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Crick

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TERRANCE MANNING, JR. *WINNER
OF THE MONTANA PRIZE IN FICTION*

CRICK

Fourth of July and the smell of cigarettes and beer breath passing between Dad and Uncle Jack is almost as thick as park dogs, onions, and jet fuel from the B-52's and Firebird's tearing up the afternoon sky. Kids are running kites, mock-up model planes held above their heads, and they're laughing. All over the park, tailgates are dropped. Tents sag. Bonfires burn bright even in the sunlight. It's the same every year: Dad and Uncle Jack dragging us kids out for fireworks, and we're driving snail's pace through Winnebagos and minivans looking for a spot to park—seven of us in the truck.

"You boys wake up," Dad says and spits out his window.

"I'm up," I say, more adult than my brother Dynamo, who's eight, wiping half-crusted drool from his chin, whining, "Can we eat'r sandwiches? I'm hungry."

I wish I hadn't argued for shotgun. I'm wedged in the front seat with Dynamo, Dad, and Uncle Jack, whose hot arm is sliding sweaty across my neck. In the truck bed are Uncle Jack's kids: Cousin Libby, the oldest at fifteen, and twins Blake and Riley—the babies, we call them, though they're the same age as Dynamo. Only link between us is the window behind my head, though in the rearview mirror, I can see Libby by the tailgate, her auburn head blinking in and out of sight as she flicks the twins in their ears to wake them. Her eyes are the same chilly gray as Uncle Jack's, and twice, on the drive up, she caught me looking.

Uncle Jack nudges Dynamo. "You quit crying if you get a sandwich?"

"Not crying," Dynamo huffs.

"Shut up, Sideways," I say, calling him the nickname that he hates, that Dad leans over and knocks me in the head for using,

that people dreamed up after Dynamo started walking because he's got one leg longer than the other—bends him sideways when he stands. But Dad says, *Kid was born sideways for a reason. God cooked him that way.*

Dynamo likes that. “God cooked me sideways,” he rattles off in the truck cab. Then—when offered—declines his sandwich.

“Boys got too much hungry in you,” Dad says. “Our house, we didn't ask for food. We went out and found it.

“Bobby did,” Uncle Jack says.

“Bobby did,” Dad agrees, as we pass what looks to me like the perfect spot to park.

Uncle Bobby was the eldest of the three. Helicopter pilot in Vietnam—he never made it home. Now it's the Cameron County air show every Fourth of July. Dad and Uncle Jack and all of us cousins sardined in the truck so that later we can watch the Black Diamond jets, the Iron Eagles, biplanes and Blue Angels flipping, diving, and we'll cheer for them, we'll chase them—like we're cheering and chasing after Uncle Bobby in the Cameron sky.

But this year's different.

This year Dad and Uncle Jack are searching for Bradley Coleman's trailer, stripe up the center with a sun catcher sprawled out for shade. Uncle Jack says they have to do what lawboys won't. No registered child molester's living in Cameron County—not near Darrel and Jack Gibson's kids. Says him and Dad grew up stupid and brawling, slaughtered pigs five years on Kerber's Farm. They'd seen blood before.

“Pass me a punk,” Dad says, and I hand him another Genesee. He's drunk, I know, blood-stained eyes looking pink. He's

excited, and I am, too—for the air show, and for finding Coleman's trailer, catching a glimpse of him: a child molester. But it's hard to say what Dad and Uncle Jack expect to do. Dad's thicker now, and fat. He's not the Darrel Gibson of the stories I've heard, the man who fought six bikers with an axe handle outside Cooper's garage. Mostly, he's a good, harmless man. At least until he's drinking with Uncle Jack—the iron jaw and mustache, the silvery-gray eyes and bulletproof cheeks. Those two drunk together and they'll be sparking M-80s, blowing up bushes, catching tires and logs on fire with gas Uncle Jack siphoned-sucked from the truck, laughing gasoline-teethed and spitting in the grass.

For all I know, they could kill the man.

