my path, and I felt the wind from his great wings on my face. That cool air was the only refreshment I'd have for the next day.

It took most of the morning to retrace my steps back to deerskin. And by the time I found it, my legs had gone soft, and I was chilled. I laid down and slept again only to waken to the same fever. I threw the skin off and tried to take in my surroundings, but the colors around me were slowly washing out. At that moment, even the pride that kept me from leaving early on, begged me to escape the wilderness. I couldn't make it to Pittson Farm for a few days, but I had a fleeting memory of the logging operation Toomey showed me. If I could make it there, I'd have a chance. "It's off now," I said out loud just to confirm that I was actually still there.

Now I can't be certain that any of this really happened. Like I said, things had gotten turned around in my head since even before I chased the bear into the swamp. I can't even be certain I made it to the logging operation either.

When I stood, my head was splitting and fierce fever and chills alternatively overcame me. The forest seemed a dangerous odd place to me that day. All the trees were like jagged prisms stacked side by side on the horizon. Even a hawk, maybe the same one I'd seen earlier,

flashed in and out of my view. A line of black, followed him, as if he were dipped in oil and painted the sky like a canvas.

I would walk a little distance, and then, feeling too badly to go on, would sit down with my back against a tree to rest. Standing after these respites required all I had in me, and I'd gasp for wind after only a few steps.

At some point, I even thought that it was September, and I was marching triumphantly back to New York City itself. I imagined parades, book deals, meetings with the mayor. I was going to have it all. I think I even cried hot tears of joy at the thought of bagels. But then the dream turned evil, and the parades turned into horrible crowds.

An audience of people from my past appeared in the trees above. From her perch in a sugar maple, my ex-wife chided me for not taking better care of myself. My mother and father looked disapprovingly at me from perches, clicking their teeth. The entire editorial staff from the Times roared with laughter at me. This continued for hours, the hallucinations ran with me like a bad acid trip.

The sun had gone down again when I found an open field, I collapsed and watched as the stars swirled around me, as if my eyes were an open camera lens. Lines circling over more lines. Dizzy and nauseous from anything that my eyes fell upon, I closed my eyes and slept.

The sound of men yelling woke me. But I was so weakened, I couldn't even gather the strength to raise my hand. Even the slightest motion caused waves of nausea that so debilitated me, that I even exorcised all thoughts of movement.

Of all my senses, my hearing was best, and a rustling came upon me. I opened my eyes to a wet snout and an excited dog.

This dog sniffed my face and laid down next to me. At first I welcomed the warmth and he couldn't get too close. I must've fallen asleep because the next thing I remember is waking to the dog over me licking my forehead. And when I first awoke to the licking, each lick sent waves of nausea through me. The closest feeling that compares to the sensation is food poisoning. The near death exhaustion/nausea comes at you strong and leaves. A tide of sickness. Just when the dog's tongue became soothing and the saliva began to cool my head, the pleasure slowly turned, and before long I again felt as though each lick would sap me of any small amount of comfort I may have had.

He was big and yellow with lithe muscled shoulders a sort cross between a labrador, rotweiller, and greyhound. He had this long yellow snout and expressive eyes. I was positioned underneath just his front shoulders and when he opened his mouth to yawn, it seemed as though his teeth could shred me on their own.

The sight frightened and sickened me again, so I closed my eyes. That's when I heard the voice. "Time to get up old boy."

Believe this, the dog spoke to me. While I've been in the woods I've come to see that many animals have communicated with me. Birds constantly chided me for invading their territory. The chipmunk barked at me for a week. The deer stared at me from across the lake. Even the bear grunted at me a few times. But this dog spoke English—words. His lips moved.

The voices in the distance crescendoed into riotous screeching. Guttural bellows followed. Then the report of a pistol caused the dog to stir. He looked over his shoulder and stepped away. At that moment, I felt as if my wits had returned. For the first time in many hours, I could put a thought together, but all the colors around me had gone wrong again. The dark greens and blues that should have taken over the night were wrapped a sea other worldly colors.

Twisted swirls of reds and oranges invaded the deeper night colors. But I could think, I could. And then the dog, it stood and walked next to me, licked my face, and stared me in the eye so deep I swear he could see my soul. Then his mouth moved. “Joseph it’s time you discovered what type of man you really are. You’ve seen something here tonight that you had no role in. But now you are everything to the dead men over there. You are their savior.”

Then there was another pop of the gun. A third and fourth pop. Then a litany of gunshots, like someone was typing. The noise didn’t stop until a voice hollered several feet from me. Someone was calling for the dog.

“Time to go Joe,” the dog said and licked my face again. “Get yourself together and do the right thing.” The dog trotted away. Moments later, an engine started and then faded into the distance.

Despite all that was wrong, I ran from the scene. Or at least moved as quickly as I could manage. I traveled for at least a half-hour—ran until my I stumbled to the ground. Sleep once again overtook me.

When I woke the next morning, the fever had broken. I recognized the forest and slowly made way back to the Lost Pond camp. Once there, I had built a fire, had a meal of smoked deer meat and slept. The next day, I repeated this and felt even stronger.

Writing this now, days after my illness, I can’t be certain I’ve done justice to the events here. Just like all the writing I’ve done in the woods, putting these words to paper seems to have changed them, like reciting a dream can never live up to its actuality. And like a dream, I can’t be certain if I created a new tale just by telling it. I find that the more I remember, the more I create anew. I can only imagine how my subconscious came to this story. But my wits have

returned now, and once again all I can think of is that bear. I'll stay until he returns, and this time, I'll not be so foolish to let him get away.

GRAY

The Millinocket newspaper reported the first attempted escape a week after it actually occurred. Front page, above the fold. A photo dominated the page—of one of the canvas covered trucks used to transfer prisoners pulling past the sign on Golden Road. Over it, the headline read, “Prisoner Escape Thwarted.”

The attempt took place during the second week of internment. A feel good piece, the paper reported the facts: date, time, number of prisoners involved, that the escapee was now in solitary confinement. The spin was that despite their best efforts, these Arabs were staying put—the North Country was secure.

Gray read the article while on the front lawn. At only nine in the morning, he was sweating just standing still—the moisture from his fingers leaving wet spots on the paper. It hadn’t rained in months, and the ground was parched. The grass under his feet, shriveled and brown, wasn’t going to help him sell the house, but a town-wide water ban left the rest of the neighborhood brown too. Behind him in the distance, in the spaces between the trees, you could see that the shore of the lake had receded leaving gray boulders usually several feet underwater drying in the sun. The steamship Katahdin was anchored several hundred feet from the dock—a crewmember was rowing the morning cruise passengers out from the dock.

He knew that the paper didn’t exactly get the story right. When he went to the town hall to pick up his first paycheck, some of the other drivers who had spoken to the guards told him the real story. A prisoner had stolen a pair of pliers and a heavy-duty trashcan from one of the work details. At nightfall, several of the prisoners boosted him—inside the barrel—over the fence. He rolled his way towards freedom. None of the guards noticed the barrel slowly churning through the razor wire until he reached the second fence. When a spotlight highlighted him, a

guard yelled at him to halt three times. Instead of stopping, the prisoner began clipping the second fence. He dropped the clippers by his feet and froze once the first warning shot was fired. It took another hour for him to slowly make his way through no man's land to the waiting guards.

Due to the near escape, all work details were halted, and Gray was jobless for the next week. He'd only got to drive the truck one other time since the prisoners arrived. He'd been assigned to the snow mobile clearing detail—they needed a local to maneuver the roads that far back in the forest, an old logging road that pushed. Reservists from the camp tried to navigate the washed out roads but had nearly tipped the truck twice. Easy pay and not much of a commitment, Gray arrived at the camp at nine, was done by three, and spent most of the day smoking cigarettes with the guards.

The week off had been productive. The kitchen cabinets were delivered and Gray used the money from the paycheck to rent the floor sander from the hardware store. He installed the cabinets in a day and stripped the floor upstairs the next. As he'd done on the first floor, he spent the next several days staining and sealing the wood. On his hands and knees, trying to perfect the corners, sand the bumps, enhance the shine, Gray felt time disappear. On a few of the days, he hardly noticed when the sun set and never looked at the clock.

In those days, in the silence of work, Gray imagined the house was unfolding like a book, as if with each day, he were reading a new page, discovering the rest of his story in front of him. It was as if only a simple glance to the right could show the future, but he couldn't bring himself to read the end—to flip to the back of the book and see how it all turned out.

Messages came on the machine. From automated telemarketers, from Penny, from Toomey updating him on the driving details. He'd even gotten a call late the night before from Lefty—drunk. Gray slept through the message and listened to it before getting the paper.

“Gray. Pick Up...Asshole. Fuck. I'm on somebody else's cell phone. You're wasting their minutes. We're coming over for the trees. Pike found a buyer. We're coming over tomorrow. Get your fucking trees ready...How do I turn this damn thing off?” Lefty didn't turn it off though and the noises from the bar—laughter, murmurs— filled the last two minutes of the message.

Outside, Gray heard the truck pull up, but didn't take his eyes from the paper. He studied the picture, trying to see if it was his truck, or if he knew any of the faces driving, or if the sign was any different in his memory. The engine cut, and one, then two doors slammed. Only then did he lower the paper. Pike raised his arm in a wave and Lefty leaned against the side of the truck as if it were the only thing keeping him up. A large yellow dog, next to him bounced on its hind legs in excitement. The dog's breed was undistinguishable—a mutt that looked like a mix between a rotweiler and a greyhound.

Lefty hobbled across the lawn, his face so pale, it almost reflected the sun—the dog bouncing next to him all the way. The dog looked familiar, but Gray couldn't place it. The animal was on him, sniffing and jumping all around before he noticed Lefty had stumbled next to him.

“Whose dog?” Gray asked leaning over to pet the dog, which had now taken to sniffing his leg and wagging its entire hindquarters.

“Pike's. Didn't want to leave him locked up inside on a day like this.”

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks. You got coffee?”

“Yeah. Wait up,” Gray said heading for the truck.

Pike was unloading chainsaws and rope onto the ground.

