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Tether

J. Matthew Gottwig

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J. MATTHEW GOTTWIG

TETHER

- Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction -

WHEN THE RATTLESNAKE bites Jack, his mother prays, *Please Lord Jesus, draw the venom from my boy; bring the color of life back into his skin; keep him breathing, Lord Jesus, keep my boy alive!*

But she doesn't cry.

No, that woman is strong as stone, but her boyfriend cries. Yes, William cries the whole sixty miles to the clinic, because he loves that boy more than he loves himself, and he cries because Katie's prayers make him think of that rattler's schc-schc-schc-schc. "We've got to be strong for him, Katie," William says, but when the doctors and nurses cover that boy (so still and ocean blue), they weep quietly for the mom who can't let go. William places a hand on his girlfriend's shoulder and whispers, "Jack loved you, Katie," which is all he can think to say.

But Katie is having none of this and pulls those linens back!

This she prays as her boy's spirit rises from his body, *No, Lord Jesus, I will not relent, Lord, because you are all powerful*, and *this* she prays as that boy's spirit ascends into the rafters, *You can do anything Lord Jesus, I know you can. I believe it in my heart of hearts*, and Katie's prayers are powerful prayers that call like eagles cry. Even as her Lord sings to Jack, prepares a place, a golden throne just Jack's size, her prayers keep that boy tethered to the earth.

But there Jack is, reaching for the sky.

Katie feels him leaving her, feels it deep inside, and hasn't ever felt this kind of sorrow before, not when her sister died, not when she quit her husband, not ever, and it is an awesome sorrow, the kind filled with glory, the kind that rises up and overcomes and gives her just the lines she needs to pray. *Death means nothing to me, Lord Jesus, because you are, stronger, Lord Jesus, I know you are,* she prays, and when Lucifer has his little look, she prays, *I bind these evil spirits of death, Lord Jesus, bind them in the pit of hell, because they have no place here among the innocent,* and when the sky opens so wide even she can hear the heavenly host, she prays, *I reject your judgement, Lord Jesus, reject it, because it is unjust to bury one so young,* and when that tether is about to snap, she wails, *You will bring my baby back!*

And Jack comes tumbling down!

That boy opens his eyes, and the doctors and nurses and even the janitor can't believe what they're seeing but know they need to finish what Katie started. The nurse with the plucked eyebrows whispers, "If you wouldn't mind escorting your wife to the waiting room..." and never misses a day of church after that.

"These people need to do their work," William tells Katie, but she won't go, not after everything, not until her boy looks at her and nods, and when she coos and strokes his little cheek, he does that very thing. Katie stands and takes William's hand but keeps whispering to herself, *Thank you, Holy Christ; thank you for bringing my boy back to me. Thank you for trusting me with this blessed gift,* and she and William step out to the waiting room

and pretend to watch the news.

Jack is a quieter boy after that, and almost everyone asks him, “Are you feeling alright? Are you, Jack?” but Jack just stares into the sky. Even when he smiles, the joy never touches his eyes.

“We feel humbled and just so blessed,” Katie says in his stead, and she talks about praying her thanks every night but doesn’t say more than that. The truth is she’s ashamed, so ashamed, because William still won’t pray with her after such a blessed miracle, ashamed they still aren’t married after all this time.

But William wants to marry her. Yes, he truly does. That man loves everything about Katie, even the mean scar she took from Jack’s daddy, who was not a good man. “But you’re not a Christian,” she says whenever he asks, but in his mind, they are married, and he is Jack’s daddy no matter the loins that begat him. “Still don’t see why that should matter,” William says, but it does. To her it matters more than anything. She prays about this, prays about all sorts of things throughout the day, and wants him as Jack’s daddy, wants to feel a mother’s joy when she sees him put his big, black cowboy hat on sideways and smile his silly smile at her boy, but all Katie feels is guilt. She knows things can’t keep going as they are, not after Jack’s salvation, not after this gift from God.

