

THE DEAD LION

by
Steven Lee Gilbert

If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted,
or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude
has been salvaged from the larger waste,
then you have been made the victim
of a very old and terrible lie.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Shut up, shuttin' up!

— Yosemite Sam

After Everything

Only a handful of mourners are present, standing together at the foot of a mountain on a narrow spit of lawn, like a knot of sullen protestors huddled beneath the rain-drenched sky and mushrooming plume of umbrellas. Their faces are turned down and their shoulders squared off against the wet and the cold and the melancholy note of mortality, while a gray-bearded man in a camouflaged jacket addresses the solemn congress. He is sharing a few words, presumably, of the figure wrapped head to toe in a white burial shroud and presented before them on a long willow frame set on four equal risers of gray cinder block. His voice is low, muffled against the falling rain which has begun in some places to soak through the thin ceremonial fabric giving way to patches of grayish-pink flesh. A broad forehead, the bridge of a nose. A pair of prominent cheek bones. One hand resting atop the other.

At the edge of the assembly, a young woman pokes her head from beneath an umbrella and jeers skyward, her eyes are puffy and red and harden with admonishment as they fixate on the foul weather. Her jaw hardens too as she turns and leans over the head of a child to speak in the ear of the tall, balding man standing next to him. Who in return offers barely a look, a single, slight shake of his head. The woman straightens and stares. She says something more in his direction and before he can register any further dissent she passes the boy her umbrella and turns out into the rain.

She hurries across the lawn toward a woodshed where there loiters a short, round man with his back to the service and dressed in the full Highlands costume. Scottish green kilt, black feather bonnet, tartan piper's plaid. She taps him on the shoulder and the man turns. She gestures to the bagpipe he has cradled in his arms and draws a for him a series of tiny, tight agitated circles in the air. The bagpiper smiles and nods. He fingers the blowpipe to his mouth. Then stops abruptly and floats through clenched jaws this one question: Sorry for asking, but who again is it we are burying?

Edith:

I remember the day, the very minute in fact, John David told us he was joining the Army. He was eighteen, I was twelve. We'd just sat down to dinner. His graduation was the next day and so Daddy was pressuring him about going to college again, using the same arguments, income and opportunity, that he would later give me—right up until I got pregnant. John David had made his mind up though and so he sat there not saying a word. After a while, Daddy did the same. The two of them sitting there stewing and picking over their plates, until the silence got too

big even for them and one of them had to say something.

--- — ---

You're sure about this? Frank asked.

Pretty sure, answered John David.

A decision this big, seems you ought to be more than just pretty sure.

John David looked across the table at his sister. Would you please pass me the beans, Edie?

Edith looked at him oddly, as if he'd spoken to her using some unfamiliar language. The beans, he said again.

So when might this happen? Frank pressed.

John David shrugged as he piled more beans on the ones he'd not eaten. All depends on the needs of the Army.

The needs of the Army?

That's what they said.

That sounds like a thing a recruiter might say. Did they at least give you some indication?

Sure.

Well like what?

John David shrugged. Different things.

Edith sat watching them. Neither had yet to mention there was a war going on.

Why don't you share just one of them, Frank suggested.

Maybe infantry.

Infantry?

That's right.

And the others?

You know. Intelligence. Supply. A truck driver.

A truck driver? Edith blurted. You hate even driving the tractor. You joined the Army to drive a truck?

John David leveled his eyes on her. That's not why, he said.

Then what is? Frank interjected.

It doesn't matter. John David leaned back in his chair. I'd do whatever they asked.

No one spoke for a few long seconds then Edith drilled her brother with the best icy stare she could muster and said, Well, I think that's absurd.

Later, the mourners all retreated to inside the house but for the woman, who stands beneath the woodshed wearing a rain jacket and slipping a pair of tall mud boots over her hosiery, while another, a man, waits nearby, holding two long handled shovels. When the man leans down and gets her attention and points toward the house, at the lone figure there jogging toward them, Edith, straightens and turns. She sets her resolve and her hands on her hips as if she knows exactly what to expect and waits for it to arrive.

What are you doing, Edie? the man asks as he wipes the rain from his head and face.

You know what I'm doing.

I thought we said it could wait.

You said that, Jordan, not me.

Jordan thrusts a hand toward the sky. It's fucking raining, for chrissake.

I can see that.

Jordan glances at the shovels, then pulls himself fully erect. As if bearing alone might weaken his sister's will. As if all of her life hadn't prepared her for this, a man's machismo. People are waiting, he says.

I don't care, Edith answered. I'm not leaving him like this.

They both turn, look at the figure lying now like a chord of deadwood beneath a blue tarp. Further back along the woodline rest two more gravesites, one more recent than the other. Next to them sits a pile of freshly dug dirt and alongside the dirt stands a tractor. Please, Edith, Jordan implores, come inside. No, she replies. John David wouldn't wait on the weather. Daddy wouldn't either. And by God neither will I.

A commotion arises from the house. Someone calling and waving their arms, loping like a wounded simian-creature across the lawn. The two watch without speaking as he steps under the canopy and lowers his hands to his knees. He alternates glances, unsure, it appears, which of them to address.

What is it, Brian? Edith asks with impatience.

Someone's here to see you, he says. From the Army, I think.

They didn't say?

Brian stares blankly at her. Edith rolls her eyes and flips the rain hood over her head. She takes one of the two shovels and starts toward the grave and the work to be done there.

What do I tell him? Brian calls out to her.

The same thing they told John David, she answers and raises one middle finger toward the foul sky. Tell them to go fuck themselves.

Edith:

The truth is everyone failed him, not just the Army. Everyone. You. Me. Daddy. The whole fucking country failed him. Failed all of them, in fact. And honestly, what were we even thinking? How can any of us begin to even understand? We send them away, ask them to commit these horrendous, awful things and afterwards they come home, many like him, unhappy and broken, having lost just about everything, their entire lives hanging by a thread. And what do we do? What do we do? We throw them a fucking parade. A fucking parade. We thank them for their service. Applaud their sacrifice. Pretend to understand the magnitude of their loss, of their pain and hurt. The truth is, we know nothing. We think we do, but we don't. And so we leave them alone to deal with all that bullshit as best they can. Like victims. Like outcasts, without hope. Without purpose. Without any new plan for going forward. I mean really, after what

*happened to him, what in hell did we expect John David to do?
Carry on like nothing fucking happened? Please.*

BOOK ONE

Late Summer, early September. Before everything. John David laid splay-legged and barefoot on the bed, wearing only a pair of faded jeans. His arms were guarded and crossed, held snugly against his bare chest while behind closed lids his eyes flittered about like some restless mayfly. Small. Fitful. Gone. Buzzing too close to the river's dark surface. No ripple of a dream from which to rise. Nothing to dream of at all.

In the distance a loud diesel engine grumbled with shifting dissent and he opened his eyes and listened as the engine grew louder and closer until he rose from the bed and stepped ghostlike to the window. He parted the blinds and glowered out on the world below with a compelled belligerence. Savage, gaunt, unshaven. A dead lion among living dogs. They were coming, the movers, creeping down the street in the milky morning pall like a conveyance of arrogant thieves amongst the azaleas and loblolly pines. A dirty white passenger van in front with four brooding faces gazing out with airs of indifference at the houses they passed in the housing area. Close behind inched the tractor trailer truck, the man perched behind the wheel red faced and scowling at the pickups and cars and garbage bins parked haphazardly along the curb.

Downstairs, the stillness and quiet was suddenly shattered by the high-pitched clamor of barking and he closed his eyes and lowered his head at the war being waged in the little dog's heart for its own shitty lot in this life and though he wanted more than anything to find reason inside him to still it he could not.

And so he listened until the fervor there too subsided and he let the go the blind and walked to the bed and sat down and surveyed the nightstand where the remains of his own measured life were assembled likewise in fierce, unwanted array. From the photo she stood smiling, a camera bag slung over one shoulder, her green eyes sparkling as if charmed by the words or some gesture made by the picture taker. Next to the picture lay a handgun and an overturned bottle of bourbon. He reached and righted the bottle and picked up the gun and removed the magazine and he ejected the round from the chamber. He pinched the bullet between two fingers and held it at eye level, as if marking some moment in time.

Outside, the rig finally ground to a halt and he tucked the round into his pocket and stashed the gun and the magazine inside a large Army duffle and then he buried her picture there too in the bag and slipped on a plain, white tee-shirt. He stepped into the hall where scattered about the carpet lay flecks of white plasterboard. In the wall near his head was a gaping hole. At his feet, a roll of gray Duct Tape. He bent down and picked up the tape and wedged it into the hole and walked down the hall where he paused at a door and reached a hand past the crisscrossing swaths of gray tape and gave the knob there a hard little shake. Then he continued on down the stairs.

The little dog looked up at him as he opened the door and the two of them stepped out into the broad daylight just as the four from the van came trodding across the yard. Two men and two women. One of the men carried a clipboard. He showed him where to sign. While the movers went room by room he sat outside on a lawn chair at the edge of the patio while the dog slept in the morning sun. At one point he could hear through the kitchen window the two women talking. One of them poked her head out the door and asked about the tape. He said to her, Just leave it.

Dascha:

A friend of mine's husband was in the same unit, that's how we came to know about the nursery things. At first, though, I didn't want anything to do with them. I mean, I didn't know him, you know, and Carlos, he wasn't thrilled about it either. His family is crazy superstitious. Like whenever the moon was full his mother would tell me, every time, to wear a safety pin under my clothes. Like pinned to my bra, you know. So the baby wouldn't be born with a cleft lip. You believe that? Crazy right? Thank God she wasn't. Isabella, that is. That woman wouldve never let me forget it.

That same afternoon. Sipping a beer on the front porch stoop. Watching the couple drive up to the house. He stood and locked the dog in one of the rooms and greeted them in the doorway where the two stood like a pair of prospective buyers, gazing past him in silence at the lackluster floors, the cobwebbed corners and tarnished walls, from which finishing nails still protruded above the smudged outlines where picture frames had once hung.

The man was dressed in Army fatigues and spoke with the cheerlessness of an infantryman. Rodriguez, he said. My wife, Dascha. John David looked at the girl who was pregnant and very far along and she smiled warmly at him and he looked at the husband and said, Follow me, and he turned and headed up the stairs.

The husband and wife shared a curious look as they climbed the steps and again when they reached the landing and saw the door there barricaded with tape. They watched as he gathered the strips one by one and collected them into a ball and then took the key from his pocket and handed it to the husband. I'll wait downstairs, he said.

A short while later the girl came sidling down the stairs, one step at a time, holding the rail for support, and found him in the kitchen where all the cabinet doors stood ajar, empty but for the dusty outlines of products once shelved there. Her cheeks were swollen and discolored, her skin blotchy with patches of dark and light color. Thick circles under her eyes. She cleared her throat. He just needs some help with the dresser, she said.

John David paused at the bedroom door, his arms hanging loose by his side, eyes peering into the room. The walls there as blue as the sky, bluer even, with fair weather cumulus clouds sponged on, big and billowy white. Some made to look like objects: A tree. An airplane. A sailing ship. Things any child might enjoy.

There's stuff still in here? the husband said.

John David looked across the room, his face drawn, his eyes hard and glassy.

What do you want to do with them? the husband asked.

Do with what?

The things here. The husband rapped a knuckle against the dresser-top.

John David walked over and glimpsed through a crack in the drawer the small infant outfits, tiny rolled up socks, a stack of colorful bibs. He slammed the drawer shut. They go with it, he said.

After they had finished loading the nursery he let the dog out of the room and followed them alone out to the drive. How much do we owe you? the husband asked. He'd taken out his wallet and started to count out some bills. You don't owe me anything, said John David. The husband counted out a couple more bills and extended the handful of money. John David looked at him and he looked at the wife, who then said something in Spanish to the husband. When he didn't seem to hear she said, Carlos, and finally he looked at her and she gave him a hard tiny shake of her head. She looked at John David. I don't know what to say, she said.

You don't have to say anything.

I feel like I should though.

Then don't.

I, we, we just—

Please, he said, please just don't.

Once they were gone he crossed the yard and stopped at the edge of the street and he turned and looked back at the house. Ghostly and lurid in the blue evening umbra, the blurry bright glow of the sun hanging low in the window glass, casting itself through the house where, were it not for the little dog perched on its hind legs at the door, it seemed passing through something soulless.

Dascha:

Not long after we got home, Carlos, he comes in from unloading the truck and he shows me this cute little purple onesie. Had a little lion on it holding a balloon and Carlos, he's standing there grinning and bouncing it around like it's a puppet or something and I ask him where he got it and he says, of course, from the dresser. A couple of days later then when I was going through the things myself something made me shiver. I don't know what it was. Something. I'm not saying it was a ghost or anything but I made Carlos get rid of it the very next day. All of it, every last thing. Every stitch. Even this real pretty bassinet. It was for the better, you know. I mean, his unit would be deploying in a few months and if there's one thing my own mother taught me it's that you can never be too careful.

In a rhombus of chaff and sunlight perched a gray-haired, old man on a metal stool, his eyes were closed and his head bowed reverently, like some parody of a backwoods preacher in his dusty coveralls and open palms resting on a sprawling conveyor contraption as if communing with the very soul of the beast.