“You sure it’s a good idea to do this with him in that condition? With the heat and all?”

“You want this done don’t you?” Pike asked.

Gray looked back to Lefty—one hand on the house and slouched over as he dry-heaved on the side of the porch, the dog licking his hand. *What a site, the kid’s a mess. His choice.*

“He’ll be okay. He needs the money just as badly as you and I do.” Pike said and closed the tailgate. “Get him some coffee, and I’ll set up.”

Inside, Lefty sat on the floor in a shaded corner with his head between his knees. Stuffy with thick warm air, the house didn’t have air-conditioning. When the heat started, it felt nice, the sweat was invigorating, loosened you. After a couple days, the heat began to lean on you, to impress itself into everything you did.

Lefty slowly raised his head and Gray noticed some deepness in his face. More than the hangover, it looked as if something had begun to suck life from him—his eyes receding into his face, the fat on his cheeks diminished. He had that glossy look you get when your mind is somewhere else.

“You sure you can do this?” Gray asked walking past him to the kitchen. No response. He poured the coffee in a plastic mug, snapped a cover on, making sure not to burn himself, then handed it to Lefty.

Lefty groaned—took a sip. Gray didn’t have to ask what had happened. He knew how some nights might exact revenge, knew that Lefty put up with the hangovers as a matter of fact.

He'd been there before. And despite Lefty's pitiful state, a small part of Gray envied him. He wanted that ability to forgo any sense and just live.

"You can sleep it off upstairs if you want."

"Give me a minute. The day I let a hangover stop me is the day I stop drinking."

"Don't be a hero."

"Ass," Lefty said like a hurt animal—quick, forceful. "Fuck no. Don't tell me—no.

We're here. Pike and I have this thing going down soon, we need the cash. Let me sit here for a while and I'll be ready," Lefty said. He nearly spat the rest of the words. Gray tried to ignore it and got a cup of coffee. There was absolutely nothing to fear from Lefty.

In the silence that followed, Lefty looked around. His eyed the floor, the molding and the smooth walls. "Jesus Gray. This place used to be a dump. Now I feel like I should take off my shoes when I go in." His tone relaxed, as if he'd remembered their friendship.

"I've been working hard." He didn't want to talk about himself. "What about you? What's going on?"

"Work's been a little slow for me. Those prisoners are picking up some of our jobs. So Pike and I have been spending time at the Legion. We drive too. Just drive around and smoke. Little road trips like you and I used to do."

Gray felt the contempt in Lefty's words, but knew it was out self-pity and wasn't worth combating. "Well, I'm glad you're here today."

"Thank Pike. I didn't want to come," Lefty said standing.

The dog bounded in the yard, looking more like a beast from the African plains. It ran in circles, chasing nothing, but picking up speed. It stopped suddenly when a small animal rustled

on the opposite side of the wall. Sniffing the air, it trotted nonchalantly past the three men who stood together, looking at equipment on the ground. Pike had the ropes coiled at the base of the trees and a pair of climbing spikes rested next to the wall. Two chainsaws lay facing the trees. The signs of use were on both—the hard plastic was scratched and dull, but not so bad that you'd think the owner was careless—just worn.

Suddenly, Pike looked at Lefty. “Show-time son. Get your ass up that tree.”

In moments, Lefty had donned the spikes and was climbing the tree. Pulling a strap around the base, digging his feet in, and tugging himself towards the branches. Inching up the tree, it was as if the work itself exorcised his hangover. Once he was high enough, he tossed a rope over a strong upper branch and let it fall to the ground below.

Gray and Pike watched in silence until the rope fell to them. They tied on the smaller of the chainsaws and raised it to Lefty. Removing it, he looped the rope over a thick branch. His movements casual almost distracted, it was clear he'd done this many times before.

The chainsaw buzzed to life, and Lefty tore through the first branch, pieces of sawdust highlighted in the sun as it fell on the men at the bottom of the tree. Once freed from the tree, Pike and Gray led the branch softly to the ground. This process continued until the tree was stripped. Bare of branches, Lefty slowly dismantled the trunk from the top. Gray buzzed through the logs, stacking them in the back of Pike's truck which he'd backed in from the road. The heat soaked him—his shirt and even his jeans caked in sweat and sawdust. The work wore him well. It felt honest—purposeful. The men were transformed—his partners not the ragged pair of drunks they were, but blue-collar hard working men. *This is good, right*, Gray thought to himself when the first tree was gone.

The men didn't speak until Lefty asked Gray about the driving. He sat on the stump, looking flushed and more alive than Gray would've thought possible earlier.

"It's hard to say. I've only done it a couple times," Gray said, a few feet from him.

"That's bullshit. What's it like?"

"It's nothing really. They call me the day before they need me. I head in with a couple other drivers, and then I go. Maybe I'll haul a load of trees or something away, then I bring them back to camp. I'm back in town by dinnertime. It's the easiest job ever."

"How's the pay?"

"Not great, but I don't do anything for it."

"At least they're paying a few of you local guys."

"You know what I think? I think we should just kill them all now," Pike said. "Why keep them alive? We're giving them jobs? What the fuck do we need to give them jobs for?"

"Don't we have to?" Gray asked. It seemed to him the correct thing to do with the prisoners.

Lefty answered for Pike. "Christ no. Just torture them, get the info, and shoot the motherfuckers. They're only going to blow us all up anyway."

"If you ask me, those boys in Washington don't have a clue. Why not just let them stay over there? Why the fuck do we bother bringing them here? Just gonna make their job easier when they decide to blow something up," Lefty said.

"We need to do something terribly impressive. Show them who's boss," Pike said.

Gray felt defensive though the attack wasn't specifically aimed at him. He stayed silent, not wanting to give any more fuel to this talk. But angry too. The two of them wouldn't be difficult to take out. Fascists. The lull in the conversation that followed hung for seconds.

Lefty looked up from the stump. “Did I ever tell you my POW joke?”

“No, and rather you didn’t.”

Lefty, undaunted continued. “Back in WWII, they had them Germans in camps like this one then. So, this woman lives way in the backwoods. She’s a good American, mother of two GIs. One day, these three Germans wander away from camp and come upon her farm. It’s a hot day like today and they decide that it would be okay to take a drink from her well. All of sudden this woman is running at ‘em shotgun in hand. By the time they realize what the hell is going on, one of the POWs is lying on the ground with his head blown off. She shot him dead.

“When the MP’s get to her house and ask why she shot the Krauts. She says ‘Germans? Oh no! I thought they was Yankees.’”

“Come on, it’s funny.”

Silence. Gray simply looked at Pike, then turned to Lefty. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he said and looked at Pike.

Lefty was ready for the attack, without wasting a beat, he replied, “That’s because you’re soft.” To Gray, it was pitiful and almost didn’t make sense, but Lefty laughed at his own comeback, then Pike joined. He laughed not with Lefty, but at Gray. Laughed at him in malicious friendship.

The second tree came down more slowly than the first. Gray felt the heat working on his back. The breeze was even hot. The work was no longer noble. Sap covered his arm, the sawdust caked into his soaking shirt. Misery. But he’d look up every now and then and with each branch, he saw the post-card forming. The view was transforming the house into what Gray had seen in

it. The paint was less chipped, the yard less scorched. It was as if it was his own mildly ugly child who, by the grace of fate, exited puberty and was actually attractive.

The logs came down slightly more violently on this one. With no branches remaining, Lefty let each section fall. Each log struck the ground, and a cloud of dust billowed. Pike cut the logs. Then split them. Gray stacked the wood into the truck. He felt lightheaded by the end.

The heat drove them to the shade of the truck. They leaned on the hot doors. Lefty sat in the middle and held cigarettes in each hand for the others. It was so hot, the cigarettes cooled Gray.

“Let’s celebrate,” Lefty said. “Pike, I know you like to have fun.”

Pike, equally exhausted as Gray let his head bob for a nod and said, “We need some beer. This is a job that needs beer when it’s finished.”

“Gray, I know you’re all teetotaling now, but you need beer son. You need beer like a fish needs water. You’re fucking yard is like a postcard. Look at it. This is a moment for beer.”

“Okay. But not the Legion. We’ll pick some up and we can drink here. Christen the porch. I don’t have the money to go to the legion.”

“That’s fair. Who’s driving?”

Pike and Lefty looked at Gray.

“Okay,” he said, “but I have to get cleaned up first. Hold on. Do me a favor. Don’t do any drugs in the street. Go out back.”

On his way to the house, Gray was exhilarated, like he was fifteen again buying beer on his own for the first time. Back then, he’d drive to Millinocket—didn’t even use an ID because he felt it gave him a better way out if things went bad. There was no evidence. The key to it all was that the package store had one of those cigarette towers over the register. It hid Gray’s head

from view. The old guy there probably couldn't tell the difference between night and day, no matter how old folks were.

On the way to the house, Gray noticed his happiness. His heart was beating in his ears, he probably had a slight case of heat stroke, but he was enjoying himself. Still he felt somewhat pitiful. He was nearly thirty and he still felt like a child giddy about drinking beer.

Gray walked inside to change his clothes. While he was in the shower, he heard the answering machine beep on and then a voice echoing. Before he left, he walked into the bedroom and listened to the message. It was Byron. "Gray. It's me. I'm in Boston. I can't tell you where. But I'm out on some street I remember from when I was a kid. I may have made it myself. In my mind. Gray, sometimes I think I'm a god. Sometimes I think I am the only one who can do the right thing. I'm coming to see you soon. I'm coming to live with you and search for that man."

Gray didn't know what to make of the message and couldn't do much about it now anyway.

The three men squeezed into the truck. Lefty behind the seat, Gray driving, Pike shotgun.

"What about the dog?" Gray asked as he pulled from the driveway.

"Don't mind him. He's a dog; they wander around on their own. He'll be here when we get back," Pike said as he turned on the radio. He tuned to A.M. and searched past French talk shows, an evangelist explaining the unwritten intricacies of the Bible, and the whining of an old white big band jazz. He settled on an angry, raspy voice.

