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## *This Humbling River*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Ryan Dean Woldruff entitled "*This Humbling River*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Margaret Lazarus Dean, Bill Hardwig, Sarah Lowe

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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*This Humbling River*

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ryan Dean Woldruff  
May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

*This Humbling River* follows the character of Carson Sellars as he returns to Dine, Missouri. “Structure and Fiction: Through the Lens of Hollywood Beat Sheets” is an essay about narrative structure in fiction and film. The essay discusses various structural models, specifically looking at Blake Snyder’s *Save the Cat!* structure as a potential model for fiction writing.

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# I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: STRUCTURE AND FICTION - STORIES THROUGH THE LENS OF HOLLYWOOD BEAT SHEETS

In Donald Barthelme's essay, "Not-Knowing," he suggests, "Writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of *what* and *how*" (12, emphasis mine). Barthelme's *not-knowing* binary, this process of working through the *what* and *how*, describes the inherent struggle for any storyteller. In terms of narrative theory and fiction pedagogy, Seymour Chatman's terms of *story* and *discourse* might better define what Barthelme means when he says *what* and *how*. According to Chatman, in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, this same language of *what* and *how* can more accurately be recognized in narratological terms of *story* and *discourse*, "the story is the *what* in a narrative . . . discourse is the *how*" (19, emphasis in original). A *story*, according to Chatman, is defined by its "content, the chain of events (actions, happenings)," while the *discourse* is defined as "the expression, the means by which the [story] content is communicated" (19, emphasis in original). In other words, the writing process involves not only a developing knowledge of the *story*—the *what*—but it also involves a simultaneous understanding and communicating of the *discourse*—the *how*. By way of example, in Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, she describes this simultaneous process of continuously trying to understand the *what* and the *how* after she had already completed a second draft of a novel:

I took my three-hundred page manuscript and began to lay it down on the floor, section by section. I put a two-page scene here, a ten-page passage

there. I put these pages down in a path, from beginning to end . . . There were sections up front that clearly belonged in the middle, there were scenes in the last fifty pages that would be wonderful near the beginning, there were scenes and moments scattered throughout that could be collected and rewritten to make a great introduction to the two main characters. . . . I noticed where things were missing—transitions, vital information we needed to know before what happened could make any sense . . . Then, when I was sure, I stacked up all the pages in their new order and set about writing a third draft. (87-88)

In this example, Lamott describes the struggles, even after a draft is finished, in coming to understand the story's *structure*. Lamott discusses how the structure begins changing while she, literally, looks at her draft anew as it is scattered in sections on the floor—how the original structure morphs through a re-defining of character and plot, and how the expression of discourse changes when she notices missing transitions and vital information. Thus, in essence, Lamott is talking about a shifting in *story structure*, which I would argue is a broad and continuously evolving blueprint, a phenomenon of process that resides in the back of a writer's brain while writing, and that also manifests itself in patterns and shapes throughout the finished product, evidenced by both the *story* (the content, chain of events) and the *discourse* (the expression of the story).

Story structure, by this broad definition, is inherently tied to beginnings, middles and ends, to point-of-view, and to pacing; likewise, structure is always connected to how we discuss character development—the goals, motivations, and conflicts that define our view of character. As Lamott suggests in her example, structure is also connected to

*discourse*, and the way in which the story is told through transitions and character focalization. And, in my view, perhaps most importantly, structure is something that is often developed, and understood, through the process of writing and revision. In terms of fiction workshops, structure is probably the most discussed element of student work, whether we're talking about it directly (I'm not sure if this scene is needed here?), or indirectly (Would anyone like to comment on why this character decides to do X at this exact moment in the story?) Thus, it is the purpose of this essay to discuss models of story structure in both books of fiction craft and Hollywood screenwriting, and then I propose a structural model, based upon Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* beat sheet, that would benefit any beginning fiction writing class, whether it is used as a story model, or as an exercise in story development.

Currently, in my fiction classes, I often teach what Alice LaPlante calls a "conflict-crisis-resolution model"—a structural model that is fairly simple to understand. As LaPlante describes in her text *Method and Madness: The Making of Story*, "the idea is that every story has conflict that gradually intensifies and culminates in a crisis, after which there is a resolution" (98). This type of structural model is commonplace within most fiction textbooks, and typically these textbooks suggest that their models follow both the Aristotelian model of beginning, middle and end, and often further cite Freytag's pyramid of introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. Yet, in Mitch James's article "Tragedy, Plot, Fiction: A Study of Sameness and How You May Have Been Duped" in *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, he argues that the common lore often provided in these fiction writing

textbooks suggests a blurring of the Aristotelian model and other models of structure. In James's words, "Saying that something has a beginning, middle and end, is not the same as saying it must have a conflict, crisis, and resolution. A beginning middle, and end system is *confining*, but the conflict, crisis, resolution system is *defining*" (16, emphasis in original). In other words, not all models function toward the same end. For example, Aristotle's beginning, middle, and end describe the spatial limits of the story, while Freytag's pyramid combines a designation of special limits, as well as a suggestion for *what could happen* within those special limits. Yet, LaPlante's conflict-crisis-resolution model simply provides probable descriptors for the happenings within those spatial limits.

In terms of teaching fiction, the distinction between plot and structure is important because while plot is often discussed in terms of the story's cause-effect chain of events, any discussion of story structure requires a broader understanding of the current (and potential) trajectories of how the story comes into form, and the ways in which changes within the logic of the structure will then affect plot, and vice versa. In other words, while discussions of plot involve a story's sequence of events in a cause-effect chain, any discussion of structure should more broadly include *how* the chain is presented, the underlying patterns and shapes, the conventions that a story might possess. In my view, structural models are valid and worthwhile teaching tools for both beginning and advanced fiction writers. Not only do structural models often introduce writers to key terminologies and ways of thinking, but they also provide a general sense of trajectory for the evolution of a story and its characters.

Ironically, even though LaPlante teaches the conflict-crisis-resolution model and includes it in her craft textbook, she also suggests that students and teachers often take structural paradigms too literally, forcing a series of patterns, shapes, conventions onto stories where, perhaps, they do not belong. The problem arises when young writers assume that structural formulas or paradigms are hard and fast rules and must be followed rigidly. By way of example, both LaPlante and Lamott cite the ABDCE structure—Action, Background, Development, Climax, Ending—as a structural paradigm that *can* work for developing a short story. And while LaPlante quips that the formula came from a “writer giving seminars,” Lamott suggests that the formula came from Alice Adams, a writer of many novels and books of short stories (LaPlante 106; Lamott 62). The point here is twofold. On the one hand, LaPlante gibes, “If you wanted formulas, you’d be reading a mathematics or chemistry textbook, not this one”—which suggests a certain widespread loathing for anything that hints at formula (106). On the other hand, structural formulas often gain a place in creative writing lore and pedagogy simply because these formulas and conventions are useful, teachable, and can potentially lead to fantastic results—not because the formula is magic, but rather because, in the best case scenario, the young writer yields to the process of creative invention while simultaneously understanding and making full use of the potential of the underlying structural paradigm.

William Goldman, two-time Oscar winning screenwriter for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President’s Men*, famously wrote that the most important lesson he’s learned about writing screenplays is that “**SCREENPLAYS ARE**

**STRUCTURE**” (459, caps and bold in original). And, certainly, there are a number of books, videos, and even software programs that have attempted to capitalize on this well-known Hollywood mantra. Programs like StoryWeaver, Dramatica Pro, Power Structure, Contour, Truby’s Blockbuster 6.0, etc. are all promised to be structural *how-to*’s—the benefit, at least in how these programs are often advertised, is to help writers “drag and drop” ideas into a structural outline before writing. In other words, these programs do not necessarily care about plot, or how the cause-effect chain works within a story, but instead they are simply providing a structural model for how a writer could *potentially* express a story through a given structure.

Yet, like structural formulas in fiction writing, these kinds of structural programs and books that suggest structural paradigms often come under fire from both critics and Hollywood personalities. For example, screenwriter Tony Gilroy (*Delores Claiborne*, *Michael Clayton*, *The Bourne* series), in a lecture to the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) openly rebuked the idea of structural formulas. After the lecture, during a question and answer session, the moderator asked, “Do you think it’s helpful to use formulas like the hero’s journey by Joseph Campbell to help you move your plot along or to build a first script?” Gilroy replied:

I think it has to be instinctive . . . you’ve been sucking up narrative since you were born. . . .What is the cumulative number of stories this audience has watched and read? You know more about storytelling than you know about almost anything. . . . You know what it looks like. You know what it feels like. You don’t need Joseph Campbell to tell you what a hero’s journey is—you know what it is. It’s already way down deep inside you.

He's writing about something he says is deep inside you before you even knew about it.

In theory, I'd like to agree with Gilroy's notion that story structure "has to be instinctive" and is something "deep inside you." Certainly, at a very biological level, the Aristotelian model of beginning, middle, and end is mirrored in universal human experiences of birth, life, and death; or, the aging cycle of childhood, adolescence, adulthood. Yet, simply knowing a certain story structure is not the same as being able to *implement* that structure successfully in a story. Even within Gilroy's extended answer, he seemingly contradicts himself: "It's always astonishing: people give [me] a script . . . and it's like, 'Did you ever see a fucking movie?'" In other words, Gilroy suggests that the connection between what a writer might *know* about story structure (even instinctively or subconsciously) and *how* the writer implements that knowledge are two very different things. In practice, even if a writer follows an "instinctive" structure, or a "conflict-crisis-resolution" structure, or "the hero's journey" structure, or the ABDCE structure, the invention of a *well-crafted* story from any structure is a difficult process.

One recent and popular structural Hollywood paradigm comes from Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!*. In *Save the Cat!*, Snyder outlines a fifteen "beat sheet" structure that he found to be successful in his own work, and then observed that other movies, both classic and contemporary, also held the same underlying beat structure. (And, to clarify, a "beat" is a Hollywood term that is often defined as an event, or moment in a script that moves the plot forward). Thus, Snyder's *beat sheet* is basically an outline of fifteen beats that, all together, demonstrate the potential structural trajectory of a movie. However, movie critic Peter Suderman's "Save the Movie!" article on *slate.com* suggests that

Hollywood has taken Blake Snyder's "beat sheet" and created formulaic movies where "once you know the formula, the seams begin to show"(1). Suderman argues that when screenwriters use Snyder's structural beat sheet model, "Movies all start to seem the same, and many scenes start to feel forced and arbitrary, like screenplay *Mad Libs*" (1). Yet, I would argue that models like Snyder's *Save the Cat!* beat sheet, or the three act "setup-confrontation-resolution" structure that Syd Field wrote about in his 1979 book, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (which sounds very similar to LaPlante's conflict-crisis-resolution), are simply empty models that, when filled, create the potential for a finished product, and nothing more. In other words, the formulaic-ness of a work is not necessarily based upon the model, but upon the writer's ability to create something original within the model.

Certainly, if a story feels formulaic then something is amiss, and even Aristotle argued that some stories were structured better than others. In Part IX of *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses "episodic plots," where if the plots are constructed in such a way that "acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" they create "the worst" sense of structure (1). Here, Aristotle recognized that a writer can create a plot which, structurally, feels improbable. Thus, it does not matter whether a writer models a story on Campbell's hero's journey, or Blake Snyder's beat sheet, or the "conflict-crisis-resolution" structure, if the actions that connect those structural elements are "episodic" in nature, if the actions are "without probable or necessary sequence," then the structure comes to feel formulaic and the seams begin to show.

Throughout this essay I have discussed various structural models as if they are all fairly similar in their aims, yet this is not always the case. By way of example, LaPlante's conflict-crisis-resolution model and Syd Field's setup-confrontation-resolution model, are both predominately focused on the *what* of the story—as the terminologies within these models suggest broad actions and situations that inform the structure by way of plot; in other words, they suggest *what* should happen in the story (there should be a conflict; there should be a crisis; there should be a resolution). Similarly, Campbell's hero's journey—which began as literary analysis and has since morphed into prescriptive structure for certain genres like fantasy and science fiction—has a complete list of the *what* should happen, including elements like a Call to Adventure, Transformation, and Return. Yet, Adams's ABDCE structure—Action, Background, Development, Climax and Ending—suggests both *what* and *how*. Background, for example, suggests *how* and *when* writer should move from initial action to backstory, which I view as a suggestion of discourse, rather than solely plot development. And so, for the rest of this essay, I provide a modified version of Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* model, a version that could be, like any other model, a structural template for beginning fiction writers. This modified Snyder model includes the following elements: Catalyst, B Story, Midpoint Crisis, All is Lost/Gained, and Synthesis.

The Catalyst is the first element taken from Snyder's model that seems to hold both commonality with other models, while also suggesting something a bit more dynamic than, for example, Freytag's exposition, or LaPlante's conflict. As Snyder defines it in his book *Save the Cat!*, the “catalyst” beat is the moment that happens at the

beginning of many screenplays, often at approximately the ten or eleven percent mark. The Catalyst is the moment where the story's progression takes a significant shift, a place where a life-changing event affects the story arc. In Snyder's words: "telegrams, getting fired, catching the wife in bed with another man, news that you have three days to live, the knock at the door, the messenger . . . in the catalyst moment [the writer] knock[s] it all down. Boom!" (76). In novels and short stories, I would argue, that this moment does not have to be as dramatic as the rhetoric that Snyder suggests, but it will be character-altering, life-changing (for the story's characters), a moment that signifies a shift from what Freytag calls exposition, into the moment of rising action; or, in Syd Field's terms, it might be called the "inciting incident"; or, in Aristotelian terms, the moment of action that begins the "complication" section (Part XVIII); or, in LaPlante's model, the conflict; or, in the ABDCE structure, this would be the Action—which is to say, in effect, many structural paradigms make use of the catalyst moment, even if we do not define it through the same terms. The difference, in my mind, comes from the word "catalyst," which, etymologically comes from the notion of dissolving, or loosening. In other words, catalyst, as a term is more rhetorically effective than conflict or setup, or even action, as it suggests a sense of initial dissolution of the ordinary world, where the character finds that the storyworld will not accept the current homeostatic state.

Furthermore, I find the specific ways in which Snyder defines the catalyst—even down to the exact place where the catalyst is often found—very convincing and easy to demonstrate to a class of students. By way of example, on page thirty-six of Jess Walter's most recent bestselling novel, *The Beautiful Ruins*, Pasquale Tursi presents a business card from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox studio executive Michael Deane—a business card

that Deane gave to Pasquale some five decades earlier—to Shane Wheeler, who happens to know Italian and is also trying to find Michael Deane. Pasquale’s action, his presenting of Michael Deane’s business card, is the exact moment where something from the story’s past-tense 1962 sections directly impact the story’s present-tense modern-day sections. This moment happens between the ten and eleven percent mark of the novel.

Similarly, on page six of Tom Franklin’s novella “Poachers,” the Gates boys are illegally shocking fish in a boat on the river when they are caught by the new game warden. Then, as reaction to being caught, Kent Gates jumps into the game warden’s boat, “his big fingers closing around the man’s neck,” killing the game warden—an action that propels the momentum of the plot, eventually leading to the Gates brothers’ downfall—again, between the ten and eleven percent mark.

As another example, in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, one of the earliest (and longest) works in the history of the novel, Lovelace’s first letter to Clarissa occurs between the ten and eleven percent mark, a letter that changes both characters’ fates.

To teach this moment, one only has to look at a story and find the moment where a character is asked, or decides, to pursue (or run from) some goal (or threat) that will carry the main plot throughout the rest of the story.

The second element of Snyder’s model is somewhat different than any other structural element previously discussed in this essay. Snyder suggests that all good movies have a B Story, or a “story that carries the theme of the movie” and gives the writer “vital ‘cutaways’ from the A story” (79, 80). And while I would suggest that it may be dangerous to consider theme while writing, what I like about this suggestion is that, unlike the other models (except perhaps the ABDCE model), this B story suggests

that stories should have some element of subplot, whether the B story is some kind of love story (as Snyder suggests) or a “buddy” story, as both are often common in Hollywood, or some other budding or crumbling relationship, or a backstory, or a sub-goal that acts as a “cutaway” from the A story trajectory—any of these options would entail the *what* of the B story.

