Great Falls, 1966

Kevin Canty
Needles and nurse’s aides and little bottles of his own blood: Evan’s been in the hospital for tests three times already, and he’s going back next week. Why won’t they tell him? None of the doctors will say the word cancer in his presence anymore, and his son has used his summer vacation to drive his little family from California. Billy never visits except at Christmas. His kindness is sinister.

The second day after their arrival, Evan talks Billy into an excursion to Glacier Park, though he knows Billy is tired of driving. Kath, Billy’s wife, refuses to go. Evan should give up but he can’t stand to be around the house with them: they argue, they watch Johnny Carson with the volume way up. And their son: Tim was once his little shining star but now, eleven years old, he is suddenly fat and sullen, a television addict. On the highway, he slouches in the backseat, sideways with a comic book, the Incredible Slob Man, according to Evan. Billy fiddles with the radio, jumping without warning from station to station, though it’s a mystery how he can hear anything at all over the stuttering roar of the motor. The wind carries a faint stink of burning diesel.

“This car smells funny to me,” Evan shouts over the engine. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong with it?”

“This is a perfectly good car. There’s nothing wrong with this car.”

“Well, I do smell something.”

“It’s the refineries,” Billy says, though they’re already
miles out of town, and the refineries are miles in the other direction. Evan decides to drop it: better to die here than in the hospital, better quickly than slowly, a fast fiery wreck.

It's hot: the sun shines bright and hard from a ceramic blue sky, empty of clouds. A simplified landscape, blue above, sunburnt tan and green below, the dusty black asphalt cutting a curve through the hills, two-lane all the way. They putter along at a steady fifty-eight miles an hour, getting passed by everyone. Semi-trucks loom like houses in the rear-view mirrors, waiting for their opportunity, and when they pass the car shakes like a sick puppy in the side-blast.

At noon exactly — he checks his watch — Billy reaches back into the cooler and opens his first cold beer of the day and his sense of release seems to fill the car. Now there will be a few good hours. Tim leans across the seatback, as the mountains break the horizon, and together he and Evan plot their day on a map of the park. The beautiful names: Kintla Peak, Many Glacier, Granite Park, Saint Mary's. Better here, Evan thinks, in a place I know. He sees himself sleeping in the dirt of the forest floor, the first soft snows of winter curling over him.


"Well, they're just watching. You know, behind billboards and all."

"I've never seen a cop behind a billboard in my life," Billy says, "and if we were driving any slower, we'd be going backwards."

Tim is suddenly alert; he leans into the space between the front seats and says, "Let's get a Mustang."
"A gas hog like that — what would we do with it? You just drive from one gas station to the other."

"We could go fast," Tim says. "We could beat all the other cars."

An Indian chief in costume and head-dress greets them from the porch of the train station in East Glacier, and for a dollar he lets them take a picture. Evan hands his Instamatic to Billy and stands on one side of the Indian Chief with Tim on the other. Billy fusses with the camera, though there's nothing to adjust. They stand there posing: the fat boy squinting into the sun, the Indian with the grim face of a retired policeman, the weak old man. As Billy goes to snap the lens, a gust of wind comes along and blows Evan's jacket up into his face, surprising him. Evan wants Billy to take another picture, sure he'll look terrible, but Billy's afraid the Indian will want another dollar.

They drive slowly across the Continental Divide, the VW banging and chuffing, cars piling up behind them, working their horns. Half the cars that pass them give Billy the finger, which Evan pretends not to see. The sun shines brightly on the gray rock of the mountains, granite peaks rising out of the forests; like cities, Evan thinks, or the outskirts of heaven. The air is thin, the meadows brilliant Irish green. Evan remembers believing in heaven as a child, thinking this was what it looked like, only warm, inviting.

"Are there bears out there?" Tim asks.

His father waves toward the hills with his open can of beer. "Grizzly bears," he says. "They come down out of the hills every once in a while and eat somebody, don't they?"

"Oh, I suppose," Evan says, abstracted.

"Came down and got one girl right out of her sleeping
bag last summer, killed her and then dragged her off into the woods about a hundred yards and ate her leg all the way off."

“All right,” Tim says.

