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“Breakfast Shots” and Other Stories: Collected Fiction of Joseph D. Haske

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BREAKFAST SHOTS AND OTHER STORIES:
COLLECTED FICTION OF JOSEPH D. HASKE

A Thesis

by

JOSEPH D. HASKE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing

BREAKFAST SHOTS AND OTHER STORIES:
COLLECTED FICTION OF JOSEPH D. HASKE

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Joseph D. Haske

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December 2011

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ABSTRACT

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The following thesis for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing consists of two parts. The first part contains five excerpts from a short story cycle, tentatively entitled Breakfast Shots. The second part includes experimentation with the short story form, including the noir-influenced *Bloqueo* and two minimalist stories derived from this piece. Several stories included in this thesis have been published in journals such as *Boulevard*, *Fiction International*, and *Dark Sky*. The rest are currently under consideration for various journals and anthologies.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, both near and far, for their continual love and support. To Bertha, Fernanda and Joey, who deal with me on a daily basis, I appreciate your tolerance: it's not easy to live with a writer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time at UTPA I have had the privilege to work with some amazing faculty and student cohorts. I am fortunate to boast that some of the most talented and helpful faculty that UTPA has to offer constitute my thesis committee. I am eternally indebted to Professors Steven Schneider and Robert Johnson for their continual instruction, mentorship and support. To Eric Miles Williamson, my thesis chair, no words on this page could express my everlasting gratitude for your mentorship: I can only repay you through my life's work and literary achievements.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was born in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, a small, blue collar town in the Eastern Upper Peninsula, and raised in the nearby Les Cheneaux area, a naturally beautiful slice of rural land near Lake Huron. I'm the proud son of working class parents and a first generation college graduate. My love for literature and writing has existed for as long as I can remember, which made me feel out of place at times, growing up in a rural environment, so far from the erudite world of letters that exists in New York or Paris. I've come to realize that I'll never truly fit in anywhere. I wasn't born into a literary tradition so I have no choice but to create my own. It's been a difficult road, finding my way as a writer, without the advantages of others who come from a background of relative privilege, but I can say with confidence, now, that I have found my way, and nothing will deter me or discourage me more than life already has.

At eighteen years of age, I joined the Army when my hopes for a scholarship were dashed by an administrative technicality, merely one semester into my undergraduate education. This situation set me back a few years, but I continued to read, mostly authors like Faulkner, Twain and Hemingway – the kind of writers most Infantry soldiers, I learned, were not interested in. These books influenced me and I continued to write: correspondence, fiction, poetry. By the time I completed my stint in the military, I was well-read for a person of limited means, although

I must admit that I read some pretty bad books too and was even able to recognize it back then, as an “uneducated” grunt.

With the assistance of the G.I. Bill, Army College Fund, and countless blue collar jobs, I graduated Summa Cum Laude, less than four years from the date I was honorably discharged from service. One of my most memorable employment experiences was working with my father at the local limestone quarry where he worked for roughly thirty years. I have literally paid for my education with blood and sweat, and I take great pride in this fact, even though there were times when I felt ashamed or was shamed by others for being who I am. After working so hard to get where I am, I’ve finally realized that the best contributions I can make to the world of fiction are those informed by my personal experiences, because utilizing these experiences renders authenticity of voice, making the superficial experience of art as real as it dares to be. The stories in my thesis represent the amalgam of my personal experiences and my formal education.

Most writers, at some point, ponder the age old question: can creative writing truly be taught? This is a question I’ve considered since making the decision to study an MFA in Creative Writing. Some people are fortunate enough to have the means to study any subject they want on a whim. For people like me, a graduate education is a serious financial decision. In my case, it’s not practical on many levels to study a masters degree in a field in which I’ve already obtained a masters degree, so my decision to take on the MFA conveys my commitment to the craft and shows that I do have some faith that a writer can learn something from an MFA program. The truth is, nearly anything can be taught and creative writing is no exception. However, the natural development of a literary artist requires a work ethic that quickly dispels any romantic notions about writing. The writer’s life is, for the most part, not glamorous; it demands imagination, industriousness and a craftsmanship that *must* be taught and learned well in order for the writer

to achieve success. Although instruction in the imaginative aspect of creative writing certainly proves more elusive than the numerous technical aspects of writing, and some writers may have an ear for language or may be predisposed to other abilities that generate quality writing, the best teachers of writing still manage to effectively prime their students for better results, helping them achieve personal goals to the best of their respective abilities.

As an MFA student at UTPA, I have had some positive experiences, having the pleasure to work with knowledgeable faculty such as those on my committee. When it comes to my development as a writer of fiction, a specific course led to a monumental shift in my perspective and skills, a form and theory of the novel course. It changed my views on the creation of fiction, and from that point on, I saw the craft through the eyes of a writer, not just a literary scholar. In this one course alone, we were required to read a novel every week for the entire semester; for each novel, we wrote 1,000 word essays, explaining what these classic novels could teach us as writers. Additionally, we produced over 50 pages of fiction and a long critical essay regarding our stance on what constitutes good fiction. Everybody in the class read different books from the list each week and we discussed what we learned from the books as a class, as writers. Needless to say, this was not one of the most popular courses for the students in the MFA program, but it was certainly one of the best courses I've ever taken. For me, this class was truly one of the most practical, valuable experiences I've ever had: I learned to read, think and work like a writer. I learned how to weave multiple narratives using stream of conscious techniques through writers such as Faulkner and Joyce. I learned to defy the limitation of plot through García Márquez. Through Marilynne Robinson's texts, I learned various methods to render a non-traditional narrative. In the work of Paul Ruffin, Barry Hannah and Phillip Roth, I learned about authenticity of voice. The list goes on.

Professors like Williamson, Schneider and Johnson have been instrumental in the progress of my literary craftsmanship. They stress the importance of reading in one's development as a writer. They know that great writers are the literary offspring of the great writers who came before them. Although many faculty in universities across the country dispute teaching the canon in MFA programs (as well as in some Literature programs), it is one of the most useful approaches for priming potential writers. Reading as much as possible of the best work in one's language provides a broad foundation for a writer. In most fields, few question the importance of knowing as much about one's particular area of scholarly interest as possible. Emerson, one of America's most notable thinkers and an unwavering advocate of progress and innovation, says in his essay on books that:

College education is the reading of certain books which the common sense of all scholars agrees will represent the science already accumulated. If you know that, --for instance in geometry, if you have read Euclid and Laplace, --your opinion has some value; if you do not know these, you are not entitled to give any opinion on the subject.

In a time when students enter MFA programs having read fewer and fewer classical works of literature, teaching such books seems the most logical approach to providing extensive resources for student writers. A student whose goal is to create literature, a daunting task indeed, should commit to twice the work of a literary scholar, reading as both critic and writer. In addition to comprehending the complex thematic scope of literature, the writer must do the "dirty work," paying special attention to mechanics and specific techniques, the so-called "tricks" of the writers who have come before them, such as effective narrative transition and dialogue.

One might counter that there is also little room for innovation if the writer reads nothing but the classics. For example, a contemporary fiction writer would not accomplish much by merely imitating the style of Victorian novelists such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens or the Brontë sisters. However, a comprehensive familiarity with what has been done in the past makes one a more formidable writer and critic. I agree with T.S. Eliot when he says that a literary tradition, “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (4). Knowing what to do with one’s knowledge of both contemporary and canonical texts is another area in which the best creative writing faculty lead the way. Professors of creative writing cannot control all aspects of students’ innovative and imaginative behavior, but they must encourage the creative development of students and guide writers in the best way possible. In the end, what makes literature, and art in general, so wonderful are the filters through which such works are created, and ultimately, literature excels when it originates from well-informed sources.

My take on all of this, then, is that reading great books has helped me improve my writing. A writer should read as much quality literature as possible and only then does that writer’s voice matter – then one can contribute something meaningful to English language letters. When one examines the rich literary history of the English language, it becomes increasingly obvious that innovation occurs where tradition meets a unique contemporary voice and sensibility. One must learn from one’s great literary heritage and use that knowledge to progress. Simply copying great writers does not suffice: an individual fire and spirit must emerge. That unique voice becomes all the more powerful when enhanced by familiarity with literary masterpieces. Such knowledge serves as a beacon that outshines one’s contemporaries, and future generations are able to look back to see so clearly what contemporary critics often

cannot. And so continues our rich literary heritage – it is a trend that will endure as long as there are people interested in reading, writing and literary scholarship.

Of course, there is much debate about how the “canon” of our time will look a hundred years from now. As a writer, I’m aware that literature is continually progressing and it is my responsibility to be aware of such changes. These days, numerous factions debate what type of literature should follow the post-modern era. There exist countless approaches to writing in contemporary American literature. Writers address culture, socio-political issues, philosophy and other relevant themes, but what the best writers have in common is that they exhibit their awareness of a great literary tradition albeit in a subtle manner. Meticulous attention is paid to technique and form with great writing, and some writers stand out as more gifted stylists than others. It would prove impossible to categorize great writing by form and style alone since the success of the writer comes with the engagement of an enlightened reader, but form and style must always be taken into account.

One issue that warrants discussion in contemporary American letters is that of minimalism. There exists a trend in many contemporary literary circles that a minimalist approach is the only accepted aesthetic in a time of text messaging and the general linguistic economy so prevalent in today’s society. Undeniably, there has existed a trend toward a certain type of minimalism in American literature for the past century, from Hemingway to Carver to post-modern writers such as Barthelme. Still, contrary to popular belief, these trends do not warrant the abandonment of the influences of Faulkner and like-minded authors, writers unafraid of high-sentence and verbosity. In fact, the influence of Faulkner is prominent in some of today’s best writers. Highly influential, world-renowned writers such as Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy exhibit their affinity toward Faulkner in their best work. For example, the conclusion

of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is reminiscent of some of the more notable endings of Faulkner's novels:

And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (335)

The rhythmic patterns, the repetition and the diction of the above quote call to mind the conclusion of *Absalom, Absalom* (although the conclusion to *Blood Meridian* is arguably more effective):

"Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"
"I don't hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. *I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!* (303)

Still, the argument that “less is better” persists in the minds of many popular writers and their acolytes these days. Some writers see this minimalism as a sort of default style, the only place to go after post-modern writing. As society devolves, so goes language, and we are expected to revert to a sort of post-apocalyptic primitivism. However, writers enter into this form of thinking at their own peril; it is foolish to believe that less is more when most of the time, less simply equates to less. Some writers do achieve great literary success with a minimalist aesthetic. However, there is a cultish devotion to the minimalist aesthetic that produces countless horrible, detestable writers whose work litters the internet and experimental journals, as they try to copy those who have done something effective with a minimalist aesthetic.

I’m not advocating that a writer dismiss economy of language, which I see as a separate issue. There is something to be learned from modernism and post-modernism in that some economy of language is necessary, in most cases, to improve the text. Writers need to edit out passages that do not effectively contribute to the work. I would never advocate a complete return to Victorian-style novels and their cumbersome verbosity. Less is usually better in that sense, since good writing should be concise. One should consider today’s audience and exceedingly shorter attention spans unless one’s intent is completely solipsistic writing. A writer’s style should reflect the essential elements of that writer’s own time. However, catering to all of society’s whims is not the answer either. Writers such as Barry Hannah epitomize the hybridization of economy and precision with style and depth. Prose such as the following, from the story, “Water Liars,” exemplifies Hannah’s superb utilization of the English language:

I dropped my beer and grew suddenly sick. Wyatt asked me what was wrong. I could see my wife in 1960 in the group of high-schoolers she must have had. My jealousy went out into the stars of the night above me. I could not bear the roving

carelessness of teenagers, their judgeless tangling of wanting and bodies. But I was the worst back then, I dragged the panties off girls I hated and talked badly about them once the sun came up. (6)

Even with this sparse, concise approach to language, Hannah demonstrates an appreciation for stylistic concerns that many contemporary minimalist writers do not. His short story collection, “Airships,” as well as his novel, *Ray*, convey a mastery and knowledge of a rich literary tradition, and every word has an impact on the story.

In my fictional work, conciseness of language is important. I think there is a common misconception that a long sentence is somehow less concise. It’s certainly achievable to write a well-developed, long sentence and still maintain precision. Many writers of my generation don’t seem to get that. They seldom stray from the short simple sentence, ignoring the example of great writers such as Hannah.

Many writers also debate about what’s more important, fiction that focuses primarily on ideas and plot, or fiction that pays specific attention to style and imagery. I believe that good fiction should do both. I realize that it’s common sense for someone to say this, but achieving both is easier said than done, and most writers tend to fall on one side of the fence or another. My goal is to achieve the kind of fiction that offers profound statements about life in subtle ways, while engaging readers with dialogue and imagery. In my opinion, many of the best books ever written are very idiosyncratic, simultaneously conveying substantial insight while dazzling the reader with precise, yet ornate, language. In these cases, the author’s style enhances the figurative as it does in novels such as *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, and others. However, books that are too overtly political often wander into dangerous territory. Too much focus on politics, for example, can render a literary work unfaithful to art. This is not to say that there is no room for

politics in Art, only that when the political message compromises artistic integrity, it becomes problematic. There are limitations when politics drowns out aesthetics and the result is sometimes bad writing. Subtlety is appreciated in these situations as opposed to a direct treatment of politics.

Again, themes and politics should be explored primarily through the figurative, through literary devices. As Hemingway said, "...I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg" (57). For example, in my stories set in northern Michigan, the grandfather represents a generation of men who, if they grow old, witness major changes to society; they either die "young" like the grandfather or eventually relinquish their former glory. The grandfather is a member of what some have referred to as the "Greatest Generation," the young adults of the World War II era. Some camps glorify the people of this time, downplaying flaws while others emphasize the issues of gender, racial and socio-economic disparity. This sort of oversimplification on both sides blurs the truth. As a writer, I convey the grandfather, grandmother and other characters as microcosms of their respective generations, celebrating humanity and the respective eras in all their glories, splendors and flaws. It is through these examples that one finds a sort of truth – a universal epiphany through multiple voices. I don't believe it is necessary to beat the reader over the head with such ideas – if one reads closely, the deeper implications are certainly there, but the story is never didactic.

The description employed in these stories and the attention to generational differences are also intended to evoke a sort of nostalgia while also exploring deeper thematic issues. The stories are set in the 1980's because a major shift occurs at this point in history. World War Two veterans are moving past middle age into their later years, and baby boomers, (hippies and

conservatives alike,) are continually increasing their dominance in mainstream society. The mainstream world is changing rapidly and the shadow of the “Greatest Generation” is slowly fading into the background. Of course, the grandfather leaves the scene before his time, bowing out from a world that will soon be ruled by political correctness, a world that would surely despise his very existence. Yet, what is he but a man, flesh and blood? He stands as a pillar of strength but demonstrates all of humanity in his complexity and weakness. He is victim, tyrant and ultimately, mortal, despite his larger-than-life presence that the book is built around and within.

The story is set in northern Michigan, in part because I grew up there, and because it is a place worth writing about in the context of the novel’s themes. I believe that in my fiction it’s important for me to return to the roots I discussed at the beginning of this essay. My home state is a place that prospered economically until problems began in the 1970’s and 80’s, with all of the concerns about the auto industry and other problems that led to a bleak economic situation for residents. I’m not the first to write about my particular neck of the woods, but I am the first writer to treat this place and its people with the appropriate literary respect. Up to this point, the most notable writer to make this area a subject of literature is Hemingway. In his Nick Adams stories and the short story cycle, *In Our Time*, Hemingway uses the eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan as setting, treating the nature so prevalent in that area with a certain reverence and some of the local characters, at times, with a certain distance, condescension and flatness. Although Hemingway summered in this area, he is technically an outsider (his primary residence was near Chicago) and, although he is held in high esteem in northern Michigan, any local could tell by his treatment of the area that he doesn’t quite fit in. He is a well-to-do suburbanite with an affinity for nature and fly fishing. With my fiction, I attempt to bring an idiosyncratic treatment

to the place and people that someone like Hemingway might not, because he simply doesn't know the place as intricately as I do, and even if he did, he has what is, essentially, the perspective of a tourist. Writers like Jim Harrison also set some of their work in northern Michigan, but I think readers would find that our respective styles and treatment of the area are quite distinct, if one compares our texts. Also, Harrison tends to focus more on nature and I, despite the attempt to familiarize the reader with the setting, deal more with people.

The experimental short fiction also included in my thesis is set in urban settings like Monterrey, Mexico and Flint, Michigan, urban settings that I'm also quite familiar with. I don't believe that writing necessarily needs to be set in a place that is familiar to the author, but I do believe that such a connection makes the writing stronger. In all of my work, I strive for an authenticity of voice, character, place and theme, and there's no doubt that it's easier to write about a place when one has more knowledge and familiarity with the place.

With all of this in mind, I believe the greatest accomplishment during my time at UTPA was moving away from a stilted, formal-sounding dialogue, to an attempt to capture the real dialogue of the place. When you come from a background like mine, there's a good chance that you don't speak and write the language of academia without some re-training. In my case, after years of trying to write "properly," there was a fear of letting go of proper dialogue to explore a more authentic dialogue, lest others would view me as "uneducated." What I've learned is that good art doesn't always represent proper speech patterns. On the other hand, there is always a danger in trying to simply reproduce the way people speak. A writer shouldn't just imitate how characters would say something verbatim, but find a manner in which to represent these speech patterns artistically, while maintaining a stylized form of authenticity.

In my opinion, what unites all of the work in this collection, from the stories about northern Michigan to the experimental pieces, is an attempt to explore the intricacies of human nature through subjects and characters that are working class. With my fiction, I employ the culmination of all my acquired literary knowledge to bring a distinct new voice to life. I'm attempting to engender a form of working class literature that remains true to the people and places represented, and to my own experiences, as well as to a rich, literary tradition. With this collection comes the humble beginning of my contributions to American literary fiction, an endeavor I do not take lightly. I continually work to improve my prose and have already worked many a nightshift to refine it.