I even overheard Aunt Patty telling Mom once that when Uncle Bobby was still alive, he, Dad, and Uncle Jack found Grandma Gibson beaten in the kitchen—her bloody leg against the counter, sunlight spilling over the stainless sink. She was nearly hidden in the shade. The three of them carried her into the living room. They couldn't have been more than kids themselves. Took time, but eventually she admitted Sam Pearson, the neighbor and Granddad Gibson's best friend, came in drunk trying to kiss her. She tried to stop him and he raped her. She made them swear not to tell. Said Granddad would love her different after that.

So the brothers kept the secret. Waited near a month and took Sam Pearson fishing up the Susquehanna River. Sam told stories the whole ride out, kept throwing his arm around their shoulders, telling them he loved them like sons. He thanked them for bringing him. They took a boat and a cooler full of beer out at dawn and smoked cigarettes fishing while the fog rolled upstream,

surrounding them. Time came, it was Uncle Bobby that did what needed done, and he used a knife. Uncle Jack held the long-barrel twenty-two to Sam's head and made him swear not to scream.

"How about the time he came home with peaches?" Uncle Jack says, recalling still, the stories of Uncle Bobby.

"Took them from Old Lady Warren," Dad remembers.

"Sonofabitch climbing through our bedroom window. I swear to God he fucked her for them." And they laugh a minute as we bang over mole holes and rocks toward Keister Creek, where we've parked before. I can see a rope swing swaying from a tree, gathering sunlight in its thread, water cool and shimmering beneath it.

"These assholes," Uncle Jack says, pointing off near the tree to a group of teen-aged boys all bare-chested and flexing by the creek, army shorts dark with water. A group of pretty girls are sitting smoking cigarettes in bathing suits on a shelf-rock bench. "Dreaming hard for that seventeen-year-old ass."

"Dream on!" Dad shouts out the window, nudging me, and smiling. The boys throw up double fists triumphantly, as if he'd complimented them. I slide down the seat, hoping the girls that turn to look can't see me squeezed between him and Dynamo, who's sitting straight up smiling at them, yelling, too, for them to "Dream on!" until I pinch his ribs and he smacks my hand, asking, "Uncle Bobby shoot them hills with napalm in the war?"

"He did what they asked him," Dad says. A bead of sweat drips from his clean-shaved face to my shoulder. He's hitting the breaks, dropping the truck loud into reverse, and all of us are bouncing back and forth as the gears shift.

“First Christmas home,” Uncle Jack says, flicks his cigarette out, and mats his mustache against his sweaty lip. “We were out back in Pappy’s shed getting stoned and leaning over the kerosene heater to keep warm from the snow coming through the window. I asked Bobby if he fucked any cunt over there, or if he’d least gotten his dick sucked good the way my buddies home on leave said they got. So he goes all serious all the sudden, says they were off near the edge of the FOB when he heard a whisper in the bushes. Almost pulled the trigger and started shooting ‘till he saw a girl’s face poking out, dirty, and shy as a turtle in a shell. Said he swore to God he’d known her all his life. Girl couldn’t be more than fourteen years old.”

And just as Dad is clutching, revving the truck engine to keep it running, and the creek is so close I can smell it, and I’m waiting to find out what Uncle Bobby did with the girl, Libby pokes her head in from the back window. “I’m getting out.”

“Like Hell,” Uncle Jack says. “Wearing those tiny shorts like your old man can’t buy you jeans; I’ll have to kill someone today.”

“Please, daddy.” Her voice is a warm breath on my neck. “There’s Becky Johnson and the girls over by the swing.” In the mirror, I can see her bony shoulder sun-burned and bending from her tank top, sun gathering on her skin. I have to close my eyes. Even at fifteen, she feels so much older than me.

“Go on,” Dad says. “Let her go.” He winks, and Libby jumps out before Uncle Jack can protest. She’s running toward the rope swing waving to her friends, and I need to get out, too. I can climb over Dynamo, through the window.

“I’m getting out,” I say the same way Libby did.

“Like Hell,” Dad says. “Someone’s got to help unload the cooler.” Which is annoying, since Dad is going to unload the cooler himself, and Uncle Jack will set up the chairs and grill, insisting there’s a certain way to do it.

