



University of North Dakota  
**UND Scholarly Commons**

---

Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects

---

January 2019

# Writing The Body: Embodied Forms And Animal Spirits

Andrew Harnish

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Harnish, Andrew, "Writing The Body: Embodied Forms And Animal Spirits" (2019). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2459.  
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/2459>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeinebyousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeinebyousif@library.und.edu).

WRITING THE BODY: EMBODIED FORMS AND ANIMAL SPIRITS

by

Andrew John Harnish  
Bachelor of Arts, University of Pittsburgh, 2004  
Master of Fine Arts, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 2013

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May  
2019

This dissertation, submitted by Andrew Harnish in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sharon Carson

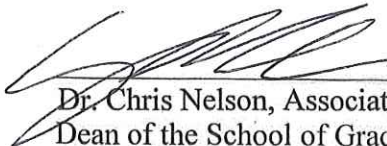
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Patrick Henry

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Crystal Alberts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sheila Liming

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Rebecca Rozelle-Stone

This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Chris Nelson, Associate Dean  
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

4/26/19  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## PERMISSION

Title            Writing the Body: Embodied Forms and Animal Spirits

Department    English

Degree         Doctor of Philosophy

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my dissertation work or, in her absence, by the chairperson of the department or the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this dissertation or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Andrew Harnish  
April 27, 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation committee, my co-chairs, Dr. Sharon Carson and Dr. Patrick Henry, and Dr. Crystal Alberts, Dr. Sheila Liming, and Dr. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone. Thank you, too, to Professor Elizabeth Harris and Dr. Yvette Koepke, who provided invaluable feedback on my writing and scholarship over the course of my doctoral program. My fellow students in the Department of English at the University of North Dakota and in the Southern Illinois University, Carbondale Creative Writing MFA program have been a constant support, like my family and friends back home. As always, my husband Kai is my inspiration. I couldn't have done any of this without him.

## ABSTRACT

“Writing the Body: Embodied Forms and Animals Spirits” is comprised of a critical introduction and a novel. The critical introduction, “Embodied Forms: One Writer’s Journey from an Ableist Aesthetic to Disability Consciousness” is a literacy narrative that traces my longstanding internalization of ableist norms and their expression in my fiction, and my gradual embrace of the value of disability as an identity and aesthetic sensibility. In so doing, the introduction argues that dominant notions of “normalcy,” “perfection,” and “beauty” are deeply damaging to the disabled writers who internalize them because they encourage the creation of art that erases disability, both formally and in terms of content.

In analyzing “Animal Spirits,” the novel portion of this dissertation, the introduction cites Vladimir Nabokov’s dehumanizing interpretation of the Samsa family in Kafka’s classic story “The Metamorphosis” to show how standards of “normalcy” and “beauty” can be deployed to degrade the worth of poor and bourgeois whites, just as they have long been used to degrade people of color. The introduction concludes with a defense of the proposition that fiction can foster empathy. Specifically, it argues that politically meaningful, coalitional empathy can be created through the reading and writing of literature in which characters who are at once privileged and interpellated in confoundingly inequitable systems are shown struggling to make sense of their realities while seeking to build and sustain meaningful relationships with marginalized characters, including disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color.

The creative portion of my dissertation, my novel “Animal Spirits,” attempts to enact this coalitional dynamic. The novel is a cripqueer coming-of-age story set on a Mennonite dairy farm

amid the 2016 presidential campaign. The narrative depicts the queer and debilitated farmboy Isaac Bauman's repression of his differences under regimes of compulsory able-bodiedness. Yet though Isaac internalizes many dominant notions of "normalcy," his stubborn longing for men and his body's confusing incapacities gradually erode his faith. The novel is also the coming-to-political consciousness of Isaac's father, Clyde Bauman. Clyde has long cherished his quiet life on a dairy farm, but he is increasingly fearful that the plunging price of milk will destroy his livelihood, and increasingly troubled by the hateful – and entirely "worldly" – rhetoric of many of his neighbors who see Donald Trump as a solution to their farming woes. As Clyde seeks to deepen his relationship to God by divesting himself of his worldly attachments to his beloved livestock and an electoral politics of hate, Isaac's tentative atheism turns into open scorn for Mennonite conformity. He changes his diet, throws himself into hookups on *Grindr*, and embraces a neoliberal vision of success through college. When Isaac comes out, Clyde is forced to choose between his Mennonite faith and his love for his son, and Isaac is forced to decide whether his eager embrace of conservative notions of perfectionism and inequality is justifiable given the violence fomented in the township by acolytes of Donald Trump. Ultimately, the strictness of Clyde's faith softens a little, and he expresses support for his son amid his bewilderment, and Isaac comes to understand the value and dignity of his "cripqueer" body.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iv

ABSTRACT.....v

I. EMBODIED FORMS: ONE WRITER’S JOURNEY FROM AN ABLEIST  
AESTHETIC TO DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS.....1

II. ANIMAL SPIRITS.....35

WORKS CITED .....317



## I: EMBODIED FORMS: ONE WRITER'S JOURNEY FROM AN ABLEIST AESTHETIC TO DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS

In 2002, after a harrowing summer which involved, among other misfortunes, my getting robbed while working at a Pittsburgh coffee shop, I dropped out of college and moved back to my parents' farm. My plan was simple: I wanted to become a writer. On a hot August evening, I informed my parents of my plan. When I got to the part about my writerly ambitions, my father frowned and shook his head. Before he could say no, I played my ace. Sometime in my mid-teens, I had overheard my father saying, in response to another farmer's question about whether he wanted one of his kids to take over the farm, that he wanted each of us to follow our dreams. My father is a practical man; I'm certain that when he made this generous remark, he never imagined his eldest son would use it as an excuse to drop out of college and return to the farm, not to help with the fieldwork or livestock, but to *write*.

When I reminded my father of what he'd said, he stared at the decking of the porch for a long time. Oh, how he must have rued that remark about dreams. But he is a man of his word, and one accustomed to having his way: if his son wanted to be a writer, then he would have the opportunity. That week, my father and brother and I set about renovating one of the grain bins in the mostly abandoned bank barn beside the farmhouse (or rather, my father and brother made these improvements, and I stumbled along beside them). We (they) installed carpet, framed out the space, and hung drywall. In two weeks, the office was finished. I furnished it with a desk, a microwave, and a battered recliner. I had every material thing I needed to set about writing. What I did not have was the faintest sense of who I was, or any sort of a meaningful subject.

The notion that I might become a writer had first occurred to me that spring upon finishing Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* in my overheated apartment on the north side of that city's university district. The novel is a lush yet comic account of an able-bodied young man's sexually confused coming of age. When I closed book, I rocked back in awe. I wanted to write something that lovely. I had a similar reaction later that spring when I encountered Anthony Burgess's novel *Earthly Powers*, a sprawling novel of ideas which I plowed through instead of studying for my finals. I'd transferred to the University of Pittsburgh to study analytic philosophy in the school's philosophy department, but by the end of my first semester, I could see that, though I could admire the beauty of a good logical proof and scorn the "metaphysical concept-poetry" of Continental theory, I simply did not have a mind for symbolic logic. My efforts as a student of philosophy were not helped by the fact that I was sleeping twelve hours a day and skipping roughly half of my classes as a consequence of symptoms I was acutely aware of but had no vocabulary for describing. What classes I did manage to attend, I sat through shrouded in a thick wool poncho that hid most of my body and muffled the worst of my stomach's rumblings. I understood that something was wrong with my body, but I had no idea what it was.

And then summer came, and I took a job as a barista – my first job in customer service. Behind the overheated bar, I found myself struggling to keep up with the pace of orders or even simply to count change. I fought with my co-workers, many of whom were understandably impatient with my slowness, my inability to remember orders or properly operate equipment, and my habit of stumbling over the rubber, anti-slip mat. Each day, my misery intensified – and then, while working the register in August, I was robbed. Even before that harrowing incident, I'd known I needed to escape the city. The robbery was simply my excuse. A few weeks later, I told

my father of my plan to become a writer. By the middle of September, I was installed in my office in the bank barn.

My assumption was that by shutting myself off from the world, I would finally be able to think clearly, undistracted by the fogginess and anxiety which I could not fully admit were rooted in my body. I imagined that alone, I could at last clear my mind, and quickly produce a novel that combined Burgess's intellectual heft with Chabon's lightness of touch. But in that dim room, hidden away on the second floor of the massive barn, all I wanted to do was sleep. Morning after morning, I'd sit down at my desk and scribble in my notebooks for an hour or so, and then tell myself that I was going to read. I'd park on the recliner, dip into a book, and close my eyes, just for a few minutes. So my mornings melted away; the entire autumn slipped by in a welter of wakeful weariness and confusion and heavy, desperate slumber.

The closest I came to writing a meaningful story was a piece about a young man who planned to shoot up his school. I had some reason to think I might be able to write this story: I'd been badly bullied in high school; I understood anomie. But I was too befogged and weary to translate those memories into any sort of plot. So, after spinning my wheels for a month or so, I pivoted to a very different project. That October, I'd been reading Ray Monk's biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great gay Austrian analytic philosopher. Inspired by Wittgenstein – and a longing for the clarity and rigor of analytic philosophy in the face of my abortive attempts at fiction – I began work on my own *Tractatus*. It turned out to be far easier to model Wittgenstein's numbered list of opaque philosophical pronouncements than to do the heavy lifting of composing a narrative with fleshed-out characters and a plot. In November, I shared my would-be magnum opus with one of my best friends, the valedictorian of our high school and a math and physics major at Penn State. He read my treatise thoughtfully, praised its ambition, but

ultimately pointed out that, because it was derivative, it had no genuine philosophical value. Deep down, I'd known this was true; still, I was crushed.

Chastened by my failures as a writer, I returned to the University of Pittsburgh in January, and resumed my halting progress through classes in literature and history. I read and drank and dreamed of transforming myself. I skipped far too many classes and, as ever, slept too much. Fortunately, I fell in with a group of kind-hearted friends who tolerated – and even seemed to like – me in all my strangeness. I slept with several men I barely knew, dated a woman who was also a good friend of mine, and, still dreaming that I might write something beautiful and thereby redeem my mixed-up life, began work on a novella about a young Mennonite man who gets engaged to a woman and throws himself off of a cliff the night before he is to be married. I showed this story to my girlfriend shortly before we broke up.

That fall, freshly graduated from college, I began work as a night janitor in downtown Pittsburgh. I chose the job in part because I'd heard that night janitorial work provides ample time for contemplation, and in part because it was the only job I felt suited for, the only one I could find. Perhaps some night janitors *do* manage to dwell on higher subjects as they mop the floors. I could not. My supervisor was a hateful man in his mid-thirties who set a breakneck pace vacuuming and emptying trash cans. His hostility toward me was only magnified by the fact that on Wednesdays he often needed to borrow twenty dollars to tide him over until the end of the week. Exhausted by his rages and my inability to keep up with his frenetic pace, I quit the job after four months and, desperate for work, took a job on my parents' farm, where, once again, I hoped to write.

This time, I was on the payroll. I wasn't permitted to while away my days in the bank barn. Still, I supposed, I ought to be able to find opportunities to work on a novel: outside of

planting and harvest seasons, contemporary, mechanized farm life seems to be full of quite a bit of “free” time. My job was to tend our flock of cage-free layer hens – gather the eggs, clean the nests, make sure the equipment was in order – and try to keep up with my inexhaustible father. I had imagined I’d use my afternoons to focus on my fiction, but this assumption took no account of my father’s work ethic or the sorts of investments that are required to maintain a farm. On a well-functioning farm, “free” time is seldom time spent idle. My father uses his afternoons to undertake the various jobs that keep the farm running efficiently: he repairs outbuildings, improves the fields, visits the bank, and acquires wood to burn in the furnace that heats the farmhouse. Especially in the colder months, this last job occupies quite a bit of his time. Instead of spending my afternoons writing, as I’d hoped, I whiled away the hours in what had once been our steer barn holding pieces of slab wood while my father sliced them into manageable pieces with a chainsaw. Despair filled me along with the choking fumes and sawdust. By the time our work was finished in the evenings, I had little energy left to write.

Still, most evenings, I tried. I began a novella-length project about a father bewildered by his son’s exhaustion, but I couldn’t advance the plot. All I could do was articulate the father’s exasperation, which was *my own* exasperation at my inability to figure out what was wrong with me. As ever, I knew something was amiss with my mind and body, but I was too worn out to identify the problem. Mornings, I tended the chickens – listening to podcast after podcast while I gathered eggs. In the afternoons, I bumbled after my father around the farm. I spent every night I could with my friends in the nearby city of Lancaster, drinking cheap wine, watching *Project Runway*, and pretending I did not have to wake at six and tend a chicken flock.

My parents knew I was unhappy. They understood I lacked the skills to be an effective farmer, just as I knew it. But what none of us could quite recognize was that I also lack an able

body. My impairments were, and still are, mostly invisible. I look “normal” enough that none of us had ever thought to trace my lack of coordination and sensitivity to heat to the surgery I’d undergone at seventeen.

That procedure – an endoscopic cardiothoracic sympathectomy – was meant curb the excessive sweating of my hands and feet by severing the nerves that control the perspiration of the limbs. Before the surgery, I was warned of several side effects. “Horner’s Syndrome,” which involves the dripping of the eyelids due to nerve damage, seemed like the most serious. “Compensatory sweating” – sweating of the trunk and legs to compensate for the loss of sweat in the limbs – seemed annoying but manageable: so long as my hands wouldn’t seem repulsive to everyone I shook hands with, I figured I’d be fine. But what I did not realize when I begged my parents for this surgery, was that the severing of those nerves also prevents the upper third of the body from perspiring – from responding to heat.

When you look at me, you cannot see that the pores of my face and neck are unresponsive. If you passed me on a frosty winter street, you’d have no idea that I wilt in temperatures above 80 degrees, no idea that my concentration scatters as my equilibrium crumbles. You’d never guess that, as someone put it on the message board devoted to the surgery, “part of me died suddenly” following that procedure (*ETS Talk*). Certainly, the surgeons who cheerfully perform this costly procedure have no idea how many of their patients end up desperate, incapacitated, lost. The message board is full of stories of people like me who turned to the surgery eagerly, only to find their lives upended. There is an entire thread devoted to the search for a way to reverse the procedure. One recipient in Vancouver recently went so far as to fly to China, where a doctor injected stem cells into his upper body. The effort didn’t work, of

course. The procedure is irreversible. Once the nerves are severed, the link between the flesh and rest of the body is permanently destroyed.

In Pennsylvania, the weather usually turns steamy in mid-May and remains that way through much of September. I had my surgery in November, so for the next several months, I felt fine. By the time summer arrived and my equilibrium broke down, the surgery was long behind me. I therefore failed to recognize the connection between the surgery and my even more uncontrollable body. All I was conscious of was how monstrous I felt, all of a sudden, how divided I felt, my head and face parched and taut and unresponsive, my lower body dripping in an effort to cool the upper third of my flesh that is numb to heat, my still stomach jumping with a gastrointestinal distress that had preceded the surgery. All I wanted was to still and order my body and to achieve some degree of normalcy – the “normalcy” I’d been raised to believe was my destiny as a white male first-born child of some privilege, the “normalcy” of the “superiority” I felt was mine by right of my intelligence and my parents’ ambitions for me.

~

In the bourgeois Mennonite community I grew up in, one can be a lawyer, a landed farmer, an appliance store owner, a physician, an accountant, the owner of a massive heating and air-conditioning concern, or perhaps even a *writer*, and still possess a degree of respectability. In that world – and in the world of upper-middle class America, writ large – the only thing you cannot do and still be “normal” (apart, perhaps, from talk openly about your body) is deviate from the group’s standards of comfortable prosperity.

This habit of mind, this definition of “normalcy as superiority” is, I think, the default mentality of bourgeois American life. It allows upper-middle class people to define what they deserve – what they take as their due – as that which keeps them more materially secure than

most people. Most upper-middle class people are well-educated; therefore, it is “normal” (necessary) that they are intelligent. They are ambitious; therefore, it is “normal” (necessary) that they are successful. They are hard-working; therefore, it is “normal” (necessary) that they enjoy the trappings of wealth. The maintenance of their comparatively privileged social positions scarcely registers; it is simply “the norm.” And increasingly, the specifics of a job don’t matter, so long as it results in the sort of gainful employment that provides a degree of cachet.

The dream of being a writer that took hold of me reading Michael Chabon in my overheated Pittsburgh apartment was bound up with my longing to conform to the norms of the success that I grew up with. Yes, I was moved by the fineness of Michael Chabon’s prose. Yes, I admired the brilliance of Anthony Burgess’s sweeping plots. But the primary reason I dropped out of college and retreated to the bank barn on my parents’ farm was because I wanted to somehow maintain the standards of my upper-middle-class farm family. And the only way I could see to do that was to labor alone, thereby hiding my bodily difference and my acutely felt sense of monstrosity. At twenty years of age, with my life still in front of me, nothing seemed more important than the preservation of the sense of my own “normal superiority” – in terms of my reputation and my art.

That ambition, in turn, was bound up in assumptions of the “ideology of ability,” which, according to the disability theorist Tobin Siebers, structures neoliberal Western life. Under “the ideology of ability,” the only worthy – “normal” – way to live is as an able-bodied bodied person. The denial of disability is central to Siebers’ argument. He writes that “disability defines the invisible center around which our contradictory ideology about human ability revolves. For the ideology of ability makes us fear disability, requiring that we imagine our bodies are of no consequence while dreaming at the same time that we might perfect them” (273). Siebers clearly



identifies the fear that disability inspires in those who identify as able-bodied, but he doesn't fully unpack the way the fear of disability operates for those of us who are meaningfully impaired, but who refuse to – or simply *cannot* – acknowledge or accept our difference, as I couldn't in Pittsburgh, or in the bank barn at twenty years of age, or, in my mid-twenties, while laboring so ineptly on my parents' farm.

By then, of course, my pretenses of respectability had broken down. Normalcy-as - superiority was just dream – a structuring dream, like my ambition to make something of myself as a writer, but one that was entirely subordinated to my daily struggle for survival. And as my “failings” registered, my self-loathing intensified. Sweating heavily in the chicken barn, stumbling on one of the roofs we were repairing, and desperately trying to recover my focus, I was still unable to make the link between the surgery I'd undergone at seventeen and my body's unpredictable incapacities. I supposed that responsibility for my inability to measure up to the standards of my community rested entirely on me. And I still believed – as I'd supposed for years – that I could escape these “failings” by concentrating harder on my writing. Like so many mixed-up children of privilege, I convinced myself that I could achieve the “normal” respectability I could find nowhere else through the practice of art.

Of course, I had no idea of the quixotic nature of the market for writing, no clue how few writers manage to make a living by their stories. My parents, meanwhile, had no idea what to do with me. They realized I was unsuited for farming, but they also saw that I'd failed at every other job I tried. They sent me to a therapist, who put me on all sorts of medications which dulled the sharpest pangs of my anxiety but did nothing to improve my balance or facility with tools or ability to work effectively in the heat. So I remained on the payroll and retreated to the couch I'd installed in my bedroom at every chance.

In my first few years on the farm, I'd tried to keep up with my father, but by my third year, my father and I both realized that I wasn't up to the job. Every day, after lunch, I'd slink up to my room, lock the door, open a book or turn on a film, and pray that my father wouldn't call me down to help with the woodpile or with some other equally taxing job. More often than not, he wouldn't, so I'd remain in my room, relieved that I wouldn't have to overheat or otherwise endanger my body, but sick with guilt at how thoroughly I was shirking my responsibilities.

~

In Franz Kafka's classic story, "The Metamorphosis," the young salesman Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into an insect, a "monstrous vermin" whose body bewilders him and frightens his family. I first encountered the story in an anthology in my freshman college English class. At the time, it seemed curious, but of little personal interest. But when I re-read the piece in my bedroom of my parents' farmhouse in my mid-twenties, it seemed to capture every aspect of my condition. Like Gregor, I was living at home. I was afraid of other people. I felt overtaken by bodily changes I could neither comprehend nor control. Every afternoon, I locked myself in my bedroom, and I retreated there again, every night. Whenever I left my room, I felt repulsive, cringingly conscious of how uncomfortable I was making everyone around me. And I felt certain that my presence on the farm was as much a burden on my family as Gregor's was on his.

Like my parents, Gregor's parents and sister had to clean up after their confounding loved one and organize their lives around his peculiar needs. Like my parents, Gregor's relations were troubled and even horrified by their loved one's body. Like Gregor, I found a *degree* of comfort in my condition. Transformed into an insect, Gregor secrets himself under his couch and walks about on the walls of his bedroom. He enjoys snatches of violin music. Alone in my room,

I could relax as I could in no other part of my life. I lost myself in the art I consumed and the narratives I still tried to compose. Miserable as I felt, I still clung to my old conviction – the conviction that had motivated me ever since my first attempt to write in my office the bank barn – that if I could *somehow* quiet my mind and concentrate and bear down without interruption, I could compose something meaningful, something that would transcend my limitations and touch other people, thus proving that I was not, after all, the failure I so acutely felt that I was in my mid-twenties.

In “The Metamorphosis,” Gregor’s equilibrium – his *degree* of comfort in his insect body – is destroyed when his mother and sister, moved by the pleasure they realize he derives from crawling about on the walls of his bedroom, enter his room to clear away some furniture to give him more space to crawl. His mother catches sight of him and is horrified. So Gregor flees to the kitchen just as his father arrives home. His father, too, is disgusted, and drives him back to his quarters by pelting him with apples, one of which lodges in a sensitive spot on his back, leaving him temporarily unable to move and permanently wounded.

I have always been deeply moved by the image of the nourishing-seeming apple as the source of the wound which ultimately leads to Gregor’s death. And I am touched, too, by the pathos of a scene in which an attempt at familial care leads to confusion and harm: this is the story of the “corrective” surgery I underwent at seventeen. But my identification with Gregor’s predicament can only go so far. My bodily differences were, after all, mostly invisible. Monstrous as a I felt, I looked “normal” enough. And the end of my isolation on the farm came about not because of an attack by my father on me, but because I very nearly inadvertently took his life.

One morning, after usual chores were finished, my father informed me that we were going to remove some fenceposts from a pasture that he wanted to convert into a cornfield. This was, I think, in the spring of 2006. The line of posts ran along the edge of a road bank, a sloping berm of earth about six feet high. To accomplish the removal, we hooked one end of a thick chain to the hitch of our largest tractor and lashed the chain's other end around the base of each post. For a reason I still can't fathom, my father put me in the tractor and insisted on handling the posts. The ultimate removal of the posts was easy enough; all I had to do was put the tractor in gear and lurch forward. The trouble was all in getting the tractor in the right position in the first place. Before I could shift the tractor forward, I had to back the big machine to the edge of the berm. If I failed to brake in time, the tractor would roll over the post, slide over the lip of the road bank, and quite possibly crush my father, who always insisted on standing directly behind the tractor each time I backed up, heedless of – or perhaps stubbornly indifferent to – my inability to handle the tractor properly.

I don't remember now how many posts there were in the row. It felt like hundreds, but probably, there were only about twenty. All I can be certain of is that, each time I backed up, my foot ached and shook as it worked the clutch and hovered over the brake. Sciatica is one of the many invisible side-effects of my surgery. As the morning wore on, my ability to control the pedals diminished. The pain in my foot and leg intensified. And each time I lifted my shaking foot from the brake, I was acutely conscious of my father standing next to the post on the lip of the berm, directly behind me.

Why did he stand there, in harm's way, instead of waiting at a safe distance off to one side? I like to think that he was testing me in some way, but perhaps this is simply how he had always done things with his father. It was efficient to stand behind the tractor: as soon as the

tractor stopped, he could leap forward, lash the chain around the post, and we could move that much more quickly to the next task. It worked so long as the tractor operator had a keen handle on the implement – which I, of course, did not.

Near the end of the row, I backed up and misjudged the distance to the edge of the berm, backed into the post, and started to slide down the berm toward the road below. The tractor's wheels slipped. The high cab began to tilt. I jammed the brake, slammed in the clutch, pulled the tractor out of reverse, and thrust my throbbing foot toward the throttle the instant I lifted it from the brake. The tractor's wheels churned for purchase, and then the tractor lurched forward, off of the side of the bank and back onto the flat. And as soon as the back of the tractor had stopped squashing the post, my father, somehow undeterred by the near-disaster, lashed the chain around the post and shouted for me to pull forward. So I complied, and the tractor shot forward again, and the post ripped from the soil, my panicked awareness that another post was waiting mostly keeping me from thinking about what I'd almost done.

Or perhaps I'd never actually been in danger of crushing my father. He might have been able to leap out of the way if the tractor had tipped. Maybe all I had really risked was flipping the tractor and further destroying my pride. Either way, it didn't matter. The exposure of my incompetence was shaming and horrifying.

Somehow, we got the rest of posts removed without incident. On the drive back to the farmhouse, my father and I didn't speak. We seldom spoke to each other at all in those days. We didn't know what to say: I could not articulate my body's impairments, and neither could my father, and so our collective bewilderment built silently between us. My father tried to deal with it as he dealt with every obstacle: by working harder on the farm. I tried to cope by locking

myself in my room, watching *Netflix*, and trying to write stories about beautiful, able-bodied young people in New York.

But in the aftermath of my near-crushing of my father, it seemed clear to me that something needed to change in my life. If it didn't, I was liable to inflict some permanent disaster upon my family. And because I remained beholden to ableist notions of upper-middle-class respectability – and because I pragmatically realized I was hampering the operation of the farm – I was convinced that *I* was the one who had to change. Already, my incapacities seemed to be infecting my father. I'll never forget the string of fine afternoons that spring when I crept down from my bedroom to find the seemingly-inexhaustible man sprawled on the floor of the living room, snoring heavily. He always worked in the afternoons. Now, he was sleeping. The despair that I knew so well seemed to be weighing on him, pinning him to the carpet. "I've never seen him like this," my mother whispered worriedly to me, when she stopped at my side one afternoon.

I nodded. I'd never seen my father that way either, but I knew all too well what depressive exhaustion felt like. In "The Metamorphosis," the wounded Gregor's gloom spreads to his family. As Vladimir Nabokov puts it in his magisterial analysis and translation of Kafka's story, "Gregor's beetle illness is catching, his father seems to have caught it, the weakness, the drabness, the dirt. 'Soon after supper his father would fall asleep in his armchair; his mother and sister would admonish each other to be silent; his mother, bending low over the lamp, stitched at fine sewing for an underwear firm; his sister, who had taken a job as a salesgirl, was learning shorthand and French in the evenings on the chance of bettering herself. Sometimes his father woke up, and as if quite unaware that he had been sleeping said to the mother: 'What a lot of

sewing you're doing today!' and at once fell asleep again, while the women exchanged a tired smile” (Nabokov 12).

In his analysis of the Samsa family, Nabokov also rightly points out how completely Gregor is wronged by his family in the aftermath of his transformation. Their cruelty toward him is all the more inexcusable given the fact that Gregor’s income as a traveling salesman had preserved their standard of living after his father’s bankruptcy. For Nabokov, then, Gregor is less a victim of his metamorphosis than of his family’s inability to respond humanely to the change in his body. “Gregor’s family are his parasites,” Nabokov tells us, “exploiting him, eating him out from the inside. This is his beetle itch in human terms. The pathetic urge to find some protection from betrayal, cruelty, and filth is the factor that went to form his carapace, his beetle shell, which at first seems hard and secure but eventually is seen to be as vulnerable as his sick human flesh and spirit had been” (Nabokov 6).

In Nabokov’s interpretation, Gregor’s metamorphosis initially serves a protective function; it emerges much like the “carapace” of an artistic sensibility. Under this reading, far from being *monstrous* as an insect, Gregor is in fact sublimely human, and it is Gregor’s family that is broken and repulsive, their human-seeming reality that is flawed. “The isolation, and the strangeness, of so-called reality—this is, after all, something which constantly characterizes the artist, the genius, the discoverer. The Samsa family around the fantastic insect is nothing else than mediocrity surrounding genius.”

There is a great deal to recommend Nabokov’s analysis. It captures the alienation that many artists no doubt feel in the face of the pressures of bourgeois society – especially when respectability is denominated in strictly material terms. But incisive as it is, Nabokov’s interpretation seems to miss something important about Kafka’s story. Yes, Gregor supported his

family in the years before his metamorphosis. Yes, he was unhappy as a traveling salesman, and his years of generosity make his family's treatment of him after his transformation seem profoundly cruel. But the metamorphosis that gives the story its title does not seem to have been sought by Gregor as an escape from the wearying terms of "normal" life. It does not seem willed. It seems entirely, and brutally, imposed upon him – and perhaps the art-making impulse *is* imposed on great artists like Kafka and Woolf and Nabokov, and not simply sought – as it is for many confused and privileged strivers – as the only available avenue for asserting "normalcy-as-superiority."

Yet even if the urge to make art *is* irresistible for the greatest artists, and even if the lack of "proper" recognition is painful, still, there is something so deeply embodied and painful about Gregor's transformation that I refuse to accept that his metamorphosis represents a mere change of a point-of-view. It is a transformation of the body so complete that it results in Gregor's changing species. He becomes an insect, one that Nabokov calculates must have been about three feet long. Gregor's appearance shocks everyone who encounters it. So, much as I appreciate Nabokov's analysis, I cannot help objecting a little to Nabokov's merciless judgment of the Samsa family in the aftermath of Gregor's transformation: "Here is the son and brother plunged into a monstrous change that should have sent them scuttling out into the streets for help with shrieks and tears, in wild compassion—but here they are, the three philistines, cosily taking it in their stride... Mark the curious mentality of the morons in Kafka who enjoy their evening paper despite the fantastic horror in the middle of their apartment" (Nabokov 8).

Certainly, it *is* puzzling that the Samsa family doesn't do more to seek help for Gregor. They never summon again the doctor they seem to have shooed away in the aftermath of Gregor's first, disastrous foray out from his bedroom. But what Nabokov misses here – or simply



refuses to dignify – is the powerful role of shame in determining the course of upper-middle-class family life. The Samsas are afraid of Gregor, but they are also ashamed of his difference, beholden as they are to their longing for “normal” bourgeois respectability. And the force of their shame interpenetrates with the force of their confusion. They are bewildered by Gregor’s illegibility as human: suddenly, he is a giant insect, even as he remains their son. They don’t know what to do. They are torn between their shame at Gregor’s confounding transformation and the devotion they feel to him as their relation.

Don’t misunderstand: I’m not *defending* this shame, or the stasis of their confusion. I’m simply saying I recognize it as human. It is the shame that my family felt toward me, the shame that I felt in those days every time I looked in the mirror. Some months before the incident with the fence posts, I outed myself to my parents as gay in an effort to control and own *some* part of my unstable identity. My mother wept. My father suggested I simply hadn’t met the right woman. When I pointed out how badly things had ended when I’d tried dating a nice girl, my father flushed and fell silent. So we stopped speaking of the subject completely, just as we didn’t speak of any of my differences or incapacities, supposing, like so many Mennonite farmers and bourgeois people of all denominational stripes, that by not speaking of a difficult subject – or a welter of such subjects – we might make it go away.

This is what Gregor’s family does in the face of his transformation, and their passive silence is not wholly unreasonable. Gregor is changed without warning into an insect; therefore, it seems possible that he might be abruptly changed back into a human. And when he isn’t – and when his father’s attempts to control him end up wounding him – his pain and grief spread throughout his family. And still, no one has the vocabulary to make sense of this pain – not Gregor, who has lost all ability to speak or write – and not his parents or sister, who are

immobilized by their confusion and by the force of the shame that feels as if it is constantly in danger of upending their comfortable bourgeois existence.

Nabokov's reading misses the pathos and flawed humanity of the Samsa family's response to Gregor's metamorphosis. The Samsas are selfish. They are complacent. But the forces that generate their shame are far larger and more powerful than they are, like the ableism and homophobia and fundamentalist Mennonite beliefs that conditioned my family and overwhelmed my parents' ability to adapt to my differences, at least for a time. Having come out, and remaining profoundly uncomfortable in my skin and deeply afraid of other people, I was very nearly as illegible to my parents as Gregor was to his. They did not understand me (I did not understand myself). They had no idea what had become of me. But they knew I was still their son. And, generous and loving people that they are, they showed far more compassion to me than Gregor's family ever showed to him. They did not speak of my differences. They did not try in any sustained way to help me find a routine or set of practices that would effectively accommodate or treat my body. But they continued to house me and care for me. They gave me space to do what I wanted, what I *thought* I needed. Our family's particular mix of bourgeois Mennonite conformity clouded their, and my, judgment, but it never obstructed their love.

Nabokov is right about this much: the solution to Gregor's predicament was the same solution to my dilemma in my mid-twenties. Both of us would have benefited from a familial redefinition of normalcy. If Gregor's parents and sister could have found some way to try and communicate with him, their relationship with him might have been restored. Likewise, if my parents and I had found some way of speaking in those days, we might have saved ourselves years of confusion and grief. But we could not do it, just as the Samsas could not do it. The disciplining force of bourgeois conformity was too strong. The ideology of ability – and the fear

of the difference of disability – kept us from trying to address the connection between my body and my failure to function on the farm. How can I judge my parents harshly when I was just as much as in the grip of a toxic vision of normalcy as they were?

~

Lost on the farm in my mid-twenties, I still imagined – like my parents, and like Gregor’s – that somehow, my predicament would change. Most of my hopes for transformation, and for my recapturing my sense of normalcy-as-superiority, remained problematically invested in my writing. Writing, I decided, would be my ticket off of the farm. In the fall of 2007, I applied to five of the best MFA programs in the country and was rejected by all of them. My despair intensified. Having told my parents I was leaving, but lacking any obvious path away from the farm, I felt even more stuck. So I resolved to depart the farm anyway. When a college friend announced that she was moving to Philadelphia to enroll in a medical school training course, I decided to join her. In the summer of 2008, we moved into a rowhouse just off of South Street. I sent out reams of job applications to firms that were slashing staff or folding entirely in the face of the mounting global financial crisis. I never received so much as a phone call. So, for the rest of that year, I lived on my savings and wrote. And when the year ended and the lease expired, I moved to Durham, North Carolina, and lived with my brother, following a pattern of communal living and mutual support that is at least somewhat legible to the wider world when practiced by visibly disabled and debilitated people, but that seems completely confounding when undertaken by those who appear able-bodied.

From my siblings, I learned that my uncles and grandparents pressed my parents about my predicament. “*When is Andy going to get a job?*” I don’t know what my parents said. All I know is that in those days, there were few jobs to be had: the country’s economy was melting

down, and most of the jobs I might have been suited for – quiet work in an archives or library – required skills and degrees that I lacked. I’d also made another error: I’d moved to climates that deepened my incapacity. Summers in Philadelphia are far hotter than in Pennsylvania Dutch country. Summers in North Carolina are hotter still. Summers in both places, my head baked, and my thoughts slowed even as my lower body dripped in a desperate effort to cool itself, and I collapsed every evening into familiar, ever-deepening, exhaustion.

After a few jobless, hopeless months in North Carolina, I resolved to apply again to MFA programs. This time, I searched online for an editorial consultant to help me with my manuscript submission and sent out applications to the list of schools she’d recommended, including one I’d never heard of in Southern Illinois. At Christmas, I returned home to my parents’ farm. Over New Years, I went, as I often did, to visit my college friends in Pittsburgh. On that trip, I stayed with my closest friends, in whom I’d always confided all of my differences: my longing for men, my surgery, my bodily discomfort, my digestive troubles.

One night, during that visit, one of my friends, a nurse, asked if I’d ever tried eliminating “gluten” from my diet. I’d never heard of the term, but I leapt at a possible solution to my bodily troubles. On New Year’s Day, 2010, I stopped consuming wheat. Within a few days, a pressure seemed to lift from the left side of my body. My concentration improved. Every day that winter, my head felt clearer; my mind felt stronger. And then, in March, after enduring another battering round of rejections, I was finally admitted into a funded MFA program at Southern Illinois University. Nights that spring, I whispered the word “Carbondale” in the moments before I fell asleep.

I was 28 years old, and my life felt like it was finally responding to my intentions. My body no longer felt quite so uncontrollable or monstrous. It was spring, so I did not have to

confront how vulnerable I still was to heat. Thus, *seemingly* transformed, I set about repudiating my ten-odd years of “failure.” I felt particularly hostile toward the writing I’d undertaken during that time. It was the work of a confused and ill person. What value could it possibly have? It never occurred to me that there might have been therapeutic value in the writing I had done.

~

In describing the widespread skepticism that exists toward writing by disabled people, the disabled American fiction writer Kenny Fries implicitly calls attention to the ableism inherent in the denigration of therapeutic writing. As Fries puts it, “writing by disabled writers has often been seen more as ‘therapy’ than art. Disabled protagonists are not seen as universal, despite the fact that all of us, at one time or another in our lives, will be, either temporarily or permanently, disabled.” The dismissal of disabled writing as merely therapeutic is not only cruel to disabled writers, it ignores the real value of therapeutic writing. Disabled and nondisabled writers alike benefit from the therapeutic dimensions of the act of expression, from the catharsis that emerges out of their work, as I did during my years in the bank barn and back on the farm in my mid-twenties, and as I have done throughout my life.

But aesthetic prejudices against therapeutic writing and writing by disabled people remain, prejudices that are at least partially rooted in ableist notions of what artfulness is and what beauty involves, and partially rooted in the internalization of the ideology of ability. Just as work by disabled people is often written off as merely therapeutic, so too, work that seems especially “therapeutic” – disorganized, un-selfaware, self-indulgent – may be interpreted by ableist readers as indicative of an authorial disability or debilitation that is incompatible with good writing. In my MFA program, writing was routinely used to police the mental and physical difference that so

many of feared, interpellated as we were in the ideology of ability, beholden as we too often were to the bourgeois notions of the “normalcy as-superiority” we hoped to achieve through our art.

During my MFA years at SIU, I did not identify as disabled – I recoiled from such a definition, just as I feared the possibility that my work might be identified as therapeutic. But even as I repressed my impairments in the program, I also sought to write about my struggles on the farm in my mid-twenties. My work in my first year of my MFA was therefore marked by a fundamental contradiction: I wanted to write about my bodily differences – the bodily differences I tried to pretend I’d “overcome” – but I also wanted to insist upon the rightness of my bourgeois notions of normalcy, notions that were entirely structured by the ideology of ability. I recall a story about a young man with a digestive ailment who lived at home with his parents, watched far too much porn, and sought to find ways to express his appreciation for his parents’ generosity toward him in his incapacity. That story therefore defended the silence and isolation I’d endured in my mid-twenties. It failed to critique the protagonist’s situation; it simply endorsed it. Fixated as the workshop was on questions of characterization and conflict, it dinged the piece for its lack of a plot and said nothing about its reification of ableist norms.

Ableism was simply not a part of my vocabulary during my MFA program, so, for the better part of three semesters, I struggled to write about my body without a critical framework or legible vocabulary for my body. Each time I presented one of these stories, I lived in terror about what it might say about me. I feared that my writing might mark me as “strange” or “wrong” or “weird” or “off,” code for the bodily and mental differences that compliant neoliberal subjects use to disqualify others from the realm of the “normal” able-bodied, including others, like me, who desperately *sought* that compliant inclusion. Finally, in my third semester, I turned away from the subject of my body entirely. I wrote a story about Clyde Bauman, at the time an aging,

straight Mennonite pastor struggling to reconcile a conflict in his church, and I was thrilled by the workshop's response. So I sought to write more about able-bodied Mennonites, modeling, as best as I could, the pastoral beauty in the work of writers like Kent Haruf, James Still, and Reynolds Price.

I produced my first stories about Mennonites in fall and winter, when my surgically-altered body was at its most efficient and my mind least befogged by heat. Still, those stories were weakened by my longing to romanticize the world of my youth, to soften and isolate its conflicts, and by my unwillingness to connect them to the world of ideas, which I have always loved. If, during my first serious attempts at writing fiction, I ended up lost in the dreary bank barn back on the home farm, during my MFA program at Southern Illinois University, I ended up lost in a storybook bank barn of my imagination – trying to create a pastoral Mennonite narrative that pleased everyone and made no mention of my doubts about faith. And because I remained fearful of the exposure of my impairments, I had no way to write about the bodily differences that will always remain with me, and that became more apparent and debilitating in the sweltering summers of southern Illinois.

When the heat rose in the summer following my first year, I forced myself to keep writing, and in the process, undid much of the good work I'd accomplished. I wrote some more solid work that fall and winter, but as I revised furiously during my final year in the program, I was all too aware that much of what I'd composed in the summer – and much of what I was trying to finish in March and April of 2013 – simply didn't measure up to what I'd submitted during the winter workshops when my work had finally received the praise I'd long desired. My predicament was magnified by the fact that I'd persuaded my advisor to allow me to write a novella about a Mennonite family – which, due to my inability to sharpen and condense my

narrative, kept getting longer with every draft I submitted. I'll never forget the words she muttered as she leafed through my pages during one of our mid-spring meetings. "I'm not sure you can do this." I wasn't, either, and the specter of yet another failure filled me horror.

With my advisor's help, I managed to cobble together a novella-like narrative out of the material I'd produced. My thesis was the story of the Mennonite farmer Clyde Bauman's attempt to purchase the family farm from his controlling father, and his twelve-year-old son's attempt to come to grips with his hatred of the farm. I knew the piece was flawed – the conflicts were too spiky and, at least for my tastes, too minor. At my defense, I apologized to the committee. I couldn't explain why my work suffered; I still had no vocabulary for connecting my writing to my body. And I didn't *want* to explain my limitations – I couldn't bear to admit my body's complicated differences; I was afraid of losing privilege I enjoyed as someone who passed as able-bodied. I simply wanted to produce stirring and lucid art. And the fact that I couldn't do it – that I couldn't redeem my "failings" as I'd long dreamed of doing, that I wasn't on my way to the "normalcy-as-superiority" I still believed was my due – filled me with an almost overwhelming sense of inadequacy.

When my thesis defense was finished, I waited in dread in the cramped hallway outside the department office. After the grilling I'd received from one committee member, who'd demanded to know what had happened to the good work I'd submitted early in the previous year, I felt there was a very real chance the committee wouldn't pass me. But I had been admitted to a Ph.D. program, and my advisor insisted that she felt my work was good enough to pass, so I graduated and moved to Grand Forks, North Dakota and began my doctoral studies, where I kept trying to revise my novel about a Mennonite farm family without making mention of any bodily differences that might seem "abnormal" or unlovely to the broad readership I craved. I knew it



was fine to write about queerness; I understood that people want to read about gay men. But I still did not understand how to depict my body, not when I was striving so diligently to attain normalcy and respectability through my art.

And then finally, in my second year, I took a course on “Body Theory” and began to realize that bodily difference and disability can be acceptable and interesting critical and artistic subjects. In that course, and in another course on “Queer Theory,” I encountered writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Hélène Cixous, Susan Wendell, Petra Kuppens, and Christina Crosby, writers whose narratives blur the boundary between criticism and life writing, and who incorporate their incapacities – and even their pain – into their accounts of care and virtue and beauty. But even then – even as I gained a vocabulary that helped me to reframe my understanding of my body – I was still unsure of how to incorporate my body into the novel I was writing. I still believed that there was no room in my story for the very particular set of incapacities I experience; I still supposed, as my advisor at Southern Illinois had suggested, that the story of a gay Mennonite farm kid was probably “enough.” So, while immersing myself in works of disability studies and queer theory, I continued to try and write a story that was entirely, and unselfconsciously, structured by normative definitions of success and beauty and able-bodiedness. I still tried to write something that would help me achieve artistically my long-sought dream of normalcy as elite accomplishment.

~

Today, there seems to be a dawning, if belated, recognition among aspiring writers that ‘how we are taught to judge “good work” is inextricably rooted in the structures of social and racial privilege’ (Al-Kadhi). This awareness has opened up new ways of understanding artfulness, alternative aesthetic perspectives that have more cultural currency now than they did even in the

first years of this decade. The disability theorist Tobin Siebers is surely one of the foremost contributors to this shift. In *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers offers a view of beauty that embraces and affirms bodily differences. For Siebers, disability aesthetics “names a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of representation” and “refuses to recognize representation of healthy body – and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty – as the sole criteria of the aesthetic” (2-3). He adds, “The aesthetic desire to transform the human revolutionizes beauty by claiming disability as the form of physical and mental diversity with the greatest potential for artistic representation” (139).

Siebers’s analysis helps us to see both the value and beauty in artistic forms that deviate from traditional norms of capacity. It also helps us to recognize the ways that “normalizing,” “perfectionistic” art can erase bodily difference. Siebers carefully traces the way the Nazi Party’s veneration of paintings that omitted any sign of disability or weakness abetted the Nazi’s eugenic program.

Reading Siebers has helped me to understand how the aesthetic priorities I held in my twenties and throughout my MFA program connected lyricism and sublimity to physical perfection. This perspective was shaped by my interpellation within the ideology of ability, my longing for bourgeois achievement, and my admiration for writers like Nabokov, who define artistic achievement in terms of lyricized intellectualism, and assess human worthiness and legitimacy precisely in terms of the capacity for insight and receptivity to high art.

Consider Nabokov’s interpretation of the “The Metamorphosis.” “The beauty of Kafka's and Gogol's private nightmares is that their central human characters belong to the same private fantastic world as the inhuman characters around them, but the central one tries to get out of that world, to cast off the mask, to transcend the cloak or the carapace” (Nabokov 2). Under this

analysis, the Samsa family's failures of sympathy toward Gregor cause its members to register as inhuman. Only sensitive Gregor – the Gregor who, in Nabokov's reading – is a metaphor for the artist – registers as fully human.

Nabokov's reading of the Samsa family seems to me emblematic of the way so many doyens of America's high literary culture have regarded – and still regard – bourgeois American life. All too often, contemporary arbiters of taste and morality look at families like Gregor's, or like my family, and see only a lack of education and curiosity. They see selfishness. They see comfortable white privilege. They see an intolerance for difference. (They see these things, I should note, because they are there! But that is not all there is to middle America.) And so, like Nabokov (whose elitist tastes they also might contest), many of the doyens of art and politics fail to see imperfectly educated, and often disabled or debilitated middle Americans as fully or properly human, thereby mirroring back the widespread white middle American dehumanization of the racial, sexual, and gendered others who are the most endangered by the dehumanizing rhetoric of the nativist conservative movement.

There are, I understand, sound political reasons for the left resistance to empathy for bourgeois white Americans. (I am more skeptical of the political value of hostility toward the “white working-class Americans” whose poverty and rejection of bourgeois customs makes them targets of leftist *and* white middle American scorn.) But art, in my view, should challenge the stereotypes that enable expedient political assumptions<sup>1</sup>. It should ask us to slow down. It should invite us to consider, as Martha Nussbaum argues, the particular circumstances of not just our moral dilemmas, but also the complicated people who structure them, and the complicated systems that they are caught up in.

---

<sup>1</sup> My novel tries to do this by depicting characters like Clyde and Isaac Bowman, Rick Denlinger, and Marie Lamborne whose complicated social and economic values blur simple notions of what it means to be “liberal” or “conservative.”

Like Gregor Samsa's parents, like my parents, and like me in the midst of my debilitation, America's comfortable – and comfortable *seeming* – Babbitts and Rabbits are subject to forces far larger and more powerful than they are. They are buffeted by a globalized economy that punishes unskilled labor – or they are rich and angered by narratives of loss of status. They are lashed to mortgages that may still be under water – or they own three homes and resent the possibility that they might have to sacrifice one due to changes in tax policy. Whether rich, poor, or somewhere in the middle, many of them are aging and debilitated. Many have friends and family members who are battling addiction. Even when they are prospering personally, many white (and not exclusively white) middle Americans look at the lives of their children and identify a diminishment of the opportunities and privileges they enjoyed.

And as they cast about in anger and bewilderment – in the face of economic fear, bodily shame, *or* selfish worry about the loss of privilege – white (and not exclusively white) middle Americans are constantly reassured by tides of conservative propaganda that all of their problems are the result of slick technocrats and racial others: Mexicans. “Illegal” immigrants. The liberals who live in sprawling cities that are simultaneously sites of unjust prosperity and unspeakable (inhuman) crime. And the more that middle-America hungers for this news, the more the profit-hungry tribunes of our fragmented media environment hasten to supply it. So a third of the country marches and stumbles along in thrall to a version of news that is inflected with bias. And it is so tempting to behold people parroting the talking points of right-wing outlets and amplifying them on social media and see only avatars and pixels and hear only the canned voices of cynical television anchors. It is so easy, amid the storms of propaganda in contemporary America, to lose sight of people's humanity.

The elitist scorn of the literary left toward complacent middle-class Americans is far, far less potent and damaging than the populist scorn of the political right for immigrants and people of color. I don't believe for an instant that empathy and thoroughgoing inclusivity in art and literature can overcome the force of nativist propaganda that is being accelerated and "weaponized" by social media. But I do think that art and literature can make meaningful differences in individual lives and in real and imagined communities. In my teens and twenties, I would have benefited enormously from access to art that was far more inclusive and that reified non-normative definitions of beauty. And American letters will benefit from its inclusion of nuanced and critical depictions of flawed white, middle American characters who are casting about and even oppressing others while being manipulated by forces they cannot understand, in particular, nativist and fundamentalist propaganda.

~

In his analysis of diversity in contemporary literature, Kenny Fries points out that 'disability is too often excluded in discussions of diversity, a good deal of which, for good reason, focuses on race. This silence is especially noteworthy because disability crosses racial, gender, sexuality, class, and national boundaries.' As Fries notes, disability is an important feature of American urban, suburban, *and* rural cultures. Under the ideology of ability, the fear of disability is perhaps one of the great remaining common threads in contemporary American life.

Disability – and the body more generally – might therefore be a useful conceptual place to look for stories that can help to foster empathy, that can link white middle Americans to people of color in suburbs and cities and urban, progressive whites. It's not just that disability is experienced by people who belong to every American group; it's also that tolerance is often (but, of course, not always) a necessary choice for disabled and debilitated people. Many of us

understand that we need to ignore aspects of other people that we don't like, because we depend on those people for support. Certainly, this is how it has been for me in my relations with my family.

In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the connections that emerge out of care for those with terminal illness this way: "It's a surprise, though it shouldn't be, that nondoing verging on extinction would be the condition of possibility for *companionship* in these realms of unmaking" (175). Incapacity can open people up to each other. The acknowledgement of shared vulnerability can be unifying. And there is so much shared vulnerability in America in 2019, with all of its weapons and pollutants and the ongoing threat of climate disaster, with all the ways Americans are debilitated by the consequences of the American dream. Art can point us to vulnerabilities that we share – the fragility of our environments, the vulnerability of our bodies, the injustices of our economy – and, in so doing, it can help to build fellow-feeling across racial, ethnic, geographic, and class divides.

If I had written this introduction before writing my novel, I might have found a way to tell a story that better uses disability to construct a set of fraught but mutually beneficial cross-political relations. But my narrative is centered around a young, questing, elitist gay protagonist who is debilitated by a severe gluten sensitivity. It is, in other words, about the debilitated person I was in my teens. Part of what I want to explore in the project is the attitude toward disability that has defined so much of my life as a privileged person with a non-visible disability living under the ideology of ability: the hiding of difference, the repression of impairment, and the way healing (or, in my case, a partial healing) can lead – at least at first – not to sympathy and empathy but to an even more anxious conformity to norms of able-bodiedness, a more rigid policing of bodily difference.

The draft of the novel I submitted for my preliminary defense sought to show the way the terror of disability conspired with neoliberal norms to produce a politics of rapacious selfishness, a politics that is happy to do all sorts of violence to other people. It did so by striving to connect Isaac's bodily anxiety and sudden healing to his embrace of an Ayn Rand-inflected libertarian politics and, eventually, Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. Some of that writing felt too didactic to my readers, as it did to me, upon rereading. I want my writing to reflect my political engagement; but in that draft, my interest in interrogating right-wing views seemed to be overdetermining Isaac's characterization.

In revising the novel for my final defense, I've sought to make Isaac a more anxious figure, one whose bodily anxiety crowds out his engagement with politics for the first two-thirds of the narrative. And, importantly, I've replaced his fixation on Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* with a fixation on André Aciman's 2007 novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, a work that I've come to realize I read and reread during my last year working on my parents' farm. Aciman's book is magnificent in so many respects – as a story of obsession, of gay love, of bodily capacity. But its vision of beauty, which includes several cutting asides about disability, is as able-bodied, privileged, and lofty as Vladimir Nabokov's.

In the draft of my novel I've submitted here, *Call Me* structures Isaac's sense of wealth and beauty, just as it has long structured mine. It shapes his fantasy life. It pushes Isaac to desire money, time, education, and a villa by the sea. It also encourages him to regard Luke Sauder as a beloved equivalent to Oliver, the beloved of Elio, the narrator of *Call Me*. Isaac longs to live as gracefully and elegantly as Elio and his family, and yet throughout my narrative, he fails to match this (impossible) standard, because of his body, because of his anxiety, and because of position as a poor Mennonite farm kid. But in this draft, as Isaac haltingly learns more about the

world and comes to see how opportunity is tilted against young men like him, he begins to question the libertarian politics he eagerly embraced as part of his worship of the rich farmer, Rick Denlinger. And when he witnesses Art Smucker's attack on Denlinger's disabled employee, Jorge Vasquez, Isaac begins to see himself more explicitly as a vulnerable minority, and he finds inspiration in Jorge's resilience, a resilience that he comes to realize he has exhibited all his life, even as he's seen himself as a failure. He even begins to question the able-bodied aesthetic of *Call Me*.

My hope is that this version of the novel better depicts the way Isaac's experiences and longings inform and complicate his politics. Now, his loneliness and residual anxiety determine his character more than his political leanings. Isaac's belated awareness of the value and worthiness of his "imperfect" body reflects my own belated awareness of the value of my own body, an awareness that I could not have come to without my work on this project or the consistently insightful input of the members of my committee.

~

Reflecting on his paralysis, one of my favorite disabled novelists, the Reynolds Price writes:

Was it disaster...? *Catastrophe* surely, a literally upended life with all parts strewn and some of the most urgent parts lost for good, within and without. But if I were called on to value honestly my present life beside my past -- the years from 1933 til '84 against the five years after -- I'd have to say that, despite an enjoyable fifty-year start, these recent years since full catastrophe have gone still better. They've brought more in and sent more out -- more love and care, more knowledge and patience, more work in less time. (178-179)



Price's accommodation to his body's difference was clearly remarkable. Even now, as I reflect on my life since the transformative procedure I underwent at seventeen, I find it difficult to summon Price's sense of thoroughgoing gratitude. I still mourn all that my body has lost, all the opportunities I've lost. (I still wonder if I could have completed this dissertation anywhere but in chilly Grand Forks, North Dakota). Yet, like Price, I see that I've become a more understanding and kinder person because of my incapacities. And I can let go, now, of my harsh – ableist – attitude toward my younger self, who I have been far too quick to write off as a failure, as a fool, as an imbecile. I can accept, too, that even if all the desperate writing I produced in my twenties was of little value to other people, it was nonetheless of great value to me. That work could never “redeem” me; it could never cancel out all my mistakes, all my unaccepted incapacities. Yet the act of writing – the ritual of writing – nonetheless probably saved my life. It gave me meaning. It provided me with a sense of purpose in the midst of episode after episode of despair and confusion.

So, in reflecting on all the thousands of pages of unpublished writing that I've produced, I want to resist the impulse to call that work “failed,” even as I want to insist that there was something quite misguided, and even cruel, about my approach to its production. It can be good to write assiduously and call oneself a writer – so long as one does not traffic in an elitism that disdains all writing that does not conform to the highest forms of art, and dehumanizes all people who are insufficiently artful *or* progressive.

I understand now that writing involves so much more than simply the production of art for others. It also involves self-exploration, self-sustenance, self-care. It can involve, as it does for the advocate for therapeutic writing Gillie Bolton, confronting “the fears, memories, and horrors buried inside which cause problems either some of or most of the time” (11). Or, it can

strive insistently to write away from those fears – to avoid engaging with the traumas of the writer’s past and body, or to confront them through metaphor, as genres like fantasy and science fiction have always done. Angela Carter and Carmen Maria Machado write just as knowingly about the body as Lucy Grealy and Reynolds Price.

As a teacher and practitioner of writing, I want to foster appreciation for all of these forms of writing. And as a writer hoping to publish a version of the novel I’ve submitted here, I remain convinced that the mantle of writer can still be ennobling, as can the dream of touching others with the sort of art that helps them to recognize the humanity of all sorts of people, even those who are selfish and insufficiently reasonable, as, after all, most of are, so much of the time.

## II. ANIMAL SPIRITS

*Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?*

Ecclesiastes 3:21

*Isaac*

Isaac Bauman was staring at the chiseled man on the cover of the novel he was reading when his mother shouted up the stairs that the cows were out in the field across from the barn.

‘I’ll be right down,’ he cried, jumping to his feet.

Still, for another moment, he stood there, gazing at the muscled figure on the novel’s cover and trying not to think of how close he’d come to getting caught the previous night. But he couldn’t just stand there wallowing in his incompetence. He had to get moving. On a dairy farm, there is nothing worse than loose cattle. He tossed the book on his bed and bounded down the stairs. In the mudroom, he pulled on his jacket and boots and green Pioneer seed cap and rushed out to his little truck, breathing a quick prayer over the job before him as he started up the road that led from the tenant house, where he lived with his parents, to the main farm.

When he reached the edge of the pasture, he peered across the barnyard. The farmstead looked as it ought to. A dozen Holsteins stood inside the white picket fence. Thirty-odd cows milled around in the exercise pasture, another big group by the willows behind them. The gate was closed. The fence seemed intact. But sure enough, a clump of eight escaped cattle stood at the far end of the field across the road, his father and grandfather’s pickups parked in the middle of the field, near, but not too near, the escaped livestock. Each man had staked out a corner forty

yards out from the cows, wisely waiting for backup before trying to herd the animals back toward the barnyard.

Isaac turned his pickup off the road and eased it toward the pair of trucks. He was halfway across the field when he noticed the small black pickup bouncing behind him. He gripped the steering wheel tighter. The last thing he needed when he was trying not to make a fool of himself was to have the most capable young farmer in the congregation breathing down his neck – though it was not Luke Sauder’s competence that quickened his pulse.

Isaac slowed beside his grandfather’s pickup, eyeing the rearview mirror in spite of himself as the taller boy climbed out of the truck. The corn stubble crunched under Luke’s footfalls. Isaac hunched in his seat and stared intently at the dust on the plastic that covered his speedometer. Even so, he felt the older boy’s gaze resting mildly upon him, the way it still sometimes did even now more than a year after he had stopped speaking to Luke in the wishful supposition that silence would put an end to all his impure thoughts.

‘You have to *go around*.’

Isaac jumped at his grandfather’s voice. The old man peered into his window, sweat beading in the seams of his face.

‘We don’t want to start pushing the cows until we’ve got fellas on all sides.’ He pointed to the tree line beyond the group. ‘You boys park by the trees over there. That should be far enough not to spook them. Once we get a few more fellas out there with you, I’ll give you the sign, and you start driving them this way.’

Isaac nodded without looking at Luke.

‘Go slow now, you hear? If you go too quick, those cows are liable to take off.’