CHAPTER II

BREAKFAST SHOTS

It's open war in Grandpa's driveway, man against bird. So far, Grandpa don't need help. Man, that old guy can swing an axe. Never seen nothing like it, the way blood shoots out little white chicken necks and paints the limestone. There's still two, three running round, no heads, every time he pins another one down on the elm stump. If chickens had souls, they might look like the steam spilling out their necks to the frost. The killing part ain't all that bad but I got a empty stomach and I puked up in my mouth twice. Death is the worst smell. Even chicken death makes the rotten garbage in a summertime dumpster smell sweet. My eyes water with the cold air and the gas from all them carcasses. Every time I catch a fresh whiff, I gag. Really something to see the way Grandpa works through them birds, though.

"Pay attention!" He says, "Gonna do a turkey." He wrestles it down, tries to steady the long gray neck on the elm block, half-choking it while its drumsticks kick his red flannelled shirt.

"Keep still you bastard." It's the first time I've heard him curse. He's the kind of man curses with his face, not saying a word most the time. Turkey's no match for Grandpa. A blue-red slab of eyes and beak that was his head falls to the rocks with one sloppy hack. Sweat rolls down Grandpa's nose and he's breathing heavy. He hands me the axe.

“Your turn, boy.”

I grab the handle. “Yep, it’s heavy,” he says. He sets up a block of firewood and grunts something that sounds like “Here.”

My first swing I want to show Gramps I’m a man. I miss the wood and almost take off my big toe.

“Easy,” he says, “boy. One chop down the middle all you need.”

Second try isn’t much better but I hit the wood. He nods and grabs a chicken by the neck.

“No Grandpa,” I say, “I can’t do it.” I feel like a pussy. Grandpa says, “Just swing easy and straight. You hit my fingers, boy, your head’s on the block next.”

I line it up best I can, see the steel slice through feathers and veins to the stump. It must be a miracle cause I close my eyes and it falls right down the middle. It’s cleaner’n I expected: blood leaks out sort of slow, pouring down over the limestone, black like chainsaw oil. It drips and rolls off the stump and mixes into Grandpa’s turkey and chicken blood. Grandpa nods and grabs the carcass.

“Breakfast,” he says.

Front porch is a real mess, with old tiles and tar-paper rolls all over. Uncle Jack pounds away up on the backside the roof. Can’t see him, just the dirty white old walls and a silver steel ladder. Wind’s picking up from the north, so chicken duty’s better’n crawling around up there. Land around the house is pretty much open, except for the orchard. Grandpa’s one of the few people left round here trying to grow. He’s got a big enough field but the land here is rough for crops and the summer heat don’t last enough to get a good harvest. The winter wheat and corn’s fine, but not much else worth it. Most houses in the county got more trees right outside the

house. All wide open here. The wind really whips through the fields and the patch of cement and limestone that runs 'tween the house, red barn, apple orchard and Grandpa's work garage. Closest tree line's a quarter mile south. Goose bumps pop out the bare part of my arms, where I rolled the sleeves to keep off the blood. Didn't help much. There's blood all over me anyway and it's just colder, not having sleeves. Month ago, I was chest-deep in Lake Huron. Now, feels like snow's coming any day. Hard to believe, just two weeks ago we camped down at Search Bay. Caught lake trout big as Cousin Tommy from Jack's row boat. We coulda lived a month out there on raspberries and trout, whittlin' driftwood around the campfire. No boots, no work, no chickens, just the warm sand on our feet and the shade of the spruce and pines to our backs. Just thinking about all that warm makes me feel even colder today.

I scrape my boots and step up to the screen door. It creaks when I reach in for the brass knob on the wood door with my slimy chicken fingers. Stepping in, I get a good whiff of my own stink before the smell of eggs and kielbasa fogs up the breezeway. My boots leave a blood trail on the green tile, so I wipe up the worst part with my sleeve. Grandma bangs around pots and pans in the kitchen. The sink runs full blast.

"Buck, that you? Bring me the garbage bags. Grab yourself a pop."

"Where?"

"Behind the wringer washer."

Everything's old in the back room, but it all works just fine. Grandma reminds me that every time I tease her about all these antiques. Says they made everything better way back then. The wringer washer, the iron, the oak laundry table – they all gotta be least as old as Grandma. I step out with bag and bottle. Walk fast past the brown wall to the kitchen, over a row of nasty old

work boots, gloves and tennis shoes. The kitchen's hot and messed with feathers, bags, boxes, newspaper and meat all around. Grandma's making raspberry jam when I give her the bags.

"My hands," she says, showing me a red jam mess. "Put 'em on the counter."

Grandpa sits down at the head of the table. Doesn't wash the blood off his hands, just starts eating. Grandma made me wash up. Take off my sweat shirt. Grandpa's sweating real good now and his brown overalls are red and purple-stained.

"Fetch me the bottle, woman." He winks at me and slaps Grandma's ass. She looks at me. Her mouth wants to say something, but it opens and closes and she don't. She pours from a fifth of Canadian Mist and slams the shot glass down on the chipped white formica in front of him. I wonder if she loves him. Even in their wedding picture she's got a sour face. Same look she makes now when Grandpa downs the shot and nods to my Coke.

"Good, boy, you brought the mix. First things first though. Afore the cocktails, we put some hair on your chest." He takes another shot, fills it up again and slides it over to me, like in a Western.

"Just a little eye opener."

"He's only twelve, Eddie." Grandma fixes his plate.

"Almost thirteen," I say.

"Wet your whistle. Atta boy. See that. Boy's got my blood in him. Takes after old Gramps."

"Gene and Mary gonna have your nuts in a wringer, old man," says Grandma.

"Brought Gene into this cruel world an bygod I'll take him out. Any man afraid of his own seed ain't much a man at all."

Both my eyes're open now and Grandpa fills the shot glass again.

The kitchen looks fuzzy. Everything moves slow motion – Grandpa, Grandma, the water from the sink. The clock ticks louder. Grandpa's snorts more angry. The chipped white ceramic on the counter drips blood and yellow chicken juice. Brown paper grocery bags full of feathers rock back and forth under air from the steel cage fan that moves side to side. Gramps bites his cracked lips, his face white-red and peeling. He shakes his head, snorts and pours another shot. I look at the *Last Supper* on the side wall, hoping he won't pour me another one, but he does. I drink it slower than the last one and start to gag before it's halfway down. Reminds me of shitty cough medicine. Grandma gives Gramps a love tap on the back of the head before she sits to his right and lights up a brown, filtered cigarette. Almost can't see her black curly hair under the red handkerchief, the same kind Gramps has hanging out his overalls. He plugs one side of his nose to shoot a string of snot out the other and wipes it on his flannel sleeve. Old country music plays on the radio till news comes on. Grandma takes another drag and puts out the cig in a Hills Brothers can.

“Take the gizzards and slop and whatnot to the burning barrel.” She hands me a couple of Hefty bags heavier'n they look.

“Not so fast. Finish that there shot afore you go,” says Gramps.

“The hell he will,” says Grandma.

“Watch your mouth, woman. We don't need no lip from you, do we boy.” He winks at me while he slaps her ass again, a lot harder than last time.

It's a hell of a thing, being drunk. My arms and legs move but it don't feel like it's me. The steam coming out my mouth looks like Grandma's cigarette rings. I sing a whole verse of some dumb old country song before I notice Uncle Ray's smirking at me.

"I'll take those, Buck Owens," he says while I stand there looking stupid at him by the barrel. "The bags, fuckface. Damn, boy, thought you was s'posed to be the smart one. No common damn sense, just like your Aunt Virginia. Whole lotta good schoolin' did her. Damn waste a money, you ask me."

Veins stick out his neck. I try hard as I can to not laugh. I can't feel my fingers real good now. They sting they're so numb, but Ray pissed off is funny. Don't think I've ever seen old Ray happy. Not really. His words might as well fall on the concrete slab under the burning barrel with the spit shooting from his lips. I'm not listening to a damn thing. He slams the chicken bags into the rusted oil drum, and that's when it starts to pour. He pulls a Zippo out his shirt pocket.

"Go get that. The fucking can. 'Bout two gallons there?"

I slosh enough on the right knee of my jeans to light the barrel. Hand the can to Ray and he flips his Zippo.

"Get to the garage. Ain't gonna let up for a while."

A bottle cap clinks on the garage floor. Gramps hands Uncle Ray a Schlitz. Ray takes the bottle, looks at me and says, "See that frigerator? That's a fucking death trap."

"Don't make 'em like that anymore." Gramps clears his throat and spits on the floor.

"Like a fuckin' coffin you get stuck in one of them things. You're inside, door gets latched up, you're meat in the old icebox."

"Got that back in forty-nine," says Gramps, "couple years after WWII."

“You were in World War II?” I look Gramps in the eyes.

“Don’t dick around and stick one of your brothers or cousins in one of them fridges,” says Uncle Ray. “You do that, they suffocate. Saw it on the TV. Monoxide poison it’s called.”

“Yep, first electric ice box we seen. Anniversary present for the old lady.” Grandpa spits.

“Were you in the war?” I hate when older family don’t listen.

“You been drinking, boy?” Ray stares me down.

“We might had an eye opener. Ain’t that right, boy.”

“Christ, Pa, he’s twelve. Just a little shit. It’ll be your ass when he goes home to Mary.”

“Don’t you blaspheme, boy. Asides, she’s Irish. There ain’t no other but that this boy’s gonna be a drinker. Gets it from both sides, right boy.” He spits and pulls the snuff can from his back pocket. “Boys want a pinch.”

“You okay, Buck. Whatever you do, don’t piss. Break the seal, you’ll be pissing all day.”

Soon as Ray says it, I feel like I gotta piss.

“Go sober up and help out the old lady,” he tells me.

I follow the bloody trail from the garage back to the house, trying not to step on any heads or turkey slime. The rain stopped but there’s puddles all down the driveway. Gramps and Uncle Ray fire up the grinder. I hear it hum in the garage. It can’t be no later’n noon, but the sky’s darker. The air numbs my fingers, even though the sun peeks out from the grey. My right boot sinks past my ankle in mud. I really gotta piss now, so I squish away into the maze of apple trees off the west side of the house. I’m already pulling down the buttons on my jeans while I’m ducking into the trees. I can’t get the last button, but the crotch heat feels good on my hands, so I stop, warm my fingers for a few seconds, then peel it out. Feels good letting out the poison. It’s a

real yellow color. I heard my mom tell the old man one time that dark piss means you're not drinking enough liquids. Sounds like bullshit to me. Gramps and I been drinking liquids all morning. I'm not playing with myself, but I keep my hands down by my dick for a little after I pull up my long johns, just to warm my hands some more. It feels good, all cozy down there, so I'm making strange noises when I feel a hand on my shoulder. Whoever it is got little girlie hands. I turn around, buttons undone, to give him hell.

"What you doing, you fucking faggot." I'm looking Father Pierre in his almighty face, but it's too late to stop the words.

"Lovely. I was looking for your grandmother, son."

"She's out here inside the kitchen." I always get nervous and say stupid shit around people like Father Pierre, people that always sound right, always say smart shit when they talk. The whiskey shots sure ain't helping either.

"Profanity is a sin, my son. Consider your eternal soul. Break ties with those who would lead you on the path to damnation: 'But if you do evil, be afraid, for it does not bear the sword without purpose; it is the servant of God to inflict wrath on the evildoer.'"

"Aren't you sposed to be a forgiver, priest?" He gives me a snot prick look but bites his tongue 'cause Grandma walks over from the front porch. She hands me another bag of chicken scraps.

"Morning, Father." Her face lights all up when she sees this fake. "Hey Buck, take this out and have 'em burn it." She stops, sighs and puts her hands on her hip. She pats me on the head and lights up a brown cigarette. They wait to talk till they know I can't hear em.

Gramps is sharpening axes inside the garage. The garbage barrel is filled to the top so I leave the bag at the side of the garage. Ray must've walked out for a few minutes. I'm thinking he mighta gone home until he walks back in with a shotgun.

"Fuckin' squirrels" is all he says. Gramps is sweating and he stops to wipe off the axe blade. Then, he grabs another smaller one. He walks back to the chicken coop, double-fisted, and I gotta say it.

"Why two axes?"

"One's a axe. Nothers a maul."

"What you use 'em for?"

"One's for chickens, one's for bigger birds. Geese and turkeys and whatnot," says Uncle Ray, smirking, loading shells into the twelve gauge.

"Oh," I tell em, looking down. I'm kinda wondering which one is what but I s'pose the bigger-handled one with all the extra metal must be the maul. I know what it means to maul. Learned it from a book I read in Mr. Miller's class. The bigger one would do a better job mauling, so I leave it at that.

"Hey, get out here, boy." Uncle Ray is shouting like nuts just outside the garage. "Take a shot at them squirrels. Already got me two of those bastards." Grandpa nods out toward the door and Uncle Ray, so I go. Gramps always says you can never get too much target practice. Never know when things are gonna get tough, but when they do, all's you can really count on is family. "Nothing's thicker'n than blood." That's what he always says. "The law won't protect you, the church won't save you and the government sure's hell don't love you." I ain't never heard him

say he loved nobody neither, but he's always talking about taking a bullet, even for the "least of his family." I know for a fact he'd do it too. All of us would.

Ray holds out the twelve gauge in firing position and helps steady it into my hands. I line up the bead with the closest target. The first shot almost knocks me down. Stings my shoulder from the kick. I'm used to a .410. Makes me off a little but I graze a fat little red squirrel enough to stun him. He just holds put there on the wet gravel. Uncle Ray walks over, picks him up by the hind end and smashes his head against a stump.

"No sense in wasting a shell. Tag 'nother one."

This time, I pop one in the neck hard enough to take it down for good. I hear the rest of the shot spray into the west wall of the barn.

"Nice shot. Go pick it up."

I walk past the turkey pen to the tool shed by the barn and bend down over the squirrel to see if it's moving. I grab it by the legs and look into its little black eyes, the head half-hanging from its body. The thing's heavy, limp and dead in my glove hand. Uncle Ray hands me his buck knife.

"Here, keep the tail. Then bag 'em with them ones. I'll clean 'em and we'll fry 'em up for dinner tomorrow."

I'm still not sure just what I'm supposed to do with the squirrel tail but I put it in my coat pocket. That makes Ray smile. My head's starting to spin faster, kinda like when you have the flu.

"I think I'm gonna check on Gramma," is all I can spit out and I walk to the house again. Smart money says the main course for dinner tomorrow *will* be squirrel, or chicken. I don't mind the taste of squirrel so much – it's not a half bad meal when people know how to cook 'em right:

with some butter, onion slices and season salt – just the shot’s a problem. Nothing worse than eating rabbit, squirrel or partridge and getting a broke tooth with the shot. No way to really help it though, I guess, less you do all your small game hunting with a .22. Now that I’m thinkin’ on it, not much fun when people don’t know how to bone fish proper neither. How many times I almost choked on a fish bone? Grandma gets it right most the time, though. Best cook I know. Always takes extra time to dig out the fish bones and really gets in there to pull out the shot from the squirrels. She’s hanging some socks and underwear on the clothesline when I’m walking all dizzy up to the house. She stops when Father Pierre says something and puts his hand on her shoulder. He moves it, kinda nervous, when they see me.

“You look like hell, son. What we gonna do with that old man, eh? Go lay down. You done enough for today.” Father Pierre looks away. Fine with me, so I move straight through to the house, bloody boots and all. I wash up in the kitchen and then curl up on the old brown living room carpet. There’s no pillow so I ball up my jacket. The warm air from the fireplace makes me tired fast. My stomach don’t feel so bad, resting on my side.

I’m scared awake to glass breaking. Room’s still real dizzy, so it takes a while to pull myself up. It’s not that late, ‘cause the sun is bright from the window by the couch. Grandma comes in, stands by the fireplace. Her right eye is purple and swoled up.

“Cops are coming. Damn nosy neighbors. Your Uncle Jack’s with the old man, cleaning him up. When they ask, you tell ‘em that you were playing ball with Jack and it went through the winda. You missed it. The winda smashed. That’s what happened.”

“What really happened?”

“Your Uncle Ray put the old man through the glass.”

“Why? Ray wasn’t even drinking.”

“He was looking out for me, but like I told him, I don’t need his help. Good sons mind their own damn business.”

“What about your eye, Gramma?”

“Oh, this is nothing, you hear me. It was an accident. Hanging pants and slammed my head into the clothesline pole.”

Father Pierre’s black shirt and priest collar hang loose on a kitchen chair but he’s nowhere around – strangest damn thing. There’s bright red on that white collar. All’s I know now is I gotta see Gramps, so I move fast out the front door to the porch. He sits there where the porch meets driveway and rubs the back of his head. His white hair is stained red and he picks out glass, one little piece at a time. Hard to tell where the birds’ blood ends and Gramp’s starts, except the bright patches on his head. He looks me in the eyes, half teared up, half looking to kill. I know somebody’s gotta do something. Gramps can’t. Not right now. I run to the garage to look for Ray’s twelve gauge but he musta took it. It’s half a mile straight through the wood path to my house from the farm. I can run it two minutes, ten seconds. Uncle Jack timed me and says no one can run it faster’n me, so I go for my .410. Only problem, today I’m not me, tripping in the grass dips of the wheat field and catching cedar roots all through the wet land trail that opens to a hill of spruce and birch.

Gramps will know what’s next. I’m ready for everything, a bag of shells, a knife and my single shot at the ready. Only problem, I fail. Cops beat me to Grandma and Gramp’s house by at least a minute. Everybody’s gone. Gramps and Ray left chickens clucking free and they peck

around in Grandma's garden, away from the mess. They already tore up the cabbage, now they're pecking at the potatoes and carrots. I pop one with the .410 and the rest go nuts. I keep walking down the trail to Uncle Ray's, shooting out the windows on all the junk cars to the side. I load, I lock, I ruin everything in my path: the '40 Woody, the '55 Buick, the blue '71 T-Bird, the white and orange Ford pick-up. The .410 kicks light on my shoulder till I'm numb. With my last shell, I hit a yellow deer crossing sign Uncle Jack stole and hung from a birch. The shot bounces back at me. It hits my chin, left ear, chest and falls on the sand around my boots. Hurts like hell, but there ain't no blood I can see. Then, I pull the knife. I stab everything worth stabbing, running fast I can down the trail. Uncle Ray'll be pissed about the T-Bird. Bought some parts to fix it up for next summer. Might tell him tomorrow I saw the neighbor, Esther's kid, run through here with a gun. Or, maybe I won't say shit.

