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FORTY ACRES

By Jeff Garrity

Jeremy dropped a fat hornworm to the ground and used his shoe to squish out its juicy green life while his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was the sixth hornworm he had flattened since he noticed the stripped vines and gnawed green tomatoes near the side porch when he got home from work.

The Cherokee purples were decimated. The romas were in good shape. The early girl probably wasn't worth saving.

Jeremy pulled his phone out to see who had called. He didn't recognize the number but before he put it back in his pocket his phone let him know the caller had left a message so he listened to it and called back right away.

"You just called," he said into his phone. "About my wife."

"Is this Jeremy Hammersley of Tottenham Court Road?"

"Yes."

"Your wife has been in an accident and she has suffered grave injuries. She's been taken to a hospital by ambulance." The police officer sounded as if she were reading from a script.

"My wife?"

"Elaine Hammersley?"

"Where is she?"

"A car accident. They took her to Memorial, the main campus. By ambulance. It happened right about 4:30."

"Is she all right?"

"I don't have her current status. I'm simply informing you that she has suffered grave injuries and has been taken to the hospital."

Jeremy had to ask which hospital again as he walked past the side porch where he had left his briefcase and sport coat. He got into his car but realized his keys were in his sport coat pocket. He retrieved his keys and drove to the hospital, his mind numb with too many possibilities.

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In a small windowless room outside the hospital morgue Jeremy sat across a metal table from a young man wearing a white lab coat. He had blond hair down to his shoulders and a small braid died green hung from the center of his wispy beard. The man unclasped an envelope and pulled out a letter-size black and white photo printed on copy paper and slid it across the table.

"I'm sorry," the man said, looking at the photo and then at Jeremy. He wore glasses and adjusted them often.

Jeremy looked at his wife's peaceful grin and bashed skull and took a few deep breaths before sliding it back across the table.

Jeremy nodded. "That's Elaine."

The man slid the photo back into its envelope. "We offer counseling services, if you don't already have a therapist. I highly recommend it."

"I need to call my daughter."

"Most insurances cover it," the man said.

"I'm okay," Jeremy said.

"If not today, you can stop in tomorrow. Or when you're ready. I can set it up now."

Jeremy shook his head and walked out. It took him fifteen minutes to find his car in the parking garage, but for the first ten he was only wandering and wasn't looking.

Jeremy called his daughter Claire as he drove home but he had to leave a message. Claire called back when he was halfway home and he pulled into a Burger King and parked in the back, staring at his dashboard while they talked. He lowered the window for some air but the squawk from the drive-through speaker made it difficult to hear so he raised it.

When he got home the streetlights were just coming on and there was a moving van parked on the street in front of his house. He pulled into the driveway and the man behind the wheel of the truck got out and Jeremy lowered his window.

"You live here?" the man said as he approached. He wasn't yet thirty and wore a Notre Dame T-shirt and a black lifting harness.

"Yes."

“We got a problem,” the man said. “Nobody was at the address off Miller Road when we got there so we waited like two hours and then this guy ...” He fished a piece of paper out of his cargo shorts and looked at it. “This guy, Torsteer, he finally comes home and he won’t let us move the stuff into his house. He tells us we gotta take everything back where we got it. He was kind of an asshole about it, if you wanna know. So we got a truck full of stuff and nowhere to put it. Ten more minutes and everything would’ve been on your lawn. I got a class in the morning.”

Jeremy pointed toward the garage and hit the button on the door opener, then parked his car on the street so the men could back their truck into the driveway. When He walked to the side porch to get his briefcase and sport coat the man in the Notre Dame shirt put down the rocking chair his partner had just handed him from the back of the truck.

“What was that guy’s deal, anyway?” the man said. “Couldn’t tell if he was gonna throw a punch or start crying.”

“I never met him,” Jeremy said, and walked into the house. In the kitchen he saw his dishes from breakfast in the sink and thought about washing them, but instead grabbed a beer from the fridge and walked into the dark living room and dropped onto the couch.

The streetlight in front of the house illuminated the empty spots on the wall where there had been three landscapes Elaine’s sister painted while she was dying of cancer. There were more bare spots on the wall by the dining room and he remembered Elaine telling him the night before that she would make copies of the family pictures but it would be up to him to get them framed. Elaine’s peaceful grin in the black and white photo dominated his mind. He thought about crying but it remained only a thought.

*

Elaine had taught English at the same high school for twenty-three years and her funeral was filled with colleagues and students. A few students, some with shaky voices, stood to talk about how Elaine had helped them through difficulties. Two colleagues spoke of her intense drive and energy. After the service, several people told Jeremy that Elaine was so strong-willed and determined it seemed impossible she was gone. Her brother said that it never occurred to him that she would die before him and he wondered what else he was wrong about. She was always the strong one, he said. The one who got through everything. He couldn’t understand how she could be dead.

The Spanish teacher at Elaine’s high school told Jeremy that she was shocked when she heard the news and that she still couldn’t comprehend the death of someone with such a powerful life force.

“So how does that work?” Jeremy said, narrowing his eyes. “This life force is supposed to keep your brains inside your skull when a pickup smashes you to pieces? Her life force was run down that day? Forgot to take it with her? Otherwise she’d be okay?” The Spanish teacher looked at Jeremy for a moment and then walked away.

*

Two days after the funeral Jeremy saw his daughter's carry-on waiting inside the front door when it was time to go to the airport.

He called up the stairs but she didn't answer. He walked through the kitchen to the dining room and saw her on the back deck sitting in the double swing. He walked through the sliding door and sat next to her.

"We used to sit here for hours in the summer," Claire said. "She'd read to me. Tell me stories. Scary ones after it got dark. Those were my favorites."

"I remember," Jeremy said.

"When I was older, we'd just talk. I wouldn't have dealt with all the girl and boy stuff very well without her." She looked at her dad and smiled. "You weren't much help."

Jeremy leaned forward onto his forearms and stared at the deck.

"Do you hate me because I didn't tell you?" Claire said.

"I can't hate you."

"I knew more than a year ago."

Jeremy sat up and leaned back against the swing. "She told me the night before she died."

"I should've said something," Claire said. "I was a thousand miles from here and it seemed like you two were living on another planet. She told me about having sex with him for the first time. How much she enjoyed it. Things I didn't want to know."

"She told you more than me."

"She told me she loved him."

"Yeah. Me too."

"That must have hurt."

A gray squirrel leapt from one tree to another in the neighbor's yard, dragging down the branch until it scrambled up the limb.

"Sure. I still loved her."

Claire put her arm around her dad. "I guess we better go," she said.

After a goodbye at the airport that brought back the sorrow for Claire and finally tears for Jeremy, he drove to the observation lot and waited until Claire's plane took off and made a sweeping turn to the east. Another Delta plane rushed down a different runway and banked in the same direction, and then

a third taxied away from the terminal. She could have been on any of them. He watched the third plane take off and headed home.

*

“Are you Jeremy Hammersley?” the woman said.

Jeremy looked up from the bottle of olive oil in his hand. The woman’s shopping cart was halfway down the aisle, near the mayonnaise. Her raincoat was damp from the rain that had fallen off and on all day.

“I recognize you from the funeral,” she said. “I’m Ron Otili’s wife, Mary. Former wife. I’m still getting used to saying that.” She waited for Jeremy to say something. “I’m very sorry about what happened.”

Jeremy nodded.

“Your wife must have been a great teacher for all those kids to show up at her funeral.”

Jeremy put the olive oil in his hand back on the shelf and they stood looking at each other.

“I almost didn’t say anything,” Mary said. “I mean, when I saw you just a minute ago. But I thought I should.”

“I’m sorry I don’t remember you,” Jeremy said.

“Oh. We got there just as the service started and sat in the back. David was with me. My son. He’s back in California now. We left right away when it was over. I just thought I should be there. David didn’t want to go. But he’s a good son. And I thought Ron would want me to be there. I mean, he didn’t ...” She bit her lip. “But anyway, I saw you just now and thought I should say something.”

They looked at each other for a moment and Mary glanced back at her cart.

“I haven’t been out of the house much since the accident,” she said. “Eventually you need groceries. Right?” She waited for Jeremy to say something. “I’m starting back at work next week.”

“I’m sorry about your husband,” Jeremy said.

She looked absently into Jeremy’s nearly empty cart. “You play these things over and over in your mind a thousand times,” she said. “I guess you’ve done that too. If someone had just stopped to talk to him when he was leaving his office, or if he’d forgotten something and had to go back. Or maybe if he’d gone his usual way home.” She looked at Jeremy and then back into his cart. “I don’t know why he went that way. Or why he wasn’t wearing his seat belt. Or a million other things.”

They looked at each other.

“You don’t ever do that?” she said.

“Your husband ran a red light and killed my wife. And himself. What else is there? Saying that some little twist of fate, or some butterfly flapping its wings in South America might have stopped it from happening seems pretty fucking pointless.”

Mary Otili looked into Jeremy’s cart again. She started to say something but stopped. She turned and walked back to her cart and stood there for a moment with her back to Jeremy and her hands on the bar. She took a deep breath and pushed her cart to the end of the aisle and turned out of sight.

*

“Yeah, this is Sergeant Bielmer down here at Central. Just wanted you to know that we finished the crash investigation and we got like six or seven pitchers we found in your wife’s car and figured you’d want those back. Photos. Couple paintings. They’re all kinda ripped up and the frames are busted but I see from a couple of the pitchers that you got a kid, and maybe those are the only copies you got. So, yeah, give us a call. We got ‘em in a box.”

*

Jeremy waited as a distraught father explained to the officer at the counter that the police department wasn’t doing enough to locate his fifteen-year-old daughter who had been missing from home for two days. A detective came through a set of double doors next to the counter and led the man back through them. Jeremy stepped forward and told the cop behind the counter why he had come.

“Oh, right,” the officer said. “She was the one following the moving van.”

Jeremy blinked a couple times and nodded.

It took two calls for the officer to locate the box of photos and paintings from Elaine’s Toyota.

“That’s some fucked up timing,” she said to Jeremy after she hung up. “If my husband walked out on me ... But still. Sheesh. Makes you wonder, don’t it?”

A heavysset police officer with a goatee came through a metal door behind the counter. He carried a box stuffed into a garbage bag and wrapped several times with clear packing tape.