Furthermore, the B story element also seems to simultaneously provide a needed *discourse* suggestion, one that, like Backstory in the ABDCE model, suggests that a sense of *how* stories can come together, something beyond simply *what* could happen. And, just as the Catalyst moment is easily identified in stories, a discussion of subplot in any fiction writing classroom would be likewise worthwhile. Certainly, one can look to short stories and novels for quick examples.

The third element, an element found in most every structural model, is what Snyder calls the Midpoint, a halfway point in story that is “either ‘up’ where the hero seemingly peaks (though it is a false peak) or ‘down’ when the world collapses all around the hero (though it is a false collapse), and it can only get better [or worse] from here out”; a place where the stakes are often raised. This moment, like other models, has its foundation in notions of conflict, confrontation, and crisis, a point which creates a sense of further development, often for the worse.

By way of a few short story examples, the Midpoint in “The Man Who Knew Belle Starr” is almost exactly at the moment where Belle Starr shoots the restaurant owner, putting McRae in an impossible situation (a false defeat, as the situation only gets worse for McRae). Similarly, the Midpoint in Jess Walter’s “Anything Helps” is the moment where Bit first approaches his son’s foster parents’ house and is initially turned

down when asked if he can see his boy (another false defeat, as when Bit finally does talk to his son, the moment is even more crushing than if he had not been able to see his son in the first place). In George Saunders' "Sea Oak" the Midpoint is when Aunt Bernie dies (a false defeat, as Bernie comes back from the dead as a rotting and talking corpse a few pages later). The Midpoint of William Gay's "The Paperhanger" is when the doctor leaves his wife and, in the next paragraph, the paperhanger is there to visit the doctor's wife, "sitting on a four wheeler, drinking a bottle of beer"; and, in this case, the Midpoint suggests a further shift, not only in what is about to happen between the doctor's wife and the paperhanger, but also in the paperhanger's character, as Gay writes, "The paperhanger was much changed. His pale locks had been shorn away in a makeshift haircut as if scissored in the dark or by a blind barber and his cheeks were covered with a soft curly beard" (84). And so, in each of these examples, stakes are raised significantly for the characters and they have, in a sense, reached a point of no return as the world that existed before the catalyst moment is no longer accessible or possible.

The penultimate element I am suggesting is the section that Snyder calls the "All is Lost/Gained" beat, a structural beat that usually happens at approximately the sixty-eight percent mark in most screenplays. The "All is Lost" plot point is often the low point of the protagonist's story—and, often, there is what Snyder calls the "Whiff of Death," where something dies, either literally or figuratively. Yet, depending upon the genre, this moment might also be termed the "All is Gained" point. The function of this Lost/Gained moment often makes clear the potential for a change in the protagonist, the potential for a final metamorphosis. Again, like screenplays, this Lost/Gained plot point seems to happen regularly in novels and short stories.

In Jess Walter's "Anything Helps" the All is Lost moment is that moment when Bit talks with his son and, perhaps for the first time, comes to realize all that he's been missing, as he is "in danger of bursting, bleeding over the street" (303).

In Larry Brown's novel *Father and Son*, a few scenes before Glen's downfall, there is an All is Gained beat where Glen goes fishing with Roy. Even Roy's dialogue seems to suggest this Gained moment. Roy says, "It's been a nice day, Glen. I'm proud you came out to see me" (234). And this scene is the only moment in *Father and Son* where someone says they are "proud" of anything Glen has done. In this scene, Glen's character seems sincerely likable—as if he hadn't already killed a man (the catalyst scene) or continually acted as a threat to his ex-wife and son.

Similarly, Tom Drury's *The End of Vandalism*, contains an All is Lost beat where a "whiff of death" also occurs: Dan takes his pregnant wife, Louise, to the hospital where Dr. Pickett informs them that, "The baby . . . is not alive" (218). Certainly, this moment is the Lost point of the novel, affecting Dan and Louise throughout the rest of *Vandalism* and even into Drury's other novels where Dan and Louise are characters. As further examples, in James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*, Jim shoots and kills Pretty Weasel. In Kent Haruf's *Plainsong*, Victoria leaves the McPhersons' (a Lost point for both Victoria and the McPhersons') and then she "drifted into a daze and sorrow of disbelief" (203).

The inclusion of the All is Lost/Gained beat in this structural paradigm is important because, like the Catalyst and Midpoint elements, the All is Lost/Gained beat there is the inherent pathway for students to recognize structure through the lens of character metamorphosis and transformation. The Catalyst, Midpoint and All is

Lost/Gained moments are not only connected to *what* could happen in a story, but they also suggest *how* the story structure could maximize the transformation potential.

Lastly, while Snyder uses the term “Finale,” I would mirror the term Catalyst, at the beginning of a story, with the term Synthesis at the end of a story. Whereas in chemistry a Catalyst enables a chemical reaction (i.e. the story’s arc), Synthesis is the process of compounds coming together to build a more complex substance. In my own understanding of fiction, the idea of Synthesis—instead of resolution, denouement, or ending—more accurately describes the process of both working toward an ending as writer, and coming to understand an ending as a reader. Just as a writer works to synthesize all the structural elements that have led to an ending, the reader’s enjoyment of a story comes through his or her own synthesis of the story’s many structural, thematic and character-oriented elements. As John Barth defines an end to a plot as a “complexified equilibrium,” I find the term synthesis likewise persuasive as it suggests a process that is, perhaps, more complex than resolution (which is often understood as an answer, or working out a problem)—while, at the same time, the term synthesis is also easier to understand than “complexified equilibrium” (Barth 131) Furthermore, if I hold an element like a B story within this structural model, then synthesis also suggests that the B story could be a significant element that reinforces the final images and words of a story’s ending.

In fictional examples, I would suggest that synthesis occurs in many, but not all stories. Like any structural model, these elements I have suggested lead to a certain type of story that, structurally, suggests some form of character metamorphosis through its structure. By way of examples, in Kent Haruf’s *Plainson*, synthesis ends the story

through a family-like gathering. In Larry Brown's *Father and Son*, synthesis finally brings together Virgil and his grandson, Bobby and Jewel, and Puppy and his wife. In Jess Walter's *Beautiful Ruins*, a number of characters likewise come together in Dee's house, suggesting a complex synthesis of historical catalysts and present-day catalysts. Yet, synthesis does not always necessarily mean a joining, or combining. In Denis Lehane's "Until Gwen," synthesis is the point at which the Bobby kills his father, synthesizing the backstory elements with the present-day conflict. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's leap suggests a synthesis of magical realist elements as well as the notion of flying that is described in the opening images of the novel. In summary, synthesis is, very simply, a compounded whole, a bringing together of the story's structure and themes in such a way that provides a new and more complex sense of the whole.

In this essay I have provided a broad definition of structure, discussed structural models commonly used in creative writing textbooks and the way structural models are often viewed in creative writing communities in academia and in Hollywood, and I have outlined a few elements of the Blake Snyder *Save the Cat!* beat sheet, which I have also modified for possible inclusion in fiction workshop classrooms. Overall, I have tried to demonstrate the potential of structural models and the ways in which teachers can point to these structural elements with recent short stories and novels. While I recognize that, like all structural models, the model I propose is wholly dependent upon how a writer works through a process of creative invention in context of the model, I would also suggest that this particular model has elements that are different—perhaps even novel—

from traditional models that are often discussed in creative writing workshops. At the very least, this model uses a certain vocabulary and underlying structure that would not only support discussions of subplot and synthesis, but also allows a writer the wiggle room to create a story that, hopefully, contains elements of character development and metamorphosis.

## II. THIS HUMBLING RIVER

*September, 1993*

In the pale half-light of early evening, Carson James Sellars leaned his forearms up on the black steering wheel of his pick-up, listening to the engine idle, looking out the open window, watching those low hanging clouds, the way they worked in a solid motion from west to east, and then he looked to the sale barn, at the cracked and blistered white paint, the thin ribbons stripping away, gray and curling at the ends, exposing the dark and rotted slats of wood underneath. This place still smelled the same. The smell of work. Cowshit. Corn dust. Diesel exhaust. A leaf fire burned somewhere, probably further to the west, where the wind pushed the smoke toward him as some kind of warning. Carson wondered if anyone was standing there, watching that leaf fire, keeping it under control in this wind, the yellow and orange leaves blazing, leaving the ground black underneath.

The sale barn sure-as-shit hadn't always looked like this. Some fourteen years ago, when the sale barn belonged to Carson's father, Carson and his father had slept in the office every night. Carson stretched out on the brown tweed couch with the alarm clock at his head and the piss bucket at his feet. His father, Danny, curled on the concrete floor in his dead wife's hand-sewn quilt. It came to be routine, this kind of denial of any real sense of home. At one point in his life, Carson had come to think of the sale barn office as a kind of home, a home that was not the place where his mother had once lived her life, not the place where his mother had died, not that place where deep loss had been scalloped into his heart. And so, Carson and his father had kept this new home, the sale

barn office, respectable and clean. Back then, it looked nothing like this run down piece of shit he was looking at now.

Carson had spent the last twelve hours in his pick-up, driving from Longview, Texas to Dine, Missouri. He'd talked to himself for the majority of the twelve hour drive, practicing some words he might say in a particular order and with a particular emphasis, and even before this drive he'd spent a few years daydreaming some ideal conversation that would encompass all that he'd want to prove, evidence that he could use concerning Beau Goffman's accounting practices in regards to the sale barn and his father's old business. But, for the most part, he liked to think that he wasn't back in Dine just because of this sale barn, as the sale barn and Beau Goffman was just a small divide in his intentions. Carson was sitting here, now, in this gravel lot, because he knew it would be easier to talk truth with Beau Goffman later in the evening, after all the farmers and truckers had quit sipping their bitter coffee and quit their stories and decided to leave for their homes and families. He figured he knew how Beau would react. He figured it all might turn to some kind of extraordinary bullshit session. He knew that a bullshit session would leave him second guessing things he knew to be fact, the truth that was told in black ink and ledger paper.

Then, there was also this counter idea that he'd considered. Beau might deny it all, even his own deliberate and devious handwritten scrawl, and Carson wasn't sure how he would react to any of that. In his heart, he was hoping this confrontation wouldn't require anything physical, or the law, but he was still considering both. He had little knowledge of how the law worked in regards to falsity and liars. And so, he wanted to do the truth-talking early in this supposed vacation he was on, just to get it over with, to put

whatever might happen now in the past, just like so many other things that he'd come to know and regret.

Three weeks past, this unexpected letter had arrived from Natalie, a teenage girl, a teenage girl who lived here in Dine, a lovely teenage girl who had addressed a letter to C.J. Sellars and sent that letter to his apartment back in Texas. He'd received the letter on a Friday in August, sometime after Rosa, his Mexican lover, had left him for her husband now living up in Denver. On the day he received the letter, he'd been welding H-beams all morning and he'd sweated rings of salt through his gray button-up shirt, and he'd been thinking about black-haired Rosa, the way she held her hands close to her chest when she talked, imagining those little motions of her fingers when she told a story. He'd left work mid-day, intending to drink Kentucky bourbon at this joint over on Marshall Street until he was shitfaced and happy. He walked home to shower before he met up with this guy Harold, who everyone called Wank. But, Carson never made it. Instead, he gathered his mail at the doorbox and saw an envelope addressed with a child's scrawl. He opened it and read. Then he read it again. And he sat at his table, with his shirt off, and read it. He walked to the refrigerator with the letter in his hand. He opened a beer and read through it again.

*Dear Mr. C.J. Sellars,*

*Blair at school said you are my real Dad. Mom and Dad both got real mad when I asked them about you. I know about the birds and the bees so it's not a big deal. Love happens. That's what I like to say. I rode my bike to see your Dad because I ride by his house on my bus route after school so I know where he lives. I didn't call him grampa or anything but he said I might be his grandy daughter if he ever had one. He kept saying*

*grandy daughter. I thought that was funny. He let me pet your horse. I have to say that Budwizer is a stupid name for a horse. Mr. Danny gave me your address. He said you weld metal for fat men in Texas. So are you my real dad or not? I heard Mom and Dad fight about it when they thought I couldn't hear. Dad said a bunch of things that I don't want to say. Okay he said you are a scumbag and some other things. I don't know if you are or not but if you're my Dad I hope not. I like to ride my bike into town and I play softball every Winsday night at the ballpark. I wear number 8. If you come and watch me play you can see just how fast I can run. Mr. Danny said you liked to run too. He said you run all the time. My birthday is on October 3rd. I am going to be twelve years old. I wrote a lot just now because I want you to write back. Please write back okay.*

*Natalie Diane Schmidt*

*P.S. My mom is Missy Kay Schmidt. She used to be Missy Kay Walker.*

He wasn't sure how many times he'd read the letter that night, but he could hear the girl's voice from afar every time, as if she were sitting there at the table with him, looking into his deep-set eyes, and his stringy black hair that needed a good washing. He felt a bit ashamed, the way she might think of him in this place, of the mold along the edge of the kitchen tile and the sticky way the floor felt on his bare feet, all those whiskey bottles that lined the sink.

He looked around his kitchen for perhaps the first time, with eyes that could now see the truth of this place, and the truth of himself, how he'd become lazy and unclean, like a hog wallowing. And, in that moment, he wanted to think he understood why Rosa had left.

He'd folded the letter and kept it in his wallet and he'd open the letter occasionally, on his lunch break while he ate a ham sandwich with mustard, and at night while he sat in his living room in his rocking chair, in front of the box TV, watching *Jeopardy!*. Once, he'd read it aloud to Wank while they were drinking at Rumbles, this biker joint down in Galveston. Carson had thought to drink just one drink, but after a half-dozen or so, he read the letter aloud and Wank nodded and smiled at some of the things Natalie wrote, even though Carson was sure Wank couldn't hear any word he'd said, and so Carson held the letter in his hand as he tried to climb up onto the bar, wanting to read to these strangers this letter from a young girl who was probably his daughter back in Missouri.

Carson came to recognize the letter as some token of curiosity from the girl, and maybe even a work of love, and he still had it folded within his long wallet that he kept in the glove box. At the very least, he wanted the chance to get to know her. It made sense, he figured, that she was his daughter. He'd thought about it enough. She certainly could be. Or, if she wasn't of his own blood, he figured he'd like to know that too. Maybe then he could put to rest this guilt he felt because of one blurry night he spent with Missy Kay Walker. Maybe he just wanted to feel the honesty of it all, if there was any honesty to be felt. Either she was his daughter, or she wasn't.

He considered the box of papers on the floorboard and then looked back to the sale barn and then to the office there across the parking lot, a building his father and grandfather had built some forty years ago. He took a breath and killed the ignition and bent down, reaching into the cardboard box sitting there on the floorboard and pulled out the manila folder, flipping lightly through all the ledger paper, looking at his own

handwritten notes that overlapped Beau's black numbers, the way Beau's numbers didn't add up, and how his own notes pointed to all the thousands of dollars that had been siphoned away years ago, and he was wondering again why his father hadn't ever wanted to double check Beau's work? He figured it was because there was this inherent trust in Beau Goffman, as if Beau was a man near to family. Beau Goffman and Carson's father were, at one time, working partners and close friends. In fact, Carson couldn't ever remember his father having a closer friend than Beau Goffman. Uncle Melvin, maybe, but that was different. And if what Carson said was true, and if Carson said it aloud, and if Beau was as deceitful as charged, then there'd be something lost for everyone here in Dine.

Carson opened the pick-up door and stepped out into the wind and shook the travel from his long legs. He squatted, stretching his thighs. He slipped his black cowboy hat from his head and smoothed back his curly dark hair and ran his fingertips along the sweatband, flicking them into the wind. He rolled his neck and slipped his hat back on and held the folder above his head for a brief moment, feeling the familiar chill of all those early fall evenings on his skin, evenings that had been just like this, when the wind would blow across the plains, hours before a cold front moved through.

He turned and listened to the cattle lowing over in section C and he could almost picture them in his mind, their stamping feet and thick bodies shoving up against the wooden planks. There was this waist-high pile of rotting feed corn heaped on the circle pad where the steel silo used to stand. It looked to have been dumped and abandoned for some purpose that Carson couldn't imagine.

