West, By God

by

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Greetings

On the morning of her mother’s 60th birthday, Tessa Trippett browsed the greeting cards in her hometown Wal-Mart for a full five minutes, unaware that the man who killed her big brother was standing a few feet away, among the sympathy cards. Because she spent so many years pondering what she’d say at that moment, how she’d curse and condemn Peter Lewis to the hottest precincts of hell, she was shocked to realize he’d been so close without her knowing. She’d wonder for days later if she’d lost any sense of intuition, any connection with her departed brother. Tessa might have walked away and never noticed Peter Lewis at all had her Clare-bear not tugged on her sweatpants and said, “Mommy, look, that man has Jesus painted on his neck.”

Tessa was reading a religious birthday card at the time – her mother went Pentecostal after Todd was killed and preferred Christian messages to “secular” ones. Thank God for you, Mom, read the card in Tessa’s hand. “Mommy, look,” Clare said again.

Tessa sighed and glanced at the man, in his blue Wal-Mart t-shirt, as he re-stocked the racks. He did, in fact, bear on his neck an elaborate portrait of Christ on the
cross, the crown of thorns rendered in sharp detail. “I see that, honey.” Tessa was unaccustomed to people with neck tattoos, but she didn’t give the man a second thought. Clare wandered closer to him, while Tessa returned to the cards. Maybe her mom could live with a funny one this year.

“Oh,” Clare uttered, “Look at the funderbolts.”

Tessa looked again. The long-johns under the man’s shirt had ridden up and exposed on his forearm two zig-zagged lightning bolts, bracketing the number 88. “Oh, sweetheart, that’s a bad tattoo,” the man said, and pushed his sleeves down. “Don’t pay no mind to that.”

A jolt ran through Tessa’s body. Nearly two decades had passed since she last heard that voice, but she recognized the sound of it like her own. It was a voice that once belonged to a skinny kid, dressed for court in a too-big suit that made him look much younger than his 18 years. It was a voice that wavered only slightly as Peter Lewis turned to the gallery and apologized to Tessa and her mother. Tessa couldn’t remember what he’d said, exactly, because she spent that time fantasizing about a tire iron and five minutes alone in a room with him. How could Peter have been so stupid, so careless with her brother’s life? She was a month shy of her Sweet Sixteen, and filled with an anger that would burn in her blood for years and years.

“Aren’t all tattoos bad?” Clare pressed.

“Well, no. I have Jesus here, and he’s our Lord and Savior. So how can that be a bad tattoo?”

Tessa felt the urge to grab for her daughter, as if she were about to wander heedlessly onto a busy road. Then Clare, temporarily stumped by Peter’s question,
performed a sudden and charming pirouette that stopped Tessa cold. She put a hand to her mouth and waited. “Mommy told my sister she’d be grounded forever if she got a tattoo.”

Tessa’s oldest, Shannon, at that moment browsing the make-up she was forbidden to buy or wear, had gotten her ears pierced earlier that year without permission. Tessa, afraid of what would come next, made her remove the little faux-diamond studs and let the holes grow over.

Peter chuckled at Clare, a muted laugh that Tessa also remembered from better times. “That’s probably because your sister isn’t old enough,” he said. “But there are good tattoos and bad tattoos, just like there are good people and bad people.”

The hatred Tessa carried for Peter didn’t subside, like she’d hoped, when she moved away from Weston, left behind her mother’s house and all the reminders of her brother. The bitter injustice of his death lingered through nursing school and the excitement of her first job and apartment. Her husband, when they first met, said she became another person when she spoke about Todd. “A scary person,” he said. The anger didn’t truly wane until her second child was born, and the pace of domestic life seemed to erase any past that didn’t include being someone’s mommy.

“Why do you have a bad tattoo then?” Clare punctuated her question with another spin, a three-quarter turn. She was much too fearless around strangers. “Are you a bad man?”

“No, I don’t think so.” And then Peter glanced at Tessa, as if he’d caught sight of her across a crowded room, his eyes greeting her over a great distance. Tessa felt paralyzed by a shock of nostalgia, like she’d come upon a treasured family photo in an
old, cluttered drawer. “As soon as I save some money, I’m going to get a good tattoo to cover the bad one.”

In her first years of nursing school, when the grief burned hottest, Tessa liked to tell people her brother was the victim of a murder. She chose the word *murder* for its enormity, because other ways of describing his death seemed so puny, even though the term was misleading. After a while, she tired of the arguments that arose once she revealed the full story – *Wait, I thought you said your brother was murdered?* – and took to saying Todd had been *killed*. Most people back home in Weston said he was killed *in an accident*, but she vowed never to use the word accident. People didn’t go to prison for accidents. Eventually, she turned to the news clippings and found the charge against Peter had been *vehicular homicide*. By then, her anger had cooled enough for her to wonder: Did pleading guilty to vehicular homicide make Peter a killer? Or was he just a fool?

Peter never was a bad kid growing up, no more so than anyone else she knew. He had a few more ragged edges than Todd, but the two of them were thick as thieves from the minute they met in middle school. By high school, Peter was eating most of his meals at their house, and he tagged along on summer trips to Blackwater Falls and Dolly Sods. Once, at a party a few weeks before Todd died, he kissed Tessa in a basement laundry room. “Don’t tell your brother,” he said. “He’d kick my ass.” They only made-out for a minute or two before some kids barged in to smoke a joint.

Clare pointed to Peter’s neck. “How much did Jesus cost?” she asked.

“Okay, Clare-bear,” Tessa scooped her daughter into her arms. “That’s enough questions for the man.”
“It’s okay,” Peter said. “Actually, Jesus cost me four cartons of cigarettes and a month’s worth of desserts.”

Peter was bulky and bald now, with dark stubble that ringed his head, and he wore an unkempt salt-and-pepper goatee. “I didn’t know you were out,” Tessa said. She had been thinking all these years of the boy she once knew, the boy who’d gone to a man’s prison. She hadn’t expected a man to emerge.

“I wasn’t sure you’d know me, Tess. You’ve got a wonderful daughter there.”

“Out of where, Mommy?” Clare asked, but Tessa ignored her.

There’d never been much to do in Weston, and the boys, especially, went crazy from boredom. Mostly they drove around and drank beer and smoked dope, and a few huffed from paper bags, their nostrils tagged with brightly-colored spray paint. It was like they couldn’t see past the weekends, couldn’t envision what was beyond the enveloping folds of the hollows. If they did glimpse their futures, they must not have liked what they saw waiting for them. “Does my mother know you’re out?”

“I don’t think so,” Peter said. “But I heard she wasn’t well. I prayed for her.”

“Got out of where, Mommy?”

Thankfully, Shannon had returned, empty-handed, from the make-up counter. Tessa shouldered Clare to her big sister. “Go get in line to pay,” she instructed. “I’ll be right there.”

“Bye, mister,” Clare waved.

“Bye,” Peter waved back.

Tessa had been a quiet and earnest student – a nerd, frankly – and she didn’t normally give time to boys like Peter Lewis, who were nothing but trouble. God help her,
but Todd wasn’t no different. Her brother was a big kid, the fullback on the football team, and when Peter’s mouth wrote a check his ass couldn’t cash, it was Todd who bailed him out. Of all Todd’s qualities, she loved his instinct to protect the most. Being a straight-A student, someone who could see above the tree-line, wasn’t easy in a place like Weston, but Todd gave her the room to stretch her mind. How many times did she tell Todd he could be anything he wanted, too? How many times did she tell him and Peter to be more careful, to think about their futures? But she was just the smarty-pants little sister who would sip the same beer all night long. Why should they listen to her? She promised herself she wouldn’t let Peter kiss her a second time, but she never got the chance to be tempted again.

“You’ve just the two girls?” Peter asked.

“I also have a son. He’s at a soccer game with my husband.” Tessa paused, and then added, “My son’s name is Todd.” The name had been her husband’s idea. Tessa was afraid to shift her anger onto her child, but instead the name had given her space from her grief. Now, when she thought of Todd, she thought of the boy who played third base on his Little League team and took after her in the classroom.

If not for her children, Tessa would have wasted her life on anger. Too bad she wasn’t blessed with her mother’s forbearance. After the sentencing, her mom had hustled from the courthouse to catch Mrs. Lewis in the parking lot. Tessa expected her mom to cuss Mrs. Lewis, at the very least. Instead, she took her by the shoulders. “We’ve both lost a son now,” her mom said, and Mrs. Lewis wept in her arms.

“So you found God?” Tessa asked.

“He found me,” Peter said. “He found me in the depths of hell and saved my life.”
Tessa used to ask why God hadn’t found her brother on the night he and Peter drove out to Stonecoal Lake to split a case of Bud Ice. Why hadn’t God stopped Peter from taking that hairpin turn on Sauls Run Road at more than 60 mph? Why hadn’t God made Todd wear a seatbelt, so he wouldn’t be thrown out the passenger window like a scrap of litter? Why hadn’t God looked out for her brother the way Todd had for his loved ones?

“I know you hate me,” Peter said to her.

But God himself couldn’t have separated those two boys, and no one could have given them more sense than they allowed themselves. It was years before Tessa accepted that Todd made his own decisions, for good or ill, and years before she realized she couldn’t keep on blaming God – or Peter Lewis, for that matter. “I don’t hate you,” Tessa said then. She didn’t realize the sincerity of those words until they escaped her lips, didn’t know the fever of her youth had truly broken. Tessa felt a great release at this knowledge, and she was suddenly hungry enough to eat a horse.

“I want you to know how sorry I am,” Peter said. Tessa looked into his eyes and felt the distance between them closing. She had to fight the desire to console him, to tell him everything would be okay, because she didn’t know if she was ready for true forgiveness.

“I know you are,” she looked at her feet. “I guess we both lost someone that night.” If she stayed any longer, she might cry in Peter’s arms, and Tessa couldn’t stand the indignity of that. She grabbed the first birthday card her eyes fell upon. “I have to go.”

“You’re in my prayers, too,” Peter said, but Tessa didn’t look back.
In the cashier line, Shannon asked about “that crazy-looking guy” she’d been talking to. From time to time, Shannon had quizzed her about the uncle she never knew, but Tessa always gave short, incomplete answers. Tessa was raising her family far from Weston, in a McMansion at Cheat Lake, where they had good schools and plenty of activities and little reason to rebel. She didn’t want to talk about Todd and become that scary person again; she didn’t want the messy past to infect their manicured present. “He was just a guy I went to high school with.”

“Was he in prison or something?” Shannon asked.

“Yes. Yes, he was.” Shannon was nearly 13 now, and most of her friends were allowed to wear make-up. Maybe it was time. What could be the harm in a little lipstick, a touch of eyeliner?

“Did he do something bad?” chimed in Clare, the smartest 4-year-old Tessa had ever known. The child had read every single Dr. Seuss book in the house at least twice.

“Yes. He did something bad,” Tessa said. “But he didn’t mean to, honey. It was an accident.”

Tessa wondered if her mother would bring down the photo albums again tonight. Her mom never removed the pictures from Blackwater Falls and Dolly Sods, like Tessa told her to. “That’s your Uncle Todd,” her mom said once to Clare, pointing at two scrawny, shirtless boys, arms entangled in a goofy pose before the falls. “And that’s his best friend, Peter.”

It wasn’t until they were in the car that Tessa thought to look at the birthday card she’d bought. On the front, rays of sunshine broke majestically through billowing clouds to spill across a green valley floor. Inside, a quotation from Psalms: This is the day the
Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Tessa found a pen in the glove box, but she didn’t know what she wanted to write – something special, though, a message full of love. She had time to pick her words. Tessa handed the pen to Shannon. “Here, honey, sign this for your grandma.”
Roberto Clemente

With his mother fast approaching her ninth decade on this earth, Raymond Cesar decided she should come live with him and Beth in Mount Lebanon. One day soon, he feared, she might not be able to drive to town for her shopping, or get up and down the basement steps for her laundry and her ironing, and Raymond was plagued by the idea of a broken hip or a stroke, his mom lying in pain for days with no one to rescue her. But Lydia Cesar would be the last person to admit the sad and hard truths of aging; at the time, she still proclaimed herself “healthy as a horse.” A lawyer by trade, Raymond foresaw months of negotiation to convince his mom to move into one of his spare bedrooms. He figured it best to start the bargaining early.
On this matter, Raymond’s wife was more than happy to take his mother’s side. Their only son had packed up and left for college earlier that fall, and Beth had immediately started to redecorate the house. She also began to muse more frequently about a sunny semi-retirement in West Palm or Naples. “We finally got the place all to ourselves,” she said, when Raymond broached the subject of a mother-in-law suite. “Can’t we savor it for a while?” Raymond enjoyed the perks of an empty nest as well, but the more he thought about his mother living by her lonesome in Spelter, the more guilt that settled uncomfortably in his bones. “She’s been alone for 20 years,” Beth argued. “What’s a little while longer going to matter now?”

Beth didn’t experience a change of heart until that article appeared in the Post-Gazette, the one that called Spelter an “environmental disaster.” This was back in 2003, when the feds first started talking about doing a clean-up, and the attention from Washington, D.C., inevitably drew the media and the plaintiff attorneys to town. For Beth, it was one thing to hear about Spelter from Raymond, but another to see words like “arsenic” and “cadmium” and “groundwater contamination” in the black-and-white of their big city newspaper. The stark language of the story shattered Beth’s objections, as if the reporter had called her a selfish daughter-in-law right there in print. After reading about the worsening condition of The Pile, the industrial slag heap that could be seen from every house in Spelter, she tossed the paper on the breakfast counter. “Okay, your mom can stay here.”

It was funny, because Raymond’s concern for his mother had nothing to do with The Pile. He’d grown up playing on that slag heap nearly every day with Tony, his best friend since they were both knee-high to a grasshopper; to them, the rolling black dunes
of waste were just more hills in a hilly landscape, another place to play King of the
Mountain or stage assaults on Nazi positions. Raymond was accustomed to The Pile and
its potential consequences, the way a smoker blithely accepts the possibility of lung
disease. Even though Beth was a liberal Democrat and lifetime member of The Sierra
Club, he never thought to make the environmental appeal to her.

In person was better, they agreed. If they made the proposal in person, ganged up
on his mother with worry, she would be less likely to blow them off. They would do it
over Thanksgiving, since Ray Jr. was spending the holiday with his girlfriend anyway.
They would drive down with all the makings for the meal, so Lydia didn’t have to cook,
and they wouldn’t take no for answer. It helped that the state had recently declared one of
the town wells so despoiled that a row of homes dependent on its water had to be
condemned. Now Beth could point out the big picture window, toward the empty houses,
and say, “See, Lydia? It’s not safe for you to stay here any longer.” But Raymond could
sense their plan going awry the moment he phoned his mother. They were welcome for
dinner, she said, and free to bring a dessert if they liked, but she could damn well cook a
turkey and make some stuffing for her son and his lovely wife.

The cold rain that greeted them Thanksgiving morning lasted for most of the drive
from Pittsburgh, until they got off the interstate and on to the backroads, where the bare
hills and denuded trees were a soggy, dun color, a shade to match the leaden sky.
Raymond’s Cherokee bounced badly along Route 19, on asphalt that was cracked and
crumbled from years of freeze and thaw, not to mention the inattention of the State Road
crews. As they neared the narrow bridge that crossed the West Fork into Spelter,
Raymond watched the shoulder for Tony, perhaps walking the four miles back from the
nearest 7-Eleven. Tony always refused a ride, but Raymond thought it important to ask anyway. During their last visit on Mother’s Day, they’d spotted Tony tromping through the woods, hefting a case of Sterno – aka “canned heat” – to his house. “What’s he doing with that stuff?” Beth asked, after Tony had waved them down the road.

“Well, he ain’t gonna use it for no heat.” Beth usually got annoyed when Raymond slipped into the vernacular – ironically or not – but this time she was too disgusted with the idea of Tony getting drunk off flammable jelly to scold his language.

As they turned off the bridge, Raymond counted Spelter’s five streets, laid down in a simple grid, and noted the landmarks therein – post office, playground, his uncle’s house, his other uncle’s house, the house of his third grade teacher, Mrs. Diaz, his grandmother’s house, the house of his aunt, the one who never wed because she was “married to God.” Raymond pulled to the curb at his mother’s and peeked at the baseball diamond where Tony and him used to be the captains and all-time pitchers, the boys who picked the squads, back when there were kids aplenty to play proper 9-on-9 games. Now there weren’t enough left to shag a few grounders.