“Got some blood on the pitchers so we had to seal it up,” the officer said. “I’m Sergeant Bielmer. I left you the message.”

Sergeant Bielmer put the box on the counter and put out his hand. Jeremy shook it and took the box and started toward the door.

“You gotta sign for it,” Sergeant Bielmer said.

Jeremy turned back and signed the release without putting the box down. The sergeant held the form with his palm while Jeremy signed. “Reap What You Sow” was tattooed in script across the back of his hand. Jeremy read it upside down before dropping the pen and turned to leave.

“You’re welcome,” Sergeant Bielmer said as Jeremy walked out into the warm mid-summer sun.

*

Eight days after Elaine’s death Jeremy went back to work at the small consulting firm he and two partners started fifteen years before. He put in a long day catching up with clients and wading through a few hundred emails, and he and one of his partners stopped for a couple beers after work. The sun was setting by the time he pulled into his driveway that evening and as he waited for the garage door to rise, he noticed his neighbor smiling at him and waving the clippers she used to cut blossoms from the rose bushes growing next to her porch. Jeremy nodded and smiled at her and then looked ahead at the two dozen boxes and scattered furniture the two men had moved into the garage the night of Elaine’s accident. He clicked the door opener again and left his car in the driveway.

*

Jeremy stepped back and then forward to straighten the family portrait taken when his daughter was twelve. The three of them wore pleasant smiles as they sat in the grass near the shore of a lake just outside of town. He always liked how the setting sun colored their faces and the rippled water in the background.

He heard his phone clattering on the kitchen table.

“Hi Claire.”

“You doing okay?”

“I’m all right,” Jeremy said. “Just putting up the picture we took at Lake Millefois. It was in mom’s car so it’s kind of beat up. You don’t sound so good.”

“I was just sitting her crying,” Claire said. “I didn’t go to work today. I’ve never missed a day. Even when I was sick. I’m just feeling like shit.”

“What is it? Mom?”

“I keep thinking that I could’ve made a difference. Maybe if I’d said something, told you about the affair, maybe she wouldn’t have been in the wreck. Maybe she would’ve left you sooner, or on a different day or ... just ten seconds earlier or later would’ve stopped the wreck. Maybe you two could’ve worked things out if I’d told you. Something would’ve been different if I’d said something. Different enough that maybe that truck wouldn’t have smashed into her.”

“Claire, there’s really no reason to ...”

“It doesn’t matter whether it makes sense or not, I keep thinking about it. No matter how I think about it I feel miserable. I should’ve done something. But I just ignored everything and something really horrible happened.”

“Claire. You didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I should have had something to do with it. Something. Anything. But I didn’t.”

*

A couple weeks after the accident, Jeremy mentioned to a colleague at work that he was thinking of getting a dog and she said that her great aunt was trying to find homes for several puppies out by Pomeroy, twenty minutes from town.

“Free to a good home,” his colleague said. “Probably free to any home.”

That Saturday, Jeremy mapped the directions on his phone and took the expressway to the third exit north, and then headed east on a two-lane road past a new subdivision with a brick and stone monument announcing Coyote Run. A mile later he came to a four-way stop at Mattison Road. On one corner rows of corn stretched across a table-flat field, and on another a will-build-to-suit sign with peeling paint stood guard over a former mobile home park with its concrete pads and electrical conduits still visible through the weeds and shrubs.

His phone told him to turn north and after traveling a couple miles he crested a hill and saw occasional corn and bean fields like green blankets laid down randomly across the rolling landscape. But most of the fields defined by century-old tree lines had been reclaimed by shrubs, saplings and tall summer grasses. Mature woodlots rose in squares and rectangles, and tangles of trees and shrubs covered swales too wet for crops.

As he drove north he passed tall, narrow farmhouses built close the road, and ranches from the ‘70s and ‘80s on shallow lots notched out of the fields. Occasionally he passed newer vinyl-wrapped two-stories with bold white trim, attached garages and pole barns out back.

Jeremy topped another hill and saw two deer walking across the pavement ahead. Both turned their black eyes toward his car and then trotted through the ditch and into rows of tall red pines planted decades before on a steep slope cut into the hillside to take the pitch out of the road. The deer stopped a short way into the pines and turned to watch him pass.

Jeremy checked his phone for the next turn and when he looked up he caught a glimpse of a hand-painted sign nailed to an aspen tree leaning out over the ditch. He slowed and pulled over to let a pickup pass, and then backed up on the shoulder until he was close enough to read it, but the sign was only painted on the other side, so he backed up farther.

FOR SALE 40 ACRES was slopped in black paint on a scrap piece of particle board. There was no other information.

The sign was next to a weedy gravel driveway built over an ancient concrete culvert with rusty re-rod showing along its edges. Jeremy drove over the culvert and stopped just before a gap in the farm fence opened onto the property. To the north the fence along the ditch had mostly fallen over but a few stretches were still held upright by grizzled and cracked wooden posts. The land in front of him sloped mostly to the south, down to a stream that seemed unnaturally straight. Peaked clumps of dogwood

bordered the stream as far as he could see. He tried to guess the forty acre's borders based on tree lines, but he wasn't sure what forty acres looked like. The open ground was covered by tall grasses, dozens of scattered saplings and shrubs, pale blue chicory flowers and fiery Indian paintbrushes. Not far from the road and just before the creek a colony of young aspen looked as if someone had pounded a thousand leafy pipes into the ground.

He noticed two deer past the first tree line, and then three more. At least one deer always looked his way while the others tore at wild grasses with their thick lips.

After a few minutes he backed out onto the road and traveled another mile north and turned onto Vassar Road. Two miles later he pulled into the bumpy gravel driveway of an old clapboard farmhouse a couple years past needing paint. Behind the house an old wooden barn's spine had broken long ago and its two ends leaned badly toward the center. There was a large orange sticker on the barn's huge sliding door and yellow tape wrapped like a skinny ribbon around the entire structure. When Jeremy got out of the car he heard a horse whinny in the pole barn across the driveway from the house, and he saw a bag of puppy food near the metal building's side door.

A woman of about sixty, small and thin, stepped out of the house and onto the large covered porch. She wore an oversized Green Bay Packers sweatshirt and a red bandana spread across her head. Jeremy guessed she was bald.

"Good morning!" the woman said, after Jeremy closed his car door. "You Joshua?"

"Jeremy. Yes."

"Now where the heck did I get Joshua?" she said, stopping to consider the question. "Must be that Bible show I was watching last night. I'm Mary Ellen. The pups are out this way." She stepped off the porch and Jeremy walked with her across the gravel driveway toward the pole barn.

"Make sure you give the one you pick plenty of things to sleep with," Mary Ellen said. "Like maybe shoes or boots or something so it don't miss its brothers and sisters too much. They all sleep in a big pile when they're little. I'd always give my puppies a warm water bottle to cuddle up with. But then I'm a softy." She smiled at Jeremy, showing a missing canine.

Jeremy stepped over a low spot in the driveway still holding rainwater from the night before, and they walked across a patch of mowed grass and weeds to the pole barn. Mary Ellen held open the side door for him.

The pole barn was thick with the rich and musty smell of livestock. Jeremy heard a horse flutter its lips but he couldn't see past the large sliding door made of unpainted plywood that divided the barn's interior.

"We're just trying to do what we can for Minny," Mary Ellen said. "She's getting on and can't take care of things. The mom belongs to her." Mary Ellen nodded toward the yellow lab lying in the corner of the puppy enclosure. The dog lay on her side with her head raised and sniffed the air while looking at

Jeremy. "Minnie sold off her land a long time ago. You passed her house on the way here. Tall thing, nearly three full stories. Looks like a big blue rocket ship with a skinny roof. Her grandkid Marla paid to get vinyl on it three years ago. Hard to find anyone to paint for anything reasonable anymore. But then it's Marla's house when Minny passes so I guess she was just making an investment."

Jeremy knelt next to the enclosure made of scrap two-by-eights and plywood. All four puppies trotted to him, ears flopping and noses up. He reached down and they all licked his hand.

"We're awful glad you got an interest," Mary Ellen said. "Whichever ones are still here tomorrow, we got no choice but to take them to the shelter. They'll put 'em down after a couple weeks. I can't do that. I put down a horse with a broken leg one time and cried for a month."

"Any idea who the dad is?" Jeremy said.

"Might be the border collie over on Mattison Road. He gets loose now and then and I've seen him come this far, but that's just a guess. Look like good pups to me no matter what blood they got. I think they'll have short hair, like a lab. Won't be the kinda dog that clogs up your vacuum." She showed her missing canine again.

"I passed a sign on Mattison Road," Jeremy said. "Forty acres for sale. Do you know the place?"

"Sure I do," she said. "Part of my uncle's old farm. It's sandy as can be and pretty high right there. Tough on corn. Beans did all right. He tried wheat now and again but it wasn't really worth it. I know it'll perk if you're thinking about building. My uncle always said if there was a lake there he'd have a real nice beach with all the sand. Nice little spot, with the crick and all. Tons a game."

"Your uncle still owns it? There's no phone number on the sign." Jeremy moved his hand from side to side and the puppies romped after it.

Mary Ellen smiled. "He probably just figures everybody knows it's his, and thought it'd be a local picking it up, you know, for farming. He's living in the past. Won't be too many years and no one'll be farming this section. You go north or west and it's all good black dirt but the big feedlots are buying all that up. Big stinky mess is what I say about those places. I used to know who owned what in this part of the county. Knew the families. Went to weddings and funerals for all kinda folks around here. Don't even know most of the people on this road no more. Not what it used to be around here."

Jeremy looked up from the puppies. "How long's the forty acres been for sale?"

Some of the puppies began to wrestle each other and pretty soon they were in a wriggling heap.

"Two weeks, I'd guess," Mary Ellen said. "My uncle's heading to Florida for good and he's just getting rid of things. We don't want it. This might be our last year here too. Certainly aren't planting next year. We got people keep bugging us to go to Arizona for the weather and the taxes. But you get grandbabies and you don't want to move away. Time gets precious. Only the good lord knows how long any of us got left and he ain't talkin', so we're just hemming and hawing about it until we do something. My

cousin keeps telling me to plat out our hundred-sixty into some kinda luxury ten-acre parcels with some fancy name like Coyote Canyon. That's what she said. Canyon. You see any canyons around here? We got plenty of coyotes but we're a little short on canyons. She's the one in Arizona."

