Close is Fine

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I was on my way home from Gerald’s when I decided to detour past the Evergreen and see if Kirsten was still working. Friday nights were busy, and I knew I’d probably have to sit at the bar, that anything I wanted to say to her would have to fit into bits of conversation that lasted no longer than what it took for her to load her drink tray. We’d agreed on the divorce months ago, but Kirsten and I were still living in the same house, sleeping in separate bedrooms, waiting for the final splintering to happen. I didn’t know what I was going to say to Kirsten, but for some reason I thought there was something I could say. Something that could return us to the lives we used to live.

We’d been good about staying out of each other’s way. I was working for Dale Pismire then, so I was gone early each dawn, and I was rarely back before Kirsten left for the Evergreen. Kirsten usually came home around two in the morning, long after I’d gone to bed. The noise of her entering the house often woke me, and sometimes I’d lie in the dark listening to her moving around downstairs—the keys hitting the table, a faucet running—trying hard not to think about how scared I could get. Some nights I was too groggy to think very much, and I fell right back into a heavy, workman’s rest. Other times, I was up until sunrise, which is not when the birds start chirping, but when they finally shut up.

I considered turning around, but I kept driving—the windows open, the warm air swirling like a tornado inside my shitty little Dodge Colt. I had cash in my pocket. I’d drunk enough beers at Gerald’s to think I needed more.

All summer Gerald had been working on a nearly life-size replica of an M198 Howitzer, this massive piece of artillery he’d seen on some Discovery Channel show about Afghanistan. He’d recorded the program on his VCR, and
he’d pause the tape and use the static-ruined still frames to get a better idea of all the parts. He was making the thing mostly out of scrap wood, and it didn’t even have a hollow barrel, but Gerald was going to drag it out to the end of his driveway and drape an American flag from it and let it be some kind of reminder for what was really at stake.

Sometimes I’d go over and hold the end of the tape measure for Gerald, or help him feed a sheet of wood through his table saw, but otherwise I kept to the sidelines. The Howitzer was his deal, and I was fine just watching. Being with Gerald sometimes made me think of being a teenager again, when my dad would drag me out to the garage to help him change the oil on the car, or to work on some repair, and then just expect me to hold the light for him, or pass him the socket wrench, to be like some sponge and sit there and soak up all his wisdom. At Gerald’s place I often just watched and listened to him explain what he was doing, and then let it all bounce right off me. I answered with things like, “Gotcha,” or, “That’s slick,” because I knew that’s what he wanted to hear, and it didn’t make any sense to point out all the ways he should’ve been doing it different, not for something I had no stake in.

By the time I got to the Evergreen I felt wrung out. When I didn’t see Kirsten’s car in the parking lot, I decided to leave. I could feel the sweat dried to my eyebrows, could feel it, like some kind of shellac, covering the back of my neck. A shower suddenly sounded better than a beer. My tool belt was sitting on the passenger-side floor, where Gerald had moved it when I’d given him a ride home. I wondered if Kirsten had finished her shift early, and for a fleeting moment I pictured her in our kitchen—the kitchen she had always wanted—heating up leftovers and setting out plates for the both of us. It was twenty miles of flat, pine-hedged highway
until I got there.

One of the reasons Kirsten and I still lived together was our house. With Gerald’s help, and a few subcontractors from Antigo, and with a lot of work from Kirsten actually, I’d built that whole thing from a modified garage blueprint. It was a simple, gambrel-roofed design. One and a half baths and a loft space, which had recently become my bedroom. The building was sound, and everything had passed the major inspections, but in the year that Kirsten and I had been living in it I hadn’t completed any of the finish work. I still hadn’t put up most of the trim or finished the caulking, hadn’t put the doors on the cabinets in the laundry room, hadn’t finished the top course of siding. They were all little things, I thought, things that I had really stopped seeing. Things that were nothing more extraordinary than the dirty dishes, or the laundry, or any of the other untidy things in life that I could never seem to get caught up with.

But Kirsten could keep up—she did get the laundry folded, and the dishes put away, and the bills paid early. It bothered her to leave things unfinished, or at least unfinished for very long. In the spring, when it was time to take the storm windows off and I didn’t help her, she gave me an ultimatum. I could either finish the work on the house, or she was going to do it herself. I tried explaining to her that she didn’t know how to cut an inside joint, and that she still hadn’t ever used the nail gun because she was afraid of it. When I told her that it’d look ugly if she did it, that it’d lower the selling price more than if we just left it unfinished, Kirsten gave me her revision. “You have a couple options,” she said. If I didn’t finish the work by fall, we’d put it on the market as is and hope we could get enough out of it. “Or you can buy me out,” she said, knowing full well that I didn’t have the means.
“My father,” she went on, as if I hadn’t already heard what she was about to say a million times from my own dad: “He always told me that if you were going to do something, you should do it right, or that you shouldn’t do it at all.” She had a handkerchief tied around her head, and wore one of my old flannels, had on a pair of jeans with ripped knees. She had a bottle of Windex in one hand, a crumpled-up sheet of newspaper in the other. Her lips had disappeared—her mouth was only a thin, straight line. “In the future,” she said, “I think you should be more of the not-at-all type.”

