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## The Woods

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## THE WOODS

Thick orange light beat at the window. When I went to look, I saw the woods behind my house were burning. The flames had spread to the edge of my property, where a wide concrete drainage ditch separated the neighborhood from the wilderness. The treeline was backlit and crackling. There was nothing to be done.

I reached for my phone on the windowsill. Two hours or so until sunrise. Standing there at the window, I felt as though this were happening the world over, that it wasn't just one neighborhood in the suburbs of Dallas. It was a silly thought that I entertained anyhow.

The cat came out of my office and followed me down the hall. In the kitchen, the tiles were cold on my feet. The coffee pot was still on from the afternoon. I poured some and went outside, nudging the cat with my foot to keep him in. I stood out on my back lawn in just gym shorts and a winter coat. A helicopter ripped through the air overhead, the air full of panic—by which I mean insects, locusts and wood roaches with nowhere to go in a hurry. I felt them more than saw them, though a few were backlit in the flames. The birds and larger animals had probably fled ahead of the heat. They were long gone.

The coffee left a bile taste in my mouth. I didn't need the coat this close to the flame, but I was shirtless underneath it. I already felt foolish being out here. Before she left, Tess had looked me over and said: You're a mess, Trevor. Well.

There was someone moving behind my neighbor's fence. When I stepped over to see who it was, he froze. It was the neighbor, a high school kid who always kept driving through the strip of grass between our driveways, spent hours banging a basketball against the eave of their garage. The noise of it grated on me. I'd moved into the house because I was tired of sharing walls with people, but as it turned out there was no escaping the

sound of everyone else.

It's not so much that I minded the kid, though—the thing was, he was a kid, and I held that against him. I tried to let it go, but it was hard.

“You see this?” I said.

“Yeah. Shit.”

“Shit is right.”

We stood there, separated by the fence. A fire is a fire. Happens all the time. Still it was strange to think what the woods would be in the morning. Like, what would we call them? Former woods? Land? Or would they still be the woods? Is the place staked out by nature, or my own mind?

It smelled like a campout.

“Where are your parents?” I said. I didn't care, but it made my allegiance clear. I couldn't really make him out between the fence slats, but he cleared his throat a little.

“My mom's in Melbourne. Business.” He leaned on the distinction of it being only his mother, like I should've known.

“You okay alone?” I said. The woods crackled and something broke in them. “Well I mean, I'm over here if you need anything.”

“Listen, man,” he said, “who are you even?”

“Nobody. A neighbor.”

“Nobody. That's right.”

He walked off. I watched him go, or really, I watched the way his body blocked the light through the fence slats. The screen door bounced shut against his back door. I turned back to the fire. A large bug hit me in the face, and I swatted it away. I looked down and couldn't make out my coffee, what was left in the mug, like if any insects had fled the fire just to drown in it. It was a shadow in my hand. I flung the liquid out on the lawn.

The fire had burned itself out by early morning, leaving blank trees behind my property that seemed to change my whole home. I spent ten minutes on my porch with a fireman, who told me they were looking into the source of the blaze. Some friends called to see that I was okay. The cat slunk through the halls. I avoided him. The fire had jumped the gap a few blocks over, and someone's house got singed. Otherwise it was just the woods that had gone.

The smell had gotten into the kitchen some, but I didn't mind. From the window over the sink I would look out each morning while I drank coffee. This morning it was different. The trees were dumb and bare. Nothing moved in the yard or beyond. The squirrels used to take daredevil leaps from one tree to the next. It would be more impressive to see now, without the cover of leaves.

I thought about Tess, thought about calling her, thought that this was a fair enough reason. But we would just fight if I called, most likely about how I wasn't supposed to call, though we could fight about anything. One time she said that the problem was that both of us were axes, neither of us wanted to be the tree. Actually, she hadn't said it was a problem. She had just said it. Both of us are axes. Honing each other's meanness with each blow. I wanted to talk to the kind of person who would say something like that, something poetic but unthinking and a little cruel.

