

From the Gunwales to the Waterline

Paul Vega

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2012

Committee: Maya Sonenberg

David Shields

Program Authorized to Offer Degree: English - Creative Writing

©Copyright 2012

Paul Vega

Contents

1. The Deer 4
2. Off The Hi-Line 14
3. Runners 39
4. Promise 70
5. Web 84
6. From the Gunwales to the Waterline
124
7. The Doxy 136

1. The Deer

A few days before I broke up with my fiancée my family gathered around my brother's hospital bed and held hands. I have no memory of what everyone's faces looked like. There was just the light and the sound. The desert dusk swathed the hospital room in a haze of purplish red, and when the nurse removed the tubes from my brother's lungs he gasped and wheezed, quietly then quieter, until his breathing came to an end.

It was months later, near the middle of June, when I left Glacier. I'd been drinking too much since Matt died of cancer - a bottle of scotch the day the Fed-Ex man delivered an updated copy of my parent's will and Matt wasn't in it, a couple of six packs when I ran into his old girlfriend in the cereal aisle at the store— but I'd been drinking too much before he died, too, a little bit more all the time until I didn't know how to stay on top of it anymore. Three weeks into a road trip that had started at graduation and now there was a burning all through my upper stomach. It burrowed into my back and caused me to switch to spliffs made of cheap Mexican weed.

The road out of Glacier was a rutted two-laner lined by half-melted snow and roadkill of all manner. Everywhere I went the cold had lingered deep into spring – most nights I had spent wrapped up in a Pendleton blanket watching my breath fog in the lantern light while rain splattered against my tent – and the past few days in Montana I had felt like I was trapped in a landscape of water. Lakes and rain and snow and blown out rivers coursing with winter's debris.

Not all of it had been easy going. In Oregon, I'd had a tire pop on a sharp turn and nearly splashed landed in the Hoback River. A man who had been right behind me stopped and offered help. He'd told me that he owned a tire shop just up the road and I should just follow him. I'd told him I had a spare and then he insisted. "It's dark," he'd said. "You shouldn't be out here on a donut. I live next door to the shop anyway. You could spend the night." He hadn't left until another truck had pulled over to offer help, and I'd practically begged the second driver to stay until I was done changing the tire.

In California, I'd rolled into a state campground near Mt. Shasta at midnight. It was a self-serve place where you left the money in a locked box by the entrance. There were only twenty or so sites and they were hidden back from the highway in a cluster of oaks. There had been only one other car, a small sedan with a one-person tent beside it, and I had parked at a site as far from the sedan as I could. I was awakened in the night to the sound of motorcycles and breaking glass. Was someone stealing my truck? I'd looked out into the dark, my eyes taking a while to focus and saw two bikes going around the small dirt track that connected the sites. One biker had a dark shape extended over his head like a club or an axe. I dove into my tent and rifled through my bag for my dull hatchet and waited. They sped off in minute, whooping above the roar of engines like dying eagles crying out in the night. The next morning there was a bottle smashed up in the bed of my truck and the wooden box in which campers placed their money was splintered like it had been hit by lightning.

A few miles out of the Glacier Park entrance and the road turned into a series of descending switchbacks. I came around one of the bends and a bear cub sprinted along next to the truck. It was twenty yards or so off the road and kept pace for a while before it bounded back into the scrub brush. The cub wasn't more than a squat shadow, and it moved not like a lumbering full-grown grizzly but like something sleek and wild. I'd seen bears in the park, hundreds of yards away by the treeline, doing bear things like sniffing each other and picking at bushes, but they hadn't seemed real to me. I could imagine how one might smell bad or drool, but not how it might think or feel, or how its heart pumped blood to its brain just like mine.

I looked over my shoulder at the area where I thought the bear had disappeared into a pocket of charred forest, but it was gone and was soon just a shadow in my mind, its quickness the only clear memory. And soon the forest blurred too and gave way to a wheat-colored plain where distant thunderheads made the sky look immense. The clouds reflected the light of the late day sun so it was weirdly slanted, almost autumnal. The soft quality warmed my face, but the pain in my stomach was heavy like an undigested meal, and I couldn't shake the thoughts I'd had all afternoon; Matt was just an old story now, the details of his life a little less vivid every time I remembered them.

The wind blew through the cab of the truck. There was just the white noise of it and the hum of the engine as the miles ticked away. I felt sorry for myself and damn lonely and slapped my leg to make the feeling go away. That was the only way I knew how to fight self-pity.

I turned on the radio and searched for a signal until I found a baseball game on AM. The announcers sounded far off and weird, like they were speaking through a fan.

The game was coming in all the way from Seattle, floating over the mountain range like some kind of tired magic. I took a joint from my shirt pocket and lit it with the cigarette lighter in the truck. The smoke was rich in my nostrils and my face grew hot and numb at the same time.

“Two out in the seventh...Mariners ahead...Comes to the plate...Strike two at the knees...No hits for the Rangers here in the seventh...”

A no-hitter. I finished the joint and rolled up the window. I needed distraction, and a guy working on a no-hitter was a small but decent enough thing to happen on a Thursday afternoon.

“Fister still pitching strong here in the seventh. He’s been masterful so far, painting the outer half with sinkers and using the four-seamer when he needs to. The only base runner coming on a Figgins error in the fourth.”

Fister and Figgins. I laughed and felt a little better, buzzed and tired, but less outside myself, less like my arteries had been scraped out and filled with sand.

“Fister, gets the sign, comes ready, goes in to his motion...Strike three! Got em’ with the slider. And we’ll head to the top of the eighth, Mariners up three to nothing. You’re listening to the Mariners Radio Network.”

“Baseball On The Radio. That would be a good band name.” Matt had been driving the truck on the way to Canyon De Chelly. It was my freshmen year in college, and he was in remission for the first time and finishing up school at UNM. We’d even had a class together that semester. “It’d be a good name because it’s the only sport that works better on the radio than on TV,” he’d said.

It had been early fall but still summer hot, and Matt drove eighty-five along I-40 all the way from his apartment like he could beat the coming heat of the day.

A stone, kicked off the edge of the trail by withered Navajo mules that left steaming piles of green shit every twenty yards, had fallen down and hit me square on the elbow only a couple miles into the canyon. It had hurt like hell and opened up a small gash that bled until my arm stiffened. Matt had stood there and shook his head as I cursed, refusing to go on. "You're fine, Mike" he'd said. "It's too hot to stop. Keep moving."

His eyes had looked unfamiliar and different than I ever remember them looking, and I had wanted him to get hurt - trip, or bend an ankle, or worse - cruel and juvenile things because I was in pain and he didn't give a damn. The hike and the heat had been even more intense after that and brought a grimness to the afternoon that silenced us.

I had been dazed as we neared the bottom and had stared at the walls of the canyon that sealed us off from the world above and seemed to ripple in the heat like the folds in a girl's skirt. When we finally reached our camp, I'd still been angry at him. We'd started to set up our tent next to a small creek, and the sound of the water running over stones cooled my brain. Without saying anything Matt had thrown his pack at me and I'd chased him into the water. I tackled him and then he jumped up like a mad man, splashing me. We ran around in the shallow stream of earth colored water, hearing our cries echo all around us. Not for any particular reason, but just because I think we knew we'd beaten something back. Just because sometimes I guess it makes you feel good and not so lonesome to yell out, like you might just be able to stand things a little longer if only you can make the world hear your voice and count you as one of its living.

I turned up the radio and felt the din of the crowd. There was a buzz that only sports crowds get, that feeling of expecting, and the cab of the truck was filled with its energy. Maybe I'd drive just a little farther, at least until the game ended. There was an Indian reservation, the interstate just beyond, and I stared out the window and thought about a hot meal, a shower, a hotel bed at the end of the night. It had been a long time since I had spent a night somewhere other than my tent or truck.

And then it was there. A deer with a good-sized rack I didn't see it until it was in my lane. The truck shuddered with the impact. I swerved over the right shoulder into a ditch, and the truck bounced so hard I hit my head on the roof. I punched down hard on the brakes and the steering wheel slammed into my sternum. The impact knocked the air out of me and for a time all the light went out of the world.

When I came to, my brain was sludgy and my head ached so bad my teeth hurt. My mouth tasted like blood, and I spit into my hands and rubbed them on my jeans.

My truck was totaled. I'd hit a deer. It was probably dead.

But then the truck was still running. I must have put it in park at some point. So there was that. I undid my seatbelt and looked over the front half of the truck. Somehow it looked normal. "Okay, okay, it's okay," I said, my breathing more labored than normal. I rubbed my stomach; it was starting to feel like one big bruise. I scanned the rest of the truck for damage. The mirror. Where was the driver's side mirror? It was sheared clean off, and for the first time I saw the driver's side window was streaked with scratch marks and syrupy blood. I'd had the window down all afternoon until I'd turned on the game. I

had a vision of the rack through the window and what it would have done to my face and took a moment to thank God and Doug Fister.

Up the ditch to the shoulder, there were shards of glass all over the asphalt that crunched loudly under my boots. The mirror mount was on the other side of the highway, weirdly bent and not worth trying to jury rig to the side. I looked westward into the sun, and it took my eyes a few moments to focus. There was no sign of the deer in the road. It was awful and creepy all at once, and I walked along the shoulder until I was convinced I was far beyond the accident. But then came a slow, quiet whine like someone letting the air out of the balloon.

Following the fence line back toward the truck I came upon it, partially hidden in a clump of rabbit brush, the kind whose yellow flowers sprinkled the rolling plain for miles up to the base of the mountains. The deer was lying on its side, bleeding from the nose and mouth. A hind leg twisted and broken. The neck was slender and white but taut and powerful enough to hold up a rack that looked like two pearly limbs of an ash tree. I kneeled down and reached out slowly and put my hand on his side. The deer opened his blood streaked eyes and stared out blankly, breathing slowly but steadily. The hair on the body was coarse, grayish brown, and I petted him for a while. The sun was going down and the wind came down off the mountains whistling through the stems of the rabbit brush and raising goose flesh on my neck. The deer looked like he'd die at any moment and I imagined animals picking at the meat of his belly, his guts stringy and steaming in the moonlight. But he didn't die. He gasped for breath, kicking out his front legs every so often. He tried to rise a few times but fell back after each until finally he just lay there, the air slowly leaking out.

The sound was terrible, and I wanted to take something sharp and long and put it deep in my ear canal until I punctured the drum and the world whirred to a silence. Along the fence line there were a few rocks about the size of the deer's head. Was it worse to leave it here to die alone or to finish things myself?

I walked back to the truck and turned off the engine. The silence was heavy, and I looked up and down the highway. There were no cars, only the heat of the engine ticking away. I lit a cigarette and leaned against the truck, massaging my left temple with my free hand. I went back to the duffel bag in the back seat and pulled out the .32, the bullets loose and gleaming beside it. I'd bought the gun at a Wal-Mart in Kalispell a few days after the bikers in Oregon had woken me up. The clerk took my New Mexico permit without a word. I hadn't fired a gun since Dad took me to the range years ago and bullets were like an afterthought. The clerk had to explain to me which ones I needed to buy and how to load the gun. Water, Batteries, Peanut Butter, Bullets. They rattled around in the box and as I loaded the small shopping basket with supplies.

Later that afternoon, I'd shot some bottles off a stump way down an access road along a county highway. I'd popped the shots off slowly at first, afraid of the recoil but then opened up and blasted away until I was nearly out of bullets. Therapeutic. That's what the TV show doctors would call it. My adrenaline rushed and I was far away from everything but the hot feel of the gun and the sound of exploding glass.

But now here were the last few bullets in my hand - cool small hard things, and there was no good feeling, just dread. I loaded the clip; my hands shook, and I racked the slide slowly. "It'll be dead when you get back. It wasn't your fault, and it'll be dead

when you get back.”

The blood had stopped flowing and was starting to dry under its mouth, but the deer was still letting out long bleats. The breeze came up again and it was like all the warmth had been blown out of the air. I aimed the gun at the deer’s head, pulled back the hammer, then stopped. “Not in the head.” But where?

I settled on aiming through the shoulder blades, anything better than splashing its brains on the dirt and the sturdy limbs of its rack. I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them, took a breath, and pulled the trigger. A tremor went through the deer’s body, then mine. The bleats were over, and it was quiet and still: like any other dead thing along a highway. The deer’s eyes stayed open looking out into forever, and I stood there for a time staring at it. “Sorry,” I said. “Sorry.”

I started back to my truck, and as I neared it a car came into sight from the opposite direction. It was a station wagon with two people inside. It was loud, a bad muffler maybe, and I shoved the gun into the waistband of my jeans and the car slowed. The driver rolled down the window, and I could see it was a man, late twenties maybe with his mouth opened like he was getting ready to say something, like he just wanted to talk to see if things were okay. But then I could see there was a woman in the passenger’s seat, with strawberry blonde hair highlighted by the last strains of the sunlight over the ridgeline and she said something to the man and they argued for a second. And I could see her face clearly now - big fearful eyes.

The man sped back up and went on down the road. They looked through the back windshield, and I stared after them until they went over the horizon. And then for the first time I looked down at my shirtfront and saw there was blood on it – the deer’s or my own, or maybe both, I wasn’t really sure. But there was a lot of it, splattered and red and bad looking, and the woman’s face made sense. I was standing there like I’d been in some kind of knife fight. Maybe they thought I was crazy, ready to hop in my truck, chase them down like it was some sort of bad horror movie.

Bloated and heavy with the sound of the deer I tried to go on like things were normal, but I was terrified of hitting something else. The radio was on just loud enough to know it was there but not loud enough to hear what had happened to Doug Fister. The cab smelled bad. Dried blood, a metallic sourness mixed with old smoke, mud. A couple cars passed as I neared Browning. Everyone who saw my truck knew something bad had happened. They were calling ahead to the cops to come pick me up; I was sure of it. But mostly they sped past, just dark outlines of people, staring ahead.

I drove deeper into the reservation, shaken and guilt-ridden, with no side view mirror, wondering what I’d do if I came upon someone going so slow that I’d be forced to pass.

2. Off the Hi-Line

I was most of the way through the forty of Pabst I'd bought in Browning, wading into the shallow part of the drunk where everything feels warm and farther away. The last few sips were still cold and my head started to even out: the good feeling of the drink sweeping my bad memories towards the horizon where they'd be waiting for me tomorrow.

I turned on the radio and flipped through the stations until I came to a Neil Young song on AM. It was "Old Man," a song my dad liked, especially for the way Young's voice wavered and sounded slightly off key but was somehow just right, the mood it created greater than his talent. I was filled with the safe feeling of being a kid staring into the grooves of the old vinyl record as Dad put the needle down on wax, and stuffed the empty forty under the seat, reaching for the bottle of whiskey in the glove box. Okay. I'd roll the truck all the way into Shelby and then head south in the morning. This wasn't so bad; I just needed to get off the Hi-Line.

The whiskey burned my throat and I looked into my rear view mirror to see if my eyes looked drunk. There was a car coming up a ways behind and a shot of adrenaline went through me. The car got closer and closer and for some reason I felt it was a cop. It was getting too dark to know for sure, but something about it – the quality of the lights or the car's body type - just made me think that. The truck was still registered to my parents, and, in a way, everything in it also belonged to them. The bloody shirt in the back seat next to the hatchet as if I'd just cut some hitchhiker into a dozen pieces, and the pot under

the seat, and the gun in the duffel bag, and the quarter full bottle of whiskey: it was just all so crazy.

Out of habit I looked to where my side-view mirror used to be, and then back at the rearview mirror. I tensed and felt a trembling deep in the middle of my body. It traveled from behind my stomach down into my pelvis and all the way up into my throat. My chest tingled and felt tight, and it was like when I'd had an arrhythmia as a kid. Ka-chunk and the skipped beat would take my breath away.

Blue and red lights come on behind me, and my heart got worse and started fluttering in that old, terrible way. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk until it was like it wouldn't ever get back on rhythm.

I drove on for another quarter mile or so, feeling like that, halfway out of my head, then brought the truck roughly onto the shoulder, came to a stop and watched the cop get out of his cruiser and walk towards my truck. He had a tanned, deeply lined face, a shock of black hair coming from under his hat, and he carried a writing pad.

The cop had sunglasses on the brim of hat even though it was near dark, and I felt small and weak, and weaker still because I knew that was exactly how he wanted me to feel: like I didn't have any options and he could do whatever he wanted, and I just had to follow along and be okay with however things turned out. He motioned and I rolled down my window.

“You have your license and registration?”

“Yeah. Yeah, let me get it.” The cold aluminum of an empty beer can grazed my fingertips as I reached around in the glove box. Receipts, old insurance slips, maps, they

were piled together, and my hands shook as I sorted, the cop tapping his pen on the roof of my truck.

I finally found the current registration.

“You know it’s illegal to drive around without a side view mirror?” he said.

“Oh, I guess not,” I said stupidly.

“You’re going awful slow, too,” he said. “You realize that? You’ll get run off the road driving that slow out here. That how you drive in New Mexico?” He snorted and scanned the inside of the truck.

“I was going to get the mirror fixed the next place I could,” I said. “I thought I’d be safe.”

He stared at me now, and I had no read on him. He could have said I was full of shit or to have a nice day and be safe. “You haven’t been smoking or drinking today, have you?”

My jaw tensed.

“Come on out of the truck,” he said.

I got out, light headed for a second from the booze and the pot, and stood to his side as if we were just two guys inspecting a broken truck, thinking about how best to fix it.

“Move to the front of the truck for me, will you?” But he didn’t say it like a question but like an order he was annoyed to have to say.

“Yeah, that’s it. Just go ahead and put your hands on the hood and face me.” I did as he said and stared at him. My heart raced, and it felt like I had to cough or I would

choke on my own anxiety. The cop went to open my truck door. Slightly drunk and angry he was going to go through my things, I stood up and took my hands off the hood.

“Hey! Just stay there, okay? Just stay there.” He said and put his hand on the top of his holster.

After that he rifled through the truck, looking up every few seconds. Afraid he’d pull his gun on me if I moved again, I felt frozen to that hood. He could have fallen over from a heart attack, and I would have been a long time considering if I should help.

It didn’t take long to find the Ziplock bag where I kept my pot. He put the bag on the top of the truck along with the whiskey bottle, then came up and handcuffed me and went through my pockets as we stood there. “Anything else I need to know about in the truck? Any more drugs or needles or weapons I need to know about?”

“There’s a hatchet,” I said, “and a gun.” The cop stared at me. I couldn’t tell if he thought I was lying or if he was genuinely surprised, and I was surprised I’d said what I’d said.

“Stay here,” he said and went back to his car and made a call on the radio.

It was almost dark, a smattering of stars appearing in the blue-black sky and the outline of a crescent moon. There was the smell of woodsmoke and far out in the cool, dry air came a bird’s call and then a response, but I couldn’t see far beyond the shoulder where the cruiser’s headlights lit the rabbit brush in an eerie, soft glow.

The sheriff came back and started going through the back seat of the truck and opened the duffel bag and pulled out the gun. “You got a permit?”

“Yeah.”

“Any reason you have a handgun?”

I shrugged. Ever since I'd bought it I'd had this weird feeling whenever I thought about it - *I have a gun, a loaded gun* and I didn't know how to connect that fact to who I thought of myself as being. I had a college degree, a Trader Joe's club card. I even had a goddamn yoga mat from when Danielle used to wake me up early on Saturday mornings and force me to go.

The cop came across the bloody clothes in the back seat and held them out for me to see. "And these?"

"I hit something," I said.

"Like a *person*," he said.

"Like a deer."

"A deer? How'd that get your clothes bloody?"

"I had to shoot it because it wouldn't die."

He stared at me for a time. "You don't seem stoned. Are you stoned?"

"No."

"Drunk?"

"No."

The cop took his sunglasses off his hat and put them in his front pocket. He had on a sheriff's badge. He came up within a couple feet of me, and I could smell his sweat and a sweet tanginess on his breath like onions and barbecue sauce. He shined a small flashlight in my eyes and asked me to follow the beam, and then made me walk a straight line.

"Recite the alphabet backwards starting from 'R'," he said.

“Shit, I’m not sure I can do that normally.” I regretted it immediately, though it was the truth - the kind of small truth I only said because I actually *was* half-buzzed.

The sheriff stared at me hard. “Look, I ran your plates and this isn’t your truck, I’m trying to figure out if you’re just an idiot or if you’re actually doing bad. You got to help yourself on this.”

I stared at him. “It’s registered to my parents,” I said. “My dad gave it to me.”

“And Mr. Russell, he’d confirm this if I gave him a call?”

I nodded.

He loaded me in the cruiser and the stiff leather of the seats made the handcuffs cut into my wrists. The dome light was on, and I could see myself a little in his rearview mirror. I had greasy, thin looking hair, and stubble, and my eyes were sunken like I hadn’t eaten a piece of fruit in weeks. When we were younger, Matt had always been the one with the truly big fuckups, like the time he’d taken acid at a rave and driven all the way into Arizona before he realized he was going the wrong direction. Dad had been angry for a while before that because he thought Matt drove the truck too much, and when he’d checked the mileage that morning he’d found a driver’s seat that smelled like piss and a three hundred mile trip logged on the odometer. They’d come to blows after that, the only time it happened. Matt had tried to leave again after Dad started yelling, and then Dad had slammed him into the kitchen counter top, chipping Matt’s tooth and streaking the Saltillo patterned tiles with blood. But there was only me now, to mess up or make my parents proud: one child in place of two.

The sheriff killed the light and pulled back on to the highway, shooting off down the road like we were chasing someone. He picked up the cruiser’s radio and talked to

what I guessed was someone back at the station. We hit a rough patch in the road, and in that moment I imagined running off the road and smashing up into the fence line and us dying in a mess of splintered bone and brains weeping out of our skulls.

“I’m taking you to the lock-up,” the sheriff said. “You’ll stay there until we can get a hold of the judge and see what he wants to do with you. Understand?”

“Yeah,” I said.

The silhouette of the mountains extended forever in either direction, and I tried to come up with a way to defend myself. But it was pointless - I could either choose to make it better or I could make up excuses. The mountains looked hundreds of miles off, and we were cutting our way through fields of sorghum or wheat or whatever people grew here, but during the day the granite peaks had been close and broken apart only by fields of Irish green. I thought about when Matt and I were kids, when Dad used to take us out to the foothills near Albuquerque, and we would hike all day in the pinyons, everything smelling of smoke and sap. We wouldn’t come back to the truck until the sun was long behind the mountains and the high desert air got cold and coyotes went around yipping in darkness broken only by starlight. There were times I would get scared and my brother would have to prod me on from behind as we trudged back to the truck, and the whole time I’d be terrified of something coming out and attacking us, of what we’d do if that happened. And one time I remember I had complained to my dad that I felt scared by the dark, and he’d said to me that that’s how you really find out about yourself, when you’re in the dark.

“You see that that there?” The sheriff pointed to something just off the shoulder. In the cruiser’s headlights, there was a small sedan missing its tires and all burned up.

“What happened?”

“Had some carjackings lately. Two man job. Guy lies in the grass by the side of the road like he’s passed out or dead while his buddy squats out of sight. Someone stops to check and before they know it there’s a gun pressed in their belly, and they’re handing over their keys.”

I stared out the back windshield. “Why do they burn the car?”

“When they get sick of it, they just dump it and have a bonfire. You’re fuck lucky, you know that? All the shit I see up here.”

My heart had calmed, but I didn’t feel lucky or anything except tired and a little drunk. I wasn’t sure if that was a thing people would really do, or if he was just trying to scare me. The highway followed the Hi-Line, which hung over the rest of Montana, a row of small, dirty towns strung together by the railroad like old Christmas lights. I’d read in the local paper in Kalispell about a hitchhiker back in the 60s who’d killed an old man after the old man picked him up along the Hi-Line. The hitchhiker had pulled a gun on the old man and then made him drive them to a cabin near Havre, Montana, where he tortured him for a couple days and then burned him up. Why the paper didn’t say. We can hardly guess the shape of our fate or the reasoning behind it, I guess.

The paper said they were seeking death penalty, because the killer had burned the old man’s legs with a cigar, taken the claw of a hammer to his face, and then poured gasoline on him and set him on fire. The Kalispell paper had said the killer had skipped bail back in the 60s (How you did that on murder charges I couldn’t figure), but he’d

finally been caught again and was due to stand trial. Where was the sense in all that? In all this? What sounded more unbelievable? The story in the paper or the sheriff's?

It was near seven o'clock when we got to Shelby. We came in on the highway and got off where it met the interstate and there was a three-block downtown full of neon and potholes like a caricature of a small town.