I’d gotten a few things done since the ultimatum—I’d finished putting the handles and strike plates on all the doors, patched and painted the spot in the ceiling where I’d cut the hole for the exhaust vent too big—enough to make it look like I was trying. Because I was. I had put a lot into the house already. And I didn’t want Kirsten to be right about me. There were two-by-fours in the walls that had my blood on them. Some of the job had been sloppy, like the bathroom, but other parts, like the molding around the fireplace, and the tiling and the countertops in the kitchen, I’d done work I was happy with. I was, despite what had happened to my marriage, proud of the house, and I wanted to see it completed, though I also knew that would mean the end of everything else.

I stopped at the end of the driveway to check the mailbox. A Super Shopper was the
only piece waiting for me, so I left it there and put up the flag, hoping I could just send it back. Kirsten wasn’t home. When I saw the empty parking spot, I knew she was on a date. I don’t know how I knew, except that I suddenly felt something stone-like in my gut. I sat in my car a while, listening to the engine clicking as it cooled, and I stared at the shafts of light seeping through the woods around the house. I had the same stirred-up feeling as when I watched porn. My blood felt thinned out, my hands shaky. The forest seemed so claustrophobic. Whoever she was with would call me a fool for letting her go. And he’d be right, except I didn’t let go. I was more of a pusher-awayer.

The day I told Kirsten I’d slept with another woman, we’d gone to Antigo to rent a U-haul for the move. But the truck they were going to rent us wouldn’t start, and we sat there for forty-five minutes while they tried jumping it. Then they switched out the battery, though I could hear right away that the problem was with the solenoid, and the engine never did turn over. I tried giving them a hand, but the manager had his own ideas and wouldn’t listen, so I let the asshole flounder.

“Help him,” Kirsten kept saying to me.

“I can’t,” I said.

Kirsten and I had already moved a few things to the house, but the U-Haul was supposed to be our big move—where we’d empty out one place and fill the other in a single trip. Kirsten had been excited, and each time the truck didn’t start, a little bit of her energy washed away. The U-Haul place also rented tools and banquet tables, and it only had one other truck, which was already reserved. “Otherwise, I’d give it to you,” the manager said, when Kirsten tried pouting. “How about a trailer?” he asked. His polo shirt had slid up his round gut a wink, and with all that insulation he was
sweating a good bit. His hands were blackened with grease, and he wiped at them with a faded pink rag. "Can't do anything about a truck until tomorrow."

We were on our way home when I told Kirsten. I thought honesty was more important than not being a dick. The girl’s name was Heidi Sprister, and she was only twenty-three years old—twelve years younger than me—though I didn’t tell Kirsten any of that. "I’m not necessarily surprised," Kirsten said. She spoke softly and seemed calm, and for a moment I started to smile, because I thought maybe it could be that painless. We were passing an old, beat-to-shit farmhouse that we’d passed a million times, one that had bits of junk scattered all around it, even way out in the fields where the cows were grazing. Kirsten’s attention seemed to be taken by the scene. On my side of the road it was all corn. When I looked back, Kirsten’s shoulders were heaving, and I thought she was crying.

"Hey," I said, touching her on the forearm.

Kirsten laughed—a sort of exasperated, disbelieving huff. She hadn’t been crying at all. "That’s just great," she said, turning to me. "Great fucking job, Tanner. Congratulations on becoming an asshole."

We didn’t say anything the rest of the way home. I tried not to think of Heidi. The car felt so small, I thought Kirsten was sure to read my thoughts. We’d been married for two years, and I think I knew that it was over then, or that it would be over, that it wouldn’t last another two, though ultimately it did.

I kept thinking of reasons I wasn’t an asshole, and reasons Kirsten was, though none of the evidence seemed very solid. "Here," I said, once we got home. Kirsten had gotten out of the car, and I held out the pamphlet for the U-Haul, which had our receipt for the truck inside. "We
can’t lose this,” I said.

“What are you doing?” she asked, shutting her door. She looked as tired as I’d ever seen her, and as bored.

I didn’t know if she meant at that moment, or in general. In general, I had no idea. “I’m going to go work on the house,” I said. “I want to at least get something done today.” I spent the afternoon just firing the nail gun into the woods, hoping each time I pulled the trigger that I’d finally have a real answer for her.

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It was three in the morning when I woke up, an hour past last call. I listened for Kirsten, but the house was quiet. Any second, I thought, she’d walk through that door. Any second. Any second. Any second.

I knew she wasn’t home, but I went downstairs anyway to see. Her car was still gone, and I stood for a while looking out into the driveway, the pole light I left on for her humming like some insect. I went around the house turning on even more lights. I moved through the kitchen, into the living room, down the hallway, the laundry room, right up to her bedroom, which I’d been peeking into for weeks.

All the old furniture was still there—our bed, a dresser my grandmother had handed down to Kirsten, the little end table I’d pieced together from old barn boards. She’d moved things around, and taken the pictures off the wall, but I recognized everything. A pair of her jeans hung on the end of the bed, which was still unmade. A stack of folded laundry sat in the chair. A few pair of underwear, just some old everyday ones, grey with blue and green stripes, were right on top. We had stopped doing each other’s laundry a long time ago, and I went and lifted up the panties and tried to imagine the shape they would take on her. Kirsten was small, almost boney. In the winter her chest was so paper-like
that blue veins showed through. Towards the end, I associated her size with a kind of frailty. But now I remember her size was the thing I always loved, that I felt so big when I wrapped her in my arms.