Jeremy snapped his fingers a few times above the puppies and they each fell backward or sideways trying to reach his hand. The puppies started wrestling each other again and one climbed out from under the others and came back to Jeremy.

"This little guy will do," he said.

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Jeremy held the office paper box Mary Ellen had given him to carry his puppy home and he watched her scoop puppy food into a small plastic tub while the dog licked his thumb hanging over the edge of the cardboard box. Mary Ellen started to hand the plastic tub to Jeremy but changed her mind.

"I'll take it to your car so you don't drop him," she said. "He might start bouncing around in that box so you're gonna need both hands."

They walked together to Jeremy's car and Mary Ellen thanked him for giving the dog a home. She put the tub on the floor in front of the back seat and closed the door. Jeremy put the puppy in his box on the passenger seat.

"Worked out well for all of us," Jeremy said.

They said goodbye and as he got into his car his phone buzzed so he pulled it from his pocket. He didn't recognize the number so he put it on the console and pulled his car ahead to turn around in the space between the house and the pole barn. As the car began to move the puppy settled and resettled his front paws and licked his lips and stared up at him from the cardboard box. Jeremy's phone let him know there was a voicemail before he reached the end of Mary Ellen's driveway so he listened to the message before pulling out onto the road.

"This is Bob Torsteer. I assume ... Hell, I don't know what you know. Elaine said she told you so I guess you know what I'm talking about. I didn't mean any harm to come to anyone. You included. I don't need to tell you that it was over between you two. I wasn't trying to tear your family apart, I just wanted her to feel like she was part of one. She told me she was dying inside. Shit, I didn't call to say all this. I just want to say how fucked up all this is. She was on her way to my place when it happened and that's been eating at me ever since. You start thinking crazy shit like if I never met her, she'd still be alive. Like I had something to do with it. Shit. Everything about this just sucks. I guess that's it."

Jeremy put his phone back on the console and looked at the puppy staring up at him. The dog raised the hinges in his ears and his snout bobbed up and down.

"It's all right, little guy," Jeremy said. He reached over to scratch his head, and then pulled out onto the road. The puppy tried to climb out of the box and nearly toppled it off the seat. Jeremy grabbed the

box to keep it from falling, shifting his eyes back and forth from the box to the road until he maneuvered the box onto the floor in front of the seat.

“You’re all right,” he said to the puppy, staring up at him from his cardboard box on the floor.

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As they traveled down Mattison Road Jeremy looked for the sign nailed to the tree that he’d seen earlier. When he spotted it, he drove over the culvert and parked in the weeds just past the gap in the fence.

“Let’s see what we think,” he said to the puppy, and reached into the box to pick him up. He carried the dog under his arm up the slope to the north where it leveled off, dipped, and then rose and leveled again. He noticed the air. It seemed alive, almost electric, without the city’s muddle. He looked at the puppy and saw that he was sniffing the air too.

“Not bad, huh?” Jeremy said to the dog.

He put the puppy down and watched him zigzag through the weeds, sweeping his nose in short arcs, his tail swishing and his backbone jack-knifing with every turn. The puppy looked up several times, waiting for Jeremy to make eye contact, and then put his nose to the ground again.

“How about Roscoe?” Jeremy said. The puppy looked up at him, his tail wagging so hard it swayed the back half of his body. “All right. Roscoe it is.”

Roscoe wandered to a patch of cone flowers where bumble bees hovered and landed, hovered and landed, hovered and landed. Near the flowers there were remnants of a concrete foundation sticking out of the ground, as much as two feet in some places. Most of it had been charred by fire and there were large pockmarks in the cracked concrete where stones had been.

The puppy peed on the foundation and then trotted to Jeremy and chewed on his shoelaces.

“Let’s go see the creek,” Jeremy said and started down the slope. Roscoe hesitated, turned his head toward the sound of a pickup with a bad exhaust pipe thundering down Mattison Road, and then trotted after Jeremy.

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Jeremy’s computer was off and he stood up to leave work for the day but his phone buzzed.

“Hi Claire.”

“Hi dad. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Still at work. Just about to head home.”

“Anything new?”

"I looked at some property not far from Pomeroy, near where we got Christmas trees a couple times when you were little."

"Where I fell out of that big wagon? God, mom was terrified."

"So was I. Terror is what parenting's all about."

"Keep telling me that and you'll never have grandkids. What's the place like?"

"Out in the country. Forty acres."

"Forty acres? You get a mule with that? How big is forty acres anyway?"

"I'll find out. Big, I think. It used to be a farm but not anymore. Fields and trees now. It felt pretty good standing there and just breathing. I'm not sure why but it seems like a good place to be. Roscoe told me to buy it."

"Roscoe? Who's Roscoe?"

"My dog. Guess I didn't tell you. I have a dog now."

"No, you didn't tell me. And he talks too?"

"I'm meeting with the owner tomorrow morning. If things go well, maybe I'll have Roscoe make an offer. It's hard to say no to a puppy."

"How far out of town is it?"

"Only adds another eight or ten minutes to my commute. You can move pretty fast on the roads out there. The blocks are a mile long and there are only two stop signs from the property to the highway."

"What are you gonna do with forty acres?"

"I don't know. Build a house to start. Your mom never would have gone for that. She liked the city."

"Hey, I got a letter a few days ago from Mary Otili. I didn't open it until yesterday. Kind of freaked me out so the envelope just sat there on the counter for a while. Katrina kept saying she was going to open it if I didn't. I finally opened it and I was so impressed I called her and we talked for an hour. She's a plant pathologist at the university. She told me what's wrong with my basil. Fusarium. She said she saw you getting groceries."

"Yes. I wasn't very nice."

"She didn't say that. I don't think she said anything about it, just that she saw you. Anyway, it wasn't her fault and I wanted her to know we don't blame her for anything. I mean if I get married and my wife kills someone in a wreck it wouldn't be *my* fault."

"No. Of course not."

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When Jeremy and Roscoe arrived at the forty acres there was a pickup with rusted wheel wells parked up the hill from the culvert, close to the charred foundation.

Jeremy drove through the gap in the fence and heard weeds scraping the bottom of his car until he stopped near the pickup. The owner of the property stepped out of his truck and smothered his cigarette with his work boot. The man carried an extra forty pounds and had mutton chop sideburns that reminded Jeremy of Joe Cocker from the Woodstock movie. Despite the warm weather, he wore an unbuttoned flannel shirt with a worn T-shirt underneath.

Jeremy put Roscoe down and the puppy loped toward the man but became distracted by a butterfly after a few strides. Roscoe tried to catch the butterfly in his mouth but gave up when it flew up several feet.

“Bill Elm,” the man said, offering his hand.

“Jeremy.”

They shook hands and both turned to face the property.

“This is the forty,” Bill said. “I can point out some boundaries so you can walk it. Lotta game out here if you’re a hunter. Deer. Turkey. Some low spots will bring in traveling ducks in the rainy years. Rabbit all over the place every few years when the coyotes leave ‘em alone.” He looked down at Roscoe, wagging his tail and looking up at him. “Coyotes usually just take the little dogs but looks like he’s gonna have some size to him. They take cats too, but I can’t say that bothers me. Used to have swallows nesting in my barn and swooping around eating mosquitoes all summer. Now I have wild cats and no swallows. My neighbor on the other side solves his cat problem with a twenty-two. Can’t seem to bring myself to do that.”

“What do you know about the house that was here?” Jeremy said, nodding toward the charred foundation. “Looks like there was a fire.”

Bill glanced at the foundation and looked at Jeremy. “Couple kids died in it,” he said. “The dad was out plowing and his wife took him some lunch but she left the stove on. Something fell off the icebox and started burning. No idea how anyone’d know that. Wasn’t much of anything left after the fire, but that’s what they said. It was an old wood house and it burned up like nothin’. The kids were upstairs. They think the older one was probably asleep and the other one was too young to figure out what to do. The mom walked out into the woods with a shotgun the next day. Buried her the same day as her kids. Happened sometime around ‘60. I was just little, but I knew the kids. We saw them at church Sundays. Scared the hell outta me. If it happened to them ...” Bill shook his head. “We lived in a old wooden house a lot like theirs.”

Roscoe was whining at Jeremy’s feet and looking up at him.

"I'm not sure I needed to tell you all that," Bill said, smiling. "Bad vibes or something."

Jeremy reached down to pick up Roscoe. "How'd you end up with the property?"

"The husband, he just up and left. No one knows what happened to him. Property foreclosed and my dad picked it up. Made sense since we were farming land on two borders. But I'm done with that. Soon as this forty sells I got a place in Florida on the Gulf side. Double-wide on a channel and a nineteen-foot boat. I'm gonna kill as many snook and snapper's I can before my time's up. That sounds like a good way to go out."

Bill pointed toward the stand of aspen on the far side of the creek that hid his house from view.

"Just past those popples is my place," he said. "I'm giving it to one of my kids. She's working at Walmart and her boyfriend's got school debt up the ass so there's no way they can even scrape up a down payment, let alone make the monthlies and pay the taxes." Will glanced at Jeremy. "You'll have good neighbors. Me and the wife raised her right. Mostly my wife. She's been dead eight years now. Goddamn cancer. Miss her every day."

Roscoe squirmed in Jeremy's arms so he put him on the ground. "Where are the property lines?"

Bill pointed out tree lines that approximated the north, east and south boundaries. "Can't see the northeast corner with that ridge there and all the scrub on it, but you'll see where the tree lines meet when you get up top. Got a nice view here. Always liked this spot."

"Does that creek run all summer?"

"Dried up once or twice I know of," Bill said. "You know how dry the soil is by how much water's in the crick. To the county it ain't a crick, it's a drain, and the drain board every ten years or so brings in a big ass backhoe to clear it. It'll cost you some money, but drain boards do whatever the hell they want and you just say, 'yessir!'" Bill looked at Jeremy and smiled. "I've had some run-ins. I keep telling you bad news, don't I?"

Roscoe left the dandelion he was chewing to pounce on Bill's boot.

"They only had to take one of the pups to the shelter," Bill said, watching Roscoe chew on his shoelace. "That was my niece you got the dog from. Oughta be a good dog. With that color coat I bet the dad's that shepherd over on Vassar. You see him around now and then. Surprised he ain't met a car bumper, all the runnin' he does."

"Your niece said the soil here is almost pure sand."

