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# **BIG PINEY CRIMES**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of South Alabama  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of English

in

Creative Writing

by

Amy M. Patterson

B.A., University of Texas at San Antonio, 1995

May 2022

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This work is dedicated to my husband for all of his support, edits, and belief in my writing; to my children and their strong desire to see me finish with this school business; to my greater family for their support, to my mother for being my partner in crime investigation; and to my uncle Ed Brown, who was treasured and missed by his family—this is my ode to you.

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## ABSTRACT

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Chair of Committee: Charlotte Pence, Ph.D.

In 1983, the year *Scarface* debuted in theaters, big oil marched across the buckle state of Wyoming with the construction of the Frontier Oil pipeline. Oil patch workers from around the U.S. came to Wyoming to labor on the project, forming a temporary community termed the pipeline family. My mother's brother, Ed Brown, moved to Big Piney, Wyoming and was hired on as a pipeline welder. His shooting death at the hands of a pipeline inspector ushered in my coming of age.

Back at the family homeplace in Texas, 1000 miles from Big Piney, grief stained the fabric of our daily lives as we processed the murder of a beloved son, father, brother, and uncle. Proper justice, something I thought we could count on, was repeatedly delayed. When an ominous warning came to my grandfather that to continue to pursue justice was to court death, despair overtook us. My grandfather stopped his attempts to "get justice for Ed." For years, hopelessness blanketed the tragedy like so much country dust, until in the wake of the pandemic, my grandfather's files on his oldest son's murder arrived on my front doorstep, giving me the means to excavate the truth.

In facing this almost forgotten family tragedy, I have overcome my fears in an effort to bring closure to these wounds. The present-day narrative follows this work and frames the story of Uncle Ed's murder. Along the way, my mother and I orchestrated an adventure that landed us in the Grand Tetons some thirty-eight years after Uncle Ed's death and just in time to meet the judge who dismissed the case against his murderer.

## INTRODUCTION

When I was eleven years old, my mother's oldest brother, Ed Brown, a pipeline welder, was shot three times in the chest by a pipeline inspector. The killer was charged with homicide, but through a myriad of mistakes and injustices, the case was dismissed in the preliminary trial. Pipeline work requires skilled laborers to move with the job site. As such, my uncle was part of a transient community within the small town of Big Piney, population 600, and that within Sublette county, population less than 5,000. At the time, local law enforcement favored locals. Cronyism and small-town politics obstructed standard justice. Many small crimes accompanied the larger crime of my uncle's murder. My thesis will be a work of creative nonfiction that builds an overall understanding of the events of October 8, 1983, and investigates why the criminal justice system in Sublette County deliberately protected Peewee Loe, the assailant, and failed Ed Brown.

Justice or the lack thereof must be the primary theme for the work. The injustice experienced by our family highlights power imbalances and opportunities for abuse within the criminal justice system. At least three people involved in this situation abused or misused their power: the sheriff worked to protect the assailant despite obvious evidence of his guilt; the prosecutor argued against prosecuting the defendant; and the justice of the peace dismissed the case without hearing any evidence. The murderer spoke of his intent to kill and followed through on it, but he was not held accountable for the loss of my uncle's life or to his fatherless children.

Within the tapestry of my family's history, a focus on the single thread of Ed Brown's life reveals the loss in the face of this tragedy. Ed Brown's childhood is

interwoven with my mother's, as their shared experiences formed an understanding of the world. Later, with his death so thoroughly linked to my mother's timeline—his killing occurred on her birthday—thoughts of mortality, loss, and tragedy reoccur. The question repeats. *How old would Ed have been:* when his daughters married, when his first grandchild was born, when his mother entered an Alzheimer's unit, and when his father died? We have carried Ed Brown with us along the family timeline carefully preserving his memory. Ed Brown died at age thirty-five. I know the hole his violent departure left in the family dynamic. That loss is compounded by the lack of justice.

Fear is another theme in this work. Much of the injustice perpetrated around Ed Brown's case was accomplished through fear and intimidation. To reexamine his story is to open up to the vulnerability of fearful places both in memory and in place. This work is particularly worked out through the mother/daughter trip to Big Piney, Wyoming to confront the justice of the peace who dismissed the case. That her name is Betty Fear only serves to highlight the contemplation of how we face our fears.

My mother contributes to this project with her memories, knowledge, and emotional resonance, but I must lean on my own point of view to provide order, cohesion, and authenticity to this work. As it is ultimately a memoir, this necessitates that the main character arc be mine. My grandfather's role also offers a second character arc. His attempts to achieve justice for Ed Brown were varied and full of highs and lows. Ultimately, he was thwarted all the way to the office of the attorney general who originally pledged to help but soon after bowed out. This was a common occurrence, someone vowed to help, then mysteriously turned away.



Creative nonfiction requires factual integrity, an especially important aspect to convey the depth of injustice suffered by my uncle and my family. This story is too big to tell in a casual conversation, and yet, I am compelled to understand and share it. I was a fifth-grader when Uncle Ed died, a formative time. After his brutal death, I expected someone to answer the questions of why Ed Brown had been shot and his killer released, but his murder remained unresolved. Maybe *I* am the person I have waited for to reveal the truth. Since I've begun this project, many important documents have come my way, often with the comment that the papers were slated to be destroyed. The opportunity to honor my uncle and offer closure for my family is now. In outlining the injustices in Ed's case, there are opportunities to explore other injustices and unjust systems and to consider how can bring healing to a loss that has known no justice.

As the first writer to designate his work as an essay, Michel de Montaigne, influences any work of creative nonfiction. A skeptic of generalized and widely accepted concepts, Montaigne tested or assayed his own ideas by employing writing in a new form as a vehicle of exploration and discovery. He declared, "I am myself the matter of my book." Montaigne did not work in a vacuum, though. Aside from an immense library, his education was extensive. Quotes from other authors appear in his work, setting a precedent for this practice in contemporary essays. Montaigne recommended interaction with the outside world in the form of travel and reading. My pursuit of truth, justice, and healing will be coupled with travel to Wyoming.

A modern-day example of narrative nonfiction that relates to my project is Truman Capote's book, *In Cold Blood*, which stands out as a vital tool for studying the form, character, and plot in a true story. Capote uses a four-part format, with various

length essays in each section. Part one reveals the backstory of the murdered family, but is loaded with tension from the very title "The Last to See Them Alive." Part two, "Person's Unknown" builds the character and background of the murderers. In part three, "Answer," we see how the plan was developed and executed; then, how the murderers were sentenced. Part four, "The Corner," gives context and description to the murderers long wait on death row. Each section then, follows a particular timeline and group of people, which works in combination to render the full story. Descriptions of photographs build images into scenes, adding characterization and depth. The plot reviews the victims' last day and the town's response to the crime, then, back-builds to the murders from the angle of the killers. The book ends with the trial and execution, events that span several years. This has been instructive in considering the structure of my work, which also moves between time periods. Capote's techniques are informative examples for my own writing practice, especially his use of photographs to vivify a moment.

Maggie Nelson's work *Jane: A Murder*, another helpful model, combines poetry, diary and journal entries, short prose, and newspaper quotes to tell the story of her aunt Jane's, officially unsolved murder. Nelson, who never met her aunt, builds the thirty-five-year-old incident from a family perspective. During the publication process, new evidence surfaced in Jane's murder, and the reopened case led to a trial. In Nelson's subsequent book, *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*, she mines the effects of renewed hope and contemplates justice.

An examination and development of my own understanding of justice is pertinent to this project as well. Exploration into Aristotle's philosophy of justice, particularly corrective justice or the reversal of wrongdoings, will form part of the foundation of my

investigation. French philosopher Michel Foucault offers a contemporary study on the concept of justice and its place in our society. His critical thinking of justice offers a unique view on the limitations and effects of justice. John Rawls, author of *The Theory of Justice*, presents an in-depth meditation on ideal justice within an equal society, a soothing foil for the injustice experienced in my uncle's case. Restorative justice, a form reconciliation justice, will provide further ideas as I cycle through the ways that I think justice could, would, or should have been upheld in my uncle's case.

At the start of this project, I had only family stories, my own memories, and Ed Brown's certificate of death. I knew my grandfather, Elwood Brown, hired a private investigator and attorneys in a doomed effort to achieve justice. A recent clean out of Grandpa's office brought these files to me. Aristotle terms these sorts of reference items "inartistic proofs." I have sorted the paperwork into the following categories: the autopsy, police and private investigation reports, attorney correspondence including that of the district attorney, legal documents, cases that were used as comparison, eyewitness accounts, copies of newspaper articles, and photographs from the work site. These documents provide a solid foundation for my work and ample opportunities for more research.

A recent mother-daughter trip to Big Piney, Wyoming, informed my understanding of the setting and allowed me to create a more authentic depiction of the area. With my interest in nature, in particular birds, I hope to bring a sense of place to the events. Learning about the ecology of the Green River Valley will be key to this endeavor. I have visited the local libraries where I was assisted in locating newspaper

articles about the crime, important books about the area, and resources about the social and political fabric of Big Piney, Marbleton, and Sublette County of the 1980s.

Research into Sheriff Slatter's tenure pointed to other cases of injustice and illuminated some of his motives for obstructing justice for Ed Brown, though I'm not sure that Slatter would have been aware of the possibility that he was protecting a federal witness. The secretary at the private investigation firm that my Grandfather hired told him off-record that Ed Brown's killer was under witness protection. She worried that continued pursuit of the killer could result in Grandpa becoming a target as well. While resolute answers to this possibility are unlikely, it has always been an important aspect in Ed Brown's story. Research into the history of the witness security program and the United States marshals, who are in charge of the program, will focus on their activity during the early 1980's. cursory research shows that many of the witnesses continued to commit crimes, including murder while under protection. Troubles within the program spurred reform in 1984.

My mother emailed a request for information to the Sublette County sheriff's office, who provided a brief and vague account of the incident before relating a recent conversation with the J.P. Betty Fear, who I was able to follow up on through a phone call and a visit. No official documentation was forthcoming otherwise, and a stop at the sheriff's office during my visit confirmed that they no longer retain papers that far back. There is still a chance that some files are kept in Cheyenne in the archives, a path to follow up on in the future.

This thesis is an informal personal essay, or memoir, that seeks truth, outlines injustices, and ultimately works to provide closure and healing. The story begins in the

present day as I prepare to travel to Big Piney, Wyoming for the first time in search of answers and context. Subsequent chapters move between the present day, my memories and those of my family around the event, and a recreation of the murder and trial. These will be woven together in a large braided essay format. The main plot will focus on the research and interviews my mother and I do in Wyoming, which allow Ed Brown's life and the details surrounding his premature death to unfold alongside our efforts. I anticipate that the writing will be of consistent essay format, but at times, I may employ poetry or other forms of writing to express key moments. Ed Brown's character will be revealed through family stories and learning about his profession. I will endeavor to create a strong sense of place both while following the events of October 8, 1983, as well as during key moments within the mother/daughter trip to Big Piney, Wyoming.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **BOOGY MAN**

When my husband suggested I travel to Big Piney, the place where thirty-eight years ago my Uncle Ed was murdered, I didn't think I could go alone. Wyoming, shaped like a badge has straight line borders that I had never crossed. Uncle Ed last worked as a pipeline welder there. Since his death, all of Wyoming has been boogey man territory. One winter break, during a family ski trip, I came as close to Big Piney, Wyoming as I had ever been. We were rumbling through the mountains in dad's crew cab diesel pickup, closing in on Boulder, Colorado when I noticed signs for Cheyenne, Wyoming. We were less than a hundred miles to the border. I asked Mom and Dad if we could go there, to see if we could catch the man who killed Uncle Ed. I've always wanted Uncle Ed's story to have a better end. Of course, my parents shot down the idea. All these years later, as a forty-nine-year-old woman, I'm embarrassed that put my mother in mind of her brother's murder while on vacation. The whole time I was on that mountain skiing the blue squares and black diamonds, drinking hot chocolate at the top lodge, stuffing another empty mini-candy bar wrapper into my pocket, my hand so cold and red that I couldn't be sure if I'd made the pocket or just scraped across the front of my ski coat, I looked for Uncle Ed's murderer in the masked and goggled faces, as if he would be skiing. Funny what fear can make us think.

As I prepared for this trip, for taking that first step into the state of Wyoming, I felt the phantoms of my old fears of the dark, of coyotes, kidnappers, and murderers. Did I

think Uncle Ed’s murderer, Peewee Loe, would be hanging out like some deranged coyote patrolling the borders of Wyoming?

“You. You stay away. If you even come near here, I will eat you,” Peewee Loe, murderer of my Uncle Ed, never said.

Peewee would be in his nineties if he were still alive. I didn’t really think he would recognize me, calling out my similarities to my uncle—our crinkly blue eyes and wide smiles with aligned white teeth—did I?

No, I decided the boogeyman can’t have all of Wyoming. I made my commitment to Uncle Ed when I accepted Grandpa’s files on his murder. I cannot stuff the yellowing witness papers back into the folder and walk away. How can I understand anything, if I don’t understand the place? People who remember Uncle Ed or what happened are in the high-risk bracket from the pandemic. To go in 2021 is the chance to connect with people who were there when it happened. I booked my plane tickets to leave the balmy weather of October on the gulf coast and fly into Jackson Hole at the forefront of the Wyoming winter and less than a month after Gabby Petito’s body was found there in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

I called my mother and told her what I had done and that she was welcome to come.

“Oh, it sounds like such an adventure,” she said while I stared at the phone wondering how all of this time, I assumed she was against going to Wyoming, against me going to Wyoming. Maybe time had softened the hard edge of hurt and fear that cut along the perimeter of the state. Maybe my fear was helping me jump to conclusions. Mom said she couldn’t come, though. Friends were visiting their ranch, the wine cellar Dad built and Mom’s painting studio.

That evening, Dad called.

“I’ve booked your mother for the trip, but I can only get you two on the same flight when you leave Jackson.” He wanted me to pick my seat. If I was surprised that mom wouldn’t protest my trip to Big Piney, I was shocked that Dad was booking her flight and seating her next to me. This had become a mother-daughter trip, like the time we visited St. Louis together, but with so much more at stake.

Mom said her dad, my Grandpa, was the one who didn’t want anyone to go to Wyoming. He wasn’t scared that Peewee would be there. He just didn’t want to lose another family member to the crooked, small town law in Sublette county.

“I wish I’d been able to make trips like this with my mother,” Mom said. “But you know, Grandma already had Alzheimer’s at my age. She couldn’t have done this trip.”

I realized that learning more about Uncle Ed was really about investing in my relationship with my mother.

I have only one real memory with Uncle Ed, but as his first sister and playmate, Mom has his whole lifetime.

When I was making plans with Mom for the trip, I asked her, “Can you make it to all the places?”

“Yes,” she assures me. “I want to go to all the places, to see where my brother lived and died, to see what he loved there.”

Thirty-eight years and six days after Uncle Ed’s death, I waited in my window seat on the first leg of the trip to Big Piney as the other passengers boarded the plane.

Dad called.



“Your mom’s flight is delayed due to weather. I can’t get her another flight out in time to catch the rest of the flights. She’s not going to make it until Saturday.”

A two-day delay. I would have to step foot in Wyoming on my own.

Mom got on the phone.

“I’m sorry. My flight is socked in. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“You mean fog?”

“Yes! Can you believe it?”

No, I couldn't. In all my time growing up in central Texas, I only remember seeing fog twice though here on the gulf coast at times there is so much fog, I feel I’m cloud walking.