“Thinking we should bring Jack back to the doctor,” William tells Katie some weeks into summer, but Katie shakes her head and says, “No, Bill, no. He’s fine, Bill,” and doesn’t believe in second guessing the will of God. She knows her boy has changed, can see it in his far-off eyes, can

feel it in her soul. William nods but doesn't agree and can't stop worrying about Jack, but it's Katie who needs some comfort that night. They grapple beneath the sheets, and Katie pulls him close, pulls him deep inside but cries without tears as his weight settles over hers, cries even as her whole body shakes and rolls, cries, because she knows she needs to quit this man she loves so dearly. When William leaves that special place between her legs, she feels alone, and she is alone, because right away, William starts dreaming that dream he always dreams, the dream he can never shake.

He and Jack are out fishing up near his family's cabin, and he's just caught a rainbow trout, a beautiful rainbow trout, and the trees and the creek are singing with springtime breeze, and, *Hey Jack! Get over here and take a look at this beauty*, but the boy doesn't show, and, *Goddamn it, he was right here!* and William gets worried.

He lets the fish go and goes out hunting for Jack and finds him not far away, but, *Oh lord*, he hears that rattlesnake's schc-schc-schc and fear takes hold of his heart.

William freezes.

He freezes, because snakes have always been his devil, and when that rattler snaps out and takes a hold of Jack's shoulder and begins twisting and snapping like a whip, William doesn't know what to do but knows he's got to do something. He grabs that snake hard, and his skin crawls from head to toe, but he hacks at it with his useless old buck knife, and, *Goddamn it!* Those fangs are caught in the boy's shirt and won't let go!

Things usually end right there, but on this night, the sky opens to

glory and song, and William stands stunned, because there Jack is all awash in holy light, smiling like he used to smile. When that boy takes to the sky, William clings to the snake like a tether and shouts, *What the hell you doing? Get down here, boy!* He holds on for dear life, holds on as his feet drag long tracks in the grass and feels like he's been holding on for all of eternity when up from the dirt, from deep in the earth, quakes Katie's prayers, that, *Oh Lord Jesus, give him life; keep him alive, Lord Father God*, which grows and grows until the sky turns dark, and Jack falls hard upon the ground. William takes the boy into his arms and holds him tight, tries to comfort him, but the truth is he's the one who's afraid.

And then their eyes meet. That boy nods one of those nods that contains a thousand words, and William says, "I get it," because he feels forgiveness in that nod.

Jack disappears.

William wakes and feels a little better about things but can hear Jack's still, small voice in the next room over. He goes to check on the boy and finds him sitting up in bed, staring up into the sky, breathing deep.

"Bad dream?" William asks, and Jack nods. "Yeah, I get them too," William says and sits in bed with the boy. They both go quiet and listen to the crickets through the open window. Then William asks, "You forgive me? About what happened, Jack?"

The boy nods again, and a great weight falls off William's shoulders.

Time stands still.

Days come and go and summer cooks the land to a crisp. William

wakes almost every night to the sound of Jack waking from a dream, that gasp and cry for help, and on those nights, he goes to comfort the boy. “Just a dream. It’s just a dream,” he says, patting Jack’s back, and Jack wraps his little arms around William’s gut. Just like that, they rest and wait for dawn.

On the day of the Pastor’s visit, it’s Katie who answers the door. Bill and her boy remain huddled in bed, and Katie is grateful for this, because she needs guidance and doesn’t want her boyfriend hearing what she has to say.

