IT BURNS

by William Black

All that fall and into the winter, bulldozers and cranes cleared away the wooded top of Ransom Mountain, knocking down trees and shoveling dirt and giant rocks into dump trucks, leaving it a flat, barren expanse. Come spring, we were told, the mountain's top and back would be a landfill, but no one thought very much about it. When school let out, the guys I knew raced off to jobs or hung outside Kearney's Drug and lit up cigarettes they had just turned old enough to buy, or else went straight to their girlfriends' houses before strict and suspicious fathers returned from work, if they worked. I had something of a girlfriend, too, Mikaela, who had gone by Mickey until right before the school year started. She was exactly a week older than I was and got good grades and turned out as well as everyone expected she would. But through the heart of that winter I found one reason or another not to go home with her and, instead, break off from the others, with Danny Noyse, to walk up Coal Street, past the old company houses, two-stories and exactly alike and crammed close together, where only elderly people lived, until the road tapered into a path that wound up Ransom Mountain. We stepped out of the woods and into the wide, windblown clearing that with its snow-filled craters could have been the moon. Our corner of it seemed forgotten, half hidden behind a stand of white birch and scraggly pines, out of the way of the heavy work being done and at the long boarded-up entrance to a mineshaft. There, we dropped our book bags and stripped down to our undershirts and took off the gold crosses we wore. “Ready?” Danny yelled above the diesel engines and the sound of rocks clanging and clamoring into deep, empty payloads, and when I nodded he clenched all his muscles and chuffed steamy, spittled breaths through his teeth. He stood no higher than my shoulders, but he was already a little man, his reddish hair receding, his face gaunt and lined, his veins popping—exactly how he looked when he flew for no reason into one of his sudden, violent rages. “Do it,” he said, and I hit him as hard

as I could—in the chest, in the stomach, in the ribs, over and over until my knuckles were raw. I was not strong. I was tall and underdeveloped, gawky and a little wild. A couple of months before, my father had taken me to the recruiting station to sign up for the Army—because it would toughen me and teach me discipline and help pay for college when I was ready to be a good student, and because there were no longer jobs around here and if you were going to do well for yourself you had to find a way out. Right before graduation I would turn eighteen, and right after it, I belonged to the Army. "Again," Danny said, and I hit him with everything I had until I was out of breath and it was his turn to hit me. We did this three, four, five days in a row, took the weekend to admire our bruises and heal a little, and then on Monday we were back up there. Danny took off his undershirt this time, and I was awed and little sickened by his body blotched with the purple bruises I had made. His chest looked the way I imagined his father's lungs to look. On this day we didn't have the strength to pummel each other the way we had wanted to, and we walked back toward Coal Street discouraged, feeling small and without speaking, and I thought that soon his father would be nothing, more nothing than the silence in those woods after we could no longer hear the huge machines dismantling the mountain, more nothing than I was able to picture. I had lain in bed trying to empty my mind and feel a nothing that was like death, but the whole idea of it went against everything we had been taught by parents and priests since before the first things we could remember, so I stopped trying to picture nothing and imagined my fists slamming against Danny's ribs and chest, trying to feel the relief and satisfaction I believed Danny found in it, the momentary completeness when I landed one solidly, nearly knocking him over, and there was not pain, I imagined, but somehow nothing and everything at the same time, and his mind went thrillingly clear, like snow, like winter air.

"Tomorrow," I said, trying to cheer him up as went back down the path. "We just need another day to get our strength back up. Make sure you eat steak tonight. Tell your dad you have to have it." But

Danny walked on ahead of me, picking up his pace, blasting through whatever energy he still had left.