♦

During fall break of their junior year at Bucknell, Raymond brought Beth for the first time to Spelter, the mythical place she’s heard about in late night smoke sessions, over coffee, after sex, Bob Dylan playing softly on the record player. She was a city girl, raised outside Philadelphia, and the name Spelter made her laugh the first time she heard it. She eventually composed a little sing-song: *Helter-Skelter, they smelt zinc in Spelter.* Beth got out of the car when they arrived and looked around. “I can’t believe this is where you’re from,” she smiled in amazement. Raymond took her reaction as proof of his
growing sophistication, but also wondered if there wasn’t an insult mixed in there somewhere.

At fifty-three, Raymond had been gone from this place long enough that sometimes he couldn’t believe he was from here, either. After he fetched the pumpkin pie from the backseat, Raymond peered at the former Grasselli Zinc Smelter, the “company” in the company town. The idle stacks rose like fists behind the condemned houses, now boarded windows and doors with plywood, and blank as tombstones. Third from the end was the house Tony had grown up in, the one he’d returned to after the divorce, the one he’d promised to die in. Raymond heard it took three deputies to put Tony out. He was surprised no one got killed.

At the front door of his childhood home, Raymond felt the knob. Unlocked, as always, though he’d told his mother a thousand times to keep it locked. He stepped inside and his foot caught on the aluminum threshold, which had pried loose on the corner. “Mama,” he hollered. “We’re here.”

“In the kitchen, Ramon.”

He found her peeling potatoes over the sink. The room, warm enough to steam the windows a quarter of the way up, smelled of the slow roasting bird. On the stove, the giblets simmered in a stock pot with celery and carrots and onion. His mother would have been working since sunrise. He bent low to kiss her cheek. “Where’s your hammer?” he asked. “I need to fix the threshold.”

“Leave it,” she waved over her shoulder. “Tony’ll fix it.”

“Mama, I know how to pound a nail.”
“You didn’t graduate law school to go around pounding nails in your spare time. Now, leave it for Tony, I said.”

“You’d rather rely on a man who lives in a tent than your own son?” Raymond laughed. “What’s this world coming to?”

“Oh, hush,” his mother turned and spanked his arm. “Tony is handier than you. And he won’t take any my help unless I give him some chores to do.”

Raymond wanted Beth to feel at home during that first visit. She was beautiful and urbane and he’d never met anyone like her. He presented her around town, “proud as a peacock,” as his grandmother would say. In every home, they were bid to eat, to sample homemade dandelion wine and _sangria_. “You’re so skinny,” his Aunt Maria said. “Don’t they feed you at that school?” Beth especially swooned over his mother’s _paella_ and _tortilla espanola_, dishes Raymond had requested when he phoned home the week before. “I’ll cook whatever you like,” his mom had said. “But under my roof you’re not sleeping with a girl you’re not married to.” She added, “_Entiendes_?” one of the few words retained from her parents’ language, which had been barred in favor of English and American assimilation.

Tony was home on leave then, between tours, and Saturday night they piled into the Firebird he’d bought with his combat bonus. With his best friend drafted into Vietnam, Raymond had avoided the sit-ins and demonstrations on campus, but he couldn’t understand why Tony would volunteer for a second go-round, how Tony could believe as he did in the righteousness of the war. “We’re trying to help these people,” he said that night, and Raymond resolved not to talk politics with him. They drove the Firebird at high-speed to a honky-tonk near Shinnston, where they got drunk on cans of
Schlitz and sang along with Hank Williams on the jukebox…*Howlin’ at the moon…I’ll Never Get Out Of This World Alive…Take These Chains From My Heart*…Outside, Raymond breathed deeply of a frosty night that smelled of dried leaves and wood smoke.

Shooed from the kitchen, Raymond went to the couch with the newspaper. For twenty years, it was the same couch, covered in the same plastic, under the same *Last Supper* triptych, next to the same lamp. Raymond had offered several times to buy new furniture, but he couldn’t argue when his mom said the couch was “like new.” The plastic made cleaning so much simpler, she said, especially in warm weather, when black dust from The Pile blew through the open windows and coated everything.

Raymond finished reading the scant local news in minutes and stretched his feet on the coffee table. *I’m just resting my eyes,* his father would say, when he came home from the smelting plant. Raymond could hear water running somewhere in the house, and soon he dreamt that his dad was in the basement shower, washing off the grime and dirt before supper. He was glad his father had come back from the beyond, so at least he’d be spared the carving of the turkey. Every year Raymond butchered and shredded the bird something horrible.

“Get your stinky feet off my table.” Raymond opened his eyes. His mother, a Virginia Slim radiating from her fingers, a kitchen towel draped over her shoulder, smacked playfully at his feet. “Honey, why don’t you go get Tony for supper?”

Raymond sat up and rubbed his eyes, as strange thoughts and questions parted his curtains, unbidden. “Mom, how does Tony get his disability checks? Since the house was condemned, I mean.”
“The postman still delivers there, even though he’s not supposed to. We all do what we can for Tony.”

Raymond wondered if that was true – that he’d done all he could for Tony. Not just once his house was boarded up, but after the war, after his wife left him. His mother glanced at the penny loafers Raymond had slipped off and pushed under the coffee table.

“Get a pair of your father’s old boots out of the basement,” she said. “We don’t want you getting those nice shoes all dirty.”

♦

His junior year, when he first considered the law as a career, Raymond thought he might like to come home and practice some kind of public interest law, maybe even run for office someday. Raymond wanted to do something worthwhile with his life, so why not make a difference right here in his backyard? He wasn’t yet sure how to channel that ambition, but he was positive of one thing: No matter what he did, he wanted Beth by his side. That’s why he was so nervous about that trip to Spelter. He did his best to show Beth the beauty and promise of his home, so she would come to love West Virginia, too, and not just tolerate the place for his sake. The visit couldn’t have gone better, but as they were driving away that Sunday evening, Beth placed a soothing hand on his knee. “You know,” she said, “life doesn’t have to be this hard.”

♦

His father’s leather boots were cracked with age and hard as plastic, but those old Red Wings fit to the size and contours of Raymond’s feet almost perfectly. Raymond felt funny in a dead man’s shoes, but he was glad to have them – the deer trail to Tony’s encampment was muddy and slippery as moss on a stone. Raymond could smell the campfire from a hundred yards out, and soon he spotted the blue tarp Tony had strung
with bungee cords between the trees, as extra rain protection for his Army surplus tent. Two milk crates were plunked beside the fire ring, and some kind of grate was balanced on two stacks of bricks over the coals. Tony was nowhere in sight, and Raymond didn’t want to startle him. “Tony,” he called out. “It’s Raymond. You in there?” There was no answer, so Raymond yelled to the treetops, “Tonnn-eee. Momma says supper’s almost ready.”

Raymond pulled a milk crate closer to the dying fire and waited. He thought about peeking into the tent, curious to see what Tony had salvaged from the house, but decided it would be improper, an invasion of privacy. After a few minutes in the cold damp, Raymond reached for the Old Grandad leaned against a tree stump. *It’s five o’clock somewhere in the world,* his dad would have said. The whiskey warmed his body, and he stirred the fire with a stick. He was tipping back again when Tony emerged from the tangle of sumac and ferns, dressed in three of four layers of thick flannel and a pair of filthy khakis, frayed at the cuffs like a cheerleader’s pom-pom. The 30.06 rifle he’d been hunting with since they were kids dangled from his right hand. “Counselor,” he nodded, but kept on down the trail. “Bring that bottle if you ain’t drank it all. You know how your mamma gets if we’re late.”

In a clearing behind The Pile, Tony held out a dirty hand. “Good to see you,” he said, but without looking at Raymond. Someone had clipped a hole there in the chain-link fence meant to keep people off The Pile. No matter how many warnings were posted about toxic, heavy metals, the slag heap was simply too attractive to the minds and bodies of bored kids.
“Let me ask you something,” Raymond said, as they followed the path to the baseball diamond. “How long you planning to stay in the woods?”

“Spelter’s my home.”

“I know that, Tony, but winter’s coming and the weather people say it’s going to be a rough one.”

Tony stopped and shrugged. “Tell that to the sheriff, because he says if I break into my own house again he’s going to have to lock me up.” They were standing in the vicinity of second base, though there was no longer a bag there. The two of them had turned countless double plays in that spot, with one of their dads smashing grown-man grounders up the middle and the other dad standing on first. On the field and off, there was little difference between them then – two sons of factory workers, fathers who would both die of cancer, though the doctors couldn’t say for sure it was occupational, and not the two-pack-a-day habits or even the bad luck of genes. What had cleaved their friendship and set the branches of their lives growing in such different directions? Why wasn’t Raymond the one living in a tent? Why wasn’t Tony the one practicing law? Raymond couldn’t answer those questions, but he knew if Tony had become a lawyer, he wouldn’t have wasted his time writing contracts and real estate agreements, no matter how lucrative they were.

“There’s something I need to ask you – a favor,” Tony said.

“Anything, you know that.”

“I need you to be my, uh, what do they call it? Something-attorney. Attorney-at-law?”

“You mean power of attorney?”
“Yeah, that. And I need you to write me a will.”

Raymond looked at the 30.06. “Buddy, what do you need a will for?”

“So I can leave all my shit to you,” Tony laughed and waved his arm over the expanse of Spelter. “I, Anthony Romero, being of somewhat sound mind and body, leave the entirety of my empire to you, Raymond Ignatius Cesar.”

“Stop fucking around. And I hope you’re not thinking about that lawsuit. You’ll be lucky to see one red cent from that case.” Over nearly a century of operation, three separate companies had owned the zinc smelter. That spring, an enterprising local lawyer had signed up half the town – Tony and Raymond’s mother among them – to sue The DePew Corporation, the only owner still in existence, the only one left to blame. DePew promised to fight the suit for decades, if necessary.

“Ah hell, Raymond, I just want a will, and I want someone to take care of all these fucking papers the state keeps sending me. I can’t deal with that shit.”

“Okay, buddy, I can do that. But why don’t you take better care of yourself and we’ll talk about your will again in twenty years?”

“Look, I’m not going to off myself, okay?” Tony said. “But God’s the one who says how long you’re here. You never know what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

Back at the house, Raymond saw his mother had filled the bird feeders while he was gone. A handful of cardinals and crows pecked at kernels scattered on the ground, in dirt that was at least a little bit contaminated, like everything else, from The Pile. “You’d think they wouldn’t eat off that soil,” Raymond said.

“I guess birds don’t got sense enough to turn down a free lunch.”

♦
The turkey was resting under tin foil when Tony emerged from the basement shower, last used with any regularity by Raymond’s father more than twenty years earlier. Raymond’s mother kept a stack of clean clothes for Tony on the shelf above the utility sink, and she let him shower there whenever he wanted – which wasn’t often.

“Why don’t you just give him my old room,” Raymond had said.

“Believe me, I’ve offered. But you know how proud Tony is.”

With his beard gone and hair clean and combed, Tony looked shorn of some essential armor, and his red, rheumy eyes shifted about, as if searching for danger. Beth kissed him on the cheek. “Well, you sure clean up nice.” He’d nicked his neck and plugged the bleed with a pinch of toilet paper. “Here, let me get that,” Beth snatched away the toilet paper.

While Raymond and his mother brought the food to the table, Beth directed Tony to a seat. “I saw you boys out there on the baseball field,” she said. “I thought you were going to re-live your ‘Spanish connection’ days.”

Raymond and Tony hadn’t played organized ball until they were 11 or 12 years old, on an all-county team with boys they didn’t know, farm kids who called their middle infielders the Spanish connection. “Yeah, I remember when those rednecks gave us the name.”

“They thought we were Puerto Rican at first,” Raymond slid the turkey on the table, “because all we talked about was Roberto Clemente.”

“The best right fielder in history. A great, great man.” A spark of life flickered in Tony’s eyes. “Plus, he hit .350 that season.”

“Oh Lord,” Beth rolled her eyes. “How do boys remember this stuff?”
Raymond’s mother set a bowl of greens on the table, the ash of her Virginia Slim dangling dangerously close to the lip. “Clemente hit .351 that year,” she corrected.

Raymond went to shut off the television while they ate. All afternoon, CNN had been showing footage of the president flying into Baghdad to serve dinner to hundreds of soldiers, a sea of desert camo and holiday fixings under a giant airport hangar. “The trip to Baghdad was conducted under enormous secrecy,” a commentator said. “This is a city where American troops suffer dozens of attacks each day.” Tony sat up as the screen flashed with images of a gunfight on a dusty street, a Humvee burning in the foreground.

“It must be hard, seeing all this war news again,” Beth said to him.

“It’s not like you think,” he said. “I don’t watch too much TV these days, anyhow.”

Raymond gathered the carving knife then, but suddenly thought better of embarrassing himself with the turkey. “Here,” he handed the blade to Tony. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

Later that night, after he’d drank six or eight full pours of Old Grandad, Tony stood in the doorway and told Raymond, “You know, I was never afraid of dying over there. The killing was the thing. I hated myself for getting so good at it.” Raymond could count on one hand the number of times Tony had spoken of the war, and never once in any detail. Tony stepped on to the porch and looked back at him, but there wasn’t enough light for Raymond to see his friend’s face. “I’m scared to death I’m going to hell,” he said, and then turned and walked unsteadily into the dark.

Raymond sat on the mattress he’d bought a decade earlier, when his sagging childhood bed started to cause him back pain, but his mind ranged deep in the backwoods
with Tony, across the creeks and through the hollows of their youth. Beth was getting undressed in the cramped room, but Raymond couldn’t seem to focus on her body, being revealed a piece at a time. “I had an idea,” he said. “What if we moved down here – just for a couple years?”

“Move here?” Beth pulled on her favorite sleeping shirt, a faded U2 Joshua Tree concert t-shirt. They’d agreed to talk in the morning about his mother moving to their place in Mount Lebanon.

“Not to Spelter, but someplace close. Maybe Bridgeport, near the country club."

“Honey, what brought this on?”

“I don’t know. Tony, I guess. And mom – there’s no way she’s going to move to Pittsburgh.” Raymond couldn’t believe how many years had passed since he’d left home, since he last owned a West Virginia address, and yet his memories were so vivid here, like everything in his life was happening at once. “If we lived someplace close maybe mom would stay with us. And maybe we could get Tony to quit sleeping in that goddamn tent.”

Beth stepped close to him, their knees barely touching. “Let me get this straight: Now you not only want your mother to live with us, but your messed-up-vet best friend too?”

Raymond rested the crown of his head against her belly. They’d never once had sex in his childhood bedroom, even though they’d been allowed to sleep together since his second year of law school, the year they’d gotten married. His mother’s room was just across the hall, and her hearing had always been so sharp. “I know it’s crazy,” he said. “But I just feel like I need to do something before it’s too late.”
“I know. Listen to me.” She took his head in her hands. “For you and for your
mom, and yes, for Tony, I’d be willing to live here a few years.”

Raymond wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. He could feel
the shape of her hips, the give of her belly and breasts, a body he knew like the rooms of
this house. Beth was still a very beautiful woman.

“But let me tell you something,” she said. “If they ever win that lawsuit, you guys
have to buy me the nicest condo in Florida.”

Raymond laughed. “Don’t get your hopes up, baby.”

Raymond dreamt he was running down The Pile, his legs churning beyond his
control, faster and faster, the bottom rising up to meet him, when the sound of a pounding
hammer jarred him from sleep. By the time he got out of bed, Tony had fixed the
threshold and was seated at the table, a coffee mug between his raw, chapped hands. He
smelled earthy and damp and sour, this last from the night’s booze.

Tony and Lydia listened stoically that morning, as Raymond and Beth explained
their plan to move home to West Virginia. Lydia smoked a cigarette with her usual
neglect; the ash spilled on the table and dropped to the floor. She rubbed the ash into the
carpet with her slipper. *It keeps the bugs out*, she usually said, but this time offered no
comment.

“Sweetheart,” she said, when Raymond finished. “I’d be happy to have you guys
closer, but why would you want to leave your home? You have a nice life in Pittsburgh.
And Beth told me she wants to get a place in Florida soon.”

Raymond looked accusingly at his wife.

“What?” Beth said. “I told her that months ago.”
“Mom, we’d be moving here for you.”

“Oh, piss on that,” she lit another cigarette. “I’m not some old lady that needs looked after.”

“Lydia, wouldn’t you like a new house, where you didn’t have to look at that slag pile?” Beth said. “We could even get a rancher so you wouldn’t have to climb stairs.”

“Let me tell you, honey, Spelter’s my home. I know it might not look like much, but it’s my home.” Lydia said this without emotion, a plain fact that needed no embellishment. “Our families came here from the war in Spain – I know you’ve heard this before – but we found good jobs at the smelter. We raised our families in peace. No one bothered us and we didn’t bother no one.”

