

Three Ways of the Saw

by Matt Mullins

I'm at the kitchen sink washing down pills when they bump up my driveway in a blue Toyota pick up, its bed eaten through with rust so bad I can see past the holes in the body to the frame. The driver, a big, middle-aged man with stubbly cheeks and a ball cap on, throws it into Park. He takes a drag on his cigarette then pulls it from between his lips. My stomach turns over with envy and regret. I think of how long it's been, and part of me rasps with the urge. Four years, eight months, and eleven days I've kept that unopened hard-pack of Marlboro Reds in my freezer. What difference would it make smoking one now?

The driver gets out and clangs the rusty door shut. He jets two gray streams through his nose, drops his cigarette onto my drive and grinds it out beneath his work boot. Then he does something I don't expect: he bends over and picks the butt up, tearing away the nub of burnt tobacco before shoving the filter into the back pocket of his dirty jeans. He starts up my walk, disappearing from the window frame. I hear the bell but don't move. Instead I watch the kid he's got with him rummage through the bed of the truck, lifting out gas cans and ropes and chainsaws.

Last week's storm brought the wet-heavy snow too early, weighing down the half-turned leaves, snapping limbs across the state. Now, after yesterday's rain, there's not even enough snow left on the ground to make a goddamn snowball. What's left are the ruined trees. My honey locust among them.

I want it all to just go away, but when the bell rings again I know there's no stopping this.

As soon as I open the door, I smell the cigarettes all over him. "Mr. Ashland," he says more than asks.

"You the service," I say.

"That's right, sir. J. W.'s Tree Service. I'm J. W. Good to meet you."

"Here for my honey locust," I say.

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"Yes sir. If you'll just sign here, please." He hands me the bid sheet on a clipboard, pointing to the blank line that needs my name. I don't even bother to check the price to make sure it's what he and Beverly agreed to when he came by a few days after the storm.

"We'll have that mess out of here in no time, sir."

"I planted that mess over thirty years ago," I say, forcing myself to look away from my mangled tree. Right down at the pack of Camels in the breast pocket of his work shirt. I was sixty-one last time I smoked. Almost five years since they told me they were taking a lung. All these years short of breath, and there still isn't a day I don't think about having one.

"It's a shame, sir. Beautiful tree."

I stand in the open doorway and watch him head off down the walk to where the kid is crouched pouring gasoline into one of the chainsaws. The kid looks to be in the far end of high school, maybe eighteen, and he's concentrating hard on what he's doing, like there's more than a stain riding on his not spilling the gas onto my driveway. He screws the cap down, slides the plastic sheath off the chain and hands the saw to J. W. who eyes along the chain. Satisfied, J. W. pumps the fuel bulb, pulls the choke then sets the saw down, putting his foot through the trigger guard as he pulls at the starter cord. The saw sputters until the motor kicks in and blue smoke rises all around him. He stands and revs it, the pitch winding higher and higher into a jagged whine before he finally eases off the trigger and lets the thing fall into an idle.

For days I've been trying not to look at my honey locust a few yards away in the center of the front lawn, but I have to look now. Trunk shattered at the main crotch about twenty feet up, most of the crown with its barely turned leaves is hanging down like a woman bending forward to comb out her long hair. From what Beverly says, it's the same scene all over town.

But today we're near sixty degrees. The sun's shining. I got squirrels and birds hopping across my lawn. More like late April than late October. Staring up into the empty, blue sky it's hard to believe that the sick snap and groan of that honey locust pulled

Beverly and me out of bed and onto the living room couch where we looked through the picture window at the broken branches piling up with falling snow.

J. W. shuts off the saw, sets it on the driveway and unzips the army duffel. He hands hard hats, a climbing harness, leg spikes, and coils of rope to the kid who arranges them side-by-side on the lawn. My chest begins to feel tight, tighter than usual, and I decide I better go back inside.

By the time I reach the bathroom cabinet, I'm wheezing hard. I see my boney face in the cabinet mirror, hairless and grey, and I think about the way all things eventually come apart. Behind that face are my pills—Elavil, M.S. Contin. Pills with names like the ships I sailed on in the Navy. Pills I sometimes take and sometimes kiss and wash down the kitchen sink one at a time, depending on the fuel level in my hope-tank. There's a little container of dental floss next to the sink. I pick it up, snap off a length and start in. Dying with Dignity, a book I charged out from the library is on top of the toilet tank. I don't recall ever reading it while sitting there, but I must have brought it in at some point. I don't get through more than a handful of teeth when the ridiculousness of the situation—a dying man flossing while staring at the cover of a death-book he's left on top of the crapper—gives me one of those sad-funny well ain't life a bitch moments I'm long since sick of.