“It was a miracle, Pastor, a miracle,” she says as they sit at Katie’s little round table and sip coffee. The Pastor says, “Indeed it was,” because he believes it was. They’ve had this conversation before, but things have changed for the Pastor, who dreamed about the boy and has come to believe some dreams have meaning. “If you’d been there, you’d know. Jack was dead, Pastor. They’d covered him and everything,” Katie says, and the Pastor takes her hand and prays a silent prayer, because he knows what’s coming next. “And here we are, still living in sin after all that,” Katie says. “Because you love the men in your life,” the Pastor says, and then, “Maybe you should just go ahead and marry him,” but Katie scowls. She says, “He’s not a Christian. We both know that,” and the Pastor does know but this isn’t the rub for him that it is for Katie. “Not everything in our lives can be perfect, Katie,” the Pastor says, and then, “He’d make a good father,” which Katie believes and admits to some wisdom in the thought. But then she reminds herself to be suspicious of Methodists like the Pastor, who sometimes lack convictions and a belief in the supernatural. She imagines Lucifer needling

him, cackling, and watering down his every thought, but he's all she has in this town since her old pastor died. "Think about the boy, that's all I'm saying," says the Pastor, and Katie can't help feeling angry, because her boy is all she's thinking about. "A boy needs a Godly father," she says, and the Pastor knows when he's been out-holied but doesn't want her sending him away, not yet.

The truth is, he wants to catch a glimpse of Jack before he goes.

"Well, I'll pray you find wisdom," he says, knowing she has no interest in following his, and Katie smiles and reminds herself she needs to trust God, but His are hard truths. "Jack still in bed?" the Pastor asks and Katie nods once but turns away, looks through the kitchen window beyond her acres and all the way to the mountains, which seem purple as night by the rising sun. "Well, I'll just say my hellos and be gone," the Pastor decides, and Katie whispers, "Suit yourself," and the Pastor leaves her alone at the table. He taps the boy's door, and his hands shake just a little, but when nobody offers a reply, he peers inside and finds Katie's men asleep. Jack is just as he remembers from his dream, his impossible dream from a few nights back. He can't think of much else these days.

The Pastor knows death can change a person and believes the boy has changed in some fundamental way, something miraculous and beyond anyone's understanding, and he has more than his own experience to go on. Others around town have asked about Jack, made known they too have had some run-in with the boy, something they can't explain, and as the Pastor looks at Jack (so still and morning bright), he prays he isn't putting too

much hope in a dream and a boy.

“Could be nothing,” he whispers but believes it’s something.

He’s heard from Ms. Hitchens, long time Kindergarten teacher and the town’s only yoga coach, who said, “Sure hope you’re praying for that boy, Pastor. I just can’t stop thinking about him. I’m telling you, I can’t,” and mentioned something about some strange dream but kept the details to herself. In that dream, an old dream almost forgotten, she danced like a fool, danced in the very same classroom Jack sat last year, danced in nothing but her skivvies for the high school principal, who would become her one and only. Years later, that man’s heart would break from too much beer and bacon, and she would vow to act healthier and exercise every day, but this dream takes place long before that. When Ms. Hitchens saw Jack sitting in that chair (just Jack’s size), she all but tripped over her own feet, because he wasn’t supposed to be in class right then, but her man called to her, said, *Mmmhmm. Oh you are a sight. Mmmhmm*, and she forgot about Jack and got back to dancing, the boy nothing but a lash in her eye.

Ms. Hitchens wanted to savor this moment, her man, but when the sky opened to bright lights and song, the principal started ascending into the sky, and Ms. Hitchens went to chase him down. Pants undone, junk jingling, that man kicked and flailed the whole way, screaming, *What the hell is going on here?* and reached for Ms. Hitchen’s hand, who herself was jumping for him, struggling on too tall stilettos, saying, *Get down from there!* like he was one of her kindergarteners. She climbed onto one of the little tables and reached as high as she could, but then he cried, *I’ll miss you*

Dotie, and disappeared. Ms. Hitchens remembered then he'd been gone for a long time. She dropped to her knees and was suddenly old and skinny like the teacher Jack had always known. *I miss him, Jack*, she said, and longed to see her man again. She looked at the boy, saw him smiling in that holy light, and realized she'd been given a gift: a memory that had all but slipped away.