The sheriff pulled up to a stop light at the end of Main Street. A large sign next to a convenience store read: NOT EVEN ONCE – METH KILLS superimposed over a large skull and crossbones. The sign looked homemade. Maybe it was a public service announcement made by the city or something someone had built and put up on his own, like a man who had lost a son and was taking a stand.

At the stoplight there was a big truck next to us with a family inside, and their eyes were on me - three young kids with dark, round faces, staring not in a mean way, but I guess because I was in the backseat of a cop car and that's an interesting thing for children to see.

In the jail cell there was a single mattress with a man passed out on it. I sat down against the wall as far away from the man as I could get, but the cell was tiny and a small toilet and sink took up an entire wall. The man was on his side facing me, and the crotch of his blue jeans was damp and brownish. The cell was like being enclosed in a sewer pipe. The man was darkened by weather and sun, and it was obvious from his swollen, red face that he'd done some drinking in his life. He frightened me. I had a brief flash of myself at fifty, stubbled with bloodshot eyes sitting on the edge of a mattress in an

apartment all alone. I buried my head between my knees, trying to block out the smell and my thoughts.

“We’re gonna cut you loose, okay?”

I had been asleep.

“What?” I said.

“The judge says we can cut you loose as long as you show up at the courthouse in the morning.”

I stood up and shook the cobwebs from my head.

“If you don’t show up, there’ll be a warrant issued for your arrest and you’ll go to jail if you get picked up again. You understand?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” The sheriff opened the jail cell, the smell of shit wafting out with me.

We walked back out into the main area of the jailhouse and it seemed impossibly bright under the fluorescent lighting. The sheriff gave me a slip of paper with an explanation of the charges: “DUI while driving to the slightest degree of impairment...”, “possession of less than one ounce...” “multiple open containers in vehicle...” The formal language didn’t seem to capture how I felt, but there it all was. Like a receipt.

“This isn’t an admission of guilt but just that you’re aware of what you’re charged with, and that you know you have to get the charges taken care of before you can leave town.”

I read them over and signed where the sheriff asked me to. My fingers were still stained with ink from where he'd printed me earlier, and my index finger left a mark on the ballpoint pen.

The sheriff tore off copies of the papers and handed them to me. "If you don't show up, you'll go to jail, no questions. And it won't be this jail. They'll take you over to the state pen south of town and let you dry out for a couple weeks...which might be just what you need."

Dry out. Like I was a piece of clothing you could put on a line.

"What time do I have to be there?"

"9:30. You got a bank card?"

"Yes."

"Any money in it?"

That comment pissed me off. How much would this would all cost? I didn't have that much left. The sheriff put the card with my fingerprints and the signed papers into a folder, and I stood there awkwardly. For the first time realized I was free, and I needed to figure out what to do.

"You can call a cab from the desk here, if you want." He shifted papers on the desk. "But don't go back to your truck. I'm on until Six AM. If I see that truck in town, it better be because someone stole it off the highway."

"All right," I said. "You know a good, cheap place to stay?" It was a weird thing to ask after I'd said it, and I didn't know why I didn't just wait to ask the cabbie.

The sheriff smiled thinly. "Well...what kind of place do you want?"

"Cheap, I guess."

“That would probably be the Totem Motel then. It beats our holding cell.” He laughed after he said this, and I imagined a place with mold on the walls and coarse sheets with floral patterns.

“You can use our phone to call the taxi. Number’s on the desk there. Don’t be late for the judge.”

I nodded and said thanks, picked up the phone, and dialed.

I felt the woman’s eyes on me as I filled out the small sheet of paper. She was thin and gray, maybe in her sixties, and she was already on her second cigarette since the time she’d answered the door to the motel office. There was some oldies music playing back up in her trailer, which was attached to the office, and I could hear a baby crying and another person shuffling around telling the baby to shush. It was near one o’clock in the morning, but it didn’t seem like I’d woken them up. We stood at a small counter covered in brochures for white water rafting and pizza delivery, and I handed back the sheet.

“Long day?” She puffed from her cigarette.

“Huh?” I said, and then she pointed to the ink on my fingers.

She smiled. She was probably used to this, a glance into people’s lives as they passed through to somewhere else.

She punched numbers into a calculator and then pulled a pair of glasses from the pocket of her raggedy navy blue sweater. “It’s 33.87 including tax.”

I pulled out my credit card and handed it to her.

“So, you’ll be downstairs with Walt. We got a big tourist group on the main level headed to Glacier tomorrow.” She said the name Walt like I ought to know who that was, and I gave her a confused look. “He lives downstairs, dear. His room is across from yours. Owns the semi-truck in the parking lot. You got a deal on that room cause there’s no bathroom. You two will have to share the one at the end of the hall, but just don’t move around Walt’s things and you’ll be fine.” She smiled and handed me back my credit card and a receipt.

“Oh, okay.” The motel was already unlike any I’d ever been to, two sagging wings built onto an old trailer home, a stairwell to my left that looked like it led to a cellar, but apparently led to my room downstairs.

The old woman took the receipt off the counter and handed me the key. “Well, if you need anything you can come up and knock on my door. I live up front here.”

“All right, I sure appreciate it.” I watched as the woman turned and walked back to the door of her trailer.

In the parking lot, I got my things from the back seat of the cab. I’d had the driver take me to my truck and then back into town, and now I owed him near fifty dollars for the ride. I paid and looked into my wallet and could imagine my bank account online, each fine I owed, each expense I incurred from here on, dragging the balance towards zero.

I grabbed my backpack and duffel bag and went back through the door where the old lady had talked to me and walked down the dark stairwell into a hallway that had two doors on either side. There were a couple uncovered bulbs hanging from the ceiling that

made things look small and dirty. A TV blared from the room across from mine and a man coughed loudly and talked like there was someone else in the room. I listened a while longer and he was just responding to the questions on *Jeopardy*. The whole hallway smelled like smoke, and a haze hung just like in the old lady's trailer.

I unlocked the door to my room and turned on the light. It was tiny, about the size of a college dorm room, and smelled like when you let food rot in the sink for a few days when you go on vacation. I sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to take stock of things, think about what I should do next, but there was only a tight feeling in my throat and chest when I thought about going home.

My ex- would be back at home, and her family, our mutual friends, someone would see me and tell someone else and she would hear I was back in town, and she'd know I was still struggling. Albuquerque wasn't really that big of a place, and we knew mostly the same people. Though some of the people we knew had already chosen sides, friendships divvied up like possessions. Did she still think about me? Did she sometimes wish things were still the same? She was probably just off work, driving down from the restaurant she worked at in the foothills to her home in Nob Hill. Maybe she was with her boss, who was also her new boyfriend, my replacement. She'd come home from the restaurant later than normal, smelling like steak and potatoes and sweat, but, also rum, which wasn't anything to worry about in its own right, because sometimes we'd both have a few drinks after work before we came back to the apartment. But that night I'd noticed something different. Since I'd known her, she'd always had a knack for doing imitations of other people, especially when she drank, and that night I remember she'd used a few words in her vocabulary that didn't mesh with her flat, southwestern accent,

words that hadn't been there before she had started working with her new boss from New York, and words that I would never use. When I caught her, weeks later, I was still surprised.

The memory, everything about that day felt like it was pressing down on my chest and made me want to get drunk again. I left the room and walked across the hallway to the room where the TV still blared. What was his name? Walt? He'd know where to buy more booze. I knocked on the door and waited.

A man in his forties with long, thinning hair opened the door. He wore a flannel shirt and a pair of sweatpants tucked into wool socks.

"Yeah?" he said. He had a clear plastic cup in his hand that looked full of whiskey and his eyes were glassy, his breathing heavy as if standing up had been a great effort.

"Hi, um, I'm across the hall and wanted to know if you knew a liquor store nearby."

He smiled at this and rubbed his stomach. He had a white shirt on underneath the flannel, and it was stained dark in the middle as if with grease from a truck. "Liquor store, huh?" He thought about it for a second. "Well, I know a place, but they're closed. However, you're in luck." He laughed and gestured back into his room which was clouded with smoke like he'd set something on fire and smelled like he'd been frying bacon all night. "I gotta sorta one right here."

"No, I didn't mean to bother you. I just wanted to see if you knew a place."

"Nah, fuck it. Come on in and have a drink. I'm just killing time until I go back on the road Monday."

There didn't seem to be anything to do but say yes. I walked into the room which was much bigger than mine and watched as he grabbed a coffee mug from the cabinet and poured it all the way full with whiskey.

"I'm Walt," he said and handed me the mug, and I could tell he was already pretty drunk. "Helluva game going on here." He gestured towards the TV and the *Jeopardy* theme song played as a new episode started.

"I'm Mike," I said. Walt went to the corner and brought me a folding chair, and then he sat down on a small, plaid recliner. I unfolded the chair and sat next to him, staring at the TV. I drank the whiskey in large gulps, and even though I hadn't had a drink for six hours I was drunk again in no time. The room was sparse. A single bed against the far wall, a rifle propped up in the corner, and a big, brown owl mounted on the wall over the TV. The owl stared out at us, and I wondered if Walt had shot it or had just picked it up from a junk sale.

Walt lit a cigarette, smoked it, lit another, and shouted answers at the TV every so often. "What is uranium!" And we were both drinking whiskey so fast now that I started doing it too.

"Amsterdam!" I said

"Don't forget," he said, "answers in the form of a question." He smiled at me in a big, drunken way as he blew smoke out the side of his mouth. We went on like that for an episode.

"Who is Harrison Ford!"

"What is a Beluga!"

“What is ‘in dire straits!’” Walt was particularly proud of that one and shouted it again when none of the contestants could think of it.

Then a new episode started, and Walt got up and poured us two more full glasses of whiskey. He brought the mug back and leaned into me as he handed it over. I was scared of him for a second. *The gun in the corner. How much had he already drunk?*

It was like he was seeing me again for the first time.

“Have at it, Miiiiike. Bottom’s up.”

He stumbled over to his recliner. Would he remember any of this in the morning? I called out more answers for *Jeopardy*, proud of myself in a stupid drunken way for knowing them. I got three answers right in a row and yelled over to him.

“Pretty damn good, son. You a college guy?” he said.

“Yeah, in New Mexico.”

“Good for you,” he said. “That shit is important. That shit is very fucking important.” He looked the room over and settled on the gun in the corner and then started mumbling. “I gotta fucking piss, fucking piss.” He went to get up and fell back in the chair. “Hahaha, I’m shit ass drunk,” he said while grinning at the TV.

The segment with Final Jeopardy was playing and I knew the answer. I practically shouted it out. “Who is Henrik Ibsen!” Trebek quickly echoed me and I shot out of my seat. “Hell yeah! How ‘bout it, Walt. Pretty damn good, huh?”

I looked over and he was nodding out.

“Walt, you okay?”

His head lolled back, deep dry creases running around his eyes like miniature coulees.

He breathed heavily and there was whiskey spilled all over his shirt front and ash peppered in his stubble.

He started snoring so loud I could barely hear Trebek ask the questions on the next episode. The TV blared and mixed with the snores, and I was left again with just the dark thoughts in my sludgy brain. I finished the last half of the mug in a couple gulps. I looked over at Walt and tried to talk to him again, but he rolled over on his side and made a sound like he was gagging on his own drunken tongue.

“Fuck it, just fuck it anyways,” I said and could smell the whiskey seeping out of me, slurring my words.

I got up slowly from the folding chair and wobbled across the room. I opened the door and left Walt passed out in his chair. In my own room I grabbed the bag with my clothes and the gun and could feel the weight of it in the corner, much heavier, more distinct than the t-shirts and other clothes, and I walked back out into the hall and searched out the bathroom. It was the first door in the hallway by the stairwell, and when I opened the door there was a shaving kit on the counter. Mouthwash on the toilet lid and a half-used roll of toothpaste and a few bars of soap. I locked the door and turned on the shower, then sat down on the edge of the toilet and took out the gun. It gleamed, condensation forming on the barrel, and I put it on the edge of the bathroom sink, and took off my shoes and socks, then my shirt, then my pants, and then I just sat on the edge of the toilet for a while looking at the gun, steam gathering in the room and clouding the bathroom mirror.

I thought of shooting the deer, the recoil and the brief flash of heat and light that was gone in an instant. I'd thought all the life would instantly go out of the deer after I'd

shot it, like when someone gets killed in the movies, but the deer hadn't died like that at all, but had actually taken a few more seconds to look all dead. I picked up the gun and pressed the barrel to my thigh and felt the coldness of the metal on my leg, though even then the pressure still felt far away, like I was touching myself with it over layers of clothing. I looked at the flecks of the deer's blood on my body and the pain in my stomach from all the drinking radiated into my back like a beam of pulsing heat. Why couldn't I stop being such a fuck up? How long could I go on like this? Matt dead, Danielle with another guy, my parents thousands of miles away, and Walt drunk and snoring down the hall. It was just me now. I brought the gun up in front me, turned it over in my hands. I thought of all the people who had managed to pull the trigger and how it was such a simple thing to do. Just a little bit of pressure and then, darkness.

A pounding came of the bathroom door, and I was so startled I dropped the gun and it clattered to the ground.

"I gotta piss like a naked race horse out here, Mike." It was Walt, his voice huge and slurred. I must have been sitting there letting the shower run for a while.

I was so shocked I laughed. "Yeah, all right. I'm fuck drunk in here. Just a second." No response. I put my ear to the door and it seemed like he'd gone back down the hall.

I picked the gun up and put it back in the bag and grabbed a small bottle of shampoo. The water was almost too hot to stand in the shower, and I scrubbed the blood from my stomach and watched it run down the drain the color of rust. I'd wait this thing out. I'd see the judge in the morning, and I'd wait this thing out.

The courthouse was a half-mile from the motel. The cab ride back to my truck had cost me another thirty dollars, and I'd checked my bank statement at an ATM on Main St. I hoped I didn't have to pay too much in fines. Would I have to go back to jail if I couldn't pay?

In the main office, there was a young, unattractive woman – two moles on the end of her nose and a semi-perm that belonged in another decade - who sat at a desk with the radio on and a pile of manila folders stacked a foot high.

She turned down the radio a bit. "Are you the guy they picked up last night with the pot and mirrors?"

"Yeah, I guess that's me."

"Okay, hon. He'll see you in a second." She was too young to be calling me "hon." I heard a man in the office behind hers talking to someone on the phone. There was some cursing and then a lot of bad sounding hacking going on.

My hangover from the night before was setting in, and I sipped gas station coffee and my stomach rumbled, the pain in it worse than ever. There was no place to sit.

"Well, wish you could have seen our city under better circumstances. You at least get to stay at a nice place?" The secretary smiled at me.

"I stayed at the Totem Motel," I said, and she made a face like I'd said I'd stayed in a whorehouse.

"Eileen!" the voice from the other room said. "Is the yahoo here from last night?"

The judge was seated at his desk. He was old, at least mid to late sixties and his face looked weathered and dark like someone who'd spent too much time in the sun, but

somehow his hair didn't match up. It was combed back and the roots were nearly white, but the rest of it was streaked with greasy brown strands like he'd styled it with melted fudge.

"Uh, I'm Mike. Mike Russell." He stared blankly at me through his thick-lensed glasses. "I was told I needed to see you before I left town."

He coughed and there was a rattle in it like he was moving things around in his lungs, making space. He did it again and then spit a chunk of something brown and mucus like into a paper coffee cup on his desk and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. He stood and we shook hands. "Right," he said, "the young man with marijuana and no mirrors. Sit down."

His cheek bulged with what must have been a wad of chew, and the coffee cup was filled halfway with brown juice.

He placed a couple pieces of paper in front of me. "Here. You just got to read and sign these forms acknowledging you did what the sheriff says you did and that you agree to plead guilty and to forego any other further action on the matter."

On the page the arrest didn't sound as bad. It was even kind of funny: "...The suspect then informed me he was incapable of reciting the alphabet back from the letter 'R.'"

"You're getting a heckuva deal here, son." The judge spit into his cup and looked me over.

"Yes, sir," I said. "But I was wondering how much this all is gonna cost."

"Yeah, well. Eileen can get you set up with a payment plan. You'll need to pay the pot fine today. That's four hundred and ninety-five. I forget what the DUI fine is. It

just went up. You're probably looking at four grand when you throw in the open containers and the mirrors..." He trailed off and took off his glasses. "So, Mike, what are you doing up here anyway? Are you in school?"

"No, sir. I graduated in May."

"Where at?"

"UNM," I said. "University of New Mexico."

"Uh huh, uh huh. And what are your plans now?" He said it in a way like he actually wanted to know, but I was looking over his bookcase in the corner. There were a handful of books that looked law related, but there was also a shelf with small bleached skulls that looked like they were from rodents.

"A hobby," he said, following my eyes.

The whole thing was weird, and I was searching for an answer to his question. I'd been asked that a lot over the last year but had never quite had the answer. With Matt dying and breaking up with Danielle it had only become less clear. "I think I want to teach," I said. "I majored in English in college and took some teaching classes. I don't know. I guess I'd probably have to go back to school to do that." It wasn't untrue necessarily, though I said it mostly because I thought it would make the judge think better of me.

"Teacher, huh?" And the judge leaned over his desk a bit and really seemed to be thinking hard about something. "I was a teacher for many years. Taught biology and loved every minute of it. He stood up and walked back to his bookcase. Actually, being a judge is just something I picked up after I retired from the school." He paused and stared

over the small skulls like he was taking stock. “A young guy needs money to set himself up for a thing like that.”

“I’m sort of between work for the summer,” I said, though in truth I had no idea what I’d do. Anything sounded better than going home and jockeying a cash register, but then that seemed to be the only immediate possibility.

The judge started flipping through a rolodex on his desk but didn’t say anything. The wad of tobacco in his mouth was like a giant tumor.

“Ah, here it is.” He stared at the card on the rolodex for a while and didn’t say anything.

“Here *what* is?” I said.

“I’ve got a grandson in Great Falls who goes to Alaska each summer. He works in a cannery. Makes good money and pays tuition that way.”

“Uh, okay.”

He looked at me like I was an idiot. “Meaning, you might consider it too.”

“Oh, oh, I guess I might. How much does he make?”

“His mother, my daughter, says it’s quite a bit, especially for a couple months work.” The judge put his hands together and leaned over his desk. “Might be a good thing for a guy like you. Give you something to keep you busy.”

I wasn’t sure I could see myself in Alaska. It wasn’t really a place I knew except from TV. “Well, I *was* thinking about heading to Great Falls on my way home.” And I was, in so far as Great Falls was a city on the interstate on the way south.

The judge picked up a pen and scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to me. “Here’s his number. At least, I think that’s still it. Seems like it’s always changing.

Charlene says he's all over hell and back and god knows what else." He fiddled with his glasses a bit and looked me over. "The two of you would probably get along." He laughed at this and spit again into his cup.

I took the paper from him and looked over the number. "Thanks," I said and was excited and nervous. This grandson couldn't be too normal if he was anything like the judge, but still, maybe it *was* the kind of thing I needed.

The judge stood up as if to leave, and I did too. He reached out and we shook hands and mine disappeared into his, which were huge and rough. He kept hold of my hand for a moment and looked me in the eye. "Just do me one favor, even if you don't call that number. Just keep your eyes open as you head out of town. There's something a young guy like you ought to take notice of. Promise me you'll have a look."

"Sure," I said. The judge let go of my hand and I turned to leave and could feel him staring at the back of my head until I was back in the main office. After that, I gave the secretary my debit card and she handed me a book of payment stubs for the rest. I owed forty one hundred more dollars when all was said and done, and it felt like even more. There was quickening of the pulse when I said the number back to myself.

On the interstate headed south, I imagined what Alaska must look like: eagles and forests and bears and tundra. The day suddenly felt open on either end. The sky looked as immense as the day before and the mountains almost too far away to see. A great plain spread out on either side of me, broken only by a gray and official looking building in the distance that was out of place.. As I got closer, I could see there was a chain link

fence all around the building with barbwire running along the top. A sign on the side of the interstate came into focus: Crossroads Correctional Facility - Next Right.

Maybe I'd give the grandson a call.

3. *Runners*

Mud in the swollen river seemed to boil as if the bones of the earth were shifting below. “How the water goes is how the earth is shaped,” my brother used to say when we were kids. It was one of the sayings he’d picked up from all the books he read about the Old West. The type of thing children’s authors attributed to long dead Indian chiefs to make them sound more stoic and wise, more like how white kids living in Albuquerque were supposed to imagine them to sound.

The air smelled like gasoline and rain clouds cleaved the sky as the Missouri River ran on, a quarter mile wide and full of silt. The day wasn’t warm exactly, but the air just didn’t have the same bite to it as the weeks before. On the drive down from Shelby I’d watched the sun balance over the fields, winter melting off even in the shadows, the Hi-Line behind me seeming to evaporate with it.

I sat on the riverbank, the gun in the brown paper sack next to me. The liquor store clerk had given me the bag after I’d bought a tall boy of Budweiser that morning. The drive from Shelby to Great Falls had taken an hour – a near straight shot down the 15. I imagined the beer back in the truck, gleaming with condensation and how it would taste against the back of my throat. The hangover had made me feel all dried out, like my skin was made of old newspaper.

I took the gun from the bag and felt the heaviness of it. Aside from the weight, it like something my mom might have picked up from the junk section at the grocery store for me when I was in grade school, but I knew the power of it now. I held it for a moment, then brought it back behind my head and chucked it as far as I could. It arced

for a long moment and landed, barrel first, halfway in a bank of mud I hadn't seen just below the river's dark surface. *Goddamnit, Mike, you can't even do this right.*

I folded up the legs of my jeans and waded out into the river, but the current was as strong as it looked and the mud was thick and created great squishing vacuums every time I raised a foot, so that eventually it felt like I was trying to walk in five pairs of boots. The ground below the surface was uneven - in some places it was very near the waterline and in others it dropped off a half-foot or so. When I got to the gun, my pants were soaked and my feet caked in mud. I picked up the gun again and looked back to the riverbank: it seemed impossibly far considering I couldn't have thrown the gun more than sixty feet. I ground my feet down in the mud and braced against the current, and then threw the gun again as far as I could towards the middle of the river. I slipped as I followed through, falling so that water went all down my shirt and in my face.

Gagging, sucking in water, spitting it back out. It ran up my nose and ears and I splashed about like a kid who couldn't swim, thrown in a pool for the first time. I finally got a grip in the mud, the sludge curling up under my fingers, and steadied myself. I got my head out of the water and spit muddy mucus into the water. Layered in mud like a zombie I waded back to shore. I felt defeated and stupid as I sat down on the riverbank, but at least the gun was gone away from me.

It was only midday, and I stripped down to my underwear and tried to dry out on a small spot of sandy grass. The sound of traffic drifted from the interstate a half-mile away, and I stared up at the sky where the sun was breaking through the clouds. It still felt too early to call the judge's grandson. How would I even start the conversation? *Hello, your grandfather gave me this number after I got out of jail. Said you could help*

me find a job? Oh by the way, how do you feel about taking a stranger fresh out of jail with you to Alaska? It made me sound as crazy as a shithouse rat, and what did I know about working in Alaska anyway? That sounded like a thing for people who knew how to do things, not a thing for a guy who just almost drowned in four feet of water. I'd never been good with my hands. Sometimes it seemed I had no idea how things actually worked – engines, gears, the machinery and moving parts of the world were all a mystery to me. I was like other adults who were ashamed of never having learned some basic skill from childhood, like reading or riding a bike.

Manual labor to me meant standing in the garage on a Sunday afternoon with my father and brother. Dad cursing at me, “Goddamnit Mike, the *other* wrench, the *other* god damn one,” while he struggled with some simple task like changing the oil on his Ford. My brother providing some sort of useful role – bringing rags or offering encouragement - while I gave up and sulked.

I had lunch at a Burger King not far from the river and the highway. I hadn't had anything to eat for nearly an entire day, and the Whopper I bought sat on the brown tray like a loser's approximation of a feast. I plowed through it in a handful of bites and it settled in my bubbling guts with all the booze from the last day. When I was done, I walked to the bathroom and placed a plastic bag with clean clothes on the counter. I'd changed back into my muddy pants when I'd left the river and just thrown on a hooded sweatshirt over my bare chest. There was no lock on the door in the Burger King bathroom and I tried to change quickly, but a man walked in as I was putting on clean

pants. He froze when he saw me and gave me a look that said: *I'm sorry for you*, before turning back around. Did he think I was homeless?

After that, I drove back to the river and parked in the sun. I smoked cigarettes and thought about the guy in the jail cell and Walt, both waking to messes and fragmented memories. What a weird night. So many lonely fuckups the world over. Was I taking my place with them, or was there something else out in front of me? I lay out and took a nap in the cab of my truck, thinking about what Alaska must be like this time of year – all snow capped mountains and bears in Irish fields, Discovery Channel wild.

