

Land of Our Fathers

by Shawn Faulkner

He called me one Friday when I was a kid and told me he wanted to go trout fishing. He had dreamt that I was a worm or a fly -- he couldn't remember which -- but he was sure I would bring good luck to the stream. The next morning, before grandma awoke, I wrapped two pieces of pizza in newspaper, grabbed my spinning rod from the storage shed and set out along the gravel road to his trailer. Just past Cutler Creek, I turned onto a path worn through the prairie grass, eased through a barbed-wire fence, crossed a cow grating and sprinted up the hill to the ridgeline, where his trailer sat on cinderblocks. I flung the door open and stumbled into a room littered with naked bodies tangled in sheets. The bodies never moved, even when sunlight coming through the door fell across them. I stepped among the arms and legs and nudged the old man with my foot. His head snapped up from the carpet. He smiled when he recognized me.

"Sorry, kid," he said. "I had a new dream. You were an eagle, or maybe it was a hawk. I can't remember which, but it was certainly bad luck."

Then, just as quickly as he had awoken, he put his head back on the dirty carpet and fell asleep. I sat at a card table in the corner and ate the pizza. After finishing the last slice, I walked among the motionless bodies. When I was satisfied that none of them would wake up, I emptied the pockets of their blue jeans before walking home.

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He once told me that luck was like water. It was everywhere, he said, and to change your fortune all you had to do was drink it down into your gut. He would pull a blade of grass from the ground and hold it before my eyes and tell me that the great rhythms of the universe -- the eternal rise and fall of tides and the changing of seasons and the birth and death of love -- were all contained in that

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one piece of grass. He talked often of received visions and of hidden meanings that only he could understand. Then he shot himself in the face with a shotgun, and any luck I had bled out onto the trailer floor.

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Before stretching his long arm out and placing the necessary amount of pressure on the trigger, he had been the tallest guy around, and the rough ladies he found in dark taverns could not resist him. He always had one or two with him, and they, like him, were usually dirty and stinking of liquor. When I did see him showered and in clean clothes, I knew he had uncovered money and was headed for Main Street, and I knew that I would spend the next morning standing beside the bleachers at school, listening to details of his arrest from the sheriff's son.

As I grew older, I would walk in the evenings to his trailer, where I would find him sitting in the doorway with his shirt off, watching the sun set over the valley, his legs dangling in grass where front steps should have been. I asked him once why he had never hammered steps together. He told me their absence kept the drunken women at bay, that even he needed rest. He was the kind of guy that would make you smile even when you did not want to. He would pick at a guitar held together with electrician's tape and drink whiskey from a silver flask with his initials inlaid in brass. He had purchased the flask in Cheyenne before I was born, and he said the flask was for the most part responsible for my birth. He did not mean it in a bad way.

He loved Willie Nelson and would sing that line about picking up hookers instead of a pen over and over. When we did speak our words drifted into the empty hills like smoke from a fire, seldom possessing the gravity to find a home. Grandma wanted me home early, and I knew he would be itching for his booze and whores, so I would leave when darkness came. One evening as I stood to go, he took my hand and held it against his chest. Deer moved along the gravel road at the base of the hill, and I thought he was holding me so they would not spook, but after the last deer had bounded up the

ridge, and I had started to leave, he pulled me against him and kissed my cheek.

The next day I found his body. The school bus dropped me off at the base of the hill, and I had made it halfway up the ridge before noticing his bare feet hanging from the open door. I dropped my books and ran. He was on his back inside the trailer. The shotgun had landed several yards down the slope in a thicket of thorns and purple wildflowers. I stood beside the open door, staring at the corpse.

Wind tore along the ridge in a sudden burst, bending patches of prairie grass until they resembled pagans worshipping their god. Frayed fabric on the cuff of his jeans trembled, and I remember thinking how strange it was that something, anything, on a dead man would move. I couldn't stand the thought of the cops with their pointless questions and knowing smirks, so I left him there, although I did pause to shove his flask, which sat on the floor beside him, into my back pocket. When the police called the next day, I rode with grandma to the morgue to identify the body. She was a tough woman. She did not cry. I never bothered to ask who had found the body.

* * *

I always figured I would end up like him. Everyone I knew ended up like their father. To tell you the truth, I had no burning desire to end up any other way. I floated along like all my buddies. We drank beer and smoked pot in deserted houses that were supposed to be haunted and beneath trestles that supported great steel locomotives that screamed through our great empty land. I managed to graduate and walk across the stage with the rest of my class. The principle was a big bastard with hair combed across his bald head, and he squeezed my hand as hard as he could when he gave me my diploma. I never felt that was right, but I got on with life. I moved into my own trailer and found work at a gas station that had once been a farmer's cooperative. The guy who owned the place had stuck two pumps in the middle of a gravel parking lot where ranchers used to load feed. Business is slow most of the year, so I

don't do much work.

The day the new doctor arrived in town, I was struck by an unexpected and rare burst of energy. I had swept out the entire store and was organizing the stockroom when I heard the brass bell on the door clatter. I stepped from behind a pile of boxes and was run into by the doctor's wife. She bounced off of me and veered into a rack of potato chips.

"Excuse me," she said after regaining her balance. Her eyes were bloodshot. "I need water."

"The last cooler," I said.

She nodded but did not move. The radio was playing a lonely country number. The sun shone through the glass windows in front, making the room warm.

"I was sweeping," I said.

"Just water."

"Last cooler."

She walked down the aisle. Her skin was tanned and freckled by the sun, her dark hair burned through with streaks of auburn. The denim skirt she wore made her long legs look even longer. I moved behind the counter. She returned with a bottle of water. I scanned it. She fumbled for money.