Lefty leaned forward. "Gray, do you listen to this guy? He was one of the first guys to put a radio and Internet show together. He gets a combined coverage of 57% nationwide. He's

fucking outrageous. He knows what it's like to get something. He's got fire. And he's not afraid to use it. He sort of makes Limbaugh look like Hillary Clinton. If you know what I mean."

The voice on the radio was in the middle of a tirade. "Hang these baby killers. But only after you torture them. They are not part of the Geneva Convention. Bush went soft on it. He caved to the left. I think they should just kill them. I'll put it on the Internet myself. Kill them and let their pals see it. If you're going to throw a guy from a helicopter, you don't do it for the first guy—you do it for the next."

"This guy just tells it like it is. I learned everything I know from him," Lefty was leaning from the back trying to turn it up.

In the store, the kid asked for Gray's ID. As he dug it out, he looked out the glass wall behind the register. Through the window, Toomey was talking to Pike.

When he approached Toomey said, "Coates, glad you're here. Now I don't have to leave a message on that damn machine of yours."

"That's right," Lefty said. "You're a hard man to get hold of. We wanted to come over a week ago. Why don't you just get a pager?"

"I don't need the noise," Gray said, putting the beer in the bed of his truck.

"Work crews are going out tomorrow. The job is yours if you want it."

"I'll do it. What time? Nine?"

"On the dot. Thank your blessings you're not one of those prisoners, working in this heat is inhumane."

"Kind of reminds you of the South, huh Tooms?" Pike asked.

Toomey leaned against the truck preparing to take over the conversation. “I guess so. But southerners are different. They can’t take the heat, but at least they know how to get out of it. I never fully understood the South. Southerners have fatalism in their souls. Not like folks up here. Yankees are cynical to the core. Everyone doubts good will or good fortune. The thing is, it’s just personal. We’re insular beings, and our darkness is only as deep as each individual. It’s only in our bones. But in the South, the cynicism is epic, mystical. They got a proud history of self-hatred. Something to do with the war. They were stripped of everything that made them whole, and they’ve been defined by that absence ever since Appomattox.”

Toomey continued speaking with great authority. Gray only half-listened and instead, he studied the other two. Pike had the appropriate glazed look on his face—clearly he’d heard this before. But Lefty, hung on Toomey’s speech as if it were a coded message or poetry—something he had to decipher. Toomey didn’t look at any of them. Looking into the sky, his eyes staring through his brow, it was clear that he was comfortable in this mode, and he continued to talk in the way some people go on about a fishing trip, or a game they went to, or about their work.

This tirade was different for Gray. He expected it, understood what Toomey was about. His mouth was watering at the thought of the beer. As Toomey rambled on, he lingered to driver’s side, opened the door, and started the ignition. Pike caught the clue and slapped Toomey on the shoulder. Lefty stayed transfixed, and Toomey hardly reacted to Pike’s touch.

Finally Pike called to Lefty, “Time to go, you’ll see him again sometime.”

Toomey looked up and realized his audience had dwindled. “Yes. I better be going too. Coates o-nine-hundred-hours,” he said, walking from them. Lefty got in the truck only after Toomey had entered the store.

Pulling out of the parking lot, Lefty leaned up. “What do you think about the Sergeant?”

“I don’t know. Something about him makes me uneasy” Gray said, before he thought to censor himself. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel wishing he hadn’t opened his mouth at all.

Pike paused, looked at Gray, then nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. He’s a talker, but he’s like a father to me though. Let me really figure out who I wanted to be.”

Lefty contemplated this, then said, “He seems like a great man. I totally respect our military men. I’d have been one if I thought I could pass the drug test. Fucking ridiculous that they think that just because I like the chemicals that I’m any less of a patriot.”

“Here, here brother,” Pike said and turned on the radio, the same commentator was yelling, “You’re not a real American if you don’t agree with me.”

Gray watched the Katahdin steam back to near port as he downed his first two beers. It emerged from behind the trees when the boat entered the town’s cove. A shadowy blue had slowly worked its way over most of the evening sky, and a pool of pink settled in the valley above the Katahdin. They sat on the floor of the porch, their backs to the house and empty bottles scattered by their legs. Gray chose bottles over cans, thinking that this was a special occasion and there should be some element of class to it. Pike was packing a bowl. Gray noticed this out of the corner of his eye and was concentrating on the boat to avoid thinking about the weed. He took another pull from his bottle, and the moment the beer hit his tongue, sweet and cold, he couldn’t for the life of him remember why he quit drinking. This was harmless bliss. He was celebrating, some suds and a little weed weren’t going to make him an addict.

“Who needs another?” Lefty asked as he stood and walked into the house.

Pike’s dog had returned and was asleep in the yard. Gray watched him twitch in a dream.

“So what do you think about driving these camel fuckers around?” Pike didn’t avert his eyes from his task when he asked.

“They don’t bother me. Besides, it’s just a job.”

“It’s not just a job. Being a teller at BigMart is just a job. Transporting Arabs around the woods is another matter all together. You’re an integral link in our democratic system.”

“I don’t know about that. I drive a truck. That’s it.”

“You don’t get it, do you? The opportunity you have to make a difference. I can’t figure you out Gray. Lefty tells me about all this wild stuff you used to do, and now you can’t tell me what you think.”

“Listen man, I don’t want any trouble. I do what I’m told. There are other people whose job it is to look out for the bad guys.”

“That’s the fucking problem here. Too many people letting government do what we should. What are you? Democrat? Republican?”

“I don’t really...”

Pike was rolling now. “One of those moderates then. Or an independent. Christ, you’re not one of those liberal Ralph Nader tree hugging faggots are you?”

Gray didn’t know how to answer this, couldn’t figure out how to escape. The boat had stopped. All it would take is a quick elbow to the temple to shut this tattooed son-of-a-bitch up. A small laugh escaped Gray when he pictured Pike’s head bouncing against the house.

This seemed to confuse Pike, and before he could start his interrogation again, Lefty walked back in, beers in one hand and loose notebook paper in the other. He extended the pile of paper in front of Gray and asked, “What the fuck are these?”

Gray stood and swiped the letters from Lefty. “Letters. It’s paper with words on them.”

“No shit. Who are you sending them to?”

“Penny,” he felt his face flush.

“You banged her, didn’t you?”

“Give me a break.”

“Why letters? It’s too much work for a chick. Why don’t you go and get a cell phone?”

Pike interrupted, “That’s it. You’re one of those back-to-nature-can’t-use-technology types. Aren’t you? Liberal motherfucking hippie. Can’t be afraid of technology. It’s what keeps us ahead of the rest of the world. So is that what it is? You forgot that you’re an American.”

Gray didn’t respond. This was all too much. It was as if all the time away from people rusted his skills. He couldn’t fight back.

“Fuck it. There’s one equalizer here,” Pike said and handed Gray the pipe and a lighter.

Gray took them and without hesitating, brought the bowl to his mouth and lit it. The weed snapped and glowed red as he drew in. Immediately, the wave crashed over him, the smoke pouring through his body, calming everything except one muscle in his right shoulder that always spasmed when he got high. In moments, he felt liquid, his body loosened and his thoughts flowed. He passed to Lefty who inhaled too deeply and hacked until his face turned red and his eyes watered. Pike inhaled, then exhaled into his cupped hands. He then took the smoke back in, blew it through his nose. “Learned that from reading Dennis Leary.”

The pipe came back to Gray and he took another long hit. With this hit, conversation seeped out of him. He talked and couldn’t tell where one story stopped and the other began. Then he got distracted by the crewmembers as they rowed passengers back to the dock. Then by the sun which was setting and casting a neon reflection on the water. The yard was fucking beautiful before him. He was a goddamned rock star for fixing this house. Good times. Good times.

When the doorbell rang the first time, Gray thought he was hallucinating. But when it rang a second time Pike told him someone was at his door.

“Don’t answer it. Cops can’t come in unless they have a warrant,” Lefty said.

Gray looked at the door, “It’s not the cops.” But drug induced paranoia came on him. It could be the cops he thought. Or the FBI even. There was a prisoner camp around. What the fuck had he gotten himself into? He looked at Lefty and Pike. “Stay here.”

Instead of going to the front door, he slipped off the porch and slid up the back wall. His footsteps woke the dog though. When he tried to wave at the dog to lay back down, it stood, cocked its head, and trotted next to him. He heard the doorbell again from inside. At the corner of the house, he peeked around as if he were in a firefight.

Frank stood on the stoop.

Gray took a moment to gather himself, then hopped from behind the house. “I thought I heard something. I’ve been in the yard.”

His eyes felt dry as he walked towards Frank, and Gray avoided looking at him directly. Instead he focussed on a spot just below Frank’s chest. But then his thoughts became lofty and wandered. Lost in the speed of pot thinking, staring at Frank’s torso, he thought he finally understood his uncle. It was like a professor had taken over his inner voice and was blathering on in the background. The push to succeed wasn’t more than a mechanism to dictate the uncontrollable. The more he achieved, the more the demon inside grew. In this flash, this THC induced vision, Gray understood that the more Frank made of himself, the more he saw his past faults. As a doctor, naturally hubris was strong in Frank. His ability to do too much tormented him. Gray felt the urge to share this, but was sober enough to know not to.

Still, Frank waited by the front stoop until Gray walked the whole way. “Your aunt wanted to call you, but since you haven’t fixed that phone, I told her I’d come up myself.”

“Come in,” Gray said, and opened the front door. When Frank passed him, Gray remembered the others.

Frank scanned the room. “This little project of yours is really coming along.” When his eyes found the porch, he walked over without being invited. Gray followed and knew Frank’s glance settled on the bottles.

“You remember Lefty. The other is his friend Pike. He works for Great Northern Paper,” said Gray. He stood behind Frank and tried to pinpoint the pot. Pike was smoking a cigarette, but the sweet aroma hung in the warm air. Frank had to smell it. Maybe he didn’t know. “We’re celebrating taking down the trees. We did it today. Took down the trees,” Gray said. He felt himself ramble but couldn’t stop. “I’m getting close to finishing.”

“I like what you’ve done. It looks nice. I didn’t know you had such a view.”

Lefty stood and extended the beer he’d been drinking, “Beer?”