I woke up sweating and the truck cab smelled like the whiskey I'd been drinking the night before. I lit a cigarette and rolled down the window. I smoked it, lit another, and pulled out my phone and stared at the screen.

I opened the can of Budweiser I'd bought that morning and had a drink of the warm, frothy beer. Just the one tall can. Something to calm my nerves. There was that initial rush of excitement, both the cooling off and stimulation of the brain, made more intense by the fact that all I had was the temporary driving permit the judge had issued to me, and I knew I shouldn't be drinking and driving the day after a DUI.

I dialed the number. After the fourth ring, a guy with a deep, but young voice answered. "Yeaaaah?" He hocked something from the back of his throat after he spoke.

"Um, yeah, is this Josh?" I could feel the energy change on the other end of the line as soon as I said his name.

“Listen, I’m fucking tired of this. You need to stop calling here. I don’t owe you guys shit. You hear me? Bo and me are fucking even.”

“Uhh...I don’t think I’m who you think I am.” I paused. “Your grandpa up in Shelby gave me this number.”

He was silent for a few seconds, and I wondered if he’d hung up. “What the hell he’d do that for?”

I took a swig of beer and rubbed my temple with my free hand. Maybe I ought to just end the call. Did I even want to do this? But the thought of Walt, waking up in yesterday’s clothes with ash and probably piss all over his pants, made me want to keep talking. “He said you were headed to Alaska and that you might be able to help me out with a job.”

“Fuck me,” he said. “Really?” He snorted and sounded genuinely surprised. There was a sound like he was outside in a big windstorm, though where I was at it was flat calm, and then I could hear him clearly again. “That old son of a bitch.”

“Hey man, it’s fine. If it’s not cool, no big deal.”

“Nononono. That’s not what I’m saying. What’s your name, man?”

“Mike.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Uh huh, uh-huh.” He paused as if he was trying to figure out just how I might be of use to him. “So Mike, you ever worked like a dog for two months in a pile of fish guts?”

He was sizing me up, so I took a risk. “No, but I spent last night in a jail cell with a guy who’d shit his pants.”

He laughed and the laugh sputtered into a cough. “That’s a start. Listen, man, you got a car?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I’m running some errands but I’m headed home in a few. You know your way around Great Falls?”

“Not really.”

“Well, where are you? We can just meet up at a bar or something.”

I looked around but really had no idea how to locate myself other than by the river. “Um, I’m down by the river.”

He laughed at me. “What the fuck, man? That could be any fucking place. Look, just take down my address and find a café and Google it or something. I gotta get going.”

He gave me his address and I tore off the label on the empty forty bottle from the day before and wrote it down on that.

“Meet me in an hour,” he said. “Can you do that?”

“Sure.”

“And just so you know, I’ve got a shotgun if you turn out to be a freak.”

“Like I said, I’m just interested in a job.”

“Ha, I’m just screwing with you man. But seriously, fucking show up in an hour. I’ll see you then.” He snorted again and hung up and that was the end of it.

The judge's grandson lived in an apartment building between a trailer park and a row of bars a couple miles from the Burger King I'd eaten at. When I got to his building, it was late afternoon, around 5:30. I parked my truck on the street and walked around until I found his apartment. My heart pumped hard as I knocked on the door. I was getting myself into another situation – good or bad I wasn't sure yet, but the excitement of it was pulling me forward.

The door opened and a skinny, pale woman with lots of mascara stood there; a light skinned black boy who measured up to the woman's stomach and had eyes the color of almonds stared up at me from beside her.

A guy about my age appeared behind the woman and child and gave me a brief nod. "Hey, man. Mike?"

"Yeah," I half-waved at him.

"Come on in," he said.

I walked into the apartment, which was good sized, with old matted down carpet and wood paneled walls, made to feel even more spacious because the only furniture was a loveseat in the corner and a large, Panasonic TV – the bulky old type people used to buy before flat screens but now left on street corners or gave away on Craigslist.

Josh was taller than myself, over six feet and with a thick head of sandy blonde hair and big rounded shoulders like someone who had done some actual work in his life. He led me up into the kitchen which had a card table with folding chairs at one end, and there was another girl standing at the counter. She was pretty – shorter, more full figured, and younger looking than the girl who answered the door. The younger girl

flipped through what looked like some kind of realty magazine and sipped from a bottle of beer, wearing only an old chambray shirt and a form fitting cotton skirt.

Josh introduced me all around. “This here’s my girlfriend, Sheila,” he said, pointing to the woman who had answered the door and followed us into the kitchen. “That little brat right there is Jayden.” The kid said hi but didn’t make eye contact.

We stood there for a moment, striped shadows from the slatted window blinds covering the walls. I couldn’t figure whether the kid was the girlfriend’s or Josh’s or this other girl’s. The only thing for certain was that it wasn’t anyone’s together. I looked at the kid and then at the rail thin Sheila and tried to imagine the little boy swimming around inside of her, somewhere between her pubic bone and stomach looking for a way out.

Josh stood with his hands on the kitchen counter and nodded at the other girl. “And this is Sheila’s friend, Lauren.” Lauren looked up from her magazine. She had huge, green eyes with brown in the irises, and she brushed back strands of dyed blonde hair from her cheekbones, the roots long and much darker where they ran into her scalp. She smiled at me. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I said, but I said it while looking at Lauren.

Josh went over to the fridge and brought out beers, and then we all sat down at the card table while the kid went to the living room and turned on the TV. Josh offered me a beer, but I really didn’t want it. I had a vague sense that if I was going to go to Alaska I ought to get myself in better shape, sharpen myself up somehow. But I was feeling awkward and still hungover. I took the beer and twisted off the top.

One wouldn't hurt anything, and it was good of him to offer. I took a couple sips and started to relax.

The TV was on, but the four of us sat at the table in awkward silence. Josh looked me over, his beer sweating between his thick, calloused fingers.

"So, you spent last night in jail, huh? What'd they pick you up for?" The girls' eyes were on me. Josh drank from his beer, finishing half of it in one gulp.

I might have lied, but then, there didn't seem to be any point. "I got a DUI," I said.

He laughed at this. "And they let you *drive* down here?"

Sheila cut in and slapped him lightly on the back. "That's no big deal, Josh. Everyone's got one of those. I know lots of people with two or three."

"I got a temporary permit from the court," I said.

"Yeah, I guess that sounds about right," Josh said. "At least that answers why you wanna do something dumbass like go work in a cannery."

I laughed. "They made me pay part of the fine already, and I now I've barely got enough money for the gas to get home."

Lauren was sitting on my right, and she drank from her bottle of beer and peeled back part of the label with her shiny, clear fingernails. "Where you from?" she said.

"Albuquerque," I said. "I've been on a road trip for a few weeks." She seemed interested by this detail and leaned closer to me. And Jesus, I could *smell* her and she smelled good. Her perfume reminded me of my ex's but slightly off, richer. What was it? Chanel Mademoiselle? And suddenly I could see myself, who I'd been and what I was now, and the thought that this girl might wear a perfume like that made me re-think her

for a moment, made me feel better about the whole thing. The first light buzz of the beer and her scent made my blood pressure rise, and I was half-hard and alert like a sixteen year old, when all a girl has to do to make you horny is just be in the same room as you.

“I like it there,” Lauren said. “I have friends who go to school in Tempe. The guys down there are so gorgeous. Not like here where it’s all Carhartts and stubble. I visited for spring break last year and went to a *huge* fucking party. We all went on a rafting trip down a river near Sedona. *Jesus*, those red, red rocks like they were on fire and everyone tanned and the boats tied together like some kind of desert Mardi Gras on water.” She paused for a moment like she was savoring the memory. “Maybe I ought to come down and see *you* sometime.” She leaned in and pushed her shoulder into me like she was just joking but really wasn’t.

What did she do here when she wasn’t drinking at a friend’s apartment? I talked about Albuquerque and tried to let Lauren know it wasn’t actually all that close to Tempe, but I could see she was thinking something else, and I thought maybe there was something she wanted from me, maybe something they all did, and that’s why everyone was being so friendly.

“I don’t know much about all that,” Sheila said as she lit a cigarette, “but I do know I’d like to get out of this apartment sometimes. A road trip sounds like such a nice luxury.” I nodded but was looking at a small blue dinner plate on the windowsill by the card table with what looked like powder from donuts smeared on it, and it made me wonder for a moment. How well did I really know these people?

But no, they seemed all right. A little down like me maybe, but we were all just young and drinking beers together on a Friday. Having friends at school in Arizona was a decent and simple thing to connect them to me.

Josh got up and brought us back more beers, and I opened mine and took a good swig, the burning in my stomach momentarily numbed. “Lauren, let’s let Mike and you catch up on the frat party scene later.” Josh sat down at the table and his face looked rigid, like an older woman gone wrong on botox, a light glaze of sweat on his forehead. “I wanna know if this guy is serious about Alaska.”

He looked at me expectantly, but he hadn’t asked me a question. “Yeah, I mean, I guess I don’t really have the first clue. I couldn’t tell you one salmon from another, or like how to tie a knot or anything, but I’d like to give it a shot.”

He grinned at me and his eyes were wet looking and wide. I could practically see the pulse beating in his pale, taut neck, and he had a grip on his beer bottle like he was afraid it might squirt away. “Shit, it’s not like you’ve got to have special skills or anything. 95% of what you do up there you can learn up there. You can stand around in a pile of guts and eggs can’t you? Sure you fucking can. You don’t mind the smell of vomit for hours at a time? Of course you’re okay with that. You just gotta learn to be there without really being there - just keep rowing the boat just keep sawing wood just keep showing up and try not to lose your mind and at the end of the summer there’s a big ass check waiting for you.”

Try not to lose your mind. This guy was a little crazy, but the money had me interested. “How much can a guy make?” I said.

“Well, it’s based on share. This year I’ll have a share and a half since it’s my third time going, so I’ll probably get nine to twelve grand for six weeks. You’d be a single share guy since you’re new, so it’d be less. Maybe seventy five hundred or so.”

Seventy five hundred. Jesus, I had expected him to say a few grand. “Where would we go?” I said.

“Klawock. It’s in southeast Alaska. Season starts on the twenty-first, so we’d need to leave here in the next couple days. Drive to Bellingham, catch the ferry there to Ketchikan, then take another ferry to Hollins, and then a car ride to Klawock. Actually, you showing up is fucking perfect. I was gonna hitch or Greyhound, but we could split gas instead and you could sell your rig in Bellingham.”

Wow, this guy had already thought this thing through. I nodded and drank some more, but I had no idea where any of those places were. Southeast Alaska didn’t mean much more to me than if he’d said the southeast side of the moon. It all sounded a long way from New Mexico, a long way from where I was at that moment and that made me excited and nervous. What a thing to tell my parents, to tell my friends. It’d be like I had planned leaving home all along.

“It’s not so bad,” Sheila said. “I worked there a couple summers ago with Josh. You just gotta be ready to be on your feet all the time. Your hands are the biggest deal. I couldn’t even make a fist most days after scraping guts out. And everything smells like fish. I mean, *everything*. I sent a letter to my mom when I was up there and she said it smelled so much like salmon guts she could only leave it in the house for a day before she had to throw it away.”

Josh cut back in. “The thing is, I know I can get you a job once we get up to the cannery. But it’s so late already you’ll have to pay your own way to get up there. I’m friends with the guy who manages the plant. I could give him a call tomorrow and let him know I’ve got another guy. I’m sure they’ll reimburse you once the season is over and you’ve proved your worth.”

I finished my second beer since I’d been there and leaned back. I could picture my days in Alaska, and they had a shape to them. The pleasure of work and the feeling of the cool of the evening after a job is done, bald eagles swooping down over a pier that looked out into the Pacific as the sun set.

“I’m in,” I said.

“Yeah?” Josh grinned.

“Yeah, I wanna go with you.”

“Well, fuckin’ A. Let’s have another round then.”

After that we drank more beer - they must have had a case or more in the fridge because we never ran low and there was no mention of getting more. Talking turned to card playing and then there was a bottle of whiskey on the table along with plastic cups and ice and it was nighttime (When had someone turned on the light in the living room?)

The girls started talking about going dancing, and Lauren put her hand on my leg under the table and I put my hand on hers. In the smooth, cool space between the top of her kneecap and where her skirt started and her thighs squeezed together tight like flesh bundled by rubber bands, I touched her and felt the friction tingle my fingertips. I hadn’t thought about sex much in the last few weeks, but it all came back to me at once. God, I

could feel it building from my dick all the way up through my stomach and chest until it reached a space behind my eyes, and it was like a great pressure that needed to get released.

I was buzzed and in a better mood than I'd been in weeks. Josh had been checking his cell phone, sending texts every few minutes, fidgeting. He got up, went to his bedroom, came back, went to his bedroom. The bathroom was back there, and I'd already pissed a couple times myself. This time he got up again and went outside to smoke and Sheila followed even though everyone had already been smoking inside all night, and then the kid came over from the couch. I asked him if he wanted to play "Go Fish" and he nodded. Every time he placed a card down, he smiled to himself like it was some big joke he was playing on me.

"How old are you, Jayden?" I said as I placed a card on the table. He just shrugged and looked over his cards, his brown eyes narrowing. I could see his fingernails were long and a little yellowed at the ends. "Jayden, when's your birthday?" I said as a way of asking again.

"August," he said. "August fifteenth. It's before school but after summer. I hate it." He kept looking at his cards. Lauren stood up and wobbled a bit, leaned on my shoulder, and then walked back to the bathroom. My eyes followed her the whole way.

"It's not so bad," I said. "I've got a summer birthday too. At least you don't have to go to school on your birthday." I smiled at Jayden, and he gave me a funny look and lay the cards out on the table as if saying *I'm done*.

"Mike, are you gonna help Josh when you go to Alaska? Mom says Josh just needs someone to help him."

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just think Josh could be nicer sometimes.” I drank my beer and wondered when everyone was coming back, what they were doing leaving me, a stranger, alone with the kid.

“I’m sure they’re all nice,” I said. “Grown ups just seem like that sometimes when you’re a kid.” He was unconvinced, and I didn’t really know what I was saying. Maybe there *was* something bad going on. I tried to imagine Josh hitting Jayden on the back of the head or Sheila grabbing him too hard but that didn’t seem to match up with the people I’d met.

Lauren came back in the room, and smiling widely. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” she said to me. “We’re too young to be playing with kids all night.” She walked over to get more ice and came back and leaned over the kid’s shoulder, smiling at me. If all the drinking and noise was new to Jayden, he didn’t act like it. He seemed to still be thinking about what he’d said and so was I.

I got up and walked over to Lauren and saw Josh and Sheila kiss and then talk softly on the porch through the open screen door, and then Sheila was back in but Josh wasn’t. Neighbors came over at some point, and the room was all buzz and movement, and somewhere in there a stereo got turned on and there was dance music playing loud. A dog came in with the neighbors and was running around the room chasing an old tennis ball Jayden pulled from under the loveseat.

I danced with Lauren, feeling warm and thought about how good it was to be around people who knew me only as I was in that moment. It was like we were all of us on some kind of drug, and there was no thought in my head of coming down.

Josh came back in from the porch and poured us both shots. We had a cheers to Alaska, and the neighbors (whose names I never got) joined in – an overweight and red faced couple who seemed to just be coming to say hi.

I was already making plans about how I'd spend that money. Pay my fines. Get my own apartment. Maybe take out a girl on a few nice dates. Then Josh left the room with the new couple to his bedroom. Both the girls came over and grabbed me by the arms. We danced together in the living room, while Jayden was still playing with the dog who was an ugly and bouncy mutt, like something leftover at the pound after all the good dogs had been taken. Lauren was moving in rhythm with her hand on my hip, and I had a plastic red cup with whiskey in one hand. I spilled some of it on myself and some on her and was drunk and confident enough to just lean in and kiss her. Her lips were soft, almost too big for mine, and her perfume encircled us.

I sipped again from the whiskey and Lauren took the cup from my hand and drank and then passed it on to Sheila. She leaned her head against my shoulder, her breath hot up against my neck. She pulled back and smiled at me. "You've got some dirt on your neck, Mike. Where'd you get that?" She said it sweetly, teasing me.

"I took a swim in the river today before I came over."

She giggled and started dancing again hard back across the room. She practically yelled, "Have you ever seen a picture of the river from the sky?"

"No," I said.

"It looks like someone praying. Praying hands around Great Falls. That's what this place needs."

I wasn't really sure what was even going on anymore, but Lauren looked beautiful in that moment. How late I would have to wait to have her alone?

I was sweating now and went and sat down on a chair in the kitchen, wiping my brow with my sleeve. Lauren followed and plopped down on my thigh, and I felt glued to that chair, stuck in the good feeling of the moment. She leaned in to my ear when Josh and the big couple came back in the room. They all chattered at each other, and I couldn't pick up what was being said over the music and the dog, and then the big couple was out the door and Josh was standing over me, sweat nearly soaked through the arm pits and neck of his gray t-shirt. "Hey, Mike! Hey, man, what's say we get some more whiskey before the girls go and drink it all?" He grabbed the bottle from the card table next to us and had a swig. There was probably a quarter bottle left and he drank from it like it was water, his face stretched tight.

I looked up, smiling dumbly. "Man, I don't think so. I mean, I would normally." Lauren just leaned into me and giggled, snorted a bit and held me around the stomach.

"Hey, I'll drive us if you're worried about the DUI. It's only a couple miles and there won't be any cops on the way. Like two stoplights the whole way." I thought about it for a little bit. He hadn't had as much to drink as me and was a bigger guy too. "I'll fill your tank on the way back. How can you say no to that? I'll even walk a straight line heel to toe if you want." He started walking around the living room miming what a DUI field test looked like and all of us laughed.

What was a couple miles? And the gas was a good deal. He was about to make me a lot of money, and he'd been as nice to a stranger as you could just about be. That was worth a ride.

“Sure,” I said, “but you’re paying for the booze too.”

He smiled and went for his jean jacket, and then we were out the door.

We were a couple blocks away from Josh’s apartment at a stoplight, the whole world a little brighter but a little less sharp than it had been that afternoon. I turned on the radio and found a sports talk channel.

“What happened to your mirror, here?” Josh said.

“A deer’s head ,” I said and he laughed because he must have thought it was a joke.

The light changed and Josh cruised through the intersection. He was driving just fine, and I was relaxed, thinking of Lauren waiting for me back at the apartment and what we might do later that night. Josh looked at me and smiled. “Hey man, while we’re out you mind if we make a pit stop at a friend’s house? I just need to run something over to him.”

I tensed, a little angry. It was my truck after all, but he was driving and I didn’t feel like I had a choice. “Yeah, I guess,” I said. “I mean, how far is it?”

“Oh, it’s real close. Like another half-mile and then the liquor store’s right past that.”

I sighed and put my head back on the headrest. “Yeah, all right. I guess that’s fine.”

“Hey, man. Don’t worry. They’re cool guys. I’m just gonna stop in and pick up some pot. You could do the same if you want.”

That didn't sound half bad. The sheriff had taken the only pot I'd had, and I didn't figure I could get anymore until I got back home. But I was confused about whether or not we were dropping something off or picking it up.

We drove in silence for a couple minutes and pulled off onto a street lined with bungalows, all old and uniform, like they'd been built at the same time right after World War II. Josh cut the truck's lights and we drove in the dark for a block and then parked.

He got out of the truck and walked around to my side and made a face like *Are you coming?* I sighed again and looked at my watch. It was already near midnight. I hoped Lauren wouldn't be passed out when I got back to the apartment.

I got out and followed Josh. The house we walked up to was as non-descript as the rest, a single story bungalow with a cottonwood in the front yard and a waist high chain link fence around it. He undid the latch on the gate, and we walked up the porch. He knocked on the door, and there was a coffee can overflowing with cigarette butts next to a couple bags of garbage and a dozen or so beer cans littering the ground. No one answered the door, and the front room was dark. Josh knocked again, and my heart was beating hard again, my head clouded by the booze but still alert.

A fat guy with a backwards ball cap and olive complexion finally opened the door and let us in. He must have been near three hundred pounds, big enough so that when he turned around and lead us in I saw an old tattoo on the back of his neck, but couldn't tell what it was because it was distorted by rolls of fat.

The fat guy walked us through the dark front room into another room behind it that was brightly lit but nearly empty. It made the furnishings in Josh's apartment look extravagant by comparison. There were some speakers in the corner connected to an

iPod player and a long wooden table ran against a wall. In the middle of the table was a shotgun. A big sawed off shotgun with shells lying next to it. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I was flushed. Did Josh knew it would be like this? Had he brought anything to protect himself? I thought about the gun and the river, and was glad I didn't have it.

There was another guy seated, facing us in one of the mismatched chairs that went around the table. His face looked similar to the fat guy, brothers maybe, except his was more defined and handsome. He wore a short-sleeved gingham patterned shirt with blue jeans and cherry red cowboy boots. There were a couple large plastic bags filled with dried out looking pot on the table with a pipe next to it and the room smelled of weed and cigarettes. The guy at the table had a scale in front of him and there was a light dusting of powder on it. To his right was a dinner plate with a straw cut in half lying on top.

"I don't expect my runners to show up with random fucking people," the guy said without looking up at us. The ceiling fan was on and it turned squeakily while the stereo was down low but unmistakably clear – It was Al Green. How bizarre.

"Hey, man, this guy's fine. He just showed up at my place this afternoon. We're both gone from Great Falls in a couple days anyway. Alaska for the summer."

The guy at the table looked up at both of us and inspected me with wide, dark eyes and then looked at Josh. He had a good, sharp haircut, combed out with some kind of gel that made him look clean and young, and for a moment I thought things would be all right. This was just like high school. Go in and pick up some pot from a friend. The shotgun wasn't a big deal.

“Listen, the only fucking reason you’re here is because Tony’s friend vouched for you and your guy.” The fat guy looked at us and nodded, and then walked over to the table and picked up the shotgun and came back to stand behind me. I could feel his hulking presence, his body odor hanging over me. He must have been Tony, but I still didn’t know why we were there. The guy from the table got up and walked over to us and got within a foot of Josh’s face. This was bad. This was really bad, and I couldn’t just leave. I was a part of this too.

Josh was searching for an answer and the guy in his face probably could too. “Well, Mike gave me a ride, and I told him you’d sell him some pot too. I was just trying to help you out. I didn’t think there’d be all this extra bullshit. My friend said you guys were cool.”

The guy backed off and walked towards the table with the drugs and leaned on it. “All right, then. I’ve got five ounces of glass for you and your guy. He better get them or you’re fucking dead.”

The guy with the cherry red boots pulled a small plastic bag from his jeans. It had a bunch of small vials with yellow caps on them that looked like erasers on pencils, and he set the bag on the table. He hadn’t looked at me since we’d walked in the door.

The guy with boots picked up the scale, and stuck out his tongue and licked off the residue. He had a big, pink tongue, so big I felt I could see the taste buds on it, and he licked the metal part of the scale for a few seconds. After he was done he wiped the saliva clean with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Go ahead. Try it and weigh them if you want.

Josh walked to the table and fingered the bag with the vials. There were ten of them altogether, lined up like toy cigarettes.

Josh opened up one of the vials and dumped a little out on the scale. He took out his wallet and pulled a credit card from it, chopping up the yellowish, white chunks into a finer powder, separating them into a couple thin lines about the length of a pinky finger. Josh ran his tongue along the edge of his credit card, then smacked his lips like after a big greasy meal. He picked up the half cut straw on the edge of the plate and leaned over the scale, snorting one of the lines going up the plate.

“Phew.” Josh shook his head and his eyes watered.

The guys with the cherry boots did the same and threw back his head and let out a wild screech. “See! That’s good shit. Your guy is gonna sell this no fucking problem.” He shook his head from side to side, seeming capable of anything in that moment.

Josh put the cap back on the vial and put them all on the scale to weigh. The electronic number on the scale fluttered and then settled on a total I couldn’t see. I wanted to just make a run for the door and drive away from there. I was sweating and numb all over, but the fat guy was behind me with the shotgun.

“This is short,” Josh said. “This is almost an ounce short.”

“That’s because we just snorted some,” the guy with the cherry boots said, grinning.

“Bullshit,” Josh said. “Those lines weren’t *that* big.”

Josh reached in his tight blue jeans and pulled out a wad of cash. He undid the rubber band and peeled off a bunch of twenties that he then put in his pocket. “I’m

keeping this,” he said. “You can get it when you give us the last half ounce.” He banded the rest and put it on the table.

The dealer was shaking, eyeing the cash.

Josh gave me a face like, *Okay, let's get out of here* we were both backing away when the dealer spoke. “Actually, you know what? Deal's off. Give me back the vials.”

“What?”

“Yeah, fuck this,” he said. “I want my shit back.”

Josh looked at me with wild, terrified eyes and then back over at the dealer.