Still, I wasn't welcome, so I stood at my kitchen window breathing in coffee, waiting for something to happen. The cat rubbed at my legs. Something moved between the burned trees, too far away for me to make out. The zoetrope geometry of the motion bothered me, like it might be a trick. I thought of the neighbor boy moving behind my fence, whether he was just lost like all of us were lost, or if there was a specificity to it, something he needed. That he might have something to do with what had happened, or at least might know something, had not escaped me. Mostly,

though, I was lonely. The cat was no help.

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I lived in a cul-de-sac, and only the back of my property and the one neighbor's actually faced out into the woods, though our houses were at such an angle from each other that I could see their front door from mine. I hesitated for a moment and went over.

A girl I'd not seen before answered the door when I knocked. She looked at me with a practiced and snotty distrust.

"Is the neighbor kid home?" I said. "I don't know his name."

"Why?"

"I just need to ask him something."

She closed the door. I waited for what seemed like too long. It was foolish. I was a fool.

He opened the door. "What's up?"

"I'm heading out for groceries. Wanted to see if you were good."

He looked back into the house. "Yeah, I guess I'm good."

"Are you sure? It's no big."

He looked at me like I was selling something. Then he said, "What's my mom's name?"

I pictured his mother, tried to remember if we'd ever been actually introduced. "I guess I don't know."

He stepped out on the porch, closed the door, and lit a cigarette without offering one. The way he leaned against the doorframe, I could tell he was the kind of trouble I'd known in high school, scrawny and vaguely sexual in a faded black t-shirt and jeans he'd cut off at the knee with dull scissors. I grew up in a herd of dangly-armed white boys, each

one of us this kid.

“I’m Trevor,” I said.

“Darren.”

He looked down the street so he didn’t have to look at me. “Well,” I said, “if you’re good, then I’ll be heading out.” I turned to leave.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Are you gonna say about the girl being here?”

I shrugged. “What do I care? I’m nobody.” He bent down to pick at a purple scab on his knee. “But next time offer me a cigarette,” I said. “It’s polite.”

He looked down at the one burning in his hand. I left before he had a chance to say anything.

I kept finding myself at the kitchen window, looking at the ruin of the woods. I didn’t like living alone—the house was a little too much for just me. I felt like I couldn’t keep track of the whole space at once, which made me nervous. It’s why I kept the cat, though Tess had loved it more than me. She was the one who had left the door open for it during a snap freeze that left it yowling on the porch. She was the one who had purposely not named it. In the end, when she moved out and I half-heartedly offered that she could take him, she had said this was his home, and I didn’t disagree. I think she saw the desperation in me, like I needed to hold on to whatever I could.

Now the cat kept me from indulging in my irrational fears and bad impulses. He’d pawed at the door to Tess’s empty studio when I tried keeping it shut. Now it stood open for him, though it bothered me. I thought

someone might walk out at any time. My anxiety was kind of like a ghost that way. The cat was a real and explainable noise.

I stood at the window a few minutes. Nothing moved in the woods. Then I went and found the cat in my office and told him I was being paranoid. He looked up at me, uncaring, and left the room.

I tried to work the rest of the morning and into afternoon, but I was distracted by the woods, though the office windows faced the front of the house and my desk faced a blank wall. Around one o'clock I gave up—I was freelance, and the work wasn't going anywhere. I sat on my back porch drinking canned High Life and watching for anything. Each of my knuckles cracked when I pressed them, and I knew I was trying to get up the nerve to go out there and poke around. After I killed the third beer I took the rest of the six-pack inside.

Underneath the bed was a double-barrel shotgun I'd taken from my grandmother's house after she died. Tess thought it was ridiculous to keep the gun under the bed, so while she lived here I'd moved it into the hall closet. When she left I couldn't sleep, and one night I put the gun back where I thought it ought to be.

I broke open the breech. It was empty, and I didn't own any shells. Still, the feel of it snapping shut again was heavy and good, and I felt a little better. I hung what was left of the six-pack off of the barrel by one of its plastic rings and went outside with the thing on my shoulder.