She took her change and looked me in the eye. "Do you need help?"

"You have no idea."

"Because that's why we're here. To help people like you."

"You're the new doctors."

"He is."

"That's what I meant."

"He loves the poor."

"I hate them."

"Come see us," she said and walked to the door. "You'll make him happy."

I watched her walk across the parking lot. The doctor stood beside a Suburban with three other guys who looked more or less like him. He was a big fellow, one of those squared-off handsome

types that look like a college quarterback, the type of guy that is easy to dislike from the start. His wife made a wide arc around them all. The doctor said something but she ignored him. There was a kid in a car seat in the back. She sat beside him and slammed the door. The doctor turned and let loose with an enthusiastic wave. His three buddies waved. I waved back.

* * *

I closed the station early and drove to Coop's house. Coop lives in the wrong part of town, directly across the street from a ratty community health center where young doctors come to pay off student loans. I knew the center well, since every doctor I had visited over my life practiced there. I had watched the doctors rotate through, and I learned to recognize them immediately. They were optimistic and cheerful at first, but would grow increasingly dour as time passed and their student loans shrank, and they would rush from town the moment their commitments were over.

Coop wheeled a cooler of beer onto the front porch and we started drinking. In an act of solidarity with the rest of the neighborhood, Coop has let his house go to hell. The foundation in the front corner has crumbled, and the entire structure lists to that side. Despite the condition of the house, or perhaps because of it, Coop's porch is perfect for drinking, and we got pretty well in to it that afternoon. We put our feet up on the handrail and created a game to see who could toss the most empty beer cans into a circle of dirt in the yard. I maintained a one can lead throughout the afternoon. We missed most of the time. Aluminum cans were scattered like leaves across the grass.

"You won't believe the wife," I said at one point.

"Nice?" Coop asked.

"Understatement."

An hour later the door opened and they walked out, blinking against the sun.

"My God," Coop said and dropped his feet from the railing to the porch. "Would you look at that?"

The doctor's wife trailed her husband and his friends. When she

reached the Suburban, she pulled her hair behind an ear with a graceful movement of one hand and yanked the car door open with the other. Even from across the street, I could see the diamond on her finger flash in the sun.

"My God," Coop said again and bent forward beside me. She stood for a moment beside the car, staring up at the hills. "She don't look happy, does she?" Coop asked.

"The wives never do," I answered.

I chucked a can all the way out to the sidewalk, where it clanked against the pavement and kicked into the street. The doctor smiled and gave an exaggerated wave. Coop held his hand up then let it fall. The wife ignored us.

"My God," Coop said for the final time.

They pulled from the parking lot, and we continued to drink.

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We finished the last two cans at dusk and made our way to Main Street. That summer the mayor had come up with the idea of blocking off traffic on Friday nights and hiring bands to play in the street. Everyone was supposed to hang out and have a good time. He called it "Summer Under the Stars" and said it would encourage tourism, but as we demonstrated weekly, the festivities served as an excuse for locals to get drunk. By midnight men pissing in alleys and against car bumpers filled the streets.

As we drove, Coop kept talking about the doctor's wife. I made fun of him for acting as if he had never seen a woman before. I could not get the image of her thighs and that denim skirt out of my mind either, of course, but was cool enough to keep my mouth shut. We sat at the bar in a sweaty little tavern and drank beer. I got in an argument with a friend we called Rooster. I can't remember what it was about. I punched him in the arm. He pushed me from my barstool. We spun each other around the room and ended up stumbling onto the sidewalk, yelling and cursing, throwing wild punches in the air. We were fighting more out of boredom than anger, and since neither of us is tough or enjoys pain like some do, the whole ordeal was fairly harmless. A crowd gathered. Egging us

on, a redneck trucker screamed and beat his hat against his knee.

Coop, always the sensitive one, thought we might accidentally hurt each other, and he threw his body between us. We turned in circles as the crowd around us grew. Somewhere in the mix I got my nose smashed pretty good. Then our feet got tangled up and we all went down in a pile on the sidewalk. No one spoke as we untangled. After we got our arms free, Rooster and I looked at each other, and we both started laughing. We sat back down on the sidewalk. The people who had come out to watch the fight cursed us and headed back to their beers. The trucker walked to where we sat and called us a bunch of faggots. When I stood my nose was bleeding. Coop was swinging his arm in little circles like his shoulder was hurt.

The new doctor had been walking down the opposite sidewalk when the scuffle broke out. Full of American handsomeness and vigor, he crossed the street and strode before us. "You guys okay?" he asked with a professional look of serious concern on his mug. His buddies followed behind him. He repeated the question. I laughed. Rooster stared at him for a moment, barked, then pushed back into the tavern. Coop milked the situation and asked him to look at his shoulder. The doctor made him sit on the curb, and he started twisting his arm about.

I walked down the street with my head tilted back. She was leaning against the bank, drinking from a plastic cup. Her cheeks were flushed, and she had this funny grin on her face, like she was amused and bored at the same time. She wore tight jeans, sandals and a white tank top that exposed a good deal of tan skin.

I stopped when I saw her. "Remember me?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"The gas station." No response. "The porch across from the clinic."

She took her eyes from the doctor and studied me. "I didn't recognize you without the beer cans."

"You're not the first."

"That was a quite a spectacle you just put on."

"Performances nightly. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Can you stop bleeding?"

"Give me a minute."