*They might take off, anyway,* Isaac thought, not that he'd dare say such a thing to his grandfather. He simply nodded and eased his truck forward, making a wide circle and praying that Luke wouldn't talk to him, that they would simply stand together by the trees in an awkward silence made just bearable by the wash of ease that rose from Luke's skin like corn pollen.

At the tree line, Isaac parked and climbed slowly out of his pickup. Luke pulled in beside him. Sixty yards away, the cows grazed away, unperturbed. Isaac folded his arms and stared intently at the cattle, tensing when Luke slowed at his side.

'Do you know how they got out?' Luke asked, after they'd stood there for a long minute.

'Nope.'

The cows grazed on in the middle of field as though nothing whatsoever was wrong.

Luke hooked his thumbs in the belt loops of his trousers. 'We'll get 'em sorted.'

Easy for him to say: he wasn't terrified of doing something dumb.

The last time the cows had gotten out, two years earlier, there had only been two escapees, but they'd been standing in the road that ran along the exercise pasture. That afternoon, Isaac had hustled across the barnyard between his father and grandfather, trying to contain his fear, rein in his flesh, and ignore how much his grandfather judged him. When they'd reached the cows, he'd done his best to follow his father's instructions; he'd tried hold his arms wide and make himself as large as possible, even though his instinct, then as now, was to make his gangly six-foot frame seem as small as possible. But when the pair of Holsteins had turned and started trotting toward him, as he'd known they would, their size had panicked him, all their dull bovine implacability. Instead of fainting toward the cows, he'd jumped out of the way and the Holsteins had lowered their heads and trotted briskly past him, as if he were a pesky member of the congregation they were trying to dodge. Fortunately, just at that moment, one of the other

members of the meetinghouse had happened by. The old farmer blocked the road with his pickup and rushed the cows as they tried to edge around it, pushing them back. With the aid of that neighbor, Isaac's father and grandfather had driven the animals into the farm lane and through a side gate into the exercise pasture. While the men congratulated each other, Isaac had hung back, scuffing the soil at the edge of the pasture and replaying the scornful look his grandfather had trained upon him.

The contempt was bad enough, but what was worse was how briefly the expression lasted. A flash of disgust – disgust Isaac knew he deserved – and then the old man's face snapped back into its usual cast of focused hardness. His grandfather had no time for fear or ineptitude, no time for *anyone* who didn't measure up to his exacting standards. Fifteen then, Isaac had been old enough to grasp how completely he failed to conform to the standards of the Mennonite congregation and on the farm. Now, at seventeen, he still failed to conform. His belly still jumped. His hands still dripped uncontrollably at the smallest spark of anxiety.

Weekdays, in the Mennonite schoolhouse, he hunched in his carrel, ground his toes into the soles of his shoes, and prayed that his belly wouldn't heave with yet another loud rumble. Sundays and Wednesdays, he cringed in his pew in the meetinghouse, bit the inside of his cheek, and prayed that his hands would stop leaking. Every day, he asked the Lord for relief, for deliverance, yet his body kept betraying him. And his stomach felt even jumpier now that he'd abandoned his relationship with the young woman he'd once believed the Lord had led him to as deliverance from all impurity and bodily discomfort.

A breeze lifted and brushed Isaac's face. As ever, the unalloyed fineness of Luke Sauder's presence made his skin lighten. But it was dangerous to think like that with Luke beside him, risky to do anything that might betray the force and depth of his desire. He drew a deep

breath and tried to push every distraction but the escaped livestock out of his mind. The hurt he'd inflicted on Mary Elizabeth Zimmerman earlier that fall. His helplessness before Luke Sauder's chiseled frame. The despair that filled him at the relentless disorder of his hands and stomach. And his latest folly: the near-disaster of his experimentation with the app he'd downloaded on his phone the previous night.

In the Bauman's plain Mennonite congregation, 'smart' phones were forbidden, like televisions, computers, and every form of technology that allowed worldliness to seep unmonitored into members' hearts. Isaac no longer worried much about worldly temptation, now that he no longer believed in God. And since breaking up with Mary Elizabeth Zimmerman, he no longer had to worry about her judgment. By telling her that soon enough, the Lord might prompt him to resume their courtship, he'd managed to convince her not to tell anyone about their breakup. He was free, for the moment, at least, from congregational scrutiny – from any outward force that might restrict the ambit of his desires. Still, it had taken him the better part of a month to work up the courage to drive to the store in the village of Kuernerville and buy one of the phones he desired. He no longer believed in the foundation of the congregation's authority, but the church still had the power to crush him.

It was an Amish girl who'd finally pushed him to make the purchase. Two weeks earlier, he'd been leafing through a men's workout magazine at the Kuernerville library when he'd spotted the young woman tapping away on a 'smart' phone in front of the rack of Amish romance novels. The Amish church was far more restrictive than the Kuernerville Mennonite congregation. Yet there she was, indulging herself, learning who knew what. If an Amish girl could have a phone, why couldn't he have one?

From the newspaper, Isaac had learned that ‘smart’ phones were basically computers. He’d read all about Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Google. He knew how powerful these companies were, how prosperous, and he’d long wanted to know what it was like to use their transformative technology, to hold it in the palm of your hand. Now, at last, he had his prompting.

The following evening, he told his parents he was heading to Mary Elizabeth’s and sped to the Kuernerville strip mall. A pimply, blue-haired clerk walked him through the various models. He’d winced at the cost of the most attractive, bechromed options, finally settling on a phone whose price seemed exorbitant, but which fell squarely in the middle of the models that lined the wall. The cost of a ‘data plan’ imparted a fresh shock. For what the phone company wanted him to pay each month, he could eat out at the Mennonite restaurant in the village ten times a month. But he had his savings, the funds he’d stored up from his years of working alongside his father and grandfather. So, begrudgingly, he handed the clerk his debit card.

Home, he’d charged the phone at the outlet behind his bureau. He tinkered with the camera, the video recorder, and of course, the browser, secreting the phone in an inside pocket of his blue canvas Bible cover when he was done. He quickly discovered that the browser’s search function did indeed allow him to investigate any subject he wanted. It was while conducting exhaustive research on the biography of a charming singer named Justin Bieber that Isaac discovered that the browser on his phone enabled him to access an endless trove of free pornography. The films he watched were not as beautiful as the scenes in the novel he’d been re-reading all through that fall. They were terribly lit and peopled with sullen, garishly tattooed models. The grimness of the actors’ predicaments often seemed so like his own entrapment in his flesh that what was meant to divert and titillate left him more conscious of how inhibited he was,



how blocked. Some nights, the instant he came, he shuddered with pity for the men he'd just watched, their abjection seeming entwined with his own, the thinness of his relief so far from the rich pleasure he felt whenever dreamed of giving himself to Luke Sauder the way the young men had given themselves to each other in the novel he adored. But however empty he felt when he was finished with one of those films, he always returned to them. They were the closest he would ever be able to come to being touched by another man the way he longed to be touched.

Between streams of porn during his second week of phone ownership, Isaac began searching for potential solutions to his trouble with his hands and stomach. Maybe he had 'social anxiety'? Ever since his teens, he'd been fearful around other people. But his stomach cramped even when he was alone in his room. What about Crohn's Disease? Irritable Bowel Syndrome? Certainly, his bowels *seemed* irritable enough, but how could stomach trouble be responsible for how his palms dripped like a spigot at the slightest provocation?

During one bout of searching on his phone, he discovered a surgery that treated over-perspiration of the hands by severing the nerves that controlled the sweat glands in the palms, but the cost of such a procedure seemed prohibitive and the side-effects were alarming. Terrible as it was to sweat too much, it might be even worse to not be able to sweat at all. He read about 'probiotics,' and even bought a pack of pills at the Kuernerville Rite-Aid in the middle of October, but the pills left him feeling even more bloated than usual. He ended up stumbling to the bathroom to void his bowels twice in the middle of the night.

All through the next day, Isaac had 'helped' his father and grandfather carve up a fallen walnut in the pasture, meaning that his father and grandfather had taken turns running the chain saw, and he'd clumsily wheeled the weighty slices of wood toward the bed of the truck. That evening, demoralized by the wearying routine, Isaac had downloaded an 'app' one of the porn

sites kept recommending to him, inputting a false birth year to trick the system into believing that he was eighteen. Eagerly, he'd skimmed the profile photographs on *Slider*. A paunchy, goateed middle-aged man leered at him. He swiped away. The next profile belonged to a rail-thin man with a shaved head and a tattoo on the side of his neck. Bitterly, he'd kept swiping. Where was the man of his dreams? (Where was Luke Sauder?) But each successive prospect only seemed more like someone he would have wanted to witness to if he'd encountered him at the township fair in the days when he'd still believed in God.

It was only after he'd perused the men on the app for several minutes that Isaac noticed the green dot in the lower corner of some of the profiles. The dot, he swiftly concluded, signified whether the person whose profile he was scrutinizing was currently online. Below each dot was a number that reported the profile-holder's proximity. The goateed man with the sagging, pierced nipples who called himself *MasterClassCocksucker* was 6347 feet away – scarcely more than a mile! And if Isaac could figure out his distance from other users, *surely, they could calculate their distance from him*. It wouldn't matter that he hadn't uploaded a photograph; anyone could still find out where he lived. All they would have to do was drive around the township until the distance between them started dropping.

How stupid he was. How *exposed* he'd left himself. He turned off his phone, rushed to the window, and peered out into the darkness, half-expecting a green light to be glowing like an emergency beacon on the tenant house lawn. But the lawn was dark. The night remained quiet. Slowly, his pulse had stopped thudding. And it occurred to him that on the remote chance someone he knew *was* using the app, that meant they were probably *like* him, and would almost certainly be just as afraid of getting caught.

*Probably.* But that did not mean that there wasn't some ogre out there trolling through the various advertisements, searching for some poor, foolish, *queer* Mennonite farm kid to expose and ruin. And Isaac's shame was already overwhelming. He couldn't handle any more shocks.

For the rest of that night, he'd left his phone off, tucked away in the zippered pocket of his blue canvas Bible cover. After the work was done the following morning, he'd switched his phone on, but the sight of the *Slider* icon had made him nauseous. He'd tucked the phone back in his Bible cover and retrieved his favorite novel from its hiding spot between his mattress and box spring. *Call Me by Your Name*. He touched the bald spot on the bowed head of the muscular man on the cover. He traced the spine of the novel with his index finger, and then opened it at random. It didn't matter where you turned in the book; every page was brimming with lyrical anguish, statuesque physicality, expertly modulated lust.

Isaac had been halfway through the scene in which the protagonist penetrates a ripe peach while dreaming of his beloved when his mother shouted up the stairs that the cows were out in the field across from the barnyard. For one more moment, he'd stared at the novel's cover, marveling, as ever, at how completely its lush debauchery eclipsed his lonely attempts to satisfy his desire, and then he'd raced down the stairs, leapt into his pickup, and sped up the road, cursing his luck when Luke Sauder fell in behind him.

He cursed his luck now as he stood at the edge of the field, eying the escaped Holsteins, Luke Sauder beside him, Luke whose equipoise filled him with equal parts hatred and longing.

Another pickup turned off the road and started bouncing across the field. *Elvin Beiler*, Isaac thought. And behind it, the black Ford belonging to Denny Keener. The phone chain was doing its work. The members of the congregation were arriving.

‘How’s Mary Elizabeth?’ Luke asked quietly.

‘She’s fine,’ Isaac hissed, eyeing Luke sharply for any sign that he’d heard about their rupture.

But Luke just nodded and scuffed the corn stubble. ‘I’m glad to hear it.’

Isaac scowled at the escaped livestock and folded his arms tighter. He’d been right to end things with Mary Elizabeth. He’d hoped that the breakup might lead to at least a slight diminishment of his troubles with his hands and stomach. But the shaming symptoms persisted. So, perhaps, misery would always be his lot, and all he’d ever be able to do was keep his head down and try not to do anything too ruinous on the farmstead, and then retreat each night into the private pleasures of the videos on his phone and the perfect beauty of the finest novels.

*So please don’t let me make a fool of myself,* he murmured inwardly. It was not a prayer. It was just a wish – a meaningless gesture, since no one was listening. Still, he could at least hope that he wouldn’t embarrass or injure himself. He could hope that he might find some way to make his life something other than a gauntlet of endless indignities and self-recriminations. He was seventeen. He was supposed to be enjoying his youth, relishing the vitality of his body. But he was not vital. He was befogged and beleaguered, though he had no idea what, precisely, was wrong with him. And all he could do to briefly escape the muddled clay of his own flesh was lose himself in dreams of men who were far more composed and self-assured, far handsomer and stronger. Men like Luke Sauder, or Elio and Oliver, the fellows whose charms and brilliance were so perfectly congruent in his favorite novel. But Luke Sauder, most of all.

Luke in the meetinghouse. Luke at the snack bar in the village. Luke at the bowling alley, where Isaac would venture with the other youth of the congregation, even though he despised the wretched game. Luke with whom he’d once shared a friendship. Luke who might once have

liked him, who might even *be* like him. Isaac couldn't be certain. He'd known Luke Sauder all his life, and still had no idea what Luke Sauder wanted, or what he thought.

*Focus on the cows*, Isaac told himself. They were what counted. He squinted across the field. On the far side of the escaped livestock, Elvin Beiler and Denny Keener had been joined by two more of the congregation's farmers. The men worked their way slowly across the field, forming a loose circle around the cattle. Finally, the fellows stopped and glanced around the field, twenty-odd yards between them. The cows grazed away, oblivious. Wide clouds sped across the sky. The wind ruffled the hair at the edges of Isaac's hat. It shook his collar. Another interminable-seeming interval, and then his grandfather lifted his blue cap and waved it with a flourish.

'You ready?' said Luke.

'Of course,' Isaac sniffed, tossing his head and striding forward with what he hoped seemed like confidence.

But his stomach twanged as he marched toward the Holsteins, half-willing, half-praying the cows toward the barns. With each step, he veered a little farther from Luke. With each step, he felt a little more alone in the middle of the field, a little more exposed. To calm himself, he turned on reflex to a glimpse of Luke, but still, his hands shook and his knees wobbled.

'Good girls,' he murmured as he advanced toward the livestock, hoping that by deploying one his steady father's favorite phrases he could summon some of the big man's confidence.

Two of the cows lifted their heads, their expressions nervous and watchful.

'Sweet girls,' he said, praying that that they would live up to this label. He glanced at Luke, the older boy now a good thirty yards away.

Luke nodded and sped up, waving his arms and shouting at the livestock. ‘Yah. Get on, now. Move.’

‘Go on,’ Isaac cried. He’d meant to say the words loudly, but they came out choked and hoarse. He waved his arms weakly. ‘Go,’ he cried again. ‘Get moving.’ His voice had deepened, but when he was nervous, he still sounded like a child.

Isaac’s grandfather edged around the cattle on Isaac’s left. Isaac’s father edged around them on Isaac’s right, the men trying to herd the cows in the direction of the barns. On every side, farmers were closing in on the escaped Holsteins, ready to head them off if they started running in any direction but toward the barnyard. And all the while, Luke kept striding toward the cattle, his movements so sure and steady that the livestock began moving toward Isaac.

‘Go,’ Isaac shouted at the front-most cow, still fifteen-odd yards away across the field.

But the big creature just kept plodding forward. Isaac ran toward her. Following his father’s advice, he stopped and feinted forward as though *he* was about to charge. It made no difference. The cows just kept trotting toward him.

A rumble behind him, a strange noise Isaac couldn’t quite place.

‘Yah,’ he shouted, imitating Luke. ‘Git. Lei, lei, lei,’ he screamed, rolling his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Still, the cows kept coming. Again, the rumble sounded behind him. What was he doing wrong? And then, to his confusion, his father turned and started swinging his arms, running toward the cows as if to push them *away* from the direction of the barn. Bewildered, Isaac stopped, still waving his arms and trilling his tongue, still helplessly trying to deter the advancing livestock. But the two frontmost Holsteins just kept bearing down on him, indifferent to everything he was trying to do to stop them.

‘Get back,’ Isaac screamed, windmilling his arms.

But the cows just kept coming as though he wasn’t there. At the last moment, he stumbled back, and the cows swept past. And still, his father kept running toward him, his big belly swinging, his heavy face scarlet.

‘*Behind. You.*’ The terrible words broke through the breeze.

Isaac whirled around and froze just as another rumble sounded. The largest bull he’d ever seen was stepping across the field toward him. The rumble that rose from the heavy lips was so low it sounded like a milk truck engine idling. The bull groaned again, but the animal was, plainly, not content with the cows he’d drawn. He tossed his head, his dark eyes locking on Isaac, the gaze focused, ruthless, primal. A hot flow of liquid started down Isaac’s thigh.

*Run*, he told himself. *Go*.

But if he ran, wouldn’t that merely encourage the bull to charge? But standing there would mean certain calamity. At least if he ran, he’d have a chance to escape. He turned and forced himself forward, his legs wobbling, his upper body straining as if he was pushing his way through water. The sky widened. The heavy breathing of the bull gathered behind him.

*Go*, he thought, conscious for a moment that the gaze of every farmer in the field was focused upon him, beholding his ineptitude. And then even that worry melted away, and there was nothing but the wobbly churning of his legs, the roar in his ears, the electric ache twanging away in his side, the panic so high and shrill it seemed that he was already pitching into the air, already falling.

*Clyde*

Thank goodness for Saturdays. Weekdays, the hourly news updates on the Christian radio station began with a rundown of the day's numbers from the Chicago Board of Trade, and all through 2015, the milk price had been poor. Even now, in October, the price was so bad that weekdays, Clyde had started switching off the radio before his meals. But on weekends, he could enjoy his breakfasts in peace. A big bowl of baked oatmeal in front of him, a wide mug of coffee, his wife, Lois, sitting at the table opposite him, their son Isaac, already done with his breakfast and up in his room, reading whatever book he'd gotten from the library that week.

Clyde nodded along with the choral hymn on the radio. The song was arranged in the Mennonite way, humbly, properly, the harmony of the acapella voices undiluted by worldly instruments or soloists or anything that would raise one member above another. It was a good song. A good morning. Why, then, did the memory of that ugliness at the Beniol Gish auction press in upon him?

He never liked to see a dairy herd sold unwillingly, but he liked Beniol. He'd wanted to see how the man was holding up. So, earlier that week, after the morning work was finished, he'd headed over to the auction. He'd been standing in the tent for two minutes when his neighbor Art Smucker sidled up, his face hard, his chest broad under his bib overalls. They'd exchanged pleasantries, made a few remarks about the weather. And then Art had started mocking the friendly way Rick Denlinger, the biggest farmer in the township, was talking to the trim, short-haired woman that he explained was the new vet. 'I'm sorry, Ricky, but you've got another thing coming if you think a dyke's into you.' That sort of thing.

Clyde had endured a few minutes of this crude talk. But every time Art made another casual reference to what he gradually gathered was sexual sin, a little Amish boy kept turning around and staring at them, wide-eyed. Art hadn't noticed, or perhaps the man simply hadn't



cared. But Clyde couldn't stand the child hearing Art's remarks. 'Brother,' he'd said, 'I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't speak that way about Denlinger. Especially when there are children within earshot.' 'Sorry, Clyde,' Art had said, his voice thick with mockery. 'Sorry, buddy,' he'd whispered to the Amish boy who'd had the good sense not to turn. And then Art had swung toward Clyde, his narrow eyes flashing. 'But you know what's worse than having a little fun? Using illegals on your farm like Denlinger does and running your neighbors into the ground.'

Clyde had shrugged. Sure, Denlinger used migrant laborers, but all big farmers did that. How else could you handle a thousand-cow herd? And everyone knew that Denlinger was a top-notch operator, which was why most of his neighbors didn't begrudge him too much. But Art Smucker wasn't like the township's other farmers. He was known to frequent the bars in Ephrata. He did his fieldwork on Sundays, when he did it at all. Back when Art's father was alive, the Smucker farm, which abutted Clyde's, had been one of the township's true showplaces. But in '97, old Enos Smucker was killed by the bouncing branch of a tree he'd felled, and the next year, Art's wife left him for her sister's place out in Ohio, and every year since, Art's crops got planted later in springtime and harvested later in the fall. The previous year, his corn had still been standing in December when the first snow of the season had arrived. He was a careless farmer, his irresponsibility enabled by the fact that he'd inherited his hundred and fifty acres free and clear from sharp old Enos, plus who knew how much Fulton Bank stock. Yet poor as Artie's yields were, and sorry as his cows looked, he never shied away from running down other farmers.

Often, Clyde wished all of his neighbors were decent men, Mennonites like his buddies at the meetinghouse. Always, he came back to the idea that, rough as Art was, the Lord had made him Clyde's neighbor for a reason – maybe because Art needed discipling, or maybe just to keep

Clyde from getting too comfortable. So, when Art had started in on illegal farm labor at the auction earlier that week, Clyde had pointed out that Rick Denlinger was such a good operator that he was bound to be following the law. But this had only enraged Art Smucker further. He'd demanded to know how anyone thought that the law could be any sort of protection against injustice when it was being overseen by 'a n\*gger' like President Obama.

Again, the Amish boy had turned, his eyes wider under his straw hat. Another farmer took his son by the shoulder and shifted him to the other side of the tent. The air had swelled in Clyde's lungs. The vein in his temple beat harder. 'Brother,' he'd said, 'the Lord weeps to hear you speak like that.' Art Smucker had just grinned, his face florid, his eyes narrow and mocking. 'That may be, Bauman, but you know I don't give two shits about God.'

At this blasphemy, Clyde's blood had started to hum. Somebody needed to set Art straight. Somebody needed to do something to keep him from profaning everything he touched. But that was not the way. That would not offer a peaceful witness. So Clyde had wheeled away from the crowd and marched to his pickup even though he hadn't had a chance to speak to Beniol Gish or any of his boys about the auction. And the most exasperating thing was that when he passed Artie on the road the next afternoon, the man just lifted his finger and waved as if nothing whatsoever had passed between them.

*Bless him, Lord,* Clyde had prayed, Thursday afternoon. He offered the same prayer at the breakfast table Saturday morning. *Soften Art's heart. Help him to find his way back to your truth.* And he breathed a prayer, too, for his own pride, the habit of judgment that seized him so easily whenever he regarded anyone who didn't seem to be following the call to be a 'stranger and pilgrim' in the world, anyone who didn't try to offer a plain witness.

When breakfast was finished, Clyde had been tempted to call Isaac and ask for his help touching up the barn trim. But it was a Saturday. The boy had been out late with Mary Elizabeth and up early for the milking. It would be nice to give him the rest of the morning off. Clyde didn't quite admit that he always felt steadier on a ladder when his son wasn't around. It was good that Isaac was helping with the cows, wonderful that he was dating a nice young woman, but Clyde still couldn't quite shake the sense that something about his son didn't add up. It wasn't just how flighty the boy seemed driving a tractor or dealing with a tough calving. It wasn't even that planting and harvest didn't seem to fire his blood. It was also his twitchiness, the way he hunched no matter how many times Lois reminded him to sit straight. So often, Isaac seemed uncomfortable in his skin, a quality Clyde had never imagined he'd see in his son. But the important thing was that the boy's heart was right with God.

All morning, Clyde painted with his father in the crisp air and patchy sunlight. The stiff breeze dried the green paint as Clyde laid it along the window frames. His thoughts swirled – to Lois, to the daggone milk price, to the blessing of having his parents as bankers. When Clyde and Lois had purchased the farm nine years earlier, his folks had left the money in the operation and charged Clyde and Lois a generous interest rate, which enabled them to still turn a thin profit, unlike some of their neighbors, and even some of the members of the congregation, couples who spent too much on equipment or who'd paid too much for their farms.

*Thank the Lord for Pop*, Clyde remembered praying, the moment before his mother had charged across the lawn shouting that the cows were out in the field across from the barnyard.

'Coming,' Clyde had shouted back, scrambling down from the ladder.

Quick as he tried to move, his old father beat him to the ground.

'Take your pickup,' his father had ordered, not that Clyde needed the instruction.

Five minutes later, Clyde and his father had their trucks in place in the field well back from the group of eight escaped Holsteins. Five minutes after that, Isaac and the Sauder boy arrived. A few more minutes, and Elvin Beiler turned into the field, Denny Keener close behind him. Soon, all the fellows were in place, spread out between their pickups around the livestock, ready to push the animals toward the barns. At the time, it had seemed like more than enough help to get the cattle moving back toward the barnyard.

Clyde's father had started them off, waving his hat. Across the field, Isaac and the Sauder boy started toward the livestock. The boys were halfway across the field when Clyde heard the first rumblings. Initially, he'd thought it was a semi, or maybe one of the neighbors opening the throttle of a big diesel tractor, and then the huge black Holstein bull stepped out of tree line. Even before Clyde spotted the telltale manure on the animal's legs, he recognized it as Art Smucker's. And still, the boys kept marching forward, shouting and waving their arms, oblivious to the animal behind them.

'*Bull,*' Clyde bellowed. 'Daggone it, Isaac.'

All the other farmers waving their arms and shouting, too. But across the field, Isaac and Luke both just kept striding forward. The wind had picked up and the boys probably couldn't hear properly. From their vantage, it no doubt looked like the other fellows were trying to get the stubborn cows to move. Of course, the cows had swung from Luke toward Isaac, following the push of the more insistent herder and the bull's guttural rumble. Finally, just as the cows swept past Isaac, Clyde's shouts seemed to register. Isaac met his eye, turned, and saw what was behind him.

'Run,' Clyde shouted. 'Go. Get going.'

Art Smucker's bull lowered its head and pawed the corn stubble.

‘Go,’ Clyde roared.

Here, at last, the boy took off, running across the field. *Go faster*, Clyde had tried to tell him. But Isaac wasn’t going to make it. The bull kept gaining. So Clyde took off, tearing toward his son with a blank, animal need.

‘Look here, you dumb bull,’ he’d shouted, all his focus zeroing in on the lump of muscle bulging from the animal’s neck. ‘Come on. Look here.’

He waved his arms, his breath whistling, the ground shaking, the clouds and corn stubble flashing in disjointed frames. Finally, his efforts seemed to penetrate the animal’s dense skull. The bull veered toward him.

‘That’s right,’ Clyde said, praying that his son was heading for one of the trucks.

On the bull came, his nostrils flaring, his black hide gleaming, his eyes consumed with territorial loathing.

*This is it*, Clyde thought, picturing Lois and trying to summon a trace of all the curves he knew and loved. He braced himself, thinking wildly that in spite of his bulk he might faint right and somehow misdirect the bull the instant before it struck.

The roar of an engine hard behind him. The bull swung its head. Clyde’s father’s massive pickup shot past, accelerating as it came. The old man wasn’t trying to herd the bull; he was trying to crush it. The big grill struck the bull square in the face and the animal’s hindquarters slewed up over the hood, the windshield shattering as the enormous body struck the passenger’s side, bounced off the frame, and fell, bloodied, onto the corn stubble.

‘Pop,’ Clyde shouted, forgetting his worry about his son.

But already, his father was turning his dented pickup, unflustered by the spray of tempered glass, the steam rising from the hood, or by how near the bull must have come to

crushing him. And the bull wasn't finished. It heaved itself to its feet, even as blood streamed from its face and crooked neck, even as it moaned in stricken pain.

Could it see? Could it charge by scent? Could it smell anything but the iron stench of the blood that coated its hide and nostrils? The scent filled Clyde's nose. The animal's enraged keening roared in his ears. How was it that he could already feel such pity for the creature that had nearly gored him and killed his son? Clyde's father stopped his truck and climbed out, shaking his head. Clyde glanced behind him. Praise the Lord, Isaac had made it to one of the pickups.

'Step back, Clyde,' his father shouted.

Clyde whirled around, glancing toward the bull, suddenly certain that, in spite of its wounds, the animal was preparing to charge. But the bull just stood there, moaning and tottering.

'Clyde,' his father bellowed. 'You're in the way of Elvin's shot.'

Clyde glanced the other way behind him. Elvin Beiler stood in the middle of the field, hefting the deer rifle he kept in the back of his pickup. Clyde nodded and stumbled to his right. The rifle cracked. Hair jumped on the bull's blood-matted head. Clyde's ears rang as the animal dropped to the ground. Still, sorrow filled him as the bull's bulk stopped moving.

*The cows*, he thought with a jolt. His father hadn't forgotten them: he was already out of his wrecked pickup, marching across the field toward Clyde's truck. Clyde fell in behind him as the Sauder boy sped across the field to meet them. The two cows the bull had been calling stood watching from the tree line. The others had thundered out of view through the trees.

'You want to head after the ones that ran toward Smucker's?'' Clyde called to Luke Sauder.

'That sounds good,' said Luke.

So Clyde jumped into the truck beside him, leaving his own pickup to Isaac and his father. Luke put his truck in gear and pointed it to the tree line. Denny Keener pulled in behind him, and then Clyde's father, Isaac hunched in the cab beside him. They were almost to the tree line when the massive new Jeep burst through an opening between a pair of ailanthus trees. It was Art Smucker's vehicle. Probably the good-for-nothing farmer had heard the rifle shot.

'Oh brother,' Clyde muttered.

Luke Sauder nodded. Clyde touched the brim of his cap in acknowledgement of his neighbor, but Art Smucker just scowled and sped toward the crowd that was still gathered around the bull.

'I'm sure glad it's Elvin who's got to deal with Artie and not me,' said Clyde.

'I was thinking the same thing,' said Luke Sauder.

And for the next two hours, while they chased the escaped livestock and finally penned them in a neighbor's pasture, Clyde forgot all about Art Smucker. But he remembered the man again at 4:30 that afternoon when he turned into the lane of the main farm to start the milking. Art Smucker's Jeep was parked by the milk house. Clyde stopped beside the walnut tree and Art jumped out his vehicle, his eyes flashing like he was spoiling for a fight

'Stay in the truck,' Clyde ordered Isaac.

The boy nodded, and Clyde climbed out into the lane.

'Neighbor,' he said, trying to keep his voice even, and trying to not think of their run-in at the Beniol Gish auction.

'Clyde.' The large man squinted at him. 'I'm here for payment for my property.'

Clyde stopped, hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. 'Which property do you mean?'

The big farmer's face flushed. 'You know damn well, Clyde. I'm here for payment for the bull your daddy rammed with his truck.'

'I see.' The vein in Clyde's forehead kept pounding. Everything the man said had to have some sort of ugliness attached to it, some sort of profanity or meanness. 'I guess if your bull had been properly penned in, Dad wouldn't have had cause to plow into it, and Elvin wouldn't have had to shoot.'

'And *I* guess if your cows hadn't gotten my bull all worked up, he wouldn't have broken out of his pen.'

Clyde exhaled slowly. 'Everyone who was there saw that my cows were in my field when your bull arrived.' It was reason. It was the truth. But the truth had never had much effect on Art Smucker.

'Maybe, Clyde, but however you want to spin it, if your cows hadn't gotten out, my bull would still be alive and right where he was this morning.'

Clyde drew another deep breath. 'Art, I'm real sorry about what happened to your bull, but the issue here, so far as I can tell, has to be with your pen. If it had been secured properly, we wouldn't be having this issue.'

'Dammit, Clyde. I needed that bull. Now, I need payment for him.'

'And like I said, I'm real sorry for what happened, neighbor, but I'm strapped, too. We're all strapped.'

The milk price would come back eventually, Clyde always tried to tell himself. The troughs of the price cycle established themselves in time. But what was it Rick Denlinger in the township had said at the farm supply store earlier that spring? The big farmer had grinned and said the market could stay out of whack a whole lot longer than some farmers could stay solvent.



Art Smucker spat and narrowed his eyes. ‘You owe me, Clyde, and that’s all there is too it.’

Blood surged in Clyde’s forehead. He did not owe *a thing* to the farmer. If anything, the man owed *him* for allowing the antics of his improperly penned animal to send his livestock racing across the township and endanger the life of his son. But Art Smucker wasn’t going to hear that. And what was he going to do – come to blows with Artie over a daggone bull in front of Isaac? That wasn’t the kind of witness he was called to offer. It wasn’t the way to behave when you wanted to try and live at peace with all your neighbors – even the ones who seemed the most indecent. Even the ones who denied the transforming force of the Lord’s love.

‘Tell me this, neighbor,’ said Clyde. ‘How much do you think that bull is worth?’

‘At least \$1600.’

‘How bout if I give you \$1000? Would that settle things?’

Art Smucker shook his head firmly. ‘I don’t think you heard me. I said \$1600.’

‘I heard you just fine, Art, but I’m thinking maybe I deserve a little discount since you bear *some* responsibility.’

Again, Art Smucker’s face flushed. ‘\$1600.’

‘Would you take \$1300? I’m telling you, I’m pinched.’

‘\$1600, or I go to the magistrate.’

Clyde bit back a snort. The magistrate would probably listen to Art’s story and toss him out of his chambers on his behind. But instead of saying this, Clyde went around to the passenger side of his truck where Isaac sat, wide-eyed and rigid with worry.

‘Could you pass me my checkbook?’ Clyde asked. ‘It’s in the glovebox. There should be a pen there, too.’

The boy's hand trembled as he handed over the items. Clyde studied the sum in his checking account. \$2,100, now that he'd made that week's deposit. But he had another \$2,000 in savings for emergencies, and this stupid incident, he supposed, counted as one.

He was writing the check out on the hood of his pickup when his father strode around the corner of the bank barn and stopped, watching him closely. Clyde noted the debit in his ledger, his stomach sinking at thought of how much it would cost to repair his father's truck. Maybe insurance would cover some of it. Maybe. It was always hard to know with insurance. He signed the check, tucked his pen in his shirt pocket and turned to Art Smucker.

'Here you are, neighbor.'

Art snatched the check from his hand and stared at the number suspiciously. But when the number registered, his face softened.

'All right. That'll do it.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Clyde.

Art nodded, swung toward his Jeep, and fired the engine, a cloud of thick, dark exhaust forming in the lane and trailing behind him.

'What did *he* want?' Clyde's father demanded.

His father spat when Clyde explained. 'The magistrate would have fined *him* for wasting folks' time. But you did the right thing. It's not worth it having Art Smucker mad at us.'

'No, indeed,' said Clyde.

His father scuffed the pavement. 'How much did you give him?'

'\$1600.'

Clyde's father nodded, still with his head bowed. 'I'll cover it.'

'You don't have to do that.'

‘Sure I do. I know what your books look like.’

Clyde flushed. ‘What about your truck?’

‘I’m not worried about my pickup. Mother and I have plenty saved up. The important thing is that nobody was hurt. Now, I reckon we ought to get the work started.’

‘Yessir,’ said Clyde.

His father turned and darted into the milking parlor. By the time Clyde and Isaac stepped inside, the old man had already opened the doors on the far side of the stable. Wearily, Clyde turned to the doors on his side of the parlor. His father’s remarks about his finances smarted. But his father was right; he could stand the loss more easily. So Clyde rebuked himself for his pride, breathed a prayer of thanksgiving for his father’s generosity, and started in on the milking, which didn’t take quite as long as usual with eight of their cows still penned in the pasture over on Mowry Rohrer’s farm.

When the work was finished, Clyde and Isaac and his father hooked up the cattle trailer and went to retrieve the escaped livestock. It took them two trips to get all eight cows back into the stable. Before leaving for dinner, Clyde and his father double-checked that the new fencer the electrician had installed that afternoon was running properly. They ought to have replaced the old fencer years ago. But Clyde had checked it regularly, and it always seemed to be running fine.

There was a lesson there, probably, but Clyde couldn’t put his finger on it. You couldn’t replace every part on a farm just because it was aging. To farm profitably, you had to take some chances. You had to work with equipment that wasn’t always in tip-top shape. You had to rely on what the world called luck, but which any true Christian knew was simply the will of God,

who was always sovereign. And when things did go sideways, that was God's will, too, however tough it was to stomach.

'What a day,' Clyde said, when he sat down to supper that night.

'I'm just glad you're both safe,' said Lois.

'Yes, indeed,' said Clyde.

Most nights, they all just prayed silently at mealtime, but that night, Clyde prayed aloud, thanking the Lord for the protection he'd provided the family that afternoon, and asking that he'd touch Art Smucker. When supper was finished, Clyde padded into the living room and reached for *The Lancaster Farming*. The article on the best ways to combat glyphosate-resistant weeds was important, but the writing was terribly dry. At some point, he must have started snoozing, because the next time he looked up, darkness had fallen, and Lois was sitting in the rocking chair beside him, reading one of her Amish romance novels.

Clyde blinked, wiped his mouth, sat up in his chair. 'What time is it?'

'A little past nine,' said Lois.

Clyde shook his head. 'I guess I was more tired than I thought.'

'Why don't we head up, then?'

'We might as well.'

He followed her up the stairs, brushed his teeth and made what he hoped was his last water of the evening while she prayed with Isaac. On his way down the hall, he paused for a moment outside Isaac's bedroom. The boy's whispered prayers were only barely audible.

*Bless him, Lord*, Clyde thought, and continued blearily on toward his room, where he undressed, relaxed into the starched comfort of Lois's freshly washed sheets. There'd been moments that afternoon when he'd figured that both he and Isaac were goners, but they'd

survived. When his father had rammed the bull, he had not been crushed. It had been a family effort, and more than family – a congregational affair. With the help of their neighbors – their church family – they’d corralled the loose livestock, and Elvin Beiler had put Art’s bull out of its misery. That was how you faced up to every sort of trouble. The help of friends and loved ones and the Lord’s mercy could overwhelm all the ugliness the Art Smuckers of the world could muster.

*Yes, indeed,* Clyde thought, turning when Lois tiptoed into the room and began unpinning her white lace prayer covering. The light from the lamp on her bureau sent a glow through the loose strands of her hair. Clyde couldn’t see her face clearly for the shadows, but he pictured her eyes burning with the focused intensity that always made his pulse speed up. Finished with her covering, she turned to the mirror and started pulling the pins from the tightly spun bun. When the hair tumbled down her back, Clyde sucked in his breath. She was lovely, and she’d chosen *him*. That was another blessing, one that was every bit as mysterious as the Lord’s intentions for the milk price or the balky habits of their son.

Finally, Lois switched off the lamp, climbed into bed, and curled in beside him.

‘I’m proud of you for giving that man the money he wanted,’ she said.

‘It wasn’t easy, let me tell you that. Course it stings a little less now that I know Pop’s going to cover it.’

‘It was still the right thing to do.’

‘I reckon it was.’ He rolled toward her, felt for her lips in the dark.

They kissed for some time. When they were finished, he ducked under the covers, and, after laboring there for a while the way she liked, hiked down his underpants and climbed on top

of her, the density of his need folding in all the frustrations of his day, all the pent-up anger, all the unexercised energy, all the mortal fear and fondness.

Afterwards, peace, spreading weariness. A prayer of thanksgiving: Clyde managed to remember to breathe one the instant before he fell asleep. And then he was hurtling through darkness, the corn silage rattling in the feed auger, another argument with Art Smucker erupting, the cows out again in the road than ran perpendicular to the barnyard and somehow restored to the stable. 'What a break,' he said, to his father in his dream, marveling at how quickly the problem had been resolved.

He awoke with a start, as he often did, moments before his 4:30 alarm. He rose slowly, stumbled toward the clothes tree, buttoned his flannel shirt, stepped into his worn trousers, and cinched his belt around his stomach, the day's chores already starting to form in his mind. He turned, bent over the big bed, planted a kiss on Lois's lips, and hurried into the hallway. Outside Isaac's room, he paused. It was unusually quiet. Like Clyde, the boy was usually up before his alarm. But maybe this morning, after everything that had happened yesterday, it would be all right to let him sleep.

Clyde reached for the knob, opened the door a crack. In his sleep, Isaac sighed, his outline just visible in the faint glow from the nightlight in the hall. When Isaac was an infant, all Clyde had to do was touch his cheek and his eyelids would droop, his round head would drift forward until it rested on his tray.

*This is peace*, he'd thought then. He thought it, now, his heart swelling with fondness for the boy he and Lois had wanted for so long. For the first ten years of their marriage, they'd prayed desperately for a child. They'd also prayed for the strength to accept the Lord's will, whatever it was, but even as they prayed this, deep down, both of them assumed that the Lord

had to want them to have offspring. They'd tried all sorts of techniques and positions. The closeness they'd shared on those nights had sustained Clyde through all the hollow days of emptiness and private sorrow, Sunday upon Sunday of sidelong stares and murmured questions. None of his friends commented on their troubles, but some of the other women said the cruelest things to Lois. Soon enough, she stopped repeating those remarks. Months went by where they hardly talked about children at all, only communicating their longing by the desperation of their lovemaking and the tenderness of their touch.

The Lord was good. He was faithful. But that did not mean that life was to be free of pain or sorrow or want. In their ninth childless year, they'd begun to look seriously at adoption. They persisted with the process, even when Lois's pregnancy advanced into the third trimester for the first time. They barely spoke of the precious creature growing in her belly, though whenever Lois's swelling stomach brushed Clyde's back, he almost cried out with yearning. *Why not this time?* Each time the question formed itself, he repented and tried to rid himself of want.

The joy he'd felt when he'd held Isaac in his arms, the fullness, was like nothing he'd ever known. Finally, they had a child, a son. The first Sunday they brought newborn Isaac to the meetinghouse, Clyde had absorbed the approving glances from the other members. But mostly he just looked at Lois, her eyes soft as she cradled their child, her round cheeks still stippled with pimples from the pregnancy. Nights, in the months after Isaac was born, Clyde would stand before the crib, gazing in fondness and disbelief at his helpless son.

Now, the boy was growing. He was almost a man, almost as tall as Clyde, but in so many ways, he still seemed so young, so immature, so fixated on the idea that there could ever be any sort of fairness or perfection in this life. After the work that evening, Isaac had been unable to shake his frustration at Art Smucker's unreasonableness. 'It's just how some people are,' Clyde

had tried to explain. ‘You just have to work around ‘em.’ Which was doubly true when your fields were separated by a flimsy tree line.

But Isaac hadn’t wanted to hear it. He’d gone on and on about the need for *justice* and *fairness*. But he was young yet. He still had so many things to learn about all the disappointments life imposed, all the sacrifices it required.

Clyde leaned into the bedroom. ‘Isaac?’ he whispered. ‘Don’t you worry about Art Smucker.’

The boy shifted.

‘Sure, he’s a rough one, but the Lord is with us, and we’ve got each other, and we’ve got the congregation. And what does Art have but his spleen?’

A soft snore passed from Isaac's lips.

‘I’m so glad you’re safe,’ Clyde added. ‘We were all pretty scared for you for a minute. Thank goodness for old Pop.’

He squinted through the shadows toward Isaac’s sleeping form. How large he seemed in the bed now. In a few years, his father might finally retire, and Clyde and Lois would move to the main farmhouse, and Isaac and Mary Elizabeth would move into the tenant house, and soon after Isaac might well open this door and behold the sleeping form of *his* son or daughter. If the Lord willed it. If the Lord didn’t return first. Though in spite of all the terrible news in the papers and the strident claims of certain evangelists, Clyde still couldn’t believe that these really were the End Times.

And then he remembered the real time. 4:29 in the morning. He tiptoed across the room, switched off Isaac’s alarm clock, and hurried downstairs, scribbling a note to Lois to let Isaac sleep. In the mudroom, he pulled on his coveralls and boots and hustled out to his pickup. It was



a two-minute jaunt up the road to the milking parlor, set in the bottom of the old white bank barn.

The lights glowed in the parlor windows. His father was waiting. His father was always waiting. Clyde jumped from the truck. The bawling of the cattle floated from the barnyard.

‘Morning,’ Clyde said to his father as he charged in.

‘Morning,’ his father answered, moving with practiced ease toward the door on his side, no tension between them here where they both always knew exactly how things were supposed to transpire.

On his side, Clyde opened his door and the first cows nosed in, lined up in their stanchion stalls. As the bars locked into place, Clyde and his father sprang down the four steps to the lower level, putting them within easy reach of the cows' heavy, mottled pink and white udders. Each man grabbed a hose from the washer, sprayed his first cow down, and then lifted the first freshly disinfected milker, and carefully fitted each rubber finger onto that first cow's teats. While they hosed down the second udder, the first milker started to chug. In the clear pipes that ran from the hoses of the milkers, warm white milk started to flow, spreading in columns across the ceiling of the parlor and through an insulated passage into the big metal tank in the milk house. There, the milk waited for the tanker truck that would carry it out into the world far beyond the farm, a world that at this hour of the morning seemed as dark and distant as part of the sky hanging up there somewhere, far beyond the stars. And as Clyde turned himself toward the tasks awaiting him, he offered another prayer of thanksgiving for the Lord's providence, and for his funny, twitchy, but still fundamentally decent son.

*Isaac*

For several moments when he woke, Isaac lay in bed, trying to hold onto the sense of warmth and fullness that had come to him in the middle of one of his dreams. Or maybe he'd been half-awake, half-dreaming when the peace had come. He wasn't certain; all he knew was how enfolded he'd felt, how comforted, like an angel, or something, was watching over him there in his room, bodying forth goodness, blanketing him with golden filaments of grace and love.

And then he remembered how close he'd come to being gored by Art Smucker's bull the previous morning. And then he remembered that it was Sunday. The news of his fresh failing would only magnify the self-consciousness he felt on every trip to the meetinghouse, even though no one knew that he and Mary Elizabeth had broken up.

He opened his eyes and received a shock. The clock on his bedside table read 5:45. He pawed at his alarm clock. How had he slept in like that? Had he forgotten to set his alarm? He jumped out of bed and rushed downstairs. His mother was sitting in the living room, reading her Bible and cradling a mug of tea.

'Why didn't anyone wake me?,' he demanded.

'We thought maybe you could use the extra sleep.'

'I have a *job* to do,' he hissed.

Her gaze softened. 'I'm sorry. We didn't think it would upset you to give you a rest, Isaac.'

He swung for the mudroom. There was no point in complaining about being coddled when he needed coddling. But that didn't mean he had to like his vulnerability, his incompetence, or the pity it prompted. And, of course, when he stepped into the milking parlor, his father just grinned like nothing whatsoever was wrong.

‘There he is,’ the big man called. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m fine,’ Isaac said. ‘I’m sorry I overslept. I guess I forgot to set my alarm or something.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ his father said, swinging to the next stanchion. ‘It’s good for young fellows to get a little extra sleep, sometimes.’

‘I’m going to go start the feeding,’ Isaac’s grandfather said, his judgment burning across the parlor.

Isaac nodded, started down the steps, and fell into place in front of the udders. Bitterly, he eyed the cow in front of him. It was one of the culprits, one of the creatures that had caused them all so much trouble. But she wasn’t the one who’d almost gored him. She wasn’t the one who’d bullied his father and cheated the family out of \$1600. And if no one stood up to men like Art Smucker, what would keep them from continuing to harass other people, from imposing themselves upon their neighbors, *especially* their Mennonite neighbors, farmers like his father who actually believed that it was their duty to turn the other cheek in the face of cruelty and violence?

Like every Mennonite youth, Isaac knew the story of Dirk Willems, the Dutch Mennonite who, upon escaping from the prison where he’d been confined for his beliefs, took off across an iced pond. A jailer had pursued him. Dirk Willems made it across the ice, but his pursuer, weighed down by his sword and armor, broke through and started to drown. So Dirk Willems turned back, extended a hand to the man pursuing him, and pulled him out of the frigid water – at which point, he was recaptured, re-imprisoned, tortured and burnt at the stake for his faith, a sentence he accepted willingly, in demonstration of his commitment to honoring Christ’s call to sacrifice. But it was one thing to believe in sacrifice when you supposed that men like Art

Smucker would ultimately be judged and punished by the Almighty. It was altogether another thing to sacrifice when you no longer believed in the hereafter or the Lord's redemptive love.

Isaac's doubts had been with him ever since he'd first started to wonder whether Muslims who'd never heard the Good News would truly be denied salvation. But as his relationship with Mary Elizabeth ground on and his body did not improve in spite of all his fervent prayers and his pursuit of purity, his doubts began to intensify. And as his faith waned, he began to dream again of Luke Sauder, whose excellence had always lifted him out of his own sense of his ugliness.

Isaac couldn't say for certain when his longing for Luke had started. All he knew was that suddenly, around the time he'd turned thirteen, there it was. Every day in the schoolhouse, he'd stared at the fine, blond hair on the back of Luke's neck. He'd studied the thicker hair on his upper lip and arms. He'd even adored Luke's occasional pimples. But though he refused to admit that there was anything wrong with his admiration, he also knew that in a plain congregation, any sort of difference, however innocuous, could be seized upon, and so took care to only admire Luke sidelong.

He seldom spoke to Luke except to greet him in schoolhouse or Sunday school classroom. But unlike the congregation's rougher farm boys, Luke never mocked him –never called Isaac 'a queer' for answering too many of the teacher's questions or singing with too much gusto or admitting how much he enjoyed reading or drawing. When the other fellows picked on Isaac, Luke just stared at the table of the Sunday school class. Sometimes, he even tried to change the subject. And several times, in those days, after the old Sunday school teacher finally appeared, Isaac had caught Luke eying him with some unreadable mixture of pity and sorrow, which part of him was grateful for, and part of him despised, as he despised every acknowledgement of his strangeness.

For years, Isaac had worshipped Luke privately. He'd never imagined that they could be friends. They were too different. Luke was the perfect farmboy, whereas he was bookish and clumsy. He would always just have to admire Luke from a distance, and that was fine. And then came the incident at the Martin's pond the summer shortly after he'd turned sixteen. He'd been sunning himself on the dock, dreaming of Luke, when Mark Beiler and Nevin Keener snuck up behind him and tossed him into the water. He flailed as he went, flopping out over the pond and smacking into the stinging water. He'd blinked back tears as he'd hauled himself back onto the dock, refusing Mark's hand. But when he sat down and draped his towel over his head, Luke had plunked down on the dock beside him and whispered an apology for what Mark and Nevin had done. 'Thanks,' Isaac had murmured. His stomach lightened as Luke's gaze rested upon him. And then they stretched onto the dock alongside each other and gave themselves over to the sun.

If Isaac kept very still, he could practically feel the muscles rippling on Luke's slender stomach. If he lifted his nose, he could catch the tang of Luke's sweat over the scents of algae and mud. Now and then, he'd turn and squint, and there was Luke's pale chest, the ridges of his slender ribs, the thatch of blond hair in his armpits, the line of fine hair that ran from his navel downward into the darkness of his cutoffs.

Already, that summer, he'd been bicycling past the Sauder farm two, sometimes three times a week, though he was never quite able to work up the courage to stop. But the Monday after Luke's gesture, Isaac finally stopped in at the Sauder farm. He left his bike by the tobacco shed and waited for Luke to emerge from the milking parlor. His stomach jumped while he waited. His palms dripped. But when Luke stepped out into the hot, bright afternoon and spotted him, the older boy's eyes seemed to light up. He didn't say much as Isaac tagged along while he fed the calves, but neither did he object. So, the next evening, Isaac returned.

That was how their routine began. Several afternoons a week, Isaac would pedal to the Sauder farm and trail Luke while he finished his chores, blurting out whatever popped into his mind: his gloss on the pastor's latest sermon, news he'd overheard that he thought might interest Luke, whose crops looked good, and whose were poor, who had preserved his farm with the county land board and received a windfall, and who was struggling. When Luke was finished feeding the calves, he'd wheel his buckets to the milk house and rinse them, and then usually nod in the direction of the back lawn.

On those beatified afternoons, they'd plop down on the picnic table behind the Sauder's garden shed, facing the cornfield. Luke would slide the file from his pocketknife and scrape the grit from his fingernails. Isaac would lean his elbows on his knees and cup his chin in his hand. Here, at last, Luke would talk: about the herd, the weather, the old Allis-Chalmers tractor he was rebuilding, the steer he was raising to show at the township fair that fall. Whenever Luke fell silent, Isaac would pose a question in a bid to keep him going. Now and then, he'd slide his leg toward Luke's and wait for Luke to shift, and the fabric of his trousers would brush Isaac's, and Isaac would breathe a prayer of thanksgiving and ask the Lord to strengthen the bond between them, to make them as close as David and Jonathan.

Weeks of this. Days of taut anticipation, glorious ambiguity, and the nighttime recapitulation of Luke's loveliness. The summer going so well, in spite of all Isaac's long-standing hostility to farm labor and all his trouble with his hands and stomach. And then, out of nowhere, in the middle of July, Luke had asked if he wanted to sleep over Friday evening and wake up at 4:30 to help with the sweetcorn crop. Isaac hated the dampness of the corn patch, the scratchiness of the stalks. But he'd pick sweet corn all day if it meant having the chance to spend the night with Luke Sauder.

The night of their first sleepover had started out perfectly. At seven-thirty, Isaac's mother drove him to the Sauders. Luke met him at the door, and after stowing Isaac's shopping bag full of sweet-corn-picking clothes and his oldest pair of sneakers, led him out to the lawn. When they reached the sweet corn patch, Luke slipped into the rows. For a moment, Isaac lost him. A stalk snapped, and Luke returned, holding an ear in its green husk. He yanked back the tight leaves, whisked away a little of the silk, took a bite, and then handed the raw ear to Isaac. Isaac hesitated – he'd never tried raw sweet corn. But Luke had asked him to do it, so he would. The kernels were harder than boiled corn, but the flavor was surprisingly sweet, even if it was much too bright. Before he could hand the ear back to Luke, the older boy disappeared back into the patch and returned with another ear. When Luke sank down in the grass, Isaac plopped down beside him. Heat lightning flickered in one darkened corner of the horizon. Lightning bugs winked and flashed over the lawn.

Finished with his ear, Luke hurled it into the patch, the damp cob arcing above the stalks and falling lightly against the leaves. And though Isaac usually hated to throw anything, for fear of looking girlish or clumsy, he lobbed his cob, too, and it almost didn't seem to matter that his arm twisted inelegantly, that his throw lacked loft. The cob crashed through leaves and the night turned quiet again. Luke sank onto his back and Isaac stretched out beside him, the dew on the grass cool against the thick damp heat of the night.

Afterwards, Isaac couldn't remember what they'd talked about. All he could recall was the kernel of corn that clung to Luke's upper lip, which he wanted so badly to touch with his tongue. All he could remember was how at ease he'd felt, lying there beside Luke in the softening heat, how he didn't want the night to darken. When Luke finally stood, he dusted the grass from off of his back and stretched his hands above his head. His shirttail lifted. A flash of

pale skin, no coveralls as a screen, this time. All the way to the farmhouse, Isaac replayed the image: the secret skin of Luke hip winking against the settling dark.

In the hot kitchen, Isaac's unease returned. They ate a snack of hard pretzels under the gaze of Luke's mother. Finished, they headed to the dining room and played several games of Rummikub. The grandfather clock ticked in the living room. The fan revolved in the doorway. Isaac's palms perspired on the tiles. And all the while, as Isaac focused on his colors and numbers, and swung his legs, and took occasional sips of meadow tea, Luke's presence washed over him, Luke's focus, Luke's unshakable composure, which partially soothed his jumpy stomach. Throughout the game, and every time he contemplated the silence of the bedroom, Isaac prayed that his belly wouldn't rumble too loudly.

At nine o'clock, they headed upstairs. They brushed their teeth separately. While Luke used the bathroom, Isaac waited in the bedroom, ran his finger over Luke's desktop, his bureau. Except for the row of blue fair ribbons and the posters of classic Allis-Chalmers tractors, the room looked just like Isaac's, small and square, furnished with a narrow bed, a dresser, a wooden desk and chair. And just like Isaac's room, Luke's was stuffy. Sweat beaded heavily on Isaac's forehead and upper lip, but Luke seemed cool when he stepped into the bedroom in a gleaming white tee-shirt and striped pajama bottoms.

Isaac brushed his teeth meticulously, changed into the pajamas he'd brought. He tried to relax. He tried to calm himself. But when he stretched out on the sleeping bag Luke had unfurled for him at the foot of his bed, his thoughts swarmed like the moths that whirled around the blue bulb of the bug zapper on the corner of his grandparents' porch. His belly rumbled softly. Not six feet away, Luke was stretched out on his bed, so close Isaac could practically feel the flow of his breath.



He had to keep still. He tried to match his breathing to Luke's. He turned onto his side, tucked his hands between his legs, the way he always did when he was waiting for sleep to come. But it was so hot, and the sleeping bag's flannel lining was too thick for summer. So, after a few sweltering minutes, Isaac unzipped the bag, freezing as the noise of the zipper ripped through the silent room. He slid one leg out of the sleeping bag. No sooner had he done it than Luke shifted on his bed. His mattress creaked. Isaac slid the other leg out of the sleeping bag, and then slipped out of the sleeping bag entirely, and kicked off his pajama bottoms. That was better. He turned onto his side again, tucked his hands between his knees and tried to picture Luke. Did he sleep on his side, too? Or on his back, like Isaac's father? He was still envisioning Luke when the older boy started to complain about the heat. 'Can you feel the fan?' Luke said. 'A little,' Isaac had managed. And then Luke had said in mild, offhand voice, that if he was too hot, he could always join him in the bed.

Isaac wanted nothing more than to do it. But a stab of electric panic obliterated his longing at the thought of being touched. If he nestled against Luke, his stomach would surely gurgle. His hands would drip. And Luke would be so disgusted that he'd probably never want to speak to Isaac again. So, after an anguished moment, Isaac whispered that he was fine on the floor, and assured Luke of this a second time. An ache opened in his chest when Luke finally said, 'All right.'

For the better part of an hour, Isaac lay there, listening to Luke's steady breathing and rebuking himself for his cowardice. But deep down, he felt certain he'd made the right choice. He was repulsive; therefore, he had to conceal his body. And probably Luke hadn't meant anything by his offer. Probably, he was just being nice.

But if that was the case, why, the next day, had Luke seemed so inviting? After they'd picked the sweet corn, they unloaded it onto the roadside stand and sold it by the bagful to passersby. At one o'clock, the traffic slowed down, and Luke lowered the back of his lawn chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. Isaac did the same, and then swiveled his head and stole one of his glimpses. Was it a coincidence that while he watched, Luke reached up and unbuttoned his pinstriped, short-sleeved shirt and opened it? Isaac couldn't say for certain. For the longest time, he sat there, memorizing each line of Luke's pale chest, the hints of his muscles, the wisps of fine, blond hair. He was still staring when Luke opened his eyes. Isaac froze, his face heating. Once again, he'd been caught. But instead of frowning or rebuking him, Luke just closed his eyes again, leaned back in his chair, and brushed his hand against one side of shirt, opening it wider.

Surely, this was a joke. Surely, Luke was mocking or testing him. For several minutes, Isaac sat there, scarcely moving. Finally, he glanced at Luke again. There he sat, his shirt wide open, his head resting on the back of his chair, his eyes closed, a mild expression on his face. Praise the Lord, he didn't seem perturbed. He hadn't mocked or insulted Isaac for staring, hadn't called him a *queer*. So Isaac sank back in his chair, and unbuttoned his shirt, comforted by the fact that the faint breeze that just grazed his chest and stomach was also brushing Luke's.

That week, Isaac replayed their afternoon at the corn stand every night before he fell asleep. Still, he shuddered each time he thought about what might happen when he slept over at the Sauders again on Friday, what he might say if Luke invited him into his bed a second time.

