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The University of Southern Mississippi

CRYPTID

by

Phillip Jarett Underwood

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2010

ABSTRACT

CRYPTID

by Phillip Jarett Underwood

May 2010

Cryptid is a term from the field of cryptozoology, which ostensibly presents itself as the study of creatures that may or may not exist, such as – but not limited to – Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Jersey Devil. The term itself, cryptid, refers to one of these unknown creatures. The novella presented here concerns a half-Native American man and his struggle to know not only his dead parents, but himself and his place in the world. While cryptids play a minor role within the boundaries of the narrative itself, the novella concerns itself more with the ways in which we define ourselves as opposed to the ways in which we are defined by external sources, and the friction that arises from these often competing systems of self-signification. Furthermore, the novella presented here represents an experiment, on behalf of the writer, in working with forms of narrative longer than the short story.

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2010

DEDICATION

for my father

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INTRODUCTION

I expect all things in life to be like a trunk inherited at the passing of a distant aunt or uncle, stuffed full of odds and ends, pictures, yellow newspaper clippings, brittle comics, letters and postcards from strangers. Sifting through the biographical detritus, I can only struggle to know what these things meant. The inherited trunk is no different from a book, poem, photograph, mural, or even comic book. For instance, the novelist writes a novel, and into that narrative go memory and influence, a stratification of the writer's mental life. The reader can never know what the novel means to the writer, so the reader creates meaning based on a similar parsing of memory and influence, of the systems that defined the reader as an individual. Even so, the meanings of things never seem easy to come by.

I find it easy to believe that things – individual works of art, sports, steak – can only have meaning in relation to the various systems to which they belong. Football is only football due to its comparative relation to other individual sports, to the overall conceptual system of sports. I've always subscribed to the notion that things have no inherent meaning, only the meaning we give them based on the stratified cultural systems we already perceive. I wouldn't have known, when I was thirteen that calling Superman a "boy scout" derived from a cultural system. At the time, I knew that my opinion of Superman was easily understandable to other people my age, particularly those who – during the "gritty nineties" of comic book storytelling – were more apt to root for characters with a fuzzier moral compass. Everything stands in relation to something else. Even Superman is only Superman when he's wearing that iconic long underwear.

I never liked Superman all that much because the idea behind the character was that he was perfect. Before regular readers expected continuity in their favorite characters' origins, powers, and lives, Superman always displayed the right power for any given situation. In one early issue, Lex Luthor discovers Superman's secret identity and gives the information to the media and, subsequently, the entire city. Superman's solution to this problem was to appear on television and use his as-yet unrevealed power of super-hypnosis to lull all of Metropolis into forgetting that he was, in fact, Clark Kent. This always seemed far too easy to me. I preferred Spiderman or Batman, especially Green Lantern. All three of these characters, in some way, were flawed, were made to be more human than the garish tights and colorful antagonists might imply. Spiderman struggled to make rent, to take his girlfriend out on a date. Batman suffered – and still does – an identity crisis, often asking himself who Bruce Wayne might be without his caped alter-ego. Green Lantern drinks too much, chases skirt as perennially as the sun rises. At the same time, each figure deals with very public notions of who they are and what they're supposed to do, how they're supposed to behave.

The people of New York know Spiderman is a hero despite his being continually maligned by the media. Batman is an urban legend, a grown up version of the boogeyman meant to scare people. Green Lantern is an intergalactic cop, and is expected to act with the same restraint police officers in the real world exercise. The fictional public in these worlds don't know that Spiderman is an awkward teenager, Batman is the heir to a billion-dollar fortune, or that Green Lantern is an alcoholic. The fictional public creates the persona, and the systems of acceptable behavior to which they hold each, and because the fictional public creates this frame of reference for the reader, the reader then

knows what is within and without the boundaries of typical heroic behavior for each of these characters. The friction created between the expectations for these heroes and their actual, depicted behavior serves as the source for some of the most enduring stories associated with each character. While I don't fight crime in my underwear, I feel somewhat familiar with this friction. Since my thesis defense for my Master's degree, I've been dealing with the question of what defines my fiction as well as a Native American writer, what it means to be Native American, what it means to be a writer.

I always wanted to be a superhero, but Native Americans aren't superheroes. At least not iconic ones, not like Spiderman or Batman, nowhere near a Superman. These American Indian heroes and villains exist, but only as offensive with stereotypical origins. Shaman, a member of the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight, speaks like a modern Tonto, in half-phrases disguised as indigene wisdom. He wears feathers in his hair. In a bind, he pulls random deus ex machina from a magical, bottomless medicine bag. Stoic, he takes no pleasure in victory or defeat, but only desires "balance," a mission entrusted to him by his dying grandfather, a medicine man. He speaks with ancestor spirits, travels with an eagle familiar, and protects the nebulous boundary between the natural and magical.

Shaman is the stereotypical Native American superhero: a tragic figure lost in the modern world, somehow granted powers above and beyond those of normal men by spirits, totems, dying elders, magic, familiars, trees, clouds, buffalo, eagles, earth, Earth, Gaia, Mother Earth, Gaius, medicine, or primitive weapons. A variation on theme motivates him: revenge, protecting Nature, destroying Nature because It refused to

protect It's children, murder, theft, protecting Nature by committing random murder and theft and vice versa, and – my favorite – to teach white men how to behave like heroes.

I think about all of this. I wonder why no one – maybe a Native American – creates the First Nations superhero that goes out to get his powers instead of bumming around the Reservation for hand-me-downs. I want a hero that saves people because he wants to save people, a villain, maybe, that robs banks because he's greedy, no one with an agenda. No feathers or native costume motifs, long, straight hair and high-bridged noses, sharp chins, or smooth faces. No bone or leather. No fringed leather, spirits, totems, or animals. I know this is a lot. I wonder if this is what other Native Americans care about.

Native American community centers on various Reservations. Later, during college, I spent some time on Reservations with distant cousins, but I grew up in north Mississippi, in the Delta, far away from any of the Oklahoma and North Carolina Cherokee communities. I knew no other natives beyond my father and grand-parents, a great-uncle or aunt, or cousins. The culture I know consists of jokes made by my father about white Indians in John Wayne movies, or stories about my family: a great-great uncle that rode with Belle Starr, another removed relative who lived to be one-hundred and fifteen, a handful killed by famous white outlaws, a list of people connected to events I try to imagine. My father's side of the family tells stories of a trunk going from relative to relative. This trunk contains all of the evidence and artifacts of this family history. I've never seen it, but I imagine the trunk looks like a pirate chest; locks, brass and convex top. I imagine it must be big, though, for all the stuff that must be in there, odd

feathers and papers, a tin-type or stacks of yellow pictures, a spent brass .45 cartridge; all just stories, a Native American fable for a family with no real history.

My mother, a woman of Irish descent, insisted we go see *Dances with Wolves* on its theatrical release. She said it would teach my brother and me – my father, too – about our culture. The tribe Kevin Costner interacts with is Sioux. When I dream about being Native American, I live in a teepee and hunt buffalo, dress like every Sioux I ever saw in a movie: bone chest plate and leather pants, a bow and arrows. Sometimes a rough-weave dirty blanket wraps around my shoulders.

In my sophomore year of college, I read *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* for the first time, in a World Literature class. Since the class was small and given in the Honors College, our professor knew something about each of our backgrounds. On the last day spent on the stories, the professor called me out in class.

“PJ,” she said, “Do you have anything to add?”

“I think everything I wanted to say has been said.”

“As a Native American, how do you feel about this books portrayal of Native Americans?” She said.

I looked around the class. I flipped through the book, trying to find something with which I could agree or disagree with any amount of certainty. “I didn’t grow up like this, so it’s not very accurate like that.”

“You’re Native American?” Blair, a classmate, said. She leaned closer. “You don’t look Native American.”

I thought about what Blair said. I told myself I look Cherokee. I look like the paternal side of my family, and like pictures I’ve seen in books and magazines, on the

internet, and the few old black-and-whites of my great-grandparents in my father's sock drawer. I don't look Sioux, Kiowa, Blackfoot, or Winnebago. I'm Native American, so I must look Native American, I told myself over and over.

I wondered if I was in an interracial relationship since my girlfriend was white. I wondered how it never seemed strange that my blonde-headed, blue-eyed brother was also Native American. We had little else in common –comics, maybe – and most of the knowledge I had of these I gathered in hand-me-down fashion, little bits of opinion and information gleaned from listening to my brother with his friends, with his girlfriends, with our parents and teachers. I knew comics, though, better than he did. I focused on finding them, stories that my brother might like. I haggled at school for specific issues of *Spawn*, or the *X-Men*. I ordered comics in random assortments through Sears, adding any doubles to the haggle pile. Everything I read and liked, I gave to my brother, saving some for birthdays or holidays.

I kept reading comics, long after my brother quit, and still read them. While I lived in Oxford, the closest comic shop was in Memphis. I drove up there the day after that class and thought about *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, about my brother, about comics. I tried to name Native American superheroes, gave up when I made it to three or four characters. At the same time I took the World Literature class, I took a Yeats class, and my first fiction workshop with Barry Hannah.

At the beginning of the semester, Barry went around workshop, asked each of us to introduce ourselves, say something about our background, and name five writers we read who worked in genres other than fiction. I don't remember all of the writers I named. After some debate, Barry decided to allow songwriters, so I'm sure – like the

other eleven people in the class – I said Bob Dylan. I fumbled for a fifth writer, I remember, and finally – thinking of the other classes I’d signed up for – said Yeats. Barry, who I’d known for a while from working at Square Books, the local independent bookstore, said, “Yeats? You’re a native. Makes sense.”

Because I’d known Barry for a while, I’d seen his decline during his first round of treatment for lymphoma. I remember how bad he looked without all his hair, wearing three shirts and a wool sports coat in August. He used to come up to the second floor of the bookstore, to the coffee shop where I usually worked. Richard Howorth, the owner of Square Books, let Barry smoke inside, so he always sat at this short, round-topped table, smoked, and had me make him coffee. When I started working at the bookstore, I had no clue who he was and never talked to him. One day, I remember being so outraged that this guy – whoever he was – just lit up in the store, right where people had to walk past him, that I asked him to put his cigarette out, and he did. He sat there for a while, quiet, watching people browse, then left. Later, Richard came to me and suggested that we let Barry Hannah do whatever he want, that he was sick and – moreover – a great writer, that he should feel at home at Square Books. When I got off that night, I swiped a few of his books from the store, went home and read a couple stories, read *Ray*, and felt like a giant asshole because, that morning, I went to work and didn’t really know who Barry Hannah was, and – while I was at work – asked him to quit smoking while standing six feet from three shelves worth of his books and short stories.

A day or two later, he came back, sat down across from the coffee counter. He smiled and asked if I minded if he smoked. I told him no, tried my best to make small talk with him about the square, the university, about the idea of a Wal-Mart superstore

coming to town. After a few weeks, I worked up the nerve to tell him I admired his work, and that I hoped I could take his workshop the following semester. He asked me what fiction writers I read, recommended books by writers I hadn't read. When I told him I was Native American, he recommended I read Sherman Alexie. He came to the bookstore a few times a week, then once a week, then got so sick he quit coming at all, and I wondered if he'd be around to teach workshop. A few months later, when he made his comment about Yeats, part of me, seeing how stooped he looked, how tired and doped up on cancer meds he had to be, figured that he just wasn't making sense. Part of me thought he referred to me being Irish.

I remember I thought about Yeats on the drive to Memphis, and I realized I'd never told Barry that I had a parent of Irish descent. I thought about what Barry might've meant, almost convinced myself he meant nothing. I thought about how I felt drawn to Yeats because he existed in two cultures simultaneously, had two opposed identities pulling at the middle. Just like a secret identity in comics. I realized I always felt drawn to the idea of secret identities, to heroes with secret identities, because I felt like no one – me included – knew who I really was, whether I was Native American, or white, both or neither. I realized that's why it made sense that I liked Yeats. Yeats came from two distinct and often opposed cultures and used the resultant friction to produce poetry. Because he created something enduring, something – in my mind – beautiful, he moved beyond being defined by either of those cultural backgrounds. I realized that I might worry about who I am or what I am until nothing else matters, or I could use that anxiety to bring something into my writing, into the world. That day, at the comic shop, I bought the first twenty-four issues of *Alpha Flight*, featuring the “mystifying” origin of Shaman.

At home, I read them and smiled, put them in a trunk filled with a jigsaw of books and other things: a book on the Trail of Tears, another filled with photography of the “Native West;” a scrap album of pressed feathers I found in my Indian grandmother’s things after she died, copies of *Dances with Wolves* and *Last of the Mohicans*, a picture of a Choctaw girl I dated in a dress sewn with tin bells; artifacts I’ve gathered in the last nine years, something to tell someone.

On the one hand, I still want to find the trunk my father talked about. On the other, I know it doesn’t exist, that it’s just an idea that turned into a story my family liked to tell. I know that it’s easy to imagine there is something there, a chest full of stories, for instance, when – really – there’s nothing there at all. Just the act of imagining such a trunk exists provides the family with a frame of reference from which all things historically familial derive. For a family scattered and vaguely defined by the very act of being Native American, the trunk becomes a repository of all the signs by which my family signifies itself. The imaginary trunk holds all the ideas about what the Native American portion of my family should be, and what that should mean. Even though the trunk is most likely non-existent, the meaning and importance placed on it by my family’s endless recounting of its existence and the nature of its contents make it into Baudrillard’s simulacrum. The trunk has become more real than the reality it supposedly represents because of all the meaning and stories that have been draped and organized around it. Most often, I see in myself and my writing – like in my family’s stories of the trunk – a need to be able to classify the world, to give it meaning. At the same time, I realize the impossibility of doing so, another theme that often emerges in my writing.

More than anything, I try not to think of any of these things while I'm writing. Barry Hannah once told me, when I asked him how to know what themes to develop in my stories, "Just write. All that other shit will float to the top. It always does." At first, I thought that Barry was just being Barry, that he was waving off a question that no writer really knows how to answer. Eventually, I realized that he was being sincere, that those things important to the writer do often rise to the surface of the story and that only through revision do we, as writers, really see what is important to us as individuals.

Now, when I sit down to read, or when I feel overwhelmed by the process of creative or scholarly writing, I try to think of that trunk. I refuse to be impeded by the cultivation of meaning. Instead, I think of my family's phantom treasure chest. I imagine it in a corner, somewhere dark – a basement or warehouse – dusty, hinges clotted with cobweb, open and empty.