“I appreciate that, mom. But what if something happens to you and we’re almost two hours away.”

“Tony looks in one me. Listen, son, you have to live your life. Don’t worry about me,” she patted Raymond’s hand. “There’s plenty of people in this world who need help, but I’m not one of them.”

“What about you, Tony? Is that how you feel?”

“That’s right.” He lit an off-brand cigarette. “I don’t bother nobody, neither.”

Roberto Clemente collected the 3,000th hit of his career, a double in the 4th inning against the New York Mets, on Sept. 30, 1972. Raymond was three weeks into One L and too busy to listen to the broadcast. That night, his mother called the one-bedroom he and Beth had rented in the Hill District. Beth had said yes to his marriage proposal that summer, and Raymond had agreed, without ever telling Beth, that they would live a good
life, free of struggle. His mother was giddy about Clemente reaching that milestone. “Study hard,” she said before they hung up. “I’m so proud of you.”

The 3,000th hit of Clemente’s career would also be his last.

Then, New Year’s Day, 1973. Raymond was a bit hungover that morning, when he turned on KDKA and learned that Roberto Clemente had died in a plane crash. Clemente had been trying to deliver relief supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua, after corrupt officials had stolen the previous shipments. The laden cargo plane had crashed into the ocean shortly after take-off from San Juan.

The news hit Raymond in a way he couldn’t explain. Beth was still sleeping, so he went for a walk, hoping to get his bearings. The streets of Pittsburgh were strangely deserted of cars, the sidewalks frozen and empty. In his fog, Raymond soon found himself in a pay phone, dialing the familiar 304 area code. “He’s not here, Raymond,” Tony’s mother said. “He’s taken up with some woman in Clarksburg. When he first got discharged, it was a different girl every week, but this one seems to have her hooks in him good.”

Beth was awake when Raymond returned to the apartment, but he couldn’t tell her about Clemente, what he’d meant to him, how he’d died trying to help. Beth didn’t follow sports, and she might find his grief silly and misplaced. Raymond said he needed to get cleaned up, and in the shower he wept alone, like a child.

♦

By 2011, when Raymond finally asked a judge to declare his best friend dead, Tony had been missing for more than four years. The sheriff had sent a search party of police academy cadets and two K-9’s when Tony first disappeared, and a group of guys from the VFW paced the woods for three days at a 25-meter spread, but there was no
trace of Tony. After a while, the searchers went back to their normal lives and duties, but Raymond still hiked the hollows for months, calling futilely to his friend. The deputies had checked the tent for a suicide note, for some clue to his whereabouts, but it was weeks before Raymond worked up the nerve to look inside himself. The blue tarp had broken loose in three corners by then and drooped to the ground.

At the Harrison County courthouse, Raymond mounted a marble staircase bounded by a brass and wrought iron railing, and waited with his attorney in the hard pew seating of Judge Keeley’s courtroom. There were still twelve spittoons embedded in the floor of the jury box, and the county had yet to bar smoking indoors. Raymond had appeared before Judge Keeley a handful of times since he started taking local pro bono cases, mostly as counsel for abused and neglected kids. He thought the judge to be a fair man. A clerk emerged from behind the bench and beckoned, “This way, gentlemen.”

Given Tony’s mental health record, the judge was understandably reluctant to issue a death certificate. “Have you considered that Mr. Romero could be among the homeless of our community, living out of touch with anyone from his life?” he asked.

“Yes, your honor,” Raymond said. “I’ve scoured every shelter and VA hospital from Charleston to Pittsburgh, with no luck.”

In the tent, Raymond had sifted through piles of newspapers and paperback mysteries, a water-logged sleeping bag and a few flannels. He didn’t think he’d find any personal items at all, until he discovered the baseball glove shoved to the bottom of the sleeping bag. It was a Wilson, well broken-in, both lightened from the sun and darkened from oil rubbed deep into the leather. Raymond tried it on, but it was too small, a child’s
glove. Even before he looked, Raymond knew what player’s signature he’d find burned into the palm.

“Well, let me say, Mr. Cesar, I’m sorry to see you again so soon after your mother’s passing.”

“Thank you, your honor.”

Judge Keeley had probated Lydia’s last will and testament not six months earlier. Diagnosed with lung cancer that later spread to her liver, Lydia had refused anything but the most basic palliative care. “Most of my patients embrace treatment,” her oncologist explained. “Your mother is one of the few who embraces life.” Lydia refused to leave her home anyway but “feet first,” and she dressed and fed herself until the day she died. Raymond and Beth didn’t need to be there as often as they were, to practically move in those last couple months. They spent that time in Spelter because they wanted to, wanted to be with Lydia. There was no sense of duty, only desire. Raymond started taking those pro bono cases for much the same reason.

At his mother’s funeral, Raymond had a funny feeling that Tony would pay his respects at the gravesite, perhaps bearing a clutch of wildflowers, but he was wrong. On the day they buried his mother, Raymond accepted the fact that Tony was gone, as well.

Lydia Cesar had died a wealthy woman, by local standards, thanks to a settlement with the DePew Corporation that made 108 of Spelter’s residents into instant millionaires, not counting the cut the lawyers took. Lydia lived long enough to learn she’d be rewarded for a life spent in Spelter, and not just in the hereafter. Judge Keeley knew well that Raymond had inherited his mother’s share of the settlement, and that he stood to inherit Tony’s as well. Raymond didn’t take offense, as the judge feared, at the
suggestion of personal monetary gain. Instead, Raymond’s attorney presented documents on the foundation he and Beth had established. Raymond also planned to donate Tony’s settlement to the foundation, the mission of which was twofold: to provide college scholarships and support for the local Little League.

“Why is the foundation based in Florida?” the judge asked.

After his mother’s funeral, Raymond decided it was time for that sunny semi-retirement. The condo he and Beth found near Naples wasn’t nearly the nicest in the state, but Beth had done wonders with the decorating. “Do we really need to donate _all_ that DePew money to charity?” she teased.

“I’m curious about the name of the foundation,” the judge said.

“We named it for our favorite baseball player.”

The judge nodded. “The best right fielder in history.”

“A great, great man.”

In the end, Judge Keeley said he’d like to wait another year before issuing a death certificate. “That’d be fine, your honor,” Raymond said. He was in no hurry, even though he knew to a certainty that Tony was gone. And, like their hero, that he’d never be found.
A Good Man

I never could think about Mr. Blankenship without being reminded of Rhonda and the summer I almost became a father. For the longest time I hated Rhonda for getting mixed with the memories of my old friend. That was unfair of me, I know that now; it wasn’t like she done it on purpose. But me and her didn’t end too well, and I missed Mr. Blankenship something terrible once he got sent down state to prison. I turned 23 that summer, but I was still pretty much a kid. Rhonda, my girlfriend, actually was a kid.

I got the call from her right around the time the marshals finally caught Mr. Blankenship. He was unarmed and drinking coffee in an IHOP near Baltimore, and they just walked up and put the cuffs on him, no fuss. I was living with his son Danny at the time, and we’d been sending whatever money we could to keep Mr. Blankenship on the run. It was a real shit show when he got busted, but I didn’t think the summer could get any worse.
Rhonda called from a pay phone down at the Middletown Mall. She was 17 then, but I’d started getting with her when she was still 16. Her mom was crazy strict and would have been none too happy to know her daughter was running with a guy my age. Her mom worked the third shift making fluorescent lamps at the Philips plant and Rhonda did pretty much whatever she wanted at night, as long as she got home by dawn. During the day she’d invent bullshit excuses to borrow the car and then she’d head over to my place for one of our afternoon romps.

I met her when she wandered into the Supper Club looking for work. The manager put her on Friday and Saturday nights, and she absolutely cleaned up on tips. She gave off this wild-child vibe that drove the miners and the downtown office men crazy. First thing everyone noticed was this tiny little waist you knew wouldn’t last for long.

All Rhonda would say on the phone was, “We need to talk.” It must have been 95 degrees that day, but my body went ice cold, like all my blood had run out. Me and Rhonda had a slight birth control issue a few weeks earlier – and by issue I mean I didn’t have any condoms and I wasn’t running down to the gas station at 2 a.m. with a raging hard-on.

The good news was I’d been down this road before and knew we could take care of it, easy. The bad news was she was dead-set on keeping the baby from the minute she walked in my door. I tried to sweet talk her, said I’d stay with her the whole time and pay for everything, even though I still owed the last girl some money. But Rhonda got the idea that an abortion would mess up her female plumbing. She said this might be her one
and only chance to be a mother, to carry on her line. “You’ll go off and marry some other
girl and have a mess of kids,” she said, “and I’ll be used up and alone.”

As if that wasn’t enough, she threw her religion at me for good measure. Here
we’d broke all the rules, engaging as we were in pre-marital sex and birth control – most
of the time anyway – and then all of a sudden she wants to be a good Catholic again?
“This is different,” she said. “It’s the worst sin there is.”

The walls were starting to close on me. It was like that first day at boot camp
when the drill sergeant screamed like a lunatic in my face and I knew I’d lost total control
of my life. “Does your religion say anything about screwing a kid up?” I said. “Because I
ain’t ready to be a father.”

“I know you’re not. You think I’d pick you to be my baby’s daddy?”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” I wasn’t sure if I should be offended or
continue to argue my unfitness.

“I mean, you’re the one who said you’d pull out!” she blurted. And then she
looked fit to cry.

The little window unit in the kitchen was rattling hard against the soupy air, but
the apartment still felt like the inside of a jock strap. Smelled like one too. Cold sweat
poured from my armpits as I tried to picture me and this country girl down at the
courthouse taking our vows, until death do us part. I couldn’t imagine changing no
diapers.

“How do you even know it’s mine?” I said then.

Damn, but that girl had a temper. I decided right there I never wanted to see her
mad like that again.
I wasn’t bullshitting when I said I couldn’t be a father.

After high school, me and Danny both did our bits – me as a wrench-turner at Fort Riley, Kansas, and him as an MP in the Air Force. We both got discharged about the same time. Danny came home and enrolled in college – he studied criminal justice down at Fairmont State – but I wasn’t doing shit except cooking down at the Supper Club and getting hammered most every night. Danny partied a lot with me, but he still took care of his business in a way that I truly respected.

They were building all these new prisons and jails back then, and Danny figured he could get on somewhere as a guard – a *correctional officer*, he always said. But him taking criminal justice while living with me was a complete joke. In those days, I was keeping half the kids we knew supplied with weed and pills. Not that I was a big player or nothing, but our apartment was definitely the spot. We were up there getting high and playing Madden Football every night til the sun came up – and sometimes longer. We’d hung thick blankets over all the windows so it was pretty easy to lose track of time on a good run.

Danny was a good kid, though – better than me, anyway – and no doubt because of his dad. Mr. Blankenship coached our Little League team, and to this day I remember him buying that Tucker boy a pair of cleats. The kid was playing in these old New Balance sneakers that didn’t have no tread left. He looked like he was ice skating going around the bases. My dad worked with Mr. Blankenship in the Tygart River Mine, said he was definitely someone you wanted on your crew. I wasn’t surprised to hear that. My dad and him were laid off the same day in ’95 when Martinka shut the mine down.
No one was more shocked than me and Danny when Mr. Blankenship killed that truck driver over on East Side. The news said he walked up to him in the parking lot, put a gun to his chest and fired. The cops found Mr. Blankenship’s Chevy abandoned out by Prickett’s Fort, but he was gone on the run. The paper kept using this old headshot of him cropped from our team photo, from the year we won the A-ball championship. It must have been the only picture they had on file, but it was damn strange to see the face of my coach, the man who used to hit me grounders and high-five me coming around the bases, under a caption that called him a killer.

It wasn’t long after that when the rumors started, people saying the guy Mr. Blankenship shot had been sleeping with his wife. I didn’t know if it was true or not, and I wasn’t about to say anything to Danny. I mean, that’s his mom. There are some things you just don’t ask about.

Mr. Blankenship was gone two months before he called the apartment. He told Danny he loved him and was sorry for all the trouble he’d caused and then he hung up. The next day, at six in the goddamn morning, two U.S. Marshals were banging on our door. That’s how we knew they were listening to our calls.

We told everyone not to talk drug shit on our phones after that, but people were so stupid, so hungry, they didn’t care. Even if a phone ain’t tapped, common sense should tell you to at least be vague. *Hey man, you got that thing I’m looking for?* But these retards calling our number couldn’t even manage that much. They’d just come right out and ask for a half ounce of weed or some Percocets.

And that was my life at the time. Not exactly the best environment to be raising a kid, am I right?
Thinking about having a baby really makes you consider your own parents.

Mine divorced when I was 12, but the split was friendly enough. I’d stay with mom during the week and then head to dad’s for the weekend. Dad and I usually didn’t do much. We’d watch football and NASCAR together, or I’d help him with chores around his place. He’d bought a piece of ground out Colfax after the divorce and gotten one of those pre-fab homes that come on two wide-load trailers. Dad was a quiet guy, never did say much, but that was okay with me. I looked up to him all the same.

I drove out to see him after Rhonda told me she was pregnant. We sat on his porch and drank Bud Lights in the afternoon heat. A storm rumbled through and the temperature dropped 15 degrees in an instant. Dad brought in the flag right before the rain started. The burst lasted ten minutes, tops. The ground cooled a bit, and mist rose up and floated like cotton through the fiddleheads.

We talked some about Mr. Blankenship – the paper that day said he was going to be brought back for trial in Fairmont soon. Danny’s sister had driven out to Maryland to take him the money we’d pooled, and the feds were following right behind. The marshals stashed Mr. Blankenship in the Baltimore city jail, which I figured had to be the worst place on the planet. Dad asked how Danny was holding up.

“Alright, I guess.” Danny and I didn’t talk much about his dad, and I tried to keep the party going, to keep his mind off shit.

“That poor kid. I swear, none of this would have happened if we all hadn’t been laid off.”
This was a common refrain with my old man: The ills of the world were due to men not working or not being willing to work. I always told him I knew about hard work – try pulling a double at the Supper Club when they got both banquet rooms rented and a full dining room – but hard work didn’t make a difference for me. I still didn’t make no money. I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell my dad about Rhonda, but after a couple beers the words tumbled like a rock into one of our silences. “Dad, it looks like I got some girl pregnant.”

He took a deep drag on his cigarette. It seemed an eternity before he answered with, “You having it?”

“She ain’t giving me a choice.”

“Can you support a kid on what you make?”

“I’ve no idea. There any mines I could get on at?”

“I got a buddy who’s bossing over in Harrison County. But it’s an open shop.”

“So? It’s gotta pay better than what I’m doing now.”

“Probably,” Dad shrugged. “Can you pass the drug test?”

He was only asking about the drugs to be practical, but I was still ashamed to answer. “Not at the moment.”

“Can you quit? Can you stay off ‘em?”

“Yeah. I guess,” but I wasn’t sure if that was true.

Dad twisted around in his lawn chair. “If you can stay clean long enough to pass the piss test, I’ll put in a word for you.”

“Thanks, pop. I appreciate that.”

“Well, goddamn.” Dad leaned back and laughed. “I’m gonna be a grandpa.”
The first words I heard from Rhonda in more than a week were hollered through the server’s station at the Supper Club on a busy Friday night. I hadn’t so much as puffed on a joint since I talked to my dad, but I hadn’t been clean long enough to feel like I’d accomplished anything special. The sound of her voice sent a charge down my legs, even though all she said was, “Can you hurry the hell up with my fries?”

I smiled at her. “You think I got some magic power to make fries cook faster?” We were slammed, and the other cook on the schedule had called to say his car wouldn’t start and he couldn’t find a ride – the usual bullshit and who knew how much of it was really true?

“Maybe you should have dropped them sooner,” Rhonda said. She did not smile back. “You ever think of that?”

I looked through the station at the rolling green of her eyes, gazed until she said threw up her hands and said, “What?” A wayward strand of rusty hair snagged cutely on her lip gloss.

Rhonda and I would be no different than any other couple who worked and drank and got fat and sometimes did things to hurt each other, but we could still find a reason to get up in the morning and go on, to grow old, to grow old together. I’d been fighting that future, but maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. There must be something to having a warm body weaved through the sheets with yours, something sustaining. I stared and stared at her, as steam from the Hobart filled the space around her face.

“I know it’s mine,” I said. “I should have never said that shit to you.” I could tell by the way she was biting her lip and sucking on her hair that she wanted to forgive me. I
shook the fries from the grease and tonged a pile on a plate. I set the plate on the server station. She grabbed the other end, but I held on. “You’re my baby, you know that?”

