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PEACETIME

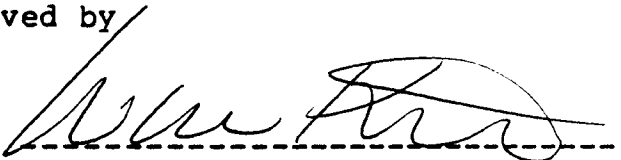
By

Timothy J. Laskowski

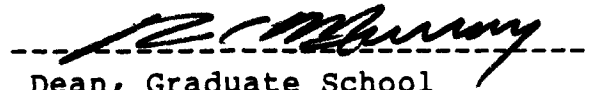
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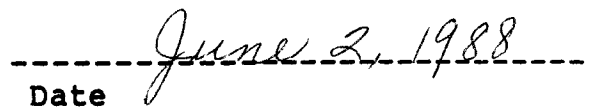
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PEACETIME

and other stories

by

Tim Laskowski

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the editors of Antietam Review in which
the story, "The Featherbed", will appear.

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for Jeannine

and for my parents

The Swampy Cree say stories live
in the world, may choose to
inhabit people, who then have the
option of telling them back into
the world again . . . If people
nourish a story properly, it
tells things about life.

-- Howard Norman
from Who Met the Ice Lynx

THE FEATHERBED

Emmet laid his full weight onto the spade's handle. The iron blade, forged into a long right angle, dug into brown oil-soaked bog. Twisting his arms, he broke loose a rectangular brick of peat. He laid it on a pile of newly-cut turf and wondered if there would be sun enough left in the year to dry these bricks.

Brendan, thirteen and small for his age, walked the mountain towards him. Emmet frowned at his nephew's retracing of steps through heather up to his knees. The boy carried a stick like a rifle, as though he were one of the rebels who had once roamed the mountain.

Below, the Glencree River cut the valley floor, sparkling in fading light as it cut the valley floor. Emmet adjusted the brim of his flat woolen cap to shield eyes that sat in a long face. He smoothed his winter greatcoat.

"I can't find the hermit," Brendan said, stopping near

his uncle, gasping the words, his stick now a staff to keep balance. Wind picked at his black hair; the sleeves of his nylon jacket rustled.

"The business of being a hermit is not to be seen," Emmet said. "He's here. I see his campsites now and then."

On the mountainside, roofs of new homes dotted what had been a bare landscape of heather, once so dense and soft the area was called the Featherbed. After sixty years of working the bog alone, Emmet craved Brendan's company and looked forward to his visits from Dublin.

"Come here," Emmet said. "It's time you did some cutting."

Under Emmet's direction, Brendan dug the spade into the ground.

"There's machines for this," Brendan said and wiped sweat from his face.

"It's not a bad trade to know," Emmet said. "Your granddad taught me, and you're old enough to learn."

Brendan paused in his work and looked down the handle of the spade. "Is Grandmum very sick?" he asked.

"Just cut."

Where Emmet had attacked the ground, Brendan sliced the turf gently. The boy was right about the machines; he would never have a need to cut turf.

Wind pried at edges of Emmet's greatcoat. Brendan struggled with the earth and Emmet thought of his own father

who had crossed the Featherbed fifty years ago, taking the Military Road into Dublin to fight for Irish sovereignty. He had walked part-way with his father; the memory remained of the man in heather, waving, ordering Emmet home.

News came two days later from a boy not much older than Emmet, carrying a rifle that he leaned outside the family's cottage before entering, not bothering to close the door. Emmet stared at the rifle, imagining its weight, the feel of its squeezed trigger, the hard recoil against his shoulder. Inside, the boy talked to his mother in confident tones about a clash between rebels and police. The boy's voice trailed off and Emmet stepped into the doorway. His mother held his baby brother in a yellow blanket. His sister, Philomena, sat at the kitchen table, an old newspaper spread before her, head up. The boy shifted his weight. Without caution or softness, he said, "Mrs. Mahoney, your husband was shot and killed by the Dublin Garda. I'm sorry, mum."

Emmet backed away, kicking over the rifle. He ran, wind carrying off his cap. His mother found him hours later, crouched in a bog hole on the Featherbed. "Come," she said and gave him her hand. At home, his father's body was laid in the parlor. Valley women had gathered to mourn.

Dusk settled on the mountain and Emmet stopped Brendan's digging. Behind the knolls, shadows had formed. Emmet believed faeries hid there, ready to rise in the coming darkness.

"Time to go home," he said. A starling spiralled above, emitting one long whistle. Two husky grey sheep moved out of the shadows and bleated in retreat up the mountain. Emmet stuck the spade into a bank of upturned earth, and he and Brendan walked home.

"Will your dad be collecting you in the morning?" Emmet asked. The boy nodded.

"Not much for you to do here," Emmet said.

"I like the Featherbed," Brendan said. "But Dad doesn't like to bring me."

"You like looking for the hermit."

"How can somebody stay up here away from people all the time?"

"You'll have to ask him, if you ever see him," Emmet said, making a low sound in his throat that might pass for a laugh. He stumbled over a root, righted himself and looked over Brendan's head. He saw a human figure twenty feet away. He was about to tell Brendan, but the figure raised a hand and faded into dark.

"What is it?" Brendan asked.

"Damn the faeries," Emmet said.

Their steps quickened. Smoke curled from the chimney of the cottage. Before entering, Emmet and Brendan kicked dirt off their shoes. Philomena stood at the hearth, bellows in hand, tending the peat fire.

"So how is she tonight?" Emmet asked his sister, hanging

his cap and greatcoat on wooden pegs. Brendan sat by the fire.

"You're so concerned about your mother that you go tramping the Featherbed. She could die any moment. A fine son you are."

Like Emmet, Philomena was tall and gaunt, and though a couple years older, still had a thick head of black hair.

"None of your guff. I'll look on her now. You get us supper."

"You must be joking," she said. "For you loafers I should get supper." Philomena put a kettle on the stove and rummaged through cupboards for bread and cheese. "How was your time with Uncle Emmet?" she asked Brendan.

"Fine." Brendan stared into the fire.

"Come on, boy," Emmet said. "Let's say good night to your grandmum."

In a small back bedroom, lit dimly, Emmet sat by the bed and Brendan stood behind him. The woman lay under white sheets, strands of grey hair strewn like thin fingers across her pillow. Her breath came harsh and low.

She bent her head towards her son and whispered, "Emmet." He squeezed her hand.

"Ma, wind's kicking on the Featherbed and the air feels tight. A terrible night altogether."

She said nothing but looked beyond Emmet to Brendan.

"Only yesterday," Emmet said, "there was a moon and the

weather was calm. Not a bad place at all. But, wind's come from the east, bringing cold. Ask Brendan. He was there."

She arched her back and said, "Brendan." Emmet knew it was not her grandson, but her husband she called for.

"I see him sometimes," she said.

Emmet shifted in his chair and put a hand on her arm.

"Give you grandmum a kiss," he said and Brendan took a small step back, then leaned and kissed the woman's forehead.

"That's nice, Emmet," she said.

Emmet was named by his father after Robert Emmet, an Irish patriot. His father had fought for a united country after the British had left, after the Free State was declared, and even after the Civil War. At his funeral, Emmet's mother made him promise, with his hand on the pine coffin, to never join the rebels.

From the doorway Philomena spoke, "Your tea is ready. Don't let it get cold."

Emmet and Brendan ate quietly by the fire. When they were done, Philomena sent Brendan to bed, and she sat with Emmet.

"Sean will be here in the morning," Philomena said. "We've got to be up early to make Ma look right. If he should see her now, he'd be sick from worry."

"Damn Sean," Emmet said into his tea mug.

"How you speak about your brother. And with his boy in the next room."

"The man will be telling me more about Dublin than I care to hear. He'll tell us how grand his car and clothes are. It's more than a body can stand."

"He'll be coming to get Brendan," Philomena said, "And to see Ma, as any good son ought."

"I don't like the man even if he is my brother." The fire's flames licked at a new brick of peat.

"You're still mad at him for going to Dublin, is all. While you spend your time tramping the bog."

It was a never-ending argument, and though Sean had left thirty years ago, they always spoke as if it had just happened. For that matter, other than the machines on the bog and the rural electrification program, his leaving was the only thing of consequence that had touched them.

"I think," Emmet said, drawing out his words, "you're the one wishing to be in Dublin and have wished it all these years."

"With you and Ma to care for? How could I have gone anywhere? With my duties, no man in his right mind would take me."

"Then I've saved some man from a terrible fate," Emmet said. "I'm going to bed."

"Well, good night," Philomena said. She muttered as she cleared cups and plates. Emmet washed in the bathroom and went to his room. He heard Philomena bustling about the home and he hoped she wouldn't wake Brendan. Fool woman, he

thought, forever on the move, as though one day she would find the right places for everything.

The morning was cold and outside the bathroom window, Emmet saw small snowflakes flit like pieces of white ash. The sweep of Philomena's broom sounded from the kitchen. He yelled to her.

She answered, "Will you think of Ma and the boy and settle yourself."

Emmet walked to the kitchen, his cheeks sunken. "Where are my teeth? I had 'em in a paper bag in the bathroom and now they're gone."

"How should I be knowing where your teeth are? Think straight, man."

"Did you throw 'em in the garbage?" Emmet fixed his eyes on her.

"I wouldn't be throwing nobody's teeth in the garbage."

"Damn it. You're always mucking about, picking up things that don't belong to you. Where's the garbage?"

"I burned it this morning while you were laying about. If you must know, the dog came in last night. Maybe he ate your teeth. He doesn't look good this morning."

"A dog's got more sense than to be messing with someone's teeth." Emmet went outside and sifted through burnt garbage.

"Did you find them?" Philomena asked as he reentered.

"No." Emmet wore a sour look. His face was grey with

ash and soot.

"Did you see the dog? He threw up this morning."

"The dog is fine," Emmet growled. "You burnt my teeth, woman."

Brendan came into the room and Philomena said to him, "I've laid out scones and butter and tea. Eat breakfast and stay away from your uncle. He's a grouch today." To Emmet, "We have to give Ma a wash before Sean gets here."

"I won't be having Sean see me without teeth." Emmet paced. "What can I do?"

"You'll help me with Ma," Philomena said, and Emmet saw no use to argue further. He followed her into their mother's room where soap, water, and towels were laid out.

"Sean will be up soon, Ma," Philomena said and sponged her mother's forehead. "We'll have you looking like a real lady."

The old woman's eyes brightened. "Sean?" she said and looked at Emmet, who held her back while Philomena washed.

"He's not here yet, Ma. Soon though," she said.

Philomena opened the front of her mother's nightgown and sponged her chest, the skin brown and wrinkled. Emmet turned his head and said, "This fool daughter of yours burnt my teeth."

His mother's lips moved into a half-grin and she coughed. Emmet laid her down. Philomena closed the gown and dabbed at the woman's face. "He talks like a real idiot

sometimes, don't he, Ma? What would I be doing with his teeth at all?"

With a pocket comb, she arranged her mother's thinning hair, brushing it out of her face.

"I hope Sean brings the Dublin paper," Philomena said. "I can read it to you."

"What's Ma care about such things?" Emmet said, playing with his mother's hair that Philomena had combed. "There's nothing in the papers but thugs and politics."

"There's woman things," Philomena said and combed the hair back. "There's fashion and theatre and cinema. Ma likes to know what's happening with the country too. We read the paper while you loaf about the bog."

"Stuff and nonsense," Emmet said and ran his forefinger across his mother's cheek.

Philomena chased stray hairs, fitting them into place. "You're looking beautiful," she said, but frowned. Emmet reached again to stroke his mother's face and his hand touched Philomena's. Both snatched their hands back as though they had been bitten.

"If we had a ribbon," Philomena said, twisting a curl of her own hair around her finger.

"She looks fine. No need to prettify her on Sean's account."

"Aye, it'll have to do," Philomena said, "as I've no ribbon in the house. It's a wonder I never think to buy

any when I'm in town, and only remember it when I'm in the cottage." She kissed her mother's forehead.

"You look grand, Ma," she said.

"I look a damn fool without teeth." Emmet said and left the room. Brendan sat at the kitchen table.