I walked into the liquor store and cleaned up in the bathroom. She was gone when I came out. Coop had recovered, and we returned to our stools. When we stepped back onto the sidewalk after a few drinks, she was standing by her husband and his friends in front of a bluegrass band picking on the sidewalk. The song ended and they walked towards the Mexican restaurant. I left Coop and followed them. They sat in a line along the bar of fake bricks that was supposed to look Mexican. She was last in the group. I slid on the barstool beside her. Her husband made a big deal of ordering shots of tequila. He did not order one for his wife. I did. She ignored me. One of the buddies slipped and landed on his rear in the floor. The doctor slammed the bar and yelled. The third did a little dance with an empty shot glass in his mouth.

She turned and picked up the shot I had ordered. "Cheers," she said and tipped it down her throat.

"Med school buddies?" I asked.

She nodded. "Helping with the move. Seeing the great white hunter off on his grand adventure."

I motioned to the bartender for two more. "I thought you might like someone to show you around."

"Don't mess with me," she said with exaggerated savageness. "I shot a pistol yesterday." She made a gun with her fingers, pointed it at me and pulled the trigger. "Bang. For the first time in my life. The range owner said I was a natural."

"I hate guns," I said.

"It doesn't matter," she answered.

We tipped our heads and downed the second round. Her legs were crossed. One sandal dangled from a foot. Her toenails were fire red.

"It sounds like you're adjusting then, getting in the spirit of the place. All that stuff," I said.

She turned and leaned in close. "He's got a big heart, just ask him."

I licked salt from my wrist. "What about you? How is your heart?"

She didn't answer.

I pushed the glasses down the bar towards the bartender. I watched as he poured new ones. When I turned back, the doctor had moved close to his wife. He handed his car keys to her and told her they were taking a cab to the next town over. He kissed her on the cheek. He acted as if I was not there.

"What's in the next town over?" she asked after they left.

"Strip club," I answered.

We walked outside. Men were jostling one another on the sidewalk, throwing beer bottles. Bugs circled beneath street lights, and bats cut through the arcs of light after the bugs. A few drunks stood in the street, throwing rocks in the air, laughing as the bats chased them nearly to the pavement before swooping back into the darkness. They stared at her. She did not seem to notice.

There are six taverns, all tight and smoky and hot, spread along Main Street. We pushed through the crowd to the next one.

"What's your story?" she asked when we reached the bar.

"Same as everyone else in this town: trust-fund baby, living off of my father's hard work."

She ignored the joke, if she realized it was a joke, and started right in about herself and the doctor and her family and her old life in Boston. She had a lot of friends, apparently, and she grew angrier as she ran through them all. We made the circuit. She continued to talk. We both continued to drink. We outlasted all but the most devoted drunks, and when we left the last tavern, the bartender locked the door behind us. Main Street was empty with the exception of small groups of men huddled together along the sidewalk. Plastic cups and aluminum beer cans littered the street.

"Your eye is turning black," she said and rubbed my skin with her fingers.

"If we do this, you understand it will mean nothing?" I said. I figured I would save her the trouble of having to say it. "And that we will never do it again?" I added.

She pulled back to look at me. "You're serious?" she asked.

"I am."

"He never asked me, you know?"

I knew the score. I took her hand and led her up the hill behind the post office. We sat in the prairie grass with the lights of the town and the reservation stretching before us. I pulled her jeans off and kissed her stomach. For the most part she lay beneath me without moving. She certainly did not seem to enjoy it. When we had finished, I tried to make small talk, but she waved me off. She sat with her knees pulled against her chest, staring down at the valley.

We dressed and walked to her car. She gave me directions while looking straight ahead. Her house was dark when I parked in the driveway. The doctor was not home yet. She walked inside without saying goodbye. I hoofed it the two miles back to Main Street. Someone had broken the antenna from my truck. Whatever. The radio didn't work anyway.

* * *

I knew when she sobered up, much like a person being pulled towards the scene of a bloody crime, that she would want to see me again. The next morning I stood in the gravel beside the pumps and waited for her. Staring down the asphalt as heat rose in waves and withered in the sky, I lost track of where I was or of how long I had been standing there until some guy in an Impala honked and told me to get the hell out of the way.

I moved inside and stood at the window behind the counter. Just as a truck carrying chickens in wire cages passed, leaving a trail of white feathers in the air, she showed. She wore sunglasses and leaned against her car as the tank filled with gas. I stepped into the heat. The sun glared off of chrome and glass, and I shielded my eyes with my hand as I walked towards her. Her boy leaned his head against the window and looked out at me. I tapped my knuckles against the glass and made a silly face. He smiled and held up a wooden car.

"Something I can help you with?" I asked.

She answered without turning. "I'm not like that. I just wanted

you to know that."

I nodded.

"I'm not," she continued.

"Fine. You're not"

The pump clicked as gas flowed. Wind kicked up dust from the gravel and blew it over the highway in swirling clouds. I turned and headed towards the station.

"It's just this damn place," she said. "I can't figure out how I got here." She made this strange motion with her hand, like a fluttering bird, then brought it back against her chest. I stopped and faced her. She removed the sunglasses. An errant strand of hair blew across her face. She pushed it behind an ear. It blew loose again and she left it. I walked back to her car. We were standing close together, sweating in the heat. The air around us seemed to contract. I could feel it go still. She turned suddenly and sat in her car. "I just wanted you to know I'm not like that," she said. She started to drive away but stopped and rolled the window down as if to say something else, but the window went back up without her saying a word. She pulled onto the highway, leaving me in a parking lot of dust.