Frank shook his hand and head in unison, then turned to Gray. “Can we talk in private?”

They walked back into the house, and Gray made sure Frank had his back to the porch.

“It’s Byron. He’s checked himself out of the hospital. We haven’t heard from him. Have you?”

Gray wanted to be forthright, but he heard himself say the words as he spoke them. “No. When did he leave?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lefty pass the bowl to Pike who lit it and took a long drag. He felt panicked, a child again.

“I was thinking he may trust you more. You now how he gets about me when he gets sick.” Gray could see it on his face. This was the moment. He could destroy his uncle with one comment, one hard look, a moment of silence, or a condescending sigh. This was what he thought of, but he opted from the middle of the road. “No Frank, this is the first I’ve heard of this.”

Frank studied Gray a beat then said, “This is very important to your aunt. She’s done a lot for you. Don’t let her down.”

“He’ll show up,” Gray said, but what he meant was fuck you.

“I don’t want to keep you from your guests. I’ll be at the house. Your aunt is very nervous. She’s still in Cambridge. She’s hoping that he’ll come home. She sometimes has a romantic view of his illness,” Frank said and turned for the door.

A few steps from his car, he paused. Without facing Gray, he said, “Come by if you hear anything. And Gray, be careful.”

Gray was on the porch almost before the door shut. “What the fuck was that?”

“What do you mean?” Lefty said smirking.

“Smoking when he was out there. That’s what I mean you little puke,” Gray said, feeling the pulse of anger in his fingers.

“Grow up Gray. This is your house. You don’t need to worry about what anyone else thinks,” Pike said. The lofty thoughts returned. And this time, the lecturer rambled on about the devil. Then about Pike. Then about how Pike was the Devil. He was killing Lefty.

“Time to go gentlemen. Time to get your asses somewhere else,” Gray said. He hadn’t noticed it, but Gray had Lefty by the collar. He felt it tear.

Pike slapped his arm away, and Lefty was on the ground. “Slow down big fella. This ain’t no problem that we caused. This is your doing. I suggest you stop this incident before you get yourself in deeper shit.”

“What the fuck are you thinking?” Lefty stood, grabbed his beer. He turned to Pike. “Let’s walk. Some people just can’t understand that you got to treat your friends right.”

“See you again big man.” Lefty said as he rubbed his neck and passed Gray.

Gray listened as Pike and Lefty got in the truck and pulled down the road.

Alone. He didn’t know what to do with himself. He wanted to be lucid, but the weed wouldn’t let him slow down. He took the paper and sat on the floor. He began to write Penny a letter, but couldn’t keep his thoughts straight. The lecturer continued and Gray wished that he could record even a few sentences of the speech, but each time he tried the words morphed and faded into unrelated thoughts. It was almost dark now, but there was still enough light to see. On the third draft, he was able to simplify his message enough. He wanted her to come see him. Then he wanted her to search the city for Byron. Moments later he had a plan. He’d sober up a bit and then drive to Frank’s place. He’d wait in the bushes until Frank fell asleep and steal a photo from the wall. In the morning he’d mail it to Penny before he went to work. This is what he did.

JOSEPH

Thursday, August 9

In these days since the bodies reappeared, I hate the world, the woods, and myself.

Last night, the thoughts flowing in and out of me, the constant drone of the crickets and frogs kept me awake. That incessant chirping—it felt like a force beyond me controlled the volume, like the wilderness was finally exacting its revenge. It stimulated me like the man in the Kubrick film. My body wouldn't shut down, wouldn't allow me to fade.

This madness. This energy. All because I'd seen those men.

I remember the moments before sleep. Remember how it all went silent. Not even a ripple of wind. I had been thinking of the winter. I came to this thought because I finally had my bear, and if not for those men, I'd have skinned it and stayed here the entire winter. That thought did cross my mind—I guarantee that I'm not revising history by saying this now. I had decided that I could stay here indefinitely. What would stop me? Both my body and mind had become accustomed to the rigors of the forest. I had conquered nature.

In my dream, a soft snow covered all, placing a blanket on these same woods. In storms like the one in my dream, the calm is so pervasive, you expect to hear your blood flow. Even the wind gets swallowed in the falling snow. I was dreaming, was asleep. And it was silent. I was in the woods. These woods I'm certain. It was night and the snow fell and I'd found the silence I'd been seeking all along.

How had I gotten here?

I woke to worse visions. Even with my eyes opened, I continued to daydream. I saw the bodies, sunburned and beginning to decompose. Foul. Just the memory brought me near tears. It brings me there now. I am not all together certain I couldn't have done something to prevent this.

I can't deny that since the incident with the talking dog, I didn't entertain the idea that the hallucination actually occurred. It's clear now that I hadn't been dreaming altogether. I knew what I heard that first time. The dog told me to do the right thing. I wrote that down. It must've happened. But his truth is something I am not able to contend with. That hallucination with the dog happened, and though I feel a failure, what could I do then? How could anyone pin this on me? I couldn't tell from their naked bodies what had happened. But when that dog tormented me, I was in no condition to help them. I'd have been gunned down with them.

I am ahead of myself though—at the end of the story when I should begin somewhere else. In the days after my illness, I'd once again become obsessed with the bear. I needed that beast, and as if I drew him with my desire, he returned to me. Bears always return. They have a better sense of direction than humans do. People speak of the sixth sense that is beyond us. Conjecture leads us to attribute this supernatural power to animals. We wonder how birds cross the globe twice a year, or how trout can venture deep into the oceans only to return to the very stream they were born in to spawn and die. When you're a kid and moving it's impossible to escape the story of the family pet who was lost and showed up at its owner's house thousands of miles away. Why do we give these creatures so much credit? Maybe it's just that animals live in an eternal state of bliss due to their heightened sensitivity. They are someplace beyond us. It's not that they have an extra sense or power, it's just that the total of their senses so greatly outweighs man's that the only way we can explain our deficiency is with conjecture. So this bear used what was given to him by nature more impressively than I. He found the burnt lands across from my camp only a few mornings after our chase. I don't know if he remembered me, but I hoped our previous encounter had taught him to fear men. He was sniffing the air when I first saw him, obviously, he knew of me before I him. The broken leg had withered slightly, and he

walked with a limp, but it was clear that he'd soon be healed. Upon seeing me, he crashed away. The next morning though, he was back.

I convinced myself of the possibility that the bear wanted revenge. Many a woodsmen might disagree with this hypothesis, but they don't know my new reality. It's true that if you don't surprise them or interfere with their young or mating, bears are typically harmless. A child could scare them off. But I'd become calculating and shrewd. Both the bear and I were changed—outside of our true natures. If he recovered, he'd come for me.

At first, I meant to re-trap him. This time, I'd deepen the pit, fortify its walls. Instead of a simple deadfall, I'd place more rocks on top and hope to crush the sonofabitch. This bear would come again. If I had any advantage, it was my intellect. I sat for many hours contemplating my approach. In this time, I couldn't help but revisit the time with the dog. It was just too surreal, and I tried to discover what really happened in the way most people analyze their dreams. Over time, this notion became as bad as the early ones of home and civilization. But what could I have done? After hours of tortuous complicated thoughts, I decided that another deadfall would be foolhardy.

My mind turned to defense—the bear may have tried a preemptive strike. I had to be prepared for all contingencies, and I busied myself constructing an improved bow. The deer carcass proved helpful for these needs. I had reserved sinewy sections of the deer's gut for just this purpose. These strands allowed for a tighter string for resistance. My bow improved, I took some time to concentrate on the arrows. Until now, hunting trout only required that I whittle a point at the end of a stick. But to take down the bear, I'd need a more formidable weapon. On the way to the Bear Mountain camp, I found flint, and after several failures, I was able to chisel a crude arrowhead. I cut thin strips from my tunic and fastened the blade tightly atop the truest and

strongest stick I could find. Bird feathers balanced the arrow. Time only allowed me to make two arrows, and I practiced shooting them in the soft ground above the burnt lands. I am not too proud to admit that in a very short time, my aim was exceptional.

And still my thoughts returned to that night with dog—a theme that recurred and slowly built upon itself.

I waited to ambush the bear. As I expected, he took off. I followed him slowly and deliberately. I'd devised a pursuit plan this time, hoping to make sense of his movements over a number of days. I tracked him like a stalker follows his victims. Patiently.

He invariably arrived in the mornings, dined on my berries and fish, then wandered to the east. I followed at a great distance, so that I wouldn't spook the creature. And after a few days, I found myself following the same paths.

Thinking back now, I must've convinced myself that the path to the clearing was altogether new to me. Because that's where I headed. Hindsight tells me that deep down I must have known what awaited me, but my consciousness never allowed those realizations to surface. Maybe I wanted to be back in that spot, or maybe the bear wanted to bring me back there.

Then one morning after I tracked the bear, that bird appeared and I followed it. The great circles acted as a homing device for my fate. Now, it is strange that a bird of prey watched dead bodies. Hawks of this type don't wait to eat the carrion—possibly it was waiting for a crow or another scavenger to let its guard down. Maybe it was just intrigued by the destruction of men. Maybe it was waiting for me as well. No. The bird was signaling to me.

Then the field. The men. The death. The horrible end to my experiment.

After I found the men, I got a good look at the clearing. Scouting the far edges, I found the logging road a few hundred yards from the field. The road was there. A decision came upon

me. All I had to do was to follow it and I could report them. But doubts invaded. Why hadn't anyone else found these men? What was this about? Was this murder related to me? Did they know of me? Surely a search party would find them.

The questions continued and seemed to knot up. A jam of intentions made it difficult to proceed. What I am certain of now is that I am the prime suspect here. I have illegally poached animals, withdrawn from society, failed to report a murder. Who is going to believe my story? Certainly that game warden wields power, he'll turn on me, use the skins as evidence of my barbarity.

The morning after I found the men, I got the bear. He returned. I woke to find him in the berry stand. He eyed me as carefully as I did him from across the lake. But seeing the men filled me with a certain electricity, a madness that let me think ahead of the bear. While he stole more trout, I moved as quickly as I could to a hiding spot up wind from the burnt lands. Earlier investigation proved that the bear would come this way. I waited.