CHAPTER I

When I get the letter from one of my cousins that my mother died, I quit my job wrestling in Florida then move to New Orleans and work at the Aquarium of the Americas as a night watchman. It's easy to convince myself that I'm being proud, that I'm working my way back home, instead of avoiding a small, empty house or finding my mother's grave in a cemetery full of low, metal markers. Bill Elk, this guy I grew up with on the Reservation knows I need money when I call. I take advantage of this and he hires me then, offers his old friend a place on his couch. He feels like he's doing me a favor.

Training for the job takes a few days. It amounts to little more than taking a few walks during the night, and spending the rest of the time in the security center, a room no bigger than a closet. It looks like most of the ones you see on TV, small and dark, ringed by silent black and white squares, empty, quiet hallways. Bill stays the first couple of nights, squeezes into the camera room with me. He shows me how to switch screens, zoom and pan. We go on checks, right after we lock the doors at closing, then again at midnight, and a last time at four, just before the early staff gets there to feed the animals and clean the exhibits. The first week, Bill tells me horror stories, about how some night watchman quit because they see things, or because they get tired of chasing people off after a few nights, or weeks, month or two.

After that, he tells me about all the animals, eels and sea horses, white-spotted Amazonian sting rays, poisonous frogs and photoelectric jellyfish no bigger than one of my thumbs. At night, the Caribbean section of the aquarium looks vacant, all the aquariums dark rectangles, circles and squares, like chunks cut out of the walls. I ask

him why some of the exhibits are dark, and he explains that some need less light at night, but that all of the tanks have nocturnal settings, the illusion of day.

The last night he trains me, Bill brings a pack of hot dogs, cheap red ones squeezed inside thick casings. We stop in the Amazon exhibit, at the piranha tank. Bill opens the pack with a little folding pocket knife and pulls out a link, whole, and hands it to me.

“Go ahead,” he says.

I toss the hot dog in the water, and crouch, watch it float, tossing end over end, down to the bottom of the tank. The fish twitch and low green light rolls along their sides ahead of a wave of shadow. They stay in formation with one another, nose to tail in an even cloud. “They’re not doing anything,” I say.

He points at the tank. “Just give it a second,” he says. “They have to wake up.”

One of the fish breaks from the rest, noses down to the bit of meat. Another darts in, and another. The water churns in a cloud of silver bubbles around the hot dog and fish, calms. The fish fall upward in the water, back into formation, and I stand. “Neat,” I say. I try to sound interested.

Bill leans on the tank. He’s taller than me, but skinnier, looks stretched in cargo shorts and a too short t-shirt. He wears his hair the way we all imagine the old way, long to the shoulders and braided in one, thick braid. “Why do you want to work here?” He says. He drops a couple of pieces of hot dog into the tank.

“I needed the money,” I say. “And it’s on the way back to Oklahoma. Why?”

“You just never seemed interested in this sort of thing,” he says. The water churns and he drops another chunk in, waits, drops another. “In high school, it was all

football and sports and drinking. Same thing until you left college. Then you ran off to be a wrestler.”

“Does it really matter why I want to work here?” I say. “I need the money and I’ll do the job.” I watch, as best I can, the fish attack the food, down in the low green night light, deep in the tank.

He looks at me, raises his eyebrows. He shrugs a little. “You just kind of disappeared.”

Overhead I hear a click and hiss, and thick mist tacks down on leaves and rocks, dimples water in the open tanks. I turn my face up and it feels good until the water mixes with the heat, thickens to humidity. Bill breathes out, loud, through his lips, and lets the last few pieces of hot dog roll out of his hand into the tank.

“Listen,” he says, “You know how it is back on the Reservation.” He puts the remaining hot dogs in a pocket, dips his hand in the water, quick, and wipes it on the leg of his shorts. “My mom went to your mom’s funeral, Cap.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “That was a month ago. What are you doing?”

The water spits and ripples, simmers a bit, and the fish calm, flick themselves back into neat rows. “I’m trying to work my way back,” I say. “I’ll get there when I get there.”

Bill looks like he wants to say something else, but I ask him where to next, what else I need to know. High up, in the ribs of the greenhouse, the sprinklers stop. A few more drops fall, slap the rocks and wide dark mouths of aquariums, slower, until they stop, too.

“Nothing,” he says. “There’s nothing else.” He pulls a hand out of his pocket, holds it up. “I could spring for a bus ticket.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I think I have it covered if you want to go home. I know you’re scheduled tomorrow.”

He tilts a little in the dim light to look at his watch, puts his hand back in his pocket. “It is late,” he says. “Anyway, you never know what might happen. Call if you need me. I’ll lock the doors behind me.” He turns and leaves, down an incline and away around a brown slump of ivy-crowned rock.

I watch the piranha a bit longer, blunt foreheads nosed into the fake current. I think about dipping my hand in, wonder what the fish feel like, the still, open eyes and slick scales, rough edges of uneven teeth.

*

The next day, Tuesday, I watch people file out through the doors at close. Tourists leave first, a clump of overweight people and skinny people, tall and short, foreign students and art students with over-sized sketch pads and tackle boxes of paint supplies; strollers and mothers, little, clustered systems of relatives, aunts, uncles and in-laws. A man walks by with his daughter on his shoulders, a couple behind them holding hands. Both look to be about my age, not quite into their thirties. They go into the people crowded around the doors and lose hands, but she grabs the back of his shirt between two fingers, and he reaches back and hooks a finger in the waist of her pants. They look at each other and smile, leave, and I lose them out in all the people. After the last visitors leave, the girl that runs the gift shop pulls the cage across the entrance and

looks at me. I wave and she looks down, walks back to the register. She opens it and starts pulling out money, arranging it into stacks.

While the rest of the staff leaves for the day, I do my first check. Inside, the aquarium feels like I imagine a reef must feel, jagged and narrow, smaller than it looks on the outside. With the low ceiling and the low hum of dim tanks, I imagine all the building above, so close, like a depth of water, and the ground beneath my feet water, too. I imagine floating there, alone, and have to walk through the arched water tunnel at the Caribbean Reef tank looking at my feet, through the rest of the crowded area and smaller tanks, the otter and penguin houses, the island terrariums of bright, croaking frogs.

I feel better when I get to the Amazon and Mississippi River exhibits. The trees and brush are close and the open tanks smell like low tide, but I can see the glass ceiling overhead. Outside, jet contrails cross the sky like unraveling seams. I stop and catch my breath, watch the sky purple past white metal and glass, out over the river and the jagged silhouettes of passing ships.

I finish my walkthrough and go back to the security room, check all the cameras. At eight, the phone rings once, twice, and I answer.

“How’s it going?” Bill says. “How’d it go last night? I guess we just passed each other at home today.”

On one of the cameras, I watch shadows outside the Gulf tank. Uneven black outlines of sharks and smaller fish, a blot of turtle on the gray screen, pass across the floor and up the wall, disappear into deeper shadow at the ceiling. “The fish are still swimming,” I say.

Bill clears his throat.

I lean back and prop an elbow on the arm of the chair, rest my head in my hand, and rock a little, back and forth. “Was there something else?” I say.

“You seemed angry last night. You still seem angry. I just wanted to help,” he says, breathes heavy across the phone.

“I don’t need help,” I say. The camera in the gift shop pans across coffee mugs and shot glasses, rows of stuffed otters and big-eyed pink turtles wearing hooded sweatshirts, children’s t-shirts, plush puppets, socks, paper weights, world music soundtracks for all the IMAX movies playing at the theater. “Not anymore help than you’ve given me.” I hate to sound ungrateful, so I tell him the help is appreciated. “I just don’t think you’d understand. And that’s not your fault.”

“You have to let someone try, at some point,” he says. I hear his stubble scrape across the phone. “We were friends at one point.”

The gift shop camera pans back to its starting point. “Have you ever noticed how everyone scatters when they leave the Reservation? We all leave in ones and twos and threes. You and I left together. Then we all separate and go our own ways,” I say. “Is that how it works for normal people? Or is that just us?” I lean forward and the chair creaks out a quick groan, metal against metal. “I’m an orphan, now, and you’re the only Indian I still know.”

“Go home,” Bill says. “You still have family there.”

“I have aunts and uncles,” I say. “The same cousins everyone else has. I’m going back.” I look at the theater camera, gray grain over rows of rigid, empty seats. “I just can’t yet. Ask me again after my first paycheck.”

“Do what you have to do, then,” he says. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I hang up and watch the screens a bit longer, a mosaic of black and white, filtered shadows, and the long dark of empty hallways.

*

Later, I go to the balcony just off the food court and smoke a cigarette.

Somewhere down along the river, I hear an accordion, then a trolley passes behind the building, under the bridge and away, and the accordion music goes, too, and all I hear are cars and far away yells, rough bar music over the low tops of buildings. I finish the cigarette and go inside, lock the door.

Something falls behind me in the food court. It sounds like boxes and silverware, empty plastic cups clanking out across tile. I turn around.

“I’m a professional wrestler,” I say. I hear something that sounds like a stifled sneeze from behind one of the counters. “Who’s there?” I walk over to the counter and I imagine I look like a cartoon thief, tiptoeing towards the low red counter and registers, the stacked, empty pizza boxes. “I know you’re back there,” I say. “Come on up.”

I almost convince myself I imagined the whole thing when a girl stands up from behind the counter. She holds up a hand. “Hi,” she says. She smiles. She has dark hair corkscrewed with curls and green eyes, wears a plain white t-shirt with a pocket and baggy shorts.

“Can I help you?” I say.

“This looks really bad,” she says. She chews on a thumbnail. “I can explain.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I lost my purse and got locked in while I was looking for it.” She crosses her arms, looks up at me. “Are you really a professional wrestler?”

“Yes,” I say. “You didn’t try to find someone? I didn’t see you on my walkthrough earlier.”

“I got scared and hid,” she says. “Plus, once I was here, I thought it would be cool to spend the night.” She bends and starts picking up clear plastic cups, stacks them upside down on the counter.

I put a hand on top of the cups. “How old are you? You wanted to spend the night?”

She moves my hand and stacks a few more. “Twenty-five, and yes, I did,” she says. She finishes the cup and starts gathering the silverware on a red plastic tray. “I told you I got scared. You’re a professional wrestler.”

“Did you find your purse?”

“No,” she says. “I hid.” She finishes putting all the loose silverware on the tray. “Do you mind if I put these in the sink?” She nods backwards with her head, towards the kitchen.

“Yes,” I say. “Put them down.” I wave her towards me with a hand. “Come out from behind there.”

She puts the tray down and the knives and spoons, forks, rattle. Out from the counter, she seems shorter, comes just up to my chest. I feel sluggish and big, too small for my body when I see her shoulders, thin brown legs.

“You’re trespassing,” I say. “I need you to come with me so I can call the cops.”

She looks up at me, winks. “Why would I want to come with you if you’re going to call the cops?” She crosses her arms.

“You’re not going to make me chase you, are you?” The drink machine shakes and a motor inside hums, ice clanks over ice. “What’s your name?”

“Jennifer,” she says. “And you are?” She offers me the back of her hand like I’m supposed to kiss it.

“Cap,” I say. I ignore her hand, scratch at my beard.

“Like captain?” She says.

“My dad fought in World War II. The soldiers got comic books in their ration packs and my dad loved Captain America.” I scratch my neck, all around the collar of my shirt.

“World War II?” She says. “You don’t look that old.”

“He was almost sixty when I was born,” I say. “You lost your purse?” I feel hot, and brush my hand through my hair.

Jennifer looks around the food court, at all the chairs on top of tables, the low glow of drink machines. “Yeah,” she says. “Could you help me find it?”

“I’ve got to call someone,” I say. I start breathing hard, bend at the waist, put my hands on my knees. “You’re not supposed to be here.” The room tilts and I fall.

*

I wake up on the food court floor, and sit up. Jennifer sits next to me, cross-legged, with a steaming paper cup, offers it to me.

“It’s coffee,” she says. “I went into Haagen-Daas while you were out and made a pot. Was that normal? The passing out thing?”

I take the cup and sip. “You shouldn’t be here,” I say.

She props back on her arms. “I couldn’t leave, could I?” Behind her, a scale Great White shark hangs from the ceiling, modeled in mid-strike, teeth floating out in a jagged circle. A scale Whale shark hangs next to it, peaceful, trailing smaller fish and bits of sea weed sculpted in imaginary currents.

“Listen, just leave and come back tomorrow,” I say. I wave her away. “I’ll look for it tonight and put it in lost and found with your name on it. I just want to be alone.” I stand, put the coffee in the garbage.

She looks up at me. “What if you pass out again and there’s no one here?” She uncrosses her legs and stands. “Is this a steroid thing?”

I wrinkle my forehead, squint at her. “What?” I say. “Why would it be a steroid thing?”

“You said you were a professional wrestler. I thought they did that sort of thing.” She uses both hands to hook hair behind her ears.

I feel myself start to breathe quick again and I take a few deep breaths, close my eyes, open them. “I wasn’t that kind of professional wrestler,” I say. I start walking towards the security room, around the atrium rail and back past the frogs, through the dark press of black tanks in the Caribbean exhibits.

She follows. “What kind of professional wrestler were you, then?”

I walk faster and she speeds up. “I was that kind, but I didn’t make steroid money.”

“Did you have a wrestler name?”

I stop at the security center door, turn around. “Just leave me alone. I don’t even care if you spend the night anymore, or if you find your purse or not. I’m going to go into this room and I want to be left alone.” I close the door and sit, lean back in the chair, and fold an arm over my eyes.

A few minutes later, she knocks on the door. “Are you alright?” She says. The thin door muffles her voice, makes her sound sad.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” I say.

She’s quiet, and I think maybe she left. I lean closer to the door.

“No,” she says. “Not really.”

I lean back, throw my arms up. “I can call the cops,” I say. “I have a phone in here.”

“You’re not going to call the cops, or you would’ve already.”

“How do you know I haven’t?” I say.

I look at the bank of cameras, find the one that points down the long hallway towards the security room door. She looks like a small ghost in the velvet grain of the camera. She sits with knees to her chest, back to the door, lays her head back and closes her eyes. “Then you wouldn’t be threatening to call them now.”

“You won’t leave me alone,” I say. “This is like a hostage situation.”

“No,” she says. “It’s not. You can come out when you want. You just won’t.”

She looks up, opens eyes tiny and dark on the screen. “Why did you run away from me?”

“You’ve got to leave eventually,” I say. “People start getting here at five to feed the animals.”

She looks at her watch, a tiny thing like a kid's meal toy, crosses her legs. She rests her hands in her lap. "It's just midnight. We can talk until then, right? Why did you run away from me?"

I look at the phone, think about calling the cops, Bill. "Because you won't stop asking questions," I say. "You won't leave me alone."