Carson heard a shout from somewhere behind him and he turned as the big body of Beau Goffman came slamming through the office screen door. The wind pinned Beau's blue plaid shirt to his chest, a black tie flapped over his shoulder, whipping like a flag. His long gray pony tail wagged back and forth as he jogged across the gravel.

"We're closed. Can't park here," Beau yelled. "There's a goddamn sign right in front you." Carson ignored Beau's pointing and instead turned his back to the wind and carried on about his business of sifting through a few of his ledger papers, looking for one in particular that he'd inked with important notes that he wanted to use to begin this conversation.

Behind him, he could hear Beau's boots crunching on the gravel, as if trying to understand what distance was safe. "I said there's a sign, you dipshit. Read it and get the hell off my property."

"I read your damned sign," Carson said. He turned to face Beau. "But you ain't going to tow my pick-up while I'm standing right here in front of you."

"C.J.?" Beau said. He stood a few yards away in the gravel, his hands on his hips. "Hell, Danny says you been down in Texas making the big money."

"I'm on vacation," Carson said.

"Well vacation or not, still can't park here," Beau said. "Not after closing."

Carson turned back to his folder, lining up the papers just-so.

Behind him, Beau carried on. "You park here and the rest of everyone else does, too. The Pinwheel closed up a couple years ago and so now all them damn teeny boppers come here to shoot the shit and blare their music. Half of them'd leave their vehiculars here overnight and I'd come in of a morning and there'd be beer cans and chew cans and

spit bottles and wrappers and so on and so forth all over the damned place. Hell I picked up a used rubber at least once a week. Them kids'd be screwing right here in the damned parking lot."

Carson gathered up the folder and turned to Beau and Beau crossed his arms but Carson didn't move to talk. Instead, he squinted into the wind and looked at that specific place next to the office window that used to say Owner: Danny Sellars, with the phone number that Carson had painted in red block letters. But Beau Goffman had painted over it, more than once from what Carson could tell. Where the sign used to be, there next to the window, on the weather-exposed side of the office, the paint was bleach white and glistening, even now in the late evening light.

Beau looked to where Carson was looking and then turned back, but Carson just stared at him, unsmiling and stiff, the folder clenched at his side and his dark jeans and his white button up shirt and the black cowboy boots and his hat pulled low on his forehead. In this moment, Carson felt he looked very much like those oil tycoons he'd come to know in the Texas oil fields and less like the long-haired teen he'd been when Beau had last saw him, so many years ago. He imagined himself growing taller, just standing there in his boots, this young boy that Beau used to know becoming a man, looming and foreboding against the backdrop of those low hanging clouds.

Then, Beau looked away, and Carson saw it too, a flock of starlings lift into the sky, a black mass of flexing and circling, twisting and bulging, the tight cluster moving away from the sale barn.

Beau started up again. "Some Waltersville kid got his skull cracked about right about where you're parked back in January and the little dumbass was in a coma for a

about a week. Thought it was the end of me. His parents tried taking me for all I'm worth 'cause it happening on my property and all. Can you believe it? So I just don't allow no parking. Period. Not even my own daughter."

Carson looked at Beau and grinned. "Your daughter the one leaving those rubbers all over the lot?"

"Better not be," Beau said. He hefted a leg up and planted a foot on Carson's bumper and chuckled uncomfortably, looking away from Carson's face once again. "I don't suppose she's that type of girl anyway. She doesn't have many boys come around, least not from what I can tell. Least, not yet. I figure she will one of these days when she gets a little longer, maybe skinnies out a little bit you know. Takes after my side too much. Mostly just her and her girlfriends like to cruise and all. They still cruise up around the ballpark and back down past Hickmore's and now they come up 3<sup>rd</sup> street to here, instead of over to The Pinwheel like they used to. Even with these gas prices they are cruising like it's free." Beau wiped the wind from his eyes and looked at the gravel. "Man did she throw a shitfit when I started getting after her. I had her car towed once. Made her walk home and all." Beau chuckled again. He slapped the hood. "I figure she thought this was her place too. But it ain't. I don't let that shit fly. Wes, he's the Sherriff now you know, he's been good about it and all. He makes it out here a few times a week when he comes into town, eats at Daisy Jo's, or he's patrolling and whatnot, and he'll flash those lights and assholes pucker real quick-like." Beau leaned a hip on the hood of Carson's pick-up.

Carson looked down at his folder, at his black boots, and then back at Beau, and there was something about the way this was all working out that Carson didn't like. He'd

imagined the easy way Beau talked, the way nothing ever seemed important or serious. But this was both important and serious, and Carson wanted to make it so. He looked to the sale barn, and then back to Beau.

“You seem to think I’m here because I like to hear you talk.” Carson watched Beau’s smile leave his face. “Get your fat ass off the hood of my truck.”

Beau shifted his weight and stepped back from Carson’s pick-up and stood there for a moment with his hands at his sides.

“Alright then,” Beau said. “I think you should leave. Right about now.”

“I’d like to discuss something with you. Inside.” Carson nodded to the office. “Bookkeeping.” Carson held up the folder. “Back when you did all the bookwork for Dad. Between about 1974 and 1978 or so? That sound about right?”

There was a bit of a shift in Beau’s gaze, as if he were looking past Carson for a brief moment, at something behind him, unwilling to meet Carson’s stare. Then, Beau said, “We got nothing to discuss. Get off my property before I call up Wes and he escorts you off.”

Carson looked over at the white shining wall of paint once again and took a deep breath, calming himself and then he looked up at the heavens, the clouds shifting and churning overhead. “Call Wes if you want, but I ain’t leaving, and I ain’t afraid of talking truth to a man of the law.”

“Your dad used to think he could do whatever the hell he wanted and there wasn’t no one gonna say or do anything about it,” Beau said. “You know as well as I do that the best thing that happened to him and you was losing this place. Took his ego

down a notch or two for the good of everybody. Probably made your life a whole lot easier, too.”

Carson looked at the gravel and then back to Beau. “You’d be better off keeping your mouth shut at this point.”

Beau crossed his thick arms. “Danny’d be telling me stories about you down in Texas and I’d always thought maybe you’d turned out half-way decent, C.J. That’s what I’d thought anyway.” Beau turned and began walking back toward the office. Carson could see Beau’s pony tail was tied every few inches with a different neon-colored band.

“You still got that ice machine by chance?” Carson held the folder under his arm and walked to the bed of his pick-up and leaned over the rear fender and lifted out a big red cooler.

Beau turned back to Carson. “What?”

Carson slid open the lid and fished out a beer that was bobbing in the cool water. He tossed it to Beau. Beau fumbled it and had to kneel down on one knee to pick the can from the gravel. He looked at it there in his hands and then looked back to Carson.

“It’s Texas beer,” Carson said. “It don’t bite.”

Beau held the can up. “This don’t make all you just accused go away.”

“I don’t mean for it to,” Carson said.

Beau considered, and then popped open the beer and watched it froth over the top for a few seconds and then he tipped it back. Carson could see the big man’s throat jiggle there above the loose knot in his tie.

“So you got ice? Or what?” Carson said again. “Gotta keep the beer cold.”

Beau looked at Carson and then at the beer can and shrugged. “Ice machine works about half the time,” Beau said. “You know where it sits. Right there by the sink. That same old piece of shit your dad used.” Beau took another drink and then twisted the can and crushed it between his palms. “But if you ever want something from me, you can go fuck yourself, far as I’m concerned.” He tossed the empty can back to Carson.

The amber overhead light flickered and then came on, buzzing. Carson looked at the empty can lying there cockeyed on the gravel.

Beau opened the office screen door and stood there in the doorway a brief moment and then stepped inside and locked the screen door. The two men stared at each other, one man inside and the other man outside looking in. Beau shook his head and turned away.

Carson stood for a moment in the wind, considering what he should do. On the one hand, he’d been thinking about setting Beau Goffman straight for a few years. On the other hand, Beau had always been nice to Carson as a boy, back when Carson would ride with Beau to deliver feed corn or drop off a gooseneck trailer full of steers. Beau bought Carson lunch at Daisy Jo’s on occasion and even brought him packs of baseball cards on his birthday.

But, there were these papers in the manila folder and half of Carson’s life spent away from his father and this town, mostly because of this man. At least, that’s how Carson figured it. His father losing the sale barn was the one thing that seemed to slide into everything that came after, like that slippery slope on a muddy bank, a slope that you try to walk down in your boots, but you keep slipping and catching yourself, and maybe you fall on your ass a few times and your hands and jeans are muddy and wet, and you’ve

left skid marks where you slipped, and when you finally get down the bank you look up, and there was another way down this whole damn time, but you hadn't seen it, because some asshole was up there hiding this other path from you. And Carson had slipped down those muddy banks before, but this time, as he stood there looking at the screen door, maybe he saw this other path, and maybe every path was just as muddy as another.

Carson bent and picked up the empty beer can and tossed it to the back of his pick-up. He opened his pick-up door and placed the folder carefully up on the dashboard. He popped his bench seat forward and lifted his rifle case from behind the seat, unlatching the case. He took out the rifle and the scope and the box of shells and he opened the bolt and slid one shell into the breech and pushed forward the bolt and clicked off the safety.

He left both the rifle case and the scope resting in the crease of the bench seat and locked his truck and wedged the manila folder under his armpit. He considered the cooler, and then picked it up in one hand, holding rifle in the other, and he walked calmly toward the office screen door, watching his black shadow grow long in the amber light. Then, he lifted his leg and kicked his boot through the storm door's cheap glass.

Carson shoved Beau Goffman's cheek flush against the cold linoleum and dug a knee into the middle of Beau's spine while his other knee pinned Beau's arm to the ground to keep it from trying to flail at him again. Carson held Beau's other arm at an awkward backward angle, twisting and bending the wrist just enough to elicit a sharp gasp from Beau's bloody mouth. Carson pushed an elbow into the back of Beau's neck and then grabbed Beau by the pony tail, pulling his head up from the floor and then

slamming it down again. He gripped Beau around the throat and leaned his weight into Beau's neck. He could feel the big man's breathing, shallow and quick. There wasn't much fight left there, and hadn't been to start with, especially after Beau's knee gave way to Carson's black boot. Carson figured Beau's knee would probably never bend naturally again, and he wasn't sorry for it.

Papers from the manila folder were scattered all across the office floor, some were yellow and some white and now a few were bent and ripped at awkward angles, and some specked with blood. The rifle rested along the seam of the brown tweed couch. Carson leaned into Beau's ear, spitting his words. "I sat there of a night listening to this Mexican station outta Marshall and working all those sheets. I even took a fuckin' numbers class," Carson said. "You know what I mean? I ain't that smart, Beau, but I know lies when I see 'em."

Beau's eyes were wide and Carson could feel Beau trying to talk, a gurgle coming up from the man's throat. Beau's face was a shade darker now as Carson's grip tightened. A flap of skin hung there from Carson's middle knuckle and the divot bled, a line of blood now trickling down between Carson's fingers.

"You know exactly what I mean," Carson said.

Beau's eyes closed and then opened, bulging like a steer caught in a chute. Carson followed Beau's gaze to a series of pictures of Beau's family lined along the wall above the brown tweed couch where Carson used to sleep. Beau and his family posed around a pyramid of hay bales, the sky blue and soft in the background. Beau was young and stout and his family gathered tightly in front of him, all sitting on the hay bales. His son squinted into the sky, not looking at the camera. His daughter stood there next to her

mother, the two looking more alike than Carson had remembered. They both cocked their heads to the side with wide smiles showing their white teeth. Beau stood behind them all, one knee up on a bale, his arms wide around them, a familiar grin on his face. And Carson figured that was about the right time. Cattle prices were going to shit in the early 80's, while Beau was shoveling money into his own pockets.

Carson leaned into Beau a bit more and he looked back down and Beau's throat gurgled again and Carson let up on his neck and Beau took in a big gasp, choking and coughing into the dusty floor. Carson reached into his pocket and pulled out his pocket knife. He unfolded it with his teeth and jabbed it right under Beau's ear lobe, along the jaw line, just enough to draw a pearl of blood.

"Just say you did it. Say it. I got these papers to prove what I know. So just say it so I can hear it." Carson picked up Beau's head and cracked it against the linoleum floor once again, the concrete underneath hard and cold. "I swear I'll put this knife in your throat and drag your fat ass over to the hogs and I'll be back in Texas by tomorrow and your wife'll find your guts and bones spread all over that fuckin' pen."

He leaned into Beau's spine one last time and stood, kicking the man in the ribs. He paced in front of the tweed couch, folding up his pocket knife and jamming it back into his pocket and then he ran his hands through his hair and looked around for his cowboy hat, but he wasn't sure where it was. He sat on the couch and took the rifle in his hands and breathed deeply and leveled the rifle at Beau and listened to the man groan.

Carson looked at his knuckles and bit off the flap of loose skin, spitting it to the floor. He wasn't sure what he'd struck—maybe the dark lacquered desk, or maybe Beau's white teeth or his silver belt buckle. Carson wiped the knuckle on his jeans and

sucked the blood from the divot, looking down as blood seeped in around bonewhite edges and trickled down between his fingers again. He held the rifle with one arm and opened his cooler with his other hand and reached his hand in, letting it rest there for a time in the cool water. The blood swirled there, mixing, the water turning pinkish against the white insides of the cooler, and then Carson shook his hand and brought out another beer. He cracked the top and tipped it back and leaned back, holding the rifle at his side. He spread his fingers along the brown tweed, the rough squarelike texture that had often left an imprint on his face and his shoulder skin that he'd see in the mirror above the sink when he brushed his teeth.

Beau looked at Carson through his droopy eyes and then he closed them for a time and Carson drank his beer, listening to his own heart and Beau's heavy breathing and the hum of the new small refrigerator that sat next to Beau's dark and polished desk. Carson's father's desk was gone, probably in some ditch or burned. It was an old oak desk, one that his mother's great-grandfather had constructed by hand. But that wasn't important at all, not to anyone but Carson. He laid the rifle to his side and leaned forward and bent down, taking Beau by the legs and jerking him, straightening him out, tired of looking at him curling there like his father had all those years ago.

Carson rolled Beau over and Beau's eyes were wide and he started whimpering and Carson lifted Beau onto his ass so he was propped against the front of that slick wooden desk of his and Carson lashed out once with his fist and caught Beau on the side of his head and Beau slid along the polished woodgrain, back on to his side, holding his skull in his hands.

"That one was just for lots of other things," Carson said. "Like this desk."

Carson picked up the rifle and the cooler and stepped into the next room where there was a sink and a toilet and a shelf of soap and and bottles of iodine and an empty bucket and a mop. The ice-machine knocked loud and inconsistent and Carson leaned the rifle along the wall and took out each can of beer, one by one, placing them up on the shelf and then he dumped the cool pink water down the toilet.

He heard Beau groaning behind him and he turned to look, to watch Beau struggle to sit up, to lean back against the desk. Beau wasn't watching Carson, instead he was looking down at his hands. His chest heaved as if he was crying, but there was no sound. Carson ripped toilet paper from the roll and wrapped a line around his hand and then turned to look at the mirror up above the sink and it all seemed so natural, as if he'd done it just yesterday, expecting to see himself there staring back. But he didn't. Instead, there was a paper sign with writing in thick black marker. Carson would recognize Beau's handwriting and this wasn't it. It was close enough though, as if some kind of off-breed of Beau's own hand, with more curled letters and less quick-dashed lines. Carson figured it was probably Beau's daughter's hand. It read: *Please Flush Twice After a #2 and Leave the Seat Up and the Door Closed With the Fan On!! Thank You!!!* And someone had since drawn a line of penciled flowers along the bottom of the page. Carson shook his head and placed all his beer cans back in his cooler and then opened the ice machine, shoveling handfuls of ice into the cooler, packing it tight around the beer.

Carson turned to look at Beau and Beau was looking back at him with wet cheeks, slick and shining, and his black tie dangled low, hanging loosely, just above the gray hairs that curled along the top of his chest. His stomach was red and exposed where buttons had popped and ripped and his gut was moving slowly in concert with a deep

wheeze that Carson could now hear as he stepped back into the office with the rifle and cooler full of ice and beer.

Beau's eyes followed him and Carson sat on the couch leaning forward, elbows on his knees. He reached down and took out a flake of ice and slipped it in his mouth and closed the cooler.