Then through Dad’s window, I see Libby take Becky in her arms. The bare-chested boys stand watching, looking hungry. Behind them, vendors man tables spilling with model planes and learner’s kits for sale, and old men are drunk, wearing American-flag shirts talking through mustaches and hotdogs. People lean heavily on the fence near the fuel yard, happy to see the jets being gassed up, Angels and Eagles glowing under pilot’s wax. From the Flyboys Youth hanger, the sound of rivet guns snap, drills zip, and kids are sanding, sawing. And later, when Dynamo begs for the arts& crafts festival, I’ll drop him off and join the guys my age for flying remote-control planes, but right now, it’s Libby—her gray eyes peering back over her shoulder, waving. Uncle Jack leaning out his window, yelling, “I see you, fuckers.” To the teen-aged boys. “I’ll be here all night.”

“Can we swim in the crick,” Dynamo asks, wide awake now.

“Swim where?” Uncle Jack asks, and for the first time, he and Dad catch eyes and laugh. Dad nearly splashes the dashboard with a mouthful of Genesee.

“In the crick,” Dynamo smiles, as if he’s in on the joke. “I want to swim, too.” He makes a stupid face, his big-assed eyes the size of half dollars all blue and looking to me to laugh with him. Sometimes I swear we can’t be brothers. He doesn’t even know

they're laughing because a crick's what Dad and Uncle Jack call a man with no dick. Started on Kerber's Farm, cutting pig's dicks off for cooking.

"Only one crick here," Uncle Jack says as we back into a spot, and all our heads turn at once, it seems, toward Coleman's striped trailer, him sitting in a lawn chair out front.

When we're parked, we pour from the truck. The day is fat with humidity—the smell of jet wax and creek water as thick as smoke. Dynamo and the twins eat their sandwiches on the tailgate, and Uncle Jack doesn't stop watching Coleman's trailer. Even when Coleman's gone, Uncle Jack is searching, his face like a sniper's, cold and patient. And Dad naps off his buzz in the shade by the truck tire.

Downstream, I can see Libby with her friends, half-submerged in the creek. They've stripped down to swim suits, piled their tee-shirts and shorts in the grass. I'm bending around the side of the truck to peep their skinny backs and sun-wet legs flexed as they trudge through the water. All the girls my age are too young to have bodies like that, with the exception of Gabby Wells, who wore nothing but a tank top once in the fifth grade and her chest bounced around all afternoon and there wasn't one of us boys, I swear God, that didn't go home and didn't think about it from under the blankets of our bunk beds that night.

Now the announcer's voice is a mechanic throb through the park. Firebird formation's prepping to kick off the show, the sound of engines rolling across the field, and Libby and the girls are drifting from my sight.

A few lots down, the Pitbull Pen's a barking spectacle—near fifty of them. Enough to draw me to it.

Their owners bring them every year for the Pitbull show the same weekend as the air event. They call it “show,” as if they're giving prizes for lookers, but they're an ugly bunch—not a single dog pretty enough to show: mouths dripping wet with foam and drool, some scar-faced and one-eyed. They got blotchy skin and mange. Bunch of monsters bathed in dog shit and piss. Rumor is: once the jet lovers leave, and the air show clears, pilots pulling planes out on eighteen-wheelers, people say the dog fighting starts. It's a smaller, more vicious crowd, too—guys with long hair and skull shirts who flip us the finger when we pass.

The dogs are on the edge of the field, by the woods, enclosed by a poorly constructed chicken-wire fence near six-feet tall. Mostly, they're separated by short chains and leashes, but some owners bring more than one, whole packs—small, sharp-toothed ones kept away from the tall, muscular ones. Sometimes, the chicken wire bends so hard, it nearly snaps. Dogs dig holes, try to escape, and eventually, there's so much mud and dirt it's half pit, half pen. Every time the announcer's microphone screeches, the dogs howl. They bark. They cry. Some kids kick the fence, but mostly, we ignore the sound of their barking. We understand that they're separate from us plane-engine boys.

“I hate those dogs,” Dynamo says from the tailgate, mouthful of turkey sandwich. “I'd like to jump in that pen and give 'em a kick.”

The twins cheer simultaneously, but Blake says, “Let's go! I'll jump in with you!”

“The Hell you will,” Uncle Jack says. “You’ll end up like Ronnie Sherer’s boy,” talking about the great remembered incident of ten years ago: 1971.