Our house was one of the newer ones built south of Main Street, set back from the curb and shaded by tall trees. To get to Danny's I had cross Main and walk four blocks north on O'Fallon Street, parallel to Coal Street, on the edge of what had been the miners' company-built neighborhood: no trees, no lawns to speak of, though chain link fences penned in dogs at some of them. Danny's was the last house on O'Fallon, leaving space between the house and the woods for a tool shed. Danny's father was always working. I would hear his chainsaw blocks away and follow the sound to the shed side of the house, where he would be driving through firewood, lean and shirtless, a cigarette between his teeth, sawdust piling up around his boots. He was a good bit older than my parents, or any parents I knew. He told people he was retired, but he had worked in the mines until he was a little older than my father was then and had lost his job when the company folded, and he had lived on unemployment ever since. Or so said my mother, always wary of my spending time with Danny, who was born the year the mines closed and while the youngest of his three sisters was nineteen and had children of her own. His mother was institutionalized within eighteen months of having Danny—some people said she was schizophrenic, others just called her crazy. By four or five, Danny had a reputation as a troublemaker; he was maybe ten when my mother saw him ride by in the back of a patrol car. But as a kid I loved going there. I loved the sound of the work, the smell of splintered wood and sawdust and motor oil, and Danny's father always stopped what he was doing to make me feel welcome and indulge me a bit. I remember showing up with a toy badge pinned to my shirt, and Danny's father laying a work-weathered hand on my shoulder and tilting his head back, squinting against the cigarette smoke from that drifted up into his eyes, or maybe he was just struggling to read the badge. “Special Officer,” he said finally.

“Wow. You're not here to bust me, are you?” and throughout that visit he made a show of tiptoeing into whatever room Danny and I were playing in and stealing one of Danny's few toys—all of them scuffed and worn and outdated, hand-me-downs or donations—so I could jump up and arrest him.

The boys I had played baseball with, climbed Ransom Mountain with, lain belly down on the cliff beside, binoculars to our eyes, scouting for Indians or Nazis—they had turned cool and secretive. They shot eight ball at night, and smoked, and at school talked about girlfriends and sex and drinking. My relationship with Mickey had grown—if that is at all the right word—out of tadpole- and salamander-hunting and the games we had made up in the woods, years before. There had been no declarations of love, nothing like that; just an easy extension of habit and taking for granted. So her requests that we do more things together came as a surprise. They began at the same time she had her hair cut in a bob and started wearing skirts, and they felt uncomfortably like the creeping in of adulthood. But nevertheless, that August and September and October, before my winter climbing Ransom Mountain with Danny, we drank iced tea on my back deck and, if it was hot enough, slid into the pool just big enough for cooling off. Or we had our parents drive us into town to see movies or hang out at the park, which was her favorite kind of date in those days. We would lie beneath an oak tree and let the turned leaves coast down to us. One Indian summer day at the beginning of November I took off my jacket, and Mickey saw the first of the bruises Danny had given me. She gasped, sort of, and touched one, and I flinched. I told her I'd been roughhousing with Danny, no big deal, and she rolled on her back and went quiet, sullen. When she had worked out her thoughts on the matter she rolled back over and climbed onto me, straddled me, leaned forward, covered my ears with her hands, and looked me straight in the eye. This was how she told me the things she felt most deeply. (When I asked why, she said that saying

these things out loud made her feel like she was carrying a “really, really, really full glass of water across a crowded room.”) She spoke slowly and in a careful, firm tone that I heard only as discrete, rhythmic, and muffled notes. Though I usually knew what she was saying. She hated that my father would think of the Army as an avenue to college and that I would follow his advice; why not just do what she was doing, earn good grades and win scholarships? And she was wary of Danny Noyse. I knew that. I could think of no one who liked him (though Mickey at least felt some kind of pity), and even his oldest playmates had cut their ties to him—over his spontaneous outbursts of rage or the way he smelled bad most of the time or his bitten down air of contempt, or because their parents had insisted they do so. Mickey stopped speaking and chewed her lip. Then she removed her hands from my ears and climbed off me and lay back down. I could have told her that Danny's father was sick, that he was likely dying, but I knew that only because Danny had let it slip and so to relieve him of the heaviness of having revealed his secret, and to convince him that I was a friend, and to keep him from someday coming at me in a fit of violence, I agreed to hike up Ransom Mountain and see how hard we could punch. Besides, I don't know what good it would have done to tell Mickey. She didn't expect me to take her words to heart. She didn't even expect me to hear them.

What do you call a mountaintop that is no longer a mountaintop and not yet the landfill it will become?