The Pastor has heard from Tom Starkly, owner of both bars in their little town, who mentioned after church one day, "You know who's wrong in the head? That boy. Maybe you should look in on him and make sure things are right," and mentioned something about some strange dream but kept the details to himself. In that dream, kept breathless by crisp air, he hunkered down behind a fallen log and waited, because he'd seen plenty of muley signs and knew there was a herd grazing nearby. When it came out, that beautiful, trophy buck, he took aim but couldn't shoot, couldn't, because he couldn't imagine ever seeing such a sight again, those ashen trees caked with snow against a high, white sky, and that buck lording over everything. He held his grandpa's 30-06 and could almost hear the old man whispering into his ear, saying like he used to say, *Go ahead, Tommy. It's ok*, and Tommy pulled the trigger. *Pop*, and that buck fell into the snow.

The whole forest took flight.

In this dream, Tom always finds that buck still breathing and can't help tearing up while he leans over to cut its throat, tearing up as his grandpa tells him it's up to him to do what needs to be done, tearing up as blood pools into the snow.

Tom knows this dream, dreams it often, but that night he spotted

Jack sitting on that log like a smudge through a broken scope. He never has much reason to ponder the boy except when Bill comes by for a drink and goes on and on about what happened, washing memories away until Tom cuts him off or Katie stops by (Jack in tow) to give them both a piece of her mind. But on that night, the sky opened up and out poured a whole mess of glory and song, and Tom lost his water into his sheets, but he didn't wake. No, he got control of himself and decided the boy was to blame for all this racket, but before he could get angry, that muley buck climbed to its feet and cantered into the heavenly light. Tom took aim but knew the buck was headed for paradise, headed for his grandpa, who would have another chance to take it down. Tom lowered his gun, looked at the boy, who, eyes closed, still smiling, seemed to be listening to the song. And then he was gone.

The Pastor has heard from others too, all who talk about dreaming some dream, but he doesn't ask the details, doesn't need to know, because his own dream sticks with him like honey.

But after all dreams, Jack wakes feeling lost and afraid, because loss won't stop calling his name. He cries his little cry until William comes and sits with him. "Just a dream. It's just a dream," William always says, and Jack hugs the man and listens to the breeze and crickets through the ghostly drapes.

But then one dream has Jack screaming and gasping for breath, and when William rushes into his bedroom, the boy holds him tight and won't let go, because he dreamed a man shot, an orange-headed man with

thick glasses, an AR-15 with bump stock and high school yearbook in his back seat.

“What is it, Jack?” William wants to know, and this time even Katie wakes and goes to see what’s wrong, but all the boy does is shake. Katie joins them in the little bed and holds her men tight, holds on to keep from falling to the floor, and when she meets the Sheriff walking along the street the next morning, Jack starts screaming. Everybody out and about turns to look at the boy, and they marvel even as their hearts feel for Jack and wish him peace.

Katie does her best to haul Jack away, does her best to comfort him, to pray Lucifer away, but the boy is so dang heavy these days made worse by his flailing limbs. She feels weak and barely able to cope with everything going on and worries demons are tormenting Jack, worries all this is beyond her power, but she prays, *Protect my boy, Lord Jesus*. Protect him, and prays without ceasing like thread off a never-ending spool.

The Sheriff feels anxious when he checks in on the family later that morning, *just making sure everything is ok*, he plans to say. He looks good, smells good too, and even combed his mustache for the visit, because he has an unspoken fondness for William, who opens the door. “How’s everything, Bill?” the Sheriff asks and can’t help the tremor in his breath, can’t help the sweat on his hand when they shake, can’t help squeezing a little harder when he feels William’s bones and scaly skin. “Fine, fine. Boy’s just a little shaken, that’s all,” William says, and the Sheriff replies, “Good, good, well I’m just...well...,” and forgets everything he means to say. “Maybe you’d

like to come inside?” William asks, because he hears the air-conditioner click and knows they’re wasting precious air. The Sheriff feels foolish and wants to get going but lets William shepherd him into the living room, where Jack sits with his mother, head buried in her neck.