Friday night, the inspection of the sweet corn crop seemed interminable. The games of Rummikub were exhausting. Isaac braced himself when he finally stretched out on the sleeping bag at the foot of Luke's bed. He wanted Luke to ask him to join him and to not ask with equal

intensity. But all Luke said was, ‘How’s the temperature down there?’ Once again, Isaac replied that it was fine. Luke didn’t push him. So, once again, he lay awake, silently cursing himself for his cowardice while praising the Lord that, for one more week, he’d escaped being unmasked as repulsive.

To counter the sense of inadequacy that filled him after each night at the Sauders’, Isaac had started helping his father and grandfather with the milking. He’d long feared the cows, but working in the milking parlor, he found he felt a little less unworthy, a little less disgusting. Ease still filled him whenever he was laboring alongside or dreaming of Luke. But every time he imagined something actually happening between them, he seized up with panic.

So the summer continued. Isaac’s labor in the milking parlor and rising sense of propriety modulated his mood, somewhat. But around Luke, his moods swung between dread and purest longing. And all the while, he had no idea what Luke really thought of him. Every week, he seemed increasingly strained in Luke’s presence. He understood that it was rude not to look at Luke directly when they talked, but he couldn’t help it. Each week, during the corn picking, he stored up fresh glimpses of Luke, like a chipmunk storing up acorns for winter. The pale skin on the nape of Luke’s neck after he got a haircut. The sun-bronzed skin on his arms. And then, like a squirrel, he darted his gaze away whenever Luke turned toward him.

And then, one Friday in early August, Luke wandered in from the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. Isaac had whirled from the bedroom just as the towel dropped, but not before catching sight of the incandescent pallor of Luke’s backside. That night, Isaac nestled in his sleeping bag and closed his eyes tightly, and still the vision of Luke’s bottom burned against his eyelids. And as he was lying there straining against the fabric of his sleeping bag, Luke’s voice broke through the darkness. ‘Isaac? Are you awake?’ ‘Uh huh,’ he’d managed.

‘I can’t sleep,’ Luke had said. ‘I can’t either,’ Isaac had replied. A long moment. ‘Do you mind if I come down there next to you?’ Luke said, finally. ‘I think I sweated through my sheet.’ ‘Okay,’ Isaac answered. But no sooner had he uttered the words then his stomach seized up. His palms started heating. And then not just his hands, but his underarms and his whole body began to tremble and drip.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he whispered, as Luke crept toward his spot. In the bathroom, he splashed cold water onto his face. He rinsed his palms and his underarms. But his alarm just kept whistling. What would happen if Luke touched him and discovered how unworthy he was? And the prospect of Luke’s disgusted visage merged with his grandfather’s judgement, with the scornful faces of all the older boys in the congregation, who’d always mocked him for being weak.

Five minutes passed, five minutes during which Isaac stood trembling in the Sauders’ bathroom, begging his body to calm itself and rebuking himself when it would not. He jumped when the soft knock sounded on the door. ‘Are you all right?’ Luke whispered. ‘I’m actually feeling kind of sick,’ Isaac replied. ‘I think it must have been the hotdogs I had for supper.’ ‘Did you throw up?’ Luke whispered. ‘No, but I think I’m going to.’ ‘Can I come in?’ whispered Luke. An ache went through Isaac as he pictured the patient cast of Luke’s features, the gentleness of his eyes. ‘Just give me a minute,’ Isaac said, staring desperately at the lock and praying it would hold.

He went to the toilet and knelt over it and gagged a little, but he didn’t have to vomit. ‘I’m right out here if you need anything,’ said Luke. ‘Thanks,’ said Isaac, his shame deepening as his escape occurred to him. ‘I think I’m probably going to need to sleep in here tonight. I’ll just make a bed out of the towels.’ ‘Are you sure?’ said Luke. ‘I could get a bucket and bring it

into my room.’ ‘I don’t want to make a mess,’ said Isaac. This was true, even if nothing else he said was. He despised messes, loathed disorder of every kind. And yet every day, his body seemed bent on producing it, on imposing it upon him.

He turned to the towel rack, made a pallet next to the toilet and curled onto his side, and tried to summon, again, that vision of Luke’s bottom. But when he did, the perfection of Luke’s body, the wholesomeness of his skin, filled him with an aching despair that spread like stinking slurry over his desire. How gorgeous Luke was, and how unfit was his own bafflingly flawed body. And there was no way to explain any of this to Luke, no way to describe his unfitness without deepening his self-consciousness.

*Lord, please help me*, Isaac had prayed, curled on the floor of the Sauder’s bathroom. But as he breathed the words, his shame only intensified. Right now, Luke was probably wondering what was wrong with him. He was wondering it, too. And he had no idea, no sense of its source or cause.

It was almost as if the Lord was punishing him. The thought struck Isaac that Friday evening just before he fell asleep. But punishing him for what? He tried to be obedient. He tried to be righteous.

Pulling sweet corn the next morning, Isaac forgot all about this possibility of punishment. And then, the following Sunday, the missionary Stephen Zook, in for a homestay from Israel, took over the Young Men’s Sunday school class and started in on the importance of guarding your heart from lustful thoughts. In his Bible, Isaac had underlined the verse in 1<sup>st</sup> John that the missionary had cited. ‘For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.’

Isaac had wanted to accept this without doubt or question. He'd decided that the missionary had to be right. Still, he'd wondered, couldn't some things of this world be good? Didn't the Lord bless his stirring responses to *all* majestic creation: billowing clouds, shining cornstalks, boulders jutting from the hills of the meadow, the promise of salvation, the lines of Luke Sauder's jaw? The plumpness of his bottom? The instant the glimpse of Luke's backside flared, he recalled again the idea that had come to him on the floor of the Sauders' bathroom: what if the Lord was punishing for these thoughts?

And then the missionary began to number the 'terrible things' that preyed on folks if they bought computers. Images of women's bosoms. Women's private parts. 'Even men, sometimes, doing things you don't even want to think about,' the missionary had said, shaking his head in sorrowful disgust. Horror seized Isaac as he grimaced and shook his head, doing his best to convey with his expression that, 'No, indeed, he certainly did *not* want to think about such ghastly, reprehensible subjects.'

Finished with his list of threats to purity, the missionary turned to solutions. 'Get married, find a wife.' Isaac's stomach had rumbled sharply at this advice. He hunched forward to keep the sweat on his back from sticking to the chair. And then the missionary outlined his second solution to the problem of temptation: accountability partners. Every young man in the class was to find a brother to confide in, someone they could pray with after services every Sunday. When the missionary said this, all the fellows at the table nodded rigidly and stared at the table. So the missionary insisted on pairing them off. Waiting, Isaac prayed fervently that he'd end up with anyone but Luke or Mark Beiler. So, of course, the missionary partnered him with Mark.

'How's your thought-life, Bauman?' Mark Beiler had demanded when he plopped down beside him. Isaac jammed his hands deeper under the low table and tried to think of some way to

answer that would not involve deceit. ‘I guess it’s like everyone else’s,’ he’d said finally, hoping his deflection would suffice. But Mark hadn’t been fooled. Amusement sharpened on his face. ‘How about this one? Who do you *like*?’ And when Isaac tried to insist that he didn’t like anyone, Mark just chuckled and demanded to know if Isaac did actually like girls.

‘Of course,’ Isaac had blurted, flushing. Under the table, he wrung his soaked and dripping hands. Mark just kept grinning. ‘So do you lust after them?’ Isaac’s stomach growled. ‘I mean, I *try* not to,’ he said. ‘But when you do,’ said Mark, ‘who do you think of?’ So Isaac uttered the only name he thought might not be a complete lie. ‘Mary Elizabeth Zimmerman?’ ‘Atta boy,’ said Mark, punching his arm so hard he almost cried out. ‘She’s a nice one.’ Mark glanced at the missionary, and then offered a piece of advice that made Isaac’s skin crawl. ‘Sure, you shouldn’t lust when you’re single, but once you know you’re going to be married, then you can do pretty much whatever you want.’ ‘That makes sense,’ whispered Isaac. At which point, Mark’s harassment stopped.

For the next few minutes, Isaac sat beside him in anxious silence. And still the words from that verse in 1<sup>st</sup> John echoed in his mind. ‘*To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.*’ Life and peace were what he’d always *thought* he’d obtained when he pictured Luke. Now, he saw that all this time he actually had been sinning. *That* was probably why he’d felt so ill at ease lying at the foot of Luke’s bed every Friday night that summer. That was the Lord, punishing him with his stomach troubles. All the while he’d told himself he was on the path toward righteousness, he was actually been veering deeper into darkness. And so he prayed for the purity that would lead him to transforming peace. And when he turned toward Luke, the older boy’s head was bowed. His shoulders were rigid. Fine beads of sweat stood out on his upturned nose. The old Isaac would have wanted to kiss them. Now, he

recognized the sin that underpinned such thoughts. To regain the Lord's favor, he had to renounce all that had disrupted his focus on holy subjects. To achieve control over his flesh, he had to purify his spirit. He saw that, now. Praise the Lord, he saw it.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, Isaac thought he was free. But instead of dismissing them, the missionary asked the young men to join hands for the closing prayer. Isaac tensed. His hands were still dripping heavily under the table. But all around the room, the other fellows were turning and, hesitantly and gingerly, taking each other's' hands. Brusquely, Mark Beiler extended a hand toward Isaac. Isaac didn't move. 'You heard the man,' Mark hissed. And so, in despair, Isaac had offered one hot, soaking hand to Mark Beiler, and the other to Nevin Keener. Mark's hand was callused and warm. He flinched at the contact with Isaac's sopping palm but did not withdraw his grip. The shaming exposure of his palms only made Isaac's hands sweat harder. While the missionary prayed for holiness and purity for each young man in the group, Isaac just prayed that the prayer would finish, that Mark would not find him entirely repulsive. But when the missionary's prayer *finally* ended, Mark wiped his hand theatrically on his trousers, once, twice, three times. 'Man is your hand sweaty,' he said, shaking his head. 'You know what they say about people with sweaty hands?' he added. 'No,' said Isaac, jumping to his feet. Mark's eyes flashed with malicious delight. 'They're lying about something.' 'They're always like that,' Isaac said helplessly.

But Mark just shook his head and grinned wider. Isaac grabbed his Bible and fled the damp classroom. He spent the entire intermission between Sunday school and church in the musty bathroom running cold water over his palms. But for all his efforts, they just kept sweating hotly. He ran from the meetinghouse as soon the service was done.



The more Isaac dwelt on the missionary's lesson, the more convinced he became that all of his miserable symptoms had to be a punishment, a consequence of his sinful longing. Unbridled lust was bad enough. How much worse to lust for the body of another young *man*. The congregation never spoke of homosexuality, but he'd heard all about the 'homosexual agenda' on the Christian radio station. He knew that it was a liberal program to undermine God's teaching, destabilize the family, and destroy the moral foundations of the country.

Was he *gay*? he'd wondered, the night after that terrible lesson. No, he'd forced himself to insist. It couldn't be. He certainly didn't support the abomination of open homosexual relationships or same-sex marriage, which made a mockery of the marriage covenant. And as he searched his heart over the next few days, he could not shake the possibility that, instead of providing relief, his closeness with Luke was worsening his defilement. He had to stop speaking to Luke. He had to stop tempting himself. As he contemplated the possibility of not spending another night trembling in shame at the foot of Luke's bed or the floor of the Sauders' bathroom, his body slackened in relief.

All that week, he repented and begged the Lord to deepen his sense of deliverance, and the Lord seemed to be telling him that his sense of conviction was right. So he kept repenting, kept begging the Lord for forgiveness, and, at services Wednesday evening, told Luke that he wouldn't be helping with the sweet corn that Friday.

For a long moment, Luke was quiet. Finally, he asked why not. 'It just doesn't suit this week,' Isaac had said, hating the primness of his voice. Luke frowned. 'You know this is the last week for our corn?' 'I know,' Isaac had said, trying to ignore the ache in his chest. Luke frowned and scuffed the gravel. 'Does this have anything to do with you getting sick at my place last week?' 'No,' Isaac insisted. He did not dare raise the subject of the strangeness of his body,

because of how tightly linked it was to his temptation. Luke's jaw moved like he was about to speak. But all he said in the end was, 'Okay. If you're sure.' 'I'm certain,' Isaac said, stiffly. For another moment, Luke had frowned at him, his gaze unreadable in the shadowy lights of the parking lot, and then he'd turned and headed for his truck.

Watching Luke disappear into the darkness, Isaac had felt as though something was being torn from inside of him. But maybe the pain was good. Maybe this grief was a necessary part of his shift away from all that was sinful toward purity. So he'd told himself that week, and mostly believed, desperate as he was for relief from the shame that surged through him whenever he thought about that awful lesson on lust. Still, some nights that autumn, a sense of loss swept over him so harshly and quickly he felt like he was falling into a manure pit that had no bottom. Some nights, too, his self-control faltered. He begged the Lord for forgiveness when he was done. And after a miserable year of self-denial, flagellation, and labor in the dairy barns, he'd asked Mary Elizabeth Zimmerman if maybe she'd like to go around with him, and she said she'd been waiting for him to ask for the better part of a year. So his decision had seemed as if it truly was ordained by God.

And in those first weeks, there was mostly just her. Her warmth, her softness, the impossibly generous affirmation of the smiles she offered him each night. But over the months of their courtship, Isaac's body's strangeness had reasserted itself. His hands still dripped, and his stomach twanged and gurgled at the faintest twinge of anxiety. The effort to achieve purity did not, after all, drive out whatever was wrong with him. The shaming symptoms that besieged him began to seem less like a punishment and more like a fact of his life.

By the middle of summer, he'd started making excuses not to visit Mary Elizabeth at her parents' house. He had to help with a difficult calving. He had to help repair a broken feed auger

(never mind that he was as useless when it came to equipment repair as he was at most other jobs on the farm). He wasn't feeling well. His stomach was bothering him. Of all his excuses, this was the one he relied on most often. It was true. He *always* did feel awful. And when, after a few weeks of this, Mary Elizabeth had asked what was wrong, he'd explained that he was worried about the uncontrollable sweating of his palms. She'd considered this with her usual careful deliberation, and then insisted that he speak to Pastor Yoder about his troubles. And even though Isaac felt almost certain that the pastor couldn't do anything to help him, he still agreed to meet with the man after mid-week services at the end of August. Part of him hoped, desperately, that the pastor might have access to some sort of secret, Godly, solution to what was wrong with him.

They spoke in the pastor's spacious office in the corner of the foyer. When Isaac had finished explaining his troubles, the pastor bowed his head, as if in prayer. Isaac prayed silently along with him. Finally, the pastor lifted his head and nodded deeply. When he looked at Isaac, his gaze was knowing and confident. 'Let me ask you something,' he said. 'You haven't, by any chance, ever experimented with dowsing?' Isaac had blinked in confusion.

'Some folks call it water smelling? It's what people do when they want to figure out where to drill for a well. A dowser comes to the property and waves his wand over the soil. The idea is that when he thinks he finds water, his wand starts to twitch.' Isaac had frowned. 'It's witchcraft,' the pastor said. 'That's why I'm wondering. I thought maybe with the symptoms you're describing you'd played around with that kind of thing?'

'No,' Isaac said, still bewildered by what possible connection the pastor could see between his body and water dowsing. 'Maybe someone in your family?' the pastor had prompted. 'It wouldn't be your dad, certainly, or your old grandfather. I was thinking maybe the folks on your mother's side?'

‘No,’ Isaac said again, his bafflement deepening. And then, in horror, he saw what the pastor was implying. The Old Testament was full of stories in which punishment was meted out on children for ‘the sins of their fathers.’ And it was one thing to believe that the Lord had been punishing him for his own sin, and altogether another to suppose that God was punishing him like this just because some ancient Bauman or Mellinger had dowsed for water. Surely, the Lord couldn’t be that unjust.

‘It’s just an idea,’ the pastor said, frowning as if he wasn’t entirely persuaded that Isaac was telling the truth about his relationship to dowsing. ‘The Lord will help you overcome this. We’ll pray now.’ But the pastor’s sonorous prayer had no more effect on Isaac’s body than all his own private pleas for relief. So, instead of receiving a solution to his difficulties, Isaac left the pastor’s office feeling like his flesh was even more hopelessly twisted, his body even more irredeemably flawed.

And the more Isaac considered what the pastor had told him, the more his horror deepened. How ludicrous it was to think that ‘the sins of the fathers’ might be responsible for his symptoms. How wickedly unfair.

The church taught that life was necessarily unjust on this side of glory, and all believers could do was try and earn their places in the hereafter by holding onto their faiths in the face of whatever trials the Lord put in front of them. But martyrs like Dirk Willems and his own Swiss ancestors had lived hundreds of years ago. And they had *chosen* their fates, supposing they’d be richly rewarded in Zion for their sacrifice. Whereas all Isaac wanted, and all he prayed for, was relief from whatever was wrong with his body. And yet, every day, in spite of his prayers, he was flung again by his flesh into unfocused ineptitude. And the more he dwelt on the persistence of his unsought misery, the more he wondered whether there even was an Almighty or a next life.

Each time these doubts seized him, he asked the Lord to somehow deliver him from his unbelief, all his weakness, all his shaming flaws. But in the weeks after that exasperating meeting with the pastor, he'd felt, if anything, more inadequate – more uncomfortable around Mary Elizabeth, more unsure of the Lord's love. Following a grueling evening at the Kuernerville bowling alley at which his sixteen gutter balls seemed like proof that he would fail at whatever he attempted, he resolved to break things off with Mary Elizabeth. It was too exhausting to try and live up to her vision of godliness. He couldn't keep leading her on.

That still left the question of how to end things. For the better part of week, Isaac weighed his options. He could make a clean break or try to withdraw from her gradually, so that she wouldn't confront him. Weak as he was, cowardly and weak, he chose the second option.

Every day at recess, he stood with her by the fence overlooking the Stoltzfus pasture, nodding at whatever she said, doing his best to be agreeable, but seldom initiating any conversation on his own. Every-other evening, he started skipping visits to her place, rarely bothering now to offer any excuse other than that he wasn't feeling well. Each time, her frustration warbled in the silences over the phone. But she did not push him. And when he did venture to her parents' house, he sat beside, and even kissed her, in a veil of gloom and mounting awkwardness. Whenever his stomach rumbled violently, he'd cough and shift on the couch and she'd gaze at him sorrowfully. But still, she didn't demand to know why he seemed so uncomfortable, and he didn't volunteer how miserable he was. Nights when he got home, he'd sink into bed and rotely ask the Lord to bless him, to heal him, but his thoughts would drift toward Luke Sauder as soon as he was done.

That fall, for the first time since the missionary's terrible lesson on lust, Isaac indulged his glimpses. Luke in the meetinghouse, inspecting his neatly chewed fingernails, Luke on the

dark at the Martin's pond beside him, one golden arm thrown over his eyes, Luke with his towel dropping away from his hips, Luke's finely muscled bottom. Each time Isaac touched himself, he'd asked the Lord for forgiveness, just in case the Almighty was looking down and judging him, but each time, the Lord's presence felt a little less likely, and each time, what he was doing felt a little less forbidden, and whenever he was done, he longed for the end of his courtship with the young woman he now knew he could never love properly.

It was Mary Elizabeth who finally raised the matter of their courtship. One Friday evening, toward the end of September, he'd gone to her house and sat on the couch and leafed through a magazine beside her. When she turned and stared at him imploringly, he didn't look up. 'Isaac, tell me what's wrong,' she said, finally. He shrugged. She sighed heavily. 'If we're going to be married, we have to be honest with each other.' 'Yes,' he said. *If*. Her gaze intensified. He stared on at the hook rug. 'So is something wrong or not?'

A buzzing sounded – a truck barreling down the road outside? Some stray electrical pulse in his body? Again, he shrugged, hating himself for his cowardice and silence. 'Okay,' she said. 'Let me ask you this. Do you want us to be married or not?' An ache went through him. 'I used to.' 'But not anymore?'

The buzzing in his ears intensified. 'I guess part of the problem is that I just haven't been feeling well?' 'Part of it?' she said, firmly, but not unkindly. And then he saw what he could say, how he could extricate himself without hurting her too much. 'Most of it. The biggest part. There are the problems you know about with my hands and stomach, and then there's how they affect my thinking. I just can't concentrate like I should. I get nervous and I start feeling all clammy and twisted, and all I can think about is how I'm constantly messing things up. And I know *you* don't mind. But around other people, I just can't stop thinking about it. I can't think about

anything else. And it tires me out. Does that make sense? It exhausts me. Even when I'm around you, I feel so worn down. Even when I'm praying. And I thought it would be different. I thought when we started going around together, I'd get better. I thought being with someone as good as you would help me overcome everything that's wrong with me. But it hasn't. I'm still as messed up as I always have been. And I'm not going to change,' he added, before she could interrupt him. 'And it's not fair to you to be yoked to me and all my problems.'

There. He'd told the truth about most what was bothering him. Surely, that was enough. Surely, now she saw how damaged he was, how unsuited. But when she spoke, her voice was terrifyingly gentle and affirming. 'Isaac. It's not up to you to say what I deserve. That's up to me.' 'I know that,' he moaned. He ought to have seen this coming. 'I know. But I guess it's up to me to say what *I* can handle. And I can't stand not being good enough for you. It's crushing me to be failing you like this. That's why I need to stop.'

A weight seemed to lift from his chest as he said it. It was, perhaps, the truest thing he'd ever said to her. And when he turned, her face was pale. Her gaze was broken. 'You're too hard on yourself,' she said. 'I know. That's part of my problem.' She nodded heavily. 'It pains the Lord to know that you're so hard on yourself,' she added. 'It pains me.' He nodded, blinking, doing his best to quell a rush of grief. 'I really think it would be good if we met with Pastor Yoder,' she said. 'I've already spoken to him,' Isaac said firmly. 'But we haven't spoken to him as a couple.' 'It won't help. There's nothing he can say.' 'Isaac, you have to trust,' Mary Elizabeth said. 'You have to believe.' 'And I'm telling you, my trust is shot.' Her gaze hardened. 'Your trust in us or your trust in the Lord?' 'My trust in myself,' he said after what he hoped was not too long of a pause. 'But I guess that's sort of part of us.' *Isaac.* She said his name so pleadingly. Her gaze rested so intently upon him. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered.

She bowed her head. 'Maybe we do need a break,' she said, finally. 'We can sit down again in the new year and revisit our plans.' 'That would be good,' he said. 'And maybe the Lord will heal me,' he added. 'Maybe I'll feel better in a few months.' She nodded. 'Can I ask you a favor,' he said quickly. 'Okay?' 'Would you mind not telling anyone we're taking a break? Just in case I do change my mind, I don't want my parents to worry. It wouldn't be lying,' he added, when she frowned. 'We just don't have to tell them anything.' She frowned for a long minute. 'Very well,' she said, finally. 'In the meantime, I want you to pray for us, and for your spirit. Ask the Lord to help you to see all of your strengths, all of what you're good at.' 'I can do that,' he said eagerly, even as he hated himself for his deceit. She nodded slowly, still eyeing him. For the first time he could remember, he hardly cared what she saw. He *was* unfit. He *was* unworthy of her. And now, at last, she was starting to recognize it. 'I guess I probably ought to go,' he said. 'That's probably for the best,' she answered.

He rose. She caught his sleeve. 'I just want to remind you of one thing, Isaac.' He froze, bracing himself for the recriminations he knew were coming. 'You really are a good guy.' He flinched. 'I'm really not. But that's very nice of you to say.' 'You are,' she said. 'And I want us to keep talking. We don't have to talk every day while we're taking our break. But sometimes.' 'Sure,' he said. 'Good.' The warmth of the smile she offered him almost covered over the hurt in her eyes.

Driving home that evening, the thanksgiving Isaac ought to have felt was mostly obscured by the cramping of his stomach. But over the next few days, a kind of relief had taken hold. To hide the breakup from his parents, he still went out most evenings. He drove around the township. He wound past Luke Sauder's farm without stopping, retracing the routes of his bike rides to the Sauder farm. He drove to the library in the village, which was where he'd discovered



*Call Me by Your Name*, the novel that helped him to understand how intoxicating life could be for young men who didn't live in constant fear of their bodies.

It was easy to wish that he had a villa in Italy, or that his parents were *intellectuals* like Elio's in the novel. It was easy to imagine how wonderful it would be if his family had servants to tend their orchards, boil their coffee, and suck scorpion venom out of their wounds. But deep down, Isaac knew that he could have everything else – the villa, the berm, the piano, the towering shelves of books, the swimming pool, the easy walk to the beach, the Italian sun – and it wouldn't mean anything if he was still chained to body that betrayed him whenever he was anywhere but his bedroom or the dairy parlor.

And his body would always betray him. This, he understood this even more acutely after he'd purchased his phone. He could ogle his porn videos. He could touch himself and imagine being taken like those men in the films. But he could never actually allow himself to expose himself to another, for fear of being found as repulsive as a suppurating cut, an oozing manure pit, or the waterlogged remains of a squashed squirrel or possum.

Thank goodness for his phone. Thank goodness for his thought-life. Thank goodness he could picture Luke while he labored beside his father in the parlor, as he had all the week leading up to morning of the escaped livestock. As he did again Sunday morning to divert himself from the shattering memories of his near-goring in the field and the almost incomprehensible ugliness of Art Smucker.

It was enough, Isaac tried to insist, laboring in the milking parlor. And if his misery came to be too much, well, then he could always take a walk by Art Smucker's bullpen, or slip into the manure pit, or climb one of the silos at midnight, stare at the stars until he was dizzy, and then swan dive out into the barnyard. But no sooner had he tried to insist this then horror seized him,

panic that was almost as sharp as the panic that had gripped him as that bull had borne down on him in the field in front of everyone.

He hated so much of his life, and yet he could never imagine choosing to depart it. There was still the possibility that somehow, he might improve. And besides, the only thing more disgusting than his body's rucking and dripping was the vision of his flesh lying broken and bleeding on the barnyard's concrete. He shuddered at the thought of his mother's stricken face, his father's grief-splintered gaze.

So, that morning, he vowed again to survive, to persist, to just get through the day. His phone would be waiting when church was done. As soon as the work was finished, Isaac and his father drove home and took their showers. They gulped down their baked oatmeal and yogurt and headed for the meetinghouse, Isaac's parents in their Buick, Isaac behind them in his truck. In the foyer, he tried to duck past the greeter, kindly one-armed Mowry Rohrer. But Mowry caught his arm.

'We hear you and your dad had a scare yesterday, Isaac. We're certainly glad you're all right.'

'Thanks,' Isaac said.

He lowered his eyes and hurried across the foyer, trying to ignore all the fond concern that member after member seemed to be training upon him. He was halfway to the stairs when he felt someone approaching on his right. He jumped when Mary Elizabeth touched his arm.

'I heard about Art Smucker's bull,' she whispered.

He nodded tautly.

'I'm so glad you're okay.'

'Thanks,' he muttered.

He didn't look at her; still, he could feel her eyes resting intently upon him.

'I've been praying a lot about us this week.'

'Me too,' he lied.

She hesitated. 'If you wanted to come over some night and talk, I wouldn't mind.'

A pang struck Isaac's side. He forced himself not to grimace too sharply. 'I don't think I'm ready for that. I still need time to pray about what the Lord wants for us.'

'It wouldn't hurt for us to pray together, you know,' she whispered. 'On Friday, my mother asked why you haven't been around for a while. I told her you've been busy, but that we've been keeping up at school. But obviously, she's going to figure things out eventually.'

He nodded. The pain in his side intensified. 'I'll think about it,' he said.

Still, her gaze bored into him. Finally, she nodded toward the staircase. 'I'll walk with you.'

He bowed his head and started for the basement. She was good – righteous and caring and hard-working – but she was not good for him. He thought she'd understood that. She *had* to understand it.

*Lord, please help her to understand,* he prayed, in spite of himself.

When they reached his classroom, she touched his arm again, and he flinched, half-turning, and disappeared inside. As he stepped through the door, all the young men turned at the low table.

'There he is,' said Mark Beiler. 'How are you feeling after the bull fight?'

'I'm fine,' Isaac said.

'Your grandpa sure pulled some stunt with his truck,' said Nevin.

Isaac nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Luke Sauder, and his stomach jumped.

‘Daggone Art Smucker,’ said Nevin Keener. ‘It’s his fault for not keeping his pens in good shape.’

‘It certainly is,’ said Isaac, sitting down in his usual spot catty-corner to Luke.

‘My dad said last time he stopped in at the Smucker place, Art’s cows were walking around in three inches of muck.’

‘I heard the same thing,’ said Nevin Keener.

‘Art’s an idiot, all right,’ said Mark Beiler.

Isaac hunched forward. So long as they were speaking about Art Smucker, they couldn’t enumerate his faults. He opened his Bible, skimmed the church program. When he glanced up, Luke Sauder’s gaze was resting upon him, his face exasperatingly, intoxicatingly mild.

‘How are you doing?’ Luke asked.

‘I’m fine,’ Isaac hissed, to quell the flash of lightness in his stomach.

Luke nodded and frowned at the table, seemingly chastened by the force of Isaac’s irritation. Which was precisely what Isaac had intended, and precisely what he rued, now. But he had to protect himself. He didn’t dare let Luke know what he wanted. He slid a pen out of his blue canvas Bible cover and started to draw a border around the edge of the bulletin, as if that thick black line could contain everything that was wrong with him.

Finally, the Sunday school teacher, old Deacon Sensenig, shuffled into the narrow classroom. The conversation quieted. During the opening prayer, a pain took hold of Isaac’s stomach. All through the lesson, he jabbed his elbow into his side and tried to draw what comfort he could from Luke’s competence without looking in Luke’s direction or giving anyone any

sense of what he thought. Several times, it seemed like Luke's gaze was resting upon him. Each time, Isaac stared at his Bible more intently and nodded along as Deacon Sensenig read the devotional message for that week. During the break between Sunday school and the main service, he locked himself in one of the stalls in the bathroom and relaxed into the bathroom's dim and soothing mustiness.

Pastor Yoder's sermon that morning was on Romans 12, a verse whose seeming simplicity provoked Isaac. 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.'

If he were to write a verse like the one in Romans, it would go like this (not that he put any stock in verses): 'Be ye transformed by the renewing of your *bodies*; which will allow you to present your *minds* as living sacrifices, to think constantly about righteous subjects and act righteously without being weighed down by your own stupid hands and stomachs.'

But, of course, his body remained recalcitrant, and he remained scattered and cowardly and incompetent. And all the while, his father sat so stoutly, so easily beside him. His grandfather sat stiffly on the pew beyond him. *They* were doubtless meditating on the fineness of their herds and the pastor's sermon, while Isaac sat there praying to whomever would listen that he wouldn't shame himself further, and boiling in his alarm.

When the service was finished, Isaac darted down the side aisle before Mary Elizabeth could reach him, not caring whether the other members saw. He just wanted to get home and lock himself in his room and give himself over to his phone. He strode out of the church and into the damp air of late October. Halfway to his pickup, he heard someone call his name across the

parking lot. He didn't turn. It was Luke Sauder's voice, all right. He quickened his pace. His stomach tightened. He jumped into his pickup. But by then, Luke was beside him.

*What do you want?* Isaac wanted to scream. Instead, he glared at Luke so that the older boy would understand how completely he was intruding on his morning.

Luke frowned. 'You forgot this,' he said, and handed Isaac his Bible in its blue canvas cover.

'Thanks,' Isaac mumbled, taking the Bible and blushing hotly at yet one more faux pas. When would his mistakes end? When would he stop seeming like an imbecile?

He placed the Bible on the seat beside him and stared at the steering wheel.

'I heard your dad paid Art Smucker for his bull,' said Luke. 'It's great that he did that.'

'It was stupid, if you ask me,' said Isaac. 'Now Art will just think that he can take whatever he wants from us.'

'Huh,' said Luke. 'I guess I didn't think of that. I was just thinking more about your dad's example. There aren't too many fellows who would do things that way.'

'That's because most of the farmers in this congregation are *smart*.' As soon as Isaac said this, he realized he'd been too harsh, again. As ever, he could never modulate himself around Luke. And the completeness of his inability to control himself left him feeling only more miserable, more unworthy of Luke, more muddled.

'I'm sorry, but I need to get home,' said Isaac, unable to look at Luke.

'Okay,' said Luke. He rested his hand briefly on the hood of Isaac's pickup. 'You have a good one, now.'

‘You too,’ Isaac said, grateful that the firing of his engine obscured the growl that rose from his belly. ‘I’ll see you,’ he said, half-turning this time, flashing Luke an apologetic expression he hoped made up for at least a little of his rudeness, without meeting Luke’s eyes.

He put his truck in gear and pointed it out of the parking lot. But no matter how much he tried to insist that it was right to have been harsh with Luke, rational to not to have given him the slightest hint of his yearning, still the shame kept spreading under Isaac’s skin, spreading until it seemed as if it might consume him.

### *Clyde*

Lots of good Holsteins at the sales stables that crisp October morning. Lots of fine livestock. Neighbors, too, farmers from across the county. Every few feet on the way to the bleachers, Clyde stopped to shake hands, sometimes to talk. He and his father had come for some heifer calves, and Darrell Kreider pointed out the nice stock he’d brought, but by the time Clyde joined his father in the bleachers, the old man had already picked out the calves he wanted Clyde to bid on, and Darrell’s cows were not among them.

Fine with Clyde. He didn’t feel like picking a fight about a couple of calves. Tired as he was feeling that morning, he didn’t feel like picking a fight about anything. He’d woken in a cold sweat at midnight from a dream in which he and Lois had defaulted on their mortgage, the third time in a week he’d been visited by that prospect, and it had been sometime past two in the morning before he’d finally fallen back into uneasy dreams.

‘If I’d have known it was going to go this slow, I would have come at noon,’ Clyde’s father snapped.

The young auctioneer just kept dragging out the bidding on group after group of spindly Herefords and Guernseys.

‘What does he think, we all don’t have stuff to do back home?’

Clyde chuckled. He would have preferred that the auctioneer go quicker, but really, there was no rush.

‘Well, I don’t know about you, but if we’re going to be here all day, I’m going to get some coffee.’

‘I’m all right,’ said Clyde. He’d been trying to cut back some on caffeine, with all his sleeping trouble, though that just meant he only had two cups in the morning, instead of three.

His father stood stiffly and stalked down the steps between the rows of bleachers.

*Bless him, Lord,* Clyde prayed, half in awe, and half in alarm. His father was pushing eighty and he still had as much energy as Clyde. He seemed like he’d never slow down, though surely he would, one day. Time caught up with everyone eventually, even farmers as ornery as Clyde’s pop. Inevitable as this was, though, Clyde couldn’t quite imagine his father slowing. He didn’t want to imagine running the farm without the old man. Course, if the milk price didn’t improve, in a few more years, there wouldn’t be an operation to run. And where would that leave Isaac?

‘See any good ones here?’

The deep, faintly bemused voice pulled Clyde from his reverie. He swung around to find Rick Denlinger, the biggest farmer in the township, standing in the aisle beside him.

‘All sorts of nice hunnies,’ Clyde said, staring intently at a bunch of Guernsey calves he’d never dream of bidding on.

‘Yessir. You mind if I sit?’



Clyde slid down the bleachers, and Rick Denlinger eased down beside him.

‘This *fella*,’ Rick Denlinger muttered, nodding toward the youthful auctioneer, who was now trying to coax some more bids on a group of rickety Jerseys.

Clyde shook his head, leaned back, and clasped his hands over his stomach. But no matter how unruffled he tried to seem, beside Rick Denlinger, he could never quite shake the sense that he was missing something. It was easy enough to write off unchurched fellows like Art Smucker who drank and smoked and blew their money on oversized pickups. It was easy, too, to look down on the inefficient obstinacy of the Amish, who spurned all sorts of modern farming technology. Much tougher to figure out were the improperly churched Mennonites who prospered. At Rick Denlinger’s Mennonite congregation, members had televisions, computers, every gadget you could dream of. Denlinger’s wife Vi didn’t wear a prayer covering. But every year, it seemed like, the Denlingers kept adding on, improving their buildings, putting up new silos. The Denlingers were so big, so efficient, that even with the milk price where it was, they were still probably turning a tidy profit.

‘I hear you and Art Smucker’s bull had a little run-in last week,’ Denlinger said.

Clyde snorted. ‘When that thing came after me, I thought I was a goner.’

‘Your father fixed him, I heard.’

‘Yessir.’

‘I hope he at least got a new truck out of it.’

Clyde shrugged. He’d seen Denlinger’s gleaming dual-wheel pickup at Agway the previous week. ‘New for him, anyhow.’

‘And your boy’s fine, too?’

‘Yep. He’s doing good.’ Isaac had seemed sort of quiet at mealtimes that week, but probably, he’d just been thinking about his schoolwork. ‘And how about your boys?’ Clyde added. ‘How are they doing?’

‘They’re great, not that I ever see ‘em,’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘Reagan’s up in New York, at NYU, doing a degree in “performance studies,” whatever that is exactly, and Ronnie just finished his M.B.A. at Cornell and took a job with a bank in dagonne Hong Kong.’

‘Hong Kong. Now where is that, again?’ Hopefully, he didn’t sound *too* dumb.

‘It’s over there in southern China, though it’s its own place, at least for now. And Ronnie says it’s beautiful there. “*Fascinating*,” he said, the last time he called. So who knows when he’ll be back. And Reagan had an internship with some theater group this summer.’

‘Theater,’ said Clyde, trying to ignore all the troubling worldly visions that accompanied that word. ‘Now how does that pay?’

Denlinger snorted. ‘Who knows. This summer, Reagan’s mother and I covered his room and board. It seemed like we were paying out the nose, but Reagan said that with rent as expensive as it is up in New York, it was actually a “*great deal*.” Didn’t seem like much of a deal to me, but he seemed to have a good time, so that’s something. He wants to stay in New York forever, he says. So I reckon it’s just going to be me and Darlene and my crew running things from now on.’

‘Is that hard on you?’ Clyde said, trying not to think of how he’d feel if Isaac told him that he wanted to quit the farm.

Denlinger shrugged. ‘I mean, what farmer doesn’t want to pass down the farm to his sons? But the boys have their ambitions, and Vi and I want to be supportive.’

‘That’s how I felt about Isaac for the longest time. But lately, he’s shown an interest in the herd.’

‘I heard that. I bet your dad’s pleased.’

‘Yep.’

‘How are you all doing with this milk price?’ Denlinger said, after a minute.

Clyde frowned. ‘We’re hanging in. Like most fellas,’ he added, trying not to think of the scale of Denlinger’s setup.

The big farmer shook his head. ‘We’d all be doing a lot better if all these daggone bureaucrats weren’t trying to control things. The daggone Milk Marketing Board with its price controls. The Department of Agriculture. Do you know how much cheese they’re buying right now? I read the other week that the reserve is up to a billion pounds.’

‘There certainly *is* a lot of overproduction, isn’t there?’ Clyde said quietly. Most of which, he wanted to add, was not coming from small farmers.

‘You know what the extension agent says?’ Rick Denlinger continued. “‘You got to get big to compete.’”

Clyde narrowed his eyes. ‘It’s nice if you can do it.’ He blinked aside the thought of Denlinger’s use of migrant labor, which Art Smucker had harped on, and tried to dismiss with equal speed the memory of what Art Smucker had said about Denlinger’s friendliness with the new veterinarian at the Beniol Gish auction. Still, the crude word Art Smucker had used to describe the woman resounded in his mind. Surely, the new vet couldn’t be...indecent. Surely, not here. On the news every day, there was another report of a drug overdose, another shooting, another piece of legislation that went against God’s law. What was the world coming to when folks in Kuernerville Township, Pennsylvania had to wonder such things?

‘With the milk price where it is, fellows need to find every possible efficiency,’ Denlinger continued. ‘And I’ll tell you, the way consumption is dropping, and with the dollar so darn strong, I just don’t see the price coming back anytime soon. I think this might be the new ceiling.’

A jolt went through Clyde. ‘You really think this is how it’s going to be?’

‘I’m afraid I do. That’s why we’re adding on.’

Clyde turned sharply. The milk price was as low as it had been in recent memory and the biggest farmer in the township was planning *another* expansion? ‘How many cows are you thinking of adding?’

‘Around 300.’

Clyde let out a low whistle. 300 *more* cows?’

‘That’s the plan. We got to keep up with the big dairies out in California and Texas.’

‘So that will take you to how many cows, exactly?’

‘1,300. I’d like to see us at an even 1,500 by 2018, but we’ll see what the dollar does in the meantime.’

‘*Goodness*,’ said Clyde. He almost added: And what do you think *we* should do? Fellows like me and my pop and Isaac? With the milk price as bad as it was, he’d welcome any advice. But before he could pose this question, Rick Denlinger clapped him on the knee and stood.

‘I should get going. A couple of the calves I like are coming up. Do me a favor and don’t talk my news around.’

‘I won’t mention it.’ Clyde swallowed.

‘I appreciate it. Always good to see you, Clyde. Good luck with your bidding.’

Clyde forced a smile. ‘You, too. Though you know we don’t put much stock in luck.’

‘Good man,’ said Rick Denlinger, and loped down the high, concrete stairs that ran between the bleachers, passing Clyde’s father.

‘What did Denlinger have to say?’ the old man demanded, the instant he sank down on the bleachers.

Clyde’s chest tightened at the prospect of a Denlinger’s expansion. ‘Oh, not a whole lot.’

‘That’s because he didn’t want to tip his hand. But you watch, he’s going to bid on the calves we want.’

Clyde wanted to contradict his father, but he was pretty sure the old man was right.

‘This is a nice lot here,’ crowed the auctioneer. ‘Eddie Welk has brought us some beautiful Holstein calves. They’re gonna make fine dairy cows. We’ll start the first one off at five hundred,’ the auctioneer said, and then dropped into his rapid, sing-song patter. ‘Five-hundred, five hundred? Do I hear ‘Five twenty?’

Clyde’s father elbowed him and he lifted his number.

‘I have five twenty,’ the auctioneer. ‘Do I have five forty?’

Rick Denlinger stood along the edge of the ring. Right on cue, his number shot up. Each of the first four cows, Denlinger took. Clyde bit his lip every time he stopped at their predetermined number. There were other good calves. Next week, there would be another auction. Big as Denlinger was, he couldn’t buy *up all* the county’s livestock. After the fifth cow, Rick Denlinger turned from the ring, nodded stiffly to the fellows around him, and started toward the office.

‘Here’s another nice hunny,’ barked the auctioneer. ‘Do I have six hundred?’

Slowly, deliberately, Clyde raised his number – and won the calf for that price. He got the next calf for \$620, the highest price he’d ever paid for a calf.

The moment Clyde won the bidding, his father shot to his feet.

‘Let’s go before the line to pay backs up to the Turnpike,’ he said, starting quickly down the stairs. He stopped after two steps. ‘You coming?’ he barked.

‘Yessir’ Clyde said, trying to shake the sense that everything was moving too quickly – the milk market, the nation’s sense of decency, the rate at which he had to move in order to keep up with big farmers like Denlinger. Or maybe the trouble wasn’t with the world. Maybe it was with him. Maybe he was just too slow, too complacent, too cheerfully plodding.

He frowned and hurried down the steps after his father, ducking past a pair of heavysset farmers in bib overalls and nodding toward Rick Denlinger without meeting his eye.

Clyde didn’t mention Denlinger’s expansion to Isaac or his father, but in bed that night, he shared the news with Lois. (The agreement to hold a piece of news in confidence never applied where your wife was concerned).

‘Goodness,’ Lois breathed, when he’d outlined the scale of the addition Denlinger was planning.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘It sort of makes me wonder how much of a future there is for operations of our size.’

‘You’ll know if it’s not working,’ she said, after a minute. ‘You’ll know if gets to be too much.’

He nodded. They weren’t there yet. But they weren’t that far, either. ‘I just keep thinking I want this for Isaac, now that he’s involved. I think he might *need* it.’

‘That makes sense,’ she Lois. ‘But aren’t there other things we could do?’

‘There are. But whenever you start in on some new crop, it gets risky.’

‘That’s probably right.’

He nodded darkly. She reached for his hand under the quilt.

‘Why don’t we pray about it?’

He nodded. They prayed together for the milk price, and farm’s future, and the future of their son. They prayed, too, for the will to accept *whatever* the Lord decided. Only when they’d finished did Clyde turn again to the matter of Rick Denlinger’s shocking revelations about the government’s interference in the milk markets. Clyde had known the Department of Agriculture was involved in the milk markets, but he’d had no idea the cheese reserves had gotten so enormous. And the price was still terrible. Which suggested that what fellows needed was not price controls or purchasing incentives, but limits on production.

If there was somebody running for president on that platform, he’d vote for them whatever their party. Unlike many of the other members of the plain congregation, Clyde was willing to vote for candidates when he felt they seemed truly godly. He’d cast his first vote fifteen years ago, pulling the lever for George W. Bush in protest at the shame Bill Clinton’s sexual sin had brought to the country. How could he have known that the mild- seeming Bush would turn into a war-monger? In sorrow, Clyde had abstained in 2004. In 2008, he’d at least *considered* voting for Barack Obama. He’d gone so far as to check out one of the man’s books from the Kuernerville Library. But though Obama could certainly tell a story and give a speech, and though he’d been strongly and rightly against the Iraq war, there was no getting around the fact that he was a liberal who favored taxes and abortion and looked down on farmers. Clyde had abstained in 2008. In 2012, he’d voted cautiously for Mitt Romney. Yes, Mormons were a cult. But they were also good people.

And next year, another election was coming, and all the candidates who were getting most of the attention seemed woefully ungodly. There was Hillary Clinton, with her corruption, her hostility to the family, and all her entanglement in her husband's misdeeds. And then there was Donald Trump, who'd owned casinos and had declared multiple bankruptcies and had been divorced three times. Fortunately, all the analysts on the Christian radio station said there was no way that Trump was going to be the Republican nominee.

*Guide all the candidates, Lord, Clyde prayed inwardly, while Lois slept. Help us to choose someone decent to lead us. Someone who will do something to help with all the country's problems. Overpriced insurance. Underpriced commodities. The shamelessness of unchecked sexual sin. Far, far too many guns.*

But maybe it was like one of the preachers said on the radio. Maybe America had become so sinful that the Lord would allow Hillary Clinton to prevail, the way he'd permitted the kings of Babylon and Persia to conquer Israel as punishment. Maybe the nation *deserved* her worldliness and corruption, fallen as it was, given over as it was to pride and idolatry.

*The Lord's ways are higher,* Clyde reminded himself, to keep from thinking of godless candidates for president or rich farmers who were expanding their operations. He nestled in closer to Lois and drew in a deep breath scented with talcum powder and her hair.

He was almost asleep when the vision came to him. Or maybe he *was* sleeping. He blinked. The bedroom swirled with violet and indigo darkness. And all at once he saw it, a massive crowd of people wearing plain clothes and prayer coverings walking toward a pillar of light, men and women of every race, every nation, turning their faces to God. They walked steadily, turning their backs on violence, corrupting substances, depraved behavior, and faith in *all* earthly leadership, *every* earthly government. A few fellows carried long guns, but only for



varmint control and buck hunting. Everyone was just trying to walk in peace, to live in a spirit of submission on the road toward a far greater glory. The splendor to come.

The folks had their backs to Clyde, so he couldn't see their faces, but he could hear their worship. The crowd was singing the acapella hymn he loved. The hymn had two titles. The first corresponded to the first line, 'Come Ye That Love the Lord.' The second title was the one Clyde knew it by. Number 529 in the *Mennonite Hymnal*. 'We're Marching to Zion.' He closed his eyes tighter and the chorus trilled through him, the final chorus that members always sang so rousing in the meetinghouse, the thunderous words confirming their certain anticipation of the glories awaiting them on the other side. 'We're marching to Zion. We're marching upward to Zion, that beautiful city of God.'

This was just a foretaste. So much more awaited every believer on the other side. And that comforting knowledge overwhelmed all Clyde's worries about the milk price, and the state of the country, all his concerns about his son.

### *Isaac*

Each evening, the week after his run-in with Art Smucker's bull, Isaac considered re-opening *Slider*. Always, the searing memory of that blinking green light on the app stopped him. He couldn't stand the idea of any further exposure. Whenever he took his place at his carrel in the schoolhouse, his unfitness seemed to glitter on his neck and stomach as brightly as the iridescent slime that pooled in the manure pit between hardened patches of manure. During recesses, he dodged Mary Elizabeth by sitting at Miss Martin's desk correcting the younger students' spelling assignments. At the meetinghouse, too, he did his best to avoid his old girlfriend's stares of concern, thereby avoiding any further talk about his faith, or his body, or the

possibility of their reunion. He wasn't ready to talk yet. He would never be ready for a discussion of their relationship, exhausted as he was by everything that was wrong with him.

He knew his mother noticed his quietness, but the gentle, thoughtful gazes that she trained upon him weren't unduly troubling. She was his mother. Therefore, she couldn't be disgusted by him. Now and then, at meals, or when he crossed the kitchen while she was nursing one of her evening mugs of tea, he'd catch her eying at him with a look that might have been worried, or might have simply been inquisitive, but which was always leavened with fondness. And he'd force a smile to reassure her, as he sped from view, so that they could preserve the charade that he was a normal young man, that he was not completely given over to the baseness and instability of his body.

In the nights after his near-goring, she came to his room and prayed with him, as she still did, most nights. All she asked when she knelt by his bed was 'How are you doing this evening?'

Always, he offered the same, monosyllabic response: 'Fine.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' she'd murmur, after a moment, and then he'd roll onto his side, shrug his quilt off of his shoulders and hike up the hem of his pajama top, and she'd slide her hand under the fabric, and touch her fingertips to his back, one of the only zones of his body that didn't recoil from the touch of others.

'Dear Lord,' she'd begin, as she always did. 'Thank you for giving me Isaac. Thank you for giving me such a kind and gentle son. Bless him, Lord. Keep him safe as he works. Help him to feel your touch, always. Help him to know your anointing love.'

Most nights, the falseness of the words weighed on Isaac, even as his mother's hands moved lightly over the pimple-stippled flesh between his shoulders and up and down his spine. But some nights – the nights when he felt loneliest and most desperate – even that falseness

couldn't overwhelm his need for touch and comfort. And the gratitude he felt for his mother's presence would swell in his chest and spill into sorrow. She was so decent, so caring, and so mistaken about the Lord's grace and mercy. And he was horribly flawed and correct about the absence of redemption or divine love. And he wished so badly that he was wrong about the universe, the absence of divinity, wrong about his own towering unworthiness, but he knew, with cold and ringing certainty, that he was not. There was nothing he could do, no one he could appeal to or believe in. There was only this world, this life, this body, which did nothing but betray him. And all he could do to find relief was turn to his phone and watch his grim and stirring videos, or lose himself in the plot of the latest novel he'd checked out of the library, or re-read one of his favorite scenes in *Call Me By Your Name* and dream about what it would be like to be rich and flawless.

Nights, when he was done praying with his mother, he reopened his phone and skimmed the products that promised to deliver relief from his body troubles. A coating for your hands that kept them from sweating. A pill you took that kept your stomach from rumbling. All of these, he purchased at the village pharmacy, trying to quell the hope that just kept surging through whenever he swallowed the pill or applied the applicator tip to his palms. Each time, for a few hours, he'd think that maybe this time he had found the solution to his difficulties. And then his stomach would heave again, or his palms would start stinging, and sweat would start to seep through the cracks in the antiperspirant's coating. Despair would sweep through him again. Shame would sweep through him. He'd slink to his room and queue up a video.

*At least Mother and Dad have their own worries to distract them,* Isaac thought, each time, guilt seizing him at how mistakenly relieved he felt whenever he overheard their worried discussions of the plunging milk price.

And then one night, almost two weeks after the bull incident, his mother knocked on the door of his bedroom as she usually did, just after nine o'clock.

He jammed his phone under his quilt. 'Come in,' he said, lightly as he could.

She stepped into the room and moved across the hook rug. But when she knelt at his side, she did not ask after his night. Instead, she exhaled heavily.

'I just got off the phone with Belinda Zimmerman,' she murmured. 'She said you and Mary Elizabeth broke up.'

Isaac blanched. He'd noticed a flash of frustration on Mary Elizabeth's face when he'd ducked past her in the foyer of the meetinghouse at midweek services. But he hadn't expected that she'd retaliate by *telling her mother* about their break, at least not without discussing it with him first. But probably that was her effort to chide and punish him.

His mother exhaled a second time. 'Belinda said you broke up with Mary Elizabeth weeks ago.'

He nodded.

'Why didn't you tell us?' his mother demanded.

'I didn't want to upset you. Especially while there was the chance of us getting back together.'

'And you don't think there is, now?'

He turned slightly. 'Well, obviously there isn't, if Mary Elizabeth is telling people that we're broken up.'

His mother's hand grazed his shoulder. 'But Isaac, Belinda said Mary Elizabeth would very much like to talk to you more about where you stand as a couple. Belinda said you're the one who refuses to discuss what happened.'

Isaac groaned inwardly.

‘Does this have something to do with your hands?’

‘No,’ he said, regretting the night several years ago when he’d told his mother about his sweating problem.

‘Okay. Belinda just said that she knows you’re very worried about them.’

‘I mean, sure, my hands bother me sometimes. But they’re not the reason we broke up. I just don’t feel like Mary Elizabeth is the right one for me right now,’ he said. ‘And like I told her, maybe I’ll still change my mind,’ he said, avoiding his mother’s gaze. ‘Maybe the Lord will bring us back together,’ he added.

‘I guess it is reasonable to take a break if you really don’t feel like you’re to be together,’ she said, finally. ‘But Isaac, all of this is just such a *surprise*.’

‘I didn’t want to bother you about it.’

‘It doesn’t *bother* us to know how you’re doing.’

‘I know that.’

‘Very well,’ she said.

He could feel her studying him in the darkness, beseeching him. Finally, she moved her hand to the edge of his quilt. ‘Should we pray, now?’

‘Okay,’ he whispered.

Her hands kneaded his back. Her words flowed over him. How revolted she’d be if she knew about the video he’d been watching not five minutes ago. How repulsed she’d be if she knew anything about his desire.

The grief that built in his chest was so sharp that he had to bite his lip. And still, the tears gathered behind his eyelids. When it was his turn to pray, he mumbled the usual words. ‘Dear

Lord, bless Mother and Dad and Grandma and Grandpa. Bless the whole family. Protect us as we work. Thank you for all the blessings you've given us. Help us to offer a Christ-like witness, and to honor you in thought and word and deed. In your name, we pray, Amen.'

'Amen,' his mother whispered. She hesitated, even as her hand kept moving gently up and down his spine.

'I love you, Isaac,' she said, finally. 'Your father and I, we both love you, so much. And we'll be praying for you. The Lord will help you find the right girl.'

He nodded, squeezing his eyelids against the tears that just kept building, and pressing his arm into his side.

'Sleep well,' his mother whispered. She bent over him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

He nestled into the quilt as his mother's footsteps crossed the room. He cringed when the door creaked on its hinges. He bit the inside of his cheek and still the ache in chest kept building. Only when the door was latched did he press his face into his pillow and let the tears flow silently down his cheeks.

## II. Winter

### *Clyde*

Friday morning, Clyde was checking the water trough in the heifer barn when the hind end of one of his best cows started heaving. The animal was seven months along and had been filling out nicely, but she still needed a couple months to finish off the calf.

*Call the vet*, he thought, his stomach sinking. He was halfway across the heifer barn when the flanks of a second fine, pregnant cow started to twitch, this one bred in the same group and also seven months along. He swung for the hay rack, pushed back a couple of girls who were grazing there, and pulled out a thick handful of hay. That bunch smelled all right. He worked his way across the hay rack, bringing handful after handful to his nose and sniffing for any sign of mold. The last two handfuls smelled off. Shaking his head, he ran for a wheelbarrow and forked the entire pile of hay out of the rack, the cows still heaving, both well on their way to abortions.

It certainly seemed like fungal poisoning. Still, he called the vet, just in case he was wrong about the miscarriages' cause. But by the time he returned to the heifer barn, both cows had given birth to stillborn calves, and, sure enough, the slick frog-like bodies bore the tell-tale lesions that signified fungal abortions.

Clyde lifted his cap and ran his hands through his thinning hair. He couldn't stand to think about another expense that winter, now when just about everything seemed to be going wrong. The milk price too low. The bills piling up. Every day, the bulldozers were clearing more ground for the new parlor on the Denlinger farm. And Isaac, having broken up with the Zimmerman girl for no reason anyone could think of, was walking around in a terrible funk.

Several times that winter, Clyde had thought of speaking to his son. The dark circles under the boy's eyes always gave him pause. And each time, before Clyde could speak, his own

weariness stopped him. It was easier not to ask. It was easier not to think too deeply about *any* problem. It seemed that any question he might pose would make them both seize up with discomfort. The sky so gray. The cold seeped into him. Some mornings, it took Clyde every bit of his strength to haul himself out of bed in the morning and stumble to the mudroom and propel himself through the rounds of his chores in the barns. The warmth of the cows temporarily distracted him from how turned around everything was, but often, at the breakfast table, the waves of gloom would rush back, and it was all he could do to smile wearily through the glaze of fatigue, praise the baked oatmeal, and retreat behind the morning paper.

This was not how farm life was to be. It was not how it had ever been that he could recall. Always, in the past, when the milk price dropped, the cost of seeds and fertilizer fell along with it. But now, even as the farm's income kept falling, the expenses kept ticking up.

And the strains seemed to be spreading. At the congregational finance committee meeting in the middle of December, Clyde's buddy Elvin Beiler had almost come to blows with the church treasurer Eugene Wenger over the mutual aid requests from the congregation's struggling dairy farmers. At that meeting, the treasurer had declared firmly that he wasn't willing to 'slash the budget for missions just to string along farmers who in all probability won't be able to keep their operations in the long run.'

It wasn't like in the old days, when everybody had farmed the same things, had weathered the lean years together and rejoiced in shared prosperity. Now, some fellows farmed, and some worked in the Mennonite businesses in town, and some did carpentry, and some sold used cars, and nobody quite knew how anybody outside of dairying was doing or what their books looked like. Now, the congregational budget had a set amount to be dedicated to mutual



aid each month, \$4,000 – a sum that, while sizable, couldn't *begin* to put a dent in the losses many of the congregation's dairy farmers were starting to rack up.

But just because the congregation couldn't solve the problem of the miserable price of milk didn't mean there was no solution to be had. There were larger forces at work determining the milk price. The manipulations of the Milk Marketing Board. The overproduction of big farmers like Rick Denlinger, overproduction that was powered by low-priced immigrant labor that sure didn't seem fair, even if it wasn't illegal.

If only the government could set hard limits on milk production, Clyde had thought, driving home from the February meeting. If only the government could do a little more to help small farmers. In bed that night, he worked his way through the list of candidates for the Republican nomination. He didn't care a bit for prideful Donald Trump, but, at least the candidate was acknowledging that things were rough out there for little guys. None of the other Republicans seemed to want to do that. They didn't seem to have any ideas other than tax cuts, which were nice when you were profitable. But what good was another tax cut when your milk check was shrinking and the price of every expense was increasing? And now, two fine calves were lost.