“Let me know how it works out,” I said and told my parents I love them.

I sat back in my seat as the last passengers boarded the plane, and the flight attendant told us what to do in case of emergency.

## CHAPTER II

### STEAK AT LOWAKE

When Mom and Dad and I lived in the old sheepherder's shack below Grandma and Grandpa's place, Uncle Ed came home to Texas for a visit in 1973 or 1974.

"Well, hello sister dear," he surprised her at the door. Dad was out. It was just mom and I at home. My blanket and toys were scattered over the thin green carpet.

"Hello, brother dear," Mom replied.

"Are you up for lunch at Lowake?"

Mom glanced back at the mess, my empty bottle on the coffee table, then scooped me up and grabbed her purse.

"Let's go," she smiled up at her oldest brother who was quite a bit taller.

Located out in the cotton fields of Concho county, the steakhouse was so popular that the owners built a landing strip in a neighboring field so bigwigs could fly in from the cities, especially Dallas. With red vinyl booths, Formica topped tables, and the nearest beer on tap for the residents of dry Runnels county, Lowake was always bustling. Mom and Uncle Ed would have dined on rare steak, a meaty baked potato, wedges of Texas toast, and huge loops of onion rings. I suppose I sat in a high chair making a mess of a packet of saltine crackers.

There is nothing I can do to change this timeline, to be older, to have had more memories with Uncle Ed, but knowing that we were all there together, in this tiny time bubble brings me a sense of camaraderie—just the three of us together, in cahoots even back then.

## CHAPTER III

### LA LOMA

Before the mesquite trees leafed out in the early spring of 1983, Uncle Ed came home to central Texas. He was thirty-three. I was nine and never saw him again. Family traveled from Euless and Bedford, and Tularosa, New Mexico to see him. Grandma planned a bar-b-que at our family retreat called La Loma, a hundred and fifty-acre hilltop shaded with Texas live oak and carpets of native bear grass, little bluestem, and beardless rabbits foot. Grandpa loved to say of La Loma that it was the kind of land that holds the world together. In the summers, we swam there in a round, above-ground concrete water reservoir that we called the cement pond. The well water, as jewel-toned as the Pacific, was treated with a copper compound to keep the resident black-bellied sheep wormed and watered and the algae at bay. Even in the brick-oven heat of Texas summers, the water shaded by oaks was cold enough to make our teeth chatter. No one planned to swim that Saturday of Uncle Ed's visit.

Covered dishes and coolers were piled on the sturdy welded metal table under the Ramada, a metal roofed shelter with open sides, where the dirt was as soft as powdered sugar. There must have been steak on the grill, baked potatoes cooked in coals, homemade cookies, and a couple of ice chests with Uncle Ed's favorite beer—Old Milwaukee. We probably rode around La Loma, Ed and Mom and their siblings sitting on the tailgate, feet dangling, while us kids in the bed of the truck tried to grab handfuls of Spanish Oak leaves as we passed low hanging limbs. The flush of a covey of quail or the silent, weightless vault of a white tail deer drew our collective attention. We would have

hunted for fossils, grey ears of old sea bed oyster shells and the remains of sea urchins and watched the sunset paint the sky from the west point, timing the final sliver of light with the last breath of the day.

That night, when the grown-ups sat in a circle of metal chairs, eager to tell stories and laugh together, my seven-year-old brother, Brandon, winged in like a moth around a scare light. He tapped Uncle Ed from behind or tried to swipe his beer. Uncle Ed scooped him up in a head lock ran his knuckles back and forth across Brandon's scalp until he cried "Uncle!" the code word to stop.

"Okay," Uncle Ed would tell him. "But this better be the last time." He'd look Brandon in the eyes, then laugh warm like campfire coals.

Later that night, when Brandon snuck up from behind and snatched the red and white polka dot welding cap off Uncle Ed's head, Ed stood up, took two long strides, planted one hand on the metal table and kicked his legs out and over. In that one clean move, he landed right behind Brandon. He caught Brandon around the waist and marched him over to the cement pond at the meniscus of light. He heaved my brother back and forth, counting down until at one, Brandon flew through the night air silhouetted by a velvet blanket of sky and splashed into the pond to a thunderclap of laughter.

The next morning, Uncle Ed was returning to his work as a pipeline welder. Using an oxy/acetylene torch he melted the base metal of thick pipes together creating a pipeline that would carry oil between Salt Lake City, Utah and Cody, Wyoming. Along with other welders, labor hands, and equipment operators in the pipeline family, Ed worked under the wide Wyoming sky and lived temporarily in a trailer park.

We gathered in the yard at Grandma and Grandpa's house, leaves and tiny branches

crunching beneath our feet, knowing that the days would be a little less bright with Uncle Ed gone back to Wyoming. Grandma organized us for a family photo against the walnut siding of the converted garage. Kids were in front like crooked teeth, smiling adults stood behind. Bare pecan limbs dangled above us. We wore jackets against the chill and faced west towards the fenced, fallow garden and the water tower where Grandma used to string up the chickens to butcher.

One week after my eleventh birthday and eight months after Uncle Ed's visit, news of his death came one Sunday morning in October of 1983. Uncle Ed had been shot the night prior while we celebrated my mother's birthday. The storm of this news upended everything. Everyone at once frantic and frozen, insects struggling in resin turned amber.

Grandma searched the house for days for the undeveloped film from Ed's last visit. It turned up in the bottom of a magazine basket, and she paid extra for twenty-four hours developing at Keaton Color. The next day, with both daughters and us grandkids in tow, Grandma knocked on the window of the Keaton Color kiosk. A pungent stab of body odor pierced the cool fall air when the attendant slid the window open, handing out the envelope of photos. Grandma thumbed through the packet until she found the family picture. She hugged it to her chest with a gasp and shook her head, the slanted light glaring in the square lens of her glasses.

"He's walking away from us," she said and locked eyes with my mother. "Walking away."

Photo in hand some thirty years later, I gaze as long as I want to, returning again to the hard-polished surface of this memory. Everyone in the family maintained eye contact with the camera, except for Uncle Ed. He wore a brown and white flannel shirt and

brown canvas pants. He faced the gate, his gaze on the sidewalk, knee cocked, one boot heel off the ground. He tilted back towards his younger brother. From the future, I wish that Uncle Roy would grab him. Keep him from leaving. I am there, too, in the middle, wearing a quilted yellow coat, my hair in pigtails. Grandpa book-ended the family on the other side. Grandma held us in the eye of the camera. In this photo, we are still okay, still whole.

## CHAPTER IV

### PARTNER IN CRIME

As a kid, I expected that an explanation would be outlined at some point like in math class on the chalkboard where the teacher demonstrated how to solve the equation. The answer would be clear—a known entity all along. At summer camp, on church retreats, and even when I met my first college roommate, I recounted Uncle Ed’s murder. I think I hoped that the recounting—how I learned of his death, how time stopped and reset to a changed world, and how I contemplated his murder—would somehow equal resolution. By the time I was old enough to ask real questions, despite my closeness with Grandpa and our countless goodbyes beneath the carport hung with drying onions where he told me, “if you ain’t got family, you ain’t got nothin,” I never asked him about Ed’s murder. Grandpa had tried to bring justice for Uncle Ed, had even hired a private investigator, but he didn’t want to talk about Ed or his death. Also, I knew that he was told if he valued his life, he would stop digging.

When my grandpa passed in 2017 and my desire for an ending that I could live with would not burden them, I took my chance to learn Uncle Ed’s story free from the constraints of childhood. I needed my mother’s support and her blessing. She is my only real, living connection to her side of the family, the side I grew up with, the side that split when Grandpa got sick and died. I don’t want this to cause her more pain, and she assures me that it won’t, that she’s ready, that she wants closure.

My mother is a painter, a watercolorist, a book maker. She paints blooming cactus in sharp detail with a depth and warmth that exceeds the photo image, water lilies with

clouds reflected in the surface of the pond, old game boards with marbles so real it seems they could be plucked from the paper. She painted Grandpa in his work shop before it burned. He stood before a bank of windows hung with hand tools feeding a clowder of shop cats. Once she painted a towering watercolor of a welder, torch in hand. Sparks fly against the purple black background; the welding hood reflects the white-hot point of the weld. The light saturates the welder's work gloves and the front of his shirt and blue jeans evoking the blues and fireworks.

Mom searched the upstairs dormer for paperwork on her brother's death. She remembered taking notes about how the sheriff paid for the murderer's steak dinner and beer the night he shot Uncle Ed. Although the search turned up photos from her and Ed's childhood, his time in the Navy in Vietnam, and the last picture of the family, there was no newspaper clipping of his murder or obituary. Her notes never surfaced, tossed away on a resigned afternoon. What she found is the Wyoming certificate of death, and I cling to it, a life raft, the only documentation I have of Uncle Ed's death. I have so little to go on that the story feels more myth than murder. With this anchor, I have proof that this happened. Cause of Death: Line 25c. Due to, or as a consequence of gunshots wounds to chest (3) three.

Mom offered to call the Sheriff's office in Sublette County, Wyoming where Ed was shot.

"I'll tell them that my father recently passed and that my family and I are just looking for some closure," she said.

I would have worried over the idea for weeks, especially after the way the sheriff blocked Grandpa's attempts to get justice for Ed back in the 1980s, but Mom just called.



She's like that. Plucky. She doesn't hesitate to strike up a conversation with a stranger because she likes their hat or what they ordered at a restaurant.

"What could he do to me?" She asked.

The sheriff's office assistant told Mom she would look into it. Later, Mom received an email saying that the files on Ed's case are no longer available, but the sheriff had talked to the justice of the peace for the preliminary trial who shared a story of the defense attorney's flippant remarks in the courtroom. That's how we learned that the justice of the peace, Betty Fear, still lived in Big Piney.

Six months later, during a pandemic purge of Grandpa's office, the files on Ed's murder turned up amongst the ledgers, folding knives, and piles of spiral pocket notebooks scripted in clean cursive. Our family had split, as families do when the older generation passes, but Uncle Roy and Mom were tentatively texting, exchanging photos, wrapping up loose ends. Roy had leafed through the yellowing pages, curious to see if there was something more to learn but ultimately put it all back in the brittle envelopes. Multiple times he had almost taken the papers out back to the incinerate. Mom asked if I could have files or at least copies. There was too much to copy, he told her. He stuffed the envelopes in a bag and shoved it into his oversized mailbox on the dirt road in front of his property and texted her.

"Come get it." He wanted nothing back.

A few days later, when the box arrived on my front porch, I put it on the dryer in my laundry room and worried about what was inside.

"Don't let it hurt you," Mom whispered to me when she called to say she sent it priority mail. The files were with her for less than twenty-four hours. The handwritten

eye witness accounts showed her that people cared about her brother. They really liked Ed and that made her sad again for his wasted life. I waited for a day with a few open hours, then I cut the tape. Within were police reports, page after page of scrawled eye witness testimony, the autopsy and certificate of death, newspaper clippings, lawyer letters, and the private investigator's reports.

Since then, I have become at least as fluent as my grandparents in the details of Ed's death, but my attempts to outline the injustice that led to his murderer being set free, won't change anything. Does this make me morose? If Ed's killer were still alive and could be found, he would be in his nineties by now. This will remain unpunished. What then can I hope to gain? The easy answer is closure, and I would welcome that for Mom who has lost a brother, an ally, the last of her family. My truth is this: I'm holding out hope that this dark digging will produce a tiny jewel of justice for Uncle Ed, a moment captured and recognized in the myriad murmuring starlings of injustice.

## CHAPTER V

### BODY BAG

The upcoming trip to Big Piney, Wyoming occupied all my thoughts and disrupted my sleep. On Friday, less than two weeks before our trip, just as I slipped into that hazy pre-sleep release where the body is unmoored and the mind largely quiet, I had the distinct sensation of a blue vinyl body bag being zipped over my feet. I startled awake. Did I fear death, too? I have never seen a body bag or considered what it would feel like to be zipped into one. The sensation stayed with me throughout the day. That night, after pizza, my son positioned our life-sized Halloween skeleton to peek through the bedroom window blinds.

“What’s the skeleton looking for?” I asked him.

“He misses his Mom. She’s dead.”

I was letting my imagination get away from me.

I might be superstitious.

Two days later on a moody Monday morning walk in the park, something happened that could have ended with a body bag. I veered off trail to a newly installed treehouse in the longleaf pine forest bordering the park. Part of a movie set, I had heard that it was due to be removed soon, so I took my chance to climb the rope ladder with wooden slate steps. The unanchored ladder swung under the house making an awkward back and up climb. As I pulled myself to the final rung, my foot slipped on the wet step. I clutched at the floor of the treehouse before scraping my forearms in a long sliding fall where I had enough time to think: “So, I did that.”

Launched backward through the open air, my back thumped against the forest floor and all the air succussed from my lungs. Three wheezing and desperate attempts later, I caught my breath. Eager to divorce myself from the scene of the crime, I flipped over on my stomach and stood up. My forearms were bruised and scrapped. As I hobbled out a few steps along the trail I felt the frogging my left butt cheek endured.

The next morning on a stiffer walk, I noted the ladder was gone. A game camera must have caught the fall. I measured the distance from the floor of the treehouse to the floor of the forest—ten feet. Had the pine straw not been thick and the ground spongy, who knows what could have happened. Was this why I dreamt of the body bag? I imagined seeing that footage played in reverse so that it looked like I flew up from the ground to the entrance of the treehouse, like a superpower.

On Wednesday, I dreamt that Mom and I were in Wyoming by a wide flat lake. I saw an alligator's head pop up and swim straight at us. We were being watched. We rushed into the library where I hoped we wouldn't be seen.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**THE TRAVELER**

When Uncle Ed came home for that last visit, I was just old enough to remember him. By day he wore an immaculate felt cowboy hat, a bright white t-shirt, under a buttoned-up jean vest and a brown flannel jacket. At night, he changed to his red and white polka dot welding cap with the short bill. He glowed with charm, put up with our tickling and arm jabs, and brought out the playfulness even in the grumpiest family members. He looked familiar, like someone I knew well. He was made of the same stuff, and I loved him for it because he didn't stay. He traveled around and moved away. Uncle Ed was proof positive that the world was a bigger place.

## CHAPTER VII

### WHISKEY AND GUNS

For Ed Brown's portable welding rig, a pickup called Greenie, he fabricated the welding bed with lockable tool boxes and his initials cut out on either side in script—EB. In the spring of 1983, he and his wife were having marital problems and were headed for divorce. When work began on the 289-mile Frontier Pipeline project that connected crude oil lines from Casper, Wyoming to refineries in Salt Lake City, Utah, Ed was primed for a new project. He hired on as a pipeline welder with Ute Western (UW). For the duration of the job, Ed relocated to a rental trailer in Daniels Trailer Court just south of Big Piney, Wyoming across from Fear Road. These were details that I could have put together with the help of family and friends, but I learned the story of Uncle Ed's murder from Grandpa's files; I recreated it from the jumble of time-stamped reports and witness testimonies.

James Loe, a greying, burly fifty-something-year-old, who insisted on going by the nickname, Peewee, was a pipeline inspector with Northwest. His job was to oversee and guarantee the quality of the welds on the line. Inspectors had a strong influence over which contractors worked the project. Early on Peewee called Rick Blaha, at UW.