I grab the bottle of oxycontin and go to the picture window where I can look out across the front porch at my mangled honey locust. Used to be that almost every day when I came home from the paper mill I'd sit on the porch swing for a while and watch its thorny, green branches sway in the wind or its snow-covered skeleton hunkering down beneath the flat winter sky. Trimming the thorns off the trunk and otherwise keeping an eye on it had been my habit ever since I planted it thirty-three years ago to grow into blocking out the transformer and telephone pole behind. But there was more to it than fixing a bad view. There is what we decide to take and what we can give back. There is the grind of the mill and the sulfur stink of stripped logs being processed down to slurry, and there are the

trees I've planted on this deep lot, one for each year here, the first of them all now halved and dying in the middle of my front lawn.

I hear a chainsaw's angry buzzing, but smaller this time, higher pitched. J.W. comes into view with the sixteen-incher to take the tops off the hanging half of the crown so the tree will drop right after they face and back cut the trunk. I know my way around a chainsaw, around trees. I should be doing this myself, even though I'm dying. Beverly understands, which is why she put the call in to the tree service before I was even out of bed the morning after the snowstorm. Part of me wants to go out there and tell them to just cut it along the split and tar the half that's left. It could live. Stranger things have happened. And if it did? Like Beverly would want to stare out at the tar-black half of my honey locust for the rest of her days.

J. W. starts going at those mangled limbs, the pitch of the saw changing when it bites wood. I'm forgetting to watch my breathing now, and suddenly it feels like someone's shoved their hands up inside my chest, wrapped them around my one lung and begun wringing. It's time to drop the shade on all this, which I do before going to sit on the couch with my pills. There's so much we'd like to avoid. It reminds me of my last visit to the Oncologist's office. "I'm sorry," Dr. Greenspan had said, "We've done everything possible." He looked truly torn up, like he'd betrayed me, and I think I felt worse for him than for myself. I'm sorry. Imagine having to begin telling someone they're dying with the same two words you'd use to apologize to a stranger you bumped into on the street.

The saw cuts off, the silence after filling a space of its own, and I remember something I read in a Discover magazine a few months ago about how matter can never be destroyed, only changed. If this is true it means the whole universe already contains everything that ever was or will be. Which, I suppose, makes us all part of one big thing, or at least all related, all individual yet connected, me and Beverly and Catherine the Great and Nixon and Gandhi and Hitler and Jesus and every frog and tree and pile of dog shit and rubber band and piece of paper ever made. Beverly says this is an ugly and

Godless way of thinking, she sure as hell isn't related to any Hitler or dog do or rubber band. "Honey," I told her, "Don't you see that means I always was and always will be part of you?"

To which she said, "You're a jackass to think you could be anything but always a part of me."

"This shit's thorny as hell." The kid's voice drifts in through the open window. "What's he want done with it?"

Once I work up the energy I suppose I'll have to go out there and tell them.

The night of the storm when Beverly and I sat in the dark on the couch looking out at the locust, we weren't talking about it, but we were both thinking the same thing: that tree is done. Like me. All through my illness, she's always tried to put the brave face on things. A transplant. The latest clinical trials. Ever hopeful. But her hope became resignation in time.

"I liked to imagine you sitting out there in the shade reading your paperbacks after I'm gone," I said.

Her eyes glistened in the blue-white darkness, but she didn't cry. Her voice held, clear and soft as she told me, "So did I."

* * *

J. W. cranks up the little Husky and waves me over to the mess of branches hanging down off the totally fucked-up tree. "Let's do 'er," he shouts over the idling motor. "Right on," I say, springing up with the ropes over my shoulder and his harness and leg-spikes in my hands. We've already cut and humped probably two cords of oak this morning, but the last thing I want is him thinking I'm tired or lazy, because I need this job—the best one I've ever had, way better than driving pizzas or working a gas station register or greasing through shifts in a fast food uniform like most of my friends do. We've been busting ass with all this shit the storm left behind, and I want him seeing how I hold up my end. Not too many guys my age luck onto a crew like this one. And today, with GL and Danimal split off on their own to handle the extra work, J.W.'s eye is on me, and that means the better I do, the sooner I get to climb and use the saws.