In the heifer barn, Clyde shook his head. The cold, half-formed, calf fetuses shone against the slotted concrete. And still, the mothers kept licking and sniffing the damp little bodies, unwilling to believe that their offspring were gone. How long would they wait? How long would they persist at a task that they had to know was folly?

Several times, in the last few weeks, Clyde asked the Lord to give some sort of a sign about whether he ought to keep his livestock, but no sign had been forthcoming, apart from the slipping price. And still, those cows kept licking the stillborn fetuses, ignoring the frost that was

forming on the edges of the placentas. But just as Clyde was about to clap his hands and shout at the stubborn mothers, one of the cows swung away, tossed her head, and let out a terrible moan. At this, the other cow turned and they both started bawling. Their grief went through Clyde. He shook his head. When that didn't work, he hammered the gate with a gloved hand, the same gate where he stood most evenings with his father and Isaac.

*Isaac-boy.* Now that he'd broken up with the Zimmerman girl, the boy seemed even shakier, even more uncertain. What was wrong with him? What had happened to his drive, his confidence? He'd been so willful as a boy, so outrageous, at times, in announcing what he wanted, and demanding it, singing his hymns, drawing his pictures, making Lois wonder if he might be a pastor instead of a farmer. Yet now, here he was, dragging himself from the milking parlor to the calf hutches to the feed shed, his head bowed, a glassy look in his eyes. And he had seemed to be doing so well with Mary Elizabeth. She had seemed like the sort of girl who'd help him in every possible way. And no one knew what had gone wrong.

The only upside was that back in October, Isaac had allowed that they might still get back together. So maybe, Maybe, come springtime, he'd patch things up with her. Maybe they'd still move into the tenant house. Or maybe he'd find some other nice girl. There were plenty of plain congregations all across the mid-state, plenty of fish in the sea.

The crunching of gravel and Clyde turned as a gray station wagon pulled up and the new vet climbed out. She'd been working the township for half a year, now, but this was her first call at the Bauman farm. She waved and walked briskly across the barnyard. She was sharp-looking in her green fleece and dark work boots and short hair. More than sharp-looking. Pretty. With a pang, Clyde remembered the terrible names Art Smucker had called her at the Beniol Gish

auction. She certainly didn't *seem* sinful. Still, he jammed his hands into the pockets of his coveralls and scuffed the gravel as the woman slowed in front of him.

'Where are the two that are having trouble?' she asked.

'It's already finished,' he said. 'They miscarried. I think we must have got a moldy bale in the rack somehow. The calves are over here if you want to see.'

The vet peered over the gate into the heifer barn. 'Those are the lesions, all right. I'm sorry.'

He shrugged. The rumble of a tractor rose from the barnyard. Clyde turned, expecting his father. But the old man was still busy scraping the manure, his gaze intent on what was in front of his bucket loader. There was no use bothering him. He'd find out about the lost calves soon enough.

'At least the mothers seem fine,' the vet said, still studying the scene. She nodded toward the group of Holsteins that stood in a ring a little way back from the stillborn calves and mourning mothers. 'They're very nice girls you have there.'

'They're all right. But I guess it don't matter how good your herd is when the milk price is this rough.'

The vet nodded deeply.

'And it's not just the milk price, either,' Clyde added. 'Pertineer everything seems like it's going the wrong way.'

'I hear you.'

The note of caution in her voice reminded Clyde not to continue with his moaning. She probably got an earful from every dairy farmer.

He forced a half-hearted smile. ‘Course, whenever I get to thinking that everything's going to pot, I remind myself that when you get to be an old timer, you start looking that way at everything. My Uncle Eli used to go on and on after his hip trouble got so bad that he couldn't drive his tractor. “The world's ending. Satan's after me.” Every holiday, he'd just fuss and fuss, and I'd think, “Well, Uncle Eli, I don't know about the *whole* world, but *your* world is definitely about done.”

The vet chuckled. ‘You're probably right about “old timers,” but you're not the only one who thinks things are very unsettled right now.’

‘I reckon we just have to focus on all the Lord's given us.’

He turned from the fetuses, doing his best to follow his own advice. There were still a few slashes of blue between the clouds. Rough as the day was, the low Welsh mountains still stood between the rolling hills. And there the fields of his neighbors, and his fields. The land he loved and tended all his life.

‘It's a nice view,’ she said.

‘We like it.’

‘I missed this land,’ she said. ‘I spent five years after my residency working down in Florida. But I couldn't get these hills out of my head. And I couldn't find a church I liked.’

Clyde's eyebrows shot up. ‘*You're* a Christian?’ So Art Smucker couldn't be right about the woman.

She tilted her head. ‘You know, Mr. Bauman, not every believer is a plain Mennonite.’

He flushed at the allusion to the undisciplined congregations. ‘That's true. And lots of folks who go to the weak churches are fine people.’

The vet's eyes sparkled. 'I like to think so. Though I wouldn't exactly call my church *weak*.'

Clyde flushed deeper. 'I'm sorry. That came out wrong.'

'It's fine, Mr. Bauman. I understand what you mean.'

'Clyde,' he said. 'Please call me Clyde.'

She nodded, but before she could say anything further, her phone chirped. She pulled it from the case on her hip and started tapping away on the fancy screen.

So *she* was a Christian? She did look a little like Lois, except that she wore silver earrings and didn't wear a prayer covering. Surely there was no way that someone so decent-seeming could actually lie with women and believe it wasn't improper? Surely even improperly-churched Christians couldn't be that indifferent to God's law?

The vet looked up and Clyde swung away, too late, he knew. She'd caught him staring, and, once again, his face was hot.

'Looks like I have a call over in Brunnerville,' she said, her eyes shining with what he certainly hoped was friendly amusement.

'Very good.'

He ought to leave it there. He'd imposed on her enough for one afternoon. Still, he followed her to her car. While she stowed her bag in the back of her station wagon, he studied the bumper stickers. There was one for Bernie Sanders, a fellow Clyde vaguely knew was running for president, and another that read 'God Bless the Whole World, No Exceptions.' If she had a sticker like that, she had to have the right attitude toward the faith. Therefore, Art Smucker had to be wrong about what he'd said. Of course, he was. Art Smucker was wrong about everything.

‘I like your bumper stickers,’ Clyde said, beaming at the vet. ‘The whole world *does* need the Lord’s blessing, don’t it?’

‘It certainly does.’

‘And now what’s the deal with this Bernie Sanders fellow, again?’

She lifted her eyebrows. ‘He’s a senator from Vermont. He’s running for president.’

‘Is that right? I’ll have to read up on him.’

‘Do,’ she said. ‘I think you’ll find that he cares quite a bit about the dairy farmer.’

‘Somebody needs to.’

The vet flashed another brilliant smile. ‘I’d love to stay and talk all afternoon about Bernie, but I’m afraid I’ve got to get to my next call.’ She glanced toward her car. ‘Listen, I’m going to waive my fee. I didn’t do anything for you here.’

‘Now, that’s not fair. You wasted your time and your fuel.’

‘I’m not going to bill you,’ the vet said, again.

‘Well, at least stop by the house and let me give you some pints of frozen sweet corn?’

She frowned like she was considering the offer.

‘We have some canned things, too. Applesauce? Pickles? I can see if my wife has any sticky buns.’

The vet smiled. ‘Maybe next time. But I certainly enjoyed our conversation, Clyde.’

‘Not as much as me,’ he said. ‘And now I don’t think I ever got your name?’

‘Marie Lamborne’

‘Well, Dr. Lamborne, it certainly was a pleasure meeting you.’

He extended his hand. Her grip was just like his, warm and solid. She turned and walked quickly around to the driver’s seat, and he eyed her, trying not to look too long at the way her

pert backside swung in those jeans. No, indeed. There was *no way* that someone that generous and friendly could possibly be living in defiance of the Lord's law.

### *Isaac*

Between videos that winter, Isaac resumed his visits to the Kuernerville library, his unlimited streaming of porn having been checked by the data charges on his first, \$300 cell phone bill. Evenings, in his room, he worked his way through the rest of André Aciman's oeuvre. He hated *Eight White Nights*, the story of a young man's passion for a mysterious woman. He far preferred the nuanced and ambiguous *Harvard Square*. But more fascinating than either of those novels was Aciman's memoir about growing up as a Jew in increasingly authoritarian and intolerant Egypt. Like the family in *Call Me by Your Name*, Aciman's family had owned a mansion. They'd had servants. They'd spoken all sorts of languages. But as the socialist general, Gamal Nassar, had consolidated his hold over the Egyptian economy, the Acimans had been forced to abandon their factory and flee the country, first to Italy and France, and then to New York City.

The night Isaac finished Aciman's memoir, he tried to imagine how he would feel if his family was forced to abandon the sort of possessions the Acimans had enjoyed. Wealth, of course, could not *completely* erase bodily infirmity – it could not erase his flaws any more than it could erase the deafness of Aciman's mother. But the more Isaac contemplated the graciousness of the life Aciman depicted, the more he recognized that money enabled the sort of pampered and leisurely lifestyle that surely went *some* way toward hiding a body's unfitness. The more he began to dream of some sort of windfall.

There were not many truly rich people in Kuernerville Township, Pennsylvania. There was a dealer of expensive Pennsylvania-Dutch antiques who'd restored a sandstone farmhouse across the road from the abandoned Quaker meetinghouse. There was a doctor who'd built a mansion that was an exact replica of one of the homes in colonial Williamsburg. But neither of those fellows had any regular dealings with dairy farmers. The only person Isaac knew whose wealth and poise approached what he desired was Rick Denlinger, the richest dairy farmer in the township, owner of 1000 cows and the better part of a thousand acres, whose sprawling, and immaculately restored, fieldstone farmhouse stood beside an enormous dairy parlor. And ambitious and prosperous as he was, Rick Denlinger was expanding his parlor, in spite of the terrible milk price.

Every week or so, Isaac took the long way to the schoolhouse and drove past the Denlinger farm. The bulldozers had finished their excavating. During a spring-like spell in mid-January, the concrete company had poured the foundation for the new parlor. Soon, the trusses would be going up. And all the while, the other fellows in the congregation grouched about the expansion, and Mark Beiler, most of all. 'It wasn't right.' 'It wasn't fair.' Which maybe was true. Certainly, the move wouldn't improve the milk price or the mood of Isaac's father. But, on the other hand, wasn't it proper that Rick Denlinger was expanding his operation? Wasn't it correct that the best people prospered and succeeded? In his carrel, mornings after his trips past the Denlinger farm, Isaac considered the matter of the expansion, and always he returned to the conclusion that if *he* were as successful as Rick Denlinger, he would certainly want to enlarge his barns.

He never confessed this to anyone, of course. He knew better than to open his mouth after services in the meetinghouse when Mark Beiler when on and on about how it was the duty of



every sensible dairy farmer to support the brash billionaire Donald Trump for the Republican nomination. Every week, Mark announced that Trump was going to build a wall that would ‘keep Mexicans from moving up here and working for nothing on the big farms.’

Preoccupied as Isaac was with the labor of trying not to seem too unfit, he didn’t spend much time thinking about Republican candidates for office. He had his own problems to contend with. His parents still scrutinized him. Mealtimes remained a trial. At the table, his mother never eyed him directly, but he could feel her registering his stiffness, tensing whenever his hand trembled while he cut his meat, or when he dropped his napkin or spilled a glass of water. And then there was his father, whose baffled, questioning looks had quickly given way to an air of generalized gloom. Even during the holidays – even on Christmas day – weariness had seemed to press upon him at the head of the table, his gaze veiled or glazed by something Isaac couldn’t bear to observe too closely, for fear that he was part of its cause.

At least the other fellows had stopped asking him about Mary Elizabeth. At least she had stopped staring at him in sorrowful confusion. Now, in the schoolhouse, she smiled past him as she wished him good morning without raising the subject of their reunion. He certainly wasn’t going to broach the subject. He was content to let the memory of their courtship fade into the background of congregational life, which it had, for the most part.

In the foyer after church, Isaac just leaned against the wall of the foyer, pressed his elbow into his side, and let Mark Beiler’s injunctions about politics roll over him like storm water. Now and then, if he was feeling especially bold, he would steal a glimpse of Luke Sauder. How perfect Luke was – perfect, and completely unattainable. Before Luke or anyone else could turn and catch him watching, Isaac would stare at the faded gray carpet, longing for the transformation that he knew would never come.

Thank goodness for his phone. In late January, a series of internet queries revealed that it was possible to use *Slider* while disabling your location. The night Isaac made this discovery, he carried the phone out to the middle of the field, turned off his GPS, and hurried back into the warmth of the tenant house, ignoring his mother's questioning stares and the snores that rose from his father where he lay sprawled on his recliner.

Back in his bedroom, he opened the app again, and a red light on the inbox icon signaled a message from someone named *EaglesDaddy73*.

*Looks like ur new here. I'll send u a pic if u send me one.*

Isaac clicked on the man's profile. A stocky, late-middle-aged man with a bulbous red nose and blond beard grinned out at him. The bearded face was not handsome, but there was at least the appearance of friendliness in his large blue eyes. Isaac peered at the photo, trying to imagine how that watery gaze would regard his own body.

At least with a photo, he wouldn't have to present himself for open scrutiny. He wouldn't have to worry about being touched and found wanting. He turned on his bedroom's ceiling light, unbuttoned his shirt, and stretched out on the quilt. Holding his phone above him, he snapped several shots of his chest and stomach, taking care not to include his face in the frame. Finished, he studied the images. The photos gave no sign that anything was wrong with him. Indeed, in the photographs, he looked surprisingly attractive, never mind that his nipples were too small. He deliberated, checking and double-checking to make sure there was no clue in the images that would render him identifiable. Satisfied, he fired them off to *EaglesDaddy73*.

Thirty seconds later, he received a reply.

*Boy, you're hot* – this accompanied by a terrifying close-up of the man's short, stout penis.

Isaac closed that image as quickly as it had arrived.

The questions came in a flurry: *Where do u live? How old are u? I'm in Manheim. U want to come over tonite?*

*Maybe another time*, Isaac typed, ignoring the previous two questions.

*How bout another pic at least? Ur so hot.*

*Maybe tomorrow*, he typed, dizzied by the speed and volume of the replies. But still, that sense of satisfaction remained. How nice it was to be wanted, even by someone who looked so rough. And how safe to communicate wholly by photograph – without having to worry about repulsing the other party, without having to dread being touched.

The next evening, when Isaac logged into the app, eight messages were waiting, six of them from *EaglesDaddy73*, each one praising him and beseeching him to send another photo, which he did, which prompted another welcome volley of praise accompanied by even more zoomed-in shots of the man's penis. Once again, Isaac winced and closed the photos, trying to put those images out of his mind. But the satisfaction of photographing himself remained, the pleasure of sharing with another person his tiny portion of comeliness.

Every night that week, *EaglesDaddy73* messaged him, begging for a meeting or at least a photograph that showed 'something new.' Each evening, Isaac obliged, unzipping his trousers part way, and then slipping them off, and then, at the end of the week, sliding out of his briefs, taking care to conceal his identity all the while.

In his second week on the app, he added a profile picture of his abs, which took on a hint of definition if he clenched his stomach with all his might. Evenings, in his room, he started doing pushups and crunches. As a means of avoiding meals with his parents, he began jogging after the evening chores four nights a week, keeping well clear of the road that led past Art

Smucker's. And all the while, he kept trading photographs with *EaglesDaddy73*. How exhilarating it was to see the muscles gaining definition in his chest and stomach. He marveled at his body's improving leanness and hardness. He wasn't *nearly* up to the standards of the models he admired on *Photomash* but, he told himself, he was looking pretty good for someone who still got his haircuts from his mother and despised his skin everywhere but on *Slider*.

If only Luke could be on that app, Isaac thought, most evenings. If only they could trade pictures. Several times, at church, Isaac thought of asking Luke if he'd ever considered buying a phone. Each time, his fear of exposure stopped him. It was too risky to speak to Luke. Everywhere but on the app, he was too disgusting. So he avoided Luke's gaze, and the older boy seemed to avoid him. They'd barely exchanged ten words in the months since Isaac had scorned his father's response to the havoc Art Smucker's bull had wrought.

Nights, he still dreamed of Luke. He dreamed of making money. He imagined the two of them lolling by a swimming pool in a villa he'd purchased, or swimming in the Mediterranean (or even the Susquehanna) like Elio and Oliver. He pictured Luke bending over him, pinning him to his mattress and somehow not being disgusted. So long as he was dreaming, he could forget the coating of shame that clung to his pores and lingered under his skin. He could dismiss the panic that seized him whenever he thought of being touched. And then morning came again, and he dragged himself out of his bed and down to the parlor, and shuffled off to school when the work was done. It was his routine, and soon enough, school would be finished, and there would be nothing but his chores, and church services, and the privacy of his bedroom and communion with books and his phone and the images that disguised everything that was wrong with him. He'd never come so hard as he did while imagining that someone found a picture of him even the tiniest bit alluring.

*Just survive*, he repeated in the meetinghouse. In his room, at night, he traced the lines of his body on the photographs he'd snapped. If only he could look like that everywhere. If only he could always be that composed, that in control of his skin. But what he told himself, in those minutes, was that it was enough to look handsome online.

And then one weekend in early February, something happened, something Isaac had long given up believing might befall him. All day Saturday, he'd been helping his father and grandfather muck out the stable. By the time he was finished with his chores that evening, he was famished. When he stepped into the mudroom, the fragrance of his mother's freshly baked whole wheat rolls opened his nostrils. At supper, he sliced open the first still-warm roll, savoring the steam that rose from the hot cavity. He buttered the roll and downed it and buttered another and downed that one, too.

'You must be feeling better,' his mother said approvingly.

'Your rolls are just so good,' Isaac mumbled.

He ate the next roll with pear jam and, even though he knew it was too much, he had one more for dessert, with his ice cream.

The stomach cramps started twenty minutes after he'd finished the dishes. They struck in the usual spot on his lower left side, but more heavily and painfully than he'd ever known. Bloated as he was, he wanted nothing but to curl up in his bed without moving in the hope that stillness might diminish his discomfort. He stumbled upstairs and out of his clothes, and slid under his quilt, pressing his side into the mattress to dull the pain.

When his mother knocked on his door to check on him, he mumbled that he was fine. But he must not have sounded convincing, because she entered his room, and rested her cool, smooth hand on his head.

‘You don’t *seem* to have a fever,’ she said.

He shrugged and closed his eyes tighter.

‘What did you eat tonight?’

‘Just what you made,’ he mumbled.

‘I don’t understand it. Your father and I feel fine.’

He nodded again and pressed his side harder against the mattress, trying to ignore the cramps that just kept throbbing through him. He must have slept, because, at 4:30 the next morning, he woke blearily to his alarm. He stumbled out of bed, forced himself down to the morning milking, though he felt as if he’d been rolled up in a carpet and pummeled, and his thoughts seemed wrapped in a thick coating of fog.

He skipped services that morning, shrugging off his mother’s concern. When he woke at ten, he reached for his phone, skimmed the news headlines, and then, in a surge of desperation, re-entered his symptoms into the search bar: stomach cramps, bloating, headache, uncontrollable perspiration, lack of concentration. He skimmed through the list of usual results, but just as he was about to click away in despair, a new result caught his eye. Celiac disease. An allergy to a protein found in wheat, something called *gluten*.

Surely, he couldn’t have such a condition. He’d eaten wheat all his life. Yet as he read and re-read the symptoms, he recalled how he’d glugged himself on his mother’s wheat rolls at dinner the previous evening.

Probably, he was jumping to conclusions, again. All his life, hadn’t he jumped to conclusions about what was wrong with him: that it was his lack of faith that was responsible for all his bodily troubles, or his failure to pull his weight on the farm, or his failure to court a young

woman? He'd *always* jumped to conclusions, and he'd always been wrong. But, as it turned out, he was not wrong, this time.

That afternoon, he suggested to his mother that maybe he'd like to try something called a 'gluten free diet.' To his surprise, she was receptive to the idea.

'It's funny you say that,' she said, looking at him fixedly. 'I was just talking to Rhoda Nolt at church, and she said her grandson Leroy has been having all sorts of digestive trouble, and his doctor suggested that he try cutting *gluten* out of his diet – flour and barley and such. They did that, and Leroy soon felt much, much better.' Her eyes widened. 'You don't think it was my *rolls* that upset your stomach?'

'I don't know. Probably not. But it seems like it's at least worth *trying* this diet, don't you think?'

'Yes, I do.' said his mother. 'I'll call Rhoda and see what sort of dishes her daughter makes for Leroy.'

His father cleared his throat. 'Seems to me that if you're going to cut out flour, you're going to have to cut out just about everything that's worth eating.'

His mother shook her head. 'Don't worry, Clyde. I'll still make *your* meals the way you like them. Besides,' she added. 'So far as I know, milk and ice cream don't have any wheat.'

His father harrumphed and returned to his newspaper. Isaac forced himself not to get too excited. Because surely doing something as simple as *changing his diet* wouldn't make any difference in the troubles that had plagued him all his life.

For supper that evening, Isaac's mother served him pork chops, mashed potatoes, and green beans. Instead of a whole wheat roll, she provided him with a double-helping of fruit cup. The meal was tasty as usual, the pork chops succulent, the home fries savory and finely salted,

the green beans drizzled with browned butter. For dessert, his father had ice cream and chocolate cake, but Isaac contented himself with vanilla ice cream, and so did his mother.

Did he feel a little less bloated that night? Maybe a little. He couldn't be certain. But he slept well and woke clear-headed. And the next day in the schoolhouse, his stomach *did* seem less jumpy. And here was the astonishing thing: over the course of the next few weeks, his flesh seemed to unclench. A heaviness lifted from the left side of his body. His belly, and even his temples, felt lighter. His concentration sharpened. His hands stopped dripping. His stomach no longer cramped after he ate lunch; it no longer roiled at every announcement of the milk price on the Market Report. In the foyer of the meetinghouse after services, he stood taller. He stood with what he didn't *dare* call confidence – he was too wary to offer such a sweeping conclusion. He'd been hoodwinked by one too many false convictions of healing. But he moved about the farm and even sat in his schoolhouse carrel with barely-concealed elation.

He was still self-conscious, of course. That habit was too deeply ingrained in his mind to vanish in the span of a few short weeks. But as the weeks of comparative equilibrium continued, the judgment he'd trained so relentlessly on himself started to turn itself toward others. How heavy Mark Beiler was, his neck thick, his stomach already running to fat like his father's. How twitchy was rail-thin Nevin Keener. How *obese* was Isaac's own father – napping in the afternoons, parking himself in his recliner every evening, stuffing himself after every meal with sticky buns and ice cream. Only Luke still seemed perfect, sitting so easily in his pew and in his low chair in the cramped Sunday school classroom.

'My body is your body.' Now, each time he pictured Luke, the words from Isaac's favorite novel resounded in his mind, the words Elio and Oliver had shared with each other, the



words he'd never imagined that he might share with Luke, words that he longed to exchange with him now.

But he still didn't know about Luke. He still had no proof. All he could say for certain was that Luke was handsome, capable, and eighteen, yet he was not dating anyone. He had *never* dated anyone. The previous fall, Mary Elizabeth had confided in Isaac that Glenda Nolt – Gladys's younger sister – had an enormous crush on Luke. And Glenda was very pretty; she and Luke would have made a fine couple. But Luke had never done a thing about Glenda's interest, and now Glenda was going around with Linford Keener, Nevin's younger brother. And though Isaac took care not to investigate this too closely, it certainly never seemed like Luke paid much mind to the girls who batted their eyelashes at him in the foyer of the meetinghouse. He just stood there in patient silence while the ease rolled off of him like the haze that rose from the low patch in the cornfield on summer nights.

Driving home from the meetinghouse, Isaac thought of all the months that Elio spent dreaming of Oliver before they first touched. Even for Elio, those months had been a trial: nights, he lay awake, waiting for Oliver to enter his bedroom. Or he stood on the balcony in the soft, summer air in just his pajama bottoms. Sometimes, he avoided Oliver. Other times, he spoke to him too harshly and spikily – but he was never vicious to him. He'd never wronged him the way Isaac had unquestionably wronged Luke.

Several times in February, Isaac thought of going to Luke's truck after services and apologizing. Driving home from the schoolhouse, he began to swing past the Sauder farm and slow at the end of the lane as he once had on his bike. But whenever he thought of actually speaking to Luke about that subject, his side seized up so sharply that it seemed like his old

bodily troubles were about to restart. Each time, his palms dampened, panic surged through him, panic that he plainly had not conquered.

Alone in his room those nights, Isaac scrolled endlessly through images of the men on his favorite photo app. Why worry so much about Luke Sauder when there were so many beautiful boys on *Photomash*? Someday, *he* would sculpt his body the way the men on the app sculpted theirs. He would dress in a deep-cut V-neck tee-shirts and skinny jeans. He would hold himself with their languor and prideful confidence. And it struck Isaac, in the milking parlor the following evening, that there was nothing stopping him – that just as he'd purchased his phone and hid it in his blue canvas Bible cover, so he could buy the clothes he wanted.

The following evening, he drove to the outlets on the outskirts of Strasburg and purchased two deep V-necked tee-shirts and a pair of skinny jeans. On his ride back, he stopped at the Kuernerville Rite-Aid and bought a costly pomade and a pack of condoms, which he promptly jammed into the back of the glovebox of his pickup, just in case he'd ever have the need to use them (he'd learned about the importance of prophylactics from pornography). Home, he locked himself in the bathroom and used the pomade to shape his hair into an imitation the carefully coiffed locks of his favorite model. It took him ten minutes – and as soon as he was finished, he washed the gel out of his hair to keep his parents from discovering how bold he was becoming. But now, at least, he knew that he wouldn't always have to look like a bumpkin.

Maybe he *would* become a salesman in the dry goods store? Maybe he *would* drive a feed truck? Or maybe he'd do something that had nothing whatsoever to do with any Mennonite church or Mennonite-owned business. He wasn't certain. All he knew was that now that he felt and looked so much better, he no longer had to worry about being beholden to the stupid price of milk. Which was a blessing, because his chores had stopped seeming like such a balm. The

stench of the cows reasserted itself. The rotteness of the labor. The tedium of rising at 4:30 every morning.

*This isn't permanent*, he told himself. This wouldn't always be his lot. The conviction bolstered him as he slogged his way from the barns to the schoolhouse and endured the trials of Pastor Yoder's sermons, and the days began to lengthen, and on nicer days, mild breezes blew over the empty fields through the barnyard.

The second Saturday in March, Isaac drove to the farm supply store to pick up the order of nutrient supplements and salt blocks. Waiting by the loading dock, he perched on the front bumper of his truck. The lawn behind the store spread north toward the Welsh Mountains, like the back fields of the main farm. The township *was* pretty, however miserable the milk price. But more and more, he believed that he was destined for some sort of job that would make him real money – money enough to live the sort of glamorous life he now felt certain he deserved.

A big diesel engine rumbled, and Isaac jumped, half-expecting to see Art Smucker bearing down on him. Instead, Rick Denlinger's gleaming, dual-wheel pickup rolled across the parking lot. And to his astonishment, the rich farmer backed his truck up beside him and then wandered over.

'Isaac Bauman, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Isaac managed, astonished that the rich farmer knew his name.

'How are things going over at your place these days?'

Isaac shrugged, blanching a little under the man's scrutiny. 'I guess they're about the same.'

Rick Denlinger leaned against the side of Isaac's pickup, rested an arm on the hood. 'This price sure is a pain.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Isaac. Before he could stop himself, he added, tartly, 'But it doesn't seem to be affecting everybody equally though, does it?'

To his surprise, Rick Denlinger didn't seem bothered by this veiled barb. He nodded thoughtfully. 'No, I reckon not. But that's the market for you. It does a wonderful job getting people what they want at prices they like, but the process isn't always pretty.'

Isaac frowned. 'I suppose that's right.'

'Don't get me wrong,' the rich farmer added. 'I'm not happy some of my neighbors are having difficulties. I'd like to see us all prospering. But the milk market is changing, and not everybody can keep up. And I'm of the school that says when something's not working, folks ought to move on. But that's not how most people think, now. They want things handed to them – not *your* folks, certainly. Not plain Mennonites. Not the Amish. But most people. They don't want to take risks. They don't want to evolve. They just want things to stay like they've always been. But the dairy business is changing. The *country* is changing, and the folks who just sit around hoping things are going to go back to the way they were are going to get plowed under.'

'That does make sense,' Isaac said, frowning. It was all very reasonable, but it didn't explain what sorts of new jobs farmers were supposed to find. He pressed his elbow against the faint flicker of discomfort in side.

'Do you mind if I ask you a question?'

'Shoot.'

'What would you do if you were my age to avoid being "plowed under"?''

The rich farmer lifted his eyebrows and nodded. 'If I were you, I'd do what I'm having my boys do. I'd go to college. That's where folks learn how the world works. That's where they meet other people and "network," bounce new ideas off of each other, come up with new plans.'

Isaac frowned. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted to 'network,' whatever that was exactly. But the idea of 'learning how the world worked' was certainly a draw.

He drew a breath. 'Is it expensive to go to college?'

'It can be,' said Rick Denlinger. 'Especially if you want to get into one of the good schools. But if your folks don't have a big income you can qualify for all kinds of what they call "financial aid." So you shouldn't worry so much about the cost. What you ought to think on is what kind of doors a good school can open for you. And if you do have to take out some loans to cover the rest, well, that's commerce. It's like I tell my boys, "You got to spend money to make money." You can't expect to get any sort of return if you don't invest.'

'That does make sense,' said Isaac, the flicker in his side diminishing.

Rick Denlinger smiled at him. 'You're a sharp fellow. You know that, right?'

'That's very nice of you to *say*,' Isaac said, scuffing the gravel. Confident though he felt now, he still had no idea how to take a compliment.

'I'm not just saying it. It's obvious. You belong in a good school. I put one son through Cornell, and I've got another at NYU. I know a thing or two about how you get into the top colleges. So if you do decide to go down that road, you let me know, and I'll do what I can for you.'

'I'll certainly think about it,' said Isaac, still trying to take in all the man had said.

'You do that. And tell your dad I said hi.'

With that, the rich farmer patted the hood of Isaac's pickup and swung for the stairs beside the loading dock. Isaac turned back to the Welsh Mountains, Rick Denlinger's advice echoing in his mind. *You got to spend money to make money.* It was how Rick Denlinger operated. Probably, it was how André Aciman's factory-owning father thought, how all prosperous people ordered their lives – how they became more prosperous, how they obtained the funds that enabled them to build seaside villas where they could read dense works of philosophy while basking in the sun. And when they grew tired of reading, they wandered down to the shore and dunked themselves in the bracing water. And if they were lucky, they could do so with a beloved at their side.

The creak of a pallet and Isaac turned. Slow-minded Gary Lefever was pushing a pallet of nutrition supplements toward the bed of his truck. He beamed at Isaac, his eyes large and friendly, even as he leaned his stooped shoulders into the jack.

'Howdy, Gary,' Isaac said, jamming his hands into the pockets of his coveralls, and averting his gaze from the man's infirmity.

And still, Rick Denlinger's proposals flashed before him. College. The top schools. Money. How freeing it would be to have funds sufficient to never feel vulnerable. Money paid for servants, for fresh squeezed apricot juice, for the space and freedom to do and think whatever you wanted. Money was what kept people like Elio and Oliver from having to sacrifice their bodies, the way poor Gary Lefever had to sacrifice his.

That was what he needed, and perhaps, if he went to college – to a top college – that was what he would obtain. And someday he would own a factory, and he would own a house by the seaside, and he would return to Kuernerville Township in an expensive car, and Luke Sauder would have no choice but to admire him.

‘You’re all set, Isaac,’ called Gary Lefever, still beaming as he slid his jack out from the back of the pallet.

‘Thanks,’ Isaac mumbled, not quite meeting the poor man’s eager gaze.

‘You have a good day, now, Isaac.’

‘Yes. You, too,’ Isaac said, hurrying toward his pickup, and trying to dispel the memory of the laborer’s anxious and needy smile, which was so like all the desperate smiles he had offered while he’d been ill. Because when you were sick or slow or dependent in any way on others, you had to smile like a servant, you had to make the people whose approval you depended upon believe that you liked them and shared their beliefs. Otherwise, they would cast you aside, and you would have nothing. As always, the thought of a return to that sort of helplessness, that desperation, made Isaac shudder.

So college. Clearly, that was what he needed. The only question was how to bring up the idea with his parents. In the days after his conversation with Rick Denlinger, Isaac tried not to think of how his parents might respond. Evenings that week, between bouts of scrolling through photos of the best colleges in the country and trading photos on *Slider*, Isaac began searching for strategies on how to become as prosperous as Rick Denlinger. He read up on the virtues of free trade and low taxation, principles that had long been the bedrocks of the Republican Party that every farmer in the township who voted belonged to. Many of the clips were informative, but a little hard to follow. It was only when Isaac discovered the speeches of the acclaimed economist Milton Friedman that the scales truly fell from his eyes.

He nodded as Milton Friedman explained that competition made economies strong and government interventions made them weak. Whenever he wondered for an instant about the people left behind in an unfettered marketplace – whenever he remembered the way *he* had felt

before he'd stopped eating gluten – he repeated Milton Friedman's refrain: 'There is no Nirvana.' There could never be a flawless allocation of social resources. Every system produced a degree of suffering and waste. In wry, unflustered tones, the economist explained that capitalism free from bumbling government interference provided the best outcomes of any economy. For proof, you simply had to look to the power and productivity of the United States.

Watching the videos of Milton Friedman, Isaac saw with renewed clarity that America only seemed broken so long as you believed in God. The instant you stopped supposing that lockstep order and perfect harmony were proofs of 'godliness,' the instability and injustice and, yes, even the *violence* of American life stopped seeming like problems, and began to seem, instead, like unfortunate yet inevitable byproducts of the system that assured the nation's might. Yes, the milk price was poor. Yes, dairying was hard for small farmers. But that was because the big farmers were becoming even more efficient producers, thus lowering the cost of milk for consumers and freeing up funds that folks could spend on other products, thereby contributing to the complication and diversification of the national economy.

From Milton Friedman, Isaac also obtained an easy answer as to where to find moral guidance in a world in which there was no God. The judgments of the market provided a neat replacement for divine law. In a free economy, there was no need to worry about your neighbors, no need to concern yourself with other people, no need to indulge in the quaint Mennonite tradition of mutual aid. In order for the nation to succeed, all its citizens simply had to labor diligently at their chosen vocations and make as much money as possible. People didn't *need* to think about others; they simply had to concentrate on bettering themselves and their loved ones. The market would take care of the rest by translating personal striving and individual



accomplishments into a collective prosperity that far exceeded any outcome a corrupt central planner could achieve.

Perusing Milton Friedman's *Wikipedia* page, Isaac discovered that the eminent economist had worked for many years as part of something called the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in California. In awe, Isaac clicked through the photographs of Stanford's lush, Italianate campus. The academic buildings looked like villas. The clouds wreathed the tips of distant mountains. The grass shone in the sun. Surely, on the Stanford campus, all sorts of beautiful young men lounged about reading dense works of philosophy – or *economics*.

Stanford. That was where he wanted to go. That was where he wanted to study. At Stanford, he would transform himself from a hayseed bumpkin into the sort of ambitious young businessman who was not beholden in any way to the (former) incapacities of his body. Nights on his jogs, he loped past the fields of green winter wheat and the brown fields matted corn stubble, his lungs opening, his thighs and calves tingling deliciously. Evenings, he snapped photos of himself posing in front of the mirror, marveling at how fit he was becoming, and wishing that that Luke's face might somehow appear on the app.

Sundays and Wednesdays at church, Isaac aimed silent messages in Luke's direction. *Do you ever think about that summer? I'm sorry I was so stupid. I should have gotten in bed with you, but I was afraid of what you would think about my body. I'm still afraid of it. I'm still afraid that you aren't like me, or worse, that you are, but that you won't think I'm good enough.* But there was no way to say any of this in the Sunday school classroom while Deacon Sensenig droned on about 'righteousness' and 'submission,' or in the foyer after services while Mark Beiler fussed about the injustice of migrant workers and the glories of a border wall, as if a wall alone could stop people from entering a country.

If only Luke would come to him, stop by the tenant house, ask him to go for a walk. Or even if Luke would confront him the way Oliver had confronted Elio in the novel.

“Do you like me that much?” Oliver had asked Elio one day while they lounged together on the lawn. Freed by the frankness of this question, Elio had answered honestly, heedless of his doubts, for once. “Do I like you? Oliver, I worship you.”

That was what he would say, if Luke asked him directly. But such directness was unlikely to be forthcoming. By the time Oliver had posed that question, he and Elio had already exchanged all sorts of intimacies. They’d kissed. They’d caressed each other’s feet under the dinner table. Elio had gently placed his hand on Oliver’s crotch. Whereas all Isaac had ever done with Luke was lie beside him at the Martins’ pond and sit next to him at the corn stand and on the picnic table behind the Sauders’ workshop. They’d never so much as touched, that Isaac could remember. Even now that he was supposedly ‘better,’ he couldn’t stand the thought of Luke touching his skin – touching him in those most secret of places – and finding him wanting.

It was safer to keep silent. It was better to talk online about dangerous subjects, to exchange pictures anonymously. Because if any of the fellows in the meetinghouse knew what he was actually thinking, they would recoil from him as if he had Mad Cow Disease. They’d report him to Pastor Yoder, who would probably encourage the members to shun him.

And where would he go? He was just seventeen. He still had another year of schooling left before he could enroll in college. He was still stuck on a farm, still dependent on his parents for everything. So, every night, Isaac searched for new photos of Stanford, new buildings new admire, new sunwashed views of the quad. He watched videos of Milton Friedman brilliantly debunking communism and socialism and defending the virtues of wealth and inequality. He

studied the profiles of the rough local men on *Slider*. At least once a week, *EaglesDaddy73* begged him for a rendezvous.

*Please let's meet up. U have no idea how much I need this.*

*I'll pay if u want, he added, one balmy early March evening. \$100?*

Isaac cringed. He ought to pay other people to touch *him*, so that he wouldn't have to feel bad if they found him disgusting.

*I hope I didn't offend u, the man added, when Isaac did not reply.*

*U didn't offend me. Isaac answered finally.*

*Thank goodness. Tell me this, at least. Tell me u'll think about my offer.*

*Ok, Isaac typed, meaning, of course, that he would not.*

*Ok! Great! Thank u! I'll talk to u soon, ok?*

*:-), Isaac typed, and closed the app, fell back onto his bed.*

\$100 was nothing to sneeze at, of course. But what he really wanted was not money, but confidence. He needed to practice. He needed to prepare himself for the sort of worldly contact he'd have to endure at college. And, of course, he needed to find a way to tell his parents about his plan to depart the farm.

Each time he tried to imagine raising the subject of Stanford, he heard his father's most favorable possible reply.

*'There's got to be a school that's closer.'*

Each time, Isaac rehearsed his answer. *'Sure, there are closer schools, Dad, but Stanford is pretty much the best one around. And it's like Rick Denlinger says, you've got to spend money to make money.'*

Or maybe he'd omit the reference to the rich farmer. The idea was self-evident, after all. People had to invest in themselves. What else was there, once you stopped believing in God and charity?

### III. Spring

#### *Isaac*

The last Saturday in March, Isaac blinked when his father asked if he was still coming to the pesticide applicator licensing meeting. Bored as he now was by agricultural matters, he had forgotten all about the gathering at the Grange hall. But for the moment, at least, he was still a farmer; therefore, it was his duty to tag along to the meeting with his father and grandfather.

It was noon by the time they reached the Grange hall. The old, white clapboard building dated back to the years when Quaker and Scotch Presbyterian farmers had dominated the township. Now, most of their farms had been taken over by Amish and plain Mennonites. The majority of the ‘improperly churched’ farmers who remained were stooped and graying figures. But not Rick Denlinger. The rich farmer leaned against one wall, his eyes narrowed, his thumbs hooked in his belt, his green Pioneer seed cap pushed back slightly. A group of neighbors clustered around the man, talking eagerly, in response to which Rick Denlinger just nodded.

In the shadow of the coat rack, Isaac folded his arms. Someday, he would have that poise. Someday, he would have that confidence. But first, he had to find some way to trust his body. On the other side of the room, Luke Sauder stood beside his father, handsome as ever in his gray striped shirt and black trousers. Isaac was tempted to approach him – to stand beside him and hope, as usual, that Luke might be moved by his charms. But just as he started forward, the balding, dyspeptic county extension agent tapped his microphone and announced that it was time for the presentation to begin, and if everyone would take their seats.

Slowly, the various conversations died down. Isaac joined his father and grandfather at one of the long tables. They’d just taken their seats when Art Smucker shuffled up. Out of the corner of his eye, Isaac glowered at the ham-faced farmer, willing him to choose any spot but the

one beside his father. So, of course, Art Smucker greeted his father as if nothing untoward had ever unfolded between them and plopped down in his seat.

Two minutes into the extension agent's discussion of the latest rules for the proper handling of pesticides, half of the farmers at the table were nodding. Five minutes in, two were snoring outright. But they all came awake as soon as the meal started. There was Eli Zook, the gray-bearded Amish bishop, and young Amos King, also Amish. Amos and his father-in-law had an impressive organic produce farm just outside of Brunnerville. Elvin Beiler came next. And then the township supervisor, Charles Groff. It was Charles who reiterated, in low tones, that there really was nothing the township supervisors could have done to block the expansion on the Denlinger farm.

Art Smucker snorted at this. Isaac's father's shook his head wearily. For several minutes, the conversation remained focused on the miserable state of commodity prices. Amos King described the struggles of his brother-in-law, whose forty-cow herd was just too small to be profitable. Charles Groff repeated the argument from a recent editorial in the *Lancaster Farming* that liquids made from almonds or rice were *juices* and shouldn't be permitted to be labeled as milk. Isaac nibbled at the ham and cheese he'd picked out of his potato roll and half-listened, eyeing Luke Sauder.

In the dream that had come to him earlier that week, he was at the Martin's pond, kneeling in the muck of the reeds that edged the dock. The other fellows were doing backflips. Nevin Keener jumped first. Mark Beiler followed, landing on his side. And then Luke stood, lean and chiseled, his chest pale where it had been untouched by the sun, and Isaac lowered himself until his eyes were barely visible above the water. The dazzling sun sparkled on the rivulets of water that slid down Luke's arms and shoulders and fell from his hair. And as Luke flexed his

knees and launched himself, the other fellows turned where they sat or capered in the water and watched him pinwheel up and over the pond's flat surface. He entered the water in an almost-perfect dive. *Like an angel*, Isaac thought. *My angel*. And when he surfaced, he turned to Isaac and smiled – and Isaac smiled back openly, for once, and the tension between them softened. A marvelous dream, so long as he was in it. But he still had no idea how he could persuade Luke to give him some sort of sign of his inclinations without risking the exposure of his own desires.

‘So what do fellows you think of this election?’ said Elvin Beiler.

The question jerked Isaac out of his reverie. The Amish farmers bowed their heads. Art Smucker stared at his plate. Isaac's grandfather frowned without speaking. His father studied his carton of iced tea.

Grinning, Elvin Beiler plowed on. ‘What do you think of Trump?’

Again, the old Amish bishop coughed.

‘What do *you* think of him, Elvin?’ Charles Groff asked.

Elvin Beiler's ruddy face flushed darker. ‘I *love* him.’

Isaac rolled his eyes behind his hand. Of course, Elvin Beiler would be every bit as enthusiastic about the candidate as his stupid son, Mark. So, as Elvin went on about how Trump was a ‘baby Christian,’ and then proceeded to endorse his plan for a border wall, Isaac returned to his dream of Luke at the Martin pond, but this time, after Luke dived perfectly into the water, he surfaced in the reeds opposite Isaac.

‘Fellows.’

Isaac jumped at the voice behind him. Rick Denlinger loomed over his chair.

‘I couldn't help overhearing you were talking about the election. What's the view here?’ the rich farmer demanded. ‘What do you all think of Trump?’

Isaac stared intently at what remained of his coleslaw.

After a long silence, Elvin Beiler piped up, his face bright, only the faintest hint of hostility flickering in the corners of his eyes. ‘On the whole, I’d say we like him,’ he said.

Rick Denlinger nodded slowly. ‘Charles, what about you?’

‘I’m not decided yet.’

‘Clyde?’ the rich farmer continued, ‘What do you think?’

Isaac eyed his father. They never talked about politics; lately, they spoke about very little, so he had no idea what his father thought.

‘I can’t say I care for Trump’s character one bit, but I haven’t figured out who I’m supporting’ said Isaac’s father.

‘No Rubio fans, here?’ Rick Denlinger said, referring to the youthful senator from Florida. ‘No Ted Cruz backers?’

‘I don’t think you can trust a word that Ted Cruz says,’ said Elvin Beiler said.

‘And Isaac, what about you?’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘Who do you favor?’

‘I haven’t decided, either,’ Isaac said.

And still, Rick Denlinger’s gaze seemed to drill into him, taking his measure, demanding to know what he really thought. The old Isaac would have stared at his plate in panic. Now, he regarded the rich farmer with something approaching calm – the way Oliver regarded Elio’s father at the table while they talked about ‘Dante,’ whoever that was.

‘Interesting,’ the rich farmer said, turning toward the food table. ‘It’s all very interesting.’ He took a step back toward the smorgasbord.

‘Now, hang on, Rick,’ said Elvin Beiler. ‘You didn’t say who *you* favor.’



The rich farmer stopped and turned, amusement twitching faintly at the corners of his eyes. 'I'm for the Republican nominee.'

Elvin Beiler grinned. 'But we're not there yet, neighbor. That's not what we're talking about.'

Rick Denlinger shrugged. 'I'm not worried about it. I'll support anybody who will cut taxes, slash regulations, and grow the pie.'

'Trump's got a great tax cut plan,' Elvin Beiler said, his face flushing brighter.

Rick Denlinger smiled. 'So does the senator from Texas. So does the senator from Florida.'

'I wouldn't vote for neither one of them *Mexicans*,' spat Art Smucker.

Isaac swung toward him; all the farmers at the table turned in surprise. The man's fleshy face was always florid. Now, it was dark. But when Isaac turned to Rick Denlinger, the rich farmer's face remained impassive. The only sign that he was displeased was in the fresh hardness that settled over his eyes.

'Technically,' he said, 'both of those senators are Cubans. *Cuban-Americans*.'

'Same thing,' Art Smucker growled. 'They're slippery. Like Elvin here said, you can't trust a word they say.'

Isaac lifted his eyebrows. It was one thing to take issue with how migrant labor was hurting the milk price, and altogether another to discount two candidates for president – two American citizens – just because of their skin color. Yes, of course, as a black man, President Obama was clearly allied with the interests of black people in cities against the interests of farmers, but you could quietly lament a politician's bias without hatefully enacting prejudice of your own in public.

‘I said *Cruz* was slippery,’ Elvin Beiler said, blanching. ‘I don’t know a thing about this Rubio fellow.’

‘He’s for letting in more illegals,’ said Art Smucker. ‘Just like Denlinger here. That’s all you need to know.’ He glowered at the rich farmer.

Rick Denlinger’s eyes hardened. ‘You may not be aware of this, Art, but immigrants start more businesses than native-born Americans. They’re more ambitious. They’re harder working. They improve the dynamism of the country, and that’s good for everybody.’

‘None of that matters when they’re *illegal*.’

The obstinate unreason in Art Smucker’s voice was every bit as terrifying as Pastor Yoder’s idea that the sins of Isaac’s water-dowsing fathers had been responsible for the dripping of his palms.

‘I don’t see why legal status should have a relationship to work ethic,’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘Good workers, effective workers, contribute regardless of whether they’re documented. But as it happens, everyone on my farm has papers.’

‘That’s what you say,’ said Art Smucker. ‘But I’d like to see you tell it to the immigration police.’

Rick Denlinger blinked slowly. ‘The authorities are welcome to stop by my operation whenever they like. We do things by the book on my property.’

Art Smucker snorted at this. But before he could rebuke the rich farmer any further, the old Amish bishop shuffled back to the table carrying his replenished plate.

‘How’s your new parlor coming, neighbor?’ asked Eli Zook, so cheerfully that it broke the spell of the hostility.

‘It’s coming,’ Rick Denlinger said. ‘This mild weather’s certainly been a help. If things keep going like this, we should be done by the middle of May. The bank’s planning an open house. I certainly hope you’ll all be there.’

‘I know will be,’ said the Amish bishop. ‘Especially if they have a spread like this one.’

Rick Denlinger smiled thinly. ‘We’ll have something to eat, I can say that much.’ He turned back to the table. ‘I hope to see you all there. It was nice talking.’ With that, he nodded and swung toward the buffet.

‘There’s a reason he’s the biggest farmer in the township,’ the township supervisor whispered, as soon as Rick Denlinger was out of earshot. ‘He knows how to home in on what counts. Taxes. Daggone regulations. Whatever you think about illegal immigrants, *those* are the biggest drains on this country.’

At this, everyone but Art Smucker and Isaac’s father nodded.

Several times, throughout the rest of the meal, Isaac glanced at his father. Alone among the farmers at the table, he seemed troubled, though Isaac didn’t know if it was what Art Smucker had said that bothered him, or how obstreperously he’d said it. All he knew was that while everyone else at the table seemed content to stuff their faces and talk about the hybrid seeds they would be planting in another month and a half, his father picked at his food and frowned at his plate. And at the adjacent table, Rick Denlinger was talking calmly to the extension agent. How impressive it was that in the face of Art Smucker’s vicious comments, the rich farmer had remained calm.

When the meal was finished, the farmers lined up, signed a form, and received their pesticide applicator licenses for the spring. Instead of falling in behind his father, Isaac fiddled

with one of the buttons of his shirt, pretending to be preoccupied until Luke Sauder sidled up beside him.

‘Howdy, Bauman,’ Luke said, not quite looking at him.

Isaac glanced toward the front of the line where Art Smucker was signing for his license.

‘Did you catch the way Art laid into Rick Denlinger back there?’

‘Oh, I heard, all right. The whole Grange hall heard.’

‘It was pretty awful.’

‘Yep, but then I wouldn’t expect decency from someone like Art Smucker. Look at how he runs his place. I’m sure he don’t think it’s *his* fault that his fields are always planted late, and his barns are unpainted, and his cows are wading around in four inches of muck in his barnyard. I’m sure he’s always blamed it on other people. It’s Denlinger. It’s immigrants. It’s never his own mismanagement.’

‘He’s *disgusting*,’ said Isaac, picturing Smucker’s tumbledown barns, the rusting balers and combines parked beside his calf hutches, all the disused equipment half-swallowed by weeds.

Luke sighed with what might have been a reluctant agreement *or* a muffled objection.

‘But anyway, we don’t need to talk about Art Smucker,’ Isaac said quickly.

Luke’s eyebrows lifted. ‘What do you want to talk about?’

*Just how much I worship you. Just how much I owe you an apology.* But when Isaac thought of actually saying any of this to Luke, panic rippled across his stomach. His palms dampened. They weren’t dripping; still, he shoved them into his pockets. ‘How many acres of sweet corn are you all planting this summer?’

‘Three, I think,’ said Luke. ‘That is,’ he added, under his breath, ‘if we don’t lose the farm first.’

Isaac turned sharply.

‘We might have to sell our cows,’ said Luke. ‘Dad’s been getting some help from the church, but they can only do so much. I tried to tell him he shouldn’t have bought that new combine, but you can’t tell some people anything.’

‘That’s true,’ said Isaac. The line inched forward. The pain in his side had softened slightly, but his pulse was still pounding.

*Apologize*, he told himself. *Apologize, and maybe you can pick up exactly where during the sweet corn summer.* But what if Luke wasn’t ready to pick up there? What if Luke had never actually liked him? What if he was pining for some girl, or even dating one, secretly?

‘How bout you all?’ said Luke. ‘Are you planting any sweet corn?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Isaac. He stared intently at the rough floorboards of the Grange Hall. Still, his face kept heating. He had to say something. He had to make some sort of gesture.

He cleared his throat. ‘So I have some news,’ he said finally.

Luke nodded without looking up.

‘About a month ago I started this new diet.’ The words sounded ridiculous, but Isaac forced himself to persevere. ‘I don’t eat anything that has gluten in it, and you wouldn’t believe how much better I’ve been feeling.’

Luke raised an eyebrow. ‘Now what’s *gluten*, exactly?’

‘It’s this protein in wheat and barley that messes up some people’s digestion.’ He glanced behind him. The pair of farmers behind them were talking busily under their breaths and didn’t seem to be paying them any attention. ‘Before, I felt really gross all the time. That summer I

helped you with sweet corn...' He did his best to keep his voice even. 'That's how I felt, just completely disgusting and jumpy. Now, I feel different. Better. I feel like I have a brand-new body,' he said, staring as intently at Luke as he dared.

'That's great,' said Luke, but without quite looking at Isaac.

Isaac forced himself onward. 'I know I've never really apologized for how things went that summer. How we kind of stopped talking and stuff.'

Luke seemed to scrutinize his fingernails even more closely.

'I mean how I stopped talking to you,' Isaac said.

Luke nodded.

'I was stupid,' said Isaac. 'But like I said, I was so messed up that I couldn't concentrate properly. I couldn't tell what was important. Now, I know.'

Here, at last, Luke lifted his head. His eyes were calm. 'So what's important?'

'Having good friends,' said Isaac.

'That's true,' said Luke.

Isaac waited, forcing himself not to drop his gaze. But after a moment, Luke bowed his head.

'I'm glad you're feeling better,' he said, again. He did not brush his shoulder against Isaac. But he did not suggest that they 'hang out' sometime. He did not allude in any way to the closeness they'd shared during their sweet corn summer.

The familiar coating of shame settled over Isaac. He'd been too forward. He'd presumed far too much. Probably, Luke scarcely noticed him. Probably, he was too busy dreaming of one of the girls of the congregation.

How stupid he was. How stupid he would always be. When Isaac's turn came, he signed on the spot the clerk directed him too, and then turned to Luke and mumbled a quick goodbye.

'Later,' he said, only realizing as the word left his lips that he was parroting one of the lines that so exasperated Elio when Oliver uttered it in the novel.

A flicker of surprise crossed Luke's face, and then his gaze resumed its usual mildness. 'I'll see you,' he said.

For one long moment, Isaac stared at him, giving him one more chance to offer him *some* sort of sign, but already, Luke was turning to sign for his license. So Isaac swung for the door and started across the parking lot, not looking back, not acknowledging his ridiculous dreams in any further way. When he reached his father's pickup, he climbed in, propped his feet on the transmission hump, and wrapped his arms around his knees, and flayed himself inwardly for his ineptitude until his father and grandfather finally ambled out of the Grange hall.

### *Clyde*

All afternoon, Art Smucker's hateful words about Mexicans resounded through Clyde. All through the milking. All through supper. When the meal was finished, he mumbled an excuse about needing to check heifers and headed for the main farm. Still, Art's ugly remarks kept ringing in Clyde's ears. But all the while, the conviction nagged at him, the spreading realization that he hadn't wanted to acknowledge or name, but which just lingered in the shadowy corner of his mind like a calf that didn't want to go up the loading chute from out of the barnyard: small farmers needed *somebody*. Small operators of every kind needed help. Maybe Elvin was right; maybe a border wall *would* cut back on the overproduction of all the big operators.

But no sooner had Clyde admitted this then he thought again of Art Smucker. If the man cared so much about threats to his prosperity, why didn't he plant his fields on time? Why didn't he do more to care for his livestock? Why? Probably because it was probably easier to blame his troubles on others – especially people looked different, especially those who came from countries with unpronounceable names.

'God Bless the Whole World, No Exceptions,' the new vet's bumper sticker rightly proclaimed. And yet every time fellows like Donald Trump opened their mouths, they seemed to be encouraging believers to hate, to fixate on their anger and anxieties in this life. But true Christians ought to be living as strangers and pilgrims, and dreaming of the life to come.

But then look at *him*. Not five minutes ago, he'd been worrying about his livestock, trying to think up some way to keep them. But how could he call himself a believer if he wasn't willing to give up any attachment that was rooted in this life, any possession – or group of possessions – that kept him from following Christ's call?

Clyde parked in the lane and surveyed the buildings. The silhouette of the bank barn shone in the moonlight. The parlor windows glinted darkly. It was so easy to fall into attachment to worldly things, so easy for Christians to persuade themselves that they weren't called to sacrifice *anything* they didn't want to give up. He climbed from his pickup and started for the milking parlor. The concrete block building always seemed hollow when it was empty of livestock. He skirted the stanchions and opened the door to the stable. The gassy warmth of the herd mingled with the damp concrete of the parlor. The nearest Holsteins lifted their heads and shifted in their stalls.

'Good girls,' Clyde said. 'Sweet girls.'



He knew each of the cows by number. They were such a nice-sized, well-filled-out bunch. Yet how irrelevant even their fineness seemed compared to the thousand cows Rick Denlinger was already milking on his farm. And three hundred more were coming.

He went to the calving barn next. The mothers jumped to their feet when he flicked on the light.

‘Good girls,’ he said again, padding toward the pen.

Both of the mothers turned and eyed him warily, their calves close beside them. *This place*. Home to so many generations of hard-working Baumans. In spite of the frustration of the milk price, one day, it still might be the home of his son.

Maybe, if they got out dairying, they could find another, more profitable, industry. Or maybe they’d try some new thing and run into terrible debt, like the fellows who’d bought into emus and ostriches back in the 90s thinking that those silly birds were going take over the meat industry. Change was risky. When the price of emus had plummeted, fellows who bought them were left with pastures full of exotic birds they’d paid thousands of dollars for that would fetch, at most, a couple bucks. Change was stressful. But there was stress aplenty in dairying as it was now.

In the calving barn, the mothers were still watching Clyde. But the calves had settled now. They were both slurping away on the swollen udders.

What if they sold the herd? What if instead of worrying so much about the herd and migrant labor and the overproduction of big farmers, he unburdened himself of the weight that had been encouraging his spirit of doubt? Wasn’t that the sensible choice? Wasn’t it foolish to hang on like this when they would soon start losing money?

*But this place*, he thought again. His cows. His equipment. The routine he knew like the sunspots on the backs of his hands.

One of the spindly calves turned from the udder and blinked at him.

‘Good girl,’ Clyde whispered again. He tried to swallow the ache that spread in his chest, but it just kept spreading, even though he knew that it probably would be smart to get out of dairying, responsible to find some other way of making a living. He stood by the bars in the calving pen for the longest time.

He took the long way home. He didn’t admit where he was going until he turned onto the road that led past Rick Denlinger’s farm. It was almost eight o’clock, but the lights in the old parlor were still burning, the migrants laboring away on Denlinger’s evening shift, improving their lives while lining Rick Denlingers’ pockets.

Was this the Lord’s will? This *industrial* approach to farming? It sure didn’t seem proper to Clyde. But there was no ignoring how efficient it was. It produced all sorts of milk, provided employment to a bunch folks from all over the world. If only it didn’t have to run a bunch of fine farmers into the ground in the meantime. But wasn’t that farming? And hadn’t the Lord promised to be faithful whatever happened on this side of glory. Everybody in the country could start drinking rice milk. Everybody in the world could turn ‘vegan,’ and still the Lord would keep finding a way to prosper farmers who truly believed.