Sixth sense and all, this brute who killed my deer waddled towards me. The first arrow caught him in the chest. A perfect shot. In a flash, I reloaded and finished him. He staggered off the path, but died only paces away. I'd have done him earlier if I knew it would be that simple.

With the death came a dreadful twist. I leaned over the bear. Maybe I was laughing or sobbing. In either case, I was exalted. But then came the slightest rhythmic thud from the sky. It grew in intensity quickly. *Thwock—Thwock—Thwock*. A helicopter. And then the noise faded in the direction of the clearing—it came and went with the breeze. The men had been found. It wouldn't be long until I was found too.

In one afternoon I'd gone from the hunter to the hunted.

And this is my decision. I am heading for Canada. In this time, I sleep in the open or in rude structures thrown together in a moment. I eat whatever the forest provides me with.

I've cleared as much as I could from the Lost Pond Camp and headed deeper into the relative safety of Bear Mountain.

I've discovered a tremendous ability to hide within myself. I know these woods as well as any man on the planet. While the men hunt me, I possess tremendous skill to hide. My light diet and activity have made me nimble in mind and body. No man is more knowledgeable about the area. What's more is that these men were heavily laden with arms—society shackles them. They can't possibly get me if I keep my wits.

Believe this—I am not leaving for Canada because I found the men, but because I am frightened of the game wardens and the consequences that face me in Northville. The border will be well scrutinized.

During these past days I've lived in a state so that I could move at any minute. I wander from place to place, always watching for men who might be after me. And I saw some men during this time, but they didn't see me. I had gone back to the Lost Pond camp to gather trout for the journey. I heard their rustling far off and fled into the trees. As I expected, the game warden was with some of the men I'd stayed with at Pittson farm. They scanned my camp, no doubt impressed with it. The faces of other men seemed so foreign to me then—so beautiful and dangerous. I stayed perfectly still until I was certain of my safety.

And now, back at Bear Mountain, every strange sound I hear startles me. With each, I think, "There they are again."

The idea that I am hunted has brought out the animal in me. I act just as the deer would. At night I sleep protecting myself from the rear. I face back my tracks. Surely if any pursuers come near, I will see them before he will have seen me.

How can any sane man expect me to capitulate to these thieves now? After these months on my own, and the potential that I now possess. How can I surrender to murderous game wardens who will take my skins? These same men who will take my accomplishments from me.

I will beat them at their own game is my mantra. Any time I become weary, I repeat it—silently in case others are near.

Canada is it. I have no confidant or person to ask advice of, so this note is my last resort. Words will deliver me. The idea has been dancing around me for a while. I will go there. The border is too vast to patrol completely, certainly it is less watched the ground I am on now. I'll face my fate in Quebec. I will follow my game trails—the logging roads will be watched too closely. The moss on the north side of the trees will tell me where I am.

Despite the distance, I don't expect the journey to take more than three or four days.

This is the last of my wilderness entries. Though it is risky, I'll return to the tree at Long Pond and deposit them there. I feel the need to confront danger. If all is right in the civilized world, the good men of Northville—Voight and the others—will be enough to persuade the wardens to release these accounts. If I am lost or murdered myself and you find these accounts, please tell others my tale. I can only hope that the wardens don't destroy these dispatches. If you find them, be sure to get them in the hands of honest men.

My mind is full of the wardens.

Tomorrow, I will be gone. Completely.

PART III

REBIRTH

re•birth \(')rē-'berth, 'rē-, \ n **1** : a new or second birth “After a while Hardee asked Georgie, ‘What do you do for a job,’ and Georgie said, ‘I save lives.’”—*Denis Johnson, Emergency*: METEMPSYCHOSIS **b** : spiritual regeneration “Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrases of the song. Then he began to make it his.... Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.”—*James Baldwin, Sonny’s Blues* **2** : RENAISSANCE, REVIVAL <a ~ of nationalism> ”I think the time is right for violent revolution, because where I live the games we play is compromised solutions.”—*Rolling Stones, Street Fighting Man* **re•born** \(') rē-'bɔ̃(e)rth, \ adj : born again : REGENERATED, REVIVED **epiph•a•ny** \i-'pif-e-nē\ n, pl **-nies** [ME *epiphanie*, fr. MF, fr. LL *epiphania*, fr. LGk, pl. prob. alter. of Gk *epiphaneia* appearance, manifestation, fr. *epiphainein* to manifest, fr. *phainein* to show — more at FANCY] “The art of war is of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject for study that can on no account be neglected.”—*Sun Tzu, The Art of War* **1 cap** : January 6 observed as a church festival in commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles or in Eastern Church in commemoration of the baptism of Christ “She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.... ‘She would have been a good woman,’ the misfit said, ‘if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’”—*Flannery O’Connor, A Good Man is Hard to Find* **2** : an appearance or manifestation of a divine

being “Nobody in his right mind who has seen war, who has seen death and war, can like war or want war.”— *Colin Powell* **3 a** (1) : a usu. sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something “Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—‘The Horror! The Horror!’”—*Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness* (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usu. simple and striking “For that long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever...Then it seems to him that some ultimate dammed flood within him breaks and rushes away. He seems to watch it, feeling himself losing contact with earth, lighter and lighter, emptying, floating. ‘I am dying,’ he thinks, ‘I should pray. I should try to pray.’ But he does not. He does not try.”—*William Faulkner, Light in August* **b** : a liter-ary representation of an epiphany “I’m going into this battle and take my union gun We’ll end this world of slavery before this battle’s won. You’re bound to lose, you fascists are bound to lose.”—*Woody Guthrie, All You Fascists*

GRAY

Not yet August and leaves had already begun to turn and fall in the woods. Gray leaned against the transport truck with an unlit cigarette in hand and watched a leaf sway like a pendulum as it fell to the ground. He'd been listening to the prisoners as they cleared the paths. Leaves—dry and papery—cracked underfoot and the voices sounded intricate and soft. Chainsaws whined and occasionally he'd hear one call to another. The week was almost over, and he'd already become bored with the driving. The house was on his mind—nearly complete, it needed to be painted.

Byron was living with him now. Quite by accident, Penny found him at the Harvard Square T-Stop one night when she went to watch the buskers. He'd been sitting with the ragged teen gutter punks who gather like moths to a light at the entrance to the subway. Some of them are from the street—abused, castaway. Most lived in the suburbs, had parents who tried hard. These kids were trying some rebellion on, but would try on other roles later. Looking entirely too old and not dressed in black, Byron stood out. She didn't approach him, but called Gray immediately. He listened to her message and drove to Cambridge to wait at the station that night. When Byron was nowhere to be found, Gray called Penny from a pay phone and stayed the night with her.

At her door, it was on her face. When she saw him, her look made him feel like an obligation. The novelty was gone. "I can't keep this up. I need to talk to you," is what she said. "These letters are nice, but I don't get enough of *you*."

The next morning, Byron was back at Harvard Square. Wild and dirty, when Gray touched his shoulder, Byron turned and said hello like Gray was supposed to be there.

"Why don't you come and live with me for a while?" Gray had asked.

On the way back to Maine, Byron rambled on about how he had squatted in an empty warehouse in Arlington with this girl he had met in the hospital. Now, he stayed at the house when Gray worked—was even pitching in and scraping the outside to prepare it for painting. Betty and Frank knew where he was but Byron refused to see them.

In the woods, a reservist, Owens, leaned next to Gray. A smoker, he and Gray shared at intervals during the day. Nodding his head to the cigarette, the soldier reached for another.

“How’s business?” Gray asked handing it to him.

“We caught ‘em in a meeting,” Owens said lighting the cigarette. He let his rifle hang behind his back. “One of our guys is an interpreter and he just happened to be walking by when the prisoners were in their escape committee.”

“Escape committee?” Gray asked.

“Happens everywhere. They organize so that they don’t screw up too many times. We know it happens.”

“Doesn’t that worry you?”

“No. These guys are just the grunts. They aren’t the ones that’ll give us troubles. We got camps in Cuba and Texas for the real bad guys. These guys aren’t any different than you or me. They don’t want trouble. I tell you, they couldn’t keep me in a camp, I’d be trying to bust out first chance I got.”

“Where would they go?”

“Anywhere I guess. I’d try to escape if I thought I had a chance to survive. Where else in the world is it easier to blend in? The U.S. is as about diverse as any other. Plus, since these guys are Geneva Convention, we got to let them know that it’s their duty to escape. Gave them papers that said as much when we transferred them here.”

“So what happened to the escape?”

“Toomey flipped. He wanted to cancel the work details this week too. He almost cancelled their prayers. You’ve seen them, how they get on their knees six times a day. I’m impressed I’ll tell you. He was just bluffing about that.”

In the distance, Gray heard the rumblings of an engine. The sound built and within seconds, Toomey’s jeep rumbled next to them. He jumped out.

“Your ears must have been burning,” Gray said. “We were just talking about you.”

Toomey looked at Gray, then to Owens who saluted. “Private, is it your opinion that our driver needs guarding?”

“No sir. I—” he said at attention. Owens’s stiff body belied his obvious humiliation.

“I suggest you go do your job and guard the prisoners then.”

Both Toomey and Gray watched the soldier salute again and march forcefully away, their heads turning in unison to follow him.

“Coates, we got a problem. I got an anonymous tip that you’d been doing some illegal things.”

Surprise, then anger filled Gray. He hadn’t thought that this conversation would ever occur. “I don’t know what to say, I…”

Toomey looked straight at him, but not in the eye. It was as if he’d chosen a point somewhere in the middle of Gray’s skull and was trying to mine it with his gaze. “Look son, I don’t give a damn what you do. You passed my drug test, and I can’t afford to lose a driver, but just look out who you’re hanging with. Some people just don’t make good decisions, and you don’t want to be tangled with the wrong crowd.”

“What did they say—No, I mean, who said that?”

“Who it was doesn’t matter. Just look out is all I’m saying.”