“Rick, my girlfriend needs a job. Things will go easier for UW if you hire my Sparky.” It was common practice to do these kinds of favors for inspectors since they could give contractors bad reports and get them kicked off the line. Usually nephews and sons were recommended though, not girlfriends. UW hired Sarah "Sparky" Prestone as a labor foreman. Though Sparky lacked knowledge and experience, she proved hard

working and gained the respect of her co-workers.

By summer, Sparky had broken off her relationship with Peewee, but he just couldn't or wouldn't respect the decision. Peewee thought she owed him since he got her started in the trade. Sparky belonged to him, absolute.

On October first, Peewee came banging on the door of Sparky's fifth wheel at day's end. He had his nickel-plated pistol in hand, the one he had been known to keep at the ready on the seat of his company truck.

"Come on, Sparky," he said. He had heard that she and Ed Brown were together. "It's time to go."

"No, Peewee," Sparky refused to budge despite her fears that he would use the pistol to shoot her on the spot. "I'm not going with you."

Ed Brown, who was inside her trailer, came up behind Sparky. The two of them had been dating since Ed's divorce came through a month back. He put his hand on her waist.

"Why don't you just grow up and get out of here?" Ed Brown said.

Peewee peeled out in the yellow Ford company truck, leaving a puff a dust hanging in the air.

That next week, Sparky watched her back. She worried that if Peewee got her alone, he'd beat her. A week later to the day, Sparky confided in a coworker that Peewee Loe told her, "You tell Ed Brown, he had better watch out. I'm coming for him."

A fellow pipeline inspector with Northwest Pipeline and a friend of Peewee Loe's, found Ed Brown and Rusty Gardner, his welding helper, on the job site that Saturday evening at 5:30 pm.

“Stay away from Peewee tonight,” the inspector warned. “He’s drunk and crazy, and he’s out to get you. I mean it—stay away.”

Ed Brown would rather laugh off a tense situation rather than argue or fight, but Rusty was struck by how much the inspector, who spent a full fifteen minutes making his point, seemed genuinely concerned for Ed's safety.

Around the same time, Rick Blaha of UW, pulled into the parking lot of the Wyoming Inn in La Barge some twenty-one miles south of Big Piney. Peewee Loe was drinking whiskey straight from the bottle in his yellow Ford company truck. Dale Simms of Central Mountain Oil Fields, a competing contractor, leaned against Peewee's truck. The men visited and passed around the bottle of whiskey. It was clear to Rick Blaha that Peewee was drunk.

“Hell,” Peewee said, “I’ve got five more bottles in the tool box.” He gestured to the mounted tool box on the truck bed. That Peewee had accepted the whiskey from Central Mountain Oil Fields was surprising since inspectors weren’t supposed to take that type of gift/bribe from contractors.

“If you’ve got so many bottles of whiskey, why don’t you give me one?” Rick Blaha joked.

Don Lockridge, the owner of UW, checked his watch at 6:30 pm as he stepped out into the parking lot of the Wyoming Inn where he was lodging. He had an upcoming appointment to make. He saw several men he knew, some of them his employees, talking together around Peewee’s truck.

“I’m going to get Ed Brown,” Peewee said. “Gonna pull his card.”

Pulling a welder's card meant that the welder would be disqualified from welding



on the project.

“Don’t do that,” Rick Blaha said. “Brown’s a good worker.”

“Evening,” Lockridge greeted the group. He spied a quart of what looked like bourbon with an inch of liquor left in the bottom propped against the front seat of Peewee's truck.

“Yup, you saw it,” Peewee said. “I’m going back to my motel room, gonna lock myself in, and go to bed cause when I get drunk, I get crazy.”

Lockridge agreed that that was probably a good plan and excused himself. He headed north on Highway 189 to the Marbleton Inn. Lockridge passed Daniel’s Trailer Court on the left as he was coming into Big Piney. At the time, there were some nice trailers there with big picture windows and people raising families. Sometimes parties got a little out of hand, but overall the people there were decent folk. Maybe Ed Brown was already sitting inside Sparky Preston's fifth-wheel at space #15 in the middle of the farthest row south in Daniel's Trailer Court. He probably cracked open a beer while he recounted to Sparky the warning that Peewee Loe’s coworker and friend had delivered that evening.

There was likely snow on the ground in a few places that night. It's the kind of cold that should cool the blood, but with an enormous supply of liquor on hand, it may have been just the kind of weather for Peewee Loe to buck against. At 7:15 p.m., they heard Peewee drive up. He slammed the pickup door and knocked hard against Sparky’s door.

"Spark, if Ed Brown is in there, I'm going to kill him and you, both."

Sparky rushed to lock the door.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” she yelled at Peewee, but she was too slow to lock up. Peewee pushed his way inside the tight trailer. Sparky tried to hide beside the refrigerator.

“I told you to leave her alone,” Peewee yelled at Ed.

“You need to mind your own business,” Ed said. “Sparky is done with you.”

Peewee balled up with rage.

“Don’t you tell me,” he hollered.

Sparky broke free from her spot by the fridge and pushed him out of the trailer.

"I told you if you were in there, I’d get you." Peewee pointed at Sparky. Then, stumbled out to his truck.

“Go on, call the police,” Ed told Sparky.

“Here,” Sparky said. “Take my pistol.” She offered him a 357-magnum, but Ed didn’t take it.

“I’m going to handle this man to man,” he told her. “Now, hurry up.”

Sparky tried to cross the road for help, but Peewee was there at his truck. She went around back of the trailer and knocked on the neighbor’s door. Nothing. When she knocked at the next door, Mike Johns answered.

“There are two guys fighting over at my place, and if someone doesn't call the police, one of them is going to get killed.” She breathed hard like she’d been running.

The sun was setting. It was getting harder to see.

“I’ll take care of it,” Mike Johns said.

Just down the row from space #15, Jolene Cook, a mother and resident in the trailer court, sent her daughter over to her friend Kelly’s trailer. Jolene planned to go out

that night and wanted to see if Kelly would babysit. A few minutes later, when Jolene walked out to her truck, she heard shouting and saw two men fighting.

Mike Johns could hear people yelling at each other. Verbally fighting. Not physical. He could see two figures as he crossed the road on his way to Janet Noel's trailer.

Jolene, unsettled by the yelling, went back into her trailer to get her hair brush. Sometimes there were fights but usually those were late at night after people had been drinking for a while. She worried about her daughter. Did she make it to Kelly's?

Janet Noel's place was surrounded by a low fence. She heard the fight from inside her trailer. Mike Johns opened the gate and knocked on her door. Janet said he was welcome to use the phone. She did not go outside.

Mike turned at the top of the step to check the fight. He saw Peewee fire the first shot at Ed Brown. They were about ten feet apart. Mike couldn't be sure if the first shot hit Ed, who ran straight at Peewee. Run away from a knife and towards a gun. These were instinctual moves that Ed had surely learned during his service in the Vietnam war. As Ed closed the gap between them, Peewee shot another three or four times.

Jolene heard what sounded like firecrackers going off. She left her trailer to go check on her daughter down at Kelly's.

Ed Brown fell, stumbled into Peewee. He was bleeding.

Janet Noel ran outside. She stopped at her gate. It was dark. The only light she could see by was the lamp post. The new yellow truck faced east towards the highway. Peewee leaned over Ed who was laying on the ground. Suddenly, he straightened up and got into the truck.

On her way out to her pickup, Jolene saw Peewee get into his truck.

He yelled, "I told you not to fuck with her."

He sped to the exit and turned left onto Highway 189 heading north towards Big Piney and Marbleton.

Sparky raced over to where Ed lay unconscious on the ground. She felt for a pulse and found a faint one. Unsure if help was on the way, Sparky drove to Big Piney to call the police.

In her pickup, Jolene drove towards Kelly's trailer. Mike Johns flagged her down.

"This man has been shot in the chest and needs help," he said.

Jolene heard Ed take a couple of breaths. There was blood all around. She ran down to her place to get a blanket for him.

Mike Johns felt the slow pulse at Ed's carotid artery. Janet Noel watched Ed clench Mike Johns' fist with his left hand. It didn't look good. Blood made a shadow below him. Where were the police? Janet Noel ran back to her trailer to make sure the police were coming. The line went straight to busy. She headed down to the neighbor's trailer to use her phone.

With a pink blanket in hand, Jolene Cook ran back to Ed. He was shaking. Kneeling beside him, she spread the blanket over him.

When Janet Noel finally got through to the police, her tone was sharp. And then she saw the lights the first patrol car.

Ed Brown's welding rig, Greenie, was parked down the line in front of Ed's trailer, the engine block was cold. He would never drive it again.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WE BE OVER

One week after my eleventh birthday on a Sunday morning in 1983, I burrowed beneath a lavender and green calico quilt trying to sleep through the ringing phone. Bright eastern light warmed my room. A hazy internal argument tumbled through my mind over whether that soft chuckling sound I heard in my parents' bedroom above me was Mom laughing because Dad was tickling her or if she was crying. Then a scream knifed through the covers. Fighting back the quilt, I started at a sun ray that cut across my bed. The lazy dust motes said nothing had changed; they lied to me.

Holding tight to the railing, I climbed the staircase to my parents' bedroom. Mom swayed in the middle of the room wearing a white cotton gown with tiny yellow flowers. I was close to her height and wondered if I would have to catch her.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Her face pulled tight like a smile beneath swollen eyes. She shook her head of messy short curls flattened from sleep. The always-made bed was unmade.

“Dad called.” By which she meant her father, my grandpa. “Something’s happened to Ed.” Her voice cracked against her older brother’s name.

I eyed the dresser with the silver foil clock, where the handset of the black-corded phone rested quietly in the receiver.

“He told me—we be over.”

“So, they’re coming over? Now?” Why didn’t Grandpa say, “we will.”

My grandparents lived just down the road. By the time Mom wrapped up in her robe

and found her slippers, we could hear Grandpa's Chevy truck crunching the grey rocks on the road that led down to our house. We walked outside to greet them. My bare toes stuck to the cool, compacted soil where we stood in a circle beneath a copse of oaks, Grandma and Grandpa dressed up in their Sunday best, though they did not attend church. Grandpa said they'd had an early morning call from Big Piney, Wyoming where Ed was working as a pipeline welder on the Frontier Pipeline.

"He's been shot three times in the chest," Grandpa said. "They got the man who do it."

"Is Ed ok?" Mom asked.

Grandpa shook his head, lowering it to his chest. He took a deep, shaky breath in.

"He's dead."

Later, Mom said she knew something had happened to Ed even before she picked up the phone. In the last year or so, a baffling reoccurring dream often woke her with a start. She heard a gunshot, then sensed a bullet whizzing past from several yards away. Each time she had the dream, the bullet came closer. By the third dream, the bullet whistled past her cheek close enough to burn. Her hand flitted up to her face as she told me, touching the place where the phantom bullet stung. Three bullets, three shots. The same three that took Uncle Ed. The trouble with premonitions is that it gives the illusion that something could have been done to prevent the thing that happened. Could something have been done?

We leaned into each other, my grandparents, my mom and dad and brother. I heard quiet crying, maybe I cried, too, but more than anything else in that moment, I thought that if we stayed together, right there in that circle, no one else would get hurt, but the

moment was fleeting, the burden of grief required perpetual motion.

What followed were two long, awkward days that I spent sinking into the big yellow-leather sofa in Grandma and Grandpa's too warm living room. My brother and cousin, eight-year-old boys, chased each other around the wood burning stove, playing tag. Being eleven though, I could sense the tension amongst the adults when rough housing and laughing erupted. The boys were sent to play in Grandma's office. I was too old to play and too young to participate in the discussions of events. So, I stayed on that sofa, listened, and not knowing why someone would kill someone else, I wondered if the murderer might be on his way to the home place to kill the rest of us.

Grandpa sat at the round oak table in the dining room where the long-corded phone hung on the wall. The Sublette County sheriff, who's jurisdiction included Big Piney, told Grandpa that the man who had been charged with homicide in Ed's case, had been released on a bail of \$100,000. He assured Grandpa that this man, who was a pipeline inspector, was not a flight risk and there would soon be a preliminary trial in the case. When Grandpa got upset, the sheriff told him he would be in touch. Thereafter, Grandpa's calls went unanswered.

Grandma, my mother, and her sister with notebook in hand discussed what needed to be done: who else among family and friends should be called, who would contact the funeral home, who would write the obituary. The earliest date the funeral could happen was the following Tuesday, three days after his murder. Grandpa called the funeral home in Wyoming to make arrangements to return Ed's body, but since Ed had died of unnatural causes, an autopsy was required. The coroner was contacted, and Grandpa made arrangements to fly Ed's body home as soon as the procedure concluded. The

scheduling was tight enough that there was concern Uncle Ed wouldn't make his own funeral.

Grandma initiated the search for a proper photograph of Ed to display beside his casket, one that she could have chair-side afterwards to remember him by. My mom and aunt brought out baskets full of glossy color photos. As we gathered around flipping through the images I felt almost normal, but the process was cut short.

"We're not going to find it here," Grandma said. The snapshots of cheery smiles and fond memories highlighted the awful reality of Ed's murder. Grandma had remembered the studio photographs recently made of Ed and his family. At the time, Grandma was confounded by the portraits. Ed and his wife, Diane, were having marital problems and knew at the photo shoot that they were likely to divorce. A packet containing the family portrait and one of just Ed and Diane, arrived in Grandma's mailbox several months back. She stashed envelope in the cabinet below the book shelf, where she found them again the day we were searching through the photographs. At that time, Ed and Diane's divorce had been finalized for a week and one day.

In the family portrait, Uncle Ed's sandy hair was combed to one side above his cornflower blue eyes and squared off mustache. Diane was a slight whip of a woman with jet black hair and a hawk-like profile. The two wore matching pearl-snap western shirts in browns and buffs. Between them stood two children from a previous marriage whom Ed planned to adopt, and Ed and Diane's five-year-old daughter.

Grandma hired a specialist to create a portrait of just Ed using the photograph of he and Diane. Thanks to the matching shirts, the photographer was able to use Diane's right shoulder in place of Ed's right shoulder which was previously hidden behind Diane.



Though the doctored photograph was imperfect, the attached darker shoulder seemed to fall behind Ed, and his blue eyes were inexplicably turned black. Grandma had little choice but to except the portrait as it was. The expense of the custom photograph would be doubled if the photographer had to make another change, and he couldn't get to it right away, certainly not before the funeral on Tuesday.

Grandma was concerned that Ed would be disfigured by the autopsy or the fight, and she might have to find a hat to cover part of his face. I overheard talk about the need to have an open casket, for closure. I didn't like the sound of the word *casket* and knowing it might be open felt like a risk. When Uncle Ed's body was returned, the undertaker said that an open casket was an option. While the rest of the family seemed relieved that Ed's casket would be open, I had questions. Would he look like himself; would he look like he had been murdered? As a country girl, I knew well the sickly-sweet odor of death that guides the turkey vultures to the roadkill. Would we smell the death on Ed?

The undertaker at the funeral home was pressed to prepare Uncle Ed's body for the viewing that evening. No one thought Ed needed to be in a suit, that just wasn't Ed. Grandma dropped off a pair of pressed khaki pants, a new western shirt, and boots at the funeral home. In lieu of a tie, Grandpa offered his own father's bolo with a green stone, maybe malachite or tortoise set in silver.