All week, Clyde prayed with Lois about the herd with Lois. Thursday, Clyde resolved to raise the possibility of selling the cows with Isaac. He made the same resolution again on Friday. Finally, on Saturday, Clyde decided that he’d been putting things off long enough. That evening, when the milking was finished, he turned left instead of right out of the farm lane.

Isaac turned in confusion. 'Where are we going?'

Clyde cleared his throat. 'I thought we'd go for a quick drive. I just wanted to talk to you about something.'

'Okay?' said Isaac, drawing the word out, investing it with all sorts of skepticism.

'You've been doing real well these last few months,' Clyde began.

'That's because I've been feeling so much better.'

'Which is wonderful,' said Clyde, wishing, for the umpteenth time, that they'd thought to look into the boy's diet sooner. 'I've been thinking lately about where we're headed with the operation,' Clyde continued. 'And I guess a lot of it has to do with your plans, what you want to do.'

'Oh,' Isaac said quietly.

Clyde swallowed, forcing himself not to read too much into the boy's hesitation. 'If you see yourself taking over the farm, I'd want to support that. If you see yourself staying in dairying, well, it won't be easy, but I'd want to support that, too. But if you don't see a future in the dairy business, I'd certainly understand, with the milk price where it is.'

'It certainly is a problem,' said Isaac.

Clyde had invited this agreement; he'd teed the boy up to dismiss dairying. Still, a pang went through him at the frank acknowledgement of their struggles.

'So you're thinking maybe it don't make sense to stick with the cows?' he said.

Isaac nodded firmly. It hurt, but at least now Clyde had his confirmation. But the boy wasn't done.

'I've actually been thinking lately that I want to go to college.'

Clyde gripped his steering wheel tighter. Apart from *maybe* a bar or a casino, it was hard to think of a worldlier place. It was hard enough imitating Christ in Kuernerville Township, Pennsylvania. How much harder would it be to maintain a Christian witness in college?

‘I know it’s not something folks in the congregation usually do,’ Isaac said quickly, ‘but I just really think it’s the right choice for me.’

Clyde swallowed. ‘How long have you been thinking all this?’

‘Not that long’ said Isaac.

‘I see,’ said Clyde.

Visions of his father’s reaction flashed in front of him, of Lois’s concern. If the boy went off to college, all sorts of people would talk. But then, in the congregation, folks talked about every little thing. And maybe Isaac needed college. Maybe the Lord wanted him to attend, just as he wanted Clyde to sell the livestock.

Again, Clyde tried to swallow his dread. ‘It’s certainly not the usual path, but I got to admit, with your mind, I could see you doing well with some more schooling.’

Isaac turned, his face shining. ‘I want to get in someplace really good.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

‘I was talking about it to Rick Denlinger and he said both of his sons got into really good colleges,’ Isaac continued.

‘I believe that’s true,’ said Clyde, frowning at the idea that the rich farmer had influenced Isaac. But Denlinger was sharp. He was darn good at what he did. There were certainly worse role models.

‘There’s one more thing.’

Clyde braced himself.

‘If I’m going to go to college, I’ll need to do another year of schooling.’

‘Oh.’ Clyde nodded, letting his breath out slowly. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. Something much worse, certainly. Some other shock. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘I reckon we can figure something out.’

They swept past the Benioli Gish farm, the barnyard empty, the silo torn down. Benioli had looked so beaten down when he’d sold his cows the previous fall, but everyone said he was doing well with the new greenhouse he’d built with the money from his sale. Maybe *they* could do vegetables. Hydroponic tomatoes, maybe. Maybe even some of that organic produce that fetched such high prices at the auction.

‘I’ll need to talk to your mother about this college business before I give you the full okay.’

Isaac nodded, his face twitching with an effort to seem composed, but there was no mistaking his excitement.

‘One more thing,’ said Clyde. ‘It would probably be best if you didn’t say anything to Grandpa about any of this until I have a chance to speak to him?’

It would be hard enough to get the old man to agree to sell the livestock. The idea that Isaac would go off to some college to study was liable to send him into a fit.

*One thing at a time*, Clyde told himself, breathing a quick prayer over his cantankerous pop.

Home, he waited to mention Isaac’s news to Lois until after Isaac had gone up to shower before supper.

‘Isaac told me something interesting after the work tonight,’ he began.

‘What’s that?’ Lois said, drizzling the lima beans with browned butter.

‘He wants to go to college.’

Lois whirled around so sharply a jolt of browned butter flew from her saucepan. ‘Oh, my *stars*.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

‘Whatever put such an idea in his head?’

‘Apparently, he bumped into Rick Denlinger the other day, and all his boys went to college. And to Isaac, it looks like Denlinger walks on water, so...’

‘Do we need to speak to Pastor Wenger?’

‘I was wondering that, too,’ said Clyde. ‘But I guess what I’ve been thinking is that we get Isaac all fixed up with a school someplace, and then tell the church.’

‘Why don’t we pray about it?’ said Lois, turning back to the stovetop.

‘That would be good,’ said Clyde.

He sidled over and put his arm around his wife, and they bowed their heads in front of the burners asked the Lord to bless their son, to strengthen his faith and keep him from worldly influences of all kinds. And when they were finished, Clyde felt mostly better, and he chalked up any residual unease to lingering uncertainty about the milk price and padded to the freezer for a quick spoonful of ice cream.

*Isaac*

The night after the pesticide applicator licensing meeting, *EaglesDaddy73* repeated his offer to pay Isaac for a meetup. He was now promising \$150 for a tryst. And yes, the man was old and hairy and heavy; but maybe, in his imperfection, he was Isaac’s equal. Maybe he wouldn’t feel so self-conscious if he hooked up with someone as rough-looking as

*EaglesDaddy73*. And the Mennonite habit of thrift still obtained: if he *was* going to have sex with a stranger, wouldn't it make sense to be paid for his trouble?

That night, Isaac re-read the scene in *Call Me by Your Name* in which Elio and Oliver finally come together. How poetic it was – how *perfect*, perfect even in its portions of shame and awkwardness. When Oliver enters Elio, it hurts, and Elio is tempted to ask him to stop. But he doesn't, and though Oliver notices Elio's discomfort, and pauses, he ultimately continues, and as Oliver plunges into him, Elio arrives at a place that he realizes he's always longed for, some fundamental core of himself, a location he could only reach through the touch of another – someone every bit as charming, handsome, brilliant, and graceful as him.

*If only my first time could be like that*, Isaac thought, touching himself. Certainly, there was no way he could achieve such transcendent closeness if he hooked up with someone like *EaglesDaddy73*. But maybe, even with someone like *EaglesDaddy73*, he could still find his way to the secret, redeeming pleasures of his body. Maybe, he could still achieve the release that Elio had accomplished with Oliver. And maybe, if he did that, he'd stop feeling so dogged by all his years of failure and repulsiveness, so anxiously incomplete.

The following evening, Isaac opened *Slider* and, after deliberating for several fraught minutes, replied to *EaglesDaddy73*'s most recent message.

*I'm free tomorrow night if you're still interested in meeting up.*

*Absolutely*, came the man's instantaneous reply.

They agreed to meet at 8:00 the next evening at a motel just outside of Manheim. Immediately, Isaac felt like he'd made a terrible mistake. But he needed this. He needed to confirm that he could bear to be touched by *someone*.

Since determining that he was going to go to college, Isaac had applied himself to his lessons in the schoolhouse. But on Friday, all through the school day, Isaac's rendezvous with *EaglesDaddy73* occupied all of his thoughts. What if the man was not who he said he was? What if he was violent, dangerous? But most of all, what if he was repulsed when they touched? That question nagged at Isaac, no matter how many times he reminded himself that the man had told him he looked hot. Appearances were one thing. Real, live, actual bodies were entirely another.

Friday evening, Isaac buttoned his plain clothes over his skinny jeans and V-neck tee shirt. At the abandoned Quaker meetinghouse, he wriggled out of his restrictive clothes and pomaded his hair. Several times, on the drive to the motel, he thought of turning around. The same idea seized him in the motel parking lot. For a long time, he sat there, staring at his phone, and wondering if he was about to make a ruinous mistake. But he had come this far. And the only way he'd know how his body would respond around another person would be to test it. Better to try with a stranger, with someone who was himself pretty rough-looking, then with someone as lovely as Luke.

At 8:15, he opened *Slider* and messaged *EaglesDaddy73*.

*I'm here.*

*Thank goodness. I thought u weren't coming.*

*Sorry. I got a little lost.*

*It's no problem at all. Come around to the east door. I'll meet u.*

Isaac gulped and climbed out of his pickup, his pulse thudding in his ears, his stomach light but mercifully not jumping. With each step, part of him screamed '*Turn around.*' '*It's not too late.*' But, as Milton Friedman emphasized, every worthwhile accomplishment involved risk.



On he went, trying to feel worthy, trying to feel as confident as Rick Denlinger. And then the motel's side door swung open and a bearded man loomed in front of him.

'Elio98?'

'That's me,' Isaac whispered.

The man nodded slowly, looked Isaac up and down, and extended his hand.

'I'm Bobby,' he said, his grip powerful and hot.

'I'm Ralph,' Isaac blurted, suddenly unwilling to give the man his real name.

'My room's down this way, Ralph,' the man said, beaming.

Isaac followed him down a drab hallway, and into a compact, barely-furnished room. The man – Bobby – locked the door and gestured toward the bottles on the side table.

'What would you like to drink? I've got Jack, and I've got Yuengling.'

'Which do you recommend?' Isaac said carefully. Alcohol was forbidden by the congregation, and he'd never touched it.

The man chuckled. 'Why don't we start you out with beer? We can save the Jack for next time.'

Isaac took the beer. He recognized the brand from bottles he'd picked up along the road that edged the farm. He twisted off the cap. The contents smelled yeasty and vaguely rotten. The man – Bobby – poured a thick shot of brown liquid into a red plastic cup and sank into the room's only chair.

'Cheers,' he said.

'Cheers,' Isaac stammered.

He lifted the bottle to his lips and took a gulp of the funky liquid, the sour flavor of the lager distracting him from the magnetic force of the large man sitting in his chair in the corner of the room.

‘Have a seat,’ Bobby said, gesturing to the pair of beds in the middle of the room.

Isaac chose the bed farthest from Bobby. The man took a long drink of his ‘Jack’ and smacked his lips. Isaac downed half his beer and stared at the paisleys on the bedspread in an effort to distract himself from the tightness of his stomach and the heat – though mercifully not the uncontrollable leakage – of his palms.

‘Do you do a lot of meetups like this?’ he asked gingerly.

‘Nope. But then it’s not often that I get to exchange pictures with someone as hot as you.’

The flush of pleasure from the compliment diverted Isaac from the way his face was heating.

‘And I hope all this’ – Bobby gestured to his broad belly – ‘don’t turn you off too much. I keep meaning to go to the gym or at least do some walking, but I’ve been too busy, lately, taking care of my mother. I just don’t get enough time for myself. That’s why you showing up is such a relief – showing up and not leaving. When you look like me, you don’t take it for granted that people won’t just take one look at you and take off.

‘Has that happened to you before?’

‘Oh, probably half a dozen times.’

‘Wow.’

Bobby cocked his head. ‘You don’t have to pretend to be so surprised. I bet you thought about leaving when you saw me.’

Isaac flushed. Why did his head feel so hot?

‘It’s all right. Like I said, I know I’m not pretty. I know I’m letting myself go. But you know what I also think sometimes? Fuck it. I’m 43 years old. I work too much, and I live with my damn mother. And as it happens, I like to eat. It cheers me up when pertineer nothing else does.’

Isaac nodded, half-hearing this and barely judging the man for the wastefulness of his attitude in the light of own steadily lightening mood.

‘What was the number we agreed on? \$150?’ Bobby reached behind him, and, after a moment of struggling, produced his wallet.

‘Uh huh,’ said Isaac, still blinking, amused now by what he’d agreed to do. If it were any other activity but this one, his father would be proud of his enterprising attitude.

‘Here,’ Bobby said, holding out a stack of bills. ‘Don’t worry. You’re going to earn it.’ He grinned. ‘You’re already earning it, listening to me jaw.’

Isaac took the cash and thumbed through it, but he was too addled to count properly, so he stuffed the bills in his pocket. When he glanced up, Bobby was studying him fixedly.

‘You want another lager?’ said Bobby.

Isaac hesitated, but the man was already heaving himself out of his chair and handing it across the bed. Isaac took the bottle and sank back. Bobby was typing something on his phone. The room swirled. The strangeness of the scene flashed and vanished in a kind of haze. Here he was, sitting in a motel room outside Manheim with \$150 dollars in his pocket. Soon, he would have sex. And he would take what he’d learned to his next inevitable hookup. He’d take his confidence. And whoever he hooked up with would be so impressed. He’d be so drawn to him that when they came together, they would lose each other so completely as Elio and Oliver.

All of this, Isaac blearily insisted. Why, then, did his forehead feel so warm? Why did his feel faintly numb? When he rose to pee, the room spun gently, the way a merry-go-round spun. He smiled while the water tinkled out of him and closed his eyes. When he stepped back into the room, Bobby had his shirt off. His chest was every bit as saggy and hairy as it had seemed in the photos on *Slider*. A faded green tattoo covered the bicep of one arm. Fuzzy as Isaac felt, it took him a moment to notice the focus that had sharpened in the man's eyes.

'You're so hot,' Bobby groaned.

Isaac flushed and stared at the dirty brown carpet. The big man rose, repeating his praise, and advanced across the room. Isaac relaxed against the wall and closed his eyes. He didn't want to move. He just wanted to stand there letting those words of admiration wash over him like bathwater. So long as he kept his eyes closed, he might be anywhere. He might be with anyone. He closed his eyes tighter when Bobby began to unbutton his shirt. While the yeasty heat of the man's breath swept over him, he thought of Luke. Luke who hadn't looked at him since their conversation in the Grange hall, Luke who he adored and hated at the same time. The calluses on Bobby's hands brushed the skin of Isaac's chest, his ribs, his stomach. And yes, a sour stench clung to the man's skin. Yes, his breathing was wheezy, but his touch was stirring and light.

And then Isaac's pants were coming off, sliding down his hips, and Bobby's beard was brushing against his crotch, and, through the haze, it struck Isaac that he must not be *so* repulsive, because Bobby kept sniffing his flesh and muttering how attractive he was. And Isaac imagined Luke whispering those words, Luke running his lips over his body. He gasped when Bobby took him in his mouth. *Luke*, he thought again, picturing what they would do together. Tight as his face was now, hot as he felt, the worst of his discomfort vanished under a tide of

sweetness that just kept rising through him, swelling and sparkling until he could hardly stand the pleasure that gushed out of him in a flood.

‘Fuck, you’re hot,’ the man said, wiping his lips.

‘Thanks,’ said Isaac, bleary from the beer and stunned by the depth of his pleasure.

He *wasn't* gross. He had not repulsed the man. He’d earned his money. In a few minutes, he would step out into the damp of the evening and drive home and take a slow, cleansing shower. And when he met up with Luke – someday, somehow – he’d kneel in front of him in worship just like Bobby had knelt at his feet.

‘You liked that, I hope?’ said Bobby.

‘Uh huh,’ said Isaac, kneeling to pull up his briefs.

Bobby touched his shoulder. ‘You can leave those off.’

Through the glaze of the beer, a ripple of concern went through Isaac.

‘Go ahead and get on the bed,’ said Bobby.

Isaac gulped.

‘We have to do this a certain way because of my knee. You’re going to kneel on the bed facing the desk there, and I’m going to be behind you. Okay?’

Isaac nodded, his unease sharpening. But hadn’t he hoped they’d do everything? Wouldn’t that fully prepare him for hooking up with Luke? Naked, he climbed onto the mattress. He shivered as Bobby loosened his trousers and eased out of them, his bright, stubby penis jutting from beneath his belly. Why was the room suddenly so cold? Why did he feel so afraid again, all of a sudden? The man reached onto the table beside the six-pack, pulled out a condom and clambered onto the bed.

‘Dammit, I forgot the lube,’ said Bobby.

‘What?’

‘I’m kidding. It’s on the table. Do me a solid and grab it for me.’

Isaac rose, retrieved the bottle, and handed it to Bobby. He scarcely felt his hands, but he noticed they were trembling.

‘Now climb back up here.’

Isaac nodded.

‘You’ve got to kneel, remember,’ Bobby said, his voice bemused and kindly.

Isaac swallowed and complied. A tearing sound – the condom coming unwrapped. That was all it. There was nothing to be afraid of. He’d seen this happen on his phone plenty of times.

‘Just relax,’ Bobby whispered, bending over him.

Isaac nodded tensely and closed his eyes. A flap of the man’s stomach brushed his back and unnamable panic spread through him. He gasped when the splash of cold gel struck him and bit back a scream. And when Bobby entered him, he did cry out. He was tempted to cry louder. Surely, if he wailed with all his might, someone would come running. But if they did that, then he might be arrested. His face would be splashed across the newspaper like the poor men who were caught cottaging in the men’s bathroom at Long’s Park.

So he kept silent. His face was so tight, his body still clenching even though the man was inside of him. Did it always hurt this much? Did people always feel so overheated? Or was that just because Bobby was so big? And still the man kept thrusting. The skin on Isaac’s face tightened further. The heat spread through him, his body struggling to recoil and open itself simultaneously. And now, he was crying louder, keening, the noise so high and frantic it seemed to come from some other body.

It was only after several minutes of this that it occurred to Isaac to wonder if beer contained gluten. A spasm of panic went through him. Why hadn't he thought to ask Bobby about the Yuengling? Why hadn't he thought to find the answer on his phone? But it was too late to worry about that now. All he had to do was hang on and get through this.

*Think of Luke*, he told himself. But he didn't want to bring Luke into the ordeal. So, instead, he tried to imagine that it was Mark Beiler inside him, Mark who he'd always despised.

*Fuck Mark*, Isaac thought, deploying a word he'd heard on his videos but had never dared to claim. And to his astonishment, the vision of Mark Beiler's flat face and piggish eyes stirred him a little, allowed him to open himself wider, and the pain diminished a little. A faint glow of pleasure began flickering alongside each searing thrust. So he tried to focus on that, which meant focusing on Mark Beiler, imagining himself abased before Mark, entirely beholden to Mark's brutish stupidity.

Finally, with groan, Bobby finished and collapsed onto the bed. Much as Isaac had hated the first half of the ordeal, he was almost sorry it was done. But when he turned and touched the mess of lube that streaked the insides of his legs, shame spread through him like sewage leaking from a hidden pipe through freshly painted drywall. He wanted nothing now but to be home and clean and untouched by anyone

'That really was great,' said Bobby. 'I hope we can do this again sometime soon.'

'Maybe. I'll see,' Isaac stammered, searching for his underwear. And still, his head felt so hot. His temples felt tight. He mumbled something about needing to get home before it got too late, picked up his pile of clothes, and stepped the wrong way into his briefs.

Bobby turned. 'You sure you're okay to drive?'

'I'm certain,' said Isaac, hopping around, trying to pull up his jeans.

Bobby sat up. ‘You have to know. Just remember, an underage DUI is worse than one when you’re 21.’

Isaac hardly heard him. All he wanted to do now was get out of that room and away from the shame that kept spreading through him. He mumbled a farewell, shot Bobby a weak wave, and stumbled out of the room down the damp hallway and out into the cool, shadowy night.

With each painful step, his sense of grossness deepened. He had moaned too loudly. He’d hurt too much. He’d poisoned himself with wheat. And his thoughts kept scattering. The parking lot swam when he climbed into his truck. From somewhere beyond the disgust and the faint residual glow of the beer came the conviction that he shouldn’t drive. But he just wanted to be home. He just wanted to stand under the jets of the shower, free from the powerful waves of revulsion that kept coursing through him as backed out of the space, even though he told himself that what he had done was not wrong. He slewed halfway across the parking lot before he found the brake and aimed his truck for the street.

Somehow, he got home that night without getting pulled over by the state police, plowing into something, or killing anyone. He parked beside his father’s pickup, eased open the door to the mudroom, and crept through the darkened house.

‘There you are.’ His father’s voice erupted from living room’s darkness.

‘Dad,’ Isaac gasped. He could just make out his father’s form on the recliner. The sweat and filth felt palpable on his body. The faint odor of lube filled his nostrils.

‘How was the bowling?’

‘Okay,’ Isaac said, certain his father could sense his lie. Blurry as he felt, he didn’t dare offer more than monosyllables.

‘We had a pretty quiet night here.’



‘Oh,’ said Isaac, praying his father couldn’t tell that he was swaying.

‘I was hoping to pick your brain about the election,’ his father said. ‘But maybe you’re a little worn out?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Another time then,’

Isaac nodded, his head still swimming. His father lowered his footrest and stood, padded across the living room and patted Isaac on the shoulder. Isaac didn’t dare move, terrified as he was that his father would notice the stench that clung to his flesh. And then his phone in his pocket began to buzz.

His father turned. ‘Do you hear something?’

‘No,’ Isaac blurted, slapping at his pocket.

He’d forgotten to silence his phone on the ride home. After what seemed like *an hour* of incriminating buzzing, he managed to hit the button that quieted his phone. He could feel his father’s questioning gaze boring through the darkness, but drunk as he was, it seemed at least possible that his father might not make the connection between that buzzing and the worldly scandal of the phone in his pocket.

‘I’m going to head up,’ his father said, finally.

‘Sleep well,’ Isaac mumbled.

‘You too,’ his father said, moving slowly toward the staircase.

Isaac closed his eyes and braced himself against the dry sink while his father trudged up the steps and made his water. Finally, the door to his bedroom creaked, and Isaac crawled up the stairs and stumbled into the bathroom, so relieved to be ensconced in the warm, bright room that he didn’t care if his father wondered why he was taking a second shower that night. He washed

the lube off his skin, soaped his throbbing backside, rinsed his face until the pressure lightened. Finished, he deposited the cash he'd earned in his underwear drawer and climbed into bed. A flash of his father's scrutiny returned. A convicting pang rang through him. And then his weariness rose again, and he thought of nothing but how glad he was to be home, and he turned onto his side, drew the covers over his ears, and relaxed into his spreading fatigue and the soreness of his bottom.

### *Clyde*

Awful as it was, Isaac's awful drunkenness felt like the capstone to Clyde's troubles. The previous week, he'd tried to raise the matter of selling the livestock with his father. He'd begun by suggesting that he and his father take lunch together in the main farmhouse, at which point his father swung toward him and demanded to know what was wrong. 'I'd like us to talk a little about where we're at with the farm.' His father had eyed him sharply. 'You need to hold off on the April payment, don't you?' Clyde had hooked his thumbs in the loops of his overalls and turned toward the heifer barn. 'I do want to speak about the mortgage. But I also want us to talk through our plans moving forward.' 'Our *plans*?' 'Dad, we're just not profitable. We're going backwards.' His father shrugged tautly. 'The milk price will come back.'

'Maybe it will. But what if it don't? That's what I want us to think on. Sure, you can let a month slide, or maybe two, but I can't just keep pushing back my payments. We need to at least be *thinking* about the possibility that we won't be able to make a go of the cows in the long run. And if that's true, then we need to consider where that leaves us. Lois and I have been praying about it, and we both just feel like it don't make sense for us to keep doing this if we're not profitable.' His father shook his head. Their predicament wasn't registering. The words weren't

reaching him. ‘One thing we both just really feel the Lord telling us is that we should not make an idol of the cows.’ His father swung from the gate, his eyes bulging. ‘Have you been talking to the missionary, or something? Have you been talking to someone who don’t know the first thing about how the world actually runs?’

Clyde bristled. Spreading the good news was not wasteful or unreasonable. It was at the center of Christ’s call. ‘Dad, you know I love the farm,’ he said, calmly as he could. ‘You know I’m grateful for everything you and Mother have done for me and for Lois and Isaac. But you also know where we’re at with the milk price.’ ‘So you want to sell out and pour everything seven generations of this family have built down the drain?’ ‘Dad, you’re not listening,’ Clyde said, his frustration rising. ‘I’m not saying I *want* to do any of that. I’m saying we might *need* to. I’m saying we might not have a *choice*.’

‘And *I’m* saying you’re free to hold off on your payments as long as Mother and I have funds. Which is going to be quite a long while yet, whatever the milk price,’ his father said, drawing himself up. ‘And I appreciate that, Dad,’ said Clyde, calmly as he could. ‘It’s very generous. But I’m not sure it makes sense to do it that way if we’ll have to sell out anyway, in the end.’ ‘If that happens, so be it,’ his father said. ‘At least we’ll have given it our best shot.’

Clyde shook his head. This was not the way the conversation was supposed to be going. And he did not know what to say. He had no idea how to get his father to see reason. ‘Don’t you care for this place?’ his father said quietly. ‘Don’t you want to see it passed onto Isaac?’ ‘Dad, I *love* this farm, but Isaac don’t want to work on a farm that’s not profitable.’ Worked up as the old man was, Clyde didn’t dare raise the subject of Isaac’s interest in college. His father’s face darkened. ‘I already told you, Clyde. We’ve got the money. I’ve got what you’ve paid me and what I’ve put in my mutual funds. We’ll be able to ride things out for a long time yet. So you can

just save your defeatist talk, all right? Save it. And you only give me another mortgage payment when you're turning a profit.'

Before Clyde could object further or breathe a word of thanks, his father turned on his manure-packed work boot and stalked toward farmhouse. 'Dad?' His father just kept going. 'Dad?' Clyde called a second time. The old man shook his head and rounded the corner of the barn. Clyde swung to the Holsteins milling in the barnyard. But he couldn't look at the cows, not now, not while he was trying to be practical and forward looking. He wanted to preserve the farm. That was why he wanted to sell the herd. And it was not as though getting rid of the cows was as drastic as moving to Israel, or even Kentucky, where several of the township's Amish families had headed recently, in search of cheaper farms.

Driving home, Clyde had tried not to judge his father too harshly. The man was old. He was set in his ways. But in a few days, surely he'd relent. Instead, the old man's anger had lasted throughout the week.

'Can't you do something?' Clyde's mother said, when she came out to give them their lunches in the middle of corn planting. Clyde turned in disbelief. 'I thought that was your job.' She lifted her eyebrows. 'It's your farm. It's your tractor.' He nodded to the rig as it bounced along the edge of the field. 'Tell that to my banker over there.' His mother sighed and brushed a stray white hair under her prayer covering. 'He told you what all this is about, right?' said Clyde. 'Lois mentioned the plan to sell the cows.' 'And what do you think?' 'It makes sense to me,' his mother said, sighing again. 'So what do we do?' 'I think we just wait,' she said. 'And pray, of course.' 'Yes, indeed.' They were quiet for a minute. The rig slowed. The tines of the planter lifted and then dropped into the earth as Clyde's father resumed his spot. 'What does Isaac think about selling the cows?' Clyde's mother said. 'He likes the idea.'

Dust billowed from the soil as the planter turned it. The warm air washed over Clyde's face. He turned to his mother again. 'If I tell you something, would you maybe not tell Pop?' 'He is my husband,' she said tartly. 'But,' she added, 'I also know he's under a great deal of strain right now.' Clyde scuffed the grass. 'Isaac wants to go to college.' His mother whirled toward him. Her pale blue eyes were wide. 'But I want to wait to tell Dad until he's had some time to get over this shock.' 'Yes,' his mother said. Clyde waited for a word of affirmation. Instead, his mother turned. 'I should go check my wash.' She touched Clyde's arm. 'I'll pray for Isaac.'

Clyde nodded. He stared at the rig for another minute, and then started for the bank barn, sobered by his mother's sympathy. She hadn't meant she'd pray that worldly influences wouldn't sully Isaac's spirit. She'd meant that she'd pray for the boy *to change his mind*, to decide to stay in Kuernerville Township, to not head off to college. Because to her, the idea of Isaac going off to college was about as incomprehensible as his marrying a Catholic or moving to faraway Hong Kong.

And Clyde had believed then that she was being unreasonable – that college was what Isaac needed, what the Lord desired for his son. Friday evening, he'd waited up to speak to the boy about the election. He'd been thinking more about something the new vet had said when she'd visited the farm in January, that she was a supporter of this Bernie Sanders fellow. He'd wanted to know if Isaac had given that man's candidacy any thought. And then boy had stumbled in reeking of drink, and while they were talking, some gadget in his pocket had started to buzz.

For several minutes after Isaac went upstairs, Clyde stood in the kitchen, praying for the boy's faith and trying to shake the spreading sense of slowly-unfolding catastrophe. The phone wasn't so awful, or *whatever* gadget of Isaac's had made that buzzing. If Isaac ended up going to

college, he was liable to get one of those phones. But drink was another story. The boy's fall into drunkenness made Clyde wonder if he was fit for college at all. Maybe Isaac didn't have the strength to withstand the pull of worldliness. Maybe he wasn't sufficiently devoted to his faith.

It was Lois who suggested he seek Rick Denlinger's counsel. As she pointed out, after he'd woken her that evening, both of his boys were enrolled in college someplace, and they seemed to be doing all right. So Clyde decided to wait to raise the matter of drink with Isaac after he'd had the chance to visit the big farmer.

He'd hoped that Denlinger's perspective would ease his mind, but when Clyde asked his neighbor if his boys behaved all right in college, Denlinger coughed and stared out across his new barnyard.

'I mean, I like to think so,' the man said, finally

Clyde's stomach lurched.

'When they're in college, you try not to micromanage them too much. What I did was just call my boys every couple of weeks and check in on their grades at midterms. Ronnie never really needed much of a kick, but sometimes Reagan lets his assignments get away from him. But by catching that stuff early and reminding him that I'm not paying fifty grand a year to let him slack off, I've always been able to get Reagan to at least bring his grades up to Bs.'

'That's good to know,' said Clyde, so concerned that the shocking sum Denlinger cited scarcely registered. 'But I guess I'm less worried about Isaac's *grades* than I am about his other habits.'

'He seems like a pretty decent young fellow.'

'But drinking at seventeen?'

Denlinger grinned. 'Didn't you get up to some nonsense at his age?'

‘Not like that,’ Clyde said, coloring at the memory of the time he’d perched on the hood of one of his buddies’ pickups, snuck up behind an uncovered Amish buggy, and snatched the straw hat off of the young driver’s head. It was indecent conduct, there was no getting around that. But at least he’d been sober when he’d done it, which was more than he could say for his son the previous night.

‘I’d tell Isaac if you catch him doing that again, you’ll take away his pickup,’ said Denlinger.

‘That’s an idea.’

‘And as for the phone, well, that’s just sort of how folks communicate nowadays. I wouldn’t worry too much about that.’

‘That’s sort of what I told Lois.’

Clyde turned again to the gleaming new parlor, his flicker of reassurance blocking a memory of how *funny* Isaac had been dressed when he’d come in the previous night.

‘Do you mind if I ask you one more thing?’ he said.

‘Shoot.’

‘Would you say your boys stayed firm in their faiths when they went off to college?’

Denlinger was a quiet for a moment. Finally, he let out a slow breath. ‘I mean I guess what I’d say there is maybe there are different seasons of faith. Right now, Ronnie’s putting in seventy, eighty hours of week at the bank. I reckon once he gets married and has kids, he’ll come back to services. And Reagan?’ Denlinger shrugged. ‘With his art and everything, I guess I like to think he’s also worshipping in his own way.’

He *‘liked to think it.’* But what the actual state of his son’s faith?

‘What I tell myself,’ Denlinger continued, ‘is that each generation has to come to things on its own terms.’

‘But surely we can create a faithful structure?’ said Clyde. ‘Surely we can provide the kind of accountability that encourages folks to follow Christ’s call?’

‘I hear you, Clyde,’ said Denlinger. ‘But the way I look at it, if I don’t push ‘em too hard, one of these days my boys will figure out what they’re missing and come back to the church.’

‘A lot of people seem to think they can get along all right without it,’ said Clyde. ‘Look at all the folks mowing their lawns on Sunday mornings and doing shopping. Have you seen the flag they’re flying outside the liquor store? “No More Bull-you-know-what.” There’s nothing decent about it.’

Denlinger sighed. ‘There are still all kinds of good people, Clyde.’

‘I’m not saying there aren’t.’

‘Reagan has brought home all kinds of folks from his school up in New York. People from all around the world. People of all sorts of faith, or no faith. All sorts of lifestyles, even.’

Clyde had frowned at this. What did a ‘lifestyle’ even mean? The important thing was finding a ‘lifestyle’ that helped you honor the Lord’s commandments and honor the Lord’s teaching. A ‘lifestyle’ that kept you from embracing the world’s habits of covetousness and hatred for your neighbor. And he didn’t care one bit for his neighbor’s idea that having no faith was an acceptable option.

Weariness settled over Clyde on the drive home from the Denlinger farm. No sooner had he turned into the tenant house lane than Art Smucker pulled in behind him, and, of course, Art was all worked up.



‘Have you heard what Denlinger’s doing?’ he demanded, meeting Clyde at the window of his pickup.

‘As a matter of fact, I just came from there, and I didn’t think anything looked too off.’

Art Smucker spat. ‘He’s putting air-conditioning in his new barn.’

It seemed improbable, but there had been at least ten work vans from a local electric and HVAC company parked by the doors by the new parlor.

‘Denny Diffenderfer told me Denlinger’s planning on housing his Mexicans right there in the parlor with the livestock so all they have to do is roll out of bed and start working.’

Clyde shook his head. ‘Denny Diffenderfer just likes to talk. Denlinger wouldn’t do that. It don’t sound up to code, for one thing, and you know what Denlinger says, he does everything by the book on his farm.’

‘Sure, that’s what he *says*. That’s what every big business *says*, Clyde. They *say* they’re playing by the rules, but there’s no enforcement. There’s no accountability. So the big operators get to feeling like they can just hire whoever they want, so long as they’re cheap. And the sp\*cs...’

‘Brother, I won’t have that word spoken on my property.’

‘Fine, the *Mexicans*, they know that if they can get across the border and forge a couple documents, they’re home free. Nobody’s going to take a hard look at their papers. It’s all just, “Do you have a social security number? Are you authorized to work here?” And if they make up some number, and say “*Si, senor,*” they’re all set. And I know Denlinger’s pulling all sorts of illegal bullshit.’

‘Neighbor.’ Clyde’s voice shook with the effort at calm. ‘I don’t want to have to ask you about your language again.’

‘Denlinger’s pulling some *B.S.*, then. He’s pulling all sorts of garbage. Is that better?’

Clyde frowned. It wasn’t, but he didn’t feel like arguing with Art Smucker.

‘And we’re just ignoring what he’s doing, Clyde. We’re just sitting here. Denny said Denlinger’s planning on hiring twenty more *Mexicans* to work in his new parlor. This is how it is on every single big farm. They can’t outsource milk production like they can chocolate or steel, so they’re bringing the cheap labor in here and raking in the profits. *And nobody’s doing anything.* That’s what I can’t understand. Fellows like you are all just like, “that’s just farming. That’s just the market.” And so we just keep on like we always have. And meanwhile, these big farms are killing us, Clyde. They’re killing us, and we’re not doing anything.’

‘I’m selling my cows, Art,’ Clyde said, interrupting the man. ‘I haven’t told anybody yet, but that’s the plan.’

For the first time Clyde could remember, his neighbor looked genuinely surprised.

‘*You’re selling?*’

Clyde nodded firmly. ‘This summer.’

‘But what are you going to do?’

‘I haven’t decided yet. I’m kicking around a couple ideas.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Art. ‘I can’t imagine this farm without Holsteins.’

‘I might buy a few steers. We’ll see.’

‘There’s no money in beef cattle here, you know that.’

Clyde chuckled. ‘It can’t be any worse than dairying.’

*And, Clyde wanted dearly to add, you would be a whole lot farther along if you planted your crops on time instead of running around trying to stir up trouble about your neighbors. But*

that would be like pouring gasoline on Art's grievances. So instead of saying that, Clyde simply told Art that he needed to get going.

'I've been having some trouble with my boy,' he explained – and regretted the elaboration as Art Smucker's eyes lit up.

'What kind of trouble?'

Clyde sighed. 'He's been running around behind my back. Getting into trouble, getting into *drink*.'

'How old is he?'

'Seventeen. He'll be eighteen next month.'

Art Smucker shrugged. 'That's normal, Clyde. That just means he's becoming a man. At his age, I was getting into all sorts of stuff. Drinking. Drag racing down in Cecil. Getting lucky.'

*Yes, indeed,* thought Clyde. *And that sort of behavior is exactly what I'm trying to protect my son from.*

'If you want my advice, don't come down too hard on him. My pappy was always riding my case, telling me I wasn't worth jack shit, and that just made me want to have more fun.'

'I am a little afraid of that kind of thing,' said Clyde, frowning at the necessity of agreeing with Art Smucker as much as at the problem of his son's conduct. 'The boy has a phone, and I'm thinking I might be able to let that slide. But I can't handle the idea of drink. Not when it encourages so much unrighteous behavior.'

'You mean *fun*?'' said Art. 'You mean everything that's worth living for?'

*Brother,* thought Clyde, *there are things worth living for that go so far beyond whatever dim pleasures you've indulged.* But once again, he didn't say it. He just shrugged and glanced toward the house. 'I really do need to talk to my wife.'

‘All right,’ said Art Smucker. ‘But my advice is, let your boy sow his oats if you don’t want him going all wild on you,’

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ said Clyde, staring at the house. He kept staring until Smucker had stepped away from his window and climbed into his truck.

*Bless him, Lord,* Clyde prayed. Still, his frustration with his neighbor persisted, and joined with his sorrow at his son’s antics. What was wrong with people? Why couldn’t they just try and live peaceably? Why did they always have to succumb to drink and other sorts of crass behavior? But, of course, he knew. It all when back to the Garden. Still, it was one thing for someone like Art Smucker or even Rick Denlinger’s sons to drink and get up to all kinds of worldly nonsense, and entirely another for it be *his* son.

Clyde waited to raise the matter of Isaac’s conduct until after the milking that evening. When they climbed into the pickup, he put his hand on the shift knob and briefly on Isaac’s knee.

‘Son? I’d like us to speak for a minute about last night.’

‘What’s wrong?’ The boy’s tone sounded too unconcerned, too eager.

‘There was drink on your breath when you came in.’

Isaac shook his head, but his cheeks flushed tellingly.

‘Don’t try to deny it. I know what drink smells like. Where did you get that? Were all the other fellows into it with you?’

Isaac sniffled. His lip shook. Tears sprung to his eyes. Clyde forced himself to keep scowling.

‘It was Mark Beiler’s,’ said Isaac. ‘Somebody threw a pack of beer into his field. He found it when he was mowing the road banks. We just had a beer, just to taste it. And believe

me, I didn't like it. If you want to know the truth, Dad, it made me half-sick. I found out today that beer is full of gluten.'

'I see,' said Clyde, frowning. It seemed plausible enough. He'd found more than his share of half-filled packs of beer along the road. And beer certainly did contain wheat.

'I'll never drink again,' said Isaac. 'Believe me. I hated that beer. I thought it was disgusting.'

'What about the other fellows?'

'I don't think they really cared for it, either.'

'I should speak about this with the other fathers.'

Panic spread across Isaac's face. 'No, Dad. Please don't. If Mark finds out I told on him, he'll never talk to me again.'

Clyde sighed. He didn't like the idea of ignoring the other boys' conduct, but probably his focus had to be on his own son. He started the pickup and aimed it toward the tenant house, letting Isaac squirm for a little, hoping that would have some effect. When he turned down the lane, he put the truck in park, switched off the engine, and eyed Isaac somberly.

'Very well. I won't go to the other fathers. But if I catch you drinking like that again, I'm going to take away your truck. I'm already very concerned about what this lapse says about how you'll do in college.'

'Dad, please don't worry about that. This was a one-time thing. I messed up, and I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

*Let that be true*, thought Clyde. 'And as for that other thing. The buzzing in your pocket. Was that one of those phones?'

Isaac got very still.

‘If it was, so be it. I’m not going to fight you about a phone so long as you promise me you’re not doing anything with it that wouldn’t please the Lord.’

‘No, I’m certainly not,’ Isaac said quickly. ‘I just use it to talk with some of my friends and keep up with the news.’

‘So the other fellows have ‘em too?’

‘Some. Not all. But Dad, *please* don’t say anything about this either, or they’ll kill me.’

It was a foolish expression, but Clyde let it slide. ‘I want to speak of one more matter before we go in for supper. The light wasn’t the best last night, but it seemed to me that you were dressed sort of funny.’

‘Oh, that? That was just the costume I wore to the bowling alley.’

‘*A costume to the bowling alley?*’

‘There was a prize for the person who could do the best impression of Justin Bieber. He’s this singer.’

Clyde frowned. Was this one of those worldly musicians that sang along to *drums*?

‘Not that I listen to his music. I’ve just read about him in the news...paper, and I thought I could dress up like that. And besides, who can turn down a chance at prize money?’

‘So you won, then?’

‘I came in third.’

Clyde shook his head. ‘I don’t like the idea of you getting yourself up like some indecent singer. Your mother don’t neither.’

‘I know,’ Isaac said.

Clyde dearly hoped that the eagerness in his eyes signified true contrition, and not merely relief.

‘It was a mistake. I see that, Dad. I promise you that won’t happen again, either.’

‘Even when you go off to college?’

‘Even in college.’

‘I hope that’s right,’ said Clyde.

‘It is. It will be. I promise.’

‘You don’t have to promise so much,’ Clyde said heavily. ‘Just let your yea be yea and your nay be nay and that will be enough.’

‘Okay, Dad. I understand’

Clyde nodded. ‘All right,’ he said, and climbed out of the pickup. He’d done what he could for now. Now the thing to do was to go see what was for supper.

At the table that night, Clyde stayed somber. He didn’t want Isaac to think he was in the clear just because they’d had one talk. Now and then, through the meal, he eyed the boy. He sat straight in his chair. He ate with a good appetite. He seemed to be over the *short-term* ill effects of the drink. So, hopefully, he’d be free of the long-term effects, too. Hopefully, he really had repented.

But what the incident showed is that if Isaac really did go off to some worldly college, they’d have to devise some sort of program for holding him accountable. Maybe the whole family could start studying Scripture together, and maybe they could continue these Bible studies over the phone when Isaac was in college. And surely any *proper* school – the sort of school that didn’t cost *fifty thousand dollars* a year – would have all sorts of Biblical classes and programs that Isaac could join. Maybe, at one of those programs, he’d find a nice girl.

*Maybe*, Clyde thought, and the prospect lifted the worst of the heaviness that still weighed on his heart.

Lois's relief at Isaac's explanation offered Clyde a further comfort.

'He won't drink it if he doesn't think it's good for him, Clyde,' she whispered, while they did the dishes together. 'You can be sure of that. He's very conscientious. He doesn't touch any food that he thinks has wheat.'

'That's true,' said Clyde.

But faithful though he tried to feel, trusting though he tried to be, something about what his son told him still didn't sit quite right.

*Isaac*

Waiting for his alarm, the morning after his rendezvous with 'Bobby,' despair had seized Isaac. Nothing about the evening had gone properly. He was not supposed to have poisoned himself with beer. His father was not supposed to have caught him. He was supposed to feel confident and complete. Instead, he felt as shaky and unstable as he had through all his years of gluten trouble.

*Maybe if we do it again, I'll feel better,* he told himself as he lay in bed, waiting for the bleat of his alarm. But each time Isaac read one of the messages Bobby had sent him begging for another meeting, his face tightened and heated, just as it had under the influence of alcohol.

*We'll see,* he typed.

At least Bobby hadn't seemed to find him repulsive. He'd roamed his hands all over his body. He'd moaned with what certainly sounded like pleasure. Why, then, did Isaac still feel so disgusting?

His alarm blared and he heaved himself out bed, hurried downstairs. When he entered the mudroom, his father didn't look up. He just kept staring at his boots, sorrow rolling from



shoulders. The air of judgement simultaneously enraged Isaac and amplified the shame he felt at what he'd done.

*It was just beer*, Isaac wanted to scream, on the ride to the main farm. But, of course, it wasn't. It was also his phone, and, whether his father knew it or not, it was also what he'd done with Bobby. He'd given himself to another man. He'd allowed himself to be taken – and not by someone beautiful, not by someone he trusted, but by sour-smelling stranger who'd given him money.

*It was not wrong*, Isaac insisted, all through the milking. Still, shame kept leaking through him. Free as he tried to insist he was from rote congregational thinking, his body still sounded its inner sirens of warning, trained as it was to try and suppress any sign of non-conformity.

At the breakfast table, his mother gazed at him with the same look of barely concealed grief that his father had trained upon him. She knew about the beer, and she was wounded. Where the beer was concerned, he could admit that he'd been wrong. But he was not wrong about what he'd done with Bobby, just about how he'd done it.

He stared at his bowl of baked oatmeal. How would it feel to do it again without being addled by beer? All day, he entertained this question. How would it feel to do it again without beer with someone he actually desired? Whenever he touched the sore place in his bottom, he thought of Luke Sauder, and he could *almost* imagine kneeling in front of Luke like Bobby had knelt in front of him. He could *almost* imagine opening himself to Luke without shame. But each time he indulged that fantasy, he reminded himself that Luke, plainly, didn't like him.

During lunch, Isaac's parents' sorrow drilled into him. When the meal was finished, he slunk upstairs and watched a video and thumbed through a few profiles on *Slider*. At some point

he napped, and dreamed that Bobby was inside him, again, and part of felt almost unbearably violated, and part of him didn't want it to stop.

On the ride to the milking parlor that afternoon, his father didn't speak. All through the milking, his mournful disapproval hovered like a haze in the parlor. Finally, on the ride home, he turned and demanded to know why on earth Isaac had come home drunk. Isaac had been planning on saying that it was an accident, that he hadn't known what he was drinking. But in answering, he offered up an even more elaborate set of falsehoods. He insisted that Mark Beiler had found the beers by the side of the road, that he'd been dressed up as part of some sort of contest at the bowling alley, and that some of the other fellows had phones, too.

This last claim was not a lie. After the evening service, several weeks earlier, Mark Beiler had flashed his new smartphone and then forced everyone to watch a video of some sort of some blonde country music singer with an enormous bosom. Halfway through the video, Isaac had stolen a glimpse of Luke Sauder. He was watching the video with a bemused look on his face, his hands jammed in his pockets. Isaac had turned back to the video before Luke could catch him watching.

To Isaac's relief, his father seemed to believe his excuses. Of course, that did not stop him from going on about the importance of accountability or instituting weekly family Bible studies. During those ordeals, Isaac tried to retreat to glimpses of men he desired, but he couldn't let his mind wander too far, for fear that his father would ask him to read Scripture aloud, or pray, which Isaac did, even as impatience filled him at all the strictures of the congregation's theology.

Evenings when he wasn't enduring family Bible studies, Isaac began braving the traffic on the highway and driving to Lancaster city, where he'd change into his V-neck tee shirt and

skinny jeans and walk along the quad at Franklin & Marshall, the city's handsome red-brick college. Strolling the campus, he smiled at all the strapping, sweatpants-and-flip-flop-clad fellows, and several of them smiled back, and so he stood taller and walked more easily, savoring his elation at how easily he seemed to fit in on the campus. On other nights, he sampled the city's coffee shops, quickly deciding that the cozy, brick-walled cafe on Duke Street was superior to the sprawling cafe on Prince, especially since the latter was patronized by a surprising number of plain Mennonites and Amish.

In the Duke Street cafe, he would carry a cappuccino to his favorite table and imagine that he was savoring the beverage opposite a man who was worthy of him – someone who wasn't hairy and old and heavy, or who wasn't content to live his life on a dairy farm. Someone who was studying economics – or perhaps Heraclitus – at Stanford or an Ivy League college. Someone who had money. Someone who could give him the sort of cosseted life that enabled the contemplation of every form of earthly sublimity – art, books, lissome and limber bodies. And still, Isaac kept parrying Bobby's requests for another tryst, and began exchanging pictures with some men in Lancaster city who were much closer to his standard of comeliness.

On those nights, the closed-off world of Kuernerville Township seemed thousands of miles away, yet it was only a twenty-minute trip back to the farm – fifteen, if he hit all the lights right. Walking to his pickup along the streets of Lancaster city, Isaac could scarcely believe that he would retire to bed in the tenant house and wake up, help with a 4:30 milking, and then drive to the schoolhouse to try to focus on *math problems*. But that was what he had to do if he wanted to get into a school like Stanford. That was what he had to do if he wanted to achieve the life he was beginning to believe he might be worthy of, repulsive as he still felt sometimes.

And then one night, after a family Bible study, he was swiping through the profiles on *Slider* when the photograph of an ancient orange Allis-Chalmers stopped him. He'd only seen a tractor like that in two places: in the rows of antique farm equipment at the township fair, and in the photograph hanging on Luke Sauder's bedroom wall. It was, Luke had explained, an image of the tractor he was in the process of restoring.

Isaac clicked on the profile. It was not a professional photograph. The edge of a barn appeared in the corner of the image – a barn with green trim and gray aluminum siding, just like the Sauder barn. And profile name, *FarmerBoy18*, certainly seemed like the sort of name that Luke might choose. According to his profile, *FarmerBoy18* was just there for 'conversation.'

*Let it be Luke*, Isaac breathed, all his judgement vanishing, all the bitterness he felt toward Luke's reticence. With a pounding pulse, he opened the messenger tab and sent *FarmerBoy18* a simple *Hi*.

He waited. One minute passed. Two minutes. Just when he was about to switch to a different profile, three dots appeared on the screen, signaling that the other user was typing.

*Howdy*

*How are u doing this evening?*

*Not bad*

Isaac blinked. *Ru up to anything fun?*

*Not really. I just came in from checking on a cow that's close to calving*

Isaac collapsed onto the bed and bit back a squeal, imagining Luke in his charming bedroom three miles across the township, typing away on his phone.

*What about you? FarmerBoy18 – Luke – typed.*

Isaac rolled onto his side. *Just checking out hot dudes, lol.*

*I guess that is sort of what people do on this thing.*

Isaac drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes, scarcely able to believe what he was about to do.

*I'll send u a pic if u send me one,* he typed.

He waited. The three dots appeared and then vanished.

*U don't even have to send me one now. I'll just send u one. And u can send me one whenever ur ready?*

Again, he waited. When no reply appeared, he clicked on the camera button and scrolled through his store of photos. He chose a modest shot that presented his chest and abs in the best possible light and added it to the chat. Waiting for a response, tried to imagine the photograph appearing on Luke's phone and lifting him the way he'd been lifted by glimpses of Luke all his life. Stirred by that photo, Luke would snap one of himself and send it to Isaac, and from these exchanges, maybe they'd move to videos, or maybe they'd simply meet up. But when he turned back to his phone to see what Luke had sent him, *FarmerBoy18* had signed off.

Isaac hammered his mattress. He'd pushed too hard. He'd tried to move too quickly. But hopefully, Luke would return in time. If it truly was Luke. If Isaac wasn't just deluding himself, as he always had where Luke was concerned. But those barns had to have been the Sauders'. And if Luke *was* on the app, well, that was proof that Isaac had not been wrong about Luke's inclinations.

In the days after that first exchange, Isaac checked the hookup app obsessively. Twice, he spotted *FarmerBoy18* online, but each time he messaged him, the other fellow just said, *Sorry, I've got to run.* It sounded exactly like Luke. When most fellows online didn't want to talk, they simply refused to acknowledge you. But since Luke's messages weren't outright rejections, Isaac

forced himself not to respond haughtily. He gritted his teeth and said that it was no problem, that he was also quite busy, which he was, between his math homework, his usual chores, and his father's twice-weekly Bible studies.

At the meetinghouse Wednesday evening, Isaac scrutinized Luke as closely as he dared for any sign of a phone or any other worldly accoutrements. He couldn't spot anything definitive. Luke just looked like he always did – lean and withdrawn. As soon as the service was finished, Isaac rushed out to his truck and checked his phone, which he'd stored in the glovebox of his pickup. Just as he expected, *FarmerBoy18* was not online.

*Hey, just wanted to see how ur week is going. I hope it's going great.*

How magnanimous he felt, typing those words. How measured and composed. Messaging *FarmerBoy18* on the app, he felt like a different person, like the person he would be when he was free of the farm and enrolled in a handsome college. He felt calmer, freer, unaffected by all the frustrations of his past with Luke, undefined by his past failings. And now, for once, he was in control of their dealings. Luke – it *had* to be Luke – was not burdened by the knowledge of their history of awkwardness. All he knew was the fact of Isaac's fitness, which was undeniable now that it was expressed online.

So where was Luke's message? The message *he'd* sent had been restrained and affirming. Why hadn't Luke responded?

Perhaps he was busy. Perhaps he was nervous. Or perhaps he'd been snagged by someone else on *Slider*.

*Please don't let that be true*, Isaac prayed, to the gods of the internet, to whomever. He checked his phone once more before turning in at 10:30. There was still no response. But when he inspected his notifications after his chores the next morning, he had a new message. It was

probably just from *EaglesDaddy73* or one of his other admirers. He opened the app gingerly, and there, at last, was his dreamed-of response.

*Hey, sorry I've been out of touch. I've had a lot on my mind. I'm still pretty new to this whole thing. I'm not used to sending pictures of myself to strangers. I'm not really used to talking about myself either lol. But I guess u have to start somewhere right? So this is me trying. Here are some things about me. I'm a dairy farmer. I like restoring tractors with my free time. That one on my profile is one I restored. I'm 18 and I have four older sisters and an older brother.*

Isaac squealed. It all matched up with Luke.

*What about u? Luke's message continued. You're eighteen, too, right? Where do u live? I'm guessing ur fairly close by if the app is showing me your profile? That picture u sent is really nice. U must work out a lot? U can send me another one if you want, and maybe I'll try taking one of me. Okay, hope to hear from u again one of these days, but I'll understand if u don't feel like writing back after I've been so squirrely.*

Isaac leaned against his headboard and re-read the message, trying to picture Luke in his bedroom not three miles away. Now, at last, they were communicating openly, uninhibited by their fear of being spotted by someone from the congregation, or by their internalization of the strictures of plain Mennonite theology. They were simply being themselves. Isaac took off his shirt, edged down his trousers and snapped a fresh photo of himself, keeping the image anonymous and barely modest, and fired off the picture to Luke.

*How about this, Isaac typed. U send me a picture and then I'll tell u about myself?*

The three dots appeared and stopped. And then the picture materialized. The image was a matching shirtless shot, capturing Luke from the base of his neck to edges of his hips. His arms were tanned. His chest was pale and flecked with a few of the same golden hairs than ran down

his belly. The muscles bulged on his chest and arms. In spite of all of Isaac's crunches and pushups, Luke was still far stronger.

*Wow, Isaac typed. Ur really hot.*

*Like I said, u r too. So, where are u at? Ru in Lancaster County?*

What if he told the truth? What if he told Luke that actually, the figure he'd admired in that photograph belonged to someone who was just three short miles across the township, someone he already knew? But if he did that, wasn't it likely that Luke would withdraw again? Besides, now that he understood himself, he wasn't the plain, anxious Isaac Bauman that Luke had so often withdrawn from.

*I'm a student at Franklin & Marshall College, Isaac typed. It wasn't Stanford, but it was the closest local approximation. I'm not sure if uve heard of it. It's in Lancaster city.*

*I think I know where u mean.*

*I'm from Philadelphia. My parents are antique dealers. We live in an apartment on – Isaac strained to remember a street from his scrutiny of the maps of the city – Walnut Street. I'm studying economics. When I graduate, I want to move to California and work for a technology company.*

*That's a long way from here. I bet the money's good out there tho. Better than dairying*  
*What year are u in college?*

*This is my first year.*

*Do u like your classes and stuff?*

*Mostly. Some are kind of boring. What about u? Do u ever think of going to college?*

*Nope. My school only goes through eleventh grade so I'd have to go back and do another year something. And I'm a farmer. I don't really need college.*



*I think some farmers go to college tho don't they?* The county extension agent had some sort of degree from Penn State.

*Probably they do. But like I said, that's not for me. What I've been doing with my free time is scouting around for other farm jobs.*

Isaac sat up. *Really?*

*The milk price is about as bad as it's ever been.*

*But wouldn't ur parents miss u?* Isaac typed, before he could stop himself. He froze, terrified that he'd given himself away. But Luke didn't seem to notice.

*I'm pretty sure my parents r going to lose their farm, so I'm not really that worried about what they think about it. I need to find a job that pays the bills.*

*It's good ur being ambitious,* Isaac typed, thinking of Milton Friedman's emphasis on innovation, and channeling Rick Denlinger's air of superiority.

*Lol. I guess.*

Isaac was tempted to launch into a further disquisition on the virtues of the market. He caught himself just before he was ready to type. It was better to let Luke speak, better to let him make the next move. Waiting, he studied the photograph of Luke's pale, neatly muscled stomach.

*Have u been on this site for long?* Luke typed finally.

*A few months.*

*This might seem like a weird question, but have u met up with any guys?*

*Just a few,* Isaac lied, shrugging off the faint pang that still struck every time he recalled what he'd done with Bobby.

*And it was okay? They didn't try to rob u or anything?*

*No. It was all very safe.*

*Good. I've always wondered about that.*

*Most of the people who use this site are nice.*

*That makes sense.*

Again, Isaac switched to Luke's photo. He wanted to press his lips to each one of those muscles.

*Do u mind if I ask u one more thing?*

*U can ask me anything.*

*U said u grew up in Philly, right?*

*Uh huh.*

*Did u grow up thinking this kind of thing was wrong?*

*This kind of thing?*

*Talking to other guys. Liking other guys and stuff.*

Isaac hesitated, his air of confidence faltering. *My parents are pretty tolerant. They always told me they didn't care who I liked.*

*Did u ever try dating a girl?*

Isaac froze. *Once, back in high school. It didn't go very well. What about u?*

*Nope. I could never work up the courage. I know which girls are pretty. I'm know which ones I'm supposed to like. But as far as girls go I guess I always just like them more with their clothes on.*

*I know what u mean.*

*That's nice to hear. I don't really have anyone to talk about with this stuff. Sometimes, I just get so lost in my head. Like I know I like guys but I know I'm not supposed to. I sometimes think "what's wrong with u? Why don't u just find a nice girl and settle down?" It would make everything so much easier. But I don't want to do that. I don't want to settle. Do u know what I mean?*

*Being gay is nothing to be ashamed of,* Isaac typed, trembling as he used the forbidden word. It seemed to blink at him on the screen.

*U should tell that to the pastor of my church.*

*Lol. A pang went through Isaac at the thought of Pastor Wenger's air of ponderous self-importance. Do u think there's anyone else at your church who might be gay?*

Isaac's pulse pounded while he waited for Luke to respond.

*I think there's at least one guy. I don't know for sure tho. He's pretty moody. I've always found him pretty hard to read.*

*Moody?* Isaac thought, indignant. Perhaps he had been, addled as he'd been by wheat, but even if Luke's moods were always mild-seeming, it was not as though they were easy to interpret. Hadn't he been ignoring Isaac *for the last two months?*

But the Isaac of the app was not defensive. He did not constantly try to initiate and win arguments. And even if he'd wanted to explain his old peculiarities, or point out Luke's apparent mixed-messages, he couldn't do so without blowing his cover. So he contented himself with a simple, sympathetic: *That stinks.*

*Anyhow, enough about that guy.*

Isaac let out a slow breath to check his temper.

*Ru seeing anyone?* Luke continued.