Heidi and I met at an old fishing lodge called the Wolf River Inn, which was run by a white-haired spitfire named Joan Jenske. I’d been having trouble piecing together enough work that year, and I’d taken on a job doing maintenance for Joan twice a week. The Inn had been built in the twenties, and everything seemed to be held together by a series of bad patch jobs. The rooms were damp, and smelled moldy if they got closed up for too long, and I tried talking Joan into letting me gut a couple and redo them right, but for Joan, patches had to do.

Heidi worked as the housekeeper, and I always saw her ferrying laundry between the cabins and the main lodge, zipping around in Joan’s sun-bleached golf cart. Once I even saw her spinning donuts with it.

I had been fixing the thermostat in Cabin Four when Heidi came in to clean. “Hey,” she said, chomping on a piece of gum. She was pushing a vacuum cleaner in front of her, dragging a mesh bag full of towels behind, and she had to slow down to navigate her way around my toolbox. “You’re okay,” she said, when I tried sliding it out of the way.

Heidi was curvy and full and wore tight-fitting Wranglers. I imagined that she’d probably been a terror on her high school softball team, though I never asked her if that was true. She had long, sandy hair that she most often wore pulled back in a ponytail, or pulled through the back of a ball cap. She’d only started working at the Inn since her husband had been called to Iraq. It was Darren’s second tour, 32nd Infantry Brigade, Red Arrow Division. Otherwise he worked for the highway department, and built
roads. “By the end of the summer,” she once said to me, snapping out a top sheet and letting it drift down to the bed, “I swear he’s browner than a Mexican.”

Some of the fishermen that came to Joan’s liked to have a good time. They weren’t scary rowdy, like some of the biker bars around here, but the rowdy that was suburban men letting loose—Sports Center, too much alcohol, a few dirty jokes. They were the kind of guys who knew enough of work that they’d see me patching something and come over and shoot the shit, and get in my way, and offer me beers, and tell me how sweet they thought my life in paradise must be. They’d ask me where the good fishing was when they should have been asking Joan, who’d fished the river all her life. Most of them didn’t even really care, would only cast a couple flies in the hottest part of the day, quit, and then start celebrating.

Sometimes they invited me to their parties. I was trudging past a cabin one day when a group of guys from Madison asked me to join them. I’d been weed-whacking for hours, and I just wanted to put that damn trimmer away.

“We’re trying to have a barbeque here,” a guy said, holding up his half-eaten bratwurst. “And you’re working too hard for us to have any fun.”

“Just keeping my boss happy,” I said. I was sunburned, had gotten stung by a wasp, and my pants were stained green up to the knees.

“Come on,” the guy said. The grill smelled good, like grease and charcoal.

“Hamburgers, hot dogs, whatever you want.”

I hadn’t seen Heidi at first. She was sitting on the deck, her back against the wall, an empty paper plate in her lap. Everyone else was standing, or sitting up on the deck railing, which I was always having to fix because of people always sitting on it. When Heidi noticed me, she gave a little half-wave. She raised the red plastic cup she’d been drinking from, and then shrugged
her shoulders.

"Okay," I said, thirsty as hell. "Let me
clock out."

The group was more my age than Heidi’s,
the kind of guys who sported pleated pants
and had nice watches and wore visors with the
Titleist logo on them. They’d made some kind of
punch, some mixture of alcohol and fruit juice
that was too sweet and too poisonous and left a
drink mustache. By the time I’d started in on my
burger, I was already spinning.

Heidi had spent the day cleaning rooms,
and I could smell the bleach, even though I was
pretty ripe myself. Sometimes Heidi found the
cabins trashed. By the way these guys were
going, Joan’s dog would be licking their puke
out of the bushes in the morning.

"Want me to drop a hint about not
leaving you too big a mess?" I asked.

Heidi nibbled on the rim of her cup. "Just
tell them to not leave any wadded up, crusty
towels."

"Really?" I asked.

"You don’t even know," she said.

I told her I didn’t believe it, though I
knew it was probably true.

"I’ll make you help sometime," she said,
"and you can see for yourself."

After it got dark, the party moved off the
deck and over to the fire pit, which was centered
between all the cabins. I told the guys where
the woodpile was, told them to help themselves,
but they’d packed the trunks of their cars full of
firewood, and they didn’t want to have to haul it
back home. There were several wooden chairs
around the fire pit. A few notched-out logs, the
kind of big logs you couldn’t find around here
anymore, served as benches. Heidi and I huddled
together on one of them. The air was damp and
cool, and the river burbled in the background. It
felt nice, having our shoulders touch, and for the
first time in a long time I seemed to remember
that I was a living, breathing person who could steer his own life in whatever direction he wanted.

Heidi and I didn’t talk much, but we stayed like that, leaning into one another. I watched the sparks dance off the fire, watched the white hot-center of the pit, all the while trying to silently will one of Heidi’s arms around me. The guys told stories based on stories they all already knew. One of them had a guitar out, though he couldn’t play any songs. I think Heidi and me were the only two listening to him.