“You saw him?” Dynamo asks, and the twins chime in. “Yeah, you saw him? You saw the boy? Wish we saw him.” Though we’ve grown used to the sound of the dogs, none of us has forgotten the story.

“Don’t go wishing for things you don’t understand,” Uncle Jack says. “That boy went missing and they recruited Uncle Darrell and me. Needed experience in the pen. The kid’s own daddy was crying like a child on his knees. Those dogs left the kid stinking in the dark.”

“Where’d you find him?” I ask. By now, Libby’s gone somewhere downstream with her friends and the six of us are stuck keeping eyes on Bradley Coleman’s empty trailer.

“Middle of the field,” Dad says. As if to give truth to the story, he sits up, voice groggy from his nap. He turns his baseball cap backwards on his head. “They say he snuck ‘round back of the pen, rattled that fence and agitated the dogs. They dragged him through a hole they dug and bit his voice box out his throat. No one heard him scream. Chewed his face so bad they had to tell it was him by the ring on his hand.”

Dynamo and the twins are busting up laughing already, slipping away from the story to watch some kid’s remote-control plane by the creek, less interested than me. “Kid live?” I ask.

“Dead,” Uncle Jack says, cracking another Genesee. “Family sued the park, so they put six suspicious dogs down. Lined them up and shot them each in the head. People feel better about that.”

When the Firebirds finish, the national anthem scratches through the speakers, crashing into its own echo as the Eagle Team takes the clear-blue sky, and Dad and Uncle Jack have gone from watching Coleman to taunting him. They throw cans at him. They tell him to keep his eyes where they belong or they'll cut his tongue out his mouth. Uncle Jack pisses on Coleman's lawn chair when he's inside the trailer, and they laugh.

There's something about Coleman that is sad to me. He's a clean-shaved man. His eyes are round and green. When he walks, he digs his hands way into his pockets as if he's reaching for money, or a lucky penny. When Dad and Uncle Jack chuck beers at him, some empty, some—by the gunshot smack they make against the side of Coleman's trailer— even full, he only turns his head, and scuttles like some possum back into the quiet darkness of his trailer.

I wonder if Dad or Uncle Jack is capable of the violence their stories promise. I wonder, if Uncle Bobby was around, alive and growing fat and drunk with them, if he'd be taunting too. Or if he'd be prepping some silver chopper for flight, the main attraction of the show, Cameron County's own Bobby Gibson—war hero, fearless—and all of us, even Dad and Uncle Jack, would be too busy chasing after the sight of him above to be watching out for Coleman. I wonder if, now I'm sipping Dad's Genesee, and Dynamo and the twins are running somewhere with the neighbor kids, and Libby's back—lying in the truck bed, her shirt rolled over her shoulders, jean shorts unbuttoned and showing her bathing suit bright yellow, her pale skin pinkening under the sun—if I should

lie down next to her sharing sips of Dad's beer, or if I should be too worried for Coleman, and the punishment that awaits him.

"You never said what happened," I interrupt Dad and Uncle Jack from their whispering near the cooler. I burp, holding the beer can in the air so they'd see me and take it. I'm thinking suddenly of *cunt*, the sound of it stuck rolling on my tongue since Uncle Jack's story. "With Uncle Bobby. That girl in the bush."

"Brought her back to the FOB," Dad says, picking the story up, walking back as if maybe he'd give up the cause and join us, and the show. "And he hid her by his bunk. But she was bleeding. Must've caught some shrapnel in the leg. Cut her good. Said he kept wiping it, trying to soak the shit up with a shirt, but it kept coming. Black like tar, and thick, too."

But the sound of Coleman's screen door slamming turns our heads. Even Libby sits up. He's leaving this time in a hurry, looking over his shoulder. Dad and Uncle Jack jog off tossing beers, stumbling as they flip him the finger and laugh, like they plan to steal his food like bullies.

Libby goes, too—into the thick of the park, disappearing. Annoyed maybe, or bored.