I should run back home and get my pup tent – the one Dad brought back from Nam. Grab my pack and hike to Hessel. It's night, though, and I'm hungry: got no money and no more ammo for the .410. Mom and Dad aren't coming home today. Grandma's supposed to feed me, and my gut's bout to give in. I walk past the field, the junk cars, the coop and make the turn north by the garage to Grandma and Grandpa's driveway. Most the chicken mess is gone, but there's still blood on the path to the front door. Even in the dark, anyone could see it. No noise comes from the house. The kitchen is quiet and dim, just the light over the sink on. The chicken parts are gone and the room has a strong Clorox smell. Gramp's bottle, just a couple shots left, sits at his place on the table. Grandma's back is turned. She reaches over to crank on the burner while she keeps washing dishes. Smells like there's stew in the pot.

“Might as well set down,” she says, not turning around.

CHAPTER III

MALCOLM

The hot red lines roll down from Blake's nostrils, into the steam of his mouth. I swing again, my gloved hand in a sloppy half-fist, thumping his purple left cheek. My wrist throbs. Blake takes a shot at my face but I move enough that he only gets the bottom of my chin. Ronnie LeVasseur steps in front of me and grabs my arm before I can swing back. My chin burns and pulses in the cold. The wind stings my bare ears, but I look at Blake and laugh. Then I give him the evil eye and tell him to come get some more. The bump on his nose is turning black and he's spitting blood in the snow. Blake gets even more pissed and tries to swing at me again, but Jay Creekmore grabs the back of his coat and makes him trip on the ice. Everyone in the circle around us laughs at him, even his girlfriend Justine.

"Hope it was worth it, Buck fuck," he says. "Turning on your friends for a fucking retard."

I look over to Malcolm. His thick brown frames are snapped where the black electrical tape used to hold them together. He grips the two pieces of broken frame in his hands, still kicking and crying on the icy sidewalk like a baby.

"Get up," I tell him. "Time to be a man, Malcolm."

The blood on his face is dark red, like the bricks of the school behind him. It's frozen raw on his ears and lips – everywhere – except for the gush from his nose and the parts of his cheeks where the tears are running down. He smiles and says, "Okay, Buck."

He tries to get up from the sidewalk but his blue flannelled sleeve is stuck to the ice and his feet skid out from under him. Most of the kids laugh. Malcolm smiles but doesn't know why.

Mr. Miller's running to us from the big glass doors under the arches. Somebody snitched.

Kara, the middle school secretary, dropped out of community college when she got pregnant by her English professor. She moved back in with her mom and dad, across the street from Grandma and Grandpa's when little Katy was born. Everybody always says she looks just as good now as before the baby. She has perky tits and a movie-star ass. Her pink lipstick, blue eyes and long brown hair almost make me forget about my sore jaw and knuckles. Kara smiles at me, then opens a black filing cabinet.

"Sorry about your Grandpa," she says.

We would've buried Grandpa last week but they never found the body. Everybody's giving up on him, though. Uncle Ray says they probably dumped him in Lake Superior cause "That lake don't give up her dead." Dad thinks they left him somewhere in Canada, up by Wawa, where they were hunting. Grandma doesn't say much of anything. I think she's afraid he just might come back.

The old wooden clock ticks slow and cruel. Kara is making copies with her back turned to me. I should be worried about the trouble I'm in, but I can't stop staring at those legs – she's

wearing black panty hose and a short black skirt – keeps bending over to give me a look. Then she catches me stare too long. First, she kind of smiles, but her mouth turns sour.

“What’s the matter with you lately, Buck? It’s the second time you’ve been here this week.”

It’s really the third time, but I’m not going to admit that. I’m not going to tell her why I’m really here either. Wouldn’t do any good anyway. I want to tell her that I’m the good guy here. That Blake and Jay and Chris all ganged up on Malcolm, the slow kid whose mother sews mittens to the sleeves of his jacket so he won’t lose them. That they slapped him around and stole his money. I want to tell her that Chris and Blake kept slapping him in his face until he cried, even after they got his money. I want to tell Kara that they called him a pussy and a fag and a fucktard, trying to get him to fight, but Malcolm doesn’t have a mean bone in him and wouldn’t fight back. I don’t want to tell her that I stood there watching all of this because these guys are supposed to be my friends but I want to tell her that Blake took it too far when he sucker punched Malcolm in the nose. It felt good to hit Blake, not just for Malcolm, but because Blake’s had it coming for a long time. All I tell Kara is, “I don’t know,” and she makes a bitchy face and goes back to copying.

I wish Grandpa could’ve been there to see me take down Blake. I never really got a good chance to make him proud of me. Now he’s gone and he’ll never know. Since there was no body, they had a picture of Grandpa on a folding table at the memorial. He wore a suit and tie, his hair slicked back. I’ve never seen him look more uncomfortable. I wonder where the hell they found that picture. He never dressed like that, except for Christmas mass. Everybody got up to say nice things about him at the memorial, even the people who didn’t like him much. Death brings out everybody’s best lies.

Kara's on the phone now and she points to Principal Roth's door, making that C-shaped sign with her thumb and finger. I know she means it's almost time to go in, but I can't help laughing, thinking she's telling me that Principal Roth's got a tiny dick. She would probably know. She gives me another look, like I'm crazy. Blake comes out half-crying. He whispers over to me that he's going to fucking kill me and says I'm a traitor. I tell him that at least I'm not a pussy who beats up retards. Kara looks over at us and Blake just smiles.

"Get back to class," she tells him. "And you – in there."

Principal Roth sits behind his polished oak desk, legs crossed, in his leather swivel chair. He's on the phone but he points to a black plastic chair and shoots me a bad look. The white walls are covered with trout and bass mounts. He's even got a swordfish on the side wall that leads back to Kara's office. His desk is piled high with neat stacks of files and paper and there's a couple copies of *Field and Stream* open on top of the stacks. When he hangs up, he catches me staring at a black and white picture with three men in fishing gear.

"You know who that guy on the left is? Ernest Hemingway. Caught that mess right there on the Fox River. Good looking feller there in the middle's yours truly. You fish, Buck? Rest of your family does."

"Yessir. You friends with Hemingway?"

"Hemingway's dead. What we going to do with you, Buck. I'll tell you, you popped that Blake pretty damn good. You know I can't have fighting like that on school grounds, son."

There's a knock at the door and Kara comes in with a note. Principal Roth rolls his eyes and she shrugs back at him before she goes back out without looking my direction.

“Buck, your family’s been through a lot with your grandpa and all, and I’m really sorry about that. He was a good man. I don’t want to call your old man. He’s got enough on his mind right now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Roth.”

“Now hold on there son, you can’t just go around starting fights. Lunch detention, two weeks, just like that Braune boy. If you ever do this again, you little sombitch, I’ll take you out back and give you ten times what you give Blake.”

“I won’t.”

“Damn straight. Your grades are good enough, son. All I’m saying is don’t fuck it up.”

Mrs. Gurov’s art class is the last period of the day. We’re painting some stupid red flowers in a black pot. “Realism,” she calls it. Katherine Beckett sits next to me, painting away, all serious. When I ask Katherine what time it is, she looks at my painting, and says, “Not bad. If you put some effort into it, you could be good.”

“No way. This is boring.”

“How can you say that? I love this class.”

“Maybe if we could paint something else.”

She smiles and sighs, like she feels sorry for me, but I can tell she wants to laugh. If she didn’t live in a red-brick house and have a lawyer for a Dad, I think I might have a chance with her.

I try to think up something smart to tell her but the end of school bell rings.

Ronnie LeVasseur waves from across the street. Ronnie failed the sixth grade twice. He hangs out with all the kids who smoke by the big rock, across from school. When I turn straight to walk down the hill from the school to Uncle Eddie's house, he starts yelling, "Buck, get your ass over here." I've never hung out with most these guys. I tried smoking cigarettes a few times with Uncle Tony and cigars with Blake and Chris, but it didn't do much for me. Smoking's what this group is all about.

Ronnie's a good guy. He gave me a ride home couple of times when it was so cold your piss would freeze before it hit the ground. He's sixteen already. Got a driver's license and a car, a brown '71 Oldsmobile. I don't like some of his friends though. Carl's got that crazy eye, and Bobby's got a twitch. Me and some of the guys from the team seen them two drinking gas behind the Standard station last summer when we were walking back from baseball practice. They were with some other tall, skinny, curly-haired kid we don't know. They had a milk jug with about fifty cents worth of gas they must've got straight from the unleaded pump. They're all staring over at me now, but I walk over anyway, cause I got to hear what Ronnie has to say.

"You ain't as much a pussy's I thought you was," Ronnie says. "You should've seen this guy bust fucking Blake Braune's nose."

"I hate that Blake cocksucker," Carl says. He's puffing a Marlboro Red and his grey eyes are glazed over.

"Me and Jason's thinking about going to Bay City Lake. Do some donuts on the ice. Wanna go?"

Everybody used to camp up at Bay City Lake in the summer till they found the body. Now it's mostly tourists come out there in the summer with their tents and campers. They don't know any better. They say it was Principal Roth found the body, all puffed-up and rotten. He was

duck hunting out there in a camouflage rowboat when the stink hit him. First he thought it might be a bear. It was a little foggy in the dusk so he rowed around looking for the smell. One of his oars hit the body, Mr. Stash. Roth netted him and rowed him to the south shore landing. He drove in to town and called the cops from the store in Hessel.

Old Johnny Stash had been missing a few weeks. Last anyone heard from him, he was fighting with Brandon Jones over twenty dollars. Brandon did some work around the house for old man Stash. Stash said he did it half-ass and wasn't going to pay him. Next time anyone saw him, he was floating face down in Bay City Lake with a .22 hole between his eyes. That put Roth in a rough spot cause the cops were trying to figure out what happened and started to ask him all kinds of questions. Came out that he was with a woman when he found Stash. She wasn't his wife. Her story kept him innocent from murder but brought him straight to a divorce. Once that was straightened out, common sense told the cops it was Brandon Jones who done it. Somebody broke into Stash's house and left the coffee can where he kept his money open on the floor. Brandon was drunk or high, like always, and went to get his money—maybe a little extra. Since then, they boarded up the windows of Stash's tar-paper shack and hardly nobody goes out to Bay City Lake. This is a dare from Ronnie, so I go.

We stop by the Res to get some gas money. Ronnie's Uncle, Bear, is smoking from a brass pipe, outside the door of his house. The outside walls are half-finished, with tar-paper hanging by the windows. Drops of water fall from the pointy icicles that hang from the top corner of his triangle shaped roof. The water wets the deck in front of Bear's feet

“Hey Bear, spot me a J.”

“I ain't got no more,” he says.

“Bullshit. Linda said you bought an eighth last night, from Mikey.”

“It’s only a eighth, Ronnie. I can’t get no more till next week.”

“You didn’t waste it all already?”

“You boys can have a puff. Just don’t get greedy.”

First Bear passes it to Ronnie, and he gives it to Jason.

“You don’t have to, Buck.”

“No, it’s cool,” I tell him.

“That’s it. Toke it up boy,” says Bear.

It’s my first time smoking weed. I know the smell. Dad and Uncle Tony smoke it all the time. I’m just starting to get a little buzz when Bear wipes the bowl with his black sweater and puts the pipe in his jean pocket. We go into Ronnie’s house for bread and peanut butter. *Stairway to Heaven* is on the black and silver turntable.

“This song’s about getting high,” Jason says.

“No it ain’t,” says Ronnie. “It’s about religion and spirituality and shit like that.”

“You’re both right,” says Bear.

Ronnie grabs a half loaf of bread and a ziplock bag full of change from the counter to get gas in Hessel. There’s no peanut butter. Before we walk out the door, I see the picture of Ronnie’s little brother, Cody. Wasn’t even a year ago now he drowned. Ronnie grabs a half pouch of Beechnut on the way out the door and makes the sign of the cross toward Cody’s picture before he steps out and locks the door.

On the way into town, we pass Anna James and Beth Cortez walking up the hill by the Baptist church. Bear and Jason are in the back seat and they tell Ronnie to roll down the window.

“You beautiful ladies need a ride,” says Bear. “Plenty of room back here.”

“No thanks,” says Beth.

“It’s cold out there,” says Bear. “Come on inside and I’ll warm you up.”

“Gross. Go away,” says Anna.

We’re all laughing until Anna looks over at me.

“Really, Buck? I would expect better from you.”

“Let’s get going,” says Ronnie. “We got more important shit to do than fuck around here.”

He peels out and the tires from the Oldsmobile spray slush and snow on Beth’s jeans and boots.

“Stuck up bitches.” Says Bear. “Who needs ‘em.”

“I’ll take ‘em any day,” says Jason. “I’m tired of jerking off all the time. How ‘bout you, Bear. You wouldn’t do ‘em?”

“Didn’t say that. I’d show them girls something,” he says.

“You realize that’s illegal, Bear,” says Ronnie. “They’re only like twelve or thirteen. You’re what, forty.”

“Thirty-nine. Back in the old days, none of that mattered. Your Great Grandma was twelve when she married my Grandpa. He was fifty. That was normal.”

“Bullshit,” says Ronnie. “That was never normal.”

“Don’t question the wisdom of your elders, you worthless little fuck,” says Bear.

“Be a good elder and make yourself useful,” says Ronnie. “Get us a fifth of Schnapps.”

The Oldsmobile slides to a stop next to the only gas pump in Hessel. Ronnie’s black rosary swings back and forth from the rearview mirrors, hitting the glass of the windshield three

times. The rosary reminds me of the one Great Grandma Marie used to wear. She was always reading the Bible. Went to mass at least four times a week until she got real sick from diabetes. When I was six, she told me this Bible story about a kid named Joseph. His older brothers sold him to slavery cause they were jealous of him. He went through a bunch of shit but he ended-up being a king or something. Great Grandma Marie always said that when people pick on people like that, it's because they're jealous. Used to think this might be true. Blake wasn't jealous when he sucker-punched Malcolm, though. Only reason Blake did it he's a fucking prick. Nobody wants to be Malcolm. Malcolm ain't never going to get rich and shame people like Blake for what they did. Put Blake up against Malcolm a million times, and a million times, Blake wins.

Ronnie is counting up the change. There's almost three dollars in the plastic bag. Bear passes up two dollars from the back seat. Jason's got eighty six cents. I give Ronnie the buck fifty I got.

"Here's the plan. We need some booze, some food and some gas," says Ronnie.

"We ain't got enough for everything," says Bear.

"You get us the bottle. Something cheap. What's left over for gas. Jay, you take care of the food. Buck and I'll keep old lady Eunice busy. Should be just the two of them."

The air's getting colder and the sun's going down. The streetlight in front of the store stutters on and we walk through the door, making the bell ring. There's only one person working, Eunice Murphy. She's stocking cigarettes behind the counter, her silver-black braid swinging side to side. She turns to us and pushes her brown circle frames farther up the bridge of her nose with her ring finger. Her black dress with red flower print covers most her short pudgy body.

"Looks like trouble," she says.

Bear laughs, but she don't. "What's good in the liquor cabinet," he asks her.

"You wouldn't be buying nothing for these boys, would you? You know I can't do that."

"Hell no. Ronnie just give me a ride into town. Needed to get some gas. I needs to get me some fuel myself, know what I mean."

He laughs again and she looks at him serious. It's so quiet when Bear stops laughing, you can really hear the old floor boards creak under Jason's feet while he walks the third aisle, scoping things out.

"Them boys gonna have to leave if I sell you liquor. Wouldn't look right."

Bear nods to the door. Ronnie looks over to Jason. Tells him to hurry. Old Eunice is climbing the step ladder, reaching for bottles when the bell clanks against the glass door. Jason's the last one out the door of the three of us. He bumps his head on the plywood windbreaker around the outside frame of the glass door and almost slips on an ice patch. Ronnie and I jump in the front of the Oldsmobile and Jason in the back.

"Start this fucker up. It's cold." Jason says.

"Got to save gas," says Ronnie. "What you get? Let's see it."

"I got some shit. Just wait a minute."

"Let's get away from here first, I say.

Bear comes out with a little brown paper bag. His eyes are bloodshot and his long black hair blows loose in the wind. He gets in the back and pulls out a glass bottle of Peppermint Schnapps.

"That's a fucking pint," says Ronnie. "I said to get a fifth."

"Wasn't enough left," says Bear.

"Left?"

“Had to get a pack of Marlboro Lights and some ZigZags.”

“Motherfucker. How much left for gas, Uncle Bernard?”

“Don’t call me that you little shit.”

“How much?”

“Sixty-eight cents.”

“Won’t get too far on that. Buck, get out there and pump it. Too cold for me.”

I never pumped gas before. Seen people do it and it looks easy enough.

“Pull the metal lever back,” says Ronnie. “Towards the car.”

I get it to sixty-five cents and try to slow it down but every time I click and let go, it goes up two cents. The dial rolls past sixty-nine, to seventy, by the time I get it to stop.

“Just get in,” Bear says. As soon as I do, Ronnie peels out around the corner, the back tires of the Oldsmobile skidding toward the frozen parking lot of the Marina. The sunset is red and gray over Hessel Bay.

Before my cousin Joe went to the Army, he told me a story about how he was coming back from a party in St. Ignace with Allen Terry and Tom Todd when they were juniors in high school. They lost a basketball game against Brimley, but they usually lost, so it wasn’t a big deal. Allen’s cousin Mark worked at the IGA down by the water in downtown St. Ignace. They picked him up after work so he could get them some beer. Mark told them about a party on 1st street and they all hung out there for a while. It was mostly guys, so they dropped off Mark at about 11:00, after they picked up another case.