Daddy? Edith said. She was standing at the barn door. Herself in a swirl of sunbeam and dust motes. Daddy? He looked at her. Please listen to me, she told him. I am listening, he said. Edith pointed. Then look at her.

Outside the barn door in the gravel stood a young girl with her two migrant parents. The girl was clutching a Hello Kitty lunch box in one hand and in the other, crushed to her chest, a stuffed panda bear. She was watching the two of them argue while her mother and father stole worried glances from one another. She belongs in school, Edith said, not the back seat of a car.

You think I don't know that? her father said. He took a rag from the pocket of his overalls and wiped his hands.

Then how is it that's where I found her?

A yellow barn cat sidled up next to Edith and rubbed its head against her leg and she shooed it away with her boot. She looked at her father. Little girls belong in school, she said. Period. End of discussion. You know that. So does Miguel.

Leave him out of it, Frank said. Miguel has his hands full.

Of course he does. We all do. It's the middle of harvest. But, Jesus, what if she'd gotten hurt or wandered off?

The phone buzzed in Edith's hand and she looked at it and looked back at her father. There's a card on the counter, she said. For John David. Please sign it and drop it in the mail. Preferably before the carrier comes.

A card for what?

For John David.

To what?

Benji's birthday party.

Why not just call him?

Edith rested both hands on her hips. Do you ever listen to anything I say? His number doesn't work anymore. He must've changed it or something or discontinued the service, I don't know. Just sign it, will you. And get it in the mail today.

Have you tried the number in my phone?

Of course I tried it. I'm the one who put it in there. The phone buzzed again in her hand and she silenced it and looked at him and said, Can you please just do as I ask? Benji really wants him to be here. Now, what time are you leaving this morning?

Leaving for what?

For the bank meeting.

Not a moment too soon.
Daddy, I swear. Can you at least try to think positive?
I was.
You sure you don't want me to be there?
You have school.
So you do then?
Actually, no. Not at all. I was just saying, you have school.
You don't have to sound so mean about it.
Listen, he said as he pulled himself up on the stool. I'm not trying to sound mean, but I've been selling these fools with money on this place since long before you got involved.
I know you have. I just wish I could be there.
Well, like I said, you have school.
Edith watched him a few long seconds and then turned and waved for the family to come forward. She spoke to the couple and then knelt and spoke to the little girl and finally she showed them all to a small table where they could sit and she turned back to face her father. I'll let Miguel know they're at the barn, she said.
I said—
I know what you said, but I'm making this my problem, so... about the bank, be sure and mention the mild winter and that late spring frost.
I will.
And also the new irrigation.
Of course.
I wouldn't mention Zoe though.
Why on earth would I mention the pig?
They'll think we've lost our minds.
What we? her father said. The way I remember it is you asked could you bring a pig home and I said no and then you went and did it anyway.
Well, one day you'll thank me.
Her phone went off again. Shit, she said. I've got to go. Just in case you were thinking this day couldn't get any more difficult, Benji says he's not feeling well, so I may need you to pick him up at school if they call.
And do what with him?
What do you mean, do what with him? Bring him home.
What if he's sick?
Daddy, that's the only reason they would call.
Shouldn't he go to the doctor then?
Edith studied him. How on earth did you ever manage this all on your own?
Manage all what?
Everything, she replied.

Jordan:

We had a couple of sayings growing up on the farm. Actually, they were just Dad's as nobody else much cared for them. But one of them was, Nature was unpredictable, there was no such

thing as an accident.

At the time, of course, I had no idea what he meant by that and even now I'm still not sure. For the longest time I thought he was talking about Mom and the accident and maybe he was, who knows—I was always too afraid to ask—but now that I'm older and have my own thoughts about it, I think it all the time.

I don't say it, but I think it.

I think it an awful lot.

The motel sat back from the road along a tall stretch of longleaf pines where nested, according to the Restricted signs reflected in the Jeep's headlights, a population of red-cockaded woodpeckers. John David parked beneath the lighted entranceway and turned off the engine and looked at the little dog, who was standing with his nose pressed to the window and studying the woodline beyond. Peeling away layers of scent—diesel, black powder, blood and sweat. Perhaps even the long-buried spoor of his own younger dog-self running wild out there, clinging to relevance. Off limits, he said. Birds only.

Their lives together had been measured by war. By what came before, what might come after. The present only existed as a bridge, not a period. A time full of emptiness and improbability. It served as the living force of every argument. every buried thought, every fragmented moment, until layer by layer the fear and the worry and uncertainty forced it spiraling upward, into words, into anger.

I don't see the purpose in that, he said to Catherine when he'd first noticed the Restricted signs popping up between his first and second deployments. It's not like it's going to stop anything.

What do you mean, you don't see the purpose?

They're just birds.

Yes, but they're not just birds. They're endangered birds, and they're endangered because of us, and by us, I mean you fucking men, who seem intent on destroying the world one piece at a time.

He watched her a few long seconds, until she turned away, and then he did the same. An Army's got to train, he mumbled.

It's a big country, John David. Find somewhere else to train. Or maybe, just maybe, stop solving your problems by killing one another.

A bell sounded overhead and John David stepped inside and a woman half-turned from behind the counter where she stood hunched over a card table heaped with laundered towels and looked askint at him. Without speaking she shuffled over to a door where she knocked once and nudged it open. From beyond came the sound of canned television laughter. She mumbled something in Korean and then stepped aside as a girl scooted past her.

Can I help you? the girl asked. She was nineteen, maybe twenty years old.

I need a room.

She struck a key on her keyboard and asked for a name and he told her and she clicked the computer keys. How many nights? She looked up from the keyboard. How many nights?

I don't know.

I'm just asking because we have weekly suites too. They come with a small kitchenette, in case you're staying longer. It winds up being cheaper.

I don't need a kitchen.

Not a kitchen, a kitchenette, so don't get so excited. It's just a tiny fridge and microwave.

I don't need either of those.

All right, she shrugged. I'm just saying, it winds up being cheaper if you're staying the entire week.

When he still didn't respond she glanced over at the older woman, who had gone back to folding towels, and she looked at John David and said, Anyway, I have to put something.

Inside the room, it was dark and cold. A faint odor of disinfectant. John David flipped on the wall switch and when nothing happened he flipped it again and then he tried the other one and a floor lamp came on next to the bed. He scooted the little dog from in front of the entrance and pulled the door shut and fastened the chain and he turned and set his bag on the bed. He looked around the room. In the wall next to the window was a second door and he walked over and jiggled the handle and though the knob turned the door was secured by a deadbolt. He jiggled the handle a few more times just to be sure and then went outside and walked to the next door over and put his ear up to the door. He knocked and waited, then tried peering in through the window.

Jin:

We got used to seeing some version of him all the time. The ones who wouldn't turn their back to the door. Or would question how many guests were registered; why so many cars were parked in the lot, things like that. Once I even had this guy ask if he could remove the bulbs from the lights in the corridor. Crazy stuff, you know. And I get it, I totally do. They're afraid and worried that being at war is the only thing they're good at anymore. At least out there, at war, they could be on their guard all the time and no one will think they're bat shit crazy.

The girl at the front desk answered the phone. Yes?

This door here.

What door?

In my room.

What about it?

It leads to the next room over.

Yes. I know that.

Is someone staying there?

I'm sorry, I can't give out that information.

I knocked but nobody answered.

You shouldn't be disturbing the other guests.

So there is someone.

The girl didn't respond. He gave her a few seconds more and then asked, Is there another room I can have? The kind with only one door.

Relax, she replied. No one's staying there.

Now you're just saying that.

No, I'm not just saying that. The room is empty. Trust me. She waited for his response and when none came she asked, Is there anything else?

John David hung up the phone and walked over to the window and parted the blinds and he stood staring out into the night. Still and gloomy and quiet. Somewhere a flickering light. A small, creeping oblong shadow at the edge of the parking lot. The blackness beyond impenetrable. He let go the curtains and stepped back and took up the chair next to the table and set it against the adjoining door and he pushed the table against that and went and found the little dog where it was sniffing around the toilet and he led it outside and stood watching from beneath the narrow colonnade as it squatted and peed in the grass.

He watched as a young couple came walking down the stairs, talking and laughing playfully, paying him no mind as they headed across the lot to their car. They stopped and as the girl was about to get in she turned and slipped her hand up the boy's uniform blouse and they kissed. The boy tried to cup her breast through her halter top but she pursed her lips and pushed his hand away and he said something to her and she laughed and he tried it again and this time she let him. When they drove past the girl turned her face toward John David and he saw she was smiling at something the boy must have said or at simply her own charming luck in life, which no one ever knew until it happened to them that it all could change in an instant. He hated that for her, that no one she knew had even the balls even to tell her.

Jordan:

Another saying Dad liked to use was that the approximate present does not approximately determine the future. The approximate present does not approximately determine the future.

*Yeah. I had no idea then what he meant by that.
Still don't.*

Edith pulled down the drive to the house and rattled to a stop next to a late-model, blue sedan. She just sat there trying to place the owner and then finally got out and walked over and cupped her hands to the glass. The inside was spotless, glistening clean, floor mats still covered in factory plastic. On the passenger seat laid a window sales tag from Kent AutoMart. She snapped upright and stepped around to the rear of the car and when she saw the licensed dealer tags, she stammered, Oh, hell no, and stomped off toward the house.

She dropped her things on the kitchen counter where she saw the birthday invitation she had asked her father that morning to mail and she snatched it up with a snarl and stormed back out of the house. She'd not gotten far when she spotted two men walking down the path from the barn. The one, Wyatt Kent, was short and portly, and the other, his son, Harrison. A slightly taller but similar version, wearing a black hoody sweatshirt with an image of a handgun on the front along with the phrase: Guns don't kill people, It's mostly the bullets.

Edith stopped to engage them and the older Kent smiled and nodded as if about to pass without speaking when Harrison cursed and lifted a boot, the bottom caked in fresh shit.

What the hell? He looked at Edith as if she were to blame.

That's Zoe, she said.

What's Zoe?

Never mind, she replied and looked at Wyatt. Can I help you?

The older man smiled. We were just visiting with the preacher, he said.

Ex-preacher, Edith corrected.

If you prefer.

I do.

Well, yes, you know how it is with some habits.

So I've heard. Go on, you were visiting with my father.

That's right.

May I ask about what?

Oh, just a friendly chat about this, that and the other.

A friendly chat?

That's right.

About this, that and...

And the other, yes ma'am, pretty much.

Harrison, who had spent this time in the grass attempting to scrape the pig shit off his boot and muttering to himself, said to his father he'd be in the car and then turned and went off down the hill.

Don't get any of that on the upholstery, his father called after him.

Edith watched him walk away when she noticed the small handgun holstered on

Harrison's hip. She looked at Wyatt. I'd appreciate it, she said, if he'd leave his gun in the car the next time you two get the urge to drop by for a chat.

I'll be sure to mention that to him. Now if you'll excuse me.

Wyatt pointed his self back down the hill and then paused and turned and looked back at Edith. Your father is right about one thing, he said. You are her spitting image.

The Mother, Rose:

She was a fighter, my Catherine was. But in a kind, respectful way, never mean about. But blunt, straight to the point. No sense leaving it to interpretation. She always knew what kind of life she wanted. But then, well, everything changed and the war started and John David... I think he just got all caught up in it all. Like so many others. It was difficult for him, too, I know. I'm not sure he could even see what all it was asking of him, what it was taking from them both. But Catherine, she saw it, she knew.

She had so much passion for life. And her art, her art. Oh my.

She found him in the same place where she'd left him earlier that morning. In the barn, leaning over the conveyor. His back was to the barn door and he was sitting hunched over with one arm hidden in his lap and the other laid across the sorter, like some drunk propped up at a bar.

Daddy? Edith said and walked up and put her hand on his back. What's wrong?

Nothing's wrong, Frank answered.

You don't look so well.

Well, I don't know why that would be. I'm having the time of my life.

Is that so?

She scootched around him where he sat on the stool and studied the piece of machinery. It still not working?

It did for a while then it didn't.

Should we call someone?

Like who? This contrary thing's a hundred years old. Anyone who could've worked on it died a decade ago.

She took a step back and looked at him. Speaking of contrary, I just saw Wyatt Kent leaving.

Hm.

What did he want?

Nothing much. Just stopped by for a visit.

Funny. That's what he said.

He lent me a hand with that washed out area.

Wyatt Kent lent you a hand?

That's right.

Strange. He didn't really look dressed for farm work. In fact, he looked dressed for his kind

of work, which near as I can tell is swindling good people of their money. Her father didn't respond and she stood there watching him tinker and finally she asked: His visit have anything to do with your bank meeting this morning?

Nope.

Really?

Not at all.

Edith studied him. Well, she said, I'll tell you what, since it sounds like the two of you have concocted the perfect alibi, I'm just going to put a pin in this for now because I need to get started on dinner and then after dinner I'll need to clean up and then give Benji a bath and put him to bed, which by then, I imagine, you will have made your own self disappear, thus sparing you any further discomfort of having me prod you like this for information. But, I can promise you, we're going to get to the bottom of this. And after we do that, you're going to tell me what happened at the bank. But for now, where's Benji?

He's here somewhere, Frank answered.

I figured as much. Should I check the back seat of the car?

He's with Miguel in the upper lot.