“Billy,” Evan warns his son, “I don’t want you scaring him.”

“Are there snakes?” Tim asks.

“Rattlers,” Billy says. “Big ones.”

Boy talk, Evan thinks, the way it ought to be; and for a moment he almost believes in Billy, he wants to believe, wants to think that he will come unstuck and start to move forward again. Billy teaches fourth-grade science in Stockton, California, fifteen hundred miles away; he drinks too much, he isn’t particularly kind to Tim, he isn’t happy. He reaches into the back seat and opens another beer, his fourth, Evan can’t help counting. He wants to think that it isn’t too late for his son. Too late, too late, too late, the road rushes by and all the beautiful meadows and the tall peaks and the deep black forests are swept past them in a rush of wind as Evan stares, trying to bring it inside himself. He knows that this is what they will tell him, when they finally tell him: too late, if we could have caught it earlier . . . Give me strength, he prays, and grant me mercy. Already the sun has changed directions, starting its long slant down into the west, where eight or nine hours from now it will set; two o’clock, and nothing since breakfast.

“I thought we might stop at the lodge,” he says. “My treat.”

“What lodge?”

“There’s one at Lake MacDonald,” he says, measuring his words. He won’t want to stop, he drives in a sort of blissful trance, always forward. “I used to go there with your mother, many years ago.”
“Sure,” Billy says, “whatever you feel like.”

This quick acquiescence isn’t like him, always pressing onward, believing that if he drives far enough and fast enough, happiness will be waiting for him around some curve. In Billy’s easy deferral, Evan hears another evidence that he is dying. The word startles him, even as a thought. He wonders what it will be like to say it out loud: I have cancer, I am not going to recover, I am dying. Far below the edge of the road, a lake lies calm and glittering in the sun, nestled into the granite roots of the mountains. What should he have done? This is only scenery, after all, something to look at. But Evan can’t help feeling that here is a thing he should have paid attention to.

The lodge is full, tourists from France and Iowa and New York City, teenagers in Bermuda shorts and plaid shirts flirting on the porch, threatening each other with buckets of cold lake-water. There is an Indian chief here, too, or at least a placard explaining who he is and the prices of various things. This Indian Chief is apparently on break. The view of the lake is very beautiful, they all comment on it, yet Evan has seen this picture on calendars and postcards and memories, so familiar that the truth of it comes as a slight shock, a reproach. The cold, indifferent beauty of this place seems like a memory of everything he hasn’t done.

After a few minutes’ wait in the lobby — wrought-iron furniture and Western prints — the three of them are seated in the back of the big dining room, the picture windows at the far end shining with the famous view, like brilliant Kodachromes. The room is loud with the clatter of glass and china and conversation in different languages. Billy, staring at something across the room, indifferently orders a hamburger and a bottle
of beer; Evan asks for a bowl of soup and a glass of water, and Tim orders a large Coke and a meat loaf sandwich.

"Hit the can," Billy says. "Be right back."

Alone, Evan and his grandson stare out the windows, as if something were about to happen. He asks the boy, "Don't you love Montana?"

"Sure," Tim says, eyes left, eyes right, anywhere but meeting his.

"Don't you feel closer to God up here?" he asks, knowing he was going too far; but he wants to give the boy something, wants to shake him out of his complacent misery. In a little while, he'll be all that's left of Evan — a frightening thought. He says, "I sometimes feel like I'm sitting in God's lap when I'm up here, it's all so clean and pretty."

"We don't go to church anymore," Tim says, eyes left, eyes right.

"You don't have to go to church to believe in God," Evan says. "You don't even have to believe. You can just close your eyes and get that feeling of something all around you." He lets his gaze drift off the boy, out the window, where the mountains are shining in the sun like music, like an opera, he imagines. He says, "There's something special about the mountains, don't you think? Something spiritual. You can see things so much more clearly."

"Dad says you're getting sick."

Tim is staring at him with avid interest, abnormal, as if Evan were a pornographic picture.

"He said I'm not supposed to talk to you about it," Tim says. "He said it's a secret."