She said sure when I asked her if she wanted to go for a walk. There weren’t any streetlights out past the Inn’s driveway. It was colder away from the fire, and there wasn’t anywhere to go really, but we could still hear the guys laughing it up, and we kept walking. We could hardly see the road. We walked all the way to Steed’s Landing, our strides lengthening as we went downhill. At the end of the road, I started running, my hands straight out in front of me for protection.

We had sex that night on the picnic table at the landing. There wasn’t much current at Steed’s, but the river still swirled and gurgled as it bent around all the rocks. The water looked as if it was made of ink. It was the first and only time I’ve ever had sex outside, under the stars, and it was uncontrolled and multi-positioned and fun—everything that sex with Kirsten was not—though it was also burdened by the feeling that I was performing some kind of demolition on my life, the same kind of sledgehammer gutting I’d been pressing Joan to do with her rooms.

The next two weeks, while Kirsten was at the Evergreen and Darren was trying not to get IED’d by some towelhead, I drove over to Heidi’s to steal away a couple of hours. Sometimes she did a whole striptease for me, right there in the living room, the TV glowing behind her. She and Darren lived in a newish
doublewide on a nice little piece of land, and there were reminders of him all through the place. Heidi and I didn’t talk about our other halves, but at times I couldn’t stop thinking of Kirsten, and at other times—like when I once pulled out and turned Heidi over, and she responded by telling me to show her how strong I was—I thought of Darren, way out in the middle of hell. There was a portrait of him in his dress blues out in the hallway. Sometimes I’d stop and look at it, trying to pretend he was from another world, from some other dimension where this kind of thing was cool. Where these things had no affect on the future, and sent no ripples.

Kirsten didn’t come home until late the next afternoon, with just enough time to take a shower and eat before she had to leave for work. I was outside putting my tools away when her car pulled into the driveway. I looked up briefly, then put my head back down to make it seem like I didn’t care, or that I couldn’t be bothered, though my heart felt like it was trying to punch its way out my chest. I’d finished the shingling, and had put the screens on the soffit vents. I’d even worked on knocking down the pile of dirt in the yard, so we could finally get a lawn. The only way I could function was to keep my hands busy, and keep my mind focused on other things, like the addition of fractions, or making sure that I followed a straight line.

“Looks nice,” Kirsten said. She’d come over to the scrap pile and stood there with her arms folded across her chest, her purse hanging from the crook of an elbow. Her white dress shirt and bra were slung over her shoulder.

“Yah,” I said, and got busy picking up the cuts.

Kirsten squatted down, careful to make sure her purse didn’t go into the dirt, and she picked up a little triangle of cedar by the corner,
holding it between her thumb and forefinger, as if it was a used tissue or something, and she tossed it into the Rubbermaid bucket. She picked up three or four pieces that way. When she stood up, her sunglasses slid off the top of her head and back onto her face.

“I hope you didn’t worry,” she said, putting the glasses in her purse.

“I tried not to,” I said. “I was a little. I figured you were okay.” I hadn’t really been worried. That’s not what it was.

Kirsten stood over me, watching me toss the last of the pieces in the bucket. How many of these buckets had I already filled in my life? Her nipples were pressing through her tank top, and I kept looking up at them. Off in the distance I could hear someone running a chainsaw. I tried to think of everything I’d finished that day, tried to be content with one thing at a time. I thought that’s how things were built. By increments, by little pieces, nailed together in a way that could keep out the cold.

Kirsten said she had to get ready for work. “What else do you have to get ready for?” I blurted out, just as she turned to go inside.

Kirsten frowned at me and asked if I wanted to explain that one some more.

“Can you please come home tonight?” I said.

“I probably won’t,” she said. “I already have plans. I’m sorry.”

I wanted to know what plans.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “They’re plans.”

Then I asked her if he had a big dick.

It’s embarrassing to say I was so childish. That I would ask the one question I didn’t really want to know the answer to, when there were so many others I really did want answered, like what would happen if we tried again.

“Use your imagination,” she said, and held her hands at least two feet apart.
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After Kirsten left for work, I couldn't stand being in the house alone, so I drove out to Gerald's. He was in his kitchen putting together a tuna melt when I came over. "Want one?" he asked, unwrapping a cheese single.

If I hadn't had to drive him around, I'm not sure I would have ever become friends with Gerald. I never had anything against him, but I wasn't much into making friends those days, even with the guys I worked with. He'd had his license revoked after his third DUI in two years. He even spent a few weeks in jail. And when he came to work for Dale, and when he kept showing up late because he was always hitchhiking, Dale gave me the job of picking Gerald up each morning and making sure he got to the site on time. Dale said Gerald could find his own way home, and that I shouldn't feel obliged, and maybe I didn't, but I gave him a ride home every night, or I at least dropped him off part way. I took him grocery shopping, drove him into town so he could buy a bigger TV when the Packers were making another run at it. Once I even took him all the way down to Appleton to visit his grandmother.