The fist time I followed Danny up the path to the spot he had already picked out and saw the boarded up mineshaft, I knew it was a matter of time before he pried the boards free and went inside, and most likely I would be with him. Or if I didn't know that, I should have. It happened on a brutally cold day before Christmas break. The brutal temperatures had added an element to our contest, making it that much harder to withstand the pain, and after Danny had started taking the punches shirtless, I did too, no matter

the weather. But as we reached the end of the uphill path and the cratered clearing it led to, an icy wind was blowing through my coat and sweater, and I hoped that Danny's hands were as frozen as mine were, too painful and stiff with cold to ball into fists. If he had reached our spot and taken off his coat, I would have too, I'm sure, and he did put his head down and walked against the wind in that direction, but he didn't stop until he had reached the boarded up mineshaft. He kicked the middle board until it gave and kept kicking until his boot went through, and he said, “Come on already,” so I joined him. The boards were old and weather-damaged and brittle, and it wasn't hard to kick through them or tear them off. I expected we would stop once we had a hole big enough to enter through, but Danny kept going, and when we had kicked or pulled or tore off every bit of wood, we took all the pieces into the mouth of the mine, and Danny told me to gather up some smaller sticks. I understood that he planned to make a fire and went out for an armload. The bulldozers that, back in the middle of the fall, had taken down the trees and plowed up hiding places and hunting stands and outcropping boulders, were pushing at the far end of clearing, expanding it to the east, and across the sheered off mountaintop, just beyond the far edge of it, stark against the soft, gray overcast, a dingy orange crane dug up earth and dumped it into the back of one of the dump trucks that idled below the ridgeline, just out of view. I watched the crane as I scavenged at the edge of the woods, the strange, sharp angle of its arm, insect-like, widening and narrowing, slowly, haltingly, a coltish mechanical leg. The crane dumped its load, withdrew itself, pivoted in jerky starts and stops, and as it did I could hear other cranes dumping dirt and rock into other dump trucks down the backside of the mountain. The landfill, we were told, would be open late in the spring, about the time I would head off for basic training to be remade into soldier, whatever that would mean exactly. When I returned to Danny he was deep into his work. He said, “We need paper. Do you have any paper?” “No,” I said, but he said, “What's in your pockets?” I pulled out three or four crumpled dollar bills. He took them and arranged

them among the branches I had brought and the broken down boards. He did this expertly, it seemed to me, with patience and diligence and real knowledge. Then from a pocket inside his coat he pulled out a square-ish tin canister. He unscrewed its top and drizzled some of the contents over the complex scaffolding he'd built. “You carry lighter fluid?” I said. He shook his head, said, “Lamp oil,” and tucked the canister back into his pocket. Then he withdrew a pack of matches from his sock, lit one and, squatting, held the flame to the dollar bills. In the first bit of firelight I saw the deep lines pulling at the corners of mouth and the vertical creases that began high up on his forehead and deepened between his eyebrows. No one else our age had lines like these, or so gaunt a face, or such thin lips, and for a moment I saw his father's face in Danny's, but without the playful good humor in the eyes.

We sat beside the fire Danny had made, warming ourselves and adding wood until the flames reached higher than our heads. Lit up, you could see the topography of the rock, craggy and dark and damp in a way that looked very cold, and shadow sounds—echoy drips and clanks—came up from somewhere deep inside. I began to say, “Can you believe it that guys worked in here?” but of course Danny's father was one of those guys. Beyond the firelight, the mine was gaping blackness. It didn't seem a tunnel, with walls and a floor and a ceiling, so much as a void, a wide nothingness, and here we were warming ourselves at the edge of it. I said, “Did your father work in here?”

Danny snorted, scoffingly, and made a face. He said, “This is a cat mine. The company ones were huge. They went straight down. Guys went into them on elevators. They were *huge*.” He stirred the glowing coals with his boot and added more wood, then went on: “They're all cemented up now though, but—but you know where the old breakers is? Used to be one right there. That's where my dad worked.”

I chewed this over for a moment, then said, “What's a cat mine?”

Danny laughed at me, and I saw anger and derision flash across his face. I had seen him fly into madness in art class, tearing up his drawing and making sounds like one of those wolf boys, reared in the woods by wild animals. Even after our teacher had restrained and then calmed him, he shook uncontrollably and his face was blotchy and red, and eventually he wept. He wept fairly often. It was not uncommon for him to start crying in class, silently and for no obvious reason. I had heard people say he suffered from whatever malady had claimed his mother. I had always accepted that as fact, but no one ever bothered to find out what that malady was or what could be done about it, if Danny was in fact afflicted, and I didn't know anyone who remembered her. Except for the fact that she'd been taken away, she showed up in no one's stories. People had always kept their distance, it seemed to me. And they talked with contempt. They were afraid. I was afraid. But Danny knew things, things beyond me. He sat cross-legged and bent forward, his face orange from the glow of the fire and lined like a man's. At that moment he had an air about him that was not wise exactly but that made me feel how small and sheltered my world was, how cut off from the things Danny carried inside him.