*Nope. I'm single as can be. That's why I'm here ;-)*

*:-) I'm glad to hear that*

Isaac lifted one hand in triumph.

*Listen, I should probably go soon. But I hope we can chat again like this*

*Absolutely.*

*Maybe next time u can send me another picture. Or maybe we could even chat by video?*

*We'll have to see,* Isaac typed, blanching at the idea of video.

*Whatever works best for u.*

*That sounds good,* Isaac typed, relieved that his new persona had not bungled the set of exchanges.

For several minutes, after Luke signed off, he lay on his bed, admiring the photograph of Luke's abs. The intimacies they'd exchanged were so thrilling they mostly cancelled out the sting of Luke's offhand insult. He was *not* moody, not anymore. He was on the right trajectory. He was moving toward college, toward prosperity, toward a seaside villa of his own, or a least a very nice apartment.

And maybe Luke would share it with him. Luke was giving up dairying, after all. Maybe he could also be persuaded to give up farming. Maybe they could lounge together on Stanford's emerald quad. Luke wouldn't even have to be a student. He could find a job as a handyman or landscaper. But in order for Luke to consider leaving the region, he'd have to come to understand the charms of a life free from hard labor – the life of modernity, the life of the metropolis, the sort of life that enabled you to spend your time not tending livestock or hustling to plant your crops, but contemplating *ideas*, reading novels, and reveling in the comeliness of other people.

*What if I showed him?* Isaac thought, in the milking parlor, the next morning.

All day in the schoolhouse, he weighed the idea of inviting Luke to meet him in Lancaster city. Such a rendezvous had risks, of course. Luke might not like coffee shops. He might be annoyed by having to pay for parking. But the more Isaac envisioned the scene of their meetup, the more certain he felt that Luke would find him irresistible when he beheld him in his deep V-neck tee shirt and skinny jeans. They would sip their cappuccinos together, gazing steadily into each other's eyes, and when they were finished, they'd rush out to the dark alley and throw themselves into each other's arms. And all the confusion that had ever existed between them would melt away. All the crossed signals and bodily fears, all the long-internalized cruel theology, all the mistaken assumptions, all the fear of being caught. They would close their eyes and let their bodies finally do what they wanted, pressing themselves together, lips to lips, tongue to tongue, belly to belly, cock to cock.

There would be no more secrets, no more veiled glances or personas. There would simply be their fondness for each other and the force of their desire. And when they finished in the alley, or in Isaac's pickup, or wherever they came together, they'd lounge in each other's arms and recount all the times they'd almost touched. Isaac would explain his self-consciousness, his self-loathing, his illness. He would apologize again, and Luke would forgive him and apologize for failing to fully accept Isaac's attempt at making amends in the Grange hall. They would laugh at their mutual confusion, their shared fears, fears that were so pitifully needless, given their years-long attraction to each other. And when they were finally finished recounting all their pratfalls and mistakes, they'd drive back to Kuernerville Township, Luke's truck close behind his, his headlights shining in his mirrors. He'd follow Isaac to the cornfield a half-mile from the tenant house, and they'd park and come together again in the darkness, under the stars. And when they were finished, Isaac would tell Luke to wait, and he'd climb into his pickup and race home, and

tiptoe up the stairs, and retrieve his favorite novel from its spot under his pillow. He'd rush back downstairs – unconcerned, somehow, about waking his parents – and he'd hurry to Luke and press the book upon him.

'You have to read this,' he'd say. 'This is basically our entire story.'

'*Call Me by Your Name*,' Luke would say, pronouncing the title slowly and eying the bowed head of the chiseled man on the cover.

'It's so good,' Isaac would add. 'It's about these two guys in Italy who fall in love but can't bear to admit it to each other for the longest time. And then they finally do, and have the most amazing, romantic experience.'

'Huh,' Luke would say. But his eyes would sparkle.

There would be no need to mention how little time Elio and Oliver had together once they'd finally acted on their desire. That would have no bearing on the story Isaac and Luke were finally embarking upon.

'Isaac,' he'd whisper to Luke, some night later that spring. 'Luke,' Luke would whisper back, while moving inside of him. And in Luke's arms, his sense of worthiness would be unlocked, and he would finally feel as perfect and complete as Elio and Oliver.

Which was not to say that there would be no pangs of fear or self-consciousness, or even the sort of shame that Isaac had derided as inimical to desire the first time he'd read about it in the novel. Shame might still rear its head, if only initially. Discomfort, even pain, like during his first time with Bobby. But washing over and snuffing out every flicker of uncertainty would be the steady, suffusing force of their shared desire and the awareness of how perfectly matched they had been, all this time.

*Clyde*

Tuesday afternoon, Clyde's father had a dentist appointment, so Clyde set to work, mucking out the free stalls. As the rhythm of the job took hold, his spirits lightened. Yes, the milk price was poor. Yes, his father was still hard-hearted, but at least Isaac seemed to be back on the right track. He'd been paying attention during the family Bible studies. He'd been saying all sorts of sharp things about sacrifice. And they could continue their discussions of Scripture even when Isaac went off to college, where hopefully he'd learn even more practical stuff. And when he was finished, maybe he'd return to Kuernerville Township, or at least Lancaster County, and find some way to serve his neighbors and remind them of the power of Christ's love.

Clyde paused and wiped his face. Somebody needed to do it. Somebody needed to make a case for charity that people might actually believe. Two Sundays ago, after the services, Elvin Beiler had started in again on the importance of a border wall. Clyde had folded his arms. 'Do you think Christ would build a wall?' he'd said quietly. Elvin Beiler's face had darkened. 'He would if that's what the government decided. "Render to Caesar." I'm sure you know that verse.'

But when Clyde had tried to say that as voters in a democracy, they were *part* of the government and therefore fully able to speak out against unchristian conduct, Elvin's eyes had hardened further. 'So we're just to let immigrants swarm in here and build up the big farms and run us all out of business and *do nothing?*' Elvin was a member of the church, yet he sounded like no one so much as Art Smucker. 'The way I see it, we're to try and choose the most Christ-like candidates and trust the rest to the Lord,' said Clyde.

Elvin Beiler snorted. Ben Zimmerman folded his arms. 'I hear you about supporting decent candidates, Clyde, but where do we find them? If that's our standard, I reckon maybe we

have to do like our parents and not vote. But don't you think that's just going to give the country over to liberals who don't care a bit about God's law?'

Clyde was ready for this question. He'd been considering it prayerfully. 'Sometimes, I do think it's right not to vote. As far as this whole primary thing goes, well, I like a lot of what I hear from Ted Cruz. And this Bernie Sanders fellow is interesting, too. I hear he cares a lot about the dairy farmer.' Elvin Beiler shook his head. 'Bernie Sanders wants to jack up taxes till we *bleed*.' 'You heard the joke, didn't you, Clyde?' said Ben Zimmerman. Clyde frowned. 'I'm not sure if I did.' 'Why is it that Bernie Sanders wants the vote of apple growers?' 'Why?' said Clyde, playing along. 'Because to pay for all the stuff he wants to do, he's going to have to make money grow on trees.'

The joke wasn't particularly funny, but Elvin Beiler and Barry Keener guffawed 'I don't know that much about Sanders,' said Clyde. 'I'm just saying, I want to support the type of candidates who are trying to *help* people, including farmers, instead of running down the least of these. What do you think Jesus would have done if he'd run into some refugees and immigrants?'

Elvin Beiler's laugh shifted into a strangled cough. When he lifted his head, he stared at Clyde like he was a stranger. Ben Zimmerman scuffed the carpet as though he were embarrassed by everything Clyde had said. 'Think about what the Lord wants for this country,' Clyde had said, that Sunday. '*Pray* about it. I'll see you on Wednesday,' he said, turning and looking around wildly for Lois.

But at services Wednesday, the first thing Elvin Beiler asked Clyde was whether he'd planted any apple trees for Bernie Sanders yet. He made the same joke the following Sunday. Each time, Clyde just chuckled and shook his head. But on the drive home from church, he



couldn't help but wonder if Elvin Beiler even believed in the Lord in his heart. Or if his 'faith' was just a habit, like trimming his lawn every fine Saturday afternoon and going hunting every fall?

The whole congregation wasn't that way, he knew. But plenty of members did seem awfully attached to their farms and small businesses, awfully fearful and angry at the prospect of changing *any* part of their lives. And it wasn't as though he was so different. He had his earthly attachments, just like anybody else. He wanted to sell the herd he cherished to save the farm he loved. But he was at least trying to limit his earthly fixations. He was at least trying not to let them push him toward a spirit of fear, a spirit of hatred for others. It wasn't easy, especially when the 'others' started to feel less like the refugees coming in from far off Guatemala, or wherever, than fellows he'd known all his life, his buddies, and even his old father, who still wasn't speaking to him, out of his own attachment to Holsteins.

In the stable, Clyde mucked furiously, filling the wheelbarrow, emptying it into the hole in the corner of the barnyard, blinking every time he stepped out from the dim and dusty stable into the soft spring sun. Everyone was so stuck on *stuff*, so insistent on having things exactly as they liked, whatever anyone else thought. There was that awful flag in front of the liquor store that read: 'Trump: No More Bullshit,' in complete indifference to the crassness of that word. On the other side of the village, someone had erected a billboard that read 'Amish for Trump,' never mind that there had never been a candidate in Clyde's memory who was less plain or forgiving. The previous week, Art Smucker had erected a massive sign by his mailbox, as big as a billboard, and as brightly painted. In giant letters, the sign said, simply TRUMP.

Of course, old Artie would go in for such an ugly sign. But, Clyde told himself, the first time he saw it, maybe Artie's advertising would have an upside: if folks in the township saw a

farmer as sheisty as Art Smucker broadcasting his support for Donald Trump, maybe they'd think twice about backing the candidate and, instead, support one of the decent Republicans left in the race. That was the idea. But Clyde saw no evidence that it was working. Instead, there just seemed to be more anger, more stubbornness, more refusal to try and work with your neighbor, to compromise.

The world was fallen. But Clyde had always believed, deep down, that Kuernerville Township was different, that the congregation was different, that members believed what they said about sacrifice and Christ-like love. But maybe the congregation was just the world patterned over with buttoned-down shirts and prayer coverings. Of course, it was. All have sinned, all have fallen short, even the most obedient-seeming plain Mennonites.

*Lord, Clyde prayed as he mucked, touch this township. Touch the congregation. Touch the whole daggone country with your love. And be with Pop, too, he added. Soften his heart. And protect Isaac, too Lord. Keep him from every form of worldly attachment, every sort of pride and self-indulgence. And keep me from that kind of thinking. Me, especially, Lord.*

Thinking of his own propensity to anger toward his neighbor, Clyde added a prayer for Art Smucker, and a prayer for every candidate running for president, even Donald Trump, and then he wiped his face again, and rested his pitch fork on the side of the wheelbarrow, and started for the main farmhouse to see whether his mother had any more of the shoe-fly pie she'd baked earlier that week.

*Isaac*

All through the chores Tuesday evening, Isaac dreamed of his rendezvous with Luke Sauder. That night, he gritted his teeth through another family Bible study. He rushed upstairs as

soon as the prayer was done. He ignored a *Slider* message from Bobby, and another from a handsome older man in Lancaster who had sent him several requests for a meetup. He messaged Luke and waited. An interminable-seeming interval. Finally, Luke replied. They chatted for a few minutes about the weather. Isaac inquired after Luke's family's crops (the corn seedlings outside his bedroom window looked just fine). And then, just as Isaac was working himself up to suggest a meeting, Luke revealed, out of nowhere, that he'd gotten a new job.

*That's great. What is it?* Isaac typed, trying to conceal his astonishment.

*It's at this big poultry operation in northeast Lancaster County. Harshbarger Farms.*

Luke was going to be a *chicken farmer*? Dairying was trying enough, but the tedium and filth of dairying didn't begin to compare to poultry farming. And Harshbarger Farms was a massive operation. They had more than a million layer hens and close to 500,000 broilers. Working there, Luke would be a cog in another huge agricultural machine. But he had to be judicious. Luke was excited; therefore, he had to be.

*Congratulations*, he typed, grateful that the anonymity of the app allowed him to hide his scorn.

*Thanks. They're giving me a trailer too. I'm moving this weekend. And I was thinking, maybe to celebrate you'd like to meet up? If you have time.*

*Absolutely*, Isaac typed, brushing aside the ignominy of living in a *trailer*. *I was actually thinking the same thing. I hope you don't mind meeting me in the city?*

*Lancaster city, you mean?*

*Yep.*

A moment. Finally, blessed agreement. *Sure, I can do that.*

Beaming into his phone, Isaac sent him the name of the coffee shop on Duke Street. They agreed to meet at the end of the week.

Before services, Wednesday evening, Isaac combed his hair as straight and brutishly as he could. He put on his ugliest shirt and least fitted pair of trousers. When he passed Luke in the meetinghouse, Luke's gaze rested on him mildly and then flitted away. *I hope I don't seem too "moody,"* thought Isaac. But set against the imminence of their hookup, the insult was almost amusing.

Thursday, in the schoolhouse he focused intently on his lessons. He labored diligently in the milking parlor. That night, to prove his obedience, he stayed home, playing Rummikub with his parents. Mid-way through the game, his father allowed that he still hadn't decided when to tell Isaac's grandfather that they were going to sell the livestock that summer.

'I reckon I'll wait til after Denlinger's open house. Who knows, maybe once Pop sees how that all works, he'll change his tune?'

'Yes,' said Isaac's mother.

*I wouldn't count on it,* thought Isaac. But resolved as he was to being agreeable that evening, he said nothing.

All the next day in the schoolhouse, he tried not to think of the completion that was waiting for him. He tried not to anticipate too much the pleasure of beholding Luke's astonishment. But he couldn't help it; each time he pictured Luke's slowly-dawning smile, he got hard.

After supper, Friday night, Isaac told his parents that he was going out with his buddies.

'Where are you headed?' his father said, without looking up from his bowl of fudge ripple.

‘Oh, we’re just going bowling again,’ said Isaac. For some reason, it always tickled him to offer the loathsome game as his excuse.

‘I hope you have fun,’ said his mother.

‘I’m sure we will,’ Isaac muttered, and hurried upstairs, putting on his tee-shirt and skinny jeans under a dowdy shirt and pair of trousers.

Before leaving for school that morning, he’d secreted his copy of *Call Me by Your Name* into his truck.

He stopped at the Quaker meetinghouse and styled his hair, inspecting it from every angle, taking his time. Satisfied with his appearance, he checked his phone – no messages from Luke – and headed toward the city.

He arrived early. He wanted to get in position, to find a table with a view of the door so that he could spot Luke the moment he stepped inside. He parked in a garage several blocks from the coffee shop – it wouldn’t do for Luke to recognize his truck. On the way back to Duke Street, he paused in the city square, admiring the old Art Deco skyscraper and the gleaming new hotel and convention center constructed out of the facade of an abandoned department store. The project had been a boondoggle, subsidized by an onerous tax on all the county’s other motels. But corrupt and unpopular as the financing had been, the end result was undeniably attractive. And it was nice to know that he would have a suitable place to stay once he returned to the city after having found a job that compensated him sufficiently to enable the sort of life he desired.

Bolstered by the thought, Isaac turned and started for the coffee shop. At 7:15, he ordered his cappuccino – he always saved by not tipping the barista. By 7:20, he was seated at a table with a view of the door. He checked his reflection in the camera of his phone, flushing at his own fineness. Time seemed to slow. He tensed each time the door opened.

*He's not going to come*, he thought suddenly. But those were the self-victimizing convictions of the old Isaac. Of course, Luke would be there. All the tantalizing photos they'd exchanged would make sure of that. At 7:29, a ruffled and bearded middle-aged man carrying a newspaper shuffled in and ordered a cup of coffee. At 7:30 sharp, a young man wandered in with tattoos on his arms, spiked hair, and piercings all over his face. Isaac eyed him suspiciously; if his hair hadn't been spiked and dyed *green*, he might have looked nice. Isaac was about to see if the spiky-haired youth was on *Slider* when the door opened, and Luke stepped tentatively inside.

Isaac ducked and shielded his face with his hand. He wanted to savor this. He could feel Luke's gaze resting on him, but there were two other young men in the café; Luke couldn't be certain his date wasn't one of them. From behind the screen of his hand, Isaac watched as Luke started forward, frowning, and paused again a little way back from the counter. He wore a gray button-down shirt and black trousers. His blond hair was mussed. Still, the neatness of its cut and side-part made him look unquestionably Mennonite.

Watching Luke scrutinize the menu, Isaac thought pityingly of his first time at the cafe. How overwhelming the unfamiliar names of the beverages had seemed. How outlandish the prices. He listened to Luke's hesitant exchange with the scruffy barista, biting back a smile when he ordered the cheapest item on the menu, a coffee.

*I'm by the shelves of coffee beans*, Isaac typed.

Luke's phone buzzed. Isaac lowered his hand and glanced up just as Luke turned. Luke's eyes widened in astonishment. He started toward Isaac and stopped, checked his phone, and glanced toward Isaac a second time.

*Hi*, Isaac typed quickly, smiling wider as Luke's phone buzzed again.

'Coffee for here?' the barista said brightly.

Luke took the mug and started for Isaac's table.

'Surprise,' Isaac said, beaming triumphantly.

At the edge of the table, Luke stopped, holding the coffee and looking confused but distinctly less overawed than Isaac would have liked.

'You're *Elio98*?'

'That's me.'

Luke glanced over his shoulder and stepped toward him. 'How long have you had a phone?'

'How long have *you* had one?'

'About a month.'

'I bought mine back in February.'

'Your hair,' said Luke. 'It looks different.'

'I hope you like it.'

'It looks good,' Luke muttered, still frowning.

'You can sit down, you know,' Isaac said, doing his best to brush aside his frustration at Luke's lack of excitement.

'And that get-up, that's something, too.'

'I'll take that as a compliment.'

Luke nodded slowly. Finally, he put his coffee on the table and sat down. But he still seemed insufficiently overwhelmed by Isaac's loveliness. Instead, he seemed irritatingly preoccupied as he stared into his coffee mug.

'Did you know who I was?' he said, finally.

Isaac shrugged and smiled primly.

But Luke just kept frowning. ‘You had to know. You would have recognized the tractor on my profile.’

‘Let’s just say I had a hunch.’

‘And you didn’t feel the least bit bad about leading me on?’

Isaac tilted his head and batted his eyelashes. ‘I don’t know what you mean. I *am Elio98*.’

‘You should have told me,’ said Luke.

‘I wanted you to get to know me first. The *real* me.’ He pursed his lips in what he thought was an alluring manner, but Luke just kept on frowning into his coffee. His charms weren’t working. He straightened and returned Luke’s frown.

‘This is who I am, now,’ Isaac continued. ‘Now that I’m better, I know how to act. I know what I want. I know what I’m going to achieve. I *am* going to go to college, and not at Franklin and Marshall either, but someplace really good, and I’m going to get a great job, the kind of job that lets me enjoy my life, like I do whenever I come here, order a cappuccino, and chat with you on *Slider*.’

‘But why couldn’t you have been honest with me?’

Isaac arched his eyebrows. ‘If you had known it was me, would you have met me here? The last time we talked at the Grange hall, I thought you hated me.’

Luke frowned at the table, but after a moment, he nodded. ‘That’s fair. Like I said, I’m still trying to get my head around all this stuff. How I am, I mean.’

‘And I understand that,’ Isaac said, relaxing a little now that the conversation was finally moving in the right direction. ‘It’s taken me a long time to understand myself, too. Especially with how messed up I felt for the longest time. But I’m better now. And I know who I want.’ He stared at Luke as intensely as he’d ever dared.



But exasperatingly, Luke just kept staring at the table.

‘So as soon as you’re done in the schoolhouse, you’re just going to take off for college someplace?’ Luke said, finally.

‘That is the plan.’

Luke nodded and studied his fingernails.

‘What?’ Isaac said, again.

‘Don’t you worry at all about what your folks will think if you just up and leave them?’

‘You’re the one who just got the new job.’

Luke shrugged. ‘I didn’t have a choice. My parents are going to lose their farm. But so far as I can tell, your parents are doing all right.’

‘Not really. They’re selling their cows.’

Luke’s eyebrows shot up.

‘I mean, it’s not completely decided. Dad’s going to wait to see what the milk price does over the next few months before making the final call. But I think it’s going to happen.’

Luke stared into his mug of coffee. ‘It gets me down to see all these good farms breaking up.’

‘They’re obsolete,’ Isaac said firmly, in an effort to steer the conversation away from farming. ‘The future is all in big farms. Which is fine by me. And it ought to be fine with you, seeing as how you’re going to go work for one.’

‘I’m a farmer. I’ve got to work on a farm. That doesn’t mean I’ve got to like seeing the homeplace auctioned off.’

‘So go back to school, then. Come with me to college.’

‘I told you, it’s not for me.’

If only he could get Luke to talk to Rick Denlinger. If only he could help him understand all the pleasures that were enabled by education and prosperity.

‘So there’s this novel I’ve been reading these past couple of months,’ said Isaac, remembering the lines he’d rehearsed. ‘It’s basically our entire story.’ But as he recounted the narrative, emphasizing Elio and Oliver’s initial reticence and ultimate connection, Luke just kept picking at his fingernails and frowning at the table.

‘It sounds like a good story,’ he said, when Isaac had finished.

‘It’s so good.’

‘But you said it takes place over a summer. What happens when the summer is done?’

Unease flickered through Isaac’s stomach. ‘Well, the guys split up. But that part doesn’t have to have anything to do with us. They only leave because Oliver has to go back to the United States.’

‘Huh,’ said Luke.

‘When I leave,’ Isaac said quickly, ‘you can come with me.’

Luke stared into his coffee mug, as if he was considering this. When he looked up, his eyes were gentle, but terribly, terribly firm. ‘Listen. You look great. You’re doing real good. But this, all this stuff, everything you’re into now’ – he nodded at Isaac’s tee-shirt and glanced around the cafe – ‘it’s just not for me.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Isaac, doing his best to smile over the plunging of his stomach.

‘I think we missed our shot,’ said Luke.

‘And I’m telling you I’ll do whatever it takes to make you like me. Believe me, I’ll do anything. You need to read the book I was telling you about. Then you’ll know what I mean. I want to worship you,’ he added. ‘I *do* worship you.’

Luke scratched at his head. ‘Maybe I don’t want to be worshipped. Maybe I just want somebody, to, you know, talk about crops with and listen to baseball game.’

Here, at last, Isaac saw the gulf between them. ‘You think I’m too gay,’ he whispered. ‘You think I’m too *queer*.’

Luke shook his head, but his cheeks heated. ‘I never said that. I just want somebody who’s a little bit more into farming.’

The despair that filled Isaac in that moment was as disorientating anything he’d ever felt while being muddled by wheat.

‘I think I’m going to go now,’ said Luke.

*You’ll kill me if you go*, Isaac thought. But all he could do was stare blankly toward the exposed bricks on the opposite wall.

Luke stood and rested his hand on the table. ‘You have a good night, now.’

‘Good luck finding a *boyfriend* on a chicken farm,’ spat Isaac.

The bearded man with his newspaper turned and lifted his eyebrows.

Luke flashed another one of his infuriatingly mild smiles. ‘That’s the nice thing about *Slider*. You can talk to folks from all over. And,’ he cocked his eyebrow, ‘I reckon some of them will even be honest with you about who they are.’ He started for the door and then stopped, turned toward the counter and dropped a five-dollar bill in the tip jar. ‘Sorry I forget to give you this earlier,’ he said.

‘No worries,’ said the barista, cutting his eyes at Isaac.

Isaac glowered back. Since when had it become customary to tip someone for doing something as simple as *pouring you a cup of coffee?*

Luke turned back to the table. 'I guess I'll see you at church,' he said.

'I guess,' muttered Isaac, still staring past Luke at the wall.

The scorn of the others in the cafe drilled into Isaac. They had no idea of the future that was waiting for him; all they knew was that he'd been spurned.

*You look good*, he tried to insist. Hadn't Bobby told him he was hot? But what did Bobby know? To him, anyone who wasn't as old and fat and hairy probably looked like Justin Bieber.

*Fool*, Isaac told himself inwardly. *Imbecile*. The familiar words of recrimination tolled through him. He *was* foolish – foolish to think that he might ever escape his sense of unfitness and inadequacy, foolish to suppose that Luke would find him anything but repulsive, foolish to imagine that he could ever enjoy the sort of beatified union that Elio had shared with Oliver, at least while living in Kuernerville Township. At least with someone devoted to Allis-Chalmers tractors and cow manure and corn crops.

*When I leave, it will be different*, Isaac told himself, and his dread lightened for a moment. But what if failure would always trail him? What if he couldn't get into Stanford, or some other equivalently excellent college? What if the sort of muscled, blonde men he pined for always found him too gross, too grasping, too queer or peculiar? What if there was no one like him, no one with whom he could share an affinity? What if his body was and always would be too taut, too twitchy, too repulsive? And what if, for all his efforts to escape, he ended up stuck on his parents' struggling farm?

And then he couldn't stand it. He rose, jammed his phone in his pocket, tossed the coffee mug on the counter, and strode out to the street. He walked quickly, shame coursing through

him. He was halfway to the garage on Prince Street before his horror softened enough to allow him to see his situation clearly. Luke had rejected him, yes, but maybe that was only because Luke was beholden to farming and dull Mennonite constructions of normalcy.

The only question that mattered now was whether other men found him attractive. At the entrance to the parking garage he stopped and opened *Slider*, hoping for a message from Luke before he could catch himself, an apology, an offer to meet him and make up. But there were just the usual notifications from Bobby and a new one from the gray-haired man who'd messaged him twice that week, asking what he was up to that evening.

*Actually I'm free,* Isaac typed, without hesitating. *Where ru at?*

The reply appeared almost instantly. *I'm in Lancaster. U want to meet up?*

Isaac's stomach jumped. *Sure.*

The man's address turned out to be in the handsome new building a block away from the coffee shop. All Isaac had to do was retrace his steps along Orange Street.

*Please don't let me disgust him,* Isaac prayed. Preemptive shame leached over him as he hurried down the sidewalk. The doorway up ahead. He paused at the keypad and entered the man's number. The door buzzed and Isaac stepped inside, made his way to the elevator, and whirred to the top-most floor, and knocked on the appointed door. And all the while, he kept repeating his refrain. *Please don't let me seem repulsive. Please don't let him be repulsed.*

The man who opened the door was even older than Isaac had expected, given how fit he looked in the photos he'd sent on *Slider*. He had salt-and-pepper hair, a stubbly beard, and thick, clear-lensed glasses that made his pale eyes seem to swim.

'Elio98?' the man said.

'That's me,' said Isaac.

‘That was so quick.’

Isaac nodded. ‘I was just around the corner, having coffee.’

‘I’m Martin, by the way,’ the man said, smiling and gesturing toward the kitchen.

So far, he didn’t seem revolted. But there was still time for that, still time for Isaac to shame himself, as he did with everyone he liked.

‘What would you like to drink?’ Martin asked, his gaze sweeping over Isaac again.

‘Water’s find for me.’

‘You’re sure you don’t want anything stronger?’

‘I actually can’t have alcohol,’ said Isaac. ‘I’m allergic to gluten.’

Martin tilted his head. ‘You know vodka’s gluten-free, right?’

Isaac frowned.

‘Check your phone if you don’t believe me,’ Martin said, lifting a bottle of clear liquid from the freezer.

So Isaac obeyed, unable to keep himself from checking *Slider* to see if by chance Luke had messaged him an apology. There was nothing from Luke, of course. But as it turned out, vodka *was* gluten-free. So, reluctantly, Isaac took the glass and downed the bracing, cranberry-infused liquid. He felt no tightness in his face this time, no overheating. The warmth that filled his throat was comforting. The temperature in his temples felt right. And Martin’s apartment was nicely appointed. The exposed brick walls were lined with bookshelves. The high windows looked out on the city’s compact skyline. An enormous flat-screen television stood in front of a blood-red leather couch. This was the sort of room that he would own someday – if he could find his way out of Kuernerville Township.

‘I like your place,’ he said quietly.

‘Thank you,’ said Martin.

Isaac took another sip of vodka. So the evening wasn’t a complete disaster. Right now, Luke was probably halfway back to his parents’ farm, and here he was, talking to a handsome older man in the apartment of his dreams.

‘Do you mind if I ask what you do?’ said Isaac.

Martin frowned.

‘I only ask because I really like your style,’ Isaac explained.

Martin nodded and poured himself another splash of vodka. ‘Can I refresh your drink?’ he said.

‘Sure,’ said Isaac, knocking back what was left in his glass first.

Martin poured carefully and then replaced the bottle on the counter. ‘You know in France, it’s considered very gauche to ask people what they do.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Isaac said, flushing deeply.

‘It’s fine,’ said Martin. ‘We’re not in France.’ He took another sip of vodka, so Isaac did the same. ‘The truth is I don’t “do” anything in the sense that you mean. I have hobbies, of course. I collect antiques. I’m very involved in several local charities. But my income is not really of my doing. My family owned a local tobacco company that my father sold to R.J. Reynolds when I was in high school. Dad was very good at diversification. Since he died, I’ve pretty much just done whatever my financial advisors say. It’s a good life,’ he said, smiling. ‘But it’s not as though I can recommend my path to others. I was just lucky.’

Isaac nodded and took another slug of vodka. He’d been drinking quickly, and each bracing swallow further numbed his sense of injustice.

‘Do you want more?’ Martin said, nodding to the glass Isaac had hardly noticed he’d almost emptied.

‘Okay,’ said Isaac. He didn’t attribute the disappearance of his indignation to the hum of the alcohol. All he noticed was that despite the unfairness of Martin’s admission, he felt equable, almost amused. Life *was* unjust. Wasn’t that Milton Friedman’s point? Maybe the only way to deal with that was to find it amusing.

When he’d finished his drink, he walked across the room to the widest bookshelf. Someday, he still insisted, he’d have this sort of library. He’d be able to enjoy this sort of grace, this sort of quiet. He would not worry about his body, bolstered as he would be by the funds in his bank accounts. He chose a large book at random and began leafing through page after page of what seemed like artful graffiti.

‘Haring, good choice,’ said Martin. His breath was warm against Isaac’s ear. His cologne had the fragrance of cedar. ‘You know he was a Kutztown boy?’

‘No,’ said Isaac, astonished to think that such an artist could hail from a nearby town. He paused on a series of sketches of rampant penises and turned the page to a painting of a misshapen map of the United States. But instead of being segmented into states, the map was filled with unusual shapes, radiant figures whose arms were interlocked, a figure riding a dolphin.

‘Find another page of dicks,’ Martin whispered, inhaling deeply and pressing against him.

It wasn’t difficult. Penises were everywhere in the book. Martin ground against him, and Isaac ground back. His host certainly didn’t seem to be repulsed. Thank goodness. Right now,



Luke was probably climbing into his narrow bed underneath his photograph of an Allis-Chalmers, and here he was with a handsome older man in the apartment of his dreams.

‘You’re so *hot*,’ Martin said, still pressing against him.

‘Thanks,’ Isaac whispered. But no sooner had the words passed his lips than a queasiness took hold of his stomach.

*Take deep breaths*, he told himself. *Focus. Don’t you dare screw this up*. He shifted slightly and closed the book.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask where you went to college?’ he said, much too brightly.

‘Dickinson. But let’s not talk about college right now.’ Martin shifted with him and ground against him harder.

‘Of course,’ Isaac bleated, swallowing another gurgle in his stomach. ‘I really do love this place.’ He’d said it before, but he had to say something. And still, the man ground into him. And still, the heaving of his stomach intensified, no matter how forcefully he tried to tell it to settle down. He shifted sideways and reached for another book, but that did nothing for his stomach. He burped, the urge to vomit unignorable, now.

‘I think I need the bathroom,’ he said, trying his best to hold down the contents of his stomach.

‘Seriously?’ Martin stepped back, his expression a shaming mixture of scorn and disbelief. But he turned grave the moment Isaac jammed his hand against his mouth. He pulled Isaac from the bookshelves and down the hall.

‘It’s right down here.’

Isaac just made it, falling to his knees on the cold tiles and heaving into the bowl. Each time he thought he was finished, his head started spinning again, and another heave washed

through him. At various points amid his ordeal, he was conscious of Martin standing in the doorway and watching him and asking how he was. Each time, he panted that he was fine.

‘This is my fault,’ Martin said, somewhere in the middle of Isaac’s misery. ‘I shouldn’t have given you so much vodka.’

Isaac tried to tell him that wasn’t true, but his attempt at an explanation was overwhelmed by another heave. At some point, he fell asleep over the toilet. When he awoke, he was in a bedroom under a quilt.

‘There you are,’ Martin said, from the chair beside him.

‘Hi,’ Isaac said, blinking. His mouth tasted of dried acid and bile. His skin felt impossibly dry. The only light came from a stained-glass lamp in the corner; still, the room seemed far, far too bright. But at least he was no longer seized by the urge to vomit.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered.

‘No,’ said Martin. ‘Like I said, this was my fault. Next time, I’ll make the drinks lighter.’

*Next time.* He’d made a mess; he’d been ridiculous. Still, there might be a next time. So his behavior hadn’t been *completely* unacceptable.

‘Would you like some water?’

‘That would be good.’ He sat up woozily, took the heavy, cut-glass cup, and downed the liquid. Finished, he fell back on his bed and closed his eyes. Just before sleep took hold of him again, he thought to ask about the time.

‘It’s a little before midnight,’ Martin said calmly.

Isaac bolted upright. He tried to dismiss how sickeningly his head spun. ‘I have to go. My parents will be worried.’

‘You probably shouldn’t go anywhere after being that sick. You certainly shouldn’t drive’

But Isaac ignored this. He stood. His clothes were intact. His keys were still in his pocket.

‘If you’re going to go, you need to let me call you a car.’

Isaac shook his head weakly. ‘My parents won’t understand.’

‘Just tell them you had engine trouble or something.’

‘I told you, I’m *fine*,’ said Isaac, his alarm increasing.

He couldn’t arrive without his truck, not if he didn’t want to arouse his father’s suspicions. But Martin was already punching something into his phone.

‘The car’s four minutes away,’ he said.

‘Do you think a taxi will go all the way to Kuernerville Township?’

‘A car will go anywhere if you pay enough. And don’t worry, I’ve prepaid on my phone.’

‘Oh,’ said Isaac. He went to the door, still trying to find some way not to betray himself.

He could say he was going to take the car Martin called and then take his truck. But when the car arrived, Martin insisted on accompanying him down to the street.

‘That’s you,’ he said, pointing to a black sedan idling next to a fire hydrant.

Isaac swallowed, glanced toward his pickup. Martin took hold of his shoulder and pointed him toward the vehicle.

‘I hope this won’t cause you too much trouble,’ he said. ‘If it does, please let me know. And message me soon, okay, and we can try this again.’

‘Of course,’ said Isaac, smiling in spite of himself, and climbing into the backseat.

On the ride out of the city, Isaac closed his eyes, trying to enjoy the fact that he was being ferried along a darkened highway in a late-model car, ordered for him by the heir to a tobacco

fortune. But all the while, he kept thinking of his parents and praying to *whomever* that they wouldn't be up. The car merged off the highway and started along the winding roads of Kuernerville Township. With each turn, the tension in Isaac's stomach tightened.

*Please let Mom and Dad be asleep,* he repeated, as the car cruised past the main farm.

The tenant house was dark when the car turned down the driveway. He whispered his thanks to the driver and crept toward the back porch. At the door he paused, listening. Nothing. He slipped into the mudroom, stepped out of his shoes, and opened the door to the kitchen. Still nothing. Good. He started across the linoleum. He'd just stepped past the refrigerator when the light flared above the kitchen table. His father stood in the doorway in a rumpled white tee shirt and a pair of brown trousers.

'I need to smell your breath.' His voice had an unusual edge.

'What's wrong?' Isaac said.

'I just need to smell your breath,' his father said again, advancing toward him. His gaze was severe. His jaw was set.

'I promise I wasn't drinking' Isaac said quickly.

As with every lie he told to defend or promote himself, this one was justified. He ran his tongue along his gums and teeth. If his father smelled anything, it would probably be the vomit. And still, his father kept coming. And still, Isaac kept backing up. He jumped when he bumped into the counter. The hardness on his father's face receded as he stopped in front of him. Pain crept into his eyes.

'Where were you tonight?' he demanded again.

'I told you, I was out bowling. My truck left me sit. That's why I had to get dropped off.'

'Which bowling alley?'

‘Kuernerville Lanes.’

‘No,’ his father said, his voice mournful. ‘Tell me again where you were.’

‘I already said, I was bowling with Martin and Nevin.’

‘*No.*’

Isaac’s stomach plunged.

‘Mother and I decided to go play a few games with the Keeners. We thought it would be fun to surprise you. Mark Beiler and his girlfriend were there. The Keener boy and his. But they said they hadn’t been bowling with you for months. So where were you tonight?’

Isaac closed his eyes. His temples were so tight. His mouth was so dry.

‘And this getup?’ Isaac’s father nodded toward his tee shirt. ‘You said it was some sort of *costume*? But I’ll tell you this, nobody was dressed up at the bowling alley tonight.’

Another wave of frustration. Had Martin had to put up with this sort of questioning from his father? Had the artist from Kutztown – Keith Haring – had he had to endure it?

‘Here’s what I don’t understand,’ his father said. ‘You’ve been doing so well this spring. You seem better. So why the sneaking around?’

*It’s because I’m doing better that I’m taking chances,* Isaac wanted to shout. *It’s because I feel more confident.* But, of course, he could never say this to his father.

‘I just don’t get it. This drinking. This *lying*. You said you weren’t going to pull something like this again.’

It was the attack on deception that pushed Isaac over the edge. Only people who were normal and healthy could afford to be consistently forthright. Everyone else had to bend the truth in order to keep up.

‘I have no choice, Dad.’ The words shot out of him. ‘I have to sneak around. I have to protect myself. I have to protect you and Mother.’

‘*Protect us?*’ His father’s brows gathered in confusion. ‘Protect us from *what?*’

These confrontations were so tedious. The standards of the congregation were so exhaustingly limiting. His father was so naive. And he was so, so tired of defending himself to everyone, trying to please everyone. ‘You really want to know?’ he said.

‘That’s what I’ve been saying.’

Isaac nodded, trying to weigh risks. Maybe his father *would* erupt. Maybe he and Isaac’s mother would withdraw their fellowship and shun him. But worn out as he felt, turned around as he felt by all his failings that night, he didn’t care. This was who he was, regardless of what anyone in Kuernerville Township thought.

‘Here’s what I did tonight,’ he began, his voice shaking. ‘I met a friend for coffee in Lancaster city. It didn’t go very well, so I met another friend, and it got a little later than I thought, so he called me a car.’

“‘He called you a car?’” his father said.

‘He didn’t think I was safe to drive.’

His father frowned. ‘And who is this “friend”?’

Isaac shrugged, forcing himself to ignore how his pulse was racing. ‘He’s this guy I met online.’

His father’s frown deepened. ‘I just don’t understand what you’re saying. You met some fellow tonight through your phone, if I have that right, and you had coffee with him. And then you met another fellow? And then he ordered you a car? But what were you all *doing?*’

Another wave of frustration, at himself this time. He wasn't being direct enough. He hadn't done enough to break through his father's naivety.

'We were just *talking*, Dad. We were talking about the sort of things *gay* men always talk about.'

His father recoiled like he'd been struck. '*What* kind of men?' His words were so soft they were barely audible.

Isaac drew himself up, his pulse pounding harder, his stomach jumping. 'I said *gay* men, Dad, because that's how I am, and I'm done apologizing for it. I'm done apologizing for who I am or what I want. And if you don't like it, you can throw me out of the house if you want. You can tell the pastor on me. You can shun me. I don't care what you do. I just want to live my life.'

'*Isaac.*' A pleading look shone in his father's eyes. 'No one's talking about *going to the pastor*. No one's talking about *throwing you out of the house*. You're confused. Whoever you were speaking to tonight, they have you all mixed up.'

Isaac shook his head. 'Dad, I've never been more certain about anything in my life. I'm gay, and you and Mother are going to have to deal with it, because there's nothing wrong with it.'

His father's eyes hardened. 'It's against Scripture. It's says very clearly in both the Old and the New Testaments that lying with another man is wrong.'

'And I don't care what Scripture says. I'm sorry, Dad, but I don't, so you're just going to have to deal with that, too.'

'*Isaac.*'

'Since we're being *honest* with each other, you might as well know the whole truth. I don't believe in God. I haven't believed in him for a long time.'

His father stared at him, his gaze empty now, as empty as Isaac had ever seen it. ‘You need to repent,’ he said. ‘You need to get down on your knees and ask the Lord for forgiveness for what you said there. The other stuff we can deal with, but we can’t go to bed with you having denied God. Please, son,’ he said, his gaze softening again and splintering. ‘Please. Do it for me.’

It was a ridiculous speech, but there was something affecting about the sorrow that shone in his father’s eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ Isaac said, ‘I know this is all a lot. But it’s the truth.’

‘It is blasphemy,’ his father whispered. ‘And it breaks the Lord’s heart. It breaks my heart. And have you thought about what it’s going to do to your poor mother?’

‘Like I said, I’m sorry. But,’ Isaac said, hardening his gaze, ‘you said you wanted me to be honest.’

‘Isaac,’ his father said again. The words came out as more a moan.

But Isaac was done arguing. ‘I’m going up now. I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t worry, I’ll set my alarm.’

He touched his father’s shoulder and stepped past him, but his father didn’t turn. A wild, almost joyful lightness filled Isaac as he climbed the stairs. He had done it. He’d told his father how he was, and it was up to his father to respond. Now, all he had to do was brush his teeth and peel off his clothes and sink into bed and wait for sleep to take him. And there would be no more hiding, no more sneaking around, no more buttoning plain shirts and trousers over the clothes that he loved. And if his parents *did* throw him out, well, he had his savings, and the promise of ‘next time’ at Martin’s. And if Rick Denlinger really did believe that the top colleges knew what was best, then he shouldn’t have a problem with anyone’s sexuality.



Isaac stepped into the bathroom, peed, and brushed the bile off his teeth like he had brushed aside all stupidity, all encroaching and oppressive Mennonite dullness. Deception was strategic. It was practical, especially for one who had so much ground to recover after having been ill for what felt like half his life. But tonight, for better or worse, he had been honest about the most important facts of his life. And what had Luke done on that score? For all his talk of honesty, what had he ever told his parents?

*Hypocrite*, Isaac thought, picturing Luke and staring at his own reflection in the mirror, a reflection that seemed capable of meeting whatever obstacles the world might throw up in front of him.

Finished in the bathroom, he peered into the hall to make sure his father wasn't waiting to ambush him with more pleas for forgiveness. The hall was empty. The light shone on from downstairs. His father was still down there, probably still praying, for all the good that would do. Isaac tiptoed down the hall and into his bedroom, curled onto his side, tucked his hands between his knees.

He was on his way. He had taken a step toward the life he'd glimpsed in Martin's apartment. Why, then, did he feel so awful? The wild elation that had seized him in the bathroom replaced by the churning sense that something horrible was about to befall him. He'd done what was *right*, he was certain of that. But he had no idea how his parents would respond in the morning. And though it was easy to *say* that he didn't care if they shunned him, he knew that it wasn't true. He did care. If they threw him out, he had no idea what would become of him.

'So please,' he whispered, and then rebuked himself. But it wasn't a prayer to the God of the congregation so much as it was a plea to *anyone* who might be listening, *anyone* who would

help him not to feel so terribly alone. ‘Please help me to be okay. Please help Mother and Dad not to take this too hard.’

Breathing those words, he did feel a little better, a little less alone, somehow. So he kept whispering them until he fell into a thin and restless sleep.

*Clyde*

Deep into the night, Clyde numbered his failings. He’d worked too hard. He’d neglected Isaac’s training. He’d left him alone with his *library books* and all his *ideas*. He’d figured the boy had needed those things. He’d believed that he was allowing the boy to pursue his God-given gifts. Lois had believed it, too. Now, it seemed that by sheltering Isaac during those crucial years of his early teens, all they’d done was encourage his spirit of self-indulgence. And all of that was ultimately his fault, because he was the father.

They hadn’t pushed Isaac enough. They’d let him isolate himself. They’d failed to develop his spirit of manful responsibility. And if his faithlessness had something to do with all his years of gluten trouble, well, then that was *also* Clyde’s fault. He was the father. The first time he’d noticed Isaac slouching in his pew and seeming out of sorts, he ought to have dragged him to the clinic and demanded that the doctor keep testing him until they figured out why he was so jittery all the time, why he was so daggone clumsy.

But they hadn’t known. *He* hadn’t wanted to know, hadn’t wanted to look too closely at whatever it was that had made the boy so afraid of the implements, so nervous around the livestock. He hadn’t had time to bother with such things, focused as he’d been on the herd, consumed as he still was with paying down the mortgage. And for these prideful fixations, the Lord was punishing him.

When Clyde finally went to bed, he woke Lois and told her what Isaac said. He wept while she wept. Sometime well past one in the morning, he grabbed a few hours of sleep. In the mudroom, the morning after Isaac's terrible confession, Clyde couldn't look at the boy directly. He mumbled his good morning and stumbled out to the truck. All through the milking, he begged the Lord to touch the boy's spirit, to help him to turn him away from his bewildering embrace of these shameful *inclinations*. Because surely, they were the reason for the boy's apostasy. Surely, if Isaac wasn't *afflicted* in this way, he'd have no reason to turn his back on the Lord.

Instead of sitting down at the breakfast table, Isaac hurried upstairs. Lois followed him. She'd been waiting, no doubt praying for Isaac just as determinedly as she'd prayed for him with Clyde the previous night.

*Let it work*, Clyde begged the Lord while he downed his breakfast.

When the time came for Clyde to go out and start trimming the road banks with his father, Isaac and Lois were still upstairs. In response to his father's question about whether Isaac would join them, it was all Clyde could do to keep his voice from breaking.

'He's not feeling too good this morning.'

His father spat but said nothing. Clyde focused on tightening the mower mount, keeping his gaze lowered to hide at least a portion of the shame that seemed to be flowing out of his every pore and crease. The deceiver had his hooks in Isaac. The boy had been enabled by that dagonne phone and all the selfishness it encouraged. But *he* was still the father. He was still responsible for the boy's training. And he had failed, because of his pride, because of his love for the farm, because of his insistence on working and pouring himself into the stuff of this life instead of properly tending to the spiritual life of his son.

When they were finished mowing, Clyde was tempted, sorely tempted, to tell his father that he was ready to sell not just the cows, but the entire farm. He'd loved it too much. He *had* made it an idol, and he needed to atone for that, to show the Lord that he understood his sin and was deeply sorry. But as much as he knew he needed to offer the Lord some sort of sacrifice, he also knew that he had no strength for a fight with his father. Instead of raising the matter of the herd and fields, he just walked silently to his pickup and drove to the tenant house for lunch, begging the Lord to touch Isaac, to soften his heart and break the hold of all his sinful desires.

Isaac didn't come down for lunch. Clyde hardly ate. Lois picked at her food. Her talk with the boy had gone just as poorly as Clyde had feared it would. Neither one of them had the right words to pierce the hardened shell of the boy's pride.

Again, that afternoon, Clyde prayed with Lois. Once more, she tried to insist that the sin that had infected their son was not his responsibility. But how could that be true? *He was the father!* He was the one entrusted with raising his son to honor the Lord in thought and word and deed. And he had failed, he'd misread his son every step of the way, because of his prideful fixations *and* because it was easier to believe that your child was doing all right than to confront the possibility that he might be sick or mixed up in some sort of trouble. His slothful trust in Isaac's decency was really no different from Rick Denlinger's dismissal of the unbelief of his sons.

*Rick Denlinger.* That afternoon, Clyde stumbled around the machine shed, sorting bolts and screws without seeing them. Anger flamed through him each time he thought of the rich farmer. So much of Isaac's self-centeredness seemed to be bound up with his newfound love of worldly ambition and money. Of course, the boy believed in self-interest – he worshipped self-gratification of every kind. That was what the world taught. That was what fellows like Rick

Denlinger modeled. Make as much money as you can. Pour all your profits into expanding your operation, as though *bigness* was what pleased the Lord, prosperity, not charity and humility and love.

And then there were other, even cruder examples of worldliness that had no doubt influenced Isaac. When you loved money, when your concerns were all of this life, there was nothing stopping you from indulging *every single* selfish desire without any concern for other people or any respect for the commandments written so plainly in the Lord's word. You could hate and resent your neighbors. You could let your barns collapse and your cows suffer. Or, you could model yourself on the richest men in the country and hire a mistress, drink and gamble freely, divorce your wife whenever it pleased you, slake your sexual thirst with prostitution, or lie with another man or woman, if that was what you desired.

If they'd known earlier about Isaac's waywardness, they might have been able to do something about it. They might have been able to send him someplace that would treat his sinful urges and deliver him from the will to blaspheme. But when Clyde mentioned the idea to Lois when he went in for his snack that afternoon, she informed him that the Christian radio station said such treatments didn't work. The only thing that *worked*, she said, was a personal determination to hold your impure desire in check as an offering of submission to the Lord.

But how could they persuade the boy that he had to suppress his sinful longing when he kept insisting that what he wanted was not wrong? What could you say when someone shrugged off the authority of Scripture as if it had no more weight than a pigeon feather? What could you say when your sharp and argumentative son kept on insisting that all the rules that ordered congregational life had no hold on his walk, no meaning?

In the mudroom, before the work that afternoon, Clyde stared at his work boots when Isaac came in. How squashed and dirty those laces were. And the paint on the floor was peeling. The boy stepped into his coveralls, his movements brisk, unruffled. Of course they were; *he* didn't see any problem.

'How are you holding up?' Clyde said, staring at the scuffed toe of his work boots.

'I'm fine. How are *you* doing?' The boy's voice was so challenging, so unrepentant, so full of hardened pride.

'I'm not doing so hot.' Clyde lifted his head. 'I'm so worried about my boy.' He tried to fix Isaac with his sorrow, to force him to feel the grief that was but the palest flicker of the pain the Lord was enduring in the face of his pride and unbelief.

But Isaac stared at the wall. 'Like I told you last night, you have nothing to worry about. I'm certain of what I believe.'

'The Lord grieves to hear you say that.'

'As I told you before, I don't believe that he does.'

Clyde shook his head. 'You know who the last person who said that to me was? It was Art Smucker. He said the very same thing to me after I told him that it hurt the Lord to hear him cursing like that in public.'

The boy drew himself up. 'You think I'm like *Art Smucker*?'

Clyde's stomach turned with unease. 'I think you're both very sure you have all the answers. And look how Art is doing? His pride has him all turned around.'

But Isaac just stood straighter. 'Dad, there is an enormous difference between being an atheist who is an uneducated cretin and one who is rigorously attentive to bettering himself and the world through his education.'

‘So you think that’s the path to salvation? College?’ Heat flashed on Clyde’s cheeks.

‘I think it’s the path to *success*,’ said Isaac, ‘which I happen to believe is the only kind of salvation any of us is ever going to obtain.’

Clyde stood so quickly he almost upended his mudroom chair. ‘First Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is the root of all evil.” And that love encourages every other form of pride and self-indulgence. It leads folks to believe that they don’t need Scripture, that they don’t need the Lord’s word. But all you have to do is look at what’s happening to this country to see how messed up things can get as soon as folks turn away from the Lord’s teaching.’

‘Dad.’ The boy’s voice was pitying. ‘There are plenty of atheists who live productive and generous lives. That’s what I want to do. I certainly don’t want to *squander my money* like Art Smucker.’

‘Isaac-boy.’ Clyde trained on him all the compassion he could achieve. ‘The Lord don’t care how rich or successful you are. All he cares about is whether you honor him and love him.’

The boy wouldn’t hear it. The boy wouldn’t back down.

‘I know that’s what you believe, Dad. But I’m telling you, I don’t believe in God. Think about it, if there was some intelligence as massive as the God of Scripture, why would he demand constant worship and allegiance from the creatures he’d made? Why wouldn’t he just want them to do their best with the faculties he’s given them?’

‘Because that’s what Scripture says.’

‘Dad, that’s circular reasoning.’

Again, heat flamed on Clyde’s face. ‘Fine. Then because, son, if everybody just does what they want without any regard for other people, order breaks down.’

‘No, Dad,’ Isaac said, in that same patronizing tone. ‘When people seek their self-interest, everyone prospers. What damages order and harms the country is when people go around trying to follow antiquated rules that have no basis in logic or reality. People need to be practical, Dad. They need to focus on what’s going to benefit them in the here and now. And that’s what I’m trying to do. That’s what everyone does, most of the time, whether they realize it or not. And like I said, if you want to throw me out of the house for thinking that, that’s your decision. I can’t stop you. But I’m not going to organize my life around the teachings of a bunch of schizophrenic fisherman and social misfits when most people in the congregation don’t do so anyway. Look at Elvin and Mark Beiler. Look at Ben Zimmerman. Do they seem like they’re living for the hereafter? Of course not. They’re trying to live for the here-and-now, just like everyone does who has any sense. Because whatever they *say*, that is all they certain of.’

The boy wasn’t wrong there. Still, he was missing something so important. Yes, people fell short. Yes, they were hypocrites. But the example of Christ, the attempt to model that righteousness in community with other believers, kept most believers from far greater sin and folly. All of this, Clyde could feel and almost articulate, but he couldn’t quite put it into words. The threat of Isaac’s intelligence blocked him. His son was, as ever, so much better at arguing.

Clyde lifted his hand. ‘I guess we’ve probably talked about this enough for one day. We’ve got to go start the work. Pop’s probably wondering where we are.’

He adjusted the brim of his seed cap and started for his truck. Isaac climbed in beside him. They were halfway to the main farm when Isaac spoke up.

‘Are you going to throw me out of the house?’

His voice, which had sounded so fierce and confident while they argued, suddenly sounded so small. For a moment, Clyde was too choked up to answer. Probably, he ought to say



that he didn't know, that he couldn't say anything for certain until he'd talked to the pastor. But he couldn't bring himself to do it.

'No,' he said, over the wrenching ache in his chest. 'We're certainly not going to throw you out of the house. You're our son.'

'Thank you,' Isaac said quietly.

Another wave of grief went through Clyde as he turned down the farm lane. How had it come to this? How was *this* what they were talking about? And what he kept returning to, all through the milking, was that the boy had seemed to be doing so well. In many ways, he still seemed like he was. He was so sharp, so well defended, so full of ideas. But though he said he knew all about how the world worked, he had no idea what people actually needed. What folks needed, in order to hold at bay the worst of the deceiver's aims, was to try and imitate Christ and hold themselves accountable on that walk by joining themselves in peaceful community with other believers. But whenever Clyde thought of the Kuernerville congregation, he kept seeing Elvin Beiler's mocking face. He kept seeing the way Ben Zimmerman had looked at him in bewilderment when he'd said that maybe they needed to support candidates like Ben Carson and Bernie Sanders who encouraged decency and charity.

Supper was silent that evening. After the meal, Clyde padded to his recliner and worked his way through each of the verses that explained the evils of sexual sin. The words in Leviticus thundered in his ears. 'You shall not lie with a male as with a female; it is an abomination.'

*Abomination.* There was no ambiguity there. Apart from denying the Lord, an abomination was the worst imaginable assault on the Lord's authority. There was no getting around this verse. It was as crisp and indisputable as the page it was printed upon. And if you

started to believe that some Scriptures didn't count as much as others, where did you stop? Why wouldn't you just throw out the whole Bible, like Isaac had done?

In bed that night, Clyde prayed with Lois for the boy's spirit. After discussing the matter for several hours, they agreed not to go to the pastor or the deacon. It wouldn't do to get the church involved right away, not when the Lord might touch Isaac at any time. They simply had to wait. They had to trust. But how agonizing it was to endure the boy's prideful presence in the milking parlor. How painful to sit beside at the table without any idea of how to reach him.

Sunday morning, Isaac said he wasn't feeling well and stayed home, but he came along to the meetinghouse Wednesday night. All through the pastor's sermon, Clyde could feel the boy's pride seething like wasps inside a tree trunk. He shifted on the pew, toward his father, who sat stiff and rigid. The old man was still scarcely talking to Clyde. angry as he was about the idea of selling the herd. But no sooner had Clyde moved away from his son than he thought of his father's silences, of his bitterness. Was that how he wanted to be? Irritable and grim with everyone? No, indeed, it was not. But how could you hold someone to Scriptural account without rebuking them, without reminding them, through your actions, that they were wrong?

In bed that night, Clyde tried to divert himself from his sorrow by thinking of his son as he had been before he'd been carried away by worldly self-indulgence. He could still see Isaac in his high-chair. After the boy had eaten, all Clyde had to do to make the boy drift off was make a circle with his forefinger on his cheek. How peaceful Isaac had seemed then. And how cheerful he'd been as a tyke, belting out his hymns when Clyde came in from the evening work. And when the boy had started reading, Clyde had been so pleased at the way the facts that Isaac shared with him had increased his own limited store of knowledge. How gladdened he'd been the day Isaac was baptized. How joyful he'd felt the morning he'd first held Isaac in his arms. Deep

down, Isaac was decent. He was good. He had to come around. So Clyde wrapped his arm tighter around Lois and asked the Lord, again, to make Isaac whole again, to touch both their hearts. To help them both understand the call to sacrifice, which was the responsibility of every believer, for every believer was tempted by impure desire.

### *Isaac*

In the days after Isaac's confession to his parents, the weight of his father's judgement hung in the parlor. Sometimes, his father looked at him mournfully. Other times, his eyes shone with a pleading softness that was almost as desperate and tedious as the looks Isaac's mother trained upon him.

At least his parents had not thrown him out of the house. At least they hadn't dragged him in front of the church. He hadn't expected that they would, but he hadn't been certain. Their refusal to punish him for his announcement at once proved their devotion to him and confirmed their hypocrisy. For all their talk about the importance of the spirit, they probably didn't want to expose him to the church because of the damage it would do to their reputations.

Several nights that week, Isaac thought of messaging Luke and telling him what he'd told parents, thus proving that he was not the least bit afraid of honesty. Each time, the anguished memory of Luke's rejection stopped him. Mid-week, he contacted Martin in Lancaster city and apologized for ruining his night. It took the tobacco heir a full day to answer, and all he said was that it was no problem at all. And when Isaac asked when they might meet up again, Martin answered that he was about to head out to his house at Rehoboth Beach for the rest of the week and that he'd message Isaac when he returned. So Isaac waited, trying to be patient, trying to console himself with the glamour of the life that awaited him beyond Kuernerville Township.

But that life seemed impossibly distant, subject as he was to his parents' mournful gazes, trapped as he was on the farm.

Before starting the work the next morning, Isaac looked up Stanford's admission rate. That year, the university had admitted 5.1% of the students who applied. So 94.9% of students who had applied were *not* accepted. And most of those students probably came from families that knew all about what it took to get into good colleges – families that spoke multiple languages, and had all sorts of money, and read books together other than the Bible. Who was he to think that he could get into a college like Stanford? He had not inherited a fortune like Martin. His parents were struggling dairy farmers, not polished professors like the parents in *Call Me by Your Name*.