I don't know if Gerald gave good suggestions, but he always had a lot of them, and though I usually never took his advice, I liked the fact that there was always plenty to sift through. We were the same age, and he was a pretty fun guy to be around, even though he was always listening to talk radio. He'd never been married, but he'd lived with a few girls over the years, and was once even engaged, which he thought made him know a thing or three about women. He talked moves, saw going to the bar as a kind of sport. He liked to brag about his bachelor life, though sometimes he'd tell me how he wished he were in my shoes—married, even if it was heading for divorce—and I could tell he was thinking about Lorie, his almost-wife.
We ate on Gerald’s back porch and watched the sun pull the day over the horizon, the sky shifting from a blaze of yellow and orange to gray and then black. Gerald knew that I’d slept with Heidi, knew that she was also married, but not that her husband was part of the Army National Guard. The way Gerald saw it, or so he told me many times, my affair with Heidi was totally understandable. He said he probably would have done the same thing, and probably sooner than I had. But I knew he didn’t know the whole story, and that if he knew about Darren he wouldn’t have felt the same way. Once when some Marine called in to one of Gerald’s radio shows and told a story about his wife cheating on him while he was off in Fallujah, Gerald called it treason. “This guy is protecting our freedom, and then this guy is banging his wife as thanks. People like that should be shot in the balls,” Gerald said. “Fallujah,” he added a second later, shaking his head as if the word held wonder.

“Fucking Fal-lu-jah.”

Gerald had staged the Howitzer next to the garage. When the sky got dark enough, the automated outdoor lights kicked on, illuminating one side of that monster and throwing a silhouette across the yard. Gerald had made a lot of progress since Friday night. He’d been concentrating on the Howitzer’s breech end, where he’d added three different hand wheels, though his wheels were actually square. Each of the wheels spun smoothly, though they didn’t have any effect on the up and down or side to side of the barrel, like they would’ve on a real one.

“How do you like that?” Gerald asked me, as I tested one of the wheels. The barrel was fixed at a forty-five degree angle. He picked up my plate from the porch and stacked it on his, and then drained the last of his soda. He’d been doing pretty well with not drinking alcohol.

“I like it,” I said, seeing that he looked
pretty proud. "They spin."

"That's what I mean," he said.

Gerald had rounded off the corners of a two-by-two to make what I knew was the telescope. I found it leaning against the carriage. While Gerald was in the kitchen I held up the telescope and tried to see how it'd fit, wondering exactly where it went, and as I did so I thought of Gerald, and how he'd probably done the same thing all afternoon, holding up the pieces to see how they'd match, or how he could make them work.

"What's with this?" I asked when he came back. I cocked back the wood like I was going to smash a fastball into the night.

"I don't know," Gerald said. "I have to figure out how I want to build the mount up."

He took the telescope from me and showed me where it would go. "There'll be an elbow here," he said. "That's how they really are. So you can just look in like this." He stepped forward, as if he was about to look through the scope and check the coordinates, see where his armaments would fall.

For a while Gerald and I tinkered around in his shop, spreading out a pile of hardware on the workbench and seeing if anything might work for the telescope mount. The fluorescent lights in the shop drew in a bunch of moths, and they beat themselves against the bulbs. There was a dusty, oily smell that reminded me of the interior of my grandfather's truck. Rather than looking for a piece to attach the telescope with, Gerald seemed more interested in just going through all the brackets and hangers and split pins and trying to remember where all the stuff had even come from. Something had gotten in me, and instead of sitting back, I really wanted to build a piece of the Howitzer, wanted to get the telescope mounted and be able to stand back and look and be satisfied that I'd done well. "What about this?" I asked him, about a galvanized
U-bracket.

Gerald was playing with an old cow magnet, seeing how many things he could pick up at once before the string of metal broke.

"Hmmm," he said, as if he hadn't heard. "Maybe." I held the bracket out so he could see it better. He took the bracket from me and tested it with the magnet, the two pieces snapping together.

"I'm not sure what I want to do exactly," he said. "I'm thinking of cutting a couple four-by-sixes down, and making a whole sort of mounting block. I have a vision. But not a plan."

I waited for him to give the piece back, because I wanted to see if it'd work, but he just tossed it back in the pile.

"Do you think they can feel that inside them?" I asked about the magnet. "Do you think they know?"

"I wonder," Gerald said. "If they eat all that metal in the first place. Maybe not."

"What if there was a magnet you could put in your head?" I asked. "One that attracted all your bad ideas together in a quiet corner, so they couldn't move around and cause trouble?"

"You'd probably feel that," he said.

Gerald and I drove up towards Post Lake, not far from where we'd been working for Dale. There were a lot of back roads up there that we'd never been on, and we followed them along, randomly right and left at each stop sign, wondering if we'd eventually come to some place we recognized. It was past midnight, the roads empty. Gerald and I had a few cans of beer with us, and I drove with an open one resting between my legs. I had the radio tuned to the country station, but the volume turned low. The roads dipped and curved, and we kept coming upon all these small kettle lakes that had no public access because they were ringed with cottages. A pair of blue reflectors marked
every driveway. Almost all the houses were dark, except for a few porch lights.

“You shouldn’t be able to own a lake,” Gerald said. “Unless you dig it yourself.”

We climbed away from the water, up onto some flatlands, where the potato fields started to take over. Deer stood far enough back to miss the brush of the headlights, but I could see their dark outlines along the roadside. Many times they didn’t even look up as we passed, but when they did, and if they turned their heads just the right way, their eyes caught enough light and glowed pale blue, like little moons.