"You seem awful scared of me to be a pro wrestler."

"Why are you stuck on that?"

"I've never met a pro wrestler before," she says. She looks up, and for a minute I think she sees the camera, but then she looks off, down the hall. "It's creepy out here. Can you at least open the door?"

"You could go home," I say.

"I don't have a home."

"You could go to your parents."

"I don't talk to my parents," she says. She stands, crosses her arms, and faces the door, leans in a little. "How about yours?" Her voice sounds louder, clearer.

"My parents are dead," I say.

I watch her stand outside the door. She sways a little, rubs her eyes with both hands, stops. She looks away down the hall, and back at the door. "Cap," she says, "I think someone's in here."

I hear a crash somewhere outside, farther out in the aquarium. I look at the camera banks, scan the first row and the second. Midway through the third row, on the camera outside the penguin house, I see three people. One stands to the side and the other two yank at one of the benches screwed in the floor across from the tank. They

pick it up, and I cock my head, like a dog hearing an unfamiliar sound, when the pair take three steps, and heave the bench through the glass. One of them reaches in and grabs a penguin, cradles it, wiggling, across his body like a watermelon. The three run off and around a corner, appear on the next set of cameras heading through the further exhibits, doubling back to the front doors.

I open the door and look at Jennifer. “Stay here,” I say. I hear the penguin downstairs, bleating like a goat, quick feet, and hurried voices getting closer to the front doors.

I run out and down the atrium stairs, just as two of them run past and through one of the front doors, one of them carrying the penguin. I start out after them when the third runs out behind me. He tries to stop and run back into the aquarium, but I tackle him. I roll over behind him and lock one of his arms over his head, grab the other wrist and pull it up behind his back. I stand up with him.

“You’re hurting me,” he says. He sounds like a teenager, wears black jeans and a tight black mesh shirt, silver rings on all his fingers.

I twist his arm up further behind him. “Where are your friends going?”

He laughs and I twist his arm until his shoulder pops, falls out limp next to him, dislocated. I let go and he falls, grabs the shoulder with a hand, starts crying. I go to my knees over him and punch him in the face. “Where are they going?”

Jennifer stands at the top of the stairs. “Cap,” she says.

I punch him again and his head snaps back. Blood flies out across the floor in a string.

“I called the cops,” Jennifer says. “You have to stop.”

I roll off of him and sit, legs spread out to either side. I look at the palms of my hands, my bloody knuckles. I look up when Jennifer crouches next to me. “Just calm down,” she says.

I lay my head on her shoulder. She curls her arm back around my head, cradles me into her neck, and I cry until the police get there.

*

After the cops come and ask questions, cuff the goth kid, two of the three squad cars leaves. The last cop tells me he needs to call whoever is on duty to come to the Aquarium, and that Jennifer and I should stay on hand. I go to the water tunnel, a glass arch slicing through the Caribbean Reef exhibit, and stop in the middle. Shadows like long darts pass across the carpet. A stingray swims overhead, a silent black kite in the dim water. I close my eyes again, and imagine the building a dark crush of water.

“I’m not bothering you, am I?” Jennifer says. Veins of light cross her face, break and meld on her forehead and cheeks.

“Does it matter?” I say.

She looks down, and I tell her no, she’s not bothering me.

“So you didn’t lose your purse?” I say.

“No,” she says. She clasps hands behind her neck, touches elbows in front. “I needed somewhere to stay.” Her arms fall. “But I wasn’t in on the penguin heist. I swear.”

“Maybe not,” I say.

A stingray picks up a mouthful of rocks and drops them overhead. They tumble down the slope of glass and fall through the water, irregular dots of black in the murky.

“You’re probably going to get fired when your supervisor shows up,” she says.

She looks up the arch of glass.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess I’m going home.”

“That’s not so bad, then,” she says. She puts a hand on the glass, watches a fish pass and pause, swim away.

I watch her watch the fish, then I watch it go too, around an artificial reef and out into the dark. “That’s what I’ve been avoiding,” I say.

“Why?”

I wonder why she cares, why I want to tell her. I think about Bill. “I hate the Reservation,” I say. “We didn’t even live on reservation land because my mother was a white woman. We lived out on the edge of town, away from everyone. When my father died, she refused to leave. All I can think is she must’ve been miserable, that she must’ve died with all these faces around that looked nothing like hers. My dad had five sisters, and they all hated my mother. I wonder if anyone was even there when she died.” I bow my head a little, close my eyes.

She blows over her hand and the condensation gathers around it, beads out across the glass. “It’d be crazy to have a home and not go to it if you could.” She looks up at me, hand still stretched out across the glass.

I look at her and think about my mother, about all the faces she must’ve seen before she died, aunts, uncles, and in-laws, cousins of cousins, wide faces and dark hair, like mine, like my father’s.

I look at the outline of her hand, silver water webbed between fingers, bent around the lower curve of palm, through to the tank beyond, thick with slow shadows,

silent in the crush of water. The condensation warms and fades, all but the curves of fingertips, and those fade, too.

CHAPTER II

I end up going home to Oklahoma when Bill fires me. A few minutes before he gets there, the keepers show up to put the penguins in temporary housing, so Jennifer and I go out to the atrium. I sit on one of the low wooden benches just inside the door and it creaks, and Jennifer sits next to me, pulls her legs up and crosses them Indian-style. The cops stop looking at the broken bits of glass, at all the scuffs on the floor, the specks and streaks of blood like jagged, red exclamation points. For the third time, one of the cops asks me why someone would steal a penguin and I tell him his guess is as good as mine.

“She one of them?” He says. He points at Jennifer then pulls up on his belt, twists until he’s comfortable.

The fake shark hanging overhead creaks and its shadow shifts across the tile floor, settles back.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Are you?”

She crosses her arms and scratches at the hem of her sleeve with one finger.

“No.” She looks at me. “Maybe you are. I was just here.”

The cop turns around, crooks his neck to the radio at his shoulder, and says something I can’t hear. Wind blows through the broken front door and a jag of glass falls from the frame, shatters on the sidewalk outside.

“I’m probably going to get arrested, now,” Jennifer says. “Thanks.”

I lean over. “You broke into the aquarium,” I say, quiet in her ear. “Why wouldn’t they take you to jail?”

“I didn’t break in,” she says.

The cop turns around and I lean straight. “That was dispatch,” he says. “Someone’s bringing Mister Elk now.”

When Bill shows up, the cop with him comes in through the unlocked door. Bill bends and steps through the broken door, arches his back around a shard of glass still clinging to the metal frame. His feet crunch on the floor, and he tiptoes, still bent over, to the edge of the corona of broken glass.

He pulls the tail of his t-shirt down. He points at Jennifer. “Who’s this?” He says.

“I’m Jennifer.” She stands and shakes his hand, sits back down.

He furrows his brow and scratches an ear lobe, pulling it between thumb and forefinger. “Nice to meet you,” he says. He turns to the cops. “Are you guys finished here? I was told you had someone in custody.” He points at the door. “Maintenance is on their way to fix that.”

They ask if he wants to press charges on Jennifer for trespassing, but he says no, it’s fine, that it was all probably a misunderstanding, a coincidence that she broke in that night. He goes up to the security room and comes back with the tapes, hands them over, and the cops leave.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say. I stand up from the bench and Jennifer stands with me. I step up behind him.

Bill watches the cops go, out onto the Riverwalk and into their cars. They turn wide circles and creep away, around bike stands and wide, round benches, out into the street and gone.

Bill turns around, smiling. "Are you kidding, Cap? I'm not going to fire you. This is great!" He grabs my shoulders, nods towards Jennifer. "This your girlfriend?"

"No," I say.

"I've been on the news tonight," Bill says. "Twice. That's why it took me so long to get here." He takes his arms off of my shoulders.

Jennifer clears her throat behind me. "Can I go?"

"You're not firing me?" I say.

"That penguin getting stolen just sold us an extra month's worth of tickets," Bill says. He walks in a semi-circle around the atrium, ignoring the crunch of glass. He stops, holds up three fingers, and curls each down as he talks. "Then there's donations. All those people with tickets will buy shit from the gift shop. IMAX tickets." He reaches in his pocket and pulls out his cellphone. "I've got to tell my mother this shit." He dials, goes outside to talk.

I go sit at the bottom of the staircase and watch him walk back and forth between circles of orange streetlight. His eyes are deep and black, shadowed above high cheekbones. I wonder what they say on the phone. Not about me, or about the penguin, but what questions she asks him about his life, what kind of answers he gives her. I wonder if they care, or if they pretend to because parents and children are supposed to be close.

Jennifer sits down next to me. "Do you want him to fire you?" She pulls her legs up, rests her forearms on her knees.

"I thought you were leaving," I say. I pick at a splinter of glass buried just at the base of a thumb.

“Where else am I going to go?” She says.

Wind blows in through the broken door, swirls around us. She tosses a curl out of her face.

“You told me you have family. Parents,” I say.

“We don’t speak.”

A bead of blood wells up from the splinter, spiderwebs out through the lines in my palm. “That’s easy. Just talk to them.”

“It’s never easy,” she says. She looks away from me, out through the front doors.

“Here he comes.”

Bill comes back inside, stops, and looks down at us. “You have to go home,” he says. He puts his hands in his pockets.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say. I stand up.

“You have to. You’ve been gone so long, your aunts are planning an estate sale. Everything. They’re going to sell the house, too.”

Jennifer stands up next to me and I can smell her hair. It smells spicy, earthy, like tilled black soil. “Cap,” she says.

I look at her, at Bill. “So?” I say. “They can have it.” I squeeze Jennifer’s hand and I know they can tell I’m lying because my voice shakes so bad I have to stop, clear my throat. “There’s nothing there for me.”

“Okay, then,” Bill says. “You’re fired.” He shrugs, hands still in his pockets, and his elbows wave out to the sides, fall.

I walk a few steps away from them both, and kick at the glass on the floor. A few bits skitter further and come to a rest, a few more fly up and shatter against the wall,

leave a constellation of glassy specks scattered across smooth, green marble. I close my eyes and rub my forehead with one hand.

“Cap,” Bill says. “Take my car. I’ll get it back when all this is done.” He comes over and puts his hand on my back, cocks his head to one side. “You should really get on the road tonight. I’ll go get what the Aquarium owes you out of petty cash.”

Jennifer comes over to me. “It’s time to go home,” she says.

I look at her. “I don’t know if I can,” I say. I hug her, and she’s so small my arms swallow her, but she hugs me back the best she can.

Bill comes back and gives me the money, almost five hundred dollars and some change, and hands me his keys. He tells us to be careful, that the car, a two-tone eggshell and brown Monte Carlo, has a tendency to flood when parked on a hill. If we need anything, he tells us, call his parents. Jennifer and I finally get on the road after I stop at Bill’s apartment and grab my things: a duffel bag, stack of comics, and shaving bag.

I stay quiet, think about the long drive, about not knowing what to do when I get there, about not knowing what to do about anything. Jennifer leaves me alone, and I keep asking myself why she’s there, or why she wants to be there, but leave her alone, too. She waits in the car while I stop at Bill’s apartment and grab my things. When I get back, she’s asleep, head resting in a hammock of seatbelt between her shoulder and the anchor. By the time we get out of New Orleans, she starts snoring, and I leave the radio off, comforted by the sound of someone breathing so close, so low and even.

Jennifer stirs the whole time she sleeps, finally waking up long enough to crawl over into the back seat and go back to sleep. She wakes up for good a few hours after that.

She yawns and rests her chin on the seat next to my shoulder. "Where are we?" She says.

"Leaving Dallas," I say. I catch her yawn.

She crawls back over into the front seat, squints out the window. "Do you want me to drive? You have to be tired."

"I'm fine," I say. "It's not but four or so more hours now to Oklahoma City, and Pope is just the other side of that. I'll sleep when we get to my family's house." I yawn again.

"We can get to know each other, that'll keep you awake." She moves her legs up onto the bench seat, and puts her back to the car door. She pokes my thigh with a big toe.

Faster cars and SUVs, buildings and guardrails, and concrete buttressed highways speed by behind her, and I imagine the door opening and her tumbling out into traffic.

"Could you not sit like that?" I say. "You're making me nervous." I look at the cracked brown plastic running from the dash up to the window, the duct taped and thumb tacked ceiling upholstery at the top of the door.

I hear something creaking, but can't tell where it is. "Just move," I say.

"Why don't you want to go home?" She says. "Is it about your father?"

"I never knew my father. He died when I was two." I switch hands on the wheel, push her legs off the seat. "I don't even know where he's buried. My mother wouldn't talk about it."

She puts her legs back up. "You have aunts on the reservation. Did your dad have any brothers? Or are you like the last Indian in your family?"

I stare at the bumper of the pickup truck in front of us, at the wide, silver Jesus fish and white stencil sticker of thorny-crowned Christ himself across the back windshield. I feel Jennifer staring at me, see her out the corner of my eye.

“Sorry. We can just listen to music.” She looks at the radio. “This shit has dials,” She says. “It’s awesome. I love this car.” She jostles my leg again with her feet, and her skin squeaks on the brown vinyl. “What kind of music do you like?”

“No radio,” I say.

“Okay,” she says. She puts her feet in the floorboard, opens the glovebox, digs around. She pulls out maps, gloves, a flashlight and mini roadside kit in vacuum-sealed black case, puts it all back, closes the glovebox. She cranes her neck over to look in the backseat, and bends down to look under the front seat. She looks at me. “Do you think Bill has a travel toothbrush in here?”

I pull off at the first exit I see that has a gas station. I reach in my pocket and hand her a twenty and a five. “Go inside and get yourself a toothbrush while I fill up the car. You can drive,” I say. “I need to sleep.”

“Where do I go?” She says, still holding the wrinkled bills up in one hand.

“Stay on this interstate until we cross the Oklahoma state line,” I say. “Then stop and wake me up. Is that fine? Can we do that?” She looks at me a little longer, like she wants to say something else, but gets out of the car instead. When she leaves I slide across the seat to the passenger side, make sure the door is locked, and lay my head back against the seat.

Jennifer stays quiet when she gets back, cranks up the car and gets back on the interstate. In a few minutes, I fall asleep.

*

When I wake up, we're in a parking lot. "Where are we?"

"It's the Oklahoma City Zoo," Jennifer says. She takes the keys out of the ignition and gets out of the car.

I get out and run up behind her. "What are you doing?"

She walks between cars and I have to slow down, worm around side mirrors. She looks back over her shoulder. "I'm starving," She says. "Zoos always have the best corn dogs."