Soon it was getting dark, and I worried about getting home. I worked up the courage to tell Danny, and when I did he chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, and then stood. He took his gloved hands out of his coat pockets, and suddenly, without looking at me, he raged at the fire, screaming a howl-like sound and kicking it apart, violently, sending showers of sparks and burning fragments of wood through the air. I covered my face and stumbled backward and fell. When I looked, there was a lot of blood. I had cut the heel of my hand pretty deeply. Once I had seen it, Danny looked too, and his fit ceased, and he came to me concerned and ashamed, saying, “Did I do that? Did I do that?” He saw the blood and stepped out of the mine and gathered up a handful of snow and used it to wipe away some of the blood still coming out, and then he took my scarf from my neck and had me hold out my hand, and he wrapped it. “Come on,” he said, serious now, in charge, and he started off ahead

of me, out of the mine and toward the path, pieces of the old boards still burning inside the mine behind us, a shrinking spot, as we made our way down the path, of undulating orange light in the darkness.

The path was all but invisible under the moon-less sky. I kept pressure on the cut, and in the cold and under the pressure and out of sight, it didn't hurt that much. We reached Coal Street, and I said, “See you later,” but Danny lifted his gloved hand toward my bleeding one and said, “I have to fix that.” I considered the wisdom of not going straight home, but Danny started along the fenced edge of someone's property, heading toward O'Fallon Street, and I followed. His house was dark, not a single window lit up. Danny led us to the backdoor, and we stepped in, and he closed the door behind us very quietly. The kitchen was as black as the mine had been, but through the archway into the living room I saw the glowing end of a cigarette rise and brighten for a moment and then dim. Danny's father said, “That you, boy?” In the dark, Danny was moving things around on the counter. He didn't answer, so I said, “It's just us, Mr. Noyes.” Then a match flared. Danny had found a camping lantern, and he lit it with the match and turned up the wick. Beside the lantern he had a bottle of vodka. He beckoned me over. “Let's see your hand,” he said. I unwrapped it, and he held it in his hand and with his finger felt for the edge of the cut. Then he turned to the sink and wet a rag and unscrewed the top to the vodka.

At Christmastime I ignored my mother's advice and bought Mickey a record album. One day over break there was no one home and I got antsy. All my bruises had faded, my hand had mostly healed, and I had spent my morning worrying about what kind of soldier I would make. I could not begin to imagine how I, of all people, would manage to become hard and disciplined. I felt a terrible sense of requirement, that I would be required to tear myself down and rebuild myself as something I did not want to be. All the comforts of time off from school—sleeping in, lazing in front

of the TV, overeating for the hell of it, for no other reason than to achieve a sense of fullness—all that felt vain and misguided, the empty pastimes of childhood, like playing with toy cars or wooden blocks. I craved and hated them, I craved and hated a life in which they made sense. I resisted what was coming until it drove me mad with restlessness, until all I wanted was to go up Ransom Mountain and give and take the hardest punches we had in us. But I had started to take some ribbing about hanging out with Danny and didn't want to be seen crossing Main Street and entering the old miners' neighborhood. So I decided to take Mickey her present, even though Christmas was still a couple of days away. Mickey's mother answered the door and said hi and Merry Christmas, but Mikaela was out. I tucked the record under my arm and told her to tell Mickey I had stopped by and would she please give me a call so we could do something later. I went back home and waited, but Mickey did not call. After supper my mother set to cleaning up and my father went into the den to watch TV, and I was still restless. I put on my coat and called into the house that I was going out for a while and set off for Mickey's again. From the street I could see her mother and father and brothers around the supper table, but no Mickey, so I kept going until I reached Main Street and decided to stop in at Gavin's, the tavern where some of my classmates had begun shooting pool at night. I had not been inside Gavin's since I was a kid. My parents were not drinkers, and they were never very social. I can see now why some people accused them of holding themselves apart. My father was a striver in his way, having achieved his goal of finishing college before he was thirty—seven years of night classes without interruption—and commuting an hour for a job that was not only steady but that offered him chances to advance. It took me a long time to realize this, but we were likely the richest family I knew.