They took Old St. Ignace Road back to Hessel so they could drink without having to worry too much about the cops. When they got to Three Mile Road, they turned north to drop off

Tom. On the way to Tom's house, they were passing the airport and Allen dared Joe to take his gray Mustang out to Bay City Lake. Tom said he didn't have the balls. Cousin Joe slid the Mustang into the turn on the left and drove it in.

They got as far as the field by the south side of Bay City Lake and starting doing donuts. They really tore up the ice. So much that they almost got stuck after taking a break to finish off the case of Old Milwaukee out by the open ice. Then Allen dared Cousin Joe to take the car up the hill to the back roads around the lake. Joe knew it wouldn't make it, but he was drunk enough to try. Besides, he didn't want to go home to my uncle and aunt as drunk as he was. Tom and Allen said they'd push if he got stuck. He didn't make it more than a quarter mile up the road from the field, and that's what happened. They spent the rest of the night digging and pushing. By the time they got it turned around and headed back out, it was morning, and the car was running on fumes. They saw people lining up for the sled dog race when they hit Three Mile Road again. Drove right past a state trooper.

We don't have enough gas to drive up there and do donuts, so Ronnie, Jason, Bear and me just drive around Hessel, out to the point, and then we take a backroad to Cedarville. Probably better that way anyway. Don't think any of us are up for pushing the Oldsmobile out of the ditch if we get stuck up there. It's too fucking cold. Jason passes around the bag of cheese puffs he stole from the store. He pulls out some Topps baseball cards and a few cans of sardines.

"Nice job, dipshit," says Ronnie. "You could've stoled something good. These ain't even real Cheetos."

"If you don't want 'em, I'll take yours," I say.

"Give me some of them baseball cards," says Ronnie.

Bear lights a cigarette. We drive out around Hill Island, passing around the Schnapps till it's gone. Doesn't take long the way Bear slugs it down. I get the last shot.

"Backwash," Ronnie says. "Toss it out the window."

It's about eight thirty when Ronnie drops me off. Mom's car and Dad's truck are both in the driveway. The light in the kitchen is on. I try to be cool walking in so they won't notice anything. When I open the door, nobody's there, just half a fifth of Canadian Mist on the kitchen counter and an empty shot glass. I check the bedrooms. Nobody's anywhere around. I get a towel from the bathroom and wash up. I brush my teeth. I feel the three packs of baseball cards Jason give me in the upper left pocket of my coat. Never stole anything before. Guess I didn't really steal anything today either, but it still feels wrong. I think of the cheese balls and start to gag. Almost puke into the sink, so I take a swig of Listerine and roll it around in my mouth. I swallow a little before I can spit it into the sink. When the bathroom door opens behind me, I just about shit myself.

"Where you been?" says Dad. He's in Carhart overalls and red rubber boots, brown work gloves hanging out his back pocket. "Pass me the mouthwash. Got called in to work some O.T. Midnight shift."

"Where's mom?"

"She took your brothers over to Ma's. Virginia picked 'em up. Some paperwork and shit cause of your Grandpa. Should be back any time now."

"Are you okay to drive to work?"

"Might want to change your shirt before the old lady gets home. Smells like smoke."

"Wasn't me. Some of the guys I was with. Not me."

“Shouldn’t do that shit. Did I ever tell you about my old man catching me smoke a cigar?”

“You told me.”

“That’s how they did it in the old days. I’m gonna miss that crazy old bastard. He wasn’t all bad, you know.” I nod until I can’t control my head from tilting down. “You might want to just take a shower. Smell you from two miles away.”

He walks out and I look in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot and I notice the stink now. Other than that, nothing looks too much different than before. When Dad was a kid, Grandpa caught him smoking. Grandpa made him smoke a pack of cigarettes while he beat my old man with a cedar switch. Bent him over a stump with his pants down and just beat his ass till he was too tired to lift his arm. Dad yelled out the first couple times but never cried. Kept smoking till the whole pack was gone. Neither one of ‘em said a word to each other for a whole year after that.

If I get in the shower now, I might make it to bed before mom gets home.

It’s Valentine’s Day and Malcolm hands me a card in the hall. It says, “I love you, Buck. I’m glad you’re my friend.” Anna James grabs it from me and laughs. Then she runs over to Katherine to show her. Katherine rolls her eyes. Got to stop this before it goes too far. I walk over and grab the card back, rip it up and throw it in the black plastic trash bin. Malcolm stares at me, smiling by the white ceramic fountain. I grab his shoulder and tell him, “You got to stop doing things like this. If you tell me you love me and give me Valentine’s Day cards, people are going to call us fags. Don’t you get that?”

“What’s a fag, Buck?”

“Never mind. Just stop giving me things.”

“But I want to give you things. You’re my best friend.”

“No, I’m not Malcolm. We can’t be friends. Don’t you get that.”

“Why not? I love you because you helped me. Nobody helps me like you, Buck.”

“I’m not your friend. I can’t even look out for myself.”

“It’s okay. We can be fags. I don’t care,” he tells me.

I’m sure he doesn’t know what he’s saying, but I can’t stop my fist from punishing his chin. It’s like somebody else took over my body and we’re on the floor, my knee on his chest. Malcolm tries to wiggle away. I push his head down with my palm, making it bounce on the red concrete tiles like a basketball, every time he tries to pick it up. I stop and look around. Nobody’s laughing anymore.

Malcolm covers his face with both hands. He’s crying, his eyes swelling behind his thick, black-taped, brown frames. I get up and slam my fist into Anna’s locker. Everybody’s staring now. Some are laughing again. Maybe at me. Maybe at Malcolm. Somebody yells, “Psycho.” Blake has a shit-eating grin. Before he can make a smart ass comment, I tell him, “Don’t make me kick *your* ass again.” The bell for seventh hour rings. I’m walking away when Blake yells, “Whenever you wanna go, we can take it outside, pussy. You can bring your fagtard for backup when you guys kiss and make up.”

We’re back to painting in Mrs. Gurov’s seventh hour Art class. My flowers aren’t as good as I thought they were yesterday. They got red lines running from the petals into the stems and the potted black dirt. I painted some spots darker than others for no good reason and there are open white places where there shouldn’t be. When we’re finished painting the red flowers,

we'll move on to some other bullshit project. Doesn't really matter. I turn to Katherine Beckett. "I get this Realism," I tell her. I'm still sweating and shaking a little, even though I tried to clean up with a brown paper towel in the restroom.

"Nice for you, Buck," she says.

Just when I'm about to tell her something smart, something that would've made her laugh yesterday – something "charming," like she says – she turns to the window and the red potted flowers. I notice something about her painting: it's almost perfect. I couldn't ever be that patient.

Sixth period I left a Valentine for Katherine in her locker. No way she seen it yet. Told her everything – how beautiful I thought she was – how smart and classy and kind. Wonder if there's time to get it back before she sees it.

Dad got a side job fixing up some summer cabins. When Mr. Roth called him about Malcolm, he told me I'd be helping him out after school a couple weeks. Mostly repairs and some grunt work, but it's cold since they shut off the power till May. These are Fisher's cabins, not Braune's, so I won't have to hear any shit from Blake at school.

"Get the putty," Dad says. He's showing me how to fix leaks. Couple pipes broke with the freeze last night. Our hands and sleeves are wet from the pipe. Dad's coat's full of soot and his face is orange and brown from rust.

"How much," I ask him.

"Not so good, but Fisher says any booze still laying round's mine." He takes a pint of Rootbeer Schnapps out his back pocket for a swig, then hands it to me. "It's okay. Take a pull," he says. The pipe stopped dripping. Dad sets down his tools and motions me outside.

He grabs a milk jug of gas from by the cabin door and walks out by the dock. He pours most the jug on a pile of scrapwood and garbage bags, then lights it up with a rolled up piece of newspaper.

“Bring that rocker over here,” he says. “Throw it in.”

It’s nightfall – that early winter kind, and a light breeze from the lake makes the birch leaves bounce just enough to make a smooth rocking noise. There’s music from the chimes on the main cabin. Dad looks calmer than I seen him for a while, warming his gloves over the junk fire.

“How them fingers?” He asks. “Some places it never gets this cold. Spent all winter down in Georgia one year. Got cold but nothing like this.”

“I never knew you went to Georgia.”

“Basic Training and Ranger School. You know there’s no sweets in Basic Training? Don’t stop some people though. This guy – we called him Candyman – he was always after the sweets. Stole cake and pie from the NCOs for some time till they wised up to it.”

Dad passes me the bottle for another swig. Never seen him drink Rootbeer Schnapps before but he always says any liquor’s good liquor – especially free liquor. There’s a crunch in the woods behind a cabin. We stop a few minutes to listen but don’t hear nothing else.

“Faun, maybe,” Dad says. “One time they call us down to formation, two-thirty in the AM. Caught Candyman stealing cake from a West Point Cadet. They send ‘em to learn. We was all pissed off cause you hardly get sleep anyway. Whole battalion stood at attention while they smoked the Candyman. Then they smoked us.”

“Why? If you didn’t do nothing.”

“The way it is, Son. The brotherhood – everybody pays for the sins of the one. Fair or not.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Maybe, but that’s that. After they smoked us, twenty-five mile road march in full gear. Candyman sat his ass back at the barracks and ate cake.”

“ What happened to Candyman?”

“He got processed out. That night he got the worse blanket party I ever seen. Couple guys held him in his bunk while the whole platoon give him a beating. Even took shine boxes to his legs and back. Never seen it like that.”

“Did you get him too?”

“Never forget that look he gave me the next day in the latrine. He was a skinny little shit with birth control glasses. But there he was – judge and jury – beady-eyed little sombitch. Thought I had it figured out till I saw that look. Now don’t know what to make of anything really.”

It’s clear over Government Bay and the stars light up the black space over the lake and trees. We have a couple shelves and window frames to tend while the junk fire smolders down, so we go to the truck for a level and tape. In the truck light, I see my clothes are as orange and rusty as Dad’s and the smoke stink might be a two shower job. Dad tries to find a good station on his portable AM, but there’s no music, just talk. Snowmobiles rev it up on the bay. Their lights point to Big LaSalle.

CHAPTER IV

SMELT

In late April the bank that leads up to the mouth of the Carp River is a five mile stretch of shantytown. Whiskey and beer bottles everywhere, the Carp curves and cuts its way through pine, sand and birch into Lake Huron. Bonfires and frosted taillights mark the way down the dusty path over mud ruts and maple roots. Old men sit smoking on rusted tailgates, bologna sandwiches in the cooler, booze at the ready. Kids slosh through sand and clay in pint-sized hip-waders that stretch to their necks. The dippers' nets shine in our headlights when the trail curves the truck toward the water. Dad steers down the campsite road that shadows the river and Uncle Tony takes up from the passenger side.

“Boys hungry?” Dad tosses back a greasy paper bag with venison and butter sandwiches.

Me, Johnny, Tommy and Cousin Ryan ride back in the Ford's wood truck bed. Dad rigged the wood frame up and bolted it in when the metal one rusted out. It's painted blue to match the cab, but you can tell it ain't a pro job.

Johnny peels the napkin from the sandwich best he can. “My bread's all wet,” he says. “This sucks.”

I take a bite and get a mouthful of napkin. Don't say a word, just spit it out.

“You boys wouldn’t make it in the Army,” Dad says. He stops for a second, to get more words out. “You don’t even imagine some of the shit we ate then, right Tony.”

Dad slides the glass back window open all the way and holds out his hand. Styx plays on the eight track. The smoky mist drifts up through the night pines. Ryan coughs. I’m sitting on the cooler so I slide back, pop the lid, and pass a couple Old Milwaukeees in to Uncle Tony and Dad.

“What’s the worst thing you ate,” I ask him.

“Bugs, rats, piss,” says Uncle Tony. “Hell, your old man even ate a shit sandwich one time, right Gene.”

“We ate shit sandwich every day back in the Nam.” Dad’s eyes shift back and forth from the road to the rear-view mirror.

Tony looks like the devil with the red glow from the cab around his slick, black hair. Smoke circles hang over his bulletproof cheeks and handle bar moustache. They must’ve been talking about Grandpa again, cause they got that dead quiet look. Then Tony says, “Pass up a couple three more. Gonna two-fist it.” It’s more than five months now Grandpa disappeared, but none of us can forget what happened. Dad says he and Uncle Jack got a plan. Says they’ll bring in Uncle Tony. Dad and Tony got more spare time now. Both of ‘em laid off from the boats. Old Lester Cronin’s gonna get his payback. Dad and Tony were Rangers in the Army.

On the ride out, Ryan told me he heard our Uncle Jack, Dad’s baby brother, tell Colonel Henry the story of Peter Girard last night. When Dad first come back from Vietnam, he found out his sister, Aunt Karen, got pregnant. Grandma told Dad it was a rape, but not to tell Grandpa. The family waited for Dad to get home to help take care of it. That’s when Tony first come up from Texas. Karen kept crying until Dad got the truth out. Peter Girard got drunk and forced her. Choked her pretty little neck with his left hand while he did it. Karen didn’t want Dad to do

nothing 'cause Pete was her boyfriend right up to the day before, till Karen found out about Pete's wife in Columbus.

Pete Girard didn't know Dad or Tony. His family always come up for the summer from Ohio since he was a little shit, but the only Metzger he knew was Aunt Karen. Jack told Henry it was easy for Dad and Tony to get Pete out to the Carp to smelt dip. They smoked a few times with him behind Cronin's Hardware and sealed the deal. Jack rode out to the river with 'em, in the back of Tony's Dodge. Says Pete was a cocky drunk – bragged the whole trip out that he didn't have to work 'cause he lived off his old man's money – tire business down in Ohio. He told Jack he was gonna trip acid when he got out to the Carp. Make it more interesting. Pete wasn't much for fishing.

Neither Jack or Pete seen it coming. Jack went to sleep around midnight and he woke up to the scream. Saw Tony toss something red into a five gallon bucket of smelt. Dad was on top of Pete, holding his right arm down, knee in the small of his back. Tony was holding a bloody buckknife and kicking ground and dust into Pete's face. Jack heard Dad say, "Guess what's next?" Jack walked over to Tony, asked him what was going on. Saw Pete's hand in the bucket. Dad told him, "Go for a walk, you ain't seen nothing. Dump that bucket a smelt while you're at it. It ain't no good anymore." Jack dumped the bucket. Then he heard another splash come from behind him. Nobody saw Pete Girard around town after that. Nobody 'round here missed him.

Ryan says when Jack got done telling Colonel Henry the story, Jack was choked up, but Henry's face didn't change the whole time. All Henry did was puff his cigar and say, "Those're the stains of kin. Yessir – the binding stains of kin."

Dad hits a rut and knocks the sandwich out little Tommy's hand.

"What's it like to smoke them gooks," asks Johnny.

“I hope you never find out, boy,” says Uncle Tony. Dad looks kind of sober all the sudden. He don’t say nothing, but he’s thinking hard.

“What was it like,” I ask him. “Vietnam.”

“Different than you think,” says Uncle Tony. “This one time we’s walking through the jungle. Middle of fucking nowhere, and we hear this noise. Sounds like a baby, but there’s nobody round, and we’re humping through some hot terrain. We’re thinking it’s a goat but it’s a real human fucking baby. Laying there in the paddy, by some plants—look like little palm trees. Sometimes, over there, you might think you’re in Florida or Hawaii or some damned place, but for the bullets all round.”

“A baby?” Says Ryan.

“Sounds like bullshit to me,” says Johnny.

“You wanna hear the story or not,” says Tony. “Platoon Sergeant says to leave it, keep going. Lieutenant Boyle says, ‘Don’t touch it. Might be a booby trap.’ What kind of shit is that? Strapping grenades to babies. But these V.C. don’t fuck around. Do whatever it takes. We saw the kind of crazy nobody believe—less you were there.”

Tony cracks another Old Milwaukee.

There’s nowhere good to park, so Dad circles around back to the north side, over where the sand bar splits the river. We all hop out where the tailgate should be while the Ford jumps and sputters dead, headlights aimed at the river bank. Johnny and I run over to the hard sandy ledge, trying to get a look at the river. It’s six feet down – can’t see much. The water, coffee and milk color, runs fast till it empties in St. Martin’s Bay. The headlights and spotlights all around make it hard to see anything but the steel mesh and poles of the smelt nets. The current crackles loud over old men’s bullshit and the C.C.R. that whines through AM radio. The wind rips

through hard every few minutes, then calms. I snatch the net away from my little brother Tommy, walk the trail down to the water and start to dip. Can't tell if Tommy's gonna cry or he's just shivering up there in his blue hood. Green and yellow snot leaks from both sides his red nose. Everything smells like fish, cedar and smoke. I breathe it all in and step into the muck. The Carp's flow pulls me closer, almost takes me in. Dad anchors me. Must've followed me down. He pulls the collar of my ripped blue coat. Steadies me on the bank.

"This ain't too far from where that kid drown last year, eh Gene," says Uncle Tony from the trail. "Never found him till the next morning. One of the LeVasseur boys. Cory?"

"No, Cody," I say. "Ronnie's little brother."

"Cody. We was here when it happened, eh Gene. Took least a good six pack afore his old man figured out he was missing. S'pose you kinda expect it with a family like that. Breed too much. Too many little bastards running 'round and there's no 'countability for 'em. Old man never heard of propalactics or what? So drunk he couldn't hardly walk too. Wasn't long, though, one of them boys was looking to take back the net from the little shit. Ended the party real quick."

"Had us all out here, shining the river with every light west of Drummond Island," says Dad. "About four in the morning, old man Jacques was down on his knees, crying to God in French. Was daylight by the time that Williams boy saw the red sweatshirt hung up on a root down river, right that way."

"Half the town needed a jump start in the morning," Tony says. "I was one of 'em. So caught up looking for the kid, my headlights was on all night. When the trooper come by, I told him I was good. You know me – I ain't getting help from no fucking pig. Had a quarter pound in

my trunk. Almost got stuck out here cause of it – sweating it out till all the pork split. Funny thing, it was LeVasseur himself who give me a jump. A rough shape that poor bastard was in.”