She laughed, finally, and her apple cheeks ripened. “You’re crazy.”

I let go. As the fries disappeared and she swished through the swinging doors, I thought, My God, what have I gotten myself into?

I survived the dinner service and when Rick the other cook finally showed I hung my apron and let him know he’d be doing clean-up and prep. I headed toward the bar for a beer. In the server’s area the owner had positioned a full-length mirror and written in White-Out along the glass, Stop! Look! This is what the customer sees. I stopped and looked. I wanted to see a good man, someone who could be a good father like my dad, like Mr. Blankenship, but all I saw was a guy who needed a beer. One step at a time, I thought. One baby step at a time.

My eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the darkness in the bar. There weren’t too many people except for the waitresses, who were doing shots in the corner. Rhonda was with them, holding a bottle of Budweiser. I watched her wedge a cigarette in her mouth and light it.

“What the fuck,” I said, loud enough that an old woman zoned out on the poker machine jerked her head. I strode across the room, but two of the waitresses stepped between me and Rhonda.

“What?” Rhonda said.

“You’re pregnant, for Christ’s sake.” I tried to lower my voice but the words sounded like a growl.
“Jesus Christ, Stanley, I haven’t told anyone yet.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “And since when do you care?” She looked at me like she expected a real answer. I didn’t give one right away, and she slammed her bottle on the bar. It wobbled but did not tip over.

“I care. I care,” I turned to John the bartender. He’d been trying to fuck Rhonda since day one. “What are you doing serving her?”

“Hell, I didn’t know she was pregnant,” he said.

“You knew she was underage.”

He smirked. “So did you.”

♦

It wasn’t too long before Rhonda had a huge fight with her mom and asked to come stay with me and Danny. “You’re man enough to make a baby,” her mom said, as I loaded Rhonda’s bags in my truck. “But are you man enough to take care of my daughter?”

“Yeah, sure,” I shrugged, but Mom didn’t look too convinced.

Rhonda didn’t wanted to go back to school for her senior year and swell up in front of everybody and be nine months pregnant at graduation, but I wouldn’t let her drop out, mostly because I didn’t know what to do with her otherwise. Half the time, I’d come home and find her on the couch smoking weed and eating Fruity Pebbles from a big mixing bowl. We’d had a bunch of arguments about her getting high, and when school started I asked what kind of mother she planned to be if she didn’t have no education. I said she needed some structure, needed to be doing something with her life. I sounded just like my old man when he marched me down to the recruiters and made me enlist.
My mom also said I should get Rhonda to a doctor by eight weeks, so I made an appointment and told Rhonda I’d pick her up after school. It was weird to wait for her in the student parking lot. Everything seemed so familiar, but I felt so out of place. I scrunched down in my seat and hoped no one would notice me.

At the doctor’s they slathered this goop on Rhonda’s belly and waved the ultrasound wand. I couldn’t make out what was on the grainy screen, but then the nurse said, “And, there’s the heartbeat.” I squinted at that flutter of life on the monitor, at my doing. I can’t say exactly what came over me, but something did. Something so basic that words like love and pride weren’t good enough. I was staring at my link to the long chain of humanity.

I could tell something had come over Rhonda too. She was real quiet in the car, sitting with her hands rested on her belly. I felt like I should say something to acknowledge what we’d experienced. “Finish school,” I said, “and we’ll get married in the summer.”

She stared at her stomach. “If you wait that long, our baby will be a bastard.”

I started to argue, started to say, What difference does it make? Then I stopped and wondered what I was so afraid of. What difference does it make?

“Alright.” Then I tried to do it right. We came to the stoplight at the Pizza Hut, and I took her by the hand. “Rhonda, my love, will you marry me over Christmas break?”

Maybe it would be snowing when we came out of the courthouse as husband and wife. The downtown would be decorated for the holidays, the tinsel wound around the light poles, the big wreath hung from the city building. We could go down to Blackwater Falls for our honeymoon. My parents had gone for theirs, but in the summer. If it was
cold enough, the falls would be frozen. I’d seen pictures on the state tourism brochures and it was beautiful. We could go over to Canaan Valley and sit in the ski lodge and drink hot chocolate. Maybe one day Rhonda and I could learn to ski. And then we could teach our son to ski too. It might have been too early to tell on the ultrasound, but I was certain we were having a boy. I had the print-out stuffed in my pocket. I was going to stick it on the fridge at home if I could find a magnet.

I was feeling pretty good when I dropped Rhonda at the Supper Club. She’d started taking some weekday shifts, but I was off that night. I hadn’t smoked weed or popped a pill in 32 days and I was starting to not miss being high, but not quite entirely. With any luck I’d be working underground in a couple weeks.

I only stopped at Bunny’s that night for a beer or two, but then I ran into a bunch of old friends – Silly and Slice and Gary and that whole crew. I showed them the ultrasound and they started slapping me on the back and shaking my hand and buying me shots. Before long, I was flying high and feeling my whole life open up like the buds on a big rhododendron. I went outside with them guys and took a couple hits off the bowl, thinking I could use Goldenseal pills to hide the weed in my system, but not really giving a shit, one way or the other. We went back inside and drank until the lights came on, and then I was driving home with one eye closed so I’d know which of the two roads to follow.

God was watching me that night, I know it. The moment those rack lights fired up behind me, I knew it. All the air rushed from my body. I pulled into the Sunoco and got out of the truck. My apartment building was just on the hill there.

“Sir, get back in your vehicle,” the trooper said. He wasn’t no older than me.
I ignored him and placed my palms on the warm hood. “Let’s get this over with.”

The trooper was startled when I got out of the truck, but he took his hand from his gun when he saw what I was doing. He got behind me and felt down one leg, then the other. “Been drinking tonight, sir?”

I woke up dressed in orange.

Some shit-kicker from Mannington was shaking me and saying, “Hey boy, you want your breakfast?” A trusty passed these hard plastic trays into our cell. I was hungry as hell so I sat up and took a tray. The scrambled eggs were the runniest, most pathetic-looking eggs I’d ever seen, but I didn’t care. I folded them in a piece of Wonder bread and ate the whole wad in three bites.

After breakfast they opened the cells and some of the guys wandered down to the day room to play cards and watch the morning game shows. A couple inmates were playing Nintendo on a second television. I went to see what games they had and found Mr. Blankenship sitting there in a white plastic chair, furiously punching the buttons on the controller. “Hey, coach,” I said.

He dropped the controller and got out of the chair. “Stanley,” he took me by the shoulders. “What are you doing in here?”

“Got a DUI.”

He nodded and hugged me, but then pulled back to look in my eyes with that piercing intensity of his. “Stanley, come on now,” he said. “You’re too old to be screwing around like this.”
“I know, coach. You’re right.” I was starting to feel bad, but then Mr. Blankenship put his arm around me, like he used to when I struck out or made an error. Mr. Blankenship told the other inmate to scoot so me and him could play Nintendo instead, and the guy walked off without complaint.

“You must be glad to be out of that Baltimore jail,” I said.

“It wasn’t too bad. You just got to earn the respect of the inmates. Which I did.”

Mr. Blankenship gave me a cigarette. I knew Danny had been putting money in his dad’s canteen for smokes and potato chips, but I hadn’t made a contribution in a while. We played Madden Football most of the morning. He let me be the Steelers, while he took the Cowboys, just to mess with me. During one of our smoke breaks I told him I was having a baby. “Stanley, that’s great, man, really great.” He shook my hand. “Congratulations.”

He asked me about my girlfriend, but I said he didn’t know her. “I think maybe I’m a little freaked out.”

He put his hand on my shoulder again. “Don’t you worry, Stanley. You’re gonna be a great dad. I know it.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Thanks, coach. It means a lot, you saying that.”

“You know, we got pregnant with Danny’s sister when I was 19. I was scared shitless too. Paula and I hadn’t been together very long, but she turned out to be the love of my life.”

I’d been afraid to bring up the rumors, but in that moment I thought Mr. Blankenship deserved to know. Still, I wanted to tread lightly. “So, is everything alright with you and Mrs. B.?”
Mr. Blankenship was quiet for a while. He dropped his cigarette on the floor and smudged it on the tile. “Everything you heard is true,” he said. “But don’t tell Danny. He’s probably heard the same thing, but I don’t want him knowing for sure. I don’t want him hating his mother.”

I found out later that Danny had heard, and he’d confronted his mother about it, too. It was years before he talked to her again. But I wondered at the time why Mr. Blankenship gave a shit what Danny thought about his mom. “I mean, aren’t you pissed at her for sleeping with that guy?” I asked.

He was quiet again and I thought I’d overstepped my bounds. “I still love her,” he said, finally. “Stanley, these last couple years have been hard. The unemployment ran out and I couldn’t find work. I didn’t feel like a man, if you know what I mean. I’ve had a lot of time to think about this stuff and I don’t blame her for nothing. She was lonely. But that son-of-a-bitch truck driver – I can’t even say his name. He knew he was fucking another man’s wife. He deserved what he got.”

I looked then at Mr. Blankenship, my coach and my friend, and didn’t see a murderer. I saw a man who loved his wife. I didn’t know if I’d ever love Rhonda like that, love her enough to kill, but I could hope.

“You’re a good man,” I told Mr. Blankenship. I meant it, too.

♦

There’s nothing worse than that jail smell. It sticks to your skin like dried sweat and stays in your hair for days, no matter how many times you wash. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. Danny picked me up after I posted bail and I gave him a $20 bill in the
car. “For your dad’s canteen,” I said. He told me Rhonda had been up in the apartment crying on the phone to her mom.

“She was packing a bag when I left,” he said.

“Christ. She’s leaving? I’m gone for 24 hours and she’s bailing on me? That’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, well, you need to go easy on that girl,” Danny said.

“What do you mean? I didn’t do nothing to her.”

Danny had never said much about Rhonda and me. He even kept quiet when she started living with us. “You should never have got with her in the first place,” he said. “She’s just a kid, for Christ’s sake.” We were stopped at a light and Danny was shaking his head like he was disappointed in me. “Look, man, she’s scared to death and doesn’t have anyone to help her. If you’re gonna be a father you gotta start stepping up here.”

The light turned green but we didn’t move. He shook his head again, and I sat there ashamed, thinking how I’d try twice as hard to get my shit together. Danny didn’t speak to me the whole rest of the way home, but he didn’t have to. Like I said, he was a good kid. Better than me, that’s for sure.

Rhonda’s two big bags were packed and lying in the hallway when we got home. There were two guys I barely knew playing Madden in the living room – some kids Danny hung around with at Fairmont State – and I could smell the joint they’d just smoked. Apparently, the hysterical pregnant girl in the apartment hadn’t disturbed their party time. I found Rhonda in the bedroom, stuffing a make-up kit into her Hello Kitty back pack. I said I was sorry.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It don’t matter.”
“Where you going?”

“My mom’s. I lost it.”

“You lost what?” I honestly didn’t know what she was talking about.

“The baby. I had a miscarriage.” She didn’t look up from her packing, but I could see her face was flushed, her body coiled with some kind of energy I was afraid to face, head-on.

“What do you mean?”

“I went to the bathroom and it came out. You weren’t here so I called my mom. She said I could come home.” Her voice was so flat I couldn’t believe it.

“It came out?” I went to the bathroom and lifted the lid. There was only water.

“There’s nothing here,” I yelled.

Rhonda came to the door. “I flushed it down the toilet. What’d you want me to do? Keep it in a jar? It was just blood and mess. What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you?”

“Look, Stanley, you’re off the hook.” She was angry now. “You didn’t want this baby. You don’t want me. So don’t act like you care.”

“I do too care.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets like a bratty child and felt the waxy paper of the ultrasound print-out. I pulled the picture from my jeans and stared at it.

“No, you don’t,” Rhonda said.

“Don’t tell me what I care about.” I crumpled the picture and dropped it in the toilet.

“Look at this place, Stan. Look at your life. How can you say you care about anything?”
“You want me to look at this place?” I’d no right to be angry with her, but I was. I went to the living room and yanked the Nintendo wires from the television. The screen went to static. “Is that what you want? You want me to look at this place?”

I turned and ripped the blanket from the window. Tacks scattered across the room and light came flooding through the dirty glass. Danny and his friends shielded their eyes and squinted like miners coming up in the mantrip. Rhonda was right: I’d never noticed before how bad our place looked. There were Chinese take-out and bong water stains on the carpet, and ash and cigarette burns all over the coffee table. I don’t think we’d ever run a sweeper in the place. Dust particles, millions and millions of them, danced through the shafts of sunlight.

Rhonda came in the living room with her book bag on her shoulders. In the harsh light I could see the tears running down the smooth cheeks of her baby face.

There was nothing between us then but the dust motes.

◆

I didn’t get work in the mines for another ten years, when I was nearly 35 years old. I’d finally gotten clean and was going to meetings pretty regular, and the job paid too good to screw up by getting high. I made $102,000 last year with overtime, enough to buy a boat and a four-wheeler, even after giving half my paycheck to my ex-wife for alimony and child support. My kids come over on the weekends. This winter, I’m taking my son hunting for the first time.

Mr. Blankenship pleaded guilty to manslaughter and got a reduced sentence. He would’ve been 58 at his first parole hearing but he died three months too soon, dropped dead in the yard at Mount Olive, his heart ruptured like an old tire. Danny came to the
funeral from Florida, where he was selling mortgages or something like that. His skin
looked like the leather on my bucket seats. He seemed happy though – as happy as a guy
can be at his dad’s funeral.

Danny asked me about Rhonda, my almost child bride, the mother of my baby-in-
a-toilet, the girl I’d hoped to love enough to kill for. I heard she worked for a while in the
Philips plant with her mom, but that was years ago. The last I saw her, she was standing
in the cashier line at Wal-Mart. She had a toddler pressed on her hip, a beautiful little girl
blessed with the same auburn hair. I couldn’t bring myself to speak to her.

These days, I don’t know where the hell she’s at.
Subsidence

Not every congregant at what would be the final Wednesday night mass at St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church noticed the tiny piece of lead that soared over the pews and landed before the altar. Father Kagame, a visiting priest from Rwanda, was preparing Holy Communion at the time, but he wasn’t distracted from his ritual. He recited, *And after Supper he took the cup and said, drink of this all of you, for this is my blood*, in his mumbo-jumbo accent no one could understand. Those who did see what happened, like Mrs. Carmella Pallotta, couldn’t tell where the shiny projectile had come from. A few heads tilted toward the vaulted ceiling, as if God had rained metal on them. Some parishioners turned to the stained glass windows, fourteen of them in the nave depicting the Stations of the Cross. From the pews, none of the windows appeared to be disturbed. The next day, church maintenance would determine the lead had pried loose from Jesus Being Stripped of his Garments and then propelled, as if by some miracle, a full dozen yards across the church.

Carmella liked to sit in front, to be nearer to God, and she was among the first to receive the sacrament that night. At the altar she leaned heavily on her cane and, against her better judgement and the advice of her doctor, stooped to pluck the metal from the
soft red carpet. She had no pockets in her dress, so she held the lead, slick like mercury and no more than an inch in length, in her palm. Father Kagame laid the Body of Christ beside it. The round wafer melted and stuck to the roof of Carmella’s mouth, and the wine that evening tasted of iron.

Carmella and her regular pew mates, Mrs. Maria Gallo, a widow, married 47 years to a high school gym teacher, and Miss Agnes Kuretza, never married and the caretaker for two live-in sisters, whispered through the rest of the service about the meaning of the lead’s appearance. “It is perhaps a sign from God,” Agnes joked, but nonetheless crossed herself. A sign of what, she didn’t say and Carmella couldn’t guess. Carmella squeezed the metal as tight as possible in her arthritic hand.

After the service she waited to show Father Kagame. The priest had fled his own country the previous year, traveled in the back of a fruit truck to Uganda and then evacuated to Rome. He’d been in their parish for only a few weeks, and Carmella was still leery of his foreignness. Also, she didn’t know Hutu from Tutsi, nor did she know to which tribe the priest belonged. She recalled only one story from Tom Brokaw, about soldiers who bulldozed a Catholic church with thousands of people inside.

At the door, Carmella opened her palm to Father Kagame and did her best to explain. He nodded and squinted, but Carmella wasn’t sure she was making herself clear. Perhaps his English wasn’t good enough to understand something this odd. But Father Kagame eventually thanked her and took the lead from her hand. As she made her way down the concrete stairs in the cold February wind, Carmella was sorry she’d spoken to the African priest. She wished she’d kept her souvenir and said nothing at all.