It was overcast. Maybe rain was coming. The grass crunched under my feet, stiff and dead from a dry winter that was finally ending. North Texas wasn't easy to understand. One year we'd have weeks of snow and ice, the next it was shorts weather as early as January. I jogged down into the concrete ditch and back up the other side. The earth was thick with gray-black ash in places, but the wind had pushed it around, exposing

scorched ground beneath and piling it up elsewhere. A blackened tree held firm against my pushing. I put a boot into the ash, expecting the powder-crunch of snow. It was like stepping in spilt flour. I yanked a beer off its ring and cracked it open. It foamed, and I took a longish pull to keep too much from spilling. Imagining what I looked like, I felt pretty good. Like I looked seminal and American. A man in a burnt wood with a beer and a gun.

I wandered further into the wilderness. Here and there were little patches of green or brown left where the trees and brush were spread thinner, and up high some of the evergreen tops hadn't gone. Mostly, though, everything was colorless. I had never been out here. The ditch line used to be bordered by thick brush that stood as high as I did and all blended together. Wind kicked between the trees, stirring up the ash, which stuck to my shoes and the bottoms of my jeans. I thought about later, when some construction assholes would come through and clear this wood, replacing it with a bunch of shoebox houses. It was already going to happen. The nature of the suburbs is to expand, to change without changing. I decided it was good that the woods had burned first. I could pretend that when they were knocked over by bulldozer and crane that it was to make way for new trees, and then I could move out before I was proven wrong by someone else's yard butting up against mine. Probably I was a little drunk.

I tromped around out there for maybe twenty minutes before I found them. If there had been leaves on the ground, they would have had warning, but my footsteps in the dirt and ash were too quiet. I saw the boy first, Darren. It looked like he was standing there facing deeper into the wild, but then I saw the girl on her knees in front of him. I froze.

The boy didn't quite have his back to me. They both were fully dressed, but I could tell his jeans were open. I thought the best thing to do would be to turn away from them and leave quietly, but she moved back



from him for a second and saw me.

Her face flushed a deep red and she put her hands by her side. Darren looked down at her and said something I couldn't make out. Then he turned toward me. I didn't know what to do, so I lifted my beer hand in what was meant as an apologetic wave, realizing too late it looked congratulatory.

He zipped up and moved toward me.

I yelled out an apology. He flipped me off and yelled, "Beat it, you stupid fuckstick. You fucking perv." He jogged back over to her, and they headed back in the direction of the neighborhood.

I finished my beer and crunched the can flat, ripped another one off the ring. Overhead, a bird landed on a branch, the first I'd seen out here. I took aim with my empty shotgun and squeezed the useless trigger.

When I got back home the back door stood open. I'd left it unlocked, and the wind had pushed it wide. I filled up with panic about the cat and called out for him. He came up from the hallway. I bent down, and he ran his arching body under my hand.

"You piece of shit," I said. I tossed two crushed beer cans on the counter and pulled the last one from its ring and cracked it open.

There was a loud knock at my front door. I went to the kitchen entrance to see Darren's face up against the window of the entryway. He didn't look angry, particularly, but his knocking was urgent enough. I probably would have let him sweat it out until later and then gone over to apologize if he hadn't seen me. I put the beer down and started walking to let him in, but I stopped at the front hallway. It felt like instinct that I looked in the direction of my bedroom, Tess's studio, and, further down, my office.

Something was deeply wrong. I felt it before I understood what it was, that gut drop of realization when the world betrays you in a serious way.

The door to Tess's studio was shut. I hadn't done that. The cat liked laying in the empty room, liked stretching out on the wood floor that Tess had insisted on because she said carpet dulls the sunlight. That door stood open every moment of every day. Darren stopped knocking. His face was lost beyond the window. I eased open the front door.

"Darren, there's someone in my house," I said. "Look, I know you're mad, but I need your help right now. There's someone in the back room." I was all coiled up inside of myself and my breath was hot and short.

I pulled him into the entryway and pointed down the hall. "That door hasn't been closed in four months."

"Dude," he said, matching my nervous tone. "You shut it. The cat bumped it." He pointed over my shoulder at the cat on the counter in my kitchen. I shook my head. He wouldn't look me in the eye because I was right and he knew it and he didn't want me to be.