"Did you save a bit of tea?" Emmet said. "I'd like a cup before I go up the mountain."

Brendan poured. "I'll go with you," he said.

"You don't want to miss your father."

They stayed quiet and stared at each other over their cups. Outside, car wheels spun on gravel. A knock sounded and Sean walked into the cottage.

"Good morning, Emmet," he boomed. "Hey Brendan, how was the weekend with the old folks? I hope Emmet didn't bore you to tears." He laughed and lit a cigarette.

"Bitter cold day on the mountain," Sean said and threw his match into the fire. "In Dublin, the sun's shining like summer."

Emmet rubbed his mouth and tried to hide his face. His brother's tweed coat was snug and the tips of his shoes had new polish. "It's a soft life you have in the city, Sean," he said, "It's a soft people who live there."

"Come now." His brother smiled, revealing perfectly preserved teeth. "A soft life, is it? Working in the factory five days a week, eight hours a day? It's a different life, that's all."

"It's not working the bog every day," Emmet said.

"Surely you're not working too hard?" Sean said. "But I'm tired of the argument. How are you, Brendan? Speak, boy."

"Fine, Dad."

"Good. How's Ma, Emmet?"

"The same. I don't think she's in great pain. Sit. Philomena will get you scones and tea."

Philomena walked in with a wide smile; Sean's visits always improved her mood.

"You look fresh as a spring flower," she said to Sean. "It's a new suit, I bet."

"Thanks," Sean said. "Got it on Grafton Street." You should let me take you, Emmet. Get a decent set of clothes."

"Don't be bothering me with such rot," Emmet said. "I can't afford anything on Grafton Street and I doubt you can too."

Sean laughed. "I trust Brendan was no trouble to you, Phil."

"No trouble at all," she said. "Every day, he looks more like our own dad. It's a joy to be given the reminder. I wish we had him more often."

From inside his coat, Sean pulled a newspaper. "The Times, Phil." She grabbed it and held it to her chest.

Sean pulled Brendan up from his seat. "Come with me to

see Grandmum, okay, son?"

"I'm going on the Featherbed," Emmet said and Brendan looked at him.

"You won't," Philomena said. "You'll sit and have tea with your brother, is what you'll do."

"Don't push me. I've had enough today."

"I want to go on the mountain," Brendan said.

Sean released the boy. "But it's a terrible place." He sighed, "You can't be spending the whole day there. Your mother's waiting at home for us."

Emmet and Brendan walked a sheep trail across the heather. Snow darted around their faces and a mist diffused the weak rays of the sun.

"Awful cold today. How are you dressed?" Emmet noted the boy's sweater and windbreaker. "You don't have to come, you know."

"I'm dressed enough," Brendan said.

They walked in silence as wind picked at their clothes and rustled through heather. They found a spot behind a knoll where the wind was blocked and sat and looked across the valley. The Glencree River flowed northeast to meet the Liffey, which continued into Dublin. Emmet studied the new homes, the fresh-cut bog roads, and in the distance, a yellow harvester cut turf.

"Your grandmum planted a garden near here," he said. "She always rushed about doing things. She had more energy

than your dad or me, or even Philomena. She'd keep in touch with other folks on the mountain and tell us what's happening. She's a good woman, your grandmum."

Brendan kicked a stone. It rolled downhill and under a bush. He looked at the sky, then at his uncle.

"Is she dying?" he asked.

Emmet turned and played with a torn fringe on his coat pocket. His mother had stitched it two winters ago. Philomena would mend it now.

"You're too young to be talking of death," he said.

"What are you? Twelve?"

"Thirteen, and I've seen some dying."

"What dying could a boy have seen?"

"Richie Quinn, my friend," Brendan said. "His father died a few months ago. The Brits shot him in Newry. Richie says he was fighting for the IRA, planning to blow a barracks."

"A man from the Republic's got no business in the North," Emmet said and pulled on a bristle of heather.

"Don't you think Ireland should be free and united?"

Emmet lifted his cap and scratched his head. Clouds moved over the valley. There would be heavy fog tonight.

"Who taught you such rot?" he said. "That talk gets men killed. What do I care what people do in the North? Or in Dublin for that matter. People been fighting for hundreds of years and they'll be fighting it hundreds more."

All it gets is dead bodies."

"Dad says Granddad was shot fighting the Brits."

"He was killed by his countrymen. Shot by the Garda in Dublin. Some things you have to let be."

Emmet twisted a twig off a heather bush and twirled it in his hands. One spring night, he had sat here with his own father, watching fires on the mountain to clear the bog of heather so men could cut turf.

Something moved in the brush behind them. He looked, saw only branches stirring in the wind. He tapped Brendan's arm.

"You wouldn't be thinking the IRA's a good thing, would you?"

"They're thugs and murderers, Dad says."

"Thank Christ your dad's got sense. What do you think?"

"Brits killed Richie's father. They killed all the rebels. Somebody's got to get rid of them."

"God have mercy," Emmet said. "Listen to your father." He shifted his weight and straightened his back. A sea gull cried from beyond the Featherbed and Emmet strained to look. The figure of his own father stood in the heather, arm raised, waving his cap.

"Dad." Emmet shook his head. The figure dropped its arm. "Damn faeries," Emmet said. He closed his eyes and rubbed his palms into his sockets.

"Dad." Emmet opened his eyes. His father was gone. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and looked at Brendan whose eyes focused on the spot where the figure had been. He poked at the boy.

"Are you all right?" Emmet asked.

"I thought I heard a voice," Brendan said. "But it's the wind."

"Aye, the wind. A terrible wind. Plays tricks on a man." He searched for words to turn their talk from his father and troubles in the North. "I wonder where that spade is I left yesterday." His hands grabbed at air as though they held the spade.

Emmet shook his head and stared at scars on the backs of his hands. "Why is it you come on the Featherbed?" he asked Brendan.

The boy stared across the heather. "Rebels lived on this mountain," he said. "I like to think where they might have hidden."

Emmet's stomach knotted. Wind played with his cap. He scanned the heather. "There's nothing but sheep and faeries on the Featherbed now," he said.

"You," Brendan said. "You're here. You never go to Dublin?"

"I've been there all I care to," Emmet said. "Selling turf. When I was younger, I talked to folks and visited the pubs. Never cared for it."

"I like you here," Brendan said.

"Dublin is a fine place, I suppose. Your dad likes it well enough."

"When I was little," Brendan said, "I thought you were a rebel, hiding on the mountain." Brendan broke a branch off a bush. "I thought you were wanted by the Garda or the Brits and that's why you didn't come to Dublin. I told my friends. They think you're a hero."

"That's a silly thing you did."

Emmet imagined Dublin children in green school uniforms, standing in playgrounds, talking of him, like his own schoolmates had talked of his father: a martyr, a name added to ballads the boys sang. Men had come often to his home to enlist him with the rebels, to do proud his father's memory. While his mother chased them away with curses and a broom, Emmet would retreat to the Featherbed in honor of the promise that rooted him to the mountain.

Brendan watched him, waiting, Emmet knew, for the hero of his imagination.

"I never shot a gun in my life," Emmet said. "Stayed on this mountain all my life. I've seen fellows do worse. My dad left and he never came back."

Brendan looked away from him.

"Things, I suppose, could have been different. God knows the right and wrong," Emmet said. He played again with his pocket fringe. His knee and elbow joints ached and

he placed fingers in his empty mouth. He was old. Things would not change. He would die old on this mountain, buried next to his mother and Philomena and Sean. There would be no ballads, no fanfare. Brendan would carry the name.

Emmet laughed. Once his mother died, he would be an orphan, a sixty-year-old orphan, living with Philomena, hoping for visits from Brendan, maybe even looking forward to seeing Sean.

"Brendan." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. He wanted to warn him about the rebels, but had only his own life as an alternative. It wasn't enough. The mountain, valley, family home, no longer were enough. The boy looked up. "Nothing," he said.

A gust of wind flipped his cap into heather. Brendan jumped and rescued it. As Emmet took the cap from the boy's hand, the wind shifted, rushing from the west, hitting them in the face, colder than before. Emmet lifted his head, alert. "It's an odd wind. There's no protecting us on the Featherbed." He sniffed the air and felt he could not draw a deep breath. He stood, arms tight on his sides.

He pulled Brendan to his feet. "Time to get back."

The boy's eyes widened into circles and he asked again, "Is she dying?"

Emmet crouched and grabbed both his nephew's shoulders.

"Aye, she's dying," he said. He crossed himself and Brendan crossed himself. Wind howled between them like a

bellows expiring a blast of air.

As they neared the cottage, no smoke rose from the chimney, and Emmet knew the fire, left untended by Sean and Philomena, had gone out.

* * *

EMIGRANTS

for my grandparents:
Anna and Jan Laskowski
Anna and Frank Dylewski

My grandmother flows from room to room in waves of silver and blue, from aunt to uncle, to my parents, to me and my brother and cousins. She carries a glass plate filled with white square wafers broken into pieces. "Opialtek," she says, "Bread of love, given each Christmas Eve. You take one, Lenny," and she flows past me to my cousins and brother.

Her hair is silver, pulled tight from her broad forehead and thin nose. A belt digs into the waist of her navy blue dress, and brown-orange support hose hide legs that sink into thick-heeled black shoes. It's snowing outside; white flakes stick to the frosted window and mount the sides of the house. "You take one," she says to my brother.

On the street, cars and pedestrians gather in front of

the motel where I work. Casimer Rowinski weaves between people and stumbles. He belches and wipes a yellow hanky across his lined face.

"Give me room," he says to me. Blades of his sparse grey hair stand like tin soldiers. I lean against outside bricks of the motel.

"Out on the town again, Cas?"

A freight starts on the lake shore. Its engine crunches, boxcars rattle, metal wheels grind on metal track. The chain on the sign that flashes Lake Erie Motel clanks against bricks and I sniff night air, stale odor of dead fish and factories on the waterfront. Cas sways in the green blinking glare of the sign, as though he is aboard the train.

"Give me room," he says and fingers his top button, tight in his neck, an old man's way of buttoning a shirt. The train's rumbling fades and recedes south. Revving car engines take over: young crazies gear up to cruise State Street.

"Your son let you out for the night?" I say and Cas leans in my face.

"Lenny." He recognizes me. "You still night clerk here? I thought you were leaving Erie. To Pittsburgh. A new job or something."

"Changed my mind."

I light a cigarette and give one to Cas. The Zippo's

flame dances in my hand.

"Why?" he asks. "Why you don't go?"

I ignore him. Cars are getting thicker. A stream of red and white lights crawls by us, aimed for the lake, past the wooden warship, Niagara, through the marina, to the dock. A burgundy Chrysler pulls into the motel parking lot. Four guys fill the car and a girl sits at a back window with a blue scarf on her neck. One guy hops out and pisses on the pavement while the girl sticks her head out and laughs. He steps over his puddle and back into the car.

"Punks," I yell. The car inches into traffic and they don't hear.

"Punks," I say to Cas. "There's more every night."

"You just wish you were them," Cas says.

"To hell with that," I say and stare past him at the Niagara, lit by headlights and street lamps, a two-masted wooden brig, of chestnut, oak and pine. The hull's black with a wide strip of white oak outlining the top of its walls. A breeze pulls at her rigging; she's permanently blocked in concrete, State Street on one side, bay waters on the other.

"Hey Lenny." Cas grabs a flask of whiskey from his back pocket and takes a swig. I pull a long draft too and my throat burns and my eyes water.

It's a warm night. Kids sit on hoods of cars that litter the road sides. They drink beer, blast stereos, and

yell at each other. Two tanned girls in halter tops, braces on their teeth, walk past. They toss their heads and lights flicker on their hair and the metal in their mouths. Cars honk and I stare a long time at their bare shoulders brushing one another.

I scratch at the tie hanging loose on my neck and rub a hand down the stitches of my jeans. "D'you see that?" I say to Cas.

"Give me room," he says.

I lead him into the motel and sit behind the formica-covered desk. The lobby's decorated in blue vinyl and plastic with tiled floor and walls. Like most nights, there's no business to worry about.

"I hear about your grandmother," Cas says. "I was sick. My son don't let me go to the funeral home."