Some years, I'm all over the park. I'll walk off watching an F-16 formation spiraling so hard I'm convinced it's losing control, that it's about to crash the woods beside the interstate, and suddenly I've walked half a mile from the truck. So many people crowded. So much noise and smoke. But this year, I'm more aware of the time between air shows, of the announcer trying to rev us up, the distance I've gained from our truck and the cousins, of Dynamo

tailing beside me—a gnat stuck to sweaty skin. Every time I have Libby in my sights, when she’s leaned back, for instance, against the truck drinking pop, or she’s building a fan from a plastic cup watching the show, and I’m sort of following her getting brave enough to say something, Dynamo’s there stepping on my toes. I can’t even pawn him off on arts & crafts. He’s all, *Gary, wait up*, and, *Check this trailer out*, or, *You ever think of flying, Gary*.

And we’re hardly half the perimeter when a boy on a 50cc motorcycle rides past and bites it by the dog pens.

“Dusted!” Dynamo shouts and darts over trying to crowbar the bike from the ground. The throttle’s dug into dirt, revving the two-stroke to a scream. Behind Dynamo, the pitbulls attack the fence, their teeth a brutal, slobbery shine snatching at his shirt.

“Have to lift the goddamned thing,” I say, shoving against the fence. I lift the bike off the kid, who rides off with his smoky exhaust clouding a three-rail trailer. But Dynamo is startled by the dogs a neck’s snap from his cut-sleeve shirt, his jean shorts and untied army boots too large for his feet, and he’s running back toward the truck, toward Dad and Uncle Jack and the twins. Short leg lifting, dropping. Head tilted sideways. Stupid kid, I swear to God.

At dusk, only the real air fans are lingering. Trash is left burning in hundred-gallon cans. The smell of bonfire and burger grease is stuck on everything: your hair, your clothes. Before us, there’s wide open field and muddy children. Dynamo and the twins are laughing on the grass with a group of kids waiting for the final air event before the fireworks: the F6F Hellcat—all chrome, Henry Hobson in the pilot’s seat. Just when the air is cooling, and crickets singing

he'll fire over the horizon, chrome catching moonlight and trailers and blinking in the sky.

This time last year, Libby and I were in the Vanderbilt's tent talking shit on the show. The Vanderbelts left to watch and we were alone. We'd spent most the night playing stupid board games, talking. Ashley Vanderbilt said a girl at school gave a guy head in the bathroom. I was lying on my stomach, and while Ashley described how the girl put his dick in her mouth by the sinks, my elbow brushed Libby's. I felt myself get hard. I crept toward her, so slightly it seemed it took an hour to move an inch. But somehow, I'd moved my hand to her back. She let my fingertips rest there. I'd been hard, it seemed, all night. Terrified she'd discover it, I pressed my hips into the grass beneath the tent, hand on Libby's skin. I pushed my pinky down the back of her pants, just enough that I had it resting in the top of her crack and I was shaking as Henry Hobson roared into the sky outside and the park cheered and I came in my pants. Felt dizzy, then sick—nearly threw up. Snatched my hand back and left the tent.

Now, by the truck, Dad and Uncle Jack are so drunk they're holding each other steady. Couple buddies with them are drinking the last of the Genesee from the cooler. Cigarette butts are sprinkled by the tires. The smell of urine starts to penetrate the night—all those drunks pissing in the grass at once. Hobson is flipping his chrome bird in the moonlit sky and Dynamo is running crooked after the sound of the Hellcat's engine, disappearing over the hill toward the creek. I don't think I've ever seen the boy so in love with anything in his life.

I want to find Libby, talk to her this night in the dark, but

again, she's gone with her girls. I can't help feeling sick and excited when I think of it, of last summer, of being alone with her again. I hate it, and myself. Even the twins, who look like her. I hate them. And Uncle Jack, his gray eyes. I hate him. This truck bed, all uncomfortable and rusted. I hate it. And there's a light on in Coleman's trailer blurring the stars above it. The glow is spilling out into the field, lighting up the side of our truck, empty beer cans gleaming in the grass.

Fireworks are the kicker, and we've waited all night for them. For twenty minutes, the park bleeds purple and blue, red, yellow, and green. Air stinks like gunpowder as the reverb pounds the fields like thunder. Then: the best part. Just when the finale seems as good as it gets, and Dad's rebel yelling, high-fiving Uncle Jack, a Stealth Bomber will blast through the night sky, carrying with it the wind and leaves, the scent of river water and summer. And the whole damn park will become one giant fucking hard-on of chanting.