"You were supposed to stop at the state line," I say. She gets further ahead of me and I lose sight of her for a second because I have to go around a minivan parked too close to an SUV. "Stop," I say.

When I get around the van, she's up to the entrance, families with strollers and kids on shoulders leaving on either side. She stops, turns back to me. A wooden arch above her, carved to look Native rustic bears the name of the zoo in uneven, liver-red letters spans the entrance between two wooden poles each topped with the zoo seal, a totemic bear done in black lines on a turquoise background. Each bear stares out, unblinking, over the parking lot.

I look at Jennifer and she smiles, waves a hand. "Come on," she says. "It'll be fun."

I try to get to her before she buys a ticket, but bump into a couple holding hands, then back into a father and his young daughter. I apologize and wait for people leaving to clear away. I see Jennifer talking to the ticket seller. She points at me, and the shadow inside the booth nods, and Jennifer goes on into the park.

By the time I get in the entrance, she's gone, so I grab one of the orange brochure maps. The park is small, not full of trees and open air like the one in New Orleans, or pictures I've seen of the St. Louis or San Diego Zoos. Little totem animals mark all the cluttered habitats, totem approximations of drink cups and paper pouches of fries mark the zoo cafés. Jennifer isn't at the first place I stop, so by the time I get to the second one, she's sitting at a low, orange and black picnic table outside nibbling the crust around the base of the corn dog stick.

"You look like a squirrel," I say. I sit down across from her, rest my elbows on the table. "We really should get going."

She finishes, wraps the stick in a mustard spotted paper napkin. "You hurt my feelings, Cap." She stands up, throws away her garbage. "Can we go for a walk?" She says. "Just for a few minutes."

I stand up next to her and she laces her fingers into mine, squeezes my hand. We walk, her leading just a step, without talking for a bit. We pass the squat, slumped aviaries, full of cockatiels and parrots, eagles, peregrine falcons, and songbirds. We pass the big cats, and the desert animals across from the cats. I watch other people pass and pause in front of the habitats and their even rows of placards, lean over the thick wood railing to get a closer look at the animals. A man gives his son a hand full of dry brown pellets from a quarter-dial vending machine and he throws them to a cluster of reindeer in a shaded, mossy enclosure. The path circles around and we go up onto a raised walkway and through the primates; monkeys first, then large apes, bonobos, and chimps. A mountain of false brown rock with false cracks and pits, the illusion of weathering, curls around the gorilla habitat.

Jennifer stops, lets go of my hand. She leans on the railing and looks down into the enclosure. “They look like people, don’t they?” She says.

I bend over next to her, rest on the rail. Three gorillas look up at us, a female, a baby, and a massive silverback serenely picking his belly button in a shaded corner of the habitat. “I guess so,” I say.

“Gorillas always reminded me of my father,” she says. “Quiet, big. Scary.”

I look at her and she looks like she’s going to cry. Her eyes water, and she sniffles, but she stops before any tears. “I can see that. I mean, I don’t know your dad, but that’s what fathers are supposed to be like, right?” I say. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t really know.”

People pass around us, stop, move on. A little boy and girl crouch in between our legs. Jennifer looks down and smiles, looks back at me. “I’m not one of them, you know.”

“One of who?” I say. The boy jostles against my leg, elbows me in the shin.

“The penguin thieves,” she says.

The boy elbows me again and we move down the rail, right next to the placard. “What does that matter?”

“I just wanted you to believe that,” she says. She looks down at the placard.

“The gorilla gorilla, or lowland gorilla,” she reads, cuts her eyes at me, “are much smaller than the mountain gorilla, and subsist on a much wider omnivorous diet than their arboreal cousins. Unfortunately, the situation for these noble primates is no less dire than that of the mountain gorilla and their numbers steadily dwindle in the wild due to

poaching, disease, and displacement.” She stops, even though I see more to read. She looks around the park, at the sun waning down behind the faux-rock mountain range.

“Jennifer,” I say, before she interrupts me.

“I don’t know why I came either, but we’re here. Can we just do this?”

“Do what?” I say.

“Just us. Just be like this, like we are now. I’m just not ready to talk about some things.” She reaches up, brushes a finger along one of my eyebrows, trails it down my cheek.

“Me either,” I say.

She looks around the park again, then. The wind blows through the park, down through the enclosure, riffling the thick green clumps of grass. “This is awful. All these animals must be able to smell each other packed in this close.”

“I reckon,” I say.

“God,” she says, holds my hand again. “How do they stand it on top of each other?”

“They just do,” I say. I look at her, and she smiles a wide smile, turns, and watches the gorillas. I know the park closes soon, and I think about it after, at night, empty of people, cluttered with cages and close spaces, all under the wide sky, and I imagine how lonely that must feel. I think about my father, and about my mother and I wonder how often they felt the same. “We need to go,” I say. “It’s getting dark.”

*

My mother’s house seems smaller than when I remember, crowded with cars parked in the gravel driveway, the yard, on the unlined, cracked street.

I stop at the edge of the yard and turn the car off. “This is it,” I say.

Jennifer touches my arm. Fingertips brush the inside crook of my elbow. I almost jump. “Do you want me to go in?” she says.

I cross my arms, rest my chin on the brown arch of steering wheel. “What do I say?”

She winds a curl of hair around one thumb, tight to the scalp, and tucks the strands behind her ear. “Tell them to leave,” she says. “This is your home.”

I look at the sky. An airplane takes off from the local airport, banks low over the ragged tops of trees. “It hasn’t been in a while,” I say.

High stacks of boxes on the front porch block one window that looks out on the front yard. “It looks like they’re already done,” I say. “I might as well get this over with.” I get out of the car and take a few steps, hear the passenger door creak open behind me, and stop.

Jennifer comes up next to me, holds my hand.

I want to shake her hand off, tell her that we should leave, that we made a mistake coming in the first place, but we go up the driveway. Gravel settles, creaks under our feet like grinding teeth.

My mother’s house looks like a red brick cracker box: small, square, with a long, low wooden porch along the front. As we get closer, one of my cousins, Simon, comes out, carrying a box. He crouches at the knees to stack it on top of another, stands straight with one hand at the base of his back.

I clear my throat and he looks our way.

“Cap?” he says. He steps down to the yard. “Holy shit,” he says. He takes a cellophane package of licorice from his pocket, tamps a short black string out against the heel of one wrist like a cigarette, and tucks it into the corner of his mouth. “Who’s your girlfriend?”

“Jennifer,” I say. I let go of her hand. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

Simon smiles. “In that case, how do you do?” He leans forward, arm out, and Jennifer takes his hand, shakes. “I’m Simon,” he says. He gnaws on the licorice and the limp end twitches.

“Who all is in there?” I say.

Simon leans back, scratches behind an ear with one knuckle. “Now isn’t a good time, Cap. Mom’s in there. All the Aunts.” He looks back over his shoulder at the house, turns back and leans in like he’s sharing a secret. “I know you don’t want the headache of dealing with Mom, or the others. I know I don’t.” He smiles again, winks.

I want to punch him in the handsome face and the handsome straight teeth, rub his head in the gravel until all his handsome salt-and-pepper hair falls out.

“You’re an asshole,” Jennifer says.

“He’s right,” I say. “That’s why they’re all going to leave. Go in there and round up your mother and everyone else and get out of here.” I look at Jennifer, back at Simon. “Please.”

Jennifer takes my hand, squeezes.

“What do you care?” Simon says. He chews the licorice and I watch the short rope get shorter, closer to the slick of drool at the corner of his mouth. “You haven’t been around.”

My knees shake. I stare at Simon. “Jennifer,” I say. “Go inside and wait for me.” I clench and unclench my jaw until a cramp swells just under my tongue.

She lets go of my hand and takes a step away, but stays outside.

Simon slurps the last inch of licorice into his mouth. “Fine,” he says. “Makes no difference to me.” He turns and goes inside.

I go and sit at the end of the porch. I rest elbows on knees and look down at the ruin of grassy mulch between my feet that used to be one of the flower beds. Jennifer sits next to me. A shiny beetle climbs over a piece of mulch, picks at the edge of my shoe, crawls away.

Jennifer pulls my head onto her shoulder. I start to say something and she shushes me. We sit like that for a bit and she rocks back and forth, the top curve of her breast brushing my cheek. She smells like the inside of a spice cabinet, like fresh-tilled earth. I want to know how she smells all over, under her arms, in the crook of her neck, the small of her back, right where her waist curves out to hip; how she smells when she’s wet, when she’s sweating. I close my eyes. I hear cars crank, doors open and shut. I smell puffs of exhaust and the soft crush of grass and damp earth beneath tires as my relatives pull away.

Jennifer stops rocking. “Cap?” she says.

I open my eyes and see chipped pink toenails peeking from a wide pair of open-toed shoes. I look up. “Aunt Merlie,” I say.

Merlie stands with her arms across her stomach, looking down at us, squinting with one eye. One side of her forehead bulges, shiny and dimpled, with a tight, lemon-

sized growth. Her silver hair, still against the breeze, teases out, shoulder-to-shoulder.

“We’ll be back for your father’s things tomorrow,” she says.

“No you won’t,” I say. “This is my mother’s house.”

She points at me with a pink-lacquered finger nail, so close I see a tiny little rhinestone set at the base of the nail. “This was your father’s house.”

Jennifer lets go of me. “Well, it’s his house now, isn’t it?”

Merlie moves the finger to Jennifer’s face. “You’re no part of this,” she says.

She leans closer to me. “I don’t care what you and this hussy do with this house, or with your mother’s things, but your father’s things are coming with me.” She stands up.

“We’ll be back to get them tomorrow.” She turns and walks across the yard, gets in a white, step-side pickup with Simon and they leave.

*

Just inside, in the living room, the house looks ransacked. Piles of couch and bed pillows clot all the corners, empty boxes, more boxes with lampshades and towel rods and tall bric-a-brac jutting from the open tops; stacked, framed pictures. All the furniture lines the walls, ragged leftovers of duct tape stuck along their edges like silver wings; black garbage sacks, plastic yellow strings bowed at their tops, fill the couch, a wingback chair, and a split-seamed recliner. A box, half-full with small framed photographs and yellow-paged books, sits in the floor. An uncapped permanent marker next to the box bleeds black into the thick, green rug.

Jennifer follows me room to room.

In the kitchen, pots and pans and bowls and silverware stand inside of each other, crowd the low, round table. Casserole dishes with mismatched lids line the counters. All

the cabinets stand open and I see places where the plaid vinyl shelf-liner curls, peels away from cheap wood underneath.

“They did this to my mother,” I say.

“Because she wasn’t Native American?”

I walk to the counter, look down at a white mixing bowl, brush it into the floor, and it shatters. Shards scatter across the floor like cast bits of bone. I push another dish off the counter, another and another. Arcs of shattered porcelain overlap, pulse under the slow ceiling fan. I pick up another, raise it over my head.

“Cap,” Jennifer says. “Stop.” She holds up a hand, fingers wide. Her face looks tight, lips pressed thin.

I keep holding the dish, but lower it, hug it close against my chest. “They picked through everything.”

She steps closer. “They did.”

I put the dish down, step closer to her. “What do you care about it?” I say. I leave the kitchen, go back through the living room, stepping over a wooden toy, an old German tri-plane, red, with an Iron Cross at the tip of each wing. I turn my shoulders sideways to get past a faded blue mattress leaning against the wall in the hallway.

I stop outside my mother’s bedroom, trace a spiral of green crayon scratched across the door. Jennifer comes up behind me.

“This was hers,” I say.

Jennifer puts a hand at the small of my back, looks up at me. “I’ll wait out here.”

Inside, square divots mark the floor where the bed and nightstand stood, and a leather-wound hoop, empty in the middle, hangs on one wall. All the old dolls my

mother collected lay stripped of their clothes, in a pile on the floor. When I was a kid, the dolls gave me the creeps, and I avoided going in my mother's room unless I needed her. I sit next to them, cross-legged. Half-lidded toy eyes stare at me from the pink tangle of fat plastic arms and crooked legs, and round, naked bellies.

CHAPTER III

Jennifer tells me we need to go through everything cluttering my mother's house. That way we can see what damage my aunts did, what they took, and figure out what to do with all her stuff, maybe put some of my grief to rest. She says she read somewhere that's the best thing to do, that housekeeping helps more than putting a body in the ground. My first impulse is to burn everything. Putting things back where they were, even rearranging them, feels wrong. I tell Jennifer this and she tells me I need rest. Instead, I decide to check the backyard. My mother bought a pre-fabricated storeroom after my father died and put all of his things inside, kept it locked with a fat, silver padlock. Whenever I asked if she'd open it up, my mother always told me there was nothing in there for me.

My mother arranged statuary, glass and plastic yard ornaments all around the yard; concrete cherubs on pedestals and glass mirror balls on metal stands, terra cotta flower pots clotted with pressed clusters of grapes and ivy. Judas and birch trees scatter the yard, limbs bent with copper, glass, pewter, and porcelain wind chimes. The wind blows and the chimes clink and whistle, moan low tones. She painted the shed aqua green, hung hammered-tin tropical fish all over the outside.

The same padlock hangs on the door, rusted solid. I pick up the little welcome mat at the foot of the door, run my fingers along the top of the jamb, but find no key. I look inside and see boxes piled almost to the roof, a ladder propped against one wall, an old wooden chest banded with metal strips. Clothes, ragged around the edges, hang from the open rafters.

Out in the woods, I hear a splash, the rustle of leaves. I stand there for a minute, cock my head to one side, eyes closed. The sound gets softer, fades further into the woods and gone.

While I'm outside, Jennifer pulls the mattress from the hallway into the living room, makes it up with a loose fitted sheet and quilt she found in a closet. She offers for me to sleep next to her, but I decline, tell her I'll take the floor instead. I tell her I'm a restless sleeper.

*

When I get up the next morning, Jennifer's gone. The mattress stands empty next to me, dips in a wide, warm oval where she slept. I smell coffee brewing.

Aunt Merlie sits at the kitchen table, stirring a mug of coffee. She leaves the spoon in, tucks it to one side with a thumb, and takes a sip. "Make yourself a cup," she says. She wears a black fedora, tilted forward to cover the growth on her forehead. She picks at a speck of lint on one shoulder of her blouse. She looks small in the big shirt, thin and hunchbacked.

I go over to the percolator and fill a cup. "Where's Jennifer?" I say, spoon sugar into coffee, stir. I turn around and lean against the counter.

"I'm not sure." She slurps the hot coffee through pursed lips, smiles. "Bill Elk's car is gone, though," she says. Lipstick smears one of her front teeth. She pushes an empty chair away from the table with one foot. "Come sit with me."