When the Sheriff sees the Pastor sitting in William’s chair, he says, “Guess I’m intruding,” but Katie shakes her head and says, “Thinking Jack had a bad dream,” and the Sheriff understands. He had a bad dream too, a dream about the only man he’s ever killed, the man who haunts his dreams. Yes, he saw that gun and yearbook in the back seat, and, *Get out of the car. Come on, now*, and the man obeyed almost in tears, almost unable to breathe. That man came toward him, unarmed but wrong in the head, and the Sheriff pulled the trigger, pulled it without the man having done a thing.

But deep down, he believed he would, believed, because he’d seen a vision of dead and dying children all across the school grounds.

Jack saw the man die, saw him fall. The sky never opened to glory and song, but the earth quaked and cracked to wailing and devastation, and Jack stared down into the pit, stared as that red-headed man with freckles like stars tumbled into torment. Then, Jack turned and ran. He ran, because he felt a different kind of loss.

Jack looks at the Sheriff, “You killed that man,” he whispers, and the Sheriff might have been able to let this go if the boy hadn’t added, “The man with the fire in his hair,” and the Sheriff loses his breath. “I did. As a young officer, I did. I’m sorry. Every day, I am,” but for the first time he

doesn't know if he should be sorry. Yes, the man had a gun, and yes, the Sheriff believed he aimed to use it, but until the ground opened up and that man descended into the pit of hell, the Sheriff always wondered if he'd done wrong.

The Pastor, the Sheriff, and even William share a look, because this moment means something different to each of them, but Katie has eyes only for Jack. The Pastor sits forward in his chair and asks, "You remember visiting my dreams, Jack?" and Jack nods but doesn't say another word, and now even Katie is listening but doesn't understand, because this sounds like the work of demons.

"What the hell is this horse shit?" William asks, looking at the Pastor and then the Sheriff, who turns red as a dusty moon. William's whole body is on guard, because he remembers his dream and sometimes wonders if Jack was there but is always too afraid to ask.

"Don't you dare talk like that," says Katie, covering Jack's ears, and the Pastor stands and declares for all to hear, "Katie, there is something special about your boy, something beyond all understanding. This, I believe," but William steps between them, stands tall with his big, black cowboy hat making him that much taller. William is the biggest man in that room, one of the biggest men in town, and the biggest atheist in the county. "Boy needs a doctor, not all you praying at him," he says, but this is the last straw for Katie, who wonders what sorts of evil William is letting in with his doubts. She needs him to repent or go away, because she can all but see the demons crowding around her boy and knows he needs protection.

Katie stands and touches William's arm. "Bill," she says, and William turns to her. "No, Katie. Boy needs help. Something none of us can give him," and when Katie says, "He's waiting for you to pray for him," William roars and Katie cowers but finds her strength and stands a little taller. They argue like dry thunder over parched plains, but William can't contain the fire in his heart, can't contain his fears and anger, and he pushes Katie (nothing rough) but catches her before she falls. For Katie, it all comes rushing back, those years with her husband, the man she quit, the man who made her bow like he was a god, bow with bruises, and William becomes that devil right there in front of her. Katie is done cowering from devils. She grabs William's arm, says, "You. You! Get out, you!" and William realizes he's done wrong and must submit. "Katie doll, I'm sorry," he says, but she doesn't hear. "You will not touch me with your ungodly hands, not ever again," she shouts, and William says, "Katie doll, I'm sorry," but Katie believes he aims to deceive her. "You are keeping him from healing, you and your lack of faith. They shall take up serpents, and it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover, but yours are evil hands. You could have kept him from being bit if you believed, but you didn't," and William has nothing he can say about this. "Go," Katie says. "Get out of my house and go."

William looks at Jack, hoping he might intervene, offer some defense, but the boy just stares back. "Come on, Jack!" William shouts and thinks he sees the boy tremble.