Evan's secret. He stares out the window, hoping to find the feeling of a moment before. But there is the view and here he is and they don't have anything to do
with each other. Scenery will not solve any of his problems; and at that moment the waitress comes and sets their plates of disgusting food on the table. Evan can't even look at his but Tim digs in.

“What else did your father say?” Evan asks angrily. “What other little secrets did he tell you?”

Tim misses the anger; he pauses between bites to think of what to tell him. Without wiping his mouth, he says, “One of the doctors thinks you’re making it up.”

One of the doctors, Evan thinks — only one. The rest think I’m gone. But then the thought breaks on him: what if I am? What if this is only pretend? What if I’m so unreliable that no one should pay attention to me? He thought of his wife, an argument after a bridge game at a neighbor’s house: you don’t even know what you want, she said, and it’s always the weak ones who screw things up. Shelley had only said the words once but Evan could still hear them.

“What else did he say?” asks Evan.

“Say about what?” Billy asks. He’s returned the wrong way, unseen, unsuspected. Tim tries to disappear, without moving, as if he sat still enough he’d change color and blend in with the chair, the tablecloth, his meatloaf sandwich.

But Evan’s still upset, a diffuse, floating anger. “We were talking about my illness,” he says. “We were talking about how I’m apparently making it all up to get attention.”

“That’s so inconsiderate,” Billy says, with a kind of dreamlike wonder. He takes Tim by the arm and hauls him to his feet, crumbs and meatloaf spilling onto the floor, and slaps him hard across the mouth.

“That’s just so inconsiderate,” he says again. “That just shows a total lack of consideration for the feelings of
others."

The slap seems to still be sounding in the corners of the room, all conversation hushed, all eyes on their table as the red welt starts to blossom around the boy's mouth.

"Excuse me," Evan says, in the silence.

He rises, folds his napkin next to his disgusting soup and leaves the table as the boy starts to weep. The other diners stare as he passes. Don't look at me, he thinks. I did the best I could, always, the best I could.

"Are you all right?" asks the Indian Chief. "Would you like to sit down?"

Evan shakes his head; then changes his mind. "Yes," he says abstractly. "Yes, I think I would like to sit down."

The Indian Chief leads Evan to a slatted Adirondack chair and helps him down, the feathers of his headdress tickling his neck. "A glass of water?" he asks.

"Yes, thank you."

But it's only Evan's mouth that's speaking. Inside he's lit with panic, trying to forget that roomful of people, staring at him, staring at Billy, at Tim. The eyes of other people.

He feels the feather-tips against his neck again.

"You want some aspirin or something?" the Indian Chief asks, handing him a paper cup of water. "You don't look so hot."

Evan says, "They're going to run over that cooler."

"What?"

"Over there." He points: a family is backing a boat into the water, lowering the trailer down the ramp, but the rear wheels of their station wagon are aimed at their picnic lunch. They're a good-looking family, the mom is anyway, and the three kids — all blonde, all having a wonderful time. Evan can't really see the dad, who's driving.
“Hey,” says the Indian Chief. “Hey, look out!”
They grin at him, and wave.
“No, the cooler,” says the Indian Chief. “You’re going to run right into it.”

The family grins again, a little less happily this time, and then the mother calls out a few sentences in a language Evan doesn’t understand — Swedish maybe, or German, something with a lot of consonants. Nevertheless her words sound gay to Evan, sounds of greeting, of light-hearted banter.

Just as she is finished saying them, the tires plow into the lunch, shoving the cooler across the asphalt with a horrible grinding sound. The blonde family all break out in peals of foreign-sounding laughter.

“Dumb son of a bitch,” the Indian Chief says.

Evan sips his water. The wind breaks the surface of the lake into coarse ripples, dispelling the reflection of the mountains, but the sun still shines warmly on the water, on the granite peaks, on the weathered brown logs of the porch and on Evan’s arms. The mountains are beautiful but, now that nothing else is left, this beauty is terrifying to him, everything he doesn’t know, everything he hasn’t done. Evan feels enormously tired, afraid to start. He closes his eyes and struggles to open them again. He scans the sky: hours of daylight left, and then the long drive home.

“Tourists,” Evan says softly. “They’re just tourists. They don’t know any better.”