"To hell with it. She's dead."

"I know her a long time. Before your dad was born. I come from Poland with her. I ever tell you that?"

"A thousand times." I manage a smile.

"She was good woman. Don't go out. Stay home and watch her family."

"I don't want to talk about it," I say.

"How she look in coffin? She look nice?"

"Shit, Cas. I don't know."

Flowers surrounded her, stems and blossoms bent into the coffin, her hands folded on her stomach, a red rose in

one and rosary beads around the other.

"I didn't look," I tell Cas.

A satin sheet covered her from the hands down. She wore a frilly nightgown and I wanted to pull the sheet to see if the gown reached her feet. I ran a hand along the satin, felt the stiff outline of her legs. I brushed the fabric while relatives moved closer, whispering. My aunt and uncle knelt and crossed themselves. My dad grabbed my hand, asked me in a low voice what the hell I thought I was doing. He smoothed his hair and pointed above the coffin to a large rose bouquet, red and white, above her face. A blue streamer floated down; gold letters spelled the word, Busia, Polish for Grandma. Dad walked me from the coffin, rose fragrance simmering in my nose.

"I bet she look real nice." Cas stalks the lobby. He kicks the floor and pinches chair vinyl. "It's a shame."

"Yeah," I say and remember her on the flower-printed couch in her living room. I was five and my grandfather had recently died. Dad was at the shop, Mom working somewhere as a Kelly girl. My parents were hustling for jobs, scraping up money to send me and my brother to Catholic school, leaving us with my grandmother.

I lay with her taking a nap. As she slept, I scooted beside her legs and rubbed my hand over the nylon of her thick support hose, its silky warmth flowing through my fingertips and chilling the back of my neck. I rubbed till

she woke and told me to stop. I waited for her to sleep and I rubbed again. She shifted her weight, trapping me beneath a leg. I rubbed harder to wake her. She grabbed me under the shoulder and pulled my head into her chest, then placed my hand under her skirt, nestled between her thighs, as far as it could go. "Okay now, Lenny?" she said, and worked my hand till she was asleep.

"We leave Old Country when we were no older than you," Cas says. "Not like now when you take a plane and go anywhere quick. People got money now. We didn't. Just enough for train and ship to America. When we go, our parents didn't want us to. They know we never see them again. They never see us or our kids."

"Enough, Cas. You want your room or you going to tell me your life history?" I pull a key from the cork board. He doesn't even look.

"You have cigarette?" he asks and continues, "When we get to America, we make families and hold onto them. We ain't got nothing else. My boys do good. Jobs in shop. Marry pretty girls. But my grandkids want to go. I never seen a town like this. Everyone talks about leaving, but everyone still here."

"Yeah," I say, walk to the lobby's glass door and lean on its metal bar, my back to Cas. He mumbles behind me.

"So when you leaving?" he says.

"Soon," I tell the door and take a breath. "Goddamn,"

I smile at Cas. "If I stay too long, I'll be like you, you old Polack."

Cas laughs. "You wish you be that lucky."

Wrinkles around his eyes are etched black like clown make-up. His hands clutch each other, big and scarred and toughened. Half a ring finger is missing. I hide my soft hands behind me.

"I remember," he says. "I tell your grandmother, 'Anna,' I say, 'Anna, everyone say we crazy when we come, but we ain't got it half-bad.' You know what she say to me? She say, 'You damn right, Cas. No matter what they say. I know it's home. I bury my husband here.'"

I scan the street and push against the glass. "Damn it, Cas," I say. "Give it a rest."

My grandmother stood on her porch, her powerful form filling a white-checked sky-blue dress, head high and eyes watchful. My brother and I played with a baseball in her backyard, almost teenagers, our parents working again. We kept away from the rose garden where white, yellow and red flowers bloomed in even rows, the ground black with peat. I remember Cas helping with the garden, the two of them, backs bent, spade in hand.

A high throw from my brother sailed into a bush. Yellow-white petals fluttered and settled in the peat. My grandmother ran, shouting, "You come home, boys. You come home now." She scooped the petals and we walked past her

into the house. She followed but instead of hollering, she put the petals on a table and turned from us. "I fix you supper," she said and banged pots on the stove.

Dad came in early from work. Smiling, he announced he found a new job selling insurance. He was out of the shop. Into the white-collar world.

"So now their mother quit work?" my grandmother said. "Their mother watch them now?"

Dad told her the money wouldn't be much to start. We'd stay with her.

"Look." She pointed at the rose petals. She spoke in Polish and turned to me and my brother. "See," she said to Dad. "They don't even know what I say."

Dad shook his head. "That stuff don't matter anymore, Ma. No one needs it."

Cas shouts over the cars, "You don't have to go nowhere, Lenny. Find good woman. Settle here."

A car rolls into the lot, the Chrysler, more girls, drinking and laughing. The girl with the scarf sticks her head out and waves. She shouts something and the car rocks, its engine revving. South, I think, if a car goes far enough, is Pittsburgh. North, there's the bay. Catch a ferry to the peninsula, cross the lake to Canada.

The girl leaves the Chrysler and walks toward me. She fades into exhaust and reappears at the door. She gives me a long looking-over and walks to the desk, stands with her

back to me and Cas. Shoulder-length blonde hair rests on puffs of pink short sleeves. Skin-tight jeans outline her butt.

"Excuse me," she turns and smiles. "I'm looking for a phone." Her sea-green eyes are highlighted with delicate strokes of liner. They open wide and blink. "I know you," she laughs. "Lenny, right? Lenny Doleski." She laughs again. "You don't remember. You were in my brother's class. I was two years behind." She sees I'm stuck for a name. "Tracey," she helps me. "Tracey Adams."

"Yeah," I say and it clicks. "Steve's little sister."

Cas clears his throat. "I worked with Adams once. Building Ten. The General Electric."

She ignores him. "What are you doing now, Lenny? Stevie's in school in Philly, you know."

"Long time ago," Cas says. "He changed his name from Adamczyk. Maybe your grandfather."

"No relation." She looks at Cas like he's crazy, then focuses on me. "I'm going to Pitt in September. Can you believe it? College already."

A horn blows. She jogs to the door and yells, "One minute." "I was gonna go to school," I tell her as she breezes by.

"Why didn't you?" She looks at the lobby.

"Changed my mind."

"Where's the phone, Lenny?"

"I've been night clerk since high school. Running the place, you know."

"Night clerk? Nice, Lenny. You have a phone?"

"Behind the desk. I'll get it." I set the phone in front of her. "Not easy to pick up and leave," I say, "with family here. And it takes money." I pick at the desk's formica edge. "Hell I don't why I never went."

She hops on the desk and crosses her legs while she dials. She wears white sneakers, Disney characters painted on them, no socks, and her ankles are brown and thick. She tucks the receiver between ear and shoulder. "I can't wait to get out of Erie," she says. "I don't know how you stand it."

"I don't know," I echo her.

She pushes the hang-up button. "No answer," she says. "Let me try one more number."

I listen to the dial click and think of last summer when I was in Pittsburgh to take in a ball game. I walked downtown, stood by the university towers, my reflection in a window bouncing back at me. I picture Tracey next to me, books under her arm, in between classes.

"You know, Lenny," she says, "I used to think you were something in high school. That's why I remember you."

"No shit," I say. "You should have told me."

"I was a skinny little kid then." She hangs up the receiver. "No answer there either." She jumps off the

desk. "I'll tell Stevie I saw you," she says. The horn blows and she's about to leave.

"Tracey," I say. "Maybe I can call you."

"Why, Lenny?"

"Maybe we could go out."

"I'm leaving for school next Saturday."

"I'll call you this week."

She plays with fringes of her blouse and Cas pushes between us and wipes a hand under his nose. "Thadeus Adamczyk." He snaps fingers in Tracey's face. "You related to him?"

"Come on." She tries to smile. "I said I wasn't."

Cas drops his head.

"Tracey," I say, "Can I call you?"

"Really, Lenny." She takes a last look at Cas, then studies my face. "Don't bother."

"You look like Adamczyk," Cas says.

"Get off it," she yells. "I'm no Polack." She moves from me and Cas to the door.

I grab her. "Tracey." I squeeze and white lines form on her tanned arm. She stares hard and I turn my face to see Cas at the desk. A guy from the Chrysler comes and bumps us with the door, breaking my grip.

"What's taking so long, Trace?" he asks.

She throws her head back and shakes her hair.

"Nothing. Just these two Polacks." She stops, smiles

weakly, and runs her foot in a circle on the tiled floor.

The guy doesn't know what to make of it. He's smaller than me, as tall as Tracey. She takes his arm and says, "Let's go."

Cas laughs and steps next to Tracey. "You tell Grandpa I say hello."

Tracey looks at him coldly and I think she's going to hit him. I grab her arm again and she reaches for my face. Her friend pulls my arm behind my back, some move he's learned from watching cop shows. I shake him off and throw him into the wall.

"You need a strong Polish boy to protect you," Cas says to Tracey and chuckles. Car doors slam outside and I let her go.

"Get the hell out of here," I say as three more guys appear, all dressed in broad-striped shirts, white pants and duck shoes. Their short hair's been sprayed to keep a wind-blown look.

"Punks," Cas says, crouching like a boxer. A guy moves towards him and I push him back.

"Motel's closed," I say. "Haul your asses out."

Girls come to the doorway. One says, "Jerry, I want to go." "Let's leave," Tracey says. "These two deserve each other." The guys look at each other. They're not interested in a fight, not liquored enough to risk their faces or clean shirts. But they've got to put on a show for

the girls.

"You wait, buddy," a brown-haired guy says. "We'll be laying for you."

"Yeah," another pipes in. They can't even talk a good fight.

"See me in the morning," I say. "When I get off."

They paw the floor, then shuffle backwards toward the door. Tracey holds her hand on her hip. "Come on, guys."

Cas can't leave it alone. "Too bad you are cowards," he says. "And me an old man."

The one named Jerry swings at Cas. I grab his neck and take him outside. I wheel in time to avoid a punch to the kidneys. I hit that guy and he sprawls against the bricks. Two girls rush to him. Blood trickles from his nose. He's dazed but okay.

I stare at the others. "You leaving now?"

They hang their heads and help their friend to the car. They pile in and swear and toss beer cans. As they drive off, Cas pulls his pants and moons them.

"Come on in, Cas," I say. "I'll buy you a coffee."

He walks in with me, laughing. "Those guys no want to mess with us."

"Shut up," I say. My knuckles throb. With my other hand, I pull at a seam on my jeans.

"We show 'em, don't we, Lenny?"

"Goddamn girl," I say, grab the whiskey from Cas's

pocket, and take a hit. He wets his lips. When I keep the flask and play with the plastic screw cap, he shuffles away.

"You don't want a girl like that," he says. "I find you good Polish girl."

I laugh. Polish girls. My mother, aunts, grandmother. I've had enough.

"To hell with it." I fling the cap past his head. It bounces on tile once, skips onto the corridor carpet, and rolls to the wall, settling in carpet threads.

Cas stands wide-eyed and laughs. His eyes are two flecks of brown glass, set deep in wrinkles. They're fixed on me, yet go past me, like a movie character on a ship in search of land. A teacher once said the Polish have a Mongolian eyelid, a genetic gift from Tartars who conquered Poland and cross-bred with the women. The eyes sit in oval pools of skin: laid-back Asian eyes in sharp, restless European faces. Eyes of my grandmother. I want to rip them out of Cas's head. I hold onto the door and steady myself with liquor.

There were secrets I never asked my grandmother, about the Old Country and why'd the hell she landed here, not just in America, but in Pennsylvania on the lake shore. While she was alive, I didn't need to know. It was fact, like the sun coming in the morning and you don't ask why, but just be damn glad it does.

Some people say it's all an accident. An accident that

the sun comes, and the earth is where it is, and we've got life on this planet. Neither fate nor God have anything to do with it. It's an accident of birth, my teacher said, that I was born in America, in Pennsylvania, with Polish blood.

"So why'd the hell you come here?" I shout at Cas. He traces a finger along the desk, his weight solid on the counter. The way he stands reminds me of his boxer's stance. Unmovable.