“Excuse me, I think I need a minute,” Gray said and walked to the end of the truck. He groaned, feeling the muscles just behind his temples tighten. He wondered when there would be a day when his past would stay put. He went for another cigarette, put it in his mouth, then kept walking off the road into the trees. Now he’d have to dig himself out again. *How fucking stupid can you be?* He wanted to run, to punch something, to do somehow to let it out. He threw the cigarette to the ground unlit. A few hundred yards from the truck there was a lightening in the forest. The trees were lower here too, spruce giving way to young poplars and birch. He pushed through underbrush and entered a clearing.

A meadow—a curious place, a clear-cut lot that was never replanted and never reclaimed by the forest around it. The sun beat down on the field and bent the air in waves in front of him. Sweat seeped down his back. Still for a moment, he focused on his breathing, relaxing, running over the conversation with Toomey again and again. He was safe. He didn’t need to worry, Toomey told him he didn’t care. Then to revenge. This aggression. Why would Pike do this?

In the moment before he turned, out of the corner of his eye he noticed something move. A man was standing in the field, grass to his waist. The man out there froze, his eyes stuck on Gray like a tracked animal. They stared dead on at each other, Gray had no thought, couldn’t find the correct reaction. The man’s POW jumpsuit was the only clear detail in his mind. Without warning the man fell back to the ground. Gray thought to himself, *this is it*. The thought of tackling the prisoner entered him, but it seemed silly. Instead, he ran for the soldiers.

Toomey was standing with Owens when Gray came upon them. Breathless, panting more from excitement and fear than from exertion, Gray couldn't get the words out at first. Then he bent at the waist, inhaled, and spat, "I just saw a guy out there."

"What?" Toomey and Owens said in identical shock.

"A prisoner, I'm certain of it."

"Are they supposed to be out there?" Toomey asked the guard.

"No sir," Owens replied.

Toomey yelled to another guard. The guard ran to him quickly. "Round them up and get a head count immediately," Toomey instructed. Then turning to Gray, he said, "Show me."

Owens, Toomey, and Gray barreled through the forest back to field. Once there, Gray took it in again. Empty, no clouds in the sky, the heat washed out the colors.

"So where is he?" Toomey asked.

Gray squinted, wandered ahead a few steps. "In the middle—out there laying down. He collapsed when I saw him," Gray said.

Toomey moved in front of him and signaled that they should spread out. He yelled, "You have been captured. Surrender or you will be shot."

Gray felt some anticipatory glee when the man stood sheepishly and remained frozen, hands above his head. But Gray noticed the man relax slightly when he looked and saw that there were only three of them. The prisoner dropped his hands and studied the field.

"Shoot him. He's escaping," Toomey said. At that, the prisoner snapped around, his hands on his head again.

"Sir?" said Owens as he looked back and forth from Toomey to the man in the field. The prisoner was coming at them, slowly, like a child returning from recess.

“Fire your goddamned weapon. He’s escaping,” Toomey bellowed.

“He’s coming back sir,” Owens said. He had even lowered his gun. The prisoner sensed the urgency and picked up his pace. But when he got close enough that you could see his each part of his wide eyes, his hands went from his head again to his side. Toomey sprang to his revolver and shot three times. The prisoner’s face hardly had time to register shock. At first, Gray didn’t realize what had happened. It wasn’t like the movies when shootings are in slow motion. Instead, his ears rang from the blast and the man fell almost before the shots were fired. In the avalanche of moments that followed, he could recall the man falling to the ground, the gun blast still echoing. A shriek as well, it could’ve been the dying man, Owens, or even himself. Toomey remained still, the gun extended in a pose.

Several other guards hollered warning and were in the clearing. By that time, Toomey was over the body.

On the ride back to camp, Gray noticed the prisoner’s blood on his shirt.

Later that night, Gray couldn’t place just how he felt. It wasn’t nervousness, or angst, or anger, but something was unsettled inside him. Drained emotionally, but buzzing in his thoughts, when he closed his eyes, he felt himself move, convulse. Uncontrollable, it felt like drugs corted through his veins. When the thought of chemicals passed into him, he knew what had to be done next.

So much had already been dictated to him in the past hours. The prisoners needed to go back. He drove the truck and waited for the soldiers to unload them. Tensions were high at the camp, it felt military. Then questions. Military police kept him at the camp and went through each detail. Gray tried to avoid directly answering anything. He simply went over the facts,

reporter-like without editorializing. Toomey's knowledge weighed on him. Gray had no guilt, but who were they going to believe?

Now at his house, the more Gray thought about it, the more clearly his position formed. This prisoner was just taking a nap. He didn't want to break out, he just needed rest. It appeared that the guy was just sleeping in the field. Taking a break. Toomey was a barbarian. But this was exactly the information he needed to ensure his secrets. Questions for hours. When he got back to his house, the FBI was there.

Gray walked in with the agents. He saw the concern on Byron's face.

"Don't worry, I'm not in trouble," Gray told him, taking the agents to the porch.

When they asked him about the football game, Gray thought it was over. Things were getting messy in his head. The agent who asked about the riot just said, "Seems you had a problem at the football game a few months ago."

"What does that have to do with this?" Gray asked.

"Just getting to know you. Got to find out what happened."

"I tell the truth."

"We'll see about that," the agent said.

When the agents left, Gray became concerned with what this might do to Byron. They were standing in the kitchen.

"I didn't do anything," Gray said about the shooting. Byron asked if it was Knowles who was shot. Gray assured him that it was a prisoner. This made Byron feel better. He walked to the front door, opened it, and asked, "So what do you think?"

“I don’t know. I’m a bit shaken,” Gray answered. Byron’s caring surprised him—his illness typically kept his thoughts focussed on himself.

“No, I meant about the house, I scraped it all. I even went to hardware store and bought some primer.”

“It looks great. I’ll pay for the paint when I get the money.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t have anything to spend my disability check on. Consider it rent.” Byron closed the door and continued, “The agents came up earlier. They said they needed to talk to you. They’d been in the driveway for hours. You in trouble?”

“No, I’m fine. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“My mother called too,” Byron shut the door and walked to the porch himself. “Does she know I’m here?”

“Yeah, I told them,” Gray said. “Did you not want them to know?”

“No. I don’t mind. But why haven’t they come by?”

“I told them not to.”

“Oh,” Byron sat down. “I think I need to get some sleep.”

“Okay. I’ve got to get out of here. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lefty was at the bar by himself in front of the huge mirror. Jacky saw Gray when he came in. A radio voice floated through the empty bar, and Gray watched as Lefty nodded his head with each point.

“Where’s Pike?” Gray sat next to Lefty as he asked.

Lefty stared straight ahead—didn’t even make eye contact with Gray in the mirror. “I don’t know. He was supposed to come here after work. What do you want?”

Gray felt the tension, felt Lefty wanted to confront him. “Hey, I don’t want to do this. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get so aggressive the other day. I was just pissed about my uncle.”

“Beer?” Lefty asked. He nodded to Jacky who delivered the round.

Gray picked up the beer and walked to a table away from the bar. Lefty followed. He had a sip. “Pike didn’t tell Toomey anything about me smoking pot the other day, did he?”

“No. He wouldn’t do that. You starting shit again?”

“I need a favor. I’m looking for something.”

“Like what?”

“Something happened today. I sort of need some medication. Some dope. Maybe some blow.”

Lefty smiled. He shook his head. “Green is fine. White may be a problem. How much you talking about?”

“You guys still owe me for the trees. I was thinking that we could barter.”

“I like what I’m hearing,” Lefty said. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Gray said and took another sip. “Toomey killed a prisoner. I’m not sure I should be talking about this. Don’t tell anyone okay?”

Lefty perked up. “What?”

“I found this guy in the field, and he shot him. I think it was a murder.”

“Murder? How can it be murder? The guy was a prisoner. I say Toomey is a hero. Throw ‘em all from helicopters is what I say. Put it on the Internet.”

“Lefty don’t you have your own opinions? This is real. A man is dead. This isn’t the fucking radio. You can’t just spit out sound-bites of what you hear from some blowhard on AM radio. Think about it.”

“Who the fuck are you to come in here and tell me what to think? You may be big, but I’ll kick your ass. I’ll take out your knees, cut you down to size, and then we’ll see how big you are. Just because I might not be as good with words as some people, doesn’t mean I can’t have opinions. You college guys, with your liberal education. Fuck that.”

“All I’m saying is that you should just listen to yourself. All that hatred is not good for you. Sometimes it’s not about liberal or conservative. Sometimes life is bigger than that. All you do when you listen to those demagogues on the radio is you think like they want you to. Think for yourself.

“You know what Gray? Fuck you. Don’t tell me what I can or can’t say. I’ve read books about you people. Just because I might not be as good with words as the people on the radio, doesn’t mean I can’t have opinions too.”

This wasn’t what Gray wanted. This wasn’t the fight he came here for. “So does this mean you won’t do that thing for me?”

“I can’t now. We don’t live in Miami you know. Sometimes it takes some time for the product to get to the store. If you know what I’m saying. Pike and I will come by in a couple of days when we have it.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Byron is living with me now. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be working on the house. Just leave a message.”

“Get a cell phone.”

Within two days, Toomey was dead. The Millinocket paper reported it with the same crossed pistol sign on the front page—only smaller than the photo for the earlier escape article. A headshot of Toomey in his military outfit sat above a column on the right hand side. The caption

read, “Prison Guard Killed.” Gray read the article in the Millinocket paper that morning. Later in the afternoon, he wanted more information. He went to the store the general store downtown, where the tourists got the Globe from Boston, or the Times from New York. Toomey smiled out from these front pages too. The same headshot. But you could get it anywhere—information about Toomey’s death was worldwide. Gray scanned the articles for his name, but didn’t find any mention of himself. All they said was that Toomey was ambushed—the prisoners cut his throat in the mess hall. Other people in the store spoke about other reports they’d read online. Gray heard one man say, “This story had legs is what he heard someone say.”

Gray left the store and went alone to Betty and Frank’s house. They had arrived that morning. Frank met him at the door. “I’ll get you a lawyer.”