Edith turned and started toward the barn door when she remembered the card in her hand. She lifted it overhead and called out over her shoulder, Also, thank you for nothing.

He sat at the table and by the light of the small table lamp studied the worn road atlas. There all the land opened wholly before him, flat, pallid and bleak, the corners curling skyward as he searched amongst the smudges and gray silhouettes, a bloodshot array of roadwork, for some mark on that pale, depthless country to which he might affix for himself a crude bearing. When no one place called out to him—and none ever did—he would glance at her picture. A few precious seconds, or longer. For eternity if given the choice. And closing his eyes he would lift one hand from the table and sweeping it over the entirety of it, like a fortune teller with their globe, he invited the land to speak to him. An errand as helpless as any there was as the world lay deaf and indifferent to him. And so it was when his hand came to rest and he measured the distance from where it hung suspended over the atlas to where he knew himself to be and found the divide never far enough. Not even when Fate, or something more sinister, beseeched him beyond the thin, tattered borders and bid him alone to the ends of the earth and over the world's blunt edge.

He woke to a noise and a flash of bright light, then went skirting for cover like some startled vagrant or half-human creature. His feet kicking and slipping across the floor, pulling up bits of carpet fluff. With one hand he shielded his eyes and pawed sideways at the air with the other and scrambling as such made his way to the corner where he pressed his balled up self into the wall.

Good morning, Sergeant, said a voice.

John David lowered his hand enough to see a figure squatted across the room. A man kneeling by the window. Dressed in the Army green uniform—slacks with black piping, jump boots, short sleeved shirt. In one hand he held the cord to the blinds and with the other was petting the upturned belly of the little dog. What the hell is wrong with you? John David asked. Funny, the officer answered, I was about to ask you the same question.

John David scooted himself up and leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. He concentrated on his breathing. Inhale, hold. Exhale, hold. Repeat. Inhale, hold. Exhale, hold. Repeat.

Sorry I startled you, said the officer.

John David glared at him. What kind of chaplain just lets himself in?

It was easier than you might think, said the chaplain as he glanced around the empty room. Now I see why. There's not much here to steal.

What does that mean?

What happened to all your stuff?

It's gone.

Gone where?

John David looked away.

Okay, said the chaplain. How about we start someplace else, your front door for instance.

What about it?

Where is it?

He remembered then waking in the night to the sound of thunder. Rising from the bed, gathering the little dog and heading out into the drizzle. Cruising along the wet streets, all but deserted at that hour save for a late night service truck. Which he'd thought odd at the time, but what-the-fuck-ever, the only reason he'd gave it any thought at. All was because he'd gotten stuck behind the damn thing, the truck's yellow hazard light igniting the gloom like a spark of tinder, reminding him of this one night during the war, but he couldn't remember exactly which night that was, or even which fucking tour, but it was just as well because at some point the truck turned off and it was just him alone in the dark on the road headed toward home. Of removing the door he'd had no memory.

The chaplain stood watching him briefly and adjusted his belt buckle and looked out the window. He looked at John David sitting with his shoulders slumped against the wall. I saw your CO this morning, he said. When I went to find you for our appointment. He asked that you stop by his office.

That's not happening, said John David. You agreed. Any day that I have to sit through this torture is a day I don't have to see him.

Ouch. You might want to reconsider though.

John David looked at him.

Sorry, the chaplain said. If he knows anything about your request for discharge he didn't share it with me.

Saving the bad news for himself?

You don't know that. And if it is that, we'll try something else. We'll try harder.

John David rolled his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. You think the problem is I'm not trying hard enough?

No, that's not what I'm saying, not at all. What I'm saying is that if one thing doesn't work we'll try something else, and if that doesn't work, something else still again. Hope builds strength and strength carries us forward, even when things seem impossible.

Will you stop.

Stop what?

Talking.

The Chaplain:

I liked John David, I liked him a lot. He's smart, thoughtful, tough—courage beyond question. But also tree top tall and thick as a root, not exactly the ideal candidate for counseling. But it was normal, after what he'd been through. Holding on like that to his anger, not wanting to let go of his grief. His constant worry and fear of reliance. The best way I know how to explain is like when you go to sit down in a chair. You see the chair. You can feel it, know that it will hold you. Then you turn your back

to sit and you trust that some jerk wont yank it out from under you while you're back is turned. If that happens, and it happens often enough, you start to believe that everything you thought you knew was true in the world was nothing but a lie and that everyone, everyone, is out to get you. It's hard to regain faith when that happens. But what's worse than that: You begin to think you deserve it.

Have you've given any more thought to attending that support group? the chaplain asked. He'd taken a seat along the wall opposite John David, the little dog curled up asleep beside him.

No.

No, you've not given it more thought or—

No.

I wish you'd reconsider. They're good people—

I never said they weren't.

Is it because these are spouses and therefore mostly wives?

There's that.

Okay. What else?

John David didn't answer.

There are men there too, you know. A couple anyway who show up time to time. But even if that weren't the case, the struggle with loss is the same no matter the survivor's gender. You can work through this, but it's entirely up to you.

I need a drink, John David said and he started to slowly get to his feet.

Says the one who woke up on the floor of an empty house.

John David paused in half-rise and looked at him.

I apologize, the chaplain said, looking embarrassed. That was uncalled for. Really, I'm sorry.

John David stood and started toward the door and the chaplain watched him and then he pointed to the floor and called out, Don't forget your picture.

John David turned and he looked back and saw the photograph of her laying on the floor. He walked over and picked it up and held it in both hands, the metal cold and thin, light as bone.

The Chaplain:

The problem is we are turning soldiers like John David loose on the world everyday with little regard for their basic human needs. We welcome them home with ribbons and medals. We pat them on the back and say job well done. And then what? We leave them alone to their struggle. Never sitting them down and asking them the hard question, the hardest question of all, which is this: What now is your purpose for living?

The private contractor, Harlan Rook, came walking up from the barracks along a worn dirt path past a small arms weapons range and a cleaning station and he turned down a wide concrete path at the end of which sat a plain-looking concrete blockhouse. Inside, beyond the metal security gate and the narrow vestibule, was another small cleaning station modeled after the one outside with long metal worktables, stools and ceiling-mounted air compressor hoses. Ballistic-proof steel and a long laminated glass window separated the secured area, behind which a dozen rows of low profile, metal halide lighting fixtures hung from the ceiling. The lights ran the length of the armory, casting a burnish on the polished olive-colored floor and the like-colored modular vaults, where were housed a vast cache of weapons and optical sighting equipment. At the other end of the depot was a built-in set of doors with locking bars, behind which were shelves and bins of ammunition and explosives. It was there he just glimpsed the armorer standing with his back to him over a table distracted by some work.

Newell, Rook called as he entered the armory.

In a minute, came the reply.

Rook pushed his Oaklies to the top of his head and started toward the sliding glass window but then saw the access gate ajar and he walked over and slipped through it. He set his backpack on the floor and sat down at the armorer's counter. The rifle propped on the cleaning stand was a 7.62x39mm Romanian AK-47 on a Type 2 milled receiver with a wooden buttstock. A six power Russian side-mounted scope was attached, and an empty thirty round magazine clip lay to the side. Rook lifted the rifle off the stand and checked the selector switch then he pulled back the bolt and raised the weapon to his eye.

The armorer walked up behind him. You're not supposed to be in here, he said in a thick Australian accent.

And you're not supposed to leave the gate unsecured.

Rook raised the barrel higher and swiveled the chair and he looked through the scope and aimed it at a point on the ceiling at the far end of the building. Can I shoot it? he asked.

Sure.

Really?

Fuck no. Give me that.

Newell took the rifle and set it down on the stand. He was a large man, with thick biceps and a big barrel chest. Now get up.

It's not really my thing anyway, Rook said as the armorer took his place at the counter and began disassembling the Russian-made rifle. Too gentle.

Gentle? Newell replied. This thing's a fucking shovel.

I've heard it shoots like one too. Rook leaned over and picked up the empty magazine clip from the table and he started to turn it over in his hands until Newell reached over and pried the magazine from his hand.

You've heard wrong, the armorer told him and he laid the magazine back down on the counter and turned back to his work.

There sat a television on the counter next to where the armorer had his workstation, the sound turned down. On the screen a gray haired man stood speaking to an audience before a photograph of an American female soldier. She was dressed in fatigue pants and a tee shirt, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, and she pointing and smiling at the exposed private parts of a man hanging suspended from the ceiling by his arms. Rook reached out and adjusted the volume.

This is a new age of terror, the man was saying. One that cannot be ignored or dealt with in the usual manner. It comes to our door in disguise. As the righteous, as children, as your neighbor, and if we are not watchful, it will destroy our way of life. Never before in the history of the humankind has there been such a great demand for a beacon of hope, people like you, an army trained to respond swiftly, effectively, and without fail to the danger.

Newell said, Another fucking beacon of hope.

Rook glanced at him. You're not a believer?

In fascist crusades? No, I'm not. I only have that crap on in the case someone important walks in. Unlike now.

The armorer reached to turn the volume down.

Hold on, Rook said and the armorer shook his head but lowered his hand anyway. This is my favorite part.

Do not allow this one debacle, the man on the screen pointed to the photograph, to shadow the fact that much of the work being done over there is being done the children of farmers, of machine operators and truck drivers, teachers and construction workers. Great Americans. Profoundly religious Americans. Yet the media tries to portray them as something evil, something godless, when the fact of the matter is, they are defending the very principles that make our country great. Individual responsibility, representative government, and the rule of law under God.

The armorer looked sidelong at Rook. Remind you of anyone?

Rook shrugged. Some noble causes succeed by slinging rhetoric, others a sword.

So what? That's okay as long as God is on your side?

You should turn the sound up more often. The Almighty stands by no man's side. It is we who should strive to always stand by His.

Sounds like more crusade talk, wrapping your cause in righteous struggle.

If you don't believe in it, then why are you here?

Newell looked at Rook as if he were crazy, then he looked around at the superbly and expensively stocked arm's room. Need I say more? Now did you want something or are just here to share your convictions?

I need a sidearm and some ammo.

You got a req?

No.

You know the rules, no requisition, no weapon.

You worry too much about rules.

Only them that pays the rent.

Rook went over to his backpack down and squatted and unzipped the top. He took out a small

pistol and removed the magazine and slid back the bolt and he gripped the barrel and walked over and extended the grip toward the armorer.

What's that? Newell asked.

It's a gun.

I can see that it's a bloody fucking gun. I'm asking what kind.

You tell me.

Newell set down the rifle pieces and he took the pistol and turned it over in his hands, speaking quietly to himself: Russian. No hammer. Well-balanced. Sturdy. Probably decent firepower. A little too angular in the hand though.

What size round does it shoot, Rook told him.

Newell popped out the magazine and inspected it and he slid it back in until it locked. My guess, nine millimeter. Where'd you get it?

From a guy.

You're quite the storyteller, aren't you?

I picked it up off a guy I brought in a couple a weeks ago. Some Special Forces dude. Tracked him down near the Mexican border.

And so what, he gave you this as a reward?

Something like that.

Newell looked annoyed as he handed the gun to Rook and went back to his work.

Rook watched him a moment and then walked over and squatted and returned the pistol to the backpack. He zipped the pack shut and stood and faced the armorer. You see something wrong with that? he asked.

Taking another man's property? Even a deserter's, yeah, you could say that.

He was just some shit bag.

Doesn't matter. It was his. He owned it.

He probably took it himself off some haji.

Newell turned on his stool and rested one hand on his thigh and looked ready to speak but then turned his attention back to the task of removing the rifle's action.

What? Rook asked.

Nothing, mate. Nothing at all.

You see some problem by holding this limp dick to a higher standard?

You mean by stealing his pistol? You've been listening to too many speeches. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got more important things to do.

The door to the depot suddenly flew open and two men in suits entered the vestibule. Behind them trailed three others, each wearing ATF jackets.

Fuck me, Newell said under his breath.

Pack up the AKs, the suited man leading the group announced.

And the Bushmasters, one of the ATF agents added.

You heard him, the man in the suit continued. Pack them up. Every last one.

He walked up to the window and looked in at Rook. What are you doing back there? he demanded.

Just lending a hand, Rook answered.

Out. Now," the man told him.

Rook did as he was told but as he closed the door shut behind him, the man had a change of heart. On second thought, he said, you're so eager, get back there and help him.

Rook watched the men storm out and after they were gone and the door had closed he turned back to where Newell had been sitting. He was about to make some wisecrack about the boss having his balls in a sling but the armorer had already disappeared into one of the back storage rooms and could be heard cursing and slinging empty gun cases around.

She stood stuffing a chicken with quarters of lemon and onion when Jordan walked with two cases of beer and set them on the counter. What's that for? she asked. The crew, he said and he turned and looked at where Benji was sitting across the house with his back to them watching cartoons on the television. He called out, Hey Sport and when the boy said nothing in return swung his head around and gave his sister a questioning look.

Don't judge, Edith told him and she toweled off her hands. We have our boundaries. She picked up one of the cases of beer and walked it to the pantry.

What are you doing? Jordan asked.

Saving it for later.

I was going to take it out to the barn.

Not now you aren't.

Then when?

This weekend, if you want. Though I'd rather you wait until after the harvest. Unless you'd like for someone to get hurt.

Why would I want that? he asked. I just thought—

This weekend, Edith cut him off as she carried the second case to the pantry.