The double doors opened for us first, giving the family an hour to be with the Ed before general viewing commenced. We parked in the street in front of the white columned funeral home. I watched Grandma and Grandpa, again dressed in their Sunday best, formally climb the steps to the front double door entrance instead of using the back door from the parking lot. The formality of it sat heavy in my gut. As my immediate

family climbed the steps, I felt hot tears but kept quiet. I didn't want to be noticed wearing my corduroy skirt and scratchy striped sweater. I didn't know how I was supposed to act as one of the family, on the lonely walk through the doors to Uncle Ed's casket.

Inside, we stood in the quiet, carpeted reception, waiting in a line for our turn to view Ed. Grandma and Grandpa went first and spent some minutes there.

"He looks good." Grandma turned to us from her station by Ed's coffin, her voice tight, head nodding. "Peaceful." She turned back and leaned into to Grandpa who stood head bowed over Ed hiding his tears. I stepped out of line and up onto tiptoes to try to get a glimpse of Ed, but Mom pulled me back.

"Just wait," she told me.

When our turn came, his body seemed heavy, sunken in the satin while his head floated just above the white pillow. His skin had a transparent glow. I checked his face for cuts or bruises. There were none that I could see, though later someone mentioned a darker hue across one cheek. His closed eyes didn't seem unnatural, just restful. His mustache and hair was trimmed and combed. His big square hands were crossed at the wrists and painted with concealer to look warm.

"Can I touch him?"

"Go ahead." Mom said, but I felt uncertain. "Just do it."

My hand shot forward faster than I intended. There was no pliability in Uncle Ed's hand, which was as still and stayed as if it were lead and the skin, despite the warm look was frighteningly cold. Inside, I felt the unfolding and release of the secret hope that he would sit up and stretch, and everything would be okay again. I pulled back for a

moment, then reached out again to rest my fingertips against the top of his hand.

Goodbye, I told him in my head. We will miss you.

No one knew for certain if Diane, Ed's ex-wife, would come to town for Ed's funeral. For a moment, the room grew very quiet as Diane walked in. She waited her turn to see Ed, then sat in the center of the visitation chairs and cried and cried. No one comforted her.

Walking away from his open casket, I understood the theater of it, how his tidy, warm appearance was meant to bring some comfort. The open casket was closure, certainty. I had seen him with my own eyes. There was no mistake. Uncle Ed was dead.

## CHAPTER IX

### WHY SPARKY DROVE AWAY

Under the multi-colored glow of the stained-glass light fixture, my family squeezed around Grandma's round oak table to play Rummy-O. I was in seventh grade and had a stash of Hershey kisses beside my game board. In a rare moment of talking to the family at large about Ed's case, Grandpa told us how he had received a packet of papers regarding Ed's death, and how Sparky Prestone left Ed at the end.

Sparky wasn't someone we had ever met. We never would. But the discussion at that table felt intimate, her name so close to being someone we might have known. And yet, in this uncanny moment, we were her juror, and Grandpa was arguing for her guilt.

"He was dying there, on the ground, and she just drove off." Grandpa shook his head, a few angry tears squeezed out.

Sparky didn't hold his hand or try to stop the bleeding or tell him she was sorry for getting him involved in her problems with Peewee Loe. She just checked his pulse, felt a faint one, and drove away supposedly to get help.

"She got him into this mess. It was her job to be with him at the end," Grandpa argued. "When he needed her."

This point of betrayal has long been a measure of Sparky's unworthiness to be with Ed. What Grandpa said seemed right. She should have been there, but I couldn't hate her for it. Trying to understand my allegiance to Sparky is like trying to spot a perch in a muddy stock tank.

Mere weeks away from the Big Piney trip, I walked my dog around the small lake

in our neighborhood park and discovered a possible reason that Sparky didn't stay. My eyes drifted along the line of goldenrod and grasses out into the marshy center above the dam, where I've seen more than one alligator and countless great egrets, anhinga, and cormorants. A surprising pink caught my eye and a car horn honked nearby as if to emphasize the moment. I saw the metronome swing of a long teal bill that confirmed the identification—a roseate spoonbill. This bird, so important to me that it featured as the center piece of one of my vision boards, had alluded me for years. Finally, a couple of summers ago on a trip home to Texas, I saw my first spoonbill alongside a busy highway in Louisiana. I squealed and insisted that my husband pull over. We were twenty minutes from our motel after a grueling eight-hour drive. Buffeted by the winds of passing eighteen wheelers and the whines of my children desperate to reach the motel, I marveled at the wide brush stroke of hot pink that was some thirty-plus roseate spoonbills sifting in a crawfish field. That night I slept with a smile on my face. I had jettisoned the idea of seeing a spoonbill in Alabama, much less in walking distance from my house. There she was though, wading through the familiar shallows, sometimes facing me head on and as slim as a sapling, other times turned to the side, looking as if she had been dipped in a bucket of partially mixed pink and crimson. I didn't want to leave the park. I called my husband. He told the kids. I texted my friend. She said it's the universe giving me a little birthday gift. I told other park walkers. When the spoonbill foraged out of sight, I continued my walk, but on the return, she was still there. I tried to get a photo that was more than a pink smudge, evidence to show fellow birders.

Suddenly, the morning walk had lingered too long. I raced back to my car parked at the tennis courts. My dog jumped in ahead of me. I shifted into reverse before my

seatbelt clicked, my mind already ten steps ahead. And then I felt the lump, bump, heard the crunch. I backed up a little further, but I already knew what I would see. A large Alabama box turtle was flattened, cracked, and broken, probably not yet dead. And I had done it.

Did I throw the shifter into park, turn off the car, and race to the turtle's side to give aid and comfort? Did I witness to this passing that sits heavy on my heart? Did I gently scoop up the pulpy mass and carry it to the woods to lay a flower on the mashed shell? I did not. No. Instead, in the bubble of my sealed car, I screamed until my head hurt, keened and cried, but I drove away. All morning the heaviness leaked out of me like brine.

And that's when Sparky came to mind. How she ran away the night Uncle Ed was shot. Maybe the inevitableness of his death drove her. A desperate attempt to deny, the plodding, crushing reality that it had happened and could not be reversed.

**CHAPTER X**  
**HE'S WALKING AWAY**

Grandma searched the house for days for the undeveloped film from Uncle Ed's last big visit home, the one where we took that family photograph. The film finally turned up in the bottom of a magazine basket, and Grandma paid extra for twenty-four hours developing at Keaton Color. The next day, with both daughters and us grandkids in tow, Grandma knocked on the window of the Keaton Color kiosk. A pungent stab of body odor pierced the cool fall air when the attendant slid the window open, handing out the envelope of photos. Grandma thumbed through the packet until she found the family picture. She hugged it to her chest with a gasp and shook her head, the slanted light glaring in the square lens of her glasses.

Photo in hand thirty-eight years later, I gaze as long as I want to, returning again to the hard-polished surface of this memory. Everyone in the family maintained eye contact with the camera, except for Uncle Ed. He wore a brown and white flannel shirt and brown canvas pants. He faced the gate, his gaze on the sidewalk, knee cocked, one boot heel off the ground. He tilted back towards his younger brother. From the future, I wish that Uncle Roy would grab him. Keep him from leaving. I am there, too, in the middle, wearing a quilted yellow coat, my hair in pigtails. Grandpa book-ended the family on the other side. Grandma held us in the eye of the camera. In this photo, we are still okay, still whole.

## CHAPTER XI

### TURTLE KILLER AND THE ANNIVERSARY

This day marked the thirty-eighth anniversary of Uncle Ed's death, and my mother's 72 birthday. The Alabama Ornithological society will meet this weekend on Dauphin Island. I had told my guides about seeing the roseate spoonbill in Langan Park, and received a call from a fellow birder who wants to look for it. She said my observation was the first record for the spoonbill in Langan Park. I got phone numbers to call if I saw the spoonbill there again.

I pulled into the parking lot by the tennis courts, returning to the scene of the crime, where I ran over the turtle two days ago. Here it still was. I turned the car around, my guts churning, and returned to my house for a shovel and some flowers. My dog waited in the car with the window rolled down while I scooped up the broken shell and body and walked it across the parking lot to the woods beyond. Purple blooming flowers, ageratum, in clustered bursts of slow motion lavender fireworks stood beside a protected grassy spot behind a fallen branch. I settled the turtle there and returned to the car to get my dog and a smooth quartz stone. I left a white flower to mark the spot where the turtle died in the parking lot. I placed purple petunias lightly on the turtle's broken back and the tumbled quartz stone from the beach by its head. With deepest apologies, I eulogized the turtle to the dying cicadas.

I walked towards the Botanical Gardens and up the long drive beside the longleaf pine forest. A man was parked there, hammering a sign into the loamy soil. It said: *Peacock Crossing*. I saw the *Crew* sign; the movie makers had returned. Another car



pulled up alongside the crew member. My dog and I walked around to the back trail, while the woman in the car asked about the treehouse. He told her he had the rope ladder in the car but hadn't hung it yet. I considered confessing to my fall from the top rung of the ladder, but I was tender from turtle time and continued the walk instead. On the way back down the hill, I saw two men reattaching the ladder to the treehouse.

One week had passed since I flew through the forest air and thumped down on my back. I had made a record with the Roseate Spoonbill, killed and eulogized a turtle. Mom was on her way to the Crews cemetery to visit Ed's grave. This time next week, we would be in Big Piney. We had kicked up so much dust around Ed's death that despite the yawning gap in time, everything about it felt close.

## CHAPTER XII

### SO MANY NEAR MISSES

In high school, Ed Brown drove a powder blue 1966 Mustang. Three bullet hole decals that Ed put on the back windshield made it look like a get-away car. As a senior, he was a badass. Fighting Bearcat number thirteen, his team won the district championship. He drove his Mustang to school on Friday's wearing a red polo shirt and slacks just like every other player. Once, he deflated the tires and drove that Mustang on the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad tracks.

Shortly after high school, Ed and some of his running buddies burned down a neighbor's barn. Grandpa kicked Ed out of the house and off the homeplace. He must have made him leave the Mustang. A couple of months went by and Grandma had enough. She started looking for Ed along the highways. She would slow down long enough to confirm by the nose or the hairline that a hitchhiker wasn't Ed, then she'd stomp the gas and swerve back onto the road. On one road trip far from home, Grandpa at the wheel, Grandma spotted a group of men walking along the highway. She insisted that Grandpa slow down, pull over—she had a feeling about this group. Grandpa reluctantly pulled his Chevy truck onto the shoulder, and one of the men who turned around was Ed. As the story goes, he looked at his companions and said:

“Well, boys, these are my folks. I'll be going with them now. It was nice knowing you.”

I imagine when he climbed into the truck, Grandma hugged him hard and patted his knee.

“My boy,” she said, “my boy.”

In the old galvanized barn, down by the three stock tanks, Ed learned to weld and repair farm equipment. He regularly helped Grandpa run the farm and ranch alongside Ralph Lopez who for years lived with his family in the Smith house on the other side of the highway, an extension of the family ranch.

One afternoon, Ed went to the Smith house to help the Lopez’ figure out what was wrong with the hand pump which supplied the house with drinking water. Improvements on the Smith house included enlarging the kitchen to enclose the rock water-well and hand pump. No one suspected that a leak had developed in the capsule-shaped propane tank that crouched outside of the house and fueled the kitchen stove. Heavy propane gas sinks to the lowest point, in this case, the bottom of the water well inside the extended kitchen. Ed and Ralph’s son, Ron, peered down at the pump. Low light prompted someone to strike a match. In that spark, the walls splintered away and furniture tumbled. Ron cupped his face with his hands; when he pulled away, the skin came off in his palms. Ralph, the stepfather, permanently lost pigment where the burns were the worst. A formerly friendly cat, scorched hairless, was only ever seen from a distance. Ed’s face was dark with scabs. A strong, burning wind seared the hair away from his forehead and ears, singed off his eyelashes and denuded the hair inside his nose.

Ed joined the Navy during Vietnam. Grandpa, an Army cook in World War II, counseled him to enlist before he was drafted to the Army. Ed posed for a photograph against a ship railing with another sailor straight out of boot camp, the sun at their backs and distant hills across the water behind them. They wore white sailor pants, tight white t-shirts tucked in, and what looks to be paper hats with USS Diamond Head printed on

both sides. Their left arms leaned against the rail and right arms hang in front, the perfect vantage for Ed's recent tattoo, a black panther crawling up his arm. In peak form, both men had strong pecks and rib cages that stood out over their flat bellies. Their ship was a munitions ship, which was always a target. Take out the ammo and there would be nothing to fight with. The crew were fed the very best foods—lobster and steak—to keep up morale, knowing that it was a strong possibility that they wouldn't survive. In a later photo, Ed stood with his hand on the gunner, barrel pointing just over his head and the wide seas open behind him. His round tummy pushed his sailor top out far enough that his rib cage wasn't visible.

A hometown boy, Kyle Brookshire, was on the same ship as Ed. Brookshire heard about a class boxer on board. One day, when he found the boxer he walked right up to him.

"There's a guy on this ship that you can't beat and that's Ed Brown," Brookshire told the him.

Supposedly, the boxer walked up to Ed and decked him. Ed got up and the guy decked him again. Finally, Ed stayed down, and Kyle laughed his head off.

Whenever Ed saw Kyle after that he'd say, "Kyle, you son of a bitch."

Ed mailed a letter to Grandma for Mother's Day from the Diamond Head. Creativity has always been valued in the family and according to Mom, Ed was the most talented. Using the tools at hand, namely lined paper and a blue ball point pen, Ed drew an anchor at top and the hull of a ship below. Across the bottom in his decorative penmanship which featured regular flourishes, he penned Happy Mother's Day. Grandma framed this one drawing she had from her oldest son, and hung it high in the hall of family photos.

Near the end of his time in the Navy, the crew spotted a bomber approaching the munitions ship. They watched as it squared up to fly overhead. The bottom hatch, where the bombs were kept, opened right above the ship, and Ed thought, *so this is it*. Everyone was quiet. Then, the sailors released a collective sigh and cheered as hundreds of leaflets fanned and flitted down to the deck.

I have heard that a handful of exits are built into our lifelines and when we reach one of those thresholds, in a place inaccessible to the waking mind, we decide whether or not we want to continue. One sleepless night, I identified three such exits for Ed: The Smith house exploding around him, manning the munitions ship in the Navy, and that last run-in with a pipeline inspector. Maybe I'm trying to afford him the subconscious choice to move on instead of having his life forced from him.

**CHAPTER XIII**  
**SUBLETTE COUNTY WYOMING**

The wood-lodge feel of Jackson Hole airport was at once rugged and refined with larger than life black and white images of local wildlife and high beamed ceilings. I expected to see a blazing fireplace around the corner. A couple of fellow passengers stood transfixed in front of the grand picture windows with a direct view of the Tetons receiving their first dusting of snow. My mind was busy confronting my fear of being in the state of Wyoming. I wasn't prepared for the grandeur of the Tetons, the immense crevices defined by the accumulating early snow. A raven glided past the vast windows.

Shortly after landing, I stepped outside, rental car keys in hand, to take a deep breath of the bracing mountain air with suspended snow crystals. Two black-billed magpies, chatted harshly across the parking lot, flying up in showy acrobatics from the treetops. I loaded my suitcase, feeling buoyant and drove with the Teton's at my back down the valley to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. At a scenic overlook near the front edge of town, I saw a fellow bird watcher eyeing the flotillas of ducks and geese that spotted the surprisingly marsh-like water. I pulled in, careful to avoid the limping raven that paced roadside, scrounging for a treat.