“Slow down,” Gerald said, motioning at me just like you’d tell a backhoe to keep lowering his bucket. “Way down.”

We crept along until we came to the next group of deer—what I thought were three does. I eased forward, bringing the car to a stop about thirty yards away, parking so that the headlights shined directly on them. Two of the deer stopped eating and lifted their heads and stared back at Gerald and me. Their big ears twitched and flicked like a horse’s.

When he took a few steps toward the road, I saw then that the third deer was actually a little spiked buck. “See that?” I asked. His antlers were still covered in felt. It meant they were soft, and still growing.

I kept the deer centered in the high beams. I don’t know how many hundreds of deer I’d seen in my life, but as we shined them that night the deer seemed new to me, as familiar but as odd as a newborn child must seem to its parents. The deer had traversed the ditch and were climbing the embankment onto the road. The buck had stepped in front, and he stood between the two girls and us. He was a pretty scrawny thing, and I wondered how long he’d make it, if he’d survive until his splay of antlers had grown to ten... twelve... fourteen points.

The deer seemed so exposed as they
lingered on the road. "Should we shoo them?" I wondered.

"If a car starts coming," Gerald said.

"Then we should honk or something."

As we waited for the deer to make it across the road, I told Gerald about Kirsten. Speculated that she was probably with the dude right then. I said, "My mind just races."

"Man," Gerald said. Way down the road, a pair of headlights appeared out of the dark. The deer were almost to the other side. "Well, that sucks," he said. "She couldn't wait?"

"I didn't."

"It resets after that. It's starting from there."

What was Kirsten supposed to wait for? How often had I told her that she should find some guy, even if I'd meant it mostly sarcastically?

"I don't know," I said to Gerald, wanting to defend Kirsten. "That seems arbitrary." I could see the part in me that was supposed to be happy for her, could see it sitting there in front of me, as clear as a glass of water.

"Maybe this is a good thing," he said.

"You know? Now it's your turn. Find some girl to go stay the night with. Hook up. Get laid. Be well."

The headlights grew larger, and the deer hesitated on the opposite shoulder of the road. I tapped the horn, and revved my car's toy engine. "I'm mean, I can show you," Gerald said. "I can show you how it's done. But then you're going to have to take it from there."

I hit the horn again, scattering the deer. "You're right," I said, because I knew Gerald wouldn't understand if I told him how ridiculous he sounded to me. I was thinking something more in line with a monastery, or jamming a screwdriver in my neck. "That's a good idea," I said. "Get on with things, right?"

"Lock and load," Gerald said. "That's
exactly right.”

That first night she didn’t come home, that night I padded downstairs and went and held a pair of her underwear, and then stayed up watching infomercials, and then went outside and stood in the backyard and stared at the marbled black sky, hoping that a star would break loose so that I could wish everything better, I went back to Kirsten’s room and looked through her stuff. I found her diary in the drawer next to the bed. It was just a plain old Mead notebook, and I’d only ever seen her write in it a handful of times, but when I flipped through, almost all the pages were full.

There was a list of New Year’s promises from all the way back in 2000, when we were sure the world was going to end. She finished that entry with a dot dot dot.

There was a sketch of how she wanted to landscape the backyard. We’d talked about a spot for a hammock, and a little fenced area where she could have roses the deer couldn’t get. She wrote about things she’d been thinking lately—wondering how much it’d cost to take credit classes at the extension in Antigo, and if she might be able to trade in her car for something less rusty once the house sold. I don’t know what I was looking for. I could tell by the frilly edge left in the spirals that a few pages had been torn out. I had to think those were the pages about me.

Then I read about Mark, the guy Kirsten had already slept with twice. In loopy cursive Kirsten wrote about the first time she’d waited on his table, how wide his smile was, the ten-dollar tip. He’d come back a second time, and then a third, and finally she let him buy her some drinks. Later they drove a big square of highway, stopping at every little tavern along the way, dancing wherever they could. Eventually they wound up right back at the Evergreen so Kirsten could get her car. He followed her down the road
to the Sleepy Inn, a little six-room hotel on the border of the reservation.

She wrote about the sex. How much she liked it when he had a finger up her and was sucking on her tits. She described the weight of him pushing down, her head getting pushed into the headboard. He’d told her how good she felt, how tight.

She’d had a fun time, but it was weird. She wanted to do it again. And so there was a second time, at our place, a lunch date. I hadn’t come home for lunch ever since starting with Dale, but just in case, Kirsten locked the doors.

The details from that encounter were brief. Second time, she wrote, and no condom. *What the hell are you doing, Sikora?* It was her maiden name, underlined twice. She was almost a week late.

After shining the deer, Gerald and I drove to the jobs site to steal some wood—two-by-fours, mostly, some trim pieces, a couple of sheets of bead board. A chain and padlock spanned the driveway, which was a two-track through the grass, but both of us had keys. We’d been working at the site since March, except for a few weeks when Dale sent us off to build a garden shed for a woman who never went outside without putting on a wide-brimmed hat, the strap tied snug beneath her chin.