"I wouldn't go that far," the man said. "It's sandy, but you can grow in it. Not real productive, depending on the year and what you got in the ground. Probably good for fruit trees, but you'd be laying awake at night all through May worrying about frost. Be lucky to get apricots once every three years. Not much better with peaches. Apples might do okay. Ten years ago I thought about a U-pick apple orchard, thinking I'd just plant the late bloomers. Don't get much higher anywhere in the county

so the cold air drains off pretty good, but I don't want to spend a month laying awake at night. I assume you're not gonna farm it anyway. I mean it's only forty."

"Not sure what I'll do, other than build a house," Jeremy said. "For some reason it feels good out here. Comfortable." Jeremy scraped at the soil with his toe. The soil was so sandy it was almost golden under the thin topsoil. "Your niece said perking shouldn't be a problem."

"Give the soil a drink and it'll be gone in a blink," Bill said. "My uncle used to say that all the time about the land around here. There's a bit of clay down by the crick, but they won't let you build there anyway. I'm asking one-thirty-five for it. Priced to sell. Don't really need to budge. I think it's fair. I'm sure you'll want to walk it, so go ahead. Stop by afterwards and we can talk." Bill reached down to pick up Roscoe. "Nice looking dog," he said, scratching the puppy's chin and making him lick the air. "I'll be at my house."

Bill handed Roscoe to Jeremy and got into his truck. He wheeled around toward the culvert and drove onto the road without slowing down.

*

Jeremy sat by a window facing the street at the Mordant Mule Café with a book and a mug of coffee on his table. It was a Saturday and he wanted to stop by his office to scan a few documents related to the forty acres, but he noticed a book he'd borrowed from a friend sitting on the passenger seat of his car and decided to stop for a coffee and some reading. He tried to read but his mind was busy so he watched people walk by on the sidewalk. When people saw him looking he would smile but their eyes would always bounce off his. A couple college students walked by holding hands and Jeremy smiled at the young man, and when he looked away, he smiled at the young woman. The young woman returned his smile and when he nodded she did the same and she kept her smile as she passed. He wondered how long before it faded.

He thought he recognized a woman walking alone on the sidewalk. She had a large cloth bag in one hand and her purse slung over a shoulder. He thought it was Mary Otili but when she came closer he realized it wasn't her, but he smiled anyway. The woman seemed to smile, or maybe she just pressed her lips together. He didn't think it was a grimace.

When she passed, the sidewalk was empty except for two sparrows fighting over a piece of a bagel near the curb and he thought about what he had said to Mary Otili at the grocery store.

"She deserved better," he said.

A woman at the next table looked up from her laptop to see if he was talking to her.

*

"Hi, dad," Claire said.

"Hi, Claire," Jeremy said.

“So tell me about the forty acres. Did you talk to the owner?”

“Couple days ago. Roscoe made him an offer and he accepted it.”

“So you bought it?” Claire said.

“There’s a couple things left hanging, but I think it’s done.”

“Is your house for sale?”

“Haven’t got that far yet.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Claire said. “Maybe I’ll come back home. I love that house and I like the neighborhood. Sounds crazy to my friends but I miss that slow Midwestern lifestyle. Even grocery shopping here in the city is a pain in the ass. And I’ve been talking to people from home a lot lately. I miss them. I miss you.”

“Did you and Katrina break up?” Jeremy said.

Claire sighed. “Just cuz I might move back home?”

“You’ve said a few things. It’s too bad. I like her.”

“So do I,” Claire said. “Just can’t seem to live with her.”

“I won’t put the house up for sale yet. Think about what you’re doing for as long as you need to. But this place is yours if you want it.”

“I’ll buy it, of course. Whatever’s fair. If I decide to leave here.”

“I won’t list it right away. I haven’t even talked to a builder yet.”

“I talked to Mary Otili again a couple days ago. She sent me some of her extra basil seeds. It’s a variety that won’t get that fusarium. Can’t live if living is without my pesto. You’ve got that nice sunny spot on the south side of the house where we always had tomatoes. I can still taste them. I could have a little pesto garden right there. If I decide to move back.”

*

“Hello, Mary, this is Jeremy Hammersley. My daughter Claire gave me your number. She said she’s really enjoyed talking with you. She liked your letter a lot too, and she’s been sounding like her old self lately and I think you had something to do with that. So, thank you. And when we met at the grocery store, I’m sorry for what I said. That was one of my uglier moments. I’m a lot prettier now. So to speak. I hope you’re doing okay. Bye.”

*

On the Saturday after the sale closed, Jeremy pulled into a hardware store to buy a hundred-foot tape to take to the forty acres. When he came back to the car, Roscoe was sitting in the driver's seat.

"All right, Roscoe, you gotta move," Jeremy said. He pushed Roscoe over to the passenger seat but it became a game and when Jeremy slid into the driver's seat Roscoe ended up on his lap and wanted to continue wrestling. Jeremy picked up Roscoe and carried him (it took two arms now) to the passenger side and plopped him onto the seat, but before he came back around to the driver's side Roscoe had stepped back onto the driver's seat and stared at him through the window.

"This isn't working," Jeremy said, and Roscoe laid down. Jeremy went back into the hardware store and bought a dog crate. The clerk talked him into one that he could attach to a seat belt.

Roscoe whined for a few minutes in his new crate, belted into the center of the backseat, but he was silent the rest of the way.

When they arrived at the forty acres Roscoe sniffed around the charred foundation while Jeremy ran the tape measure and used branches he snapped from a dead pine tree near the ditch to mark tentative corners for the house he planned to build. When he had staked out the corners he walked toward the road and looked back toward where his house would be.

Roscoe trotted over and smelled Jeremy's shoes.

"What do you think?" he asked the dog. "Walk out basement?"

Roscoe looked toward the road and came to attention as he watched four bicyclists speed by in tight formation with their heads lowered, backs arched and legs straining.

"Let's go," Jeremy said and he let Roscoe lead the way on a romp around the property. When they got back to the car Roscoe didn't hesitate to climb into his crate. He circled once and lay down.

Before they had traveled a mile, Jeremy lowered his rearview and saw through the side slats of Roscoe's crate that he was asleep, curled up with his snout resting on his rear legs.

Jeremy decided to take a different route home. He knew Mattison Road became Macklin Avenue and went all the way downtown, but he couldn't recall ever travelling its entire route. He decided to skip the highway and head straight south until he hit the river, and then work his way west and north toward his house. He had heard about a new dog park along the river and thought he knew where it was. Maybe Roscoe would be awake by then. Jeremy wanted to see how he would do around other dogs.

Houses became thicker as they traveled south, and there was a junk yard with a high fence, a couple motels with weekly rates, an auto parts store, a body shop. Eventually ditches gave way to curbs, the blocks grew shorter, and the potholes deeper and more frequent. He passed a liquor store and a pawn shop with bars on their windows.

Sitting at a stoplight at Gleason Street he remembered when he was first driving on his own his father told him to stay away from that part of town. He couldn't remember ever saying anything like that to Claire. It never seemed necessary.

He saw a gas station up ahead and pulled in to get water for himself and Roscoe. He left two full liter bottles on his kitchen counter when they left the house earlier.

At the head of the line only one of two registers was open behind the thick glass. A young African-American woman in front of Jeremy held two large bags of potato chips under her arm and two liters of soda between her fingers. Under her other arm she held two boxes of Pop-Tarts and in her hand was a box of one-hundred-twenty diapers. Jeremy looked to see if there were any carts or carriers of any kind in the store but he didn't see any.

The box of diapers dropped to the floor and the young woman tried to pick it up but dropped a box of Pop-Tarts when she tried to lift it. She wore cutoff jeans and a tank top.

"You've got your hands full," Jeremy said. "I can get those for you."

He gave her the Pop-Tarts and tried to hand the diapers to her but they slipped off her fingers and dropped again.

"You want me to hold onto them until we get up to the register?" Jeremy said.

The woman smiled at Jeremy. "Thank you."

Jeremy picked up the diapers and the young woman turned to face forward. She looked back and smiled again. "I appreciate it," she said, and faced forward again.

"Happy to help," Jeremy said to her back.

A few transactions later, the young woman reached the bullet proof glass so Jeremy scanned the diapers and put them on the floor next to her.

"You got a bag or something?" she said to the clerk, a disinterested young man with a Nike headband holding a pencil against his temple.

The clerk just shook his head with his eyes half closed.

The young woman slipped four twenties into the metal tray and waited for her change, and then somehow gathered everything and walked to the door, turning to push it open with her back as Jeremy paid for his two waters.

After Roscoe lapped up half a liter of water from the plastic bowl, Jeremy closed the crate door and they started back down Macklin Avenue. A block ahead they passed the young woman from the store waiting outside a graffiti-covered bus stop. She stood by the curb with everything in her arms except the diapers which were on the ground between her feet.

Jeremy waved as he drove past and she smiled when she recognized him. Jeremy took the next four rights and pulled over in front of the bus stop and lowered the passenger window.

“Do you want a ride home? You’ve got a lot to carry.”

The young woman ducked down to peer inside the car.

“You a cop?”

“A cop? No, no. Just thought you could use a hand.”

“You want a date?”

“No date. Just trying to help.”

She looked inside the car and saw Roscoe crated in the back seat. “He bite?” she said.

Roscoe’s tail was thumping the sides of his crate. His front paws danced and he licked the air at the thought of making a new friend.

“He nibbles,” Jeremy said. “He’s just a puppy. And he’s in the crate anyway. The door’s unlocked.”

She opened the back door, put the potato chips, pop tarts and soda on the back seat next to Roscoe’s crate. She went back for the box of diapers and jumped into the front seat with the diapers on her lap. Her hair reminded Jeremy of the seventies when he was a kid and afros were popular.”

“Just go straight ahead and turn left on Del-Hi. There’s a liquor store on the corner.” She looked at Jeremy and smiled. “Nice of you to do this.”

Jeremy checked his side mirror and pulled out onto the road. “Well, your smile made me feel good in the store, so I’m just paying you back.”

“Men tell me I have a nice smile,” she said, turning to look out her window. “My trademark, I guess. My mom told me I was born with a smile on my face. She was going to call me Lorena after her mom but she called me Joy instead.”

“You having a party?” Jeremy said. “That’s a lot of potato chips.”