That evening, after the work was finished, Isaac read the passage in the novel in which Elio's father intuits his love for Oliver and affirms that love. Always before, Isaac had wept when he read the lines in which Elio's father notes that 'our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once,' and so ought to be used to pursue love wherever it could be found. Now, the scene left him cold. How fortunate Elio was to live in such a villa and benefit from the wisdom of a father who is, the novel reveals almost as an aside, correcting the proofs of his 'latest book' in the moments before their conversation about love. Doubtless, with such a rich and intelligent father, Elio could get into whatever college he wanted – Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia. And Elio was beautiful. And Elio was brilliant. And sure, he Isaac Bauman, might be 'sharp,' as Rick Denlinger had called him, but he didn't know anything about all the references to poets and philosophers that the characters in the novel tossed off as though they were famous figures in the Bible. When he'd tried to read the *Wikipedia* entry on 'Leopardi,' he'd started to yawn.

And still, Isaac kept driving into Lancaster city some evenings. Sipping cappuccino, he checked *Slider*, ignoring Bobby's messages and scanning for a message from Martin. But Monday and Tuesday passed without any word from the tobacco heir. Tuesday night, Isaac stood outside the entrance to Martin's apartment, pretending to text someone, and hoping the man might appear. Only when it started drizzling did he abandon his vigil. He drove home feeling cold, miserable, and increasingly vulnerable. Wednesday, Isaac broke down and messaged the older man. This time, Martin didn't reply.

If only he hadn't drunk so much of that stupid vodka. If only he hadn't made such a fool of himself. If only he hadn't ruined his best chance to catapult from the drudgery of farm labor into the rarefied life he desired. If only he hadn't been, again, so out of control, so repulsive.

*Maybe you will always be this way*, he told himself, replaying that awful scene at Martin's. Maybe he had never been one of the elect and fortunate. Maybe he had always been destined to eke out a menial existence, if not on a farm in Kuernerville Township, then in some dingy town, somewhere. The more he dwelt on this possibility, the more correct it seemed. He was a bumpkin, however much he might try to disguise it with his deep V-neck tee-shirts and skinny jeans. He was unfit, marred and twisted by years of shame and self-consciousness and trouble with his palms and stomach. How stupid he'd been to suppose that *changing his diet* could somehow erase all his years of mistakes. He'd probably be lucky to get into the local branch of the state university, whereas people whose parents had money and brilliance could achieve whatever they wanted.

And still, his parents kept training their mournful gazes on him. Still, they kept judging him for what he knew was not and never would be wrong. One evening, his father suggested, out of nowhere, that he ought to try dating a woman again. And when Isaac explained, miserably,

that he'd already tried that, his father cleared his throat and mumbled that the Lord didn't care what he thought on while he was with a woman, that maybe all the Lord cared about was what he did. At which point, the man launched into a mortifying anecdote about the unrealistically beautiful women in the lingerie inserts in the Sunday newspaper, which he tried to throw out before reading the paper every week.

'Please, Dad,' said Isaac.

Mercifully, his father stopped talking, and Isaac stared on out the window of the pickup until his father drove them back to the tenant house for supper.

That night, Isaac skipped services in the meetinghouse. In his room, he stared hopelessly at the photo of the Stanford quad. How perfect the campus seemed. How perfect life had the potential to be for anyone who could somehow rise above their baseness, their unfitness, and their poverty. How idyllic life could be – but maybe only for people who started out with everything.

He sank back on his bed. As despair washed over him, he imagined that he was floating in an enormous sea of cow manure, or that he was on a raft, drifting further and further out to sea. But all the while, he knew that he was lying on his narrow bed in his tiny bedroom in the tenant house on the corner of his family's farm. And if he didn't do something, he might always be there, shuffling along under the weight of his parents' sorrow and judgment, unable to speak about his desires, unable to act upon them, except in secret, unable to be who he was, openly and freely.

*So do something*, he whispered to himself.

And then he remembered Rick Denlinger's offer. But when he'd promised to help Isaac, the rich farmer hadn't known what a bungler he was. He hadn't known how inept Isaac was at

every single thing he attempted, from repairing broken fan motors to herding escaped livestock to ingratiating himself with rich men in Lancaster city.

*Maybe in college, I will be different,* he tried to insist. Maybe. Or maybe, college would simply present another opportunity for him to falter.

*You have to try,* he told himself.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, straightened his hair, and headed down to his truck. It was dusk by the time he reached the Denlinger farm. The lights shone in the ‘old’ parlor, while the ‘new,’ unfinished parlor was dark. Isaac stared at that massive expanse of darkness, wondering how in the world he was going to find Rick Denlinger. He certainly couldn’t just go ring the doorbell on the farmhouse, could he? Obviously, it was a mistake to have come. He was about to put his truck in reverse when two figures stepped out of the old parlor. One of them was Rick Denlinger. The short man beside him walked with a limp. Isaac waved. Rick Denlinger squinted at him and started toward the pickup, the other man limping along beside him. Isaac opened his door. Only when the map light on the ceiling illuminated his face did Rick Denlinger’s expression lighten.

‘Oh, it’s Isaac Bauman,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t sure *who* was stopping in here at eight in the evening.’

‘I’m sorry for just coming by uninvited,’ Isaac said, unsure of whether he ought to climb from the truck.

‘None of that,’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘It’s good to see you.’ He turned to the man beside him. ‘Jorge, this is Isaac Bauman, son of one of the finest dairy operators in the township. Isaac, this is Jorge Vasquez, the new assistant manager of our herd.’

‘Hello,’ said Isaac.

‘It is very nice to meet you,’ said Jorge. His brown face was round and well-proportioned. His eyes were warm.

‘Jorge just moved here last month from Amarillo, Texas. He helped run one of the big dairies down there.’

‘That’s great,’ Isaac said, shrugging off the menace of the big Texas dairies. That competition wasn’t such a threat now that his parents were selling the cows. (But the children of the owners of those big dairies were a different story, the privileged young men and women who had probably already been accepted into the very same colleges that he was hoping to apply to.)

‘So what can I do for you, Isaac?’ Rick Denlinger said, hooking his thumbs in his belt loops.

Isaac drew a breath and tried to dismiss the thought of all of those children of privilege. ‘I’ve been thinking about your offer to help me get into a good college, and I’d like to take you up on it. The more I’ve been reading about the value of education, the more I realize I need to try and get into the best school I possibly can.’

‘I will go check on the calves,’ said Jorge. ‘Isaac, it was very nice to meet you.’

‘It was nice meeting you, too,’ said Isaac, eyeing the man idly as he limped toward the parlor.

Rick Denlinger nodded and turned to the gate that gave onto the barnyard. ‘I’m glad you’re interested in college. I’m glad you’re being ambitious. Not enough people are these days, especially around here.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Isaac. ‘I spoke to my parents, and they support the idea.’ Or at least they *had* supported it – since coming out, he hadn’t revisited the idea of college with his parents. But soon enough, he’d be eighteen, and it wouldn’t matter what they thought.



‘Good. I wasn’t sure what your dad thought about the idea when we talked. But we still need to get you through high school first, right?’

‘Yes,’ Isaac said, frowning at the inadequacy of his congregational education.

‘I think it would be good if you did some tutoring for the standardized tests and such things. I’ll have to give your dad a call and run the idea by him.’

‘I’d really appreciate that,’ said Isaac. ‘I want to do anything I can to give myself a chance.’ He swallowed. ‘I’ve been reading about how hard it is to get into some of the good schools. It’s pretty intimidating.’

‘It certainly is. But you’ll have a good story to tell. Plain Mennonite kid. First-generation from your family to go to college. Admissions committees care about all that stuff. We’ll work on making sure they know all of that. But first, we got to make sure your scores are up to snuff. You got to pass a certain baseline before most these schools will even think about letting you in.’

Isaac gulped again at the thought of math tests. ‘Do you mind if I tell you something else that’s worrying me?’

‘Shoot,’ said Rick Denlinger.

‘Every time I read the admissions statistics for some of the schools I want to get into, I end up feeling like the system is rigged against people who have families like mine.’

Rick Denlinger snorted. ‘Sounds like you’ve been listening to Bernie Sanders.’

Isaac frowned. ‘So you don’t think it’s true?’

Rick Denlinger spat. ‘I think college admissions are tough, but that good candidates always have a shot. Whatever fellows like Bernie Sanders and the rest of his leftist buddies say, the system is *not* rigged, unless you think it’s a problem that we have an economy that rewards smart people who work hard.’

‘Is that why you don’t like Donald Trump?’ Isaac said, recalling the skepticism toward the candidate the rich farmer had voiced at the Grange hall.

Denlinger tapped the gate. ‘Trump is interesting. He talks like a leftie, half the time. He goes after trade way too much for my tastes. But like all of the ugly stuff he says about Muslims and Mexicans, it’s just talk. He’s a capitalist, deep down. He’s rooting for our entrepreneurs. I don’t like him, but you better believe I’ll support him if he’s the nominee. He wants to strip away regulation and red tape. His win would set a fire under people’s bellies, move folks to take risks they never felt they could take under Obama. Would I prefer Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio?’

*Absolutely.* Am I sorry Mitt Romney’s not running for a second term? Every time I think about the fact that Romney lost in ‘12, I still feel like I got punched in the gut, and not just cause of how much money I gave to his campaign. Romney was such a sharp man. He would have been such a good president. But this is where we are. Trump’s going to be the nominee, and he’s going to make the left squeal, and he’s going to make lots of good Republicans like me uncomfortable. But wrong as he might be about some stuff on the margins, the fundamental principles he supports – capitalism, deregulation, lower taxation, *much* lower government spending – these are things America needs in order to respond to the problems in front of us. They’re the sorts of things a young fellow like you should be wanting to see more of, because they’re going to increase your opportunities.’

‘That makes sense,’ Isaac said.

Certainly, it all sounded reasonable enough when Rick Denlinger put it like that. Certainly, it comported nicely with Milton Friedman’s arguments. Still, Isaac couldn’t help wondering if at least part of the system – the parts that parceled out opportunity – was badly stacked against people like him. What happened to opportunity when the children of super hard-

working, super-smart people took all the slots at the best schools? Rick Denlinger would probably say that this was the system operating properly, that it would lead to the most capable people getting hired by the top companies, and that all of that would further advance the national interest. But was it *fair*? Milton Friedman would probably counter by reminding him that there was and never could be a Nirvana, and that all that counted was national productivity. So maybe he shouldn't worry so much about fairness, at least so long as he had a shot at being part of that fortunate top group.

And maybe, if Rick Denlinger begrudgingly rooted for Donald Trump, then Isaac ought to follow his lead. That night, instead of turning to his favorite novel, Isaac opened his phone and queued up a video of one of the man's rallies. For the first time, he didn't recoil from the ugliness of the crowd or the crudeness of the candidate's bluster. Trump's anger and roughness mirrored how people like Mark Beiler and Art Smucker talked. His account of a 'rigged system' expressed what many people believed about their lives – what *he* believed whenever he compared himself to people who had everything. And yet underneath it all – and underneath all Trump's business about 'border walls' which got fellows like Mark and Art Smucker so excited – was a dedication to capitalism, to the system that sustained his wealth, and that might spur Isaac to his own sort of success, so long as he could find his way to the right college. Which he would try to do. He'd try with all his might. And hopefully, with Rick Denlinger's help, he'd succeed.

*Clyde*

Friday afternoon, Clyde and his father had a difficult calving. So they got the chains out, crept toward the heaving mother, and hooked the chain to the tiny hooves protruding from the

heaving vulva. For twenty minutes, they worked on the calf, pulling when the mother pushed, resting when she rested. Finally, the placenta-veiled calf flopped into the straw. The mother whirled around, swung her head warningly, and Clyde and his father jumped back, slipped out of the pen, and took their place on the other side of the bars.

Thirty seconds passed, the calf lying motionless while the mother licked the tiny muzzle. But just as Clyde was about to start worrying, the little calf's back legs twitched. Clyde's father nodded. The mother licked the calf's back and shoulders, and the calf twisted her slender head, trying to follow her. And when the mother drew back, the calf tried to rise, tumbled, and tottered to her feet.

It was a bull calf, exactly what they didn't need – or what they wouldn't have needed if they were keeping the livestock. For several minutes, Clyde stood there, studying the wobbly, slick creature as the mother licked it. The sour odor of wet manure hung in the air, alongside the ripe, salty scent of the birth fluids. And when the mother got the last of the placenta sloughed off, she worked herself around so her udder was in front of the calf, and the little creature lurched forward. Then he latched on. Clyde had seen all of this too many times to count. Still, he marveled at the speed with which the newborn calf stood and took the teat, the deeply implanted knowledge of what he wanted.

He turned toward his father. The old man was staring fixedly at the bull calf.

He swallowed. 'Have you thought anymore about what we're going to do with the cows?'

The sinews in his father's neck tightened. 'You mean have I thought anymore about whether I think we should give up?'

‘Dad,’ Clyde said, patiently as he could manage, ‘you know that’s not what I want us to do.’

But the old man didn’t respond. He just pivoted on his heel and stalked from the calving barn. Clyde took off his cap and passed a hand over his scalp. Why was it that Isaac and his father both seemed so determined to defy his every attempt at reconciliation?

It was in the Lord’s hands, he knew. Still, it was so hard to take. So, there in the calving barn, he bowed his head and offered a prayer for all three generations of Baumans – for his stubborn father and his mixed-up son, and for the weariness that kept threatening to sweep back over him. Finished with his prayer, he headed up to the haymow, threw a few bales onto the rack, and then poked his head in the calving barn, just to check on the calf and its mother.

The mother was bleeding, bleeding just heavily enough to make him worry. She would probably be all right. He could check her again after lunch. But she was one of his favorites – and she would fetch a good price when they finally did have their livestock auction. He ducked into milking parlor and dialed the vet’s office. With everything he was dealing with that week, it would sure be nice to see good Dr. Lamborne.

Twenty minutes later, the vet’s dusty station wagon pulled up in front of the barn. Clyde waved and wandered over while Dr. Lamborne gathered up her equipment. He nodded stoutly at the bumper stickers. Yes, indeed, God did bless the whole world, no exceptions. Jesus had embraced everyone. But that did not mean he accepted every sort of conduct.

He led the vet inside, pointed her to the mother, who was still nursing the calf, even as the blood shone darkly on her backside.

‘She has a tear,’ the vet said quietly. ‘She’ll probably just need a few stitches, but I’ll need to tranquilize her to put them in.’

‘Do you want me to do it?’ said Clyde, swallowing at the cost of the medication.

The vet shook her head and smiled. She knelt, drew a short-barreled dart gun out of her bag, and pointed it through the bars. The gun clicked. The cow whirled around when the dart struck her flank. She flicked her tail, tossed her flanks the way she would if bothered by a horsefly. But the calf was still nursing away, so after a moment, the mother calmed down, and Clyde and vet settled in to wait for the tranquilizer to make its way through the cow’s bloodstream.

The suckling of the calf whispered through the barn. The ripe scent of the birth fluids washed up from the straw. Clyde’s shoulders unclenched a little. The calf was so spindly and fine.

What if he told Dr. Lamborne about Isaac? All at once, Clyde felt like he had to tell someone. And she was a Christian, and she was so sharp, so confident. She’d know how to counter the falseness of Isaac’s unbelief. But at the thought of the scale of Isaac’s sin, Clyde’s resolve crumbled. And what if what Art Smucker had said about the woman was true?

He turned. Dr. Lamborne was watching the mother, watching her intently. Her silver earrings shone. The fine lines of her face glowed in the light from the bulb. She was so good; she couldn’t possibly be so turned around. But what if she was? The vet swung toward him, frowning in concern.

‘Are you okay, Clyde?’

‘I’m fine,’ he managed.

Still, he felt her wondering. And the kindness in her green eyes struck him in some deep and tender place, and all the grief he’d been holding that week came rushing up, all the strain of the silence he’d enforced upon himself. He shook his head, sniffled once, and chuckled. He

thought that would do it. And then the grief swept back and caught him. He let out a great heaving gasp and jammed his hand against his mouth. Still, the ache kept spreading. He closed his eyes against the tears, hammered his fist against the feed cart to stifle the sob.

‘*Clyde*,’ the vet said. She slid toward him, touched his arm.

‘I’m sorry,’ he managed. ‘It’s just my boy. My son, Isaac. He’s not doing so well.’

She nodded gently.

He sniffled and tried to control himself, and still his anguish kept churning. ‘He’s all mixed up. He bought this phone, and it’s put all sorts of worldly ideas in his mind. He’s lost his faith. He says he don’t believe in the Lord.’

Through his tears, he glanced at the vet. Her face was gentle. Her eyes were encouraging. So he forced himself on.

‘He’s got it in his head that he can do whatever he wants, that he don’t have to think about other people. He’s so fixed on success, on making money, on doing *whatever* he wants,’ he repeated, veering away from the confession whose lewdness might make them both uncomfortable. ‘I don’t know what to do to get through to him. He’s just so wrapped up in his pride. It’s like he’s built this whole world for himself, where everything confirms what he wants to believe.’

‘He sounds like me when I was his age,’ the vet said.

‘Oh, I doubt you were like him,’ Clyde said, swallowing another flash of concern. ‘He’s so headstrong. He’s so argumentative.’

‘That was me at seventeen, all right.’

‘So what changed you?’

‘I went to college. I figured out I didn’t have all the answers. I started going to a good church. I started to recognize the value of service.’

Clyde blinked in disbelief. So maybe college *could* help some people in their faith, instead of substituting for it like all the ideas Isaac encountered on his phone?

‘Now what college did you go to?’ he said, wiping his nose on his arm.

‘Swarthmore. It’s near Philadelphia. It’s a school with a really great ethic of care and social justice.’

‘That’s what my boy needs. That’s what Isaac is missing.’ He swallowed. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know if there’s a good Mennonite church nearby, by any chance?’

The vet thought for a moment. ‘I believe there is. Yes.’

That was a blessing. ‘And is it hard to get in there? Is it expensive?’

‘Swarthmore’s very selective. And it has a very high sticker price, but there’s quite a bit of financial aid. And as it happens, an old *friend* of mine works in the admissions office. I could certainly ask her to take a look at your son’s application. Of course, it would all depend on whether he is qualified.’

‘Oh, he’s qualified all right,’ Clyde said, his excitement propelling him past the vet’s strange inflection of the word ‘friend.’ ‘And like I said, your college is exactly the kind of place he needs. One that’s focused on care for your neighbor. One with good churches.’

Dr. Lamborne nodded, but now her attention was focused on the mother. The cow was still standing, but her head was lolling. Another minute and she stumbled and knelt, and the calf skittered back. And then the mother was down. The vet slipped into the pen and the calf wobbled to the corner and stood there, helpless on its legs, pitiful, its fur still damp from the placenta. While the vet worked on the mother, Clyde knelt by the calf and whispered to the jittery creature.



‘Good boy. Sweet fellow. You’re all right. Your mother’s going to be just fine.’

And maybe college could be all right for Isaac. Maybe, at the right school, he would find himself moved back toward Scripture, back toward care for his neighbors, back toward the sacrifice of all his selfish desires. Maybe, at college, he could even find someone like Dr. Lamborne. Yes, indeedy.

‘Tell me the name of that college you went to again?’ he said, when Dr. Lamborne had finished stitching up the mother.

‘Swarthmore.’

‘Right. I knew it had “more” somewhere in the name. I’m going to tell Isaac all about that school.’

She smiled. ‘I’d like to meet your son, sometime.’

‘I’d really like him to meet you.’

‘Will you all be at Rick Denlinger’s open house tomorrow?’

Clyde frowned. Several of the fellows had mentioned the event at church Wednesday night, but given how things had been going lately, he wasn’t sure he needed to attend a celebration of the big farmer’s accomplishments.

‘We’ll see,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ said the vet, bowing her head as if she understood his hesitation.

She probably *did* understand it. She was like Lois; she didn’t miss anything. So maybe they would have to go to that daggone open house. It might be worth it just so Isaac could meet the vet. Even just having him encounter her example would be worth something. And she could tell him about her college, and maybe the boy would decide that he wanted to go there, and he would enroll, and learn, again, to care for other people, to sacrifice, to imitate Christ’s example.

At the table that evening, Isaac's pride hardly bothered Clyde. That night, after praying with Lois and telling her about the vet's description of her godly-sounding college, he slept well for the first time since Isaac's confession of his apostasy.

*Isaac*

Thursday evening, Isaac traded pictures with two new men on *Slider*, labored away at his math problems, and read up on the Ivy League. Cornell, where one of Rick Denlinger's sons attended, admitted ten percent of its applicants. Those odds were still terrible, but they were better than Stanford or Harvard. And there were various state schools that also, apparently, offered decent educations. Penn State. The University of Pittsburgh. Even Temple, in Philadelphia, seemed to be improving in the rankings, though Isaac did not know what to think about the idea of going to school in a city as big as Philly.

All through his lessons in the schoolhouse on Friday, he tried to imagine himself alone on an unfamiliar campus, trying not to fail his math classes or seem like a bumpkin. But all the while, his chest tightened as he anticipated the gazes of scorn that young people from polished and prosperous families would probably train upon him. It was one thing to walk the quad of Franklin and Marshall at dusk, and altogether another to sit in a classroom with those flawless young men and women. (He couldn't imagine how he'd feel sitting at the outdoor meal with Elio and Oliver attend in Rome, where everyone is talking about complicated subjects in multiple languages, and holding themselves with matchless poise and comportment, and otherwise seeming flawless.)

But he had to try and fit in. He would try and fit in. That weekend, he vowed he would suggest a meetup with one of the handsome men he was messaging. He would find ways to break

the strain of life in the tenant house under his parents' scrutiny and judgement. Friday evening, he planned to jump onto the app as soon as supper was finished. But at the meal that evening, his father suggested *out of nowhere* that Isaac might enroll in online coursework to complete the year of high school the Mennonite schoolhouse couldn't offer. He'd even allowed that they might install some sort of work room with internet in one of the barns.

'That's how the Amish do,' his father said. 'And maybe, if we get you set up with an office, you could leave your phone there when you're not working on schooling.'

'Maybe,' said Isaac. 'I'd have to have the office, first.'

His father stuck out his lip and nodded. Then he'd reached around to his desk, produced a scrap of paper, peered at it for a moment, and asked Isaac if he'd ever heard of a college called 'Swarth-a-more.'

'I hear it's a real good school,' his father added. 'The vet, Dr. Lamborne, she went there. And she's going to be at the Denlinger's open house. So maybe I can introduce you if you come tomorrow.'

'I hadn't really been planning on it,' Isaac mumbled.

Now that he was out to his parents, their evident unease – and outright shame – reflected on him whenever they stood together in public. He gritted his way through services at the meetinghouse and did all he could to avoid being seen with them otherwise. He certainly had no interest in walking with his father through a crowd of farmers.

But after the meal that evening, he looked up the college that his father had mentioned, and it turned out that, even though his father had mangled the name, *Swarthmore* was one of the top liberal arts schools in the country. It wasn't part of the Ivy League, but it seemed like the sort of institution that was worth investigating, at least. And after all the buildup that spring, he *was*

sort of curious to see what the interior of Rick Denlinger's new parlor looked like. So, when the milking was finished Saturday morning, he told his father that he had decided he was going to come to the open house, after all.

Bitter as his grandfather still was about selling the cows, Isaac had expected him to make some sort of excuse to avoid the open house. But at ten o'clock, the old man muttered that they ought to get going if they were going to get to Denlingers' before all the donuts ran out, and all three of them piled into his father's pickup and set out across the township.

All spring, Isaac had been tracking the construction of the Denlinger's expansion. Still, that morning, the new milking parlor seemed especially dazzling. It dwarfed the old parlor and bank barn. Its red siding glowed against the white paint of the other barns. Its aluminum siding sparkled. Isaac's grandfather harrumphed. Isaac's father let out a low whistle. Isaac bit back a smile. Now that Rick Denlinger was backing him, he had a stake in the success of the new operation. He very much wanted Denlinger's latest investment to succeed.

At the bottom of the ridge, Isaac's father eased in behind Elvin Beiler's weathered Dodge Ram. Every farmer in the township was there, farmers from all over the Midstate and beyond. On the walk down the Denlinger lane, Isaac spotted three Maryland license plates, one from Delaware, and two each from New York state and Virginia. When they reached the tent, Isaac's father headed inside for donuts and coffee. Isaac followed, nodding to Nevin Keener and Mark Beiler and doing a quick check of the rest of the tent for Luke Sauder, not that expected to see him. Everyone knew the Harshbargers worked their hired help hard.

It was while scanning the crowd for Luke Sauder that Isaac spotted the lanky young man standing beside Rick Denlinger. His sharply-etched features matched the rich farmer's. But where Rick Denlinger's face was sunburned, the young man's face was pale. His ears were

pierced and hung with round black earrings. The markings of some sort of tattoo snaked down his arm from under the rolled-up sleeve of his flannel shirt, and the hair on his head was buzzed. It had to be one of Rick Denlinger's sons.

As if sensing Isaac's gaze, the fellow turned. Isaac jerked toward the food table. The last thing he wanted was for Rick Denlinger's son to catch him staring and take him for the bumpkin he still very much feared he was. He scowled at the mockingly glutinous donuts and poured himself a cup of coffee. When he dared to turn back toward Rick Denlinger, the young man beside him was tapping away on his phone.

The fellow was almost handsome, but something about him seemed different. It wasn't just his pallor, or his tattoos, or even his earrings. Maybe it was just the way he held himself; he was slouching a bit as he stood there by his father. Or perhaps it was something deeper.

What if he was gay? Of course, the tattoos and earrings didn't mean anything definitive: plenty of straight fellows sported such things. Still, something about the anxious way the young man held himself suggested some sort of affinity. What if he was on *Slider*? Isaac cursed himself for leaving his phone in his Bible cover. He'd done it on purpose, to prevent himself from turning to it in boredom or irritation and thereby drawing the attention of the other members.

The young man turned, and Isaac ducked out of the tent. He'd stared enough for one morning. He needed to seem at ease – as confident and ambitious as Rick Denlinger. Still, Isaac kept wondering about the young man with the tattoos. Still, he kept feeling hopelessly uncouth and uncultured. Outside, he circled around to the lawn that gave onto the lane that ran between the farmhouse and the new parlor. A wiry, mustachioed man Isaac didn't recognize guarded the entrance to the new parlor. A cluster of 'English' farmers stood in the middle of the lane. Snatches of their conversation floated toward Isaac. *Cost and forecast, mortgage and milk price.*

*Commodities. Manure management. Migrant labor. Daggone regulation. Donald Trump, and, of course, the poor farmer.* Never mind that *restrictions* on migrant labor were a form of the very regulation farmers claimed to despise. And for all their complaints of poverty, very few of these men were truly impoverished. *Cash* poor, perhaps. Struggling in the face of the milk price. But there were plenty of brand-new pickups parked on the road, even with the milk price where it was. Quite a few of the fellows who claimed to be and probably even *felt* poor had plenty of assets locked up in their farms and livestock.

The clouds had parted slightly. The sun shone weakly on the aluminum roof of Rick Denlinger's new parlor. The red metal siding gleamed. It really was a fine setup. Rick Denlinger ought to be very proud. Was he equally proud of the young fellow beside him – if the young man actually was his son? Did Rick Denlinger mind those tattoos, those earrings? Was he glad the fellow was back from college? And what would he think if his son struck up a very close friendship with a certain young former Mennonite, soon-to-be former dairy farmer?

Isaac was already imagining his first date with the young man he dearly hoped was Rick Denlinger's son when Denlinger strode around the tent's opposite corner, the tattooed young man behind them. Both men moved with the unhurried ease of fellows who knew they'd already won, though while Rick Denlinger held himself erect, the younger man walked with his head bowed, as if to deflect at least a portion of his own difference or his family's triumph.

*Let him be like me, Isaac thought. And let him like me. And when we talk, let me not make a fool of myself the way I did when I visited Martin's apartment.* A wave of shame heaved through him at the memory. But already, the crowd of farmers was streaming out of the tent and past him toward the new parlor. He hurried forward to stake out a good spot to watch the unveiling. The crowd fanned out, jostling and muttering. The air that hovered over the barnyard

shifted from barely-veiled bitterness toward begrudging excitement. Rick Denlinger whispered something unintelligible to the mustachioed man beside him and then stepped forward, levered the brim of his cap and toed the gravel while he waited for the conversations to die down. But folks just kept gabbing away until old Mowry Rohrer stepped forward and let out two fierce, high-pitched whistles.

Rick Denlinger nodded at Mowry and cleared his throat. 'I want to thank you all for coming this morning,' he began, as the last fragments of conversation rose and dissolved. 'Thank you, too, for being such good neighbors.'

A few theatrical coughs rose from the crowd.

'I just want to say a few very brief words of thanks to everybody that helped make this happen. To Lester Craul at Unitrust Bank and Aquilla Nissley with Nissley Construction. To my crew here. None of this could have happened without them. Thank you, fellows.'

A muffled grumble went through the crowd. Isaac glanced around for any of Rick Denlinger's migrant workers, but there was no sign of them.

'And to my wife, Vi.' The rich farmer turned, and a petite, neatly permed woman in a green blazer stepped forward. 'Honey, you're one in a million. Thank you.' His hawkish features softened. 'And to my son, Reagan.'

So it *was* his son.

'It's nice to have you with us today.'

The tattooed young man glanced up briefly and shot the crowd a nervous smile. The sun sparkled off the black circles in his earlobes. He was handsome, even though he was maybe a little too thin, and even though his shoulders seemed so hunched.

“We’re going to open things up now,” Rick Denlinger continued. “I hope you enjoy yourselves. Don Ressler from Hanover Equipment will have a booth in the back of the parlor if you’re interested in getting more information on what we’ve done.”

He turned and pushed open one of the big red doors. The mustachioed man beside him handled the other. Isaac followed the crowd inside, keeping an eye out for Rick Denlinger’s son. The stable was magnificent, bright and high-ceilinged, with thick rubber mats on each free stall. Vented ductwork snaked between the girders across the ceiling.

“Is that air-conditioning?” said the Amish farmer to Isaac’s left, gaping at the ducts.

“It sure looks like it,” Elvin Beiler said.

But it was not the air-conditioning that stopped the farmers short at the doorways that joined the stable to the spotless new milking parlor. What seemed to be an enormous carousel stood in the middle of the space. The circular arrangement was composed of 16 stanchions. A gleaming chrome tower stood behind each stanchion stall, a bright metal arm jutting from each tower. Isaac peered at the array in astonishment. He’d never seen such a setup, but he thought he knew what it was.

“I don’t believe it,” Elvin Beiler said, confirming Isaac’s hunch. “Denlinger put in robotic milkers.”

In each of the three doorways that gave onto the parlor from the southern stables, farmers shook their heads in envious awe. The chrome towers formed the foundation of the automated system. From the end of each metallic, robotic arm sprouted the rubber fingers of the hoses that in the Bauman parlor Isaac and his father manually fitted to each cow’s teats. Each robotic arm also held a spray nozzle.



In the farming magazines, Isaac had seen photos of these setups in action. When it was time for milking, the cows would amble into their stanchions and the arms would swing to life, spraying the udders, drying them with bursts of warm air, and then fitting the hoses onto the teats. With such a setup, there would be no need for more migrant workers, no need for more workers of any kind. But though Isaac knew he ought to feel nothing but unquestioning admiration for the efficiency of Rick Denlinger's setup, when he stared at the nearest robotic tower and arm and tried to channel the rich farmer's arguments and summon an air of purest worship for the workings of the market, he still felt small – which was simply an irrationally emotional response to the newness of the robots.

'They don't work,' Charles Groff muttered. 'Herb Shenk tried robotic milkers a couple years ago and his cows didn't like 'em, and he ended tearing 'em out.'

'But Herb's setup wasn't anything like this one,' Elvin said.

Isaac nodded. If Rick Denlinger had installed a robotic setup, it was almost certain to run smoothly.

'How much do think this cost?' Isaac asked, following the men toward the carousel.

The question repeated itself as more farmers streamed into the parlor and spread out around the carousel. A neatly printed sign taped to each chrome tower read, 'Please Do Not Touch.' Still, some of the farmers stepped into the stalls

'Whatever it cost, Denlinger's got it,' Elvin Beiler muttered. 'Besides, if they work, these robotic setups pay for themselves. It's only supposed to take one guy to keep 'em running, so your labor costs go way down, and with these robots, you can milk 24-hours-a-day. The cows just trot in whenever they feel like it. Those are the computers, right there,' Elvin added, nodding

toward what seemed like a pair of large closets with glossy blue doors in the center of the carousel.

The place did not feel like a milking parlor. It did not feel like a barn. It felt more like the operating theater in the large-animal veterinary clinic over in Chester County. It was the future of farming, a future that had no place for small family dairy farms. And that was *good*, Isaac reminded himself. If Rick Denlinger was right (and surely, he *was* right), then the efficiency of robots would obviously make America's economy even more productive. Why, then, in the face of the metallic array, did he still feel so strangely small?

'I'll tell you what I'm going to do,' said Charles Groff. 'I'm going to go talk to that salesman. I want a price tag. If this is the future, I want to know exactly what it costs. Who knows,' he added, turning to Art Smucker, who'd stomped up beside them. 'Maybe by next year you'll have one of these setups in your parlor, Art?'

Art Smucker just shook his head and stared darkly at the carousel.

The big farmer's odious presence was all the spur Isaac need to get moving. He followed Charles Groff along the outskirts of the parlor, trying to hold his head as high, trying not to seem daunted. All around the barn, farmers just kept shaking their heads, pushing their caps back, letting out low whistles and murmurs of disbelief. Isaac passed his father and, briefly, met his gaze. His father shook his head and grinned resignedly. Isaac narrowed his eyes. It was just like his father to smile wearily and submissively in the face of someone else's triumph. Isaac edged his way into the group in front of the equipment salesman's table. The mustachioed equipment salesman wouldn't give a price for the robotic system.

'Then how about this, then?' Charles Groff asked. 'How much would it cost if I wanted to build something exactly like this on my farm?'

‘It always varies by operation,’ the mustachioed salesman said firmly. ‘But if you’re interested, I’d be more than happy to come over to your place and give you a price.’

Isaac reached for a brochure, accidentally took three, and dropped one. Steady as was he was trying to seem that morning, he was still clumsy.

‘Two million dollars,’ Elvin Beiler muttered bitterly, shuffling in behind them. ‘That’s the number I heard. And that’s just for the robots. Darryl Rineer says Rick has at least another two million in the barns.’

Four million. Four million, *and* Rick Denlinger had to buy all those new cows. And meanwhile, his parents were barely keeping up with their modest mortgage. But Milton Friedman would simply say that was how the market worked. The future belonged to the biggest, most efficient farmers. Everyone else had to figure out how to labor alongside and profit from robots *or* ally themselves with those prosperous and farsighted operators who could afford robotic arrays. Isaac turned, searching for Rick Denlinger. The rich farmer stood by one of the doorways, leaning against the wall. Isaac waved and hurried toward him, still trying to summon some degree of the man’s confidence while trying not to seem to be trying too hard, in case Rick Denlinger’s son was watching. And it struck him, as he studied Rick Denlinger’s confident posture, that the rich farmer with his immaculate farmhouse and state-of-the-art milking parlor wasn’t *so* unlike Elio’s father in the novel he loved.

‘Good to see you, Isaac.’

‘It’s good to see you, Mr. Denlinger.’

‘None of that. Call me Rick.’

Isaac flushed with pleasure of the intimacy. ‘This is quite an impressive setup.’

‘Thank you. It certainly cost enough.’

Isaac very nearly asked the amount. But he had to be careful. Instead, he said, ‘A bunch of folks are saying that this is the future of dairying.’

The rich farmer chuckled. ‘That’s what I keep telling myself when the bills come in.’

Isaac swallowed. ‘I talked to my dad some more about college last night. He seems to think maybe I should do my last year online.’

Rick Denlinger’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Does he now? Good for your old pop. He always has been ahead of the curve.’

‘Well, not compared to *you*.’

Rick Denlinger smiled. ‘He certainly seems a lot more farsighted than some fellows I could name.’

‘Possibly,’ said Isaac, brushing aside the matter of his father’s archaic and blinkered convictions. ‘It’s certainly nice that your son could be here.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said the rich farmer. ‘His mother coaxed him down from New York City. It takes quite a bit to get him to join us these days, but we’re sure glad he’s with us today.’

*New York City*. Images of the skyline blazed against the chrome of the robotic parlor.

‘So this would be the son who attends NYU, not Cornell, is that right?’

‘That’s right.’ Rick Denlinger chuckled. ‘Reagan has never liked to study as much as his older brother. But he’s got other gifts.’ He glanced around. ‘I’d introduce you, but I don’t know where he got to. Marie?’ he called. ‘Have you seen Reagan?’

Isaac turned, expecting Rick Denlinger to be addressing his wife. Instead, a younger woman with short hair strode up to join them.

‘I saw him a minute ago,’ the woman said. ‘I think he might have gone out to the barnyard.’

‘Hang on, let me text him,’ said the rich farmer. ‘Marie, do you know Isaac Bauman?’ he said, while he tapped away on his phone. ‘He and his father and grandfather run a dairy over on Penn Charter road.’

To Isaac’s surprise, the woman beamed. ‘Is your father by any chance Clyde Bauman?’

‘Yes?’ Isaac said, still trying to place the woman.

‘Well, then I think I was just talking to him about you. I’m the new veterinarian at Dr. Hess’s practice, Marie Lamborne,’ she said, recognizing Isaac’s puzzlement. ‘I stopped at your family’s farm yesterday to put some stitches in a cow. Your father wanted to know all about my alma mater, Swarthmore College. He seems to think you ought to apply.’

Rick Denlinger grinned. ‘See, I knew the two of you would hit it off.’

The woman turned as a tall woman with long, brown hair slowed beside her. ‘And this is my wife, Laura Hartzler.’

*Your wife?* Stunned though he was by the casualness of this admission, Isaac managed to respond calmly.

‘It’s very nice to meet you both.’ Still, he could feel his cheeks reddening. He prayed that Mark Beiler and Nevin Keener and his grandfather weren’t watching. But why should he care what they thought? These were his people, people who weren’t beholden to the repressive views the congregation insisted upon. ‘How did you two meet?’ Isaac asked, as if he were asking Mary Elizabeth how she’d met the fellow he’d heard she’d started courting.

The veterinarian’s smile broadened. ‘We met at Swarthmore. Laura here is how I ended up becoming a Quaker.’

‘You’re *Quakers?*’ This time, Isaac did fail to disguise his shock. ‘I didn’t know there were any Quakers left.’

Both of the women looked amused.

‘There are still a few of us,’ said the veterinarian’s wife.

Isaac nodded, trying to cover over his ignorance. ‘I’m guessing you didn’t tell my dad that you’re a Quaker?’”

The veterinarian’s brow furrowed in concern. ‘No, I don’t believe I did.’

‘I figured,’ Isaac said, ordering himself not to look over his shoulder. Still, his voice shook as he spoke. ‘He has very little tolerance for anyone who’s not plain. He has very little tolerance for anyone who does anything that goes against the norm.’ He swallowed and forced himself to continue. ‘When I told him I’m gay, he responded very judgmentally.’

Having uttered the electrifying word, Isaac couldn’t help glancing around. Mercifully, none of the members of the congregation were anywhere close by. And the farmers who were in the vicinity were entirely absorbed with the robotic milkers.

‘The plain churches still have a long way to go, don’t they,’ said the veterinarian.

‘Not just the plainest ones, neither,’ Rick Denlinger said, with a sigh. ‘Our church is still all bent out of shape over the issue of gay membership. But then I guess churches always have to argue about something.’

The veterinarian’s wife touched Isaac’s arm. ‘I’m glad you were able to tell your father,’ she said. ‘It took me a long time to tell my folks.’

Isaac summoned his gravest, most knowing nod. ‘It needed to be done. I was just getting so tired of all the dishonesty.’

‘That’s certainly the sort of thing you’ll want to talk about in your college application essays,’ the veterinarian said.

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Rick Denlinger. He grinned at someone behind Isaac. ‘There you are.’

Isaac turned. Here, at last, the rich farmer's son sidled up next to them. Up close, the young man's face seemed even paler. Dark purple circles hung under his eyes. But the brightness of his eyes, combined with his pallor, only made him seem more alluring.

'Reagan, you remember Dr. Lamborne and her wife, Laura?'

'It's great to see you again,' the young man said, smiling warmly at both of the women.

'And this is Isaac Bauman. He attends one of the plain congregations, but he's very ambitious. He wants to go to college. I told him you might have some advice on that front.'

Isaac straightened and tried not to flush too hotly.

'It's nice to meet you,' said Reagan Denlinger.

'It's nice to meet you,' said Isaac, trying to ignore the amusement that flashed in Reagan Denlinger's eyes. The fellow probably *did* take him for a bumpkin – and who could blame him, dressed as he was like a farmer?

If only he was wearing his skinny jean and V-neck tee-shirt instead of his coveralls and a cap that didn't even fit him properly. If only he'd never been poisoned by wheat. If only he'd never had to worry about being punished for his longing. (If only had someone as successful as Rick Denlinger for a father.)

'I've got to go check on a few things,' said the rich farmer, 'so I'm going to have to leave you all, but Laura and Marie, we want to have you over for dinner some night. And Isaac, you keep me posted on what you're planning with this whole online school thing, you hear?'

'I certainly will,' said Isaac. His sense of unworthiness receded for a moment and deepened again as the rich farmer strode away. He turned to Reagan Denlinger, doing his best to ignore his shame. 'How do you like NYU?'

‘I love it,’ the young man said. ‘I love Washington Square, and the school has a such a fabulous performance studies department. And there’s an amazing queer theory program, too.’

‘That sounds amazing,’ said Isaac. ‘I’d love to take a course in queer theory.’ He turned to Marie Lamborne. ‘Do you think they have those at Swarthmore?’

‘I would think,’ she said.

‘They absolutely do,’ Reagan Denlinger interjected. ‘They have courses in queer theory at every good school.’

Isaac glanced toward the group of farmers beside them. All of them still seemed preoccupied, so he steeled himself and repeated his news. ‘I’m so interested in classes like that because I just came out to my parents.’

‘Good for you,’ said Reagan Denlinger. ‘How did they take it?’

‘They’re plain Mennonites, so not very well.’

Reagan Denlinger nodded. ‘I was lucky. I think my parents always sort of knew about me.’

So he *was* gay.

Marie Lamborne touched his arm. ‘We’re going to leave you fellows. But, Isaac, it was very nice to meet you. And please let me know when you start to put together your college applications.’

‘I will,’ said Isaac. ‘It was very nice to meet you, too. And you,’ he said, smiling at the veterinarian’s wife.

‘Yes,’ the woman said. Her gaze was warm as it swept over him.

Isaac watched the pair as they made their way past the carousel toward the doors that gave onto the lane. They were married, and they lived in Kuernerville Township, and Rick



Denlinger approved of them, just like he approved of his son. It was remarkable that such tolerance for difference could exist in the midst of so much anxious judgement and conformity. But then maybe tolerance was always easy for people who had everything, people who had nothing to lose by being generous. Their status was assured by the sums in their bank accounts. So maybe even systems of kindness and decency were rigged or tilted toward people who were prosperous.

He turned to Reagan Denlinger. ‘Do you mind if I ask you something more about your studies?’

Reagan Denlinger glanced up from his phone. ‘Not at all.’

‘What sort of things do you study in your classes on queer theory?’

‘We look at a lot of things. Queer sexual practices. Queer kinship formations. Strategies that marginalized people can follow in order to thrive in the face of capitalist violence.’

*Capitalist violence.* That sounded like a view that was entirely opposed to freedom of the market.

Isaac eyed Reagan Denlinger carefully. ‘Does your father know you think that capitalism is violent?’

Reagan Denlinger shrugged. ‘We don’t talk much about politics. He knows it makes me crazy – sorry, *bananas* – that he’s a Republican. And he knows I’m a socialist, but I think he tells himself that it’s like a phase, that I’ll grow out of it once I get older. When I informed him that I’m going to vote for Bernie Sanders in the primary, he just looked at me and asked if I knew that we already have an entitlement crisis in this country. Whatever that means.’

Isaac had no idea. Still, he nodded knowingly. So Reagan Denlinger was a *socialist*. It made a certain sense: his father handed him everything he wanted, so he probably supposed that it could be that way for everyone.

*Why couldn't it be?* Isaac wondered, suddenly. Milton Friedman would say that it was because there could never be a Nirvana, and maybe that had been true when he made all of his videos. But would that still be the case when the bulk of labor was accomplished by robots? If the robots did the milking and driving and deliveries and all sorts of stuff, wouldn't that give people all the time in the world to enroll in classes in queer theory, performance studies – or just to watch a lot of porn and read and re-read the novels they loved? And maybe that would be good. Maybe that was the future. (Though probably studying these subjects with other people in college would be far healthier than locking yourself in your bedroom and staring at your phone all the time.)

'I wish I could enroll in college now,' said Isaac.

'How much more time do you have?'

'Another fifteen months.'

Reagan nodded. 'I know it's awful here. But it will go fast. Anyhow, that was how it was for me.'

Isaac sighed and stared at the gleaming robotic milkers. 'I hope you're right.'

Reagan Denlinger pulled out his phone. 'Listen, it was really nice to meet you, Isaac, but I should probably get going soon. I have a paper I need to finish this weekend.'

'I understand,' said Isaac.

He shook his head when Reagan asked him if he was on any of the big social media sites.

‘It’s probably for the best,’ said Reagan. ‘They’re all trying to steal our identities, anyway. What’s your number?’

He entered it in his phone when Isaac offered it.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘It was so nice to meet you, Isaac.’

‘You too,’ said Isaac, beaming.

When Reagan Denlinger started for the doors, Isaac very nearly asked him if he’d ever studied economics at college or watched any videos by Milton Friedman. But he had a feeling he knew the answer. And he didn’t want to push his luck. He stared intently at the robotic milkers. He’d wait until the next time they talked to ask more about what, exactly, ‘capitalist violence’ involved.

As soon as he thought it was safe to turn, Isaac pivoted and tracked Reagan Denlinger as he crossed the back of the parlor. The crown of the young man’s head gleamed in the fluorescent lights. The tattoos shone on his arms. How fortunate *he* was, how lucky, and how certain in the convictions that contradicted every tenet of free-market economics, all the careful strategic assumptions his father had employed in constructing his state-of-the-art robotic milking parlor.

Surely, Rick Denlinger knew more about how the world was than his privileged and cosseted son. But privileged as he was, Reagan Denlinger was not protected from every sort of violence. He was still gay or queer or whatever he called it, and goodness knew that plenty of people in Kuernerville Township, and all over the United States, wanted nothing to do with queerness, or gayness, or *any* form of difference. So Reagan Denlinger had to know something about the anguish of conformity and the force of confusion. Just not enough to make him humble. Not enough to make him doubt that at nineteen, he could know everything.

He seemed so confident in his outlook – every bit as confident as father was in his endorsement of the markets and the fundamental entrepreneurialism of Donald Trump.

So who was right? How was he, Isaac Bauman, supposed to figure out what was right where economics were concerned? How was he supposed to balance the thoughtfully reasoned, diametrically opposed views of people like Rick Denlinger and Milton Friedman against people like Bernie Sanders and Rick Denlinger’s son? Maybe he didn’t have to balance them? Maybe all he needed to do was figure out what he needed to do to get ahead.

*Maybe*, thought Isaac. But that conclusion still left him dissatisfied. He wanted to understand. He wanted to anticipate what was coming. Production was changing so quickly, changing even here in Kuenerville Township, whether people wanted to admit it, or not. And if farmers didn’t change, they *were* going to get plowed under – or, at least, that was what Rick Denlinger said, and perhaps what he wanted. And yet every time Isaac started to criticize the man for his rapaciousness, he thought, again, of how productive he was, how efficient was his operation, and how beneficial economists like Milton Friedman argued that such productivity was to people who just wanted clean milk, or any other product, at low prices.

In college, he’d figure it out. In college, he’d learn which of these views was most correct. In college, he’d study queer theory. He’d learn how to conduct himself with Reagan Denlinger’s easygoing confidence.

*So please let me get in*, he begged the universe. *Please let me get in somewhere good. Stanford. Swarthmore. Anywhere that will give me what I need – and please, please, please help me to make enough money so that I won’t be plowed under.*

Finished with his entreaty, Isaac shuffled through the rear stable and out the back doors. He hesitated when he stepped into barnyard and spotted his father. The last thing he needed

while he was dreaming of college and freedom was more of his father's judgment. But where else was he going to go? He'd talked to everyone else he cared to speak to at the auction. He shuffled across the barnyard. When he stopped at the gate, his father didn't turn; he just kept staring at the heifers milling about in the barnyard, the calving barn and the 'old' parlor looming beyond them.

'That's quite a setup Denlinger has in there, ain't it?' his father said.

'It's certainly impressive.'

His father pushed back his seed cap and nodded. 'Do you know what I found myself wondering in there?'

Isaac waited, preparing himself for another dreary verse from the Bible.

'What's going to happen when it's us against the robots?'

It was a good question. Still, Isaac rejected it on reflex, out of hostility to his father.

'I imagine we'll find ways to work alongside them,' Isaac said. 'I wouldn't be surprised if robots create *all sorts* of new jobs.'

'Maybe,' his father said. 'Or maybe they'll just put half the country out of work.'

'I very much doubt that,' Isaac said, though, truly, he had no idea.

'I wonder,' said his father.

Isaac didn't know about the robots. All he knew was that the waves of gloom rolling from the man's shoulders were stultifying – they seemed to join frustration with the carousel of robotic milkers to frustration with every form of change and progress, including those that were not wrong.

'Dr. Lamborne's wife was very nice,' he said, to counter his father's tiresome air of self-pity.

His father whirled toward him. ‘Her *wife*?’

‘Oh, haven’t you met her?’ Isaac said, smiling primly ‘Apparently, she is some sort of Quaker.’

‘Lord, have mercy,’ his father mumbled.

Isaac turned and fixed the man with a look of unsparing judgement. His father shook his head. He seemed like he was about to trot out another verse. So Isaac tried to seem even more imperious and triumphant. He was unsure of all sorts of questions about economics and politics, but he had no doubts whatsoever about the rightness of his identity.

‘I’m going to go see if there are any of those donuts left,’ his father mumbled, his expression wilting.

‘Enjoy,’ Isaac said brightly. He turned back to the Holsteins milling beyond the gate. A low barn stood beyond it. His father was so innocent, so fixated on a view of the world that had nothing to do with how life actually was in 2016. But surely, faithful delusions like his father’s would erode in time. The senseless myths that had long blinkered vast swaths of the country would be stripped away, and there would be nothing left for people to dwell on but the fullness of the opportunities in front of them – or on all the opportunities that were being taken away by robots.

Isaac lifted his gaze. Jet trails streaked across the zenith, the white plumes of cloud flowing from glittering planes that surged across the continent from one splendid city to another. Someday – if he was fortunate – he would fly routinely like that. He would jet back and forth across the continent, perhaps even across the whole globe. And he would not have to think about what men like his father thought. He would not have to reckon with any of Kuernerville

Township's idiocy. Whatever happened on small farms or small, dull business, he would succeed by aligning himself with the prosperous and triumphant.

The gravel crunched. Isaac turned and froze as Art Smucker lumbered to a stop beside him. The grim farmer spat once, tucked his fingers in the belt loops of his coveralls, and spat a second time. Usually, when people stood so close beside you, they *spoke*, but Art just stood there. A third time, he spat, a rich spray. How did one man have so much saliva? Surely, now, he would say *something*. But instead of speaking, the man just took his thumb, scraped it against his stubbled chin, and then folded his arms.

'What did you think of Denlinger's setup?' Isaac ventured, finally.

The big man spat again. 'It ought to be illegal.'

'I'm sorry?'

'We can't compete with that. There's no way we can compete.'

Isaac turned. The man's expression was dark. He tried to choose his words carefully. 'I guess the way I look at it is we don't have to compete. There are other things we can do.'

Art Smucker snorted at this. 'There's other things *you* can do. What about me? I'm fifty years old. If I sell my cows, you think I'm going to go find a new job? If I have to sell, I'm finished.'

'I very much doubt that,' said Isaac. 'I'm sure there are a number of jobs that would suit you nicely.'

But the tension bunched in the man's brows and shoulders kept him from invoking the concept of comparative advantage *or* suggesting that the man go on a diet and either enroll in college or find a trade in the service industry.

Again, Art Smucker spat.

‘I guess we’ll see,’ said Isaac. ‘But I should get going.’

The door to the calving barn opened and a trim figure in rubber boots and spotless coveralls started across the barnyard toward the ‘old’ milking parlor. The brown skin of the man’s cheek flashed above the blue collar. It was Jorge, Rick Denlinger’s new assistant manager.

Art Smucker stiffened, drew in his breath sharply.

*Turn around*, Isaac thought inwardly, willing Jorge back into the calving barn.

Oblivious, the man kept right on walking behind the line of Holsteins, moving slowly, deliberately, one foot dragging against the concrete.

*‘Go back to your country.’*

Art Smucker’s shout thundered across the barnyard.

Isaac froze. Jorge glanced anxiously over his shoulder, and continued on toward the ‘old’ parlor, quickening his pace, but still limping.

Art Smucker grabbed the gate and shook it. The clang of the metal rang against the concrete flooring of the barnyard. ‘Don’t you hear me? Can’t you speak *English?*’

Jorge turned again, rank alarm on his face this time. As Art Smucker began clambering over the fence, the worker pivoted and started back toward the calving barn, moving quickly, but still slowed by the hitch in his gait.

‘That’s right,’ Art Smucker bellowed as jumped onto the ground. ‘*Get out of here. Go back to Mexico. Go work on some fucking farm down there.*’

*You should do something*, Isaac thought. But the farmer was so large. And noxious as the man’s speech was, Isaac wasn’t about to confront it directly or put himself in harm’s way. He had his future to think about, after all.



The employee was ten feet from the calving barn. But Art Smucker wasn't stopping. He tore across the barnyard. Again, Jorge glanced behind him, rank fear on his face, fear which Isaac recognized all too well from his years of anxious self-monitoring. If only he had his phone; then he could record this and take it to the proper authorities. But all he had in his pockets of his overalls were some old tissues, a rubber band, and a few strands of lint.

Jorge was almost to the door, but Art Smucker was close on his heels.

'Stop,' Isaac cried weakly just as a cry rose behind him.

'Whoa, Artie. Hang on.'

Isaac turned just as his father charged past.

'Whoa, Artie. Whoa, now.'

But Art Smucker didn't turn. He lunged forward, catching Jorge by the arm just as the man opened the door, and pulling him to the ground.

'Get off of me,' Jorge cried in high, clear English.

'You don't fucking belong here,' Art Smucker cried, pinning Jorge to the ground and looming over him. 'This isn't your country.'

'Get off of me,' Jorge cried a second time.

'Art,' Isaac's father bellowed again, struggling over the fence and running again as soon as he was on his feet.

Isaac put his hand on the gate, uncertain now about whether he should follow his father. The cows had edged back, giving him a clear view of Art Smucker as he started to pummel Jorge's face.

'Art,' Isaac's father bellowed.

Art Smucker glanced up, once, his face blank with fury, and resumed his attack. Jorge squirmed under him, doing his best to shield his face. And still, Isaac's father kept running, lowering his big shoulder and tackling Art, knocking him off Jorge and onto the ground. Both men rolled around, struggling to find a hold, their matching coveralls rendering them momentarily indistinguishable. And still, Isaac remained where he was. But if he just kept standing there, he'd probably seem like a coward. So as Jorge struggled to his feet, and Isaac's father grappled with Art Smucker, Isaac hopped over the gate. Jorge glanced once at the men as they struggled on the concrete and then hurried toward the door to the calving barn, his face bloodied, his foot dragging heavily behind him.

Elvin Beiler and Charles Groff rushed past, and Isaac hurried forward behind them. His father and Art Smucker struggled on, one man on top for a moment, then the other, their forms still almost indistinguishable, they were both so flushed and so large. Finally, Isaac's father rolled on top of Art Smucker and pinned him to the concrete.

'Brother, you can't treat folks that way,' Isaac's father said, gasping, his chest heaving. 'It's not *Christian* to treat them that way.'

Art's face shone scarlet as he broke through and swung for Isaac's father's face. The blow knocked Isaac's father back. He shook his head once, and then, to Isaac's astonishment, his father started swinging, taking aim at Art Smucker's face, still straddling him. The blows rained down with such force that the man had to cover his head.

'Clyde.' Charles Groff's voice rang across the barnyard, and then he knelt and tried to pull Isaac's father off Art Smucker. Still, Isaac's father kept hammering away, and Isaac froze, stunned by his father's transformation and fearful of where it might lead. But just when it

seemed like his father might really hurt Art Smucker, Charles Groff and Elvin Beiler threw themselves into the fray and pulled his father to the side.

‘I’m sorry,’ his father gasped, as the two farmers gripped his arms.

‘Can you sit up, Artie?’ said Elvin Beiler.

Art Smucker sat up and spat. He spat again when Isaac’s father tried to apologize a second time.

‘Fuck you, Bauman.’

‘Brother, I’m sorry,’ Isaac’s father repeated. ‘But you can’t go around treating people like that. That man has every right to be here.’

Art Smucker threw back his head and spat again.

‘Denlinger’s coming,’ Charles Groff cried. ‘And you know else is going to come if you keep this up, Art? The *police*.’

‘Let ‘em come,’ Art Smucker bellowed. ‘I want the cops to check all the papers of everyone who’s working on this farm.’

Isaac’s father shook his head. He nodded to Charles Groff, who released him, and heaved himself upright. Art Smucker sat up, straightened his cap, and stood, too. He glared from Isaac’s father to Charles Groff to Elvin Beiler, and then his eyes locked on Isaac. Isaac knew he ought to glower right back, but the man was too menacing, too unpredictable, so he stared at the concrete and cursed the man, inwardly. He turned as Rick Denlinger strode up, Reagan Denlinger close behind him.

‘What’s going on here?’

Charles Groff turned. ‘Do you want to tell him, Art?’

Art Smucker just spat thickly.

‘There was a little issue between Art here and one of your workers,’ Charles Groff explained

*It was not an issue*, Isaac almost shouted. *Art attacked Jorge*. But once again, he kept silent for fear of drawing attention to himself and incurring the wrath of Art Smucker.

Rick Denlinger turned toward the crowd of farmers who’d followed him from the parlor. ‘I want to say something, and fellows, this is important. *Anyone* who harasses my employees is not welcome on my farm. And I want to say one more thing, something I believe I’ve said before. *Every one* of my workers is here legally. Every one of them has a right to be here. We only do things on the right way in this operation.’

‘Whatever you say,’ Art Smucker muttered, his eyes downcast now, his voice surprisingly dull.

‘It’s not “what I say,”’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘It’s the *truth*, however hard I realize that is for some of us to agree on.’

Art Smucker glowered at the barnyard floor.

‘And now, having made myself clear on that score, I’d like to ask you to leave, Art,’ Rick Denlinger continued. ‘You’re not welcome on my property. If I see you here again, I’m calling the state troopers.’

Art Smucker shot another hateful stare at Rick Denlinger and started across the barnyard. One of the farmers standing by the gate opened it and Art Smucker slipped through. The crowd parted and Art shuffled toward the new parlor and disappeared inside, the township supervisor Charles Groff trailing watchfully behind him.