You can't treat them like they're your children.

I'm not treating them like children. They're employees who have a job to do. I'm treating them like that, like employees. Who I value and respect and want not to get hurt.

Whatever. Where's Dad?

In the barn would be my guess. He's afraid to come home. She went back to stuffing the chicken as Jordan bent to look out the window at the falling grey dusk and then back at his sister. The bank meeting not go that well? he asked.

I'll get to that, but first, what do you know about Wyatt Kent?

Hu shrugged. He's a crook.

And Harrison?

Also a crook. Only dumber. Why?

I ran in to them today. Out here.

Out here?

Seems they had a little chat.

With Dad? He can't stand their type.

Apparently a little less today than yesterday. What could they possibly be interested in this far from town? Surely, not another car lot.

There's no telling. How much does he need anyway?

She looked at him. How much what?

Money.

Money?

Yes.

A shit-ton, she said and went back to stuffing the chicken.

It's really that bad? I mean isn't this place paid for? This house? The land? Those trees?

You can't pay bills with land or trees or houses you happen to live in. You pay it with cash. She looked at him. I'm surprised. I thought being a business owner yourself you'd know these things.

What about operating capital?

Operating capital?

Yeah. Surely there's that.

Well, let's see, she said, where to begin.

She paused with one hand buried in the chicken and the other she raised and made into a loose fist. A lot of that so-called operating capital, she started, is tied up in the fact that we lost a ton of blossoms in that early thaw we had. Remember that? Back in March? And then there was the late season frost in mid-April. Both of which, you know, are terrible for apples trees. But now, that wasn't really cash even, was it? I mean it's the the promise of future cash maybe. Farm zero, mother nature one.

Okay.

Then came the really dry summer where those blossoms that did survive developed end rot. Farm still zero, mother nature two.

You can stop now.

After that came an increase in pest control costs, a greater need for pruning, both of which impacted our labor costs. Add to that a sorter that can't seem to stay in operation for more than ten minutes at a time. Let's see. Where are we. Three. Four. Five. Shall I go on?

You made your point. So what's he going to do?

You're asking me? I have no idea. I'm lucky to have gotten as much as I did out of him.

Which was what?

Edith looked at him and she glanced across the room at the television and the end credits of whatever cartoon the little boy had been watching. Benji, it's time to turn that off.

Just one more, he said.

No sir.

Benji turned and laid over the back of the couch to plead with her. Please. Just one?

All right, one more. But then it's time to get ready for a bath. We all need to get to bed at a descent time tonight.

The little boy spun around and jumped in the air and landed again in a seated position his eyes glued to the screen and a commercial for pop-up pudding pops.

Fucking hell, she muttered and glanced over at her brother who wore a grin. What? Some boundaries, he said and she looked away. Nothing wrong with being flexible.

Jordan raised both hands in the air. I'm not saying a word.

Yes, you did. Just now, in fact.

Back to the money, I was thinking...

Here we go.

Marcus and I have been thinking about developing an apple beer, like the one that was popular back in the seventies—

Edith stopped him. You're not listening. When I say a shit-ton I mean a holy shit-ton. Besides, he would never take money from you.

Why not?

Because he wouldn't. And I don't mean just from you, I mean not from any of us. Not in a

million years.

He'd rather just lose this place?

No.

Well there must be something someone can do.

Brian has an idea.

Brain? Jordan said. As in your Brian?

Yes, she replied, dragging out the word. What other Brian would I be speaking of?

I don't know, but, either way—and I'm just going to say this—your Brian doesn't exactly seem to be like the money raising type.

Stop calling him my Brian. He's just Brian.

Have thought about renting out the apartment?

Over the garage?

Yeah. It's just sitting there empty, isn't it?

Edith didn't answer.

What? Jordan asked.

Nothing, she said.

Come on. Out with it.

She looked away. I just thought maybe...I don't know, I thought maybe John David might need it?

John David? You think he'd ever agree to moving back here?

It sounds more plausible than having a stranger live over the garage? You think Daddy would ever accept that?

Sounds like he might not have a choice.

Not happening.

There's this woman I know, she might—

Edith cut him off with a hard laugh. Ha. Now you're definitely dreaming. He definitely would not rent it out to one of your tattooed, brewery girlfriends.

I take offense to that comment. And also I'll have you know this person is not in fact a girlfriend and don't think I've seen her step foot in the brewery. Nor does she have any tattoos. Now that I'm aware of anyway. She's British by way of Africa. Or at least that's the way I've heard her put it. She teaches yoga downtown and needs a place sooner than later.

Why all of the sudden?

She and her husband are separated. The place she's been staying is too expensive. Plus, she wants to live alone.

I don't know, Edith said. I mean go ahead and ask him if you want. Personally I'd especially love to help another woman with man trouble. God knows we need to stick together, but—

The door to the house opened and the two turned to watch as their father appeared in the doorway.

Hello, Edith called to him.

He nodded at her, then looked at Jordan and nodded at him too.

How was your day? Edith asked.

Fine, he said.

I'm making roast chicken for dinner. She looked at Jordan and smiled and winked and then looked at her father. Your favorite.

He grumbled something undecipherable and sat down at the table to take off his boots.

Jordan was just asking about your meeting with the bank, Edith told him. When her father didn't respond, she asked, You want to share with him what you shared with me?

Not particularly. No.

Fine. Then I will. Edith turned toward her brother. The bank suggested he liquidate. Liquidate what?

The whole everything, she replied.

Edith:

So, yeah, I'm the one who stayed, the one who stuck it out with Daddy. First Mom, then Jordan, and finally John David, too, and after that it was just me all alone with him. What I could I do? I couldn't leave him, and trust me I had plenty of opportunities. I had plans of my own. Same as Jordan did, same as John David. I thought one day I'd be like Darwin and set off on my own grand exploration. See where the wind and sails took me. Then Brian came along and then Benji and everything had to change. Had I not gotten pregnant, I don't know. I'm not sure that would've changed anything. I loved it here. Still do. This is home. These mountains are my Galapagos. This orchard, my lab. These apples my finches. I know that sounds silly but I don't care. John David had what he thought were his own good reasons for leaving and after Mom died so did Jordan doing what he did. I get all that and don't hold anything against either of them. But I think there's a lot of truth to the saying that sometimes you just have to pick yourself up by whatever strap you can grab and find the way to carry on.

He sat behind the wheel watching his fellow soldiers coming and going from the headquarters building. Men mostly, and a few women too. But mostly men. Some of whom he was starting to recognize. Not by name but by their appearance and whether or not they carried themselves with the recklessness of the uninitiated or the vigilance of the war torn. He opened the car door and the little dog stirred from where it was curled into a ball in the floorboard of the passenger seat and he reached over and snapped a leash on its collar and walked it over to the ball field where it stooped in the grass and peed. He secured it by the leash to a bike rack and headed across the lot.

Inside, the captain was busy on the phone and John David was made to stand waiting in the hall outside his office. From there he could see the CO sitting with his back to the door. His chair leaned back. One boot propped on an opened desk drawer. He was holding the landline in one hand and the other lay cantered loosely across his bald scalp, which had taken the hue of pink grapefruit. The fingers of that hand flexing open and closed as he spoke.

I don't want a fucking replacement. What I want is my damn money back. No, fuck no, I am not going to calm down. When you sold me the wheels you assured me they were bulletproof strong. Do you remember saying that? Bulletproof strong, you said. Those are your own words. Would last for-fucking-ever, you said. Best two grand I'd ever spend. What? No. I don't give a shit why the spokes cracked. It's a goddamn Porsche. I'm lucky as hell to still be alive. Yes. You do that and then call me back.

The commander hung up the phone and he swiveled his chair around and when he saw who was standing in the hall he called out, Sar'nt Durant? John David entered the office and the CO asked, You ever bought anything over the Internet?

John David looked at him but didn't speak. He stood facing the desk at some degree of attention. His eyes fixated on the wall where hung portraits of the chain of command.

Those greedy cocksuckers won't stop at anything to screw someone up the ass, said the captain. Then he suddenly cocked his head to one side and looked askance. Why are you not in uniform?

John David glanced down at his jeans, his tee shirt. He looked at the captain.

You're out of uniform, the captain informed him.

Yes sir.

I'm asking why, Staff Sergeant.

John David didn't answer right away and the captain's jaw knotted and slacked and he pursed his thin lips and his face turned more and more red the longer his question went unanswered.

I have the day off, John David replied.

You have the day off? the captain repeated and he sucked on his teeth like he did every time one of his subordinates did something he thought asinine and he looked at John David

and dropped his foot to floor with a thud. He leaned forward in his chair. Listen, he said, I don't care if you're on leave or not. When I request you to report to my office you do so in the proper fucking uniform. Is that understood?

Understood.

Understood what?

Understood, sir.

The CO leaned back again and the boot returned to its open-drawer post. I gather since you're here you've spoken with the chaplain. He told you the board has reached their decision?

The CO paused, wringing whatever he could from the power of his position. It's not the answer you were hoping for.

From the hall the outside door opened and in walked a small ruckus. Laughter. Some playful banter.

Keep it down, the captain called out when the men passed in front of his door. This isn't a goddamn summer camp. He looked at John David. Of course you can appeal but you'll need to provide something more.

More what?

Proof.

What kind of proof?

That your situation warrants a hardship discharge, I guess. I don't know. You should probably talk with the chaplain about that.

The chaplain.

Yes. Is there a problem with that?

With the chaplain?

Yes.

No, sir.

The CO studied him. A few seconds passed. Then he leaned forward. So is that what you want to do?

What?

Appeal

John David didn't answer.

How long have you been in, Sar'nt Durant?

Six years.

How much longer on this enlistment?

Sixteen months.

Enough for another deployment?

Probably.

No, not probably. The answer's yes, for sure. How many of those has it been?

Deployments?

Yes.

Four.

Including this last one?

Five then.

The captain dropped his boot and he lowered his knobby bald head and stroked one hand across it and massaged the back of his neck and his eyes were closed and he inhaled deeply and slowly let it out. He looked across the desk. Listen, he said, I can see you're still having a difficult time, and, personally, I don't blame you. There's no question in anyone's mind you've

suffered a terrible loss. Of that there's not anyone anywhere on this planet who would fucking disagree. Hell, if it was me in your shoes, I'd want to be left alone, too. Or better yet, be sent back to the war to rain down holy terror on the filthy fucking shoulders of my enemy. Anything to escape my own skin. Were it not for this goddamn leg injury, I'd be doing just that. But that's not the point. The point is the Army has spent a good bit of money training you. They're not just going to let that go. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Leaning against the desk was the cane the CO used to walk with and he regarded it with disdain but then he picked it up and held it across his lap like a baton. He gestured toward his desk with his chin. I have something here that might help, he said. Sixty days of excess leave with your name on it. Already approved by the deputy CG. Effective immediately. You can go do whatever the fuck you want. Clear your head. Get your life back together. Spend the day dressed in women's panties, if that's your thing. I don't care, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that at the end of those sixty days you come back here locked and loaded. Ready to get on with whatever the fuck it is we have to do to see this mission through.

And what of the appeal? John David asked.

There's not one. You drop it. You accept the Board's decision.

John David didn't respond and the CO reached and picked up a pen from his desk. He extended his arm. Those are the terms, he said. Take it or leave it.

The phone rang and the CO glanced over at it and he tilted his head in its direction and looked at John David. I need to get this, he said.

The CO:

The last thing he needed was any more time to himself. I knew then that would get him nowhere. I'm not saying putting a rifle in his hand would of solved all his problems, but as Patton himself said, war is the only place where a man lives. They engender those who fight them with more than just blood and death. Camaraderie. Unity. Brotherhood. These are what Sarn't Durant really needed. Not time to himself. Not more poking around in his mind. He needed someone who would stand on his chest and scream in his face that others were depending on him. His command, his fellow soldiers. There are enough people already walking around disinvested in the outcome. Most of them have no fucking clue. The only ones who even know there's a war still going on is us poor fucking bastards still fighting it.

As he was leaving the headquarters building John David noticed the car. The Porsche. It was parked in the CO's personal spot, just to the right of the back entrance. Bulletproof wheels and all. John David glanced around the back of the headquarters building and adjoining lot and walked over to the front of vehicle. He stood looking down at the hood. Then he surveyed the surroundings again and reached a hand to the small of his back where he removed a knife from a belt clip. He stepped quickly forward and crouching beside the Porsche jabbed the blade into the glossy sidewall and even before he had fully removed it the tire began to hiss.

PFC Brantley:

Just speak into the camera?

Yes.

Do I look at you?

I'd prefer you look directly into the camera if that's okay. I can scoot closer if that helps. Is that better?

Yessir.

Okay. So tell me about the day leading up to the Red Cross Message. You were part of a convoy with Staff Sergeant Durant, is that correct?

Yessir.

What was the mood like that day?

The mood? I don't know. Kind of crappy, I guess. But that was par for the course. You just do your best. You know. To not get killed or whatever.

Where were you headed?

Some village near the border to setup patrols. Something to do with denying sanctuary to the bad guys. That's what they called it anyway, Denying the enemy sanctuary.

Sounds vague.

Yessir. That pretty much sums up most of the missions we went on over there.