Beau stared at the floor for a moment and then back to Carson with a look on his face that Carson had never seen before. Perhaps it was a look of regret and guilt, or perhaps a look of knowing that something is now lost forever, the type of look Carson saw on his father's face for months after his own mother had passed.

"So?" Carson said. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and rolled the flake of ice around on his tongue.

Beau looked away and nodded, slowly, and then he looked again at Carson and kept nodding.

"Do you understand all that this means?" Carson said.

Beau nodded again and looked down at his quivering hands. He tried lifting the wrist that Carson had turned at an awkward angle, but instead he winced and laid it back in his lap.

"Dad," Carson said. "You know I tried telling him a few times but he wouldn't have none of it. Stopped talking to me, even. I'd call about the same time every Sunday night, and after I accused you he just stopped answering the phone. Maybe it was 'cause he felt some kind of shame that he didn't run a proper business, or that he let his trust run too far. But, he might listen now that I'm back and I got these papers with me. He ain't got much to live for anyway, from what I've heard. If I took him these papers, I don't

know what he'd do. You know him better than me. I figure he'd probably hurt you worse than this. Or maybe Uncle Melvin or Hank Bevins would do it. You took them out of work too. Hank lost a wife because of it."

Beau nodded again.

"Dad, he used to have me thinking you were what kept things going for so long. He probably still thinks the world of you," Carson said. "Still. To this day, he's probably been thinking exactly what he's always been thinking."

Beau nodded again.

"So what do we do about all that?"

Beau tried to pull a shoulder up to his face to wipe the wet away, but he could only shrug.

"Can you drive?"

Beau tried lifting one arm, but he couldn't. He reached up with the other arm to the lip of his desk and tried to turn his body, but he was having a hard time of it and so he let himself back down without looking at Carson.

"So this is what you're going to do," Carson said. "You're gonna sit here and think about this for awhile. If your wife calls--"

Beau shook his head.

"No?"

Beau cleared his throat and this voice came out as a whisper. "She ain't around to call."

"She dead?"

Beau shook his head and spit a line of blood to the floor. He cleared his throat.  
“She remarried.”

Carson sat back and held the beer between his legs, running his finger along the lip. “Who?”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s gone. Kids too.”

Carson shrugged. “Point is, you got about four hours to get hold of Dad and set this all straight. Hear what I’m saying?”

Beau shrugged. “It ain’t gonna matter, C.J. Everyone’s moved on.”

Carson pointed at the floor, anger rising in his voice. “He woulda rather slept right there. Every night. For the rest of his life. We went out home and he sat in a folding chair in the kitchen for a damned week, staring out the goddamned window. Didn’t move. You take away what a man knows and he just goes straight to shit. So you’re telling me this won’t matter to him?”

Beau looked at his hands and then to the doorway and Carson looked there too, where the wooden door creaked and then the wind pushed it open. Just past the wooden door was the office mudroom. The shattered screen door glass reflected the amber overhead light from the parking lot outside, like some kind of slick and jagged thing that held the color of this early evening hour.

Carson stood and walked over to Beau’s desk and picked up the phone and took the thick phone book from the dusty shelf above Beau’s desk. “You still living over at the old place on Double E?”

Beau nodded again.

“Same phone number? 5742?”

Beau nodded and took in a deep breath. Carson opened the phone book and turned to the G section, running his hand over the thin paper just to check his memory. “I’m gonna call over there to make sure you ain’t lying straight to my face. You better hope Brenda don’t answer.”

Beau shrugged and dropped his head as if to rest. Carson stared at Beau, waiting for some other reaction, but there was none. So, he reached down and spun the rotary dial, listening to the clicking roll. He picked up the phone and moved around the desk and sat on the brown tweed couch watching a new line of tears slip down Beau’s cheeks.

Carson held the receiver in front of Beau, waiting for someone to answer. But no one did.

Carson squatted along the sidewalk on Lightburne Street and felt through the packed ice, pulling another beer from his cooler. He could still smell the leaf fire, even after walking to the other side of town. He reached back and checked make sure the rifle scope was still there, wedged in his back pocket. It kept slipping up, and so he pushed it back down again. He tapped out a cigarette and lit it, cupping it in his palm, out of the wind. He sipped the cold beer and thought about Beau, still sitting there, propped against that lacquered desk, one eye closed, and the other swollen and red, and the tears leaking out the corners of both. He squatted there for some time, replaying his words in his mind, what he’d said and what he wished he’d said, maybe something about the sale barn looking like trash, or about the tweed couch and how he’d wanted to sit there, maybe fall asleep once again, or how this town was going to leave Beau sliding down that steep

muddy embankment that he was already on, how there wasn't nobody gonna help a damned liar and a fake, not in this town.

Carson observed this yellow house with a sagging porch. He stretched his thighs and rested his left hand upon the packed ice, the knuckles throbbing, the back of his hand swelling, bruised.

As a boy, Carson had mowed this yard for Markus Delhaus. Markus was some cousin of Carson's mother by marriage and she had insisted that Carson push mow the yard for free. So he'd done it, just like she'd asked. Carson figured he was truly mowing because his father Danny owed Markus some kind of debt, but if so, neither Markus nor his mother had ever let-on. Markus just sat on the porch and drank beer and watched Carson mow the yard, pointing occasionally at some patch of weed or grass that Carson had missed. Then, Markus would boil a hot dog and bring out some plain potato chips for Carson to eat while he talked about all his beautiful blonde granddaughters living in these foreign cities with skyscrapers and buses and jazz music and sculptures of bulls and lions and museums and big ball parks and all of what Carson tried to imagine. He'd always liked Markus and he was wondering if he was still around, if he still came to the porch of a night to sit and watch the clouds turn purple and red for a time, as the sun slipped down behind them. Carson watched the windows for light and movement inside, but there wasn't any, and that old white Ford Fairlane wasn't parked there in the carport, either. He picked his hand from the cooler and squeezed a fist and felt the tightness along his knuckles and the small bones of his wrist.

The evening was turning quickly dark and in the distance a dome of light from the ball field raised up into the darkness and so he took up his cooler and walked up to the

sagging porch and leaned over the porch rails and took this red and white lawnchair that was propped there next to a dead potted plant. A line of ants moved along the porch, around the dead potted plant and to someplace Carson couldn't see. He held the lawnchair there under his arm for some time, looking over the porch, watching the ants, studying a toy dump truck with a bunch of screws and nails and a hammer handle sticking up out of the bucket. Carson bent down and peered through the spindles and if he had tried to stand there and count the nailheads that were hammered into the smooth yellow porchwood, he couldn't have. There were hundreds of nails hammered in some random pattern that Carson couldn't figure, all within a yard or so of where the lawn chair had been leaning, where the ants funneled out from beneath the porch. Carson waited for a time, curious, looking for someone to come to the door, or some vehicle, maybe a white Fairlane, to turn into the driveway, but there was no immediate traffic and no lights flicked on inside, at least not from what he could tell. So, he wedged the cooler at his hip and lifted the lawnchair over his shoulder and headed toward the domed light where Natalie's softball game was supposed to be getting started.

Before he crossed into the south edge of Hardy's field, he took off his boots so as to keep them from getting muddy and, eventually, he came to sit in the red and white lawnchair along the high bank of the Nemanya River, below an outcrop of trees, hiding his long body in the shadows as headlights turned into the ballpark.

When the warm ups began, a light mist was settling in on his forearms and he could feel his black jeans now becoming damp and cool and sticky. He held the rifle scope up to his eye and squinted through it, watching the girls. He scanned for this girl,

Natalie, who could be his daughter. She'd said she wore number eight and it didn't take long for him to find her. And although he'd never seen her until this very moment, he figured he would have known which one of these girls was his daughter, even without the blocky white numbers they wore on the backs of their jerseys. Her long bowed legs, her sun-bleached blonde hair, the way she stood with her hip cocked, as if she were leaning into a door jamb that wasn't there.

He watched this girl, Natalie, this young lady that was of his own blood, this daughter that he'd never known. He watched her through the rifle scope as she tossed the softball back and forth, and he watched her as she giggled with some other girl, holding her glove to her face as if telling some dark secret that she didn't want him to see. He watched her adjusting her uniform, tucking and retucking the shirt into her white pants, and then reworking her belt through the loops, and then he watched her turn quick and alert toward the dugout and he watched as she jogged head down toward where the team was huddling along the first-base line. Then, when he could no longer watch her because she was swallowed up by the shadows of the dugout, Carson took a minute to relax his squinting eyes. He looked at the arc lights above the field, the way this new mist seemed to come straight down, even though he was sure it was all some sort of illusion, some trick of angle or distance from where he was sitting, the bats flying in and out of the mist and the light.

He laid his rifle scope in his lap and sank a little lower in the lawn chair, reaching down and feeling along the tips of the wet grass for the rim of his beer. His knees were stiff again and his hand throbbed and he was restless. He tipped the beer can and finished the last half, and then he stood and stretched his arms and lunged a couple of steps toward

the bank's edge, his bare feet sinking in the wet earth. He tossed the beer can into the river and took a piss, listening to the river shush and froth below him, where the river grass swam belly up and the catfish huddled in deep holes.

Then, he took his seat again and lifted the scope to watch his twelve year-old daughter perform cartwheels in right field. Her legs were straight as steel fence posts and her arms were angled and straight too, stiff, and she cartwheeled again and again, perhaps the most perfect cartwheels he'd ever seen. Then, after a few cartwheels between pitches, and even from this distance, Carson could hear the coach yelling at the girl to pay attention here in the very first inning. He saw his daughter look over to the dugout, and then nod, as if to say, *Yessir*. As if to say, *Please don't be mad at me*. She looked at her white cleats and then looked back toward the dugout and the back to her cleats.

And Carson was thinking that if he were closer to the game, maybe if he were sitting there in the stands, he might yell a word or two at this dumbass coach, something about letting little girls behave like little girls, even when they're supposed to be out on the ball field playing this sport of softball.

He figured only a few people knew this girl Natalie might be his daughter. It had never become public knowledge, what happened between Carson and Missy that year after high school, and it was one of the hard reasons that he'd left Dine. But, now that he'd been watching her for a while, he figured you might be able to tell, if you looked at him and her together. If they'd stood side-by-side, he imagined someone would figure it out. He had a long, sinewy body, and legs that bowed enough to make his knees ache and pop on occasion. She had his bowed legs too, he'd already decided on that. Except, he hoped that she'd soon grow out of those bowed legs, if that was in the realm of

possibility. He could imagine her, older, with those slightly bowed legs, and he could imagine her without them. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a pony tail and he watched her pull strands of it to her mouth, chewing on her hair between pitches. He figured that's why no one ever guessed that she was his daughter. The blonde hair. But, then he was thinking about how her hair might grow darker. Then, maybe people would figure it out. Carson had blonde hair, too, as a boy. It only darkened as he'd aged. But people probably couldn't remember that. They probably couldn't remember his blonde hair. Either way, she'd have long legs, and whether her hair stayed blonde, or went dark, she'd be lovely and she'd be trouble.

The score was four to zero in the third inning and Natalie's team was losing when she came up to bat for the first time. By his count, she was batting eighth. He brought the scope to his eyes, sitting forward, elbows on his knees. She had an open stance, almost facing the pitcher, as if to say, *I'm watching your dumbass and what are you gonna do about it?*—at least, that's how Carson figured it. And he liked that. He liked that about her. He was grinning, just sitting there. He wasn't thinking a thing about Beau Goffman or Flick Whalen or about Texas or anything else. He was just there with the cool mist and the river behind him and the lights over the ball field and the rifle scope up to his eye, squinting through it. He was just a father with a twinge of hope and a bit of pride, both of these emotions swelling there in his chest. Carson watched the girl swing, awkward and slow. He wanted to yell something, but he wasn't sure what that might be. He watched her swing and miss again. And then one last time she swung at a ball that was high, up at her neckline.

He leaned back and sat there for a minute trying to sort out this new feeling in his chest. The bat was too heavy, he figured. Get her a lighter bat. This idiot coach should at least know what type of bat a young girl should use. He wanted to yell, but even if he yelled, there wasn't anyone going to hear him from this distance.

During the next inning, a small pick-up pulled along the shoulder of the highway and killed its lights. Carson watched the overhead light pop on inside the pick-up, the orange light flickering there in the dark and the man inside digging for something at his side. The man was short and thick with muscle. His name was Flick Whalen and he was Carson's cousin. Flick had spent summers with Carson and his father while Flick's father, Uncle Melvin, was in jail for beating a man to death outside a bar called The Pubhouse in Waltersville. Flick had spent time with Carson in Texas, too, working on motorcycles and learning how to speak to Mexican women. He'd lived with Carson for a half-year while they both worked an oil field in the Basin. But Flick liked to think he could send larger men to the hospital—and he had, when the occasion presented itself. And this is why Flick was now back here, in Missouri, and not still with Carson back in Texas, where Flick had developed a reputation as a good mechanic with anvils for fists.

Carson clicked his lighter twice and Flick clicked his lighter in return, holding it up for a brief second before lighting a cigarette. Flick walked toward him, stepping through the wet field as if trying to keep his cowboy boots from the mud, but Carson knew just as well that it wouldn't matter, that the field always held water on this side of the highway, which is why Carson had removed his boots before he'd lifted one step toward the river.

Flick stood off to the side of Carson, pulling a drag on his cigarette. “So you some kind of pervert?”

Carson looked up at Flick and then back to the game.

“Why ain’t you watching from the stands?” Flick said. “You playing with your tallywhacker out here or something?”

“We agreed to meet out here.”

“Didn’t have to,” Flick said.

“We didn’t?” Carson looked at Flick again and could see Flick’s white muscle shirt bobbing at the shoulders.

“Just saying, if you wanted to see teenage girls run the bases, we could have been sitting a little closer you know?” Flick cupped his hands under his chest and jiggled these mimicked breasts. “So we could actually *see* them run the bases, you know? All bouncy and stuff.”

“Ain’t no bouncy stuff happening over there,” Carson said. “At least, not those girls in the game.”

Carson picked up his scope and searched along the wooden bleachers again. There, along the third base side, Missy, Natalie’s mother, had moved a few rows up and was now leaning against her husband, Wes Schmidt, the Sherriff of Nemanya County. He was in street clothes, jeans, and a red Nemanya Indians t-shirt. In those street clothes, he looked like he might be some regular guy, maybe someone you could trust. Missy wore a white sleeveless blouse and held a blue blanket across her lap. They were sitting close to each other, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder. Carson squinted into the scope, watching them for a time, the way he shared his popcorn and the way she handed him her

drink. She looked pretty damn good, Carson figured. Her hair was darker now and cropped short, holding a little curl upturned there at the ends. He didn't remember ever seeing her hair that way before. And her shoulders, tanned, seemed to shine when she moved, reflecting the arc lights.

"The sheriff's daughter plays," Carson said, finally. He figured he could have just as well said, *My daughter plays*, but that would have taken further explanation that Carson didn't want to give at this moment. Even in all their closeness, there were some things that Flick didn't know, or if he did, he'd probably forgotten, and Carson was fine with that.

"Wes Schmidt's here?"

"Uh huh," Carson said. He reached into his cooler and pulled out two beers, handing one to Flick. He watched Flick open the beer. Then he asked, "You in some kind of trouble or something?"

Flick shrugged and took a drink and then looked at Carson and smiled, the whites of his teeth flashing there in the dark. "Course not," Flick said, his grin wide. "Just always looking for it."

"Well, I wanted to see the game," Carson said. "Been a long time since I watched a game on this field."

"Didn't Wes marry Missy Walker?"

"Yep."

"Didn't you bang her once-upon-a-time? Her daddy got real mad and shit? Something like that?"

Carson tipped back his beer and finished it and raised the rifle scope to his eye and didn't answer.

Natalie trotted across the diamond, head down, glove curled into her armpit. She looked up, briefly, and Carson believed it was in his direction. He thought maybe she had smiled, maybe even waved her glove his way. Then, she turned to face the infield again, hands on her knees, waiting for something to happen. He wished she'd do another cartwheel. If he were closer, he would've yelled to see one. The best, most rigid cartwheel she could muster. Then he'd stand and clap his hands and hoot and whistle. And then, maybe he'd walk down to the dugout and grab a shock of that coach's hair and pull his dumbass forehead through the dugout's wire fence.