* * *

My father would have shaken her off. He would have joked about her with his buddies at the bar, but I couldn't let a good thing lie. I felt bad about what I had done, and I began to picture their life together. I wondered who made the coffee in the morning, or if he ever used her toothbrush at night because he was too lazy to reach for his own. Perhaps there is something about seeing the underside curve of a woman's breast, or of running your hand along her bare thigh, that makes you think more fondly of the husband. I don't know, but at night, when I should have been picturing her naked body, I couldn't stop thinking of him.

A month passed. The days clicked into place more or less like normal. My shift would end, and I would drive to Coop's. We would drink beer on his porch and watch the doctor go home for the evening. He carried a leather briefcase and would throw it in the backseat before stretching beside the Suburban. He would take his

lab coat off and place it on top of the briefcase, turn and wave. He always waved, even when he looked tired as hell.

"Nice guy," Coop would say and wave back.

Then one night I couldn't take the thought of their happiness any longer. I followed him in my truck and entered their neighborhood at dusk. I parked on one of the streets that could have been any other and started walking. The doctor had set his briefcase and coat on his front porch and was goofing with his boy in the yard. His wife stood on the porch, drinking a glass of red wine. She wore sunglasses, though the sun had set and had no intention of bothering her. She followed me with her eyes. She certainly did not smile.

The doctor saw me coming and stopped messing with his boy. "Evening," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Doc," I replied and kept walking.

The boy attacked his leg, and they started goofing again. I continued down the sidewalk. Just as quickly as it had come, the curiosity faded. They were no different than any other American happy unhappy family. I made the slow circuit back to my truck.

* * *

I started thinking of my own boy as I drove back to Coop's. He was seven that summer and we had never talked. His mom had been a year behind me in school, a dark thing with popping little breasts and skinny knees. I had knocked her up at a party at the river bottoms my senior year. I was high, the moon was bright and we had ended up in the back of my pickup. I slept there and had to ask Coop the next morning who I had been with. I didn't talk to her afterwards until she called to tell me. There aren't many places you can go from there.

Each month I slipped an envelope with as much money as I could spare under the door of the house she rented. I did it at night, after I was certain he was asleep, and I had the habit of sitting in my truck at the curb afterwards, watching her television flicker through the window. I would sit there most of the night and would sometimes start to write him a note on some paper I kept in the glove box, but I could never find the right first word. I could hear guys drag racing

on the old highway, and when that died down coyotes barking in the hills. I tried to picture him sleeping, maybe with the sheets kicked down and one arm above his head like I did.

His name was Jeremy, and a considerable part of my life was devoted to avoiding him. But one afternoon, after we had been out of school for a few years, I stepped from a tavern door on Main Street and saw his mother on the sidewalk. She was not any thicker than she was that night at the river, and her eyes didn't look any older. Barely able to hold his weight, she was carrying Jeremy on her hip. He was tired, and he rested his head against her shoulder. His feet were bare and hung down to her waist.

We stood on the sidewalk, looking each other over.

"Hi," she finally said.

"Hey," I answered.

"Thanks for the extra last month. I bought him a big wheel."

I nodded

She stepped around me. "His birthday is next week. You can call him," she said. "I think he would like that." Jeremy lifted his hand and gave me this little hand-twist wave as his mom walked down the sidewalk. I did not call him.

* * *

I was fairly content over those years. I was happy to get by without going hungry, but then one of my buddies crashed his motorcycle into a barbed-wire fence, and my world tilted. He was an angry guy, and he had been doing nearly 90 when he lost control. He died instantly, the coroner said, although I don't understand how anybody could know the exact moment the soul flees the body. Perhaps he lay in the ditch and suffered, unable to speak or close his eyes to the stars. Perhaps he had tried to crawl back to the pavement before dying.

I had been drinking tequila with him that afternoon in his father's barn. When Coop called the next day to tell me about it, I walked outside and vomited on the steps. For the rest of the day I lay on the couch, trying to escape the sunlight leaking through the blinds. I finally got down on the floor and turned on the television,

hoping the noise would drive the nasty thoughts from my mind. When the screen warmed up and came into focus, a preacher was railing at his congregation, telling them to take charge of their lives, to inject themselves with a zest for living, to use tragedy to make themselves better people, all that type of garbage. He claimed to have been no good, lazy, a drug addict, before discovering God's love, and that he had transformed himself into a cyclone of goodness afterwards. I could blame it on my buddy's death, the blinding sun, or the previous day's tequila, but I'm embarrassed to admit that I started believing him. By the time I fell asleep that night, I had convinced myself that I could be a good man.

The next morning I walked into the mayor's office and sat in a leather chair before his desk. We shared a common current, the mayor and I, since he, elected by an 80 vote margin out of 372 ballots cast, was determined to make the town a better place to live and die in. I told him of my desire to make myself a better man. He said he had heard about my friend, that he was sorry. I told him it was nobody's fault. He tented his fingertips and rested his chin on them. He sat that way for a dramatic moment or two before asking if I had ever considered joining the civic group that helped with reservation improvements.

I just stared at him.

"Good, because I think that would be an excellent opportunity for you to give back to the reservation and to our town. The group meets several times a month, and they have an incredible amount of energy and many exciting plans for the reservation. So much energy. I will call the chairwoman right now and let her know they have a new member."

The committee turned out to be four white women trying desperately to get through the days. Their husbands all worked as managers at a book distribution center and played golf together on the weekends, and the women, who held on to the hazy notion that their men might someday be promoted and shipped back East, had invented ways to make themselves busy.