“Give me my money back first.”

“No, I'm keeping that too.”

This was a joke. He had to be kidding.

“This is some fucking bullshit,” Josh said. “Give me my fucking money back if you're gonna pull this shit.” The dealer just stood there smiling. “Fuck it, then. We're leaving. Come on, Mike.”

Josh started to walk towards me, and the dealer nodded at the fat guy behind me, and in a couple quick movements the fat guy pushed me out of the way, walked up and smashed the butt of the gun into Josh's cheekbone, which made a sound like ice cracking underfoot. Josh yelled out and fell to his knees holding his face. Then the dealer kicked Josh in the ribs and then again in the same spot on the opposite side of his ribcage, his boots gleaming. Josh put his face into the carpet and hugged himself. He spit blood and what looked like vomit out in front of him and rubbed his head in the carpet like a dog trying to scratch an itch on its snout. I stood there frozen while the fat guy moved to stand between us.

“Give me back my fucking meth!” the dealer yelled, while the fat guy took out a cigarette and lit it.

Josh was quiet for a while, kneeling in the carpet, face in his own mess, looking like he was in some sort of bizarre prayer pose. “Fuck you, motherfucker.” Josh was gasping, bleeding, his voice syrupy, but you could hear what he’d said.

The skinny guy walked up from behind and flipped Josh over onto his back. *Jesus, just shut your fucking face and give the guy back his money.*

Josh’s face was a mess, bruised and covered in all the blood and saliva and vomit. It was like I was there with a stranger. He lay on his back a while and no one said anything. There was a pause, the Al Green still playing. Maybe that was the end of it. Josh would give the skinny guy the money back and we’d go. But then Josh said, “Fuck you,” again to the dealer. “Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.” Again and again and again he said it, and I wanted to kick Josh myself for doing this to me.

The dealer took the shotgun from the fat guy without saying a word and straddled Josh. He stood there for a bit and then went down to his knees so his ass lay flat against Josh’s stomach and balls. He brought the shotgun to Josh’s closed, bloody mouth. “Open up,” he said, tapping the double barrel against Josh’s wet, glistening lips. He probed Josh’s lips a couple more times with the barrel. “Open up,” he said again but in a clear and strangely sweet voice like your mom might have when she was trying to feed you bad tasting medicine as a kid. Josh’s lips parted but he didn’t open his mouth wide, and you could just see his yellowed, crooked teeth, blood on them too.

Click click click. The dealer tapped the steel of the barrel against the enamel of Josh's teeth. Click click click. "Open up," and click click click. Again the sound of metal on teeth. I was out of my mind with fear, and now Josh was crying.

Josh reached in the front pocket of his jean jacket and brought out the vials the guy had given him, his arm shaking and his face covered in so much wetness you couldn't tell what was tears and what was all the other mess. He held it out there next to him in his palm, and the dealer took it from him. Slowly, the guy stood up and brought the gun to his side.

"And that other fucking money, too," The dealer said

Josh pulled the other twenties he'd peeled off the wad and the dealer swiped them from his hand and counted, a final insult.

The dealer placed the shotgun on the table and went to the stereo, turning it up and fiddling with the bass like nothing had happened, whistling to himself when Green hit a falsetto part.

Josh was still on the floor, trying to hold back tears, and I didn't know what to do.

"Well?" the dealer guy said without looking up from the stereo. "Get him the fuck out of here. What else are you good for?" He was talking to me, and I wanted to kill him in that moment. Pick up the shotgun and blow him and the fat guy away. I stared at the gun for a few moments and thought if I'd been a little drunker, maybe had snorted some of what they had snorted, I might just have reached for it, but I was too scared to do it. The fat guy motioned for me to move and then lit another cigarette.

I bent down and gathered Josh. He put his hands on my shoulder and we backed slowly out of the apartment, the fat guy staring at us through the cloud of his cigarette smoke while the dealer whistled along to the stereo.

“What was that, man? What the fuck was that?” I was driving slow in the right lane and wasn’t even sure I knew the way back to the apartment, as Josh slouched down in the seat next to me. I kept looking over my shoulder to see if there were any cars behind us, and I wished intensely I hadn’t hit the deer the day before and lost my mirror.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I need something to clean this shit off my face.” He’d stopped crying, but his voice was still shaky. I reached into the back seat with my other hand on the steering wheel and came across the shirt I’d been wearing the day before when I’d shot the deer.

“Here,” I said and tossed it at him.

He wiped off his face on the shirt, fresh blood on old. “He’s probably just high out of his mind. He was probably high when we got there.”

“Someone needs to call the fucking cops,” I said.

Josh sat up a bit in his seat. “And tell them what? That I got my ass kicked for trying to run crystal meth? If that guy found out we called the cops on him, we’d be fucking dead.”

“Jesus, I don’t know. I DON’T KNOW.” I caught my breath. “Why did you even take me there?”

“Look, I didn’t know it would be like that. My friend said the guy was looking to sell and I owed my friend a favor. I wanted to make some extra money before I left to

leave Shelia and her kid. I didn't know you were gonna be here. You were just convenient, and then I figured you owed me since I'm getting you that job."

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Jesus fucking Christ." Maybe I should just pull over and kick him out of my truck? But then he was bigger than me, and that was all I needed now - to get in a street fight while I was drunk and driving on a suspended license. I might have left him outside the house if I had been in my right mind at the time.

We were silent for a while. The radio was on the same channel as before - baseball standings being read back to us.

"It wasn't always like this," Josh said. It sounded like an apology and made him seem pathetic and sad. "I was just trying to do good by Sheila before I leave. It's not usually this fucked up around here."

"Do you usually do dope, too?" I looked over at him and could see out the window, the neighborhood was familiar again.

"Yeah, not much, but some. Enough that I'll need some more before we leave. But just enough to get me through the trip to Alaska and then I'm done."

What was I supposed to do with that information? Feel bad for him? The guy had practically got me killed and now it turned out he was on speed.

"You ever done any?" he said.

"Yeah, once...a couple times." It was true. I'd worked with a speed freak back home, and tried it a couple times with him out of boredom.

"It's like all the lights go on in your head at once and there's no voice telling you not to follow whatever ideas you get. And every idea seems like the best you ever had," Josh said. I looked over at him in the passenger's seat. All those visits to his bedroom.

All that time up and down. He'd probably been high the entire time we'd been talking in his kitchen. Some of his friendliness was starting to make more sense, and I wondered if the girls had done it too, were doing it right now. Maybe it was because I was still drunk, but the thought of Lauren high and waiting for me didn't seem all bad. It seemed wrong with the kid still there in the house too, but there was another part of my brain, the animal part that was excited and found it sexy. Life was about as fucked as it could be. What difference would one more mistake mean? We neared Josh's apartment complex, and I parked my truck in the same spot as when I'd left. I looked at the clock and it was only 12:45. We'd hadn't even been gone an hour. I had started to sober up a little but was still buzzed and wanted another drink. I turned off the engine and listened to the stillness of the night, only the sound of the engine's heat ticking away. I could leave Josh and drive off, but the promise of more drinks and Lauren being there made me re-consider. Where was I going to go?

We sat in silence for a while, a minute maybe. "I've tried to quit. It's the same bullshit you hear on TV shows and people say in therapy. It's like every morning you wake up and say this day is the last and then night comes and you're higher than you've ever been. And once you get going you just do up everything in the house so there'll be nothing left the next day. All the booze, all the speed, all the cigarettes, because you think that if there's none around that'll make you stop. But it doesn't. Even when you know you're doing wrong, you don't stop."

I thought it was a lot to lay on someone you hardly knew, but I guess he thought of me as someone on the outside of his problems. "I know what you mean," I said. And I really did. The drinking, the pot, the deer, the gun in the hotel, the drive to the drug

dealer's house: it was the resume of a real low life, not just your average fuck up, and so I opened up the truck door, helped Josh out of his seat, and trudged back towards his apartment door, arm in arm.

The kid was gone - to his room, to his father's, I didn't know. The girls were still in the kitchen, chatting quietly and smoking. The stereo was on but turned down low. When we walked from the living room into the kitchen, Sheila gasped and both girls got out of their seats. Sheila grabbed Josh, but didn't say anything to either of us. I think she knew what had happened, and that's exactly what the girls had been talking about when we got there.

Josh and Sheila went into their bedroom and closed the door, and then it was just Lauren and me. I sat down next to her, and she leaned her head on my shoulder without saying anything. The blue plate from earlier was on the table but now had white chunks on it with a straw laying next to it.

Dope on the table and the quarter bottle full of whiskey and a pack of cigarettes. It was like nothing had changed, except for the fact that we were all just being honest with ourselves now.

Lauren raised her head from my shoulder and then did a line of the powder on the table. I cut up a line and did the same. It hurt for a second, but then cooled quickly, and I went numb. And then we both did it again, and I was absolutely high out of my mind.

Jabbering, sweating, kissing, feeling each other and sniffing.

Before I knew it the dinner plate was empty, just smears of whiteness across it and it was 4 AM and we were lock-jawed talking at each the way people on speed do.

She was just in her bra and underwear and there was a tattoo on her side that wrapped around to her back. A tulip on a long stem and I told her it was beautiful even though I knew she'd get old some day and so would it and then it would fade and wrinkle with her body. She leaned over my lap and licked the plate with her finger, and then sat down on my lap and leaned in to kiss me. We nearly lost our balance on the little chair. "You're a little messed up," she said and giggled.

"So are you."

"I like you that way," she said. "I like you a little messed up. You're more fun."

We kissed as she undid my pants. It was as far from love as you can get.

She fell asleep on the couch around sunrise, and I sat in a chair in the living room and poured myself a whiskey, watching the first light of dawn come in the window, wishing for asleep. Around seven, I took a blanket from the corner and passed out on the ground.

"Hey, wake up."

I had no idea where I was, or why my throat felt raw and scratched, my nose full of snot.

"We ought to leave for Bellingham this afternoon," Josh said.

"What are you talking about?" I mumbled.

"Don't you still want to go?" I was on Josh's floor, and he was at the counter in the kitchen, having a drink of water, smoking a cigarette. I could see his outline, but the

blinds were drawn and his face was still a blur. It took me a while to reconstruct the night; he was acting like nothing had happened.

The air was dark and heavy with wetness, smoke and alcohol. It must have been raining outside for it to still be so gray. I stared at the ceiling, listening to Josh throw away bottles and thought about what was to come. Was I really going to go all the way to Alaska with a guy like this? How could I trust a person after the kind of night we'd had?

I could go home and pay the fines, get a ten-dollar an hour job and sleep alone in my parent's basement on an old mattress that had been my dead brother's. Or, I could follow Josh to Alaska. I closed my eyes again and listened to myself breathe; my future was still in the dark above me.

4. Promise

Josh snorted the last of his meth while we waited at a used car dealership off the interstate. What would I tell Dad? I had no idea only anxiety. Josh dumped the off white powder onto the dashboard, and it glistened in the sunlight like glass on asphalt. How could I explain *this*?

We'd rolled in to Bellingham around noon. The ferry wasn't scheduled to leave until the next afternoon, but I wanted time to get rid of the truck and anything else I could. If the dealership would take the truck, I'd call Dad and see about transferring the title.

Josh cut the meth into a couple fat lines. The salesman in the showroom talked to an old man wearing sweatpants and a pink golf shirt tucked in to his waistband. Josh pulled the straw from a soda cup and cut off the last four inches with his pocketknife. Leaning his head over the dashboard, he went up one line and down the other and threw his head back.

"Careful," I said, like a parent, like a friend, but the meth was already burning hard in his nose, working back up in his brain. What if this guy died on me before we got to Alaska? I *needed* him.

"It's gotta be a big one or I'll try and buy more before we leave." He snorted and a little bit of blood ran out of his nostril. Josh bent back down and lapped at the residue on the dashboard. The salesman came out the front door then, and I hopped out to meet him. We shook hands, but his eyes looked past me to the truck. Had he seen what Josh was doing?

He was tall with thinning gray hair that came to a pomaded ponytail in the back, and he wore baggy dress pants and a short sleeve white dress shirt with a tie. “We’ve been on the road all day,” I explained, following the salesman’s eyes.

“Uh-huh,” he said, and I looked in at Josh who was leaned back in his seat, eyes closed, sun on his face.

“I was hoping to sell my truck,” I said.

He nodded, took a pad from his pocket and started to walk around, making notes - a list of faults. He was overweight and his backside looked bizarre, like a bag of wet clothes were stuffed down his pants. He leaned over my windshield reading the VIN number.

“I know it’s got some dings.”

He stopped and bent down over the fender. Ran his finger along the metal curves. “Jesus, is that blood?”

Brown goo had dried in streaks across the chrome, darker and angrier looking than all the bug splatter. I should have cleaned it off, but there just hadn’t been time since we’d left Great Falls.

“It’s all over the mirror mount here, too. Christ almighty.”

“It still runs,” I said. “I mean, fill it up and it’ll just go and go if you give it a chance.”

“What year and mileage?”

“It’s a ninety-four. A hundred and eighty thousand miles.”

He put his pen in the pocket of his shirt. “In all honesty, my sales associate told me about you guys out here but didn’t give me many details. If he had, I probably

wouldn't have come to take a look. There just isn't a huge market for mid-90's Chevy Silverados. Especially with that kind of mileage and *especially* in this condition."

"What condition?"

"Look, don't try and play your game here," he said and puckered his lips.

My game?

"Maybe you could part it for something if you've got the time," he said.

"You can't give me anything for it?" There was a note between pleading and anger in my voice that was embarrassing.

"We could maybe do five hundred in trade if you want. That's really the best I could do."

"Fuck that," I said. "Kelly Blue Book is more than that. It was twenty grand brand new."

He raised up his hands in front of him and shrugged.

"Look, I'm sorry, but this truck is worth more than five hundred dollars."

"It was twenty grand fifteen years ago. Now it's just one busted rig." He put his hand out. "Thanks for bringing it around."

"Fuck 'em, just fuck 'em." Josh pounded on the dashboard. There were scratches and a fading yellow-blue bruise on his face from the dealer's house, but he was in a good mood overall. "Let's just dump the fucking thing and get some food. The cod in the terminal brew house is great. So's the IPA."

The water was movie blue and there were boats everywhere. I'd never seen so many in my life. We'd been driving around the harbor killing time. People were all over

the docks, pleasure boaters and fisherman and tourists. Two fishermen on the back deck of a boat had a net spread out between them, one doing something to it with a knife or a big needle. Stripping it? Mending? I parked in the main lot by the terminal and we got out and stretched.

“Look, you go ahead, I’m not hungry,” I said. But mostly I just wanted to be on my own for a little. Two days in a truck with Josh and I was ready for a break.

Josh said okay and went into the brew house at the north end of the marina.

I walked the other direction, amongst the fisherman, the air pulsing with the sounds of diesel engines and brief puffs of black exhaust that disappeared into the cyanine sky. There was hollering and pallets of food being loaded on to boats and dogs running without leashes and people pole fishing.

The two guys I’d seen from farther away were still working on the back deck of their boat. One was about forty and the other a teenager. They had similar builds and curly full heads of hair blooming out from under ballcaps.

I sat on a bench within earshot and cycled through my phone. Should I still call dad? Was I really going to Alaska for the summer?

“Go four meshes back and then work your way forward. Be sure you tie it back to the corkline, too,” said the older fisherman.

“Jesus, Dad, I know.”

“Fine then,” said the father. “If you’ve got this under control, I’ll get to work on the engine. The timing belt is damn neared sheared off.”

The teenager threaded the big plastic needle and went to work, weaving it through the meshes in an intricate pattern of knot making that he made look easy. He held up the

net to inspect and what had been a six foot wide hole was gone, replaced with the fresh meshes he'd made.

I wanted to know how to do that; I wanted to know how to build, how to fix, how to be useful. It was like the fishermen were speaking another language, a text of family knowledge that only they shared.

And here I was. Unshowered since Great Falls and chauffeuring a guy on meth, smelling like old Pabst and three day old sex. I couldn't call Dad. Not now. I needed something to *show* him before I called. What if I just came back from Alaska with a big check and a bunch of stories about the cannery? What if I came back successful? There'd be no questioning the experience. And suddenly I knew that's exactly what I'd wanted all along; I wanted to go away and come back different than I'd been before I left Albuquerque. I just hadn't known how to make that happen.

"Fuck it, just dump the truck in the ocean," Josh said. He was joking, but I could tell he was sick of the car problem. That wasn't really *his* problem. His face was sweaty and he pounded the rhythm of the song on the radio like it was an old favorite.

We were driving away from the terminal and the water's edge. There was a neighborhood nearby of two story houses with soft, flowery colors, and I drove to the end of a block that emptied into a cul-de-sac. Josh and I grabbed our bags, and I started stuffing everything else under the back seat: the hatchet, bloody clothes, old whiskey and beer bottles. There was a porno magazine – *Big Black Wet Butts* - that Josh had stolen from a gas station in Sandpoint. *Hey, I've never slept with a black woman in my life.*

Why not? I've always wanted to. He'd said, smiling, after he'd pulled it out from the front of his pants.

I stared at the magazine. Josh wanted things. Maybe they were dumb or bad for him, but at least he knew. Maybe it was that simple. You either *wanted* something or you did not. You either did or you did not.

We stood with our gear on the hood of my truck and I looked through my backpack for a marker and paper and some duct tape. Josh was still beating a steady rhythm on the hood but no one was watching. There were just the sounds of a neighborhood, kids playing and a motorized saw whirring in a garage: people living their lives.

I wrote a note and taped it on the inside of the windshield.

Please do not tow. Headed to Alaska for work. Back in August to reclaim.

PROMISE.

Writing the word "Alaska" made the choice feel real and a little frightening – three thousand miles from home all explained by six letters written in thick, careful lines. Did my handwriting say something about my character? Would the person who saw it believe I was coming back?

*

Josh vomited over the railing on the observation deck of the ferry. An older couple watched; I could feel their eyes. He puked again and it arced long into the grey churning water. We'd spent the night before in the ferry terminal. "I'm still high as shit,"

he'd said. "I'll watch the stuff while you sleep." It was a nice gesture and a way the speed had made him unexpectedly valuable.

That morning I'd woken to him pacing the terminal floor, listening to his iPod, and talking to himself quietly - junk food wrappers from the vending machine lying around me like sentinels, and all our stuff just as we'd left it.

I handed Josh a paper towel and bottle of water and he rinsed his mouth and spit again over the railing. Was he was seasick or withdrawing? Probably just seasick. It didn't really matter.

We were a few hours out of Bellingham. Nothing looked different yet— everywhere there were giant evergreen forests broken by granite, the mountains far off with snow covered peaks gradually consumed by cloudbanks. It was late in the day and I was hungry. I only had a twenty-dollar bill left in my wallet and a credit card already piling up with charges: gasoline and a ferry ticket, cigarettes and beer.

Josh stopped vomiting. He was ashen and wobbly as he stood. I helped him into the main cabin, and we went to the ferry's café where we ate grilled cheese with ham and warmed ourselves sipping on burnt coffee heavy with sugar.

"Only thirty more hours," he said, smiling, shaking. "Only thirty more hours to Klawock." The ferry drifted through the Inside Passage so slow only the lack of lights along the coastline signaled that we'd gone any farther north, any farther away from the world.

"Will we start right away?" I said.

“Man, I don’t even want to *think* about work right now. Thirty hours is just the next time I’ll get to sleep in a bed.” He blew on the coffee, cupping it with both hands.

“And tonight? Where do we sleep tonight?” We’d only bought tickets for the ride and not for a sleeper cabin but Josh had promised it would be fine. *Everyone does it.* He’d gotten all the details right so far, even if he was pretty messed up.

“Anywhere. Here. *Right* here.” He patted the hard wooden bench seats of the café booth. “I might try to rack out right now. I really can’t even remember the last time I slept.”

We’d left Great Falls Sunday afternoon and now it was Tuesday evening sometime (my phone had stopped working once we got out of Bellingham). Josh had been awake however long that was.

“How does it work in the plant, you coming off the junk?” I said.

Josh’s was staring up at the ceiling.

“It’s not so bad. I’ll feel washed out, like now, but we’ll all be tired. I’ll be at it a few days and soon I won’t be able to separate the work pain from the other. The want doesn’t go away, but it does get better.”

“Can you still get it there?”

“It’s harder. They only advance you so much money and you gotta go to Craig to get it. You’ll see people on it, though. Watch. And pills, too. A lot of people do pills there too. Oxycontin Zombies.” He made a noise like a ghost, and I smirked.

“What kind of people work at the plant?” I said.

“It’s a weird mix. There are some Natives and a few Americans from the Lower 48, but it’ll mostly be Czechs. There’s some law that allows them to work for the summer on a visa.”

“That sounds bizarre,” I said.

Josh didn’t answer. He’d closed his eyes and turned over into his backpack.

I went looking for the restroom and people were everywhere. A large Native woman with two kids and a bald spot on the crown of her head, a couple guys with beards, fishing boots and backpacks and nothing else, an old man in coveralls with no baggage staring into his cupped hands like the answers were somewhere there in the tiny dark, a group of college kids who looked European: there were people hunkered down like us on the benches down the main corridor, in the forward seating area, chatting, sleeping wherever they could find space, on backpacks and rolled up sleeping bags. It was like some sort of floating refugee camp. Where did they all come from? Where were they all going?

I came back from the bathroom and went to the café register and bought two bottles of beer and sat back down at our booth. I pulled out the postcard I’d bought at the ferry terminal gift shop. It said *Only in Alaska!* in the upper right hand corner and had a brown bear sitting on a toilet in the middle of the forest with a newspaper in his hands. The front of the newspaper said *Do bears ---- in The Woods?* The *shit* was blocked out by the bear’s arm.

I’d been waiting to be alone to do it, ever since I’d chickened out on actually calling my parents. It took both beers to even get started, and when I was done it still

didn't seem right. What do you say to the parents of your dead brother when you're so far from home, separated by so much water?

I read the postcard back.

Mom and Dad,

Been camping everywhere. Forget the last time we talked, June 1? 2? Had some trouble in Montana but then some luck too. I'll explain all of it later. Found a summer job in Alaska. It's in a place called Klawock and I hear the money's good. Don't worry, I'm not going to be on "Deadliest Catch" or anything. It's just working in a cannery. I'm not crazy.

Don't be mad, but I left the truck in Bellingham (that's in Washington state by the way). I'll pay if there's fines or something.

Hope you guys are both well. I wish I could tell Matt I was going to Alaska. I think that would be something he would have liked. I miss you both and will call if/when I can. Take care.

Love,

Mike

I put the postcard back in my bag and bought another beer. The café stopped serving soon after and then they dimmed the lights all over the ship - powering down for the long winter of the trip.

On the bench Josh's head was propped up on his bag so I could see his smooth jawline, hair falling over high cheekbone. Despite it all, he wasn't a bad guy. He had interesting things to say. *Did you know Montana has more species of mammals than any other state? Did you know that Glacier has 250 lakes and none of them are less wide than a mile?* He'd known where to find the dealership and terminal in Bellingham, the timetables for the ferries and had even called ahead to the boss in Klawock. He had a disease, and in the half-light, he looked younger than I would have thought, too young to be so sick.

It had been six months since Matt had died, but so much had happened. All of it was like some sort of long dream.

What were Mom and Dad doing right then? Probably watching TV, my brother's ugly beagle, Jack, resting on the couch between them, all the house open and filled with the falling desert sun, except for Matt's room, which always stay closed. Blinds drawn to the outside and door closed to the long corridor that connected all the rooms to one another.

A stack of books with a copy of *Going to Meet the Man* on top that I'd given him after graduation, half-empty coke cans, a pill box like old people used (days of the week on it) with bottles of Oxycontin all around it, boxers neatly folded on the comforter, old pot hidden under the bed and a breathing mask hanging over a folded up wheelchair in the corner: I could picture all his old things where he'd left them, and my parents holding on to it all, even the dog, like they were waiting for my brother to come back.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Matt had said, naked, crying, shaking in my arms. He had smelled sour, like something was rotting away under his own skin.

“Shut up, man. Don’t be sorry. You’re going back to school with me. We’re going back to school next year. Together,” I’d said. Lame. Pathetic. That’s how I remembered it sounding. I wonder if he’d thought the same.

I’d been stunned when I came home and he was so bad off. He’d been okay at Thanksgiving. Not good, but okay. We’d smoked pot and gone to the movies. He’d even driven us. But when I saw him again he was on oxygen, a tank next to his bed. Things were so bad I’d taken to making promises to him, future hypotheticals where he was alive and we were together, as if that would give him a reason to keep fighting. I’d thought at the time, *If I can imagine it for him, he has to live it*. But that was just all selfishness on my part. The only world I’d know was one with him in it, and I was trying to trap him in it no matter how sick he got.