The vehicle and equipment and the gear the men carried and even the men themselves clinked and clambered and rattled and shook as they made their north through the desert toward the border. Past landscapes of lush browns and greens, fields of wheat and barley. A rare offering of tranquility and peace to the war-weary.

Four weeks, said Corporal Mitchell riding shotgun. Five tops.

Really? That quick? asked Brantley, the PFC behind the wheel.

The seasoned corporal cut his eyes toward the young soldier. Don't worry. A lot can go wrong in five weeks.

I'm not worried.

Is that right?

I mean, how hard can it be, right, to lockdown some dipshit village?

Mitchell looked at him and laughed and he glanced at the two men seated behind him in

the Humvee. Sarn't Durant, you believe this fucking new guy? Thinks you can just stride into town like a fucking gunslinger and own it. As if that were all there was to winning a war. You want to square him away, or should I?

In the seat directly behind the corporal, Staff Sergeant John David Durant had his eyes lowered to his lap.

Sarn't Durant? Sarn't Durant?

John David looked up into the corporal's face. What?

Mitchell's eyes shifted to John David's lap and the item he held there. A flimsy slip of paper sealed in a plastic baggie. That's not doing you any favors, you know that right?

John David slipped the baggie into the pocket of his flak jacket and he scrunched up his nose and peered out the window and said, Neither is sitting behind you. What the hell did you eat for breakfast?

Huevos Rancheros, Mitchel replied with a grin. Almost as good as what I get back home. That would explain your marital status.

The driver, Brantley, snickered and the corporal turned to him and said, Drive the Humvee, Private. That's all you have to do. Just drive the fucking Humvee.

The corporal turned in his seat again to look back at John David. Girlfriends, husbands, wives. Babies. Especially babies. Especially ultrasounds of babies. They're just distractions, you ask me.

Which I didn't.

Who needs a reminder of just how far this bullshit is out of our hands?

At ease, Corporal, said the man sitting next to John David, his own face buried in a journal.

Sorry, LT, the corporal answered and he turned to face forward. I keep forgetting you're here.

What was that? the Lieutenant asked.

Nothing, sir. Nothing at all.

Corporal Mitchell:

Here's the thing about wars. They don't care who they fuck over. Like Sarn't Durant. A great fucking guy, an incredible soldier. But every time he stepped outside the wire he was carrying the extra weight of this future life he had planned. Right there, square on his own fucking shoulders. I know that sounds crazy. But you also cant help but wonder if every casualty, every motherfucking close call, every hope and dream he had for that kid cracked and crumbled a bit, just a smidge. I mean really, when it comes right down to it, isn't that the purpose of war? The real fucking intention? Besides sowing death and destruction. A fucking lifetime of true despair. It doesn't care who or what it kills. It doesn't even have to be a real person. Just the fucking idea of a person is enough.

They passed fields of crop, a few small flocks of sheep, some goats, and one large herd of camels. No people. Not a soul, not a sign of anyone anywhere. Not even as they entered the

village.

Someone tell them we were coming? The corporal said.

The PFC laughed. Yeah, maybe the fu—

Cut the chatter, ordered the Lieutenant. Who then radioed the other vehicles in the convoy to remain on alert. Brantley, he asked, when's the last time you washed these fucking windows?

The private replied, Not sure, Sir. A couple a days ago, I'd guess.

You'd guess a couple of days ago?

Yessir.

You don't think being able to see out them is all that important?

You mean through the windshield, sir?

I mean through any of them? snapped the Lieutenant.

They went on a bit until Mitchell leaned over to the Private and said, Guess they didn't tell you down at the recruiter's office you'd be spending every second of your time in uniform washing some goddamn dirt off some goddamn Humvee, did they?

No. They failed to mention that.

The Lieutenant:

Soon as we arrived you could feel something different in the air. It wasn't hostility. That feeling had been there since day one. It was more like electricity. Like a hum. But coming from inside your head. Just a tiny nagging reminder that things aren't always as they seem. A warning. As we started to collect our gear and exit the vehicle, that's when there came the heavy compression of a single rifle. Which, strangely enough, made all the difference in the world in terms of what happened next.

Instantly, Mitchell jerked sideways a couple of times, trying to see out the window, and he turned and looked over the seat back and looked at John David's window, which was shattered and black. Holy shit!

Fuck.

Get down!

Holy shit, Mitchell repeated.

You see anyone? asked the LT, his voice shaking.

John David pointed through a small clear space in his window. There, he said.

A man stood not far away down a side street holding an Ak-47 rifle. The weapon appeared to have a jammed as the man was working the action furiously to correct it. He was dressed in the traditional low key attire—baggy pants, a long shirt and a head wrap. Only his footwear stood out from that of any other insurgent.

Sandals? Mitchell called out. We got shot by a farmer in fucking sandals?

The Lieutenant:

Honestly, it got hard to tell who was the enemy and who wasn't. These bad guys, they force these farmers out of their fields. Shop

owners, too. Anyone really. People just living their lives peacefully. And they threaten them, they threaten their families. Then they give them a gun and say, Now go shoot Americans or else. When I first arrived I used to think we were fighting a war against violence. Against greed, injustice, oppression. But then I came home and what do I find happening in America. Violence. Greed. Injustice. Oppression. The situation is no different. The people in charge forcing others to do their dirty work. The only difference is in America there's this appearance of progress. Maybe there's nobody holding a gun to your head, but why use a gun when it's a whole lot easier to wave money.

John David flung open his door and leapt from the vehicle. He dropped to the ground in a crouch and raised his rifle and targeted the sights on the man in the sandals. Down, he said. Get down on your knees. Drop the fucking gun.

The farmer looked at him, still frantically working the rifle's action.

Drop it!

Mitchell who had taken a position behind an adjacent building, yelled, Light him up, Durant.

John David trained his eyes on the farmer. A few yards behind the man a figure stood peering out from behind a partially opened door. A small person's face, a young girl. Dressed all in white and holding a shepherd's crook.

What are you waiting for? Mitchell yelled. Shoot that motherfucker.

The farmer cursed and flung the malfunctioning rifle to the ground and withdrew with some effort a handgun from under his long shirt.

John David applied the slimmest of pressures to the trigger. Please don't, he muttered, but the farmer raised the handgun and John David fully engaged the trigger and fired and the man fell backwards onto the road. He lay there not moving. Behind him, there was no sign anymore of girl.

PFC Brantley:

They ordered us back to base after that. Same fucking day, no discussion. Though by then we knew it was just one farmer with a forty year old rifle, it didn't matter. We just did as we were told.

Corporal Mitchell:

Everyone's nerves were pretty fried after that, but especially John David's. After we got dropped us off at the barracks, I fell hard into the sack and so did he. But I could hear him tossing and turning. When someone came banging on the door, I thought it was him making a racket until I heard him get up to answer it.

Staff Sergeant Durant? the soldier, a woman, asked him. She was dressed in clean and sharply-pressed BDU's. Wearing a reflective belt around the middle.

What is it?

She didn't answer right away and he looked past her to see was there anyone else, but saw no one.

Can you get dressed please and come with me? she said.

Why? What for?

What is it? Mitchell said groggily behind him.

John David glanced at him and he looked back at the specialist. I know you, he said. You're from the chaplain's office. What's happened?

She waited outside the door looking uncomfortable while he got dressed and then he followed her across the compound to the chaplain's office where, once inside, she directed him to a door. He opened it and looked in. Another, the battalion chaplain, was standing next to a desk. On the desk sat a telephone, the receiver off the hook and on its side. He looked at the chaplain and looked at the phone and looked again at the chaplain.

Come in, said the chaplain and motioned a hand toward the phone.

John David stepped forward. Outside the building the sound of the morning call to prayer began playing over a loudspeaker somewhere. He picked up the phone. Hello?

Sergeant Durant?

Yes.

This is Julie with the American Cross.

Edith:

I wasn't sure what to think when they said the baby was backwards and they were going to have to turn it. I mean, everything seemed to be going okay at first. The doctor at least seemed to know what he was doing. He talked like he did anyway. He was so calm and direct about it, like it wasn't any big deal. As if this kind of thing happened all the time. It wasn't until I noticed that everyone else in the room had stopped talking and were just standing there looking at him like he was some kind of crazy. That's when it hit me, how serious it was. Then I just wanted it to be over, bad as that sounds. But I did. I just wanted it to stop. The alarms. The nurses chattering. For Catherine to stop screaming. At some point, when the doctor said she was hemorrhaging, someone grabbed me from behind and pushed me toward the door. The last thing I heard before it closed was the doctor yelling for God to hand him the forceps.

After he'd left the CO's office John David spent the rest of the afternoon sitting at a bar amongst the couple of other lone warriors scattered about, like buoys bobbing in the dark current, their shoulders slumped but for the occasional sigh and despite there being nothing but sports playing on the seven huge televisions their eyes were pointed down staring into glasses of beer or mixed drinks or in some extreme cases both, until one of them would stand and stumbling make their way to the latrine or in a rare case, the exit, to which he and the others would silently share a look of godspeed to the one crazy motherfucker stupid enough to venture back into the broken world awaiting them each outside.

When he, too, worked up the courage and left it was just after three in the afternoon. He headed to the motel and parked in his usual spot and then staggered up to his room where he fumbled briefly with the key before shoving it into the card reader. When the door didn't unlock he swiped it again. Still nothing.

What the fuck? he mumbled and looked at the number on the door. He jiggled the handle and roughly swiped the card reader again and was studying the card for a defect when the door to the room flung open. Standing there scowling and shirtless was a man with one hand on the door and the other gripping a small white bath towel around his hairy, pot-bellied middle.

What? the man demanded.

John David looked confused and speechless and blinked several times and then looked the man in the eyes. This is my room, he said. The man made a face and told him to buzz the fuck off and slammed the door shut.

John David stood there a moment, teetering, then made up his mind and he steadied himself and banged again on the door. Nothing. He banged again. Then came angry muttering from inside and the door opened and the man in the towel stood filling the doorway once more. John David looked past him and saw a woman scowling from the bed, the white bed sheet pulled up to cover her breasts. John David looked at the man. This is my fucking room, he said.

The man studied him a long moment and he must've been considering the possibility of a mistake on his part because he leaned forward and read the numbers on the door, but then looked again at John David and said, Go bother somebody else. He started to push the door shut, but before he could close it fully, John David had thrown himself into the open space. He shoved against the door but the man was taller and weighed several pounds more than he and was also probably sober and as he pushed back he extended one hand and grabbed John David by the shoulders. He dug his thumb into his collar and drove him backwards onto the walkway.

Inside the room, the girl asked what was the goddamn problem. There's not one, the man snarled back and he sneered at John David and called him an ass and reached back to shut the door.

John David growled and sprung forward. He jabbed one lone arm through the doorway before it could close and wedged his shoulder against the door jam and with the man's weight pressing against it shoved his cheek into the narrow opening. He cut his eyes to the left to better see beyond it and into the room. Plus, there's a fucking noise ordinance, he snapped over the din of the music.

What the hell? the man said. Call the front desk, he barked to the girl and he thrust his weight harder against the door. John David cried out and the man grabbed his wrist and using the door as a fulcrum wrenched the arm backwards and pinned it to the backside of the door. Call the fucking front desk, the man said again to the girl, who hadn't yet moved from the bed.

When the girl from the office arrived, she looked at John David and she looked at the man on the other side of the half-closed door. What's going on here? she demanded.

This stupid prick thinks this is his room.

The girl held up her hands. Sir, please let him go.

Tell him, John David said to the girl. Go ahead. Fucking tell him.

The girl looked at him. You only reserved the room for the one night, remember?

John David craned his head to look back at her. What?

You only reserved the room for one night.

So, you just gave it to someone else? What about my stuff?

There was nothing in here, said the man.

Sir, please. Just let him go. And can you please turn off the music?

The man let go of John David's arm and he stepped back letting the door open further. The towel had fallen to the floor in the scuffle and he looked at it and glanced at the girl and then looked down at his limp, spotted pecker. He smiled at her and she looked away and he reached down and scooped up the towel.

The music? the girl reminded him.

This is bullshit, said the woman from inside the room. They all three looked over at her and watched as she got up from the bed and walked over to the dresser and turned off a small, portable stereo. She was tall and thin and naked too, with short cropped hair, and she saw them all three just looking at her and she turned her back to them and slipped on a tee shirt.

John David rubbed his shoulder and looked at the girl. I just want my things.

I know you do, she told him. I have them. Don't worry.

He stood watching her, wobbling and his eyes looking very unsteady.

When you didn't check out this morning and I didn't hear from you about extending your stay I moved your things to one of the other rooms. The one's with kitchenettes. I told you about them?

He looked like he didn't remember and she said, Just follow me, and showed him to the room and after they went inside she pointed out where she'd put his belongings.

My duffle, he said.

It's right there. She pointed into the closet.

Did you go through it?

No, of course not.

He was quiet a couple of seconds, trying to remember what else he owned, something substantial. My shaving kit? was all he could come up with.

On the shelf in the bathroom.

She walked over to the bathroom and turned on the light and stepped back to show him but he had sat down, perched on the edge of the bed like some soggy cardboard cutout, his

head hanging low, his shoulders drooped and his legs splayed out straight before him. To the girl, he looked to be sleeping. She walked over and took both of his feet in her hands and with some struggle maneuvered him flat on the bed.