"What?" He doesn't understand. "This motel is good place."

"Why'd you come to America? To Erie?"

"Jobs here," he says. "No war. Not like Poland."

"Goddamned Polack," I say and try to smile, but my lips won't bend.

Cas thinks it's funny. "You Polack too. Like me."

My stomach tightens and I clench my fists. In the funeral home, my aunts and uncles and parents talked a language I never spoke. I'd ignore them till they'd say my name, or the priest would pray in Polish and people would answer. He'd say the name, Anna, and I'd ask what he said. Everyone would act like they didn't hear my English. They continued in Polish and I couldn't understand because I'm not a Polack.

Cas is laughing. "You as much Polack as me." I grab his shirt with one hand and his arm with the other.

"Goddamn it, Cas." I shake him and he grips the desk.

A freight starts on the lake shore, its whistle echoing in the lobby. My soft hands hold Cas and I realize he's not resisting, just waiting me out.

I wheel him around and push him towards the door. He stays steady. "Go home, old man," I yell and glimpse his eyes, confused but not afraid.

"We take care of those punks," he says. I stay quiet while he thinks of something else. "I know your grandmother. Before you were born." The rumble of the train vibrates under my feet.

"Roses," Cas says. "Me and Anna teach you to grow roses." He smiles, standing a foot away, his eyes narrowing.

"I forgot," I say and cough up whiskey-tasting spit that I swirl in my mouth.

"C'mon, Lenny," he says. "You don't forget." He shoves me playfully on the shoulder. I grab and squeeze his wrist. His arm muscles flex, but he says nothing, only keeps his gaze on me. I focus on the top button of his shirt, pressed tight in his neck. I let go of the wrist and snatch at his collar. With both hands, I push him against the lobby's front glass wall. He grimaces as his back hits and I hold his collar and dig my fingers in. "Lenny," he says. "You pick on old man?"

Traffic sounds filter through the wall and compete with

the train's rhythmic chugging. Headlights flicker through glass, like a heartbeat in Cas's glossy eyes. With a quick jerk, I rip the top button off his shirt. He flattens against the glass, arms out. The whiteness of his neck gleams.

"I go to bed now," he says, voice steady. "Give me room."

"Goddamn, go home," I yell, but the words drift, lost in street sounds. Through the window I look at cars, going nowhere but the quarter-mile up and down State Street between motel and dock. "Go home," I say, but my voice is broken. His white neck still glares. The motel walls shake with vibrations and I shake with them.

"What kind of boy you are." Cas sniffs, runs a finger under his nose, and pushes me aside. "Your grandmother be ashamed."

I spin him and push him backwards. He falls heavily into a chair; the cushion and his body both give out a soft whoosh. He tries lifting himself but falls back, pain in his eyes.

I watch his thick blue-veined hands grasp the arms of the chair. He straightens and rubs the small of his back. He groans and his face contorts.

"Cas." He doesn't answer. "Cas, get up." He doesn't even try. No sound comes but harsh breathing. He's a rag doll, baggy clothes, tossed aside. He lifts a hand, feels

for the torn button, and massages his chest. The hand falls and his breath calms so I can't hear it. His eyes shut.

"C'mon, Cas, stand up." I yell and grab the chair by the arms, lift both it and Cas. He nods and a corner of his mouth turns, a weak smile that reminds me of the way the undertaker had arranged my grandmother's mouth. Coldly peaceful.

I kneel, something I didn't do in the funeral parlor. I grab Cas's hands and plead, "Please get up." My head drops on his knees and I stroke the cuff of his pants. I run a finger inside a shoestring loop and one word of Polish comes. "Busia," I say, and his knees stir. I look and he grins.

In the rose garden, my grandmother wore a blue full-length apron over her dress. Warm breezes stirred rose petals and blew wisps of silver hair in her face. "Be careful," she said to me. "Only do what I tell you." I was just tall enough to look over bushes at my dad and Cas in overalls two rows away. She gave me metal clippers that barely fit my hands and had me snip a branch whose leaves were brown at the edges and whose thorns were brittle. Cas shouted and she went to him. With the clippers I reached a top branch, green and full with buds. The clippers snapped shut and the branch broke, hanging by its skin. I held it straight, wishing it could reattach itself. I removed my hand and the branch fell, resting in the bush then falling

further. Its swollen buds, tips of red peeking from the green, settled into the peat.

I tucked the clippers close to my chest and snapped them shut. The flesh between forefinger and thumb caught in metal edges opposite the blades. A purple bubble of blood formed and broke. A thin red trail trickled into my palm and I cried. My grandmother came but didn't see my hand, only the branch I cut. "I no tell you to cut that," she said and took the clippers. She saw my hand. "You watch. Don't get blood on your clothes." She turned and talked in Polish to Cas. I sucked the blood, tasting it and rolling it on my teeth. I heard my name and they laughed. I smeared a trail of blood across my tee-shirt.

My grandmother turned, hair and apron billowing. "We go home," she said and dragged me by the ear into the kitchen. She threw me into a chair, yanked the shirt over my head, and rummaged through a cabinet for iodine and a band-aid. She daubed the cut with pink-red fluid and I cringed at the sting, crying but holding my hand steady. She wrapped the cut in the band-aid and I grabbed her apron. "I'm sorry, Busia," I said. She bent and kissed my wound. "Okay, Lenny," she said.

In the lobby, Cas says, "I go to bed." He stands over me, feet firmly planted. I get a key for him and he picks up the half-empty whiskey flask off the desk. As he heads for the corridor, I watch cars through the glass wall. Some

drift south, following the train. Some north, past the Niagara warship, to the bay. I rub a hand down my thigh, crease my jeans, and straighten my tie, holding my arms in close, pushing the knot into my neck. The noise of the train dissolves into a hum, fading, lost in street sounds.

Cas pads down the corridor. I stand with my hand on a glass wall. "Night, Cas," I say. He waves the flask and says he'll see me in the morning. I stare through the empty hall. He won't wake till late, after my shift is over, and I'll be gone.

My grandmother steps off a train in Erie, Pennsylvania. She's seventeen and wears a blue kerchief bought in New York. It is sixty years ago but I am at the station, watching her hesitant step on the platform, her eyes searching the long narrow building for signs to indicate she's found a home. Her hair is light brown, face tanned and forearms too muscular to be considered ladylike. She wears a long coat with ragged fringes. It doesn't cover entirely the navy blue dress topping her ankles and resting on high-top button black shoes. She wipes hair off her forehead and wets her lips, straightens her coat as my grandfather, a young mustachioed man, hurries to her, Panama hat cocked, advertizing his new Americanness.

They hug, quick and uneasy, eyes looking for reasons to be together this far from home. I sense my beginning in

their uncertain look. They don't notice when I walk slowly by and step on the train, my face long and eyes sad, but my grandmother breaks her gaze from the man and sees me. Cold flushes my cheeks as the train lurches along the platform. Brown hair falls on my broad forehead almost to my thin nose. Brown skin is stretched tight across my heavy forearms. We see in each other's faces signs of our emigrant hearts. I wave and she reluctantly blows a kiss and waves back.

* * *

PEACETIME

Word came yesterday from my mother, a victorious shout across the thousand miles between us, that Dooley, the friend of my youth, was dead. "The drugs erased him," was what she said, "God rest his soul. They found him in a bathtub with a needle in his arm." She reminded me that she had predicted it, that she had been right all along. It had been destined.

There are things I can fathom that I couldn't ten years ago, growing up on the east side of a Pennsylvania town on the Lake Erie shore. Signs of tragedy were marked across Dooley's face, across his gait and posture, attracting me to something unknown and forbidden. Dooley had drugs and younger girls and I was not the only boy to follow him like a puppy. Explanations I gave for my behavior found no merit with my mother or other adults, but even at this distance, they hold some weight with me.

Dooley was different. Other kids we looked to as leaders were tough and unemotional, but Dooley had a gentleness allowing those of us younger to explore his generousities. He was generous especially with me, with his drugs and sometimes his girls.

My wife, Aggie, accepted the news with her usual common sense: "The death of someone so young is hard." Though she kept her eyes down and her voice soft, she added, "Maybe in this case, it was for the best." She knew Dooley during the last months, when she and I were sixteen, trying to grow up, I a hard case, and she trying to be my rock and savior.

That last summer, I was still angry with the world, and no one knew it was Dooley who kept things in perspective. Whenever I thought my own life hard, I always had his to compare it to. It was a painful time, the summer I saw my father for the first time in six years, when I relived his alcoholic rages and his leaving. It was the last summer I paid any attention to my mother on God and church. She was fond of saying every sin was a nail to pierce the flesh of Jesus, and I owed something to the Lord because he had died for me.

My memories of Dooley are caught up with Lake Erie. In bad weather the lake rose like an ocean, waves breaking on shore, pushing sand and stone. Even in winter when ice froze the lake into stillness, I'd sit for hours, looking. My father told about men who tried to walk the ice thirty

miles to Canada only to lose their way among high wind-shaped ice dunes. They lost their bearings or slipped through thin ice. Some died.

Before my mother's phone call, Dooley was lost to me for ten years. After the night he was beat up, I didn't visit him in the hospital and I didn't see him afterwards. Maybe he went into the army as he said. I only know I lost him, willingly, and gave him no thought when, at eighteen, I left town for good to enter college. I could find him now, my mother said, under a stone marker in Calvary Cemetery, not far from the lake, not far from Waldameer Park where we were last together. But I have no desire to look for him near waves I have long abandoned for the flat green fields of the Iowa midwest.

The lake, I'm sure, still rolls, still breaks on the sand and gravel shore; things like that don't change. When I was nine, I stood in the surf with my father, occasionally puffing on his marijuana joint. My pant-legs were rolled up and water splashed to my knees as he pointed across the lake, saying Canada had not been a bad place to live and sometimes he wished he'd stayed there. The winds drowned out some of his words, but in intervals of calm I heard about his army tour of Vietnam, Germany afterwards, and how after one night of dreams that kept him awake, he went AWOL to Sweden and eventually to Canada. After a year of no job, time spent on Ontario beaches looking across, he hitched a

ride home to be court-martialled.

"You were only a few years old," he said. "Too young to remember. I spent six months in Leavenworth before coming back to claim you. I married your mother. Only woman crazy enough to wait."

My mother was on the beach with us. She wrapped an arm around me and led me through the surf. We floated underwater, faces down, holding hands, ripples lapping our bodies and me blowing bubbles to signal my father I was alive.

Dooley's father died in 1974, an angry man. When younger, Dooley and his sisters carried bruises reflecting his temper. He was an intelligent man, Dooley said, a professional man, an insurance man, who gradually lost all ways to cope with his world. He'd believed in nothing but his country, and even that recently had let him down. One summer night, his father escaped again from the state hospital, Dooley hid in my house as police scoured the neighborhood. Dooley found him the next afternoon, a day marked by Nixon's resignation. The television was on in the living room and his father sat in a tubful of water in the bathroom, pistol in hand. "The water was red," Dooley reminded me on our last night together. "And in my head, I still hear the newscasters talk about the president."

That last night with Dooley changed my life, brought me redemption. We were on the beach, the lake stirred by

winds, and the moon full like a ball of white ice. We stood naked on a crumbled concrete jetty, toes gripping the rusted iron supports. Despite a strong wind that carried waves over our ankles and blew bugs in our faces, it was a hot night, and we looked for a cooling rain. We were on a picnic for kids in probation group homes. Above us in the park on the bluff, kids and counselors were cleaning sinks in the pavilion and picking debris off the picnic grounds.

Since his father's suicide, Dooley's mother kept to her bedroom, coming out rarely to say she talked to God; angels said her husband was all right. Dooley's intake of drugs increased and it was a drug offense that landed him on probation.

On the jetty, he bent over the water, poised for a dive. A sea gull circled overhead, black-tipped wings silhouetted by the moon. It cried once, a crisp call above the wind. Dooley timed his jump between waves, his slender figure barely rippling the water, and his long hair floated behind like a stream I could follow. His head bobbed six feet away and he shook his hair and shouted. I jumped feet first, arms wide, into a crest. I was pushed back towards shore and surfaced with a mouthful of water and sand.