♦
The more Carmella thought of the lead, how light the shard felt in her hand, the more apprehensive she grew of its origins. That Sunday morning, eager to see her church again, she arrived twenty minutes early to fetch Maria for mass. Maria’s husband had been traditional and wouldn’t allow his wife to drive or handle money. Since Frank Gallo’s death from a stroke, Maria had reluctantly learned to use the check book, but she remained wary of the Oldsmobile, parked now under a tarp in the garage. Carmella drank a cup of coffee while Maria removed her curlers. “How are you feeling today?” Maria asked when she emerged, coiffed and ready.

Carmella waved a hand. “Eh, invecchiare e brutto.” She wasn’t sure her friend knew the expression. Maria was ten years younger and had been born in this country. “Getting old is ugly. That’s what my father used to say.” It had been a long time since Carmella thought of her father, dead for more than 40 years from the black lung. It was 1918 when the man from the mines came through their village, outside Salerno, promising work and the riches of America. Their family was poor and there were no jobs, so they boarded a steamer in Napoli on the company man’s word and little else. Carmella was five years old, and she left behind most of her language and all but a few memories of the Old Country. She’d never returned. In fact, she didn’t even own a passport.

Agnes had been born over there as well, in Poland. Carmella asked her once what would have happened if their families had stayed in Europe. “Hard to know,” Agnes said. “We could have died in the war.” That might have been true, but now at the end of her life Carmella wished she had more to show for having come here, for her father having suffered so greatly, the breath stolen from his body. Carmella rubbed her achy hand, traced the ragged scar from the night her grandson lost his mind on those drugs. The cut
had bled badly and healed poorly and seemed to make her arthritis worse. She told Maria they should get going. Snow had started to fall and she wanted to go slow on the roads.

In the car, Maria warmed her hands by the dashboard vent. “Are you going to Rosemary Mazzei’s funeral?” she asked.

“Oh, did Rosemary die? She was such a sweet lady.”

“I saw the obit was in the paper.”

Maria lived near Mount Calvary Cemetery, where Carmella’s husband Angelo was buried. Rosemary no doubt would be laid there as well. Just about every tombstone had a name that ended in a vowel or looked like a random scramble of consonants. Carmella took a back road to avoid passing the graveyard, which she thought was bad luck even before her husband was in one. “I don’t read the obits,” she said. “Too many people I know in there.”

“My mother used to say she checked every morning for her name. If she didn’t see it, she knew it was okay to get dressed.”

Carmella’s mother also was full of quirks and superstitions. She was said to have been a village prognosticator, a reader of signs, and she would tease Carmella that she too had the sight. Carmella’s father discouraged his wife’s mysticism, said Americans thought them backward for such beliefs. Carmella liked to think she’d inherited her mother’s gift, but the world had grown so confusing that she no longer trusted her premonitions. Carmella tightened her grip on the wheel, surprised to find that she’d been thinking of her parents again, after all these years. “Have you heard anything about that metal we found at mass?”

“Oh, no, I’d forgotten about that,” Maria said. “That was so strange, though.”
“Yes, so strange.” She drove down the hill by Dunbar, the segregated black high school that became the middle school her white grandchildren had attended. The ancient building was still in use because the county had no money to build a new one. Carmella turned past the abandoned Hartley’s Furniture Store, where she once bought a walnut Brasilia dinette set in a pique of extravagance, and the shuttered Fairmont Theater, the marquee no longer advertising movies, but bidding folks to “Have A  ice D y.” At the corner, she passed the former Pallotta Hardware. As usual, she stared hard through the windshield and willed herself not to look. The car splashed through the slush, and Carmella feared the roads would be treacherous if it got any colder.

After Angelo died, Carmella had closed the hardware store and sold the building. Frank Gallo told her she’d made the right decision because she was a woman and women didn’t have a head for business. But Carmella had kept the books for decades, and what she told Frank had been the truth: “If not for me, we’d have been bankrupt years ago.” She told Frank a few other things, too, gave him a real piece of her mind that day.

Carmella could read the numbers and see what was happening, even if her husband denied it. First it was the chain stores, and then the Wal-Mart, and then the Super Wal-Mart. The stress of it, she was convinced, gave Angelo that third heart attack. He stumbled from the bathroom one morning with his hand on his chest, as if he were going to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. “Carm, this is the one,” he said. The hardware store since had become The Good Time Café, stacked wall-to-wall with slot machines. The big display windows were blacked out, but the letters of the Pallotta Hardware sign were still visible in the soot of the brick façade.
Agnes was waiting in their regular row, three programs in hand, when they arrived at the church. She scooted down the pew and dug in her purse for the breath mints she offered at the start of every service. “I got everything in this bag but a condom,” she’d said once. “I’m too old for that now.” She didn’t specify if she was too old for sex, or too old to get pregnant, though both surely had been true. Agnes was a great beauty in her youth; she compared favorably to Eva Maria Saint. After her fiancé was killed in Normandy, she earned quite the reputation around town, but that hardly mattered now. “We’re three old hens, married to the Lord,” Agnes declared, after Angelo and Frank both had passed. Carmella would have cussed the person who questioned her friend’s honor. Heaven, she believed, must have a place for women who equate love with heartache.

As she joined her friends in the pew, Carmella looked about the church for some evidence of change, some consequence of the lead’s intrusion. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary, and she hoped the dread she felt was merely the unease of a very old woman.

As usual, the pews were only half-full, even with the baptism of Francis and Becky Cresenczi’s grandson that day. No one could have known at the time, but the Cresenczi boy would be the last child christened at St. Anthony’s. Carmella’s latest great-grand had been baptized that winter, not at St. Anthony’s, but at the Assembly of God church her grandson attended with his new wife. The preacher there rained fire and brimstone in three-hour blocks to a crowd that spilled into the aisles. The people spoke in tongues and the women wept in rapture. Her grandson’s wife complained she couldn’t find mascara that didn’t leave her eyes raccooned like Tammy Faye Baker every Sunday.
At the baptism, the parents waded with the baby into a hot tub, and the preacher used a hose to spray water over the child, like he was some kind of plant.

Father Brian, the rector at St. Anthony’s, soon preceded down the aisle, with Father Kagame and the altar servers parading behind. Father Brian was a Southerner and spoke with a lilting accent. Many people thought he was a homosexual, but Carmella didn’t believe such speculation, about a man of God, was appropriate. After the procession and the opening hymn, sung badly off-key, Father Brian stepped forward and said he had a matter of great importance to discuss with the congregation. He briefly explained the incident with the lead and the stained glass. Carmella had been rubbing her hand, the spot in her palm where the metal had rested, and now she caught her breath. Father Brian said maintenance had discovered a crack in a basement wall that might indicate a shifting of the church’s foundation. The pressure of the shift likely fractured the glass and ejected the lead. “A city engineer is due to inspect the property on Monday morning,” he said, gravely. “There’s a possibility the church could be ruled unsafe and be condemned.”

St. Anthony’s was built at the corner of Grafton and Spence Streets in 1920, and for 75 years had been a beacon to the Italian and Polish immigrants who weren’t welcomed at St. John’s, the Irish parish. The prospect of that history being wiped out by some low-level city official sent murmurs through the crowd. Agnes genuflected and then spoke out, “How could this have happened?” The sound of her voice restarted Carmella’s breathing.

Father Brian said he didn’t know for sure but there had been reports of mine subsidence in the area – a small pit had caved the asphalt near the swing sets at Windmill
Park. Few parishioners would have remembered that, during the Depression, folks had
dug shafts on their own lands. That was the last time coal was mined this close to town,
under people’s homes and churches. Carmella’s father had worked those pits for the extra
money. He’d smuggle home hunks of coal in his overalls and toss them into the furnace
before washing for supper. She knew them old wildcat mines didn’t show on any maps.
There was no way to know if one was beneath your feet until the ancient timber supports
gave way to age and rot.

Father Brian reminded his flock then that God was the only one who could shake
the ground, and if the church was to be condemned then it was His will. He recalled
David, who was clean of hands and pure of heart, and therefore God answered when he
was surrounded by his enemies, when the cords of death encompassed him.

Then the earth reeled and rocked;

The foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked…

And who is a rock besides our God? – the God who girded me with strength

Carmella didn’t feel particularly girded with strength, and she didn’t see why God
had to go messing with her church. She looked at the waves of loose skin of her hand, at
the rutted scar that sliced a canyon across her palm, at the spot where she could feel the
lead lying like a phantom limb.

♦

After mass, the three women made their way to the basement for coffee and
cinnamon-and-sugar fritta bread. Given how many people had gathered along the far
wall, to inspect the fateful crack, Carmella expected the Virgin Mary to have formed in
the plaster. But the damage was unremarkable. The wall on one side of the fissure jutted a
few millimeters, but the injury hardly seemed fatal. “It looks like a little spackle’s all we need,” she said.

“But if the foundation is no good.” Agnes shook her head.

Carmella peered into the church kitchen then and wondered how many rigatoni and meatball dinners she’d prepared for receptions and fundraisers and bingo nights, her daughter, Sarah, aproned at her side. Sarah was her pride, the only one of her children who had married a Catholic – a nice Greek boy who died ten years later from cancer. Her sons were another matter. One had found a home in the Navy and described himself as a “confirmed bachelor.” The other had wed a Snuffy woman, a country girl from the hollows outside Monongah. Her people had been on welfare for generations and weren’t even ashamed of it. Sarah, too, had turned her back on the church once her children became teen-agers. “I only went for the kids,” she said, which wasn’t explanation enough for Carmella. She could still picture Michael, Sarah’s youngest, raising Cain in the basement when he was little, before their family was visited by tragedy.

Maria passed her fingers along the fracture. “What will happen if the church is condemned?” she asked. “Will we have to go to St. John’s?”

“I’ll never set foot in that church again,” Carmella declared. She had learned English mush faster than her parents, even though she was just a little girl. By the time she was six years old, she had become their conduit to the outside world. The shame of repeating for them the insults hurled at St. John’s would never leave her. “The Irish said we smelled bad. They said we stank of garlic.”

“They were no better to the Polish,” Agnes said.
“That was so long ago,” Maria said. “All those people are dead. There’s no Irish church, no Italian or Polish church.”

“You’re just a youngster,” Carmella said. “You weren’t called those things.”

“It’s in the past,” Maria said. “It’s forgotten.”

Carmella’s mind was sharp. She did the Fairmont Times crossword every day, even on Sundays. She was careful to flip through the paper without glancing at the Daily Crime Log, for fear of seeing Michael’s name yet again. None of her memories had slipped. They would remain vibrant in her mind until the day she was placed in Mount Calvary. A day, she knew, that was coming soon. “I remember,” she said. “I remember everything.”

Carmella ran her hand along the crevice. Particles of plaster coated her fingers the color of egg shells, a shade like the suit Michael wore, not ten years ago, for his confirmation. He looked like an angel in white when he was called to the altar. He’d winked at Carmella – that ornery kid had winked – as he strolled down the aisle past her pew. Michael had one of the highest IQ’s ever tested at the high school, but he never could sit still, not for five minutes. They used to call him Dennis, for Dennis the Menace, but Carmella had a soft spot in her heart for him.

She was so confused when Sarah and Michael’s stepdad bundled him off to rehab for the first time at 16, so shaken to learn of the things he’d been doing. She knew what was happening elsewhere; the paper and her television carried news of the inner city and their drugs and their crack babies, but it was like war in a distant country, of no consequence to her. The Sixties and Seventies had come and gone, and people in Fairmont had changed little that she could tell. She thought her community was insulated,
that the hills were like a bulwark against the times, which seemed to be changing only for the worst. She thought small towns were built on better, firmer ground.

The last time Michael came to his mother’s for Sunday dinner he was so high on drugs, worse than anyone had ever seen him. His pupils were like black saucers nested in the pink capillaries of his eyes. John, his stepdad, told him to leave, and Michael cussed him something awful. There was pushing and shoving. The knife was lying on the cutting board; Sarah had been chopping onions for the marinara. Michael waved it, blindly, and John yelled, “You gonna kill me, you junkie?” Carmella tried to get out of the way, but she was too slow, the kitchen too crowded. She raised her hand by instinct, as if to blot out the sun.

Michael seemed horrified by what happened. He backed into the corner, his eyes wide with terror. Carmella balled her flayed hand into a fist, but refused to inspect the cut, to react to her wound. “Michael, give nonni the knife.” She extended her clean hand. “Please, Michael, give me the knife.” After she’d passed the blade to Sarah, Carmella hugged her grandson around the neck, her injured fist at her side. Blood squeezed through her fingers and dripped to the linoleum.

The city not only condemned St. Anthony’s, but ordered the diocese to demolish the structure immediately. Five days after Carmella had scooped that providential piece of lead from the floor, the church was ringed with caution tape, an official notice from the Office of the Building Inspector nailed to the front doors.

A week later, a group of parishioners gathered to watch the big Caterpillars collapse the roof and claw at the tan brick walls. News vans from the two Clarksburg
stations arrived, and both crews interviewed Carmella, the woman who’d found the lead. “The lead was a sign,” one reporter said on the news that night. “A sign of mine subsidence deep underground. A sign that St. Anthony’s days were numbered.”

“We’re going to rebuild,” Carmella told the impossibly young, female reporters, even though she’d heard the rumors: the Diocese would never build a new church for such a small and dwindling congregation. Carmella didn’t know why she’d bothered to lie to the reporters, what good she thought her phony optimism would do.

The men on the Caterpillars needed just two days to reduce to rubble a building Carmella had watched rise when her mind first picked along the rocky shores of English. After a third day, all that remained was the broken and useless foundation. A week later, the hole was filled with dirt, mounded like a grave and planted with grass.

On the day the demolition began, Father Kagame had stood in the swirling snows of March, bundled tightly in his overcoat and toboggan. He looked miserable and out-of-place. “Are you warm enough, Father?” Carmella asked.

“Yes, thank you, Mrs. Pallotta,” the priest said. “I fear I will never become used to the weather in this country.”

Later, Father Kagame read from the Gospel according to John, the tale of Jesus tossing the moneychangers from the temple. *Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, This temple has been under construction for forty-six years and you will raise it up in three days? But he was speaking of the temple of his body.* The more Carmella listened to him, the better she understood him. His voice was florid, his accent intoxicating. The words of this man,
marooned from his homeland, seemed to float among the snowflakes, like the notes of a strange and beautiful music.

Father Brian also gave a short sermon that day. He said the temple of the body was what mattered, that the body of St. Anthony’s was its people and history and traditions. “We might lose our building,” he said, “but our church will live on. St. Anthony’s will live on.”

As Father Brian spoke, Carmella closed her eyes and prayed not for her parish, but for Michael. She knew the church would be remembered for a time and then forgotten, like a language that’s no longer spoken. Not even God could stop the death of memories. Because she would never again set foot in a church – because her heart had drawn a line she would not cross – she decided her final words to God were best spent on her grandson. Carmella asked the Lord to soothe whatever pain afflicted Michael’s soul, to keep his body safe from harm, to let him find some peace in this life. Amen.

Carmella watched herself on the news that night. She’d never been on television before. “Is that what I sound like?” she asked, although there was no one to answer her. Before the news came on, she’d been thinking that Sarah should get the Brasilia dinette set. She should have John come over this week with the truck. “When did my hair get so thin?” she again asked no one in particular. Carmella could hardly recognize the old woman they’d put on the news.
As the final words were said over his grandfather’s grave, Billy Cruikshank didn’t much dwell on the man who’d shown him how to shoot a rifle and drive a stick-shift, who’d taught him many of the useful and manly skills his own father had forsaken. All Billy could recall at that moment was the promise he’d made the old man, more or less on his death bed. Billy hadn’t particularly wanted to make that pledge, but he didn’t think it wise to refuse someone nearly across the threshold of the hereafter. Despite not having much religion of his own, Billy had to wonder, as he mumbled a quiet Amen, whether it was prudent to break a vow to the dead.

The August sun pounded on Billy’s neck and shoulders as he returned to his truck, parked along the cemetery road. There hadn’t been rain for weeks, and the parched, brown grass crumpled like paper beneath his feet. The last time he’d walked between these headstones, for Denny Tucker’s funeral, a hard crust of snow had coated the grass. Five hundred people had paid respects to Denny, a kid who was three-sheets when he drove off Dents Run Road, yet no more than a handful had attended the services for
Kenneth Cruikshank. Billy’s grandfather used to say he’d lived too long, and now Billy understood what he meant. So many people had mourned the Tucker boy, but Kenneth looked unloved at his own funeral. Why was one death considered a tragedy, and the other a mercy?