"This guy isn't afraid of people, I see." I said to the young man with a pair of binoculars strapped to his chest. "What have you seen today?"

"More Canada geese than I can count," he said.

"Are you from here?"

"No, in fact, I just moved here from Alabama to take a job in the Bridger-Teton

Forest.”

“That’s crazy. I just flew in from Alabama today.”

He told me he was from a place in northern Alabama that was known for making fire hydrants. There was a bald eagle’s nest back home that he had been keeping an eye on.

“I just took the most amazing drive,” he said. “There’s a loop through the forest. It doesn’t take more than a couple of hours and there are so many gorgeous views and birds to see, especially on the lake.”

The wind whipped off the water. I’m thankful for the silk long johns I wore and my puffer jacket. I noticed Garrett had goosebumps on his arms. He wore little more than a pair of khaki pants and button-down shirt. The raven had flown on. I thanked Garrett for the recommendation and wished him well. On the way through Jackson, I passed the impossibly thick elk antler arches that mark the town square.

My home away from home old was at the Log Cabin Motel, billed as an old trapper's cabin in the heart of Pinedale, about an hour and forty minutes from Jackson Hole and almost forty minutes northeast of Big Piney. With a population of less than six hundred people Big Piney accommodations were limited. I liked the idea of having access to Big Piney and a retreat away in Pinedale. On my hosts recommendation, I ate hot and sour soup across the street at the local Chinese food restaurant. A huge bronze moose stood out front. The moose are sometimes seen wandering through town.

The next morning, the sun had come out big and bright. That, in combination with sparkling icicles and patches of snow, made me long for a billed hat. I had a felt cowboy hat in mind. At the local thrift store, I found a wool blend newsboy with a bill, hardly a subtle undercover investigation prop, but my eyes were shaded and my head was warm. I

had survived my first night in Wyoming. The next day, when I drove back up to the Tetons to pick up Mom, I saw a bald eagle flying straight at me before landing in a pine tree over a creek.



## CHAPTER XIV

### PIPELINE FAMILY

A photograph of Uncle Ed on a pipeline welding job in Wyoming depicted a surface of the moon type setting. The dry, beige landscape of crumbled rock and clay was devoid of plants or grasses. An excavator shovel hung at his back and the tail end of a welding truck was visible ahead of him. A wide snaking pipeline roughly the diameter of a galvanized garbage can lid rose out of the ground behind him like a worm from Dune. Braced by steel mounts and a thick four by four, the pipeline was suspended just above knee level. Uncle Ed leaned over it. Sparks were still flying inside the pipe from a recent cut.

He wore a white welders cap, the kind with a soft bill that when turned backwards lays flat against the head to give the welders helmet plenty of room. These cotton caps are so slight, a dozen would easily fit into an average shoe box. The small bill shielded his eyes from the harsh sun. I rarely saw Uncle Ed in any other hat, even when he was not welding. In this photo, his hair was long enough to throw a couple of honey colored curls from under the backside of the cap. His side burns were short chops, and extended just below mid-ear. He wore aviator sunglasses and his signature wide-trimmed mustache. A khaki long sleeve shirt, jeans, and dusty boots were augmented by a leather tool belt with a handy striker to start the torch and what looked to be a hammer. Gauntlet style cuffed leather sleeves extended just below the elbows and protected his forearms. But for the blue of his eyes and his jeans, he was in camouflage.

My own sparse welding experience is more of a catalogue of dangers. As a child

playing on the dirt road by our stock tank on a hot Texas afternoon, Grandma grabbed my shoulder.

"Okay, now your Daddy's about to weld," she said. "Whatever you do, don't look at it or you'll turn into a witch."

I peeked at the flying sparks, but avoided the white-hot point of contact where the UV light is almost supernatural. Welders must wear welding helmets and protective eye glasses even under the helmet. If proper protection is not in place, staring at the weld point can lead to temporary eye damage, sometimes called welder's flash and could result in permanent eye damage. To be a welder is to work with volatile gasses and flying slag that can easily burn through clothes and fall against tender bare skin where it continues to burn. Weld in the rain and risk being shocked. Welding is a dirty, hot, noisy business full of blue-white light and endless flying sparks.

Pipeline welding necessitates a willingness to be light on your feet and willing to be away from home for weeks on end. It's transient work. Through a discussion with a pipeline welder turned inspector, I came to understand that this creates a community, the pipeline family, a connection of pipeline and oil patch workers that spiders across the United States. Which means that pipeline workers run into the same people at different jobs, sometimes states away from their first connection. The work day is easily ten to twelve hours long, often seven days a week for several weeks on end. This is part of what gives the pipeline family such a tight structure. As the pipeline progresses, the worksite shifts. The crew might travel an hour to an hour and a half or more in either direction just to get to work, an extended commute that adds more hours to the work day.

In the challenges of pipeline welding, the character of the welder becomes apparent.

They must be tough enough to handle elemental extremes and able to forgo creature comforts on a daily basis. Exposure to the elements like extreme cold and heat can create unsafe and uncomfortable welding environments rife with challenges that must be solved on the fly. Certified welding inspectors come through to inspect the quality of the welds.

As much as possible the pipeline family tries to have low impact on locals, many of whom are in opposition to oil and gas. Some don't want outsiders in their town.

Depending on the size of the job, the sheer number of workers that come together to create the effective pipeline work scene can reach the population of a small town. For local residents, doubling their town size in a matter of weeks can make it feel like the pipeline crew is taking over. Extra traffic from large trucks hauling supplies, as well as company trucks and welding trucks contribute to what can feel like an exploded traffic scene. Of course, it is temporary. The pipeline crew will do the job and move on. Often gas companies or contractors will make a good Samaritan donation to the town for the disruption. Sometimes at the start of a job, the local law will come to the orientation and encourage the crew to keep traffic violations to a minimum. A worker can get blackballed for causing trouble with the law or within the pipeline family.

Welders often weld their own grills. These are sometimes mounted on the welding rig, or there may be a separate trailer that hauls the main grill for the group. Often the cooking responsibilities are shared, and the crew eats family style. Popular meal choices include steaks, hamburgers, chicken, and fajitas. Price gouging in the grocery stores can occur. In the morning, steak might be one price for the locals, but by noon, a higher price tag is applied.

I asked the pipeline inspector if the transitory nature of pipeline work makes for a good place to hide out. There have been guys that he's worked with that were always watching their back.

"Yes, someone could easily hide here."

I felt a torn between the unsettling thought of someone purposely hiding out and the relief in knowing that in the pipeline family, it could be done. An otherwise "stick out like a sore thumb" kind of character could disappear into a small town if they were part of a transient community.

## CHAPTER XV

### POST FUNERAL BIG PINEY

The days spent cooped up together in Grandma and Grandpa's house trying to sort through the tragedy broke open after the funeral, and we split into our separate lives to take stock of the losses.

Grandma and Grandpa needed to go to Big Piney to close out Ed's affairs. The accused was still out on bail. Grandpa wanted to see justice was served. He called the sheriff who was again unavailable. Grandpa left a message to say he was coming up to look into what happened. The sheriff called back.

"Mr. Brown, do not come up here. There's nothing you can do here," the sheriff told Grandpa. "Nothing." He said Ed had attacked Peewee and was beating him up—it was an open and shut case of self-defense.

That didn't sound like Ed at age thirty-five who had survived the Vietnam War and preferred to laugh off tense situations instead of starting a fight. The coroner noted there was one small abrasion on the knuckle of Ed's right index finger and another on the left hand middle finger. His blood alcohol level showed that he had opened a beer but hadn't finished it.

Within a week or so of the funeral, Grandpa, Grandma, and they're remaining son, Roy, drove the thousand miles from the home place out to Big Piney. They would have driven through Lubbock, Texas where the plains are so flat, you can see the curve of the earth, maybe cut the tip off of Oklahoma on their way into Colorado and through Boulder. I wonder if they paused after Laramie, when they passed through Wamsutter

where Ed used to live on the edge of the Red Desert. Knowing how Grandpa was when there was business to attend to, they would have only gassed up at stations on their side of the road and pit stopped only when necessary.

Did Grandpa see the man in the brown hat for the first time when he drove out to Daniel's Trailer Court? Did he leave Grandma there alone to clean out Uncle Ed's trailer? I hope he stayed with her, but Grandpa was the one who was a mess and Grandma was the rock. The open plains beyond the trailer, full of rubber rabbit and big sage brush, might have brought her some peace, though the toothy jagged mountains to the west likely spoke more directly to the shards of rage, loss, and grief. I think she hugged that cold, sweating jug of orange juice she found in Ed's refrigerator. The whiff of a promise was there. He meant to pour himself a glass for breakfast, when he returned.

In Ed's will, changed just two months before his death, in response to the divorce, he left all of his possessions to his "beloved father and mother." Always one to take care of business first, Grandpa would have gone straight to the bank as soon as it opened, to settle Ed's account and collect his property from the safety deposit box in the vault. Maybe Ed used the Bank of the West, a low, squat building of beige brick, across from the tiny post office in downtown Big Piney. When Grandpa opened the door to the bank, any conversation would have stopped. In a town of less than six-hundred people, anyone not recognizable as a family member or neighbor would be noticed and watched. Would the man in the brown hat who followed close on Grandpa's heels have stopped conversation or was he familiar enough to the locals? Grandpa would have had his paperwork in order. I imagine their shock at the almost empty bank account elicited some sympathetic looks. Grandpa reasoned that maybe Ed had some outstanding bills to settle,

but when it came to the safety deposit box, there was no way to reason his way out of it. The box was empty save for a single currency band bereft of its stack of bills. Ed's ex-wife, Diane, had already been to the bank.

“She cleaned it out,” Grandpa told us later.

Grandpa likely drove up the street to the law office to see Sheriff Slatter, the man in the brown hat lingering outside, confirming to Grandpa that he was indeed being followed. Attempts to get more information about the case from the sheriff were met with no small amount of intimidation, enough to leave such an impression on Uncle Roy that for weeks after the trip, he systematically checked his windows and doors every night despite living some nine hundred plus miles away in Tularosa, New Mexico.

“There was definitely something going on up there with that sheriff,” Roy said.

Having taken care of Ed's rental trailer, gassed up his welding truck, and closed out his bank account, Grandma, Grandpa, and Uncle Roy would have little left to do in Big Piney. No one was talking. The sheriff's final words to Grandpa were "Don't come back if you value your life."

In family records, it is clear that they were gone until October 24th, when they "returned home from Wyoming and Utah," having left sometime after Ed's funeral on October 11th. Peewee Loe's preliminary trial commenced and closed on October 20, 1983, which means they would have been either in Wyoming or Utah at the time. No one remembers Grandma or Grandpa discussing the preliminary trial. The cagey sheriff may not have alerted them to the impending trial before they drove the welding truck almost due south a couple of hundred miles to Ed's property in Vernal, Utah so they could pick it up on a subsequent trip, along with another pickup truck he called Lily. Split Tree, he

called the place in Vernal, Utah, because of the split tree on the hill. They would have left nothing behind in Big Piney. I don't know if they attended the pre-trial, found themselves stunned into silence watching the spectacle of the prosecutor argue against prosecuting.



**CHAPTER XVI**  
**CASE THE JOINT**

The first full day Mom was in town, we decided to case the joint in Big Piney. It was a Sunday, the sun was shining and the temperature warm enough not to wear our coats, though we still wore hats, scarves, vests, and silk long johns. Mom read a quote that morning that said when we delay doing something that we fear it builds strength and not where its wanted. So, we faced our fears together as we turned left from Pinedale onto highway 189 heading south towards Big Piney for the first time.

Mom had an eye for spotting pronghorns, hooved animals sometimes called antelope, who are part of the largest land migration in the world that goes right through Sublette county. grazing on the undulates slopes of big sage bush and tufts of flowering rubber rabbit. The white rumps of the pronghorns and their stately silhouettes against the sapphire sky make for connect the dots down into the lower valley with the Wind River Range to our left and the Tetons to our right.

Before long, we passed the fair grounds. A woman there practiced her barrel racing. A billboard ahead said the Marbleton Inn was one block up. The diner there used to be the best in the area and was the place where the sheriff bought Peewee Loe's dinner the night he shot Uncle Ed. A clean, but nondescript elongated cream-colored building with a wide parking lot was before us. A small covered entrance framed the double doors. A scarecrow was stuck on either side of the entrance in the empty plant pots. The diner L-shaped at the back side had the open sign on and not a car in sight. I imagined a sobering Peewee being led inside by Highway Patrolman Lipe. Don Lockridge of UW was already

seated for dinner and would watch as Peewee came in, not yet aware that Peewee had killed one of his pipeline welders.

We continued down the highway. If you were unfamiliar with the history, you might think Marbleton and Big Piney are the same time. The line between where one town ends and the other begins was unclear, but for crossing over North Piney Creek. Countless attempts over the years to merge the two towns have failed. In Big Piney proper, the Icebox of the Nation, we turned just after the Silver Spur bar. The Greenvalley Museum with its seven-building complex, occupies much of this part of town. It includes an old school house surrounded by aging wagons and farm and ranch equipment and serves as the repository for all the pioneering history of Big Piney. Mom recognized a hand push tiller, like she has back home, hanging on the log wall. We drifted across the street and passed by the Frontier Lodge and Hardware store, a two-story log building with a stucco facade that looked straight out of the old West and an antique shop with more old equipment, wagon wheels, and saddles. The episcopal church and another small historic looking church appeared deserted on Sunday morning, but a newer Catholic church on the backside seemed well attended. Fewer than six hundred people live in Big Piney.

Mom looked up Betty Fear's address, the justice of the peace who dismissed the murder charges against Peewee Loe. We planned a surprise visit on the last day or two of our stay in Sublette county but figured it would be good to know where she was. We followed the directions to her place on a small hill just outside of town, overlooking a wide rolling plain and the snow-covered mountains edging the skyline beyond. Betty's house looked fresh and clean, the upper part painted white with round river rocks making up the lower half where a suburban home might have had red brick. A wide cemented

drive gave plenty of turn around space for her mid-sized red pickup truck. A picture window looked out on the drive and a yellowing lilac bush framed one side. Mom suggested we might just knock on the door now. I agreed, but needed a pit stop before. I couldn't see meeting Betty with an urgent need to pee.

We drove back down the hill to town and found a lively convenience store called the All American with the history of Big Piney printed and hung in the windows. Inside, I bee-lined for the restrooms, noting a gathering of silver-haired women who came in behind us. Mom went next. I was delighted to find apple cider vinegar to make a marinated onion and radish salad for our roasted turkey, Havarti cheese, and avocado sandwiches on toasted whole grain bread. I bought the Sublette Examiner, digging for twenty cents from the bottom of my purse. The clerk, a middle age man, said there was twenty cents in the spare change. I thanked him as Mom came up beside me.

"Follow my lead," she hooked my arm and walked us over to the tableful of women dining on fried potato wedges and other crispy fare.

"Are you ladies' native to the area?" They nodded ascent, and Mom told them that her brother used to live here, that we are on a mother-daughter trip just passing through and wanted to see it. A conversation ensued and soon we were introduced to all the women who gave us their names and where their grandparents homesteaded in the area. The oldest at the table was Helene, a 90-year-old writer, who gifted us three of her fiction books set in the area and based on the history of the homesteaders. She emphasized *fiction*, but one of the younger women said as an aside that really, they were based on things that had happened there. Helena's red headed grandson was in from the University at Wyoming and gave us the books that he had in his truck ready to take back to school to

give to a friend.