The swim was my idea. The counselors on the bluff had boasted about how they "modified my behavior." Earlier in the day, they took a day's television privilege because I swung a fist at a kid. Later, when a counselor bumped me in

a softball game, they fell over themselves in praise because I checked my temper. I overheard them talk about my improvement since I got serious with Aggie. A "nice" girl, they called her, one to keep me out of trouble. I wanted to bust somebody. I never considered Aggie a part of my rehabilitation.

I was on six months probation. My problem, my mother and counselors said, was my temper. Five months before, I was playing hockey in the street with Dooley on the sidelines. Something he said angered one of the kids. Dooley stood, hands in pockets, talking calmly, but the boy raised his fist. I came from behind and smacked him with my stick.

Afterwards at my hearing, my mother told the judge she had done her best, had raised me Christian and prayed to the Lord. But now she wanted no part of me until the County had fixed my behavior. She blamed Dooley for her loss of control, and at her request, when I went to a group home, I was forbidden contact with him.

The water was cool that night and I swam to where Dooley treaded water.

"Feels good," I said.

"Anything to get away for a while." Water beaded on the beginnings of a beard on his chin. He kicked his feet and breast-stroked into the lake. His white buttocks flashed in the moonlight like the white cap of a small wave.

"It's pretty rough," I shouted.

He stopped and smiled. "Who cares?" He swam back.
"You afraid I'll drown?"

The gull flew above, eyeing us like we were something edible. I dipped underwater and gathered stones from the lake floor. I threw one at the bird who dodged it and floated higher.

Dooley grabbed my arm. "Let it alone."

I dropped the stones and we swam nearer to shore till our feet were anchored in sand and stones.

"I'm tired of all this." He nodded his head towards the picnickers on the bluff.

I splashed water in his face. "You're done with it now." In a month, he would be eighteen and no longer under the court's jurisdiction.

"Nothing's working out," he said. "Those jobs they got me, cleaning yards, McDonald's; they were garbage." A wave nearly swamped us. He spit out water and continued, "Nobody's got a sense of humor anymore. You got to be on time, do things their way. It's worse than school was."

"Hell, to be eighteen," I said. "I'll trade places in a minute."

"You got something," he said and hunched his shoulders and walked towards shore. Waves hit to his waist and he turned. "You got Aggie."

"That's over," I said and stood next to him.

He shook his head. "What are you talking about? She's good, man."

"It's not so good," I said, words barely coming out. I knew what I was saying was wrong. Ripples of water played between my legs and I kicked a foot out of the sand. It hurts when I think how close I was to losing Aggie, but at sixteen, I was a fool. Before her, there were only sexual encounters, girls I didn't care to see in daylight, incapable of fun unless drunk or in bed. Aggie came and I enjoyed her smile, her appreciation of lake and woods, time together holding each other, making love or just talking as we traced imaginary starfish in the sky. But at that point, talking to Dooley, I was ready to give her up.

"I don't deserve her," I told him, and he placed an arm over my shoulder, resting his hand on the back of my head. My affair with Aggie had given me a sense of command over sex and a new openness to sensual feeling. I let his hand ply my matted hair.

"It's like a law being broken," I said about Aggie. I bent my head back into his hand. "To hell with it."

"Come on," he said. "Talk." Dooley always demanded I explain myself. I'll remember him for that.

"Inside me," I told him. "It isn't right. Like I'm getting something that isn't mine and it'll be taken away when I'm not looking." I walked out of the water and kept my back to him.

"You like her," he said. "What's the problem?"

"In the group homes," I said, "They don't give you a reward unless you do what they want. But Aggie is always there. She doesn't ask for anything. I don't have to do anything for her." Dark clouds moved in from the west, promising rain. "It's over," I said, hugged myself and dug my feet into the sand. "I'm back where I belong."

He stepped past me to our clothes. Sea gulls wailed and wheeled above. They tipped their wings, dove to the lake, and fought the wind. Sometimes the wind stood them upright in mid-air, and they squawked and beat their wings in search of a gentler current.

From underneath our clothes, Dooley grabbed a loaf of bread. He flung a piece of it in the air and gulls fought to catch it. He tossed a couple more pieces.

I shook my hair and dried myself with my shirt.

"What else you been doing?" I asked.

He kept his eyes on the birds fighting for bread. "I was into some good drugs. Even selling some. But the customers were grade school kids. I couldn't stand that."

He sat on his haunches. Water dripped from his bare arms and thighs. "Look at this," he said, and held bread out on his palms. Two birds waddled towards him, grabbed the bread in their beaks then flew away. He held more out. Gulls fought to reach his palms and when the bread was gone, they continued pecking at his hands in search of crumbs.

Only Dooley's eyes flinched as beaks pinched his flesh and I wondered when the pain would force him to pull back. The gulls' glassy eyes shone like black polished stones.

Bubbles of blood broke in between Dooley's fingers, and red drops hit the sand. Still he didn't move, not till I yelled and waved my arms, scattering the birds.

Dooley sat on the sand, smiling. He said my name and shook his head as though there was something I couldn't understand.

The gulls' eyes, they still gleam in the dark of my mind, on days when wind and rain are in the air and I walk the acre of farmland Aggie and I have bought. I see them in the eyes of crows, sleek and black, like gulls in their search for carrion. Does it matter now that I do understand, that I could give Dooley's look back to him, nod my head, hold my chin and say, "I see?" Maybe in that moment on the beach I still could have helped him.

"You're crazy," I said and picked him off the sand.

"Don't worry." He flashed his hands, trickling red.
"I'll wash them."

Kneeling on the jetty, he rinsed his hands in the lake. I dressed and knelt with him on the concrete, waves wetting our knees. Strands of his hair stuck out and were lit up in the moon. We sat together on the jetty.

Water reminded me of my father, a man who had crossed an ocean and a lake to come back to me. He lives now on a

hot ocean coast, waiting for me to rejoin him.

"I saw my dad," I told Dooley. "Last month."

"I thought he was gone long ago."

"He's in Florida." I kicked loose concrete into the water. "He sent a ticket and I flew down. He wants me to move there."

"Florida, man," Dooley said.

"White beaches and sunshine," I laughed. "Girls and string bikinis."

His wet teeth glistened as he smiled.

"He's remarried," I said. "To a Vietnamese with three kids he supports working as a counselor for drug abusers." I swatted a mosquito on my neck.

"What's your mother say?" Dooley asked. He looked between his legs, one foot flat on the jetty, his arm resting on his knee.

"She's wants me back," I said. "She visits the home every day and preaches Jesus. Says how rotten my Dad was to leave. How she's put up with me so I owe it to her to stay."

I marvel at my mother's constancy. I listen on her weekly calls to Iowa. I lean back and smoke while she fills my head with Christ. I forgive her victory over Dooley and take her pleas to come home as a last vestige of her maternal role. She must realize we need the distance; it's the distance that keeps us together.

I didn't tell Dooley or my mother that Florida was the last place I wanted to go. When I visited, it was summer. Mosquitos were the size of dragon flies, sweat drenched my back when I stepped outside, and my father's house was too quiet: the whir of an air conditioner whispering through the doorways' beaded curtains, my father breaking silence to say in low monotone, "Weather's great here, no snow ever," while across the room, the woman and her children murmured, watching TV with the sound down, and my father continuing, "I want to make up for lost time."

His words no longer echo in my head as much, but they are how I remember him. War veteran, ex-alcoholic. He lifted himself only to live a life of expiation for crimes he imagined he committed. He writes each Christmas, same sense in his words, that he has something to make up for. I answered the first of his letters, but the others I have thrown away after reading.

On the jetty, I kicked at the iron support and lied to Dooley, "I might go to Florida."

"Is that why you're dumping Aggie? Cause you're moving?"

"That's why," I told him. Aggie is in this room with me. She sits in an easy chair, stroking loose folds of her belly which recently emptied itself of our first-born child. Her face had been rounder, no grey strands in her black hair or faint creases in her forehead. When I told her I was

going to Florida, we sat on a swing set in a park and her lips thinned and became full again. Her eyes stared, frightening me with their desire and intensity, strengthening my fears and resolve to leave her. I told her Florida would be a new start; the weather, according to my father, was great, no snow ever. Her eyes were sharp enough to suspect the half-truths of my rambling.

Dooley rubbed his hands on his thighs. "Florida." His breath came out in a low whistle. "I wish I had something like that. The County can't wait to get rid of me." Dooley never moped, but he was as downcast as I can remember him, staring at the lake, looking like he hoped a wave would carry him to a more secure land.

"I never told my father I loved him," he said. "Because I didn't. I never loved him." His face was brittle; I thought it might shatter like glass into a hundred pieces. "The water was red," he said. "And in my head, I still hear the newscasters talk about the president."

There are summer days, when the sky is blue and infinite over brown fields and there hasn't been a hint of rain for weeks, I think what I could have said. Sometimes, something clear and logical comes to mind and I slap my thigh. But I know now neither logic nor clarity would have helped.

I had nothing to say. The silence was broken by sea

gulls calling and a shout from the beach. Six kids walked on shore towards us.

"Hey," the youngest, Keith, yelled to me. "Aggie showed up looking for you."

I stared into waves and didn't answer.

"She can't stand a day without her lover," Keith laughed.

"Hey Dooley," Greg, a tall round boy my age, shouted. "You got any dope?"

Dooley stood on the jetty, shook his hair, and hugged his bare chest. His demeanor was changed. He smiled as the boys on the beach whistled.

"Nice bod," one yelled.

"What's this?" Greg said. "We come across a couple of fairies?"

Dooley walked through them to get his clothes. He dressed and said, "I've always got dope."

"I don't know if I want it from a skinny faggot like you," Greg said, turned to the others and laughed.

I remember all the kids, names and faces. Some were friends but most were just those I'd been thrown in with. We passed time together. What we did wasn't important. They stick in my head only because of that night. Greg's is the face I have the most trouble with. I understand him but still haven't made peace with him, haven't forgiven him yet.

While Greg urged each boy to laugh, I grabbed him from

behind and locked his head between my forearm and biceps. "Nobody's saying you have to take any dope." I ground my knuckles into his bare scalp. "What the hell kind of haircut is this anyway?" I said and released him.

Greg rubbed his head that was shaved to the bone.

"He's going to be a marine," Keith said. "Gonna get his ass shot off."

"Goddamn you," Greg said, in a wrestler's crouch, facing Keith.

I pushed Greg back. "Dumb shit," I said. "You got a whole year to wait."

"I'm ready." His eyes darted back and forth. "My PO is setting up the enlistment. I'm doing push-ups and sit-ups and running."

He knelt to tie his sneaker, came up with a handful of sand and threw it in my face. I dodged his swing, caught his arm and pulled it behind him.

"Maybe the marines will teach you to defend yourself," I said. The others formed a circle, urging a fight.

Dooley stopped us. "Let's smoke some dope," he said. "I got something that'll make you all feel like you're in your mothers' arms again."

I shoved Greg away and stood next to Dooley. He said, "Maybe you want to find Aggie."

"No," I said, but didn't tell him I was afraid, that I still hadn't figured out my feelings, that I could still be

swayed by a look or a touch.

I lagged behind as Dooley led the others to the foot of the bluff. He sat under trees, facing the lake, and the others formed a semi-circle around him. The moon shone on Dooley's white clothes and brown whiskers. He crossed his legs and delicately fingered a small block of tin foil.

"Sit down," he said to me. "Here I've got one of the secrets of life." His voice was a wave drawing me. I sat and completed the circle.

"I wanted a few of us together," he said, not shouting, yet loud enough to be heard above the waves. "Time to say good-bye, folks."

I shifted my feet in the sand. "What do you mean? Where are you going?"

"I was going to tell you," he leaned towards me, "before the others came." He sat straight and scanned the group. "Uncle Sam's got me. The army."

"What the hell," Keith said. "I wouldn't have figured you for it."

Like trying to memorize the imprint on sand of a receding wave, I scrambled to gather the sense of his words. A chill crept across the top of my shoulders and I was scared.

"No work here," Dooley was saying. "No money, no nothing. My PO says it's the last thing for me."

"You and me, Dooley. We'll take care of the country,"

Greg said like the officer he would become.