"Why are you here?"

"I just wanted to talk to you." She takes another sip, and coffee runs out of the corner of her mouth. She wipes it away with the tips of her fingers, wipes the fingers on

her pants. Deep wrinkles crease the corners of her eyes, her lips, bracket either side of her mouth. “Someone needs to talk some sense into you.”

“Do you know where the key to the shed is?” I say.

She closes her eyes, breathes in deep through her nose. She looks at me. “I know this has been a hard time for you. When your Uncle Buddy died, I didn’t get out of bed for almost a month.”

“No one tried to take any of his things away from you.”

She straightens her hat, runs one finger along the under side of the brim.

“Everyone knew better than that,” she says. She clears her throat, picks at the table with one long, pink fingernail. “We just wanted to help.”

I cross my legs at the ankle, put my mug on the counter. “Was Simon snooping around back last night?”

“Probably,” she says. “My eldest is an idiot,” she says. She blows across the top of her coffee. A little sloshes out, traces a thin crack down the side of the mug. “Ever since Amy left him, I can’t keep him out of my medicine cabinet.” She puts the mug down and folds her hands, laces wide-knuckled fingers. “I’ll probably end up burying him next to Buddy.”

I pick at a brown seam in the formica counter, where it meets the sink. “Why are you so hateful?”

“That’s not hateful, Cap,” she says. “That’s just the truth.” She scratches a dry spot at the edge of one eyebrow. “It seems like I’m the only one who doesn’t have a problem with telling the truth.”

I hear the front door open and Jennifer comes into the kitchen holding a brown paper sack. "I got some things for breakfast," she says. She stops, looks at me, and at Merlie. She puts the sack next to me. "I can leave you alone."

Merlie holds up a hand, flicks her fingers, and Jennifer starts to leave, but I stop her. "It's fine," I say.

"Are you sure?" she says. I nod and she clears a spot on the counter, starts pulling things from the sack. Juice, eggs and peppered bacon, a loaf of white bread, margarine, and a short, fat can of molasses. "I've got enough for everyone," she says. She takes a frying pan from a cabinet and puts it on the stove.

I go over and sit at the table. "She can hear whatever I've got to say."

Merlie shrugs. "Just let me, Patty, and Bonnie come help. This was your father's house, and we'd like to put this all to rest."

"My father's been dead for twenty years," I say. "I know all of you miss him like I miss him. But this is my house."

Bacon slaps the pan, sizzles.

She bunches her fingers and taps her forehead once, twice, a third time. "James was my brother," she says. "You never knew him, so how could you miss him?"

"Just leave us alone," I say.

Jennifer cracks eggs into a deep bowl, grabs a fork and stirs. Metal clinks against porcelain.

"There are no opportunities here," she says. "You shouldn't stay." She takes a hard, red candy from her pocket, pulls both bowed ends. She pinches the candy, points at

me with it. “You could go to college. Clint got a full scholarship to Oklahoma State.” She pops the candy in her mouth, licks thumb and forefinger.

“Clint’s dumber than Simon,” I say.

“That may be true, but he got one of those Native American scholarships,” she says. “I’m not sure you could get one. You look the part, at least.”

I wish I could slap her, at least reach into her mouth with a thumb and wipe the lipstick off her teeth. I want to embarrass her. “I’d like you to leave,” I say.

She folds her arms. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I think I’ve figured out why you’re so angry,” I say. I scratch inside an ear with my little finger. “You’re so ugly that you figure it’s the only way to take attention away from that.” I point at her forehead. “What is that?”

Jennifer coughs. She stabs a piece of bacon with a fork, and holds it above the pan. Grease drips from the wrinkled strip of meat, crackles and hisses. She flips the meat back into the skillet, stares at the knobs on the stove.

Merlie looks at her, then at me. She picks up the mug and empties it in the middle of the table. Caramel liquid splashes and spreads, runs across grooved wood. She leaves.

I find a rag in one of the drawers and clean the coffee, crouch and clean the floor where it run off the side of the table, trace the grout between tiles with one wrapped finger.

Jennifer finishes cooking and we sit to eat. “She just showed up?” she says.

I break strips of bacon into my eggs, scoop it all onto a slice of toast. “She was sitting in here waiting for me to wake up,” I say. “She made the coffee.”

Jennifer pries the top off the molasses can with her spoon. She cuts a few pieces of buttered toast into triangles, drizzles them, cuts the bread with the edge of her fork. She takes a bite. "Have your aunts cleared out the shed?"

"It was padlocked," I say, point my fork back over one shoulder. "I heard something in the woods last night."

Jennifer wrinkles her nose, smiles. Molasses pools on her plate and she drags a piece of bacon through it, takes a bite. "It was probably one of your cousins or aunts," she says.

"It was right after they left," I say, curl my toes against the floor.

"Maybe it was a bigfoot." She raises her eyebrows, takes another bite of toast. "I know," she says. "Maybe it was your father."

"That's not funny."

She stops chewing, pushes the food into one cheek. "I wasn't trying to be funny." She swallows, takes three long gulps of juice. "Maybe he wants to see you."

"Stop," I say. I push my plate back. "That's ridiculous."

"A sasquatch isn't?" she says. "I thought Indians believed in ghosts and shit."

I stare at her. "I wouldn't know," I say.

"That was rude," she says. "I'm sorry." She puts her fork on the plate. "Please eat."

I shovel the rest into my mouth. "Is that better?" A piece of egg rolls down my chin.

"Stop being childish," she says. "I said I was sorry." She scoots her chair around the table, closer to me, puts a hand on my arm.

I pull back from her. "I'm getting out of here," I say. I get up, grab the car keys, and leave.

*

I ride to the library, which looks more like an old, two-storey ranch house than what I think a library should look like with wide stairs leading up to a high porch lined with smooth Grecian columns. Inside, an old Cherokee woman with hair so thin I see light shining off her scalp stacks books on a cart. She stands behind a glass case that displays a collection of pottery shards, beaded vests, fans of turkey feathers tied together with strips of thin leather, a dark leather ball and woven wooden basket. Little strips of handwritten paper label arrowheads arranged small to large. Birds, large fowl, small game, deer, people.

"Is that true?" I say. I point at the last arrowhead, a fat black triangle the size of my palm, serrated all the way around.

She keeps her back to me, opens a book to the front cover, and puts a card in the little manila pocket there. She closes the book, runs a hand over the scuffed plastic cover. "I reckon it is," she says. She thumps the thick book down on top of another. "Can I help you?"

"I didn't see any computers," I say.

"We don't have use for nonesuch," she says. She pushes a stack of hardcover books to one corner of the cart, starts another. "People always looking up the pornography, anyway."

I scratch my chin. "I needed to look up a book," I say, look around the room. Wide staircases sit to either side of the counter, go up to an open landing crowded with shelves and low tables, and dim, green-hooded lamps.

"You can use the card catalogue," she says. "Or you can ask me." She licks the back of one thumb and opens another book. She closes the book.

"Does anyone else work here?"

"I've got help," she says. She looks at my hands, looks me in the face and shifts her jaw to one side, squints. "What sort of books you read anyway?"

"I'll just browse," I say.

"Suits me," she says. She goes back to stacking books. The pink tip of her tongue just shows through wrinkled lips as she opens the next book. She stops when she sees I'm still standing there. "Go on," she says. "Don't steal nothing."

"Do you mind if I just speak to whoever else works here?" I say. "I'm not really sure where to start."

I expect her to pick up a phone, or call someone over an intercom, but she picks up two heavy books and claps them together once, stops, claps them again. She thumps the books together a third and fourth time.

Laney Hunt, this girl I knew years ago, comes to the railing at the second floor and looks down at the old lady. "What is it, Settie?" Laney says. She brushes long black hair to one side with a forearm, holds it against her neck with one hand. She looks at me. "Cap?"

She wears thick, black rimmed glasses and a white tank top. A loose yellow skirt brushes the tops of her brown ankles, and I hear bare feet slap wooden stairs. She skips

the last two steps and comes at me with her arms open, hugs me, pushes me back and looks at my face. She hugs me again.

Settie snorts. “Looks like you know each other.” She nods at Laney. “This one knows everyone,” she says. She turns and leaves, pushes the cart off into the stacks.

Laney blows at the woman, tongue between her lips. “Don’t worry about her,” Laney says. She waves a hand. “Miss Bull’s just angry at everyone.”

“Her name is Settie Bull?” I say. I wince.

“I know,” Laney says. “Wouldn’t you be angry, too?” She rubs one of my arms, cocks her head to one side. “I heard you were back in town,” she says. “For good? Or just visiting?” She leans back, elbows propped on the counter. The lights inside the case hum, flicker and dim.

“I just came to find a book,” I say. I look at her feet. “You’re not wearing any shoes.”

She reaches and tucks hair behind one of my ears. “What are you looking for?”

“Do you have any books about bigfoot?” I say.

Her hand comes off of my shoulder and she steps closer to me. She widens her eyes. “Did you see something?”

Off in the stacks, I hear Settie Bull clear her throat. “I don’t want to listen to this shit,” she says.

Laney looks back over her shoulder and takes my hand. “Come with me,” she says. She starts towards the stairs. Her hand pulls mine, but I stay put at first and our fingers come apart, arms fall. She turns back to me, and nods her head for me to follow, so I do.

We go upstairs, to the landing. Laney leads me past a cluster of shelves, into a reading area. A rug, pocked with burns and two wingback chairs with matching ottomans face a fireplace. Laney tells me to sit, that she'll be right back, and she goes out of the room.

I sit and pull an ottoman closer with my toes, prop my feet. A mantel-wide oil painting hangs over the fireplace, flush with the ceiling. It shows a blue-eyed white man in a seersucker suit standing to one side of a roaring fire. He's bald, with white hair cropped close above his ears, and a white handlebar moustache. One hand rests on the smooth top curve of an antique globe. After a few minutes, Laney comes into the room, holding a tall stack of books between chin and hands.

She puts the books down on the floor between the chairs and sits, puts her feet up. A crescent of dirt traces the outside of each sole, heel to little toe. "Here you go," she says. "Just take what you want. No one's checking these out anytime soon."

I point at the painting. "He gives me the creeps," I say. "Who is he?"

"Andrew Fontaine." She takes a book from the top of the stack, fans through the pages with one thumb. "This one is really good," she says. "It talks about how the cryptid debate is more of a thing to white people than minorities."

"No," I say. "I mean, who was this guy. Why is there a painting of him here?"

She closes the book over her thumb. "He was a cattle baron that lived here until we started moving into the area. Then he left." She opens the book again. "It says here that most tribal people are so in tune with their natural surroundings that they've just come to accept the existence of cryptids as part of daily life."

I stare at the painting.

She closes the book and puts it back on top of the stack and the stack falls to one side, scatters across the carpet between us. “Apparently, he was so afraid of Indians that he drove three hundred head of cattle to Colorado and never came back for his stuff.” She points at the pile of books. “Do you want to look at these or not?”

I glance down. Some have hard covers and no sleeves, and yellow mouse-chewed pages, others soft covers, creased at the corners with blurred photographs of dark figures, or rough sketches, or pictures that look like old wood engravings. “So you believe this stuff?” I say.

“Why not? I listen to Coast-to-Coast every night.” She reaches down and grabs one of the books, holds it up. She holds the back cover close to her face. Her lips move a bit as her eyes go from word to word. “A lot of crazies call in, but every once in a while you hear something magic,” she says.

I watch her. She finishes reading and turns the book back over, turns it to the table of contents. “I imagine it’s just people wanting attention,” I say. “Telling stories, you know?”

She closes the book and folds her hands over the spine, rests it on edge in her lap. “What’s wrong with that? No one tells stories anymore.”

I look all around, at the shelves and the pile of books. “They don’t?”

“These are just books,” she says. “Stories are different.” She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose with a knuckle. “You should know the difference.”

“It seems like everyone’s pointing out what I don’t know.” I hear a fluttering in the fireplace, up the chimney, the sound of birds chirping.

Laney sits up straight. “The first step to knowledge,” she says, “is admitting you know nothing.”

I rub my eyes with thumb and forefinger, pinch the bridge of my nose. I sigh. “Who said that?” I say.

She tosses the book over the arm of the chair and it thumps onto the floor, slides across the low mound of books. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I probably read it somewhere.” She leans back, elbows cocked on the arms of the chair, and cuts her eyes at me. She smiles. “So you brought a girlfriend back with you?”

Birds chirp in the chimney, flutter. A handful of crooked brown twigs fall into the clean firebox.

I open my eyes. “So you’ve been talking to Simon?”

“Merlie comes in every week. She likes those true crime books,” she says, shifts. Old chair leather squeaks. “I imagine Simon doesn’t read much,” she says.

I reach down and pick up one of the books. The picture on the cover shows a werewolf peeking through tall, dry stalks of corn. Words drip like blood from a full moon. The monster hunches, drools. I look at Laney. “I’m pretty sure she’s not my girlfriend.”

She purses her lips and one corner of her mouth curves up. “How do you know her?”

“We met at the aquarium in New Orleans,” I say.

“Are you fucking?”

“None of your business,” I say. I push the book down between my thigh and the chair cushion. “Why?”

“Because, if you aren’t, then it’s not serious, and you and me could fool around.”

Laney leans to one side, folds her legs up behind her in the chair. She brushes a hand through her hair and pulls a bit out to one side, twists it around a thumb. “Why did you leave me, Cap?”

I breathe deep, in and out through my nose. “I didn’t leave you,” I say. “We’d quit dating months before I left.”

“Then why did you leave?” She uncoils the hair from her thumb, separates it into three strands and starts braiding. Her head cocks to one side, away from me.

I watch her fingers dance over each other, twisting hair together in a thin rope. “There wasn’t much here for me, I reckon,” I say.

The braid reaches her scalp and she hooks one finger in its base, pulls down, and her hair unravels. “There isn’t much here for anyone,” she says. “You’re no different.”

“It’s easy for you. You never had to defend the fact that you were Cherokee.”

“Neither did you,” she says.

“Tell that to my family,” I say. “What’s left of them, anyway.” My eyes and nose burn. My scalp tingles. I look away from her, watch a sugar ant trace a smooth groove in the floor. I rest my elbows on my knees and cover my face with my hands.

Downstairs, Settie Bull whistles long and loud. “Laney!”

Laney stands and I feel her hand on my head. “I’ll be right back,” she says, and leaves. “Maybe when I come back, we can fool around a bit.” I feel the warm outline of long fingers on my scalp. I gather up the books and go downstairs, look around for Laney, but only see Settie Bull behind the glass counter.