"So you ready to go then?" Flick said.

"Not really." Carson watched the girl toe some word there in the grass with her cleats. *Fucking coach*, he figured. *Dumbass*. *Dipshit*. There were a number of words Carson imagined Natalie was writing there in the outfield with her cleats.

Flick put a hand on Carson's shoulder, leaning into him, tapping a clump of mud from the wedge of his cowboy boot. "Well I ain't gonna stand around here to get a hard-on and wait on you," Flick said, gesturing to the ballpark. "Come by Daisy Jo's when you're done playing with your pecker. She's wanting to see you."

"What if I don't?"

"Then don't. Hurt that good woman's feelings. See if I give a damn. I'll be there 'till ten, then I'm gone. And don't call me if you don't show up. I pissed a couple people off to get this set up on short notice."

“Get what set up? I got my own things going on right now.” Carson looked to the field and then again to Flick. “You getting me into some kind of trouble?”

Flick bobbed his shoulders and grinned. “Nah.”

“Sure you are. Just say it.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Figured.”

Flick pulled off Carson’s black cowboy hat and rubbed a knuckle on his head until Carson punched a fist into Flick’s thigh. Flick hopped on one leg for a brief minute, massaging his thigh, laughing like it hurt, and then he reached into the cooler and pulled out another beer.

Carson smiled and pointed to the ball field. “You see this bow-legged girl here in right field? The bow-legged blonde?” Carson picked his hat from the ground and slipped it back on his head. “She’s a cute one. She was doing cartwheels there in the outfield earlier. Then the fuckin’ coach got after her.”

One inning left, but Carson didn’t want to be seen by headlights pulling out of the ballpark, so he cut across Hardy’s pasture where two horses stood by the fence and watched him pass and then dipped their heads over the fence to pull the long grass from the ditch. He looked back to the ballpark, the way the floodlights were uneven, leaving a dark hole in right-center field. The streetlights of Dine flickered yellow and orange, and beyond those lights one tower stood above the rest, pulsing disclets of red through the night.

At the edge of Hardy's field, Carson came to a ditchwater creek that fed into the river. There, he dipped his muddy feet in the trickling water and wiped them down with his palms and shoved on his boots. He dipped the lawn chair in the water and wiped the mud from the legs and the bottom rungs and then he walked a few blocks in the dark. In the shades of night, the houses looked different than before, all run down and all like home.

He cut through an alley where bald tires were stacked next to a cord of wood and he walked to the house with the sagging porch a few blocks south of where he'd stepped out of Hardy's field.

There were lights on now in the front, so Carson circled around to the side of the house and lifted the lawn chair up over the porch rails, letting it down gently.

Then, he stood on the sidewalk, at a distance, with his cooler at his side and the scope in his back pocket and looked in the window where the blinds were open and he watched a young boy with blonde hair sitting shirtless at a card table eating a bowl of cereal. The boy was nodding and chewing, reading the edge of the cereal box, and then turning the box and reading something else. *Ten percent Niacin*, Carson figured. *One hundred and ten calories per serving*. Carson had read it all before.

A woman Carson thought looked a little familiar entered the kitchen. Carson squatted there on the sidewalk and took out his scope and had a closer look. She wore a purple t-shirt with a white design of ballroom dancers and a line of stars that rainbowed up and over the dancers. He could tell she had just taken a shower because her dark hair was a tangled mess of wet and her face and her neck were splotched with red, as if the shower was steaming hot, right up to the minute she decided to step out. She took the

box of cereal from the table and the boy said something with his mouth full, milk dribbling down his chin. *I was reading that goddamn box*, Carson figured.

He stood there on the sidewalk smiling at his own thoughts for a few more seconds and watching the boy scowl, surely pissed off. Then the boy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and drank down the milk from the bowl. The woman appeared again and took the bowl and came toward the window, toward Carson, toward what must have been some kind of dishwasher or drawer below the window, and she bent at the waist and he watched her thin arms pull something out and then push something in there below the windowsill. She looked up briefly at the window, as if she were looking right at Carson, or maybe at her own reflection, or maybe at a clock that was near the window, at some object that Carson couldn't see, and then she turned and yelled some quick burst of words that Carson couldn't quite discern, but sounded like the type of yell that came from a tired mother, probably worn out from wherever she spent her long working days.

And Carson felt all of a sudden wrong that he'd taken the lawn chair. Maybe she had missed it. Maybe that lawn chair was the only chair in this world where she could come to relax, out on this sagging porch, just sitting there staring at these yellow and orange lights and the mist in the air, listening to the occasional *shhaw* of traffic, where she could gather herself after a hot shower, somewhere away from the boy and away from the evening news and away from the bullshit of this day. Maybe she had already come to curse the missing lawn chair. But he was hoping she hadn't.

He thought about leaving, about distancing himself from the house, distancing himself from his considerations of knocking on the woman's door. If he did knock, would she answer the door? Or wouldn't she? Would she be scared of a knock this time

of night? Would she be expecting someone? Would he say to her, *Is this your lawn chair? Oh, it is. Okay. Well it was in the ditch over there and I figured it was yours because yours was the closest porch.* Or, would he say to her, *I took this chair this afternoon because it was sitting there, just free, just leaning there against the porch rails, and I watched my daughter from this chair and it was a comfortable and nice chair and I thank you for letting me borrow it.* Or, would he smile and say nothing at all and wait for some expression of fear, or of curiosity, or of love to come to her familiar mouth.

And so he dipped into his cooler and took out the last two beers and walked up the steps, his weight creaking the porchwood, and he stood there in front of the door looking at the door and the windows and the nails hammered into the porch and the line of black ants that were thicker now than before. Inside, he could hear the woman hollering for the young boy, his name was Gerald, to go to bed. Then, there was a baby crying and she was shushing the baby, and then the baby was silent and he stood there for some time, still and listening, the beers in his hands.

And then the lights in the kitchen were turned off and he looked at the beers and placed them along the rail banister. He took the lawn chair and opened it and placed it just so, as if to put it in the exact location where he knew she'd probably wanted it all this time, and he left one beer there, on the porchwood, next to the lawnchair, for her to find when she was relaxing, ready for a beer.

The night shimmered with the smell of wet grass and asphalt and leaf fire smoke and Carson kept his head down, listening to the the *ska-skeet* of his boots along the black

road, as if to keep from looking in all the windows as he was passing, as if to keep from seeing these people he might believe he recognized.

Even from this distance, he could hear the cars leaving the ballpark, the occasional revving of an engine, the noise of cars on the highway a few hundred yards away. He looked back and saw the arc lights still on, the halo of white still there above the low dark houses and their curtained amber window light. He wondered how many of them vehicles, if any, would be deciding to stop for a drink at Daisy Jo's. He wasn't sure what kind of welcome he'd get from this town, but he was sure he'd get one. He figured Daisy would be glad to see him, if nothing more than it meant one more beer and whiskey drinker. She'd always been good to him. She'd cooked his meals for eight years after his mother died. He and his father would stop by the bar twice a day for meals during the summer and she'd always get the grill going, even if they came in late. He was wondering about one of those pulled pork sandwiches, or a tenderloin with pickles, maybe a side order of cheddar balls.

He cut through a yard, stepping around a tricycle and a sandbox full of water and cut through another alley where bull thistles had grown up alongside the buildings, waist high and blooming. He emptied the cooler of cool water there in the alley and took a piss in the shadows. There was country music playing in the distance, muted and moving, trotting forward at an arm-swinging pace. Carson removed his hat and brushed his hair over with his fingers. He came out of the alley and stepped onto the sidewalk and looked down Main Street where the old brick road arched and sagged, uneven and glistening in the night. The low buildings along the street were slick and dark, warped sheets of plywood in the windows.

Across the street, Daisy Jo's neon red sign glowed in the night and a red sheen reflected in the cars and trucks parked along the sidewalk, glossy and wet.

Flick's truck was parked down the block, sitting alone under a pulsing orange street light, but Carson didn't see Flick there behind the wheel, so he opened his wallet and took out a few twenty dollar bills, slipping them into his jeans pocket. He'd stashed four hundred dollars in his rifle case in the truck before he'd locked it and left it in Goffman's gravel lot. But, he'd kept a hundred in twenties in his wallet and figured it was best not to flash around that much cash on a Thursday night when he wasn't sure about who else might be waiting in there. He also didn't want to give Flick the wrong impression when he opened his wallet.

Or, maybe he did.

He still wasn't sure about Flick. Not yet, anyway. They'd been good friends when Flick was with him in Texas and Carson had come to miss something about him when he left, but that seemed long ago. Maybe it was just that Flick was Flick. He wasn't a pretender, he said what was on his mind, and even though he talked too much and was prone to exaggeration, he was honest when it mattered and he'd tell it like it was. Blunt, sometimes. Rash, occasionally. But, Carson knew who Flick was and what he was and there was a kind of commitment that they'd always had while growing up that they'd always been honest to one another, even when they weren't honest with anyone else. Flick had depended on Carson, especially when Flick had come down to Texas. They'd shared a bedroom for a few months, and told stories to each other in the dark.

Carson twisted his neck and rolled his shoulders to relax himself. He looked back to the ball field where the lights were now off and stepped onto the brick street.

A man stepped out of a truck and walked around to the tailgate, leaning back, crossing his arms as if to wait for Carson to cross the street in front of him and Carson couldn't get a good look at the man there in the red shadows of Daisy Jo's.

"I thought you might show up here," the man said. "Or the ballpark. I couldn't decide which."

The words were sharp and loud against the brick and Carson knew he'd see Wes Schmidt eventually, but was hoping to avoid it for as long as possible.

Wes lifted his chin a little bit, as if waiting for Carson to say something. Carson looked to Wes's truck, and then back to Wes.

"We drove separate," Wes said. "Missy and Natalie are at home, if that's what you're wondering about."

"Well I wasn't," Carson said. His boots clicked across the bricks and he looked away from Wes, to the neon red sign, focusing on it as he crossed the street.

"I suppose you want to talk to me, yeah?" Wes said.

"I don't," Carson said. He walked between a car and a truck, looking briefly toward Wes over the cab of the car.

"Beau Goffman called me at around eight-thirty. You happen to know why that screen door was broken?"

Carson stopped and turned to Wes. He was looking for some sign of truth in what Wes was saying. If he'd truly talked to Beau, he'd know about the screen door, and this conversation could go a number of different ways, and Carson was sure none of them were good if Beau had given the first word. "I don't," Carson said.

“Well Beau called, like he does, and said there was a truck with Texas plates parked in his parking lot. He’s particular about that lot nowadays. Tries to keep it clean.”

Carson considered the meaning of what Wes was saying. “You and I both know that’s a crock of shit,” Carson said. “If you had talked with Beau, at any point tonight, we’d be having different words.” Carson stepped up onto the sidewalk and stood in front of Daisy’s sign and tipped the cool water from his cooler. The back of his hand was swollen and bruised and throbbing. He stood and kept his hand back, out of the light.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wes said.

“Beau and I had a talk this evening and we agreed to come to terms on a few things concerning the sale barn. Strictly business talk.”

“That so?”

“It is.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Wes said. “Some business with Beau Goffman?”

“I’m on vacation,” Carson said. “Beau was just a thing.”

“When was the last time you came here on a damned vacation? Or to say anything to Beau Goffman?”

Carson shrugged and looked toward Flick’s truck. Carson had a hard time saying exactly what he wanted to say. There was an element of just being honest that he’d always appreciated about his own father, the way his father had always called people on their bullshit and spoke truth to people who liked to dance around the reality of things. It was a certain bluntness that people weren’t always prepared for, something that would catch them off-guard and keep them unbalanced. Flick had it too. It was a decided trait

that ran in the Sellars blood. But Carson had to work for it. He'd often tried to mimic that honesty in times like these, when there was a truth there just underneath the surface. Why not just let it out?

Carson looked at Wes. "You should get her a lighter bat," Carson said, his voice solid against the night. "Something she can actually swing to make contact."

Wes stepped forward, quick, his eyes wide. He pointed his index finger straight and deliberate, hovering right below Carson's chin.

"You leave her alone," Wes said. "You just leave her alone."

"Did you leave my truck alone? Or'd you call up Dirty Lawrence and tow the damn thing? I know Beau didn't call you at eight-thirty."

Wes took a step back and dropped his finger and looked down the street toward Flick's truck. "I like to be upfront and clear about how this is going to be," Wes said.

"Alright," Carson said. "So let's be upfront and clear."

"First of all, it seems a little odd that my daughter would hear some stupid rumor about you and Missy and then you'd show up less than a month later. So I just wanted to make sure you got the message. I don't want you near my family. Even if some young girl gets a notion in her brain that you're her father. You're not. You got it?"

"Absolutely Sheriff," Carson said. "I got it."

"Cut the Sherriff bullshit, C.J. I ain't saying this as a Sherriff, I'm saying it as her father," Wes stepped back and looked again toward Flick's truck. "Between you and me, you're better off staying away from cousin Francis this go-round. He's been hanging out with the wrong crowd."

“Me and Flick are the wrong crowd,” Carson said. “Least that’s what most people tell me. I don’t need to hear it from you.”

A brown van pulled in beside Flick’s truck. Two men stepped out. Carson and Wes watched the men, one with a bald head and a beard. The bearded man looked toward Wes and Carson for a few seconds, and then he reached into the van and pulled out a black jacket. The other man, a tall man with thin hair and long arms, leaned in and said something to someone in the back of the van, who Carson could not see.

Carson looked back to Wes, and Wes was watching the van too. Then, he turned to Carson, as if there were something else on his mind, or some element of understanding that had come into the open. His voice was calm and soft, like an officer of the law trying to diffuse some situation before it gets out of hand, as if the audience meant this conversation should go another way, separate of where it was originally headed. “I can drop you off at Lawrence’s,” Wes said. “If you need your truck. Or, I can drop you by your dad’s place. It’s on my way.”

“I got a ride,” Carson said, looking back at the two men, wondering how long this conversation between he and Wes would go on, considering that these men didn’t need to hear any damn part of it. Carson and Wes stood there, for a time, watching the two men stand there talking, the way they kept looking over their shoulders. Then, the men seemed to understand that Carson and Wes were waiting for some reciprocal act of lending privacy.

The man with the long arms nodded to the bar and then they both stepped up onto the sidewalk, walking past Carson and Wes. The tall man waved an arm covered in black tattoos without looking at Carson or Wes, and there was a moment of silence in the street

as one jukebox song ended and another began, as the two men opened the door and stepped into Daisy Jo's.

Carson lifted his hat and rubbed a line of cool sweat from his forehead.

Wes nodded. "Maybe before all the drinking and hell-raising and trouble-making begins, you should go see Danny. I'm sure he'd appreciate a visit."

"I'm sure he would." Carson scratched at a mosquito bite swelling on his forearm.

"Mom always talked highly of your dad," Wes said. "Though I'm not sure why. I think she'd have married him ten years ago if it wasn't for everything else."

"He's still waiting for mom to come back home from the cemetery," Carson said.

"That's what I kept telling her," Wes said. "But then, I promised her I'd keep up with him after she passed. Because you weren't around. So that's what I'm doing right now. Taking care of her business, like I promised. This one last time." Wes blew air through his mouth and pulled a wad of bills wrapped in a rubber band from his pocket. "He gives me a fifty dollar bill every week for groceries, but I never use it all. I don't think he's been eating anyway."

"Keep it," Carson said. "I don't need his money, or yours."

Wes tossed the wad of bills underhanded toward Carson and Carson let it hit him in the chest and then roll onto the brick street.

"I said to keep it."

"You should do something nice for him."

"Maybe I will, but I don't need his own money to do it."

"He know you're back?"

“He might.”

“If Beau knows, he’ll probably know by morning. Don’t let him down.”

“Thanks for the tip, Sherriff.”

“You know, he still talks about you like you ain’t a shitbag.”

“He don’t talk about you at all.”

Wes shrugged. “I don’t suppose he does.”

Carson leaned down and picked up the wad of bills. “So, just so I know, Dirty Lawrence towed my truck? He still tow it to his shop in Waltersville?”