Betty was beside him filling the rest of the entrance. Gray had the photo of Byron he sent to Penny in his hand. He handed Betty the photo. She looked at it and smiled. “So tell me, how is he?” she asked.

“He’s at my place. I thought it would be best if I came alone.” He stood at the bottom of the stoop, but was nearly eye-level with his aunt and uncle.

“What’s he doing there?” Frank asked.

“He’s helping me with the house.”

“Do you need money?”

“He gets a check from the state. Disability. We’re living off of that.”

Frank tensed “You’re taking advantage of him?”

“No. I have money too. I’ll pay him back.”

“Is he taking his meds?” Betty asked.

“No. He’s drug-free.”

Frank paused. Gray could tell he wanted to ask about his drug use too. “I think he should stay with us now.”

“You’re wrong. This is working for us. I’m helping him. He’s helping me.”

Frank shot back, “Don’t worship the insane Gray. It’s nice to think they somehow transcend us, but they don’t. They’re sick. Byron is sick. Be careful what you do with him.”

“I’m taking care of him. We go to bed early and get our work done.”

The three of them stood together—none looked at the others. “I’ve got to go.” Gray said hugging Betty. He squeezed her wanting to find some safety, comfort. He was about to turn away when Frank handed him a few bills.

“No. I can’t take this,” Gray held up his hand in refusal.

Frank only said, “Please.”

When Gray reached for the money, Frank took his hand and hugged him.

Betty only said, “Thank you.”

At his car Gray turned around to confirm a suspicion. Betty was crying, she made no attempt to hide it.

At the house, Byron was waiting on the porch. The answering machine was filled with messages. “It’s been ringing all day. Mostly reporters. Penny too. She said that she read about the problems and wanted to know if you were all right,” Byron told Gray.

Just the mention of Penny made Gray warm. The reporters didn’t matter to him. His privacy was more important. He started up the stairs to listen to her voice. By the third stair, he heard the door open. Pike and Lefty didn’t speak when they came in.

“I thought I told you to call first.”

“We need your help,” Pike said. He took out a gun. “Somebody has to pay for Toomey. The government isn’t telling us anything. We need your help. They need to execute them all.”

By the time it all registered with Gray, Lefty had his shooting arm extended in a rigid line pointed at Byron. Gray thought that Byron could slap the gun away easily. Lefty looked at Gray and said, “All we’re looking to do is smoke them out. Skin a couple alive and then we’ll show the rest of the world who’s boss.”

“What are you going to do?” Byron asked, his voice was casual, not what you’d expect.

“I’m not going to do anything. They’ve already done it all,” Pike responded. “You know what they say, you don’t throw a man from a helicopter for his sake. You do it for the guys after him,” Pike said. Gray looked at him straight. Dust under his nose, eyes intense. He was hopped up. Pike continued, “We are not ruled by man or government now. We are ruled by history Gray.”

“What are you doing? Do you even hear what you’re saying?” Gray moved down the stairs slowly.

Pike ignored his question. “I want to see it. I want to see where it happened.”

“No. You guys are crossing a line here,” Gray said. He was thinking of how he’d throw them out. Pike first because he was bigger.

“I don’t think you understand,” Pike said, cocking his gun. “You’re coming with us. “Let’s go,” he said and waved them to the truck.

Outside, the dog was in the front seat. Lefty and Byron jumped into the bed. Pike taped Gray’s hands with duck tape and shoved him into the passenger’s side. The ride was long, and

Gray hoped that at some point the hysteria would wane. At first, Gray only gave him directions. After a few minutes of silence, Pike said, “The story is flowing downhill for you big guy.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re going to do?”

“You’ll see. Shit is going to burn.”

Gray had seen the gasoline in the bed of the truck before he got in—at least ten tanks of it. “You’re not going to do something stupid?”

“What are you? Some kind of Liberal Nancy Boy? Is it right to let these guys out on the street to crash another plane into our buildings. These guys are going to kill us.”

The truck rolled to a stop by the snow-mobile site. Gray sat still—he wasn’t getting out. This is where it ended, this game. These guys weren’t going to do a thing he’d decided. Lefty stood with Byron at the door. He pulled the trigger back on his gun. “Come on out Gray. Get out of the truck,” he said.

Walking from the road to the meadow, Gray thought to himself *Your life doesn’t stop before you do*. The notion stopped him in his tracks. *What was that? I’m not going to die*. But he felt connected, felt like he was with everyone. Was with Penny. Byron. Lefty. He was in their thoughts. Pike, behind him, nudged him forward.

When they reached the clearing, the dog bounded to the edges of the field. The moon lit the expanse of the field in a soft blue. The sky was so bright and cloudless it seemed that only a blanket had been laid over the sun. Colors were all shaded.

“This is it. This is where Toomey shot the prisoner. So now what?” Gray asked. He could take them out before they knew to shoot, even with his hands tied. They were weak—not thinking straight.

They sat Byron and Gray on the ground and walked a few paces away. Gray listened, but couldn't make out the conversation—voices mashed together. They began to yell, it sounded more like a pack of dogs than men.

Gray looked at Byron. "You okay?"

Byron nodded. "The dog. He's found someone out there."

"Get yourself together Byron. Ignore the dog, we need to get out of here. When they come back, I'll knock Pike over and you take run. Get to the truck and get help.

Pike and Lefty came back over and stood Byron and Gray up again.

Just as Gray was about to topple Pike, Byron stepped forward. "Hey you. With the dog. Knowles," he yelled. Then turning to Gray, he whispered, "It's him Gray. He's going to save us. We're going to be saved. It's him. I know it."

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Pike asked.

"Lefty, this guy is crazy," Gray said nodding his head to Pike.

Pike hit him across the back of the head—pistol-whipped him. Gray's knees went soft, but he stayed upright. "Do the right thing Lefty. Do the fucking right thing. Do the right thing," Gray repeated it like a chant. Then Byron joined in. In moments, he was screaming it.

Lefty was crying when he pulled the trigger.

Byron slumped.

"This doesn't make sense," Gray said thinking of Betty. How would he tell her?

"Nothing makes sense. That's simply the way it is. We make our own sense Gray," Pike said. "You allowed that prisoner to go free, then you perjured yourself about one of our fighting men. He is dead at your hand. You are guilty. You killed my friend. If my country will not condemn you, I will."

It wasn't like he'd expected. An air of extreme clarity surrounded him. Almost a peacefulness. There wasn't any pain. All he could remember was waking in his bed. The light in his window glowed cobalt blue when he opened his eyes.

JOSEPH

Sunday, October 3

Since I've been out of the woods, I've found it difficult to spend much time indoors. What surprises me is that this is the only aspect of coming to the civilized world that has gone like I anticipated. Consumed with restlessness when I first came back, I expected the everyday noises were going to be just too much, but on my first night back in my apartment, I actually enjoyed the music of everyday household sounds—the whine of my computer, the echo of ringing telephones, the pounding of my neighbor's unbalanced laundry machine—all followed some simple logic. Within days, almost imperceptibly, the din waned until it was unnoticeable. Readjusting to the elements of the civilized world that bothered me before my experiment turned out to be simple. I actually appreciated them. Little things confronted me. For instance, I hadn't noticed how my back suffered in the forest. Only two nights in a real bed and I felt straightened. Other conveniences revealed genius to me. Toilet paper, the refrigerator, air conditioning all re-amazed me. But much like the initial days in the forest, I found that I tormented myself.

The problem was with the stimulation. I needed to be outside to deal with it all. I took to walking the streets so that I didn't have to put up with my thoughts. I'd been walking for so long, that I felt a drive to continue moving.

Before I left the forest, I'd played the scene out in my mind a hundred times. I fully expected guards to rush at me the moment I let down my defenses. I wondered whether I should struggle against them or let myself fall limp and force them to wrestle with their own consciences.

After walking west for three days straight, I was rather certain I'd crossed into Canada. I spent my last night in the wilderness at the edges of a rail line that I suspected ran near Megantic.

I'd crossed this same rail line a day earlier. I also crossed a number of roads. Each time, I felt I'd certainly be seen by a car, or some unsuspecting individual who simply happened to be out for a walk. Luckily, I went unnoticed.

That morning, the rumble of the train woke me. When I'd first heard it, I slipped back into the forest out of habit. Only when it had nearly passed me up completely, did I realize I didn't need to hide anymore. It's possible that somebody on the train, perhaps a conductor may have seen me, but I suspect that the first person I saw was a small girl further down the line.

I followed the tracks, knowing that it would take me into town, and rounding a bend, I noticed the young girl playing by the tracks. Slight and beautiful, she couldn't have been older than four or five. Her blond hair, so pale, glowed in the sun. How I expected to terrorize her with my skins and rough whiskers. I imagined how her eyes would first fill with terror, then tears. I didn't trust my voice, so I kicked the rocks to make noise. She looked my way, and instead of running, this little cherub only eyed me carefully. After the briefest of pauses, she said "Bonjour."

From then on, the utter opposite of my loneliness in the wilderness confronted me in Megantic. Within moments from when the girl led me to her parents' house, a group of locals surrounded me. Most were fluent in English, but each time I spoke, a boy translated for a circle of old men who'd taken up behind me.

They told me of the murders over the border—of the killed POW and the American soldier taken as a reprisal. Overwhelmed, at first I didn't admit to knowing about the men I'd found. But the locals seemed to know my questions before I asked them. They told me that the other murderers were in custody and had also been charged with arson. The tale was almost beyond belief, but the people of Megantic explained it all. Shortly after they murdered the men I

found in the field, they set siege to the POW camp off Golden Road. They set fire to the underbrush, hoping to exterminate all signs of life anywhere near the camp. Only with the assistance of the prisoners, were the guards able to put out the flames.

At first, I couldn't express how pleased I'd been to discover that I was just a mere curiosity to search parties. Inside I felt the shame for not reporting them. These poor men stayed in the wilderness far longer than they needed to. At times now, I wake to the frightening visions of their bodies.

My conclusion now is that we are all fallible. As human beings, we make mistakes. Not everything in the world is the result of forethought. Evil exists, but sometimes it can be explained by point of view. It's too easy to attribute all awfulness to evil. I admit to my shortcomings, but I've never been evil. I am simply a man.