They were kind to me, though, and asked about my family (I

made stuff up) and what my goals were (I made some up). They rotated houses for the meetings and competed in an unspoken game of one-upmanship, each striving for supremacy via fancier candle arrangements, prettier bowls of smooth pebbles, or the best chocolate-chip cookies. They took turns coming up with ideas, or “council initiatives” as they called them. It didn't take long to learn the rules. If an idea was bad, they would pursue it for a month or two before dumping it. But if an idea was a good one, say for a community center where they could give painting lessons, the three who had not thought of the idea would peck and tear at it until the originator had given up, and the idea would die a quick death.

Through my indifference I became the middle man, the mediator they pitched their ideas to. When they asked me my opinion on a bad idea, I would tell them it was great, and they would rush off in a storm of clicking jewelry, leaving the odor of cheap perfume behind, to start organizing. If it was a great idea, I'd shrug my shoulders and keep my mouth shut. At the meetings I would find a window to sit by or wander around their backyards, inspecting privacy fences and lawn furniture. They could have put a headdress on me and had me hand out cigars by the door. I didn't care. I was fine being their Indian mascot. They always had plenty of food and let me take most of it home with me. At one meeting, I fell asleep in an easy chair and they had to wake me as they left. I should have been embarrassed.

* * *

Not long after my gig with the committee began, a cop drove out to Coop's house and handed me a shotgun. He said he had cleaned out a storage room beneath the jail and had found it leaning against the wall in the corner. A tag with my father's name was twisted through the trigger guard. He thought, all these years later, that maybe I would want it. He didn't know what to do with it. He was a young guy, about my age. I knew him from school. He had a blond mustache and sharp blue eyes. He was a good guy, and I felt kind of bad for putting him in that situation.

“How's your sister?” I asked after I took the gun from him.

“Good. She's doing good,” he answered and pushed his hands in

his pockets and nodded. "Doing real good, baby and all. I remember your dad from some of our games when we was kids."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say. After standing for a moment in uncomfortable silence, we shook hands and he left. I took the gun home that night and cleaned it. I keep it in the closet hallway along with the flask. Sometimes I get it out and sight along the barrel to the steel bead and squeeze the trigger until the firing pin slides forward in the empty chamber. Crazy as it sounds, I like the clicking noise the pen makes inside the hollow steel. I wonder if my father heard that delicate sound before the darkness rushed in.

* * *

The rest of the summer passed without me getting another glimpse of the doctor's wife. I went to work. I went home. In the evenings I would sit with Coop on his porch, and we would watch summer storms rumble over the plains until thunder shook the house and lightning knifed the sky. One afternoon, after fall weather had crowded in and pushed the storms south, I found myself back in the doctor's neighborhood. One of the ladies on the committee lived there, and we were meeting at her house.

After the normal round of cheerful hugs, the ladies moved to a back room to review a proposal for a neighborhood playground. I remained in the kitchen, where I ate a piece of chocolate cake and flipped through a bathroom-design magazine. Someone knocked. I made my way slowly to the door, still chewing, hoping one of the ladies would beat me there.

They didn't. I pulled the door open. She stood in sunlight on the porch. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She stared at me for a moment then looked off into the yard. She turned back. "Damn mayor," she said. I tried to think of something clever to say but could only stand in the doorway with my mouth full of cake. The ladies swooped in, surrounded her and pulled her into the kitchen. They had already started fighting for her attention, nudging each other out of the way, when it dawned on one of them that they should introduce us. She told me her name was Emma. We shook hands formally. I gave her a little bow.

Throughout the meeting, she tried to act excited about the ideas the ladies discussed. She refused to make eye contact with me. When she left, backing out of the door, promising to come again, we all crowded around a window to watch her walk to her car. The ladies were beside themselves for landing such a woman.

"What a sweet, sweet girl. She will fit in great with the team. And so cute," one of them said.

"A great girl," another confirmed.

"I bet she will have a nice house," said another.

"Maybe they will stay."

"They never do."

There was a long pause, and I could tell by the silence that they all wanted to climb in her car and go with her.

"I can't wait to see her house," one finally said in a meager little voice.

I didn't say a word. I just watched her walk.

* * *

At the next meeting, other than a curt hello, Emma ignored me. The following month she brought sugar cookies. I watched her from a spot near the door as she carried on with the ladies. When I was certain she would ignore me again, I walked into the backyard and began kicking dirt into the swimming pool. The sun was striking the water and angling up into my eyes, and as the dirt dissipated and sank, shadows ran along the pool bottom. The sun and shadows lulled me into a stupor. I stood beside the pool for most of the meeting, staring into the chlorinated water. When the intensity of the sun's reflection on the water had weakened, I heard the sliding door to the patio open and close, then steps across the tile. Emma moved beside me. Neither of us spoke. She reached back with her foot, tore up a piece of sod and kicked it nearly across the water.

"That's not nice," I said.

"Goddamn you."

We watched the dirt settle to the bottom.

"I'm sick of this place," she said.

"We all are."

"I'm sick of him." She toed another piece of dirt into the water. She laughed a little laugh that was not a laugh at all. She stepped closer to the pool. The toe of her shoe hung over the water. She leaned forward and looked down. I could see then that she was crying. She did it silently and without shaking, only the tears snaking down her cheeks gave her away. She reached out and held my arm. She dipped her shoe in the water then pulled it out.

We walked into the yard and sat facing each other on lawn chairs. We bent forward until our heads almost touched. She went on about how much she hated the place, about how much she hated her husband for bringing her here. She was so angry, in fact, that she was not sure if she still loved him. All that type of stuff. I nodded and tried my best to look interested.