“Dinner. Can’t afford Mickey Ds for the kids tonight. Got a can of tuna, some bread and now we got potato chips.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“You really give a shit what I’m having for dinner tomorrow?” Joy said.

Jeremy shrugged.

“Leftover potato chips,” she said. She looked at Jeremy but he kept his eyes ahead. “Tomorrow ain’t here yet. Got pop tarts for breakfast, after that, I dunno. I don’t get my hospital check until Thursday. I wash dishes in the cafeteria. Just part time.”

“Doesn’t sound like a high paying job.”

“Grandma was always telling me to get on the straight and narrow. She died last January. The cancer got her. I really miss her so I’m trying real hard for her.”

“How many kids?”

“A hundred.”

Jeremy smiled.

“Just two. Their dad fell off a ladder working construction and can’t hardly walk no more. They said he was drunk so he didn’t get anything. The man was a meth head but he never drank. I don’t even know where he stays these days. The meth ruined him. Two more blocks and turn left.”

Up ahead Jeremy saw a listing metal pole holding up a sign with enough plastic still intact that he could make out the words Hill Top Liquor. Broken out windows were protected by rusty metal bars and faded graffiti covered the building’s block walls.

“And I got my dad staying with me now too,” she said. “Damn near drank his self to death and he’s got all kinds of problems and don’t take his medicine like he’s supposed to. Shoulda been dead a few times. I think his brain’s fadin’ too.”

“Doesn’t sound easy.”

“Two kids, my sick dad, a part time job washing dishes. Add it all up.” She looked at Jeremy. “It don’t.”

Jeremy slowed at the next intersection and waited for instructions.

“Left, first one on the right.”

Jeremy pulled onto the remnants of an asphalt driveway with chicory and dandelions growing out of the black gravel. The house was a post-war two-story with clapboard siding largely lacking paint. The old detached garage leaned badly and moss grew on its roof shingles. There was a large yellow warning sticker placed there by the city next to the swing-style door that seemed to be stuck half open.

Jeremy asked if she needed a hand as she got out of the car.

“I got it.” She opened the back door, gathered everything and pushed the door closed with her hip. She smiled at Jeremy and started toward the stairway outside the house. The railing for the first section of wooden steps lay on the ground. When she reached the landing halfway up she turned back and mouthed “thank you” before she started up the next section leading to a small deck outside the door to her apartment on the second floor of the house. Jeremy watched her drop the diapers and Pop-Tarts

and pull a key from her pocket to unlock the door. She tried opening the door but realized the dead bolt had been thrown so she pounded on it a few times. When the door opened she stepped inside and then reached outside to retrieve the diapers and Pop-Tarts and closed the door.

Jeremy backed out of the drive and drove home while Roscoe slept.

*

Jeremy watched Will Cerson of C&B Builders use his fingers to make a box at arm's length like a painter framing a landscape.

"I'd say the grade is around six or seven percent," Will said. "Plenty good for a walk-out. This is gonna turn out real nice," he said, looking off to the south toward the creek. "Yeah, real nice. Probably fill your freezer from your back door if you want. Seasons don't tend to matter much around here with the deer so thick. And every deer you kill is one I don't hit with my truck." Will smiled. "I done that a couple times."

"Not sure I'm much of a hunter," Jeremy said.

"Everybody I know out here's got a gun or three," Will said. "Maybe living out here will give you a taste for blood."

The two men gazed across the landscape. Roscoe sniffed one of the four stakes Jeremy had stuck into the ground on their last visit.

"You divorced?" Will said. "I see where your ring used to be. Nunna my biz, if you don't want it to be. Just like to know who I'm building for."

"My wife died in a car wreck. It's been six weeks. Seven weeks, I guess."

"Open foot, insert mouth. Shit. Sorry, man."

"You didn't know." Jeremy nodded toward the charred foundation. "You're probably too young to remember the fire that happened here. The guy who owned the property said a couple kids died when their mom left the stove on, and then she shot herself."

Will turned to look at the foundation and then back at Jeremy. "Don't remember it first hand, but we all knew about it growing up. Scared hell outta us kids. All kinda rumors went 'round. Like the dad did it on purpose but his wife got out so he blew her head off and said it was suicide. Or the kids didn't really burn up but were sold off to some rich folks." Will looked at Jeremy. "Just rotten luck is what I believe. Who hasn't left the damn stove on? Just don't usually kill your kids when you do it."

Roscoe wandered back to the men and Will bent down to scratch him behind his ears. "If you do a walkout basement you could have a nice deck above it. Or you could wrap a deck around either corner, east or west. I'd just go south, right over the walkout. Gives you a real nice view down to the creek. I'd cover the deck if it was mine, since it's facing south. Fixed, or some kinda roll down. Up to you."

Roscoe laid on his back and bared his belly to Will.

“He must like you,” Jeremy said.

Will rubbed Roscoe’s belly with his fingertips. “Second story deck would give you underneath to work with too. You know, shaded and sorta protected space. You’ll want to put down a concrete pad for that.” He stopped rubbing Roscoe’s belly and the dog stood up and stared at Jeremy.

“Nice looking dog,” Will said, standing again. “I know Minny’s lab is the mom, but you got any idea about the dad?”

“Heard a couple guesses but no one really knows,” Jeremy said.

“I know there’s a spaniel I see running around here now and then,” Will said. “Got a collar but I don’t know where he belongs. Might be him.”

Will watched a dump truck roar past, followed by a pickup towing a backhoe. The man driving the pickup waved and Will raised his hand.

“We could start in late September,” Will said.

“That would be great,” Jeremy said. “Earlier than I thought.”

““Woulda been spring but we had one cancel on us cuz of a divorce. I guess all we need to do is figure out what it’s gonna look like and come up with a price.” He looked down at Roscoe. “You’ll be a foot taller when the house is done, I bet.”

Roscoe looked off to the east and stood at attention. Will and Jeremy looked in the same direction but couldn’t see what caught the dog’s eye.

“Yeah, you got some room to roam,” Will said. “I think you’ll like it out here.”

“You live close by?” Jeremy said.

“About four miles east. I built half the houses on Vassar, and seven or eight on Mattison, although most of those are toward the city. Even built a house for a colored guy just north of town. I took a lot of shit for that.”

“What color was he? Or do you mean African-American?”

“Yeah. Black guy. Couple kids. Figured I was doing the guy a favor.”

Bill Elm drove by in his pickup and bumped his horn. Will turned and waved and watched Bill’s car slow and turn into his driveway on the other side of the creek and disappear behind the aspens.

“You built the house for free?” Jeremy said.

Will smirked. "Course not," he said. "I bumped the price fifteen grand, hoping he'd say no. I mean I got friends and family all around here and they all got standards, you know? I was afraid they'd kick me outta poker night."

"Charging more was doing him a favor?"

Will squinted at Jeremy and Jeremy stared at Will.

"Jesus, man. You gotta understand where you're at. There's people out here don't want nothin' to do with them people. Maybe there ain't as many anymore but we all got a lot invested in our property."

"Meaning what?"

"You want to live next to a buncha niggers?"

"I'm going to find another builder."

"What?"

"I'm not doing business with you."

"What the fuck? I'm building you a house, not marrying your daughter. Relax, man."

"I'm not doing business with you."

"Are you fucking kiddin' me?"

"I'm serious. We're done."

Will stared at Jeremy for a moment. "Shit, suit yourself," he said and started toward his truck.

"Welcome to the neighborhood, asshole," he said out his truck window, and then wheeled around and drove across the culvert and onto Mattison Road.

*

On the way home Jeremy decided to try the dog park again, still anxious to see how Roscoe would behave around other dogs. But on Macklin Avenue he saw Joy walking on the sidewalk and pulled over.

"You decide you want a date?" Joy said through the passenger window.

"No, no. We're just headed downtown," Jeremy said. "We've been out to some property I bought near Pomeroy."

"Who's we?"

"Just me and Roscoe."

"Roscoe?"

"The dog." Jeremy nodded behind him at the crate.

"Your dog ain't a person, you know," she said, flashing a smile, and raising her head to look up and down the street over the top of Jeremy's car.

"Sometimes I wonder," Jeremy said.

"Roscoe was my grandad's name," Joy said when she ducked down and leaned into the window again. "So they tell me. I heard of Pomeroy. My uncle married some white lady and they built a house out there maybe ten years ago. I was still in school. Somebody tried to burn up their house. I hope that asshole's still in prison. We don't go out that way."

"Who's we?"

"People like me."

"Sorry."

"You lit the fire?"

"No. Just wish things were different."

"Wishes are for fishes. My aunt used to say that. She wasn't a happy person."

"You need a lift somewhere?"

Joy raised again to look over the top of the car, then leaned into the window again. "Just going to get some bread and a couple boxes of mac and cheese at the gas station. And something for the kids' breakfast. The bus never came so I'm walking."

"Ever go to a real grocery store? Probably save some money and eat better." Jeremy tried to keep his eyes off her cleavage.

"It's more than a hour on the bus for the closest one. And there's a transfer. You time it wrong or the bus is late and it's a whole lot longer." She rose up to look over the top of Jeremy's car again. "I did it once with my boy. Ain't worth it."

Jeremy looked behind him. Roscoe was curled up and asleep, his curved spine pressed against the crate's side slats.

"Jump in and I'll take you to the one I go to," Jeremy said.

"I'm sure you got better things to do than drive my ass around," Joy said.

"Not really," Jeremy said. "We'll be at the store in ten minutes and I'll take you home after. I need to pick up a few things anyway."

"You already done something real nice," she said. "I appreciate it. If you don't want a date, I gotta go."

"I'm just feeling like being nice to somebody and I guess I'm picking on you. Blame it on your smile. Won't take any more time than walking to the gas station and back."

"Last time a white guy did something nice for me, this guy fixed my faucet from spraying all over. Didn't charge me nothin' but then he said he wanted to take me up the ass. You gonna ask to take me up the ass?"

"No."

Joy looked over top of the car again but ducked down quickly.

"I gotta go," she blurted. "Meet me at my house. Two blocks back, turn left. You been there. Be careful." Joy trotted down the driveway of a boarded-up house with tall weeds and a bright yellow tag on its door and disappeared into the backyard.

Jeremy took his foot off the brake to pull out into traffic but when he checked his sideview it was filled with flashing lights. He put his car in park and the police car pulled in just behind him with its lights still flashing. Jeremy watched in his rearview as the cop finished speaking on his radio and got out of the cruiser. Jeremy lowered his window and turned off his car.