“I sent her out on an errand,” Settie says. “We need dog food.”

“This is a library,” I say.

“Dogs need to eat.”

I shrug my shoulders and put the books on the counter. Settie Bull goes through them, pulling cards. She tilts each cover to one side, into the light, grunts, goes to the next one. I end up checking out all the books Laney found for me on bigfoot and yeti, orang pendak and the almas, skunk apes, amomongo, barmanou, and the Kenmore grassman. I wonder if any of these things really exist, and if they feel as out of place as I do.

*

When I get home, no lights are on in the house, except the bathroom. I hear vomiting and go back there to check on Jennifer. I crack the bathroom door and peek inside. She sits, legs curled to one side, in front of the toilet, head resting on the seat. I think she’s asleep, but her eyes spring open and she lifts up a bit, vomits into the toilet. She wipes her chin with the back of one hand, lays her forehead on the seat.

I open the door the rest of the way. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sick,” she says. A string of drool hangs down her bottom lip. “Please leave me alone.” Some of her hair hangs over in the toilet.

“You’re getting it in your hair,” I say. I go over to her and crouch down, pull her hair up away from her face with one hand.

“Please leave,” she says. She burps, swallows. Her throat bobs.

“Was it something you ate?”

“No,” she says. She looks up at me. Sweat shines on her upper lip.

“Do you have a fever?” I say. I cup one palm across her damp forehead.

She slaps my hand away. “Leave me alone.” Her stomach tightens and back curves, and she vomits again, over the lip of the toilet seat.

I hold my hands up, shrug. “What is it? Are you pregnant or something?”

“Maybe I am.” She turns her head to one side on the toilet seat and hair falls across her face, hides her eyes. “Yes,” she says.

I stand up. “Whose is it?”

She pulls her hair back with one hand. “No one you know,” she says. She turns her head and vomits again.

I go outside to get away from the sound of her being sick. My face feels hot, the tips of my ears. I want to go back inside and yank her up by one arm, give her the rest of the cash, and put her on the road back to New Orleans. I want to break something because I had to come home in the first place. I look around the yard at all of my mother’s lawn decorations, concrete statues and the wind chimes hanging on bent branches. I push a mirror ball off its metal stand and one of the tiles pops off. I pick up the ball and throw it into the woods, grind the mirrored tile with a heel.

A rabbit statue stands up on its haunches next to a bush, and I kick it in the face, pick the hunk of concrete up. I walk down to the shed and bash at the cheap aluminum latch, at its hinge, the rusted padlock. Little chips of concrete start falling off the rabbit and cracks show at the base of its ears. Wood around the latch hinge dents, frays and splinters. The rabbit’s ears fall off, but I keep hammering at the strip of metal until it snaps and drops.

I go into the storeroom, look around. Cardboard boxes crowd around a small, open spot in front of the door. A banjo leans in one corner, rusted strings broken, curled

away from its neck and body. Clothes hang from the rafters, brush the top of my head as I pull a box out and sit. The room smells like pine, old paper. Pulp novels, photo albums, newspaper clippings, old Bibles, and coffee cans crowd a low bookshelf. I take one of the photo albums, open it. Plastic pages stick, crack and part.

A black and white picture on the first page shows my father in his army dress uniform, my mother in a smooth white wedding dress and wisp of veil. A widow's peak and shiny black curl of hair show under a high, cocked hat. He looks off to his right, away from the camera, smiling. A twist of rolled cigarette hangs in one corner of his mouth, and a dimple creases his chin. He looks small in the green coat and pants, shoulders narrow, belt hitched high and tight. My mother's hand rests in the crook of his elbow. She looks up at him, sun dappling her face.

On the next page, my father holds a cluster of dead birds in one hand, a shotgun in the other. A gray and black moustache hides his upper lip. Patches of beard scatter his face, high up on high cheekbones. A finger blurs one corner of the picture, and I imagine my mother on the other side of the camera. I wonder what she saw, and what she felt, what I'm supposed to feel.

Jennifer comes up and stands just inside the door, leans against the splintered jamb. "I like the fish," she says, points up.

I stare at the picture in the album. "My mom was from Biloxi and she said they reminded her of the beach," I say.

"That's nice," she says.

I look up. "Have you ever been to Biloxi?" I say. "They don't have any fish like that." I close the album, mark my place with a thumb.

“It reminded her of home.”

I put the album back on the shelf. “You feel better?”

She wipes at the corner of one eye. “A little,” she says.

“Let’s get married,” I say.

She closes her eyes. Wet eyelashes lace, stick together. “Cap.” She opens her eyes, takes a deep breath.

“Just say yes,” I say.

“I’m not really pregnant,” she says. She steps inside and reaches up, brushes a hand through the hanging clothes. “This was your father’s?”

I think about the picture of my father, my mother’s blurred finger. I think of their wedding picture. “This is all just stuff,” I say.

She shifts from one foot to the other and the plywood floor creaks, pops against loose nails. “It’s all just stuff,” she says. “More or less.” She sits on the floor in front of me, hugs her legs to her chest. “I like the fish.” She rests a cheek on her knees.

I look outside. Sun shines through the black sticks of trees. The wind blows, whistles around windows, and all the chimes outside jangle, glint silver and copper. Judas blossoms fall past the window, diagonally from branch to ground.

“Marry me,” I say.

She holds a hand to her chest, rubs her neck. “We need to clean the house,” she says.

“It’s just a decision,” I say. “Marry me.”

Something hits the window, quick, bows the cloudy plastic and falls to the ground outside. We both jump. Jennifer holds a hand to her chest, rubs her neck. I go outside

and she follows me. The ball I threw into the woods sits a few feet away from the window. Mud smears the mirrored face, clumps in gaps where tiles are missing or cracked. I push it with my toe and it rolls, curves to one side and stops. The ball catches the sun and little squares of light prick our faces, the side of the shed, all the static fish hanging there.

CHAPTER IV

When I ask Jennifer to marry me, she avoids the question. The next day, I wait for her to bring it up, to at least turn me down so we can be awkward around each other, or maybe even have a fight. Instead, she only talks to me to ask questions, or offer suggestions on how to rearrange furniture, what she thinks can be thrown away, and what can stay. She helps me clean the house, pack up my mother's things and put them in the shed with all my father's boxes of pictures, dusty uniforms and tarnished metals, baseball bats, and coffee cans full of rusted nails, old coins, and little, rubber-banded bundles of chocolate wrappers he took from the places he fought in North Africa and Italy during the war.

I feel like we just move things around, like all of my mother's dolls and embroidered pillows and old, faded t-shirts still clutter the house. By the end of the day, I notice square, dust-lined gaps where boxes used to be and divots in the rugs where furniture sat for years and years, and, by that evening, the house feels empty, like another box waiting for things to be put inside.

Eventually, all that's left of my mother's home are three boxes, stacked in a short tower next to the kitchen table. Jennifer bends at the waist, pushes them to the back door. Shallow white lines scuff the green linoleum.

She puts hands at the small of her back and stands. "That's it," she says.

I run my shoe over the scrapes in the floor and they fade a little, but stay. "It's fine," I say, rub an eye with the tip of a thumb.

“I’ll go get us some food, then,” she says. “Maybe some barbecue.” She shifts from one foot to another and her shoes stick to the floor, crack when they come up. She turns to go, puts her hand on the doorknob.

I clear my throat. “We’re almost out of money.”

“We have to eat,” she says, and leaves.

I hear keys jingle, the car door open and close. The car gurgles and chokes once, twice, and cranks. The house creaks and quiets, echoes a little in the kitchen when I pull a chair out from the table and sit. I put my elbows on the table and rest my head in my hands. I wonder what to do about Jennifer, about the house, what my father would do in my position, or even my mother. I know so little about either of them, what they were really like. I wonder what normal people do in my situation.

I decide to look for the phone, trail the cord to a drawer by the oven. It’s a green rotary phone, and the dial wobbles when I call information. I get Simon’s number, listen to the line click as dial. The phone rings once, twice, a third time, fourth, and fifth before he answers.

“Simon,” he says.

I touch the receiver to my forehead, put it back to my ear, tell him it’s me, that I need a favor. Static spits and cracks between us. I take the base in one hand and go sit at the table.

“I heard what you said to Mom,” he says. His stubble rubs against the phone.

I curl loose loops of cord around a finger, unwind them. “I’m sorry about that,” I say.

He laughs and I have to hold the phone away from my ear. “Don’t worry about it. I thought it was great,” he says.

I feel hot so I reach over and pull one of the chains hanging from the ceiling fan, turn the light off, then on. I pull on the other chain until the fan speeds up.

“She probably deserved it,” he says, clears his throat.

“I figured you’d be pissed.”

“I know she’s no angel,” he says. “I ain’t defending her just because she’s my mom.”

“Why weren’t you with her?” I trace loopy, faded numbers on the little piece of yellow paper in the center of the dial, peel it up with the corner of a thumbnail.

“Since you called,” he says, “Let me ask you something.” He crunches something into his mouth, chews. “You said you ain’t with that girl. You mind if I take her out?”

The yellow paper sticks to my bottom lip, takes some skin when I pull it off.

“Yes,” I say. “I mind.”

“Whatever.” He slurps, swallows hard. “What do you need?”

I run my tongue over the rough spot on my lip and taste blood. “Is La Tavernetta still open?” I say. I hear explosions on the other end, cartoon sounds, bouncing springs and gunshots.

“You mean that Italian place John Two-Trees owns?” He burps and blows across the phone. “Yeah, it’s still open.”

The glass fixture hanging from the ceiling fan rattles, and the light inside flickers, fades, and flares back. “You think they’re hiring?” I say.

“You know John changed his last name to Peppi? Said more people would eat there if they thought he had a wop last name,” he says.

A clump of dust falls from the ceiling fan, drifts down to the floor. “You know anywhere to work around here?” I stand and pull the chain hanging from the fan. The motor inside quiets and the blades slow.

“So you’re staying?” he says. “Mom owes me ten bucks.”

I stop the fan with a hand, and bits of dust drift down on my face like bits of black snow. “I don’t know if I’m staying or not,” I say. I push up on my toes and rub the tops of the blades with my hands, push all the dirt off in the floor.

“Go to the Buffalo Park and talk to Ned Horsechief. I run pallets of buffalo steaks to Seattle for him,” he says. “He owes me a favor.”

I tell Simon we need to get together soon and thank him for the advice, for the money, and get off the phone. After I hang up, I sweep the kitchen floor. I try to find a dust pan but give up and push the pile of grit onto a folded piece of paper with the edge of my hand, dump it all in the garbage. I think about waiting until Jennifer gets back, but decide to walk to the Buffalo Park since it’s less than a mile down the road. Anyway, I figure, I want Jennifer to be a little upset that I’m gone when she gets home.

The Buffalo Park sits on a few acres of tall-grassed pasture next to the airport. The main building looks like an old house, whitewashed with green shutters, and a high, uneven porch. A white swing hangs at one end of the porch, faces a life-size fiberglass buffalo. Fibers like tiny hairs sprout all around the jagged edges at the end of its snout and white scratches cross-hatch, scar each eye.

Through the front window, I see a man wearing a wide headband and denim coat. He sits behind a counter at the back of the room, hunched over a cluster of plastic soda bottles. He pulls a penknife out, unfolds it with a thumb, hunches over a cluster of plastic soda bottles. When I go inside, a cowbell at the top of the door clangs.

“Can I help you,” he says. He takes one of the bottles and brings it up close to his face, cuts down the seam on the back of the label.

“I’m looking for Ned Horsechief,” I say.

He leans to one side and takes a cigarette lighter from a wire display, tests it, puts it back, and takes another. “That’d be me.” He waves the flame across the thin line of glue on the naked soda bottle. “Tours are twenty, forty if you want to ride a horse.”

“Simon Lark told me to come talk to you.”

He takes a square piece of white paper from a stack next to him, wraps it around the bottle and holds it there. He sits straight. “You’re Kim Oosahwe’s boy?”

I look around the room. Dust covered coffee table books of Indian photographs and children’s books about how the Indians lived and books that have titles telling how easy it is to make Native sand paintings fill bookshelves along either wall. Cobwebs clot between dreamcatchers and tiny drums hanging from the ceiling by thin pieces of yarn.

I point at the bottles. “What are you doing?”

He holds the bottle up and shows me the label, the black outline of a buffalo. A red tongue lolls under crossed-out eyes and a trail of bubbles streams up between its horns. “This is the park’s newest product,” he says. “Buffalo beer.”

“It’s just Coke,” I say.

“It’s buffalo beer,” he says. “I can’t charge four bucks a bottle for Coke.” He puts the bottle down, sticks the knife in the countertop. He folds his arms. “I was sorry to hear about your mother. She was a real song.”

I look at the floor, rub a foot across a knothole.

He takes the knife and another soda bottle, cuts the label. “I’ve got to figure out somehow to keep paying my two worthless sons.” A long uneven strip tears off the soda, all the way around the top of the bottle. “You looking for work?”

“Where are your sons?” The windows rattle and the floor vibrates. I hear a jet engine pass low, fading and gone. Dreamcatchers and toy drums overhead sway, slow, and stop.

“Damn airport,” he says.

“What sort of work?” I say.

“I reckon you could shovel shit off Tatanka Trail.” He pinches the label and twists the bottle, tears the rest off in a wide strip. A piece sticks to his finger and he shakes his hand. “Not just buffalo shit. We got giraffes and water buffalo and gazelles. Got a couple of monkey cages, too. Sometimes, they throw shit out through the wire. I’d have to pay you cash, though,” he says, looks up. “Taxes.”

“Isn’t tatanka a Sioux word?” I say.

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s not Cherokee.” I reach up and hit one of the drums with a finger, watch it sway back and forth.

“And buffalo ain’t buffalo, either,” he says. “Technically, they’re bison. I don’t care what they’re called as long as folks are paying to see them.” He looks up, leans to

one side, and takes a bundle of keys from his pocket. He waves me over and I take the keys. “The shovels and rubber boots are around back.” He nods to one side. “Use one of the flat shovels and try not to take too much dirt. That’s the horse trail and we don’t want any riders getting thrown. I can’t afford the lawsuits.”

I hand the keys back to him.

Ned sighs, drops the keys. “I suppose you’re here for Simon’s money,” he says. “He usually has that Hunt girl come pick it up.” He takes a wad of bills out of an inside jacket pocket, unravels and puts ten hundreds on the counter. He unwraps them, smooths them with the heel of one palm. “Thousand, right?” He says.

I look at the stack of wrinkled cash, at Ned. “Twelve-fifty,” I say. “Gas.”