She untied his boots and removed them and set them aside. She did the same with his socks. She studied his pants zipper briefly before deciding that was just asking too much of her and she wrestled the covers out from under his dead weight and placed them over top him. She walked over to the window and drew the blinds and turned off the lights and as she was leaving she paused in the open doorway, a fairylike silhouette with one hand on the door and the other resting on the wall switch. She turned her chin slightly, just over her shoulder.

What of your dog? she said.

What about it? he muttered and his words when they came surprised her so that she turned to look back into the gloomy room.

Where is it? she asked.

The two women were talking to one another across the counter when the phone rang. Excuse me, Edith said and answered it. Okay, sure. Okay. Yes, well can't you make them? They can't tell you anything? What's their number then, I'll call them myself? Hello? Sorry, what? No. Absolutely not. I'm not about to put him through that again. Edith looked up and saw her father standing at the sliding glass door and asked into the phone, Is there a preacher or a minister or someone of that nature on post? Yes, like a chaplain.

Frank slid open the sliding glass door and looked at the two woman and came inside.

What's is it? Edith asked. If it's about lunch, I haven't even started.

It's not about lunch.

Then? What?

Nothing. I just came by to see did you need any help.

With making sandwiches?

That, or anything else. I saw the car and...

You saw the car and thought what? That I was doing something behind your back. No, only you do that.

Frank looked at the other woman.

Hi, I'm Clara, the woman said as she rose from the stool.

She's interested in renting the space over the garage, Edith said.

Frank looked at her. Wasn't aware it was for rent.

Well then, I guess I was wrong, I do.

Do what?

Go behind your back, because it is and this is Clara and she's interested, so. Edith looked at her. You are, aren't you? I mean you will be after you've seen it, right?

Of course, Clara answered.

Good. Edith looked at her father. I'll be out soon, she said and waited for him to leave and after he'd gone she said that they would take a look at the space and after she would draft up some sort of lease agreement. Nothing fancy, she said. Just enough to satisfy him and possibly the bankers.

The bankers?

Long story, Edith said and they walked outside. And I'm sorry to have done that to you. Sometimes, to get things done around here, it's best to just spring it on him.

You're sure he's okay with it? He seemed a bit, I don't know, taken aback.

Oh, he was totally taken aback. Quite the cheeky thing for me to do, as y'all say across the pond, right? But yes, to answer your question, he'll be fine. As you'll see around here, I am outnumbered by men in my life, five to one, and while they are, for the most part, good men, even good men—perhaps especially good men—need a little nudge of a reminder of who's really in running the show.

Later, after she'd shown the apartment and made sandwiches and delivered them to her father, she went and found Benji kneeling before a young tree helping Miguel wrap it with plastic white trunk protectors. She dropped to her knees beside the boy and asked was he hungry.

He said yes and she handed him a sandwich and then told Miguel she had one for him, too, as well as the others who were having to work on a Saturday. I left them with Daddy at the barn, she told him.

You don't need to keep doing that, the foreman responded. They bring their own lunches. I know. But Saturdays can be a day they don't have to if they don't want to.

She reached over and held the spiral of plastic in place while Miguel finished wrapping it around the base of the trunk and secured it. The air was cool and crisp despite the overhead sun.

Tell me again why this is better than just painting the trunk white like we've been doing. Well, because now we have a pig roaming around.

You're blaming Zoe?

I'm blaming the thing will isn't deterred by paint.

She's not going to eat the trees, just the rotten fruit that falls from them, and maybe weeds and insects.

I'm not taking any chances.

Did he put you up to this?

Your father?

Yes.

Miguel didn't answer.

I knew it. He doesn't believe anything I tell him. This is science though and been proven to work. For centuries. In England they even call them orchard pigs. So, don't blame Zoe for having to switch. How much more do these shiny things—that will never, ever decompose, by the way, littering the earth forever—even cost?

The bankers—

The bankers? Good God. Don't tell me he told them about her after I said not to. They must think we're fucking stupid.

Edith looked over at Benji. Benji, she said. He looked up. Don't repeat that.

Didn't you just say it would work? Miguel asked.

It will, but bankers, they're idiots who know only numbers. They don't know how shit really works on a farm.

Miguel arched his eyebrows and shrugged.

What else did he tell you about the meeting?

Not much.

Did he say anything about Wyatt Kent?

The foreman shook his head.

But you saw him out here?

He nodded.

Fuck. I can't do this, not now, not with everything else going on.

What else?

With John David, I mean.

Yes, your father mentioned that.

He talked about John David?

Just in passing.

Really?

Yes.

Huh. I don't know why I find that surprising, but I do.

Miguel stood and looked at her. Men talk too.

I doubt that, but just in case, what advice did you give him?

Advice? What makes you think I would do that?

Edith didn't answer but canted her head to one side, waiting.

The foreman sighed. Here's what I told him, he said. I shared this story from Mexico of a Spanish soldier who was married to a beautiful native woman. They had two children whom the soldier loved very much. However, the soldier had come from a very wealthy family and his parents and other relatives disapproved of this wife. They threatened to disown him unless he married a Spanish woman. Not wishing to lose his inheritance, the soldier banished his native wife and sent for a new bride from Spain. The soldier's wife was filled with rage and jealousy and to avenge herself against her unfaithful husband, she drowned their two children in the river. The soldier was horrified when he heard what she had done, and he tried to have her arrested. But his wife had gone mad with guilt. She escaped into the wilds, roaming throughout the land, searching the rivers and lakes for her children. But she could not find them. Finally, in agony, her spirit to live crushed, she drowned herself in the river, too. But her spirit then could not escape to heaven because of the severity of her crime. And so she wanders the earth, wailing in guilt and in grief, condemned forever to live with the knowledge that she will never find them.

Miguel stopped talking and Edith knelt there looking up at him and not speaking. She then rose too and said to him very slowly, First, that's a horrible story, and second, I'm not sure what exactly that has to do with John David.

It is a story of grief wrapped in guilt wrapped in loss, he said.

What? Wait, I'm sorry. I know you mean well but I'm tired and angry and just not getting the connection. I'm sure it teaches some wonderful lesson about dealing with death but I just don't have the right mindset.

No, Miguel replied. It's not about death, but living. Your brother is the one who is drowning, not you. You can only hold the life raft close. It's up to him to climb aboard.

Rook left the barracks and headed out onto the blacktop where a crowd of twenty or thirty protesters had gathered on this bright sunny day and were lined up along the open field on the opposite side of the street holding their signs aloft and hooting and caterwauling when they saw the motorbike exiting the compound. He steered across the centerline and pattered up to a small cluster of them and their cries grew louder and their faces contorted in a rictus of disgust and he sat there and watched them a moment as they shouted their slogans: Warmonger. Mercenary. Civilian killer. He revved the big twin engine and sneered as a few of the ones standing closest to him blanched at the choppy pop and growl and then he gave the Sportster full throttle and turned their message obscure in a hailstorm of clamor and smoking rubber.

It was still daylight when he pulled into the State Line Bar and Grille at Danville. Gray sky overhead. Dark storm clouds to the west. A steady breeze. The parking lot was empty but for an old blue pickup truck parked along the side. Black plastic bags of trash piled in the back. Rook parked to the right of the door and turned the engine off and climbed off and went inside.

Don't open till six, called the bartender without looking up from across the bar where he stood in a cowboy shirt wiping down mugs with a dishtowel.

Rook checked his watch. That's in like ten minutes.

So?

It's ten minutes.

The bartender looked up. I know you?

Rook strode on over to the bar. What the hell do you think?

Oh. I shoulda figured. Long time no see.

Not long enough.

Back to see the kid are ye?

That'd be none of your business, Wilbur. Now how about a beer. Rook sat down on a stool.

They aint here.

You think I can't fuckin see that?

The bartender didn't answer but tossed down his rag and walked over and drew a beer from the tap and walked it over. Just don't go makin trouble like last time, he said.

Don't you worry about that.

Rook sat there drinking. A couple of younger men and a middle aged woman came in shortly after he did and sat down at one of the tables. The woman giggled and snorted like she was already half-drunk. When the bartender came back from taking their order Rook set his empty glass on the counter and ordered another round and stood up and went and looked out the door at the parking lot. He stared up into the gloomy sky and let the door swing shut and went back and sat down at the bar.

The woman came walking up. She put her hand on top of the bar and turned to face him.

You got a smoke I can borrow?

Borrow?

That's right.

You wanta borrow a cigarette?

She smiled and said nothing and he looked over her shoulder at the two men she'd come in with, who looked like boys on some college JV football—or more likely lacrosse—team from somewhere, sitting there looking like assholes amused at the hag they'd picked up at some trailer park. What's wrong? he said to the woman. Neither of them two pricks smoke.

The woman turned her head slowly and her eyes followed and she looked back over her shoulder at them. Don't know, didn't ask.

Maybe you should. Rook turned his back to her and she stood there another few seconds longer and then he heard her shuffle away.

The bartender brought him his beer. Can I use your phone? Rook asked.

Aint you got one?

You know as well as I do they don't work out here in this shithole from civilization.

The bartender pointed his stubbled chin at the phone hanging on the wall near the door to the kitchen.

Rook walked over and dialed the number. After a few seconds he hung the phone up and reached back and took out his wallet and pulled out a folded slip of paper and read off the number and dialed again. When there still was no answer he hung up and went back to the bar.

Must be in a hurry to see you, the bartender said.

How about you fuckin shut up, Wilbur, and fetch me another beer?

The bartender watched him sit down and then he walked over and drew him another draft and set it down in front of him. You know where this usually leads?

Yeah. More of my money in your crooked pocket.

I aint talkin about the beer.

Listen here, I didn't choose this place on account of needin your advice. Fact is, I didn't choose this place at all. Gerrie Dean did. If I'd had my druthers we'd be meetin some place a little more private than this rodent-infested fuck sore.

Better luck next time.

And what's with lettin faggots and whores in here? I thought this was a family establishment.

Fuck you, one of the boys came back with.

Rook started to stand but the bartender had already walked to the end of the bar and was reaching for the phone and shot him a warning look and he settled back down on the stool. He finished his beer and left ten dollars on the counter and got up and went outside where it had started to rain. He loped over to the motorcycle and as he was retrieving his rain jacket from one of the saddlebags the Mustang pulled into the lot. He stuffed the jacket under his arm and went over to where she had parked and walked around to the passenger side and opened the door and got in. About damn time, he said.

Tell me you didn't bring that freakin bike.

I didn't bring that freakin bike.

Then what's that?

The freakin bike.

Goddammit Harlan. You know I don't like him to ride that thing. And besides it's gonna

rain. What are you gonna do then?

Rook turned around and looked at the boy sitting in the carseat. How you doin, boy?

Good.

Harlan watched him. He was holding some sort of toy figure in his hand. Just good?

Yessir.

Well. I reckon that'll have to do.

What are you gonna do, Harlan? He can't ride that thing in the rain.

I got a rain jacket.

You got one for him?

He can use this one.

That's just asinine, Harlan. Plumb stupid, that's what that is. I told you before I don't like him ridin that Harley.

You already said that.

Well, since you don't seem to listen I'm sayin it twice.

Rook looked and smiled at the boy again. He said: You like ridin the motorcycle, don't you?

The boy didn't answer.

See, said Gerrie. He don't. You keep tryin to turn him into somethin he's not.

I do?

Yes. You do.

And what about you, Gerrie Dean. What are you turnin him into? Some soft little homo you can play dress up with and teach how to cook and play dolls? The boy needs to know manly things. Aint that right?

The boy was still looking at him. Outside it started to rain harder.

That's enough, Harlan.

The point is, I aint gonna break him, Gerrie Dean.

I heard that before.

Don't start.

Well, I have.

What happened then wasn't none of my doin and you know it.

It doesn't matter. The judge says it's my own decision. If I don't think it's safe he doesn't have to go and I don't so you can just take your rainjacket and that stupid bike and we can talk about it some other time.

It took me three hours to get up here.

Sounds like your problem.

You keep at it, I'll be sure and make it yours, too.

You think I'm happy about it? I got plans too.

What plans you got?

I aint tellin you nothin.

You still seein that Boner fella, aint you?

His name's Bonner, not Boner. And no, to answer your question, I'm not.

Then who?

I already told you, I aint sayin. What I will say is this, those plans didn't include me takin off work and haulin him down here only to find you about as ready to tend to him as you are fit to run for governor.

You're turnin in to a real smartass aint you?

You can think what you want, Harlan.

Good. I will.

They sat there looking at one another and a few seconds passed. Then she said, Listen, I'm fixin to leave. So you might want to think about gettin out.

I'll get out when I'm damn ready.

Harlan.

Shut up.

Rook turned around in the seat and looked over at the boy. We was goin to go up to Smith Lake, maybe do some fishin. Build us a big old bonfire. That sounds fun, don't it?

The boy nodded.

You been goin to church?

Of course I take him to church, Harlan.

Rook reached out and grabbed her arm and squeezed. I'm talkin with him if that's okay. She nodded and when he didn't let go her eyes started to well up.

I mean it, he said, don't start that shit with me. He let go of her and looked back at the boy. You been goin to church?

Yessir.

Readin the bible?

Yessir.

That's good, real good. You listen to what it says, ya hear?

Yessir.