Before we started loading the wood, Gerald and I wandered out onto the back deck. We’d been at the house so often it felt like it was ours. All around us the tree frogs were talking. The lake looked purple, and out in the distance we could see the black lump of the small island, which you weren’t supposed to go to because of a pair of loons nesting there. The lake house was the biggest project Dale had ever done, and though it was a beautiful piece of property—the lot had twelve-hundred feet of waterfront—the whole thing had been a killer. From the road the
land sloped hard to the lake, and it was a horrible slant to work on. We put in the deck and a row of big windows to show off the lake, but until we got the foundation poured and the floors laid we spent all day hobbling around on the side of a muddy hill. With just a little bit of rain, that clay turned slick as snot. The mosquitoes swarmed. It took two people to move a wheelbarrow—one pulling, one pushing—and all of us, even Dale, fell on our ass at some point. All the fixtures and cabinets and sinks and countertops were from specialty places, not the kinds of things you could just go into Antigo and get at the Fleet Farm, which is how Dale had mostly been doing it. We were constantly getting the wrong pieces—wrong color, wrong style—and sometimes we even installed them, only to take them out and ship them back and wait on their replacements.

"Do you think you could live here?" I asked Gerald.

"Here?" he asked. I could hear the water lapping against the shore. "Are you kidding me? Sitting in the lap of luxury, enjoying my view. I don't think it'd be a problem."

I didn't think he was lying, but I didn't believe him. The view was something, and the bathroom had a whirlpool tub, and the kitchen had granite countertops and an oversized, restaurant-quality stove, and even while there was still sawdust and sheets of clear plastic everywhere—even though the walls were unpainted, and uncapped pieces of Romex jutted out from several junction boxes—you could still see that it was the kind of place that made it into lifestyle magazines and onto TV shows, the kind of place that wasn't for people like Gerald and me, even though we'd built the thing.

"I don't know, man." Maybe for a few days, I thought. I'm sure Gerald pictured it being like some rap video, and that there'd be women in bikinis, and that it'd always be a party,
because I’d imagined the same thing, before realizing that that was a whole other fantasy beyond just living in the house. “I think it might get lonely,” I said. “All those shelves and bookcases. Heck, most of the rooms. They’d all be empty if I lived here.”

“You’d have to just start filling them up,” Gerald said. “Plasma screen. Pool table. A couple mirrors or some shit. I don’t know, you’d get a decorator.”

He was living in a fantasy for sure, one where we never had to ask Dale for a draw on our paychecks, and where we never got behind on the satellite TV bill. Kirsten was my decorator. “Right now,” I said, “I feel like I want to be pouring everything out.”

We started hauling wood to the car. I opened the hatchback, and we stuck the two-by-fours and trim pieces down the center, angling them so I’d be able to use the stick shift. The bead board, even when we bent it a little, was still too wide to fit in the car and had to go on the roof. The boards sagged in the middle when we hoisted them up. I only had one bungee cord with me, and we’d already used to tie down the tailgate. We couldn’t find any rope, only some hot pink mason line. An extension cords probably would’ve worked all right.

“One of us has to ride on top,” I said. I think Gerald knew that I meant him.

“Rochambeau,” he said.

I pointed out that I was the only one with a license.

“You’re heavier,” he said.

I used to think about it more, spent all those days in bed, immobile, stoned on Vicodin, wondering what would’ve happened had I gone rock instead of paper. But I’ve come to see that it’s silly to worry about stuff like that, the what-ifs, so I’ve tried to eliminate that kind of thinking, just as I’ve tried to eliminate other
things from my life. I can’t say if I’m happier now, but I no longer feel broken, and my head has finally stopped ringing, and for that I’m grateful. My bones only ache when a storm front rolls through.

“Start slow,” I yelled to Gerald. “Go gradual.”

My face was flat against the wood, my arms stretched wide. My legs dangled off the back of the roof. What I remember is how good it felt to be so foolish. And how so very little, besides that little moment, seemed to matter. It was a kind of peace that I hadn’t felt in years. I didn’t know what was going to happen, only that I’d try and hold on.

Gerald merged off the gravel shoulder and onto the blacktop. He lifted a can of beer out the window and wiggled it around some, which I guess was his way of asking if I wanted any. “I’m good,” I shouted. Gerald said something, but I couldn’t hear what it was. Slowly the can sunk from view. “Turn the radio down,” I yelled. “Unless it’s something good. Then crank it.”

Gerald thought he was driving around forty. That’s when I’d pounded on the roof. I’d told him to keep inching up in speed until I banged on the top of the car, then that was as fast as I wanted to go. A few times, he said in his statements, he’d sped up to see if I’d pound on the roof again, so maybe it was closer to fifty.

We were passing through the Nicolet, not far from the fish hatchery, where the trees had been cut back from the road. Even in the hard darkness you could sense those red pines towering along the embankment. The air ripped through my hair and under my t-shirt. I felt like I was flying. I wanted the wind to scour me. Once in a while we’d move through a cloud of bugs and I’d put my face down and listen to them splatting the windshield. Otherwise, I watched the road. I was entranced by the motion, had been fixating on that ever-changing spot where
the headlights ended and the darkness began.

Gerald stuck his hand out the window and raised his middle finger and let out a howl. The volume on the radio went up. I could feel him pounding on the ceiling of the car. He was absolutely right. We had a moment there where the night seemed to be humming, and we felt like outlaws, like invincible men.