* * *

Jeremy's mom called the next day. She thought maybe I would like to go watch my son play baseball. His team had a game that night at the city park. As I was driving in to meet Coop after work, I saw the glow from the lights above the trees, and I turned towards the park. I was bored, I told myself, even of drinking beer, but I knew that was not true. I snuck along the edge of the parking lot and sat in the last row of wooden bleachers behind home plate. The lights shone brightly on the dirt infield but were dim in the outfield corners. Outside the chain-link fences that ran along the base paths, kids scrambled for foul balls, which they could exchange for a quarter at the concession stand. A few rows in front of me, a man praised Jesus and clapped every time something good or bad happened on the field. Behind him, two drunks laughed and spit sunflower seeds into his hair.

Jeremy played shortstop. He could not keep his body still. He would scamper one way and then the other with every pitch. His coach would yell from the dugout for him to calm down, and he would remain in one spot for a minute or two, but then he was at it again, bouncing around and kicking up clouds of dust with his cleats. After the third out, he would sprint for the dugout and remain standing while his team batted. In the fourth inning he

fielded a grounder and threw the ball over the fence behind first base. He spit and pounded his glove and muttered to himself just like the big leaguers do. I got a kick out of that.

I stayed in the bleachers after the game ended. Jeremy left with his mom and some guy in a rusted-out Impala. I watched as the coaches gathered the bases and stored them in a shed behind the centerfield fence. The lights went out, but I did not feel like going. I sat in the dark, watching the empty diamond.

* * *

In the committee meetings that followed, Emma gave up acting interested in the reservation altogether. We would meet in the kitchen, ditch the ladies and wander into the backyard, where we would sit and talk. Even when the temperature fell, we would find a spot of sunshine large enough to push together in. There were the many small touches we pretended were normal, the accidental brushing together of arms and legs, the looks that lasted longer than they had a right to. She did not seem to notice. I could not sleep. We both ignored the committee ladies.

Christmas came. I pulled the flask from the closet. I polished it until light reflected from the silver, filled it with whiskey and carried it in my pocket to the next meeting. Emma and I took turns sneaking drinks, and when the ladies carried banana bread to a neighbor, we crowded into a closet. I held mistletoe above her head and kissed her. I dropped the branch and pushed my hands up her shirt. Laughing, she punched me on the arm. She told me she was not like that. I told her I knew better. We became tangled in coats. We tripped on boots and rolled into the hallway. I kept trying to kiss her. She could not stop laughing. I finally gave up and left.

* * *

Winter transitioned to spring. Snow melted and the ground softened. A year had passed since our escapade on the hill above Main Street. I still thought of her most days. I missed Jeremy's birthday, again. The heat came and tourists arrived. Minivans waiting for gas stretched from the pumps to the asphalt. Prairie grass stopped growing and turned brown at the tips, and a brittle

sound like that of bones clapping together filled the wind as it blew over the hills.

At noon on the 4th of July I closed the station and headed into town to watch the parade. I watch it every year, and every year it is the same, except for the people, who change, but only in increments: kids grow taller, the old folks who line the curbs with lawn chairs grow smaller and closer to death, and so forth.

I parked behind the liquor store and walked to the far end of Main Street, where the town ends and prairie resumes. I leaned against a light pole and wished I smoked. For some reason I wanted to dangle a cigarette from the corner of my mouth. The high school band warmed up in a vacant lot behind the fire station. When it was time, they lined up and came marching through, blowing out of tune and stepping out of time. Then came ranchers and their children on horseback, the 4 -H club, and finally World War II vets who seemed to be disappearing inside their clothes. Tourists lined the street, clapped their hands, snapped pictures, sang patriotic songs. They always made a big deal of the whole thing.

Emma stood with her husband and son on the opposite sidewalk. She was staring at my side of the street, but I could not tell if she was looking at me or at the veterans or at nothing at all. She turned and touched her husband on the arm. She rose on her toes to whisper in his ear. He nodded and they kissed. She walked down the sidewalk. I followed her on my side of the street then crossed behind the flag twirlers.

Kids ran loose on the sidewalk. A clown stood on the corner, twisting animals and swords from balloons. The band continued to play, its music receding as it marched. I walked a few feet behind her. I watched the muscles in her calves flex. I watched her skirt rise and fall with the motion of her hips. Sweat stood out on the back of her neck. Her silver earrings reflected the sun.

When a police officer stopped the crowd at an intersection, I let my hand rest against her back. She looked over her shoulder but did not push me away. I followed her into the alley behind Main Street. In shade created by century-old buildings, we kissed. I tore at the

buttons that held her skirt up. She bit my ear and whispered, "Not here." I pulled her head back by her hair and kissed her neck. She whispered again, "Not here." We ended up pinned against one of the walls. "Not here," she said over and over as we kissed. She finally pushed me hard in the chest with both hands and walked quickly away, straightening her skirt as she went. "Goddamn you," she called over her shoulder. She turned from the alley and was gone.

* * *

There was no lull this time. Momentum did not die. I found a note tucked under the windshield wiper on my truck the next morning, and we met that afternoon at a rundown hotel outside of town. The hotel rooms, which had not been painted in decades, formed a U around a gravel courtyard that wildflowers had overrun. I parked and listened to the truck engine tick as it cooled. The sun was out, and it was hot and bright, and the shade beneath the awnings nearly black where it fell. I stepped from the truck and could feel the gravel through my boots as I walked towards the room. The door was cracked. The window air-conditioning unit was running on high. Emma sat on the far side of the bed with her back to the door. Her sandals lay on the carpet against the wall.