"Gung-ho type." Dooley laughed as his hands worked the foil, in no hurry, creasing edges, a seamstress working a hem. The moon's rays reflected the foil, bathed his slow fingers in grey light. "Yeah," he said to Greg. "The marines are looking for a few good crazy men."

Greg stared at his hands, wondering if he had been insulted. "My dad was a marine. Before Nam," he said. "Hurry with that stuff."

Dooley shook his hair and wind blew it off his shoulders. He laughed quietly while he gripped a block of dark brown hash and broke it cleanly in half. He skimmed the surface of one half with a pen-knife, slivers of the hash falling into the foil. He packed the slivers into a small pipe, took a sky-blue lighter and sucked the flame into the bowl.

"Take this," he said to me.

I puffed and passed the pipe; I drew smoke into my lungs and my chill and fear left. I exhaled with a cough and relaxed.

Greg was extolling the virtues of the marines to Dooley. A sea gull squawked and Greg jumped up and threw a stone at the bird. Dooley stood and reached for his arm, cocked with another stone as the bird passed again. "What's the difference," he dropped his hand as Greg threw the stone, "army or marines."

I lay back on the sand. My eyes filled with stars poking light between clouds. I pictured Dooley's hands, their loose grip on the knife, like a life-saving surgeon's, carving the hash. Vietnam was not long behind us. Men brandishing knives and guns had filled the television screen all the days of our growing up. In our living rooms, we saw more acts of war than most veterans. But I couldn't place Dooley on that screen. I couldn't imagine a bayonet filling his hand or his long, graceful fingers loading a clip into the magazine of an M-16. Something intrinsic would die in his training to be a soldier.

I sat up. The pipe was repacked and coming my way. The lighter's flame lit Keith's face, his mouth puckered and intent on drawing smoke. I took the pipe and closed my eyes; a red-orange glow penetrated my eyelids as Keith directed the flame into the bowl. But I didn't inhale. I didn't want a fog clouding my brain. I opened my eyes, felt the sting of heat from the lighter and in the shadow of the wiggling flame, I watched Dooley, sitting there, watching me.

"Puff on it," he said.

I struggled against the high in my brain, the mist of one puff of hash. I knocked the lighter out of Keith's hand and threw the pipe at Dooley's stomach.

"What the hell is this?" I yelled and stood up.

"What do you mean, pal?" he said, holding the pipe,

reaching for more hash.

I stayed silent and the circle was quiet till Greg said, "He's horny for Aggie." The others laughed. They talked about girls we knew, telling lies. Someone said how cool Dooley was, what great stuff he'd given us, best high we'd ever had. I was forgotten till I spoke in a strained voice that caught their attention, "The army, Dooley. Why the hell the army?"

Dooley stared and the others kept quiet.

"You'll find out," he said. "There's nothing doing out there. What's the difference anyway? At least I'm not crazy enough to join the marines."

Greg started to talk but I cut him off. "You can't do it," I said and folded my arms on my chest, hands holding my sides. I turned and watched waves, imagined being below them, floating with the current.

"You'll never make it in the army," I said. "You won't follow orders. They'll break you."

"So, it all sucks," Dooley said. "Like school. Only more rules to break."

"Leave him alone," Greg said to me and the others picked up their own conversations.

My mind twisted to find words. "You won't make it, Dooley," I said. "They'll cut your hair."

"Jesus Christ," Greg said. "Who the hell cares about hair? The army'll make him a man. Nothing wrong with

servicing your country." He spoke defiantly. That sentiment, so soon after the war, was not usually heard. We hadn't the years to forget, or years under an optimistic president who would reaffirm patriotism and be cheered for it.

"Do you care about my hair?" Dooley asked me.

"I only just thought of it," I told him.

"No," he said. "You don't care."

"Damn it," Greg said. "You two sound queer."

"Screw it," Dooley said, looking at Greg. "What I'm doing has nothing to do with my country, nothing to do with being a man. What I'm doing is because I've got no choice."

"Hell," Greg said, exasperated. Our talk held too many subtleties. For him, it must have been like looking for stars through a blacked-out window. "The marines wouldn't want you."

"You're both fools," I said and looked around at the bluff, the trees, the shore. In a newspaper my mother sent once, there's two paragraphs about Greg, the hometown boy who rose from a troubled past to become a marine lieutenant. I wonder how many other kids I knew found themselves in the military. The draft was recently ended and the volunteer army begun. Probation officers and school counselors dumped kids like us into the services. Recruiters talked to me, emphasizing that my life was going nowhere, so why not think about the army. One called the house, and my mother, remembering how the war and the army had stolen my father,

quoted Jesus to him about turning the other cheek, and slammed the phone in his ear.

Dooley stared at me.

"You've got to understand," he said.

"You're a fool," I said.

Wind blew his hair and he shook his head. "To hell with it." He took the lighted pipe from Keith. "Only enough for one more round on this stuff."

I stepped back, dizzy from the hash. I half-formed a thought to find Aggie, tell her I wasn't going to Florida and didn't know what the hell I was doing. Wind streaked my face and rustled my clothes. The hash was clearing from my head, and I looked at my wet sandy feet and felt silly.

Greg stood in moonlight, talking down to Dooley, waving his arms. His legs were spread. He pointed at Dooley and said to the others, "He's a wimp. The army don't need wimps like him."

Dooley was himself, calm. He leaned back and his eyes landed on me.

"There's no more dope," someone said. "Anymore dope, Dooley?"

Dooley stood and faced Greg.

"It's over," Dooley said. "Nothing's left." He looked into each face. "To hell with it all. To hell with the army and marines. To hell with you, Greg."

I stepped between him and Greg. From the corner of my

eye, I saw Greg clench his hand into a fist. I tried to steer Dooley out of the circle, but he stood like dead weight and I fell into him.

"Let it be," he said and brushed me aside.

"Get out of here," Greg said to me, his fist raised. Dooley stood in front of him.

"This is shit," someone said lazily. "I'm losing my buzz."

"You're an asshole," Dooley said to Greg, drawing out his words.

Greg threw a punch, and I knew I had time to stop it, to pull his hand behind him and break his arm.

I let the punch land, solidly, on Dooley's jaw. His head snapped and his body sprawled on the sand. Time has softened only slightly the sound and sight of that punch. The rationality that tells me, without doubt, that Dooley had already reached a place beyond my help, has not made it easier to forget. Martyrs, I've learned, don't want to be saved, but the guilt of letting go lingers in the blood.

Dooley rose to a crawling position and I grabbed a crooked stick of white driftwood. He swayed on his feet and smiled at me, then looked at Greg. "Goddamned crazy marine."

I spit in the sand. The others yelled and closed the circle around Dooley. "What good is it?" I shouted, then just yelled to blot the sounds of Dooley's groans, of kicks

into bone and flesh.

I ran to the shoreline and a gull darted on skinny feet. I swung the driftwood stick and the bird skipped to the water's edge. As it rose to fly it was hit by an incoming wave. It floundered, wings flailing, feathered coat pocked with bare spots. Stone eyes, blank and dumb, remained unblinking above its crooked beak. I swung the stick wildly, splashing water. The bird fluttered. Soggy and dazed, it flew to the jetty as I swung again into the lake. I waded through water up to my waist, and raised the stick. The gull sat, exhausted, chest heaving. I swung the stick again, but the bird spread its wings and pushed into flight. The stick cracked and rained splinters as a wave lifted me onto the jetty and laid me on my back. I watched and smiled as the gull banked into the wind, shook its wings, and rose to the moon.

In the last hours of night, my eyes bleary and my clothes wet with rain, I sat on a dune as paramedics carried Dooley past me. Aggie sat with me and I stretched my arm over her shoulders, resting my chin in her hair. She talked to me about Dooley and about nothing. I gripped her tighter and she wiped her face in my sleeve, gently bit the flesh of the inside of my elbow.

I was a child on that beach and counselors warned me Aggie's arms were symbolic, a return to my mother. I am a

man now and I am happy I have not yet put childish ways behind. There are times still when I must, like a son, seek her comfort.

Aggie smiles from her chair where she breast-feeds our baby. I sense the mistakes I will make with this daughter, but someday I will take her to the stone marker in Calvary Cemetery. We'll walk the Lake Erie beach and I'll talk to her about Dooley. We'll watch waves crest and drop at our feet and I'll tell her to be gentle and patient; there are things like this that seem never to change.

* * *

ISAAC

for Nathan and Cara

Moonlight shines through slitted windows onto General Wayne's bristly white hair and plastic cheeks. Above his open mouth, his black hollow eyes stare into the vortex of a sharply-sloped ceiling. The general, known for his impatience, called by Indians, Chief Who Never Sleeps, lies in bed, a few straws thinner each day.

I sit with him in the top story of the reconstructed Blockhouse. Octagonal white walls display grey flintlocks and pistols and yellowed maps. Below hang feathered tomahawks and bows and grooved arrowheads. The general, under a sky blue blanket, rests beside a wall.

I've only worked here three weeks and I'd be fired if caught this late with the general. But tonight I look closely at his pale face with its painted blushed cheeks and lipsticked mouth, a dark hole frozen in a scream. His face is not the porcelain I thought, but cheap plastic, and pieces of his straw stuffing roll under my boots when I walk.

"Very few visitors lately," I tell him though I know he's beyond hearing.

"Those fools at the Alcohol Center chart their success ratio," I say. "I'm number 32 in this month's plus column." General Wayne is unblinking. I pull a straw from his arm and pick my teeth.

"They put me in touch with my ex-wife and think that's a big idea. I could have gotten her anytime. She never gave up on me." I pace, crossing strips of moonlight, dipping the general in and out of shadows. I stop so the white light hits him in the eyes. "She promised me a visit with Zack, though," I say. Zack's my seventeen-year-old son.

The brass buttons on my long blue coat glisten for a moment. The coat is Revolutionary War style, sweeping to the bottom of the nylon stretch pants that end at my knees. My shirt is ruffled and the ends of the sleeves blossom in white around my hands.

I'm the assistant caretaker for the general's Blockhouse and its grounds. The Blockhouse sits on a bluff above Lake Erie, behind the state's old folks home and cemetery for veterans. On weekdays, I keep the grass short and the trees pruned. I polish the statue in the cemetery and rotate sun-faded plastic flowers from grave to grave.

I was drying out at the Center when I heard about the job, the state's new policy to hire what they call

"recovering alcoholics". The Center staff said it was too soon for me to face real people, but I impressed my employers with my knowledge of General Wayne. And so between one and five on weekends, I dress in this uniform and talk to visitors about the general. I have the knowledge because my father taught me it, over and over, when I was a kid. He loved American history, and because the general had died in this city two hundred years ago, this was his favorite story:

Many Indians, the Wyandotte, Miami, and Shawnee (Tecumseh was one of these), threatened the western border. General Wayne defeated them, burned their grainland, and made the border safe for people. President Washington bestowed great honor on the general and asked him to accept the surrender of British forts on the Great Lakes. Coming home from this, General Wayne suffered an attack of gout and he stopped at the fort here which overlooked Lake Erie. Before a doctor could come, he died in great pain.

Through a window, the moon rises full and wild. I sit

on the bed and pull another straw.

The general's mouth retains its painful yawn.

"I know the lake around here," I say, "and the bay surrounded by the peninsula where I've found arrowheads. As a boy, I fished the lagoons, walked peninsula trails that took me from sand to pine to oak to grassland in an hour's time. I dipped my hand into lagoon water from a wood canoe and one day with my father caught twenty-seven perch." I stare out the window and sigh. "That's a long way from the streets and grates I've grown used to."

General Wayne is not impressed. His eyes don't move when the moon passes over them.

"I had a dog," I say. "She liked to howl at a moon like this."

When I was twelve, my family had a house on a bluff above the lake. Half a mile away was the paper mill where my father applied chemicals to whiten brown sheets. Air smelled of sulphur, water was laced with cyanide, and the shore was littered with garbage, tires, and abandoned shoes.

When cancer came to her mouth, my grandmother moved from New York to live with us. Sixty years ago, she had emigrated from Poland, and as she grew older, she gradually discarded English, reverting to her native tongue. She told stories, and I responded to bits of English, to her gestures

and expressions. The stories were without words for me, but her animation brought them alive.