"Do you have your phone?" I asked. He didn't. "Okay, well, mine is in my office, which is down there. I get it, I call the police, we both leave the house. I just need you to watch for me."

"Police won't come for a shut door," he said.

"They will."

He shook his head. He was probably high.

He shook his head again, but I needed him to stay. I got him by the shoulders and said, "Look, stand here, just a second."

I went into the kitchen and took the shotgun off the table, a knife from the block on the counter. The cat had disappeared somewhere. I walked back to Darren, who was staring down the hallway, and pressed the

shotgun to his chest.

“It’s not loaded,” I whispered, “but they won’t know. That’s power.”

He nodded and clutched it to himself. My feeling sorry for him let me not feel the awful fear in me. I needed him here mostly so I had someone to live up to.

“Hey,” I said. He stood there with a dumb look on his face. I touched him on the arm and he flinched. “What’s the girl’s name?”

He didn’t answer, so I asked again.

“Cory.”

“Did she leave?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you like her?”

“We’re dating.”

“Well, sorry about the woods. In a few days, it’ll be funny.”

I felt almost fatherly, so I went on. “I mean, you didn’t do anything wrong. If y’all care about each other and talk about it and no one is hurting, it’s all good.”

He wasn’t listening. We were both thinking about the door. I felt guilty putting the kid in this, but here he was, and I didn’t see another play.

We moved into the hallway. Darren put the gun against his shoulder, pointed it out in front of him, tensed and leaning forward on his feet. If the gun had been loaded and he had cause to use it, he would have fallen over standing that way, but I didn’t correct him. I held the knife at my side and slid past the door to the studio.

I held up a closed fist at Darren and he nodded. We had both seen movies. If I hadn’t been terrified I might’ve laughed. Darren, at least, had

the excuse of youth. It was fine if he played at being a man.

My phone was in my office where I left it. I thought about calling right then, but I didn't like the thought of being on the phone in here, having to explain a danger I didn't understand while I was still in it. Then I realized that the plan should have been to leave and call from Darren's phone, but this was the play we were making, and it was moving towards something whether I liked it or not. My hands shook. I put the phone in my pocket and moved back to the hallway.

Darren had his hand on the knob of the studio door. He looked at me as though everything next was fated, inevitable. I started to shake my head and he turned the knob and threw the door open, whipping the shotgun back up in the same motion. The door bounced off the wall and settled most of the way closed again. Darren looked in.

I moved to the door.

A man was sunk into the far corner. At first, I thought he must have always been there. He looked at us but didn't move inside his ramshackle clothes. There was no way to get an idea of the body inside of them, except that he was filthy with soot and grime. His eyes were red and wet. He'd clearly been in the fire, and looking at him here in my house broke something open in me.

He tried to speak but was stopped by a coughing fit. When it was over he turned away from us and pulled his knees into his body, the last of the daylight cut across the lower half of him.

I took a step forward. "Did you live in the woods?" I said. "Were you in the fire?"

He nodded, then shook his head. He looked at Darren, who still pointed the gun towards him.

"Put it down," I said, and he let the gun hang at his side. I asked

the man his name. He didn't respond. "You don't know? Or you don't want to tell me?"

He turned away from me and dropped his face onto his arm.

I thought of what Tess would do, but couldn't come up with anything. I thought of what any person would do. I didn't know. I looked from the man to Darren and back. When a thing mattered, there weren't ever any answers. Whether a thing you did was right or not comes later.

I cleared my throat to say something before realizing that there was nothing for me to say. The man watched me from the corner. He didn't have anything with him. No backpack, no plastic bags. Just his ash-stained self and some clothes thick with the smell of sweat and fire sitting in the corner, which I already thought of as his corner, seeing as Tess wasn't around and I'd made no attempt to claim the room for myself.

I said the only thing I could think to say: "Come on, then. Let's get you cleaned up and fed."