In any event, Gavin's has two rooms. You come in the front door to a foyer where, if it is winter or rainy, you stomp your boots clean. Up one step, open a second door, and there is the bar like a living room, lit warm and cozy by red neon signs. Well before you are my

age now, you know everyone in the place, they are your friends and old classmates and neighbors, and everyone looks up as the door opens to see who has come in. If you are a younger man, you walk through the bar either boastfully or sheepishly, as I did that night, accepting a little teasing from your friends' parents and your parents' coworkers and your old coaches and even their parents, who for thirty years, forty, have held claim on a particular table or bar stool. The second room, the back room, is brighter, and at its center is the pool table. There, you learn to smoke and drink and fantasize about what your life might like when you're a man, and every now and then one of the old timers will come in from the other room, pick up pool cue, and show you how young and green you really are.

When I came in that night, there were Shep and Jimmy Manko and Percival drinking beer and holding pool cues and chain-smoking inexpertly. They talked a little too loudly, and their eyes were red and irritated. Shep and Manko were being shown what's what on the pool table by Eddie Curran's grandfather and his pool-playing partner, Tom Mayes, who wore a baseball cap with the name of the aircraft carrier he had served on during World War II stitched across the front. Shep, when it was his turn, let his cigarette burn in the corner of his mouth and leaned into the smoke, lined up, and smacked the cue ball a little too hard, so that when he missed, the balls slammed into each other, remaking, randomly, the whole landscape of the table. Curran's grandfather chuckled and sunk five, six balls in a row, ending the game. “You want in?” he said to me, chalking up, but I shook my head, and the boys noticed I was standing there. “Hey,” Percival said. He lit a second cigarette off the burn of the first and stubbed the first one out. “You need a beer,” he said. He slapped my back as he passed, on his way to the bar to buy us drinks, and in a moment he came back, saying, “Cheers,” and handing me a can and a frosted mug, though he preferred to drink straight from the can. “So what brings you out tonight?” he said. Percival was not someone who talked to me, as a rule. He lived with his mother and grandmother in an apartment over Lyons

Barbershop, and as soon as he was old enough, he dropped out of school to take a job. I had not seen him since then, and maybe he was lonely without school, or maybe he was a little giddy with the new sense of himself he was developing at the bar, but in any case he was chatty. He shared his cigarettes with me and bought me beers, and we watched Shep and Manko lose again and again to Curran's grandfather and talked about the people we knew. He had taken a job at a warehouse—steady pay that his mother and grandmother had come to rely on, as what work they got was sporadic. I expected him to say something about his hopes or plans for the future, but he didn't, and I got the sense that he felt his life was pressing against him and that he came to Gavin's to relieve the pressure for a little while, to give himself some breathing room, and that he was basically okay with this system he had worked out. He did ask about my plans after graduation, and when I told him I had enlisted in the Army he nearly spit out his drink. "Really? I thought for sure you were going to say college. Of all the people I know, I figured you and Mickey were the college type ones. I figured you'd be together forever, go to college, get married."

"I still might," I said, "after the Army."

"That girl's going places," he said about Mickey, and I agreed. "But I don't know what she sees in Frankie White. I mean, he's smart like she is, but he's such a—I don't know. I just never thought much of the guy."

I had never paid much attention to Frankie White. I certainly never considered him a threat. He was outgoing and not terribly funny, and he wore pressed shirts and always looked neat, and in the hour or so that followed I understood that what Mickey had been saying when covered my ears was not about Danny Noyes, or not just about Danny Noyes, and I began to fathom the long stretch of space that had opened up between us, beginning whenever she began to imagine herself in bobbed hair and skirts and earrings and as a girl named Mikaela. Frankie White was not, it turned out, a serious interest, but he gave her a chance to try out her new idea of herself. I understood that, more or less, and I did not begrudge her.