"Close the door," she said without turning.

I stepped inside and stood against the wall.

She walked to the bathroom and leaned close to the mirror. "Look at these eyes," she said and pulled her skin taught against her cheek bones. "They look so damn tired. I sat in the driveway for fifteen minutes trying to talk myself out of coming. I even drove around the block, pulled back into the driveway and turned the car off."

"And here you are."

She turned and looked at me. "Do you think I'm a horrible person?"

"I don't know one way or the other."

"Because I think I am."

"I don't think it matters."

"Goddamn him."

I walked to the bathroom and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. She leaned her head back against my chest. "Oh hell," she said. I pulled her back into the room. She straddled me on the bed. I lifted her shirt over her head, kissed her nipples, felt them grow hard in my mouth. The walls of the room were thin, and as we wrestled in the dark, every sound from outside was magnified. An eighteen wheeler roared past on the highway. A car door slammed shut in the parking lot. At some point she bit my shoulder so hard I bled.

Afterwards, after our breathing had slowed and our sweat had dried, as we lay against each other on the bed, she started in about her husband. She kept on until she cried. She eventually pulled her clothes on and left. I lay there for some time, thinking more about the doctor than about her. When I finally swung my feet to the floor, I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror, and for a moment I saw the old man's legs hanging from the open trailer door. I stood in the shabby room and studied myself in the mirror. "Oh hell," I said and walked into the heat.

We couldn't go more than a day without seeing each other. We had sex in my truck behind a billboard advertising the existence of live buffalo. We had sex in a collection of dingy hotel rooms. We had sex on the bank of a creek that curved through a hayfield. We had sex in her bedroom, a pillow jammed in her mouth to muzzle the screams. We had sex on the hill overlooking Main Street, behind a stack of pallets in an alley, in the grass beside a dirt road in the middle of a hard rain.

* * *

Young guys I used to run with trickled in for beer and cigarettes. They would walk the twisting blacktop from the reservation in a ragged single-file line, and we would offer the old greetings and shake hands with the old warmth, but we had nothing left to talk about. With the packages under their arms and their eyes cast down at their feet, they would walk back in the same order they had come. I was watching them so intently one morning that I did not notice Jeremy's mother walk in.

"He wants to play catch with you," she said. I turned from the window. Her dark hair was parted in the middle and hung before her eyes. "He asks me every day. You should play catch with him." She stared at me across the counter. "He's singing in church on Sunday. I bought him a brown suit with a brown tie. You should go see him sing in church," she said and walked out. I turned back to the window.

On Sunday morning, I dug through the bottom of my closet until I found the blazer I had worn to my high school graduation. It was faded and too small and most of the gold buttons were missing. I pulled it on anyway and drove to church, but I went to the pretty brick church in town, the type of church doctors go to. The congregation was standing and singing when I entered. Emma was halfway up on the right. The doctor had his head back and his mouth open, and you could tell from the looks of the people around him that he was going at it pretty hard. I walked down the center aisle and sat in the pew in front of them. The preacher, a short, round lady with silver hair and dangling earrings, walked down the aisle. She climbed to the lectern, paused dramatically, at which point I was sure she was about to let us have it with fire and death, and said: "Forgiveness is what God has offered to each of us, and only in light of that forgiveness can we seek redemption. To be forgiven, we must learn to forgive. For without that ability, there is no love."

She kept on in that vein: love and forgiveness, redemption and love. Blah blah blah. I can't imagine a more worthless message. I turned and looked over my shoulder at Emma. She returned my stare as long as she dared. The preacher went on in the background. I kept staring. She pulled her boy closer to her. All of the forgiveness and all of the smiles were too much. I wasn't buying it. The place was as meaningless as I remembered it. I stood and walked down the aisle to the foyer. I could hear people turning in their pews and whispering as I passed. I kicked the doors. They slammed open against the brick walls.

That night, I walked up the hill to the old man's grave and tried to talk with him about the doctor's wife. I felt silly, like I was trying

to imitate a scene from some corny movie. So I started telling him about Jeremy instead, about the way he moves across the diamond, about the way he spits in his glove like big leaguers do. When I started talking about my son, I stopped thinking of bad scenes from old movies. I stayed there late into the night. Coyotes howled at me when I walked back to my truck.

* * *

She showed up at the station on Monday. I locked the front door, and we went into the back. She was upset and aggressive. Afterwards, I lay on my back and watched her dress. She wore green g-string panties, and when she slid them over her hips and into place, it was almost as good as the sex.

She turned and said: "Stay away from my family."

"I can't go to church?"

"Not that one."

"I went to find Jesus."

"Don't be a jerk."

She walked to where I lay on the floor, bent over me and raised my chin with her hand. "Stay away from my family. This is not a game." She finished dressing and left without looking at me.

* * *

The lobby of the clinic was cleaner than it used to be. An old woman sat behind a metal desk and answered the phone when it clattered. All of the windows were open, and a breeze ran the length of the building, turning back magazine covers on a side table. A nurse opened a door and called my name. I thought it was funny that she went to the trouble of calling my name. There was no one else waiting. I followed her down a hallway and into an examination room. A broom handle propped open a window. A black fly buzzed around the ceiling. It all made me tired.

I sat there for several minutes before the doctor came in. I suppose he had to make me wait to build his importance. When he did walk in, he grabbed my chart and started flipping pages without saying hello. He finally looked down and told me my temperature was normal, my blood pressure good. He sat on a leather chair and

rolled between my knees.

"What's bothering you?" he asked while looking in my eyes with a light.