It was going to be a big batch of curry anyway, so that I could eat it through the week. I wasn't doing anything I wouldn't have done already. There was a comfort in that, but also a strangeness. Darren was balanced on the edge my kitchen sink, his ass hanging into the bowl, a cigarette pointed out the open kitchen window. The cat kept jumping up on the counter, and I kept throwing him back off. I stood over the pot of boiling vegetables—carrots, onion, celery, and cauliflower. The man was showering. I'd given him an old shirt and some cargo shorts. He'd offered a weak smile in return, a whispered thanks. When I helped him up he'd seemed like he might crumble. His voice was gone from the smoke.

After that I'd walked him into the bathroom. I'd said, "Turn it up

hot, let it steam up. It might help. Take as long as you want.”

“Do you trust him?” Darren said.

“About the same as I trust you.”

“I mean, he could be a murderer.”

“I doubt it.” I walked to the counter near him and started cutting potatoes. “Besides, he’s in no shape for it.”

He flicked his cigarette out the window. I could tell he was dancing around something in his head. His foot bounced in the air. I thought of him out there the night before, watching, doing nothing. Well, neither had I.

“Stop being so fucking nervous,” I said. “It’s fine. Plus no one is making you stay.”

He looked out the window, clearly a little hurt. He was invested in this. We might even be friends. “I’ll go.”

“You don’t have to. That’s not what I meant.”

The cat looked up at us. Darren put an arm down toward him and almost fell.

“What’s its name?”

“Fuckstick.”

“No, really.”

“He doesn’t have one.”

“What kind of pet doesn’t have a name?”

“My girlfriend is the one who didn’t name him. She said it was undignified, limiting.”

“That’s kind of dumb.”

“Well, she’s an artist.”

I went to the fridge and got two beers, walked over to Darren, and said, “Are you on something that makes drinking a bad idea?”

“No. It was mushrooms, but they were pretty weak. I got shook out of it pretty good.”

I handed one over, and he cracked it open over the sink. I went into the dining room to check that the shower was still going. It was.

When I walked back into the kitchen Darren said, “Think he’ll be okay?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t seem burned, but smoke inhalation’s bad any way you cut it.”

Darren ashed his cigarette into my sink. “Gimme one of those,” I said.

He held the pack out to me, then his lighter. “Should we take him to the hospital?”

“I asked him. He didn’t want to go.”

“So?”

“He’s grown. He’s his own person. That counts for something.” I shrugged, lit my cigarette and took a full drag.

Darren’s phone buzzed. He’d run to grab it when the man first started showering. I said, “You can invite her if you want.”

“I don’t know.”

I shrugged. “Your call.”

“She doesn’t like strangers.”

I finished my beer and went for another. “Probably she shouldn’t.”

“I don’t know. We’ve been fighting a lot. Like, a lot. She’s crazy.”

I shrugged. “No such thing as crazy.”

“Of course there is.”

“You’ll see. You just think that because you don’t live alone. When you get your own place, you’ll do all kinds of irrational shit when nobody’s looking.” I spilled some beer on myself and looked down at my shirt. “Everybody’s crazy, so probably nobody is. We just use that

label to make people seem worse than we are.

“What about your girlfriend?” he said. “Where’s she?”

I grabbed the cutting board of potatoes and slid them into the pot. Some water splashed over the side and sizzled into the gas burner.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Come on,” Darren said. “Really? You’re gonna pull rank on me?”

“Fine. I wanted a family. She didn’t.” I turned to him. “I say this not to say you’re dumb, but I know you go to public school, and public school is garbage. You know what cognitive dissonance is, yeah?”

“Yeah. Sorta.”

“The short version is that it’s trying to believe two opposing things at the same time.” I stirred the pot of vegetables. “I mean, the thing about cognitive dissonance is it eats at people. So: I want this future. I don’t want this future. Those two things banging against each other.” I tapped my temple. “It makes you mean.”

For a long while after she left, I’d blamed Tess for that meanness, for the ways I’d shown it, for the ugly place where it all ended between us. I used to believe that she’d pushed me to that place, but the truth was she hadn’t really. I went there all on my own.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Life doesn’t really get any better. You fail. You try again. You make yourself better instead.”