Rick Denlinger turned to the crowd. ‘All right, fellows. Now that *that* nonsense is behind us, there are still plenty of donuts in the tent out front, and there’s plenty of coffee, and I know

Don from Hanover Equipment would be happy to talk to anyone who's interested in getting a quote on a similar setup.'

The farmers in the crowd nodded slowly. A few moseyed back toward the parlor. Others remained in clusters in the barnyard, doubtless already recounting the drama.

Rick Denlinger turned and extended a hand to Isaac's father. 'I want to thank you for standing up for Jorge there, Clyde.'

Isaac's father shook Rick Denlinger's hand, but he didn't accept the man's praise. 'I lost my head.'

Isaac rolled his eyes inwardly. Beholden as his father was to Mennonite self-denial, he was probably begging the Lord for forgiveness and berating himself for what he'd done.

'I don't know what's wrong with some people,' said Rick Denlinger.

*I do, thought Isaac. They're nasty as copperheads, lazy as sloths, and lunkheaded as oxen.*

'I don't know what got into *me* there,' said Isaac's father. 'All of a sudden, I just saw red. It wasn't much of a witness, was it?'

*Oh, please,* thought Isaac.

'I wouldn't beat yourself up,' said Rick Denlinger.

Isaac's father nodded and stared at the concrete.

Rick Denlinger turned to his son. 'I'm going to talk to my guys and see what they want done here. You run in and tell mother what happened. Keep your phone on.'

Reagan Denlinger nodded, glanced self-importantly at Isaac, and took off. But why wouldn't he seem self-important? He had a job. Whereas all Isaac could do was stand there eavesdropping on Rick Denlinger and judging and admiring his father. And what was wrong

with people like Art Smucker? What led people to think that they could treat others like that? Coarse as Donald Trump was, you couldn't blame him for all of it. The blustering candidate hadn't pushed Art to charge across the barnyard.

There was something else the matter with Art Smucker. He didn't take care of his barns or his fields. He didn't take care of his body. He didn't seem to want to. The only sort of initiative that seemed to interest him was violence.

How did you fix someone like that? *Could* you fix them? Or would violent men like that always be as much a part of the country, and the only way to deal with them was to knock them the way Isaac's father had done in the parlor?

'I need to check on Jorge,' said Rick Denlinger.

'I'll come with you,' said Isaac's father.

Rick Denlinger nodded. In the instant before Isaac's father started forward, he turned and met Isaac's gaze. The worry that flashed on his face might have been for him or Art Smucker's cruelty or his own startling outburst of violence. All of these, probably.

Isaac swung toward the new parlor. All across the barnyard, the farmers of the township were recounting what had happened. No doubt they'd be talking about it for some time. And in their stories, his father would be the hero, which, in some sense, Isaac had to admit he was. But it was not as if his father's moral compass was flawless. He was still a fundamentalist. He still clung to an obsolete view of sex and propriety. He still judged people for ways of being that were unquestionably not wrong.

Isaac squared his shoulders and started for the new parlor. But all the while, Art Smucker's anger kept pressing in on him, Art Smucker's hatred, Art Smucker's outburst of savage violence. And alongside his horror at how cruelly Jorge had been treated another

uncertainty gathered. Only when Isaac stepped into the new parlor did that deeper anxiety clarify. The carousel of robotic milkers shone in the fluorescent lights. His sense of smallness sharpened, his sense of vulnerability, his awareness that while Rick Denlinger might be insulated from the changes that were taking hold of the dairy industry, and the whole country, he was not. And he still didn't know what to think about what was happening. He still had no idea what sort of change to root for, or who to believe. All he knew was that anyone who acted like or inspired fellows like Art Smucker was abominable and terrifying.

*Clyde*

*Lord, forgive me*, Clyde breathed, as he followed Rick Denlinger across the barnyard. The blood pounded in his head. The electric focus that had seized him as he'd grappled with Art Smucker still mostly blocked the pain in his knees and knuckles. But there was no mistaking the sickness in his stomach. What a fool he'd been. What a terrible witness he'd offered.

His anger was understandable, like the need to restrain Art – to tackle him, to wrestle him, to pin him to the concrete. But what he could not abide – what shook him each time he recalled it – was the *hatred* that had exploded through him as he'd started laying into his neighbor. He'd wanted to punish the man, but it was more than that. He'd wanted to take his head off. He'd wanted to *destroy* him for his meanness, for the stupidity of his violence toward Denlinger's employee, and for all the pride and self-indulgence that seemed to be taking hold of the entire country. And he'd almost caught himself. Above the blur of his rage, he'd heard a whisper from his conscience. Still, he'd kept going, laying into Art, trying to show the man that violence toward your neighbor had consequences, that pride had consequences, that acts of hatred would not go unpunished. But in so doing, his own hatred had reared its head,

overthrowing his conscience. If Charles Groff and Elvin Beiler hadn't pulled him off Art, there was no telling what he would have done.

Trailing behind Rick Denlinger, Clyde hardly noticed the fineness of Rick Denlinger's calving barn. What had happened to his judgement, his sense of proportion? What had happened to his commitment to faithfully imitate the peaceful witness of Christ? But it was so hard to maintain that witness in a world where so many people seemed completely given over to violence and self-indulgence? Art Smucker. Dr. Lamborne and her 'wife.' Even his own son.

He followed Denlinger into the adjacent office. Jorge was slumped in a chair. Blood oozed from his nose. His cheeks were swollen. The discolored lids of his eyes puffed out from their sockets. Two other migrant employees were leaning over him, one holding a wet dishcloth, the other holding a compress of ice. At the sound of the door, they both swung around. Their faces softened when Rick Denlinger stepped inside.

'How's he doing?' said the rich farmer.

'I have been hurt much worse,' said Jorge.

His face was bruised and puffy, but his voice was bright. The blessing of the man's cheerfulness allowed Clyde to forget, for the moment, the shame of his own conduct.

'I'd like you to see a doctor,' Denlinger said, kneeling at his side.

'That is not necessary,' Jorge said.

'You might have a concussion,' Denlinger said, nodding. He stood. 'I'm going to call the ambulance. And what I *ought* to do is call the police to report an assault.'

Clyde nodded stoutly. If he'd involved the authorities after Art Smucker's bull got out the previous fall, maybe Art wouldn't have felt such a free hand to attack others.

'I would rather not make a fuss, if it is all right,' Jorge said quietly.



Denlinger frowned. 'You're sure about that? We'd have a good case.'

'It is not necessary.' The wounded man's eyes shone with gentle firmness.

Clyde wished he knew where that spirit of submission came from, how he could recover it.

'All right,' Denlinger said after a minute. 'No ambulance. No police. But I still want you to see a doctor. Don't worry. I'll have her come to the house. Now let's get him inside,' he said.

'I can walk,' said Jorge.

'*No seas estúpido!*' said the worker holding the ice compress. To Denlinger, he added, 'We'll put him in my truck,'

Denlinger nodded, and the two employees helped Jorge to his feet, Denlinger supporting him from behind.

Jorge was fine, praise the Lord. But still, how foolish *he'd* been. How out-of-control. Clyde hurried past a couch and kitchenette. He held open the door on the far side of the office as fellows helped their brother outside, and then rushed past them to open the door to the truck. Once Jorge was loaded in, Clyde followed Rick Denlinger toward the farmhouse, his head down, shame spreading over him like slurry leaking from a crack in a concrete pit.

Maybe the older Mennonites had it right. Maybe any attempt to engage with the world was damaging. Maybe it made no sense to think at all about elections or the world's fallen standards. Maybe all anyone could do was go to church and worship the Lord and try their best to be humble. No sooner had Clyde tried to insist this then Art Smucker's curses rang in his ears, again, Art's mottled, furious face flashed before him. It had been right to stand up to Art, right to try and restrain him. But how much better his witness would have been if he'd somehow found it in himself to subdue the man and then turn to him in a spirit of forgiveness?

By the time Clyde and reached the farmhouse, the workers already had Jorge out of the truck. Vi Denlinger directed them, still clad in the green jacket that set off the hazel notes in her eyes.

‘Go right in towards the kitchen,’ she said, as the men helped the man toward the door. ‘There’s a couch in the family room. You can put Jorge on that. Don’t worry about your boots. I’ve already rolled back the rugs.’

This ought to have been Clyde’s cue, but he was too shaken to pay much mind to social graces. He followed the others inside, through a ‘mudroom’ the size of his living room, and through a kitchen whose counters were covered with yards of marble. By the time Clyde reached the living room, Rick Denlinger’s workers already had the wounded man stretched out on one of the pairs of leather couches in the ‘family room’ that adjoined the kitchen. A TV as big as Clyde’s kitchen table hung across one wall. A fresh pang went through him at the sight of the worldly device. But, of course, not everyone who invited the world into the middle of their home was given over to anger and pride. Rick and Vi weren’t. If only Clyde could say the same for their son. The skinny youth stood in the kitchen, the tattoos on his forearms flickering as he tapped away on his phone. No sooner had Clyde’s judgement flamed than he remembered his misdeeds. Who was he to judge anyone for their pride?

Rick Denlinger shuffled over. ‘Is it just me, or are people getting dumber by the year, Clyde?’

Clyde bowed his head. ‘I know *I* sure am.’

‘You know I wasn’t talking about you.’

Clyde sighed. ‘I don’t know what got into me *or* Artie.’

‘Art’s always been a hot head, but this goes beyond that.’

‘I’ll tell you who *I* blame if you’re interested,’ Vi Denlinger said firmly.

Rick Denlinger shook his head. ‘It’s bigger than Trump. There are just a bunch of idiots who don’t know what do with themselves, so they go around getting all worked up about foolishness. Immigration. Bathrooms. All of it. They were there before Trump, and they’ll be there long after he’s gone. But most of them aren’t as nasty as Smucker. We just had some bad luck here, is all.’

*There’s no such thing as luck*, Clyde thought wearily. There was only the Lord’s will. So what greater glory might his outburst accomplish?

‘I certainly hope you are right,’ called Jorge. ‘Otherwise, I may be looking to move back to Amarillo.’

The men beside him chuckled and nodded.

‘Mr. Rick,’ Jorge added. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know your friend’s name.’

‘I’m Clyde Bauman,’ Clyde said, stepping forward.

Jorge extended his hand. ‘Mr. Bauman?’

‘Please, call me Clyde.’

‘Clyde? I want to thank you for the aid you gave me in the barnyard. Ever since my accident, I don’t move as fast as I used to.’

‘I’m glad I could help,’ said Clyde. ‘But it really wasn’t my best moment, I’m sorry to say.’

‘You did what you needed to,’ said Rick Denlinger. ‘We all appreciate that.’

Clyde nodded, trying not to let the praise wash away his sense of shame. And then Vi Denlinger murmured to someone, and he turned. Dr. Lamborne hurried in, her face set in concern, and Clyde stared harder at the table and breathed a prayer for both their spirits of pride.

But when he lifted his head, the vet's competence stirred him just like it always did. She knelt by Jorge, tested his reflexes, shone a light in his pupils. When she'd finished, she spoke in low tones to Rick Denlinger, and then swung toward Clyde.

'I hear you did a good job today.'

He flushed and looked away. 'I'm afraid I didn't do a good job at all,' he mumbled. 'I lost my head.'

'You had a reason to be mad,' she said, turning toward Jorge. 'There's something wrong with you if idiocy like that doesn't make you angry.'

'I should have done better.'

She smiled quietly. 'It's good you were there. And next time you're in that sort of pickle, you'll know your limits.'

'I hope,' he said, catching himself as he started to return her smile.

She had *a wife*. She probably approved of Isaac's pridefulness. And to think she called herself a Christian.

*So guide her, Lord, Clyde prayed. Touch her.* But all the while, as he prayed this, he knew how badly he also needed the Lord's touch.

'Come on in,' Vi Denlinger called to someone behind them.

Isaac stood in the doorway, frowning as if he was afraid to interrupt. But in spite of, or perhaps because of that hesitancy, he looked handsome, older than seventeen. He hurried over to Rick Denlinger's tattooed son, and the two of them started talking. It would probably be a toss-up to figure out which of them was more in love with the world, more given over to pridefulness. But even as Clyde's irritation flared, he reminded himself, again, that he had no right to judge after his conduct in the barnyard.

‘I met your son,’ said Dr. Lamborne. ‘He’s a very interesting young man. We had a good chat about Swarthmore.’

Clyde nodded stiffly.

‘Are you all right, Clyde?’ said Dr. Lamborne. Her gaze was concerned, but also guarded.

He turned toward her sorrowfully. He was *not* all right, but how could he tell someone looking at him with such warmth that she was part of the problem? He was flushing again. It was so warm in the room. He was sweating under his coveralls. And even as he grieved for the self-indulgence of Dr. Lamborne and Isaac, Rick Denlinger’s gussied-up son, and, of course, for Art Smucker, the weight of his own self-indulgence pressed in on him. In the barnyard, he might have killed a man, so fixated was he on meting out judgement, judgement which was ultimately the Lord’s to offer.

‘I guess we ought to go,’ he said.

Dr. Lamborne’s gaze pressed in on him. ‘You’re worried about Isaac.’

‘Yes, indeed, I am, if you want to know the truth. I’m worried about his faith. I’m worried about his fixation on money, and I’m *very* worried about his attitude toward sexual sin.’ He couldn’t look at her as he said this.

‘Oh, Clyde. Please tell me you don’t think it’s all that simple.’

A vein flickered in his forehead. ‘The old ways still work well at our church,’ Clyde insisted, brushing aside his memories of the finance committee meetings and his arguments with his buddies about politics.

‘Maybe that’s what you believe. But let me tell you this. You’ll lose Isaac if you try to control him,’ she said. ‘And what you’ll find, I think, the more you learn about gender and

sexuality, is that desire is not something people can simply turn on and off like a light switch. Love is complicated. Bodies are complicated. But it is possible to turn every sort of person toward care and decency. There all kinds of faithful gay and queer and trans people.’

‘I don’t even know what all those words *mean*,’ Clyde groaned. ‘And I appreciate your concern, but I think we need to leave, now. You take care. Don’t forget to read some Romans the next time you study your Bible. The verses on sexual sin are in the New Testament, too.’ He turned to Isaac, who nodded back and resumed his conversation with Rick Denlinger’s son. He swung toward Jorge and the fellows beside him.

‘I’ll see you all. Do let us know if there’s anything more we can help with. And I’m sorry, again, that my temper got away from me back there.’

‘All I can say is thank you,’ said Jorge.

Clyde sighed and said goodbye to the Denlingers. When he started for the door, Isaac followed him. At least the boy was coming along without making a fuss. As they made their ways down the walk, the farmers who remained glanced up from where they stood in little groups in the lawn, nodding without speaking. Clyde bowed his head, to avoid the temptation to accept any of the admiration that they might be training upon him.

He cleared his throat. ‘I hope you won’t judge your old dad too harshly for my part in what happened back there.’

‘Dad, you were right to be angry. That man is horrible.’

Clyde nodded slowly. ‘That certainly is how the world sees it. But that’s not what the Lord calls for.’

‘You protected Jorge. That was good.’

Clyde shook his head. What value did any praise have when it came from his worldly son? What good was encouragement when it emerged out of the same standards that endorsed selfishness and shamelessness and every kind of self-indulgence?

Dr. Lamborne's station wagon was parked by the parlor. Clyde didn't turn, but he pictured that bumper sticker. 'God Bless the Whole World, No Exceptions.' There was something to that idea, but offering a blessing was very different than offering a spirit of approval. Sure, Christ had broken bread with tax collectors and prostitutes, but he'd done so to share with them a Godly witness, a faithful way of living that asked people to imitate his spirit of sacrifice, not simply do whatever they wanted.

They turned from the lane and started up the hill past the line of pickups. As they neared their truck, Clyde spotted his father. The old man was sitting in the cab with his arms tightly folded, staring across the field away from the Denlinger farm.

'Did you hear about what Dad did?' Isaac called, when he climbed into the truck.

The boy sure did know how to stick in the knife. The old man didn't answer. When Clyde eased in beside him, he didn't turn. Clyde started the engine. They drove for several minutes in silence. But the old man cleared his throat when they passed the Smucker farm.

'I reckon Art had that coming,' he said quietly.

'I agree,' Isaac said firmly.

'No, Dad,' said Clyde. 'I lost my head. I overdid it.'

'Maybe we've been too gracious to him. I don't know. Maybe we were fools to write him the check for that bull.'

'Pop, you were the one who said we don't want someone like Smucker mad at us.'

‘That’s true. But goodness knows I’m certainly not right about everything. You saw what Denlinger did in there. You were right. There’s no future for us in dairying.’

Clyde glanced from the road in disbelief.

‘I think we ought to sell the herd,’ his father said. He didn’t quite turn, but he nodded as he said it. ‘Call the auctioneer on Monday. The sooner we make it happen, the better price we’ll get for the cows.’

‘If you’re sure,’ said Clyde, so stunned he felt dizzy.

His father nodded again and closed his eyes. Clyde gripped the wheel tighter. The sun flashed through the cross-hatched streams of hazy clouds. The silos towered over the homeplace. The corn seedlings shone brightly. But his vindication felt hollow. His father’s concession to sensibility was too tied up in his endorsement of his misdeed. Clyde started the pickup, and as he eased it out from the line of trucks and pointed it toward the homeplace, he asked the Lord again for forgiveness, for some way of atoning for everything he’d done that might have caused the Lord grief.

### *Isaac*

Home from the open house, Isaac and his father lunched on the cold cuts Isaac’s mother had laid out. When meal was finished, Isaac’s parents retired to their bedroom for one of their ‘naps.’ To escape the nauseating creaking of his parents’ bedsprings, Isaac went for a walk in the meadow. The sun was warm, the hazy blue sky still streaked with vapor trails and filaments of cloud. A hawk lazed overhead. He followed the cow path that wound past the swamp and led toward the hillside. The odor of skunk cabbage swirled into the muddy scent that rose from the stream.



As he walked, Isaac tried to let the motion of his powerful strides dispel his confusion. But all the while, Art Smucker's attack on Jorge kept flashing before him. The panic-stricken look on the man's brown face. The hatred in Art Smucker's voice. The harshness of the blows the man had rained down upon Jorge when all he was trying to do was accomplish his job.

*It might have been me*, Isaac kept thinking, picturing Jorge's limp and brown skin and recalling how strange his body had seemed in the years when he'd been muddled by wheat. *It could still be me*. It was not as if he was normal, now – whatever 'normal' even was. Was Luke Sauder normal? Were Elio and Oliver normal? Or were they unusual attractive, intelligent, capable, and able-bodied? Surely, they were; surely, that exceptional abnormality – that 'perfection' – was what made him fixate upon them.

And there was no way it was wrong to long for that sort of beauty. But as Isaac trudged through the grass, it struck him that the exacting standards of his version of grace and 'perfection' were not so different from those of the congregation. Both were rigid. Both were conformist, in their way.

But no. One was enfolding and elevating and the other was oppressive. Again, he insisted: there was no way the longing for wealth and beauty and the elegance of families like the Denlingers could possibly be wrong. The sun beat on Isaac's neck as he started up the hill in the corner of the meadow. The sweat built on his brow. Surely, it was good to want to be as handsome and composed and charming as possible. When he'd been ill, hadn't his life been miserable? But wasn't it also true that you could be different and still be capable, successful, confident, *and* resilient? Jorge was proof of that.

Isaac stepped onto the boulder that jutted like a prow over the shallow valley and steadied himself. And Jorge wasn't the only one who was different and stubbornly persistent. Yes, his life

for the last four-odd years had felt like nothing but a run of mistakes and indignities, but he had survived, in spite of his frailties. He had made it to this point, to this boulder here in the middle of the meadow, the sun beating on his head, a soft breeze washing his face, the scents of greening grass and sour skunk cabbage tickling his nostrils.

Yes, he was still clumsy and vulnerable. Yes, he still felt impossibly small compared to Rick Denlinger's robotic milkers and his vast stores of property. But he had survived, like Jorge had survived, like Mary Elizabeth had survived him. Driving past the village snack bar, Isaac had seen her with the fellow she was dating, a carpenter who attended another plain congregation. Glen Good, his name was. Now, in the foyer Sunday mornings, Mary Elizabeth smiled and lowered her eyes each time she passed him, as though quietly amused by all that had transpired between them. She was doing well. And *he* was doing well. Rick Denlinger was backing him. Dr. Lamborne had offered to help him with an application to Swarthmore. Reagan Denlinger had asked for his number.

Did this mean he would prosper? Did it mean he would thrive like Elio and Oliver in *Call Me by Your Name*? No, it certainly didn't. But maybe, even if he didn't match their lofty standards of brilliance and sublimity, he could still do all right.

*My body is your body*, Elio had said to Oliver in the novel. So far, at least, Isaac still couldn't say that to anyone, not to Bobby, who he'd hooked up with in that musty hotel room, not to Martin, in whose posh apartment he'd gotten so grossly drunk. Certainly not to Luke Sauder. He did not know how to share himself, but that did not mean he was irredeemably flawed or hopelessly disgusting. He pressed his palm to his cheeks, to the back of his neck, to his belly.

'This is your body,' he whispered.

And then he knelt down, sat on the boulder, slipped out of his shirt, and spread it behind him. He ran his across his chest and again across his stomach, just grazing the skin. The sun beat into him. The breeze ruffled his hair.

‘This is your body,’ he repeated.

It was not a ‘perfect’ body, but it was all he had. And as the sun warmed him, he imagined that he was back on the dock of the Martin’s pond beside Luke Sauder, or out in the garden, the summer when he’d helped the Sauders with their sweet corn, or curled up at the foot of Luke’s bed in the humid darkness. Why had he said no to Luke? Why had he declined his invitation? Because his body was unsteady, yes. Because he’d felt so painfully different. But also because he’d believed then that there was nothing worse than being different, nothing more disqualifying than having an unsteady body.

Maybe this was why Luke had rejected him in the coffee shop. Maybe he’d seemed too rigid, too perfectionistic. A ripple of longing went through Isaac as he pictured Luke working away on the Harshbarger farm. Whatever he was doing, he was bound to look good. And maybe they were still destined to be together. Maybe, now he knew what they needed, they could be different together. He wouldn’t mind if Luke was a farmer if Luke didn’t mind that he constantly obsessed about getting into the best possible college. (Though if he didn’t get into Stanford, or even Cornell, he *supposed* that would be all right.)

He turned to his phone. The sun flashed on the smudged screen. Luke was probably working. It wasn’t really realistic to expect him to respond. Still, Isaac messaged him, asking if he’d heard about the violence at Denlinger’s open house. He waited, trying to temper the rising sense that he and Luke had been meant to be together, after all. But it kept building, because now he knew that he did not have to be ‘normal’ or perfect. He could be different, and he could

survive, like Jorge or like Reagan Denlinger with his tattoos and his earrings, or like Dr. Lamborne, who had wandered through the crowd of bigoted farmers at Rick Denlinger's open house with her wife.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Probably, Luke was working. But just as Isaac was about to slide the phone back into his pocket and head back to the house, his phone buzzed. It was Luke. It turned out he had heard about Art Smucker's outburst. The news had already made the rounds among the Hispanic workers at Harshbarger Farms.

*Good thing ur dad was there, Luke concluded.*

*I kno, Isaac typed. I wish u could have been there.*

*Me too.*

Isaac smiled, thinking of Luke's charming cautiousness. *How r u liking ur new job?*

*It's not bad. We get lots of breaks. More breaks than I ever got working on the home farm. How are things going for u?*

Isaac's pulse quickened. *They're fine. They'll be better once school is over.*

*I miss you, he almost added, but that seemed like too much. Instead, he simply typed: Maybe we could try getting coffee again sometime. It wouldn't have to be in the city.*

Maybe they could even do it that evening. The sun beat on Isaac's neck. He squinted at the screen as he waited for Luke's reply.

*That sounds good, Luke replied.*

*Great!* Isaac typed, and waited for Luke to elaborate. But nothing more was forthcoming.

*You have to give Luke time, Isaac told himself. But that conviction did not dissolve his frustration. Did he not deserve to be rewarded for having accepted something crucial about himself, for having made this breakthrough?*

*Be patient*, he insisted. But patience had never been one his strengths. After ten minutes of silence, he jammed his phone in his pocket, put on his shirt, and started back across the meadow, and the lightness that had taken hold of him lifted as quickly as it had come.

There was so much he didn't know. There were so many people who were smarter and handsomer and more prosperous. But he would keep trying. He would keep pushing himself. And when he failed – and even if he was beaten – he would try to summon Jorge's spirit of persistence, and force himself onward against the current.

It was better not to be battered in the first place, of course. It was better to earn enough money to protect yourself from every sort of harm. Isaac spent the afternoon reading the *Wikipedia* page of Warren Buffett, the third-richest man in the world, who argued, contrary to Rick Denlinger, that rich people ought to pay more in taxes for the good of the country and had endorsed Hillary Clinton for the presidency.

That was something to think about. Buffett's position certainly sounded like a middle ground between the socialist inefficiencies that Milton Friedman warned against and market thinking that only seemed to be benefiting those who were already thriving. During the evening work, Isaac fixated on the notion of higher taxes on the very wealthy. It was a nice diversion from his worries about whatever Art Smucker might be up to and his frustration at Luke's lack of a response. But he had to be patient. And this time, when Luke messaged him, he'd be forthright about who he was.

All through supper, the tenant house phone kept ringing with people calling to see how his father was doing, and to congratulate him. Isaac tried to suppress his frustration. Yes, the man had done a good thing, but he was still beholden to plain Mennonite theology. When the meal was finished, Isaac rushed upstairs. No message from Luke. Isaac skimmed his *Slider* inbox, but

there was just the usual raft of messages from Bobby. Lonesome as he felt, he decided to message the man. Yes, Bobby was hairy and rough-looking, but that didn't mean they couldn't have a good time. He sent a quick message and bounded downstairs. And maybe, by the time he reached his pickup, Luke's message would have appeared.

'I'm going for a drive,' he said, ignoring his parents' sorrowful expressions. 'I won't be out very late.'

He was halfway to the motel in Manheim when his phone buzzed with a notification from Bobby.

*Great to hear from u bud but I'm in Atlantic City for the weekend. I'll hit u up when I'm back.*

Isaac groaned – and almost rear-ended a semi. He swerved around the truck, took the next exit off the highway, and started east. It was only after he passed the borough of Ephrata that he acknowledged he was heading toward Harshbarger Farms. He would just message Luke and tell him that he was in the neighborhood and see how Luke responded. He dialed Luke's parents' number and got the address from his father. Eight minutes later, he turned into a compact trailer park and stopped in front of a light brown mobile home with dark brown trim. There was a second vehicle parked on the concrete pad behind Luke's little pickup, a massive, brand-new, dual-wheeled black truck.

*Rick Denlinger's truck*, thought Isaac, recalling the vehicle from Agway. But maybe it was a coincidence. Reagan Denlinger would surely have his own fancy car. Probably, it was one of Luke's buddies from Harshbarger Farms. He reached for his phone and texted Luke.

*So it turns out I'm in ur neighborhood. Any chance u want some company tonite?*

*Ur in Stevens?* Luke replied, after a moment.

*Yep.*

Another long minute passed. Finally, Luke responded.

*I'm busy tonite. Another time.*

*Sounds good,* Isaac typed, his stomach sinking.

So it *was* a date.

For a long minute, Isaac sat in his pickup, trying to tamp down his nausea. He'd had a breakthrough. He and Luke were destined to be together. He couldn't be elbowed out of the way now. But what if it was Reagan Denlinger? How could he possibly compete with him?

He had to know. He climbed from his truck and crept up to the massive pickup, peered in the window. A leather folder on the console between the seats read Crescent View Farms. That was the name of the Denlingers' operation. So probably, it was Reagan. He turned toward Luke's trailer. It wasn't right to snoop. What he ought to do was turn and head straight back to his truck. But he had to know.

He crept toward the trailer, keeping to the shadows in case some nosy neighbor was waiting to berate him for trespassing. When he reached the door, he tiptoed up the metal stairs and pressed his eye to the window, most of which was covered with blinds. But through a sliver, he could just make out the old couch in Luke's living room. Luke was lying face down on the sofa *with his shirt off*, and Reagan Denlinger was sitting on top of him, kneading his shoulders. Isaac gaped in a disbelief that was shot through with yearning. Part of him still wanted to pound on that door. Couldn't he join them? Couldn't he share in their delectation? But if intruded and Luke rejected him, he would feel even more miserable. So let them have their fun.

Isaac tiptoed from the door and trudged to his pickup. Maybe Luke had been lying when he said he didn't like queerness and coffee shops. Or maybe 'I don't care for all of this' had

simply meant that Luke didn't care for how he'd been before his breakthrough. Or maybe their moment had passed, and he'd been completely wrong about their 'destiny,' as he'd been about so many things.

When he climbed into the driver's seat, he hammered the armrest. He cursed himself for his stupidity. And then he remembered: he had to be resilient. He had to persist, precisely because he was vulnerable. He had to keep pushing while also accepting himself as he was. He opened the hook up app and skimmed the profiles. It was still early. There was still time for him to message someone. But he was tired, suddenly. The day had been exhausting. And maybe, sometimes, persistence involved resting when you were weary.

Once more, he stared past Rick Denlinger's pickup toward Luke's trailer and forced himself to register and accept his grief. Perhaps it was like Elio's father had said: most people tried to close themselves off from pain. But perhaps, sometimes, it was good to suffer, especially for those you truly loved. And he did love Luke Sauder, however hopeless their future might be, however confounding was everything that had passed between them.

'Bless him,' he whispered, as he pointed his truck homeward. 'And bless Reagan Denlinger. But also bless me.' And he summoned another glimpse of the quad at Stanford, on the off chance that he might be one of the fortunate five percent who gained admission to the vaunted campus.

When he turned into his parents' driveway, the house was so dark that he thought his parents had already gone up to bed, even though it wasn't even 8:30. And then he noticed that his father's truck was not in the driveway. That was odd. But maybe his father was in the calving barn or out with one of the heifers. One of the cows had looked to be almost ready that afternoon, though Clyde's father had said the calf probably wouldn't come until the middle of



the week. Or maybe it *wasn't* a calf. Maybe Art Smucker had snuck up on the house and attacked his parents and stolen his father's truck.

Isaac shivered when he climbed from the truck. Dread filled him as he approached the house. When he stepped onto the porch, the porch lights flashed, and the back door flew open. He jumped, but it was only his mother.

'Isaac, thank goodness you're home. Your father insisted on running off to *Art Smucker's* to try and apologize to him for their disagreement from this afternoon.'

It was an almost unbelievably foolish decision. 'Why in the world would he think that he had to go *tonight?*'

'That's what I tried to ask him, but he got it in his head that he had to do it, so off he went. I at least got him to agree to take Elvin Beiler along.'

'I *guess* that's good,' Isaac said, folding his arms.

'I spoke to Vi Denlinger,' Isaac's mother said, pacing to the stove and turning on the heating element under the tea kettle. 'She wanted to know if we would like someone to watch our place. She and Rick have hired *a guard* to watch their farm. I told her I would be happy to have one, but that I wanted to wait until Clyde came home to decide.'

'You should have just said yes,' Isaac snapped.

It made no sense to turn down the offer of protection. But beholden as his mother was to tradition, she believed that it was up to her husband to make any decision that might seem to go against congregational theology.

'Hopefully your father will be home soon,' she said.

'Hopefully,' said Isaac. 'But in the meantime, I think we should lock the doors.'

'We have to find the keys, first,' his mother said. 'The old bolts won't turn without keys.'

‘They’re probably in Dad’s desk,’ said Isaac, trying his best to quell the wave of irritation at the family’s lax and trusting attitude toward security.

‘I’ll look,’ his mother said. ‘You put the water on.’

So, while she started rifling through the desk, Isaac filled the kettle and then ambled over to the cupboard and surveyed their tea choices. Why on earth had his father decided to go see Art Smucker? Probably, it was that foolish verse about ‘not letting the sun go down on your wrath.’ What nonsense. There was nothing anyone could say to such a cretin that could change his mind.

‘I found the keys,’ his mother cried.

Isaac hurried over. His mother held a ring full of old brass keys aloft. Isaac followed her to the front door. She inserted one of the keys into the old keyhole. The first time she tried to turn it, she failed. But when she tried the second key, the bolt turned creakily.

‘There.’

A flicker of relief went through Isaac. He followed his mother to the back porch, where she locked that door. Then they carried their tea cups to the living room, lit a candle, and turned off all the lights so they would notice every set of headlights that swept past the house. Isaac settled on the sofa beside his mother. Isaac cupped his mug in his hands and stared just past the candle flame.

‘I wouldn’t think your father would be *much* longer,’ his mother said, when the clock chimed nine o’clock.

‘No,’ said Isaac.

A pair of headlights swept across the lawn they both turned, but it was just a noisy pickup.

The candleflame flickered. Right now, Luke and Reagan Denlinger were probably having all sorts of fun. Let them have it. One of these days, he'd find someone.

'Do you ever talk to the Zimmerman girl?' his mother said, out of *nowhere*.

Isaac gripped his teacup tighter. 'Not really. But she seems very happy with the fellow she's going out with.'

'Yes,' his mother said, opening her eyes and training a sorrowful look on Isaac.

He glowered past the guttering light and braced himself for the lecture to come.

But his mother just sighed. 'You know how much your father and I are praying for you, don't you?'

He nodded without looking up.

'You know that we love you, even if we don't understand?'

'It's not that complicated,' he snapped. 'There is no God. Everyone should be able to be with whoever they want.'

'But Scripture,' she said, with a sigh.

'Scripture is wrong.'

She sighed again. 'Please, let's not argue.'

'You're the one who brought this up.'

She pulled the teabag out of her cup, spun it, and dropped it back into the water. 'I'm sure your father will be home very soon.'

'Yes,' said Isaac.

But when 9:15 came, and his father still hadn't come home, Isaac's chest began to tighten.

‘You don’t think Art Smucker would keep a gun in his home, do you?’ his mother said, suddenly.

Isaac recoiled from the memory of Art Smucker’s mottled face. ‘He’s a farmer. I’m sure he has guns.’

She nodded and pulled out her teabag again, spun it around again. ‘Would you mind too much if I prayed?’

‘Whatever you want,’ he said. He wasn’t about to admit that he’d welcome any diversion. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the couch. A trace of peace washed over him in time with his mother’s words.

‘Lord, protect Clyde,’ she prayed. ‘Watch over him.’

A knot formed in Isaac throat as he tried to imagine what it would be like if his father were gone.

‘We know he’s in your care,’ his mother whispered. ‘We know you’re watching over him.’

But right at the moment, Art Smucker might be blasting him with a shotgun at close range, the way he might blast anyone who didn’t want to do exactly as he said. All the prayers in the world couldn’t stop that. No guardian angel was going to swoop down and lift the hatred from Art Smucker’s mind or knock aside the barrel of his gun. Either Art would resort to violence or he wouldn’t; it wouldn’t have anything to do with God.

And the more Isaac considered this, the more certain he was that his father was gone, that he had been taken. He would not have his father’s support to rely on as he sought to find the right college; it would just be him and his mother. What if they ran out of money? What would

happen to all his carefully designed dreams? He would be a pauper. *He might have to remain on the farm.* He would be at the mercy of every big producer, every robot.

Or maybe his father wasn't gone, yet. Maybe he was shot and bleeding out in the weeds of the Smucker lawn like a buck who managed to escape his hunter and had worked himself into a thicket of briars where he would curl up and die.

'I think I should go over there,' he said.

His mother clutched his hand. 'Please stay here,' she said. 'I need you to stay here'

He nodded and sank back down on the couch beside her. Frightened as he was for his father, he hadn't actually wanted to leave.

'Would you mind if we sang something together?' she said.

He shrugged, as if he didn't want to do it. 'I guess we *could.*'

The song she chose was one she'd used to sing to him nights when she lay on the bed beside him and stroked his back while he struggled to sleep. 'Be Still and Know That I Am God.' Its verses simply repeated the title.

*Be sti-ll and know, that I am God.*

*Be sti-ll and know, that I am God.*

*Be st-ill and know, that I am God.*

As a boy, he'd found the words peculiar, bordering on sacrilegious, because the person singing *wasn't* God, but was simply his mother. And to inhabit the voice of the Almighty, or even just to repeat it in that way, seemed to claim a portion of the Lord's power. He sang quietly at first, but as they continued, he gave himself over to the simple refrain. Now that he didn't believe, he no longer felt guilty about claiming for himself all the divinity – all the power and privilege – that he could possibly obtain, however scant his allotment might be.

When they'd finished that hymn, they started in on one of his mother's favorites, 'In His Time,' and then Isaac suggested that, if his mother wanted, maybe they could sing a song from the *Mennonite Hymnal*. He didn't tell her outright that he was hoping to sing the hymn that was still his favorite, even though he was no longer a believer. He rose and fished the hymnal from the bookshelf so that they could get the third and fourth verses right, the magnificent verses which Mrs. Hostetter at church said that someone had discovered carved into the wall of a lunatic asylum, thus proving, so the story went, that even the maddest people could be filled with the Lord's grace. 'The Love of God,' the hymn was called.

Loudly, they sang each of the verses. As soon as they were finished, they began the hymn again. Every few lines, Isaac would glance up and almost meet his mother's eye, but instead of looking at her and exchanging signs of worry, he just kept pouring himself into that song. The more they sang, the more closeness filled him, closeness to his mother and to everyone who loved acapella harmonies. And so long as he was singing, he didn't care how deluded his mother was, or how wrong she was about his body, and so long as the music sparkled on his lips, he felt certain that his father would be all right. But dread filled him again as soon as they finished the song.

### *Clyde*

The idea to go to Art had come to Clyde during the milking. Lois had blanched when he mentioned the plan after supper. She'd begged him not to go, or at least to wait until Isaac got home. But there was no telling when the boy would get back from wherever he'd gone. To calm Lois somewhat, Clyde allowed that he'd stop in at the Beiler farm. He loaded a calf in his truck – as an offering to Art, as a gesture of atonement – and set off across the township. When he got to

the Beilers', the lights were still on in their milking parlor. They were either late with their milking or busy with a break. Either way, they didn't need to be bothered. So Clyde put his head down, tried to ignore the heaviness in his belly, and pointed his pickup north toward Art Smucker's farm, praying all the while that the Lord would bless his errand and somehow use the terrible events of the day to soften Art's heart.

The Smucker farm was dark when Clyde turned down the lane. No lights shone in Art's farmhouse or milking parlor. Still, when Clyde pulled up in front of the farmhouse, what sounded like an entire pack of dogs started barking inside the farmhouse. He had his door halfway open when the lights blazed in the lawn. The floodlights lit up Art's property like they illuminated the lawns of worldly folks at Christmastime. But instead of pointing toward groups of wicker reindeer, rows of inflatable snowmen and Santa Claus, and the *occasional* manager scene, all the lights shone outward from the house toward his pickup. The calf in the bed of Clyde's pickup thrashed desperately.

*The poor creature*, Clyde thought, as he switched off the engine and rolled down his window.

'Yello?' he shouted, over the roar of the dogs. 'Anybody home?' he called, louder this time.

'Shut up,' Art Smucker roared, and the dogs' barking slackened. 'Who is it?'

Clyde's pulse jumped at the curse. He squinted into the lights. 'It's me. It's Clyde Bauman.'

The unmistakable click of a gun being cocked. Clyde's heart started racing. He braced himself for the shot.

*Lord, if I go, be with Lois and Isaac.*

‘What the fuck do you want?’

Clyde swallowed and forced himself out of his pickup. ‘I came to ask your forgiveness for what I did this afternoon, for laying into you like that.’

Art stepped down from the porch into the light. He wore a sleeveless tee shirt, jeans, and work boots. He was hatless. His hair was uneven. A shotgun rested in the crook of his arm. On he came down the raised walk, peering down at Clyde. Clyde forced himself not to move.

*Lord, please touch him. Please let him feel your presence. And if I go, please help my presence here to mean something to Isaac. Help it to show him something about sacrifice.*

But most likely, his death on this errand wouldn’t mean a thing to Isaac. The boy would probably just write him off as a fool for trying to witness to Smucker. Which maybe he was. But at least he knew where he was going, however vain his errand, however fearful he felt as he stood there with that gun trained upon him.

‘What do you have in the back of your truck?’ Art demanded. ‘It sounds like a stuck pig.’

‘It’s a calf,’ Clyde said. His tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth. ‘I brought it to you to show how sorry I am for how worked up I got this afternoon.’ He nodded sideways, still conscious of the shotgun in Art’s arm. ‘Do you mind if I untie her for you? She’s a real nice hunny.’

He’d expected a grunt of assent, or another string of curse words. Instead, Art began to guffaw. ‘You’re *unbelievable*, Bauman. You’re unbelievable. Why the fuck do you think I want your calf? All I want is for people not to come barging onto my property, and for my neighbors not to use illegals.’

‘It’s not migrant labor that’s going to power Denlinger’s new parlor, Art. It’s robots.’



‘It’s both, Clyde. Get your head out of the sand. Sure, robots are a problem. Sure, they’re gonna put lots of good men like us out of work, but you think that just because rich fellows start using robots more the migrants are going to stop coming? Fuck no. So long as they get a dime more here than they can in *Me-hi-ico*, they’ll keep marching across the border, and that’s just going to make it harder for workingmen like us to compete.’

The calf thrashed. Clyde’s pulse pounded. Through the rush of his thoughts, he tried to find some way to persuade Smucker of the value of yielding.

‘I’m not saying you’re wrong about the robots,’ said Clyde, ‘but what you got to remember is that a lot of folks are coming from rough places, Art. Violent places. They’re just trying to make better lives for themselves here, like our ancestors did when they came.’

The analogy had seemed inspired, but Art just shrugged it off.

‘That right there is my point, Clyde. You think the Indians liked it when the white men showed up? You think they were thrilled to see a bunch of settlers building forts on their beaches? No sir, they were not. But they couldn’t do anything about it, because they weren’t prepared. They didn’t have the equipment to defend themselves, so they got wiped out. But how do you think it would have gone if the Pilgrims had landed in Massachusetts and all the Indians had AR-15s?’

Clyde frowned. Maybe, if the Indians had to do it over, they *would* have killed every settler on every beach. But they hadn’t – moved as at least some of them had been by pity or curiosity or a fellow feeling that might even have bordered on Christian charity. They’d refrained from violence. Some of them had helped their neighbors, and many of them had suffered and died for that. Their children had suffered. They’d sacrificed enormously. But in some larger sense, hadn’t things turned out pretty well for lots of Indians and whites and all sorts of people in

America, fallen though it was? He'd read somewhere that the first lady, Mrs. Obama, was the descendant of one of those people who were brought over as slaves. Yes, there was violence, pride and hard-heartedness, but there were also so many humble, hard-working people, so many fine farms, in Pennsylvania and Ohio and Indiana and all across the plains, the topsoil twelve feet deep in Illinois and Iowa, the prairie teeming with productivity, corn, soybeans, wheat, and sorghum, all sorts of grains, to say nothing of the livestock, the millions of beef cattle and pigs and chickens and dairy cows which had replaced the bison, and which now fed the country.

Clyde cleared his throat. 'I reckon maybe I haven't thought as much as you about immigration, neighbor. But the way I figure, it worked all right for our grandparents when they came over here. And now maybe it's our turn to yield a little, to turn the country over to some of the other races, just like some of the kinder Indians did when our people started arriving.'

Art Smucker spat and shifted his rifle. 'I just don't get you, Bauman. I'm trying to tell you I don't have a beef with you. I'm trying to tell you we're on the same side in the fight that's coming. And you just keep sticking your thumb in my eye. *Your* church might have you in the tank for "love," or whatever you want to call it, but, believe me, if the other races take over, they're not going to show us the least bit of mercy. They're going to take our farms. That's how it's going down in South Africa. They're going to take as much of our property as they can get ahold of. They're going to jack up our taxes. That's how it always is. All you have to do is look at history to see that people always take everything they can from each other. You can try to say it's otherwise. You can talk about "Jesus" til the cows come home. But there is a war coming, and the winners are going to be those who are prepared, who are willing to stand with those who are like them, and the losers are going to be the ones who go on and on about being nice.'

*Lord, be with him,* Clyde prayed again, over the weariness that washed through him.

‘Artie, I got to say I don’t think there would be *any* winners in that sort of fight. And I don’t see it, I really don’t. But maybe you’re right about conflict. I’ve never known as much as I should about politics. I will say this, though. These lines you’re trying to draw between people by race, they don’t make sense. People are just people. Some are decent and some aren’t. And if a fight is coming, well, I reckon the folks who want to fight can have my farm. They can take my property. Lois and I, we’ll try and go find a place where there’s still a little peace to be found.’

‘I just never knew you were such a *liberal*, Bauman,’ Art Smucker said, shaking his head.

‘What I am is a Christian.’

‘And I’m telling you, that’s all a *story*. It’s bullshit. It’s not going to do you a bit of good when the fighting starts.’

‘You might be surprised what it could do for you.’

‘I very much doubt that.’

Art’s dogs kept baying and barking at the windows. The steel barrel of the rifle glinted where it hung from Art’s arm. Clyde sighed through his nose. He wasn’t accomplishing anything. Art was just as stubborn as ever. So probably, it *had* been a mistake to come.

‘I guess we’re not going to get anywhere with arguing,’ Clyde said. ‘But I reckon I still need to ask for your forgiveness. I wronged you today. I was out of line with how I laid into you, and I’m sorry. Will you forgive me for what I did to you in Denlinger’s barnyard?’

Art Smucker snorted. ‘Nope. I’m not going to “forgive you,” Clyde. You want to know why? Because your anger is *good*. Train that on your real enemies. Train that on those who want what’s yours. People who want your farm. People who want to go after your wife and that son of yours who’s probably up to who know what right kind of trouble about now.’

The vein in Clyde's temple twitched. *Please don't speak about my son.* He turned to the truck. He just wanted to get away from Smucker, to offer him the calf and go home.

'I want to give you this calf, if you'll take her.'

Again, Art laughed. 'I don't need your fuckin' calf.'

Clyde rested his hand on the side of the bed. The little creature was quiet, now, the bed of the pickup slick with the manure and urine she'd loosed in her fear of the dogs and of Art himself, probably.

He glanced toward Art. 'Do you have an open hutch for her?'

'I told you, I don't need her.'

'I want to leave her. Besides, we don't need her now that we know we're selling the herd.'

Art spat at this. Clyde just did his best to body forth as much peace as he could aim toward anyone holding a shotgun, and with his heart still pounding like it was.

'I'll be seeing you, neighbor. And I know maybe you don't want to hear it, but I'll be praying for you, too.'

Art Smucker spat again. 'Think on what I told you. Think about what's coming. Think about which side you want to be on.'

'I want to be on the side of *peace*,' said Clyde.

'Good luck with that,' said Art Smucker.

'All right, neighbor,' said Clyde, and he turned to his pickup, conscious again of the presence of that gun, of the bead his angry neighbor might at that instant be drawing upon him.

But he didn't really think Art Smucker was going to shoot. He climbed into the pickup, backed it away from the porch, and pointed it toward the tumble-down bank barn. The hutches

were behind it, cheap plastic igloo-like structures that shone in the lights of his truck. Startled by the lights, several of the calves tottered to the openings. Clyde scanned the hutches. Sure enough, the last three were empty, so he heaved the calf from the truck and dragged it across the grass to the nearest empty hutch.

He untied the calf, fastened the gate of the hutch into place, and made his way to Art Smucker's filthy, mouse-ridden milk house. As he mixed up a bucketful of replacer, the words of a hymn his mother sang when he was boy resounded in his ears, its tune softening in his chest a little, lifting some of the weight from his shoulders. 'Be Still and Know That I Am God.' And each time he voiced the words, the face of one of his decent neighbors shone before him, one of the people who just wanted to live quietly and gently get on with the work of the day. Lois's face. Jorge's face. Dr. Lamborne's face. At the thought of her goodness, an ache heaved through him. Why, of all people, did she have to be given over to sin.

*What if she wasn't even if she did have a wife?* The thought flared in his mind as brightly as Art Smucker's floodlights. But no, Scripture was very clear. That had to be the deceiver talking.

*Forgive me, Lord,* he prayed. *I'm all mixed up this evening.* When he'd stirred the bucket of milk-replacer, he carried it back to the hutch and held it and hummed to the calf until she inched forward and started drinking.

'Sweet girl. That's a good girl. You're going to be just fine.'

Was it true, though? Would she be all right? Or would Art Smucker beat her and punish her? There was no telling, but so far as Clyde knew even Art wasn't dumb enough to actively harm his livestock.

'Okay,' he said, giving the calf's knobby forehead one last scratch.

A fresh stab of fear went through him when he drove back down the lane. Art Smucker remained on his porch, the rifle hanging from his arm. It would be so easy for the man to shoot. But he didn't – because Clyde was his neighbor. Or perhaps, Clyde thought wearily, simply because he was *white*.

The visit had been wasted – wasted, at any rate on Art. But as Clyde sped home, he thought of the Lord, again, of Jesus, who'd sat down with tax collectors and prostitutes and all sorts of people. Perhaps even people like his son. Heaviness filled him as he thought of the errand he'd just completed. If he could go and ask forgiveness of someone like Art Smucker, how could he not ask it of Isaac, who he had judged in a way that Jesus had surely not judged the vulnerable people he chose to spend time with?

But what could he say? He didn't want the boy to believe that he and Lois had no objection to his conduct. He certainly didn't want him to believe that he accepted his apostasy. But maybe there was no way to bring him back to the Lord except by the sacrifice of his own prideful desire to control and determine the course of his son's life.

He turned down the driveway. Praise the Lord, the boy's pickup was parked by the back porch. Clyde parked beside him and eased his way out of his truck. When he'd come home from the Denlinger's open house that afternoon, Lois had greeted him worriedly. This time, she threw the door open and rushed into his arms.

'You made it,' she exclaimed. 'You're all right.'

'Course I'm all right,' said Clyde.

'I was so worried. Isaac and I, we were both so worried, we were about to call the police.'

'That wouldn't have done any good, believe me, not with Art holding a gun on me, and cussing and talking all about war and violence.'

‘What an awful, awful day,’ Lois said.

‘Yes, indeed, Clyde said, stroking Lois’s back.

The screen door opened, and Isaac poked his head out of the mudroom.

‘There he is,’ called Clyde.

‘Hi Dad,’ Isaac said quietly.

‘Come on over here,’ said Clyde. ‘I need to say something to you.’

Another moment of hesitation, and then the boy padded across the back porch in his stockinged feet. Clyde wrapped one arm around Isaac, and Lois pulled him close.

Clyde cleared his throat. It was one thing to know you needed to share a word with your boy, and altogether another to actually do it. ‘When I was over at Artie’s asking him to forgive me for losing my head, it struck me that I never asked for forgiveness from my son.’

Isaac arched his eyebrows. He still seemed so prideful, so unrepentant. But Clyde forced himself on.

‘Son, will you forgive me?’

Isaac’s eyebrows shot higher. ‘For what, exactly?’

Clyde frowned. ‘For being hard-hearted toward you. For maybe not treating you like I think Christ would want.’

‘But you still think I’m sinful, right?’

Lois clucked softly.

Clyde nodded. ‘We’re all sinners, though, aren’t we? We’ve all fallen short of the Lord’s glory. That’s what I felt the Lord laying on my heart when I was over at Art’s.’

‘But what does that *mean*?’ said Isaac, his voice still so hard and skeptical.

‘It means that I’m asking you to give me another chance.’

‘Another chance to do what?’

Clyde sighed. He floundered. Still, he pressed on. ‘I don’t know, exactly. To understand? To pray? To try and get my thick old head around all this stuff?’

Isaac sighed deeply.

‘Please?’ said Clyde. ‘Your mother and me, we’re both trying.’

‘Yes,’ Lois whispered.

Isaac sighed again. Then he shrugged.

That was all the opening Clyde needed. ‘I know we don’t do this kind of thing too often, but would you maybe want to give your old pop a hug?’

Lois stepped back. Isaac frowned, but after a moment, he nodded, and Clyde bent down and wrapped his arms around the boy, catching a whiff of his own sharp sweat. He squeezed Isaac, feeling that strong young back, those wiry arms.

*Watch over him, Lord, he prayed. Keep him safe. Draw him toward you. Help him to feel your love and your peace.*

He wanted to keep squeezing, but he knew Isaac wouldn’t go in for that, and even this much contact was making him uncomfortable, so, after a moment, he released him. The boy straightened his shirt and hair as though he’d just been through an ordeal.

Clyde coughed. ‘Should we head in?’

Lois nodded and started for the house. Isaac high-tailed it. Clyde followed, not quite looking at Isaac as he disappeared into the mudroom, but hoping the boy felt his love. It was a start, wasn’t it? He nodded to himself. Hopefully, it was.



By the time Clyde got into the kitchen, Isaac was already upstairs, probably on that phone of his, doing who knew what. But he forced himself to accept that was up to the Lord to handle.

He turned to Lois. ‘How bout a dip of ice cream? I think we deserve one this evening.’

Lois frowned. He could see her readying her usual arguments about the virtues of low-fat cottage cheese and yogurt, but she caught herself. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I have some tin roof sundae in the freezer. Sit,’ she said. ‘I’ll dish it for you.’

But instead of sitting, Clyde followed her. She opened the door to the freezer, and he bent over her neck, drank in a deep breath of her starch and sweetness and talcum powder. She had a carton of ice cream in hand; still, he turned her around and kissed her, relaxing against her curves, reaching deep into her mouth with his tongue. He didn’t know what the Lord had in store for Isaac or for the country or for himself as a former dairy farmer. But so long as held onto his wife, he didn’t have to think about any of that nonsense. All he had to do was enjoy the feeling of her warmth against his, her softness and strength. He held onto her for a long time.

In bed that night, he held her tighter. Nestled up against her, it struck him that it was sort of hard to believe that the Lord would want to deny this pleasure, this closeness, to anybody. He couldn’t say for certain. Nowhere in Scripture did it say that life was to be free from want. But the point of a helpmeet was having someone to bear you up during hard times, to touch and comfort and inspire you in ways no one else could.

And as sleep started to take hold of him, he thought of Kuernerville Mennonite and all the ways his buddies seemed to be missing the heart of Christ’s love. So it seemed at least possible that the church Dr. Lamborne attended with her *wife* might have something important to say to about Christ’s call. Or maybe it would just be another worldly congregation with a

worship band and a pastor who sounded like he was announcing a baseball broadcast. Or were the Quakers the ones who had no music of any kind? Clyde wasn't sure. All he knew, in the instant before he slept, was that there would be plenty of time to think about all that. And that he was grateful, oh so grateful, that his family was safe, that his son was there in the house with them, that this rough day was just about finished, and a new day was coming, praise God.

### *Isaac*

It took Isaac several hours to fall asleep that night. Every time a truck sounded on the road, he was convinced it was Art Smucker. Twice, he rose, peered out into the darkness, certain that at that very instant, Art was stalking toward the house. Each time, he strained and braced himself for the breaking of a pane of glass or the scrape of a window, but there was no sound but the blood beating in his ears, the breath whooshing in his nostrils, and the water creaking in the pipes. He scowled every time he recalled his father's partial apology. Words of forbearance meant very little so long as the man was still convinced that what Isaac believed was wrong. But forbearance *was* better than judgement. And irritated though he still was by his father's blinkered faith, he was very, very glad that the man was all right.

Gradually, Isaac's fear softened. Weariness began to take hold. Softness slipped over him, softness that was not unlike the peace that had filled him while his mother had prayed for his father, while they'd sung together the hymns that Isaac loved. The words were misguided, of course, but was there not *something* true about the sentiment they inspired? Beauty was real. Sublimity. The important thing was to not get too fixated upon it.

'This is your body,' he whispered again, trying to recover a sense of the ease that had filled him in the meadow that afternoon.

He traced his palm over his chest and stomach and thought, again, of Luke and Reagan Denlinger in Luke's trailer together, and of himself, on the outside as usual, uncertain and ignorant as usual, but still so fortunate to be alive. Like Jorge was fortunate, like Dr. Lamborne and her wife were fortunate, like all sorts of people. Mary Elizabeth, his mother, even slow Gary Lefever running the jack at the loading dock of the farm supply store. Even his father.

Around midnight, Isaac finally fell asleep. When his alarm jolted him awake at four thirty the next morning, he didn't know where he was. And then he remembered. He was still stuck on the farm, still subject to the township's layers of stasis and conformity. He forced himself out of bed and into his work clothes and down the stairs to the mudroom.

'Morning,' his father said, already seated on the chair beside the door to the barn, pulling on his rubber boot-covers.

'Morning,' Isaac mumbled.

It was still pitch black when they made their way out to the truck. On the ride to the main farm, Isaac peered warily into the darkness. But the milking parlor was warm and bright. The cows bellowed impatiently in the barnyard. The auger juddered away as it carried the feed from shed at the base of the silos out to the trough. When Isaac opened the door on his side of the parlor, the first cows nosed in and trotted to their stanchions, their thickly veined udders radiating heat and fullness, their hides shining in the fluorescent light.

His father already had his first udder sprayed. As Isaac waited, the first automatic milkers started humming. Still, for one more moment, he remained, studying the setup that had brought him this far. In another few months, the parlor would probably be shuttered. That was progress. He nodded approvingly at this, and reached for the hose, and sprayed down his first udder. More progress was surely coming. Rick Denlinger's robotic milkers were just the start. And he wanted

to be part of it. He would do his best to be part of it. But he also wanted to do his part to make sure that what was coming for the country wasn't too harsh. Working his way down the line of stanchions, he repeated the refrain that would sustain him until he was ready to depart the farm. *Stanford. Harvard. Columbia. Cornell. The University of Pennsylvania.* With Rick Denlinger's help, maybe he'd get into one of those schools, and he'd pursue a course of study that would help him understand everything he needed to know about politics, business, queer theory, and economics.

When the milking was finished, the dawn was just breaking over the fields. For a long moment, Isaac stood there, regarding the fiery streams stretching across the horizon and dreaming of joining the College Republicans. Or maybe he'd start his own club. The Warren Buffett Society of America. It would welcome people who wanted to prosper and give back to their neighbors. Maybe. If it didn't sound too liberal. If that kind of thinking wouldn't lead to all sorts of inefficiencies. He still wasn't certain. But he had time to think on that. Months and months of time. And he was hungry. And his mother was sure to have a good breakfast all laid out. So he set those questions aside and climbed into the pickup with his father, nodding along, in spite of himself, to the acapella hymn on the radio station.

## WORKS CITED

- Bolton, Gillie. *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself*. London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999.
- “ETS Talk -- More Comments From Members.” *ETS and Reversals Discussion Forum*. Yuku, April 26, 2014. Web. 2 May 2016.
- Fries, Kenny. “The Exclusivity of Inclusion: On Disability and Diversity.” *Medium*. June 19, 2018. Web. 1 January 2019.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. “Vladimir Nabokov’s Lecture on ‘The Metamorphosis.’” 2009. <http://www.litandwriting.umb.edu/engl200/spg09/documents/nabokovonkafka.pdf>
- Price, Reynolds. *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*. Scribner, 1994.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment -- For Identity Politics in a New Register.” *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard Davis. Routledge, 2010.