Mom took a photograph of the women of Big Piney and gave them her card. I wrote my name on the back. We told them goodbye.

Deanne, a short haired woman on the far side, sporting a flannel jacket asked where we were off to next.

“We’re going to see Fremont Lake, a glacier lake,” I said.

She had a good laugh. “I didn’t know that’s what we called it now.”

I wasn’t sure what I had said.

One of the other women said Deanne was a nurse so she gets to take care of everybody. We chatted a few minutes more to let the laugh dissipate.

Back in the rental SUV, we marveled at our good luck and pluck. I asked Mom about that last interaction with Deanne. She explained that the lake is glacier melt water, but the way I said it made it sound like the lake was a glacier. We shared a laugh about what the Women of Big Piney would make of us.

Daniel’s Trailer Court was near this side of town and on my list. We turned right and followed highway 189 further south. I pictured it further from town and told mom I wasn’t sure it even existed anymore, but she quickly spotted something ahead on the right. The first trailer at the turn-in was little more than the frame and hanging strips of what must have been paneling blowing in the breeze. Other trailers further back were double wide. One had a wall full of windows, all of them busted out. If anyone lived on this row, it was a grim spot. All the numbers were in the eighties and nineties. We were looking for space fifteen. At the end of the row, I forged across two lots and onto the road on the other side. A greenhouse porch attached to the front of a trailer had the silhouette

of a witch hat in the window. Other trailers had chairs outside. Still, it looked sparsely populated. Occupied trailers stood every couple of spaces and decaying trailers in between. The numbers were falling thirty-four, twenty-eight, eighteen.

“There it is,” I said. “Space fifteen.”

Mom sucked in her breath, covering her mouth with her hand. I drew a long breath and let it out. The space was empty but for the hookup and a post with the number 15 painted on it. Beyond this were the rolling sage brush hills, big wide sky, and toothy mountains to the west. I put the RAV4 in park, not bothering to move out of the road. We breathed and tried to get our bearings. For so long, I had envisioned Peewee running some distance back to his truck to get his pistol, but now I see that he was parked within a handful of long strides to the door of Sparky’s fifth wheel. Mom and I got out. We stepped lightly on the colored pebbles and dry crunchy grass below. Mostly, I looked at the rolling brush on the other side of the fence, then down at my feet. I picked up a domed red rock, when I flipped it over, the backside had a few white streaks, which gave it the look of a real heart. Mom picked up an elongated green one, smooth and easy to fit into the palm.

Back in the vehicle, I opted for some grapes, a little energy to prepare for our unannounced visit to Betty Fear’s house. I crushed one red grape between my teeth and felt sadness well up, as if the grape had been saving it.

“I’m sad,” I said.

She nodded and cried, too.

As we left the trailer park, I checked the name of the road that dead ended at Daniel’s Trailer Court: Fear Road. I hit the gas and in less than a handful of minutes, we were in

the town limits on our way to Betty Fear's house. My stomach flipped. I didn't know what we would meet there, maybe an empty house or a gun toting paranoid person. We parked on the road beside a boulder in front of Betty's drive and walked up to the main door, tucked behind a yellowing lilac bush. Mom rang the doorbell and for some time all was silent. She knocked on the front door just beneath the Halloween wreath. We thought the house empty. Then, we heard a voice call from inside.

Mom took the lead, as seemed right for the meeting with the judge who had released her brother's killer. Betty Fear called from inside and said to open the door. She was hooked to oxygen having just recovered from Covid 19 (despite being vaccinated), and she suffered from weak lungs.

Mom showed Fear the photo we had taken less than an hour ago of the women of Big Piney, those ladies dining at the All American after church, like they do every Sunday. Mom told Fear how much we had enjoyed their company. Then she labored to get the reason for our visit.

After a couple of starts, she said, "You're not going to like this."

And then Betty Fear knew who we were and why we had alighted on her doorstep.

**CHAPTER XVII**  
**FACING OUR FEAR**

If Mom hadn't joined me on the trip to Big Piney, I would have told Betty Fear that I was the one who called her about a year ago to ask about the case. Shortly into that conversation, she had assured me that it wasn't her, that she didn't do it. I kicked myself many times after that for my too soft reply. I could have asked, *Well, who did it?* or *Why are you defensive?* But instead, I was namby-pamby, all apologies and easy to push away, which she did leaving me to stew for a year over that retort:

"It wasn't me, I didn't do it."

Mom had an agenda though, and I wanted her to have her wish, so I stood back while she took the lead. For the first several minutes of standing on Betty Fear's stoop, shielded from the road by the yellowing lilac bush and peering at the large wooden dining table covered with a completed 1000-piece puzzle and three more puzzle boxes ready at the side, Mom talked about Uncle Ed. How he had lived and worked here. How the case against his murderer was thrown out of court.

Betty Fear's picture window in front of the dining table over looked the rolling expanse of Bureau of Land Management property between Big Piney and Pinedale, further north. The light was fantastic, clear and bright. She was a nymph, tiny and petite. Her turquoise fleece vest and pastel striped shirt gave her the air of a Jackson Hole resident. A colorful head wrap covered most of her hair. She leaned against the entry wall of her home, the thin tube connecting the oxygen tank to her nose a ready reminder of her recent illness. I had worried that the pandemic might get her. She's in her eighties now,

but she stood the whole time we were there.

I reminded her about Ed's case.

"You were the justice of the peace at the time. Uncle Ed was a pipeline welder shot by a pipeline inspector. You dismissed the case," I said.

Betty adjusted the oxygen tube and squinted for a moment at the tile floor in her entryway.

"Oh yes, I remember something about that. What was it that came out in the paper? 'This is highly unusual' or something," she said. Oddly enough, the current sheriff of Sublette County had contacted her a few years prior and wanted to know what should be done with the files on Ed Brown's case. They were updating, clearing out the old stuff. They didn't see any reason to keep it.

"Who was the prosecuting attorney?" Fear asked.

I supplied the name, noticing how fluent I had become in the details of Uncle Ed's case.

"Bill Jackson."

She sighed and shook her head.

"You have to understand," she said and gave a gentle tug at the oxygen tube as if pulling garden hose for slack. "Back then, there weren't a lot of lawyers around to choose from. Basically, the ones that were here had to take their turn as county prosecutor. Bill was particularly ineffective. He just didn't do the work, but there was really no one else to take his place."

"He quit showing up for work before his term was up," I said. I didn't mention how that started right after the statute of limitations ran out on Uncle Ed's case, and he moved



to Hawaii.

“That’s right,” she said.

She remembered the reaction of the defense attorney, Gerald Mason, upon hearing that the county prosecutor didn’t think there was enough evidence to convict. He had in fact, presented no evidence at all, having done nothing to collect evidence or testimony, despite the readily available and willing witnesses.

“Mason leaned back, hands clasped behind his head and said, ‘Your Honor, I couldn’t have said it better.’”

We had heard this before from the sheriff’s office when Mom asked for information regarding Uncle Ed’s murder. Fear said there was nothing she could do and dismissed the case.

“Were you threatened?” I asked.

“No, I was not threatened,” she said without hesitation.

In order for the justice of the peace to bind a case over to a trial, there had to be some evidence. Jackson presented nothing. So, Betty Fear called a ten-minute recess to contact a senior judge. He confirmed her conclusion. She couldn’t bind the case over on a gut feeling. For the first time, I understood how she had no choice, but I had to hear it from her.

Mom had two pictures that she wanted Betty Fear to see. One of her and Uncle Ed, probably six and eight years old, dressed as a cowgirl and a cowboy, wide-eyed and sweet. The other photograph was of Uncle Ed on his last visit home, one of the few times he wore a cowboy hat. He had a wide grin on his face, and he stood in front of his new welding rig.

“He’s a handsome guy,” Fear said.

I asked her how she became a justice of the peace, particularly in the 1980s and being a woman.

"The position needed to be filled. I had a grasp on law from teaching at the local school," she said. After eight years as justice of the peace, the position was dissolved in favor of the circuit judge system. She said she would have gotten out of it soon anyway. Many of the cases she saw involved domestic violence and child molestation. With a population of less than six-hundred, she knew everyone.

“There are still some cases that give me heart burn,” she said. Mostly these involved local kids whose parents were reticent to let their child take the punishment the law required. The parents would protect them from the consequences that Fear felt would have kept them from getting into further trouble. One father came to her a few years back. His son was one of these cases.

"If I had listened to you, judge," he said. "And let him take those early consequences, my son wouldn't have landed in prison". Years later, that son was out of prison and back home to start over.

Betty invited us in for tea. Mom and I declined though, not wanting to put her or ourselves at risk with her recent brush with COVID, though I'm certain we would have gone inside under other circumstances. I would have loved to look more closely at the skillfully painted landscapes in oil and acrylic hanging above her dining room table, to see what other views she had. Despite my feelings of suspicion and frustration at my earlier phone conversation with Betty Fear, I liked her and so did Mom. She was plucky and sharp-witted.

I asked her how the local residents felt about the pipeline crew back in the early 1980s.

"I think people were glad for their presence and welcoming," she said. "Things picked up. The local bars and restaurants filled with people. I can barely stand to drive past Daniel's Trailer Court now. It's in such rough shape, but at the time it was a nice place. Some families even lived there."

"I'll tell you a funny story about some workers who would meet at the Silver Spur downtown at day's end. They'd get to drinking and cause all kinds of trouble. I would see them in court and review the laws they broke.

"Yes, yes, your honor," they would say. "That was us, we did it."

"They never tried to get out of it," Betty crossed on ankle over the other as she leaned against the wall, a youthful, vigorous gesture. The move of a skilled story teller. "I would give them their fine, and they would take care of it. But then the next week they'd do it all over again. One evening, I walked into the Silver Spur and there they were, and they came right over."

"Don't worry judge, we've got your back."

We shared a laugh at that. I was aware of the sun sitting lower in the sky and my hunger rising, but I wanted to make sure I covered all the bases.

"What about the sheriff, Sheriff Slatter, what kind of guy was he?"

"Funny, I know he dealt with this case, but I don't remember him being in the courtroom," she uncrossed her ankles and adjusted the oxygen hose. "He was old school."

Old school was a phrase we came to associate with Sheriff Slatter as we spoke to other residents.

"He was at the end of his career. Tired, you know."

"Did he do a good job?" I asked, and she hedged her bets.

"I think he was fair and just," she said, "Though I'm sure some people would disagree with me. You know," she continued, "This may not be comforting coming from the judge who set the killer free, but we did the best we could for what we had," Betty Fear said. "I wish we could have discussed it over tea."

Fear hadn't wanted to say anything to implicate the sheriff, but I knew from my family's experience and the police reports in my Grandpa's files that he had been anything but "fair and just" in Ed Brown's case.

**CHAPTER XVIII**  
**DISPATCH CALLS FOR THE SHERIFF**

I devoured the police reports in Grandpa's files knowing instinctively that the present-day sheriff's office would not give me any paperwork.

October 8, 1983 7:41pm

Dispatch advised that a person at the Country Chalet Inn Motel in Marbleton needs to have the Sheriff or a Deputy stop by as soon as possible.

Sheriff Bud Slatter pulled into the parking lot at the Country Chalet Inn Motel. He was of average height and in his early sixties. Slatter's eyelids drooped almost to the point of covering his eyes and his thin lips were never without a lit cigarette, even when he ate. Emphysema stalked him. He parked beside Highway Patrolman Officer Lipe in front of room #5. Lipe, a young officer, with dark hair and a fit physique was inspecting the murder weapon that Peewee Loe used during the shooting at Daniel's Trailer Court.

"Hello, Sheriff," Lipe said. "Loe is in room #5. He's asked to speak to you."

Slatter nodded. He stamped out his cigarette, pulled out the pack and lit another before opening the door.

Officer Bob Hansen, the Marbleton officer on call that evening was the son-in-law of the couple who owned the Country Chalet Inn Motel. He had been attending Peewee Loe while Lipe secured the murder weapon. Shortly after the sheriff arrived, Officer Hansen exited the room to join Patrolman Lipe by the patrol car. As Lipe

prepared to place the murder weapon into the evidence bag, Sheriff Slatter came out, lit cigarette in hand.

“Let me have that gun,” Slatter said.

Lipe immediately handed the weapon to the sheriff. Slatter opened the door of his unlocked patrol car and tossed the untagged pistol onto the front seat. He returned to the room without comment.

Highway Patrolman Lipe and Officer Hansen were left standing in the parking lot of the Country Chalet Inn Motel outside of room five. Both men were stunned by the sheriff's action.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't lock that car," Hansen said. "I can see the gun right through the window."

"You know," Lipe said. "The chain of evidence has just been broken for the murder weapon."

8:10pm

Patrolman Lipe and Officer Hansen entered room five. Peewee Loe stood at the table unattended, phone in hand, wearing nothing more than his boxers. He was calling his boss in Arkansas.

"Well, I'm in a lot of trouble," Peewee told his boss.

Sheriff Bud Slatter entered the room from the central hallway.

“Sheriff,” Peewee said, “would you speak to him?”

Slatter took the phone.

## CHAPTER XIX

### EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT PEEWEE LOE

I never saw Peewee's face. No one in the family did. There were no photographs, and no copy of his driver's license in any of the police files. Patrolman Lipe described him as about fifty-years-old, six-foot tall, with a stocky build, and grey haired. He weighed approximately two hundred pounds. His wife was back home raising their grandkids. The supposition was that Peewee was from Arkansas, Idaho, or possibly Louisiana. Lipe wrote his name down as James R. Loe, but a multi-state search by the private investigation firm showed no evidence that a man by that name existed.

Peewee rented room #5 at the Country Chalet Inn Motel in Marbleton, Wyoming. He worked on the Frontier Pipeline project as a pipeline inspector for Northwest Pipeline, who paid his \$100,000 bail and hired the most successful local defense attorney. Peewee had a reputation among local pipeline contractors as a hard-nosed, arrogant S.O.B. Peewee drove a brand-new company truck, a yellow Ford pickup. He kept a nickel-plated twenty-two pistol on the seat next to him and loved to show it off even though there was a policy against carrying guns or alcohol in a company vehicle. He showed it off to Sparky's boss more than once. When he learned that Sparky had a young lover, named Corbus, he waved the pistol at him and told him to stay the hell away from Sparky. This was six weeks before he shot and killed Ed Brown. Peewee target practiced with the same pistol in a field the day before the shooting. He kept the gun loaded with hollow point bullets that expand on impact creating a bigger hole in the target.

Peewee, meaning diminutive or small, was an oxymoron name for a big, ham fistled

man. Peewee, the call of a tiny bird. Peewee's official first name, James, means *supplanter*. When Patrolman Lipe and Officer Hanson addressed him as James, he insisted on being called Peewee. Loe. Indicative of low. Loe is the spelling most often used in the paperwork. Though in one set of papers, it was spelled Lowe. Maybe adding the "w" to his last name was a genuine spelling mistake, but dropping that "w" could have been a way to hide a man.



## CHAPTER XX

### ANOTHER STEAK DINNER

Sheriff Slatter instructed Patrolman Lipe and Officer Hansen to take Peewee to the local clinic. Lipe, asked Sheriff Slatter if he wanted a blood sample to establish the level of alcohol.

“Peewee doesn’t drink,” Sheriff Slatter said.

“His breath reeks of alcohol,” Highway Patrolman said.

“Yeah. I’ll give him a breath test.”

“The blood test would be a better measure of his state of intoxication.”