"Speak English," my father once said to her. The sun shone behind, blurring him in white glare. "Polish won't do him any good."

"He is a Polska," Grandma said. When she wanted me to understand, she spoke English. She sat on our back steps, crystal earrings dangling like prisms and separating light, bathing her neck in a rainbow.

"He's American," my father said and retreated into white sunlight.

As he watched his mother fall into her old language, words rasped with cancer, my father grumbled and drank. He took me on walks to the Wayne Blockhouse and told me American history. As Grandma became sicker, he whipped me more often, and punched my face. Nights, my mother rocked me in her arms, singing songs she knew from a brief career before marriage. She sang, "Baby, I'm sorry. He loves you." She diverted his moods and blows onto herself.

Despite my pleading and assurances that I could care for one, I was never allowed a pet. My father called animals dirty and smelly, not fit to be around people. But one day, Grandma and I saw a stray dog, red like an Irish Setter, walking the stones on the shore, sniffing at garbage. For several days we watched her, till Grandma grabbed a soup bone and called the dog. Grandma ignored my

father and the dog became ours.

I knelt and pulled on a stick in the dog's mouth.

"Betsy," I said and shook my head, searching for a name.

"Martha," I said.

My father stood over me and slapped my head.

"It's not staying," he said. "Don't bother giving it a name."

"Red Dog," I said. Not a name but it became what I called her.

When there was a moon, Red Dog howled. My father would throw rocks and leave the house. Grandma and I would sit in grass on both sides of the dog, laughing at her howls.

Once, Grandma held Red Dog in her lap and put her ear to the dog's chest. She rocked with his howls, and in concert with the motion she moaned, soft but building. She smiled, released the dog and howled full force to the moon.

She coughed in spasms, mucous wetting her lips. She massaged her throat and said quietly, "Sometimes words are not important. The feeling is important. Words can lie." She coughed again and spread her fingers through her silver hair. "Children are born with only a howl. Soon this sickness will leave me with nothing else. I will be as I began."

I listened to Red Dog and felt rumblings in my stomach. Grandma coughed again and stood, pulling on my hand. "We go home now," she said and took me inside the house.

In daylight, the three of us walked the shore, speaking in English and Polish and dog. When left alone, Red Dog ran along a cove, where the lake indented the shore. On the other side, granite cliffs echoed her barking, and in answer she'd bark again.

"She thinks there's a dog on the cliffs," Grandma said. The current was strong and Red Dog would be swept back when she tried to swim to the other side.

Winter came and Grandma stayed in the house. Her voice faded to whispers, hard to hear because she held her hand over her mouth. My father used home to eat and sleep in between work and the bars. He left Grandma to my mother, and Red Dog and I to ourselves. She continued her barking at the echo as ice built along the shore, and snow blurred the distinction between land and frozen lake.

It was warm one afternoon and Red Dog barked wildly. Ice extended from our shore and from the cliffs till only a small opening in the middle remained. Red Dog quieted. She studied the ice, checked her footing, and barked. The echo came and she followed it onto the ice.

"You'll find out," I yelled. "There's no dog there."

She walked to the opening and sniffed, looked at the cliffs, then at me. I heard the pure, crystal sound of cracking ice and saw Red Dog's eyes open. "Run," I shouted, but her paws slipped. Ice opened below her and she yelped, falling into white, bobbing her head once, then

disappearing. I ran on the ice, felt its cracking and retreated to shore. I called and looked for another opening where she might surface. I called and I cried.

I ran to the house and up the stairs. "Grandma," I yelled and jumped on her bed. She grimaced, spoke in Polish and patted my head.

"Red Dog fell through the ice. She's drowned."

She sat still, stroking my hand and I didn't think she understood. Her silvery hair was splayed on the pillow and she smiled weakly. She whispered soft words in Polish, and I shook my head. Tears fell to her lips, she dropped her head, and said in English, "Is okay. She go ahead of me. Make place for me."

"She's dead," I yelled.

"Is okay."

My mother entered the room and I ran past her, not listening to her words that followed me. I was outside, on shore, eyes on the lake's ice and water. There was no Red Dog, just blaring white under a haze of blue sky. I ran further down the shore, and wandered into an area my father had forbidden me. Abandoned giant oil drums, tall as our house, rose in rust from the snow. Open doors at their bottoms were black rectangles where older kids had entered at night to drink. Ladders on the sides took kids to the top where some had fallen and died. I walked into a drum and kicked through beer cans and campfire remains, dark

except for sunlight from the door, showing graffiti painted on the round metal wall. I kicked a can and listened to the deep continuing echo. "Peace With Honor," someone had painted. "The Grateful Dead Alive" was beside it. I sunk to the floor and huddled my arms around me. "Dead," I shouted and listened to the echo. "Red Dog," I shouted till my yells lost their words. My voice faded to a growl, then grew again to a bark. I howled long and deep and fell asleep with echo wrapped around me.

My father called. A narrow ray of sun lit a path to my feet. I was chilled from the cold metal of the floor and wall and I stood stiffly, emerging into a grey and rust landscape. My father slipped through snow between drums, calling, white breath obscuring his face. I walked into view and he stood still. Between breaths, I saw bloodshot eyes and a downturned mouth. He grabbed my arm, "What the hell are you doing here?" He dragged me home and pushed me in his car. We spun out of the driveway.

Night came black. Headlights showed enough to see the road ahead and dim weeds poking through snow on the sides. When we stopped in the stillness, I saw the narrowness of the road, the depths of the woods beside us, and heard crows above the wind's rustling.

In the glare of dashboard lights, my father's hand whipped out, and I took the sting across my nose and lips. Blood flavored my mouth and he reached and opened my car

door.

"Get out," he said. "I never want to see you again."

He drank beer, chewed an unlit cigar, and called me all names but my own. I sat, not moving, not looking at him.

"I didn't mean to go to the drums," I said. "I'm sorry."

"You can't follow rules, you can't stay with me. Get out."

"But Red Dog," I said.

He pushed me towards the door and I held my seat, crying. I said I was sorry, and repeated it till it became a chant. He rested, then pulled me towards him.

"Damn the dog," he said. "I told you not to keep it. This is your Grandma's fault."

His hands shook on the wheel and he pounded it.

"With your grandmother sick and needing you, you go off with that stupid dog." He looked at me, his hands fell off the wheel, and he slumped.

"Close your door," he said.

I was too slow to respond and he slapped me.

"Close your goddamned door."

We sped through the country, turning sharply on narrow roads. When we reentered the city, his beer was gone and his cigar chewed to a wet brown stub. We parked on a lane behind the Wayne Blockhouse, between it and the lake.

"I love you," he said, belched, and looked at me. "Do

you love your Dad?"

I nodded, crying, and he hugged me. I inhaled the alcohol smell and promised I'd be good.

He looked away from me and stared at the Blockhouse. "There's a story about the general I never told you," he said. The moon outlined the back of his head and it was steady. "His son's name was Isaac, a Biblical name. Thirteen years after General Wayne died, Isaac came to take the body to the family plot in Delaware County. When they brought the body up, it hadn't rotted like they thought and Isaac didn't have room on his wagon. So he had it dismembered and the flesh boiled off. He took the bones home but the flesh was re-buried here, under the Blockhouse."

My father shivered with his head down. I held his hand and he looked away from me.

"Grandma's a good woman," he said. "But she never gave up the Old Country. It was hard for us kids, trying to fit in."

He kept his back turned, staring at the night. "With all the death in this world," he said, "I don't understand why you want a dog. Dogs die and that's one more pain to live through."

A few days later, Grandma went to the hospital. I was too young to visit on her floor, so I sat in the lobby,

sitting in sunlight refracted by venetian blinds. She died and there was a Catholic funeral, litanies sung in Polish by old men and women. I didn't understand the words but I felt enclosed and safe within the sound of their shrill and cracked voices. My father was stiff and quiet, as he sprinkled holy water on her coffin and threw the first piece of dirt into her grave.

I wasn't surprised to see Janice at the Alcohol Center. Even after her remarriage, she'd call or visit. Perhaps it was only our son, Zack, that kept us linked, but I liked to believe that in her tears and in her touch of my hand, there was still love for me. Even in the drunkest times, I insisted on seeing Zack. When I was sober, either working or looking for work, she brought him to me.

I had never taken Zack to the Wayne Blockhouse, never told him stories that belonged to my father. I was determined to treat him differently, but this left me no way to talk to him. When I had money, I bought him an aquarium, guinea pigs, cats, and a cocker spaniel. When I drank, even when I lived with him, I did it out of his sight. I never hit him and only rarely yelled. Janice calls me weak and I know he doesn't respect me.

We have been friendly in our time together. We walk, me in sneakers and my hair over my ears, Zack in sandals and green lining the part in his close-shaven hair. I comment

on changes in my neighborhood, while he tells me about school, how science is transforming the world so that one day we will all be an homogenous unity.

Through seventeen years, sober or drunk, I've been afraid of my son.

The first day I was released from the Alcohol Center, I took him to the Wayne Blockhouse.

"This is where I'll be working," I said.

We walked through the cemetery, in and out of the land's slight depressions. Out loud, I read tombstones:

Private Joseph Harrigan, January 5,
1842 to June 23, 1863, Civil War.

Corporal Wilhelm Schmidt, 1900-1918,
World War I.

Private Antonio Scalizzi, 1925-1952,
World War II and Korea.

Private Casimer Merski, 1845-1876,
Indian Wars."

"Any Indians buried here?" Zack asked.

"No," I said. "Just Americans."

A bronzed Civil War soldier stood before us, one hand on a rifle, the other holding a flag. Sparrows darted around his head. "One nation," the pedestal read, "indivisible." White excrement dripped over the soldier's hat into his eyes.

"General Anthony Wayne is buried there," I said and

pointed. I led Zack on the path to the Blockhouse.

"The wood doesn't look two hundred years old," he said.

"It's a replica." I scratched my head. It was warm and I was sweating.

"My father, your grandfather," I said, "told me a lot about General Wayne."

"I've heard about him." Zack laughed. "A teacher said they called him 'Mad Anthony'. He murdered the Indians. What his son did was some sort of justice."

I sat on a rock that marked the path, overlooking the lake. In the quiet, a breeze creasing my hair, pine and grass scent in my nose, my eyes on the lake in the distance, I could hear, faintly, rhythmically, right below me, the easy lapping of water in concrete stalls of the city's sewage plant.

When Zack looked at me, his laughter died. I studied the wood of the Blockhouse, varnished into a dark shine. A jay called and I shielded my eyes to find the bird in a tree. I turned to Zack.

"Time for you to go home," I said.

In the years after I had left Janice, my father called me a drunk and a bum, but he kept me in his life. It's not that we saw each other much, and even when we did, the tone in his voice was the same as when I was a child. He didn't have time, he said, but often when I left jail or the

alcohol center, he had money and a job for me. But the cycle went on too long and both my gratitude and his patience wore out. Our separation, when it came, was overdue.

I was dry now as I walked the highway through suburbs to my parents' house. Hawks swooped out of woods over wide yards. Ground squirrels and woodchucks scurried in bushes. Crows fed on squashed animals on the road, cawed at me and continued their feeding.

The sun was high; I sweated and thought of Zack, how, for the rest of his life, he would try to destroy me or hope to come to terms with me. And he'd eventually know he'll never do either. At most, he'll understand there was no bad intent. It all defies logic: everyone of us, destroyed in some way by our parents, yet believing when the time comes, we can do better. Even as a kid grows and you see in him what you were yourself, you think maybe he won't hurt like you did, that maybe you didn't scar him as badly as your parents scarred you. But at night, when you hear the wind blow through his open window, scattering his hair and his school papers, you know. You've brought a kid into this world and you can't help but give him a life of fighting you, hurting always.