“I swear this is getting to be more trouble than it’s worth.” He takes another few bills out, throws them on the counter.

I take the money. On the walk back home, I stop and watch the airport. Blue lights pulse and fade on the runway. The radar dish on top of the tower spins a lazy circle, clicks with each turn. I watch a plane land and another take off, watch it go up until it’s a speck and gone, lost in curled wisps of cloud. Contrails cross the sky like unraveling seams and I wonder where each leads, if the places they end are any different than this one.

When I get home, Jennifer meets me at the door. She asks where I’ve been, why I would leave when I knew she just went to get food. I tell her Simon asked me for a favor and she tightens her lips, goes into the kitchen, so I follow her. Grease spots and spreads all over the outside of a white paper bag sitting on the table.

I point at the ceiling. “I cleaned the fan,” I say.

“The food is cold,” she says. She crosses her arms.

I sit across from her. “I’m sorry,” I say. “Let me make it up to you.”

“How are you going to do that?” She says. She nods at the sack of food. “This was our last decent meal for a while and you ruined it.”

“I doubt that,” I say. “I found some money. Let’s go out.” I lean back, look at the clock on the oven. “It’s four o’clock. Get ready and we can have an early dinner.”

*

After we both take showers and dress, we go to the restaurant. As we drive through town, Jennifer looks out the window, at passing convenience stores and tire stores, places to get your oil changed, pancake houses, and furniture stores.

“This isn’t how I imagined a reservation would look,” she says.

I turn the radio down. “What did you think it would be like?”

“You always read about how bad they are, how everyone lives so poor and drinks and does drugs,” she says. She reaches under the collar of her shirt, hooks a thumb under her bra strap. “This is just like any other town. I mean, all the signs are in Cherokee and English, but it’s still just a town.” She looks at me, bites her bottom lip. “I can understand why you wouldn’t want to be here, though. It’s just plain.”

“That’s everywhere,” I say.

The restaurant sits in a strip mall, between a check cashing place and make-your-own pottery store. Inside, the restaurant looks like an Italian villa, with terra-cotta tile floors and stucco walls, and hollow, concrete busts of famous Romans, a fountain with a plaster statue of the Venus de Milo in the middle. Black and white pictures of Cherokee and Sioux, Apache, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Nez Perce hang on the walls next to the

tables. The salt-and-pepper shakers look like Hopi kachina dolls with uneven painted eyes, long arms and fingers cradling low, round bellies.

The waiter takes our drink order and leaves. We're about to order when Simon shows up with Laney Hunt. He wears a pair of khakis and western shirt buttoned up to the throat, bolo tie tight to this neck. Laney wears a short black dress, turquoise necklace and earrings, carries a heavy black purse. They see us and come over to the table. Laney says hello and glances at her feet, looks at Jennifer. She introduces herself, and they shake hands.

Simon wraps his arm around Laney. "Y'all mind if we join you?"

I want to say no, but Jennifer tells them that they're more than welcome, so they take the last two seats.

Jennifer opens her menu, flips it over to look at the back. "They don't have wine?" She says.

"Dry county," Laney says. She reaches in her bag and pulls out a tear-shaped bottle wrapped in wicker. "We brought our own." She drums the fingers of one hand across the basket-weave. Her fingernails clack and scratch the dry wood.

Simon waves the waiter over to ask for glasses, nods. As the waiter turns to go, Simon pulls his apron with one hand and points at the ceiling, whispers something.

I lean closer to Laney. "I didn't know you guys were dating."

"We're not," she says. "We just go out sometimes."

Speakers overhead scratch and spit, and I hear mandolin and violins.

Jennifer watches us talk. "You two know each other."

"We grew up together." I lean back, open my menu.

“We dated before he left,” Laney says, waves a hand. “No big deal.”

The waiter brings our drinks and four empty glasses, opens Laney’s bottle of wine.

“He drilled the cork,” Simon says. He takes the broken cork and holds it under his nose, breathes deep. He fills Laney’s glass, his glass and Jennifer’s. I wave him off when he gets to me..

“So, what do you do, Laney?” Jennifer says. She folds her menu and puts it on the table.

“I work at the library.” She dips a fleck of cork from her wine with a fingernail.

The song fades away and another starts, a man and woman singing opera without music. The woman’s voice fades and the man’s sings breaks into the silence, clear and loud.

Laney tosses her hair, smiles. She looks at me. “What do you think about the books I picked?”

“What books?” Simon says. He takes a gulp of wine and his throat bobs, settles.

“Nothing,” I say. “Just some stuff about bigfoot.” I clear my throat, put my hands under the table and rub the tops of my legs.

“You know there’s a sasquatch lives behind your house,” Simon says. “I’ve seen him.”

“No you haven’t,” Laney says.

The waiter brings us a loaf of bread and a saucer of olive oil and cracked pepper. He puts a small plate in front of each of us, asks if we’re ready to order. I tell him we need a minute and he sighs, wipes his hands on the front of his shirt, tells me to wave

when we need him. He goes out front and lights a cigarette, stands in front of the big window, watching us.

“I have seen a sasquatch,” Simon says. He finishes his glass of wine, pours another. “I was hunting.” He wipes his forehead with the flat of one palm. “I didn’t get a clear shot at him, or else I’d be a rich man.”

“You were probably high,” Laney says. She puts her drink on the table and it wobbles.

“You don’t think there’s a bigfoot, Laney?” I say.

“I do,” she says. She points at Simon. “I just don’t think he’s seen it.”

“Mom used to tell this story,” Simon says. “Remember, Cap? She used to tell this story that Tsul `Kalu lived in the woods and that my dad and her dad and his dad had seen him.”

“Who’s Tsul `Kalu?” Jennifer says.

“Spirit of the woods,” I say.

“No,” Laney says, “He was the lord of the game. He was a hunter.”

“He was a giant,” Simon says. “And he was ugly, and he was covered in hair. Sounds like a sasquatch to me.” He leans on the table and it tilts, wobbles, sloshes wine over glasses.

Laney unfolds her napkin and wipes at a spot of wine. “It doesn’t sound anything like it,” she says. “If you or Cap read any of the books I pick for you, you’d know that.”

“I got better things to do,” Simon says, leans back. He puts his hand behind his head and winks at Laney, Jennifer.

“Like what?” Laney says. “Drive a delivery truck?”

Jennifer takes a salt shaker, spins it on the table between her hands. It falls over, spills. "I've been reading one of your books," she says. She pinches a few grains of salt, tosses them over a shoulder. "It's funny."

Laney crosses her legs at the knee, cradles her glass of wine in both hands. "Why is that?" She takes a sip of wine.

Simon slaps my shoulder with the back of one hand. "Cat fight," he says. He tightens his tie.

Laney holds up a hand. "No," she says. "I want to know what's so funny."

Jennifer sits up, tugs at the bottom of her t-shirt. "It's nothing." She clears her throat.

"What tribe are you?" Laney says, narrows her eyes.

Jennifer smiles. "Elijah," she says.

Laney holds her glass up. "Here's to you," she says. She drains the glass. "How long have you and Cap been together?"

I'm about to tell Laney that Jennifer and I just met, that we're still not together. Jennifer looks at me and smiles. She reaches across the table and puts her hand in mine. "Just a few days," she says. "But we're already thinking about getting married."

Simon laughs, pats me on the back. "Congratulations!" He says.

"Good for you," Laney says, refills her glass, right up to the top. She leans over and slurps the first bit of wine from the rim, leaves a crescent of lipstick behind.

Simon puts a hand on her shoulder. "You're drunk," he says.

“And you’re a deadbeat.” She shrugs him off, slaps me hard, right at the top of my cheek. “That’s for leaving,” she says. “Twice.” She takes her wineglass and leaves. Simon grabs her purse, the open bottle of wine, and goes after her.

Jennifer looks at the menu, purses her lips. “I’m not very hungry,” she says. “Can we leave?”

I get up and leave a twenty on the table, and we go out to the car. On the way home, I leave the radio off. On the way home, Jennifer stays quiet. We turn onto the road leading by the buffalo park before I work up the nerve to say anything.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She lifts her head, opens her eyes, shifts. The vinyl seat cracks, settles. “Don’t worry about it,” she says. “We’ve got leftovers at home we can eat.”

“I’m sorry I asked you to marry me,” I say, look at her.

She stares out the front window, leans forward and squints. “Stop,” she says.

“We should talk,” I say.

She points out the front window, grabs the steering wheel and pulls hard right. I hit the brakes. We slide to a stop in the middle of the road, and a monkey jumps onto the hood, stares at us. Water buffalo brush against the car, and three giraffes pass, legs shadowed stilts out past the car lights.

Jennifer breathes hard, mouth open. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s the buffalo park,” I say. “All the animals must’ve got loose.”

She nods, looks out and up at the giraffes. “They’re so quiet,” she says.

I rub my hand through my hair. “I’m tired of being here.”

She scoots to the edge of her seat, taps at the windshield. The monkey looks at her. It runs up the windshield, and I hear its paws tap along the roof.

“After I call Merlie, we can drive back to New Orleans and go our separate ways,” I say. I rest my forehead on the steering wheel. “You were right. We don’t know each other.”

Jennifer leans back, rests her hands in her lap. “No one really knows anyone else, Cap,” she says. “We only have ideas.” She smooths my hair down with one hand thumb trailing fingers, scalp to neck. “I like my idea of you, and that’s enough,” she says. “It has to be.” She pinches my earlobe, soft.

I look down at the creases and wrinkles in my shoes, then look at her.

She nods out the window. “I think this is the last of them,” she says. “Let’s go home.”

A line of buffalo like low, slow mounds of earth pass through the fog in front of the car, tails flicking. Breath puffs, clouds around wet snouts, curls and drifts away, and we watch them cross the road, on into the trees and gone.

CHAPTER V

When we get home, Jennifer tells me to wait in the car for a bit, that she has a surprise for me. She gets out and goes into the house and I turn the car off. Instead of sitting there, I go around to the backyard, go about halfway down low slope that leads from the house down to the woods and stand there. I watch the trees move in the wind for a bit, look at the shed crammed with all of my mother's and father's things. I go down to the edge of the trees and pick up the mirror ball that we left in the mud, wipe it off a bit, then toss it underhanded into the woods. I close my eyes and stand there for a bit, cock my head to one side. I wonder if there really is anything out there. I wonder if it's Tsul`Kalu, or sasquatch, ghosts, or just whatever we want it to be. I think about my mother and my father and I wonder if they asked the same things. I wonder if, now that they're dead, they know.

Jennifer calls for me, so I go inside. Back in the bathroom, I hear water running.

"Cap?" Jennifer says. She comes down the hallway, stops just outside the room. "I ran you a bath," she says. "There wasn't any bubble bath so I used shampoo."

I look at her hair, at a smudge on her neck, the hollow spot at the top of her chest. "You go ahead," I say.

She crosses her arms. "No," she says. "Let me do this for you." She turns and goes back down the hallway. In the bathroom, she crouches, digging under the counter. "I can't find any towels," she says. "Get in and I'll go find you one."

Bubbles peak in soft mounds, rustle. I get into the bath, lean my head against the wall, and close my eyes. Out in the house, I hear footsteps pop across loose hardwood. I fall asleep.

Jennifer wakes me up a few minutes later. “I couldn’t find any towels,” she says. She holds up a white sheet. “We’ll just have to use this.” She wads the fabric and drops it next to the tub, kicks her shoes out the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking a bath,” she says.

Jennifer takes her shirt off, arms crossed over her head. Small breasts rise, fall. She bends at the waist, pushes her pants and panties down. She stands and I see a dark, thick thatch of pubic hair under the shallow curve of her stomach.

“Make room,” she says. She pulls a red rubber band off her wrist, leans her head to one side, twists and curls her hair into a knot. She gets in and her legs brush mine. Tiny hairs along her legs bristle against my thighs.

“This tub is pretty small,” I say. Water sloshes over the side, splashes across the tile floor.

“Give me your feet,” she says. She grabs one of my legs, pulls it up. She rubs my foot with her thumbs, bottom to top, twines her fingers between my toes. Stray strands of damp hair stick to the curve of her neck, move when she tilts her head to look at a brown splotch of freckles inside my ankle. “What’s this?” She says. She traces the spot with a finger.

“It’s a birthmark,” I say. “Mom said my father had one, too.”

“It looks like dirt,” she says. She cradles the heel of my foot, lowers it into the water. “Want to do me?” She holds up a foot, wiggles her toes.

I try to copy the way she rubs, but her foot feels small, my hands awkward. She leans her head back and closes her eyes. A bead of sweat rolls down out of her hair, traces her cheek down to chin.

“What do you think you heard in the woods?” She says. She sinks a little lower in the water, closer to me.

When she moves, a brown circle of nipple breaks through the bubbles, disappears. “Nothing,” I say. “I don’t know. It just reminded me of that story my aunts used to tell.”

“Tell me,” she says.

“It’s stupid,” I say. A steam curls between us, drifts away.

“Come on,” she says. She cups a foot around my waist, shakes me a little. “You want to. Don’t make me beg.”

“What do you want?” I say. Water beads on the wall, trickles down into the tub.

She sits forward, crosses her arms. “I’d like to have sex.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I thought you’d want to,” she says. Water drips from the faucet.

“Well, I don’t know you,” I say. “I figured you were leaving soon.”

She slaps water at me and stands up. “I guess I am,” she says. She gets out of the tub and wraps the blanket around her waist, leaves.

I pull the stopper out of the tub, sit there while the water drains. I hear cabinets open, slam shut, the rattle of silverware, plates clanking against plates. I get out and dry off with my t-shirt.

When I go into the living room, Jennifer’s found a black and white TV with rabbit ears, hooked it up at the foot of the mattress. On the television, a commercial for a local

car dealership runs, shows a guy wearing black top hat and cape running from car to car. He slashes at price tags with a butcher knife. The commercial fades to black and the vertical hold flickers, settles.

Jennifer comes in the room holding two brown plates, hands me one. “It’s better than nothing,” she says. “I forgot to put the leftover barbecue up.”

A fat dollop of peanut butter sits on each plate, a fan of crackers. Water, cloudy with fat, pools around a few Vienna sausages. I sit next to her on the mattress.

“What are we watching?” I say.

She twirls a finger in the peanut butter, puts it in her mouth, then takes a bite of saltine. “Whatever’s on,” she says.

I eat one of the sausages, chase it with a few crackers. The commercials end and the show, a rerun of Gunsmoke, comes back on. “I hate Westerns,” I say.

Jennifer licks a curl of peanut butter from one knuckle. “Find something else, then.” She finishes the last few crackers on her plate, puts it to one side of the mattress, and looks at my plate. “Are you going to eat yours?”