“Did you see him, Uncle Tony,” Johnny asks him.

“See who? The LeVasseur boy. Yep, we saw the body. Kid was bloated good, only a few hours in the river, right Gene?”

Dad nods. He’s helping Tommy and Ryan dip with the other net. Looks like they’re really catching ‘em too. Dad shines the flashlight on the five gallon bucket to show us. It’s filling fast.

“You never told us what happened with the baby.” Tommy says.

“The grenade,” says Ryan.

“So I see it there. Muddy blanket stuck in a pile of jungle shit. Baby looked clean. Best I could tell, there’s no wire. Big stupid bastard I am, I kneel down to it and tell the platoon to clear out. Sergeant Preston says ‘step away from the baby.’ Tells me, ‘That’s an order, Vega.’ He’s scared shitless, knows I won’t listen to him, and he backs off with the rest of ‘em, except your old man. Gene’s down on the ground there with me, looking for wires under the baby. I remember we looked at each other, thinking we might be blowed to shit any second. Then I picked it up. Nothing—just stopped crying.”

Tony stares out to the dark side of the trail, into the maples.

“Then what happened,” I say. “Did he die?”

“Who?” Says Tony.

“In the Nam,” I say.

“It was a girl,” he says. “About then I got really scared. Started thinking what we was gonna do with it. Couldn’t just leave it there. Boyle wanted to, but he was too churchy to order

us not to. ‘I ain’t responsible for that damned thing,’ he said. ‘You wanna get your dick shot off for a little dink baby, that’s your business. Dumbass grunts.’ That Boyle was alright for a college boy. Your old man rigged up some bandage straps to sling that baby up on his shoulder.”

That’s as far as Tony gets before he’s got to take a piss. He walks out to the tree line with his Zippo and Zig Zags.

Tomorrow’s Good Friday. We got half a day of school, but most of us won’t be there. I must’ve seen about half the guys in my class here – Chris, Jay and Paul. It’s so dark, who knows who else is out there. Got my turn with the hip waders. I was out there a good hour or more. The old man and I went to the shallows but it still was up to my thighs. After a while, you really start to feel the cold in the water, even with the waders. I got my gloves and winter coat on, but there’s no way to keep ‘em dry when you’re half a net deep in smelt. I can really feel the chill now, out of the water. Dipping really works up a sweat, ‘specially when they’re running good. One pull, the net was so heavy, almost took me downstream. Dad was close by again, but even strong as he is, I wonder if he could’ve got me in time if I fell. “Keep your head up and your back straight, less you want to take a dip,” he said. I filled the bucket myself a couple times, the catch shining like Coors Light cans in the headlights of the old Ford. When the five gallon bucket fills, it’s Johnny’s turn in the waders, so I do the dumping. Three black trash bags sit almost full in the truckbed.

The music’s quieter now that most the party crowd’s gone. Only the serious dippers and drunks stick around this late. The slow breeze in from the bay is just cold enough to frost my neck and give me goosebumps on my arms. The spot on the river where we’re at’s got a tree on

the other side, growing sideways out the bank. It swings back and forth real slow over the brown water like an old man in a rocking chair. It's not so crowded on the bank now that most the traffic's gone. Uncle Tony's still smoking with Chester Wolff out by the maples on the other side of the road. The moonlight's bright enough now I can see they're both real serious. Probably talking about Lacey again. She left him on Christmas day and he still breaks down every time he talks about her. There's nothing like a six-foot-three 250 pound Italian-Mexican with a big bushy moustache, fifth of Popov in hand, rolling around in the dirt crying like a baby in his leather Harley jacket. When it happens, about once a week or so, Dad's quick to point out that even though Tony's like a brother, he ain't blood.

Tommy and Ryan sleep in the cab of the pick-up. Their blanket is the canvass tarp strip Dad uses to cover his tools in the truck bed. Ryan's mouth is open like a smelt sucking for water. Tommy's curled up like a bear cub. Rest of the guys took a break from the river. Dad's chugging Old Milwaukee with my baseball coach, Mr. Roth. They're drunk laughing by the cooler in the back. Johnny plays catch with Roth's kid. His name's Johnny too. They're both fifth graders but the Roth kid's a fat little fuck. My brother Johnny's skinny like me. People always say we look like twins, but I'm taller, older.

Colonel Henry and Grandma Clio used to come out here every year, long as I can remember. Never showed up this year, though. They're not big into smelting, but they sit around the fire, drink beer and smoke with the best of 'em. Last year they come here around one in the morning with some hot plates of pulled pork, mashed potatoes, brown beans and barbecue sauce. Must be five in the morning now and I'm starving. The venison sandwiches and one can of brown beans we had are long gone now. There's a part of me that keeps thinking any minute the Colonel's Lincoln's gonna turn down the path to find our spot on the river. Colonel Henry will

light his cigar, take off that beaver-skin hat and scratch his head while he tells me in Kentucky drawl to help Grandma with the food in the backseat. It'll warm my hands through the foil Grandma wrapped around the plates and I'll feel that hot air from inside the car, just before it slips out into the dark morning frost and my face will remember what it felt like to not be outside, to not be here.

The only headlights we see for now are headed out to Mackinac Trail.

The night's catch steams in silver piles from buckets and trash bags in the bed of Dad's truck. A few smelt flop around in small empty spaces in the back. Some are just there, frozen to the wood on the bed. I love smelt dipping, but I hate that fish stink, and smelt, in these numbers, can do some real damage to your nostrils. That cold, muddy fish smell that grocery store fish can't match. The way they're piled up there, I'm not sure how we're gonna get back home, all six of us, without somebody sitting on a pile of fish. We really killed 'em tonight. There'll be smelt frying for weeks.

There's no good reason for me to go back down to the river, but I feel a urge to get down there one more time and feel the little scaly darts pull the net downcurrent. Dad and Tony found a campfire ring. They're smoking by the fire, roasting a couple smelt. Dad moves the stick to different spots in the pit to keep 'em from burning. All three younger boys're sleeping in the cab of the truck, windows fogged from snoring. They all got mud on their jackets and pants. Ryan and Tommy got their sweatshirt hoods and gloves on. Johnny's wearing Dad's camouflage Budweiser cap with the brim loose over his eyes and nose. The cab smells like fish sweat and wet sand when I open up the truck for another trash bag.

“You going back down,” Dad says.

“We got enough damn smelt already, dude.” Tony puffs and chokes a little on his joint.
“It’s not all about the fish.”

“No, but the fishing makes it better,” the old man says. “Come sit down, Buck. You’re old enough to hear this.”

I want to go back to the river. See the smelt caught in the steel mesh and feel the cold numb of the steel net through my brown jersey gloves. The icy water of the Carp feels safer, warmer than Tony and Dad’s cold faces over the fire pit. Dad points for me to stay put, so I take my seat on a half-slab of birch that’ll feed the fire before dawn.

“Your Grampa was a good man,” says Tony. “Gave me work and a place to stay when we got back from the war. I’d do anything for him.”

“Can’t do anything for him now, Uncle Tony,” I say, feeling the ice inside my chest, “He’s gone. Ain’t nobody can bring him back.”

“He ain’t coming back, but we sure’s hell gonna do something about it,” Dad says.
“That’s my old man. You listen to me and listen good, boy—I don’t want you telling no one about this, not your mother, nobody. You got me?” His hazel eyes burn through my frosted soul. All I can do is nod and look down at the roots that stick out through the last few patches of ice.

Last year, out here at the Carp, the Colonel got into it good with Uncle Ray about church and God. Uncle Ray was talking about how Colonel Henry and Grandma Clio should just get married already, instead of living in sin. When Ray brought it up, made me sick to my gut. I never wanted to think about Grandma and Henry rolling around wrinkled and naked. Why would old people even want sex—leave the fucking to the young. Ray must’ve been thinking a lot

about it though. Brought it up a few times before the Colonel told him to shut his “got-damned mouth.”

Colonel Henry always says, “Ain’t no bigger hypocrites than you’ll find in church on Sunday, boy. Biggest sinners of ‘em all.” He gave old Ray an earful, and Ray mostly stood there shaking his head. Everybody knows Grandma Clio is the boss, but she let Henry go on, shooting Ray bad looks. Never seen Colonel Henry get so many words out without Grandma stopping him, but she was pissed off at Ray. Let old Henry lay into him. Seemed like every other word was a curse, but the Colonel cranks it up when he gets riled. Ray said something about blasphemy and the Colonel told him why should he care about a God who let him sit there and watch three of his brothers die in a coal mine.

“Who does that to a nine-year old,” he told Ray. Six of em fell in the shaft but only three made it out. “What the hell kind a faith a boy have in a god that cruel?” He told us how he never went to church after that. All this is probably the reason Ray didn’t come out this year. Don’t know why the Colonel and Grandma Clio didn’t come though. They get over these kind of fights real quick. Don’t take it personal. Wherever they are, it’s warm, not like here.

I wish I could go back and erase everything Tony and Dad said. I wish I was one of the younger boys, sleeping in the cab of the truck, even with the stink. Lester Cronin’s got it coming, but I never wanted to be drug into it. Makes sense now why Tony’s keeping such a close eye on Lester. No surprise he’s the one gonna take him out.

It’s personal too – not just about Grandpa. Tony’s still sore over the Walleye contest. They say old Cronin cheated – caught fish after the deadline. Nobody could prove nothing, being the honor system and all, but Lester caught almost a pound after it was over – stole second place

and Tony's hundred-fifty prize. Before Lacey left, that was all Tony'd talk about when he got pissed-off drunk.

Tony got real fumed when Mom told him what happened with Lester's Ma. Rumor is Lester killed her off with D-Con. Needed the 'heritance money so he could keep his hardware store open. Rat poisoned her every day till the end. Nobody in town can prove it, but everybody knows the truth.

I zip down and piss by Dad's front truck tire. Try to get the zipper all the way up while I walk past the fogged windows of the old Ford, north of the fire, but it jams and pinches my pointing finger. I grab that smelt net one more time and take the path down the hill to the river. Don't even look back when the truck starts. Could be Tony and Dad had enough and are packing up, but it might be they're trying to keep the boys warm in the cab or to keep the battery from draining in the cold. The radio was on all night and half the morning.

The dim sunlight fights its way up from behind the bank and paints a pink-red sky. Hard sand from the bank falls in chunks when I step in the wrong places. I feel drunk but I didn't touch no alcohol—not even a sniff of Dad or Tony's beer. The truck motor sounds like a hacksaw in rookie hands. After a few tries, the engine turns over. The eight track is blasting. Sounds like Styx again. About three feet down, a big chunk of sand crumbles off the side. I try to grab the branches of a pine that grows crooked, almost sideways off the water, but it only keeps me up for a few more seconds. The tip of the tree bounces back like a slingshot, slapping me in the face.

The current pushes me little by little away from the hill-top campsite where Dad parked the truck. I don't yell, not even with the shock of the cold water. It's not that deep and I'm sure

somebody'll hear the splash. I can't see anybody, just the cold red sunrise and the roots and trees that stick out the steep bank of the Carp. I try to pull myself out but my clothes are too heavy. The hip waders fill fast with river and it's all I can do to breathe, to keep my head above the dark water. The river thrashes me to a branch sticking out the right side bank hill. I grab the twisted cedar with frost-numb fingers. I think of Cody LeVassuer's cold, white and blue carcass. I'm stronger than him. I won't die in this river. The cold's loosening my grip, though, and the wet's prying my fingers from the branch little by little. I hold on a good couple a minutes, then I go back where the river wants to take me. I fight with all the fight left in me to get back to the bank, but the water's too heavy. I fight again, with nothing left but my 'drenaline. Try to do it again, but all the muscle in my arms and legs is gone and I give in to the river. I'm scared of what comes next but it feels kind of peaceful, in a way, 'cause I'm so tired.

Last year, after Henry and Ray's big fight, later, in the summer, Dad and old Henry got into a deep talk when we were cooking out at the dunes. Henry says he's mostly a atheist but he could be wrong. There could be a God—nobody knows for sure. Guess that's the best anybody's got to go with. Don't calm me much, not knowing what's next, but the river's taking me under, taking me with her, and nothing I do can change that. My head gives way to the Carp's brown current.

After the other boys fell asleep, Tony finished his Nam story. He said that him and Dad took turns carrying the baby, but Dad carried it more than Tony.

“Don't know how he did it,” Tony said, “humping the sixty and all. My fat ass had a hard enough time without the baby, but I tried to pull my weight.”

He said that the baby was good luck. Not a shot fired the three days they carried the baby. They fed her water and coffee through a green nipple they rigged up out of rain gear.

“You would of thought it was a real tit the way that baby’d suck on that thing,” Tony said. “We left it with a little girl the first village we come across. Humped a good thirty miles that day and then the shit hit the fan, got real hot. Took three, no, four KIA, in our platoon alone that day. Can you believe that, Buck?” He told me. “A baby, right there, in the middle of the fucking jungle.”

A single hand rips me out of the river with a pull like a steel crane. That kind of force, it’s got to be Uncle Tony. All I feel is the hand and the suction of the river, until the iced air stings through my soaked clothes and works its way to my head. I feel punching on my chest, steady and strong till I chunk out water. Everything feels hard and real again. I see the face with the hands. It’s Dad, not Tony.

“Gonna be a cold ride home,” he says. “Told you keep your head up. Got to keep your goddamn head up, boy.”

CHAPTER V

FRONTERAS

Mexico isn't what I thought it'd be. Reynosa's not a Clint Eastwood border town with sombreros, vaqueros and six shooters. It's not cigars, tequila and bandoleers or leather-saddled horses with shotgun holsters and fire horns. It's city-dirty, traffic and sweat. Grandpa's truck's in a dirt lot in Hidalgo, Texas, right across the bridge. Jack drives it now, since Grandpa disappeared. Dad was afraid we'd get lost driving in Mexico, so Jack just parked it over there.

The three of us walk up to Mexican customs and the moustached man in green waves us through. A short woman in a dark blue jumpsuit scrubs the sidewalk with a pushbroom and soapy water. She pours green stuff from a bottle that says Fabuloso over a black patch on the cement. It smells like flowers, dust and Lysol all around. There's a long row of taxis on the other side of the Mexican customs building, where the traffic from the bridge meets the narrow streets. Dad and Uncle Jack just ignore the drivers. They all look me in the eyes and I tell them "no gracias" every time one of them says, "Taxi." They all look as desperate as old man Edgar begging for whiskey outside George White's Amoco station back in Cedarville. One man wipes his forehead with his silk purple shirt sleeve and the others point to their cabs. Their smiles only last till we walk by.

A dust-faced boy, can't be older than seven, tries to sell us cigarettes and gum and follows us all the way to a black, steel bench in the plaza. Jack stomps his foot at him but he doesn't go away until Dad buys a pack of Marlboros, fifty cents.

Jack wipes his forehead with a red and black rag. His face looks like a riping tomato and sweat comes down like a creek on his chin. We all put on fresh T-shirts in the morning, but now they're like car wash towels.

Dad lights up a smoke.

"The truck okay there cross the river?" He holds the box of Marlboros out to me and Uncle Jack. Jack shakes his head no, but I light one up. This is only the second time Dad ever let me smoke.

"Nobody wants that piece of shit Dodge, Gene," says Jack. "How many times it break down on the way here?"

"Guy at the gas pumps in McAllen says the bus station just a couple blocks from here," Dad says.

"Should've asked him which direction," I tell him.

"Finish these smokes and we'll start walking that way," he says. "We'll run into somebody tell us which way to go. You just keep track of the money. Still got that stash in your pocket, Buck? Gonna need that when we get back."

I start to pull the wad out my right jean pocket. He gives me a not here look. Then he just nods and slaps me hard on the back. He flicks his Marlboro down and crushes it into the dusty concrete with his brown, steel-toed boot. The letter is wadded up in the back pocket of his blue Carharts. Uncle Tony wrote that note, leaving everything he owned to Dad. That was before he pulled the trigger and painted the kitchen wall with his blood and brain chunks. It was the old

man and me found him there, sitting at the kitchen table with the note. First line was, “To my friends: sorry to cash out early. Everybody else can suck it!” The rest of the letter was kind of boring—a dead man’s unfinished business.

Tony was supposed to help with the revenge but he couldn’t keep his shit together. Left the rest of us to take care of it. Nobody blamed him though, with everything Lacey put him through. He was loyal as a son to Grandpa. When I heard young Rufus Cronin bragging to the Adams boys about what old Lester did to Grandpa, Tony was the first one I told. He was ready for war. Just wasn’t ready for Lacey—banging all those other guys and fucking with his head after he found out.

A blonde girl in a red, silk shirt and black mini-skirt waves at us from a side street. There’s a row of orange and brown cement houses and a corner store with a Carta Blanca sign on our left side, and a dirt mound wall on the other side of the road. Old Volkswagen Beetles and beat up pick-ups with chipped, faded paint line both sides.

The girl waves again.

“Well look at that,” says Dad.

“Hey, you guys. Come here to me, please,” she yells to us. “Yes, you.”

“She speaks good English. Maybe she can help us find the bus station,” I say.

She’s thin and curvy and Jack gives Dad a look and whistles. The closer we get to her, the happier she looks, but her face changes. Thought she was a woman in her twenties, but she’s probably not much older than me. She’s wearing too much makeup and her dye job is school bus blonde. She has the wide, brown, glossy eyes of an older woman. Her black, high-heel boots make her look taller than she really is, but she’s still a couple inches shorter than me. She holds

out her hand to Jack, palm down, like a princess in a movie. Her smile shrinks when Jack just shakes her hand. Can't say for sure if she's nervous or maybe a little shifty.

"I'm Ana," she says. "What is your names?"

"Gene." Dad holds out his hand. Ana rubs his arm.

"You have sexy muscles. And, you are a cute one," she tells me. "What are you sexy men looking for in Reynosa?"

Dad pulls out a Marlboro and lights up. "Bus Station. You know where we go to catch a bus to Acapulco?"