"Out for a party?" The cop stood just behind Jeremy's window and his hand rested on his holstered pistol.

"No."

"Looked to me like you were going to make a run for it."

"I didn't see you until I was about to pull away."

"Your girlfriend saw me."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"We've got your license plate number ..." The officer's radio squawked and he paused to listen, and then started walking backward toward his patrol car, his hand still resting on his gun. "We'll know about it if you come back here to pick up any more young ladies."

The officer jumped into his car, flipped on the siren and lurched out onto the street past Jeremy. The cop slowed at the red light ahead just long enough to see that the intersection was clear before darting through.

Jeremy waited for a motorcycle to rumble past and then pulled away from the curb and turned right at the light, and then took another right onto Joy's street. Three blocks later he pulled into her driveway.

From his car he saw that the door into her apartment was hanging open. Joy stepped onto the small deck at the top of the stairs and waved him in. Her hand was a blur and she seemed insistent. She walked back inside but didn't close the door.

Jeremy thought about backing out the drive and going home. Instead he got out of the car and started up the steps. At the top he pushed the door open all the way and saw Joy's young son sitting on the kitchen floor next to his unconscious grandfather. Joy was on her knees leaning over her father and she had a syringe in her hand. The plunger had already been depressed. She raised one of her father's eyelids, and then sat back on her ankles.

"Pop Pop's sleeping," the boy said to Jeremy.

The man lay still, breathing slowly with his mouth open and his eyes closed. A little girl, just learning to walk, stood holding onto a leg of the card table at the center of the kitchen and stared at Jeremy with wide eyes. Whenever Jeremy looked at the little girl he could see the corners of her mouth form a smile behind her pacifier.

Joy looked up at Jeremy. "He was on the floor when I came in. He was making the kids sandwiches when it happened." She nodded toward the stove where a black cat sat on one of the burners trying to paw tuna from a can that was only part way open. "Git!" she yelled. The cat leapt off the stove and Joy turned back toward her father. "He's got to take his medicine. I can't be here all day."

Her father's eyelids fluttered and he let out a weak groan.

"You back?" Joy said, bending over him and looking into his eyes.

After a moment he rolled over and worked his way to his hands and knees and then needed Joy's help to climb into a folding chair next to the card table.

"You gotta take your medicine," Joy said. "You know that. Right? And you gotta eat something."

He licked his lips and closed his eyes, exhausted. "I do. Yes."

Joy looked up at Jeremy. "I hate to even ask. Can my little ones come along to the store? Dad's not up to chasing them around tonight."

Jeremy looked at the little girl and her pacifier popped out of her mouth when she smiled. The boy climbed up onto one of the folding chairs next to the card table. His feet dangled over the edge of the chair as he stared at Jeremy.

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "That's fine."

"That cop give you any trouble?" Joy said.

"No. Something more important came up."

"Imagine that. Okay, kids. We're going with this nice man in his car to a big store." Joy looked at Jeremy. "What's your name?"

"Jeremy," he said.

“No shit? People still use that name?”

“Three or four of us,” Jeremy said.

“Makes you seem old, don’t it? Sounds like something outta the Bible. I guess that’s Jeremiah. I’ll get the kids ready. Can you grab that car seat by the door?”

*

Joy turned to look into the back of Jeremy’s car. Her daughter was asleep in her car seat and her son seemed happy enough to watch the passing scenery.

“Too bad you have to do that,” Jeremy said, checking his side mirror. “I mean, too bad you have to work on the streets.”

“Easy money.”

“Easy?” Jeremy could see the highway entrance up ahead so he steered into the right lane. “I’m not judging, just wish you didn’t have to.”

“Mama, where we going?” Joy’s son said.

“To a big store, baby boy, like I told you,” Joy said, turning to face her son. “We’ll be there in a minute.” She turned to face forward. “It’s easy money cuz there’s no application. No interview. No degree. No boss, except the assholes trying to get at my money. Telling me one minute they love me and the next they gonna kill me. Give a guy a gun and he thinks he owns everything he points it at. Only got beat up once.”

“Seems like a tough life,” Jeremy said.

“Just gotta hold on until January when I go full-time at the hospital and a get decent pay check. Some bennies too. They gonna make me a cashier when this old guy retires. He had a heart attack couple months ago. Maybe he’ll have another one. Feel bad even thinking like that but January seems like forever.” Joy shook her head. “And if any of the bosses see me on the street ... Shit, game over. Been wearin’ a wig and sunglasses when I’m working.”

“They got gummies at the big store?” her son asked from the back seat.

“They got everything in the world,” Joy said.

“I want gummies,” the boy said.

“Okay, we’ll get some gummies.” Joy turned to face her son.

“Maybe sis would like some too. You gonna share?”

The boy looked at his sleeping sister and then back at his mom. “Okay.”

*

"How about meeting right here by the carts when we're done?" Jeremy said.

Joy hoisted her daughter into a shopping cart seat and her son held onto the cart with one hand and watched people walking past.

"Okay, and we'll race," Joy said with a smile, and puffed out her cheeks to make her daughter giggle. She reached down for her son's hand and the three started off.

Jeremy unmaled a cart and walked toward the rich, yeasty smells coming from the bakery in the store's near corner. He picked up a loaf of bread that promised to make his heart healthy and put it in the cart. He saw the cheese section ahead along one of the store's side walls and decided to make a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner since the bread promised to take care of his heart. Hoping to find gruyere, he went to the specialty cheese section, a refrigerated island in the center of the wide aisle. On the opposite side of the island a woman stood holding a morsel of wrapped cheese in each hand. He noticed that she was Mary Otili.

"Hi Mary," Jeremy said.

"Hello," she said when she looked up.

"Good to see you. I promise I'll be nicer this time." Jeremy smiled.

Mary looked at one of the cheeses she held.

"Claire is moving back here," Jeremy said. "I guess you knew that. I don't know how much it has to do with what happened to her mom. No way to know, I guess."

Mary looked at the cheese in her other hand and decided to put that one back. "I really like her," she said and put the cheese in her hand next to the eggs in her cart.

"She wants to finish a few things and line up a job before she moves," Jeremy said.

"All you got is one loaf of bread?" Joy said, pulling her cart next to Jeremy's. Her daughter held a package of Oreos with both arms and she beamed a smile at Jeremy from the cart. "I got two little kids with me and I'm half done." Joy's son held onto the cart with one hand and stared up at Mary.

"Joy, this is Mary."

"Hi Mary," Joy said, and turned back to Jeremy. "Loser buys ice cream on the way home."

Mary noticed Joy's son staring up at her. She smiled and said "Hi."

The boy looked at Jeremy. "Ice cream?"

"I was just teasin'," Joy said. "See you out front, slowpoke," she said to Jeremy, and pushed her cart toward the baked goods.

"I'm helping her out," Jeremy said to Mary.

Mary's hands were on her cart, ready to push away.

"Joy's a prostitute and she works at Memorial on Macklin," Jeremy said. "Not as a prostitute. She works in the cafeteria. She's just on the street on weekends, mostly. Says she charges twenty bucks extra if the guy's wearing a suit. Her dad lives with her and he's not doing well, and she's got the two kids. I'm just helping her out, otherwise she'd have to buy groceries at a gas station. How about having coffee with me after work sometime? I usually go by the university on my home. Maybe meet at the Mordant Mule."

"I'm really busy right now, getting ready for a trip." Mary said. "Say hi to Claire for me." She wheeled her cart around and headed down a side aisle.

*

"I can grab the bags for you," Jeremy said when he pulled into Joy's driveway. Her daughter had fallen asleep again and her son unbuckled his belt but couldn't get the door open.

"Okay, I gotta carry baby girl." She got out and opened the door for her son. "Baby boy, you can go up the steps by yourself, can't you?"

"Yeah."

Her son went up the steps one at a time, always leading with his right foot and using his hands on the steps in front of him, and then reaching up to the railing once he passed the first section. Joy walked slowly behind him, carrying her daughter in her car seat. Jeremy was behind Joy with two plastic bags in one hand and a box of diapers in the other. He looked through the gaps in the steps and saw that the structure was held up by spliced four-by-fours. Some of the two-by-fours connecting the posts were cracked where the screws went through.

When they reached the top Joy put the car seat down outside the door so she could pull the key from her pocket. The bump woke her daughter and she started to fuss, crinkling her forehead and squinting at her mother.

"Shhhh, baby girl," Joy said, opening the door for her son and then following inside with her daughter in her car seat.

"On the table?" Jeremy said.

Joy looked up from the reluctant latch on the car seat. "Okay."

Jeremy walked in and settled the bags on the card table, and then plopped the diapers next to the bags.

"If you want, we can do this every week," Jeremy said. "On Thursdays I'll go home after work, feed Roscoe and take him for a walk, and then come here and we can go shopping. I'll bring you back here after. Doesn't make sense getting groceries at a gas station."

“You gonna rent a hundred busses and take all my neighbors too?” Joy was still working on the car seat latch.

“No, just you.”

Joy’s daughter was starting to whimper but the latch finally gave way so Joy picked her up and carried her into the living room to deposit her in the reclining chair. “And you don’t want anything from me?” she said when she came back into the kitchen.

“Just smile now and then. You’ll be on your feet in January. I’ll give you a hand until then.”

“Let’s try every other week.”

Her daughter started to cry in the living room.

“Okay, see you in two weeks,” Jeremy said, and turned to leave, but looked back. “Seven?”

“All right,” Joy said, and walked into the living room to get her daughter.

*

Two weeks later Jeremy pulled into Joy’s driveway a few minutes after seven. The door to her apartment opened and her son stepped out. He turned back and watched his mother, with his sister in one arm, lock the door, and then scoop up the car seat next to the door. On the way down the steps, Joy’s son took each step one at a time with his hand sliding along the wooden railing. Joy bounced her daughter and made faces at her as they followed. The little girl giggled and pushed on Joy’s puffed out cheeks with her hands. The kids wore t-shirts, shorts and flip flops.

Halfway down Joy’s son caught a railing splinter in his hand and his face contorted before he let loose a scream. Joy put the empty car seat on one of the steps and motioned to Jeremy that she would have to go back up to her apartment and the trio did a slow U-turn. Jeremy climbed the steps far enough to get the car seat and carried it to his car to buckle it in. He wandered out to the sidewalk and looked up and down the street. There was a man sweeping his walkway on the next block. A kid clipped some bushes along the front of a house and an old woman stood watching him. Two girls rode their bikes toward Macklin Avenue on a crossing street.