Across the field, women holding babies are standing on the roofs of Winnebagos. Young girls and boys are lying over windshields eating red, white, and blue snow cones and now-stale popcorn from the Flyboys Hanger. And there's Libby, a hundred feet away hunched under a trailer umbrella kissing some older boy with army shorts and exercised arms. He's grabbing her ass and Uncle is Jack moving toward them. The boy bails, disappears somewhere into still-parked trailers and trucks. Uncle Jack and Libby are faced off with each other, arguing, but their voices are lost when the show begins, the first explosion lighting up the sky.

There's a collective and surprisingly dull cheer spreading as Uncle Jack yells at Libby. She turns and he trips trying to make her hear him. It's the first time I've ever seen him look so pathetic, though that's not the word that comes to me. No one knows where Dynamo is and no one cares. I sure as Hell don't. I want to run to the edge of the creek to where we flew remote-control planes and threw Frisbees. I want to find my air-show friends, the same guys I see every year, and talk shit to them, cuss to them, say *cunt* to them like I understand what it means and spit between drags of their fathers' cigarettes. I want to stand in the middle of the jet field while engines cool, and there's a magic still in the fumes hanging in the air. But Dad grabs hold of my shoulder, spins me toward him. His voice is scratched from cheering, and he's drunk. I hear his confusion of whatever it is he thinks I'm feeling standing there watching the fireworks alone when he says, "You're about a man now, Gary. You're old enough to know this."

He sits me down on an empty lawn chair near the truck. "So don't be a stupid ass telling no one. Get us put in jail. All of us—even you. Don't go fucking up."

When Dad and Uncle Jack found out Coleman was registered, they asked their boys at the station about running him out of Cameron. Coleman had served his time, though—three years. He'd moved into Cameron from Harrisburg and was allowed to live his life, quietly. People needed to respect that.

Dad was picking plums at the grocery store a few months later when Coleman strolled up next to him. He started picking plums, too, as if he belonged there, as if he'd gone and committed

his crime and now, since he'd served for it, he was some kind of free man.

"Hate a bad plum," he said, smiling at dad.

Caught off guard, Dad smiled back, and left. He sat in the parking lot for nearly an hour, unable to start the truck and watching people leave the store, feeling ashamed, as if sharing a smile over plums had somehow made him guilty, too. He said it haunted him. Had to be its own crime knowing what kind of man Coleman was.

In June, Dad and Uncle Jack came up with a plan. Said if Uncle Bobby was still alive he'd have already marched up to Coleman and crick'd him in the street. Uncle Bobby was fearless. But this was a delicate matter to cook. That's how Dad says it: cook. Makes them sick to think Coleman's here around all these kids, back and forth from his trailer.

The plan is simple: Uncle Jack, the hunter, crawls into Coleman's trailer when it's dark, when the fireworks have everyone's eyes where they need to be. He's a patient man. He'll wait Coleman out. No different than the pigs on Kerber's farm. Those pigs thought they were clever, too. But Dad and Uncle Jack used to sit up in the barn beams waiting for the fuckers to walk beneath them. When they did, they dropped and wrestled them to the ground. They cut their dicks off later, in the dark, one guy holding the pig's snout shut to keep it from screaming.

I wish Dad never told me anything. No Coleman picking plums. No plan to make him a crick. I wish now that Dynamo was here to talk about swimming in the crick, and Dad and Uncle Jack would

laugh about that. I wish I was Blake or Riley sleeping in the grass, exhausted from too much fun, too much playing packed into a single day.

Uncle Jack is smoking cigarettes now, peering from Coleman's trailer window to his feet as if he might cry. I swear he wants it more than Dad. When he found out, he was so pissed, he said, *He's lucky I don't slit his throat.*

By the truck, Libby's pouting and angry and I have an urge to be close to her that moves me in front of her. "Libby," I say so soft it disappears into the oh's and ah's cooing behind us as the fireworks light up the sky, reflecting purple and green off of Libby's tear-wet face.

"What do you want?"

"To talk," I say. "I can get us a beer."

"That's okay," she says, laughing.