"Give me a cigarette and I tell you."

"Aren't you a little young to smoke," says Jack.

"Not too young to show *you* things," she says.

"I bet," says the old man. Ana lights up and points to the opposite direction of where we were walking.

"Go that way two streets and pass the plaza. Then you go right three or four streets. Then you cross and go left. The bus is straight of there."

"Is that the Rio Grande on the other side of that mound," I ask.

"It is the Rio Bravo," says Ana.

"Damned if it don't look like the Rio Grande," says Jack. "Couldn't be though, or we're walking the wrong way."

"In US, it called Rio Grande. In Mexico, it is Rio Bravo," she tells us.

"Sounds like a bullshit story to me," Dad says, kind of quiet. "Name's already in Mexican, why would they change it here."

It's got to be a hundred degrees, but Ana isn't sweating and it looks like she's been outside for a while. Her boots are dusty around the bottom from the street, but most of the leather is so shiny it almost hurts my eyes to look down. For the first time, I smell my own stink. It's like three-day underwear mixed with that old coin hand smell. Ana smells like tangerines. She snares us in with those bright eyes and her pink grizzly lips.

"I have a place," she says. "You could come inside."

"We got to get going," the old man says. "Gotta catch a bus."

"Maybe I'll catch you on the way back," says Uncle Jack.

I wave to her and smile and we walk toward the plaza.

"Hey sexy," she says, "can I have another cigarette?"

The old man looks down at the pack of Marlboros and starts to take one out. He puts it back and tosses the pack to Ana.

"Thank you, Señor Muscles," she tells him.

This is my first time in Mexico. First time out of the country, really, unless you count Canada. I've never seen a place like this before. There's hardly no trees and everything's dusty brown. The streets smell like old rust and sewer. I should pay more attention to Reynosa but Jack and Dad are walking fast and I got to keep up. I'm tired from the trip. Too tired to think. Too tired to take it all in without thinking about everything back home.

The people here—they see us. Some give us funny looks, some smile and the rest of them don't pay us any attention. The farther away from the bridge we get, people aren't so pushy. Hardly nobody asks for money now, but just about everybody's selling something: Rottweiler puppies, chrome car parts—all kinds of food: burgers, tacos, strange red and white meat spinning

around on a metal rod. Too hot to think about food, though. The only place I know that's hotter than this is a sauna. Like the one out at the Browns' place. We'd all go ice fishing out there in McKay Bay. Around dark, we'd fire up the sauna. Tony, Jay and Dad would leave a few twelve packs in the snow bank. Once it got nice and hot, we'd all pile in and see who could stand it the longest. After the older guys had a few beers, they'd run barefoot on the ice over Lake Huron. Sometimes me and the younger boys would do it too.

One time Tony drank so much he passed out in the sauna. He was in there a good twenty minutes before anybody noticed. Bet he felt this kind of hot tired. Hot like Reynosa. No green, no trees except for a palm or mesquite here and there. What would you do for firewood around here?

Ana gave good directions, so the bus stop was easy to find. We finally figured out they call it the "Central." Inside, the bus station is a little cooler than outside, but not much. They got fans blowing and a place to sit down, so it beats walking around the street. Dad brings tacos and Cokes from a stand outside the bus station.

"You gotta try this, boys. This is some good shit," he tells us, salsa running down his upper lip and a piece of tortilla in his moustache.

"I'd eat the ass out of a puppy," says Uncle Jack.

"Cheap too," says the old man, "only paid five bucks for all this."

He's right – they are good. Best tacos I ever had. My favorite Mexican restaurant is a place in the Soo. The tacos are good there, just different than here. More cheese and harder tortillas. Place is called the Palace. Tony used to take us there. Every time he'd get drunk and tell us how the Mexican food was so much better in the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Miller saw Tony

with Lacey at the Palace two weeks before he shot himself. I heard Miller talking to Mr. Roth about it at school. He said Lacey gave Tony a lap dance right at the table when “Whole Lotta Love” came on the jukebox. She knocked the nachos off the table with her ass and the waitress told her to leave or she’d call the cops.

We could really use Tony about now. My Spanish isn’t good enough to understand the ticket guy and nobody else here is helping. Tony always said he could get by with his Spanish, even though he didn’t know as much as the rest of his family. Funny, the only family Tony ever really talked about was his little sister Lucy and his Dad. His old man was career military. Saw some heavy action in WWII and Korea but was lucky through most of it. Not even a scratch on him till a Belgian hooker knifed him into a coma in Amsterdam. He went on special leave when he found out Tony and Lucy’s mom was fucking around on him with a young captain. Never made it back to base. Died from stab wound infections. Tony never wanted anything to do with his mom after that, and he didn’t say much more about family. Except for Lucy. Always said he missed her. Tony’s land is on the Texas side of the river, in Mission. After we leave Jack at the bus stop, we’re going to see about it and meet Lucy. Tell her the bad news.

A slick-haired guy in a white-collared shirt and a black vest walks behind the ticket counter and says something to the guy who can’t understand me. He nods and smiles at us.

“To where you go, gentlemen?” he asks.

“A beach somewhere would be nice,” says Jack. “How about Acapulco?”

“How long a trip is that,” asks Dad.

“Maybe one day and a half,” says the man, “if you get connections on time. We have no direct bus. You go for vacation, yes. I print for you the tickets?”

“Give us a minute,” says Jack. “We need to talk about this.”

The man smiles and says something in Spanish to the other man about a girl named Marisol.

“Let’s get a beer,” says Dad. “We need to work this out with clear heads.”

There’s a bar back home they call the Skunk House. The real name is Little Ricky’s—they just call it Skunk House cause it’s painted black and white and smells like skunk. Outsiders call it a dive, but it’s not. It’s where the locals drink their beers. Been there a few times with mom to pick up Tony and Dad when they’re too drunk to get the keys in the ignition. Mom sends me in to get them cause she don’t want anybody to see her in there. Not sure what she’s worried about—you can barely see your hand three feet in front of your face through the smoke. Every kind of rotgut whiskey, vodka and tequila you can imagine sits on the cedar board behind the bar. On tap, they got the cheapest beer in town. That’s why Dad and Tony called it home.

It’s hard to walk in the Skunk House. Your shoes stick to the floor the minute you step in. Some of the scariest women I’ve ever seen would stare at me like I was a piece of candy. There’s almost always some kind of fight or yelling going on in that place. The cantina across from the bus station makes the Skunk House look fancy.

“Dos cervezas por favor,” says Dad. “And a Coke for the kid.”

“Y una Coca Cola, verdad,” says the man at the bar.

We take our bottles to a tall table with no chairs.

“I can’t do this Gene,” says Uncle Jack. “It’s not as easy as in the movies. Nobody speaks English here. And what do I do for work? All’s I got is four hundred dollars.”

“Can’t go back home,” says Dad. “Can’t take the chance with the law. You sure Cronin saw your face.”

“I think so. Not sure. Hell, I was so nervous—almost pissed my pants. Maybe he didn’t see nothing.”

Dad puts his arm around Jack’s shoulder. “You had the tough part—did your best.”

“No Gene. I fucked it up. I closed my eyes when I went for the shot. I tried to think of a fourteen point buck but I couldn’t get over he was a man.”

“Ain’t much of a man,” I say. “If it would’ve been me, I would’ve put it right between his fucking eyes after what he did to Gramps.”

“Shut your mouth, boy” Dad tells me. “You don’t know what you’d do till you do it. Jack did what he could. Not his fault. Tony was supposed to take the shot.”

“Why didn’t you take it,” I ask him. “You got more experience.”

“Jack’s a better shot than me with the bow and arrow. He done better than I would of.”

The bartender drops two more bottles on the table even though nobody ordered them. Dad pays and points to a pack of smokes. A girl at the bar tosses the pack over and Dad walks to the window and lights one up. He stares out the window like someone’s staring back at him, but I look out and nobody’s there. Jack rubs his scalp with the palms of his hands. The bald spot on top of his blonde hair is sunset red. It’s quiet in the bar and the crowd to the busses is slowed.

“Better watch that mouth, you little cocksucker,” Uncle Jack tells me.

Jack should’ve been a senior in high school this September. In about two months, he would’ve started football practice. He was an all-conference linebacker and right guard last year. He might’ve married Holly Miller next year. Had three kids. Probably would’ve worked at the docks and played poker every Saturday at Ernie Roth’s. Now he’s homeless. Dad says maybe Jack could live in Uncle Tony’s trailer in Mission until he works everything out. Maybe Lucy

could line up a job for him where she works: a place where they make packaged food for the Army, MREs. Tony always told Dad if times got tough they could work there or in the oilfields, out by McCook. Only problem is getting back over the border now without getting caught.

I wonder if Grandpa had any idea when he crossed the bridge into Canada that Cronin was out to get him. It's no secret Grandpa and old Lester Cronin weren't best of friends when they headed off to Ontario for their moose hunting trip. They used to be real close. Went to Canada together every year since Grandpa moved up from Detroit in the 50's. Dad, Uncle Ray, Johnny, Grandma and me were all there when they packed up the trailer, just like every other year. They went in Lester's truck but only Lester came back three weeks later. He said he got in a fight with Gramps and left him at the bus station in Wawa. He acted surprised around Grandma when he came back. Said Grandpa should've been back a week early. Everyone who knows Grandpa knows that isn't true. He'd be out there every day trying to get his moose. Shane Grady told me that he heard Rufus Cronin bragging about how Lester shot Grandpa in the back with his 30-06. Said he didn't die right away so Lester beat him with a wooden maul handle and dumped him in Lake Superior.

Dad thinks Lester owed Gramps some money and didn't want to pay up. Mom heard gossip that Grandpa had a thing with Agnes Cronin. All we know for sure is that there's no body and it's a safe bet nobody's ever going to find one. If it would've been a fair fight, Lester would've never left Canada.

By the time Dad and Jack finish up their beers, the sun is lower, moving toward the upstream side of the river. The bartender points us back in the direction of the bridge, right where Dad said it would be. Our shirts are sweat-stained, but not as wet as before. Smoke-white

clouds puff out everywhere in the baby-blue sky over the Rio Grande. It seems deeper than the dark sky back home.

Jack's got a good buzz, but Dad keeps a straight face, for all that beer he drank. At the cantina, he gave me a half a bottle of Dos Equis and said, "That's enough for you. Shouldn't of let you smoke that cigarette neither. Don't tell your mother."

"This place ain't so bad," says Jack. "People seem real nice. Might stay here if I could understand all that Mexican talk."

"It's called Spanish," I tell him, but they don't say anything.

We walk by city blocks, with red, white and brown-painted brick houses. Most have black steel bars in the windows and chain-locked gates in front. There's a bank, a taco stand and a dark, wrinkled lady selling some kind of ice cream from a pushcart.

"Wonder how they keep it cold," asks Jack.

There's a girl across the street with long blonde hair and a short black skirt.

"Wonder if that's Ana," says Dad.

There's something about that Ana that reminds me of Anna James back home, except this Ana's the Mexican version. It's in their faces, the shape, the look, the blonde color of their hair. Anna James is in Europe by now. She cried in front of everybody at one of our baseball games. I was in the on-deck circle and I heard her scream from the bleachers behind home plate. She threw a tantrum cause she didn't get to Rome last year. Even after Mr. James told her he'd take the family to Italy this summer, she still sniffled and pouted through the rest of our game. I wonder what the Mexican Ana would think about Rome. I'm sure I'll never see it.

The blonde girl flirts with a man in a blue uniform. Maybe a cop. When we get closer we see that she's older than Ana by at least twenty years. Her face is wrinkled under the white-powder make-up and her eyes cold, narrow and brown.

"Wonder how long she's been at it," asks Jack.

"Long enough to catch some gonorrhea," says Dad.

"Is there a cure for that?" I ask him.

"There's a cure for pretty much everything, son. Except death. You probably take care of gonorrhea with some penicillin."

The woman gets into a small Toyota truck with the man in the uniform. We watch him light her cigarette before they drive away and turn left by the river wall. The bridge is straight to our right.

"Texas," says Jack.

We stop and look up at the light blue sky one more time, then walk. On the trip down, we saw a young girl hitching a ride on an eighteen-wheeler at a truck stop. We heard her say she was from Boston. Dad just shook his head and said, "Wonder how she ended-up in Tennessee. So far from home. So far from her family and her roots."

Last November, Uncle Tony, me and Jack were playing Euchre. Tony said his roots were deep in the Rio Grande Valley. After Jack and Tony left, I asked Dad about our roots.

"Deep as the cedars. Stronger than the jackpine. We've got roots, boy."

Ana's Rio Bravo curls in from the west, slow and muddy toward the bridge. Jack takes another deep breath. The brown waters of the Tahquamenon and the Carp are a different than the brown I see in the river under the guardrail.

We walk to the halfway point of the bridge. There's a copper plaque that marks the border. Dad turns to say something to Jack but he's not there. He's standing a hundred yards back, staring at us from just past the toll gate.

CHAPTER VI

DIRTY BUSINESS

The rusty gold-color thermometer that hangs on the inside barn wall says 40 degrees, a warm day for January. The icicles that hang from the tin roof over the main barn door drip into slush puddles on the concrete entry way. The big gray crate full of cedar butts is on top of another crate, so I need the ladder. Dad told me to split half a cord for Grandma, but I'm not sure exactly how many pieces make up a cord. Some of the butts are thick and heavy, so I have a hard time getting my gloves around 'em. Other pieces are only big around as a baseball bat. I try to throw as many down, fast as I can, but the whole thing is kind of like a backwards puzzle—you have to take out one piece before you can get the next. They're packed in the crate good, and some are still iced together. I get what looks like a few wheelbarrow loads and climb down for the axe.

Grandma and Uncle Ray are just outside the barn door. They're trying to figure out what to do with Smokey, Grandpa's old beagle. He started limping around the last couple of weeks. Might have had an accident or it could be old age—he's older than I am and that's old in dog years.

"Take him out behind the garage," Grandma says. She hands Ray the old .22 pistol with a wooden handle.

“He’ll make it okay,” says Ray. “Just got a little limp. It gets worse, I’ll put him out in a couple of weeks.”

“Dammit Ray,” she says, “I’ll do it myself. We both know he ain’t gonna make it through winter. Might as well do it now.”

“Too much work today, Ma. By the time I clean up the mess and bury him proper.”

“You got Buck here to help you out. You dig the hole and I’ll get a couple trash bags to clean up the mess.”

“Don’t do it Ray.” I yell out the door. “Smokey can make it. It’s just a limp.”

“Mind your business, Buck,” says Grandma.

“Give me the pistol” says Ray. “If it’s gotta be done, I’m gonna do it. Get in there and chop some kindlin’, Buck.”

You can almost see the sunrise under the gray sky cover. Every few minutes, a gust from the north blows in through the big open door. Some of the butts split easy. Hit ‘em clean a couple times and they fall in good-sized splinters on the cement floor. Other pieces split crooked and you have to pull everything apart once the axe gets stuck. Sometimes you have to beat the butt on the cement just to split everything up.

If I had another ten dollars, I’d be skiing with Katherine Beckett. She’s the one who said I should go. Never been downhill skiing before. Probably never will, the ways things are around here. If I had the money, Mom and Dad would have another excuse—don’t want me to break an arm before baseball season—or there’s too much work around the house. Or Grandma’s house. It’s the second time I had to lie to Katherine—the truth is too embarrassing. We were supposed to talk about a book on the bus to Boyne Mountain. *A Farewell to Arms*. Ernest Hemingway. Katherine is so good at tennis, she even beats all the high school kids. She always reading—likes

books more than tennis. She always smells like flowers and her hair is never out of place. She's kind of a pain in the ass when she gets bossy, but it feels good to be around her—like I forget all the bad things.

I hear the shot from out behind the garage.

Maybe it's better I didn't go skiing. I only got 200 pages into the book. I'll finish it by Monday, but now it's back to cedar butts.

I almost got a wheelbarrow full when I hear the side door to the stable open and the metal bolt clang against the wall. Uncle Ray climbs up to the loft and comes down with a tire iron. He's about to go back through the side door but he turns and looks at me.

“What the hell you think you're doing?” He says, “If you do it right, you don't have to beat the hell out the floor with cedar butts. Give me the axe.”

Ray splits a few pieces and they come apart clean and straight.

“This is how it's done, see? You fill up the wheelbarrow and take the kindlin' to the woodshed. Bring some inside for the old lady. I'll split—you're taking too damn long. Gonna break the fuckin' concrete.”

On his next chop, the axe gets stuck halfway down. When Ray pries it loose, the handle slips and hits his leg. Even though the wheelbarrow's only three quarters full, I move as fast as I can to the house. I'm almost there when Ray swears something at me but I pretend I can't hear. I push the load up to the porch, grab an armload of kindling and turn the brass knob.

I peek in the kitchen from the entry way but Grandma's not there. I walk the kindling through the kitchen and the passage to the living room, and pile the cedar sticks by the fireplace. There's a black water trail from my boots through the kitchen. I try to get her mop from the back

part of the house. It's in my hands when she yells, "I just cleaned the damned floor. Get the mop."

It's Saturday. I could be down at the field in Cedarville, playing snow football with the guys. Since Grandpa disappeared, Dad sends me over to help Grandma with chores a couple times a week. Woke me up today at 6:30, when everybody else was still sleeping, and dropped me off here. Dad says my brother Johnny's too young to help, but I don't believe it. He's ten already. I asked Dad why I couldn't sleep in and help out later in the day. He just said that doing things you don't want to do makes you a better person. Maybe I don't want to be better.

When I got to Grandma's she'd been awake for a while. Already had the house cleaned and breakfast on the table. Now she's in the living room with a push vacuum, scraping up the dirt on the old brown carpet.

"I let the fire out. Start another one and put the rest of the kindling there. Gonna get cold later."

"Where you gonna bury Smokey," I ask her.

"Out past the duck pond," she says. "Told Ray to get some rocks to put on top so the coyotes don't get him."

"He would've made it through the winter," I tell her.

She just gives me a look like I'm an idiot.