Darren grinned. “I keep getting the feeling you’re trying to teach me things, and look, it ain’t happening, because, I gotta be honest, I’m just seeing a sad old man drinking a Miller High Life like that makes him cool.”

I raised my beer. “You’re like a son to me. In that we don’t understand each other and I’m very disappointed in you as a person.”

He raised his beer back. I heard the shower go off.

In my clothes, he was a different kind of out of place—when I saw him I



thought, that's me. That's who I am. We looked nothing alike, though, and I shook off the feeling. His cheeks were pink above his beard, which looked darker in its wetness, but otherwise he looked frail and small in my too-large Jawbreaker shirt from college.

I took the towel from him when he held it out and tossed it into my bedroom. "Do you need anything?"

"No." His voice was pained, throat-scratched, and he followed the word up with a coughing fit. He grasped my door frame and bent away from me, hacking into his opened palm.

When he turned back toward me, I said, "Let's maybe not talk." Darren came up the hall behind me with the cat in his arms. I went into my office and got a pad and pen, handed it to the man. "If you need something, can you write it for me?"

He nodded.

"Okay."

I led him to the living room. "You'll stay the night if you want."

He shook his head.

"Nope, shut up. You're welcome to stay."

He scratched something into the notepad. *Too much.*

"Listen," I said. "I'm just trying to keep society going. It's what anybody would do. Besides, Darren's staying too, right?"

This was the first I'd mentioned it, but Darren looked over at us and nodded. The cat jumped out of his arms.

I checked on the curry. It was bubbling and the vegetables had gone soft enough. I liked Thai curry, the kind with coconut milk and lime and mouth-searing heat. Tess had liked the milder stuff, and this was one of hers, a British curry, all mush and root vegetables. It seemed a nice thing to offer strangers. I felt good about what I was doing, a thing I might've felt

hollow about if not for all the beer.

I got out big bowls and scooped them full from the rice cooker on the back counter, then put a heap of curry on top of each one, then cilantro, some green onion.

I enlisted Darren to set the table while I got us drinks. The man nodded that it was okay when I asked if he wanted one. I thought of his throat, so I got down the whiskey from the top of my fridge and I poured it over ice. I topped each drink with a squeeze of lemon and a Luxardo cherry I'd made myself the week before. Since I'd been alone, I'd been learning new things as a way to pretend at self-improvement, and the cherries were one of my projects. I wanted to give the man something good, something he maybe hadn't had before. I carried the drinks into the little dining room and passed them around.

"What's this?" Darren asked. I told him.

He looked a little impressed, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this whole thing might be him making fun of me. For being older than him, or for being uncool, or both.

We ate in silence for a minute. I caught Darren making a face when he took a sip of his drink, which he tried to hide. The man ate slowly, blew carefully on his food.

"Does it hurt? Is it too hot?" I asked.

He nodded, then shook his head.

"What can I do?"

He shrugged. I let it go.

"So you live in the woods?" Darren asked.

The man nodded again.

"That's so weird," Darren said. I shot him a look. "I mean, not like, you're homeless and all, but—I've been hanging out in those woods since

I was a kid. There was a little hole behind my house in the bushes, and I would cut through it and just be out there for hours. I mean, I've thought of them as my woods since I was eight. I didn't think anybody else was ever out there. Not that the woods were mine, really. It's just weird is all. How'd you get to live out there?"

The man scribbled something on his pad. *Sad story.*

I asked, "What about the fire? Did you see what happened?"

He wrote *Accident*. Darren put an arm in front of his bowl and bent over it to eat.

"What kind?"

The man put his pen to the pad, but hesitated. "Leave him alone, Trevor," Darren said, then to the man: "We don't care, all right?"

"Am I bugging you?" I asked it to the room more than to either of them. The man shook his head.

"So what was it, a campfire?"

He underlined and then tapped the pad. *Accident*. Darren looked away, and the man looked over at him for a barely perceptible moment, and I had to admit to the thing I'd already sort of known. Darren had been out there, teenaged and angry, maybe after a fight with the girl, smoking cigarettes, or just a bored kid with a lighter. It had been a dry winter. He got out through the little cut in the brush and stood in his yard watching it all go down. There was no point in taking the story any further. If that's what happened, the man was trying to absolve Darren of the blame.