"We can take a walk. Stupid fireworks, I swear to—"

"You can leave," Libby says, shutting me up, and I'm so embarrassed and mad I almost say, *I wanted to tell you a secret, about my dad and yours*, but I want to make her feel sorry, too, for brushing me off. I want to run out to the jet field and throw myself to the dogs. And after I've fought them, after I've walked back bloody and brave, she'll see me different.

So I run to the field, where the planes are parked—B52's, Iron Eagles, jets. Even the Hellcat, in the dark, is a sleeping creature, the chrome a mirror gathering firework light. Behind me, Libby's not even looking; she's pouting. I can see Dad loading the cooler up, but he can't see me. Uncle Jack is around back with something in his hands I can't distinguish in the dark. I wonder if I

stay out all night, if I hide until the Stealth Bomber fires across the sky, if I can go on pretending they won't do what they plan to do, and Bradley Coleman will go on as some quiet ex-bastard living alone, clean-shaven, with a tomato garden behind his house.

When the finale hits the sky, I bend my neck to watch. I feel, for a moment, like I'm floating, as if watching the colors jump, I can lift into a dream. I nearly fall backwards, but catch myself. I stumble and knock into the dog pen, their constant, though ignored, barking suddenly easing into focus. I can feel something latch onto my ankle.

Takes a minute to realize a pitbull has me. It's a hungry fucker, and at first, I'm tough. I'm shouting, *Goddamn dogs, get off me*, swatting with a fist. But then teeth break my jeans, and I panic. Hurts like Hell. Another one got me above the knee, pulling my legs under the pen. Fireworks are blazing gunshots in the night, aggravating the dogs—the crowd, the park, their cheering. Teeth crawl up my leg, biting into my thighs. I've given up punching. I'm grabbing between my legs to protect myself, and they're biting my hands. The truck is only a hundred feet away. I can see my family, but they're too far to hear me scream. Libby is climbing to the roof, craning her neck to watch the sky explode. Nothing about her says she feels shame, too. Or that she throws up at times, humiliated and scared of my father, like I am of hers. And Dynamo is standing in the bed of the truck, his back to me, firework light turning him into a blinking, iridescent lamp as he raises his arms, and though I can't hear, this is how he'll describe it to me later: that the image of an angel is growing in his memory. She rose from the hills beyond the interstate. Had wings like moonlight

and water. And he has to tell someone he's seen God, he knows it. So he stands shouting to Dad and Uncle Jack, to Libby. "I saw an angel," he says. He gives them every detail: her liquid face, the way the sky opened up and accepted her.

Dad and Uncle Jack laugh. "That's no angel, boy. That's a Hellcat," Uncle Jack says. "Got to love the kid, though. Thought the Hellcat was an angel."

And before Dynamo can finish, Uncle Jack pushes his buck knife beside the cooler in the truck and shares a look with Dad, a grave, knowing look like a deep secret Dynamo can never know, and says, "Just like Bobby." His face opening, now, and shedding the hunter, the sniper's eyes, the man that carried, once, his mother bleeding to the couch. "For helicopters and angels; a goddamn sucker." Then he says the girl Uncle Bobby found had bled so much that night he couldn't soak it up. He went for help. He was in the medic's tent when fire lit up the FOB and men poured, it seemed, from the trees, shooting boys dead in their sleep. Bobby crawled to the edge of camp where he'd found the girl in the first place, and hid. Lay listening to the screams, the gunshots, and finally, hours later, the quiet crackle of the tents left burning.

"And don't think that's not brave," Dad says, suddenly, as if that's what he'd wanted Dynamo and the twins and Libby to take away: that Uncle Bobby was no coward, but a good man, and brave. Dynamo doesn't care. He retells his story. He retells with precision. He can feel her still, in his chest. He can see her still, her wings. And it's then, as he spreads his arms like his angel, that Dad spots me behind him, by the pen beneath a pile of pitbulls.

And though I feel only pressure releasing, and arms scoop-

ing, I'm told later it took Dad a while to tear me out, that he got his arms all bitten up and bloody, too. But for me, it's only a moment. I can see trailers and trucks bouncing past as Dad says, "You go swimming with dogs, you're bound to get bitten." He's smiling—softer, now, than he had earlier—as if he's thinking I'm no man, but a boy.