The family had planned lunch after the burial, so Billy joined the short procession of vehicles headed to the Cruikshank homestead, 122 of God’s normally green acres, out past Mannington. Billy was behind his aunt’s black Escalade, the only one that bore out-of-state plates. Pure Michigan, he read, the letters forming slowly, stubbornly in his brain. The once busy farm was now quiet as a ghost town. Billy’s grandfather had started selling off the last 30 head of beef cattle that spring, when Medicare and the VA would no longer cover the cost of his heart pills and his oxygen tanks, not to mention the nurse who came to the house three times a week. “I just hope I run out of breath before I run out of cows,” he’d said. As the Herefords dwindled, Billy’s share of the chores took less and less time to complete, but he still worked nearly every evening at the farm, thankful there wasn’t another person for miles to tell him what to do.

It seemed there’d always been someone to tell him what to do – his teachers and his father and his girlfriend, who became his ex after she nagged him one time too many about wasting his days “with them damn cows.” A year earlier, Billy had been anxious to graduate from North Marion and squirm from under education’s thumb, but the job he’d found at Superior Laundry came with a boss who said when to arrive, when to eat, and when to go home. Now the muscles in Billy’s neck would set like concrete first thing in the morning, and he’d walk into work like he had a 2x4 run up his spine. By the end of his shift, electric pulses would shoot down his arms, so bad at times that his fingers
would go numb. But as soon as he left for the farm, Billy started to feel better. There he’d spread the hay and water the troughs, feeling his neck and back regain their natural slack. After he smoked his joint and watched the sunset, he’d be as loose and limber as an infant. Whatever Billy was doing at that moment of release, he’d pause with the dead certainty that the farm was where his happiness resided. There and nowhere else.

Billy’s grandfather also loved that land, ground that had belonged to their family for more than a century. Kenneth tried his best to die in the farmhouse where he’d been born, but his decline was slow and long, and suicide was unthinkable, an abomination. He referred to the old folks’ home where he spent his feisty, final days as “hell’s waiting room,” but the mediocre care was enormously expensive. Billy visited his grandfather there, in the tiny room he shared with an old fella who never received family. The three of them would watch the evening news and *Wheel of Fortune*, on a television bolted to the cinder block wall. Billy always left once *Jeopardy!* started – trivia shows only reminded him of all the things he’d failed to learn in school.

The night he decided to tell Kenneth about the Army, Billy muted the television during a commercial and scooted his chair close. He wasn’t sure how much of his grandfather remained in that withered body on the bed, but if anyone would understand the decision he’d made, it would be his Pop-Pop. Kenneth was so hard of hearing, Billy damn near had to shout in his ear. His grandfather shook his head rhythmically, back-and-forth on the pillow, and fiddled with his oxygen tube. Then Kenneth drew a long, wheezy breath. “Don’t do it,” he coughed, and closed his eyes. He didn’t open them again for two days.
Billy was sure his Pop-Pop had crossed to the other side, even if his body didn’t yet know it. But on the third day, a nurse called and said Kenneth had sat up and asked for him. Billy arrived at Sunset Manor just before *Wheel of Fortune*.

“You know what we were talking about the other day?” his grandfather said, a newfound vigor in his voice. “Promise me you won’t do it.” There was an aura about Kenneth that brought the hair on Billy’s neck to strict attention. Billy gave his word not to enlist, and his grandfather bade him to sit a while.

“And remember,” Kenneth said. “I want you to have the Luger.” The gun, which Kenneth had liberated from the body of a dead German officer, was the most prized of his war spoils. “You take good care of it.” Kenneth grabbed hold of Billy’s wrist, his grip astonishingly strong. “You hear me, boy?”

“Yeah.” Billy knew his grandfather hated that lazy word, *yeah*, and amended his speech accordingly. “Yes, sir. I’ll take care of it.”

By the time the *Jeopardy!* theme started, Kenneth’s body had slouched, and his eyes were glazed over, but his fingers remained like a vise around Billy’s wrist. Billy couldn’t have wrenched free if he wanted to. Where, in God’s name, did that strength come from?

There was a category on *Jeopardy!* that night, *Bible Prophets*. The first few answers were revealed, and Kenneth perked up and gave the correct responses. “Who is Moses?” and “Who is Abel?” These were the easy questions, but Kenneth knew the hard ones as well. *This prophet-warrior was carried to Heaven in a whirlwind.* “Who is Elijah?” The final, $500 answer was the most difficult yet: *This Old Testament prophet*
warned of man’s destruction, but his name means ‘salvation.’” Kenneth turned his head and winked at Billy. “Who is Hosea?”

Billy laughed. As far as he knew, Kenneth hadn’t sat through a church service since his wedding day.

“You didn’t know I was so smart, did you?” Kenneth’s grip finally loosened. “My daddy used to drill me on scripture. He liked that old-time religion.”

Kenneth Cruikshank passed that night in his sleep, no doubt dreaming as he had for the past 60 years of hedgerows and exploding pines, the embers sizzling in the snow of the Ardennes. There were only three Herefords left by then, but the sale of those remaining cattle covered Kenneth’s funeral expenses, as if that had been his plan all along.

The stout ladies from the VFW Auxiliary had arrived at the farm early that morning, and they were setting out the meal when the family returned from the cemetery. Billy took his lunch to the back deck, where he could be alone, and balanced in his lap a Styrofoam plate of fried chicken and green beans with fatback. He forgot his sunglasses inside. The winter pasture, a denuded hillside his grandfather called “the back forty,” rolled away from the house, in a wave of sun-bleached grass the color of desert sand. Beyond the pasture sat old Mr. Allison’s farm, where some Texas company was punching holes in the shale, to see if the ground had gas to give, too. Gas-drilling was a new idea in these parts, and the well pad had become something of a curiosity. At night it glowed on the horizon like a small city, and people said the rig looked like a rocket, ready for take-off.
Six months ago, Billy and his best buddy, Brandon Ice, had driven to the Allison place with the idea that they’d land roughneck jobs with good pay and bennies. They suspected the gas company needed lots of men, but there were only seven vehicles parked there, all with Texas and Louisiana plates. A man wearing a white hard hat and a collared, company shirt stepped from a construction trailer to greet them. His cheek bulged with a wad of chew. They thought it was a good sign, to get such a good ‘ole boy for their first real job interviews. “What y’all know about fracking?” the man asked, once they’d stated their purpose.

“Nothing, sir,” Brandon said. “But we’re hard workers and real fast learners.”

“I’m sure you are, son,” the man spat. “But as you can see, we got all the help we need.”

The gas man wasn’t rude to them, but the encounter left Billy warm with shame, as if he’d been told he didn’t stack up to those Texas and Louisiana boys. Brandon, though, was stomping mad. “How they gonna come in here and not even hire a single local?” he said. A week later, Brandon walked into the recruitment office at the Middletown Mall and volunteered for the infantry. He wanted to do something meaningful with his life, and he said fighting for freedom in Iraq was a better deal than shoveling shit or flipping burgers in Mannington. “You should come with me, Billy-boy,” he said.

Billy wanted to enlist right then and there, he truly did. The two of them had done everything together since the second grade, but he was still needed at the farm. “As soon as my grandpa passes, I’ll be right behind you,” Billy said. They even shook on it.
Billy wasn’t very hungry after the funeral. He ate half his chicken and none of the green beans, and then set the plate on the deck, at his feet. As he straightened, his lower back seized like an old engine, and tiny shocks fired along his hamstrings. Not even 20 years old and already he was beset with the maladies of age. The Army might not take him, not in his state. Billy limped down the stairs and into the yard, trying to stretch out. Out of habit, he walked toward the barn. His grandfather had taught him to spell his first words, M-A-I-L and P-O-U-C-H, from the advertisement painted on the side. That was long before anyone realized how Billy reversed the letters in his head. He mostly kept them straight now, but the sun had so faded the paint, he could barely read the slogan: 

*Treat Yourself To The Best.*

Around the barn, Billy crossed a patch of bare earth where the corn crib had stood for generations. His father had sold the crib on the internet a few weeks back, to a man from Pennsylvania who said he collected “old farm pieces.” His dad also found buyers for the quad and two of the John Deere’s, and Mr. Allison said he’d do a good price on the baler. Billy circled back through a shaded gulch, where the ancient spring house remained amid a grove of elm and maple. The spring house roof, now green with moss, sagged like wet cardboard. Earlier that year, the roots of a nearby tree had breached the stone foundation and wobbled the pine walls. For all Billy’s life, it seemed the farm was being unmade, slowly and without his notice. And then, suddenly, he saw that everything had fallen apart and been carted away.

“You can’t make a living farming anymore,” his dad had said, on more than one occasion. “Farming’s a hobby now, and an expensive one at that.” Billy’s father had grown up here, but these days he’d rather play golf or tinker on his computer than get his
hands truly dirty. Billy’s Aunt Cindy had turned her back on this place long ago – moved to Michigan after high school and married an engineer. She and the engineer raised two kids in a big colonial-style house Billy had seen only on their Christmas cards. Her husband hadn’t come to the funeral, nor had Billy’s cousins, who were practically strangers to him.

“Your dad says you might be going to Fairmont State in the fall?” she’d said that morning. Her accent was so flat, so foreign, that Billy wondered how they could be related. “What do you want to study?”

Billy shrugged. “I’m thinking about joining the Army, like my buddy Brandon.”

His aunt reached across the kitchen table and took him gently by the wrist. “Billy, don’t you think you’d be better off in college?”

“College is just another place where I’ll feel stupid.”

Back in the house, the VFW ladies had stuffed the lunch plates in the trash, and covered the leftovers with foil. In the kitchen, a half dozen men, uncomfortable in shirts and ties, their sleeves rolled to the elbows, helped themselves to the vodka and bourbon stashed next to the toaster. Bob Herron beckoned to Billy as he passed. “Come in here, son.” Bob was one of his grandfather’s oldest friends. He handed Billy a glass and poured two fingers of Jim Beam. “I was just saying how, in school, they always put your grandpa up front ‘cause he couldn’t read the blackboard. After Pearl Harbor, me and him went down to Fairmont to enlist. Your grandpa, he was worried he’d flunk the eye test, so I went in first and memorized the top four lines of the chart. I come out and told him, and he rattled off them letters.” Bob tapped his temple with the nub of his index finger, lost to a chop saw accident. “He could memorize anything. He was real smart like that.”
Later that night, with the liquor and the stories washing warmly through his mind, Billy went to his grandfather’s room, where the smell of Pall Malls and Old Spice still hung in the air like a perfume. All these years, and Billy never knew his grandpa had such bad eyesight. Kenneth was always a crack shot, and here he couldn’t even make out the letters on a chart.

Billy opened the top dresser drawer and felt behind the socks and underwear for Kenneth’s honorable discharge. Unfolded, the document was almost the size of a newspaper, with little squares and rectangles of information, sometimes typed across the lines. Billy slowly scanned the boxes: Name. Height. Weight. Hair Color. Eye Color. Hometown. Farther down, he read, almost from memory: Civilian Occupation and No.: Farm Hand (3-16.10) and Battles and Campaigns: Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland, Central Europe.

The Army had sent Brandon’s unit to Camp Victory in Baghdad. Brandon had only been in-country for about six weeks, but he’d already e-mailed about two firefights and three roadside bombings. I cant believe how fucking hot it is here, he wrote in his last e-mail. Like 120 in the shade, and you dont even want to smell the latreens They got open sewers everywhere here and the whole city reeks in this heat. Hajji never heard of no septic tank, lemme tell you. No kidding man, its like rivers of shit running on both sides of the road. The other day on patrol the humvees took fire and one flipped in a ditch. The 50 .cal gunner drowned. I knew him a little. He was from Oklahoma. Seemed like a good kid. Can you imagine that? Drowning in a river of shit??!!

Billy slid his hand back in the drawer and removed the oblong boxes that contained Kenneth’s Bronze Star and his Purple Heart. In the Purple Heart box, Kenneth
kept the piece of oxidized shrapnel the medics had removed from his thigh. The fragment, about the size of a matchbook, was fused and jagged like a meteor Billy once touched in science class. Billy plucked it from the box and placed it in his pocket.

The night he’d watched Jeopardy! with his grandfather, Kenneth had taken hold of his arm one last time, as Billy was saying goodnight. “I’m glad you changed your mind,” he said. “If you went over there, you’d never come back.” Billy tried to remember, but those might have been his grandfather’s last words to him.

The Luger was kept wound in a terrycloth towel, at the very back of the drawer. Billy unwrapped the bundle on the bed. His grandfather first let him fire the Luger when he was a boy, eight or nine years old and skinny as a reed. The gun didn’t have much kick, but in the hands of a child it felt like something alive and desperate. Billy remembered clear as day the odd ejection mechanism, the toggle that folded back like a trap door. The spent casings brushed hot along his knuckles and clattered to the porch, until two stacked in the pipe and jammed the slide. “That Luger never did fire for shit,” Kenneth laughed.

Billy stood now in his grandfather’s bedroom and felt the pistol’s weight. As he did, a white pain sizzled down his shoulder and through his forearm, causing him to drop his inheritance to the floor.

Billy wasn’t sure what he intended when he walked into E-Z Money Jewelry & Loan, about a week after the funeral. He told himself he merely wanted to inspect the Glock he’d seen for sale there, but in the parking lot he’d tucked the Luger down the back of his jeans. Before long, the Glock and the Luger were laid atop the display case, side-
by-side on a black towel. The Glock was a fine weapon, light and reliable, and way more practical than some Nazi antique.

That morning, Billy had driven past the farm and seen the Century 21 sign, next to the mailbox that had Cruikshank painted in his grandfather’s loopy cursive. Billy’s dad said a developer from Morgantown had shown interest; the guy wanted to build a driving range and plant a crop of them orange storage sheds people rent by the month.

The pawn shop’s televisions were tuned to Fox News, which showed heavy fighting in some Iraqi city called Najaf. Billy didn’t normally watch the news, but he remembered when those American boys got burned and hung from that bridge. There were Iraqi kids, younger than him, who posed and cheered in front of the bodies. Billy had stared dumbly at their jubilant faces and felt ashamed, like the Iraqi boys were daring him to a fight he knew he couldn’t win. Twice in the past week, Billy had driven to the Middletown Mall and sat outside the recruiter’s office. He watched through the storefront window as men in full-dress uniform talked to boys like him, in jeans and work boots. After he’d smoked a few cigarettes and grown tired of the classic rock on the radio, he drove away.

Brandon e-mailed him a few days after the funeral. *Mom told me about Kenneth.*

*Sorry to hear that, billy-boy. Gotta run, man. Take care of yourself.*

The pawn guy pointed toward the television. “Things are getting pretty crazy over there.”

“I’ll be headed over soon.” Billy wasn’t yet sure if that was true, but he wanted to hear how the words sounded. Either way, didn’t God already know what would happen? Wasn’t everything already written in that book of his?
“You gotta be nuts to go over there.” The pawn guy shook his head. “So, what are you asking for this here? Or you just want to trade straight-up for the Glock?”

“Well, what’s the Luger worth? I’m no gunsmith.” Billy tucked the Glock in his waistband, to feel the weight.

“It’s worth what I can sell it for. You tell me your price and I decide if I can sell it for more than that.”

Billy might not have been the smartest guy, but he knew when he was being cheated. “I’m not afraid to die, you know.” He set the Glock back on the towel. “I want to serve my country.”

“Son, I’m not questioning your courage. I’m just trying to do a bit of business here.”

“Give it here,” he said. “That was my Pop-Pop’s Luger. It ain’t for sale.”

The wind was blowing something fierce when Billy left the pawn shop, dark clouds spreading like a bruise across the sky...This prophet-warrior was carried to heaven in a whirlwind...Billy had been carrying the shrapnel with him that week, and the jagged edges stuck him in the thigh as he hustled toward his apartment.

Billy stopped in the middle of the 4th Street Bridge to sniff the approaching downpour, the ozone that smelled of metal shavings. Behind him, a small billboard rose above the road, a hand-painted “For Lease” sign affixed at the bottom. The last advertisement had peeled and faded nearly to nothing, but still visible was the outline of a man, a soldier crouched in an unfamiliar landscape. Billy couldn’t read the words once printed there, but he knew the Army’s slogan by heart.
Coal Run Creek meandered beneath Billy’s feet, the banks littered with a rusted shopping cart, dozens of old tires and bags of garbage, and the hull of what might have been a washing machine. A sewer pipe jutted from the hillside and drained into the creek. On a hot day, like today, the smell of shit reached the street. Billy took the shrapnel from his pocket and grabbed hold of the fence. With two fingers, he threaded his grandfather’s good luck charm through the lattice of chain-link. The wind gusted, and Billy opened his fingers.