His breathing had gotten so much worse even in that week. At night he couldn’t find where he’d put the oxygen mask in the dark, and I had to pick it out from the stinking clothes and medicine bottles. The only sound besides us in the dark was the wheeze of the oxygen tank, pumping air at the same steady rate, metronomic, indifferent.

I’d been having problems with Danielle and figured it would be good for her to have the apartment to herself for a while. Good for both of us. We’d still have Christmas together. But that week before Christmas at my parent’s house had been hell. Every night with Matt was worse than the one that came before it. I had been sleeping across the hall from him in my old room and would wake to his hoarse shrieks. My parents never came back to that part of the house. Either they didn’t hear, or they were just

relieved, comforted, to have someone else to take the burden off them. They'd been living with his sickness for years, ordering their lives around his seasons of treatments, while I just got to drop in and help when I could.

That last night I had spent with Matt he hadn't even been able to get out of bed to use the bathroom. I'd just bring him a bedpan, and he'd do his best work not to mess his pants. I'd told my parents that day he needed to go to the hospital, that he needed to come off the Oxies, that nothing we were doing for him was doing him any good anymore, and I think they knew at the time that was true.

But I guess they had been waiting, waiting and hoping. They'd take him after everyone came for Christmas. He had another experimental treatment in California at the turn of the year. If only he could just hold on until then.

What more could they really have done? Could I?

We'd sat there in his bed that last night, holding each other, trembling. He'd slept sitting up because he didn't feel like he could breathe while on his back anymore.

"I'm gonna die," he'd said that last night he'd spent at home. "Don't let me die."

"I won't," I'd said. "I promise." Because what else could I do? How could I have known it was a lie, an absolute lie - that he would die in a week?

When he'd finally fallen back asleep, I knew I had to take a break. I wanted to see Danielle, to be out of my parents' house, even if just for a couple hours. I'd grabbed my keys and driven to my apartment across town. Near Four AM - no traffic except for a few semis on the 40 and light snow falling like it does sometimes in the high desert. I'd wanted to lie up against her, smell her, feel her curve into me and taste the sweat on her

neck. If I could just do that for a little while, I'd be able to face Matt again, face my parents.

I opened the door to the apartment and the TV was on but no one was watching. The TV was paused on a DVD menu – *When in Rome*.

Kristen Bell's dumb face etched forever in my memory now- mid-smile, those shining white teeth and blank doe-eyes.

There were beer bottles all over the counter and a half-drunk bottle of white wine. Shaking, the blood pulsed in my ears. *No. No. No. Not this, Not now. Why now?* I had walked back to the bedroom, opened the door, quietly, almost imperceptibly at first and then just let it swing open. Dark. Outlines of two bodies in bed, one larger than the other, the larger body huge, uncovered, and with an arm hanging off the edge. Thick thick hair on the arm and a chain gleaming around the wrist. The room smelled like her but wrong. The air was wet and heavy with bodies and a cologne I didn't recognize. I had gagged and felt like throwing up.

After that the bottle of white wine from the counter sloshing in my truck's middle console was the only clear memory. More beers. Driving. Then just blackness, and I woke up back on Matt's floor wrapped in a pile of his old blankets, him staring at me, eyes wide with fear. *Where have you gone? Where did you go?*

Josh stirred on the bench in the cafe, turned onto his stomach and farted in his sleep. The great diesel engine down in the ferry's belly hummed. I wanted to cry but couldn't. I'd cried so much already before leaving home. I had to get over this feeling sorry for myself.

We'd be in Klawock in another day. The job needed to work out. It *had* to work out.

5. *Web*

A quarter mile down the road from the ferry terminal in Hollins a beat up Toyota truck slowed and pulled to the side of the road, kicking up gravel and a cloud of dust. We'd only had to wait ten minutes before someone stopped. It was just like Josh had said.

The driver had the passenger's side window down and the radio was playing. The people on the radio were just chatting like they were on a telephone. The driver was Native and wore a fitted baseball cap and oversized green rain jacket. He was slender and had on white work pants that were spattered with flecks of paint.

"Headed to Klawock?" Josh said, which was the only place the road went as far as I knew.

"Yeah," he said, shouting more than necessary. "You can clear the cans and other shit." He grinned dreamily, looking behind us into the dense forest of evergreens that hummed with the sound of insects and rushing water.

We threw our gear in the bed of the truck, and Josh crawled into the tiny back while I took the passenger's seat. The driver was smoking a cigarette and had a can of root beer clenched between his thighs. There were more empty soda cans by my feet, candy wrappers, a greasy hand towel, and what looked like a snake's rattle the color of a honeycomb.

The man slipped the truck into gear and pulled back onto the highway. The rattle rolled around the floor sounding like when you shake a spray paint can. All the windows

were rolled down but the smell of paint fumes and smoke was heavy in the cab. The road followed the edge of a lake and steam rose off the far shore; it caught in the late day sunshine and twisted lazily there. A fine mist was falling too: light and dark side by side like the weather was confused about what to do. The man turned the radio up to hear above the wind. Bernie from Haida told the host he wanted Jen from Hollins to know that she needed to pick up an outboard motor today or she would default on the payment.

I frowned at the radio dial and the driver saw.

“Open Line,” he said. “Public radio because cell phones don’t work in the bush.” His meaning was clear but the way he spoke sounded like his tongue was partially numbed.

The sun etched the line of mountains on the water, but there were no boats. The only other cars on the road were going the other way.

“Sodas in the glovebox,” the man said, “if you want.”

I turned to Josh and he shrugged.

I opened the glove box. There were a few more cans of root beer crammed in with maps, a pair of work gloves and small wire cutters. There were also a handful of medication bottles lined up like shotgun shells.

“Get me one too,” the man said. He threw his other can out the window.

I took out one for each of us (they were all warm) and passed them around.

“We’re headed to Klawock Oceanside,” I said, “if you know where that is.”

“I know,” the man said and swigged from his warm root beer, spilling some on his cheek where it curled down his throat, leaving a stain like a tear. His face was shaved

except for a mustache that was laughably sparse. His eyes drooped for a moment, and then they snapped back open, bloodshot.

“You can just take us to downtown...if you want,” Josh said.

“Yeah,” I quickly agreed.

“I can take you all the way,” the man said, and then: “My friend got fired from there last summer.” The man’s head swayed a bit from side to side, like it was a jack in the box in a child’s hand.

“Why?” I said. A question would keep him alert.

The man shifted his slit-eyes toward me and grinned a little, his gums wet and pink.

“He took a gun to work.”

“Oh,” I said.

“They frown upon that,” the man said and laughed to himself.

The plastic casing over the speedometer was cracked spreading out like a spider web, but we couldn’t have been going more than thirty-five, crawling down in to a huge basin in the middle of the rain forest.

“Don’t you want to know why he did that?” the man said licking, a bit of soda from his chapped lips.

A sign near the road read: Klawock 4 Miles. Vines crept out of the forest and up the signpost. They were like thick-bodied snakes with bulbous heads.

“I guess he must have had a pretty good reason,” I said.

“Heh,” the man said. “He wanted to shoot one of the Czechs for fucking his girlfriend,” the man said. “They were all belliers.”

Josh had already told me that most of the people who worked at the plant were Czech. The boss, Earl, thought they worked harder than the locals, than Natives, but then almost all the fishermen were Natives.

“That doesn’t sound like a bad reason,” I said.

“The boss thought so,” the man said. “They fired him and called the cops and my friend went home and threw his girlfriend’s things out their apartment window into the harbor.” He nodded his head back and forth slowly. “He threw her *TV* in the water. Can you believe that?”

“I guess I can’t,” I said.

“No you really can’t,” he said.

The man was quiet again and we got to town in a few minutes. The main block had a grocery store, a café, a post office and no stoplights.

Snow capped mountains came around the city on all sides, except to the northwest where a narrow passage provided a window to the ocean which was ablaze with the setting sun. We drove over a bridge that crossed Klawock River. A hundred yards away there were two bears pawing at the shallow water. There were only a couple of houses actually on the water and they had docks with motorboats.

We came around a bend and then there were many houses- most were obviously built without a contractor’s help, others were pre-fab models or nothing more than shanties - all with engine parts, toys, nets, or skiffs in their yards. At the end of the street there was the cannery, a long T-shaped building with a high, corrugated metal roof and a dock at the end. There were plastic tubs the size of hot tubs stacked thirty feet high on either side of the high part of the T.

The bunkhouse was next to the cannery, a gray two story building with a chipped gray paint job and a smoke shop on the bottom level that advertised the local lottery and bingo night on a large hand painted banner. There were mattresses piled up on the side. Josh had said it looked like an abandoned insane asylum; he was right.

The man parked and left the truck running. Josh and I were out of the truck and had our gear slung over our shoulders by the time the man had gotten out of his seat.

“Thanks,” we both said.

The man smiled at us and wobbled a bit against the door of his truck. He lit a cigarette and stamped out the end of the match with his boot heel.

“We’ll be seeing you around town,” the man said. “It’s a long summer.”

The entrance to the bunkhouse was around the side from the smoke shop. There was a college-aged guy out front with a cigarette. The tide was in so that the bunkhouse entrance was practically at water level.

“Hey,” Josh said. The smoker smiled widely and they back clapped.

“Hey, fuckwad,” the smoker said in a thick accent.

“Mike, this is Honza,” Josh said.

Honza looked like the caricature of a Russian gangster with deep-set dark eyes and a mustache that flipped up at the ends in unintentional handlebars. He had on a warm up suit for a high school he’d obviously never gone to.

“Hey,” I said and Honza shook my hand and flicked his cigarette out into the water. The cigarette hissed as it went out, and there was all kinds of bizarre junk in the shallow water - a wheel barrow, a tire, license plate (Was that a child’s doll?)

The bunkhouse was on the second floor, and we climbed the stairs together. People were everywhere inside and all of them loudly drunk. There was no English being spoken except when someone cursed and then it was followed by a lot of laughter.

“Hey, American! Fucking moonshine! Try, now!”

A hugely tall man with dreads shoved a plastic bottle at my face.

“Go ahead,” Josh said. “They make it themselves. They’ll be pissed if you don’t have some.”

I took the bottle and said thank you to the giant and swigged from it. It tasted like rubbing alcohol and rotten plums, and I gagged so hard that my eyes watered and everyone nearby laughed. Josh grabbed the bottle from me, drank, and then immediately puked into a trashcan in the hallway, which made me feel better.

“Who the fuck is that?” A short, fat middle-aged white man came out from a room at the end of the hallway and lunged toward Josh. They did a sort of awkward dance like drunken football players in the open field, and then the middle-aged guy picked Josh up and bear hugged him.

The man dropped Josh and turned on me, his face red and sweating, cheeks bulbous like they were filled with acorns.

“You the new guy?” he said to me.

“Mike,” I said, “Good to meet you,” and I put my hand out.

He waved it off.

“I’ll shake it once after the season is over,” he said.

He had to be the boss, Dan. He was the only one in the bunkhouse over the age of twenty-five.

We walked into the room from where Dan had come and it was a big kitchen with cheap plastic tables, two water coolers, a TV, and a refrigerator. Dan grabbed two beers from the fridge and cracked them open with one hand and handed them to us.

“How was the ride in?” Dan said.

“Randall’s brother picked us up,” Josh said.

“Oh, fuck.” Dan leaned against the corner of a table littered with empty cans and dirty dinner plates smeared with ketchup and grease.

“You knew that guy?” I said to Josh.

“No, I knew his brother from last summer.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I said.

“Because I knew who fucked his brother’s girlfriend,” Josh said, “and it wasn’t one of the Europeans.”

“That girl’s three hundred pounds,” Dan said. “You wouldn’t think she would be that in demand.” Dan whirled on me drunkenly. “Mike, what’s your policy on fatties?”

“My what?” I said.

“Fat chicks,” Dan said. “Do you like boning fat chicks?”

“Uh...No?”

“Good. That’s the right answer.” Dan clapped my back. “Rule number one: don’t mess with the locals and especially don’t fuck any of the locals.”

I was pretty sure that was actually two rules but I said okay.

Dan took us through the hall and all up and down it people were taking pictures and laughing and it was like a summer camp but with alcohol and enforced labor. A few of the people seemed to be couples, and I was surprised there were girls. Lined up and

down the hallway like combat boots, there were dozens of pairs of Xtra-Tuffs. They were beat up and lived in unlike the new pair in my duffel bag, and there were dirty work clothes hanging from nails on the wall. In the corner there was a pile of clothes with a sign above that said "Free." Just piles and piles of shorts and t-shirts with logos of sports teams and high schools you never heard of. That explained Honza's outfit. Some people had already been in the bunkhouse for a week readying the plant and processing the first catches.

Dan took us to a room at the end of the hall.

"You're top bunk, Mike," he said. "Josh, you're in the room across the hall."

There were two sets of bunk beds in my room, one on either side, and a flag on the wall (the Czech flag I assumed though I'd ever seen one) and a bunch of hooded sweatshirts, dirty boxers and toiletries littering the floor. It was like my college dorm room except unpainted, smaller, and it smelled like old fish instead of Axe deodorant spray.

"I think someone pissed in that bed last year," Josh said to me.

"You can always flip the mattress over," Dan said. "There's been lots worse than piss on these beds."

After that it was all moonshine and beers and meeting all the Czechs whose names I had a hard time keeping straight outside of Honza.

The moonshine gave light bulbs and electronics a weird glow like tracers you get from psychedelics, and the night whirred around me until my head was like a giant helium filled balloon and I had to sleep. I crawled onto my top bunk sometime around

midnight, and my three Czech bunkmates were already there whispering in the dark. They were quiet until I was down for a while, and then they went back to talking. I had my closed my eyes, saw lights dancing on my eyelids for a long time, and soon slept the sleep of the dead.

“Use your legs, pussies!” Dan screamed gleefully at Honza and me as we struggled to push the racks of fish on the wheeled metal base into the freezer. We lost our footing and Honza let go and the stack started rolling back on me. I stumbled with it until the stack hit the trough at the bottom of the ramp and started to tip, the metal groaning and a couple hundred pounds of fish and metal ready to fall on me. Lights out.

But the racks held. Only the top two needed to be shifted back into place. I didn't have the strength or angle to make a push, so I let the rolling base slide the rest of the way onto even ground. Honza came back around and we shifted the top two racks into place. The bandana I was wearing was sticky and wet with god knows what, and the flannel shirt I'd gotten from the “Free” pile was rough and itchy but at least I wasn't using my own clothes.

“Jesus Christ! Just watch for a second!”

Dan pushed us out of the way and launched the racks of fish up the ramp. His wide ass erupted from his Carhartt jeans as he charged up the ramp, and the bald, splotchy crown of his head glistened with sweat.

He pushed it the rest of the way into the freezer and came out panting.

“Springsteen, you know the best thing about being a pussy?”

I felt like puking and had the acidic taste of plum in my mouth.

“No, Dan. What?” I said.

“You are what you eat!” Dan laughed heartily and there was frozen spittle on his beard from the blast of frigid air.

I laughed. I hadn’t heard that one since I was a teenager. Dan squeezed my shoulder.

Honza looked at us in a confused way. His English was a work in progress; Josh had said Honza couldn’t speak English at all the year before. He’d said they’d taught each other a few dirty phrases in each other’s languages. But apparently they hadn’t gotten to anything cunnilingus related.

“Get low, you guys. Get low and push like a mother. That’s all there is to it. And for fuck’s sake, don’t stop halfway up like that. It’ll get one of you killed.” Honza and I nodded, but I’d learned a hundred different things in a few hours and the pace of the work only made it harder to remember each bit of advice.

The fish on the racks were hollowed out after going through the line but still smelled like five kinds of death, and Honza and I grabbed the next stack of racks at the base of the ramp, bent down and leaned into the welded metal cages with all our weight. We pushed, legs pumping, my body already sweating hard under the flannel shirt and old rain pants until we got the fish just to the lip before the freezer entrance.

We looked at each other for a moment and then thrust our bodies into the stack. I was either strong enough to push the racks or not: a matter of *want*. The wheels on the base clunked and cleared the lip, and then Honza sprinted back to the fish line. The racks moved easily now on the smooth, level floor, and I pushed them towards the others.

At the back of the freezer my breath fogged in the dim light. The whole thing was actually a larger container, the kind semi-trucks haul, and had been fitted with a refrigeration system. How had they gotten the container into the plant? A crane? A giant forklift?

The compressors were a wall of noise, and it was like being inside a huge engine: I was a piston.

I slapped myself on the leg and jumped up and down a few times swinging my arms windmill style and the blood in them tingled.

I started to jog out of the freezer but slipped on fish slime and hit hard on the concrete floor. My knees throbbed, the fish blood on my face sticky and smelling like ammonia. Everywhere there was a fog like dry ice in boiling water and the blood clouded my eye and gave the world a pink hue. What next?

All at once I shot up like a marionette.

“Wise souls move through the dark only one step at a time!”

The words thundered in my ear: Dan. Then: meaty hands under my armpits, holding me like I was a child.

“What!”

Dan let go and I wiped my face. My eyes still stung but the tears were already clearing the blood.

“I thought you went to college, Springsteen? You don’t recognize Yeats?” His presence had cleared a pocket in the fog. He smiled, a wad of tobacco in his cheek. He knew Yeats?

“Josh told me your were an English major before you came here!”

We walked out of the freezer. I limped a little.

“Yeah!” I shouted

“I went to college, too,” he said. “We’re not all illiterate like you probably think.” Dan slammed the door and smiled.

Suddenly I could hear all the other noises of the plant again, far off by the line. The music, forklift, conveyor belt: all of it was an undulating hum of factory life.

“Thanks for the help,” I said. “Sorry about the racks.”

“Don’t say sorry,” he said, “just don’t do it again.” He hefted up the waist of his jeans. “You’re doing fine. First day’s the hardest.” He slapped me on the butt like a coach and I trotted back to the make line.

At the end of the first day, we sprayed down the slime line, full of guts and blood, and I was so tired I ached like I had the flu. Everyone cleaned their stations and walked around in their blood-stained, ill-fitting, orange and yellow rain clothes like deranged construction workers.

It was near 8 PM and the sun was lowering itself through the broken clouds outside in the harbor. The smell of the ocean blew in through the huge open doors at the end of the plant and cleared away some of the stench. A heron stood perched on the edge of the dock nipping at the heels of a handful of seagulls who were swooping into the water every so often to pick up the guts that washed out from the cannery drains. If the job was outside, it would have been weirdly beautiful. Still, I’d made it through a day. Dan had even complimented me for picking up the pace in the afternoon.

I watched Dan as he raced around the plant. I liked him. He was different one on one than he was in groups. I hadn't met anyone like him much since I was on the JV baseball team and our coach used to go around red-faced screaming at anyone who wasn't willing to get in front of the ball. But I had escaped Coach's wrath. I wasn't afraid to do the work on the field, to dive in the dirt for a grounder or block the ball with my body, and he always applauded my effort even if the skill wasn't there. *You'd all do a lot better if you tried as hard as Mike.* Which was the kind of thing that got me dirty looks from everyone else on the team but made me secretly proud. And anyway, I couldn't *stop*. There was some pleasure so simple in diving into the grass - a strawberry rising on a kneecap, feeling a ball smash into my chest and then seeing the imprint of the stitches on me later that night. Sometimes I'd even sit on the edge of my bed and trace the impressions with my fingertip, the geometric lines of black and blue all that was left after the salt stains and sweat of practice had been washed away. So far this work felt good like that.

The next morning we woke at six and went back to work, the sun already high above the treeline and a hundred greedy seagulls eyeing us from the roof of the cannery as we trudged up from the bunkhouse.

Air steamed from the blood tank where the salmon were falling from a conveyor after being headed, gutted, and cleaned by the crew at the head of the fish line. The tank was practically overflowing because the processors were going so fast. The salmon rose up on the conveyor belt from the russet colored water in the tank and we sorted them onto

metal racks about three feet by three feet. The edges of the racks were half a foot high, and in the corners were welded on half moons of metal so we could stack one rack on the other.

Speakers blared high overhead, connected to an iPod up in the cannery office. A warped version of Outkast's "Bombs Over Baghdad" played. It sounded like it was being distorted by a delay pedal, murky and wet with the air of the plant.

"Springsteen, what is poo-see?" Honza yelled.

Josh stood across from Honza at the end of the table and smiled. I was wearing the bandana and flannel again and Dan wouldn't stop calling me Springsteen.

"My name isn't Springsteen," I said. "Dan's just calling me that because of the bandana."

"Just answer the question, Springsteen!" Josh yelled his face ashen and warped in a forced smile. He had puked a couple times the day before but was better today aside from the color.

Honza shrugged and repeated his question emphasizing the "poo" in his Czech pronunciation of pussy.

"It means vagina!" I said "It means he thinks you work like you have a vagina," I said.

"Like wuh-mahn? He calls us act like wuh-mahn?"

"Yes!"

Honza laughed crazily.

"We're not vagina! We work hard! I show Dan who is poo-see! Hahaha!"

"Yeah, okay," I said.

Some of the racks were coming apart on the bottom and the unusable ones were stacked over the back half of the plant from floor to the ceiling in a boneyard of broken metal. The main room of the cannery, with the fish line and sauna sized totes filled with salmon, was about the size of a football field.

I caught salmon and spread them evenly across the rack. Every third or fourth one that hit the rack sprayed sludge into my face: blood, stringy guts that escaped the scrapers, and pink sacs of eggs. I tried to keep my mouth closed and turned the salmon tail in, their slit bellies resting against the backs of their neighbors.

At eye level, there was a sign: *Pinch Point*. It had a cartoon person on it who had put his arm in the crook of the conveyor belt. Someone had drawn on the warning sign with a marker, and there was a snapped off arm floating above the cartoon man. The person with the marker had even been careful to add blood pooling around the cartoon man's feet.

Honza and Josh stood to my right. They were on either side of the metal table and took the racks from me once I'd spread fifteen or so small, soft-bodied pink salmon across it.

I filled a tray with pinks and pushed it towards Honza and Josh. They grabbed it and stacked it onto a wheeled metal base. When they had six, they used a hydraulic pulley to pick up the stack and then started on a fresh stack of seven. When they had the second stack done, they lowered the first stack back on to it and pushed the towering mass of fish towards the back of the plant and the blast freezer we filled to start each day. We were playing a game - the day before we'd filled the blast freezer in an hour and a half - today we were running around like madmen trying to fill it in just an hour.

My muscles had a good kind of burn and I'd been sober the night before. I'd been so sore when I got up, but they quickly loosened and it was incredible how much more energy I had.

After the first break, I walked out the huge garage doors at the end of the plant where the forklifts came. The view of the ocean gave a sense of the vastness beyond and I sat on the edge of the pier and let my body rest. Out there were the towering evergreens of the Tongass Rain Forest that I'd read about on the ferry ride: 17 million acres of trees waving in the wind and coated in a near constant companion of fog while the rivers teemed with salmon that swam out to sea in schools so dense that from afar mariners mistook them for whales.

I had my phone in my pants underneath my rain gear and pulled it out and took a picture of the harbor and then one of the banner over the outside of the plant that said "Alaska's First Cannery- 1876." I imagined all those who had come before - Native Americans, and Chinese, ruffian bearded gold seekers: an ancient fraternity of laborers that I was slowly joining.

When I came back from break, a new man was there.

Dan showed him to the end of the table on my left and gave him a stack of racks to push to me. Earl demonstrated the process and the man stood there. The new guy was Native American and huge. Not tall really, but he made Dan look skinny through the shoulders. He had a fresh, military style hair cut, and his face was dark and pock mocked but shaved cleaned and not quite middle-aged but not quite young.

"Got it? Just like that." Dan pushed a rack towards me. Then stacked up a few more in front of the Indian.

The man nodded.

“Guys, this is Herb,” Dan said. “He’ll be helping you out sometimes. Let me him know what needs doing.” Dan walked back to his forklift and sped off to the totes of fish he’d been stacking by the head of the line and hopper that fed the fish down a ramp to the headers and the rest of the crew on the “slime line.”

Herb stared at me.

I finished a rack and then another and then there wasn’t one waiting for me.

“Herb, Herb,” I said it loud but he stared off at the fish line, the forest, the vast blue water in Klawock’s harbor. “Herb, another rack!”

“Yeah.” His voice was loud, almost enthusiastic. He grabbed a rack and pushed it at me so hard it smashed into my hand. Pain shot through my wrist and knuckles, and I snapped the hand back into my body.

I wanted to yell but didn’t. He was plenty big enough to hurt me if he wanted.

“Careful, man. Push them more gently,” I said.

Herb nodded and mimed doing it gently. I couldn’t tell if the gesture was genuine or if he was making fun of me.