The specific motivations of the murdered are not clear as of yet. We do know some facts. They were apprehended shortly after, and the trial for them promises to be bigger than any since O.J. When I heard of the fire, I panicked greatly. My first thoughts were of my birch bark accounts. But to my surprise, the Canadians knew that Edmund Voight had collected them. It appears that he made a number of digital copies as well, which made their way to the Internet within the day. It seems my words had made it to the Internet before I'd even crossed the border.

I was asked what I wanted the most. They gave me food, cigarettes, whiskey, but I couldn't stomach any of it. Each proved too great of an assault to my senses. Oh, but the first shower and shave I had felt as heavenly as any sensation I have experienced ever.

I'd been in Megantic for only a couple days when the representatives from Northville and the state of Maine came to see me. Originally, I planed to return home in the air and avoid any legalities I may have brought on myself. But Mainers assured me that I would have safe passage

through their state. Newsmen also seeped into that small Canadian town like a bad aroma. Many had been in Northville reporting the murders and fire. I gave as many interviews as possible in town. It was a whirlwind up north, but I returned to my apartment in the city with little fanfare.

It's as if I can't tell which experiences have made me now. I am somewhere in my life and can't determine who it is I am. What I have done is not a heroic event as some have told me. At a banquet held in my honor, a man came to me up, and shaking my hand, he said, "Mr. Knowles, I want to congratulate on the remarkable thing you have done." It was the same thing over again that night, and I couldn't help inwardly smiling at the word remarkable. "I want you to know," the man continued, "that I believe in you, but there are some at the banquet tonight who are skeptical."

I told him, "I am not a hero. Any person of adequate health can follow in my footsteps."

Since then, I sincerely believe these words. I've met a number of people who think of me as a hero. But I am not. Any person, with a clear mind and good fortune can accomplish what I did. You simply need determination. This country is fertile. The forests exist despite all our encroachments—it still lives. Existential? No. Man is capable of so much beauty in the world. Secular humanism? Who cares? We have limitless possibility.

Even in the short time I've been back, I've also felt a backlash. Many say that I attempted this experiment for fame or money. They say that this first person account is lacking artistry. To those who say that my woodland journal is not a good use

of literature, I say that I will piss on their grave. I created this and wrote it down. Though I based it upon my experiences, my life, it is still a creation, a thing I am responsible for. Should I take money for it? Yes. But believe this, I don't want to take the rest. The difference here is that

if I write about my life well enough and mask myself well enough to capture someone in the spell of the story then I'll make money. If I hid something important in there or am an idiot savant and tap into something special without knowing it, then PHD's will compete to be the first to write criticism on me, because they need the publication and are in fact more ingenious than the tenured folks anyway. But if I do this all poorly or if the writing is not aesthetically pleasing, then I fail. Who knows, maybe someone grad student will write a paper on it anyway.

This morning, like I have done so many times in the past months, I woke early, before the sun came up, and set myself upon the streets. And though the sun was only beginning to wash the sky with light, I still couldn't see the stars. I miss that. In the wilderness, I became acutely aware of my ignorance. I saw many birds, trees, and insects I couldn't name. The stars made me feel the smallest though. The large constellations—Orion, the Big Dipper— were obvious, but at night, when I stared into the limitless sky, I had no knowledge to help me understand it. Trying to make sense of myself, I gave constellations names. I also observed the sky closely. What I noticed most was the slow shifting of the night sky. Each night, the sky rotates, and night after night, it slowly renews itself with new stars. The change is slow, like when you gain weight, but it is changing. Always changing.

Only a block from my flat is a garden center. During the day, the owner places trees and shrubs at the edges of the sidewalk, so that the only way to avoid the deluge of vegetation is to walk in the street itself. It's like an extension of her store. I got in the habit of closing my eyes as I pass through it. The leaves touch my face, and the canopy cocoons me from the outside world. For fleeting moments I am somewhere else. But this morning, the sidewalk was bare.

I often wonder what the murderers of the men I found were looking for. Did they honestly believe that they could change things? Did they think their terrible act would make a difference? The thing is, I feel like the Rozencrantz and Gilderstern in this tale. It is clear that I am a sidelight. My struggles are only a sub-plot and anything I may have lost in this experiment is inconsequential.

How mad I'd become in the past months. As I re-read my notes, I realized how much I neglected to write about a great deal of my time in the woods. My best day was a warm sunny aromatic day on Bear Mountain. This was before I lost the deer. That day I sat naked under the sunlight at the corner of the cedar grove with a group of chickadees in the trees above me. The flutter of their wings occupied me for quite some time. Occasionally one would announce its nasally call. *Chik-a-dee-dee-dee*. What stands out the most is how I listened to the sound of their tiny wings as the birds flew to and fro gathering grass. On my walk this morning, that day returned me to with each of its beautiful memories.

I didn't write about myself either. Many nights, I wanted to use my accounts as therapy for my old emotional scars. In the wilderness, I thought that I was not attempting the experiment for any other reasons than my own. I was not doing it for my wife, but I'm now certain that this denial added to my madness.

The only other time in my life I walked as much as I do now was when I was firstdivorced. At the time, my wife was working as an ad executive in a fancy firm in Manhattan. She was the sharpest woman I'd ever met. She knew how to tongue lash even the best of men. And she didn't do it just because she was a woman. Some women use their sex to put them over

the top, and she could have as well if she'd wanted to, but I had seen her beat a man down with her womanhood tied behind her back.

Since she was good at it, we fought—not any more than every other married couple. At first, we'd quarrel and then work it out. But after a few years, she'd work late all the time. One night, when I was watching the game by myself again, it occurred to me that we had been fighting even more than the usual. The next image in my mind was the way she laughed at her boss's jokes at the Christmas party the year before. She let her hand linger on his shoulder and she did it in front of me. I was her pawn. I was her goddamned thrill.

So I got all private dick on her from then on. Every night I'd ask her how her day was. I wanted to know every detail of every meeting. I didn't let on that I knew about the affair; I was just the epitome of caring the husband. I was hyper-sensitive-uber-husband for weeks. At first, I think she liked the attention, but I saw her begin to unravel. She dropped dishes, got speeding tickets, yelled at our cats for nothing—Lady Macbeth would be envious of her. But the night I told her I was going to ask her boss over to watch the game, she glared deep into me.

What she said was, “Let's take this step by step and leave all the crying and carrying on for later.”

So I knew what was coming. And it was like watching a car come at you in traffic, knowing that it's going to slam you. Or when you play sports and you see that big motherfucker barreling through a line of blockers. You know the blast is on the way and you dig in. But the sting, the pain is always sharp. When she said she fucked him, and that's what she said, “I fucked him,” my fingers went all tingly, like the blood suddenly receded back into safer spots in my torso. In my mind I anticipated wanting to know it all. It was all there in front of me, so in my fantasy, I didn't want to let her off the hook. If I could see her side, I'd be able to get beyond it.

That wasn't the case. And like a kicked dog, I curled up. We didn't divorce then. Instead, I let it go on. I let her make it my fault that I didn't trust her, let her become a victim, let myself stand up and accept responsibility for letting her stray. Then I remembered that I had a pair of testicles. If I were a lesser man, I'd have put my foot in her ass for it all. But I didn't. I just took to walking. Compulsively trudging through the streets.

Then the buildings went down. September 11 changed it for all of us. The horror that gripped the city seemed to fit in easily with my own misery. But misery was not relative to the victims' families. I remember walking past fire stations days after the planes hurled into the Trade Towers. I'd seen it on television, and like most of us, I was paralyzed on my couch for the entire day. The phone lines were down, I was staying put. But no riots, no crime to speak of more than the usual. As I continued my walks, what moved me more than anything were the spontaneous gathering at the fire stations—the crowds that dropped flowers and lit candles at all hours during the day. These makeshift monuments at the fire stations grew when hope of finding the men vanished, obliterated any self-pity I had.

Mornings like this one, even on a Sunday, I am overwhelmed by the people on the streets—so many of us. Beautiful. Folks going to work, or church, or for bagels, all lost within themselves. We can do anything. We have the opportunity to create our destinies. But the mob is also scary. Every day is the same, the wall of business people, all of them so young, filing past you on their own way. How simple and horrible is the idea that it will stop?

It doesn't matter if my ex-wife reads it and is upset over the things that I say about her. I don't mention her name at all. And I don't think that the game wardens or Voight should be upset that I spoke about them either. This story is mine. It belongs to me. Their involvement is

inconsequential. We can't cleave ourselves from the experiences of others. It is utterly dangerous and foolhardy to try.

One morning walk from my past stands out for me now. It is the walk I copied this morning. Starting from ground zero, I walked uptown to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Back then, the dust covered everything—stores that left the doors open were covered in inches of soot for months. Even the buildings blocks away had a thin film of dust fifty stories high. Tourists gathered ten deep just to glance at the remains. People openly wept in the street. Those who worked down there wore masks. The military and police openly roamed the streets watching everything we did.

Independent images remain for me. The fire stations. The utter misery man is capable of creating. In Times Square, I saw the lights, the animated screens. Central Park—the tiny oasis of vegetation in the midst of the towers of concrete. Then the paintings at the museum. We are capable of so much beauty and so much horror.

One painting occupied me then and today. The inspiration for my experiment was an obscure cubist rendering of a solitary man on a yellow path. Behind him, jagged trees on a diagonal obscured bands of blue and green. It was so perfect, so much more accurate a portrayal of everything I can express in words. I sat and watched it, hoping for answers. None arrived.

When I left the museum today, I considered that my problem is that nobody can see me here. I try to say hello, I really do, but when I'm on the street, they don't notice me—they walk right on by. I am completely alone in an ocean of humanity, and I can never go back. The forest though, that will always live on.

On the great marble steps in front of the museum, the first rain drops passed over me. That night, I followed this storm on line—the storm that crossed Manhattan this afternoon is just

now colliding with an air mass south of the White Mountains, it will push out to sea, only to spin back over Nova Scotia and drop rain all over Lost Pond, on my shelters, and will wet my perfect memories.

VITA

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