Wes nodded and turned, walking toward his pick-up. “Your dad told me about it all. Natalie coming by his place and all that. He said she talked his ear off and asked him to dig up your address for her. I couldn’t fault him. I think he wanted it to be true. But it’s not,” Wes said. “And this here,” Wes pointed to the glistening bricks. “This here means just what I said—I’m being upfront and crystal clear. You should get back to Texas. In fact, tomorrow would be just fine. And I ain’t saying that as a father, I’m saying that as a Sherriff.”

Carson watched Wes open his pick-up door and step up and in. Wes started the engine, letting it idle for a time. Carson could feel his neck and shoulders tight and knotted. He took a few deep breaths and looked up to the night sky, listening to Wes’s pick-up rumble over the brick. The mist had stopped at some point that Carson couldn’t remember and the moon was slipping in and out of cloud cover, white and waning.

Carson dropped the empty cooler at his side and tapped out another cigarette and lit it. Behind him, a muffled country western tune came from inside Daisy Jo's. Some quick beat that sounded a little bit ornery and Carson imagined the those Mexican women back in Texas putting their hands over their black hair and swiveling their hips on the small raised dance floor next to the pool tables.

In truth, he wasn't sure he even wanted to go inside. There'd be a few regulars, maybe a few that he recognized, and they might raise a glass and buy him a drink. But there'd be others that would look his way and raise an eyebrow and tell some bullshit story that they wouldn't say to his own face. Maybe the story would be true to some degree or another, or maybe it wouldn't—and maybe the story would be about this kid named C.J, or maybe about C.J.'s father, or maybe about one of C.J.'s uncles. If they were feeling cocky or stupid, they'd say something about C.J.'s mother.

*Isn't that C.J. Sellars?*

He could see them looking now.

*Danny's boy?*

*He's a Sellars.*

Someone would say that. He was sure of it.

He stepped to the sidewalk and sat down along the curb, his back to the doorway and took a drag on the cigarette and began counting the bills. There were a lot of fives and a lot of ones and he lost track a couple of times and just went from the last number he remembered. When he was finished, he figured he held somewhere close to four hundred and eighty-two dollars in his hand. He couldn't remember hearing about Wes's mom's death, but he was sure his father had never mentioned it. Not once. Although everyone

knew Danny Sellars and Eliza Schmidt had been seeing each other off and on for about fifteen years. Even when Carson was in high school, some five or six years after his mother had passed, he could remember his father coming home late, smelling like cologne, although he'd said he just went to play poker with some friends. Maybe it was just this town and the talk that would start up if Danny Sellars and Eliza Schmidt had married, maybe that's what they'd decided against.

But Carson figured he was to hold most of the blame for keeping them apart. He didn't remember much now, anyway, but the rumors were still there, apparently still spreading like they had twelve years ago. This kid C.J. gets drunk and this girl Missy gets drunk and they're naked in the back of his father's old Dodge and then something about the way it happened changes and he can no longer remember the exact actions because he's been thinking one story and she's started telling another, and he'd say he never felt any guilt or loss, but that wouldn't be so truthful either.

And what does it mean that he still sees her sixteen year-old face in the occasional dream there in the drifting morning light, after he's already been to up to piss and then laid back down? Sometimes she's there laughing beside him, riding in the passenger seat of the Dodge. Sometimes she's running from him in the cornfield, shirtless and barefoot.

And he's sure none of it's true.

Just dreams.

Just lies that his brain is telling him.

Even when he was with Rosa in Texas and burying his face in her dark oily hair, his hands on her waist, he'd later have dreams of Missy lying beside him in the bed of the Dodge, sharing beers, looking up at these stars that have since settled behind the clouds.

The mosquito bites on her legs.

That part might be true, he figures. That part, he partially remembers, the bed of the pick-up, the mosquitoes. There were two versions of this story and he wasn't sure which one was true anymore.

Maybe he had committed some offense, but it hadn't felt like it at the time. The way he heard it later, from this girl named Becky who was her friend, Missy said that she ran from him during the night, that she went back to her daddy and she was missing her clothes. Carson can still see the running in his dreams, but he does remember her leaving. He doesn't remember her upset about what they'd done. Yet, he also knows there are lies you tell yourself that become truth after a while, after your memory lets go of the truth and all that is left are these things you say, if even just to yourself.

He remembers that her father came in the dawn to find C.J. and he came into C.J.'s house and her father wasn't much of a fighter, but he sure tried and then C.J. is looking down at Missy's father, this man who was just trying to do something about what his daughter had told him, and he remembers the way his lip was splayed open where the teeth had ripped through, and he remembers the man's eyes, looking around at him as if to see the world for the first time, as if the world had become this bright glare of the morning sun as it reflected off the steel silo next to his father's place, and there was this pause in all the anger and guilt and the heavy breathing, a pause where C.J. was thinking about jail time and some other eye for an eye thing that might occur, because this surely hadn't turned out like Missy's father had planned.

So, he goes to live with his mother's uncle, another Delhaus, Markus's brother Mickey, in Texas, and he learns to weld. And then he joins an oil crew, and Mickey

passes on at some point, and Flick comes down, and he decides to call himself by his birth name, the name his mother always liked, even if she didn't say it often. So, he comes to introduce himself as Carson instead of C.J., and that seemed to be enough for awhile, just a thing that he'd heard might work on one of those call-in shows when people are sitting at home eating a bowl of cereal after midnight, maybe a little drunk, and trying to focus on reading that nutrition information, as if it's the most interesting thing in the world, working a forefinger through the maze on the back of the cereal box.

*Think about yourself positively.*

*Repeat to yourself the words you want to become.*

And so on and so forth this story about himself is written and rewritten in his mind, but he's not sure what is true anymore. Up here, in Dine, he knows himself in one way, and down in Texas he knows himself another.

Either way, now he has a roll of bills to show for all of this, four hundred and eighty-two dollars, give or take, and he figures he can buy a whole lot of fuckin' Cheerios with that roll of cash.

"C. J. Sellars," Daisy Jo was saying. "How the hell are you?" He hadn't heard the door close, so maybe she came from around back where she'd go smoke on occasion. She sat beside him on the curb and offered him her pack, and she had one cigarette between her lips and another in her hand. Her bleached hair was tied up in a knot and a few toothpicks stuck out of the knot, wedged along the darker roots. She wore a low-cut pink shirt, showing off that thorny rose tattoo just above her left breast. She leaned back

to light her new cigarette off the one in her mouth, and the black outline of the rose tattoo seemed to blur a little there with her freckles in the streetlight.

“I been thinking about something to eat,” he said. Her eyes were glassy and she smiled at him with her wide mouth and he could see a couple of hickeys there on her neck when she turned his way.

“Well stop thinking,” she said. She put her arm around his shoulder and hugged him toward her and he could smell the whiskey and smoke and the sweet powder that she must have dabbed along her cheekbones and her neck. He let her stay close, her fingers thin and hard, holding his shoulder tight. “Francis was saying you were going to come around tonight and I was wondering what kind of man you had turned into.”

Carson lit his cigarette and shrugged. He looked away. “Ask me tomorrow,” he said. He stood and stretched his legs, and looked down the street at this woman who had appeared, a long-haired blonde with a short yellow skirt and a white top.

“You want a tenderloin or something?” Daisy said. “Grill’s shut down, but I’d fire it up if you want something. I got some of those quick burgers, too, I been making. They ain’t as good as the real thing, but they don’t take long if you want one.”

Carson nodded and watched the blonde adjust her top. She looked at her reflection in the window as she passed, stepping briskly along the sidewalk, into Daisy Jo’s.

Carson looked down at Daisy. “Who was that?”

“Oh she comes in every-once-in-awhile. Comes in with these two shady looking fellows sometimes. They shoot pool and she drinks at the bar. Kind of a slut, from what I can tell. Probably fuckin’ them both.”

Carson grinned. “Tenderloin would be alright.” He sat beside her again, on the sidewalk, and they smoked in silence for a time. Then, he said, “How’s Tammy doing?”

“She’s fine. Just fine. It’s nice of you to ask,” Daisy said. She looked at him and smiled. “Mostly people stay away from the subject, you know, except you and Francis.”

“Flick ain’t always a jackass,” Carson said. “Just most of the time.”

In Texas, he’d been to a few bars where women would come in holding hands and go off in some corner to kiss, and he realized that, at some point, he’d come to know this about Daisy and Tammy. Maybe it was common knowledge once you were of a certain age and began wondering about the people you saw on a regular basis. But most people pretended that Daisy and Tammy were just close friends, like sisters, and they didn’t share the same bed. Carson had come to figure that maybe Daisy dressed the way she did so as to give off this vibe that men were just okay, too. As if she’d act one way in public to help her cause in another way at home.

“She still working at the nursing home?”

“Until we both end up there, most likely,” Daisy said. “She likes it, you know. Always has. I tell her when she comes home she can scrub on my ass too, but she don’t.”

Carson grinned, and Daisy smiled soft and looked away, and Carson saw that Daisy was beginning to chill, rubbing her arms and pulling quick on her cigarette. She blew it and looked at him with a grin. “Well, I take that back,” she said. “When I’m wearing a fuck-me sign on my forehead, then she gets a little nurse, you know.”

Carson laughed and rubbed Daisy’s back, as if nothing had changed, as if they’d been talking like this for the past twelve years, and then he put his arm around her and pulled her close.

“It’s so good to see you, Daisy Jo,” he said. And he meant it more than any other thing he’d said all night.

Daisy let Carson in through the backdoor and he sat on the floor in the kitchen, leaning up against one of the wooden cabinets, eating a tenderloin, just as he had as a young boy while his father would sit at the bar, getting rowdy and loud.

Then, he stood and walked through the kitchen and took a carton of milk from the refrigerator and opened it and stood there, listening to the music start up again from the jukebox. He walked to the kitchen door and looked out the small circular window at the men lining the bar. Flick was one of them, and he was telling some story with his hands, waving them around as if casting some kind of spell on this blonde woman with stringy long hair and flushed cheeks, the one that Daisy had called a slut.

Later, Carson leaned over a beer at the bar and looked around for those two men, but they had played a few games of pool and then left. He watched the blonde-haired woman, the way she was inches from Flick’s face, talking softly, even though the music was loud. He was thinking about the woman in the house with the sagging porch, the mother and the beer he’d left there by the lawn chair.

Then, this blonde-haired woman turned to him and leaned her lips next to his ear and she put her hand on his leg and flicked out her tongue and he looked at her and she smiled, her eyes moving slow in their sockets. Then, she seemed to look at him again, as if for the first time, and Flick laughed and slapped Carson on the back and slammed his fists to the table and ordered them all another round of drinks.

Carson watched the blonde-haired woman walk slowly to the bathroom, looking over her shoulder as she went. Then she turned and looked back toward Carson and Flick and neither man could tell whom she was beckoning, but Carson wasn't interested and so he pushed Flick that way, toward this woman who Carson didn't know, and hadn't heard her name. He watched Flick move toward the blonde-haired woman, his step a little lighter and quicker. Carson waved Daisy over and she shook her head, looking at Flick, and then leaned in close and he had to shout for her to hear. "You know who lives over in Markus Delhaus's old place?"

Daisy leaned back and cocked her head to one side, looking down the length of the bar, and then back to Carson. She leaned in again, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Ain't that one of his granddaughters? Her name is Nina, maybe, or Trina. Something like that. She was living over on the west coast for awhile. Seattle maybe. Showed up here a few months ago."

Carson knocked on the door and waited and then he knocked again and waited and he was feeling good that the beer can he'd left wasn't there, that she had come out on the porch at some point in the last hour or so, if just for a short time. Whether she drank the beer, or not, he didn't care, but surely she'd known someone had been here, someone had wanted her to relax a little, someone cared, even if it was just a cold Texas beer.

He was feeling pretty good, too.

Beers, the tenderloin, Flick had bought him a few drinks. Daisy Jo made him this drink she called Hogshit, some mixture of molasses and corn whiskey that she kept chilled in the freezer. It went down like sludge, but it made the world light and happy.

She gave him a glass and poured a little of the hogshit into it and he'd watched the slow way it poured from the jar into the flask. She'd laughed and seemed happy that he liked it.

He looked over to the lawn chair and he walked over there and sat in it for a time, and sipped the hogshit from his glass, it was getting runnier now, a little less than sludge.

He kicked at the side of the house with his boot as if it were akin to knocking, even though it wasn't. The porch light came on and he heard the woman inside shouting some threat that he couldn't quite make out. Then, a who's there? Or something like that. And he smiled at her voice, the scared part of it, knowing that she'd be okay.

"Why you look so goddamned familiar?" Carson yelled.

The kitchen window popped open and he could see her face there, looking out, from inside the house. He waved and she jumped a little at the motion of his hand.

She stepped out from door with a pistol in her hand and she stood underneath the porch light, her hair flat on one side of her head, her eyes wide and scared. So, he raised his hands in front of his face and shunned the porch light as if it were the sun.

"Don't kill me yet," Carson said. "I'm just stopping by. Just came to stop by and say hello and all that." Carson cocked his head to one side. "You feel like talking?"

"Are you stupid or something?" the woman said. "Drunk?"

"A little of both I suppose," Carson said. He dropped his hands and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He looked at her, the way her face was in shadow and her hair was waving there in the breeze, just under the light, and the way the light sent lines through her dark hair, and how the light slipped along the curves of her shoulders and arms and down her legs, and it all looked more beautiful than anything Carson had

seen for quite some time. He sat up straight and turned his palms toward her, as if to offer up his innocence. “This used to be Markus Delhaus’s place and I was just looking for that old bastard ‘cause he owes me quite a bit of money for all those times I mowed his yard when I was a boy.”

“He’s in Waltersville now,” she said. “In an old folks home.”

“He used to have this cave in the backyard and I don’t see it no more, but he used to have it and I got the mower tipped up on there once, an old Snapper mower, the riding kind you know, and it tipped straight up, like this—” Carson lifted his hand, quick and vertical, and he stared hard at its verticalness for a few seconds, correcting it, just so, “—like this, and then I was hollering after him and he came out of the house in his underwear and was laughing at me cause the mower was tipped.” Carson looked at her, and then back to his fingers, pointed straight to the porch ceiling. “Just like this,” he said. “Just straight like this. On that old cave. That used to be in the backyard there. A tornado shelter, I believe. That cave was, I’m saying. And I could have died. I could have died, right then, maybe nine years old, I could’a been dead. If that mower had kept tippin’ over.”

The woman dropped the pistol a bit. “I called the law,” she said.

“You had no reason to do that,” Carson said. He tipped back his glass and looked up at her, smiling.

“I don’t know you. You’re on my property. It’s almost one in the morning. My baby’s already been up twice tonight. Those sound like good reasons to me. And the fact that I’m more than ready to shoot you if it means I can go back to sleep.”

Carson leaned back in the lawn chair and kept up this smile, wide and drunk. “I’m Carson Sellars, some call me C.J., but I like it if people call me Carson. I took this here lawn chair earlier in the evening and then I returned it after the ballgame. I was hoping you didn’t need it in the meantime, but I was thinking you might have wanted it, to relax or something, and so I came by to introduce myself and apologize for any wrong I’d done by borrowing it.”

“I want you to leave,” she said.

“I left a beer,” he said. “It’s gone.”

“Just leave,” she said.

“You drank it,” Carson said. “I know you did.” He stood and held his palms up in front of him. She stepped back, just under the porch light, and Carson could see the signs of tiredness there on her face, and in the shadows of her eyes. He looked down at her breasts, at the dark circles there on her shirt where her nipples had leaked and he backed along the edge of the porch and could not stop looking at those dark circles. She seemed to notice and covered her breasts with one arm, holding the pistol out, pointing at him once again. Carson stopped and held his hands up high, as if she were some lawwoman, forcing him to do so. “I just want to say that I am truly, truly sorry for bothering you on this lovely night.”

She dropped the pistol a bit, relaxing her wrist. “We danced a few times,” she said. “During the Dine Summer Days, when I was visiting uncle Markus.”

“I remember that, now,” Carson said, because he did, as if the mention of dancing, the purple shirt she wore earlier, it all seemed to click. She had short hair then,

and the thin bones of a young girl. She had kept her distance while they danced, but she'd smiled the whole time.

“You busy tomorrow by chance?” Carson said.

“We're cousins,” she said.