He saw Joy bringing her kids back down the steps and Jeremy met them at the car and opened the back door. Joy’s son showed off his bandaged finger before he got into the car.

“Ouch,” Jeremy said.

The boy nodded and climbed into the back seat. Joy walked around the car after putting her daughter in her car seat and gave her son’s finger a kiss before she got into the passenger seat.

No one spoke as Jeremy backed out the driveway and drove to Macklin Avenue, and then toward the highway.

“You know I appreciate it, but those parsnips you gave me last time were awful,” Joy said on the highway entrance ramp. “Kids wouldn’t try even one.”

“Fry them in butter and call them white carrots. That’s what we did with our daughter. They’re delicious. Sweet as candy.”

“I’m sticking with stuff I know what it is,” Joy said. “I know we ain’t got shit but at least the kids can eat something they like. The boy ate up most of the beans in the pan though. Even baby girl ate some.” Joy turned around to face her daughter. “Didn’t you like the beans?”

The girl beamed a big smile.

“Me too!” her brother said.

“I know, I was just telling him,” Joy said.

Joy turned to face forward again. “Put butter in the pan and fry, easy as pie. My aunt used to say that about anything. She’d even fry a slice of bologna for a sandwich. One time she said ‘put him in the pan and fry, and watch him die.’ Said that about her husband. Never saw her so mad. Even told me never to call him uncle.”

“What’d he do?”

“Kept coming home late, or maybe he didn’t come home at all sometimes. I was a kid when I lived with her. It was just for a year when my mom had some trouble. I remember my aunt’s collard greens. Smothered in vinegar. I miss those. When I lived with her was the only time I ever ate collards. She came up from the South.”

“We should stop at the farmers market sometime,” Jeremy said. “I’ve seen collards there. Maybe in a couple weeks we’ll go shopping on a Saturday instead so we can go to the market.”

“Too rich for my blood,” Joy said. “Let’s stay with the grocery store.”

“My treat,” Jeremy said. “I’ll buy you some collards.”

“People like me don’t go there,” Joy said.

“They’ve got games and things for the kids. They might like it.”

“You’re not listening.”

“All kinds of people go there. It’s just shopping.”

“I know where I’m welcome and I know where I’m not. You want to go to the grocery store, that’s cool and I appreciate it. Farmers market? No.”

*

“Hi, Mary, it’s Jeremy. Claire will be here later this week for a couple days. She has an interview for a one-year appointment with the state. She really hopes she gets it so she’ll have time to find something permanent instead of feeling like she needs to take the first job that comes along. I called because she’s having a party next Friday. It’s really her friends throwing it for her, but she wants to do it at her new house. It’s still my house too, for a while. She wants to invite you so I told her I’d make sure you knew about it. She’s saying eight o’clock but I’m sure it will go on pretty late. Hope you can make it.”

*

“This is just beautiful, dad,” Claire said. They stood at the top of the first rise where Jeremy’s new house would be. “I think that view will make your morning coffee taste a little better. And Roscoe will love it.”

Roscoe heard his name so he trotted to Claire’s feet and she bent down to pet him.

When she straightened she looked to the east where Jeremy had used a shovel and a rake to work up a small area for a garden.

“Seems like somebody didn’t have much respect for your fence,” Claire said.

The chicken wire staked in a small rectangle was mostly bent and crumpled and the bean plants that had been growing for a couple weeks were only short stalks with a few leaves dangling here and there. Some of the plants had been yanked from the ground and their dried remains lay on the sandy soil. There were deer tracks throughout the enclosure and a few sets of droppings.

“I was just trying to keep rabbits out,” Jeremy said. “I’m not sure how big a fence I need for deer.”

“Clearly bigger than that,” Claire said. “Mary might know what to do. Have you talked to her lately? She seems to be ignoring me.”

“I saw her at the grocery store again a few weeks ago, and I left a message for her about Friday night. I don’t think she wants anything to do with me.”

“Why not? I think you two have some similarities.”

“Other than the obvious?”

“What’s that?”

“The crash.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Claire looked down at Roscoe and he wagged his tail so she reached down and scratched him behind his ears again. “I’m going to see Layna tonight so let’s go out for dinner tomorrow night. My treat. Last chance since the party is Friday and I’m flying out Saturday.”

“I can’t. I help someone every other Thursday.”

“Help? Doing what?”

“She doesn’t have any way to get groceries, other than going to a gas station near her house, so I take her to the grocery store.”

“Some old lady?”

“No. Maybe a little younger than you. Don’t know for sure. She’s a single mom, couple kids. Her dad’s not well. She works in the cafeteria at the hospital on Macklin and she’s a hooker a couple nights a week to make ends meet. Seems like a rough life so I help her out and give her a ride to the store.”

Claire looked at her dad to make sure he was serious. “How does one get to know a hooker, other than the obvious way?”

“I stopped at a gas station on Macklin and she was in front of me in line. She was all loaded down with food and diapers so I gave her a ride home to help her out and now we go to the grocery store together every other Thursday. It bothered me that she was buying food for her kids at a gas station.”

“Wow.” Claire let the story soak in. “Nice to have new friends.”

“Maybe this is one of the stages of grief.”

“Hanging with hookers?”

“Compassion or empathy or something.”

“What’s your friend’s name?”

“Joy.”

“Good marketing,” Claire said.

“Just feels good to be helpful.”

“Don’t fall in love with her, okay?” Claire said.

“She’s twenty-five or something.”

They watched Roscoe flip onto his back and writhe in the dusty soil.

“Do you miss mom?” Claire said.

“Sure.”

“Despite?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if I do,” Claire said. “I don’t know if I can miss her like I should. It really bothers me.”

Jeremy stepped toward her and put his arm around her.

"Maybe," Claire said. "Maybe living in the house will work. I don't know. But I hate myself for feeling like life just goes on. She was my mother."

Jeremy watched Roscoe bound after a grasshopper that launched itself six or seven paces at a time. Roscoe almost caught it in his paws, but it wriggled free and the chase started again.

*

Jeremy was invited to a dinner party by the Koenigs, a couple he and Elaine met volunteering at an outdoor blues festival the year before. The couples invited each other over for dinner in the months following the festival, and the Koenigs, travelling overseas when Elaine was killed, offered their sympathies by email. Weeks later they invited Jeremy to their dinner party.

During dinner he mentioned to a woman he sat next to that he was going to build a house and she told him she dealt in authentic mid-Century.

"Mid-Century?" Jeremy said.

"Furnishings. Post-war."

"The second."

"Of course."

"Chairs? Couches? Coffee tables?"

"All sorts of things. Authentic pieces are eminently collectible."

"Authentic? You mean people make fake furniture from the '50s?"

"People fake anything of value."

"So I assume people don't sit on the chairs or the couches they buy from you?"

"They buy items *through* me, not from me. I'm a broker. Holding inventory ties up cash. But, to your question, some clients are investors and they warehouse their pieces. I assume your interest lies in something to sit on."

"I haven't thought about furniture. The house isn't built yet."

"A conch wouldn't build a beautiful shell and leave the inside unlacquered. Frank Lloyd Wright was just as concerned about the inside as the outside."

"He was a pretty miserable human being, wasn't he?"

"Taking pride in your home is more to the point."

"But after a while, no matter what kind of a chair it is, I think it will just be something to sit on."

“That’s why you need to work with someone like me. Keep things changing. Freshen things up.”

“With old furniture.”

“I don’t think you’re in the market.”

“No. I guess not.”

*

Jeremy drove to Joy’s apartment for the usual shopping trip and waited in the driveway. Joy didn’t come out onto the deck so he headed up the steps. After he knocked on the door Jeremy could hear someone coming. Slowly. Feet dragging. The door creaked open and he saw Joy’s father, his eyes watery and bloodshot, the skin on his face sagging like the clothes on his bony body.

“She’s sleeping,” he said. “Some other time.” He started to push the door closed.

“Is she all right?” Jeremy said.

Joy’s son peeked around the door.

Joy’s father nodded but didn’t look up. “Had a hard night. The good Lord’s got her in mind.”

“Can I see her?”

Joy’s father shook his head and started to push the door closed again but Jeremy held it open.

“What happened? Anything I can do?”

Joy’s father focused hard on the center of Jeremy’s face. “You a doctor?”

“No.”

“Then ain’t nothing you can do for her. She’s my daughter. I’ll take care of her.”

Jeremy could see Joy’s daughter, pacifier in her mouth, standing in the kitchen holding onto a leg of the cardboard table. He could hear voices coming from the TV in the living room.

Joy’s dad closed the door and Jeremy heard the dead bolt clap into place.

*

“Hi, this is Jeremy. I’m going to delete you from my phone and I won’t call anymore. It seems like I’m bothering you. But I hope you’ll still talk with Claire now and then. I think you helped her. Maybe you’re done with both of us. I understand, either way. Sorry again for what I said a couple months ago. I hope you’re getting on with your life. Won’t ever be the same though, will it? Bye.”

*

On a bright and unusually cool Saturday morning Jeremy and Roscoe drove to the forty acres and Roscoe leapt out of his crate and trotted toward the creek with his nose to the ground and his tail swishing. Jeremy followed with his new battery-powered chainsaw a saleswoman at Woods and Water Power Supply convinced him to buy with the promise of very little maintenance and no need for oil or gas.

After a few steps through the tall browning grasses and bright goldenrod his phone buzzed.

“Hi Claire.”

“I got the consulting job,” she said.

“That’s great, Claire. Congratulations.”

“It feels good. I start in three weeks. I’m not sure I’ll have everything wrapped up here, but I guess I’ll have to. And I had lunch with Katrina yesterday. It was her idea. We agreed to not hate each other.”

“Glad to hear that. I like her. Maybe a little distance will help you two stay friends.”

“I think it already has. It’s Saturday so I bet you’re at your property. I can hear the wind in the phone.”

“Yeah, Roscoe’s off chasing something and I’m gonna play lumberjack and cut down some dead trees.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing? Don’t kill yourself.”

“The Internet made me an expert. I’m gonna have some people over next month and I want some firewood. I was thinking I’d have a housewarming party in the fall but I fired the builder. I’ll be your housemate for a little longer than I thought.”