Dusk came and I was hungry and tired. The gravel of my parents' driveway slipped under my feet and I fell, scraping my hands and elbow. I went to the back of the house and

through patio doors and screens saw my mother under a yellow light, smoothing a red-and-white checkered cloth over the kitchen table. A cassette recorder played a Chopin mazurka, sad moody piano strains breaking around my mother. She followed the rhythm around the table, stroking the cloth, fingers lingering in red squares. She reached for a drink on the counter, sipped it and wiped her lips with one finger. She saw me through the glass, her eyes half-shut and red, mascara dried in thin streaks on her cheeks. She smiled and I went in.

"You want something to eat?" she asked.

"No. Coffee, maybe," I said.

"We have instant," she said, her face worried that this wouldn't be good enough. She filled a kettle, turned on a burner, and paused over the stove. She slammed the kettle down. "Where've you been?" she said. "A year. No calls, no letters."

I sat and bunched cloth in my hand. "Dad," I said.

"Is he home?"

She held onto a cabinet door handle and rested her head on wood. She straightened and turned the music down.

"He comes home to eat," she said. "And sleep."

I let go of the cloth and smoothed it. "Still a bastard," I said.

"He's your father." She sat next to me, head down.

"At least he comes home."

"Too bad," I said. "One of you should have left. Years ago."

"Like you and Janice," she said. "In my time, it was better or worse."

I shifted in my seat and looked out a window. "Instant coffee is fine," I said.

She stood and circled around me. She put her hand on the back on my chair and leaned in my face. "You're sober."

"I'm off the stuff. For good."

She pulled my head into her breast, held me and cried, "Oh, baby, baby. I prayed every night. For you. That you'd walk in that door and say that. Oh baby, my baby. I can't believe it. Please let me get you something to eat. Please honey."

"A sandwich. Whatever." I waved my hand and turned to see her back moving away from me.

"Zack," she yelled from the white refrigerator that swallowed her head. "Do you see Zack? Tell me about him."

She brought food. We talked. She had a son again. And a grandson. She drank coffee.

"I can't believe he's seventeen," she said. "I remember you then. We were all happy. I remember everything."

She left the room and I stared at cardboard-framed collages of pictures on the wall. One looked like Zack but the haircut and clothes were wrong. It was me at ten, hands

behind my back, eyes down. Few pictures were of my father; he was too often behind the camera, snapping me and Mom: candid shots of worried faces wishing for poses to make the pictures right. Mom was young, fat, and her hair orange henna.

She danced into the kitchen with a clean, newly made-up face. Lines were gone and blush reddened her, emphasizing the holes of her sunken cheeks. She leaned over my shoulder.

"Remember that red dog?" she pointed. "What was her name?"

"I don't know," I said, and shifted my gaze. My grandparents stood in black-and-white, hand-in-hand. Grandpa was wiry and anxious in a high-collared shirt and sleek dark suit, no tie and a derby cocked on his head. Grandma wore a bright ankle-length dress and a garland of daffodils in her hair. Recent immigrants, their names Anglicized by customs, they glowered at the camera.

"You remember Grandma," Mom said.

"Some."

"Everything was good," she said. "We were lucky. Your dad at the mill, Grandma with us."

Night passed on my mother's reminiscence. For the first time in two weeks, I wanted a drink and I damned the antabuse lingering in me, mentally balanced one drink against the drug's nausea.

Twelve times the clock in the living room chimed. "I got to go, Ma," I said.

No." She held my hand in damp fingers. "Wait for Dad."

I stood, her hand still clutching.

"Dad would be so happy to see you," she said. "Like this. It's another chance. He talks about you all the time."

"I got to go."

"No, honey." Her voice wavered. She stood with me, bent, hand steadying herself on the table. "Don't leave me alone. Please, baby."

She held me, face crying in my shirt. A breeze blew curtains at the window above the sink. Outside, animals rustled bushes and gravel crunched, lights flickering through patio doors as a car cut its engine. I sat Mom down while Dad slid the screen door and stared at our faces. He leaned on a wall and focused on me. "Son," he said and walked, holding onto chairs, coming near me. "Like a fucking bad penny."

"Get us some beers," he yelled at Mom. Her voice was small as she said, "He's not drinking." He leered at her with narrowed eyes and stumbled past us to the living room, falling onto the couch.

"Son of a bitch," I said under my breath and followed him.

He sat, fumbling with a shoestring, his fingers tangling in black plastic-covered loops.

"What's the occasion?" he said and burped. He gave up on the laces and let his head fall to the couch's back.

"Obviously can't be bail money," he said, his eyes closed.

"So it must be you need money for booze."

"I never needed money," I said quietly. "Not from you."

He lifted his head. His words were slurred and he looked at me with cold white eyes. "Should have known you'd end up the bum you are. Even as a kid, you always got lost. I'd find you in those oil drums."

"That's not right," I said. I dug hands into my pockets and shifted the weight on my feet. He surprised me. He was past sixty, near retirement, yet no smaller than I remembered him. "Dad," I said. "There's something else. Maybe we can talk."

He laughed and rested his head back again. "Whatever, kid," he said, his eyes closing and his voice fading.

"There's been worse times. We got through 'em."

He spread himself out on the couch and cocked an arm under his head. "We got to stick together," he said, barely audible. "We can handle it." His words ended in a deep breath. He snorted, gasped once, and fell into a loud snore. I stood, muscles up and down my arms tense as my fingers closed into fists.

Mom walked in with two beers in her hands. "To hell with the beer," I yelled and knocked the cans to the floor. They foamed at a baseboard and she knelt and cried. I pulled her to her feet and held her face to make her look.

"The bastard's asleep," I said.

She stood over him. His fat belly rose, nostrils flaring with each breath. An odor of smoke and alcohol smothered the air. Mom played with her hands and looked at me. She bowed her head and shook Dad's arm.

"Don't bother," I said. "He'll never wake up."

"You want your beer?" she said to him. She shook him harder and he snorted, moving off his stomach to his side so his back was to her. He let out a fart. She kicked the couch. She straightened and looked at me again. I frowned and turned to walk away. She shouted at Dad, "Damn," and she slapped his back. "Your son's here," she said and pounded fists on him. He turned his head, eyes half-open, showing white. He fell asleep again, his snore finding a rhythm.

Mom slumped to the floor and I stood at the couch, hands clenching. I raised my arm over him and I was still, enveloped in his smell. His back rose and fell, and my own breath grew deeper. The regular up-and-down motion of his back caught me; I thought it would pull my fist down into him, into his face, shattering his nose, ending his ugly snores. But despite his sound and movement, he was like a

dead man to me. I shook my head and stepped back.

Mom tugged on my still-raised arm and I let her lower it to my side. "It's okay, honey," she said, and walked to the end of the couch. She sat, put his feet in her lap, and untied his shoes. She slipped them off, set them on the floor, and sat under his feet.

"All the time I tried to make it right," she said. "All I ever wanted was a family. The way it should be."

"Ma, I'm going," I said.

"Okay," she said. "He's home."

I got to the door and she grabbed my hand. "You come back," she said. "During the day on a weekend. Everything will be right. I'll tell him how you are. He'll be happy."

A cloud passed over the moon and an owl hooted as I listened to my feet crunch gravel, stepping toward the highway. By the time I would reach town, the bars and liquor stores would be closed and I was grateful for that.

At the Blockhouse, Zack visited me during lunch hour. He inspected a small cannon mounted on oversized yellow-painted wheels.

"This isn't original either," he said.

He walked to where I sat on a rock overlooking the lake. Maple and oak trees swayed, and we listened to a woodpecker's insistent knocking. A squirrel leaped from one branch to another, and sea gulls flocked on open grass by

the cemetery. Below us, hanging to the side of the bluff and just within our reach, a dark-leaved shrub flowered in pink and purple.

Zack stood by me, digging his foot into grass, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Why are you an alcoholic?" he asked.

"I'm not," I said quietly, aware that I was breaking Rule Number One of the Alcohol Center's program. I knew what denial was; I had done enough time in my mind's darker places, time enough to know that this was something different. It was a process of elimination. I was finding myself. "I am not a drunk," I said louder.

Zack looked at me with doubt and disappointment. He knew the rules too, had studied them in a book. It would be a while before he realized the randomness of their applicability.

I just wanted to find common ground for the two of us, because I knew then that, what I'd been trying to tell myself for years, was true. It was something I had doubted because I had abandoned him, because I drank and forgot him. But it was okay; it was not contradictory. I loved him.

"Look," I said and pointed to the shrub on the side of the bluff.

"Rhododendron," he said, reached and pulled a flower. He slid a finger down its stem, held it close to his face and studied it. "It's their time of year."

I looked at it with eyes, released from their drunkenness, surprised by the clarity. Petals shone like satin and filaments stretched slenderly to the top, ending in fat yellow anthers. The flower unfolded in Zack's hand and sun highlighted its purple shades, tingeing his fingers in a wavering violet shadow.

"Look at the colors," I said. "They almost blind you."

"Bright colors attract the bees," he said. "It makes reproduction possible."

I took the blossom and twirled it. I stared through its petals at a purplish sun.

"The bees extract nectar," Zack began.

"Be quiet," I told him, and he was, and we watched the flower turn in my hand.

The moon filters through the blockhouse windows, bright on me and the general. It has climbed almost to its apex and only its gradual revolution changes his face. It drains him of color and veils him in white.

I look about the room. This replica Blockhouse has stood a long time, and the wood under my feet is worn beyond its varnish. I reach under the general's blanket, under his nightshirt, and pull a straw. I flip it to the floor, then pull another.

"The great General Wayne," I break into the spiel I feed weekend visitors, "hero of the War for Independence,

hero of the West, died here in 1796 at Fort Presque Isle, on land sold by the Iroquois after the United States conquered them. At Fallen Timber in Ohio, he drove the Indians beyond the Maumee, burned their lands, made it safe for white people to settle peacefully." I look at my feet; pieces of straw are scattered around them.

"He died of gout," I say with emphasis, like a carnival barker. "The greatest soldier and statesman to ever grace this city rested here, till his son remembered ..."

I dig into the general's chest, grab fistfuls of straw and let them slip from hand to floor. The words of my spiel jumble and spill out in the wrong order.

"Dismembered him," I say. "Boiled him in a pot."

Outside, the moon reaches its highest point. A dog howls and I run to the window.

"The dog protests the moon," I tell the general. "It breaks his night. Covers everything in white."

The general's face holds the pain someone painted into it long ago.

"My father took me to the woods to die," I say. "Yet still, I'd start down that highway to ask him for food. Only drunkenness would stop me, make me lie down in weeds before I'd get there. I'd wake up in piss and shit, sober enough to be embarrassed and sober enough to want another drink.

"The streets are hard," I continue. "Begging.

Forgetting who you are in order to smile at nuns in soup kitchens. But I never lied when I told them I believed."

The general is silent, his chest a hollow cavity. I look him over, my eyes locking onto his plastic face. I remember stories about his spirit roaming between here and Delaware County trying to reunite his flesh and bones. I walk back to him, kicking through his stuffing on the floor.

"Me and my friends would've killed to sleep in this Blockhouse," I say, and then hold myself because I feel cold. "In winter, wind curled around our necks and snow blew up our pants. We smothered under a white blanket and found ourselves in missions or on grates. Some of us are entered as success statistics in alcohol center books, but it's memories and piss and shit and vomit that make us recover."

I'm breathing hard. My hands itch from handling the straw. I sit again, lower my voice and speak to him:

"Like you, I have a son. He brought me back here. I had no other stories to give him."

I lean back, then rock myself. I am surprised by the low groan that rumbles from my gut.

"Busia," I use the Polish name for Grandma. "She taught me stories, but not the words. I've had to start from the beginning."

The dog's howl becomes music echoing inside the Blockhouse. I drop my head, rise and turn from the general.

I find the stairway to the lower story and climb down to the outside where the night is bright and mild and the dog howls in song. I take off the Revolutionary War coat and let it fall. Standing upright, I inhale, let go a whistling breath and I breathe deeper. Soft, but rising, my sounds join the dog's, and I shake my head, then lift it. A howl escapes full and deep from my chest, echoing across water. I float with the sound, bounce with it off granite cliffs that mark the shore.

Above me, the moon is broken. It has begun its descent into trees. Under its last light, I rummage through my pocket and take the purple flower I've kept there. The petals have separated and wilted but they tremble within my palm as I walk the unfamiliar streets to where my son lives.

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