“Long, long distance,” Carson said. “And by marriage.”

“For Christ's sake,” she said. She stepped back into the doorway and shut the door and he heard it lock.

“Are you Nina? Or Trina?” Carson yelled.

He stood there at the edge of the porch light, looking down at himself and at the porch and he took another drink from this glass of hogshit, and he sat there on the porch step, his back to the yellow house, and he reached out his arm and he ran his fingertips over all those nail heads poking up out of the soft porch wood and when the porch light finally went off he started walking back to Daisy Jo's, wondering what time it was and if Flick was still there, where they were headed, what trouble they were getting into, or if Flick had maybe gotten distracted and left with that stringy-haired blonde.

They took Highway 102 north toward Waltersville. Flick drove with his elbow out the window, his arm bulging there on top of the doorframe. He smelled his fingers, and then looked over at Carson and held his hand out, wiggling his forefinger.

Carson shook his head and looked back at the road, the solid yellow lines and the white bugs hitting the windshield. He closed his eyes, listening to the rush of wind coming through the open window, the pops of bugs as they left yellow and green streaks on the windshield.

“You get her name?”

“Hell no,” Flick said. “Said she was from over near Stone Port. I figure she was there watching the game like you. Ain’t that who they played?”

“I think so.”

“Well there you go.”

“Daisy said she’s a slut, comes in with those two guys that were playing pool most of the night.”

“That’s fine, too,” Flick said. “I ain’t picky.”

At the junction of Highway 102 and county road JJ, Carson looked up the long rolling hill, toward where Wes lived, the house sitting at the crest, where JJ rounded by the river and went up the hill, less than fifty yards from Wes’s house, a two story place that used to be blue, if Carson remembered correctly, with a large white wraparound porch. It had once been a dairy farm, and belonged to Wes’s father, and in the Schmidt family for many decades. There were lights on in the windows, and Wes’s truck was parked outside. The house, Wes’s truck, the barn, it all seemed so miniature from this distance, as if it were some kind of dollhouse that Carson could reach up and play with, adjust to his liking.

“We got time to go by Dad’s place?” Carson asked.

Flick looked at him, and then at the clock. “No.”

“We got time to go by the Wal-Mart? They got a Wal-Mart in Waltersville now?”

“They do, but we don’t,” Flick said. “We’re late thanks to you wandering the damn streets.”

“Wasn’t just me,” Carson said. He looked back over his shoulder, at the hill, and the house, where Natalie was sleeping. He felt a slow settling in his chest, as if he’d lost something. He wasn’t really wanting to see his father, but rather wanting to drive by Wes’s place on the way to his father’s house. He wanted to look up from the blacktop road, from this passenger seat as they passed by, to see some glimpse of movement in the window light, to imagine which light was Natalie’s. He wondered if the ball field, if this brief passing, if this was as close as he would ever get to Natalie, just within looking distance, as close as a rifle scope would let him see, as close as the highway could be to where she slept.

*Maybe tomorrow*, he figured. There’d be some way to at least see her up close. To at least say hello. And maybe that’s all he wanted. He wasn’t necessarily wanting to test Wes, to see how far he could push these boundaries Wes had created in his mind.

But, there was that to think about.

If Natalie was his daughter, he’d want to see some kind of evidence, face to face, to hear her voice, the one that he’d imagined so many times, to see these expressions he’d seen from a distance.

“You sure we don’t got time to drop by a Wal-Mart? Won’t take but a second.”

“We don’t want to be late with this guy,” Flick said. “Hear what I’m saying?” His voice was serious, more wso than usual. He didn’t look at Carson when he said it and Carson couldn’t see any expression on his face.

Carson looked out the window at the passing night, the ditchgrass tall and bending in the wind, at the side mirror and a set of headlights behind them.

“I ain’t so sure that I want to get involved here Flick,” Carson said.

Flick looked over at him. “Nothing hard.”

“Then why don’t you tell me what this is all about?”

“You’ll turn it down.”

“So, I’m turning it down right now.”

“Not until you see it,” Flick said.

“So if I turn it down later, then what?”

“You won’t,” Flick said. “When you see it.”

Just then, a car passed them with a group of young women inside. They had the windows down and shouted something that Carson couldn’t quite make out. Flick flexed his bicep out the window. And Carson could see one of the girls go wide-eyed and giggle, and then the car was in front of Flick’s truck, in the beam of the headlights, and the girl leaned out the window and blew a kiss.

Carson figured Flick was not an unattractive man, and from a distance he probably looked younger than he was, maybe like some kind of daytime television star. He had eyes like specks of shale, and thinning brown hair that he kept buzzed close to his scalp and, if you were close enough to see his face, you’d see that chain of pock marks lining his cheeks and chin and glistening with oil, even when he wasn’t sweating.

Flick laughed and honked, quick and tight, and yelled out the window, something about those girls showing some titties, but then the girls sped up, the taillights glowing red in the distance, and Carson wasn’t paying much attention to them now, thinking instead about Natalie, wondering what kind of girl she was. If she was growing up right, or if she’d somehow end up with a man like Flick fingering her in a bar bathroom.

“What would you have done right there?” Flick said.

“Right where?”

“Those girls. If they had stopped?”

Carson shrugged.

“What happened to your ballsack?”

“I figure they’re all under eighteen, and I’m a grown man.”

“That’s why you’re here,” Flick said. “Always thinking ahead.” He looked at Carson and hit him lightly on the shoulder. “Me, I’d fuck ‘em all. And I’m not opposed to all at the same time, neither.”

Carson gave Flick a look and Flick smiled wide. Carson looked away.

“I would have,” Flick said. “I would still. If they stopped right now, damn skippy I would.”

“Listen to me Flick,” Carson said. “I’m not interested in all this shit anymore.”

“Damn,” Flick said. “Look at you. All up tight. Nuts shrunk. You think I’m gonna steer you wrong? You think I’m gonna say, Hey buddy, let’s get into some big trouble, eh? No, Flick wouldn’t do that. Not today. Not yesterday. Not right now. Not ever.”

Carson looked out the window as they passed Bellow’s Lake. It had almost dried up one summer when he was a teenager and dropped so low that you could smell the dead fish from the road. The conservation department decided to drain it and, even now, you could still see the old banks there in the moonlight, the bones of the fish buried somewhere in that sunken place where the lake used to be.

“But I do think someone is following me,” Flick said.

“What?”

“Headlights behind us. Same ones that were there when we pulled out of Dine. Even before that car full of girls passed us.”

“I doubt it.”

“I don’t,” Flick said.

“Then slow down,” Carson said. “Make them pass you.”

“You figure it’s Wes?”

“I don’t figure it’s anyone,” Carson said. “Unless you got some reason to be followed.”

Flick looked at Carson and there was some question in Flick’s eyes, as if Carson could see a visible shift in what Flick was thinking, from those teenage girls to something more serious.

“What? You piss someone off lately?” Carson said. He watched Flick’s speedometer drop down to forty-five. The headlights behind them backed off, too.

“Not exactly,” Flick said. “But maybe.”

“Turn up here,” Carson said. “The road that goes to Vance Hoyt’s place.”

Flick sped up and took a left, off the main highway, heading east, and Carson looked over his shoulder, watching out the pick-up’s rear window. The gravel was wet and there was no dust kicking up behind them.

“Take the next right,” Carson said, pointing. “Up there. Just go to Hoyt’s.”

“What if it is Hoyt?”

“Well then you’ll know who it is,” Carson said. “Won’t you?”

“He don’t like me much,” Flick said, grinning.

“There ain’t many people that like you much,” Carson said.

A band of light reflected from the rearview mirror, across Flick's eyes as the headlights turned to follow them. Flick's grin left and he looked at Carson, and then over his shoulder, again at the headlights.

"On second thought, kick it in the ass and then just pull over when you turn," Carson said. "Just pull off next to Hoyt's pasture and kill the lights. You know where I'm talking about? That little inlet to his pasture, where we used to load up his steers?"

Flick nodded and stepped on the gas and Carson looked over his shoulder as rocks and mud pinged against the undercarriage. Flick turned up the road that went to Hoyt's place and swerved into the short drive, just beyond a shock of trees that lined the road.

Carson jumped out of the truck and slid down the west bank of the road, digging his hands into the muddy bank to slow his slide. He ran a few yards in the ditchwater, crouching there in the tall weeds and trickling stream near the culvert as the headlights of full-size van passed overhead. Carson lifted his head. It was a brown van, maybe that same one that was parked outside of Daisy Jo's, the one with the two men, and maybe that stringy-haired blonde.

Carson squinted and wished that he would have thought to grab his scope because he was thinking it looked like an Iowa license plate, but he couldn't quite tell as the van sped away.

He climbed up the side of the ditch and jogged back to Flick's truck where Flick was standing in the amber dome light with the truck door open, his revolver dangling there in his hand.

"You know that van?" Carson said. "That brown van? Those two men at Daisy's?"

Flick looked down the road, to the flickering red taillights that were still there in the distance, cresting a long hill. "I don't know," Flick said, bobbing his shoulders.

"Maybe. I didn't look at them real good, I guess."

"What do you mean, maybe? Did you hurt that woman?" Carson said.

"Hell no," Flick said. "I just banged her."

"What's this all about then? Are you just fuckin' paranoid?" Carson pointed to the hill, where the red taillights had disappeared. "Was that for real?"

Flick looked down at his pistol. "Get in the truck," Flick said, finally.

"I want to know what the hell is going on," Carson said. "I want to know right fucking now."

"Get in the truck before they come back," Flick said.

"Jesus," Carson said. He jogged around the back of the pick-up and stepped in as Flick reversed quickly, jamming the gears, turning back onto the main gravel road.

Flick held out the pistol for Carson to take and Carson looked at it, the way Flick held it loosely, hovering in midair like some kind of gift. Then, he took it and Flick shifted gears again, speeding down the road. Carson turned in his seat and watched out the rear window, but no headlights followed.

"Take county roads to Waltersville," Carson said.

"Planning on it," Flick said, driving straight across the highway to the gravel road that led West toward Geynor.

"You gonna tell me what this is all about?" Carson said.

"Give me a goddamn minute, okay? I need to think."

And so, they were both silent for a time. Carson looked out the window, at the passing farmland, at the rows of wooden posts and barbed wire fences, the occasional shock of trees and dense forest. He still had the pistol in his hand and had checked the chamber more than once, as if at some point he would look down and wouldn't see a bullet lodged there, ready to fire.

Flick kept looking up in the rearview mirror and swiping a hand over his bald head. Carson could see that he was sweating now, the rivulets sliding down beside his ear, beading on his forehead. Flick reached into his console and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He offered the pack to Carson, but Carson shook his head. Flick drew a cigarette and lit it with the dashboard lighter, the metallic tip glowing in the dark of the cab. Then, Carson took a cigarette anyway. "So?" he said.

Flick shrugged and motioned to the truck bed. "In the toolbox," he said.

The scent of dew and alfalfa and Carson watched a pulsing red light in the distance that kept a slow sort of time, as if this were all in slow motion and things weren't quite real. Flick crawled up into the truck bed and opened up the toolbox, picking out the boxes of nails. Carson could hear the metallic cling as Flick moved a few of the boxes to the side. Flick reached in and brought out a separate box and opened it and held it out to Carson, the crystals there flickered and glowed under the cab's amber dome light.

"Higgins runs a construction company up in Des Moines and one in San Antonio. We use the nail boxes for transport. Probably don't need to, but the boxes look legit. If any pig asks me to open up the toolbox for some damn reason all they see is these boxes, my tools, that kind of thing. I keep these real boxes on top here, and only a couple of the

other boxes down below, so even if someone decides to dig a little, won't find nothing, least not on the surface."

"I don't want any part of this," Carson said. "I'm gone." He turned and started walking, not even sure which direction he was going, already lost on these back roads from the winding and backtracking before they'd stopped here, next to the wide and flat hay field. Carson heard the pick-up engine and the throttle and Flick pulled up next to him.

"C.J.," Flick said. "Get in the fuckin' truck. C'mon. Just get in the truck."

But Carson kept walking, head down, listening to the tires crunch along at a slow pace in the gravel next to him. He looked sidelong at Flick the way he was leaned out the window, his arm against the door, his bald head reflecting the cab light. "You know as well as I do. Nothing good comes from this," Carson said.

"You want a cigarette?"

Carson turned and faced Flick. He took the cigarette from Flick's hand and leaned in and Flick lit it. "How'd you get into this shit anyway?"

"Higgins was looking for a diesel mechanic, so I do that for a couple of years. Then, he comes to me and says they need a driver for this other stuff. A driver who's also a mechanic—that's a great thing."

"Yeah," Carson said. He shook his head. "Really fuckin' great."

"Just get in the truck," Flick said.

Carson kept shaking his head. The world felt heavy and dense, as if it were filling his insides with some thick slurry, the gravity pulling against all this additional weight. He turned away from Flick and crouched along the gravel. A breeze moved across this

alfalfa field, the darkness swaying there in front of him. He held the cigarette up and watched the tip flare there in the breeze.

Flick tapped on the side of the door panel for a time, and then his voice started up again, calm and consistent. “If you don’t want to go, fine, but I’ve been down to San Antonio a dozen times over the past few years, and each time I’m thinking maybe I’ll come let you in on this deal, and each time I’m figuring that you’d maybe look down on me a little. I figured you would, just like you are now, which is why I didn’t ask. This time is different. Things been happening. Like tonight. A few different things, okay, happening just outside of my vision, you know, just out there beyond what I can see. Higgins ain’t asked me to do anything for a few months, been having this other guy do it, this guy named Bone, the guy who usually cooks the stuff. He’s a hardass, even scares me a little. And they know I ain’t got anyone here that gives two shits. It just bothers me a little.”

At some point, Carson had turned to look at Flick, the way he was still leaned out the window, still talking with his hands, trying to explain these matters of importance that were hard for Flick to say out loud.

Flick shrugged. “Maybe it ain’t nothing. Maybe it ain’t nothing at all to worry about. And I’ll give you whatever they pay me. I ain’t hard-up for money exactly. But, if it *is* something, then I figure having you along wouldn’t hurt. Know what I mean?”

Carson stood there, listening, waiting for something to change his mind. He dropped the cigarette and toed it into the wet gravel.

“Higgins ain’t expecting you either,” Flick said. “I told him I had a friend in Texas once and he told me to see if you were interested in helping out, so I ain’t exactly lied. Just a little.”

“I ain’t gonna do it,” Carson said. “Either way, I ain’t gonna do it. I shoulda made you tell me straight a long time ago. I thought you were just screwing with me, maybe getting a stripper or something.”

“You serious?”

“About the stripper? Crossed my mind.”

“No, I’m saying you really ain’t gonna help me out?”

Carson shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not this time.”

The two men looked at each other and then Flick turned to the road and nodded, looking straight ahead. “Alright then,” Flick said. “Just get in the truck and I’ll take you wherever. You don’t know where the fuck you’re walking anyway.”

Carson recognized that low dwelling in Flick’s voice, the way it had dropped off like some man that comes to realize his own loss. Carson let out a long breath and looked in the distance, toward where the field seemed to meet up with a line of trees. The breeze picked up, carrying a light mist across his skin, pulling a dark wave across the alfalfa field.

In Carson’s mind, there were these things he didn’t ever plan on getting into. He had no interest in the wives of other men, but then there was dark-haired Rosa. He had no interest in children of his own, but then this new possibility with Natalie showed up in a letter. He hadn’t considered leaving Dine, but then he left for Texas. Then, he hadn’t wanted to come back to Dine, but then he called Flick to say he was coming back. He

felt like he could see all these things pulling at him, tangling up his mind. Maybe he should have kept this whole trip to himself. Flick had been the only person he'd told about this so-called vacation.

So, maybe that meant something.

Maybe it did.

Carson turned and shook his head and took a drag on his cigarette. He lifted his cowboy hat and swiped at his forehead. "You know you're a real big dumbass. You shouldn't be into this kind of shit Flick. It ain't worth it. Nothing is worth this kind of fucked-up thing."

Flick grinned and nodded and patted the side of the door panel with his palm, a quick succession of taps. "Let's go motherfucker," he said.