“You fired the builder?”

“Can’t do business with a racist.”

“I’m sure we do all the time, just doesn’t come up.”

“This guy wasn’t trying to hide it.”

“I’m not sure which is worse. Why haven’t I received an invitation to your party?”

“I haven’t invited anyone yet.”

“You know that’s a critical part of the process. You can start by inviting me.”

Roscoe bounded up the creek bank and stood looking at Jeremy.

“You and Roscoe are at the top of the list,” Jeremy said. Roscoe shook the water from his coat. “He’s just back from a swim in the creek.”

“How’s he doing? Getting big?”

“Probably twice as big since you saw him last. He thinks I’m talking to him. Phones must be confusing to dogs.”

“Hey, I finally heard from Mary Otili. She’s been in Peru for a while. She’s done a lot of research down there on potato diseases so she went to visit friends and unplug for a while. She said she loves it there. We’re going to meet at the Mordant Mule for lunch when I’m in town. Oh, I didn’t tell you, but I’ll be there in a couple weeks to sign some paperwork and meet some of my new colleagues. The Mule’s the only place I could think of near campus. Everything’s so different there now.”

“Yeah, it’s almost all chains. Not like it used to be.”

“I asked her if it was all right for you to join us but she said that would change the conversation. Sorry. I guess she has a point though.”

Jeremy eyed the dead trees along the creek and looked at Roscoe. He wondered how he could keep his dog safe from falling trees. “No problem. I don’t think she wants anything to do with me. But I’m glad you two are still talking. Seems good for both of you.”

“Talking with her sorta reminds me of mom. Hey, I gotta run. I’m going to a show tonight and I need to get some more work done or I’ll be thinking about that instead of enjoying myself. Just wanted you to know I got the job.”

They said goodbye and Jeremy thought of putting Roscoe into his crate so he could cut down the trees but decided that would be cruel on such a nice day. He put his chainsaw back into his car and they wandered the property until Roscoe’s pace slowed to a walk and his tongue hung out the side of his mouth.

After Roscoe climbed into his crate, Jeremy sat behind the wheel of his car and tried to decide if driving to Joy’s house would be an act of legitimate concern or dangerous meddling. “What do you think, Roscoe?” he said, lowering his rearview to see his dog curled up in his crate with his snout on his ankles and his eyes nearly closed.

Twenty minutes later he steered his car into Joy’s driveway. He checked to see that Roscoe was still asleep and headed up the stairway. He picked up a stray child’s sock lying on one of the steps and when he reached the top he noticed that the door to the apartment wasn’t closed all the way. When he knocked, it swung open a few more inches.

“Anybody home?” he said, pushing the door open a little farther. “It’s Jeremy. Anybody home?”

“Who the fuck are you?” A man’s voice came through one of the closed doors on either side of a short hallway past the kitchen.

“Just looking for Joy,” Jeremy said. He pushed the door open farther and saw that most of the cupboard shelves in the kitchen were empty.

“Find yourself another bitch,” the voice said, muffled because of the closed door.

“Joy doesn’t live here anymore?”

The voice didn’t respond.

“Any idea where she went?”

“Get the *fuck* outta here!”

“I just want to know if she’s okay.”

“That door don’t close with you on the other side in two seconds I got every right to shoot your ass. You understand?”

“Just tell me where she is, that’s all. Are her kids okay?”

A young woman wrapped in a towel came out of the bedroom to the right. “Are you fucking deaf? Get the fuck outta here!”

“Is she all right?” Jeremy said.

The young woman looked into the bedroom. “You believe this shit?” She looked at Jeremy again. “You gonna die.”

A man wearing boxers came out of the same bedroom and pushed his way past the woman and glared at Jeremy. “I’m done talking,” he said. He had a pistol in his hand but kept it pointed at the floor.

“You dropped this,” Jeremy said, and tossed the child’s sock in his hand inside the door before pulling it shut.

As he walked across the deck toward the stairway he heard the deadbolt slap into place.

At the bottom of the stairway he studied how the steps and the attached small deck at the top were held up and wondered if he could take it all down without everything landing on his head. He walked to his car and lowered a couple windows for his sleeping dog and grabbed his chainsaw from the back hatch. As he walked toward the house he decided he would first take out the four-by-fours holding up the stairway so everything would fall away from the house.

Standing under the steps he read the instructions printed on the top of the saw, located the on/off switch, and pulled the trigger to cut a notch in one of the four-by-fours like he saw in a couple YouTube videos the night before. He finished by making a short cut from the other side of the four-by-four all the way through to the notch. The stairway leaned slightly toward the street but then steadied. He cut the next post holding up the stairway and the steps leaned a little more.

After he cut through one of the four-by-fours holding up the deck and then started on another, the entire structure lurched and the weight from above pinched his saw, stopping the chain. He tried to pull it free but couldn’t.

The heavy spikes holding the deck to the house let loose a chorus of squeals as they lost their grip. Jeremy heard wood snapping above him and a deck board fell and slammed into his shoulder as he hurried toward the house, covering his head with his arms. The entire structure fell away from the house and thundered to the ground and soon settled into a silent pile of lumber between the house and his car. He thought about trying to retrieve his chainsaw but it was buried.

Flying boards had put a few dents in the side of his car, and Roscoe stood in his crate, his ears hinged and his eyes trying to learn from Jeremy's face what he should think about the calamity that just woke him.

"It's all right," Jeremy said through the window.

Jeremy looked over top of his car and noticed a group of kids watching him from a vacant lot across the street. He wondered if any of them would think to remember his license plate number.

The pain in his shoulder caused him to wince when he reached for the key in his pocket. He steered with his left hand as he backed out onto the street and saw the kids in his rearview. Some were waving and shouting, and a boy in a white T-shirt ran toward the passenger window of his car. Jeremy threw it into drive and heard a gunshot as he accelerated down the street. In his rearview he saw the boy in the white T-shirt kneeling in the middle of the street. His shirt was soaked with blood where he held his shoulder with the opposite hand. The other kids had scattered into the neighborhood.

Just after Jeremy turned onto Macklin Avenue he saw a speeding police car traveling toward him with its siren blaring and lights flashing. He pulled over and the police car zoomed past as Roscoe howled in tune with the siren. Jeremy thought the cop would turn toward Joy's house but it kept traveling down Macklin and turned in the opposite direction.

Jeremy looked ahead and behind, and then wheeled his car into a U-turn and drove back toward the house. When he turned onto Joy's street he saw the boy still kneeling on the pavement and holding one arm tight to his body and rocking back and forth. The blood had soaked into more of his T-shirt. Jeremy didn't see anyone in the apartment doorway so he stopped his car between the house and the boy and bent low when he stepped out.

"I'll get you to a hospital," he said to the boy.

"Why'd you shoot me?" the boy said, his eyes wild with fear.

"No, no. It wasn't me. I want to help. Can you get up? Push hard where the bullet hit, okay? Push with your hand. Real hard. And keep pushing."

"It hurts bad," the boy said.

"C'mon, get in the back." Jeremy opened the back door and used his good arm to help the boy onto the back seat where there was just enough room next to Roscoe's crate.

"He's right there!" Jeremy heard a woman's voice from in front of the house.

Jeremy jumped into his car and the man in boxers came around the far side of the house and ran into the street. The man aimed his gun at Jeremy so he floored the accelerator and turned the car toward the man. The man fired, blasting a web of cracks into the windshield and the car slammed into him just as he tried to leap out of the way. The man bounced off the windshield and landed on the curb.

As Jeremy sped down the street he glanced in his rearview and saw the man lying motionless across the curb.

“You okay?” Jeremy said as he sped away. “You okay?” he shouted but he didn’t hear anything. “You okay!?”

“My shoulder hurts real bad,” the boy wheezed from the back seat.

“Keep pushing hard where you’re bleeding, okay? Okay!?”

Jeremy could hear the boy start to cry. “Why they shooting at me?”

Jeremy sped down Macklin toward the hospital a mile away. He would’ve gone through red lights but the crossing traffic never let up. At the hospital he pulled into the half-circle drive in front of the emergency entrance and he helped the boy out the back door, using his good arm to hold onto him as they walked toward the entrance.

“Can you walk okay?” Jeremy said. The boy didn’t say anything but he kept walking.

An orderly saw them and trotted out pushing an empty wheelchair.

“What’ve we got?” he said, helping the boy into the chair.

“Gun shot,” Jeremy said. “Shoulder, I think.”

“Just one shot?” the orderly said, but Jeremy had already started walking back to his car.

“Hey, you can’t leave!” the orderly said to Jeremy’s back.

A security guard came through the glass doors and the orderly said something to her and pointed toward Jeremy. Jeremy stood next to his car and reached into his pocket, wincing again, and realized he’d left the keys in the ignition. By the time he started the car and put it in drive the security guard rapped her knuckles on the passenger side window.

“We got security cameras all around here,” she said, shouting through the glass. “We got your license plate and some nice pictures of you.”

Jeremy put the car in park and lowered the passenger side window.

“I can’t stop you from leaving but the cops are gonna want to talk to you,” she said. “You can wait until they show up at your house or at your work, or you can talk to them now. Wasn’t you shot the kid was it?”

“No. I didn’t shoot him. I just don’t want him to die.”

“You did right bringing him here. We got laws for people doing the right thing. But I’m gonna tell the cops you wanted to leave right away. Nothing I can do about that.”

Roscoe yipped a couple times and thumped his tail against his crate.

“Nice looking dog,” the guard said. “How about pulling into short term? I can ride along and show you where to go if you’re okay with that. We’ll even find a treat for your dog and pay your parking.” She smiled and waited for Jeremy to decide.

He nodded and popped the lock. An ambulance pulled in behind and turned off its siren. Jeremy watched in his rearview as a man and a woman jumped out and ran toward the back of the ambulance.

The guard pointed toward Macklin. “Just turn right at the street and it’s the next entrance.”

Jeremy pulled away from the curb.

“Woo wee! Sure did a number on your windshield. Best get that fixed before you drive at night or you’ll think you’re driving through fireworks. I know that from experience.”

The guard looked over her shoulder to see another ambulance pull in and stop behind the first one.

“Looks like it’s gonna be one of those days.” She looked at Jeremy and smiled. “Guess I’m not telling you nothin.”