I can't say how I felt about it, whether I was sad to hear this news or not, but I can say it came as a shock. And my way of softening the shock was to drink whatever Percival handed me and try not to think about it. I remember the cigarettes and the beers and being convinced to try my hand at pool. I remember a cigarette between my teeth and leaning through the smoke to line up my shot and finding all the balls floating in and out of focus, and I shot wildly, hitting nothing. At some point Percival had gone to the bar for another round, and while he was gone, the room wheeled, and I needed to leave. I put down my pool cue and made my way through the first room and out the door and onto the Main Street, where I realized I had left my jacket inside, and the air was brutal, painfully cold, but I would not go back inside to get it. I walked. I passed King Street, where Mickey lived, and kept from looking down it, and came to my street and turned and made it halfway to home when I decided I wasn't ready yet, that I had to take a moment to consider what had happened—with Mickey, with Percival, with me. I sat down in the snow in the Wilson's yard, alongside their hedgerow, to think. I had wanted to think about Mickey. Already I understood that while it hurt some to learn that I was no longer her boyfriend, for the first time in my life, the bigger pain was the way it left my future, my years in the Army and after it, that much more impossible to imagine. I tried to steady myself by flattening my hands on the snow-covered lawn, by taking long, slow, deep breaths, but above me the sky was vast and black, and the only thing that came to mind was the glowing end of Danny's father's cigarette in the pitch-black room, the way it brightened like the fire we had left burning in the mine and then dimmed, the way I understood that cigarette was killing him and yet he would not give it up.

Some weeks went by—the holidays, the return to school, which was tense and unwelcome. Danny was cool and remote, anxious and preoccupied. We did not go up Ransom Mountain, and for that matter, he didn't speak to me. I admit I kept a distance from

him, especially when I thought Shep and Manko might be around, and worse, to inoculate myself against whatever they might have been thinking, I told them both about Danny's disheveled house, the threadbare carpets, the empty windowpanes patched with cardboard, the fact that Danny and his father had no electricity. Still, I expected Danny to approach me about resuming our game, or that he'd wait for me outside when school let out. Instead, at the end of the day he just sort of vanished, and Mickey, she tried to seem as little changed as possible. She was polite and good natured, as always, and when she saw me walking ahead of her on the sidewalk or in the hallways, she called for me to wait for her, and she talked as she always had, telling me stories from her days and expecting me to do the same, but the questions she asked sounded false to me, off somehow. When I saw her ahead of me, I stopped and let her go on ahead of me, or I turned and went another direction. I never gave her her Christmas present, which I kept for a long time but never listened to, and she never did come by to deliver mine, if she even bought me one. Sometimes I thought, with a strange, painful kind of amusement, that we ended the same way we began: one way of thinking just slides into another, and soon the new way becomes a habit, and it feels that your life has always been, will always be, exactly as it is now. She did not tell me about Frankie White. Gradually, she let herself be seen with him, until everyone simply accepted them together, and I spent two or three nights each week at Gavin's, learning to shoot pool and pace my drinking. I took Percival's advice about chewing gum or eating bread to cover the smell of beer, though it didn't work. My parents, especially my father, thought graduation and the Army could not come soon enough.

One day Danny seemed particularly distressed. I don't know how else to put it. His face was blotchy and strange looking, distorted somehow. Between classes, going about his business at his locker, he wept silently, and the usual suspects of bullies and idiots taunted him—“Are you crying, Danny? Why are you crying? ‘Cause you're a baby? A mentally retarded cry baby?” At lunch, in the

crowded cafeteria, he snapped. I did not see it happen, but apparently he went after Jeremy Neal—pinned him against the wall and drove the tines of a fork into his chest until Jeremy's shirt blossomed with blood. I did see the teachers charged with lunchroom duty struggle to take Danny down and carry him—literally carry him as he kicked and thrashed and screamed awful, wailing sounds—out of the cafeteria and down the echoing halls to the principal's office. Some hours later I saw him in his blue parka, the hood with the fake fur trim pulled up, leaving through the school's north-facing side door and heading home through the snow. The rumor, passed on with delight at the scandal, was that he had finally been expelled.