Flick's tank was nearing a quarter-tank by the time they came upon the path that led to Higgins' place at close to three in the morning, some four hours later than what Higgins had expected. Flick kept glancing in his rearview mirror, even as he guided the pick-up carefully down the winding dirt path.

Carson opened the glove box again, just to have one more look at this box of nails, the way the box didn't show any of what was truly inside, the way the amber light didn't seem to care at all about the fact that Carson was looking at something with his eyes that he still didn't quite believe with his mind, that his cousin had turned some dark corner and here they were, bumping down below the bluffs of the Nemanya River, along this mud path and into a hollow that seemed to hold no light.

In the distance, somewhere in the dark field up ahead, was this place that Flick said used to be old Ellis's grist mill, but Carson didn't remember any grist mill and he couldn't remember hearing any stories about some hermit named William Ellis either. Something about how the man made millions on the grain trade, that he was the first millionaire in Missouri, that he was shot during a gold exchange gone bad. Carson was sure Flick was full of shit, and that these stories were simply there to calm his nerves, as if whatever was to come of this night, there'd still be a morning to tell about it.

At the bottom of the narrow path, the dirt turned to tall grass and the headlights shone on a trail where few vehicles had worn a path in the tall grass. Carson watched the grass give way, the burred heads of the weeds whipping and then breaking under the truck. When they came to a stop, Flick's headlights beamed at the side of the old mill, the gray wood thick and wide. There were two windows, both black on the inside, and Carson sat there with the pistol in his hand, looking to see if any movement showed behind the black.

Autumn leaves rustled and drifted through the headlight beams, yellow and orange, and a quiet mist drizzled in some kind of steady pattern, settling on the windshield. Carson looked over at Flick, waiting for some understanding of what this all meant.

Flick reached forward and turned on the wipers for a few seconds. He looked up to check his rearview mirror and then he squinted again at the mill as if to see something that hadn't already been seen. Finally, he leaned back and swiped a hand over his bald head and looked at Carson.

“This is what I’m talking about,” Flick said. “Shit like this. This ain’t ever happened before.”

“What ain’t ever happened before?”

“This. Nobody home,” Flick said, gesturing to the mill. “That guy I was telling you about, tall, skinny guy, calls himself Bone, usually he meets me out here. Usually he’s waiting for me. Hates it when I’m late.”

“Give it a minute,” Carson said. “Ain’t like they’re not gonna collect.” Carson turned the pistol over and checked the chamber. Flick reached down and slipped his revolver out from underneath his seat.

“You ever been inside?” Carson said, nodding toward the mill.

“I been down to the river. Along the bank of the mill. It’s nice down there. Would be a good place to set a line if this weren’t all going on. Bone keeps a generator along the backside of the mill. I figure he’s always here, cooking or cutting the stuff. Or doping up himself.”

Carson looked out the window, at the line of trees in the distance. He figured the Nemanja River was just beyond the tree line. “You should come with me back down to Texas. Open up a shop or something. Forget all this bullshit.”

“You ain’t sticking around?”

Carson shook his head. “I came back for a couple of things but there ain’t nothing here. Well, one thing, I guess, but I don’t figure it’s going to work out.”

“All those boxes I brought down? You finally talk to Beau about all that?”

Carson looked over to Flick. “It wasn’t good.”

“Hurt him?”

“Maybe a little,” Carson said. “Ain’t like I wanted to.”

Flick grinned. “Hell if you didn’t.”

“Left him in bad shape. Wasn’t right.”

Carson looked to the windshield, the way the mist was collecting and rolling, drops gathering with other drops, collecting speed on the way down. He considered this story about Natalie, her letter, the softball game, this trip. And this is what Carson would always remember, this easy conversation in the dark, the headlights beaming on the mill and the leaves drifting, a ripple pulling across the tall grass, the way he and Flick fell into this familiar talk, these hard conversations seeming easy once again.

Flick sat up straight, attentive, looking out over the dashboard, and Carson could hear it too, this constant humming that grew louder.

“Here we go.” Flick looked over at Carson, as if considering something for the first time. “Maybe you should get on the floorboard ‘till I explain things.”

“You serious?”

“Yeah.” Flick brought his revolver up just below the dashboard light, turning the chamber and loading two more bullets, and then he tucked it in the back of his pants and pulled his white shirt down over the top of it.

And so Carson shifted down to the floorboard, his back against the door, pulling his legs up underneath him, relaxing his arms up on his knees, holding Flick’s other pistol tight in his grip.

There was this sudden light and Flick raised a hand to cover his eyes. Carson slipped off his cowboy hat and lifted his head, just high enough to see two floodlights

perched atop the mill, pushing the light deep into the hollow. He heard voices and the muffled sound of a yell coming from somewhere beyond the truck.

“Just stay here.” Flick opened the door and stepped out of the truck and the light bathed him like a white specter, his bald head shining and slick. Flick stood in the light, squinting into it for a time, and then ducked back into the pick-up, reaching down as if to pick something from the seat. “This ain’t good,” he said, low and harsh, without looking at Carson. “Just stay down. I’ll leave this door open, here. If anyone comes to it besides me, use that fuckin’ gun.”

He reached across the seat and opened the glove box above Carson’s head, taking the box of nails. He dumped the nails onto the floorboard and took out the small bag of crystals, holding it up into the light.

Voices came from somewhere beyond the truck and Flick lifted his head. “I know I’m fuckin’ late,” he yelled. “Shit happens.” He left the truck door open, and Carson settled there on the floorboard with his hands around his knees watching the tall burred heads of the long grass flitting there beyond the open door, the way the white light drew a hard line up along the back of the long bench seat.

Carson waited, listening to the muffled voices, and then the voices got louder and Carson could hear Flick there, saying something, maybe coming closer, or maybe not.

A shadow passed over the top of the bench seat and Carson heard the rustling of someone coming up along his side of the truck, a series of taps moving along the quarter panel, and then the tailgate dropped and the truck dipped with the weight of a body stepping up into the truck bed. Carson lowered his head, lengthening his body along the floorboard, a rush of pulse there in his fingertips, beating against the whole of his insides.

He kept the pistol hand free, up against his chest, but turned his body to get a sliver of view from up and out the rear window.

A man's face appeared in quick half-views, thin and gaunt, sores along the taut skin of the man's forehead and cheeks, his eyes there somewhere, buried in the dark shadows of his skull as he worked in the toolbox, the metallic tinging of these boxes, of nails shifting, and it looked to Carson as if the man were scavenging, his actions quick and tight, the way his head seemed to twitch and spasm as he sifted through the toolbox.

Then, the man looked up and the white floodlight caught his whole face, as if to outline the man's features, one milky white eye, and the other that kept darting around, as if trying to find a focus, and Carson couldn't tell where the man was looking. Then, the man was gone and the truck swayed from some quick action and Carson's door came open behind him and he didn't have time to turn before the man had a thin arm around his neck. He brought the pistol up and fired two shots in quick succession, and one went through the windshield and the other through the cab roof, and the man's forearm was rigid and unmoving and Carson kicked his legs, trying to get some foothold for a sense of balance, but tiny white and red and pink bursts fluttered there at the peripheries of Carson's vision, and the man's hand clamped around his own hand, guiding the pistol to the floorboard. Carson tried to push against the man, but the man's strength was constant and firm and Carson held no leverage as the world turned dark.

When Carson came to, he was leaned against Flick's front tire, the rim's metal cool and rigid on his back. His hands were bound in front of him with baling twine, tight, digging into the soft skin and tendon and bone of his wrists. His ears rang, neck stiff. He

tried to look up, but the light and the dark were churning before him, and a figure was there in the middle of all that churn, crouched and watching. Carson turned his head to one side and heard laughter, close, coming from the man, a low and coarse laugh. Carson closed his eyes and tried to stop the churn, to focus on something else. And the Nemanya was somewhere in the distance, the sound of it like a kind of constant and peaceful hushing, the way a mother might quiet her child.

After a time the churning stopped and Carson looked to the man who stood a few feet away. The gaunt-faced man had a rifle slung over his shoulder and was staring down at Carson and working his jaw and muttering some conversation to himself.

Near the mill, Flick talked with some large man, who Carson imagined was Higgins. Flick's hands were waving again, just like they had with the stringy-haired blonde at the bar.

Carson spit blood from his mouth and looked up at the gaunt-faced man. "Are you Bone?"

The man took a few steps forward, crouching down in the grass. He leaned in on the rifle. "I am a man of many names," he said.

"Flick says you're usually the delivery man."

Bone shrugged and turned and looked into the floodlights atop the mill. His white eye twitched as if there were something poking at it. "Delivery man? Sure. Sometimes. Depends on my mood. I fill many roles."

"Well seems to me this woulda been a whole lot easier if you'd just met us when we drove in and done your job."

“Or maybe if you would have done yours,” Bone said. “Or him, I should say.” He walked on his haunches, a few steps closer, dropping his head, as if to look up into Carson’s eyes. “Most people won’t look at me. Your friend won’t. He’ll do anything to keep from looking me in my face.”

“It ain’t that pretty,” Carson said.

Bone grinned and stood and looked down at Carson, as if to see through him, as if to study the minerals and worms in the soil below. Then, he walked closer yet, sitting cross-legged in the tall grass, the rifle across his lap, within arms reach of Carson, and Carson saw that Bone was barefoot, his toenails long and yellow. Bone leaned in close, the sores on his face and forehead seeming to shift and twist in the light. “Tell me,” Bone said. “Are you an honest man? Or are you a liar?”

“Depends,” Carson said.

“The truth never depends.” Bone grinned. “Even the smallest lie makes a difference.” Bone kept grinning, his white eye shifting in its socket, seeming to look for something that wasn’t there. Then his head snapped quickly to the side, looking at the mill, at Flick and the large man who turned to walk toward them.

Carson watched them too. Flick moved like a ghost floating over the tall grass. He walked with his head down, Higgins behind him.

“Your friend is a liar and a thief,” Bone said.

“I’ve never known him to be.”

Bone grinned, a thin line moving across his face. “It always starts small. With him, too.” Bone brought his fingers to his thin lips and whistled. Higgins raised a hand and held it above his head, and dropped it quickly.

“See, that’s unfortunate,” Bone said. “We know you were followed tonight. And he just lied about that small but important thing.”

Bone shifted up onto his knees, and raised the rifle. There was a loud crack and Carson turned to watch Flick’s body jerk and then fall. The big man, Higgins, stopped to crouch down beside Flick as he tried to stand.

Carson lunged toward Bone, the baling twine digging into his wrists. He grasped for some piece of cloth or limb he could hold onto, but Bone pushed back, putting the rifle between them, kicking out at Carson’s knee. Carson shoved forward, driving the thin man into the ground, trying to open his hands wide enough to take hold of Bone’s neck, or an arm. Bone punched a fist to Carson’s temple once, and then again, and Carson rolled to the side, trying to focus.

Bone straddled him and held the rifle against his throat and leaned in close, his jaw working slow, deliberate, some low muttering that Carson couldn’t understand. Carson reached up, grasping, and there he felt the solid metal of Flick’s pistol, tucked into Bone’s waistline. Carson took it, and pointed up into whatever mass was there on top of him. He pulled the trigger once, and then again and again. He pushed Bone to the side and looked over at the man’s body, the way Bone’s milky eye was still rolling in the socket, as if to get one last look at this living world.

Carson held the pistol in both hands, pointing it at Bone, working his way up onto to his knees. But none of it mattered. Bone was dead, just like any other man. And so, Carson squinted into the floodlights, toward where Flick and Higgins had stood near the mill, and Higgins was still there, his attention now turned to Carson and this series of gunshots.

Carson took the pistol and jogged around to Flick's driver's side door and stepped up and in. He now felt this sharp pain in his wrists, throbbing, this severe digging, the way the twine seemed to wedge between ligaments and tendons, his hands weaker now, as if they had no strength of their own. He slid the pistol up on the dashboard and reached his hands up and underneath the steering wheel to turn the ignition.

His fingers were numb and so he worked the steering wheel in a circle with his forearm, pushing the gas in short bursts. Higgins stood there, watching the truck approach, this look of confusion on his wide face. And Carson saw Flick rise up to his knees, his white shirt now stained with blood up near his shoulder and Flick reached behind his back and drew the pistol and Higgins shuddered, his eyes wide and searching and he turned toward Flick and Flick was still pulling the trigger, firing into the man's body as it fell backward, into the tall grass.

Carson felt Higgins' body as he bumped over it, braking next to Flick. He stepped out and looked in the truckbed for something to cut against this baling twine around his wrists and finally settled for the sharp edge of the toolbox, where it had begun to rust. He took Flick under the arm, guiding him around the side of the truck. The bullet had punched through the top of Flick's chest and his head lolled and he spat blood as Carson led him up into the seat.

The sky was purple and red when Carson dropped Flick off at the St. Charles emergency room door. He told the white-haired nurse that they'd been coon hunting and he wasn't sure how it had happened, but maybe he'd pulled the trigger on accident, or maybe the rifle just misfired. The nurse was talking faster than Carson could keep up

with and so he just kept nodding and helping in the sensible ways of lifting and guiding, helping Flick up onto the gurney.

He stood there in the lot beside the truck for some time, smoking a cigarette, looking at the dawn sky, considering all these possibilities.

The nurses watched him through the sliding glass doors and one reached down and picked up a phone and Carson considered going inside, to explain things once again, to keep on with this hunting story that he and Flick had worked out when Flick was still slipping in and out of consciousness. But, instead, he stepped back up into the truck and turned the ignition.

More than anything, he was just tired. His wrists ached and his hand throbbed and there was blood on his shirt, but his legs moved fine and so he pushed the shopping cart along the cereal aisle of the Wal-Mart. He gathered a number of different colored boxes, filling the cart, and then he carried a few more under his arm. In the beer aisle, he slid three long cases along the bottom of the cart, and then pushed the cart across the store, nodding politely at a few of the early morning workers, their eyes still heavy and swollen with sleep.

He picked out a woman's blouse, blue like Daisy Jo's eyes.

In the lawn and garden section, he looked at the selection of lawn chairs, asking one of the workers if there were any that rocked. The worker led him to a different section, with a canopy and a grill, a big set-up for some kind of large family gathering. Carson picked out a sturdy looking lawn chair, one that had a slight curve along the bottom for easy rocking, one with a beer holder and a crisscrossed pattern on the back that held the colors of dusk.

The softball bats all hung in a row and Carson took each one in his hands, holding it, weighing it, looking at the tags, not for the price, but to see the length and the weight. He chose a white bat with pink designs. Twenty-seven inches long and seventeen ounces, the smallest he could find. He swung it a couple of times there in the aisle just to get a feel.

At the checkout, he pulled the roll of bills from his pocket, this four hundred and some-odd dollars. He kept flipping through the bills, counting, handing bills to the checkout clerk in groups of ten. Then, he looked around for a candy bar and put that up there, too.

Carson filled Flick's truck with gas and drove to Dine with a beer between his legs. At the yellow house with the sagging porch he left the boxes of cereal for the boy named Gerald and the new rocking lawn chair and one case of beer for the woman named Nina or Trina. He hung the blouse on Daisy Jo's back door, where he'd entered earlier in the night and where she'd enter in a few hours to start working up the lunch menu. Beau's truck was still parked outside the sale barn and Carson wondered if the man had even left, or if Beau had become like his own father and slept on the floor overnight. He drove through town and considered going out to see his father, but there'd be things to say that he didn't feel like saying, things to explain that he didn't feel like explaining.

And so, he headed out of town on Highway 102, toward Wes Schmidt's place, where Natalie was surely sleeping. There were these stories he wanted to tell Wes, and one truth he needed to hear. He had Flick's truck and these nail boxes in the toolbox and he was prepared to trade it all for a bit of truth from Missy and Wes, and maybe a ride to

Dirty Lawrence's where he could pay to get back his own truck. Then, maybe he'd try to guide Wes back to Ellis's mill, where there were dead bodies and other things that would look different in the daylight.

Or, maybe he'd keep up with this hunting story and just see what Wes would say about the softball bat. He was just beginning to consider all the possibilities, these conversations that he still needed to have. But surely, he would see Natalie there at Wes's place, maybe even hear her voice. If nothing else, he'd leave her with this white and pink softball bat and maybe one day he could watch her swing it.

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## **VITA**

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