“Not much fish today, eh?” Herb said.

“Huh?”

“Not too much fish today, eh?” He repeated slower and grinned.

I had no idea what he meant. There were fish stacked in totes from floor to ceiling and the blood tank bulged with them.

We rotated positions after each stack of fish we froze, and now Josh and I were at the end of the table while Honza sorted.

“Kurva! Fucking kurva! Idiot kurva!” Honza yelled at Herb, who was again staring out through the big window at the end of the fish line into the bay and the blue, frothing water.

“What does kurva mean?” I said to Josh.

“Whore or fucker.”

“That’s messed up,” I said.

Josh shrugged. “He’s retarded. I worked with him last year.”

“Like autistic?” I said.

“Like retarded, I don’t know. He’s Web’s son. Web owns the *Cathia Rose* and they deliver their catch here.”

“Is that why he works here?” I said.

“I guess.”

“Why doesn’t he answer me?” I said

“He did. ‘Not much fish today, eh?’” Josh mimicked Herb’s clipped, odd voice.

“He just needs to get to know you better. Watch, he’ll talk to me.”

We rotated again and Honza and I worked the end of the table. “Fucking idiot!” Honza yelled at me, but he was talking about Fred.

“Josh says he’s handicapped,” I said but Honza clearly didn’t know what I was saying. Maybe there was no word for handicapped in his language.

“Fucking poo-see,” Honza said and grinned, his yellow pointed teeth showing.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

My hand hurt where Herb had hit it. The tendon in my middle finger was tight and rubbery and hurt worse every time I bent it, like it might snap if I gripped something too hard.

Josh stood at the end of the conveyor belt. We'd moved on to sockeyes, bigger salmon that took longer to clean and they came slowly. I was starting to see how each kind looked different, subtle differences in their coloring and size. It wasn't hard to tell even though I'd never seen one before that day. We'd filled the blast freezer and the other bigger freezer by three in the afternoon and were now just putting the fish back into totes to freeze and rack later. Josh hit the floor pedal and the fish plopped into the tote, which was filled with ice we had to hand shovel into it.

"Fred, you ever smoke weed?" Josh said.

Herb smiled big and nodded.

"With my cousins," he said.

"We ought to blaze on one of our days off," Josh said and smiled over at me.

"Hahaha, okay, okay," Herb said.

Josh peppered Herb with more questions. They were all for our enjoyment but Herb was definitely more comfortable with Josh than me.

Dan was walking toward us from the front of the line so Honza and I pretended to be busy, which meant bending over and pushing guts out of the way with our gloved hands.

Josh was just standing there watching the fish fall from the conveyor belt into the slush totes.

“Herb, you ever take a bump off a titty?” Josh said while the hard bodied sockeyes splashed down.

Herb stared, not understanding, and I stood up from where I was shuffling guts. Honza did too.

“What are you guys doing?” Herb said. I didn’t say anything. “Honza, why aren’t you working?”

Honza shrugged.

“Honza! Why aren’t you guys working?” Dan repeated.

“Josh asked Herb if he take bite out of titty. Then we stopped,” Honza said.

“What the fuck?” Dan said to Josh and then smacked him on the back the way you might a little brother.

“I’m just fucking around,” Josh said. “Fred knows I’m kidding, right, Herb?”

“Uh-huh,” Herb said.

“Uh-huh,” Dan said. “Web will skullfuck you if he hears you’re messing with Herb.”

“Web’s a teddy bear,” Josh said but his face said otherwise.

“I’ll tell him you said that when they come in for offload tonight,” Dan said.

Josh ignored Dan and stomped on the foot pedal, kicking it to loosen the guts.

“Stop doing that!” Dan yelled. “You guys all hear me? You keep wrapping the cord around the table and kicking it and it’ll break, and there’s no back up pedal.”

We sat at the picnic table on the bunkhouse's second story porch spooning up forkfuls of mayonnaise covered baked salmon and dipping tater tots in ketchup. It was past eight, the shadows of the pines by the bunkhouse just starting to grow long.

There were a few skiffs and other boats tied to the pier and kids were riding their bikes while others were fishing. Every so often a truck pulled up to the building and the occupants would look up and give us dirty looks on the way in to the smoke shop. What was it with Native and whites here? Why were there so few Natives in the plant? I wanted to ask someone but they were all acting like it was completely normal.

A broken down fishing boat groaned against its ties while the crew chatted and smoked, standing atop huge piles of net stacked on either side of the deck. *Seiner*. The fishing boats were called seiners. I had a book on the table next to my plate I'd picked up from the "library" in the galley, which consisted mostly of fishing books, *Maxims* and *Harry Potter*. The book I'd chosen from the library was about fishing boats, their various parts and means of fishing. *Seiner. Port. Starboard. Power block. By-catch*. I'd wanted to know the terms ever since I saw the father and son working on the docks in Bellingham and I practiced them in my head while everyone ate.

There were a few of us at a picnic table- Milos, the giant dreaded man from the first night, Honza, Josh and myself. The table was on the second story balcony of the bunkhouse, while everyone else ate in the kitchen inside. Dan chatted with the plant mechanic and bookkeeper at a small table beside us.

"Springsteen, what you reading?" Josh was chewing on the cold salmon.

I held the book up.

“*Commercial Fishing Methods Volume 3.*” He let out a low whistling. “Must be a real page turner.”

I closed the book.

“What is up with Herb?” The dreaded Milos said as he shoveled down tater tots drowned in mayonnaise and ketchup. “At clean up he kept saying, ‘Not much fish today, eh?’ I said to say to him - Herb! There are lots of fucking feesh, but he just talk about something else.”

“Dan, what *is* the deal with Herb? You’re old friend with Web, right?” Josh said.

Dan ignored us and chatted with the others at his table. Adult’s table. Kid’s table.

“How old is he?” I said to Josh.

“Hey, Dan?” Josh said louder this time.

“What?” Dan said obviously annoyed.

“How old is Herb? 40?”

“He’s 35,” Dan said.

“Is it true Web’s the tribal president?” Josh said. “And that’s why he works here?”

“Look you guys, he’s fine if you just give him a little encouragement. He’s harmless,” Dan said.

“He kind of busted up my finger,” I said. I put my left hand and on the table, and the middle and ring fingers were bruised and swollen and I could hardly bend the middle one.

Josh started to talk. “Last year he —”

Dan let his fork clatter loudly on the table.

“Look, just keep telling him he’s doing a good job and stay on him and he’ll be fine.”

Josh looked incredulous.

“He almost broke Mike’s finger.”

“Springsteen, I’m sure it was an accident,” Dan said.

“What about last year?” Josh said. “I was sitting here, this exact spot, smoking a cigarette. Herb was with Web on the dock. He had a fishing pole and a gallon bucket and was catching rockfish. He must have caught like a dozen in an hour. Web was screwing with the prop on a skiff, and Herb got bored of fishing and wanted to help with the prop but Web wouldn’t let him. So Herb stands there and Web asks him a couple times to move back and then Web gets the motor going and goes to stick the prop back in the water and just when he does Herb out of nowhere dumps the bucket of rock fish on the prop. Little rock fish guts and blood sprayed all over the dock and skiff and Web screaming at Herb so the whole dock could hear and telling him when they get home he can make his own fucking dinner.”

Dan stood to leave his table.

“Look, don’t screw with Herb,” he said to us. “Klawock takes care of Herb and so do we. We don’t have a cannery without the fleet here.”

That night was my first offload. The *Cathia Rose* came first. There were only four boats in the fleet, but Dan had told us that they could each catch over a million pounds during the summer. At distance the boat was just a hazy set of sulfur colored lights, but then there was a long wooden boat with a chipped white paint job and a

flowing, script like name painted on the bow in blood red paint. Who was Cathia? Web's wife? Herb's mother?

I grabbed a pallet jack and wheeled it to the sorting table and put it under a tote figuring I would sort the catch like everyone else.

"Springsteen!" Dan shouted at me from the opposite side of the dock where the other half of the crew was setting up to offload another boat on the way. "Springsteen, you're on hydros!"

I left the jack and walked to Dan.

"I'm on what?"

"Hydros!" Dan shouted and he walked briskly into the large canopy that split the dock in half and stored wheel barrows, machine parts, and other junk. I followed. "You hit this button to run the hydros on this side of the dock." Dan pointed to where the *Cathia Rose* was tying up. "You knock it to the other side for the other hydros." When he said knock he actually hit the button with a big wooden stick next to the controls.

We walked to the hand controls on the *Cathia Rose* side of the dock and Dan showed me how they operated a twenty-foot high crane with a large cable running down it and a hook at the end. Next to the crane there was what looked like a gigantic steel vacuum with a hose that came out the top like an elephant's snout, big enough to suck up a dog or child. Dan ran me through the controls for the crane. "Up, down, side to side. Nothing to it. See."

I sort of saw.

Dan put my hands on the controls and they were touchy. A little pressure jerked the cable and brought on mechanic shrieks, the hydraulic fluid coursing through the lines like oily blood.

“Look, I need someone who can speak English. Someone who can *communicate* with the crews. Just wait for them to tell you what to do,” Dan said pointing to the crew on the deck of the *Cathia Rose* as it approached. If you don’t understand, they’ll explain it. Go slow and don’t bring the cable all the way up or it could get stuck.”

“Okay,” I said, still unsure.

Dan took another big hose off the ground and tossed it over the edge of the dock, down to the boat. He hit a button on the industrial sized vacuum and it came to life as loud as a truck’s engine with the hood up. There was a long handle jutting out from the vacuum.

“After they get the covers off the hold, send the hose down.” He pointed to the elephant snout. “Let them dump the return hose into the hold first. Make sure both hoses are in the hold. Wait until you hear the clicking noise on the pump and each time you do, push this handle away from you. Bring the handle back towards you after you see all the fish are pumped from the hose.”

“How will I be able to tell?”

“There’s a mirror on the canopy you can see from where you’re standing. See.” He pointed and I could see the sorting table in the mirror’s reflection. The table looked much farther away in the mirror than it actually was. “Once you see there aren’t any more fish coming onto it, pull the handle back.”

Dan walked off up the stairs to the cannery office whose main entrance was on the same side of the dock, and I went through all the instructions in my head and had already forgotten half of them.

The *Cathia Rose* eased up to the dock and a huge figure appeared out of the dark dressed all in black, steering from the flying bridge. He was over 300 pounds, and his thick hair was plastered back by the wind: Web. The boat on the other side of the dock arrived, the captain full of shouted directions, but Web brought the boat into dock with a few hand signals to his crew. He sipped from a silver can of beer and other empties behind him on the ground of the flying bridge. An all-Indian crew of four chatted and smoked on deck as they grabbed the lines to tie off and lifted the lids from the hold. One guy had a powder blue ball cap and no rain gear on and roved over deck, giving directions to the rest. They all looked as young as me or younger, and they worked in unison, confident as a slick fielding baseball team who finished off an out by going around the horn.

Web idled the boat and the crew tied off. The guy without rain gear, who must have been the deck boss, climbed the ladder to the bridge as the others finished with the ropes, but before he could get to the bridge Web leapt off the side of the boat and onto the dock in an impressive show of agility.

Web said something I couldn't hear and then he was up the stairs into the cannery office before the deck boss could climb back down the ladder.

The tide had come up few feet since we'd finished cleaning earlier that evening, and the deck of the *Cathia Rose* and the crew were so close I could smell soap coming from the deck hand who held the return hose. I was surprised. He must have showered

on the way in. I lowered the snout onto the deck and the crew unhooked it and I brought the cable back up. The fish were bursting from the holds when they pulled off the hatch covers. How much was that? Ten thousand pounds? Twenty thousand? More? Suddenly a million pounds seemed reasonable and the money it equated to was staggering. Sockeyes were worth more than a dollar, pinks around fifty cents, and it was like looking into a tank of gleaming dollar bills.

The deck boss gave the thumbs up. I heard the clicking noise in the vacuum and pushed the handle and dozens of a salmon went shooting up the hose. They came crashing down fifty feet behind me on the sorting table in a cascade mixed with seaweed and jellyfish. The dock behind me was a frenzy of activity. People sorted the fish into totes based on species and then others wheeled away the full totes on pallet jacks where forklifts picked them up, sat them down on a oversized scale, and then whisked them back up into the bowels of the plant. After half an hour the novelty of working the fish vacuum wore off and I was cold and tired, my knees and hand both throbbing. I practiced the terms I'd memorized from the book. Port. Starboard. Stern. Bow. Gunwale. Over and over again and then spelled them out in my head, forward, then backward.

The water in the boat's hold churned as the fish got sucked up and they added cups of cooking oil to the brew every few minutes for a reason I couldn't fathom. One of the crewmen stared hard at me staring while others walked in and out of the cabin with fresh cups of steaming coffee. I stood with a boot on the ledge of the dock and tried to look stoic, but there was a world between them and me. The plant had been fine so far, at times, even fun, but watching them I couldn't help but think that fishing would be more

fun, more money. It would be like working in the plant, but outdoors and without the gore. Who wanted to be doing the cleaning when you could be doing the catching?

The water level in the hold went down painfully slow but finally around midnight the deck boss made a throat slitting motion and I cut off the fish pump. I brought the hose out of the water with the hook on the crane and lowered it onto the edge of the dock.

Two deckhands jumped into the hold and tossed salmon the pump hadn't gotten into a small plastic tote. The deck boss and other deckhand walked to a gray tote on the port side where larger salmon were on ice.

"Lower the hook back down!" The deck boss yelled. "We've got some Kings."

I was unsure but lowered the hook and the deck boss attached it to two ropes tied to the tote.

The door to the cannery office opened in the corner of my eye, and then Earl and Web were down the stairs standing next to me. The wind made the tote rock in the air above the boat, and the ropes attached to the tote were old and frayed in places. The tote was filled to the brim with fish and the top layer slid around, everything creaking and straining at once. I brought it up so slow I am almost couldn't tell if the tote was moving at all.

One of the deck hands yawned.

"Faster," The deck boss yelled.

I pushed down a little more on the lever.

"Fuck, faster!" he yelled. "I wanna get to sleep tonight."

I pushed down on the control hard, and the tote shot up fast and hit the power block. King salmon exploded and the guys on deck went to their knees.

“Stop! Fucking Stop!” the deck boss yelled.

The salmon were upwards of forty pounds apiece and hit the deck with thuds like blocks of ice. One landed in the hold and the guy who had been tossing fish hollered out. Suddenly my heart was so loud I could hear it in my ears. I thought I’d killed the deckhand in the hold.

“What the fuck?” the deck boss yelled. “What the fuck was that?”

The tote was still swinging in the air, leveling out. I was as shocked as them.

“Lower it back down!”

The deck hand climbed up the ladder from the hold, glaring at me, but alive.

“Mike, Mike, Mike, watch what you’re fucking doing,” Dan came over and stood right beside me. “You gotta watch out for the power block. Like this.”

Dan pressed expertly on the controls and lowered the tote back down and the crewmen started to put the Kings back in the tote.

“No!” Dan shouted to the deck boss. “You guys fucked up too. Grab another tote and take a few more out. There’s way too many in there already. Give my guy here a chance to get it up.”

“Getting it up is his fucking problem,” the deck boss yelled.

“Just load the fucking totes!” Web said.

His voice was weirdly high-pitched and made him sound youthful but also frightening and everyone stopped to look.

Dan backed off the controls. “Do it again,” he said to me.

It was fine after that, the weight in the tote much less so that it was easier to gauge how much pressure to put on the controls. I brought the two totes of Kings onto the dock, and we sprayed down everything and were done for the night.

Web climbed back aboard his boat and wheeled it around, looking back as I washed seaweed off the dock, his eyes trained on me like a warning.

The sound of kids playing blew up from the grass below, and I leaned over the bunkhouse balcony and a bald eagle swooped down past my head and perched on the top of a tree on the other side of the road. I'd been at the plant a week and already made more than a thousand dollars. Offloads had gone more smoothly each successive night after the first with the *Cathia Rose*, and now Dan was letting me have more responsibility, even telling me to holler at the crews to hurry up if they were too slow at offload. That afternoon in the plant, Honza, Josh, and me had set a new record - forty five minutes to fill the blast freezer and only three hours to fill the big one. It after dinner and I'd just showered and was sipping on a beer (the first one I'd had in a few days), and the smell of the sea and soap on my body made me feel warm and satisfied. I was earning my keep.

It was like I hadn't been alone since the motel and my night with Walt, and now I was on another planet: only the distance and the heaviness of my body from work made it possible to believe everything that had happened.

The day was ending in a fiery way. A silhouetted sailboat in the harbor looked like it was being vacuumed up into the horizon. After dinner most people had gone to

nap. There was nothing to do until offload, and I was alone on the porch watching the day turn from blue to red, the sun setting through a haze and setting the water ablaze and filling my lungs with light.

Dad had called me that day. My reception had been sporadic since getting to Klawock and his call had come while my phone was dead, the battery sucked dry while it was on “roaming.” I’d charged it up while nervously listening to the message.

He was good. Mom was good. Matt’s old dog was good, though his paw had been giving him problems. Dad was glad to hear I’d found work and wanted to know when I’d get done. There was a trace of worry in his voice, but he hoped I made a lot of money. He said he’d help out if the truck got towed.

All this time I don’t know why I had been so worried. My parents were supportive, good people. They just wanted me to know what I wanted to do, and was that such a bad thing? But it was always hard to talk to them now. Matt was dead of cancer, his ashes sitting on my parents’ fireplace mantel in a gray metal urn, between a spelling bee trophy I’d won in third grade and an 8th grade baseball MVP trophy he’d won, and smaller than both – a fate so senseless we could hardly have guessed it. Every conversation percolated with this unsaid, shared knowledge, and made not talking about it feel like a lie, though a necessary one.

I put my head down on the table and closed my eyes. The beer made my head a little fuzzy and the work and the fish danced behind my eyelids. For the first time in forever, I couldn’t drink. The fact that tomorrow was another day of work, that it would begin at 6AM and end in early evening, that there would be an offload and then another day to follow just like it, was comforting.

I woke from a dream where I was working on the processing line with music pulsing overhead and someone screaming.

“Offload in 15. Offload in 15,” Dan shouted in the bunkhouse. He walked down the hallway knocking on each bedroom. How long had I been asleep?

There was saliva on my arm, and I pulled out my phone and the voicemail screen was still up. I blinked sleep from my eyes, and there was a prickling under my skin like needles. It was nearly eleven and the sun was just down. The work and sleep had made my limbs go heavy. Everyone was rushing out into the hall, putting on sweatpants and sweatshirts, pulling on boots gleaming with scales, and I was with them and then down the stairs out into the pitch black.

“Not much fish today, eh?” he stuttered a bit and repeated it. “Not much fish today, eh?”

I nodded, trying to blink the heaviness from my eyes. Herb was starting to get to me. My finger had healed throughout the week, turning from black to blue to yellow while the movement came back, but it was like having a second job just to keep Herb on task. Herb do this, Herb do that, when any normal guy would have only needed to be instructed once.

He pushed a rack at me and I grabbed it off the table, slamming it down in front of me. Totes full of pinks were stacked to the ceiling on either side of the slime line. We’d been at it for six hours, but it looked like there were more totes than when we had started. The freezers were filled and we were just rolling the fresh full racks up to the walls and leaving them there, their slimy bodies warming in the stale air. They were in

columns three or four deep against the entirety of the wall behind us, coming up closer and closer to our backs while the towering stacks of totes squeezed in on either side.

The fish fell so fast that the blood tank overflowed and whoever was nearest had to toss them back in. I was sorting the fish onto the rack, smashing the foot pedal down as hard as I could to keep up.

The offload had totaled 300,000 pounds and had gone from just after Dan had woken me up the night before until four thirty in the morning. It was more than twice as many fish as any night we'd offloaded so far that week, and I'd stood on the edge of the dock with sharp pains in my knees, the pump vacuuming the fish out of the boats in a violent monotony.

We'd cleaned the dock while wandering in a thick morning fog. The sun rose and started to burn it away but then the slimy web of jellyfish run-off from the salmon sucked at our boots and left us stumbling around with arms in front to catch a fall like fish processing zombies.

I smashed the foot pedal and suddenly nothing. The conveyor belt stopped moving. The salmon came from the slime line and dropped into the blood tank with heavy smacking sounds as they landed on each other.

Dan came over. His eyes were sunken in his head, like he hadn't been to sleep at all. He inspected the control box on the side of the conveyor belt, opposite from the big red *EMERGENCY STOP* button, and then retreated to a room in the back to get his tools.

He sent us to break and no one said a word but Herb who was asking how late we'd been on the docks offloading. No one responded. There was only smoking and groaning and a lot of rolled eyes as Herb went from guy to guy asking the same question.

When we came back Dan was smiling and sweating but there was no foot pedal anymore.

“What’s up with the pedal?” Josh said.

“I don’t have time to fix it right now. I rigged the conveyor belt to just be on or off. The only way to stop it is to hit the emergency shut off, okay?”

“How do we keep up?” Honza said.

“Don’t stop,” he said. “You’ve got the extra body helping out now anyway.”

“You mean Herb?” Josh said.

Herb was standing right there.

“Look it’s only until we get through the pinks.”

“What about *tomorrow*?” I said. “We’ll have to process them again then.”

“Don’t you guys fucking bitch to me.”

Dan brought the foot pedal from off the table behind him and it was frayed like a rat had been gnawing at it.

“You guys broke the cable.”

“That wasn’t my goddamn fault,” I said. “That’s bullshit.”

“Sort the fucking fish,” Dan said.

We sorted fish so fast now I sweated onto the trays and couldn’t tell what was perspiration and what was fish water. My bandana smelled sour and whatever was on it dripped down my nose, some of it getting in the corners of my eyes and burning.

We rotated and had about fifteen more totes of pink salmon to go before there’d be no more racks at all to put them on and we’d get to go back to the easy job of just dumping the processed fish back into slush totes. Everyone was breathing hard.

“Herb! Bring more racks!” I yelled.

“Where?” He looked around and there were a couple stacks behind him, though they weren’t on rolling bases, so he was wasn’t sure if he could use them.

“There!” I said. “Right behind you. Now!”

He sauntered off and I loaded a rack and then another. A salmon fell over the conveyor belt and lodged itself between the table and the rack. I leaned across to get it, feeling the slick fish rub against my sweatshirt. I grabbed the fish and sent the full rack down to Josh and Honza. The pain between my shoulder blades from standing and leaning was white hot every time I pushed a rack.

A rack smashed into my side, a drilling pain that stole my breath. Herb was lining them up all in row like I’d ask but not paying attention to the one nearest me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” There was a sharp pain from the effort of raising my voice.

I bent over onto the table and leaned on the rack to gather my breath, but it was balanced over the edge and it flipped over and I went backwards with it. The concrete lit through my head like an electric current, and the whole plant whined down to just a ringing in my ears. I sat up and fish fell to floor with no tray to catch them, sending a slurry of guts splashing back at me. Five, ten, fifteen fell to the floor. The sound of the plant came back gradually.

“Herb!” hit the stop button I said. My sounded like when you cover you head with your hands. The button was on the left side of the conveyor belt and Honza and Josh couldn’t reach it without having to crawl under the machine.

“Idiot, it’s on this side. On the belt!” Honza shouted and came over to pick me up and grab the rack from the ground.

Herb walked up to the conveyor, but he couldn’t see the EMERGENCY STOP button like the rest of us because it was on the inside corner of the machine next to the electrical box Dan had hotwired.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Josh yelled and over the table pointing at the button. “Are you a fucking idiot?”

Herb moved in close, leaning over the table and his head was within a few inches of the conveyor belt and then he saw the button. He went to hit it with his left hand and set his other arm against the metal plate with the *Pinch Point* to brace himself.

Herb started to scream. High and reedy until it broke apart into a pitch almost too high to hear. The sleeve of his hooded sweatshirt had caught and his forearm was between the topside and underside of the conveyor belt.

Honza crawled under the sorting table through the fish and guts and hit the manual stop button, partially straddling Herb. Everyone was looking back like we’d killed someone.

Herb was on a knee with his right arm above him still caught in the machine. He was moaning. I got up and walked to Herb and put my arm on his back. He shuddered and popped up ripping his arm out of the machine. The sleeve of his sweatshirt was torn, and there was blood and long gash in his arm, though I couldn’t see how deep.

Herb was crying and howling, and now everyone on the slime line had stopped working and was down at the end of the line in a circle around us.

Dan had been on the forklift at the other end of the plant and he came up chugging up.

“Back off. Everyone back the fuck off.”

Dan took Herb’s good arm and held it.

“It’s all right big guy. It’s all right.” He took a clean rag from his back pocket, rinsed it with the nearest hose for clean up, and tied it around Herb’s gashed forearm. Herb’s wrist and palm were streaked with blood and there were dots of it on the sorting table, fresher and redder than the fish blood.