"I saw you at church on Sunday," I answered.

He lowered the light. "I noticed you as well. That was some exit."

"That preacher lady is something, huh? All that talk of redemption. What a load. Just feeding cookies to the weak. Give them something to lean on because their lives are so miserable."

The doctor made a note in his pad. He placed his stethoscope on my chest and listened to my heart. He moved his hand from my chest to my back, and I could not help thinking of the many times his wife had moved her hands over the same area.

"Is there something bothering you?" he asked.

I gave a weak cough and told him my throat hurt. He stood and placed his hands on my neck.

"Do you believe what she said about forgiveness and love and all that stuff?" I asked.

The doctor sat, rolled across the room and removed a wooden tongue depressor from a desk drawer. He rolled back. I opened my mouth. The light again.

"Your throat looks fine. Have you had a fever the past few days?"

"No. Well, maybe a small one," I lied. "But how," I started but stopped.

He asked questions about my family and my medical history. He checked the flexibility of my joints and the alignment of my back. When he was done, he stood and walked to the door. "You seem to be in excellent physical shape, and your throat looks fine. You don't have a temperature. There's really nothing I can do for you. A lot of people feel run down this time of year. If you continue to feel bad, come back in a few days, and I can order additional tests." He motioned with his hand to the open door but stopped me when I reached him. "Look, regarding the questions you have about the preacher's sermon, I can refer you to a colleague if you feel you are struggling with some issues and need help."

"What, a shrink?"

"If you need to talk."

"Do you believe in it, Doc? In redemption? That's all I need to know."

We were standing together in the doorway. "Yes," he said. "I do believe in redemption, even for those who don't deserve it. I believe we would have nothing to live for if there was no redemption." He ushered me through the door and into the hallway. I turned and looked at him. He held my file before him in both hands. He looked very serious, in a doctor sort of way.

"You mean that, don't you, Doc?"

He turned, flipped my chart open and scribbled inside. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't."

I walked to the end of the hallway and pushed the door open. Sunlight rushed into the building. I turned. "You're a good man, Doc. You're a good father, too. You should be proud of that."

He turned his back to me and walked off. I'm not sure if he heard me.

* * *

I watched her car come down the valley. An old country song played lonely on the radio, just like the first afternoon we met. She swerved into the parking lot and skidded to a stop. The car door slammed, then the door to the station slammed. She stood before me with clenched fists.

"Goddamn you," she said. She said it again just in case I had missed it the first time. She threw her car keys at my face. They knocked a box of chewing tobacco from the shelf behind me. She swung and knocked the radio from the counter. It broke apart on the floor. The silence was heavy without the music. "I told you to stay away from my family," she said.

"My throat hurt."

"Don't you understand this is not a game?" She pounded the counter with her fist. "This is my life."

"Mine, too," I said, but I didn't expect much from that. It was just something to say.

She rocked back on her heels, brought her head forward and

rubbed her temples with her fingers. "This has been bad," she said and closed her eyes. "What the hell was I thinking?" She spoke as if I was not there.

"Your husband will forgive you," I said.

"What?" she asked and opened her eyes.

"He believes in redemption. He told me."

She cried her silent cry. I walked around the counter and rubbed the tears from her cheeks. She took my hand and kissed it. We did it right there on the floor, behind the counter, our jeans twisted down to our ankles, boxes of magazines and candy scattered around us. She dressed quickly when we had finished and walked to the door, where she stood and stared out at the hills on the far side of the valley. I picked up the radio parts and threw them away.

"You know I have to tell him," she said.

"I've known the entire time."

"I'm sorry about it all."

"It's not your fault."

She straightened her hair and left.

* * *

When I closed the station that evening my truck would not start. I normally would have called Coop, but the sun was out and warm, and I decided to hoof it. I had cleared town and was making time on the shoulder, trying to think of nothing, to just watch the wind move among the wildflowers, when I heard the car crest the hill behind me. I could tell from the pitch of the engine that I would never make the ditch. I kept right on where I was.

The Suburban cut in front of me and slid to a stop. The doctor, his lab coat off, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his face red and frenzied, jumped out and came towards me. I thought of running but knew I would tire before he did. I crouched into an intimidating fighter's stance. He knocked my hands aside and swung his fist into my jaw. The punch spun me around, and I ended up on my knees in the gravel, my back towards him. By the time I had staggered to my feet, he was on me again.

He reached out, grabbed my shirt with both hands, and pulled one

fist over his shoulder. I tried to twist away but could not break his hold. Just as the fist started down, towards my face, he stopped. It was as if something had seized his body in mid movement. He stood perfectly still, his arm frozen above me. He released my shirt. He dropped his arms to his sides and looked down at his fist. He turned and walked back to his car, leaned with both hands on the hood and closed his eyes.

I rubbed my jaw and, after determining he was done with me, looked out at the land that had been my only home, my father's only home. The edge of the sun had sunk beneath the west ridge, and everything in the valley, the swaying grass, the barbwire fences that separated fields, was shaded in gold.

"Look, Doc, I'm sorry about what I've done," I said.

He twisted violently and pointed his finger at me. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare even start with that. You've got no right to talk about feeling sorry." Spit flew from his mouth as he screamed.

But that was the thing, looking at the man, I was sorry. I was sorry for every damn thing.

"Don't you dare," he continued, but his body seemed to deflate as he said it, and he drew in a big breath as if his chest hurt. He leaned forward again on the car. "Don't you dare," he quietly repeated.

I walked past him. "You're a good father," I said. "You're a better father than I will ever