"William, let's sit and talk about this," the Pastor says, and the

Sheriff says, “Time to calm down, Katie,” but Katie stands tall and crosses her arms and says, “God’s will be done, and this is God’s will. I have known it for far too long and done nothing.”

The Sheriff turns to William. “Well, this is her property, Bill,” he says, and William goes, slamming the door on the way out. The Sheriff follows close behind. “Need a place to stay?” the Sheriff asks, but William climbs into his truck, turns the key, and sits without a word.

Jack knows the sound of William’s truck, knows how it sounds when it drives away, and whispers, “Bill? Where you going, Bill?” but Katie fears demons are whispering through her boy. She wraps her arms around him and prays, *With the power of Christ, I cast you out, evil spirits*, but the Pastor stops her. “There’s nothing evil about your boy,” he says and decides to tell her about his dream and what it has come to mean.

She was there, his beautiful wife, who died before her time, taken by a disease of the spirit and mind, and he remembers holding her hand and weeping, the hospital curtains like a shell. The Pastor is used to this dream. He knows it well, knows that sorrow will cling deep into morning, but this dream was different, because Jack was there watching, just watching, and when the skies opened up and the glory of the Lord shined down upon the three of them, Jack stood and smiled, and the Pastor’s wife, yes even his wife, started singing the songs of the heavenly host. That woman opened her eyes, and they were lucid eyes, lucid at last, and the Pastor believed she’d repented before she died, repented of all those things she said and did as the disease corrupted her soul.

And that woman took to the sky.

The Pastor wanted to hold on to her hand, hold it like a tether and never let go, but he has prayed for her soul, prayed for it every night, and letting her go was the one thing he knew he must do.

And he did.

That dream felt so real the Pastor believes it was real, and yes, he might be a worldly Methodist, but it seems clear to him that Katie's boy has been touched by God, and Katie shouldn't fear that his are the work of demons.

"Gave me a peace I haven't felt in years," the Pastor says.

Katie looks at Jack and feels something new. It's pride, she feels, and opens to the wisdom in the Pastor's words.

But then she sees the pain in Jack's eyes, that tearful pain, and knows he hasn't cried for a long, long time. And Katie knows why, knows she shouldn't have let things end this way, knows William is less a devil and more a man broke by lack of faith in something greater. She also knows that man is long gone, but her boy is holding on to him, holding on like a tether.

And William is gone. His whole soul feels lost. He drives with fear and fury, first to the Town Pump for more than a couple cases of beer, and then all the way to his cabin in the mountains, the cabin where it all started.

Memories of that rattlesnake don't wait for him to settle in, and he starts drinking and dreaming that old dream and wakes to sweat and turmoil, but no sky opens up in these dreams, not anymore.

In that state of mind, he wanders into the wilderness with nothing

but a pack of jerky and a case of beer to keep him going, wanders for what feels like days, wanders with frequent naps across a land that never sits quite right, wanders and pauses whenever he hears something like a rattle but only ever finds bugs. And God only knows how much time has passed when he wakes with that last beer can in his hand, nothing but a gulp at the bottom, and no idea how far he's gone or where he's ended up. It's a bright morning, with sunlight shining through the trees, shining just for him, it seems, and William covers his eyes. He hears it then, that rattlesnake's schc-schc-schc somewhere close, and his skin crawls from head to toe. He finds it soon enough, trying to sun itself on a hunk of granite, while a bobcat slinks nearby. "Git!" William shouts and throws his empty beer can at the cat, who crouches and then jumps away, leaving William alone with this bringer of death and dreams.