"Are you scared without Grandpa here?"

"Can't sleep much lately. When I do, wake up in a panic."

"What's wrong?"

“Not afraid, just gets me to thinking. Other night I had a dream about my poppa. When we were kids, we used to spend the summer at a cabin on the river. No electricity. No water. Blocks of ice in sawdust to keep the food fresh.”

“No water? You were next to the river.”

“Wiseass. I can tell you’re gonna be a troublemaker. Why can’t you be more like little Johnny. Get yourself a decent haircut. Now that’s a sweet kid.”

“My brother Johnny?”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t know him.”

“Sometimes I get to thinking about something that happened way back then and I panic. I want to know the name of the river or something and I think to ask my Dad, but then it hits me that I can’t. He’s gone. Just like Ma--almost everyone from back then. It’s like that claustrophobia, but with time—and there’s no way to get it back. You’re too young to understand. Once you been in this world for some time, you stop and look around and twenty years gone by like nothing. As much as you want to, there’s no going back. It’s confusing, this time thing.”

“You think they’ll ever find Grandpa?” I ask her.

“When you finish your breakfast, clear your plate. I need you to carry some boxes upstairs for me.”

Ray chopped enough cedar to fill the shed and then some. My jean cuffs are soaked from all the back and forth with the wheelbarrow. The sun is out and the ice water from the roof of the

barn drips faster. The thermometer says it's fifty degrees now. The orange county plow truck scrapes ice from the meridian highway on the west side of Grandma's house.

"Smell that?" says Ray. "Fuckin' skunk. Get a shovel and go clean it up."

"Are you sure. I don't smell anything," I tell him.

"Coming from over there, by the orchard. Take a corn bag and bury it out by the field."

"Why don't you do it."

"Don't question me boy. Do as your told. I gotta bury Smokey out by the pond. You get the skunk and by the time we finish, we'll meet up here and clean up the mess in the barn."

When Ray turns toward the garage and heads off to bury Smokey, I go back to Grandma's house. Grandma takes a turkey out of the freezer and takes off the wrapping. She puts it in a black oval roasting pan.

"There's another box in the living room needs to go up to the attic," she says, her back to me.

"I'll get it in a minute," I say. "Anything else you need while I'm in here?"

"Take the box up and take a break. Get yourself a pop when you come down."

There's a photo album on top of the box. First picture on top is black and white. Three men by an old car. Looks like a Model-T. Fat guy on the left wears a suit and a derby. The skinny guy in middle and the guy with a curly moustache on the right are both smoking pipes.

"One in the middle's your Great-Grandpa, Nate." Didn't hear Grandma walk in behind me.

"What year is this," I ask her.

“Twenties. Maybe nineteen twenty-two, three. Don’t know the man on the right. Think it’s a relative. Man on the left is Al Torrio. My dad worked with him. Used to come over for dinner when I was a little girl. Gave me this.” She pulls a gold locket and chain out the box.

“What kind of work,” I ask.

“My dad was in transportation. Had his own company. When I was a little girl, we ate off real silver. Lived in the biggest house on the block. White columns, red brick.”

“What was that like?”

“That was a long time back. Never did laundry or washed dishes till I got married. My Dad died in forty-eight and that changed things for all of us.”

“How’d he die?”

“Get that box upstairs and take a break.”

My eyes water from the skunk smell. I brushed up against the tail so now my jeans’re gonna smell like skunk for the rest of the day. Grandma won’t let me in the house smelling like this. Missed my break cause that son-of-a-bitch Ray drug me out of the kitchen. Told Grandma, “No breaks for Buck till he gets rid of the skunk.”

Even with two bags around the skunk carcass, the smell is too much. I toss it into the wheelbarrow and step toward the field. Wonder if Ray finished with Smokey yet? That was one of the best dogs I ever knew. I’d like to slap old Ray upside the head for putting a bullet in him. Didn’t even give that dog a chance after all he done. Smokey saved Grandpa from a black bear one time when he was hunting down Flower Creek Road. Bear got so used to people baiting deer out there and eating the apples, came right after Grandpa when he spooked him. Smokey wasn’t

as big as the bear's leg but he got barking and growling till the bear run off. Saved Ray from stepping in a sinkhole, then Ray thanks him by putting a bullet between his ears.

Least Smokey didn't suffer like this skunk. Looks like the skunk made it about fifty feet without its hind legs before it curled up and died by the driveway. There's a blood trail through the slush on the Meridian all the way to here. What's left of the back legs are still on the road. Probably stinks all the way to the Chippewa County line. Smells so bad you couldn't pay me enough to clean this up. Not even all the silver and gold coins Grandma has. There was a whole box of old things she had me bring down from upstairs. Said some of the coins were from when she was a little girl, but most of 'em they found when they moved into the house in the fifties. The house was here since the 1800's, so it was already old when they moved up from Detroit. Grandma says they were fixing up the house and they had to take out old beams from the cellar because they were rotting. When Grandpa and his brothers were crawling around down there, they found a metal box buried in the dirt by a beam. It had all the coins and some papers.

I hope one of these days I'll be that lucky.

Don't want to spend the rest of my life cleaning up skunks and shit and chopping kindling.

"Quit daydreaming and clean up the skunk," Uncle Ray says. "Almost lunch time. Let's finish up."

He opens up the burlap corn bag and nods to my shovel. I tuck most of my face under my green sweatshirt and scrape the skunk from gravel and slush. I lift the carcass to the bag but a few chunks of skunk innards fall off the shovel. The skunk head slides out but Ray kicks it into the bag with his boot.

"Get all of it," he says. "Those pieces there too. Don't leave none of it on the driveway."

“Can’t get all of it,” I tell him. Some of it’s stuck to the ground.”

“Get as much as you can,” says Ray. “Don’t give me that look. You got someplace better to be.”

“I could be skiing,” I tell him.

Ray starts laughing like I never seen him laugh before. “Skiing. Well excuse me.”

“Was gonna go with the school. You get a discount. Just needed ten more dollars.”

“Where do they go skiing, Mr. fancy boy?”

“Boyne Mountain. It’s downstate, across the bridge.”

“I know where it is,” he says. “Deliver lumber down there sometimes. Don’t even get me started on that. Why the hell would you wanna go there?”

“Some of my friends go. They say it’s cool. Why don’t you like Boyne?”

“Not Boyne. That whole fuckin’ place. Don’t want to see anything on the other side of the Mackinac Bridge.”

“Why? Weren’t you born in Detroit?”

“I was just a baby back then. You get down there, they don’t even put the U.P. on the map. Like we’re not good enough. Nothing but the fuckin’ mitt. They can keep all that— everything under the bridge. Fine with me if I never have to cross that bridge again.”

We walk through the limestone slush down the old road to the woods on the far side of the field. The wind is picking up and the sun is under the clouds now, making everything gray. When we get to the treeline, it calms a bit, with the hardwoods blocking the wind.

“Where did you bury Smokey?”

“Other side of the pond,” he says. “That was one hell of a dog. I’ll miss that yappy little bastard.”

“Then why’d you shoot him. He would’ve made the winter.”

“I didn’t. Your Grandma did.”

I start to dig but the ground is still mostly frozen. When I get a foot down, Ray says, “good job. Tough ground.” He takes the shovel and starts to work the ground. “Get on back to the house,” he says. “Wash off the skunk and help your Grandma.”

Katherine and the kids from school are probably still skiing.

CHAPTER VII

BLOQUEO

They take off the blindfold and everything's still dim. I can't see the men who brought me here. They're shadows and boot steps walking out the door. A bare bulb, low-watt, hangs from a gray extension on a wood ceiling fixture. The dark ceiling blur settles to a blue haze. Cement walls are mostly bare, except for a space to my left where someone started to stucco the blocks. Children, women and men, some with bruises, black eyes and ripped pants, stare at me from the corners of their faces. The place reeks a nasty combination of shit, piss, vomit and *fabuloso*, but piss wins out over all. There's a cracked, plastic paint bucket, white as cigarette smoke, for a toilet. It sits in the corner to my right. From the smell all around, I'm thinking it's a new addition. There's holes where outlets should be, wires sticking out into chaos. There's no furniture, just pink stained bed sheets. Some of the adults, mostly women, sacrifice their bodies—they're beds for the half-dozen or so kids. No windows in the room, just a door off to either side of me. I've been brought in blindfolded before in these situations. It's just as creepy every time, not knowing what's coming. There's no doubt I'm where I'm supposed to be, but none of these people fits the description of the girl.

Just two days ago, I met her uncle at Spanish Flowers in downtown Houston. He was some sort of politician who owned a chain of cafes in different parts of northeast Mexico. Most

of the family lived in the fancy hills of Monterrey, “en las mejores partes,” he said. He came with his wife and teenage kids when they started getting kidnap threats four years ago. He helped launder money for his business partner’s friends and everything got worse from there. He worked out a deal with another friend and cashed in all of his Mexican businesses. Then he moved most of the family to Texas. Wasn’t that hard – his wife is a dual citizen, but people with that kind of money don’t usually have too many problems getting in. It’s the middle class, hard-working types who sweat through those interviews at the American Consulate while smug clerks pick through every detail of their life, looking for reasons to deny the visa. It’s the jodidos: masons, farm workers, back-breaking laborers who risk it all to swim the river, jump the fence, or hide stuffed in the back of a tractor trailer full of fruit or sugar or truck parts. People like this guy come and go as they please.

The uncle gave me a picture and all of the leads they had, stuff they would never share with the cops. Not that they trust me, but they really got no choice. He tried to be friendly but it was all fake as hell. It had to be strange for him to sit down to lunch with a man in my line of work but when you deal with the kind of people who kidnap innocent kids, eventually you come running to someone like me.

They made me check my backpack at the door. The picture of the girl is in there, with my Ruger, sweatshirt and three day dirty boxers. They know why I’m here. They know who I’m after. That’s about all I told them. Next step is to find the girl and get the hell out. I’d know her anywhere now. I studied that picture all the way down here. I scan the room for her from my spot on the back wall while we wait for the boss.

The place looks like a basement, with its low ceiling and dark gray blocks. There’s a gunman at each door, one with a 16, one with an AK. They wear black pants and button-down

collared shirts, one in blue and the other pink. If I had to make a go of it now, I'd go left and take my chances with the blue shirt. He's a young one, looks more scared. Pinky has one of those smiles that begs to scratch the trigger finger. He keeps staring at me, his eyes dancing from head to head around the dusty light. Most of the hostages are focused on me too, the six-foot-three foreigner with blue eyes. A sweet-looking morenita with a dust-stained face shoots me a smile. In a situation like this, you'd expect her to quiver and cry like some of the others in the room. Maybe she's been here a while—maybe it's faith. What if this isn't the place? The blonde girl from the picture is nowhere around.

A skinny boy with curly black hair nudges me awake and passes on two corn tortillas with brown beans dabbed in the middle. The tortillas are burnt black and hard, but I'm not missing a chance to eat. You never know when the next meal's coming. He gives me water in a paper cone. There's sand and dust around the edges of the paper. He points to a metal tub by the corner. The water's rusty and grainy but doesn't taste too bad. I go for another drink, but a man in black pulls my sleeve from behind and says, "camina cabron." I never saw him coming. Didn't even hear the door open. Pinky and Blue still sit at their posts. This one looks like a cop, but without all of the patches and I don't see a badge.

"A dónde vamos," I ask him. I hope we're going to see the boss.

"Ya sabes. ¿Por qué te metes en todo esto?"

"¿En que? Soy turista." I smile at the lie he'll never believe.

"Sí, como no. Por qué no fuiste mejor a Cancún pendejo? No te hagas."

We walk up 61 brown and gold tiled stairs. The holding room must have been underground. The walls around are rough and unfinished, but they're covered in a gray cement

stucco. The bulbs down the hall are brighter than downstairs but hang uncovered from the ceiling. A cheap wood door with a plastic handle is open on the right. There are four men and one woman in the room. The man sitting at the desk is familiar. He knows me too, but neither of us can figure out from where. We just stare. A good bet would be the School of the Americas. I want to ask him if he's ever been to Fort Benning, but it's better not to talk too much just yet.

"Please sit, Mr. Hannah," he tells me. That's not my real name but my passport says it is. He waves away a woman in a black leather mini-skirt and the rest of the group, all men, all in black police uniforms, stand by the walls, staring me down. I try not to gawk too long at the girl when she walks out, but I haven't been with a woman for over two months now—too much damn work, not enough pleasure. A silver crucifix hangs just below her firm cleavage, her soft purple shirt buttoned down to dangerous territory. She sees me see her – winks at me, brushing her long chestnut hair and dyed-blond highlights from her face with her hand, probably just to get me going, to make me suffer. She has beautiful, wandering eyes – can't quite make out their color, but they seem yellow, like the tile. The man at the desk looks pissed, so I know he must have something going with her. There's no way she's his wife—probably a girlfriend or love for hire—but his breathing says he's hooked on her something bad. Can't say I blame him.

"You speak good English," I tell him.

"Why are you here?" He half smiles, his hands on his crossed legs, like a high school principal.

"I'm on vacation. Hasn't been a good one so far. Was kinda hoping for at least a two star hotel."

"You think you are a smartasshole, Mr. Hannah?"

“You mean smartass?” If they want to kill me, ain’t nothing gonna stop that. No reason to hold back.

“I know the saying. But you are a smartasshole.” The man to his right giggles and almost chokes when he stops himself. The rest don’t seem to speak good English. “You come for this girl?” He holds up a picture on his desk. “Want to see her?”

I did a job in 1997 for a man, his wife and their girlfriend. He was a preacher at one of those stadium-type churches with the rockband stages and money flowing like Vegas. Even had his own TV show twice a week: gave marriage advice on Thursday night and the big show Sunday mornings. I caught it once after I finished the job in Ohio and before I moved on to Bucharest. About made me sick to see this douchebag, knowing all that money was rolling in. Made me think I should change professions. I spent five years at West Point and this guy barely finished his GED, got his preacher license from a cereal box. He really knew how to get stupid people to hand over money, though. From the looks of his mansion, there’s a lot of em out there – no shortage of dumb fucks in this world.

The preacher had a hell of a time trying to get to his point, trying to explain himself and justify hiring me to do his dirty work. Seemed like he believed his own bullshit. I could see in his eyes a sort of crazy that scared the hell out of me. Like there weren’t no limits or rules for the way he did things. It was one of my first jobs of that kind and I was jumpy to start, but this guy creeped me out more. After all the awkward, he still couldn’t get down to business, quoting Old Testament verses and crying, until the girlfriend broke out the powder. It was the first time I ever did drugs that hard, but I thought what the hell when his wife and the church secretary came in, garters and black lingerie under plaid skirts and red sweaters. I knew it was planned—he needed

dirt on me in case something went wrong, but I wasn't gonna stop. No good reason to do anything but stay for the party.

By the way that secretary danced on me, you'd never guess she worked at a church. They all went wild after a few snorts, a few drinks. Brought out these fancy oils and flavored rubbers—all kinds of shit you mostly see in movies. The women felt each other up, all three at once for a while. It wasn't the first time they'd done this. Looked like they were even gonna suck face but they didn't. They played with each other's hair with their heads close together, staring at me and the preacher. The smell of cinnamon candles and fancy perfume was all around. I looked over to the preacher once and he was sitting on his tan leather recliner, rubbing his dick through his dressy black pants. It relieved me to see him speechless for a while. His wife and girlfriend walked over to the recliner and the secretary to the couch were I was sitting. The preacher's wife undressed the girlfriend from behind while the girlfriend unzipped the preacher and jerked him off. The secretary unzipped me and sat on my legs. She started to kiss my chest just when the preacher blew his load. The secretary turned to see him and then she let me have it. I would've roughed up the girlfriend's husband for that ride alone, but I still got the five thousand after I broke leg and beat his face swollen.

This kidnapped girl—seeing her now—she looks a lot like the preacher's and his wife's girlfriend. This girl's nineteen, though, and the other woman would be in her forties now. There's something about her though—the ash blonde hair, yellow eyes—those pouty lips.

“Ya llegó tú héroe gabacho” says the boss man, “viene a rescatarte.” He looks at the others and they all laugh.

“No lo conozco,” she says in a raspy voice, different than I imagined she'd talk. Nothing at all like the woman from the preacher job. I smile at her in a way that is too familiar. I could

almost settle for a girl like this, her firm, almost muscular form, her smooth creamy cheeks and those eyes, with a charm and intelligence beyond their years. She looks away from me. She's not shy, more like repulsed. I don't usually get that reaction. Especially not in Mexico. The ceiling fan clicks while it spins above us, hanging crooked from a low ceiling.

"This is the girl you look for, true," the boss says. "Let's walk."

The big guard is from Texas, his parents from El Salvador. Speaks English without any accent. That's all I want to know about him. He brings me a glass bottle Coke and we sit at a white plastic table with white plastic chairs that say Cerveza Indio in green letters.

"Te conozco, ¿verdad?" says the boss man. I remember him now. He was a young Mexican teniente when he trained up at Fort Benning. He scored high on interrogation techniques. His unit was part of a Special Forces group that really got its money's worth over there.

"Maybe," I say.

"Let's get up to business," the boss says.

"Am I still in a position to do business?" I ask him, thinking I shouldn't have.

"What do you do, man," asks the Texan.

"These days, I'm sort of a negotiator."

"Y antes? A que te dedicaste?" The boss laughs again, like an awkward teenager.

"I studied History in college—never made much of it. My life isn't all that interesting. Let's talk money. The girl's family offers forty. This is how it'll all go down. Her uncle says..."

"¡Deja con las pendejadas! Sabes que este viejo guarda una fortuna en Houston. A poco, crees que soy tan pendejo? ¡Se acabó! Todo ya se acabó."

The Texan's name is Alex, like the hurricane that flooded the city just a few weeks ago. Tore up pieces of the highway. It even took out houses in the wealthier neighborhoods. The river water's still higher than I've ever seen it here. Alex told me all about how one of his neighbors almost fell off the highway when it cracked open when he came to get me from the holding area the second time. He's young and he's got one of them innocent faces. Makes you wonder why he's not watching Monday Night Football in a Laredo bar.