Then came the quick flash of the deer, and the thud of it hitting the side of the car.

When Gerald swerved—one way, then overcorrecting—the boards shifted, and a terrible whip-snap pitched me from the roof. If I think back to it now, though he must have only been a blur, I remember seeing Gerald as I fell. He was leaning forward, with his chest against the steering wheel, and his eyes fixed on the rearview. I wanted to yell to him, scream that he was looking the wrong way, that I was over here, but I couldn’t. I remember feeling like I was gasping for breath, like someone was dunking me under the water. I wanted Gerald to turn and look me in the eyes, flash that same smile he must’ve had just a second before, during all our glory. I thought that if he saw me some sort of safety line would come taut. But I could feel things shrinking away. Gerald was staring into the mirror, at the cartwheeling deer. “Lit up red,” he later said. “From the brake lights.”

Kirsten was in the hospital room when I woke up. She was sitting in a vinyl armchair by the window and reading a magazine. She had her hair in pigtails, which were my favorite, and she was wearing khaki pants, part of her uniform from the Evergreen. I wondered what she was reading about, which celebrity, which scandal.

I could sense being in the road, smelling the asphalt and wondering if Darren had paved that section of highway. I remembered the sound of feet slapping the ground as the paramedics ran
toward me. The doctors told me I was out cold the whole time, but I remember Gerald being there and talking to me and saying that I’d make it.

“Hey,” Kirsten said, when she noticed me staring. “Look who’s awake.” She got up from the chair and came over and held my hand. She rubbed my fingers and smiled at me, searching my face, which felt swollen as a balloon.

“Am I okay?” I asked.

Kirsten shook her head yes and started to cry. “Sorry,” she said, when I asked her to stop. She wiped her eyes and smiled for me and tried to seem cheerful. “You will be,” she said. “You’re alive.”

The first step in building the house, after subcontracting the excavation work, was putting together the forms for the foundation. Gerald helped. It was tedious and hard labor, but we moved our way through it—knocking in stakes, leveling the boards, cutting and bending and tying the rebar together.

We were measuring one of the corners, making sure we’d kept the forms square. “I’ve got forty and three-eighths,” I said, letting the tape retract. “We’re close.”

“I can live with close,” Gerald said.

“Close is fine.”

I smiled when I heard that. Math that was approximate. For a while I even took what Gerald said as some truism for life. I thought of that day in the hospital. We had gotten so that we couldn’t even touch each other. Kirsten started playing with my hair. She tested my forehead with the back of her hand. My collarbone was broken, my leg stabilized by titanium pins. I wanted to reach up and take her hand and put it against my cheek.

“I’m glad you woke up before I had to go,” she said.

“Me too.” I was numb on painkillers, so for a moment it seemed maybe it had been worth
it, just to be like that with her again.

After the ambulance took me away that night, Gerald got arrested. He spent twenty hours in jail, only a few blocks from the hospital. Dale fired us both, though he hired Gerald back on short-term to help him finish the lake house. I went out and looked at it once, probably a year or so after it was completed. The owners had it up for sale already. All the blinds were drawn, and on the deck the furniture was stacked and covered with a blue tarp. Down by the water, an aluminum rowboat sat upside down, the hull blanketed in pine needles.

Kirsten went to the chair and grabbed her purse, and she promised to come back in the morning.

"Don’t promise," I said. I didn’t want her to do that.

She found an apartment in Kemper and was out of the house before I’d even been released from the hospital. Gerald called me a few times after I went home, and couldn’t stop apologizing, couldn’t stop saying he’d make it for a visit sometime, even though he’d have to hitchhike. When it was time for physical therapy, my mom and dad put me in the back of their minivan and drove me to town. Sometimes we’d stop on the way back and get some carry-out and go to my empty house, where my mom would set the table, and my dad would plate all the food, and we’d sit and eat in silence, or maybe talk about the weather, or how good the fried chicken was. Kirsten and I had accepted an offer on the place and were waiting for the closing date. My half was already spent, the price of my trauma.

Once at therapy I thought I saw Darren. He had on a camouflage shirt and was sitting at one of the padded benches. He was pulling a sock over his nub leg, prepping it for his prosthetic. When he looked up, I saw I was wrong, that he was just a stranger. I didn’t know whether he’d served or not, but I gave him a
little salute.

The day I went and looked at the lake house, I also drove past Gerald’s place. We’d been up late the night before and had said our beer-soaked good-byes. My parent’s minivan was packed tight with whatever I had left. I’d planned on stopping one last time, but as I got near I decided to just keep going.

The Howitzer sat at the end of Gerald’s driveway. He’d painted the whole sculpture primer gray, which took away from all that wood, though it still looked good, it still stood out. The telescope was mounted just where he’d shown me it’d go.

Instead of getting a cloth flag, Gerald had painted an American flag on a square of the bead board, and he’d hung it from the Howitzer’s barrel. He’d made a sign that read *Bring the Troops Home*, a yellow ribbon sticker in each of the corners. To what, I wondered, speeding by. Bring them home to what? In real life, the Howitzer had a range of almost twenty miles. I put my foot on the gas, knowing I’d have to go at least that far to be safe.