I set the gear down on the far side of the tree and walk over to watch J. W. topping the smaller branches. He works the saw up from the bottom if a branch is touching the ground, and down from the top if it hangs without pressure.

"So you don't pinch the chain," he shouts over the whine.

"I know," I shout back, "You've shown me."

After he's sawed all the tops from the hanging limbs, it's my turn to pull brush mule.

"This shit's thorny as hell. What's he want done with it?" I ask, thinking he probably wants it at the curb for city pick-up, an easy haul twenty feet away.

"Drag the branches up there, back into the scrub," J. W. points at the wooded hill next to the house where I can see a dirt trail leading to a tangled thicket of long-dead cuttings. "Better put on your gloves."

"Will do," I say, turning my back to him and keeping my "buncha goddamn fucking bullshit" under the idle of his saw as I pull on my gloves, grab up the thickest of the thorny limbs by their cut ends and start to drag them away.

By the last load I'm stripped to my dirt-smeared T-shirt, sweat rolling down my scratched and bloody arms as I slip my way back and forth on the slick mud-path. I do feel like a goddamn mule, grunting, ripping these long branches through the tight spaces between trees, stepping over and through what I've already dragged to set what I'm dragging now on top of the pile I've made. I stop to catch my breath after the last of it. Down the hill, I can see J. W. standing on the porch drinking a cup of coffee, it looks like, and talking to the homeowner, some old guy, who's like eight-hundred and coughing into his fist now and again. I take my work gloves off, tuck them into the back pocket of my jeans and head down there.

"First one I ever planted," the old man says, and J.W. nods in sympathy like we're at somebody's funeral.

Then it's an uncomfortable silence and they're looking at me standing there sweating underneath my grimy baseball hat. I feel drops tickling my nose and wipe my forearm across my face. My

muscles got the serious burn going, but I can tell I've still got power to give; it's no worse than two-a-days in pads, and I feel like telling J.W. let's hit it and bang this job out so we can get on to the next client. Because that's what getting paid by the job means—harder you work, more you make an hour. Except this is J. W.'s Tree Service, not Donny's Tree Service, so we do it his way. For now.

"Can I get you something to drink, son," the old man says, "Coffee? Water?" and I think, damn, if I really was his son I wouldn't be worried about a drink, I'd be worried about having to bury his ass. His pupils are blasted like he's on some serious shit. He's got a thin, white, stubbly head of cut cornfield hair, grey, liver-spotted skin, and he's breathing in these short little pants as if he'd been going up and down that hill with me. For a second I think maybe it's my own quick breathing that's got him going, so I make an effort to slow mine down. I suck in a nose-full of the crisp fall air and the whole world smells turned over, new and wet, full of those smells I love, the gas and oil and sharp tang of fresh sawdust that follows us everywhere.

"I'm fine, sir," I say, "Thank you."

"Donny, this is Mr. Ashland," J. W. says, "I just found out he used to work with my dad over at the mill."

"We're all connected," the old man says, looking at me in this spacey way like there's some kind of cosmic magic shit in the idea that he happened to work with Grandpa Joe back when the mill employed half the goddamn town.

"Yes, sir," I say.

"Donny's my half-sister's kid," J. W. says, "Guess you could say he's my apprentice. Just graduated high school last June."

"Got your whole life ahead of you, son," the old man says.

"Yes, sir," I say thinking I'd sure as hell like to get on with it instead of standing here fucking around.

"I'm teaching him the way of the saw," J. W. says, "Trying to give him a real education before he decides to go off to college and learn to be a smartass."

"Measure twice. Cut once," the old man tells me, "That's the way

of the saw. You can apply that to anything from your girl to your job."

It's the same old shit. Everybody thinking I need their advice on how to live just because they were once eighteen.

The old man glances over at the totally fucked-up tree we've half cut down and hesitates, "Do you have any tree tar?" he asks.

J. W. starts to get a little nervous, "Well sir, realistically, I don't think there's any way we can...I mean, your wife said she wanted us to..."

"I know. I know. Forget it," the old man starts to turn away, "I guess I better get out of your way."

"I'm sorry sir," J. W. says, "Really."

"Nice to meet you, sir," I say, and the old man nods and cuts us off with a wave as he turns to go inside.