William feels his fear, feels it deep inside, and hasn't ever felt this kind of fear before, but Katie's words keep tormenting him, and he knows he needs proof he can be stronger than flesh, needs to know he would never hurt Katie again, never hurt anyone. *Think I'm afraid of you, you sonofabitch?* he prays, and the snake gets back to rattling. William moves toward the serpent, moves through dense grass and fallen cones, and moves beneath pine trees and through shadows into light, and there, feet away, waits that snake, unblinking, tempting him to come closer. *Get me. Do it, you sonofabitch,* he prays and extends his hand. *Grab on, make me feel it,* and when that snake's tail rises higher and William thinks about Katie, thinks about holding her tight at night, he prays a different prayer, prays,

You shall not hurt me, but keeps his hand outstretched, sees those eyes contemplating, that mouth opening, those fangs like daggers aching for his skin and imagines Jack seeing the same sight and feeling the same fright and wanting more than anything to be somewhere else. Katie was wrong, he realizes, because he did protect the boy. Maybe he could have done better, but he protected him, and here William is out in the middle of nowhere with nobody to protect him, but maybe God will.

And that snake moves fast.

And William wishes he were somewhere else.

And lo and behold, the boot cometh hard upon that snake's neck, and William can't help but believe he has seen the Boot of God.

"What the hell you doing out here, Bill? Trying to get yourself killed, is what!" and William drops his arm, lets his whole body drop, and for a second feels angry before realizing his prayer has been answered. "It didn't hurt me," he says, "Oh Lord, it didn't hurt me," and gunfire pierces his ears and rolls through the canyon below.

William hears nothing more but sees the headless snake, looks up to see the Sheriff, whose mustached mouth is moving, but William has only a ringing in his ears.

In the Sheriff's truck hours later, William asks, "How long I been gone?" and the whole world sounds underwater. "Couple days," says the Sheriff, but to William, it feels more like a month. He accepts some mystery in his salvation, in the Sheriff showing at that precise moment. *The Lord protected me*, he thinks to say but can't, not yet, and he hopes this will be

enough for Katie, hopes she'll meet him part way and carry him home.

"Take me to them," William says at last, and the Sheriff looks at him but says nothing, not at first, not until he coughs some grief away. "Sunday, so they'll be at church," he says, and William sits up, lifts his chin, and says, "Then take me there," but hasn't been in years. The Sheriff nods but drives on without another word. "What me to come in too?" he asks after they arrive, and William gives him a look and asks, "What for?" but the Sheriff can't think of anything to say. William takes the man's hand. "Appreciate what you did, coming out for me like that," he says and squeezes tight in that way the Sheriff likes, but then the Sheriff lets him go.

And William walks toward that little Methodist church with the tall, white steeple against the wide open sky, and all is quiet but the Pastor's voice echoing through the parking lot, echoing without resolve and then with resolve as William steps inside and finds Jack upon that stage, Jack, surrounded by Elders praying for the boy who touches dreams, and the Pastor, praying loudest of all, *And we thank you Lord for the unknown and making some things known in times of hardship*, and William moves down the isle. The Pastor's words call to him, yes, but he sees the fear on Jack's face, feels something fundamentally wrong with bowing before a boy but chooses to accept there are some things he does not understand. *Your peace passeth beyond all understanding, Lord, and we thank you for bringing us a conduit of peace, Lord*, prays the Pastor, and the church is bursting at the seams, because Word about Jack has traveled, and William sees locals and wanderers, the nurse with plucked eyebrows, Ms. Hitchens, all William's

drinking buddies, who wouldn't be caught dead in church. So many folks have a story to tell about Jack, and those who don't wish they did, wish he would bring a little of that glory and song, but William passes them all without a thought, down the isle, catching the Pastor's eye along the way and toward Jack, who watches him, breathing deep, because he has come to fear dreams.

William finds Katie in the front, sits next to her, takes her hand, and her skin crawls from head to toe, but she doesn't let go, not yet, not until Jack sees William sitting there and runs to him, clings to him, but the prayers don't stop.

Folks gather around that little family and pray, not loud prayers but whispers, and then the Pastor leaves his pulpit and joins them, placing a hand on William's head and another hand on Jack's, and everyone seems to be reaching out and touching that little family, fingers rolling, trembling, sliding, holding on tight, and whispering, whispering, like schc-schc-schc-schc-schc.