"Boss wants to see you, dude," he tells me.

"Don't suppose I can just go away. No harm done."

"Something like that," he says while we walk upstairs. "Captain's got a deal for you."

This time we talk casual in the hall, just the three of us. I can tell by the look on the Captain's face he's nervous to tell me what he's gonna tell me.

"You want the girl, we give her to you. Or you walk."

"What's the catch, Capitan?" He doesn't like it much I call him that. He tries to smile.

"Trabajas con nosotros y te doy la muchacha."

"Work out a deal that pays a hundred or more with her uncle and you keep some," says Alex.

"Qué clase de trabajo?" I ask the boss.

"No te conocen. Será bien fácil. No más nos ayudas a limpiar la ciudad de esta basura que trae," says the Captain.

"Just help us take out one dude," says Alex. "Nobody here knows you. They'll never expect it.

"I don't do that kind of thing anymore. I don't believe in it."

“El Jefe’s only keeping the girl alive for you to work with us. She’d already be dead now, man.”

“Don’t put this on me. If they want to kill her they’ll kill her anyway. I know I can get you more money from her uncle. Just take your money and I’ll move on.”

“Doesn’t work like that, bro. Different rules here.” Alex is so frustrated with me I’m thinking at least part of this was his idea.

“Si quiere ser maricon, dejalo,” says the Captain. “No lo necesitamos. You are free to go Mr. Hannah. But, I know who you are and you are the worst kind of killer. That is why you will walk down the corridor and ring the bell to your left. Bianca will give you everything you need and you do one job for us. Si te gusta, te puedes quedar con nosotros. Or, you walk upstairs and ring the bell to your right. Walk away with nothing—el camino del cobarde. Sabes bien que eres del nuestro. No te engañas, Hannah.”

I push the button. It won’t be long now. I’ll catch a bus to Reynosa and walk three blocks to La Mansion for a gourmet dinner. It’s been five years since the last time I crossed that way. I’ll walk a few more blocks to the bridge into Hidalgo, Texas. There’s always cabs there. Then the bus to San Antonio. One thing’s got me a little worried. Crossing over last week they had roadblocks set up on the highways. Couldn’t tell if they were federals or who the hell knows what. Five years ago you never saw that bullshit. Just need to stay clear of all that and there’s enough cash in this backpack to keep me going for a while. Important thing now is I’m free as I’ll ever be.

CHAPTER VIII

RESCATE

Captain leaves me with a cocky Texan in a white tile room. His name is Alex, like the hurricane that flooded the city a few weeks ago. He gives me a cup of coffee, a notepad, and a black Bic pen. The curly-haired boy and the man in black stand in the back of the room. Alex gets down to business.

Write down a number.

I already gave the number. Forty.

Write down a number and give it to me.

I hesitate, then write “40K” on my note pad.

Give it to me.

What?

Give me your number.

I tear out the paper and hand it to Alex. Alex looks at it and rips it in half. He starts again.

Write down a number.

I’ll try for fifty. I don’t know. I have to call.

Write down the number.

I write down “50K” and hand it to Alex. He looks at it and rips the paper in half.

Write down a number.

Look. What is it? What do you need?

You want the girl. We'll give her to you. Or you walk, now.

What do you need?

One fifty. And you can keep part.

Don't do that kind of thing anymore.

The girl is only alive for you to work with us. She'd already be raped in the ass twelve times and dead by now.

They might kill her anyway. Take the forty. I'll get you more on delivery.

Doesn't work like that, Major. Write down a number...

I pick up the pen again. My arm shakes but I pretend not to notice. I write again, without authorization or guarantee: “80K.” I tear out the paper, and hand it to him. Alex's cheek twitches. He crumples the paper in his fist. Shakes his head. The skinny boy and the man in black lift me out of my chair, walk me over to the door and push me outside into the humid August Monterrey street. The door slams shut and locks behind me. I think of all the roadblocks on the way here. I look at my wrist, feel my pockets. Watch, and wallet are gone.

From somewhere inside the building, there's a raspy scream.

CHAPTER IX

CONTRACT WORK

My blindfold is off but everything's still dim. Shadows, boot steps, and wheezing chest coughs. A low-watt hangs over the dark from a yellow wire. White haze settles on hewed stucco in a damp, cinder-block room. Campesinos, bloody, and black-eyed, pace in their ripped jeans. The shit bucket odor, puke-stained shirts and fabuloso hit hard.

Naked women strapped to sheet-less mattresses writhe in the mist of cigarette rings. One groans harder when she sees me. A filthy baby sucks her mother's tit in a wooden chair. Two guards sit their post at the door.

But no girl.

I close my eyes, strain to remember the picture – high cheekbones, delicate nose, eyes too experienced for fourteen.

A skinny boy with curly black hair nudges me and passes the brown beans. Water comes in a cone, sand and dust around the curled paper edges. The boy points to a corner. Metal tub. Not hungry, but I'm thirsty.

The water is salty, rusty, pickled like piss. Two sips before a man in black steps in from the hall. Pulls my sleeve. There's a leather clip on his pocket but the badge is missing.

Camina cabrón. He tells me.

¿A dónde vamos?

Ya sabes. ¿Por qué te metes en todo esto?

¿En qué? Soy turista.

Sí, como no. No te hagas, pendejo.

He grabs my arm, takes me out the door and down the corridor. The curly-haired boy follows, sixty-one brown and gold tile steps. The light here is brighter than downstairs. A cheap wooden door with a plastic handle opens to my right. Four men. One woman. Six folding chairs. The man at the desk is familiar. He sits in a black leather swivel chair. We stare: special, unconventional warfare training, Fort. Benning, Georgia.

That was after my graduation from West Point.

Please sit, Mr. Hannah.

Passport name, not real name. He waves away a woman in a black leather mini-skirt and patent boots. The rest, in black uniforms, stand by the walls. I stare too long at the silver crucifix in her cleavage, her soft purple shirt buttoned-down dangerous. She winks before she turns to leave, brushes her chestnut and painted blonde streaks with her left hand. Her eyes are yellow as the tile. The man at the desk clears his throat.

Why are you here?

I'm on vacation. Maybe you could help me find a two star hotel.

You think you are smartasshole, Mr. Hannah? You come for this girl, no?

I wipe the blood off my lip with the back of my hand and nod.

The man in black grabs my arm again and we walk out the side door into another room. The curly-haired boy switches on a spotlight. There she is, back corner of the room, in a steel dog kennel. Her face reminds me of a job in the 90's. Ohio. Douchebag preacher and wife took

on a lover. Paid me with collection money to make the girl's husband go away. After ten minutes of Old Testament from the preacher, a secretary in garters and purple panties sealed the deal.

Nose powder orgy in the back offices of a stadium church.

I took too many chances on that hit. Had to cool down in Bucharest a few months.

Kidnapped girl is shorter, but with the same ash blonde hair, green eyes, and pouty lips as the secretary.

Ya llegó tú héroe gabacho. Viene a rescatarte.

Guard smiles, two gold teeth. The girl cringes.

No lo conozco.

Her raspy voice seems different than how she should talk. Her body is firm, toned. Those smooth creamy cheeks frame her eyes. She looks away from me. Looks repulsed.

Things change with time.

The ceiling fan clicks above us, hanging crooked from a low spot.

CHAPTER X

SHOTGUN

It's the first time a man ever tried to put his hand in my pocket and I want to kill the motherfucker. I would have already if he didn't have that cheap-plastic black .22 four-shot stuck in my gut. Far as I can tell, they outnumber us fifteen to two, but just one gun. It would be fifteen to four, but Tommy's pussy cousin, Darnell, ran as fast as he could, first sight of the pistol. Maya didn't want to leave, but they made her. I know she's watching from behind the stained orange curtains of our motel room. I know she wants to call the cops but she can't with the box in there.

I feel like I might piss my pants but I don't want them to know that. If Tommy's scared, he's doing a better job of hiding it, but the gun's pointed at me, not him. Tommy and I look at each other. We say it with our eyes that on most days, this asshole would be toast. We're pissed: at the crowd of wanna-be thugs hooting and taunting us while the ring leader pulls a ten out of my pocket and looks it over with bloodshot eyes, but mostly, we're pissed at ourselves. We let our guard down. Drank too much and got careless. Now I'm a potential gut shot victim.

"Look what we got here," says the gunman, holding the pistol steady in his right hand and showing off the ten spot with the left.

"Give it back." I'm shocked Tommy can get those words out in a manly tone.

“Na-uh,” says the gunman. “Tell you what. We gonna get some weed and you smoke it with us.”

“No, you take it. You can smoke it. We gotta get going.” My voice cracks. They know I’m scared now. It’s not the first time I ever had a gun pointed at me, but it is the first time I don’t have my own to answer back. I don’t usually leave it in the car but we weren’t expecting any problems. This isn’t even the fucking drop house. We were just walking to the liquor store on the other side of the parking lot. I feel light-headed, not just from the malt liquor, and it’s not so much that I’m scared. I know this could be the end and I am afraid to die. I think of my family and how they tried to raise me respectable. Maybe if I get another chance I’ll try to change my ways. I hear them laughing and cursing and calling me names. If I could get my hands on my .44, I’d smoke all these motherfuckers’ asses. The thought of it going down like this, a punk with a toy-looking .22 pointed at my navel, just frustrates me to no end.

“Oh, you look mad, white boy,” the gunman works his crowd. “What you doing down in the ghe-tto anyway? Don’t you know that dangerous to your health and shit. You and your Puerto Rican friend should know better than to come down here.”

Tommy isn’t Puerto Rican. His dad is black, but he doesn’t say a word.

“How ‘bout you just let us go now?” I’m too tired for this. It seems like we’ve been standing in this parking lot half the night. I really need to piss. I’m waiting for him to let his guard down but this guy’s good. I see it’s not gonna happen.

“How ‘bout we fight for this here money,” he says. “You win, you walk away, take your ten dollars.”

“No way man.” I almost forget Tommy is still standing here until I hear him pipe up. “You lose and the rest of your boys jump us. I know how it works.” I realize that all the attention is on me and Tommy could’ve probably slipped away, but he’s sticking here with me.

“Shut up fool. I ain’t talking to you. What you say Elvis? You wanna throw down?”

“You got your money for weed,” I tell him. “Just let us go please.”

“Okay John mother-fuckin’ Travolta. Since you asked all nice and shit, you can go. But you gonna give us those jackets first. Both of ‘em.”

“Oh hell no,” Tommy says. I’m trying to get his attention. Let him know we should just give up the jackets and walk away. He sees me. He ignores me.

“Give ‘em up and you cake boys can get outta here.”

I know Tommy’s gonna say something stupid but I can’t stop him. “You’ll have to shoot us first.” I look over in disbelief. He tries to reassure me, “They don’t want no jackets with no blood on ‘em.”

“Motherfucker,” the gunman is frustrated. “You need to know I ain’t playing. I ain’t from here, I’m from D-town – De-troit, bitches!”

“I don’t give a fuck. Shoot me down, D-town.” I think Tommy might be serious. He’s tired of all this too. Detroit looks us over and starts laughing. I can tell he’s a little bit nervous. I realize now he was probably scared all along.

“Couple of faggots. Get on out. I’m taking the dime and you ain’t getting no weed, but you two can get the fuck on out and get your fuck on. I don’t give a damn.”

He pulls the .22 out and away from my gut and points it at my head.

“Walk away. That’s right, take chico with ya punk ass.”

So we're back in the hotel. I want to rip down those nasty orange curtains. Maya's crying and she hugs us both. I'm not used to seeing her all emotional like this. Truth is, she's a bad ass girl and she's Tommy's girl and I never so much as touched her before, but it all feels natural. I realize these two are the closest thing I have to family right now. I know what they're willing to do for me. I tell Tommy I'm going to the car to get my .44 and he goes over to the box to get his nine. Maya tells us to hold up. Darnell said something about calling the cops when he ran out. He never did come back. Tommy and I don't give a damn, but sure enough the blue lights make their way through the curtain.

Do we hide the box? There's no time and nowhere to put it so we leave it by the nightstand and get ready to play the victim. There's knocking and a loudspeaker but no siren. Detroit and his crew must be long gone. Maya opens the door, crying what has to be fake tears.

"Evening Ma'am, we're here to investigate a civil disturbance."

"They had a gun and I thought, I thought they were gonna die." What an actress.

"Can you gentleman describe the perpetrators?" The partner speaks up.

"There was like twenty of 'em" I tell him. I see the first officer's gray eyes peering at the box. Tommy does too and it makes us nervous.

"What's in the box?"

"It's my – girlie stuff." I'm thinking, "Way to go Maya." He still looks all suspicious at us though.

"What did they look like?" The partner keeps writing notes, ignoring the box. "Were they..."

"They were all black," snaps Tommy. Gray eyes seems a little too happy about this new bit of information.

“What were they wearing?”

“Mostly red jackets,” I remember, “everything else is blurry.”

“You boys been drinking, huh.” He must know we’re underage and he sees empty 40 ounce bottles of Olde English and Mickey’s on the sink, the bed and the floor.

“Yes sir.” Tommy confesses after me. I think he’s gonna ask for our i.d. and Maya works her magic.

“They tried to kill us. Are you just gonna let them get away with it?”

“No ma’am. Powers, call for backup. Let’s get these vermin. You two. Enough booze for tonight. You might have figured out, this isn’t the best part of town for you to be in. You might want to get a place in Flushing or further north next time.” They rush out, old gray eyes staring us down one last time. Looks like he wants to nail us too. We all must be thinking the same thing: he’s coming back for us tonight. They close the baby blue door and Tommy holds up both middle fingers. The tires spray gravel and stones at the plexiglass. “Fucking pigs!”

We don’t waste any time. As soon as the coast is clear, we pack our shit, leaving the box for last.

“The drop isn’t till tomorrow,” I remind them.

“I called Carlos. Don’t be pissed. I had to do it. Thought they were gonna kill ya.” How could we be pissed at Maya after everything.

“Get the box. Time to go hunting.” Tommy loads a round into the chamber. I’m already there.

“No, he said not to take any chances with the box.” Maya’s more than a little nervous.

“Fuck the box. First thing’s first.”

We drive around for a few hours. Maya saw Detroit get into the car, a white Pontiac Sunbird. The rest in a long green car, probably a 70's model. It's quiet as we make our way up Martin Luther King Boulevard. A small crowd smokes outside the Copa and most everything else is dead, shutters and bars on the windows and eerie security lights glimmer in the black and white slush of the covered sidewalks. There's a gas station open. Tommy stops the car. He buys a pack of Newports from the Arabian man who's staring us down from behind the bullet-proof glass and metal bars. Maya uses the pay phone to beep Carlos and I sit on the trunk, hand in my coat pocket, caressing the trigger steel.

"Hamilton." Tommy jump-steps to the driver's side. I don't know where the hell that is and it's okay because he's driving. I guess he tells me in case he forgets. "We're not that far away," he says, but it's taking forever and none of us says much else. The music is low. All I can hear is some sort of bass – probably N.W.A. but I can't quite make it out. He slams on the brakes when he sees a sign that says "Durant Park." We almost spin around sideways in the slush and shit and he skids into a small wooden sign that says "Play Safe." We get out, he checks the damage but waves it off, disgusted, all in a fraction of a second. There's no lighting nearby except for two tall poles across a field. Out in plain sight, on a picnic table, we see Detroit, or what once was. He's full of bullets but I can still make out his face. He's young. Maybe younger than us – fifteen, sixteen? All indications will have the police looking for a rival gang: the three prongs pointing up, carved into his hand; the black tagging on his red goose down jacket. But, there's a note in the other hand. I'm not touching it but Tommy does. It says "W/love C." Tommy spits in Detroit's face and we walk back to the car.

The place where we dropped the box smelled like a mix of the home perm kits my sister uses, sulfur and a cattle farm. Tommy said it was next door to a crack house. Maybe that's what's in the duffle bag we picked up when we dropped the box. I don't want to know what it is, but I'm thinking there's some kind of drugs in there. It's not my problem. I'm just the hired help. We're past Saginaw now and what I see out the windows is greener with every mile marker. The snowdrifts are taller and whiter. The horizon is turning pink, making it harder to keep our eyes open. Tommy has family in Tawas. He tells me it might be a good idea to sleep before we finish the trip to the Soo. He turns off 75 and takes 23. Maya is asleep in the back. "We'll be safe there," he says. I just stare out at the image to my right, an ice-covered Lake Huron.

After the drop, Tommy put in a Johnny Cash C.D., something I didn't even realize he had. I asked him back in Flint why I never drive. He said it's not so much that I'm the better shot but that he's the better driver. That's the funniest shit I've heard all day. I want to close my eyes and dream about the good old days in the Wild West. I imagine myself riding on top of a stagecoach. Only thing is, every time I close my eyes, Detroit's .22 pokes me in the stomach and jolts me back.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joseph D. Haske was born in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan and was raised in Cedarville, near the Les Cheneaux Islands. He grew up with a large, extended, loving family and was active in athletics. After his honorable discharge from active duty service in the US Army Infantry, he returned to Michigan. There he attended Lake Superior State University, graduating summa cum laude and earning the distinction of Outstanding English Graduate in 1999. After working in several jobs, such as interpreter, teacher, laborer and sawmill worker, he attended Bowling Green State University in Ohio and the Autonomous University of Guadalajara in Mexico, earning master degrees in English Literature and Spanish in Fall of 2002.

Since graduation from Bowling Green, he has been a member of the English Faculty at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, where he currently serves as Department Chair. His work has been published in such prestigious journals as *Boulevard*, *The Texas Review*, *Fiction International*, *American Book Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Dark Sky*, *Texas Books in Review*, and *Ale Cart*. While an MFA student at the University of Texas – Pan American, he has read his creative work at numerous venues, including the prestigious Hugh C. Hyde Living Writers Series at San Diego State University. He currently lives in Mission, Texas with his beloved family: his wife Bertha and their two children, Fernanda and Joey.