J. W. drains his coffee cup and sets it down. "Let's get this over with," he says, almost like he's mad about it, and I wonder if I did something to piss him off.

We go over to the tree where I've left the spurs and climbing harness. J. W. steps through the leg holes of the harness before buckling it on around his waist and between his legs. Then he steps into one of the spurs and cinches up the leather straps, winding the leather around the metal spike running along the inside of his shin before buckling it tight. He does the same with the other. I hand him one end of the coil of rope which he loops through the `beaner hanging off the harness belt. He looks the tree up and down, steps to it and hugs the trunk. He raises one leg and chucks the spur in, then straightens himself up on that leg and digs in with the other. Holding on by one arm and the spurs, he works the flip-line open with his free hand and slips it around the trunk to snap it into the clip on the other side of his belt. "Watch for tangles," he says to me, meaning the rope hanging down from his waist to the ground coil. Then he's climbing, working the spurs and flip-line together until he's way up at the tree's broken crotch.

"Send the little Husky," he says. I grab his rope just above the ground-coil and put the two owl eyes in it then fold them inward,

toward each other, to make the butterfly hitch in a single line just like he showed me. I wrap the loop around the body of the smaller Husquevarna chainsaw and make it tight. "All you," I call up to him

He reels the saw in, frees it from the rope, starts it in one pull then begins cutting top down on the shattered base of the hanging fork we've already topped. Sawdust floats down on me, and I step back. We keep this pace we'll knock out one, maybe even two more jobs today. That's a hundred and fifty bucks at least I'll be taking home for eight hours work, almost six hundred for the week. More than enough to start saving for my own chainsaw; more than enough to buy beer and gas the old 'Stang so Carol Anne and I can go to the bonfire at the lake tonight and work toward that promise she's been giving me in installments, as the two of us like to say.

J. W. finally cuts most the way through the limb, and it creaks like an old door as it slowly falls, peeling a layer of bark away from the trunk. He turns the saw off, hooks it by the handle to the 'beaner on his harness then loops the long rope around the tree's good fork, putting a running bowline on it. He shakes the rope out for me, and I walk it away from the base of the tree to keep it free of his legs as he flip-lines and spurs his way down.

"Well," he says once he's unhooked and standing next to me, "Looks like we can put the face-cut in right there and get it to lie down straight across the driveway."

I'm already starting to walk the guide rope across the asphalt. In my head we've got this wood cut and tossed up that hill or to the curb or wherever the old man wants it.

"Relax," J. W. says climbing out of the harness and spurs, "Let's take five." I notice he's short of breath and sweating pretty hard, and I realize he hasn't been looking too good lately, like maybe he's got a bug or something. He stretches his arms and back as he walks over to the cooler to get a Gatorade.

"You're the boss," I say, letting the rope go, but part of me grinds. J. W.'s pissed about something; he's slowing us up on purpose, and I have no idea why.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

"Nah, there's nothing wrong." He opens the tailgate and sits down with his Gatorade. "Let's just relax a minute. This job isn't all about cut it down and drag it off, you know. Have a seat."

"That's alright," I say, "I don't wanna cramp up on the other jobs."

"Have it how you like," he says. He gets his pack of smokes from his shirt pocket, shakes one out and puts it to his lips, then he takes it away without lighting up and sits there holding the thing, looking at it like he's reading a thermometer.

"Mind if I bum one?" I ask.

He snaps back from wherever he's gone and eyes me up and down like I'm some dead tree, some snag, he's about to take out.

"Nasty habit," he says, and he holds out the smoke to me.

"That's why I do it," I say, grinning around the cigarette, "Got a light?"

"When you start smoking?" He asks.

I shrug.

"Your mom know you smoke?"

I shake my head no and take the lighter from him. I fire up the Camel, suck in a hard drag and hand the lighter back. The smoke tastes good. Carol Anne's already got me nearly hooked on her Winston Lights.

"There's a lot my mom doesn't know about me," I say.

Which is why I'm getting my own place. Why I want to finish this job and get on. Because I got things to do and bills to pay.

"Well, damn, if you ain't the big man." J. W. shakes a smoke from the pack for himself. "You oughta relax, Donny," he says, "You got a whole life to get through."