Billy’s eyes were fine, good enough to follow the shrapnel’s descent into the water. He pictured that strange meteor from another world war flowing into the Mon, headed north to join the Ohio. Maybe it would make the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. Maybe it would travel to all those faraway places Billy never dreamed of seeing.

Or maybe it would lie where it fell.
Leaving

1.

The time her husband came home drunk from Big Savage Mountain wasn’t the end, wasn’t what finally convinced Stacey to move out, first to her dad’s and then to a little apartment in town. Ross, a rifle case slung over his shoulder, had promised that morning to get a buck and not to drink with his buddies, but in her heart she’d known better. She wasn’t surprised that he couldn’t resist his friends, or his favorite Southern Comfort. And she wasn’t yet angry enough to break up a marriage of 24 mostly happy years. She wouldn’t make that decision until it was too late.

The day he went hunting, Stacey spent huddled at the kitchen table, a yellow highlighter poised above the pages of a $90 textbook called “Basic Research for Paralegals.” She’d just started back to school then, and she studied in a persistent panic over the years she’d lost, wondering if she’d ever catch up. She filled her ashtray, the wobbly one her son had made in shop class, with the butts from two packs of Salem Lights.

It was well past ten o’clock when she heard his tires on the gravel. She went to the window and looked into the pitch black November night. The porch light shone on his
truck, parked with three wheels in the grass. The way Ross was weaving toward the house, she knew he’d not only fallen from the wagon, but likely wrapped it around a tree.

He hadn’t gotten a deer, neither.

Ross stumbled into the house without so much as a “hello.” Stacey heard his boots clop on the floor, his keys clank on the coffee table. Flecks of mud spotted the carpet from the front door to the living room. Stacey followed the trail to her husband, sprawled across the pleather sofa and watching the final minutes of a football game. The room smelled of whiskey and wood smoke. “You’re drunk,” she announced.

He grinned. “Damn right, I am.” Four months earlier, their family doctor had given him a couple years to live, tops, if he didn’t quit drinking. That morning, he’d been sober for 93 days.

*Let go and Let God.* That was the advice Miss Venetia had given her. Stacey had gone to Al-Anon hoping to learn the secret to keeping a man sober, but Miss Venetia told her to forget Ross, to focus on “your own damn self.” Miss Venetia should know; her ex-husband was a mean drunk. “Pack a bag and save your pennies,” she said, over coffee one night. “Tell him you’re outta there if he drinks again.”

Out of deference, Stacey went home and packed a suitcase. She slid it under the mattress, behind the dust ruffle, but never told Ross about it. It was like when the kids were little; she wouldn’t threaten to spank them because she couldn’t stomach the punishment. Miss Venetia kept after her, but she wasn’t the one who eventually convinced Stacey to leave. Ross had never been mean. He was a happy drunk.
Stacey glared then at her happy husband. “That’s it?” she said. “That’s all you got to say for yourself?” The gesture he made from the couch was so imprecise, so shaky, she was amazed he’d gotten back alive. “You couldn’t sober up before you come home?”

“We stopped down the VFW. Baby, the ‘Skins were playing.”

The game was now blaring on their big screen. The camera focused on a line of cheerleaders, belly buttons and the pom-pom fringe glowing three feet high, before the network cut to a Budweiser commercial.

“Good Lord, Ross.” Stacey turned on her heels, but stopped in the hallway. “You can just stay right there on that couch. You ain’t stinking up my bed.”

In their room, Stacey fell to her knees and felt for the suitcase, the blue Samsonite with the hard shell, last used eight years earlier, when she and Ross took the kids for a week at Myrtle Beach. The case was heavy, filled now with spare underwear and socks, an extra toothbrush and tampons, wedding albums and pictures of the kids. And, of course, money. For years, Stacey had spent the cash she earned from her sewing jobs on little extras for the kids, and silly luxuries for herself, the figurines and scented candles she bought at the Winchester mall. Now she stashed her sewing money in the Samsonite, deep in the shoe pockets, where sand was still wedged along the seams.

The family had had such a wonderful time at the beach. Rickie built endless sand castles and then cried when the waves washed them away, and Ruby fell in love with a lifeguard nearly twice her age. Ross wasn’t amused with his daughter’s swooning, but Stacey remembered what it was like to be young and beautiful, to feel that first spark of interest in boys.
Packing the bag had reminded Stacey of when she was little, how she’d watch her father stock the basement with canned goods and gallon jugs refilled from the faucet. “Better safe than sorry,” he’d say of a possible Soviet attack. But Stacey had never been like her father. She found his planning for nuclear destruction to be morbid and ridiculous. She said she’d rather die in the blast than spend God-knows-how-long eating baked beans in their dingy basement. “We won’t be that lucky,” her father said. “No Russian’s gonna waste a bomb on our little town in West by God Virginia.”

Stacey stared at the Samsonite and thought about those words, “Better safe than sorry.” She had no idea how they applied to her marriage. After a few moments, she tipped the suitcase over and kicked it back under the bed.

Before she could go to sleep, Stacey had to iron her uniform and hem those slacks for Bob. The pants were folded and stacked on her sewing machine, the pedal-operated Singer that had belonged to her mother. “If you take care of it, that Singer will last forever,” her mother had said, shortly before she died, with hardly a grey hair among the strands lost to chemotherapy. As Stacey threaded the machine, she was more than aware of her mother’s opinion of Ross: “I didn’t raise my daughter to marry no ruffian like Ross Lynch.” Wilma Mae was sick enough at the time that Stacey wouldn’t argue with her, not even to defend her man.

Stacey heard the front door open and shut. She wondered what Ross could be doing, but then she remembered Rickie had taken his dirt bike to visit that Swiger boy. The two of them ran around the woods together like a couple of hellions. “Take your shoes off,” she called out. “You track mud in my house I’m a-skin you alive.”
Rickie appeared in the doorway. “What’s up with dad?” He scratched at his chin, the spot where dark stubble had seemed to sprout almost overnight.

She sighed. “He come home drunk.”

“Good.” Her son laughed. “He’s been boring as shit since he quit.”

“This isn’t funny. And watch your language, young man.” Rickie smelled strongly of campfire. She just hoped them boys didn’t burn down the woods someday.

“Your father, he’s not healthy enough to be drinking like that.”

“Come on, mom.” Rickie peeled off his hoodie. “It’ll take more than booze to kill the old man.”

Stacey looked up from the hem she was stitching, but Rickie was gone from the doorway. “Do you know what time it is?” she hollered.

“It’s, like, eleven.” His voice receded down the hall.

“And what time’s your curfew?” Rickie didn’t answer. She hated having these conversations through the walls, but she was too weary to get up from the machine. “It’s a school night, young man.” She heard the toilet seat bang against the tank, followed by the cascading sound of her son pissing with the door open. Had he been drinking tonight as well? She didn’t want to know.

“Okay, mom. Sorry.” She could feel him roll his eyes at her.

For years now, Rickie had been looking up to his father for all the wrong reasons, and Stacey feared that, at 16, too much of his life had been determined already. Ruby’s life, too, but in a different way. In high school, she’d been so embarrassed by her father’s swaying, slurring engagement with her friends that she stopped bringing people to the house. Now at college, she refused to date boys, especially those in fraternities, and she
hadn’t attended a single football game. She seemed to have no fun at all. But she also earned all A’s her freshman year, in science classes that baffled Stacey, and now she was talking about dental school, or maybe even med school. My daughter, the doctor, Stacey thought. Who saw that coming?

Stacey finished the final hem and folded the pants carefully. No doubt, there were reasons to stay with Ross, and reasons to go. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that either way she’d have to pay some awful price, face some consequence she couldn’t foresee, and that fear kept her stuck to her spot. She returned to the bedroom and wrapped the pants in a plastic Wal-Mart bag. In a few minutes, Stacey was undressed and lying in the dark, considering the Samsonite, solidly built and full of her possessions, and yet an abstract object that whispered an impossible idea.

Stacey was not ready to let go, not willing to let God control the fate of her family.

◊

It certainly wasn’t Bob Hale who talked Stacey into leaving her husband.

Bob Hale, the county prosecutor who sat in her section at The Brass Rail Diner every day for a month before he worked up the nerve to ask a question not concerning the lunch special. Bob Hale, who carried a pistol in a conspicuous shoulder holster, even though the most dangerous criminals he faced on a daily basis were wife-beaters and drunk drivers. “I’ve had some threats,” he explained. “I figure, better safe than sorry.” The pants Stacey had hemmed the night before belonged to Bob; he’d written his full name in felt pen inside the waistband. She’d then forgotten to iron her “lunch lady dress,” as Ross called it, so now she was driving to work in a uniform so wrinkled it looked like she’d slept in it.
As she passed the high school, Stacey saw a ghostly blanket of fog hovering over the football field where Rickie played on a middling varsity squad. That weekend, the team had beaten Keyser, an even smaller school, to finish the season 4-6. Her son was a good player, the leading tackler some games, but he wasn’t near big enough or fast enough to do anything with the sport. Stacey would be sad after next season, when she’d no longer be able to sit in the stands and clang a cow bell and scream his name.

Rickie’s father had played on that field, too. And Stacey, balancing a giant bouquet of white and red roses, had promenaded there at halftime of the Moorefield game in 1969. Ross had come from the locker room, soaked in sweat and covered in grass stains, to escort her. As they walked to mid-field, the public address announcer recited her clubs and activities.

_Stacey Anne Barrack, vice-president of the Student Council. She also runs varsity track and is a member of the yearbook staff..._

Stacey wasn’t crowned Homecoming Queen – Bonnie Hovermale was – but she didn’t mind. She’d never felt as happy and safe as she did that night. Her entire life, Stacey had hoped to recapture something of the bliss she felt on the 50-yard line, at the moment she realized how much she loved Ross Lynch. Two years later, when Ross was off fighting in Vietnam, they got engaged in letters air-mailed across the Pacific. Ross had been drafted with two other boys who played in that Moorefield game; Jimmy Roy, the team’s fullback, was killed in Quang Tri province in ’71. But Ross returned, just like he’d promised. On their wedding day, he stood next to the preacher in his Class A dress uniform. Stacey had no idea what all them ribbons meant, what they signified. She only knew that Ross looked handsome and whole, thank God.
The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Varnell Barrack, of Berkeley Springs, she is escorted by senior co-captain Ross Lynch.

Days before the wedding, her mother warned, “Ross has always been a good time, honey, but you don’t marry the good time.” Wilma Mae hadn’t known indoor plumbing until she went to elementary school in town, and she didn’t have a flush toilet in her own home until the sixth grade. In high school, she worked a cash register at the town drug store and, there, caught the eye of Stacey’s father, a fastidious young pharmacist. “You marry men like your father,” Wilma Mae advised, in the back-country accent she’d never managed to subdue. “Someone who can take care of you.”

Stacey was never once sorry for ignoring her mother’s advice. Ross had done right by her. Their house might not have been the best in town, but the kids didn’t want for anything. The only thing Stacey hadn’t understood, what she was only now grasping, was how time would make that night on the field seem gauzy and unreal, how the emotions that once overwhelmed her would fade along with everything else. Only Jimmy Roy had remained unchanged for her, frozen at 17. He was the last boy from Berkeley Springs to be killed at war, the last name etched on the VFW’s memorial. His picture hung there, in the bar where Ross had done most of his drinking.

Stacey hopes to attend Shepherd University and pursue a career in nursing or pharmacy.

The Brass Rail sat across from the Morgan County Courthouse, where Bob Hale worked. Stacey started waitressing about the time Ruby left for college. Ross was in such bad shape then that his equipment had stopped working in the bedroom. Stacey and Bob got to be friendly, and then even friendlier. Bob was so happy when she enrolled in the
paralegal program, it was like he’d come up with the idea. After their one and only tryst at the Super 8 in Maryland, he pledged his undying love to her. “Let me take care of you, Stace,” he said. Stacey couldn’t believe she’d slept with a man who wore black dress socks to bed. She looked at his gun, slung over a nearby chair, and repeated what she’d told her mother all those years ago: “I don’t need a man to take care of me.”

Bob came for lunch that day at his usual time. He ordered an open-faced turkey sandwich, with gravy and mashed potatoes and a sweet tea. They chatted about the weather and the headlines in the sports page. “Your boy had a hell of a game against Keyser,” he said, as she cleared his plate. After lunch, they met in the parking lot so Stacey could return the slacks. He took the Wal-Mart bag and thanked her. “You look tired today,” he said.

“Yeah, I was up late.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Not really, Bob.”

He stood there, bag in hand, while Stacey waited. “Oh, right.” He reached for his wallet. “Ten bucks a pair?”

Stacey didn’t like the way she felt, staring at the twenty dollar bill he offered. She suddenly wanted to refuse the money, but then she thought about the Samsonite under her bed. She took the crinkled cash. Someday she might need all the money she could get.

2.

On the morning she finally left her husband of 25 years, Stacey Lynch was awakened by a phone call from her daughter. It was 2 a.m. and she was alone in bed. The
Samsonite had been gathering dust beneath her for well more than a year. A few minutes later, on her way to the police barracks, Stacey would find Ross on the living room couch, where he stayed whenever he succumbed to the bottle. Lately, he’d been sleeping there more often than not.

Stacey didn’t at first recognize the voice on the phone saying, “Rickie’s in jail.”

“What? Ruby? Is that you?” Stacey had studied late that night, and the phone had pulled her from a deep pit of slumber. “What are you saying?”

“He wants me to come bail him out, but I’m not driving two and a half hours in the middle of the night. I got an O-Chem test tomorrow.”

“Wait, where’s Rickie?”

“This is ridiculous, mom. My roommate answered the phone and told me I got a collect call from a correctional facility. Do you know how embarrassing that is?”

Stacey’s head was beginning to clear. “Slow down, honey. Tell me what happened.”

“Your son got arrested for drunk driving, but he’s afraid to call you. He said if I didn’t come get him by morning they’d send him to the regional jail. I say jail’s the best place for him.”

“Jesus.” Stacey sat up and reached for the light switch. “I can’t believe it.”

“You better start believing it, mom. Last time I was home, Rickie and dad were down in the basement the whole time you were at school, like I didn’t know they were getting drunk and high together.”

“They were doing what?”
“Listen, mom, you want to put up with their bullshit, that’s fine. But you tell Rickie don’t call me for help. That goes for Dad, too.”

For months, Ruby had been telling her, “Just get outta there, mom. Just leave.” Stacey knew what her daughter thought: she was weak, a doormat. Stacey hated the idea that she was a disappointment to Ruby, but that fear alone had never been enough to send her packing. She always told herself that Ruby never had a boyfriend, never had a relationship. What the hell did she know, anyway?

♦

Stacey walked into the State Police barracks in Paw Paw and came face-to-face with Holly Perry, the girl Rickie had escorted to senior prom. Before the dance, Stacey had taken pictures of them in the front yard, Rickie in his rented tux, Holly in her taffeta gown. At their graduation a week later, Stacey saw that Holly had finished third in their class. Such a pretty girl, Stacey thought, and such a smart girl, her whole life ahead of her.

“Hello, Mrs. Lynch,” Holly said. Her mascara had pooled into dark circles around her red, watery eyes. Holly’s mother was nearby, signing papers for a uniformed trooper.

Mrs. Perry noticed Stacey then and charged over. “You listen to me,” she pointed a furious finger at Stacey. “You tell that son of yours to stay away from my daughter. I didn’t raise Holly to be running around with no drunken ruffian.”

Stacey was stunned, aghast.

“Holly’s going off to college in the fall, and I don’t need no more middle-of-the-night phone calls from the police, you hear?” Holly’s father was a lawyer in town. Stacey had waited on him at the diner. She’d learned from him that Holly was going to some
fancy girl’s college in Virginia, while Rickie had only the vaguest plans “to find a jay-oh-bee,” as he said.

Holly tugged her mother toward the door, as if she was afraid Stacey might start some trouble. “Mom, please.”

“Well, what do you expect,” Mrs. Perry said. “The father’s no better. How many DUI’s he got? The only reason Teddy Crenshaw hasn’t fired him is they’re old drinking buddies.”

Stacey should have said something, anything to defend her men, but she was paralyzed.

“Come on, mom,” Holly said, holding the door. “I’m sorry about this, Mrs. Lynch.”

“You gonna be sorry when we get home,” Holly’s mother said. “I don’t want you seeing that boy again. I don’t even wanna hear his name cross your lips.” They went out and the door slammed after them.