Otherwise you'll grow up stupid like all them idiots your mama's been bringin round the house. And you ought to quit playin with dolls. People'll get the wrong impression. Rook looked at Gerrie. Will you get him some real toys? Like a pocket knife or something. You got you a pocket knife, boy?

Harlan, please?

He ignored her. I've got one I'd give you, he said, but it's a little big.

The boy swallowed and nodded. He slid the toy figure out of sight behind him.

Rook nodded and turned around and looked out over the dashboard and back at the bar. He thought of the two men and the old woman inside and raked the fingers of his hand through his goatee. We aint through with this, he said.

I never said we was, she replied.

He opened the door and got out and before he shut it he leaned over and sneered at her across the seat. And next time we meet find us a different place. I about hate this fuckin bar.

The little dog wasn't where he had left it. The leash was there still secured to the bike rack but the dog was nowhere to be seen.

Are you sure this is where you left it? the girl asked.

Yes. This is where I left it.

You're positive?

He said nothing but held up the leash.

All right. Don't take it out on me, she said. I'm just trying to help you find it.

Sorry. Thank you. Can we get back to it now?

They walked along the fence next to the ball field, whistling and calling his name.

Searching up and down the parking lot, looking between the cars—the Porsche was missing—and they walked around the building entrances and out along the street. Eventually they made their way toward the housing area, past a small grassy play area where they checked in and around the park benches and landscaped shrubs.

The girl stopped and described the dog to a couple of soldiers walking past who said they'd not seen it but told her they had passed a group of teenagers hanging out at someone's house. The house was just around the corner so they went and checked there, too, searching up and down for the dog, for the teens, and finding neither headed back to the parking lot.

John David stood next to the bike racks looking bewildered with his eyes pointed down toward his feet, his hands resting loosely on his hips. He walked over to the edge of the parking lot and turned and carefully retraced his steps back to the same spot trying to remember what had he done after leaving the CO's office. There was the Porsche, yes, he fucking remembered that, how could he not, but after that...what? He went and walked around the general area again where the Jeep had been parked and he returned once more to the bike rack. He noticed the girl was watching him. What? he asked.

Nothing, she said and looked away.

This is where I fucking left him.

I didn't say a thing.

I tied him up right there, he pointed to the spot with all four fingers of his hand extended, and then I gave him a biscuit.

And then?

He turned and took a few steps toward the headquarters building and turned back around and said, I left him right there and went inside.

Inside where? she asked.

Over there.

How long were you gone?

I don't know. Not long.

How long is not long?

I don't know. Maybe ten minutes. Twenty tops.

That's pretty long, she said. And then what?

He looked at her but didn't answer.

How long ago even was this? she asked. What kind of time frame are we talking here?

What?

How long has it been since you tied him up here?

He turned his back to her. He closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about it.

How long? she persisted.

This morning, he said.

She studied him with disbelief. This morning? Your dog's been tied up that since fucking this morning, in this sun?

Obviously not, he shot back, still turned away from her, the hand brandishing the leash extended straight out to his side.

The girl shook her head and muttered, Well, I hope it was worth it.

He turned and glared at her. What?

I hope it was worth it, she said again.

You hope what was fucking worth it?

She didn't answer right away, but stood there just glaring at him for a few long seconds before peeling her eyes away. Forget it, she said and she slipped her phone out of her back pocket and glanced at it once and returned it. She looked at him. So what now?

Someone must have taken him, he said.

Like who, animal control? A dog thief?

Wait here, he said suddenly and he started across the lot toward the buildings.

Where are you going? she called to him. When he didn't answer, she added, I need to get back.

The girl stood watching after him as he crossed the parking lot and up the steps to the headquarters building and disappeared inside. She looked around nervously as if suddenly aware of being all alone and she walked in a hurry to the Jeep and opened the driver's side door and climbed in. She shut the door and locked it.

Inside the building John David glimpsed into the captain's office and saw that the chair behind the desk sat empty so he went into the admin office across the hall. There was no one there either, but when he stepped back into the hall he noticed a man standing with his back to the door in the CO's office. A civilian, dressed in khakis and a blue chambray shirt. Reading the citations and awards hanging on the wall. The man turned.

Hello, he said to John David.

Footsteps approached then from down the hall and John David turned and watched as a second later the admin specialist came around the corner. Has anyone reported having found a lost dog? he asked him.

What?

A lost dog. Has anyone brought one in or mentioned seeing one running loose in the parking area?

The admin laughed like he thought he was being pranked. No, he said. Nobody's come in looking for a lost dog.

No, you're not listening. Someone else would have reported having fucking found it. I'm

the one who lost it.

Oh. My bad. But no, not that one either.

The admin went into the office and walked around behind the counter and he laid the magazine he was carrying down on the desk and he looked up at John David, who had followed him as far as the counter.

What about the CO? John David asked him.

What about him?

Where is he?

He's gone out, the admin responded.

Any word yet on when he'll get back?

Both soldiers turned to look at the voice who'd spoken up to see the civilian who'd been waiting in the CO's office filling the doorway of the admin's office. The man pointed to his watch. It's been nearly an hour, he said.

The admin replied, Sorry, no, sir. I've not heard anything from him as of yet.

But you saw, on his calendar, we do have a meeting, correct? He did know I was coming?

Sir, I wouldn't know anything about that. Captain Rhodes keeps his own appointments.

The admin then looked at John David and suggested he try asking around the housing area.

Oh, okay, great advice. Thank you.

John David scooted past the civilian and marched down the hall and he shoved through the double doors and went out outside, where he stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the parking area. A horn honked and he looked over and saw the girl sitting behind the wheel of the Jeep. She tapped on her wrist where a watch would have been had she been wearing one and then waved him over. He stayed where he was and looked away. A few seconds later the doors behind him opened and the civilian walked out. He nodded at John David.

He suggested I might have better luck tomorrow, the man said.

John David went down the steps and crossed the parking lot and he walked past the Jeep without paying the girl any attention, who then laid on the horn again, longer. She got out and followed after him. Hey, she said. Hey. She jogged to catch up. What'd you find out?

When he didn't answer she stopped and stood watching perplexed as he came to the fence as if to search the ball field again. Forget it, she called out. I've already called someone to come get me.

The civilian walked up and stopped beside her. She looked at him. What kind of dog did you lose? he asked.

The girl glanced at him. It's his, she replied.

The man nodded. Seems pretty tore up about it.

She turned and glared at him. Would you not be?

I would, the man replied. What's it look like?

It's a him, she answered and described the dog. Small, brown. Four legs and a tail. But we're probably wasting our time, he's not here.

Why do you think that?

He forgot about it and so he's been gone since this morning.

The two watched as John David climbed over the fence and started across the ball field toward the bleachers, his arms stretched out to his side, by all appearance talking to himself.

What's his name?

John David, the girl replied.

The man cupped his hands around his mouth and called, John David.

John David's head snapped up and turned in their direction.

What are you doing? the girl asked the man.

Calling for the dog.

That's his name, stupid, not the dog's. Jesus.

Oh, sorry. You two are friends?

Not really, she replied.

But you're helping him?

She glanced up at him and then over at where John David was now bent down on his hands and knees, halfway under one set of bleachers. Does it look to you like he could use it?

He told her his name was Brad Ware and that he was a journalist on post to do research for a story. Then he offered to help and together they searched the grounds again for the dog, with Ware walking alongside the girl, posing questions for her here and there, while John David kept to himself. They checked around the parking lot, looking behind shrubs and beneath cars and even opening the lids and peering inside the big green trash dumpsters. When her ride showed up, she called to John David and waved and she waited for him to wave back but he didn't so she just said good-bye to the writer and left.

Ware walked around the fence and joined John David next to the bleachers and he apologized for not having had better luck. I don't suppose he's wearing a chip, is he? he asked.

No idea, John David answered. He was standing with his back to the bleachers and one hand raised to block the sun so that he might study the field area for the umpteenth time. What's a chip?

A microchip. They implant it under the skin. It contains the animal's name and some contact information. Other stuff too probably. I just know it makes it easy to relocate lost pets with their owners. Vets know about them, so do humane shelters. If he's wearing one they'll find it.

Maybe.

You would have had to ask to have it put in. Did he come from the shelter or a breeder?

No answer.

Or if it was a rescue, Ware continued, they usually do those, too.

John David looked evenly at him and said nothing.

The writer looked away. He raised one foot and rested it on the aluminum bench and scratched at a spot on his calf. When he lowered it and turned back around he saw that John David had walked off. He hurried to catch up. Pets become a popular item during wartime, he said. More so than even usual. I suppose it's safe to assume your wife then picked him out. I only say that, he went on when there was no response, because I noticed you're wearing a wedding band.

John David stopped suddenly and turned and faced the writer. What did she tell you?

What did who tell me?

The girl.

Ware shrugged. Nothing really, he said. Mostly we were just looking for your dog.

You were talking though, too.

That's true. It's one of the things people do with one another.

John David watched him and then he started toward the parking lot and when he reached

the bike rack he stopped. A taxi had pulled up to Headquarters building and he watched as the door opened and the captain stepped out. He looked across the lot at John David and his eyes narrowed and his face turned red and he fitted the red beret on his head and shaped it just so with his hands and then marched up the steps to the double doors and went inside.

The writer walked up and John David nodded toward the building. Better catch him while you can, he said.

Actually, Ware said, I think I'll give it a day or two. He looks kind of pissed.

This is the Army. Everyone is fucking pissed.

A Neighbor:

She got that dog sometime after his last deployment, while he was gone still. Just a couple of weeks before the baby was due. As a rescue, I think, from the shelter. Or maybe she found him. I don't really know. I mean, we weren't that close and all. We both had learned to keep pretty much to ourselves, her especially. Not saying that's bad or anything—I mean after all I had a family, too—but being an Army spouse is like that. You either get good at being alone, or you get out. After the...after she died, we kept it for him. The dog, I mean. Romeo. I just kind of figured that once he got home and got settled in, got all of her affairs taken care of and such, he'd want it back. A month went by then another and one day I stopped him and asked him about it—the twins had grown very fond of him and so, you know. Anyway, afterwards he just looked at me like I was nuts. Like he didn't even know the little dog was his. I don't know. Maybe she never told him about it. Things like that happened, too.

She parked and while she unloaded the car of the groceries she sent Benji in the house to change his shoes and then she did the same and the two headed up the path to the barn. Chatting about the day. Who pushed who at recess. What a teacher may or may not have said. What had he learned. When they came to a small fenced-off area, strung up haphazardly, along one side of the barn, she stopped and looked over the flexible fencing and saw the pig, Zoey, napping on her side.

What is this?

She looked at Benji and thought of sending him to the barn to wait but decided against it and lifted him over the fence and told him to wake up the pig while she went to work removing the fencing. After she'd finished she helped the boy nudge the pig to its feet. Go on, she said. Go eat.

They peeked inside barn and then continued up the path until they found the the foreman working with a couple of other men to lay a new line of irrigation.

What's with the pen for Zoey? she said to Miguel.

You'll have to ask him.

He pointed and she looked and saw her father further up the hill, close to the road, speaking to another man standing outside a car. Who is that? she asked, squinting.

Miguel didn't answer. She looked at him. Do you know them?

I don't.

She looked again up at the road and looked at the foreman and said, I turned Zoey loose by the way.

I told him that's what you wanted.

How's she supposed to do what she's supposed to do if she's behind a fence.

You mean to wander wherever?

Yes, wherever. Why not?

Aren't you worried? Miguel waved his flattened hand above the ground.

About what?

Her poop.

What's wrong with her poop?

Nothing probably, but, there's always the risk, you know, of contaminating the fruit. The FDA, they have rules.

About pig poop?

Not specifically, but about using raw manure as fertilizer.

We're not fertilizing anything with it. Not intentionally anyway. And so what if we are? How can they be fine with spraying a poisonous cocktail of man-made chemicals, but then have a problem with animal shit? That's fucking stupid. Let's let her run loose. If the government—which was, if I remember correctly, founded by farmers—doesn't like it, those damn bureaucrats can come out here and bag the shit themselves.

The foreman looked to have nothing to say in reply so she left him to get back to his work and took Benji by the hand and they headed toward the barn. Along the way she bent down and leaned in close and said, Don't tell Daddy I said that word. Or Grandpa either. They would kill me.

I won't.

Promise?

Cross my heart.

When they reached the house she put Benji in front of the TV while she dialed the number the soldier had provided her earlier. A woman answered. I'm sorry, she said, no one's available. I can take your number and have someone give you a call.

Is there not a person I could speak to now? Edith asked.

They're all out.

Out, as in...for lunch? For the afternoon. For several months?

For the day.

This is urgent.

I understand. Have you tried the Red Cross?

Edith sighed. Not this again.

Excuse me?

Nothing. I would just like to speak to someone today, if possible. I'm a teacher and it's nearly impossible to get away to use the phone during the day.

If you'll just leave your number—

Yes, I get that part. Someone will be in touch. Only if they call during the work day, I won't be able to answer their call and we'll be right back in this same predicament.

The line went quiet.

Hello? Edith said.

One moment, please.

This is Chaplain Rosario.

Edith explained who she was and of her troubles trying to reach her brother, who had recently come back from the war having lost his wife and baby during childbirth, and who had, it now seemed, disconnected his phone, maybe even moved out of his house, and she and her father were growing concerned about his whereabouts and wellbeing. I was hoping you could help, she finished. My father was a minister and I know he had been useful to others in similar situations.