Herb was crying, huge sobs that turned to a steady whimper like a dog hit by a car.

“I didn’t touch it. I didn’t touch it. I didn’t touch it,” was all he would say.

“What the fuck happened?” Dan shouted.

“It was an accident,” Josh said.

“Pinch point,” Honza said, pointing at the sign on the bottom of the conveyor belt, which was now splattered with fresh blood.

I scraped guts from the spine of a pink salmon with a medieval looking spoon. My hand ached so bad I couldn’t make enough of a fist to grip a cigarette during breaks. Dan had called us into the office that morning and told Honza, Josh, and me that we were switching places with three “scrapers.” They would replace us as rackers. Herb hadn’t been hurt all that bad - he only needed a dozen stitches. In fact, Web even wanted Herb to go back to work as soon as the stitches came out. But Dan had told Web what happened, and Web didn’t want us working around herb anymore.

“This is bullshit. This is three years I’ve worked here,” Josh had said. “Two for Honza. It wasn’t our fault.”

“I know,” Dan had said, “But Web’s my biggest boat. If it’s between him and three crewmen, it’s got to be him. It’s as simple as that.”

The headless fish were crawling past us on the conveyor belt and my feet were numb from the water and small chunks of ice that fell off it. Across from me, Josh and Honza looked equally miserable. They had their heads down, raking away with their spoons.

That night the offload went late again, until nearly 3:00. The tide was out and the boats full, and we pumped them until we all went weak in the knees from the effort of standing.

Dan kept me away from offloading the *Cathia Rose* to avoid confrontation with Web, and I chatted with Jeremy, a deck hand on the *Valerie J*.

“You look racooned eyed,” he said and snuck me a cigarette from his boat. We’d been chatting a little over the last week whenever I offloaded his boat and he was friendly, a bouncer from Seattle with a Mohawk and goatee that belied a goofiness.

I asked him all kinds of questions about fishing and sleeping on the boat and what the weather was like. I’d been thinking about it more and more, especially after spending my first day scraping out guts instead of racking.

“You sound like you want to go fishing,” he said.

“I do,” I said. “I just don’t know how.”

“Shit, go to Craig after the next opening and just ask around,” he said while throwing me a King salmon to put in a tote.

“Really?” I said.

“It’s early,” he said, “and the peak of the season is coming.” He bent over to search for any more Kings in the tote they had on deck. “Someone’s deckhand always quits early and that captain will replace him with any live body so he doesn’t miss any fishing.”

I said thanks and the *Valerie J* crew started untying the boat. Wow, could it be that easy?

After that, I hosed the pier off with the first hue of dawn inching over the mountains running the last few days over in my mind. The wind had picked up and there was the smell of rain and diesel fuel in the air. Unmoored, far out in the harbor where it was just a beacon of soft yellow light, the seiner left a trail of exhaust as it headed back out to sea.

I suddenly knew what I would do.

6. *From the Gunwales to the Waterline*

For a week, I silently scraped guts and said nothing to anyone about my plans. I went on like that, paying as little attention to the job as possible, instead staring out into the harbor, watching the seagulls swoop into the blue water and the tops of the pines as they swayed in the salty breeze. All the boats were in the harbor with a day off and our workday was due to end early. The deck hands walked through the plant, using our showers and laundry machines. Jeremy from the *Valerie J* talked to Dan at the head of the line. I'd been fantasizing about what he'd told me all week. Just the thought of heading out to sea made the hair on my neck rise and my pulse beat a little harder.

"Clean up," Dan hollered around One PM. Everyone ran to their soap buckets and scrubbed away the fish guts and blood from the processing line with berserk enthusiasm because we had the next couple days off.

After lunch the crew crowded around the table in the kitchen trading stories about whose hands hurt the most, sharing bruises and scrapes, and arguing about which group of processors worked the hardest, but I could already feel myself receding from them.

Two full days off with nothing to do was a gift so great it bordered on burden. People suggested hikes and fishing, physical activities so their bodies wouldn't have the time to tell them how tired they were. The groups split and went their separate ways.

Honza, Josh, and me took a cab to Craig so we could go to the bar. They wanted a break from Klawock after the week that had followed the Herb incident. We all took large draws from our banks accounts, each having made over a grand in the last couple

weeks. It was a quarter of what I needed to pay the fines for the DUI in Montana, but I had my goals set higher.

Craig was much bigger than Klawock, a few thousand people compared to a few hundred. The taxi dropped us off at the harbor, which was huge, maybe a hundred or more fishing boats. Before we left I'd taken a few clothes from my duffel bag and other bare necessities, stuffed them in my backpack, and left the rest in the "Free" pile in the bunkhouse. I'd stripped my life down to just one light pack. There were fisherman at the harbor in Craig, chatting and smoking, a few drinking beers, but most working on nets and the day was intensely bright; it was so much like Bellingham I had a moment of *deja vu*.

We walked to the nearest bar, which was called the Potlatch. Inside it was happy hour and everyone seemed to know each other.

The cigarette haze was as thick as the fog in the cannery's blast freezer and made my eyes water just the same. Men played pool at the far end of the bar, moving like neon ghosts backlit by beer signs and we sat on stools next to a burly middle aged man in a long-billed ball cap and work shirt and a guy our age who wore deck boots and had shaggy black hair coming out from under a beanie.

The rest of the bar crowd looked much the same - young men to the very old in Xtra Tuffs and sweatpants, hooded sweatshirts and Carhartt jackets. Sprinkled in like fat little toys, women in too much makeup tottered on their stools. They drank and smoked, complained and then fell silent as their men argued about the catch, the gear, the long summer ahead.

“The next opening might only last three days,” the older fisherman said. The younger man nodded and sipped from a glass of beer and stared into the long mirror behind the bar.

The bartender wore a ponytail underneath a straw trilby hat and alternated between filling drinks behind the bar and reading from a newspaper.

“What would you like?” The bartender came up to Honza, Josh, and I. His black ponytail curled partially around his shoulder and down his front like it was trying to get away.

There was only one tap so I just said a pitcher of beer. The fishermen were to my right, and Honza and Josh were to my left. They complained about our new jobs as scrapers and the unfairness of it. On a walk to town to buy beers, Josh had actually had a scary incident. A truck had driven up behind him honking and throwing rocks, nearly running him over so that he had to dive in the bushes.

The fishermen next to me discussed a variety of mechanical topics, all involving fishing in some fashion, and I listened intently, waiting for an in to the conversation.

I nervously drank beer and then was suddenly, and surprisingly, buzzed. How long had it been since I'd been really drunk? Since the first night in Klawock? Long enough that two beers had warmed my head and made me feel assured in what I was going to do.

We drank until about nine and then settled our tab. Outside, we smoked cigarettes, waiting for the cab to arrive. Dan was locking the bunkhouse at ten to keep people from coming back too drunk. The cab arrived and Josh and Honza moved towards it. I stayed.

“Coming, or what?” Josh said with the cab door open, the engine running softly.
“I’m not sleeping outside.”

“I’m going back in,” I said.

“What?” Josh looked incredulous and stepped back from the cab.

“I’m staying here,” I said. “I’m not going back to Klawock.”

“Seriously?” Josh said.

“C’mon,” Honza said. “We sleep at the plant. You’re drunk.”

“Look, good luck in the cannery,” I said. “I hope you make a lot of money. But I’m going to try to get on a boat.”

“What?” Josh said. He’d walked back up to me. The cabbie had gotten out and hollered at us to hurry.

“Tell Dan I’m sorry,” I said.

“You’re serious, huh?” His eyes were intent and clear. He looked so much better than on the ferry ride up. Even after all that had happened, I really did like him.

“Yeah, I am,” I said. “Thanks for getting me the job. I mean, really. Thanks.” I put my hand out. “Give me a call when you get done.”

“Okay, man. Okay.” He came up and we back clapped and then I shook hands with Honza.

They walked to the cab where the driver waited with an annoyed look. Josh’s eyes met mine as he went in to the backseat and then they were pulling out onto the main road heading back towards Klawock into the dusk.

I sat back down where I’d been in the bar and the same two fishermen were still there, and I ran through a way to interrupt them – *So when’s the next opening? How’s the*

fishing so far? But it all sounded lame, and I was worried about sounding like a greenhorn, which I was. But Jeremy on the *Valerie J* had sounded so certain. Someone would need help.

The bartender poured a mug and came back. The beer was still like pond water.

“Did you get fired or something?” He was washing out a beer mug with a white towel stained gray and frayed at the edges.

“Huh?”

“I seen the cash in your shirt pocket there.” I’d left the small roll of twenties from the ATM visible like an idiot. “And then you came back in without your friends.”

The fishermen next to me looked over for the first time.

“I just barely got here,” I said glancing over at the older fisherman. Gray beard and weather beaten face but something also child like in his chipmunk cheeks and rosy complexion.

“I wondered the same thing when I seen your backpack,” the fisherman said, “but then I thought it was a little early in the season to be giving up.” His voice was gravelly but sprinkled with a kind of “don’t you know” friendliness like someone from the Upper Midwest.

This was it. “Hey, are you looking for help on your boat?”

He shook his head. “I don’t operate with a crew.”

“But maybe you know someone?” I pressed.

He turned away on his stool and the rejection was embarrassing. It felt like everyone had seen, but then I looked around and people were just as they’d been.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I said. “Let me buy you a drink.” I stood and went between the two fishermen.

The older one spun on his seat. “I haven’t had a drink since 1996,” he said and puffed on his cigarette, looking me over. I had wide, surprised eyes. “But that’s a nice offer to a stranger.” He smiled and his attitude changed. “I’d take a Coke and I’m sure Ben would have a beer.”

The younger guy raised his eyes and lifted his glass and we shook hands.

“Randy,” said the older man and we shook hands and I told him my name.

I was a stranger introducing myself yet again.

I held a couple fingers up and the bartender came back. I ordered a pitcher.

“Did you walk the docks?” Randy said.

We’d moved to a free booth in the corner by the door and the air was clearer, my eyes feeling less like they were filled with sand. Ben owned a boat as well, but his deckhand was his younger brother, asleep back in the crew quarters..

“Well, yeah,” I said. I sipped from my beer and Randy had a straw in his Coke.

“In all honesty, I’ve been listening to you guys for the last couple hours, wanting to talk to you.”

“It’s mostly about perseverance,” he said. “Sometimes guys quit too easily. Knock off and have a beer instead of asking more captains.” He stared at my glass, sweating between my fingers and I wished I’d drank less. “But that isn’t your game, is it?”

I shook my head. “No, I want this bad,” I said. “I was working in Klawock at the cannery before I got here. I was stacking fish all day and running the crane at offload.”

“Why did you quit?” Ben said.

“I though fishing seemed better.”

Randy sipped from his Coke and rubbed at his salt and pepper beard.

“Fishing *is* better,” Ben said. “I worked at a cannery when I was sixteen. You couldn’t pay me to do that again.”

Randy leaned into Ben and said something quietly. Lips pursed, Ben pushed his drink out away from him.

“We know guy a couple stalls over looking for help. His kid decided not to make the trip up at the last second and he had to do the first opening alone this week,” Ben said. “He’s a high school buddy of mine.” “Do you want me to get him?” Ben said.

Seriously? “Yeah,” I said, stunned. “Of course.”

Not five minutes later I was sitting across from a bleary eyed bed headed blonde guy, who couldn’t have been more than two or three years older than me. Ben and him were both boat owners and here I was less than a three weeks removed from night at the Totem Motel.

The new captain was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and except for his dirty blond beard, he didn’t look much like a fishermen at all, too skinny and clean cut compared to everyone else.

I had gotten another glass from the bar while I waited, my breathing coming rapidly, blowing into my hands to calm myself.

“I’m Brian,” he said. “Can you pass a piss test?”

“Yeah,” I said. I hadn’t been able to say that in a while.

“And Ben says you worked in Klawock? On the slime line?”

“Yeah, I liked the work. I just thought fishing would be better.”

“How long were your work days?” He sipped from his beer mug.

“Fourteen, fifteen hours, plus offload at night.”

“Uh huh. Do you get sea sick?”

“No.” I had no idea.

“And you’re free the rest of the summer?”

“Yup.”

“Works for me. We’ll try the next opening and see if we can stand each other.

It’s a long season, Mike. We have to make sure we get along first.”

We left town at Six AM that Sunday morning. The boat was stocked with food and ice. We’d gone grocery shopping together the day before, and while other captains loaded up on red meat, cigarettes and whiskey, Brian gave me a list full of fresh fruit, yogurt and a couple pounds of some grained called quinoa. The last thing we bought was beer, but it was just a six-pack from the local brewery.

The grounds were only forty miles from town but it took us almost six hours to get there. The boat was a thirty-two foot gillnetter. It was white with royal blue trim and Brian had bought it only two years before. The only fishing boats I’d seen in Klawock were the much bigger seiners with crews of four or five and large back decks with stacked nets and corklines. But on the gillnetter it was just Brian and me. Some boats were manned only by the captain. I couldn’t imagine a summer like that. A guy would go crazy by himself over a whole season.

The boat cruised along at six knots, rocked from side to side by waves that looked small but made the fiberglass hull shudder and groan and my stomach go queasy. The crew quarters were two sleeping bags on body length pieces of foam on the starboard side of the fo’c’sle. The port side of the fo’c’sle was occupied by the head, stove, and other assorted supplies - tool box, a couple rifles, electrical wiring.

The opening started at noon Sunday. It was supposed to go until Wednesday at noon and then we’d head back in. Brian unspooled a net over the stern from a hydraulic “drum.” It went on and on, two hundred and fifty fathoms, until the far end buoy bag was just an orange speck bobbing up and down in the waves like it was winking at us. The coastline looked all the same, evergreens and slate colored boulders, the only distinguishing feature being Tree Point Lighthouse, whose name was accurate though laughably arbitrary. There were boats spread out every half mile or so doing the same as us.

We let the net “soak” for an hour and then Brian jogged the boat to one end of the net to pick it up.

“Take the gaffe hook and grab it near the buoy bag,” he said. “Then attach it to the drum. If you drop it or move too slow it could get in the wheel, so don’t fuck up.”

His directions were clear but his patience was thin, and he already had a tendency to micromanage. The night before while cooking dinner he’d stood over my shoulder while I let the water boil, like I might do that wrong and ruin the spaghetti somehow.

Brian pulled up to the buoy bag, and I leaned over the stern with the gaffe hook. I leaned slowly toward the water, which was only a couple feet away from the railing, while Brian looked back out the port window to make sure I got it. I missed a couple of

times and then finally hooked the line and brought it up to the drum, but the boat was drifting forward and I struggled to attach the bag to the drum. It stretched taut, and I tried to pull the net toward the drum and the boat, but it was a useless game of tug of war.

I was straining, staring hopelessly out into the water when Brian suddenly appeared and grabbed the line from my hands. He used the throttle on the stern to bring the boat back toward the net.

“Fucking watch it,” he said. “You have to be faster than that. Every time faster than that.”

I fumed, but he was obviously right. In that moment, I realized he had my whole life in his hands. I couldn’t drive the boat. We were too far out to swim to shore. Everything depended on him.

After an hour, we picked the net. Brian showed me how to use the fish picker, a hand sized plastic tool with a metal hook at the end. He used the hydraulics to bring the net over the stern and wrap it back on the drum. As it came, there were salmon every couple fathoms. I’d thought they’d be dead, but they were not. They fought hard against us, making it hard to pick them free, and when they hit the deck they flailed about splattering watery blood on the legs of our rain gear.

When that set was over, I threw the fish down in the holds based on species and then rinsed the blood, seaweed, and jellyfish from the deck. We made another set and after an hour and a half went to pick it up.

The next morning I was determined to make a better impression. The fishing started at around Four AM, the sun already coming up.

This time I took the gaffe hook and threw myself over the rail, but the boat was too far away and I almost lost my balance and went over the rail.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. Stop!” Brian screamed at me through the port window.

He ran back onto the deck. “Jesus, you just scared the shit out of me,” he said.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You can’t lean that far over the gunwale,” he said. “You could fall over and get swept up into the prop.”

“Okay, okay. I was just trying to be fast.”

“Use your free hand to hold the rail and lean over with the hook like this.” He demonstrated and picked the line near the buoy bag easily. “This boat rides low. There’s very little freeboard, so you don’t have to lean over as far as it looks.” He handed me back the gaffe hook and tied the buoy bag to the drum.

We started picking again, the drum humming.

The day went on and on like that in a monotonous routine. I’d make small mistakes and Brian would tweak my mechanics a little more each time, showing me how to use the picker more nimbly with a flick of the wrist instead of putting the strain on the elbow, how to throw three or four fish down at a time by gripping them back their tails, even how to put my rain gear on and walk on deck without losing my balance.

That night we sat at the galley table eating a dinner of salmon and rice, the water all around us so brightly lit that we had to wear sunglasses in the cabin.

“What’s freeboard?” I said. “You mentioned it earlier.” It had been on my mind all afternoon because I didn’t recognize it from the book of boat terms I’d read in Klawock.

“Freeboard is the distance from the gunwale to the waterline,” Brian said. “Watch the other guys. They’ll fill their boats with so many fish there won’t be any freeboard and the stern goes below the water when they hit a wave.”

“That sounds incredibly dangerous,” I said.

“The season’s only so long,” Brian said. “The balance between greed and safety isn’t always clear.”

Two days later we were docking in town. It was the first of July, the harbor all decorated with signs reminding us of the fireworks celebration on the fourth, and I hopped onto the wooden walkway with the stern line in hand and tied it to a cleat on the dock. I’d been a fisherman for four days. It was weird to call myself that, but it was also assuring to have a title.

Brian put the boat into neutral and came out, grabbing the bow line and tying it off next to me. “So you think you can see yourself doing this for another six weeks?” he said, straining with the thick, brown rope in his hand.

I shook my head. It would be a grind, but I still wanted it. “Definitely,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “We’ll see if you still feel that next time we come to town in August.”

“Huh?” I said.

“We’ll stay out all of July,” he said. “That’s when we’ll really make our money, so enjoy your town time now. You won’t be back for a while.”

Brian hopped back on deck, and I was left on the dock staring at the tiny gillnetter where I’d live for the rest of the summer.

7. *The Doxy*

I was awake in my bunk and I could feel my legs sweaty against the thin piece of foam. Thunder reverberated through the mountains. I listened to the rain fall softly on the deck. I waited. Brian would be in to get me up soon. My knees ached at the thought of crawling on deck, and there was still a welt on my cheek from where a jellyfish tentacle had stung me the day before. We hadn't been to town in nearly five weeks.

The bunk in the fo'c'sle was humid and warm, heavy with the scent of unwashed clothes and a six-pack of glass bottled beer that had broken open on our last jog out from town. The bottles had smashed into the toolbox after we'd ploughed through a stretch of six-foot rollers. I'd been driving the boat at the time, and I thought of that terrible feeling when the boat would reach the top of a crest- that long moment where time seemed to pause- before the bottom fell out of the world, and we went crashing into the next trough.

There were six inches between my forehead and Brian's bunk above mine, and I stared at the swirls in the wood for a while. A filtered shaft of moonlight lit the fo'c'sle, and I drifted in and out of sleep. In a dream, there was a Danielle, warm and naked lying against me, all the sexless days disappearing as I concentrated on rivulets of sweat that ran across the contours of her shoulders and back.

But when I woke back up, I had the image of Dave in my mind. His fat, oily neck and the folds of pasty white skin. The salt stained ball cap covering his sparse white hair, and the way he waddled on deck of the *Pacific Queen* because his midsection was so bloated. He'd been in my dreams ever since his heart attack. Ever since the joke had

started that I killed him by asking him to climb the stack for my new rain gear. He'd died early in the season, before he had taught any of his crewmembers knew how to drive the boat. And after he'd died (midway between Ketchikan and the fishing grounds), the crew had floated, captainless, and in a panic for miles, dropping anchor too far from the shore so that it never hit bottom, and instead drug behind them like a bum leg. We'd listened to it all play out over the radio like it was a program broadcasted to entertain us, instead of an actual thing that happened.

I sighed and reached for my socks and pants at my feet and rolled out of the bunk. I wouldn't be going back to sleep. My throat was dry, and I felt like a beer. I hadn't had a drink since I had gotten on the boat. My stomach muscles were visible. I'd lost weight but hadn't seen myself in a mirror since Montana. It was incredible to think that had been almost two months ago.

The analog clock on the wall of the wheelhouse read Five AM. It was time for the change of light set. Brian hadn't been to sleep that night, hadn't properly been to sleep in days it seemed, and I'd only gone to bed five hours before. I wondered what kind of mood he'd be in. I brushed my teeth and was putting on deodorant when the VHF crackled to life.

"Attention all mariners. Stand by for important message from U.S. Coast Guard, Ketchikan, Alaska." I walked to the radio and turned the volume up a few notches.

I watched Brian's outline on deck, bent over the stern and studying the end of our net.

“Attention all mariners, be on lookout for fishing vessel, *The Doxy*, thirty-two foot white and blue gillnetter out of Gig Harbor, Washington. Last seen Wednesday night fishing two point five miles southeast of Tree Point, Alaska near the Nakat Bay jackline. Repeat, *The Doxy* is a thirty-two foot white and blue gillnetter last seen fishing southeast of Tree Point, Alaska. Please report any information on missing vessel to Coast Guard channel eighteen. Over.”

I stared at the radio trying to comprehend the meaning. The message started to cycle over.

When I got on deck, Brian was already at work. The gibbous moon was fading but still high over the ridge of Canadian Rockies. The sky was star sprent and tendrils of fog drifted over the evergreen trees and enveloped Tree Point Lighthouse. The water lapped against the hull, and the hydraulics lines on the drum pulsed like arteries carrying their fluids through rubber hoses. I knew just what they looked like from the inside now. Brian had taught me how to fix a leak in one, and the calluses on my palms were still darkened from where the grease had worked its way in.

I put on my rain gear and walked to the starboard side of the drum. I tried to think how I'd say it, and then decided to just say it fast and natural. “Jake and Buster are missing.” I couldn't think of Jake's face, but I imagined his dog, a golden retriever named Buster, wagging his tail and running back and forth across deck. They usually fished a couple of sets over from us, and I would watch him through the binoculars. The dog was always on deck, even when Jake wasn't. A good lookout.

“Huh?” Brian didn’t look up from the net. He picked clumps of seaweed and small sticks from the net, and I helped.

“*The Doxy’s* gone missing.”

“Says who?”

“Coast Guard. I just heard it on the VHF.”

The sky was purple and blue in the east. It felt like day was coming so much later than just a few weeks ago, and it made me feel both sad and excited to think of going home. The days of the \$5000 catches were gone, but we were still making good money. The ten percent crew share I’d signed on at was now worth almost ten grand total. Brian had predicted I’d make five or six.

“He probably just cut out early with the closing today.”

I looked at Brian and didn’t think he believed what he’d said. The fishing on the outside was closed for a few days, and most guys went inland to work an open fishery on the weekends. You had to be lazy or in need of repair to not spend the weekend grinding inland. Everyone knew Jake was dumb, but he wasn’t lazy. His frenetic worship of the Lord was proof enough of that.

“I like the guy, but he doesn’t have a fucking clue what he’s doing. He’s corked the shit out of a Randy a few times, and he got us that one time. Maybe he just gave up on Nakat for the weekend. A guy’s gotta have some guts and the right teaching to fish the mouth of Nakat.”

“That’s where he went missing,” I said.

Brian didn’t say anything, and I could tell he was thinking it over.

The net came slowly over the stern, and finally the seaweed cleared and there were a few fish. They were no longer the vibrant silver of early summer but rotting and black and eggless. With jagged misshapen teeth, and chunks of missing flesh where sea lions had been gnawing at them, they were like mutant versions of their early summer selves. The net was full of surprises by this time in the season.

“They look about as good as I feel,” Brian said. “Goddamn sea lion bastards eating at them.” He grinned, and his teeth shown in the dim light.

There was a fish every few fathoms for the first hundred, and the boat bobbed in the three-foot rollers as I yawned and blinked sleep from my eyes.

The rain was just a drizzle now, and I started daydreaming of the first cup of coffee, jogging on the gear with the sun warming my face, the clouds receding back into the mountains until they cleared the sparkling inland fjords and disappeared back into Canada. But in my mind, I kept going back to Buster running the deck of *The Doxy*, and those mossy granite cliffs of Nakat Bay. They’d be hard to climb if a guy fell in.