“So, you’re here for the Lynch boy?” the trooper said.

His words didn’t immediately penetrate the fog of shame rolling through Stacey’s mind. Eventually, she turned to the trooper. “Yes. I’m his mother. Can I see him?”

“We don’t normally let people back there,” the trooper said. He was an older man, and he seemed to take a welcome measure of pity on Stacey. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt, though.”

Stacey followed him through an electronic security door and into an office crammed with four cluttered desks. A young trooper pecked on a manual typewriter. Rickie, the only prisoner, sat on a bunk in one of the two cells. He was upright but asleep,
his head dipped awkwardly over his shoulder. The older trooper banged on the bars.

“Wake up, son. You got a visitor.”

Rickie’s eyes opened and slowly focused. “Ahh, man.” He rolled his neck. “Ruby called you?”

“That’s right. What would you’ve done if she hadn’t?”

Rickie shrugged. “Gone to the regional, I guess. Called a bondsman.”

“Boy, I don’t know what I’m a-do with you.” Stacey grabbed hold of the bars.

“What were you thinking? Drinking and driving – you could have been killed.”

Rickie sat back, his dark features catching the light from an overhead halogen.

“Come on, mom,” he smiled. “It will take more than a little booze to kill me.”

Rickie had always taken after his father, but he never looked more like Ross than he did in that smile. That smile stopped Stacey cold, and told her she’d waited too long. The time to protect Rickie from their mistakes had come and gone. “You were with your dad tonight, weren’t you?” She already knew the answer, but she needed to ask.

“Fuck, mom,” Rickie hung his head low. “What difference does that make?”

“Watch your mouth, young man. And answer my question.”

“Yeah, okay, we had a few together.”

Stacey drew a deep breath. “Rickie, I’ll get you out of here, but on one condition.”

Rickie sighed heavily. “What’s that mom?”

“Your pick: college or the military.”

At the Al-Anon meetings she would attend for years, Stacey never knew how to explain her decision to leave. She could point to the people who said it was the right thing
to do, to those mornings she woke in a cold, half-empty bed, to the indignity of speaking to her son through the bars of a metal cage. But was it one thing or all of them? She didn’t know. Her decision didn’t come as an epiphany or a triumph of spirit. Leaving was an act of frustration and surrender. At the barracks, she suddenly was willing to pay the price for leaving, but only because she couldn’t bear to stay and watch as her loved ones destroyed themselves.

By the time they got home from Paw Paw, she’d made up her mind. Still, it wasn’t easy to walk through the house for the last time. Stacey thought she might be sick as she yanked the Samsonite from under the bed and hefted it to her Bronco. She returned to the bedroom, feeling dizzy, and collapsed her mother’s sewing machine. The ancient Singer was heavy as an anchor and too cumbersome to bear alone. Rickie had gone to his room and flopped across the bed. “Get up and help me with this,” she said.

As they scooted past the living room, each carrying an end of the cabinet, Rickie asked, wearily, “Where are we going with this?” Stacey didn’t answer. She could hear Ross stirring from the couch. In the garage, they laid the Singer flat in the truck bed. The machine oil would leak that way, but Stacey didn’t want to bother draining it. “Mom,” Rickie said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to my dad’s. I’m leaving.” She waited a moment to let the words take root, and then watched as their significance bloomed on her son’s face. “I wish you’d come with me, but you’re a grown man now. I can’t tell you what to do.”

“Mom, I know I screwed up, but you don’t have to do this. I’ll never touch another drop again. I swear.” Rickie raised two fingers in a Boy Scout salute she’d last
seen before he hit puberty. Rickie looked at that moment like the little boy who used to throw tantrums to get his way, and the sight nearly broke Stacey’s heart.

“This isn’t your fault, Rickie. Just…things need to change around here, you know?”

Ross walked into the garage then, rubbing his eyes with the palm of his hand.

“What the hell’s going on out here? It’s 6 in the damn morning.”

“Mom says she’s leaving. She’s got her suitcase and she’s going to granddad’s.”

Ross stopped rubbing his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Rickie, go inside,” Stacey said. “Go on, get in the house.” Her son didn’t move at first, but then he slowly back-pedaled to the door, his eyes trained on her. “Don’t forget your promise to me,” she said. “You keep your word.”

“What’s he talking about?” Ross smiled. “You’re leaving for where?”

“You know where I just come from? The State Police barracks. Your son got a goddamn DUI.” Stacey set her arms across her chest. “Look, you want to drink yourself to death, I guess that’s your business. But I can’t watch you lead Rickie down the same path.”

“Jesus, Stace, I’m sorry. But you don’t have to do this.” Stacey tried to get in the Bronco, but he reached over and held the door shut. “Hold up, let’s talk about this. Tell me what you want me to do.”

Stacey turned to face the man who’d been the love of her life for a quarter century. She could smell the whiskey seeping from his pores. “Ross, don’t you never drink with that boy again.” She hated that she’d become such a nag. She used to be so much fun.
That’s not a problem. Never again, I swear.” He stepped back and let her in the Bronco, but then he wedged his body in the door. “Come on, you don’t wanna go. I’ll go back to AA tonight. I’ll go every day if I have to. Come back in the house, Stace.”

“Ross, I hope you do get sober, but it’s too late for promises you can’t keep.” She started the engine and yanked on the door until he moved. She could hear him saying, “Don’t go, Stace. Don’t go.” His arms were outstretched, pleading. “You’ll be back,” he said, finally. “End of the week, you’ll be back.”

“I’m doing the right thing,” she told herself, as she backed out of the garage. She kept saying it over and over. I’m doing the right thing. I’m doing the right thing. She pressed the garage remote and watched the door descend, her husband disappearing a little at a time.

Stacey was upset when Rickie chose a four-year hitch in the Army over college, but proud that he enlisted without complaint, as soon as his drunk-driving charge was settled. “A man’s got to live up to his word,” he declared. Rickie was sworn-in with two other boys, right before they shipped out to basic. She wanted her son to get an education, but she didn’t worry much for his safety. This was 1998 and peacetime, the Cold War over and done. Her father no longer stored baked beans and drinking water in the basement.

A settlement in Lynch v. Lynch was reached shortly before Ruby’s college graduation. Stacey and Ross met at the mediator’s to go over the documents. Ross tossed
his keys on the conference table and Stacey saw that he’d gotten another key tag from AA, the black one for one year of sobriety. “Congratulations,” she nodded.

Stacey signed first, her hands sweating against her will. Ross scribbled his name next. “So, our daughter’s going to be a doctor,” he said. “Can you believe that? The Lord sure does work in mysterious ways.” Stacey wasn’t yet used to Ross invoking God and his “higher power.”

“She’s going to dental school, Ross, not med school.”

“They call them doctors, don’t they? That’s what them letters, DDS, stand for.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Stacey laughed.

“Then she’s going to be a doctor.”

Stacey laughed again. She was happy Ross had made this easy. Happy enough that she didn’t refuse when he asked for a ride to graduation, when he said his truck was in the shop and he’d been bumming rides all over creation, but he could take the Greyhound if it was too awkward for her. “No, no, it’s fine,” she said.

She was less happy the morning of graduation when she felt a flutter of anticipation while doing her make-up, like she was getting ready for a date. Less happy when Ross strutted from his house in a black leather coat, with his hair slicked back in that bad-boy way of his, and her body reacted as if no time had passed between them. They weren’t in the car long before Ross asked if she was still dating that “Bob guy.”

“What business is that of yours?”

“None whatsoever,” Ross said. “I’m just making conversation.”

Stacey wasn’t annoyed with Ross for asking the question. She was annoyed with having to answer it. “He wants me to come live with him.” Stacey lit a Salem Light.
“You gonna do it?”

“I doubt it.”

Ross lit a smoke, too. “Well, most men don’t take rejection as well as I do. You remember what you said to me, first time I asked you out?”

Stacey laughed. “Yeah.”

“You said your momma wouldn’t let you date a ruffian from Indian Creek.”

“I should have listened to her, too.” Stacey smiled at the man she couldn’t yet think of as her ex-husband. She couldn’t deny that getting back together had crossed her mind more than once, especially since his sobriety seemed to be sticking. But then Miss Venetia explained the concept of the enabler. “Taking him back would just give him permission to drink again,” she said. Ross seemed to agree. The mediator asked them once if reconciliation was possible, and he answered, “My sponsor says I need to work on myself before I can be with anyone else.”

Leaving her husband was the hardest thing Stacey had ever done, but he’d gotten sober and she couldn’t complain about that. Rickie had cleaned up his act, too. He’d breezed through jump school and Ranger training, and was stationed in Germany. He claimed to be “straight-edge and high on life.” And Ruby – her daughter still hadn’t attended a single football game, but she’d finally gotten herself a boyfriend. Ted was quiet and serious and nothing like her father, but it was a start. Stacey was starting to believe she had done the right thing. She had let go and let God, and nothing bad had happened to her family.

The day was clear enough for them to get the classic rock station out of Cumberland. Stacey turned up the radio, and they hit a nice run of songs: Credence’s
“Bad Mood Rising,” Skynyrd’s “The Ballad of Curtis Loew,” The Allman Brothers’ “Whipping Post.” They’d seen The Allman Brothers in the summer of 1970, a few weeks before Ross shipped out. Stacey dropped acid that night for the first time. Later, while they made love in his childhood bedroom, she experienced what their druggie friends called “an awakening.” In the morning, the sense of enlightenment was gone, but Ross remained.

Ruby’s graduation was held in the big basketball arena. From the stands, her daughter appeared as a tiny, robed figure, draped in a sash to indicate high honors. In two days’ time, she and Ted would leave for a month-long backpacking trip through Europe. They’d been planning it for weeks. Stacey was a little jealous, but also amazed at how the world had opened for her children, in a way she never dreamt for herself. Even Rickie had been to France and Italy on leave. He mailed home postcards that were signed, “God Bless, Pfc. Lynch.” Ross kept telling her to call their son “Rick” instead of “Rickie,” but he would always be Rickie to her, no matter his rank or the countries he visited.

She and Ross used to talk about traveling too, once the kids were grown. “There’s a big world outside these hills,” Ross would say. “We’ll go see it together, baby.” But until Rickie’s postcards arrived, Stacey had forgotten she ever wanted to see the world. The one from Venice showed a plaza full of people under a cobalt sky, a church at one end bulging with domes and crosses that punctured the heavens. La Piazza di San Marco, it said on the reverse, consecrated in 1093. With the cards affixed to her refrigerator, Stacey announced to Bob that she’d like to travel. “You wanna go to Myrtle?” he said. “Maybe Disney?”
After graduation, they all had dinner with Ted and his parents, at a Mexican restaurant in a strip mall. Ross asked the waitress for a diet coke, and Stacey ordered a margarita with extra salt. Later, she noticed Ross bowing his head in prayer, his lips twitching slightly over a chicken enchilada platter. By then, the first margarita had warmed her body, and she wondered how Ross’s equipment worked now that he was sober. She also wondered if Ted wore black dress socks to bed. The waitress came by and Stacey said, “Sure, I’d love another drink.”

Ross did his best during dinner to charm Ted’s equally quiet parents. There wasn’t a silence he couldn’t fill with a joke or a story about his smart and pretty daughter. Stacey had known friends who quit drinking and became different people, big personalities that suddenly turned withdrawn and sad. Not Ross, though. He was the same. Even Ruby seemed pleased with him that night. She didn’t even get upset when he teased her about the lifeguard at Myrtle, how she ran after him “like a little puppy dog.”

The restaurant was busy and the service slow, so the waitress brought a round of drinks on the house. Stacey didn’t finish her third margarita, but her head still swirled when she stood to leave the table. She couldn’t remember the last time she drank so much. In the parking lot, while everyone said their goodbyes, Ross put his arm around her shoulders, to steady her. As they walked to her car, Ross said, “Why don’t you let me drive.”

“Whatever you say.” She fished in her purse for what seemed a long time to find her keys. In the car, she fumbled hopelessly with the seatbelt. Her hands felt swollen, like two balloons.
Ross leaned over and guided the buckle into place. “Better safe than sorry,” he said.

A few minutes later, they were on the interstate. The sight of the road, rushing and humming under the head lamps, was hypnotic. Stacey felt light, as her mind floated through time. “Ross Lynch, you were the love of my life,” she said then. “I always thought the world would end if we couldn’t be together. Isn’t that ridiculous? But you know what, Ross, nothing’s happened. What does that mean? What does that mean, Ross?”

“I don’t know, baby,” he answered, quietly.

No matter what else might be in store for her, Stacey knew she’d spend the rest of her days alone. She couldn’t return to Ross, nor could anyone replace him. She’d never again feel her heart swell like that night on the football field, and perhaps that was a steep enough price for leaving.

Stacey closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cool window glass. She stayed that way for quite a while. Before she drifted to sleep, the night deejay on the Cumberland station found his groove: The Rolling Stone’s “Satisfaction,” Steely Dan’s “Reelin’ In The Years,” and The Allman Brothers again, “Ramblin’ Man” this time. The music of their youth was still popular. Somehow, these songs had become ageless.

♦

They wouldn’t see each other much after that night. They’d ride to Morgantown together four years later for Ruby’s graduation from dental school; Ted was no longer in the picture. Mostly, they’d gather whenever Rickie came home on leave. Rickie liked to stay at his father’s place, and the two of them would host big barbeques for the whole family. Stacey asked her son not to re-enlist after Afghanistan, but he said he couldn’t let
his guys go to Baghdad without him. “I understand,” she said, even though she didn’t. She still wished her son had gone to college, but she was proud of the man he’d become. The last time he was home, they had a big picnic, 50 people at least, all of them drinking nothing stronger than pop.

Rickie used his father’s address on his Army paperwork, so that’s where the Army messengers went after the roadside bomb in Anbar province. Ross took it upon himself to inform Stacey; he wouldn’t let the Army men near her. She cried nonstop for a week. Somewhere in her grief, she saw how badly she’d misunderstood the world, how she’d failed her son, and now God had duly rebuked her.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Miss Venetia said. “It was them Arabs that done it.”

“What the hell do you know about it!” Stacey snapped, at what would be her last Al-Anon meeting.

Miss Venetia took her by the shoulder. “Listen to me woman, God don’t punish people like that.”

“You must have read a different Bible than I did.” Rickie shouldn’t have been in the military. Even if he was a drunken ruffian for the rest of his life, at least he’d be alive. At least she’d have someone to talk to, instead of staring at a box of remains, his blackened dog tags hung from her bedroom mirror. Stacey would never forgive herself.

She thought for sure Ross would go back to drinking after Rickie’s death, but she was wrong. She kept a close eye on him during the ceremony at the VFW, when they unveiled Rickie’s name on the memorial: SSgt. Richard M. “Rickie” Lynch, Iraq, 2005, right below Pfc. James L. “Jimmy” Roy, Vietnam, 1971. Afterwards, everyone went into the bar to see Rickie’s portrait on the wall. Stacey wouldn’t have been a bit surprised if
Ross had sidled up and said, *Fuck it, give me a Southern Comfort.* Lord knows, Stacey wanted to. Instead, Ross closed his eyes and said a quiet prayer beneath their son’s picture. He shook a few hands and took his leave.

Stacey never could fathom that her Rickie had traveled so far and been killed in such a strange place. Not when she’d spent nearly every second of her life in this little town in West by God Virginia. She still hadn’t done any traveling, and now she wondered if she ever would. The old Samsonite remained her only suitcase. For all she knew, the sand from Myrtle Beach was still inside the pockets. Everyone these days used those fancy roller bags. The Samsonite was an antique, like the Singer she hadn’t touched in forever, except to mend a stitch or two, here and there. If Stacey was going to see the world, she’d have to get one of those new roller bags.
They said she had the hands of a bricklayer. I thought they were like the old pines, knotty and eternal. Hers were the hands that drew the milk and pressed the butter, tended the orchard and corrected the children. The hands that shook my grandfather awake when he thrashed and screamed in German. The hands that tried in vain to pry the bottle from his lips. Dots on a map may be destiny, but I charted mine in her calloused palms, her strong, amber-tipped fingers, never without a smoke. Her thick, mulberry veins pulsed when she worked her tools, polishing and shaping the common rocks found in our hard ground. Veins like the black seams that run under the hills, tiny cavities where men once crawled on their bellies, leaving spoil of shale and sandstone amid the ferns. She set her finished rocks on the window sill, pieces of quartz sparkling in the morning light. Is that a diamond? I once asked. No, sweetheart, she said. There are no precious stones around here.

- For B.J.