“No,” I say. “I’m not hungry.” On the television, women and children huddle together in a circle of covered wagons.

She takes my crackers and puts the plate next to hers. She breaks pieces off a saltine, crunches the bits with her front teeth, swallows, stares at the television. Blue light glints on her eyes, flashes and fades. Another commercial starts. A mother and father, sister and brother sit around a table holding menus, smiling. The commercial cuts to a close up of steaming piles of pasta surrounded by tomatoes, wedges of cheese, a half-empty bottle of red wine.

“I don’t want you to leave,” I say.

She cuts her eyes at me. “I’m going to sleep,” she says. She rolls away from me, onto her side, and puts all the broken bits of cracker on the plate next to the mattress. She turns her head. “Do you mind calling Bill tomorrow and asking if I can drive his car back?”

I stand up and turn the TV off and the picture shrinks to a bright white dot. I stay there for a minute and listen to one of the chains on the ceiling fan click against the glass fixture. After a bit, I take one extra pillow from the bed and throw it onto the floor next to the mattress, then find a quilt in one of the hall closets. I fold it over once, then again, put that on the floor, and lay down.

Outside, the orange security light in the front yard comes on, and I imagine it humming and buzzing, clotted with bugs. I stare at the dim ceiling, trace imaginary constellations in the stucco lumps, divots, and pinprick shadows. I see a hunter with a bow, a tusked pig stuck with arrows, and proud horses with manes of scattered stars, my mother’s face, and my father’s.

*

I feel a poke in my side.

“Cap,” Jennifer says. She pokes me again, grabs a shoulder and shakes me.

I squint at her. “What?” I say. “Is everything okay?”

She rolls over on her stomach, bends her legs up at the knee. “You don’t have to sleep on the floor.” She claps her feet, soft, sole to sole.

I sit up, cross my legs. “I was sleeping fine.” I yawn. “I’m sorry about earlier,” I say.

She scoots closer to me and one corner of the fitted sheet pops up over the mattress corner. She kisses me on the tip of my nose. “We can still have sex,” she says. “If you want.” She rolls over on her back, wiggles, and one hand comes out with her underwear, drops them on the bed between us. She lays her arms up beside her head, fingers curled, relaxed, and smiles at me.

I look at her mouth, at the curve of her lower lip. She reaches up, pulls a strand of hair back from her cheek. I grab her hands, pull her up, take off her shirt. Her breath smells like coconut, and I kiss her, kiss her ears, her neck, the ball of each shoulder, the flat part of her chest just below the neck. I feel her hands in my hair, the ragged drag of a chewed fingernail against my neck.

Jennifer grabs my hair, pulls my head back. “Do you hear that?” she says. Her brow furrows.

I shake my head, try to kiss her again.

“It sounds like a lawnmower,” she says.

I look over her shoulder, out through the wisp of thin curtains. I hear footsteps on the front porch. Someone bangs on the door, loud and long, so hard it sounds like the door might break. The knocking stops, starts again, and Jennifer jumps.

She pushes back from me and pulls the sheet up, holds it bunched under her chin. “See who it is,” she says.

I go to the door, lean close, listen. Outside, I hear boards shift, creak. The doorknob turns, slow, turns back the other way, wiggles. I turn the porch light on and crack the door, see Simon standing to one side, forehead against the outside jamb, swaying. I open the door the rest of the way.

“What do you want?” I say.

He looks at me, eyes half open, and smiles. A red line creases the middle of his forehead. I look past him and see a green and yellow riding lawnmower parked at the bottom of the porch steps, two muddy ruts going back to the street. A wide scuff of red paint starts at one headlight, wraps around the side of the mower.

“Cap!” He says. “Come with me.”

I look back at Jennifer and she raises one hand, keeps hold of the blanket with the other. I turn to Simon. “I’m not going anywhere with you. I’m in the middle of something.” I go to close the door and he stops me with one hand.

“I’ve got a gun.” He reaches into the back of his pants and pulls out a pistol. “It’s a forty-five,” he says. He pulls the slide back, chambers a round.

I hold my hands up and take a step back. The door swings open, slams against the inside wall.

“Cap?” Jennifer says.

I hold my hands up. “It’s Simon,” I say. I turn at the waist, look at her. “He has a gun.”

“I heard,” Jennifer says.

Simon cranes his neck, looks over my shoulder at Jennifer. He waves with the gun. “I’m just going to borrow him for a bit.” He looks at me and raises his eyebrows, leans closer. “Sorry,” he says.

“You’re drunk,” I say.

“No, I’m not.” He leans back and pulls a liquid prescription bottle from his back pocket. He shakes it in my face. Dregs of syrup slosh up the brown sides of the bottle,

trickle down in thick rivulets. “I’ve been sipping on mom’s hydrocodone.” He puts the bottle back in his pocket. “Get some clothes on,” he says. “We’re going frog gigging.”

I step through the door. “You need to go home,” I say. “Why don’t we call Amy?”

“My wife left me,” he says. “You’d know that if you’d been around.” His teeth grit and he pokes me in the chest with the pistol. “We’re going frog gigging,” he says.

“Fine. I need to put some clothes on.” I reach up, push his hand down, nod my head back. “Meet me around back.” I turn to go inside.

“You’re leaving with him?” she says. She lets go of the blanket and it falls, puddles in soft curves and folds in her lap and I see her breasts, shallow curves of shadow underneath.

“He wants to go frog gigging.” I put my shirt on, tug at its tail, and sit on the mattress beside her. “He’s high.”

“So you’re going frog gigging with him,” she says. She folds her arms. “What’s frog gigging?”

“You hunt frogs with a spear,” I say, turn my socks right side out. “I don’t want to go.” I pull on one sock, the other.

She lays back, arms stiff by her sides. “So don’t go,” she says. She puts a hand on my arm.

“He might shoot himself.”

Her knuckles crook and she claws my arm. “He was taking your mother’s things.” She flattens her hand, rubs a smooth palm across the scratches she just left. “He

comes here armed and stoned and you're leaving with him instead of having sex with me," she says.

"I know," I say. I pull on my shoes, tuck the loose laces down next to my ankle. "He's my cousin." I lean over to kiss her. She turns her head so I kiss her cheek. I look at the side of her face, at a triangle of tiny moles there, up next to her ear. "What if he'd've gotten pissed and started shooting up the house?" I stand. "I'll be back before morning," I say.

Overhead the fan creaks, rocks, and a clump of dust falls from one of the blades, floats down to the floor. I wait for her to say something, but she stares at me a minute and looks away, at some invisible spot on the ceiling.

Outside, Simon waits, pistol tucked in the front of his jeans. A burlap sack hangs over one shoulder and he cradles a homemade in one elbow. "It turned cold, didn't it?" he says.

"Not really," I say. "It's probably just the drugs."

He jabs the gig in the soft ground and rolls the sleeves shirt down, buttons one wrist, then the other. "You can use this," he says, nods at the gig.

I pull the gig out of the ground, and look at its tip. Three rusty nails, flat heads removed, stick from a thick wrap of duct tape. I prop it on one shoulder. "What are you going to do?" I say.

He digs in his pocket and pulls out a bundle of keys on one wide ring, flips key after key over in his hand. He holds up a light no bigger than a quarter, presses it a few times between thumb and forefinger. "I'm going to be your spotter," he says. He goes

down into the woods and I hear leaf-muffled snaps, muttering, the brittle shake of tree limbs. The tiny light flickers, bobs and dips between rough, damp trunks.

I look back at the house and see Jennifer, standing in the door. She holds the bedsheet wrapped tight around her shoulders, and light shines around her, dim through the loose fabric.

“Cap,” Simon says. “Where are you?”

I go to him and he stops, flashes the light over a clump of briar, a dip of ground thick with brown pine needles, rotten sticks, and leaves.

“Over this way,” he says, and moves off to the left.

I pull the back of his shirt, and he stops. “What am I supposed to do?” I say.

He turns, holds the flashlight up under his chin. Tips of stubble shine silver all over his face. “You’ve never been gigging?”

“You always went hunting with your brother,” I say.

“Shuffle your feet through the leaves,” he says. “When they jump, stick them.”

He stands in place, moves his feet back and forth. Leaves plow up around his ankles.

“Shuffle your feet,” he says.

I do, and frog hops away, toward the edge of the light.

Simon points at a frog hopping towards the edge of the light. “Get it!”

I stab down with the gig, hear something crunch.

“Shit,” Simon says. “You got it by the leg.”

I bend at the waist to look, keep weight on the gig so the frog stays pinned. Blood beads where the gig dimples pierced skin. “What’s wrong with that?” I say. The frog twists, scrabbles at the dirt with short, fat forelegs.

“It isn’t any good to eat now.”

I stand straight, point down. “What about its other leg?”

“Best to just put it out of its misery,” he says. He pulls the pistol from his pants and shoots the frog.

I clamp my hands to my ears and the gig falls to one side. Simon shoots again, pauses, looks at the gun, fires again, again and again and bits of leaves and mud spray up, splatter our legs. The gun slide kicks back, and smoke curls from the open chamber, wafts around and away from the light. I look where he shot, at the dark hole in the ground, mud furrowed on either side, at the ragged bits of frog hanging from the end of the gig.

Simon spits to one side, wipes across his mouth with a forearm. “I think I got mud in my mouth. Hold this.” He hands me the light and it blinks out. He spits, blows between his lips.

I shine the light on him. “We should go back,” I say.

Simon slides the clip from the gun, reaches in a pocket, and comes out with a handful of fat bullets. He holds one up to the light and it shines, brass body narrowing to flat-tipped copper. “Hollow tips,” he says. He tucks the gun in one armpit, pushes rounds into the clip with a thumb.

“Are you going to shoot me?” I say.

He laughs, tucks the clip up in the handle of the gun, and slaps it with one palm. “No,” he says. “I thought about shooting myself. What’s one less Indian with issues?” He sits down on the wet ground, crosses his legs. “I’m tired of being an asshole,” he says. He hands me the gun, butt first.

I look at his hand. His brown knuckles look dry, gray. "I'm not going to shoot you," I say.

"Take it," he says. "I think it was your dad's. I found it when we were cleaning out the house." He shakes the gun. The cuff of his shirt comes unbuttoned, flaps around his thick brown wrist.

I take the gun, hold the chamber up to my nose and breathe deep. The residue there smells thick, like oil and pepper. "This was my father's?" I look down at Simon

"I'm tired," he says. "I think I'll lay down." He leans to one side, stretches his legs, and rests his head on an elbow.

I think about leaving him there. "How much of that bottle did you drink?"

He holds a hand up to his mouth, yawns. "Just half." He starts pulling leaves up to his body, over his legs. "Cover me up," he says. "I'm cold."

I click the safety on the gun, tuck it into my pants. "No," I say. "You need to get up." The wind blows. Bare branches rub against each other and pine boughs shush. A pine cone clacks down through limbs, thumps the ground. "We've got to finish gigging, Simon."

When I bend over to pick him up, he waves me off. "Go on without me," he says.

He feels too heavy, like dead weight, but when I get him to his knees he stands the rest of the way. I lean him against a tree, pick up the gig, and hand it to him, business end down. "Here," I say. "I'll be your spotter and you do the gigging." I take the burlap sack from him and toss it over my shoulder.

He sways a bit, almost slides off of the tree.

"Simon," I say. "Come on."

He raises his eyebrows like he wants to open his eyes but his eyelids are too heavy. I hear the first clicks and tacks of rain against the trees overhead. I imagine Simon dying out here, overdosed on liquid painkillers, just falling on the ground and sinking down under leaves and needles and thick dark mud.

“How many frogs is a good batch?” I say, take the burlap sack off, wave it at him so it brushes his face. “Simon.”

He slaps the bag away. He lifts his head off the tree squints at me like he just woke up. “Ten or so frogs a person.” He cocks a thumb at me, then at himself. “So like twenty or thirty total, I reckon,” he says. “Get that light out of my face.” He cups palms over the top end of the gig, rests his forehead on the back of his hands, and sways a little. Mud smears, thins out to water where he lay on the ground, shoulder to ankle.

“We’d better get started,” I say. I look up at the sky through crooked black limbs. “It looks like the bottom’s about to fall out.”

He starts to sit again, but I grab him. “I’m sorry about earlier,” he says. “About Laney.” He looks at me, puts his arms around my shoulder. He hugs me close. “I’m sorry about mom.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “No one thought I was coming back.”

He leaves a hand on my shoulder, wipes under each eye with a knuckle. “Are you staying?” he says. He sniffs.

“Let’s do this,” I say. I turn away from him, leave his hand draped on my shoulder. “Just hold onto me. I’ll shuffle and you gig.” I feel his forehead against the back of my neck, bone on bone.

“Were you out here the night I got here?” I say.

“No,” he says. I feel breath on the back of my ear. “Why?”

I hear a croak and a frog jumps, away from my feet. “There’s one.” I stop and point with the light.

He spears past my hip, holds the frog up. I pull it off into the bag.

I twist the end of the burlap, pull it up through a belt loop on my jeans. “I heard something in the woods,” I say. “It sounded like someone walking.” I start shuffling again and the bag jumps, bounces against my calf. Simon stumbles, almost falls, and his fingers dig in my shoulder. “It reminded me of that story your mom used to tell.”

He snorts. “Which one was that?”

I push a branch back with one hand, hold it until Simon passes, too. “Tsul `Kalu,” I say. “Remember? She said he lived here.”

“She was just telling stories,” he says. “She hated the woods.” Another frog jumps and Simon jabs, misses. “The sasquatch won’t bother us if we don’t bother him.” He lets go of my shoulder and drops the gig, bends at the waist with his hands on his knees. He vomits, stands, clutches his stomach, and bends back over, vomits again. He wipes his mouth with the flat of one hand. “Can we go back now? I want to go home.”

Rain picks up, falls harder. I feel the first few fat drops tap my scalp, run down through my hair and into my face. Simon looks better, eyes open. He slurs less when he talks, sways less, so I feel better about going.

*

By the time we get back, I’m soaked to the skin and the sky goes gray. I offer to let Simon stay in the house until the rain lets up, but he refuses, tells me I can keep the gig and bag, the one frog we managed to catch. I walk around front with him and we

push the lawnmower back out to the road. He drives off and away, around a curve of unlined. I hear the mower chug and spit, fade, and go inside.

Jennifer snores, and I watch her bare chest rise, fall. I take my clothes off, try to brush as much water off my skin as I can with bare hands. I think about waking her up. Instead, I pull the blanket up and get into bed behind her. I put my face in her hair, breathe deep, feel her skin next to mine.