And I wondered: Who was I in this story? What did my opinion matter? I came in after the action, I had my own story I had to tell. But it did matter. Whatever had happened out there had changed things for each of us, with Darren at the center, his youth and drugs and stupidity, which I was powerless against. I came up against the hard edge of myself.

“I can’t fucking believe—” I said, but the man’s eyes started to water, and he shook his head. Darren had his hands in his lap, his face pointed down toward them. The man tapped what he’d written on his pad. *Accident.*

I looked at it but didn’t comprehend. “Darren, you did this?”

Darren set his fork down and sat quietly with his hands under the table.

“Darren, talk to me.” He still didn’t say anything, and I felt this ugliness rising up into the back of my mouth. I slammed my palm hard against the table. Everything rattled. “Say something, damn it.”

The man scribbled and slid the pad over to me. *Accident. He didn’t know. Don’t. Don’t be like this. He’s your kid.*

The words were deflating. Of course the man thought Darren was mine. And there was no point in explaining right then, in making it otherwise, because in the ways that mattered he was exactly right.

“Okay,” I said, though a part of me still didn’t want to. I looked to the man, and then to Darren, and said it again.

Darren wouldn’t look at either of us. “Hey,” I said, “Hey, it’s okay, man. You’re okay. I mean, fuckups, they occur. Happen every day. And then there they are, and we gotta live with them. So look, Darren, it’s yours to live down, and I got nothing to add or subtract. Y’all want another round?”

The man nodded.

“A beer, if that’s okay,” Darren said.

The man coughed while I was standing, and I froze. His cough had a power to it, a danger, like trying to start a lawnmower. The yanking motion and the sputtering and also the promise of blades. When he was done, he let out a weak apology that I waved off.

In the kitchen, the last of the evening light had faded, leaving the

harshness of fluorescence. I could hear Darren speaking lowly to the man, not secrets, but something serious and hushed. It was a crime, whatever happened out there. The authorities should know about it. Probably they would figure it out anyway, if they bothered to look into it. And the man had been in it and then forgiven it like it was nothing. Probably I should follow his lead.

I thought of Tess, who I missed less and less as the days went on, how slowly we move from misery to not even minding the loss. Whiskey sloshed into the glass, and some spilled. Darren came in with two empty bowls and started refilling them from the pot. The cat slunk through my halls as always. Outside, the animals were returning home, picking over what was left, settling in or moving on. I could see them out there. Or I couldn't. What mattered was that they were out there. There was a warmth to the fullness of my home, and I stood there for a moment letting it find a place near my breastbone. I made welcome.

This moment, of course, was soon to end. After dinner, Darren would step outside to call his girl and end up walking home, saying he would be back, each of us knowing he wouldn't. I would make up my couch with spare sheets. That night, the man would have a coughing fit that would leave him doubled over and gasping, and I would call an ambulance. I would sit there with my hand on his back while he wheezed, feeling the struggle of his lungs to get air. I would say things to him that I thought might matter. I would suddenly feel too drunk to go with him in the ambulance, too much of a burden and a stranger. He would go into the hospital and not come out again. A few days later I would walk over to Darren's home and ring the bell. His mother would answer, and we would look at each other, and I would think of what she may have heard coming

from my home, how the person that we are is never quite the secret we want it to be, and instead of answering her question I would look away, I would turn to face my home and the woods beyond.

I picked up the two drinks. Darren grabbed his beer out of the fridge, balancing the bowls in one hand. The refrigerator door was going to close on him, and I stopped it with my foot. He muttered his thanks, and we returned to the table, where the man sat. He nodded when I set the drink in front of him. I looked at each of my guests. I was drunk, yes, but I was happy too. We had a place where we could be who we were without the burden of being who we were, and I had helped to make it. May there only and ever be now, I thought. May this be the story we tell. I raised my drink. We all raised our drinks. Like most everything, it wasn't enough, but for just then it seemed like it might be.