There was no immediate response over the phone and Edith cleared her throat and started again, Like I said, I'm his sister and—

What is your brother's name?

John David, she said. Durant. He's a sergeant there.

The military has pretty strict rules about what information they give out regarding its service members. I'm sure you can appreciate why.

Yes, of course. I understand completely. I just don't know where else to turn.

When did you last speak to him?

Months ago, Edith replied. After the funeral, which was in January. Since then he has just kind of shut us out.

Please don't take this the wrong way, but I should ask, are the two of you close?

Close?

Yes.

Edith didn't answer right away. No, she admitted. I thought we were, but I guess not, not anymore, not really. His decision, not mine.

The chaplain didn't say anything.

It's complicated, Edith told her.

I understand, said the chaplain. But I must raise the possibility—and this is just me, just suggesting a possibility. I don't know you from Adam and I don't know your brother's situation or anything of your relationship with him. But it's possible that you're having difficulty reaching him because he doesn't want to be reached.

Yes, maybe.

You might have to respect that.

I know, but.

There was a long pause.

Okay, the chaplain said.

Okay as in you'll help me? Edith asked.

Okay as in let me see what I can find out.

Thank you.

Don't thank me yet, the chaplain replied. I can't guarantee any results that you haven't seen already for yourself.

Were he able to lose the sum of the hours and minutes of all the yesterdays he gladly would. How else to face tomorrow? There were no more aggregates of time to consider. No new days. No coming years. Only the endlessness of now.

Of the dog he'd thought long and hard. The first few days following Romeo's disappearance he focused all effort on finding him, visiting the local shelter, posting handmade notices around the ball field, on the doors leading into the barracks, at the dining facility, on the walls of the supply room. He attached them to trees, to the bike stand and to the dumpster. He left papers beneath the wiper blades of the cars parked along the street and in the lot detailing the dog's description along with a photo he'd found that his wife had taken of him. He taped them to the mailbox of the neighboring housing area. Later, he thought to add a reward and went around and put up new signs offering \$100 for the dog's return. Then \$500. And finally, in an act more of drunken rage than of any expectation, he raised it to a \$1000. All of his efforts went unnoticed, however, that is until the captain had arrived in a fit one morning and ordered the signs all removed. Every last fucking one, according to the admin whom John David had paid fifty bucks to have the company's admin office listed as the point of contact. After that there was nothing more he could do but sit and wait and wonder and fume throughout the long day for his carelessness, his negligence, until even that produced nothing of substance.

The start of one such long day found him stopped at an intersection. Waiting in the left turning lane for the light to turn, his wipers turned on against the road mist kicked up by the steady commute of morning travelers. He'd left the hotel to get a gallon of milk, nothing more. In the lane, directly to the front of him idled a donut delivery truck and to the rear a minivan. From inside the van an olive-skinned woman appeared to be arguing with her teenage daughter, both of whom were waving their hands in the air, churning and slicing and slicing and churning, and their mouths were moving at the same time. In the lanes to the right of him the cars zoomed past. How one was heard over the other he had no idea. He strained his neck to see the traffic light up ahead but the delivery truck sat too tall and blocked his view. He tapped on the steering wheel and watching the truck's sliding back door, half-expecting it to open, revealing men armed with guns, wearing hoods to hide their faces. Nothing in America would surprise him.

He cracked his window and turned his head and took in a breath of damp air. The traffic to the right began to slow, the brake lights and the reflection of the brake lights off the wet pavement brilliant and gleaming as the cars began to stack up alongside him, until in the next lane over there appeared a man on a motorcycle. The rider was covered head to toe in black raingear and as he turned his head and looked in through the passenger window at him, John David saw that behind the helmet's face shield the eyes were blurred and distorted. The rider raised two fingers in greeting. John David looked away. He checked the mirror for the minivan and saw that the woman and the girl had stopped arguing and were instead staring simply and gravely ahead, as if having come fully in line to accept their roles in this world.

He suddenly shifted the Jeep into reverse and backed up until he determined he had enough clearance of the truck's rear bumper to turn the steering wheel hard and then he shifted into drive and the Jeep lurched across the grassy median and over the asphalt lip and onto the opposite lanes, headed back in the same direction from which he'd just come, resigned to eating his cereal dry.

She noticed the figure again while standing at the kitchen sink coring apples for ciders. He was at a distance still, and she still could not make any features, but he was alone and walking along the property line not far from an old logging road where she'd seen him before talking to her father. She set down the knife and told Benji to stay put and walked out of the house.

Excuse me, she said as she approached the man from behind. When he turned she saw it was Harrison Kent.

Oh. What are you doing here? she asked.

Just looking, he said.

This is private property and you're not welcome to look.

Simmer down, sweetheart. It's business.

You simmer down, asshole. And this farm is definitely not any of your business.

He didn't answer and looked around the yard, toward the orchard, the rest of the land, seeming to take it all in. She noticed he was not wearing the pistol she'd seen before on his hip.

You need to leave, she said.

He did as she asked and after he walked to his truck parked along the shoulder of the road and had climbed inside and after he shut the door just sat there another minute or so on his phone. Edith stood watching him from the wood line, in plain sight, and it wasn't until he was completely gone from her view that she made her way back to the house, where she noticed a car parked in the driveway and Clara bent over the trunk.

How's the move-in going? Edith asked.

Clara looked up from the trunk and stepped back holding a cardboard box. Fine, she said. This is the last little bit.

Let me help.

You don't have to, Clara insisted.

Don't be silly. I wish I could've done more.

You never realize just how much stuff you have until you have to move it. Thank you again for letting me move in so soon. I wasn't sure what I was going to do if you'd said no.

Don't mention it. It really doesn't need that much done to it.

Edith gathered a box of things from the trunk and followed Clara up the stairs and into the small apartment. They set the boxes down amongst others in the middle of the living space. She looked around. There are things, I am sure, in the cupboards—pots and pans, kitchen stuff—and also still sheets on the bed. Just throw them in the corner and I'll get them later. As for anything else you find, just set them aside and I'll get them out of your way as soon as possible.

Thank you, Clara looked around. It's a very lovely flat.

I know, right? I thought of claiming it for myself, when Benji and I moved back here, but I thought being closer to Daddy would, you know, be better, for all of us. Edith glanced out the window where she could just see her father and son through the trees near the barn trying to coax Zoey to walk with the boy on her back. Now, though, she said, I'm starting to question my reasoning.

You're sure this won't be an intrusion?

Nonsense. It'll be wonderful, you'll see. Already Benji can't stop talking about you. He's acts like you're from another planet. Because of your accent, you know.

Now that you mention it, Clara said, I do get those kinds of looks, only I'm not sure it's for the same reason.

Oh, I'm sorry, did that sound rude? I feel like it was rude. I didn't mean it that way.

Oh, please. No offense taken.

It's just that you're kind of a big deal and for a little boy who's parents are separated big deals are hard to come by.

Then I'm happy to oblige him. Clara offered her some tea.

No, thank you though. I really need to be going. I don't know what Jordan has told you about us, but we have another brother. John David. He's in the Army and...

Yes, Jordan mentioned him and his situation.

He told you about Catherine, his wife?

Clara nodded. He did. It's so terribly sad.

Edith pointed to three photographs hanging on the wall above the sofa. These are some pictures she took after they'd married, she said, or before, I can't remember which. I hung them this past Spring, when I thought maybe John David would come visit. He didn't, but I liked them and decided to leave them there.

They're lovely.

It was a passion and talent of hers. One of many.

They both fell quiet.

Anyway, Edith said as she turned to face Clara. I just realized I left my phone in the house and I'm waiting on a phone call. So, welcome. Please let me know if there's anything you need. And again, if there's something here you don't need or it's just in the way, just set it aside and I'll take care of it. It's really a pleasure, Clara, to have you here, part of the family.

The two hugged and Edith let herself out and descended the stairs and walked back to the house and let herself inside, as if already she were a stranger to it.

Days later, a different kind of crossing. He stood watching from the shadows of a nearby shed as several buses passed through the gate and paraded single file over the apron of the airstrip toward the open-bay hangar where in the bleachers erected for this very purpose had assembled a jubilant and raucous crowd of friends and family members. A call went out amongst them and a chorus of cheers erupted as the bus came into view. A loudspeaker squawked to life and began blasting country music.

The buses came to a stop and they sat with their engines idling thirty yards away on the sun-scorched tarmac. A minute passed, then two. When the doors still did not open, the crowd fell hush and quieted. A murmur arose. Voices collaborating in speculation. The cause for delay anyone's guess.

But why? some said.

Have they not waited long enough?

It's the Army way.

To hell with the Army.

Soon a chant dribbled forth: Let them go. Let them go. Let them go.

Some threatened to charge the buses from the bleachers and free the returning soldiers themselves.

When the doors finally opened and the soldiers issued out in a quick, but orderly fashion, they emerged into the bright sunlight to those watching and waiting for them, many in tears, filled finally with the good life once more and they called out their names and waved their flags and held aloft colorful, handwritten, homemade signs and the children stood on their tiptoes or gazed out from atop tall shoulders searching, searching, then bursting into smiles or tears of their own when their eyes, after so many long, sad, worrisome days and nights, suddenly found their mark.

The soldiers lined up in formation and with his back against the warm aluminum side of a nearby pack shed, John David watched as the first sergeant took control, calling on his subordinates—which he himself had once been—and waiting for each to speak up and he then turned the ceremony over to the Battalion Commander. While the commander addressed the families, John David searched amongst the troops for the faces of those he'd grown closest to. There was Golding and Rodriguez. Brantley. Miller. McCallister. And Peterson, who still owed him twenty bucks. And Corporal Mitchell. And the Lieutenant. Everyone there it looked like but McCoy who he'd heard back in the Spring had walked off the compound one day and put a bullet through his skull all because, according to rumor, his middle school son had come out as gay to his classmates (and to his parents) in a school-wide email. But John David knew that was bullshit. McCoy adored his son. The boy was all he would talk about. It wasn't his son's sexuality he couldn't live with, it was his absence from home on account of the fucked-up, never-ending war.

The Battalion Commander kept his remarks short and sweet and dismissed his soldiers and their families with a sturdy salute and a promise to give the unit the much-needed time to heal and regroup and even before his words of departure left his lips the stands emptied with a thunderous roar as everyone spilled out onto the lawn and into the arms of their heroic loved ones.

As the crowd began to disperse, John David turned sharply and headed back to the parking lot where a shapely young woman wearing a little red dress and high heels—an attire

picked out for this special occasion no doubt—had stopped and was adjusting the strap to one of her heels. She tapped the bottom of the shoe against the pavement and cast him a worried look. I've not missed it, have I? she said and hurried on her way.

Later, John David caught up with Mitchell, at a hobby store just off Post.

How'd you know I'd be here? Mitchell asked him.

You fucking kidding me?

Mitchell thought about that, and then nodded. Good guess.

From the aisle in which they stood, the two looked around the shop. Shelves and shelves of model trains, assortments of tracks. Scores of miniature figures of trees, people, automobiles and buildings. Tiny bridges and stop signs and tunneled out mountains.

It's not the same, is it? asked Mitchell.

What? John David answered.

Everything.

They agreed to head down the street for a beer and a few minutes later were sitting at one of the tall cocktail tables situated just off the bar. Mitchell had ordered a plate of hot wings and when the waitress brought him his order he sat there a moment just admiring it.

It's funny, he said, you know, the things you miss while you're over there. I mean there's the usual. Women. Beer. Bacon. Women.

The two men shared a sort of laugh.

But honestly, Mitchell went on, what's really to miss? He held both palms open in the air as if the answer lay in the empty space between them. Everywhere you look here, there's fighting. I mean there's not so much blood and body parts and not everyone wants to kill you, but still. There's no peace even though we claim to be a peace-loving people, even though we say we hate war and oppose bloodshed and violence. Despite the very thought of conflict. But, I'll be goddamned, look around here. Just turn on the fucking TV.

John David looked over the bar, where, indeed, one of the TV screens was silently playing a news reel of a man burning the American flag in some big city street protest.

See that? Mitchell continued. Most Americans would, at the drop of a fucking hat, have him arrested, tried and thrown in jail for desecrating that flag, because they believe he's a traitor to the country, to the ideals for which it stands. Those same stupid fuckers are quite content though to tighten that flag like a noose around the necks of refugees, immigrants, the poor.

Mitchell looked at John David. Makes no fucking sense, does it?

John David raised his glass. To patriotism, he toasted.

Mitchell looked away and a strange silence descended on them after that, until the corporal said to him, Why the fuck are you even still here?

What do you mean?

I mean, why are you still here? In the Army? You not had enough of this fucking bullshit?

John David watched him and he looked away and took another drink of his beer and he looked at his friend. He shook his head, raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

Yeah, Mitchell agreed. Don't I fucking know.

Mitchell started to say something else but stopped and shook his head. He drank what was left in the mug and set it back hard on the table and he looked at John David and his face told him all that it needed of the gravity, the sheer scope, the absurdity of life back home, and the two of them sat there together the next short while, not speaking, but just watching the TV monitor and finishing their beers, until Mitchell announced that he had someplace to go and he left and after he was gone John David sat there alone, staring into the plate of wings, which neither had hardly touched.