I smile and nod. What he doesn't know is that I'm already roaring down a dirt road toward the life he's talking about. I've got Carol Anne smashed up against me on the bench seat, her hand clamped on my thigh in a mix of terror and joy. I've got a smoke between the fingers of my one hand on the wheel, and the arm thrown across her shoulders ends with a beer in my fist. The radio is loud, I mean fucking LOUD, and we're laughing, screaming every time I top a hill

because it seems like, fast as we're moving, we just might launch ourselves right out of here.

* * *

Goddamn kid is a good kid, but he's all crash and burn. These trees have a life he still hasn't learned to feel. And he wants to climb. Wants to work the saws. He's got to learn to know the tree before he can spur up, or that tree will sure as shit throw him down. He has to let the tree to show him where to cut, or that tree might make the saw take a finger, or his hand. He rolls his eyes when I try to tell him, acts like I'm talking some new age bullshit. If he didn't have pussy on the brain he'd listen when I say an arborist isn't about cut it up and pay me. An arborist is a surgeon, a healer, someone who cuts out what's dead or grown wrong so the rest can survive, flourish even. Sometimes the kid seems to get it. Sometimes, like today, like any Friday, it's nothing to him but a means to an end. A paycheck.

I stub out my smoke on the tailgate, shred what's left of the tobacco and stuff the butt in my pocket.

"Okay, Donny, let's do it," I tell him, and he walks the rope over to the other side of the driveway where he'll stand and pull once I put the back-cut in and the tree begins to lean. Usually I love this job, cutting away dead limbs and crossed branches and shaping a canopy away from rooftops and power lines, but this is just too much. Beverly told me when I did the bid that Mr. Ashland doesn't have much time, and she needed get this handled right away because she doesn't want him staring out their front window at the wreckage of something he'd loved for so long. As if staring at the stump and the telephone pole behind it will be any better for him. The whole time she's telling me this, I can see some little girl behind her in the living room waiting on her accordion lesson, waiting to learn "Blow the Man Down" or "Greensleeves." Because that's what life does, it goes right on having accordion lessons in spite of us, and that's how Beverly keeps it together in the face of it all: she teaches the accordion to little kids and tries not to think about living without her husband. I charged her half of what I usually would, but she didn't

even read the bid sheet—she would have paid whatever I asked. While she was signing I noticed all the school pictures and wedding pictures and baby pictures on the mantle behind her. They probably had sunny-day picnics with their kids and their grandkids horsing around in this yard under the shade of that tree, those sweet smelling clusters of honey locust flowers falling down around them like in some movie or a dream. Now the heart of that tree's been ripped open to the pulp and there's no saving it.

I crank up the Husky 450 and put in the face-cut, careful about the angle so the tree will lay itself down along the line I visualize.

"You ready," I shout over to Donny who looks to have his mind on what he'll be doing tonight with that girl instead of on what he's doing right now.

"Get your head out," I say, and he sets his mouth and nods, tightens his grip on the rope.

I'm three-quarters through the back-cut when the tree begins to lean wrong, falling toward my truck in slo-motion, and I already see the bed crushed when Donny heaves on the guide-rope, barely managing to swing the trunk just past the trailer hitch so it's only branches scratching the truck and no real weight hitting the bed.

"Goddamn, Donny" I shout, cutting off the saw and running over. I've got to keep down the urge to smack him upside his head and knock off his hard hat.

"What happened? Weren't you pulling?" Then I notice he's just as upset as I am, and suddenly I'm not sure if it was his lack of pulling or my bad face cut that made the tree fall the way it did.

"Hell yes, I was pulling," he says, "I was pulling my fucking ass off to keep it away from the bed. Why'd you face-cut like that? Why didn't you move the truck?"

I'm ready to tell him to shut his punk mouth because if fourteen years of tree work has taught me anything it's how to make a tree lie down where I want. Then I realize it could have been both our fault. Or neither. Trees will just fall their own way sometimes, no matter how much you know or how careful you are.

"Damn it, Donny. You got to pull harder," and I leave it at that,

though I know he's right about how I just should've moved the truck in the first place. I look over my shoulder to check if Mr. Ashland has seen what's going on, but the picture window shade is down, and the house looks still and empty like he's already left us.

We start to section up the trunk and limbs, both of us catching ourselves now and then on the thorns. I let Donny work the little Husky, partly because I feel guilty for yelling at him, and partly because it's time he learns. He does good with the saw, uses it just like I showed him, as an extension of the line of his arm. Once we've finished, he grabs some of the choice cuts and starts setting them in the bed.