In history I sat next to Mickey. She passed me a note that read, ARE YOU OK? I squinted and made a face and wrote back, OF COURSE. She answered, I KNOW DANNY IS YOUR FRIEND. I don't know why that made me so angry, but I shook my head and tore up the note and tucked the pieces inside my textbook. She wrote, YOU CAN'T GO FOREVER WITHOUT TALKING TO ME. I ignored her. She wrote, OUR LIVES ARE CHANGING. I'M FIGURING SOME THINGS OUT FOR MYSELF. I tore up the note and tucked it inside my book. She wrote, YOU HAVE TO TOO. YOU HAVE TO MAKE SOME DECISIONS. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders and turned my palms up, exasperated, and I mouthed to her, “What the hell are you talking about?” Her face flushed, but she went back to listening to the teacher and taking notes. Later she passed me another note that read: YOU'VE ALREADY DECIDED. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THAT UNTIL JUST NOW. I'M SORRY FOR BUGGING YOU.

The last time I saw her she had come in with her family from Massachusetts, where she lives now. I recognized her car, or maybe it's her husband's, by the license plate. It was parked in front of her parents' house. I drop by every now and then to help her father with the yard or do the chores that are too much for her mother. When I saw Mickey's car, however, I decided to keep driving, to wait until she had had her visit and gone back home. But

she surprised me one evening when I stepped out of Gavin's for a smoke and she had her daughter, shy, little Rachel, by the hand. I was embarrassed by my cigarette and the shirt I wear to work, with my name stitched over the pocket, across from the patch that reads GENERAL DYNAMICS. And I was quick, too quick, I know, to point out how much I read and what books I consider to be my favorites and that my girlfriend, who also works for General Dynamics, but upstairs from the shop floor, in accounting, has her college degree. But Mickey seemed happy to see me anyway, and she said she was surprised to find out that Danny had become a cop. Not long after Mickey had gone away to school, Danny went to the police station to ask the cops he'd gotten to know for work. He began by doing office chores but was diligent and reliable, and he earned—really and truly earned—the right to have his record expunged, and yes, now he's a cop. He parks his patrol car in the lot alongside Kearney's Drugstore and waits for cars he recognizes.

"He pulled me over!" Mickey said. "He said he recognized me when I drove by."

"He does that to everyone. People call him a rite of passage. You're not officially one of us until he pulls you over to say hi and see how you've been doing."

"That's so funny. He seems good, less—I don't know—odd, less stressed out," she said. "I think he still feels a little guilty about what happened, I think that's why he stopped me. But it looks like everything turned out all right for him."

I nodded and we hugged goodbye. I let her walk away and then stubbed out my cigarette. I did not go back into Gavin's, even though I had a fresh beer waiting for me, and quarters stacked on the pool table.

When school let out that day I stayed behind, pretending to be busy with something until the halls were quiet. By the time I left it was almost dark, and I went out the same door I'd seen Danny leave by that afternoon so I could cut behind Main Street and into the old

miners' neighborhood without being seen, and I went straight to Danny's. From half a block I could see the house was dark. I banged on the front door, and when no one answered, I went around to the back. The backdoor was unlocked, and I let myself in. I stood in the kitchen, on the threshold of the living room, where I had seen Danny's father's cigarette in the dark. The house was cold and still, it smelled of sickness and stale smoke, and Danny's father's chair was empty. There was a draft from one of the broken windows. I called for Danny, I called for his father, but no one answered. I left and climbed the path up Ransom Mountain, and it was fully dark when I reached the top. A bitter wind came from the backside of the mountain, along the makeshift road the cranes and dump trucks had made, the same road that fire trucks and police cars would soon be speeding up, their lights strobing, their sirens wailing. The wind came hard across the clearing, making my ears burn and my eyes tear. I had to duck my head to walk against it. As I reached our spot I wiped my eyes and saw that the bulldozers had expanded the clearing to the west, taking out the cat mine and the stand of birch and pine that had broken the wind for us, and I did not see Danny. Not right away. When I did he was in the cab of the nearest bulldozer, dousing the seat and controls with lamp oil. Then he climbed down from the cab and threw the empty tin as far as he could, and I went to him, intending to stop him before he went any further, until I saw his face, the twisted mouth, his eyes swollen and red from crying, his cheeks chapped under the film of tears. When he saw that I wouldn't—I couldn't—stop him, he reached into his sock for his matches, but his hands were shaking and too cold to the grip and strike one. But I did not decide. There was no moment of decision. It's just what I could think to do. I reached out and took the matches from him, and I climbed into the cab and turned my back to the wind and managed to get one lit before I dropped it on the oil-soaked seat and jumped down as the flames shot through, brilliantly white and hot and so loud Danny was already covering his ears.