Sheriff Slatter considered for a minute.

“Alright then, do it,” Slatter said.

9:02pm

Patrolman Lipe, by order of Sheriff Slatter, took Peewee to the Marbleton Inn to eat dinner. When Peewee entered the restaurant with the two officers, Don Lockridge, of UW, was eating dinner at a table by the window. He noticed that Peewee wore different clothes from when he had seen him earlier that evening. Peewee seemed excited.

The three settled at a table. Peewee ordered steak. The sheriff came in shortly thereafter and paid for Peewee's steak dinner.

## CHAPTER XXI

### DEANNE AND AGAIN

The next day, after our first trip to Big Piney, Mom and I took the morning drive up to the Wind River Mountain Range where we spotted a female moose grazing in a red willow marsh just beside the secret Sacred Rim Trail. I pulled over and grabbed the binoculars. Mom took photographs. The view was stunning: a gorgeous jewel tone blue sky above, the mountains behind highlighted by a light dusting of the first snow, a line of pine trees including a few yellow-leafed aspens, the red of the willow marsh meadow, and the boldly silhouetted moose in the center of it all.

Back down the mountain in Pinedale, we stopped for lunch at the Heart and Soul Cafe across the street from our trapper's cabin. We ordered at the cash register from the owner of the cafe—the barley soup and BLAT (bacon, lettuce, avocado, tomato) sandwich. I noticed that Deanne, from the table of Big Piney women we had met yesterday, was deep in conversation in the corner with another woman. We sat up front by the picture windows and the four-foot fountain centerpiece guarded by a smiling witch on her broom. Mary, the waitress we had met yesterday when we stopped in for coffee and bought some of her boyfriend's prints of moose and raven, offered to take our picture. Alexis, a yogi and wayward traveler who was stranded in Pinedale after her camper, Minnie, broke down on the trip out to Wyoming from Florida, was seated in the booth next to us. Alexis had decided to stay for six months, teach some yoga, try out living in the west. We told her about the strong women we had met and the female moose we spotted.

“Sounds like your being supported by the divine feminine,” she said. Just then her phone rang.

“I can’t believe it,” she said. “I just got the estimate for the camper. It’s finally going to be repaired.” She had been in the area for over a month waiting for the estimate.

Two women were leaving the cafe. I nudged mom.

“There’s Deanne.”

I was still laughing about how Deanne responded to my glacier lake mistake, and there she was. Mom popped up and knocked on the glass. Deanne mouthed, “What are you doing here.” We rushed over to the door and greeted her. Mom told her we’d be headed to Laramie that afternoon.

“Do you mean Big Piney?” she asked, and we all laughed at the mistake. “I’ll be interested to learn what you find out.”

“I’m sure you got a call as soon as we left town yesterday,” Mom said. We figured news of our trip to Betty Fear’s house had spread and by Deanne’s reaction, we figured we were right.

Mary came up behind us, “Soup’s on!”

We said our goodbyes to Deanne and her friend. Over lunch we chatted about what might be going through the rumor mill in Big Piney and laughed about how Deanne was so good at catching us making mistakes.

After lunch, we skipped nap and headed out for Big Piney. I wanted to get a couple of more pictures and to mail something to myself from the local post office. We saw Burney and Company, a busy looking building with this motto painted on the side of the building: “Come right in the house.” That reminded me of something someone used to

say back home. We pulled in and discovered that this was the local grocery store. I asked at the front register if there were any Big Piney postcards, but the cashier shook her head, her mouth was full of a bite of pastry. How about greeting cards? She pointed towards the back of the store, covered her mouth and said, “By the pharmacy.”

On the walk towards the pharmacy, Mom whacked my arm, “Look! Look who it is.” I squinted ahead. “Deanne’s friend from the cafe.”

Mom walked right to her. The greeting cards were caddy corner to Deanne and her friend.

“Looks like we’re following you. I can’t believe we just saw you in Pinedale and now here,” Mom said.

Deanne introduced her friend Connie. Their lunch at the Heart and Soul Cafe was in celebration of Connie’s eightieth birthday. A box of blue winter squash was open in the bottom of Connie’s grocery cart. Her sister sends it to her every year for her birthday. Connie apologized for not introducing herself earlier.

“I gather you heard why we’re in town,” Mom said to Deanne. “Did Betty Fear call you?”

No, as it turns out, one of the women of Big Piney that we met the previous day is a good friend of Betty Fear’s.

“Well, we went to her house yesterday after we saw you,” Mom said.

“You went to Betty’s?” Deanne gave a little snort.

“We did. And she was so good to us,” Mom said.

I noticed a bit of a frown on Deanne’s face.

“Are you and Betty Fear friends?” I asked.

Connie who sat on the bench outside the pharmacy window, wore a soft teal sweater that matched her eyes, and she listened intently. When she heard my question, she piped up with a laugh.

“Ha,” Connie said. “Sometimes, yes, sometimes, no. They’re related.”

Deanne nodded and shook her head at the same time. “Oh yeah. She married my cousin, divorced him and married my uncle.” This was a move that Deanne did not find charming.

“You know, I remember that case with your brother,” Connie said. Her parents owned the local grocery at the time.

“What did you think about Sheriff Slatter?” I asked.

“Oh, he was so crooked.” Connie told us about a case in Rock Springs where three cops had a prisoner in the patrol car, and they killed him. Sheriff Slatter wasn’t involved, but he drove down to Rock Springs to testify on their behalf, and when the jury was picked, his wife was on it. She ran a local diner called the Sage Cafe where all the gossip was exchanged.

“She should never have been on that jury being that her husband was involved in trying to help those cops. People thought it was wrong and said so. They weren’t convicted, but the one guy couldn’t work in law enforcement anymore. He moved here and worked for a while on a local ranch.”

“Hey,” Connie said. “There’s Jeannie. The star of the show.” She asked if we had seen the 60 Minutes short last night on the Drift. When we watched it later, we saw Jeannie riding her horse and herding the cows down from the drift.

Deanne asked if we had a chance to see the Green River Museum, but I hadn’t heard

anything from Jenna who had promised to check for us.

“You can just knock on the side window. I’ll bet she’s there,” Connie said.

“Carissa Pinkerton,” Deanne said. “but we all just call her Shorty.”

“We’re planning to stop by the Country Chalet. I hope to talk with Bob Hansen. He was on duty that night,” I said.

“Oh, yes. Bob and Nancy are wonderful. Go ask them. I’ll bet they remember something,” Connie said. “You know who else you should talk to,” Connie asked. “The owner of the Heart and Soul Cafe, Kathy Lee. She used to be a deputy for Sheriff Slatter. She probably remembers that case.”

## CHAPTER XXII

### COUNTRY CHALET INN MOTEL

The wooden shingled Country Chalet Inn Motel sign is red with a lantern on top. The motel squats on the high and dry crest above Big Piney, just off highway 189 in Marbleton. An A-frame, two-story, rough cut wooden structure with a rock chimney serves as the living quarters and office, while a long, single story stretch of beige brick strives north with six brown doors visible in front and the mirror image six rooms on the back side. As Mom and I pulled into the parking lot, I spotted room number five close to the office.

“That was his room,” I told Mom.

Ilene and HE Cameron owned the motel at the time. Peewee Loe had returned to the Chalet within minutes of the shooting. He blustered into the motel lobby hollering:

“Ilene! Ilene, get the sheriff.”

The Cameron’s came out of the living quarters together, where they saw a bloody Peewee in just his undershirt and pants.

All these years later, on October eighteenth, ten days after the anniversary of Uncle Ed’s death, Mom and I opened the door to the Chalet lobby and were greeted with a warm, stuffy blast of air and red carpet. I felt the weight of that moment even as I was comforted by Connie and Deanne’s assurance that the Hansen’s are good people. I hoped Bob Hansen would remember the incident.

A woman with long silver hair, glasses, and a plump figure stood at the Formica topped counter beneath a chalet style wooden clock that must have hung in the motel from the early days. A basket of Halloween candy and chocolate salt water taffy sat on

the counter. The heat blast came from an electric fireplace beside a red couch against the front wall. Red, orange, and yellow geometric carpet covered the floor.

“Hi, I’m looking for Bob Hansen,” I asked. “Is he available?”

“He’s busy,” replied the silver haired woman, “but I’ll check.” She disappeared through the doorway into the living quarters where Ilene and HE Cameron lived before. When she emerged again with Bob Hansen, he introduced her as his wife, Nancy.

Ilene and HE Cameron were Nancy’s parents. She inherited the motel from them. Nancy was at the Chalet the night that Peewee came in calling for her mother, Ilene. Nancy’s parents made her wait in the living quarters. They were good friends with Sheriff Slatter. The night that Peewee stumbled in calling for the sheriff, Ilene said she didn’t think he was around, but that the officer on call for Marbleton was her son-in-law, young Bob Hansen.

On the day of our visit, Bob stooped almost in half. He was a stout, white-haired man, over six feet tall, stiff and in pain from a recent back surgery. He couldn’t stand up straight. I was relieved when he settled himself on the arm of the nearby sofa with his hands on his knees to prop up his upper body. He wore a denim shirt and jeans and his blue eyes twitched when we made eye contact.

I explained that Mom and I were in the area looking into her brother’s murder, a call that he, Hansen, had been on back in October of 1983. Bob Hansen remembered the incident pretty quickly, how he had assisted Highway Patrolman Mark Lipe. They were together in Peewee’s room when Peewee told them where to find the murder weapon—in the top drawer of the dresser.

“I remember Lipe,” Hansen said, “he carefully catalogued the firings on that pistol.”



Hansen laughed.

“Funny thing was, Peewee was just going around in his underwear, nothing else,” Hansen said. Peewee had taken his clothes off because of the blood and evidently didn’t put anything back on for a while. This struck Hansen as funny at the time and was something that he continued to chuckle about during our visit.

When asked about Sheriff Slatter’s role that night, having described the various ways he had broken the chain of evidence, Hansen wasn’t surprised.

“He was a big fan of the sundowner law,” Hansen said.

Sundowner law, an unwritten law used to racially discriminate by beating up or killing black people who stayed in a town after sunset. Uncle Ed was not black, but many of the cases that my grandpa was referred to involved nonwhite sons who had been beaten to death or otherwise killed in a racially charged fights. Their fathers tried to get justice for them, but were denied as the discrimination was not against the father, but the murdered son.

"But, what does that mean?" I asked.

"It means," Bob Hansen said, "he was old school."

Hansen said that Sheriff Slatter would have had jurisdiction over Ed’s case because Daniel’s Trailer Court is just outside of Big Piney town limits, which seemed strange. Daniel’s Trailer Court is in view of Big Piney and it took merely a handful of minutes to arrive there from the center of Big Piney, but then everything here is so close. It wouldn’t take more than eight minutes to get from Daniel’s Trailer Court through Big Piney and into Marbleton to The Country Chalet Inn Motel. Town limits matter though. At the local Wind River Brewery in Pinedale a couple of nights prior, I heard one man brag to his

friend that just over his back fence was officially outside of the town, so he could legally stand at his fence and target practice into the county. I wondered if Peewee was aware that Daniel's Trailer Court was under the sheriff's jurisdiction and if that figured into his plans.

Hansen told us about the man camp that was built shortly after Uncle Ed's death, across from Daniel's Trailer Court. This was a housing solution for the workers who were needed to build a refinery facility for the pipeline. Trouble could be expected with that many overworked men living together.

"You have to understand, that was before tasers or pepper spray. Sheriff Slatter issued every one of us officers a pick ax. Didn't want us using a gun."

"But what was the pick ax for?" I asked.

"Well, that was his idea of how we would defend ourselves," Hansen chuckled at that.

We heard a dog bark from behind Bob and Nancy's private residence door.

I asked him if he heard anything about the preliminary trial. He paused a moment before saying, "that was the biggest farce I ever saw."

Hansen was curious how things would turn out, especially since he had been involved in the call at the Chalet. So, he volunteered to be a security guard for the courtroom when the preliminary trial came up on October 20, 1983. There hadn't been a murder in a long time and people were interested in how it would be handled. The small courtroom was packed.

"It was just right over there," he said and pointed towards some place in town behind the Chalet. "The county prosecutor..." Hansen said.

“Bill Jackson,” I supplied.

“Yeah, his nickname was ‘Let’s Make a Deal, Jackson.’”

Jackson showed up in the courtroom with his easel and his map out. He set up like he was planning to make an argument, but he didn’t present any evidence. According to Hansen, he told the judge there just wasn’t enough evidence to prosecute the case.

“The defense attorney didn’t even have to say anything. Damnedest thing.”

“What did Betty Fear do?”

“Oh, well, she called to ask another judge about it, but she couldn’t do anything. Case dismissed.”

“You know Jackson moved to Hawaii as soon as the statute of limitations ran out?” I asked. “Makes me wonder if he was paid off.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Hansen replied.

The dog whined and barked again.

“Aw, somebody’s missing you,” I said.

“Yeah, he doesn’t like to be left out,” Nancy said.

I told Hansen how Grandpa hired a private investigator to try to get to the bottom of this and that the secretary had warned him away from too much digging.

“She said Peewee was in witness protection,” I said. “She warned Grandpa that he could be hurt or killed if he kept after Peewee. Have you heard anything like that?”

“No,” Hansen said looking pleased. “I hadn’t heard anything like that.”

No one I had. Who gets told when a protected witness moves to the area—anyone?

The dog barked, again.

“Do you remember what Peewee looked like,” Mom asked.

“Well,” Hansen said and looked down at himself and back up, “he kind of looked like me.”

I asked Nancy if I could peek down the hallway. She readily agreed.

“Would you like to see one of the rooms?”

“Is room number five open?” I asked.

“Was that Peewee’s room?” Bob Hansen asked.

I nodded. Nancy said it was open. She got the keys from behind the desk. The front office area seemed plain enough, the kind of grim entry you might expect from an old roadside motel, but I wasn’t prepared for the grand effect of that wide hallway. Every room in the motel has an outside door and an inside door onto the great hallway that runs like a spine through the center of the motel. Maroon geometric carpet with gold flowers patterned the wide floor, ripples showed periodically where, as Nancy told us, the carpet had been damaged by a leak, but she couldn’t bear to replace it. Tall fake dieffenbachias, one of Grandma’s favorite plants, in too tiny basket pots leaned awkwardly against the white walls. The pitch of the roof defined by thick cross beams and wood slate ceiling was accented with medieval metal pendant fixtures and yellow sheet glass.

“I always said I didn’t want this motel, but when Mama and Daddy passed, we just ended up here,” Nancy said. “Sometimes I feel trapped, like I live in a cage.”

Later, Mom and I agreed that the atmosphere inside the motel was heavy and stagnant. That carpet was striking though. A few parts medieval, a strong dose of red rum from *The Shining*, and a generous dash of appreciation for what Nancy’s mother had done with the place.

“Wherever I can, I’ve tried to keep it original,” Nancy told us as she stopped in front of door number five. She approached that room with the ease of someone moving through a beloved home. I felt myself hang back. The gesture at once so familiar, to be shown a room, and at the same time full of horror at what I might see or how Mom might react. Nancy walked right inside.

“Let me open the curtain so you can see better.” She crossed the room. “Normally all the rooms have art on the wall, but someone decided they needed the pictures from this room more than I did.”

“They stole the pictures right from the wall?” I asked.

She nodded.

Somehow it seemed right that this room would be stripped of the comforts and personality that the other rooms bore. Still the effect of the sloping support beams angling from the great hall and through the room certainly lent an air to the space.