"Take those out," I tell him.

"Why?"

"Because I said so is why," and I can see him bristle, but I don't care. Even if I told him, he wouldn't understand the reasons why every single stick of it should stay here.

"Aren't GL and Danimal coming with the trailer? Don't you want the wood for the lot?"

"GL and Danimal got other things to do with the trailer," I say. "We're stacking this wood near the side door for Mr. Ashland. So get it out of the bed and don't fuck-up his lawn starting the stack."

"Fine. Whatever," he says, taking the wood back out and setting it on the grass near the driveway. "You don't need to ream me out for it. I was just trying to score a little wood for the bonfire at the lake tonight. I didn't think you'd mind."

"Green wood don't do shit but hiss and smoke," I say

"Well, since when do we stack people's wood for them."

"Since right now, goddammit."

He lets out a groan to make sure I know he's pissed but still gathers up a big armload of logs and starts toward the side of the house. He is a strong kid, already bigger than a lot of men, and still without his full growth. He could become one mean, dangerous bastard if someone doesn't keep an eye on him. Monica, his mother, has already sensed our old man's dark streak in him, and I owe it to her to do what I can. I shouldn't have snapped at him the way I did.

Doesn't teach him much of anything worth learning.

It's three by time we've got all the honey locust stacked, the lawn around the stump raked, and the sawdust swept off the driveway and walk. I don't bother knocking to tell Mr. Ashland we're through; if he's resting, he doesn't need to be disturbed, and Beverly and me have already discussed the check I'll be getting in the mail. So I just pull the carbon off the paperwork, fold it up, and stick it in the mailbox mounted next to the front door of the house.

Donny's already in my truck waiting when I come down the walk. I can tell through the windshield that he's searching my eyes, trying to see if I'm still pissed at him or if I'm just tired. Well, I am tired, all the time lately, and irritable, and this weird itch in my throat makes me think I should go see a doctor even though I don't want to. Maybe I'm just getting old. Only thirty-three, and I can't climb and carry quite like I used to, though I've learned some little thing with each tree I've taken down. Each tree that is so much more than a tree if you take the time to understand what you're dealing with and why.

"That's all for today," I say as I get in and slam the door, "Let's knock off."

"Knock off?" Donny doesn't try to hide the disappointment in his voice. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I say, "And you'll be getting your pay in cash today so quit your bitching."

"I wasn't bitching."

I take a smoke out and light it, thumb without looking over to the stump I've cut nearly level with the ground. "Donny, what kind of tree was that we just took out?"

"I don't know. A linden?"

"A honey locust, Donny. Some of the hardest wood there is next to Ebony. Tree like that can live a hundred and fifty years or more, see generations of people come and go unless some storm or sickness takes it down."

"Not this one."

His smartass shit nearly makes me snap, but I can't blame him.

He doesn't realize anything more than he's sore and swiping back at me. I take a deep breath, calm myself. I don't want to drop the ball this time.

"That's not the point," I say. "Point is you need to learn the difference between the trees, Donny. It's important to know the differences when most people see things as the same."

"Okay," he says, flatly, "I'll get to work on that," and I decide to take what he says in a good way.

"Can I bum another smoke?"

I turn the engine over, toss my pack into his lap, "From now on you start buying your own."

I back out of the driveway and pull onto the street in front of Mr. Ashland's house. Before I drop it into Drive, I look across Donny at the pale blue ranch. Mr. Ashland is there at the stump, down on one knee, an unlit cigarette between his lips. He's running his fingers lightly over my cut, following the rings in a slow circle. I imagine he's considering time. All that has passed. How much he has left. There is the honey locust wood stacked against the side of his house. A year, at least, before it will be dry enough to burn, and I doubt he even has that long. Already, I can feel the absence of my half-nephew next to me. He's gone, off in his mind thinking about a future of drinking cheap beer with his buddies and their girlfriends beside a hissing, smoky bonfire at the lake. I consider tapping the horn to get Mr. Ashland's attention so I can wave goodbye, but I don't because he lifts his head just then as if called. He's looking right at me, though I can tell it isn't really me he's looking at. It's something else, something that makes him smile. And that's what he's doing as I smile back and drive away: smiling a grim smile, his fingers still circling and working their way toward the center of that tree's severed life where he will end by touching the beginning.