I picked the net in a mechanic fashion, but before long the fish were coming over the rail in large clumps, and I jabbed my fish picker into the net trying to keep up with Brian. These fish were lively and small, mostly pink salmon, with spots on their tails and dumb vacant looks in their eyes. They were only thirty-five cents a pound, half the price of chums, and I was starting to hate them for being so cheap and so plentiful. I wanted to break apart their gill arches with my hand, step on them and watch them burst open. Punish them for making me work just as hard as three weeks ago but for half the money.

The net was slick with jellyfish slime, and their bulbous, membranous bodies came up with the fish and then broke apart in the meshes of the net and plopped on the deck like blobs of pink and purple snot.

Brian screamed out like he'd been burned by a hot iron, and slammed the drum to a stop.

“Motherfucker. Motherfucking fucker.” There was slime across all across his cheek and nose, and he shook his head from side to side. I could already imagine the welt on his face. They had a way of lingering. I'd been jellyfish stung across the eye so bad earlier in the season that I went blind for a day and continued to have blurriness and tearing for two more.

Brian cursed again, but then started the drum back up. He looked angry and in pain but said nothing else. *There's only so much time to feel sorry for yourself, or anyone else.* That was something Brian was always saying to me. I had taken it up like a mantra and chanted it to myself while on deck, setting it to the rhythm of a Clash song I liked and beating that rhythm into the deck as I threw fish into the holds.

We picked the fish from the net, but many were too small to get caught in the large meshes. They fell out and hit the deck hard, popping off like bleeding firecrackers at our feet and splashing the stinging jelly fish slime onto our pant legs before spasming out their last few moments of life in bloody half arcs all across the deck. A few other fish were like chunks of ice, large silvers and sockeyes, already in rigor mortis and heavy enough that they could bone bruise a toe if they hit right. The fish piled up and blocked the scuppers and turned the deck murky and russet colored, and pretty soon we were ankle deep in them.

“Goddamn,” Brian said. “There’s a metric fuck ton of em’ this morning.” His mood had already turned away from the news of *The Doxy*. Despite the pain, it was obvious the set would turn in good money. “You better go throw a few down before they start falling over the sides.” The boat rocked hard starboard and a few dozen fish smashed into the rail.

“Alright, Cap, I gotcha.”

I left the net and pulled the hatch covers off the holds. I rearranged the brailer bags, and then threw a few dozen fish in the port hold to even out the boat’s weight. I worked on my hands and knees, and each time I tossed one of the stiff fish into the hold, it echoed against the fiberglass sides like a stone down a well. My back was stiff, and my palms ached from grabbing fish by their thick tails, but even on my longest days on the boat my hands didn’t ache as bad as in the cannery. And here I could sleep out on deck during the night, watching the brightest stars I’d ever seen wheel across the sky.

I put the hatches back on and returned to helping Brian.

“How many did you put down?” he said.

“About a hundred.”

Brian stopped picking from the net and surveyed the rest of the deck. There must have been another hundred fish on deck and ten more in the couple fathoms of net between the drum and the stern. There was blood everywhere, even a little glistening in his sandy blond beard.

“At this rate, they just might sink us. It’s turning into a theatre of fucking war, man.” He smiled wide like a little kid, that smile that said the fishing was still good. How did he always end up in such a good mood? Maybe it was because he was the youngest

captain in the fleet. Maybe it just felt that good to have his own boat, to be making money on his own terms. One thing I'd come to learn: fishing was about money more than anything, and when we were making it, it was a great feeling. Pulling a fish from the net was like plucking a ten-dollar bill from thin air.

I smiled too and decided to play along. "Should I employ counter-insurgency measures, sir?"

"Naw, not unless the little bastards get up past the top of the scuppers again."

In another hour, we'd finished picking the last hundred fathoms. There must have been 400 fish in the set. I couldn't remember a set all season that had lasted longer or that had had more fish. I worked at throwing the fish down the holds and cleaning the deck. I whistled to myself the entire time. Brian had played the "Best of Michael Jackson" on the boat stereo the night before, and I had "Billie Jean" stuck in my head. Pretty soon he joined in and was singing the lyrics. He took a break from setting back the net in the water and started moon walking in his blood encrusted Xtra Tuffs, and I laughed. On our boat, we passed days with an iPod mix and old copies of the New Yorker Brian's girlfriend mailed us. I thought of sitting in old Randy's galley at the net float, gas station porno strewn on the dining table and a tape of Conway Twitty on a boom box. Things could have been much worse.

By the time Brian set the net back, the early morning fog and rain had cleared and it was turning into a bright and warm day. Maybe only sixty-five in the sun, but hot enough that the inside of my rain gear was already sticky and sour with the scent of fish guts and blood. I peeled off my rain jacket and pants and went inside.

I made a pot of coffee, and then poured a cup. The taste was rich and bitter and streamed down my throat. I felt that jolt of energy fighting back against the waves of tiredness, and it made me think of caffeine after a hangover. The way it had of cutting through the fog and making everything better, if temporarily.

What were Josh and Honza doing now? Waking to another morning in the bunkhouse, ready to scrape guts for twelve hours? This had turned out so much better than that. What if I'd never met Josh? Fred? Jeremy on the *Valerie J*? My fate had been sculpted by strangers and coincidences into a shape I could hardly have guessed when I left Albuquerque.

Brian sprayed the back deck and then changed from his rain gear. I walked to the open cabin door to ask if he wanted a cup, but then suddenly he came rushing at me and pushed me aside into the kitchen counter. He hopped into the fo'c'sle and returned with his rifle. Brian put the boat in gear, and the diesel engine roared to life. The engine strained as he rammed it through the gears, up to what must have been ten thousand RPMS for a short sprint along the fishing gear. We crashed through the rollers, and my stomach slammed into my throat. I bounced high as we hit each wave, and then I hit my head on the low ceiling, shattering the bare light bulb over the sink all over the galley floor. I cursed, rubbed my head, and Brian looked back for a moment. He fired out the port side for a minute or so, and then put the boat in neutral and climbed out the window.

"Get me more ammo," he shouted. "Worry about the light bulb later. We've got a couple of sea lions in the net."

I went down into the fo'c'sle and fumbled through the toolbox for more bullets, all the while muttering to myself.

“Every fucking time. Every fucking time, he does this. Sea lions, and he acts like their fucking killer sharks.” I talked to myself for a while to work down from the anger.

“All that gas and time just to save a few fish from getting eaten.”

The bullets were cool from being stored in the dark, small blunt things unlike the pointed .32 slug I’d bought in Montana and used to kill the deer. When I got home, I never wanted to touch a bullet again. I was sure of that.

The door of the head flew up as we hit another wave, and there were bullet casings in the toilet. I scanned the floor (an area of about two feet by three which doubled as a miniature shower) and there were five or six more shell casings. They were coming in from the small port side window, where Brian lay prone, his rifle over his shoulder. He’d stopped firing, and I walked back into the cabin and put the bullets on the captain’s chair.

I stared at the shattered glass on the floor. Fuck it. He can clean it up when he gets back in.

Brian stood on the port side of the bow and scanned the net for the offending sea lions. I hadn’t seen them. I could rarely see them, but Brian had a hawkish sense for these things. I walked over to the drawer where we stocked the canned foods, and pulled a small moleskin notebook from it. I looked over my last few entries, and then watched Brian as he leaned in the window for the extra ammo and reloaded. Brian walked back to the bow and stood.

There was a short burst on our other radio. “Mike, you got me on here.” It was Randy on *The Kimberly* - the voice was old and loud, a little slurred and deliberate like someone who carried too much weight in his face and neck.

I reached for the radio. “Yeah, Randy. I got you.” I watched Brian pacing the bow through the window, still searching the net.

“You hear this deal about Jake on *The Doxy*?”

“Yeah, we just got the transmission before our change of light. You wanna talk to Brian, you’ll have to wait. He’s massacring some sea lions.”

Randy chuckled loudly over the radio. “Yeah, I seen that. The fishing’s slow over here, and I been watching through my binoculars. Looks like you guys had a helluva change of light set, too, before those sea lions came around. You must have caught everything before they could get down to me.”

“We caught a couple,” I said. Brian had taught me never to reveal too much about the catch to other fishermen, even friends.

“Right, a couple. You guys fishing Nakat after the closure today?”

“Yeah, affirmative there, Randy. Brian thought we’d fish up by the mouth of the bay.”

“Shit,” he said. “Up there with the big boys. Well, tell Brian I want to come around and talk. I’m gonna leave the gear here and give it a good soak.”

“Right, Randy. I’ll tell him. See you in a few. Over.”

“Hey, uh wait.”

“Yeah.”

“A few of us are gonna meet on the *Gene S* tonight over by Cape Fox. Have a drink and say a prayer for Jake if you guys wanna anchor up.”

“Alright, I’ll let Brian know. Over.”

The Kimberly bobbed stern to stern with us, about fifty feet away. Randy stood on the back deck and ran the boat from the second throttle he had next to his drum. It was not the safest parley. I walked on deck and stood next to Brian who still had his rifle in hand.

“Ahoy there, boys. I hear you’re having some sea lion trouble.” Randy was shouting, but the day had turned clear and silent. It was the kind of day when, with the engine off, the eerie chatter of deckhands drifted over the water for a quarter mile.

“I think I scared them off,” Brian said.

“Yeah, just remember to be careful firing off the bow like that. I was doing that one time and damn near killed myself.”

“What happened?” Brian put the boat in reverse and backed a little closer to *The Kimberly* in the shifting seas.

“I was shooting at this little shit fucking seal that was swimming around my gear. Somewhere up near Juneau in the 80s. I had this brand new scoped rifle I brought up with me that season. God, she was gorgeous. I was popping shots off my hip, but then got down on my belly and lined one up through the scope. Only problem was that the scope had gotten off in the ride up that year, and so when I fired a shot it went about three inches lower than I meant. The bullet hit my anchor chain, ricocheted back, and nailed me smack dab in the middle of his forehead.” Randy chuckled his big man’s laugh like it was funny instead of horrific.

“I was stunned. I was pretty sure I’d killed myself. But then I walked back inside the cabin and saw the bullet had lodged between my skin and skull. I took a pocket knife and pried the bullet out, and then drove myself back to town for stitches.”

Brian and I stared at each other. Randy was no doubt a tough old guy, a former crabber in the Bering Sea and off the coast of Oregon, but he had a bunch of these near death stories. Stories where he hung out his truck door over a mountainside, or cut himself out of bite lines while forty foot waves crashed down on him, and it was hard to know what was bullshit and what wasn’t. They had started the first night I met him and Ben back in Craig six weeks before.

“No Coast Guard?” Brian said.

“Ah, shit, in those days they didn’t come out unless you were missing an arm, or turn up drowned.”

“Or, you have a heart attack?” I said.

Brian and Randy turned to me.

“Yeah, or you up and die like poor old Dave.” Randy took off his long-billed cap and wiped his big red forehead with the back of his hand. He had been good friends with Dave on the *Pacific Queen* and I was sorry I mentioned it. “What do you guys think of this whole *Doxy* thing?”

“I don’t know,” Brian said. “He better turn up soon, or one of us will have to talk to that big old wife of his.”

Randy laughed. “Maybe he just went back to town because he felt bad for missing church for our opening last Sunday.”

Brian laughed, and I laughed. “God damn, he’s not a bad guy, though. Corked the shit out of us during change of light a few weeks ago, and I ran his ass up and down on the radio for it. Then, when I saw him in Ketchikan later that week, he gave me a McDonalds gift certificate for twenty dollars and a hand written apology on the inside of a book.”

“What was the book?” Randy said.

“*You Can’t Be An Atheist Because God Doesn’t Believe in Them.*” Brian said

We all laughed. It was just the sort of book you could imagine Jake giving someone.

“Sonuvabitch means well. Just needs to cut out that God shit and figure out the fishing.” Randy spit out into the water. “All right guys, meet you tonight over on the *Pac Queen*?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” Brian said. “We’ll probably knock off early, maybe around sunset.”

We steamed to the off load point in the little bay inside Cape Fox. It was just after noon, and we were south of the lighthouse and around the bend from Nakat Bay. Brian had regretted the sea lion ordeal, and let me drive the boat as he swept the glass from the cabin floor. He took the wheel when finished, and in a few minutes we could see the *Pac Queen.*, bright and red and black and shining in the sunlight. There was a skull and crossbones painted on the bow like it was some sort of modern day pirate boat, but really, it was just an old crabber out of Seattle that doubled as a tender boat for

gillnetters in the summer. It must have been a little over a hundred feet long, and when we pulled alongside, starboard to port, it cast a huge shadow over us that made me feel like we'd be crushed by it.

It was still clear, and a couple of eagles sat perched on the tops of evergreens. The wind was blowing steadily, and the pine trees swayed hard. The replacement captain of the *Pac Queen* was a young guy named Gabe, and he greeted us by tossing over a line. I tied it to our stern line, and then caught the next line from one of their deckhands.

“How goes Blue Boots?” their deckhand, Paul, shouted at me.

When I'd left Klawock, I'd accidentally left my Xtra Tuffs in the bunkhouse and hadn't had the time to buy a new pair before I went out fishing with Brian. He'd had an extra pair buried in the middle hatch that we rarely used. They were cheap blue boots that went to mid-calf and looked like they were made for a child at play on the beach, and so I'd spent the first week of the season as “Blue Boots,” a bad nickname for someone trying to earn his spot. Brian, the deckhands on the other boats, the tender guys, and especially Dave, the obese and sour captain of the *Pac Queen*, had called me it. It hadn't taken long before I got tired of the nickname, and I so I'd put in an order with the processing plant for new boots and rain gear at the end of my first week fishing.

On a Saturday near the end of June, the gear had arrived. Dave had been the only one on deck at the time, and the gear was in a box on the top of a double stack of ten foot by twelve-foot plastic tubs. He'd cursed me, and then waddled over and climbed the stack to get my gear. I remembered him gasping for breath after he handed me the gear, and me pulling back after sweat from his hands dripped on to mine. He died in his bunk on the way back to town a few hours later.

“You know, I haven’t had those boots for over a month,” I said to Paul and tied the other line to the bow.

“Yeah, not since you quit the cannery.” He’d heard about what had happened in Klawock with Fred. The distance from Craig to Klawock wasn’t much and people talked in the bars all the time. He smiled a toothy grin, and the veins on his forearms were huge and wrapped in barbwire tattoos.

I looked at him. “At least I wasn’t the dipshit who dropped anchor two miles from shore.” He stared at me but didn’t say anything else.

Gabe ran the hydraulic crane and lifted the brailer bags from the holds one by one. Each one was near a thousand pounds, and it was a spectacle to watch a bag swing in the air forty feet over the deck, its miasmic juices draining to the bottom and spilling out in vile arcs.

Gabe hollered across deck as he worked. “Norm on *The Dog Catcher* says they found *The Doxy* crashed up into the rocks a couple miles east. No one on board.”

Brian’s eyes got wide. “Coast Guard show up yet?”

“They’re sending out a cutter, but it might be a couple hours yet. Who knows, as bad as shape as that boat of his way in, Jake might just have crashed it himself to collect on it.”

We left the *Pac Queen* with a check in hand, and Brian promised we'd return to their anchor point that night to share a cheers for Jake and *The Doxy*. There was another full day of fishing, and all the effort that entailed, beating back behind us and erased and forgotten by the warm ocean breeze and the forever of Alaskan blue sky, but there was no grace in the afternoon. The sense of accomplishment I usually felt after delivery was muted by the mystery of the crashed boat.

We spent the early afternoon fishing at the mouth of Nakat Bay. The current ran hard, and it flooded on every set. We had to pick the net every thirty minutes because it would be swept a half-mile inland in that time. It was difficult work for two to keep up with, and I thought about the struggle someone like Jake would have working a set by himself. Most one-man crews fished farther inland where the waters were calm and the fish less plentiful.

Between sets I didn't bother to change from my rain gear, but instead stayed on deck and studied the face of the rocks that walled off and channeled the fjord. There were clumps of trees with gnarly gray roots that grew out of the granite, clinging to it like they were fearful of being washed away.

Brian came on deck from the cabin and stood next to me. We both just stared out at the cliffs. An eagle glided down from one of the gnarled trees and floated across the shimmering blue surface of the water.

"Birds are supposed the souls of dead fishermen, you know."

"You think he crashed it on purpose?" I said.

"Guys leave boats out here all the time for one reason or another. He wouldn't be the first..."

“But you don’t figure that’s what happened?”

“I have a hard time believing it.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Let’s go back up in the bay. I need a nap before we meet back up with those tender boat assholes.”

I drove the boat out about an eighth of a mile from the net, pointed it straight at the middle, and then set it to autopilot. The bay was calm, and the net had been in the water for over an hour. Brian had been asleep most of that time. At that distance, I had about a minute to get on deck and piss before we ran over it over. It was a game I played sometimes when Brian napped, something to break the monotony. I needed any kind of distraction that afternoon.

There were boats every quarter mile with their nets stretch across the waterway as I pissed over the side of the boat. I held myself and looked at the fishscales on the hairs of my knuckles and saw them glitter in the light. It seemed like as the summer went on there were fishscales everywhere. In the bunks, on our boots, in the food. Under our fingernails and in our ear canals.

The boat was practically on top of the net now, and I zipped myself up and jogged back in the cabin. I took the wheel and turned it slightly towards the net so the prop wouldn’t get caught. I straightened it out and nodded to myself. Brian had taught me all of that and now it was like muscle memory.

I continued jogging the boat along the gear, and took the binoculars from behind the radar screen on the dash. Randy had the next set over from us, and he was combing the last fifty fathoms of his net. I could see each fish he picked: chum, chum, pink, chum, and the rest a mess of seaweed. When he was done, he set to work cleaning a few of his fish. Randy was unstable on deck. He didn't have a tray to cut the fish on, and he worked on his hands and knees. When he finished cleaning his fish, he went back inside and started the old wooden boat. I looked at the name on the boat and studied the scripted, careful lettering: *Kimberly*. It was Randy's wife's name. Had anyone thought to call Jake's wife?

I drove the boat back and forth along our net in low gear until the middle bunched and both ends hooked in on themselves and caught tree branches and seaweed. It was long past the time we should have picked it. Around the middle of the net there was a weird, glinting mass, and I looked through the binoculars again. It was unlike anything I'd seen in the net, and I stared at it for a good ten seconds, before I could tell it was a loaf of bread.

I shouted down to Brian in the fo'c'sle. "Hey, Cap, wake up. You gotta check this out."

"Is it about time to pick up?"

Brian climbed the stairs from the fo'c'sle and yawned and scratched his stomach. He stared out the port window at the net. "Wow, it really turned into a shit heap."

"Check out the middle," I said and handed him the binoculars.

He peered through them and chuckled. "Whole wheat or potato?"

Brian put his boots on slowly, and then we switched places, and he drove us to the north end of the net. I went on deck and leaned over the side and picked up the net near the buoy bag with the gaffe hook and attached it to the drum.

There were few fish in the net, but mostly it was just junk. The process was slow and my mind drifted. I broke apart sticks that came up in the net, sliding them free from the meshes and tossing them overboard. We got to the loaf of break, and I picked it out with the gaffe hook. I turned to throw it in our trash in the cabin when Brian spotted a dark, long mass in the net about ten fathoms out. It was encased in stems of olive brown seaweed, wrapped in the green meshes many times over. When it was halfway up the back of the boat, the hydraulics on the drum whirred in protest, and we leaned over and pulled it over the stern. It was heavy and my back burned with the weight. It took us twenty minutes to get it fully untangled, and the whole time we knew it was a dead dog. The tail came free first, and it was stiff like it was made of a heavy gauge of wire. A couple of half eaten fish fell out as we unwrapped the layers. When we got to the head, the left eye was open and staring out at us, but there was a hole in the head where the other should have been. There was fur and flesh torn out from around the right eye socket. Something had been at eating at it, and a raggedy mess of blood vessels was the only thing left in the gaping hole in its head. We both just stared at it. That place where an eye should have been. I was sick and felt bile in the back of my throat.

“Let’s put in on the middle hold,” Brian said.

I grabbed the front legs, and Brian grabbed the back. They were stiff and solid like the silvers and sockeyes we’d pulled up in the first set of the day. It was Jake’s dog.

There was no doubt. After we sat it on the hatch, I kicked it softly in the ribs, as if I thought it might suddenly hop up and be okay.

“We’ll finish picking the neck. Then, get the shovels from the lazarette.”

I nodded. I couldn’t say anything.

At dusk, we anchored up and rowed our skiff out to a break in the rocks where the muddy shore led up to the woods. We carried the dog back into the trees a ways, breathing hard and cursing the entire way because Buster was so big and water logged. A swarm of no-see-ums followed us the entire way, and we sat Buster in the tall grass as we dug a hole five or six feet deep in the soft dirt. The flies bit me on the face, on the arms, sucking at any piece of flesh and I slapped at them. They landed around the dog’s exposed eye socket and sucked on the bloody vessels until the area was just a buzzing baseball sized mass. I wanted to cry and stopped digging to beat at the dog’s face with my fist, trying to clear away the flies. Brian said nothing, and when I stopped pounding away at the dog’s head, there were just as many flies.

“Okay, help me pick him up,” Brian said.

We each chose an end and went to heave him in the hole when I stopped.

“Wait. Not yet,” I said.

We set Buster back down and I reached down and undid his collar, the chain links cool and rough against my hand. I fingered the engraved address on the small, metal plate attached to the collar and put it in my jean pocket.

We picked Buster back up, pouring sweat, and placed him in the grave, and then shoveled dirt on top, a proper burial.

“Let’s pray Jake is still out there,” Brian said.

And I nodded. But in my mind I thought of a man falling off his boat at the crest of a tall, frothing wave and then struggling to climb up the mossy cliffs around him. And I thought about a dog jumping over board, swimming out to help his friend, and then going under.

*

Starboard to port, the boats rocked in rough unison. I climbed the rail of our boat onto the *Pac Queen*. and then Brian tossed me my summer gear. First, a trash bag with my deck boots and ten pairs of salt and salmon encrusted sweat pants and socks and then my backpack. It had been a week since we buried Buster. The season had slowed enough that Brian was sending me home on the tender.

Brian reached up and handed me a check.

“Don’t blow it all in the bars,” he said and smiled.

“I won’t,” I said. “Actually, I’m not sure how much I can drink anymore.”

Brian’s eyebrows arced.

“How’s that?” he said.

“Well I’ve been sober a while now. It started about six weeks ago, involuntarily.”

I grinned.

He nodded and spit into the water.

“There’s a spot waiting for you next year if you’re interested,” he said. “Or this fall if you want to follow the fish north.”

“I might just take you up on that,” I said and shook his big, callused hand. Is that what my hand felt like now? When I touched a girl again would she comment on how rough it was? It was a good feeling.

“You don’t have to decide right now. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

“Yeah, and you’ve got to buy a new engine,” I said. The season had been a big surprise. We’d caught 140,000 pounds total, all at a good price. Buying a new engine had been a joke when I got on because Brian thought he’d never be able to afford it. Now it was just a matter of choosing the right one.

“Like buy a new motherfucking engine.” He grinned from ear to ear.

Gabe on the *Pac Queen* fired up the engine and water frothed in the small gap between the boats. It was as sunny and hot as it had been all summer, even though it was nearly mid-August and the leaves on the evergreens were already turning the color of fall. I was slipping away, back to another world and I was anxious.

“Good luck,” Brian said.

“Bye,” I said and then I untied the lines on the *Gene S* and he did the same on his boat and that was that.

I bought a flight back to Seattle, arriving on the sixteenth of August, two months to the day from when I’d spent the night on Josh’s floor in Great Falls.

It was a gray, steamy day and light rain fell. I stood at the gateway and watched the tourists, families and businessmen swarming the walkways, anxious because it had been so long since I'd been around that many people.

I took a bus from the airport to the south part of the city, fingering the engraving on Buster's dog collar, trying to think of what to say.

I put the collar back in my wallet and there was the check from Brian. I'd made ten thousand dollars on top of what I earned in the cannery. Incredible. On the "For" line of the check it read: *Gillnetter Robot/Deckhand*. Brian had more fishing ahead of him before he went home but it would be relaxed. A couple weeks of Silvers. Half days with no need for a deckhand and then he'd be back to Seattle.

It was almost Six PM, a long stream of cars emptying out of the city for the suburbs. Jake's house was in Renton, even though *The Doxy* was out of Gig Harbor, and I came to a yellow and blue bungalow with a carport and a yard full of toys, one a squeaky dog bone.

I walked up the porch and knocked on the door. My palms were sweaty, and I rubbed them together. Next to the door there was a sign: "So Solicitors – We Already Found Jesus And Don't Need Anything Else." I chuckled. There was no answer and I knocked again and still no answer. I took the collar from my wallet and put it in the open mailbox and then sat down on the porch and lit a cigarette.

I took my cell phone out and dialed home, waiting expectantly for my father's voice.