“I had to replace most of the furniture,” she gestured to the dark headboard that extended across the wall making one giant headboard for two queen sized beds. Two olive colored wooden arm chairs with a wicker back accent and padded seats reminded me of chairs Grandma would have liked, Scandinavian.

“I like the chairs,” I said.

“Those are original. Mama’s sleigh chairs. I try to keep them going, but they’re so old.”

In the bathroom mirror, I considered my reflection, still wearing my coat and brimmed wool newsboy hat, and felt the unease, knowing that Peewee had stood here, had washed Ed’s blood from him in that tub. I became aware that Nancy blocked the

doorway. Nancy was talking about the medieval art her mother had bought for all the rooms. Mom stood on the green pile carpet, arms crossed, a strained but friendly look on her face. I wanted her to be able to get out. I moved closer to Nancy who shifted aside.

“One of my guys that stays here, he always requests room four. Says he wants that Viking to watch over him. Want to see that one?”

She unlocked and swung open the door, the room is flipped. The same sleigh chairs, green carpet and wood slat ceiling, but the beds are on the opposite wall. Rembrandt's *Conquistador* hangs above one and a still life of fruit above the other.

Back in the lobby, Nancy said she's like her mother, she makes friends with many of the guests who stay here.

“Mama babied those guys,” Nancy said.

That's why Peewee called for her that night. They were friends.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### INDEPENDENCE ROCK

After Ed's funeral, on the way to Big Piney to close out Ed's affairs, Grandma and Grandpa stopped southwest of Casper, Wyoming and less than two hours from Wamsutter, where Uncle Ed once lived to see Independence Rock. William Sublette, who Sublette county is named after is credited with naming the rock after he picnicked there on July fourth on the way to what would become Pinedale, Marbleton, and Big Piney.

Uncle Ed once told Grandma that he carved his name on Independence Rock.

"I need to see his name, Elwood," Grandma had told Grandpa. "I need to."

The task was monumental. The large granite dome is 130 feet high, 1,900 feet long and 850 feet wide. Also known as the Register of the Desert, there are over 5000 names dating back to 1824.

When Grandpa had something to do, he was single-minded in his pursuit. Grandma's stop to find Ed's name on the huge old rock would have had immense pressure behind it, a tidal wave pushing at the door. And Grandma's need was strong. She was on her way to mop up the last of her oldest son's life. Like an electric shock waiting on the tips of her fingers, she needed to touch him, to have this moment of connection.

Grandpa put his arm on her shoulder.

"Rose Marie, it's time to go," She had looked and looked. Grandpa wouldn't wait. Desperate, she turned her back to the rock and said a little prayer.

"I'm here, Ed, and I want to see your name."

When she turned around, his name was the first thing she saw.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE HEART AND SOUL CAFE

The next morning, Mom and I skipped our usual breakfast of avocado toast and a fried egg. We opted for an omelet at the Heart and Soul Cafe for our last morning in town. This was also my chance to speak to the owner about Sheriff Slatter and see if she remembered Uncle Ed's case. I took a couple of deep breathes as we headed up to the counter. My previous impressions of Kathy Lee were that she was hard working with a cold demeanor that didn't seem to match the warmth of her cafe.

After we placed our orders, I told Kathy Lee that I really like the way she had decorated the place. It was a warm and welcoming. That was first time I saw her smile. A petite, very slim woman, Kathy Lee has the longest natural lashes, top and bottom, that I have ever seen. Her looks reminded me a little of a honky-tonk queen, big blonde hair, blue eyes. She wore a black and red flannel shirt and jeans.

I told her we were in town looking into a case that she might be familiar with.

"Did you work for Sheriff Slatter in 1983?" I asked her.

"I was a deputy. The first female deputy in the county," she said. "I asked questions and kept asking. People didn't always like that."

I filled her in on Uncle Ed's story, and how the sheriff broke the chain of evidence.

"Do you have paperwork on this case? Because I'd like to see it."

Kathy Lee, I came to learn was indeed a fan of Sheriff Slatter's. The first full devotee I had met. Most thought he was a good enough guy, though old school.

I asked her about the prosecutor, Bill Jackson.



“He was a terrible prosecutor. Just didn’t do his job. Who was the defense attorney?”

“Gerald Mason.”

“Now there is a ruthless man who made big money defending murderers. Let me tell you a story.”

There was a man in town with two sons, Kathy Lee told me. He got along just fine with the older son. The other son was much larger, didn’t even look like them, and was always into trouble. One evening, the bigger son came to the father’s house. His brother was there. They all started talking and got into an argument. The bigger son pulled out a gun, shot and killed his father, and wounded his brother. Gerald Mason took on the case and got that man off on self-defense.

“He was always so Christian about it, too,” she said. “Now his son is an attorney here in town. I don’t have a beef with him. He’s just lazy, but I use him for wills and such. Gerald Mason though, he got a lot of bad people set free, and he made lots of money doing it.”

I told her how Gerald Mason didn’t have a chance to defend Peewee Loe because Bill Jackson did it for him. She wasn’t surprised.

“Jackson was lazy.”

She gave me her email address.

“Send me that paperwork. I know in my heart that Sheriff Slatter was a good and decent man. I’m sure he did the job right.”

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE LABRINTH

At the Pinedale library beside the Sheriff's office, a librarian named Jen who helped me find the relevant newspaper articles, asked if I knew of Hank Ruland. His book was in the special collections room and was titled, *War Stories of a Wyoming Sheriff*. She offered to contact his son to see if he would be willing to visit with me.

Several other librarians were involved in the search. One came in to ask about Ed's story. She couldn't believe that it happened in 1983. "It's sound like the wild west!"

When I finished thumbing through the papers, I joined Mom for a tour of the stunning Pinedale library. Next to a picture window hallway overlooking a courtyard, a rammed earth wall ran the length in striated reds and browns. The polished cement floor gave a clean expansive feel. At the end of the hallway, in a generous meeting room a labyrinth was stained on the concrete floor. Within moments, Mom and I were off, brushing against each other as we followed the pattern in the floor, widening our progress before tightening up towards the center. Then we reversed and walked back out again. Afterwards, I felt calm and settled. My head was clear.

**CHAPTER XXVI**  
**LEAVING WYOMING**

On our final morning in Wyoming, Mom and I left our Trapper's Cabin in the dark. We watched the sun rise kissing the rolling hills, then the mountains as we climbed back up to Jackson Hole. I hope to come back. To make it out to Vernal, Utah where Ed planned to build a home on a property he had there that he called Split Tree, for the old split tree on the hill. I'd like to meet his friend, a fellow welder, who still lives there, Jimmy Justice.

In the airport, Mom takes my picture in front photo canvas of an eagle flying directly at the camera, just like the one I had seen when I came to pick up mom. I'm acutely aware that it's October 20. We're flying back on the anniversary of Betty Fear's dismissal of the homicide charges against Peewee Loe.

In the next airport, between our flights, Dad bought us lunch at Pappadeaux. TVs hung around the bar where we ate our shrimp salads. Breaking news on every TV showed helicopters circling an area.

"What's going on?" I asked Mom.

I've been so occupied, I haven't kept up with current events.

"They found the remains of Gaby Petito's fiancé today."

**CHAPTER XXVII**  
**SHERIFF RULAND**

Back home after the Wyoming trip, I received an email from Jenn, the librarian. She had told Hank Ruland's son about our visit and asked if she could share his phone number with me. Hank Ruland and I visited on the phone a few days later.

The seventy-five-year-old native of Pinedale has a youthful voice, not what I expected from a career lawman who saw the last days of the wild west. All told, Hank Ruland was Sheriff of Sublette County for twenty years. He was in his twenties during his first stint, making him the youngest sheriff elected up to that point. During his long career, Ruland worked all the positions from dispatcher, to captain, to investigator before he retired in 2005.

When I asked Ruland if he was familiar with Ed Brown's case, he recounted the death of another Ed Brown during that same time period. That Ed drove his pickup into the river and drowned. I wondered if Ruland would have agreed to visit with me if he knew which Ed Brown. I filled him in on the basics, including what I knew of the shoddy way the Sheriff handled the evidence. I asked if he was familiar with Bud Slatter.

"He was old school," Ruland said. Slatter was older. Ruland served under him for most of his early career. Collecting evidence in a case didn't matter much to Slatter, he focused on the letter of the law. Ruland remembers working on a case of a dead man up the river in Bondurant. He was securing the crime scene and waiting for the state investigators to come in from Cheyenne when Sheriff Slatter drove up. There at the crime scene, Slatter cut a willow branch from a nearby willow tree and poked it into the victim's

blood, smearing it around.

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” Ruland said.

When Slatter left, he just tossed the willow branch behind him. The Cheyenne team arrived to document the crime scene.

“What’s up with this branch and these blood splatters?” One of the Cheyenne investigators asked.

“The sheriff’s been here,” Ruland said.

There was another murder, not long after Uncle Ed’s, at the man camp.

“One guy just stabbed another man to death. Got him multiple times and then got away with it. The sheriff’s department had the murder weapon, the blood-stained knife, but they lost it,” Ruland said.

The public was upset about that. Ruland remembered feeling that things had to change. It was time to clean up how crimes were handled. People were losing their lives and not getting the respect and attention to their deaths that they deserved.

“Back then, they just put them in a pine box and moved on,” Ruland said. They weren’t thinking of people’s families, that this man might have had a wife and kids or mom and dad.

I wanted to know what Ruland thought about the Sheriff talking to Peewee’s boss on the phone in his motel room right after the murder.

“Peewee asked if the sheriff would speak to his boss. And he did. There’s no record of what he said.”

Ruland wasn’t surprised.

“I can hear him saying, ‘I talked to his boss and he’s gonna straighten up.

Everything's gonna work out all right.'” Ruland said.

Slatter didn't want to come down on these guys. Somebody would get in trouble and Slatter would say he's learned his lesson now. He's not going to make any more trouble. Plus, he and the prosecutor were buddies. Between the two of them, they weren't prosecuting any crimes. I couldn't help but wonder if part of the reason Uncle Ed was denied justice was because the guys were lazy and didn't want to work. When had they lost sight of the fact that people's lives were at stake?

"Was Sheriff Slatter a local?" I asked.

"No," Ruland said. "He came to work the oil patch in the early days and just stayed on. When he lost that last election for Sheriff, he moved back to Brashear, Texas. Died shortly after that."

"Was he sick?" I hadn't been able to find the cause of death other than a mention that he succumbed to a long-term illness.

"He died of emphysema. He was an extreme chain smoker." Ruland related how Slatter always had a lit cigarette. "Even when he ate, he was taking drags between bites. And woe to whoever had to drive him for treatments at the hospital in Denver, he chain-smoked the whole way."

When he was on oxygen towards the end of his life, Slatter would turn off the oxygen and light up a cigarette.

"I mean, we can sit here and list his faults, but the man isn't here to defend himself and it wouldn't change anything," Ruland said.

After Slatter lost that last election for sheriff, Ruland took over in the interim until the newly elected sheriff came into office. That was the mid-1980s. The last of the old school

law was closing up. The new sheriff sent deputies to be properly trained in investigations and homicide.

I told Ruland how Grandpa had hired a private investigator and had been warned, unofficially, that Peewee was in witness protection.

“Have you heard of anyone in witness protection in Sublette County?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

I asked Ruland what inspired him to write his book. He said it was something he had threatened to do for some time.

“If I ordered a copy, would you sign it for me?”

He said he’d be happy to send me one. A few days later, I got it in the mail. On the front cover, there’s a photograph of Hank Ruland in uniform wearing a white cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses, and standing beside his white horse, Mouse. Behind him is the lower Green River lake and Square Top mountain. At the top right corner, there’s an image of the sheriff’s badge.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### SPARKY'S ESCAPE

In a follow-up interview conducted by Check Mate, the private investigation company that Grandpa hired in 1985, Rick Blaha said the community in Sublette County was shocked that the charges against Peewee Loe were dropped. Some said it was “cold-blooded murder.”

People in the community talked about how there had never been a conviction for a murder taking place in Sublette County.

"That's a bit of a community joke," Blaha said. "No murder convictions."

Blaha would do anything to aid the investigation or suit. He and others would like to see Peewee convicted for killing Ed Brown. Blaha volunteered to be available for statements and hearings. If a deposition was needed, he offered to have it taken through his attorney as a way to save the expenses.

Of Sparky, whom he hired under duress from Peewee, he saw her the day after the murder. She was wrecked. He offered her the day off, but she wanted to stay at work.

“A while after it all happened,” Blaha said, “I got a call from Peewee at the Grand Junction office. He wanted to know where Sparky was, so I gave him her telephone number. Sparky sure was mad about that. Come to think of it, Peewee is extremely jealous of Sparky.”

While Check Mate was unable to find Sparky or Peewee, word was that she was with him. I wonder if Peewee forced her to leave with him by gunpoint, as he had tried when Ed was still alive, only this time, Sparky didn't have backup.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

On Veteran's Day, my son and I picked a bag full of satsumas from our loaded tree and walked them over to our neighbor, Cedric, to thank him for his service. We've been neighbors for almost ten years now and have enjoyed many a visit over the fence or in the front yard. He has a long history in law enforcement.

On a whim, I asked Cedric when a person in witness protection is moved into an area, who is notified.

"Nobody," he said and explained that there's no way to know who is a snitch or who's related to who or friends with someone. The only way anyone would be told is if something went wrong and they had to come in in an emergency situation.

Our dog got the zoomies. The kids laughed as she raced around Cedric's yard and almost bit the extension cord he had out to vacuum his truck. I told the kids to take her home.

I knew that the witness program had started under the U.S. Marshall's.

"I wonder if you know a Marshall who would talk to me. I just want to ask general questions about the program."

Cedric cocked his head to the side.

"I don't know anyone who would talk to you. It could jeopardize their career. Besides the ones we have here, we call them *butt-chuckers*, because they're basically transporting prisoners."

When I asked who would be in charge of witness protection here, he said maybe a task force that would be made up of people from multiple places: ATF, CIA, FBI. They would know.

“But if you start asking questions, they’re going to ask about you. They’ll look into you, your family, your friends. If you have skeletons, they’ll find them. Every family does, you know. Best let sleeping dogs lie.” Cedric peered at me hard with his right eye. “You don’t want to open up that can of worms, do you?”

I shook my head, glad the kids were back at the house.

“Grandpa hired a private eye.”

“Oh yeah,” Cedric said, “They would get a call to back off if they were messing with a witness. They’d get in trouble if they didn’t.”

The P.I. Firm was warned off, I thought to myself.

I remembered the conversation I had with my brother a few days ago when I asked him if he thought Grandpa might have made up the part about the witness protection. We agreed that it was too fanciful a lie. It didn’t match Grandpa’s character. But Brandon suggested that maybe the P.I. didn’t want to pursue the case and wanted him to drop it. Maybe that’s another reason that the secretary told him about the witness protection. The private investigator firm that Grandpa hired was staffed with ex-CIA and FBI agents. How, I had long wondered, could they not manage to track down one man, and why was there no copy of Peewee Loe’s driver’s license or any photographs of him? In Big Piney, I had started to feel foolish when I asked about the possibility of his being in witness protection. Thanks to Cedric’s wise words, I will let sleeping dogs lie, knowing that I got as close as I dare.

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**Appendix A: Walking Away**



**Appendix B: Ed Brown on the Homeplace**



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